

UNDERSTANDING THE SUBJECT:
WOOLF'S USE OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN IN *THE VOYAGE OUT* AND *JACOB'S ROOM*

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INTRODUCTION

Like many of her contemporaries, Virginia Woolf looked for new ways of crafting fiction. In her essay “Modern Fiction,” she claims that she would construct her work in opposition to the Edwardian writers such as Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy, who she referred to as “materialists” because they were “concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (147). Even as Woolf struggled to disrupt conventions of Edwardian fiction and emerge as a modern twentieth-century writer, two of her first three novels—*The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Jacob’s Room* (1922)—follow the pattern of the classic nineteenth-century genre: the Bildungsroman.

According to Susanne Howe’s classic 1930 study *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen: Apprentices to Life*, in the Bildungsroman,

The adolescent hero of the typical “apprentice” novel sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counselors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work effectively (4).

The Voyage Out and *Jacob’s Room* both adhere to the conventions of which Howe speaks. In *The Voyage Out*, the female protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, leaves her home and takes a trip to South America, is educated by her aunt, experiences a sexual awakening, and falls in love with a man of high social status. In *Jacob’s Room*, the male protagonist, Jacob Flanders, begins his education with a tutor at home, completes it at Cambridge,

develops his sexuality through relationships with multiple women, and takes a trip to Greece. However, there are certain aspects of these novels that do not adhere to the end goal of the conventional Bildungsroman. Franco Moretti claims that “the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*” are central to the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman (15). These centralities are what Woolf seeks to complicate in order to achieve a thorough revision of the Edwardian novel.

Joanne Frye identifies *The Voyage Out* as “in part a novel of manners and in part a Bildungsroman” yet “within the traditional framework discordant elements jar and begin to form their own stronger and deeper patterns in the metaphysical depth which is Woolf’s real concern” (403). Although Woolf’s plot follows many of the conventions of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, it withholds its expected resolution: after Rachel Vinrace, a sheltered 24 year old girl, embarks on a journey into womanhood as she travels from London to South America during which she is mentored, has her first sexual encounter, discovers a bit of independence, and falls in love, she unexpectedly dies. Because of Rachel’s death, the plot fails to achieve the goal of harmonious socialization. Likewise, Jacob Flanders also has a premature death. After his return home from Greece, Jacob fights and dies in the First World War, through which he also fails harmonious socialization.

Although men and women had different ways of assimilating into society during the nineteenth century, Lorna Ellis argues, both males and females had to “find a conservative niche in society...at the expense of adventure and personal autonomy” (19), a sacrifice that is reflected in the structure of the bildungsroman for both male and female

protagonists. She acknowledges that options for women during the nineteenth century were much more limited than they were for men—women rarely had the option of having a career (19). Instead, female Bildung entailed assimilation into society through domesticity, usually marriage. The male, on the other hand, must assimilate through politics and business. However, as Beverly Voloshin claims in her essay “The limits of domesticity: the female Bildungsroman in America, 1820-1870”, in the nineteenth-century female Bildungsroman, we find female protagonists “rebell[ing] against the domestic role [in two ways], her attempts to be independent and her hostility toward male power” (285). The rebellion of female protagonists that Voloshin identifies in the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman carries over into the twentieth century.

In *The Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle analyzes the modernist inheritance of the Bildungsroman and provides a comprehensive literary history of the genre. He turns to the eighteenth century German Enlightenment “which created and nurtured a tradition of aesthetico-spiritual (or classical) Bildung” (7). In the eighteenth century, Bildung, or the tradition of self-cultivation and education was associated with a genre of aesthetics. This genre was concerned with spiritual development and the aesthetics of self-cultivation. However, as the Bildungsroman migrated from an association with German national identity to Anglo-America literature during the 19th century, the concerns of self-cultivation shifted to concerns of socialization and social mobility.

While drawn to the genre, both James Joyce and Virginia Woolf refused to adhere to the model of harmonious socialization that is found in both the male and female nineteenth-century Bildungsroman (Castle 7). Yet in other ways, both authors follow

conventions of this genre, specifically the female variety. One of the ways that the modernist Bildungsroman mimics the nineteenth-century female Bildungsroman is by focusing on the development of a character's inner life. Because the character's end goal in the nineteenth-century male Bildungsroman was conceived in social terms, external institutional pressures often result in the neglect of the protagonist's inner life. Some critics have claimed that by refusing full socialization to their protagonists, modernist writers have failed to write a Bildungsroman. For example, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland claim that "female development ceases to resemble Bildung at all" (qtd in Castle 212). But according to Castle, this failure is a tactical one. He claims that one of the goals of the modernist project is to define what it is to be a human being and to examine the ways we define and acquire selfhood. By purposefully avoiding the goals of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, modernist writers achieve "critical triumphs" (3). Moreover, he argues, by deterring their characters from assimilating to existing societal structure, these writers focus on more complex problems including identity, nationality, art, and interpersonal relationships (3).

Specifically, the modernist Bildungsroman is concerned with individual, rather than social subjectivity. For Castle, Woolf's focus on individual subjectivity separate from society in *The Voyage Out* is evidence "that the modernist's strategy of reinhabiting the Bildungsroman form and destabilizing its dialectical structure is the ideal condition for the progressive and critical instauration of Bildung" (215). By destabilizing the formal conventions of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, Woolf creates possibilities for her female characters that did not exist in fiction before (216). But he also claims that *The Voyage Out* does not meet the goal of finding individual subjectivity because Rachel

Vinrace dies before she has the ability to do so. Nonetheless, individual subjectivity is a major concern in the novel.

In its concern with individual development, the Bildungsroman serves Woolf's purpose of exploring subjectivity—in more ways than Castle describes. In all her novels, Woolf probed the many dimensions of the human psyche. She makes this clear in “Modern Fiction,” wherein she describes a novel that attempts to achieve more than alternate social possibilities. Woolf believed writers of the nineteenth century (namely Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett) were draining fiction of life and were not capturing what she believed to be the core of reality: the human mind and consciousness. Rather, they were writing of “unimportant things” and spending “immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (148). Woolf believed that these writers were too concerned with the physical apparatus of their stories, and less concerned with the psychological experience “in which she felt the truth of human experience lay” (Greenblatt 2143).

Although Woolf had not written “Modern Fiction” before the publication of *The Voyage Out*,¹ her first novel illuminates many of her initial concerns with inner life that emerge in her later novels. Woolf's first novel poses questions about how one's interiority can be developed and be represented in fiction. Her characters are obsessively

¹ Prior to the publication of Virginia Woolf's first novel, Woolf had only published a few essays and reviews. In 1897 she had begun recording intimate observations about writing and her life in a diary. She would continue this practice over the course of her life. However, it was not until 1907 that Woolf embarked on her first work of fiction: the novel that would become *The Voyage Out*. It was another two years after the publication of her first novel that Woolf and her husband, Leonard, founded the Hogarth Press¹ and Woolf published a short story under the title *Two Stories* (the second story was written by Leonard). It was yet another two years before Woolf published her famous manifesto on modern writing, initially titled “Modern Novels.”¹ In that same year (1919), Woolf also published her short story “Kew Gardens” through Hogarth Press and her second novel, *Night and Day*, through Duckworth Press.

concerned with whether or not they can understand each other, and the novel specifically explores the importance of *feeling* over *facts* in that mutual understanding. The characters in the novel seem to be asking similar questions to those that Woolf asks in “Modern Fiction.”

Jacob's Room asks similar questions to *The Voyage Out*, but approaches them in a different way. Unlike *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room* provides much more interior access to character's minds, except that of its protagonist, Jacob. Jacob's interiority appears to be unknown and unknowable, both to the other characters in the novel and to the reader. By rendering Jacob's interiority unknowable, Woolf seems to be raising questions about fictional characters who only develop their exterior, rather than their interior. Jacob completes all of the steps in his *Bildung*, but does not show any interior development, sense of self, or feelings about the world and the people around him and because of this both the characters and the reader know little about him.

The *Bildungsroman* provides a way for Woolf to explore what fiction should and should not be in two of her earliest novels. By subverting many of the genre's traditional conventions, Woolf is able to critique qualities of the novel that she does not believe reveal life, truth, or the “essential thing” (“Modern Fiction”). In *The Voyage Out* she approaches this by posing questions about understanding: Can I ever completely understand someone else? What, indeed, does understanding another person mean (*what* do we want to understand about other people)? In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf intensifies these questions by focusing the novel on a character about whose inner life we know little or nothing. This novel, in essence, challenges the social and institutional orientation of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* by representing its protagonist as an unsatisfying

cipher, setting the stage for Woolf's tour-de-force novels of the mid-1920's in which the inner life, or "essential thing," takes center stage.

CHAPTER 1

Bildung and Understanding in *The Voyage Out*

Woolf explores the problem of how one person can understand another person's subjectivity throughout *The Voyage Out*. The very first instance of dialogue in the novel is Helen Ambrose telling her husband, Ridley Ambrose, "You can't possibly understand" (7). As they prepare to leave for a trip to South America, Helen thinks about leaving their children behind. The couple walks down the street, a spectacle in height, and Helen begins to cry. Mr. Ambrose is aware that he cannot access or understand the sadness that Helen is experiencing. Because Helen and Ridley are husband and wife, one might assume that theirs should represent the most intimate of human relationships—but such is not the case. Woolf's decision to open the novel with an illustration of a married couple who simply cannot understand, or access, what each other is thinking and feeling, signals a problem that her novel will address both thematically and narratively.

