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The Perfect Image of a Young Man:
The Influence of
Greek Culture and Aesthetics
in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*

A Thesis
Presented in
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Early in her novel *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf gives an idealized vision of Cambridge University. Imagining student quarters in the night, she writes, “If any light burns above Cambridge, it must be from three such rooms; Greek burns here; science there; philosophy on the ground floor” (*Jacob's Room* 38). The lights in the windows seem to burn forth like beacons to Woolf, advertising what is available to those fortunate enough to inhabit such spaces. Clearly, Woolf is attracted to the glow, but is not allowed in. It is important to note that it is Greek to which Woolf first calls attention. While Woolf is certainly interested in all of the subjects being studied, she primarily views the halls of higher education as the repository of Greek learning. When exploring Virginia Woolf's life and scholarly passions, it becomes apparent that the language and culture of ancient Greece were a frequent touchstone for her, both in her writing and her personal relationships. A survey of her written works reveals numerous references to ancient Greek writing, language, and art woven into her modernist narratives. The frequency and pervasiveness of such Greek items and imagery indicates that their inclusion was quite intentional on Woolf's part, an idea that leads to the question of why they were added in the first place. By tracing the Greek ideas through Woolf's work and examining her expository and personal writing, many important truths are revealed about her proclivity for Greek.

Virginia Woolf's personal, lifelong connection to Greek culture is no secret, yet the full extent to which it permeated her thought and writing, in particular her novel *Jacob's Room*, is relatively unexplored. References to Greece and Greek culture become a form of shorthand for Woolf to tackle complex ideas relating to institutional education, male privilege, artistic aesthetics, and even death and loss. While much work has certainly been done to examine aspects of the Greek elements of *Jacob's Room*, a full assessment of just how influential Greek

culture is on the novel has not been undertaken. Some critics have mentioned Greek in passing while discussing notions of education, gender, and aesthetics in the novel, yet it is hardly the main subject. One article that actually does focus on the Greek elements of *Jacob's Room* is Mary Koutsoudaki's 1980 article "The 'Greek' Jacob: Greece in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*." This article does a fine job of tracking the Greek elements in the novel, yet does not explore the implications of their inclusion. Indeed, this is a good place to begin an inquiry into the subject of Greek influence on the novel, as Jacob demonstrates a great deal of interest in Greek culture and literature, and even takes a trip to Greece itself to take in all of the ancient sites. However, there are clues throughout the novel that the influence of Greece goes far deeper than these simple plot points. As the novel progresses, the representation of Jacob becomes increasingly statue-like in its language, yet the aesthetics upon which Woolf bases this imagery is specifically Greek. Additionally, just as the character Jacob is a stylized rendering of a Greek statue, the novel itself is rendered in a similar fashion. In a way, Woolf creates a monumental piece of Greek statuary out of her novel to house a smaller statue, which is the character Jacob. In total, *Jacob's Room* and its main character both become complex works of art following in the style created by the ancient Greeks thousands of years prior.

This thesis will begin by examining Woolf's exposure to ancient Greek culture and the academic frustrations that resulted from not being allowed the same opportunities to progress in the subject as some of her male friends and relatives. The next section will examine the privileged education that the fictional Jacob Flanders receives and ways in which it influences his worldview and interactions with others. In particular, the ways in which Jacob uses his educational status and knowledge of Greek culture as tools of social dominance will be explored.

From there, the thesis will track Jacob's journey to Greece, which is the spiritual heart of his education and privilege. Ideas of ancient Greece are not solely limited to the novel's plot and the actions of Jacob, however. The next section will track how Woolf uses the aesthetics of Greek sculpture, which she outlines within the novel, to fashion Jacob. However, this aesthetic exercise is not limited to Jacob alone. Using the same framework as she did for Jacob, Woolf crafted her novel in a distinctly Greek aesthetic. To close, the thesis will examine how both Jacob and the novel are Woolf's exercise in a Greek aesthetic and the important implications of crafting them in such a way.

Woolf's Greek Studies

Throughout Virginia Woolf's life, she often reflected on how much she loved Greek language and culture, but also her frustrations in having not been fully educated on those subjects. Woolf's first notable exposure to ancient Greek influence came with the start of her Greek language lessons. Her work in Greek lasted from the beginning of these lessons in October of 1897 until her death in 1941 (Fowler 218). Her enthusiasm for Greek was quickly apparent, as she freely expressed to others. In a letter to Emma Vaughan, a relative, she stated that Greek was "daily bread, and a keen delight" and continues, "For goodness sake prod Marny [Emma's sister] till she opens her Greek books again (*Letters 1*: 35, 17? June 1900). While Woolf was extremely passionate about her Greek studies, she was limited by her gender from pursuing them to their full extent. In fact, Woolf was already quite exceptional in her time for being a woman and knowing any Greek at all. In 19th century England, aside from men with a university-level education, the general populace was largely excluded from learning Greek, which meant that

lower-class men and women, such as Woolf, did not get the opportunity (Nagel 61). The idea that she had somehow missed out was not lost at all on Woolf, and her frustration echoes in her writing throughout her life. For her essay “A Letter to a Young Poet,” for instance, she wrote, “The lack of a sound university training has always made it impossible for me to distinguish between an iambic and a dactyl” (*Death of a Moth* 210). It is telling that both of these poetic conventions are based in traditional Greek verse, which Woolf would most certainly have studied given the chance to pursue higher education. In order to explain the strengths and weaknesses of her learning in the subject of poetry, she immediately turns to Greek concepts of form, which highlights what she believed was her real educational shortcoming.

Even with this seeming reverence for higher education, a notion of well-educated men not understanding all that they were expected to know seems to have come from Woolf’s real-life experiences. She was fully aware of how her husband and her father, both recipients of top-notch, high-level education, were later unable to fully grasp what they had once studied. As Nagel notes, “Even an expensive education, however, could not guarantee the desired result” and Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, “was aware that, despite Eton and Cambridge, he was not a real scholar” (Nagel 66). Similarly, Leonard Woolf noted “how in just a few short years he went from being an excellent classics scholar” to forgetting most of what he had been taught (Nagel 66). While it is not entirely clear whether their inability to commit their education to memory ever had any detrimental impact on those around them, it does seem clear that Woolf understood what type of damage such misappropriation of knowledge could do. The prime example of this phenomenon is, of course, the fictional Jacob Flanders of *Jacob’s Room*.

Woolf’s experience with Greek culture was not limited to literature and textbooks. In fact,

she went on two trips to Greece, one in 1906 and the other in 1932 (Fowler 218). Her excitement prior to the first trip was palpable in her letters. In a letter to Violet Dickinson, she proclaims, “it will be great fun to rush through Europe, and climb the Acropolis” (*Letters 1*: 283, 24 August 1906). While she speaks enthusiastically of traveling the continent, her biggest anticipation seems focused on the portion of her trip that will bring her to Greece. Even at this early juncture in her life, Woolf has a bit of odd trepidation involving her impending visit. In a letter to Lady Robert Cecil, she speaks of her upcoming trip and says, “I feel that this should be the crown of a long life spent in teaching Greek verbs, to schoolgirls; instead of which I have done nothing whatever except write a cheque” (*Letters 1*: 285, Early September 1906). There is a sense of inadequacy in this statement, as if Woolf feels that she is somehow unworthy of a trip to Greece because she is removed from the academic enterprise surrounding Greek culture in her own country. She feels that only after she has done great service to the perpetuation of Greece's lasting achievements can she truly be worthy of such an experience. While this feeling is not evident in her later writing, there is always a lingering sense of inadequacy, even if it is slight, in regard to her knowledge of the subject.

One of Woolf's most interesting reflections on the idea of learning Greek language came from her essay “On Not Knowing Greek,” first published in 1925 in her essay collection *The Common Reader*. Importantly, it highlights the difficulty of learning Greek language and studying Greek literature, even for someone with the benefit of an elite education. Additionally, this is a particularly pertinent work to understanding Woolf's frame of mind at the time of the writing of *Jacob's Room*, as *The Common Reader* was Woolf's next major project following the completion of that novel (Hussey 59). In the essay, Woolf laments that fact that Greek literature

can never be truly understood by modern readers given the nature of translations, the removal of time, and the obvious language barrier. She writes:

For it is vain and foolish to talk about knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition. All the more strange, then, is it that we should wish to know Greek, try to know Greek, feel for ever drawn back to Greek, and be for ever making up some notion of the meaning of Greek, though from what incongruous odds and ends, with what slight resemblance to the real meaning of Greek, who shall say?

