QUEERNESS AND AIDS

IN *THE HOURS*

POR

LEONARDO BÉRENGER ALVES CARNEIRO

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QUEERNESS AND AIDS

IN THE HOURS

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This work is dedicated to my mother,

Maria Helena, whose unselfish love

determined the course of my life narrative.

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(God help all children as they move into a time of life they do not understand and must struggle through with precepts they have picked from the garbage cans of older people, clinging with the passion of the lost to odds and ends that will mess them up for all time, or hating the trash so much they will waste their future on the hatred.)

Lillian Hellman – Pentimento

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I. INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR AND HIS NOVEL

Being considered rather reserved about his personal life and upbringing, Michael Cunningham does suggest in his fiction an autobiographical undertone, unveiled by his constant focus on familiar relationships and conflicts.

In Land's End: A Walk Through Provincetown (2002), his most explicit autobiographical work, Cunningham praises Provincetown and its inhabitants, concentrating his narrative on his adult life rather than childhood. The novelist first lived in the Cape Cod town as a writer, when he was awarded a residency at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. "P-town", as it is called by its inhabitants, has attracted a huge variety of American literati, including Norman Mailer, Stanley Kunitz and Mark Doty.

Michael Cunningham was born on November 6th, 1952, Cincinnati, Ohio, a city considered to be rather conservative and ordinary. After his birth, his family moved to Chicago and Germany, and finally established itself in Pasadena, California, where he spent his adolescence. During this period of his life, Cunningham's ambition was to become a rock star, but it was a classmate, a girl he was in love with, who first presented Cunningham the beauty of literature, as she urged him to

read Virginia Woolf. In an attempt to impress her, Cunningham headed straight for the library and found only Woolf's 1925 novel – Mrs. Dalloway. Although he had "no idea what it was about", he recalls the "depth, density, balance and music of those sentences". It is in Woolf's prose that Cunningham finds a correspondent to the artistic elation that Jimi Hendrix provoked in him during his adolescence. As an admirer of the American musician, Cunningham found in Virginia Woolf's style the same rhythm Hendrix performed on stage and records, that is, the possibility to do with language what Jimi Hendrix did with the electric guitar. In The Hours, Cunningham wants to confer to the place where he came from the same lyricism Virginia Woolf develops when, in Mrs. Dalloway, the English novelist finds extraordinary and unprecedented beauty in ordinary things, especially in her celebration of London.[1]

After graduating from the English Department at Stanford University, Cunningham left San Francisco and went to Colorado and then Nebraska. Working as a bartender, Michael Cunningham decided to attend for two years a writer's workshop at the University of Iowa. In 1981, having his first book (Golden States) published, Cunningham emerged as a writer and, consequently, moved to New York City, where he began teaching Creative Writing, first at Columbia University and now at Brooklyn College. Due to the success of The Hours, Cunningham

[1] Reading & Conversation, November 14, 2001, www.lannan.org

could afford the purchase of his house in Provincetown, where he intends to retire with his partner Ken Corbett.

Emmanuel S. Nelson states in relation to Cunningham that "his works seem to have come in two prolific bursts: in 1981-1984 and in 1990-1991"[2]. Being considered by the novelist as "practice", Golden States, now out of print, is still purchased by many readers on the Internet. Though not successful in relation to his first long narrative, Michael Cunningham was welcomed when offering his reading public his next two novels: A Home at the End of the World (1990) and Flesh and Blood (1995). In these three works, we see the journey of male protagonists from unhappy nuclear families to "alternative" family arrangements. During the 1990s, Cunningham was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship (1993) and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1998). In 1999, a short story ("Mister Brother") won an O. Henry award.

A Home at the End of the World, Cunningham's most celebrated work before The Hours, is written in the first-person narratives of Jonathan, Bobby, Clare, who shared a house in Woodstock, as a family would do. It is a narrative of loss, in which unorthodox relationships are configured as a means of amending past deprivation. The Woodstock household in this novel is, as Bobby records, "not much weirder than

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[2] NELSON, E. (1993) p. 83

any family"[3]. Bobby and Jonathan have been utterly inseparable since they were teenagers in suburban Cleveland. As close as brothers, for Bobby becomes an orphan and is adopted by Jonathan's family, they also experiment sexually. The two eventually lose touch, but meet up again in their twenties in 1980s New York, where Bobby moves in with Jonathan and his eccentric roommate Clare. The girl had planned to have a baby with Jonathan (now openly gay), but she and Bobby become lovers, while Jonathan still has feelings for Bobby. The trio form their own unusual family, in a house they buy in Woodstock, questioning traditional definitions of family and love, while dealing with the complications of their love triangle. Erich, a former sexual partner of Jonathan's, joins the household when he becomes ill with AIDS, making the trio face the limitations of life and love.

Like A Home at the End of the World, Cunningham's 1995 work (Flesh and Blood) is a family saga. Although narrated in the third person, the chapters are similarly told from each family member's perspective. The story begins with the marriage of Constantine and Mary, united by the fact that both are immigrants. They have three children: Susan, Billy and Zoe. Again, not only familiar relationships are of Cunningham's concern, but also the AIDS epidemic. Cruising the end of an era of narcotic and sexual freedom, Zoe becomes pregnant and

[3] CUNNINGHAM, M. (1990) p. 273

HIV-positive, giving birth to a son, Jamal, who will represent in the novel the embodiment of freedom.

The Hours has expanded tremendously Cunningham's reputation and visibility in the American literary context. In 1999, it won both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. In January 2003, following the release of Stephen Daldry's filmic adaptation, The Hours reached number one in the U.S. Fiction best-seller lists. The phenomenal success of the novel contradicted Cunningham's anticipation for he believed that this novel would distress many of his readers. Furthermore, the success was initially felt like a burden to the novelist, for how could any subsequent work live up to this success? The answer to this question came in the form of another novel: Specimen Days (2005).

What we, readers, hear in each section of this novel is not the voice of Virginia Woolf, but Walt Whitman's. Divided as if it were three independent novellas (one gothic, one thriller and one science fiction), the novel is united by the presence of the poet Walt Whitman in each narrative. The three stories are separated in time, but the setting is the same (Manhattan). The characters mirror each other (a deformed, Whitman-quoting boy, Luke, is a terrorist in one story and a teenage prophet in another; a world-weary woman, Catherine, is a bride and an alien; and a handsome young man, Simon, is a ghost, a business man

and an artificial human). Themes of love and fear, loss and connection, violence and poetry reverberate with increasing power in the novel. "In the Machine," set during the Industrial Revolution, tells the story of twelve-year-old Luke as he falls in love with his dead brother's girlfriend, Catherine, and becomes convinced that the ghost of his brother, Simon, lives inside the iron works machine that killed him. "The Children's Crusade" explores love and maternal instinct via a thriller plot, as Cat, a psychologist, draws away from her rich, white and younger lover, Simon, and toward a spooky, deformed boy who is also a member of a global network committed to random acts of terror. Finally, in "Like Beauty," Simon, Catareen, a lizard-like alien and Luke, an adolescent prophet, strike out for a new life in a postapocalyptic world. Once again Cunningham presents his reading public characters that have to get along with their social limitations, regarding not only a special treatment to the familiar institution, but also the haunting presence of death, thematically resembling The Hours.

In The Hours, the novelist makes use of a very much peculiar writing technique marked by the intertwining of three narratives which do not share same times nor spaces. The novel begins with a letter left by Virginia Woolf in which she exposes the reasons for her suicide. After this prologue, the narrator alternates from "Mrs. Dalloway" to "Mrs.

Woolf" and then to "Mrs. Brown"; each of these names will be used as titles of chapters of the book.

Depicting an ordinary day in the life of these three women, Cunningham deals with uneasy ideas. One of the narratives is a day of "Mrs. Dalloway", Woolf's character, but in New York, today, now named Clarissa Vaugham. This woman is free to do whatever she wants to: to live an open lesbian relationship with her partner Sally, to have a job, to challenge her social environment, to live a platonic love with a gay old friend, Richards, now HIV-positive. Though Cunningham's Dalloway lives in a time that allows women to do many things which would be considered unthinkable in Woolf's time, the character reminds the attentive reader of Woolf's Dalloway, in terms of her normative identity and commitment to the demands of the mainstream society. The second woman, Mrs. Brown, lives in Los Angeles, 1949, married to a man who fought in World War II. Laura is a "bookworm" who is trying to cope with her reading of Mrs. Dalloway, but can not concentrate on it because of her intense anguish in relation to the life she has. The last of these women, whose day takes place in London, 1923, is Virginia Woolf herself, by the time she was writing the novel Mrs. Dalloway. Cunningham dedicates seven chapters to each of his female characters, and a last one, in which we see Clarissa and Laura together, united by Richard's suicide.

As Michael Cunningham himself declared in many interviews, the attentive reader can easily infer that two major issues are constantly present and lyrically portrayed in his narratives: the AIDS epidemic and new forms of familiar organization. Taking this into account, and based on my studies on Queer Theory, I shall discuss, in this thesis, how these two themes are presented in The Hours.

The present study shall be divided into three main parts. In the first one, I shall focus on the theoretical support that will be used as the foundation of my analysis. Therefore, considerations around the concept of queerness shall be discussed, as well as the theoretical perspectives implied in a study on the AIDS epidemic.

By discussing the idea of queerness, my main objective is its dissociation from homosexuality, that is, the understanding that being queer is not synonym for being gay, nor lesbian, nor bisexual, but a broader experience, rather related to one's existential position, to one's place in the world. In this regard, being queer shall be understood as an experience of defiance, or existing against or, even, out of the normative.

In relation to the AIDS epidemic, different theoretical perspectives will be presented. Aiming at a proper contextualization of the syndrome, some historical and political aspects related to it must be punctuated. Furthermore, the most recurrent metaphorical constructions around the

disease will also be discussed, as it is through the analysis of these metaphors that one visualizes the underlying ideologies that compose some marginalizing discourses around the epidemic. Finally, AIDS representational potentiality in literature shall be highlighted, taking into account that it is exactly the metaphorical nature of literature which defines literary discourse itself.

Established my theoretical support, I shall open my literary analysis through a comparative parallel between the characters Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaugham. Obviously both resemble each other in many aspects; this is the backbone of the novel, as we are dealing with narratives that work as mirrors, in the sense that they are intrinsically connected. However, my main interest does not fall on the potential similarities that Clarissa and Laura share, but rather on the contrasts implied by the way they perceive their lives.

Laura Brown is the character through which some aspects of queerness come more vividly. Living comfortably in a suburb of Los Angeles right after World War II (1949), Laura transgresses all the boundaries to which she was committed. Mother and wife are attributes that, instead of bringing her some security, feed her anguish. Her husband Dan, her son Richie, and her pregnancy only push Laura to an attitude of escapism through literature. Laura's inability to deal with the social role that is culturally imposed upon any woman is a strong remark

of her queerness. Through Laura, Cunningham brings into light a character that is in total opposition to the conservative virtues of our Western society: the idea of building a safe world for familiar values. The theme of motherhood echoes in Cunningham's works, but from my point of view it finds its central construct in Mrs. Brown, whose misery comes exactly from the conflicts of being a housewife and a mother. Laura fears that she cannot discover her true talents while devoting herself to her family; in order to experience the life she has imagined, she has to escape. In this sense, one can say that Laura's queerness is so structural in her inner world, that even literature is not enough to bring her some personal fulfillment, leading the character to a less metaphorical escapism: Mrs. Brown goes to Canada and, as a consequence, joins a group that is not covered by the voice of the mainstream, that is, those women who believe in a possibility of wellness without experiencing the protection of a male provider and, moreover, motherhood itself.

Clarissa Vaugham, on the other hand, shall be characterized as an anti-queer figure. Living in the last years of the twentieth-century, Clarissa is free to live fully a potential queerness, but what one can see is the opposite of it, that is, the portrait of a rather normative subjectivity. Living a stable relationship with Sally in the Village, New York (which in itself embodies no challenge to any norm), Clarissa, who

made use of medical technology to be a mother, is constantly approaching the normative, as she feels rather comfortable as an aristocratic editor who finds shelter in the controversial feeling of security that a long-term relationship brings to individuals. In addition, Clarissa's relationship with her daughter is worth discussing in this perspective of the novel as well. Opposing to his Mrs. Dalloway, Cunningham presents Julia Vaugham as a heterosexual girl with a clear queer turn. Through the contrast of these two characters, I shall problematize the theories presented in the theoretical chapter, which do not understand homoeroticism as synonym for queerness.

When discussing the presence of the AIDS epidemic in The Hours, my analysis shall be mostly based on the character Richard Brown and his relationship with Clarissa Vaughan and Louis Walter, as he is, in Cunningham's work, the major representative of an entire of generation that experienced some emotional fluidity and sexual freedom, which, in the context of the 1960s seemed plausible. However, in the 1980s, with the emergence of the disease, that generation found in itself its limitations – the result could not be different from a retake of conservative values and Puritanism, strong characteristics of the place from which the American mind looks at the world.

For that, some considerations about the syndrome itself - its history and the way society has been dealing with its victims - are

necessary. In this regard, an articulation between The Hours with the studies of Susan Sontag (A AIDS e suas metáforas), Elaine Showalter (Anarquia sexual: sexo e cultura no fin de siècle) and Marcelo Secron Bessa (Histórias positivas: a literatura (des)construindo a AIDS) in which the scholars discuss some of the metaphors which are socially associated with the epidemic, comes to contextualize and to enrich the reading of the AIDS epidemic in Cunningham's novel.

By establishing a clear parallel between his characters Richard Brown, Virginia Woolf and Woolf's own character Septimus Smith (Mrs. Dalloway), Cunningham invites us to read Richard's infection as an effective symbol of his own personal decadence, as well as of the fragmentation of the past ideals of the generation he, Clarissa and Louis belong to.

Since "memory" plays a decisive role in the narrative, Clarissa's, Louis's and Richard's recollections of their past address the readers of The Hours to trace an opposition between their idealized youth and their present circumstances, which are strongly marked by Richard's suffering. At the present time, Richard is experiencing many of the unpleasant symptoms of the HIV infection, including AIDS-related neurological complications and, therefore, the loss of his sanity, which, together with a biography shaped by maternal abandonment and uneasiness, led him to embrace suicide.

What one can say concerning the way the AIDS epidemic is presented in The Hours is that Cunningham does not approach the subject without social commitment. The author does not portray, through Richard, the hero of a circumstance. From my point of view, Richard is a man that embodies the frustrated expectations of an entire generation whose main pursue was the establishment of new patterns in relation to social, sexual and marital contexts. In this perspective, AIDS is used as in its symbolic potentiality, representing not only the fragmentation of a man whose existential anguish could not be diminished by the experience of an artistic life, but also the decadence of a society that has lost, within the interval of one generation, its patterns and daring possibilities.

