

# **The Hours Study Guide**

## **The Hours by Michael Cunningham**

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## Plot Summary

The novel opens with a vivid description of Virginia Woolf's suicide. The plot then moves through time and space to intertwine the lives of three women: Woolf, Laura Brown (an unhappy housewife), and Clarissa Vaughan (the modern-day Mrs. Dalloway). As we switch back and forth between these three women's stories, we experience their lives as told through the events in a single day.

Virginia Woolf's day begins with her writing her new novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and nearly ends with a possible suicide attempt, averted at the last moment by her husband Leonard.

Laura Brown, whose day takes place nine years after Woolf's actual suicide, is the reader of Virginia's book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and a fellow candidate for suicide. Her thoughts of suicide that day are also diverted, although we learn from the third storyline (Mrs. Dalloway's/Clarissa Vaughan's) that she later chose to abandon her family instead of committing suicide.

Clarissa Vaughan, who is based on the character created by Virginia Woolf, was nicknamed "Mrs. Dalloway" by her lover, Richard. Richard, we ultimately learn, was Laura Brown's abandoned son. He witnessed her suicidal tendencies, lived through her abandonment, and when we catch up with him in the present day, he is a tortured artist, dying of AIDS. Clarissa is planning a party to honor Richard, the dying writer, for winning the Carrouthers Prize, which he is scheduled to receive that night. Clarissa's day reflects the plotlines and events which Virginia Woolf wrote about in *Mrs. Dalloway*. However, Woolf's book ends with Clarissa Dalloway's party. In *The Hours*, Clarissa Vaughan's day ends with a suicide, instead. Richard tells her he won't be able to attend her party after all, moments before plunging to his death in a suicide leap from a fifth-story window. As Virginia Woolf herself decided while writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, the tortured artist character must die; with his sacrifice, Clarissa Vaughan/Mrs. Dalloway is allowed to go on living.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

In 1941, shortly after the start of the Second World War, Virginia Woolf walks out of her home, leaving behind two suicide notes, and heads towards the river. On her way, she passes a farm worker digging a ditch, and she thinks how successful he is, how fortunate, to be doing his job and doing it well on such a beautiful day. Virginia tells herself she is a failure as a writer. The voices in her head are back, and she fears the black headaches are not far behind. She notices the bombers in the sky, a sign of war, or a sign of madness, depending on if they're real or not - she can't tell.

At the river, she searches for a heavy stone, notices a lone fisherman upstream. He doesn't notice her, however, as she places the stone in the pocket of her unseasonably warm coat. She thinks of her husband Leonard, her sister Vanessa, and her other loved ones. Wouldn't it be kinder, she thinks, to return to the house and destroy the suicide notes? If she does, she knows Leonard and Vanessa won't ever let her go again. She carries on with her plan, walks into the water, and is taken by the river. At home, her husband finds the note. Somehow he knows to go to the river, but when he arrives, all he sees is the lone fisherman, upstream; Virginia's lifeless body has been carried downstream by the river.

## Prologue Analysis

Michael Cunningham has taken the text of Virginia Woolf's actual writings - in this case, her suicide letter to her husband - and depicts the scene for the reader as he sees it in his imagination. Here in this vivid Prologue, Cunningham sets the tone which he will continue throughout *The Hours* - a poetic, stream-of-consciousness writing style which follows the tradition of Woolf's own writings. Her suicide note, written in her own words, blends in well with the prose that Cunningham writes from her point of view.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Sally is busy cleaning the bathroom, and Clarissa Vaughan still needs flowers for tonight's party. She decides to get them herself and sets out into a gorgeous June morning to complete the errand. Pausing for a moment on the threshold, Clarissa likens walking out into the sunny day to plunging into a pool of cold water and experiencing the shock of submersion into another element. She enters late-twentieth-century New York City, thrilling to the sights and sounds around her. She is fifty-two, but stepping into this glorious morning, she feels as fine as she did at the age of eighteen; she recalls stepping out into another sunny June morning with Richard, in Wellfleet, when they were young lovers. It was Richard who had given her the nickname "Mrs. Dalloway."

She thinks of Richard's perverse luck - his sharply declining health coincides with his winning the recently announced Carrouthers Prize, which will assure his legacy as an author. Despite her sadness about Richard's ill health, she is enjoying this beautiful day, and that makes her feel like a "sluttish widow, freshly peroxided under her black veil, with her eye on the eligible men at her husband's wake." (pg. 11) She knows Richard would be analyzing everything he sees on the streets and looking for flaws. Unlike Richard, Clarissa loves life, every bit of it. Still thinking of that day when she was eighteen, she remembers that she was always the romantic of the three of them: she, Richard, and Richard's lover (Louis). Clarissa believes her love of life is a childish belief associated with people she considers simpleminded believers, like housewives or Christians. Clarissa is embarrassed by her belief in the existence of the soul and never speaks to anyone about such sentimental mush. Nonetheless, she can't help but enjoy the day and looks forward to the party she will have tonight for Richard.

She meets Walter Hardy while crossing the plaza. She offers him her cheek when he moves to kiss her lips and then condemns herself for being too conventional. She wonders if Walter will be impressed that she is the woman in Richard's book, but the book did not sell, so Walter is not significantly impressed. He tells her he's in town with his lover, Evan, who may have a new lease on life thanks to a newly prescribed AIDS drug. Clarissa tells Walter about the Carrouthers Prize and the party she's giving tonight in Richard's honor. The moment she invites him, she knows Richard and Sally will both be furious with her. If Richard were well, he would spend half an hour lecturing Clarissa about men like Walter, who Richard thinks do a disservice to the gay cause by trying to become ever-youthful, like the popular athletes who used to torture gays during high school. In her mind, Clarissa can hear Richard "putting down" various subjects, including the subject of Sally, Clarissa's lesbian life partner. Sally and Clarissa are too domestic to gain Richard's respect as a couple. Despite the fact that they are open about their homosexuality, and although Sally works tirelessly for political causes and as a public television producer, as far as Richard's concerned, Clarissa sold out and became a society wife.



Clarissa looks in the shop windows, thinks of buying something for Evan, then sees a lovely dress her daughter would never wear. Staring at her own reflection in the window, she thinks of her daughter's friend, Mary Krull, and how neither her daughter nor Mary would approve of the dress or of Clarissa's rather normal appearance. Mary Krull is described as someone Clarissa thinks should be respected because she lives a life of poverty and is willing to go to jail for her political causes. A lesbian and an activist, Mary has no respect for lesbians like Clarissa (who lives a suburban, domestic life), and Mary Krull is seen by Clarissa as a predator who's after her daughter. Clarissa notices a movie being filmed up the street and decides to be grateful for the life going on around her. She enters the flower shop and interacts uneasily with the florist, Barbara. Clarissa feels the weight of Mary Krull's judgment at the idea of wasting money on flowers for a party, and she feels equally guilty refusing anything Barbara offers her. Their transaction is interrupted by the sound of gunfire; the women move to the window and decide it must have come from the movie set. Through the window, Clarissa watches as a movie star - is it Meryl Streep? - pokes her head out for just a moment, as if in benediction of those assembled.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Right from the outset, author Michael Cunningham begins to parallel Virginia Woolf's novel. Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, for which Clarissa Vaughan is nicknamed, begins in much the same way, with Clarissa Dalloway buying flowers in preparation for a party she is to give that night. Cunningham's story revolves around *Mrs. Dalloway*, and in his three main characters he creates an author, a reader, and a protagonist for Virginia Woolf's famous work. Clarissa Vaughan is actually more of an alter-ego than a faithful rendition of Clarissa Dalloway, but in this first chapter, she remains very faithful to her namesake. The plot mirrors *Mrs. Dalloway* point-by-point in this opening chapter: from the flowers, to the gunshot, to the people on the streets. By adding in Virginia Woolf as a character, Cunningham is able to make some allusions between her life and work.

Cunningham's Clarissa thinks of herself as a sell-out because she loves life, secretly believes in the soul, and because she's allowed herself to forge a lasting domestic bond. She measures herself against a hard-line ideal in which freedom means an utter rejection of society, and in which society is presumed, assumed, to be bad. Mary Krull represents this ideal, and Clarissa feels that she's failed in Mary's eyes, while resenting at the same time the hard-line viewpoint which Mary represents. At the other end of this scale is Barbara, who represents society's servants. Clarissa also feels like a failure because she hasn't been a better friend to Barbara; and yet Clarissa also despises her own inability to give orders to Barbara comfortably, as she believes a society woman should be able to do.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

In this chapter, we've flashed back to 1923, eighteen years before Virginia Woolf kills herself. The author wakes from a dream which has given her inspiration for the novel she's working on: *Mrs. Dalloway*. She will begin her novel with Clarissa Dalloway running out to buy flowers on a beautiful day in June. In the bathroom, Virginia washes her face without permitting herself to look in the mirror. Sometimes, in the mirror, she sees a dark vision rather than herself. She cannot risk any unpleasantness this morning, not when she's inspired and in the mood to write. She grabs a cup of coffee from the dining room, avoiding breakfast and her servant, Nelly, in the kitchen. She knows black Nelly would only ruin her mood. She instead goes to her husband, Leonard, who is already at his desk, glaring at printing errors he's found on some proofs. He chides her for skipping breakfast and insists that she will eat a proper lunch. Leonard looks her up and down, thinking she's aged. Impatient to get to work, Virginia agrees to lunch, then sneaks back upstairs to avoid running into Nelly. In her study, she meditates on the delicacy of inspiration. Afraid, as always, that it will desert her, she picks up her pen and begins to write.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter sets the household dynamic for Virginia Woolf's character. Virginia, at the age of forty-one, behaves more like a child than the lady of the house, sneaking around to avoid Nelly's disapproval. Virginia's inability to comfortably rule over her servant parallels the dynamic established with Clarissa in the previous chapter. This chapter also establishes Leonard's paternal tone towards his wife.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

In Los Angeles in 1949, Laura Brown reads Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. She reads to avoid getting out of bed, to avoid having to live her life and behave like the wife and mother she's supposed to be. It is her husband Dan's birthday, and Laura cannot face the idea of going downstairs and making breakfast for him and her son, Richie. She promises herself a few more pages of reading in exchange for making Dan a birthday cake later. Laura knows Dan won't mind if she sleeps in, especially since she's pregnant, but she's overcome by a disproportionate sense of guilt when she hears him making the breakfast.

