“A woman's whole life in a single day. Just one day. And in that day her whole life”

Fluid Sexual Identity in Michael Cunningham’s The Hours

B.A. Essay

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Abstract
This bachelor thesis, Fluid Sexual Identity in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* focuses on the approach to sexual identity in *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham. Cunningham as a gay writer draws on his own experiences and integrates his vision of sexual identity into his works. He perceives sexual identity as a fluid and never fixed quality. In this essay the main characters of the novel will be examined to present the complicated themes of sexuality and identity. *The Hours* contains three narrative strands. The first one explores one day in Virginia Woolf’s life as she starts to write *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923. The second strand focuses on Laura Brown’s day in 1949 as she is trying to escape her life of an American housewife. The third strand concentrates on Clarissa Vaughan, a New York based editor, as she organizes a party for her dying friend, Richard. An analysis of these three characters will form the main substance of this essay. In the last part of this essay the movie *The Hours*, based on the novel, will be analysed as it translates to the screen the main themes of the novel. Arguments will be supported by source material from a varied assortment of articles, interviews with the author and profiles written about the novel along with material relating to the eponymous film based on the novel.

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Introduction

This essay provides an analysis of Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours*. In this essay my emphasis will be on examining the theme of sexuality and sexual identity. Because Cunningham sees sexual identity as a variable process, not a stable and unchanging state, he is against dividing people into hetero- and homosexuals. His perception of sexual identity is reflected in his works. In one of his most acclaimed novels, *The Hours*, he paints a tender portrait of the many faces of sexuality and sexual identity. His novel presents portraits of three women touched by Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. Cunningham, from his early teenage years, was fascinated with Woolf and his novel draws on her themes and concerns and reinterprets them. He creates Woolf as one of the characters of his novel, describing one day of her life, a day spent on creating and writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. His Virginia, although based on Cunningham’s extensive research, is a strictly fictional character. Cunningham follows her day in Richmond, where she lives with her husband, Leonard. In the second narrative strand he focuses on Clarissa Vaughan, an editor living in New York in the end of the twentieth century. Cunningham follows her day as she prepares a party for her friend and former lover, Richard. Even though she is happy in her relationship of eighteen years with Sally, Richard’s illness causes her to reevaluate her life and question her life choices. Episodes centred on her character are named “Mrs. Dalloway”, because of the nickname Richard created for her years back. The last storyline focuses on Laura Brown, a housewife living in Los Angeles in 1949. She and her husband Dan, the Second World War veteran have one son, Richie and expect another child. Cunningham describes one day in Laura’s life, a day spent on reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and trying to find a way out of her unhappy life. The analysis will focus on these three women, their emotional contemplations and actions. These three stories represent identity struggles in different socio-cultural eras. Even though they live in different eras, some of their concerns stay much the same. In this essay I will explore how Cunningham’s vision of sexual identity as polymorphous and fluid is described and represented in *The Hours*. I will analyse how the theme of identity is depicted and presented in different socio-cultural eras and how expanded through times when personal freedom and increased women’s rights
effect identity related dilemmas. I will seek to analyse the theme of suppressed desires and the consequences of living a split life.

I will support my arguments with source material from various essays, interviews on the subject and profiles written about Michael Cunningham and the film based on his novel. My primary source material will be the novel and the movie. I will use both to support my arguments. A collection of essays and interviews on the subject will be used to support my point of view. The essay is divided into five sections; an introduction, a biographical segment which introduces Michael Cunningham as a writer, a theoretical look at the relationship between two novels: *The Hours* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, an analytical segment split into four parts, a section dedicated to the film adaptation of the novel, and lastly a conclusion.

1. **Michael Cunningham as a gay writer**

Michael Cunningham was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1952, and grew up in Pasadena, California. After graduating from Stanford University he received his MFA from the University of Iowa. As a homosexual, Michael Cunningham is very open about his sexuality. Themes of sexual identity are visible in all of his work and he admits that he draws on his experiences: “It kind of organically falls into the story that I write. As a gay man myself, I’ve had certain experiences and you sort of draw on the experiences that you have had. I certainly don’t feel that I need to produce books with gay stuff in them for some hypothetical reader. I really and truly write what I know best and what is interesting to me” (Halterman). According to Reed Woodhouse’s categorization of gay literature, Cunningham’s work belongs to the post-Stonewall literature labelled as assimilative. This version of gay fiction “tacitly appeals to mainstream values - especially those of the family, or of monogamous love” (Woodhouse 3). Cunningham integrates homosexuality into the mainstream literature. Even though his characters very often happen to be gay, he does not want their sexuality to be defying them quality: “What I'm left with, for my own purposes, is something like this: I am a gay writer. I'm also a white male writer, an upper-middle-
class writer, an American writer. All those qualities matter in some ways, and, in others, matter very little. In the final analysis, one is simply charged with writing the best goddamned novels one can write, using whatever the world has shown us, and the world does show itself in certain particular ways to people who are gay, white, male, middle-class, and American” (Moore).

Assimilative fiction has been criticized for its failure to present difference; protagonists are only able to temporarily establish alternative families, ‘leaving the gay protagonists isolated and often wretched’ (Young, 16). While Woodhouse in his categorization considers audiences as either gay or straight, Cunningham writes for ‘smart’ heterosexuals: “What I meant to say is that I don't want to be seen as only a gay writer. I've always been out, and most of my novels are concerned with the lives of gay people. I'm perfectly happy to be a gay writer, because, well, that's what I am. What I never wanted was to be pushed into a niche. I didn't want the gay aspects of my books to be perceived as their single, primary characteristic. Like any halfway serious writer, I'm trying to write about more than my characters' outward qualities, and focus on the depths of their beings, their fears and their devotions, which take place at a level deeper than sexual orientation. Gay people fall in and out of love, for instance, in ways that are not entirely foreign to the ways in which straight people do. There are of course some real differences in the ways gay people live and what we experience, but we're not from Mars” (Moore).

