
RESEARCH ARTICLE

On the Illness Writing and Literary Healing in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, analyzing the diseases portrayed in the novel to explore their cultural symbolic significance and the healing function of literature. On one hand, the paper first examines Virginia Woolf's mental illness and Richard's AIDS, revealing that disease is not merely a physical phenomenon, but also a cultural vehicle for moral judgment and social exclusion, particularly the stigmatization of AIDS within the homosexual community. On the other hand, the paper explores the healing effects of literary reading and creation on individual trauma. By analyzing how Woolf achieves emotional catharsis through her writing, how Laura awakens her self-identity through *Mrs. Dalloway*, and how Cunningham reconstructs his mother's fate through writing, this paper demonstrates the unique role of literature in the reconstruction of self-identity, emotional release, and psychological healing.

KEYWORDS

The Hours; Michael Cunningham; illness; healing

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1. The Writing of Diseases in *The Hours*

1.1 Virginia Woolf's Mental Illness

In *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham starts from a depiction of Woolf's suicide by drowning, skillfully portraying her as a female writer torn between the abyss of consciousness and the impulse to create. Throughout her life, Woolf struggled with mental illness, "suffering from alternating moods of mania and depression after experiencing a mental breakdown at the age of thirteen" (Su Zhongmei, 2019). In the introduction to *On Being Ill*, Hermione Lee mentions, "All her life, severe physical symptoms—fevers, faints, headaches, jumping pulse, insomnia—signaled and accompanied phases of agitation or depression. In her most severe phases, she hardly ate, and shed weight frighteningly" (2012). These somatic symptoms not only torture Woolf's mind but also ravage her body. The death of her mother when she was thirteen marked a turning point in her life and set the stage for her later mental breakdowns. Subsequently, the deaths of her family members—her sister Stella, father, and brother Toby, further destabilize her mental state.

Moreover, Woolf suffered repeated sexual assault by her half-brothers George and Gerald during her childhood, and this trauma echoed throughout both her works and her mental state. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Woolf's early trauma has a profound impact on her personality characterization, especially on the distortion of her self-perception and body awareness, which becomes a significant factor in the frequent recurrence of her mental symptoms later in life. As Roger Poole points out, "Virginia's shame about her own body and her relationship with the mirror and Gerald Duckworth will affect her entire emotional life and sex life, and are significantly linked to the causes of her several mental breakdowns" (1995).

However, "in the 19th century, the mentally ill were no longer viewed as divine, creative geniuses; instead, madness was labeled with tags of bodily and moral contamination" (Sun Pingping, 2008). Under the traditional constraints of the Victorian era, the oppression of patriarchy, and the torment of illness, Woolf was forced to lose her freedom and moved away from London. At the same time, the treatment of mental illness itself became a source of immense torture and pain for her. She recorded in her

diaries several times about her experiences with hallucinations and nervous breakdowns, expressing her aversion to the doctors' treatments. She once wrote:

"Dr. Sainsbury, Dr. Fergusson, & the semi-legal discussion over my body, which ended in a bottle of quinine pills, & a box of lozenges, & a brush to varnish my throat with. Influenza & pneumonia germs, perhaps, says Sainsbury, very softly, wisely & with extreme deliberation. 'Equanimity--practice equanimity Mrs. Woolf' he said, as I left; an unnecessary interview from my point of view; but we were forced into it by one step after another on the part of the bacteriologists"(1998).

This reflects Woolf's disappointment with the medical treatments. At that time, the Spanish influenza was widespread, and she was consequently diagnosed with "Influenza." While Woolf does not accept the doctor's diagnosis, and the ineffectiveness of the treatment only worsens her condition. In fact, Woolf's experiences reveal the limitations of mental illness treatments during that era. In fact, Woolf's experiences with treatment reflect the limitations of mental illness care at the time. After being diagnosed with mental instability, doctors recommended the "rest cure," a treatment developed by American physician Silas Weir Mitchell. This method involves forbidding patients from socializing, meeting visitors, reading, talking, and most importantly, writing, to avoid stimulating the mind. Patients are also required to stay in bed, drink large amounts of milk, and consume nutritious food to gain weight (Li Boting, 2012). However, this approach failed to yield any significant results and only exacerbated Woolf's condition. This kind of pathological treatment is also reflected in her works. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus's mental struggles closely mirror Woolf's own experiences. Dr. Homles treated Septimus for six weeks and merely prescribed a little bromide. This irresponsible and unprofessional portrayal of the doctor directly reflects Woolf's distrust and critique of the medical system of her time.

