

Virginia Woolf as a Central Character in Michael Cunningham's

The Hours

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Abstract

This article focuses on the significance of life by analyzing Cunningham's Virginia Woolf. Cunningham creates a fictional character of Woolf by representing her life and the process of how she created her work, *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *The Hours*, I try to evaluate Cunningham's perception of Woolf's life and work. In the part, "Mrs. Woolf," Cunningham not only depicts Woolf's own failure as a writer and but also her struggles for her own insanity. And Woolf's suicide in "The Prologue" is very significant. Her suicide influences the other two women's' stories in the parts of "Mrs. Brown" and "Mrs. Dalloway."

Keywords: Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Struggles between Life and Death, Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

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In *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is a central character. Not only was she a productive female writer, but she was also an important women's right's advocate. And Woolf is best known for her contribution to modernist literature. E. M. Forster (1879-1970) said "She liked writing with an intensity which few writers have attained, or even desired. Most of them write with half an eye on their royalties, half an eye on their critics, and a third half eye on improving the world, which leaves them with only half an eye for the task on which she concentrated her entire vision" (206).

Virginia Woolf and her siblings—Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) and Thoby Stephen (1880-1906), "moved out of the family residence in Hyde Park Gate, Kensington, to what was then a rather less respectable address in Bloomsbury, that area of London which borders on the British Museum. They determined to make their new home, 46 Gordon Square, a place where their friends could easily meet and talk at all hours" (6) .² They established the Bloomsbury Group and helped her to develop a most unique literary talent and a sense of creative art. Released from the doctrines of her family and Victorian traditional values, Woolf decided to be a writer. Her brother, Thoby, and his friends [such as *Lytton Strachey* (1880-1932), *Duncan Grant* (1885-1978), *John Maynard Keynes* (1883-1946), *Roger Fry* (1866-1934), Vanessa's husband, *Clive Bell* (1881-1964), and Virginia's husband, *Leonard Woolf* (1880-1969)] held meetings to discuss art and literature and achieved considerable distinction in their various fields. Their communal attributes put emphasis on "skepticism about the social moral and religious traditions of Victorian England as well as an approval of innovations in art and literature" (496) .³

Being a social elite and an intellectual in her society, Woolf sharply criticized social conventions and entire social political systems in her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Michael

² D'Auila, Ulysses L. (1989). "Introduction: Bloomsbury and the Climate of Modernism," *Bloomsbury and Modernism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

³ Liu, Bingshan (1992). *A Short History of English Literatu.* , Henan: Henan People's Publishing House.

Cunningham depicts Woolf as a woman who fights against her insanity and who creates her famous novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, which takes place on one day of 1923. In Cunningham's depiction, she suffers headaches all the time and faces her dilemmas between life and death. Before creating *The Hours*, Cunningham kept reading and re-reading Woolf's biographies and diaries. Cunningham's reinterpretation of Woolf suggests that his aim is to broaden her themes, to depict them in a new context in order to emphasize their universality (Sarah Van der Laan's "A New Hour for Woolf"). When he was writing the storyline, Cunningham paid attention to Woolf's inner struggles. And Woolf can be considered as a central character that has a great influence on the other two female characters' stories in the two parts, "Mrs. Brown" and "Mrs. Dalloway."

Cunningham shows Virginia Woolf as a middle-aged woman, who fights against insanity and endures a suffocating life. And he depicts Woolf as an ordinary and unconfident woman. He also describes a fictional husband-wife relationship between Leonard and Virginia. Before Cunningham wrote this novel, he started to read many of Woolf's biographies, her diaries, and her journals. In the novel, Leonard almost takes care of her because she is suffering from insanity. They have to move away from London to Richmond in order let Virginia Woolf undergo psychiatric treatment. Although Virginia thinks: "She is better, she is safer, if she rests in Richmond" (TH169)⁴, this is almost killing her. In the beginning Cunningham describes Woolf's physical appearance and her unstable mental condition, he tries to subvert Woolf's ideal image in which most people regard her as a famous female writer in early 20th century English society.

