

Artistic Anxiety and the Pressure to Perform in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

Elizabeth Lamszus

Department of English and Modern Languages,
Olivet Nazarene University
1 University Ave
Bourbonnais, IL 60914, USA
Email: emlamszus@olivet.edu

Abstract:

Though they are not conventional visual artists, the characters in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* each engage in creative acts – Virginia writes stories, Laura makes a home for her family, Clarissa orchestrates a party – but these creative acts are ultimately unfulfilling for each of them. These creative acts are not simply unfulfilling, however; they also, more significantly, cause deep-seated anxiety as the women consciously or subconsciously recognize the divide between their “undisputed origin” (Trinh Minh-ha 1998, 649), their true selves, and the roles that they are expected to perform: successful author able to craft the perfect story, supportive wife and mother able to create a perfect cake and birthday celebration, and pleasant hostess able to create a warm, effortless, memorable party. The identity crises that these women experience are due in part, then, to societal expectations that press them to simulate, in the Baudrillardian sense, their lives to the point where the difference between their authentic selves and their performed selves becomes dangerously indistinguishable. These simulations are further reinforced by new names and corresponding identities that men have given them by way of nickname or marriage and are so devastating that they lead some even to suicide.

Keywords: postmodernism, performance, art, identity, simulation, naming, anxiety

In postmodern critical theory, Jean Baudrillard's ideas of simulacra and simulation have been immensely important for understanding certain aspects of the literature of this period. In *The Precession of Simulacra*, he suggests that “pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 1998, 633). Simulations, then, feigning to have what one does not, threaten modernism's idea that, while the true and real have been replaced by the false and imaginary, they are recoverable. In order to accomplish simulations, a certain level of creativity is required. Trinh Minh-ha identifies a similar condition in her *Woman, Native, Other*, but also explains its implications:

Authenticity as a need to rely on an ‘undisputed origin,’ is prey to an obsessive *fear*: that of *losing a connection*. Everything must hold together. In my craving for a logic of being, I cannot help but loathe the

threats of interruptions, disseminations, and suspensions. To begin, to develop to a climax, then, to end. To fill, to join, to unify. The order and the links create an illusion of continuity, which I highly prize for fear of nonsense and emptiness. Thus, a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling. (Minh-ha 1998, 649-50)

Minh-ha identifies the tentative nature of authenticity. Any interruption, dissemination, or suspension can threaten the connection to the genuine layer of self, and not only that, but the ordering of a life creates the *illusion* of continuity only. If the continuity is revealed to be nothing more than illusion, then nothing is left but empty chaos. Both Baudrillard's ideas of the collapsing separation between the true and false, and Minh-ha's dialectic of authenticity and the illusion of continuity are helpful in understanding Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, published in 1998. Cunningham's novel stems from Virginia Woolf's 1923 *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel that helped shape literary modernism. Claudia Olk notes that, "In taking a fictional reality as its point of reference, *The Hours* dwells on the notion of a permeability of the boundary between reality produced and reality perceived" (Olk 2004, 204). Not only does it engage in the permeability of the boundary of reality and perceived reality, but it also, more significantly engages with Baudrillard's and Minh-ha's postmodern theories of the realities of the self. *The Hours* offers readers multiple experiences of the artistic anxiety and the pressure to perform pre-determined roles, resulting from interfered identities.

