

Research Article

Analysis of Imagery in *the Hours* from the Feminism Perspective

Yan Chen*

China University of Political Science and Law

*Corresponding Author

Yan Chen

Abstract: The protagonists in Michael Cunningham's novel "The Hours" have different family backgrounds, life experiences and final endings, they are the representatives of women's independence and self-improvement in their era. All three of them reflect the courage of women themselves to change their lives and destiny. This paper seeks to analyse some symbolic imageries to explore the theme and represents the trajectory of feminist development.

Keywords: feminism, imagery, The Hours.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Hours was written by one of the most famous American writers Michael Cunningham, and it attracted numerous readers once it published. In the year of 1999, it was the winner of Pulitzer Prize for Literature.

The novel tells the story of three women living in different period. The first woman, Virginia Woolf, a talented female writer, is under the control of her husband because of her mental illness, and is closely based on the biography of the actual Virginia Woolf. The second woman, Laura Brown, a housewife, is trapped in household chores. The third woman, Clarissa Waghén, is an independent woman in the new era. They are the representatives of women in three different periods of the twentieth century, they live in different periods, but all yearn for freedom, independent social status and equality, and all make efforts for the women liberation.

The author uses a certain number of imageries to link the three women together. This paper analyses three primary imageries, house, flower and water, and through describing the different relationships between three women and the same imagery to reflect the awakening of female consciousness, and the improvement of women social status in the twentieth century.

ii. The Analysis of Three Imageries

2.1 House

"House" is regarded as a place where is dependable, safe and restricted"¹, it conveys that the house has its own contradiction because it can be a prison or a freedom land. On the one hand, owing to the absolute dominant position of men in a family, women are always under a passive or subordinate state, therefore the house or the room can be a prison for women; On the other hand, when women become independent and have their own house, they can extricate themselves from the control of men and do whatever they want in the house or out of the house, and thus, the house can be a freedom land. "House" takes as imagery runs through the entire novel *The Hours*. And the author stresses its contradiction through describing three different houses, which are related to three different women, Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown and Clarissa Waghén.

¹ Mike, Krone. *Cultural Geography*, 2003.

Quick Response Code



Journal homepage:

<http://www.easpublisher.com/easjehl/>

Article History

Received: 15.07.2018

Accepted: 28.07.2019

Published: 24.08.2019

Copyright © 2019: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non commercial use (NonCommercial, or CC-BY-NC) provided the original author and source are credited.

2.1.1 House: A Prison for Women

Hogarth House, a two-storey house with gray-white external walls, is located in the suburbs of London, Richmond. "Gray light fills the room, muted, steel-toned", "Hogarth House is always nocturnal, even with its chaos of papers and books, its bright hassocks and Persian rugs"². Gray light creates a depressed and dignified atmosphere, which makes people feel suffocating and associate the state of the woman who lives there. Virginia Woolf, who lives there, is regarded as a patient in the house, under control and surveillance of her husband, her doctor and even servants, almost loses all her freedom. Her husband Leonard arranges her daily life, including eating, sleeping, writing, taking a walk and other trivial things. Her doctor examines her mental health regularly and gives her different tablets and warns her husband to make sure that she takes the tablets on time. The two men, meddle in Virginia's daily life unduly, they impose many a limitation on Virginia's normal life under the guise of care. Meanwhile, in the relationship between Virginia and her servant Nelly, Virginia also feels uneasy. "She goes up stairs stealthily, so as not to attract Nelly. Why does she always feel so secretive around servants, so guilty of crimes?", "She gets to her study, quietly close the door. Safe"³. Only after making sure that everything is safe, she starts writing. Why she is so cautious? She is the hostess of Hogarth House, and Nelly, merely a maidservant, why she is afraid of Nelly? In essence, Nelly is the representative or the helper of Virginia's husband, she helps him to keep a fairly watch on Virginia, and it makes Virginia feel fear and uncomfortable. Therefore, she always looks for the opportunity to slip out of the house; sometimes just for taking a walk outside, but sometimes she even attempts to go back to the downtown area of London, where is dangerous and attractive for her. "Here all she desires is a return to the dangers of city life (83, 79)"⁴. Virginia is deeply attached to London, where is filled with freedom and colorful life, and makes her heart beat and feel that she is truly alive. "All London implies about freedom, about kisses, about the possibilities of art and the sly dark glitter of madness"⁵. The opposite of London is Richmond or Hogarth House, a depressing place, like a care unit for mental patient, or more definitely, a prison for Virginia. Living there, she feels hopeless and breathless at every moment.