To Cunningham, Virginia Woolf is not a perfect wife at all. He even imagines that Woolf regards herself as an unsuccessful writer. At the beginning of "Mrs. Woolf's" part, Virginia does not know how to deal with her servant, Nelly Boxall. And Virginia tries to

⁴ Cunningham, Michael (1999). *The Hours*. London: Fourth Estate. In this article, pages of the novel will be cited as "TH."

avoid “risking exposure to Nelly’s bargaining and grievances” (TH31). Virginia also thinks, “It could be a good day; it needs to be treated carefully”(TH31). Nelly, who is a servant in the house, seems to Virginia that she must be responsible for being a hostess. But Virginia does not want to be bothered by trivial things, only her writing. Therefore, Virginia chooses to steer clear of Nelly, and she wonders, “Why is it so difficult dealing with servants? Virginia’s mother managed beautifully. Vanessa manages beautifully. Why is it so difficult to be firm and kind with Nelly; to command her respect and her love?”(TH 87).

Virginia Woolf, who belongs to the bourgeois class, is not good at communicating with people who come from the lower classes. And bourgeois people often treat them without paying attention to their needs and plights. For example, when Virginia enters the kitchen to deal with Nelly, she wonders, “How does she remember, how does she manage, every day and every hour, to be exactly the same?” (TH 84). When Nelly and Virginia are talking about the food for lunch, Nelly satirizes Virginia: “Unless you’d like something fancier”(TH 85). Cunningham critically shows not only the difference between a bourgeois intellectual and a laboring -class woman but also reveals Edwardian intellectuals’ “snobbery.”

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf is afraid of facing her inner and dark self by looking in the mirror. The reason why she is so afraid is that the mirror reflects an image of her “dangerous” side:

...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...

She, Virginia, could be a girl in a new dress, about to go down to a party, about to appear on the stairs, fresh and full of hope. No, she will not look in the mirror (TH 30-1).

In the above the passage, her hallucination of “the dark manifestation of air that

matches her body” refers to her “other self” in her unconscious. M. -L. Von Franz uses Carl Jung’s idea of “the shadow” and assumes that the other side of the self is the shadow “represents the opposite of the ego and to embody just those qualities that one dislikes most in other people” (182)⁵. While Virginia Woolf rejects looking in the mirror, she also denies her true self from her reflection of the mirror. This reflection of Virginia in the mirror seems her real self who has to be concealed and which she refuses to admit. The mirror reflects on “the other self” of her own, and she is afraid of facing her “dark side” which will take over her normal-pretended self. Here “dark side” refers to her insanity. From many biographies, we know that Virginia’s mental condition was not very stable. When she began her mental breakdowns, she was often trying to kill herself.

Meanwhile, in “The Prologue,” Virginia Woolf is suffering from “the voices”(TH 4) inside her, as is Richard Brown in the part, “Mrs. Dalloway.” All the time she suffers headaches and “these voices” in her mind. Before committing suicide, Virginia Woolf thinks she has “failed” to fight against her insanity:

She has failed, and now the voices are back, muttering indistinctly just beyond the range of her vision, behind her, here, no, turn and they’ve gone somewhere else. The voices are back and the headache is approaching as surely as rain, the headache that will crush whatever is she and replace her with herself. The headache is approaching and it seems (is she or she is not conjuring them herself?) that bombers have appeared again in the sky (TH 4).

Before killing herself by drowning, Woolf also thinks about herself, “She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric”(TH 4). However, she hesitates before going into the river. She is thinking of the possibility of choosing life. “She imagines

⁵ Von Franz, M. -L. (1968). “The Process of Individuation,” *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

turning around, taking the stone out of her pocket, going back to the house. She could probably return in time to destroy the notes. She could live on; she could perform that final kindness” (TH 5). Nevertheless, “standing knee-deep in the moving water, she decides against it”(TH 5). Because “the voices are here, the headache is coming, and if she restores herself to the care of Leonard and Vanessa they won’t let her go again, will they? She decides to insist that they let her go”(TH 5).

