Aunthood and Narrative Voice: Virginia Woolf's Materteral Form

Reynolds, R.

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

Aunthood and Narrative Voice: Virginia Woolf's Materteral Form

Rosemary Jean Reynolds

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature

School of Humanities, University of Westminster

April 2020

ABSTRACT

It is rare to find an area of Virginia Woolf's work that has not had, in some form, critical attention. Yet this thesis is the first study, of any length, which takes aunts in Woolf's writing as its focus.

This thesis starts by asking the question, why *are* there so many aunts in Woolf's writing? This initial enquiry leads to a consideration of the position of aunthood in British culture during Woolf's lifetime, and argues that the discourse surrounding the 1907 Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act is emblematic of the aunt's unique position between inside, and outside, the family. Using this historicist research alongside existing poststructuralist Woolf scholarship, this thesis develops a new way to read Woolf's innovation in narrative form. It develops a theory of the materteral which takes into account the aunt's specific historical position at the time, and Woolf's personal conception of aunthood as expressed in her private writing as well as her fiction. Using this understanding of the materteral this thesis traces the trajectory of aunthood in Woolf's work, whether it manifests in character (Helen Ambrose, Eleanor Pargiter, and Lucy Swithin to name a few of Woolf's aunts) or, as this work argues is particularly pertinent for Woolf studies, in narrative voice.

CONTENTS

In loving memory of my brother

Freddie Reynolds

1990-2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I am sincerely grateful to my supervisors: Professor Leigh Wilson and Dr. Simon Avery. Your kindness and humour, alongside your thorough and generous feedback on my work, have made writing this thesis a truly happy experience. Thank you for your guidance, endlessly-impressive knowledge and expertise, and your belief in me and this project.

There are other academics without whom this project would not exist – Professor Steve Ellis and Dr. Jan Campbell were crucial to the early stage of its development at the University of Birmingham, bringing respectively an expertise in Woolf's relationship to her past, and in psychoanalytic theory. Dr. Helen Glew at University of Westminster – your insight and support is so much appreciated. Dr. Matthew Geary, thank you for your help navigating psychoanalytic theory and for your many years of friendship.

To all my students at University of Westminster, at HMYOI Feltham, and to all of my young people at SPEAR London, thank you. You keep me curious, alert, and alive – always helping me to situate my work in a bigger picture.

To my understanding managers who have allowed me to multi-task as much as I have over the last few years, thank you – Kim Hastilow at University of Westminster, and Avis Maxwell at SPEAR London.

Sincere thanks to my proof-readers (and friends) – Jenny and Sue Fogarty, Dr. Anne Reus, Cassie Edmiston, and Dr. Mark Vincent.

Thank you to my partner, David McNamee, for your love, patience, and cups of tea. Thank you to Kitty Clark, for your unwavering faith in me over the last 16 years and for inspiring me to be boldly creative in all that I do. Thank you to Dr. Morwenna Bennallick for offering me support in every area of my life, and for showing me how to fight the good fight.

Thank you to my family for their support: my dad Alan Reynolds, his partner Sue Edmunds, my mum Helen Reynolds, and my brothers Freddie and Matthew. Thank you also to my mother-in-law (or rather, not-in-law) Sally McNamee, for all your encouragement.

Thank you to my Saturday morning social club: Frances O'Callaghan, Ros Selby and Val Townsend. Long may we read our fortunes together.

And finally to my dear friends Kirsty Bryant, Lauren Puckey, Marney Ryan, Christina Brown, Chelsey Mordue, Katy Oglethorpe, Susie Ivins, and Maggie, Katie, and Emma Cruise; thank you for filling my life with so much laughter and for always picking me up when I fall.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Rosie Reynolds, 21/04/20

INTRODUCTION

This thesis takes for its subject the role of the aunt in Virginia Woolf's experiment with narrative position and voice. While some critics (such as Elizabeth French Boyd and Jane Marcus) have considered Woolf's own aunts, and the relationship between their writing and hers, this thesis is the first study of aunthood in Virginia Woolf's fiction.[1] It seeks to understand why there are so many aunts in her work, and to question their roles as actors on the level of diegesis and on the extradiegetic level of narrative voice. In this thesis I conduct close literary analysis of Woolf's work, but the lack of any existing framework for literary analysis of aunthood has led me to also utilise research from other disciplines and to take an approach that also uses elements of narratology, kinship studies and historical investigation. Thus while my research draws on the great body of Woolf criticism that exists, it also seeks to identify an area of Woolf studies that is deserving of more attention.

Aunthood was a subject which Woolf could not put down. From Helen Ambrose in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915) to Lucy Swithin in her final novel *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf's novels and stories are full of aunts. In this thesis I argue that by reading these aunts closely *as* aunts, rather than following the critical tendency to read them as surrogate mothers (if their familial position is noticed at all), we can find a new way of understanding Woolf's innovation in narrative form and the relationship between character and narrative in her work.

In this thesis I work towards a theory of materteral narrative voice as one that exists between character and narration. This narrative voice is both a presence in the text and in its

[1] For example, Elizabeth French Boyd, *Bloomsbury Heritage: Their Mothers and Their Aunts* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976); and Jane Marcus, 'The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination', in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

containing narrative. It resists distinction, fixedness, even naming - and therefore, in terms as defined by Julia Kristeva, resisting the patriarchal symbolic.[2] The materteral narrative voice challenges patriarchal notions of separation and delineation and reconfigures the relationship between textual diegetic levels – between the story and the telling of the story. In this way it is associated with the semiotic – with that pre-linguistic space before even the most primal boundary between 'self' and 'other' exists. To understand why it is the figure of the aunt that is key to Woolf's narrative innovation, it is necessary to historicise the family romance that underpins Kristevan readings of Woolf – to bring together poststructuralist approaches with social history. In Freudian terms, separation from the mother (the transition from the semiotic world of the mother to the symbolic order of the father) is a necessary part of a childhood, as is the Oedipal phase which allows us to detach from our parents and become healthy adults and part of a social world beyond the family. These separations, first from the mother and then from the parental unit, are facilitated by the incest taboo: to act on our sexual desire we (and I acknowledge here the cultural specifics of Freud's 'we') must leave the family and direct our desire elsewhere. Claire Colebrook, in her work on feminist criticism and poststructuralism, explains the narrative in the structuralist terms with which post-structuralism was in dialogue:

> The entry into this system [of culture] takes the form of a prohibition of incest: we abandon the first object of desire – the mother who meets all our bodily needs – and establish relations of alliance with other families, whose women we exchange for those of our own. Culture begins, then, with the exchange of women. Woman

[2] Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, Ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 89–136.

> becomes that first desired and denied object that is renounced in order that we might recognise each other as cultural subjects.[34]

But the aunt, who I argue is neither fully inside nor outside of the family, complicates this exchange. Who does she belong to? Aunthood problematises the incest taboo, as I demonstrate below by situating the figure of the aunt within a legal and sociohistorical framework. By using a culturally specific definition of aunthood and relating this to the Kristevan semiotic, I demonstrate how vital the proliferation of aunthood in Woolf's work is in allowing a potentially non-incestuous continued relationship to the semiotic. In other words, I demonstrate the ways in which aunthood allows Woolf to renegotiate and ultimately reject the fixed separation of character and narrative.

In Chapter One, then, I seek to explore Woolf's own understanding of aunthood. Initially I do this by establishing some contemporary historical contexts for the aunt. I situate Woolf's understanding of aunthood in a very specific moment in the history of the family, when the traditional sprawling, many-sibling Victorian family was becoming smaller. As historian Peter Scott pointed out in 2008, 'there is still doubt regarding the motivations driving changes in families' fertility behaviour and the extent to which the same factors influenced different socio-economic groups', and it is not the aim of this thesis to postulate on the causes of the decline.[5] Rather, what I do in Chapter One, is use studies of census data to evidence that there *was* a decline in the number of children people were having, and historical studies of family households to suggest that one so-far ignored impact of the fertility decline was a great reduction in the number of aunts and uncles a child may expect to have. The decline was so

---

3 Claire Colebrook, 'Feminist Criticism and Poststructuralism', in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 216.
4 Colebrook, 216.
5 Peter Scott, 'Did Owner-Occupation Lead to Smaller Families for Interwar Working-Class Households?', *Economic History Review* 61, no. 1 (2008): 99.

steep that, as Wally Seccombe points out, 'there was evidently widespread discontinuity between the generations' – one effect of which would be that someone might *have* many aunts and uncles but be an aunt or uncle to far fewer children, as was the precise case with Woolf.[6] I do not wish to oversimplify, and the multitude of literature on the subject is evidence of the complexity of this shift.[7] As Scott and Sretzer have both said, this was not one smooth transition; although there is a consensus that from the 1880s until the 1940s (almost exactly Woolf's lifetime), family size was reducing at a rapid rate. Aunts were in decline.[8]

Having established grounds for my reading of aunthood, in Chapter Two I begin my literary analysis with *The Voyage Out* (1915). Departing from the work of Patricia Laurence on Woolf's exploration of 'the dialectics of outside and inside', I argue that the aunt in particular is a way for Woolf to explore seemingly opposite ideas.[9] Looking at existing criticism of the novel, I suggest that Woolf scholarship has neglected the figure of the aunt in *The Voyage Out*. In some cases I suggest that the role of the aunt has been obscured by descriptions of Helen Ambrose, an aunt-character, as anything but an aunt. I establish the sheer volume of aunts in the novel, and the prominence of the word. Focusing on Rachel's Richmond aunts, the two women who raised her after the death of her mother, I introduce the idea of aunthood in the novel functioning as a switch point where the narrative deviates from realist storytelling into a more impressionistic expression of the limitations of realist form in communicating character. There is a significant body of criticism looking at *The Voyage Out*'s relationship to the tradition of Bildungsroman, and in Chapter Two I seek to establish

---

6 Wally Seccombe, 'Starting to Stop: Working-Class Fertility Decline in Britain', *Past & Present* 126 (1990): 156.

7 The literature on the subject is concisely summarised by Simon Sretzer in *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

8 Sretzer, 9–65; Scott, 'Did Owner-Occupation Lead to Smaller Families for Interwar Working-Class Households?', 122; Sretzer, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940*, 533.

9 Patricia Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 135.

exactly how I am using the term. I consider aunts in Bildungsromane, particularly the character of Mrs Reed in *Jane Eyre* (1847), and here use one of the few pieces of criticism I have been able to find which focuses specifically on the literary function of aunthood: Colm Toibin's 2011 article for the *London Review of Books*, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)'.[10] Examining the ways in which *The Voyage Out* and the aunts within it reject realist traditions, I consider in detail Helen and Rachel's relationship, making use of Patricia Juliana Smith's reading of the relationship as lesbian.[11] In the latter part of the chapter I look at narrative voice, and the influence that Helen's presence has not only on the level of diegesis, but in the heterodiegetic level too. The introduction here of the aunt as being able to exist between diegetic levels – as being the site where character is most clearly an inextricable mix of both form and content – is an important one for the rest of the thesis, and throughout this work I develop this argument using Woolf's novels, stories and her essays on character.[12]

In Chapter Three I continue chronologically and consider three key texts: the first is *Night and Day* (1919), Woolf's second novel. Like her first, there are many aunt characters and yet no criticism I have found considers what function aunthood plays in the text. The second is a pivotal text – perhaps the most important for this thesis – in which Woolf's conflagration of narrative and aunthood is most explicit: the 1920 short story 'An Unwritten Novel'. Finally, I look to *Jacob's Room* (1922), the first of Woolf's novels not to feature aunt-characters but also the first, I argue, to utilise a materteral narrative voice. Throughout Chapter Three, I

---

10 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Colm Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', *London Review of Books* 33, no. 6 (2011): 13–19.
11 Patricia Juliana Smith, '"The Things People Don't Say": Lesbian Panic in *The Voyage Out*', in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, Eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 128–45.
12 Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in *Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32–36; Virginia Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', in *Selected Essays*, Ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1992), 37–54; Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Selected Essays*, Ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1992), 6–12.

work towards this understanding of what aunthood looks like in literary form, moving away from a focus on aunt-characters. Before discussing these, I begin Chapter Three by introducing some key terms for the chapter, borrowed from the field of narratology and using the work of Gerard Genette and Frank Stanzel. I describe the form of both *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* in narratological terms and use these to explore the concept of a materteral narrative voice being one that exists between diegetic levels: a concept key to reading 'An Unwritten Novel' in particular.

I use *Night and Day* to establish a connection between aunthood and narrative control, though this is not the only novel where this is a facet of aunthood, and in Chapter Four I explain how this functions in later novels. It is in *Night and Day*, though, that we most clearly see aunt characters as those who are skilled in creating a narrative. Mrs Hilbery is mother to the protagonist Katharine and, while based on Woolf's aunt Anny and an aunt to another less important character, Cassandra, her family role is clearly that of mother before it is that of aunt. Unlike Katharine's aunts Celia, Eleanor or Lady Otway, Mrs Hilbery is not graced with the insight or writerly skill to create narrative and communicate character. She is not able to pull together any kind of narrative out of the facts of her father's life, and struggles on unsuccessfully to write a biography of him. I consider in turn the aunts of the novel, before exploring the novel's form and its relationship to aunthood. Moving on to 'An Unwritten Novel', I closely analyse the text to demonstrate that it is aunthood which is key to the creation of character. I argue that in this story the boundaries between diegetic levels become permeable, never again returning to the clear separation of story and narration found in *Night and Day*.

The influence of 'An Unwritten Novel' on all of Woolf's writing which came after is profound: here, using the aunt, she tests out a method of integrating character and narrative voice which is to characterise her novels from then on. In the final part of Chapter Three, I

show how this new form is developed in *Jacob's Room,* leading to an understanding that the presence of the aunt in Woolf's work is not limited to characters in the plot, and arguing that even without these the materteral can be read in the text with regard to its form.

In my fourth and final chapter, I focus on *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941). I begin the chapter by acknowledging the work between *Jacob's Room* and *The Years*, giving a sense of the trajectory of aunthood following Woolf's innovative discovery in 'An Unwritten Novel.' I argue that the relative disappearance of aunts in her fiction between 'An Unwritten Novel' and *The Years* is related to her finding full expression of the materteral in the novels' forms.

In exploring *The Years*, I argue that we see in the novel a new function of the materteral narrative voice: it is able to act as an agent in the diegesis by moving objects and ideas between the minds of different characters. I closely analyse passages where the boundaries between characters' consciousnesses are slippery, and come to a thorough examination of the character of Eleanor Pargiter. Eleanor is an aunt character in the novel, but I suggest she is also related to the novel's narrative voice and shares qualities with a narrator which situate her, with her containment of multiple stories and desire to understand and communicate character, somewhere between diegetic levels.

Despite poststructuralist critics' relative disinterest in this novel, I conclude that the unfixed and duplicative nature of kinship roles in *The Years* – its movement across various collateral family clusters, rather than focusing on one cluster and its direct lineage, means that each character is both sibling and cousin at least – is something with rich potential for reading in the context of Kristevan ideas of the semiotic and symbolic. In Chapter Four I use these concepts, in the specific context of the British family in the early twentieth century, to suggest that it is *The Years,* rather than *The Waves*, where Woolf's writing is most anti-

patriarchal: because the very structure of the novel resists lineage in favour of a far harder to define mode of relation.

I conclude Chapter Four with a reading of *Between the Acts* (1941). *Between the Acts* is Woolf's final novel and it features a prominent aunt character, Lucy Swithin. In my reading of the novel I consider its distinctive narrative voice, which builds on Woolf's earlier experiments with a narrative voice that exists between the characters in the diegesis and an extradiegetic narratorial world (with the accompanying knowledge usually allowed to a heterodiegetic narrator). Using Louise Westling's reading of the novel through the lens of phenomenological philosophy (in particular that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty), I argue that the aunt is key to the narrative voice being a site for the representation of simultaneous subjective experience. Rather than being focalised by different characters in turn (as in, for example, *Mrs Dalloway*), it instead contains and expresses the consciousnesses of humans, animals, even flora, across time and space as if they were not discrete but swirled together into what Westling calls a 'dramatic cacophony'.[13] Lucy Swithin's character can be described as a microcosm of the novel's narrative voice. Galia Benziman's description of her makes this clear: 'Her entire existence revolves around the collective and the universal. For her, everyone, herself included, is merely a particle in a huge, inseparable self.'[14] My reading of the importance of the aunt for this particular style of narrative again relies on the cultural knowledge of the role as an unfixed one; the historical and biographical knowledge of Woolf's particular use of the title to carry opposite connotations, and an application of Kristevan ideas to articulate the way in which this narrative voice is a semiotic expression and thus anti-patriarchal (and materteral).

[13] Louise Westling, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', *New Literary History* 30, no. 4 (1999): 868.
[14] Galia Benziman, '"Dispersed Are We": Mirroring and National Identity in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 1 (2006): 56.

Overall, this thesis seeks not only to shed light on a previously under-researched aspect of Woolf's writing, but to develop an approach to reading aunthood that transcends the confines of character study and allows us to determine a materteral form. With the hindsight of Woolf studies' extensive work on Woolf's biography, and on locating the anti-patriarchal in her texts, I argue that the figure of the aunt demands a synthesised approach – the result of which is a new way of understanding Woolf's inarguable literary innovation.

