People Come Together in a Room: Space, Intimacy, and the Narratology of *Jacob’s Room*

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Jacob’s Room is a rambling, redundant affair, in which the commonplace details and motives of ordinary people are divided and subdivided until they form a series of atoms, and the author’s speculations upon these atoms have the volubility of conversation in a drawing-room.

—Maxwell Bodenheim (222)

So writes the critic Maxwell Bodenheim in “Underneath the Paint in Jacob’s Room,” a brutal review of Virginia Woolf’s novel, published in 1922. Bodenheim was not alone in this specific disdain for Jacob’s Room, as critics and scholars have echoed the same condemnation for over a century: the failure of the titular character to fully materialize. Another critic derided the novel as “so full of parentheses and suppressions, so tedious in its rediscoveries of the obvious, and so marred by its occasional lapses into indelicacy” that he “found great difficulty in discovering what it was all about”; still another warned, “no true novel can be built out of a mere accumulation of these notebook entries” (214).1 Woolf had understood the risk she was taking in her experimentation with form, even in the earliest stages of the design of Jacob’s Room. In 1920, she writes in her diary, “My doubt is how far it will enclose the human heart—Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding, scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist” (Diary 13). This lack of scaffolding is what prompts much of the critical distress surrounding the novel. However, in Woolf’s rejection of traditional narrative structures in Jacob’s Room, the novel is not entirely without form, as many critics have complained; in her early drafts, Woolf names the symbolic nexus that will ultimately

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1 The first quotation is from Lewis Bettany’s “Middle Aged Sensualists,” originally published in Daily News (October 27, 1922); the second is from an anonymous review originally published in Pall Mall Gazette (October 27, 1922); both reviews were reprinted in Suzanne Raitt, ed., Jacob’s Room, (New York: Norton, 2007).
unify the text: “Let us suppose that the Room will hold it together. Intensity of life compared with immobility. Experiences. To change style at will” (Holograph 1). With this declaration at hand, we realize that the key to understanding the novel’s free-floating complexity is embedded in its very title: the “Room” holds Jacob’s Room together, and proper comprehension of the novel’s engagement with architectural space is vital to understanding the text as a whole.

I submit that the novel’s lack of “scaffolding” is not a fault of its construction, but the very element that makes the transmission of its message possible. Throughout this essay, I will demonstrate how architectural space emerges as the symbolic language through which Woolf makes her commentary on the ontological distance that separate people from one another in the novel: rooms, walls, windows, and doors become metaphors for the boundaries that both protect and deny the establishment of intimacy between people, and ultimately inhibit one’s full understanding of another person. Woolf also demonstrates this theme on a narratological level by employing a narrator whose frequent refusal or inability to depict Jacob’s interior state emphasizes the impossibility of unfettered access to a given person; as I move through Jacob’s development, I will track the moments in which the narrator struggles to follow Jacob into his room or into other significant spaces. These instances often occur at times when the characters themselves grapple with their fundamental inability to understand each other; the narrator’s difficulty therefore sharpens the novel’s picture of the limitations of intimate knowledge of the self and other.

Sexuality is another manifestation of the theme of interpersonal access in Jacob’s Room. As sexuality is typically a private, interior aspect of being, Jacob’s ambiguous sexual orientation becomes another facet of his unknowability. Jacob is shown to be in continuous flux between adherence to heteronormative expectations and willful experimentation with fellow members of the all-male academy; the novel’s
examination of Jacob’s amorphous orientation explores concepts of the public vs. the private—and the doubly-private world of closeted gay desire. I will focus on two women, Florinda and Sandra Wentworth Williams, whose relationships with Jacob most visibly highlight his struggle with stereotypical notions of masculinity and dominance within heterosexual relationships. In regards to Jacob’s experimentation with men, the aesthetics of classical Greece are a significant motif in the novel: the narrator uncovers its use as the medium through which male-male affection is communicated within the academy and disguised from outside view. The final movement finds Jacob traveling in Greece and becomes the novel’s thematic symphony: all questions of space, ontology, intimacy, sexuality, and authorial access are brought to a head during Jacob’s inward contemplation abroad. And finally, Jacob’s sudden death shortly after his trip to Greece reifies his unknowability, as the text concludes with countless unanswered questions about his character—but this is the success of *Jacob’s Room* overall: the novel stands as a document of the unresolved, empty spaces that exist between author and character, character and reader, and all people from each other.
I. The First Universe: Jacob’s Foundational Concepts of Intimacy and Spatial Security

That a novel so thoroughly concerned with rooms and interior spaces begins outdoors should not be overlooked. Jacob’s Room opens with a panorama of a beachside scene in Cornwall, where Jacob’s mother is penning a letter while a young Jacob and his brother Archer play along the shore. The widowed Mrs. Flanders is brought to tears as she writes to her faraway lover Captain Barfoot, thinking to herself, “Scarborough is seven hundred miles from Cornwall: Captain Barfoot is in Scarborough: [her deceased husband] Seabrook is dead” (3). This emphasis on spatial proximity, on the distances that separate self and other, later emerges as the text’s foremost consideration; as the novel examines the ontological strictures that obstruct our full access to other people, images of spatial distance—as well as spatial boundaries, such as walls, windows, and doors—form the language through which this distinct ontology is expressed. The narrative perspective is momentarily handed over to an onlooker, Mrs. Jarvis, who watches the crying Mrs. Flanders and thinks to herself that “marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields, picking up stones, gleaning a few golden straws” and that widows are “lonely, unprotected, poor creatures” (3). Already, we see intimacy and security rendered through architectural images; without the protection of the domestic fortress, one is left to wander and to collect only small, meaningless objects and experiences. Mrs. Flanders lacks the symbolic fortress of domestic partnership on one level, but we later see that the physical home she has created for her children—Jacob’s earliest model for domestic safety—is marked by a similar insecurity. However, before we are shown this home, we must first understand the importance of the fact that Jacob is originally introduced to us away from it.
The psychoanalyst Gaston Bachelard’s 1958 treatise *The Poetics of Space*, introduces the concept of “topoanalysis,” which Bachelard defines as “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives” (Bachelard 30). Bachelard’s topoanalytic theories provide an extremely valuable framework with which to understand Jacob’s childhood home—and the significance of his displacement from it in the opening scene. Bachelard exalts the childhood home as a site of almost religious importance:

> The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind...Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world. Before he is ‘cast into the world’...man is laid in the cradle of the house. (29)

In this light, the narratological choice to “cast” Jacob away from his childhood home in the opening scene—as well as to emphasize this lack of security by situating the scene on the shifting sands and continuously undulating currents of the seaside—causes Jacob to emerge into the text as a person without anchor, without security, without stasis. The foundational lack of a secure home-space to which he can safely return engenders in Jacob an unceasing inclination to flee, to travel, and to escape. Throughout the opening scene, Jacob’s brother Archer calls out to him time and again, with no response. Jacob’s elusiveness for the rest of the novel is thus a trait intrinsic to his being, ingrained in his characterization since the formative years of his childhood; never has Jacob responded to the call of his name, nor does he ever come to complete rest throughout the story. The entire novel itself is a continuous call out to Jacob, a narratological effort to bring his character into full view—one that is demonstrated to be categorically futile.
The scene in which we directly see Jacob for the first time is distinctly surrealistic, incorporating dreamlike images that ambiguously suggest both sexuality and death. Jacob is playing on large boulders on the edge of the shore when he finds a soft-shell crab emerging from a crevice in a rock. We later find that he traps the crab in the bucket that he is holding, but he is first interrupted, having stumbled upon “an enormous man and woman...stretched motionless, with their heads on pocket-handkerchiefs, side by side, within a few feet of the sea.” This flash of interrupted intimacy, found in a space where implied romantic or sexual intimacy would not typically occur, is a startling, formative moment in Jacob’s early consciousness. Jacob flees away from the couple towards what he thinks is his nanny (“a large black woman”) sitting further down the shore—but he has mistaken a giant rock for the woman-figure. This oedipal interchange of the mother-figure and the rock is significant in that confuses Jacob: whereas rocks typically emblematize stasis and security, Jacob is frightened by the perceptual realization that what he expected to be his caretaker is, in reality, a lifeless rock, “covered with the seaweed which pops when it is pressed.” At this moment, he realizes “he was lost,” and is then confronted with a symbol whose shadow will linger over the rest of his life: “He saw a whole skull—perhaps a cow’s skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it. Sobbing, but absent-mindedly, he ran farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms” (5). The mechanics of motion in this passage require close observation: Jacob is not frightened by the skull, as he was by the “enormous man and woman” or the mother-rock figure, and does not run away from it; rather, he runs “until” he holds the skull. After fleeing symbols of domestic security—the man-and-woman couple, and the maternal caretaker figure—Jacob has run towards the death symbol, effectively embracing it in his arms. This is where the psychosexual importance of this scene lies. The startling discovery of the man and woman lying together is Jacob’s first encounter with hetero-romantic
intimacy within the text—and set next to the scene’s other discoveries, the crab and the skull, Jacob’s future experiences of heterosexual intimacy in the novel are already primed to be intermixed with images of death, decay, and loss. The early distortions of Jacob’s concept of domestic security are only more apparent once we step into his rickety childhood home.

The Bachelardian home is the “cradle” in which one is laid; it is also “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world” (Bachelard 26). Yet Jacob’s “first universe,” the home in which we find him sleeping after the beach scene, is not the cradle of protection and domestic comfort that Bachelard describes here. The bedroom that Jacob shares with Archer is dimly lit, phantasmagoric, shadowy, unsettling; in fact, it does not even securely enclose its interior space, and allows for the outside environment to encroach upon its interior, configuring a dreamlike atmosphere similar to that of the beach scene: wind from the outdoors “stirred the cloth on the chest of drawers,” and the parted window curtain “let in a little light, so that the sharp edge of the chest of drawers was visible, running straight up, until a white shape bulged out; a silver streak showed in the looking glass” (8). The surrealistic ambience here can be viewed as a window into Jacob’s misshapen unconscious, accessed while he dreams—an extension of the dream sequence that commenced on the beach. Bachelard delineates this sort of psychospatial experience of the childhood home, writing, “[One] experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thoughts and dreams” (Bachelard 26). We see that Jacob’s childhood home is unsound on both the physical and virtual levels. Physically, the home is not a fully enclosing, watertight space; it “seemed full of gurgling and rushing; the cistern overflowing,” with “water bubbling and squeaking and running along the pipes and streaming down the windows.” In restless half-sleep, Archer asks his mother, “What’s all that water rushing in?” and she assures him that it is only the sound of the bath
water draining (7). The lack of secure enclosure here—the home’s failure to serve as the boundary between the indoors and the outside—is an early thematic iteration of the insecurities that Jacob will later experience in his adult relationships, wherein the rooms that he comes to inhabit fail to protect the intimacy that they enclose from dissolution.