Finally Virginia Woolf chooses death by drowning herself in the river, because she thinks death “seems the best thing to do”(TH 6). Sartre said in “The Origin of Negation,” “Anguish then is the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself. In this sense it is mediation, for although it is immediate consciousness of itself, it arises from the negation of the appeals of the world” (39). Woolf’s fear of facing her insanity and the future brings out her anguish. Then Sartre said, “This nihilating power nihilates anguish in so far as I flee it and nihilates itself in so far as I am anguish in order to flee it. This attitude is what we call bad faith” (44). Sartre also indicated, “I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself” (40). Suicide is a solution for Virginia Woolf to get away from her anguish [insanity].

On the other hand, she has to fight against both her physical and mental tortures in order to complete her writing. In the part, “Mrs. Woolf,” she is afraid of the coming of headaches. And “she works, always, against the fear of relapse”(TH 70). She has to persuade herself to avoid these “voices” and welcome “everything that is infected with brightness.” “There’s no dark in the shuttered room, no dark behind her eyelids” (TH 71). Besides, these “voices” are “indistinct but full of meaning, undeniably masculine, obscenely old. They are angry, accusatory, disillusioned” (TH 71). These voices seem to mean Woolf’s own fear and her predicament of losing herself. And these voices will result in her loss of confidence and her wish to die.

In addition, “Woolf’s creation of *Mrs. Dalloway* identifies directly with the victims of World War I. Septimus Smith is suffering from shell- shock, a euphemism at the time for mental illness, a widespread and lasting consequence of the war (Tylee 61,249). Woolf knew well what traumatized individuals suffer, again because of personal experience. Her character’s symptoms parallel her own. Psychologically, she too had been traumatized by death” (17) .⁶ “Under male-dominated Victorian and Edwardian societies, women could not openly express their anger and agony; a woman’s true emotions were untold and unknown” (152) .⁷ Therefore, Cunningham vividly portrays not only Virginia Woolf’s fear of patriarchal oppression and war but also presents her repressed sexual feelings. We know she has a heterosexual marriage with Leonard Woolf, but she is not satisfied because of physical and mental desires.

Compared with Virginia Woolf, Clarissa Vaughan in “Mrs. Dalloway’s” part positively faces herself by ignoring her appearance and her age. For example, when Clarissa looks at the mirror, she sees her “pale reflection” (TH 57). She does not have any feeling about it, and “she has gotten used to ignoring the mirror” (TH 57). Although she tries to ignore the reflection in the mirror, she is not afraid of seeing her physical decline. Compared with Clarissa Vaughan, Virginia Woolf refuses to look in the mirror because of her fear. Virginia Woolf seems not to accept her age as well as Clarissa Vaughan. Thus, Cunningham describes Woolf as a woman who cannot accept her coming physical decline.

Cunningham also implies that Virginia Woolf’s life is not as good as other people’s by describing her relationship with her husband (TH 164-70). Virginia plans to go back to London by train, but her husband interrupts her intention. She sees her husband “briefly as a

⁶ Basin Topping , Nancy and Hamovit Lauter, Jane (1991). “Virginia Woolf’s Keen Sensitivity to War- Its Roots and Its Impact on Her Novels”, *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

⁷ Usui, Masami (1991). “The Female Victims of the War in *Mrs. Dalloway*,” *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

stranger might see him: merely another of the many men who walks on streets. She is sad for him, and strangely moved”(TH 170). Although she knows that her husband Leonard is worried about her mental condition, she still feels breathless. Leonard tells her that they have to go back to the house for Nelly’s dinner. But Virginia hesitates, she thinks “But London! She still wants, desperately, to get on the train”(TH 171). She struggles between Leonard’s advice and her desire to go back to London. Even though her husband gives his love and care, Virginia cannot feel free. She asks her husband the possibility of moving back to London, but Virginia finally chooses to go back with Leonard to their house in Richmond. In the novel, “They look into the window of the butcher’s shop, where they are reflected, brokenly, in the golden letters”(TH 171). This “broken image” seems to mean that Virginia will never feel free and complete unless she moves back to London. Even though she says to her husband that “It’s time for us to move back to London, don’t you think?” (TH 172), she eventually conceals her intention to go back to London. Cunningham clearly presents his views of Virginia Woolf’s suffocating life.

