Sexuality in *The Hours*

An Intertextual Analysis on the Reconstruction of Characters and the Representation of Sexuality

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Abstract

Sexuality in *The Hours*: An Intertextual Analysis on the Reconstruction of Characters to Represent Sexuality

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The essay aims to analyse what impact the reconstruction of the characters of *Mrs Dalloway* and the fictional character of Virginia Woolf has on the representation of sexuality in *The Hours*. The theoretical framework is based on queer theory, heteronormativity and gender studies. It also focuses on the use of allusions of intertextuality as a technique in the rewriting of *Mrs Dalloway*. The study focuses on the characters of *The Hours*: Clarissa Vaughan, Richard Brown, Laura Brown, and Virginia Woolf. The notion of sexuality and gender are common themes throughout *The Hours* where characters explore their choices and feelings for their sexual identities. The analysis examines what impact heteronormativity has in past and present societies. The notion of sexuality is explored among the characters where they struggle with their understanding of their sexualities. Cunningham demonstrates how sexuality can be perceived as ambiguous and how the search for sexuality continues to be apparent throughout the different time periods.

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1.0 Introduction

Throughout history there have been written texts that are in reference to other texts and this technique can be understood as intertextuality where literature is rewritten according to their precursor literature. This form of interaction between two different texts creates a new extended version of a similar notion. Therefore, some form of texts can give the reader an expanded understanding in relation to previous literature. In order to gain an expanded understanding of Michael Cunningham's The Hours (2000), the reader must be aware of the references to Mrs Dalloway that are apparent throughout the novel and only then can the literature be understood in context to the previous text.

1.1. The Hours

The Hours is an intertextual novel that is influenced by and follows the techniques of Mrs Dalloway and as a result The Hours can be recognized an extension of Woolf’s novel. The novel is centred on societies of different time periods and includes the social attitudes of restrictions and advantages of contemporary society regarding the sexuality of the characters. There are many instances in The Hours that echo Woolf’s narrative structure in Mrs Dalloway. Both novels share a similar narrative technique of following the hours of one single day in the lives of the characters. The Hours tells the story of the lives of three women who live in the years of 1923, 1949 and 1999. Virginia Woolf is portrayed as herself in the narrative of 1923 and is seen writing her novel Mrs Dalloway in the suburb of London. The narrative of 1949 follows Laura Brown and her attempts to bake a cake in her role as a housewife. Clarissa Vaughan, similar to Clarissa Dalloway, is going out to buy flowers and is planning an event for her friend Richard in the 1990s New York.

1.2. Previous studies

Birgit Spengler notes how Cunningham’s The Hours can be recognized as an expansion of Mrs Dalloway. She argues for how the inclusion of Virginia Woolf’s character in The Hours shows how it can be noticed as a transgression of the ideas of Woolf’s (52). One way in which the relation between The Hours and Mrs Dalloway can be seen in how sexuality is represented within the construction of Clarissa Vaughan, Richard Brown, Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf. Monica Latham describes Mrs Dalloway as an ‘exemplary’ novel of
modernism because of the flexible construction since it can be effectively duplicated in order to incorporate new ideas, themes and symbolism (9). Latham explains how Woolf explores notions such as class, identity and society and focuses on gender construction including the ambiguity of sexual orientation (9). She notes that contemporary writers can reconstruct and adapt the text of Woolf’s text and insert new ideas on sexuality (9). According to David Van Leer, these ideas can be seen in The Hours where sexual relations are explored (190). He continues to explain how Cunningham’s choice of setting is in ‘post-Stonewall’ in order to involve narratives of different sexualities such as gay and bisexual (190). Van Leer concludes that it is evident that the characters are either explicitly gay or that they have another sexual orientation other than heterosexuality but it might not be as explicit (191). Sexuality is put into contemporary society in order to show how sexuality changes from latent to explicit but at the same time does it also involve ongoing issues regarding sexuality (Aimone 161). James Schiff states how the public attitudes in The Hours enable homosexuality in Clarissa Vaughan’s life that would be considered as unacceptable to Clarissa Dalloway in 1920s London (367). The public attitudes of contemporary society depend on the ‘cultural climate’ where characters feel forced to hide their sexuality and choose to identify themselves within sexual labels that are accepted and constructed by society (368).

