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A REVISION OF FAMILY AND DOMESTICITY IN  
MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S *A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD*,  
*FLESH AND BLOOD AND THE HOURS*

By

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Thesis

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A Revision of Family and Domesticity in Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours*

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Primarily through the experiences of his gay protagonists, Michael Cunningham critiques the heteronormative nuclear family structure of the 1950s and depicts alternatives to it. Drawing on the work of feminist critics who focus on the political intent of American women authors during the nineteenth century, the findings of family historians who examine families of the 1950s, and the work of sociologist Kath Weston, who analyzes the formation of gay families and the impact of AIDS, I argue that Michael Cunningham represents domesticity in ways that promote readers' appreciation of and support for alternative family models.

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## INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Michael Coffey for *Publisher's Weekly*, writer Michael Cunningham admits that he “does seem to have some kind of fixation on the whole notion of family” (53). While writing *The Hours*, he thought that he had finally written a book that is not about family, but he realized that in *The Hours*, “once again, is the specter of the queer, extended, post-nuclear family” (53). Three of Cunningham’s most central novels – *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours* – critique the heteronormative, white, middle-class American family structure and offer readers new ways of conceptualizing family. Part of the critique and reconceptualization of family comes through in Cunningham’s use of a sentimental rhetoric similar to that employed by American women writers during the mid to late nineteenth century. Like the work of these authors, Cunningham’s novels also qualify as domestic fiction because most of the action occurs within the home, and the author describes the interior of each character’s home in precise, evocative details. Cunningham magnifies the domestic space so as to intensify his readers’ ability to empathize with his characters, especially the protagonists, who are white, male, and gay. Cunningham, like authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner, demonstrates that he is part of a legacy of writers who use sentimentality and domesticity to provoke political change and acceptance of their characters. Because American political policies, government officials, media personalities, and culture reveal the persistent homophobia and heterosexism that exist in the United States, the novels’ tender representation of the particular struggles his protagonists endure suggests an attempt to motivate readers to feel the need to work for changes that will give all Americans an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of family.

Though many people maintain close relationships with their biological family members, many have established relationships during adulthood with people whom they consider themselves just as – or more – intimate with and committed to than their biological families. How do Cunningham’s texts represent the process of alternative families coming together? What are the similarities between these characters’ childhoods and their perceptions of their parents’ relationships? How do Cunningham’s novels establish the validity of his characters’ search for family, one not necessarily based on two people’s desire for a lifelong sexual partner and/or progeny? My exploration of queer<sup>1</sup> family values revealed through Cunningham’s texts constitutes the ultimate aim of this thesis; however, our understanding of the formation of these values and Cunningham’s style of communicating them rests upon an initial overview of relevant aspects of American literary history and Cunningham’s placement within it.

Michael Cunningham’s novels clearly critique aspects of the heteronormative nuclear family structure (the purportedly “traditional” structure of American families), and represent slightly different kinds of families, families not based upon blood, marriage, and/or childbirth. By presenting a realistic, fictional portrayal of the damage wreaked upon children and parents who follow rigid gender roles and expect their children to conform in the same way, Cunningham’s texts promote the importance of people being accepted – even encouraged – for shaping families that satisfy their needs. Cunningham’s *A Home*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours* not only expose people to the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word “queer” to describe the family values Cunningham’s novels espouse because these values deviate from the notion of “traditional” American family values that the U.S. government propagated with particular force during the Cold War. Since the 1950s, American presidents (Reagan, Bush Sr., and Bush Jr.) have reemployed the nuclear family model as a means to promote a return to conservatism, a stand against political action groups who fight to receive the funding and benefits afforded to heterosexuals who conform to the “traditional” American family model.

benefits of a more open concept of family but also to the ways in which AIDS both destroys bonds and creates them. In a *Publisher's Weekly* interview, Michael Cunningham describes his desire for *Flesh and Blood* as two-fold: he wanted to write the best book ever, and he wanted it to contribute to the battle to find a cure for AIDS (Coffey 53). The two issues in which Cunningham's novels engage – family and AIDS – both have their own political history in the United States. Because of the politics inherent in Cunningham's representation of these issues as well as the author's use of sentimental rhetoric and domesticity to encourage his more conservative readers to modify their political views, Cunningham's approach aligns with that of some of the very first American writers.

In the introduction to her *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Cathy N. Davidson asserts that some early Americans, especially those whose political opinions and personal needs were publicly suppressed due to their gender, race, sexual orientation, and/or class, chose to write as a means to surmount their censorship. According to Davidson, when a person chose to write in America, his or her choice was always an ideological one (7). Davidson's argument regarding the split between the work of British authors and that of newly American authors rests mainly upon her assertion that the political issues American authors conveyed differentiated them from their British predecessors. Especially notable in early American fiction, Davidson claims, "is how individual conflict becomes a metonym for national conflict and private vice a synonym for corruption of the polity" (6). Davidson's claim regarding eighteenth-century women novelists' use of individual as national conflict and private as public vice applies to Cunningham as well, though he alters the conflicts and vices of his characters to replicate

the American polity in the late twentieth century. Davidson analyzes Hannah Webster Foster's novel, *The Coquette*, as a means to demonstrate how early American female authors reveal the connection between domestic and public oppression and the misogyny inherent in the founding fathers' formation of the democracy. Davidson explicates the way in which Foster fictionalizes a well-known public scandal as a means to call her (female) readers' attention to the tragic consequences of the limitations placed upon their lives in the emerging democracy. Similar to Foster, Cunningham fictionalizes issues currently being publicly contested (the legitimacy of partnerships and families who do not fit the traditional model and the demand for increased spending on AIDS research) as a way of dramatizing the effects that public policies have on individual lives.

Davidson's work on the political import of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimental and domestic fiction written by American women describes salient elements that Cunningham's texts also feature. Popular novels written by women during this time differ quite dramatically from works such as *The Coquette* because women's expectations for themselves changed from 1797 to the middle of the nineteenth century. Whereas Foster's protagonist, Eliza Wharton, ostensibly believes that she will be satisfied when she finds a man to whom she is sexually attracted and who will respect her ambitions and intellect, Susan Warner's hugely popular *The Wide, Wide World*, published in 1851, presents a protagonist who believes that true contentment comes via her accomplishment of absolute adherence to the doctrine of Christianity. In *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Nina Baym summarizes the plot structure of novels similar to Warner's and provides the following list of their features: 1) a female protagonist is deprived of the support she had depended upon to foster her



throughout her life 2) she must then overcome her insecurities 3) she is often deemed a “heroine” because the feats she accomplishes resemble the unacknowledged, fantastical exploits of children in fairy tales 4) her hard-earned conviction of her capabilities positively changes others’ reception of her, and 5) more often than not, the novels conclude in the land of “happy endings,” which, in these stories, involves the female protagonist wedding an ideal suitor (19-20). Not all of the plot features Baym notices in women’s writing during the nineteenth century entirely apply to Cunningham’s novels. While creating family on their own terms is not easy, the protagonists’ ability to do so is not meant to be interpreted as similar to the “fantastical exploits” of children in fairy tales. Moreover, in regard to the fourth aspect Baym notes in women’s novels, the fathers’ reception of their sons does not change a lot from the beginning of the novels to the end. In *A Home* Jonathan does not tell his father that he is gay, so his father’s response to him remains the same – awkward and confused – even after Jon “settles down” into his family. In *Flesh and Blood* Constantine loathes his son’s homosexuality even after he – Will – has entered into a committed relationship and he and his partner care for his youngest daughter’s son after she dies from AIDS. The relationship between Richard and his father in *The Hours* is barely described, so readers can infer little about his father’s perception of him. Most of Cunningham’s novels end happily, insofar as the protagonists’ enjoy a realistic level of contentment.

Like the heroines in much of women’s fiction during the nineteenth century, Cunningham’s protagonists begin to form their identities after they become aware that they cannot depend upon their parents (in Baym’s terms, “the supports”) to offer them emotional support as they struggle to create a life for themselves. The parents ostensibly

view their sons' sexual orientation as a choice and feel justified in their reluctance to accept their sons as they are. Unlike the heroines, however, the protagonists' struggle does not involve the caveat that they find a mate who enables them to continue their self-development by allowing them the freedom to contribute to the marriage in a way that is not founded on the expectations of their gender. The new family models that Cunningham's texts present near their endings can be referred to as "happy" because they demonstrate that the characters have managed to form permanent bonds that do not duplicate the misery of the couples in the novels who fit the nuclear family model. Each of the individuals decides to commit to one another only after they have spent years together. Though they are not driven to commit to one another by the same forces that drove their parents together, Jonathan's and Will's relationships become more stable when they are compelled to share the responsibilities of caring for one who depends on them.

Yet, although the struggles of Cunningham's protagonists and the realistically happy endings of *A Home* and *Flesh and Blood*<sup>2</sup> resemble those of women's novels in the nineteenth century, Cunningham's texts, as well as those written by and about American women during the nineteenth century, owe much of their plot structure to the very first novels. I believe, however, that Cunningham and nineteenth-century American women writers differentiate their work from this long tradition through their careful inclusion of

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<sup>2</sup> *Flesh and Blood* has a "happy ending" insofar as Will and Harry commit to each other and caring for Jamal, the son of Will's sister, Zoe, who dies from AIDS. Will's mother, Mary, moves to Boston, so she can be a regular part of Will and Jamal's life. For most of her life Mary cannot fully express her feelings. But *Flesh and Blood* is not without tragedy; Ben, the son of Will's older sister, Susan, kills himself when he discovers that he has sexual feelings for his cousin, Jamal. Ben's suicide provokes Susan to make necessary changes in her life, and the sacrifice of the character Ben, like the deaths of characters in sentimental novels, encourages readers and the living characters, to reassess their purpose.

sentiment into richly described domestic spaces as means to provoke specifically political effects.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (arguably the most well-known American novel of the nineteenth century), best shows an early example of the power a thoughtfully conceived domestic space can have over readers. Early in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe provides readers with a description of Tom and Chloe's home that enables them to enter the dwelling of slaves. Stowe informs readers that the small log cabin in which Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe reside has a "neat garden patch" in the front, and the large scarlet begonia and native rose plants "[leave] scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen" (17). Though these characters are forced to live in a "rough" dwelling, they create an attractive garden that, combined with the natural beauty of the area, diminishes some of the ugliness of slavery. Readers also see Aunt Chloe, the matriarch of her abode and head cook in the "masters" quarters, prepare dinner for her "ole man," a dinner that, when Aunt Chloe lifts the lid of the kettle, leaves "indubitable intimations of 'something good'" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 17). Stowe, the omniscient narrator, claims that she must leave Chloe at the stove so she can "finish [her] picture of the cottage" (17). Through Stowe's description, readers learn that Chloe's part of the home is somewhat out of the way of the traffic of the children and consists of a bed that is "covered neatly with a snowy spread" and a piece of carpeting lay by the side of it (17). Chloe finds respite in the "feminine" space she has designed for herself. The author proceeds by describing prominent features of the rest of the cabin's interior. Whatever nineteenth-century readers may have imagined about slaves' quarters prior to reading Stowe's novel, Stowe's representation of Tom and Chloe's home enables readers to further appreciate

their humanity through her presentation of their home. By encouraging her readers to recognize the shared concerns of all parents, whether they are white or black, Stowe attempts to move them to join the struggle to end slavery.

In each of the Cunningham novels I discuss – *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours* – the author carefully describes the domestic spaces in which his characters reside. Like Stowe’s readers, Cunningham’s readers know the characters more intimately and can empathize with them more completely because the author invites them to observe their actions within their homes, a familiar place. The earliest moment in which Cunningham domesticates the sexuality of one of his protagonists occurs when Jonathan and his friend/romantic interest, Bobby, engage in their first sexual act together. As the “furnace [rumbles] from deep in the house [...] [and] steam [hisses] through the pipes” of Jonathan and his parents’ home, which is an “ordinary house surrounded by the boredom and struggling green of an Ohio spring,” Jonathan and Bobby engage in a sexual act that involves cleaning up ejaculation when they have finished (*A Home* 51-53). In *A Home at the End of the World*, Cunningham’s highly-acclaimed, first major novel the author strongly suggests that Jonathan and Bobby give each other “hand jobs” until they both come to an orgasm. Surely not all of the people who have read this novel previously experienced such an event vicariously. Still, Cunningham does not force the reader into this scene. By the time Jonathan and Bobby get to this point in their relationship, readers have been privy to significant events throughout Jon’s and Bobby’s childhood; this scene is just another memory the readers share with them. By setting Jonathan and Bobby’s first sexual act together in Jonathan’s home, Cunningham domesticates their ostensibly homosexual orientation.

Cunningham's descriptions of his characters' private spaces are amazingly precise, whether they are concise or elaborately drawn. Take, for example, the following scene from *Flesh and Blood*: as Billy plays in the living room, his mother is in the kitchen and "[rings] the plates and glasses on the drainboard. With a rag she [makes] squeakings that [are] the sound of cleanliness itself" (28). Now consider this longer description from *The Hours*: Laura Brown (as she and her young son, Richard, bake a cake for Dan, husband and father, respectively)

begins sifting flour into a blue bowl. Outside the widow is the brief interlude of grass that separates this house from the neighbors' garage [...] The bowl on the counter before her is a pale, chalky, slightly faded blue with a thin band of white leaves at the rim. The leaves are identical, stylized, slightly cartoonish, canted at rakish angles, and it seems perfect and inevitable that one of them has suffered a small, precisely triangular nick in its side. A fine white rain of flour falls into the bowl (75).

The former example, from *Flesh and Blood*, reveals what readers later learn is Mary's obsessive attention to cleanliness; the latter, from *The Hours*, is a list of the details inside and outside Laura Brown's home on which she focuses to make herself feel less anxious.

The action in many of the women's novels in the nineteenth century and that in Cunningham's is not far reaching; the events either occur in the home or nearby. For that reason, they have been described as "domestic" fiction. Readers see the conflicts unfolding mostly within the home, and readers most likely read these novels in their own homes, which encourages them to consider their personal domestic dramas. The sins of mothers and fathers are writ large, and children's perceptions are brought into focus. The mothers and fathers are not to be completely held responsible for their bad behavior, however. Cunningham's historical account of it reveals that political and social forces constrained their range of emotions. The United States during the 1950s was a time of

widespread conformity, which one can acknowledge just by looking at a list of the most popular television shows during the time: *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. These shows presented the American viewing audience with a standard of home life that many tried to replicate. Because the members of so many TV families basically conformed to and promoted rigid feminine or masculine behaviors, one can be sure that many saw this behavior as “normal,” or, at the very least, something for which they should strive.

Based upon appearances, Cunningham’s prototypical 1950’s married couples look very much like those on TV shows and magazines produced during the decade. For example, after Alice’s miscarriage, Jonathan recalls that his parents’ relationship took on “the easy, chaste familiarity of grown siblings” (*A Home* 19). According to Jonathan, his mother and father “[invented] a cordial, joking relationship that involved neither kisses nor fights” (19). The perfection of their appearance as the ideal family is publicized in a Sunday supplement of the *Cleveland Post* when Alice’s cooking becomes “renowned” and Jonathan and Ned (in the photo) “[look] on, proud, expectant, and perfectly dressed” as Alice cuts into a shrimp casserole (19).

Cunningham makes readers aware of the tenuous bonds people form when they enter into an apparently permanent commitment that is predicated upon each other’s rather general, shared requirements of a mate, such as the desire for children, a home, and stability. In Cunningham’s novels, as is the case for some of the women in early American women’s novels, none of the female characters wed the male characters because they already feel a true sense of intimacy with them. On the contrary, Cunningham’s heterosexual couples view the time after marriage as offering the

opportunity for intimacy. For example, in *The Hours*, on the morning of her husband's birthday, Laura Brown asks herself why she married him. She realizes, "She married him out of love. She married him out of guilt; out of fear of being alone; out of patriotism [...] He had suffered so much [in WWII]. He wanted her" (*The Hours* 160). Laura's rationale for marrying Dan is both personal and social. Because she believes that no one desired her before Dan, she concludes that, if she does not marry him, she is going to spend the rest of her life alone. She also feels it her cultural responsibility to marry Dan, since he sacrificed his own life by fighting in the war. To Laura, marriage is the sacrifice she makes for her country.

The Eisenhower administration urged young men and women to take advantage of the convenient lifestyle made possible to them through the valiant efforts of those who fought in the war. After WWII and during the Cold War, the American government promoted the heteronormative, suburban lifestyle as offering a concrete way for "patriotic" Americans to prove to the world the supremacy of democracy over communism. Furthermore, as Elaine Tyler May points out, the horrendous death toll of the war surely prompted many Americans to feel an anxious need to repopulate the earth, to ensure their posterity and contribution to the continuation of the American way of life. Personal desires were seen as selfish desires. Cunningham's heterosexual couples – the protagonists' parents in all three novels and Susan (Will's sister) and Ted – rarely consider anything outside of the "norm," i.e. relationships that are not represented in their community, on TV, in magazines, etc. as far as the trajectory of their life that includes their interpersonal commitments. For that reason, the three central married women in Cunningham's novels experience similar dissatisfaction.