Besides, Cunningham also portrays the fictional character of Virginia Woolf as a woman who is not on an equal position with her husband and her servant. To her husband, Virginia is a patient. She suffers from insanity, and Leonard needs to take care of her all the time. To her servant, Virginia seems to be an irresponsible hostess. As well as Nelly Boxall indirectly reminds Virginia that she is not a responsible hostess. In the part, “Mrs. Woolf,” Leonard forces Virginia to eat something that Nelly prepares (TH 33). Virginia reacts impatiently and disobediently. She says that, “If you send Nelly to interrupt me I won’t be responsible for my actions” (TH 33). It is clear that Virginia feels impatient with her husband’s control and for being treated as a patient. Of course, Virginia is actually the one who “needs comfort and is in danger.” Virginia Woolf must think her husband should listen to what she needs, and help her to keep away from “danger.” Also, the way Nelly treats

Virginia is very ironic. Cunningham shows that Virginia regards her relationship with Nelly as a “queen” to an “Amazon warrior.” In other words, Nelly is actually the one who holds the power instead of Woolf. Virginia only has her title of hostess and possesses no real power to manage her servants. Furthermore, Nelly challenges Woolf’s status of mistress, and Woolf clearly knows that she is afraid of Nelly:

Nelly knows, of course she knows, and in offering pears she reminds Virginia that she, Nelly, is powerful; that she knows secrets; that queens who care more about solving puzzles in their chambers than they do about the welfare of their people must take whatever they get (TH 85).

This passage expresses not only Nelly’s belittlement of Virginia but also Virginia’s powerlessness in front of her servant. It is evident that Virginia, without talents, cannot cope with material things in the real world. In this way, “She will give Clarissa Dalloway great skill with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding. Her servants will love her. They will do more than she asks”(TH 87).

In Cunningham’s vision, Woolf is described as a woman who treats herself as a “failed writer,” as Laura Brown regards herself a “failed housewife.” For example, when she thinks about what she has to write, she has a sense of failure: “On her writing stand in a unlit room lie the pages of the new novel, about which she cherishes extravagant hopes and which, at this moment, she fears (she believes she knows) will prove arid and weak, devoid of true feeling; a dead end”(TH 163). After her enjoyment of writing the novel, Virginia Woolf is uncertain of her own creation. At the beginning of her writing, Virginia wonders how to manage Clarissa Dalloway’s life:

Clarissa Dalloway, she thinks, will kill herself over something that seems, on the surface, like very little. Her party will fail, or her husband will once again refuse to notice some effort she’s made about her person or their home. The trick will be to

render interact the magnitude of Clarissa's miniature but very real desperation; to fully convince the reader that, for her, domestic defeats are every bit as devastating as are lost battles to a general (TH 84).

However, she changes her mind about killing her heroine when she is drinking tea with Vanessa in the kitchen. She suddenly thinks: "Clarissa will not die, not by her own hand. How could she bear to leave all this?" (TH 153). Instead of her character, Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith eventually commits suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Cunningham shows Virginia Woolf's suicide results from her sense of failure. In "The Prologue," we read: "She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric" (TH 5). Virginia believes that she has failed, and eventually loses her self-confidence and her identity of existence. Richard Brown in the part, "Mrs. Dalloway," also believes that he has failed and is defeated by his disease (TH 65-6). Thus, Cunningham's representation of Woolf's image echoes Woolf's idea about her character of Septimus Smith when she has Smith commit suicide in the part, "Mrs. Woolf":

Virginia imagines someone else, yes, someone strong of body but frail-minded; someone with a touch of genius, of poetry, ground under by the wheels of the world... a someone who is, technically speaking, insane, because that person sees meanings everywhere, knows that trees are sentient beings and sparrows sing in Greek. Yes, someone like that... a deranged poet, a visionary, will be true one to die (TH 211).