Laura is a post-World War II bride, having married - to his mother's horror - the conquering local hero, returned from war. She was a loner, a bookworm, and one would think that she is not really the type a popular and handsome man like Dan would have chosen to marry. Perhaps she was flattered by his attention, or perhaps she would've felt too guilty turning down a man who'd nearly given his life for his country. In any case, she doesn't seem to quite know how she became Mrs. Dan Brown, wife and mother. Her life seems surreal to her, and she wonders what's wrong with her. Laura is moved by the prose in Woolf's book and ponders how the author, who seemed to have such emotional capacity to love life, could have killed herself. Laura likes to imagine, secretly, that she's capable of being more than a housewife and wonders if other women feel the same way. *Mrs. Dalloway* captures some of those feelings, and Laura believes she and all the other women married to the war veterans have sacrificed themselves for their country's men, to repay the sacrifice made by the men in the war.

Finally, she goes downstairs to find that her husband has bought her flowers. This angers her deeply, and she tries to hide it because he, as usual, is as happy to see her as a puppy who welcomes its best friend home. She sees him to the door in a stilted, ritualistic manner. Once he's gone, she's bewildered as to how to behave in front of her son. Somehow, when Dan's there, she can play the part of a competent mother, but when she's alone with her son, she feels watched, studied by her son. Like a woman resigned to her fate, she resists the temptation of the novel which awaits her upstairs and tells her son that today they will bake the most perfect cake imaginable.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Laura Brown's character is the reader who will react to Virginia Woolf's prose. Desperately unhappy, and seemingly unaware of it, Laura is naturally attracted to the writings of a suicidal woman. This chapter reflects the impact that powerful writing can have, as we believe Laura's life may hinge on whether or not Clarissa Dalloway's character kills herself. Laura mirrors both Virginia Woolf's character, with her suicidal tendencies, and Mrs. Dalloway's character, with her role as a society wife. Laura has



created for herself a life which is not authentic; she's playing a role which doesn't suit her, and yet, like Mrs. Dalloway, she believes that role is her duty, and that her sacrifice is a gift to the world. Her standards of perfection are hinted at here, as she insists on baking the best cake ever. Laura has magnified the importance of everything she undertakes; when her husband does *her* job by making breakfast, she feels that she's failed miserably and hates him for exposing her failures.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Clarissa Vaughan carries her flowers into the street and joins the throng of onlookers watching the movie set. She's embarrassed to be watching for celebrities, and after a few minutes, she heads towards Richard's apartment. Approaching his neighborhood, she passes a familiar street corner: there, when Richard was nineteen, they had stood and argued. He had wanted more from her than she was willing to give, and she had reminded him of Louis, of Richard's desires for men. Clarissa had walked away from Richard that day; she didn't walk away from the friendship but from the possibility of something more - a lifelong relationship with a man that she still loves.

Today she enters Richard's squalid apartment building and knocks on the door. Richard calls her "Mrs. D." and asks her in. Richard is talking to himself as she lets herself in to the dark, disease-ridden apartment. She can't help but resent Evan for being young enough to be saved by the new AIDS drug; Richard's condition has progressed too far, and he is dying. As she greets him, she inhales his familiar smell, now tinged with illness. She asks if he's hearing the voices today; he says "not right at the moment." Clarissa asks if she can talk to his doctor about increasing his medication, and Richard, defiantly, says that just because he can't hear the voices doesn't mean they're gone. She tries to interest him in the movie star she saw that morning, but realizes that, to Richard, all the people in his life are like characters in a story. Richard has a habit of dramatizing existence, which puts some people off, but Clarissa loves the drama it brings to her life. She asks if he remembers the party and the award ceremony. He remembers them clearly, although they haven't actually happened yet. Richard tries to beg off from the party; he doesn't like these kinds of parties, but Clarissa insists he come. He says he's a failure as a writer, and the award is just sympathy for his illness. He calls her "Mrs. Dalloway" and asks her to take his hand; he tells her it's like it's all happening at once - them being middle-aged here-and-now while at the same time being young lovers standing by a pond. She feels regret for the life they could have had together, but immediately denies the feeling and tells him she'll see him later that day.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Richard's character is a reflection of the character Septimus from the original *Mrs. Dalloway*; in *The Hours*, he is also a reflection of Virginia Woolf - the tortured writer who hears voices and feels failure as a writer. That thought of failure is particularly telling, as it was one of Virginia's final thoughts in the Prologue just before she killed herself. The author uses these similarities to foreshadow Richard's ultimate demise. Clarissa, just as her namesake, reveals herself to be a woman out of touch with her own feelings. Her reaction to her feelings of loss over Richard are to deny them, as if she is an author writing her own character and doesn't believe her character could feel such a thing. In

this way she is similar to the Richard she describes - the Richard who views everyone as a character in a melodrama, often to the exclusion of their true personalities.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Two hours into her morning, Virginia is pleased with her writing. She has high expectations for her book, though she's aware that, by tomorrow, she may come to hate everything she's written today. Virginia thinks that her character, Clarissa Dalloway, must die at the end of the book by taking her own life. She stops writing and goes back downstairs to the printing room, where Leonard and his assistant Ralph are working. Out of loyalty to Leonard, she is deliberately cold to Ralph. Privately, Virginia thinks Leonard is too hard on his assistants, but feels it is her duty as his wife to reflect his attitude. She attempts to treat Ralph like a servant, seeking just the right tone that her mother would have used with her servants, but it comes off wrong and Ralph thinks she is taking his side over Leonard's.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Suicide is being established as a central theme in *The Hours*. Virginia Woolf's deliberations over the possibility of her character, Clarissa Dalloway, committing suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway*, are meant to reflect her own decision on the matter. Another theme, established earlier and carried through this chapter, is the master/servant dynamic. It seems a surprising preoccupation for someone like Virginia Woolf, whose politics leaned dramatically to the left. One would suppose that, given her political views, Woolf would not have had servants or would have been inclined to treat them as equals. Instead, she frequently worries about her inability to keep her servants in their place.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Laura Brown is baking her husband's birthday cake with the help of her young son, Richie. In her mind, she's created the vision of the perfect cake. As a housewife, this cake is her art, and she has high hopes for its success. Her loving and sensitive son has picked up on the importance his mother gives to the cake, and he becomes extremely nervous about making a mistake as he helps her measure out the flour. After he follows her instructions to the letter and dumps the flour in the bowl, her first response is, "Oopsie." (pg. 78) Richie cries quietly over his mistake, until his mother reassures him he actually did it correctly. Unconscious of the effect her rigid standards of perfectionism are having on her son, Laura wonders why he's so delicate. As he dries his tears, Laura tells herself that she's happy with her marriage and her life, and she tells herself that she really wants the unborn child she carries.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Laura has taken the notion of baking a cake and transformed its importance so that she feels her very self-worth rides on a successful outcome. For this reason, she cannot allow her young son to make even the tiniest error while helping her bake the cake. Laura's internal dialogue, in which she continually tries to convince herself she is happy, speaks volumes about the lack of happiness she truly feels. If she really loved her husband and children, as she claims, one would think that she would not have to constantly convince herself of that fact. Her internal dialogue reveals that she feels she has traded the life she was meant to have for her marriage. Her thinking seems extremely rigid, conforming, and black-and-white to the reader; Laura cannot comprehend the possibility of being "herself" within the marriage. Laura has subsumed her own personality to the role of wife and mother. On some level, she seems aware that her family feels she's "letting them down," but Laura doesn't seem to understand that they love her, and would possibly support anything she chose to do. Laura chooses to play her role of wife and mother to the best of her ability. The baking of the cake symbolizes the false ideal she's trying so desperately to reach.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Virginia Woolf walks down the street, planning Mrs. Dalloway's suicide. She decides to give Clarissa a first love - a woman. In her youth, when everything seems possible, Clarissa will fall in love with a woman and be excited and happy about the future. Clarissa must then "come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man." (pg. 82) Virginia decides Clarissa will kill herself when she reaches middle age. For the moment, Virginia focuses on the young lover, what she should be like. Virginia decides to make her brave and scandalous, like her own sister Vanessa. The author talks to herself while walking down the street, and people raise their eyebrows at the odd scene Virginia makes as she talks to herself.