The protagonists of these novels, the children of these couples, are, from their very first memories, sensitive to the tacit conflicts between their parents, especially those experienced by their mothers. They relate more to their mothers because they spend substantially more amount of time with them; their fathers are frequently away at work. The protagonists sense their mothers' loneliness, bitterness, and depression. The protagonists, who seek approval from their fathers, experience these same emotions. Over the years, they grow less and less dependent upon the idea that they need their fathers' love to make it through life. From an early age, the main characters rebel against the parents' performance of rigid gender roles. Jonathan cares for his beloved doll; Bobby learns how to cook, and Billy refuses his father's offer to buy him a football. Jonathan privately mocks the friendly, sexless charade performed by his parents. Bobby wants to escape his mother's wrath and his father's ineffectual attempts to assuage it. Billy despises his father's rage and his mother's helplessness. Coming to terms with their sexual orientation is made more difficult not only because of their own feelings but also because of social prejudice. Like other teenagers, the protagonists face the possibility of being rejected by those to whom they are attracted. For example, Billy, after he construes his friend's, Bix's, attempt to show solidarity as an indication of his reciprocal feelings of sexual attraction, is "cuffed" in the face by Bix after he touches his cheek (*Flesh and Blood* 100). In the case of Cunningham's main characters, they could lose more than just some self-esteem; they could also lose their best friends if the friend terminates the friendship because of his fear regarding the amorous feelings his friend has toward him.

The trajectory of the lives of the children born to parents wed in the 1950s differs dramatically from that of their parents. Jonathan moves to New York to attend NYU;



Billy/Will chooses Harvard. Richard makes his way from his LA suburb to New York and, much later in his life, wins a prestigious poetry prize. Bobby remains in Cleveland to attend culinary school. Clare marries and divorces a man in her early twenties, then enters into a relationship with a woman. Unlike their parents, who seemed rushed to fall in love, Jonathan seems to speak for all of these parents' children when he states, "[they] hadn't worried too much [about falling in love], because [they'd] thought they had all the time in the world" (*A Home* 172).

Because Cunningham spends so much time in the beginning of his novels critiquing the form and function of the white, middle-class heteronormative family structure, readers may find contradictory his choice to end his novels with gay couples whose relationship so closely resembles that of the happily married couples at the end of women's fiction written during the nineteenth century. Is a nuclear family structure the only permanent relationship model that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, have to look forward to? Granted, Cunningham does present readers with a more evolved family picture in both *A Home* and *Flesh and Blood*. In *A Home*, Clare lives with Bobby (the father of her child), Jonathan (her closest friend and Bobby's best friend), Erich (Jonathan's ex-lover who is dying from AIDS), and her and Bobby's baby, Rebecca. At first, the situation seems nearly idyllic. Clare chooses to stay home with Rebecca while Jon and Bobby work in their restaurant during the day. Bobby and Jonathan have individual parenting styles, and each compliments Clare's method of child rearing. Even so, she eventually takes her daughter and abandons their country home because of her myriad worries regarding Rebecca's early exposure to death and the likelihood that she would not be Rebecca's most-beloved caretaker, since Bobby and Jonathan also give

Rebecca their undivided attention and affection. While Bobby and Jonathan adjust and eventually come to a full appreciation of the life they share together, Claire seems to cling to the notion that she will find true contentment only after she has found a man who will play a more traditional paternal role. Claire may have lost her potential for fulfillment because she was not able to relinquish her conventional ideals.

In *Flesh and Blood*, Zoe's (Billy/Will's sister) family unit consists primarily of her son (Jamal) and Cassandra, a transvestite who accepted Zoe's plea for a surrogate mother (Zoe was a teenager when she asked this of Cassandra) and now fulfills the role of Jamal's grandmother, since Zoe's real mother does not establish a bond with him until after Zoe's and Cassandra's death. Apparently, heterosexual men cannot yet even be imagined as occupying a place within such a new concept of domesticity.<sup>3</sup> Heterosexual female readers who yearn for a more progressive family, then, are presented with only two "realistic" alternatives in Cunningham's novels: a family comprised of women and a child or one constituted by gay men and a child.

Cunningham also critiques the heteronormative family structure by employing rhetoric similar to sentimental and domestic women's fiction writers in the nineteenth century; however, he utilizes the power of sentimentality and domesticity not to uphold the primacy of the nuclear family model but to reveal its manifold defects. Though Cunningham's representation of his protagonists' upbringing seems to support the stereotype of the lonely, needy mother as instilling her son with "feminine" qualities, the novels do not offer a "cause" for the protagonists' sexual orientation. Instead, they

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<sup>3</sup> Though Bobby maintains a sexual relationship with Clare, he cannot be described as completely heterosexual because he first explores his sexuality with Jon and makes no effort to continue his development as a sexual being until Clare coerces him to do so. Jamal, Zoe's son, who Will and Harry raise after Zoe dies, is heterosexual; however, he leaves the home when he is eighteen.

demonstrate the unnecessarily tragic effects of couples' unquestioned allegiance to a way of life that forecloses the possibility of providing a truly nurturing family life for their children. In other words, if the fathers of the protagonists were open to ways of working through their homophobia, they could have developed healthier relationships with their sons. Cunningham's novels prompt readers to recognize the need for a greater appreciation of people who create family on their own terms, who have learned from the mistakes of their parents. In addition, his novels give readers who desire family – but not a “traditional” family – images of people who have accomplished this.

In each of the three Cunningham novels I discuss, the primary characters are deeply affected by characters who suffer from AIDS, and, in Chapter Two, I explore how these novels present a continuation of the use of sentimental rhetoric and domestic space as a means to foster social transformation in regard to the pandemic. In addition, I situate Cunningham's literary representation of AIDS within the genre of AIDS literature and utilize the work of other critics who have commented on the efficacy of sentimentalism in regard to its potential to erode homophobia.

In the Introduction to his *AIDS: The Literary Response*, Emmanuel S. Nelson argues that when news of the epidemic first hit, the response of gay novelists was “shocked, stunned silence” (1). Beginning in the mid-eighties, however, Nelson states that writers began to “register their responses in a variety of ways” (2). While some continue to explore issues not directly related to AIDS, they may allude to it or “render its menacing shadow and make it integral to the tone and mood of their works” (Nelson 2). He claims that others have attempted a “direct, full-scale confrontation with the plague,” “created a defiant literature of resistance,” and/or “chosen to abandon their

primary mode of critical expression in favor of the more clear-cut mode of expression available in essays and journalism” (2). Cunningham’s response qualifies as a direct confrontation with the plague, and his work offers a literary act of resistance. His novels variously explore how the characters unknowingly engage in behavior that puts them at risk, the extreme anxiety felt by those who know those who suffer from AIDS as they watch their physical and mental health deteriorate and worry if they, too, will eventually suffer similarly, the nearly complete unwillingness biological family members demonstrate in regard to caring for their afflicted family members, the presentation of non-biological family members stepping in to offer the nurturance and support they need, and the tacit suggestion that all people need to reevaluate the ways in which they seek and measure personal fulfillment.

In the Introduction to *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, editor Claude J. Summers asserts, “standard literary anthologies and histories continue all too often to [...] fail to supply relevant biographical information about gay and lesbian writers” (x). Though I cannot be certain exactly what Summers deems “relevant” biographical information about a gay author, the brief biographical information in *Publisher’s Weekly* article reveals the experience that Cunningham has with the kinds of families he portrays in his novels. Michael Cunningham was born in 1952 in Cincinnati, Ohio, into a family “that enjoyed increasing prospects in the prosperous fifties” (Coffey 54). Cunningham’s father worked in advertising, and his mother kept the home. The family moved to La Canada, California when Cunningham was ten. All three of the Cunningham novels I discuss include suburban settings; however, once the protagonists are old enough to move away, they choose to live in urban areas. The action in *A Home at the End of the World*

initially occurs in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. *Flesh and Blood* first takes place in New Jersey. The story of Laura Brown in *The Hours* is set in a suburb of Los Angeles. The stories of the protagonists begin with the stories of their parents, who meet and soon marry during the 1950s. Though Alice and Ned in *A Home at the End of the World* do not enjoy “increasing [financial] prospects,” Mary and Con and Laura and Dan (in *Flesh and Blood* and *A Home*, respectively) do. The author of the *Publisher’s Weekly* article, Michael Coffey, reports, “like an entire generation of American kids, [Cunningham and his younger sister] were raised on rock ‘n’ roll and rebellion” (54). In *A Home* and *Flesh and Blood*, Cunningham frequently quotes lyrics from songs popular during the 1960s as a means to further enable his readers to relate to his protagonists. For Jonathan and Will, music helps shape their perception of who they are and the beliefs for which they stand. Music connects readers with the protagonists and includes the characters living with AIDS “in the larger tapestry of [their] culture’s history” (Kaminsky 3).

*The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* offers a general overview of the contributions of gay writers in America from colonial times to the present, and, since Cunningham is a contemporary author working within the legacy of gay and lesbian fiction, we must consider how he fits within this particular history. Yet, his critique of the heteronormative family structure is not always specifically “gay.” His portrayal of such families just happens to be the first that affirmed my own, mostly unspoken critique of the relationships between the men and women in my family; however, as Summers makes clear, some gay male or lesbian writers’ talent for precise and careful artistic analyses of society has come at a great cost. Summers states,

The most painful and destructive injustice visited upon gay men and lesbians has been their separation from the normal and the natural, their

stigmatization as *queer*. Yet the internalization of this stigma has also been their greatest strength [...] Fostering qualities of introspection and encouraging social analysis, it enables people who feel excluded from some of the core assumptions and rituals of their society to evaluate themselves and their society from an ambiguous and often revealing perspective (*xii*).

Though many authors, including Cunningham and some early American women, such as Hannah Webster Foster, have used the novel as a means to critique the conventional family structure, Cunningham's is the first to have made a major impact on my recognition of the ways I had been taught to think of family, how I came to find fault with the traditional conception of it, and, most importantly, how I came to realize viable alternatives. Cunningham's novels have literally changed my life, insofar as I no longer think marriage is the only way I can share a home with people I love and to whom I am committed. I do not know if the acuity of Cunningham's vision reveals a positive side effect of his feelings of exclusion "from some of the core assumptions and rituals of [his] society"; however, coming to a better understanding of how biological and non-biological families have been portrayed over the years by lesbian and gay authors constitutes my next project. My current work is an attempt to show how Cunningham's novels fit into the broader category of American sentimental and domestic literature and demonstrate a continuation of the deployment of sentimentality to generate political change in America.

Summers explains the contributions gay men and lesbians have made to American literature from colonial times to post-Stonewall. Yet, he does not mention gay or lesbian authors' use of sentimentality and domesticity as a means to inspire readers to understand the common goals they share and motivate them to combat heterosexist political practices. Perplexingly, he also does not spend much time discussing the ways in which gay and lesbian writers' portrayal of family has changed over the years. Cunningham's

three most central novels offer critical readers the opportunity to study contemporary sentimentality and domesticity in addition to the way literary representations of family reflect reality and the changing needs of society.

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## CREATING FAMILY

In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*, Elaine Tyler May explains the ways in which the nuclear family model served as a political cure-all for Americans' anxieties during the Cold War. As evidence May uses dialogue from what came to be known as the "kitchen debate," a 1959 debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev that took place at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. During the debate Nixon cites the quality and affordability of American household appliances as proof of his belief in the superiority of free enterprise over communism. May claims that Nixon deliberately focused on the merits of the model suburban home because had the discussion emphasized armaments, the United States' vulnerability in the event of a nuclear war would have manifested itself (385). Nixon touted the modern suburban home as offering a secure, abundant family life for anyone who aspired to it. In such a dwelling gender roles were clearly defined; it offered a space where women could achieve a reputable level of domestic accomplishment, and men could display their competence as breadwinners by purchasing the latest conveniences. The media hailed Nixon's visit to Russia a political triumph, and many observers credit it with securing Nixon's political future (May 385).

The kitchen debate sent many Americans a message regarding their responsibility to secure what they came to believe was the American way of life. The nuclear family model provided them with an ostensibly patriotic, desirable trajectory for their lives. Even though interest in achieving the domestic ideal gained momentum before many could actually attain it, the fact that 96.4% of the women and 94.1% of the men who

came of age during and after WWII got married reveals their dogged faith in it.<sup>4</sup> Not only did people share an interest in marriage, they also married younger, had more children, and the spacing between their children was much closer than in recent years (May 386). While the availability of contraceptives enabled couples to plan their families so that they could achieve their personal goals before having children, birth numbers reveal that many did not utilize contraception, which suggests that married couples' ambition was to have children, and/or the religious conservatism of the era dissuaded them from family planning. Since Americans "behaved in striking conformity to each other during these years," May concludes that Nixon could confidently declare the home as the center of postwar ideals (386).

Nixon effectively used the domestic space as a political tool to win the support of the American polity, and three novels written by Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours*, replicate the conformity of 1950's behavior to create different effects. Cunningham's novels, like those of some American authors before him, reveal the flaws of institutions promulgated by American public officials and tacitly encourage their readers to improve them. Feminist critics during the late 1970s and through the 1980s – Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, and Shirley Samuels, for example – demonstrate the political intent behind nineteenth-century American women writers of sentimental and domestic fiction by exposing these novels' commentary on issues such as women's rights, slavery, and poverty. Before the work of Baym and others, literary critics – both male and female – viewed the work of sentimental and domestic fiction writers as void of literary merit, since it clearly contained propaganda

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<sup>4</sup> According to May, "Those who came of age during and after World War II were the most marrying generation on record" (386).

meant to motivate people to think, feel, and act in ways that might alter their society. Literature, according to the critics who view these women's texts negatively, is meant to evoke timeless themes of humanity, not to engage in the politics of a particular historical moment. Such a view limits the space that sentimental and domestic fiction is given in anthologies of American literature, which precludes readers from recognizing the ways in which the novel has functioned as a means for relatively marginalized authors to disseminate their concerns about their society. The work of Jane Tompkins, particularly *Sensational Designs*, persuades readers to see "literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order" (xi). Cunningham's first three novels exemplify their potential to modify the institution of family in the United States; moreover, Cunningham's work demonstrates a progression of sentimental domestic fiction itself, insofar as he also writes in ways considered critically valuable.<sup>5</sup>

Cunningham's novels reveal myriad flaws in the nuclear family model of the 1950s. Though a nuclear family, simply defined, merely requires a man, woman, and child, the depictions of such families in Cunningham's novels show that the American nuclear family par excellence requires a series of actions that ultimately belie the naturalness of its formation. The novels present the creation of each nuclear family chronologically; therefore, I comment upon the flaws the novels present in the couples' relationship in the sequence they are presented. For organizational purposes, a subtitle begins each of the sections in which I point out an issue common among the protagonists' parents and provide historical data that support the validity of the novels' representation

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<sup>5</sup> Cunningham won the 1995 Whiting Writers Award and the 1995 Lambda Literary Award for Flesh and Blood. He won the Pulitzer Prize and the Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction for The Hours.

of the couples' conflicts. Important to sentimental/domestic authors, such as Cunningham, is presenting a realistic, albeit dramatized, vision of a particular milieu so that readers can more clearly comprehend the need for the changes the author's text implies.

### Jumping on the Bandwagon

Cunningham, an author whose protagonists are born to people who adhere to the nuclear family model, uses his fiction to reveal the flaws of the impersonal model prescribed. In all three of the novels, the mother of each protagonist decides to wed for reasons that reflect the social reality for many American women during the 1950s. For example, Alice, in *A Home*, the first in Cunningham's trio of prototypical, mid-twentieth century American women, recalls how, when she was thirteen, she decided to become more talkative and unruly in an attempt to distinguish herself from her parents' reserve and bookishness. Only a few years later, she meets her future husband, Ned Glover, an older man from the North who drives a convertible and tells funny stories. May claims, "postwar Americans [...] were looking toward a radically new vision of family life and trying self-consciously to avoid the paths of their parents," which Cunningham demonstrates through Alice (388). According to May, "the depression of the 1930s and World War II laid the foundation for a commitment to a stable home life," and *Flesh and Blood* portrays this through Mary's decision to marry Constantine because he can provide her with a more affluent lifestyle than her parents have (386). Finally, Laura, in *The Hours*, who describes herself as an unattractive woman and avid reader, clearly suggests that she had no choice *but* to accept Dan's marriage proposal. After all, no male sought her before Dan, especially not an exceptional one. Having once been thought to have

died at Anzio (a WWII battle in Italy), Dan is given a hero's welcome home, and, in the words of Dan's mother, who was shocked that he asked Laura to marry him, he "could have had anyone" (*The Hours* 40). But Laura lives in "the new world, the rescued world," and "How could she deny a handsome, good-hearted boy, practically a member of the family, who had come back from the dead?" (*The Hours* 39, 40). Laura's description of her behavior during this time evokes Judith Butler's theory that "because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end [...] gender performance always and variously occurs [under] [a] situation of duress" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 903). As a single, supposedly undesirable female, Laura surely would have endured some sort of punitive social consequence had she declined Dan's marriage proposal.