Young notices that Cunningham writes at a time when sexuality is seen as a fluid force, and proposes that terms like ‘assimilative’ or ‘queer’ should be re-evaluated. Rather than writing for either a gay or straight audience, Cunningham takes into account contemporary notions of sexuality as polymorphous (Young 19-21). For Cunningham human sexuality does not fall into the distinct categories defined by the words homosexual and heterosexual. He underlined this in one of his interviews: “Human sexuality is tremendously complicated, so much so that the designations ‘gay,’ ‘straight,’ and ‘bisexual’ are all but meaningless. How many of us have had crushes, and even sexual experiences, with people who fall outside our official ‘erotic category’? Okay, not everyone, but many
of us. I’m interested in sexuality that falls outside the official lines of demarcation” (La Force).

2. The relationship between Mrs. Dalloway and The Hours

The Hours is a novel written by Michael Cunningham. It was published in 1998, and won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and PEN Faulkner Award for Fiction. From his early teenage years Cunningham was deeply fascinated with and moved by Virginia Woolf’s works: “I can’t imagine a more important writer than Woolf today. She knew that our lives, all our lives, are epic stories, and she had the power to tell our stories as no one has before or since” (Cunningham “The Years” 140). In one of his interviews he stated that he appreciates her works because of the characters she created and her lavishing use of language. What is especially important for him, is that Woolf “understood and wanted us to understand that there are no insignificant days, that there are no insignificant lives - that any day in anyone’s life contains most of what we need to know about all of life, very much the way the blueprint for an entire organism is imprinted on every strand of its DNA” (“The Years” 140). Her ‘one day novel’ describes everyday prosaic and ordinary experiences ‘conveying the experience of being alive’ (Schiff 379). Cunningham himself called The Hours an improvisation on Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway. His inspiration is clearly seen in the title of his work, as The Hours was Virginia Woolf’s original title for Mrs. Dalloway. As Pilliere states in her article “Michael Cunningham’s The Hours: echoes of Virginia Woolf”, The Hours is not a copy or pastiche of Mrs Dalloway but a reinterpretation and invitation to look for new parallels and new meanings (133). Critics have also defined The Hours as an homage to Woolf, an imitation of Woolf’s novel, an interweaving of Woolf’s life, death, novel, and theories (Battisati 158). In his work Cunningham explores themes that are typical for Woolf – sex and love, madness and sanity, suicide and the city and, as Woolf proclaims, that no life is ordinary (Young 34-38) and offers “a rewrite through which we can imagine the history of women’s emancipation as centred around the possibility of rewriting time, and in the end, reframing matters of life and death, happiness and suffering” (Steyaert 166). Hardy, in her work “The Unanchored
Self In The Hours After Dalloway” notices that Cunningham’s use of Woolf’s themes, images, events and characters “makes us feel afloat in a world of dispersal, disjunction, and play (...), in a world of postmodern sensibility that goes far beyond a project of straightforward homage” (Hardy 401).

3. Cunningham’s vision of identity reflected in *The Hours*

“My life has been stolen from me. I'm living in a town I have no wish to live in... I'm living a life I have no wish to live... How did this happen?” (*The Hours-Film*).

Virginia Woolf, as portrayed by Cunningham, decides to focus only on one day in Clarissa Dalloway’s life. She believes that a single day can reflect a person’s entire life experience. She knows that everything in one’s life is equally important and can influence one’s attitudes towards life. Cunningham shares Woolf’s belief that the experiences of one day in a life can mirror an entire life experience; his novel’s narrative span occurs on one June day in the lives of three women: Virginia Woolf, Clarissa Vaughan and Laura Brown. It is the first of Cunningham’s novels in which the theme of women is central. The story is divided into three narratives: Virginia’s Richmond in 1923, Clarissa’s New York at the end of the twentieth century and Laura’s Los Angeles in 1949. All three women are influenced by Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and related to each other through her story. The chapters are entitled “Mrs. Dalloway”, “Mrs. Woolf” and “Mrs. Brown” and divided into several episodes. As Battisti points out, “Even though these three threads seem separate, Michael Cunningham manages to achieve a sense of cohesion, interweaving the lives of the three women, in spite of the different places and periods in which they live” (Battisti 159).

Each text crosses different social, cultural and historical contexts, but the main concerns these women share are the same: “By constructing parallels between their lives which are, nevertheless, distinguished by class, time, space, domestic roles and occupation, the text claims a common ground of female experience at the level of the everyday, one that centres upon the notion of woman’s universal suffering under the constraints of the domestic quotidien. *The Hours* explores the efforts of these three women to negotiate their
everyday, domestic roles as mother, wife, hostess and/or carer, with their personal aspirations and sense of self” (Lorraine 61). The cohesion of experience between Cunningham’s characters is especially visible in his repetition of metaphors, thematic and semantic structures (Young 64). The characters constantly contemplate the success or failure of their lives “seeking external indicators of worth and value in the material worlds in order to validate their judgement” (Young 41). Cunningham portrays female identity through the decades from early twentieth-century Europe forward through America in the twenty-first century to explore the ambiguity of sexual orientation and the instability and complexity of identity. In his work he employs Woolf’s questions and themes to represent the image and treatment of homosexuality in different decades of the twentieth century, an image defined by different social and cultural standards. Cunningham explores the problem of ‘suppressed desire’, the difficulty and consequences of living a split life. He explores the outcome of the split between socially acceptable persona and the private self. His characters are touched by madness, depression and loneliness. Even though female empowerment provided increasing rights and freedom for women, all three women are thwarted by social restrictions and limitations in many aspects of personal and social life. As Cunningham explains, “I wondered what would happen if someone very much like Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway were alive today and free of the constraints that were placed on Clarissa Dalloway in London in the ’20s. What if she were set free? Would it be different or ultimately pretty much the same? Would she impose her own restrictions?”(Schiff, “Interview” 113). Young calls The Hours “a novel about the narration of identity” and Mrs. Dalloway as “a novel about the fluidity of identity” (39-41). Similarly to Woolf, Cunningham is interested in his characters’ ‘becoming through interconnections’. As Schiff underlines, “Woolf’s modernist writing remains very genuine for understanding the fluidity and multiplicity of life becoming, a concept that Cunningham continues, imitates, paraphrases, and partially transforms by extending and improvising on Woolf’s exploration of the fragmentation, complexity, and multiple nature of the self” (371).