(Collected Essays 1)

Woolf opens her essay with the idea that Greek is unknowable to modern readers. However, there appears to be some playfulness in this opening statement with the notion that it is somehow foolish to learn Greek, as Woolf makes clear later in the essay. While she says that nobody can be fully taught to comprehend the works, she also reinforces their importance to modern readers as a solid and unchanging cultural touchstone. Perhaps echoing her own personal thoughts on Greek language, she concludes, “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age” *(Collected Essays 13)*. Even though she is uncertain whether she can fully comprehend these works or not, they remain a bastion of certainty thanks to their straightforward nature. Additionally, she appreciates Greek's austerity and aloofness. As she notes, “Greek is the impersonal literature; it is also the literature of masterpieces” *(Collected Essays 12)*. This duality of Greek works may be what is most

appealing to Woolf. While she acknowledges that they may not exude warmth, she also recognizes that they are masterful in what they do accomplish. Even with the great divide in thought and interpretation between the writing of Greek literature and Woolf's time, there is still much recognizable greatness in the ancient works, even for individuals with a more modern sensibility.

Another important touchstone for *Jacob's Room* is Woolf's brother, Thoby Stephen. Many of the facets of his life find their way into the novel and inform some of the minute details of the character Jacob. Indeed, both men come from upper class backgrounds and "the general shape of Jacob's career conforms to Thoby's: education at Cambridge, work of a faintly literary kind in London" (Wall 305). In many ways, *Jacob's Room* was meant as a novel for her brother. On the most basic level, Woolf intended the novel as a kind of elegy for Thoby, who had died on November 20, 1906, after contracting typhoid during the family's trip to Greece (Wall 305). For both Jacob and Thoby, the trip to Greece becomes a final pilgrimage before their early deaths. For Woolf, Thoby's connection to Greek culture goes beyond this trip, however, as he was also privy to the type of classical education that she so envied. In fact, Woolf acknowledges, "it was through him [Thoby] that I first heard about the Greeks" (*Moments of Being* 125). It seems that Thoby became a kind of academic liaison for Virginia, regaling her with tales of what he had learned, to her apparent delight. Also, it appears that Virginia saw him as a kind of shepherd to guide her through her Greek education. In a letter to Thoby telling him that she had begun Greek lessons, she said, "We have got as far as the first verb in our Greek, and by the Christmas holidays you will have to take me in hand" (*Letters I*: 9, 24 October 1897). To Thoby's credit, it seems that he did try to foster his young sister's interest in the subject, as evidenced in a letter

from Virginia to Thoby thanking him for the gift of a copy of *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* that he sent for her twentieth birthday. She wrote, “Your book has come and delights me. These little Epigrams I think I appreciate the most of all Greek” (*Letters 1*: 40, 29 January 1902). However, there is also some indication that Virginia frequently dwelt on the fact that she was not allowed the same educational opportunities as Thoby. In truth, Virginia's simmering jealousy of her brother seems to be at the root of much of her academic frustration. In a 1901 letter to Thoby she asked, “How many females tried for Paris' apples? and where can I read about it in English?” and requested, “You might send me a card with all information as soon as possible. The rest of my family is grossly ignorant.” (Shone 17). In this statement Virginia's envy of her older brother's opportunity is quite clear, as well as her perceived limitations in the subjects of Greek language and literature. Even though other members of her family were well-educated, Virginia clearly saw something special in Thoby and relied on him to enlighten her. Even without having attended a university herself, Woolf was able to witness firsthand the ancillary benefits that resulted from academic privilege. In fact, it was Thoby's academic and social connections from Cambridge that brought Virginia into the circle of the Bloomsbury Group—a relationship that would influence much of her writing career (Hussey 272). Woolf must have understood just how important her brother's academic connections were as a result of this, and probably would have wondered what she could have accomplished with similar relationships of her own to build upon. Thanks to Thoby, Woolf saw firsthand the kinds of advantages that came with a stellar education, from the knowledge that stood to be gained to the social connections that derived from such an experience.

Jacob's Education: A Defining Experience

Following Woolf's own observations of Thoby, *Jacob's Room* demonstrates how the most formative influence on Jacob's character is his elite education. It touches everything in his life, from the attitude with which he associates with others to the social environment to which he gains access. Reading about Jacob's experiences, it is also easy to see Woolf's frustrations with her own education. Jacob receives everything Woolf did not and arguably does very little with the gift of a good education, particularly compared with what Woolf was able to achieve without such a background. Perhaps most importantly, Jacob's education surrounds him in the ancient Greek literature that comes to define so much his existence. Both consciously and unconsciously, Jacob takes on a variety of his more Greek characteristics thanks to the work he does at prep school and at Cambridge. Importantly, much of the Greek aesthetic that flavors *Jacob's Room* begins with Jacob's arrival at the university and grows stronger as the novel progresses.

While Woolf certainly alluded to her frustrations with being excluded from a formal education in Greek language, it is in *Jacob's Room* that she directs her ire. Jacob Flanders grows to embody how all of the advantages of a privileged education are lost on someone who fails to make full use of them. He also becomes someone who uses his educational status as a tool to assert his authority over others. Jacob's education in the novel begins humbly enough, with the short line: "Jacob Flanders, therefore, went up to Cambridge in October, 1906" (*Jacob's Room* 27). While this statement seems innocuous enough, it in fact sets the stage for much of Jacob's actions and attitudes in the following pages. It is notable that Woolf chose to set this sentence as its own paragraph and setting it at the end of the second chapter, further setting it apart. This moment signifies Jacob's entry into a world of educational privilege open to only a select few.

Truly, the entire world opens up to Jacob at this moment, with the help of his inherited privilege. Alex Zwerdling observes, “His family connections, his education, and his good looks provide him with an entry into many different social circles—bohemian, professional, aristocratic” (Zwerdling 66-7). For Jacob, the entire world is open before him, despite the fact that very little was actually required of him to get into this position. Life sits before him on a silver platter.

Indeed, Jacob's life soon becomes intertwined with the privileges of academia. The novel charts Jacob's growth and development in a male-centered world and “shows young men attaining 'culture' almost as a birthright” (de Gay 69). While at college, he exists in an idyllic, almost dreamlike atmosphere, yet this portrayal comes with a certain amount of irony from Woolf. When Jacob first arrives at Cambridge, Woolf asks, “Is it fanciful to suppose the sky, washed into the crevices of King's College Chapel, lighter, thinner, more sparkling than the sky elsewhere? Does Cambridge burn not only into the night, but into the day?” (*Jacob's Room* 30). On the one hand, in this moment, Cambridge seems to shine out as a beacon of enlightenment, bathing the world in the benefit of its otherworldly glow. However, in another way, Woolf seems to poke fun at the attitudes of the Cambridge elite, who may actually think that the air seems cleaner and the sun brighter in their favorite space because of their place of privilege within it. Even in this serene landscape, the roots of Jacob's snobbery and exclusion of women are evident. As he sits in chapel for a service, he muses, “But this service in King's College Chapel—why allow women to take part in it? Surely, if the mind wanders [. . .] it is because several hat shops and cupboards upon cupboards of coloured dresses are displayed upon rush-bottom chairs” and continues, “No one would think of bringing a dog into church” (*Jacob's Room* 31). For Jacob, the presence of women interferes with the solemnity of the academic and religious setting. The

idea that women would enter in this realm is completely offensive and distracts from whatever should be happening there. However, it is particularly telling that Woolf singles out Jacob's own behavior in the same setting, noting how he "looked extraordinarily vacant, his head thrown back, his hymnbook open at the wrong place" (*Jacob's Room* 31). It seems that the problem lies within students like Jacob and not with any so-called distractions, no matter how many women surround him in the chapel. He has allowed himself to be disturbed by something that should have no bearing on his life and, in fact, has distracted himself from what he feels is so important.

