

Rich Metaphors in a Bird's Funeral: An Analysis of a Segment from The Hours

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Abstract. This study examines the richly symbolic "bird's funeral" sequence from the film *The Hours*, a brief yet thematically pivotal scene that encapsulates Virginia Woolf's philosophical meditations on life, death, and freedom. Through a detailed analysis of visual symbols, character actions, camera movement, and compositional symmetry, this paper explores how the director translates Woolf's inner world into a cinematic language that actively engages the audience. The scene's central motifs, the yellow roses and the dead sparrow, function as dualistic symbols of vitality and mortality, while Virginia's intimate gestures and the camera's gradual close-up actively transition the viewer from detached observation to empathetic participation. The symmetrical framing of Virginia's face and the bird's body further reinforces themes of equality and foreshadows her tragic fate. This study integrates semiotic and cinematographic analysis to demonstrate that the sequence not only visualizes Woolf's existential reflections but also invites—even demands—the audience's emotional and intellectual involvement. Ultimately, the scene functions as a microcosm of the film's broader concerns; by leveraging concentrated imagery and interactive narration, it transforms personal tragedy into universal philosophical inquiry.

Keywords: *The Hours*, Funeral, Metaphor, Imagery, Cinematography, Film Analysis

1. Introduction

Existing scholarship on *The Hours* primarily consists of macro-level analyses of prominent motifs or narrative techniques throughout the entire film, as well as intertextual studies comparing the film with Mrs. Dalloway. Scholars have extensively analyzed recurring motifs (e.g., water, birds, flowers) through feminist and socio-political lenses. However, there is a significant lack of detailed analysis focusing specifically on the "bird's funeral" sequence, particularly from the angles of cinematography and metaphorical imagery. This scholarly oversight is particularly problematic given the sequence's status as the film's thematic linchpin. The sequence's intricate formal techniques and layered symbolism create a hermeneutic barrier to fully grasping both the film's essence and Woolf's characterization. This study seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship through a meticulous analysis of the "bird's funeral" sequence, offering a detailed perspective on its cinematic construction. It will explore how the scene utilizes rich visual symbols, progressively intensifying camera work, and symmetrical composition to convey philosophical contemplations on life, death, and freedom. The paper argues that this sequence is not merely an externalization of a

character's psyche but also a sophisticated cinematic mechanism designed to guide the audience from passive observation to active empathy and philosophical reflection, thereby highlighting its unique value in cinematic storytelling and thematic expression. By adopting a micro-analytical approach, the study operationalizes the form-as-content paradigm revealing how film mechanistically guides audience empathy through camera movement and visual composition. Its value lies in transcending the traditional "fidelity" framework of adaptation studies and constructing a tripartite analytical method integrating "symbol-lens-composition."

2. Codes and symbols

2.1. Images

The yellow rose, with its vibrant hue, conventionally symbolizes life, vitality, and warmth. Some interpretations suggest it represents a "gateway to heaven" in this context [1,2]. Across Woolf's oeuvre, yellow roses persistently negotiate the boundaries between reality and illusion, evolving into complex imagery that carries existential contemplation. In *To the Lighthouse*, the virtual yellow roses on the wallpaper endure the interrogation of time, symbolizing the fragility of human order in the face of eternal flux [3]. In *Between the Acts*, the yellow roses arranged as part of the dinner setting serve as a metaphor for the coexistence of social rituals and internal collapse [4]. These yellow roses function both as symbols of construction and as pointers to inevitable deconstruction, establishing a dialectical tension between life and death, appearance and truth [5-7].

The *Hours*' cinematic adaptation masterfully captures this literary essence, transforming the yellow rose from a textual image into a striking visual symbol. The cluster of yellow roses placed beside the dead bird in the film, with its fiery hues set against a somber backdrop, creates a powerful contrast—simultaneously a celebration of transient life and a contemplation of death itself. It perfectly echoes Woolf's ultimate concern with the essence of life, condensing the philosophical reflections in literature into a tense cinematic moment, thereby accomplishing an exceptional transition from literature to film.

Another dominant visual element is a bird. This small, fragile black sparrow's corpse symbolizes death itself—specifically, an ordinary, mundane death, unlike the grand scale of death in war or disease. Simultaneously, birds—a favored motif of Virginia Woolf herself—symbolize freedom as creatures of flight. Its death, therefore, signifies the loss of that freedom, a transition into confinement [8,9]. Knowledge of Woolf's biography, or the film's narrative, reveals that Virginia was effectively confined to a country home for treatment due to her unstable mental state during this period [10]. This readily invites the association between the bird and Virginia herself, explaining her profound interest in the creature.

As noted in a review from *Spirituality & Practice*, the film portrays her as "restless, agitated," yet she still "joins her niece in laying to rest a small dead bird the children have found." This ritualistic burial scene reinforces the symbolic connection between the bird and her own predicament [11].

2.2. Actions

Virginia's performative gestures demand meticulous scrutiny. Her initial act of placing the roses constitutes a funeral rite for the bird, imbued with a sense of mourning. The ritual of presenting a vibrant living rose to an ostensibly insignificant bird constructs a profound dialectical opposition, signifying her deep respect for this fragile life and, by extension, for death itself.