II. PRESENTING THE THEORY

In to order discuss The Hours, it is necessary to approach some concepts regarding queerness and AIDS, as it is on these specific fields that the critical analysis of the novel shall be based in the following chapters of this study.

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English provides more than one entry for the term queer. In its first entry, queer is defined as "strange", "unnatural", "unusual", words that already address us to a semantic field closely related to an idea of oddity and awkwardness. Moreover, in a second entry, the term is defined as synonym for "homosexual, especially a homosexual man"[4], that is to say that this definition restricts queerness to one's sexual orientation.

However, queer theory has much enlarged the definition of the word and does not necessarily associate its meaning with homosexual desire, extending the use of the word queer as an expression of identity, or even as the expression of intersecting identities. Annamarie Jagose, in her book Queer Theory: An Introduction, traces the history of this theoretical field, which is worth recollecting before any discussion of the term "queer" itself.

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[4] The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995) p. 1161.

According to Jagose, queer theory may be regarded as a school of literary and cultural criticism that emerged in the United States in the mid-1980s, owing its intellectual roots to feminist theory as well as to French philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Queer theorists analyze texts - which can be anything from Wuthering Heights to TV sit-coms – aiming at discussing underlying meanings, distinctions, and relations of power in the larger culture that produced the texts. The resulting analysis reveal the oppression of sexual dissidents who violate sexual taboos or do not conform to culturally sanctioned gender roles. As Jagose herself states in the introduction to her book, "broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire."[5] In this sense, according to the American scholar, queer theorists' crucial goal is to resist a model of stability (the heterosexual one), focusing on the mismatches between biological sex, gender and sexual desire. By doing so, queer theory demonstrates the impossibility of any "natural" sexuality, and calls "into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'".[6]

Following Jagose's steps, it is also plausible to say that queer theorists are more ambitious than their "Gay Lib" forebears, who, after

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[5] JAGOSE, A. (1996) p.3.
[6] JAGOSE, A. (1996) p.3.

the Stonewall riots (1969), already "challenged conventional knowledge about such matters as gendered behaviour, monogamy and the sanctity of the law".[7] According to the theorist, The Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s, reflecting some other changes which took place in the social scenario (the black and the feminist movements), fought to create a place for sexual minorities in Europe and in the United States; yet queer theorists want more than liberation.

Jagose points out that queer theorists' main interest is to destabilize cultural ideas of normality and sexuality, as well as to give voice for those people who not conform to an ideal society which is absolutely dichotomous, labeling its individuals as "heterosexual" or "homosexual" ones. Jagose claims that the term queer should not only refer to one's sexual orientation, but to all those people "whose shared characteristic is [...] an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality"[8]. Many theorists hope that this strategy will undermine the status quo and foster the freedom people need to create their own sexualities.

However, the most vocal opponents of queer theory believe that gays and lesbians are fundamentally different from straights and constitute a minority population that has existed in all times and places. This concept of sexual minorities, stressed by early gay liberation

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[7] JAGOSE, A. (1996) p.3.
[8] JAGOSE, A. (1996) p. 98.

leaders, paradoxically reinforces the heterocentric discourse, as it still understands sexuality in a bipolar, dichotomous way, which is, according to Jagose, exactly what queer theory questions.[9]

The American scholar also highlights in her book the fact that queer theory is a product of the university, though allied with the broader queer movement in gay and lesbian communities. Being inheritor of Michel Foucault's studies on sexuality, in which the French historian explicitly engaged in denaturalizing dominant understandings of sexual identity, queer theory has occupied, mainly among American academics, a place of respect and relevance in the context of the so-called post-structuralist studies, together with some fields of Linguistics and Psychoanalysis, for example.[10]

We cannot deny that the patriarchal society we live in is the society of the white heterosexual men. The hegemonic discourse of the dominant culture was historically built around and aiming at this specific group. However, ignoring the dominant voice, there are visible differences among us. This is the specific point the term queer is attached to: it works as an umbrella under which those who do not belong to the heterosexual white male culture (which also implies being married, monogamic and fertile) can share, somehow, identity. Or, in

[9] JAGOSE, A. (1996) p. 111.
[10] JAGOSE, A. (1996) p.80.

other words, some different perspectives of the world are sheltered by the concept of queerness.

Many are the examples of different cultural and sexual backgrounds that are covered by this umbrella: people of color, homosexuals, bisexuals, transgenders, to name just a few. Those who simply do not conform with the so-called “mainstream” fit perfectly in the term queer, that is, those people who do not express their identities as a repetition and internalization of the values of the established normative society.

But what is the normative? Around which values is the norm structured? In order to answer questions like these, one should appreciate the matter having the writings of Michel Foucault in mind. In his História da sexualidade I: a vontade de saber, the French historian attempts to disprove the thesis that Western society has seen a repression of sexuality since the 17th century and that sexuality has been unmentionable, something impossible to speak about. Foucault, on the other hand, states that Western culture has long been fixated on sexuality, what he calls “hipótese repressiva”.[11]

Foucault’s main argument is the one that sexuality is a discourse production rather than a natural condition, which is an idea inserted in his larger understanding of human subjectivity as a productive and

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[11] FOUCAULT, M. (2003) p. 15.

enabling response to networks of power. In this perspective, power is not primarily a repressive force, in the sense that it forms knowledge, it induces pleasure, it produces things:

> Não foi somente ampliado o domínio do que se podia dizer sobre o sexo e foram obrigados os homens a estendê-lo cada vez mais; mas, sobretudo, focalizou-se o discurso no sexo [...]. Censura sobre o sexo? Pelo contrário, constituiu-se uma aparelhagem para produzir discursos sobre o sexo, cada vez mais discursos, susceptíveis de funcionar e de serem efeito de sua própria economia.[12]

Accordingly, the social convention has created a discourse around sexuality, thereby making it ubiquitous. This would not have been the case, had sexuality been thought of as something "natural". Furthermore, the concept of sexuality itself is a result of this discourse, and the interdictions do have constructive power: they have created sexual identities and a multiplicity of sexualities that would not have existed otherwise. Therefore, marginalized sexual identities, in Foucault's analysis, are not simply oppressed by the operations of power; they are produced by these same operations.

In this sense, the norm, what society understands as "natural", is, in fact, a social construction which has been shaped by power relations through centuries of human social organization. Heteronormativity is, in this regard, a construction which came to fulfill the expectations of a

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[12] FOUCAULT, M. (2003) p.26.

society still in a process of organization, which found its basis on the logics of capital: marriage and procreation come to be, with this in mind, the only possible alternatives to save money and goods; family became the shelter of capital.[13]

The compulsory association between biological sex, gender and sexual orientation turned out to be a necessity for the perpetuation of the status quo and for the complete effectiveness of heteronormativity. Nevertheless, throughout human history, instead of being repeated or internalized, the norm may be dislocated. We cannot erase the existence of those that, for a plurality of reasons, do not fit in the normative. Out of the norm these same individuals are not ignored. Contradictorily, by experiencing life out of the norm, they make themselves even more perceptible and socially present.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her introduction ("Axiomatic") to her book Epistemology of the Closet, reinforces the foucaultian idea that sexuality is a construction. According to Sedgwick, the fact that gender, biological sex and sexual orientation are understood as equivalent concepts is the true demonstration of how social forces impose upon individuals a monolithical way of experiencing identity. Sedgwick defines sex as a group of irreducible, biological differentiations among members of the species. Gender, however, is conceptualized by the American

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[13] FOUCAULT, (2003) p.37-41.

theorist as the social production of male and female identities and behaviors. Finally, Sedgwick understands sexuality as:

> [...] the very opposite of what we originally referred to as (chromosomal-based) sex: it could occupy, instead, even more than "gender" the polar position of the relational, the social/ symbolic, the constructed, the variable, the representational.[14]

Based on Sedgwick's words, one can arrive at the conclusion that ideas around sexuality go even beyond sexual orientation; rather, it is much related to the individual's position and attitude towards the world. The understanding that biological sex, gender, sexual orientation and sexuality are synonymous concepts, together with ideas related to compulsory marriage and fertility, compose the ideology that is behind the historical construction of normativity, which is exactly to what queerness is opposed. In this view, queerness is more an attitude of opposition in relation to normative society than a simple statement about sexuality.

Ruth Goldman, a major contemporary queer theorist, in her article "Who Is That Queer Queer? Exploring Norms around Sexuality, Race and Class in Queer Theory", analyzes the role of gender, social class and race in the configuration of a queer identity. Consequently, the theorist

[14] SEDGWICK (1990) p. 29.

shows us that queer identity can be expressed through more than one single aspect (sexual orientation) of one's personality.

Goldman opens her article by stating her aim: to discuss some existing contradictions "within and without queer theory"[15]. One of the crucial contradictions the American scholar finds in queer theory is the one which is precisely related to its rhetoric. Based on an ideology of inclusiveness, queer theory is understood as an intellectual space "polyphonic and diverse discourses that challenge heteronormativity"[16] would find their academic shelter. However, poses Goldman, many constituents of one's identity (mostly race and social class) are neglected by the theory, whose main interest is still based on the individual's sexual orientation. In order to explore this contradiction (inclusion x exclusion), the theorist ends up conceptualizing the term queer itself, which is worth examining.

Ruth Goldman emphasizes the fact that, when discussing the signifier "queer", one should not associate it with a monolithical identity. Rather, the term implies a plurality of identities, which, intertwined, compose one. To make her point clearer, the theorist presents herself as an illustrative example of the idea she defends:

> [...] the signifier queer goes further than simply signaling an alternative sexuality; it

[15] GOLDMAN, R. (1996) p. 169.
[16] GOLDMAN (1996) p. 170.

> offers a way in which to express many intersecting queer selves – in my case, to name just a few, as a bisexual, a Jew, a feminist, an anti-capitalist, an anti-racist – all of which stand in opposition to powerful societal norms.[17]

Goldman's statement raises three relevant aspects which are implicit in the idea of queerness. Firstly, the fact that it approaches aspects of one's subjectivity that go beyond sexual orientation, or any other "alternative sexuality". Next, she calls attention to the multiplicity of selves that may compose a queer self, highlighting the idea of "intersecting" identities. Finally, in terms of conceptualizing "queer", there is an underlying conclusion in her words, as the theorist summarizes all these intersecting selves in what she calls an attitude "in opposition to powerful societal norms".

Following Goldman's line of reason, the term "queer" has been so passionately embraced by gay and lesbian academic and non-academic communities that it has been understood as a synonym for sexual orientation, which she considers a misreading of what "queerness" represents. Accordingly, Goldman claims that queer theory has as its intellectual basis theorists such as Foucault and Derrida and, therefore, "aims to transform power structures by altering discourses about sexuality and gender"[18] and, ultimately, to disrupt heteropatriarchy as a

[17] GOLDMAN (1996) p. 170.
[18] GOLDMAN, R. (1996) p. 173.

whole. In this perspective, "queer" focus on the denaturalization of the norm, on criticizing normative consolidations around politics, identity and community, or as Ruth Goldman herself says in her article: "one of the inherent goals of queer theory is to undermine heteronormative hegemonic discourses."[19]

Reinforcing Goldman's postulates, Professor Calvin Thomas, in his article "Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality", leaves explicit the possibility of straight participation in queer theory. Like Goldman, Thomas, as a heterosexual man, takes himself of an example of the fact that "there may be many more ways than one (or two or three) to be 'queer'".[20]

As an academic, Calvin Thomas has had the chance to learn from feminist theory and, therefore, to question the construction of masculinity.[21] As a queer theorist, Thomas aims at offering a refreshing look at the relation between queer theory and critical examinations of the construction of heterosexuality.

One of the most highlighted issues in Thomas's text is related to male straightness, for, according to him, men tend to be more homophobic than women, as "the terror of being mistaken for a queer dominates the straight."[22] In this sense, as anti-homophobic discourse

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[19] GOLDMAN, R. (1996) p. 179.
[20] THOMAS, C. (1997) p.83.
[21] THOMAS, C. (1997) p.84
[22] THOMAS, C. (1997) p.99.

constitutes one of the pillars of queer theory, Calvin Thomas's proposition of questioning male heterosexuality, and the way it is dialectically related to homosexuality, is a rather queer view over straightness itself.

The crucial issue defended by the American scholar in his text is that straights have been learning from queer theory to question constructions of straightness, to question their place in those constructions, and to make critical interventions into the institutional reproduction of the heterosexual norm. Fully aware of Foucault's theories, Calvin Thomas claims that heterosexuality is a social-historical construction. In this sense, heteronormativity is absolutely open to a deconstructive reading, aiming at defying the normative, which would imply, according to the theorist, the questioning of straights' "own sexual practices and the exclusions and repressions that make them possible."[23]

If nowadays it is possible to have, institutionalized in universities, an academic field whose main target is the challenge of patriarchy, it is due to a previous work of many feminist theorists, who, in the middle of the twentieth century, began to deconstruct patriarchal social values and "naturalized" male supremacy. In this sense, Simone de Beauvoir's

[23] THOMAS, C. (1997) p. 89-90.

writings, and mainly her long essay The Second Sex, are considered to be the founding stones of the so-called gender studies.

Beauvoir's objective in her work is to define femininity itself and, therefore, to determine the place women have been occupying in our Western society. To do so, the initial point of the French essayist is the deconstruction of any discourse that naturalizes male hegemony over female existential condition.

Following Beauvoir's theory, all the dominant discourse was historically built by men and aiming at men's interests. Females have been, through centuries, understood as lacking individuals (as defended by Aristotle), or as imperfect beings (as theorized by Thomas Aquinus), that is, femininity has no definition in itself, but always in relation to masculinity: "thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being".[24]

Accordingly, all human experience is punctuated by a crucial duality – men as the Self, women as the Other, that is, in object position.

> No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as

[24] BEAUVOIR, S. (1997) p. 16.

> such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. [25]

What makes a woman a woman, as Beauvoir points out, is not her biological functions nor her physiology, but her existential position as an object. This same position was not achieved by chance; it did not simply occurred.[26] Its construction owns to centuries of a culture of oppression and male supremacy, but not objectively, as black slavery or Jewish persecution. Facts did not take place to submit women, but cultural issues, as old as human existence, determined femininity to occupy the place of the Other.