On a virtual level, the architectural flimsiness of Jacob’s childhood home is reflected in the absence of the socially-stable “fortress” of parental marriage, and the empty space left open by his missing father. Bachelard understands the childhood psychological encounter with the home-space as one that provides a person with a lens through which all future experiences of space are refracted, as “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.” A properly constructed and secure home is thus a facet integral to the healthy maturation of the psyche, which seeks to continuously generate a sense of shelter, even in places that are actually unsound; Bachelard writes, “the imagination functions in this direction [towards home] whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter,” and with a sturdy foundational concept of the home-space ingrained during early childhood, the mind can later “build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows,” and “comfort itself with the illusion of protection,” wherever one goes, creating a sense of safety and secure ontological identity in spaces where these notions are challenged (27). The young Jacob does not have such a formative model of domestic security that he can later carry with him as he matures, and is thus permitted to become attached to the death symbol that he has brought home into his interior, unconscious space: “the sheep’s jaw with the big yellow teeth in it lay at his feet” while he sleeps—and death is further inlaid into Jacob’s early psychic development (8). Because he lacks the foundational concept of a secure home-space—and carries one that is instead so thoroughly confused with images of death—
Jacob is later left to wheel between the desire to build secure spaces with others and a disgusted aversion to total enclosure.

The thematic engagement with enclosure here is especially interesting when compared to the symbol of the crab trapped in Jacob’s bucket. We watch as the “the opal-shelled crab slowly circled round the bottom, trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side; trying again and falling back, and trying again and again” (9). The symbolic implications of the crab are manifold. The crab itself is trapped within the spatial confines of the bucket, but its anatomical features engender a different sort of entrapment, as well; Bachelard believes “everything about a creature that comes out of a shell is dialectical,” and “since it does not come out entirely, the part that comes out contradicts the part that remains inside…The creature’s rear parts remain imprisoned in the solid geometrical forms.” The crab in the bucket thus becomes doubly enclosed, denied access to the external world by its entrapment in the bucket, but also physically restrained by the nature of its being. There is always a part of the crab that is contained or hidden, because to uncover this part—by removing its shell—would cause its death. Bachelard reads shelled creatures as “half fish, half flesh,” but also “half dead, half alive, and, in extreme cases, half stone, half man” (128). If the crab in the bucket is a symbol that encodes Jacob’s relationship to space, life, and death, then Jacob himself is also doubly entrapped. The “bucket” in which Jacob exists is the one in which we all exist—a physical reality that is constructed by the fundamental ontological separations of self from other, and of self from space. But the self is further restricted from the outside world (and from other people) by its own nature: we are all “shelled” beings, with interior lives that are permanently shielded from the view of others. To destroy the shells that hold these aspects of the self together as a coherent unit would naturally entail death, as there would no longer be any boundary between the self and its
surroundings. Jacob experiences such a death. Bachelard identifies an “obvious dynamism” in the behavior of shelled creatures, writing, “a creature that hides and ‘withdraws into its shell’ is preparing a ‘way out’…By staying in the motionless of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds, of being’ (131). These are precisely the motions that Jacob follows throughout the relationships of his adult life: Jacob is at certain times hidden, at rest, out of view, withdrawn; at others, he is impulsive, fiery, inconsolable. The arc of this flux can be traced along the various relationships that Jacob enters into with other people, but indeed, Jacob’s “preparation” for a “way out” of his shell abruptly concludes in a true explosion: the explosion of a military shell on the battlegrounds of war that causes his death.

Throughout *Jacob’s Room*, the Woolfian narrator contends with the novelistic tendency to remove the shell of a given character to examine what it contains, but is repeatedly confronted with the ontological impossibility of such an act. The distinction of *Jacob’s Room* lies in the fact that it seeks to create a portrait of a human being who is even further removed from ontological knowability because of his sudden and premature death. We will see that the text contains a myriad of unanswered questions about Jacob’s nature—his personality and sexuality, his tastes and vulnerabilities—and while Woolf casts these questions as fundamentally unanswerable, the reader is still left to wonder what more we could have known had Jacob not been obliterated from the text, and from reality, so abruptly. If Jacob (as well as a whole generation of young men) had not died so prematurely and had lived, for example, into old age, would we be any closer to answering these questions? At the conclusion of the opening sequence, it is early in Jacob’s life yet, but Woolf has already begun to establish a distinct perspective on the nature of intimacy with other people. And by situating this investigation within the symbolic language of architectural space, Woolf has uncovered the symbolic damages dealt to Jacob’s early consciousness that
will come to affect the rest of his life. As he moves into young adulthood, we see just these effects at play in his various relationships with men and women, but before we can begin to analyze the relationships between Jacob and his friends and lovers, we must understand a different sort of relationship—the relationship between Jacob and the narrator. As she is responsible for organizing, augmenting, and presenting to the reader *all* of the interpersonal relationships within the textual world of the novel, the narrator’s struggle with authorial access to her characters is of special importance.

II. Ten Years’ Seniority and a Difference of Sex:
   The Narrator of *Jacob’s Room*

The rooms at Cambridge, where Jacob spends much of his young adult life, are the symbolic nodes around which Woolf concentrates her commentary on the nature of being and the knowledge of other people. During Jacob’s train journey as he moves from home to Cambridge, the narrator emphasizes this knowledge as tenuous, nearly impossible, and thus before we even enter Jacob’s room we are primed with a narrative perspective that is in constant search of a stable understanding of self and other. Looking upon Jacob sitting in a train car with a stranger, the narrator muses, “Nobody sees anyone as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves.” Here we see the perception of one’s self installed as an integral facet of the perception of the other; however, the interspersion of personal identification and social perception would naturally give rise to complications if the social relationships were to falter—which is exactly what Jacob encounters repeatedly throughout the failed relationships of his adult life.

The majority of our narrative contact with Jacob is delivered via the thoughts and conversations that other people have about him; he is thus subject to a host of personal projections that these other people generate and then append to him. This is
part of how the novel demonstrates the futility of “true” or holistic knowledge of a given person: if our view of a person is the amalgamation of many other people’s projections, then it is categorically impossible to understand the person detached from these projections. However, one of the most significant textual features of the novel is that Woolf extends this ontological inability to fully understand other people to apply to her narrator: just as the characters in *Jacob’s Room* struggle to know each other, the Woolfian narrator must grapple with the same ontological restrictions that attend the literary process of depicting these characters. “It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done,” the narrator concedes, and indeed, for much of the novel, Jacob is continuously shown to be unknowable even on a textual level, remaining out of the narrator’s reach (22).

Linda Martin’s reading of *Jacob’s Room* situates this effect within the larger literary applications of the “theory of mind,” a term introduced in 1978 by the psychologists Premack and Woodruff that refers to “the constellation of cognitive skills that allow humans to conceive that other people have minds, mental lives, and independent belief systems, and to use this knowledge to engage with others and predict behavior” (Martin 178). Martin argues that Woolf employs purposeful “mind-blocking” techniques in her characterization of Jacob, wherein Woolf “teases readers with textual cues that tempt us to draw premature conclusions about Jacob’s character” before later providing conflicting or paradoxical information that prevents us from assembling a proper conception of Jacob’s interiority (182). Martin believes that because “glimpses into Jacob’s interiority are so infrequent, scattered, and incomplete” that “broad assessments about Jacob’s mind and character cannot definitively be made...[and] recognizing this fact is vital to understanding Woolf’s method” (183). Martin’s reading is certainly astute, but it perhaps imbues the character of the narrator with an excess of intentionality; while there are many moments where the narrator
provides information that conflicts with her previous statements, it appears less likely that she is actively intending to “mind-block” or deceive readers than she is merely experiencing the same phenomenon apparent throughout the text that the other characters experience, as well: the impossibility of full and infallible ontological knowledge of other people.

Barry Morgenstern, in “The Self-Conscious Narrator in Jacob’s Room,” understands the text as composed of “two plots,” which are “Jacob’s growth and death” and “the narrator’s learning about him.” Morgenstern argues that the narrator’s learning about Jacob is part and parcel of the full comprehension of Jacob’s own plotline—and the text as a whole—because “[the narrator’s] way of viewing the world in general affects her perceptions and her confidences to us and, therefore, is a large part of our understanding of Jacob” (Morgenstern 353). Morgenstern’s argument is significant in that much of the criticism of Jacob’s Room neglects to consider the narrator as an active participant in the text, one who is struggling to know Jacob just as the other characters and we as readers are. I submit that the most important aspect of the narrator’s “self-conscious” status—as it is the aspect to which she repeatedly returns during moments of narrative confusion regarding Jacob—is her awareness of her and Jacob’s difference in gender. The narrator frequently stresses what she perceives as a divide between men and women, believing it to be a significant factor in the difficulty in establishing intimacy between one person and another. When she sees Jacob watch Florinda walk down a street with another man, the narrator writes of herself, “Whether we know what was in [Jacob’s] mind is another question. Granted ten years’ seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first; this is swallowed up by a desire to help” (74). We see here that the narrator perceives the limitations of her narratological power to be predicated, in part, on the fact that Jacob is a man and she is an older woman—and that her wariness of Jacob is overridden by an almost
maternal impulse to comfort him. The confusion in the narrator’s own approach to depicting Jacob complicates the reader’s ability to understand him, and we are left with an acute awareness of the ontological limitations that inhibit our access to other people.

