

# Depression and Narrative

*Telling the Dark*

Edited by  
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**SUNY**  
PRESS

Published by State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY  
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Diane Ganeles  
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Depression and narrative : telling the dark / [edited by] Hilary Clark.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-0-7914-7569-0 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Melancholy in literature.  
2. Depression, Mental, in literature. 3. Mental illness in literature I. Clark, Hilary  
Anne, 1955-

PN56.M4D47 2008  
889'.933561—dc22

2007047994

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Chapter 11

### *A Meditation on Depression, Time, and Narrative Peregrination in the Film *THE HOURS**

*Diane R. Wiener*

I begin to have what happened to me.

—Muriel Rukeyser, “Children’s Elegy”

Narrative is the vehicle through which individual and collective voices, identities, and enactments of agency are emplotted—or not. The term “emplotment” was developed by philosopher Paul Ricoeur<sup>1</sup> and has been adapted by numerous writers from a range of disciplines to describe the processes by which subjects are repeatedly placed, place themselves, and may resist placement in relation to specific identities, stories, images, histories, events, meanings, and so on. In addition to its obvious reference to literary and cinematic plots, and to the ways that a life is like a literary or filmic world that is variously molded by oneself and others, emplotment can be metaphorically considered in terms of plots of land, plots on a graph, plots of time, or any related process of creating schemes, negotiating spaces, and making plans that may or may not be difficult to alter.

The question of how identities, stories, and cinematic images of depression are realized and could be said to realize themselves through narrative acts is central to my discussion of narrative in relation to structures of time. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur asserts that the nonlinear or nonchronological is not equivalent to the atemporal. Time can be understood to be circular, layered, spectral, multiplicitous, and processual. He notes, “Peregrination and narration are grounded in time’s approximation of eternity, which, far from abolishing their difference, never stops

contributing to it.”<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur’s references to peregrination in relation to narration are compelling when one considers that peregrination—a journey from one place to another that involves migration, wandering, or roving—can be understood to occur in nonlinear ways.

Although there are potentially parallels and convergences between peregrination and narration, practitioners in the social sciences, cultural theory, and psychotherapy frequently identify narration as a process which renders coherent, cohesive, and linear a set of temporal experiences or variables that are often initially more disparate and nonlinear than orderly. Thus it might seem that peregrination and chronological narration are wholly different: peregrination is typically nomadic whereas narration is typically serial and linear. However, rather than seeing peregrination and narration as separate and different processes, I believe that peregrination can be used as a metaphor to describe nonlinear narration. In this essay, I am interested in reading two recent cinematic narratives of depression and “madness”<sup>3</sup>—and the social messages that these films carry, forward, deny, and refuse—as narrative peregrinations, rather than as merely “coherent” or “incoherent” narratives.<sup>4</sup>

A uniquely layered portrait of women’s depression and “madness,” *The Hours* presents its audience with myriad opportunities to consider narrative in relation to temporality and themes of coherence. Expressions of identity that are or can be socially coded as deviant or incoherent have long been experimented with and critiqued by filmmakers, visual and musical artists, and poets. In its representations of depression and “mental illness,” and in its special use of nonlinear time, *The Hours* joins other creative endeavors that complicate culturally widespread definitions of coherence and competence.

Like a brilliantly colored sample from an origami instructional manual, *The Hours* folds and refolds the interconnected stories of three women living at different times, from the 1920s through the 1950s to the present: Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown, and Clarissa Vaughan. Each character is affected by profound emotional anguish, by her own suicidality or that of someone very close to her, and by Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Film critic Peter Travers summarizes the film as follows:

In the 1920s, Woolf lives in the London suburbs with her protective husband (the superb Stephen Dillane) and battles demons of the mind as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*. That novel will affect the lives of Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), a housewife and mother living in 1950s Los Angeles, and Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep), a modern New Yorker planning a party for a former lover (an off-key Ed Harris), a poet dying of AIDS. Director Stephen Daldry interweaves these stories with uncanny skill.<sup>5</sup>

I would argue that Woolf's novel does much more than cleverly bridge the three narratives: it acts as a catalyst for each woman's pained self-awareness and complicated interpersonal alliances. *Mrs. Dalloway* strongly influences the relationships between the women and the characters around them within their respective temporal landscapes. Even more interestingly, like Michael Cunningham's novel upon which it was based,<sup>6</sup> the film uses the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* to create relationships between the three women themselves, sometimes in a brave and overt dismissal of linear time.<sup>7</sup>

Laura Brown's adult son Richard (Ed Harris), who calls Clarissa Vaughan "Mrs. Dalloway" because of her party-hostess role, says good-bye to Clarissa before killing himself, leaping to his death from the window in front of her. Richard tells Clarissa shortly before his death that she is "always giving parties to cover the silence." Clarissa has been planning a party for Richard on the occasion of his being awarded a literary prize and, as she tells him, has invited "a group of people who want to tell you your work is going to live."