Soon enough, Jacob's thoughts and actions become permeated with his increasingly male-centered literary opinions, which seem to invariably arrive back at Greek or Greek-influenced works. Through this, there is some understanding of Jacob's strengths and also his limitations. Woolf writes, "Although the plays of Shakespeare had frequently been praised, even quoted, and placed higher than the Greek, never since they started had Jacob managed to read one through" (*Jacob's Room* 46). In this case, Jacob blames his inability to read Shakespeare on the shoddiness of the editions he has at hand. Yet, it seems more likely that Woolf "undermines Jacob's apparent privilege by describing his reading interests ironically to show that he does not really engage with the literature on offer to him" (de Gay 69). While Jacob works with literature that would have been considered important to his education, much of Woolf's representation of Jacob reading and learning centers on the ways he misinterprets or misappropriates the works. Later in the book, Jacob becomes absorbed in Plato's *Phaedrus*. It seems possible to hear the voice of Virginia Woolf's experience in the explanation of the text. She writes, "The *Phaedrus* is very difficult. And so, when at length one reads straight ahead, falling into step, marching on, becoming (so it seems) momentarily part of its rolling, imperturbable energy" (*Jacob's Room*

114-15). However, there is something in these words that distances Woolf from Jacob's study habits. In particular, it is the manic militarism that seems to push Jacob through his work. The study of Greek becomes almost a drill, which Jacob slogs through with determination. Really, the impetus for such behavior came much earlier. Back at the university, Woolf notes the same type of motion in the mind of an old professor named Huxtable. She writes:

Now, as his eye goes down the print, what a procession tramps through the corridors of his brain, orderly, quick-stepping, and reinforced, as the march goes on, by fresh runnels, till the whole hall, dome, whatever one calls it, is populous with ideas.

(Jacob's Room 39).

With military precision, Jacob and his professor cut through their studies. As the novel later demonstrates, such attitudes invariably lead to men becoming embroiled in conflict. Ironically, it is in the idyllic and seemingly benign university setting that such attitudes are fostered and allowed to propagate.

Thanks to his deep, quasi-military, drill-like immersion in his work, in one important scene, Jacob become wrapped up in the study of a text and sequesters himself from the outside world—only to find that it has gone on without him as he worked. He presses forward in his work, seemingly with blinders on to shield against anything beyond his areas of interest. This scene demonstrates, in a very real sense, how Jacob's academic ambitions have cut him off from the whole of humanity. As he nears the end of his work:

The dialogue draws to its close. Plato's argument is done. Plato's argument is stowed away in Jacob's mind, and for five minutes Jacob's mind continues alone, onwards, into the darkness. Then, getting up, he parted the curtains, and saw, with astonishing

clearness, how the Springetts opposite had gone to bed; how it rained; how the Jews and the foreign woman, at the end of the street, stood by the pillar-box arguing.

(*Jacob's Room* 115).

As Jacob slogs through his work, it is not into the bright light of knowledge, like that seen at Cambridge, that Jacob moves toward, but rather into a kind of darkness. Indeed, he has worked into the darkness of night but also into the darkness of isolation and ignorance. Jacob may be versed in the works of Plato, but he becomes less fluent in the ways of living, breathing people. Jacob is trapped in the past in the pages of his books as the weather changes and people go about their business.

In the same way, Jacob is also isolated from those closest to him. He frequently tries to associate with others through the literature he has been trained to revere, yet his friends and acquaintances rarely have the same reactions to the works that he does. Jacob speaks without explaining, not understanding that his academic privilege has equipped him with tools for understanding that others may not possess. In a sense, the language of his desires has been rendered cryptic and impenetrable to outsiders by the antiquated language of the works he prefers (Harris 428). Yet, he never bothers to find out their opinions about these works or attempt to discuss them in a manner that might be more accessible. At one point, he feels a certain connection to young woman named Florinda. As he sits with her, he feels that “women [. . .] are just the same as men—innocence such as this is marvellous enough, perhaps not so foolish after all” (*Jacob's Room* 80). Jacob decides to express these feelings toward Florinda by lending her a copy of *Adonais*, one of Percy Bysshe Shelley's works. Importantly, this is a work from a noted philhellene dealing with a Greek subject. This distinction would have no doubt been important to

Jacob, given his leanings. Regardless, this gesture ultimately rings hollow for Florinda, as she lacks the same interest and educational faculty to approach such a work. Unlike Jacob, for whom such works receive the utmost respect, Florinda greets it with indifference. Simply put, Florinda is not equipped with the same academic skills to approach such a work, as she has not had the same opportunities as Jacob. Woolf writes:

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. But then her day had been a long one. (*Jacob's Room* 80).

This scene stands as a perfect contrast to the one in which Jacob works feverishly into the night on Plato's works. Florinda is worn out from a day spent out in the world, which gives her little time to try and interpret Shelley, while Jacob spends an entire day doing just such work, to the point that he has no idea what has transpired outside of his study in the passing hours.

Additionally, Jacob is harsh in his assessment of others, particularly women, who try and approach the academic realm. He clearly holds a high opinion of his own likes and dislikes, leaving little room for what others think. Even Clara Durrant, who is somewhat smitten with Jacob seems put off by Jacob's attitude. Woolf writes, "I like Jacob Flanders," wrote Clara Durrant in her diary. 'He is so unworldly. He gives himself no airs and one can say what one likes to him, though he's frightening because. . .'" (*Jacob's Room* 71). Here, Woolf trails off and does not reveal just what is so frightening about Jacob, yet it seems as if it stems from when people attempt to reveal their opinions to him. The same attitudes are thus directed at Jacob's other romantic interest, Florinda. Woolf writes, "Florinda was ignorant as an owl, and would never

learn to read even her love letters correctly” (*Jacob's Room* 80). Though his section appears to be from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, one cannot help but read Jacob's own gender bias in it. In many ways it seems to mirror his reaction to the women in his college chapel, where he viewed them as unthinking and less than human.

Interestingly, Woolf seems to have consciously tried to make Jacob more judgmental and less likable as she worked on the novel. In the draft of *Jacob's Room*, Jacob thinks, “to figure out a comradeship 'like that of the Greeks (how they ran in his head!) all spirited on her side, protective on his, yet equal on both, for if there's one thing damnable its condescension from man to woman” (*Jacob's Room Draft* 93). Jacob expresses no such sentiment in the final version of the novel and any trace of such notions of equality are erased. Still, this seems understandable, as such sympathy from Jacob would have seemed out of character given what he says and does in the rest of the novel. Indeed, the way he treats the two women in his life does not make sense in the context of a kinder, gentler Jacob. For these women, even if they did have an enthusiasm for the same subjects as Jacob, they are far from being equipped to study them with the same facility as he does and without any thoughts of gender equality, there is no chance of it. Indeed, like Woolf herself, both Clara and Florinda, and most other women for that matter “have never been and never will be taught Greek early and long enough to read Aristophanes or Sophocles in the original” even if they have a desire to do so (Harris 431). In this way, Jacob can always be sure and assertive with his opinions around these women, as they cannot challenge his privileged academic achievements. They are effectively removed from any dialog by no fault of their own.

For all of his fine education, Jacob frequently reveals how little he actually knows, despite what others may think of him. In one instance, at a party, a friend named Mrs. Durrant

(Clara's mother) asks Jacob if he is fond of music. Surprisingly, Jacob replies, "Yes. I like hearing it [. . .] I know nothing about it" (*Jacob's Room* 91). While Mrs. Durrant understands exactly how educated Jacob is, she does not hesitate to respond, "Why is it nobody is ever taught anything they ought to know [. . .]?" (*Jacob's Room* 91) His education may give him a certain aura of privilege, yet he still remains somewhat at odds with high society, as he is not a well-rounded individual. Even in areas that Jacob is purportedly passionate about, he is still lacking the necessary faculties to represent his knowledge. His reverence for Greek culture is well-documented throughout the novel, yet an interesting caveat to his knowledge is revealed. Woolf writes, "Jacob knew no more Greek than served him to stumble through a play. Of ancient history he knew nothing" (*Jacob's Room* 78). Despite the fact that he uses the ancient Greeks as a frequent basis for comparison to the modern world in which he lives, he truly has very little practical knowledge of their history or culture. He simply chooses to rely on his own idealized notions of what they represent rather than delving into the actual reality of the situation.