Virginia Woolf, like Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, possesses the same literary talent and the greatest mind, and also finally commits suicide. Between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*, these three characters: *Septimus*, *Virginia*, and *Richard*, choose ways that seem right. As a consequence, there are two suicides in each novel.

In *The Hours*, Leonard looks after Virginia Woolf's illness until she secretly attempts

to go back to London. According to Quentin Bell, he indicates Virginia tried to kill herself many times. After she married Leonard, her mental condition was not under control (*Virginia Woolf: A Biography* vol. 2. 17). In the novel, Leonard wonders why Virginia would rather live in London than in Richmond. And Virginia talks about her wish to move back to London, Leonard answers her: "I'm not all sure" (TH 172). Leonard asks her if she really wants to live in London, and she answers: "I do. I wish it were otherwise. I wish I were happy with the quiet life"(TH 172). In the final, Virginia chooses to go back to the house with Leonard. And "she keeps the ticket in her bag. She will never mention to Leonard that she'd planned on fleeing, even for a few hours"(TH 172). So, Cunningham also vividly represents a contradictory relationship between husband and wife in the novel.

Furthermore, Cunningham explicates his ideas on the basis of conventional relationships and social values between men and women under patriarchal- dominated society in *The Hours*. In "Mrs. Woolf's" part, for example, Virginia and her niece, Angelica Bell, prepare a rose bed for the burial of a dead bird. Virginia secretly knows that Vanessa's two sons, Julian and Quentin, are "laughing, quietly, at Angelica and perhaps, by extension, at her" (TH119). Woolf thinks,

Even now, at this late age, the males still hold death in their capable hands and laugh affectionately at the females, who arrange funerary beds and who speak of resuscitating the specks of nascent life abandoned in the landscape, by magic or sheer force of will (TH 119).

These males believe that females have no power to fight against difficulties in their lives. And the only thing they can do is to prepare a funeral and cry. Cunningham seems to imply Vanessa's two sons might symbolize male intruders who try to dominate women's existence. On the other hand, Woolf knows that her life is not as perfect as her sister, Vanessa's. When she attends to Vanessa's arrival, Virginia "is not looking particularly well,

and there's not much she can do about it" (TH 114). Vanessa "looks younger than Virginia; both of them know it"(TH 114). Virginia secretly knows that she is different from Vanessa. She obviously begins to feel anxious. Perhaps Virginia Woolf knows that she is unable to be the kind of woman her sister is.⁸

Cunningham also demonstrates Woolf's desire for women. Eileen Barrett's indicates, Virginia Woolf is "one of the twentieth century's best-known lesbians" (3). She is famous not only for her literary achievement but also for her lesbian inclinations. Woolf learned to open her sexual identity and revealed her own interest in women. And Patricia Cramer says, "Woolf's close familiarity with Bloomsbury homosexuals and feminist circles provided her with a range of possibilities for expressing same-sex love" (Cramer119). However, homosexuality was a taboo in Woolf's society, as well as in Laura Brown's. Although she had a heterosexual marriage with Leonard Woolf, she still could not abandon her love for women. In "Mrs. Woolf's" part, Cunningham displays a role of "external censorship" (Cramer 120) to repress and penetrate Woolf's lesbian inclination for women. Here "external censorship" is "the primary cause for Woolf's circumspect treatment of lesbian themes in her writing" (Cramer120). "As Louise DeSalvo's groundbreaking book *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* illustrates, Woolf's traumatic experience of sexual abuse and her Victorian training exacerbated her difficulties in writing about women's sexual experiences."⁹

"Yet these influences did not prevent Woolf from doing so. Her novels are

⁸ In Quentin Bell's biography, he describes Woolf's recollections of her diary about "A State of Mind" which she made on 15 September 1926:

Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh it's beginning, it's coming-the horror-physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart-tossing me up. I'm unhappy, unhappy! Down-God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure, failure. (The wave rises).

He quotes Woolf's words in her diary as: "Vanessa has three children; I have none."

Bell, Quentin (1974). *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers.