CHAPTER ONE: Mother and Other: positioning the aunt in the history of the family

'Aunts were Aunts and Crosses were Crosses; and though you might drop your "G"s in talking of them, you could not bury them.'[1]

The quotation in the epigraph is from a story called 'Friendships Gallery' [sic] which Woolf wrote for her friend Violet Dickinson in 1907, and in opening the thesis with a brief consideration of it I hope to suggest the complexity of Woolf's relationship to aunthood, some of the thesis's key themes and the need for a deeper understanding of aunthood's prominence in her writing.[2]

Virginia Woolf's affectionate nickname for Violet Dickinson was 'Aunt', a title which she used to address Dickinson in various letters between 1902 and when 'Friendships Gallery' was written in 1907.[3] She also refers to Dickinson as an aunt to her siblings.[4] In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee notes that Dickinson 'has been treated subsequently as a negligible, comical figure' – something which Lee (and other critics, such as Jane Marcus) have challenged.[5] Lee emphasises the emotional impact of Woolf's relationship with her older friend:

---

1 Virginia Woolf, 'Friendships Gallery', *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no. 3 (1979): 277. Note: In 1979 *Twentieth Century Literature* published a section of the much longer full work, which is available in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.
2 Woolf, 'Friendships Gallery'.
3 For example, Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Vol 1: 1888-1912. The Flight of the Mind*, Ed. Nigel Nicolson, assisted by Joanne Trautmann, vol. 1 (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 54.
4 Woolf, 1:244.
5 Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), 196; Marcus, 'The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination', 37–38.

> What she gave Virginia Stephen at a time of great vulnerability was very important. Dickinson enabled her to behave freely, childishly, like a daughter or a favourite pet or a sweetheart.[6]

She notes that it was Dickinson who 'set up [Woolf's] first professional commission, to review for Margaret Lyttleton, the editor of the Women's Supplement of an Anglo-Catholic clerical paper called the *Guardian*'.[7] Like Lee, Marcus credits Dickinson with beginning Woolf on the road to a professional writing career along with one of Woolf's actual aunts, Caroline Stephen, saying that: 'Between them, the two Quaker spinsters, Violet Dickinson and Caroline Stephen, wove a professional life of work for the lost young woman.'[8] Despite this, Marcus does not connect Dickinson and Stephen in their aunthood and surrogate aunthood, and describes Caroline Stephen as 'undoubtedly the most important of Woolf's early mother/mentors,' erasing her aunthood in a way that, as this thesis demonstrates throughout, is generally characteristic of critical readings of aunthood.[9] In fact, when 'Friendships Gallery' was published in *Twentieth Century Literature* in 1979, Ellen Hawkes described Dickinson's role in Woolf's life as a 'surrogate mother, an older sister, a confidante, a tutor in her reading and a mentor for her writing' – but never directly as an aunt.[10] What is clear is that Woolf had great affection for Dickinson, and that Dickinson played an important role in Woolf's professional and emotional life.

The story she writes her 'aunt' Dickinson is a spoof biography. In it, young Violet develops under the watchful eye of a cruel, critical and fanatically devout Christian aunt. The

6 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 169.
7 Lee, 215.
8 Marcus, 'The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination', 37–38.
9 Marcus, 37.
10 Ellen Hawkes, 'Introduction to "Friendships Gallery"', *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no. 3 (1979): 271.

narrative begins with the Violet-character's entrance into society via a dance at the Bath Corn Exchange, before which 'she had to submit to a solemn exhortation from her Aunt who was also her Godmother'.[11] Her aunt offers the young Violet (who she insists on calling by her given name, Mary) advice on the courses available to her in life:

> 'Mary Dickinson,' began the Aunt, using as Aunts do, the least palatable expression, 'remember that you are neither beautiful, nor, for anything I can see, in any way attractive; God in his infinite Goodness has caused you to grow at least six inches higher than you should grow; and if you are not to be a Maypole of Derision you must see to it that you shine forth as a Beacon of Godliness.'[12]

The Christian imagery of the 'Beacon of Godliness' in contrast to the pagan image of the 'Maypole of Derision' suggests that Violet's aunt is not only seeking to steer Violet's social voyage out but seeks to influence her spiritual life too. In Woolf's writing aunts who preach and practice a strict Christianity (interestingly not the more liberal Quaker Christianity of Woolf's own aunt, Caroline Stephen) appear time and again – but so too do aunts who subvert this convention. For example, in Chapter Two I discuss *The Voyage Out's* Helen Ambrose and argue that she prophesises her niece Rachel's turn away from the Church, and in Chapter Four I discuss *Between the Acts* and the character of Lucy Swithin – an aunt in whom we see arguably the most sympathetic portrayal of Christianity in Woolf's oeuvre.[13] In 'Friendships Gallery,' written more than thirty years before *Between the Acts,* the idea of the aunt as a container of contradiction, a rejector of categorization, and a vessel for exploration

---

11 Woolf, 'Friendships Gallery', 276.
12 Woolf, 276.
13 Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (Reading: Oxford World's Classics, 1992); Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998).

of ways to express the complex, subjective, modern spiritual experience within a framework that no longer works, is present. Violet is a dutiful niece and goes to the dance wearing 'a heavy golden cross', though 'in truth its bars were hollow' – suggesting both its failure to represent truly anything of meaning to its wearer and a disparity between its description by the narrator (as heavy) and Violet's experience of the object as hollow and thus, lighter than it looks.[14] The question this poses about narratorial knowledge and the relationship between character and narrative voice is a small indicator of the questions Woolf asks in her later fiction and essays – and which, this thesis contends, lead her to the development of materteral narrative voice, the key innovation in her work that we see expressed fully for the first time in 'An Unwritten Novel,' which I discuss in Chapter Three.

When one of Violet's companions at the ball suggests that the cross should be buried in the garden of the Corn Exchange, Violet finds an opportunity (the first in the story) to assert herself and her beliefs. She refuses to completely discard the cross:

> Violet expressed some very decided opinions; how Aunts were Aunts and Crosses were Crosses; and though you might drop your 'G's in talking of them you could not bury them. And if my instinct is true the Cross is still in its box, and the box is in its drawer; just as the Aunt is in her cottage, and twice a year Violet visits her.[15]

So while Violet's aunt has burdened her with a symbol of faith, she has also provided her with her first opportunity to assert herself. Without the aunt, Violet would not have this moment of self-discovery; she would not stand up to her peers. This is an early Woolfian example of an aunt character crucial to the plot – we see this again in, for example, Helen

[14] Woolf, 'Friendships Gallery', 276.
[15] Woolf, 276; Woolf, 277.

Ambrose's offer to take her niece to South America. In 'Friendships Gallery' the day following the ball, the Cross and the Aunt are inseparable:

> The first thing that caught her eye was that Emblem of her Aunt and IT [sic] which had somehow proved so versatile the night before. But now the ugly thing was one and indivisible; and Violet felt constrained to recognize it. She took it with her to her bath, and set it on the soap dish while she sponged herself. She meditated whether she should kiss it, and laughed out loud.[16]

The cross has become an 'Emblem of her Aunt'. In this story (with its 'aunt' recipient) we can see the contradictory, unfixed notion of aunthood that is explored throughout this thesis. For a woman for whom Woolf uses the term of endearment 'aunt', she has written a story in which the aunt is cruel, old-fashioned and so connected to religion that her character's emblem is a crucifix – itself having a contradictory function in the story, being a symbol of passivity and sacrifice that has been imposed on a young Violet who uses it to overcome her passivity. Within 'Friendships Gallery' the aunt can be understood to be more than just an antagonist. It is in defense of her aunt that Violet asserts herself – her true virtue is shown not by overthrowing her aunt (and by extension religion and tradition) but by finding her own way to relate to her. The ability of the role of the aunt to represent and contain dialogic opposites is one that is key to this thesis, as is aunthood's non-contingent kinship role. 'Friendships Gallery' illustrates how complex Woolf's notion of aunthood was, and this contradiction can be found later on in Woolf's writing, too. For example, in a 1934 diary entry Woolf writes:

[16] Woolf, 'Friendships Gallery', 278.

> [I] was thoroughly irritated with Duncan for making Nessa into Aunt Mary—cant come here, cant go to London as long as he is ill; & with Nessa for her passive submission; & with myself for being the good fairy Aunt.[17]

Despite the aunt character being the driving force of the narrative in 'Friendships Gallery,' Karin Westman's 2001 article about it does not use the word aunt except in one note – where she points out that Woolf also wrote comic biographies of her real life aunts Caroline Stephen and Mary Fisher.[18] In reading 'Friendships Gallery', as with all of Woolf's other stories and novels featuring prominent aunt characters, it is a mistake to assume that aunthood is incidental, however, and my research begins with a demand for a more careful reading of aunthood. This thesis does not suggest that Woolf's use of aunthood was a conscious aim, but it does suggest that, given the volume of aunts in Woolf's work, the excess of aunthood and great-aunthood in her life, and the rapidly changing shape of the family during the period of Woolf's writing, attention to aunts can show us new things about Woolf's writing.

The research framework: poststructuralism and historicism

This thesis draws on two key fields of Woolf criticism, often seen in opposition to one another, and suggests that understanding the figure of the aunt demands synthetic use of previously conflicting approaches. Firstly, it draws on poststructuralist feminist criticism on Woolf, predominantly from the mid-1980s and 1990s, that reads her fiction through the lens of Julia Kristeva's work on the symbolic and the semiotic.[19] Secondly, it draws on more

---

[17] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell, vol. 4 (London: Penguin, 1983), 239.
[18] Karin E. Westman, 'The First "Orlando": The Laugh of the Comic Spirit in Virginia Woolf's "Friendships Gallery"', *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 1 (2001): 65. This is from 2001?
[19] Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, Ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 89–136; examples of key poststructuralist work on Woolf include Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels* (Edinburgh:

currently popular historicist readings of Woolf that send researchers back to the archive, focusing on extra-literary details from Woolf's own life and from the wider social, economic and political milieu. What has driven this combination of approaches is the subject: the figure of the aunt. In this chapter I consider the theoretical fields which I use in this thesis and demonstrate how both are critical for understanding Woolf's use of aunt characters and materteral narrative form. It is in bringing these approaches together, just as much as in what they uncover, that this thesis is revealing something new in the field.

Throughout this thesis I argue that Woolf understood the role of the aunt to be one that resists categorisation and definition, and that it is this that makes it so important a role for understanding Woolf's narrative technique, which, like the aunt, exists between categories – neither fully 'in' (homodiegetic) nor 'out' (heterodiegetic). Below I explain in more detail the terms symbolic and semiotic, but suffice it to say here that aunts are linked to the semiotic. Where my argument departs then from the poststructuralist feminist criticism discussed above is by interrogating *why* the aunt is an expression of the semiotic for Woolf: I do this by historicising aunthood as a culturally determined role, so that Woolf's understanding of aunthood is specific to her time, place and personal experiences. This is in contrast to the ahistorical nature of many psychoanalytic readings of the family. This thesis is not a consideration of what aunthood is in the abstract; instead it considers the legal, social, historical and cultural construction of aunthood in England, leading up to and during Woolf's lifetime, to understand why in textual terms the aunt expresses the semiotic and challenges patriarchy. So the figure of the aunt can be seen as forcing us to construct a critical approach that unites aspects of poststructuralism with historicism. In addition to the narrative

Edinburgh University Press, 2010); and Michele Barrett, *Imagination in Theory : Essays on Culture and Writing* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998). For a detailed discussion of this approach, see Pamela Caughie, 'Postmodern and Poststructuralist Approaches to Virginia Woolf', in *Palgrave Advances in Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 143–68.

innovation that the aunt facilitates (a key exploration of this thesis), this then is another of the aunt's powerful effects – to change the lens through which we read Woolf.

The influence of the Kristevan reading of Woolf spans several decades now, with nuances and complexities that this thesis has little space to explore.[20] In her influential 1985 work *Sexual/Textual Politics* Toril Moi offers an explanation of writing practice as anti-patriarchal using Kristevan terms, which usefully glosses one of Kristeva's key terms, the symbolic:

> The modernist poem, with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning. Since Kristeva sees such conventional meaning as the structure that sustains the whole of the symbolic order – that is, all human social and cultural institutions – the fragmentation of symbolic language in modernist poetry comes for her to parallel and prefigure a total *social* revolution. For Kristeva, that is to say, there is a *specific practice of writing* that is itself 'revolutionary', analogous to sexual and political transformation, and that by its very existence testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order of orthodox society from the inside. One might argue in this light that Woolf's refusal to commit herself in her essays to a so-called rational or logical form of writing, free from fictional techniques, indicates a similar break with symbolic language, as of course do many of the techniques she deploys in her novels.[21]

[20] For a consideration of the limitations of this school of thought, see 'Introduction' in Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest & Question of Itself* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
[21] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985), 11.

The relationship between Kristevan theory and Woolf's writing has produced a rich body of criticism, for example by Makiko Minow-Pinkney and Miglena Nikolchina, that explores how the latter challenges the symbolic order of language and identifies it in particular with Kristeva's semiotic.[22] One of the key poststructuralist texts on Woolf that makes use of Kristeva is Makiko Minow-Pinkney's *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (1987), the reissue of which in 2010 is a testament to the longevity of these enquiries.[23] Describing this work in 2007, Minow-Pinkney said that:

> It maintains that theoretical readings of Woolf's aesthetics behind her experimental novels reveal Woolf's modernist aesthetics to be a feminist subversion of the deepest formal principles of the very definitions of narrative, writing and the subject, of a patriarchal social order.[…] The book explores Woolf's feminine writing as poised over the chasm between the semiotic and the symbolic, maintaining a difficult and delicate dialectic between submission to the symbolic and refusal of it.[24]

Minow-Pinkney identifies the formal challenge that Woolf's writing poses to the patriarchy, and says that it responds to 'a patriarchal social order', but does not explicitly link aesthetic qualities to particulars in the world outside the text. I contend that, while this is an incredibly useful text for exploring the semiotic in Woolf's work, it nevertheless falls down in claiming to demonstrate the challenge Woolf's writing poses to a 'patriarchal *social* order' [emphasis mine].[25] Where Minow-Pinkney's argument does not go far enough is in considering the

[22] Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*; Miglena Nikolchina, 'Born from the Head: Reading Woolf via Kristeva', *Diacritics* 21, no. 2 (1991): 30–42.
[23] Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*.
[24] Makiko Minow-Pinkney, 'Psychoanalytic Approaches', in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 65.
[25] Minow-Pinkney, 65.

relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic; making explicit the links between symbolic and semiotic form in the text and a corresponding culturally and historically specific situation in the world makes a far stronger argument. In other words, it is open to criticism for being ahistorical and, in its decentering of the human subject, at odds with more contemporary approaches to Woolf scholarship. Beth Rigel Daugherty says that 'debate has occurred between those who worry that feminism cannot raid patriarchal theories (such as those of Marx, Freud, Lacan) without being co-opted and those who believe feminism can transform those theories.'[26] Diana L. Swanson has described poststructuralism as 'not likely to be the most conducive to a scholar's ongoing involvement in single-author studies' because of its focus on text, so that it represents 'lesbianism/lesbian desire in language and narrative rather than on developing a coherent understanding of Woolf's *oeuvre* or her development as an artist, a lover, or a feminist.'[27] Rachel Bowlby, in defence of poststructuralism, sums up some of the criticisms levelled at it as 'the standard sudden-death right-on epithets' of 'ahistorical, biologistic, leaves out the social, all text, all sex, elitist, [and] apolitical'.[28] In grounding my reading of the aunt as 'between' and 'unfixed' in legal and social historical discourse, as well as in Woolf's work, I seek to avoid some of the criticisms summed up above by Bowlby. Conversely, purely historicist Woolf scholarship might be accused of lack of attention to the text as a corpus with its own generative significance, or of diluting the extraordinary innovation of Woolf's writing by reducing it to a series of material circumstances. By using elements of poststructuralism in my analysis I seek to avoid criticism that might be levelled at a singularly historicist project.

[26] Beth Rigel Daughtery, 'Feminist Approaches', in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 112.
[27] Diana L. Swanson, 'Lesbian Approaches', in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 200.

What is important here for my argument is that Woolf's resistance to the fixedness of the patriarchal symbolic order of language has been argued by many critics, but not with any reference to aunthood. What bringing the aunt to this conversation does is force the abstract notion of the Freudian family romance to be read in biological and social terms. It means we can see Woolf's resistance to the patriarchy via her texts as specifically responding to her cultural and historical position. This approach, combining poststructuralism and historicism, also has implications beyond the field of Woolf studies: suggesting that the Freudian family romance is not incompatible with a historicist approach but instead can, in some circumstances, lead to a richer understanding of the relationship between family roles and textual form.

While surveys of Woolf criticism will usually mention the Kristevan-influenced approach to her work, they also make clear that it is something that is predominantly in the past. In Jane Goldman's 'Critical Approaches' chapter in the *Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*, she includes it under a section heading 'The 1980s', though in the 1990s there were still book-length studies of Woolf making use of poststructuralist feminism (Patricia Laurence's *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* in 1993, for example).[29] By the 2000s, this approach to reading Woolf was little-seen. Curiously, Minow-Pinkney's book was reprinted in 2010 without any additional preface or introduction which might have acknowledged the relative disappearance of this kind of approach to Woolf criticism – nor do reviewers of the reprint acknowledge it.[30] Pamela Caughie, in 2007, articulated the critical turn in Woolf scholarship against poststructuralism, saying that:

---

[29] Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 133; Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*.

[30] Gerri Kimber, 'Review of *Makiko Minow-Pinkney, Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*', in *Annotated Bibliography of English Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Verita Sriratana, 'Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels/Virginia Woolf and December 1910: Studies in Rhetoric and Context', *Woolf Studies Annual* 21 (2015): 166–71.

> No one today would call her or himself a structuralist critic, and increasingly identifying oneself as a poststructuralist, deconstructive, or postmodernist critic is becoming equally passé. Instead today we hear scholars identified with movements such as cultural studies, gender studies, and queer theory.[31]

As Caughie suggests, there has been a trend since the beginning of the new century within Woolf criticism to consider her work as situated culturally, historically and in particular, politically. This can be understood as part of a wider trend in modernist studies, loosely defined as New Modernist studies, that can be dated back to the inception of the Modernist Studies Association in 1999. 'Theory has been forgotten,' Stephen Ross argued in 2009.[32] He writes that:

> Perhaps because it belongs to the same realm of the 'high' as did canonical modernism, perhaps because it is seen as an outdated instrument whose usefulness has been superseded by a return to the archive and historicism, theory has been marginalised in the new modernist studies.[33]

Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz discuss the broader turn in modernist studies in their 2008 article 'The New Modernist Studies.'[34] They explore two key areas of focus for New Modernists – far larger of the two is the shift in focus to 'literary production outside

---

31 Caughie, 'Postmodern and Poststructuralist Approaches to Virginia Woolf', 34.
32 Stephen Ross, *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 1.
33 Ross, 1.
34 Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies', *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737–48.