In her first novel, Woolf closely analyzes the nature of understanding other people, distinguishing two distinct kinds of understanding: that which comes from knowing facts, and that which comes from knowing other people's emotions. In the novel, "facts" refer to exterior information about an individual's life: where they live, where they were born, what they do for a living, their politics, their hobbies, their interests etc. This kind of information is found in the Edwardian novels that Woolf criticized in "Modern Fiction." Woolf talks about feelings, on the other hand, in terms of emotion—specifically love. Feelings related more closely to subjectivity. The OED defines subjectivity as "The quality or condition of being based on subjective

consciousness, experienceness, experience, etc.; the fact of existing in the mind only” (“subjectivity”). When one character feels as though she does not know very much about another character, this usually means that she does not know what another character feels, or is experiencing mentally.

Woolf clarifies throughout the novel that the ability to understand people at this level is central to self-development and maturity. Understanding and representing characters’ consciousness in fiction was a central project for Virginia Woolf, and although she had a vision for her fiction that revised the trends in the novel during the nineteenth century, her first book is a classical nineteenth-century genre: the Bildungsroman. Nonetheless, the character’s relationships in the novel allow Woolf to clarify themes related to understanding. For instance, Helen, Rachel Vinrace’s aunt and mentor, wants Rachel to acquire the skills to be able to probe past understanding people through facts and instead understand them through feelings. Therefore, Woolf is suggesting that female development depends on learning to interpret other people’s subjectivity. This is, paradoxically, not an uncommon theme of female Bildung. In fact, women who are good at knowing other people make better marriage matches and marriage was the ultimate goal for female characters in the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman.

Woolf’s first novel follows many of the conventions of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman. The female protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, begins her journey into womanhood on the *Euphrosyne*, is educated by her aunt Helen, has her sexual awakening initiated by the passenger Richard Dalloway, and falls in love with a man of high social status, Terence Hewet. However, Woolf denies Rachel the goal of social assimilation

when, at the end of the novel, Rachel dies before marrying Hewet. Woolf's challenges to gender conventions begin earlier in the novel, once Rachel and the crew land in South America and leave the *Euphrosyne*. Castle argues that Woolf seeks to overcome the gendered Bildungsroman not by "discover[ing] a separate space of female self-development" but by "occupy[ing] a common space"—one that belongs to both males and females (215). Across the novel's two sections—the journey to South America on Rachel's father's ship the *Euphrosyne* and the time that the characters spend in South America—we can see how Woolf confronts the conventions of the Bildungsroman pertaining to social relationships and interactions. By subverting the mentor and marriage conventions of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, Woolf offers her own ideas of what self-development is, or should be. The fact that Rachel dies might suggest that at this point in her career as an author, she thinks full mutual understanding is not possible. However, mutual understanding is the ultimate goal of the novel, as a novel of development.

Helen and Ridley are just one example of a man and woman on the *Euphrosyne* who have trouble understanding one another. The first seven chapters, taking place on board, introduce seven central characters: Helen and Ridley, Rachel and her father Willoughby, Mr. Pepper, and Clarissa and Richard Dalloway. After Helen and Ridley's conversation before boarding the ship, the next place that we see contention related to a mutual understanding between male and female characters is Rachel and Helen's conversation about Mr. Pepper. Soon after Helen and Ridley arrive on the ship and are acquainted with Rachel, Willoughby, and Mr. Pepper, the two women separate from the men who move into the dining room to converse with one another as if they were "old

friends” (14). Rachel and Helen meditate on the interactions between the men as they peer through a slit in the blinds. As they observe them, Rachel describes Mr. Pepper to Helen by comparing him to a fossilized fish that is sitting in a basin in front of them. Helen tells Rachel that her comparison is too severe and Rachel begins to reflect on what she knows of Mr. Pepper:

“I don’t really know him,” she said, and took refuge in facts, believing that elderly people really like them better than feelings. She produced what she knew of William Pepper. She told Helen that he always called on Sundays when they were at home; he knew about a great many things—about mathematics, history, Greek, zoology, economics, and the Icelandic sagas. He had turned Persian poetry into English prose, and English prose into Greek iambics; he was an authority upon coins, and—one other thing—oh yes, she thought it was vehicular traffic. He was either to get things out of the sea, or to write upon the probable course of Odysseus, for Greek after all was his hobby (15).

Helen responds to this account by asking if he has ever been in love, and although Rachel then describes his heart as a piece of old shoe leather, she admits that this is something about Mr. Pepper she does not know and has never asked. The conversation concludes when Helen decides that she will ask him this question herself.

Rachel’s meditation on what she knows and does not know about Mr. Pepper produces the distinction between facts and feelings that is key to Woolf’s analysis of “understanding”. Rachel claims that she does not really know him, but then provides a detailed list of his interests, hobbies, and skills, and informs us that he has a close relationship with her family back home: “She told Helen that he always calls on Sundays

when they were at home...” (14). When Rachel describes the things she knows about Mr. Pepper (although she claims she does not really know him at all), she relays a list of facts about the man instead of feelings, and makes a clear distinction between the two. Her reason for doing so, she claims, is “...that elderly people really like them better than feelings” (14). From this distinction she seems to discern that one does not know another person if one is not acquainted with their feelings and she feels that the information she does know about Mr. Pepper does not constitute *understanding* him. Furthermore, the facts about Mr. Pepper that Rachel lists off do not satisfy Helen. According to Rachel, Helen gets “unexpectedly to the point,” (15) and wants to know about the man’s heart: has he ever been in love?

The emphasis on a distinct separation between facts and feelings and the idea that characters can only know each other if they are able to understand one another’s subjective experience supports Gregory Castle’s claim that *The Voyage Out* is a progressive Bildungsroman. Its interest lies in exploring individual subjectivities separate from society. Although the Bildungsroman’s traditional focus is the development of the self, and characters in quintessential Bildungsromane reflect on their own development (*Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, etc.), modern writers including Woolf were much more focused on character’s inner experience than their social interactions. This shift from the outward to the inward is a common way to define the modernist project. According to David Herman,

...analysts ranging from Leon Edel to F. K. Stanzel, from Ian Watt to Georg Lukács, [claim that] modernist writers, departing from the course taken by their nineteenth-century predecessors, shifted their emphasis from the detailed profiling

and authentication of the fictional worlds in which characters' experiences unfold to capturing the mental or psychological texture of those lived experiences themselves. Or, to put the same claim another way, the modernist accent falls less on fictional worlds than on fictional-worlds-as-experienced (243).

But Woolf is not only interested in her characters understanding their own individual consciousness--; *The Voyage Out* explores to what extent and on what basis characters can understand each other's subjectivity. Herman claims that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "Woolf developed a distinctive 'mind-style'" (244). This "mind-style" does not exist in *The Voyage Out*. In her first novel, however, we can begin to see how Woolf developed this "mind-style" by using, and in part subverting, the Bildungsroman to pose questions about understanding another's subjectivity. Because the Bildungsroman is concerned with subjectivity, albeit in a social framework, it is suited to questions related to understanding. Woolf presses beyond the relatively narrow concern of the nineteenth century Bildungsroman with *social* subjectivity, however, to ask philosophical questions about her characters' ability to understand each other.

To return to Mr. Pepper, we never enter his mind. In fact, Helen never discovers whether or not he has been in love. Because Woolf has not yet developed her "mind-style", she is unable to solve this problem in her first novel. However, we can see the difficulty of understanding other people as part of Woolf's strategy for criticizing and altering the Bildungsroman. Nonetheless, she will eventually be able to use this critique to generate her own unique form, first perfected in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Woolf explores Clarissa and Richard Dalloway's lives in depth in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but their brief appearance in *The Voyage Out* plays a significant role in the

Bildungsroman plot and the question of understanding other subjects. Clarissa and Richard board the ship in Lisbon while Mr. Willoughby stops “to [do] business until five o’ clock that afternoon” (33). Their significance in the novel is not located in their own relationship, but in their individual relationships with Rachel. In fact, Clarissa and Richard appear to have a relationship free of conflict: Clarissa claims that Richard understands her and that “He’s man and women as well” (14-15).² But this is not what we experience through Rachel’s interactions with Richard. Richard Dalloway sets into motion Rachel’s sexual awakening and progression into womanhood (a convention of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman) but his relationship with Rachel is also another representation in the first section of the novel where a man and a woman have trouble understanding one another’s feelings.

Richard sums up this interaction with Rachel when he claims, “We don’t seem to understand each other” (62). After Richard falls asleep to Clarissa reading *Persuasion* aloud, Clarissa leaves to take a message from a sailor, leaving Rachel and Richard alone. Rachel watches Richard sleep and thinks about who he is: “He was a man of forty perhaps; and here there were lines round his eyes, and there curious clefts in his cheeks. Slightly battered he appeared, but dogged and in the prime of life” (59). She wonders about Richard’s life ambitions and after he wakes, the two attempt to enter into an intimate conversation with very little understanding of one another’s feelings.