As Steyaert emphasises in his article, Cunningham analyses gender identity as “not one that leads to a kind of resolution, or a climax, but one that redefines the time of one’s
life through its pauses, its exquisite moments and the ordinary hours of a day” (165). Cunningham explores identity as a product of daily interactions and experiences and takes into account personal and social influences to explore the tension between the inner and outer lives of his characters. He describes how identities change over time as people create new relations in the public scene. As Povalyaeva states in her article “The Issue of Self-identification in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Cunningham‘s The Hours”, “What looks common to both writers is, first of all, their understanding of the ways and methods of self-identification of a personality in the world: communication with other people, love, family, career, art” (270). Cunningham contemplates the stability of self-identity and struggle to define personal sense of being. In his view identity is fluctuating, as a stream, a flow. It is a changing process, constantly in creation. Identity in his eyes is never fixed or absolute. Cunningham makes sexual ambivalence and identity significant concerns of his novel. The fluid nature of sexuality and repressed desires are explored through the stream-of-consciousness technique which gives the reader access to the characters’ minds and thoughts. As Steyaert highlights “Cunningham constitutes the three women by describing the quality and the sensations that are part and parcel of the minute-to-minute unfolding of one day ‘out’ of each of their lives. The opening passages of each of the characters are painted through nuances of colour, rhythm and aliveness as each of them wakes up and begins the day. Each passage gives us a different take on the experience of flow” (172).

Mrs. Woolf’s morning brings a sensation of flow when she “moves without walking”, “floats through a feather of perception, unbodied” through the “world of farms and meadows”. Her vision of a Platonic park bring an impression of liquidity “a stone maiden, smoothed by weather, stands at the edge of a clear pool and muses into the water. Virginia moves through the park as if impelled by a cushion of air” (Cunningham 30).

Mrs Brown’s morning is full of tensions between the expectations of society and her own longing ‘to lose herself’ in reading. She awakes to “some sort of pulsating machinery in the remote distance, a steady pounding like a gigantic mechanical heart, (…) she felt the dank sensation around her, the nowhere feeling, and knew it was going to be a difficult day. She knew she was going to have trouble believing herself, in the room of her house”
(Cunningham 38). While she reads *Mrs. Dalloway* she experiences a sense of fluid becoming. “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 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 saltwater, that weightless brilliance” (Cunningham 40). She reads to “calm and locate herself” (Cunningham 40).

Clarissa’s day presents similar sensation of flow and liquidity, when “Clarissa pauses at the threshold as she would at the edge of pool, watching the turquoise water lapping at the tiles, the liquid nets of sun wavering in the blue depths. As if standing at the edge of a pool she delays the plunge (…) New York in (…) its bottomless decline” (Cunningham 9).

In his literary creation of fluid and disruptive identities he places three narratives on a chart of historical progression from secrecy toward assimilation (Young 70). Because of the social and moral restrictions of late-Victorian England with its implementation of sexual restraint and strict social code of conduct, Virginia Woolf is forced to repress her true identity and her desires. Through the characters of Virginia and Laura, Cunningham explores the negative effect of suppressed desires and living a split life. Cunningham uses the terms “obfuscation”, “clogged pipes”, “gold”, “indescribable second self”, “a parallel” to describe Virginia’s deeply hidden self: “This morning she may penetrate the obfuscation, the clogged pipes, to reach the gold. She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she was religious she would call it the soul. It is more than the sum of her intellect and her emotions, more than the sum of her experiences, though it runs like veins of brilliant metal through all three. It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made of the same substance, and when she is very fortunate, she is able to write directly through that faculty. Writing in that state is the most profound satisfaction she knows, but her access to it comes and goes without warning” (Cunningham 35).

In her social life and in her relationships she tries to stay in a character of Virginia, she does not allow herself be her true self. Her acts are well planned and rehearsed. Her
split identity is clearly visible in a scene in which Virginia Woolf watches her servant Nelly: “Virginia walks through the door. She feels fully in command of the character who is Virginia Woolf, and as that character she removes her cloak, hangs it up, and goes downstairs to the kitchen to speak to Nelly about lunch. In the kitchen, Nelly is rolling out a crust. Nelly is herself, always herself; (...) How does she remember, how does she manage, every day and every hour, to be so exactly the same?” (Cunningham 84). Sometimes she gets lost in acts, and has trouble remembering who she really is: “she pauses to remember herself. She has learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation… She is the author; Leonard, Nelly, Ralph, and the others are the readers” (Cunningham 83). As Laura feels like an actress going onstage to perform, Virginia sees herself as an author, she creates a vision of herself for the others. She only allows the society to see what she is ready to reveal. As Richie represents the always present controlling eye of society for Laura, Nelly represent the same kind of threat for Virginia who is aware that “Nelly, is powerful; that she knows secrets; that queens that care more about solving puzzles in their chambers than they do about the welfare of their people must take whatever they get” (Cunningham 85). Living in hiding contributed to Virginia’s mental disease, the always present headaches, voices and finally thoughts which led to her suicide. She, herself is afraid to be her own self, even too afraid to look in the mirror. The mirror poses a threat to Virginia because of its ability to represent her true self. She is afraid to look herself in the face: “the mirror is dangerous, it sometimes shows her dark manifestation of air that matches her body, takes her form, but stands behind, watching her, with porcine eyes and wet, hushed breathing” (Cunningham 30-31). She needs to concentrate and make an effort to no be herself: “she must work to stay in character… do not think of the face in the mirror” (Cunningham 85). She is trapped in her house in Richmond, which seems to her “not dark itself but it seems to be illuminated against darkness” (Cunningham 31). With optimism she tries to face another day, which could be good if “treated carefully” (Cunningham 31). Virginia feels very often out of place, the feeling of nonbelonging which she experiences is most visible in the scene at the train station. She tries to physically escape her life as it is in Richmond and go back to her old life in London. It is too tiring and exhausting emotionally for her to keep on living in
hiding, never be able to be fully herself: “And here, of course, is the dilemma: he’s entirely right and horribly wrong at the same time. She is better, she is safer, if she rests in Richmond; if she does not speak too much, write too much, feel too much; … and yet she is dying this way, she is gently dying on a bed of roses. Better, really, to face the fin in the water than to live in hiding” (Cunningham 169). She decides to move to London where “She will remain sane and she will live as she was meant to live, richly and deeply, among others of her kind, in full possession and command of her gifts” (Cunningham 209). When Leonard looks at her he first sees Virginia Stephen. It emphasizes that before being a wife of Mr. Woolf she was her own self. Now he sees Virginia Woolf, as she is defined by being the wife of her husband and taking his last name.

