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Michael Cunningham's Novel *The Hours* from the Perspective of Feminist  
Literary Criticism

Master's Thesis

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Praze dne 4.5. 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, raised a wave of sensation when it was published in 1998. Literary critics, notable literary magazines and the public praised this book for its creative, moving, and imaginative character. Most of the attention seems to have been paid to the postmodern narrativity of the text and also to Cunningham's ability to recast the story of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in a new light. This diploma thesis, however, casts a critical look at *The Hours* from the perspective of feminist literary criticism – one may see this novel as a glorification of Virginia Woolf's talent, at the same time, it is impossible to ignore the fact that it is female characters who occupy the center of attention.

The very first chapter of this thesis serves as an overview of the historical development of the strong bond between literature and feminism, which eventually gave rise to feminist literary criticism as such. As the main findings of this paper will be based on close reading and a critical analysis, it is inevitable to introduce the most noteworthy names of feminist critics and their ground-breaking works. The strongest attention is then paid to the evolvement of feminism and feminist literary criticism in the Anglo-American context for the reason that Michael Cunningham is an American author. This thesis, nevertheless, also makes reference to some of the non-English critics like H el ene Cixous or Simone de Beauvoir.

Secondly, with respect to feminist studies and literature, Michael Cunningham's role and the overall position of male writers within the literary canon is brought into focus. As one may expect, throughout history, feminist literary critics perceived male writers as enemies, not allies, yet, there are scholars like Peter Murphy who proposes otherwise in his study *Feminism and Masculinities*. This thesis aims at demonstrating that the relationship between feminism and men is not an impossible one – in particular, I will try to prove that despite the fact that *The Hours* was written by a male writer, it can eventually be read as a feminist piece of fiction. Cunningham works with specific narrative methods and themes in order to depict his strong female characters as faithfully as possible.

Thirdly, the following chapters then look from the feminist perspective at the individual, yet brilliantly intertwined, stories of the three main characters. The first of

these chapters is dedicated to the character of Virginia Woolf, who herself belongs to those who paved the way for feminist literary criticism. Therefore, Cunningham's depiction of Woolf's day in Richmond will be analyzed in terms of credibility of the portrait, and also with respect to Woolf's true (in parts also controversial) contribution to feminist literary criticism. In this chapter I will primarily refer to Woolf's essays, diaries and the biography written by Alexandra Harris so as to verify the degree of accuracy of Cunningham's portrayal of Mrs Woolf. As far as the debate about Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf is concerned, Elaine Showalter's critical viewpoints (presented in her work *A Literature of Their Own*) will serve as the steppingstone for the evaluation.

The next chapter critically examines the day of an American suburban wife – Laura Brown, who is a passionate reader of Woolf and a dissatisfied mother in a household. The dismal situation of thousands of American housewives became the central focus of Betty Friedan, an American feminist, whose publication *Feminine Mystique* represents the major theoretical source when analyzing the story of Mrs Brown.

The last of the feminist literary examinations delves into the story of Clarissa Vaughan who lives in the 1990s in New York City. Mrs Vaughan, nicknamed Dalloway, is an independent mother who is also open about her relationship with another woman. Eventually, this makes the impression that Clarissa has overcome the oppressions and prejudices that the previous female protagonists had to face. However, Cunningham's novel proposes that the birth of post-feminism by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, together with numerous clashes between women, constitute another challenge to be dealt with in the future.

In addition to Cunningham's strong female protagonists, selected motifs and themes (which often reoccur in his fiction) then serve as the connecting and also comparing tool when evaluating the lives of Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa. *The Hours* builds a very complex view of how the feminist achievements progressed in time, since the individual stories map the female experience from the twenties until the nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite all the discriminations and injustice, women have always found a way to raise their voices and pursue a change, which is, in the end, the main message behind Cunningham's *The Hours*. As a result, this novel may be considered a feminist piece of fiction, no matter that having been written by a man.

## 2. Feminism and Literature

In order to understand the true nature of feminist literary criticism, which has been chosen as the main critical approach in this thesis, one must, in the first place, explain the strong and inseparable interconnectedness of feminism and literature as such. These two phenomena mutually react to each other and while tracing the historical development of this symbiotic relationship, one should also penetrate into the nature and major objectives of feminist criticism. Of course, highlighting the most representative figures and their revolutionary studies is also crucial when defining feminist literary criticism.

Firstly, at least a brief definition of feminism should be stated – in a broader sense, feminism serves as a label for a movement dealing with the position of women who, as a more vulnerable and softer sex, have been marginalized and oppressed throughout the human history under the supremacy of men. The outlook on such problematics may, obviously, be more or less radical and the feminist theories are never black-and-white as they usually tend to be politically, biologically, economically, or culturally oriented. Nevertheless, all feminists strive for establishing fair and unbiased environment for living; an environment which would secure equal opportunities and legal protection of women around the whole world. Not only do feminists perceive as vitally important to uncover all the mechanisms, prejudices and predispositions which hamper in gaining complete equality between men and women, but they also fight for overcoming gender as a difference making label.

In spite of the fact that feminist studies and related disciplines, such as literary criticism, are relatively new and the term ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ did not officially come on the scene until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literature, from the very beginning of human literacy, mirrors human experience and serves as a reliable tool when examining cultural and social values. The reason why feminists refer to literature as a crucial historical source is thus self-evident; Pam Morris, an English literary critic, believes that: “Positive images of female experience and qualities can be used to raise women’s self-esteem and lend authority to their political demands” (7). To put it bluntly, not only does literature enable to carefully trace and describe female experience in history, but it also helps to promote a critical re-evaluation of literature written by women. Furthermore, literary texts provide culturally substantiated answers to questions like – “What are the power relationships between men and women? What does the work reveal about the

operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy? What role does the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition?" ("Feminist Criticism"). Surely enough, the scope of feminist interest is much wider, and these questions represent only a small amount of the target problems. However, one crucial fact has not been stated yet – literature should not be considered static. Literature represents quite the opposite; it is a highly dynamic, powerful, and political tool and so is feminist literary criticism. Judith Fetterley, an American literary scholar publishing mainly in the seventies, fittingly declared that: "Literature is political" (Fetterley xi). In her quite radical views, literature always hides a political agenda that works in favor of males. As expected, similar claims would, from today's perspective, be taken with a pinch of salt. As everything else, the field of literature is not invariable, nevertheless, Fetterley was true in pointing out at literature as a powerful weapon. As it will be demonstrated in the following chapters, feminists became well aware of the power of the written word.

## **2.1 Breaking the Silence: Laying Grounds for Feminist Literary Criticism**

As it has been already mentioned, feminist literary criticism is a product of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely of the political and social changes that took place in the sixties: Civil Rights Movement, loud fights for passing the Equal Rights Amendment, sexual revolution, pacifist sentiments and many more helped the dissatisfied voices of women to be finally heard. Nonetheless, it is necessary to bear in mind that feminist literary tradition and criticism may not always be confined to years following the sixties only. Many theoreticians, like Gill Plain, Susan Sellers, or Laurie Finke, believe that attention should be also paid to those who helped to predetermine and pre-define the nature of this branch of literary study. Still, the following pioneers and their legacy should be perceived in the general context of literature rather than in a close relation to feminist literary criticism since it took several centuries to create and form the individual subgroups of feminist studies.

If the interpretation of ancient texts and the overall female position in the mediaeval literature or Bible is left behind, it may be altogether asserted that women had to work extremely hard in order to secure themselves an undistorted image as literary characters, but also to finally find courage to undisguisedly compete with men on the financial marketplace. As a case in point, one might name Isabella Whitney or Anne



Bradstreet who, as female writers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, challenged the long history of literary texts that had been written, or rather published, exclusively under male names. It was not an exception that in the past, female writers were forced to hide their identity. Women had to write under male pen names as literature was still a field to be male-friendly only. This fact, however, did not stand in the way of one of the first female figures who broke the silence and advocated for women's rights – Mary Wollstonecraft. This British writer and mother of Mary Shelley was one of the first true feminists whose own controversial lifestyle, being full of love affairs, “gave impetus to her ideas about female sexuality, sensibility, and women's status as writers, intellectuals, mothers and citizens” (Plain and Sellers 46). During the times of big changes in Europe, namely during the French Revolution when societies were abandoning the original monarchist system and they were urging more liberal and democratic environment, Wollstonecraft was not afraid to oppose such names as Edmund Burke, one of those who did not agree with the revolutionary thoughts and propaganda. After having written *A Vindication for the Rights of Men* (1790) Wollstonecraft felt the urge to speak for those who had been for a long time silenced and seen as not being worth any political involvement – women. In her *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft wishes for women to break free from religious oppressions and prejudices which were created by men. “Wollstonecraft too gestured towards a different kind of writing, a different kind of self-imagining, able to invent and encompass a future state beyond the prison of sex: a ‘precious specialty’ which still remains to be expressed” (Plain and Sellers 61). What is more, Wollstonecraft brought about topics such as the need of female education and she demanded a completely new perception of women's, often underestimated, role in society. These ideas were similar to those which were repeatedly brought into focus, for example by Virginia Woolf in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Generally speaking, Wollstonecraft's political thoughts and strong faith in female uniqueness represented a milestone in the history of feminism.

The need to produce literature that would finally describe and reflect the female question continued with the 18<sup>th</sup> and especially the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this period, however, female writers were still tied up by rigid conventions and prejudices of that time. Female writers (coming not only from the Anglo-American environment) like the Brontë sisters, Mary Ann Evans, Luisa May Alcott, Betsy Perk or Sidonie Gabrielle Colette were producing novels that worked on women's issues, unfortunately still under the guise of

male pen names (or at least gender neuter names as in case of Alcott). One of the female writers, nevertheless, felt bold enough to make a step forward and started using an exclusively feminine pen name: A Lady. Jane Austen used this fictitious name as a manifestation of her femininity and expression of pride.

Even though feminist literary criticism was, by that time, still in its infancy and female authors could not equal their male counterparts, American literary critic Elaine Showalter notes that this phase was crucial for days to come: “The woman’s novel had moved, despite its restrictions, in the direction of an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community” (Showalter 29). What is more, this period prepared a breeding ground for the phase expected: the ‘feminist phase’ (dating from 1880-1920) by Showalter’s terminology (29), a phase that took more politically oriented course. According to Taylor Gilkison, “both politics and society collectively evolved throughout the twenties. However, the political change that occurred was due to an ongoing movement dedicated to the obtainment of equal rights for women” (Gilkison 1).

As partly explained in the quotation above, the new era emerged mainly thanks to the women’s suffrage movement that was escalating with the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took women many decades to claim their rights as voters whose participation in elections would no more be perceived as baseless. The new and proud sentiments were, of course, reflected in female literature as well since literature became a powerful tool how to negotiate the political empowerment. What suffragists wanted was to redefine the literature canon in order to support their beliefs; they desired their political voices to be echoed in non-fiction (numerous essays, pamphlets, biographies or articles appeared in daily or weekly magazines – for example *The Suffragist* (1913–1920) in America, or *Votes for Women* (1907–1918) in the UK). Furthermore, what the suffrage movement also came up with were the new genres of fiction – as Claire Delahaye, in her article for *European Journal of American Studies* asserts, the suffrage movement should not be credited with the production of non-fiction only. During those years, diverse numbers of novels, short stories, plays, or poems were written and published (Delahaye 2). As an illustration, Kate Chopin shocked the audience with her short stories which often openly depicted female sexuality and rejection of marital fidelity.

Suffragist novels, or so called ‘pro-woman’s rights novels’, like *A Modern Madonna* (1906) by Caroline Abbot Stanley or Marietta Holley’s *Samantha on the Woman Question* (1913) were challenging the original literary tradition with their strong focus on female voting experience. Alice Duer Miller, in her pro-suffrage rhymes, defended what women were fighting for and she was also reacting to anti-suffrage speeches or publications in a sarcastic and humorous way (Delahaye 5-6). Mary Chapman explains, not only was literature a medium to manifest that females became literate, and thus worthy any political debates, but it was also “creative literature that helped them to find their political self-expression through creative literary forms that in turn worked to persuade others of the wisdom and necessity of enfranchising women” (Chapman and Mills 5). These beliefs proved to pay off in 1918 when women finally reached their goal to be able to vote in the United Kingdom. In the United States the amendment was passed two years after.

Even if women had not gained full independence yet, a great shift was made from what used to be the norm in the century before, during the Victorian period. In the days of modernism – a ground-breaking cultural and literary transformation, women started to be recognized not only as daughters, mothers, or housewives, but also as workers in factories whose work was financially rewarded. Furthermore, the often-rigid morals of Victorians were replaced by more open and liberal environment. In the United States this historical period has earned a nickname ‘the roaring twenties’; inseparably connected with pop culture and relaxed atmosphere in society hoping for better tomorrows as everybody was determined to leave the horrors of the First World War behind. In any case, this era represented the basis for feminist literary criticism primarily by introducing two women – Virginia Woolf and Simone Beauvoir whose legacies were crucial.

Virginia Woolf made her name in feminist history for her bohemian and liberal spirit and also for her casting a critical look at problems which have been chasing female writers since the beginning of time. Woolf once said: “For most of history, Anonymous was a woman” (Carroll) as a reference to the marginal role of female authors who were forced to write under pen names, or they had to stay completely anonymous. Woolf’s thoughts were published in half fiction and half nonfiction called *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) which is seen by many feminist literary critics as an explicit manifestation of female determination to gain a position on the literary market. Virginia Woolf, who was publicly professing female’s encouragement, came up with a metaphor of a room which

“not only signifies the declaration of political and cultural space for women, private and public, but the intrusion of women into spaces previously considered the spheres of men” (Plain and Sellers 71). Woolf did so by discussing primarily the educational and economic factors that influenced female careers as writers. A whole chapter will be dedicated to this modernist writer because she is also one of the main characters illustrated in *The Hours*.

The second pivotal work for later feminist and gender studies was Simone Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). For Beauvoir, a graduate in philosophy, it was not a problem to delve into her own existence as a woman. She was probably one of the first female writers in Europe who started to ask herself what it actually means to be a woman. In her essays, Beauvoir redefines the limits and strong boundaries of gender which she finds too restrictive. According to Beauvoir, gender is not biologically predetermined, it is rather a social construct. Her most frequently quoted statement: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 17-18) has become one of the strongest arguments against gender restrictions, justifying the opinion that sex is not only biologically, but primarily socially predetermined. She also maintains that as ‘the second sex’, women are always less visible when being compared to the ‘first sex’ – referring to men.

In spite of having mentioned that feminist literary criticism is to be officially set in the sixties, this chapter tried to prove that it was not born overnight. It took centuries for women to raise their voices and take a stand against any form of oppression or disadvantage. All the historical and social revolutions listed helped to shape feminist literary criticism and to predict the future course of feminist studies in general.

## **2.2 From the Sixties onward: Birth and Rise of Feminist Literary Criticism**

The previous chapter served both as an introduction and a historical synopsis of the most crucial events, names and written texts which laid the groundwork for the official birth of feminist literary criticism. Similar to the revolutionary Europe of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1920s in America and the United Kingdom, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued in the spirit of great political and extensive social changes. The most significant one was the huge wave of civil rights and tendencies that shook the United States.

The United States witnessed numerous protests when people marched with a common vision – to put an end to social and ethnic discrimination. Luckily, this story had

a happy ending, The Federal Government decided to hear the unsatisfied voices out and ensured better conditions for living by passing the Equal Pay Act (1953) which addressed gender discrimination and supported those employees who felt disadvantaged. What is more, this was followed by the Civil Rights Act (1964) banning any discrimination based on skin color, sex, religion, or sexual orientation. It looks as though, these accomplishments only triggered revolutionary moods and other fights for more equal tomorrows followed during the 1970s. One of such social upheavals was The ERA movement; a proposition of the Equal Rights Amendment that would guarantee no legal distinctions between sexes when it came to property, employment, divorce, or parenthood. This social debate, however, stirred up discrete emotions among America women to such extent that antifeminists started to boycott the equality efforts with No ERA campaign.

Therefore, it is no wonder that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to feminist literary criticism which strived to capture and evaluate these changes publicly, under the respected academic patronage. The new generations of feminists started to ask themselves: What does it mean to be a woman in today's society? What connects all women and what divides them? The upcoming responses reflected not only the current role of women in society, but they also gave impetus to re-evaluation of female characters in the books written by men, plus, they made a request for restoring female literary tradition.

Both in the United States and the United Kingdom new publishing houses focusing solely on woman's writing were established – for instance Women's Press (1977), Wild Tree Press (1984) or Pandora (1983). Also, one shall not forget about the African American branch of the feminist movement called 'womanism' that was being formed in this environment. With Alice Walker in the leading position, black feminists took a great part in restoring the Afro-American female literary tradition. Soon after that, it was also other female American minorities (Jewish, Asian, or Hispanic) who concentrated on mediating the inner world of wives, mothers, and daughters.

From the sixties onward, feminist critical studies were experiencing a boom. One of the early recognizable feminist writings was *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) written by the American feminist activist Betty Friedan. In this publication, Friedan subjects the often-idealized role of an American suburban mother and wife to a critical scrutiny. As

Plain and Sellers, while tracking the history of feminist literary criticism, put it, this book “presented cogent arguments against the philosophical and cultural ideologies that relegated women to inferior status in society and in the home” (239), which is also the reason why it has gained such popularity. Friedan’s influential view on the state of American housewives will serve as a critical viewpoint when dealing with the story of Laura Brown from Cunningham’s novel.

In the following years, a greater number of feminist scholars and literary critiques, like Mary Ellmann or Patricia Mayer Spacks, dedicated their books to the discussion about the lower status of female literary tradition. Over centuries, women’s literary history was seen as an undercurrent, as something that was not worth the attention and feminists felt in charge of changing this reality. It was with Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) that a noticeable breakthrough was recognized, as Guerin asserts, this was the first widely read work of feminist literary criticism (223). Millet had succeeded in gaining public awareness by close reading the famous theatre plays by prominent male writers such as Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer or Jean Genet, believing that these pieces were used as a tool to celebrate the misogynist and sexist attitudes in favor of women. Millet’s radical and adamant voice brought her into front pages of leading newspapers both in America and Europe.

In spite of the fact that feminist literary criticism seemed to have overcome several obstacles by proving its position among other critical approaches, feminist studies then met with displeasing judgements coming from within. Firstly, it is claimed that in the seventies, white feminist critics failed to address the non-white female experience: “... to neglect non-white women writers was undoubtedly to fail to respond to some of the most striking writings of the time – works and topics being brought out by Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall and Alice Walker among the African Americans, as well as the Asian American Maxine Hong Kingston and others” (Plain and Sellers 128). Secondly, it was high time feminist literary critics celebrated the women’s literature by pointing at its success, not at its inferior status. Plain and Sellers explain: “Now ... the emphasis moved from their difficulties to how much they had achieved in spite of these obstacles in their way” (Plain and Sellers 125). One of the female academics who reflected this need in her work was Elaine Showalter, one of the first theoreticians of feminist literary criticism.

Not only did Showalter come up with a theoretical background for female literary tradition, but she also paid respect to many female writers from the past. In her critical study, aptly named *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Showalter uncovers the continuity in female texts and also the interconnectedness of the writers' lives and their works. In particular, Showalter provides a commentary on often forgotten and neglected names from British literary history like Sarah Grand, Mary Braddon, and Mona Caird among others.

Also, Showalter reconstructed the history of female literary tradition and divided its development into three phases so as to clearly define the evolution. As Showalter herself explains, the first phase she called the 'feminine phase' (dating from 1840 to 1880) in which women tried to prove their ability and talent for writing, which, nevertheless, was often disguised under pseudonyms. The second, 'feminist phase' (1880–1920) was strongly influenced by the fact that women gained their political voice and could use literature for their own purposes. Finally, the last, 'female phase' (ongoing since 1920) eventually breaks free from any act of imitation and protest, both of which were so typical for the previous periods of formation (Newton 208).

Equally crucial for the feminist poetics is Showalter's invention of the terms 'feminist critique' and 'gynocritics'. Feminist critique is concerned with women as readers whose apprehension of male produced texts bears its specifics. The second type, called gynocritics, views women as producers of textual works and it concentrates on the differences between men's and women's writing (Indruchová 22). All things considered, Showalter's contribution to the feminist literary studies is undoubtful and her terminology is still being used.

