

Sexual and Gender Identity in Postmodern  
Rewriting: from *Mrs. Dalloway* by  
Virginia Woolf to  
*The Hours* by Michael Cunningham\*

Florica Bodiștean\*\*

**Abstract:**

This study analyses Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* as a rewriting of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, in relation to a direction found in the literary studies of today, i.e. lesbian and gay criticism, and the theory of rewriting as the literary expression of an ideology that blasts all forms of power imposed by canons. The identity theme of Michael Cunningham's rewriting is seen as a permanent negotiation between gender and sex, as Cunningham's novel investigates not only the sources of the sexual options – homosexuality / heterosexuality / autoeroticism – and the issue of affective fulfilment in this existential formula, but also the determination of gender roles in three societal structures existing in different moments in time.

**Keywords:** rewriting, lesbian and gay criticism, identity, sex, gender

**Postmodern rewriting. Lesbian and gay criticism**

In the current literary context, the distinct profile of rewriting – an expression of “literature in the second degree” (Genette, 1982) that rebuilds and reinterprets canonical works of literature critically and polemically – is outlined by several ideological directions that share the focus on the issue of identity from various perspectives. Rewritings that are seen from the perspective of femininity, homosexual orientations, postcolonialism and implicitly of any postdictatorship renegotiate the theme of identity, promoting ideas like pluralism, the destabilisation of hierarchical systems and the denial of the official versions, ideas that are revealed with the crisis of archetypes experienced in postmodernity. Exploring the version of the minor groups, trying the case of the conflict between the strong “official” versions and the weak, “particular” minority versions, all these areas analyse the ideologised, identity-based

---

\* Paper presented at the International Conference “Romanian as a Foreign Language”, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Iași, October 30–31, 2015, organized in the framework of the Days of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. The topic of the conference: *Romanian Language and Identity in the Continuous Cultural Reconfiguration of Europe*.

\*\* Professor PhD, “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad, bodisteanf@yahoo.com

narratives about individuals and members of communities, organised around discursive terms related to nationality, ethnicity, race, social status, gender and sexual orientation and moral and religious beliefs. It is an opposing or at least alternative rethink of ethics in postmodernity; the forces defining the implicit debate are of the centre–margin, identity–alterity, power–non-power and official–dissident type. Rewriting, the *pièce de résistance* of these recuperating orientations of postmodernism and post-postmodernism, takes the form of a counterfactual narrative of the established texts; it is equally determined by an aesthetically recycling or replicating perspective and an ethically interrogative perspective. On maintaining a permanent and explicit reference to the source text, rewriting has, in postmodernity and post-postmodernity, a compulsory biological dimension that aims at blasting the “institutionalised” interpretations and, with them, a certain type of collective mentality. Rewriting is more than an implied comment; it is a countertext to the official text and has a strategic stake involving a certain type of social positioning. The critical/revising model of rewriting is “a way of reading the marks of this work in postmodern narratives that appear to rehash a former story while in fact polemically revising that story along with the cultural stories underlying it” (Moraru, 2001: 21).

Deconstructing the heterosexuality/homosexuality opposition, lesbian and gay studies re-raise the identity theme from the viewpoint of sexual orientation, a category as influential as that of gender in feminist studies. Among other aspects, these studies interpret the metaphor of homosexuality as “«transgressing boundaries», re-challenging identity categories or consciously fighting against enforced rules, social limitations and cultural prejudice” (Tucan, 2007: 129–130).