Virginia herself expresses her own homoerotic desire in her fiction. She can create and manipulate the storylines in her fiction but she herself cannot act on her feeling because of the rigorous social restrictions at the time. As Schiff notes: “Because of the cultural climate, Woolf was compelled to live a relatively secret and encoded sexual existence, and her character Clarissa Dalloway, whose sexual orientation would appear to be largely toward women, ends up in a rather chaste, heterosexual marriage that crushes her soul” (368). The image of her life reminiscences one of “depicted flowers floating in bowls of water” (Cunningham 83).

The character of Mrs. Dalloway is the manifestation of Virginia’s true feeling and desires. While walking in Richmond she decides that “Clarissa will have had a love: a woman. Or a girl, rather; yes, a girl she knew during her girlhood; one of those passions that flare up when one is young—when love and ideas seem truly to be one’s personal discovery, never before apprehended in quite this way; during that brief period of youth when one feels free to do or say anything; to shock, to strike out; to refuse the future that’s been offered and demand another, far grander and stranger, devised and owned wholly by oneself (…) Clarissa Dalloway, in her first youth, will love another girl, Virginia thinks; Clarissa will believe that a rich, riotous future is opening before her, but eventually… she will come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man. Yes, she will come to her senses, and marry. She will die in the middle age, she will kill herself, probably, over
some trifle” (Cunningham 81-82). Virginia creates Clarissa as an idealized version of herself. She is aware of the fact that she is a bit eccentric and to some extent she regrets that she is not more similar to her mother or her sister Vanessa. She lacks in domestic skills and struggles with her servants. She creates Clarissa Dalloway to be the perfect hostess; someone she would want to be. She does not feel in control over her own life and her demons. She decides that Clarissa will have “great skill with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding. Her servants will love her. They will do more than she asks” (Cunningham 81). She creates Clarissa as “the consummate social being, a far cry from Virginia herself, for whom there was always a tension between the social self and the creative self” (Charles 308).

According to Young her preoccupation with her lack of authority represents the fragility of her own sense of self and the denial of maternity as Woolf was prevented from becoming a mother by her doctors (53). Virginia thinks that having children “is the true accomplishment; this will live after the tinselly experiments in narrative have been packed off along with the old photographs and fancy dresses” (Cunningham 118). She is afraid that the work of her life, her novels won’t survive. She misses her life in London very deeply, especially all that the city has to offer; the people and freedom that the city is offering represent life: “On the other side is London, and all London implies about freedom, about kisses, about the possibilities of art and the sly dark glitter of madness” (Cunningham 172).

“Oh, it's about this woman who's incredibly - well, she's a hostess and she's incredibly confident and she's going to give a party. And, maybe because she's confident, everyone thinks she's fine... but she isn't” (The Hours-Film).

Laura feels misplaced and suffocated in her role as a 1940s housewife. She married her husband out of obligation rather than love. She felt obligated to provide her husband with the happy life he deserved because he fought in World War II “less than five years ago Dan was believed to have died at Anzio, and when he was revealed two days later to be alive after all … and when he came back to California he was received as something more than
an ordinary hero… and proposed to his best friend's older sister… what could she say but yes” (Cunningham 39). Years later she is still wondering why she married him: “She married him out of love. She married him out of guilt; out of fear of being alone; out of patriotism” (Cunningham 106). She is afraid that there must be something wrong with her. She herself is not sure if the feelings she experiences are common to all women or it is just her emotional instability: “She would like to know if Kitty feels like a strange woman, powerful and unbalanced the way artists are said to be, full of vision, full of rage, committed above all to creating…what?” (Cunningham 106). She instructs herself to be happy because she is loved by her husband and her son; she commands herself to be brave: “She does not dislike her child, does not dislike her husband. She will rise and be cheerful” (Cunningham 41). She understands that she is very lucky but deep inside she is miserable. She is afraid that she cannot discover her true talents while she is taking care of her husband and family (Young 55). She feels despondent about her life. Laura Brown knows that she fails in her role as a mother and a wife. The cake she decides to bake for her husband’s birthday symbolizes her desire to succeed in her role as a mother and a wife. She decides to give it another chance but she is never content with the outcome. When the cake she bakes fails her expectations, she feels that she has failed also as a creator. Her creation is as imperfect as her life: “a cake invested with an undeniable and profound sense of comfort, of bounty. She wants to have baked a cake that banishes sorrow, even if only for a little while. She wants to have produced something marvellous; something that would be marvellous even to those who do not love her. She has failed” (Cunningham 144). She contemplates leaving behind the life which has defined her: “For a moment she wants only to leave - not to harm him, she’d never do that - but to be free, blameless, unaccountable” (Cunningham 78). In a sudden surge of emotions she finds herself unexpectedly content with her life: “it seems suddenly easy to bake a cake, to raise a child. She loves her son purely, as mothers do - she does not resent him, does not wish to leave. She loves her husband, and is glad to be married (…) She has caught up with herself (…) she will not lose hope. She will not mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents (…) she will remain devoted to her son, her husband and duties, all her gifts” (Cunningham 79).
Cunningham describes Laura’s split identity in the scene at the hotel. Her other self is “humiliated”, “unfortunate” and “perverse”. She feels almost as a physical presence of her other self: “It’s almost as if she’s accompanied by an invisible sister, a perverse woman full of rage and recrimination, a woman humiliated by herself, and it is this woman, this unfortunate sister, and not Laura, who needs comfort and silence. Laura could be a nurse, ministering to the pain of another” (Cunningham 149). She imagines different version of herself watching her from behind. “For an instant, no more than that, she has imagined some sort of ghost self, a second version of her, standing immediately behind, watching” (Cunningham 214). She tries to find some balance between her social self and private self. “So now she is Laura Brown. Laura Zielski, the solitary girl, the incessant reader is gone, and here in her place is Laura Brown” (Cunningham 40). She performs her role as a mother and wife but feels very uncomfortable, unfit and unprepared for it: “a dreamlike feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed” (Cunningham 43). She performs her social self for her family but it resembles the life of living death. “A spasm of fury rises unexpectedly, catches in her throat. He is coarse, gross, stupid; he has sprayed spit on the cake. 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 continue” (Cunningham 205).