The second woman, Laura Brown, a housewife, lives in a large villa. Inside the villa, buff is the main color, different kinds of articles for daily use here and there. Laura has a considerate husband, a lovely son and she is heavy with a child again. It seems that everything is perfect for her and the life should be comfortable and warm. Nevertheless, under the perfect surface, an invisible thing annoys her, that is, a housewife.

Laura's husband is a soldier or a survivor of the Second World War. "When he comes back to California, he is received as something more than an ordinary hero"⁶. After the Second World War, men rule the world, especially the men who have participated in the War. As for Laura, she is so lucky and glorious that she can be his wife; therefore, she ought to be gentle and obedient, deal with all trivial household affairs for him and provide him a comfortable family life. "She should not be permitting herself to read", "She should be out of bed, showered and dressed, fixing breakfast for Dan and Richie", "and she should be standing before the stove in her new robe, full of simple, encouraging talk"⁷. A great many household chores exist in the large and square house. Even after her husband going to work, her son's grey eyes fix earnestly on her at every moment. He watches her, observes her, and sees what she is doing; if she is doing the things that a mother should do. "He watches her constantly, spends almost every waking hour in her presence", "He will watch her forever. He will always know when something is wrong. He will always know precisely when and how much she failed"⁸. Those all prevent Laura from doing her favorite thing, reading. She is a bookworm, and has deep love for reading books, but under the pressure of tradition and society, she has to repress her desire to read and force herself to adapt to this kind of life—dealing with household affairs. Besides, she also has to tell herself to be positive, to love her family, her husband and son, to treasure what she has now.

All these things make Laura feel unbearable eventually. When she reads *Mrs Dalloway*, she begins to rethink her life profoundly: only traipsing back and forth in the house, only doing trivial daily chores day and night, empty and meaningless. It is obvious that she is an intellectual woman; she should have her own ideas, her own work and life. But in reality, in order to gain recognition of the society, she becomes "the Angel in the house"⁹ and takes her husband and son as the center of her life. "She herself is trapped here forever, posing as a wife. She must get through this night, and then tomorrow morning, and then another night here, in these rooms, with nowhere else to go. She must please; she must

² Michael, Cunningham. *The hours*, 2000. p. 31.

³ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2000. p. 34.

⁴ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 83.

⁵ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 172.

⁶ Ibid. p. 40.

⁷ Ibid. p. 38.

⁸ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 192-193.

⁹ Dong, Xiao. *The imagery of Room in The Hours*(2012).

continue"¹⁰. Laura is overly disgusted with her present life, so she decides to get away from the house and see the outside world, to look for her own life and do her favorite things.