After Richard dies, Laura comes to New York and meets Clarissa, who is destroying all of the special food dishes that she prepared for the party in a symbolic act of resignation, anger, and relief in the wake of her friend and ex-lover's tragic death. Laura had been estranged from Richard because she left him when he was a child, but she is treated with courtesy upon her arrival by Clarissa, her lover Sally (Allison Janney), and Clarissa's daughter Julia (Claire Danes). In the overlap between these characters in this section of the film, linear time is preserved rather than questioned, since Laura is elderly in the present time that is Clarissa's. This is not the strongest or most interesting part of the film narrative, however. More interesting is the idea that throughout the film Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan are already linked through themes of grief and sexuality that extend beyond their relationships with Richard and their eventual meeting.

Lesbian intimacy—and the frequent inability to express it freely—is a dominant theme in this film, but the intriguing lesbian characters are not Clarissa and Sally, the "out" yuppies with a great New York brownstone who live comfortably in the early twenty-first century. Clarissa and Sally seem to have it all, yet Clarissa is aggrieved by Richard (while he is still alive and later), for whom she is and has been a primary caretaker and with whom she may still be in love. Clarissa seems trapped in the past, emotionally dead inside herself and, from all appearances, to her lover. She is depressed despite her frenetic preparations for the party. Aware of the deep trouble she is in, Clarissa makes comments such as, "I seem to be unraveling." Richard also has an awkward relationship with time and memory, in part because of all the medications he is taking for AIDS. Moreover, he experiences lingering grief over the loss of his mother at a young age, as he seems to have felt abandoned by her. At one point he

thinks that he has already received the literary prize, and when Clarissa gently corrects him, he says, "I seem to have fallen out of time."

In my reading, the first homoerotic intrigue in the film is between Laura Brown and her friend Kitty (Toni Collette), who awkwardly and passionately kiss in Laura's suburban kitchen while her young son Richie (Jack Rovello) waits for his mother in a nearby room. Kitty has just tearfully told Laura that she has to have a "procedure" and needs Laura to feed her pet, and in sharing comfort their lips meet. In fact, Laura kisses Kitty full on the mouth. Kitty's desire is vivid and obvious, but her response when the kiss is over is to say, "You're sweet," thus denying that anything really significant has happened beyond the bounds of what occurs in a caring friendship. In a parallel scene, Virginia kisses her sister Vanessa (Miranda Richardson) on the mouth at the end of an awkward family visit, and asks Vanessa if she (Virginia) seems better, emotionally speaking. The depression from which Laura and Virginia obviously suffer creates a cross-temporal connection between these two passionate kisses and the two women who initiate them. In this and in other ways, *The Hours* reckons with simultaneity and points to the possibility of concurrent emotional universes that transcend apparently separated times, spaces, and other dimensions. Moreover, the film may be suggesting that unfulfilled lesbian yearning, or unfulfilled desire more generally—desire for escape from a dull life, in both cases—can lie behind depression. It seems to me that the freedom as well as the ability to follow one's desires and meet one's needs may be, in part, a way out of depression. For some, however, such a path may not be realistic or possible as an actual choice to make, or if selected may still not be enough to move away from great pain and suffering.

In one of the film's most troubling and effective scenes, the train station scene, Leonard (Stephen Dillane) tells Virginia that she has "an obligation to [her] own sanity," as they debate the merits of psychiatric expertise and medical treatments for her "illness." She says that her life has been "stolen" from her, and that she is "living a life [she has] no wish to live." She wants to leave their country house and go back to London, where it is vital and busy. Virginia tells Leonard, "You cannot find peace by avoiding life." This is essentially the same sentiment that Richard expresses to Clarissa. Richard consistently asks Clarissa to stop living her life for him, and he is keenly aware that his death will free her, a fact that she resents. He asks her, "Who's this party for?" and says, "I think I'm only staying alive to satisfy you." Unsurprisingly, after Richard dies, Clarissa's passion for life indeed reignites, and she embraces Sally with warmth and feeling, probably for the first time in many years.