At another point, the narrator concedes Jacob’s fundamental unknowability, writing, “There remains something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself,” though “part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy,” with whom Jacob is freely conversing. We see that the narrator understands that her powers as a novelist cannot subsume Jacob’s own autonomy in communicating his own interiority, but that this communication is, notably, more easily practiced between Jacob and Bonamy, a man. She then recognizes that in some way, Bonamy possesses easier access to Jacob’s inner self, asking the reader to “consider the effect of sex—how between man and woman it hands wavy, tremulous, so that here’s a valley, there’s a peak, when in truth, perhaps, all’s as flat as my hand” (56). Thus, while the narrator grasps that gender does not actually create a “valley” between men and women, she nonetheless experiences difficulty in her authorial access to Jacob due to her status as a woman. On the level of the novel’s other characters, the differences between heterosexual and male-male forms of intimacy is a theme that the narrator uncovers in Jacob’s friendships with other men at Cambridge and in his various affairs with women; we will see that Woolf’s use of the symbolic language of architectural space visualizes the differences in interpersonal access between men and women, and men and other men. Through her intentional symbolic play with the notion of the room-as-person—and the shared occupation of spaces as ontological closeness between people—Woolf increases the novel’s overarching success in transmitting its own distinct ontology.

III. The Queer Academy: Jacob at Cambridge and at Sea
That our first view into Jacob’s room at Cambridge shows it to be empty configures a crucial dynamic that propels Jacob’s growth forward through the novel. The interplay between emptiness and fullness moves beneath the entirety of the text in constant flux, and the architectural spaces therein—the empty room versus the inhabited room—reflect the modulating levels of intimacy that Jacob establishes with other characters. During our first view into Jacob’s room, the narrator writes, “Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there” (29). The listlessness here implies a lack, and the emphasis on the absence of a person in the chair points precisely to what is missing—a person to fill the space and endow it with ontological presence. The primary instantiation of Jacob’s room as empty makes this the default: Jacob’s room is always something to be filled, and Jacob himself is always something to be potentially filled, as well, with the intimacy engendered by his relationships with other people. Over the course of the novel, Jacob will bring a series of men and women into his room who temporarily endow it with fullness, but the insurmountable distance that divides the self from full knowledge of the other will necessarily return the room and Jacob to emptiness, before permanently rendering them both void. We begin with this deficit here and end with it on the final page; Jacob’s empty room encloses us on either side of the text. Understanding the moments of intimacy that swell in between is vital to the total appreciation of the novel’s overall concept of the boundaries between self and other.

We see such a striking moment of intimacy rather early in the novel, and the encounter with Simeon in the third chapter materializes a peak of intimacy that Jacob never recaptures again. Jacob and his Cambridge colleagues carouse well into the night before the group leaves Jacob and Simeon alone in Simeon’s room. Their exit reflects one of the ways that the novel conceptualizes intimacy between men as extraordinarily
powerful, but fragile and impermanent: as they leave the room, “the shape they had made, whether by argument or not, the spiritual shape, hard yet ephemeral, as of glass compared with the dark stone of the Chapel, was dashed to splinters, young men rising from chairs and sofa corners, buzzing and barging about the room, one driving another against the bedroom door, which giving way, in they fell” (34). The appearance of this “spiritual shape,” forged by a cluster of men in the distinctly male-only space of the Cambridge academy, introduces one of the most crucial elements of the novel’s exploration of different forms of intimacy: the homoeroticism of male-male relationships within the academy and the paradox of its existence.

Susan Harris transposes Eve Sedgwick’s reading of The Picture of Dorian Gray onto the thematic implications of academic homoeroticism in Jacob’s Room; to Harris, Sedgwick’s “Victorian cult of Greece” largely informs Jacob’s experience of Cambridge, in which its all-male culture “simultaneously promotes, requires, and denies homosexual desire within the academy” through its fixation on ancient Greek aesthetics (Harris 432). Sedgwick understands Victorian academia’s obsession with “statues of nude young men,” as the means by which male-academic culture “gently, unpointedly, and unexclusively positioned male flesh and muscle...[as] the subject or object of unphobic enjoyment” (Sedgwick 136). While Greek classicism becomes the aesthetic medium through which members of the academy can express “unphobic” love for the male form, Sedgwick recognizes that the academy also has homophobia and gay panic “so deeply at [its] heart” that it simultaneously reinforces the “homophobic prohibition” of openly gay desire (138).

That the culture of the male academy is paradoxically both the engine and the censor of desire between men forces much of the homoerotic content of Jacob’s Room to be sublimated into the intellectual discussions of Greek classicism that Jacob has with his Cambridge colleagues. At one point, Jacob and Timmy Durrant walk down a
street while discussing Greek philosophy, and feel “boastful, triumphant; it seemed to both that they had read every book in the world; known every sin, passion, and joy.” So as Jacob and Durrant see “civilizations stood round them like flowers ready for picking,” they “decided in favor of Greece.” Jacob sighs to Durrant, “Probably...we are the only people in the world who knew what the Greeks meant,” which amplifies the sense that the enjoyment of this intimacy is privileged to only these male members of the academy (59).

It is clear that the elevation of Greek classicism as the ultimate aesthetic functions primarily as a mask for the expression of Sedgwick’s “unphobic” homoerotic desire throughout Jacob’s Room; the narrator notes, “A strange thing...this love of Greek, flourishing in such obscurity, distorted, discouraged, yet leaping out, all of a sudden, especially on leaving crowded rooms” (60). The characterization of the cult of Greece as both discouraged and “leaping out” is another signal of its paradoxical existence, as is the emphasis on its secrecy and privacy—enjoyed only after “leaving crowded rooms.” The narrator further identifies the fetishism of Greece as a façade after revealing that Jacob, in fact, “knew no more Greek than served him to stumble through a play” and “of ancient history he knew nothing.” The sense of intimacy with Durrant configured by their discussion of classicism regardless allows Jacob to imagine that their walk in London is “making the flagstones ring on the road to the Acropolis,” because “the whole sentiment of Athens was entirely after his heart; free, venturesome, high-spirited” (60). This transportive moment prefigures Jacob’s later vacation in Greece—where Jacob’s inward self-exploration reaches its apex—but we will later find that his actual experience of Greece runs contrary to how he had fashioned it in his imagination.

The erotic power of Greek classicism therefore informs the symbolism of the earlier scene with the roughhousing men in Simeon’s room. After their exit, Jacob and
Simeon are left alone, and the room settles into stillness as Jacob’s mind drifts to elliptical thoughts concerning Julian the Apostate, the ancient Greek emperor and philosopher. Jacob hears Simeon murmur, “Somehow it seems to matter…” and then begins to feel an “intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly,” before rising to stand behind Simeon’s chair (34). Jacob implicitly communicates his desire for Simeon by expressing it in terms of intellectual appreciation for him, saying, “Well, you seem to have studied the subject,” and then the scene slips into a markedly erotic mode, full of liquid images:

He balanced himself, he swayed a little. He appeared extraordinarily happy, as if his pleasure would brim and spill down the sides if Simeon spoke.

Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing. But intimacy—the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. Without need of movement or speech it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the lustre of a pearl…. (35)

Kristina Groover considers Woolf’s language in this scene to “render friendship a sacred mystery” and to show a “transfiguration of academic argument into an ecstatic state that transcends language” (Groover 51). While Groover is right to track the scene’s “idealization of male friendship…as nurtured by intellectual intimacy,” Groover has in some ways fallen for the disguise that the homosocial world of Victorian academia designed to mask itself from onlookers. With Sedgwick’s reading of the academic fetishization of Greece in mind, it is necessary to extend the explication of this scene’s ejaculatory imagery beyond mere “male friendship” and recognize its obviously queer codification for what it is (54).
In the span of seven paragraphs, the symbols used to represent intimacy among males in the scene transform considerably. The roughhousing of the group of friends creates an image of simultaneous solidity and fragility: something “hard yet ephemeral,” a glass shape that is shattered by the group when they hit the bedroom door. The ephemerality of the academy’s expressions of homoeroticism is its defining characteristic—and the fleetingness of these moments is the product of the culture’s encouragement of male-male desire on the condition that it does not tip over into overt, lasting displays of homosexuality. This is why the glassy, “spiritual” shape that the group had created is broken once they breach the boundaries of the interior space by falling through the bedroom door: the “shape,” or public expression of their affection, seems to shatter and return to nothingness once they are out of view. However, we see next what replaces this shape when such men are behind closed doors.

Set alongside the splintery glass shape made by the group, the images of Jacob and Simeon’s private intimacy are contrastingly fluid: Jacob can almost feel his “pleasure…brim and spill down the sides,” and he can sense that the room is full of “intimacy” that is “still, deep, like a pool” (35). Jacob’s stance over and behind Simeon further suggests sexual positioning, and the fact that the pool that washes over Jacob’s mind is pearl-colored plays with seminal associations. This is expressly a point of climax, but one that is necessarily silent—“without need of movement or speech”—and it occurs only within Jacob’s mind because its outward physical manifestation is proscribed by the academy. The tacit embarrassment of the moment is evident in the curt, staccato sentences that describe Jacob’s quick departure from the room: “[Jacob] murmured good-night. He went out into the court. He buttoned his jacket across his chest. He went back to his rooms, and being the only man who walked at that moment back to his rooms, his footsteps rang out, his figure loomed large” (35). In the aftermath of symbolic coitus, Jacob is metaphorically redressing and quietly exiting, as
if he had been caught up in the intensity of this forbidden exchange with Simeon and had been temporarily afloat in a tide of intimacy. From Simeon’s room Jacob walks directly to his own room, which has remained empty up to this point, and the narrator emphasizes this return to isolation with the sounds that follow Jacob on his walk back: “Back from the Chapel, back from the Hall, back from the Library, came the sound 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’” (35). Echoes are products of empty space, and are ephemeral themselves; in this moment, it is the sensation of intimacy that echoes away from Jacob with every step from Simeon’s room, dissipating in the empty space of the abandoned city streets.

These illustrations of Jacob’s sexuality are valuable assets in the analysis of the novel’s overarching concept of ontological access. Sexuality itself is typically a private, interior aspect of human consciousness that is only expressed within the confines of private space; but the homosexual dynamics of the novel are, in fact, doubly private, as they are not afforded a public space in society at all. Rather, they often only euphemistically exist in the “closet”—a private space within the private space of the room. In this light, Jacob’s ambiguous orientation becomes another aspect of his unknowability, and in the novel’s overarching philosophy of being, sexuality becomes another facet of the human that is inscrutable to other people.