In addressing some characteristics of postmodern literature, Stacey Olster suggests that, "Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, novelists could not fall back upon religion when they needed to find a new ordering principle behind history...If writers wished for an ordering principle behind history, they had to construct it for themselves" (Olster 1989, 8). This is something like what we see in *The Hours*. Characters attempt to construct ordering principles for their lives in the midst of societal pressures; engaging in creative acts seems to promise order but fails to deliver. Mary Joe Hughes, in an article entitled "Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Representation," explores some of the issues related to art in the novel. She claims that "The [repeated image of the] plunge and its associated meanings are ultimately linked to the role of literature, especially in *The Hours* and, more generally in both novels, to the act of creation" (Hughes 2004, 350). Hughes identifies an important role of literature and other acts of creation in *The Hours*, but she unfortunately ignores the troubling condition of Cunningham's artists in the text, all of whom suffer from anxiety that is, at times, debilitating to the point where suicide is the only alternative for two of them. The artistic anxiety stems from the pressure to perform pre-determined roles; rather than living life as they would like, each of Cunningham's characters are forced by others to create a self, a life other than what would, perhaps, be more natural, authentic, and enjoyable. Although postmodern art and literature may have an "animating power" (Hughes 2004, 355), they also throw into relief the instability of personal identities; Cunningham's female characters face anxiety when given the task to create or perform roles that have been assigned to them under new names given to them by men.

The novel's prologue foregrounds the disastrous implications of creating, or attempting to

create art, particularly when the art is created to fit society's expectations. On her way to drown herself, Cunningham's Virginia Woolf passes a farm worker who is cleaning a ditch, a mundane, but necessary act. As she sees this man, Virginia "thinks of how successful he is, how fortunate, to be cleaning a ditch in an osier bed. She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric" (Cunningham 1998, 3-4). In contrast to this stranger's work, writing has been a false pursuit, according to Virginia. In her letter to Leonard, Virginia again acknowledges her failure as a writer: "You see I can't even write this properly" (Cunningham 1998, 6). In contrast to the man engaging in physical labor, Virginia sees herself as a creative failure, a gifted eccentric only. Although her husband, Leonard, and perhaps even she herself, had expected her to be a writer, Virginia now sees that he was only playing at that role, and not convincingly. Certainly her health, the severe headaches she suffered, may have contributed to her decision to put a stone in her pocket and walk into the river, but perceiving herself as an artistic failure is more meaningfully painful for Virginia. As she contemplates her suicide, the physicality of Virginia's surroundings impress upon her, but they remain parenthetical: "(the fur collar tickles her neck)" (Cunningham 1998, 4), "(the bottom [of the river] is mucky)" (Cunningham 1998, 5), "The yellow surface of the river (more yellow than brown when seen this close) murkily reflects the sky" (Cunningham 1998, 5). In her last moments, Virginia seems to shift from her attempts at creating something to simply experiencing her life, though these new experiences have not become integrated with her life, and they never will.

When the novel steps back in time from Virginia's suicide to 1923 as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, the artistic anxiety that leads to her death immediately confronts readers. Virginia wakes up in the middle of the night, worrying about how to start her novel:

This might be another way to begin, certainly; with Clarissa going on an errand on a day in June, instead of soldiers marching off to lay the wreath in Whitehall. But is it the right beginning? Is it a little too ordinary?" (Cunningham 1998, 29)

Perfecting the creative act consumes Virginia to the point where she dreams about it; she cannot escape it. Not even being in the presence of her sister later can stop Virginia's mind from continually returning to her art. However, when she forgets the line that she had imagined, Virginia tells herself that "it doesn't matter, really, because she still has the feeling it left behind" (Cunningham 1998, 30). Unfortunately, feelings are fleeting, and Virginia realizes that nothing can disturb her if she means to capture the feeling. She determines to skip breakfast because "she can't bear the interruption it would entail, the contact with Nelly's mood" (Cunningham 1998, 34). Virginia sacrifices the nourishment she needs for the sake of her work, for the sake of creating. And although she does enjoy writing when she can tap into the mysteries of the world, "her access to it comes and goes without warning" (Cunningham 1998, 35). Because creativity is fickle, so is Virginia's pleasure in it, and yet it presses her, waking her up in the middle of the night with its urgency. There is inherent uncertainty, leading Virginia to question her competency, even her identity:

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 1998, 35)

The creativity has an agency of its own, leaving Virginia to simply follow the pen's lead. If she is unable to create, the thought of being simply herself seems to terrify her. The illusion of a connection to her true self or the deep mysteries of the universe, when exposed as false or otherwise inaccessible, leads to emptiness at Virginia's core, as Minh-ha would suggest.

