

Discussion Questions for *The Hours*

1. Cunningham plays with the notions of sanity and insanity, recognizing that there might be only a very fine line between the two states. What does the novel imply about the nature of insanity? Might it in fact be a heightened sanity, or at least a heightened sense of awareness? Would you classify Richard as insane? How does his mental state compare with that of Virginia? Of Laura as a young wife? Of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*? Does insanity (or the received idea of insanity) appear to be connected with creative gifts?
2. *The Hours* is very much concerned with creativity and the nature of the creative act, and each of its protagonists is absorbed in a particular act of creation. For Virginia and Richard, the object is their writing; for Clarissa Vaughan (and Clarissa Dalloway), it is a party; for Laura Brown, it is another party, or, more generally, "This kitchen, this birthday cake, this conversation. This revived world" (106). What does the novel tell us about the creative process? How does each character revise and improve his or her creation during the course of the story?
3. Each of the novel's characters sees himself or herself, most of the time, as a failure. Virginia Woolf, as she walks to her death, reflects that "She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric" (4). Richard, disgustedly, admits to Clarissa, "I thought I was a genius. I actually used that word, privately, to myself" (65). Are the novel's characters unusual, or are such feelings of failure an essential and inevitable part of the human condition?
4. Toward the end of Clarissa's day, she realizes that kissing Richard beside the pond in Wellfleet was the high point, the culmination, of her life. Richard, apparently, feels the same. Are we meant to think, though, that their lives would have been better, more heightened, had they stayed together? Or does Cunningham imply that as we age we inevitably feel regret for some lost chance, and that what we in fact regret is youth itself?
5. *The Hours* could on one level be said to be a novel about middle age, the final relinquishment of youth and the youthful self. What does middle age mean to these characters? In what essential ways do these middle-aged people--Clarissa, Richard, Louis, Virginia --differ from their youthful selves? Which of them resists the change most strenuously?
6. What does the possibility of death represent to the various characters? Which of them loves the idea of death, as others love life? What makes some of the characters decide to die, others to live? What personality traits separate the "survivors" from the suicides?
7. Would you describe *The Hours* as a modern version of *Mrs. Dalloway*? A commentary upon it? A dialogue with it? Which characters in *The Hours* correspond with those of Woolf's novel? In what ways are they similar, and at what point do the similarities cease and the characters become freestanding individuals in their own right?
8. For the most part, the characters in *The Hours* have either a different gender or a different sexual orientation from their prototypes in *Mrs. Dalloway*. How much has all this gender-bending affected or changed the situations, the relationships, and the people?
9. Why has Cunningham chosen *The Hours* for the title of his novel (aside from the fact that it was Woolf's working title for *Mrs. Dalloway*)? In what ways is the title appropriate, descriptive? What do hours mean to Richard? To Laura? To Clarissa?