#### **Rewriting and ideological debate**

Through its title, Michael Cunningham’s novel reveals itself as a rewriting of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* whose original title was also *The Hours*. As with Virginia Woolf’s work, a day in a woman’s life provides enough epic material for a novel. Published in 1988, 73 years after Woolf’s book, *The Hours* blends three narratives, three stories constantly oscillating between fictional and metafictional, of which only one rewrites the topic of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The first story focuses on Virginia Woolf in 1923, the year she wrote the novel, more precisely the day she woke up from a dream with the first sentence of the novel in her mind, and 1941, the year of her death. The second story is that of Laura Brown, a mother and a wife living the American housewives’ typical life in the 1950’s, and is also placed within the space of one day in June,

the day she is torn between the obligations imposed by her husband's anniversary and her inclination to follow her own desires. The third story depicts Clarissa Vaughan, a New York editor at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, former lover and now good friend of Laura's son, a poet suffering from AIDS. They all live only several hours, but these hours prove the simple truth that life can change radically not from hour to hour, but from minute to minute. Based on the alternative-blending narrative formula, the epic connection between the last two stories is formed only in the last chapter that winds the disparate plot threads into a ball and places it in the metatextual mirror provided by the story of Virginia Woolf, the writer in search for an "atemporal" character to represent her in different times. The novel is written on four real-fictional levels: two stories of fictitious characters, one story of a real writer and one story of a famous character from a real book, Mrs. Dalloway.

Clarissa's day is a puzzle made of the same pieces as the novel that serves as its model, but the pieces are combined by the logic behind a different social-historical context. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the morning the two characters – the two Mrs. Dalloway, the original and the copy, the woman in the book and the woman in the slice of life imagined in the novel – with the joy of living without a certain reason. A bitter irony, since both women's day will end with the news or the reality of a death: that of Richard, who jumps out of the window, as Septimus Warren Smith did in Virginia Woolf's novel. It is a June morning, "fresh as if issued to children on a beach" (Woolf, 2004: 1), that brings to the forefront the memory of another morning, that spent in Bourbon or Wellfleet, when each of the two 52-year-old women was only 18 and the future was a yet unwritten page. Clarissa was called Mrs. Dalloway by Richard then, because her special being deserved the name of a literary heroine, one who was destined to prosper in the public space, like her namesake, but not Anna Karenina, for instance, who was defeated in the fight between a too strong individuality and the pressing demands of a patriarchal society. Clarissa had nothing to do with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia and her new name would prove to be a sign anticipating the conformity leading to social success, but also an addiction to an identity alien to her own nature. Concretely, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this conformity translates, paradoxically, into a revolt against prejudices. A revolt assumed ostentatiously as a current, even fashionable way of asserting individual freedom. Michael Cunningham's Clarissa is a declared lesbian who declared her love for Richard openly, a lesbian who, as she herself admits, has the air of "a sluttish widow, freshly peroxided under her black veil, with her eye on the eligible men at her

husband's wake Cunningham, 2002: 11), therefore a lesbian who has embraced this status out of helplessness or mischance (the film is more explicit: Clarissa declares that she has adopted her lesbianism "out of comfort"). As a matter of fact, Richard also thinks that Clarissa lives with Sally out of weakness and her relationship with her is an absolutely common refuge, Sally being harmless and insipid like a house on a peaceful street. Unlike the 'classical' ideology of the rewritings, which is one-directional because it invokes a marginal vision to deny the central version, Michael Cunningham's rewriting covers a larger territory, i.e. it does not render the truth of the formerly oppressed absolute, it is not a reversed dictatorship, but a debate. Consequently, *The Hours* is more likely an "art of positioning" (Cărăuș, 2003: 30) subordinated to a social agenda, a kind of de-ideologization that, due to the availability to negotiate the ready-to-accept postulates, is open to man's profound truths that are impossible to render in a unique formula.