⁹ Cramer, Patricia (1997). "Introduction," *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*. New York: New York University Press.

passionately concerned with female sexuality: particularly the role of male sexual abuse in women's subordination and the liberating possibilities of love between women."¹⁰ In *The Hours*, Cunningham represents Virginia's affection to her sister, Vanessa, by her kiss. "Virginia kisses Vanessa secretly behind Nelly's neck; it feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures"(TH 154). Cunningham suggests Woolf is forced to conceal her love to her sister.

Although Virginia enjoys the kiss with Vanessa, she still has to conceal her enjoyment. Virginia Woolf conceals her homosexuality in terms of her marriage with Leonard Woolf, and when she wants to express her love to her sister and women — this is forbidden by her society. Therefore, Cunningham presents Woolf's incapability of expressing her sexual inclinations. This is one of the reasons why Virginia's insanity is so serious, and one of the reasons she eventually chooses death by drowning. The author perceptively shows Woolf's society in which gay people suffered from prejudices and discriminations. And homosexuals were forced to hide their sexual inclinations.

In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the kiss with Vanessa has inspired Virginia Woolf to give Clarissa Dalloway a secret kiss with Sally Sexton.¹¹ Comparing homosexual relationships in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*, Cunningham presents the development of homosexuality from Woolf's age to his contemporary age. He not only portrays homosexual relationships more than Woolf but also expresses women's repressed homosexual desires by showing Woolf's consideration of a proper marriage for a woman in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf is depicted as a "living dead woman" in

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf thinks, "Clarissa Dalloway will have loved a woman, yes; another woman, when she was young. She and the woman will have had a kiss, one kiss, like the singular enchanted kisses in fairy tales, and Clarissa will carry the memory of that kiss, the soaring hope of it, all her life. She will never find a love like that which the lone kiss seemed to offer" (TH 210).

Richmond. She attempts to go back to London, but eventually fails. London, to Virginia, seems not only a symbol of freedom and joy of life but also her own “prescription” for her insanity. Although she for her husband’s sake stays at Richmond for a peaceful life, she still feels that she is dying there. As she says, “I wish it were otherwise. I wish I were happy with the quiet life” (TH 172). In her diary, Woolf wrote:

But I could toy with, at least control all this, until suddenly, after the last likely train had come in felt it was intolerable to sit about, & must do the final thing, which was to go to London... Saw men & women walking together; thought, you’re safe & happy I’m an outcast; took my ticket; had 3 minutes to spare, & then, turning the corner of the station stairs, saw London, coming along... And then, not to show my feelings, I went outside & did something to my bicycle. Also, I went back to the ticket office... & all the time I was feeling My God, that’s over. I’m out of that. It’s over (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* vol. 2. 270-1).

In *The Hours*, she imagines her life is “being measured away, cupful by cupful, and the carnival wagon that bears Vanessa—the whole gaudy party of her, that the vast life, the children and paints and lovers, the brilliantly cluttered house—... No, she will not telephone from the station, she will do it once she’s reached London, once there’s nothing to do be done. She will take her punishment” (TH 169).

She is almost successful, until Leonard’s appearance eventually destroys her plan. Virginia cannot reveal her intention to go back to London, and it is evident that her escape has failed. The only thing she can do is hide her ticket to London in her bag and go back with Leonard (TH 172). She chooses to be an obedient wife.

In addition, Cunningham seems to break off the boundary between insanity and sanity by describing Virginia Woolf’s fictional life. According to Leonard and her nephew, Quentin Bell’s biographies both suggest that there was an absolute dichotomy between

sanity and insanity in Virginia's states of mind. Leonard Woolf described his wife's mental situation as follows:

For nearly 30years I had to study Virginia's mind with the greatest intensity...I am sure that, when she had a breakdown, there was a moment when she passed from what can be rightly called sanity to insanity. On one side of this line was a kind of mental balance, a psychological coherence between intellect and emotion, an awareness and acceptance of the outside world and a rational reaction to it; on the other side were violent emotional instability and oscillation, a sudden change in a large number of intellectual assumptions upon which, often unconsciously, the mental outlook and actions of everyone are based, a refusal to admit or accept facts in the outside world (78-9).¹²

This passage from Leonard Woolf's autobiography vividly explains Virginia's unbalanced mental condition. When she is sane, she returns to her normal condition in the outer world. And she often goes across these two sides in her mental condition. Therefore, Leonard's experience of dealing with Virginia's mental breakdown indicates an absolute dichotomy existed between Woolf's sanity and insanity.

