



Sacred Heart  
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University  
**DigitalCommons@SHU**

---

Psychology Faculty Publications

Psychology Department

---

Summer 2010

# The Hours – A Film to Enhance Teaching Psychology

Christina J. Taylor

*Sacred Heart University*, [taylorc@sacredheart.edu](mailto:taylorc@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/psych\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/psych_fac)



Part of the [American Film Studies Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Taylor, Christina J., "The Hours – A Film to Enhance Teaching Psychology" (2010). *Psychology Faculty Publications*. 40.  
[http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/psych\\_fac/40](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/psych_fac/40)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu).

# *The Hours* – A Film to Enhance Teaching Psychology

Christina J. Taylor, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT

*Taylor, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences.*

## **Abstract**

Hollywood films provide a rich and engaging means for teaching students about psychological topics. *The Hours* is an especially noteworthy film because of the wide range of psychological issues touched upon, including mental illness, gender roles, families, chronic illness, bereavement, caregiving, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Analysis of the film in this paper provides instructors of courses in psychology, social work, nursing, medicine, women's studies, and related courses, with suggestions for how this compelling film can help students develop in their understanding of human psychology.

## **Introduction**

There is a growing literature showing that Hollywood films provide a rich source of material for learning about psychological topics and issues (Akram, O'Brien, O'Neill, & Latham, 2009; Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2010). Research points to a number of pedagogical benefits to feature films: (a) films increase students' enjoyment of course work (Baehr, 2010; Badura, 2002; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2001) and improve performance (Henry, 2006; Smith, 2009), (b) films provide an opportunity for contextual learning that extends beyond texts and lectures to the real world (Alexander, 2005; Shepard & Brew, 2005; Toman & Rak, 2000), (c) films deepen knowledge, understanding and empathy (Furst, 2007; Raingruber, 2003), and (d) films teach students how to be life long learners of human psychology through art (Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990). With ready availability of films online and on DVDs, instructors can employ films in a variety of ways. To save class time for discussion it may be optimal for students to view the film outside of class and then review specific scenes in class that highlight topics for discussion and written assignments. A film such as *The Hours* (2002) can be used in this way to cover topics such as psychopathology, gender roles, families, chronic illness, bereavement, caregiving, sexuality, and sexual orientation. The complexity of the content and the artistic presentation of the interwoven stories offer a captivating means of engaging students in their course work. The analysis that follows provides instructors in psychology, counseling, social work, nursing, medicine, women's studies, and related courses, with suggestions for how to use this film to advance students' understanding of human psychology.

## **Psychological Topics**

First and foremost, *The Hours* (2002) contains poignant and moving portrayals of the symptoms, features, and causes of the depressive disorders (4th ed., text rev.; DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Major characters in the film exhibit several types of depression: Virginia Woolf and Richard Brown, Bipolar Disorder; Laura Brown, Major Depression; and Clarissa Vaughn, Dysthymic Disorder. Discussion of the portrayal of these disorders in fully realized characters can facilitate students gaining understanding of the symptoms of depression and developing empathy for individuals who suffer from these afflictions. Unlike many film portrayals of mental illness, *The Hours* also offers less extreme depictions of psychiatric symptoms, certainly an advantage for generalizing learning to real life (Raingruber, 2003). Importantly, learning about depression through the film is contextualized in people's lives that unfold over time. This can assist students to make a fundamental distinction between a person and her or his diagnosis, certainly an important lesson for all (Shepard & Brew, 2005).

The Hours is an exceptional film in its focus on mature women and some of the gender issues related to depression (Wedding et al., 2010). Instructors can use the film to put a face on the gender gap in rates of depression by showing how depression is manifested in the three women characters – Laura, Virginia, and Clarissa. Given epidemiological data showing that women have twice the rate of clinical depression as men, the film evokes consideration of an array of factors that produce this gender difference, including stereotypic gender roles, marriage, motherhood, and feelings of helplessness and uncontrollability (Mazure & Keita, 2006). Laura Brown is an especially effective springboard for students to analyze the role of gender in depression because Laura actually ends up doing what many would consider the worst thing a mother can do – leaving her husband and children. In explaining her actions, she states that the housewife role was, “. . . death. I chose life” (The Hours, 2002). This dramatic action offers teachers the means to engage students in discussion of the constraining impact of traditional gender roles on women and the consequences faced by a woman who breaks the rules. Laura Brown’s plight may not initially engender a sympathetic response in the viewer for she appears to possess all the ingredients of the American dream – a loving husband, a son, a modern and tidy 1950’s home on a suburban street lined with trees, cars, and carpools – and yet she is depressed and suicidal. The homemaker role does not suit her. And while sexual orientation may be a factor in her inability to play the traditional role, Laura’s character depicts a real life dilemma with serious and lasting consequences.