The character who questions the Clarissa's position in relation to the issue of sexual identity is the friend of her daughter Julia, Mary Krull, for whom Clarissa is an old-fashioned lesbian stuck in her idea of comfort. Mary Krull is the true nonconformist character in the book, the one who hates both rules and hypocrisy, especially the hypocrisy to pretend to be pleased with being different than the rest of the world, because this is also a bourgeois attitude in itself. But volitional and independent Clarissa is troubled in her satisfaction by the revelation that she has traded love for affection and that the ideal of a great and lasting love affair with Richard, based on their tried and deep friendship, could have given her the chance of a fabulous life. As it is, all Clarissa is left with is a decent life that matches the consumerist, complex-free, hedonistic, libido-driven 20<sup>th</sup>-century mentality: "Venture too far for love, she tells herself, and you renounce citizenship in the country you've made for yourself" (Cunningham, 2002: 97). The "sense of missed opportunity" lies in the memory of the happiness she felt thirty years before, materialised in "a kiss at dusk on a patch of dead grass, and a walk around a pond". This was more erotic an experience than all her other erotic experiences. On looking back, she can say that "that was the moment, right then. There has been no other" (Cunningham, 2002: 98). This is also what Richard himself experiences. He is a bisexual whose choice of homosexuality will cost him his life, since in his novel what stands out is not the figure of Louis, his lover for twelve years, but two women: Clarissa, of whom he thinks exhaustively (he dedicates over fifty pages to the scene in which she wants to buy nail polish) and the ghost of his mother, a torturer and a victim at the same time, Laura Brown, who abandoned him when he was three and who pays for her

guilt with suicide. That our profound ego becomes manifest in books, not in life, is the idea that applies both to Richard and Virginia Woolf and to Laura Brown. Read in the psychoanalytic register, Richard's homosexuality is an expression of helplessness.

### **Evolution of mentalities and timelessness of characters**

*The Hours* is not just a rewriting of Virginia Woolf's novel. It is an update of her book, a literary study of how mentalities and gender and sexual liberty evolve in three moments in time: 1923, 1949 and 1999, the end of a century and a millennium (reference is made to 1965 and the liberalisation of love supported by the flower-power generation). The ideology of the novel is infused with feminist and sexual identity-related hermeneutics, *gay and lesbian criticism*, illustrating, in the three time references, the steps that were taken during a century. In the story about Virginia Woolf, what appears to be mere extravagance, an experiment, an isolated, psychotic case or "a writer's destiny" becomes, through Laura Brown, a disruption of the traditional structures and, through Clarissa Vaughan, the legalisation of the difference in sexual orientation that no longer surprised anybody. Over the years, Clarissa's story shows that a century had to pass before the obscure inclination of her predecessor (the first Mrs. Dalloway) for Sally Seton could be continued in the social context too, with another Sally, the television producer who became her partner. At the beginning of the 1890's, the 18-year-old Clarissa Dalloway and the bright and independent Sally Seton spoke about the inevitable marriage with a man as a catastrophe. Nevertheless, the former became a fashionable, successful wife with moments of inner frigidity, married to a dull but decent politician, and the latter, the prolific wife of a recently enriched miner's son, and mother of five. The last story, developing at the end of the millennium, brings to the fore no less than four homosexual couples that replace the heterosexual couples in the novel by Virginia Woolf: Clarissa Vaughan – Sally, a pair that has resisted for fifteen years; Richard – Louis, in their youth; Louis and his younger student, in the narrative present; and the fashionable author and screenwriter Walter Hardy and his AIDS-stricken friend Evan. Even the patterns of the genders change, since the meeting between Sally, Walter Hardy and Oliver St. Ives, another declared homosexual, is to plan the production of a thriller whose hero is a ... homosexual.

Yet the three parallel stories in *The Hours* demonstrate that the behavioural/identity patterns are timeless, only the contexts change and this is what makes the former more or less acceptable, more or less illicit. The three characters are the avatars of an eternal soul. One

seemingly dull day is isolated from each heroine's life – the same day that develops in different years, a day that apparently can be organised only in relation to a party: the party in honour of Richard, who won the Carruthers Prize; Laura Brown's husband's anniversary party; the special tea that Virginia Woolf herself wants to offer her sister and her children when they come to visit. This may be the reason why the great revelations occur to all the heroines while they are in or around the kitchen. Yet such a common day, when the only duties are to buy flowers, bake a cake, find Chinese tea and candied ginger, a day that starts so well, since every woman has an invigorating morning, can end in a disaster. What makes the difference is... the hours, the unpredictable hours adding spectacular twists to the inner status of the characters who are assessing their identity development. The hours are dark and light. The darkest are the hours of the confrontation with death and affective failure that each character has to face.