In a dimly lit room, shortly after Richard's death, Laura narrates her life choices to Clarissa, including her decision to leave her children,

although she does not overtly make mention of her sexual orientation: “It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It’s what you can bear. There it is. No one’s going to forgive me. It was death. I chose life.” It is implied that Clarissa somehow knows what Laura has endured, in terms of Laura’s sexuality, difficult choices, and attendant losses. Laura’s admissions help Clarissa to come into contact with her own desires for freedom, which she then expresses to Sally.

In the 1950s thread of the film narrative, Laura is barely functioning and suicidal. Trapped in suburbia, she is a woman who cannot freely express her sexuality. Pregnant and miserable, Laura does not want to abandon her family, but she considers ending her life by taking an overdose of pills. Instead of committing suicide in a hotel room alone, however, she chooses life; waiting until her second child is born, she then leaves her family and moves to Canada. As viewers we do not find out this information until Laura enters Clarissa’s life. We do know that Richard has somehow lost his mother, and some viewers may guess early in the film that Laura is Richard’s mother, but it is quite possible that this crucial detail is not completely clear until, shortly before his death, we see Richard crying as he admires a picture of the mother who eventually left him. The sensual black-and-white photograph of Laura in her wedding dress is a chilling moment of well-placed melodramatic excess in the film. Because of his age, it is not clear if Richie knew as a little boy that when his mother was reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, she was thinking of leaving him and of killing herself.

Despite the poignant and often disturbing tone of the film, some reviewers joked about its content, perhaps because of its sometimes heavy-handed dramatic flourishes, or perhaps because depression and the larger topic of suicide make some people very uncomfortable. Other reviewers found the film to be an important contribution to discussions of depression among women.<sup>8</sup> While *The Hours* received mixed reviews, I am interested in its promise as a text that speaks volumes about temporality and narrative structure. Whatever its critical reception, this film is a sophisticated piece of cinema that merits analysis, and also highlights the importance of including women’s own “voices” in cinematic narratives of “mentally ill” women. I will draw some comparisons with *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), another recent film on women and “mental illness,” in order to highlight further the unique visual features and peregrinating narrative structure of *The Hours*.

Based upon the memoir of the same title,<sup>9</sup> the film *Girl, Interrupted* uses creative temporal manipulations, moving between present moments and memories as protagonist Susanna Kaysen experienced these temporal shifts while she was institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital during

the late 1960s. In ways that are different but parallel to those of *The Hours*, *Girl, Interrupted* uses nonlinear time sequencing and flashbacks in order to reenact Susanna's emotional perspective while in the asylum. Susanna's confusion, sadness, and anger, particularly in relation to her family, and her at times defiant resistance to a changing American society at war, are depicted through a variety of crosscuts between periods and scenarios in her life. For example, an early scene shows Susanna (Winona Ryder) in an ambulance immediately after her suicide attempt, but the viewer soon discovers that this event has already happened in the overall film narrative, and the cut to this scene can be read as a comment on Susanna's experiences of displacement.

Addressing the memoir, Susan Hubert notes, "Kaysen employs several 'postmodern' narrative techniques in *Girl, Interrupted*. The novel is a pastiche of sorts, containing Kaysen's personal narrative, various documents associated with her hospitalization and diagnosis, and stories about other patients."<sup>10</sup> Although I would not call the book a novel, as Hubert does, there are clear correspondences between the written text and its film adaptation in terms of the use of pastiche. The film's narrative structure in some ways echoes the book's design.

Temporal manipulation in the film *Girl, Interrupted* is often accomplished with the use of "checks." The psychiatric nursing staff does routine checks in each of the rooms in the women's psychiatric ward to make sure everyone is stable and safely sleeping in bed at night. Susanna dreams of—or awake, perhaps actually sees—people (not the nurses) at the door of her asylum room, but these are really at the doorway(s) in her past. She sees events literally open and close with the movement of her door, events often associated with the time when she lived with her difficult parents. As Susanna's condition improves, and she gets closer to being discharged from the hospital, the number of scenes of her writing increases, and these scenes are faster in tempo than other scenes. The frequency of flashbacks and dreamy temporal crosscutting lessens, implying that Susanna's improved mood and lessening depression accompany a progressive developmental movement into her own future and away from her fraught past.