Nevertheless, Cunningham seems to subvert Leonard Woolf's conceptions of Virginia Woolf's sanity as a kind of performance. He questions Leonard Woolf's observations of Virginia's psychological situation and doubts the separating line between sanity and insanity is clear. In "Mrs. Woolf's" part, Virginia herself regards that her sanity depends on her performance: "She has learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation, not simply for the benefit of husband and servants but for the sake, first and foremost, of one's own convictions" (83). She treats her insanity as "conviction," which others may have convicted her of being insane while she is having mental

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breakdowns and seeing illusions. Whenever she does anything, she has to pretend she is “normal.” She tries to act as a character that is always as normal as other people.

Therefore, Cunningham shows the separating line between sanity and insanity is not as clear as Leonard’s observations make it seem. Not only does Cunningham break off the absoluteness between sanity and insanity but also he considers Woolf’s sanity as a “performance.” And she has to “remain on good behavior” (210) to let her husband believe that she is well recovered and she can move back to London again. She is always performing as a good wife, a good patient, and a responsible hostess in order to keep living in the real world.

In the “Prologue,” Cunningham describes Woolf’s hesitation before she decides to drown herself in the River Ouse: “She could live on; she could perform that final kindness” (5). Certainly she chooses to die because she cannot pretend to be a normal person and is unable to keep going on living in the world.

Jonathan Dee thinks:

We are in Woolf’s head when she engages the madness with which her difficult life was fired: “she can feel the nearness of the old devil (what else to call it?), and she knows she will be utterly alone if and when the devil chooses to appear again.” And of course, in the prologue mentioned above, we are offered access to that consciousness even as it extinguishes itself, on the afternoon Woolf walks into the River Ouse with stones in her pocket (“*The Hours: Review*,” *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1999).

Here, Woolf’s “madness” results in her death, and Woolf is afraid of fighting against the nearness of “old devils” which will take over her states of mind. On the other hand, Woolf’s illness also interrelates with her own creativity. She had told Ethel Smyth that “the loss of control, the spewing forth of anger at loved ones, and the hallucinations were

often useful for her art”.¹³ Insanity makes it possible for some writers to see their visions of creation and have inspirations for creating their new works. For example, Richard Brown in the part, “Mrs. Dalloway,” creates his poetry and novel when he is mentally ill. And Quentin Bell indicates, “the moments of her depression were followed by moments of creativity” (*Virginia Woolf: A Biography* vol. 2. 112).

Although Virginia is afraid of having dreadful headaches, she still suffers from them to inspire herself to create new works. Compared with Cunningham’s Woolf in *The Hours*, Woolf’s Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* is another character that combines illness with creativity. Septimus is described as a poet who is a visionary in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and he is aware of something through his own illusions that people cannot perceive. In this way, he writes when he is insane: “Some things were very beautiful; other sheer nonsense. And he was always stopping in the middle, changing his mind; wanting to add something; hearing something new; listening with his hand up. But she [Rezia] heard nothing” (155).

Nevertheless, his wife and other people do not understand what he has perceived and treat him as an insane person. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, before he commits suicide, he helps his wife to create an artistic work—the hat: “It was beautiful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was real, substantial, Mrs. Peters’ hat” (159). But after he finishes drawing the hat, he “shuts his eyes”(159) and feels the inner oppression is very close. He then eventually kills himself by jumping out of a window.