For Clarissa Vaughan, as for her literary predecessor, the day is impregnated with present-past flashes that contrasts their potentials with their identity materialisations – the woman she could have been and the woman she actually is. The crucial moment is identified only now, after thirty years, in her separation from Richard after a summer's affair, for a mixture of reasons that include fear of involvement, her lack of trust in his inclinations and feelings and mostly the unbearable frivolity of the age:

... for Clarissa wanted her freedom and Richard wanted, well, too much, didn't he always? He wanted too much. She'd told him that what happened over the summer had been exactly that, something that happened over a summer. Why should he want her, a wry and diffident girl, no breasts to speak of (how could she be expected to trust his desire?), when he knew as well as she the bent of his deepest longings and when he had Louis, worshipful Louis, heavy-limbed, far from stupid, a boy Michelangelo would have been please to draw? Wasn't it, really, just another poetic conceit, Richard's idea of her? They had not had a large or spectacular fight, just a squabble on a corner – there had been no question, even then, of deep damage to the friendship – and yet as she looks back it seems definitive; it seems like the moment at which one possible future ended and a new one began (Cunningham, 2002: 52).

### **Eros versus living**

„Fine” and „fresh” are the words the two Mrs. Dalloway both use when they speak about the June morning in the present and the one thirty years before. The first morning gave them the sensation that life was a never-ending surprise, that the future was open to all possibilities. The second is just a recollection and an illusory reloading.

From the dawn of the June morning of the narrative present, the story of the two women named Clarissa leads to the twilight of a

snobbish party, very successful even after the strictest standards, or the sad wake where people eat the food prepared for Richard's celebration that never occurred. Thirty years of life are re-evaluated between one morning and one evening, starting with the decisive moment that determined their configuration, that of a love choice. And this choice was made, as the heroines discover, at an age when one does not know oneself very well. But for the women the revelations occur too late to bring a change. Both are stuck in their destiny forever and their soul can be young and fresh again only if it feels the effect of Proust's Madeleine and then just for several hours and only if those hours remind of other hours that were themselves young and fresh. As Clarissa Vaughan says in the end:

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 imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more.

Heaven only knows why we love it so (Cunningham, 2002: 225–226).

The line taken from *Mrs. Dalloway* reappears to define the two heroines mostly through their common love of life that remains constant despite all opposing arguments. Also common to both of them is the fact that erotic conformity makes room for the manifestation of their insatiable desire to live:

Nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long. No pleasure could equal [...] this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank (Woolf, 2004: 164).

The true love for a great man, be him Peter Walsh or Richard, is too limitative and possessive a stake for both women, a form of chaining and self-devouring. Instead, a life lived at lower levels is much more tempting, as it allows a closer contact with the diverse and complex reality. The eros-living equation contrasts intensity with variety and the vertical with the horizontal, as these new Amazons, at the age of erotic options, trade the pleasures of the narrow bedroom for the larger areas of the social environment. But not without remorse and regrets, as it is shown in the script of this day in which the two women, both having a possible deficit of *anima* and a surplus of *animus*, are subjected to the examination of their affective fulfilment. Their choice itself does not involve any sexual preference, neither homoerotic, nor heteroerotic; it is strictly social and answers to gender-type options. This is why the choice belongs to the Amazon-type of behaviour seen as a volitional act