The scene between Laura and Kitty, her fashionable neighbor with cancer, further illuminates Laura’s struggles with motherhood. Kitty tells Laura how lucky she is to have a child, a view of her life that Laura definitely does not share. This point is underscored by her response to Kitty’s question about the book she is reading. She explains that Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf, 1925) is about a woman who is giving a party – she appears to be fine on the surface, but in reality she is not at all fine. This is a major theme of the film and one that links the three women characters – Laura Brown, Virginia Woolf, and Clarissa Vaughn - with Virginia Woolf’s fictional character, Mrs. Dalloway. Exploring this theme can encourage students to look beneath the surface of people and their situations so as to deepen their knowledge, understanding, and empathy (Shepard & Brew, 2003).

The disturbing scene where Laura leaves her worried son at a babysitter’s so that she can go to a hotel where she plans on taking her own life is a powerful portrayal of a depressed parent’s interaction with a child and can set the stage for teaching about the effects parents with mental illness have on their children (Stinchfield, 2006). Laura is portrayed as emotionally distant and detached from her child. And Richard, her son, as the children of such parents are want to do, evinces a precocious sensitivity to the tenuous nature of his mother’s attachment to him and his father (Raingruber, 2003). His desperate cries and calls to his mother when she leaves him is one of the film’s most wrenching scenes. The pain that we observe in Richard as an adult character (he incorporates his anger toward his mother into his novel) is keenly experienced because we have witnessed how he suffered in childhood. The heartbreak in Richard’s past and the difficulties he experiences in his intimate relationships captures the generational legacy of mental illness and the role of genetics in depression. Research shows that individuals with Bipolar Disorder, such as Richard, tend to have parents, such as Laura, with Major Depression (Comer, 2010).

Virginia Woolf’s story in the film offers opportunities for discussion of many issues related to mental illness. In real life Virginia suffered from Bipolar Disorder, a diagnosis that she shares with Richard Brown in the film (Dally, 1999). In the film, mania (really hypomania, a less intense manifestation [DSM-IV-TR]) is hinted at when

Virginia undertakes writing her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1925). She writes and smokes feverishly while showing little need for eating or sleeping. In fact, research shows that there is a strong association between Bipolar Disorder, creativity and artistic achievement (Jamison, 1993). The film's depiction of the relationship between creativity and mental illness offers instructors an opportunity to explore this topic with students in the context of the real life of Virginia Woolf and the fictional character of Richard Brown (Fleming et al., 1990; Jamison, 1993).

Artistic inspiration is not without its costs, however, and the stories of Virginia Woolf and Richard Brown in *The Hours* (2002) present us with gripping portraits of individuals afflicted with Bipolar Disorder who take their own life (Jamison, 1999). Bipolar Disorder has one of the highest risks for suicide in comparison to other psychiatric or medical illness (Goodwin & Jamison, 1990). Of note, the film's treatment of suicide is supported by evidence showing that among people with Bipolar Disorder, in contrast to Major Depression, women and men have equal rates of suicide through the use of lethal methods (Goodwin & Jamison, 1990). The recurrent misery associated with Bipolar Disorder does not discriminate based on gender and this is born out in the film with the suicide of both characters (Jamison, 1999). Increasing students' knowledge about suicide among people with depressive disorders can be accomplished by examining the depictions of suicide in the film (Hyler, 1996).