As it always goes with any critical study, feminist literary interpretation did not stay in isolation throughout the time, on the contrary, it became more prone to drawing inspiration from other movements whose philosophies started to blend in the feminist reflection on literature and society. An immense transformation came with the postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking which triggered multiple focuses: "Structuralism insists that no term has meaning in itself but can only be identified in relation to other terms; poststructuralism investigates the emergence of systems of relations" (Plain and Sellers 214). As a result, feminist studies experienced one of the turning points in its history and feminist literary interpretation started breaking into many

fields of interest: “From the mid-1960s to the early 1990s it is possible to trace the concept’s gradual development from an initial revolt against the androcentrism that had dominated literary studies, to a complex and diverse set of discourses seeking to problematize the assumptions, not only of gender, but also of race, class and sexuality” (Plain and Sellers 102). Consequently, the diversity of different discourses hampered the reduction of all the heterogeneous feminist texts to key ones. In this completely new environment, it is possible to trace diverse influences for the feminist studies, the most prominent and notable ones were psychoanalysis, Marxism, multiculturalism and last but not least – queer theories (in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir were advocating against judging womanhood on the basis of biology or physical appearance, nevertheless, psychoanalysis found its way to influence feminist literary studies and it gave birth to psychoanalytic feminism. Unlike the feminists coming from the Anglo-American environment who showed hostility towards Freudian ideas about the human psyche and the close interconnectedness between mind and body, others drew a great deal of inspiration from this study. Psychoanalytic feminism wants to get an insight into women’s psyche, seeking explanation why men continue to repress woman, which is achieved at two levels: “The first section studies differences between men and women on microlevel, primarily within families, focusing on women’s psychology and environment.... The second area focuses on exploring the constitution of gender ... female libido and the continual reinforcement of patriarchy throughout society” (“Psychoanalytic Feminism” 687). This outlook on women gained popularity primarily in France and takes, for example, a dominant position in the texts and studies by Hélène Cixous.

Marxist feminism, which emerged in the seventies, perceive women, on the other hand, in the context of working opportunities and social class background. Marxist feminists like Lilian Robinson or Maria Rosa Dalla Costa examined the position of women especially from the economical and materialistic point of view. They paid attention to those aspects of life which might deprive women of their rights to equal work opportunities, job security, or payment. What is more, they both stressed the fact that opening the labor to women is only a partial triumph over men dominancy, thus, they made a request for ‘liberating women from the slavery to a kitchen sink’, meaning that women have been exploited not only as a workforce in the labor but also in a household (Costa and James 18-19), it was therefore time for a brand new social and economic order.



Even though sexual and gender identity stood, for a long time, outside of feminist studies' focus, in the recent decades, these have evolved into fully complex theories. In the seventies, gay and lesbian literary criticisms departed from feminist literary interpretation and started to grapple with the problem of heteronormativity in literature. What is more, what these critics, as the first ones, also did was to track down the homosexual literary history and to point out to writers such as Oscar Wilde, Radclyffe Hall, James Baldwin or even Virginia Woolf by re-reading some of their works with reference to one's sexuality.

A symbiotic, or at least a very close relationship, can be also spotted between gender and feminist studies. Their historical developments parallel each other; in the past feminists used the term gender as a synonym for feminine, nowadays however, the position of gender within literature is being even strengthened: "With an increased sensitivity to the cultural construction of gender, feminist theorists will continue to gain new insights into how and why men and women experience gender in the many and particular ways that they do" ("Gender" 253). The issue of one's sexuality is one of the prevailing themes in *The Hours* and the following chapters will thus provide a more detailed comment about this topic.

To conclude this theoretical chapter, one may assume that since literature is strongly embedded in culture, it is likely that the evolvement of feminist studies and feminist literary criticism will continue in a quick pace in the future. So far, this thesis tried to map the transformation of feminist literary interpretation which was born as an innovative attitude towards the female question in the sixties and which gradually gained a heterogenous character by the end of the millennium. Regardless of various directions that feminist literary criticism took, for the purposes of this thesis it was crucial to list the most essential works and theories since many of them serve as the source for the critical examination of Cunningham's novel.

### 3. Feminism and Men: An Impossible Relationship?

As it has been already indicated, feminist literary criticism shares a highly complicated history with male writers, in most of the cases, the female experience portrayed in literary fictions conceived by men was seen as untrue, gender biased and approving of masculinity. The imaginary barrier between male and female writings springs from the binary status of sex which also goes hand in hand with binary opposition of literature. Not only feminist literary critics, but also many psychologists (like Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley) put the language variety down to sex difference: “Similar speech by females and by males has been shown to be perceived differently and evaluated in different ways” (Moi 153). Women and men seem to have been predestined to perceive the world in a different light which naturally leads to opposing views not only in the real life, but also on paper.

On the other hand, there are many writers, academics, and scholars like Peter Murphy or Toril Moi who do not perceive the barrier between female and male studies as impenetrable. Also, Margaret Fuller, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, approached the relationship between males and females in a rather conciliatory vein – she acknowledged male and female as one, complementary unity (Peprník 226). Even Virginia Woolf herself, whose pro-woman status is firmly rooted in feminist literary tradition, challenged the notion of purely female aesthetics by blurring the line between femininity and masculinity in her later works. In *Orlando* (1928) Woolf introduced a gender fluid character who lives for centuries and with every resurrection he/she changes sexes. Even though Woolf never questioned the uniqueness of female writings, she also stated: “... any emphasis, either of pride or of shame, laid consciously upon the sex of a writer is not only irritating but superfluous” (Woolf, *The Essays* 316). Furthermore, many texts written by men should be given the chance to prove their status as pro-feminist, which is, after all, one of the main affirmations in this thesis.

Scholar Peter Murphy is one of those academics standing on the more positive side of the feminism and men debate. He highlights the beneficial influence of feminism on male identity (and vice versa) and informs about the long time neglected male support to women and female writers: “While much has been written about the overwhelming number of misogynist male authors, and complaints have been lodged against histories of feminism dominated by a few male writers, an intellectual history of male authors who

have supported women's rights and causes is long overdue" (Murphy 1). In other words, Murphy makes a point by saying that much attention has been paid to those authors and texts which did more harm than good. However, throughout the history, there have also been male writers trying to bring the female question into focus in an honorable way. For instance, humanist Sir Thomas Elyot was expressing his humanist ideas in an open support of female education in *Defense of Good Women* (1540), followed by the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and catholic priest François Poullain de la Barre who, despite his religious status, wrote social philosophies revolving around discrimination and equality of women – *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* (1673) or *On the Education of Women* (1674).

In the nineteenth century, when women had to face another series of challenges; starting with the abolishing efforts through claiming the rights to vote, it was also the male voices which were strongly opposed to any form of women's disadvantage. Murphy points out that:

Several European, British, and American pro-feminist men joined the battle for women's rights. In Britain, for example, William Thompson ... penned an appeal on behalf of women against men whom he saw as directly responsible for keeping women in a form of civil and domestic slavery, and Robert Owen ... the utopian socialist, defended women's rights. (Murphy 6)

Also, if one delves into the female question on the stage, G. B. Shaw could be credited with dispelling stereotypical myths about lower class women, in *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1898) Shaw defends females who had to recourse to prostitution, while in *Pygmalion* (1913) he raises a debate about the necessity of female's education and male prejudices (Chen). These names are only a handful of those who actively took part in female political liberation.

As it turned out, not only did men adopt their own strategies to support women both privately and publicly, but they soon after found out they could profit, in a good sense, from this (seemingly contradictory) relationship. When a turning point came with the 1960s and the 1970s and the women liberation movement was reaching its climax, it was high time males had discovered their own self-image through the female perspective. In Murphy's words, what happened in the seventies was that "men turned the feminist lens upon themselves as men" (9), not only women but also men could subdue their

masculinity to a critical scrutiny. Moreover, one should bear in mind that this reaction was mutual: “Men were not alone in this feminist analysis of masculinities. Several women contributed invaluable insights into the discourse of ‘men’s studies’, a ‘feminist masculinity’, and the ‘male condition’, and in this dialogue with women, the investigation of what it means to be a man in a patriarchal society became more subtle, more layered, more radical” (Murphy 10). One might therefore conclude that the feminist studies gave impetus to a completely new perspective of male studies under whose patronage critical publications, articles or essays were written. One of such works were, for example: *For Men Against Sexism* (1977), edited by Jon Snodgrass, or Professor Andre Tolson’s publication from 1979 – *The Limits of Masculinity: Male Identity and Women’s Liberation* (Murphy 12) which provides a critical outlook on the concept of manliness.

What is more, when it comes to social studies, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is connected with various movements striving for equality regardless of sex, gender, or sexual identity. Eventually, women joined forces with men, and they fought together in the name of oppressed minorities – for instance for lesbians and gays, among all, as especially male love for other men was still a thorny topic: “Even among many heterosexual men who have been influenced by feminism, the taboo against loving the same sex remains unchallenged. Lines like ‘I may be anti-sexist, but I am certainly not gay’ can still be heard” (Murphy 165). This quotation proves that the evolvement of male studies and male literary criticism followed a very similar pattern of the history of feminist literary criticism, which, in the latest decades, turned its attention to women of color or women of non-heterosexual identity.

Furthermore, on their way to liberation, feminist activists and journalists felt the urge to speak of men as well. Gloria Steinem, a leader of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, dedicated one of her most notable essays to one of the best known African American gay writers – *James Baldwin, An Original* (1964). Also, Hélène Cixous was addressing the close relationship between one’s sexuality and writing as a body experience, claiming that people are bisexual in their nature, it is possible for both men and women to produce feminine texts (“Cixous, Hélène”). These, and many more examples stand as a proof that even proud women and active feminists can touch upon the connecting elements of the male and female worlds, that they can write about male issues without jeopardizing their feminist endeavor.

In conclusion, not all men saw the antipatriarchal female efforts as a direct threat, on the contrary, many of them stood up for the second sex in defense. Also, against all odds, feminist writings proved to be a convenient tool to also explore the male identity and its position within society. Although many radical and separatist feminists would hesitate to agree, the truth is that feminists were willing to lend men a hand in exchange for their support when it came to female questions, and that feminist studies gave the impetus to birth of adjacent humanities. All in all, the relationship between men and women, between male writers and feminist literary critics is not an impossible one.

### **3.1 Michael Cunningham and the Female Inspiration**

In the process of close reading *The Hours* from the feminist perspective, it is unavoidable to look at the male author of this novel and to consider all the overt or covert agendas behind his drawing on the life and work of Virginia Woolf and the other female protagonists. Moreover, not only tries this chapter to clarify the position of *The Hours* in the context of Cunningham's other works, but it also strives to decide whether there exists a double standard when it comes to feminist literary criticism and gay male writers.

Firstly, let us look at the driving force behind Cunningham's wish to write a novel that would revolve exclusively around female characters. It is not a secret that Cunningham's first encounter with Virginia Woolf was in his teenage years when he desperately wanted to impress a girl. By that time, he did not see any special aesthetics in *Mrs Dalloway*, and it took some time before he could fully appreciate the true 'Woolfian genius'. In an interview for the *Guardian*, Cunningham enthusiastically admits: "My only experience with sentences before then had been confined to the simple declarative. Woolf's sentences were revelatory.... Reading *Mrs Dalloway* transformed me, by slow degrees, into a reader" (Cunningham, *Guardian*). It would definitely please any feminist literary critic to hear that it was a novel written by a woman that contributed to male writer's artistic awareness and language admiration.

After having read most of the literary pieces by Woolf, Cunningham felt an urge to pay tribute to this literary giant of modernism. His literary ambition was to come up with a contemporary retelling of Woolf's story about middle aged Clarissa Dalloway who is about to throw a party. Nevertheless, Cunningham was fully aware of Woolf's unique

talent and her position among feminists, he describes the process of his writing as follows: “I approached the idea with appropriate nervousness. For one thing, if one stands that close to a genius, one is likely to look even tinier than one actually is. For another, I am a man, and Woolf was not only a great writer but is a feminist icon. There has long been a certain sense that she belongs to women” (Cunningham, *Guardian*). Cunningham makes it clear that his intention was not to provide a new, better version of already existing novel, on the contrary, he perceived Woolf as his personal muse whom he respected not only as a gifted tutor but also as a prominent feminist figure.

Despite Cunningham’s determination to write a novel which would bring Woolf’s fictional character Clarissa Dalloway into a modern world, something was still missing. It took another female from Cunningham’s life – his mother, to stop the artistic stagnation: “Sitting at my computer, I pictured Clarissa Dalloway, and pictured Woolf, her creator, standing behind her. And then, unbidden, I imagined my mother standing behind Woolf” (Cunningham, *Guardian*). Cunningham’s mother, the second source of his inspiration, helped him to create another character – Laura Brown, named after Woolf’s essay “Mrs Bennett and Mrs Brown”. As Cunningham further explains, Laura Brown was a fictional reflection of his meticulous mother and, at the same time, she mirrored some of the personality traits of Woolf herself: “It seemed that in some fundamental way, my mother and Woolf had been engaged in similar enterprises. Both were pursuing impossible ideals. Neither was ever satisfied, because the end result, be it book or cake, did not, could not, match the perfection that seemed to hover just out of reach” (Cunningham, *Guardian*). Woolf was, indeed, full of doubts when it came to her literary skills. It is generally known she lacked confidence not only as an artist, but also as a woman, Woolf had to live under constant fear she was not giving her best as she often believed her sister, painter and mother of two, Vanessa Bell, had achieved better success and recognition (Harris 51-52). What Michael Cunningham did was to carefully transfer these professional uncertainties and personal anxieties onto paper.

What is more, even the novel title *The Hours* is not a result of pure a chance, this was originally the name Woolf wanted her book *Mrs Dalloway* to come under, but then she changed her mind: “But now what do I feel about *my* writing? – this book, that is, *The Hours*, if that’s its name?” (Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* 57). Eventually, Cunningham’s story follows *Mrs Dalloway* in a very similar pattern, yet, it is vital to stress that

Cunningham wanted, by no means, to feed on Woolf's career or ideas – he openly admires Woolf's play with words and he gives her the credit for his writing.

Similar to Woolf, Michael Cunningham has achieved status as a novelist who can masterfully show empathy for his fictional characters. It looks as though Woolf's personal statement: "How I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, and each comes to daylight at the presentment" (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 60) would perfectly fit to Cunningham himself. May it be the portrait of two growing up male friends in Ohio in his *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), time travelling in *Specimen Days* (2005) or an intimate confession of a middle-aged married couple from New York in *By Nightfall* (2010), Cunningham is always persistent to build a splendid inner lives of his fictional protagonists and not to leave his readers disappointed.

Also, what seems to be another literary signature of Cunningham's novels is the recurring motif of one's sexuality – his characters are, in most of the cases, openly gay, bisexual or they at least question their own sexual urges and nature. Cunningham himself does not feel any shame when revealing his homosexuality, and his novels usually come under LGBT or Queer fiction. At the same time, Cunningham does not like the idea of being labeled as a 'gay writer'. In an interview for *Out Magazine* Cunningham stated:

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. (Cunningham, *Out*)

When facing something as demanding and principled as a feminist literary criticism, it would be much more convenient to reach for a novel that was written by female. Michael Cunningham was not the only one who decided to bring Woolf to life again – in a novel *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014) by Maggie Gee, Mrs Woolf finds herself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century New York, discovering all the miraculous changes in a completely new and modern environment. This diploma thesis, nevertheless, strives to challenge the notion that it is possible to find feminist agenda only in female literature.

Also, in response to Cunningham's private life, another crucial question arises – Would Cunningham's sexuality play in favor of his being subjected to feminist literary investigation? It might seem that feminist literary critics would grant an exception for gay male writers, examining their texts about women with a less critical eye, yet, this logical assumption is not exactly right. Even though both feminist and gay male studies share common enemies, they can never reach a complete unity: "On the one hand, that male feminist criticism is an issue, underscores the impact feminism has had on men; masculinity, like femininity, is constructed and heterogeneous. On the other hand, there is always the risk that male critics engaged in feminist criticism will repeat the patriarchal structure of male homosocial exchange that excludes women" ("Men in Feminism"). In other words, there is always an invisible chance that male writers might want to incorporate the experienced patriarchal norms into the texts.

Surely, a countless number of works about women were written by men and vice versa, nevertheless, regardless of the sexual orientation of male authors, they would always constitute a potential threat. Moreover, the same critical hypothesis goes for male feminists whose practice is, according to the 1980s debates, adjacent, yet not the same as feminism ("Men in Feminism"). Therefore, this diploma thesis will look into the feminist question predominantly with reference to the content of the novel and secondarily to the purposes uncovered by the author himself, disregarding his sexuality.

### **3.2 Mediating the Female Experience**

When Michael Cunningham was once asked how it is possible that his insight into female mind is so credible and precise, he openly responded that he believes no emotions should be limited to being perceived as masculine or feminine only ("Michael Cunningham Answers"). According to both Woolf and Cunningham, emotions should not make a difference when it comes to gender, which is something that poses a huge problem for the feminist point of view – a view that sees female experience as unique, elusive by men. Nevertheless, Cunningham refines his confession by adding that he regularly consulted the written pages with his close female friends ("Michael Cunningham Answers"). Still, it was not only this friendly support that helped Cunningham to mediate something as complex as the flow of thoughts inside a female brain.



According to Joyce Carol Oates, in an attempt to produce a highly subjective piece of fiction, the writer should be as ‘Woolfian’ as possible (Oates, *New York Times*). Even though Oates was aiming at female writers, Woolfian style of writing could be applied to Cunningham’s work as well. Following Woolf’s own writing technique, Cunningham counted on a narrative which would make his story telling as internal and subjective as possible. It is true the question of narrativity and formal structure may not be the target focus of feminist literary criticism (this field is rather a concern of formalist or narratology studies), yet, the degree of the writer’s ability to display the female perspective is definitely attention worthy.

Firstly, in the process of following the ‘Woolfian’ style, Cunningham decided to base his novel on a figural narrative – according to Manfred Jahn’s description, figural narrative enables a 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrator to enter the consciousness of the characters and to mediate their opinions, feelings etc. At the same time, the narrator stays anonymous, indistinct, he only fulfills the function of a mediator (Jahn N1.18). In *The Hours*, the narrator separately (within relevant chapters), penetrates into Clarissa’s, Virginia’s and Laura’s heads following their train of thoughts. Jahn describes this centralized point of view as follows: “An entirely covert narrator presents the story as if seen through the eyes of an internal focalizer” (N1.20) Hence, this technique results in a highly subjective and omniscient storytelling in which, nonetheless, the narrator abstains from any side commentaries or critical evaluation which could destroy the final artistic impression.

What is more, Jahn also notes that the technique of a figural narration is often presented in so called ‘slice of life stories or novels’ whose content is “restricted to a very brief episode in a character’s life, often only a day, a few hours or even just a single moment” (N.3.3.10). By all accounts, both Woolf and Cunningham were fond of this narrative approach, proving that even a negligible fraction counting few hours might reveal the most covert desires, doubts, or ambitions.

More essential, however, than the ‘slice of life story’ is the interconnectedness between figural narration and stream of consciousness (N.3.3.9). Following the example of Woolf, Cunningham does not present the inner thoughts as random fragments, but rather as an abrupt explosion of intimate confessions or as a natural flow of feelings and opinions that pass through the mind. For instance, the reader witnesses the sudden transition of Clarissa’s emotions: “She feels briefly, wonderfully alone, with everything

ahead of her. Then the feeling moves on. It does not collapse; it is not whisked away. It simply moves on, like a train that stops at a small country station, stands for a while, and then continues out of sight” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 92), or a moment of sudden emotional flooding: “The world, this world, feels suddenly stunned and stunted, far from everything. There is the heat falling evenly on the streets and houses; there is the single string of stores referred to, locally, as downtown” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 111). This also brings us to both Woolf’s and Cunningham’s work with the notion of time – in particular, to the opposition of so called ‘public’ and ‘private’ time.

From the point of view of Peter Childs, this technique was commonly used in modernist novels whose narrative was a mixture of public time and private time – the first one, mediating the present consciousness of the characters, usually being signaled by the present tense, and the latter one, mediating the character’s inner journey into their personal history, being indicated by the past tense (171). This alternation between the characters’ consciousness in present and private time helps to build complex characters within a limited amount of time. This is caused by the fact that “in public time only a few seconds have passed, but in the character’s mind it may be nearer to several minutes” (Childs 171). As a result, the authors’ fictional worlds may seem to be shrunken to ‘a day in life’ narratives only, yet, the private time functions as a memoir laden with numerous and intimate life stories.

At this point, it is also essential to note that Cunningham’s stream of consciousness is not an exact copy of the one that Woolf used. In her novels, Woolf was able to skip from one consciousness to another, varying the points of view presented, sometimes even a single passage is retold by another character in a different light. Cunningham, on the other hand, came up with a highly fragmented story as all of the three female protagonists live in different times and places. For this reason, Cunningham always dedicates a chapter devoted solely to one of the females and the internal focalization thus stays fixed on one consciousness only.

In response to the structural fragmentation of the novel, it should be emphasized that the formally independent storylines, varying both in time and space, are thematically interconnected and they together represent a very complex novel. *The Hours* is divided into 22 chapters, each of which bears a relevant title in accordance with the character – Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Brown, or Mrs Woolf. Cunningham separately penetrates into the

minds of Virginia, Laura and Clarissa and jumps in time and space across a whole century, between two continents. However, these leaps are never chaotic or accidental – all the chapters dealing with one of the women make a coherent line, since Cunningham works with textual references, images, themes, or motifs that build a sophisticated bridge between the fragments.