What sounds even more interesting in Beauvoir's theory is the dialectical characteristic that she elucidates in this Self (male) – Other (female) relationship. The supremacy needs, to be supreme, the undervalued; the oppressor needs the oppressed. Women, through an unconscious process of internalization, repeat, to be more precise, reinforce their own oppressed condition. On the other hand, men, because of their sexual needs, turn out to be dependent on women. In other words, the Self regards the Other as an object, and the Other accepts its position through all social, constructed values it inherits unconsciously.

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[25] BEAUVOIR, S. (1997) p. 18.
[26] BEAUVOIR, S. (1997) p. 18.

> Male and female stand opposed within a primordial Mitsein, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two haves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another. (...) In truth woman has not been socially emancipated through man's need – sexual desire for offspring – which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female. [27]

Following Simone de Beauvoir's writings, the Bulgarian psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva adapts much of the feminist theory to Jacques Lacan's postulates, mainly those related to the study of semiotics. When Virginia Woolf's novels were reclaimed by feminist scholars of the late 1970s and 1980s, Julia Kriteva's theories were popularly applied as an explanation of their narrative fluidity.

In her essay "A criança de sentido indizível", through psychoanalytical theories of language and maternity, Kristeva challenged the notion of a fixed coherent ego, claiming instead that the "symbolic self" was a momentary position in language (the symbolic order) continually threatened by semiotic impulses. As a state of pre-linguistic fluctuation, governed by drives and rooted in infancy, the semiotic may be broadly characterized as maternal, opposed to the

[27] BEAUVOIR (1997) p. 19-20.

paternal law of the symbolic order. In this sense, it is rhythmic and musical as opposed to the paternal law of the symbolic order.[28]

Kristeva's adaptation of Lacan's psychoanalytical theories is useful for the enrichment of some readings of some narratives (mainly those which have the stream of consciousness technique as its backbone), for it clearly highlights an intrinsic relationship between two concerns: language and maternity.

In the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray is one of France's most versatile feminist critics, discussing major issues in religion, law, psychoanalysis, and literature. In a more political article, "Women on the Market", Irigaray traces an analogy between the theories of Karl Marx, in reference to the logics of the capitalistic productive system, and the female position in this same society.

In his book Capital, Marx attempts to explain the hidden underpinnings of the capitalist economic system, and to reveal the rather illusionary nature of the relationship between the materiality or utility of a thing, and its perceived "value" in a capitalist society. In her article, Luce Irigaray argues that there is another similar system that pre-dates and is probably a requirement for capitalism, and yet remains

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[28] KRISTEVA, J. (2002) p. 119.

independent of capitalism, which, says the theorist, comes to be the subjugation of women as a commodity to men.

Accordingly, while for Marx capitalism is only a stage in the larger process of the evolution of economic systems, for Irigaray "all the social regimes of 'History' are based upon the exploitation of one 'class' of producers, namely, women."[29] In face of this, women have been, throughout History, treated as mere exchangeable commodities, which contributes to the empowerment of males.

When we come to discuss the AIDS epidemic in The Hours, some considerations about its origin and background are necessary. Gabriel Rotello, a Brazilian journalist who works for The New York Times, in his book Comportamento sexual e AIDS: a cultura gay em transformacão, establishes some of the changes that the American gay community has gone through, in the 1970s, in terms of sexual practices.

According to Rotello, AIDS, just like any other epidemic, is in fact an ecological disturbance that occurs when human behavior provides some microorganisms with the appropriate conditions to proliferate[30]. In this regard, Rotello's main concern in his study is to understand how the sexual behavior of the gay community itself propitiated the emergence of the disease as an epidemic or, in his own words: "o que procuro

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[29] IRIGARAY, L. (1993) p. 173.
[30] ROTELLO, G. (1997) p. 13.

explorar aqui, ao contrário, é como o próprio comportamento gay interagiu com o HIV, contribuindo para a epidemia."[31]

Rotello points out that at least through the 1950s, gay men were stereotyped as effeminate and often obtained sex by fellating the so-called trade, nominally straight men looking for satisfaction[32]. With the advent of gay liberation, they turned to having sex with one another and many made of multipartnered anal sex a militant outlaw culture, defiant of the heterosexual, homophobic majority. In this sense, the bathhouses, while offering a communitarian haven from homophobia, also institutionalized part of the liberation movement, providing sexual opportunities in private cubicles, showers, saunas, hallways and dimly lit ''orgy rooms'' devoted to anonymous encounters.

Obviously that Gabriel Rotello rightly emphasizes that AIDS is not a peculiarly homosexual disease, pointing out that most of the cases worldwide are spread via heterosexual sex. What perhaps most encourages its spread is a high frequency of unprotected sexual activity between a group of people who are infected and other members of this same group or people outside it. According to the Brazilian journalist, from the 1970s on, core groups of gay males arose in cities like New York and San Franciso, transmitting the virus to one another by practicing unprotected anal and oral sex with dozens to hundreds of

[31] ROTELLO, G. (1997) p.14.
[32] ROTELLO, G. (1997) p. 57-8.

partners, mainly in bathhouses, discos and sex clubs. Gay men outside the core patronized the bathhouses too, establishing a bridge between the infected group and the rest of the gay population.

> Nos inícios dos anos 80, havia mais de duzentas saunas importantes em toda a nação, que geravam uma indústria de cem milhões de dólares anuais. Muitos gays não tinham nenhum interesse nesses lugares, e diversos deles os desaprovavam abertamente. Mas gostassem ou não das saunas, poucos gays estavam a mais de poucas horas de carro de uma delas, onde quer que morassem. As saunas constituíram instrumentos eficientes para a criação de uma nova cultura sexual, caracterizada por uma maior auto-estima e por um genuíno sentimento contrário. Mas foram também o instrumento de ligação entra a nova cultura e um nível muito elevado de troca de parceiros. E em parte devido à sua segurança, privacidade e higiene relativas, em parte porque sua clientela era agora exclusivamente gay, boa parte dessa troca de parceiros envolvia o sexo anal.[33]

One may say that since the beginning of the epidemic, the gay community has been exposed to an aggressive campaign for the use of condoms. However, Rotello argues convincingly that the "condom code"[34] was so readily adopted because it promised to reduce the diffusion of HIV while permitting gay males to keep their sexual life style

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[33] ROTELLO, G. (1997) p. 81.

[34] The expression "condom code", originally a slang phrase used among urban gay men, has been widely used in any academic field that deals with the AIDS epidemic to designate the adherence of gay communities to safer sexual practices.

largely unchanged. The dominant reaction was to interrupt the virus, not to change the cultural and behavioral context of AIDS transmission. But condoms, says Gabriel Rotello, can leak, and are not always used. The idea that safer sex would be a guarantee with the use of condoms only came to reinforce some sexual practices that were precisely to be avoided.[35]

By the early 1980s, many gay men who were sexually active presented strange symptoms: a rare kind of cancer (Kaposi's sarcoma), and an ever rarer kind of pneumonia. Tests seemed to indicate that it destroyed their immune systems completely: these people were sick, and had no way of fighting the illness. There was no known way to cure them. Many of the victims could trace the origin of their disease either directly, or indirectly, to homoerotic sexual practices. As a result, Gay Related Immune Deficiency (or GRID) was the very first name of the syndrome.

An immune deficiency it was, but necessarily gay-related? Drug addicts using intravenous drugs became afflicted, and many said they were not gay. Moreover, women, children and hemophiliacs, the bleeders who needed regular blood transfusions, also became ill. The disease, therefore, needed a new name: AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

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[35] ROTELLO, G. (1997) p.127-32.

In 1984, the American writer and essayist Susan Sontag publishes Ilness as Metaphor, a book in which she analyses a series of metaphorical constructions of illnesses (mainly cancer and tuberculosis) present in texts from Ancient Greece to the twentieth century literary canon: James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Frank Lloyd Wright, to mention a few. Four years later, connected with what was happening in the medical and social scenario, Sontag develops her former work into another one: AIDS and its Metaphors (1989).

In this book, Sontag reinforces the idea she discussed in Ilness as Metaphor that some metaphors and mythical constructions around certain illnesses may be as painful and lethal as the disease itself. Some of these metaphors find their roots in the prejudice society has towards the afflicted, which put these patients not only in a position of stigmatization and marginalization, but also, in many cases, away from the proper treatment. Accordingly, Sontag's main target in her work is to see illnesses not as metaphors, that is, to understand diseases without their metaphorical constructions, which she considers the healthiest way of being sick.

However, since its origins, a huge net of metaphors were promptly constructed around the AIDS epidemic, due to the fact that it is still today faced by the medical society as a rather mysterious illness. According to Sontag, two primary metaphors are attached to the

epidemic: the one of an "invasion", concerning the process of being ill, that is, the presence of a strange agent in people's bodies, and the one of "pollution", which refers to the virus transmission.[36]

Although many metaphors have been associated with the AIDS epidemic, it is, as Sontag says, the idea of "plague" the most crucial one: "a peste é a principal metáfora através da qual a epidemia de AIDS é compreendida. [...] a AIDS banalizou o câncer".[37]

Plagues have been represented in our Western world as synonyms for calamities and collective injuries. What is more, the most relevant aspect of a plague is its character of punishment. In the case of the AIDS epidemic, the fact that it transforms the bodies of its patients into something repulsive, and also the fact that its main vehicle of transmission is the sexual one, only stresses its representation as a condemnation. As Susan Sontag herself poses it:

> Ao contrário do câncer, entendido como uma doença provocada pelos hábitos do indivíduo (e que revela algo a respeito dele), a AIDS é concebida de maneira pré-moderna como uma doença provocada pelo indivíduo enquanto tal e enquanto membro de algum "grupo de risco" – essa categoria burocrática, aparentemente neutra, que também ressuscita a idéia arcaica de uma comunidade poluída para qual a doença representa uma condenação.[38]

[36] SONTAG, S. (1989) p.22.
[37] SONTAG, S. (1989) p. 53.
[38] SONTAG, S. (1989) p. 55-6.

In this sense, AIDS has been used to symbolize a punishment for those who sexually transgress (mainly homosexual men) and, therefore, as a representation of the moral relaxation society experienced in relation to homoeroticism. Moreover, in such conservative perspective, not only gay men are the ones to blame for the emergence of the epidemic, but also everything that can be summarized in the expression "the 1960s".[39]

Another interesting aspect discussed by Susan Sontag in relation to the AIDS epidemic as a plague is the fact that it may affect every single individual in society. The idea that even those individuals who are not homosexuals nor make use of intravenous drugs may get infected by the HIV virus reinforces some fears (mostly the one of social disintegration) which have been cultivated for centuries in the minds of the American people.

Sontag makes allusion to the puritan preachers during the colonization of the United States, and their idea that syphilis was a divine punishment for human excesses[40]. The fact that each individual could be potentially infected (by the virus of syphilis in the past or by the HIV virus nowadays) has been used as a tool to exert moral control and sexual regulation over society, for each individual would, therefore, control the other. As Sontag herself poses it:

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[39] SONTAG, S. (1989) p. 76.
[40] SONTAG, S. (1989) p. 72.

> A idéia de que a AIDS vem castigar comportamentos divergentes e a de que ela ameaça os inocentes não se contradizem em absoluto. Tal é o poder, a eficácia extraordinária da metáfora da peste: ela permite que uma doença seja encarada ao mesmo tempo como um castigo merecido por um grupo de "outros" vulneráveis e como uma doença que potencialmente ameaça a todos.[41]

The idea defended by the American essayist is the one that all the metaphors that exist around illnesses, and around AIDS particularly, increase a feeling of guilt in the minds of the afflicted. In this regard, Susan Sontag claims that one should perceive human diseases as what they are, without a metaphorical veil representing them, which, according to her, only exists to stress a discourse of marginalization.

Following Sontag's steps, the American literary critic Elaine Showalter publishes, in 1990, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle. In this study, Showalter compares and contrasts the impact of the syphilis epidemic at the end of the nineteenth century with the emergence of the HIV/ AIDS epidemic, as well as their literary representations.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, recurrent sexual scandals took place in the English society: the trial of Jeffries, a

[41] SONTAG, S. (1989) p. 76.

famous brothel owner; a series of journalistic articles about prostitution in England; the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde[42]. These scandals, says Showalter, affected the social perception of sexuality, generating campaigns for social purification and demands for a more emphatic legislation.

Moreover, especially in relation to homosexuality, as the term was medicalized and criminalized (the Labouchère Amendment) in the decade of 1880, more and more people located in homoerotic behavior the reasons for the social and moral corruption of the time.

> O surgimento e transformação em caso médico da moderna identidade homossexual na década de 1880 conquistou a ampla atenção do público com o julgamento e condenação de Oscar Wilde, em 1895. Na realidade, muitos ingleses consideravam os escândalos homossexuais das décadas de 1880 e 1890, até o julgamento de Oscar Wilde, como sinais definitivos da imoralidade que derrubara Grécia e Roma.[43]

At the end of the twentieth century, due to the emergence of the AIDS epidemic, we witness a similar reaction in relation to homoeroticism, as the epidemic stimulated homophobia and also

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[42] SHOWALTER, E. (1993) p. 16.
[43] SHOWALTER, E. (1993) p. 16.

triggered strong social reactions against the sexual liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s[44]. As Showalter poses it:

> A pandemia de AIDS emergiu também, em 1981, após uma década de drásticas mudanças nos costumes sociais e sexuais norte-americanos, mudanças que, na opinião de muitos, conduziriam a um comportamento deturpado e imoral. Entre essas mudanças estava a aceitação do homossexualismo.[45]

In face of this, Elaine Showalter highlights in her study the fact that the epidemic has been used as an instrument of sexual control. Its constant association with a transgressive sexuality and with the gay movement stressed some of the metaphors related to divine punishment and christian guilt that have always characterized the disease, coming to the point of being named WOGS (Wrath of God Syndrome), which only emphasizes the judgmental attitude some conservative politicians and religious leaders had towards the epidemic.

However, different from syphilis, cancer or tuberculosis, which were, in the previous decades of the twentieth century, anonymous illnesses, AIDS became part of the historical identity construction of the gay movement during the 1980s and 1990s[46]. The epidemic, in this sense, cannot be understood detached from the gay culture of the late

[44] SHOWALTER, E. (1993) p. 17.
[45] SHOWALTER, E. (1993) p. 247.
[46] SHOWALTER, E. (1993) p. 249.

twentieth century, as it turned out to be one more political fight against homophobia for the American gay men.

To discuss some of the political implications of the AIDS epidemic, one should analyze Joshua Gamson's article "Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement 'Newness'". In his article, Gamson examines AIDS activism in America, through the activities of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), the most visible political group related to the AIDS epidemic in the United States.