### No Alternatives

Though May admits that many baby-boom parents would not state it as a conscious desire, she asserts that repopulating a world traumatized by the deaths of WWII must have, at least subconsciously, contributed to couples' compulsion to marry and bear children (386). Indeed, the scenes the women describe when considering the events that led to their marriage have a sense of urgency about them, as if their future either begins or ends with their choice. They do not think that someone or something better may come along.<sup>6</sup> According to a 1955 marriage study, "Less than 10 percent of

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<sup>6</sup> Coontz explains that men and women during the 1950s did not have viable, i.e. socially acceptable, alternatives to the nuclear family. After WWII women who had gained "independence, responsibility, and income" through their employment in factories during the war were "downgraded to lower-paid, 'female' jobs"; therefore, for a woman, it would have been hard to live on her own income (31). Some doctors recommended shock treatments for women who sought abortion, "on the assumption that failure to want a baby signified dangerous emotional disturbance" (Coontz 32). Men who were not married or did not

Americans believed that an unmarried person could be happy,” and one popular advice book stated, “The family is the center of your living. If it isn’t, you’ve gone far astray” (Coontz 25). Because the early scenes between Mary and Constantine in *Flesh and Blood* and Laura and Dan in *The Hours* are set in 1949, and those between Ned and Alice in *A Home* occur during the early 1960s, by analyzing their actions, readers can infer that these characters hold beliefs similar to the real-life counterparts. Readers can also deduce that if Cunningham does not intend to critique the nuclear family model made popular during the 50s, he would not spend so much time establishing the ways in which the couples’ he creates perfectly conform to the model, so that the novels can later reveal the negative consequences of an unquestioned adherence to it.

#### Lack of Physical Intimacy

Because the couples lacked intimacy before marriage, this dearth carries over into their relationship as husbands and wives. Moreover, the perception that men should perform the brunt of wage-earning labor severely limits the amount of time they spend with their wives and children. Michael Cunningham devotes little space to describing what the male and female characters did together before marriage and children, which suggests that this information is irrelevant. Consequently, the couples do not seem as able to relate to one another as individuals as they are through the domestic roles each performs. Stephanie Coontz writes, “A contradiction in terms in early periods, ‘the sexually charged, child-centered family took its place at the center of the postwar American dream’” (28). Coontz suggests that during periods earlier than the 1950s

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accept family roles could have lost their jobs or not receive promotions, and bachelors “were categorized as ‘immature,’ ‘narcissistic,’ ‘deviant,’ or even ‘pathological’” (Coontz 32-33).

sexual intercourse was not considered in the same way as family. Though a couple must engage in sex to create a child, that act was kept separate from the terms people associated with family. In the 1950s, however, sex seemed a carrot for people who decided to create a family. Children were thought necessary and so, too, was a family dynamic between husbands and wives that differed from their parents' relationship. The sexual "charge" that Cunningham's heterosexual couples have apparently derives from their desire to have children. Once they tacitly decide to have no more, their interest in having sex wanes.

In all three of the novels, the protagonists' fathers, mothers, or both demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the sexual relationship they have with their spouses. At the age of thirty-five, Alice makes "some promises to [herself] regarding [her] marriage," one of which includes reintroducing sex into her relationship with her husband (*A Home* 56). She admits that she had "imagined marriage in one of two ways: you loved a man and coupled with him happily, or you didn't"; she had never "considered the possibility of loving someone without an accompanying inclination of the flesh" (*A Home* 59). Alice loves Ned and she knows that Ned loves her, even though she had believed that husbands and wives primarily express their love for one another through sex. On the night she attempts to initiate sex with Ned, Alice is not able to become sexually aroused by him. She eventually gives up the "promise" she made to herself. Much later in the novel, after Ned dies, Alice finally experiences a satisfying sex life when she starts dating a younger man.

During a scene in *Flesh and Blood*, Con drunkenly pleads with his wife, Mary, to have sex with him. Mary rejects Con's request and admits to herself that "for years [...]"

she'd felt desire closing down in her" (90). This recognition once to cause her to panic, but it does no longer. Constantine's need for physical intimacy manifests itself in two ways previous to the aforementioned scene with Mary. On several occasions he fondles and kisses his oldest daughter, Susan, and, after Susan marries and moves away, he begins an affair with Magda, whom he later marries after Mary divorces him.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Hours*, Laura kisses Kitty, a friend who lives two doors down, and, as she thinks about it a couple of hours later, she deduces that she

can kiss Kitty in the kitchen and love her husband, too. She can anticipate the queasy pleasure of her husband's lips and fingers (is it that she desires his desire?) and still dream of kissing Kitty again someday, in a kitchen or at the beach as children shriek in the surf, in a hallway with their arms full of folded towels, laughing softly, aroused, hopeless, in love with their own recklessness if not each other, saying *Shhhh*, parting quickly, going on (143).

When her husband kisses and touches her, Laura derives "pleasure" from his lips and fingers; however, the concomitant queasiness causes her to question the source of such pleasure, which reveals that she does not completely trust it. Laura does not interrogate the feelings she has for Kitty because they make her feel good; she truly desires Kitty, not just Kitty's desire for her. Laura and Kitty: two women, mothers loving each other while married to men. Having superficially achieved what society expects of them, Laura imagines that she and Kitty can fulfill their deeper desires together. Laura's vision shows readers what she truly wants, but we know her reality and the unlikelihood that she can

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<sup>7</sup> Coontz states, "We will probably never know how prevalent incest and sexual abuse were in the 1950s, but we do know that when girls or women reported incidents of such abuse to therapists, they were frequently told that they were 'fantasizing' their unconscious oedipal desires" (35). Susan, Con's most beloved daughter, admits that Con sexually abused her, but this does not happen until the end of the novel, when she is in her thirties. Coontz succinctly describes Susan's situation as a teenager when she writes, "growing up in 1950s families was not so much a matter of being protected from the harsh realities of the outside world as preventing the outside world from learning the harsh realities of family life" (34).



realize her vision without making drastic changes. She has one young son and is pregnant with her second child. She has no money of her own. Occasionally, she feels content in her home and with her son. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz claims, “Some men and women entered loveless marriages in order to forestall attacks about real or suspected homosexuality or lesbianism,” and, though Laura does not indicate her sexual feelings for women before she marries Dan, her attraction to Kitty suggests one explanation for the clinical depression that results from Laura’s inability to connect to her roles as wife and mother.

The parents of Cunningham’s protagonists do not model healthy interpersonal relationships; they do not demonstrate the love for one another that apparently led to their decision to marry. Some of the characters express disdain for their parents’ kind of relationship, while others, through their actions, show that they mean to avoid developing a similar bond with the one they love.

#### Wives’ Desperate Search for Creative Fulfillment

Both Mary and Laura place a lot of importance on the cakes they bake their families. A perfectly baked and decorated cake symbolizes their allegiance to the codes of domestic femininity. For Easter, Mary bakes and assembles a rabbit-shaped cake according to the instructions she finds in a magazine. She gasps when Zoe, her youngest daughter, bumps into her and causes her to make a nick in the cake. When Con, her husband, comes into the kitchen, she requests that he care for Zoe until the cake is finished. Before he agrees to take Zoe outside, Con asks Mary if Zoe is “really bothering her,” which implies his reluctance to watch her for a few minutes (*Flesh and Blood* 11).

Mary replies that she is working on her “masterpiece” and needs “just a little tiny bit of peace and quiet to get it done” (*Flesh and Blood* 11). As Con looks at her, she “touches her hair and offer[s] a soft, embarrassed laugh,” and she is “as lost in the demonstration of her own qualities as she had been in the slicing of the cake” (*Flesh and Blood* 11).

Both the baking of the cake and her attempt to persuade Con by demonstrating her femininity require a performance. Still, Mary finds personal fulfillment in the creation of a perfect cake. Once she knows that Con has left with Zoe, she returns to the cake and thinks,

Although she [is] not artistic, she believe[s] she [understands] an artist’s temperament. She understand[s] the absorption and the urgent, almost bodily hunger for time, simple uninterrupted time in which to work (*Flesh and Blood* 12).

Mary, who has no time to pursue goals of her own, recognizes that she has only a few minutes to complete the project she created for herself. During an era when many women her age raised children and maintained the home, the production of a perfect Easter cake offers Mary the opportunity to show her family that she excels in her role as wife and mother. Mary’s desire to know the pleasure of a public success was shared by some of her real-life counterparts. Stephanie Coontz reports, “By the mid-1950s, advertisers’ surveys reported on a growing tendency among women to find ‘housework a medium of expression for [their] femininity and individuality’” (27). Because many women during the 1950s did not work outside of the home, one of the few ways they could demonstrate their particular talents was through a limited amount of “feminine,” domestic skills.

Laura, in *The Hours*, demonstrates a more profound anxiety regarding the cake she makes for Dan's birthday. When she and her son begin baking the cake, she reflects:

She is going to produce a birthday cake – only a cake – but in her mind at this moment the cake is glossy and resplendent as any photograph in any magazine; it is better, even, than the photographs of cakes in magazines. She imagines making, out of the humblest materials, a cake with all the balance and authority of an urn or a house. The cake will speak of bounty and delight the way a good house speaks of comfort and safety. This, she thinks, is how artists or architects must feel (it's an awfully grand comparison, she knows, maybe even a little foolish, but still), faced with canvas, with stone, with oil or wet cement [...] At this moment, holding a bowl full of sifted flour in an orderly house under the California sky, she hopes to be as satisfied and as filled with anticipation as a writer putting down the first sentence, a builder beginning to draw the plans (*The Hours* 76, 77).

Laura refers directly to the influence that magazines have on her conception of what a cake should look like. For Laura, though, creating a cake that looks like those in magazines is not enough. If Laura's cake is extraordinary, she seems to think that she will be judged similarly. Her belief that a cake has the potential to evoke feelings and ideas like works of art do indicates her appreciation of the domestic arts. Laura perceives the cake as an opportunity to show her particular talent as a wife and mother. The cake exemplifies the earnest art involved in the duties she performs everyday.

Laura permits her three-year-old son, Richie, to help her prepare the cake, and when considering the view of the kitchen with the two of them in it, she realizes, "She is herself and she is the perfect picture of herself; there is no difference" (76). Earlier that morning, Laura condemned herself for not doing the things she "should" be doing – for failing to wake early to prepare breakfast for her son and husband and offer her "simple, encouraging talk" (38). The connection Laura feels with her environment ends when her anxiety regarding Richie takes precedence. Richie pours flour into the bowl, and when

his mother says “Oopsie” as the flour dust rises and almost reaches his nose, “He looks at her in terror. His eyes fill with tears” (78). Richie interprets his mother’s exclamation as indication that he made a mistake. Laura wonders why she must be so careful with him, and she wants to leave him, so she can “be free, blameless, unaccountable” (78).

Stephanie Coontz reports, “When *McCall’s* ran an article [in 1956] entitled ‘The Mother Who Ran Away’, the magazine set a new record for readership. A former editor commented: ‘We suddenly realized that all those women at home with their three and a half children were miserably unhappy’” (37). Obviously, Laura’s discontent is not a rarity among her real-life counterparts. Reading Laura’s story and noticing how it corresponds with aspects of real-life women’s stories persuades readers to consider the tragedy of people living a life that does not match the one they want for themselves.

Cunningham’s thorough inclusion of the details of Laura’s environment establish that, even though Laura has the items necessary for the ideal domestic space, she feels separate from them. Her home and designated role within it does not conform to who she feels she is. Yet, with a second child on the way and no income of her own, Laura is somewhat “trapped.” Interestingly, Coontz notes, “By 1960, almost every major news journal was using the word *trapped* to describe the feelings of the American housewife” (37).

Alice, in *A Home at the End of the World*, perhaps because she and Ned meet and marry during the early 1960s, rather than the 1950s (unlike the couples in the previously discussed novels), develops her skill as a cook to such a degree that she eventually starts teaching cooking classes at the YMCA. Though she refers to baking skills such as folding eggs into batter as an “art,” she does not perceive her ability to cook as one of the

few opportunities she has to demonstrate her creativity and individuality. Because Alice only has one child, Jonathan, who is thirteen in the early 1970s, it is more socially acceptable for her to seek employment outside of the home. When Ned's theatre does not do well financially, Alice gains employment as a secretary in a real estate office. She enjoys having a place to be during the day so much that she "dread[s] the weekends" (101). In addition to her job, she plants an herb garden, starts teaching the cooking class, and rejoins the church guild. Neither Mary nor Laura indicate a desire to meet more friends, whereas Alice looks forward to the three or four people that she predicts will continue to be her "baking friends" (106). Unlike the other two women, Alice considers leaving her husband, Ned. But she admits that she "can't imagine doing it, not really"; she claims, "One of the revelations of [her] early middle age is the fact that [she] care[s] for him [...] If he were more successful, perhaps [she] could manage it" (105). Interestingly, Ned and Alice are the only couple out of the three that stay together. Mary divorces Con, and Laura flees from Dan and her two children to Canada.

### Abuse and Homophobia<sup>8</sup>

#### *A Home at the End of the World*

Writer Benita Eisler recalls a common middle-class experience during the 1950s:

As college classmates became close friends, I heard sagas of life at home that were Gothic horror stories. Behind the hedges and driveways of upper-middle-class suburbia were tragedies of madness, suicide, and [...] chronic and severe alcoholism [...] The real revelation for me was the role played by children in [...] keeping up appearances. Many of my new friends had been pressed into service early as happy smiling fronts, emissaries of family normalcy, cheerful proof that 'nothing was really wrong' at the Joneses" (Coontz 35).

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<sup>8</sup> Because no abuse occurs within *The Hours*, the novel will not be discussed in this section.

None of the children who experience abuse in Cunningham's novels seeks support by telling someone about the hardship he or she endures in the home. Cunningham's readers, however, observe the abuse directly. Cunningham's characteristic attention to the details of the spaces in which the abuse occurs ensures that readers envision the scenes clearly. By providing the perceptions of both the abuser and the abused, the author gives readers insight into the immediate and eventual effects the abuse has on the family. Similar to the "close friends" Eisler discusses above, Cunningham reveals some of the ugliness that lies within the well-kept homes of the upper-middle-class.

Jonathan, in *A Home at the End of the World*, does not suffer physical or sexual abuse from his father, Ned, but rather the emotional abuse that is part of Ned's homophobia. On a shopping trip with his mother when Jonathan is five, he demands and receives a baby doll. The type of doll Jon obtains is probably one that many American readers themselves had as children: it is made out of pink vinyl, has lids that shut when laid flat, and hair that grows from evenly spaced holes in its scalp. Jonathan's mother, Alice, teaches Jonathan how to bathe, diaper, and feed his "baby." One evening, right before dinner, Ned walks into the bathroom where Jonathan has just finished bathing the doll. Ned inquires about the "kid's" health, and Jonathan – as he holds the doll that has water leaking out of its joints and yellowish-green hair that has taken on "the smell of a wet sweater" – replies "Okay" (11). Ned says "Good Baby" and pats its "firm rubber cheek with one big finger"; Jonathan is "thrilled" when his father demonstrates affection toward the doll (11). Yet, Ned's subsequent actions disprove the sincerity of his acceptance of the doll, and the tone of the scene changes from tender to condemnatory. As Jonathan holds his recently bathed doll in a thick white towel, Ned "hunker[s] down

on his huge hams, expelling a breeze spiced with his scent,” and, in a question that is simultaneously meant to coerce Jonathan’s agreement, states, “You know boys don’t usually play with dolls, don’t you?” (11). Jonathan responds, “Well. Yes.” – which is an example of Jonathan’s characteristically measured and astute responses. Ned continues by telling Jonathan that he can play with his doll at home, but, because “other boys may not understand” why Jon likes to play with a doll, he is not allowed to take it out of the house (11). The only rationale Ned gives his son for not displaying his affection for the doll publicly is that other boys might misunderstand him. Instead of letting Jonathan experience for himself the various reactions that other boys may have to his doll, he makes his son agree to avoid them.

Many readers will concur that, to some degree, young boys who play with dolls in public are at greater risk for violence and teasing. Such readers will perceive Ned’s admonition as a protective measure. However, as the adult Jonathan reflects upon this incident, he realizes:

Standing small before him, holding the swaddled doll, I felt my first true humiliation. I recognized a deep inadequacy in myself, a foolishness. Of course I knew the baby was just a toy, and a slightly embarrassing one. A wrongful toy. How had I let myself drift into believing otherwise? (11).

Although Ned may be protecting his son from the cruelty of other children, the shame that his father’s “protection” causes Jonathan seems more hurtful than what he might have experienced as a result of teasing by his peers. The “deep inadequacy” and “foolishness” Jonathan perceives in himself as a young boy is a result of his knowledge that many consider a doll a “wrongful toy” for a boy, and, because a doll is “just a toy,” it seems as though Jonathan considers himself deficient and imprudent for not abandoning the doll and choosing toys his father would deem acceptable. Yet, Jonathan’s question

regarding how he let himself believe that his parents, particularly his father, would be different and accept him no matter what toys he chose, implies that, as a five-year-old, Jonathan expected more from him. In other words, he did not anticipate that his father, the man he idolizes, would uphold the status quo. Before he leaves for work, Ned asks Jonathan if he is “all right,” to which Jonathan replies, “Uh-huh” (11). Ned then states, “Good. Listen, I’ve got to go. You take care of the house” (11). Ned clearly establishes a “proper” role for Jonathan – maintaining the house while he is gone.

