

The Hours

by Michael Cunningham



About the Book

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of Michael Cunningham's **The Hours**. We hope they will give you a number of interesting angles from which to approach this incisive, daring, and deeply affecting new novel, winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award.

In this remarkable book, Cunningham draws inventively on the life and work of Virginia Woolf to tell the story of a group of characters struggling with the conflicting claims of love and inheritance, life and death, creation and destruction. The novel moves along three separate but parallel stories, each focusing on the experiences of a particular woman during the course of one apparently unremarkable but in fact pivotal day.

Clarissa Vaughan, a book editor in present-day Greenwich Village, is organizing a party for her oldest friend, Richard, an AIDS-stricken poet who has just won a major literary prize. Laura Brown, a young wife and mother in 1949 Los Angeles, cares for her toddler and prepares a birthday cake for her husband as she tries to resist increasing waves of panic and feelings of alienation from her humdrum yet demanding life. And Virginia Woolf herself, the third woman, works on her new novel, **Mrs. Dalloway**, chats with her husband and sister, bickers with her cook, and attempts to come to terms with her deep, ungovernable longings for escape and even for death. As the novel jump-cuts through the century, the lives and stories of the three women converge, stunningly and unexpectedly, the night of Clarissa's party for Richard.

Discussion Guide

1. Clarissa Vaughan is described several times as an "ordinary" woman. Do you accept this valuation? If so, what does it imply about the ordinary, about being ordinary? What makes someone, by contrast, *extraordinary*?
2. Flowers and floral imagery play a significant part in *The Hours*. When and where are flowers described? What significance do they have, and with what events and moods are they associated? How do flowers affect Virginia? Clarissa?
3. Cunningham plays with the notions of sanity and insanity, recognizing that there might be only a very fine line between the two states. What does the novel imply about the nature of insanity? Might it in fact be a heightened sanity, or at least a heightened sense of awareness? Would you classify Richard as insane? How does his mental state compare with that of Virginia? Of Laura as a young wife? Of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*? Does insanity (or the received idea of insanity) appear to be connected with creative gifts?
4. Virginia and Laura are both, in a sense, prisoners of their eras and societies, and both long for freedom

from this imprisonment. Clarissa Vaughan, on the other hand, apparently enjoys every liberty: freedom to be a lesbian, to come and go and live as she likes. Yet she has ended up, in spite of her unusual way of life, as a fairly conventional wife and mother. What might this fact indicate about the nature of society and the restrictions it imposes? Does the author imply that character, to a certain extent, is destiny?

5. Each of the novel's three principal women, even the relatively prosaic and down-to-earth Clarissa, occasionally feels a sense of detachment, of playing a role. Laura feels as if she is "about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed" [p. 43]. Clarissa is filled with "a sense of dislocation. This is not her kitchen at all. This is the kitchen of an acquaintance, pretty enough but not her taste, full of foreign smells" [p. 91]. Is this feeling in fact a universal one? Is role-playing an essential part of living in the world, and of behaving "sanely"? Which of the characters refuses to act a role, and what price does he/she pay for this refusal?

6. Who kisses whom in **The Hours**, and what is the significance of each kiss?

7. **The Hours** is very much concerned with creativity and the nature of the creative act, and each of its protagonists is absorbed in a particular act of creation. For Virginia and Richard, the object is their writing; for Clarissa Vaughan (and Clarissa Dalloway), it is a party; for Laura Brown, it is another party, or, more generally, "This kitchen, this birthday cake, this conversation. This revived world" [p. 106]. What does the novel tell us about the creative process? How does each character revise and improve his or her creation during the course of the story?

8. How might Richard's childhood experiences have made him the adult he eventually becomes? In what ways has he been wounded, disturbed?

9. Each of the three principal women is acutely conscious of her inner self or soul, slightly separate from the "self" seen by the world. Clarissa's "determined, abiding fascination is what she thinks of as her soul" [p. 12]; Virginia "can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would call it the soul . . . It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made of the same substance" [pp. 34-35]. Which characters keep these inner selves ruthlessly separate from their outer ones? Why?

10. Each of the novel's characters sees himself or herself, most of the time, as a failure. Virginia Woolf, as she walks to her death, reflects that "She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric" [p. 4]. Richard, disgustingly, admits to Clarissa, "I thought I was a genius. I actually used that word, privately, to myself" [p. 65]. Are the novel's characters unusual, or are such feelings of failure an essential and inevitable part of the human condition?

11. Toward the end of Clarissa's day, she realizes that kissing Richard beside the pond in Wellfleet was the high point, the culmination, of her life. Richard, apparently, feels the same. Are we meant to think, though, that their lives would have been better, more heightened, had they stayed together? Or does Cunningham imply that as we age we inevitably feel regret for some lost chance, and that what we in fact regret is youth itself?

12. **The Hours** could on one level be said to be a novel about middle age, the final relinquishment of youth and the youthful self. What does middle age mean to these characters? In what essential ways do these middle-aged people--Clarissa, Richard, Louis, Virginia --differ from their youthful selves? Which of them resists the change most strenuously?

13. What does the possibility of death represent to the various characters? Which of them loves the idea of death, as others love life? What makes some of the characters decide to die, others to live? What personality traits separate the "survivors" from the suicides?

14. If you have read Virginia Woolf's **Mrs. Dalloway**, would you describe **The Hours** as a modern version of it? A commentary upon it? A dialogue with it? Which characters in **The Hours** correspond with those of Woolf's novel? In what ways are they similar, and at what point do the similarities cease and the characters become freestanding individuals in their own right?

15. For the most part, the characters in **The Hours** have either a different gender or a different sexual orientation from their prototypes in **Mrs. Dalloway**. How much has all this gender-bending affected or changed the situations, the relationships, and the people?

16. Why has Cunningham chosen **The Hours** for the title of his novel (aside from the fact that it was Woolf's working title for **Mrs. Dalloway**)? In what ways is the title appropriate, descriptive? What do hours mean to Richard? To Laura? To Clarissa?

Michael Cunningham was raised in Los Angeles and lives in New York City. He is the author of the novels THE HOURS, A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD, SPECIMEN DAYS, FLESH AND BLOOD and BY NIGHTFALL. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Best American Short Stories*, and he is the recipient of a Whiting Writer's Award. He received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award for THE HOURS, which was a *New York Times* bestseller, and was chosen as a Best Book of 1998 by *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Publishers Weekly*. He is a Professor at Brooklyn College for the M.F.A program.

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