Western Europe and the United States' and concern with 'the interrelation of cultural, political, and economic transactions.'[35] The other is 'modernist scholars' ongoing exploration of the networks of publications in which high modernist artifacts saw print and of the movements and agendas such publications served' – in other words, new media.[36] The implication of this trend for Woolf studies in particular is usefully summed up by Laura Marcus:

> The Woolf of contemporary feminist criticism is a Woolf in the world. Critics look on the one hand to the workings of space and place in Woolf's writing and thought, including her complex relationship to questions of nationalism and imperialism and the imbrications of these with her critiques of patriarchy and fascism. They are turning on the other hand to literary history and tradition, to Woolf's remaking of the past in the present, and to the implications and dimensions of her reading...[37]

In this thesis I attempt to demonstrate the contemporary usefulness of poststructuralist readings of Woolf when applied with a sensitive understanding of historical context, combined with elements of narratology and kinship studies; and the way in which the materteral, specifically, brings these approaches together. I suggest that Woolf's endeavour in much of her work was to ask what it means to relate to another person (in both senses of the word relate), and to find a narrative technique and novelistic structure that explores subjectivity without prioritising either particular characters or particular subjective

[35] Mao and Walkowitz, 739.
[36] Mao and Walkowitz, 744.
[37] Laura Marcus, 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 175.

experiences. No single experience of an event is more real than another – though the reader might sometimes seek a moral authority within the novel. To represent subjectivity in a way that does not privilege one perception over another (such as is common in realist fiction), Woolf needs to be able to explore family relationships away from the patriarchal structure that family titles represent, and away from the patrilineal and matrilineal understanding of how things (ideas, money, history, genetics) move through families. Families need a new shape – a misshapen spill rather than a neat line – and to be seen through their cultural and historical location rather than as a dynamic outside of historical change (and thus reflective of psychoanalytic theorists themselves: often white and European). We see non-parental familial relationships move to the fore, a diegetic choice reflected in the diffusion of narrative power and which we might also consider in the context of semiotics – a shifting, unsymmetrical, fluid narrative voice resisting any absolute authority or symbolic categorisation.

I have explained how my thesis will make use of poststructuralism, and here I explain some of the research in kinship studies that has shaped my reading of aunthood, thus bringing cultural and historical specificity to the poststructuralist reading of Woolf. This thesis reads the importance of the aunt in Woolf's work as inextricably linked to her 'unfixed' position in the family. In this chapter I will go on to demonstrate that for Woolf the aunt is unattached to one particular set of conventions, but that a broader conception of aunthood as unfixed can be established by looking further afield to cultural anthropology, family communication studies and kinship studies. I seek to demonstrate three points here: firstly that the multifarious portraits of aunthood across Woolf's fiction and life writing may seem contradictory, but are supported by sociological studies – that cultural understanding of the aunt contains, just like Woolf's, these oppositional ideas. Secondly, that study of language and kinship terms suggest that in English in particular the title 'aunt' applies to complex and varied relationships. Thirdly, that the term 'aunt' is unique in the range of relationships that it signifies.

Aunthood in kinship studies

In *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles* (2010) Robert Milardo argues that aunts (and uncles) are under-discussed both in family theory and kinship studies and also in public discourse. As a result of this:

> We have heretofore no common terms by which to describe our expectations of aunts and uncles or their typical activities and to differentiate them from the expectations and activities of other family members such as parents or grandparents. Terms such as aunting and uncling have a clear linguistic parallel with the term *parenting*, a word in common usage, but the former still sound foreign to some ears.[38]

The results of his comprehensive study point to an explanation for this – the role of the aunt tends to be specific to individual family situations. In his study, and in the studies he mentions in his literature review chapter, the difficulty of trying to fix what being materteral might mean is clear. 'In one of the first direct investigations of uncles and aunts,' Milardo says, 'then-graduate student Janice Chebra reported contact with nieces and nephews averaged "monthly or several times per year or less".'[39] This is quite a variation. He also talks about a 2006 study by Laura Ellingson and Patricia Sotirin, 'Exploring young adults' perspectives on communication with aunts', which found that their participants (aged 21 on average) 'described their aunts as mentors and role models, confidantes and trusted advisors, older peers, and occasionally second mothers', but also that '[f]or others, and especially those

[38] Robert M. Milardo, *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.
[39] Milardo, 18.

nieces and nephews who were close to their aunts in age, aunts were often viewed as experienced and "savvy peers".'[40] What is suggested then, I argue, is that a social theory of aunthood is incredibly difficult. Milardo concludes that:

> Although basic inquiries of aunting and uncling are limited, the few existing studies are suggestive of how aunts and uncles on some occasions and in some families actively mentor their nieces and nephews and advise parents on matters of child care.[41]

Without the caveats 'on some occasions' and 'in some families' it is impossible to make a statement summarising what is culturally understood as the role of the aunt. These are contemporary studies, but later in this chapter I demonstrate that we can draw the same conclusions from the limited work that has been done about aunts in Woolf's lifetime, piecing together evidence from various disciplines.

The title 'aunt' in English is incredibly unspecific – even without taking into account its use for relationships outside of the family. In broad public discourse, 'aunt' applies to either a female sibling or the female partner of siblings of either one's mother or father. This lack of specificity is all the more stark when taking in to consideration the kinship terms of other languages. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch contrasts the kinship terms of English and Seneca in his article 'Kinship Terms are not Kinship'.[42] In this, Bloch describes the relationship

[40] Laura Ellingson and Patricia Sotirin, 'Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 23, no. 3 (2006): 483–501; Milardo, *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles*, 20.
[41] Milardo, *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles*, 21.
[42] Maurice Bloch, 'Kinship Terms Are Not Kinship', *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 5 (2010): 367–416.

between the matrilineal Senecan society and their kinship terms, and in doing so highlights the limitations of English kinship terms which by comparison seem quite blunt. In Seneca, the word for mother is *noyeh* and the word for mother's sister is also *noyeh. Noyeh's* offspring, in English called cousins, have four names dependent on whether they are older or younger than the subject (or Ego, to use anthropological terms) and dependent on sex. These terms are the same for the Ego's siblings – so instead of sister and brother, Seneca has *ahje* (older sister or older female cousin), *kaga* (younger sister or younger female cousin), *haja* (older brother or older male cousin) and *haga* (younger brother or younger male cousin). 'Father's sister', however, is *ahgahuc.* Her children, regardless of age or sex, are *ahgareseh.*[43] Bloch does not go into affine relationships, and I do not know the Senecan word for mother's brother's (*hocnoseh's*) wife or father's brother's (*hanih's*) wife but Bloch makes an interesting comment regarding the catch-all use of aunt for this in English. He says that:

> As genealogical distance from Ego increases, less and less effort is made to tailor distinctive terms for kin types. Wife gets a term to herself. Brother's Wife wears a term borrowed from another relative (sister), but altered to fit her (with the added suffix -in-law). Uncle's Wife wears a term borrowed from another relative (Parent's Sister), and not altered to fit her. And Cousin's Wife gets no generally accepted term of her own at all. This sequence illustrates a general rule: More terminological resources are allocated to closer kin.[44]

[43] Bloch, 370.
[44] Bloch, 375.

While Bloch's point (where he refers to 'uncle's wife' and 'parent's sister') is that the duplication of the title 'aunt' for both the parent's-sibling role and the parent's-sibling's spouse role is a sign of that role's relatively low importance to the Ego, I argue that it is not possible to consider its shared title a diminution of one category of aunt (the affine aunt) without seeing it as a diminution of the other (consanguineal aunthood). In this thesis I emphasise the flexibility of aunthood as an enabling tool for literary innovation, but Bloch's point is a reminder that while aunthood's unfixed position might be useful, it is a sign that perhaps the kinship term 'aunt' (and its multiple signifiers) is at odds with what is, as demonstrated by Milardo, Ellingson, Sorotin and others, a vital and meaningful relationship – perhaps deserving of more specific kinship titles.[45] That said, the lack of specificity of the term is perhaps what makes it so attractive to Woolf, its relative lack of patriarchal markers freeing it from some of the oppressions and meanings of patriarchy. Even paring 'aunt' back to its most essential definition (which Woolf does not do), the name allows for more flexibility than any other lineal or collateral relationship, bar uncle. And doing so – reducing 'aunt' to its genealogical or affine definitions – is to misrepresent the role. As any ethnographic study of aunthood might tell you, aunts can be just as many things in life (and more) as they can in literature. 'If kinship is not reducible to genealogy', anthropologist Dwight Read argued in 2007, 'we need a new paradigm for what constitutes kinship, one that enables us to recast unresolved questions in a new light.'[46] Seventy years earlier, in *The Years*, Woolf was using fiction to explore this very issue.

My final point before moving on to situate aunthood historically is one that may seem obvious but requires stating: the ability of 'aunt' to apply, without qualification, to affine *and* consanguineal relatives is unique among English kinship terms (with the exception of

[45] Milardo, *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles*; Ellingson and Sotirin, 'Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts'.
[46] Dwight W. Read, 'Kinship Theory: A Paradigm Shift', *Ethnology* 46, no. 4 (2007): 332.

'uncle'). Mother, father, son, daughter, grandmother, cousin, second cousin – all of these have a biological imperative, and when those roles are configured differently, qualifiers are introduced: stepmother, father-in-law. Not so with 'aunt'. It conceals, as much as reveals, a relationship. It is in this way that it is most clearly analogous to Woolf's narrative technique, as I will show. This idea of aunthood as noncontingent (and thus semiotic, rather than symbolic) is also supported by an examination of its position in the family through the lens of the law and by looking at the changes that were happening from the early-Victorian period through to Woolf's lifetime to the cultural understanding of family. As a vehicle for exploring ideas about aunthood leading up to and during Woolf's lifetime the debate surrounding the Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister bill is incredibly useful.

Marriage with a deceased wife's sister

The debate began with the passing of the 1835 Marriage Act, which formally prohibited a man from marrying his deceased wife's sister on the grounds that their relationship was within the prohibited degrees of affinity. Before the Marriage Act was passed in 1835 the law regarding marriage with a deceased wife's sister was ambiguous, still 'based on the 1533 Henrican statute fixing the degrees of consanguinity and affinity, specify[ing] that marriages within prohibited degrees could be annulled at any time within the lifetime of both spouses by the Ecclesiastical Court.'[47] Thus, a person could be married to their deceased wife's sister unless someone wanted to challenge it, in which case the marriage could be retrospectively voided. So the idea of a marriage between a man and his deceased wife's sister as prohibited was not new, and nor was its total annihilation the primary aim of the Act, for while it outlawed any future marriages between a man and his deceased wife's sister it also declared

[47] Nancy F. Anderson, 'The "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill" Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England', *Journal of British Studies* 21, no. 2 (1982): 67.

that any such marriage that had taken place before the passing of the Act was legal and should not be at risk of annulment, thus guaranteeing inheritance for children of these unions. According to Nancy Anderson, the English Lord Chancellor Lyndhurst's 'specific motive [in introducing the bill] was to guarantee the legitimacy and inheritance of the son of the seventh Duke of Beaufort, who had married his deceased wife's half-sister, a relationship within the prohibited degrees'.[48] Even during the debate in parliament surrounding this 1835 Act there were those who argued that marriage with a deceased wife's sister should be legalised, but the priority was legitimising existing marriages and so the bill passed as it was.

In 1842 the first bill was introduced that sought to remove 'deceased wife's sister' from the prohibited degrees of marriage, thus allowing for future marriages between a man and his deceased wife's sister. It did not pass, and despite reintroduction and debate nearly every year for the rest of the nineteenth century, the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act was not passed until 1907, 65 years after its first introduction. Curiously, the equivalent Deceased Brother's Widow's Marriage Act was not passed until 1921 and even then, with note that there was little demand for the bill but an expectation that the number of men who died in World War One would mean that there would be more marriages of this kind expected, and also that the passing of the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act made this later act 'common sense.'[49]

It is noteworthy that the word 'aunt' is curiously absent not only from the materials of the debate surrounding the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act itself (such as pamphlets and court transcripts) but also largely from the significant historical analysis of the discourse. While the discourse focuses on marital relationships, rather than materteral ones, there are clearly potentially serious implications for the position of the (in this case) unmarried aunt.

---

[48] Anderson, 67.
[49] 'Deceased Brother's Widow's Marriage Bill', *Hansard Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 45 (1921).

What was being debated annually was to what degree the aunt was related to the first family (of mother, father, son, daughter) and whether that degree was close enough to be incestuous. Much of the debate assumes children exist from the first marriage, thus making the debate about aunts, really, rather than just sisters-in-law.

The story of the debate about marriage between a man and his deceased wife's sister is a story about incest. It explores the relationship of the aunt to the nuclear conception of family and asks if she is close enough to the family to be sexually forbidden by the incest taboo. As mentioned above, this thesis attempts to bring together two literary approaches (poststructuralism and historicism) in order to make the argument that the aunt is the key figure for Woolf in negotiating a new relationship between character and narrative voice. Above, I have argued that Woolf's materteral narrative voice is anti-patriarchal, both because its formal qualities resist the singular definition associated with the symbolic but also because the aunt presents a relationship to the semiotic that has the potential to allow for *enough* separation but still maintain access (reflected in Woolf's innovation in narrative position). Acknowledging the criticisms of poststructuralism as ahistorical, it is important to demonstrate that when I talk about Woolf's use of the aunt, I am using a historicist approach to locate the aunt culturally and temporally. To demonstrate that the aunt in the nineteenth century was acknowledged to be a figure on the cusp of the family (thus also linking her to a question of incest and positioning her as a challenge to the patriarchal order maintained by the incest taboo), below I explore the discourse surrounding marriage with deceased wives' sisters.

The issue of whether or not a man might marry his deceased wife's sister, while generally relevant for a historicised conception of aunthood necessary for this thesis, also touched Woolf's life in a very real way. Virginia Woolf's half sister Stella Duckworth had married Jack Hills in 1897, but died shortly afterwards. Jack remained close to the Stephen family,

and in 1900 began a relationship with Vanessa Stephen which outraged the wider family – particularly those Hermione Lee calls 'the ubiquitous aunts,' who 'fell into a panic of disapproval.'[50] In her exploration of the discourse around the deceased wife's sister question, Nancy Anderson links Vanessa's desire for Jack to her sexual abuse by her half-brother, George Duckworth, saying that 'beneath the sense of disgust and horror, it may have so excited her that she wanted to resume through marriage the sexual relationship with a brother in the displaced form of in-law'.[51] While Anderson's retrospective psychoanalysis of Vanessa may be of its time (she was writing in the early 1980s), she does offer some interesting historical context:

> The emotional attachment within the Victorian family was all the more intense, in contrast to earlier and also to the twentieth-century family, because the rigid Victorian code of morality, restricting extra-familial heterosexual relationships, dammed up libidinous feelings within the home. For many young Victorian men and women, the only available people towards whom to direct erotic strivings were family members.[52]

While Anderson's argument here is rather generalised, if it was these 'dammed up' homes which led to the middle and upper classes desiring a substitute for their siblings, this argument which seems to be *against* marriage with deceased wives' sisters on the grounds that it is grows from an incestuous desire has much in common with the argument *for* it that I discuss below, regarding aunts as stepmothers. Just as the aunt is cast as the perfect substitute

---

[50] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 141.
[51] Anderson, 'The "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill" Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England', 74.
[52] Anderson, 69.

mother by proponents of the Act, in her analysis Anderson suggests that the relationship is mutually beneficial, for the husband is a substitute as well (for a desired brother). Following Mary Jean Corbett's argument that the debate surrounding marriage with a deceased wife's sister cements the aunt 'at the apex of the triangle that forms the second family' in this liminal space between one's household and the rest of the world, Anderson's suggestion of marriage with a deceased wife's sister as a sublimation of incestuous desire perhaps casts the aunt in her literary manifestations as emblematic of all manner of social transgressions, sexual or otherwise.[53] Certainly this configuration of aunthood as a vehicle for sublimated desire associates her with the semiotic. Corbett evidences Woolf's awareness of the debate surrounding the 1907 Act using 'Reminiscences,' Woolf's 1907 short memoir addressed to her nephew, Julian Bell, in which she discusses the thwarted relationship between Vanessa Stephen and Jack Hills.[54] She also points to a moment in *Mrs Dalloway* when Peter Walsh is incredulous that Richard Dalloway had said that 'no decent man ought to let his wife visit a deceased wife's sister' who had developed a relationship with her brother-in-law.[55] In addition to the evidence Corbett uses, Woolf's 1939 autobiographical essay 'A Sketch of the Past' recalls a conversation about Jack and Vanessa between Woolf and her half-brother George Duckworth, in which he mentions 'some vague threat about its being against the law and as Stella was her sister, marriage was illegal.'[56]

The arguments as presented as part of the debate were complex and sometimes offered contradictory portrayals of the aunt's position. For example, one of the arguments that comes up many times in the 1848 commissioners report into marriage with a deceased wife's sister, which heard evidence during the 1840s from campaigners on both sides, is the argument that

---

53 Mary Jean Corbett, 'Husband, Wife, and Sister: Making and Remaking the Early Victorian Family', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35 (2007): 8.
54 Mary Jean Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2.
55 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 82.
56 Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being* (London: Triad/Panther, 1978), 142.

marriage to a deceased wife's sister is the best possible outcome for the children of the widower. Elizabeth Gruner links the popularity of this argument to a deliberate 'sidestep[ping of] the question of incest', which was a troubling but pertinent concern of those wishing to preserve the prohibition of the 1835 Marriage Act.[57] This is suggestive of an oppositional relationship between motherhood and sexuality: the more the discourse focuses on an aunt's maternal qualities, the less it is forced to consider the implications of her as a sexual actor. What Gruner's reading and the original materials of the debate demonstrate is that the aunt can be read convincingly as either a sexual prospect or a surrogate mother. The implication for this thesis is that the materteral is in relation with the maternal enough to explore the semiotic but in relation with the external world of patriarchal society enough to access the symbolic. In narrative terms: the semiotic materteral is an unconstrained narrative voice that moves between diegetic levels, and characters that move in and out of the narrative voice in free indirect discourse; a narrator who oscillates around the action of the story level. What is important is that the materteral, unlike the maternal, can also be part of the social world of the father: existing outside of the family romance – translating in narrative terms into the materteral narrative voice's ability to contain all the diegetic levels and subjective experiences that comprise Woolf's semiotic narrative ballet, within the symbolic framework of a novel. The argument that aunts make the best stepmothers chimes with the figure of the aunt often found in literature: the aunt as a spare mother – or, as Gruner describes the aunt's role in a marriage to her widowed brother-in-law, as 'a convenient replacement for her dead sister as both wife and (step)mother'.[58] In the terms of this thesis, this argument expresses anxiety about aunthood's existence outside of patriarchal control. In marrying the aunt, the widower moves her from an unknown space between familiar and other (with undefined

[57] Elizabeth Rose Gruner, 'Born and Made: Sisters, Brothers, and the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill', *Signs* 24, no. 2 (1999): 435.
[58] Gruner, 3.

sexual potential) into a safe, fixed space inside the family. The implication for the proliferation of aunts stepping into caretaking roles in literature is that their caretaking has a dual function: not only does this move provide a maternal figure for an often orphaned or poorly-parented protagonist, it also relieves any potential anxiety over the aunt's peripheral position. When an aunt becomes a stepmother, her sexual availability to both child and widower is classified. Thus particularly important is the way that Woolf acknowledges but ultimately resists the assimilation of the aunt into the patriarchal order: Helen Ambrose is a prime example of an aunt who is placed to take up a maternal role but simply does not, an argument I make in Chapter Two.