While Jacob's misrepresentation of his knowledge of Greek culture might seem harmless and foolish on his part, the reality of how he uses it is far more sinister. Frequently, he uses his own idealization of ancient Greek works to justify his own misogynistic tendencies. Jacob reveals the true nature of his attitude in one crucial passage. Just after Woolf reveals that Jacob knows little Greek language or history, she writes of Jacob thinking about Greece while with his frequent companion, Florinda:

However, as he tramped into London it seemed to him that they were making the flagstones ring on the road to the Acropolis, and that if Socrates saw them coming he would bestir himself and say 'my fine fellows,' for the whole sentiment of Athens was

entirely after his heart; free venturesome, high-spirited. . . . She had called him Jacob without asking his leave. She had sat upon his knee. Thus did all good women in the Greek days. (*Jacob's Room* 78).

Jacob's Greece is an abstract idealization in which classical historical figures and women approach him on his own terms, with little or no basis on how they may have actually behaved. Just prior to this episode, while Jacob marches along with a male friend proclaims, "Probably, [. . .] we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant" (*Jacob's Room* 77). Ancient Greece is a blank slate for Jacob, in which he can insert his own values to make it more appealing to his nature. In this way, Florinda behaves in a Greek fashion in Jacob's eyes simply because Jacob believes his misogynistic tendencies are within the Greek tradition, whether or not there is any truth in that idea. While he knows little about the history or language, he believes that he is the one to interpret its philosophy and apply it to the modern world. In his hands, it becomes something quite volatile, as it can basically become whatever he needs it to be to suit his whims, and those with less education can do little to oppose or challenge his assumptions.

When visiting Greece, Jacob demonstrates just how out of touch he is what he reads and purports to enjoy from ancient Greek culture. Woolf writes, "he was beginning to think a great deal about the problems of civilization, which were solved, or course, so very remarkably by the ancient Greeks, through their solution is no help to us" (*Jacob's Room* 158). Through he raises Greek culture above all else, Jacob fails to realize its inherent value. To him it remains locked in the past, a quaint example of what ancient people thought and did. Even with his reverence for Greek culture, in this moment Jacob makes entirely clear his low opinion of their achievements. Ancient Greek culture exists better as an abstraction, in which everyone behaves in a way that is

pleasing to Jacob, and his ideas and attitudes remain superior to those of everyone else. In truth, very little of what he has gleaned from these works has much to do with their actual contents. Instead, he looks for material to reinforce his own values, many times at the expense of their intended meaning.

While Jacob is frequently mistaken about the nature of Greek culture, it is important to note just how pervasive it is throughout the novel as a symbol of education and high culture. Frequently, it serves as a reference point for whatever Jacob happens to be doing in his life. There are even some situations that are not blatantly Greek, yet reveal themselves to be with closer scrutiny. One key example is Jacob's visit to the British Museum, a longtime bastion of the academy and an important repository for classical culture, which of course includes ancient Greek. While Jacob is in the museum, Woolf ruminates on the pervasive, and somewhat oppressive, stature of the institution. She writes:

There is in the British Museum an enormous mind. Consider that Plato is there cheek by jowl with Aristotle; Shakespeare with Marlowe. This great mind is hoarded beyond the power of any single mind to possess it. Nevertheless (as they take so long finding one's walking-stick) one can't help thinking how one might come with a notebook, sit at a desk, and read it all through. A learned man is the most venerable of all—a man like Huxtable of Trinity, who writes all his letters in Greek, they say [. . .] (*Jacob's Room* 113)

Jacob certainly aspires to such lofty achievements, yet he still remains stuck at a desk with all of the other mere mortals, consigned to plug away at his task. Even the architecture of the museum reinforces the supremacy of classical thinkers and cultures. Woolf mentions, “Closely stood together in a ring around the dome were Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Shakespeare; the

literatures of Rome, Greece, China, India, Persia” (*Jacob's Room* 112). These individuals and institutions are raised up above the common man to look down upon them as ancient gods were thought to look down on the earth. For people like Jacob, the only shot at “heaven,” as it were, is to study classical works and try and glean some inspiration from them.

The time spent in *Jacob's Room* at the British Museum is fairly short, but it is a critical passage for understanding the novel's notions of gender inequality and the potential of a classical education for women. Aside from the references to the various scholarly pillars upon which the institution is built, Woolf also makes note of some of the physical artifacts found there, in particular the famous Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon. When Jacob visits them he encounters a woman named Miss Marchmont who can “never resist a last look at the Elgin Marbles” (*Jacob's Room* 112). Jacob perhaps better understands the academic nuts and bolts of the works, but it is individuals like Miss Marchmont, and Woolf herself by proxy, who appreciate them as was probably intended by the ancient artists—on a deeper, emotional level. While Jacob silently and studiously examines the works, she regards the statues as living beings and “looks at them sideways, waving her hand and muttering a word or two of salutation,” which causes Jacob to turn away from where he was looking (*Jacob's Room* 112). Unlike Jacob, who is caught up in the academic aspects of the works, Miss Marchmont is able to see the statues as works of great humanity and associates with them in that regard. It seems that her view is reflected in Woolf's own way of thinking as “Woolf's ideal relationship with Greece was an unattainable combination of magic and familiarity” (Fowler 219). With the same sense of wonder, Miss Marchmont regards the Elgin marbles. First, there is a bit of magic in her view, as she feels that they are somehow receptive to her kindness, and second, she feels enough of an affinity and familiarity

with them that she greets them as old friends. It is also easy to see Miss Marchmont as an analog for the author, given how Woolf continually regards Greek in her personal writing. Even late into her life, Woolf acknowledged the power of Greek over her psyche, writing, “how Greek sticks, darts, eels in & out!” (*Diary 5*: 236, 11 September 1939) It is hard to imagine Jacob professing a similar enthusiasm for Greek, except perhaps when he is able to mold it to his own purposes. Really, his misinterpretation of the subject matter brings him more joy than any love for the language, art, or literature.

Through her portrayal of Jacob's education, Woolf simultaneously demonstrates the amazing insight that can be gained from such an opportunity, but also what a dangerous thing advanced learning can be in the wrong hands. There is nothing inherently wrong with the works that Jacob studies, but when paired with his misogynistic viewpoint, these works become the ammunition for his gender bias and exclusionary attitudes. In particular, Jacob's assessment of Greek culture is based more on what he believes it to be rather than what it actually is, allowing him to use it as he pleases.

The Culmination of a Life: Jacob's Trip to Greece

The most pivotal episode of the novel is Jacob's trip to Greece and in particular his visit to the Athenian Acropolis. Woolf's attention to the Acropolis, and its position at the dramatic center of the novel, demonstrates that it holds a deeper importance beyond its obvious connections to Greek culture. It serves as both the center of institutionalized academic thought and also the gendered exclusivity of the dominant educational system. This section is perhaps the clearest look at what kind of young man Jacob has become. His abilities, and more importantly

his inabilities and shortcomings, are elegantly laid out as he moves through the environment that has shaped him from afar. The trip to Greece is the culmination of his life up to this point, which sadly does not have much further to go. Oddly enough, in the place where he should find the most inspiration, he remains decidedly uninspired. Similarly, when he should be the most open to new ideas and experiences, he becomes extremely close-minded. Ultimately, Woolf reveals the most about Jacob by showing decisively what he is not, since at this stage in his life is Jacob is better defined by his shortcomings than what he has achieved.

