

# Virginia Woolf:

## *Jacob's Room*

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Notes &c.

### Objectives

1. To describe the distinctions between metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche.
2. To distinguish the differences between stream of consciousness and what the reader can know.
3. To demonstrate increasing 'close reading' (or [New Critical](#)) skills that are essential for poetry but can be equally important to reading prose.
4. To describe the importance of gender to Modernism and the Bloomsbury Group.

### Reading Assignment

Gifford, James. "Lecture – *Jacob's Room*." Fairleigh Dickinson University, Vancouver, BC. 2007. Web. <http://tinyurl.com/ycedypxe>

Woolf, Virginia. *Jacob's Room*.

### Commentary

[Virginia Woolf](#) has become one of the most widely read of modernist novelists, both for her success with experimental forms as well as for her social commentary. Her long essay-cum-book *A Room of One's Own* was for many years a standard part of many universities' core curriculum, her novels inspired Michael Cunningham's novel and the subsequent film *The Hours*, and her works were translated and adapted by other authors, such as [Jorge Luis Borges](#) of Argentina (himself a major modernist writer of the [Modernismo](#) tradition in South America). Woolf's influence on the later responses to Modernism is profound, as is her contribution to social and political thought.

However, this was not always the case. Woolf was not as widely regarded during his career as were [Joyce](#) and [Eliot](#), and her major works appeared after the *annus mirabilis* of Modernism: 1922. *Jacob's Room* is her first formally inventive novel. Her previous two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night & Day*, were more traditional in form and technique, and her friend T.S. Eliot immediately noticed the sudden transformation Woolf undertook in *Jacob's Room*. Eliot wrote to her scarcely a month after the novel's publication by the Woolfs's [Hogarth Press](#): "It seems to me that you have bridged a certain gap which existed between your other novels and the experimental prose of *Monday or Tuesday* [her short story collection of 1919] and that you have made a remarkable success" (221). Eliot's comments came only days after the first American publication of his poem *The Waste Land*, for which the Woolfs would publish the first edition that included the complicated "Notes" section. Woolf and her husband [Leonard](#) published the first British book edition of Eliot's poem nine months later in a limited print run of 450 copies for which the type was set by hand by Woolf herself for Hogarth Press. For these reasons, several of the authors in this network are referred to collectively as the [Bloomsbury Group](#), named for the London neighborhood in which many of them lived and they frequently met.

*Jacob's Room* was published in the same year as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Moreover, the relationship between *Jacob's Room* and Joyce's earlier *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is easily detected (Lawrence 381), as is Woolf's integration of [stream of consciousness](#) methods. The latter means that while *Jacob's Room* is quite a brief novel, it also requires significant reading time and attention.

### **Consciousness and Metonymy**

A number of preparatory remarks are needed to begin the novel. Woolf is the first author in this course to focus her narrative on a protagonist of the opposite sex, and this leads her to the interesting situation of constructing a novel around Jacob in which his own thoughts do not figure as prominently as those of others, in particular the thoughts of females. Jane Austen famously avoided private conversations between men in her novels for the simple reason that she had not witnessed them – Woolf adopts a similar avoidance while developing Jacob as her protagonist.

This is most poignantly evident in the closing scene of the novel in which Jacob's old shoes metonymically stand in for Jacob himself.

This substitution by metonymy, in which one thing stands in for another (such as a flag for a nation or a crown for a monarch), is a recurring theme in the novel as a whole. The related technique of synecdoche, in which a part stands in for a whole (such as a prow for a ship or trigger for a gun), is also common in the novel. It is a form of substitution. Much like with James Joyce's protagonist Stephen Daedalus, our attention is frequently restricted to the perspective of a single character's frame of reference. Yet, through metonymy and synecdoche, Woolf broadens the scope of the novel and gives her readers access to information beyond the mental frame of a single character. The British novelist David Lodge has perhaps outlined this productive use of metonymy and synecdoche in *Modernism* as a whole better than any other critic (Lodge 481–496). His simple example leads him to more complex repercussions: "in the sentence 'A hundred keels ploughed the waves,' *keels* is a synecdoche meaning *ships*, derived from the contiguity of ships and keels, and *ploughed* is a metaphor derived from a perceived similarity between the movements of ships and ploughs" (483). For Lodge, the tension between metaphor and metonymy (or synecdoche) defines a crucial tension of modernist fiction, and his essay even concludes by drawing from the ending of Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* in which she vacillates between using the Lighthouse itself as a metaphor or a metonym.

