# Nature, Being, and War in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*

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**Abstract**

The modernist movement in literature and culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ushered a momentous shift in the manner in which art and literature was perceived and expressed- it shook traditional consciousness and questioned the conventional. The year 1922 was particularly remarkable in initiating a new approach towards how literature can be realized.

Modernism has deconstructed the classical, white, able-bodied "Vitruvian Man", against their temporal and spatial positioning. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), an outstanding modernist writer pioneered the stream of consciousness narrative technique. However, recent research works have delved into the natural elements that prevail in Woolf's writings. In Woolf's works, nature forges a profound relationship with the corporal reality that permeates the lives of her characters. Nature forms a significant part of Woolf's writing and how human lives are entwined in it, whether consciously or unconsciously. Woolf, in fact, focussed on authoring the autobiography of Elizabeth Barret Browning's cocker spaniel Flush, after completing the onerous task of writing *The Waves*. Louise Westling contends in her pivotal article "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World" that throughout Woolf's career, she "increasingly placed human ambitions and systems of meaning against the backdrop of enormous geological forces and vast reaches of time. Increasingly, she sought to portray the non-human, or what David Abram calls the 'more than human' world within which we are tiny and only momentary presences" (856, *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies*). Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a prime example of how her writing shifts from human centrality towards animality.

In this paper I shall explore how Woolf's experimental novel *Jacob's Room* heralds her ecological experience through her feminist narrative technique and questions the anthropocentrism of the Western culture that is preoccupied with the semantics of war and destruction.

**Keywords**: modernism, anthropocentrism, animality, ecocriticism, war

Modernism was conspicuous by a paradigm shift in the literary, cultural, artistic and political scenario from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. The antitraditional manifestation that marked the modernist movement was underscored by paradoxes and contradictions. This aspect was elucidated by Peter Childs, who described it as "paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair" (*Modernism: The New Cultural Idiom*, 17). Modernism ushered in a tumultuous era, with the world war, communist revolutions, colossal advancements in science and technology, Western imperialism and the rise of fascism. In addition to scientific innovations, galvanizing the hope for a new utopian dream with a transformed man at its core, several philosophical and psychological theoreticians, emphasised the internal reality of the modern man and his relation to the temporal external world. Modernism initiated a metanarrative discourse that negated the concept of realism, historiography and emphasised the transient nature of space, time and memory. Simultaneously, the traumatic effects of the First World War (1914-1918) left an immense void in the lives of the people of that time. Samuel Hynes has inferred what he calls "the Myth of the War" as "the notion, partly true and partly imagined, that the war created a vast gap between the pre-war and the post-war world" (*A War Imagined*, xi). The general patriotic preoccupation with war was countered by the futility, violence, death and disillusionment that war brings about. Cultural figures including D. H. Lawrence, Clive and Vanessa Bell, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, and the philosopher Bertrand Russell openly opposed the war. The war made customary beliefs appear meaningless. The commencement of the war was described by Henry James in a letter to Howard Sturgis on August 5, 1914, as "the plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness" (*Letters*, 398). Consequently, modernist literature substituted omniscient narrative with fragmented and fallible perspectives and internalized the fractured self, in tandem with the uncertainty of life that the war signified.

The modernist era with its ambivalent perspective on life and being, accentuated the complex characteristics of society's relationship to the natural world. Nature has been extensively represented in literature and cultural renditions as a redemptive and therapeutic agent. Moreover, there has been a general tendency to create a binary framework separating nature and culture, where the solace of an idyllic pastoral life acts as a counter to the corrupted and profane urban life. In addition, individuals and their crises, being removed from their natural environment, have often been contemplated as victims of cultural phenomenon. The portrayal of nature has been relegated to a mere trope. But canonical modernists like Virginia Woolf have explored the inter-connectedness, intermingling and co-dependency that exists between the natural environment and the modern human lives. Laurence Coupe's *Green Studies Reader* has identified the modernist period as a consequence of ecocritical scholarship. Similarly, the new modernist studies analyse modernism from a historical and materialist perspective. "Some efforts at dialogue between ecocriticism and modernist studies have been made: as early as 1998, Carol Cantrell argued in *ISLE* that key elements of modernism, such as its critique of Cartesian dualism and interest in embodied perception, are of vital interest to ecocritics, while in modernist studies Douglas Mao described modernism as 'foundationally ecological' in its concern with material objects as 'something like the synecdoche of endangered nature'" ('Ecocriticism and Modernism', 100). Yet, it can be assumed that modernists, being perceptive, witnessed profound changes that were forged between human beings and the