Those who desired the legalisation of marriage with a deceased wife's sister were methodical in their campaign. In 1846 a report assembled by a group of 'guilt-tempting individuals', to use Chase and Levenson's words, surveyed five districts of England and found '1364 transgressions of the approved degrees [of affinity], of which nine-tenths were said to be marriages with the deceased wife's sister'.[59] This report was enough to instigate a parliamentary commission to investigate the issue by consulting 'authorities, religious and civil; [and] most strikingly it conducted interviews with a number of men who had married a deceased wife's sister'.[60] In 1847, lawyer William Campbell Sleigh recounted the testimony of one of his clients, who was married to his deceased wife's sister:

> Why Sir, when my wife died I was left with three or four infant children […] what was I to do? No woman would marry me. I was obliged to be out all day: there was no one to take care of the children. My wife's sister was extremely kind to them. I

[59] Karen Chase and Michael Leveson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 108.
[60] Chase and Leveson, 108.

> thought I should like her, and she thought she would like me: we married, and we have been as happy as man and wife could be ever since.[61]

Sleigh also offers another similarly unromantic testimony:

> I married my late wife's sister because we had an infant family. The children were accustomed to their aunt. I did not see a person who was so likely to be kind to them as she was; and, under all the circumstances, I thought it was better to marry her.[62]

These men both use 'kind' as a descriptor of their new wives, and indeed both seem to suggest that kindness was the *primary* criteria for step-motherhood. Rather than falling into a paradoxical argument that marriage between one's father and one's aunt is not incest because her position as a family member makes her the natural choice for stepmother, Sleigh in his testimony focuses on the motherly qualities born out of the materteral relationship: as if the very character of these women is defined by the existence of a sister's child. This is despite the quotation he uses being from a man who seems unsure how many children he has ('three or four infant children').[63] It poses a question so full of creative potential for writers of aunt characters: what of the aunt who does not resemble the mother in any way? Is it possible to be a good aunt without being maternal? Outside of the arguments surrounding marriage with a deceased wife's sister, in non-fiction and in literature, we know that it is – and certainly for

---

61 *First Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State and Operation of the Law of Marriage as Relating to the Prohibited Degrees of Affinity, and to Marriages Solemnised Abroad or in the British Colonies*, vol. 28, Command Papers, No. 978 (London, 1848), 7.
62 *First Report*, 28:7.
63 *First Report*, 28:7.

the modern reader the unmarried, childless aunt has tropes of her own that are specifically un-maternal. However, in this particular argument, which was very much about what constitutes a good aunt, what duty she has and so on, the aunt herself is subsumed into a discourse of motherhood, step-motherhood and maternity.

Not all were convinced by this argument, and in their counterargument we find some sense of the aunt with a personal agenda -- the aunt who has her own children. Gruner cites conservative politician Alexander Hope:

> [S]o long as the wife's sister continues the unmarried guardian of her nephews and nieces, they will be to her the nearest and dearest, and only objects of love and care, but as soon as she marries their father she incurs the risk of having children of her own, who will be much nearer to her than her former charge.... A good aunt may often be changed into, if not a bad, at least a less devoted step-mother; a step-mother perhaps, on account of the very relationship previously existing, more jealously alive to trifles than a stranger would have been.[64]

As Gruner points out when she discusses this, the argument still very much roots the aunt in the maternal: 'women must mother, it seems, but will always mother their own in preference to another's.'[65] Not only is she characterised in the discourse by her relationship to motherhood or sisterhood, she is always an object. To my knowledge, no account exists written *by* an aunt who became a stepmother; rather she remains the/a 'silent participant in

64 Alexander James Beresford Hope, 'The Report of Her Majesty's Commission on the Laws of Marriage, Relative to Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister: Examined in a Letter to Sir Robert Harry Inglis, Bart M.P', 1849, 149–50, http://www.jstor.org/stable/60101130.
65 Gruner, 'Born and Made: Sisters, Brothers, and the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill', 435.

the conflict'.[66] There are various strands of this argument that Woolf's aunt-characters with children resist. Firstly, they exist for things beyond their children – Helen Ambrose for example leaves her children to travel with her husband. She loves her children, is not portrayed as a bad mother to them, but is allowed other focus in her life. Secondly – the relationship between aunt and, in particular for Woolf, her niece, is often an impactful one with its own special qualities – despite the women having their own children. As an example of this, in Chapter Two I discuss *Night and Day's* Lady Otway and her relationship to her niece Katharine.

For some proponents of the Act an aunt's potential as a stepmother was a moot point, because a marriage between a man and his sister-in-law constituted incest. 'The characterization of in-law marriage as incestuous reminds us of the historical variability [of incest]', says Corbett.[67] To the modern reader, affine incest as a concept may seem bizarre, but multiple critics have explored the way in which the debate surrounding marriage with a deceased wife's sister was, for some, a sanitised expression of genuine concerns about consanguine incestuous relationships and an anxiety about the changing shape of the family. Corbett warns that to dismiss the anxiety surrounding marriage with a deceased wife's sister as 'a species of Victorian foolishness' would be to 'miss the ways in which it also illuminates divergent definitions of who belongs to "the family" and what constitutes "incest"'.[68] For understanding how aunthood in Woolf's writing challenges the patriarchal order by destabilising the incest taboo (as argued above) it is useful to understand the relationship between aunthood and incest specific to Woolf's lifetime.

---

66 Gruner, 429.
67 Corbett, 'Husband, Wife, and Sister: Making and Remaking the Early Victorian Family', 8.
68 Corbett, 2.

Before the 1835 Marriage Act, marriage with a deceased wife's sister was prohibited by canon law. The Anglican church held that when the Bible says that 'shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh', it means it literally.[69] If a person becomes one flesh when they marry, their siblings become the siblings of their spouse and vice versa.[70] For this reason no distinction was made between family by affinity and family by consanguinity – these were 'treated in exactly the same way under English law and on the same footing in the eyes of the Anglican church' until they were distinguished in the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act in 1907.[71] An aunt by blood was no different to an aunt by marriage in theory, since the degree of familial closeness was seemingly the same.

Nevertheless, evidence shows that while 'hard-line opponents of marriage with a deceased wife's sister' may have argued that the relationship was the same, within the ecclesiastical courts there was evidence of a difference in attitudes.[72] In his summation of the cases of Woods vs. Woods, involving an incestuous marriage between an uncle and his niece the judge made the distinction clear:

> Whatever ideas may be entertained with regards to marriages between persons within the degrees of affinity, there is no difference of opinion in respect to marriages of this kind, where the parties are connected by consanguinity, which are exceedingly

[69] 'The First Book of Moses, Called Genesis - Chapter 2', in *The Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge University Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1611).
[70] Mary Jean Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 4.
[71] Corbett, 'Husband, Wife, and Sister: Making and Remaking the Early Victorian Family', 4.
[72] Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*, 64.

> revolting to the opinions and feelings of mankind, and it is inconsistent with the public welfare that such connexions should be allowed to continue.[73]

The debate around affine incest seems to be an academic one for this judge, but committing consanguine incest is a 'revolting' physical transgression. Clearly affinity and consanguinity, even 67 years before legally made distinct, were not the same when it came to incest: blood was thicker than water.

While the debate surrounding the subject was largely focused on the middle and upper classes, there was an argument that incest was increasingly present in the working classes – and the seemingly facile debate over the incestuous affine relative may in fact have been a more palatable expression of some genuine fears about the effect of overcrowding on the frequency of incest in the working-class population. Anthony Wohl examines the evidence and states that 'fully four decades before the sensational explosion of concern about incest among the working classes in the 1880s … early Victorian investigators were already describing it as "common" to working-class domestic life'.[74] He argues that a living situation 'conducive for incest' was generated by 'an age of high maternal deaths in childbirth, where grown-up daughters acted as surrogate mothers'.[75] This seems to echo the arguments of those campaigning to allow marriage with a deceased wife's sister: the woman who seems most similar to one's wife (in Wohl's argument, her daughter) is naturally going to inspire in one some of the same feelings. How common incest was in the working classes is debated, with Corbett arguing that:

---

73 W.C. Curteis, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Ecclesiastical Courts at Doctors' Commons* (London: Saunders and Benning, 1842), 529.
74 Anthony Wohl, 'Sex and the Single Room: Incest Among the Victorian Working Classes', in *The Victorian Family*, Wohl, Anthony (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 7.
75 Wohl, 204.

> With verified incidents of MDWS [marriage with a deceased wife's sister] among working class people numbering only forty of the nearly 1,400 cases documented by a team of solicitors, the assertion that MDWS was 'at least as frequent' among the poor as among the middle classes relied largely on rhetoric rather than statistics to establish that working-class widowers and their respectable upper-class counterparts differed very little in their aims and desires.[76]

This is not to say that incest was not occurring, but that the portrayal of working-class incest in the discourse surrounding marriage with deceased wives' sisters seems to have another purpose, that of implying that 'all widowers of whatever class position are subject to the same needs and desires.'[77] It is possible that the overcrowded living conditions of the working classes in the nineteenth century and an increasingly collective approach to child-rearing would have undermined some of the arguments for the passing of the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act. For example, marriage of a deceased wife's sister to ensure that the children are cared for seems less necessary in a community where 'childcare is a collective practice…with neighbours functioning as auxiliary parents', as Louise Jackson evidences was often the case for the Victorian working classes.[78] There is evidence that the name 'aunt' was often used for female neighbours 'whether they were blood relatives or not'.[79] If a neighbour acts like an aunt, and an aunt acts like a mother, remarrying becomes at least less urgent with regard to childcare. The use of anxiety around marriage with a deceased wife's sister as

[76] Corbett, 'Husband, Wife, and Sister: Making and Remaking the Early Victorian Family', 10.
[77] Corbett, 11.
[78] Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 1999), 34.
[79] Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwood, 1984), 169.

synecdoche for anxiety about family life more generally is in keeping with this thesis's description of materteral narrative as that which both contains and is part of the diegesis.

One sad consequence that I cannot find raised by anyone either during or after the debate over the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act is that for the children gaining a stepmother means losing an aunt. Tellingly even Gruner, whose work does use the word aunt and is extremely comprehensive, does not include the materteral relationship in her summation of what was lost in a case of marriage to a deceased wife's sister. She focuses on the loss of a sororal bond and says that 'while the deceased wife's sister may indeed become sister, wife, and mother all in one, the significance of her originary, defining relationship to her sister is lost in the shuffle - as are her desire, her freedom, and her voice'.[80] The deceased wife's sister also had an 'originary' relationship to her sister's children, and yet there is no mourning for the loss of the materteral relationship. Not once in any of the original debate materials can I find any acknowledgement of this as a loss. This tells us not only something about aunthood in the age into which Woolf was born, but also about a sustained dismissal of the materteral bond as a valuable or unique relationship, quite at odds with its frequency and prominence in some of the most popular literature of the last three hundred years.

The Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act was finally passed on 29 August 1907. 'Its passage,' argues Anderson, 'reflects the increased rational and secular spirit of Edwardian England.'[81] The establishment of affine and consanguine relationships as distinct 'effectively enabled the institution of legal penalties for consanguineal incest', and the Incest Act was passed shortly after, in 1908.[82] Corbett devotes a chapter of *Family Likeness* to Woolf, and details carefully the links between Woolf's 'Reminiscences' (written in 1907) and the 1907

[80] Gruner, 'Born and Made: Sisters, Brothers, and the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill', 425.
[81] Anderson, 'The "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill" Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England', 85.
[82] Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf,* 4.

and 1908 acts above. Woolf was born, she says, 'at a moment when incest and its cultural meanings were being renegotiated'.[83] Corbett argues that Woolf was 'reconfiguring kinship for new uses in new times', but I do not agree – at least not with regards to the aunt.[84] I contend that Woolf's use of aunthood relies on its existing position, rather than changing or reconfiguring it. The aunt's consistent presence, coupled with its lack of definition, is exactly what Woolf is taking advantage of, and these qualities of aunthood that Woolf makes such use of are what this thesis seeks to illuminate. Where I do agree with Corbett is in her understanding of the aunt (in the particular context of the debate surrounding the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act) as existing between inside the family and outside of it.[85]

The historical and biographical research presented in the rest of this chapter allows us to construct an understanding of aunthood that Woolf might have had based on broader historical data and on her own personal experience of aunthood. It is upon this that my discussion of aunthood in Kristevan terms is founded: thus ensuring that the theories are not being applied ahistorically. Before I move on to close literary analysis, it is important to consider what aunthood meant in the early-twentieth century and more specifically what it meant to Woolf. In the next part of this chapter I use historical and biographical material to demonstrate two key points essential for the argument of this thesis. Firstly, I will show that the proliferation of caretaking aunts in fiction in the period was not simply reflective of real life – for while there were more women not having children there was also a fertility decline and nothing to suggest a rise in the number of children whose parents were unable to take care of them. This suggests that aunthood has a specific literary function: one this thesis will go on to explore. Secondly, I establish that Woolf's lifetime (1882-1941) was a significant

[83] Corbett, 175.
[84] Corbett, 200.
[85] Anderson, 'The "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill" Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England', 69.

period for the history of the family, in which there was a sharp reduction in family size. Thus Woolf was of a generation who were likely to have had many aunts and uncles, but few nieces and nephews. This is important in understanding the relationship between the aunt and the semiotic and in understanding how the position of materteral narrative voice relates specifically to this historical moment.

Aunthood in the early twentieth-century

The large extended family with its many aunts and uncles had often found itself satirised in literature as old and fussy, specifically in contrast to a young protagonist pushing against social boundaries, such as in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). In Woolf's writing this idea is pervasive, as we see with aunts such as Rachel's Richmond aunts in *The Voyage Out* and Aunt Celia in *Night and Day* – but what complicates the aunt figure and makes her able to contain oppositional ideas about order and enclosure as well as free expression in this particular historical moment was that the large number of unmarried women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries meant that many aunts had been afforded opportunities for a different kind of life, free from the restrictions of husband and children. In the early-twentieth century these oppositional ideas, which had been present for much longer (as discussed above with regards to the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act), were most amplified.

Historians Ruth Perry and Katherine Holden have both argued that the prominence of aunts in the lives of literary characters are not reflective of the number of either caretaking aunts or maiden aunts in real life. Both devote part of their books, focusing in Perry's case on 1748-1818 and in Holden's case on 1914-60, to considering what the purpose of the aunt is in

literature, given that the number of aunts in the literature of their respective periods did not reflect British demography. Perry says that:

> The sheer number of fictional orphaned protagonists assigned to aunts when their parents died probably means that some aunts did take in some orphaned children. But as I have been emphasizing, the caretaking aunt was also a literary convention independent of its historical veracity.[86]

Perry links the proliferation of fictional caretaking aunts to psychoanalytic maternal separation:

> The 'aunt,' being simultaneously both mother and other, solves both the problem of separation and that of identification for the female protagonist. Having already separated from a perfect paragon of a mother, the heroine is free to identify with this powerful and independent 'aunt' – up to a point. That point, of course, is marriage, when the evolved female self must be subordinated to the new husband and the new conjugal unit.[87]

[86] Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 362.
[87] Perry, 368.

The ‘mother and other’ role of the aunt that Perry links to maternal separation acknowledges the liminality of the aunt which the discourse surrounding marriage with a deceased wife’s sister further evidences. Holden agrees:

> The significance of the frequency with which they appear in girls’ fiction suggests also the ready availability of the maiden aunt image to stand for what is ‘other’ in women, to represent the part of the mother which was in reality unavailable and had needs which conflicted with those of her daughter.[88]

Woolf uses the aunt *because* of her position on the brink of knowability, in her well-documented struggle to represent the human experience of other humans; to ‘bring back character from the shapelessness into which it has lapsed, to sharpen its edges.’[89]

Holden’s book *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-1960,* is the most thorough consideration of aunthood in this period that I have been able to find: she dedicates a whole chapter of her book to discussing aunts and uncles. Like Perry, Holden acknowledges the disproportionate number of aunts taking care of orphaned children in fiction, but the historical context which informs her attempt to understand the figure of the fictional aunt is specific to the period of study of this thesis. In this way Holden’s book not only informs this thesis but provides a similar model for its approach – using as it does (though briefly) Freudian theory applied to a culturally specific moment. Holden argues that:

[88] Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 169.
[89] Woolf, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, 35.