2.1.2 House: A Free Place for Women

House is regarded as a prison for Virginia and Laura, but for Clarissa, house has another meaning—freedom land. Clarissa lives in the end of the twentieth century, in New York City. As a magazine editor, Clarissa has a splendid villa, living with her girlfriend Sally. "Pine-planked floors, the bank of casement windows that open onto the bricked patio where emerald moss grows in shallow stone troughs and a small circular fountain, a platter of clear water, burbles at the touch of a switch"¹¹. Clarissa has her own villa, her own house. In her villa, no one keeps watch on her or forces her to do household chores. Besides, she is a career woman, and has formal occupation, and she communicates with other people actively and has a large circle of friends. Thus, she loves her life, she loves her house. "You try to inhabit it, to love it, because it's yours"¹². Besides, Clarissa occupies the dominant position in the relationship between her and her former boyfriend Richard, for she takes care of him for more than ten years. She is concerned with Richard's condition of illness and brings medicine to him regularly; she even decides to hold an evening party for the prize-winning works of Richard. And all of these out of her own free will. Meanwhile, the description of Richard's house has a sharp contrast with Clarissa's villa. "Only the ancient marble wainscoting, veined in blue and gray with deep yellow, smoky overlay, like a very fine old cheese, now hideously echoed by the yellowish walls"¹³. Richard's house is dirty and disarranged while Clarissa's villa is clean and neat, the contrast embodies that woman's social position has improved and women are even superior to men in some aspects. Here, "house" is the symbol of freedom, the author uses it to express that if a woman has her own house, she can be free from the control of men and keeps the initiative in her own hands. It works in concert with Virginia's point of view "Women should have their own houses"¹⁴.

At the beginning of 19th century, Virginia is under the control of her husband in Hogarth House; after the Second World War, Laura is puzzled by trivial daily chores in the buff villa; in the beginning of 20th century, Clarissa her own villa and lives an independent life. House as imagery runs through the whole novel and changes of the relationships between three houses and three women show that women never stop struggling for independence and freedom.

2.2 Flower

Flowers of different colors have different meaning: purple flowers represent mystery, yellow flowers represent melancholy, red flowers represent passion and white flowers represent conservatism.....Owing to the special relationship between flowers and women, writers always use flowers to describe women, different flowers represent different women.

On the one hand, women are always charming and attractive, like flowers, but on the other hand, besides ornamental functions, flowers have no real value, like women, in a male-oriented world, only being served as the accessory.

2.2.1 Depressive Purple Flowers

Flowers first appear in the description of the first woman Virginia Woolf, "she may pick up her pen and find that she is merely herself, a woman in a housecoat holding a pen, afraid and uncertain, only mildly competent, with no idea about where to begin or what to write. She picks up her pen. Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself"¹⁵. But in the real life, in Hogarth House, purple flowers are put in a vase by Virginia's servant, Nelly. Flowers are always decorations, and no one takes notice of them, so they are placed in an inconspicuous corner of the house.

Purple, the most difficult mixing color, has its own special meaning. On the one hand, it is deep, mysterious and creative; on the other hand, it is bleak, dark and unattractive. The characteristics of purple are exactly tallied with the character of Virginia. On the one hand, Virginia is a talented and thoughtful writer, often loses in her works and cannot get away, likes purple flowers, which are mysterious and creative. But on the other hand, in male-oriented culture, Virginia's works always cannot be understood, or even sometimes be criticized, also like purple flowers, bleak and unattractive. In spite of this, Virginia still loves writing, because during writing, she can control everything, including the hero's talking, action or even death. Besides, for a writer, the content of the work can most show her innermost thought. "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself", the sentence being wrote after careful consideration, embodies that the writer, Virginia herself, wants to arrange her own life freely, wants to buy the flowers herself, just like Mrs.

¹⁰ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 205

¹¹ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2000. p. 86.

¹² Ibid. p. 90.

¹³ Ibid. p. 48.

¹⁴ Wu, Hongqing. *Virginia Woolf and Feminism*, 2005.

¹⁵ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 32.

Dalloway. But the reality is just the opposite. In real life, Virginia is regarded as a mental patient, under the control of her husband and servants and lives in an unfamiliar place. She is unfamiliar with the places surrounding Hogarth House, let alone knowing where the flower shop is. The gap between the reality and the writing makes Virginia crazy and despairing.