environment that they inhabited. Moreover, this argument can be further extended to modernism's rejection of the conventional form and the questions it might pose about nature. Modernism was distinguished by its disintegration and defamiliarization of prevalent constructions, which can encompass both human nature and the natural world. The resistance that modernism offered created a counter-discourse that was somewhat akin to the discourse of nature. "Merleau-Ponty asserts that perception and language arise from the 'continuity between our bodies and the world' and that knowledge involves not a predatory instrumentality but a process of 'reciprocal exchange between multiple centers of perception'." ('Ecocriticism and Modernism', 107) Ecocriticism appeared in the field of literary and cultural studies in the late 20th century, primarily as a marginal phenomenon. Ecocritics have assumed an interdisciplinary approach where they have equated the progress of civilization with worldwide environmental catastrophe – deforestation, climate change, desertification and rampant exploitation of natural resources, which demanded immediate address. Walter Benjamin has observed in one of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' that there is "…no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (*Illuminations*, 258). This argument can be further extended to the ecocritics who observe that culture thrives on the exploitation of the natural world. If war is considered to be a by-product of civilization, it has been indifferent to the consequences on the natural world of which humans are a part. Although, modernist writers were not distinctly concerned about the repercussions that the war had on the environment, yet, the modernists in their exploration of the fractured being, ultimately delved deeper into the relationship that was forged between the human and the environment he inhabited. The vulnerability of human lives was juxtaposed with the disintegration of the natural world. The extensive scientific advancements that characterised the age, brought with it ruthless exhibition of power and war was the inevitable means of perpetrating the same. The discourse of war naturally eliminated social and environmental concerns. But that did not necessarily erase them- as Derrida argues "[t]hat does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book" (*Limited Inc*, 148).

The presence of nature in Virginia Woolf's texts acts as a counter to the hegemonic discourse of war and power. Woolf's life and work resonate with her interactions with nature and environment, and the personal and political consequences of such interactions. For Woolf, the study of nature is indispensable to the perception and description of life. Her first memories of the natural world are recorded in "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). She conveys her affinity to the whole environment in the following words: "I was looking at the flower by the front door; 'That is the whole,' I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower" ('A Sketch of the Past', 71). Woolf, also, narrates her experience of living with animals – her early diaries refer to the dogs that her family had and also the dogs she had with Leonard Woolf. Thoby, Woolf's older brother was the family naturalist and inspired his younger siblings to catch moths and butterflies, and make detailed observation of birds. She was acquainted with the works of 18th C. naturalists, such as Gilbert White and Thomas Pennant. The Stephen children's newspaper, the "Hyde Park Gate News", recorded their familiarity with one of the leading mid-Victorian natural historian, the Rev. G. J. Wood. Leslie Stephen was an amateur botanist, who collected flowers and kept them pressed inside an album, and inspired his children to familiarize themselves with the various types of plants that grew in their

neighbourhood. Woolf went for bug-hunting with her siblings, caught butterflies and moths- which were encouraged by her parents and displayed in their family museum. Leslie Stephen even went on to form the family Entomological Society. Another major influence on them was the entomological works of Rev. F. O. Morris's books on British birds, butterflies and moths. Being educated in Victorian natural history, cultured nature was also very much a part of the Stephen family. Woolf recorded her early life in London, where the family visited the Kensington Gardens for daily walks, the Regent's Park Zoo and toured the recently opened Museum of Natural History. "The fact that the children of Leslie Stephen, the 'godless Victorian' who 'attributed his loss of faith quite directly to reading The Origin of Species', could be brought up on this pre-Darwinian scientific tradition demonstrates the stagnation of popular natural history in the late Victorian period" (*Virginia Woolf and The Study of Nature*, 35-36). Woolf gained direct access to the literary world through her father, Leslie Stephen, editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography* and *The Cornhill Magazine*, and author of *Hours in a Library*, *Mausoleum Book*, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, and *The Playground of Europe*, and many other articles and critical reviews. Woolf, in keeping with the change that the age was going through, tried to revise the characteristics that the novel assumed in the 19th century. "Living from 1882 through 1941, Woolf saw and charted the transition of consciousness from Victorian confidence and Edwardian upheaval to Modernist perplexity and phenomenological relativism" (*Bloom's Bio Critiques Virginia Woolf*, 67-68). Woolf famously proclaimed "On or about December 1910 human character changed", followed by "All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature", in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' in 1924 (*Collected Essays*, 320). Woolf's works developed a unique medium to delve into this unknowable psyche, altering the perception of reality and how it is perceived or represented. At the same time, it was crucial to analyse how these dynamics altered or sustained the relation that humans had with the natural environment that they inhabited.