> The high numbers of young women who did not marry in the late nineteenth century, when families were larger and marriage rates lower than after the First World War, meant that older unmarried aunts attached to families remained ubiquitous throughout the early and mid-twentieth century.[90]

In arguing this Holden challenges the 'belief in a "lost generation" of men as a result of World War I – men who had either died or were left with long-term physical and mental disabilities, and an accompanying surplus of young women who would never be able to marry and were often portrayed in similar terms to widows.'[91]

Holden makes some important points for this thesis in her analysis of real life aunthood. One is that because singleness 'was linked with not having achieved the full status of adulthood, aunts and uncles were often portrayed as meeting children at their own level.'[92] She points out that 'perhaps partly because of their assumed youthfulness, it could be hard for children to accept favourite aunts' […] adult friendships and partnerships outside the family.'[93] Not only does this position between childhood and adulthood represent the resistance to categorisation that aunthood poses (and is explored in particular in Chapter Four), it also provides an interesting counter to the arguments made in the debate surrounding marriage with deceased wives' sisters that aunts make the best stepmothers – suggesting that for the niece or nephew, realising their aunt as an adult with her own relationships is a challenge. Holden points out these contradictions with particular reference to the phrase 'maiden aunt':

---

90 Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914-60*, 167.
91 Holden, 11.
92 Holden, 166.
93 Holden, 166.

> The primary meaning of the term 'aunt' refers to a relationship with a sibling's child, but one of its secondary definitions is 'a woman to whom one can turn for advice, sympathy, practical help etc.' so it is not necessarily connected with families. Being a maiden has very different connotations, suggesting youth, virginity and the absence of children or a sexual relationship with a man, while for a woman beyond childbearing age being an 'old maid' implies an inappropriate naivety, even eccentricity, indicating that she has not achieved the position of full adulthood conferred by marriage and making her open to ridicule and pity. Connecting 'aunt' with 'maid' is therefore contradictory: as both an insider and outsider in families, she could be invested with power but also with vulnerability.[94]

Here Holden demonstrates some of the contradictions around aunthood and sexuality that come up in Woolf's writing and are explored in this thesis. Woolf's configuration of the aunt figure as between generations, and between child and adult, while also a sexually mature woman finds its most full expression in Helen Ambrose in *The Voyage Out*, who is playful like a child, sexually alluring like an adult woman, and threatening like an adult male.

Something that demographic historians do agree upon is that Woolf's lifetime saw families were changing at a rate, it has been argued by some, unlike any seen before:

> Marriage patterns, birth rates, infant and child mortality, family sizes, sexual behaviour and sexual attitudes, the position of the elderly, and the typical

[94] Holden, 167.

> compositions of households in terms of children, servants and boarders, were all changing relatively rapidly between the late-1870s and the 1920s, when compared with the preceding and succeeding half-centuries.[95]

All of the above list would have affected the role and position of the aunt but of particular importance to Woolf's lifetime was the change in family size and the proliferation of the nuclear family. It is widely accepted that by the turn of the century the Victorian dynastic family was in decline – Adam Kuper said of Woolf's 1919 novel *Night and Day* that 'it documents the end of the dynastic age.'[96] As Garrett et al. detail in their 2001 study of census figures, women were having fewer children.

> Among those married women born between 1851 and 1855, over one-third experienced at least seven live births and as many as fifteen per cent had ten or more confinements during the course of their lives. But of those women born half a century later, between 1901 and 1905, less than five per cent of those who married had seven or more children and only one per cent had ten or more […] Whereas fifteen per cent of the former had only one or two children, almost fifty per cent of the latter cohort had families of this small size.[97]

[95] Eilidh Garrett et al., *Changing Family Size in England and Wales: Place, Class and Demography, 1891-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.
[96] Adam Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (United States: Harvard University Press, 2009), 254.
[97] Garrett et al., *Changing Family Size in England and Wales: Place, Class and Demography, 1891-1911*, 13.

Scholars have approached this data in various ways to consider the causes of the fertility decline, which saw the average number of children a woman had fall rapidly from around 1880 onwards, rising only slightly in the 1940s. Economist Timothy J. Hatton and epidemiologist Richard M. Martin made use of this data to understand the rapid improvement in children's health in the first half of the twentieth century. They produced a paper in 2010 that argued that:

> The dramatic fall in fertility meant that, for households with children, income per capita increased more strongly and poverty rates declined more rapidly than they would have otherwise. It also meant an improvement in the disease environment within the household as the degree of crowding decreased.[98]

Hatton and Martin focus on the effects of the decline, rather than the causes, but say that 'this trend has been interpreted as the progressive substitution away from large numbers of children per family towards higher average child "quality"'.[99] Wally Seccombe considers not only the 'historic watershed' of the new birth-rate lows, but what the implication is for 'the stopping *mode'* of fertility regulation in Britain in this period, by which he means a decline effected by decisive choice.[100] His research gives us some insight into how the decline was achieved, evidencing that in the period 1901 to 1931, when 'proletarian birth-rates were cut in half':

---

98 Timothy J. Hatton and Richard M. Martin, 'Fertility Decline and the Heights of Children in Britain, 1886–1938', *Explorations in Economic History* 47, no. 4 (2010): 517.
99 Hatton and Martin, 506.
100 Seccombe, 'Starting to Stop: Working-Class Fertility Decline in Britain', 153.

> There is evidence of change in four practices: (a) a rise in incidence of induced abortion; (b) more frequent resort to coitus interruptus; (c) a decline in coital frequency by deliberate abstention; and (d) increased use of contraception devices.[101]

His summary of scholarly explanation is similar to Hatton and Martin, suggesting that the shift occurred in cultural conception of the ideal family, and birth-rates followed, hence the increase in 'stopping' modes. While 'demographers conventionally present the desire to control fertility in marriage as arising from the cultural formation of an ideal family size', Seccombe argues that this was only the case for middle-class families and that 'proletarian limiters' were responding to fears around the mother's health and to financial concerns in restricting their family size.[102]

The overarching argument of this thesis is that the aunt resists categorisation, and can exist outside of the patriarchal lineage, thus posing a challenge to the named, fixed, categories of the symbolic. Its fluid, non-contingent status and ability to render boundaries porous are semiotic qualities. Since it is essential for a child to break with its mother (and for women writers to, as Woolf was explicit about) in moving from a semiotic world to the symbolic one, the aunt is a way to retain a link to the semiotic and the qualities of the pre-symbolic phase while attaining the separation from the mother that adults must have. Where the historical information is vital for the following chapters which examine Woolf's texts is in demonstrating that this is not a blanket application of psychoanalytic theory but a reading led by Woolf's conception of aunthood, the cultural position of the aunt at the time of writing,

[101] Seccombe, 152; Seccombe, 154.
[102] Seccombe, 'Starting to Stop: Working-Class Fertility Decline in Britain', 170.

and the vast number of unexamined aunts appearing, disappearing, and reappearing in her oeuvre.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that Woolf's particular understanding of aunthood is linked to a wider confusion over the role of the aunt in cultural terms, and that this resistance to fixedness can be read in terms of the Kristevan semiotic. In the early twentieth-century the debate surrounding marriage to a deceased wife's sister, which focuses on the question of incest, is evidence of a legal and cultural position and clearly positions the aunt as a challenge to the incest taboo that upholds the patriarchal model of the family. I have established these core ideas at this early stage of my thesis to demonstrate that my reading of the aunt relies upon, and indeed requires, the cooperation of two often contrasting approaches: one using psychoanalytic theory and drawing on the work of feminist poststructuralist Woolf criticism of the 1990s and one taking a historicist approach more common in contemporary Woolf scholarship. This chapter, then, both indicates the framework I will use below when reading Woolf's work but also points towards the original aspect of the contribution that this thesis seeks to make to our understanding of Woolf's literary innovation.

CHAPTER TWO: 'Have you any aunts?': aunthood and subversion of the Bildungsroman in *The Voyage Out*

The Voyage Out, published in 1915 and written between 1908 and 1912, was Virginia Woolf's debut novel. Its gestation and development was arguably more turbulent than any other novel she would go on to write. Louise DeSalvo's research concludes that 'a conservative estimate would be that no fewer than seven drafts of the novel once existed,' but that 'far more than seven drafts—perhaps as many as eleven or twelve—would be a possibility.'[1] It is the story of a young and sheltered woman, Rachel Vinrace, who travels with her aunt and uncle, Helen and Ridley Ambrose, to the fictional South American port of San Marino. There, she stays in a villa with her aunt and uncle and encounters a group of fellow English travellers staying nearby at a hotel. After an outing with the group, Rachel gets engaged to one of the young men, Terence Hewet. On a second expedition Rachel catches an unidentified fever, returns to the villa, and dies.

There has been much critical work on *The Voyage Out;* its ambivalence (and ambiguity) around language, literature and history have been noted before and are evident in the diversity of critical reactions. Building on the work of critics such as Molly Hite, who reads *The Voyage Out* as a text which engages with and in some ways quite radically departs from the realist tradition, and of Patricia Laurence who examines the novel's capacity for expressing opposite concepts in dialogue with each other, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that the aunt is key to many of these innovations.[2] Where this thesis departs from previous criticism is in its argument that it is the figure of the aunt in *The Voyage Out* that enables Woolf to navigate a multitude of oppositional ideas and to disrupt the realist tradition of the novel.

---

[1] Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), 9.
[2] Molly Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', *Modernism/Modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 523–48; Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*.

Upon reading *The Voyage Out* for the first time, Woolf's friend, the writer and critic Lytton Strachey, declared that he loved 'the feeling reigning throughout', and called the novel 'very, very unvictorian.'[3] However, the novel's relationship with the realist tradition, in particular the Victorian Bildungsroman, has divided critics, and it seems that in light of the more obvious formal departure of novels from *Jacob's Room* onwards, the impact of the strangeness of this 'very unvictorian' novel has lessened.[4] While many critics acknowledge the presence in *The Voyage Out* of the seeds of innovation which were to germinate later in Woolf's career, the degree to which this novel can be read as formally innovative in and of itself has been debated. Elizabeth Bishop describes the novel as a 'rather traditional work.'[5] Patricia Juliana Smith, while writing about the homoerotic content of the novel, argues that 'in form, if not in content, *TVO* [sic] remains a traditional novel.'[6] Pamela Transue implies something similar, that there is a tension between traditional form and non-traditional content, that '[i]n this first novel, Virginia Woolf is hindered by her attempt to work within traditional novelistic conventions.'[7] She argues that 'one senses a disjunction between what she wants to do in the novel and the tools she has for doing it.'[8] I am contesting this reading of the novel on the basis that the relationship between form and content is more complicated and symbiotic than these readings suggest: changing one necessarily changes the other.

The Voyage Out's vastly differing critical interpretations are due to its position on the cusp of so many seemingly opposite ideas, as a dialogic container of a number of divisions that can be explained within, to use Laurence's phrase describing the splits in the female experience,

---

3 Leonard Woolf and James Strachey, eds., *Virginia Woolf & Lytton Strachey: Letters* (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), 56.
4 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000).
5 Elizabeth Bishop, 'Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 27, no. 4 (1981): 343.
6 Patricia Juliana Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 37.
7 Pamela J. Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 17.
8 Ibid., 17.

'the dialectics of outside and inside.'[9] Laurence gives examples of the divisions in female experience that she argues Woolf (as well as Sigmund Freud and Max Ernst) explores, in a table:

body	mind
unconscious	conscious
visible	invisible
public	private
primitive	civilised
surface	depths
semiotic	symbolic
irrational	rational
presence	absence[10]

As discussed in Chapter One, the conception of the aunt on the cusp of 'inside' and 'outside' corresponds with the aunt's position with relation to the family and is historically pertinent to the early twentieth century and the proliferation of the nuclear family unit, which pushed the aunt further from the centre of the family into the liminal space between outside and in.[11]

[9] Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 135.
[10] Ibid., 135–36.
[11] Magali Gente, 'The Expansion of the Nuclear Family Unit in Great Britain Between 1910 and 1920', *The History of the Family* 6, no. 1 (2001): 125–42; Garrett et al., *Changing Family Size in England and Wales: Place, Class and Demography, 1891-1911*.

Before unpacking the function of the aunt's role in *The Voyage Out*, it is first useful to establish just how prominent aunts are in the novel. In the body of *The Voyage Out* criticism I am unable to find even mention of the sheer number of aunts in this novel, despite much focus on the relationship between Helen and Rachel which is, of course, materteral. More than this, work on the novel often goes further than ignoring aunts and actively obscures their existence by prescribing alternate kinship terms. The names given to Helen by critics, often replacing rather than supplementing 'aunt,' are symptomatic of the wider critical treatment of the aunt as a literary figure. Bishop calls her 'Rachel's companion, the older and more worldly Helen Ambrose,' erasing the familial relationship entirely.[12] Beverley Ann Schack also erases the family connection, calling Helen Rachel's 'educator-guardian.'[13] Smith describes her as 'matron and mentor.'[14] DeSalvo calls her 'the mother-surrogate.'[15] De Salvo is not alone in calling Helen a mother-surrogate; Clare Hanson does the same, and in their introduction to *Voyages In: Fictions of Female Development,* Abel et al. call Helen Rachel's 'beautiful aunt/surrogate mother' – a construction implying that Helen is a hybrid, an aunt spliced with a mother, and perhaps that 'beautiful' is something that an aunt can be but that a mother can not – or perhaps aunts are beautiful so rarely that it must be part of Helen's description.[16] Gönül Bakay goes further with her reading of Helen as a maternal surrogate, saying that '[i]t is significant that Rachel feels a deep attachment to her mother and later to Helen whom she identifies as her mother.'[17] Bakay does not refer to any part of the text to evidence Rachel's identification of Helen as a mother and I cannot find evidence for it in the novel – even

[12] Bishop, 'Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 344.
[13] Beverley Ann Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 16.
[14] Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction*, 32.
[15] DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making*, 3.
[16] Clare Hanson, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Macmillan Press, 1994), 29; Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, 'Introduction', in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development,* Eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1983), 3.
[17] Gönül Bakay, 'Virginia Woolf's Gendered Language'', *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 142.

describing Rachel's feelings towards her real mother as a 'deep attachment' seems to go beyond what is presented in the text. Other critics such as Frederick McDowell and Susan Stanford Friedman describe Rachel as under Helen's tutelage, though the novel never quite makes clear what Helen is tutoring Rachel *in*.[18] Stanford Friedman does name Helen as Rachel's 'Aunt Helen,' and is the only critic I have found who in her summary of the novel qualifies that Helen is not *just* Rachel's aunt, but 'Aunt Helen, her dead mother's old friend.'[19] Given Rachel's Richmond aunts' dislike of Teresa, Rachel's mother ('why, for goodness sake, did they do nothing but criticise her when she was alive?'), Helen's close friendship with Teresa is another way of establishing her difference from these aunts, who I discuss below.[20]

One of the things that the critical avoidance of naming Helen's aunthood says about the role of the aunt is that 'aunt' is not shorthand in literary discourse for anything that resembles Helen – thus to describe her critics have, in some cases, totally erased her aunthood. The only frame of reference in which to contain her is in her relation to the maternal – DeSalvo even spends considerable time evaluating Helen's mothering of her own children as well as arguing that she is a terrible, destructive mother-surrogate to Rachel.[21] Woolf is not asking us to read Helen as a mother, however. Helen's children are not in the novel. Rachel has aunts at home who have raised her; she has a father who figures large in her life. Yet there is a clear tendency to read Helen's character in relation to a set of standards for mothers, or surrogate-mothers at least. The absence of the adjective materteral from both common and literary parlance is perhaps

[18] Frederick P W McDowell, '"Surely Order Did Prevail": Virginia Woolf and *The Voyage Out*', in *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, Ed. Ralph Freedman (California: University of California Press, 1980), 77; Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Spatialisation, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology & British Women Writers*, Ed. Kathy Mezei (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 119.
[19] Stanford Friedman, 'Spatialisation, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 119.
[20] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 209.
[21] DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making*, 37.

evidence that, outside of its relation to motherhood, aunthood lacks its own distinct characteristics.

There is one commonality in critical responses to *The Voyage Out:* however brief a summary of the plot may be, Helen is always a feature of it. As a character, her importance in the novel is and has been undeniable, and for many critics her power is almost mythical: 'Helen appears as the designer of Rachel's fate (anticipating Mrs Ramsay's mythic, even sinister, qualities in *To the Lighthouse*),' argues Hermione Lee.[22] '[A] Norn-like figure as she works on her embroidery the pattern of which shows the setting for the future voyage up the river' says Tone Sundt Urstad; 'carefully structured as a Fate figure,' says Schlack.[23] But none have considered her aunthood, and what Woolf's locating of a Norn-like power in *that* role, years before the mythic, maternal, Mrs Ramsay, might mean. Since Helen's familial relation is not essential for the plot (for instance by offering or withholding inheritance or allowing her niece entrance into a social world otherwise barred), the decision to make the central relationship bar the romance an aunt—niece one is worthy of an attention as yet unpaid.

