

“Silence Laps Smooth Over Sound:” Sound, Gender, and War, in *Jacob’s Room*

In Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf argues that women’s perceived inferiority is essential to all violent and heroic action (36). Her 1922 novel, *Jacob’s Room*, carefully reinforces her argument by portraying the cultural assumption of women as mercurial and frivolous in stark contrast to orderly, militaristic men. Men are continually associated with scholarship and action, while women are rarely able to articulate a coherent thought and are continually reduced to items of fashionable clothing. Kate Flint, in her article “Revising *Jacob’s Room*,” has argued that through revisions, Woolf came to structure the novel around general perceptions of the differences between men and women. Flint’s argument that such differences are in regard to values and opportunities, as well as attitudes, which were “crucial to the maintenance of the dominant ideology of a society which was capable of sending ‘young men in the prime of life’ off to their death on battlefields or under the sea” (362) draws on Woolf’s own conjecture from *A Room of One’s Own* that women serve as looking-glasses for men, reflecting their figure at twice its size. Woolf contends that this mirror effect is necessary to all violence; if women were not inferior to men, then the image in the looking glass would shrink. “How,” she asks, “is he to go on giving judgment, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?” (36). What is striking – and haunting – in Woolf’s novel, is the use of sound to shape the argument that devaluing females and what is perceived to be femininity leads to a masculine society, which operates on militaristic ideals of power and structure that lead to violence. Woolf uses sound in *Jacob’s Room* to reinforce gender inequality, align Jacob with his inevitable death in war, and reinforce the idea that hyper-masculinity sustained a society that was able to dehumanize an entire generation of young men so much so that it was capable of

sacrificing them. Essentially, by the end of the novel an entire generation of young men have become victims of the society that privileged them; their own authority has silenced them. By aligning certain sounds in the novel with masculinity and militarism, Woolf has recreated a stronger sense of her own prediction that the silencing of women (through exclusion from politics and education), would lead to violence, and ultimately, the silencing of an entire generation of men as well.

In the first three chapters, Woolf begins to use sound in order to evoke the inevitability of Jacob's death, as well as the privilege of the male voice over the female. In the first scene of the novel, Jacob is missing: "Ja – cob! Ja – cob!" shouted Archer The voice had an extraordinary sadness. Pure from all body, pure from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking against rocks – so it sounded." (3). Archer's cry for Jacob introduces several ideas. First, "the extraordinary sadness" links Jacob with grief and foreshadows his untimely death by portraying him as already lost. Second, Archer's voice, "pure from all body, pure from all passion" suggests that there isn't anything corporeal or distinctive about Archer and it suggests the dehumanization of young men who will be sent to war. Archer's cry that goes "unanswered, breaking against rocks" suggests that no one is there to respond or even receive the voices of the young man, which implies an inevitability that both young men, although they have already been associated with shouting (a forceful, abrupt sound - like gunfire) will become anonymous and silenced despite the privilege and authority of their shouting voices. Furthermore, the sounds of a storm at sea add to the anxious, gnawing feeling that the boys will be lost to some chaotic circumstance. "A single leaf tapped hurriedly, persistently upon the glass. There was a hurricane out at sea." The persistent, methodical tapping of the leaf contrasted with the turmoil of the hurricane is analogous to the structure of marching in the military contrasted

with the chaos and destruction of war. Furthermore, the tapping of the leaf while the boys are asleep adds to the sense that their time is running out – there is a hurricane at sea and war in their future. In Chapter Two, Woolf reinforces the inevitability of Archer and Jacob’s deaths, “Sounding at the same moment as the bell, her son’s voice mixed life and death inextricably, exhilaratingly.” (10).

