

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Hours

by

Michael Cunningham

Book Information

Michael Cunningham, The Hours
Quiz Number: 31227
Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998
ISBN 0-374-17289-7; LCCN
230 Pages
Book Level: 6.6
Interest Level: UG

In this novel the author draws on the life and work of Virginia Woolf to tell the story of a group of contemporary characters who are struggling with the conflicting claims of love and inheritance, hope and despair.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Book Sense Book of the Year Award/Honorees; Misc./Other; Nat'l Bk. Critic Circle Award/Honor; Pen/Faulkner Award; Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Emotions, Happiness; Emotions, Love; Recommended Reading, Book Sense 76 - Top Ten; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Women's Studies, Women's Studies (All)

Main Characters

Clarissa Vaughan a New York poet who lives with her lover, Sally; she is a friend to Richard, who calls her Mrs. Dalloway

Dan Brown Laura's kind, war-hero husband

Julia Clarissa's nineteen-year-old daughter, a self-assured young lady

Kitty Laura Brown's neighbor whom Laura consoles after learning she has a tumor

Laura Brown a restless California housewife; a bookworm who married a war hero

Leonard Woolf Virginia's husband, a book editor who loves her and nurses her during her illness

Louis Richard's lover from his college days

Mrs. Dalloway a character in a book by Virginia Woolf; also, the name Richard calls Clarissa

Nelly Virginia's cook

Richard (Richie) Brown Laura's three-year-old son; as an adult he is an award-winning poet and author who suffers from AIDS

Sally a public television producer who has been in a relationship with Clarissa for eighteen years

Vanessa Woolf Virginia's sister

Virginia Woolf a prominent English author who suffers from mental illness and commits suicide

Walter Hardy a youthful-looking romance novelist who cares for his sick partner, Evan

Vocabulary

hyperbole a figure of speech in which exaggeration is used

segue to move smoothly from one situation to another

squalid dirty; filthy

ubiquitous seeming to be present everywhere at the same time

Synopsis

The novel begins with a prologue describing Virginia Woolf's suicide and follows with additional events in a nonsequential format. The events focus on the links between Virginia and two other women, all of whom live in different times and places.

Clarissa Vaughan lives in New York City in the late twentieth century. She is preparing for a party for her dearest friend and former lover, Richard, who has won a literary prize for his work. She and Richard parted ways as lovers many years earlier. Clarissa steps out in the morning to buy flowers for the party and stops by Richard's squalid and dimly lit apartment on the way home to see how he is getting along. Richard is dying of AIDS, and the disease has ravaged his mind. He is having headaches and hearing voices. He still knows Clarissa, though, and affectionately calls her Mrs. Dalloway, based on a character in Virginia Woolf's novel of the same name. Clarissa tells Richard she will return in the afternoon to help him get ready for the party and award ceremony. She returns to her apartment that she shares with Sally, her partner for the last eighteen years, and contemplates the relationships in her life. Louis, one of Richard's former lovers, stops by her apartment, and they reminisce about their college years and a time when she, Richard,

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and Louis shared a summer home. Clarissa invites Louis to the party before leaving to help Richard. When she arrives at Richard's apartment, she finds Richard astride his fifth-floor windowsill. He does not want to attend the party and ceremony, nor does he want to face the hours of pain in his future. He claims he is a failure. He asks Clarissa to look in on his mother, who lives alone. Despite Clarissa's pleas, he slips off the sill and plunges to his death.

Virginia Woolf is living in a suburb outside of London with her husband, Leonard, after World War I. She must rest and recover from a period of mental illness, during which she was plagued with severe headaches and voices speaking in her mind. She is in the throes of writing a novel called *Mrs. Dalloway*, which will take the reader through one ordinary day in the character's life. Virginia is plagued with doubts about her writing and lives in fear of her mental illness returning. She feels she is suffocating at her country retreat and longs for the vitality and stimulation of London. During a visit from her sister Vanessa and her children, Virginia tends the death of a bird with the children, drinks tea and shares a kiss with Vanessa. Virginia takes these moments to heart and makes decisions about the characters in her novel based on them. Her protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, will once kiss a woman, and Virginia decides Clarissa will not die, but a friend of hers will -- an eccentric and gifted poet. After Vanessa's departure, Virginia flirts with the idea of going to London and quietly slips out of the house. Sensing something amiss, Leonard goes after her and intercepts her. They return home, and Virginia persuades him to move back to London with her.

Laura Brown is a young mother in Los Angeles in 1949. A bookworm all her life, she married a home-town war hero, Dan Brown, who had been her brother's best friend. She wakes on Dan's birthday and finds it difficult to leave bed, for she is engrossed in the Virginia Woolf novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. She wonders to herself how someone so gifted could ever contemplate suicide. When she does get up, she finds Dan and her son, Richie, already eating breakfast in the kitchen. Laura plans to make the perfect cake for Dan's birthday. When

Dan leaves, she and Richie begin, but Laura is not satisfied with the cake's homemade look. Her neighbor Kitty comes over and tells Laura about her recent medical problems. Laura consoles Kitty, and in the process, there is a moment when their lips meet. Ashamed, Kitty pulls away. After Kitty leaves, Laura dumps the cake and begins again, trying to make things perfect. She wonders why she feels so empty with a wonderful husband and son and another child on the way. She drops Richie off at a neighbor's and drives to a hotel to read some more. When she picks up Richie later, she feels that he has seen through her feigned excuses for errands and knows her dissatisfaction with a life that seems stifling to her. Dan comes home, and they celebrate his birthday. Laura hopes that a moment that seems "perfect" between Dan and Richie will be enough to sustain her.