According to Jane Tompkins, characters in sentimental novels “act out situations that teach readers what kinds of behaviors to emulate or shun,” and readers most likely recognize the detrimental effects of Ned’s homophobia – his fear that Jonathan’s choice to play with a doll reveals his nascent homosexuality – not Alice’s decision to teach Jonathan how to care for a baby (xvii). As Nina Baym, another theorist of women’s fiction, points out, among “abusers of power [...] least guilty are the mothers”; indeed, Alice is, at this moment, free from censure – unless one views Alice’s demonstration of traditionally feminine tasks for her son as the cause of Ned’s ensuing punishment of Jonathan. Yet, where readers place the blame for this tragedy is not as important as recognizing that, by creating a scene readers can clearly envision, Cunningham has given his readers “a basis for remaking the social and political order in which [these] events take place” (Tompkins xvii). Ned conflates Jonathan’s gender with his imminent sexuality. Jonathan likes playing with dolls, which society deems appropriate for girls; therefore, in Ned’s mind, Jonathan’s preference for dolls indicates his son’s homosexuality. He punishes Jonathan because he fears having a gay son. Ned does not



have to support the legacy of homophobia in American society and politics, but he does, and his actions have a permanent, negative impact on his son's perception of himself.

What the doll symbolizes to Ned incites his anger for a second time, during which the effects are even more destructive because Jonathan intuitively feels that he can no longer depend upon his father's love. After he overhears a fight between his parents, Jonathan goes into their room, where his father sleeps. Jonathan – disappointed when his mere presence fails to arouse his father's concern – crawls into his father's bed and touches his elbow. Ned's expression upon waking “nearly stop[s] [Jonathan's] heart” because Ned's “fatherly aspect [has] withdrawn and in its place [is] only a man” (17). The five-year-old Jonathan “aches” for his father to reach down and bring him up on the bed with him, but he does not, and Jonathan claims that this gesture “might have rescued them both” (17). Had Ned held his son the way Jonathan wanted him to, Jonathan would not have lost his faith in his father's goodness. Ned could have assuaged his previous mistreatment of Jonathan by acting less selfishly in this situation. They may have both been “rescued” because the important bond between father and son would not have been broken. Instead, Ned brusquely tells Jonathan to go back to his own bed (18). Jonathan refuses because he “would settle for nothing less than consoling him” (18). When Jonathan realizes his father will not be comforted, the adult Jonathan recalls,

I grew balky and petulant. I hovered at the edge of tears, which strained his patience. I wanted him to require my presence. I needed to know that by my kindness and perseverance I was victorious in the long contest for his love (18).

Ned does not give Jonathan the filial affirmation he needs, and Jonathan realizes, “At that moment I came to know my mother's reticence, her delicate boned sense of remove. I had practiced imitating her and now, in a rush, I could do nothing else” (18). When his

father no longer acts like his father, Jonathan can no longer act like his son. Alice's reserve and distance from Ned may be her self-defense against feeling the rejection Jonathan experiences, and Jonathan, because he does not know how else to react to this trauma, assumes aspects of her personality. Ned's changeable, inscrutable love, which does not require regular affirmations of others' need for it, compels Jonathan to distrust it, to prepare himself for a time when his father may permanently withdraw it. After his father puts him to bed, Jonathan, "in a fury, slip[s] out of bed and [runs] across the room to [his] toy chest" where he pulls out his doll (18). In the middle of this drama, Cunningham describes the headboard of Jonathan's miniature bed, which has a cartoon rabbit that dances "ecstatically on a field of four-petaled pink flowers" (18). The image on the headboard evokes the frivolity and purity associated with an ideal childhood and starkly contrasts with the reality of Jonathan's childhood. Jonathan takes hold of his doll, and, "in a nearly hysterical tone of insistence," shouts, "This is mine" (18). The doll symbolizes a love that he can claim because he knows it will always be his. In response to Jonathan's desperate assertion, his father hollers back to him, "Jesus H. Christ. What the hell is the matter with you? *What?*" (19). Jonathan responds by restating "This [the doll] is mine" (19). Though Ned has the power to reject his son's displays of care and devotion, he cannot truly take away the doll – which will always remind both Jonathan and his father of the weakness in his father's character. The pathos of this scene is clear: little Jonathan standing small in front of his father and clutching his care-worn doll; Ned looking down at his son, realizing that his words have destroyed something in them both.

The narrator of this scene, Jonathan as an adult, states that his father's "singular question would continue crackling in the back of my head like a faulty electrical

connection” (19). Ned’s initial reaction to Jonathan’s doll made Jonathan feel “inadequate”; when he asks Jonathan to tell him what is wrong with him, the question maintains a crackling that is similar to a “faulty electrical connection.” In the first instance, Jonathan locates the problem within himself; in the second, the conflict is created by a damaged connection, which suggests Jonathan’s awareness of his father’s own defectiveness. Clearly, Ned believes that men and women, girls and boys should behave in ways that conform to his culture’s notion of “masculinity” and “femininity.” Ned’s belief obstructs his ability to create a meaningful bond with his son.

The text allows room for acknowledgment of the feelings that fuel Ned’s behavior, which suggests that readers are not meant to revile him. Jonathan thinks that his father “had wanted so much, and the world was shrinking. His wife shunned him, his business was not a success, and his only son – there would be no others – loved dolls and quiet indoor games” (19). The text gives readers the opportunity to empathize with Ned, through Jonathan’s point of view. Ned married a woman. He expected that she would adore him the way she did as a teenager. His wife gave birth to a son, and he anticipated a son who would play rough games and prefer the outdoors. The theatre he owns fails to draw crowds. The world he had believed would accommodate his desires shrinks each time his reality does not fit his image of what he wanted it to be. Like Alice and Jonathan, the nuclear family model – because it severely limits personal expression – fails to bring Ned contentment, too.

### *Flesh and Blood*

As a child, Constantine Stassos – Billy/Will’s father – reveals a need to prove his “masculine” competence to his parents and two older brothers, and the severity of the

adult Con's insecurity manifests in his abuse of his oldest daughter, Susan, and his only son, Billy. When he is a young boy Con secretly tries to create a garden that will yield produce better than his family's garden. He wants to show them his superiority as a provider and disprove their perception of him as "the runt, of whom so little [is] expected" (4). Con believes that through "the push of his own will" he can grow perfect vegetables from the cracked dirt of his parents' land in Greece (4). Apparently, Con is not successful in this endeavor. He never overcomes his feeling of inadequacy, which the text reveals through regular inclusion of the areas in his life in which Con thinks he is lacking, e.g. his relationship with his wife, his competence as a breadwinner, and his value as a father.

As in *A Home at the End of the World*, the first rupture between father (Con) and son (Billy) occurs when the son is only five. As Mary carefully puts Easter baskets together for her three children (Susan, Billy, and Zoe), Billy comes down the stairs and wants to see the baskets on the table. Con, who sits at the kitchen table with Mary, becomes irritated when Billy does not heed Mary's gentle requests that he go back to bed. Mary's look of panic when Billy briefly sees the baskets informs Con that she places a lot of importance on the element of gleeful surprise that accompanies children's early morning discovery of their Easter booty. The text suggests that Con perceives Mary's disappointment as his fault. While Billy continues to struggle to see the baskets, Con feels "a hard little pellet of anger forming in his throat" (17). The third-person narrator of this scene explains,

Constantine fought to contain himself. This is my little boy, he told himself. My boy is just a curious kid. But another voice, a voice not quite his own, railed against the boy for unnatural smallness, for a growing tendency to whine. For ruining Mary's surprise. These new traditions

were important and precious, these visitations by bearded saints and fairies and rabbits. They had to be carefully guarded (17).

Though Con tries to talk himself out of an irrational anger toward his son, the other voice, the one that is “not quite his own” (perhaps it is his father’s voice condemning Con for his own “unnatural smallness”), provokes Con to perceive his son’s “feminine” appearance (Billy’s frailty) and behavior (his whining) as an occasion for punishment. Constantine, a Greek immigrant desperately trying to realize the “American Dream,” takes it upon himself to protect the “sanctity” of American traditions and what they imply about family and values by beating the son who uncovers them.

The narrator describes the violence that occurs in the Stassos kitchen in excruciating detail:

Constantine rose. The look of fear that crossed Billy’s face further tightened the constriction in his throat [...] He might have conquered his own anger if Billy had remained defiant. But Billy began to cry, and without quite having decided to, Constantine was shaking him, saying “Shut up. Shut up and go back to bed” [...] Constantine had lost himself in his own fury, and with ferocious clarity he shook Billy until Billy’s face grew twisted and blurred [...] He set Billy roughly onto the floor, where he collapsed [...] He pulled Billy to his feet, held him upright, and aimed him toward the stairs. “Go,” he shouted, and he slapped his son’s bottom hard enough to send him stumbling halfway into the living room before he fell again, howling, gasping for breath” (18).

Constantine continues his demonstration of destructive rage by sweeping his arm across the table, which sends the baskets and their carefully arranged contents flying around the room. Constantine destroys what he had ostensibly sought to protect. He lifts his arm to smash it into Mary’s painstakingly handwrought bunny cake, only to realize that he cannot push his rage that far. This scene ends with Constantine promising to be better and putting the contents back into the plastic eggs. For the Stassos family, as for other families, the advent of Easter is not as much a celebration of religion and family as it is a

realization of the burden such holidays place on their budget and performance of a traditional family upholding American values.

The novel contains another explicit scene of Con's abuse of Billy when Billy is twelve. Mary and Con are engaged in a dispute regarding the apparent disrespect each gives to the other's work. Con does not think that Mary gives him enough credit for the money he earns, whereas Mary claims that Con does appreciate the amount of work required of a woman who is the primary caretaker of their children and maintains the home (44). Billy, who is "still as skinny as he'd been at five," comes into the kitchen and grabs a Coke from the refrigerator (45). The narrator's comment regarding Billy's still small build confirms that Billy is no better able to physically defend himself against his father's attacks than when he was five. Constantine feels "a constriction in his throat, a spasm of ownership. That Coke is mine [he thinks], I paid for it" (45). Apparently, Con does not feel as though Billy sufficiently appreciates the work he must do to earn the money that enables him to provide such things. But Constantine does not attempt to engage in a discussion with his son regarding his feelings that his efforts are not recognized. As in the previously discussed scene of abuse, Con's throat constricts, which is a psychosomatic response to his anger. He loses the ability to communicate. Having learned no other way to deal with this emotion, he communicates his frustration by beating his son.

As in the previous scene, Billy does not retreat, even as his father becomes increasingly aggravated. Billy, who had been studying geography upstairs, quizzes his father's knowledge of geography facts. When Con cannot answer Billy's questions correctly, Billy starts asking his father progressively easier questions – questions such as,

“How do you spell rhythm?” and “What’s seven times nine?” (47). Con’s building anger is made apparent through his words, the tone of his voice, and his actions, but so, too, is Billy’s. After both Con and Mary have told Billy to go upstairs, Billy turns, and “His thin face was swarming with an emotion Constantine couldn’t name. It might have been rage. It might have been terror” (47).<sup>9</sup> Billy’s face reveals that, even as he experiences terror, his response is to fight. Billy cannot fight back, though, and his father hits him with the “heel of his hand, a smack solid and sure as a hammer driving a nail deep into pine” (48). The narrator informs us that Constantine, as he hits his son, feels as though he is “obliterating a weakness in the house [...] [and] cauterizing a wound” (48). Billy is not the “weakness” in the house, but to Constantine, Billy symbolizes his own weakness. Constantine’s homophobia, which seems to stem from his insecurity regarding his manhood, destroys the bond he could have had with his only son.

Susan, the oldest child in the Stassos family, refuses to believe in the severity of her father’s emotional and psychological problems. On the evening of the night that the preceding clash between Con and Billy transpired, Susan finds Billy outside, smoking a cigarette. Billy informs her that their father hit him repeatedly. Susan responds, “Daddy’s going through a hard time [...] He has a lot of responsibilities now. I think we need to be patient” (58). Susan, a cheerleader who dates the captain of the football team, has been into the homes of the people who live on broad, tree-lined avenues such as theirs. She knows that her father thinks that he is as well-liked as the rest of the professional men in their neighborhood. Susan, however, realizes that their house –

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<sup>9</sup> In yet another altercation with his son, this time when Billy is seventeen, Constantine finally feels something toward Billy other than homophobia. As Billy tries to take off one of his boots (to show his father that he doesn’t need what his money can buy), Con, for the first time in his memory, “pities” and “admires” his son for his “rage and shrill potency” (109). Constantine then says Billy’s name “affectionately” in an attempt to smooth things over. Billy walks out on his father.

unlike the homes of other men – is an “imitation” (56). Still, Susan appreciates what her father is trying to do: provide a lifestyle for his family that is as good as that of the other men. When she asks Billy to be “patient,” she implies that, once their father is content with what he has accomplished, he will not express his stress through aggression. She ends her conversation with Billy after Billy tells her that one day he is going to kill their father. In response, Susan calls Billy “stupid” (59). She does not take seriously the extent of Bobby’s animosity toward their father.

Constantine’s inability to deal with his emotions eventually destroys the relationship he has with his oldest daughter, Susan, too. Susan is warming milk on the stove when her father comes home. She knows that he has been drinking. Con tells Susan, who has been chosen as a potential homecoming queen, “You will be queen [...] Yes. Oh, yes, you will be chosen” (60). Constantine may believe that Susan’s crowning as queen will validate the work he has done to integrate himself into American culture. As Susan sits with him at the table, he puts his hand on hers. Susan looks at her father and “recognized what was in his face, the love and the hunger and the bottomless grief” (61). Her father says, “Susie,” and the narrator explains, “His face was imploring as a baby’s, full of a baby’s inchoate, violent need” (61). Susan tells her father, “I’m here [...] I’m right here” (61). The narrator describes Susan’s thoughts before she kisses her father:

She was frightened and vaguely excited. It wasn’t desire; not exactly desire. She saw the power she could have. She heard her name being called out on the football field, saw a crown lifted in the floodlit air. Slowly, with tenderness, she took [her father’s] big suffering head in her slender hands and guided his face to her own [...] She thought he would pull away. He didn’t. She was frightened. She let the kiss go on (61, 62).



In Susan's mind, her ability to satisfy her father's needs and repair the damage he has done to the family seems connected with her potential to rise above her family's lifestyle of "imitation."

Once the kissing and hugging starts, Susan does not know how to stop it. The narrator explains that Susan believes if she were to say no, the behavior she and her father engage in would be given a name. Readers can assume that the name it would be given is incest. On the night that Susan is not crowned homecoming queen, her boyfriend, Todd, proposes to her. Earlier, Susan had thought of her father and wondered how she could say no to him, now that she was "less than she'd been" (79). She once had the potential to be homecoming queen, the epitome of the promise of American beauty. She agrees to marry Todd because "If she and Todd went home that night and announced their engagement, she'd have a new language to say no in. She'd be protected" (81). Susan, who once tried desperately to heal her father through tenderness – only to be threatened by it – escapes her home and the abuse that occurs within it in the only way that is available to her, marriage. Susan – a member of a new generation – makes the same mistake as her mother when she marries Todd for a reason that has less to do with love than it does with need.

#### Images of Home: What the Protagonists Remember

##### *A Home at the End of the World*

Like Jonathan, Bobby begins telling his story with a memory from when he was five. Whereas Jonathan's memory evokes his primary desire for his father's affection, Bobby remembers Yasgur's farm. Through Bobby's point of view, readers are privy to the interiors of the three homes owned by the adults who raised him: the home in which

he lives with his whole family, his home without his mother and brother, and the Glovers' home. Bobby's childhood, adolescent, and young adult experiences indicate the ways in which a home that appears to have everything one needs can fail to provide sustenance if the individuals who inhabit it are miserable.

On the day the farm impresses itself on Bobby's mind, Burt (Bobby's father) drives home in a new, albeit used, Chevrolet convertible. Isabel, Bobby's mother and Burt's wife, saves rubber bands and puts them on doorknobs. She washes used plastic sandwich bags and hangs them on the clothesline to dry. The text makes it clear that Isabel, a woman who displays her family's thrift, will not appreciate her husband's purchase. Isabel's stern remonstrance of Burt echoes in Bobby's pronouncements that "the car has to go," and his mother "never sets foot" in it (3). Before Burt returns the car, he takes his sons, Carlton and Bobby, for a ride out to the country where they experience a bonding moment inspired not so much by the windblown ecstasy of a ride in a convertible but by their passing view of a thriving farm (3).