1.2 Richard's AIDS

In the interview with Amy Jones, Cunningham mentions that there are two "catastrophic events" that dominated his writing career: the AIDS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic, and he emphasizes how both influence him as a writer. He said, "I don't know if that makes us writers of the plague generation, but it is somewhat unusual historically speaking to find most of your writing career dominated by two catastrophic events in the form of communicable diseases"(2024)

AIDS is a recurring theme in Cunningham's works. It is not only a physical disease but also a metaphor deeply rooted in cultural imagination and social structure. In Susan Sontag's classic discussion of disease metaphors, she points out, "The sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means— especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity" (Sontag 75). Within this cultural framework, AIDS is not only seen as a physical affliction but also as a projection of moral judgments, such as "pollution," "degradation," and "punishment," particularly targeting the homosexual community. As Sontag says, "among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution" (Sontag, 1990).

In *The Hours*, Richard is a victim of this stigmatization. He is a homosexual writer with great literary achievements who wins the Carrouthers Prize, but his success cannot offset the shame and loneliness within his heart. He was abandoned by his mother at an early age and once witnessed the kiss between her mother and their neighbor Kitty. This chaotic and unexplained experience become deeply embedded in his emotional and cognitive structure, shaping his understanding of gender and intimate relationships. After growing up, Richard tragically infected with AIDS, which not only ravaged his body but also shattered his trust in interpersonal relationships and public spaces. He refused to attend party, avoided all social gatherings, and ultimately, amid both psychological and physical torture, leaped from his window, heading toward self-destruction.

It is noteworthy that Cunningham, through his depiction of Richard's living space, effectively extends the bodily metaphor of AIDS into the physical space. The living environment he portrays is not merely a backdrop but an extension of Richard's physical condition and mental state:

"This neighborhood was once the center of something new and wild; something disreputable; a part of the city where the sound of guitars drifted all night out of bars and coffeehouses; where the stores that sold books and clothing smelled the way she imagined Arab bazaars must smell: incense and rich, dung-y dust, some sort of wood (cedar? camphor?), something fruitily, fertile rotting" (Cunningham, 1998).

This passage is infused with a sensory decay and sense of degeneration. The phrase "fruitily, fertile rotting" resonates metaphorically with the physical deterioration brought by AIDS. Just as Richard's body gradually disintegrates from illness, his living space likewise undergoes collapse and marginalization. The interior of his apartment further materializes this pathological space.

"She feels, always, as if she has passed through a dimensional warp—through the looking glass, as it were; as if the lobby, stairwell, and hallway exist in another realm altogether; another time" (Cunningham, 1998).

From Clarissa's perspective, Richard's apartment seems to detach from the time and order of reality. It is not only a geographical "other space" but also a psychological and social "heterotopia"—as Foucault suggests, heterotopia is a place that accommodates the "other," existing outside the dominant social order. Henri Lefebvre emphasizes in *The Production of Space* that space is not a neutral physical entity but rather "a social product" and "a historical product," whose production and reproduction reflect power relations and social structures (2021). Richard's dilapidated and shadowy room embodies such spatial politics. It

symbolizes a body and identity abandoned by mainstream society, a heterotopic space constructed by disease, his homosexual identity, and the traumatic silence. In this respect, AIDS is no longer merely a kind of disease in medicine, but becomes a metaphorical disaster produced by social and cultural prejudice. It manifests in Richard's inability to gain dignity, support, and empathy in public space, as well as in the disorder and ruin of his private space.