Virginia's lateral recumbency to gaze at the bird's eyes dismantles the hierarchical death gaze, establishing visual parity. This cinematic gesture enacts intersubjective communion: through matched eye-level framing, the camera collapses diegetic distance, compelling viewers to share Virginia's phenomenological encounter with mortality. The bidirectional gaze transforms spectators from passive observers into active participants, prompting existential interrogation of the reciprocal gaze between life and death. Thus, the act of gazing at eye level is not merely an externalization of the character's psyche but also a cinematic mechanism that propels the audience from passive observation to active engagement. In this process, the audience's understanding of the film's themes deepens: life and death are not binary opposites but mutually reflective; the equality between a great writer and a humble bird reveals the universality of existence. By sharing this gaze, the audience not only comprehends Virginia's inner solitude but is also compelled to confront their own feelings about death, thereby achieving a profound interaction between the film and its viewers.

3. Cinematography and audience interaction

In analyzing the "bird's funeral" sequence in *The Hours*, André Bazin's realist film theory provides crucial theoretical support. Bazin's theory posits that cinema's ontological essence resides in mummifying reality through photographic means, eschewing excessive manipulation or aesthetic. He particularly advocated for the use of long takes and deep-focus shots, as these techniques preserve the continuity of reality to the greatest extent, allowing viewers to actively choose their focus of gaze within a relatively free viewing experience [12].

In the "bird's funeral" sequence, the gradual zoom of the camera exemplifies this realist aesthetic: the director refrains from imposing meaning through rapid editing or excessive montage, opting instead for a slow, natural camera movement that guides the audience step by step into Virginia's subjective experience. This approach not only maintains the continuity of action and environment but also allows viewers to undergo a process of transition from detachment to immersion, from observation to empathy.

The sequence initiates with an establishing shot that positions the spectator in a distanced observational vantage point. The camera then steadily moves closer, culminating in two close-up shots: one of her face and one of the bird's face. This progression can be divided into three distinct stages.

3.1. Panorama—observer

In the initial stage, the audience assumes the role of complete observers. We witness a woman performing an unusual act in the garden. This distance allows us to survey the entire environment but maintains an objective, somewhat detached and curious perspective.

3.2. Zooming in

In the second phase, the camera's axial zoom operates as a deliberate attentional mechanism, orchestrating the viewer's perceptual focus. It seems to urge, "Do not just glance; look closer, delve deeper." This movement mimics the natural human impulse to lean in when captivated by something, shutting out peripheral distractions. As Virginia arranges the roses, the calls of her sister, Vanessa, fade away, symbolically isolating the viewer from the external world and drawing them into Virginia's internal psyche.

One noteworthy detail merits consideration: As shown in Figure 1, as the camera zooms in, Woolf gradually shifts from the center of the frame toward the left side. Woolf's deliberate displacement from the compositional center—ceding visual dominance to negative space—creates a hermeneutically unsettling yet thematically congruent frame. First, it can be interpreted spatially: the audience, following the camera's movement, approaches Woolf from her left side (i.e., the right side of the screen), ultimately arriving at a position slightly off-center to her left. Second, from a psychological perspective, occupying the center of the frame traditionally signifies visual importance. By displacing Woolf from this central position, the film diminishes her visual dominance. This deliberate weakening of her prominence aligns perfectly with the theme of equality. Through this cinematographic choice, the film strips away the aura of a "great writer," reinforcing the philosophical idea that all lives hold equal value—thus foreshadowing and reinforcing the equation “Virginia Woolf $\approx$ the bird” that follows.

3.3. Close-up shot

The sequence culminates in extreme close-ups of Woolf's visage and the avian corpse, erasing the phenomenological distance between spectator and screen. Viewers are no longer distant observers but are placed directly into Virginia's mental space through the director's lens. The subtlest tremors in her eyes and the rhythm of her breath become palpable. The audience is compelled to share her gaze and her intensity. This progression inevitably leads viewers to ponder: What does Virginia see in the bird's eyes? And what do we see?

Bazin's ontology of cinema posits its unique power in mummifying the world's true appearance, wherein audiences are not passively receiving imposed meanings but actively participating in the generation of significance. In this sequence, viewers are placed in a position of sharing the gaze with Virginia, compelled to contemplate the existence and subjectivity of death. This exemplifies the practice of Bazinian realism—through visual authenticity and continuity, it enables the audience not merely to "see" but to "enter" the world of the image and engage in an interactive dialogue with it.



Figure 1. Process of zooming I

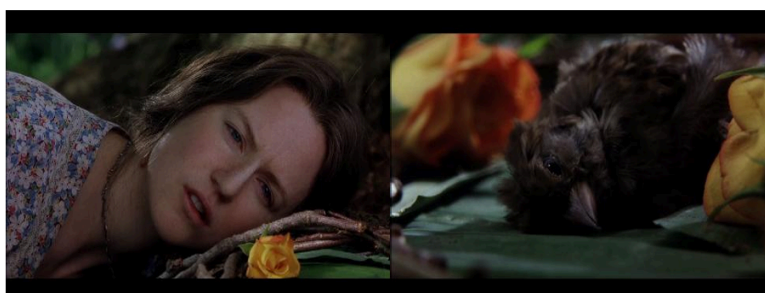


Figure 2. Two close-ups

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