It is apparent that The Hours is an extended writing of Mrs Dalloway where Cunningham includes themes such as sexuality and gender. The aim of this essay is to analyse what impact the reconstruction of the characters of Mrs Dalloway and the fictional character of Virginia Woolf has on the representation of sexuality in The Hours. In The Hours, Cunningham includes a fictional version of Virginia Woolf and uses intertextuality of Mrs Dalloway as ways to represent sexuality in past and present societies. The characters Clarissa Vaughan, Richard Brown, Laura Brown and the fictional character based on Virginia Woolf will be analysed because they are central figures throughout the novel. Clarissa Vaughan and Richard Brown have distinctive similarities to the characters of Mrs Dalloway and they carry the same name as characters from Mrs Dalloway. Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf are not characters of Mrs Dalloway but both characters have a relationship to Mrs Dalloway, where Laura Brown reads and is influenced by Mrs Dalloway, and the character Virginia Woolf is writing Mrs Dalloway.
2.0 Background

2.1. Sexuality

This essay’s focus is on how sexuality is represented in *The Hours*. The definition for sexuality can be understood as a way “in which sex and one’s identified sex collapse to form a particular way of expressing physical pleasure” (Brent Davis & Sumara 196). In *History of Sexuality volume, I*, Michael Foucault argues for how sexuality can be understood as a social construct rather than a biological human attribute. He explains the idea of sexuality to be a discursive production by comparing the perspective of sexuality through different time periods: middle ages, renaissance, and the Victorian era (17-18). According to Foucault, sexuality is constantly “put into discourse” (11) and he continues to explain how this ‘discourse’ is affected by power. In other words, power can be observed as a factor that influences individuals’ perception of sexuality. This ‘power’ can control and create restrictions in how sexualities are expressed in society. Attitudes in relation to sexuality can also be seen to have changed throughout history (12). Furthermore, Nikki Sullivan adds that sexuality is also a cultural construct and there is no true account on heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality (1).

2.2. Queer theory

The essay will analyze aspects of how one’s sexuality can influence one’s life choices and way of living. Therefore, is it fruitful to have queer theory as the theoretical framework. Annamarie Jagose states that the term queer can be viewed as a relatively new term in the field of gender studies (72). In the 1920s New York, men identified themselves as ‘queer’ on the basis of their sexual interest in men. Terms such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’ was commonly used to identify their sexual orientation throughout the twentieth century (Jagose 72). ‘Queer’ had become an ‘umbrella term’ for a coalition of non-heteronormative people to reside under (1). However, Jagose argues for these terms to not be recognized as synonyms. The discursive proliferation of lesbian and gay studies has experienced uncertainness in different circumstances due to the question of which term to use (74). Therefore, ‘queer’ is perceived as a consequence of the problem of categorizing non-heterosexual people according to labels (75). Steven Epstein adds that the ‘queer’ movement showed a resistance to the
tradition to label and restrict people into categories (195). It cannot be dated exactly to when the term ‘queer’ had its start as a movement however it is noted to have been popularized during the early 1990s (Jagose 76). Furthermore, Epstein explains that the term ‘queer’ was developed within a political sphere due to its association with the activist group Queer Nation (194). He states how “queerness describes a politics of provocation, one in which the limits of liberal tolerance are constantly pushed” (196). The queer movement continued to challenge the norms. As a result, ‘queer’ has become a term with a political undertone.

2.3. Heteronormativity and the Heterosexual Matrix

In my analysis, there will be a perspective on how heterosexuality is seen as the norm in the contemporary societies of The Hours. However, to analyse the utility of addressing a heterosexual identity, one must first understand the term ‘heteronormativity’. Stevi Jackson notes how heteronormativity manages the normalizing of heterosexuality and contributes to push a heterosexual identity on to those who identify within a non-normative sexuality (105). Jackson adds heteronormativity has been created because of the ‘norms’ throughout history and these norms have influenced the ‘contemporary usage’ of heteronormativity (110). Therefore, heterosexuality is seen as the only ‘valid’ sexual identity in society (Slagle 13). Heterosexuality is “taken-for-granted” and is never addressed (Kitzinger et al. 293). Jane Ward and Beth Schneider state in The Reaches of Heteronormativity (2009) that the production of a heterosexual identity is closely connected to the understanding of heteronormativity however heterosexuality is not equivalent to heteronormativity and the definitions thus can be separated. The practices of a heteronormative society are subdued to sexualities that are not considered normative (434).

Judith Butler, an expert in the field of gender studies, takes heteronormativity and explains further how sexuality and gender fall under a ‘heterosexual matrix’ (9). She further notes how heterosexual normativity is not solely dependent on the production of gender but also on the hierarchy that exists within gender which essentially contributes to the heteronormative structure. The heteronormative structure contributes to maintain the heterosexual matrix where sexuality and gender is based on assumptions on one’s sexuality (Butler 12). Butler explains it as “if gender hierarchy produces and consolidates gender, and if gender hierarchy presupposes an operative notion of gender, then gender is what causes gender” (12). In other
words, the gender hierarchy contributes to the production of gender and subsequently maintains the presumption of what gender is. In addition, gender regulation establishes and maintains the order of gender and strengthens the idea of how men and women can only feel attracted to each other. This notion also limits and restricts other sexualities (14).