The introductory passages of the individual stories demonstrate this interrelation: “There are still flowers to buy.... It is New York City. It is the end of the twentieth century” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 9) – that is the opening sentence in a chapter about Clarissa Vaughan. A similar pattern is to be observed in the story of Virginia Woolf: “Mrs. Dalloway said something (what?) and got the flowers herself. It is a suburb of London. It is 1923” (29) and thirdly, in the story of Woolf’s keen reader, Larissa Brown reads: “*Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself...* It is Los Angeles. It is 1949” (37). Not only does Cunningham intertwine the three storylines with a reference to the flower symbolism, but he also makes his readers notice the jumps in time and space.

To conclude, Cunningham’s fiction with its fragmented character, intertextual references and metafiction might be labelled as a postmodern pastiche on Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. According to Jaroslav Kušnír, Professor of University in Prešov, it was also feminist and sexually different literature that the post-modernist writings have opened space for (16). Surely, a postmodernist status does not necessarily entitle a novel to be called a feminist fiction, yet, Cunningham’s play with words and ability to mediate the female experience to the last detail plays in a favor of this thesis proposal. It goes without saying *The Hours* and *Mrs Dalloway* represent an elaborative journey into the depths of a female soul in a very similar manner, mainly thanks to figural narration and stream of consciousness.

## 4. Mrs Woolf

In this chapter, the first female character from the novel – Virginia Woolf is to be examined from the feminist perspective. For the reason that Woolf was closely modelled on a real-life female writer, Cunningham’s portrayal of this modernist icon is being analyzed also with respect to her actual life experience and biographical information available. In the very first part, Woolf is studied as a female who was educated and economically active, based on the factual sociohistorical background of her writing career. In a similar vein, this chapter concentrates on Woolf as a novelist, in particular, it inspects Cunningham’s fictional look into Virginia Woolf’s head while writing a new piece of fiction – *Mrs Dalloway*. Furthermore, Virginia’s personal life, her marriage, and interpersonal relationships are brought into focus, giving both references to the novel and Woolf’s personal correspondence and notes in order to evaluate the credibility of Cunningham’s writing. Lastly, this chapter aims to clarify Woolf’s position among feminists as especially the later feminist literary critics, like Elaine Showalter, challenged Woolf’s feminist legacy.

### 4.1 The Writer in the House

“Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.”

– Virginia Woolf

As it has been already stated in the theoretical part, feminist literary critics see Virginia Woolf as an essential member of the first wave of feminism – dating back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This particular turning point in the feminist history is associated mainly with the suffrage movement and female political agenda proposed both by public and written word. Nevertheless, it is necessary to stress the status of women not only as voters, but also as writers, as females taking part in the money-making process.

Virginia Woolf, born in 1882, seemed to be clear about the social difficulty related to women and work. In her essay *Women and Fiction* (later on a part of *A Room of One’s Own*) she explained that women were simply too overwhelmed with family duties which eventually prevented them from possible talent discovery. What is more, women lacked

needed education so as to become economically active and thus also financially independent. Woolf's thoughts were indeed right, yet, from the position of a financially secured woman with upper-middle class status, at least a little bit unrealistic. Woolf wished the best for women, however, her strong conviction that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, *A Room* 4) did not reflect the situation of most of the British female population.

It is true that during the Industrial Revolution, women and children entered in large the labor market, nevertheless, in most of the cases only as a cheap labor force. Those who were luckier could take part in business running with their husbands or fathers, yet, similar chances for female financial advancement were ruined during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "The sustained growth of the economy in the later nineteenth century and increasing real wages, particularly men's wages, meant that ... women ... would tend to withdraw from the labour market. This helps to explain a tendency for the labour force participation of married women to decline from the mid-nineteenth century until the interwar period" (Purvis ch.4) This situation eventually meant for women to get back to their marital and maternal responsibilities.

When Woolf was mentioning 'women' in her essays and public speeches, her propositions were, in the real world, applicable almost solely to women coming from middle or upper middle classes, because only for them was it possible to get a higher form of education. Females of lower and working classes had a scarce opportunity to attend at least elementary schooling or so called 'dame schools' which were "small, private schools run by working-class women in their own homes" (Purvis ch.5). What is more, regardless of the economic situation of a family, the schooling system kept instilling domestic values and marital obedience in the girls. Despite the more relaxed atmosphere in the twenties, it was still possible to trace persistent Victorian tendency to educate women with one common goal: to shape them into perfect 'Angels in the house'. This label stood for the female ideal of the Victorian era, imagining women as perfect housewives and mothers – passive, submissive, well-behaved, and always good-looking. In *Women's and Gender History* Jane Purvis explains that middle class girls' education "...should also polish the young lady through a training in the social graces, which would render her competitive on the marriage market. There was no need for a grammar school or university education, whose function was to prepare middle-class boys for service to Church or state" (Purvis

ch.5). This was also Woolf's case who was home schooled with her sister Vanessa, while their brothers were sent to grammar schools and universities.

Paradoxically enough, Woolf's writing career had always been accompanied by men; Woolf's father was the one who introduced her to writing and who encouraged her during the first years of Woolf's literary attempts. Alexandra Harris claims Leslie Stephen, Woolf's father, did not hide his wish for Virginia to become a historian and biographer – his library, full of philosophical studies and Russian classics, was open to his daughter who felt immersed in the reading day and night (Harris 30). Later on, when Woolf made her name in the British world of literature, she maintained strong intellectual relationships with numerous male intellectuals, for instance E.M. Forster or Lytton Strachey, whom she always looked up to and cared about their professional opinions. Thirdly, Woolf's husband Leonard Woolf represented probably the most crucial role in Woolf's career, since she respected his critical outlook on her works: “Well Leonard has read *To the Lighthouse* and says it is much my best book and it is a ‘masterpiece’” (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 115), they spent hours consulting and making adjustments to Woolf's latest novel or essay in process.

Woolf's readers and literary critics should be aware of the fact that despite Woolf's being brought up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in accordance with traditional Victorian values, she succeeded in ‘killing the Angel in the house’ and she became the Writer in the house instead, in which she exceeded expectations of her time. Woolf published abundant number of novels, short stories, essays, critical studies, or biographies for which she deservedly won a status of one of the most prominent female writers of British modernism. Into the bargain, she also cofounded The Hogarth Press with her husband, and she became an equivalent ‘breadwinner’ in the family – she and Leonard bought a car for the money she had earned for *Mrs Dalloway* (Harris 122) – from these points of view, Woolf definitely did go against the traditional current.

Now, it is time to have a critical look at how Michael Cunningham combined the biographical information and his fictionalized view of Woolf with the intention of creating a faithful representation of this modernist icon. Starting from more general evaluation, it might be alleged that, in his novel, Cunningham tried to map Woolf's writing ambitions and to dig into her consciousness to the smallest detail. In *The Hours*, Woolf becomes the subject of her own writing strategy – stream of consciousness, for

most of the time, the reader stays immersed in Woolf's head, listening in on her inner monologues and thought processes in relation to her writings. Objectively speaking, this narrative strategy seems to be working in favor of passing the female experience on the readers as precisely as possible, on the other hand, when having to submit the novel to feminist critical reading, Cunningham sails close to the wind. The reason why is simple – it is possible to track down most of the thoughts, Cunningham claims to be Woolf's, in her diaries or essays. In order to evaluate whether Cunningham's portrait of Woolf is credible enough and does not hide any misleading or patriarchal agenda, this chapter will work with citations from *The Hours*, but it will also take Woolf's diaries and biography into consideration.

Starting from the early morning in the novel, Cunningham stresses Woolf's sustained zeal for her writing. Her passion was so strong that even in the moment Woolf opened up her eyes, she felt the unmanageable urge to put her ideas on paper as soon as possible, ignoring such superstitious matters as a choice of hairstyle or a dress: "She, Virginia, could be a girl in a new dress, about to go down to a party, about to appear on the stairs, fresh and full of hope. No, she will not look in the mirror. She finishes washing her face" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 31). Virginia even neglects physical needs like having breakfast: "If you send Nelly in to interrupt me I won't be responsible for my actions" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 33) – informs Mrs Woolf her caring husband boldly, adding: "I'll eat later. I'm going to work now" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 33). When put in contrast to the majority of women of that time, Cunningham's story emphasizes Woolf's otherness, or rather, (in the context of this thesis) uniqueness and determination.

Even in a fictional world, Woolf's character is far from passive, submissive, she never really worries too much about her appearance – such concerns were the holy trinity of the typical 'Angels in the house'. Cunningham's Woolf is, just like she was in reality, childless and not having to preoccupy herself with any tedious form of a housework, since she and Leonard hired a maid. Therefore, Mrs Woolf's only concern was to produce a quality piece of work: "Virginia pours herself a cup of coffee in the dining room, walks quietly downstairs, but does not go to Nelly in the kitchen. This morning, she wants to get straight to work without risking exposure to Nelly's bargainings and grievances. It could be a good day; it needs to be treated carefully" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 31). Because Virginia was a part of the middle-class society, she could benefit from living a life that was accessible almost exclusively by men, moreover, based on the last citation,

one might get the feeling that Woolf's thinking resembled what would a man usually think about women's complaints.

Continuing with Woolf's busy day, Cunningham let Woolf explain her rush to work soon after, when she describes the elusiveness of the 'writing muse', muses may appear or disappear regardless of the artist's cause:

Writing in that state is the most profound satisfaction she knows, but her access to it comes and goes without warning. She may pick up her pen and follow it with her hand as it moves across the paper; she may pick up her pen and find that she's 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. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 35)

Similar to many other artists, Woolf occasionally suffered from the creativity crisis, not being able to find the right words: "One always has a better book in one's mind than one can manage to get onto paper" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 69), Cunningham makes Woolf stress this obstacle as he offers a portrait of an artist as realistically as possible.

Also, Cunningham presents Woolf as a meticulous writer, a staunch perfectionist who constantly re-evaluates what she has already written, doubting her writing skills: "It seems good enough; parts seem very good indeed. She has lavish hopes, of course – she wants this to be her best book, the one that finally matches her expectations. But can a single day in the life of an ordinary woman be made into enough for a novel?" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 69). Despite Woolf's talent, her unfaded hunt for the best fitting words was accompanied by a constant pressure, worries that she was never giving out enough. When Woolf collects her thoughts about the very first paragraph of *Mrs Dalloway*, she immediately questions the quality of her novel's beginning: "But is it the right beginning? Is it a little too ordinary?" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 29). Still, the readers should keep in mind that Cunningham did not try to undermine Woolf's legacy or her writing skills, quite the opposite, he makes Woolf communicate with her readers in the most honest way. Cunningham proves to have studied Woolf's diaries in order to transfer her writing genius on paper with all its flaws and strengths.

Woolf did, indeed, write in her diary that she was worried that she would not be taken seriously, that all she made was easy reading (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 148). These uncertainties might have sprung from Woolf's painstaking endeavor to literature –



sometimes she spent the whole day in her study, working simultaneously on two different works. Alexandra Harris, in her biography of Woolf, notes that while Woolf was in the middle of writing *Mrs Dalloway*, she was also collecting notes and thoughts for the essay *A Common Reader* (1925). Despite being overwhelmed by a load of work, Woolf was having the time of her life while working on *Mrs Dalloway* and *A Common Reader*, even though she fully recognized the fragility of this brief moment of happiness (94). Unfortunately, this premonition eventually came true. Cunningham's work transmits these downfalls and problems with writing into his fictional world as well.

To Woolf, writing was not only a personal form of self-realization, it was also a therapy – she might have killed the Angel in the house, got herself money and a room of her own, however, she did not manage to overcome the inner demons that haunted her for most of her life. Woolf's highly unstable mental condition was probably the most crucial factor that played role in her career and personal life. Beginning in her youth, Woolf was troubled by nervous breakdowns, headaches, and hallucinations. During these episodes, Woolf's mind was paralyzed, preventing her from any writing: "My depression is a harassed feeling. I'm looking: but that's not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it?" (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 85). Such mental collapses tended to reoccur when Woolf found herself in a stressful situation and the breakdowns repeatedly resulted in Woolf's hospitalization. This provides the explanation for why she wrote *Mrs Dalloway* in Richmond and not in London. Woolf was advised to leave the rush and hum of the big city and try living in a countryside, breathing in fresh air, and going for walks in the nature. This treatment was back then commonly prescribed as a cure for what the modern medicine would evaluate as bipolar disorder – a diagnosis that is typical for extreme mood swings between emotional highs (manias) and emotional lows (depressions).

As depicted both in *The Hours* and her diaries, Woolf's unstable mental condition had an effect on her working on *Mrs Dalloway*. There were days during which she felt chirpy, energetic and self-confident about her texts: "I shall produce *Mrs. Dalloway* in Bond Street as the finished product. If they say your fiction is impossible, I shall say what about Miss Ormerod, a fantasy. If they say: 'You can't make us care a damn for any of your figures', I shall say read my criticism then" (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 46). Nevertheless, these states full of courage and persistence could have been easily replaced by severe depressions full of doubts and discouragement: "I'm a failure as a writer. I'm out of fashion: old: shan't do any better: had no headpiece" (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 31).

Cunningham records the never-ending and exhaustive fights against the manic depression of Woolf in a detailed and very authentic way: “At those times the headache moves out of her skull and into the world. Everything glows and pulses. Everything is infected with brightness, throbbing with it, and she prays for dark the way a wanderer lost in the desert prays for water” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 70-71). Woolf’s depressions only negatively impinged her own reflection of herself as a writer: “She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 5). Cunningham’s labelling Woolf as a gifted eccentric might have arisen as his own perception of this writer, or, he might have traced down in Woolf’s diaries what *Manchester Guardian* wrote about her art – “brilliance combined with integrity; profound as well as eccentric” (Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* 76).

Unfortunately, Woolf’s inner demons eventually spent and destroyed Virginia’s mind and soul, she took her life in March 1941 when she drowned herself in the river. Cunningham does not omit this biographical fact in his novel, he opens up the first chapter about Mrs Woolf with a jump to the future, to the day when also the fictional Virginia decided to silence the voices in her head for once and all: “She imagines turning around, taking the stone out of her pocket, going back to the house. She could probably return in time to destroy the notes. She could live on; she could perform that final kindness. Standing knee-deep in the moving water, she decides against it” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 5). The novel’s prologue, which deals with the last hours of Virginia’s life, serves both as a foreshadowing of Woolf’s mental collapses and a literary memento of this incredible writer.

#### **4.2 Mrs Dalloway: A Window into Virginia’s Soul**

If something is to be found as the joining element in Woolf’s fictions, it would be Woolf’s creating an alternative universe in her novels, a safe place in which her characters would succeed in what she herself failed. Pursuant to Woolf’s life and *The Hours*, it is evident Virginia Stephen was not destined to become the prototype of an upper middle-class housewife, quite the reverse, she and Leonard hired a housemaid so that Virginia could fully concentrate on her writings.

In *The Hours* Mrs Woolf is never to be witnessed folding clothes, hoovering the floor or cooking, likewise, when she enters the kitchen while Nelly (the maid) is preparing the food, Woolf cannot not help feeling as if she is not welcomed, just as if she has just stepped into someone else's territory that felt so strange to her. However, Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway (as depicted both by Woolf herself and Cunningham) was completely opposite to her. In Cunningham's version, while Mrs Woolf collects her thoughts about the portrayal of Mrs Dalloway, she thinks: "She will give Clarissa Dalloway 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, *The Hours* 87). Cunningham's story, as he himself declared, was strongly based on Virginia's actual life – in Virginia's youth, it was vitally important for young ladies to attend various social gatherings or cocktail parties, however, Virginia Stephen was no Mrs Dalloway – what would have brought joy to Clarissa constituted a forced social act full of awkwardness for Virginia. During the parties, Virginia had a strong feeling she did not fit in, while the others were drinking booze and were competing in affairs and sexual experience, Virginia felt as an alien, uninteresting virgin and hopeless intellectual who would rather talk about Plato (Harris 35). Whilst Clarissa Dalloway puts on a green dress in Woolf's story, Woolf herself did not feel comfortable wearing dresses, they simply highlighted too much her femininity. As believed by many of Woolf's biographers, Virginia had been sexually molested by her stepbrothers George and Herbert during the years 1889-1904 (Nicolson) and thus she never fully accepted her womanhood, never completely came to terms with her own experiences as a body. This might provide at least a partial explanation for why Woolf avoided any sexual scenes in her works, plus, she believed female freedom of expression was strongly bounded by the other sex's prejudices:

To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say.... She could write no more.... Her imagination could work no longer. This I believe to be a very common experience with women writers – they are impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex. For though men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women. (Woolf, *Collected Essays* 288)

Woolf never publicly opened up about her being sexually abused (only a handful of her relatives were aware of the molest), still, she did talk about her writing restraint when it came to sexuality and the female experience in terms of physicality. When she introduced female characters in her works, they were usually portrayed mothers or wives to their husbands; nevertheless, Woolf focused on their inner lives in an aesthetic rather than a sexual manner. In spite of the fact that Cunningham, as a male, might pose a potential threat when referring to *Mrs Dalloway* and re-creating the artistic universe of Woolf, he did prove to respect Woolf's moderate preferences – one can neither find any explicit sexual scenes nor striking bursts of strong desires in Woolf or in Cunningham. Rather, any form of sexuality is usually shrunken into few hugs or innocent kisses: “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” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 210) – this is what Mrs Woolf is planning for Clarissa's love life.

Additionally, in connection with Woolf's real life and her treatment of sexuality in her fictions, it is possible to spot that Woolf made her characters break free from any heteronormative expectations – she gave space to Clarissa Dalloway to become attracted to men as well as to women. In the 1920s, the fluidity of one's sexuality was nothing unusual among the intellectuals of Bloomsbury group whose members were, paradoxically, born into the Victorian era: “An increased erotic freedom followed the Victorian age, as Freud ushered in the twentieth century with a view of sexuality as the basic instinct underlying almost every human” (“Eroticism” 192-93). Not only Clarissa Dalloway, but also Woolf herself fell in love with women and let them become her inspiration. The most notable was probably Woolf's affair with an English poet, novelist and journalist Vita Sackville-West whom she met between December 1922 and January 1923 (Cook ch.9). Vita is believed to help Woolf get a second breath in her life and to teach her how to finally feel confident in her own body.

In Cunningham's fiction, there is no single reference made to Vita and Virginia's relationship, even though they already knew each other while Woolf was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, instead, Cunningham further develops the complexity of Mrs Woolf's relationships with her older sister Vanessa. In *The Hours*, when Vanessa pays a visit in Richmond to her sister, Mrs Woolf suddenly gives way to her emotions: “Nelly turns

away and, although it is not at all their custom, Virginia leans forward and kisses Vanessa on the mouth. It is an innocent kiss, innocent enough, but just now, in this kitchen, behind Nelly's back, it feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures. Vanessa returns the kiss" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 154). The just cited quotation might be interpreted in several ways – this passage might either intimate Virginia's hidden feelings for the same sex, it could also have been an attempt to demonstrate Virginia was ready to shock, to break the conventions and taboos set. However, it is essential to mention that outside of Cunningham's novel, there is no evidence advocating for any romantic tension between the two sisters.

Be it as it may, in Woolf's biographies, there are some commentaries being made on account of Woolf's sexuality, Elaine Showalter in her study of Woolf states: "In fact Woolf was far from sexless; her view of the world seems to have been quite sensual, even erotic, until she was forced to translate her feelings into sexual events. And Bloomsbury set high standards on sexual performance" (270). Even though Showalter's proposition was aimed at the nonfictional Virginia Woolf, it would just as well work for Cunningham's Virginia, who was in her mind still present in the moment of 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. It will serve as this afternoon's manifestation of the central mystery itself, the elusive brightness that shines from the edges of certain dreams; the brightness which, when we awaken, is already fading from our minds, and which we rise in the hope of finding, perhaps today, this new day in which anything might happen, anything at all. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 209-10)

If the passage above is being observed from more pragmatic and artistic point of view, it is possible to dismiss the erotic undertone from it and to replace it with a proposition that Cunningham only tried to come up with a fictional moment explaining Woolf's inspiration for another kiss, namely the one in *Mrs Dalloway*. Just like Virginia and Vanessa, Clarissa Dalloway cherished the memory of when she and her friend Sally Senton got closer together, it was a nice summer day when their lips touched: "Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned

upside down!” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 25-26). More than that, both Woolf’s and Cunningham’s working with the character’s consciousness is accompanied by a rapid slowdown of the narrative pace. Not only the characters, but also the readers feel as if they were frozen in time, observing the sudden flood of thoughts and emotions as the writers’ poetic language intensifies the experience. To Woolf, it was these little details and moments in one’s life that enabled her to create vivid memories and eventually a conscious literary masterpiece.

