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# A Virginia Woolf of One's Own: Consequences of Adaptation in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

Brooke Leora Grant

*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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A VIRGINIA WOOLF OF ONE'S OWN: CONSEQUENCES OF  
ADAPTATION IN MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S *THE HOURS*

by

Brooke Leora Grant

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### A VIRGINIA WOOLF OF ONE'S OWN: CONSEQUENCES OF ADAPTATION IN MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S *THE HOURS*

Brooke Leora Grant

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With a rising interest in visual media in academia, studies have overlapped at literary and film scholars' interest in adaptation. This interest has mainly focused on the examination of issues regarding adaptation of novel to novel or novel to film. Here I discuss both: Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, which is an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the 2002 film adaptation of Cunningham's novel. However, my thesis also investigates a different kind of adaptation: the adaptation of a literary and historical figure. By including in *The Hours* a fictionalization of Virginia Woolf, Cunningham entrenches his adaptation with Virginia Woolf's life and identity. My thesis compares the two adaptations of Virginia Woolf's identity in the novel *The Hours* and the film *The Hours* and investigates the ways in which these adaptations funnel Woolf's identity through the perception of three men—Michael Cunningham, novelist; David Hare, screenwriter; Steven Daldry, director.

My reaction to the fictionalization of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* mirrors Brenda Silver's sentiment in the introduction to her book *Virginia Woolf: Icon*: "My distrust of those who would fix [Virginia Woolf] into any single position, either to praise her or to blame her, remains my strongest motivation" (5). The vast discrepancy between the one-dimensionality of Mrs. Woolf, *The Hours*' character, and the complexity in Virginia Woolf's identity that becomes apparent to a reader of her fictional and autobiographical writing reveals the extent to which Cunningham and the filmmakers simplify Virginia Woolf's identity to fit their adaptations. My motivation in writing this thesis is in drawing attention to the ways in which *The Hours* fixes Virginia Woolf into a single position and the resulting effects *The Hours* may have on future interpretations of Virginia Woolf.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, whose passion for literature continues to inspire me, as it did when I was a child; to my father for his unwavering support and his vitalizing humor; to Alexis, Keill, Tirza, Hadas, and Maiyah for their constant patience and encouragement.

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## Introduction

Like most literature, Virginia Woolf's writing has been interpreted in different ways over the last century as cultural and literary trends have changed. Her essays and novels have been appropriated for various causes and, as society changes, so does the meaning derived from her writing. Along with her texts, Virginia Woolf herself has changed. Over the years, Woolf's identity has been interpreted and appropriated for various roles by various readers. In her biography *Virginia Woolf*, Hermione Lee explains:

Virginia Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation. She takes on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives, or victim of abuse, or lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst, depending on who is reading her, and when, and in what context. (758)

My thesis analyzes two such interpretations of Virginia Woolf: Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (1998) and Steven Daldry's 2002 film adaptation of Cunningham's novel also entitled *The Hours*. An adaptation of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *The Hours* is a beautifully written novel which employs many of Woolf's images and themes, often mimicking Woolf's writing style and echoing her voice. *The Hours* provokes interesting questions about the similarities between the two novels, and like many adaptations, it highlights specific themes in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and re-presents them in contemporary contexts. Like other adaptations of Woolf's work, *The Hours* provides further evidence of the enduring nature of Woolf's work and the relevance of

Woolf's ideas to contemporary society. However, Cunningham's decision to place Woolf as a character in his novel makes *The Hours* different from other adaptations of Woolf's texts. *The Hours* becomes more than an adaptation of Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*: *The Hours* becomes an adaptation of Woolf herself. In both its text and film versions, *The Hours* has inevitable and lasting effects on Woolf's identity as an author.

Cunningham's fictionalization of Virginia Woolf is the root of an expanding removal from Woolf, the literary and historical figure. The reader of *The Hours* accesses Woolf through Cunningham's filter, being once removed from the literary and historical figure. The viewer of the film *The Hours* accesses Woolf through various filters: the screenwriter David Hare's filter; the director Steven Daldry's; and the actress Nicole Kidman's. These filters further remove the viewer from Woolf, the literary and historical figure. With each filter, Woolf's identity becomes narrower and more concrete until, finally, the Virginia Woolf that is presented to the general public is a limited and specific version of the Virginia Woolf that emerges from a selective reading of the vast fictional and autobiographical writing that she completed during her lifetime.

Both Woolf's novels and her autobiographical writings are marked by a complexity of meaning, even a duality, which was most likely influenced by her own experiences. Tuzyline Allen, a Woolf scholar, explains, "Life, as Virginia Woolf knew it, was at once ecstatic and painful. From her early years in the upper-middle-class confines of the Stephen's home at Hyde Park Gate to the intellectual magic kingdom of Bloomsbury, Woolf straddled the extreme emotions of joy and grief, excitement and anguish" (20). Although Virginia Woolf had episodes of severe depression, these were paralleled and, in fact, dominated by her fantastic sense of humor and passion for life.

This coexistence of contradictory emotions in Woolf's life enters into her writing. On 30 August 1923, while writing *The Hours* (her working title for *Mrs. Dalloway*), Woolf expressed her conscious desire to establish depth in the lives of her characters: "I should say a good deal about *The Hours* and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth" (*Diary* 59). And a week later she asserts, "characters are to be merely views: personality must be avoided at all costs" (*Diary* 59). From the pages of her diary, an accessible, sincere Woolf speaks about her process of writing, her struggles and her revelations. Authors from the past or the present rarely leave behind or offer such a detailed written record of their development as a writer, but Woolf's letters and diaries open a space for readers to observe the precision and intensity with which she wrote, to feel her passion, her labor, and her vulnerability. In that space, a sketch of an individual begins to surface, a fuller view of Virginia Woolf, and she is an intricate character full of "humanity, humour, depth."

Because this project deals with both the literary and historical figure and a characterization of that figure, it is necessary to carefully identify the difference. When speaking of the historical author, I will use Virginia Woolf and Woolf interchangeably. Each of these refers to the actual person. Similarly, when I discuss characters in Virginia Woolf's work (specifically and most often, the main character in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*), I will use the character's first name, Clarissa Dalloway for example, or I will link the name with Woolf, Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. When I speak of the fictional characters in Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* and the corresponding characters

in the film by the same name, I will call them Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway.

In order to avoid being labeled a snob, as Woolf herself often was, I will define through Woolf's own words "the common reader," a term I will use frequently in this project. Samuel Johnson's definition of the common reader provided Virginia Woolf with a personal and powerful justification for writing. In the introduction to her collection of critical essays *The Common Reader* (1925), Woolf wrote a short prelude entitled "The Common Reader." In it, she quotes from Samuel Johnson: "By the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours" (CR 1). Never privileged with a formal education, Woolf saw herself as a common reader, and Dr. Johnson's support of the common reader provided validation for Woolf's own critical work. Essentially, the common reader determines the longevity of literary works, and it is the opinion of the common reader that matters most. Woolf explains:

The common reader, as Dr. Johnson implies, differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to import knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of a whole—a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing. He never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric which shall give him the temporary satisfaction of

looking sufficiently like the real object to allow of affection, laughter and argument. (CR 1)

Clearly, this description that Woolf places at the front of *The Common Reader* is meant to be somewhat sarcastic, eloquently magnifying her own weaknesses in order to provide herself with the authority to write a book of criticism. However, the common reader, as Woolf points out here, is driven by an instinct to create meaning out of the novels that he or she reads. Two aspects of Woolf's definition are crucial to understanding my use of the term "common reader": the significance of the common reader's opinion and the instinct, even drive, to define, for oneself, the meaning of a text.

Two additional terms which I use frequently in this project are "sexuality" and "sensuality." They are not used interchangeably, but signify very different approaches to the treatment of sexual attraction in Virginia Woolf's and Michael Cunningham's writing and in the film. The term "sexuality" will be used to describe sexual matters and sexual attractions between characters in each text as well as in the life of its author. "Sexuality" will be used when a situation or character is distinguished by sex. "Sensuality" on the other hand will be used to describe a suggestion of sexuality, something less overt than sexuality itself.

For those who are not familiar with the texts this project will discuss, I will provide a short introduction to each. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's fourth novel, published in 1925. It follows its main character, Clarissa, a middle-aged, upper-class woman on a June day in 1923 London, as she prepares for a party that she will host that evening. Clarissa begins the day flower shopping for her party, and as she walks around London, she ponders her growing age. After she returns from buying the flowers, Clarissa receives a

visit from an old friend, Peter Walsh, whom she once considered marrying. They discuss Peter's recent trip to India and Clarissa's upcoming party. Peter asks Clarissa about their former relationship; when Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth, enters the room, Peter leaves the Dalloway house to walk in Regents Park. Later, Elizabeth leaves with her tutor, Doris Kilman, whom Clarissa dislikes, to go shopping. Richard Dalloway, Clarissa's husband, attends a lunch date with Hugh Whitbread and Lady Bruton. On his way home, Richard decides to buy Clarissa some flowers and goes home to tell her that he loves her, but when Richard arrives home, he cannot find the words.

Clarissa's story is paralleled by the story of shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Smith, who struggles to re-enter society. His wife, Lucrezia, attempts to aid Septimus by arranging a meeting with a doctor, Sir William Bradshaw. He orders Septimus into an asylum. The couple returns to their apartment to await the men who will escort Septimus to the asylum; however, fearing a life of insanity and loneliness, Septimus jumps out of the window to his death. The two stories collide at Clarissa's party where many of the characters from the novel meet and where they hear of Septimus Smith's suicide. Clarissa ponders the beauty of death and admires Septimus' decision. As her guests begin to leave, Clarissa enters a room and Peter Walsh recognizes the importance of his relationship with Clarissa.

The general plot of *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, only provides a framework for Woolf's treatment of character. The thoughts, memories, hopes and fears of the characters drive the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway*. While revising *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf wrote in her diary on 27 April 1925: "But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: and I should like to investigate the party

consciousness, the frock consciousness, etc.” (*Diary* 74). As with her previous novels, Woolf labors to show the multiplicity of her characters and the varied nature of the human experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours*, follows three women on one day in their lives. Each of these women, however, is living in a different time period and place. The novel shifts between narratives as the women wake for the day, prepare for a visit or a party, and grapple with depression. *The Hours* begins with an exquisite description of Virginia Woolf’s suicide, including the letter she wrote to her husband Leonard before she walked into the river Ouse in 1941. The reader is then introduced, one by one, to each of the women in their own time and place, and the narratives continue with flash-forwards and flashbacks, intertwining the women’s stories. Each section in the novel is labeled by the name of the female character at the top of each page—Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown or Mrs. Dalloway—to distinguish whose story is being told.

Mrs. Woolf, a fictionalization of Virginia Woolf, in 1923 has an idea for a new novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, while living in Richmond, a suburb of London. She begins the day writing in her room and then decides to take a walk through the country to think about her character Mrs. Dalloway. Later, Mrs. Woolf receives a visit from her sister Vanessa and her children. The children find a dead bird in the garden, and Mrs. Woolf helps them make a resting place for it. After Vanessa and the children leave, Mrs. Woolf’s depression becomes more severe, and she attempts to run away to London. Mr. Woolf finds her in the train station and convinces her to return home, after agreeing to move the family back to London soon. She ends the day thinking again of her character Mrs.

Dalloway and decides that her main character will not commit suicide, but someone in the novel must.

Mrs. Brown, a pregnant Los Angeles suburban housewife reading Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1949, struggles to get out of bed in the morning, even though it is her husband's birthday. Eventually, she wakes and sees her husband, Dan, off to work. She is left alone in the house with her son, Richie, and they begin preparations for Dan's birthday celebration. Together, Mrs. Brown and Richie bake a cake, but Mrs. Brown is disappointed when the cake does not turn out perfectly. She receives a visit from her neighbor, Kitty, who is going to the hospital for some tests on her uterus. After Kitty leaves, Mrs. Brown bakes another cake and feels the need for some space. She drops Richie off at a neighbor's house and goes to a hotel to read *Mrs. Dalloway*. While she is at the hotel, Mrs. Brown contemplates suicide but decides instead to return home. She picks up her son from the neighbor and goes home to celebrate Dan's birthday.

Mrs. Dalloway, a lesbian in New York in the late twentieth century, plans a party to celebrate her friend Richard's reception of an award for his literary work. Mrs. Dalloway begins her day with flower shopping for the party and visiting Richard, who is dying of AIDS. Mrs. Dalloway returns home while her lover and live-in partner, Sally, has lunch with Walter Hardy and a movie star named Oliver St. Ives. Mrs. Dalloway's and Richard's old friend Louis stops by the apartment; they reminisce about the past until Julia, Mrs. Dalloway's daughter, enters, and Louis leaves. Julia then leaves with her friend, Mary Krull, whom Mrs. Dalloway dislikes, to go shopping. Mrs. Dalloway returns to Richard's apartment to pick him up for the party. Richard is sitting on the ledge of an open window. The two discuss their past relationship and Richard's declining health.



Abruptly, Richard jumps out of the window to his death. Mrs. Dalloway returns to her apartment where Sally and Julia are cleaning up the party arrangements. At the end of the novel, the narratives collide in a fascinating way when an aged Mrs. Brown turns up at Mrs. Dalloway's apartment and the reader discovers that Mrs. Dalloway's friend Richard is Mrs. Brown's son Richie.

Although it takes liberties in its interpretation of Cunningham's characters, especially with the character of Mrs. Woolf, the film *The Hours* follows the plot of the novel nearly exactly. David Hare, an acclaimed British screenwriter, wrote the screenplay for *The Hours* based on Cunningham's novel, and Steven Daldry directed the film. A collection of well-known, successful actors and actresses were recruited for most of the characters. Nicole Kidman plays Mrs. Woolf; Julianne Moore plays Mrs. Brown, and Meryl Streep plays Mrs. Dalloway. Ed Harris, John C. Riley, Jeff Daniels, Toni Collette and Claire Danes also have roles in the film. *The Hours* won an Academy Award for Best Actress in a leading role for Nicole Kidman's performance. *The Hours* was released in 2002, only four years after the publication of Cunningham's novel.

Both the novel and the film continue to be acclaimed as captivating adaptations of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Among the reviews of *The Hours* quoted on the inside cover of the novel is one from the *Miami Herald*: "A brilliant tour de force...This is a skillfully wrought novel thoroughly imbued with the spirit of Virginia Woolf and crafted in keeping with her rare excellence." In another review of the novel, published on Salon.com, an entertainment and news website, Georgia Jones-Davis states, "Michael Cunningham's new novel, *The Hours*, is neither an homage nor a sequel to *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is, rather, an attempt at osmosis with the spirit of Virginia Woolf" (par. 1).

Kirk Honeycutt, in the *Hollywood Reporter* commends Kidman's performance as Mrs. Woolf in the film *The Hours*: "In her vocal inflections and body movements, the graceful, athletic Kidman morphs into an angular, tightly wound cerebral artist racked by hallucinations and voices. We see her fierce intellect struggle to work through these bouts to fulfill her artistry" (11).

While common readers, reviewers and movie-goers are struck by the passion and skill with which Cunningham and the filmmakers capture the well-known author, I am concerned about how their filters are altering the way that this and future generations read and see Virginia Woolf. As a material example of these filters and the ensuing removals from Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure, that occur from Cunningham's and the filmmaker's depiction of her, this project will mainly consider sexuality, specifically the recurrence of lesbian sexuality, and the representation of Woolf as a mad genius, in the text and film versions of *The Hours*.

The first removal comes in Cunningham's decision to make Woolf a character in his novel. Michael Cunningham's novel begins with a lyrical description of Woolf's suicide. It is as if Cunningham metaphorically kills Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure, to give himself the liberty to recreate her as his character, a character much more one-dimensional than Woolf's writing shows her to have been. Throughout his novel, Cunningham masterfully intertwines many of Woolf's images with his own; they appear unexpectedly and sensitively. Unfortunately, he lacks this sensitivity in his adaptation of Woolf herself when he says of her: "She's grown craggy and worn. She's begun to look as if she's carved from very porous, gray-white marble. She is still regal, still exquisitely formed, still possessed of her formidable lunar radiance, but she is

suddenly no longer beautiful” (*Hours* 33). Cunningham’s character Mrs. Woolf limits Virginia Woolf’s full range of emotions, restricting her identity and her writing. Cunningham forces personality upon her, making her a victim of the very thing she strove to avoid in her own writing.

