

People are Ghosts. World War I in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

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Abstract: When Leonard Woolf first read *Jacob's Room* before it was published he said to his wife as recorded in her diary: "[h]e thinks it my best work (...) he says people are ghosts; he says it is very strange." This paper will show how both *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf are deeply concerned with the effects of World War I and portray victims of an armed conflict as ghosts. Gruesome scenes of the battlefield are absent from Woolf's pages but war is present through characters who have perished, been mentally or physically injured, relatives who are left behind, their existence transformed into a void. The fragmented nature of these two works reflects the fragmented reality of post-war England. The conflict affected the entire population, men and women from all social backgrounds. Through Woolf's personal writings it is clear how her personal life was disrupted by air raids, food shortages, conscription of male friends and family members, the struggle of many close to her to obtain the unpopular status of Conscientious Objectors or the inevitable fact that some were killed in the trenches. As a writer Virginia Woolf responded artistically and critically to the enormity of the war to end all wars but didn't.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, World War I, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Jacob's Room*, war victims

Resumo: Quando Leonard Woolf leu *Jacob's Room* pela primeira vez antes da sua publicação, disse o que ficou registado no diário de sua mulher: "[h]e thinks it my best work (...) he says people are ghosts; he says it is very strange." [Ele acha que é a minha melhor obra (...) diz que as pessoas são fantasmas; diz que é muito estranho]. Este artigo demonstra como *Jacob's Room* e *Mrs Dalloway* de Virginia Woolf são obras que se ocupam dos efeitos da Primeira Guerra Mundial e que apresentam vítimas de um conflito armado como fantasmas. Cenas violentas de batalhas estão ausentes das páginas de Woolf, mas a guerra está presente através de figuras que pereceram, foram feridas mental ou fisicamente, entes queridos cujas vidas se

transformaram num vazio. A natureza fragmentada destas duas obras reflete a realidade fragmentada da Inglaterra do pós-guerra. Este conflito afetou toda a população, homens e mulheres de todos os estratos sociais. Os documentos pessoais de Woolf deixam claro como a sua vida foi perturbada por raides aéreos, pela escassez de alimentos, pelo recrutamento de familiares e amigos do sexo masculino, pela luta daqueles próximos da autora por obter o estatuto de Objetores de Consciência ou pela inevitável morte nas trincheiras de alguns. Como escritora, Virginia Woolf respondeu artística e criticamente à enormidade da guerra.

Palavras-chave: Virginia Woolf, Primeira Guerra Mundial, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Jacob's Room*, vítimas de guerra

One has come to notice the war everywhere.

Virginia Woolf, *Diary I*, 1918

As the epigraph above reveals, Virginia Woolf noticed war everywhere in her life. Through Woolf's personal writings it is clear how her routine was disrupted by air raids, food shortages, conscription of male friends and family members, the struggle of many close to her to obtain the unpopular status of Conscientious Objectors or the inevitable fact that some were killed or injured in the trenches. As a writer Virginia Woolf responded artistically and critically to the enormity of war. Armed conflict is a recurrent theme in her work and quite often assumes a predominant role in her diaries, letters, essays and fiction. World War I is the main theme in the texts I am proposing to analyse in this paper.

Jacob's Room was published by the Hogarth Press on 22 October 1922, with a dust jacket designed by Vanessa Bell, inaugurating Virginia Woolf's freedom from other publishers (Hussey 1996: 126). Leonard's reaction to this novel is reported in Virginia Woolf's diary: "[h]e thinks it my best work (...) He calls it a work of genius (...) he says that people are ghosts; he says it is very strange" (Woolf 1978: 186).

Indeed, the experimental narrative of *Jacob's Room* takes us through fragmented episodes of Jacob's life, which we follow trying to grasp its reality and make sense of the rather sketchy information provided only to find out in the very last words of the novel that

Jacob has been dead all along. It is the life of a ghost we are reading about and the book is riddled with allusions to Jacob's elusive nature. Throughout the novel he is rendered "profoundly unconscious", "indifferent, unconscious", "extraordinarily vacant" and intangible "there is that young man (...) I don't see him (...) No, you can't see him" (Woolf 2012: 426, 438, 440, 531). He cannot be grasped as he has ceased to exist, there are only memories left. If one tried collating memories of a dead person, the result would be similar to Woolf's narrative, a dispersed series of events which, pieced together, shape a vague, nebulous image of the life of a human being, so complex in itself. The result could only ever be the shadow of the person sought. Full knowledge and understanding is impossible, therefore scraping memories is all that can be done to attain a certain level of meaning and to connect us to others, to maintain a link with the past.