2.4. Gender Perspectives

Since the analysis includes a search for sexual identity in female characters of *The Hours*, is it relevant to include perspectives on gender. This is included to further analyse the restrictions in sexuality in contemporary society. Jackson notes how queer and feminist theorists want to neutralize the terms of sexuality and gender that are present through “social agents or subjects, sexual and gendered selves who through their embodied activities construct . . . sexual attraction” (Jackson 108). He continues to compare how these distinctions explain how gender, sexuality and heterosexuality intersect. These intersections produce distinctiveness between and within them (108). Robyn Rowland and Renate Klein further explain that there is an emphasis on the ‘nature’ of women and its distinctiveness from how men are defined. The idea is that women “by nature” are described as “submissive, passive and willing to be led” (15). Men on the other hand are illustrated as belonging to the gender of rational and intellectual attributes and as influencing and gaining power. Rowland and Klein state that the relation within the spectrum of gender continues to maintain the patriarchy and that the patriarchy establishes the idea of how attraction can only occur between men and women (15-16).

Butler refers to the concept of gender as ambiguous which does not necessarily interrupt the discourse of sexuality which can sometimes reflect ‘non-normative’ practices. It can lead to the effort of maintaining a normative sexuality and keep it intact (14). Butler states that the coherent self of a woman’s identity is created by “unwritten regulations” that continues to materialize gender relations (9). In other words, the “unwritten regulations” can be linked to the norms that influence sexuality. Rowland and Keine add how heterosexuality can be understood as a compulsory nature because it allows men’s access to women as a ‘natural right’ (15).
2.5. Intertextuality

As mentioned in the introduction, The Hours is noted to be an extended writing of Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway and therefore, The Hours can be recognized as an intertextual text. Intertextuality is used as a technique throughout the analysis in order to analyse the characters of The Hours and Mrs Dalloway. Therefore, is it essential to clarify the concept of intertextuality as preparation for the analysis of this essay.

The term intertextuality was first coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s when she sought to combine the theories of Saussurean and Bakhtinian (Allen 3). In Kristeva’s work “Word, Dialogue and Novel” she defines intertextuality as “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). Kristeva means that texts can be perceived as intertexts, where texts are recycled and referred to each other (66). Graham Allen states that the term intertextuality refers to how literature is built from codes and systems that are based on previous texts of literature. The meaning of a text can be understood through interpretations of how texts are referenced to one another (1). Intertextuality refers to the different relations between texts but it also refers to the relations within text and it could be explained as how “every text is connected to other texts by citations, quotations, allusions, borrowings, adaptations, appropriations, parody, pastiche, imitation” (D’Angelo 33). The intertextual text can be understood to have been produced or constructed from one of the figures that connects one text to another text.

In 1968, the literary theorist Roland Barthes published his work “The Death of the Author”, where he discusses for how the process of reading a text from an author suggests that there are preconceived notions of the text and eventually provide the text with another meaning. He explains that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a signal signified, to close the writing” (147). Barthes rejects the idea of how an author is the only origin of the text and he states that the removal of the author would essentially create multiple interpretations of the text instead of solely considering the author’s interpretation as the definite one (147). Furthermore, in “The Bounded Text”, Kristeva notes how a text is created outside its discourse and operates across languages. She suggests that texts are a
‘permutation’ of texts (36), these texts are therefore not original and are compiled from other existing texts (36). Barthes writes that a text derives from previous texts. He adds that texts are not simply words that create one ‘theological’ meaning, but rather is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash” (146). That is to say that a text is not considered as original but is created by a mixture of different texts.

Kristeva’s term on intertextuality was extended by Gerard Genette in the late 1990s when he refined it to transtextuality in order to include all ‘phenomenon’ of intertexts and narrow it into five specific categories (Allen 110). In Palimpsests, Genette argues for the five categories of transtextuality to be: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality. He explains how each one of these categories are “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed” (1). Genette’s definition refers to the broad relationship within and between texts which he categorizes according to the five categories.

This essay will not focus on Genette’s collection of these relations but rather his definition on intertextuality. He defines intertextuality as the relation between two texts and it does refer to the ‘presence’ of one text in another text. Genette’s definition of the term intertextuality is narrowed down to plagiarism, quotations and allusions (2). Plagiarism refers to the use of other texts without any references to the previous text (Genette 2). Quotation according to Genette, is a traditional way of intertextuality where the text uses quotations marks (2). Allusions draw attention to how the meaning of a text is solely understood through the relationship with another text therefore making it ‘unintelligible’ to those who do not understand the references (Genette 2). William Irwin states in Against Intertextuality, how allusions are meant to be perceived as an intentional implicit reference and are not limited to the replacement of a referent and contributes to the “theory of interpretation” (227). Intertextual ‘interpretations’ are the connections between texts and can according to the notion of allusions be understood as a way to direct the reader to see these intentions of the author (236).