Although Virginia is able to write on this day and she feels powerful in doing so, she also knows that "tomorrow she may look back at what she's written and find it airy, overblown. One always has a better book in one's mind than one can manage to get onto paper" (Cunningham 1998, 69). The inspiration exists, the skills exist, and yet, directly translating thoughts into the material world is impossible, especially extended over a period of time. Virginia has to stop writing after a few hours because something inevitably "within her falters, and she worries that if she pushes beyond her limits she will taint the whole enterprise" (Cunningham 1998, 70). The writing process is tentative, and works in fits and starts, but an even more problematic aspect of the creative impulse is the insecurity, the lived falsity of her identity. Virginia accepts that "sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation" (Cunningham 1998, 83), implying that no person is quite sane, including herself; there are only people who perform sanity well.

This impersonation begins to collapse what is real and what appears to be real, as it does for Virginia, who "feels fully in command of the character who is Virginia Woolf" (Cunningham 1998, 84). Here, then, is Baudrillard's theory of simulations beginning to take hold, threatening the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' of who Virginia is. At this point, she is still aware of the difference, since she controls the character, but because she is fully in control of creating a convincing character of Virginia, the potential exists for that character to become Virginia. Not only are there implications for Virginia's writing, but it complicates her relationships with people. One of her weaknesses is managing the servants, and though she wonders how she might be both firm and kind with Nelly, commanding respect and love, Virginia does nothing to address that part of her life. Instead, Virginia endows her character, Clarissa Dalloway, with "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 1998, 87). Virginia's artistic anxiety leads her to attempt to solve the problems in her own life by simply creating someone who does that part of life better than she. Her control over the character of Virginia is just as much a control over her own actions as it is a control over her fictional creation.

The anxiety, the restlessness that haunts Virginia, persists, even once a good deal of her novel is complete. She has to convince herself that:

It is enough to be in this house, delivered from the war, with a night's reading ahead of her, and then sleep, and then work again in the morning. It is enough that the streetlamps throw yellow shadows into the trees. (Cunningham 1998, 164)

Virginia looks to physical details of her surroundings for comfort, but they provide nothing substantive to ease her. Even the lure of London cannot soothe Virginia. After she convinces Leonard to move, Virginia imagines the ways in which art will save her:

She will go to the theater and concert halls. She will go to parties. She will haunt the streets, see everything, fill herself up with stories...She will write and write. She will finish this book, then write another. She will remain sane and she will live as she was meant to live...in full possession and command of her gifts. (Cunningham 1998, 209)

However, as readers will remember from the prologue, or from the real Virginia Woolf's life, art could not save her, whether she was surrounding herself with the art of theaters or creating her own art through writing. The inspiration she gained from other created things does nothing to help her perform as a sane woman, or, if they do, the performance is fatal.

Laura Brown, though not an artist in the same way as Virginia Woolf, yet struggles with artistic anxiety that develops out of the pressure to perform as a housewife in the 1950s should, and like Virginia, Laura wraps up her identity with a created thing – in this case, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Readers are first introduced to Laura when she is reading in bed, and in doing so, “trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world” (Cunningham 1998, 37). Though she might achieve some level of self-preservation in reading, Laura is still plagued by her role as a wife and mother:

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 should be there, shouldn't she? She should be standing before the stove in her new robe, full of simple, encouraging talk. (Cunningham 1998, 38)