Laura desperately tries to find a way out; she considers suicide: “It is possible to die. Laura thinks, suddenly, of how she - how anyone - can make a choice like that. It is a reckless, vertiginous thought, slightly disembodied - it announces itself inside her head, faintly but distinctly, like a voice cracking from a distant radio station. She could decide to die. (…) By going to a hotel, she sees, you leave the particulars of your own life and enter a neutral zone, a clean white room, where dying does not seem quite so strange” (Cunningham 151). She decides against taking her own life, she chooses living. Her choice is the expression of her autonomy: “She strokes her belly. I would never. She says the words out loud in the clean, silent room: “I would never.” She loves life, loves it hopelessly, at least at certain moments; and she would be killing her son as well. She would
Reading Virginia Woolf’s books is a way for her to escape her own life and look at it from a distance: “She is reading Virginia Woolf, all of Virginia Woolf, book by book. She is fascinated by the idea of a woman like that, a woman of such brilliance, such strangeness, such immeasurable sorrow (…) She, Laura, likes to imagine (it’s one of her most closely held secrets) that she has a touch of brilliance herself, just a hint of it” (Cunningham 42). She attempts to lose herself but at the same time also find herself within the pages of the novel Virginia Woolf is creating. In Woolf’s novel she discovers a world that exposes or reinforces her homosexual desires: “She is herself and not herself. She is a woman in London, an aristocrat, pale and charming, a little false, she is Virginia Woolf” (Cunningham 187). Discovering her lesbian inclinations creates for her new horizons and other options (Charles 308). She cannot reveal her lesbian desires because of social and moral restrictions. She decides that she is not ready to keep on living according to the standards defining the housewife of the 1940s. These standards are guarded by the society and her family. She feels the pressure especially from her son, “He will watch her forever. He will always know when something is wrong. He will always know precisely when and how she has failed” (Cunningham 192–93). He is watching her, constantly reminding her of her social identity, making her very uncomfortable in his company: “Alone with Richie, she sometimes feels unmoored - he is so entirely, persuasively himself. He wants what he wants so avidly (…) He seems, almost always, to be waiting to see what she will do next” (Cunningham 47). She tries to follow all the rules which she imagines a mother should follow, but when she is alone with him she loses direction and does not remember how to act: “Laura faces her little boy, who stares at her nervously, suspiciously, adoringly” (Cunningham 111). She desires both Kitty and Dan, however differently. She finds Kitty’s distinct qualities equally attractive and appealing: “Laura desires Kitty. She desires her force, her brisk and cheerful disappointment, the shifting pink-gold lights of her secret self and the crisp, shampooed depths of her hair. Laura desires Dan, too, in a darker and less exquisite way…She can kiss Kitty in the kitchen and love her husband” (Cunningham 143).
“When I'm with him I feel... Yes, I am living. And when I'm not with him... Yes, everything does seem sort of silly” (The Hours-Film).

Clarissa Vaughan’s identity comes from her attraction to the surrounding world: “she (…) simply enjoys without reason the houses, the church, the man, and the dog (…) his indiscriminate love feels entirely serious to her, as if everything in the world is part of a vast, inscrutable intention and everything in the world has its own secret name, a name that cannot be conveyed in language but is simply the sight and feel of the thing itself. This determined, abiding fascination is what she thinks of as her soul (…); the part that might conceivably survive the death of the body” (Cunningham 12). Although Clarissa Vaughan is free to live openly as a lesbian, what is not possible for Virginia and Laura, she meditates on her life choices and paths not taken. On various occasions she questions the choices she has made. She has a strong feeling of nostalgia for her youth and unrealized possibilities. The illness of her collage friend and former lover, Richard causes her to reevaluate her life choices. She contemplates and wonders what might have happened if she had stayed with Richard, “Couldn’t they have discovered something … larger and stranger than what they’ve got?” (Cunningham 97). She wonders, “How is it possible that she feels regret? How can she imagine, even now, that they might have had a life together? They might have been husband and wife, soul mates, with lovers on the side. There are always ways of managing” (Cunningham 67).

As James Schiff observes, “Changes in legal standing and public attitudes toward homosexuality enable Clarissa Vaughan to live a domestic and sexual life largely unavailable to Clarissa Dalloway in 1920’s London” (367-68). Clarissa Vaughan is able to embrace her identity and live her life in a way she chooses to. She, however constantly considers her former relationship with Richard and the relationship she has with Sally to negotiate her self-identity. As Schiff notices, Cunningham indicates, that “even if she were to live an openly gay existence, she would continue to experience doubts. In demonstrating that her life, whether as a lesbian or heterosexual, would be more similar than different, Cunningham suggests that strict demarcations between queer and straight are problematic.
and that sexual orientation is complex and fluid. In *The Hours*, men and women desire touch and contact with one another and that desire often transcend...s, via sexual orientation, that society has constructed” (368). Her identity is ambiguous, as she realizes herself, the same elements turned both Richard’s and Sally’s friendship into love and the relationship she had with Richard was simply “an expansion of the possible” (Cunningham 96). Even though Clarissa is generally pleased with her life, the feeling of being insignificant and irrelevant haunts her. She is pleased with her social and material status, but very often entering her own apartment she feels alienated and dislocated: “Clarissa is filled, suddenly, with a sense of dislocation. This is not her kitchen at all. This is the kitchen of an acquaintance, pretty enough but not her taste, full of foreign smells. She lives elsewhere… Clarissa recognizes these things but stands apart from them. She feels the presence of her own ghost… the part that owns nothing; that observes with wonder and detachment, like a tourist in a museum” (Cunningham 92). She realizes that her identity is defined mostly through relations to others, especially Sally and Richard. Richard compromises her identity by calling her Mrs. Dalloway. She is aware that in his eyes she isn’t fully herself, Clarissa, but does not want to upset him by mentioning it, “isn’t it time … to dispense with the old nickname? If he’s having a good enough day, she’ll bring it up: Richard, don’t you think it’s time to call me Clarissa?” (Cunningham 55).