Back at her home, Hogarth House, she pauses to get into character. She reminds herself that she is an author, a wife, and a woman of society; she is a woman who was once mentally ill, but has recovered. Virginia feels her sanity depends on playing her role convincingly. She is unfortunately thwarted by her maid, Nelly, whom Virginia sees as being insolent. She "reads into" everything Nelly says and is convinced that Nelly, by offering her a plain dessert to go with lunch, is punishing Virginia for not placing her lunch order on time - in other words, in Virginia's mind, for failing at being the mistress of the house. To punish Nelly for her supposed disrespect, Virginia sends her off on a lengthy, last-minute errand to London; Nelly is to buy China tea and sugared ginger in preparation for Virginia's sister's arrival that afternoon at four o'clock. Virginia wonders why she has such a hard time commanding servants and resolves that her character, Mrs. Dalloway, will be very skilled in the art of ordering others around.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Michael Cunningham reveals his take on Virginia Woolf's thought process, and he tries to convey what ideas and concerns might have passed through her mind on an ordinary day like the one in the story. Try as Virginia might, she's unable to step into the role she attempts to play; since the role she attempts to play is herself, the reader sees the hopelessness of her situation. Unable to comfortably take part in her own life, we begin to see how Virginia will eventually justify her suicide. Virginia's discomfort with her own life mirrors Laura Brown's feelings, detailed in the previous chapter.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Clarissa returns home with her flowers and meets her lover, Sally, who is on her way out the door. For a moment, Clarissa sees Sally as if for the first time; in truth, Sally is an aging woman with a poor sense of fashion and is visibly impatient. They kiss on the lips, and Sally tells Clarissa she's going out to lunch with Oliver St. Ives. Sally feels guilty for having lunch on her own, with a movie star, while leaving Clarissa to prepare for the party. Clarissa insists she have a good time, but she inwardly feels left out since it seems that Oliver didn't find her important enough to invite to lunch. She wonders if the fact that she is the woman in Richard's award-winning book will cause Oliver to reassess her, but believes that he has relegated her to the role of wife, Sally's wife, and cannot see her as an independently important person. Clarissa chides herself for being so petty as to want to be considered important.

Again, she thinks back to the summer when she was eighteen: when she and Richard first became lovers, when life still held promise, and she felt important. She believes their intertwined personal relationships might not have occurred in such a painful way had they not all been living together in one house: her, Richard, and Richard's lover (Louis). She and Louis had tried to make love, but found it impossible; they shared only their love for Richard. The first time she and Richard had kissed, out by the pond, marked a huge turning point in her life - the beginning of happiness. Now, years later, she realizes the day she walked away from him on the street corner may have been the end of her happiness. Certainly it was the deciding moment which led her here, to this luxuriously appointed home which she shares with her life mate, Sally. Clarissa allows herself, for a moment, to feel as if the house doesn't belong to either Sally or herself; in that brief moment, Clarissa feels relief.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

In some ways, Clarissa is the inverse of Virginia Woolf's character, Mrs. Dalloway. Like Virginia Woolf's character, she has chosen a steady, secure life, instead of choosing the true love of her heart. Clarissa walked away from Richard, because life with him would not have been stable, and chose instead the marital security of life with Sally. The blissful kiss that Clarissa Vaughan shared with Richard at the pond parallels the kiss shared by Clarissa Dalloway and her young female lover in *Mrs. Dalloway*. It's an ironic twist to Woolf's Clarissa, who opted against the gay life in order to live a more socially acceptable married life. Cunningham's Clarissa chose a gay lover *against* social convention; and yet, that very choice put her into the role of society wife, just like Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway.





# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Laura Brown's cake has not turned out as intended; it looks home baked and amateurish. She fixates on the crumbs in the icing and the lopsided 'n' in 'Dan.' She reminds herself that it's just a cake and that her husband will love her regardless. She steels her mind to performing her other wifely tasks for the day: cleaning the house, preparing dinner, and wrapping the presents she's bought for her husband. She knows, but cannot accept, that he will love her and her gifts unconditionally. She wishes she could be the person she's pretending to be, but she feels strange and pathetic; she feels tolerated, not loved. Her thoughts touch on Virginia Woolf putting a stone in her own coat pocket and drowning herself in the river. Laura banishes the thought.

Just then, Laura hears a knock on her door. It is her neighbor, Kitty, from down the hall. Laura panics because she is in her robe and hair is unbrushed; her appearance is not suitable for her role. She considers hiding inside the house, pretending she's not home, but her young son's eyes are on her, and she cannot let him discover her acting so strangely. Kitty enters, and she appears to be everything that Laura wants to be: confident, attractive, and "normal." Laura invites her to sit down for a cup of coffee. Kitty sees the cake and calls it "cute." With that one word, Laura feels condemned as a failure; her work of art has turned out cute, like a small child's art project. To make herself feel better, Laura brings up what she thinks is Kitty's weakness - Kitty's husband Ray. Ray was popular, successful, and handsome in high school, but he has turned out to be less than stellar as an adult. He's not a failure, but Laura thinks that he is not worthy of the likes of Kitty, and she believes Kitty must be embarrassed by him. Kitty enjoys the taste of the coffee and compliments Laura; Laura then feels her self-worth somewhat vindicated.

Kitty is acting strangely, and Laura insists on knowing why. Kitty needs a favor; she admits she has to go to the hospital, as she has a growth in her uterus which has been preventing her from getting pregnant. She implies, but does not say, that it could be life-threatening. In the face of Kitty's fear, and Kitty's failure as a woman (in Laura's eyes), Laura feels better about herself. Confidently, she embraces Kitty, thinking, "This is how a man feels, holding a woman." (pg. 109) Laura believes an understanding has passed between them and that Kitty, like herself, must be playing a role that she hates, too. Laura kisses her; Kitty returns the kiss. Kitty pulls away and asks Laura to feed her dog while she's in the hospital. To Laura, that kiss meant a great deal. For Kitty, it was merely an expression of her fear, a response to Laura's confident reassurance. In the aftermath, Laura feels even more foreign than before, her true desires exposed to a woman who doesn't share them. After Kitty leaves, the world seems smaller to Laura. She looks around her small world and decides to bake a new and better cake. She hides the first cake in the trashcan while her son looks on.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The kiss in this scene is an important turning point for both the novel and for Laura's character. It echoes the kiss remembered by Clarissa in the previous chapter, as well as the kiss for Clarissa Dalloway that Virginia Woolf plans to include in her novel. These two earlier kisses were described in the narrative as being the beginning of happiness for the two Clarissas. For Laura's character, we finally see where her happiness lies and why she can't be happy being married to a man. Having experienced this brief moment of bliss, it seems possible that Laura's character - heretofore secretly suicidal - may have discovered the key to her own future happiness.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Virginia is helping her husband and his assistants, Ralph and Marjorie, correct printing proofs when her sister arrives an hour and a half earlier than planned. Leonard insists he cannot interrupt his work and will make his appearance at four o'clock, when Vanessa was scheduled to arrive. Virginia assures him she will take care of her sister. Virginia worries about her appearance; she meant to fix her hair and change her clothes before Vanessa and her children arrived. She attempts to greet her sister with a worldly sense of assurance, and they kiss chastely on the lips. Virginia asks where the children are; Vanessa informs her that the children found a dying bird beside the road and have taken it to the garden. Virginia tells her that Nelly is in London, picking up treats for their tea; she admits that Nelly gave her a hard time about going. Vanessa's airy reply hits just the right note, Virginia thinks, about how to treat servants. In the garden, Virginia surveys her sister's children: Julian, Quentin, and Angelica. She remembers her childhood with Vanessa and how she once suggested to Vanessa that she name her future daughter Clarissa. Vanessa's children, not Virginia's books, are the true legacy, thinks Virginia. In her memories of childhood with Vanessa also lies a hint of sexual games that Virginia and her sister may have played, once upon a time, as innocent children.

The dying bird is attended solemnly by the children. Angelica wants to have a funeral, but the bird is still alive. With Virginia's help, the little girl creates a deathbed for the bird from grass and flowers and thorns. Virginia finds herself looking longingly at the deathbed, wishing she could lie down on it and die. Kneeling next to Angelica, Virginia fancies they share a moment, "a complicity that is neither maternal nor erotic but contains elements of both." (pg. 120) However, when she looks into her niece's eyes, she sees nothing but Angelica's impatience to be admired for her work and the little girl's desire to be set free and find a new game. Virginia's thoughts of death continue even as the group returns to the house to have tea.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter, not only do we see more of Virginia's continuing death wish, we also see elements of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. Her decision not to have children, along with her moment of confusion about Angelica, are both possible results of the emotional damage experienced by Virginia Woolf, who in real life was sexually abused by her stepbrothers from a very early age. Virginia, in her writings, called herself a coward about sex within her marriage. The psychiatric field was not well developed during the time Virginia lived, and so she would likely not have had any help distinguishing the innocent childish sex play with her sister from the heinous acts perpetrated against her by her stepbrothers. Her stepbrothers were likely sexually

abused themselves, and so there may have been additional abuse in her household from parental figures or trusted adults.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Clarissa Vaughan fills a vase with flowers, intent on hosting the perfect party for Richard. Louis arrives unexpectedly; she hasn't seen him in over five years and didn't even know he was in town. He's become a drama teacher since their days living together at the house; in Clarissa's eyes, he's become unimposing and harmless. She tells him of his amazing timing; her party takes place tonight and is in honor of the Carrouthers Prize that Richard has won. Louis greets her with a tight embrace and thinks that there is so little love in the world. He surveys Clarissa's apartment disapprovingly; it represents upper-class New York, a world he disparages. He blames Sally for having this influence on Clarissa. Clarissa, the perfect hostess, brings out glasses of crisp, carbonated water adorned with lemon peels; Louis considers this an indictment of her character. He doesn't tell her that he's visited New York several times over the past five years; at that time, it seemed simpler not to contact either her or Richard. Now Louis is coming back to stay.