Then, flowers appear in a bird's funeral. Virginia's sister Vanessa and her children find a dying bird on a muddy path and they send it to the backyard garden because they want to hold a funeral for the bird. Virginia joins them and helps create a bed in which the bird can die comfortably. Afterwards, Virginia let Angelica, her sister's daughter, to pick up some roses because she thinks that the funeral needs to be decorated by them. Then, "Angelica takes one of the roses they have picked and places it, carefully, along the edge of the grass mound. She adds another and another until she has created a rough circle of rose buds, thorny stems, leaves"¹⁶. Then, the bird dies on the warm bed surrounded by roses. Right at this moment, "Virginia looks with unanticipated pleasure at this modest circlet of thorns and flowers; this wild death bed. She would like to lie down on it herself"¹⁷. Virginia is lost in her thought, she thinks, maybe the dying bird, which surrounded by roses, is the true picture of her life. The dying bird finally dies on the warm bed, like she is often seemed depressed and close to emotional breakdown.

In others' eyes, Virginia has a comfortable and affluent life, she has a considerate husband, who takes care of her cautiously and tolerates all her behaviors. Every day, she can just do her favorite writing and does not have to consider anything because all her life has already been well arranged. But in Virginia's eyes, she may die in the superficial comfortable life because she has never been the master of her life. She just likes a bird locked up in a cage decorated by beautiful flowers. Flowers can disguise comfortable life but cannot relieve the depressive and disconsolate feelings in Virginia's heart.

2.2.2 Brave Yellow Roses

The second woman Laura Brown, a housewife without formal career, intends to buy some flowers for her husband's birthday party, "she thinks of the flowers she will buy, she thinks of roses surrounded by gifts"¹⁸. But when she gets up, she finds her husband Dan has already bought the flowers, "on the tabletop, a dozen white roses offer their complex, slightly sinister beauty"¹⁹. She is a little angry because she cannot buy the flowers herself, "oh, Dan. Roses, on your birthday, you are too much, really". Nevertheless, after a while, she cools down, she thinks "angry, it doesn't work" because a housewife should be obedient. Besides, her husband is a glorious soldier, who survives in the Second World War. He deserves it.

Then, as a wife, she should also make a birthday cake and make her husband happy in his birthday. It is the most important thing for her now. So, she has to put down her favorite book and to make a birthday cake with flowers. "She squeezes yellow rosebuds onto the edges from a pastry tube and writes 'Happy Birthday Dan' in white icing"²⁰. But, she is unsatisfied with the cake she made from beginning to end. "She'd imagined it larger, more remarkable, more lush and beautiful, more wonderful. This cake she's produced feels small, not just in the physical sense but as an entity. It looks amateurish; handmade"²¹, "she glances nervously at the cake, wishing she could hide it. There are crumbs caught in the icing. The 'n' in 'Dan' is squashed against a rose". Laura feels extremely guilty for that, "why did she put the roses first, when any idiot would have known to begin with message?"²².

Laura really minds the flowers, no matter the flowers for celebrating the birthday or the flowers on the birthday cake. Why? Maybe to some degree, flowers represent Laura herself, flowers are the decorations of the birthday and Laura herself is the decoration of her husband's life. Her life depends and centers on her husband and her son's life and she always feels depressed and sorrowful for that. Family makes her lose herself. She gives up her favorite reading, forgets her literary talent and expends all her energy on dealing with household chores. She is angry for she cannot buy flowers for her husband; she is upset for she cannot make a satisfied cake for him. "For her, domestic defeats are every bit as devastating as are lost battles to a general"²³. However, such kind of life makes Laura feel deeply tired. Superficially, Laura is dissatisfied with the birthday cake, but in fact, she is dissatisfied with her life, and she is dissatisfied with being an appendage of her husband's life.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 114.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 43.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 99.

²¹ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 99.

²² Ibid. p. 103.

²³ Ibid. p. 84.