The consequences of Cunningham’s portrayal of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* are heightened by his emphasis on Mrs. Woolf’s own performance as a character. Mrs. Woolf, once removed from Virginia Woolf herself through Cunningham’s slant, speaks and is spoken of in the novel as often standing apart from life and from herself as a character, which additionally removes the reader from Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. Mrs. Woolf, in her daily chores and in her writing is continuously aware of her need to perform, to act. Cunningham writes: “Virginia walks through the door. She feels fully in command of the character who is Virginia Woolf, and as that character she removes her cloak, hangs it up, and goes downstairs to the kitchen to speak to Nelly about lunch” (*Hours* 84). In the discussion with her cook, Nelly, Mrs. Woolf must play a role: “‘A lamb pie sounds lovely,’ Virginia says, though she must work to stay in character” (*Hours* 85). Even in her mind, Mrs. Woolf feels a necessity to identify herself as a character; her writing depends upon it: “Have faith that you will be here, recognizable to yourself, again tomorrow” (*Hours* 72). The narrator of *The Hours* reasserts that the identity of Mrs. Woolf, who is referred to often in the novel as Virginia or Virginia Woolf, is controllable, if not predictable. This control, directed by Cunningham, translates into a characterization of Virginia Woolf who is fictionalized by her self-characterization, this further removing the reader from the literary and historical figure.

The third removal comes about four years after the publication of *The Hours* with the release of the Academy Award-winning film by the same name. In contrast to the novel, this adaptation has had a more widespread impact on popular culture, and interestingly, further narrows Woolf's identity. The film highlights and reinforces the specific and concrete nature of Mrs. Woolf's identity with little regard for the consequences it may have for Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. Director Steven Daldry claims: "We never wanted to impersonate or imitate Virginia Woolf but find our own Virginia Woolf that was right for us and right for Nicole" ("Three Women" *The Hours* DVD). So the character of Mrs. Woolf in the film is a compilation of the director and the actress's perceptions of the fictionalized Mrs. Woolf in Cunningham's *The Hours*, and intention aside, this Mrs. Woolf is an impersonation of an historical figure, a figure from which the audience is, at least, thrice removed.

Cunningham and the filmmakers have each, in their own way, been exposed to Woolf's writing and identity. In the bonus material section of *The Hours* DVD called "The Lives of Mrs. Dalloway," each of the men involved in the making of the film talks about his passion for the project and his interest in Virginia Woolf. Cunningham states that he "always wanted to do something with it [*Mrs. Dalloway*], about her [Virginia Woolf], the way you want to write about your first love." David Hare, the screenwriter, explains: "all my own work has to do with exploring lives of modern women." And director Steven Daldry, coming from a literature background, states that he has "always been a fan of Virginia Woolf."

The characterization of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, in both its text and film versions, is in many ways, a construct of three men: these men possess and control their

fictional Woolf in order to fulfill their fantasy of her. I share Daniel Mendelsohn's sentiment. "I think these filmmakers like women in the way Virginia Woolf fears that male writers liked, and used, women" (165). In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf explains her research on women in history and women in fiction. In her exploration, she finds a discrepancy: women in history are different from the women in fiction written by men. Rather than showing women as they truly are, many male fiction writers portray women as they imagine them to be, leaving a large gap between women in fiction and women as they really are:

Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance...A very queer composite being thus emerges...She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (*Room* 43)

Often, as Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own*, women in the fiction written by men are portrayed as men imagine them. *The Hours* is a story about women, one that offers female characters, including a fictionalized Virginia Woolf, imagined by a male author. Carried away by Cunningham's poetic language and brilliant story line, by David Hare's beautiful cinematic translation of connections in Cunningham's story, by Steven Daldry's skilled direction and inventive visual scenes, readers and viewers may forget that they are looking at the women in *The Hours*, including Virginia Woolf, through the eyes of three men, Cunningham, Hare, and Daldry, each having filtered the female

characters through their own perception of what women, of what Virginia Woolf, should be.

Of course, the nature of fiction requires an author to construct his characters through his own perception, and the license that is extended to fiction writers to create limitlessly from their own imagination or experience makes discussing the effect that *The Hours* has on Woolf's identity much more complicated. By fictionalizing Virginia Woolf, the literary figure, Cunningham, Hare and Daldry have escaped many would-be critics who would disagree with their depiction of Woolf. However, because Cunningham and the filmmakers' characterization of Virginia Woolf places such strong filters over the lens through which many audiences view her, it is important to examine how these filters are operating and the effect they can and will have on the identity of Virginia Woolf.

The next chapter, "The Voice of Virginia Woolf," provides a short biography of Virginia Woolf and a summary of her involvement with the intellectual community of the Bloomsbury group, in order to place Woolf and her writing in historical and artistic context. "The Voice of Virginia Woolf" also discusses Woolf's social and political involvement in the various communities in which she lived. While I do not want to solidify Woolf's identity, for I believe this to be impossible, in the second chapter, I will present a collection of Virginia Woolf's own words, the words of those who knew her, and those who have studied her in order to establish a common sense of Woolf for the purposes of my thesis. This chapter will provide a backdrop against which the third and fourth chapters may be read.

The third chapter, "A Novelist's Task," explores Cunningham's novel *The Hours* and analyzes the ways in which his depiction of Virginia Woolf isolates specific

moments of Woolf's life and presents them as defining characteristics of her personality. It also provides, through reviews and commentaries on the novel, evidence of how readers blend Cunningham's version of Woolf with Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. The fourth chapter, "Making a Contemporary Virginia Woolf," analyzes the ways in which the filmmakers have accentuated the decisions that Cunningham made in his fictionalization of Virginia Woolf. This chapter discusses the ways in which the film adaptation of *The Hours* further narrows the identity of Virginia Woolf. It identifies the influence that the film has on the popular perception of Woolf, the literary and historical figure, because of its mainstream appeal and widespread success.

## The Voice of Virginia Woolf

Discussing identity presents a unique difficulty. Because each individual identity is constructed in many ways at numerous times, identity is inconsistent, slippery. Delineating the boundaries of Virginia Woolf's identity proves an especially daunting task, because, as biographer Hermione Lee explains, "she seems extremely near, contemporary, timeless. But she is also evasive and obscure" (VW 4). Virginia Woolf's identity is not one thing; it is many things, and there are many Virginia Woolfs. Various "Virginia Woolfs" have been constructed by her many biographers. Innumerable "Virginia Woolfs" have been constructed by her many readers. Virginia herself constructed various "Virginia Woolfs:" Woolf the essayist and Woolf the critic are different from Woolf the novelist. And, there is my Virginia Woolf, the one I have constructed from reading about her and from reading her novels, her essays, and her diaries.

Providing a biography of Woolf seems almost ironic. As a biographer, Lee describes Woolf's aversion to the idea of biography: "Virginia Woolf spent most of her life saying that the idea of biography is—to use a word she liked—poppycock" (VW 4). But, in order to compare Virginia Woolf the literary and historical figure with the interpretations of her identity in *The Hours*, some sense of who she was as a person and who she is as an author must be established. Carefully, I aim to establish a sense of her identity without stumbling into the pitfall of seemingly trying to identify the "right" or "true" Virginia Woolf or to claim that my version of her is the correct version. In the following pages, I will provide a construction of Virginia Woolf which is fluid enough, I hope, to allow variance.



Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January in a suburb of London to Sir Leslie and Julia Stephen. She was one of four children from the marriage: Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian. The family lived at 22 Hyde Park Gate in Kensington and belonged to what biographer and family member Quentin Bell called “the lower division of the upper middle class” (20). Even before Virginia, Vanessa, Adrian and Thoby began their Thursday nights in Bloomsbury, which would become an intellectual and artistic center in early twentieth century Europe, the Stephen family was part of London’s intellectual society. Leslie Stephen was a well-known and respected historian and biographer; he was the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Thoby and Adrian attended public schools and then were sent to Cambridge. Although Virginia was not educated at university like her brothers, a lack she would feel for the rest of her life, she studied Greek with private tutors, attended Greek and History classes at King’s college, and spent a great deal of time reading and studying in her father’s library. Virginia was allowed complete, uninhibited access to the library and, from a very young age, wanted to be an author, while her sister Vanessa wanted to be a painter. Vanessa and Virginia, as well as Thoby and Adrian, were supported and encouraged by their parents to be educated, foster their talents and pursue their dreams.

Virginia endured several traumatic experiences in her youth, which may have contributed to the recurring mental breakdowns throughout her life. In 1895, Virginia’s mother, Julia Stephen, passed away from influenza. Virginia was thirteen. Two years later, her half-sister, to whom she was very close, died. In February 1904, only nine years after her mother’s death, Virginia’s father, Leslie Stephen, passed away. As she did after

her mother's death, Virginia suffered a brief mental and physical breakdown after her father died.

As a child, Virginia Woolf was also exposed to sexual abuse by her half brother George Duckworth. In addition to the somewhat negative fictional representations of George in several of her memoirs, according to Mark Hussey, Woolf also "told Janet Case and Ethel Smith about her 'incestuous brother' in detail" (VW A-Z 75). Woolf's memoir "22 Hyde Park Gate" ends with a description of George's incestuous actions. Apparently, Woolf's anger toward her brother's behavior "softened," as Hussey records, and "despite his being a significant part of her childhood, his death meant very little to her (75). However, as Hermione Lee explains, there are scholars who have claimed that Woolf never recovered from the sexual abuse: "There is a school of thought that argues that [Virginia Woolf's] life is dominated by childhood sexual abuse. I am not of that opinion, because I don't read her life as that of a victim" (*Hours* DVD). While this experience in childhood must have altered Woolf's sense of sexuality and her emotional health, to define her by abuse disempowers her and necessarily ignores her rich, productive life. But certainly, the consecutive shocks of family deaths and the sexual abuse by her brother George affected her deeply.

In September of 1904, Vanessa and Virginia escaped the trauma of 22 Hyde Park gate and moved to 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury. Both have expressed in their writing the relief they felt leaving the home in Kensington. Bloomsbury was a less acceptable neighborhood than Kensington, and for the Stephen children, it offered freedom from the Victorian house at 22 Hyde Park Gate. Bloomsbury offered a fresh start. Shortly after the move, Toby returned from Cambridge and began meeting

regularly at 46 Gordon Square with his friends from the university. On these Thursday nights, which centered on drink, food, and conversation, this group of family and friends gathered to talk about life, art, beauty, and truth. In her memoir “Old Bloomsbury,” Virginia Woolf describes these gatherings: “These Thursday night evening parties were, as far as I’m concerned, the germ from which sprang all that has since come to be called—in newspapers, in novels, in Germany, in France—even I daresay, in Turkey and Timbuktu—by the name of Bloomsbury” (*Moments* 186).

Unlike many of the other modernist groups forming at the time, Bloomsbury was not an established club organized with member lists and manifestos. Many critics, who later attempted to define Bloomsbury, confused the dates, the members, the place and the purpose. This irritated the surviving members of Bloomsbury; in fact, several members of the group published essays attempting to clear up the confusion. In his essay regarding the definition of Bloomsbury, Clive Bell, an original member of the group, states simply, and probably sarcastically: “All one can say truthfully is this. A dozen friends—I will try to name them presently—between 1904 and 1914 saw a great deal of each other” (Rosenbaum 118). Among the friends and family who attended these gatherings were Thoby Stephen, Clive Bell, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Desmond McCarthy, Duncan Grant, John Maynard Keynes, and Vanessa, Virginia and Adrian Stephen. Other members who drifted in and out of the group include E.M. Forster and Dora Carrington.

In addition to its less acceptable geographical location, the name of Bloomsbury became the object of social disapproval, due to the members’ promotion of rebellious ideals and lascivious behavior. Virginia and Vanessa, to the disapproval of many of their

more socially acceptable friends, were intimately connected to this group of young intellectuals and would stay up all hours of the night debating matters of art and beauty with Thoby and his friends. Of Virginia's participation in the Thursday night conversations, Adrian wrote in his diary: "Very soon, Virginia, with exquisite art made herself the centre of the argument making the vaguest statement with the intensest feeling and ready to snap up anybody who laughed" (Bell 147). The members of Bloomsbury maintained their friendship throughout their lives, but the gatherings before the traumatic effects of World War I, fondly remembered by the members as "Old Bloomsbury," represented a time of excitement, importance, and freedom; these nights were marked by a strange dichotomy of normalcy and, as Woolf calls it, the "miraculous" (*Moments* 190). In their letters, memoirs and essays, the members of Old Bloomsbury all acknowledge that they were only vaguely aware of the impact that these nights would have on artistic and literary thought throughout Europe and America.

Although the members of the Bloomsbury Group met for nearly ten years, in November of 1906, only two years after Leslie Stephen's death, Thoby died of typhoid fever. His death affected the lives of the Stephen siblings profoundly. Only two days later, Vanessa agreed to marry Clive Bell, one of Thoby's closest friends from Cambridge and an original member of the Bloomsbury Group. Virginia and Adrian moved from 46 Gordon Square to 29 Fitzroy Square, another home in Bloomsbury. With the Bells living at Gordon Square and Virginia and Adrian living at Fitzroy Square, Bloomsbury then had "two centres separated by a very convenient distance" (Bell 115). For the next six years, although Thoby was gone and Vanessa was married, the siblings

continued the Thursday night meetings and strengthened their relationships with the young, intellectual group.

Virginia and Vanessa, the matriarchs of these two centers, were both influenced artistically by the Bloomsbury Group. The Theory of Aesthetics that ultimately inspired the artistic ideas of the Stephen sisters and other members of the Bloomsbury Group more than any other theory was, for the most part, outlined by Roger Fry, an influential art critic and painter. Primarily concerned with visual art, Fry's theory rejects the emphasis on content as the measurement of artistic value and asserts that form is the most significant aspect of art, that through it, the true value of art is expressed and experienced. Mark Hussey credits Roger Fry with "revolutionizing how people in England thought about art" (95). Vanessa, a painter, was clearly influenced by Fry's artistic theories, and "several critics have discussed Woolf's work in terms of Fry's aesthetics" (Hussey 96). Virginia Woolf transferred Fry's preoccupation with form over content from visual art into literature. Where Roger Fry perceived lines and colors as building blocks of the aesthetic experience, Virginia Woolf began a lifelong obsession with the moment and its function as the building blocks of the literary aesthetic experience.

The Stephen sisters were not only artistically connected to the members of Bloomsbury, but they were both connected personally to the group: each married an original member of the Bloomsbury Group. Four years after Vanessa's marriage to Clive Bell, on 10 August 1912, Virginia married Leonard Woolf. He was one of many suitors that sought the hand of the decidedly beautiful Virginia, but he offered her many things that others could not. Of Woolf's decision to marry Leonard, Julia Briggs states: "One crucial factor for her was Leonard's emotional intelligence; another was his total

commitment, his absolute and unflinching certainty that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, a conviction that nothing could shake” (*Inner Life* 33). Scholars and biographers continue to analyze Leonard and Virginia’s relationship. Some critics accuse Leonard of controlling Virginia; others pity him as her caretaker. But, as Hussey points out, “Whatever one may decide among the conflicting and contrasting interpretations of the biographical record, Leonard was Woolf’s most intimate and constant companion from their marriage until her death in 1941” (372). Leonard offered emotional support to Virginia throughout their marriage and cared for her during her periods of physical and mental weakness. He kept close accounts of her health, including “keeping a daily record of her physical state” in 1912 when she began to complain of headaches (Hussey 371). A writer and editor by trade, Leonard also offered unvarying support to Virginia’s writing. Hussey asserts that “[Leonard] was invariably the first reader of her manuscripts” (372). Despite the difficulty of Virginia’s recurring emotional and mental breakdowns, Leonard strove to provide Virginia with an encouraging environment that would improve her health and foster her writing.

