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Uncommon Readers: The Unevenness of Literacy and Learning in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*

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Herzog, Matthew. "Uncommon Readers: The Unevenness of Literacy and Learning in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 48.1 (2022): 25-45. Virginia Woolf extensively engaged with issues of education in her own time. Her most famous tracks from *A Room of One's Own* to *Three Guineas* all contain criticisms of "educated men." Woolf brought these critiques into her literary output in her novel *Jacob's Room*, which has come to be seen as an anti-bildungsroman. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf's first self-proclaimed experimental novel, she critiques the male figure of culture and literacy while also showing new female figures of literacy. Yet, not all these figures receive the egalitarian moral force of Woolf's project. This article focuses on the character of Florinda, a working-class prostitute in the novel. Woolf's descriptions of Florinda's literacy problematically move from sympathy to condescension. By looking at the portrayal of this working-class female figure of literacy, this article shows how the unevenness of literacy and learning in the period found its way into one of Woolf's first modernist novels. (Jeonbuk National University)

Key Words: Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, Literacy, Modernism, Common Reader, Working-Class Women

I. Introduction

Virginia Woolf composed her first experimental novel, *Jacob's Room*, as a means to break down the dominant male figure of culture and his representation in literature. Critics have established that the act of critique was at the center of her

project.[1] For Woolf, exposing the limits of this figure was a way to open a space for new female figures of culture and literacy to emerge.[2] Her literary method of critique was to imbue her tone with irony, creating ironic detachment as Alex Zwerlding has termed it. According to Zwerlding, "there are many indications in *Jacob's Room* that Woolf wanted to maintain an ironic distance between her reader and her main character. Her tone in describing him and his friends is often patronizing" (70). It is here that we can recognize Woolf's achievement: it was not only in critiquing the novel of culture and literacy, essentially the bildungsroman, on the level of content, but by bringing this through to her innovations at the formal level. Woolf articulated her project of critiquing male upper-middle class socialization on multiple planes that add meaning to her work.

Yet, her achievement was situated within her own historical circumstances and as such it is marked by those very circumstances. In a an essay titled "Beyond Cambridge English," Raymond Williams positions modernist experimentation in the context of literacy. He tells us that "we need to see these developments [in modernism] as a specific cultural formation, which has been at once a response to and governed by an underlying and decisive unevenness of literacy and learning; the unevenness, specifically, of a class society, at a definite and critical stage" (221). For Williams, a core contradiction of modernism and its experimentations in writing was that it happened at a particular historical moment of uneven education. This was essentially a period when a small group of fiction writers were changing the very nature of the literary arts, specifically novels and poetry, during a historical era when there was still intense variation in general literacy levels and many were still

[1] See Zwerlding pg. 73 for the novel as a "covert critique" of "romantic posturing"; Little, "Comedy" pg. 105 for the novel as a "literary attack"; Dobie pg. 195-96 for how the novel reveals relationships of "masters and servants"; Handley pg. 113 for how the novel "challenges hierarchies"; and Harris pg. 420 for the novel as a "critique of sexuality."

[2] According to Judy Little, "The narrator privileges Jacob's textual 'room,' however, rather than the character himself, and she fills that room with characters and voices from a distinctly feminine culture" ("Feminizing" 242).

barred from education.

Indeed, it was this very unevenness that also found its way into literary works in terms of not only form and style, but also content and narration. It was precisely in the distance between Woolf's critique of the male figure of culture and literacy and her attempt to represent new and emerging female figures that the unevenness of literacy and learning appears in *Jacob's Room*. Specifically, in this article I focus on the character of Florinda, a prostitute that Jacob frequents. Woolf includes a number of passages about Florinda's literacy and compares her to other female middle-class characters in the novel. What arises is that we can locate some of the limits of the Woolfian project in how Florinda is depicted. Woolf's figure of literacy is a semi-literate young prostitute placed beyond any possibility of learning. She is condemned by Jacob and Woolf's narrator to never fully access human culture, which in this period was written culture. As we will see, Florinda's consciousness and labor as a sex worker both place her in the realm of nature and exclude her from the realm of culture, bound to life in the present and never to achieve the immortality that writing can provide. The tone and style of Woolf's depiction move from limited sympathy to direct condescension.