However, in _Jacob’s Room_, there exist spaces in which Jacob is free to test, exercise, and reshape the various ambiguities of his identity. Alexandra DeLuise identifies Jacob as “presumably bisexual,” and argues that Jacob engages in heterosexual dynamics “primarily during parties, in public places, or in his London flat,” while Jacob’s homosexual encounters occur either “within the private, intellectual spaces of his male counterparts, such as Simeon’s rooms at Cambridge or Richard Bonamy’s rooms at Lincoln’s Inn” or “in the natural world—for example,
drifting on the Cam in a rowboat or walking on Haverstock Hill at night,” as in the outdoors, the characters enjoy a sense of freedom away from the prying gaze of society (DeLuise 66). DeLuise’s assertion is a succinct and accurate distillation of the connection between the outdoors and transgressive sexual exploration as evident in the novel; I would also argue that water-spaces are particularly significant for Jacob, as their natural flow is an apt metaphor for the liminal, fluctuating shifts in identity that Jacob experiences within them.

Such an aquatic scene occurs shortly after the climactic moment in Simeon’s room: Jacob and Timmy Durrant are traveling by boat to Durrant’s family home in the Scilly Isles, and the dynamic between the two men swings between masculine rivalry and homoeroticism. Timmy Durrant, whose “[navigational] calculations had worked perfectly,” is transformed into a masculine figurehead at the bow of the boat, where he sits “with his hand on the tiller, rosy gilled, with a sprout of beard, looking sternly at the stars, then at a compass, spelling out quite correctly his page of the eternal lesson-book.... ” Durrant’s appeal here is noticeably enwrapped in notions of Greco-classical masculinity, as it is Durrant’s ability to guide the boat with precision and confidence—in addition to his physique—that is striking to the narrator, who looks on and thinks, “really the sight of him…would have moved a woman.” The narrator then makes a point to draw out Jacob’s confusion of appeal and distaste that permeates the scene: “Jacob, of course, was not a woman. The sight of Timmy Durrant was no sight for him, nothing to set against the sky and worship; far from it. They had quarreled.” Jacob sits in begrudging silence, annoyed by Durant’s prowess and miffed by the petty arguments that the pair had during the trip, including “the right way to open a tin of beef” (35). But Jacob is most irritated by the fact that “Timmy knew where [the passing ships] were bound, what their cargoes were…the name of their line, and even guess what dividends it paid its shareholders.” There is therefore a marked
sense of masculine envy that Jacob directs at Durrant, but in the liminal space of the shifting sea, this envy is susceptible to transformation. After a period of silence, Jacob begins “to unbutton his clothes” and sit “naked, save for his shirt, intending, apparently, to bathe.” Jacob’s shift from jealousy to homoerotic vulnerability is, on one level, visible in the shedding of his clothes and his open nakedness in front of Durrant, but it is also reflected in the shifting coloration of the surrounding environment. The narrator writes of the ocean water: “The Scilly Isles were turning bluish; and suddenly blue, purple and green flushed the sea; left it grey; struck a stripe which vanished;” and when Jacob begins to bathe, “a broad purple mark appeared [in the water], like a bruise; or there floated an entire emerald tinged with yellow” (36). These kaleidoscopic images are a signature of Woolf’s, as she is a writer renowned for her painterly abilities; here her use of color-shift symbolizes the interior shift that Jacob experiences as he is immersed in the waves, where his envy is washed into a new state of peaceful comfort with his male companion. Thus, once Jacob resurfaces, the tense silence between the pair is broken and they sit happy together once again, Jacob naked in the sun.

The fact that the cycling through these states of identity occurs while at sea—a liminal space between fixed landmasses—is crucial to the text’s overarching engagement with space and personal identity. The undulation of the waves is a perfect symbolic vehicle for Jacob’s continuously ebbing embodiments of different modes of masculinity and relationship styles, and Jacob is free to experiment with various attitudes towards himself and an intimate relationship. However, just as in the opening beach scene, in which Jacob’s self-awakening is intermixed with images of loss and decay, so too is the liminal passage here darkened by the presence of death. Jacob and Durrant sight the shores of the Scilly Isles in the distance: “The mainland, not so very far off—you could see clefts in the cliffs, white cottages, smoke going up....as if the end of the world had come, and cabbage fields and stone walls, and coast-guard stations,
and, above all, the white sand bays with the waves breaking unseen by any one, rose to
heaven in a kind of ecstasy” (36). This passage, with its mention of “the end of the
world,” acknowledges the looming presence of death over Jacob’s life, clouding over
him during the moments in which he is symbolically vulnerable, in flux between states
of being. We also see that “the cottage smoke droops, has the look of a mourning
emblem, a flag floating its caress over a grave. The gulls, making their broad flight and
then riding at peace, seem to mark the grave” (37). Jacob’s grave has been preemptively
marked; his constant motion, his unceasing flux, will indeed eventually end
altogether—on the battlegrounds of World War I.

The narrator herself questions why this sense of death looms so closely as the
boat drifts towards land, noticing that “the Cornish hills have stark chimneys standing
on them; and, somehow or other, loveliness is infernally sad.” Looking more closely,
the narrator understands that it is the “chimneys and the coast-guard stations and the
little bays with waves breaking unseen by anyone [that] make one remember the
overpowering sorrow,” but she wonders, “What can this sorrow be?” (37). The
narrator’s own answer to this question reveals a wealth of information regarding the
text’s philosophical perspective on the constructs of human existence. She solemnly
declares, “[The sorrow] is brewed by the earth itself. It comes from the houses on the
coast. We start transparent and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of
glass. To escape is vain” (37). This phobia of enclosure, the overwhelming fear of being
trapped in a space from which there is no escape, harkens back to the image of the crab
in the bucket from the opening chapter. The “sorrow” emanates from earth, from the
fact of our existence at all; consciousness itself only operates within the confines
constructed by a “space” of life enclosed by the boundary of death. Looking backwards
at history through “our pane of glass” is possible, but to escape the construct of
existence itself—without crossing over into death—is “vain,” and patently impossible.
Moments in this passage also exemplify the narratological technique with which the narrator examines the space that divides author from character, reader from character, and more largely, one person from another. Immediately after her dramatic declaration, the narrator hedges: “But whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob’s gloom as he sat naked, in the sun, looking at the Land’s End, it is impossible to say; for he never spoke a word” (37). This is indeed a confession of the limits of the stock one can take in another without mutual communication, but it is also an admission of the authorial tendency towards invention. We as readers do not know if this concept of inescapability truly derives from Jacob’s consciousness, if it is a worldview to which he even subscribes—or if it is rather a judgment that the narrator, or Woolf, or the text itself has transposed onto the character of Jacob. Jacob is therefore an empty space in a textual sense, one to be filled by the descriptions, conclusions, and inventions of other people—whether they are other characters, authors, or readers. Much of our readerly perceptions of Jacob are only granted through the eyes and voices of characters who interact with him, or think about him independently; as such, it is impossible to stably understand the composition of Jacob’s consciousness, because the traditional authority of an objective, third-person narrator is patently absent from this novel. Instead we are given a hesitant, noncommittal, vacillating narrator who frequently cannot decide whether to “follow” Jacob to various scenes at all.

With the introduction of the character of Richard Bonamy, the narrator starts to become increasingly aware of the limitations of her authorial access to Jacob, as Bonamy establishes an intimacy with him that, at times, appears more penetrative than her own. The scene in which Bonamy is introduced, where Jacob and the Durrant family are attending an opera together, magnifies the issues that have plagued the narrator’s attempts to properly depict Jacob’s character. After effusive details about
the opera’s set and props, the history of *Tristan and Isolde*, and various attendees in the audience, the narrator experiences a point of sensory overload when she looks onto the crowd—“two thousand hearts in semi-darkness”—and feels that “the observer is choked with observations” (52). The narrator uncovers a spatial system that mitigates this phenomenon, one that seems to have been constructed organically by society: “Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself; stalls, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery.” Even though the stratification accomplished by these spatial boundaries makes the parsing of different sets of people easier, as when they are arranged in boxes, “there is no need to distinguish details,” the issue of personal alignment still stands: “the difficulty remains—one has to choose [where to sit].” This question is wholly connected to concepts of intimacy; as we watch the narrator imagine sitting next to the Queen of England, where she would “hear the Prime Minister’s gossip” or “the countess whisper, and share her memories of halls and gardens,” the narrator suggests that entering one of the demarcated spaces would precipitate an intimate connection with the other people there. This is another iteration of the novel’s theme of spatial proximity and interpersonal intimacy: while the boundaries of space separate groups of people from others, they simultaneously enclose their constituent members, creating seemingly intimate in-groups. However, because the narrator realizes that “never was there a harsher necessity…or one that entails greater pain, more certain disaster” than to choose a seat among the opera boxes, we see that it is not sufficient to merely be classed into a group. The narrator solemnly declares, “wherever I seat myself, I die in exile” (53). Just as in the boat scene, the prospect of intimacy is here eclipsed by the looming inevitability of death, which nullifies the spatial boundaries constructed by society that allow for the perception of belonging to intimate groups. In this passage, Woolf continues to demonstrate a distinct narrative
picture of the limits of intimacy’s power within the larger construct of the human experience: to the narrator, the perception of intimacy makes life feel meaningful, but it is not enough to prevent the ultimate dissolution wrought by death, which is an individual, “exiled” event. The search for intimacy with other people may indeed be the task of the human experience, but the results of this experience are of no consequence—and the prospect of “true” or total intimacy remains illusory—as death destroys the individual alone.

That Jacob is shown to resist any sort of stratification within the opera-box metaphor furthers his characterization as unknowable. After the opera, Mrs. Durrant speaks to her family about Jacob in private, struggling to find the words to describe him: “‘Distinction’—Mrs. Durrant said that Jacob Flanders was ‘distinguished-looking…Extremely awkward…but so distinguished-looking.’” The narrator agrees with Mrs. Durrant: ‘Distinction was one of the words to use naturally, though, from looking at him, one would have found it difficult to say which seat in the opera house was his, stalls, gallery, or dress circle. There was something in the shape of his hands…which indicated taste. Then his mouth—but surely, of all futile occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?” (55). Even with society’s systems of interpersonal organization at hand, we see that Jacob still falls outside of those boundaries and defies classification. This again bolsters Jacob’s characterization as anomalous in his relationship to space, but the passage also speaks to the ways in which any sort of all-encompassing summary of a given person is ultimately futile, whether attempted by a narrator or by any other person.