From 1915 to 1924, the couple lived in Hogarth House in Richmond, London. In 1917, the couple founded the Hogarth Press, which they operated in their home, providing Virginia with a “therapeutic activity” and a means by which the Woolfs could publish smaller works that other publishers would not consider (Hussey 113). Eventually, the Hogarth Press developed into a significant publisher for modern works, publishing all Woolf’s novels beginning with *Jacob’s Room* (1922), much of her shorter fiction, and all of her non-fiction books. Biographer Hermione Lee clarifies the significance of the Hogarth Press: “[Hogarth House] was very, very important for Virginia Woolf, because it

meant she could publish her own work, and it freed her up to be an experimental writer” (*Hours* DVD). The press also published other major modernist texts such as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and all of Freud’s writings in English. In 1924, the couple moved from Hogarth House to 52 Tavistock Square, London, where they lived until 1939 when they moved to 37 Mecklenburgh Square, London. In 1919, the Woolfs purchased Monk’s House in Rodmell, which offered Virginia a place of rest away from the social demands of London. Leonard and Virginia alternated their time between London and Rodmell, spending most of their summers at Monk’s House, and in 1940, they moved to Rodmell permanently after their home in London was damaged by bombings. (Hussey 165).

Regardless of where the Woolfs lived, Virginia participated in the political and social issues of the community, primarily with the Women’s Suffrage Movement. Woolf’s interest in women’s rights started at a young age and lasted throughout her life. In 1910, she volunteered to work for the Women’s Suffrage Society; In 1913, she and Leonard attended the Women’s Co-operative Guild Congress in Newcastle. In 1916, she lectured to the Richmond branch of the Women’s Co-operative Guild and served as their leader while she lived in Richmond. “From 1917 to 1921, Woolf ran monthly meetings of the Guild in her home, Hogarth House, for which she arranged speakers” (Hussey 369). When the Woolfs moved permanently to Monk’s House, Virginia became secretary of the Rodmell Labor Party; in 1940 she helped the Rodmell Women’s Institute stage a play.

Virginia Woolf’s passion for women extended from community issues into her personal life. Aside from the female members of her family to whom she was very close—her mother Julia, her half-sister Stella, and her older sister Vanessa—Virginia

would have several significant female friends throughout her life. Jane Lilienfeld explains: “Virginia Woolf loved women...Virginia Woolf envied women; she got angry at women; she needed women; she hungered to be joined with other women, in imagination, through learning, through creating fictional women, through friendship” (37). Among the women who significantly influenced Virginia are Violet Dickinson, Lady Ottoline-Morrell, Katherine Mansfield, Dora Carrington, and Vita Sackville-West.

Undoubtedly, the friendship which affected Virginia more deeply and for a longer period of time than any other was with Vita Sackville-West. The two women shared intense emotions for each other and communicated regularly, especially between the years of 1924 and 1934. Their letters to each other are filled with passion, and clearly the women shared a sensual relationship. Hussey quotes Louise DeSalvo as saying, “the correspondence between Woolf and Sackville-West ‘is one of the great love duets of contemporary letters’” (248). Many scholars claim that their relationship was physical. Although Vita was outwardly homosexual, despite her long-term marriage, little evidence exists for the claim that the two women had an ongoing physical relationship. Quentin Bell, nephew to Woolf writes, “There may have been—on balance I think that there probably was—some caressing, some bedding together. But whatever may have occurred between them of this nature, I doubt very much whether it was of a kind to excite Virginia or to satisfy Vita” (119). The nature of Virginia’s relationship with Vita continues to be debated by scholars and historians, but the extent to which, if any, her relationship with Vita was sexual remains unproved.

Often in her letters and diary, Woolf spoke of women and to them with a sense of romance, which contributes to the uncertainty regarding her relationships. In a 1903 letter



to Violet Dickinson, Woolf wrote, “I have never kept a single letter all my life—but this romantic friendship ought to be preserved” (*Letters* 175). Virginia’s relationships with women were passionate and emotional. However, little evidence exists for the idea that Woolf had sexual feelings for any of the women in her life. While Woolf’s writing about women’s place in society and literature is explicit, her writing to women and about women remains indistinct. Woolf expresses in *A Room of Ones Own*: “The truth is, I often like women. I like their unconventionality. I like their subtlety. I like their anonymity” (111). Women were primarily her friends who, at different times, encouraged Virginia’s writing and offered her emotional support, and certainly; women remained at the center of her life and her writing.

Above all, Virginia Woolf thought of herself as a writer. In a letter to Clive Bell on 30 August 1908, she confesses: “I think a great deal of my future, & settle what books I am to write—how I shall reform the novel & capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, & shape infinite strange shapes” (Bell 137), and in her diary, on 20 May 1925, Woolf writes: “Now I suppose I might become one of the interesting—I will not say great—but interesting novelists?” (*Diary* 73). Virginia’s love of writing allowed her to remain cheerful about life in spite of her emotional struggles. In her memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf describes the capacity that writing gives her to contain and explain the trauma of life experience: “It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me” (*Moments* 72). Perhaps the greatest evidence of Woolf’s passion for writing comes in the massive volume of writing that she completed during her lifetime.

On 26 March 1915, at age thirty-three, Virginia Woolf published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. It was the culmination of an eight-year journey and the beginning of a lifetime of writing. On 20 April 1925, Woolf wrote of her immersion in writing:

One thing, in considering my state of mind now, seems to me beyond dispute; that I have, at last, bored down into my oil well, and can't scribble fast enough to bring it all to the surface. I have now at least 6 stories welling up in me, and feel, at last, that I can coin all my thoughts into words. Not but what an infinite number of problems remain; but I have never felt this rush and urgency before. I believe I can write much more quickly; if writing it is—this dash at the paper of a phrase, and then the typing and retyping—trying it over; the actual writing being now like the sweep of a brush; I fill it up afterwards. (*Diary 73*)

In the years that followed the 1915 publication of *The Voyage Out* until her death in 1941, Woolf wrote an immense amount of fiction, biography, and criticism. In *Virginia Woolf: A-Z*, Hussey lists one hundred twenty-one works by Virginia Woolf including novels, longer fictions, short fiction, essays, reviews, and biographies.

Although it took her eight years to publish her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf wrote nine novels over a twenty-six year period: *Night and Day* (1919); *Jacob's Room* (1922); *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925); *To the Lighthouse* (1927); *Orlando* (1928); *The Waves* (1931); *The Years* (1937); and *Between the Acts* (1941). While she was writing novels, Woolf was also producing shorter fiction, which she called “sketches” (Hussey 137). She was able to publish some of these sketches individually through the Hogarth Press. *Two Stories* (1917) was the first publication for the Hogarth Press; it contained

Virginia Woolf's "sketch" "A Mark on the Wall" and Leonard Woolf's short story called "a story." Through the Hogarth Press, Woolf also published her "sketch" *Kew Gardens* (1919) and *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), a collection of eight "sketches" by Virginia Woolf including "A Society," "Blue & Green," "An Unwritten Novel," "The String Quartet," "Kew Gardens," and a revised version of "The Mark on the Wall" (Hussey 165). Woolf has twenty-nine published short stories. *Monday or Tuesday* was the only collection of her shorter fiction that was published in Woolf's lifetime. Other collections have been published posthumously: *A Haunted House and Other Stories* (1944) was edited by Leonard Woolf and published by the Hogarth Press, *Mrs. Dalloway's Party* (1973), and *The Complete Shorter Fiction* (1985).

In addition to her fiction, Virginia Woolf wrote forty-four critical essays and reviews. Her most well-known critical writings are the long essays *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). She also wrote two collections of shorter critical essays entitled *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Common Reader, Second Series* (1932); both collections were printed by the Hogarth Press. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), *Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1950), *Granite & Rainbow* (1958) were all collections of Woolf's essays that were edited by Leonard Woolf and published posthumously by the Hogarth Press (Hussey 103). *Collected Essays* (1966/67), published in four volumes by the Hogarth Press, is the most complete collection of Woolf's essays, containing all the essays in both volumes of *The Common Reader* and all the essays in the four collections edited by Leonard Woolf (Hussey 58).

Virginia Woolf also wrote a satiric play called *Freshwater* (1923) based on the life of her great-aunt Julia Margaret Cameron, which was performed at Vanessa's house in Fitzroy Square in 1935. She wrote *Flush: A Biography* (1933), which is a short biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog and presents the lives of the Brownings from Flush's point of view. A much more serious project was the biography of her friend, Roger Fry. It was a difficult project for Woolf, one that she often tired of. In her diary on 5 May 1938, Woolf wrote: "my eyes ache with *Roger* and I'm a little appalled at the prospect of the grind this book will be" (*Diary* 281). Nevertheless, she did finish *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), and ended up "getting absorbed in [it]" (*Diary* 289).

While she was busy writing and publishing her fiction, biographies and critical work, Woolf also wrote several autobiographical papers, which were published in a collection called *Moments of Being* (1976); it includes "A Sketch of the Past," "22 Hyde Park Gate," "Old Bloomsbury," "Am I a Snob?" and "Reminiscences." Virginia Woolf wrote consistently in a diary from 1915 to 1941. Leonard Woolf edited the diary and published a short version entitled *A Writer's Diary* in 1953. The complete diary, which she kept in thirty notebooks, was later published in five volumes as *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (1977-84). In addition to writing in her diary, Woolf was also an avid letter writer. Many of her letters are published in a six volume collection called *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (1975-1980). This collection contains 3,767 letters that Woolf wrote to friends and family during her life (Hussey 146).

In a diary entry on 14 May 1925, Woolf writes: "The truth is that writing is the profound pleasure and being read the superficial" (74). While she was always sensitive to criticism and valued the opinion of her friends and of critics, for Woolf, writing was the

greatest pleasure she knew, and it was partially the decline of that ability that eventually drove Woolf to her death. Although the years leading up to her death were difficult, filled with fears of imminent war, which were intensified because of Leonard's Jewish heritage, Virginia remained positive. At the end of his biography, speaking of the years 1936-1939, Bell says that "Neither Vanessa nor Virginia ever courted sorrow, or wallowed in grief as their father had done when he was bereaved. It was their instinct to remain as cheerful as they could" (210).

Despite Virginia's cheerful attitude, by the beginning of 1941, the stress of her declining mental stability, the war and the increasing frustrations with her inability to write began to wear on her. Lee records that by February 1941, "she could not write her history book; she could not write anything except those revolted, paralyzed fragments" (VW 743). During the next month, Virginia's despondency about her writing and about her life increased, and she feared she was entering another mental breakdown. Sometime in March, she wrote a letter to Leonard, which she dated "Tuesday" (possibly the 18<sup>th</sup>). It would be one of two letters that Virginia would leave for Leonard before her suicide, a copy of which can be found in [Appendix C](#). Lee describes the letter:

This generous, careful, precise letter...which was hidden and kept in reserve, is not the letter of an irrational or mad person, but of a person in despair with no sense of a future, and suffering from a terrible fear of the possibility of a breakdown with no prospect of recovery. The writing of the letter, and the act it presaged, though an act *in extremis*, was rational, deliberate, and courageous. (Lee VW 744)

On the morning of Friday, 28 March 1941, Woolf wrote a second, similar letter to Leonard, which she did not date. This letter, found in [Appendix D](#), was more desperate. Lee outlines the moments of that morning: “At 11 a.m., Leonard went out to the lodge (she left the letter to him lying there on the writer’s block). She said she was going to do some house work and then go for a walk before lunch” (Lee VW 748). Virginia left the letters to Leonard and Vanessa that she had written earlier in the month on a table in the house. She went to the banks of the River Ouse near their home in Rodmell, placed a large stone in the pocket of her fur-coat, and walked into the river. Nigel Nicolson, son of Vita Sackville-West, believes that “Virginia willed herself to die” (*Hours* DVD). Although Virginia Woolf was a skillful swimmer, she drowned on 28 March 1941 in the River Ouse. When her body was recovered, the time on her watch read 11:45 a.m.

Because writing was such a defining aspect of Virginia Woolf’s life, recognizing the elusiveness and subtlety that distinguish Woolf’s life and writing are essential to understanding her identity. Frustrated by novels which seemed to her too removed from everyday life, Woolf experimented with form throughout her life’s work in order to find the means by which she could fulfill her obligation as an artist, an obligation which she defined as representing the “ordinary mind” in her writing. She writes in her essay “Modern Fiction”:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel...Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.

Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit? (CR 149)

By writing the mind of her characters, the thoughts and images that they encounter on a daily basis, or rather than the conversations they have with each other, Woolf hoped to create novels which more closely depict life as the “ordinary mind” perceives it. In her book *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, Briggs emphasizes Woolf’s preoccupation with the minds of her characters: “Woolf’s fiction is centrally concerned with the inner life, and finding ways of re-creating that life in narrative” (ix). Inspired greatly by Fry’s Theory of Aesthetics as well as other modernist views of the time, Woolf attempted to find a form of writing that would allow her to more fully capture the internal consciousness of her characters.

In her diary and letters to friends and family, Woolf relentlessly scrutinized her experimentation with form both in her completed writing and in her writing in progress. In response to his letter praising *The Voyage Out*, Woolf writes to Lytton Strachey on 28 February 1916: “I think I had a conception, but I don’t think it made itself felt. What I wanted to do was to give the feeling of a vast tumult of life, as various & disorderly as possible...and the whole was to have a sort of pattern, and be somehow controlled” (quoted in Majumdar and McLaurin 65). A year after the publication of her first novel, Woolf was questioning her method of capturing the inner life. Wondering if it was even possible to achieve her goal, she asks Strachey: “Do you think it is impossible to get this sort of effect in a novel;—is the result bound to be too scattered to be intelligible? I expect one may learn to get more control in time” (quoted in Majumdar and McLaurin 65). Woolf unremittingly searched for the form which would allow her to maintain

control over the content of her novels while still achieving the effect of capturing the inconsistency of life and an “ordinary mind.”

Over the next five years, Woolf had published her second novel, *Night and Day*, and was working on *Jacob's Room*. Still preoccupied with her method of writing, on 1 March 1921, Woolf questions in her diary: “Suppose one of my myriad changes of style is antipathetic to the material?” (29). Although Woolf was always questioning her writing style and the form she used to portray the lives of her characters, as she progressed as a writer, Woolf became more confident in her ability and more comfortable with experimentation: Of *The Waves* (1931), her seventh novel, Woolf wrote in her diary in the summer of 1930: “I am more and more attracted by looseness, freedom... This rhythm (I say I am writing the Waves to a rhythm, not to a plot) is in harmony with the painters. Ease and shabbiness and content therefore are all ensured” (Bell 155). What emerges from Woolf's constant experimentation with form is a breadth of work that shows the richness and complexity of her mind.

Woolf's novels grow increasingly inward, culminating in *The Waves*, which concerns itself primarily with the expressions of inner thought and the inner lives of six characters. The only dialogue in the novel is reported from the memory of the characters, and little distinguishes the shift between characters except Woolf's exceptional talent at creating a unique voice for each of them. *The Waves* displays, beautifully, the ever-changing nature of identity, how individuals are continuously in flux and cannot be solidified. Bernard, one of six characters in *The Waves*, reveals: “This, for the moment, seems to be my life. If it were possible, I would hand it you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, ‘Take it. This is my life’” (238). Bernard's



desire to package a character echoes Woolf's desire in *A Room of One's Own* where she laments, "I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between your notebooks and keep on the mantel-piece for ever" (4). Much like Woolf, the essayist, Bernard recognizes that "in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story—and there are so many, and so many—stories of childhood, stories of school, of love, marriage, death, and so on; and none of them are true" (*Waves* 238). Both Woolf, the essayist, and Bernard, Woolf's character, express a desire to contain life within definable words or images. Woolf acknowledges that this desire to formalize life, to make it still, is natural; yet, she resists the impulse in her writing and ultimately believes it impossible.