Jacob's Room is important for how it shows side by side Woolf's heretical critiques of those in her own class-fraction through the figure of Jacob and, via her formal innovations, a critique of the cultural dimensions of upper-middle class education. In terms of form and gender, Woolf invented a way to write a bildungsroman where the central male protagonist only appears at the margins of the novel. She displaced the male figure of culture and development, the dominant figure of literacy, while simultaneously opening a space for excluded female figures and their voices to enter her fiction. Such a move signals her critical appropriation of innovations in style and form that mixes them with certain political ends. In this sense, the innovations have a progressive value. Woolf saw the unevenness of learning and literacy and sought to address it not only in terms of content, but in terms of form. Here formal innovation allowed for unevenness to be figured in the

way that resonated with the contemporary movements in writing. Still, what we can see from the problems that arise in *Jacob's Room* is that even as Woolf tried to address the issues of the unevenness of literacy and learning in the period, she could not find a way to move beyond them. She met her limits in other women, the very ones she employed in her own home to cook and clean for her, which is to say working-class women.

II. Woolf's Common Reader

A discussion of Virginia Woolf and literacy cannot neglect her important contributions on the subject in her two collected editions of essays titled *The Common Reader* and *The Second Common Reader*. A close reading of the opening sentence of Woolf's two paragraph essay on the common reader will help us understand that these common readers were not of the lower-classes. Indeed, it is the possession of privacy and material space that allows Woolf to imagine one of the central characteristics of the common reader: "There is a sentence in Dr. Johnson's *Life of Gray* which might well be written up in all those rooms, too humble to be called libraries, yet full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people" ("Common" 1). Through Woolf's own imaginative construction, she provides insight into the social and material conditions of common readers. The types of property and material objects owned by these readers speak to their own class position: humble rooms, full of books, with the privacy of the bourgeois home. Moreover, as private readers they have autonomy over their privacy, which is to say they control the private spaces where their reading takes place. Common readers, then, were certainly not members of the lower-classes where the accessible forms of property did not allow for private reading. We may also recall that in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf explicitly mentioned the importance of middle- and upper-middle class women having a private space for themselves.[3] However, there is a difference

between gender roles preventing one from using a space, which is part of the family home, and not having that space at all, a condition of working-class women.

This point may sound as if it is making minute nuances overly important. Yet, many British feminists have a conflicted relationship with Woolf that tends to be lost as the author's work travels across the Atlantic. According to Regina Marler, American Woolf scholarship, has been "described as a rejection of the English Woolf, that wilting maiden, in favor of a taut, adaptable survivor: a sort of frontier Woolf" (137). Yet, as Marler later obliquely discusses, this transatlantic crossing was not just about a return to the younger Woolf, but a matter of the politics of social class. British critics, knowledgable of the British class structure, tended to note Woolf's achievements and limitations, specifically her inheritance as the second generation of literary Bloomsbury. There were American feminists, though, who wanted to see in Woolf not just a good liberal of the upper-middle class, but a revolutionary. Marler writes of Jane Marcus that she saw Woolf as "not only a pacifist socialist feminist but 'deeply committed to the revolution'" (Marler 142). Indeed Marcus refers to Woolf as a "genteel Marxist" (266). British feminists working with historical methods of the "history from below" approach have provided a corrective to these American images of Woolf. Alison Light in her book *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* seeks to tell Woolf's life through the eyes of her own female servants, the women who cooked her food, changed her chamber pot, and when Woolf was feeling bouts of depression allowed her to dust the house with them. Light makes it difficult to see the "revolutionary" Woolf of American scholarship, not simply by revealing she had servants, but rather by how she treated them.[4] We can turn to a specific incident that Light describes where Woolf had a

[3] In *A Room of One's Own* we are told, "For my belief is that if we live another century or so . . . and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own . . . then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down" (149).