Gamson reading of the movement is, as he himself acknowledges, foucaultian. According to the theorist, what ACT UP members are fighting is an invisible enemy, not the visible power that comes from the government agencies and from the drug industry: they respond to a control that comes from the creation of abnormality. In Gamson's own words: "power is maintained less through direct force or institutionalized oppression and more through the delineation of the 'normal' and the exclusion of the 'abnormal.'"[47]

Accordingly, power comes from a process of stigmatization of those who occupy a non-conforming position in society. In this perspective, the transgressor would be labeled as punishable and, therefore, visible, while the dominator turns out to be more and more

[47] GAMSON, J. (1998) p. 335.

invisible. In such process, the stigmatized would be even more vulnerable, as it "becomes the focus of attention".[48]

If we turn our eyes back to the 1980s in the United States, we can easily perceive how the State itself was involved in the domination of HIV-positive people, as a form of repressing sexual minorities. In relation to the Reagan administration, Joshua Gamson says that "while subsequently calling AIDS 'America's number one health problem,' the administration consistently avoided initiating a co-ordinated, adequately financed attack on that problem."[49]

Since AIDS is a disease constructed around a net of stigmas (from homosexuality to drug abuse and prostitution), one may arrive at the conclusion that the invisibility of what Gamson calls "the enemy" was easily established, which is, according to the theorist, the main obstacle that the AIDS movement has to face.

What is clear in Gamson's article is the necessity of the deconstruction of images and symbols associated with the epidemic, as it is based on them that the "enemy" empowers itself. The only possible way to respond to the script of the AIDS plague would be "by undermining that script, resist the labeling through which contemporary domination is often effectively achieved."[50]

[48] GAMSON, J. (1998) p. 339.
[49] GAMSON, J. (1998) p. 341.
[50] GAMSON, J. (1998) p. 346.

However, the syndrome has been present not only in the political and medical discourses, but also in the literary one. The Brazilian professor and literary critic Marcelo Secron Bessa, in his book Histórias positivas: a literatura (des)construindo a AIDS (1997), analyses some of the literary constructions of the AIDS epidemic, having the work of Caio Fernando Abreu as the backbone of his study.

Secron Bessa opens his study reinforcing some of Susan Sontag's postulates. According to him, one of the most dangerous ways to analyze the epidemic is to historicize it, that is, to establish parallels between the AIDS epidemic and other epidemics humankind faced in the past, which highlights the metaphor of the plague, discussed by Sontag. The Brazilian critic points out the perils involved in regarding the epidemic as a plague and, therefore, as a punishment, for its emergence occurs in a historical moment marked by strong conservative political forces. As he poses in his text:

> Não é crucial, portanto, detectar de onde surgiu ou investigar sua origem; o que se torna importante é que a epidemia surge em um momento histórico particular onde forças neoconservadoras tentam se aproveitar da doença, ressuscitando a metáfora da peste – entre outras - para manobras ideológicas.[51]

[51] BESSA, M. (1997) p. 22.

By eliciting the manipulative potential of the metaphor of the plague, Marcelo Secron Bessa clearly subscribes Sontag's main contribution to all literary criticism related to the HIV/ AIDS epidemic. However, taking a more political attitude, Susan Sontag's main proposal is to understand the disease deprived from all the metaphorical representations it has been submitted to.

Analyzing the medical discourse around AIDS, which would be, a priori, more literal, distant and non-metaphorical, Bessa claims that this kind of discourse infers the existence of the disease per se. However, such idea ignores the fact that even scientific discourse is absolutely committed to all sorts of social issues, which are considered to be "non-scientific" and, therefore, also constructed and, inevitably, representational, metaphorical.

The fact that every discourse is metaphorically "contaminated" is, according to Secron Bessa, inherent to language itself, as language is essentially representational and symbolic. When one comes to think in terms of literary discourse, this "contamination" is even more structural, as its main purpose is artistic. Bessa's own words are rather elucidative in relation to the matter:

> As "ferramentas" para escrever literatura, portanto, são as mesmas para o empreendimento científico. O alienígena – o figurativo, a metáfora – sempre estará

> presente em qualquer discurso, pois a linguagem contamina a si própria. E a ficção, o locus presumivelmente natural da metáfora, pode apontar a contradição da aparente auto-identidade do discurso que se pretende literal.[52]

In this regard, poses the Brazilian scholar, literature comes to be one discourse that makes part of a discoursive net that exists around AIDS. More than merely representing social and political reactions to the epidemic, it also presents new forms of looking at it. These original concepts and approaches, depending on the underlying attitude of the literary author in relation to AIDS, will construct a kind of language that reinforces or deconstructs monolithical images and identities, feeding the discussion around the epidemic, presenting, directly or indirectly, new forms of dealing with it.

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[52] BESSA, M. (1997) p. 31.

III. QUEERING THE HOURS

In The Hours, Michael Cunningham intertwines three narratives which are structurally and thematically united by the echoes of Virginia Woolf's novel, Mrs. Dalloway. In this study, my analysis shall concentrate on two of these narratives. By contrasting and comparing the characters Clarissa Vaughan and Laura Brown, we, readers, are invited to reflect over our own positions in relation to queer identity and familiar bonds. Laura Brown, inserted in a rather normative environment, sees in the possibility of experiencing life out of the norm an attempt to diminish her existential anguish. Understanding the term queer as the theorist Ruth Goldenberg does, one can say that Mrs. Brown is frankly open to a queer characterization. Contrastingly, we have Clarissa Vaughan, whose movements point to the norm. Clarissa's normativity is, in my opinion, so evident in the narrative, that even her lesbianism is in accordance with social expectations. To reinforce this idea, I shall oppose Clarissa to her daughter, Julia Vaughan, whose subjectivity, obviously queer, does not present any clear homosexual trace.

One cannot deny that these two characters (Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan) share many problems and questions in relation to

their existential position; however, both differ in terms of identity. My intention is to analyze how these women perceive and interact with the world around them, bearing in mind the concepts of queerness discussed in the theoretical chapter.

It is not by chance that Cunningham chooses three crucial historical moments in the last century to serve as the setting of the three narratives. Virginia Woolf lives a time of social decadence and ruin, which comes to mirror her own inner world. Clarissa Vaughan lives in the last moments of the twentieth-century ("It is New York City. It is the end of the twentieth century"[53]). In our post-modern setting, characterized by the loss of ideologies and by the lack of patterns, Clarissa sees herself similarly lost, with her thoughts constantly turned to her past, a time in which she still had something to fight for. In relation to Mrs. Brown, as her analysis shall be understood as a pattern of queerness in this contrastive perspective, her social reality deserves a rather detailed portrait.

Mrs. Brown's action takes place in 1949 – "It is Los Angeles. It is 1949" (p.37); therefore, a period right after the World War II, peculiar in the American history. Professor in the New School for Social Research, Eric J. Hobsbawm, in his book Era dos extremos: o breve século XX, establishes a solid survey of the period, in the world and in

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[53] CUNNINGHAM, M. (2002) p.9. Subsequent quotations from this novel refer to the same edition and shall be identified by page number in the text.

America. For the historian, the so-called Golden Years were strongly marked by many issues, including some characteristics of the role performed by women in the social scenario. Because of the necessity of men to fight in the war, many women saw themselves taking control of their families, as this position, previously male-specific, was, in many homes, vacant. Moreover, as in any other war time, these same families lacked a provider, that is, men were not there to go to work, earn their money and support their families. With this in mind, it is not hard to assume that this position had to be fulfilled by the ordinary, middle-class wives, who had to find a job as any other integrant of the current working force.

This change, says Hobsbawm, sounds amazing if we take into consideration the time in which it took place. In 1940, says the historian, only 14% of the women who lived with their husbands worked for a salary. In the seventies, this percentage almost doubled[54]. The fact that women joined the working force was not new, as since the nineteenth-century some occupations related to commerce and assistance were already performed by them. However, what we see after the World War II in the entire developed world, and especially in the United States, is an astonishing growth of the number of women attending universities.

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[54] HOBSBAWN, E. (2005) p.304

This entrance of married women in the market (most of them were mothers as well) and the fantastic expansion of the superior education composed a perfect setting for the reflourishing of the feminist movements in America after the second half of the twentieth century, or in the words of Eric Hobsbawm himself:

> Na verdade, os movimentos de mulheres são inexplicáveis sem esses acontecimentos. Desde que as mulheres, em tantas partes da Europa e da América do Norte, tinham conseguido o grande objetivo do voto e direitos civis iguais depois da Primeira Guerra Mundial e da Revolução Russa, os movimentos feministas haviam trocado a luz do sol pelas sombras, mesmo onde o triunfo de regimes fascistas e reacionários não os destruíram.[55]

Although all these changes took place in relation to the social role of women in the world and in the United States specifically, the perspective of the male-heterosexual-white mainstream over the female subjectivity was still one of superiority. Women were still regarded, as Simone de Beauvoir uses the term, as the Other[56], that is, a being that exists in relation to, not by itself: an individual subjugated by a force that, through a historical process marked by oppression, achieved supremacy. Such cultural context only stresses the conflict that female individuals, like Laura Brown, undergo, that is, being a productive

[55] HOBSBAWN, E. (2005) p. 306-7
[56] BEAUVOIR, S. (1997) p.16.

individual was not sufficient to guarantee an equal relation between men and women, as otherness is a condition not necessarily related to economical circumstances.

It is exactly at this point that Cunningham's narrative gains in beauty and richness. Laura Brown does not accept nor take for granted the object position that society imposes on her, as a woman and mother. Her narrative opens right on the day of her husband's birthday. The narrator emphasizes how hard Laura thinks the day will be, and also the effort she has to make for very simple movements, like preparing Dan's and Richie's breakfasts. Mrs. Brown hesitates in abandoning her reading of Mrs. Dalloway and attending simple house activities that she was supposed to engage in, as a suburban, middle-class housewife. In this sense, Laura finds in literature her escapism, a solution to deal with a reality she despises. Through fiction, she achieves a parallel world, distant from the imprisonment of the suburban home.

Going down the stairs this same morning to find her husband and her three-year-old son having their breakfast, Laura has a feeling which is described as an old one: she has the impression that she is an actor about to go on stage. However, she is not a capable actor; she feels that she is not appropriate for the role. One may ask which role it is. The answer is simple – conscious of this imperfection, she is not the perfect actress to play the role of Mrs. Brown.

The titles of the chapters (Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Woolf) tell us a lot about the existential condition of these three women. Their first names are not used, but their husband's names. By doing so, Cunningham highlights their object condition, as Beauvoir poses the matter. In social terms, Mrs. Brown is now part of the house furniture, part of her husband's goods. Analyzing her from this perspective, we can have a better understanding of the role played by literature in her claustrophobic reality. As Eliane Berutti states in her article "The Hours: A Queer Reading":

> What is Laura Brown's connection with the other two women, one may ask? To start with Virginia Woolf, the reading of Mrs. Dalloway has filled her difficult day. It would be hard to deny that literature does play an important role in her life since books and characters have more to say to her than the so-called "real life" people. Literature works as a form of escapism from her reality – the difficulty of living in her neat and modern suburban house, of relating to her perfect husband and child.[57]

If we turn our eyes to the theories developed by the Bulgarian psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, we will probably understand Laura's flight through literature better. According to Kristeva, semiotic impulses (language) challenge the order, which is totally symbolic[58]. Following the writings of Lacan, Julia Kristeva understands semiotics as a fluctuation

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[57] BERUTTI, E. (2000) p.4
[58] KRISTEVA, J. (2002) p. 115.

governed by drives and located in childhood, therefore, related to maternity. On the other hand, we have the "symbolic order", whose coherence and linearity are connected with paternal laws; furthermore, the impulses of semiotics would challenge the "symbolic order". In this perspective, Laura's reading of Mrs. Dalloway, while she is a pregnant suburban mother, is a way of defying a norm which is represented by the "symbolic order", according to Kristeva. Virginia Woolf's ability in dealing with a rather fluid way of writing provides Laura with a possibility of relief, as the immersion in Woolf's prose would represent a distress of an order which is symbolic, of a norm which is socially constructed; therefore, a possibility of queering the self, of not submitting to the mainstream society.

One of the most acclaimed contemporary feminist theorists, Luce Irigaray, in her article "Women on the Market" (1993), claims that patriarchal societies are organized having an exchange system as their basis, that is, women are regarded as commodities in a market which is monopolized by males. Irigaray's view over the matter does not go against Beauvoir's; on the contrary, it reinforces the theory of the French feminist. Like Beauvoir, she sees the position of women also object-related, in the sense that female individuality is always referred to masculinity, that is, a subjectivity which does not define itself, but is determined by the existence and by the exertion of power of

masculinity. Laura Brown is not Laura Zielski (her single name), or Miss Zielski. Laura was not given the chance to live according to her own subjectivity. As a woman, her existence would be condemned to dedicate her life to the social commitments she is submitted to.

From my point of view, one of the most touching moments in the narrative is the one in which Laura is trying to make a cake for Dan's birthday. Laura begins her day facing a task which seems to be tremendously hard for her. With Richie's help, which only makes her even more anxious, as her son's presence feeds even more her anguish, Mrs. Brown feels the urge of performing a role she cannot fit in: the one of a housewife. Her first attempt in making the cake failed, as the result is absolutely unsatisfactory. Trying to put herself together, Laura invites her son to make another cake, which is made and decorated with great effort from her part.

My reading of this passage is a metaphorical one: the cake comes to symbolize her life as a wife and mother, that is, her position as an object in the world. Allegorically speaking, the cake is the representation of the place of women in society – a place that Laura refuses to occupy: an object, a commodity. Moreover, Mrs. Brown is very much aware of the fact that she is totally unable to fit in this role, to bake a cake, to be an object. Being helped by her son, Laura tries to convince herself that she is in the right place, that she has the correct life:

> It seems she will be fine. She will not lose hope. She will not mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents (what if she has no talents, after all?). She will remain devoted to her son, her husband, her home and duties, all her gifts. She will want this second child. (p. 79).

Having failed in making a perfect cake for her husband, consequently in being a perfect woman, what would be left to Laura? Locating in the physical sphere a death which was already existentially consumed? Accepting this kind of existence as a condemnation? Or would it be possible to continue, but differently? In this sense, Laura experiences a kiss with her neighbor, Kitty. This kiss may be seen as sexually transgressive, an epiphanic moment in her confined life.

Unlike Laura's bookish and foreign appearance, Kitty has outwardly seemed to embody American ideals of womanhood and family values. Her infertility and acquiescence to Laura's desire, however, belie the simplicity of such concepts. Laura's sense of being foreign, and with a lesbian turn, indicates awareness of her transgression, although she avoids the stigmatization of definition by explaning the embrace as a possibility of experimental simulacra: "This is how a man feels, holding a woman" (p. 109).