However, all these break out after the visiting of Kitty (Laura's friend). Kitty wears a white T-shirt with a crystal flower ornament on her chest. When talking with Laura, Kitty loses control and cries out loud for she is ill and unable to have children with her husband. Laura is shocked after hearing that, because in her memory, "Kitty and her friends—steady, stolid, firm-featured, large-spirited, capable of deep loyalties and terrible cruelties—were the queens of the various festivals, the cheerleaders, the stars of the play"²⁴, but now, "Kitty has seemed, until this moment, like a figure of bright and tragic dignity—a woman standing by her man"²⁵. Laura is shocked by that and rethinks profoundly: woman can only exist as a birthing machine and eventually be buried under the household chores? No. She cannot continue this kind of life, family and herself, she can only choose one. It is inevitable to hurt the person she loves for the pursuit of herself, but she firmly believes that women should be independent and "women cannot find themselves through their husbands or children or through the dry and dull domestic chores"²⁶. She should have an independent life, although she may pay a heavy price for that. The flower here represents courage, and it implies that Laura finally has the courage to leave home and lives an independent life. "She goes to the window, parts the filmy white curtains, raises the blinds. There, below, is the V-shaped plaza, with its fountain and struggling rose bushes....."²⁷, Laura just likes those roses, never give up struggling.

2.2.3 Passionate Red Roses

The third woman Clarissa, she lives in the end of the twentieth century. She is independent economically, but still relatively relies on her former boyfriend Richard mentally and this kind of dependence is totally out of love, not the requirement of the traditional society, "Richard was the person Clarissa loved at her most optimistic moment"²⁸. Moreover, Clarissa takes care of Richard, who gets AIDS, ten years as one day. After hearing Richard wins a prestigious literary prize, she even decides to hold a celebrating party for him. She is the representative of women in new period.

Morning, she gets up early and directly goes to the flower shop to buy flowers for the evening party. She refuses to buy lily, which is recommended by the flower shop owner, because lily represents chaste and undefiled women. People always say that a man should marry a woman who is introverted like lily, not flaunting and can reconcile herself to being a housewife, and can devote all her life to the family. But the character of lily is totally opposed to the character of Clarissa, who is free and passionate. So, Clarissa only chooses the flowers she likes, "Clarissa chooses peonies and stranger lilies, cream colored roses, does not want the hydrangeas, and is considering irises (are irises somehow a little outdated?)....."²⁹.

Moreover, after buying them and going back her home, Clarissa can put the flowers in any places she wants, "Clarissa fills a vase with a dozen of the red roses. She takes it into the living room, puts it on the coffee table, steps back, and tries it several inches to the left"³⁰. As time goes by, women have more rights. It is an easy thing for women to buy flowers according to their wishes. In these open years, women begin to have an independent life and to decide all their personal things, including emotional issues. Clarissa has lived with her girlfriend Sally for almost 18 years, and they procreate a daughter by using the sperms from a man they never know, "the father no more than a numbered vial, no way of finding him"³¹. Clarissa and Sally bring up the girl together and live an affluent and free life. "Sally flourishes the roses and, at the same moment, notices the vase full of roses Clarissa has put on the table. They both laugh.....Sally hands the flowers to her and for a moment they are both simply and entirely happy"³². Clarissa is free and passionate, like red roses, she falls in love with her girlfriend Sally, and she loves her deeply. Red roses are the symbol of their everlasting love and also the symbol of female liberation.

2.3 Water

Water is always related with women, because people always say that women are made of water, superficially obedient and tender, but actually are full of passion. Water also has two aspects, sometimes gentle and quiet, and sometimes surging forward like a torrential tide. The two opposite aspects of water are very similar to the character of the three women in *The Hours*; they are all calm on the surface and surging in the deep.

²⁴ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 102.

²⁵ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 108.

²⁶ Yuan, Suhua. *The Hours: the Tactics of Intertextuality in Post-modern Time*(2009).

²⁷ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 143.

²⁸ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 97.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 110.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 117.

³¹ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 157.

³² Ibid. p. 180.