[4] Servants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a complex topic. Depending on one's employer, the job could be quite good in relation to other forms of work available to single middle-aged

falling out with one of her servants, Nellie Boxall:

> Back in London that autumn there were more scenes at Tavistock Square, culminating in the ultimate reversal of roles: Nellie ordered Virginia out of her room. The irony of Nellie feeling able to dismiss Virginia – a measure of Nellie's independence – when Virginia had just published *A Room of One's Own* went unremarked. Nellie had got above herself; in reality the room was not 'hers'. Being treated like a servant was so painful and humiliating that Virginia went straight to Leonard and determined to sack Nellie by Christmas. (192-193)

Light's work on servitude and domesticity provides an immensely nuanced reading of Woolf and her politics, but this passage crystallizes Light's argument that "the figure of the servant and of the working woman haunts Woolf's experiments in literary modernism and sets a limit to what she can achieve" (xviii). Having a room is not just a matter of privacy, or even solely patriarchal subordination, but also domestic labor relations between women of different classes. Servants lived with the families they served and were provided with whatever accommodations the family saw fit. In turn, they did not own their rooms. Privacy was something servants were allowed to have by the family, but it could also be taken away by either the head or the mistress of the house. Nellie Boxall was not a common reader. If Nellie were to have read in the room that the Woolf's provided her, she would indeed be the other to the common reader, namely an uncommon reader.

Yet, having noted these limits, it will also be important to look at what the concept of the common reader allows Woolf to achieve and what it means in terms of literacy. Woolf's concept was not only a matter of readers and literacy, but also of critics and their relationship to scholars: "the common reader, as Dr Johnson

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women. Even Karl and Jenny Marx had a servant. Yet, she was treated very differently from how Woolf treated her servants. Indeed, after the passing of both Jenny and Karl, Helena Demuth went to live and work for Friedrich Engels who even wrote her obituary: "By the death during the past week of Helena Demuth the Socialist party has lost a remarkable member" (Engels). Woolf's servants did not fare as well historically and Light had to do extensive historical research to recover the stories of their lives.

implies, differs from the critic and the scholar" ("Common" 1). While Woolf had the material and social conditions to be one of those who might have possibly written Johnson's sentence, she was excluded from the dominant male educational institutions because of her gender. Woolf was able, though, to become a critic, since at the time the field of literary criticism was not highly institutionalized, and this allowed for the possibility of critics of diverse backgrounds. It is here that a contradiction arises: the very existence of the book *The Common Reader* attests that Woolf herself was not necessarily a common reader. That she could collect not just one, but two volumes of critical essays, shows that she was more of a critic than anything else. Yet, what we can infer is that this figure is the one with whom Woolf had the most solidarity. This affiliation no doubt grew out of Woolf's own common background with her own definition of the common reader. Similar to the common reader, she was "worse educated" (at least formally) in relation to the male critics and scholars of the Bloomsbury group ("Common" 1). Perhaps most importantly she stood against "impart[ing] knowledge or correct[ing] the opinions of others," two characteristics that define the scholar and the critic respectively ("Common" 1). In this sense, Woolf was a part of the literary-critical establishment, but always positioned herself on its margins. She was a critic for the common reader, which in many ways was a concept that at once represented her own social position even as she moved beyond it.

Woolf was a critic who held that common readers should not accept the authority of critics. Moreover, Woolf was open to aesthetic skepticism, which her father, the nineteenth-century literary critic, Leslie Stephen, abhorred. For Woolf reading was a pleasurable act, but it was equally important for readers to try to "train their tastes" ("How" 268). These positions come together in tension in the final essay of *The Second Common Reader*, "How Should One Read a Book." Originally a lecture given at an all-girls school, it went on to be published in the *Yale Review* in 1926. The essay gives the most succinct definition of the Bloomsbury conception of literacy and reading. Woolf's ultimate point in the essay is first that the authority of

critics should not be heeded and readers should read with their feelings. Secondly, she advocates for readers to take up the methods of criticism because readers have a duty to influence authors as a way of opening up the expanse of literature.