The pervasiveness of aunts is not limited to the elevation of an aunt to main, rather than supporting character. The very word aunt is like an echo around San Marino: in anecdotes, letters and reminiscences, the word aunt is a thread that runs through the novel's conversations. It appears by my calculation eighty-one times, a great number in comparison to the appearance of the word 'uncle' (sixteen times) or even 'mother' (forty-six) or 'father' (seventy-one).[24] In particular the characters are in written correspondence with their aunts, who are presumably back in England – their aunts anchor them to the colonial motherland. Mr Pepper writes to his aunt who is, according to Hewet, 'a very remarkable old lady, eighty-five he tells me, and he

[22] Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Methuen, 1977), 33.
[23] Tone Sundt Urstad, '"Real Things under the Show";: Imagery Patterns in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 9, no. 2 (1998): 172; Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion*, 16.
[24] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*.

takes her for walking tours in the New Forest'.[25] When Hewet's travel companion Hirst writes a poem about God, he does so 'on the back of the envelope of my aunt's last letter,' which he has been storing 'between the pages of Sappho.'[26] It may be the same aunt of whom Hirst speaks when he criticises what he perceives to be an anti-intellectualism in Rachel's dislike of Edward Gibbon's work, comparing her to his 'spinster aunt.'[27] Edward Gibbon was an English historian and an MP in the late eighteenth century, whose most famous work was *The History of the Decline of the Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) and who would function well as an emblem of British male literary history.[28] Woolf would have been very familiar with Gibbon, whose biography featured in Leslie Stephen's *Studies of a Biographer* (1898).[29] When Rachel is offended he explains:

> 'My Aunt,' Hirst interrupted, 'spends her life in East Lambeth among the degraded poor. I only quoted my Aunt because she is inclined to persecute people she calls "intellectual", which is what I suspect Miss Vinrace of doing. It's all the fashion now. If you're clever it's always taken for granted that you're completely without sympathy, understanding, affection—all the things that matter.'[30]

In fact he has read Rachel wrong here – what she objects to is a refusal she senses on Hirst's part to engage with people outside of intellectual discourse, rather than intellectualism itself, but Hirst's disdain for his aunt and the implication that she is out of touch with the modern

---

[25] Woolf, 175.
[26] Woolf, 276.
[27] Woolf, 226.
[28] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 8 vols (London: The Folio Society, 1990).
[29] Leslie Stephen, 'Gibbon's Autobiography', in *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. 1, 4 vols (London: Duckworth and Co., 1910), 147–87.
[30] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 227.

world of ideas that he inhabits is present in other characters too, and while as readers we can see that Hirst has read *Rachel* wrong and are led to be critical of him in that regard, the dismissal of his aunt and her opinions goes relatively unchallenged. Woolf's selection of Gibbon as the point of contention on which Rachel is judged against Hirst's aunt is perhaps ironic: Gibbon's own aunt was so important for his life that she is often mentioned in his biographies, including in Stephen's, as a crucial and guiding figure.[31] In his memoir Gibbon said of his life that:

> The maternal office was supplied by my aunt, Mrs. Catherine Porten; at whose name I feel a tear of gratitude trickling down my cheek. A life of celibacy transferred her vacant affection to her sister's first child; my weakness excited her pity; her attachment was fortified by labour and success: and if there be any, as I trust there are some, who rejoice that I live, to that dear and excellent woman they must hold themselves indebted.[32]

Of all the figures of British literary history that Woolf could have chosen here, she chose one who allocated the source of all his success to his aunt.

Hewet's aunt, we hear, died of cancer.[33] Susan has other aunts than Mrs Paley, the aunt she travels with – 'I like to be a great deal with my Aunts,' she says.[34] Mrs Thornbury had an aunt who 'suffered dreadfully, so it isn't fair to call her horrid,' who used to give her ginger as a child. 'We never had the courage to tell her we didn't like it. We just had to put it out in the

[31] Stephen, 'Gibbon's Autobiography', 169–70.
[32] Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life and Writing* (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), 61.
[33] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 229.
[34] Woolf, 304.

shrubbery,' she recalls.[35] What is clear from this plethora of aunts is that while Helen Ambrose is a rich and complex character, aunts can also function for Woolf as shorthand for small-minded Englishness, or at least a banal, unexamined life – and in this way she is engaging with aunts of the realist Bildungsroman (as discussed below). This is evident in the way that Rachel talks about her aunts at home who raised her, too. Yet even these aunts signal a change in the narrative when Rachel thinks of them. In Chapter Two Rachel is reading *Cowper's Letters* when the mention of 'the smell of broom in his garden' transports her back to the house in Richmond where she lives with her aunts and 'she saw her Aunt Lucy arranging flowers in the drawing room.'[36] This daydream of Rachel's marks a narrative shift from third person omniscient narration, 'her mother having died when she was eleven, two aunts, the sisters of her father, brought her up,' to something more fluid, often slipping into free indirect discourse: 'Why did they do the things they did, and what did they feel, and what was it all about? […] How odd! How unspeakably odd!'.[37] It is her aunts that appear to unlock her mind and expression from the confines of realist narrative reporting. Not only does the narration change but thinking of her aunts quickly changes the content of her thoughts from fixed, certain facts to expansive philosophical questions: 'what was it all about?'.[38] This function of the aunt as a switch point between the familiar and the disturbing is used again when Terence and Rachel meet, and the aunt signals a move from polite, conventional conversation to those 'unspeakably odd' concerns about life and the nature of reality that they both share – a moment discussed later in this chapter.

Further evidence of Woolf's ambiguous regard for Rachel's Richmond aunts is the confusion over their names and their seeming interchangeability – even though as discussed

[35] Woolf, 369.
[36] Woolf, 33.
[37] Woolf, 32; Woolf, 34.
[38] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 33.

above they do seem to have a special role in the novel of signalling a shift in tone and in Rachel's concerns. In Chapter Two of the novel, the aunts with whom Rachel lives in Richmond are referred to as Aunt Lucy and Aunt Eleanor. In Chapter Fourteen Rachel refers to Aunt Lucy and Aunt Katie. In Chapter Sixteen, Rachel describes domestic life in Richmond in more detail, telling Hirst that 'Aunt Lucy used to do a good deal in the kitchen, and Aunt Clara I think, spent most of the morning dusting the drawing-room and going through the linen and silver.'[39] In Chapter One Helen recalls Rachel buying a piano, and says that 'Aunt Bessie' has been in touch to say that 'she is afraid you will spoil your arms if you insist upon so much practising.'[40] This practice presumably takes place at home, where Rachel's piano is, and thus we can assume Helen is referring to one of the Richmond aunts here too. We only ever hear of Rachel having two aunts, and so can presume at least that when two aunts are mentioned in a pair, like Lucy and Eleanor; Lucy and Katie and Lucy and Clara, that these are the Richmond aunts. In total then these two aunts have five names between them: Lucy, Eleanor, Katie, Clara and Bessie. In *Melymbrosia,* an early draft of *The Voyage Out,* the aunts are called Bessie and Clara, so it is quite possible that those two names are left in from earlier edits. Most likely, there are only two aunts and the various names are mistakes. The alternative option becomes rather complicated – Rachel would have three aunts called Lucy, each living with a different sister. These errors, not picked up by Woolf or any editor, are a telling glimpse into the regard held for the women who, as Rachel says, 'influenced her really' and 'built up the fine, closely woven substance of their life at home.'[41] This is not to say that these aunts are not important for the novel – as I discuss below they function as the key to a truer mode of communication for Rachel and Hewet – but that Woolf's aim is not to recover the truth of the lives of old spinsters in Richmond in order to share it with the world. The content of these aunts and their

[39] Woolf, 242.
[40] Woolf, 15.
[41] Woolf, 246.

actual lives is not really important, nor their individual personalities. The general effect of the changing names of Rachel's aunts prevents a reading of the novel as an attempt to reclaim aunt and aunthood from stereotype – as perhaps one could read other novels with aunt prime characters such as Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* in 1926 and Winifred Holtby's *Poor Caroline* in 1931.[42] Woolf's relationship with the figure of the aunt is more complex, as this thesis seeks to evidence.

Helen and Rachel are not the only aunt—niece pairing in San Marino. The cast also features a young woman, Susan Warrington, who is travelling companion to her demanding aunt, Mrs Paley. Like Rachel's Richmond aunts, Mrs Paley sees marriage as the most important goal for her niece, and her cruel and demanding behaviour ends as soon as her niece achieves an engagement to fellow traveller, Arthur Venning:

> Directly she became engaged, Mrs Paley behaved with instinctive respect, positively protested when Susan as usual knelt down to lace her shoes, and appeared really grateful for an hour of Susan's company where she had been used to exact two or three as her right.[43]

This is in high contrast to Mrs Paley's previous behaviour as a 'selfish old aunt, who paid [Susan's] fare but treated her as a servant and companion in one.'[44] This also calls to mind Kathleen Holden's reading of maiden aunts as non-adult because they were presumed not to have had sex; except here the niece is treated as a child until she becomes engaged and then in

[42] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes or The Loving Huntsman* (London: Virago Press, 1993); Winifred Holtby, *Poor Caroline* (London: Virago, 2011).
[43] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 201–2.
[44] Woolf, 201.

an instant, commands an adult respect.[45] The story of Susan Warrington finding her independence away from her aunt, finding her life opened up by her romance with Arthur Venning, is one more reminiscent of a traditional marriage plot – it finds resolution in a way that Rachel and Terence's relationship never does. Arthur liberates Susan from the life of servitude represented by the aunt as a traditional authority figure, overcoming her initial protestations that she is needed by her aunt:

> 'Couldn't we explore the town this evening?' Mr Venning suggested.
>
> 'My aunt—' Susan began.
>
> 'You deserve a holiday,' he said. 'You're always doing things for other people.'
>
> 'But that's my life,' she said, under cover of refilling the teapot.
>
> 'That's no one's life,' he returned, 'no young person's. You'll come?'
>
> 'I should like to come,' she murmured.[46]

This relationship becomes an engagement rather quickly, and Susan and Arthur remain part of the ensemble cast that forms the backdrop against which Rachel, Helen and Terence exist. Whereas Helen seems to be both in control of Rachel's courtship and betrayed by it, Susan's story of her submissive relationship with her aunt and the potential for marriage to offer an escape is a story more familiar to us. Rupert Christiansen calls the 'unmarried young woman […] trapped by the iron whims of an elderly relative' a 'common phenomenon of the Victorian era,' and in the following section this trope is examined.[47] While on the surface Susan's

[45] Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914-60*, 166.
[46] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 132–33.
[47] Rupert Christiansen, *The Complete Book of Aunts* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 102.

marriage frees her from her aunt, really the engagement takes place under the aegis of tradition represented by Mrs Paley – one of the characters in the novel who is easily read and dismissed as a type. Mrs Paley and Susan are what the reader might expect Helen and Rachel to be. The literary spectrum of aunthood is made all the more clear by the juxtaposition of Mrs Paley and Susan with Helen and Rachel; Woolf's ambivalence towards the role, and its variety of functions, are in heightened relief.

Traditions of the realist novel

It is necessary to identify which novelistic traditions Woolf was rejecting or subverting in *The Voyage Out* before exploring the relationship between the use of the aunt as a literary device and the shift from a realist novel towards a modernist one. A significant amount of critical work exists which questions the relationship between *The Voyage Out* and the Bildungsroman genre.[48] The term itself is historically and culturally variable. Tobias Boes offers a useful and comprehensive analysis of the development of the genre and its semantic denotation in 'Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman:* A Historical Survey of Critical Trends' (2006), but for this thesis only some key points need to be established:

> Using the most reductive of terms, *Bildung* (from *das Bild:* "image" or "form") might be described as a process of teleological and organic growth, in the manner of a seed that develops into a mature plant according to inherent genetic principles (Kontje,

[48] For example, Elizabeth Abel, 'Elizabeth Abel, Narrative Structure (s) and Female Development: The Case of *Mrs Dalloway*', in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, Eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1983), 161–85; Maja Lindberg Brekke, 'The Discomfort of Civilisation: Destabilising the Bildungsroman in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room*' (University of Bergen, 2017), http://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/12105; McDowell, '"Surely Order Did Prevail": Virginia Woolf and the *Voyage Out*'.

> *German Bildungsroman* 1-2). Implicitly referring to this concept, Dilthey argued that in a *Bildungsroman,* '[a] regular development is observed in the life of the individual: each of the stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage' (390).[49]

The Bildungsroman is a novel that charts the development of a protagonist over a number of years, usually starting when they are a child and finishing in adulthood with a sense of resolution. Its inception, as argued by Franco Moretti in his book *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture,* was in the shift towards a youthful protagonist, which he sees as perhaps the defining feature of the Bildungsroman and which was exemplified in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795), a novel that 'codifies the new paradigm and sees youth as the most meaningful part of life.'[50] Gregory Castle says that:

> In Moretti's model, the classic bildungsroman of Goethe and Austen turns on its ability to reconcile narrativity and closure, youth and adulthood, free self-making and social determination. It both reflects and produces social consent, modelling for its middle-class readers a fragile compromise between inner and outer directives in subject formation.[51]

---

[49] Tobias Boes, 'Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends', *Literature Compass* 3, no. 2 (2006): 232.

[50] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995); Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 3.

[51] Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006), 74.

'The motifs of education, marriage and the journey, all constitute important aspects of the genre,' argues Maja Lindberg Brekke in her thesis, 'The Discomfort of Civilisation: Destabilising the Bildungsroman in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out'* (2017).[52] These are key features of a Bildungsroman plot, all of which work towards the aim of bringing the protagonist into the world and socially integrating them. 'In the Bildungsroman,' says Lindberg Brekke, 'the individual becomes part of the whole […] socialization becomes an individual's choice rather than a necessity.'[53]

In 1983 Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsh and Elizabeth Langland addressed a crucial gap in critical understanding of the Bildungsroman in their book *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development.* They argue that 'the female developmental plot may engender other formal revisions of the *Bildungsroman*' and, as the title of their book suggests, make a detailed analysis of *The Voyage Out* and its generic position in relation to the Bildungsroman.[54] They argue that while the novel has clear features of the genre, its departure from tradition is a necessary feature of a specifically female developmental novel. 'Fictions of female development may revise the conception of protagonist as well,' they argue.[55] 'Women characters, more psychologically embedded in relationships, sometimes share the formative voyage with friends, sisters, or mothers, who assume equal status as protagonists.'[56] This revision clearly applies to *The Voyage Out*, but I disagree that the dissolution of the sole protagonist is a formal decision dependent on female development, and suggest reading the dispersal of narrative focus in the context of a move away from a novelistic structure in which characters other than the protagonists exist only to educate the protagonist or to facilitate their narrative. What can be agreed upon is that *The Voyage Out* engages explicitly with the Bildungsroman tradition, with

52 Lindberg Brekke, 'The Discomfort of Civilisation: Destabilising the Bildungsroman in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room*', 15.
53 Lindberg Brekke, 12–13.
54 Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, 'Introduction', 12.
55 Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, 12.
56 Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, 12.

some critics arguing that it embraces the genre and some that it subverts or rejects it: Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, says that it 'narrates a failed Bildungsroman for its protagonist and inscribed a successful Bildung for its author.'[57] Ellen McWilliams calls it 'an archetypal female Bildungsroman' while acknowledging that it 'ends with a sacrifice of the heroine to Victorian convention.'[58]

To understand how Woolf is engaging with the tradition of aunthood in the Bildungsroman requires understanding how aunts function in the genre more generally. Colm Tóibín explores just this in an article he wrote in 2011 for the *London Review of Books*, titled 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th-century novel),' which discusses many novels which might be called Bildungsromane.[59] He identifies one feature of literary aunthood as filling the gap left by the many absent parents of nineteenth-century literature, which is, in his words 'full of parents whose influence must be evaded or erased, to be replaced by figures who operate either literally or figuratively as aunts, both kind and mean, both well-intentioned and duplicitous, both rescuing and destroying.'[60] He gives the examples of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* (1814), narratives of the Bildung of, respectively, Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price. Of Elizabeth Bennet's Aunt Gardiner, Tóibín says:

> It is to her house in London that the sisters repair in that hushed interregnum when both Bingley and Darcy have disappeared and with them the prospects for Jane; and it is while travelling with her aunt and uncle that Elizabeth renews her relations with Darcy. It is through them that she discovers that Darcy has rescued her sister Lydia. In other words, they offer stillness, unforced opportunity, vital information – none of which is

[57] Stanford Friedman, 'Spatialisation, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 109.
[58] Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (London: Routledge, 2017), 18.
[59] Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)'.
[60] Tóibín, 13.

> available from the girls' mother, or indeed their father. This idea that the sisters have to be removed from the family home for the novel to proceed makes the role of their uncle and aunt essential in the book.[61]

He highlights here the potential of aunts as tools for furthering the plot. This is one of the ways in which the reader of *The Voyage Out* is led to expect Helen to be a traditional aunt – it is Helen who suggests that Rachel stops with her in South America rather than continuing to travel with her father.

Tóibín identifies another structural function of aunts: 'that they allow for dramatic entrances and departures,' saying that 'all through the 19th century, aunts breach the peace and lighten the load.'[62] He uses the example of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* and of Mrs. Glegg in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss.*[63] He looks to the volatile Aunt Dante in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce (1916) and her argument with her brother on Christmas day, and concludes that: 'aunts depart in novels as aunts arrive, changing everything.'[64] The difficulty, he argues, is having an aunt in situ. He discusses this with regards to Fanny Price's aunts Mrs Norris and Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*:

> Since the opening of the novel has all the characteristics of a fairy tale, Austen must have been tempted to make Lady Bertram, the aunt in whose house Fanny will live, an evil ogre and to make Mrs. Norris, the aunt who lives nearby, the kind and

---

61 Tóibín, 14.
62 Tóibín, 14.
63 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 1994); George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin Books, 1979).
64 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', 14.