In a touching conclusion, Clarissa and Laura share their grief following Richard's death. Presently an elderly woman, Laura has been both villified and adored by her son Richard (once young Richie) in his fictitious works. After attempting suicide long ago, she left her family and became a librarian in Canada. Clarissa comforts her and offers her the food from the party that never occurred. The day is over, and Clarissa senses the need to hang on to the significance of certain brilliant hours in one's life and the hope there will be more to follow amid the suffering.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

Clarissa Vaughan feels as if she is witnessing something that has already happened, "like a memory," when she sees Richard sitting on the window ledge. What memory is it?

Although never stated, it is most likely her recollection of Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf. Virginia had stated that in the end, Clarissa Dalloway would not die, but her friend who was a visionary and poet would. Perhaps this is the memory to which Clarissa refers, since "Mrs. Dalloway" has been so much a part of her interactions with Richard.

Literary Analysis

How does the author connect Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown, and Clarissa Vaughan to the character Mrs. Dalloway?

Virginia Woolf is the creator of the character Mrs. Dalloway, and throughout the book, the reader is given short glimpses into Virginia's life as she gives life to her character and story. Laura Brown reads Virginia Woolf's novel and uses it as a way to escape from her own life and homemaking responsibilities. Mrs. Dalloway comes to represent the part of Laura Brown that is being suppressed by her environment. Laura Brown, in turn, becomes a fictional character herself when her son Richard uses her as the main subject of his prize-winning poetry. Clarissa Vaughan, according to her friend Richard, is a modern Mrs. Dalloway. Her life parallels Virginia's creation, and she provides a realistic embodiment of Virginia Woolf's fantasy.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Laura so tired on that day in 1949?

It is very likely that Laura is exhausted by her pregnancy and the business of being a mother. It is also possible that she is worn out by the energy she uses to keep up the façade of happiness and perfection. She is trying to fit herself into the mold of the post-war housewife, but the mold does not quite fit her. She seems to long for more intellectual stimulation and relationships with deeper meaning.

Constructing Meaning

Laura, Virginia, and Clarissa each talk about special moments in their lives they have tried to hold on to. What "perfect moments" have there been in your life?

Willing students should share moments that have been especially memorable and special to them. The students can be reassured the moment does not have to be spectacular or heroic, but can be a simple, touching moment they cherish. They should explain, if they can, why they cherish this memory.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft *The Hours* is unique because of its unusual plot line. Michael Cunningham was able to weave three different stories and settings together by using a novel that is written in one plot, read in another, and paralleled in the third. Have the students try to emulate this complex yet interesting narrative technique by writing their own short story in which they intertwine at least two plots, one involving a real-life writer who is writing a play, poem, or novel, and the other involving a fictional character who is, at some point in the story, reading the novel. For the first plot, the students should choose an author writing a work with which they are familiar, such as William Shakespeare writing *Hamlet*, Mark Twain writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or Mary Shelley writing *Frankenstein*. They can then create a fictional character whose life somehow parallels an event from the previous plot line. The focus of this activity should be on teaching students how to intertwine multiple plot lines with fluent transitions and giving students ideas for working with more complex and original forms of fiction.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Cunningham uses Virginia Woolf as a character in the novel. Encourage the students to research the real life of Virginia Woolf to see how true-to-life Cunningham was in his depiction of her. Students can write a short biography on Woolf and comment on whether or not they

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believe Cunningham intended to give an accurate portrayal of the legendary writer.

Comparing and Contrasting *The Hours* contains many parallels between the characters, both real and fictional. Have the students go back through the book and find any similarities that exist among Virginia Woolf, Clarissa Dalloway, Richie/Richard, Clarissa Vaughan, Sally, Laura Brown, Louis, Leonard, Dan, Vanessa, and Kitty. An effective means of presenting their comparisons may be to make a grid chart with the names running both across and down, and writing the comparisons in the squares where the names intersect.

Understanding Literary Features Suicide is a major motif in this story. Have the students reread the prologue and the chapter in which Richard falls from his window ledge. Then ask the students to analyze the ways in which the writer narrates Virginia Woolf's and Richard's suicides. What differences and what similarities do the students notice about the author's mood, tone, and style in these two scenes? For example, the students might contrast the peaceful and almost soothing out-of-body narration of Virginia Woolf's drowning with Clarissa's perspective on Richard's pathetic and gruesome fall. Once the students recognize the similarities or differences in the author's narration, they can then begin to look for meaning in the author's craft. They should ask themselves why the author might have written the scenes differently or why certain elements are repeated in both scenes. Have the students write a critical essay that deals with suicide in *The Hours* and reflects their individual interpretations of the text. You may also wish for the students to research other critical essays on the novel if time permits.