Woolf opens the essay with the dialectical tension between personal feeling and reasoning on the one hand and training in literary response on the other. At first, she starts with a strong polemic against critics and their authority. She states, "The only advice, indeed, that one person can give to another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. . . . independence . . . is the most important quality a reader can possess" ("How" 258). We can see an advocacy for both critique and rejection. She goes on to write, "To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom, which is the breath of those sanctuaries" ("How" 258). She returns to the notion of the private library, "our libraries," this time figured as a private sanctuary away from the public world of critics, which signals the importance of possessing private space for her understanding of common readers. Academic authority can impinge on the free reading of common readers that allows the connections between experience and reading to happen. Also, the designation of authorities as "furred and gowned" recalls the language of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* in their critiques of higher education. Woolf sets up an antagonistic language of "us vs. them," "us" being those with private reading spaces, "them" being the educated intruders. Indeed, there is a tinge of populism in her rhetoric, but it does not necessarily signify solidarity with working-class women.

Still, right as the essay seems at its most critical, she makes the dialectical turn to literary training. According to Woolf, "But to enjoy freedom, if the platitude is pardonable, we have to of course control ourselves" ("How" 258). While it is understandable that Woolf would value control, having to fight throughout her life with condescending male critics and authors whose stock and trade was classifying

women's writing as emotional as a way to discredit it; it is also interesting, from another position, in that this value of control takes on class distinctions. According to Light, Woolf often saw her servants as raging hysterics prone to emotional outbursts, especially in regards to dealing with wages. She writes, "If Nellie wanted more money or more appreciation she was being self-centered. . . .When Nellie, feeling vulnerable and defenseless, resorted to tears and temper, Virginia, like a Victorian husband, called it 'hysteria'. She slowly learnt to steel herself, to become cold and angry and withdrawn" (207-08). While Woolf may have promoted her common readers to realize the truth of their emotions in the face of authority, this was not a form of solidarity she gave out in other instances. It is here we have to recognize the limits of Woolf's own anti-authoritarian stance, because when it came to the realm of feeling and independence, she could be as oppressive as those who oppressed her. Her qualifying dictum to "follow your instincts" is as nuanced as it is restrictive because instinct has to be trained: "We must not squander our powers, helplessly and ignorantly. . .we must train them, exactly and powerfully, here on the very spot" ("How" 258). While Woolf was critical of dominant institutions of training, and specifically those of higher education, she did not turn away from training all together, but recognized the necessity for self-training when one lacks the proper authorities to provide productive training supportive of intellectual development.

Woolf defines a dual process of reading that meshes impressions and judgements. They balance her anti-authority take on criticism with a respect for the history of that criticism:

> The first process, to receive impressions with the utmost understanding, is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgment upon these multitudinous impressions; we must make these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting. ("How" 266)

That she figures reading as a matter of receiving impressions speaks to the

Bloomsbury influence, especially of Roger Fry, on how Woolf conceived of literacy. By using a term from the world of painting to describe reading, we can see how she figured reading for criticism as an aesthetic practice of literacy. The difference between receiving and understanding, though, is a matter of time: "Wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose, or fall asleep. Then suddenly without our willing it, for it is thus that Nature undertakes these transitions, the book will return, but differently ("How" 266). The immediate moment of reading of "the conflict and the questioning" is connected to the one side of the common reader that has always been valorized – the realm of feeling. The conflict and the questions that result from this come out of reading with instincts. Yet, what Woolf is articulating is her value on distance as the antidote to emotion. Her recommendations to engage this distance, to go for a walk or take a nap, speak to the Bloomsbury milieu. One wonders how this process changes if one has to go work or resume chores, which are not situations where readers decompress and process what they read, but rather need to focus attention in a much different way. Regardless, having taken time away from the novel, "the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phases" ("How" 267). Here we see Woolf's recognition of the time and labor involved in reading, which often breaks it up over "separate phases," but these separate phases are also connected to immediacy and feeling. Whereas what changes with impressions as they are given time after the completion of reading is that the "Details now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pig-sty, or a cathedral. Now, then we can compare book with book as we compare building with building" ("How" 267). Still, this first part of the process is seen as something quasi-natural for Woolf, which as long as it is given time, will play itself out. Of course, the problem is that having time is not something natural but social.

