

But what of the
chickens: jacob's
room and the
masculine martyr
narrative



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The 1910's and early 1920's were littered with sob-stories about men who gave their lives for their country in the first world war. Poetry, songs, radio plays and indeed, many novels are dedicated to this subject. These stories nearly all centered on a young man, from a good family who had the whole world at his feet, and a long, successful life ahead of him. This young boy would then be called up to serve in the ' great war,' and, being a brave and noble lad, he would not decline. Instead, he would take up arms, and go with friends, brothers, and complete strangers to fight an unexpectedly gory war, only to die in battle. Some of these works, such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Siegfried Sassoon's " What does it matter?" or Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, take a distinctly anti-war tone, decrying the conflict as a pointless travesty. Others, for example John McCrae's " In Flanders Field" see the war as a more noble endeavor.

But none of these narratives, be they pro or anti-war, optimistic or pessimistic, are of any interest to Virginia Woolf. Attempting to craft a novel for the new age, she writes about the war from a different moral perspective entirely. The world is already filled with books about brave young male heroes, so her book, *Jacob's Room*, will not feature such a character—in fact, he will be ostentatiously missing. Many works of fiction already decry the loss of innocence, so she shan't bother with that, but rather will look at the dull future most of these men actually lost. And she will also attempt to reveal to us the real victims of this war—not the dead, but the women who must pick up after the dying and soldier on. In this essay, I will examine the ways *Jacob's Room* undercuts, mocks, and questions the narrative of the

masculine martyr, through its innovative format, use of familiar setting, and martial diction. Let us first examine the way the story depicts, or does not depict, its characters. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Jacob, the character the book is ostensibly 'about' does not appear as such in the story. He is seen, thought on, and influences other characters, but he himself never serves as a central figure—we do not see the world through Jacob's eyes. Instead, we see the world through the eyes of a multitude of other characters, many of whom are only tangentially related to the so-called 'protagonist.'

For example, allow us to examine the passage involving Betty Flanders' search for a stamp in the very first chapter: "'Scarborough,' Mrs. Flanders wrote on the envelope, and dashed a bold line beneath; it was her native town; the hub of the universe. But a stamp? She ferreted in her bag; then held it up mouth downwards; then fumbled in her lap, all so vigorously that Charles Steele in the Panama hat suspended his paint-brush," (Woolf 4). Seamlessly, Woolf's story flows from being centered on a country widow, to a painter trying to get the right image. It's a rather unimportant moment from a narrative perspective, but there's more to this frequent bouncing between points of view than just narrative convenience. There's no reason this book has to be about Betty Flanders, as opposed to Charles Steele, or about Charles Steele as opposed to Mrs. Jarvis. Woolf tries to create a story that has a place for everyone in it; deliberately excluding the struggles of Steele, however picayune, would be akin to an act of violence—silencing him forever as surely as an axe.

This story runs entirely contrary to the typical war novel, before, during, and after World War I. From Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got his Gun* to Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, most novels written about and during war focus on the events of the war itself, and how one, specific individual suffers or affects the event. But this is of course, not how conflict works. It relies on multiple people, many of them not present in the conflict itself. In many ways, though it does not involve any violence or combat, *Jacob's Room* displays war in its enormity and entirety more accurately than the narcissistic parables of many other war-driven stories. Rather than relying on the audience's ability to sympathize with one individual figure, Virginia Woolf presents us with a cavalcade of characters, then shows us the world through their eyes and how each of them, however indirectly, is affected by the war and the soldiers in it. Jacob, she seems to tacitly assert, was not the only casualty of war, nor were men the sole victims.

This is re-enforced by the non-traditional plot. The story does not move in a linear fashion or stay anchored in one place, but rather bounces through both time and space, settling on everything from the most picayune to the doldrums of life. These, however, are not depicted as such. What might pass as filler in another story is here treated with love and respect. Take, for example, the exchange between Betty Flanders and Ms. Jarvis in chapter eleven: “‘ I never pity the dead,’ said Mrs Jarvis, shifting the cushion at her back, and clasping her hands behind her head. Betty Flanders did not hear, for her scissors made so much noise on the table. ‘ They are at rest,’ said Mrs Jarvis. ‘ And we spend our days doing foolish, unnecessary things without knowing why.’ Mrs Jarvis was not liked in the village,” (Woolf 181).