Importantly, Jacob's attitudes about women come into stark focus at this point in the novel. Looking again at Jacob's reaction to Miss Marchmont, in a broader sense, it seems to typify how he reacts to women who attempt to encroach on the academic sphere which he so exalts. The biggest confrontation in this vein occurs when Jacob visits what is essentially the center of the universe for all philhellenic people, the Athenian Acropolis. When Jacob finally makes it to the hallowed site, he decides to take the opportunity to sit and read in the ruins, but it is interrupted by a group of women, French tourists, who wander into his field of vision and snap pictures of the ruins. When this occurs, he thinks to himself, "Damn these women," then murmurs, "How they spoil things" (*Jacob's Room* 159). Just as Jacob believed that the women in the King's College Chapel somehow interfered with his ability to worship and focus on the service, he believes that the presence of women has somehow ruined his visit to the Acropolis. The irony in this situation is that Jacob, as a modern individual and a tourist himself, is just as alien to the setting as are the women.

The scene with Jacob and the women at the Acropolis bears a strange resemblance to Woolf's own experience visiting Greece. Prior to her 1906 trip to Greece, Woolf wrote the

following to her friend Violet Dickinson:

“Still it will be great fun to rush through Europe, and climb the Acropolis. I can settle to read Greek history and Antiquities so I shall make the scenery—in fact the atmosphere and colour my job; after all, I shall say, one doesn't come to Greece to look at the ruins.”

(*Letters I*: 235, 24 August 1906).

With this image in mind, it is not hard to imagine the young Virginia Stephens as a tourist similar to the French women that so irritate Jacob. However, it is important to note that it is Woolf's observations collected during this trip that allow her to create the scenery that surrounds Jacob as he sits atop the Acropolis. Just as she wrote, she “makes the scenery” of Athens for the readers of *Jacob's Room* quite evocatively, writing, “the sight of Hymettus, Pentilcus, Lycabettus on one side, and the sea on the other, as one stands in the Parthenon at sunset, the sky pink feathered, the plain all colours, the marble tawny in one's eyes, is thus oppressive” (*Jacob's Room* 157).

Contrasting Woolf's ability to portray her experience in Greece, Jacob laments his own representational abilities, thinking, “It is highly exasperating that twenty-five people of your acquaintance should be able to say straight off something very much to the point about being in Greece, while for yourself there is a stopper upon all emotions whatsoever” (*Jacob's Room* 144). Unlike Woolf's seemingly epiphanous experience on the Acropolis, Jacob's thoughts turn to the trivial and inconsequential as he takes in the same scenery. He is thus “inspired”:

to write a note upon the importance of history—upon democracy—one of those scribbles upon which the work of a lifetime may be based; or again, it falls out of a book twenty years later, and one can't remember a word of it. It is a little painful. It had better be burnt.
(*Jacob's Room* 158)

For Woolf, the experience yields the novel *Jacob's Room*, but Jacob only walks away with a half-baked idea—which will probably be discarded and forgotten. While he understands the importance of the experience, the ability to express what he has seen and felt in a constructive manner escapes Jacob. Indeed, by juxtaposing Woolf's elegant prose with Jacob's writer's block, the reader is reminded of Woolf's “freshness of observation and expression” and also “how far Jacob still was from finding his own voice” (Zwerdling 77). Jacob may have the education, but he still lacks the means to express the inspiration he receives from the world around him.

When Jacob finds offense in the incursion of the women into the Acropolis he is upset with both their intrusion into a site that he finds sacred and also their ingress into the male-dominated world of the educational system that fosters attitudes of modern philhellenism. Truly, Jacob would have seen ancient Greek society as the basis of his scholastic tradition. Just as women are cut off from enjoying the works that Jacob exalts, Jacob also hopes that they will be excluded from the very cultural experiences that inform his ideas of the academy, leaving them completely in the dark. This concept of being removed from the privileged group is keenly reflected in Woolf's own life. One of her main regrets in life was “that she did not receive the formal university education in classics enjoyed by her brothers and their friends (including her husband)” (Nagel 65). The Acropolis is literally the city upon the hill and beacon of learning and educational ambition for the western world, and Jacob seeks to exclude women from this rarefied place. Just as the French women “spoil” the space, the ingress of women into academic spaces ruins them for Jacob. Still, with the production of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf raises the question of what women could do if allowed into the same academic circles as men, given the same inspiration and opportunity. While Jacob's visit to the hallowed site is fruitless, Woolf's

experience yields a fully formed piece of art.

Another important aspect of Jacob's trip to Greece is its relation to the British Romantics. In many ways, Jacob's travels mirror those of Lord Byron, most notably in the stops in both Rome and Athens. However, while Byron's works are rich with descriptions of foreign lands, Jacob's own attempts in the same vein are somewhat less exciting. During his travels, Jacob imagines what he will tell others about what he has seen:

“You ought to have been in Athens,” he would say to Bonamy when he got back.

“Standing on the Parthenon,” he would say, or “The ruins of the Coliseum suggest some fairly sublime reflections,” which he would write out at length in letters. It might turn to an essay upon civilization. A comparison between the ancients and the moderns [. . .]

(Jacob's Room 143)

Of course, none of this ever materializes in the novel and whatever Jacob's “sublime reflections” might have been, they remain a mystery to everyone but Jacob. It is not difficult to hear a Byronic ambition for exotic travel narrative in Jacob's thoughts, but his ideas never seem to gain much traction, whether here or anywhere else.

Amazingly, it is this combination of Greece and Byron that closes the book on Jacob. In the novel, the last person to see Jacob alive is Mr. Floyd. In London, he spies Jacob and recalls, “I gave him Byron's works” (*Jacob's Room* 183). Woolf's choice of Byron for such a pivotal position in the novel is not an arbitrary one in the least. Famously, Lord Byron died of fever while fighting in Missolonghi for Greek independence from Ottoman Turkey (de Gay 71). While it is not likely that Jacob died fighting in Greece, it is probable that his lifelong study of Byron imparted him with a romantic notion of fighting and dying on foreign shores. Similarly, it is

telling that the last images before the reader learns of Jacob's death are of Greece:

But the red light was on the columns of the Parthenon, and the Greek women who were knitting their stockings and sometimes crying to a child to come and have insects picked from its head were as jolly as the sand-martins in the heat, quarreling, scolding, suckling their babies, until the ships in the Piraeus fired their guns.

The sound spread itself flat, and then went tunneling its way with fitful explosions among the channels of the islands.

Darkness drops like a knife over Greece. (*Jacob's Room* 185)

It is not hard to imagine that descriptions such as this would have pushed Jacob into action, rushing to defend his idealized version of the Greek nation, just as Byron had done almost a hundred years earlier. While his life may have ended in the mud of Flanders, in his own mind, Jacob most likely fought to defend the foundation stones of his education—classical Greek culture and the philhellenism of the Romantics.

The Perfect Representation of a Young Man: Jacob as a Greek Statue

The inclusion of Greek culture and art has far deeper applications in the novel than to explain Jacob's tastes and attitudes. Importantly, Greek culture is so pervasive that Woolf crafts Jacob into a version of a Greek statue himself, while fully examining all of the limitations inherent in such a representation. In particular, the elements of Greek statuary in descriptions of Jacob emphasize his incomplete development as a fully formed, thinking individual and also some of the empty and hard-headed aspects of his personality. Jacob is simultaneously an idealization and an abstraction to the various people that he encounters in the novel. The

opinions of these individuals vary widely, yet there appears to be a common thread of Greek aesthetic through all of their views of the young man.

Throughout the novel, there are numerous hints from Woolf that Jacob is a type of fabricated image. It is with a bit of irony that Jacob himself begins to point this out in the novel, while not ever being fully aware of the implications for himself. During his Greece trip, he observes, “the Greeks, like sensible men, never bothered to finish the backs of their statues” (*Jacob's Room* 157). Jacob himself is an unfinished portrait, thanks to the fragmented nature of the novel, as well as the brevity of his life. However, there is another layer of complexity in this statement, as he is standing inside the Parthenon at that moment “on the exact spot where the great statue of Athena used to stand” (*Jacob's Room* 157). As Woolf's classically-educated readers would have understood, the Athena statue, though lost centuries earlier, was still considered one of the finest examples of Greek statuary through known copies and accounts. However, this is not the only time that Jacob is seen as a stand-in for a classical Greek statue. While visiting a Greek museum with exhibits of ancient statuary, one of Jacob's travel companions, Sandra Williams, “got Jacob's head exactly on level with the head of Hermes of Praxiteles. The comparison was all in his favour” (*Jacob's Room* 153). At the height of the novel, Woolf positions Jacob as a surrogate for two of ancient Greece's “unfinished” masterpieces. In doing so, Woolf hints that Jacob himself is somewhat incomplete, like the statues without sculpted backs, in that he is not fully matured and thus cannot be a complete individual and also that he is a something of a hollow shell for others to fill with their ideas and opinions.