Virginia Woolf's suicide by drowning is shown at the beginning and end of the film. Virginia's reading of the suicide note in the film expresses the cumulative impact of the torment, dysphoria, alienation, despair and pain she suffered through out her life (Lee, 1999). As Woolf's biographer points out, this letter is not the product of "an irrational or mad person, but of a person in despair, with no sense of a future . . . and . . . no prospect of recovery" (Lee, 1999, p. 744). Drowning in misery is in fact how Laura Brown's suicide attempt is shown in the film. As was true of Virginia Woolf, Richard Brown found life to be unbearable. According to the known risk factors for suicide (Comer, 2010), Richard Brown experienced many of them, including the following: (a) bipolar disorder, (b) substance abuse – a cocktail of prescription drugs, (c) suicidal ideation, (d) availability of a lethal method - an apartment on a high floor, (e) confinement and isolation, (f) limited social support - no intimate partner, (g) feelings of hopelessness, (h) being an older white male, (i) having an attempted suicide in the family, (j) genetic predisposition, (k) being unable to work, (l) being a poet, (m) feelings of anger and irritability, and (n) having a physical illness – dying of AIDS. *The Hours'* (2002) nearly encyclopedic treatment of suicide risk provides dramatic case studies for student analysis (Hyler, 1996).

Virginia Woolf suffered almost all of her life with untreated Bipolar Disorder despite the fact that Leonard Woolf consulted with the best doctors available at the time to help with her condition (Lee, 1999). The treatments recommended, that are also shown in the film - eating properly, resting, and avoiding excessive stimulation - did not change much from the latter part of the 19th century into the 20th, and were often worse than the disease itself (Dally, 1999). Attitudes toward mental illness were harsh and even worse for women, in one case involving a brutalizing regimen of confinement and forced feeding (Lee, 1999). The cure seemed to rest at least partly on the idea that mental illness was a willful act of nonconformity that could be treated by breaking the will of the patient. Psychiatry and psychology were only at the very beginning stages of more scientific understandings of mental illness during the lifetime of Virginia

Woolf (Comer, 2010). Because the stories in the film unfold over the course of the 1920's to 1990's, it is possible to talk about the history of treatment and the advances in treatment that transpired during those years.

Clarissa Vaughn, Mrs. Dalloway, is a pivotal character in the film for discussion of questions about normal moods versus clinical syndromes. She appears to possess a breezy self-confidence, but beneath this thin veneer lays significant sadness and unhappiness that may have been present for a long time. Clarissa shows signs of Dysthymia, a mood disorder defined by the presence of a depressed mood for at least two years (American Psychiatric Association [DSM-IV-TR], 2000). This is a disorder that occurs more commonly in women and Clarissa's gloominess appears congruent with the diagnostic criteria (Comer, 2010). A substantial part of her sadness appears to be due to the burden of caring for Richard, a man who she has loved since adolescence. The fact that Richard and Clarissa had homosexual relationships as adults and that Virginia Woolf in real life had a lesbian relationship points to the reality of human sexuality as fluid and complex, and provides a jumping off point for discussion of this issue in the classroom (Dally, 1999; Lee, 1999).

Clarissa's dedication to Richard parallels Leonard Woolf's assiduous care for Virginia. As Lee (1999) points out, "Leonard made Virginia's illness one of his life's works" (p. 174). There is enormous stress associated with caring for individuals who suffer with Bipolar Disorder and suicidal tendencies (Goodwin & Jamison, 1990). Despite providing extraordinary care, caregivers cannot prevent those they care for from taking their own lives (Jamison, 1993). Clarissa bears the special burden of witnessing Richard's violent death (Jamison, 1999). Leonard Woolf and Clarissa Vaughn can thus be counted among the large population of family and friends who are left behind by suicide. Although the film gives only a suggestion of suicide's aftermath, this can be a jumping off point for students to explore the emerging literature on the impact of suicide on family and friends (Ellenbogen & Gratton, 2001; Jordan & McMenemy, 2004). With Leonard, we are left with the image of his panicked run out of the house. With Clarissa, we see her family – her partner and daughter, draw her close. And as the day ends, Clarissa accepts her partner's warm and tender embrace. What lies ahead? Not only do Leonard and Clarissa have to mourn their loss, but as suicide survivors they will probably spend considerable time trying to understand what happened and experience a more complicated bereavement because of guilt and the perception that they failed to save their loved one (Furst, 2007; Jamison, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

This analysis shows that *The Hours* contains a variety of psychological content for classroom instruction. It is a nuanced film with limited action that can certainly be challenging for students to understand and appreciate. The tone of the film is somber and meditative, reflecting as it does the quiet manifestation of people's interior lives. The hauntingly beautiful Phillip Glass score accentuates the despondency that lies beneath the surface of the characters' lives. In this regard, the artistic representation of the struggles faced by the women and men in *The Hours* makes it a worthwhile stretch for students who will inevitably face some of these very same difficulties in their lives. Deepening their critical thinking about these serious matters and arming them with a more acute appreciation for the complexity of life may benefit them in their own hours.