From the first pages of *Jacob's Room* we learn the family portrayed holds a surname which in 1922, the post-war period that enclosed recent and traumatic memories, was synonymous with fighting, war and death (Zwerdling 1986: 64). Flanders is not just a surname; it is like a premonition engraved in people's lives, as are the tears Mrs Flanders sheds at the beginning of the book. We witness Jacob's mother weeping making "the entire bay quiver" and "the lighthouse wobble" as if the world around her shuddered as a reaction to her crying, responded to her grief. The tears produced a "horrid blot" as Betty Flanders tried to write a letter; her life will be tainted, stained as the letters she writes: "[m]y son, my son – such would be her cry" (Woolf 2012: 421, 485).

What we are faced with, in the following pages, is the life of Jacob displayed in an intricate collage of events. We are given the clues that will establish the links, the possible key to the riddle that was Jacob's life and death, as suggested by the narrator: "it's no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints" (*idem*: 439). Following the narrator's recommendation, and so looking for clues in the text itself, we learn that Jacob was educated in Cambridge and that after finishing his studies, moved to London, enjoyed visiting the British Museum and was fascinated by St Paul's Cathedral, both symbols of male domination and that he read *The Daily Telegraph*, a conservative newspaper, hence a channel for the voice of patriarchy (*ibidem*: 438, 465, 494). Jacob is referred to several

times as “unworldly”, in other words gullible. He is, after all, a product of institutionalised power, which he believes in and his mission is to uphold and perpetuate it.

He would soon be a victim of this power and to accompany the shift in his role, his status from privileged male bastion of society to a casualty, we observe a change in his attitude as he starts questioning the system that enveloped him and was prepared to sacrifice his life. Later on in the text we see that he “cursed the British Army” and it is stated that “he had a violent reversion towards male society, cloistered rooms, and the works of the classics; and was ready to turn with wrath upon whoever it was who had fashioned life thus.” At this point in the novel we realise that Jacob is revaluating the legitimacy of the society he was immersed in and that “the British Empire was beginning to puzzle him”; we find out just before the end of the book that all of Mrs Flanders’ sons, Archer, Jacob and John were “fighting for their country” (*ibidem*: 519, 548).

The circumstances of Jacob’s death are merely suggested: “[d]id he think he would come back?” asks his good friend, appropriately named Bonamy, on the last page (*ibidem*: 548). Mrs Flanders is holding an empty pair of Jacob’s shoes not knowing what to do with them, reinforcing the idea of the empty room, both symbols of a void that will remain. Jacob will not inhabit his room or wear his shoes again. They are the empty shoes of a man who will not come back from a conflict that obliterated a generation. Jacob fell victim of an “anti-humane masculine ideology” (Hussey 1996:128), a system that educates its subjects, provides them with privilege and grants them the supposed ultimate honour of dying for it. Jacob is one of the war victims of this novel as he lost his life fighting for a regime that he had started questioning, but there are others. His brothers are also in the frontline. His mother, referred to constantly as “poor Betty Flanders” is often depicted crying, making her one of the women who suffered loss in the war: “the eyes of all the nurses, mothers and wandering women are a little glazed” (Woolf 2012: 504). Captain Barfoot, Mrs Flanders’ lover/companion, his name suggesting the counterpart of the empty shoes she holds at the end of the novel, “was lame and wanted two fingers on the left hand, having served his country” (*idem*: 434). Jacob’s empty shoes could hardly be filled by a man, who, judging by his name and his injured leg is fit for no footwear. The Empire had also taken “Morty, [Mrs

Flanders'] brother, lost all these years (...) last heard of – poor man – in Rangoon" (*ibidem*: 484, 518).

If we follow the hints, we are left with a tale of death, loss and grief caused by a system which shows no mercy and transforms both men and women into victims, an idea that Virginia Woolf would pursue and explore for the rest of her life as a writer. William R. Handley defends that *Jacob's Room* is not a conventional anti-war work but that Jacob represents the millions of unknowable soldiers killed in World War I (*apud* Hussey 1992: 130). It is, thus, a novel deeply concerned with war and its effects on people both in the battlefield and on the home front, an elegy for the generation of men that was slaughtered in the war (Hussey 1996: 126). Alex Zwerdling remarks, though, that Woolf's elegy "is revisionist: there is nothing grand about Jacob; the sacrifice of his life seems perfectly pointless" (1986: 73). So many individuals were slaughtered, the war left so many empty rooms and mothers holding empty shoes that we may venture the idea that *Jacob's Room* is an elegy not only to the soldiers who purposeless died, but to everyone who has been touched by war, those maimed and the ones left to mourn, everyone who has had to endure the emptiness and void a war inflicts.

Jacob was created not as a presence but as an absence (Hussey 1996: 127), the young man that is no more, killed in a war that only affects the text obliquely. There are no violent battles or excruciating deaths described. We solely hear of them when we are piecing the hints together, as if they were reports of what we know is happening. In *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel published on 14 May 1925 by the Hogarth Press, this absence is reinforced by the idea that "the War was over" (Woolf 2003: 4) but early on we are told of its effects that are still felt "the War was over, except for someone like Mrs Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed (...) or Lady Bexborough (...) they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over" (*idem*: 4). Mrs Dalloway can try and not see the remnants of the war around her but she will be forced to do so.