Whereas the convertible ultimately shames Bobby and his parents (his older brother, Carlton, simply enjoys it) because it represents a lifestyle obviously beyond their means (even the five-year-old Bobby wonders if his father's impetuosity indicates his loosening grip on reality), the American pastoral transforms Bobby because he perceives it as an attainable future replete with tranquility, care, and contentment. Bobby's view of the farm has a cinematic quality in that it is both panoramic and intimate, imparting a collective and individual view of the farm's classic beauty and enduring economy. The "sea of swaying wheat" "anchors" the outbuildings, which are made of white clapboard that looks "molten" in the light of the setting autumnal sun (4). Cows graze and munch

under cool shade cast by old trees with orange and yellow leaves (4). The Morrow males' collective reverence for the farm, revealed through their reluctance to either speak or move while passing it, encourages readers to interpret the farm as a wholly familiar, yet sacrosanct creation of American culture. Bobby finally breaks the bucolic spell by shouting, "We're home," a declaration tacitly accepted by Bobby's father, his brother and, perhaps, the novel's readers, who accept Bobby's invitation to consider the farm as their home, too (4).

Bobby "[doesn't] know what he is saying" when he asserts their homecoming, and his uncharacteristic exuberance suggests the rarity of his seeing a dwelling that kindles such optimism (4). Imagining his father, brother, and himself as products of this quintessentially wholesome environment makes Bobby feel as though "The world is gaudy with possibilities"; it is a fantastical world in which they are prodigal sons driving home in a convertible from the brash hub of city life, finally ready to settle into their lives as modest farmers. While the males in the Morrow family tacitly experience this dream together, the only female in the family, Isabel, may be cursing her wasted beauty as she tersely scrubs a floor in their suburban home (4). She plays no part in Bobby's reverie of home, nor does a consideration of the labor involved in sustaining it.

In the first five paragraphs of *A Home at the End of the World*, Cunningham accomplishes an important preliminary feat for a successful sentimental/domestic novel: he puts his audience "in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event" (Tompkins 127). Cunningham's ability to move his readers to feel, think, and act in certain ways depends upon the degree to which he establishes the veracity and merit of his primary characters' desires.

Though the back of the novel's jacket indicates issues concerning homosexuality as one of its themes, readers are first introduced to Bobby, an earnest, five-year-old boy with conservative values. Unlike his older brother, Carlton, Bobby cannot jump into the convertible without worrying about the implications of his father's sudden impulsiveness. Bobby's actions are more similar to his father's than his brother's, insofar as he "enjoys" pulling Carlton back into the car when Carlton stands on the seat and screams wildly into the rushing air (4). When Bobby takes on the paternal role, he feels "useful" (4). Through our first encounter with Bobby, we learn that he is a sensitive, caring, and purposeful young boy. These features of Bobby's character do not change, but later in his life, some of the characters mistakenly construe Bobby's reticence as indifference. Readers must not make this same mistake; by doing so they will overlook the appeal of Bobby's simple love. Through Bobby's memory, Cunningham informs us that his novel is, indeed, about home. The homes in which we were raised and the homes of which we dream; the homes we leave and the homes we choose.

The dining-room wallpaper in the home in which Bobby is raised depicts a farm that shares similarities with Yasgur's, and Bobby notices it during moments that reveal how far his ideal is from the reality of the home life of his 1950s nuclear family. One afternoon, Bobby comes home to find his mother washing fruit. Bobby observes her as she "sighs over an apple's imperfection. The curtains sport blue teapots. [His] mother works the apple with a scrub brush. She believes they come coated with poison" (26). The simple description of the curtains and Isabel's determination to keep the apples' contamination from spreading into her home effectively brings readers into the kitchen of the Morrow family by imparting readers with an image and impression of the matriarch,

Isabel, whose actions influence everyone else who lives in the home. Because police cars have been “browsing [their] house like sharks,” Bobby’s mother asks him if Carlton is taking drugs (26). Bobby tells his mother that Carlton is not doing drugs, but she is not satisfied with his response. With scrub brush still in hand, Isabel follows her son out of the kitchen. Bobby hears his father’s homemade clock chime in the half hour and heads toward it. He knows that in a matter of seconds his mother will strike him for walking away from her while she is trying to speak with him. He gets as far as the rubber plant before she “collars” him (27). Isabel tells her son, “I told you not to walk away,” and “cuffs [Bobby] a good one with the brush. She catches [him] on the ear and sets it ringing” (27). Bobby stands still, lets his mother know that he “received the message,” then resumes walking (27). Isabel hits Bobby again, this time on the back of his head, and Bobby recalls that it is a hit hard enough to make him “see colors” (27). Bobby keeps walking, remembers that their home runs west to east, and notes that every step he takes away from his mother brings him closer to Yasgur’s farm. In Bobby’s mind, escaping his mother precedes his ability to realize his perfect home.

Bobby meets Jonathan in school when both of them are thirteen, and Bobby soon becomes a regular dinner guest in the Glovers’ home. By the time Bobby meets Jonathan, his brother and mother both had died tragically in the home. Carlton dies when he runs through the sliding glass door, and later, Isabel overdoses on prescription medications. Though the Morrow house may have lacked the comfort Bobby observes in the Glovers’ home before the death of his mother and brother, the Morrow home becomes even less nurturing when just Bobby’s father and he reside in it. By this time, Bobby has begun frequently eating dinner with the Glovers. Whereas Alice cooks

gourmet meals and attempts to engage the boys in conversation, Bobby and his father take turns cooking and struggle to carry on a discussion. One evening, Bobby's father prepares chopped steak and squares of frozen hash browns; he drinks Scotch from "a glass with pictures of orange slices round and evenly spoked as wagon wheels" (75). The glass is a remnant from a time when it was, most likely, more frequently filled with orange juice or milk, rather than the liquor Burt drinks to quell his sorrow. After dinner, Bobby places his plate on the stack piled next to the sink where "An enormous fly, iridescent, roams ecstatically over a quarter moon of yellowed lamb fat" (77). Though the glasses are the same and the curtains "still sport blue teapots," the disrepair of the Morrow home reveals the hopelessness of those who live in it (77). Bobby, who walks to the Glovers' home after this meal, observes the home until every light is turned off for the night. Then, he walks in "a slow circle around it, with stars and planets shining overhead" (79). He claims that he "orbit[s] the Glovers' house," which suggests Bobby's comparison of himself to a planet and the home as the sun, dependent upon the light, warmth, and life both the sun and the home provide (79).

### *Flesh and Blood*

Though Constantine makes his living building homes for families, he cannot create the sense of home he wants for himself. Constantine meets Kazanaskis, the man who becomes his business partner, in a tavern one afternoon. According to Con, it is his "Greek good fortune" that brings him into contact with this man (33). Constantine, who was "raised on thrift hard as bone," wins the respect of Kazanaskis, the developer, because he utilizes the cheapest materials and knows how to cut the costs of labor (33). The homes they build repeat themselves in series of three: one has a gabled roof, another

features a small front porch, and the third has symmetrical bay windows. The homes are popular because they are inexpensive and have nice touches, such as picket fences, false dormers, brand-new appliances, rumpus rooms, and two-car garages. Constantine's financial success rescues his family from living in a reproduction. The home Constantine builds his family has two fireplaces, thirty-eight windows, and a front door that is "flanked by carved wooden columns white and fluted as wedding cakes" (43).

Constantine fulfills Mary's desire for a more affluent lifestyle than her parents have. He proves that he is a capable provider. Still, neither he nor Mary demonstrates contentment. Because Constantine does not experience the soothing effects he attributes to a home within his own home, he experiences them vicariously by watching the families who live in the homes he has built. The text suggests that Con would be more able to experience domestic fulfillment if he could realize that the views of contentment he sees are the result of the labors inside the home, too.

Constantine's financial success enables him to buy his family an elaborate house, which sits on a full acre (a big change from the "scrap" of yard they had behind their first home). Mary surely could not have imagined how well Con would do. Yet, despite the home and all of the perfectly ordered tools hung on the pegboard in the garage, Constantine, once or twice a month, drives to the village he has built, chooses a house to observe, and drives home "in a chaos of yearning" (42). He imagines that Mary, or someone like her, sits beside him in the car while he smokes cigarette after cigarette, watching as lights turn on then off, as people go and come back. If Mary were in the car with him, he could prove to her all that he has accomplished, the lifestyles he has created.

But domestic harmony cannot be produced by mere materials. The text presents Con as always an outsider still looking in.

### The Hours

Laura Brown, Richard's mother, does not feel comfortable in her own home. Upon waking in the morning, she is overcome with guilt. She feels as though she should have gotten up before her husband and son, so she would have been able to serve them breakfast. Especially because it is her husband's birthday, she feels it her responsibility to create a perfect day for him. A day that begins with a savory breakfast, hot coffee, and a young son and dutiful wife seems to Laura what his birthday should be like. But she cannot rise early because she stayed up late to finish a book. She cannot get out of bed until she has started the book that waits for her. Through reading the book, the narrator declares, "Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No, that's not it exactly – she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world" (37). The narrator is careful to represent Laura's actions accurately. The initial statement, that she is trying to "lose" herself, implies that Laura Brown wants to forget who she is. Changing "lose" to "keep" means that Laura wants to retain her pre-marriage, pre-motherhood, identity as a quiet, plain girl who reads a lot. She keeps herself by withdrawing from her reality into fiction. Mrs. Dalloway, the protagonist of Virginia Woolf's novel by the same name, animates the bedroom she shares with her husband in a way that neither she nor her husband does. After reading the first five lines of *Mrs. Dalloway*, "already her bedroom (no, *their* bedroom) feels more densely inhabited, more actual, because a character named Mrs. Dalloway is on her way to buy flowers" (37). The narrator suggests that, in Laura's mind, the life of Woolf's character is more real, deliberate, and profound than the life she



shares with her husband. Before stepping down the last of her stairs, Laura compares her feeling to that of an actress waiting in the wings, one who is “not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed” (43). To Laura, being a wife and mother does not come naturally; she knows what society expects of her, but on mornings such as this, the role takes too much effort for her to perform.

Once Laura bakes her husband’s birthday cake, she takes her son to a woman’s house down the street so she can be alone for a couple of hours. The narrator explains that three things – the child, the cake, and the kiss – cause her to panic (142). To allay her nervous energy, she must leave her home. While lying on the bed in a hotel room, she contemplates suicide. When you enter a hotel, the narrator explains, “you leave the particulars of your own life and enter a neutral zone, [...] where dying does not seem quite so strange” (151). Laura thinks, “It could, [...] be deeply comforting; it might feel so free: to simply go away. To say to them all, I couldn’t manage, you had no idea; I didn’t want to try anymore” (151). The neutrality of the hotel room enables Laura to focus on thoughts concerning her self. She is not distracted by thoughts of what she “should” be doing. The clarity she gains by realizing death as an alternative to a life of trying to be what her son and husband need subsequently leads her to realize that she cannot kill herself. After giving birth to her second child, she leaves her family. She moves to Canada, becomes a librarian, and never remarries.

### Images of Home: What the Protagonists Create

#### *A Home at the End of the World*

Readers’ first glimpse of the apartment that Jonathan shares with Clare comes from Bobby’s point of view, and the interior design of their apartment indicates a

difference between what Jonathan desires in a home from what his parents' house portrayed. The French doors and hollyhocks of Ned and Alice's home suggest a classic attractiveness. Bobby describes Jonathan and Clare's apartment, which Jon admits that Clare "had a lot to say about decorating," thusly:

You stepped straight into the living room, which was painted orange-red, the color of a flowerpot. There was a sofa covered with a leopard-skin sheet, and a huge painting of a naked blue woman twisting ecstatically to reach something that hovered just off the edge of the canvas. The room was full of light. Streams of it tumbled in through the barred windows, which were bracketed by thick fifties curtains crawling with green and red leaves. If you pulled those curtains the sunlight would snap out like electricity. They were as weighty and businesslike as the metal door we had just passed through (133).

The colorful décor of the main living areas reveals more about Clare's personality than Jonathan's, but it also shows that Clare and Jon have a relationship in which each are given the space to express themselves as they choose. The remarkable amount of light that comes through the windows of the apartment indicates openness and a preference to let in light rather than keep the curtains closed for privacy. The painting of the blue, naked woman in the suggestive pose indicates an appreciation of the female body and sensuality in general. When Bobby first sees the apartment Jonathan shares with Clare, he cannot help but exclaiming, "Yow [...] This is your *place*" (133). Bobby's emphasis on the word "place" speaks to the in-your-face originality of the apartment, made possible by Clare's efforts to individualize it. Jonathan also expresses aspects of himself through the way in which he decorates his room. As Jonathan shows Bobby his bedroom, he admits that he "got a little carried away" with the "Zen thing," and readers know what he is talking about when Bobby describes the room as having a futon, all white walls with no pictures, and a paper lamp with thin, wire legs that stand on a bare

wooden floor (133). Whereas Clare feels most comfortable living in a place where countless items reflect who she is, Jonathan's bare room suggests that he either does not want to disclose aspects of himself so freely, or he does not feel it is necessary for him to devote energy toward making his room unique. Importantly, the home that Clare and Jonathan have established, unlike the home of Jonathan's or Bobby's parents, displays aspects of the people who inhabit it. The space is not merely functional but also representative of whom they are.

The home Jon, Clare, and Bobby create together accommodates their changing needs and reflects their maturity. Bobby explains,

After three weeks we found a two-story brown house five miles out of Woodstock, a place with a motherly, slightly insane dignity whose advantages mostly balanced its faults. Its walls stood on a solid foundation. The price was low – a desperation sale. Light from an alfalfa field floated through the rooms as if the passage of time was man's silliest delusion. Well water clear and cold as virtue itself flowed from the taps (260).

Bobby's personification of the home calls to mind aspects of each character. The location, Woodstock, has been the place Bobby has been trying to get to since his brother first told him about it when he was a child. All three characters, especially after Rebecca is born, demonstrate their idiosyncratic approach to parenting – their “motherly, slightly insane dignity whose advantages mostly balanced [their] faults.” And, finally, the relationship between Bobby, Jon, and Clare is, like the home, built on a solid foundation.

### *Flesh and Blood*

Both Billy and Zoe rebel against the superficial order of their parents' home by choosing places after they graduate from high school that signify no concern for order at all. Billy's best friends, Charlotte and Inez, rename him “Will” because they think Billy

too childish a name for him. About the name, the narrator informs us, “The name Will became his first sly privilege, then his right, and finally an outward fact,” which could also represent the label “homosexual,” since Will explores his sexual attraction to men during this time (119). In addition, “Billy belonged to the old past, the dying era of cars and sorrow and colonial greed, the prosperous desolation of houses” (119). He no longer inhabits the milieu in which some desperately seek pleasure through ostentatious displays of wealth. Billy’s new life as Will includes the apartment he shares with Charlotte and Inez, which is located on the top floor of a “faded brown house on Massachusetts Avenue” (119). The narrator goes on to tell us that “Paisley bedspreads blew from its rattling windows; silver chimes glittered fretfully on its prim front porch” (119). Will “adores the house,” loves Charlotte for “being wry and mannered and faintly masculine” and Inez for “her willful and methodical rejection of common sense” (119). Will appreciates his home mostly because of the people with whom he shares it. He tells Inez and Charlotte all of his secrets and even begins inventing new ones (119). He calls them “the Holy Sisters of Permission”; unlike his parents, Charlotte and Inez accept Will and their home as they are (119).

The first – and only time – Constantine and Mary see Will’s college domicile occurs on the day he graduates from Harvard. From Mary’s point of view, the house looks as though it is on the verge of collapsing into a dusty heap. Mary checks the address to make sure they have come to the right place, and Con holds Mary’s elbow as they walk across the porch. Mary’s perception of both Will and his apartment’s appearance leads her to believe that she does not know her son at all. The narrator describes Mary’s thoughts in the following manner:

Billy and Zoe sat together on the sofa, which looked as though it might be infested with something that would get into their hair [...] She saw, suddenly, that Billy's and Zoe's hobo clothes [...] were part of a larger perversity. There they sat, her son and daughter, heir and heiress to centuries of daily struggle [...] There they sat in rags, hair unkempt, slumped like the poorest of white trash on a piece of furniture that had been dowdy and threadbare even when new. For the first time in her life, Mary knew her son as a stranger [...] someone who might do anything, whose head was full of thoughts and desires she couldn't imagine (176).

Mary bought her children expensive clothes and expressed to them the importance of looking well-kempt, carefully "put together." The "hobo clothes," which she once considered harmless, she now realizes expose aspects of Billy's and Zoe's personality she had never before considered. Their apparent disinterest in clothes and apartment furnishings reveal a vast generational difference. Though her Sicilian grandmother did not have enough money to buy drinking glasses, she still kept them lined up in "immaculate" rows (176). Mary has demonstrated her regard for her grandmother's cleanliness by keeping her own house spotless. Billy and Zoe, who appear to not care how they look or the environment in which they live, flout the money and values of their family. Because Billy does not share the same values as she does, Mary does not know how to relate to him.

