

EPHEMERALITY AS AN INTERTEXTUAL FEATURE IN *MRS. DALLOWAY*, BY VIRGINIA WOOLF, AND *THE HOURS*, BY MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to analyze the intertextual relations between the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf and *The Hours* (1998) by the Pulitzer Award-winning Michael Cunningham, from the marks of ephemerality in both texts. The theoretical background for this investigation relies on the concepts of intertextuality and adaptation. Ephemerality is a shared nuance emphasized in *The Hours*, with elements like flowers, waves, and kisses, becoming an essential intertextuality trait between the novels, yet not as studied as other aspects like, for example, the mirroring of characters or the matter of homosexuality.

KEYWORDS: Adaptation. Comparative Literature. Ephemerality. Intertextuality.

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RESUMO

Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar as relações intertextuais entre o romance *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) de Virginia Woolf e *The Hours* (1998) do vencedor do Prêmio Pulitzer Michael Cunningham, a partir das marcas de efemeridade em ambos os textos. O embasamento teórico desta investigação se apoia nos conceitos de intertextualidade e adaptação. A efemeridade é uma nuance compartilhada com ênfase em *As Horas*, marcada pela presença de elementos tais como flores, ondas e beijos, tornando-se um traço de intertextualidade essencial entre os dois romances, embora não tão estudado quanto outros aspectos como, por exemplo, a semelhança entre os personagens ou a questão da homossexualidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Adaptação. Literatura Comparada. Efemeridade. Intertextualidade.

INTRODUCTION

The influences of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* on Cunningham's *The Hours*, and how his re-reading of Woolf broadens the understanding and interpretation of some aspects of her novel, are noteworthy in many standpoints. The craft of the plot, the unfolding of the characters, and the expression of time are features that appear more clearly at the first reading. This paper presents an intertextual analysis of the novels focusing on one component of the expression of time: the nuance of ephemerality.

Virginia Woolf wrote the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* placing the protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, in London on a June day in 1923. From the beginning of the day, when the character appears on the first lines of the novel saying that "she would buy the flowers herself" for the decoration of a party she is arranging, until the end of the evening, the reader is captured by a range of events involving the protagonist and the other characters, which are gradually introduced in the narrative and are all related directly or indirectly to the main character: Clarissa Dalloway is a woman with a well-regarded social life, recognized for her stability and considered in all aspects, who questions within herself at every moment of the day about the choices made in her life and the way she became a woman who values so many futilities, such as preparing a party and carrying out banal activities, buying flowers, and other ephemeral things without significant value, while various events and situations happen in the world, in London, or in the private lives of people who are related to her.

Based on this narrative, Michael Cunningham writes *The Hours* (2006) using the same resources of the English writer, placing his protagonist, Clarissa Vaughan, in New York, also on a June day, going out to buy flowers and getting ready to throw a party. However, his narrative acquires new horizons, as the protagonist's present time occurs at some point in the 1990s, in a city shaped by globalization, where individuals live, work, suffer from depression and diseases, such as AIDS, which at the time was like a death sentence. To create the plot of his novel, Cunningham makes extensive use of metafiction as he links all the characters to Woolf's novel. For doing so, he develops three narratives, in three different times, spaces, and diverse characters, who are all intertwined and related to the protagonist. There is the narrative of the fictional character of Virginia Woolf, in the 1920s, writing *Mrs. Dalloway* on a

June day that culminates with her suicide; there is the narrative of Laura Brown in the 1950s who reads Mrs. Dalloway, also on a June day; she suffers from depression and traumatized her son, Richard who years later became part of Clarissa Vaughan's circle of friends and suffers from depression as his mother; and there is the narrative of Clarissa Vaughan, in the 1990s, who is called Mrs. Dalloway, a nickname given by Richard, her best friend and former lover, for whom she is preparing a party, also on a June day. All the characters in the three narratives developed by Cunningham deal with the transience of time, especially in the day when the stories happen, and wonder how life went so fast until the present moment of their lives.

Despite taking up a previous text, the author of *The Hours* remains original and contributes to Woolf's novel's successive creative process, even after it has been written and consolidated in the literary world. Cunningham recreates and contributes to the reaffirmation of Virginia Woolf's work, at the same time that remains original in his writing, by placing his narrative in a different nation and time from the one of the English writer, giving new meanings, as well as reaffirming other patterns of the inspiring literary source.