The action of *Mrs Dalloway* takes place in one single day in June 1923. As Clarissa went out to buy flowers to prepare for a party in her central London home later that

evening, the reader is faced with parallel events that interrupt the narrative, thus becoming part of it. Septimus Smith and his wife, Rezia, short for Lucrezia, were wandering the streets on their way to Harley Street to see Dr Bradshaw, when an explosion caused by a car was heard. Clarissa jumped, everyone looked and while the people in the street were discussing who might be the occupant of such elegant and loud vehicle, Septimus' "world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames"¹; Rezia said to herself in desperation: "[h]elp, help! she wanted to cry." The couple looked out of place. An onlooker thought they "both seemed queer" (*ibidem*: 12). They seemed strange because their life had been deeply touched by war, the very same war Mrs Dalloway is glad is over. The war was not over for Septimus, as his life was ruled by the horrors he had endured at the frontline. As a good citizen, drawn by the initial euphoria of waging war, "Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save (...) England"; he enlisted as he thought was his duty, "he developed manliness (...) They were proud of him; he had won crosses" (*ibidem*: 64, 65). He served his country diligently, was decorated for behaving like a true, valiant man.

He was safe now the war had ended, on that June morning back in England, a nervous wreck, nonetheless. What happened to him in the battlefield would haunt him for the rest of his days. This would be his last day. He had seen his closest friend Evans be killed just before the Armistice was signed and "congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably"; "[t]he last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference" (*ibidem*: 64). This is how he is described as having reacted during the war. Now that it was over, he panicked in the streets of London in the face of a loud, seemingly harmless noise. Septimus is a shell-shock victim of World War I.² He is a war casualty; he had not lost any limbs, but his sanity had slipped away. His symptoms were numerous and varied. He suffered from auditory and visual hallucinations "(sparrows) sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words"; "saw faces laughing at him, calling him horrible disgusting names, from the walls, and hands pointing"; saw "Evans (...) behind the railings" in Regent's Park on a warm June morning in 1923; he "talk(ed) to himself or to that dead man Evans", he felt "sudden thunder-claps of fear", he often cried, had frequent headaches, insomnia, nightmares and was suicidal (*ibidem*: 18, 50, 64, 16, 68, 17).³

Rezia is a young Italian woman, displaced in London, not having mastered the English language, feeling lonely and homesick, looking for help by taking her husband to seek a second opinion on Septimus' condition. Doctor Holmes had "said there was nothing the matter with him", dismissed a serious, but relatively newly identified illness as "nerve symptoms and nothing more" and suggested he "take up a hobby" (*ibidem*:17, 68).⁴ Rezia knew that this was not the case but could not understand her husband's behaviour: "[e]veryone has friends who were killed in the war", "it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now" (*ibidem*: 17, 50). Rezia embodies common prejudice and ignorance of mental illness, as does Dr Holmes. However, this simple woman with no medical qualifications recognised that the husband she lived with was not the same man she had married and pursued her quest to find a solution. Sir William Bradshaw's diagnosis was more helpful: "it was a case of extreme gravity. It was a case of complete breakdown" (*ibidem*: 70). Nevertheless, his prescription leaves much to be desired: a rest cure in a home.⁵

The system that was prepared to send these young men to war was not equipped to treat them when they returned, wounded, shell-shocked. In her personal writings, Virginia Woolf reflects on these matters: "[t]he more one sees of the effects on young men who should be happy the more one detests the whole thing" (Woolf 1977:123). The establishment inflicted lifelong mental and physical pain which limited real lives. She saw an even greater irony when she visited her brother-in-law, Philip, who had been wounded in World War I and was recovering in hospital. She records in her diary: "[a] feeling of the uselessness of it all, breaking these people & mending them again, was in the air" (*idem*: 92). The pointlessness of war is everywhere.

It is through Lady Bradshaw, the doctor's wife, that Septimus invaded Clarissa's world. The news of his suicide left her indignant. Her party was a success, all was going swimmingly, so "what business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?" (Woolf 2003:133). Clarissa's world, the world she had chosen, embodies the institutionalised power: "[t]he Prime Minister (...) this symbol of what they all stood for, English society" had come and her guests were so distinguished "everybody in the room ha(d) six sons at Eton";

Richard Dalloway himself, “a Conservative”, “was already at the House of Commons” (*idem*: 125, 138, 30, 88). Alex Zwerdling sees Clarissa’s party as “a wake for the established power” (1986:122).⁶ Only a decaying class would allow the interference of Septimus, a common mad veteran, in such a triumphant and luxurious sphere.