> watchful one. Or to make them both ogres. What she decided to do was to hand all the badness to Mrs. Norris.[65]

Mrs. Norris is, as Tóibín points out, the archetypal wicked aunt, whose malevolence is 'clear, at times rather too clear,' but he perhaps overstates the point to say that 'all the badness' is handed to her.[66] Lady Bertram's passivity causes its own problems for Fanny, and other critics such as Joan Klingel Ray have written about the very serious consequences of her less obvious 'bad'-ness with a less forgiving attitude than Tóibín, who finds her a 'subtle, restrained and ingenious creation' who does no good but no real bad.[67] He discusses the problem posed by Fanny's residence with Lady Bertram, meaning she cannot appear episodically as she is always present in the home.[68]

> If [Austen] makes Lady Bertram merely unpleasant, Fanny will have to respond to her unpleasantness in scene after scene, because Lady Bertram is, unusually, an aunt in residence rather than an aunt who comes and goes. This will then become the story of the book: a simple story of cruelty and resistance to cruelty. And if Lady Bertram is actively cruel to Fanny, how will she treat her own children? If she treats them with kindness, then the intensity of their agency will be diluted and dissolved. If she is cruel to them too, then the singleness of Fanny, her solitude as a force in the book, will not emerge.[69]

---

65 Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', 14; Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: Pan Books, 1972).
66 Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', 14.
67 Joan Klingel Ray, 'Jane Austen's Case Study of Child Abuse: Fanny Price', *Persuasions* 13 (1991): 16–26.
68 Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', 14.
69 Tóibín, 14.

Austen's answer, as argued by Tóibín, was to make Lady Bertram 'too sleepy to care,' living a 'gloriously underexamined life' and thus 'at precisely the opposite pole from Fanny.'[70] This reading obscures the complexity of Lady Bertram's role and minimises her power to the point of disappearance – if her role is to be as invisible as possible, why is she there? It is this kind of reading that, as I argue below, Woolf resists in the character of Helen Ambrose – who is unashamedly present in all her inconsistent parts *and* present with Rachel throughout the novel.

I also suggest that Tóibín's argument requires ignorance of arguably the most influential Bildungsroman in English with a female protagonist: *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Bronte, which features an aunt who could be said to epitomise the 'wicked aunt' type: Mrs Reed. Mrs. Reed is aunt to the titular character, and while critic Charlotte Higgins compares her to Mrs. Norris she is also like Lady Bertram in that she is indifferent to the causes of great suffering to her niece.[71] Mrs. Reed is 'blind and deaf on the subject' of her son John's violent bullying of Jane, despite it occurring in her presence.[72] Just as Klingel Ray's reading of Lady Bertram makes us rethink passivity as a form of abuse, Alina Pintilii's reading of Mrs. Reed establishes the aunt's complicity in Jane's abuse by John, whose 'awful behaviour is encouraged by his mother's indifference.'[73] 'Mrs. Reed,' Pintilii argues, 'is not only indifferent to the relationships between her children and Jane, but she is guilty of them.'[74] While Mrs. Reed could be considered one of the cruellest aunts in English canon, *Jane Eyre* has not been reduced to 'a simple story of cruelty and resistance to cruelty' – as Tóibín

---

[70] Tóibín, 14.
[71] Charlotte Higgins, 'Literary Aunts: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', Online Newspaper, *The Guardian: Charlotte Higgins on Culture* (blog), 25 March 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2011/mar/25/classics-janeausten.
[72] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 10.
[73] Alina Pintilii, 'On the Representations of Parent-Child Relationships in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë', *Cultural Intertexts* 1, no. 1 (2014): 35.
[74] Pintilii, 35.

suggests *Mansfield Park* would have been if Lady Bertram were cruel.[75] Perhaps the way that Bronte worked around this was to locate this relationship primarily in Jane's childhood. Jane is ten when she is living at Gateshead with her aunt and subject to abuse, so that the reader anticipates growth and change in all Jane's relationships: we know, being introduced to Jane at such a young age, that this is not the young woman in her finished form. Thus Mrs Reed's cruelty to Jane has a function of compelling the reader to read on: Jane cannot win against Mrs Reed's cruelty and lies when she is a child, but what might she do to her aunt when she becomes an adult?

Woolf does use these techniques to varying degrees in *The Voyage Out,* though in some cases their subversion is more apparent. Rachel's mother is dead, and her father is away on business – rather like a nineteenth-century heroine – but we don't meet the aunts that have stepped in to raise her. As for Helen – she could and has been argued as representing either part of Tóibín's opposites: 'both kind and mean, both well-intentioned and duplicitous, both rescuing and destroying.'[76] One key difference between *The Voyage Out* and these earlier novels is that Rachel is an adult of twenty-four at the beginning of the novel – when her relationship with Helen begins properly. Fanny Price is ten when she is sent to Mansfield Park, as is Jane Eyre when we meet her (thought she has been living with her aunt since she was one). A quarter of *Jane Eyre,* until Chapter Ten, is taken up with the years ten to eighteen of her life – the events of *The Voyage Out* take place over months, rather than years. Rachel's age distances Helen from the parental position, making Rachel more responsible for her own actions. Interestingly, Lily Bart, heroine of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) which Tóibín also discusses, is twenty-nine at the start of that novel. Wharton keeps the traditional relationship dynamic though by making Lily completely dependent on her aunt

[75] Christiansen, *The Complete Book of Aunts*, 161; Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', 14.
[76] Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)', 13.

financially – however cruel her aunt is Lily must endure it and, like Jane Eyre or Fanny Price, cannot just walk away. This tradition of a dominant-submissive relationship between aunt and niece is not followed in *The Voyage Out.* Rachel presumably will inherit from her father, and is old enough to decide whether she wants to travel to San Marino or carry on with him – she does not *need* Helen in the way that younger or penniless heroines need their nieces. Thus Helen perhaps could not get away with being as cruel to Rachel as some of the aforementioned aunts are, because Rachel would have no reason to endure it. Woolf writes a relationship between a naïve young adult and a more experienced adult who are assessing each other and learning how the other experiences life.

In the traditional Bildungsroman, the aunt exists in the domestic world, and often is strongly associated with her home or even with one room within it. Mrs Reed is inseparable from the Red Room in which she locks Jane, and Lady Bertram from her sofa. Chapter Seven of George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), whose central plot is the Bildung of Maggie Tulliver and her brother Tom, is called 'Enter the Aunts and Uncles' and narrates a visit from Maggie's Aunts Glegg and Pullet and their husbands – a group who seem to fill Dorlcote Mill to the brim. These aunts are enforcers of gender difference – they tell Tom to hold his head up and then leave him be, but Maggie is subject to fussing about her clothes, her skin (which is 'so brown') and especially, her hair.[77] When Maggie takes it upon herself to cut her own hair in protest, her uncles and her father are amused, but her aunts are outraged:

[77] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 118.

> ‘Fie, for shame!’ Said aunt Glegg, in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. ‘Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread and water – not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles.’[78]

Her aunt Pullet declares ‘she’s more like a gypsy nor ever.’[79] Her father comforts her and defends her against her aunts, a poignant moment in their relationship, which she thinks of years after, ‘when every one else said that her father had done very ill by his children.’[80] The aunts are very much upholders of the restrictive gender rules against which young Maggie rebels. They want Maggie to be meek and passive – like Mrs Reed who protests that her complaint against Jane is because of Jane’s passion.[81] There are similarities with Rachel’s Richmond aunts, though they are upholders of gender rules and not actively malicious in the name of feminising their niece, like Mrs Reed is. In the case of Helen in *The Voyage Out,* her relationship to marriage and domesticity is more ambiguous. Helen herself travels the world with her husband, and it is Helen who invites Rachel to San Marino; Helen who goes out walking with her and who allows her to observe Terence; Helen who wants her niece to develop herself – her uncle Ridley Ambrose barely seems to leave the villa.

It is not exclusively the conventions of Bildungsromane that *The Voyage Out* moves away from, but other traditions of the realist novel too (though some of these may also be features of Bildungsroman). In her book *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty,* Herta Newman quotes Woolf’s review of *The Tunnel* by Dorothy Richardson from 1919: ‘We want to be rid of realism, to penetrate without its help into the regions beneath

78 Eliot, 125.
79 Eliot, 125.
80 Eliot, 125.
81 Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 37.

it.'[82] That may have been true by 1919, but in *The Voyage Out* its help is certainly still present. These features of realism which I will identify before continuing to consider that aunts are not rejected by Woolf in her debut novel, but we can see them being subverted and re-purposed in an attempt to create something new, years before she 'makes the strongest case for delivering fiction from the constrictions of traditional realism, and for evolving a more flexible generic model that might accommodate the changing order of reality' in her essays 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1923), 'Character in Fiction' (1924) and 'Modern Fiction' (1925).[83]

As Newman argues about Woolf's writing in general, Woolf is 'embracing indecision as the basis of her renewal' and 'invites us to share the full measure of her doubts.'[84] *The Voyage Out* rejects many notions of fixedness or certainty, and this plays out in many ways: there is no clear moral code in the novel and so the reader does not know if characters are 'good' or 'bad'; and the plot is ambiguous – is Rachel's death a tragic end to a blossoming love story or a fortuitous escape from a life that would have made her miserable? There is little in the novel that can really be pinned down, and few characters who can be easily categorised (which is reflected by the variety of critical responses both to the novel itself and to its central characters). The whole approach to character is unusual – where Woolf offers descriptive details the narrator withholds opinion about those details, so that the reader cannot easily dismiss any character as one thing or another – a narrative technique I discuss in detail later in this chapter. Elizabeth Bishop says that:

> It is in *The Voyage Out* that one discovers Woolf labouring to achieve what she would later effect with felicitous ease: a mode of discourse which compels the reader's active

[82] Virginia Woolf, '"The Tunnel"', in *Contemporary Writers* (London: Hogarth, 1965), 121.
[83] Herta Newman, *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 3.
[84] Newman, 4.

> participation, guiding him [sic?] to the point where he can make his own intuitive leap, to apprehend a reality that will not submit to denotative prose.[85]

While the later 'felicitous ease' of Woolf's writing practice is arguable, Bishop accurately describes Woolf's 'bold plans of reform' as leading her 'away from traditional concepts of plot and character, for her interest lies less in the variables of personality than in the radical character of human beings and things.'[86] In *The Voyage Out,* unlike in many realist novels, a character's teleological function is often unclear: they often provide neither an obvious plot function (so often the case for the aunt, for instance leaving or denying a legacy, such as in Charlotte Lennox's 1758 Bildungsroman, *Henrietta,* or in the aforementioned *The House of Mirth*), nor an educational function for either heroine or reader.[87] Beyond the Dalloways, Terence and Helen, the characters do not even affect the heroine, Rachel, much. Mr and Mrs Thornbury, Mr and Mrs Flushing, Miss Allen, Mr Pepper, Evelyn Murgatroyd, Susan Warrington and Mrs Paley, Arthur Venning and even St John Hirst are, as Gillian Beer points out, 'entirely concerned with his or her own particular way of living.'[88] Beer notes this in the context of the book's move away from Bildungsroman form, where one might expect to see 'a chastened accord between the hero and his society at the book's ending.'[89] According to Galbiati and Harris, contemporary critics felt that the 'large cast of characters […] contributed to an impression of formal fragility.'[90] Newman also addresses the 'problem of character' for

---

85 Bishop, 'Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 343.
86 Bishop, 344.
87 Charlotte Lennox, *Henrietta* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).
88 Gillian Beer, 'Introduction', in *The Voyage Out: Centenary Perspectives*, Eds. Sarah M. Hall, Mary Ellen Foley, Lindsay Martin, Claire Nicholson (Southport: The Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain, 2015), 1.
89 Beer, 1.
90 Maria Alessandra Galbiati and Peter James Harris, 'Reality and Language in *The Voyage Out*, by Virginia Woolf', *Acta Scientiarum. Language and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2010): 67.

Woolf, which Newman sees as the failure of the realist novel to communicate anything that resembles real life:

> If character is neither accessible nor dispensable, the genre, as it is traditionally conceived, cannot survive. It is, ironically, in confronting this dilemma, accepting fully its dire implications that Woolf hits upon an ingenious resolution. She will replace the illusion of reality with a redeeming doubtfulness that should clear the air of falsehood and signal from afar, the elusive essence that she cannot grasp.[91]

Joanne Frye reads Rachel 'not as a defined physical being, but rather as a consciousness through which the reader apprehends Woolf's thematic concerns.'[92] Jed Esty refers to *The Voyage Out*'s plot as a rewriting of 'imperial quest-romance' which uses 'dissolution of psychic boundaries in a colonial setting [to] serv[e] as a thematic base for the dissolution of realist perspective.'[93] 'This dethronement of character from the elevated place it had attained in much Victorian fiction was part of a larger realist revolt against idealism as a moral and social creed,' argues Maria di Battista, who also identifies this as a feature of both Edwardian and Georgian writers, who often 'created characters that often were morally undistinguished and sometimes barely likeable.'[94] Regardless of the motive, this turning away from certainty for both the narrator and the characters is a defining feature of this strange novel. Dorothy Hale touches on this when she describes Woolf's approach to the novel more generally:

---

91 Newman, *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty*. Xi.
92 Joanne Frye, '*The Voyage Out*: Thematic Tensions and Narrative Techniques', *Twentieth Century Literature* 26, no. 4 (1980): 403.
93 Jed Esty, 'The British Empire and the English Modernist Model', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32.
94 Maria Di Battista, 'Realism and Rebellion in Edwardian and Georgian Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42.

> The vision of life conveyed by a novel is, Woolf insists, a 'vague, mysterious thing.' Every effort of analysis, every attempt to assign positive attributes to 'life' or to locate in the novel its objective correlative ends in failure. For Woolf the aesthetic achievement of the novel is to project 'life' as a life force, as energy, animation, what she calls the 'unknown and uncircumscribed spirit.'[95]

The plot itself is unusual for a realist novel: very little actually happens. A young woman travels to South America, meets someone she might be in love with, agrees to marry him, and then dies. Transue argues that Woolf's plot 'is too weak to carry the weight of her impressions and instead simply interferes with the open-ended exploration of consciousness which is her strength', but Stanford Friedman argues that this aborted marriage plot 'represents an exhilarating victory over the tyranny of conventional plot, as Woolf would later call it in her 1923 essay "Modern Fiction."'[96] The novel's relationship with the marriage plot is ambiguous; Gregory Castle states that 'Rachel neither advocates marriage nor surrenders herself to it.'[97] He acknowledges that:

> Many critics read *The Voyage Out* in terms of a marriage plot or, as it is sometimes called, the 'two-suitor plot,' which involves 'the protagonist coming of age by distinguishing Mr. Right from Mr. Wrong.' These critics often insist that Woolf

[95] Dorothy Hale, 'The Art of English Fiction in the Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13.
[96] Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style*, 17; Stanford Friedman, 'Spatialisation, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 109.
[97] Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 238.

> challenges the 'either/or' trap of 'phallogocentric dualism' duplicated in the institution of bourgeois marriage.[98]

While the conventional plot of a realist novel could be a narrative of Bildung, a marriage-plot or an adventurous quest, it is clear that *The Voyage Out* is not exactly in any of these categories, though it is in dialogue with all of them (and perhaps more – for instance the feminist polemical novel as suggested by Molly Hite).[99] But it is not only in communication with concepts of genre and plot that *The Voyage Out* aligns itself with the elusiveness of the semiotic. Below I address the novel's tense relationship with language, and explore the semiotic textual eruptions and quieter disturbances that characterise further the novel's resistance to the symbolic language of which it is created – and argue that Helen Ambrose is the key to reading these, a link that previous scholarship that explores the novel's relationship to language has not gone as far as to make.

Aunts and communication

In the introduction to this chapter I presented Transue's list of divisions in the psychical experience, framed broadly as outside/inside. By examining *The Voyage Out's* relationship with language and its straining against the confines of its own form we can see that the aunt is on the cusp not only of language and silence but of the proper and the improper – the sayable and the unsayable. In *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, Laurence argues that: 'Distinctions are made in [Woolf's] novels between what is left "unsaid," something one might have felt but does not say; the "unspoken," something not yet formulated

[98] Castle, 238; Castle, 225.
[99] Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out and Elizabeth Robins's My Little Sister'.

or expressed in voiced words; and the "unsayable," something not sayable based on the social taboos of Victorian propriety or something about life that is ineffable.'[100] As established in Chapter One, aunthood is connected to the social taboo of incest, perhaps the most unsayable of desires, and is often mislabelled so as to appear invisible (often while having great effect or impact). Laurence's expression of that which exists outside of naming (and so, in our argument, in the realm of the semiotic) in Woolf's novels describes aunthood too – and below I explore the ways in which aunthood is used by Woolf to articulate her frustration with the limitations not just of realist form, but with language itself (thus privileging semiotic linguistic effects and misdirects). As I have suggested above, it is the aunt's specific historical position established via the debate surrounding marriage to the deceased wife's sister that links her role to the incest taboo and suggests the role as a publicly sanctioned way to express unsayable desires – so that for Woolf writing this in the late 1910s aunthood is a direct link to the pre-linguistic, the repressed, and the semiotic. I demonstrate this below with reference to two key conversations in the novel.

In Rachel and Terence's crucial first intimate conversation, which takes place just after they witness Susan Warrington and Arthur Venning in a romantic embrace, we see Woolf first make use of the aunt to explore the limitations both of the traditional novelistic form and of language itself. When Terence asks Rachel her Christian name, he immediately repeats it back to her (the first example of unconscious mimicking and repetition, itself a semiotic linguistic effect, which increases as the couple spend more time together).

[100] Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 1.

> ‘Rachel,’ he repeated. ‘I have an aunt called Rachel, who put the life of Father Damien into verse. She is a religious fanatic—the result of the way she was brought up, down in Northamptonshire, never seeing a soul. Have you any aunts?’[101]

Rachel replies ‘I live with them,’ an ambiguous response, that encompasses both the Richmond aunts that she goes on to discuss and excludes Helen, the companion with whom she is travelling and who Terence has already met.[102] While Rachel’s reply does not explicitly exclude Helen, perhaps the type of aunt described so clearly by Terence (a reclusive religious fanatic) has steered Rachel’s mind away from her, given that she is so different in character.[103] Terence’s aunt sounds rather like Woolf’s own Aunt Caroline Stephen, sister of her father Leslie, who wrote a number of important Quaker texts and was a devout and well-respected member of her church.[104] Rachel’s Richmond aunts are obsessively religious too, as she tells Hewet when he asks what they would be doing now:

> 'They are probably buying wool,’ Rachel determined. She tried to describe them. ‘They are small, rather pale women,’ she began, ‘very clean. We live in Richmond. They have an old dog, too, who will only eat the marrow out of bones . . . They are always going to church. They tidy their drawers a good deal.’ But here she was overcome by the difficulty of describing people.