For Woolf, life is inconstant; identity is inconstant. They move and mold, sometimes slightly, sometimes drastically. Briggs states in her book *Reading Virginia Woolf* that "Woolf herself enjoyed that 'indirection' that 'finds direction out,' as all her work attests; and her ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory feelings, often over issues of great importance to her...are a source of richness and complexity within her work" (168). Woolf's writing resists categorization, as she resisted it herself. Her commitment to elusiveness and subtlety in her fiction, non-fiction, letters and autobiographical work demonstrates her life-long search to represent, through writing, the varying nature of life and identity. Her novels are layered with meaning. She showed life to be "various & disorderly" (quoted in Majumdar and McLaurin 65). This multiplicity makes it extremely difficult to pin Virginia Woolf down on any issue.

In spite of this indefiniteness, over the last century and increasingly in the last three decades, Virginia Woolf has been claimed as a representative for various agendas. Very early on, Woolf was recognized as a modernist writer. Hussey states that by 1920, “she was a leading literary figure and critic” (379). In 1979, Sonya Rudikoff wrote of Woolf’s acclaim as a modernist writer: “She was on the cover of *Time* in the thirties, and with Joyce, Proust, Lawrence, and others, she has for decades been placed in the innovative, experimental, lyrical tradition of the modern novel” (545). Woolf’s image on the cover of *Time* shows her as a professional, as can be seen in [Figure A-5](#). However, throughout the 1970’s, Woolf’s image began to change. Her two long critical essays regarding the political and social status of women—*A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938)—made Virginia Woolf an attractive writer for the feminist movement. Beth Rosenberg explains: “It was the feminist movement of the 1970s and the work of feminist scholars like Jane Marcus, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar that initiated the shift toward Woolf as feminist” (1112). The feminist movement added to Woolf’s already solid position as a canonical writer by forcing her face and ideas into the public consciousness. Rudikoff’s article is evidence that as early as 1979, scholars and readers noticed changes in Woolf’s identity as an author: “The feminism which the last decade has discovered in Woolf thus enlarged the reputation of an already considerable writer, already a modernist, experimental writer securely placed in the modern tradition” (546). While feminism was increasing the prominence of Virginia Woolf as an author, Woolf was increasing the solidity of feminism. “Woolf helped to establish feminist criticism as a legitimate critical method” (Rosenberg 1112). Lending to

it the weight of her authority, Virginia Woolf quickly became an ambassador for the feminist movement.

Recently, Virginia Woolf has become synonymous with the queer movement, and many current arguments center on Woolf's sexuality and the sexuality that she portrays in her novels. Brenda Silver, in her book *Virginia Woolf: Icon*, discusses how sexuality has informed many of the recent adaptations of Woolf's texts: "The almost simultaneous appearance and popularity of the refashioned texts in the early 1990's speak directly to debates about feminism, gender, sexuality, and androgyny in what has been called, conflictually, a 'post-feminist' or a queer movement...and Virginia Woolf was claimed for almost every position" (Silver 212). Similar to the feminist movement of the 1970's, the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century have seen another change in the identity of Virginia Woolf. And, much as she did with the feminist movement, Woolf's credibility lends its weight to the queer movement. In the 1990s, a new "Virginia Woolf" emerged: Virginia Woolf as lesbian.

Some critics, scholars, and authors turn to Woolf's biographical information to find support for their claims, seizing the ambiguity surrounding sexuality in Woolf's life and writing. In her article "A Lesbian Reading Virginia Woolf," Toni McNaron claims complete understanding of Woolf's sexuality: "I knew I was in the presence of a lesbian even if she did live with Leonard all those years" (11). Arguments rage about Woolf's sexual orientation, and in order to justify their possession of her, many attempt to define and solidify Woolf's identity, sexual and otherwise. Since the 1970's, as Rudikoff supports, "There is hardly a detail of her personal life which is not known and studied, hardly a fact of her emotional history or domestic routine which is not processed as

interesting, relevant, useful” (540). Discussions about Woolf’s biography have fueled the appropriation of Virginia Woolf’s life, of her personal identity.

Due in great part to the many adaptations and appropriations of Virginia Woolf’s identity and writing, she continues to be an increasingly mainstream figure. No longer reserved for arguments in the academy, Virginia Woolf has become part of American culture. Woolf’s face, her photographic image, has gained widespread popularity: [Figures A-1 through A-4](#) show some of the recognizable photographs of Virginia Woolf throughout her life. Over the years, Woolf’s image has achieved a type of celebrity status. [Figure A-6](#), a photograph from an article in *Time* magazine listing “European heroes,” places Woolf’s picture among historical giants such as Machiavelli, Petrarch, and Martin Luther. Like many celebrities, her face has also been used for more casual settings like cartoons and caricatures, as in [Figure A-10](#).

Recently, Woolf’s photographic image has been commodified: from Barnes and Noble canvas bags to T-shirts, Virginia Woolf’s face is everywhere. [Figure A-7](#) shows Virginia Woolf’s face on a British postage stamp; [Figure A-8](#) shows her face on a coffee mug that can be purchased on e-bay, and [Figure A-9](#) shows a Virginia Woolf watch for sale on the internet. Silver explains that Woolf has become a popular as well as an intellectual commodity: “Wherever one looks, it often seems, whether in academic journals, newspapers and magazines, television and film, or billboards, Virginia Woolf is there, endorsing by her presence and status whatever product—whether intellectual or material—is being offered for our attention” (*VW Icon* 8). Virginia Woolf’s image and the intellectual power that it carries, permeates pop culture, but she continues to be a representation of high culture and high modernism. As such, she fascinates many

readers, common and uncommon alike. Hermione Lee explains that “because of these re-appropriations, she seems to us, now, both a contemporary and an historical figure” (VW 758). Many appropriations have sought to bring Virginia Woolf out of the intellectual domain and into pop culture, approximating her to contemporary society.

Michel Cunningham’s award winning novel and Steven Daldry’s award winning film add to Woolf’s celebrity status. In her book entitled *Virginia Woolf’s Nose: Essays on Biography*, Lee writes of *The Hours*’ effect on Woolf’s identity: “Now that this much contested literary life-story has been turned into novel and film, a powerful, popularized version of her, for the time being, prevails” (39). The next chapters will analyze who that “Virginia Woolf” is, how she has been created, and how she contradicts the nature of Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure.

## A Novelist's Task

Whereas Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure, is a complex, ever-changing subject who resists simplification, the fictional character Mrs. Woolf in Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* reduces Woolf to a caricature which lacks the complexity that is essential to Woolf's life and writing. Cunningham is entitled his own "Virginia Woolf;" *The Hours*, as an adaptation of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, has a right to stand on its own as a contemporary piece of fiction, and had Cunningham's novel—which follows the lives of three women in three different time periods: Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway—isolated itself to the adaptation of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the ultimate influence on Woolf's identity may not have been so severe. But, because Cunningham creates a "Virginia Woolf" writing *Mrs. Dalloway* as a character in his novel, the adaptation of Woolf's image and person in *The Hours* blurs the line between Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf" and Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure, altering the way audiences perceive her life and her identity.

Despite denials by Cunningham and those involved in the production of the film *The Hours*, the novel and the film alike are apparently driven by a desire to define Woolf—to limit her identity to a woman constantly ill, constantly weak, and constantly a lesbian—which is neither characteristic of Virginia Woolf's life nor her work. Woolf's characters, whose outer actions often oppose their inner thoughts, are at once happy and burdened with significant troubles. Of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf writes in her diary: "In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity" (56). Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf presents contradicting issues and paradoxical experiences in the lives of her characters. Perhaps more than any other, Clarissa

personifies Woolf's desire to show the multifarious nature of identity. Clarissa, looking into a mirror, ponders her identity:

She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one center. (*Mrs. D* 37)

Knowing that, inherently, she is not one thing, but many, Clarissa, chooses which facet of her self to present to the world. The image in the mirror changes; Clarissa Dalloway's identity adjusts depending on her environment. Aware of these shifts, Clarissa can control them.

While *Mrs. Dalloway* is marked by Woolf's desire to "give the slipperiness of the soul," *The Hours* is marked by an oppressive consistency or sameness in Cunningham's characters (*Diary* 54). Mrs. Woolf of *The Hours* exposes the common reader to a characterization of Virginia Woolf that Lorraine Sim describes as "center[ing] on her status as invalid and creative genius, . . . disempowered by a repressive, domestic existence in suburban Richmond" (12). From her first section to her last in *The Hours*, Mrs. Woolf is paranoid, anxious, and mentally unstable: "I am alone, Virginia thinks . . . and she knows she will be utterly alone if and when the devil chooses to appear again. The devil is a headache; the devil is a voice inside a wall; the devil is a fin breaking through dark waves" (*Hours* 167). Cunningham's description of Woolf's illness and the thoughts and fears that she might have had are poetic and perhaps fairly accurate. He masterfully intertwines her own imagery, her own words with his; Woolf did suffer from terrible

headaches, whose return she dreaded. However, the consistency with which he writes of these feelings of madness offers no alternative for the reader but to see Woolf as a creative genius constantly tortured by mental illness: “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” (*Hours* 71). Often, in the novel, Mrs. Woolf feels lost and trapped, unable to participate in everyday activities due to the unceasing fear of a relapse into madness.

In his depiction of her illness, Cunningham portrays his Mrs. Woolf as suspicious: Watching Nelly, the Woolf’s cook, “Virginia thinks, she would like to slit my throat; just so with an off hand stroke, as if killing me were another of the domestic chores that stand between her and sleep (*Hours* 87). Lifting the looking-glass image from *Mrs. Dalloway*, Cunningham shows Mrs. Woolf as suspicious even of herself. When Mrs. Woolf faces the revealing mirror, “She is aware of her reflected movements in the glass but does not permit herself to look. The mirror is dangerous; it sometimes shows her the dark manifestation of air that matches her body, takes her form, but stands behind, watching her, with porcine eyes and wet, hushed breathing” (*Hours* 31). Rather than contemplating her own identity in the mirror as Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa does, Mrs. Woolf fears her identity. Cunningham represents Woolf throughout the novel as anti-social and isolated from friends and family; she spends the majority of *The Hours* avoiding those around her and her inner self.

In actuality, Woolf was highly social. Francine Prose points out in the *Mrs. Dalloway Reader* that “Despite recurrent bouts of illness, she helped Leonard Woolf run the Hogarth Press and maintained a social schedule so demanding that the healthiest,



youngest, and most popular guests might have had trouble attending that many dinners and parties—and the morning after, going to their desks and picking up their pens” (2). Beginning with their Thursday meetings in Bloomsbury, Virginia Woolf and her siblings relished the companionship of friends who were actively engaged in the artistic and literary community. These social gatherings inspired Virginia Woolf: “It filled me with wonder to watch those who were finally left in the argument, piling stone upon stone, cautiously, accurately, long after it had completely soared above my sight...One had glimpses of something miraculous happening high up in the air” (*Moments* 190). She enjoyed conversation and saw it as an opportunity to do research for her novels. And then, Woolf did pick up her pen. Over the span of only twenty-six years she produced an extensive amount of writing. Prose describes Woolf’s ability to write amidst the trauma of her emotional struggles: “She was periodically insane. She endured horrifying hallucinations. But on her healthy, lucid days—which is to say, most days—she was seemingly indefatigable, a phenomenon of sheer productivity” (2). It is this aspect of Woolf’s identity that Cunningham fails to represent.

Mrs. Woolf does not exist as a talented, healthy writer; throughout the novel when Mrs. Woolf writes, it is with constant fear of either losing her inspiration or pushing herself into another attack of illness. In the first section, Mrs. Woolf contemplates as she prepares to write for the day: “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” (*Hours* 35). And in a later section, rather than discuss the daily event of choosing what to have for lunch, Mrs. Woolf “sulked straightaway to her study, fearful that her day’s writing (that fragile

impulse, that egg balanced on a spoon) might dissolve before one of Nelly's moods" (*Hours* 85). Mrs. Woolf, in every way, is fixed; she has no control over her mind, over her decisions, nor over her writing; she is reminiscent of the nineteenth century poet whose genius is dependent on the appearance of the muse.

How unlike the woman who emerges from Virginia Woolf's work! According to Woolf's diaries and autobiographical writings, she labored meticulously over her novels. She was adeptly aware of what she wanted to accomplish in each text, and in many instances, Woolf specifically expresses the joy that she felt when writing: "Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together" (*Moments* 72). Writing gave Woolf gratification; it gave her control.

Contrarily, Mrs. Woolf loses control in writing. She is subject to the restrictions of her illness and the fragility of the writing experience: "Virginia lays down her pen. She would like to write all day, to fill thirty pages instead of three, but after the first hours something within her falters, and she worries that if she pushes beyond her limits she will taint the whole experience" (*Hours* 70). Woolf did experience severe spells of illness, and in those times, she was withdrawn, agitated, and unhappy. However, if she suffered from constant illness and fear of writing, as does Mrs. Woolf in *The Hours*, worrying that writing too much will remove from her the pleasure she gets from it, Virginia Woolf could not have completed the amount of writing that she did and have felt about writing the way she articulates in her diary.

Cunningham further traps Mrs. Woolf by emphasizing tension in her relationship with her husband, whom I will refer to as Mr. Woolf. In addition to describing her

seclusion in the suburbs of Richmond as a type of prison, which poses concerns of its own, Mr. Woolf in *The Hours* becomes Mrs. Woolf's jailor more than the loving, supportive companion that Leonard Woolf was to Virginia. After Cunningham's Mrs. Woolf escapes one afternoon, in a desire to catch the train to London, Mr. Woolf "come[s] after her like a constable or proctor" (*Hours* 170). Contrasted against Mrs. Woolf's imagined freedom in London, Mr. Woolf, Richmond and the Hogarth House entrap Mrs. Woolf. As she and Mr. Woolf walk from the train station, and from her potential flight to London, Mrs. Woolf ponders, "On this side is stern, worried Leonard, the row of closed shops, the dark rise that leads back to Hogarth House" (*Hours* 172). Unlike London, with its bright lights and busy streets, Richmond is shut up, blocked off from the world in obscurity, mirroring Mrs. Woolf's lack of creativity and productivity in the London suburb. Virginia Woolf did, at times, feel isolated from London and miss the lively social circle that awaited her there. But, as Sim explains, "Richmond was not a prison entrapping Virginia Woolf the housewife; it was a place of independent, creative work for her as an author" (8). Mrs. Woolf, however, epitomizes a housewife and a struggling writer, wishing to escape the grasp of her husband and the tedious life in suburbia.

Although the majority of the references to Mr. Woolf in *The Hours* portray him as "gruff, stingy, and all but impossibly demanding," there are minor moments where Cunningham allows for some equality in the marriage, but most of these times come after submission by Mrs. Woolf (*Hours* 72). After a vague conversation about moving back to London, which Mr. Woolf sidesteps, at best, he begins to guide Mrs. Woolf back to Hogarth House. She decides it best not to tell him of her plans to go to London and "links

her arm in his, and gives his elbow an affectionate squeeze” (172). Moments such as this do show tenderness and intimacy in Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Woolf’s marriage. Ultimately, however, the relationship between Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Woolf resembles more that of a master, whose dominance must be respected, and his subject than it does a marriage of intellectual equals. As long as Mrs. Woolf remains sensitive and submissive to her husband’s desires, she will be rewarded:

[Mr. Woolf] scowls at his watch. “It’s nearly half past then,” he says.

“I’m just restless. I’m not tired yet.”

“I’d like you to go to bed at eleven,” he says.

She nods. She will remain on good behavior, now that London’s been decided on (210).

Mrs. Woolf treads very carefully around Mr. Woolf’s seemingly austere personality. The implication that she will be compensated for good behavior, more clearly stated as obeying Mr. Woolf’s rules, reinforces his authority in the dynamic of their marriage. Mrs. Woolf sulks and paces throughout the novel, as if she were caged inside her home and inside her marriage. Despite subtle moments of familiarity, Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Woolf dance around each other throughout *The Hours*, both sensing each other’s fragility.