According to AbdelRahman (2008), Cunningham's book is considered "one of the most typical postmodern novels with its reliance on intertextuality and fragmentation, its crossing the boundaries between fact and fiction, its preoccupation with time, and its intricate interwoven narrative." The novels will then be analyzed comparatively, focusing on how ephemerality is conveyed and how it affects the characters' personalities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - INTERTEXTUALITY

The relationship of interconnection between texts and literary works, known as intertextuality, is testified by traces of other stories in a literary work in the way the author creates his characters, their characteristics, or the way they behave, or the trajectory of their roles within the plot. These traces may be misunderstood as copying, rewriting, or plagiarism. However, mechanisms of reference, allusion, interdependence, rewriting, re-reading, among others, work to keep alive the creative literary process, which can often cross nations,

linguistic and temporal boundaries to manifest themselves at different times and places by proving or confronting concepts and styles.

In some readers' eyes, this resumption of literary tradition elements may appear as a lack of creativity or originality. Still, the dialogue between texts is something fundamental to the constant renewal and revitalization of literature. Like a living organism that keeps renewing itself, literature is under continuous renovation, but it retains primordial characteristics over time; the author, one of those responsible for the renewal and maintenance of cultural inheritances, works on the data of the literary tradition and adapts them according to the time and target audience.

On intertextuality and influences of works on each other, Brazilian scholar Tânia Carvalhal (2006) states that:

[...] what was understood as a relationship of dependence, the debt that a text acquired with its predecessor, becomes understood as a natural and continuous procedure of rewriting the texts.³ (CARVALHAL, 2006, p. 51)

This process of rewriting a text and giving it new meanings has been used many times in history and seems to have gained strength contemporarily. In cinema, comics, and in many examples of books, such as *The Hours*, adapted to the cinema in 2002, authors pick up ideas from world literary traditions and adapt them for our days. Linda Hutcheon (2006) calls these new stories adaptations and confirms the previous quote saying that:

[...]adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation. (HUTCHEON, 2006, p. 8)

Therefore, one should not see this relationship of interdependence between works as something inferior, which would disqualify the author, but rather analyze how he deals with intertextuality and interdependence.

³ Tradução nossa: [...] o que era entendido como uma relação de dependência, a dívida que um texto adquiria com seu antecessor, passa a ser compreendido como um procedimento natural e contínuo de reescrita dos textos. (CARVALHAL, 2006, p. 51)

Through intertextuality, the author contributes to the resumption and rediscovery of previous works or texts. An author can repeat something through it and make it acquire a secondary position from another author's publication. Still, by transforming it, he ends up reinventing it, giving it meanings, or possible elucidations, that the original work could not achieve (CARVALHAL, 2006, p. 57). About one century after its publication, *Mrs. Dalloway* continues inspiring recreations and adaptations of many kinds (LATHAM, 2015, p. 208). Still, not all of them gain notoriety or receive attention for their own quality and craft.

This is what happens with the example of the intertextual relationship in frame here. Michael Cunningham manages to take an idea by Virginia Woolf about how the passing of a single day's hours is full of internal reflections. Like in the prior source, he leads the readers to immerse themselves in his characters' consciousness in the same way that Woolf did decades before. He shows that people, seen as subjects, are the result of a process of events, traumas, decisions, and choices. As Hutcheon (2006, p. 178) says, “an adaptation is not vampiric”; it means that it does not take away the life of the prior work. Cunningham revives *Mrs. Dalloway* by revisiting it.

The reception to *The Hours* was by no means unanimous. Some specialists in Virginia Woolf's life and works reacted, for instance, saying that “Cunningham makes her a suicide first, and a writer second” (WHITWORTH, 2005, 219). Newman (apud LATHAM, 2015, p. 225) says that “Cunningham resurrects the familiar cliché in which madness and genius are inextricably linked and mutually enhancing.” Nevertheless, we did not find any study concerning the intertextual relation between the works based on ephemerality as a common trace to be analyzed.

EPHEMERALITY AS A SHARED NUANCE

From all the aspects that seem remarkable to composing the intertextual relation between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*, ephemerality functions as a nuance intertextually shared. From the title itself, the stress is not in the day, month, year, or any other time measurement unit: it is in the hours that give both the impression of brevity and that of

eternity. In many passages, we can see this stress: Barbara (the florist) and her “hourly wages”; “the hour, irrevocable” in the Woolf’s excerpt Laura is reading; the struggle of Woolf (the character) in the hours she spends writing; and many others.