Unfortunately, Mrs Woolf’s pleasing meditation over the sentimental memories was usually disrupted by sustained headaches and emotional lows, for her fading health condition had always played a fatal role in most of her relationships, be it her marriage to Mr Woolf, relationship with her sister Vanessa or other friends and relatives. Besides Virginia’s own problems with depressions, the strongly implanted Victorian values seemed get hold on to part of her personality. Cunningham’s novel proposes that Woolf was putting the heterosexual relationships and her own marriage to the first place, similar to Mrs Dalloway: “Clarissa will believe that a rich, riotous future is opening before her, but eventually (how, exactly, will the change be accomplished?) she will come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man. Yes, she will come to her senses, and marry” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 81). Such suggestion may cause a dispute among more radical feminists and feminist literary critics who warned about the concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and the possible pitfalls of the institution of marriage which, in its nature, automatically puts women in the passive, inferior position, both socio-economically and sexually. Nevertheless, Woolf did not feel limited by her marital status, she did not object the institution of wedlock, but she also insisted on entering marriage voluntarily.

Regardless of the common feminist view on marriage, Woolf, and eventually also Cunningham himself, did prove that Woolf’s marriage was a happy one. In many respects, it went against the traditional current, since most of Woolf’s interpersonal relationships (both with men and women) were based on intellectual understanding rather than on sexual outbursts. This is demonstrated in the exchanged correspondence between Virginia and Leonard: “I feel no physical attraction in you. There are moments – when you kiss me the other day was one – when I feel no more than a rock” (Spater and Parsons 61). Nevertheless, this does not mean Virginia and Leonard were not in love or in an unsatisfactory marriage. Leonard liked Woolf’s personality, respected her mood swings,

and supported her in her career. Cunningham attentively reflects the special relationship of the two: “She may be the most intelligent woman in England, he thinks. Her books may be read for centuries. He believes this more ardently than does anyone else. And she is his wife” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 33). Along with that, Leonard and Virginia spent hours proofreading her novels, it was not because Mr Woolf would question Virginia’s talent, it was because she trusted him and respected his opinion – Cunningham describes a moment in which Virginia approaches her husband, frowning, looking at her writings with an expression of a slight judgements, yet, Mrs Woolf thinks: “As he looks at her, though, the expression fades almost immediately and is replaced by the milder, kinder face of the husband who has nursed her through her worst periods, who does not demand what she can't provide and who urges on her, sometimes successfully, a glass of milk every morning at eleven” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 32). Fairly enough, if the spirit of the whole marriage of Mr and Mrs Woolf was to be shrunken into few demonstrative lines, it would be exactly the previous citation from *The Hours*. Leonard was incredibly tolerant, not forcing his wife to fulfill her marital duties, he was rather trying to help her develop her writing skills.

Woolf’s personal correspondence and biography revealed the secret of the harmonious relationship of the Woolfs: “...those for whom Virginia had strong affections fell within a narrow patter of people occupying peculiarly supportive position in relation to her...” (Spater and Parsons 60), which is true both of Virginia’s sister Vanessa and of her husband. In *The Hours*, Woolf supports these claims, when she opens emotionally up in her goodbye letter for Leonard, writing: “*I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me & incredibly good. I want to say that – everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me, it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness.... I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been*” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 6). So far, it looks as though Cunningham’s view of the marriage was highly realistic, almost idealistic, describing Leonard as a tenacious husband and Virginia as a loyal housewife being a fully equal and respected member of the household and marriage.

Nevertheless, the task of this thesis is to spot and evaluate any patriarchal or oppressive passages in the novel, therefore, at this point, it is also time to bring a more critical opinion on the scene. For instance, how would feminist literary critics account for the parts in Woolf’s goodbye letter in which she writes: “*I can’t go on spoiling your life*

any longer” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 6) or when she thinks: “...and if she restores herself to the care of Leonard and Vanessa they won’t let her go again, will they? She decides to insist that they let her go” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 5). These delicate thoughts tell about the novelist’s feelings of guilt and helplessness, just as if an invisible cloud of threat was constantly hanging above her.

If the clues to clarify the objectionable parts in *The Hours* are to be supported by feminist studies and memoirs from Woolf’s life, it would no longer seem coincidental that Cunningham’s fiction communicates another, more unsettling and darker, level of the Woolfs’, apparently functional, relationship. Firstly, some of the feminist literary critics, like Elaine Showalter, and even some of Woolf’s relatives became determined that due to Woolf’s poor physic condition, she was not able to make decisions about her own life, concerning both the question of her being institutionalized and having children: “The inadequacy Virginia felt when she contrasted the sexual side of her life with Vanessa’s was compounded by Leonard’s decision they should not have children.... According to Quentin Bell, Virginia had happily anticipated having children and did not know of Leonard’s misgivings until some time after they married” (Showalter 272). From the feminist perspective, such manipulation could be perceived as a form of male supremacy and involuntary female submission. Whatever circumstances played the significant role in Woolf’s mental stability, they were always firmly rooted in Woolf being a woman:

Woolf’s illness had always had some source in female experience; they had taken the classic female forms of frigidity, depression, and suicide attempts, and had been treated in female asylums with therapy intended to induce female passivity....The guilt, which so puzzled Leonard, and which I have described as her feelings of female inadequacy and her immense internalized anger against him and against Vanessa, became so overwhelming in this last attack that only self-destruction seemed commensurate with her despair. (Showalter 280)

Showalter’s proposition that Virginia was partially ‘forced’ to commit suicide in order to release the burden on her husband’s shoulders is indeed traceable in *The Hours*. If Leonard’s intensive care and radical decision making is read as patriarchal oppression of women, it would also be possible to interpret Woolf’s suicide as a form of protest, as an action of taking things in her own hands after all the time. If anything, Woolf was a free spirit, and against all the common labeling of Woolf as prudent, asexual, or timid, she



was, in fact, passionate and lively about life, her work and also about London. Virginia's stay in Richmond may be likened to living in a golden cage; she was surrounded by a loving husband, caring servants, and lovely nature, even though she must have felt under constant and binding surveillance. This might as well provide a justification for Virginia's feeling so rebellious after having kissed her sister behind Nelly's back and subsequently feeling an urge to leave Richmond for London.

Urged by desire to feel unbounded again, Virginia breaks free from the domestic oppression when she leaves the house and heads to a train station so as to catch a train to the capital. This moment feels almost victorious, yet, the awareness of guilt is still present in the back of her head: "If she does this, if she gets on the train that leaves in, what now, twenty-three minutes, and goes to London, and walks in London, and catches the last train back...Leonard will be insane with worry. If she calls him...he'll be furious, he'll demand that she return immediately" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 168-69). These worries eventually prevent Mrs Woolf from taking the trip and escape the feelings of imminent restrictions placed on her individuality: "She thinks, for a moment, that she will turn and run back to the station; she thinks she will escape some sort of catastrophe. She does not do any such thing. She continues walking forward, toward Leonard, who has clearly come out in a hurry" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 170). From these excerpts, it is evident that Leonard had to be aware of every step his wife took because of a constant fear she might attempt to take her life again. At the same time, Woolf probably felt as if in prison – every move she made was observed and evaluated, in most of the occasions, as harmful or inappropriate for her health.

All things considered, Cunningham's illustration of Virginia Woolf's personal life may be shrunken into 24 hours only, nevertheless, his novel captures more than an ordinary day in her life and it tells the readers more than how passionate she was about her profession as a writer. Cunningham touches upon such delicate topics as Woolf's inner fears, sexual preferences, suicidal thoughts, or the hidden reflection of her mind and soul in *Mrs Dalloway*. Cunningham's artistic depiction of Woolf is miscellaneous and authentic as he proved to have studied Virginia's written confessions and personal history. One, and rather questionable part, might lie in Cunningham's fictional implication of the romantic tension between Woolf and her sister Vanessa, yet, it is possible to justify the passage in more rational or artistic view. Also, despite the certain advantage that Woolf as an upper-middle class woman had, she was able to prove her

position as a writer, more than a housewife or a housekeeper, in the house. Cunningham alternately draws the reader's attention from more shallow details about Woolf's stay in Richmond to more serious problematics such as the alleged patriarchal control over Virginia's life by Leonard and Woolf's demonstrative (and also symbolic) escape from the house and eventually her suicide. The writer shows ups and downs in a day in life of Virginia Woolf so credibly that it sometimes almost feels as if the fictional and nonfictional levels of the novel melted into one. Stream of consciousness participated a great deal in mediating a very subjective, firsthand study of Woolf's strong, yet complicated, personality. Into the bargain, Cunningham's text offers a nice hint of how Mrs Woolf's life story left a significant mark on her books.

Surprisingly, if the readers decide to study Woolf's life and relation to feminism before even delving into *The Hours*, they might come across unexpected findings. Some aspects of Woolf's writings and her personal stands, as it turned out, endangered her position in the feminist prominence. This concern is to be discussed in the next chapter.

### **4.3 Are Feminists Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**

When Michael Cunningham talked about Virginia Woolf in connection with other women, he described her as a 'feminist icon' and 'belonging to women'. In the context of feminist literary criticism, notwithstanding, Woolf's name keeps stirring up controversial discussions on her behalf. Even though it might seem Woolf's position among feminists has been firmly established, feminist literary critics never managed to come to a unanimous consensus about Mrs Woolf. Instead, they have formed two camps; on one side of the debate, with Elaine Showalter as the main critic, questions Woolf as a feminist patron, whereas the second one, represented by Toril Moi or Rosi Braidotti, advocates for Woolf as a prominent figure in the process of evaluating and re-creating the female literary tradition. This chapter brings up the most crucial doubts about Woolf as a feminist in order to valorize the feminist essence of *The Hours* – if feminist literary critics exclude Woolf from the feminist literary tradition, it could seriously jeopardize the proposition of this diploma thesis which strives to qualify Cunningham's novel as a feminist reading.

Despite Woolf's considering female literature as unique and the female aesthetics far more different from the male one, it is also possible to trace some of the remains of Victorian expectations in Woolf's fiction. In her essays, Woolf was publicly calling for female independence and literary differentiation, yet, many of her novels seem to be more revolutionary and innovative in their form, rather than in their content or female character development. Historians dealing with female question (like Jane Purvis) share with feminist literary critics (Elaine Showalter or Rachel Blau DuPlessis) a very similar view on the female literature being produced by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to DuPlessis, many of the female protagonists were depicted as passive, because the theme of female quest or 'bildung' (education, accomplishment, development) was strongly repressed and the endings of the novels were highly predictable – the story either resulted in a successful courtship, marriage, or in a social or sexual failure and death (DuPlessis 1-3). Moreover, many of the literary fictions revolved around the daily lives of middle-class or upper-middle class women only. Such texts, coming from the interwar period, were later on unfavorably evaluated by some of the feminist literary critics or historians, such as Judith Rowbotham, who argued that "authors utilized an illusion of reality in order to give credibility to an otherwise unconvincing narrative" (Purvis ch.6), meaning that the female authors, who themselves were part of middle-class society, focused almost entirely on middle or upper-class female heroes. Consequently, women's literature was reflecting the female experience only of the privileged, more thriving ones which subsequently provided a distorted picture of reality.

When one looks at this accusation with a critical eye, it is unfortunately very likely that Woolf herself would have to defend her novels in front of feminist critics. May it be Mrs Ramsay or Mrs Dalloway, Woolf mostly portrays her characters as middle-class mothers and wives in a household. To put it bluntly, some of more radical critics might read *Mrs Dalloway* as a story about a privileged women who openly admits her lack of knowledge and education: "She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed..." (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 7) and whose only concern is to decide what dress she should put on and what flowers she shall pick so as to impress her guests.

Whatever the truth, Woolf's writing and personal position among feminists stays uncertain, however, it is not the seemingly hidden Victorian agenda in her works that would not let feminists sleep, surprisingly, it is Woolf's treatment of gender fluidity in

her later works and her failing to mediate the female experience with a sufficient emphasis. One of the upmost opponents of Woolf is the feminist and literary critic Elaine Showalter, who is, indeed, afraid of Virginia Woolf being associated with feminism and feminist literary canon. In Showalter's own words, it is necessary to debunk Woolf as the feminist literary myth: "I think it is important to demystify the legend of Virginia Woolf. To borrow her own murderous imagery, a woman writer must kill the Angel in the House...for Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, the Angel was Jane Austen. For the feminist novelists, it was George Eliot. For mid-twentieth-century novelists, the Angel is Woolf herself" (Showalter 265). Showalter's negative valorization of Woolf's fictions and essays springs both from the criticism of the form and content of her works, moreover, even from Woolf's personality as such.

Firstly, it is Woolf's drawing on the concept of androgyny (firstly introduced in the essay *A Room of One's Own* and further developed in *Orlando*) that causes Showalter's dissatisfaction with the reading. As much as Woolf tried to praise women's writing, which she believed is always feminine, to Showalter, "*A Room of One's Own* is an extremely impersonal and defensive book" (282). When using words such as impersonal and defensive, Showalter is referring to Woolf's proposal that a writer should leave the strictly given boundaries of one's sex behind and try to get rid of the limiting gender identities which might negatively affect the writer's creativity: "...it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman" (Woolf, *A Room* 87). To Showalter, however, the whole concept of Woolf's androgyny is simply illusory and unrealistic: "The androgynous mind is, finally, a utopian projection of the ideal artist....Whatever else one may say of androgyny, it represented an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness" (289). In this way, Woolf allegedly failed in transmitting the female experience, since she herself never fully came to terms with her own femininity and experience as a body: "Woolf was extremely sensitive to the ways in which female experience had made women weak, but she was much less sensitive to the ways in which it had made them strong" (Showalter 285), this is how Showalter comments on the closely related literary works and personal life of Woolf.

Secondly, according to Showalter, Woolf repeatedly and deliberately moved the reader's attention from essential female questions to a rather complicated narrative structure – in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf combines the fictional with nonfictional in order to get her message across. Despite the fact that Woolf reconstructs the history of woman's writing and that she raises topical questions such as: “Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?” (Woolf, *A Room* 22) or: “Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men?” (Woolf, *A Room* 23), as stated in Showalter, this essay still fails as a feminist reading due to an excessive deviation from the original intention.

Showalter claims one should stay detached from narrative strategies so as to get to the heart of the matter, which is the key problem when reading Woolf's works that are significantly experimental in form: “If one can see *A Room of One's Own* as a document in the literary history of female aestheticism, and remain detached from its narrative strategies, the concepts of androgyny and the private room are neither as liberating nor as obvious as they first appear. They have a darker side that is the sphere of the exile and the eunuch” (Showalter 285). In other words, Woolf has been critically attacked for staying too impartial and her essay for being too much form centered – as a result, this eventually prevented her from transmitting the female message onto her readers.

Also, when illustrating her point in the essay, Woolf comes up with a fictional character of Shakespeare's sister Judith, whom she compares to her brother William, who, as a man, had the opportunity to develop his talent. In any case, Woolf's imaginative problem handling became another subject of Showalter's backlash – the selection of Shakespeare is, according to Showalter, an inappropriate one since only a little is known about Shakespeare's personal life.

Last but not least, it was not only *A Room of One's Own* which brought about controversial commentaries, it was also Woolf's essay *Three Guineas* – published in 1938 and written as a reflection on the wave of rising fascism in Europe and the female position in society. To some scholars and feminists, like Naomi Black, this text is a peak of Woolf's contribution to feminism: “Three Guineas is special because in it the feminist perspective becomes an explicit argument” (Black 29). Woolf came up with a courageous idea that a woman experience might contribute to a social change. On the edge of war Europe, Woolf was commenting on the patriarchal gender system in which men are

always hungry for fights: "...the great majority of your sex are today in favour of war" (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 16), the vision of victory simply makes men excited or even pleased. On the other hand, women are pacifists in their nature and thus they might bring peace into the world. Similar to thoughts in *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas* openly criticizes patriarchy and the fact that women are being excluded from the political and public sphere. In Woolf's eyes, it was high time women had gained same access to finances and education, which were the spheres men always dominated over.

Woolf also admits that the traditional role of women as housekeepers and loving mothers might restore order and peace in the world that is currently being tossed by violence and fascism. Yet, when approaching the topics concerning motherhood or working-class females, in the eyes of Elaine Showalter or Queenie Dorothy Leavis, Woolf's description of the world was highly idealistic and nonpersonal considering the fact that Woolf could not relate to other females' experience, since she herself was childless upper middle-class woman. Showalter saw Woolf as naïve and isolated from female mainstream in that she wished to inspire women whose day to day lives she simply could not identify with (Showalter 294). When referring to Woolf's naivety, Showalter had in mind the passages in the text which talked about daughters of butchers or other working-class females as 'daughters of educated men' for whom Woolf wished to find a decent job with amended salary. In the essay, Woolf stated: "It is true that women civil servants deserve to be paid as much as men; but it is also true they are not paid as much as men" (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 95). Showalter saw Woolf's social commentaries both as elitist and unrealistic, bearing in mind that in the thirties only a handful could afford the luxury of higher education and Woolf took her stand from the position of an upper-class intellectual.

Nonetheless, Woolf's wish for education regardless of class should be read as right and visionary, not naïve, or in any way selective. American philosopher and feminist Rosi Bradiotti defends the ideas presented in the essay, refuting any allusions to Woolf's negative elitism: "Woolf stated that for *any* woman to be able to turn her interest in the arts and especially in literature into a source of income, some general and very concrete sociopolitical preconditions would have to be fulfilled. This is true for any woman – that is to say, for all women – not only the few privileged ones" (166). It was not only Bradiotti who stood up for Woolf as a feminist icon. Despite all the negative comments on Woolf's behalf, (E. M. Forster, for instance, labelled *Three Guineas* as Woolf's worst book) many

feminist critics would describe, from all of Woolf's works, this particular essay as the most feminist one.

Oddly enough, it was not only the feminist literary critic Ellaine Showalter who excluded Mrs Woolf from the feminist club, it was also the writer herself. The relationship between Woolf and feminism was a dynamic one – during the course of Woolf's political engagement (Woolf was most politically active during the women's suffrage), she regarded herself as a part of the feminist movement, yet, when her writing career was reaching its peak, Woolf became reluctant to call herself a feminist. Such feelings can be spotted in *Three Guineas* in which Woolf refers to feminism as 'an old, vicious and corrupt word': "That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'. Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word" (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 184). Besides expressing her personal attitudes towards the question of war and pacifism, Woolf also explained that feminism had to be destroyed as a concept which had run its course. It is highly paradoxical that someone who is so vehemently refusing the feminist label is now, by most of the literary critics, considered a leading feminist representative of the first wave of feminism. Nevertheless, it is vital to stress the context in which Woolf perceived the word in question, to Woolf, feminism was a time-limited practice – the female hunt for being authorized to do the same professions as men and to gain the voting right. Since Woolf perceived these goals as achieved, the empty meaning of feminism was to be replaced by another, functional and relevant concept.

It looks as though the new concept to arise was, the already delt with, androgyny. Woolf's conviction that human experience exceeds the limits of one's gender, however, does not have to automatically imply that she was abandoning the belief in female uniqueness. Quite the opposite, Woolf took the sex equality to another level when she applied femininity on men the same way she applied masculinity on women, which is also an approach that the latest gender studies are incline to. Over and above that, when the readers decide to have a closer look at the severe critique of Woolf in Showalter, it is possible to proclaim Showalter's negative opinions about Woolf lack stronger argumentation and, in some parts, they might even interfere with bias.

It is true feminist literary critics may find it demanding to figure out the feminist agenda in Woolf's complex texts due to their modernist and challenging structure. On the other hand, when focusing only on one aspect of the literary work, the final impression might be strongly distorted as it does not perceive the text as a whole. Toril Moi, in her defense of Woolf, agrees: "It is in this sense that Showalter's recommendation to remain detached from the narrative strategies of the text is equivalent to not reading it at all" (Moi 10). Likewise, the potential of any feminist legacy should not be limited to the content of the literary piece or the personal life of the female writer only, especially not in case of Woolf who made her name in the history of literature not only as a feminist, but primarily as a modernist. The fact that Woolf experimented with the narrative structure in her novels and essays made her one of the most valued proposers of the modernist approach to literature, and one of the few female modernists who received a world-view recognition (alongside with Gertrude Stein). What is more, Woolf's stream of consciousness, mostly described as easy to grasp, is sometimes put in contrast with James Joyce's less comprehensible work with this technique. In other words, to regard Woolf's feminist literary acquisition irrespective of the formal level of her works would equal to neglecting her literary contribution as such.