2.3.1 Water: The Symbol of Death

The beginning of the novel is the description of a drowning woman, Virginia, whose life is taken away by water. "She wades awkwardly (the bottom is mucky) out until she is up to her waist.....Almost involuntarily (it feels involuntary, to her) she steps or stumbles forward, and the stone pulls her inthen the current wraps itself around her and takes her with such sudden, muscular force it feels as if a strong man has risen from the bottom, grabbed her legs and held them to his chest. It feels personal"³³. Virginia goes into the river and ends her life. She sleeps in the water eternally, and after seeing that, no one feels sad or regretful, but a sense of relief, because Virginia eventually attains what she wants: freedom, through ending her life. She is finally freed from constant surveillance and all other encumbrances in the real world through ending her life. She gets peace through death.

The author uses the way of flashback, starting from the death of Virginia and then, the period of time before her death. When Virginia is twelve years old, the death of her mother makes her mental breakdown, so she is extremely sensitive and screwed-up in her childhood. She never goes to school like ordinary children and receives education at home; she is taught by her father, who is a well-read and knowledgeable man, has read a great number of literary masterpieces and has long-standing friendships with many famous scholars and distinguished personages. Under the influence of her father, Virginia has a rich spiritual world and extremely sensitive character and becomes a brilliant and thoughtful writer later. Virginia is not an ordinary person or she is doomed to be a person out of the ordinary; she is never satisfied with her current life because she always attempts to achieve an unusual and extraordinary objective, that is, the complete liberation of women.

However, Virginia lives in the early twentieth century. In that period, though women liberation movements rise here and there and gain a little success, the inequality between men and women still exists obviously in the society. Virginia also repeatedly calls for the equal rights and social status between men and women in her works, and women should have their independent identities and voices, but these only receive a lukewarm endorsement. The reality proves that her objective is impossible to be achieved. As a result of it, she feels painful and her mental disease becomes worse and breaks out many times. The authoritative doctor says that Virginia needs to rest quietly for some time to recuperate. Then, her husband Leonard brings her to Richmond and keeps close watch on all her activities together with servants. Virginia hates living in Richmond because it is the epitome of the traditional Patriarchal Society and it is completely opposed to her ideal life or her objective. Therefore, Virginia always attempts to get away from Richmond and back to her love London, "Better to die raving mad in London than evaporate in Richmond"³⁴. But when considering her husband and her family members who care much about her, she gives up her ideas. Therefore, she can only comfort her heart through writing; she often uses water as the object of her writing, which appears in her writings many times. She loves the free and uninhibited water, moving around and owning strong strength, and she believes that water can bring her peace. But the reality is quite the contrary, her thought likes water, is unable to stop, rolls ahead ceaselessly in her heart. And the gap between her thought and the reality troubles her, and makes her cannot get a moment's peace. Maybe death is the only way for her to free herself, and only death can make a little contribution to her objective. "Death is the city below, which is Mrs. Dalloway loves and fears and which she wants, in some way, to walk into so deeply she will never find her way back again"³⁵. Then, Virginia goes into the river without hesitation; she goes into the free world. She hopes to use death to arouse women, to promote women liberation movements. She hopes her spirit can be continuous and unbroken, like water, in-pours in every woman's heart.

2.3.2 Water: The Symbol of Hope

The second woman Laura Brown, lives in the period after the Second World War, she is a young housewife without formal career and is pregnant again. After the War, American people are mentally and physically exhausted; they all want to have a peaceful, stable and happy family life, especially the soldiers who survive in the War. Laura's husband is one of those glorious soldiers, he needs a virtuous wife, and he needs a warm and sweet home. It is the universal living pattern after the War, men go to work outside and women stay at home to deal with domestic chores. But Laura is a woman who loves reading and thinking, she pursues not only material satisfactions, but also spiritual needs. After reading Mrs. Dalloway, the indescribable pressure or the questions in her heart being answered and she clearly realize the limitation of her life: obviously, she is a talented woman like Mrs. Dalloway, but she cannot do what Mrs. Dalloway does, she is trapped in household chores, day after day, year after year, no freedom, no career, no independent social status. She feels herself is on the verge of emotional collapse, and it is necessary for her to find a place to calm her down. Then, she requests a neighbor to take care of her son and drives her into a hotel; she opens a room and lies on the bed quietly, she starts reading Mrs. Dalloway and thinks it can bring her peace, but the result is just the opposite. The thought of female liberation in Mrs. Dalloway likes waves surge forward her heart, "she is taken by a wave of feeling, a sea-swell, that rises from under her breast and buoys her, floats her gently, as if she were a sea creature thrown back from the

³³ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 5.

