

## ***Jacob's Room: A New Form for a New Novel***

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the impact of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition that Roger Fry organized in London in 1910 on Virginia Woolf's ideas on the novel. Her dissatisfaction with the state of the genre finds expression in her diary and in her criticism of the work of the Edwardian novelists. *Jacob's Room* (1922), her first truly experimental novel, deploys some of the painterly techniques that the post-impressionist painters and vanguard movements of the 1910s effected. It represents a decisive step in her search for a new form for a new novel.

**Keywords:** *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf, essay, experimental novel, painting, post-impressionism

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Virginia Woolf was a restless writer. After *Voyage Out*, each one of her novels constituted a field of formal experimentation in which she sought to address problems and find answers to her dissatisfaction with the state of the modern novel, especially regarding the literary practices of Edwardian novelists, whose kind of realism she repudiated. Her essays, letters, and diary also clearly record the extent to which her writing was marked by an incessant search for new paths and by her reflection on form, representation, and character. To the critical exercise that the appreciation of the work of her predecessors provided her, she added her non-fictional production, which is configured as a territory for probing possibilities and is punctuated by questions, comments, and observations that, taken together, give proof of an inquisitive mind, attentive to her creative process and the demands of her craft.

Despite acknowledging the formal mastery of some of her contemporaries, she felt that "life escapes" in their work and goes on to state that "perhaps, without life, nothing else is worth while [sic]," whether this essential thing that she pursued is named "life or spirit, truth or reality" ("Modern" 8). From Woolf's perspective, there should be no separation between art and life, and

fiction could not but present a meaningful account of a human being's experience in relation to other human beings, to the external world, and to the abstraction that "we [are] prepared to call life itself" ("Modern" 11). One of her main concerns centered on the novelist's attitude towards life. The relationship between life and literary truth is a recurring problem in the reflections of a writer conscious of the urgency of finding new forms and tones to address issues imposed by the historical moment. Ultimately, Woolf called for a revolution in the novel, a task to which she would tirelessly dedicate herself, especially from *Jacob's Room* up until her last work, *Between the Acts*. In her essays, diary, and correspondence, assertions emerge here and there, in which she seeks to rethink the genre that she characterizes as "that cannibal" (*Selected* 80), as in the following examples:

I keep thinking of different ways to manage my scenes; conceiving endless possibilities; seeing life, as I walk about the streets, an immense opaque block of material to be conveyed by me into its equivalent of language. (*Diary* 1: 214)

[...] the novel or the variety of the novel which will be written in time to come will take on some of the attributes of poetry. ("Narrow" 19)

[...] the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. ("Narrow" 23)

The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. ("Phases" 141)

The method of writing smooth narrative cant [sic] be right; things dont [sic] happen in one's mind like that. We experience, all the time, an overlapping of images and ideas, and modern novels should convey our mental confusion instead of neatly rearranging it. The reader must sort it out. (*Diary* 3: 126–127)

[...] for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. (*A Room* 38)

The recurring terms "life," "truth," and "reality" practically become equivalent, being used comprehensively and interchangeably, as synonyms for "spirit," which is ultimately what fiction must capture and communicate. Far from referring to the mere transcription of reality, or not at

all meaning a simple correspondence to facts, “reality” needs to include the intangible, that is, “life” or “spirit,” opening up consciousness to the experience of the world. Thus, even if written in prose, the novel should bring “something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play” (*Selected* 80), in order to “express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly” (80). Imbued with this power or poetic force, the prose gains lyricism, rhythm, and musicality. To the questions “What is reality? And who are the judges of reality?” in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (“Modern” 8),<sup>1</sup> there is an answer in *A Room of One’s Own*, about what writers should capture in fiction:

What is meant by “reality”? It would seem to be very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. (99)