There are other symbols and images of the ruling power. All around London we come across scenes that took place on that same day in June. St Paul’s Cathedral reappears as an emblem of the system appealing to a “seedy-looking nondescript man” who thought it “offers company (...) invites you to a membership of a society; great men belong to it; martyrs have died for it” (Woolf 2003:21). A man seeking shelter and a sense of belonging wondered whether St Paul’s Cathedral could be his refuge. The reader is left with his hesitation on the steps and will never know what his decision was. Near St Pauls military music was being played “the noise was tremendous (...) as if people were marching; yet they had been dying”; in Whitehall “boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them (...) praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (*idem*: 100, 37). Snippets of a day full of independent events that are brought together by an imaginative writer with a voice and a purpose. London was showing itself as a proud city, encouraging public patriotic moments in a people profoundly traumatised by World War I.

Septimus Smith is one of the war victims of *Mrs Dalloway* but, like in *Jacob’s Room*, there are others. Septimus stands with his hallucinations as “the giant mourner with legions of men prostrate behind him” lest we forget: “London has swallowed up many millions of men called Smith”; Rezia represents the widowed wives, the women left behind, “poor women waiting to see the Queen go past – poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War” (*ibidem*: 53, 63, 15). Woolf would not leave women unnoticed. Just like Mrs Flanders, Mrs Foxcroft and Lady Bexborough in the very first pages of *Mrs Dalloway* are the mothers who nurtured their boys only to have them killed by a war waged by a system that disregards human life.

Miss Killman, her name suggesting her radical nature, is a different sort of female war victim. Although she too had lost a brother in the war and is, thus a woman who lost a male relative, “she would not pretend that the Germans were all villains” (*ibidem*: 90). She

made her opinion heard and, as a result, lost her job as a history teacher, her opinions not deemed suitably conventional for a well-respected, conservative school. Another element of interest is introduced with this character and her attitude. Both men and women, as we have seen, are portrayed by Woolf as victims of the establishment and this category would have to include both men and women recognised as the “enemy” of the structures of power and its discourse. Those who defend the “enemy” must be labelled as enemies and adequately removed from mainstream society. “This late age of the world’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears” (*ibidem*: 7). This “well of tears” does not have a nationality, is not gendered and includes those affected by an armed conflict, regardless of their origins.

Virginia Woolf was deeply concerned with society, its structure, its legitimacy to wage war and produce ghosts like Jacob and Septimus, shadows like the bereaved mothers and wives. She abhorred violence, noticed it and exposed it everywhere. The author of these works would later write “[t]he human race seems to repeat itself insufferably” (Woolf 1994: 464) as she endured the experience of yet another World War, the end of which she would never see.

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NOTES

¹ Septimus' world shuddered like Mrs Flanders' did.

² "Shell-shock [was] a term introduced to the public in 1922 when the Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shell-shock" was presented to the British parliament. The report (was) (...) extensively quoted in *The Times* in August and September 1922" (Hussey 1996:174). Virginia Woolf must have been familiar with it as she was an avid reader of newspapers, particularly interested in issues concerning war and mental illness.

³ During Virginia Woolf's breakdowns, she is reported to have displayed symptoms Septimus presents, such as birds singing in Greek and emotional anaesthesia (Poole 1995:186).

⁴ Septimus' illness would probably be diagnosed today as Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It "results from experiencing or witnessing traumatic, life-threatening events including combat-related experiences" (Smith *et al.* 2009:90). Elaine Showalter sees a parallel between the diagnoses applied to women and traumatised soldiers showing symptoms of what she defined as "male hysteria" in *The Female Malady*. "The Great War was a crisis of masculinity (...) Placed in intolerable circumstances of stress, and expected to react

with unnatural “courage”, thousands of soldiers reacted instead with the symptoms of hysteria (...) it is a feminine kind of behaviour (...) the hysterical soldier (...) (showed) the same constellation of traits associated with the hysterical woman.” By referring to Virginia Woolf and *Mrs Dalloway*, Showalter points out the way in which Woolf connects “the shell-shocked veteran with the repressed woman of the man-governed world through their common enemy, the nerve-specialist” (1987: 171, 172, 175, 192).

⁵ The rest cure had also been prescribed to Virginia Woolf: “the private home at Burley Park, Twickenham, for ladies with mental problems (helpfully indexed by Quentin Bell as ‘a madhouse’), where Virginia went for ‘rest cures’ in 1910 and 1920” (Lee 1997:182).

⁶ The following facts constitute some of the evidence of a decrepit Conservative party in June 1923: “[t]he elections of 1922 and 1923 marked the (...) rise of Labour”; “in 1922 the Irish Free State was proclaimed” and in India there were the first signs of “agitation for independence” (Zwerdling 1986:121).