Laura knows exactly what is expected of her, and yet none of it appeals to her. She debates the issue at length as she lays in bed, avoiding reentering that world and playing a role that she believes she is not meant to play. Laura knows well enough that each day she puts on an act for her family and uses that terminology to describe her attitude: she finds herself feeling like she's “about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed” (Cunningham 1998, 43). Unfortunately, today will not be a good day because Laura “knew she was going to have trouble believing in herself” (Cunningham 1998, 38), which would also make it difficult for Dan and Richie to believe her behavior as authentic. Dan and Richie expect that Laura's “undisputed origin,” to use Minh-ha's language (1998, 649), seeks to be a good wife and mother, though Laura knows otherwise. The disconnect plagues Laura throughout the novel, but she takes advantage of it when it suits her, allowing herself to shirk responsibility because she is pregnant, although, in her pregnancy, she is fulfilling another expectation: to be a nurturing mother with a house full of kids.

Not only does Laura engage in art as an avid reader, but as a post-war housewife, she is charged

with the duty of helping to design and build a new society. She reflects that:

we are here, all of us, making homes, having and raising children, creating not just books or paintings but a whole world – a world of order and harmony where children are safe (if not happy), where men who have seen horrors beyond imagining, who have acted bravely and well, come home to lighted windows, to perfume, to plates and napkins. (Cunningham 1998, 42)

Hughes posits that Laura here channels the spirit of Clarissa, “clearly nourished by the novel she is reading, in which the re-creation of life after the devastation of war is a central theme” (Hughes 2004, 354). According to Hughes, reading *Mrs. Dalloway* somehow gives Laura the courage to create a life for her family. However, for Laura, there is no comfort in this kind of creative act. By participating in the life of one soldier’s wife, Laura, willingly or not, participates in creating a stable environment for her family and post-war America. And, especially since Laura does not seem to be invested in that project, her work is more of an art form than it might have been for other women at her time. However, this venture causes her anxiety; Laura knows exactly what society expects of her, but instead of motivating her to act in those ways and fulfill those expectations, she is paralyzed, eventually seeking escape through attempted suicide and then a move to Canada.

Part of the larger work of creating a society is creating things on small-scale for her family, and Laura begins her day by creating a cake for her husband, with the help of her son. As they mix ingredients, Laura seems to revel in her ability to perform at that moment: “She is herself and she is the perfect picture of herself; there is no difference” (Cunningham 1998, 76). Whereas Virginia was on the verge of simulating herself, Laura has achieved it: the real Laura and the projected Laura are identical at that moment, and the artistic power urges her on to imagine

making, out of the humblest materials, a cake with all the balance and authority of an urn or a house. The cake will speak of bounty and delight the way a good house speaks of comfort and safety. This, she thinks, is how artists or architects must feel (it’s an awfully grand comparison, she knows, maybe even a little foolish, but still), faced with canvas, with stone, with oil or wet cement. Wasn’t a book like *Mrs. Dalloway* once just empty paper and a pot of ink? It’s only a cake, she tells herself. But still. There are cakes and then there are cakes. (Cunningham 1998, 76)

Suddenly Laura gets consumed by the notion that she can make a perfect cake for her husband, so when the cake fails to meet her own expectations – “It looks amateurish; handmade” (Cunningham 1998, 99) – she decides the cake has to be thrown out. Not even the second cake can stand up to Laura’s critical eye: “What [she] regrets, what she can hardly bear, is the cake. It embarrasses her, but she can’t deny it...she had hoped to create something finer, something more significant, than what she’s produced, even with its smooth surface and its centered message. She wants (she admits to herself) a dream of a cake manifested as an actual cake” (Cunningham 1998, 144). Part of the anxiety that grips Laura is the impossibility of making manifest her thoughts and dreams for

the cake, which is the same anxiety that Virginia suffers from.