### **References**

Akram, A. O'Brien, A., O'Neill, A., & Latham, R. (2009). *Crossing the line: Learning*



- psychiatry at the movies. *International review of Psychiatry*, 21(3), 267-268.
- Alexander, M. (2005). A review of the literature. In M. Alexander, P. Lenahan, & A. Pavlov, (Eds.), *Cinemeducation: A comprehensive guide to using film in medical education*, 3-7. Oxon, UK: Radcliff.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Badura, A.S. (2002). Capturing students' attention: Movie clips set the stage for learning in abnormal psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29(1), 58-60.
- Baehr, M. (2010). Efficacy of feature films in undergraduate psychology teaching: An exploratory study. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 70(7-A), 2381.
- Comer, R. (2010). *Abnormal Psychology*. (7th ed.). New York: Worth.
- Dally, P. (1999). *The marriage of heaven and hell: Manic depression and the life of virginia woolf*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Ellenbogen, S. & Gratton, G. (2001). Do they suffer more? Reflections on research comparing suicide survivors and other survivors. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 31(1), 83-90.
- Fleming, M.Z., Piedmont, R.L., & Hiam, C.M. (1990). Images of madness: Feature films in teaching psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 17(3), 185-187.
- Fox, R. (Producer), & Daldry, S. (Director). (2002). *The Hours*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount.
- Furst, B.A. (2007). Bowlby goes to the movies: Film as a teaching tool for issues of bereavement, mourning, and grief in medical education. *Academic Psychiatry*, 31(5), 407-410.
- Gabbard, G.O. & Gabbard, K. (1999). *Psychiatry and The Cinema*, 2nd. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Goodwin, F. K., & Jamison, K. R. (1990). *Manic-depressive illness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Henry, N. (2006). Using movie character cases to teach psychiatric diagnosis: An empirical validation study. *Dissertation abstracts international*, 66 (7-B), 3949.
- Hylar, S.E. (1996). Teaching psychiatry? Let hollywood help! Suicide in the cinema. *Academic Psychiatry*, 20(4), 212-219.
- Jamison, K. R. (1993). *Touched with fire: Manic-depressive illness and the artistic temperament*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Jamison, K. R. (1999). *Night falls fast: Understanding suicide*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Jordan, J. R. & McMenamy, J. (2004). Interventions for suicide survivors: A review of the literature. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*.34 (4), 337-349.
- Lee, H. (1999). *Virginia woolf*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mazure, C.M. & Keita, G. P. (Eds.). (2006). *Understanding depression in women: applying empirical research to practice and policy*. Washington: APA.
- Raingruber, B. (2003). Integrating aesthetics into advanced practice mental health nursing: Commercial film as a suggested modality. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 24, 467-495.
- Roskos-Ewoldsen, D.R. & Roskos-Ewoldsen, B. (2001). Using videotapes to teach social psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 28(3). 212-215.
- Shepard, D.S. & Brew, L. (2005). Teaching theories of couples counseling: The use of popular movies. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 13(4), 406-415.
- Smith, G.W. (2009). Using feature films as the primary instructional medium to teach organizational behavior. *Journal of Management Education*, 33(4), 462-489.
- Stinchfield, T.A. (2006). Using popular films to teach systems thinking. *The Family Journal*, 14 (2), 123-128.
- Toman, S.M. & Rak, C.F. (2000). The use of cinema in the counselor education curriculum: Strategies and outcomes. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 40(2), 105-114.
- Wedding, D., Boyd, M.A., & Niemiec, R.M. (2010). *Movies and mental illness: Using films to understand psychopathology* (3rd. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe.
- Woolf, V. (1925). *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Hogarth.