If we search for the etymological meaning of the word “ephemeral,” we will find it derives from a Greek word that translates into “something that lasts only one day.” Thus, this word is perfect for applying to both novels, and this very feature – etymological meaning – marks the beginning of our analysis.

The resonances of *Mrs. Dalloway* in *The Hours* continue with establishing a common element between the two works: the departure of the protagonists of the respective novels to buy flowers for the ornamentation of a party that will take place at the end of the day. The very image of flowers contains the feeling of something temporary, transient, yet sublime and admirable:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. (WOOLF, 1996, p. 5)

There are still flowers to buy. Clarissa feigns exasperation (though she loves doing errands like this), leaves Sally cleaning the bathroom, and runs out, promising to be back in half an hour. (CUNNINGHAM, 2000, p. 9)

In the prior work, *Mrs. Dalloway*, the protagonist's stream of consciousness connects her to past events and introduces characters related to her, who also add their memories to the narrative contributing to the elucidation of various facts in her life. Clarissa Dalloway goes through the hours of a June 1923 day, reminiscing about facts and situations that contributed to her becoming the person she is in the present day of the narrative. A single event of the day, like the crash of a car, or the sound of Big Ben at the tower of the Palace of Westminster, is heard by various characters who express different reactions to such events and also, through flashbacks, reflect on their lives, always returning to facts linked them to the figure of Clarissa Dalloway.

Clarissa spends the hours of the day reflecting on her choices and analyzing who she is to society and who she really would like to be; about how she acts in front of people, pleasing them, being polite, behaving according to the established social standards, and about how she really thinks, her secret opinions, her repressed desires, all of this for the maintenance of a

well-established life, which gives her comfort and security, but futile. At the end of the day, which culminates with the end of the party she was preparing at the beginning of the novel, after so many events and reunions, Clarissa concludes that she likes to be the person she is and admires her choices and behavior, but admits to herself that she could, in some situations, have acted in different ways, which would lead her to different destinies. However, within the standards set by the society of her time, she wonders if everyone is a prisoner even though she stood out well with others and with herself and felt at peace with the simple and fleeting things she cultivated, such as the affection for flowers:

Are we not all prisoners? She had read a wonderful play about a man who was scratched on the wall of his cell, and she had felt that was the true of life - one scratched on the wall. Desperate of human relationships (people were so difficult), she often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her. (WOOLF, 1996, p. 211)

In taking up Virginia Woolf's work, to write *The Hours* several decades later, Michael Cunningham uses the resource of metafiction, through which he involves, in some way, the characters of his work in the book of Virginia Woolf. The narrative modules are divided into three, all linked to Mrs. Dalloway, either through the reading of the book, the similarity of the characters in *The Hours* with those of *Mrs. Dalloway*, or the creative process of the work by the author. Cunningham read diaries, biographies, and letters to recreate what would have been the last day in the life of Woolf, who suffered from depression and ended up committing suicide by drowning herself in a river near her house.⁴

From the fictional author's creative process while writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Cunningham transfers the reader to the intertwined narrative of another character reading Virginia Woolf's novel years later: Laura Brown. She lives in the United States in the post-World War II years and, like Woolf, she also suffers from depression and reflects on how the author wrote an

⁴ In the words of the author on A Note on Sources, the postface segment of the edition used: "While Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Nelly Boxall, and other people who lived appear in this book as fictional characters, I have tried to render as accurately as possible the outward particulars of their lives as they would have been on a day I've invented for them 1923. I depended on information on a number of sources [...]" The author cites bibliographies written by different authors and assembled letters that were exchanged by the individuals involved and personal diaries.

excellent work and ended up committing suicide. Her identification with the character Clarissa Dalloway is significant because she is continuously analyzing her choices, reflecting on the husband she agreed to marry, about her little son who worships her, about feeling guilty for not being able to match such a love, and about the fact that she is pregnant with another son, whom she would not like to have. During Laura Brown's hours, there is also the arrangement of a party that the character is preparing to celebrate her husband's birthday. Unlike the flowers, which appear only in the house's decoration, the object that the character is dealing with is a cake that she is preparing with her son (a cake being also something short-lasting). She tries to make it look perfect, getting to the point of baking it twice, throwing the first one in the rubbish, because she does not find it good enough to demonstrate her capacity as a housewife, mother, and wife, roles that she despises, but that she continues trying to play.