The character of Richard Bonamy reinforces Jacob’s complex inscrutability, as Bonamy is simultaneously shown to possess a singular intimacy with Jacob, while also being baffled by Jacob’s personality. The fundamental arc of Bonamy’s and Jacob’s relationship is a silent, one-sided love affair, in which Bonamy’s love for Jacob becomes
increasingly uncomfortable to Jacob in the last third of the story and is ultimately unrequited and re-closeted after Jacob returns from Greece. When Bonamy is introduced, as well as in two other moments in the text, the narrator uses a covert marker to designate his gayness that has been overlooked by the extant body of the novel’s criticism: he is repeatedly referred to as “the young man with the Wellington nose” (53). This is likely a reference to Gerald Wellesley, 7th Duke of Wellington, who had a noticeably large, hooked nose. Wellesley is now thought to have been a closeted homosexual, one who reluctantly entered an unhappy marriage with Dorothy Violet Ashton in 1914. Later, in 1920, Dorothy Wellesley became the lover of Vita Sackville-West, noted romantic partner of Virginia Woolf (Hassett 185). The physical alignment between Bonamy and the Duke of Wellington is thus a marker lifted from Woolf’s own life, used to effectively yet silently indicate his sexual orientation. The symbolic import of Bonamy’s crooked nose is further evident later in the story, when he jealously imagines Jacob falling in love with a “straight-nosed” woman while traveling in Greece.

Even more visibly than with Timmy Durrant, the academic fixation on ancient Greece is the foundational apparatus with which Bonamy and Jacob communicate their affection for each other. The pair’s mutual affection is immediately apparent upon their first meeting: having spotted Jacob at the opera, Bonamy later knocks at Jacob’s door at midnight, exclaiming, “By Jove! You’re the very man I want!” (53). The homoerotic subtext of this statement is confirmed by the content of their ensuing discussion—the poetry of Virgil and Lucretius—and the two men establish their relationship through the medium of Greek classicism. The expression of intimacy via academic appreciation is also evident when Bonamy listens to Jacob read an unfinished essay and heartily commends him; Jacob is “excited,” as “it was the first time he had read his essay aloud” (54). This is vulnerability of an academic sort on its surface, but
bearing in mind the novel’s consistent use of academia as the language of homoerotic affection, it is the incipient moment of the pair’s queer courtship in its subtext.

Bonamy’s seemingly easy and immediate access to Jacob leads the narrator to muse upon her own struggle to establish intimacy with Jacob. She concedes, “There remains something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy—the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history.” The intimacy that the two men share is thus predicated in part on spatial proximity: it is Bonamy’s physical presence in the room that engenders the closeness that the narrator perceives she lacks. However, as I previously mentioned in Section II, it is also “the effect of sex,” or an apparent divide between men and women, that prevents her from establishing the immediacy she desires with Jacob. The narrator conceives of gender relationships using the language of spatial and topological division: “between man and woman [the effect of sex] hangs wavy, tremulous, so that here’s a valley, there’s a peak....” However, even as these irregular fissures seems to exist between men and women and, at times, obstruct intimate access between them, the narrator hedges, wondering if “in truth, perhaps, all’s as flat as [her] hand” (56). Her consideration that the issue of gender is perhaps null when attempting to understand the divisions between people reinforces the notion that such divisions are fundamentally ingrained in the nature of all human consciousness, irrespective of gender. The passage also reiterates that the impulse to achieve closeness with other people, despite those divisions, is an intrinsic aspect of being, and therefore the guiding impulse of the novelist. Thus, while “even the exact words get the wrong accent on them”—or a person may misjudge their concept of another—there is “something [that] is always impelling one to hum vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all” (57).
This moment is another recapitulation of the novel’s philosophy: though full understanding of another person is impossible, it is yet our natural inclination to construct a sense of knowledge of other people, even if this entails creating fictions that fill the empty spaces where we lack such knowledge. *Jacob’s Room* emphasizes this fact in reverse, by employing a narrator who frequently declines to provide crucial pieces of invented narrative information, and instead leaves the empty spaces within Jacob’s character agape and painfully apparent. In doing so, the novel stimulates the insecurity we as readers feel when these spaces are not filled for us—and ultimately demonstrates that these are the very spaces that divide all people from each other.

IV. Cloisters, Classics, Confusion: Jacob’s Affair with Florinda

While Jacob’s love of ancient Greece and his affection for his male colleagues may seem, at this point in the novel, perhaps the only immutable qualities that a reader can ascribe to such a variable character, we find that Jacob’s affinity for the male-centric world of academia is more complex than a straightforward enthusiasm. As the novel moves into its first pithy representation of Jacob’s engagement with heterosexual dynamics—his affair with Florinda, the prostitute—we watch Jacob contend with aspects of his personality that he had previously championed, such as his love for the homosocial culture of the academy, while attempting to embody a stereotypical, heteronormative masculinity in his relationship to women. Florinda’s ambiguous characterization allows for this sort of experimentation as Jacob is able to construct his own self-serving concept of her, and thereby configure a dynamic between them in which his sense of masculine dominance is reinforced. Jacob’s experimentations with different modes of sexual self-identification complicate our ability to securely
understand his character, and thus the incongruence between these modes becomes a significant manifestation of his overall unknowability.

From the moment of her introduction, Florinda is repeatedly emphasized as “brainless” and vapid. The narrator’s choice to render Florinda’s lack of intelligence with language centered around emptiness is an extension of the novel’s thematic comparison of people to spatial enclosures; Florinda’s lack of interiority is precisely what permits Jacob to imbue her with his own self-serving projection of who she is in relation to him. When we first see her in the middle of a frantic Guy Fawkes celebration, the narrator accentuates her emptiness with several strong images: her face appears “fresh and vivid as though painted in yellow and red,” evoking a painted mask; in the firelight, Florinda “seemed to have no body,” and instead becomes a disembodied shape in front of a void: “the oval of [her] face and hair hung beside the fire with a dark vacuum for background” (57). Harris argues that in this description of Florinda, the reader “is allowed to see only the surface, the reflecting veneer,” and that the “narrator acknowledges that what [she] grasps is a shell, not substance” (Harris 424). It is interesting to compare Florinda’s association here with shells and shelled creatures to the crab in the bucket from the opening scene; whereas the crab’s symbolic import resonated in the notion of accessing a person’s protected, hidden interior, the images of Florinda here do not even indicate that there is substance to be found beneath her “shell” at all. Instead, she is only a spectral, disembodied oval, floating in the “vacuum” of negative space as an empty container. Florinda is therefore susceptible to be filled by the projections of other people—even more so than Jacob, who has also been the repository of other characters’ projections. In his affair with Florinda, Jacob reverses the projective process that has been continuously applied to him, redirecting it towards Florinda and fashioning her into someone of his own making.
Florinda’s intentional obfuscation of her own backstory—a tactic she uses in her prostitution to transform herself into the subject of a given client’s desires—allows Jacob to deceive himself in his conceptualization of her. As Florinda “talked more about virginity than women mostly do,” and alternately “had lost it only the night before, or cherished it beyond the heart in her breast, according to the man she talked to,” Jacob is therefore free to construe her as the stereotypically virginal, feminine counterpart in their dyad, which fortifies Jacob’s sense of masculinity: “Jacob took her word for it that she was chaste…Wild and frail beautiful she looked, and thus the women of the Greeks were, Jacob thought; and this was life; and himself a man and Florinda chaste” (61). This moment reflects the effort Jacob makes to locate Florinda within his beloved world of Greek aesthetics—one that ultimately proves to be futile.

As much as Jacob insists to himself that “this is life” and that his situation is resolved, his consideration of Florinda against the academic culture of Greek classicism—with its emphasis on intellectuality—comes to be the very reason his relationship with her is untenable. Florinda’s lack of intelligence is subject to brutal mockery by the narrator, who describes her as “horribly brainless” and “as ignorant as an owl” (62–63). In Jacob’s attempt to shoehorn Florinda into his notion of the classical ideal, Florinda fails to provide the sense of intellectual excitement that he so cherishes with his male companions. The narrator writes, “The problem is insoluble. The body is harnessed to a brain. Beauty goes hand in hand with stupidity.” Jacob therefore cannot ignore his physical attraction to Florinda, but he also cannot reconcile her lack of intellectual stimulation within that attraction. Looking at her, he feels a “violent reversion towards male society, cloistered rooms, and the works of the classics”—a desire to return or revert to the natural ease of the homosocial world of academia, in which the rooms of his colleagues are sites of comfort, intellectual excitement, and homoerotic affection. At the same time, Jacob also feels “ready to turn with wrath upon
whoever it was who had fashioned life thus”—unconsciously cursing the culture of the academy that has paradoxically instilled in Jacob the need for intellectualism in all of his intimate relationships but required that this intellectualism be shared between men. This is why, though Jacob’s “body” desires Florinda, it is harnessed to a “brain” that is repulsed by Florinda’s idiocy. So, as Jacob looks upon Florinda, he sees that she is “straight and beautiful in body” with “her face like a shell within its cap,” but her physical appeal is irreconcilable with the homosocial intellectual standards that the academy has conditioned in him, and he realizes “cloisters and classics are no use whatsoever” in his relationship to her (64).

Jacob’s patent incompatibility with Florinda is cemented shortly thereafter. With the evaporation of Florinda’s physical appeal—which Jacob has directly connected to her chastity—Florinda becomes useless to Jacob’s attempts to assert the heteronormative masculinity that he wishes to embody. After Jacob sees Florinda “turning up Greek Street upon another man’s arm,” the illusion of her chastity—one half of the assertion that “Florinda was chaste and [Jacob] himself a man”—vanishes; Jacob then breaks communication with her and never sees her again (74). Ironically, Florinda deserts Jacob by walking down an avenue that bears the very name of Jacob’s aesthetic ideal—and as her spatial displacement away from Jacob increases, the prospect of her fitting into that ideal moves further out of reach.