There are hints of Jacob's statuary nature throughout the novel. The first account of Jacob as a young man comes from a woman he encounters on a train on the way to Cambridge named

Mrs. Norman. She notices with Jacob how “All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious” (*Jacob's Room* 28). It is not hard to imagine Mrs. Norman's description being applied to a stone statue just as easily as it pertains to Jacob, simply the representation of a youthful male, not an original, as it were. Woolf outlines how such images of Jacob had been constructed from a very young age and reinforced by all of those around Jacob. Their observations helped to craft Jacob into the perfect Greek statue. Woolf writes:

But it is the governesses who start the Greek myth. Look at that for a head (they say)—nose, you see, straight as a dart, curls, eyebrows—everything appropriate to manly beauty; while his legs and arms have lines on them which indicate a perfect degree of development—the Greeks caring for the body as much as the face. And the Greeks could paint fruit so that birds pecked at it. (*Jacob's Room* 145).

Jacob has been meticulously groomed into the image of a perfect Greek statue and is only “real” because of this association. He is only what others think of him and has no real identity in the novel outside of these associations. Indeed, this concept of Jacob is not entirely confined to those who formed it. Jacob's love interest, Florinda notices this characteristic when trying to wring conversation from the stoic young man. After several of her questions go unanswered, she muses, “Jacob. You're like one of those statues. . . . I think there are lovely things in the British Museum, don't you? (*Jacob's Room* 81). Florinda cannot rely on any word from Jacob to inform her concept of him, so she begins to construct her own image of who he is. Additionally, Jacob's friend Fanny Elmer echoes this sentiment exactly and sees him almost entirely as a Greek statue, an idea which his trip to Greece does nothing to change. Woolf writes:

Sustained entirely upon picture post cards for the past two months, Fanny's idea of Jacob

was more statuesque, noble, and eyeless than ever. To reinforce her vision she had taken to visiting the British Museum, where, keeping her eyes downcast until she was alongside of the battered Ulysses, she opened them and got a fresh shock of Jacob's presence, enough to last her half a day. (*Jacob's Room* 180)

For Fanny, an ancient Greek statue is a worthwhile surrogate of Jacob. She does not desire his words or his kindness, but rather an idealized image of him to sustain her friendship. His absence from her life makes this even more of a reality, as Fanny's image of Jacob becomes the only sustaining element of their relationship. Without his being there, he becomes even more of an abstraction—he is no longer a living being, but rather Fanny's idealization of him. She has crafted her own Greek statue out of her ideas of Jacob to replace the person who is not there to inform her sensibilities otherwise.

Even the songs that Woolf has Jacob choose to sing echo with a certain irony in light of these ideas. At one point, during a sea trip to the Isles of Scilly, Jacob breaks out in a rendition of the hymn “Rock of Ages,” singing, “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, / Let me hide myself in thee” (*Jacob's Room* 51). While this hymn actually refers to the strength and endurance of God, when issued from Jacob's lips, it is easier to imagine him wanting to become one with the rock, rather than seek the refuge of God within it. Later, when Jacob visits Greece, Woolf arranges so that he physically enacts this literal interpretation of the hymn. At one point, “Jacob sat himself down in the quarry where the Greeks had cut marble for the theater” and, presumably, for some of their statues (*Jacob's Room* 152). It seems that this is the only solace for whatever mood Jacob is in at this time, as his friend Bonamy observes, “You couldn't make him understand a thing when he was in a mood like that. One had better leave him alone. He was dull. He was apt to be grumpy”

(*Jacob's Room* 153). Like the blocks of stone with which he seems to be most comfortable, Jacob is unmovable, incapable of understanding, and is best left to his own devices. Elsewhere, this notion of Jacob's removal from the human world is echoed. Woolf writes, "Jacob had little sense of personal association; he seldom thought of Plato or Socrates in the flesh; on the other hand his feeling for architecture was very strong; he preferred statues to pictures" (*Jacob's Room* 157-8). Even in the classical works he appreciates, he prefers to think of them as something stone and static rather than anything living and dynamic. Just as he is a fixed, unmoving representation of a human being, he believes that ancient Greek thinkers are frozen in time, just like their images in the British Museum.

Another dimension of Jacob's portrayal as a Greek statue is the idea that he is being represented as an elegy or memorial. There are hints throughout the novel of Jacob's death, and perhaps all portrayals of him are in retrospect, with the people who knew him reflecting on his impending absence. Indeed, even without the connotations of statuary, the link between Jacob Flanders and the war casualties was well established at the time the novel was published as "Flanders was a synonym for death" since "nearly a third of the million British soldiers killed in World War I lost their lives in the Flanders mud" with "the heaviest losses [. . .] among the young officers of Jacob's class" (Zwerdling 64). Jacob's last name aside, Woolf further drives this connection home in her novel when referring to a character named Jimmy who now "feeds the crows in Flanders" (*Jacob's Room* 100). With Jimmy, the foreshadowing is direct, yet with Jacob Woolf's approach is far subtler. Just as Fanny Elmer imagines Jacob as a statue in the British museum, his friend Bonamy begins to see him as a military memorial. This occurs in a moment when Bonamy hopes to get an answer to a question from Jacob concerning his love life. Woolf

writes, “As for responding, or taking the least account of it, Jacob stared straight ahead of him, fixed, monolithic—oh, very beautiful—like a British Admiral” (*Jacob's Room* 174). Indeed, in these words it is not hard to imagine Jacob as a substitute for the statue of Admiral Horatio Nelson that sits atop the column in Trafalgar Square in London. This is a war memorial with which all Londoners—and perhaps all British people—would have been familiar in Woolf's time, not to mention the present day, as well. Such a portrayal associates him with the armed forces and foreshadows his ultimate death in battle (de Gay 71). By having those who best know Jacob personify him as a statue, Woolf molds Jacob into a living war memorial in the time leading up to his death.

Indeed, the idea of memorializing war casualties was a difficult one for the British in Woolf's time. In many ways, *Jacob's Room* is Woolf's attempt at a war memorial for the generation of young men lost in the war. This memorialization is foreshadowed throughout the novel, even as the young men are attending Cambridge. Woolf writes:

Look, as they pass into service, how airily the gowns blow out, as though nothing dense and corporeal were within. What sculpted faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance. (*Jacob's Room* 30)

It is telling that these men “pass into service,” or enlist, fairly early in the novel, but by the end, they are sent out into the battlefield to be cut down. In many ways, this seems to be the only logical conclusion to such an elite training. Referring to the old Professor Huxtable at Cambridge, Woolf shows what a life spent in such pursuits will yield. When Huxtable is lost in thought, she notes, “Strange paralysis and constriction” and “marvellous illumination,” but also

that at times “you might fancy that on a pillow of stone he lay triumphant” (*Jacob's Room* 39).

Huxtable's life has lasted much longer than the young men he has mentored, but his fate remains the same—a stony representation in death thanks to the self-image his work has created for him.

Another instance Woolf's memorializing conjures images of both the metal Greek statuary that she prized, but also of a young boy's playthings, touching the memorial with a heavy dose of irony. In a stylized account of a battle, she writes:

Like blocks of tin soldiers the army covers the cornfield, moves up the hillside, stops, reels slightly this way and that, and falls flat, save that, through field-glasses, it can be seen that one or two pieces still agitate up and down like fragments of a broken matchstick. (*Jacob's Room* 164)

Far from an imposing monument, this small memorial is quite fragile, falling down in the battlefield with only a few tattered pieces remaining in the end. In her attempt to write about Jacob and to prepare her memorial, Woolf “was determined to write an honest account rather than a heroic one” (Zwerdling 66). Compared to the earlier account at Cambridge, Woolf seems to be describing the same set of men—cast identically from the same mold, devoid of solid form, and moving in unison. In this sense, in both the microcosm of the previous passages as well as her overall rendering of Jacob, Woolf has managed to strip away the sentimentality and idealization that normally goes hand-in-hand with war memorials.