The moment of vision implies the elimination of chronological time and the dissolution of the boundaries between the outer and the inner world; the material world and external reality capture the gaze and trigger the plunge into interiority, through perceptions and sensations, while the mind wanders in the midst of the objects, sounds, and colors of real life. Published originally under the title “Modern Novels” in 1919, “Modern Fiction” is a critique of the “materialist” writers and a manifestation of Woolf’s discontent with the value they placed on facts and “unimportant things” (“Modern” 8). Because they submitted to the tyranny of plot, because they focused on material and objective details, life escapes them, according to Woolf. The essay traces a path as to how the novel should capture life; a most often-cited passage in it almost sounds like a manifesto:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, now what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little a

mixture of the alien and external as possible? (9)

This excerpt concentrates on some of the most relevant principles that guided what could be described as Woolfian poetics: the impact of impressions on and the movement into the mind; the writer's freedom; the centrality of emotion; the refusal of conventions; the protest against rigidity. By rejecting the unimportant and the trivial ("the life of Monday or Tuesday"), Woolf suggests that what matters is the inner look, a step with evident consequences to her narrative technique, in which plot, characterization, description, prose and poetry, fiction and lyricism are blurred to create "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope." In this way, banal everyday incidents are only of interest as a resource to explore their hidden meaning, in an art of writing that seeks to apprehend, in novels (but also in diaries), "this loose, drifting material of life" (*Diary* 1: 266).

The wish to break with current conventions appears at different times and in different ways and materializes in a set of ideas that configure a certain conception of the novel, in Woolf's effort to find her own voice and tread a path that responds to the challenges of her time. The writer's diaries prove to be a repository, over the years, of doubts, discoveries, and illuminations, and they provide really precious information regarding her methods and her aesthetic principles. Amid notes on everyday actions, meetings, outings, Virginia Woolf reflects on the process of composition of her novels and outlines a theory of fiction, not as an articulated body of concepts, but as insights that are intertwined with the record of everyday life.

The whole discussion about the need to give a new direction to the novel exposed in "Modern Fiction" was completed with the debate about fictional character in which, once again, Woolf's counterexample is the novelist Arnold Bennett. The essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924) was a response to the review that Bennett had published a year earlier,<sup>2</sup> in which he acknowledged the originality of *Jacob's Room* but pointed to the novel as an example of the younger novelists' failure to create true and realistic characters. Bennett's review was met with Woolf's objection, who returned the criticism stating that the Edwardians had never been able to grasp the elusive character that every writer should aim to create. The anonymous "Mrs Brown" crossing London in a train carriage represents for her not an external reality, but a kind of inner essence, "the spirit we live by, life itself" (*Mr Bennett* 21). Her central argument is that, in the new type of fiction that the contemporary world demanded, the creation of a convincing character did not depend on external details—age, profession, class, social relationships—but should make their solidity disappear, their characteristics crumble, their house collapse, and cause them to become "a will-o'-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window" ("Mr Bennett" 35). In Woolf's "biography of fragments"—Hermione Lee's characterization of *Jacob's Room* (72)—the biographer's interest lies not in the facts about her protagonist, which are unobtrusively embedded in descriptive or meditative passages. Not one complete portrayal of Jacob is provided, but rather a mosaic made up of the variety of views and traits that evoke him. He is a shadowy, elusive figure, whom one never gets to know—Leonard Woolf would comment that "the people are ghosts" in the novel (*Diary* 2: 186).

Her concerns and ideas about character-creation would be again aired in the lecture given to the Cambridge Heretics in 1924, in which Woolf made what she described as a “disputable” assertion: “[...] on or about December 1910 human character changed” (“Character” 38). This could not be a reference to the findings of Sigmund Freud, whose work she knew about but would read only much later, in 1939. So as to sustain what might sound a witticism, she pointed to Samuel Butler’s novels and Bernard Shaw’s plays as recording the first signs of that change. Then she went on to mention ongoing shifts not only in the relationships between bosses and employees, husbands and wives, parents and children, but also in religion, politics, and conduct. She was thus advancing the argument that in order to truly capture character, it was necessary to leave behind the customary narrative conventions and find new tools. However, nothing explained the apparently random choice of date in Woolf’s assertion. In fact, it has been construed to be an indirect reference to the social and intellectual climate of the time and to the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition, organized by art critic Roger Fry; likewise, nothing in the sentence signaled the transformative effect that the exhibition had on Virginia Woolf and on Vanessa Bell. Entitled “Manet and the Post-Impressionists,” it was open from November 1910 to January 1911 at Grafton Galleries and properly introduced for the first time the modern movement in painting to an English public accustomed to academicism. Will Hodgkinson describes it as a “cultural earthquake” and remarks that, despite being a critical and public disaster, it changed the course of art and culture in Great Britain.

