

**Living in the Moment:
The Everyday in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Cunningham's The Hours**

Jessa Bushell

In both Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* the characters live out one rather ordinary day. While Cunningham's novel focuses on the storyline of three different women in three different times and Woolf's focuses predominantly on the mind of one woman, both novels revolve around a woman or women organizing a party. As these women go about preparing, the reader inhabits both the lives of the women and those of multiple other characters that cross paths with them. During this one ordinary day, the characters are bombarded by seemingly insignificant moments that tend to result in significant outcomes. Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours* demonstrate how the everyday moment enables one to live life as it causes powerful feelings to erupt and illuminating possibilities to arise.

As both novels open, Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway and Cunningham's Clarissa Vaughan feel completely alive on an ordinary June morning. Despite walking into a street separated by time and place, these two women are both in "[love]" (Woolf 8) with what they see. Vaughan admits that there is "endless life" in the city in which she "loves, helplessly, the dead television...[and] the vendor's cart," while Dalloway admits that "the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans...[are] what she love[s]; life; London; this moment of June" (Cunningham 14; Woolf 4). Both women are consumed by love for these mundane objects that represent life to them. Dalloway notes that what she "loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the car" and Vaughan "loves West Tenth Street on an ordinary summer morning" and "simply enjoys without reason the houses, the church, the man, and the dog" (Woolf 8; Cunningham 11-12). Different sights arouse the senses of these women, but the result is the same, for both feel the life in the streets.

Furthermore, the everyday sight allows the women to feel their own existence and its immortality. Becoming aware of their own lives, these women recognize in an ordinary day how their lives will continue even after death. Dalloway notes that "somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survive[s]...liv[ing] in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there" (Woolf 8). Similarly, Vaughan feels "as if everything in the world...has its own secret name, a name that cannot be conveyed in language but is simply the sight and feel of the thing itself. This determined, abiding fascination is what she thinks of as her soul...the part that might conceivably survive the death of the body" (Cunningham 12). In view of the everyday sights, both women recognize that life does not end after death but continues existing through the everyday and small moments and objects in life. One ordinary June morning makes these women feel pleasure in life itself, because they find life in the ordinary and everyday.

Additionally, the everyday creative tasks of Lucrezia and Laura Brown enable the two women to feel hope. Time and place separate these women as well, but for both of them one simple moment makes all the difference in allowing them to recognize that there is hope in living. Laura, who lives a suffocating life, sets to baking a cake and, as she does, she feels that “[i]t seems suddenly easy to bake a cake, to raise a child,” while Lucrezia, suffering with her mentally ill husband, is “rejoiced” when he takes part in her hat making (Cunningham 79; Woolf 121). The hope of existing the way they believe they should is shown to these women in one single everyday chore. Laura feels hopeful that she can go on with her life, and Lucrezia feels Septimus may yet return to her and return her life to her. Laura admits that “[i]t seems she will be fine,” that “[s]he will not lose hope,” and that ultimately “[i]t does not seem impossible that she has undergone a subtle but profound transformation, here in this kitchen, at this most ordinary of moments” (Cunningham 79). With Septimus’s involvement in the hat making, Lucrezia acknowledges that “[n]ever had she felt so happy! Never in her life!” for it was “the first time for days [Septimus] was speaking as he used to do!” (Woolf 121). While each woman’s hope is short lived, with Laura eventually choosing another life and Septimus taking his, the fact remains that these ordinary moments give Laura and Lucrezia the feeling of hope to live the lives they crave and for life itself.

After already demonstrating its ability to elicit incredible feelings, the moment continues to prove its power as it awakens Laura and Peter to the possibility of escape. Realizing Clarissa is the only one who knows he is in town, Peter seizes his moment of freedom. All at once “the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcomes him” (Woolf 44), and presents the opportunity for a moment of freedom. Seizing the moment he becomes “an island” that “[stands] at the opening of endless avenues down which if he chose he might wander” (Woolf 44). Laura, in a room “not surprising or unusual in any way,” acknowledges that “[s]he could do anything she want[s] to, anything at all” (Cunningham 149, 150). These insignificant moments tie Laura and Peter together for neither feels so helpless when he or she realizes the possibility of escaping from his or her own life. An ordinary moment in time bears the greatest significance on Laura and Peter for neither feels stifled by his or her life at the time being. Peter is “free” from himself, while Laura can “decide” to do as she wishes (Woolf 44; Cunningham 151). As Peter realizes “[h]e ha[s] escaped! [and is] utterly free,” Laura recognizes that the hotel has “rescued her the way morphine rescue[s] a cancer patient” (Woolf 44; Cunningham 149). Her “buoyant release” and Peter’s “escaping (only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was” allows them both to be “free” (Cunningham 150; Woolf 45, 44). Despite Peter’s freedom lasting momentarily and Laura’s a lifetime, both share the possibility of a moment, both see the possibility of life in a moment.

While the possibility of escape is shown to Laura and Peter, the everyday moment works to illustrate the possibility of existence itself to Clarissa Dalloway and Cunningham's Virginia Woolf. The moment Virginia sips her coffee, she is awakened to the possibility of writing, and Clarissa, upon hearing of Septimus's death, is enlightened to the possibility of simply living. Virginia "picks up her pen," whilst Clarissa realizes she "must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter" (Cunningham 35; Woolf 158). A single moment unites these women as they recognize the possibilities in life or for life in the everyday or small. For Virginia, existing enables her to have the possibility to write, and for Clarissa her existence itself comes to matter. A man, one whom Clarissa does not know, has "communicate[d]" (Woolf 156) with her, and as a result she has decided she can live fully. Hearing of Septimus's death, she thinks "if Richard had not been there reading *The Times*, so that she could . . . gradually revive . . . [s]he must have perished" (Woolf 157). Since she knows nothing of Septimus, his death is a normalcy of life, and so in such an everyday moment she realizes that with Richard "she [has] escaped," while Septimus "[has] killed himself" (Woolf 157). She has been able to see, now, the possibility of living. Virginia "sips her coffee, sets it down, stretches her arms" and is thus filled with "infinite possibilities" (Cunningham 34), ones that allow her to create and write. In different ways both women are filled with the idea of the possibility of living. The life of the moment resonates with them both completely, as one sets to writing and the other realizes the possibility of life itself. Clarissa "ha[s] never been so happy" and Virginia finds a "purer" version of the "self" as a simple everyday drink of coffee enables her to "penetrate the obfuscation, the clogged pipes, to reach the gold" of her writing (Woolf 157; Cunningham 34). An ordinary report of someone's death and Clarissa is overcome by how Septimus has thrown it all away and in this instant she understands her life and the possibility of it all, and Woolf is filled with the possibility of being able to write and to create. Two ordinary moments connect these women and awaken within them two very different possibilities of life.

Despite the fact that there are countless other ordinary or everyday moments in both novels, the handful shown demonstrates the importance of seemingly insignificant moments. Both novels illustrate that it is not the big, flashy, or ideal moments that make the difference, but the everyday, mundane ones that make and define life. Ultimately, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours* demonstrate the importance of the everyday moment in eliciting great feeling and awakening possibilities that transform a mere existence into a life. These everyday moments spur life into the characters and demonstrate the importance of living in the moment. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours* represent, in a wider sense, the way in which the everyday moment illuminates existence and is existence itself.

References

- Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2011. Print.
Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.