Jacob's Room as an Exercise in Greek Aesthetics

While Woolf certainly establishes the idea that the character Jacob is a type of statue, this concept seems to transfer to the novel *Jacob's Room* as a whole. The same incomplete

representation that is used to describe Jacob also pertains to the novel as a whole. This facet of the work is generally attributed to Woolf's desire to create a modernist novel, which is certainly true, yet there is something larger at work that fits closely with the general themes of the novel. In fact, Woolf attempted her own Greek aesthetic exercise in crafting the text. Using many of the same techniques that formed Jacob the character, Woolf writes a novel that is at once aesthetically well-crafted, yet at the same time, utterly incomplete in its representation of the life it aims to describe. To better understand how Woolf is able to accomplish such a feat, one must look to Woolf's background in Greek culture, but also to the Imagist movement. Using Imagist principles combined with her own advances in a modern application of the Greek visual aesthetic in literature, Woolf created a novel that borrows from both schools, yet is clearly something unto itself.

Given the way that Jacob is portrayed, it is easy to imagine him as a piece of Greek statuary, yet it might not be as obvious that the novel could be the same type of creation. Still, there are hints throughout the text that point in this direction. However, one of the most important clues comes from outside of *Jacob's Room*, in Woolf's own account of the novel from the time shortly after the it was published. She wrote:

People—my friends I mean—seem agreed that it is *my* masterpiece, & the starting point for fresh adventures. Last night we dined with Roger [Fry] & I was praised wholeheartedly by him, for the first time; only he wished that a bronze body might somehow solidify beneath the gleams & lights—with which I agree.

(*Diary 2*: 214, 27 November 1922)

It is also quite intriguing that both Woolf and Roger Fry latched onto the idea of an unfinished

statue as a metaphor for the book. In truth, the fragmented nature of the novel lends itself to such a description, with glimmers of the narrative of Jacob's life emerging from the scattered representations of the book.

Upon close examination, much of the aesthetic of *Jacob's Room* also bears a great debt to the Imagist movement, which had a great impact on early modernist literature. Certainly, Woolf was familiar with the works of poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and was more than likely familiar with the works of perhaps the premier Imagist proponent, T. E. Hulme, as his works were fairly prevalent in her time. Pound later claimed that there were three guiding Imagist principles, two of which seem very relevant to Woolf's writing:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation. (Kenner 56).

At first glance, these two principles may not seem to apply to *Jacob's Room*, yet with a bit of digging, the connection is clear. For starters, every detail in the novel, no matter how abstract, is in some way a "direct treatment" of Jacob, in that everything serves to complete the full image of the young man. Every bit is a clue or insight into what Jacob sees, experiences, or learns in one form or another. Each word or idea contributes to the main idea. Such work was not unprecedented, either, as Imagist principles had found their way into novels previous to *Jacob's Room*. From Imagism emerged fiction, such as that of Dorothy Richardson, which "emphasized inclusiveness, length, and detail" (Raitt 844). While *Jacob's Room* is not as lengthy or inclusive as Richardson's work, it does lean in that direction, with its use of minute details leading to a larger overall picture.

While Woolf certainly did not follow the ideas of the Imagists to the letter (nor could she,

as the the movement was most preoccupied with poetry), her novel appears to be her own interpretation of their principles. Most importantly, the theories of Imagism help to make sense of how Woolf may have thought to construct her own work. One important concept that Woolf seems to have latched onto for *Jacob's Room* is the Imagist idea ridding the text of all extraneous material (Raitt 841). On the surface, it may not seem that Woolf spared much detail in her novel, yet it is interesting to think of all the things she does not share about Jacob in the novel, even though the book is ostensibly his biography. In this sense, the novel is free of any extraneous material, as it does not try to promote an image of a young man such as Jacob, with all dalliances and sidetracks intact, outside of Woolf's narrow focus. In fact, Woolf makes a pronouncement toward the end of the novel that sounds positively Imagistic. She writes:

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 entirely what is done. (*Jacob's Room* 162)

This statement sums up most of what Woolf accomplishes with her novel. She gives the reader a series of hints with which to make a fair assessment of Jacob without ever explicitly spelling out what it is we are to think of her character. In her Imagism-based assessment of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, Suzanne Riatt observes, “The novel is not throwing words away; rather, it is the first text ever to bring the world to life on the page. What seems to be waste turns out to be an unfamiliar manifestation of accuracy and completeness” (Raitt 847). Reading these words, it seems as if they could just as easily be applied to *Jacob's Room*. However, Woolf takes this idea in a direction that the Imagists might not have anticipated. She does not waste any words on Jacob, because part of his identity is incomplete given his early and untimely demise—

the novel thus becomes the complete representation of an incomplete individual. She tells everything there is to know about Jacob, but the reader is left understanding perfectly what is lacking in Jacob, thanks to Woolf's delicate omissions. Like a Greek statue with an unfinished back, Woolf's novel represents only what needs to be represented, or what is available to portray, and nothing else. The novel, which is to be an account of Jacob's life, is sheared off for the very simple fact that his life itself has been cut off before being given the chance to grow and mature.

Also important to Woolf's aesthetic was the Imagist concept that the literary work itself must be "treated seriously as an art object" (Brinkman 29). For the Imagists, this meant printing their poems in an aesthetically pleasing way, yet once again Woolf appears to have put her own twist on the idea. For her, text itself becomes the artwork—an incomplete Greek statue fashioned out from the words and accounts of the novel. Truly, her art object is the result of the careful placement of words, yet not in the purely spatial sense that the Imagists would have recognized. Still, like a carefully placed poem on a page, *Jacob's Room* is only able to emerge as art thanks to Woolf's strategic writing and the meticulous economy in rendering her subject matter. Her layering of aesthetic notions—placing an incomplete statue of a young man in an incomplete statue of a novel—requires just as much artistry as anything the Imagists could have accomplished through stylized page layouts.

Still, there remains another concept central to Imagism that Woolf appears to have embraced in her writing of *Jacob's Room*, perhaps even more literally than the Imagists may have intended. A central idea put forth by Imagist proponent T. E. Hulme was that so-called classic poetry had something of a concrete quality which was lacking in Romantic verse, in particular, referring to the hardness and dryness of classic poets like the Roman Horace and

Alexander Pope and the comparative “dampness” of the Romantics. As Hulme put it:

The thing has got so bad now that a poem which is all dry and hard, a properly classic poem, would not be considered poetry at all. [. . .]

The dry hardness which you get in the classics is absolutely repugnant [. . .] Poetry that isn't damp isn't poetry at all. They cannot see that accurate description is a legitimate object of verse. Verse to them always means bringing in some of the emotions that are grouped round the word infinite. (Hulme 182)

Indeed, this concept may be responsible for much of Woolf's Greek aesthetic and symbolism in the novel keeping in mind the stony representation of Jacob and the hard facts of the world around him. Zwerdling posits that Woolf avoided Jacob's inner thoughts and feelings since “such a transcript comes too close to presenting a finished product rather than a consciousness in process” and that she tried “to give him a sense of someone who remains a permanently unknown quantity” (Zwerdling 70). Truly, there is little to no insight into Jacob's emotional state, yet there is a very comprehensive representation of the type of young man that he was and the myriad influences that made him into the man that he was. There is very little hint as to Jacob's internal motivations, yet it is still possible to understand why he acts as he does, thanks to the other “dry and hard” details that Woolf provides. Indeed, nothing could be more “concrete” than a Greek statue, and Jacob's stony attributes come to define him. Still, the biggest clues about Woolf's attitude are found in her essay “On Not Knowing Greek.” Referring to Greek literature, Woolf writes:

There is a bareness and abruptness in their literature which grates upon a taste accustomed to the intricacy of and finish of printed books. We have to stretch our minds,

to grasp a whole devoid of the prettiness of detail or the emphasis of eloquence.