Richard presents himself as a person who supports women: “...there is one fact I admit I’m proud of; owing to me some thousands of girls in Lancashire – and many

² This is a very different version of Clarissa and Richard Dalloway than the Richard and Clarissa who reappear and are the central characters of Woolf’s fourth novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

thousands to come after them—can spend an hour every day in the open air which their mothers had to spend over their looms” (60). After this remark, Rachel feels that Richard is warm and means what he says, and she asks him to explain his politics. In his response, Richard informs Rachel that women do not belong in politics and Rachel replies by explaining her own philosophical view of life and society. Afterwards, the narrator concludes that their “attempt at communication had been a failure” (62). This is when Rachel comes to the conclusion that she and Richard “don’t seem to understand each other” (62). However, throughout their interaction, Rachel expresses “a thrusting desire to be understood” by Richard while he seems to be comfortable in accepting that it might be impossible for the two to be on the same page because “no woman has what I may call the political instinct” (62).

Woolf repeats the word “understand” in Rachel’s interaction with Richard, as in the novel’s first line of dialogue when Helen tells her husband Ridley that he cannot understand her. In the first section of the novel, it seems that women have a strong desire to be understood by men. In both of these instances, the men don’t reveal any “facts” that they know about these women, but they don’t seem to understand their feelings, either. We can assume that Ridley knows more “facts” about Helen than Richard would or could know about Rachel—Helen and Ridley are married and Rachel and Richard have only recently met. And although the content of their conversations is very different—Helen is discussing her feelings about leaving her children behind and Rachel is expressing her philosophical perspective on the world—both interactions focus on a lack of understanding, specifically in how characters *feel* about situations. Whether or not these

characters can know one another does not depend upon the information they have about one another, which differs considerably from case to case.

Although Rachel and Richard Dalloway's "attempt at communication had been a failure," Rachel and Clarissa's interactions on the ship transcend communication. In contrasting Rachel's interactions with Clarissa and those with Richard, Woolf suggests that gender plays a role in determining how well people can understand each other. This gender difference follows the pattern set in the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman.³ In the latter half of her novel, however, Woolf frustrates the idea that "only women can understand certain experiences which are essentially incommunicable to men" (qtd in Lazzaro-Weis 18).

Prior to Rachel's one on one interaction with Richard, she and Clarissa share an interaction that develops into an understanding between the two. Rachel is playing Bach when Clarissa enters the room and tells Rachel to continue playing. Rachel tells Clarissa that "It is too difficult" with another human in the room (53). Clarissa then feels badly that she has interrupted Rachel's playing but Rachel lets her know that she does not mind that she has come into her bedroom. The two begin to discuss the books in the girl's room (*Wuthering Heights* and Cowper's *Letters*) and Clarissa informs Rachel that although she enjoys the Brontës, she prefers Jane Austen. The narrator describes Clarissa's disposition to Rachel while in the bedroom as "an extraordinary degree of sympathy and a desire to

³ In her essay "The Female Bildungsroman: Calling it into question," Carol Lazzaro-Weis describes the way that 1970 feminist critics "analyzed the ways in which nineteenth- and early twentieth- century women novelists had represented the suppression and the defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms" (17). She cites critic Jean Grimshaw who claims that, "any theory that argues for the equal validity of all perspectives and realities with the intentions of claiming that understanding is determined by gender (i.e. only women can understand certain experiences which are essentially incommunicable to men), is ultimately incapable of providing the means for conceptualizing the oppression and domination of one group by another" (qtd. In Lazzaro-Weis 18).

befriend” (53). Similar to how Rachel desired to be understood by Richard, it seems that Clarissa has some desire to have an intimate understanding with Rachel.

At first it seems that Clarissa and Rachel do not understand one another. Rachel lets Clarissa know that she does not enjoy Jane Austen and Clarissa informs Rachel that she will enjoy her more when she is older. Clarissa expresses her interest in Shelley and her personal philosophy that it is “living, not dying, that counts,” adding “I don’t expect you to agree with me” (54). Even acknowledging that they may not see eye to eye suggests that Clarissa is thinking about a common understanding between her and Rachel. Nonetheless, the two then express their interests in one another: “I long to ask questions,” Clarissa tells Rachel, “You interest me so much” (55). Rachel expresses a mutual interest in Clarissa: “And I—I want to ask questions” (54).

After Clarissa and Rachel leave Rachel’s bedroom, they stand out on the boat deck and admire the scenery. Clarissa begins to think about the fact that she and Rachel have only just met: “‘How odd it is!’ she continued impulsively. ‘This time yesterday we’d never met’” (54). She continues by claiming: “We know absolutely nothing about each other—and yet—I feel as if I *did* know you!” (55). Immediately after Helen exclaims that she feels like she knows Rachel, the two make it clear that they do not know much about one another’s exterior lives at all. This makes sense considering that they have only met the day before:

“You have children—your husband was in Parliament?”

“You’ve never been to school, and you live-- ?”

“With my aunts at Richmond.”

“Richmond?”

“You see my aunts like the Park. They like the quiet.”

“And you don’t! I understand!” Clarissa laughed (55).

Despite how little Clarissa and Rachel know about the facts of one another’s lives, Clarissa still exclaims that she understands Rachel and this is because she can completely relate to and understand Rachel’s feelings. Although Clarissa is older than Rachel, she was once her age. We do not know whether or not Rachel and Clarissa have had similar upbringings, but because they are both women, Woolf seems to suggest that each intuitively understand how the other feels. For Rachel and Clarissa this understanding constitutes as knowing one another, even if they know hardly any exterior facts about each other at all.

Clarissa and Rachel’s relationship seems to suggest that “only women can understand certain experiences which are essentially incommunicable to men.” But as the ship approaches closer to South America, Woolf complicates this idea in preparation for the unconventional development of Rachel and Helen’s relationship after the ship lands. The relationship between Rachel and Helen is interesting when compared with the relationship between Rachel and Clarissa. Through the lens of the Bildungsroman genre, Helen is the most obvious mentor for Rachel in the novel. Helen is Rachel’s aunt, and after they leave the ship, Helen becomes Rachel’s full time guardian and mentor during their stay in Argentina. But Helen does not assume the conventional Bildungsroman mentor role. Helen wants to help Rachel assimilate into society, but her main concern is Rachel’s lack of knowledge about men and her own sexuality. She recognizes that Rachel

has had a typical Victorian upbringing: “Helen could hardly restrain herself from saying out loud what she thought of a man who brought up his daughters so that at the age of twenty-four she scarcely knew that men desired women and was terrified by a kiss” (75). Helen here criticizes nineteenth-century values of chastity and ignorance of sexuality for girls, values that were also inculcated in the female Bildungsroman. Helen desires to guide Rachel on a different path. Not only does she want Rachel to converse with multiple men and understand her own sexuality, there are times in which the novel might suggest that Helen could be sexually attracted to Rachel or jealous of her development. No wonder, then, that in their first conversation the two women appear not to understand each other; they have very different expectations for their relationship and more profoundly, for what a woman should know and become.

After the Dalloways leave the ship Helen has an urge to “make things straight again” and we witness her first attempt to understand Rachel’s feelings (74). She decides that she will occupy her time by talking to her niece. Helen “wished to know what the girl was like, partly of course because Rachel showed no disposition to be known” (74). Of course the reader knows that Rachel desired to be understood by Mr. Dalloway and felt comforted by the mutual understanding she shared with Clarissa. Helen asks Rachel to come have a conversation with her instead of practicing piano. Rachel follows her “indifferently” and her conversation is monotonous and common place but nonetheless she decides to reveal that Richard kissed her before departing. Helen looks at Rachel but “could not make out what she [Rachel] felt” (74). Not only can Helen not discern Rachel’s feelings about the kiss, but she knows little of Rachel’s upbringing and “supposed that she had been kept entirely ignorant as to the relations of men with

women” (75). However, Helen then asks Rachel if she knows many men and Rachel replies by telling her she knows Mr. Pepper. Her response is ironic, insofar as we are already aware that she has little knowledge of his thoughts and feelings. Her response also emphasizes how sheltered Rachel really is.

In the conversation that follows, Woolf draws our attention to the lack of mutual understanding between Helen and Rachel, despite Helen’s desire to know her niece better. Rachel “seemed to be inattentive” as Helen tries to explain the facts of life to her (76). Helen “wanted to make her niece talk, and so to understand why this rather dull, kindly, plausible politician had made so deep an impression on her, for surely at the age of twenty four it was not natural” (77). She wonders why Rachel is so impressionable. Further, the two women disagree about Clarissa and Richard. Rachel viewed Clarissa as being able to understand her whereas she felt that Richard could not understand her at all, and Helen feels quite the opposite: “She was quite nice, but a thimble pated creature...I’d far rather talk to him any day. He was pompous, but he did at least understand what was said to him” (77). Rachel and Helen’s contrasting opinions on Richard and Clarissa sheds light on how Helen and Rachel differ. At this point in the novel, Rachel seems to meet the expectations of a nineteenth-century girl. Helen’s preference to Richard’s attitude over Clarissa’s suggests a more progressive twentieth-century character—one who feels fully comfortable having social interactions with men. This is precisely why Helen, not Clarissa, has to be Rachel’s mentor.

Rachel concludes this conversation with Helen by claiming that “It’s very difficult to know what people are like” and then brings Helen “a fat red book” titled *Who’s Who* (77-8). Although Rachel will eventually come to learn and agree with the

narrator of the novel that people understand each other through feelings, by presenting this book of biography to Helen, she seems to be suggesting that this is currently how she thinks one could know another person—through the external facts in a brief biography. After handing Helen the book, their conversation continues and Rachel agrees with Helen that “people are very interesting; only—” (78) and never finishes her sentences. Her inability to finish her sentence is more of a suggestion that Rachel does not know how to understand other people. She even asks Helen, “But how does one know?” (78). Helen answers by saying that “I really can’t tell you” (78). Rachel still thinks that Helen has “failed to understand” the points that she has been making throughout their conversation and tells her that: “Some things you don’t understand, of course” (79). But as we will see later in the novel, Helen is only developing the idea that we can understand another’s subjectivity through feelings—an idea that Rachel will come to accept and experience later in the novel.