The analysis will consider Genette’s accounts on allusions in order to understand the references that appear in The Hours in relation to Mrs Dalloway. Intertextuality will also be
used as an analysis technique in order to reference and to find deeper understanding between the two novels. By doing so, it is efficient to find themes and analyze the relation of *The Hours* to *Mrs Dalloway*. The intertextual analysis will be conducted through contrasting and comparing the two novels in order to find parallels.

3.0. Analysis

Cunningham’s use of three narratives suggests that there are multiple characters to follow throughout the novel. The chosen narrative technique is able to demonstrate several characters that pursue an interest in the exploration of their sexuality. The following part will analyse Cunningham’s construction of Clarissa Vaughan, Richard Brown, Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*.

3.1. Clarissa Vaughan

Cunningham’s use of intertextuality is apparent from the beginning of the novel when he begins the chapter of Clarissa Vaughan with “There are still the flowers to buy” (9). It is a reference to the first sentence of Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* where Woolf writes “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). Cunningham’s choice of wording can be interpreted as if the story of *Mrs Dalloway* is continued in *The Hours*. Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* can also be detected in the choice of the first name of Clarissa Vaughan similar to Clarissa Dalloway. Further into *The Hours*, Richard Brown coins the name Mrs Dalloway to Clarissa Vaughn because he thought it would be suitable for Clarissa to be named after a famous literary masterpiece (10). Likewise, the narrative of Clarissa Vaughan imitates the one of Clarissa Dalloway. It is not only the name Clarissa that has been reused in *The Hours*. Richard and Sally’s names from Mrs Dalloway reappear in the narrative of *The Hours* but the story seems to have been adjusted for the late 1990s. Sally can be seen as an intertextual component in *The Hours*. In *The Hours* Sally and Clarissa’s marriage is described as stable and affectionate (Cunningham 97). The relationship can be seen as a development of an alternative universe of the characters of *Mrs Dalloway*. Sally Seton was Clarissa’s greatest friend (Woolf 65). Their affection can be interpreted to be romantic as well. Clarissa recalls one of the most prominent memories of her time together with Sally and that is when they exchange a kiss for the first time:
Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life . . . Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt shad been given a present . . . – a diamond, something infinitely precious. (Woolf 38)

The significance of the kiss between Sally and Clarissa shows how rare and precious the moment was for her. The kiss left Clarissa uncertain of her feelings towards women and men. In *Mrs Dalloway*, she expresses her thoughts and feelings for women as how men would feel towards women and she could not simply resist a woman’s charm (34). Ideas such as loving a woman only surface in moments where these feelings of revelations are seen, however, these moments would not last (35). The feelings Clarissa experiences are not necessarily accepted by the social order. Jesse Wolfe states that the time period of *Mrs Dalloway* would consider the idea of sexuality as fluid to be radical and controversial (40). The kiss in this instance was a once in a lifetime opportunity which is why she remembers it so vividly and expresses it as “the most exquisite moment” in her life (Woolf 52).

In *The Hours*, a kiss between Clarissa and Sally is not described as a once in a lifetime opportunity and is not written in the same manner of Woolf’s. The kiss between the two of them is described in an insignificant way because “they kiss quickly, on the lips. They are always generous with kisses” (Cunningham 89), and the kisses are considered to be relaxed and casual since the kisses are described as normal and a reoccurring theme (Cunningham 90). This could be interpreted as if the intimacy in *The Hours* differs from Mrs Dalloway, where Cunningham writes in a way that normalizes same sex relationships. The kiss does not have the same significance as the one in *Mrs Dalloway* since Cunningham experiments with several kisses of diverse sexual orientations (371).

The covert relationship in *Mrs Dalloway* is turned into an overt homosexual relationship in *The Hours*. The juxtaposition of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Sally allows Cunningham to involve notions that shaped *Mrs Dalloway*. *The Hours* continues to explore matters of *Mrs Dalloway*, such as what life would have been like if it had continued in another direction. The relationship between Clarissa Vaughan and Sally is secure yet Clarissa’s inner thoughts are overwhelmed with memories of Richard. She reflects over her decisions in the past and a life with him:
How often since then has she wondered what might have happened if she’d tried to remain with him; . . . gone off somewhere (where?) with him . . . Couldn’t they have discovered something . . . larger and stranger than what they’ve got. (Cunningham 97)

These contemplations of regret also correspond to Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway in her marriage to Richard Dalloway. Throughout Mrs Dalloway, Clarissa continues to make reflections concerning her sexuality, she thinks “this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?” (Woolf 35). Clarissa is certain of her love towards Richard however she still senses a yearning for Sally and what life would have been like with her. It is similar to how Clarissa Vaughan experiences uncertainty in her decision of marrying Sally instead of Richard.