³⁴ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 164.

sand where it had beached itself—as if she had been returned from a realm of crushing gravity to her true medium, the suck and swell of salt water, that weightless brilliance"³⁶. She begins to indulge in fantasy, she thinks, she may die and end all of these through death, and then get free, like Virginia Woolf, "it could, she thinks, be deeply comforting; it might feel so free: to simply go away"³⁷. She imagines the sound of flowing water becoming louder and clearer, she can feel the rapid flowing water submerging her. She strokes the smooth curve of her pregnant belly, inside which is her baby. All of a sudden, she shouts, "I can't!" She sits up on the bed, sobbing and thinking, "Still, she is glad to know (for somehow, suddenly, she knows) that it is possible to stop living. There is comfort in facing the full range of options; in considering all your choices, fearlessly and without guile.....It (death) would be as simple as checking into a hotel, it would be as simple as that."³⁸

Water makes her awake when she attempts to die, and lets her know that death is a possible choice, not necessary, it can be choosing. "Suicide is a behavior violated the law of nature, it can help you out of trouble momentarily, but it cannot solve the fundamental problem". Death can help her avoid all the things, but in the meantime, it proves that she has never been independent in that she gives up the right of living independently. So, she must have a better choice and the choice is completely not death. "One cannot truly get peace through avoiding life"³⁹. Water gives Laura hope and courage to continue living. Later, Laura makes the most important decision in her life: she gives birth to the baby in her belly, then, in a fine day morning, she leaves home and goes to Canada and finds a job in a university library. She finally has a greater space to achieve her dream of reading, and is no longer troubled by household chores; she finally has independent economic ability and lives an independent life. "Laura reads the moment as it passes. Here it is, she thinks; there it goes. The page is about to turn"⁴⁰.

2.3.3 Water: The Symbol of Freedom

The third woman, Clarissa, lives at the end of the twentieth century, a fifty year-old woman, still attractive. She is also optimistic and confident. She gets up early and goes to buy some flowers for the dinner party, and she is awful good humor. "The vestibule door opens onto a June morning so fine and scrubbed Clarissa pauses at the threshold as she would at the edge of a pool, watching the turquoise water lapping at the tiles, the liquid nets of sun wavering in the blue depth"⁴¹. Water is cheerful and light-hearted, just like Clarissa's mood. In that period, the equality between men and women has mainly achieved and women have independent social status.

Then, Clarissa goes to see her former boyfriend Richard, and goes into his house, "The apartment has, more than anything, an underwater aspect. Clarissa walks through it as she would negotiate the hold of a sunken ship"⁴². Richard's house is filled with water, like a sunken ship, and water represents women liberation and independence. It embodies that women as independent social identities have influenced men's life in many aspects, women no longer be in a subordinate position. After Richard drops from the window and dies, although Clarissa is shocked and sorrowful, she can well control her emotions, "she feels (and is astonished at herself) slightly embarrassed by what has happened. She wonders why she doesn't weep"⁴³. It is easy for Clarissa to control herself, just like "turning off the faucet"⁴⁴. Women not only can control their emotions easily but also can control their life easily, and their lives are not influenced by men anymore.

After Richard died, although Clarissa feels sad and sorrowful, she is optimistic as well, "Clarissa will be bereaved, deeply lonely, but she will not die, she will be too much in love with life, with London"⁴⁵. The river of women liberation arouses heavy waves in Clarissa's years, women become independent and their life only centre on themselves, and they have courage to face all the difficulties because they love their life. "An hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we have ever imagined, though everyone knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything for more"⁴⁶.