Secondly, Showalter's attack on the pervasive theme of androgyny in Woolf's later fiction might have been justified in the phase of the feminist studies in the seventies and eighties, however, in the more open environment at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (which leans towards blurring the dividing line between sexes) the harsh critique of Showalter would probably not meet with success. Simone de Beauvoir maintained that femininity is not biological but an artificially made construct, Judith Butler, an American feminist and psychologist writes in her study of gender called *Gender Trouble* (1990): "The very subject of woman is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of 'the subject' as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women" (Butler 4). Nowadays, feminism closely cooperates with queer and gender studies which would together perceive Woolf's suggestion of androgyny, in the context of the twenties, as something revolutionary and ahead of its time. After all, what feminists have been fighting for from the very beginning is equality, which is exactly what androgyny proposes – it does not prefer masculinity over femininity and vice versa, it establishes an absolute impartiality.



It is true the proposal of androgyny might appear rather unrealistic and the question to what extent it is achievable is still left to debate, yet, by being open to such form of cross-sexuality would not automatically exclude Woolf from the feminist circles.

A similar argumentation would go hand in hand with reflecting on Showalter's evaluation of Woolf's alluding to Shakespeare's life in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's intention was to demonstrate the connecting element between author's renown and gender: "Woolf's declaration of the death of the author brings with it an alternative, collective, model of authorship, a questioning of canonicity and a revision of our metaphors of gender" (Plain and Sellers 69). Woolf's decision to choose Shakespeare, not Christopher Marlowe or John Milton, was highly a pragmatic one; she wanted to highlight her point, namely – to warn about the problem of genius restricted through questioning the authority of the greatest of British writers. What is more, even though only a little is known about Shakespeare's private life, there is no doubt about this playwright's relying on the themes of cross dressing, disguise of identities, proposition of bisexuality and eventually challenging the gender-roles in his comedies and sonnets. When one considers these facts, it would no longer feel pointless for Woolf to demonstrate her argumentation on William Shakespeare.

Apparently, the most problematic and contradictory part of Showalter's study about Woolf rests in blaming her for 'avoiding the female experience as a body' and simultaneously depriving Woolf of empathizing with mothers or the pregnant ones. In this way, Showalter significantly limits the female writers' point of view and excludes her own sex from being able to transmit the feelings from the female position. It was not Woolf's own choice to struggle with the never-ending body-shaming and never being given the opportunity to raise her own children, on the contrary, Woolf was a victim of her time and primarily of the patriarchal society – it was men who drastically shaped Woolf's self-perception. Firstly, Virginia was repeatedly sexually abused by her half-brothers which, with most probability, contributed to her depressions and eventually to her husband and doctors rejecting the option for Woolf to get pregnant in such an unstable mental condition. Showalter does mention this information in her study, still, she does not see it as an explanation or an excuse for Woolf's supposed anti-feminist agenda in her books.

Feminism, like any other humanistic science, is not a stagnant matter, it has both conventional and radical margins and every person's approach might freely move on the scale between the two extremes. Even if it is possible to spot traditional values transmitted in Woolf's fiction, it is also essential to look at her works and opinions in relation to the sociohistorical context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many respects, Woolf's approach to femininity may seem inadequate, unrealistic and her feminism too complicated to classify, nevertheless, her treatment of gender and one's mind fluidity would still break conventions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If Cunningham's novel is to be commented regarding Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf, it can be stated that even if *The Hours* does not contain any compromising reference to Woolf being a feminist, Woolf's spiritual and financial independence together with her outlook on the state of literature tells about her persuasions: "Men may congratulate themselves for writing truly and passionately about the movements of nations; they may consider war and the search for God to be great literature's only subjects; but if men's standing in the world could be topped by ill-advised choice of hat, English literature would be dramatically changed" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 85). In this citation, Cunningham portrays Woolf both as serious and cynical in tone which would also oppose Showalter's narrow-minded image of Woolf's personality. The feminist dispute over Mrs Woolf may not be resolved yet, though the importance of Woolf's contribution to British literary canon stays far-reaching and irrefutable.

## **5. Mrs Brown**

Now, it is time to move the feminist critical eye to another of Cunningham's female protagonists – Mrs Brown. Laura Brown is a young housewife and a mother of one, living in Los Angeles. Originally, what Cunningham had in mind was to create a fictional character that would reflect his mother's meticulous nature, yet, the final picture of Laura Brown's day touches upon more serious subjects. In particular, it draws on something that bothered emancipated women for a long time – 'the problem that has no name'. The story of Laura provides both a complex look into the domestic environment and an intimate confession of an American housewife living in the post-war environment.

Therefore, this thesis strives to clarify how the former feminist attitudes shaped the female consciousness, how the post-war societal moods predestined the lives of the majority of American women. While commenting on the female condition, Betty Friedan's seminal work *Feminine Mystique* will serve as the main critical source for evaluating Cunningham's text from the feminist perspective. Laura Brown's personal experience is firstly analyzed with respect to Laura's being part of the heteronormative whole, and secondly, this thesis classifies Laura as a female reader, a passionate bookworm, who would rather disappear in the world of fiction than continue living the prescribed domestic life.

### **5.1 The Golden Age of American Family**

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, the United States experienced a decade of booms – both in terms of technology and military or economy and pop culture. The new generation of Americans was preoccupied with technological advances and the rapid growth of economy induced a consumer lifestyle – to own a shiny car and a brand-new stereo became the new standards. Further, newspapers and television commercials were promising to make the housewives' life easier than ever before with help of various kitchen tools and cleaning gadgets.

The horrors experienced during the war years, together with the new imminent danger of the Soviet Union, and a relatively conservative political status gave rise to a completely new social climate in which the only certainty and stability could be found in

a marital and family life. The return to traditional values and common desire for 'normalcy' urged people to quickly adapt to the new social model. Moreover, it strongly shaped the way people perceived anything that would deviate from the standard: "Americans in general disavowed the social and political activism that had marked the years between the two wars. In particular, the postwar years saw an almost total rejection of feminist programs and awareness; building a home and bringing up a family seemed to be enough for most women" (Hymowitz and Weissman 326). As both feminists and historians remember, in the new environment, which was strongly favoring domesticity over career, the demand for a clear-cut division of male and female roles in relationship or marriage was gaining both in intensity and traditionalism.

The model of a perfect American family was represented by a middle-class husband and wife. Men were expected to be the exclusive breadwinners in the family: "Society encouraged men to equate their masculinity in part to their ability to financially 'support' women and children" (Hymowitz and Weissman 325), while women's task was, once again, to return to 'the Angel in the house' ideal. If men were to provide the family with finances, women were then expected to stay at homes with the kids and take on the role of full-time housekeepers and caregivers. Historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, in their study of domestic revolutions, explain that the set pattern for the marital life ensured the prosperity of the family in that the relationship between male and female roles was a symbiotic one: "The fifties ideal of a marital partnership was based on the assumption of a wife's role as a hostess and consort. This was essential for the smooth running of the household and for the promotion of her husband's career" (187), in return for the wife's care and support, men endowed the family with economic security.

As a result, the 1950s in the American history could be labeled as the golden decade or the golden age of the family life – the birthrate grew rapidly, while the number of divorces was extremely low. Also, it was not an exception that thousands of girls were prematurely leaving universities so as to get married, settle down in a suburban area and raise a family. In other cases, girls voluntarily abandoned the schooling system with a vision to at least increase their chances to find a potential and decent husband. In such conditions, nuclear families very soon became the life and soul of the neighborhoods outside of larger cities for they constituted a suitable place both for the wives to raise the children and for the husbands to commute downtown to their works.

At the same time, while taking the career path was strongly supported, if not enforced, when it came to men, women who decided to give priority to their education or work over wedding and pregnancy had to face harsh criticism and disdain: “In the 1950s the propaganda against career women took on a particularly scurrilous tone. Women who sought careers were regularly depicted as ‘castrating’ and incapable of loving.... The woman who persisted in her desire for a career despite the hostile propaganda often paid a large emotional price” (Hymowitz and Weissman 325). The social pressure was so strong that women were being perpetually reminded of their destiny on daily basis – not only advertisements, but also popular literature worshiped females in a household. Contrariwise, women who ‘went astray’ became the archenemies of the American reproduction cult: “Women’s magazines pictured housewives as happy with their tasks and depicted career women as neurotic, unhappy and dissatisfied” (Kellogg and Mintz 181). Women’s readings such as *McCall’s* or *Ladies’ Home Journal* encouraged women to settle down, give birth and create a cozy love nest for their husbands and offspring. It goes without saying that such propaganda and romanticized images were extremely biased, especially if one considers that not only middle-class families were living in the United States. There were also working-class families who simply could not afford for women to stay at home. The promoted visions of the prototypical and happy American family were strongly selective and did not fully reflect the reality – many of the females did not get used to the domestic life which had been ordered to them, moreover, from the feminist point of view, it simply looks as though women were given no choice.

Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* captures the undistorted reality, the real face of what women actually might have felt behind the closed doors. Another part of his novel focuses on a daily routine of an American housewife – it is Los Angeles, it is 1949, and the next of the central female characters – Laura Brown starts her day in bed, reading *Mrs Dalloway*. At first glance, Laura’s life seems almost flawless, just as if cut out from a women weekly magazine – while she is fully concentrating on her reading, it is her husband Dan who willingly makes coffee and who prepares cereals for their son Richie. To many, Laura Brown is living the American dream, she has married a loving and handsome man, a war hero who does not insist on her being the one who serves the breakfast or washes the dishes. Also, three years ago Laura gave birth to a cute little boy and she is going to deliver another child soon. Nevertheless, even in a fictional world, nothing is usually as it seems to be, from Laura’s evaluating her own life situation it is

possible to deduce that owing this all is actually not a blessing for her: “It is almost perfect, it is almost enough, to be a young mother in a yellow kitchen touching her thick, dark hair, pregnant with another child” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 44). The dubious tone in Laura’s inner voice indicates that such life condition is not enough, something is missing.

In a while, it starts to become evident that Laura’s declining level of satisfaction with her own living being described as ‘almost perfect’ and ‘almost enough’ has a lot to do with her status as a mother and wife. As Laura’s morning continues, she proves not only to be ambivalent about her privileged life, what is more, she is also facing a serious internal struggle. Unlike to Laura, to her husband Dan their family life exceeds his expectations, to him, to lead such a lifestyle, to live in a routine is a gift: “It seems sometimes to be impossibly fine that he should have all this: an office and a new two-bedroom house, responsibilities and decisions; quick joking lunches with the other men” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 45). Unfortunately for Laura, a happy and fulfilling life is not to be limited to a new two-bedroom house, maternal responsibilities, and marital obligations. Due to Mrs Brown’s ability of self-reflection and critical thinking, she gradually becomes aware of her ‘otherness’, otherness that scares her. She wishes she could fit in like her husband: “Why, she wonders, does it seem that she could give him anything, anything at all, and receive essentially the same response. Why does he desire nothing, really, beyond what he’s already got? He is impenetrable in his ambitions and satisfactions, his love of job and home. This, she reminds herself, is a virtue” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 100). Sadly, as it has been indicated a few paragraphs above, it was highly unwelcoming for women to doubt their predetermined place in life – to deviate from the norm would get along with a potential threat both to the woman and the family:

If a woman had a problem in the 1950’s and 1960’s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. (Friedan, *The Feminine* 12)

The never ending or even graduating feeling of uncertainty and guilt became the unwanted secret of many American women who were made to believe that to satisfy the

societal needs went hand in hand with being happy and content in life. After all, this was something that everyone, including Laura, desired – to feel satisfaction and love: “She wants to be loved. She wants to be a competent mother reading calmly to her child; she wants to be a wife who sets a perfect table. She does not want, not at all, to be the strange woman, the pathetic creature, full of quirks and rages, solitary, sulking, tolerated but not loved” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 101). Similar to Woolf’s inner demons and depressions, it is not possible for Laura to shut the doubts in her head, the feelings of remorse and irritation are mingling in her confused mind. As she is to walk down the stairs to join her husband and son for breakfast, she almost feels as if having a panic attack, even something as ordinary as a family breakfast stirs up another avalanche of emotional chaos in her mind:

Asking what is wrong with her- What, she wonders, is wrong with her. This is her husband in the kitchen; this is her little boy. All the man and boy require of her is her presence and, of course, her love. She conquers the desire to go quietly back upstairs, to her bed and book. She conquers her irritation at the sound of her husband's voice, saying something to Richie about napkins (why does his voice remind her sometimes of a potato being grated?). (Cunningham, *The Hours* 43)

Despite Laura’s own need of love, she is having a hard time expressing devotion and tenderness to her closest family. Her inner angst and frustration are even doubled by the fact she acknowledges the apparent perfection of her family members, her husband is not alcoholic, gambler or brute and her son is not a naughty or rebellious child. Still, Laura admits she feels tensed when her son Richie is around and that it is not comfortable for her to share a room with her husband. Laura’s brain consonantly switches between her fearing of failing as a wife/mother and lavish hopes for rediscovery of the domestic bliss: “It seems she will be fine. She will not lose hope. She will not mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents (what if she has no talents, after all?). She will remain devoted to her son, her husband, her home, and duties, all her gifts. She will want this second child” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 79). Intentionally or not, what Cunningham brings into focus here was also a subject of psychological and feminist study in the 1960s. The elusive problem that women were fighting but were not able to name was conveniently marked as ‘the suburban syndrome’ or ‘the problem that has no name’.

## 5.2 The Problem that Has No Name

It was Betty Friedan who, in the sixties, came up with the designation of a problem without a name. In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan turns her focus in retrospective to suburban middle and upper-middle class women and tries to demystify the happy housewife heroine as the female figure. Friedan described the problem as follows:

It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?” (Friedan, *The Feminine* 44)

For a woman living in the half of the twentieth century it would have been highly problematical to become public about her inner struggle, therefore, she tried to suppress the problem as hard as she could, she could never really seek help or confide to her husband. Despite being steadily haunted by the daunting vision, Mrs Brown also keeps this secret just to herself.

As Friedan found out, the feeling of unhappiness was closely connected to the female identity, in particular, women adapted to their status as wives, mothers and housewives so quickly and intensively that there was no space left for inspecting their own self-reflection: “The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘Tom’s wife...Mary’s mother’” (Friedan, *The Feminine* 96). In Laura’s case, she believes part of her true self was lost when she married. Symbolically, she underwent a transformation when Laura Zielski, a passionate bookworm, was replaced by Laura Brown, a woman with a completely different lifestyle and expectations being placed on her individuality. Cunningham tried to capture both: the moments full of resistance towards the life Laura did not really wanted to choose and the moments when she was determined to awake the housewife heroine in her: “She will not go upstairs, and return to her book. She will remain. She will do all that's required, and more” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 48). On the spur of the moment, Laura wants to be better, to do



more – it is a perfect occasion for her to demonstrate her abilities (not only to her family, but also to herself). Since it is Dan’s birthday, Laura decides to compensate for the breakfast she neglected by baking her husband a perfect birthday cake.

In Laura’s eyes, however, this will be not just any birthday cake, it will become a symbolic epitome of her as a capable housekeeper and a loving wife. Eventually, the cake becomes one of the major symbols in the book, both for the readers and Mrs Brown who places high hopes in the piece of a sweet party – as if succeeding in baking would secure Laura’s transformation as a female in a household. In Laura’s world, cakes can make her get rid of the problem without a name – when she and Richie are preparing the dough, Laura feels positive about her baking ambitions: “...for a moment she is precisely what she appears to be: a pregnant woman kneeling in a kitchen with her three-year-old son, who knows the number four. She is herself and she is the perfect picture of herself; there is no difference” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 76). And surely enough, here in the kitchen, with her hands covered in dough, Laura believes in her change:

It seems possible (it does not seem impossible) that she's slipped across an invisible line, the line that has always separated her from what she would prefer to feel, who she would prefer to be. It does not seem impossible that she has undergone a subtle but profound transformation, here in this kitchen, at this most ordinary of moments. She has caught up with herself. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 79).

Based on Laura’s testimony, it is possible to deduce that her constant wish to fit in is so strong that it almost feels fake, just as if it was something she did not honestly desire but rather believed it was good to desire, that this was the right way to behave and think.

Living in 1949 in America, Laura is convinced that the ‘mystique’ of the feminine fulfilment is actually an unquestionable reality and the key to blessed life. Yet, despite Laura’s secret prayers and the effort she put into the baking, the cake turns out different than she had imagined it to be – much smaller and less stunning, she hoped for more: “There's nothing really wrong with it, but she'd imagined something more. She'd imagined it larger, more remarkable. She'd hoped (she admits to herself) it would look lush and more beautiful, more wonderful. This cake she's produced feels small, not just in the physical sense but as an entity” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 99). In other words, it is possible to interpret the episode with the birthday cake as a parallel to Laura’s life in general – she married because no other option was to consider, it was simply impossible

to refuse a war hero: “Why did she marry him? She married him out of love. She married him out of guilt; out of fear of being alone; out of patriotism. He was simply too good, too kind, too earnest, too sweet-smelling not to marry. He had suffered so much. He wanted her” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 106). Apparently, Laura saw both getting married and raising a family as a compulsory civic duty and a pragmatic decision one makes in life. Unfortunately, when Laura starts to realize there is no way back, she also becomes aware of the fact that, deep in her heart, she would have not voluntarily picked such life. The young Laura Zielski had higher hopes for her future self.

Laura is persuaded that in another life, the reality would be far more different for her, and so would be her friendship with their neighbor Kitty who comes unannounced just when the cake has been baked. Firstly, Laura is hesitant to let Kitty in, her hair is a mess and her cake is a physical proof of her domestic failure. Eventually, she gives in, lights a cigarette, and opens the door. In the book, Laura’s friend Kitty is presented as the right opposite of Laura – satisfied with her life as a suburban wife, presentable, good-looking, and skillful. Laura believes that there are two types of women only: “There are two choices only. You can be capable or uncaring. You can produce a masterful cake by your own hand or, barring that, light a cigarette, declare yourself hopeless at such projects, pour yourself another cup of coffee, and order a cake from the bakery” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 104). As Laura has to admit to herself, she would fit into the second category.

Kitty’s presence always causes a sensation of ‘cleanliness and domestic philosophy’, according to Laura, Kitty possesses what she herself is missing, the true housewife aura. Paradoxically, to Kitty, who has always liked to present herself in the perfect light, the true housewife heroine is Laura. The reason why is simple – Laura is a mother and soon she will become a mother of two, whereas Kitty is afraid she is unable to bear children. Surprisingly enough, Laura who secretly wishes she was not burdened by her maternity duties wonders why Kitty is still childless: “Laura imagines (it’s impossible not to) that when they make love, he must spurt rivers, as opposed to her own husband’s modest burble. Why, then, are there still no children?” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 105). This plot creates another paradoxical level in the novel, whereas Laura struggles heavily to finally find balance in life, she feels both empty and as if possessing no personality, others perceive her as the model wife and mother.

Nevertheless, Laura sense that Kitty the perfect has her own demons too, she may be infertile and her marriage difficult:

Laura has always imagined, as have most others, that Ray is the problem.... Kitty has seemed, until this moment, like a figure of bright and tragic dignity – a woman standing by her man. So many of these men are not quite what they were (no one likes to talk about it); so many women live uncomplainingly with the quirks and silences, the fits of depression, the drinking. Kitty has seemed, simply, heroic. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 108)

In a sense, Kitty admires Laura and Laura admires Kitty – Kitty envies the family her friend has, Laura, on the other hand, wishes she possessed the strong will of Kitty’s to hold out. Even if not explicitly, a strong bond is formed between these two women, Kitty’s steadiness shows that no household is intact, yet, if one reconciles with what they got, the life becomes bearable: “Laura stabs out her cigarette, thinks of lighting another, decides against it. She makes good coffee carelessly; she takes good care of her husband and child; she lives in this house where no one wants, no one owes, no one suffers. She is pregnant with another child. What does it matter if she is neither glamorous nor a paragon of domestic competence?” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 107). For a moment, Laura decides to ignore her imperfections.

It looks as though Cunningham followed a very similar chain of events in the individual stories presented in *The Hours*. Besides from drawing on the motif of identity loss, Cunningham counted on the strong and intimate connection between the female characters. When Kitty reveals her innermost fear to Laura, they share a very intimate and vulnerable moment: “Kitty snakes her arms around Laura's waist. Laura is flooded with feeling. Here, right here in her arms, are Kitty's fear and courage, Kitty's illness” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 109). What is more, this passage provokes the readers’ judgement about Laura’s sexuality. Can it be Laura’s suppressed bisexuality or homosexuality that prevents her from feeling complete? Well, it might be one of the possible interpretations: “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”

(Cunningham, *The Hours* 110). Even though the kiss is rather innocent and soon after, Kitty pulls away, it floods Laura with excitement and understanding.