According to the Brazilian psychoanalyst and literary critic Malvine Zalcberg, this kiss reveals an attempt of appropriation. Struggling against herself in order to perform the role of a perfect housewife, Laura

sees in Kitty a model that should be internalized by her. In other words, a pattern which, due to her inability to fit in, provides Mrs. Brown with extreme anguish and depression.

> Laura e Kitty são ambas, mulheres atormentadas e abençoadas, cheias de segredos partilhados, empenhando-se sempre: uma e outra se fazendo passar por alguém. Estão extenuadas e cercadas; assumiram uma tarefa tão imensa.... [....] A este eu secreto de uma outra mulher Laura espera ter acesso, e, desesperando-se ante a possibilidade de perdê-la, quando Kitty lhe conta que está se internando no hospital com suspeita de câncer, Laura dá um beijo na boca de Kitty: "você não levou a mal, não, é?" [59]

Following the perspective of the present analysis, I am inclined to disagree with Zalcberg. In my opinion, what Mrs. Brown aims at achieving with this kiss is not the appropriation of the norm, that is, it is not the internalization of a model that her neighbor comes to embody: the perfect, dedicated housewife. Rather on the contrary, as she does in relation to literature, Laura pursues a possibility of evasion, a possibility of experiencing life out of the norm.

An analysis of The Hours indeed suggests that sexuality is too fluid to be determined by fixed labels of identity. The libidinous impulses of the central protagonists whose inner lives are most fully drawn – Woolf, Laura Brown, Clarissa Vaughan and Richard Brown – seem to be the

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[59] ZALCBERG, M. (2003) p.243

least rigidly demarcated. All have experienced same- and opposite-sex desire. Actually, we might argue that it is precisely because their interiors are more comprehensively revealed that we know their desires to be fluid.

What is more, one cannot forget that there is, in fact, in each of the main characters of the novel a fluidity of desire or, as Michel Foucault uses the term in the book História da sexualidade I: a vontade de saber (2003), a plurality of desire. In this same regard, getting physically connected to Kitty would open to Laura a possibility to experiment her own sexuality, to deny her social role as a wife, and mainly, as a mother, for we have to be attentive to the fact that this kiss takes place in the presence of her son Richie, the "unblinking" boy whose presence only feeds Laura's anguish, as if reminding her of the place she should comfortably occupy. Choosing to kiss Kitty in front of the son (as she could have asked him to leave the place, or even not kissed her), Laura erases his existence. Therefore, she also erases in herself the characteristic that, in our Judeo-Christian society, marks mostly a woman, the most solid pillar of our western concept of a familiar nucleus: motherhood.

The theme of motherhood resounds throughout Cunningham's novel, but finds its central construct in pregnant Laura Brown, whose misery stems from the conflicts of being a mother. Laura fears that she

cannot discover her true talents while devoting herself to the norm: to her son, to her family. Like Clarissa Vaughan, Laura is tormented by the perception that others have of her, her marriage especially. Her husband Dan, a World War II veteran who was believed to have died in Japan, "could (in the words of his own alarmed mother) have had anyone" but instead chose her, "the bookworm, the foreign-looking one" (p.40). Laura struggles to make the ordered and harmonious home a war hero deserves; she is taut between the ravenous love her son has for her, Richie; her secret desire to create a perfect home, and a profound despondency. She reads to escape from this anxiety.

Laura thinks about Virginia Woolf's biography: she knows that the British writer had put stones into the pockets of her coat and drowned herself into a river: death seems to Mrs. Brown a good "way out", as the feminist theorist Élène Cixous coined the term[60]. She decides to bake another cake, leave her son with a baby-sitter and embrace suicide. After reading part of the book, she falls asleep and waits for death to come. However, awaken by the intensity of what, in my opinion, can be understood as an epiphanic moment, Mrs. Brown realizes that "it is possible to die" (p.151), the same way it is possible to live. At this precise moment, Laura chooses not only life, but a queer life: a plausible existence out of the norm, or even against it. In a certain

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[60] CIXOUS, E. (1996) p. 154

extent, we, readers, do witness a death in this chapter of the novel; it is Mrs. Brown's death, but not Laura's.

Massaud Moisés conceptualizes epiphany, understanding the term as an aesthetic experience of unveiling, of revelation, or in his own words: "um momento de intensa visão que descortina uma significação muito além do mundo cotidiano da experiência comum"[61]. We, readers, clearly understand the result of this revelation: Laura's next step on her way to the construction of her own self. She does go beyond her existential position as a mother and wife. It happens through queering her existence, through challenging the norm she was submitted to; furthermore, Laura comes to deny a certainty which is taken for granted by the mainstream: only inserted in a familiar context can a woman count on certain security. For Laura, such assertion is not applicable, for it is exactly the pressure of the norm that her son, her husband, her pregnancy, and the entire comfortable suburban context represent that makes her feel insecure, anguished – a dead soul in a living body.

Pursuing a less metaphorical escapism, Laura decides to leave her family and to restart her life in Canada as a librarian. At the end of the narrative, we come to know that she is Richard's mother, Clarissa Vaughan's best friend and previous lover. Richard committed suicide for being tremendously tormented by feelings of failure as a poet and

[61] MOISÉS, M. (2004) p.157

imminent end, since he is infected by HIV, already suffering from the terrible symptoms of the disease.

In this lapse, around fifty years have passed by. The meeting between the two women, Laura and Clarissa, takes place in Clarissa's house, after Richard's funeral. What, we, readers, see in contrast with the anguished and imprisoned woman of the past, is an elderly lady who has saved no efforts to live according to her beliefs, denying the position of an object, of a commodity, of a being with no voice.

> So Laura Brown, the woman who tried to die and failed at it, the woman who fled her family, is alive when all the others, all those who struggled to survive in her wake, have passed away. She is alive now, after her ex-husband has been carried off by liver cancer, after her daughter has been killed by a drunk driver. She is alive after Richard has jumped from a window onto a bed of broken glass. (p.222).

Like Woolf's eponymous character, Clarissa Vaughan, on the other hand, is holding a party. The narrative follows her trajectory through New York's Greenwich Village as she buys flowers for the gathering, echoing the perambulations of Clarissa Dalloway in London's West End. Clarissa's party is not only a celebration for Richard, who has been awarded the Carrouthers, a literary prize for poets, but also the most effective way she finds to escape from her own real conditions. Buying

and arranging the flowers, drawing the placement, cooking the "crab thing", Richard's favorite dish, are Clarissa's major concerns on her day depicted by Cunningham. By doing so, she does not face her inner anguishes: Richard's imminent death, her relational problems with Julia, the problems her relationship with Sally is presenting.

It is exactly to this point that one should be attentive when analyzing Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway, for his character rather resembles Woolf's one in terms of subjectivity and perspective of the world.

Both characters are drawn from very different social eras. Clarissa Vaughan lives in a time of great sexual emancipation in Manhattan at the end of the twentieth century. Comparing Clarissa Dalloway and Clarissa Vaughan, we can notice that some progress in relation to the empowerment of the social place of women clearly took place. In 1920's London, Clarissa Dalloway is a being in relation, that is, socially constructed and determined through her marriage, around the male figure. In 1990's New York, Clarissa Vaughan eventually defines herself: "And here she is, herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore; there's no one now to call her that." (p.226).

Even after all the social movements that took place throughout the twentieth century, Clarissa Vaughan is, in terms of identity, as normative as Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway. Both characters are in a

constant search for inner stability, which seems utopian, taking into consideration their multi-faceted subjectivities. Doing this, Cunningham clearly suggests that social changes do not imply differences in emotional experience.

At this point of this study, the line I shall follow to analyze Clarissa Vaughan and her position in her environment is the one of an anti-queer figure, which would find reflections on her interaction with her familiar structure and experience. Different from Laura Brown, whose attitude is, in my opinion, clearly queer, Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway is strongly submitted to all the demands of the mainstream; a position that can be perceived even more obviously if contrasted with her own daughter, Julia Vaughan.

Right in the first chapter dedicated to Clarissa, the attentive reader gets in contact with strong suggestions of her normativity. As she goes shopping around her neighborhood, she casually meets an old friend, Walter Hardy, an author of gay best-sellers. Clarissa's first reaction is to invite Hardy for the party she is preparing as a tribute to Richard. Through the description of Walter Hardy, we can infer that, though being a homosexual, he does not present strong traces of queerness. Moreover, Hardy is depicted as the exact response to what our contemporary society would expect from a gay man who is beginning to face his own conflicts related to aging. Walter Hardy is

described as the result of the appeals of our mediatic society, that is, the flattening of his own inner life: a man who is in a constant attempt to diminish the damages time makes in people, undergoing a process of alienation and commitment to capitalist values. In this sense, Walter Hardy works as a mirror of dominant voices and established values:

> Little in the world is less mysterious than the disdain people often feel for Walter Hardy, who's elected to turn forty-six in baseball caps and Nikes; who makes an obscene amount of money writing romance novels about love and loss among perfectly muscled young men; who can stay out all night dancing to house music, blissful and inexhaustible as a German shepherd retrieving a stick. You see men like Walter all over Chelsea and the Village, men who insist, at thirty or forty or older, that they have always been chipper and confident, powerful of body; that they've never been strange children, never taunted or despised. (p. 17-18)

Would it be possible to deny that Walter is an automatic response to what society expects from us? Obviously not. Hardy is a mere reflection of some values which are shared by the mainstream, that is, the healthy, handsome and successful man, whose main pursue is the rescue of an idealized youth; the kind of stereotype even more frequent and unquestionably inside his own community: the gay community. Júlio de Assis Simões, analyzing the periods of life (childhood, adolescence

and maturity) of urban gay men, in his article "Homossexualidade masculina e curso de vida: pensando idades e identidades sexuais", describes the impact of the process of aging over the gay communities:

> Um impacto especialmente negativo seria provocado pelas mudanças na aparência física: cabelos grisalhos e rugas podem compor um padrão estético atraente para homens heterossexuais, indicadores de caráter e sucesso; mas entre os homossexuais seriam considerados repulsivos.[62]

Walter does not challenge the norm of his environment. Though openly experiencing his homoerotic condition, the character does not present, in terms of identity, any queer aspect.

Richard Brown despises the confident masculinity which men like Walter incorporate, whose bodies say nothing, but conformity:

> Richard argues that eternally youthful gay men do more harm to the cause than do men who seduce little boys, and yes, it's true that Walter brings no shadow of adult irony or cynicism, nothing remotely profound, to his interest in fame and fashions, the latest restaurant. Yet it is just this greedy innocence Clarissa appreciates. (p.18).

[62] SIMÕES, J. (2004) p. 418

From this quotation, we can see that Richard's idea about homosexuality touches a political sphere and, in this regard, Walter's attitude embodies a complete opposition to Richard's. However, Clarissa and Richard do not share the same ideas in relation to Hardy; the former is, into a certain extent, attracted by Walter's shallowness. Clarissa sees his books neither as intellectual failures nor as corrupted works, but as examples of narratives which could bring some comfort to those who need it.

The image Clarissa has of Walter Hardy differs entirely from the one stated by Richard, which embodies a vivid example of her normativity. Clarissa is as normative as Hardy, for her perspective over homoeroticism does not touch any political aspect of the matter. On the contrary, for this Mrs. Dalloway, every existence should be fulfilled with romance, sacrifice and courage: imagery rather stressed in Hardy's novels; concepts that were taken from the mainstream, from heteronormativity; therefore, anti-queer.

All the three major characters in The Hours are continually thinking about the success and failure in their lives, seeking external indicators that would validate the judgments they make about themselves. Virginia Woolf judges herself on the success of her writing, Mrs. Brown on her cake, and Clarissa on her party. In relation to Clarissa Vaughan, this touchstone exists as a background, that is, in

relation to people who are connected to the media. In Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, this background is represented by people from high-esteemed social classes or by members of the political scenario. By replacing these institutions by the power of image, Cunningham implies a certain criticism against the empowerment of the media that we witness in our contemporary society.

Choosing the flowers that would ornament her gathering, Clarissa and the florist are interrupted by a commotion that takes place in the streets. Not controlling herself, Clarissa tries to identify who the person is and gets completely attracted by the possibility of seeing a movie star. One cannot deny that Hollywood productions are representative of a mass culture, therefore, accepted a priori, established and normative. It is by this idea that Clarissa is attracted. She identifies herself with the norm, that is, with a culture which is produced in the foundations of the mainstream, coming to the point of considering an actress that she sees, but does not recognize, an angel. At this point of the narrative, Cunningham seems playful: in 1997 Vanessa Redgrave performed the title role in the screen adaptation of Mrs. Dalloway (directed by Marleen Gorris).

> Suddenly the door to one of the trailers opens, and a famous head emerges. It is a woman's head, quite a distance away, seen in profile, like the head on a coin,

> and while Clarissa cannot immediately identify her (Meryl Streep? Vanessa Redgrave?) she knows without question that the woman is a movie star. She knows by her aura of regal assurance, and by the eagerness with which one of the prop men speaks to her (inaudibly to Clarissa) about the source of the noise. [...] as if an angel had briefly touched the surface of the world with one sandaled foot [...]. (p.26-27)

However, it is through the appreciation of Clarissa's relationship with her daughter, Julia Vaughan, that the normative characteristics of the former appear more vividly to the reader of The Hours. Mother and daughter present rather distinct perspectives of the world, a clash that should be understood as larger than a mere conflict of generations. If we return to the first chapter dedicated to Clarissa, we can easily point out Clarissa's difficulties in accepting her daughter's anti-normative identity. Clarissa is in doubt about buying or not a black dress that she sees in a shop while crossing the streets to buy flowers. Though Clarissa strongly believes that this would be the most suitable outfit for a young girl like Julia, she knows that her daughter would not wear it.

> Clarissa passes a shop and thinks of buying a dress for Julia, she'd look stunning in that little black one with the Anna Magnani straps, but Julia doesn't wears dresses, she insists on spending her youth, the brief period in which one can wear anything at all, stomping around in

> men's undershirts and leather lace-ups the size of cinder blocks. (Why does her daughter tell her so little? What happened to the ring Clarissa gave her for her eighteenth birthday?) (p.21)

Nothing could be more representative as a standard black dress: sensuality, vanity and youth are the most ordinary characteristics associated with it – everything that is expected from a nineteen-year-old girl. Reproducing values that she internalized from the dominant culture, Clarissa wants to see them repeated on Julia. However, her daughter sees herself and the world around her from a different angle. By her outfit, Julia exteriorizes her identity by challenging the norm, by being queer.