Perhaps the most striking instance of this type of displacement occurs in the first section of Chapter VII, in which Jacob's sexual encounter with the young art student Florinda (Woolf's sister was also an art student) is described in terms that relate only the objects in Jacob's room rather than to either actor in the scene. The reader moves from Jacob's mother, Mrs. Flanders, to the letter she has written to her son describing a range of domestic trivialities including chicken breeds and the varieties of wool for knitting (Woolf 71). However, by metonymically allowing for this letter to represent the maternal relationship between mother and son (just as the "White House" might represent the entire American government or a specific administration), the reader is able to move beyond the stream of consciousness limitations to Mrs. Flanders's perspective. Consider how the various objects in Jacob's room function as metonyms in this important passage in the novel:

The letter lay upon the hall table; Florinda coming in that night took it up with her, put it on the table as she kissed Jacob, and Jacob seeing the hand, left it there under the lamp, between the

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biscuit tin and the tobacco-box. They shut the bedroom door behind them.

The sitting room neither knew nor cared.... But if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit-box had the feelings of a mother, the heart was torn by the little creak, the sudden stir. (78-79)

The scene as a whole, across the two paragraphs, shows the function of metonymy and synecdoche across the novel as a whole. The letter stands in for the mother just as the "little creak, the sudden stir" stand in for Jacob's sexual experiences.

Moreover, as Lodge would assert, the metaphorical displaces the metonymic in Modernism in general, and this is precisely how Woolf sets up her novel. She returns to metaphor immediately after the section break following the scene above – the section break being a "gap" that is noted by Edward Bishop in his discussion of the importance of "the spatial silence, the white space of the gaps on the page" ("Mind" 303). After the letter's "heart was [metonymically] broken by the little creak, the sudden stir" (Woolf 79), Woolf changes the letter from the mother into a metaphor: "Let us consider letters – how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark – for to see one's own envelope upon another's table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien" (79). This inevitably leads to Jacob's defeat a page later when he is walking one evening: "Then he saw her turning up Greek Street upon another man's arm" (81). The empty space on the page after this sentence shows the absence of Woolf's commentary on Jacob's interior thoughts and feelings, despite the obvious suggestion that he is experiencing a good deal of feeling and thought at this moment, perhaps even a paroxysm of feeling and thought. As Bishop points out in his article on the gaps between section breaks in *Jacob's Room*, the "gaps are essential, and if they are to be truly productive in engaging the audience, they must be more than merely visual cues like paragraph indents" ("Mind" 304) since Woolf herself commented "that [Lawrence] Sterne is a 'forerunner of the moderns' because of his 'interest in silence rather than in speech,' which makes us 'consult our own minds' (CE 98)" (Bishop, "Mind" 304). For our reading, this means we should be aware of the textual gaps between scenes or the unspoken answers to questions just as we should be aware of the tension between metonymy and metaphor.

Ultimately, the novel asks the reader to figure Jacob Flanders metonymically for his generation, the generation of young men who died in the [First World War](#) (on Flanders fields) yet continued to appear in society through metonymic substitutes. The generation of young men might have perished, yet their cenotaphs and memorials continued to appear in the post-war cities. Both France and England, after World War I, simultaneously entombed unknown soldiers in Westminster Abbey and l'Arc de Triomphe on 11 November 1920. This metonym, however, must expand to the metaphorical, and Jacob's empty rooms and abandoned objects do not simply stand in for him but suggest that life after World War I was (metaphorically) an empty room with much confusion, no life around which to create meaning, and an uncertain future.

### **The Room in *Jacob's Room***

Since we have good access to Woolf's drafts and manuscripts for *Jacob's Room*, a number of critical questions can be posed that might otherwise not come to light. For instance, to what degree are Jacob's actual rooms a unifying trope in the novel? Was the novel purely dedicated to formal experimentation, or do the resemblances between Jacob and the famous war poet Rupert Brooke (who died in World War I) and Woolf's brother Thoby Stephen (who died of typhoid contracted while in Greece) both suggest a social commentary and personal difficulty on Woolf's part to engage emotionally in the novel, and hence her retreat to objects and metonymy?

For instance, as Bishop notes, "The draft [of the novel in Woolf's manuscripts] records a gradual and often very groping process of discovery as both the subject matter and the form evolve together" ("Shaping" 116). His most striking example

is that Woolf is using *rooms* as an index of characters; Jacob's [room] is not the first singled out. In fact the lyrical passage that introduces Jacob's room at Cambridge, "The feathery white moon never let the sky grow dark..." (i, 36) appears again at the opening of a section which deals with a young woman in her room at Newnham College. (116)