Woolf begins to demonstrate the cultural assumptions about gender in the first few chapters by privileging the male voice over the female voice; the first step in her argument that male domination and female subordination leads to violence. The value of the male voice over the female voice becomes apparent in the development of Captain Barfoot. Chapter Two begins with conversation among the ladies of Scarborough: “‘Mrs. Flanders’ – ‘Poor Betty Flanders’ – ‘Dear Betty’ – ‘She’s very attractive still’ – ‘Odd she don’t marry again!’ ‘There’s Captain Barfoot to be sure – calls every Wednesday as regular as clockwork, and never brings his wife.’” (9). From the beginning of the chapter, Woolf depicts the cultural assumptions that women are vacuous gossips. She thus characterizes women by the sounds of chatter, gossip, and sighs. The sound of female conversation itself reflects the subject matter: their conversation is inane and the sound of it, empty noise. Their conversation is like birds chattering; they cut one another off and interject unfinished thoughts, because no single woman demands any authority. Woolf accomplishes the portrayal of the feminine stereotype with dashes that indicate rapid interjections not well formed before they are spoken. In contrast, male conversation is thoughtful, intentional, and authoritative. Mr. Dickens even reports the time commandingly: “he took out his great silver watch and told her the time very obligingly as if he knew a great deal more about the time and everything than she did.” (21). Mr. Dickens code-switches to a feminine “chat” with Mrs. Barfoot only when it is in the service of Captain Barfoot; since it is in the

service of another man, he seems to gain pride and power from it: “He liked to think that while he chatted with Mrs. Barfoot on the front, he helped the Captain on his way to Mrs. Flanders. He, a man, was in charge of Mrs. Barfoot, a woman.” (21). Because Mr. Dickens is in charge of Mrs. Barfoot, he gains a sense of authority from being with her, despite the fact that the conversation is womanly and mundane: “She would ask him questions – who people were – who now kept Mr. Jones’s shop – then about the season – and had Mrs. Dickens tried, whatever it might be – the words issuing from her lips like crumbs of dry biscuit.” (20). Mrs. Barfoot’s speech is valued as much by Mr. Dickens as the crumbs of dry biscuit. Mrs. Jarvis, too, is characterized by her womanly speech; she struggles to find the words to express herself, “heaving a sigh, [she] thinks to herself, ‘If only someone could give me . . . If I could give someone . . .’ But she does not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it her.” (22). When Mrs. Jarvis interacts with Captain Barfoot, the degree to which men and women are supposedly different becomes clearer: “Women would have felt, ‘Here is law. Here is order. Therefore we must cherish this man.’” (23). “‘Yet I have a soul,’ Mrs. Jarvis would bethink her, as Captain Barfoot suddenly blew his nose in a great red bandanna handkerchief, ‘and it’s the man’s stupidity that’s the cause of this, and the storm’s my storm as well as his’” (23). In this statement, Mrs. Jarvis sums up the pacifist, proto-feminist sentiments from Virginia Woolf’s other writings, such as *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One’s Own*, in which she blames the devaluing of women and institutions like Oxford and Cambridge for breeding heroism and violence while leaving women to negotiate the aftermath of masculine/militaristic ambition¹.

In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf advises, “you must consider very carefully before you begin to rebuild your college what is the aim of education, what kind of society, what kind of

¹ For more on this, see: Briggs, Julia. *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2006.

human being it should seek to produce . . . I will only send you a guinea with which to rebuild your college if you can satisfy me that you will use it to produce the kind of society, the kind of people that will help to prevent war.” (33). She continues: “it must be an experimental college, an adventurous college . . . which does not hoard dust and perpetrate traditions. Do not have chapels. Do not have museums and libraries with chained books and first editions under glass cases . . . Next, what should be taught in the new college, the poor college? Not the arts of dominating other people; not the arts of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital.” As Woolf has observed, the marshaling of young men into mindless, militaristic roles begins at exclusive institutions like Cambridge. In *Jacob’s Room*, she has made this point plain in the first sense of Cambridge: the sounds of boots marching into procession. “What sculptured faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance . . . inside the Chapel was all orderly. Gravely sounded the voices; wisely the organ replied, as if buttressing human faith with the assent of the elements.” (27). Woolf makes it clear that these young men will become war heroes if Cambridge succeeds at its aim. The young men have *sculptured* faces evocative of the silent, deathly statues that will come to memorialize these very men at St. Paul’s cathedral after the war. The description of the young men entering Cambridge, though, reduces them to their blank faces and great boots; they’ve already attained the anonymity necessary to make them pawns for war. The procession itself is representative of the kind of linear thinking necessary to move men to go to war mindlessly. It’s the type of thinking that Woolf discourages in *Three Guineas*: “[the poor college] should teach the arts of human intercourse; the arts of understanding other people’s lives and minds . . . it should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to cooperate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life.” (34). The aim of the poor

college that Woolf describes as an ideal institution that aims to produce a society against war is in opposition to what is described as Cambridge in *Jacob's Room*. The men in the procession at Cambridge have been reduced to boots and sculptured faces; there is no combination of mind and body. These men are just bodies and their boots ring out with certainty, authority, and dominance, which are only illusions passed to them from tradition and taught to them by the institutions that will silence any individualism. In the noise of many marching boots, the individual himself is silenced; he becomes anonymous – the first step to dehumanizing him enough to make him soldier.