Ironically, Virginia Woolf’s relationship with Leonard is marked by intimacy and a mutual sense of security. They depended upon each other; Leonard cared for Virginia in her times of illness, and Virginia provided Leonard with an abiding companionship. But, their marriage was more than a mutual dependency. In her biography of Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee speaks of the Woolfs’ relationship: “Leonard Woolf’s obvious suitability as a husband was both an attraction to Virginia and, perversely, an obstacle. He was the

right age. He belonged to her ‘family’: he had loved Thoby...and he was the closest of her closest friends” (302). In her diary, Virginia Woolf repeatedly records Leonard’s support of her writing; he offers her continual encouragement. He is her most unvarying and most valued critic. *July 26, 1922*: “On Sunday L. read through *Jacob’s Room*. He thinks it my best work. But his first remark was that it was amazingly well written” (45). *January 23, 1927*: “Well Leonard has read *To the Lighthouse* and says it is much my best book and it is a ‘masterpiece.’ He said this without my asking” (102). *July 19, 1931*: “[*The Waves*] is a masterpiece,’ said L., coming out of my lodge this morning. ‘And the best of your books.’” (168). *November 3, 1936*: “Miracles will never cease—L. actually liked *The Years*! He thinks it so far—as the wind chapter—as good as any of my books” (261). The marriage, as it appears in Woolf’s diary, did not entrap Woolf, but offered her a place of refuge and security. Leonard challenged her, inspired her, and supported her. He was her partner, her nurturer, and her friend.

It is not accidental that Cunningham excludes this aspect of the Woolfs’ relationship. Cunningham’s emphasis on Woolf’s illness and weakness buttresses his reading of her sexuality as it represents Woolf as a victim—trapped by society, by her husband, and by heterosexuality. Even by organizing his novel into sections labeled by each of the women’s last names—Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway—Cunningham confines the women and defines them through their relationships with their husbands. Woolf herself points out the nullifying effect of being identified through one’s husband in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown...this being Mrs.Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (11). Cunningham depicts Mrs. Woolf as existing somewhere

between the quintessential wife-as-prisoner Mrs. Brown and the liberated lesbian Mrs. Dalloway. In her article on *The Hours*, Sandra Singer remarks: "Of the three main characters, Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Brown act within the culturally defined gender roles of their times, while the third, [Mrs. Dalloway], at the end of the twentieth century, represents freedom from the assumed gender positions" (11). In the novel, Mrs. Woolf appears to be confined within the gender roles of her time. More Victorian than Modern, Mrs. Woolf assumes the role of an ill, dependant woman who marries for security rather than for love or companionship. Mrs. Brown, separated from Mrs. Woolf by twenty-eight years, is equally confined within the gender role assigned her. Each of these women, set against the apparent freedom of Mrs. Dalloway's lesbianism, represent an internal, seemingly universal struggle against repressed homosexuality. Although Mrs. Woolf and Virginia Woolf are not interchangeable, Cunningham's adaptation associates Virginia Woolf with the fight to define one's sexuality, which emerges as the central theme of the novel.

Each female relationship in *The Hours* is defined by a sexual connection. Mrs. Brown, while reading Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, lusts after her neighbor, Kitty, and wishes to escape her life as wife and mother. Mrs. Dalloway, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's character, is a New York lesbian planning a party for her gay friend, an award-winning poet who is dying of AIDS. In addition to the overtly lesbian encounters between women in the novel, most of the female relationships in the novel, even peripheral relationships, contain some element of sexuality. In an encounter between the character Mrs. Woolf and her niece, Cunningham writes: "Virginia leans toward Angelica as if they shared a secret. Some force flows between them, a complicity that is

neither maternal nor erotic but contains elements of both” (*Hours* 120). This overarching and overstated sexuality between women in *The Hours* implicates Woolf in a twenty-first century definition of lesbian sexuality, implying a deep struggle to define, to resist or embrace, one’s sexual identity.

In *The Hours*, Cunningham draws lesbian sexuality to the foreground, making Mrs. Woolf, both as a character and as an author, his own lesbian heroine and a part of what he calls “the queer, extended, post-nuclear family” (quoted in Coffey 53). Highlighted against the gloomy relationship between Mrs. Woolf and Leonard is Mrs. Woolf’s relationship with her sister, Vanessa. In the novel, Vanessa brings her children to Hogarth House to visit their aunt. The two sisters have several sensual exchanges, culminating in a kiss before Vanessa leaves. There is an apparent sexuality even in Cunningham’s description of their relationship: “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 on lawn before a body of children” (*Hours* 116). Cunningham suggests a sexual connection between the two sisters, making the disturbing assumption that not only was Woolf a homosexual but also that she and Vanessa were incestuous.

Throughout the visit and after they leave, Mrs. Woolf is fixated upon her physical connection with Vanessa, which builds from innocence to eroticism. Mrs. Woolf’s obvious fixation on her own physical appearance in Vanessa’s presence and her reliance on Vanessa’s perception of her implies a romantic relationship between them rather than a sibling relationship. Upon Vanessa’s arrival, Mrs. Woolf, concerned that she did not have “time to do a little something with her hair,” fears to look in the mirror (115).

Instead, Mrs. Woolf thinks, “Vanessa will be her mirror, just as she’s always been...She kisses Vanessa, chastely, on the mouth” (114). Although this innocent kiss with her sister appears to contain less erotic suggestion than any of the other kisses in the novel, the very assertion that the kiss is chaste suggests that it may have been unchaste, and the specification of the kiss on the mouth further suggests the sexual possibilities of kissing. As the day passes, the sexual connection between the two sisters intensifies as does the sexual tension surrounding Mrs. Woolf.

Before Vanessa leaves Hogarth House, the two sisters exchange another kiss, one with more erotic overtones: “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” (154). Compared with the earlier kiss, this kiss, which professes to be chaste and free of sexual implications, is written as quite erotic, something prohibited by Mrs. Woolf’s society, something that needs to be hidden from onlookers. Later that night, after being found by her husband at the railway station and returned to Hogarth House, Mrs. Woolf ponders the kiss again, thinking that “it was full of a love complex and ravenous, ancient, neither this nor that” (210). The apparent innocence of the sisters’ kiss fades as the trapped and starved sexuality of Mrs. Woolf becomes more evident. Finally, Mrs. Woolf recognizes that “She, Virginia, has kissed her sister, not quite innocently, behind Nelly’s broad, moody back” (210). The kiss between the two sisters, at first pure and affectionate, expressly innocent, changes over the course of the novel, as does the impression of Mrs. Woolf’s sexuality. It becomes increasingly evident that Mrs. Woolf, trapped in an unhappy and controlling marriage, is also trapped in a heterosexual society. Although Mrs. Woolf’s recognition of her own



desire for female sexual attention oddly comes through the relationship with her sister, her preoccupation with lesbianism is also obvious as she writes of her characters.

Paralleling the lesbian sexuality present in Mrs. Woolf's personal relationships, Cunningham's account of Mrs. Woolf inventing her character Clarissa Dalloway reinforces his reading of Virginia Woolf's sexuality. Cunningham writes, "Clarissa Dalloway, in her first youth, will love another girl, Virginia thinks; Clarissa will believe that a rich, riotous future is opening up before her, but eventually...she will come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man" (82). Mrs. Woolf senses that love with a girl, only possible in youth before the pressures of society take over, offers a life of excitement and fulfillment that cannot be achieved in a heterosexual relationship. But, as duty demands, women relinquish those possibilities and conform to their social requirements. The character Clarissa Dalloway that Mrs. Woolf writes feels emptiness as a result of her decision to marry which mirrors Mrs. Woolf's own emptiness and disappointment in her life and her marriage. As Mrs. Woolf walks through Richmond composing her novel, "[she] thinks of the love of a girl" (83). Mrs. Woolf and her character Clarissa Dalloway, whom Cunningham writes as a repressed lesbian, become synonymous. Cunningham simultaneously asserts the presence of lesbian sexuality in Virginia Woolf's characters and her own life, doubly enforcing his homosexual reading of Woolf's sexuality.

By interlinking Mrs. Woolf's writing with her own life, Cunningham also infuses Mrs. Woolf's life with the life of her character Clarissa Dalloway. After a testing conversation with her cook, Mrs. Woolf ponders over her writing table: "Why is it so difficult dealing with servants? Virginia's mother managed beautifully. Vanessa manages

beautifully. ...She will give Clarissa Dalloway great skill with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding” (85). Cunningham implies that Mrs. Woolf, unable to have control in her own life, transfers that control to her character. This implication may result in a false synonymous relationship between Woolf and the characters in her novels, leading the common reader to make the assumption that Woolf lived through the lives of her characters, further enforcing Woolf’s connection with the fictional characters of *The Hours*.

Laura Brown, a Los Angeles suburban housewife in 1949 reading Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, embodies the fears and emptiness that Cunningham imposes on Clarissa Dalloway’s life because of her decision to marry: “[Mrs. Brown] herself is trapped here forever, posing as a wife” (205). Much like Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown is confined inside an unfulfilling heterosexual marriage. She struggles with maintaining her charade as a satisfied wife and mother; she struggles with her pregnancy and lack of desire for another child. And, she finds gratification in the arms of her beautiful neighbor, Kitty: “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” (143). Cunningham writes a description of Kitty redolent of a romance novel. Although both women are married with children and living lives of apparent heterosexuality, their relationship is laden with lesbian intimations, and eventually, the two women surrender to their passions.

Kitty pays a visit to Mrs. Brown, as she cautiously prepares for her husband’s birthday. Cunningham’s description of Mrs. Brown’s interaction with Kitty asserts a sexual connection rather than a subtle sensuality between women:

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. Here are her breasts...Here are the depths of Kitty;...the untouchable essence that a man (Ray, of all people!) dreams of, yearns toward, searches for so desperately at night. (109)

Kitty's husband cannot find the profound, passionate, resonance in his wife that Laura can. Cunningham's seemingly heterosexual women are each trapped and unfulfilled. Kitty and Laura are both robbed of that same life, that possible abundant future, of which Clarissa Dalloway will be robbed. Briefly, however, they recover some element of their lost futures. Each woman admits, silently and privately, to her lesbian desires:

Kitty nods against Laura's breasts. The question has been silently asked and silently answered, it seems. They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. ...Kitty lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss. (110)

After their arousing encounter, each woman returns to her husband and children, to the obligations of heterosexual society. However, each has acknowledged that she is pretending to be a contented wife and mother while concealing her lesbian desires.

Although Mrs. Brown is not historically connected to Virginia Woolf, her reading and continuous quoting of *Mrs. Dalloway* and the intertwining nature of the novel link Mrs. Brown's sexuality with Mrs. Woolf's sexuality and therefore with Virginia Woolf's own sexuality.

Cunningham's *Mrs. Dalloway*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Clarissa Dalloway*, exists in a society dominated by homosexuality. A resident of New York City at the end of the twentieth century, Mrs. Dalloway lives with her eighteen-year partner, Sally: "This love of theirs, with its reassuring domesticity and its easy silences, its permanence has yoked Sally directly to the machinery of mortality itself" (183). Mrs. Dalloway's closest friends, as well as her enemy Mary Krull, are all homosexual. Mrs. Dalloway's narrative questions many of the cultural, emotional, and physical issues surrounding homosexuality in the twenty-first century. Richard, a prize-winning poet dying of AIDS, questions the validity of his award. He suspects the award has more to do with his illness than his writing: "I got a prize for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it; it had nothing to do with my work" (63). Mrs. Dalloway's long-time friend Louis constantly searches for fulfillment with a young, beautiful lover, but ultimately feels empty and alone: "This would be the fourth, at least of the ones she knows about. [Clarissa] would like to grab Louis and say...I can't stand to see you make so much of yourself and then offer it all to some boy just because he happens to be pretty and young" (133). After coming out to the American public, an actor Oliver St. Ives "was subsequently dropped from his leading role in an expensive thriller" and becomes a spokesperson for gay rights and gains increasing fame, fame that was never afforded him as an actor (93). Mary Krull, a young and angry New York University queer theorist, highlights the contrast between different lesbian sexual identities: "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...than a well-dressed dyke with a respectable job" (160). The characters in Mrs. Dalloway's life allow Cunningham to address

current concerns of the homosexual public, tackling, through an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's characters, some of the problems that arise from identifying and defining one's sexuality in the twenty-first century. As Cunningham re-tells *Mrs. Dalloway*, with Woolf's characters, slightly altered, *The Hours* inextricably links itself with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Inevitably, the Mrs. Dalloway sections of *The Hours* imply that, had Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway lived fifty years in the future, she would have been free, as Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway is, to express her lesbianism. For the common reader, the distinctions between Mrs. Dalloway and Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway are not always clear. One reviewer says of the two Mrs. Dalloways: "They share the same first name, and they're pretty much the same character, despite the differences in their surroundings" (Popick Par. 4). As Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway becomes the Clarissa of the future, her sexuality influences the way common readers will read Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway and her sexuality. This adaptation of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* influences the way common readers will read Virginia Woolf's identity as well. I would contend that the representation of all lesbianism in the novel leads the common reader to label Woolf with the same sexuality.

However, Virginia Woolf was not confined, as is Mrs. Woolf, within a social circle that allowed no room for the questioning of sexuality. Many of her friends were outwardly homosexual; others were privately involved with people of their own sex, and many of them were heterosexual; regardless of their sexual orientation, the members of the Bloomsbury Group, comprised of Woolf's most intimate friends, consciously challenged social and cultural boundaries, including boundaries of sexual

experimentation. Vanessa Bell says of the group, “When it is said that we did not hesitate to talk of anything, it must be understood that this was literally true. If you could say what you liked about art, sex, or religion you could also talk freely and very likely dully about the ordinary doings of daily life” (Rosenbaum 108). The freedom afforded by the Bloomsbury Group widens the gulf between Woolf’s life and the apparent restrictions that Mrs. Woolf feels. At the core of Virginia Woolf’s life and work is a remarkable treatment of sexuality which is diverse, contradictory and experimental.

Woolf takes the reader on a journey of discovery in each of her novels, always weaving contradictions into the text, leaving interpretation to the reader. There is a certain presence of sexuality in all of Woolf’s work including moments of sensuality between men and women, between women and women, and between men and men; these moments are distinguished by a particular flexibility, by a questioning of the origin and significance of this sensuality. In her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf portrays Clarissa Dalloway pondering: “And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident—like a faint scent, or a violin next door, she did undoubtedly feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. Against such moments there contrasted (as she laid her hat down) the bed and Baron Marbot and the candle half burnt” (32). Woolf proceeds in this passage to a tender description of a shared moment of familiarity between Clarissa and her husband, juxtaposing the delicate intimacy and attraction that Clarissa feels toward women with the relationship she shares with Richard. Perhaps more than any other, Clarissa’s friendship with Sally exemplifies Woolf’s depiction of sexuality. Eileen Barrett comments: “In the passionate friendship of Sally and Clarissa,

Woolf captures the intermingling of the intellectual and erotic, the personal and the political that she experienced in her own feminist friendships” (151).

Virginia Woolf shared relationships with many women throughout her life, several of them essential to her. She cherished those friendships, and each fulfilled her in a different way. Each of them was complex and inconstant, but uniquely significant. In her diary, Woolf wrote: “If one could be friendly with women, what a pleasure—the relationship so secret and private compared with relations with men. Why not write about it? Truthfully?” (*Diary* 67). Echoing her life and this great desire to be friendly with women, to show women more than “only in relation to the other sex,” Woolf writes about women (*Room* 82). She writes about women in her life in her autobiographical work, and she writes about them in her fiction.