It is in the second half of the reading process that training becomes immensely important: it is a matter of making the judgement itself. Woolf notes, "To continue

reading without the book before you, to hold one shadow-shape against another, to have read widely enough and with enough understanding to make such comparisons alive and illuminating – that is difficult" ("How" 267-68). Judgement requires one of the key practices of aesthetic literacy, a knowledge of the history of literary works. She recognizes that criticism requires time for the inculcation of familiarity with the history of literature, but gaining that familiarity with the history of literature may seem impossible for the common reader. Woolf asks, "Would it not be wiser, then, to remit this part of reading and to allow critics, the gowned and furred authorities of the library, to decide the question of the book's absolute value for us?" ("How" 268). On one level, she recognizes the issue of cultural inequality; yet, on another level, she finds catching up to be another impossibility. She acknowledges that "we learn through feeling" regardless of how much we try to deny our personal investments in understanding narratives. This brings her back, though, to the notion of time. Her compromise between the impossibility of catching up with literary history on the one hand, and letting critics decide everything on the other is that "as time goes on perhaps we can train our taste; perhaps we can make it submit to some control" ("How" 268). She comes to an informal notion of aesthetic training, which still costs time and does not really resolve the two impossibilities. We may learn through feeling, but to turn feeling into taste, there needs to be training, there needs to be control. Woolf's common readers may have time even though they do not have education and with time perception itself can be changed. It is here we can see what Woolf is gesturing at: "Thus, with our taste to guide us, we shall venture beyond the particular book in search of qualities that group books together; we shall give them names and thus frame a rule that brings order to our perceptions. We shall gain a further and a rarer pleasure from that discrimination" ("How" 269). The difference between feeling and taste is that feeling relates to a single work, whereas taste allows the reader to move to groups of works and understand their relationships. Woolf, then, lays out a theory of literary perception: how to perceive a single literary work in relation to other works. This theory rests on the concept of

taste, which as we can see for the common reader requires time and training that it seems is supposed to be self-directed and autodidactic.

At this point, we come to the limits of Woolf's own theory and begin to see the nature of its social character and its implications for her notion of the common reader. Feeling moves to taste through training. For critics and scholars, this is done through the mediation of institutions of learning, which common readers are excluded from. Yet, Woolf can only see auto-didacticism as the way out for the common reader. She proposes an individual solution to a collective problem. On one level, this is understandable, seeing as she found all dominant institutions to be exclusionary, and no doubt recognized that opening them up to more equal forms of access would take a great deal of time. On another level, though, it also speaks to the ownership of privacy that common readers possessed and could use to develop alternative spaces and literacy practices to the dominant ones perpetuated by universities.

Woolf's own use of the common reader could go beyond trying to advocate for her own class position as a marginalized woman within the upper-middle class. Speaking in the 1940s at a lecture given to the Workers Educational Association, she proclaims that "We have got to teach ourselves to understand literature" ("Leaning" 153). Yet, this cannot be done without literary history proper: "Write daily; write freely; but let us always compare what we have written with what the great writers have written" ("Leaning" 153). Woolf groups herself with her working-class audience as "commoners and outsiders" and she does not make the nuanced concessions that she does in speaking to private school girls of the difficulties of such a task. Written at the start of World War Two, the talk ends with Woolf noting that "English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf – if commoners and outsiders make that country our own country, if we teach ourselves how to read and to write, how to preserve, and how to create" ("Leaning" 154). While this does not have the condescending rhetoric of Victorian liberalism, it does, uncharacteristically for Woolf, take the conditions necessary to liberate those in

her own class fraction, common readers with their own libraries and private reading spaces, and universalize them to England's "commoners and outsiders," which in the context of the talk at the WEA certainly had class connotations. It is this situation that brings us back to the complex lines of identification with lower social positions, but also Woolf's distance from them.

Auto-didacticism contains an element of circularity to it, but it can be overcome with the external aid of inherited private libraries and personal space, which women, even in Woolf's position did not always have. Yet, for the classes that lacked these external aids, teaching themselves was a much more challenging matter. Woolf seems to have a romantic view of autodidactic learning as an enterprise accomplished by hard work and dedication, instead of learning being something social and recognizing the differences in communities in terms of the possession of cultural resources and the limits on what can be learned. Woolf's imperative to "write daily" and "write freely" rings with a sense of her own mis-recognition of the exigencies forced on individuals who could only support themselves with the most difficult forms of time-consuming labor.