Clarissa is a personification of Mrs. Dalloway, she “is removed from herself, from the room, as if she is witnessing something that’s already happened. It feels like a memory. Something within her, something like a voice but not a voice, an inner knowledge” (Cunningham 197). After Richard’s death she regains her full identity apart from Mrs. Dalloway, “And here she is, herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore; there is no one now to call her that. Here she is with another hour before her” (Cunningham 226).

Clarissa and Laura share the same feeling of dislocation and nonbelonging. Their satisfaction and happiness are easily replaced by the sense of sorrow and discontent; “she sees how easily she could sleep out of this life - these empty and arbitrary comforts. She could simply leave it and return to her other home, where neither Sally nor Richard exists; where there is only the essence of Clarissa… It is revealed to her that all her sorrow and
loneliness… stems simply from pretending to live in this apartment among these objects, with kind, nervous Sally, and if she leaves she’ll be happy, or better than happy. She’ll be herself. She feels briefly, wonderfully alone, with everything ahead of her… Then the feeling moves on… This is in fact her apartment, her collection of clay pots, her mate, her life. She wants no other” (Cunningham 92). She finds her dilemmas shallow and trivial: “I am trivial, endlessly trivial” (Cunningham 94) she thinks when she finds out that she has not been invited to a party. She tries to justify her fears and dilemmas. “It isn’t failure to be in these rooms, in your skin, cutting the stems of flowers” (Cunningham 94). She is afraid that if she stayed with Richard, it would destroy the coherence of her lesbian identity: “Venture too far for love, she tells herself, and you renounce citizenship in the country you’ve made for yourself. You just ends up sailing from port to port. Still, there is this sense of missed opportunity” (Cunningham 97).

Despite being a societal outcast she considers herself too domestic and feels threatened by Mary Krull, her daughter’s friend: “You know she mocks you, privately, for your quaint notions about lesbian identity” (Cunningham 23). Mary Krull considers her and Sally to be “queers of the old school, dressed to pass, bourgeois to the bone, living like husband and wife” (Cunningham 160). “Clarissa Vaughan is only deluded, neither more or less than that. She believes that by obeying the rules she can have what men have” (Cunningham 160). Young states that Krull “is merely a one-dimensional expression of the political belief that sexual identity is not a private matter but bound up with transformation of society” (Young 69).

The progress in the empowerment of women is reflected in self-definition and narrative point of view. The 1920’s Clarissa is socially defined by her married name, in 1990 Clarissa eventually is able to define herself. She can be her own Clarissa, not Richard’s Mrs. Dalloway (Young 41). What is important, is that her final moment of self-definition takes place in her apartment. Until then her meditation about life and self-identity are influenced by her encounters with friends and people she meets on the streets of New York. As Young notices, the city symbolizes social life, vibrant and full of opportunities, contrasting with sadness of the isolated and constrained self of Woolf, Laura Brown and
Richard Brown (59). Laura Brown recalls the sentence from Mrs. Dalloway, “life, London, this moment in June” (Cunningham 111), and the image of possibilities and freedom the city represents becomes a life force for her (Young 61). Her attitude towards life changes, she is open for new possibilities.

At the end of the day in modern New York, Laura, who is revealed to be Richie’s or Richard’s mother, Clarissa Vaughan with her lover Sally and her daughter Julia, connect in a small gathering. There is an acknowledgement that there still are the hours, that life goes on, and it should be celebrated. Richard’s death helps Clarissa understand the value of life and appreciate it more. “Here, then, is the party, still laid; here are the flowers, still fresh; everything ready for the guests, who have turned out to be only four. Forgive us, Richard. It is, in fact, a party, after all. It is a party for the not-yet-dead; for the relatively undamaged; for those who for mysterious reasons have the fortune to be alive” (Cunningham 226).

4. The kiss

“The kiss was innocent — innocent enough — but it was also full of something not unlike what Virginia wants from London, from life; it was full of a love complex and ravenous, ancient, neither this nor that” (Cunningham 209–10).

The stories of three women are connected by the image of a single kiss. That one kiss offers new possibilities and new vision of the future. As Schiff states “In a novel in which the self is most often depicted as alone and detached, a kiss serves most crucially as the initial point of physical contact, the moment at which the gap between people is bridged. Though often desired, this moment of intimacy is also frightening because characters remain uncertain, particularly if the kiss threatens or violates social order, of how it will be interpreted and whether it will be returned. By delivering a many-mirrored variation on a significant Woolfian moment, Cunningham not only riffs on the precursory author's text but also universalizes the ambiguity of sexual identity and desire. Whereas in Mrs. Dalloway one woman shares a single kiss with another woman, in The Hours myriad characters of varied sexual orientation (straight, queer, bi) experience a desire to kiss someone they are not
supposed to kiss” (370-371). As Steyaerd underlines it “is clear that their affects differ, whether one relates those kisses to the more liberal Bloomingdale era of Virginia Woolf, the more conservative post-World War II period in Los Angeles, or the post-AIDS era in New York’s Greenwich Village at the turn of the Millennium” (169).