Post-Impressionism, a term coined by Fry, encompassed works by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Matisse, and Picasso, and meant to suggest both continuity and discontinuity in relation to Impressionism. Fry thus indicated the emergence of a new style, characterized by the non-naturalistic use of colors, interest in the primitive, the distortion of planes and forms, and increasingly distanced from verisimilitude and figurative art. Although still attracted to the interplay of colors and light and shadow, post-impressionist painters were above all bent on discovering and exploring the emotional meaning in things. Fry would further explain that post-impressionists did not aim to imitate form, but to create it; they sought not to imitate, but to find an equivalent for life; to create not the illusion of real space, but an immediate sensation of space.<sup>3</sup>

One of Woolf’s biographers states that “Virginia had little to do with the mounting of the exhibition and supported it hesitantly from behind the scenes, but it seriously affected her. What artists were doing in painting [...] she intended to introduce into prose, offering the essence of a person or a place without describing them exactly” (Nicolson). Initial reservations were gradually put aside, and Woolf adopted several pictorial procedures that began to become more noticeable, for example in stories such as “Kew Gardens,” “Mark on the Wall,” and “An Unwritten Novel,”<sup>4</sup> which Woolf described in a letter as “the great discovery (...); somehow I saw, branching out from the tunnel I built, that method of approach, *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* etc.” (qtd. in Lee 376).

“Kew Gardens”<sup>5</sup> is a collection of snapshots featuring a few families that stroll around the garden on a hot day in July and stop to admire a flowerbed where a snail makes a very slow trail among the colorful flowers moving in the soft breeze. To give a sense of this space and the people

in it, the story deploys some of those new techniques in its drive to incorporate the color and movement the narrator wishes to apprehend and translate into words:

Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all colours, men, women and children, were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then, seeing the breadth of yellow that lay upon the grass, they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue. (*Complete* 95)

Another short story, “Solid Objects” (1920), “is loaded with potential meanings about the relationship between life and art, between the big and the small, the real and the intangible” (Tearle), or, in other terms, between granite and rainbow, a title that brings together a series of essays by the author.<sup>6</sup> It centers on a man’s relinquishment of a political life in favor of his obsession with glass, china, stones, and iron—solid objects that come to acquire an ethereal quality for him. Contemporaneously with the writing of these stories, Woolf took the first steps towards creating her third novel; the entries in her diary record the issues that occupied her and the signs of her restlessness and uncertainty. In her comments, we witness the writer in search of a course and of a form that would convey a vision that, taking advantage of the discoveries in the short stories, aspired to a renewal of the novelistic genre:

[...] & happier today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in *An Unwritten Novel*—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn’t that give the looseness & lightness I want: doesn’t [sic] that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything? My doubt is how far it will <include> enclose the human heart—Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist. Then I’ll find room for so much—a gaiety—an inconsequence—a light spirited stepping at my sweet will. Whether I’m sufficiently mistress of things—thats [sic] the doubt; but conceive mark on the wall, K[ew]. G[ardens]. & unwritten novel taking hands & dancing in unity. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover: the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance 2 weeks ago. (*Diary 2*: 13–14)<sup>7</sup>

Still in the spring of 1920, after visiting an exhibition of African carvings at the Chelsea Book Club and listening to a lecture by Fry, Woolf would write to Vanessa: “I dimly see that something in their style might be written” (qtd. in Quick 566) and she began writing *Jacob’s Room* the following day. Shortly before the novel’s publication, on 27 October 1922, Woolf recognized that she had achieved what she tirelessly pursued:

There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; & that interests me so that I feel I can go ahead without praise. (*Diary 2*: 186)

[...] I think Jacob was a necessary step, for me, in working free. (2: 208)