Accustomed to look directly and largely rather than minutely and aslant, it was safe for them to step into the thick of emotions which blind and bewilder an age like our own.

(*Collected Essays* 10)

Hulme's sentiment that modern audiences may not be primed to understand or appreciate older works seems to be reflected in Woolf's words, though she does take a kinder tone toward the Romantic notions that Hulme shuns. Similarly, much of *Jacob's Room* is devoid of the "prettiness of detail" that normally fills out a more conventional novel. Hulme's words even appear to be echoed in the thoughts of Jacob's friend, Bonamy, further reinforcing the idea of Imagism in the novel. Bonamy muses, "I like books whose virtue is all drawn together in a page or two. I like sentences that don't budge though armies cross them. I like words to be hard" (*Jacob's Room* 148). While he also acknowledges that his preference is not a popular one, it appears that Woolf was willing to take such a route in her own writing. She certainly understood that with a Greek level of restraint, along with the "hardness" and "dryness," she could better achieve her intent in portraying the incomplete young Jacob. While it also is clear that she does not fully reject the "dampness" of the Romantics, given their inclusion in the novel, for the aesthetic purposes of this novel, it became more important to align herself with the ancient Greeks.

The idea of crafting a "hard" or "dry" Greek work was really nothing new to Woolf. Indeed, the exercise of fashioning narrative or experience into Greek-style artworks even predates her first trip to Greece. In a 1906 letter to Violet Dickinson she commented, "There is a Greek austerity about my life, which is beautiful and might go straight into a bas relief" (*Letters*

1: 221, 16 April 1906). It is telling that Woolf, a budding writer, would imagine her life as a piece of Greek visual art, rather than in prose. Even after her trip to Greece, she still regards her writing in such terms. In another letter to Dickinson, she wrote, “I try to hammer out an article [. . .]; something fantastic about Greece, but it won't come smooth” (*Letters 1*: 295, 26? November 1906). Clearly, there was something special to her about the idea of art and emotion permanently rendered in hard monumental stone or metal—but only as it pertains to Greek experience or Greek aesthetics. Furthermore, she selects a typical kind of ancient Greek artwork as the proper medium for representing her life, rather than any more modern format. She does not imagine her life as something more abstract or modern, such as an impressionist painting, for example. To link with Imagist principles, such works would reflect a more “damp” aesthetic and lack the concrete clarity of Greek works. Given the later innovations that Woolf would bring to modernist literature, this look to the past tells a great deal about where Woolf's passions were rooted.

Unlike the Imagists, Woolf sees the potential of Romantic poems and incorporates some of their aesthetic into her work, as well. Indeed, Greek culture was embraced by the Romantics and later by other British people and there seems to be a kind of a diffusion this type of Greek aesthetic into Woolf's writing. In fact, there seems to be some of the same coldness and impersonal nature in *Jacob's Room* that Woolf observes in the writing of the Romantics. Writing about Keats in 1906, Woolf observed that this works had “no d—d humanity” and noted, “I like cool Greek Gods, and amber skies, and shadow running like water, and his great palpable words—symbols for immaterial things” (*Letters 1*: 273, 30? December 1906). Clearly, Woolf does not see the same “dampness” in Keats' poetry that other Imagists might, instead seeing far more concrete imagery. Reading *Jacob's Room* it is easy to see how Woolf also creates a portrait

that is in many ways devoid of humanity and represents something that is no longer part of the material world, as it is no longer living. Just as the figure on Keats' Grecian urn represents someone who is long gone, yet remains fixed in a permanent state of seeming motion (Wall 318), *Jacob's Room* represents a life that has passed, yet it still echoes in the hearts and minds of those who encountered it. At the end of the novel, even as Jacob's quarters seem frozen in time, the world outside continues in a mad frenzy, once again echoing what had occurred earlier in the novel. In short, the world keeps spinning, even without Jacob in it. Woolf writes:

Pickford's van swung down the street. The omnibuses were locked together at Mudie's corner. Engines throbbed, and carters, jamming the brakes down, pulled their horses sharp up. A harsh and unhappy voice cried something unintelligible. And then suddenly all the leaves seemed to raise themselves. (*Jacob's Room* 186).

Jacob's apartment has become a sort of shrine, forming the image of the young man out of fragments, now that his physical body is no longer there to define his life. The details of Jacob's life remain concrete, even though he is no longer a part of the world. In this sense, the novel itself is a shrine like Jacob's apartment. Everything in it is fixed and unmoving, as the events it portrays are all in the past, yet the world still moves on.

The idea of elegy figures into Woolf's overall aesthetic, as well, as this concept helps to explain the reason for crafting the novel in the style of Greek statue. In very simple terms, how does one represent something that no longer exists? Of course, memorial statues are one way to accomplish such representation, but Woolf demonstrates that the same can be achieved through writing. Kathleen Wall argues that the portrayal of Jacob is elegiac because by the time the novel is constructed, he is an individual that is already "beyond representation" and he is "that which is

no longer there to represent” (Wall 318). This interpretation does account for much of the way Jacob is described, yet there is another key reason why he is depicted as he is. Jacob is not entirely beyond representation, since people still recall details about him and his life. Still, the ways in which he can now be represented are now more limited since he is no longer there to serve as a model, as it were. His life is now based on the fragmented memories of those who may (or may not) have known him very well. Like the statue without its back, this version of Jacob is comprised of the only available perspectives. The final chapter of the book demonstrates this, as Jacob's life is suddenly defined by all of the ephemeral items in his former apartment, while he is conspicuously absent from the scene. What is left behind is perhaps the front of the Greek statue—the purely physical ephemera of a life lived—and what is gone, along with Jacob, is all of the detail that could have filled in the back of the statue with the full details of the young man. Importantly, the chapter repeats various items and elements that appeared in the novel previously, emphasizing that Jacob is no longer shares space with any of them. In fact, the book closes with Jacob's mother bringing out a pair of his old shoes and asking, “What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?” (*Jacob's Room* 187). Another poignant image is that of an empty chair, which first appeared during the portion of the novel concerning Jacob's college experience. Woolf writes, “One fibre of a wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there” (*Jacob's Room* 186). Just as the Parthenon stands as an empty husk without the statue of Athena there to inhabit it, Jacob's apartment becomes an abandoned space without Jacob there to occupy it and use the many items he left behind. In the same way, the novel is devoid of its defining feature—its main character—and is defined by his absence. The Parthenon, Jacob's apartment, and the novel itself are all empty husks for lost monuments.

Ultimately, Woolf was able to accomplish a great deal within the pages of *Jacob's Room*. To start, she was able to offer a critique of the male-centered educational system that had shut her out. More importantly, the novel allowed Woolf to explore ideas surrounding Greek language and culture, which were her favorite areas of study and the biggest source of regret when taking stock of what she had been unable to master in her own education. However, Woolf decided to carry the idea of Greek culture even further by making both *Jacob's Room* and its main character exercises in a Greek aesthetic. In particular, both the novel and the man become stylized versions of Greek statuary by utilizing the same aesthetic principles that define their ancient stone counterparts.

With all of its elements taken as a whole, *Jacob's Room* can be viewed as Virginia Woolf's homage to the ancient Greek culture which she loved so well. By demonstrating just how pervasive it is and what kind of power it has, even in the hands of someone who does not fully comprehend it, she reinforces just how important it is to herself and others. Still, Woolf manages to prove the relevance of Greek culture even further, by turning her main character into a piece of Greek art and doing the same with her novel as a whole. By incorporating and reinterpreting the tenets of Imagism, Woolf is able to craft a novel that is simultaneously modern, yet still indebted to the works of ancient Greece. Unlike her character Jacob, who is unable to properly interpret or do anything practical with his Greek knowledge, Woolf brings the ancient works into the modern world and reinvigorates them. She channels their power into her own writing and demonstrates what they are still capable of doing.

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