In opposition to Julia's distance in relation to her mother, Cunningham brings into his narrative a peculiar character: Mary Krull, a militant homosexual, professor of Queer Theory in New York University. It is interesting to notice that Julia is much closer to Krull than she is to her own mother. Julia's queer identity finds in Mary Krull a certainty of acceptance, a place of comfort, as both Julia and the queer theorist share the same position in relation to the world.

Eliane Borges Berutti, in her article "The Hours: A Queer Reading", explores an imaginary dialogue between Clarissa and Krull, for both characters personify two opposite perspectives on lesbian social identity.

I consider worth revisiting this imaginary dialogue, in order to establish the contrast between their queer and normative identities:

> 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. (p.160-161)

Clarissa believes that the lesbianism represented by the queer theorist is based on aggressiveness, that is, a veiled desire to shock a society that rejects homosexuality. Clarissa Vaughan does not see Krull's queer attitude as the expression of a subjectivity which, though against the normative, has its rights to exist, but, rather, as a symbol of a despotic position in relation to lesbianism.

On the other hand, Krull's belief that sexual identity is not a private matter but bound up with transformation of society is clearer in the ideas that she has about lesbians like Clarissa:

> Fool, Mary thinks, though she struggles to remain charitable or, at least, serene. No, screw charity. Anything's better than queers of the old school, dressed to pass, bourgeois to the bone, living like husband and wife. Better to be John fucking Wayne, than a well-dressed dyke with a respectable job. (p.160)

Mary's presence is understood by Clarissa as a threat, for it is exactly by the queerness of the former that Julia is attracted. Clarissa's normativity, on the contrary, highlights the difficulties that this mother-daughter relationship already presents. She cannot understand why her daughter is attracted to Krull. While to Clarissa's dismay Julia has adopted the sartorial style demanded by Mary's subcultural status, as there is no suggestion in the narrative that the appeal for Julia is sexual: what Julia and Krull share is identity: a queer one. Though being heterosexual, Julia is a queer figure in the novel, which disturbs Clarissa's movements in adhering to the norm. As the queer theorist Calvin Thomas defines himself in his article "Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality" (1997), it is possible to be "straight with a twist", that is, to be heterosexual and queer. According to the scholar queerness is not a synonym for gayness, which implies a possibility for those who are other-sex oriented to experience an attitude of defiance in relation to the community in which they are inserted.

Since her youth, Clarissa has shown strong normative traces, mainly in relation to her familiar nucleus, or even, in relation to her own potential family as an adult. Thinking about the friendship between Mary and Julia, the image of her father comes to her mind: a republican man (strong symbol of conformity in the American culture), who did not

demonstrate any critical attitude in face of the society from which he came.

> Clarissa's father, gentle almost to the point of translucence, loved seeing women in little black dresses. Her father grew exhausted; he gave up his cogency the way he often gave up arguments because it was easier to agree. (p.24)

Clarissa inherits from her father various character traces, being her normativity the strongest one. Going against the norm is the movement she avoids the most; the only possibility to assure a more comfortable life, that is, the insertion in the mainstream society. Understanding Clarissa's unwillingness to challenge the norm is, in my opinion, fundamental in the sense that her normativity is the center of her personality. Clarissa's choice for a stable familiar experience is a reflection of her anti-queer position in the world. A relationship with Richard Brown would imply the acceptance of a sexual fluidity that Clarissa Vaughan regards as a position too daring to be taken. In this same regard, Sally comes to represent the stability that Clarissa's subjectivity needs to reproduce normative values.

Unlike Laura Brown, whose insertion in the structure of a normative family compelled her to defy this same structure, Clarissa wants to assimilate and reproduce in her lesbian relationship the dominant heterosexual patterns of our society. The same motherhood

that Mrs. Brown had to leave behind in order to survive out of the norm is, for Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway, a vehicle of insertion, that is, of belonging to the norm.

Gay or lesbian couples are not able to produce, by natural means, a baby. If we have in the novel, on one hand, Mrs. Brown anguished with the presence of her son Richie and, moreover, with a undesirable pregnancy, we do have, on the other, Clarrissa's deliberate will to become a mother, that is, to transform a relationship that would be, primarily infertile, to a fertile one. For Clarissa, due to her assimilative, anti-queer subjectivity, constituting a family would represent a possibility of insertion in the mainstream. However, having conceived her daughter through anonymous artificial insemination, Clarissa feels sure that Julia hates her for the denial of a father. Her feeling of guilt is a vivid representation of her need for belonging. Though Clarissa, Sally and Julia can be clearly understood as a family, through Clarissa's eyes it is still a "lacking" experience, for the male figure was left aside.

We can say that an adolescent may require the paternal presence when it lacks in a family, but the turbulence that Clarissa and Julia face when dealing with each other finds its roots in deeper matters: what they do not share is identity. Clarissa's impulses in reproducing normative patterns clash with Julia's queer attitude in relation to herself, to the world, and, moreover, to her own family, coming to the point of

questioning what seems unquestionable in the Vaughan's home – Clarissa's dedication to Richard Brown.

The same Richard that, in childhood, required from the mother an attention and love that would be impossible for her to give; in maturity, now suffering the effects of an advanced stage of infection by HIV, demands from Clarissa the same dedication. However, regarding the position that these women (Laura and Clarissa) take in relation to Richard Brown, there is a huge difference. Richard works for Clarissa, as the party she is preparing does as well, as an attempt to escape from her own questionings, and therefore, from a possibility of challenging the normative life she leads. Nursing Richard made her not analyze her present circumstances, turning her thoughts always to the past, as if the present were unchangeable, unquestionable, unchallengeable. Opening to individuals the possibility of challenging present circumstances is the backbone of queerness; the possibility that Clarissa escapes from.

At this point, it is worth questioning Clarissa's relationship with Richard during their youth. Richard, Clarissa and Louis experienced a triangular relationship when they were undergraduates, in Wellfleet. In Cunningham's novel, this site of adult memories of youthful possibilities surely gains in irony, for being Wellfleet so geographically close to Provincetown, the Cape Cod town which welcomes gays and lesbians, and accommodates alternative arrangements.

> Clarissa, being the youngest, the only woman, felt she could afford a certain sentimentality. If it was late June, she and Richard would have been lovers. It would have been almost a full month since Richard left Louis's bed (Louis the farm-boy fantasy, the living embodiment of lazy-eyed carnality) and came into hers. (p.11)

In Clarissa's mind, this romantic summer she spent with Richard is always recollected in a strongly melancholic tone. She refers to it as a time of possibilities, that is, a time of daring experiences, of renewal and discoveries; her deepest wishes, tangible – what she herself defines as happiness: "it was happiness (...) Now she knows: That was the moment, right then. There has been no other." (p.98).

Late in the narrative, we know that Richard proposed to Clarissa, to which she declined. For clear reasons, the reader begins to speculate the motives that led Clarissa not to accept Richard as a husband, therefore, to deny to herself the possibility to experience a feeling that she defined as very close to a stage of pure happiness.

Richard's proposal found in Clarissa's normativity its main obstacle. The experience seemed plausible for a summer, but not for an entire life. When choosing to live exclusively as a lesbian, Cunningham's Dalloway could transpose to the homosexual sphere a familiar pattern that she assimilated from the mainstream culture. Living maritally with

Richard would imply a queerness her assimilative subjectivity could not afford.

Living a long-term relationship with Sally as well as transforming herself into a mother are ideas that bring to Clarissa a fantasy of belonging, that is, an illusion of inclusion into the dominant culture. It is inserted in a structure whose pattern comes from the heterocentric world that she can move in a safer way. The summer experience in Wellfleet was just for a summer indeed.

As one can easily point out, Clarissa is a complex being, full of doubts and regrets; however, with a clear certainty: the rejection of a queer life. In this sense, Cunningham's ability to update Virginia Woolf's novel – Mrs. Dalloway – achieves, in my opinion, a level of mastery, for both Clarissas mirror each other in terms of their identity: an identity entirely committed to the demands of the norm.

Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan are characters that in a primary analysis could be understood as reflecting each other. However, this mirror between the two distorts its images the moment the reader of The Hours is aware of the fact that not everything in a literary work lies on the surface. In terms of plot, the two narratives converge, but they diverge a lot if we are attentive to the subjectivities which each of the female characters come to expose.

There is no argument against the fact that the familiar experience is one of the main concerns in Cunningham's writing. In Laura Brown's chapters, we are invited to get into the mind of a woman whose most pursued experience is the possibility of queering her existence through the denial of the idea that a woman could only exist in reference to a family, to a home. Nevertheless, Clarissa's desire is on the opposite side, for she regards the norm as a site of security and comfort.

These matters, lyrically depicted by Cunningham, do not approach the political pamphlet. Again being trustful to his muse Clarissa Dalloway, the author takes a life-affirming attitude, for both Laura and Clarissa, though so different in terms of identity, are the ones who survive at the end of the narrative. Their meeting after Richard's funeral arises in us the same feeling Clarissa Dalloway experiences in her last scenes during her party: a sensation that no life is ordinary.

In the next chapter, my analysis shall concentrate on the representations of the AIDS epidemic present in the novel. It seems important to state here that the treatment of the disease in this thesis is not a scientific one. Rather, Richard's infection will be discussed in its allegorical dimension, articulating my reading of the novel with theoretical concepts, which were previously conceptualized in the second chapter of this study.

IV. DISCUSSING THE EPIDEMIC

In the previous chapter, considerations about queerness in the novel were traced with a particular focus on the characters Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan in relation to their familiar experiences, as well as the way the two perceive the realities in which they are inserted. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, my appreciation of the novel shall be based on the themes Michael Cunningham himself acknowledges his readers to consider as the major ones in his writing: contemporary forms of familiar experience and the impact of the AIDS epidemic. Following this perspective, in this chapter, I shall discuss the epidemic and its representations in the novel. For that, my analysis will be mostly focused on Richard Brown, as he is the major HIV-positive character in the narrative, and his relationship with Clarissa Vaughan and Louis Walter.

Accordingly, it sounds necessary to me that, for a consistent understanding of how Cunningham handles the theme in his literary work, one should revisit some aspects related to the disease itself: its most characteristic symptoms, as well as society's attitude towards the HIV-positive individual. Moreover, as previously posed in the theoretical chapter of this thesis, following Susan Sontag's steps, one should be

attentive to the fact of how intensely our society has associated AIDS with the idea of punishment and, therefore, how gay individuals have been constantly pointed out as the ones to blame for the emergence of the epidemic.

One cannot deny the fact the AIDS epidemic has put into discussion some topics related to sexuality, making the debate around homoeroticism freer from previous taboos which it was attached to. Although this may be considered by some theorists one of the deepest impacts caused by AIDS, it is not the only one to be highlighted in this chapter. The disease has also put an end to a process which finds its roots in the movements of the 60s and of the 70s – a process that pointed to some relaxation of the sexual norms.

Throughout the 1970s, American gay men were experiencing a singular moment of sexual liberation, after long fights for their rights in the 1960s, which led the movement to the Stonewall riots in New York, 1969. For instance, male bath houses were spread all over big cities, mainly in New York and San Francisco.

By the beginning of the 1980s, American and European physicians had to face a mysterious illness which was hard to be fought against with the use of ordinary antibiotics. Actually, it was not exactly a disease, but a collection of diseases which appeared as a consequence of the loss of the body natural defenses. In reality, a syndrome, whose

most remarkable epidemiologic characteristic was the fact that its victims were mainly, and almost exclusively, gay men. Scientific journals from all over the world presented cases of young gay men who were tremendously weakened by simple pneumonias. Many others presented a rare kind of skin cancer: the Kaposi's sarcoma. Their mouths and lungs were constantly dominated by all kinds of fungus and microorganisms which devastated the bodies of their rotten victims. Because of its victims, the syndrome was primarily identified in scientific magazines as Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID). In the common media, the name would be transformed into "gay disease" or "gay cancer".

For those doctors who worked in areas with a large concentration of homosexuals, like the Greenwich Village and Castro, the plurality of sexual partners of their patients was not new information, as the presence of venereal diseases among them was highly frequent. However, for most scientists who were first entering the gay world, such characteristic of these patients was enough to a general judgment of homosexuals as promiscuous and, what is more, agents of death.

In some public medical centers, doctors and nurses, terrified with the devastating consequences of the HIV infection and, moreover, aware of its most powerful contaminating vehicle (sexual practices), began calling the disease as "The Wrath of God", highlighting its punishing

aspect in relation to those who do not fit in a society rigidly marked by a heterocentric frame.

The literary critic Elaine Showalter, in her book Anarquia sexual: sexo e cultura no fin de siècle, establishes a parallel between the AIDS epidemic and its impact in the twentieth century scenario and syphilis in relation to the end of the nineteenth century. AIDS, says Showalter, emerged in 1981, after a decade of intense social and sexual changes in the American society. These same changes, including some acceptance of homoerotic behavior, were regarded by the most conservative extracts of society as corrupted and immoral. Previously called, in a very much derogatory tone, WOGS (Wrath of God Syndrome), AIDS has been constantly associated with a punishment for unnatural sex, a "gay cancer", as the term was used by the beginning of the 80s, which would show men all the consequences of a corrupted life.

Another undeniable impact which was generated by AIDS in the gay community is that the disease turned out to be an issue that mobilized entirely a sense of gay identity. The AIDS epidemic cannot be understood as something detached from the so-called "gay culture", nor should its effects over the attitude of the mainstream in relation to homoeroticism be minimized, in the sense that it has, unfortunately, been used as a reinforcement of prejudice and judgmental ideas. If before the emergence of AIDS, gays were seen as promiscuous, or even

dangerous to the social-body health, after its emergence, things got even worse. I make mine the lines of Elaine Showalter:

> Ela [a AIDS] não pode ser compreendida isolada nem da cultura gay do final do século XX nem da homofobia que sempre visualizou o homossexualismo como doença. Como comenta Dennis Altman, "é difícil falar do impacto da AIDS sem mencionar as mudanças nas percepções dos homossexuais, tão entrelaçadas estão as duas na imaginação do público".[63]

As result of this, what we see in America during the 1980s is the flourishing of movements of activism, like ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). In a text entitled "Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement 'Newness'", Joshua Gamson analyses these organizations. First in New York City, and after in many other cities in the United States, these centers claim for the rights of patients who were tested positive and of those who were already diagnosed with AIDS, fighting for, among many other things, treatment opportunities and also for funds directed to scientific research. However, Gamson poses a question that sounds very much pertinent: against whom are these movements fighting? The author himself provides the answer: against an enemy which is not one.