In an interview, Cunningham discusses the construction of The Hours. Cunningham reveals how he wanted to include the idea of ‘what if’. What if Clarissa Dalloway was alive today and had the same sexual orientation, which was perceived as taboo in London during the 1920s (Schiff 367). In the interview, Cunningham reflects on whether Clarissa would be tied to her restrictions or if she would have chosen another path (367).

Cunningham’s novel examines the change in attitudes in societies by including the perception of homosexuality in the time period of Woolf’s and adjusting it to suit contemporary society. Clarissa Vaughan’s sexual attraction for Sally and Richard leaves her puzzled in her life choices similar to Clarissa Dalloway, however, the distinction can be drawn from the society which the two narratives are situated in. Cunningham has transformed the strict social conventions and limitations of the society in Mrs Dalloway to a society with a more tolerant attitude. In contrast to Clarissa Vaughan, the freedom of choice regarding her sexuality makes her feel uncertain in who she should to choose to be with.

3.2. Richard Brown

It can be argued that Richard’s character in The Hours can be viewed as a combination of several characters from Mrs Dalloway. It can be seen as if the character is a reconstruction of Richard Dalloway, Peter Walsh, Septimus Smith and Sally Seton. Cunningham constructs Richard Brown with the identical first name of Clarissa Dalloway’s husband Richard.
Dalloway. The relationship between Clarissa Vaughan and Richard Brown could had perchance been identical to *Mrs Dalloway*, supposing that Cunningham had not chosen Clarissa Vaughan to be in an open homosexual relationship with Sally (20).

The jealousy of Richard Brown is also evident in *Mrs Dalloway*’s Richard Dalloway, he admitted that he was once jealous of the relationship between Clarissa and Peter Walsh (Woolf 176). Clarissa clarified that she was content with her choice in marrying Richard instead of Peter since she wanted support and comfort (Woolf 177). In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa could not continue with Peter because of his demands (95) and “with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable” (10). The suffocation Clarissa Dalloway experiences is similar to *The Hours*, when “Clarissa wanted her freedom and Richard wanted, well, too much, didn’t he always?” (52). Clarissa’s need for freedom is noticeable in both novels. Cunningham has continued to expand the details of Peter Walsh into Richard Brown, however, in this case, Clarissa chose to continue her love with Sally. Cunningham’s rejection of a heteronormative relationship contributes to the exploration of Clarissa Vaughan’s sexuality.

Cunningham writes how “Richard will never admit to nor recover from his dislike of [Sally]” (20). Richard does not approve of Clarissa’s new lifestyle together with Sally since she has become a ‘society wife’ and he despise how open Sally and Clarissa are of their homosexual relationship (20). Which resembles to how Peter criticises Clarissa Dalloway’s desire to live a comfortable life with Richard Dalloway. He scolded her on how she would become “the perfect hostess” (9). In both novels, Richard Brown and Peter despise the way Clarissa Dalloway and Clarissa Vaughan change themselves in accordance to society in order to behave in a manner which is expected of them. Clarissa Dalloway feels insecure in her organisation of her party since people expect it to be a great event, yet she does not enjoy it and feel distant from the party (Woolf 257-259). Clarissa Vaughan similarly feels as if the party will be a failure and she sees herself as superficial (156).

Cunningham’s re-writing of Richard includes a sort of resentment towards society and its rules. Richard is frustrated with the prize he has won for his literary work. He believes he has
received the prize due to his bravery of battling with AIDS (63). Richard does not want to be associated with a label from society and wants to distance himself from the people and the arranged party.

Richard Brown can also be recognized as a reconstruction of Septimus Smith’s mental health. The hearing of voices in Richard’s case (Cunningham 198) can also be seen in Septimus Smith from *Mrs Dalloway* (26). After Septimus’s return from World War I he struggles with hallucinations and is diagnosed with ‘shell shock’. Septimus and Richard can be considered to share similar traits concerning mental health. The hallucinations interrupt their daily lives and it is evident that both of them have lost control over reality. Richard’s suffering is meant to portray the suffering of post-war trauma of Septimus. The suffering of AIDS and PTSD of World War I are applicable for the different time periods. Cunningham incorporates contemporary world issues and adjusts to suit the era of 1990s New York in *The Hours* when the substantial AIDS epidemic had its impact on homosexuals. *The Hours* depicts how homosexuality has become more accepted yet there is a continuous battle. In this case, it is not only the restrictions of society as it was in 1920’s, but the incurable disease that affects their mental health as well. Roger Lancaster and Micaela Di Leonardo explain how the Stonewall riot contributed to a gay liberation movement. But the movement also received homophobic backlash during the AIDS crisis (388).