During Helen and Rachel’s conversation, right before the ship arrives in South America, Helen invites Rachel to “spend the season with them in their villa by the sea side” (79). The two decide that although they have a lack of understanding, living together is worth a try and Helen becomes Rachel’s mentor, per the conventions of the genre. However, Rachel and Helen’s interactions on the ship foreshadow how their mentor/protégée relationship will not follow an entirely conventional path on land.

Chapter 7 begins with the *Euphrosyne* arriving in South America: “By nine o’ clock the *Euphrosyne* had taken up her position in the middle of a great bay; she dropped her anchor...” (83). The arrival on land marks a shift in the way that characters interact with one another, and a beginning for Rachel’s grasp of what it means to know and

understand other human beings: “Rachel, to whom the voyage meant a complete change of perspective” (84). Further, relationships between men and women, women and women, and men and men begin to become more complicated and frustrate the initial idea that the novel presents about a lack of understanding between genders. Nonetheless, Helen still has a desire to understand Mr. Pepper that is not fulfilled. In the last paragraph of the chapter Helen

...reflected that she had never yet asked him whether he had been in love. They had got further and further from that subject instead of drawing nearer to it, and she could not help feeling it a relief when William Pepper, with all his knowledge, his microscope, his note-books, his genuine kindness and good sense, but a certain dryness of soul, took his departure. Also she could not help feeling it sad that friendships should end thus, although in this case to have the room empty was something of a comfort, and she tried to console herself with the reflection that one never knows how far other people feel the things they might be supposed to feel (89).

Helen’s conclusion sets the stage for the themes that were introduced in the beginning of the novel to be further explored in the latter half. Helen fails to ever know Mr. Pepper the way that she desires to know him or the way that the novel values knowing another person—through feelings rather than facts. In fact, in this last paragraph, she lists off the things that she has learned about Mr. Pepper (he is smart, he has a microscope, he carries around notebooks, he is a kind person and he has a good sense of the world), but still feels like their relationship drew “further and further” from what felt essential to Helen in her understanding of Mr. Pepper; whether or not he had ever been in love.

After the characters leave the ship, the narrative jumps ahead three months into their stay in South America to show how relationships have developed and changed over this time. In the first section of the novel, the sexes have trouble understanding one another: Helen claims Ridley cannot understand her feelings in the opening scene, Rachel feels misunderstood and desires to be understood by Mr. Dalloway, both Rachel and Helen have trouble and fail to ever understand Mr. Pepper (because neither of them discovers whether or not he has ever been in love). The one prolonged scene where two women do have a mutual understanding of one another is Rachel's interaction with Clarissa Dalloway, but Helen and Rachel's interaction towards the end of the sea journey foreshadows the way that relationships between the sexes will become more complicated and frustrate common Bildungsroman conventions—specifically of a successful mentor relationship and harmonious socialization of the female protagonist through a marriage.

The first chapter on land begins with Helen writing a letter: “It is an odd fate that has put me in charge of a girl...considering that I have never got on well with women, or had much to do with them...” adding, “However, I must retract some of the things that I have said against them” (91). Helen describes her position as Rachel's guardian as “an odd fate”; however, Helen was the one who invited Rachel stay with her. As a member of the family who is not the protagonist's mother, her fate to become Rachel's mentor follows the genre conventions. Furthermore, Rachel's lack of knowledge (whether it be about facts or feelings) is also common for the female protagonist of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman. What is different in Woolf's version, however, is that as Rachel's mentor, Helen seeks to liberate Rachel rather than traditionally educate her, and the way she plans to do so is through communication.

As Helen continues her letter she explicitly critiques the type of education that would be commonly found in the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, while implicitly expressing her desire to understand Rachel.

If they were properly educated I don't see why they shouldn't be much the same as men—as satisfactory I mean; though, of course, very different. The question is, how should one educate them? The present method seems to me abominable. This girl, though twenty four, had never heard that men desired women, and, until I explained it, did not know how children were born. Her ignorance upon other matters as important (here Mrs. Ambrose's letter may not be quoted)... was complete. It seems to me not merely foolish but criminal to bring people up like that. Let alone the suffering to them, it explains why women are what they are—the wonder is they're no worse. I have taken it upon myself to enlighten her, and now, though still a good deal prejudiced and liable to exaggerate, she is more or less a reasonable human being. Keeping them ignorant, of course, defeats its own object, and when they begin to understand they take it all much too seriously (92).

Helen claims that she needs to educate Rachel, but through knowledge about human relationships and understanding, not facts, nor proper conduct. She wants to teach Rachel about desire and love—i.e. feelings.

Rachel and Helen develop a close relationship but never are able to achieve the sense of mutual understanding that Rachel achieved with Clarissa. Throughout the novel Rachel feels critical and unsatisfied with Helen's method of teaching her about the ways of the world. For example, as Rachel is spending time alone in the room which Helen promised to her and reading Isbena's plays she announces to herself: "What I want to

know...is this: What is the truth? What's the truth of it all?" (117). She then thinks about her aunt's method in bringing her to an understanding of human relationships: "Talk was the medicine she trusted to, talk about everything, talk that was free, unguarded, and as candid as a habit of talking with men made natural in her own case" and feels that it does not satisfy her personal quest for truth or human understanding. Rachel describes Helen's mentorship as "free" and "unguarded," but most importantly, reliant upon "talking with men." At this point in the novel, Rachel has not entered into her relationship with Hewet. Still, we know that not only she is ignorant when it comes to male and female relationships and she is reluctant to engage in them in the way Helen has in mind.

Although Helen is interested in promoting Rachel's interactions and relationships with men, the novel's ambivalence about her own possible attraction to Rachel makes it even harder for the two to understand each other. Helen never tells Rachel how she feels. And although she projects her feelings physically, she never clarifies exactly what they are. Indeed, Woolf intends Helen's feelings to remain enigmatic, as one of the novel's most famous scenes makes clear. Rachel, Helen, Hewet, and other travelers staying at the hotel take a journey up the Amazon, disembarking to explore the jungle. Rachel and Hewet take a walk alone in the woods. After getting lost, the two profess their love for each other for the first time. During their time alone, Helen and the others worry about their whereabouts and decide to look for them. Helen happens to come across them first and she dropped a hand,

...abrupt as iron on Rachel's shoulder; it might have been a bolt from heaven. She fell beneath it, and the grass whipped across her eyes and filled her mouth and ears. Through the waving stems she saw a figure, large and shapeless against the

sky. Helen was upon her. Rolled this way and that, now seeing only forests of green, and now the high blue heaven, she was speechless and almost without sense. At last she lay still, all the grasses shaken round her and before her by her panting. Over her loomed two great heads, the heads of a man and a woman, of Terence and Helen (276).

This physical interaction between Helen and Rachel probably receives the most critical attention of all the scenes in *The Voyage Out*. Most critics analyze it for its homoerotic implications. Even if that is what Woolf intended to imply, the scene holds even more interesting implications when thinking about Helen as Rachel's mentor. Typically, the mentor in the Bildungsroman supports the love interest of the protagonist with the goal of promoting harmonious socialization through marriage. In this scene it seems that Helen wants to disrupt this conclusion just when it is in sight. She physically separates Rachel and Hewet. After touching Rachel—which Hewet has not yet—she leaves Rachel on the ground and looms above her. Perhaps Helen's physical intrusion in Rachel and Hewet's relationship foreshadows Woolf's choice to kill the female protagonist of this Bildungsroman before she can marry. But it could also suggest Helen's autonomy. Possibly, Helen is jealous of Rachel and Hewet's relationship and Woolf allows her female character to express her jealousy in a way that would not have been traditionally accepted in the nineteenth century novel.

Many critics see Rachel's death as the triumph of autonomy over marriage. But Rachel's death could also function as a triumph over Helen and further subvert the convention of the mentor in the Bildungsroman. Not only does Rachel die before she can marry Hewet, but she also dies before she has had, or can have, sex with him. Throughout

the novel, Helen attempts to mentor Rachel by guiding her towards her personal sexuality and her comfort with men. But we know that Rachel has not always agreed with this type of education and has many times rejected any physical or sexual relationship with a man. She is kissed by Richard in the very beginning of the novel, but unexpectedly and not by choice. Further, when Helen and Rachel attend Susan and Arthur's⁴ engagement party engagement party—a place where women and men socialize and dance—Rachel tells Hirst that “This is my idea of hell” (157). Later on, Rachel and Hirst dance and have a conversation in which Hirst asks Rachel “Have you got a mind, or are you like the rest of your sex?” adding, “You seem to me absurdly young compared with men of your age” (154). Rachel feels incredibly angered by Hirst's judgement and as she walks out into the garden “Her eyes swam with tears of rage” (155). Rachel interacts with Hewet later on during the dance, but her interactions with these men are not what Helen has hoped. In fact, they are in direct opposition to Helen's flirtatious engagements with both Hirst and Hewet during the dance. Although Rachel's feelings fluctuate about the dance, by the end of the night she ends up isolating herself from social activity all together when she begins to play the piano: “she had played the only pieces of dance music, she went on to play an air from a sonata by Mozart” (166-7). The individual task of playing the piano further supports Rachel's rejection of Helen's guidance.