Clarissa defines her experience as “one's greatest point of optimism converging in one kiss an intense yearning for all that is possible in love” and “singular perfection, in part because it seemed, so clearly to promise more. Now she knows: That was the moment, right then. There has been no other” (Cunningham 98). That one kiss constituted her true happiness: “It had seemed like the beginning of happiness, and Clarissa is still sometimes shocked, more than thirty years later, to realize that it was happiness” (Cunningham 98).

Virginia characterizes her kiss as the “kiss that would sustain her. (...) She thinks, suddenly, of Vanessa’s kiss. The kiss was innocent - innocent enough - but it was also full of something not unlike what Virginia wants from London, from life; it was full of a love complex and ravenous, ancient, neither this nor that” (Cunningham 209-10). She decides that Clarissa will experience that kind of kiss which will define her life and haunt her for the rest of her life: “Clarissa Dalloway will have loved a woman, yes; another woman, when she was young. She and the woman will have had a kiss, one kiss, like the singular enchanted kisses in fairy tales, and Clarissa will carry the memory of that kiss, the soaring hope of it, all her life. She will never find a love like that which the lone kiss seemed to offer” (Cunningham 210).

The kiss illuminates an explosion of Laura’s repressed and confused sexual identity. “Kitty nods against Laura’s breasts. The question has been silently asked and silently answered, it seems. They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work. Kitty lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss…Laura is the dark-eyed predator. Laura is the odd one, the foreigner, the one who can’t be trusted. Laura and Kitty agree, silently, that this is true” (Cunningham 110). When Laura kisses Kitty, she knows that even though she loves her
husband, she can “still dream of kissing Kitty again someday, in a kitchen or at the beach as children shriek in the surf, aroused, hopeless, in love with their own recklessness if not with each other” (Cunningham 143). This one single kiss will offer her the power to change her life completely.

5. The Movie

“To look life in the face, always, to look life in the face and to know it for what it is. At last to know it, to love it for what it is, and then, to put it away” (The Hours- Film).

Stephen Daldry is an English director of both movies and theatre. His film career started when he debuted in 1998 with a short film Eight for which he received the Jerwood Film Prize and BAFTA Award nomination. However, the real film career began for Daldry in 2000 when he directed his first feature film, Billy Elliot. In 2002 he directed The Hours and 6 years later he released The Reader. He has received an Academy Award nomination for all three of his feature films: Billy Elliot, The Hours and The Reader (IMDb).

Stephen Daldry was offered the chance to direct The Hours while he was still finishing his work on Billy Elliot. His friend, David Hare sent him the script and with the producer, Scott Rudin, offered him to direct the movie (Anwar). Daldry in his interview for BBC stated that what he loved the most about Cunningham’s novel was “that it described so brilliantly the difficult choices that we make in order to make our lives possible, and the moments of joy we must grab when they happen” (Anwar). The cast includes most highly regarded screen actresses: Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf, Meryl Streep as Clarissa Vaughan and Julianne Moore as Laura Brown. As the strands were shot separately and in different locations, the main actresses never met on set. The movie was shot both in the USA (episodes with Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore) and the UK (episodes with Nicole Kidman). The film was released in the USA in December 2002 and then in Europe in February 2003. The Hours received positive critical reviews and was nominated for Academy Awards in nine categories and went on to receive five Golden Globes nominations.
The film, based on Hare’s screenplay and Cunningham’s novel, offers visual interpretation of Cunningham’s literary themes. *The Hours* is an outstanding film, unique and moving. The first scenes of *The Hours* are interlaced together as the three women start their day, creating visual connections between their lives and destinies. Different colour palette and intensities used in each story represent changing position of women in general over time. In Laura’s episode colours are very warm, full of intensity, perfectly reflecting the climate of the times in which Mrs. Brown lives. When we observe the scenes with Virginia, the colours are appropriately subdued, more cool and dim, while the modern part of the movie is filmed in a rather cold, realistic and unsentimental style.

This remarkable motion picture has the power to deeply move the audience, because it proposes to ask difficult questions, forcing viewers sometimes to seek difficult and brutally poignant answers. From the first minutes viewers collide with the raw beauty of the image and the depth of emotion masterfully conveyed by the leading actresses. The main heroines live a false, unwanted life. They are placed in different eras (20s, 40s and present day), based on completely different hierarchies of values, which they must face. They must live it all, try and survive the best they can until they make a choice which will bring them freedom, but every choice carries consequences - death, misery of others, abandonment and pain. All their daily activities, flower arranging, baking cakes, writing books, helping friends, receiving guests and taking care of children - all of it suddenly turns out to be illusory acts covering the impending darkness. *Mrs. Dalloway* (written, read, experienced) has the power to change them. As stated above, the extraordinary power of this movie is largely due to the formidable acting skills and prowess of all three main actresses, Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore. With profound and compassionate subtlety they manage to portray the keen need and desperation of these characters to confront their lives, to re-evaluate them and to make a total change. Particularly fascinating in the movie is Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf. She skilfully manages to convey the inner emotions which torment her heroine, hidden under the mask of discouragement, apathy and overwhelming her delicate mental state. The anguish felt by the main characters is almost palpable. When Laura looks through the window it seems like she is waiting for something
to happen, she hopes that something will change. But nothing happens and while she is waving goodbye to her husband she knows she will have to face another day of her suffocating, everyday life. The tension between her and her son, amplified by the silence reminds of a ticking time bomb. She is the most tragic of all three. She is a symbol of rebellion against society, which imposes the roles of a housewife and mother. She does not want to live like everyone else, she wants to experience all the forbidden things, she wants to live life intensely, wants to act, rather than wait for a better day. The pressure from the outside world on Laura’s social identity is in the movie underlined by the word “mommy” uttered by her son as he is watching her constantly and judging. Audience can look at Laura and observe her through Richie’s eyes. The movie adds to the idea of motherhood, when Kitty says: “you’re lucky, Laura,”, “I don’t think you can call yourself a woman until you’re a mother” (The Hours). As Lindgren notices, “traditional gender roles are naturally found behind the statement (...) By introducing the idea of motherhood as the only real indication of womanhood, Kitty reverses the power structure in the scene, and Laura Brown finds, in the new hierarchy, the strength to both comfort and feel attracted to her friend” (513- 514). The film version offers more obvious representation of Virginia’s struggle and frustrations when in the scene at the railway station she says to Leonard, “I’ve endured this custody. I’ve endured the imprisonment. My life has been stolen from me. I’m living a life I have no wish to live. How did this happen?” “This is not you speaking,” replies Leonard, “This is not your voice.” “It’s my voice,” replies Virginia. “It’s mine and it’s mine alone. If I were thinking clearly, I would tell you: You cannot find peace by avoiding life, Leonard” (The Hours). Her emotional anguish and suffering are illuminated by the longshots of Virginia’s character alone in her room and Laura’s character in her dark apartment. The medium of the longshots is also used to underline the isolating nature of Laura’s life. Her constant suffering is perfectly visible on her face, revealing her emotional anguish. At the end she is able herself to take active part in her storytelling when she explains to Clarissa the reasons behind her decision to abandon her family, “There are times when you don’t belong, and you think you are going to kill yourself. Once I went to a hotel. Later that night I made a plan. The plan was I would leave my family when my second child was born. And that’s what I did. I got up one morning, had breakfast, went to the bus stop, got on a bus.
I’d left a note. I got a job at a library in Canada. It would be wonderful to say you’d regretted it, it would be easy, but what does it mean? What does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It’s what you can bear. There it is. No one is going to forgive me. It was death. I chose life” (*The Hours*).