However, without being exposed to Woolf’s autobiographical writings, her diaries or her letters, the reader of *The Hours* may assume that the frail, frightened, and trapped woman created by Michael Cunningham is an accurate representation of Virginia Woolf. Cunningham’s adaptation results in the conflation of Mrs. Woolf and Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. Book and movie reviews have shown that the public often equates Cunningham’s version of Woolf with Woolf herself. In a review of *The Hours* that appeared in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, the association is obvious: “[Clarissa’s] journey though the streets of lower Manhattan is a rich feast of images, sounding—as so much of Cunningham’s novel does—as if it were penned by Woolf herself” (Woelz 48). Another review states: “By insinuating Woolf’s own life within his novel, her struggles with despair and her joyful immersion in writing, he’s taken the light off of his endeavor and placed it onto hers—he’s brought the honored artist into the work

itself” (Caldwell K1). These recurrent reactions to Cunningham’s novel suggests that many common readers mistake Cunningham for Woolf, or at least assume that *The Hours* and *Mrs. Dalloway* are interchangeable. In another review, Karl Woelz applauds Cunningham’s adaptation:

Cunningham dares to slip beneath the skin and into the very blood of the high priestess of High Modernism herself, Virginia Woolf...Nobody has captured so fully and beautifully (and with such seeming effortlessness) the very essence of Woolf’s prose—its vision and rhythms, its fierce ephemerality, its power and compassion—as Michael Cunningham does here. (48)

Although Mrs. Woolf is a fictional representation of Cunningham’s “Virginia Woolf,” my concern is that whether Cunningham realizes it or not, Mrs. Woolf in *The Hours* may come to characterize Woolf herself. Placing Virginia Woolf within a fictional context obscures the line between biography and fiction, making it difficult for the common reader to distinguish what is Virginia Woolf and what is Cunningham’s fictionalization of Woolf if, in fact, the reader is aware that there is a distinction between the two; readers continue to see *The Hours* as “an ambitious and largely successful attempt to weave the life and sensibility of Virginia Woolf into a story of [Cunningham’s] own characters,” to see *The Hours* as a replica of Woolf’s own life and writing (“NY Times” *Hours*). Cunningham, who admits to a fascination and obsession with Woolf since he first read *Mrs. Dalloway* at age 15, desires, through writing *The Hours*, to put Woolf finally into a fixed body, to finally say *this* is Virginia Woolf. It is not Cunningham’s perception of Woolf with which I take issue; rather, I am interested, if



not concerned, that Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf" has become the new Woolf, that a great majority of readers are now inevitably reading and seeing Virginia Woolf through Michael Cunningham's filter.

The next chapter will investigate how the 2002 film *The Hours* directed by Stephen Daldry, beginning with the already narrowed perception and characterization Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf," further funnels Virginia Woolf's identity into a fixed form by magnifying Mrs. Woolf's madness and highlighting the presence of lesbian overtones in Cunningham's novel. Within the film, there are several removes from Cunningham's character, and subsequently from Woolf herself. The screen writer creates a Mrs. Woolf from Cunningham's novel who is subject to the vision of the director of the film and the actress's interpretation of that direction. So, the general understanding and portrait of Virginia Woolf presented to viewers of the film becomes Nicole Kidman's version of Steven Daldry's version of David Hare's version of Michael Cunningham's version of Virginia Woolf.

### Making a Contemporary Virginia Woolf

In 2002, only four years after the publication of Cunningham's novel, director Steven Daldry and screenwriter David Hare's film *The Hours* opened in American movie theaters. As an adaptation, the film follows, quite closely, the narrative of the three female characters from Cunningham's novel—Mrs. Woolf, played by Nicole Kidman; Mrs. Brown, played by Julianne Moore; Mrs. Dalloway, played by Meryl Streep. However, the film amplifies the specific aspects of Virginia Woolf's identity that Cunningham chose to portray in his fictionalization of Woolf which moves the viewers of the film *The Hours* further from the original text of *Mrs. Dalloway*, from Woolf's other writings, and from Woolf herself. In the film, Mrs. Woolf's sexuality becomes more potent and her madness more intense. Considering its widespread popularity and success, the film version of *The Hours* further contributes to the establishment of Virginia Woolf as a genius female writer trapped within the confines of heterosexuality and her husband's rule. Emphasizing these aspects of Cunningham's Mrs. Woolf in the film further alters the representation of Virginia Woolf that ultimately reaches the mainstream public.

Michael Cunningham apparently generously handed over his novel to screenwriter David Hare without any concern for the way in which it would be adapted. In the *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, Cunningham explains: "I don't have any notions about the 'sacred text' in terms of turning a book into a film, at least for any book of mine" (Peregrin 30). This postmodern statement by Cunningham and his unusual act of willingly and happily surrendering his work in the name of artistic ideology and experimentation might be laudatory in terms of Cunningham's willingness to allow his

work to be adapted, but it shows no sensitivity to the historical figure whom he co-opted. Cunningham may not have any anxiety about what the film may do to his novel, but there should have been some attention paid to the possible effects the film would have on Virginia Woolf, for she is not one of his texts. However, in the hands of David Hare and Steven Daldry and through the face of Nicole Kidman, somewhat enhanced by a prosthetic nose, Mrs. Woolf essentially becomes the “Virginia Woolf” that many twenty-first century readers now recognize.

For many, including Kidman, the prosthetic nose used in filming apparently provided a kind of conduit through which the spirit of Virginia Woolf was channeled. The changes to Kidman’s face are obvious, as shown in [Figures B-1 and B-2](#). Director Steven Daldry described it as a “releasing mechanism,” and Julianne Moore, Kidman’s co-star says that “the transformation is wholly emotional. It really is an emotional face that [Nicole Kidman] creates” (“Three Women” *The Hours* DVD). Kirk Honeycutt, a reviewer for the *Hollywood Reporter* commented that “Nicole Kidman— with a prosthetic nose—turns into real-life author Virginia Woolf in 1923 England” (10). The physical changes made to Nicole Kidman’s face intended to make her more closely resemble Virginia Woolf decreases the distance between Mrs. Woolf and Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. For the common viewer, Nicole Kidman becomes more than an actress playing Virginia Woolf; the changes in her facial features make her the new face of Virginia Woolf, giving three-dimensional life to the many popular photographic images of the author.

Woolf’s photographic images, used for various purposes over the last century, from biography to advertising, have, until now, represented the “authentic” or “real”

Virginia Woolf. Speaking specifically of Virginia Woolf's photographic image, Brenda Silver explains in her book *Virginia Woolf: Icon* that the photographic image has a "perceived ability to convey the essence of an individual, his or her innermost nature and qualities, an attribute inseparable from its presumed 'realism:' its seemingly direct portrayal of the individual" (136). Much of a photograph's appeal lies in its apparently magical power to unmask for its viewer the "true" individual. Virginia Woolf's photographic image has provided a portrait to which many readers have turned in order to discover an authentic "Virginia Woolf."

However, Woolf herself mistrusted these effects of the photographic image: "Woolf is fully aware of how readers/viewers come to photographs in search of evidence and place upon the photograph their preconceived notions of knowledge, truth and fact. Woolf's quarrel...is with a culture that expects a subject to be visually revealed and clearly defined" (Wussow 3). Long before the emergence of visual media in mass, Woolf sensed the danger in a medium that seems to provide an absolute definition of an individual. She was wary of the "realism" supplied by a photograph and the tendency for a viewer to mistake that "realism" for knowledge. The powerful ability that motion pictures have to make characters, whether historical or fictional, come alive on the screen supersedes even the realism of photography. As a moving, breathing, talking representation of Virginia Woolf, Nicole Kidman's characterization becomes the newest image which apparently transfers the "essence" of Woolf's identity.

While great lengths were taken to perfect Nicole Kidman's prosthetic nose in order to enhance her transformation as Mrs. Woolf, the character in the film hardly resembles the historical figure it claims to represent. Daniel Mendelsohn, author of "Not

Afraid of Virginia Woolf,” expresses his disgust at what he calls Kidman’s impersonation of the author: “[Virginia Woolf] was memorably described by Nigel Nicolson, who knew her, as ‘always beautiful but never pretty.’ Without the prosthesis, Kidman is pretty without being beautiful; with it, she is neither” (160). In the film, Kidman looks much less like herself, but neither does she look like the image of the sleek, sophisticated Woolf that survives in photographs. Her beauty, as well as the beauty of her mother, Julia Stephen and sister, Vanessa Stephen, is mentioned often by those who knew the family. Nicole Kidman’s Mrs. Woolf retains none of Virginia Woolf’s elegance, poise or intellect. Kidman sulks through the movie, playing a mad-writer turned captive in a housedress. However, I agree with Mendelsohn: “The physical appearance of the film’s Woolf is only worth mentioning because it may be taken as a symbol of the ways in which the film’s attempts to invoke Woolf herself, or her work, have the effect of flattening or misrepresenting her” (161). Much like failure of the flattened, awkward nose, meant to draw viewers closer to the historical figure and resurrect, on film, the spirit of Virginia Woolf through her image, Mrs. Woolf’s nature fails to capture the beauty, subtlety and complexity of Woolf’s life and work.

The makers of the film apparently did little research on Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. In the bonus material of *The Hours* DVD, the actresses and the filmmakers alike speak of their intimate familiarity with Cunningham’s novel, but little is mentioned about the familiarity with the author they are attempting to revive. The filmmakers mention Virginia Woolf’s name only when asserting that they are not, in fact, representing the author, but recreating their own character. Despite what the filmmakers wanted to do with the character of Virginia Woolf, it is nearly impossible, when adapting

an historical figure, to detach the characterization from that historical figure. The two are inextricably linked, and viewers tend to mistake the fictionalization for biography. In a review in *The Advocate*, Michael Glitz declares that “[Nicole Kidman] has blossomed from a movie star to an actor of great stature by capturing Woolf’s essence” (40). Even if the filmmakers did not intend it, much of the praise of the film has come from its proposed success in portraying the identity or “essence” of Virginia Woolf.

Although *The Hours*, like Cunningham’s novel, represents only one day in the lives of three women, that single day is meant to represent their entire lives. At the beginning of the film Mrs. Woolf ponders, while starting her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*: “A woman’s whole life in a single day, just one day, and in that day her whole life.” This explicit statement emphasizes the obvious implications in the film that each of the women’s lives in the film can be and is being characterized by the events of one day.

Similar to Cunningham’s Mrs. Woolf, the film’s Mrs. Woolf presents the life of Virginia Woolf as one of sadness, illness, and defeat. Of the character in the film, Mendelsohn says: “It is just one half (if that much) of the real Woolf, and it’s no coincidence that it’s the half that satisfies a certain cultural fantasy, going back to early biographies of Sappho, about what creative women are like: distracted, isolated, doomed” (162). In order to satisfy this cultural fantasy, the film’s Mrs. Woolf accentuates the isolation, paranoia, and weakness of the novel’s Mrs. Woolf. In her article “Regarding *The Hours*: A Transposition in Fiction and Film,” Herta Newman explains: “That [Virginia Woolf] was also formidably intelligent and famously charming are facets of her character as well documented as her ‘madness,’ though they fail to conform with the

view the film embraces: that gifted women are generally ‘mad’ and always unattractive” (9).

Clearly Cunningham cannot be held responsible for decisions the film makers made regarding the adaptation of his novel, nor for the countless interpretations by common viewers of the film. However, the film adaptation, while diluting many of the issues present in Cunningham’s novel in order to compress the story into two hours, brings to the foreground the themes of madness and homosexuality which drive the novel. Newman continues:

The film portrait, modeled closely on the novel’s, reveals to what considerable extent Cunningham bases his characterization of Virginia Woolf on the exhausted stories concerning her madness and suicide. [By] sharpening, clarifying, and admittedly often simplifying its ideological underpinnings, the film effectively lays bare the novel’s deepest meaning. (9)

While there exists a great deal of evidence to the contrary, Cunningham’s decision to portray Woolf’s life in this way, which is enhanced by the film, appears curious and enforces the stereotypes against which Woolf fought her entire life.

In the film *The Hours*, the cultural fantasy of the genius madwoman shut up inside her home producing masterpieces overwhelms the image of Virginia Woolf who completed a massive volume of work and lead a life of social, intellectual and artistic excitement. In the film, Vanessa’s children half ignore their aunt and are afraid of her apparent illness. Vanessa’s youngest daughter Angelica, who is more in tune with Mrs. Woolf than any of the other characters in the film, seems to pity her aunt’s obvious

mental instability. Concerned about the lasting effects of this characterization, Woolf's grand-niece, Virginia Nicholson criticizes the film's depiction of her aunt in *The Independent*:

I thought it was a terrible bit of casting. What worries me is that a generation of cinemagoers will see Virginia Woolf as a neurotic, gloomy, suicide-obsessed femme fatale...To anyone who knew her, she was enormous fun, made everyone laugh and had a crazy sense of humour. Her nieces and nephews didn't sit around mooning over dead birds with her. They had a lot of fun and a lot of laughter. (7 July 2004)

Nicholson's fears are justified. In the majority of the reviews, critics praise Kidman for her ability to subdue her own personality in order to foreground the melancholy demeanor of a tortured writer and capture the character of Mrs. Woolf. Claudia Puig's review in *USA Today* applauds Kidman's performance as "she strikes just the right chords as a troubled artist seeking inspiration and grappling with madness" (par. 3). Mick LaSalle, in his *San Francisco Chronicle* review, says of the character, "When not writing, she's like a drifter in her own home, afraid of servants and unable to leave" (par. 7). Working from Cunningham's reading of Woolf's life, the film portrays the character Mrs. Woolf primarily as a housewife trapped by her husband in a remote area of England, removing from Virginia Woolf's identity any traces of her as an intellectual and social individual. On the "Internet Movie Database," a common viewer commented on the character of Mrs. Woolf in the film: "She is a psychological mess, making life difficult for those around her and full of torment and despair" (aimless-46 par. 5). Throughout the one day that represents Woolf's whole life, Mrs. Woolf avoids



conversations with friends and family; she huffs and rolls her eyes at her husband's request that she eat; she gazes solemnly in the mirror in seeming disappointment at her life, and she sulks about her home laboring against the fear of madness. In speaking about the film, Herta Newman explains: "It is the overwrought presence of Virginia Woolf that dominates the film as indeed it does the novel. Yet it is not so much a 'real' Virginia Woolf as her legendary image that appears to have captured the author's imagination and serves as a model for his stricken heroines" (8). In so many ways, the film's Mrs. Woolf drains from Virginia Woolf's identity the complexity that was essential to her own characters and her own life.

Basing their Mrs. Woolf on Cunningham's fictionalization, the filmmakers also highlight the sexuality present in Cunningham's novel. David Hare, the screenwriter of the film, said in an interview, "Obviously, you know Michael's work, and you know Michael. Anything that was in the film about sexuality tries to be honest to what the book was about and indeed what Virginia Woolf herself was about" (Glitz 40). Assuming that Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf" is the correct "Virginia Woolf," that Mrs. Woolf's sexuality and Virginia Woolf's sexuality are the same thing, the filmmakers state that by remaining loyal to Cunningham's interpretation of Woolf, they are simultaneously remaining loyal to Woolf, offering *The Hours* as an illustration of Woolf's own sexuality rather than a representation of Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf."

In the same interview, Cunningham states: "It's hard to know about Virginia Woolf. She hardly had sex at all. She had sex with Leonard a couple of times after they were married, and she couldn't manage it. She had that big affair with Vita Sackville-West, but she and Vita only had sex a couple of times with kind of the same result. She

was a mess” (Glitz 40). Although there is documentation that Virginia and Leonard spoke with Vanessa after their honeymoon about their concerns with sex, how does Michael Cunningham know how many times the couple had sex? How does he know if and how many times Vita and Virginia had sex? Cunningham interprets Woolf’s ambiguous feelings toward sexuality present in her letters, diaries, and novels and represents that interpretation as biography through his character. This results in a Mrs. Woolf whose sexuality fits with twenty-first century expectations and is indicative of Cunningham’s “Virginia Woolf” but hardly resembles Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure.