Both the surface content and the inner workings of these few sentences cast a light on Woolf's critique of the war narrative—namely that the young men going off to die have a narrative, representationally and cosmically, where many others do not. The first sentence of this passage is Mrs. Jarvis claiming she has no sympathy for those who have passed on—given the context and subject of the book, this is inevitably interpreted as those fighting in World War I, or at least includes them. As she says this, Mrs. Jarvis engages in a perfunctory, thoughtless motion, designed to give her more comfort. She is unsatisfied with her position, in other words. Betty, however, does not pay attention. She is thoroughly encapsulated in her current chore, and it is so loud and thought consuming she does not take in what her friend has said. Next, Mrs. Jarvis says that the dead are at rest. Their time is at an end. Something with an ending has meaning, definition, and meaning is better than almost anything at effacing pain. Not only does the act of getting killed end life and all the little hurts and disappointments which come with it, but it also makes what the dead person did important, or part of a story. The soldiers—including Jacob Flanders—who died in World War I, did have a purpose, which was to die for their country. Many of them didn't even live long enough to doubt that purpose. But no one plays recruitment anthems from Mrs. Jarvis and Betty Flanders, or claims that the countless emotional sacrifices and compromises they've made were done for a purpose. This is why Mrs. Jarvis continues ““And we spend our days doing foolish, unnecessary things without knowing why.”” Not only is it true on a larger scale—the living are not made martyrs or subjects of stories, whilst the dead frequently are used as heroes or examples in social narratives—but even in the passage, we see both women engaged in meaningless, unimportant

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tasks designed in their own ways to provide comfort. Mrs. Jarvis's moving and shifting provides her with a better-feeling position, whilst Betty Flanders' cutting drowns out Mrs. Jarvis' harsh words.

And yet, despite implying this moment is tiny and ultimately meaningless, the whole novel is comprised of such exchanges, chance encounters, and random moments—not of vainglorious deaths or charges over the top. What might have passed for a conversation over tea with accompanying chores in some other book here resembles something of a gladiatorial game, with epic implications. Clearly it is because Woolf thinks these trivial events are in their own way of crucial importance—no more or less than a gory battle—and more than that, because she is attempting to provide a sort of meaning for the neglected and nameless civilians of the war, who, while living, never found or were given one. Another example of such an instance comes very near the novel's end, when, lying alone in bed, Betty Flanders hears a loud booming noise she has come to associate with martial activity: “ Again, far away, she heard the dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets. There was Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country. But were the chickens safe? Was that someone moving downstairs? Rebecca with the toothache? No. The nocturnal women were beating great carpets. Her hens shifted slightly on their perches,” (Woolf 246). Earlier, Betty has mistaken these thumping noises for guns, but now describes them as “ Nocturnal women beating great carpets.” In doing so she equates the fairly mundane task of beating the dust out of a carpet with the turmoil of World War I. More importantly, she describes the women as nocturnal, not only because she is currently in bed at night, but because the wars women

fight in this world are unseen, cloaked in darkness, hidden from view by the loud bangs and bloodshed of war. In the next few sentences, we see her, clinically go through a list of ' casualties' or the men in her life who have left for one reason or another. But, despite this, the act of losing her sons and lovers does not affect her nearly so much as the other tiny battles she must keep from losing—the chickens in their coop, someone downstairs, Rebecca's hurt mouth. Seabrook is dead, his troubles are over. Jacob, too, is soon to be gone. But Betty need not lose her chickens to foxes, nor her property to burglars. In fact, she cuts off her list of dead male relations in order to focus more clearly on the tasks still at hand. And even when she has assured herself that the hens are safe, like her, only shifting slightly, still the omnipresent thundering hangs over all of them. She stands to lose more, but can do nothing about it but wait, and occupy her mind with thoughts of her hens, until more news comes of her sons, or of the war. She suffers the same stress, but has been denied the agency and recognition given to her male counterparts. One passage in the book which I found to be supremely important was the following: " Could one read them year in and 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 nib cleft and clotted," (Woolf 123). All the passage really tries to say is that women write as many manuscripts as men, countless different works of engaging nature, most of which aren't seen—partially because of their temporal nature, partially because the world they live in does not value their contribution.

In a way, that's all Jacob's Room is; a documentation of the myriad unread female narratives blotted out by the bloodstains of the war. They did not stop happening simply because we no longer hear or read about them. Indeed, in a certain light, they could be called as bad or worse as what was suffered by Wilfred Owen and Jacob Flanders—at least the latter figures had an end to their suffering in sight—no war goes on forever, and no soldier can survive every battle. Eventually, they would go home or die. This isn't the case for the women they left behind. For them, there will always be another chicken to check on, another letter to stamp, and another war to take their families away. The title of Woolf's novel may be Jacob's Room, but that room is emptied of its rather uninteresting occupant, in order to afford us a better view of the street below teeming with unheard and unseen travelers. Through her choice of setting, unique characterization and format, Woolf creates a story which supplants the masculine martyr narrative with a new type of story; one centered on the struggles of anonymous civilians, mainly women.