of self-determination in the new contexts. Even the suggestion of diffuse lesbianism in Virginia Woolf's heroine implies the idea of her affective independence expressed against the Victorian Puritanism in an experimentalist and defying manner. One cannot ignore that the association between the Amazon and the homoerotic behaviour in the character's structure becomes louder during the "crazy years" when "the radicalization of emancipated women's attitude takes place. In those times an anti-motherhood, anti-heterosexuality discourse was launched that projected the lesbian Amazons in the middle of a public scandal." (Babeți, 2013: 563; see also the chapter *Suratele. Lesbos Club (The Sisters. Lesbos Club): 557–567*). It is undoubtedly significant for the "dating" of the plot in *The Hours* that the Bloomsbury group, to which Virginia Woolf belonged, was the predecessor of the young hippies of the 60's in the matter of sexual revolution. All the three stories in Michael Cunningham's novel occur in past moments of absolute release, after the two World Wars, in the flower power years, at the end of the millennium.

#### **Clarissa Vaughan's "previous lives"**

Laura Brown is a classic case of Amazonism: the middle-class housewife suffocated by the comfort of an ideal family life runs away because she does not recognize herself either as a mother or as a wife. We do not know whether her instinctual urge to kiss Kitty was more than a momentary impulse, an Amazon-type inclination, but it is certain that female roles are completely alien to her. This 20<sup>th</sup>-century Madame Bovary not only identifies herself with the different kind of life that she reads about in Woolf's novel, but also has the strength to fulfil her aspirations without becoming lost in the process, as her famous predecessor did. The most adequate expression of her natural self is the "own room" of her favourite writer, Virginia Woolf. It is also present in the hotel room where she takes refuge for several hours to read Mrs. Dalloway and in the library in Toronto, where she will work until retirement after fleeing from her family. In reply, the image of the counterfeit self is the ruined cake, the leitmotif of the anniversary, the objectification of her relationship with her own marriage revealing a "broken self", a dispersed, inorganic structure like the common materials that the cake tries to harmonise in an organised product. It is a way to master the inner chaos that will prove, at the second attempt, an amateurish and ordinary creation, signifying only her endeavour to compensate her lack of vocation. Laura Brown is part of the strange series of 'instinctive Amazons', women who, like shepherdess Marcela from *Don Quixote*, Tisbea, Don Juan's victim in the play by Tirso de



Molina, or Rosaline, Juliet predecessor to Romeo's heart, reject the erotic project organically, being capable to have, "at least some of them, an ambiguous relationship with their own body and eventually their own sensuality that we suspect to be absolutely autoerotic" (Ursa, 2012: 86). Laura Brown's drama is that she cannot remain indifferent to her failure in making the cake, that she cannot get rid of the guilt for having abandoned her family. She is also a woman made of parts, never imposing, never self-confident, living with the burden of having done what she could instead of what she should have done, because she has come to know herself only after reaching a status that was not hers. This woman, pregnant with her second child, flirts with the idea of death the day she "awakens" not because she does not love life, but because deliberate death is a manifestation of free will, which is precisely what she does not have in her life.

On the surface, the inadequacy to existence is also visible as a difficulty to establish proper relationships in the case of Virginia Woolf the character: both the servants and her sister who pays her a visit dominate her. Her interior crisis has much deeper and older roots, being triggered by the fight between disease and writing, between the alien voices she hears and the voice of her second, purer ego, the creative ego. She is forever negotiating her working time with the time she dedicates to the others on this day when she awakes with an inspiration, with the rare feeling that she possesses that inner faculty to recognise the mysteries that animate the world: "Writing in that state is the most profound *satisfaction* she knows" (Cunningham, 2002: 35). For a writer, the absolute perception of life in an auroral morning occurs without delay, through writing, as for Laura Brown the state of well-being is reached while reading how Mrs. Dalloway becomes ecstatic at the beautiful June day. Of the three heroines, only Clarissa Vaughan feels the joy of living through direct stimuli.