³⁶ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 36.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 145.

³⁸ Michael Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2003. p. 152.

³⁹ Virginia, Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1998.

⁴⁰ Michael Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 200.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 9.

⁴² Ibid. p. 56.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 195.

⁴⁴ Yao, Fanmei. *The Application of Visual Metaphor and Symbolic Rhetoric in The Hours*,

⁴⁵ Michael, Cunningham. *The Hours*, 2005. p. 203.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 216.

III. CONCLUSION:

The story of three women lasts for over seventy years, and each of the three women is the representative of an era of the twentieth century. The relationships between them and the house, flower and water all express that with the development of the times and the progress of the society, the female consciousness has been awakened and women social status have been improved.

In Virginia Woolf's age, under the influence of male-dominated culture, the thinking women who pursue independence cannot be understood by most people. She is lonely and extremely desperate, but she never gives up, she is always thinking, pursuing and struggling, which occupy more than half of their life. But sadly, in the end, she can only get freedom through death, a helpless way. In this age, the power of women is extremely weak.

In Laura's age, the status of a housewife annoys her. Although she is painful, her choice is not death but living, which needs more courage and determination. Family and herself, she chooses to pursue herself firmly. On the surface, her conduct is a betrayal of her family, but in essence, her conduct is the full affirmation of her personal value. After that, she is extremely peaceful when facing the public criticism, which says that she abandons her husband and son, is totally not a responsible wife and mother, bad enough. She is still peaceful, because her soul is free and she finally gets a complete life. "Here she is, the woman from Richard's poetry. Here is the lost mother, the thwarted suicide; here is the woman who walked away. It is both shocking and comforting that such a figure could, in fact, prove to be an ordinary-looking old woman seated on a sofa with her hands in her lap", "So Laura Brown, the woman who tried to die and failed at it, the woman who fled her family, is alive when all the others, all those who struggled to survive in her wake, have passed away. She is alive now, after her ex-husband has been carried off by liver cancer, after her daughter has been killed by a drunk driver. She is alive after Richard has jumped from a window onto a bed of broken glass⁴⁷". Yes, she is still alive, because she is alive for herself, not others. Maybe many people comment her a hateful and poor woman, but she is a respectable woman as well, because of her courage, her independence and her determination of pursuing personal value. Moreover, she takes a big step on the way of women liberation.

In Clarissa's age, women already have their own houses and the income of five hundred pounds a year, which called by Virginia Woolf. She is the most independent one among three women, but she still spiritually relies on men. Only after the death of Richard, she becomes completely independent. After his death, Clarissa is never dispirited; she is still calm and finally feels relieved. From now on, no one calls her Mrs. Dalloway, and her life and feelings only belong to her. "It seems, at that moment, that Richard begins truly to leave the world. To Clarissa it is an almost physical sensation, a gentle but irreversible pulling-away, like a blade of grass being drawn out of the ground", "Yes, Clarissa thinks, it's time for the day to be over⁴⁸". She finally gets spiritual independence and finally completely gets rid of the emotional attachment of men. "Here she is, herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore.....Here she is with another house before her⁴⁹".

Michael Cunningham uses imageries to shape the three women who live in different periods of the 20th century. They break through the limitation of the house, the bondage of flower, like the wavy choppy water; try hard to welcome their independent and free new life.

REFERENCE

1. Dong Xiao. The Imagery of Room in *The Hours*, *Journal of Hebei Union University* 3, 2012.
2. Michael Cunningham. *The Hours*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
3. Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Macmillan Collector's Library, 1998.
4. Wu Hongqing. *Virginia Woolf and Feminism*. China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2005.
5. Yao Fanmei. The Application of Visual Metaphor and Symbolic Rhetoric in *The Hours*, *The World Literature Criticism* 10, 2017.
6. Yuan Suhua. *The Hours: The Tactics of Intertextuality in Post-modern Time*, *QiuSuo* 5, 2009.