To Woolf, it seems that Cambridge itself, in its exclusiveness, its orderliness, and its tradition, institutes the cultural knowledge that maintains a society eager to go to war. In *Jacob's Room*, institutions like Cambridge give young men a false sense of certainty and assuredness that trains them for war. Tradition, maintained by the sounds of the academy, fosters the male ego so much so that young men are made to feel self-important, nationalistic, and heroic. The consecrated walls, lights, and hallways of Cambridge imbue a feeling of importance and tradition and the sounds of Cambridge reiterate it, “The stroke of the clock even was muffled; as if intoned by somebody reverent from a pulpit; as if generations of learned men heard the last hour go rolling through their ranks and issued it, already smooth and time-worn, with their blessing, for the use of the living.” (10). At the university, even the noise of the clock is magisterial and militaristic, as if the authority of men controls it. The notion that a sound as universal as the stroke of clock could reinforce superiority and authority points to the problem of the militarization of the academy discussed by Flint. The artificial sanctity of Cambridge breeds pride, self-importance, and nationalism - that ultimately encourage war. Eventually, it becomes implied (as suggested by this passage in *Jacob's Room*) that the time belongs to the young men

and that if they were not there to hear it, the clock would be of no use to the rest of the living. It's to this aspect of entitlement and control steeping from tradition that Woolf admonishes in *Three Guineas* as the university's encouraging militarism and war. Even the sound of Jacob's footsteps echo the authority given to him through Cambridge, "being the only man who walked at that moment back to his rooms, his footsteps rang out, his figure loomed large. Back from the Chapel, back from the Hall, back from the Library, came the sounds of his footsteps, as if the old stone echoed with magisterial authority: "The young man – the young man – the young man – back to his rooms." (42). In one passage, Woolf captures the idealization and romance of "the young man," as well as the orderliness and structure of the university, maintained in the institutions that she warns hoard dust and perpetuate tradition in *Three Guineas*.

In Eileen Barrett's essay, "Indecency: *Jacob's Room*, Modernist Homosexuality, and the Culture of War" she examines the implications of Jacob's essay, entitled "The Ethics of Indecency," that was challenged by Professor Bulteel. Barrett argues that Jacob's essay on the ethics of indecency illustrates the repressed and untold stories of Edwardian male homosexuality, which challenged the ideas of masculinity (170) that Woolf believed cultivated militarization and war. Susan C. Harris contends that the academy refuses to publish Jacob's essay in order to "conceal from itself and from outsiders the redirection of sexual desire on which its continued dominance depends." (Harris 432). The passage in question reads, "even as Jacob copied his pages, he knew that no one would ever print them; and sure enough back they came from the *Fortnightly*, the *Contemporary*, the *Nineteenth Century* – when Jacob threw them into the black wooden box where he kept his mother's letters, his old flannel trousers, and a note or two with the Cornish postmark. The lid shut upon the truth. This black wooden box, upon which his name was still legible in white paint, stood between the long windows of the sitting room." (67). I

would argue along with Harris and Barrett, that the significance of Jacob's essay being shut in the black wooden box undoubtedly has to do with the fact that it challenged the ideas of masculinity that were important in maintaining the structure and lineal thinking of the academy that successfully marshaled the young men into war. Additionally, the black wooden box ultimately signifies not only Jacob's corporeal death, but also his silencing. In the holograph draft of the novel, the black wooden box also conceals "a great many photographs of ~~young men~~" (Woolf 2010, 79). The black wooden box, with the lid shut upon the truth, also signifies the silencing of other young men at the hands of a masculine, militaristic society. Barrett argues that the photographs of the young men represent "the generation of Cambridge lovers who will be lost in the war," which also supports the idea that Jacob's wooden box contains the challenges to society that are silenced in order to maintain a culture in which a generation of young men would be sent to die in war. It's also interesting that Woolf has marked out "young men," effectually silencing herself and censoring the "indecent" of her own writing in the same way that Jacob's professor has silenced him.