The encounter with radical modernism made Woolf reject a scientific perspective of the natural world and elevated her affinity to a more visionary approach. Woolf's works often embody nature through modernist aesthetic representations by means of impressionist narrative techniques. According to Woolf, a part of nature should be represented by an artist as it is, imbued with the artist's subjective reality. Woolf's shift from a scientifically objective depiction of nature to an impressionistic one, dehumanizes the representation of nature. Thus, with Woolf, nature is inextricably connected with one's experience, perceptions and visions, contrary to mere realistic depictions that represent nature as a separate entity. Not only does Woolf narrate personal emotions, but also diffuses a spirit in the nonhuman world. Woolf's narrator in "The Mark on the Wall", tries to imagine the life experience of a tree: "the close dry sensation of being wood; then the grinding of the storm; then the slow, delicious ooze of sap …. The song of birds must sound very loud and strange in June; and how cold the feet of insects must feel upon it, as they make laborious progresses up the creases of the bark, or sun themselves upon the thin green awning of the leaves" (*The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, 82-83). Woolf, here, explores the subjectivity of a nonhuman being, i.e. the tree and tries to manifest how it feels. In *To The Lighthouse* (1927), a simple weather report upsets the plans made by humans, with Mrs. Ramsay finally realising that it is only through

participation in the animal world, and by following the birds- that this plan will come to fruition. The title of *The Waves* (1931) foregrounds the natural world as an agency for the human lives. Simultaneously, Woolf uses cultural metaphors to describe natural elements- the human lives and concerns are juxtaposed with the natural progress throughout the day. Again, in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the character of Septimus Warren Smith perceives everything around him in a manner, that is not usually considered 'normal'. Orlando from the eponymous novel forges a firm connection with an oak tree, under which he composes poetry. He appreciates the hardness of the oak tree in his boyhood, which gives him a sense of stability. The consciousness of Racheal Vinrace from *The Voyage Out* (1915) is momentarily arrested when she sees a tree in her walk. The most remarkable short story by Woolf in this regard is the *Kew Gardens* (1921), where she plunges the reader into the microscopic atmosphere of the garden. The third-person narrative technique is concentrated on a single flower bed, while, describing the people who pass by it. A profound connection is forged between the human beings and the insects with the sun. A rhythm is contrived as the story moves back and forth from the nonhuman to the human world. In Woolf's works, nature is represented from multi-perspective that allows for varied subjective context through which nature can be internalized. The natural forces are constantly at work, irrespective of the humans inhabiting them – this idea underlies Woolf's works. The early association that Woolf had with nature and its elements is reflected in her portrayal of fictional children occupied with the same activity. Jacob Flanders forages for marine life in tidal pools, and his brother, John collects and classifies butterflies, moths and beetles; the Ramsay children are also surrounded by sea-weeds, butterflies, crabs and sea-birds; Martin Pargiter recommends a beetle expedition. For Woolf, the natural world generally fascinates children, but it tends to vary with the disposition of the child. This preoccupation with nature further initiates wider social values.

Virginia Woolf's *Kew Gardens* prefigures her composition of *Jacob's Room* (1922). "[The] ecocritical premise [of] a text is never separate from its environment: 'Genres and texts are themselves arguably "ecosystems," not only in the narrow sense of the text as a discursive "environment," but also in the broader sense that "texts help reproduce sociohistorical environments" in stylized form (Barwashi 2001: 73). Indeed, an individual text must be thought of as environmentally embedded from its germination to its reception (Buell 2005: 44)" (*Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 12). Woolf resumed her diary entries from August, 1917, after recuperating from her illness in 1915. The country house, Asheham, which she rented from 1911 to 1919, gave her a quieter environment that allowed her to observe the outside environment closely and to introspect. She perceived how nature flourished richly, without any kind of human intervention. She also visited the Kew Gardens frequently during these times and kept record of the new plants or birds that she observed. *Jacob's Room* was envisaged by Woolf in the following manner around that time-

> Reflections upon beginning a work of fiction to be called,
> perhaps, Jacob's Room: Thursday, April 15th 1920
> I think the main point is that it should be free.
> Yet what about form?
> Let us suppose that the Room will hold it together.
> Intensity of life compared with immobility.
> Experiences.

To change style at will. (*Macmillan Modern Novelists*, 38)

It appears that in *Jacob's Room* Woolf endeavours to assert how knowledge and enlightenment have, in fact, been detrimental to the humans, since it only allows superficial understanding; civilization leading to war and violence. So, Woolf focuses on 'room(s)' for delineating her characters in the novel- where, not only Jacob's, but each individual's perception of the world creates their individual truth.