Woolf's non-fiction writing reveals her intense capacity to interrogate the world around her, gain insights into that world, and relate them to those values and practices in literary and cultural production which she was trying to advocate on behalf of. When Woolf adhered to her own mandate to discuss her own class and position, what she revealed could be both prescient and radical; yet, the times that she let her language slide and saw herself in similar positions to lower classes, she risked appearing disingenuous. A similar problematic arises in her fiction. As we will see the character of the prostitute Florinda in *Jacob's Room* presents a number of issues for Woolf and her relation to emerging figures of culture and literacy.

III. The Problem of Emerging Figures of Culture and Literacy

Jacob's Room was the novel through which Woolf said she found her voice as a writer (Flint xxvii). As such, there are times when her approach was effectively able to succinctly break down the male figure of literacy. Her achievement in this regard was to make this breakdown literary, not just a critique registered in non-fiction prose, but a narrative built around making this breakdown meaningful. Her protagonist Jacob becomes representative of the fall of the bourgeois educated male. Woolf's approach in *Jacob's Room* allows for certain possibilities, but still, as is the case for every writer, these stances close off other types of engagement. Her critique is successful in part because she spent her life around male figures of literate culture and she knew them inside and out. It was often these figures who were simultaneously enablers of her own personal development, and some of her closest companions, while also at the same time being her harshest oppressors. The lack of formal institutions to mediate these relationships no doubt made that oppression much more personal. Yet, when we come to female working-class figures, those figures with whom Woolf had a limited engagement with, which is to say mainly when they were servants in her own home, Woolf struggled in her writing and ended up on more problematic ground. This is specifically the case with the character of Florinda, a prostitute that Jacob frequents in the novel. Woolf's narrator has a limited sympathy for this character, which quickly turns into scorn.

With *Jacob's Room*, Woolf found a form to express her criticisms of bourgeois literary culture in literary terms. On another level, *Jacob's Room* is a novel that is searching. It is looking for those who may now look in on and even come to inhabit the metaphorical room of the figure of literacy, the space that was once "Jacob's room." It is in her own search for new figures of literacy that the limits of Woolf's own project come to light. Not all figures are depicted equally and, indeed, there is a core unevenness in the representations of different female figures of literacy. It is here that the narrator's affinities for certain figures are made clear.

With this contradiction we can see Alison Light's insight into Woolf's writing and politics more clearly: "Virginia's public sympathy with the lives of poor women was always at odds with private recoil" (203). Both her public sympathy and private recoil come through in *Jacob's Room* with her depiction of Florinda.

The clearest example of Florinda's marginalization in Woolf's literary economy can be found in the passage on the comparison of the letter writing capacities of the women emerging as new figures of culture and literacy. There is a great deal of sympathy in terms of tone for the middle-class women in the passage. As we can see though, it is Florinda's lack of literacy that occupies the most space in the passage. Woolf writes:

> Mrs Flanders wrote letters; Mrs Jarvis wrote them; Mrs Durrant too; Mother Stuart actually scented her pages, thereby adding a flavour which the English language fails to provide; Jacob had written in his day long letters about art, morality, and politics to young men at college. Clara Durrant's letters were those of a child. Florinda - the impediment between Florinda and her pen was something impassable. Fancy a butterfly, gnat, or other winged insect, attached to a twig which, clogged with mud, it rolls across a page. Her spelling was abominable. Her sentiments infantile. (126-27)

The difference between Clara and Florinda is subtle but important. They are both love interests for Jacob, Clara a possible candidate for marriage and Florinda his paid sex worker. Interestingly, the narrator contrasts their literacy practices in terms of classifications of maturity. Clara's letters are childlike, implying that she can write and compose albeit naively. This is in line with how Woolf positions Clara's class background: as a woman in the upper-middle class she needs literacy practices but does not need to develop them. Florinda, on the other hand, is figured as nearly illiterate and incapable of writing letters. Readers are told of an impediment between Florinda and her pen, but it is implied that this impediment is a matter of the capacity for attention to the practice of writing itself. Florinda is distracted by the outside world of nature, but also embodies that world and its meanings. It is a

world without higher thought processes or the training for attention, the social conditions of cultural practice for Woolf. Instead it is one where "butterflies, gnats and other winged insects" live unself-conscious lives amongst twigs and mud. The subtle hierarchies imbued in the novel are not overt, but nor are they hidden. They are there in the style, tone, and mood. While there is an indifference to Clara, there is a disdain for Florinda. It is not that Clara is childish, but her writing. Yet, it is Florinda herself, her very emotions, which are here not just childish, but infantile. The narrator's judgement is on Florinda's person and not her writing.