It isn't only the academy that pushes people forward linearly, however. The noises of commerce and the street convey the same urge; their rhythm and monotony are militaristic in their push for progress. The tenacity of commerce in reaching its ends is violent in its disregard for the individual and successful in distracting the individual from the violence done to him. "The incessant commerce of banks, laboratories, chancelleries, and houses of business, are the strokes which oar the world forward . . . And they are dealt by men as smoothly sculptured as the impassive policeman at Ludgate Circus . . . his face is stiff from force of will, and lean from keeping it so. When his right arm rises, all the force in his veins flows straight from shoulder to finger-tips; not an ounce is diverted into sudden impulses, sentimental regrets, wire-drawn

distinctions. The buses punctually stop.” (157). The policeman, who represents the individual-turned-placeholder, has been silenced- literally, his thoughts and voice are drowned out by “the incessant commerce.” One can imagine this incessant, nondescript hum of many noises of business that deadens individual sounds. Society has turned even the policeman into a soldier; his face is sculptured as the faces of Cambridge and the faces of the statues of war heroes at St. Paul’s. The policeman is both a victim of the militaristic culture that has silenced him and stamped out individuality, but he also enforces and perpetuates it. At the movement of his arm, buses punctually stop - giving him a false sense of certainty and control over the system that actually controls him, just as the young men at Cambridge believe in their own agency while in reality, they are being marshaled forward mindlessly. Nowhere is the culmination of militaristic thinking and structure into violence and heroism more apparent or more poignant than in the following passage:

“The battleships ray out over the North Sea, keeping their stations accurately apart. At a given signal all the guns are trained on a target which (the master gunner counts the seconds, watch in hand – at the sixth he looks up) flames into splinters. With equal nonchalance a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together.” (157).

At Cambridge, there was only the illusion that time was issued by learned men; now, the clock has been silenced and it’s the master gunner who has usurped the authority of the watch and replaced it with his own voice in order to command destruction. Like boots marching methodically forward, the sound of the master gunner’s voice expresses inevitability of and urgency toward volume and then silence. The counting of the seconds, the explosion of the

target, and the silence that follows explosion mirrors the experience of the generation of young men sent to die in war: their marching boots and the incessant hum of commerce first drowns out their own voices and critical thoughts, building up to and pushing them toward a final eruption of violence and sound in the form of war and guns, until afterwards, they meet the real, haunting silence of death.

In fact, just before the narrator reveals that Jacob has been killed by war, his mother is haunted by the sounds of distant, but approaching gunfire,

“The sound spread itself flat and then went tunneling with fitful explosions among the channels of the islands . . . ‘The guns?’ said Betty Flanders, half asleep, getting out of bed and going to the window, which was decorated with a fringe of dark leaves . . . Again, far away, she heard the dull sounds, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets. There was Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country.” (178).

The use of sound to intensify the feeling of the inevitability of violence is compelling. As Mrs. Jarvis observed in an earlier chapter, “it’s the man’s stupidity that’s the cause of this, and the storm’s my storm as well as his.” (23), Betty Flanders has to fight her own version of the war in coping with the violence and prospect of losing her sons. The image of her looking from a window fringed with leaves is in fact evocative of a trench camouflaged for battle. In order to cope with “the storm,” Betty Flanders appropriates the noise of the gunfire to a more domestic noise: the sound of nocturnal women beating carpets. Nevertheless, in the following chapter, Betty Flanders is faced with the telling silence of Jacob’s empty room.

The end of the novel presents the silence of Jacob’s room in contrasted with the incessant noises of commerce outside, “Engines throbbed, and carters, jamming the brakes down, pulled their horses sharp up. A harsh and unhappy voice cried something unintelligible.” (179). The

world continues to move forward despite the deathly silence of the young man, confirming the notion of the young man as anonymous and not heroic. The only voice is unintelligible; it has been silenced by machinery and action – masculine power. The looking glass from *A Room of One's Own*, then, has not been shattered by the war, but continues to enlarge the self-conceptions of masculinity. The world moves on, manly and militarily as before, despite the deaths of Jacob's generation of young men, implying that until femininity is valued for something other than the reflection from which masculinity gains self-importance, militarism, violence, and heroism will drive society forward.

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