*The Hours* does remain loyal to Cunningham’s work and its concentration on homosexuality, highlighting the presence of lesbian sexuality in the film. Even more than the novel’s Mrs. Woolf, the film’s Mrs. Woolf aptly fits Cunningham’s description of Virginia Woolf’s sexuality as “messy.” One reviewer, in describing an interaction in the film between Leonard and Mrs. Woolf, says, “[Leonard] begins to cry quietly, perhaps understanding that, as much as he loves [Virginia], this self-absorbed bisexual nutcase genius (or whatever she is) will never really be his” (O’Hehir par. 21). Indeed, the film’s Mrs. Woolf is a mess. She struggles with the obvious pressures of repressed lesbian impulses, and she battles with defining her own and her characters’ sexuality. Mrs. Woolf, in the film, appears physically, emotionally, and mentally withdrawn from the world, except in the expression of female intimacy, specifically in the kiss with her sister Vanessa.

Whereas the richness and complexity in Woolf’s writing comes from her ability to juxtapose conflicting emotions with grace and subtlety, the resonance in the film comes out of its intertwining theme of lesbian sexuality. Michael Glitz of *The Advocate*

applauds the depiction of female relationships in the film: “If any aspect of *The Hours* can be said to best embody emotional intelligence and richness, it is the echoing woman-to-woman kisses that punctuate the film: Woolf’s hungry, unexpected kiss of her sister; Laura’s thoughtful, caring kiss of her stunning neighbor; and Clarissa’s kiss of her lover, Sally” (40). While lesbian sexuality permeates the majority, if not all, of the female relationships in the film, I will deal specifically with the three kisses, so praised by Glitz’s review. Echoing the filmmakers, Glitz claims that “the three kisses in the film—obviously they’re all ambiguous. They’re not sexual kisses. They’re not nonsexual kisses” (40). Apparently, it should be clear to all viewers that these female kisses are indistinct.

It is not clear to me. Neither is it clear to many common and uncommon viewers that these kisses are meant to be ambiguous. “Lesbian overtones abound,” says reviewer James Berardinelli, “Woolf (a bisexual) is seen to plant a lip-to-lip smooch on her sister...while something similar happens between [Mrs. Brown] and a neighbor” (par.3). Common viewer Roland Zwick wrote in his review of the film: “The first thing that may strike you about *The Hours* is that this film features more major characters who are gay, or at least bisexual, than any mainstream movie I can think of” (par. 1). Reviewer Harvey Karten, after providing a short plot summary and commenting on human connection, writes: “And oh yes, there is a lesbian motif” (par. 3). Many reviewers, both professional and non-professional, do not see the kisses or the female relationships in the film as ambiguous, subtle expressions of sensuality, but as obvious homosexual interactions. The three kisses are laden with sexual tension and implication, even more so than in Cunningham’s novel.

The kiss between Mrs. Woolf and her sister Vanessa in the film contains emotional elements not immediately obvious in the novel. Mrs. Woolf, in the novel, ponders the kiss throughout the day, and as she does, the sexual implication becomes stronger. The film immediately draws the sexuality in the kiss to the foreground. Vanessa hustles her children out the door while Mrs. Woolf pleads with her to stay; condescendingly, Vanessa cradles Mrs. Woolf's face in her hands and gives her a kiss on the cheek. To Vanessa's surprise, Mrs. Woolf grabs Vanessa's face and aggressively kisses her with a disturbingly passionate hunger. Michael Cunningham, in his commentary on the film, described the kiss between Mrs. Woolf and Vanessa as a "vampire kiss" (*The Hours* DVD). Cunningham's is a fitting description. The kiss between the sisters contains a dark, primitive sexuality reminiscent of many vampire films. However, Director Steven Daldry's commentary on the kiss rejects the presence of any sexuality in the exchange: "Again, there is nothing sexual here at all" (*The Hours* DVD). I find the director's denial of the presence of sexuality in the film unsettling. Either he is unaware of the homosexual overtones of the film, which is doubtful, or he feels that the sexuality in the film plays a more minor role than it does.

This, however, is not the case. Mrs. Woolf, in the kiss with Vanessa, seems to be unleashing upon her sister all the frustrations of being trapped in Richmond and of her heterosexual marriage. Vanessa, disturbed by the kiss, looks disapprovingly at Mrs. Woolf and, after attempting to sooth Mrs. Woolf's agitation, quickly escapes into the carriage and the comfort and safety of her children. Mrs. Woolf, in the scene, appears to be a threat to Vanessa's happiness as a wife and mother, thrusting upon her sister all her repression—emotional and sexual—in the departing kiss.

Added to the presence of lesbianism in the character of Mrs. Woolf, which is inevitably linked with Virginia Woolf's sexuality for the common viewer, the sexuality present in the lives of the other two characters, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway, is also linked with Virginia Woolf's sexuality. Due to the nature of the film, I am concerned that many viewers will have mistaken the depiction of lesbian sexuality in other aspects of the film for Woolf's own ideas about sexuality. In her review, Christy Lemire mentions that "Daldry's direction, coupled with Peter Boyle's editing, truly make us feel as if we're watching three facets of the same woman" (par. 3). At the beginning of the film, the alarm clocks of all three women in their respective homes go off. Mrs. Woolf, in 1923, awake in bed after a visit from her doctor, stares vacantly into the distance; Mrs. Brown, in 1951, lies in bed, pregnant, and switches off her alarm; Mrs. Dalloway, in 2001, after being stirred by her lover's early morning return, turns off her alarm and bustles through her house to the bathroom.

In the following seconds, the camera alternates seamlessly between Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Woolf putting up their hair, facing the mirror and washing their faces. Mrs. Woolf looks down to wash her face, and the camera cuts to Mrs. Dalloway lifting her face from her sink, having just washed it. The next scene shows the faces of all three women as they prepare for the coming day, cutting to vases of flowers in each of the three worlds. Nicole Kidman, in the "Three Women" segment of the bonus material, says of the film, "It was magical to see us all connected like that" (*The Hours* DVD). Indeed one of the most beautiful aspects of the film is the continuing interconnection among the three women through these editing effects. Considering the ability of this film to

intertwine the characters to this degree, the tendency to connect the sexuality in the entire film with Woolf's own sexuality becomes clear.

Mrs. Brown, an overanxious, pregnant housewife in a pale-blue, flowered bathrobe, struggles to make a cake for her husband's birthday. Unexpectedly, her neighbor Kitty comes by to ask a favor. Mrs. Brown examines herself in the mirror, and before she can open the door, a voluptuous Toni Collette, as Kitty, enters the house. Kitty wears an extremely low-cut halter dress with a beautiful floral necklace; her hair is perfectly styled, and her lipstick is a crimson red. She is the quintessential Fifties woman, physically appealing and exceptionally sweet. After she tells Mrs. Brown of her upcoming surgery to investigate a "growth in her uterus," Kitty's façade of the successful, blissful, social housewife begins to fade. In this moment of vulnerability, Mrs. Brown rises from her chair; pressing Kitty's cheek against her breasts, Mrs. Brown bends down and kisses Kitty's red lips. In the actress' commentary, Julianne Moore says the kiss is "something that [Kitty] accepts that Laura gives to her...She loves her and there's also an element of sexuality involved, and Toni [Collette] accepts all of that" (*The Hours* DVD). Although Kitty sidesteps Mrs. Brown's questions about the kiss afterward, the moment contains a mutual attraction and acceptance. Exuding sexuality, Mrs. Brown's kiss, witnessed by her young son, gives the viewer the sense that she is closer to accepting and perhaps pursuing her lesbian desires than Mrs. Woolf is.

In the director's commentary, Steven Daldry admits to repeated questions from viewers about the lesbian overtones in the Mrs. Brown kiss. To them, he replies: "There is an erotic charge to it, and perhaps in a parallel universe, Laura Brown would describe herself or would come out as a lesbian, but certainly in this story, she would never

describe herself as such” (*The Hours* DVD). Implied in Daldry’s answer is an affirmation of the lesbian sexuality that pervades the film which implies that each of the women is repressing, compromising, or coping with her lesbianism. Mrs. Brown does not appear to be a lesbian, or a woman who would call herself a lesbian; she comes across as an average housewife dealing with powerful attractions to another woman, which intensifies her already unstable and unhappy state. Had she lived in the world the film creates for Mrs. Dalloway, she perhaps would have had the freedom and the ability to identify her lesbian desires. In Cunningham’s commentary on the film, he says of Mrs. Brown: “She’s got a lesbian thing going on, but she has a lot of other things going on too” (*The Hours* DVD). Truly, all of Mrs. Brown’s problems do not stem from her inability to confront her attractions to Kitty, but certainly, the necessity she feels to repress her perceptible lesbian desires factors into her unhappiness and into her final decision to leave her husband, her son, and her life in Fifties suburbia.

Near the end of the film, the two women who are in a lesbian relationship, Mrs. Dalloway and Sally also share a kiss. Unlike the other two kisses, Mrs. Dalloway’s kiss contains less sexual and more emotional energy. As the intertwining of the stories suggests, Mrs. Dalloway is free to live the life she wants. She is not constrained by social rules like Mrs. Woolf or by familial expectations like Mrs. Brown. She realizes, unlike the other women, that she belongs in her world and she will remain in her lesbian relationship. Mrs. Woolf chooses suicide instead of continuing her “repressed” life, and Mrs. Brown, as the reader later discovers, chooses to leave her husband and children. Daldry says, in the director’s commentary, that he has always seen the Mrs. Dalloway kiss as “different than the other kisses, as seeing the life that’s in front of you rather than

the life that has been or the life you want or wanted” (*The Hours* DVD). Being in the open, the lesbian sexuality in this kiss does not express anxiety as the other two kisses do; however, the implications about lesbian sexuality that are so integral to the Mrs. Dalloway kiss emphasize the sexual need revealed in the kisses of the other two characters and, by extension, the presence of repressed lesbian sexuality.

The film’s emphasis on lesbianism, while influencing viewers’ perceptions of Virginia Woolf’s sexuality, also represents each of the major female characters as erotic objects. According to Mendelsohn, Woolf herself reacted to this type of fictionalization of women in literature, and “what the makers of the film are doing, it occurs to you, is exactly what Woolf worried that men did in their fictional representations of women: seeing women from the perspective of men” (162). Woolf’s concern mirrors the twenty-first century criticism of female objectification in film. Laura Mulvey’s criticism of “woman as image” and “man as the bearer of the look” in contemporary cinema rejects the utilization of women as “an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film” (383). Mulvey explains: “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object within the screen’s story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (384). As objects, women cannot be possessors of the gaze; instead they are recipients of the “male gaze,” a term which originated from Mulvey’s argument. The term “male gaze,” most often used to in reference to film, refers to the ways in which camera angles and editing construct women as objects, according to Mulvey’s theory, for male consumption. At first glance, it may seem that Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway—women, who are, at the very least, unaware of and



often irritated by the men in their lives—do not provide examples of Mulvey’s argument or of the male gaze.

However, the film, like Cunningham’s novel, defines these women by and through their sexuality. *The Hours* is guilty of what Mulvey calls “neatly combining spectacle and narrative” (383). The film, apparently about a day in each of the women’s lives, is actually about female sexuality: “Cunningham moved the reader through the cultural history of the twentieth century, from early ideas of female repression and social conformity to current views of gender transgression and sexual liberty” (Singer 11). The women in the film, created through the eyes of the male gaze of three men—Cunningham, Hare, and Daldry—are sexual beings at their core. Sexuality drives the narrative. Clearly, each woman in the film serves as an erotic object for other women but also serves as an erotic object for the man in her life: Mrs. Woolf to her husband; Mrs. Brown to her husband; Mrs. Dalloway to Richard and to Louis. And, as reviews have shown, these women also serve as erotic objects to the viewers whose comments rarely fail to mention the presence of sexuality in the film. The filmmakers’ appropriation of Virginia Woolf’s identity not only reduces Mrs. Woolf to a woman grappling with madness and repressed lesbian desires but, ultimately, reduces her to an erotic object of the male gaze.

The popularity of the film and its success in Hollywood has piqued the already rising interest in Virginia Woolf. *The Hours* grossed more than forty-one million dollars in the United States alone before it left theaters in May 2003. Many common readers, attracted to the modernist author, will have seen the film in order to further their knowledge of Woolf. Others, only slightly familiar with Virginia Woolf, may have come

away from the film with a desire to become more familiar with her. And many common viewers, desiring exposure to the intellectual figure of Virginia Woolf without the effort of actually reading her sometimes difficult writing, leave the film with the satisfaction of knowing something about Woolf.

Part of the intrigue surrounding adaptations of Woolf is the desire to bring her down into common life, to make her continuously more accessible to the non-academic public, and *The Hours* contributes to that process. In many ways, *The Hours* makes Woolf contemporary. Steven Daldry states: “What we wanted with Virginia is a contemporary, somebody that felt part of our generation, part of our world, not her literary figure lost in the mists of time, but somebody who was speaking directly to us now” (“Three Women” *The Hours* DVD). Many common viewers are drawn to *The Hours* because of its ability to give the reader and viewer an avenue of accessibility to an apparently mysterious literary figure. Herta Newman explains:

What finally distinguishes a successful adaptation like *The Hours* is its ability to satisfy this appetite for culture without unduly taxing readers so inclined, or forfeiting the broad appeal of mainstream fiction. For despite its borrowed high-brow aura, Cunningham’s is a mainstream novel, worthy of its best-sellerdom, and excites in turn the popular instinct of film-makers, who, eager to market the appetite for culture, purvey the preempted aura, adjusted now to the more generalized taste of the viewing public, at yet a further remove. (9)

Through *The Hours*, many common viewers and readers have been exposed to Woolf who would otherwise not have known anything about her, but the film’s ability to

reach a larger, more common audience has also increased the effects that Cunningham's characterization has had on Virginia Woolf's identity. In order to make the supposed inaccessible Virginia Woolf accessible to the mainstream public, the film necessarily removes her depth and complexity:

It is still a serious problem that little about this frumpy cinematic Woolf suggests why she loves London so much; you get no sense of Woolf as the confident, gossip-loving queen of Bloomsbury, the vivid social figure, the amusing diarist, the impressively productive journalist expertly maneuvering her professional obligations and relationships. (Mendelsohn 161)

The film's Mrs. Woolf, a character palatable for a common viewer, is, perhaps, also more enduring for the common viewer. The power of the cinematic pleasure and effortless accessibility to "Virginia Woolf" created by the film may ultimately consume Cunningham's novel and, in turn, consume even his fictionalization of Woolf. LaSalle writes that "Director Stephen Daldry employs the wonderful things cinema can do in order to realize aspects of *The Hours* that Cunningham could only hint at or approximate on the page. The result is something rare, especially considering how fine the novel is: a film that's fuller and deeper than the book" (par. 2). The film's appeal may ultimately overshadow the appeal of Cunningham's novel, and the film's Mrs. Woolf may be the only Woolf common viewers will know. This Woolf, from the numerous reviews, emerges as a woman defined by madness, suicide and repressed homosexuality. As one common viewer remarks in frustration, "The fact of the matter is that Woolf was severely mentally ill. She was no heroine. She was a very sick woman" (jmkeeling95 par. 2).

Although there were moments of illness in Woolf's life when this statement might have been true, Virginia Woolf was a highly social, lighthearted, curious individual who valued friends and family and who was loved by those who knew her best. Ironically, included in bonus materials of *The Hours* DVD is a biographical piece called "The Mind and Times of Virginia Woolf." I find it interesting that though the filmmakers claim to be creating a contemporary figure rather than impersonating or recreating an historical one, they felt it appropriate to put a biographical documentary of Virginia Woolf on the DVD and, further, one which contradicts, in many ways, the "Virginia Woolf" portrayed in the film. Unlike the film's Mrs. Woolf, the documentary, produced by The Bridge and directed by Tony Steyger, shows Virginia Woolf as a complex intellectual, as a "muscular, prolific, energetic, strong, big writer" (Lee *The Hours* DVD). Many scholars, biographers, and friends and family of Virginia Woolf comment in the documentary about her strength, her passion for life, her sense of humor, her writing, and her illness. Nigel Nicolson, the son of Vita Sackville-West speaks of her illness, not as a continuous, debilitating fear, but as isolated periods which were difficult for all who knew her: "When Virginia went off of her head, which she did about four times in her life, it was a total transformation. She was insulting; cruel to the people she loved most, like Leonard Woolf" (*The Hours* DVD). Clearly, Nicolson's explanation of the great change in Woolf's actions and demeanor during her periods of illness is evidence of the presence, if not dominance, of her healthy periods.