The first home in which Zoe lives after her parents' resembles Billy's, insofar as it is rather sordid and permits her to live as she chooses. She lives across the Hell's Angels' headquarters in New York in a fourth-floor walk-up with her friends Ford and Sharon (189). She and Sharon drink wine and smoke marijuana; Ford plays guitar on the streets. Cassandra, the drag queen who Zoe recruits as a surrogate mother, visits her daily. She drinks coffee, asks about the details of Zoe's life, and offers advice.

The home Zoe shares with her son, Jamal, evokes a kitschy domestic charm. Will describes the home as not “profound enough for mortal illness [because] it lacked solemnity and weight” (321). When he rushes to visit Zoe upon hearing that she has AIDS, he walks in to find that

Zoe’s apartment was the same apartment, bright and shabby. Here was the big kitchen with its broad-planked floor and its smells of cinnamon and coffee. Here were her chipped plates and unmatched cups stacked behind glass cupboards, here the faded pictures of Mexican saints and the awful amateur paintings she collected in thrift stores (321).

Cunningham’s describes Zoe’s apartment similar to the way Stowe describes Uncle Tom’s cabin, insofar as the details he chooses show readers more about Zoe’s personality through the home she has created. One can infer Zoe’s contentment: her apartment is bright, which calls to mind clarity. A large kitchen that smells of coffee and cinnamon suggests that much time has been spent in it, baking and visiting. Though her plates are chipped and the cups unmatched, they are clean and stacked. Her sense of humor and irony is conveyed through the thrift store pictures that hang on her wall. Cunningham details the domestic spaces of his characters as a means for readers to feel more familiar, intimate with them.

### *The Hours*

Both Clarissa and Richard remember the summer they spent together in a house on Cape Cod as one of the best times in their lives. Clarissa decides that “It was the house, really” that made her feel as though “she could kiss her grave, formidable best friend down by the pond, it seemed that they could sleep together in a strange combination of lust and innocence, and not worry about what, if anything, it meant” (95).

The “ecstatic unreality” of the house and the weather, according to Clarissa, enabled her and Richard to become more intimate friends (96).

After visiting Richard in his home, which is the space of a man dying of AIDS, Clarissa returns to the expensive apartment she shares with her partner, Sally. At first she feels better upon entering her home. She reflects upon her and Sally’s “impossible good fortune”; she is “struck” by the apartment’s beauty (91). Located in West Village in New York, it has two floors and a garden, “pine-planked floors, [...] [a] bank of casement windows that open onto the bricked patio where emerald moss grows in shallow stone troughs and a small circular fountain, a platter of clear water, bubbles at the touch of a switch” (91). Not long after she enters her home she feels “dislocated” (91). She thinks, “This is the kitchen of an acquaintance, pretty enough but not her taste, full of foreign smells” (91). The sophisticated kitchen she and Sally decorated does not evoke the Clarissa she was at eighteen. Because she just returned from seeing Richard, she is still thinking about their relationship and the house, the place that made anything in her life seem possible.

By describing the homes his characters inhabit throughout each novel, Cunningham portrays how they reflect the characters’ changing mindset. An attractive home can make a person feel pride, but not necessary a sense of belonging and comfort. Through the characters and their homes, readers are reminded that family is what truly constitutes a home, not decoration.

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## DOMESTICATING AIDS

Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours* critique the heterosexual marriages that conform to the nuclear family model of the 1950s in order to provide a basis for readers' appreciation of the protagonists' struggle to create more loving, open relationships than those their parents demonstrate. In each of the novels an important character(s) contracts AIDS and stabilizes the protagonists' commitment to maintain the alternative families they have formed. In *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston compiles and interprets interviews she conducted during the 1980s with gay men and lesbians on the topic of kinship. Weston's anthropological work reveals the truthfulness of Cunningham's representation of the complex emotions experienced by some gay men and lesbians during the decade that the gravity of the AIDS crisis became known. Like nineteenth-century American women authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Cunningham utilizes domestic spaces as a way to enable readers to comprehend the disruption that contentious public issues create within the home. In *A Home* and *The Hours*, the characters with AIDS – Erich and Richard, respectively – depend upon the care and support of people with whom they are not biologically related. Erich's parents disown him once they learn of his homosexuality, and Richard's parents apparently do not take an interest in their son's well-being. The social work that Cunningham's novels accomplish includes portraying the ways in which AIDS drives his characters to combat the discrimination against and fear of PWAs (People With Aids) by embracing them and offering unconditional love and support when their biological families do not.

Cunningham's novels not only qualify as American domestic and gay and lesbian fiction, but also fiction written about AIDS, and James Cady's essay, "Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing About AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*," offers readers unfamiliar with the tradition of AIDS writing basic guidelines in which to understand Cunningham's contributions to this subgenre of gay and lesbian writing. Cady argues that AIDS literature usually falls into one of two categories, immersive or counterimmersive, which he claims represent the two main literary responses to the "profound denial that has dominated worldwide cultural reaction to AIDS" (244). The name Cady gives each category refers to its most distinctive feature. Authors who write "immersive" AIDS literature *immerse* their readers in the "special horrors" of AIDS and offer them no "relief or buffer" from "prolonged [...] direct imaginative confrontations with the disease" (Cady 144). Counterimmersive writers *counter* the impact of the reality of AIDS by presenting characters who are often in a state of denial about AIDS and using "distancing devices" that protect the reader from a too disturbing encounter with it (Cady 244).

Cady offers readers two categories to think about methods of narrative treatment regarding AIDS, as well as a means to comprehend the relative merits of the work of authors who deal with AIDS in their texts; however, as one learns with most binary constructions, the terms immersive and counterimmersive do not allow room for texts that demonstrate aspects of both, which all three of the aforementioned novels by Michael Cunningham do. Aspects of Cunningham's work qualify as immersive, particularly scenes that include one of the characters with AIDS – Erich, Zoe, Cassandra, or Richard – and during which the narrators explicate their feelings regarding the

relationship they maintain with the character and their reaction toward the character's rapidly deteriorating health and appearance. However, because the creation of new family forms represents the main theme of Cunningham's novels, frequent revisions of family and domesticity outnumber the scenes during which readers directly confront the characters most affected by AIDS and the issues with which they must cope. If texts do not sufficiently immerse readers in the range of emotions felt by those who experience the death of those from AIDS, Cady suggests that such texts do little to create the sense of emergency needed to provoke readers to take action against the ineffectiveness of the American government in treating and preventing AIDS. While Cady's essay assists readers in recognizing the weaknesses of texts written by AIDS writers who fail to sufficiently draw readers into the terror of the disease, it does not encourage readers to explore the significance of myriad forms of representation regarding the crisis.

Cunningham's novels primarily focus on the issue of family and secondarily on the impact AIDS has on families. The work of Kath Weston demonstrates the ways in which AIDS can both destroy and strengthen relationships. Weston reports, "When people told relatives and friends they had AIDS, kin ties were reevaluated, constituted, or alienated in the act, defined by who (if anyone) stepped forward to offer love, care, and financial assistance for the protracted and expensive battles with opportunistic infections that accompany this disease" (186). In Cunningham's novels readers experience AIDS mostly through the ways in which the protagonists' conception of family changes when someone for whom they care contracts HIV/AIDS. In consideration of Cady's method of categorizing AIDS texts, the intense focus on family and domestic spaces in *A Home*, *Flesh and Blood*, and, to a lesser degree, *The Hours*, disqualifies them from being

completely immersive because readers spend so much time engaging in issues in the protagonists' lives that do not directly arise from the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, the families formed at the end of the novels function to counter the "special horrors" of AIDS with images of progress and hope for the future.

In a *Publisher's Weekly* interview with Michael Coffey, Cunningham explains,

I think my interest in the post-nuclear family, which might include, say, a biological mother, a same-sex lover and the drag queen who lives downstairs, probably comes from being a gay man living through the AIDS epidemic. Everybody writes about what they know, obviously. I have lived through an epidemic that involves seeing all kinds of things, maybe one of the most significant of which is seeing nonbiological families come through in a way that biological families might not (53).

Cunningham's novels present the flaws of rigidly heteronormative families and subsequently reveal the ways in which individualized, "post-nuclear," family formations offer PWAs the emotional and financial support they need – the support members of their biological families will not provide. The fiction of Michael Cunningham contributes to the battle to find a cure for AIDS by showing readers that a cure will not be found until the general public recognizes their responsibility to help find it. He makes readers aware that issues concerning HIV and AIDS filter into all sections of the social fabric.

Cunningham's texts make readers aware that they should not assume that the battle to end the AIDS crisis can be effectively fought by the contributions of the friends and families of PWA. For example, Erich's parents – the two people one would probably most expect to offer him the emotional, financial, and physical assistance he needs – have "written him off," which reveals how dire Erich's situation and that of some real-life PWAs is (*A Home* 310). When Jonathan, Bobby, and Clare recognize that Erich's biological family will not care for him, they assume the responsibility, which encourages readers to

recognize that it is not shared blood, but acceptance, love, and commitment that define family.

In “Narrating Disease: AIDS, Consent, and the Ethics of Representation,” James Dawes observes that Randy Shilts<sup>10</sup> “repeatedly characterizes AIDS as a ‘story’” (28). Cunningham’s novels focus on the experiences of those who care for the characters who eventually contract AIDS. The protagonists begin the stories of their relationship with these characters with their initial memories of them.<sup>11</sup> These stories are as much about the impact of AIDS as they are about the development of kinship. When AIDS becomes part of the characters’ lives, the disease makes the depth of their bonds apparent. The narrators imbue their stories with sentimentality and focus intently on the domestic spaces in which events occur. In this aspect, Cunningham’s novels continue a tradition of sentimental and domestic fiction most commonly associated in American literary history with women authors during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like these authors, Michael Cunningham presents a current problem in his society and subsequently shows his readers how to act in ways that will prevent this problem from further weakening the bonds that sustain us.

#### A Home at the End of the World

Jonathan, one of the protagonists in *A Home at the End of the World*, broaches the subject of AIDS with his long-term lover, Erich, after he learns a friend, Arthur, is suffering complications from it. AIDS, a social disease, becomes a personal issue for Erich and Jonathan only after it affects someone Jonathan knows. He engages in a discussion with Erich about their sexual histories as a way to assess his risk for

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<sup>10</sup> Shilts wrote *And The Band Played On*, a multi-genre novel that focuses on AIDS.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike some counterimmersive AIDS fiction, Cunningham’s stories about characters with AIDS do not start with their seropositive diagnoses of it. The novels present meaningful histories of Erich, Zoe, Cassandra, and Richard’s lives, thereby making it possible for readers to connect with them.

contracting AIDS. Jonathan, who narrates this scene, describes features of Erich's apartment that give readers insight into the general nature of Erich's relationships. They discuss their sexual pasts on the couch that Erich's parents gave him in celebration of his admission into a Michigan law school. The large, imitation-leather couch sits wall-to-wall in Erich's small apartment and looks "like a cabin cruiser berthed in a swimming pool" (172). Erich left law school after only a year to pursue his dream of becoming an actor, and the couch symbolizes the difference between the ostentatious lifestyle Erich's parents wanted him to attain and the humble one he has. As mentioned previously, Erich's parents no longer speak with him, which reveals their unwillingness to accept their gay son as he is. Their behavior implies that they feel justified for retracting their love and support because Erich has not lived up to the expectations they had for him. Not only has Erich been rejected by his parents, but also by Jonathan. John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" – set to repeat on the stereo – provides background music for a scene from a relationship that cannot, at this point in the novel, be used as an example of a supreme love between two people. Erich and Jonathan occupy different pools of lamplight, a detail which evokes the emotional and physical distance between them (173). Jonathan deems Erich a good lover, but he will not commit to him because he thinks he "deserve[s] better" (174). Erich's "crimes," according to Jonathan, are "lack of focus and dearth of wit" (174). Similar to Erich's parents, Jonathan will not commit to Erich because Erich does not meet his requirements. The inclusion of specific aspects of Erich's living space and Jonathan's commentary regarding them subtly informs readers of the deficiency of Erich's past and present relationships. Perhaps for the first time, readers start feeling sympathy for Erich.

After he and Erich discuss the number of sexual partners each of them have had, Jonathan concludes that they both fall “somewhere toward the middle of the risk spectrum” and offers readers an explanation for his and Erich’s sexual behavior (172). Jonathan, who once had sex with a boy who played the flute in Washington Square Park and, on a different occasion, an old Frenchman he met on the subway, admits, “In my late teens and early twenties I’d seen myself as a Puckish figure, smart and quick-limbed, incorrigible. I’d imagined the prim houses and barren days of Ohio falling farther away with each new adventure” (173). Jonathan’s sexual encounters ostensibly distance him from his parents’ dispassionate relationship and the staid environment of Ohio. Jonathan states that during their years of promiscuity, he and Erich “hoped vaguely to fall in love but hadn’t worried much about it, because we’d thought we had all the time in the world” (172). In addition Jonathan recalls,

Love had seemed so final, and so dull – love was what ruined [our] parents. Love had delivered them to a life of mortgage payments and household repairs; to unglamorous jobs and the fluorescent aisles of a supermarket at two in the afternoon. We’d hoped for love of a different kind, love that knew and forgave our human frailty but did not miniaturize our grander ideas of ourselves. It sounded possible. If we didn’t rush or grab, if we didn’t panic, a love both challenging and nurturing might appear [...] And in the meantime, we’d had sex (172).

Love, according to Jonathan, leads people into marriage and initiates a life of banality. Jonathan and Erich’s aversion toward their parents’ relationship fuels their desire to rebel against it. Their sexual orientation, they feel, transgresses the relationship model to which their parents conform, and by engaging in sex with multiple, random partners they seemingly diminish their chances of falling prey to their parents’ practical kind of love. Political and social coercion to marry during the 1950s and 60s presumably caused Jonathan’s and Erich’s parents, like many other men and women, to “panic,” “rush,” and

“grab” for the affection of anyone suitable enough to marry. During their twenties, Jonathan and Erich each believed that an exceptional love waited for them; consequently, they fulfilled their more simple desires by having a lot of sex, all the while believing that it presaged a love supreme.

Instead of merely mentioning Erich and Jonathan’s discussion regarding their sexual past, Cunningham engages readers in it. Readers never before compelled to consider their mortality as a result of a discussion about their sex lives are brought into a “direct imaginative confrontation” with perhaps one of the first on the list of the “special horrors of AIDS” (Cady 244). Implicit in the statement that, like Erich, he is “frightened, too; [he], too, wanted to fall in love,” is Jonathan’s recognition that he may never find his ideal life partner. If he were diagnosed with AIDS, he may have to accept that his life may never be more than what it is or has been. Jonathan interprets his past behavior as he describes it, which suggests an attempt to explain his actions to readers in a way that will make them better able to understand and empathize with him. Yet, the euphemistic language employed at the end of the scene counters the immersiveness of it. Jonathan explains that he and Erich never discuss that they “had not exercised bodily precautions together,” which means they did not discuss their failure to use condoms while engaging in oral sex, anal penetration, or any other act that presents a risk for contracting and/or spreading AIDS (174). Cady argues that counterimmersive AIDS literature often presents characters who, like readers of this kind of literature, are often in a state of denial about AIDS themselves. Because Cady believes that the audience for counterimmersive AIDS literature is comprised of two kinds of readers – those in denial of the AIDS epidemic and those “harrowed” by it – he asserts that authors who write this



type of AIDS literature protect their readers through “distancing devices” (244).

Apparently, Cunningham’s readers and Jonathan and Erich themselves must be distanced from the words that signify the acts in which they participated. Jonathan and Erich, instead of acknowledging that one or both of them may have AIDS and have infected the other, go into Erich’s bedroom and make love with “a new gravity” (175). Jonathan and Erich commit to one another through their tacit agreement to continue having sex with each other.

Not long after Jonathan and Erich discuss their past sex partners, Jonathan – after seeing Erich for several years – finally introduces him to Bobby and Clare, an act that, despite Jonathan’s aversion to it, informally inducts Erich into their family.<sup>12</sup> Though Clare’s insistence ultimately prompts Jon’s invitation to Erich, Jon and Erich’s discussion presumably compels Jon to take responsibility for his part in the relationship. Bringing his relationship with Erich “out of the closet” is the first step. Clare notices Jonathan’s immediate discomfort with the scenario; after Erich and Jonathan enter, she notices Jonathan “[linger] near the door as if he might slip away and leave the three of [them] together” (206). Later, while Bobby and Erich discuss music and look at records in the other room, Jonathan tells Clare, “I told you this would be a disaster. You wouldn’t listen to me” (208). Though Bobby and Erich talk animatedly with one another about music, and Clare admits that she has not spoken with Erich long enough to form an opinion about him, Jonathan chooses to perceive the situation as a failure. Clare asks

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<sup>12</sup> Soon after they have sex with each other, Bobby and Clare inform Jonathan about it. Bobby tells Jon, “Now we’re, like, really a family [...] The three of us. Man, don’t you see how great it is? I mean, it’s like, now all three of us are in love” (177). Clearly, what constitutes family for Bobby is love. Previous to Bobby’s declaration, he, Jon, and Clare performed the roles of a heterosexual family. Clare played the part of the mother, Bobby, the son, and Jonathan, the uncle. Jonathan begrudges Bobby and Clare for entering into a sexual relationship. He foresees their future without him in it. He imagines they will have a home, kids, and trips to the supermarket; he concludes, “They would have all that,” a statement that alludes to Jonathan’s desire to find a partner and establish a family (180).

why Jonathan continues seeing Erich even though he seems to dislike him so much, and Jonathan replies, “Sex [...] And my own craziness. Oh, I guess I’m fond of him in an unromantic way. I just never wanted to mix him in with the rest of my life, and I was right about that” (209). Jonathan’s vague response suggests that he appreciates Erich for fulfilling his basic need for sex and not demanding intimacy from him (Jon’s “unromantic” fondness for Erich).