The urge to face structural problems and capture modern sensibility translates into what is experimental about the 1922 novel. Its experimentalism produced contradictory reactions from its first readers, divided between acknowledging the strong visual appeal of the work and complaining about its lack of plan and of narrative. *The Guardian* of 3 November 1922 labeled it as unconventional; *The New York Times* of 4 March 1923 considered that there was “no plainer manifestation of the modernist trend in contemporary English fiction” and drew attention to the insignificance of the incidents in contrast with the representation of the states of mind of Jacob and Mrs. Betty Flanders. Its style was defined as “sheer poetry,” and excerpts from *Jacob's Room* were cited that could be “offered as poems.” All that was needed was to split up the sentences as “vers libre” and rearrange the lines:

Tears made all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes, and spangled the kitchen with bright knives, [...] (*Jacob's Room* 4)

Sunlight strikes in upon shaving glasses; and gleaming brass cans; upon all the jolly trappings of the day; the bright, inquisitive, armoured, resplendent, summer's day, which has long since vanquished chaos; which has dried the melancholy medieval mists; drained the swamp and stood glass and stone upon it; and equipped our brains and bodies with such an armoury of weapons that merely to see the flash and thrust of limbs engaged in the conduct of daily life is better than the old pageant of armies drawn out in battle array upon the plain. (227–228)

*Jacob's Room* could be described as a “coming-of-age novel,” as it seeks to capture Jacob's growth from childhood to adulthood. Stephen Kern suggests, however, that Woolf “parodies the *Bildungsroman* and the idea that life has some overall purpose” (42). Woolf takes her protagonist to Cambridge University, a trip to Europe, a job in London, and finally to war. It is, however, a novel about a development interrupted by the death of its protagonist. This almost inapprehensible, elusive figure is said to represent the more than 800,000 English soldiers killed during the First World War. Life and death, those two recurring themes in Woolf's work, are viscerally intertwined and run through the narrative from beginning to end. *Jacob's Room* opens and closes with an absence. On a beach in Cornwall, a landscape that the narrator paints with colors and fills with shapes, a call brings onto the stage the boy whose trajectory the narrative will share through a set of frames separated by blank spaces, like silences punctuating snapshots of life. The chapters are composed of blocks and scenes that, juxtaposed in a relationship of contiguity, or metonymically, look like dots to be connected to form a portrait that, ultimately, is neither fulfilled nor completed.

Woolf diluted the plot in the traditional sense by leaving gaps and abandoning causality, eliminated conflicts and introduced an omniscient narrator who confesses the limits of omniscience: “It is no use trying to sum people up” (*Jacob's Room* 37, 214); and again in “Jacob, no doubt, thought something in this fashion” (189). Or still:

In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him. (96)

Its unknowable protagonist escapes both us and the narrator, who renounces access to Jacob's inner life and makes him inscrutable. As they are simply fragments, neither conversations nor letters constitute elements of his characterization. As in a Cubist painting, the different perspectives of the other characters are juxtaposed, composing, through a process of montage, a multifaceted image of Jacob, in the way that Cézanne created multiple perspectives, or Braque and Picasso explored reality in Cubism. The human form is outlined by the joining of angular pieces and the interplay of light and shadow, thus exposing Jacob's various facets. Alternating and shifting points of view are the procedure that enables us to form a portrait that escapes any realistic representation of this young man living at a crucial moment in European history. Everything operates by suggestion, as if to prove that it is not possible to see anyone completely, but just glimpse some detail or feature, “a nose, a shoulder, something turning away, always in movement” (qtd. in Martin 176). The void left by Jacob at the end makes the novel a “meditation on loss” (Martin 177); however, many scholars argue that if *Jacob's Room* is an elegy, it is a satirical elegy, in which Woolf demonstrates her opposition to intellectualism, patriarchy, and the political structures that drove young Englishmen to war.