Woolf was already familiar with Newnham College, a woman's college, which was only the second that would admit women to the University

of Cambridge beginning in 1871 (the first was Girton College in 1869). Both colleges were comparatively poor in comparison to the male colleges, and they were further from the center of the University, which meant female students would lose a larger portion of their day from studies to walking or transport in comparison to men. Woolf chose to use both Girton College and Newnham College, and her lectures at them, as the basis for her 1928 work *A Room of One's Own*. As Bishop elaborates, "Jacob's room is filled with clues to his character – books and pictures and his essay in progress on the table – but he himself is absent and he remains elusive," and is it more surprising for readers to realize that this moment in the text was originally designed to contrast with a second female protagonist who was studying at the same time and at the same university as Jacob (116). Ultimately, Woolf chose not to include this material in the novel but did publish it as a work on its own in 1926 titled "A Woman's College from Outside." That the same phrase describing the room appears in her drafts for both rooms shows that Woolf was conceiving a critique of the gender inequities in the education system when she first envisioned the novel, but she subsequently dropped this approach in order to focus on the limitations placed on Jacob by his gender and his eventual involvement in the First World War.

### **The Unconscious and Symptomatic Texts**

Understanding Woolf's works is complicated by the fact that she was also intimately involved in the first translations and publications of [Sigmund Freud's](#) works in English. Her youngest brother Adrian Stephen was also one of the first psychoanalysts in Britain, training under Ernest Jones. Although Woolf does not invite her readers to psychoanalyze her characters, she does manipulate the distinction between a character's thoughts and the same character's unknown or unconscious motivations and desires. This distinction between what a character thinks and what the reader might recognize appears at several points in the novel – the invitation is for the reader to view some actions or objects as symptoms of an underlying motivation of which the character appears to remain unaware. As with metonymy, one thing stands in for another.

This process stands out perhaps most overtly in the marriage proposal that Mrs. Flanders receives in a letter from the Rev. Andrew Floyd. When she receives the letter, we as readers can observe her

spoken comments to Rebecca, but we do not have access to her thoughts, even though her experience in this moment is the focus of our readerly attention:

“Mr. Floyd brought it himself, did he?—I think the cheese must be in the parcel in the hall—oh, in the hall—” for she was reading....

“Yes, enough for the fish-cakes to-morrow certainly—Perhaps Captain Barfoot—” she had come to the word “love.”... Up and down went her breast... She shook her head and was looking through her tears at the little shifting leaves against the yellow sky when three geese... scuttled across the lawn with Johnny behind them, brandishing a stick.

Mrs. Flanders flushed with anger.

“How many times have I told you?” she cried, and seized him and snatched his stick away from him. (13)

This scene is symptomatic in a number of intriguing ways that stand out more clearly when juxtaposed with the next section of the novel that follows after a gap in the page. First, notice how we as readers do not have access to Mrs. Flanders’ thoughts until they turn to anger, even though this anger contradicts the external impressions we are given of her emotions. Her external tears and deep breaths are contrasted with the phallic stick she snatches away and her anger. The impression is that a transformation has occurred in Mrs. Flanders to which we are not granted access, and only once she has solidified her emotions into anger (for whatever personal reason we are not told) are we offered the omniscient narrator’s description of her mental state.

This confusion and presumed inability of Mrs. Flanders to observe her own reasoning and emotions in this moment appears immediately afterward when she looks at the cat given to her family by Rev. Floyd (each boy is given a sexually suggestive gift, such as a phallic paper-knife or the wildly sexual poetical works of Lord Byron, with the exception of the youngest who takes a kitten). The kitten, in the new time frame after the section break (Woolf 15), is seen by her in a highly peculiar description that suggests the reader ought to return to Mrs. Flanders’ moment of anger and reexamine it afresh:

“Poor Topaz,” she said (for Mr. Floyd’s kitten was now a very old cat, a little mangy behind the ears, and one of these days would have to be killed).

“Poor old Topaz,” said Mrs. Flanders, as he stretched himself out in the sun, and she smiled, thinking how she had had him gelded, and how she did not like red hair in men. Smiling, she went into the kitchen. (15)

The combination of “killed,” “smiled,” and “gelded” (castrated) reconfigures Mrs. Flanders’ earlier motherly response to Rev. Floyd via letter. Our readerly understanding, which is distinct from the access we are given to her thoughts, suggest that violence, castration, and usurping of power play a role in her feelings. What is important for how we approach the novel as readers, however, is that we are made forcefully aware of a significant gap or distance between what a character can recognize in his or her own thoughts and what *we as readers* are able to recognize as an external observer.

### Questions for Self-Review

1. How do form and content relate to each other in *Jacob’s Room*?
2. In what ways is Woolf modeling her novel on Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and in what ways is she developing forward from Joyce’s initial innovations?
3. Do gaps or aporias in the novel matter as much as the actual text, as Bishop argues?
4. Is there a cinematic quality to Woolf’s novel, its scene changes, and its focus on objects or landscapes? Compare or contrast it to a film from the first half of the twentieth century.
5. How does gender figure differently in Woolf’s novel in contrast to Joyce’s?

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