Clarissa warns him that Richard's deterioration is quite dramatic; he marvels that she's remained close to him and tells her he's read the book. Louis recognized Clarissa as the main character, but he's not complimentary about the book. He says it was an extremely long book and nothing really happens, until the sudden death at the end. They reminisce about the house in Wellfleet. It's clear that although their fondest memories were made that summer, their most painful ones were, too. Louis tells her he often hated her that summer, when she was with Richard; Clarissa knows. Louis says he tried to be good - in their way of seeing life, "good" was and is defined as being sexually open and free - avoiding a monogamous lifestyle. Even this day, Louis is judging Clarissa for having settled down to a spouse's life with Sally. Louis is not happy; he lies and tells Clarissa he's in love with his current partner, Hunter, but in truth Louis doesn't love him at all. He thinks again how little love there is in the world.

For a moment, Clarissa feels very close to Louis, imagines making love to him or maybe just sorting through their memories together. Then Julia, Clarissa's daughter, comes home. Louis turns away to hide his tears and makes his escape from the apartment soon after. Before leaving, he greets Julia, who is the same age Clarissa had been that fateful summer; he briefly imagines running off with her. He pictures his new life in New York, tells himself he's not too old to start over. He recalls feeling too old to start over when he was twenty-eight and finally gave up on Richard.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

The characters in *The Hours* seem as unhappy as Virginia Woolf must have been. They all repress their truest desires, without, it seems, ever recognizing what their true desires may be. Louis, who was (and is) desperately in love with Richard, thought he



was being true to himself by denying that love, that need for commitment, and maintaining an open relationship. Even years later, he continues to judge Clarissa for choosing exactly the sort of life that might have made Louis happy. Unfortunately, Clarissa judges herself by the same standard, believing she was weak and shallow to choose a committed relationship over an open one with Richard. The open relationships maintained by this group of characters reflect the open relationships between the members of the real-life Bloomsbury Group; the pain and devastation caused by those relationships is documented in *The Hours*, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and in the true-life pain experienced by Woolf.

Louis's review of Richard's prize-winning book could just as well sum up his relationship with Richard. Louis spent years waiting for something more to come out of his relationship with Richard. Louis was waiting for a commitment - the word all the characters skirt around is commitment. Eventually he stopped waiting, but his return to New York and his emotional response to Richard's illness may signify that, on some level, he's still waiting and hoping. Little does he know that his life with Richard will end in the same way as Richard's book - with a sudden death. Ultimately, Louis's description of Richard's book could also serve as a description of the eminent Virginia Woolf's life: "They'd waited all that time, and for what? More than nine hundred pages of flirtation, really, with a sudden death at the end. People did say it was beautifully written." (pg. 130)



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Laura Brown drives her Chevrolet in a state of dream-like awareness. She's bought herself a few hours of freedom by dropping her son off at a neighbor's house, pleading last-minute errands for her husband's birthday. She's fulfilled all of her wifely duties for the afternoon and will allow herself some time away to think about the kiss and the cake. The kiss doesn't bother her; in fact, she imagines, briefly, a life of love with Kitty. Although, Laura knows that she's tipped her hand, given Kitty insight into who Laura really is, which makes Laura feel powerless. The cake is what really bothers her; it signifies her failure to achieve transcendence through the life she's chosen.

When she arrives at the downtown area of the city, she considers her options. She has no desire to be around people, and she ultimately decides to rent a hotel room for a couple of hours for the purpose of reading *Mrs. Dalloway*. She pulls into a respectable hotel, feeling guilty and sinful, surprised that the clerk doesn't find her suspicious. She feels the need to lie to him, and she tells him her husband is getting the luggage and will be joining her shortly. The clerk gives her the key, and as she heads towards Room 19, she feels like she's gotten away with something. She enters the fictional world of *Mrs. Dalloway*, reading a portion in which the main character considers death and quotes Shakespeare's play, *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun, Nor the furious winter's rages." (pg. 151) For the first time, Laura consciously considers the possibility of suicide. She fantasizes about it the way people fantasize about a lover, something pleasurable. She forces herself to remember the child in her womb and vows never to commit such an act. It would be simple, she thinks, as simple as checking into a hotel.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Laura's desperate need to get out of the life she's created causes her to leave Richie at a neighbor's house and drive to a hotel, with the idea of suicide floating around in her mind. This is the first time Laura admits to herself that she's unhappy with her present circumstances. Suicide, at this point, is the only option she sees for changing those circumstances. Her thinking is still seems very black-and-white: either live the life she's resigned herself to, or die. Only those two choices permeate her consciousness. The child in her belly, which keeps her from choosing suicide, also feels like a trap, forcing her to live on and continue in her unhappiness. Given her current thought processes, Laura can only view her husband and children as anchors, weighing her down in life.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Virginia sits in the kitchen, having tea with her sister; for this brief moment, she truly appreciates her life. She begins to reconsider killing off Mrs. Dalloway. How could she leave this domestic bliss behind? Nelly arrives on the scene with the sweetened ginger and China tea, furious that Virginia has prepared tea without her and wasted her time by sending her to London. When Nelly turns her back on the two sisters, Virginia leans forward and kisses her sister on the lips; Vanessa returns the kiss. The kiss feels as delicious as forbidden pleasure to Virginia.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Virginia's decision to let Clarissa live, based on her own present happiness, is Cunningham's way of showing us that Clarissa Dalloway was strongly based on the true-life Virginia Woolf. Virginia's thoughts of suicide prompted her to want to kill off her character, but now that Virginia is, for the moment, happy, she will allow her to live. The kiss in this chapter is the author's representation of the first kiss, the "real life" kiss, that led to both authors (Woolf and Cunningham) writing such a kiss for their Clarissa characters. Virginia had been thinking of her sister as she wrote the female love interest for her character Clarissa, and so Cunningham has alluded to an incestual element mixed in with the overall theme of sexual confusion.





# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Julia, alone with her mother now that Louis has departed, shakes her head over the sad, strange man. Clarissa asks her daughter for a hug and is rewarded by a smile which transforms Julia into a young lady again. Julia is so serious, thinks Clarissa, so adult; she worries that her mannerisms irritate her daughter as her mother's used to irritate her. She worries about her daughter being friends with Mary Krull, who right at this moment is outside smoking a cigarette. Clarissa, offended, insists that Mary come inside and greet her, then instantly regrets sounding so old fashioned. Dutifully, Julia goes to get Mary, after telling her mother not to be afraid of her friend.

Mary's head, like Julia's, is shaved. She is twice Julia's age and obviously in love with her. Julia apparently only admires Mary for her social causes, belief in personal suffering, and rejection of all things material. Mary hates Clarissa for being a fellow lesbian who has bought into society's norms with her nice home, "married" life, and penchant for throwing parties. Mary, at this moment, is trying her best to charm Julia's mother. Mary and Julia are on their way to buy boots for Mary, who hates to shop, of course, and rants about how deluded the sales clerks are in their materialism. For a moment, Mary and Clarissa face each other, each thinking their private, condemning thoughts. Clarissa sees herself through Mary's eyes and again condemns herself for being trivial and shallow. At the same time, she sees through Mary's facade. She knows Mary is out to conquer both the world and Clarissa's daughter with her splashy show of hatred, and Clarissa feels Mary's popularity can't last. She wonders if her straight daughter sees in Mary a father figure; having been raised by two lesbian women, Julia's idea of a father figure might be a butch dyke like Mary. As they leave, Mary thinks how she would give anything if only Julia could love her in the way she loves Julia.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Mary and Clarissa both represent opposite views of lesbianism. Clarissa has opted to maintain a monogamous, more socially accepted, relationship with her life partner, Sally. Mary, a very public champion of gay rights, feels threatened and undermined by Clarissa's buying into the system. This duality rings true not only for the gay community but for many minorities groups who may have similar internal conflicts.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Vanessa and the children have gone, Nelly is in the kitchen making dinner, Leonard is writing in his study, and the dead bird lies on its bed of roses in the garden. Virginia stands looking out the window, thinking about her new novel. Her hope is to create something utterly perfect, and she's afraid she will fail. Virginia tells herself she's content with her life. The headache is coming back; suddenly, she decides she must escape. Out into the night she goes - no word, no note. She's just taking a walk, she tells herself. In the garden, she stands for a moment over the body of the dead bird and thinks that this corpse, representing death, is the opposite of the life shining from the house windows up above.