Jacob first appears in the novel on the seashore, evading his mother's attention. Woolf portrays him as part of the landscape, suggesting how the environment that Jacob inhabits is as important as himself. Jacob is included in the narrative as a part of the rock on which he is perched: "The rock was one of those tremendously solid brown, or rather black, rocks which emerge from the sand like something primitive. Rough with crinkled limpet shells and sparsely strewn with locks of seaweed, a small boy has to stretch his legs far apart, and indeed to feel rather heroic, before he gets to the top" (*Jacob's Room*, 2). Jacob is heard speaking for the first time in the novel, after Woolf begins describing the tide pool and the "opal-shelled crab" that emerges from it (*Jacob's Room*, 2). The narrative is interrupted by Jacob's murmuring: "Oh, a huge crab" *(Jacob's Room*, 2). Woolf then goes on to depict how 'he' "begins his journey on weakly legs on the sandy bottom" (*Jacob's Room*, 2). Woolf never makes explicit the identity of the 'he' she alludes to here, and the journey might very well be Jacob's, beginning from this instance. Immediately, Jacob seizes the crab and it feels cool and light to his touch. The journey that Jacob embarks on begins with the spoil of nature. Betty Flanders's tear-stained letters to Captain Barfoot states how "everything seems satisfactorily arranged", and they are "packed…like herrings in a barrel" (*Jacob's Room*, 1). On the other hand, Betty's vigorous search for a stamp makes her appear like an insect with an antennae, through the eyes of Charles Steele, who is painting. He hurriedly paints the canvas violet-black because the landscape being too pale, "needed it" (*Jacob's Room*, 1). There are many elements on the beach that are not actually what they appear to be- the prostrate sun-bathing bodies of the couple appear to be like corpses to Jacob, who frightened by the gulls gathered at their feet like carrion birds, rushes to his nanny, whose appearance is akin to a rock covered in seaweed. Jacob is gradually plunged into the despair of his surroundings. He notices a skull under the cliff- it is impossible to ascertain whether he runs towards or away from that skull, but ends up finally holding the skull "in his arm" (*Jacob's Room*, 2). But amidst all the dilemmas that surround him, Jacob seems to secure a strange solace in the skull, maybe as a sign from the past, which is followed by his discovery and being chided by his mother. Betty forgets to buy the meat for dinner and puts a sleepless Archer to sleep by asking him to think about the fairies, or the beautiful birds returning to their nests. But the sense of security and of a wholesome family has already been breached by the death of her husband, Seabrook Flanders. The first chapter ends with Jacob soundly asleep, with the crab futilely trying to escape from the pail, prefiguring the fate that awaits Jacob and a heavy rain that overpowers the aster flower. The very opening chapter establishes a deep connection between nature and human lives, where the natural environment does not merely act as a metaphor, but complements the turbulence and dilemmas that characterise human existence and will dominate the lives of the characters. The ensuing chapter follows Seabrook's uneventful life that has been concealed by his tombstone that read "Merchant of the City" (*Jacob's Room*, 5). Woolf lyrically narrates how Seabrook has now become a part of nature that surrounds the Flanders family. Woolf presents an idyllic rural life, with the Flanders family visiting the

Dods Hill and Betty languidly gazing at the distant sea and the horizon. She thinks about the aquarium in the town which had visitors coming from all over the town, where a monstrous shark caught by Captain George Boase was on display. Years pass by, Archer joins the merchant navy, Jacob and John collect bugs and preserve butterflies. Woolf gives equal importance to humans as well as nonhuman beings when she narrates "A garnet brooch has dropped into its grass. A fox pads stealthily. A leaf turns on its edge. Mrs. Jarvis, who is fifty years of age, reposes in the camp in the hazy moonlight" (*Jacob's Room*, 10). Woolf situates all these elements side by side without prioritizing the human over the other elements. It is from the *Kew Gardens* that Woolf displaces the usual human-centred narrative technique from above, and experiments with the bottom-up perspective, thereby, disseminating a single, centralized point of view. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf satirically notes how both dogs and women, both devout and faithful, are neither approved by the religion or the church. This decentres the traditional all-knowing human, male narrator and supplants it with a hesitant female witness, who allows multiple and diverse points of view and voices to converge.