[63] SHOWALTER, E. (1993) p. 249.

To begin with, we cannot forget the fact that the beginning of the epidemic took place in a very much conservative political period in the American history (during Reagan and Bush governments). Both administrations were amazingly inattentive to the epidemic, coming to the point that its existence was only officially admitted by President Ronald Reagan after the death of over 20,000 people[64]. Accordingly, it seems obvious that one of the main obstacles that this fight against prejudice had to face was the State itself. Secondly, a less concrete, but as hazardous enemy: "the process of normalization"[65], that is, the cultural-historical process whose main vector goes in the direction of punishing those who do not fit in the socially prescribed rules.

Roberto Machado, in his introduction to Microfísica do Poder also calls attention to this process of normalization:

> Não se explica inteiramente o poder quando se procura caracterizá-lo por sua função repressiva. O que lhe interessa basicamente não é expulsar os homens da vida social, impedir o exercício, e sim gerir a vida dos homens, controlá-los em suas ações para que seja possível e viável utilizá-los ao máximo, aproveitando suas potencialidades e utilizando um sistema de aperfeiçoamento gradual e contínuo de suas capacidades.[66]

One may likewise connect Machado's ideas with Showalter's. The syphilis terror was, in the nineteenth century, used as a tool to control

[64] GAMSON, J. (1998) p.341.
[65] GAMSON J. (1998) p.343.
[66] MACHADO, R. (2004) p. XVI.

some sexual practices that challenged social interests, mainly embodied by some institutions, like religion and monogamous marriage. Literature came to represent this terror, and many times, in a critical way, as we see in Ghosts. In the play, Ibsen's ghosts refer not only to syphilis as a disease inherited from parental boundaries, but it also makes reference to our bourgeois morality as a social illness.

Syphilis is not a mystery in medical sciences any longer. Besides, in terms of literary representation, it has been long overshadowed by other themes. The terror we have to face today, and literature mirrors it, is the AIDS one: an epidemic that made society, in my opinion, put aside many conquests from previous decades. An epidemic whose reactions own much more to its association with what is considered "deviant behavior" than to medical knowledge itself.

Susan Sontag publishes Illness as Metaphor in 1984, in which she discusses some metaphorical interpretations generally connected with plagues and illnesses in the Western World, from ancient times up to modernity. In her work, it seems rather clear to us that the more scientifically mysterious a disease is, the more our culture provides this same disease with metaphorical interpretations generally related to punishment, as well as the understanding of its victims as morally corrupted and, therefore, condemnable.

In the late 1980s, when the amount of HIV/AIDS victims grew tremendously, Sontag feels the necessity to retake her research on metaphors and illnesses in another work: AIDS and its Metaphors (1988). In this book Sontag poses the fact that society regards the AIDS epidemic through eyes that are filtered by a net of moral, ethical and political concepts, whose main force points to an adherence to strong conservative and normative values, taking a step backwards in relation to the loss of certain barriers experienced by the combative generation of the 1960s and 1970s: the private sphere, more than ever, is now of public interest as well. According to Sontag:

> A idéia de que as doenças sexualmente transmissíveis não eram graves chegou ao apogeu na década de 1970, época em que muitos homossexuais masculinos passaram a se considerar membros de uma espécie de grupo étnico, cujo costume folclórico era a voracidade sexual, e as instituições da vida homossexual nas cidades transformaram-se num sistema de consumo sexual, de velocidade de eficiência e volume inauditos. O medo da AIDS torna obrigatória a moderação do apetite sexual, e não apenas para os homossexuais. Nos Estados Unidos, o comportamento sexual anterior a 1981 agora parece, para a classe média, parte de uma era de inocência perdida – onde inocência significa licenciosidade, é claro. Após duas décadas de esbanjamento sexual, de especulação sexual, de inflação sexual,

> encontramo-nos no início de uma época de depressão sexual.[67]

Susan Sontag states that the epidemic beats the position previously occupied by cancer (main focus of her former essay) in terms of stigmatization of its victims, as it is an epidemic and, moreover, invariably lethal. The main metaphor elicited by the essayist is the one that understands the HIV infection as a plague, that is, a synonym for evil, a punishment for those who challenge the social normative structure to which all of us are, a priori, submitted.

In my reading of the novel, Cunningham does make use of a metaphorical construction to discuss the AIDS epidemic in The Hours, giving his readers the idea that the plague can be read as a solid symbol of a decadent reality. As literary discourse is metaphorized in its essence (idea which is defended by the Brazilian critic Marcelo Secron Bessa in his book Histórias positivas: a literatura (des)construindo a AIDS), Cunningham constructs a representational net around the epidemic in his text which comes to reinforce its artistic nature. Furthermore, the "metaphorical infections"[68] present in The Hours, which are inherent to literary language itself, end up highlighting the idea that each discourse on AIDS uses the epidemic in accordance with the underlying goals this same discourse aims at achieving, or as Secron Bessa states in his

[67] SONTAG, S. (1989) p. 90-91.
[68] BESSA, M. (1997) p. 31.

Histórias positivas: "cada linguagem, ou melhor, cada discurso, encontrará uma AIDS apropriada ao que se quer."[69]

In face of this, the presence of the disease in The Hours is literarily used by Michael Cunningham not attached to the images Sontag analyses in her essay, which have been used to reinforce prejudice, but it works as a parallel with Virginia Woolf's mental instability. Richard and other minor characters who are infected are not presented as morally corrupt nor socially punished. Rather, the disease is depicted to contextualize and symbolize Richard's personal fragmentation, as well as the same fragmentation experienced by the generation he belongs to.

One should be attentive to the fact that much of what we know about Richard comes from the voices of Clarissa and Louis Walter, his former lovers. In this sense, it seems obvious that point of view plays a very important role here, as Richard's voice is absolutely committed to his rotten state of mind.

The time Clarissa spent with Richard, when both were undergraduates, is depicted, through Clarissa's voice, in a very much idealized tone. Together with Louis Walter, Clarissa and Richard lived a threesome relationship during a summer they spent in Wellfleet. Richard alternated his nights with Clarissa and Louis. At this point of my

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[69] BESSA, M. (1997) p. 31.

discussion, it is worth mentioning that Clarissa, at the present moment, is fifty-two. If we take into consideration the fact that the narrative takes place by the end of the twentieth century – "It is New York City. It is the end of the twentieth century" –, it is easy to infer that these three characters spent their summer in Wellfleet by the middle of the 1960s, a time of social challenge and experimentation.

In The Hours, Clarissa's perspective over her own past sounds very idealized. It is in her youth, in the 1960s, that she locates her perfect moments. Her thoughts, turned to Wellfleet, transcend her present, and orient her to elements that her present reality does not have. But, one should ask, what is her present reality? A present absolutely related to Richard Brown and his decadence, that is, the opposite of her promising past; a present marked by loss, ruin and uneasiness.

Clarissa's reality is the reality of the "broken dream". Though she tries to escape from this atmosphere of depression by throwing a lavish party for Richard, or even in her flashbacks, through which she attempts at reestablishing a connection to a perfect summer she had when she was eighteen, nothing can stop the miserable conditions of Richard.

Going to Richard's apartment, Clarissa passes through the neighborhood which had once been the epicenter of all the excitement of the 60s and 70s: "the center of something new and wild" (p.51). Her

short walk transmits to us a picture of the West Village in the late twentieth century. Her present West Village echoes Clarissa Dalloway's Westminster with a momentary snobbishness as she considers that "the neighborhood today is an imitation of itself, a watered-down carnival for tourists" (p.52). In opposition, this area of Manhattan was, in the 1960s, a site of dissidence, of queerness: the precise inversion of its normative aspects of today.

Moreover, it was right in one of the streets of West Village that Clarissa Vaughan lived what she seems to consider one of the most striking moments in her personal life: the day Richard proposed to her. Richard's promise of love represents all the promises that youth days seemed to keep at that moment. The contemporary West Village turned out to be a place to encounter stories of personal tragedies, as we hear of the abeyance of Evan's declining t-cell count in a meeting with Walter Hardy, and learn that Barbara, the flower shop owner, has failed in her career as an opera singer and escaped breast cancer.

Now, instead of social and personal excitement, Clarissa is about to drown herself in an environment of helplessness, ruin and decadence. Richard's building is depicted as the extension of his own physical and mental fragmentation. His disease has developed into some mental disorder as well, and his place reflects it.

Clarissa herself is still surprised with the aspect of the building and it is interesting to notice how the adjectives used to describe it are totally applicable to Richard Brown himself. His fragility finds echo in the squalidness of the vestibule of the building: "At Richard's building she lets herself in through the vestibule door and thinks, as she always does, of the word "squalid"" (p.53). Richard's paleness also finds reflection in the vestibule, as the walls are described as "as faded yellow-beige walls" (p.53), and mostly highlighted, the difference from what the place is in the present and how it was in the past, establishing a parallel with Richard himself. A place that promised more, an encouraging setting: "[...] hopes were nurtured here; that upon entering the lobby people were expected to feel as if they were moving in an orderly fashion into a future that held something worth having." (53-4). Richard also had a promising future as an artist, coming to the point of being awarded with the Carrouthers Prize. However, not only AIDS does not leave a door open to the completion of his talents, but mainly the idea Richard has of himself as a failure. Like the building, the poet is undergoing a movement downwards, which only finds its end with his suicide.

This atmosphere of uneasiness and despair is even sharper in his apartment, where his armchair is described as an extension of his loss and insanity:

> Richard's chair, particularly, is insane; or rather, it is the chair of someone who, if not actually insane, has let things slide so far, has gone such a long way toward the exhausted relinquishment of ordinary caretaking – simple hygiene, regular nourishment – that the difference between insanity and hopelessness is difficult to pinpoint. (p.58)

Due to AIDS infection, the young, impetuous man has been transformed into a cadaverous figure. What is more, as a poet, one of Richard's most highlighted characteristic – his intellect, his privileged mind – is now into a process of decline and apocalyptic end. Richard used, in the past, the word "genius" to define himself: "I thought I was a genius. I actually used that word, privately to myself" (p.65). The self-confident poet of the past is, in the present, portrayed as someone who gets totally terrified by figures of monsters and imaginary creatures. He lives in a parallel world of madness and that only exists in this same mind that once was so self-assured.

In fact, for the dying man, time is becoming a merely physical experience. While his "muscles and organs have been revived" (p.56) by new drugs, his mind is a chaos of voices startled by moments of lucidity. Some of the voices even appear to be Woolf's; he speaks some parts of her suicide note before he dies. Aware that his body endures while his

mind deteriorates, Richard is afraid because soon meaningless time, blank hours, will be all he has: "One and then another, and you get through that one and then, my god, there's another" (197-8). He has no future: as his mind disintegrates, his existence can only be corporeal – he will become simply an object.

Fragmented as he is, Richard cannot separate the past, present and future, nor distinguish temporal or physical space in language. Soon as no more than a breathing body, incapable of coherent thought and expression, he will only exist in a continuous present. His bold recognition that he has only the present hours left prompts his suicide: he can no longer author a single coherent narrative.

There are moments in the story when Richard appears to be already living a perpetual present. His love affair with Clarissa has shaped both their lives. He talks to her of a poignant moment:

> "You kissed me beside a pond."
> "Ten thousand years ago."
> "It's still happening."
> "In a sense, yes."
> "In reality. It's happening in that present. This is happening in this present" (p.66)

Clarissa attributes Richard's confusion of time and space to his tiredness and medication; however, his disorientation raises questions about the demarcations of narrative for us, readers. The continuous

separate presents he imagines – "that present...this present..." (p.66) – may be different narratives of his life; the one he lived, the one he had hoped for, the novel he wrote about Clarissa, and Mrs. Dalloway, the novel he imagined her living.

Right after Louis Walter left her apartment, Clarissa begins recollecting, once again, this summer they spent in Wellflet:

> It had seemed like the beginning of happiness, and Clarissa is still sometimes shocked, more than thirty years later, to realize that it was happiness; that the entire experience lay in a kiss and a walk, the anticipation of dinner and a book. [...] What lives undimmed in Clarissa's mind more than three decades later is a kiss at dusk on a patch of dead grass, and a walk around a pond as mosquitoes droned in the darkening air. There is still that singular perfection, and it's perfect in part because it seemed, at the time, so clearly to promise more. Now she knows: That was the moment, right then. There has been no other. (p.98)

In Clarissa's mind, this romantic summer she spent with Richard is always recollected in a very much melancholic tone. She refers to it as a time of possibilities, that is, a time in which everything seemed to be possible; her deepest wishes, tangible – what she herself defines as happiness. Clarissa regards her youth through a melancholic perspective. Her "best world' was not only thinkable, but possible.

Clarissa places her past pictures in her youth, when experiencing a sexual fluidity with Richard and Louis. At this point, it is interesting to notice that the most highlighted event in Clarissa's memory is exactly being kissed by Richard, who had a stable partner at the moment, Louis. It is the kiss, a recurrent symbol in the narrative, which best embodies her idea of affection.

One cannot forget that Richard Brown has been Louis's partner; therefore, clearly characterized by a homoerotic desire. Clarissa's insertion in such relationship can be understood as a rather queer attitude, as she was not only daring our social heterocentric frame, but also putting at stake the idea of monogamy, center of our Western ideal of relationships.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Clarissa's normative identity is the shaper of her attitudes and behavior. By locating her ideal of happiness in a fluid sexual experience she had in the past, the character admits her own inability to be queer. Her potential queerness belongs to her utopian past, as it is only inserted in a stable and normative context that she can handle her reality, which tremendously differs from the expectations she had in Wellfleet.

> It was 1965; love spent might simply engender more of the same. It seemed possible, at least. Why not have sex with everybody, as long as you wanted them and

> they wanted you? So Richard continued with Louis and started up with her as well, and it felt right; simply right (p. 96).

Clarissa, in a very peculiar historical moment, contextualized in the challenging environment of her generation, had the chance to queer her existence. However, her normative traces are the ones that prevail in her maturity.

Commenting on the relationship the three of them had in Wellfleet, Louis admits that he could not handle his jealousy: "I tried to be good. I tried to be open and free." (p.131). So common among young people in the previous decades, relationships like the one they had only proved to be an attempt. Furthermore, with all the changes that sexual behavior had to operate during the AIDS era, those experiences only survive in the minds of those who have lived it.

Even in relation to Louis Walter, we can see the clash between present and past. Richard's most recent book, a long novel that has Clarissa as its muse, has only one short scene about Louis. He, who in the past spent so many years as Richard's lover, is in the present assigned to brief lines in a book.