She leaves, walking unconsciously towards the rail station. She passes a couple walking together and feels alone. She can feel her madness descending on her again, in the form of a headache and voices. The idea of taking a train to London breathes new life into her, and she purchases a ticket. It was Leonard who took her away from her precious city for her health; although she knows he was right to do it, she feels she's losing her soul, drop by precious drop, here in the suburbs. She decides not to call home until the deed is done and she's in London; but as she strolls down the street, killing time until her train departs for London, she meets her husband, hurrying worriedly up the street towards her. He was afraid something had happened; she hides her train ticket in her purse and tells him she was merely out for a walk. He convinces her to go home with him, but she makes him promise to discuss, over dinner, the possibility of moving back to London.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Virginia, much like Laura Brown in an earlier chapter, is vaguely aware that she's in danger, but doesn't consciously admit that she's in danger of committing suicide. She wants to escape from her home, and the scene in the garden where she thinks of the dead bird, of death, as being the very opposite of her home, is telling. Leonard is afraid, aware on some level that his wife might hurt herself. The words go unspoken between them, however, but her behavior has frightened him so much that he's willing to discuss her desired move to London.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Sally is at lunch with Oliver St. Ives, St. Ives's assistant, and Walter Hardy. Oliver, a movie star and now a well-known gay activist, has asked Sally for her opinion on his new film idea about a gay action hero. She dissembles, waits for Walter to speak. Finally, Walter speaks supportively, while Sally tells Oliver she's unconvinced about the film. She looks around Oliver's apartment and wishes she didn't desire so much to impress him. She knows that in order to stay in his good graces all she had to do was support his movie idea, but part of her resents herself for wanting to be his friend only because he's a celebrity. At her continued lukewarm reaction to his idea, he utters a sigh. "This is a resigned and final sigh, running toward the nasal register, meaningful in its lack of drama. It is like the first disinterested sigh a lover sends over the telephone wires, the sigh that signals the earliest beginning of the end. Has Oliver used that sigh in a movie? Or has someone else, somebody real, sighed like that into Sally's ear long ago?" (pg. 178) Either way, Sally realizes she's been rejected by Oliver St. Ives. As she leaves with Walter, she is half grateful, half sad, to be now excluded from the ranks of celebrity. Walter, on the other hand, has endeared himself and seems to have passed Ives's test. Sally and Walter exchange a look, both aware of what's transpired.

Before she can leave Walter on the street corner, he drags her into a store; he wants to buy a present for Evan. She wonders how Walter's taking Evan's recovery, now that he's spent years waiting for his young lover to die. She thinks of past presents she's bought for Clarissa - some appreciated, some not - but all received with the same pretense of enjoyment. She harbors a moment of anger towards Clarissa, Walter, Oliver, all the insincere people she knows. She sees the beautiful, expensive shirt Walter buys his lover and feels a rush of longing for Clarissa; she thinks of the fragility of life and how people like her, who've found love, are forever afraid of losing their loved ones to the curse of mortality. Walter tells her he'll see her tonight, and she wonders who invited him to the party.

She stops to buy flowers for Clarissa. At home, she finds Clarissa dazed from her encounters that day with Mary Krull and Louis Waters. Clarissa brings Sally up to speed on the day's events, after which Sally presents her with the flowers. For that brief moment, they are both entirely happy.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

This chapter continues the theme, begun in the original *Mrs. Dalloway*, of society's shallowness and duplicity, as symbolized by the concept of celebrity. Sally, unlike Clarissa, has been included in the "in" crowd; she was invited to lunch with St. Ives. However, her dislike, on general principal, of society's craven regard for celebrity, causes her to botch the potential friendship. Walter symbolizes everything Sally

disregards and yet craves, and for those conflicting reasons, she alternately holds both warmth and contempt for him. Clarissa, too, has mixed feelings about Walter. Only Richard, as we learned previously, is firm in his rejection of Walter and of all things society deems worthy. His utter rejection of human society can be seen as a key factor in his ultimate decision to reject life.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Laura Brown returns home at a later hour than she intended. Still, it's not even six o'clock, so Mrs. Latch, the neighbor watching over her son, will not require an explanation. With her mind on the Virginia Woolf novel she's been reading, she attempts to wear her life again through paying attention to symbols, such as her car, her wedding ring. She has to force herself to move forward, having spent the past hours longing for death. She nearly stumbles at the door of Mrs. Latch's house, but gathers her courage and rings the bell. At the sight of her, Richie starts crying and runs to his mother. She thinks he's a momma's boy. He stares at her with suspicion.

Alone in the car with Richie, she tells him they're in big trouble because she's running late with Dan's birthday dinner. She looks in his eyes and sees a disturbing new emotion. He tells her, frantically, that he loves her. He knows, she thinks, that she's lying. He must sense that she's been somewhere illicit. She reassures him that everything is okay, but he continues to stare at her, unshed tears in his eyes. She realizes that he's seen her with Kitty and he's seen her throw away the first cake; he's so devoted to her that he watches everything she does and always will. For a brief moment, she envisions him dead. Laura bites back her anger and keeps both hands on the wheel.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Laura is such a child herself that she allows herself to feel judged by her son's scrutiny. She hardly realizes herself that she meant to commit suicide that day, but from her son's reaction, the reader realizes that the boy must have known, must have read it in her emotions. His abject relief at her return is the relief of a boy who thought he'd never see his mother alive again. He tries so hard to convey his love, but is defeated because she is unable to receive it. As Laura notices him scrutinizing her for warning signs, the boy's fate is sealed. In that moment, although of course she's not aware of it, Laura has decided to leave. She cannot bear the mirror of herself she sees in her son's face, and the perceptiveness of the child will ultimately be her excuse for leaving.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Clarissa arrives at Richard's apartment to help him get dressed for the party. He doesn't answer her knocks on the door; worried, she lets herself in. The apartment, usually dark and shadowed because Richard can no longer tolerate much light, is uncharacteristically flooded with sunshine, revealing the dinginess of disease which has invaded his personal space. He calls out for his Mrs. Dalloway, and she rushes to the other room and finds him perched in an open windowsill. He tells her it's a beautiful day, and she pleads for him to come down. She moves towards him, and he leans further out the window. He tells her he's sorry he can't make it to her party; she tells him he doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to do, and again she begs him to come down from the windowsill. He tells her he can't face the endless hours of sickness ahead of him. She wants to know if he's hearing the voices again; he tells her they're always there, but he's not listening to them right now - he's listening to her lovely voice. Richard speaks to her of the morning she was eighteen, when she walked out of the house into the sunshine. He tells her it was the most beautiful sight he's ever seen. He remembers being young, being in love with her and with Louis. That incomparable morning has remained strong in both of their memories and that makes Richard feel like a failure. He'd hoped, as a writer, to write something which could stand up to a memory like that one. He tells her she's been so good to him and that he loves her. His final words before falling out the window are, "I don't think two people could have been happier than we've been." (pg. 200)

Clarissa knows that he's just fallen five floors to his death on the concrete below; she hears the impact. She can't take it in; he'd seemed so serene, she half expects him to get up off the ground and dust himself off. She runs down the stairs, guiltily conscious that she feels grateful to be alive. As she descends the final set of stairs, she can see the pool of blood around Richard's head; he wears the gray felt slippers she bought for him. She touches him lovingly, wants to tell him she loves him too, and is moved by his courage in loving her all these years against all reason. She wants to explain that she left him because she desired a normal life, which he wouldn't give her; he wouldn't even give her the satisfaction of attending her party.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Richard's final words echo the suicide note Virginia Woolf left for her husband, in which she tells Leonard that she doesn't think two people could be happier than they have been. With these words, Richard reveals the multiple roles he and the other characters have been playing. Richard is an echo of Virginia Woolf and of the character, Septimus, which she created. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia has Septimus commit suicide, but spares Mrs. Dalloway from the same fate. If these two characters represent distinct parts of Virginia Woolf's psyche, she kills off the tortured artist part of her nature and allows the

bland society wife aspect of herself to survive...at least for a few more years, before the famous author actually does commit suicide. By sacrificing the character aspects shared by Septimus and Richard, the authors allow both Clarissa Dalloway and Laura Brown to survive.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Dan Brown blows out his birthday candles, spraying the cake with a few drops of spittle in the process. Rage overtakes Laura at his carelessness with her cake, but she stifles it, tells herself to be pleasant, to keep posing as a wife and mother. She thinks again how nice death would be. Dan puts his arm around his wife, tells her how perfect everything is. She asks her son if he made a wish too. Laura thinks that Richie, like his father, is constantly wishing, not for something more, but for a continuance of what they already have. Laura has an epiphany in the act of laying the dinner plates on the crisp white cloth. She realizes she has succeeded, after all; she has obtained perfection in this moment. She feels the moment slipping away and watches as her son makes another wish.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Laura has rejected the possibility of suicide, but her entire being seems to rebel at rejoining her life in any meaningful way. She is surprised by the perfection of the moment she manages to create, by her own ability to achieve the unreachable ideal she's sought after as a wife and mother. Even in that moment she looks to the future, seeing that brief perfection already as part of the past.





# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

Virginia Woolf has won her battle to move back to London. The possibility of life opens up for her as she thinks of the concert halls, the parties, the city streets. These animating thoughts return her mind to Vanessa's kiss; the kiss contained a similar promise of joy fulfilled. She decides to give Clarissa Dalloway such a moment, such a kiss, in her story. Clarissa will only be allowed to experience that bliss once, and she must survive her entire life on the strength of that one happy memory. Virginia consigns Clarissa to a lonely, grieving life, which Virginia imagines will still somehow be happy for Clarissa, because Clarissa too loves living in London. Virginia conceives the idea of creating a new character, a tortured artist, who will commit suicide instead of Clarissa. Leonard interrupts her train of thought, sternly ordering her to bed. With the trip to London to look forward to, Virginia decides to comply and be on her best behavior.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

The kiss with Vanessa and the promise of a move to London has given Virginia's character a new lease on life. Whether or not it is her sister, or just women in general, whom Virginia is interested in, that kiss has stirred feelings of happiness in Virginia which she thought were dead. Although she resigns herself to never being romantically happy, Virginia consoles herself with her love of London, and that love, for the moment, is enough to keep her alive. By deciding not to kill off Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia has symbolically spared her own life. By no means is the reprieve permanent; Virginia creates the Septimus character who will die instead of Mrs. Dalloway.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

Laura is brushing her teeth in preparation for bed. She knows her husband will be waiting, expectantly, for her to join him. She knows the look of happy surprise he will give her when she enters the bedroom - as if he can't believe his luck that she's there with him. She compares him sexually to the novelty cans from which paper snakes pop out when you open the lid; she thinks ruefully that there will be no more reading tonight. She toys with the full bottle of prescription sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet, thinking how easy it would be to check into a hotel room and end her life. Once again, her pregnancy stops her from committing suicide. She thinks back to that moment of perfection at dinner and wonders if perhaps that's enough. Maybe she's done her job enough and can let go of it all now.

She stands in her negligee at the side of the bed. Dan speaks to her tenderly, asks if she's coming to bed. Her lips say yes, but her body remains standing motionless at the side of the bed. She feels completely detached from the scene. He asks her again if she's coming to bed. Again she says yes, but she remains standing still.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

Laura is unable to move. She cannot go forward with this charade of her life, nor can she allow herself to end her life, knowing that she is pregnant. She stands by the side of the bed, detached from her body and from her life. It is a turning point, of sorts. We know that she must find some other option, because she cannot, will not, go on as she is.



# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Clarissa and Sally lead Laura Brown into their home. When she enters her home, Clarissa is relieved to see that her daughter has put away and removed the hors d'oeuvres for the party. The flowers remain. Julia has fallen asleep on the couch, and she wakes to the sound of Sally's voice. Clarissa introduces Julia to Richard's mother. Sally thanks Julia for attending to the party cancellation. Julia tells her she was able to "head off" most of the guests, but a few people had shown up, including Louis Waters. Apparently Louis had broken down when he heard the news. Julia spoke to him at length, and he seemed a little better when he left. Julia, seemingly the hostess, offers Laura a cup of tea. The women decide Richard wouldn't mind if they ate the party food after all. They talk about what a wonderful writer Richard was. When Laura says she's read his work, Clarissa realizes that Laura knows the effect that she, the unhappy wife and mother, had on her son. Clarissa wishes she could get past the awkwardness and ask Laura the important questions, but she wouldn't even know what to ask. Both women wish out loud that they could have taken better care of Richard. Clarissa looks at the woman who hurt Richard so; she marvels that Laura has outlived her husband, her son, and her daughter. Clarissa takes Laura's hand and holds it.

After a moment, Clarissa excuses herself to the kitchen to check on Sally and Julia's progress. Sally kisses her on the forehead and tells her it's time for this night to be over; they will have a late meal, then go to bed. Clarissa agrees, thinking how fragile life is. Most of Richard's family is dead and his mother will one day follow. Even his writing will disappear into dust. Why, she wonders, do people love life so much? It's for the hours, she realizes, those precious hours of wonder and joy sandwiched in between the other hours, the long dreadful hours of pain which we must all go through. With another hour ahead of her, Clarissa calls Mrs. Brown into the kitchen to eat a late meal.

## Chapter 22 Analysis

The other option which Laura found for her life is revealed as we realize she is Richard's mother. Richard Worthington Brown, the tortured artist, dead by his own hand, is the very little boy who watched his mother leave him behind one day with the full intention of killing herself. In his book, he's written his mother's end as a suicide. In her true, real life, we find she took another option; she abandoned her family years ago. This scene with Clarissa Vaughan is ironic and sad. Both women are lesbians: one chose the life of a homemaker, one violently rejected that same life. The man Clarissa rejected in favor of a normal life is the same little boy Laura rejected because she couldn't stand her normal life. Both women abandoned Richard. Clarissa, however, remained his friend, a part of his life, even if she never gave him the secure home life he lost so many years ago when Laura left him behind.



The title of the book is revealed as its central theme; the one lesson Clarissa takes away from the mixture of pain and joy she's felt through this long day is that life is about moments, hours, in which we experience life's transcendent joy. The other hours, the ones we get through somehow, are worth living through even if they're painful; those brief moments of indescribable joy remain with us always. Clarissa will always have her kiss by the pond with Richard.



# Characters

## Richard Brown (Richie)

Richard's character is the link which ties the storylines together. At some point during the novel, the reader realizes that the eminent writer and winner of the Carrouthers Prize is the same little boy we see in the scenes with Laura Brown. As a child, Richie is depicted as an extremely sensitive little boy. His mother has very little understanding of this, and she often wonders why he overreacts to the smallest criticism. Laura Brown is not self-aware enough to realize that the boy is reacting, on a profound level, to her unhappy moods and increasing detachment from her family. At his tender age, Richie realizes, even before his mother realizes, that she intends to commit suicide. Richie is not merely aware of his mother's moods, he is deeply affected by them. He idolizes his mother, as little boys will, and takes on her worldview as his own. He is too young to understand that her extreme perfectionism fuels her disproportionate sense of failure. He embraces her perfectionism, and this is the reason for his over-sensitivity to criticism. This is exemplified by his inordinate fear of making a mistake while baking the cake; he has absorbed her fears of failure.

Unfortunately, what he learned as a child stays with him in adulthood. Despite winning the Carrouthers Prize, Richard feels like a failure as a writer. His mother's sexual confusion also haunts him as an adult. He witnessed, when he was a child, her deliberations over whether to stay in her marriage or leave to pursue her true sexual identity; he echoes that indecision with his inability to choose between Louis and Clarissa. He loves them both, and he has seen firsthand the consequences of walking away from the bonds of commitment. This prevents him from forming any commitments, and it also prevents him from walking away from those he loves. Louis and Clarissa both left him. Richard would most likely have been content to remain in a painful state of limbo with the two of them. After all, his mother's decision to leave her family hurt him deeply. He can neither commit nor leave, afraid of making the same mistakes Laura made. In essence, he refuses to participate in life or love and winds up alone, tormented, and broken. His choice to commit suicide also seems to be a response to his mother's decision to "walk out" and leave the family. Like her, he sees suicide as freedom. Because her leaving was so painful to him, it's possible he would have actually preferred she kill herself. In his novel, where he was in control of her character's destiny, he changed the reality of her leaving and instead chose for her to commit suicide. Ultimately, he made the same choice for himself.

## Laura Brown

Laura was Richard's mother. Her failure to be true to herself planted the seeds which ultimately led to Richard's destruction. Long before the novel began, Laura betrayed herself by marrying Dan Brown. It was not only a betrayal of herself, but a betrayal of Dan, to whom she made promises she was not equipped to keep. Interestingly, in the



movie *The Hours*, which was based on this book, Dan Brown is portrayed as a jerk who stifles his wife, thus driving her to consider suicide. Similarly, in real life, Leonard Woolf (Virginia's husband) has often been blamed by feminists and critics alike for driving Virginia to suicide. One would think that these judgments unfair to Leonard Woolf and the character of Dan Brown since they negate the concept of personal responsibility. It was not Dan Brown who caused Laura's depression. Her depression was caused by her own refusal to discover her true sexual identity, and it was also caused by the false vows she made when she married Dan.

Is Laura's confusion understandable? Certainly. When she began to understand herself better, she had a choice as to how to handle the mistakes she made. Her marriage was a mistake; she married Dan because she thought so little of herself that she felt she had no right to refuse a war hero's proposal. Laura didn't realize that it was actually her responsibility to refuse the proposal if she was incapable of honoring her marriage. People who have been victimized early in life - like Virginia Woolf, sexually molested by her stepbrothers - often feel they lack the power to stand up for themselves. This is a common and understandable mistake made by victims who've been made to feel powerless. It's worth noting that victims who have become accustomed to victimizing behavior also become victimizers in turn.

Laura, belatedly, realizes she has been untrue to herself in creating this marriage. She could have divorced her husband and remained a presence in her children's life; however, the only two options she considered were suicide and abandonment of her family. She wanted to wish away her mistakes instead of healing them. She was such a perfectionist that she really couldn't accept the fact that she made a mistake, and for this reason tried for so long to be a good wife. Had her thinking been less extreme, less black-and-white, her child might have grown up to be a healthier human being, capable of making and recovering from his own mistakes. It's not fair to blame Laura Brown for her son's unhappiness - although her son did blame her. The cycle of victimization has been passed down generation-to-generation throughout human history, and Laura undoubtedly inherited her own problems, to some extent, from her parents.