Despite the universally acknowledged norms of the 1920s and 1950s, Cunningham places no sexual restrictions on his female characters. Be it only a sensual figment of one's imagination or an actual realization of a physical connection, all of the main female protagonists are portrayed as sexually fluid, they use their sexuality so as to escape the societal expectations, something as simple as a kiss eventually demonstrates a taboo breaking yarning or heteronormative disobedience:

Love is deep, a mystery – who wants to understand its every particular? 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; a way that is more subtly haunted by cruelty and shame. Still it is desire, sharp as a bone chip. She can kiss Kitty in the kitchen and love her husband, too. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 143)

Cunningham's characters are free to inspect their true nature, Laura convinces herself she is allowed to do both, to secretly long for women and love her husband too.

Be it Mrs Woolf or Mrs Brown, Cunningham uses the motif of kissing as an action trigger. It looks as though the shared kiss has breathed new life into Laura's mundane days, she wants to feel alive, she wants to read books, she wishes to escape her daily routine and the judgmental look of her son. Even if it might appear that, to some extent, Laura has come to terms with her condition, the cake still reminds her of her failure: "What Laura regrets, what she can hardly bear, is the cake. It embarrasses her, but she can't deny it. It's only sugar, flour, and eggs – part of a cake's charm is its inevitable imperfections.... She has failed. She wishes she didn't mind. Something, she, thinks, is wrong with her" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 144). Baking the perfect cake goes hand in hand with Laura's perception of herself as a handy housewife and a loving woman, it is also a way of her self-realization, it is an opportunity to show her creativity.

Unfortunately for Laura, the time period she was born into, allowed women to experience self-satisfaction only in connection with housework. To society, flower arranging, mastering in table setting or finding the perfectly matching shade of curtains were the expected sources of women's joy. Nevertheless, Laura's understanding that bed making or dinner serving could never make her complete, makes her, once again, want to

leave this world behind: “Having done all that, she's permitting herself to leave. She will be home in time to cook the dinner, to feed Kitty's dog. But now, right now, she is going somewhere (where?) to be alone, to be free of her child, her house, the small party she will give tonight. She has taken her pocketbook, and her copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 142). Friedan’s study of females’ annoyance with their own lives would provide a backup for Laura’s leaving the house, Friedan notes: “Sometimes a woman would tell me that the feeling gets so strong she runs out of the house and walks through the streets. Or she stays inside her house and cries. Or her children tell her a joke, and she doesn’t laugh because she doesn’t hear it” (Friedan, *The Feminine* 49). Still, for the unsatisfied women in the 1950s, there were not many options to liberate themselves from the unwanted vicious circle. Women might either forget about their lost possibilities and turn to domestic life or to consider leaving the family and thus risk a public humiliation. In extreme cases, some of the unsatisfied housewives took their lives. In case of Laura Brown, a passionate reader, however, it is books which help her survive through the worst days. To Laura, literature represents a convenient way to escape her domestic routine.

### **5.3 The Reader in the House**

As indicated in the previous chapter, reading has always been an essential part of Laura’s personality. With most probability, if she was asked to describe herself with two words, she would hesitate to respond Richard’s mother or Dan’s wife, she would rather choose to call herself an enthusiastic booklover. It seems that the prospect of house cleaning or playing with her son would spark only a little enthusiasm in Laura’s heart, as opposed to being allowed to read the whole morning or night. In Laura’s inner world, one gets inundated with excitement by reading a brand-new book. In short, for Mrs Brown, a day spent reading is a day purposefully spent, the fictional worlds of the stories provide her with comfort, protection and self-rediscovery: “Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No, that's not it exactly – she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world. She lays the book face down on her chest. Already her bedroom (no, *their* bedroom) feels more densely inhabited, more actual, because a character named Mrs. Dalloway is on her way to buy flowers” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 37). Right now, Mrs Brown is discovering the writing talent of Virginia Woolf, immersed in the mysteries of *Mrs Dalloway*.

However, living in a world in which women were constantly reminded that a well-made bed or a perfectly decorated house were the true virtues, reading a book would then equal doing something prohibited, something that only distracts the housewife from what she should be doing instead: “She should not be permitting herself to read, not this morning of all mornings; not on Dan's birthday. She should be out of bed, showered and dressed, fixing breakfast for Dan and Richie. She can hear them downstairs, her husband making his own breakfast, ministering to Richie. She should be there, shouldn't she?” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 38). Once a woman committed herself to a family life, she was no more allowed to preoccupy herself with such superstitious business as reading books: “In another world, she might have spent her whole life reading. But this is the new world, the rescued world – there's not much room for idleness” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 39). When it comes to women and their attitudes towards literature, Friedan claims that finding time to simply sit down and open a book was a scarce activity, also, even if a woman got lucky to read, it would be no piece of fiction for demanding readers: “She can never spend more than 15 minutes on any one thing; she has no time to read books, only magazines; even if she had time, she has lost the power to concentrate” (Friedan, *The Feminine* 58). In this respect, Laura is not a prototypical housewife, she gives priority to her hobby over manual work in the house and also over her family: “She exhales a rich gray plume of smoke. She is so tired. She was up until after two, reading. She touches her belly – is it bad for the new baby, her getting so little sleep? She hasn't asked the doctor about it; she's afraid he'll tell her to stop reading altogether” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 48). Had it not been for Laura's pregnancy, she probably would not have been allowed to spend so much time reading, instead, she might have been accused of neglecting her maternal and marital duties for books.

Leaving this hypothesis aside, literature represents something vital for Laura, it makes it easier for her to withstand, it reminds her who she really is: “She will read one more page. One more page, to calm and locate herself, then she'll get out of bed” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 38). Considering Laura's middle-class upbringing, higher education and eventually also her intellectual hobby, it would feel less accidental for her to undergo an identity crisis – Hymowitz and Weismann agree that it were educated middle-class women who were prone the most to experience the suburban syndrome: “A middle-class upbringing emphasizes competition and achievement for girls as well as boys.... Marriage and motherhood represented a sharp and startling change to this kind

of woman. Cut off from the avenues of self-expression that a middle-class upbringing encouraged, many women felt as if they had lost their identity” (332). With the highest probability, such contradictory transition between Laura’s girlhood and adulthood eventually worsen her coming to terms with her new self.

On the one hand, while engrossed in reading, Laura feels lively and sane – it is her personal form of self-realization and her imagery world to hide in. On the other hand, examining her housewife abilities in contrast to Clarissa Dalloway, the perfect hostess, only supports her clumsiness. Also, imagining herself in Virginia Woolf’s shoes is a bittersweet sensation for Laura, since it is also a painful memento of her wasted life and lost opportunities:

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.... She wonders, while she pushes a cart through the supermarket or has her hair done, if the other women aren't all thinking, to some degree or other, the same thing: Here is the brilliant spirit, the woman of sorrows, the woman of transcendent joys, who would rather be elsewhere, who has consented to perform simple and essentially foolish tasks, to examine tomatoes, to sit under a hairdryer, because it is her art and her duty. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 42)

Laura tries to awake some kind of undiscovered talent of hers by producing her own piece of art – the birthday cake: “Laura is an artisan who has tried, and failed, publicly. She has produced something cute, when she had hoped (it's embarrassing, but true) to produce something of beauty” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 104). Nevertheless, when Mrs Woolf’s literary masterpiece is put into contrast with Laura’s lame attempt to bake, it makes Laura feel even more frustrated and dissatisfied.

What is more, Laura understands reading as something forbidden, the act of delving into another fictional story almost equals to having an affair or leading a double life. In particular, when Mrs Brown decides to leave the house and drive her son to a babysitter in order to be alone and free of her child, the party and the house, she is carefully selecting a suitable place for her private reading session. Laura’s hunt for a safe and hidden spot is accompanied by thrilling nervousness, just as if she had arranged a secret date: “She has gone to a hotel in secret, the way she might go to meet a lover.... It's the secrecy, she tells herself; it's the strangeness of what she's just done, though there's

no real harm in it, is there?" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 188-89). It might be therefore proposed that it is not a physical contact with other people but literature that satisfied Laura's sensual needs. When she finally, feeling almost ashamed, checks in the hotel so as to indulge in privacy with her readings, she experiences both relief: "She is so far away from her life. It was so easy. It seems, somehow, that she has left her own world and entered the realm of the book" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 149-50) and shame: "Having this room to herself seems both prim and whorish. She is safe here. She could do anything she wanted to, anything at all" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 150). Laura is suddenly preoccupied with embarrassment and dark thoughts.

Since reading *Mrs Dalloway* stands for something very private, if not sensational, Laura's knowing about Virginia Woolf's troublesome life and tragic death makes her consider other options (excluding books) to escape her domestic duties, one of them being a suicide: "She could decide to die. It is an abstract, shimmering notion, not particularly morbid. Hotel rooms are where people do things like that, aren't they?" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 151). On one hand, Laura wonders how it is possible that someone so talented like Mrs Woolf might have ended up her life by putting stones in her pockets and drowning herself in a lake, at the same time, the vision of dying does not terrify Laura, quite the opposite, it comforts her:

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. She imagines Virginia Woolf, virginal, unbalanced, defeated by the impossible demands of life and art; she imagines her stepping into a river with a stone in her pocket. Laura keeps stroking her belly. It would be as simple, she thinks, as checking into a hotel. It would be as simple as that. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 152)

Just like other decisions in Laura's life, even thinking of death is strongly influenced by her marital and maternal status. Nonetheless, as much as she realizes how immoral and selfish it would be to leave her kids and husband behind, the prospect of turning back to forced domesticity is way too much intimidating: "It seems, briefly, that by going to the hotel she has sopped out of her life, and this driveway, this garage, are utterly strange to her. She has been away. She has been thinking kindly, even longingly, of death" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 188). From this moment on, the return to the everyday life



terrifies Laura immensely, she becomes preoccupied with death and the possibility of committing suicide, just like her role model.

Cunningham's portrayal of Laura's hopeless situation was, by no means, exaggerated or implausible. The often-difficult task of meeting the social expectations had frequently a devastating effect on women's health. Friedan's study asserts that many suburban housewives paid both high emotional and physical price when suffering from the suburban syndrome:

During the 1950's, psychiatrists, analysts, and doctors in all fields noted that the housewife's syndrome seemed to become increasingly pathological. The mild undiagnosable symptoms – bleeding blisters, malaise, nervousness, and fatigue of young housewives – became heart attacks, bleeding ulcers, hypertension, bronchopneumonia; the nameless emotional distress became a psychotic breakdown. (*The Feminine* 313).

In extreme cases, some of the suburban females eventually had recourse to taking their own lives since it was the easiest way to liberate themselves.

#### **5.4 The Price Paid for Freedom**

In such an unstable psychic condition, women became slowly menace not only to themselves, but also to their children. Since the fathers were for most of the time absent from the child's life, busy with work, it was the mothers who played an essential role in the mental development of the child. In the story, Richie is described as a sensitive and tentative child who watches closely every step his mother takes:

He watches her constantly, spends almost every waking hour in her presence. He's seen her with Kitty. He's watched her make a second cake and bury the first one under other garbage in the can beside the garbage. He is devoted, entirely, to the observation and deciphering of her, because without her there is no world at all. Of course, he would know when she's lying. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 192-93)

Laura's failing to reconcile with her marital role shapes her son's personality – it is indicated that he is rather sensitive and fragile, as if constantly afraid of disappointing or losing his mother, every error or a sign of mistake makes him weepy: "He looks at her in

terror. His eyes fill with tears. Laura sighs. Why is he so delicate, so prone to fits of inexplicable remorse? Why does she have to be so careful with him?" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 78). Richie is a very sensitive and perceptive kid, as such, he must have noticed Laura's flouting her parental duties.

The mother's possibly negative influence on their sons was at the center of focus of the 1950s society and specialists: "A major source of concern was that children, and particularly boys, were failing to develop an appropriate sex role identity. Because boys were brought up almost exclusively by women, and men were absent from the home most of the day, it was feared that they would identify with their mother's behavior and fail to develop a firm sense of their masculinity" (Kellogg and Mintz 189-90). As Cunningham's story continues and the character of Richard reappears one more time, this time approximately some forty years after his childhood, it becomes evident that the negative childhood memories, his anxious personality and his mother's rejection had a catastrophic influence on his life. Friedan stresses that: "...motherhood had to become a full-time job and career if not a religious cult. One false step could mean disaster. Without careers, without any commitment other than their homes, mothers could devote every moment to their children; their full attention could be given to finding signs of incipient neurosis – and perhaps to producing it" (*The Feminine* 219). In other words, Friedan suggests that the day to day exposure of children to their mother's influence could turn both positively and negatively. In little Richard's case, it was unfortunately the latter option – he grew up lonely, having problematic relationships and escaping to the world of books just like his mother. Both Laura and Richie became the victims of the suburban syndrome.

Back in 1949, as Laura's day is drawing close to an end, the readers are still impatiently waiting for Laura to make a radical stand, meanwhile, Dan has come back from work and the promised birthday party takes place, the song is sung, the candles are lit. Despite the positive atmosphere, Laura is still caught up in a vicious circle, her world became black and white as her mind constantly swings between two extremes. At one moment, her persuasion to accept her destiny seems to be successful, yet, in another minute, her anxiety becomes stronger than her self-deceit: "A spasm of fury rises unexpectedly, catches in her throat.... 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" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 205). Eventually, Cunningham closes the chapter in a positive spirit, Laura Brown is to believe that she will

accomplish her mission as a good wife and mother, better days are to come: “The dining room seems, right now, like the most perfect imaginable dining room, with its hunter-green walls and its dark maple hutch holding a trove of wedding silver. The room seems almost impossibly full: full of the lives of her husband and son; full of the future. It matters; it shines” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 207). Now, if the future days of Laura Brown are interpreted as a mirror of the sociohistorical evolution of the American domesticity, the readers might arrive at an unexpected change of events.

In contrast to the fifties, which represented the golden age of American family, the decade that followed brought about a radical re-shaping of what people perceived as the generally accepted standard. The revolutionary calls for female independence and self-realization stirred up brand new norms. The cult of the housewife heroine began to fade, and people started to feel more open about the possibility of childlessness, cohabitation without marriage or premarital intercourse. The more relaxed atmosphere contributed to females’ winning control over their lives again – women started to re-seek job opportunities, the numbers of divorces and single mothers grew in large. Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, in their research for the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, declare that the progressive trends towards marriage being exclusively voluntary, growing endorsement of gender equality or the declining stigma that unmarried childbearing was destructive, helped to establish more relaxed and liberal environment (1031-32). If these facts are taken into account, it might be proposed that Cunningham’s novel, despite being a fiction, does have a factual backup.

Mrs Brown’s day might have ended in depicting her as a determined woman to settle for what she has got, thinking that the page is about to turn, yet, Cunningham decides for another, more liberating and feminist denouement. Cunningham’s postmodernist approach ultimately leads in bringing the lives of his two characters – Clarissa Vaughan, living in the nineties in New York, and Laura Brown, together. The readers are thus allowed to find out the outcomes of Laura’s future living in retrospect:

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 exhusband 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 glass. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 222)

Laura's testimony reveals that the suburban syndrome was so pervasive and unescapable that after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Laura eventually left her family, with most probability, in a secret. In particular, she ran away to Toronto to pursue a career of a librarian, the perfect job for booklovers. Fleeing her son, daughter, and husband enabled her to start from scratch, to follow her dreams, to discover her talents without feeling remorse for such a radical decision. Apparently, she cut ties with her family and only came back to The States to attend her son's funeral. Clarissa Vaughan, ex-lover of Richard who is in charge of the wake, is looking at old Laura Brown, thinking: "Here she is, then; the woman of wrath and sorrow, of pathos, of dazzling charm; the woman in love with death; the victim and torturer who haunted Richard's work. Here, right here in this room, is the beloved; the traitor. Here is an old woman, a retired librarian from Toronto, wearing old woman's shoes" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 226). Cunningham's novel proposes that even though Laura managed to break free from the domestic prison to pursue a life in freedom, she had to pay the highest price – she stayed misunderstood and looked down on by many who saw this radical decision as selfish and irresponsible.

All things considered, it may be claimed that the strong point of Cunningham's fiction rests in his ability to create both – a credible and an extremely intimate image of complex female characters. The inner development of Laura Brown is shown without any censorship, with all its ups and downs. Laura Brown is many persons in one, to some readers, she might represent a strong-willed woman who never gave up, to Betty Friedan and other feminists, Laura would be an innocent victim of the feminine mystique, and to her beloved ones, however, a selfish person and renegade. Despite setting the story in 1949, Laura's problematic experience may powerfully resonate with the 21<sup>st</sup> century readers as well. Cunningham's story of a woman who prefers books over her family life and well-run house, story of a woman who eventually decides to abandon her children in despair only stresses how forcible and harmful the public inclinations towards anti-feminism and anti-independence were. Laura's final liberation from the forced domesticity can be understood as Cunningham's unconventional and pro-womanist approach to female questions.

## 6. Mrs Vaughan ('Dalloway')

In *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham firstly reconstructed the inner world of Virginia Woolf, the writer, then he created a fictional character of Laura Brown, a dedicated reader of *Mrs Dalloway*. Thirdly, to close the circle, Cunningham wanted to come up with modern embodiment of Woolf's famous Clarissa Dalloway. Imagining what would a typical day of contemporary Clarissa look like, Cunningham puts a completely new perspective on the character of Mrs Dalloway. Numerous essays or academic papers were devoted to a thorough investigation of Cunningham's postmodern work with paraphrases and intertextuality, nonetheless, the task of this diploma thesis is to focus on content, rather than form, so as to comment on the feminist agenda hidden between the lines.

Living in the 1990s in New York City, the contemporary representative of Clarissa Dalloway seems to have overcome all the obstacles and inequalities which Mrs Woolf and Mrs Brown had to fight against. However, as Clarissa Vaughan's story progresses, it becomes clear that there are still challenges to be faced, one of them being the clash between feminist movements during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the topical issue of sexual disease spreading.

### 6.1 New Decade, New Woman

As suggested right above, Cunningham extracted the most essential elements of *Mrs Dalloway* regarding its plotline, formal aesthetics, themes, and the characters' personality traits in an attempt to adjust them to the context of the 1990s in the United States. Despite Cunningham's novel close relation to its original counterpart, it is also essential to keep in mind that the modern Clarissa Vaughan came out as an independent protagonist, as a fictional product of the postmodern era and the postmodern society. As such, Clarissa is indeed a reflection of her namesake, yet, in comparison to the other stories from *The Hours*, Clarissa's world introduces a completely different environment.

If we start the literary evaluation from more general observation, it might be proclaimed that Cunningham's female characters are, in fact, types. Of course, Mrs Woolf, Mrs Brown and eventually also Mrs Vaughan are presented as strong personalities and individual entities. On a larger scale, however, Cunningham's central female

protagonists stand as an epitome of their social classes and also of the sociohistorical context of their time. Surely, all of the three women could profit from living rather a privileged middle or upper-middle class life in comfort and financial security. Nevertheless, this was not enough to secure them a seamless life. Mrs Woolf's day pictured a highly personal testimony of a woman living under the influence of an unstable mental condition. Also, her story was analyzed in contrast to many women's limited access to education, work opportunities and financial stability. The second story of Laura Brown, set by the end of the forties, authentically mirrored the predetermined life-path for many suburban wives who had to give up their studies and careers in order to dedicate their lives to household and motherhood. By the same pattern, the last of the narratives, introducing Clarissa Vaughan, illustrates the female situation in the nineties in America.

Once again does Cunningham treat female topics as the key ones – this eventually enabled him to demonstrate how the hunt for female equality evolved in time and space. Cunningham's work with the three plotlines (Mrs Woolf, Mrs Brown and Mrs Dalloway) as individual fragments effectively asserts, as a whole, that it is not only time or place that changes, but also the position of women inside the societal hierarchy – what might have been considered exclusive or even unattainable for many women in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became a rightly acquired standard during the course of the subsequent decade.

Following the feminist tradition and female question in America from the sixties onwards, women coming from different social and ethnic backgrounds joined their forces in an effort to launch another liberalizing movement in the seventies and eighties. Feminists strived to raise awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace, unequal job opportunities or discrimination of pregnant woman workers. Gender inequality in education, domestic violence or illegality of abortions were another burning topics on the list of many feminist agendas. Moreover, the 1970s went down in history as a sex liberating era – firstly, it was the invention of a birth control pill in the sixties which paved the way to more relaxed atmosphere. Secondly, it was non-heterosexual minority groups and the question of transgender which were finally brought into spotlight after years of neglect and rejection (“The Sex Freak-out”). Despite the fact that not all of the social changes were achieved immediately, the strong female voices of the seventies contributed to a new, more secure, and nondiscriminatory environment to live in: “What used to be the feminist agenda is now an everyday reality. The way women look at themselves, the

way other people look at women, is completely different then it was thirty years ago.... Our daughters grow up with the same possibilities as our sons" (Friedan, *Life*, 375). These were the words that Betty Friedan used to describe the new pro-woman and minority friendly tendencies.