Carol Ohmann even considers her attitude as iconoclastic in relation to education, politics, culture, and the State. It is only almost at the end of the novel that the narrator turns, more explicitly, to the mechanics of modern life and the theme of war, when referring to the “men in clubs and Cabinets,” “the battleships” with weapons, the armies, “the banks, laboratories, chancellories [sic], and houses of business” as “the strokes that oar the world forward,” and to “a dozen young men in the prime of life [who] descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and there, impassively [...] suffocate uncomplainingly together” (*Jacob's Room* 216). For Linda Martin, the novel is at the same time a sincere manifestation of the feeling of mourning and pain for losses in the war and a criticism of English institutions, as evidenced in the excerpt just quoted.

This ambivalence largely results from the way in which Jacob from the beginning appears as a figure both present and absent, making it difficult to draw any inferences or form any judgment about him. Any definition regarding his personality is always provisional, either because

the narrator provides contradictory information about him, such as, for example, his opinion about women, or because the impressions of third parties are varied, seeing him sometimes as distinguished, sometimes as clumsy, sometimes as attentive, and sometimes as a distant young man. It is the colors, the scenes, or the settings that suggest his feelings, as if he were, like Clara Durrant, one of those “hazy, semi-transparent shapes of yellow and blue” (*Jacob’s Room* 75). Images replace facts in characterizing characters. The glimpses that grant access to Jacob’s mind, personality, or motivations are always fleeting, momentary, “endowing Jacob Flanders with all kinds of qualities he had not at all. [...] Yet over him we hang, vibrating” (97–98).

The oscillation between the direct and indirect presentation of the protagonist prevents us from having a definitive image of Jacob (the narrator mentions the indistinct outline his mother made of him), which lacks clarity and whose blurred, impressionistic features represent the closeness between literature and painting that Woolf pursued in her writing. According to Lee, style contributes to the imprecision of images, thanks to the ambiguity of the syntax, the long and rambling sentences, the interpolation of direct and free indirect speech, the changes in verbal tenses, all of them resources in the biographer’s struggle to “discover and communicate character” (78). While Van Gogh imprinted rhythm in his paintings with his thick and expressive brushstrokes or the regular repetition of elements (cf. the diagonal slant of the flowers in “*Iris*es”), Woolf resorted to the recurrent use of semicolons, lists of details, ellipses, and inversions, for the same purpose and effect.

Lee argues additionally that Woolf’s technique in *Jacob’s Room* is necessary to express the writer’s belief in the shadowy nature of the character and elusive nature of relationships. There is, no doubt, a certain gesture of humility in realizing the other’s unknowability:

But though all this may very well be true—so Jacob thought and spoke—so he crossed his legs—filled his pipe—sipped his whisky, and once looked at his pocket-book, rumpling his hair as he did so, there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself. (*Jacob’s Room* 97)

The narrator’s admission that “a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown” (96) calls into question her own omniscience when she confesses the limits of what she can learn or know, or when she concedes she does not have access to certain scenes or conversations. On the other hand, without exactly characterizing herself as an intrusive narrator, she makes her presence felt with the inclusion of meditations; up to a certain extent, she also breaks with convention when she identifies herself by her difference in relation to Jacob (“granted ten years’ seniority and the difference of sex”; 128). She also uses free indirect discourse as a procedure to penetrate the consciousness of her several different characters, without ever giving up the prerogative of sharing their point of view, and she paints small pictures, exploring the relationship between shapes and colors, making the novel a testing ground for using painting techniques in writing.

Jack Stewart notes that as a writer she intended to convey the sensation of life in a certain consciousness through a language of sensory perception similar to that of painting. Woolf conceived her fiction with a strong visual component, in which objects lose their contours and blur into a kind of mist: “The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled” (3); the colors mix in the reflections on the sea surface: “The Scilly islands were turning bluish; and suddenly blue, purple, and green flushed the sea; left it grey” (61). It is mainly in small descriptive passages that, for example, Woolf captures reflections in moving water, creates snapshots of nature, still lifes in the style of Cézanne, or the hustle and bustle of urban life, as in Monet and Pissarro:

Jacob’s room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin—an essay, no doubt [...]. (48)