Virginia escapes her artistic anxiety through suicide, and though Laura eventually attempts suicide, she first escapes by spending time alone at a hotel. Laura finds herself at a clean, respectable hotel “under false, or worse, inexplicable circumstances – she’s come, in some obscure way, to escape a cake” (Cunningham 1998, 147). Escaping a cake sounds like an activity fit for the insane, but Laura is not insane; she simply wants to put distance between herself and everything the cake represents: a perfect cake for a perfect family. However, for Laura who is probably not meant to be a homemaker, the failed cake reminds her how imperfectly she plays her role and also the perceived impossibility of living out a different one. Of course, booking the hotel room under false pretenses makes Laura an effective performer: she “intends to tell the desk clerk that her husband has been unavoidably delayed, and will arrive with their luggage in an hour or so. She has never lied like that before, not to someone she doesn’t know or love” (Cunningham 1998, 147), and she surprises herself when her performance is believed, or is at least sufficiently uninteresting to avoid raising questions. Although she lacks motivation or ability to perform for her family in creating a perfect life for them, when Laura has the opportunity to create a new identity, a new reason for being, she is successful, happy, and even excited by the possibilities it offers. She performs easily when it is on her own terms.

Perhaps because Laura finally escapes the life she had to convince herself to participate in and has the opportunity to leisurely read, it suddenly occurs to her that “It is possible to die. Laura thinks, suddenly, of how she – how anyone – can make a choice like that” (Cunningham 1998, 151). Before leaving the house without her son, it’s unclear that Laura had ever made a choice of her own true will. Even her decision to marry Dan seems to happen to Laura, rather than her actively seeking it: “What could she say but yes? How could she deny a handsome, good-hearted boy, practically a member of the family, who had come back from the dead?” (Cunningham 1998, 40). Laura is left without options throughout her life, and the sterile hotel room signals a new space for her to simply think, to imagine something outside of the duties of wife and mother – even if that something is death. She admits that “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” (Cunningham 1998, 152), and the connection between art and choice crystalizes for Laura. Unless she finds an escape-route, art’s demands will defeat Laura, just as they defeated Virginia Woolf.

When Laura returns to the neighbor’s house to retrieve Richie, “She is herself and not herself” (Cunningham 1998, 187), and then “She is overtaken by a sensation of unbeing” (Cunningham 1998, 188). As Laura reenters her former life, she has a small identity crisis, or she at least becomes hyper-aware of the performance she is about to begin again. She fights off dizziness and gathers courage, but still Laura “doesn’t know how she’d explain two and a half hours spent reading in a rented room” (Cunningham 1998, 189). In creating a space for herself, Laura violates society’s expectations for her; no one could possibly understand Laura’s rationale (if one exists), let alone her impulse. Returning to Baudrillard’s theory, Laura now senses that there is a disconnect between her

true self and her false self, and in simulating a good mother, picking up her son to prepare a party for her husband, that disconnect becomes more prominent in her life, destabilizing her identity. Olk suggests that “[Laura’s] efforts to balance self-image and self-experience grow increasingly complicated because Laura Brown’s notion of reality is undermined by a sense of role-play she acquires when looking at herself” (Olk 2004, 210). Although mirrors do complicate Laura’s identity, as we see here, her reality is shaken even without seeing herself in a mirror, indicating the depths to which she has engaged in simulations and the difficulties she faces in finding her logic of being, as Minh-ha would suggest.

Once back in the domestic sphere, the same instability reigns as Laura finds herself swinging back and forth in her attitude toward her situation. She gets angry when her domestic creation, the cake, degenerates: Dan is “coarse, gross, stupid; he has sprayed spit onto the cake,” and Laura finally realizes that “She herself is trapped here forever, posing as a wife” (Cunningham 1998, 205), but not long after, when Laura sets the table for dinner,

it seems she has succeeded suddenly, at the last minute, the way a painter might brush a final line of color onto a painting and save it from incoherence; the way a writer might set down the line that brings to light the submerged patterns and symmetry in the drama. (Cunningham 1998, 207)

Moments before, Laura had to calm herself down from a flash of anger at the role she is forced to play and the beautiful cake that was not treated with care. Now Laura revels in completing the picture of her home, just as a painter or writer revels in making his or her work a unified piece of art. And the celebration of the goodness of her home quickly fades, too, when Laura attempts to overdose on the pills in her medicine cabinet as she and Dan prepare for bed. She remembers the freedom of the hotel and the simplicity of achieving that freedom, and “think[s] how wonderful it might be to no longer worry, or struggle, or fail” at creating a world, at performing a life (Cunningham 1998, 214). Although Laura is unable to escape the worry and struggles through suicide, she does eventually escape by leaving her family behind, moving to Toronto, and becoming a librarian, work in which she has access to as much art and literature of her choosing as she could hope for.