2. The Healing Function of Literature

2.1 Laura Brown's Reading

Laura is portrayed as a bookworm with a plain appearance. She marries a soldier who has just returned from the battlefields of World War II and strives to fulfill her duties as a virtuous wife and tender mother. However, her life is radically altered after marriage. She is no longer "Laura Zielski, the solitary girl, the incessant reader" (Cunningham, 1998). Instead, she transforms into "an angel in the house," suffocating under the weight of family obligations. This is not merely an isolated case but rather a universal representation of women's lives in the postwar period. As Zhou Yan pointed out, "The era in which Laura Brown lived was the beginning of post-war reconstruction. People who had experienced the ravages of war longed for a life of peace and tranquility, yearning for stable family relationships" (2009). After the war, men who witnessed the cruelty and horrors of battle are lauded as heroes, celebrated for their sacrifices and bravery. In contrast, women are encouraged to be happy wives and mothers, ensuring the stability and prosperity of family. Under such environment, Laura finds herself forced to accept the predetermined role as a woman, which restricts her personal desires and aspirations. And at the same time, she struggles with deep insecurities about her own worth. When faced with Dan's pursuit, she cannot help but ask herself, "How could she deny a handsome, good-hearted boy, practically a member of the family, who had come back from the dead?" (Cunningham, 1998). On one hand, she is torn by inner conflict and doubts her value. On the other hand, she internalizes the societal doctrines imposed on women and has become accustomed to placing her husband's needs above her own, even willingly taking on the responsibility of being the perfect wife—"She will do all that's required, and more" (Cunningham, 1998). Through Laura, the novel highlights the emotional and psychological toll exacted by societal pressure on women during the postwar period, showing how they are expected to sacrifice their personal identity for the sake of domestic fulfillment and stability.

In *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* plays a significant role as a connecting thread, intertwining the inner lives of the three female protagonists. Laura is not only a fictional character within the story but also a passionate reader who refuses to be confined by the monotonous and oppressive lifestyle imposed upon her. As Ye Shuxian mentions in *Literature and Healing*, "For society's lower classes, ordinary people, and common folk, literature can offer an outlet for psychological release and catharsis" (1999). While reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, Laura finds an awakening within herself. Through the pages of the novel, she begins to envision a life outside of the domestic sphere, realizing that she is not limited to the roles of wife and mother. *Mrs. Dalloway* becomes more than just a book for Laura—it is a mirror reflecting her own suppressed desires and a source of strength. This moment of epiphany leads to a monumental shift in Laura's life. She ultimately decides to leave her family and move to Canada to become a librarian. This shift marks not only a personal awakening but also reflects the profound influence literature can have on individual liberation. As a form of spiritual healing, literature gives Laura the courage to defy traditional constraints and step into a new chapter of her life.

2.2 Virginia Woolf's Writing

In Virginia Woolf's worldview, illness is not merely a physical defect, but rather a unique mode of cognition and perception. In *On Being Ill*, she astutely observes that society's focus on the mind often overlooks the body and illness, "people write always of the doing of the mind." She not only calls for writers to pay more attention to the body and illness but also acknowledges the distinct value that illness brings to creation. As she says: "In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarme or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, the words give out their scent and distil their flavour" (2012). In a state of illness, the senses often transcend rationality, entering a nearly delirious, pure state, characterized by "rashness"—a bold and impulsive sensitivity. This quality is not only a necessary condition for writing but also the mental stance required for deep reading. During the creation of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf consciously incorporated mental illness into the literary structure. In her diary, she writes, "*Mrs. Dalloway* has branched into a book; & I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side—something like that" (1954). She sought to juxtapose the perceptions of the ill and the healthy, disrupting and subverting the binary opposition between health and illness. As Long Dan points out, "Woolf's purpose in writing is to critique the social system and portray how it functions; to depict it in its most tense and intense operation" (Jones, A, 2021).

Moreover, writing itself serves as a healing process for Woolf. Through her diary and novels, she transforms her emotions and suffering into language. She candidly admits in her diary: "The truth is that writing is the profound pleasure and being read the superficial" (1954). This "profound pleasure" arises from the psychological catharsis and mental solace that creation offers. "Literature is not only beneficial to the psychological well-being of the author—helping to release emotions and broaden their horizons—but also leads to the harmonious development of their career. For example, the completion of a writer's work allows them to release their impulses and passions through 'empathy' in the process of literary creation, alleviating inner pressure" (Ye

Shuxian, 1999). Writing, for Woolf, becomes a form of self-therapy, a way to channel emotional turbulence into artistic expression that ultimately provides mental release and healing.