The whole city was pink and gold; domed; mist-wreathed; resonant; strident. Banjoes strummed; the parade smelt of tar which stuck to the heels; goats suddenly cantered their carriages through crowds. It was observed how well the Corporation had laid out the flowerbeds [sic]. Sometimes a straw hat was blown away. Tulips burnt in the sun. Numbers of sponge-bag trousers were stretched in rows. Purple bonnets fringed soft, pink, querulous faces on pillows in bath chairs. Triangular hoardings were wheeled along by men in white coats. (18)

Even from the standpoint of narrative voice, Woolf explored the alternation of perspectives, adopted a plastic form, and fought for freedom from the constraints and limitations of the Victorian novel, taking an extraordinary step towards a new form. Her narrator in *Jacob's Room* does not hesitate to challenge conventions, to take risks and use all the possibilities at her disposal to capture the poetics of everyday life. Her mobility and the adoption of different modalities of point of view subvert the more traditional role of a narrator less willing to experiment. Furthermore, with this step, Woolf strips away the artificial character of the omniscient stance, accepting and incorporating doubt and uncertainty about the world. Multiple and simultaneous perspectives come together to outline the silhouette of a young man whose self is after all inaccessible. The narrator observes her character and speculates: “But whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob’s gloom as he sat naked in the sun, looking at the Land’s End, it is impossible to say; for he never spoke a word” (63). In the end, as Lee concludes, the only thing we know about him is his name. But Lee reminds us that, although Jacob escapes us as an individual, he remains “a figure of a recognizable class, at a particular time, doomed to a particular tragic fate” (84).

In the elegy for this condemned youth, images of death pervade the story from its very opening: the surname Flanders, echoing the battlefield; the skull of a cow; the sheep’s jawbone; the man and woman lying on the beach, as if dead; the allusions to the literary past; the Moonlight Sonata; Jimmy, who feeds the crows in Flanders; Jacob’s empty room in Cambridge, with its sad

air, anticipating the end of the novel. The lyrical-elegiac tone that runs through the novel as a whole finds a culmination in the final expression of an absence: “Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there” (*Jacob’s Room* 247). From another angle, the use here of the still life technique contrasts with the movement of life outside the window, with Pickford’s van swinging down the street, the buses locked together, the engines throbbing, and the leaves seeming to raise themselves. There is a feeling of anguish on seeing the “procession of shadows” depart (96); there is the regret for the lives led to death by institutions and the war machine; there is a lament for the young lives wasted in battle, symbolized by the emptiness of Jacob’s premature loss. All that was left of him were the scattered letters, the wicker armchair, and a pair of old shoes. The question remains for Mrs. Flanders: “What am I to do with these, Mr Bonamy?” (247). The call “Jacob! Jacob!” reverberates throughout the novel, three times in Archer’s voice, then in Clara’s thoughts and finally in Bonamy’s cry, standing next to Jacob’s bedroom window, at the end. The questions still resonate: who is or was Jacob and why is he called? The last, silent question seems to be that of the narrator, or to a large extent that of Virginia Woolf: how does one represent what or who no longer exists?

## Notes

1. Originally a lecture entitled “Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown” given in 1923.
2. Arnold Bennett, “Is the Novel Decaying?” *Cassell’s Weekly*, March 1923. According to Bennett, she “can’t create or didn’t in *Jacob’s Room*, characters that survive” (Woolf’s paraphrase in *Writer’s Diary*). The first version of her essay was titled “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” and was published in the US and then in England. A later version was written as a lecture to the Cambridge Heretics on 18 May 1924, then published in the *Criterion* under the title “Character in Fiction,” and then published by Hogarth Press as *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* in 1924.
3. The French Post-Impressionists: Preface to the Catalog of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, Grafton Galleries, 1912, *Vision and Design*, p. 15. Cited by Jonathan R. Quick, p. 560.
4. Published in the collection *Monday or Tuesday*, in 1921.
5. First published in 1919 as a small book by Hogarth Press and later included in the volume *Monday or Tuesday*.
6. *Granite and Rainbow* was published posthumously in 1958. The phrase appears in Woolf’s essay “The New Biography.”
7. Lightness (visual impressionism, a reference to the French impressionists); gaiety and inconsequence imply a privileging of pleasure; unity is equivalent to structure.

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