Clarissa’s artistry is again different from either Virginia’s or Laura’s. Rather than creating a novel or a home for a family, Clarissa’s focus is on creating a successful party for Richard, whom we later find to be Laura’s son. Not only does Clarissa work to create a masterpiece of a party for Richard, but perhaps more significant for her, Clarissa surrounds herself with art and artists, including Richard, an award-winning writer. As part of her preparatory work, Clarissa visits Richard, dying from AIDS, and just as Virginia and Laura are pressed with expectations, so is Clarissa: Richard “seems to have decided early on that Clarissa stands not only for herself but for the gifts and frailties of her entire sex” (Cunningham 1998, 19). Clarissa’s audience is narrow, but nonetheless significant in shaping her, pushing her to perform in particular ways.

Clarissa looks to literature as a source of comfort for her friend Evan, whose health is

tentatively returning. She searches for the perfect book but finds that nothing satisfies: "They are all, at once, too general and too specific. You want to give him the book of his own life, the book that will locate him, parent him, arm him for the changes" (Cunningham 1998, 21-2). No matter how much art promises to help people better understand themselves in relation to others, not one specific piece can be just suitable enough, which leads Clarissa to the conclusion that:

There is no comfort, it seems, in the world of objects, and Clarissa fears that art, even the greatest of it...belong stubbornly to the world of objects...She wants for Evan and she wants for herself a book that can carry what that singular memory [of the tree branch tapping a window] carries. (Cunningham 1998, 22-3)

Clarissa's memory of the tree branch, "more than any other feels urgent and deeply, almost supernaturally comforting" (Cunningham 1998, 22), but she realizes, just like Virginia and Laura do, that she cannot make her immaterial memories into material objects that she can touch and feel and interact with, though perhaps that is for the better, since objects provide no comfort. In any case, not even art can materialize memories, so Clarissa leaves the bookstore empty-handed.

The everlasting quality that Clarissa seeks in art and memory finds some substance in film. On her way back from the florist, Clarissa sees a movie star for a brief moment – either Meryl Streep or Vanessa Redgrave, possibly Susan Sarandon – and finds that she "can't help being drawn to the aura of fame – and more than fame, actual immortality" (Cunningham 1998, 50). Of course this movie star will not live forever, but recordings of her will be stored away in archives with other objects, physical mementos of her art. Although this may be true, the immortality is qualified by what is done with these objects, similar objects to the ones that Clarissa was skeptical of earlier: they are simply catalogued and stored away, perhaps taken out once in a while, but surely forgotten eventually as more and more objects join the collected archives.

Once Clarissa begins the party preparations at her apartment, she too feels pressured to create a perfect experience for her honored friend: "She will give Richard the best party she can manage. She will try to create something temporal, even trivial, but perfect in its way...What more can she offer him?" (Cunningham 1998, 123). Richard is receiving a special award for his life's work, his writing; Clarissa can give nothing to this artist except a temporal experience, and perhaps in part because her creation is for another artist, the pressure to succeed is even greater. Clarissa strives to create a perfect party atmosphere for Richard, and an important part of that is the ability of the hostess to be pleasant, entertaining, and effortless in doing so. When Louis stops by later, he "wonders if they're calculated, these little demonstrations of self-knowledge that pepper Clarissa's wise, hostess performance" (Cunningham 1998, 130). Clarissa's party is cut short, but in Louis's company, we see a sample of the role she plays as the perfect hostess. And later, just before Clarissa watches Richard fall to his death from his window, she notices that she "can feel herself acting well in a difficult situation – but at the same time is removed from herself, from the room, as if she is witnessing something that's already happened. It feels like a memory" (Cunningham 1998, 197).