Richard Brown shares similarities with Sally Seton regarding how both characters are the ones which Clarissa Dalloway and Clarissa Vaughan continue to reminisce over. It can be observed as if *The Hours* has reconstructed Sally Seton as Richard Brown. In this case Richard is a man that had a heterosexual relationship with Clarissa Vaughan, which indicates that Cunningham chose to write the heteronormative relationship as the love Clarissa Vaughan desires. The relationship between Clarissa Vaughan and Richard did not last and Clarissa chose to leave Richard. When she left, Richard fell in love with Louis Waters and their relationship continued for a couple of years (Cunningham 52). Richard’s relationship change from Clarissa Vaughan to Louis Waters shows that in his time period he had the opportunity to be more free with his sexuality. Richard recollects his memories and explains to Clarissa that he was in love with Louis and was also in love with her (199). It can be understood as if Richard Brown’s sexuality lead him to an indecisiveness of the relationships.
he had. Once again, it is apparent that *The Hours* challenges notions surrounding the ambiguity of sexuality.

3.3. Laura Brown

The construction of Laura Brown is not directly related to the world of *Mrs Dalloway* but the character is constructed to emphasize sexuality and gender norms in contemporary society in *The Hours*. Unlike Clarissa Vaughan, Laura feels as if she is trapped in her marriage to Dan. Laura believes that “[she] is trapped here forever, posing as a wife” (92). It is evident that she is not comfortable in the role of being a wife since she describes it as if she is ‘posing’ to fit into the label of a housewife. The uncertainty of Laura Brown’s life decisions is similar to the uncertainties of Clarissa Vaughan, she thinks to herself: “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” (106). The unsatisfaction she suffers could be interpreted as to her being trapped in a heterosexual relationship. Laura believes that her love for Dan stems from a place of “cruelty and shame” (143). Her marriage to her husband is perceived as an obligation in fulfilling her role as the perfect wife and particularly due to his return from World War II after he had been assumed dead. Laura could simply not say no to a heroic man who had suffered from the war and asked to marry her (40). According to Laura, Dan could be considered to be an exemplary husband of the society of the late 1940s and it would have been a peculiar choice if she had rejected him. The rules of society indicate that women had to be agreeable and settle eventually. Jessamyn Nehaus notes that the gender roles in the 1950s were noticeably present, and society strictly regulated these structures to be maintained and followed (531). The presence of gender norms was evident in daily routines in the lives of women. After the World War II a woman’s place was seen to be in the kitchen and to be able to cook food for the family (532). Throughout *The Hours*, Laura can be seen to attempt to bake the perfect cake (38). In Laura’s case, she sees the cake as an objective to bring “balance” and “authority” into her home (76). The cake is a failure and Laura reflects on her incompetence of being a mother and wife (101). Rowland and Klein describe these roles to be part of the patriarchy and how women are in a “man’s world” (15).

The uncertainty of her choices and her marriage is related to her bisexual sexual attraction. Laura’s attraction for other women becomes apparent during Kitty’s visit to Laura. The
encounter is not merely described in a friendly manner, the descriptions also hint at something sexual. Laura feels overwhelmed when she hugs Kitty and imagines that the feeling she has can be similar to how men feel when hugging women (109). Laura feels grateful for the given opportunity to hug Kitty and without thinking she gives Kitty a kiss on her forehead (109). Cunningham’s explanation of how Laura feels is related to the description of Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa Dalloway ponders on her feelings towards women and the kiss she shared with Sally. The kiss with Sally is described as an insight to how men must feel (47). The feeling is explained as a “pressure of rapture” that “gushes” and leaves Clarissa with an unidentified feeling (Woolf 47). The description of how a woman feel in another woman’s presence is explained through a sensual approach, however, the feelings are still seen from the perspective of a man, Clarissa Dalloway thinks “she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt” (Woolf 47). According to Clarissa and Laura, is it strange to imagine a woman to fall in love with a woman, the feelings they experience surely must be how only men feel towards women. Clarissa Dalloway acknowledges that her feelings for Sally “was not like one’s feeling for man” (50). The case of Laura and Clarissa Dalloway indicates that the women only see the possible attraction from a man’s perspective.

Similarly, Laura shares the same thoughts of uncertainty to women as Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa Dalloway is seen to ponder on “this question of love . . . this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love” (Woolf 48). Falling in love with a woman seems to be defined as something that is difficult to name and understand since she believes that she had feelings for Sally but cannot understand what those feelings were. Cunningham continues Woolf’s pattern of reflecting over what being in love with a woman signifies and the attempt to understand it:

Love is deep, a mystery-who wants to understand its every particular. Laura desires Kitty. She desires her force, her cheerful and 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. (Cunningham 143)

The idea of loving a woman is a strange notion that is not familiar to Laura. She loves Dan, yet, the excitement she feels for Kitty differs since it feels much more intense (143). Yet, both Clarissa Dalloway and Laura Brown pursue the thought of loving a woman while knowing the
restrictions of their societies. Karin Martin explains that heterosexuality and its normativity can be seen as the compulsory nature within sexuality. Heteronormativity is institutionalized in society and affects the everyday practices of individuals (191).