The Mrs. Dalloway that Virginia Woolf the character outlines as a character pines for London, suffocated by the life she leads in Richmond, where she has lived for eight years to recover from her illness, and for an inner balance that might bring her proper reasonability, enthusiasm and measure in her relations with the others. Mrs. Dalloway is a substitution and compensation product; therefore the day of Virginia Woolf the character is impossible to separate from the day of her character: in the plot, Clarissa, a highly sensitive and susceptible woman initially predestined to suicide from an apparently minor cause, transfers her hopelessness to Septimus Warren Smith so that she, Clarissa, can solve her dilemmas and remain a winner who embraces life, as the disease from whom she and her author suffered is

defeated. Life dictates the book and the day's details and events move to the fictional realm naturally, passing from the meditation on death suggested by the wake of a bird, to the eroticism concentrated in the kiss she gives to her sister Vanessa.

The narrative materialisation of this mediated way of living shows Michael Cunningham's bright artistic intuition and the possible justification of the metafictional level of his book. The story of the writer in search of her character supports Harold Bloom's opinion that Virginia Woolf is "an apocalyptic aesthete, for whom human existence and the world are finally justified only as aesthetic phenomena" (1998: 435); her erotic energy and feminism are channelled to aestheticism, in a reading-writing vision of the contemplative type, and „the homoerotic, though the natural mode, was largely impeded by solipsistic intensity" (Bloom, 1998: 443), by the belief that one's own personality is the only creation that exists.

### Conclusions

With a multilevel narrative structure including three parallel stories, Michael Cunningham investigates, at various levels, the sources of the sexual options – homosexuality/heterosexuality and possibly autoeroticism – and the issue of affective fulfilment in this existential formula. At the same time, due to the exact representation of the social-historic background, the novel deals with the problems of the gender roles in three societal structures existing in different moments in time. How much of an Amazon and how much of a lesbian is each of these women, what role determination plays in finding an acceptable, if not happy solution to existence or whether age – the often mentioned age of fifty-two – plays a role in Clarisse Vaughan's the existential crisis are questions to which *The Hours* avoids giving straight, therefore superficial answers. Instead, the book prefers to suggest the complexity of the issues that a choice raises and to employ its consequences at the fictitious level. Rewriting a feminist book by a man has the great merit that it is not situated "on the opposite side", it does not betray its spirit, but it extends its problems to include the "What if" type of questions and explores, with an exceptional knowledge of nuances, the depths of the feminine soul, and sometimes even the masculine soul, from inside the aspiration to androgyny, which was not alien to his model, Virginia Woolf, who in *A Room of One's Own* wrote: "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. [...] Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated" (Woolf, 2012: 101).

**REFERENCES:**

- Babeți, Adriana, *Amazoanele. O poveste (Amazons. A Story)*, Iași, Polirom, 2013.
- Bloom, Harold, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York – San Diego – London, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.
- Cărăuș, Tamara, *Efectul Menard. Rescrierea postmodernă: perspective etice (The Menard Effect. Postmodern Rewriting: Ethical Perspectives)*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2005.
- Cunningham, Michael, *The Hours*, New York, Picador USA, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- Genette, Gérard, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré (Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree)*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.
- Miloș, Ionuț, *Cealaltă poveste. O poetică a rescrierii în literatura română contemporană (The Other Story. The Poetics of Rewriting in Contemporary Romanian Literature)*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2015.
- Moraru, Christian, *Rewriting. Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2001.
- Tucan, Dumitru, *Introducere în studiile literare (Introduction to Literary Studies)*, Iași, Institutul European, 2007.
- Ursa, Mihaela, *Tratat despre ficțiunea amoroasă (Eroticon. A Treatise on Amorous Fiction)*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 2012.
- Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own. The Voyage Out*, Introductions and Notes by Sally Minogue, Ware, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2012.
- Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway*, Introductions by Carol Ann Duffy and Valentine Cunningham, London, Vintage Random House, 2004.