MOD A DALLOWAY ESSAY 1

A comparative study of Mrs Dalloway and The Hours reveals commonalities of the human experience to offer renewed insights to contemporary and future audiences. Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1925) is a modernist archetype, which critiques and explores social paradigms, linking individuals’ consciousness by their shared sensory experiences of post-WWI London. Stephen Daldry’s film The Hours (2002) resurrects Woolf’s values in a postmodern aesthetic, offering new insights on repression through shifting perspectives that surpass fictional and biographical genres. The repressive nature of time and prescribed gender roles that separate human connection is explored in the different contexts of the two texts in order to advocate the ultimately fulfilling value of life. Thus, in considering Mrs Dalloway and The Hours, the reader comes to a heightened understanding of how texts reflect the values of their contexts.

Mrs Dalloway extrapolates nihilistic modernist attitudes prevalent in Woolf’s post-WWI context in her exploration of the confronting realisation of one’s mortality and the consequent chaos of self. Woolf’s use of tunnelling into Clarissa’s past as she recalls the imagery of death evoked in ‘her heart, affected, by influenza’ with ‘a warning, then the hour, irrevocable’, exemplifies the incessant reminder of one’s mortality. Indeed, the belief that ‘death ended absolutely’ is highly reflective of evolving values of secular existentialism in the modernist era. Clarissa’s fixation on the Big Ben as a signifier of time is conveyed through the repetition of ‘the leaden circles dissolved in the air’ and shows the disruptive nature of the continual striking of the clock throughout the day. Thus, as Clarissa’s subjective perception of time is interrupted by external time, characterizing the Big Ben as a symbol of ineluctable mortality, it demonstrates the disconnection between the individual and their external surroundings.
such, Woolf uses this to capture a newfound apprehension of death and disconnectedness in fractured post-war consciousness. Clarissa’s stream of consciousness, ‘In the middle of my party here’s death!’, ‘talk of death at her party?’ and ‘the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!’ repetitiously enforces the importance of the conservative party as a symbol of connection in the wake of fractured consciousness within post-war society. Clarissa’s isolation from this society and the external world and ‘into the little room’ allows her to reflect and contemplate upon the interior. This gives her sympathy for Septimus despite their differences. The parallels between their identical fears of death; ‘the terror; the overwhelming capacity’ allows her to feel ‘somehow very like him’ connecting isolated individuals paradoxically within the chaotic detachment of post-war society that experienced a newfound fear of death. These fears of death reflect the emergence of psychoanalysis in the 1920s which led to concepts of Sartrean existentialism which focused on the fleeting nature of time. Thus the chaotic interior explored through common fears of death, ultimately affirms life.

Daldry recontextualises the values expounded in Woolf’s text through triptych sequence shifts between paralleled time periods to establish that the universality of mortality ultimately makes life fulfilling. Death is also symbolically represented through the continuous imagery of water in the opening scene, Laura Brown’s attempt at suicide and Clarissa’s thoughts of being ‘out, out, far out to sea and alone’ which represent feelings of existential loneliness in the modern era. In adapting this ‘oceanic feeling’ cinematically, Daldry takes Freud’s modernist values which criticized romantic ‘religious feeling’, and reconstructs them for contemporary audiences. Thus, Daldry reinforces the notion that confines of mortality can reveal universal feelings and values across distinctive
contexts. Indeed, Woolf’s tunneling technique is reconstructed with the reappearance of Laura Brown, whereby death unites separate storylines and contexts into one. Though Elizabeth’s derogatory epithet renounces Laura Brown as a ‘monster’, emblematic of the difficulties within womens’ abilities to decide their own lives, her marginalized story is given a voice, showing the ambiguity of ‘truth’ that permeates post-modern thought. It is this ability to transcend set storylines and perspectives respective of their contexts that ultimately affirms the power to unite individuals through their common mortality.

The restricting nature of human relationships is explored in Mrs Dalloway as Woolf highlights the ironic failures of a structured patriarchal society. Septimus and Clarissa are restricted by a common sense of victimization by the war’s patriarchal values, which connect their ‘tunnels of consciousness’. His parenthetical aside ‘one must be scientific above all things’ is contrasted with the futility of objectivity in the rhetorical question ‘must, must, why must?’ This challenges traditional notions that associate rationality with confining masculine gender roles, reinforcing Woolf’s protofeminist values and revealing her dissatisfaction with her androcentric society. Similarly, Clarissa’s reductive anaphora to ‘being Mrs Dalloway, not even Clarissa anymore; This being Mrs Richard Dalloway’ reflects her self-awareness that ‘no more marrying, no more having of children’ has resulted in the loss of her identity in the confined 1920s domestic sphere. Thus, by observing Woolf’s view on limiting gender conventions in her context, the conflict between individuals and constructs of society become apparent.
Woolf’s complex portrayals of human relationships are affirmed through Daldry’s lens of contemporary feminism, which.... The suppressive patriarchal expectation to maintain the ideal home is represented in the symmetrical mise-en-scene of LA. This highlights superficial constructs of order in an attempt to rebuild civilisation after WWII and reinforces similar notions in Mrs Dalloway regarding the restraints placed upon gender. Recontextualised to 21st century New York, Clarissa Vaughn’s choices and independence as a result of evolving second-wave feminism and gay rights are evident through her romantic relationship with Sally and her successful career. However, her relationship with Richard confines her, similarly to Laura Brown and Mrs Dalloway, into the role of a caretaker to the point where a close-up shot depicts her ‘unraveling’ in the domestic setting of her kitchen. Here, The complexity of human relationships transcends contexts as both Laura and Clarissa face dichotomous obligations to duty and themselves despite the supposed liberation of women through the feminist movement. The self-reflexive nature of the film, which depicts the fictive Virginia Woolf’s construction of the text influencing Mrs Brown and Clarissa Vaughn, then echoes the polyphonic nature of Mrs Dalloway. Thus, The Hours affirms the continuities of women and their expected roles in society despite distinctive contexts.

In conclusion, a comparative study of Mrs Dalloway and The Hours enhances an appreciation of the universality of mortality and human relationships as viewed through a feminist lens through shifting perspectives which challenge a reader’s perception of the modern world.