The rewrite of *Mrs Dalloway* challenges the questions that are visible in the society of the 1920s. The kiss between Laura and Kitty can be related to *Mrs Dalloway*. In *The Hours*, Laura is seen kissing Kitty when Kitty subsequently “lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing . . . They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss” (110). Kitty is the one that ends the kiss by leaning back which leaves Laura feeling guilty. Laura glances over to her son Richie and “he [was] still watching” (110). Laura knows that Richie will always be an eyewitness and she thinks that “he will watch her forever. He will always know when something is wrong. He will always know precisely when and how much she has failed” (193). Richie is a reminder to Laura of how she should behave and what is expected of her which makes her feel uncomfortable around her son. The encounter between Laura and Kitty was observed by somebody else, which Laura notices. It was not done in secret and was still seen by a bystander of society. Laura knew that the kiss was against social restrictions.

Cunningham seems to have developed the scene with Clarissa Dalloway and Sally into Laura and Kitty. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the exquisite kiss is interrupted by Peter Walsh and Joseph. The kiss was interrupted, and Clarissa Dalloway felt frustrated since she felt a moment of happiness and now it was over (53). Indicating that she wanted more from the moment. The interruption prevents Clarissa Dalloway and Sally to process and recover from the kiss and ultimately leaves Clarissa Dalloway unsatisfied. Both stopped the kiss since it would be a violation against society and notably due to them being observed. It is also apparent that Laura and Kitty are also observed by Richie. In contrast to Woolf, *The Hours* leaves Laura to process the kiss and to understand what had happened. The kiss is not interrupted, and the kiss can be seen as spontaneous and unpredictable of the more progressed society in 1949 to the one in 1923. Kitty responds to the kiss by telling Laura that she is sweet and proceeds to continue the conversation as if the kiss had never happened (110). The kiss could be observed as meaningless due to Kitty’s response; however, it contributes to the reflection of what could
have continued to develop if Kitty had not stopped the kiss. *The Hours* explores the possibility of escaping the social restrictions women have.

Cunningham provides Laura with a choice that helps her escape the life of being a wife and a mother. The feeling of failure eventually leads Laura to choose a different path. Laura attempted to be the perfect mother and housewife; however, she chose to leave her family (222). Although Cunningham provides the narrative with an alternative which *Mrs Dalloway* did not possess, he shows that Laura is able to escape her heterosexual marriage. The ‘what if’ aspect contributed to the choice of a path which would have been an uncommon choice for someone in 1920s.

3.4. Virginia Woolf

In *The Hours*, Cunningham includes Virginia Woolf as one of the characters of his three different narrative timelines and the portrayal of Virginia suggests that she had ideas on sexual attraction towards women. The re-writing of Virginia as a character in *The Hours* uses Virginia as a subject to show the oppressed homosexual tendencies that were not legal during the 1920’s. It can be perceived as an effort to explain the openness and acceptance of the contemporary era in contrast to the period of Virginia’s. Schiff clarifies how the cultural climate of Woolf’s time consisted of a suppression of sexual feelings towards the same sex (369).

Cunningham includes the relationship between Virginia and her sister Vanessa; however, the relation seems to implicate a sexual connotation. The description of their relationship is apparent to be sexual. Cunningham writes “one moment there are two young sisters cleaving to each other, breast against breast, lips ready, and then the next moment, it seems, there are two middle-aged married women standing together on a modest bit of lawn” (116). It could be interpreted as if the relationship between two women is described as of a woman is confusing and lacks a clear definition. When Virginia leans into Vanessa’s daughter Angelica, she expresses her thoughts as if “some force flows between them, a complicity that is neither maternal nor erotic but contains elements of both. There is an understanding here” (120). It
can be observed as if Vanessa’s visit to Virginia leads Virginia to have thoughts of lesbian tendencies. This can also be seen in her reflection regarding her niece Angelica.

Cunningham’s use of intertextuality is detected in Virginia’s writing of *Mrs Dalloway*. In *The Hours*, Virginia is seen constructing Clarissa Dalloway as a way of presenting Virginia’s ideas on sexuality in *Mrs Dalloway*. Cunningham explains Virginia’s writing process of *Mrs Dalloway* as “[Virginia] focuses her thoughts on the question of Clarissa’s first love. A girl. The girl, she thinks, will be brash and captivating” (82). Cunningham’s Virginia decides that “Clarissa Dalloway, in her first youth, will love another girl . . . she will come to her senses, as young women do and marry a suitable man” (81). Cunningham suggests that Virginia is aware of the social restrictions of loving a woman. The sexual attraction between women seem only possible in the days of youth. Virginia understands how women need to abandon their desires and adapt to the social demands and marry a man (Cunningham 81). *The Hours* disregards those restrictions of society and can be noticed as the alternative world of 1990’s New York for the alternative Clarissa Vaughan.