Meanwhile, the narrator looks on the scene with pity and vicarious embarrassment for the jilted Jacob. She scrambles to determine Jacob’s interior emotional state but recognizes the possibility of such knowledge is tenuous, because “whether we know what was in his mind is another question” (74). This question is part of the narrator’s continuous confrontation with the limits of her authorial access to Jacob, and we see that mixed in with notions of spatial privacy versus publicity in regards to intimacy. The narrator watches Jacob leave the scene, and self-righteously
declares, “As for following him back to his rooms, no—that we won’t do.” For a moment, the reader is caught off-guard: the straightforward decision by the narrator to deny the reader’s access to Jacob at an important emotional juncture is momentarily arresting. But in the very next breath, the narrator reneges—“Yet that, of course, is precisely what one does”—and we follow Jacob into his room (75). The narrator describes the journey that the mind takes to enter Jacob’s room, configuring a distinct picture of the nature of exterior space:

The march that the mind keeps beneath the windows of others is queer enough. Now distracted by brown paneling; now by a fern in a pot; here improvising a few phrases to dance with the barrel-organ; again snatching a detached gaiety from a drunken man; then altogether absorbed by words the poor shout across the street at each other (so outright, so lusty)—yet all the while having for a center, for magnet, a young man alone in his room.

(75)

We see here that the process of entering someone’s room—or representatively, entering someone’s mind—is a highly erratic and sensory experience, involving numerous environmental distractions that barrage the mind as it moves from the interior stasis of its own consciousness into the liminality of the outdoors. The guiding impulse is the force of the “magnet” of the young man in the room, whose hidden interiority draws the interests of other people—but we see that this magnetism is what complicates the understanding of Jacob as an individual independent of these external interests.

The next time that Jacob reenters his room, the narrator notes, “he seemed to bring back with him into the empty room ten or eleven people whom he had not known when he set out” (89). Jacob’s magnetism and his attraction of other people’s
curiosity is one of his definitive qualities, but its mechanism is in fact paradoxical: if Jacob’s central mode of being is as a magnet for the essences of other people, then his interior is obscured by the accumulation of these projections. This is a large part of what makes Jacob so difficult to understand intimately, and is the crux of the text as a whole. To know Jacob isn’t to know Jacob alone, but to perceive the sum of the thoughts and opinions that other people have projected onto him. *Jacob’s Room* is in search of the clear ontological picture of the person that lies beneath these projections, and the narrator suggests that this search is the essence of human experience:

> Shawled women carry babies with purple eyelids; boys stand at street corners; girls look across the road—rude illustrations, pictures in a book whose pages we turn over and over as if we should last find what we look for. Every face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square is a picture feverishly turned—in search of what? It is the same with books. What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning the pages—oh, here is Jacob’s room. (77)

This moment is the centerpiece of the novel and a declaration of its narratological raison d’etre. The search for intimacy and knowledge of others is our continual task as human beings; and narrative text is shown to be the very same sort of search, as novelists seek intimate understanding of the characters that they create. Whether or not the narrative pursuit of this sort of ontological truth is ever successful remains ambiguous in *Jacob’s Room*. However, whereas a certain anxiety permeates this question at other places in the text, this passage imbues this search with an optimistic sense of wonder. There is, therefore, tension in the human search for intimacy: the hazy unknowability of other people is simultaneously terrifying and
invigorating, death-threatening and life-affirming, the greatest obstacle of the human experience and the very thing that makes life meaningful and exciting.

In an adjacent passage, we again see Woolf employing spatial symbols as the language of this contemplation, drawing parallels between interiority and intactness, exteriority and dissolution:

Why, from the very windows, even in the dusk, you see a swelling run through the street, an aspiration, as with arms outstretched, eyes desiring, mouths agape. And then we peaceably subside. For if the exaltation lasted we should be blown like foam into the air. The stars would shine through us. We should go down the gale in salt drops—as sometimes happens. For the impetuous spirits will have none of this cradling. Never any swaying or aimlessly lolling for them. Never any making believe, or lying cozily, or genially supposing that one is much like another, fire warm, wine pleasant, extravagance a sin. (96)

Thus, while the traversal of the exterior space between enclosures—between the self and the other—is a thrilling “exaltation,” we must necessarily return to the stasis and peace of the room. To remain amidst the intensity of the exterior world would cause the self to evaporate like “foam into the air,” or in the words of Bachelard, to become a “dispersed being.” The comforts of domesticity are listed among the fundamental ontological assumptions that “one is much like another,” or that we can find ourselves reflected in other people—because they are necessary to a sense of secure identity. In between such home spaces, we are unmoored and free-floating, but this temporary flux is required in order to cross into the rooms of other people. The novel can thus be read as a ledger of the attempts of others to enter Jacob’s room, for Jacob to cross into other people’s rooms, and our own attempts as readers to enter the rooms of the
characters. However, a greater significance of the novel lies in the fact that Jacob’s room is ultimately left empty. When we enter his room during the final scene, Jacob’s absence is glaring; Jacob, indeed, has been “blown like foam into the air” within the outdoor space of a battlefield. With this in mind, the above passage becomes another point of dark foreshadowing: Jacob’s “exaltation” cannot last, and will conclude in his death. The final third of the novel follows Jacob at the height of his exaltation: his trip through Greece.

V. To Keep Forever: Jacob in Greece, Jacob after Death

The final section of the novel intersperses episodes of Jacob’s travels in Greece with select interactions of characters who remain back in England. In its extension of the scope of physical distance between Jacob and the people he had previously known, the section brings to a head the novel’s investigation of interpersonal proximity, access, and intimacy. Jacob’s interior struggle with his sexuality also reaches a tipping point while in Greece, a process primarily catalyzed by Richard Bonamy. Bonamy, who largely remains a peripheral character for three quarters of the novel, emerges into prominence during Jacob’s trip to Greece; it follows that the underlying eroticism of Bonamy’s and Jacob’s relationship comes to the foreground in the space that gave birth to the culture of homosocial academia. However, whereas Jacob arrives in Greece with an enthusiastic affection—and even a longing—for Bonamy, we watch as Jacob begins to intentionally terminate their relationship as his discomfort with its homosexual undertones increases. As this happens, Jacob enters into an affair with an older, married woman named Sandra Wentworth Williams; the relationship with Sandra restructures his previous understanding of heterosexual dynamics and intimacy with women. As Jacob works through these considerations concurrently—within the unenclosed, open-air spaces of the Greek ruins and the countryside—the travel section becomes a final
period of liminality in which Jacob can process the nuances of his sexual identity. This period of flux resolves with Jacob’s definitive closeting of any inclination towards homosexuality, and the conscious decision to operate only as a heterosexual man.

Bonamy’s lingering pull on Jacob is clear even before he sets foot in Greece. While traveling through Italy to Greece, Jacob imagines how he will frame his experiences in his communication to Bonamy: “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” (108). However, once he actually enters Greece, Jacob discovers it to be much different from the homosocial, utopian realm that the academy had led him to believe it would be. And at the end of his first day there, Jacob finds it “highly exasperating” that other people “should be able to say straight off something very much to the point about being in Greece,” when Jacob himself feels “a stopper upon all emotions whatsoever” (109). Adam Parkes acknowledges this reversal of expectations, noting that in Jacob’s travels, “contemporary Greece...seems devoid of homoerotic feeling” (Parkes 167). I would argue that this effect derives from the novel’s thematic representation of intimacy, in which shared physical presence within spaces is necessary for the experience of intimacy; without a male companion present at the monument-sites with him, Jacob cannot establish the sense of homosocial closeness that he had felt so strongly in earlier scenes with Simeon, Bonamy, and Timmy Durrant.

The extensive geographical separation between Jacob and England during his travels takes a toll on Bonamy’s sense of security, as well; at home in England, Bonamy’s anxiety runs high, as he predicts that Jacob “will fall in love...[with] some Greek woman with a straight nose,” which recalls the marker that the narrator had repeatedly used to signal Bonamy’s queerness—his crooked “Wellington nose” (111).
Bonamy’s concern over Jacob’s romantic excursions is centered around the idea that Jacob could find someone who manifests the characteristics that endear Bonamy to Jacob, but in the socially approved body of a woman—one whose physical features correct the symbolic crookedness of Bonamy’s. During this contemplation, the narrator provides the first full expression of Bonamy’s desire for Jacob, which is deeply intertwined with the culture of the exclusively-male homosocial academy. We again see the narrator rendering homosocial desire with the language of academics as she notes that Bonamy “couldn’t love a woman and never read foolish book” and that “his taste in literature affected his friendships, [making] him...only quite at his ease with one or two young men of his own way of thinking” (111). Parkes understands this passage as the narrator “[making] it clear that Bonamy’s classical education has shaped not only his taste in literature, which tacitly equates silly books with silly women, but also his sexual preference” (Parkes 165). Even as this is accurate, the fact that Bonamy’s taste is focused on simplicity—“I like books whose virtue is all drawn together in a page or two”—complicates his attraction to Jacob, whose complexity has been emphasized ad nauseam. Bonamy recognizes that “Jacob Flanders was not at all of his own way of thinking,” but is nonetheless entranced by Jacob’s inscrutability, as he senses “something—something” which makes him feel “fonder of Jacob than of anyone in the world” (112).

If Bonamy represents the draw of homosocial desire to Jacob, then Sandra Wentworth Williams is, oppositely, another iteration of the heteronormative standard with which Jacob struggles to align himself. The narrator characterizes Sandra using a playfully satirical voice, and her upper-class pedigree and overly romantic demeanor are subject to many subtle jabs throughout her inner monologues. We are introduced to Sandra with her thought, “I am full of love for everyone...for the poor most of all—for the peasants coming back in the evening with their burdens,” and with the image
of Sandra “looking very beautiful, tragic, and exalted” while she contemplates poverty in her luxury hotel suite. Sandra’s awareness of her own beauty—thinking to herself in her opening monologue, “I am very beautiful”—coupled with her wealth, places her in a position of near-untouchability to Jacob (113). Sandra operates with a self-appointed ease that allows her to navigate the social spaces of the story, as well as her relationship with husband Evan and her affair with Jacob, without fear of rejection or failure. Her independence thus creates a challenge to Jacob’s attempt to configure a heteronormative dominance over her—as he had attempted with Florinda—and Sandra becomes uniquely important in Jacob’s evolving understanding of intimacy.