Once again, Minh-ha is helpful for understanding the self-awareness and the out-of-body experience that Clarissa has at this moment. Clarissa knows that Richard will jump out of the window before her very eyes, disrupting her logic of being; earlier, Clarissa revels in life and loves the indestructibility of the world (Cunningham 1998, 14), and Richard's choice for death interrupts her connection to the part of her that values life. By making the present moment into a past memory, Clarissa copes more calmly with Richard's impending suicide.

Even with her partner Sally, Clarissa puts on performances, as Sally reflects, though they are not as convincing as the performance for Louis or the performance for herself:

Clarissa refuses to admit it when a gift doesn't please her, despite Sally's exhortations. Every present, according to Clarissa, is perfect, exactly what she'd hoped for, and all the hapless giver can do is wait and see whether the watch will be deemed 'too good for everyday,' or the sweater be worn once, to an obscure party, and never appear again. (Cunningham 1998, 181)

Some might classify Clarissa's actions as simple politeness, but after eighteen years with Sally, she should be able to be honest with her. Instead, Clarissa checks herself and puts on a performance as the ever-thankful recipient of unwanted gifts, though Sally can see through the act.

As with the other characters, Clarissa experiences moments of instability, particularly regarding her identity, when she engages in creating or performing something, or when she simply thinks about the potentially dangerous power of art in her life. At one point, Clarissa contemplates what her life would have been like if she had stayed in a relationship with Richard, rather than committing to Sally:

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. Venture too far for love, she tells herself, and you renounce citizenship in the country you've made for yourself. You end up just sailing from port to port. Still, there is this sense of missed opportunity. (Cunningham 1998, 97)

Clarissa envisions a wild and exciting life with Richard, something made for art, rather than the reality of life. But then she can't decide if she is still the same person who wants that evocative life, or if that was simply something from her past. She decides finally that her life is good, but somewhat lacking. The illusion of order or continuity is tentative for Clarissa, so she grasps for peace in the decisions she has made. Unfortunately, she is only partially successful as she senses that she has missed something important in life.

In many ways, Richard, an author like Virginia, exemplifies the artistic anxiety that can grip a person and not let go. In contrast to Clarissa, who is drawn to the aura of fame, Richard has no interest in the illusion of immortality that fame offers. Instead, Richard makes everyone around 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 1998, 61). Although this approach to life and interaction with people may help his art, it's unclear whether it also improves his relationship with people. How well does he really know Clarissa, for example, if he continues to call her a name that she would prefer to do without (Cunningham 1998, 55)? And at the end of his life, Richard admits to Clarissa that he has failed, and it is a failure born of his art:

I just feel so sad. What I wanted to do seemed simple. I wanted to create something alive and shocking enough that it could stand beside a morning in somebody's life. The most ordinary morning. Imagine, trying to do that. What foolishness. (Cunningham 1998, 199)

Richard must be suffering greatly from his battle with AIDS, but at the end of his life, Richard focuses on his art, and just like the others in *The Hours*, is unable to translate his vision for creative work from his mind to reality, leaving him greatly disappointed and unfulfilled.