Because Rachel displays a resistance to Helen's mentorship and Helen seems to have inconsistent intentions as a mentor, Helen and Rachel struggle to ever understand one another. By creating tension in this mentor/mentee relationship, Woolf subverts the common conventions of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman and leaves room for an

⁴ Two characters who are also staying at the same villa as Rachel, Helen, and Ridley

alternate Bildung for her female protagonist. This alternate Bildung allows Rachel to push back and pull away from her relationship with her love interest, Terrence Hewet, when she feels she wants to explore her autonomous self. Moreover, the fact that Rachel dies before marrying Hewet (the end goal of the nineteenth-century female Bildungsroman) Rachel does not only resist fitting into her expected role in her relationships with Helen and Hewet, but through her death she refuses them. However, Woolf seems to suggest larger implications Rachel's death than the avoidance of marriage, implications that are in tandem with understanding another's subjectivity.

Hewet's character presents explicit commentary about understanding another's subjectivity. We are first introduced to Hewet in an interaction between him and his best friend, Hirst. As the narrator scans the hotel, she captures moments from each of the travelers in their bedrooms until she settles on Hirst's bedroom where "he was reading the third volume of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of Rome* by candlelight" when "the door opened, and the young man, who was inclined to be stout, [came] in with large naked feet" (101). The young man is Terrence Hewet. Hirst and Hewet's conversation immediately begins with a discussion about feelings. Hewet asks: "D'you think you *do* make enough allowance for feelings?" (101). Hirst replies to Hewet's question: "Feelings? Aren't they just what we do allow for? We put love up there, and all the rest somewhere down below" (101). Immediately we see that Hewet and Hirst feel differently about feelings even though they are both men. Hirst thinks it is silly that Hewet got out of bed to ask him this question in the first place and their conversation continues by Hewet informing Hirst that "Women interest me" (101). Hirst replies by telling Hewet that women are "so stupid" and all women are the same (101). Hewet

counters: “No two people are in the least the same. Take you and me now” (102). The two continue to talk about relationships and women and Hewet wonders if being connected to other people, or being in love is “really what matters most” (103). Hirst answers that “Of course it is” but then he meditates on the difficulty in achieving this.

Hirst feels that although he knows exterior facts about Hewet’s life (he has money, he went to Cambridge, and he left to travel), he does not know anything about his feelings:

Although they had known each other for three years Hirst had never yet heard the true story of Hewet’s loves. In general conversation it was taken for granted that they were many, but in private the subject was allowed to lapse. The fact that he had money enough to do no work, and that he had left Cambridge after two terms owing to a difference with the authorities, and had then travelled and drifted, made his life strange at many points where his friends’ lives were much a piece (103).

Hirst’s knowledge of Hewet is akin to Rachel’s knowledge of Mr. Pepper. In both cases, the knowledge that Hirst and Rachel lack concerns love.

Hewet and Hirst’s conversation foreshadows themes that will manifest in Hewet and Rachel’s relationship. They think about what it means to be alone and to be connected with other people. Hewet claims that “The truth is that one never is alone, and one never is in company” (103). Hirst asks Hewet to explain what he means and Hewet responds with a somewhat ambiguous philosophical response:

Oh, something about bubbles—auras—what d’you call em? You can’t see my bubble; I can’t see yours; all we see of each other is a speck, like the wick in the middle of that flame. The flame goes about with us everywhere; it’s not ourselves exactly, but what we feel; the world is short, or people mainly; all kinds of people (103).

Hewet emphasizes the variety of individuals in the world; what makes each person distinctive is feelings—“what we feel.” Bubbles are typically clear, and they are easy to burst, which would suggest that individuals could easily comprehend and even merge with each. Yet throughout the novel, characters have trouble bursting each other’s bubbles and seeing the flame, or what they feel.

In the latter half of the novel, Rachel and Hewet struggle to burst each other’s bubbles. Rachel, staying in the villa with Helen and Ridley, and Hewet, staying in the hotel, “...met frequently. [And] When they did not meet, he was apt to send a note with a book or about a book...(Woolf 218). Despite frequent meetings, “If Rachel was ignorant of her own feelings, she was even more completely ignorant of his” (219). Even after Rachel and Hewet profess their love for one another during their boat excursion on the river, the two often struggle to come to any kind of mutual understanding. Rachel and Terrence are able to spend time together in a more comfortable way since expressing their feelings about one another. Often, Rachel plays piano and Terrence works on his novel. But even in close company, Rachel still feels that they hardly know one another at all. As Terrence “read a novel which someone else had written, a process which he found essential to the composition of his own” Rachel observes him as he sits “deep in the arm-chair” and thinks to herself: “Would there ever be a time when the world was one and

indivisible? Even with Terrence himself—how far apart they could be, how little she knew what was passing through his brain now!” (288). Nonetheless, Rachel and Hewet do have a desire to understand one another.

One might say that Hewet fails at love. He is never able to marry Rachel and it is not until the moment before her death that the two come to a mutual understanding, or burst each other’s bubbles. Hewet is waiting to say his last goodbye to Rachel before she dies. As he enters Rachel’s bedroom, he approaches Helen who sits by her bedside. Helen gets up and leaves the room so Hewet can sit beside Rachel.

He sat down by the bedside, and a moment afterwards heard the door shut gently behind her [Helen]. He was alone with Rachel, and a faint reflection of the sense of relief that they used to feel when they were left alone possessed him. He looked at her. He expected to find some terrible change in her, but there was none. She looked indeed very thin, and, as far as he could see, very tired, but she was the same as she had always been. Moreover, she saw him and knew him (342).

Woolf achieves two goals in this scene: she avoids marriage as the conclusion of Rachel’s development, while allowing the two characters to reach the kind of mutual understanding that Rachel seeks but never finds throughout the novel. Hewet says that Rachel “knew him”; the narrator claims that “The curtain which had been drawn between them for so long vanished immediately,” referring to Hewet’s metaphor about the bursting of bubbles. In fact, as Rachel takes her last breath, “he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself” (343).

Throughout the novel, characters consistently struggle to understand one another's feelings and subjectivity. The novel suggests that full understanding of other people—understanding of other's feelings—is necessary for their own self development. Not only does Rachel struggle to find a mutual understanding with those around her in the novel, but she consequently struggles to gain a clear understanding of herself. Because Rachel and Hewet seem only to achieve a full understanding of each other (and possibly of themselves) through death, Woolf could be suggesting that this understanding cannot be completely achieved in life.

While mutual understanding seems necessary for *Bildung*, perfect understanding—like the perfect union—is not a desirable end for the female *Bildungsroman*. Woolf suggests this through Rachel's death. If she is to gain the perfect union with Hewet, her life must be sacrificed. But the novel does not necessarily suggest that a perfect union with Hewet is Rachel's ultimate goal. Only a year has passed since the beginning of the novel and Rachel has not fully developed before her death. With more time and experience, Rachel might have chosen a different path than a marriage. However, the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* suggests that marriage is the only path for a woman to have a successful *Bildung*. In order to challenge that, Woolf kills her protagonist in refusal of a nineteenth-century ending. Woolf does not indicate what a desirable ending is, but that is in keeping with the modernist *Bildungsroman* and its many frustrations.

Although the ending to the novel does not provide a clear alternative path for female *Bildung*, Woolf's suggestion of an alternative path is what is most significant. Woolf's use of the *Bildungsroman* to explore understanding of other character's feelings

and subjectivity opens the door for her own unique style of narrating her characters' consciousness in future novels, including *Jacob's Room*.

CHAPTER 2

The Critique of the Bildungsheld: Development without the Self in *Jacob's Room*

As Jacob Flanders travels to Cambridge—an expected fate for Virginia Woolf's Edwardian male protagonist—he rides in a train carriage with a woman by the name of Mrs. Norman, whom after she exits the carriage, we never meet again. Like many of the women Jacob encounters throughout his rather brief life, Mrs. Norman meditates on what she can gather about who Jacob is from their short confrontation. It is not much. Jacob is roughly the same age as Mrs. Norman's son, who is also at university. Nonetheless, she concludes that any man could be dangerous. And so after avoiding him by reading the newspaper, she “stealthily looked over the edge to decide the question of safety by the infallible test of appearance” and meditates on what she can gather about who Jacob might be:

Taking note of socks (loose), of tie (shabby), she once more reached his face. She dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious—as for knocking one down! No, no, no! She looked out of the window, smiling slightly now, and then came back again, for he didn't notice her. Grave, unconscious . . . now he looked up, past her . . . he seemed so out of place, somehow, alone with an elderly lady . . . then he fixed his eyes—which were blue—on the landscape (Woolf 28).

Mrs. Norman mainly notices Jacob's physical attributes: his mouth, his lips, his blue eyes, his expressions. But she also somehow gathers that he seemed “unconscious” and “out of place.” After an overview of Jacob's exterior appearance, Mrs. Norman gathers

that “Nobody sees any one as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves...” (29).

Although it seems obvious that one would not be able to gather much about another from a brief train ride with hardly any exchange of words and an understanding based completely on one’s physical appearance and actions, many women throughout *Jacob’s Room* (1922) lack any deep understanding of Jacob, even those whom he knows for much longer than Mrs. Norman. Across the board, critics of Virginia Woolf’s third novel agree that Jacob is an unknown character, both to the other characters in the novel, and to the reader. It makes sense that Mrs. Norman is unable to gain any access to Jacob’s thoughts or psychology because their encounter is incredibly brief and lacks any conversation. However, even those characters that do appear to spend more time with Jacob have trouble getting to know him on a deeper level.