After dinner Erich, Jonathan, Bobby, and Clare go up to the roof of their building and share an experience that permanently connects them. Bobby starts dancing to the Spanish music coming from below, and Erich soon joins him. Erich matches Bobby’s love of music and dance. Jonathan and Clare admit that they do not want to be the “chaperones” of Erich and Bobby’s party, so they, too, start dancing. Soon they begin singing songs from various musicals. Clare, the narrator of this scene, recounts, “Something took hold of us up there,” and she compares this “something” to a feeling from childhood (211). She describes it as the sensation she felt “when a game gathered momentum” (211). Like members of a team, Bobby, Erich, Jonathan, and Clare compliment one another. During this scene, their individual strengths coalesce and move each other forward. These moments of connection, created by something Clare cannot put into words, establish a bond between Erich, Bobby, and Jonathan that later becomes permanent for the three men. Yet, Clare notices that Jonathan does not have the same feelings about the events that are transpiring as she does. While they sing “Get Me to the Church on Time,” Clare looks over at Jon and sees him staring at her with a look she has never seen from him before. She describes it as an “injured, glowering look, something between anger and sorrow” (211). The song, obviously about marriage, may be what

provokes Jonathan's mix between bitterness and sadness. At one point in their friendship, Clare and Jonathan were going to have a baby together. All of their plans for the future included each other. In a sense, Clare and Jonathan had made a commitment akin to marriage. At this point, Jonathan seems to realize that Clare has tacitly divorced herself from him, which hurts. He has lost the Clare he once knew so well. Clare also angers him by withdrawing from him, by reneging on their unspoken pact. She has committed herself to Bobby, Jonathan's first and only true love. Jonathan's future is changing before him, and Clare has usurped his control over it.

Readers do not see Erich again for eighty-six pages, which could be considered an indication of the text's counterimmersiveness, its way of distancing readers from issues in which they may not feel completely invested. However, during these pages events occur that put into motion the establishment of the family that ends the novel. Upon his return from Arizona, Jonathan tells Clare that he must move out of the apartment he shares with her and Bobby. Clare wants to know why, and Jonathan declares, "To get a life" (202). When she asks what he feels he is currently living, Jonathan replies, "A cancelled ticket," which alludes to his perception of Clare's disregard of the plans she had made with him. But Clare has not forgotten what she planned with Jonathan; just two pages later she thinks about her attempts to get pregnant with Bobby but raise the child with Jonathan. She thinks, "We could be a new kind of family. A big disjointed one with aunts and uncles all over town" (204). If Clare were to be open about her intent, she would not only assuage Jonathan's insecurity, but also recommit herself to a future with him. She does not do this. Ned dies, and Jonathan requests that Bobby and Clare accompany him to the funeral. After the funeral, during a tense scene initiated by Alice's

emotional breakdown, Jonathan tells Bobby that he can have his life, since he seems to want it. He says that Bobby makes a better son, anyway, because he brings home girlfriends and will eventually have children, whom will give his mother a purpose for her remaining days. During the long trip home, Clare declares that she is pregnant with Bobby's child. Clare, Bobby, and Jonathan decide to move to upstate New York. They will raise the baby together.

The home they find, according to Bobby, "answers the elderly mountains. It, too, is docile and worn smooth. It has been humbled by time" (264). Bobby's statement evokes the characters themselves, especially Jonathan and Clare, who, prior to the birth of Rebecca, were more anxious, uncertain about their future. Now they have the routine of raising a child, and Bobby and Jonathan have a restaurant to operate, too. He compares himself and Jonathan to "a pair of mail-order brides" because they paint the walls white and hang striped curtains, kids' school pictures, families on vacation, and a grandmother shoveling snow (266). They aptly name it "The Home Café," (though Jonathan jokingly refers to it as the "The Homo Café) (267). Even the pictures on the walls of the café espouse a hodgepodge family.

Eventually Jonathan calls Erich, whose physical appearance makes it clear to Jonathan that he has lost his "Dr. Feelgood."<sup>13</sup> After a year of not seeing Erich, Jonathan decides to invite him to stay for the weekend. He admits that he wants Erich to visit because he desires sex. Erich's apparent illness changes Jonathan's mind. When Jonathan sees Erich standing at the top of the train's steps, he observes, "On someone as

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<sup>13</sup> It is no accident that Jonathan, the narrator, refers to Erich as "Dr. Feelgood" right before Erich arrives. The irony is made obvious. Whereas Erich's skill as a lover once made Jonathan feel good, the sex he had with Erich now makes him feel terribly, considering that it was through sex that Erich contracted the HIV virus – a disease that Jonathan, too, may have.

wiry as Erich, the loss of even five pounds [...] [has] a noticeable diminishing effect. He [has] lost at least ten. His skin [is] gray and dense-looking” (296). Jonathan comments on every sign of illness that Erich’s appearance reveals. He sees that, though Erich “[can] walk well enough, [...] there [is] a palpable caution in his step, an elderly deliberateness, as if his bones were soft and brittle as wax” (297). As Jon looks at the back of Erich’s head, he “[can] see the patch of unprosperous skin that [shows] through his thin hair – both skin and hair had lost a luster that [is] perceptible only by its absence”; furthermore, “Although Erich had never been robust, his hair now [looks] as if it would break off in your hands. The scalp underneath [is] hard and dry; juiceless” (298). When Jon hugs Erich, he feels “a surge of panic” and imagines pushing him under the train so that he will “be ground to nothing [...] and no longer exist” (296). Erich embodies the slow, painful death Jonathan fears. Imagining killing Erich gives Jonathan temporary control over his own fate. Without Erich, he would not have such an intimate reminder of what he, too, may later endure. Moreover, Jonathan does not love Erich. Because of the nature of their relationship – the fact that Jonathan may have given Erich AIDS – Jonathan cannot simply walk away from him – especially not now that they have realized their mutual responsibility. To envision pushing Erich underneath the train is akin to deleting him from his life story.

As Erich, Jonathan, and Bobby drive home together, Jon avoids asking Erich about his health, and his concern regarding his own wellbeing manifests itself. He remembers that the last time he and Erich made love – fourteen months ago – they had taken precautions but, before that, they had not practiced safe sex (297). While riding in the car, Jonathan “[runs] [his] fingertips lightly over [his] chest,” and a bit later, he

“[cannot] stop stroking his chest,” two actions that suggest his attempt to soothe his body, contain its health, and inspire its defense (297, 298). As Jonathan attempts to assuage his anxiety concerning his own health, he recognizes the “distinctly social aversion [he] [feels] to asking Erich about his health (297). He claims that it is not “horror” but “embarrassment” that prevents him from broaching the subject. Jon’s own shame precludes his ability to communicate meaningfully with Erich; instead, he points out his “favorite views [of the countryside], [discusses] the eccentricities of the local population, and [tells] [Erich] of their recent visit to the county fair” (298). Jonathan knows he is avoiding the inevitable, which involves asking Erich about his physical condition and hearing his response. Once Erich confirms that he has AIDS, he validates Jonathan’s fear.

As Bobby, Clare, and Erich, stretch and yawn after a movie, Jonathan asks Erich how long he has been sick. Erich replies that he has been feeling sick for over a year. When Jonathan acts as though Erich should have told him earlier, Erich reveals an uncharacteristic bitterness through his response. He tells Jonathan that, because there is no cure for AIDS, he thought that telling him about it right away would be pointless: Why make Jonathan start worrying earlier than necessary? That evening, Erich sleeps alone in Jonathan’s bed, and Jonathan sleeps with Bobby and Clare. Jonathan seeks reassurance from Clare that he is going to be okay but notices the lack of conviction in her voice. Clare wonders if Erich has anyone who can care for him in New York, which provokes Jonathan to argue that he does not have to love Erich because Erich has AIDS and he somehow owes him love. Later that night, Bobby goes into the room in which Erich is staying, and when Bobby asks him who cares for him when he is sick, Erich

replies that volunteers do. A couple of close friends have died from the disease, and his parents do not speak to him.

When Jonathan takes Erich in to show him his and Bobby's restaurant, Jonathan's thoughts during this scene reveal a form of homophobia that is tied to the signs of HIV. As Gert and Marlys, the lesbians who are cook and waitress, respectively, greet them, Jonathan feels "vaguely embarrassed by Erich's pallor and thinness," which suggests his anxiety regarding how Marlys and Gert will interpret Erich's appearance (300). Though Gert and Marlys most likely know that Jon is gay, Jonathan claims that he feels as though he has "bought some perversity of [his], some unpleasant secret, into the place where [he] [has] effectively simulated innocence" (300). Jonathan's thoughts concerning this situation suggest that he believes everyone perceives that Erich has AIDS. Consequently, he feels that the way Erich looks incriminates him as a man "guilty" of having sex with other men, an act he labels a "perversity" and an "unpleasant secret." Instead of imagining how he might counter condemnatory gestures, glances, and/or allusions concerning Erich's condition, Jonathan seeks to disassociate himself from both Erich and his sexual orientation. Concomitant with Jonathan's embarrassment regarding Erich's appearance is the implication that he fears being "uncloseted" as a gay man, and, even more, a gay man who may have AIDS. Cunningham's depiction of Jonathan's thoughts during this scene compels readers to consider the extent of Erich's social marginalization and inferiorization, which James Miller states are the two primary issues that radical AIDS activists address (*Fluid Exchanges* 5). At this point, Erich cannot even depend upon Jonathan, a gay male himself at risk for AIDS, to offer him emotional support.

Once Erich comes to visit Jonathan, the novel's primary concerns – family and the effects of AIDS – dominate the remaining pages, and Cunningham describes precise aspects of Clare, Jonathan, and Bobby's domestic space as a means to bring his readers into closer proximity with what the characters are experiencing. Bobby urges Jonathan to agree to have Erich come the following weekend because Erich needs rest, and "He's like, a member of the family now. Whether [they] like it or not" (313). Unlike the notion of gay and lesbian families as families of "choice," Bobby's statement makes clear that his conception of family includes the caveat that anyone with whom one of them has shared a significant amount of time deserves their support if and when one needs it. Though Jonathan replies that Bobby is "going to drive [him] crazy with this [family] shit," he later discusses the issue with Clare, upon whom he relies for advice that will ultimately confirm what he wants to hear (313). However, since having Rebecca, Clare, according to Jonathan, "[holds] the world more accountable to standards of unfaltering affection" (306). Cunningham introduces the conversation between Jon and Clare thusly:

Late Sunday afternoon [Jonathan] [is] in the kitchen with Clare and Rebecca. Clare slice[s] an avocado. Rebecca [sits] on the counter top, sorting through a set of plastic, animal-shaped cookie cutters, and [Jonathan] [stands] alongside, to keep her from falling. Outside the window [they] [can] see Bobby and Erich sitting in the unruly grass, talking earnestly" (314).

Despite his calm surroundings, Jonathan is not ready to admit Erich permanently into his domestic space. He cattily comments to Clare that it is though Bobby "has a new love," since Bobby is "doggedly affectionate" toward Erich (314). As she lays the avocado slices on a plate and begins peeling a Bermuda onion, Clare responds that nastiness is not "becoming" in Jonathan (314). Jonathan replies that he "[does] [not] feel like Erich needs to suddenly become [their] favorite charity," and tries to dissuade Clare from



accepting Erich's constant presence by claiming that Erich is "practically a stranger" (314). Clare states that, since they have nothing lacking for themselves, they have room for him (314). Surely when Jonathan invited Erich to stay with them for the first time, none of them anticipated that he would eventually be living with them permanently,<sup>14</sup> but Erich's deteriorating health and lack of support changes their minds about what their responsibilities toward Erich entail. By making readers part of Jonathan, Clare, and Bobby's family and home, Cunningham enables readers to relate to all of the characters in regard to their reasons why Erich should or should not stay: Bobby considers Erich a part of their family; Clare is practical; Jonathan does not want to face the horrors of AIDS – which he himself may endure – in his home. When Erich first arrives, Jonathan stands on the porch awhile with Rebecca and imagines escaping into the woods behind their home. At the end of the scene during which Erich confirms that he has AIDS, Jonathan tries to escape his feelings of discomfort by claiming that he hears Rebecca crying and needs to check on her. Clare does not let him leave.

Bobby does not believe that "family" is merely a group of people to whom one chooses to commit; furthermore, both Clare and Jonathan's actions reveal the sacrifices they have made to stay together. Clare initially did not want to move out of New York City, and later, as she prepares to leave for her mother's home in Washington, she urges Bobby to come with her, to leave Jonathan, Erich, the home and restaurant for good because she worries about the ways Erich's dying and Jonathan's potential to suffer the same decline will affect Rebecca's conception of life. Before the three of them chose to move, Jonathan decided to leave Bobby and Clare because he had "fallen in love with

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<sup>14</sup> On page 295, Jonathan admits that he called Erich because he was "lonely," which is his euphemism for wanting to have sex.

[them]” and believes that love prevents him from falling in love with anyone else (218). None of the characters that comprise the family that lives in “a home at the end of the world” consciously chose one another as family members, but once it becomes clear to them that theirs is the strongest, most important bond they have, they (with the exception of Clare) commit to it. The circumstances of their lives “choose” their family for them.

Cunningham occasionally addresses readers through Jonathan’s point of view, and the following message demonstrates didacticism reminiscent of the moralizing tones that authors such as Warner and Stowe assume. Erich eventually moves into the home, and Jonathan explains,

After a period of resistance Erich agreed to take over my bed, and in doing so almost palpably relinquished a degree of participation in the ongoing, living world. This moment may come to us all, at some point in our eventual move from health to sickness. We abandon our old obligation to consider the needs of others, and give ourselves up to their care. There is a shift in status. We become citizens of a new realm, we are no longer bodily in command of our fates (315).

Because all of us could find ourselves in the position of needing comfort and support but having no one close to us to provide it, Cunningham implies that we can all, at the very least, do as Jonathan and “[practice] the tenderness [we] hope to inspire in others if [our] vigor leak[s] away and our [bodies] [start] to change” (315). Perhaps one of the greatest fears a person has when considering a life without a family of her or his own is that she or he will die alone, under the impersonal care of strangers, and feel as though she or he failed to create even one loving, unconditional bond with another person. If, however, one views all significant relationships, e.g. relationships that span years and survive through change, as offering the opportunity for reciprocal support and comfort, one is less likely to view being single as presenting the risk of “dying alone.”

Jonathan describes Erich as “an elderly spirit in the house, alternately courtly and short-tempered”; he explains that it is though their “grandfather might have come to live with [them]” (316). Indeed, Erich does teach Jonathan to accept his life as it is, not as what he thinks it will be. Clare intuits that Jonathan “believe[s] his life [will] get fatter and fatter [...] [and] [maybe] that [is] the fundamental flaw of in his perception. Maybe that’s what prevent[s] him from falling in love” (324). After Clare leaves with Rebecca, the relationship between Jonathan, Bobby, and Erich becomes more intimate. Without Rebecca, Erich benefits from all Jonathan and Bobby’s substantial capacities to provide careful love and attention. Bobby describes a scene from a “normal afternoon,” during which he and Jonathan give Erich a bath: “Together, [they] scrub his head and his skinny neck. [They] wash the hollow of his chest, and the deep sockets under his arms. Briefly, [Erich] smiles. At the sensation of bathing, or something more private than that” (331). In this desexualized image of three men in a bathroom, two men bathe the third. This scene evokes the significance of giving care. Van Morrison’s “Madame George” wafts into the bathroom from the bedroom. Jonathan and Bobby, before helping Erich into the tub, dance together. The tone of this scene is alternately sorrowful and affirmative. The tone is sorrowful because Erich is not aware of Jonathan and Bobby’s devotion to him yet affirmative because Jonathan and Bobby capably provide a home for Erich at the end of his world.

The final scene of the novel occurs during an afternoon in April, several months before Erich dies. The three men go to a pond to take their first swim of the season. Bobby, just as cautious as he was on the day when Jonathan jumped into frigid water many years ago, tries to persuade Jon and Erich not to take the swim because the water is

cold, and Erich could get pneumonia. Bobby's attempts fail, mostly because Erich insists on going in. Jonathan, Erich, and Bobby undress together, then Jonathan holds Erich's hand as the two of them walk into the water. Jonathan admits that this is the first time he has felt intimate with Erich, despite the fact that they "had made love hundreds of times" (341). Jonathan admits that, while he stands in the water, something happens to him. Until then he "[has] lived for the future, in a state of continuing expectation, and the process came suddenly to a stop while [he] stood nude with Bobby and Erich in a shallow platter of freezing water" (342). Though he is "nothing so simple as happy [...] [he] [is] merely present, perhaps for the first time in [his] adult life" (342-343). Jonathan's revelation confirms Clare's earlier perception of Jonathan – that he was waiting for his life to gain significance and lived more for his future than in his present. Finally, Jonathan recognizes that the life he shares with Bobby and Erich is enough.