With the exception of her periods of illness, those who knew Woolf remember her as lively, energetic, comical, and highly social. In "The Mind and Times," Woolf's niece Olivier Bell describes the children's reaction when their mother, Vanessa, informed them

of a visit from Virginia: “Oh hooray! Virginia’s coming to tea. Now we shall enjoy ourselves,” she said, “because [Virginia] was very enlivening and inspiring” (*The Hours* DVD). Even near the end of her life, in the threat of war and a breakdown of her emotional and mental state, Virginia Woolf maintained her positive attitude. Quentin Bell, Woolf’s nephew, describes the mood at the Woolf’s house during the last years of his aunt’s life:

Virginia’s diaries, it is true, become increasingly despondent; private miseries and public events struck with overwhelming force, but still, she was not overwhelmed...the new friends whom Virginia had made in the thirties...did not carry away with them the impression of an old and gloomy authoress, frustrated in her work, bereaved and menaced. At Monk’s House and at 52 Tavistock Square the prevailing sound was still one of laughter; it might take some courage to go on laughing at that time, but an appearance—and indeed a reality—of gaiety was maintained. (210)

The character of Virginia Woolf as expressed by those who knew her starkly contradicts Mrs. Woolf as depicted in the film *The Hours*: a one-dimensional character defined by her madness and dominated by her inability to express her homosexual impulses.

My concern here is that the film’s Mrs. Woolf is too easily mistaken for Virginia Woolf, the literary and historical figure. On the “Internet Movie Database” one common viewer explains: “Virginia’s story is mostly factual, the other two are fictional” (TXMike par. 1). The consequence of this blending of the fictional and historical figures creates a widespread opinion that Virginia Woolf was a woman who “[chose] suicide over a suffocating marriage...because the Victorian times did not allow her to live her true

lesbian desires,” as another common viewer reports (jmkeeling95 par. 2). Trusting the filmmakers of *The Hours* to provide an accurate representation of Woolf, common viewers, it seems, generally perceive Virginia Woolf as a neurotic, disempowered mad woman who, against all odds, wrote novels about women, like herself, struggling with depression and defining their sexuality.

## Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's readership continues to expand due to the popularity of *The Hours*, a significant and seemingly positive consequence of Cunningham's adaptation. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, for the first time in its seventy-eight years, is on the best seller list. In his review of the novel, Michael Wood expresses delight in reading *Mrs. Dalloway* after *The Hours* and encourages others to do the same: "We don't have to read *Mrs. Dalloway* before we can read *The Hours*,...[but] to not read *Mrs. Dalloway* after we've read *The Hours* seems like a horrible denial of a readily available pleasure—as if we were to leave a concert just when the variations were getting interesting" (par. 9). Common viewer JoBlo on the "Internet Movie Database" commented: "The lady friend who joined me...was invigorated enough after the film...to make a little detour by the bookstore to purchase a copy of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*" (par. 2). Julia Briggs also comments on the pleasure of reading *Mrs. Dalloway* after exposure to *The Hours*: "*The Hours* is a fascinating novel and makes a remarkable film; yet to turn back from it to *Mrs. Dalloway* is to recognize how easy and uncontrived, but at the same time how inward, experimental and still startlingly modern is this novel, written more than three-quarters of a century ago" (*Inner Life* 158). Perhaps feeling less intimidated by Woolf after being exposed to Cunningham's fictionalized representation of her, more common readers are embarking on a journey to creating a "Virginia Woolf" of their own, but that journey, altered by Cunningham's adaptation of Woolf, leads readers down a path to "Virginia Woolf" marked by inter-textual influence.

I imagine Virginia Woolf's reaction to Cunningham's depiction of her would be similar to Mrs. Dalloway's response in *The Hours* to a friend's suggestion that she is the

woman in Richard's novel: "'This isn't me,' she says, 'It's Richard's fantasy about some woman who vaguely resembles me'" (*Hours* 129). Mrs. Woolf in *The Hours* is not Virginia Woolf. She is Michael Cunningham's fantasy about a woman who vaguely resembles Virginia Woolf. I'm sure that each lover of Virginia Woolf's writing has a fantasy about who Virginia Woolf is, and those fantasies, I imagine, are as varied as Woolf's readers. Each individual's "Virginia Woolf" is valid and significant, and how it is different from other "Virginia Woolfs" is not so important as how each reader comes to their own perception of Virginia Woolf and her writing: "For as the argument mounts from step to step, ... what matters is not so much the end we reach as our manner of reaching it" (Woolf *CR* 32).

Woolf's own preoccupation with a reader's path to knowledge through the experience of reading is evident in much of her writing. Julia Briggs asserts that "Woolf recognized the power of reading and knew that its impact could be as strong as that of any actual experience, and that, like any powerful force, it could be felt as threatening as well as inviting, coercive as well as seductive" (*Reading VW* 67). The influence of modernist thought at the time propelled Woolf's approbation of impersonality in writing, because it allows the text to remain open for the reader to determine its meaning. In her diary, she writes: "The dream is too often about myself. To correct this; and to forget one's own sharp absurd little personality, reputation and the rest of it, one should read; see outsiders; think more; write more logically; above all be full of work; and practice anonymity" (*Diary* 119). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf advocates anonymity or impersonality in writing as she praises the work of those who emulate it and criticizes those who do not. Expressing the disapproval of the personal and the problems that



accompany it, Woolf critiques the writing of Charlotte Bronte: “One will see that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire...She will write in a rage when she should write calmly. She will write foolishly when she should write wisely. She will write of herself when she should write of her characters” (69). Plagued by the personal, according to Woolf, Bronte can never emerge completely as an artist. She is forever contained within the confines of her own influence. She is tangled within her writing, unable to separate herself from her characters and her emotion from her artistry. Her readers, then, are also tangled within Bronte’s personality.

On the contrary, Woolf applauded the work of Shakespeare as ideally detached and impersonal: “his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us...All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded” (*Room 56*). Unlike Bronte, Shakespeare leaves no traces of himself in his texts. The reader, looking into the mirror of Shakespeare’s writing, sees only the reflection of her own emotions. Perhaps overstating her case, Woolf asserts that the whole of Shakespeare’s excellence lies in his ability to remove himself from his writing. She is also delighted by the work of Jane Austen for “here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching...for that reason, Jane Austen pervades everything she wrote, and so does Shakespeare” (*Room 68*). Jane Austen, like Shakespeare spreads so completely and thinly through her work that she is nearly invisible to her readers.

The objectivity that these authors labored so greatly to maintain, or at least the appearance of objectivity, lends itself to and perhaps even encourages adaptation.

Interestingly, along with Shakespeare's works, works by Jane Austen are some of the most commonly adapted texts. Over the last century, Woolf has come to stand opposite Shakespeare as a major figurehead of British literary history and one that has been almost as commonly adapted. Brenda Silver draws this parallel, in her book *Virginia Woolf: Icon*: "Virginia Woolf, you may be thinking, is not on a par with Shakespeare, but you would be wrong. By the mid-1900s she was not only appearing alongside Shakespeare whenever a 'canonical' woman writer was needed, but her novels, already subject to versioning for scholars and general readers, were increasingly being adapted—or versioned—for the stage and screen" (211). Because Woolf's impersonality in writing leaves the text open and fluid, each individual reader finds different resonances within the narratives, allowing her writing to be readily retranslated and adapted.

Much like Shakespeare, and perhaps due to her incessant desire to write as he wrote, disappearing nearly completely into her texts, Woolf remains an elusive figure. Like her writing, Woolf's identity is something complex, layered, and often contradictory. It is one thing, but simultaneously, it is something else; she is much like her character, Bernard, in *The Waves*:

There are many Bernards. There was the charming, but weak; the strong, but supercilious; the brilliant, but remorseless; the very good fellow, but, I make no doubt, the awful bore; the sympathetic, but cold; the shabby, but—go into the next room—the foppish, worldly, and too well dressed.

What I was to myself was different; none of these things. (260)

It is of this openness and complexity which Cunningham's adaptation robs Virginia Woolf. Contradicting Woolf's expressed desire to remove personality from her texts, *The*

*Hours* forces personality upon her, intertwining Woolf's identity nearly completely with that of *Mrs. Dalloway* and with the characters in that novel. Above all, *The Hours* highlights specific aspects of Woolf's personality in an attempt to simplify her, to define her, to categorize her. Cunningham's adaptation, perhaps more than any other, closes the text of Virginia Woolf's identity, and blocks the reader's ability to veer from the path to "Virginia Woolf" that he has built.

Cunningham is not alone in his fascination with defining Woolf, with identifying who she is as an author and a person. Cecil Woolf, nephew of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, in a monograph to his Bloomsbury Heritage Series, is publishing a collection of Woolf's likes and dislikes. For research, he has asked Paula Maggio, who edits a weblog on [worldpress.com](http://worldpress.com) called *Blogging Woolf*, to create a page where "Woolfians, both common readers and scholars," can post references of Woolf's likes and dislikes from her letters and diaries. This collection is evidence not only of Woolf's vast readership, containing comments from national and international scholars and common readers, but also of the prominent interest in defining who Virginia Woolf is. Because of this interest, adaptations of Woolf's identity and work are likely to continue, and as these appropriations increase in frequency and popularity, Virginia Woolf will remain a significant figure in pop culture.

Fortunately, much has been done to analyze Woolf's emergence as a popular icon and the resulting appropriations of her identity, providing, for the common reader, a way to reopen the text of Virginia Woolf's identity. Maggio's weblog includes links to information on Woolf: Bibliography of Woolf Studies; Dreadnought Hoax; Obituary; Courses on Virginia Woolf taught at various universities throughout the world; Virginia

Woolf Travel, which lists links to historical places significant to Virginia Woolf; Woolf as Commodity, which lists a variety of links to “Woolf” items for sale on the web; Woolf Resources, a list of links including Bloomsbury Group, Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Woolf Studies Annual and many others; and Woolfians Connect, which offers links to several international Woolf Societies. Among these is a link to World Wide Woolf, a web page by Brenda Silver. As an outcrop of her book, *Virginia Woolf: Icon*, Silver published an online essay for the University Chicago Press website which investigates Woolf on the World Wide Web. In her essay, Silver delineates how Woolf’s “presence on the web graphically illustrates her multiple personae...Her appearances can also be read as embodiments of the medium itself. When Virginia Woolf goes hypertextual, her proliferation and diversity become one with the connections, disjunctions, juxtapositions, and interactions that characterize the web” (par. 8). Silver’s essay allows the public entry to a multifaceted “Virginia Woolf.” Websites, articles, books and adaptations that help to ask questions about Virginia Woolf, that highlight her multiplicity and her complexity balance other adaptations of Woolf that would attempt to fix her. Accessibility to such sources for common readers is crucial, helping to remind them that Woolf cannot be simplified to a set of ideologies by people who would use her. Such sources advocate the removal of filters like Cunningham’s that would assign Woolf to a specific, concrete reading and encourage adaptations that open up the text of Virginia Woolf rather than close it.

Ultimately, understanding of Woolf cannot be limited to what is known about her history, and it certainly should not be limited to adaptations or fictional representations of her. Individuals must advocate, as Woolf did, the importance of seeing past the myth of

Woolf's personality. Readers must go to Virginia Woolf's texts to learn of her. For, as Francine Prose explains:

What we know, or half know, or think we know about Virginia Woolf—that sad litany of childhood trauma, illness, madness, suicide, death, dark decades brightened by flashes of acid Bloomsbury wit—has come to seem like a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of a brilliant, blighted life and about the particular perils of being a writer and a woman. Yet, every sentence Virginia Woolf wrote, every word she wrote about writing, tells a parallel but altogether different and contradictory story—a narrative at once courageous, inspirational, and far more valuable to us, her grateful heirs, than the pitiable image of the fragile, haunted, still-beautiful woman who, at fifty-nine, methodically filled her pockets with stones and walked into the river. (1)

Virginia Woolf left for future readers a bulk of writing, both fictional and autobiographical, which inspire hope, laughter and learning amidst the difficulties of everyday life. She left novels and short stories that inspire readers to contemplate the meaning in ordinary moments and unspoken thoughts. She left an extensive diary that offers a unique glimpse into the mind of a writer, all of which enhance the text of Virginia Woolf. I hope future adaptations will help to reopen the text of Woolf's identity so, as Hermione Lee states, "Virginia Woolf as an author will go on changing" (759). It is that ability to change, after all, which allows each reader to create a "Virginia Woolf" of their own.

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Appendix A. Images of Virginia Woolf



Figure A-1: Virginia Woolf, 1902



Figure A-2: Virginia Woolf, 1927



Figure A-3: Virginia Woolf, 1930



Figure A-4: Virginia Woolf, 1933



Figure A-5: Cover of *Time* Magazine, 12 April 1937



Figure A-6: "European Heroes" *Time* Magazine 2004 (Clockwise from top left: Machiavelli, Petrarch, Martin Luther, John F. Kennedy, George Orwell, Virginia Woolf)



Figure A-7: 2006 UK Postage Stamp

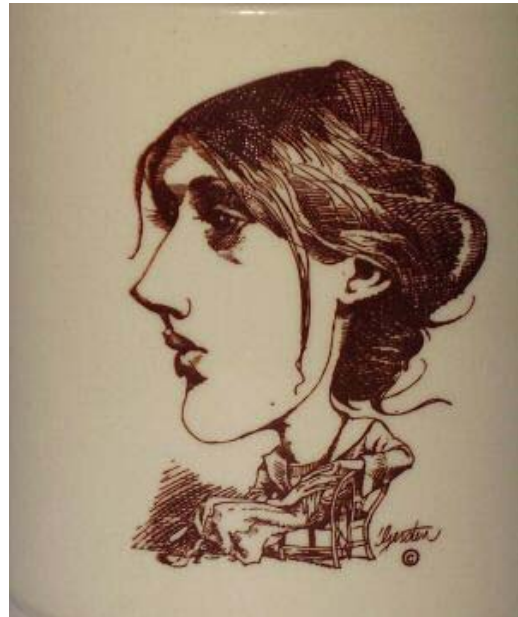


Figure A-8: Coffee Mug, eBay



Figure A-9: Virginia Woolf Watch



Figure A-10: Caricature, N Kentucky U

Appendix B. Images of Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf from The Hours



Figure B-1: Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf



Figure B-2: Nicole Kidman with director Steven Daldry

## Appendix C. Letter from Virginia Woolf to Leonard dated "Tuesday"

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going  
mad again: I feel we cant go  
through another of these terrible times.  
And I shant recover this time. I begin  
to hear voices, and can't concentrate.  
So, I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have  
given me  
the greatest possible happiness. You  
have been in every way all that anyone  
could be. I don't think two  
people could have been happier till  
this terrible disease came. I cant  
fight it any longer. I know that I am  
spoilng your life, that without me you  
could work. And you will I know.  
You see I cant even write this properly. I  
cant read. What I want to say is that  
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 [new page]  
have saved me it would have been you.  
Everything has gone from me but the  
certainty of your goodness. I  
cant go on spoilng your life any longer. I don't think two  
people  
could have been happier than we have been.  
V.



Appendix D. Letter from Virginia Woolf to Leonard  
Left on her writing block the morning of 28 March 1941.

Dearest,

I want to tell you that you have  
given me complete happiness. No one  
could have done more than you have done.

Please believe that.

But I know that I shall never get over  
this: & I am wasting your life. It is this madness.

Nothing anyone says can persuade me.

You can work, & you will be much  
better without me. You see I cant  
write this even, which shows I am right.

All I want to say is that until this  
Disease came on we were perfectly  
happy. It was all due to you.

No one could have been so good as  
you have been. From the very  
first day until now.

[She added with fresh ink]: Everyone knows that.

V.