Clarissa Vaughan may not be the daughter from the previous quote, she is a middle-aged female, born to the forties, however, her character is definitely an embodiment of the feminist efforts and achievements already mentioned. Clarissa is an upper middle-class intellectual who made her way through the patriarchal system – she got university education, then she successfully joined the labor market and managed to raise a family without a man in the house: "...if you've raised a daughter as honorably as you knew how in a house of women (the father no more than a numbered vial, sorry, Julia, no way of finding him)" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 157). In her early fifties, she lives more than a satisfactory life, working as an editor and publisher who may absent herself from work to do free time activities such as shopping: "What a thrill, what a shock, to be alive on a morning in June, prosperous, almost scandalously privileged, with a simple errand to run. She, Clarissa Vaughan, an ordinary person (at this age, why bother trying to deny it?), has flowers to buy and a party to give" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 10). Cunningham creates a parallel to the opening scene in *Mrs Dalloway* – it is also a beautiful spring morning and Clarissa Vaughan is on a hunt for the perfect party decorations. In comparison to Woolf's Mrs Dalloway or Mrs Brown, Mrs Vaughan is an illustration of the nineties' female standards – she can be both; an independent parent and a proud careerist who makes enough money to be able to afford herself an apartment in the New York city and a pair of designer shoes: "Clarissa is skittish and jubilant about her luck, her good shoes (on sale at Barney's, but still)" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 14). Apparently, Clarissa is aware of her luck and is grateful for the benefits in her life.

What is more, the rapidly declining dominant position of men left a significant mark not only on Clarissa's career but also on her sexuality. Contrarily to the previous stories of Virginia Woolf and Laura Brown (in which the only implication of the women's same sex attraction was limited to two kisses), in the nineties, Clarissa Vaughan is allowed to live the way she feels like living – in a luxurious New York apartment with a long time relationship partner, a woman: "Here is her home; hers and Sally's; and although they've lived here together almost fifteen years she is still struck by its beauty and by their impossible good fortune. Two floors and a garden in the West Village! They

are rich, of course; obscenely rich by the world's standards; but not *rich* rich, not New York City rich” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 91). Based on the first impression, Clarissa Vaughan’s standards of living simply seem too good to be the true – her life is an epitome of the revolutions held by women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Clarissa is portrayed as woman living the American dream, she is a strong female character who has escaped the heteronormative circles and who is proud of her labels as a lesbian and a female careerist who enforced a life with another woman without being treated differently, without being looked down on: “...she and Sally do not attempt to disguise their love for anyone’s sake” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 20). In fact, the theme of homosexuality and bisexuality is pervasive in Cunningham’s fictions, however, he, as a writer, does not confront heterosexuality in relation to women only.

Clarissa and Sally are not the only ones who built sexual and partner relationship with the same sex. For the first time in this novel are also men allowed to step outside from the heterosexual norms – it is for instance Clarissa’s childhood friend Louis who is openly homosexual and who claims to be in love with one of his male students. Cunningham simultaneously subverts the traditionalistic patterns within society and challenges the stereotypical judgements about one’s sexual interests. As far as sexuality is concerned, Clarissa Vaughan is no Clarissa Dalloway, unlike her fictional namesake, she did not ‘come to her senses and married a suitable man’, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women are allowed to choose, they can ‘come to their senses’ and settle down with another woman.

And yet, it was not Cunningham’s objective to celebrate lesbianism or to put homosexuality and heterosexuality into opposition, quite the reverse. As it has been already proposed in the analysis of Mrs Woolf and Mrs Brown, to Cunningham, physical or emotional attractions are not permanent, it is something fluid, something that might change its quality according to the emotional mood or age of the person. Such approach to sexuality would then also echo the more unifying attitudes of the eighties and nineties. As Plain and Sellers map the development of feminist criticism of the millennium, they inform the readers that by the end of the 1980s, queer theories emerged as a reaction to the unstable and out of date categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and they declared themselves to be the new ‘post-identity’. Roughly speaking: “Queer theorists understood the category of homosexuality as socially constructed and therefore contingent. Rather than affirming



gay and lesbian identity, queers focused instead on countering homophobia and at the same time undermining the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual” (302). That being said, *The Hours*, as a literary reflection of its time, would definitely fall under the queer interests. Even though Clarissa Vaughan has been living for years with a woman, she had also been dating and falling in love with men.

One of Clarissa’s lovers and one of the major male protagonists here is Richard Brown – a grown-up Richie from the previous story, for whom Clarissa is throwing the celebratory party. Clarissa describes Richard as being her ‘most rigorous, infuriating companion and her best friend’, he is the one who decided to nickname Clarissa Vaughan Clarissa Dalloway: “Richard had insisted that Mrs. Dalloway was the singular and obvious choice. There was the matter of her existing first name, a sign too obvious to ignore, and, more important, the larger question of fate” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 10-11). Richard Brown took the enthusiasm for books and female writers after his mother, he likes to perceive people around him as fictional characters, including Clarissa: “It is only after knowing him for some time that you begin to realize you are, to him, an essentially fictional character, one he has invested with nearly limitless capacities for tragedy and comedy not because that is your true nature but because he, Richard, needs to live in a world peopled by extreme and commanding figures” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 61). Not only Richard’s drawing to the world of literature, but also his and Clarissa’s complex relationship was crucial for Cunningham’s novel.

## **6.2 The New ‘Post-Identity’**

As it has been partly demonstrated, if *The Hours* is read as a postmodern adaptation of the original masterpiece *Mrs Dalloway*, it might be proposed that Cunningham’s re-writing shows Woolf’s fictional characters in a completely different light. Cunningham often turned in the opposite direction what Mrs Woolf had planned for her fictional protagonists. Still, many of the motifs and themes present in *Mrs Dalloway* found their way to Cunningham’s fictional world. As a result, *The Hours* couples the original with the new, the old with the modernized.

Let us again focus on Clarissa’s personal life and her relationships. In Woolf’s story, Mrs Dalloway is married to Richard Dalloway, a bright, thoughtful, and

hardworking Englishman, in *The Hours*, Clarissa is living with Sally, described as a self-confident gray-haired woman, devoted wife and an intelligent person who works as a producer for public television. Despite her and Sally's long-lasting relationship and life in luxury, they both feel that their partnership fell into an old familiar routine: "The party will go well or badly. Either way, she and Sally will have dinner afterward. They will go to bed" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 93). Cunningham's text makes point in showing the real face of interpersonal relationships, be it an intimate connection between men and women or between the same sexes.

The day-to-day coexistence of Sally and Clarissa seems, naturally, to bring only a little excitement or passions, it appears that their days have been limited to exchanges of quick goodbye kisses and critical evaluations of the partner's outfit. The extraordinariness of their relationship fades and Clarissa sometimes feels as if having no connection with Sally: "Clarissa meets Sally on her way out. For a moment – less than a moment – she sees Sally as she would if they were strangers. Sally is a pale, gray haired woman, harsh-faced, impatient, ten pounds lighter than she ought to be. For a moment, seeing this stranger in the hall, Clarissa is filled with tenderness and a vague, clinical disapproval" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 89). And it is not only Clarissa but also Sally who acknowledges this kind of familiarity, on her way home she thinks: "'I love you' has become almost ordinary, being said not only on anniversaries and birthdays but spontaneously, in bed or at the kitchen sink or even in cabs within hearing of foreign drivers who believe women should walk three paces behind their husbands" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 182), yet, the sense of domesticity does not scare her as much as it haunts Clarissa.

To escape their day to day routines, both fictional Clarissas enjoy immersing themselves in the past memories about the good old days, when they were young and carefree, when no limits were placed on their choice of partners, when they were exempted from any commitments: "That summer when she was eighteen, it seemed anything could happen, anything at all. It seemed that she could kiss her grave, formidable best friend down by the pond, it seemed that they could sleep together in a strange combination of lust and innocence, and not worry about what, if anything, it meant" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 95). Unlike Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway cherishes the memory of kissing her friends Sally Senton, in *The Hours*, it is Mrs Vaughan's romance with Richard that repeatedly comes to her mind, even after all these years: "What lives

undimmed in Clarissa's mind more than three decades later is a kiss at dusk on a patch of dead grass ... There is still that singular perfection, and it's perfect in part because it seemed, at the time, so clearly to promise more. Now she knows: That was the moment, right then. There has been no other" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 98). It is not only sentimentality that makes Clarissa crave her past identity, these escapes to the past has also a lot to do with her age.

It goes without saying that Clarissa Vaughan, aged fifty-two, is missing her youthful affection and physical attractiveness: "People don't look at you on the street anymore, or if they do it is not with sexual notions of any sort" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 94). If the fragments from Mrs Vaughan's past are put into contrast with her days as a middle-age dame, it becomes obvious she is coming through the unpleasant process of ageing – one of the ubiquitous themes both in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Hours*. While the young and beautiful Clarissa is passionately kissing Richard on the pond, having the whole world at her feet and not having to bother about tomorrows, her fifty-two years old self has grown up decent and orderly. It is even too much daring, almost inappropriate to kiss people on their mouth. "I'm so prim, Clarissa thinks; so grandmotherly. I swoon over the beauties of the world but am reluctant, simply as a matter of reflex, to kiss a friend on the mouth" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 15-16) – this is what comes to Clarissa's mind as she is greeting her friend Walter.

Cunningham's Clarissa may seem to be living the American dream in the nineties, still, she feels bound by her age and societal expectations more than ever before – suddenly, wisdom does not exceed spiritual freedom and living in a monogamy starts to feel a little bit mundane, Clarissa remembers: "It was 1965; love spent might simply engender more of the same. It seemed possible, at least. Why not have sex with everybody, as long as you wanted them and they wanted you? So Richard continued with Louis and started up with her as well, and it felt right; simply right" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 96). Despite Clarissa's admitting that relationships were equally complicated by back then, recollections of those days when she, Louis and Richard lived in a love triangle fill her with notorious sentimentality. Her attempt to have a relationship with Louis may have 'failed utterly', however, his and Louis' deep feelings for Richard eventually built a connecting element between the three young lovers.

Just like in case of Laura Brown, the readers witness Clarissa Vaughan finding herself between two emotional extremes. There are moments in which Clarissa is consciously present and frankly content with what she has, with her special bond with Sally: “Sally hands the flowers to her and for a moment they are both simply and entirely happy. They are present, right now, and they have managed, somehow, over the course of eighteen years, to continue loving each other. It is enough. At this moment, it is enough” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 185), nevertheless, this does not prevent Mrs Vaughan from ‘sensing the feeling lost opportunity’ which is ubiquitous and destructive.

In the story, Clarissa is even spotted imagining abandoning this routine: “It is revealed to her that all her sorrow and loneliness, the whole creaking scaffold of it, stems simply from pretending to live in this apartment among these objects, with kind, nervous Sally, and that 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” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 92). Nevertheless, unlike Mrs Woolf or Laura Brown, Clarissa Vaughan is probably not suffering from depressions or the suburban syndrome, in fact, if all the ‘symptoms’ are put together, it becomes crystal clear that Clarissa is undergoing a typical midlife crisis – a temporary phase when one doubts the life decisions that were made. Clarissa thus starts to consider leaving her life in luxury for life in freedom:

They are only choices, one thing and then another, yes or no, and she sees how easily she could slip 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, a girl grown into a woman, still full of hope, still capable of anything. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 92).

Despite the idyllic first impression, Clarissa feels disaffected, both in her apartment and relationship, and seeks solace and encouragement in memories. Clarissa’s constant daydreaming becomes the key element when evaluating her as a character. On the one hand, Clarissa considers the possibility of leaving Sally and getting back to Richard: “They might have been husband and wife, soul mates, with lovers on the side. There are ways of managing” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 67-68), on the other hand, Clarissa is well aware of the fact that the idealistic projections of the old days are only an echo of the past that cannot repeat itself: “...Clarissa wishes, suddenly and with surprising urgency, that Richard were here beside her, right now – not Richard as she's become but the Richard of

ten years ago; Richard the fearless, ceaseless talker; Richard the gadfly” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 19). So, even if Clarissa never talks out loud about her inner crisis, she ultimately comes to the conclusion that: “Maybe there is nothing, ever, that can equal the recollection of having been young together” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 97). Clarissa slowly abandons the urge for a radical life change. Maybe it is not possible for Mrs Vaughan to turn memories into reality, but one cannot at least take them away from her:

Clarissa believed then and she believes today that the dune in Wellfleet will, in some sense, accompany her forever. Whatever else happens, she will always have had that. She will always have been standing on a high dune in the summer. She will always have been young and indestructibly healthy, a little hungover, wearing Richard's cotton sweater as he wraps a hand familiarly around her neck and Louis stands slightly apart, watching the waves. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 131)

Furthermore, Cunningham worked with the theme of ageing correspondingly to the theme of one's sexuality – regardless of his characters' gender. It is not only the character of Clarissa Vaughan who tries to escape the process of ruthless ageing, it is also Sally, Richard or Louis whose handsome appearance have disappeared as they years went by: “His old beauty, his heft and leonine poise, vanished with such surprising suddenness almost two decades ago...” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 124). Woolf's original story of *Mrs Dalloway* draws a great deal on the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity, most of the female protagonists are portrayed as wives and mothers, as sensitive human beings who throw parties and arrange flowers, men, on the other hand, are the breadwinners who are rather secretive about their emotions and who nervously play with their pocket knives. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the borderlines of these two extremes started to blur and Michael Cunningham, as a contemporary author, has proved to be distancing from these double conventions – if Sally is the modern echo of emotionally restrained Mr Dalloway who goes and buys roses for his wife, then Richard Brown is the contemporary reflection of both Peter Walsh and Sally Senton.

Generally speaking, Cunningham's pastiche supports the proposition that it is possible to behave woman-manly or man-womanly – in this novel, women buy and give flowers to their lovers and men are allowed to be both emotional and masculine. The character of Louis, for instance, is caught showing his feelings in front of Clarissa and

her daughter Julia: “Louis turns to face her. Fine, let her see that he's been crying. Fuck it” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 136). In other words, Cunningham’s characters, living in the 1990s, are presented as both feminine and masculine which is then reflected in their personality traits, habits, or sexual fluidity.

Such hypothesis would bring us again to Woolf’s theory of androgyny which she employed in her later fiction. Despite the fact that many feminists were reluctant to deconstruct the concept of femininity, many of them, like H el ene Cixous, departed from the feminist mainstream and actually advocated for the possibility of possessing both femininity and masculinity in one body: “Driven by a belief that we are all inherently bisexual, Cixous suggests that feminine writing can be produced by men as well as women. Bisexuality is conceived not in terms of neutrality, but rather as the presence of both sexes in an individual” (“Cixous, H el ene”). This proposition might be applied both to Cunningham’s choice of gender-neutral characters and his ability to write a feminine piece of fiction – none of these would contradict the feminist interpretation.

### **6.3 Challenges to the Contemporary Feminism**

As demonstrated in the previous two chapters, Cunningham’s fiction is never to be judged by its cover or the gender of its protagonists. Cunningham’s text argues that neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality, neither femininity nor masculinity would necessarily exclude or contradict each other. As the day of Clarissa Vaughan proceeds, her self-confidence and high degree of emancipation prove to be only one part of her personality. Surprisingly, Carissa Vaughan turns out to be, in fact, rather traditional, submissive, maybe even snobbish.

It was especially Richard’s critical eye which suggested that the layers of disobedience and remarkability only hide Clarissa’s true self: “Richard told her, thirty years ago, that under her pirate-girl veneer lay all the makings of a good suburban wife, and she is now revealed to herself as a meager spirit, too conventional, the cause of much suffering. No wonder her daughter resents her” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 16). Interestingly enough, Richard, as Clarissa’s most rigorous and infuriating companion predicted that Clarissa would grow up rather conservative and rigid. In his eyes, Clarissa

is no rebel, she is no Isabel Archer or Anna Karenina, she is rather like Mrs Dalloway – an average looking and moderate housewife with an eye for detail.

For instance, common to both of Clarissas' highly observant nature is their bad habit to judge people by their appearance. Clarissa Vaughan likes to evaluate other protagonists' haircuts, makeup, or style of clothing, not even her partner Sally escapes Clarissa's critical observation: "Clarissa thinks, she should never wear yellow, not even this deep mustard tone" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 89). Moreover, Clarissa often worries about frivolous topics: "Her party, she thinks, will fail. Richard will be bored and offended, and rightly so. She is superficial; she cares too much about such things. Her daughter must make jokes about it to her friends" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 156). As indicated, both Richard and Clarissa's daughter Julia object Clarissa's frivolity and also her and Sally's living high on the hog.

Nevertheless, Clarissa herself acknowledges her loved ones being judgmental about her. Moreover, she is aware of the fact that Richard never fully got over her choosing Sally over him: "Richard will neither admit to nor recover from his dislike of her, never; he will never discard his private conviction that Clarissa has, at heart, become a society wife..." (Cunningham, *The Hours* 20). As this citation indicates, it was also Sally who had a significant influence on Clarissa's lifestyle, Richard perceives Clarissa's settling down with Sally as "...some workaday manifestation of deep corruption, at least a weakness on her part that indicts (though Richard would never admit this) women in general, since he seems to have decided early on that Clarissa stands not only for herself but for the gifts and frailties of her entire sex" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 19). Richard's cynical opinion stems from his broken heart, Clarissa's superfluous interests and also from his worrying about Clarissa's position within her partnership. For the first time in the novel, Cunningham's text admits the possibility of women feeling inferior or overlooked in the same-sex relationship. While Sally is invited for a business lunch by a movie star Oliver St. Ives, Clarissa stays at home, thinking: "Oliver did not say to Sally, 'Be sure to bring that interesting woman you live with.' He probably thought Clarissa was a wife, only a wife. Clarissa returns to the kitchen" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 94). Richard's premonition turns out to be justifiable if we consider Clarissa's own fearing to be the less interesting or the less noteworthy one in the couple.

Now, if the feminist critical eye is brought on the scene, the character of Clarissa Vaughan might be evaluated from various perspectives. Firstly, it is possible to examine the story of Clarissa Vaughan in the context of the third wave feminism which started to form during the course of the 1990s as a more relaxed opposition to the second wave. In contrast to the second-wavers, female representatives of the third wave aimed to be less judgmental and rigid, they recognized men as equals, both physically and mentally, which, however, did not hamper their active play with femininity. Moreover, third-wave feminists did not overemphasize the concept of shared female experience. Albeit they did not discard the concept as a whole, more space was given to women as individuals whose personal history may greatly vary (Heywood 178-79). Therefore, the way Cunningham builds the character of Clarissa Vaughan would not necessarily go against the feminist believes – Clarissa is not obliged to be revolutionary or to shock, she is an individual with a well-paid job, female partner, and traditional values.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist studies, and feminism as such, dispersed in many directions and the often-contradictory opinion groups may be claimed to find their way to Cunningham's narrative as well. For instance, the modern alter ego of Woolf's Doris Kilman is represented by Cunningham's minor protagonist of Mary Krull. She is a friend and also a schoolteacher of Julia Vaughan, she is the yin to Clarissa's yang – Mary Krull is a radical feminist whose womanlike appearance vanished with her bald head and a disastrous clothing style: "Mary the righteous, shaved head beginning to show dark stubble, wearing ratcolored slacks, breasts dangling (she must be past forty) under a ragged white tank top.... Seeing Julia and Mary together, Clarissa thinks of a little girl dragging home a stray dog..." (Cunningham, *The Hours* 158). The clear antipathies are both sided, Clarissa dislikes Mary and is afraid of Mary's influence on her daughter, similarly, Mary resents everything that Clarissa stands for – elitism, pomposity, and extravagant upper-class taste:

Briefly, while Julia's back is turned, Clarissa and Mary face each other. *Fool*, Mary thinks, though she struggles to remain charitable or, at least, serene. No, screw charity. Anything's better than queers of the old school, dressed to pass, bourgeois to the bone, living like husband and wife. Better to be a frank and open asshole, better to be John fucking Wayne, than a well-dressed dyke with a respectable job. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 160)



Mary Krull thinks that Clarissa Vaughan is caught in a trap in that: “She believes that by obeying the rules she can have what men have” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 160). Mary is convinced that suppressing the woman in her would make her less vulnerable and submissive, however, in Clarissa’s view, by abandoning her femininity, Mary is turning into a man: “You’re just as bad as most men, just that aggressive, just that self-aggrandizing, and your hour will come and go” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 161). In general, the clash between Clarissa’s and Mary’s values stands for the individual approaches to the female experience. While some women felt safe enough to express their female nature – there was simply no need to feel endangered by men, others believed that by choosing the path of revolt and disobedience would secure them equality and respect.