Transcending victimization is a huge challenge, and the era Laura Brown lived in lacked psychological enlightenment; she, like Virginia Woolf, did not have the support or knowledge needed to overcome her pain and confusion. Novels like *The Hours*, which explore such themes, can help to create human awareness of such issues and provide hope that the current generation of victims may not follow the same path as their victimizers.

## Clarissa Vaughan

Clarissa Vaughan was nicknamed "Mrs. Dalloway" by Richard in honor of the literary character, Clarissa Dalloway, whom he believes she resembles. To fully understand Clarissa Vaughan, one must understand what author Virginia Woolf had in mind when she created the character of Mrs. Dalloway. Woolf thought of Mrs. Dalloway as a shallow society wife; too weak to buck convention, Clarissa could only submit herself to society's judgment and try to live up to its standards. This view of society wives reflected



the beliefs of the Bloomsbury Group. At the time Virginia lived, women had even less equality than they do today; Virginia was associated with feminism because she created characters, such as Mrs. Dalloway, who were considered indictments of the socially-accepted female role.

The Bloomsbury Group felt that there were more important things in the world than throwing parties and keeping house. The irony is that while they concerned themselves with social agendas like world hunger and poverty, they actually embraced poverty as an ideal. They denigrated homemakers and yet hated the injustice of homelessness. Home is not just a house; a home is also comprised of the people in our lives whom we love and count on. The Bloomsbury Group denied its members the type of marital and family commitments which give human beings a sense of home. Virginia Woolf thus created a character which must in some way have reflected her own mixed feelings. Mrs. Dalloway loved life, but she stood for everything that Virginia was taught to hate. Virginia seemed to secretly yearn for the life of a society wife, but she, on the basis of her beliefs and that of the Bloomsbury Group, would not allow herself to have that life. Virginia originally planned to have Mrs. Dalloway kill herself; in the end, Virginia spared Clarissa Dalloway's life. Virginia must have seen some beauty in her character which she could not bring herself to destroy.

Clarissa Vaughan, created in Mrs. Dalloway's image, feels guilt and shame over her own supposed shallowness. Despite the fact that Clarissa loves her life and her wife, she allows people like Mary Krull (who represents the Bloomsbury Group's viewpoint) to judge and condemn her. It is a shame that Clarissa's character could not respect herself and her life more. She must have been doing something right, because she is virtually the only happy character in the book. Society is certainly not perfect, and there is nothing wrong with ignoring or even rebelling against social convention in order to be true to one's self. However, human beings are social creatures, and therefore a complete and utter rejection of society actually contradicts our fundamental nature. Clarissa Vaughan was true to herself, and she might have been even happier had she not substituted the judgment of others for her own.

## Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's character represents author Michael Cunningham's interpretation of the real Virginia Woolf. She is the tortured artist, much like Richard's character, and in the novel her reasons for killing herself mirror Richard's: They both felt they had failed as writers. Her thought process in *The Hours* seems twisted, or askew, in the sense that she seems to see everything through a dark lens. Despite her success as a writer, despite her financial success, despite the level of independence and equality she manages to achieve as a woman (during a time when feminism was a rather new subject), Virginia has very low self-worth and cannot appreciate any of her successes. Virginia is obsessed with social standing; she pretends to hate it, but she is impressed by people, like her sister, who are capable of succeeding in society. This was symbolized in the book by Vanessa's easy dealings with servants, which contrasted with Virginia's inability to command her own servant, Nelly. Her sense of powerlessness is so



complete that she believes killing herself is the only solution to her problems. She metes out death to her characters, almost as an experiment, to figure out how others might react to her own suicide; in the end, it seems that Virginia only cares about what others think of her. Ironically, Virginia judges Clarissa Dalloway harshly for caring what others think of her; and yet, in this reader's opinion, Clarissa's character in *Mrs. Dalloway* was more true to herself than the character of Virginia in *The Hours* ever managed to be.

## Louis Waters

Louis is Richard's former lover; Richard was the love of Louis's life. In the same singular way that Richard's heart remained true to Clarissa over the years, Louis remained true to Richard. Despite the many lovers Louis has had over the years, he has not had a single meaningful relationship since the time he left Richard. Louis regrets having left the love of his life, despite his good reasons for doing so. Not only did Richard torment Louis by openly having an affair with Clarissa, but Richard was also, on general principle, against the idea of commitment. Richard viewed commitment as a form of selling out, giving in to social mores. He held out absolutely no hope to Louis, and he immediately made it clear to Louis that the only kind of relationship Louis could have with Richard was an open one. Louis did not want to accept that kind of treatment from the man he loved, however, out of love and desperation, Louis did accept it for almost ten years before giving up and walking out on Richard. And yet Louis never got over Richard, and Louis's emotional response to Richard's illness and subsequent suicide suggests that Louis regrets not staying and fighting for the man he loved.

## Julia Vaughan

Julia is Clarissa's daughter; to Clarissa's friend Louis, Julia represents Clarissa as she was in her youth.

## Mary Krull

Julia's friend, Mary Krull, is a social activist and a lesbian who thinks that Clarissa sold out by conforming to society's mores.

## Sally

Sally is Clarissa's lesbian life partner. She represents Clarissa's conformity to social standards. Despite Clarissa's sense of guilt for creating a normal life with Sally, her choice proved to be a good one, as these two are the only reasonably happy characters in the book.





## **Nelly**

Virginia Woolf's disgruntled servant, Nelly, is the nemesis who Virginia feels she must overcome in order to convincingly play the part of a society wife.

## **Oliver St. Ives**

Oliver is the gorgeous, former B-movie star who catapulted to greater fame when he came out of the closet and began promoting gay rights.

## **Walter Hardy**

Walter is an acquaintance of Richard and seems unfriendly. Clarissa both likes and dislikes the man, as he represents not only conformity to social mores, but he's also socially successful.

## **Hunter Craydon**

Hunter Craydon is Louis's latest boyfriend. Louis tells Clarissa he's in love with Hunter, but he's not. He's only in love with some ideal that Hunter cannot live up to.



## Objects/Places

### Hogarth House

Hogarth House is the real-life home of Virginia Woolf. She and her husband Leonard moved, for a time, to Hogarth House, in the suburbs of Richmond, because Leonard felt it was important to Virginia's mental health to be away from the city life of London.

### Dan's Birthday Cake

This is the cake which Laura Brown bakes and re-bakes in her futile attempt to achieve her ideal of being the perfect housewife. Her failure to create a perfect cake drives her to despair, as it symbolizes, for Laura, her overall failure in life.

### The Wellfleet House

Wellfleet is the house where Richard, Louis, and Clarissa lived together as young adults. Clarissa's most memorable hour, in which she kisses Richard out by the pond, takes place here.

### The Normandy

The Normandy is the hotel which Laura Brown checks into the day she nearly commits suicide.



# Themes

## Death Wish

Suicide is the central theme of the novel. Whether to accept life or reject it has been a literary theme dating back to the ancient Greek tragedies. William Shakespeare summed it up perfectly in Hamlet, with his famous line, "To be or not to be, that is the question." Psychologically speaking, there are two major reasons for suicide: despair and revenge. Given Laura Brown's level of anger and resentment, emotions she stifled continually, revenge may have been part of her motivation. Despair most certainly played a part in her death wish, however. She saw the life she'd made for herself as a series of long, depression-filled hours. With no hope or prospect for joy in her life, those hours seemed unbearable. Laura flirted with thoughts of death, which to her seemed a release from the hours. Virginia Woolf sought that same release from her own despair.

What causes despair? Many people suffer pain and tragedy, make heinous mistakes, and yet retain a sense of hope about the future. For human beings, life is often a series of mistakes and regrets, intermingled with triumphs and joys. Every human being has their own threshold for what they consider an acceptable level of failure, and beyond that acceptable level comes despair, an inability to recover hope; this is a sliding scale and completely dependent on our own viewpoint. People who exceed their own level of tolerance for failure may feel they have no choice but to kill themselves. Laura Brown, for example, had an extremely low tolerance for failure. Had her second cake come out as poorly as the first, she may never have checked out of that hotel. The characters of Richard and Virginia Woolf both felt they had failed as writers, despite the many awards and accolades they achieved. Hope is critical to our emotional well-being, and the loss of hope which characterizes despair can lead to a death wish.

When a human being views their life through the lens of despair, as Laura, Richard, and Virginia all did, the only hope they are often capable of imagining lies in death. It is a cruel irony that many people who commit suicide are reaching out to the only hope they can imagine - the death that they hope will provide a release from their problems.

## Sexual Confusion

Homosexuality has been a part of human behavior through the ages, and yet it is still little understood today by some, large sections of society. This lack of understanding creates huge difficulties for homosexuals, as they have few role models and very little guidance for developing their sexual identities. Laura Brown, a stereotypical post-war housewife, could not imagine that she herself was gay. She spent a great deal of time and effort denying her basic instincts because the world she lived in seemed to have no place for someone like her.



Laura's son displayed a similar level of sexual confusion; he was in love simultaneously with both Louis and Clarissa. Richard did accept his homosexuality, however, and even Clarissa knew it was his fundamental feeling. Clarissa was the only woman in his romantic life, and it's entirely possible that his confusion stemmed from his need for a maternal figure, whom Clarissa represented. Laura, Clarissa, Richard, and Virginia Woolf all have similar feelings of sexual confusion within the novel.