In his early days at Cambridge, Jacob expresses his discomfiture with the genteel society. The natural world acts as a solace against the oppressive forces of civilization. "Despite Jacob's romantic sensibility, we find that in Woolf's novel the landscape seems to be always already polluted by the concept of the wasteland; we cannot hear Jacob's surname without thinking of the famous battlefield that shares it or "find the poppies spread in the sun" without remembering the flowers' bloody history and rich symbolic capital" ('Reading *Jacob's Room* as a Transmission of Shocks', 38-39). Yet, Woolf offers a consolation to the readers through the natural landscape - "They say the sky is the same everywhere. Travellers, the shipwrecked, exiles, and the dying draw comfort from the thought, and no doubt if you are of a mystical tendency, consolation, and even explanation, shower down from the unbroken surface" (*Jacob's Room*, 12). These lines resonate with Jacob's romantic nature which is simultaneously challenged by his initiation into the civilized world, which seeks to control nature and the beings who inhabit it. The fox hunting in Jacob's Room portents the approach of World War I, resulting in Jacob's inevitable fall from the horse and discontinuing the hunting adventure. Woolf's allusion to the death's-head moths, little bones lying on the turf, peacocks devouring bloody entrails, the sound of a tree falling, Mrs. Jarvis's fantasy about galloping phantom horsemen over the moors or Jacob's flight of fancy during his stay in Greece, resembling wild horses- all indicate towards the impending war and Jacob's eventual death. "Jacob's imaginary fusion with his horse in a fox-hunt also links him to the ancient Centaurs of Greek myth, notorious for their lustful, unruly ways, including profligate indulgence in drunkenness and rape, characteristics that manifest themselves in milder forms in Jacob's own behaviour" ( 'The Woolf, the Horse and the Fox', 118-19). There is another instance of Mrs. Durrant visiting Mrs. Pascoe, where Woolf describes Mrs. Durrant as hawk-like, who has lost her ebullience. Mrs. Durrant expects her son and comments on the potatoes going bad because of the blight. This is followed by their ride up the hills in her carriage. While Mrs. Durrant is able to assimilate the entire scenery, Mrs. Pascoe can only perceive a patch. After riding up the hills, they are encountered with an ethereal view of the vista- "The moss was soft; the tree–trunks spectral. Beyond them lay a silvery meadow. The pampas grass raised its feathery spears from mounds of green at the end of the meadow. A breadth of water gleamed. Already the convolvulus moth was spinning over the flowers. Orange and purple, nasturtium and cherry pie, were washed into the twilight, but the

tobacco plant and the passion flower, over which the great moth spun, were white as china" (*Jacob's Room*, 23). But the rooks are forever present and the tree does not have enough space to house them all, signifying the imminent war and the death it would bring along with it. Woolf also makes semi-autobiographical references to Jacob's passion for naming, cataloguing and arranging the moth specimens that he captures. This entire pursuit is steeped with violence and man's tendency to systematize and control nature. Woolf's modernist perspective criticises this propensity in man and advocates a more ambiguous mode of being. For Woolf, it is eventually impossible to name and classify different species, in the same manner, that Jacob's being is made more pronounced by his absence at critical points in the story. However, Jacob is much like the butterfly he chases or the moths that he names. His life is short-lived, but eventful, and in his death, his absence and the letters that he leaves behind, only regenerates him in the memories of the people who knew him. The readers are informed of Jacob's death in the penultimate chapter through Clara Durrant's imagination. Jacob's image flashes before Clara's eye before fading away in the cityscape, in the same manner as a red underwing moth lies unnoticed on a tree, and is abruptly revealed by the red flutter of its wings.

Woolf interprets the experiences of life the way it is perceived in reality, in fragments. Jacob is characterized by the physical environment he inhabits. Woolf does not provide any rational explanation to the readers at the end of the novel and the readers are left with Mrs. Flanders holding the shoes of her dead son. Jacob remains ambiguous and elusive, much like the memory of her brother, Thoby, whom she had lost to disease at the age of 24. The novel has been structured along with an anti-anthropocentric multicentric viewpoint. Woolf akin to her modernist sensibilities does not create a well-rounded character. To cite Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, modernism brought with it conscious fragmentation against the portrayal of the entire panorama. Woolf displays what the biologist Jakob von Uexküll described as the Umwelt of the animal in the first decade of the 20th C. Uexküll expands the term to emphasize the inclusivity of all beings in the environment. Similarly, in Woolf's work all the elements of nature are interspersed into the lives of the humans. "The world of Jacob's Room is a textual equivalent of a world where, in Karen J. Warren's words, 'difference does not breed domination" (1990: 145). Woolf's new experimental form emerges as closely tied to her ecological awareness. It has its prototype in the journey of a snail across a flowerbed, and is rooted in her close observation of the interlaced multiverse of the natural world" (*Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 28).

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