While the narrator may classify characters based on their compositional literacy practices, other literacy practices act to constitute the content of social relations between characters in the novel itself. Here we can turn to another passage on Florinda that provides background to how Jacob relates to her. It includes a sympathetic portrayal alongside similar negative judgements by the narrator: "For when Florinda got home that night she first washed her head; then ate chocolate creams; then opened Shelley. True, she was horribly bored. What on earth was it about? She had to wager with herself that she would turn the page before she ate another. In fact she slept" (105-06). Here Florinda's attention is not figured as something inherent but comes out of her social situation. She has just come home possibly from her work and washed and then sits down to try to read and engage with "culture," but tired she becomes bored with Shelley and cannot sustain the attention necessary to grasp what his poems are about. She tries to play a game with herself by providing a reward for turning a page, but it does not work. The labor of reading becomes overwhelming and she falls asleep.

One might almost think that Woolf was conceiving of Florinda as a common reader in this passage, providing a sympathetic portrayal of a reader whose labor in the sex work industry wore her down and prevented her pursuit of a more cultivated life. The sympathetic tone of these lines, however, quickly changes: "and though Florinda was ignorant as an owl, and would never learn to read even her love letters correctly, still she had her feelings, and liked some men better than others, and was

entirely at the beck and call of life" (106). The narrator quickly turns from sympathy to condemnation claiming that Florinda is so ignorant she cannot even read and understand her own writing. Florinda is unable to cross the gap between nature and culture. She is wrapped in the immediacy of living unable to reflect and gain distance from anything she does. Woolf's narrator goes on to speculate about what Florinda would have been like with education:

> If Florida had had a mind, she might have read with clearer eyes than we can. She and her sort have solved the question by turning it to a trifle of washing the hands nightly before going to bed, the only difficulty being whether you prefer your water hot or cold, which being settled, the mind can go about its business unassailed." (107)

There are two telling aspects to this passage. First, there is the "we" that the narrator is referring to. With it, the narrator refers to a group of readers, because if Florinda had a mind she would read more clearly than this group can. Perhaps, it is common readers. Then, we get the phrase "She and her sort," which seems to acknowledge that the narrator has a sense of group identity, and it is not with Florinda. The tone here is assertive when it comes to Florinda and "her sort," since unlike others in the novel they are able to be directly known and summed up.[5] They have worked out trifling practices to make sure that their minds go unbothered. Florinda and her sort live in the world of convention and the everyday and perhaps, if they could get out of this, they might be excellent readers, but they never concern themselves with such matters. They simply live in the world and do not even aspire to the pleasures of culture. The passage ends with the question of intelligence being a means of social relations between Jacob and Florinda: "But it did occur to Jacob, half-way through dinner, to wonder whether she had a mind" (107). The condescension in this passage is placed with the male figure of literacy as he looks

[5] One of the themes in the novel is the radial self-questioning of the narrator and the question of whether it is possible to know and be with others. See Morgenstern "The Self-Conscious Narrator in *Jacob's Room.*"

down on the intelligence of a sex worker. The passage is run through with contradictions, but yet there are some clear lines of distinction being drawn.