Jacob’s Room is a Bildungsroman. During the course of the novel, Jacob Flanders is raised by his mother, educated by his tutor, Mr. Floyd, attends Cambridge, interacts with various mentors, develops his sexuality, and travels to Greece. However, like Rachel Vinrace,⁵Jacob is unable to complete his Bildung (he dies at a young age in the First World War). In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf probes the capacity of people to understand one another’s feelings, and explores the extent to which individual development depends on this capacity. Although Rachel Vinrace dies before she reaches any complete sense of self or conclusions about the world around her, she still develops her interior feelings. In

⁵ Rachel Vinrace is the protagonist of Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out*

Jacob's Room, however, everything exterior in his Bildung is developed (his education, his relationships, and his worldliness), but not his individual subjectivity.

Most of what we learn about Jacob throughout the novel is superficial and Jacob hardly reflects on his growth as an individual or his relationships with other characters. This leaves his interiority enigmatic to the reader and the characters in the novel. Although *Jacob's Room* does not subvert the Bildungsroman conventions in the same way that *The Voyage Out* does, the other characters' inability to know Jacob's interiority raises questions about understanding another person's subjectivity, and whether or not self-development can exist without any sort of mutual understanding with other subjects. It also raises questions about whether personal development can take place in the absence of an active interior life.

Critics and scholars tend to connect Jacob's unknowable qualities with loss and the elegiac aspects of the novel. Jacob's shortened life (he dies in the Great War) reflects Woolf's brother Thoby's tragic death as a young man. Like Jacob, Thoby attended Cambridge and traveled to Greece shortly after where he contracted typhoid fever and died at the age of 26. Thoby's death was only one of many losses in Woolf's life.⁶ Kathleen Wall claims that "the general shape of Jacob's career conforms to Thoby's education at Cambridge, work of a faintly literary kind in London, a trip to Greece. But... Woolf has changed the frame of the novel so that the young men [Jacob Flanders]... die in the war, thus transforming her elegy for her brother into an elegy for a generation of you men..." (305). Other critics, however, attribute Jacob's unknowability

⁶ Prior to Thoby's death, Woolf's mother, Julia Prinsep Duckworth Stephen, died suddenly in 1895. Her half-sister Stella died two years later.

to the parodic qualities of the novel. Although Woolf was very close and spent ample time with Thoby and his friends at Cambridge, she was resentful that women were denied the classical education that these men had the opportunity to receive. She was also in opposition to the patriarchal intellectual and political structures in England. In such criticism, Jacob's flat and impenetrable personality then represents the privileged Edwardian male. Susan Harris claims that not only is Woolf parodying the privileged Edwardian male, but through the censorship of Jacob's sexual interactions she is also parodying Edwardian prudery and the Bildungsroman (420). But Woolf's critique of the Bildungsroman in *Jacob's Room* is more in depth than merely commenting on prudery during the nineteenth century.

Gregory Castle points out that authors like Virginia Woolf refuse the Bildungsroman's end goal (harmonious socialization) in order to suggest or create different options for their characters. He argues that Woolf's decision to kill Rachel Vinrace before she marries her fiancé Hewet is her way of allowing Rachel to refuse a life of domesticity that was expected of women. When Castle focuses on the failure of the genre for male characters, he uses James Joyce's character Stephen Daedalus from *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* as a novel with similar implications. Instead of achieving harmonious socialization within Ireland, Stephen chooses exile to escape societal pressures and pursue his dream of becoming an artist. But *Jacob's Room* is also a modernist Bildungsroman and just like *The Voyage Out*, the protagonist dies before he achieves maturity and assimilation. Despite their protagonists' difference in gender, both novels critique the genre and illuminate the dependence of self-development on an understanding of other people. Jacob's lack of development is a consequence of his

failure to gain a mutual understanding with other people. His interior life is never developed in the novel because the characters and the readers never gain any understanding about Jacob's feelings, and only come to understand him through his physical appearance, his actions, and what we can find in his room.

By leaving Jacob unknown, Woolf seems to be commenting on the way in which the Edwardian fiction that she criticizes in "Modern Fiction" is "concerned not with the spirit but with the body" (Woolf 147). She criticizes Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy for a design that focuses on the material aspects of life instead of "...life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing..." (149). Although many characters throughout *Jacob's Room* have penetrable minds in which we can experience their interior life and their spirit, Jacob does not. In fact, one instance in the novel where we come to know Jacob the most intimately, are through the material objects that exist in his room.

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—"Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?" There were books enough; very few French books; but then anyone who's worth anything reads just what he likes, as the mood takes him, with extravagant enthusiasm. Lives of the Duke of Wellington, for example; Spinoza; the works of Dickens; the *Faery Queen*; a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages; all the Elizabethans. His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water's rim. Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua—all Very

English. The works of Jane Austen, too, in deference, perhaps, to someone else's standard. Carlyle was a prize. There were books upon the Italian painters of the Renaissance, a *Manual on the Diseases of the Horse*, and all the usual text-books (37).

Based upon the material objects in Jacob's room we know that Jacob cares a lot about books, that he is writing an essay, he is interested in history and the Greeks, and that he is a student at the university. Rooms are intimate spaces. However, relationships with other individuals are often more intimate than the material objects that one owns. Although we learn something about his pastimes and social relationships, Jacob himself is actually physically absent in this space. We do not see him in his room interacting with these objects, we do not see him taking part in his pastimes, and we just see the objects themselves sitting, untouched. The feelings that this particular scene of Jacob's bedroom gives is that it is something so personal that belongs to him, yet he is completely absent from it. Really, we never get a detailed instance in the novel where we know the private life of Jacob Flanders inside his bedroom. This feeling that Jacob is absent from something that is so personal and integral to his life also exists in his relationships. Many of the relationships that Jacob does have in the novel are intimate and sexual relationships with other women.

One aspect common to the Bildungsroman that both *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room* complicate is the sexual awakening of the Bildungsheld as they grow and develop. In the case of *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's ambivalent sexuality calls into question the generic conventions that call for her to find satisfaction in an erotic relationship with an appropriately marriageable person, and more fundamentally raises the question of

whether she, Hewet, and Helen are capable of mutual understanding. Although Woolf gives us access to the characters' interiority in *The Voyage Out*, they struggle to understand one another. The same kind of issues present themselves in *Jacob's Room*. Because Jacob's character is often presented as being sexually and emotionally ambivalent in his relationships, both the characters and the reader are unable to understand his subjectivity, ultimately leaving him "unknowable".

In her essay "Elegy and the Unknowable Mind in *Jacob's Room*," Linda Martin suggests that Woolf's denial of interior access to Jacob and her focus on his external environments and gestures "deflect[s] away from Jacob's interiority...[and the novel] prevents readers from learning about him in the firsthand manner which they are accustomed..." consequently rendering him unknowable (177-8). The attention the novel gives to exterior environments and gestures manifests during all of Jacob's interactions with women throughout the novel, starting from the very beginning with his mother. In the first chapter of the novel we are introduced to both Jacob and his mother Betty Flanders. We learn about her feelings as they relate to her deceased husband, her current suitor, and her son. Betty's sons, Archer and Jacob, play about the beach while she, "pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand," writes a letter to her suitor Captain Barfoot:

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight;

the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright ; but the blot had spread
(Woolf 5).

Betty's physical gestures while writing this letter indicate that she is experiencing strong emotions. She then contemplates the landscape, and we can imagine that her eyes glaze over as she sees the "bay quiver" and "the lighthouse wobble." She pulls herself out of her emotions as "she winked quickly" and rationalizes her feelings by simply claiming that "Accidents were awful things." The narrator does not tell us explicitly what Betty is feeling, but from this small description of Betty writing a letter, we are able to enter into her interior mind and experience her feelings—rendering us the notion that we understand Betty a little bit better than we did before we picked up the novel.

Archer interrupts Betty from her letter writing to let her know that he cannot find Jacob and the novel takes us to Jacob's location upon a "tremendously solid brown, or rather black" rock (7). After catching a crab upon the rock, Jacob has the realization that he has misplaced his mother and his nanny and begins to get upset. But unlike the insight we gain into Betty's subjectivity through her display of emotions, the description of Jacob hardly tells us anything about his interior and fixates on his exterior surroundings and gestures:

There he stood. His face composed itself. He was about to roar when, lying among the black sticks and straw under the cliff, he saw a whole skull —perhaps a cow's skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it. Sobbing, but absent-mindedly, he ran farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms (8).

Jacob's face is described as "composed" which is a reference to his exterior appearance, but also one that gives no insight into what it is that he is feeling—his face does not express any emotion. And just as he is about to explode into emotion ("He was about to roar") he is distracted by a skull lying on the ground. He then is described as "sobbing" but this sobbing is "absentminded"—an indicator that there are not any feelings behind it. Much of this description of Jacob also focuses on what is outside of him, without any of his own reaction to it: "lying among the black sticks and straw under the cliff, he saw a whole skull—perhaps a cow's skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it." We might at first assume that Jacob fears the skull because as he is sobbing "he [runs] farther and farther away" but then we are not so sure because he somehow "[holds] the skull in his arms." This description does not allow us to know anything about who Jacob is because we are unaware of any of his feelings. One could assume that this might be because Jacob is only a child in this opening chapter, but Jacob's "absent minded" reactions to the relationships that manifest throughout his life often mimic our first encounter with him in the novel.