There is also the narrative of Clarissa Vaughan, a book publisher in New York City in the 1990s, who, unlike the others, breaks various patterns and can be considered an opposite "version" of the character created by Virginia Woolf, but who keeps the characteristics of *Mrs. Dalloway's* protagonist: Clarissa had many love affairs, including Richard (son of Laura Brown), but now, both in their fifties, appear in the narrative as gay, best friends, with a solid affective bond; she is in a stable relationship with a woman, while Richard is infected with the HIV, suffering from the passing of time, waiting for death, until advancing it by throwing himself from the window of his building before Clarissa's eyes. Richard calls Clarissa by Mrs. Dalloway for associating her with the character created by Virginia Woolf, saying that his friend lives to value futile things, such as preparing parties, buying flowers, prioritizing financial conquests, and having a very "standardized" social life in the American society. All of this in the name of a secure and stable life, in which, although continually reflecting about her choices (like Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf's character), Clarissa is satisfied with, while living in the superficiality – a quality that refers directly to ephemerality – of the New York life, in contrast with the hardships that people around her face (depression, AIDS, instability). These issues appear throughout the whole narrative in the presence of time that runs so fast and changes everything, condensed into a single day. Through the characters' stream of consciousness, we see present and past until it culminates in the tragic outcome of Richard's suicide.

Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway is in a constant state of mood changing. The present and past facts narrated in the novel alternately, added by her self-modifying depending on whom she is talking to, give us an idea of transience that combines perfectly with the notion of ephemerality. Even though her name is the novel's title, we do not know who Mrs. Dalloway exactly is, for she keeps oscillating between past and present, and from what she thinks she is to what she thinks she wanted to be.

Following this idea, the image of the waves is recurrent in both texts. A wave is also a symbol of ephemerality: it comes, grows, reaches its peak, and breaks, dissolving in a very short time. It is also connected with the uncertainty faced by the characters, as well as with the mood changing and the decision to put an end to the hours through suicide, present in both works, especially in Cunningham's novel, in his references to Woolf's suicide.

The kiss may also be pointed as a representation of the ephemeral in both novels. How significant are the kisses – and the kissers? How long does a kiss take? Despite this, it may leave deep marks in the ones that kiss, as we can see in the two stories. A kiss may take just seconds but also endure a whole lifetime in the memory of someone. At this point, it is necessary to clarify that ephemerality, in the perspective we are dealing with it here, is not only a reference of brevity, related to something that happens in a flash and suddenly comes to an end; it goes beyond the mere short duration of time. It is brief, indeed, but has long-lasting consequences and importance. Otherwise, it would not be worthy of consideration.

These features show that the notion of ephemerality passes through the intertextual relationship between the two works. By adapting *Mrs. Dalloway*, Cunningham recreates Woolf's work, giving it new meanings when he uses the resource of metafiction to construct the plot of his narrative but keeps the nuance of ephemerality as the conducting wire that sparks its own meaning in both novels.

CONCLUSION

In the face of the intertextual relation that Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* establishes with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, we verified through a comparative analysis that *The Hours*

conservates the notion of ephemerality not only as a common feature but also as the most perceptible one, despite standing out as an original and innovative novel (by taking the concepts raised by Virginia Woolf to a new level, expanded into different narratives and different timelines).

The comparison proved that both works deal with the theme of "ephemerality" through various symbolic elements, such as the presence of flowers, party preparation, and waves. These elements represent the characters' attempt to fulfill the void caused by the passage of time and the changes caused by it in their lives. Ephemerality is a shared nuance emphasized in *The Hours*, becoming an essential trait of intertextuality between the novels, yet not having received as the mirroring of characters or the matter of homosexuality, for example.

Lastly, by establishing the intertextual relationship with Virginia Woolf's novel, Michael Cunningham's work plays an exquisite role in keeping it original, giving new meaning to the work of the prior author – one that is still to be revisited and discovered by new readers. Even though Cunningham has received some criticizing from specialists on Woolf (LATHAM, 2015; WITHWORTH, 2005; NEWMAN, 2003), as a novelist, he indulges himself in recreating Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. After all, ephemerality also touches creators and re-creators.

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