> All those years with Richard, all that love and effort, and Richard spends the last years of his life writing about a woman with a town house on West Tenth Street. Richard produces a novel that mediates exhaustively

> on a woman (a fifty-plus-page chapter on shopping for nail polish, which she decides against!) and old Louis W. is relegated to the chorus. (p. 126).

What is even more interesting in Cunningham's exploitation of the theme is that the novelist does not associate AIDS infection with homoeroticism. Richard has lived a gay life, obviously, but the narrative presents us some other gay characters who do not suffer from the disease. Walter Hardy, a friend Clarissa runs into when going to the florist, is a symbol of health and wellness. In addition to it, Hardy's lover, Evan, is infected. Differently from Richard, Evan, who is making use of the cocktail, is in much better health conditions, and is even planning to go dancing in the same evening Clarissa is throwing her party. Cunningham presents a character that, though HIV positive, is clearly more life-affirming than Richard is, which leads us to the conclusion that living with AIDS is also possible:

> "He's feeling so much better on this new cocktail, he says he wants to go dancing tonight."
> "Isn't that a little much?"
> "I'll keep an eye on him. I won't let him overdo it. He just wants to be out in the world again." (p. 16)

Even more interesting in Cunningham's fiction is the fact that by presenting a couple composed by partners who do not share the same

serology, the author makes AIDS lose its character of gay condemnation, so frequent by the beginning of the epidemic.

Although the aim of this thesis is not a comparative analysis between Woolf's and Cunningham's works (but an analysis of how the latest deals with the two themes that compose the pillars of his writing: familiar experiences and the AIDS epidemic), it seems inevitable to me to mention and to take into consideration the intrinsic relationship between The Hours and Mrs. Dalloway.

In The Hours, Michael Cunningham interweaves aspects of Woolf's life, her novel, and her theories. Although the rewritten story of Mrs. Dalloway is only one third of the triplet composing The Hours, the concerns of Woolf's novel – sex and love, sanity, madness, suicide, political power, the city – permeate beyond the explicit parallels detailed in the narrative, from and into the sections dedicated both to "Mrs. Brown" and to "Mrs. Dalloway."

The character pairings not only occur between Mrs. Dalloway and the "Mrs. Dalloway" sections but across all the three narratives ("Mrs. Dalloway", "Mrs. Woolf", "Mrs. Brown"). The formal and semantic similarities between the two novels as well as character duplication encourage and direct the reader to make these comparisons. For example, in writing a novel about the woman that he has re-christened "Mrs. Dalloway", we are invited to read Richard Brown as doubling

Virginia Woolf – herself a character in Cunningham's novel. Cunningham relates that when in an early stage of writing Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf planned that her heroine would commit suicide. But in Cunningham's fiction, following an afternoon of quietly blissful contentment with her sister, nephews and niece, Woolf decides that Mrs. Dalloway – and by implication she herself at this moment – could not bear to leave all this. Cunningham thus presents a fictionalized Woolf as the original holder of this life-affirming philosophy, which is shared by both Clarissas.

However, in Richard Brown's novel the character based around Clarissa Vaughan (whose name is not disclosed) apparently does die by her own hand, the same way Richard commits suicide. In this sense, one may say that a familiarity with Woolf's novel thus generates crucial questions about characters in The Hours and, more specifically, about Richard's suicide, as it mirrors the same tragical deaths experienced by Virginia Woolf, Septimus Smith, and the muse of his novel. With this in mind, one may easily arrive at the conclusion that Richard's death mirrors and retakes Woolf's own suicide: the poet and the novelist, in Cunningham's novel, are the ones who do not bear their realities, whose minds and bodies reflect the idea both share of themselves, that is to say, an idea of ruin and personal collapse.

When Clarissa goes to Richard's place to pick him up for the party, she finds him sitting on the windowsill. Richard is absolutely unable to

see himself as a valuable poet. Instead, he judges himself a fraud, as Virginia Woolf did, which led her to embrace suicide. Both artists have the feeling of incompletion in relation to their works and, moreover, to their personal lives. In the novel, it is clear the way Richard sees the Carrouthers not as a prize awarded for his career as poet, but for the fact that he is HIV-positive and suffering the hardest symptoms of the disease.

> I got a prize for my performance, you must know that. I got a prize for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it, it had nothing to do with my work. (p.62-3)

As Eliane Borges Berutti states in her article "The Hours: a Queer Reading": "He feels he has failed in his life; a careful reader may see that he shares the same emotion that overtakes Virginia Woolf in the prologue."[70]

Understanding Richard's reasons to commit suicide as only related to his physical agony is, in my opinion, a simplification of the character's complexity. Although the text does not present explicit reasons for this feeling of failure that haunts the mind of the poet, it does bring some information between the lines that are interesting to be analyzed.

The last conversation between Clarissa and Richard is about the summer spent in Wellfleet. Richard calls Clarissa's attention to the fact

[70] BERUTTI, E. (2000) p.3.

he had never seen anything as beautiful "as the sight of you [Clarissa] walking out a glass door in the early morning, still sleepy, in your underwear" (p. 199). This beauty Richard locates in this particular morning is the source of his poetry. Richard's search for unlimited love and the beauty he sees in it is, in fact, his main motivation to live and, therefore, the leitmotif of his writing.

Richard's attempt to experience unlimited love, represented in the novel by the triangular relationship with Louis and Clarissa, is, in my reading of the novel, the compensation in his young adulthood of the same feeling of incompletion which permeated his mind in relation to his mother, Laura Brown, when he was still little Richie.

At this point, it is mandatory to state that it would be of no difference if Clarissa had accepted his proposal, as Richard's demands for love and care belong to the sphere of the impossibility. His personality was shaped by his needy existential position in face of Laura, who was clearly unable to fulfill Richard's emotional needs, due to her queerness and incompatibility with the experience of motherhood. This feeling of incompletion, the locus from which his art comes, is only aggravated by the effects of the disease, as it is precisely his mind – the epicenter of the life of an artist - the organ most affected by the virus.

The existing relationship between Richard's eternal search for love and his poetry is so close, that some of his last sentences before death

are even ambiguous, letting the reader in doubt whether his words are in reference to his literary work or to the experience in Wellfleet.

> I just feel so sad. What I wanted to do seemed simple. I wanted to create something alive and shocking enough that it could stand beside a morning in somebody's life. The most ordinary morning. Imagine, trying to do that. What foolishness. (p. 199)

Richard's emotional frustration in relation to his dreams of fluid and infinite love is the same frustration he feels in regard to his career as a literate, as his poems are the externalization of his anguishes, that is, they are a metaphor, a symbolic representation, of his failure as a "loving human being".

Richard Brown, who in childhood begged for maternal love and attention, believed that through queerness he would achieve some personal fulfillment, that is, that experiencing unlimited love he could get healed from old wounds that the abandonment of his mother left in him. A fragmented heart, feelings shared with Clarissa and Louis, were still not enough and, even, impossible in the monolithical sexual frame of the normative world, mainly reinforced by the emergence of the HIV/ AIDS epidemic.

It is interesting to notice how Cunningham, in Richard's suicide scene, still makes use of Woolf's text (Mrs. Dalloway), as her character

Septimus Smith commits suicide the same way Richards does. Moreover, Richard's last words are the same Virginia Woolf writes to Leonard in the prologue to The Hours: "I don't think two people could have happier than we've been" (p.200), which makes even clearer the underlying comparison between the characters.

What one can clearly say concerning the way Cunningham deals with the theme of AIDS is that the author does not approach the subject without commitment. On the contrary, AIDS is used as a symbol of something broader: of the decadence of a society that does not find anything else to fight for; that has lost, within the interval of one single generation, its patterns and ideologies. The epidemic in the novel is used as a background for the discussion of the human condition and, what is more, for the appreciation of the anguishes of a soul: a man who tried to use his artistic talent as a possibility of finding some comfort in life, but failed in it.

Through the reading of The Hours, we realize that once more literature can make use of any social issue to fulfill its expectations: to generate beauty, to trigger discussions, to enlarge our understanding of what surrounds us. Michael Cunningham, although dealing with such tough matters, leaves us a positive message: surviving is always possible, as Clarissa and Laura did.

V. STATING MY LAST WORDS

It is a fitting irony that The Hours, a novel which is, among many other things, about a writer who wins a prestigious award, should be granted two significant literary accolades: the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/ Faulkner Award. The latter, a prize established by writers to honor their peers, is testimony to the critical acclaim of fellow novelists; The Hours spent weeks on the best seller lists at the time of publication, after the prizes, and upon the release of Stephen Daldry's 2002 filmic adaptation.

In this regard, one may ask the reasons for a work that deals with rather tough and uneasy themes to have such a positive reception. In order to answer a question like this, we should be attentive to some of the novel characteristics, as well as to Cunningham's own intentions in writing The Hours. Consequently, the novelist's propositions for the reading of his work were used in this thesis as the major themes to be analyzed in the narrative: contemporary familiar experiences and the impact of the AIDS epidemic.

As the novel is composed by the intertwining of three narratives which have as their central figures feminine characters, my choice was to compare and contrast the subjective constructions of two of these

characters (Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan) in order to discuss their perceptions of the world, which find reflections on the way they experience familiar issues. Moreover, as these narratives are temporarily located in different time frames, a comparative analysis between Laura and Clarissa, who are contextualized in the second half of the twentieth century, made possible the problematization of some of the changes, mainly those related to sexuality, society has been going through since the World War II.

Since my first reading of The Hours, Laura's existential position as an "outsider" came vividly to me, in contrast with Clarissa's movements to feel inserted in the mainstream culture. In this sense, as Cunningham is, in my reading of his work, dealing with identities that diverge exactly in terms of challenging or not the normative society, the text brings elements that make an articulation with some concepts that come from the theoretical legacy of Queer Theory.

With this in mind, Laura Brown was characterized as a queer figure. Her queerness comes exactly from the character's attitude and interaction with her familiar context. Following the postulates of queer theorists who do not understand queerness as synonym for homosexuality, which is exactly the case of Laura Brown, as her erotic desire seems too fluid to be labeled as same-sex oriented, my queer

understanding of her came from the analysis of her position against and outside the protection of the norm.

Laura's queerness gains in intensity if one takes into consideration the fact that her anguish finds its origins exactly in the performance of her familiar attributions, which were mandatory for women who lived in the America of the 1950s. Her tense relation with her son Richie, as well as her dissatisfaction with her pregnancy are, in my opinion, the most solid elements that support a queer analysis of her personality, as the denial of motherhood is considered almost inhuman in a society that thinks female parentage in terms of "maternal instinct".

In relation to Clarissa Vaughan, my main objective was her characterization as a normative subjectivity and, therefore, an anti-queer figure. Clarissa's search for shelter in the norm is present in many aspects of her biography and inner life. As an open lesbian who lives in the gay neighborhood of New York City, Clarissa counts on all the elements to be understood as a queer person. However, Cunningham's construction of his Mrs. Dalloway reproduces, sometimes even explicitly, all the normative traces of Virginia Woolf's character.

Clarissa also reflects her normativity in relation to her familiar nucleus, as she tries to bring into this experience crucial values from the heterocentirc culture. Living with her partner Sally for almost twenty years, she feels the illusion of protection and security that long-term

relationships bring to individuals. What is more, having recurred to medical technology to have a baby, Clarissa brings to her ideal home the possibility of fertility, which comes to be the absolute opposition to Laura's movements, who sees in maternity a source of anguish and frustration.

In reference to the presence of the AIDS epidemic in The Hours, my reading of it was a metaphorical one, with a focus on Richard Brown, the major HIV-positive character in the novel, and his relationships with Clarissa Vaughan and Louis Walter. Nevertheless, some historical and political aspects of the disease were taken into account, so that my analysis could be inserted in its proper context.

Accordingly, Cunningham establishes a clear parallel between Richard, who is neurologically affected by the virus, and Virginia Woolf, whose mental disorder led her to commit suicide. The self-destruction of both characters is rather revealing. As artists, Virginia and Richard did not find, in literature, the necessary personal fulfillment to take a life-affirming attitude, nor the resolution of their existential anguish.

Richard Brown, whose reality is marked by an atmosphere of loss and decadence (which the AIDS epidemic, in my reading, comes to represent), is the representative of an entire generation that believed in more fluid possibilities of experiencing erotic desire and romantic interactions. Richard's dreams of the past are contrasted with his

present, which is dominated by his haunting ideas of death and decadence. His feelings of failure and artistic inconsistency, which have their roots in a childhood marked by maternal abandonment, gain in intensity with the presence of the AIDS epidemic in the novel.

Cunningham's approach to such tough matters, however, is marked by an intrinsic lyricism in his writing and, above any other thing, by the peculiar perspective he has on them. In relation to the familiar experiences analyzed in this thesis, though the author presents two characters who differ so intensely in terms of identity, his readers are not able to point any judgmental attitude from his part. On the contrary, Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan are personalities which are exploited by Cunningham with equivalent respect and, in some passages, even some sympathy. Differently from some other gay writers, whose discourse are highly political, Michael Cunningham's commitment is to artistic elation and, therefore, to literary achievement itself.

By making a metaphorical use of the AIDS epidemic that involves a man whose decadence is related with the loss of patterns and ideals of an entire generation, Cunningham deconstructs most of the previous metaphors associated with the syndrome, which only reinforced a marginalized position of those who suffer from it. Rather, the novelist constructs a discourse that allows new forms to deal with and to look at the epidemic.

What is most appealing to me in The Hours is the author's ability to, through literature, bring into light new concepts of sexuality, of body, of family arrangements, of being ill. And above all, new forms of love.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis of new forms of familiar arrangements and the AIDS epidemic as presented in Michael Cunningham's The Hours. In order to discuss familiar experiences in the novel, the characters Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan were analyzed in terms of their queer and normative identities, respectively. In reference to the AIDS epidemic, its metaphorical potentiality in literature was discussed, mainly in relation to the character Richard Brown. The contextualization of the syndrome in the American scenario and its impact over the gay community were also examined.

KEY WORDS: American fiction – queer theory – Michael Cunningham

RESUMO

Esta dissertação é uma análise dos novos modelos de organização familiar e da epidemia de AIDS como são apresentados em As Horas, de Michael Cunningham. Para discutir as experiências familiares no romance, as personagens Laura Brown e Clarissa Vaughan foram analisadas em função de suas identidades queer e normativa, respectivamente. No referente à epidemia de AIDS, foi discutida a sua potencialidade metafórica na literatura, principalmente em relação ao personagem Richard Brown. A contextualização da síndrome no cenário norte-americano e seu impacto na comunidade gay foram também examinados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ficção norte-americana – teoria queer – Michael Cunningham

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