Throughout the novel, Jacob has many significant relationships, most of which are romantic relationships. Besides his mother, Betty Flanders, and his good friend, Bonamy (which literally means good friend), Jacob has significant relationships and interactions with his friend Timothy Durrant's sister, Clara; Florinda (a woman who he describes as "horribly brainless"); Fanny Elmer (a woman concerned with dresses and parties); and a married woman with whom Jacob feels he has fallen in love with during his time in Greece, Sandra Wentworth Williams. Most of these relationships manifest during different periods of Jacob's life (some like Clara, Bonamy, and of course, his

mother, carry throughout). The reader is able to understand these characters through Jacob's relationships with them because we gain insight to their feelings about Jacob. However, the opposite happens with Jacob. Because the novel does not reveal to us the ways he feels in these relationships, he appears just as unknowable to us as he did as a child on the beach.

Susan C. Harris argues that "Throughout the novel, anything spoken on the topic of sexual desire or sexual activity is subjected to a very specific and ostentatious kind of censorship that cuts overt discussion of sex or sexual desire out of the text" (420). She claims that Woolf's reason for doing so is that it allows her to "parody the conventions of the bildungsroman, which require the hero's sexual education to assume a central role" (420). But again, Woolf's dismantling of the Bildungsroman, in this case the parodying of Jacob's sexual experiences, also allows her to emphasize how little we know about Jacob's character. Jacob's sexual encounter with Florinda is the best example of this.

Florinda and Jacob walk up the stairs to his apartment and Florinda finds a letter on the stairs that she "put[s] on the table as she kissed Jacob" and then they "shut the door behind them" (Woolf 90). Not only are we shut out of the room and therefore shut out of Jacob and Florinda's relationship, but we are also denied any kind of insight into the feelings that Jacob has about Florina and their time together. In fact, after the door is shut, we are only given a description of the exterior space in which their relationship is taking place: "The sitting-room neither knew nor cared. The door was shut; and to suppose that wood, when it creaks, transmits anything save that rats are busy and wood dry is childish. These old houses are only brick and wood, soaked in human sweat, grained with human dirt" (90). In this exterior description of the building in which Jacob

lives, it is almost as if the architecture and inanimate objects possess more feelings than Jacob himself. The sitting room does not “care”. The description of the physical objects that surround this moment in Jacob’s life, rather than his feelings about it, are reminiscent of the earlier description of his bedroom. In fact, Jacob never reflects on this encounter and his feelings towards Florinda at all.

What Jacob *does* reveal about his feelings towards Florinda does not offer us much insight into his interiority. When he thinks about who Florinda is, he reflects that she is chaste (as she insists) and “wild and frail and beautiful” like “the women of the Greeks were” (77). He concludes his thoughts about his relationship with Florinda with a rather simplistic statement: “. . .this was life; and himself a man and Florinda chaste” (77). Here, Jacob might appear to be shallow. Nonetheless, his shallow response is just as ambiguous as his reaction as a little boy on the beach. Even when he does present some feelings, they are confusing and hard to make sense of, adding to the difficulty of knowing what he feels. By nodding towards moments in Jacob’s life—specifically, sexual and intimate encounters with women—but then denying the reader access to such scenes, Woolf is giving a playful nod towards the prudery in nineteenth-century fiction, but she is also suggesting perhaps, that intimate moments like the one that we assume Florinda and Jacob share in his bedroom provide us with real insight to who characters are, and particularly what they feel. When we do enter Jacob’s bedroom earlier in the novel, he is absent from it. Now, as he does enter into his own bedroom, he shuts us out. Woolf is therefore shutting us out of Jacob’s interior life and for that reason we do not get to know him at all.

Woolf's omission of Jacob's sexual encounters and Jacob's omission of his feelings are significant in two other sections of the novel: first, the relationship he develops with Fanny Elmer before he leaves for Greece, and second, his relationship with Sandra Wentworth William once he arrives in Greece. Jacob encounters Fanny Elmer through the view out his window. Her friend, Nick, is drawing her, and Jacob decides to leave his apartment and follow the two to Leicester Square where "he pushed through the swinging glass doors and took his place beside them" (116) and all three characters go to the opera. During their first encounter, we know nothing about what Jacob thinks about Fanny, but we do know what Fanny thinks about him:

She thought how little he said yet how firm it was. She thought how young men are dignified and aloof, and how unconscious they are, and how quietly one might sit beside Jacob and look at him. And how childlike he would be, come in tired of an evening, she thought, and how majestic; a little overbearing perhaps; "But I wouldn't give way," she thought. He got up and leaning over the barrier. The smoke hung about him (116).

Fanny describes "young men" as "aloof" and "unconscious" as she thinks about Jacob—qualities that other characters also find in him. Here Woolf is parodying the demeanor deemed proper for young Edwardian males, yet she also causes us to wonder whether he really is aloof and unconscious, or just unavailable for Fanny to know or understand. The narrator describes other characters "as endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all" adding that "what remains [of Jacob] is mostly a matter of guess work" (72). For example, during his first interaction with Fanny, what we learn of Jacob is that he leaves momentarily to fetch a program, he tells Fanny and Nick that "The dancers

come right at the end" (117), he picks up Fanny's dropped glove and stares at her angrily, and that he was fearful of her for a moment. However, we are given no justification for Jacob's feelings and unlike Fanny who was "fall[ing] in love," Jacob remains just as unknowable as ever.

The chapter continues to describe Fanny but not Jacob. For example, we learn that she has been "hanging about the neighborhood of the Foundling Hospital merely for the chance of seeing Jacob walk down the street..." (120). She sees shadows of Jacob that are not Jacob and she reads books that she thinks Jacob will approve of until "he took out his pipe in the arm-chair opposite" her and the novel provides us with a second encounter between the two (123). Fanny tells Jacob that she enjoys the novel and Jacob thinks that she is a liar. He thinks about Clara Durrant, another woman with whom he has had a relationship and then he lets Fanny know that he is leaving for Paris on his way to Greece and therefore he cannot attend the "dance at the Slade" with her (123). Fanny thinks that Jacob will forget her while she is gone, and she is right.

Throughout Jacob's entire relationship with Fanny we do not receive any insight about his feelings towards her. We know very briefly that he thinks she is lying about her interest in *Tom Jones*, and we know that he gives her an angry stare at the opera, but that is all. However, it is clear during their last encounter that Jacob and Fanny have been seeing each other for some time. When Fanny is walking through London thinking about her love for Jacob it is "the middle of February" (117) and by the time she is preparing her dress for the dance at the Slade and Jacob tells her he is leaving, it is May ("...there is nothing so detestable as London in May") (122). Although four months is not that long, one might think that Jacob would have more feelings about his relationship with Fanny,

or that Woolf might reveal more of their interactions. We can only assume that they have had some kind of relationship. Fanny's feelings towards Jacob seem significant in February, and they seem even more significant when he tells her he is leaving in May. However, Jacob has no appreciable feelings towards her. Furthermore, given that Fanny is Jacob's second relationship with a woman after Florinda, Woolf seems to be presenting Jacob's sexuality in a way that doesn't correspond to the Bildungsroman convention of erotic relationships that contribute to the development of the protagonist's mature subjectivity. Instead, Jacob has sexual relationships without subjective content.

In "Modern Fiction" Woolf asks of Arnold Bennett's characters: "His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how they live, and what do they live for?" ("Modern Fiction" 148). The same questions could be asked of Jacob. Jacob does live an abundant life. He attends college, he has many friends with whom he spends time traveling and engaging in the arts, he lives in the city, and shortly before his death, he has the opportunity to travel to Greece. But we do not know what Jacob lives for, or how he feels about his life or the people in it. Later in her essay, Woolf asks, "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 mixture of the alien and external as possible" (150)? But Jacob is completely alien to the other characters in the novel and to the reader. And when Jacob is explored as a character, the exploration puts almost all its focus on his exterior appearance, his exterior life, and his exterior surroundings. For example, although Jacob seems to express more in depth feeling for Sandra Wentworth William than any other woman in the novel, the scenes wherein they

interact focus namely on their exterior experience and actions. Moreover, Jacob never explicitly reveals how he feels, nor does Woolf.

Sandra Wentworth Williams and her husband Evan are at dinner in the same hotel as Jacob when the three characters are first introduced. Sandra and Evan are at their own table, conversing, when Sandra notices Jacob sitting alone: (“ Ah, an English boy on tour," she thought to herself.)” (Woolf 142). The couple and Jacob converse during their time at the hotel until Jacob leaves to do some traveling alone in Athens. During his time in Athens the narrator informs us that Jacob lies in bed “remembering Sandra Wentworth Williams with whom he was in love” (149). After Jacob’s return, Sandra, who “lay back in a trance” on their hotel balcony notices Jacob “standing in the Square with a book under his arm looking vacantly about him” (152-3). Before they reunite, Sandra meditates on Jacob’s character:

But how far was he a mere bumpkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow? It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. Some, it is true, take ineffaceable impressions of character at once (153).

Sandra’s questions of who Jacob is, indicates that she feels that she really does not know him at all. She wonders if he is unsophisticated, or stupid, but decides really she cannot sum him up and should not decide who he is based upon her initial exterior impressions of him.