When Vanessa first arrives for her visit to Virginia, they exchange a kiss when “[Virginia] kisses Vanessa, chastely, on the mouth” (114). The kiss is described as an innocent kiss which implies that there is a possibility of the kiss to be of romantic or sexual undertones. Virginia decides to kiss her sister once again before she leaves however this time it is described as “an innocent kiss, innocent enough, but just now, in this kitchen, behind Nelly’s back, it feels like most delicious and forbidden of pleasures. Vanessa returns the kiss” (154). The kiss has become less innocent than the previous kiss and the sexual implications of an attraction is more evident. Virginia was cautious to the presence of the maid Nelly and it signifies how Virginia knows that her feelings are prohibited by the society of 1920’s. Yet in *The Hours*, it can be interpreted as if Virginia’s search for her sexual identity suggests that she used herself as an inspiration to write Clarissa Dalloway. The construction of Virginia Woolf coincides with Woolf’s Clarissa where both Cunningham’s Virginia and Clarissa Dalloway are uncertain of their sexualities yet aware of the social limitations.
Cunningham suggests that Virginia was aware of her search for sexual identity and incorporated it into *Mrs Dalloway*. Monica Latham notes that “contemporary authors readdress key subjects . . . [such as] social critique and gender issues . . . to reflect new political scenes and sexual configurations, and bear different meanings for present-day readers” (9). It is apparent that in his rewriting of *Mrs Dalloway*, Cunningham features sexuality as a fundamental theme in the three different narratives. *The Hours* has incorporated the morals and rules of societies throughout one century into one story.

4.0. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to analyze what impact the reconstruction of the characters of *Mrs Dalloway* and the fictional character of Virginia Woolf has on the representation of sexuality in *The Hours*.

The analysis was done by studying aspects of sexuality, heteronormativity, gender and intertextuality. Cunningham’s rewriting of *Mrs Dalloway* can be perceived to demonstrate sexuality throughout different decades. The reconstruction of Clarissa Vaughan, Richard Brown, Laura Brown and the construction of the fictional character Virginia Woolf describes how the exploration of one’s sexuality can occur in different contemporary societies regardless of the restrictions and opportunities. In the analysis, it can be seen how the characters of *The Hours* experience uncertainties and confusion because of the restrictions of the societies the narratives are situated in.

The three narratives of *The Hours* show how each character battles with their sexuality either by accepting it or trying to understand it. It is evident that there are notions of heteronormativity that affect their thoughts and feelings for their own sexuality. Unlike Clarissa Dalloway, Clarissa Vaughan is able to come to terms with her sexual identity. Clarissa Dalloway attempts to understand her feelings and longing for Sally where Clarissa Vaughan has an open relationship with Sally. But Vaughan continues to ponder on her feelings for Richard. Cunningham’s reconstruction of Clarissa Vaughan indicates that the
roles of Vaughan and Dalloway have been reversed in order to show Dalloway’s sexuality from a present perspective.

Richard Brown's likeness to Mrs Dalloway's character Septimus Smith is due to the contemporary world issues that they both experience in different time periods. Richard Brown’s suffering of AIDS shows that Cunningham incorporates issues regarding sexualities where he includes another sexuality other than a heterosexual identity. Laura Brown identifies her feelings for Kitty to be stronger than the ones for her husband Dan. This implies that she is aware of her feelings and ponders often to what they mean similarly to Clarissa Dalloway. In the case of Cunningham’s character Virginia Woolf, it can be concluded that Cunningham included the author herself as a character in order to demonstrate how Woolf herself could have been unsure regarding her sexuality. This uncertainty does also reflect in her protagonist Clarissa Dalloway in Mrs Dalloway. Cunningham's Virginia Woolf can be seen to have been influenced by her own sexuality and incorporated it subtly into her novel.

The reconstructing of the characters of Mrs Dalloway shows the issues in different contexts where heteronormativity is normalised and how this affects the characters’ sexual identities. It also shows that sexuality is not absolute and could be interpreted as ambiguous. Cunningham’s exploration of sexuality in the reconstruction of characters suggests that the societies from 1923 and 1999 have undergone a progression in attitudes. The freedom to choose and explore one’s sexuality seems to have changed throughout the time periods of 1923, 1949 and 1999. However, The Hours also portrays the characters as continuously experiencing due to their emotional feelings. Cunningham exposes the complexity of exploring sexuality through different time periods and how the characters struggle to come to terms with the norms of society but at the same time acknowledge their innermost desires.
5.0. Works Cited