Let's compare this with another passage on another group of women in the novel and their literacy practices. The narrator's tone changes dramatically with this shift between characters. Here sympathy defines the passage and is never pulled back: "Mrs Flanders knew precisely how Mrs Jarvis felt; and how interesting her letters were, about Mrs Jarvis, could one reading them year in, year out - the unpublished works of women, written by the fireside in pale profusion, dried by the flame, for the blotting-paper's worn to holes and the nice cleft clotted" (122-23). Mrs. Flanders and Mrs. Jarvis are middle-class women living in a provincial town, and the narrator sympathizes with these women whose writing will always be the "sheets that perish" trapped in obscurity (126). Nowhere do we read the language of "us versus them" as with the Florinda passage. This is not a passage about Mrs. Flanders and her sort. The phrase "the unpublished works of women" is enough to evoke the sense of an unequal world where these women will be bound by their circumstances never to move beyond letter writing. The narrator ultimately registers a lament for the condition of the women. The difference of tone here is telling: Florinda does not receive such sympathy - she is not writing by the fireside but reading late at night bound in her ignorance. There is no lament for Florida's lost works never to be published. Instead, we are provided with a rationalization as to why Florinda and her sort do not even properly engage their literacy. They relate to the world by being totally within it, within life, having no reflective distance. While the women by the fireside spend a great deal of time and care composing their letters and reflecting on their choices in their writing, but yet will never be remembered for it. Florinda, though, can barely get words down on the page before she is distracted by an insect on a stick. She is not lamented but looked down on.

In turn, the lament of the unpublished works of women is not a lament for all women's writing, but a limited group of women's writing - Woolf's common readers. In her non-fiction writing, Woolf is quite honest about advocating for

professional class women, and this is related to her desire not to provide false charity. On one level, this is admirable and shows her awareness of class issues and how nineteenth-century forms of charity only upheld the system they addressed, but on another level, it can come off as cold and distant. We can turn to an earlier point in the novel, though, to see how positive relations between working-class and middle-class women are imagined. When we learn of Jacob's early life, we find that Mrs. Flanders' writing and labor are supported by a female servant, Rebecca: "'Good-night, Rebecca,' Mrs Flanders murmured, and Rebecca called her ma'am, though they were conspirators plotting the eternal conspiracy of hush and clean bottles" (12). This is one of the few times we encounter Rebecca outside of the kitchen,[6] and she is in the children's bedroom engaging in childcare. There is a slight gesture towards the power relation between Rebecca and Mrs. Flanders when it is noted that Rebecca refers to Mrs. Flanders as "ma'am". However, whatever the relation between servant and master is here, it is glossed over by what comes after. What readers are meant to infer is that even though Rebecca is a servant, both her and Mrs. Flanders, as two women in solidarity, are engaged in the joint struggle of childcare represented above as being co-conspirators in "hush and clean bottles." Of course, there is no conspiracy. The solidarity is imagined. Servants are only ever present as a result of economic relations of employment. The specter that haunts and disturbs Woolfian feminism is the female working-class woman. Instead of glossing over Woolf's shortcomings, it is better to acknowledge them and make her a partial and human writer with flaws on the same level as her male counterparts in the literary canon. Indeed, Woolf's writing is of such a high quality that to discuss these issues frankly will do no harm to her literary reputation.

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[6] Woolf's figure of the servant is connected with food and the body, two things Woolf herself had a problematic relationship with (Light 63). Mrs. Flanders thinks about Rebecca in relation to these elements. We hear how she gives Rebecca fish presumably to prepare and cook. (22). In another instance, Mrs. Flanders is writing a letter and talking about her servant and how she finally went to the dentist to have teeth pulled (122).

IV. Conclusion

This article has taken a somewhat critical view of Woolf in relation to her novel *Jacob's Room* and its depiction of literacies and how this relates to the limits of her modernist practices. However, *Jacob's Room* was not Woolf's most acclaimed novel. As she developed her practices, wrote more on education and reading, she advanced her novels and their depictions of literacy. *Mrs. Dalloway*, perhaps, represents her most extended attempt to engage with the unevenness of literacy and learning through the character of Septimus Smith. The character is similar to Hardy's Jude Fawley or Forster's Leonard Bast and is certainly Woolf's foray into this archetype of the working-class autodidact striving for culture. With Woolf's depiction of Smith there is a much more sympathetic tone and a capacity to use her literary innovations to let the struggles that Smith faced come through. What is interesting about Smith is his cross-class love affair with his teacher Miss Isabel Pole. It is here that a certain class mixing comes about that is not present in *Jacob's Room*, but perhaps points to important changes in Woolf's views and practices on literature, class, and women.

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