Daldry admitted that he tried many different kinds of music for the movie, but always kept coming back to Philip Glass’ composition and finally it was Philip Glass’ music that was chosen to accompany the movie. His compositions are minimalistic in style, furnished with slowly evolving passages. These passages connect characters and events, the three narratives. Music is the most recurring theme throughout the film. Glass’ film score proposes to tie both the narrative and the characters together in a subtly recurring and repetitive style. His music provides not only a link between the three women, but also between three separate times, cultures and worlds. The piano-dominated score conveys the structure of the film, making the main theme more comprehensible. Music perfectly enhances both images and scenes and “forms a capacity to blend the three narratives and suggest rhizomatic connections across time, space and subjects. As a sound bridge across the three realms, the music relates not to images, but to the amorphous flux (of emotions, creativity, identity) behind the images” (Hillman, Crisp 36). As different characters reappear on the screen, different variations of the same theme accompany them, creating a special kind of flow or continuity. Hillman and Crisp suggest that “historically and dramatically porous, music operates like a stream of consciousness, with transitions between levels of consciousness matched by that between identities” (30). At the very beginning of the film, when we observe the sleepy, newly awoken women, the music occurs as a bit drowsy and then briefly halts just for a second, then it goes on again and stops. This brings to mind the early morning stupor, when we do not know if we are already awaken or still dreaming. Music The soundtrack complements the characteristics of the main characters and creates new associations. Later in the film, music flows and resounds freely. Another key element is the piano (supplemented with strings), which perfectly reflects and illustrates all the story’s deepest emotions.
Conclusion

Cunningham’s vision of sexual identity as never fixed and absolute is visibly manifested in his novel. He explores female identity through the decades to explore and illustrate the ambiguity of sexual identity. The progression of the stories demonstrates, that personal freedom has expanded during time, but emotional struggles and dilemmas remain unchanged. Cunningham places his characters in different eras, based on different set of values, to represent the changing vision and treatment of homosexuality. His heroines have to face the times in which they live according to the contemporary rules and values governing their lives. By penetrating deeply into the minds of his troubled heroines, Cunningham exposes their complexity and vagueness, both in themselves and in their relations with the environment. They share the same concerns about identity, awareness of the inevitable passing, earnest attempt to find happiness and freedom. He explores the themes of “supressed desire” and the results of living a split life. Through his characters he explores complexity and multiple nature of self-identity. He explores the tension between the socially accepted persona and the innermost concealed self. The identity Cunningham describes is influenced by the relationships and interactions his characters have and as a product of these interactions and social influences, identity is constantly redefined and never fixed. Cunningham uses the stream of consciousness technique to give the reader access to the characters’ minds and deepest thoughts. With sensitivity he uses nuances of colours and rhythm to create a special kind of flow accompanying each of the characters as they start the day. He places three storylines on a chart of historical progression from secrecy toward assimilation. Through the characters of Virginia and Laura he explores the theme of supressed desire and living a split life. As Virginia’s life is defined by the social and moral restrictions implemented in late Victorian England, she has to hide her true identity and supress her sexual desires. Most of the time she plays a role of Virginia and never allows herself to be her true self. She expresses and releases her homoerotic desires in her fiction. Very similar feelings accompany Laura. She slowly dies performing her role of a 40s housewife. She loves her family, but at the same time she resents them, because they are the reason why she cannot be truly herself and explore her real talents. Every time
she feels trapped and miserable she escapes into Woolf’s books. She constantly struggles to find some balance between her social self and her most private self. The kiss she shares with Kitty awakens her lesbian desires and evokes with her new life options. She considers suicide while identifying with Woolf, but she loves life too much; she leaves her family behind to start a new life in Canada. Clarissa Vaughan is able to live openly as a lesbian, but feels deeply nostalgic about her relationship with Richard. She experiences doubts and wonders if staying with Richard would make her happier, because the same feelings draw her to him and to Sally. Similar to Laura, she feels dislocated and alienated in her domestic life. She realizes that with Sally she cannot be truly herself.

The fates of the three heroines, Clarissa Vaughan, Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf, living in different periods of the twentieth century, reminds us that the human being is a very complicated creature - struggling between the expectations of others and ones’ own most intimate dreams and desires. Cunningham’s vision of sexuality as fluid and evolving is excellently represented through the characters of Virginia, Clarissa and Laura. In his novel he explores how nuanced human sexuality really is. Identity presented by Cunningham is a continuous creative process influenced by social practices and personal factors, not a stable quality. By challenging the notion that human sexuality is fixed and stable Cunningham challenges the rigid binary designation and categorization of people as either ‘gay’ or ‘straight’.
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Primary sources


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