After Sandra and Evan eat dinner at the hotel with Jacob, we encounter Jacob and Sandra’s most intimate interaction. After dinner, Sandra and Jacob speak alone by the

window while Evan “sat in the smoking room” and Sandra and Jacob decide that they will journey to the Acropolis alone for the evening (157). Sandra attempts to tell Jacob her feelings about the Acropolis, but he replies in a complaint: “There were some awful women this morning” (157). Then, she asks him what he will do with his future, and whether or not he will fall in love and get married. Jacob replies this time in complete disregard by asking Sandra, “Shall we go on?” meaning should we continue to keep walking to the Acropolis (158). Eventually, Jacob seems to express a bit of feeling towards Sandra: when she asks him to write her once he returns to London, he agrees, and he also gives her a book of poems by Donne. However, soon enough, the couple “...had vanished. There was the Acropolis; but had they reached it? The columns and the Temple remain; the emotion of the living breaks fresh on them year after year; and of that what remains?” (160). Once again, the narrator draws the curtain across Jacob’s relationships—parodying the outward form of the Bildungsroman while denying us its substance of subjective development. Neither the reader nor even Sandra herself has access to his feelings. Before she and Jacob spend time alone, Sandra thinks about how unknown Jacob is to her. And, when the two are alone (a situation in which both character and reader would expect to gain more insight into Jacob) we learn not much more. Jacob gives Sandra a book, but he has also given Florinda and Fanny books, so the gesture is no more significant than it was in his previous relationships

We do not know what ultimately happens between Sandra and Jacob besides that “he went with them [Sandra and Evan] to Constantinople” the next morning, but we do learn what Sandra feels about Jacob (160). She imagines herself reading the book of poems that he gave her and reminiscing on the time they spent together—which was

presumably good or the memories would not make her feel so pleasant. However, when she thinks of what she knows about Jacob, she returns to exterior attributes, instead of interior ones, explicitly noting that she does not know how he feels. Sandra imagines herself asking Miss Edwards, “Are you happy, Miss Edwards?” and then meditates on Jacob:

“What for? What for?” Jacob never asked himself any such questions, to judge by the way he laced his boots; shaved himself; to judge by the depth of his sleep that night, with the wind fidgeting at the shutters, and half-a-dozen mosquitoes singing in his ears (162).

Sandra seems to believe that Jacob “never asked himself any such questions” about happiness, or possibly, love. She seems frustrated that she does not know how or if Jacob would answer these questions. Nonetheless, she lists off physical attributes about Jacob that she does know: the way he laces his boots, the way he shaves himself, and the way he sleeps at night. The physical qualities that we know about Jacob do not satisfy Sandra. Physical qualities are all Sandra and the reader really seem to know about the novel’s protagonist.

However, it is not true that we only know the physical characteristics of all the characters in the novel. In addition to Florinda, Fanny, and Sandra, we also learn a lot about how Betty, Bonamy, and Clara feel, and therefore we come to know them better as characters than we know Jacob. Jacob and Bonamy are best friends from Cambridge. Often, we see Bonamy reflecting on his feelings about Jacob. For example, when Jacob is away traveling in Greece, Bonamy reminisces on his friend:

...Jacob Flanders was not at all of his own way of thinking—far from it, Bonamy sighed, laying the thin sheets of notepaper on the table and falling into thought about Jacob's character, *not for the first time*. The trouble was this romantic vein in him. "But mixed with the stupidity which leads him into these absurd predicaments," thought Bonamy, "there is something—something " —he sighed, for he was fonder of Jacob than of any one in the world [my italics] (139).

Bonamy's opinions about Jacob suggest that he knows his friend better than the other characters do. He claims that Jacob does not have "his own way of thinking" and that he is a romantic, but also that he can be stupid and gets himself into "absurd predicaments." But there seems to be something about Jacob that leaves Bonamy feeling as if he does not understand him the way he wants to for he thinks "there is something—something" and then sighs, as if he does not know what that something is and has given up on trying to figure it out. Nonetheless, he feels as though he cares for Jacob more "than anyone in the world." In this passage, we enter Bonamy's intimate thoughts about his friend Jacob in a way that we never encounter Jacob thinking about other people. Bonamy cares about Jacob and his predicaments in his relationships with other people.

Not only do we learn about how Bonamy feels about Jacob, but we also have more insight into his interiority throughout the novel than we do of Jacob's. In the Bildungsroman genre, the focus is on the protagonist's development. But in the case of Jacob Flanders, the interiority of the characters around him are developed significantly more than his own, through the display of their feelings. When Bonamy "went expressly to talk about Jacob to tea with Clara Durrant" we gain a sense of who he:

“...the virginity of Clara's soul appeared to him candid; the depths unknown; and he would have brought out Jacob's name had he not begun to feel positively certain that Clara loved him—and could do nothing whatever. "Nothing whatever!" he exclaimed, as the door shut, and, for a man of his temperament, got a very queer feeling, as he walked through the park, of carriages irresistibly driven; of flower beds uncompromisingly geometrical; of force rushing round geometrical patterns in the most senseless way in the world. "Was Clara," he thought, pausing to watch the boys bathing in the Serpentine, “the silent woman?—would Jacob marry her?” (151-2).

Bonamy is obviously an intuitive and sensitive person. He realizes Clara's innocence and vulnerability without her revealing anything to him. He also concludes—without any confirmation from Clara—that she is in love with Jacob. He decides to resign from speaking about Jacob to Clara and leaves before anything is said. However, he dwells on this situation after “as he walked through the park” revealing that he is mindful of other people's feelings, and is emotional himself, for he “got a very queer feeling” about the situation. These are the types of feelings that we never learn about Jacob.

Because Jacob's feelings are never revealed to us, he does not develop his interior life while he is developing his exterior life. Woolf makes Jacob (but not the others) a creature of entirely “material” details. He exhibits all the physical details and facets of life, but lacks any kind of spirit. It is difficult to say whether or not Jacob's lack of feelings are inherent to his character, or are based on what is and is not revealed to us as readers and the other characters throughout the novel. Nonetheless, Jacob never completes his *Bildung*. Unlike Rachel Vinrace, he experiences much more of the world

and has many more achievements before his premature death. However, he does not seem to develop any really opinions or understanding of himself, the world, and those around him. Although in *The Voyage Out*, characters have some trouble understanding one another, their development is explicitly clear to the reader, and somewhat clear to the other characters in the novel.

Although Jacob's premature death in World War One evokes many things in Woolf's novel, one possible interpretation of his fate is that he cannot continue to develop an exterior life without an interior one. There might not be "...so much as drought between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards" in the trajectory of Jacob's life, "And yet—if life should refuse to live there?" ("Modern Fiction" 147).

CODA

The Questions that Manifest in Form

I read Virginia Woolf's later (and most well-known) novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* before I read her first and earlier novels. When I entered into the world of *The Voyage Out* I was a little shocked—not by the characters and the plot, but by the style of Woolf's prose: Where were the semi-colons? Where were the long fluid sentences that paint images in color and create the sound of the ocean's waves? The sentences were choppy, the dialogue developed much of the characters, and the narrator seemed inconsistent, almost as if she was trying to figure something out. And she was.

What I began to notice about the book (besides that there were in fact moments of Woolf's poetic prose and her prophetic insights about human nature) was that it was full of questions. These questions were not only raised by the narrator, but also by the characters. Both parties wanted to know: what does it mean to understand another's subjectivity? How can characters access each other's interior lives? And what does this mean for the development of the character, but also the development of the novel?

Woolf's first novel is a Bildungsroman—a genre that she and other modernist writers inherited from the nineteenth century. But the twentieth century called for art that penetrated deeper than “the series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged” or perhaps “not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it” (“Modern Fiction” 150). Woolf's approach as an emerging female novelist was “to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display,

with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible..." (150). The spirit of which Woolf speaks is the world that exists inside human consciousness. Woolf began her work as a novelist by tackling the problem of representing consciousness in fiction—this is where she believed that the truth of human experience lay.

Woolf answered her own questions about understanding others by developing her narrative technique and prose style. *Jacob's Room* was Woolf's first attempt at what scholars commonly call the "stream-of-consciousness" technique, or "mind style." However, Woolf is still posing problems in her third novel that she eventually resolves in the form of her prose in her fourth novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Jacob's enigmatic character gives way to the transparent minds of Clarissa Dalloway, her husband Richard, Septimus Smith, and the host of minor characters whose thoughts she reveals in that novel. That is not to say that Woolf ever explicitly answers the philosophical questions she poses about the basis for knowing other minds—I do not believe that is the aim of her project. But by the way her prose has developed by the time she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is evident that she has figured something out. Seamlessly, we are able to enter the minds of characters and through their internal thoughts and feelings a whole new world opens for these characters, but also for what fiction can achieve.

I like to think that Woolf leaves us little hints in her novels about how her thought process has developed and how she feels about the questions she asks. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, after Peter Walsh sees Clarissa Dalloway for the first time in five years, he walks down the streets of London and thinks to himself:

"...-- Clarissa had a theory in those days—they had heaps of theories, always theories, as young people have. It was to explain the feeling they had of

dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known. For how could they know each other? You met every day; then not for six months, or years. It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not “here, here, here”; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her skepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death...perhaps—perhaps” (152-3).

In her fourth novel, Woolf is still asking the same questions that she did in her first: “For how could they know each other?” The question will never be answered concretely for there are “heaps of theories, always theories.” Thankfully, Woolf’s theories have manifested in her timeless prose and stories.

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