### Flesh and Blood

Will's youngest sister, Zoe, one of the characters who later contracts AIDS in *Flesh and Blood*, starts venturing into New York from Long Island when she is sixteen. The year is 1972. She and her best friend, Trancas, spend their Saturday evenings in bars. Zoe becomes intrigued by Cassandra, a drag queen, who, one evening, prevents Zoe and Trancas from leaving with a dangerous man. Zoe later voices her concern regarding Trancas' recent prostitution, and Cassandra speaks with Trancas, urging her to make the men wear condoms and telling her how much she should charge for each of the acts she performs. Zoe contemplates the differences between her mother, Mary, and Cassandra. She deduces that the "old world," guarded by her mother, has too many rules (155). Cassandra, whom Zoe considers the "guardian spirit" of the "new world," does

not believe in concrete rules about one's behavior but does believe in safety (155). Zoe desires a mother who lives in the new world, one who can help her find her way through it. She invites Cassandra to have tea with her, and four years later, Cassandra refers to Zoe as her daughter.

Cunningham makes clear the two potential causes of Zoe's contraction of AIDS. She has "sex with men who could turn out to be anybody," and there are "syringes full of crystal meth that [make] her slip through the hours like thread slipping through the eye of a needle" (189). Zoe engages in the behaviors that put her, a heterosexual woman, at most risk for AIDS. Cunningham shows that AIDS is not a "gay disease," but a disease that anyone can contract if one does not know the behaviors that put one at risk and take precautions against them. Cassandra, a transvestite, also contracts HIV from unsafe sex. Because both Zoe and Cassandra's lives differ dramatically from Erich's, the text compels readers to think about more issues that AIDS raises in the lives of people who live with this disease and those who love them.

In 1982, Cassandra calls Mary, Zoe's biological mother, when Zoe is hospitalized for an overdose and gives birth to the son, Jamal, she conceived with Levon, a black man. Mary begs Cassandra to stay with Zoe until she arrives at the hospital, to which Cassandra replies, "I wouldn't abandon my daughter, now, would I?" (249). Mary is taken aback by Cassandra's comment and especially Cassandra's appearance. She had not known that Cassandra is a man who has consciously taken over her role as Zoe's mother. Over the years, Cassandra and Mary become close friends, even though they occasionally bicker about the ways in which each responds to Jamal's misbehavior. Mary, the "guardian spirit" of the old world, admonishes Jamal for careless behavior,

such as playing outside during the winter without gloves, whereas Cassandra thinks that Mary overreacts. Cassandra, a woman familiar with the more real dangers of the “new world,” offsets the distance created between adults and children by counterbalancing Mary’s tension with her ease.

The appearance of KS-lesions on Cassandra prompts Zoe to tell Jamal that she has AIDS. As Dawes points out, “Unlike many victims of cancer, diabetes, and other diseases, AIDS victims are turned physically inside out: their bodies become the involuntary narratives of the illness within; their interior lives are obscenely publicized” (36). KS-lesions “obscenely” publicize one’s private life because their unsightly appearance blatantly advertises their disease, which was contracted through “obscene” acts of unprotected sex and/or intravenous drug use. Zoe knows that Jamal will notice Cassandra’s lesions and ask her about them. Instead of leaving it up to Clarissa to explain their cause and what they portend, she takes it upon herself to provide Jamal with the knowledge he deserves. Diagnosed with AIDS three years earlier, in 1986, Zoe realizes that she must admit her illness to Jamal before the signs of the disease do it for her.

*Flesh and Blood* immerses readers into the experience of Zoe, a mother who must tell her son that she has a disease that will eventually kill her. Zoe fixes Jamal a sandwich and sits at the kitchen table with him. The day is “cold” and “white”; it refuses to snow (313). Between the buildings, the sky outside the windows is “fat and [billows] [...] opaque” (313). Both the weather and her son’s reaction to her having AIDS fail to conform to her expectations. Jamal reacts dispassionately; he wonders how she contracted AIDS, if his father gave it to her, if she will die, and with whom he will live.

Zoe admits that she “resent[s] her son for being calm, and for wondering what would happen to him” (315). Zoe is “relieved and she [is] furious and she [is] sad almost beyond tolerance” (315). Jamal accepts his mother’s announcement with a disconcerting calm. His youth prevents him from perceiving the profound changes his mother’s illness will create in their home and his life. Zoe did not want the conversation to be so ordinary; she wanted her son to express at least a measure of the immense grief that her death will cause him.

Soon after Zoe informs her son of her illness, she calls Will. The conversation between these two characters provides some of the details required for providing care for those living with AIDS. Will immediately asks her what her T-cell count is. She informs him that her T-cell count is 400, and Will decides to take the earliest possible flight to see her. Zoe’s health has begun to decline.<sup>15</sup> Will then discusses treatment options with Zoe, which reveals his need to assure that she is doing everything she can to maintain her health. Zoe confesses that she is afraid to start taking AZT because Cassandra took it and suffered severe anemia, a well-known side effect. Zoe tells Will she will probably start taking Bactrim, to ward off “opportunistic infections,” but she has been considering aerosolized pentamidine (326). Though she worries about the cost, Will assures her that she need not worry; there are many people in her family that will help. While Con and Susan – father and sister, respectively – may not understand Zoe, they will not, like Erich’s parents, abandon her.

Because Erich is not one of the narrators of *A Home at the End of the World*, readers are not brought into a direct confrontation with the inner experiences of a

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<sup>15</sup> According to one website, most people without HIV have a T-cell count of 700-1000. Individuals infected with HIV have a “normal” T-cell count if it is above 500. Those whose T-cell count drops below 200 are diagnosed as having AIDS (<http://aids.about.com/od/technicalquestions/f/cd4.htm>).

character that has AIDS; however, Zoe is a character with narrating privileges in *Flesh and Blood*. Yet, the times during which readers are brought most into her consciousness are those that occur after Zoe has lost the ability to speak. Cunningham italicizes her thoughts and, because third-person, not first-person, narration is employed, one cannot be sure if Zoe has fully “join[ed] the illness” and no longer thinks of herself as a subject, or if an omniscient narrator takes over at this point (417). Dawes asserts, “When the self becomes coterminous with the body, when speaking stops, the world disappears,” or, at least with Zoe, her sense of obligation to communicate with the world disappears (33). The last time she tries to speak to her son, “a voice that [is] not a voice, that [does] not speak in words [...] roll[s] through her like a stone” (*Flesh and Blood* 417). Zoe’s thoughts reveal a return to her childhood appreciation of nature and her assessment of the people in her life. One afternoon, while the whole family spends time at Con and Magda’s vacation home, Zoe notices Jamal sitting next to her, holding her hand. The narrator describes her thoughts in the following manner:

Jamal was going into time. She had made him and loved him and here he was, the living boy. Here was everything that would still happen. Zoe’s lungs filled with fire and she reached for him. She was burning, she was not afraid. She would stay here, watching from the branches of a tree (435).

Though Zoe is dying and cannot speak with her son, she would endure an eternal, internal burning if she could watch her son as he grows.

Will and his partner, Harry, agree to care for Jamal when Zoe dies. Mary moves to Boston to be near them. Toward the end of her life, Zoe points out, “In every story there’s a daughter whose job it is to die” (425). The “job” that Zoe performs in *Flesh and Blood* requires that her death catalyzes her family members’ recognition of what they



must do in order to make the most of the time they have left. Readers recognize this about themselves, too.

### The Hours

Richard, the character in *The Hours* who has AIDS and later commits suicide, was diagnosed with AIDS prior to the years when more effective drug therapies were put into place. Consequently, his mind has been “eaten into lace by the virus” (55). Clarissa, who describes Richard as her best friend, often remembers Richard as he was before AIDS. She says of Richard that he was her most “rigorous, infuriating companion” (19). She contends that he “needs to live in a world peopled by extreme and commanding figures,” and so he “insists on a vision of [his friends] that is funnier, stranger, more eccentric and profound than [they] suspect [themselves] to be” (60). Richard no longer has the ability to maintain the verbosity Clarissa fondly recalls or his flattering perceptions of his friends. His domestic space reveals the extent to which his disease has depleted his desire and ability to care for it. Clarissa makes sure someone launders his clothes at least once a week and brings him meals. She visits him daily to inquire if he is eating and the medications help prevent his troubling hallucinations. The care Clarissa provides Richard is not as extensive as that that Jonathan and Bobby provide Erich or Clarissa provides Zoe. Clarissa considers Richard her oldest, dearest friend, not, necessarily, a member of her family. Her family consists of her daughter, Julia, and her partner, Sally.

Clarissa’s description of Richard’s apartment, especially his chair, reveals the severity of Richard’s condition, and the amount of time Clarissa has dwelled upon it. The following is Clarissa’s description of Richard’s chair:

The chair – an elderly, square, overstuffed armchair obesely balanced on slender blond wooden legs – is ostentatiously broken and worthless. It is upholstered in something nubbly, no-colored, woolen, shot through (this is, somehow, its most sinister aspect) with silver thread. Its square arms and back are so worn down, so darkened by the continual application of friction and human oils, that they resemble the tender parts of an elephant’s hide. Its coils are visible – perfect rows of pale, rusty rings – not only through the cushion of the seat but through the thin yellow towel Richard has draped over the cushion. The chair smells fetid and deeply damp, unclean; it smells of irreversible rot. If it were hauled out into the street (*when* it is hauled out into the street), no one would pick it up. Richard will not hear of its being replaced.

Cunningham’s gift for immersiveness emanates from the precise details of his characters’ domestic spaces. Richard’s chair has held him through the phases of his death. An impersonal, new chair, one that has not held him as his “very beautiful and quite terrible” hallucinations have tormented him could serve no purpose (59).

Clarissa does the best she can in caring for Richard. She loves him for bringing passion into her life and believing in her exceptionality. Ultimately, she cannot prevent Richard from killing himself because Richard’s mind, a mind that created great poetry and literature, now produces hallucinations that make it impossible for him to envision an earthbound future in which he could be at peace. Richard’s death, like the death of Erich and Zoe, has the effect of compelling those still living (in this case, Clarissa) to reevaluate their lives and recommit themselves to the people upon whom they depend for love and support.

I began this chapter by introducing work by Kath Weston and James Cady that illuminates different aspects of Cunningham’s literary treatment of the AIDS crisis. By using Cady’s classification of AIDS writing as either immersive or counterimmersive, readers can superficially discern the relative merits of the work of authors who deal with

AIDS in their texts. In regard to how Cady might classify Cunningham's novels? Well, this question makes clear the limits of Cady's categories. Like most binary configurations, the categories immersive and counterimmersive cannot contain texts that demonstrate aspects of both, which all three of Cunningham's novels do. For one to have a reputable amount of knowledge concerning the range of voices that have contributed to the genre of AIDS literature, one cannot dismiss a novel just because Cady would deem it counterimmersive. Authors, like people, react to disease, fear, and pain in different ways. By considering the ways in which many authors' narrate the experience of AIDS, perhaps we can get a better understanding of the kind of work that could prevent future people from dying of it. The more writers writing about AIDS increases the amount of people who read about and, at least imaginatively, experience the pain of it themselves.

According to Weston, AIDS was historically situated in a period of discourse regarding gay and lesbian families and "served as an impetus to broaden and expand gay families" (183). The three novels discussed in this chapter fictionally represent this specific social change that occurred in the United States during the 1980s. In *A Home at the End of the World*, Jonathan and Bobby become Erich's caretakers and provide him with a comfortable, loving home at the end of his world. Erich – having been disowned by his biological family – surely would have died under the impersonal care of strangers had his long-term lover, Jonathan, and his friend, Bobby, not taken on the responsibility of caring for him. In *Flesh and Blood*, Will and Henry raise Jamal when his mother, Will's sister, dies from AIDS. Though Will and Henry were content without a child, Will does not disregard his dying sister's request that he care for Jamal when she dies. Presumably, Richard, in *The Hours*, did not want to leave his apartment in order to

receive more continuous care from Clarissa, his most devoted friend. Had Richard been made a part of the everyday domestic routine in Clarissa's home, the connection between care and family would have been even more apparent.

Weston notes that progressive hospitals and hospices "modified residence and visitation policies to embrace 'family as the client defines family'" (183). "Loved ones," a term often used to describe one's family, "respects the principles of choice and self-determination in defining kin, with love spanning the ideologically contrasting domains of biological families and families we create" (183). The ways in which Cunningham's characters respond to the characters who contract HIV and later die from AIDS show readers that people define themselves as family when they commit to providing the care and support one needs.

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## CONCLUSION

Several years ago, upon entering graduate school, one of my professors asked each of the students participating in the seminar course the author whom she or he most admired. My response: Michael Cunningham. Though I now find it hard to name an author whose work I enjoy more than any other's, my study of *A Home*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours* has literally changed my life, insofar as I no longer think of family just in terms of marriage, heterosexuality, and children. I now consider current and future friends as potential family members and focus on developing these relationships, instead of pining for one person with whom to share my life.

I have always appreciated Cunningham's portrayal of families. Like Cunningham's protagonists, I come from a family in which the men and women perform the duties socially expected of their gender. My dad, a farmer, starts work at eight o'clock every morning. My mom has a job outside of the home, too, but she is also expected to cook the meals, launder the clothes, clean the house, wash the dishes, and maintain the cleanliness of the family car. My parents split the bills evenly. They married in the 1970s, whereas the primary heterosexual couples in Cunningham's texts married in the 1950s or 1960s. The difference between the decade(s) is represented in the fact that it was and is unexceptional for my mom to have a job outside the home. What has not changed is that my mom, like the mothers of the protagonists, performs all of the duties of a housewife, even though she does not enjoy each of them or have the time to complete them. My dad does not seem to think twice about nagging my mom when the dishes have not been washed in a couple of days or the pair of jeans that he wanted to wear were not washed. He also likes to remind her that she is overweight by saying

something whenever she goes into the kitchen. In describing my parents' marriage in this way, I do not mean to imply that my dad is cruel. In fact, he is the most genuinely kind man I know. The conflict is that he was raised in an environment in which women completed the domestic chores daily, which is why he expected the same of my mother. In Montrose, South Dakota, the small town in which I was raised, the women's liberation movement appears to have had little impact. I worry that my brother, who wants to marry eventually, may have difficulty finding a person willing to make a lifelong commitment to him because he has the same attitude regarding domestic chores as my dad does – that they are not his responsibility. One night, while on a family vacation, I told my dad that I would never marry a man who expected me to do all the cooking and cleaning; I expect these tasks to be equally divided. He told me that I would have a very hard time finding someone to marry me, which badly hurt my feelings. Not because I desperately want to marry, but because his comment suggested that another person would never commit to me simply because of who I am, but because I would make a good wife, i.e. a person who would eliminate all of his housework.

I appreciate Cunningham's representation of it because I find it realistic, and I like that the protagonists' relationships do not duplicate the inequities of their parents' marriage. Though the protagonists are gay men, there are two female characters – Clare in *A Home* and Zoe in *Flesh and Blood* – who enter into relationships that are not heteronormative. However, just because a relationship occurs between two men does not mean that heterosexual readers like me cannot learn from it.

I am interested in new family forms because I cannot imagine myself in a nuclear family model. Yet, I do not think that the only benefit of Cunningham's work is that it

has relieved me, in a sense, to know that, just because I do not intend on getting married or having children, it does not mean that I am choosing to live without a family I can call my own. Studying Cunningham's work has made me aware of the writing of other gay and lesbian authors. I am particularly interested in augmenting my knowledge of how these writers have portrayed family over the years. I have much to learn and feel that not enough has been written on this important subject.

I came to realize the similarities between Cunningham's work and that of nineteenth-century American women writers while studying the social, political, and literary relevance of these women's novels. Both Cunningham and many of these authors magnify the domestic spaces of their characters as a means to show the personal effects of public policies. Making readers part of the homes in which the characters live – characters who may be different than they because of race, sexual orientation, class – enables them to empathize with them more completely. However, because of the negative view critics have held of these women's work since they were written, some contemporary readers of my work may feel that making a comparison between Cunningham and these women is less than flattering. However, I agree with Jane Tompkins' assertion that when one considers novels not as timeless works of art but as testaments to a changing world and an author's perception of the direction in which it needs to go, one can better appreciate why an author might represent his fictional worlds in a particular way.

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to aid the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. Michael Cunningham writes to create awareness of the acts that constitute family, particularly in relation to the AIDS crisis. When biogenetic family members are



unwilling to care for those with AIDS, the people with whom they have grown most intimate willingly take on the financial and emotional responsibility of caring for them. Through this experience, they realize that they are family. The characters with AIDS accept their condition with grace. Similar to Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, those who die from AIDS teach the other characters, and us, how to live.