The "checks" are used in *Girl, Interrupted* to move back and forth in time and to create empathy with Susanna's pain and disorientation, but these shots and scenes do not overtly encourage viewers to question the existence of flat, linear time itself, as *The Hours* does. Rather, *Girl, Interrupted* manipulates time to show how Susanna can be and is "cured"; once she has become reoriented to the expectations of a normative daily life, normative (linear) time is restored.

In contrast, *The Hours* creates webs of time that layer upon each other, and while some characters from different temporal layers eventually

meet and interact in a shared present, the aftermath of a suicide, temporal resolution is not a primary goal of the film. By the end of the film, I was left with the impression that the three narratives are tangled together like the single string in a game of cat's cradle, and that perhaps there is no past, or future, either for the characters or for the film audience who might care for them in "real" life. Rather time, whatever it is, exists in the experiences of trauma, sadness, and pleasure, in the present—the here-and-now. As depicted in the film, Woolf shows within *Mrs. Dalloway* that a woman's entire life can be said to happen in a single day. In watching the film, viewers understand the adage of *carpe diem* ("seize the day"). The here-and-now also has its own changing shapes, and tributaries in *The Hours*—like the river pictured at the outset and at the end—seductively draw the viewer into an undertow of pain and curiosity.

At the end of the film, Virginia Woolf, with stones in her pockets, again walks into the deep water of the River Ouse as she does at the beginning. A visual palimpsest is invoked; the traces of Woolf's death and life have been remarked upon and thus seem to linger in perpetuity. Due to the ways in which Woolf and her peer characters are depicted, film viewers are encouraged to bear witness to their suffering, to call into question how as members of a society and as individuals we address (or do not address) the ethics surrounding suicide, suicidality, and depression. *The Hours* creates visual-emotive and temporal landscapes that one can repeatedly visit, as Woolf's death and life are and have been repeatedly "visited."<sup>11</sup> When we watch, assess, talk, and write about the film, we create and retrace palimpsests in a seemingly infinite regress of linked memories and interactive, peregrinating experiences, which problematize the idea that time, human responsibility, trauma, and suffering are ever limited to a single life.

### Notes

This essay is a tribute to my beloved aunt, Joan Fallert, and is also in memory of my recently departed friend, Tommy Jarmiolowski, both of whose experiences of *The Hours* affected my own, immeasurably.

1. As Ricoeur explains in *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, his idea of emplotment is an extension of Aristotle's concept *muthos* as described in the *Poetics*. While Ricoeur says that he "borrows" the concept from Aristotle, he also expands it in new directions (31). After unpacking Aristotle's usage of *muthos*, Ricoeur explains, "Aristotle . . . ignored the temporal aspects of emplotment" (Volume 1, 54). In the *Time and Narrative* trilogy, Ricoeur in part sees his project of helping readers "apprehen[d] [the] correspondence between narrative and time" as accomplished by a "confrontation between the Augustinian theory of time and the Aristotelian theory of the plot" (Volume 3, 241). One of his goals, among many others, is to think through "the configuration of time by narrative" (*Ibid.*).

2. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, 29.
3. I use quotation marks around the terms “madness” and “mental illness” to indicate that the definitions of these terms are contested and variable.
4. My theory of narrative (in)coherence is discussed at greater length in my Ph.D. dissertation, “Narrativity, Emplotment, and Voice in Autobiographical and Cinematic Representations of ‘Mentally Ill’ Women, 1942–2003.”
5. Travers, review of *The Hours* in *Rolling Stone*, January 23, 2003, 76.
6. *The Hours* (1998).
7. In the second volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur discusses *Mrs. Dalloway* and remarks, “Overall, may we speak of a single experience of time in *Mrs. Dalloway*? No, insofar as the destinies of the characters and their worldviews remain juxtaposed.” He refers to a “monumental time” in the novel “resulting from all the complications between clock time and the figures of authority” (112).
8. See, in particular, the reviews of *The Hours* by Dana in *Rolling Stone*, July 10, 2003, 79; Giles in *Newsweek*, September 16, 2002, 55; Schickel in *Time*, December 23, 2002, 72; and Rozen in *People*, January 27, 2003, 29.
9. Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (1993).
10. Hubert, *Questions of Power*, 99.
11. In a special “filmmaker’s introduction” to the 2003 DVD release of the film, director Stephen Daldry invites his viewers to watch *The Hours* again and again, now that it is available on DVD. He says that he knows that they will find new and intriguing things to consider with each viewing. (For what it’s worth, I agree with him.)

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