The affair with Sandra pushes Jacob’s contemplation of his relationship to Bonamy to the foreground, and while occupying the open-air, unenclosed spaces of Greece, Jacob is afforded the freedom to weigh the repercussions of his options. Just as the outdoor liminal spaces of the ocean and the seashore were sites of ontological self-searches in Jacob’s past, so do the rolling hills of Greece provide Jacob the required room for self-exploration. Jacob himself is wholly elated by this freedom, as the narrator notes, “Stretched on the top of the mountain, quite alone, Jacob enjoyed himself immensely. Probably he had never been so happy in the whole of his life” (115). Shortly thereafter Jacob writes to Bonamy, “I intend to come to Greece every year so long as I live...It is the only chance I can see of protecting oneself from civilization” (116). The irony here is poignant: Jacob will never return to Greece, as he will not even live another year. The “civilization” from which he “protects” himself will order his death on the battlegrounds of war and obliterate Jacob from the world. Bonamy, too, correctly identifies the underlying eeriness of Jacob’s message: “‘Goodness knows what he means by that,’ Bonamy sighed...These dark sayings of Jacob’s made him feel apprehensive, yet somehow impressed, his own turn being all for the definite, the concrete, and the rational” (117). Jacob’s unreadability continues to be the basis of his
appeal to Bonamy; however, such miscommunication between the two men precipitates the dissolution of their bond after Jacob returns from Greece and crushes any prospect of a sexual relationship for which Bonamy may have hoped.

As he falls in love with Sandra, Jacob becomes increasingly wary of his dependence on Bonamy. Whereas upon his immediate arrival in Greece, Jacob repeatedly had the impulse to write to Bonamy or to imagine Bonamy in Greece with him, Jacob steadily begins to question this impulse before eventually rejecting it altogether. After his first outing with the Williams couple, Jacob notices that “the difficulty was to write to Bonamy,” and thinks, “Poor old Bonamy! No; there was something queer about it. He could not write to Bonamy” (118). In essence, Jacob is revoking the access that Bonamy had to him; by withholding textual communication, Jacob denies Bonamy’s ability to sustain intimacy with him from afar. Again, it should be reiterated that Jacob experiences the impulse to write to Bonamy in moments where a space’s importance is emphasized, such as during his visits to Salamis, Marathon, and “the exact spot where the great statue of Athena used to stand” in the Parthenon. This reinforces the notion that the shared experience of space is crucial to the novel’s conception of intimacy; Jacob’s solitary experience of these monumental sites amplifies his lack of an intimate companion and causes him to want to bring Bonamy with him into these spaces. But after visiting the Parthenon, “[Jacob] wrote a telegram to Bonamy, telling him to come at once. And then he crumpled it in his hand and threw it in the gutter” (119). As text and the written word—whether in letters or telegrams—are the only communicative threads that sustain Jacob and Bonamy’s relationship while Jacob is abroad, Jacob’s choice to silence this communication is on one level a termination of the relationship, but also representative of a more total silencing that Jacob is attempting to enact upon his own sexual identity.
After discarding the telegram, the reality of the nature of Bonamy’s attachment to Jacob begins to materialize in Jacob’s consciousness, but not fully so:

“For one thing he wouldn’t come,” he thought. “And then I daresay this sort of thing wears off.” “This sort of thing” being that uneasy, painful feeling, something like selfishness—one wishes almost that the thing would stop—it is getting more and more beyond what is possible—"If it goes on much longer I shan’t be able to cope with it—but if someone else were seeing it at the same time—Bonamy is stuffed in his room in Lincoln’s Inn—oh, I say, damn it all, I say—”

(120).

For the first time we see Jacob begin to consciously acknowledge the homosexual affection that has undergirded his and Bonamy’s friendship, as well as his understanding that an explicitly gay relationship with Bonamy is impossible. The euphemism “this sort of thing” becomes the placeholder for homoeroticism or homosexuality—Bonamy’s intense desire is starting to evolve into an attachment that is “beyond what is possible” in the culture of the academy, in which homosocial affection is encouraged, but must not tip over into overt displays of homosexuality. However, the passage makes clear that it is not only Bonamy who would suffer should their relationship implode: Jacob’s knowledge that he would not “be able to cope” points to a deep-seated attachment to Bonamy that Jacob on which Jacob has relied for months, where Bonamy has been a source of intimate understanding, intellectual affirmation, and clarifying counsel to Jacob. Jacob processes all of this while standing on a street in Athens, with “the sight of Hymettus, Pentelicus, Lycabettus [mountains] on one side, and the sea on the other” and thus stands between two powerful liminal spaces of the novel, Greece and the undulating sea. This is the peak of Jacob’s
ontological search through his sexuality, and the point at which he must decide how to move forward. And that night, Jacob’s decision is visible in a literal turnover: “The hook gave a great tug in his side as he lay in bed on Wednesday night; and he turned over with a desperate sort of tumble, remembering Sandra Wentworth Williams with whom he was in love” (120). Jacob has therefore set in motion his turning away from the pull of the “hook” that Bonamy exerts from overseas, and has committed himself to the sole pursuit of heterosexuality via his affair with Sandra.

In the following days, Jacob continues to bid farewell to the prospect of queer identity. At one point, he attempts to find a place to sit down and read a book in Athens, but is distracted both by his surroundings, which symbolically remind Jacob of his dilemma: “Greece was over; the Parthenon in ruins; yet there he was” (120). Jacob thus accepts that his utopian expectations of Greece—as well as its attendant notions of homoerotic intimacy—have failed to hold up to their modern reality, where they are actually in ruins. Jacob then puts down his book and tries to “write a note upon the importance of history...one of those scribbles upon which the work of a lifetime may be based, and one can’t remember a word of it. It is a little painful. It had to be burnt” (121). The burned note is akin to the crumpled telegram in that they are both silencings of texts, reflexive censorships of ideas that Jacob previously held but now abandons; Jacob is expunging queerness from his concept of self. Jacob pauses “to draw a straight nose,” a symbolic rejection of Bonamy’s “Wellington nose,” as he looks at the women walking around him. His frustration spills over: “Damn these women—damn these women!” he thought.... ‘How they spoil things’.... ‘It is those damned women,’ said Jacob, without any trace of bitterness, but rather with sadness and disappointment that what might have been should never be” (120). The narrator’s language is again circumlocutory, but manages to convey the clear implication that it is functional gay relationships that “might have been”—but because of their societal
proscription, such relationships can never truly materialize. The narrator then offers an aside: “This violent disillusionment is generally to be expected in young men in the prime of life, sound of wind and limb, who will soon become fathers of families and directors of banks.” This serves to cast Jacob and Bonamy’s struggles not as anomalous or taboo, but as a common experience among a multitude of “sound” men, who are forced to closet themselves and quietly assimilate into typically masculine roles of society, as fathers and businessmen. Jacob himself has set this course of action for himself, albeit not without struggle, and as the women pass by him, Jacob moves over to the Erechtheum and begins to stare at a statue of a “goddess...holding the roof on her head. She reminded him of Sandra Wentworth Williams.” The spatial symbolism of a woman supporting the ceiling of a structure is significant; in terms of societal assimilation, a heterosexual pairing is exactly this for a closeted man—a secured place in the public sphere. Yet Jacob still hesitates: “He looked at her, then looked away. He looked at her, then looked away. He was extraordinarily moved, and with the battered Greek nose in his head, with Sandra in his head, with all sorts of things in his head, off he started to walk, right up to the top of Mount Hymettus, alone, in the heat” (121). Thus, after a period of cognitive self-inquiry, Jacob has turned away from Bonamy, from queerness, and towards an exclusively heterosexual mode of being.

The scene that immediately follows flashes back to England, where Bonamy has almost paranormally sensed a shift in Jacob’s identity. Bonamy visits Clara Durrant “expressly to talk about Jacob,” where his anxieties over Jacob’s relationships with women become fully apparent. As he listens to Clara speak, Bonamy slowly realizes her attraction to Jacob without her stating it explicitly: Bonamy “would have brought out Jacob’s name had he not begun to feel positively certain that Clara loved him—and could do nothing whatever.” Flustered, Bonamy leaves in a hurry before stopping to watch men bathe in the Serpentine pool of Hyde Park, wondering “would Jacob
marry her?” (122). Bonamy is undergoing a process of realization that runs parallel to Jacob’s in Athens—he is slowly coming to understand the unfeasibility of an explicit partnership with Jacob, and the increasing likelihood of Jacob’s partnership with women.

Jacob seeks such a partnership with Sandra, who comes to upend his previous understanding of heterosexual dynamics and the nature of intimacy with women. As previously discussed, Jacob had most visibly engaged in relationships with women whom he viewed as inferior in order to practice a stereotypical masculine dominance. However, Sandra is a far cry from the women whom Jacob had manipulated before; in fact, Sandra clearly views Jacob as beneath her. This is how Sandra rises to importance in Jacob’s evolving understanding of intimacy and the knowledge of both himself and other people: Jacob is surprised by the fact that “Mrs. Williams said things straight out. He was surprised by his own knowledge of the rules of behavior; how much more can be said than one thought; how open one can be with a woman; and how little he had known himself before.” Sandra’s demonstration of her worldliness is startling to Jacob, who thinks to himself, “People wouldn’t understand a woman talking as she talks.” Noticing that Sandra “wore breeches...under her short skirts,” he looks back over his former flings and thinks, “‘Women like Fanny Elmer don’t [wear breeches]...What’s-her-name Carslake didn’t; yet they pretend...’” (117). Sandra’s self-confidence leads Jacob to reconsider the fundamental relationship between men and women, which the academic culture had construed as a structure in which men exist on an intellectual level above women. Unbeknownst to Jacob, Sandra further reverses this heteronormative paradigm in her interior monologues, as well: the fact that Sandra “suspected him of being a mere bumpkin” is a total deflation of the mystique with which Jacob’s resistance to classification had previously imbued him. Sandra seems, at times, even annoyed with the young Jacob’s clinginess, in one moment seeing Jacob in
public and turning to her husband: “’There is that young man,’ she said, peevishly, throwing away her cigarette, ‘that Mr. Flanders’” (123).