2.3 Macheal Cunningham's Expressing

Cunningham mentions that when he was conceiving *The Hours*, he thought about his mother. As a homemaker, his mother is confined within home, as Cunningham describes, "she couldn't break out of it and so she became obsessive about everything" (Mendelsohn, D, 2023). Her life is limited to domestic duties and the trivialities of daily routines, leading to the suppression of her emotions and sense of self. Cunningham recalls his mother's life in the interview: "She really would bake a cake and throw it out and start another cake" (Mendelsohn, D, 2023). His mother served as the inspiration for the character of Laura in *The Hours*. Laura's life is filled with a pursuit of perfection, yet she is also trapped in self-doubt. The novel includes a scene where Laura repeatedly fails while baking a cake for her husband. Her obsession intensifies her anxiety, eventually leading her to feel hopeless and stuck. Through the cake, Cunningham not only explores the constraints his mother couldn't escape but also expresses his deep sympathy for such a limited life. As Shi Tieru notes, "Writing, as a narrative form, allows the writer to construct stories about themselves and the world during the creative process, to interpret both, thus achieving some form of emotional release and fulfillment" (2006).

"Laura is the character closest to my mother," Cunningham uses Laura's story to offer an alternative possibility for his mother's life. He believes that his mother's life is "too small for her" (Mendelsohn, D, 2023), and that she should have had a much broader horizon. Thus, it allows Cunningham to give Laura a brave new ending, one in which she escapes the confines of family life to seek self-identity and freedom. This ending serves as a kind of imaginative compensation for his mother's fate and also marks Cunningham's process of self-healing through writing.

Furthermore, Cunningham draws inspiration from Woolf in both language and themes. Just as Woolf juxtaposes the worlds seen by the healthy and the ill, Cunningham offers readers a broader perspective, writing about homosexuality, heterosexuality, and a variety of other identities. Speaking about *The Hours*, he said, "One of the primary purposes of fiction, as far as I can see, is that it is quite possibly, maybe the most effective narrative medium of any kind for letting us, as readers, know what it's like to be a person who is not us" (2022). As a homosexual writer, his works often feature queer themes and characters with HIV. Through them, Cunningham expresses his deep concern for the struggles faced by homosexual communities. The recurring presence of AIDS is both a projection of personal emotions and a reflection of his attention to social inequality and marginalized groups. Cunningham does not view writing as a cure for AIDS, but he believes that writing can raise awareness and encourage the public to focus on the issues surrounding AIDS. Through this, Cunningham ensures that his writing not only serves as a means of emotional release but also holds the potential for social change. His exploration of identity, illness, and social justice through the characters in *The Hours* serves as a powerful reflection of both individual and collective struggles, demonstrating the transformative power of narrative to confront and challenge the boundaries of personal experience and social norms.

Conclusion

The Hours is not just a novel about disease, but also a work about how literature gives meaning to suffering and offers possibilities for the redemption of broken lives. This paper reveals that disease is not only a physical reality but also a metaphorical existence constructed by social discourse and moral judgment. Woolf's mental breakdown reflects the Victorian era's repression of female creativity and the crude nature of medical treatment; Richard's AIDS becomes a symbol of the stigmatization and spatial marginalization of the homosexual community; and Laura's dilemma deeply illustrates the profound conflict between the family and self-actualization of postwar American women.

Moreover, the healing power of literature is a central theme in *The Hours*. Laura awakens to a desire for another life through reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and bravely breaks free from the constraints of family, reshaping her identity; Woolf, through her writing, transforms pain into art, finding brief moments of peace and control in her creation; and Cunningham himself intervenes in the narrative as a writer, rewriting the trapped fate of his mother and voicing solidarity with the homosexual community and AIDS patients. In this context, literature is not only a mirror reflecting the diseases of individuals and their times, but also an act of resistance, through retelling pain and reconstructing fate, it provides the possibility to transcend the limitations of reality. Disease may never be completely eradicated from life, but literature, through its narrative power, gives a voice to the voiceless, builds connections for the lonely, and gives form and meaning to broken experiences. It does not aim to cure disease, but to understand it; not to eliminate pain, but to find human dignity and freedom within it.

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