At this point, it is necessary to assert that Clarissa Vaughan has chosen this life for her willingly, unlike Laura Brown, she accepts her role as a mother and wife, this is who Clarissa is: “She could, she thinks, have entered another world. She could have had a life as potent and dangerous as literature itself. Or then again maybe not, Clarissa tells herself. That’s who I was. That’s who I am – a decent woman with a good apartment, with a stable and affectionate marriage, giving a party” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 97). Regardless of the possibility of having a stormy relationship full of passions and rebellion, deep in her heart, Clarissa craved something stable and ordinary: “She would confess to her desire for a relatively ordinary life (neither more nor less than what most people desire)...” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 203). Therefore, Clarissa Vaughan ultimately learns to proudly accept her age-gained society wife identity. In her fifties, there is no need to be ashamed of her status as a loving mother, quiet housewife and a punctilious hostess.

That being said, some of the literary critics might call for another and more explanatory evaluation of Clarissa’s domesticity and moderation – namely the one drawing on the post-feminist theory. If the stream of post-feminism is put into contrast with third-wave feminism, it can be claimed that these two streams do not have clear-cut boundaries. Some of the theoreticians, like Audrey Bilger, see the third-wave feminism and post-feminism as two contradictory movements, others, for example Lisa Duggan, try to focus on the agenda they have in common. In any case, post-feminism (emerging in the 1980-90s) is usually characterized for its non-political and rather conservative character: “From the postfeminist perspective, women are equal enough in theory that they can let down their guard and enjoy their actual subordination” (“Postfeminism”). Even if Cunningham’s characters disapprovingly evaluate the traditional division of

gender roles in Clarissa and Sally's relationship, this division does not bring doom – both for Clarissa and Sally, there is a sense of safety and security in their stable partnership, which is something that Clarissa would miss with Richard: “Clarissa, was clearly not destined to make a disastrous marriage or fall under the wheels of a train. She was destined to charm, to prosper” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 11). With reference to post-feminism in practice, Lisa Duggan, a professor of social and cultural analysis, maps how the concept of equality changed during the new social, political, and economic environment. Despite the fact that the inner organization of society has undergone numerous transformations, it does not necessarily indicate that queer relationships strictly avoided the heteronormative model. Duggan claims that with the neoliberal sexual politics, there also came ‘the new homonormativity’ which she describes as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (76). In spite of Richard's or Mary's seeing the nature of Clarissa's marital state as a deep corruption of her womankind, as an antifeminist manifestation of gender inequality, it makes Clarissa content in her life: “This is, in fact, her apartment, her collection of clay pots, her mate, her life. She wants no other” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 92). The post-feminist promotion may, indeed, render more conventional solutions, but it also establishes the long-awaited armistice between the two hostile female camps.

What is more, equally important to feminist three-wavers, queer theoreticians, post-feminists, and Cunningham's fiction is the necessity of pointing at the destinies of people who are dying of AIDS. Firstly, the problem with HIV virus spreading was put into association mainly with young male gays, however, soon after, this pandemic became a burning issue to women as well. Leslie Heywood argues: “Because of women's invisibility in the AIDS epidemic, women quickly became active and vocal about the lack of proper medical diagnosis, care, and prevention education during the late 1980s and early 1990s” (17). In *The Hours*, this illness represents one of the central focuses since Cunningham himself witnessed the devastating outcomes of the virus when he lived in New York: “If you survive a war or epidemic, your sense of life and the world is changed. You've just seen a level of mortality which many people don't see. And you work with that. You simply take it as part of the material you've been given and try to negotiate it as a writer” (Brookes). The topic of AIDS/HIV is being referred to many times in the book,

but especially in connection with Richard Brown whose life has been thoroughly shaped by the deadly diagnosis.

Had it not been for Richard's illness, Clarissa believes they might have been together, instead, Richard's body is being slowly eaten by the virus while his consciousness departed from the rest of the outer world. Richard's days, spent in isolation, became very monotonous, Richard just sits in a chair with the blinds pulled down – his apartment slowly withers away like his owner: "His apartment is, as always, dim and close, overheated, full of the sage and juniper incense Richard burns to cover the smells of illness" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 56). Clarissa 'Dalloway' is the only one who pays regular visits to Richard, hoping to cheer his days a little bit. However, the life with the disease is merciless and the look at Richard's fading zest for life and his body in pain is frightening. Despite the fact that there are other protagonists, like Walter's partner Evan, who got treated successfully, Richard and his beloved Clarissa have to accept that it is too late for Richard to be saved:

How can she help resenting Evan and all the others who got the new drugs in time; all the fortunate ("fortunate" being, of course, a relative term) men and women whose minds had not yet been eaten into lace by the virus. How can she help feeling angry on behalf of Richard, whose muscles and organs have been revived by the new discoveries but whose mind seems to have passed beyond any sort of repair other than the conferring of good days among the bad. (Cunningham, *The Hours* 55-56)

In the postmodern play with his characters, Cunningham portrays Richard Brown not only as the contemporary reflection of Sally Senton or Peter Walsh, his heartbreaking fate mirrors the bleak end of Woolf's tragic hero Septimus Smith. Just like Septimus, Richard becomes completely paralyzed by his illness, as the time progresses, he starts hearing voices and falls into depressions. In the end of the story, Richard resorts to committing suicide, he jumps out of a window right before Clarissa's eyes: "She reaches the window in time to see Richard still in flight, his robe billowing, and it seems even now as if it might be a minor accident, something reparable" (Cunningham, *The Hours* 200). The ending of *The Hours* is eventually as tragic as the one of *Mrs Dalloway*, a life has been lost and the party is ruined. Instead of inviting guests and buying flowers, Clarissa must arrange Richard's funeral and contact Richard's mother, "the woman of wrath and

sorrow, of pathos, of dazzling charm; the woman in love with death; the victim and torturer who haunted Richard's work” (Cunningham, *The Hours* 226). Cunningham closes the fictional circle by bringing Laura Brown on the scene once again, now, as an old woman who, unlike Clarissa, never reconciled with her social status as a mother and wife, as being discussed in the previous chapter.

To sum up, the last of Cunningham’s stories is probably the most complex one – it simultaneously replicates the text by Virginia Woolf, and it brings together the protagonists who were originally introduced in the narrative of Laura Brown. The most thought-provoking part of Clarissa’s story, though, lays in Cunningham’s challenge to the stereotypes and the binary opposition of gender, which, in the context of the 1990s, casts a completely new light on the controversy. Moreover, Cunningham also allows his male characters to abandon the patriarchal expectations, since he actively exposes the male protagonists to femineity. At the same time, with reference to the post-feminist traditional focus, Cunningham’s Clarissa finds peace in family life and consumerism. Certainly, women have gone a long way towards recognition and equality, yet, the characters of Mary Krull and Richard Brown pointed at the contemporary challenges to the 1990s America feminism – be it the divergent attitudes towards the concept of womanhood or the relentless fights against the HIV virus. In any case, Cunningham’s seminal novel operates at different levels and brings about number of provocative subjects which may be found reader-attractive even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 7. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this diploma thesis was to subject *The Hours*, written by Michael Cunningham, to feminist reading in order to confirm (or deny) the proposition that this novel may be considered a feminist piece of fiction. When it comes to a male-written literature which deals with female questions or has women as the central protagonists, feminist literary critics, and women in general, often approached the possibility of men writing a credible and patriarchally undistorted story highly skeptically, if not disapprovingly. However, the findings of this thesis have proved the opposite, namely, that men can express the complexity of women's inner worlds just as well as they can address the problems women had to face on daily basis.

The first of the theoretical chapters 'Feminism and Literature' prepared a breeding ground for the upcoming critical evaluation by putting feminism in context with literature and by giving a rough outline of female writing approximately from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. As feminism eventually gave rise to feminist literary criticism in the 1960s, the affiliated theoretical subchapters mapped the mutual evolvement of feminism and feminist literary criticism, beginning from its birth in the sixties till its transformation by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With respect to the overarching objective of this thesis, it was also inevitable to introduce both opinion camps concerning the question of men's position in feminism and literature. 'Feminism and Men: An Impossible Relationship?' thus aimed at suggesting that the nature of male discourse does not necessarily have to lead to rejection or destruction of female questions, quite the opposite. In many cases, men proudly stood behind the female quest for freedom and equality and, as Peter Murphy's study *Feminism and Masculinities* showed, neither feminism nor femininity do automatically exclude masculinity, quite the reverse, female studies triggered the shaping of male identity and they also gave impetus to the creation of male studies. Michael Cunningham himself publicly pays tribute to Virginia Woolf who contributed to his fascination with 'Woolfian' literary aesthetics and who also became his personal inspiration while writing *The Hours*.

Correspondingly to Woolf, with a vision to mediate the female experience as credibly as possible, Cunningham counted on the technique of stream of consciousness, figural narrative, and centralized focalization – subsequently, these narrative strategies

resulted in a frankly omniscient storytelling without the narrator making any side commentaries or personal evaluations which may hamper the reading experience.

Based on the critical feminist analysis and close reading, Cunningham's novel proved to work with female questions and aesthetics on different levels, therefore, the whole storytelling opens a wide scope of possible feminist readings and evaluations. Firstly, it was possible to concentrate on how precise Cunningham's picture of Virginia Woolf was, since the character of fictional Virginia Woolf is closely based on the real-life experience of this modernist writer. Taking Virginia's bibliography, personal correspondence, her diaries, and essays as a bedrock for the literary interpretation, this thesis came to conclusion that Cunningham's description of Mrs Woolf's day was highly precise and reader-enriching. Several corresponding quotations from *The Hours* and Woolf's essays or diaries proved Cunningham's undistorted narration which led to a very authentic portrayal of Mrs Woolf's personality – be it her meticulous approach to writing or her fighting against her inner demons and depressions.

Secondly, in response to Woolf as a part of the feminist movement, the chapter 'Are Feminist Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' brought out the feminist debate, provoked by Elaine Showalter, on whether Woolf's surprisingly uncertain or even refusing attitude towards feminism and her drawing on the concept of androgyny (among other issue) should endanger or even dismiss her reputation as one of the founding mothers of feminism and female literary canon. In spite of all the serious accusations on behalf of Woolf and her writings, this thesis closed the dispute in Woolf's favor, either by refuting Showalter's bold argumentation or by clarifying the mitigating circumstances of Woolf's stance.

What is more, as it was mentioned in the theoretical part, feminist literary criticism may observe literature in two different ways – it might either focus on women as readers or as producers of literary texts. *The Hours* provides both of the perspectives. Firstly, Cunningham examined the train of inner thoughts of Mrs Woolf as a female writer and, in the second story, he introduced Laura Brown, a keen reader of Woolf's prose. By doing so, Cunningham paid the central attention to women's status not only as mothers, wives or daughters, but as writers – active labor force participants, and as readers – educated intellectuals for whom the fictional worlds of female literature provide a safe haven, a place to feel truly content and carefree.

Most importantly, however, what Cunningham's novel represents is a comprehensive outlook on women's position in society across generations. As stated in 'New Decade, New Woman', Cunningham's female protagonists might be considered types. Not only do Mrs Woolf, Mrs Brown and Mrs Vaughan stand for the social classes they come from, but the time and environment they find themselves in strongly echo the three waves of feminist development. Here, the only source of criticism or shortcoming of Cunningham's work might arise – he almost exclusively focused on the experience of upper-class women, none of the central female characters introduced was poor or uneducated. Nonetheless, the chapter 'Michael Cunningham and Female Inspiration' tried to clarify Cunningham's (rather narrow) character selection.

In the first story of Virginia Woolf, Cunningham places emphasis on Woolf's independence, determination and her being the equivalent bread winner in the family. At the same time, nonetheless, Cunningham touches upon the possible threats of binding surveillance over Virginia, whose attempt to escape to London and her committing suicide might be interpreted as an escape from the patriarchal oppression.

Secondly, in the testimony of Laura Brown, Cunningham switches the readers' attention to an American housewife who is suffering from 'the problem that has no name' (also known as the suburban syndrome). As the chapter 'Mrs Brown' revealed, the suburban syndrome was a serious phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s America and of feminist research by Betty Friedan. Eventually, Laura's decision to pursue her own happiness and to leave her family behind is then read (despite its controversy) as a form of throwing off the shackles of heteronormative expectations and obligatory domesticity.

Thirdly, the story of Clarissa Vaughan is set in a completely different environment – it takes place in the 1990s in New York City. Cunningham casts a modern look at originally Woolf's characters, since he strongly draws on the idea of gender neutrality and by illustrating that one may behave woman-manly and man-womanly without loss of identity. Such tendencies reflect the contemporary development of female and gender studies which call for impartiality and breaking down of stereotypes. Furthermore, the last narrative refers to the clash of third wave feminism and post-feminism, plus, it warns about topical problems such as HIV virus spreading.

All findings considered, Cunningham's novel *The Hours* succeeded in being subjected to the critical eye of feminist literary interpretation as it proved to contain

numerous pro-female elements and as it successfully mediated a serious look into some of the feminist burning issues. Central female protagonists are portrayed as strong, determined, and independent.



## Resumé

Tato diplomová práce si stanovila za cíl podrobit román Michaela Cunninghama *Hodiny* feministické literární analýze a výsledně tak dokázat tvrzení, že ho lze považovat za román feministický. Třebaže se jedná o dílo napsané autorem mužem, nikoliv ženou, Cunningham v náročné zkoušce uspěl, a jeho román *Hodiny* prokázal, že neslouží pouze jako literární sonda do duše jedné z předních modernistek. Tento román (patrně neproslavnější z Cunninghamových literárních počinů) zaštiťuje různorodou feministickou problematiku a pracuje s ženskými tématy na vícero úrovních.

První teoretická kapitola nahlíží na feminismus v kontextu literatury a následně mapuje souběžný vývoj ženského psaní a feministické literární kritiky přibližně od 16. století, přes oficiální zrod této kritiky v šedesátých letech, až po její současnou situaci. V návaznosti na novodobé tendence v oblasti mužských a ženských studií se pak třetí teoretická kapitola obrací na problematický vztah mezi muži spisovateli a ženskou literární kritikou, která z velké většiny nahlíží na muže jako na autory patriarchálně zaujaté a mocensky nadřazené. Tato kapitola se nicméně soustředí na více pozitivní stránku problematiky a předkládá názorné příklady, kdy se muži hrdě postavili za originalitu ženského psaní a práva žen obecně. Mezi takové muže patří i Michael Cunningham, který považuje Virginii Woolfovou za svou múzu a autorku, která mu pomohla odhalit krásy literatury. Cunningham tak ve svém románu spoléhá na konkrétní narativní techniky (jako například proud vědomí či centrální fokalizaci), které mu umožňují čtivě a detailně zprostředkovat spletitý vnitřní svět ženského myšlení a chápání.

Jak již bylo zmíněno, román *Hodiny* nabízí hned několik možných interpretací z pohledu ženské literární kritiky. Zaprvé, praktická část této diplomové práce komentuje míru přesnosti zobrazení života a osobnosti Virginie Woolfové v Cunninghamově pojetí. Na základě osobní korespondence, napsaných esejí a deníků bylo možné zhodnotit, které z Cunninghamem prezentovaných informací byly podloženy skutečnými a fakty, a které nikoliv. Z celkového hodnocení vyplývá, že autorova znalost života Woolfové byla ve většině případů přesná a literárně vystihující.

Virginia Woolfová, jakožto jedna ze zakladatelek feminismu a ženské literární tradice, se ovšem sama stala terčem kritiky, a to konkrétně v sedmdesátých letech, kdy feministická literární kritička Elaine Showalterová bojovala za demystifikaci a pomyslné sesazení Woolfové z feministického trůnu. Ačkoliv byly argumenty Showalterové

(publikované v díle *A Literature of Their Own*) četné a závažné, tato práce uzavírá debatu na téma Woolfová a feminismus ve prospěch Woolfové. Jak její (v pozdějších dílech často prosazované) téma androgynie, tak i odmítavé postavení k feminismu měly své opodstatnění.

Cunninghamův román se dále může pyšnit tím, že nevykresluje hlavní ženské hrdinky pouze jako manželky, matky či sestry, ale především jako emancipované a vzdělané bytosti – jako oddané spisovatelky (v případě Woolfové) a nadšené čtenářky (v příběhu Laury Brownové). Tento fakt zrcadlí jedno z hlavních zaměření feministické literární kritiky, a to konkrétně popis žen jako autorek a žen jako čtenářek.

Co nicméně dělá z románu *Hodiny* komplexní feministické dílo, je především jeho snaha zachytit ženskou zkušenost napříč téměř celým staletím a v rozdílných prostředích. Nejen, že tímto způsobem může čtenář detailně pozorovat, jak se postavení žen měnilo s ohledem na vývoj feminismu v průběhu dvacátého století, ale také jaká témata byla středobodem ženských hnutí. V příběhu paní Woolfové z třicátých let Cunningham vyzdvihuje postavení Woolfové jakožto ekonomicky aktivní osoby a intelektuálky, pro kterou nebylo denním chlebem vařit či prát, ale obohacovat literární kánon. Stinnou stránku jinak idylicky vyzařujícího soužití manželů Woolfových je možno vyčíst z pasáže, kdy se Virginie cítí pod neustálým drobnohledem svého manžela a rozhodne se tak ke spontánnímu útěku do Londýna, který ovšem končí neúspěchem.

Dále, osobní zpověď Laury Brownové, nespokojené Americké manželky a matky z předměstí, odhaluje skličující pravdu a neutuchající boj proti „problému beze jména“, také známého pod názvem „předměstský syndrom“. Diplomová práce kriticky zkoumá jeho projevy a důsledky a odkazuje se při tom na klíčové dílo Betty Friedanové *Feminine Mystique*. Jakkoliv kontroverzně se může jevit Lauřino rozhodnutí opustit rodinu a utéct do Kanady, v kontextu této práce je toto rozuzlení chápáno pro-feministicky.

V posledním z příběhů čtenáři nahlíží do soukromí Clarissy Vaughanové a neoliberálního prostředí New Yorku devadesátých let. Cunningham zde pracuje s původními postavami z románu *Paní Dallowayová* a propůjčuje jim zcela nové, genderově neutrální rysy a projevy chování, které rezonují s vývojem třetí vlny feminismu a tehdejším zrozením queer studií. Jak feministické čtení prokázalo, postava Clarissy zároveň odkazuje na konzervativní známky typické pro post-feminismus, zatímco skličující tematika viru HIV šíří myšlenku soucitu a závažnosti tohoto

onemocnění, jež bylo jednou z položek na seznamu feministické agendy v devadesátých letech.

Závěrem nutno podotknout, že všechny z Cunninghamových hrdinek pochází buďto ze střední či vyšší sociální třídy a mohou tak být vnímané jako prototypy svého sociálního statusu, který je oproti jiným ženám v ohledu vzdělání a financí zvýhodňuje. Tento fakt je tak jediným možným nedostatkem Cunninghamova románu, jelikož jeho hlavní hrdinky reprezentují pouze vybranou sociální skupinu. Nicméně, kapitola pojednávající o Cunninghamově ženské inspiraci tuto nedokonalost objasňuje. Cunninghamovo dílo se tak i přes svůj feministicky kontroverzní status (napsané mužem) zaslouženě stává názorným dílem, které zpracovává téma ženské emancipace, nezávislosti a individuality.

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## **Annotation**

**Author:** Bc. Michaela Čechová (F190362)  
**Department:** Department of English and American Studies  
**Title of Thesis:** Michael Cunningham's Novel *The Hours* from the Perspective of Feminist Literary Criticism  
**Supervisor:** prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.  
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**Key Words:** feminism, feminist literary criticism, Virginia Woolf, women and literature, equality, gender roles

**Abstract:** In this diploma thesis feminist literary interpretation is applied in order to uncover the feminist nature of Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (1998) which pays tribute to one of the leading figures of British modernism and the feminist movement as such – Virginia Woolf. The main objective of this paper, that *The Hours* can be regarded a feminist piece of fiction (despite having been written by a man), is based on a thorough analysis, close reading and inspection of selected themes, motifs, and symbols. This thesis also addresses how the sociohistorical background of the main protagonists (Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan) predetermined their status as women.



## **Anotace**

**Autor:** Bc. Michaela Čechová (F190362)  
**Katedra:** Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky  
**Název práce:** Román *Hodiny* od Michaela Cunninghama z pohledu feministické literární kritiky  
**Vedoucí Práce:** prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.  
**Počet stran:** 97  
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**Klíčová slova:** feminismus, feministická literární teorie, Virginia Woolfová, ženy a literatura, rovnoprávnost, genderové role

**Abstrakt:** Tato diplomová práce interpretuje za pomoci feministické literární kritiky román Michaela Cunninghama *Hodiny* (1998), kterým autor vzdává hold Virginii Woolfové, jedné z předních britských modernistek a zároveň také jedné ze zakladatelek feminismu jako takového. Analýza vybraných témat, motivů a ženských hrdinek v románu *Hodiny* se snaží poukázat nejen na to, že socio-historický kontext hrál jednu z hlavních rolí ve společenském zařazení žen, ale především, že je možné považovat Cunninghamův román za feministické dílo, i když bylo napsané mužem, nikoli ženou – autorkou.