Sandra’s assumption of superiority to Jacob is a point of interest to the narrator, who is more similar to Sandra in terms of age and gender than to any other character. Sandra’s labeling of Jacob as a “bumpkin” leads the narrator to launch into another episode of narratological self-reflection:

But how far was he a mere bumpkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow? It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. Some, it is true, take ineffaceable impressions of character at once. Others dally, loiter, and get blown this way and that...We live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by—this unseizable force (125).

That the novel fails to “seize” the true characterization of Jacob has been the charge laid against Jacob’s Room for nearly a century, but as the narrator here describes the fundamental ontological division between authors and characters, the admission of the impossibility of her own task proves that the narration of Jacob’s Room demonstrates its own philosophy. The narrator cannot “know” Jacob because no one can truly “know” another person at all—but it is the duty of the novelist to document this search without regard for its futility. This is why the narration elides the climactic moment of Sandra and Jacob’s affair—their covert walk to the Acropolis together in the middle of the night—and wonders, “As for reaching the Acropolis who shall say that we ever do it, or that when Jacob woke next morning he found anything hard and durable to keep forever?” (129). We as readers are not afforded textual access to Jacob and Sandra
at the Acropolis, but we are made to question what having this access would mean—
because it is not clear if even Jacob, who was present at the scene, is offered any
mnemonic durability from his shared experience with Sandra.

Even though we have watched Jacob participate in a variety of relationships,
our understanding of him has moved progressively out of reach with every passing
scene—and Jacob has become increasingly opaque to the other characters around him,
too. After Jacob returns from Greece, Bonamy’s instinctual anxiety that Jacob had
fallen in love is confirmed, and their ensuing conversation dissolves their partnership
entirely. Bonamy thinks to himself, “He has not said a word to show that he is glad to
see me,’ and begins to act flustered as the realization of Jacob’s shift in attitude sets in:

“[Bonamy] was sarcastic because of Clara Durrant; because Jacob had
come back from Greece very brown and lean...because Jacob was silent.” The “silence” here is
symbolically powerful in that it resolves the tension between publicity and privacy that
was at the heart of Jacob’s homoerotic experimentations. No longer is there a question
of coded homosexuality or even a language in which to encode homoeroticism; Jacob’s
diction when speaking about his travels in Greece is terse; the language of classicism
that had previously allowed Bonamy to “play round him like an affectionate spaniel”
before “they would end by rolling on the floor,” is stripped of its previous erotic power.
Jacob, once brimming with excitement to relay his travelogue to Bonamy, is curt and
reserved, leading Bonamy to snap, “You are in love!” Jacob’s subsequent blush and
silence effectively snuff out any hope of a greater partnership with Jacob that Bonamy
may have had—and to Bonamy, “the sharpest knives never cut so deep” (132). Bonamy
flounces away, “gazing into motor cars and cursing women,” as he searches for the
archetypal woman that Jacob had chosen over him: “Where was the pretty woman’s
face? Clara’s—Fanny’s—Florinda’s? Who was the pretty little creature?” (133).
Bonamy will never find out who this “straight-nosed” woman may be, as he will never see Jacob again before he dies.

Before Jacob is drafted into the war and vanishes from the text in his death, one of our final views of him is appropriately situated in the mind of someone else, and not of Jacob in physical reality. Fanny Elmer’s contemplation of Jacob, which is “sustained entirely upon picture cards for the past two months,” finds him “more statuesque, noble, and eye-less than ever” (137). That Jacob is rendered most clearly in a realm removed from reality and extant only in the cognitive space of another person is distinctly representative of the text’s conception of the nature of our knowledge of others. In this way, our “truest” sense of access to other people is bodied forth only in the mind, in the imaginative portraits that we create of others, using concepts that barely derived from physical reality. This is the novel’s portrait of Jacob: a creation that exists only as an Other, as a projection that a given person generates with little regard for factuality. Fanny thinks to herself, “This is life. This is life,” as she boards an omnibus, and that “After all, he would, he must, come back to her” (139). The theme of Jacob’s returning reappears; however, Jacob stands no chance of returning, as he is merely an illusory figment created in the minds of other people that is in constant shift as he encounters new people. He cannot “return,” as he no longer exists as the person whom is summoned. The narrator underscores the inaccuracy of these cognitive projections: while Fanny had entertained her own picture of Jacob in this given moment, it is more than likely false, as “Jacob might have been thinking of Rome; of architecture; of jurisprudence,” or any number of things, “as he sat under the plane tree in Hyde Park” (138). Jacob is once again proven to be unknowable, wholly subverting the fictions that other people have devised—fictions that are further rendered meaningless when Jacob’s story abruptly ends, and his usability as an object of other people’s projections is revoked.
The actual agent of Jacob’s departure—the war—remains off-site for the entire text. The narrator only gestures to it obliquely in the final pages, with sounds of battle echoing over the ocean and reaching spaces that Jacob had previously inhabited. The war’s interruptive force clashes with the Greek spaces that were previously exalted: we see that a “red light was on the columns of the Parthenon,” and “the sound [of gunshot]...tunneling its way with fitful explosions among the channels of the islands” (142). The war’s invasion of these spaces, once sites of peace and contemplation, runs parallel to the psychospatial breakdown wrought by Jacob’s death: Jacob-as-room himself is overtaken by the forces of military violence that ultimately cause his ruin. The narrator never confronts or depicts Jacob’s death directly, or even outright states that Jacob is engaged in combat; this information is only transmitted through Mrs. Flanders, who hears the sounds of explosions—a “dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets”—echoing over the ocean while in her home in southeast England. In a passing moment, she thinks of “Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country”—and this is how the reader understands that Jacob is at war (143). This narrative occlusion creates a sense of abrupt shock—and just as quickly as we learn that Jacob is fighting in the war, we learn of his death a few sentences later.

The final chapter, a piece of text less than three hundred words, is the most thematically harmonious scene of the novel. Bonamy and Mrs. Flanders stand in Jacob’s empty room, looking around at Jacob’s old possessions, which now metonymically emphasize Jacob’s absence. Bonamy marvels, “He left everything just as it was...Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for anyone to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?” (143). The concept of Jacob’s returning has been in play since the opening scene, in which Archer yells Jacob’s name on the beach; just as Jacob did not come back to Archer’s call as a child, Jacob has not returned to the calls of his family and lovers. In her engagement with the theme of
Jacob’s overarching failure to “return,” the narrator recalls and repeats earlier swatches of language used to describe Jacob’s room throughout the final scene. She repeats her opinion that “the eighteenth century has its distinction...the rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose or a ram’s skull is carved in the wood” that she had previously stated in Chapter V (54); she also restates, “listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fiber in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there” from Chapter III (29, 143). The juxtaposition of linguistic return with Jacob’s glaring failure to return is a uniquely poignant narratological device that emphasizes notions of what remains of a person who is no longer present: between total absence and intimate immediacy is the empty room, full of personal objects that outlast the people who had inhabited the room. Jacob’s objects are physical referents to his psychic existence, to what the personality of “Jacob” represented in the world—and his personal letters are diminutive texts within the larger textual document of his existence (the novel) that represent still-extant relationships that will forever be left unfinished.

Bonamy then stands at the window and sees the movement of urban life below: “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” (143). As previously discussed, the window is a potent metaphor in a novel concerned with the construction of rooms; the window in Jacob’s Room is the pane that separates the interior from the outside, the self from other—and now, the living world and the afterlife. Standing at this midpoint, Bonamy is overcome with grief, reacting as if the window were a functional portal between these worlds; he calls out, for the final time, “Jacob! Jacob!”—but at this point, Jacob cannot ever return to this call, as he is no longer a part of the world in which it is registered. Mrs. Flanders is equally overcome with the confusion of grief, bursting
open the bedroom door and presenting the most iconic image of the novel—Jacob’s old shoes. She asks, “What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?” as she holds them out. Jacob’s shoes are no longer of practical use, but by the nature of their ownership, still refer to Jacob’s existence and therefore must be counted among the things that remain of Jacob himself. It is interesting to note that shoes are objects of mobility, as well; over the course of the story, we have watched Jacob travel between different spaces in the process of his exploration of intimacy, and shoes are articles of clothing that make the traversal of these spaces possible. Jacob, once perpetually in transit, no longer requires shoes, as his movement has altogether ceased in his death.

Finally, there is a recursive significance of Jacob’s shoes’ presence in his empty room: the shoes are empty spaces, Bachelardian “shells,” themselves. In the novel’s examination of space, we have found that while the room is vital to the preservation of living beings, it is the inhabitant of the room for whom we and the author search. Without corporeal beings to fill these spaces, there is no consciousness to apprehend them, give them meaning, and forge relationships within them. The room itself is only the architectural shell of the ontological encounter that occurs between its walls. The room “holds it together,” just as Woolf envisioned in her plan, and the “it” here is what Woolf attempted to depict across the novel, in bas relief: the intimate understanding of a person. Without the people inside a room, it is a lifeless container; without a person standing in them, a pair of shoes is lifeless, too.
July 26, 1922—

On Sunday [Lytton Strachey] read through Jacob’s Room. He thinks it my best work. But his first remark was that it was amazingly well written... He calls it a work of genius; he thinks it unlike any other novel; he says that the people are ghosts; he says it is very strange.

...I am on the whole pleased. Neither of us knows what the public will think. There’s no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; & that interests me so that I feel I can go ahead without praise.

-Virginia Woolf, (Diary 168)

We now know where the tide of critical opinion largely fell on Jacob’s Room, but Woolf’s words here, written three months before the novel’s publication, reveal a significance that remains unmarred by the brutal reviews that would follow. Woolf’s discovery of her own voice in Jacob’s Room—of a means of building a structure of text with “no scaffolding” and “scarcely a brick to be seen”—is the incipient moment of her development as a modernist powerhouse. The works that Woolf completed next, including Mrs Dalloway in 1925 and To the Lighthouse in 1927, are counted among her masterpieces, and among the greatest of the canon of English literature. It is evident, too, that Woolf carried a special awareness of space throughout all of the works she later produced: we now have A Room of One’s Own, the vacation home in To the Lighthouse, Orlando’s castle, and the schoolhouses and staircases of The Waves. It is, undoubtedly, no small miracle that Woolf understood the singular progress she forged in her completion of Jacob’s Room—and then moved ahead without praise.
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