Cunningham crafts each of his characters to experience anxiety over their various art forms and performances, but not without reason. The artistic anxiety sends each character into personal identity crises, perhaps in part because each is renamed – someone else has fashioned them into something or someone new. Virginia is renamed through virtue of her marriage to Leonard, causing a doubling effect on her identity. Leonard, in reflecting on Virginia, reminds himself that:

she is his wife. She is Virginia Stephen, pale and tall, startling as a Rembrandt or a Velázquez, appearing twenty years ago at her brother's rooms in Cambridge in a white dress, and she is Virginia Woolf, standing before him right now. (Cunningham 1998, 33)

This person is both a young, single woman, incredible as any painting, and also a “craggy and worn” married woman, looking “as if she's carved from very porous, gray-white marble” (Cunningham 1998, 33). Not only does the past become immediate for the present at this moment, but Cunningham here gives readers a glimpse into the two beings contained in Virginia's body, and explains at least some of her difficulty in reconciling the various parts of her identity.

Laura undergoes a similar transformation, though with different results. After reflecting on the events leading up to her marriage, Laura seems resigned to the changes: “So now she is Laura Brown. Laura Zielski, the solitary girl, the incessant reader, is gone, and here in her place is Laura Brown” (Cunningham 1998, 40). Whereas Virginia held her past alongside her present self, Laura's present replaces her former self completely, or at least that is how Laura attempts to live in order to conform to the expectations set up for her. Reading as much as Laura would like to is not possible for a responsible wife and mother, so Laura at times tries to suppress her former interests and desires, reminding herself that “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?)” (Cunningham 1998, 79). Despite her insurances that she can live fully as Laura Brown rather than Laura Zielski, the former

self will not be put to rest, and eventually Laura succumbs to it, escapes to the hotel to read for a short time, and later escapes to Canada to do the same indefinitely.

Cunningham draws the same attention to Clarissa, who, though never taking a man's surname in marriage, is nevertheless renamed by one. When she and Richard were young, he decided that:

Vaughan was not the proper name for her...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 1998, 10-11)

Richard simply takes it upon himself to give Clarissa a new name, imagining her life to be something different than what Vaughan suggests. Clarissa, young and in love "was eighteen, renamed. She could do what she liked" (Cunningham 1998, 11). Although Richard acts out of authority over her, Clarissa seems to find freedom in her new name, at least at first. Twenty years later, Clarissa wonders whether "Isn't it time...to dispense with the old nickname?" (Cunningham 1998, 55). Clarissa wants to be rid of the name that she believes no longer adequately represents her, and on its own, this might be an innocent desire to move on from a tired nickname. However, at other points in the novel, Clarissa reveals that she struggles with her identity. Sally walks in on Clarissa looking "as if she is not quite sure who she is" (Cunningham 1998, 184), and earlier Clarissa feels a strong desire "to be Louis; not to be *with* him (that can be so thorny, so difficult) but to *be* him, an unhappy person, a strange person, faithless, unscrupulous, loose on the streets" (Cunningham 1998, 155). Mrs. Dalloway, if she cannot escape the name and the pressures associated with living a life worthy of a literary character, would rather become someone else entirely, let alone regain her former name.

Trinh Minh-ha suggests that "The *real*, nothing else than a *code of representation*, does not (cannot) coincide with the lived or the performed" (Minh-ha 1998, 650), and it is precisely this struggle that Michael Cunningham's characters experience in *The Hours*. They try to grasp the real of themselves while also living performed lives for their families and close friends; however much the performances may at times be indistinguishable from the real, in Baudrillard's terms, they ultimately cannot coincide with the real. Any attempts at simulation only end disastrously, particularly if the simulation is prompted by others' expectations. Interestingly, Cunningham himself engages in the creative act in writing *The Hours*, and though we cannot fully know his motivations for doing so, he completed that act more successfully than any of his characters were able to, and in doing so, raises a number of important questions about the role of art in postmodern literature.

References:

Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulation." *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. (Eds.) Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998. 631-637.

- Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. New York: Picador, 1998.
- Hughes, Mary Joe. "Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Re-Presentation." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45.1 (2004): 349-361.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. "Woman, Native, Other." *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998. 649-654.
- Olk, Claudia. "Vision, Intermediality, and Spectatorship in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 49.2 (2004): 191-217.
- Olster, Stacey. *Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.