## Social Standing

The desire to be admired by society is a theme throughout *The Hours* and throughout its predecessor, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa's inner dialogue reflects both her desire to be admired and her self-condemnation for holding such a shallow desire. There are several references to fame, beginning with the movie star emerging from her trailer during Clarissa's morning excursion. Later, Sally's lunch with the famous Oliver St. Ives provides an opportunity to illustrate how people desire to be admired by society and share in the glory of those, like St. Ives, who have achieved success in society's eyes. Clarissa feels left out when St. Ives doesn't include her in the luncheon invitation, because she feels he has not deemed her important. She has nearly identical thoughts when she meets Walter Hardy, a man she does not even like, and yet she is disappointed that he, too, seems to find her unimportant. Clarissa clings to Richard's growing fame and respect as an author and hopes the fact that he wrote about her in his prize-winning book will elevate her social standing. Simultaneously, she chides herself for wanting to elevate her social standing at all. The desire to feel important is so ingrained in Clarissa that even at the moment of Richard's death, she wishes she could tell him how much she wanted him to come to her party, so he could show her guests how important Clarissa was to Richard.



# Style

## Point of View

The book maintains a first person point of view throughout, although it is alternately told from the points of view of Virginia Woolf, Clarissa Vaughan, and Laura Brown. The chapters themselves are divided up between the three women, but the first person narration does not always match up with the prime protagonist in the chapter; sometimes the first person narration switches to someone else in that woman's life. In Virginia's chapters, however, the first person never switches to anyone else: we don't hear Vanessa's thoughts, and we don't hear Leonard's or Nelly's thoughts. The same is true of the Laura Brown chapters; we know her son's reactions only through her eyes, and she retains the narrative throughout each one of the chapters which bears her name on the heading. In the Mrs. Dalloway chapters, the point of view feels like an omniscient narrator; the first person narration skips easily from character to character, giving us the full picture of not only Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts, but Louis's, Mary Krull's, and Sally's. The Mrs. Dalloway chapters are centered around the writing style of Virginia Woolf, and these seemingly random jumps from one character's thoughts to another's lend themselves to her stream-of-consciousness writing style which Michael Cunningham emulates, particularly in the Mrs. Dalloway chapters.

## Setting

The present day action is set in the city of New York, ranging from the tonier section (which suits Mrs. Dalloway's character) to a more squalid area (fitting for Richard, the tortured artist). City life is important in the story; Virginia Woolf's character pines away for her lost London while she is trapped in the suburb of Richmond. Meanwhile, Laura Brown's character lives in and embodies the idea of suburbia. This symbolic location ties in with her unhappiness. To Virginia Woolf, the suburbs were a soul-killing place to live; by placing Woolf and Laura Brown in the suburbs, Cunningham gives us a geographical basis for their unhappiness.

Time is another important element of the setting. The three wives - Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (Clarissa Vaughan), and Mrs. Brown - all inhabit different times. The Mrs. Woolf chapters all take place in the 1920s, when she was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, with the notable exception of the first chapter, which shows us Woolf's suicide in 1941. Thus all the Woolf scenes are temporal flashbacks which take place eighteen years before her suicide. The Woolf suicide is also the only event to take place on a separate day, as the novel focuses on chronicling one single day in each of the characters' lives. Laura Brown's day picks up in 1949, eight years after Virginia's death; Laura's scenes are flashbacks to the young mother she was before abandoning Richard. Mrs. Dalloway's day, which is also Richard's final day on earth, takes place in the present; Laura Brown is mentioned at the very end of the story when she is an old woman. The novel ends with the close of that day, thus neatly wrapping up all the temporal loose ends.



## Language and Meaning

The language in *The Hours* is poetic, and it is meant to echo the style of Virginia Woolf's own beautiful prose. Not only does Michael Cunningham use excerpts from her writings throughout the book, but he actually captures and delivers his own prose in her poetic style. She was known for her stream-of-consciousness writing, which skipped from thought to thought, often tangentially. Cunningham captures this precise method, and his characters are revealed to us through the seemingly random thoughts of the other characters. This style allows a character to be rounded out gradually. The style of the writing delivers more emotion than fact, and indeed, the plot itself is minimal; what matters to the story is the emotion, conveyed so beautifully by the author.

## Structure

The novel is structured as three separate narratives which ultimately intertwine. Each chapter is headed with the name Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, or Mrs. Brown, as the book is essentially the story of these three wives. The lynchpin character is Mrs. Dalloway, and these sections incorporate Virginia Woolf's novel by the same name. Author Michael Cunningham has cleverly worked in two additional storylines which take Virginia's original approach to a higher level. The Mrs. Woolf chapters incorporate the author into this updated version of her story, and we are able to see how Virginia's life influenced her art. The Mrs. Brown chapters add an element of backstory to Richard's character, while underscoring all the major themes in the original *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The Mrs. Dalloway chapters are a homage to Virginia Woolf's novel, and the chapters present virtually identical events to *Mrs. Dalloway*, as Clarissa Vaughan struggles with the same emotions as her namesake. Despite the similarities, Michael Cunningham has raised the bar by varying the sexual identities of the characters. The original Mrs. Dalloway represents social convention. His Mrs. Dalloway is also a society wife, but she is married to a lesbian woman, which defies social convention. This structural variance from the original novel allows the author to explore the challenges of being in a minority group. Homosexuals face the same type of discrimination by society as other minority groups face. This rejection by society causes minorities to respond by rejecting society in return. This cycle of pain is shown convincingly through the clever inter-weaving of two novels into one modern masterpiece.



## Quotes

"For a moment, still, it seems like nothing; it seems like another failure; just chill water she can easily swim back out of; but then the current wraps itself around her and takes her with such sudden, muscular force it feels as if a strong man has risen from the bottom, grabbed her legs and held them to his chest. It feels personal." Prologue, pg. 5

"She, Clarissa, was clearly not destined to make a disastrous marriage or fall under the wheels of a train. She was destined to charm, to prosper. So Mrs. Dalloway it was and would be." Chapter 1, pg. 11

"When her husband is here, she can manage it. She can see him seeing her, and she knows almost instinctively how to treat the boy firmly and kindly, with an affectionate maternal offhandedness that seems effortless. Alone with the child, though, she loses direction. She can't always remember how a mother would act." Chapter 3, pg. 47

"The chair smells fetid and deeply damp, unclean; it smells of irreversible rot. If it were hauled out into the street (*when* it is hauled out into the street), no one would pick it up. Richard will not hear of its being replaced." Chapter 4, pg. 59

"He understands that he's expected to dump the flour into the bowl but it seems possible that he's misunderstood the directions, and will ruin everything; it seems possible that by spilling out the flour he will cause some larger catastrophe, upset some precarious balance. He wants to look at his mother's face but can't take his eyes off the cup.

'Turn it over,' she says." Chapter 6, pg. 78

"That summer when she was eighteen, it seemed anything could happen, anything at all. It seemed that she could kiss her grave, formidable best friend down by the pond, it seemed that they could sleep together in a strange combination of lust and innocence, and not worry about what, if anything, it meant." Chapter 8, pg. 95

"Kitty hesitates, then lets herself be held. She surrenders. She does not cry. Laura can feel the relinquishment; she can feel Kitty give herself over. She thinks, This is how a man feels, holding a woman." Chapter 9, pg. 109

"'That's nice,' she says, and surprisingly, it is. Virginia looks with unanticipated pleasure at this modest circlet of thorns and flowers; this wild deathbed. She would like to lie down on it herself." Chapter 10, pg. 119

"To his complete surprise, he begins to weep. The tears start simply enough, as a heat at the back of his eyes and a furring of his vision. These spasms of emotion take him constantly. A song can do it; even the sight of an old dog. They pass. They usually pass." Chapter 11, pg. 134



"Love is deep, a mystery-who wants to understand its every particular? 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." Chapter 12, pg. 143

"*Fraud*, Clarissa thinks. You've fooled my daughter, but you don't fool me. I know a conquistador when I see one. I know all about making a splash. It isn't hard. If you shout loud enough, for long enough, a crowd will gather to see what all the noise is about. It's the nature of crowds. They don't stay long, unless you give them reason. You're just as bad as most men, just that aggressive, just that self-aggrandizing, and your hour will come and go." Chapter 14, pp. 160-161

"The little boy can tell she's been somewhere illicit; he can tell she's lying. He watches her constantly, spends almost every waking hour in her presence. He's seen her with Kitty. He's watched her make a second cake, and bury the first one under other garbage in the can beside the garbage. He is devoted, entirely, to the observation and deciphering of her, because without her there is no world at all." Chapter 17, pg. 192

"That is his way - boyish surprise; a suave, slightly abashed glee; a deep and distracted innocence with sex coiled inside like a spring." Chapter 21, pg. 213

"There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult." Chapter 22, pg. 225





## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the impact that being left by both his mother and Clarissa had on Richard's character.

Both Clarissa and Louis walked away from Richard. Do you believe there was some quality in his character that kept love at bay?

How were Clarissa's choices different than Laura Brown's?

Why do you suppose Louis feels there's so little love in the world?

Do you believe that Clarissa Vaughan is happy with the life she's created? Why or why not?

Cite and explain three ways in which Clarissa Vaughan's choices parallel Laura Brown's.

Do you believe Virginia Woolf makes a good role model for feminism? Why or why not?