Meanwhile, Richard Brown in the part, “Mrs. Dalloway,” is also an example of combining madness with creativity. To Clarissa Vaughan, he is a poet with creative talent; however, he is suffering from AIDS. She thinks, “How can she help feeling angry on behalf of Richard, whose muscles and organs have been revived by new discoveries [AIDS medication] but whose mind seems to have passed beyond any sort of repair other than the

¹³ Marcus, Jane (1987), *Virginia Woolf and the Language of Patriarchy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 99.

conferring of good days among the bad” (55-6). Owing to his disease, Clarissa believes that his mind has collapsed and that he is “technically speaking, insane” (211). And Richard believes that the reason why he has got the Carrouters Prize is only for his having AIDS, and “it has nothing to do with his work” (63). Not only can he not take his literary achievement, as a prize he has got, but also cannot endure his sense of failure in his life anymore. Eventually he is the same as Septimus who commits suicide by jumping out of a window.

Cunningham seems to imply that creativity and illness are both connected with death. Richard Brown and Virginia Woolf both are linked together between “artistic millinery and death” (121). As Septimus Smith finishes painting Mrs. Peters’ hat before committing suicide, the hat he decorates is also artistic millinery. This is also a creation of death. And this is similar to the cake that Laura Brown makes for her husband’s birthday in the part, “Mrs. Brown.” When Laura begins to make the cake, she “hopes to be satisfied and as filled with anticipation as a writer putting down the first sentence, a builder beginning to draw the plans” (77). Her purpose for making a cake is only to celebrate her husband’s birthday while she is making it. However, Laura attempts to kill herself after making the cake. The first failed cake she makes seems to reveal not only her intention to die but also it is also a symbol of her failure.

In the “Prologue,” Cunningham represents Woolf’s suicide. At the beginning of *The Hours*, he quotes completely Woolf’s last note to her husband, Leonard (6-7). Cunningham considers this as her apology to her husband, because Virginia thinks that Leonard is entirely patient with looking after her disease and has treated her incredibly well all her life. She does not want to spoil her husband’s life any longer, so the best way she seems to stop is to die. In Cunningham’s perception, Virginia Woolf commits suicide because of her insanity and her sense of failure. Eventually she cannot fight against her

illness, and she is unwilling to spoil Leonard's life and work. Meanwhile, he seems to manipulate Woolf's death at the beginning to reaffirm his interpretation that she treats herself as a failure. As well as "Mrs. Dalloway's" part, Richard Brown is also unable to face himself. Their "madness" and "illness" lead to death in the end.

Meanwhile, "The Prologue" represents Woolf's death as a mirror that reflects the bringing of life. At the beginning, the river seems to imply life is not only like a flowing with no return but also it is a rebirth of beginning.¹⁴ Virginia Woolf chooses to drown herself might support Carl G. Jung's theory of the water image: "the entrance of the underworld" (138).¹⁵ And Roger Poole says, "Death by water obviously had no terrors for Virginia. In a sense she regarded it as a happy release, a going home. Down there was her element. Down there she would not have to struggle any longer against forces which always looked likely to overwhelm her" (273).¹⁶ While Virginia's body is floating in the water, this portrayal of her death seems to show life is like water, which is able to continue, or, to be gone.

Virginia has become a mirror to reflect life itself in the currents of the water. The depiction of "the boy and his mother" in "The Prologue" seems to insinuate the relationship between Richard and Laura Brown. Meanwhile, in "Mrs. Woolf's" part, Cunningham uses flashbacks to see deeply into Woolf's life and work. And the author presents Virginia Woolf's death as a continuance of life through the other two women's' stories. As a consequence, Woolf's struggle between life and death is a study of human life and existence.

¹⁴ In Roger Poole's "Death by shrapnel or death by water," he indicates his ideas about the image of water to Virginia Woolf:

Water is the resolution of intellectual argument, water is the merging of opposites and the annulling of conflicts, but water is also the deep pull of unconsciousness, easy death. Water is dissolution of the self in something greater than the self. Water is the greatest forgiver, the great receiver, the great lover, the great divine element which makes all argument unnecessary and all strife unimportant. Water was the call to death itself.

Poole, Roger (1982), *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, Inc.), 266.

¹⁵ Jung, Carl (1986), *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*, (London: Ark Paperbacks).

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