---

101 Woolf, *The Voyage Out,* 157.
102 Woolf, 157.
103 Woolf, 157.
104 Marcus, ‘The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination’.

'It's impossible to believe that it's all going on still!' She exclaimed. [105]

Rachel's difficulty in describing her aunts using mundane details about the facts of their lives is an expression of Woolf's own frustration with the limitation of the realist novel with regards to describing character – one she explores in 'Character in Fiction' when she says that '[the Edwardians] have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things.'[106] What Rachel and Terence discover here, together, is that character cannot be pinned down by physical description and that the language they have is not sufficient for them to communicate meaning to each other – and so begins their stunted relationship and joint quest for a mode through which they can truly understand each other and the world – something which is also true of Katharine Hilbery and Ralph Denham's relationship in *Night and Day*, as I discuss in Chapter Three. Aunts are *such* a polite, safe, mundane topic of conversation – and such a common one for the guests at San Marino, as demonstrated above, yet, as demonstrated in Chapter One, they are associated with perhaps the most unsayable thing in society: incestuous desire. Here, they provide space for Hewet and Rachel to say something rather more profound about how one communicates subjective experience – in a sense telling secrets behind a veil of propriety. Bishop notes that '[t]he semantic content may be minimal, but such exchanges create a tone, a mood, and in fact for Terence and Rachel the "random unnecessary things" prove far more effective than the formal biographical sketches that Hirst had demanded during an earlier meeting.'[107] The aunts also function here in a similar way to when Rachel daydreams about them, as discussed above. They seem to trigger in Rachel a self-awareness that allows her to comprehend the un-reality of the world around her – the limitations of the tools that she has to

[105] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 158.
[106] Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', 49.
[107] Bishop, 'Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 352.

navigate the world with – and in this they allow her to enter an unconventional realm of discourse. Her exclamation that 'it's impossible to believe that it's all going on still!' addresses complex notions of memory, separation, and transition, as well as very fundamental concerns about the human experience: how real is anything except the present moment? The questions 'have you any aunts?' is, for Rachel, one that allows her to communicate things that might, for various reasons, otherwise be unsayable.

Terence and Rachel are shortly joined by Helen and Hirst, and Helen laughs away Rachel's attempt to talk about her beliefs (which are somewhere between 'unspoken' and 'unsayable', using Laurence's distinctions).[108]

> 'I believe—I believe,' Rachel stammered, 'I believe there are things we don't know about, and the world might change in a minute and anything appear.'
>
> At this Helen laughed outright. 'Nonsense,' she said. 'You're not a Christian. You've never thought what you are.'[109]

What Rachel has attempted to communicate – with difficulty as her stammering suggests – has been misread by her aunt, who has taken Rachel's metaphysical beliefs and reduced it to one word: 'Christian.' The conversation ends once the rest of the group return. So that while Aunt Helen is very different from the Richmond aunts, it is aunts that have broken the barrier between Rachel and Hewet, that has allowed them to begin to attempt a truer communication

[108] Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 1.
[109] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 161.

of themselves, and it is an aunt that has put the boundaries back up, switching the novel back to something more traditional than Rachel's philosophical grasping. Helen admires something of Rachel's strangeness though. Her criticism is softer, and less concerned with Rachel's adherence to a patriarchal order - unlike the Richmond aunts who have written to her to say that they are afraid that Rachel will spoil her arms if she keeps playing piano. Helen is amused by Rachel's unpolished, unaffected ways:

> Again Helen laughed at her, benignantly strewing her with handfuls of the long tasselled grass, for she was so brave and so foolish.
>
> 'Oh Rachel,' she cried. 'It's like having a puppy in the house having you with one—a puppy that brings one's underclothes down into the hall.'[110]

These underclothes which Rachel exposes are the limitations not only of the discourse the characters have to try and communicate with each other but the insufficiency of the content of traditional novelistic discourse in expressing character to the reader. There are obvious connotations too which relate Helen and Rachel's relationship to the semiotic: underclothes are the closest thing to the body, but outside of it. Helen's description of her relationship with her niece as one that results in the exposure of her underclothes is one that further exemplifies aunthood's delicate position with regards incest and which reminds us of bodies and physicality.

It is not just the content of these conversations that, via the aunt, veers between traditional and something beyond that. Language itself is often inelegant and interrupted – speech is

[110] Woolf, 161.

permeated by strange sounds, non-sequiters, stammers, repetitions and sentences that go nowhere. The language is sometimes sparse – Laurence argues that 'the spaces in [Woolf's] novels for the reader are the silences of the writer whose conception of writing is to allow the reader's emotions and responses a place to grow in the generous spaces of ellipses, dashes, and a lexicon and scenes of silence.'[111] Nick Montgomery notes 'a gathering awareness throughout the text of the disruptive and uncanny power of sound,' and describes the 'curiously frustrated conversations and abortive utterances of the characters.[112] Bishop says that:

> One notices throughout Woolf's writings a constantly fluctuating regard for language: it strikes her by turns as an almost magical force, as a mere necessary evil, and as a betrayer of life. These disparate attitudes inform *The Voyage Out*, and the work is both a groping exploration on Woolf's part of the connection between reality and language, and a dramatic portrayal of a corresponding exploration in the growth of the central character.[113]

The novel does, as Bishop argues, explore the relationship between reality (or the *actual* experience of being alive) and language (the tool with which we can communicate that experience) but crucially there is a third presence in this relationship: the body. Helen's strong physical presence in the novel exemplifies aunthood's connection to body more generally. This connection, as discussed in Chapter One, is via the incest taboo, and is a facet of their semiotic function. While in a patriarchal model of society it could be argued all women are firmly linked

111 Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 91.
112 Nick Montgomery, 'Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (2000): 35; Montgomery, 34.
113 Bishop, 'Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', 344.

to the body, read as they are in terms of either sexuality or maternity (or lack of both or either), the aunt is doubly marked because of the potential for her body to undo the family structure that relies on the incest taboo. The body negotiates, facilitates, interprets and mediates reality and language and is deserving of at least the same attention – particularly in a novel where the heroine dies from a fever that takes hold of her body so quickly and entirely and where her aunt, to quote Smith, is 'dangerously embodied.'[114]

Unlike the ghostly Katharine Hilbery, heroine of Woolf's next novel *Night and Day* (1919), the central female characters in *The Voyage Out* inhabit their bodies with gusto.[115] In particular we are reminded of their bodies and circulation by frequent flushing and blushing. When we first glimpse Rachel, having dinner with her aunt and uncle aboard a ship travelling to South America, she is 'blushing scarlet' while her aunt Helen is 'thumping her tumbler on the table' to try and cover the rude comment of her husband.[116] Rachel 'flushed and fumbled her fingers in her lap' when Clarissa Dalloway walks in on her playing piano.[117] When Richard Dalloway hints to Rachel that there is something about 'love' which 'girls are kept very ignorant' of, Rachel's body, 'looking so queer and flushed', communicates something to Helen that Rachel herself has not even found words for yet.[118] When Rachel tells Helen that she has been kissed by Richard Dalloway she 'grew flushed.'[119] Helen flushes when she thinks that she may have upset William Pepper, another companion travelling with them, '[s]he flushed to think that her words, or her husband's, or Rachel's had penetrated and stung,' even suggesting that words travel not from mouth to ear but from mouth *into* another's body.[120] Helen's physicality is emphasized when, at the hotel, she is observed by two older women while at a dance:

---

114 Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction*, 39.
115 Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (London: Penguin, 1992).
116 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 10.
117 Woolf, 59.
118 Woolf, 72.
119 Woolf, 85.
120 Woolf, 101.

> Her beauty, now that she was flushed and animated, was more expansive than usual, and both the ladies felt the same desire to touch her.
>
> 'I *am* enjoying myself,' she panted. 'Movement—isn't it amazing?'
>
> 'I have always heard that nothing comes up to dancing if one is a good dancer,' said Mrs. Thornbury, looking at her with a smile.
>
> Helen swayed slightly as if she sat on wires.
>
> 'I could dance for ever!' she said. 'They ought to let themselves go more!' she exclaimed.

Helen's body is communicating something to the ladies that calls them to action – they desire to touch her. Helen's position as a sexualised woman – in opposition both to the Richmond aunts, who are spinsters, and to Rachel who dies a virgin – is also made clear here. Not only is she so beautiful that even middle-aged women sitting out dances desire to touch her, but she is panting and flushed as if herself excited. Where the elevation of the body and the physical experience in the novel intersects with the novel's use of aunthood is here, in Helen's body and its unpredictable behaviour.

Helen's body

Helen's name alone encourages the reader, whether deliberately or not, to consider her appearance and the effect she has on men: 'Rachel Vinrace has no model for adult femininity/sexuality except her aunt Helen Ambrose, whose names suggest both acceptance of

the male gaze and conformity to male standards and desires,' says critic Clare Hanson.[121] In her book *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction*, Patricia Juliana Smith argues that Helen embodies 'lesbian panic, the threat of lesbian desire.'[122] As suggested above, Helen's allure affects both men and women, and Smith argues convincingly that it is not just the threat of desire which makes Helen unsettling, unpredictable, but a desire that is specifically homoerotic. This has implications for understanding Woolf's use of aunthood – as will be explored below, Helen's actions towards Rachel and the capacity for a lesbian reading of her relationship with her niece use the aunt again as a switch point, or the location of a cusp between two things (explicit lesbian desire and heteronormative, homosocial, sororal physical relationships). To use Transue's concept of outside and inside, Helen negotiates the outside: socially acceptable, patriarchal, fixed; and the inside: fluid, secret, sexual and taboo.

Helen as the embodiment of the threat of lesbian desire is never more explicit than in the much-discussed passage which immediately follows Rachel and Terence's engagement. Vital to any reading of Helen and Rachel's relationship, I produce it here in full:

> A hand dropped abrupt as iron on Rachel's shoulder; it might have been a bolt from Heaven. She fell beneath it, and the grass whipped across her eyes and filled her mouth and ears. Through the waving stems she saw a figure, large and shapeless against the sky. Helen was upon her. Rolled this way and that, now seeing only forests of green, and now the high blue heaven; she was speechless and almost without sense. At last she lay still, all the grasses shaken round her and before her by her panting. Over her loomed two great heads, the heads of a man and woman, of Terence and Helen.

[121] Hanson, *Virginia Woolf*, 28.
[122] Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction*, 20.

> Both were flushed, both laughing, and the lips were moving; they came together and kissed in the air above her. Broken fragments of speech came down to her on the ground. She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage. Raising herself and sitting up, she too realised Helen's soft body, the strong and hospitable arms, and happiness swelling and breaking in one vast wave. When this fell away, and the grasses once more lay low, and the sky became horizontal, and the earth rolled out flat on each side, and the trees stood upright, she was the first to perceive a little row of human figures standing patiently in the distance. For the moment she could not remember who they were.
>
> 'Who are they?' she asked, and then recollected.[123]

Writing about this passage Smith says that 'the orgasmic images with which Woolf inscribes this embrace connote that what Rachel "realises" is nothing less than the intent of Helen's homoerotic desire.'[124] The sexual connotations of this scene are quite clear – as is the link between sexuality and violence that permeates the novel: 'Helen was upon her' could be interpreted either way. Helen rolls Rachel 'this way and that' and leaves her panting in the shaken grass, before Terence appears and then Helen is 'flushed,' kissing Terence above Rachel who is on the floor between them, connoting both a bizarre sexual threesome and a strange family portrait, Terence and Helen's parenthood of infantile Rachel, on the floor looking up. In perhaps the most obviously sensual moment Rachel realises 'Helen's soft body,

123 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 330–31.
124 Patricia Juliana Smith, '"The Things People Don't Say": Lesbian Panic in *The Voyage Out'* in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, London: New York University Press, 1997, p. 130

the strong and hospitable arms, and the happiness swelling and breaking in one vast wave.'[125] As discussed above, Smith has argued that the novel's form 'remains traditional,' and yet the effect of Helen's homoerotic threat on the *form* in this passage, not just on the content, is clear: Rachel loses the connection to reality which allows her to accurately describe her experience and must rely on visual impressions which do not immediately cohere into one clear picture, giving the scene an abstract, dreamlike nature.[126]

The reader's understanding of aunthood greatly shapes any reading of this scene and its undeniable lesbian undertones, as does the aunt's position on the cusp of the family. Helen's position as an aunt denies the homoerotic moment as she reveals it. She is family, close enough to be considered responsible for Rachel's development. However, she is not a consanguineal relation – were Rachel a man and Ridley to die, a marriage would not be incestuous. Were Helen Rachel's mother, any amount of physical closeness might be excused as maternal. While this passage would be strange, the implication of the swelling and breaking may be natal, rather than orgasmic. Were Helen Rachel's friend, or an acquaintance such as Evelyn Murgatroyd or Susan Warrington, the complex blend of violence and sex might be diluted by a more obvious lesbian scene.

Mitchell Leaska calls this the strangest passage 'of any in Virginia Woolf's fiction'. He argues that 'Helen's rough physical handling of Rachel [is] both bizarre and monstrous.'[127] The images, to Leaska, 'suggest erotic turbulence, a swirling mixture of sensuality and violence.'[128] This mixture has been key to various critics' readings of the passage. Gregory Castle argues that Helen 'appears at once to possess her sexually and to pin [Rachel] down for Hewet's delectation.'[129] Molly Hite describes it as 'a startling moment in which [Rachel] is abased and

---

125 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 331.
126 Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction*, 37.
127 Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 30.
128 Leaska, 30.
129 Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 228.

displaced: first struck to the ground and "[r]olled this way and that."'[130] Here the body, Helen's body in particular, leaves no space for thought or language – speech occurs in 'broken fragments,' Rachel is 'speechless and almost without sense,' and when the moment has passed and she looks around herself she does not know where she is, or what she is looking at.[131] Helen's description likens her to a natural disaster: beneath her grass whips into Rachel's eyes and ears, she is 'large and shapeless against the sky' like a storm, and her soft and strong body incites in Rachel 'swelling and breaking in one vast wave,' like a tsunami. It is she that obstructs Rachel's viewpoint, both literally placing herself between Rachel and the view and stopping Rachel seeing that view in a conventional way, so that when 'the grasses once more lay low, and the sky became horizontal, and the earth rolled out flat on each side, and the trees stood upright,' Rachel sees people as a 'a little row of human figures' – shapes without meaning.[132] For Esty this is linked to a unique narrative perspective, 'where Rachel acts both parts, the peering protagonist and the blurry human figure. She cannot interpret or describe the effects of her own self-dissolution.'[133] In this passage of *The Voyage Out* the reader does not have more information or an explanation after the event, nor do we know what Rachel makes of her experience – we are kept in the shadows.

The point at which Helen pounces in this passage interrupts the trite conversation of Rachel and Terence, who 'began therefore to describe how this felt and that felt, how like it was and yet how different; for they were very different.'[134] The repetition here of 'felt' and 'different,' and the bipartite clauses, as well as the withholding of the actual words that Rachel and Terence are saying, implies that what they are saying does not need to be reported – that the reader may

---

130 Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', 536.
131 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 330–31.
132 Woolf, 330–31.
133 Jed Esty, 'Virginia Woolf's Colony and the Adolescence of Modernist Fiction', in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899-1939*, Eds. Richard Begam and Michael Moses (Duke University Press, 2007), 81.
134 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 330.

guess at the content of the conversation. 'This is happiness, I suppose,' Rachel thinks, and then adjusts herself to cover her doubt and say to Terence, 'This is happiness.'[135] This ironic and facile moment is interrupted by the sound of Helen's 'dissevered syllables' calling Terence's name, and the crescendo 'swishing of the grasses' which 'grew louder and louder' until the 'bolt from Heaven' that is Helen's hand drops on Rachel to announce her arrival – making it very clear that with Helen comes a rupture in the surface of things – in this case a violent one. The semiotic interrupts the symbolic, Rachel is overwhelmed by shape, sound, and movement, and the aunt again has been the switch point between a straightforward realist novel and an impressionistic, modernist one.

Aunthood and Narrative Voice

The ambiguous nature of aunthood is not only useful for Woolf in the creation of Helen's character: it is reflected in the novel's narrative voice, which fails to instruct the reader (just as Helen fails to really instruct Rachel) in a way that some critics have found limiting for the novel's success. Molly Hite, building on the work of Jane Eldridge Miller in her comparison of Woolf's work to Edwardian feminist fiction, sees this technique as a continuation of the endeavours of polemical novelist Elizabeth Robins.[136] In her 2010 article **'**The public woman and the Modernist turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*,' Hite **'**suggests another kind of antecedent for Woolf's modernism' in the feminist polemical novels of the 1910s-1930s.[137] Hite argues that:

[135] Woolf, 330.
[136] Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*'; Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
[137] Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', 524.

> Seeing the tradition of the feminist polemical novel as one of her early influences allows us to indicate more precisely what Virginia Woolf turned away from in her modernist turn. It also affirms that insofar as modernist innovation is a continuation as well as a reaction, Woolf's novels took on themes and criticisms pioneered by female writers of the maternal generation.[138]

Hite's analysis of *The Voyage Out's* relationship alongside the tradition of the feminist polemical novel evidences what Hite sees as a key feature of Woolf's turn from tradition: her 'experimenting with a narrative strategy of withholding or presenting conflicting tonal cues, thus at key points refusing to give readers authorial guidance about how to evaluate events, comments or characters.'[139] Laurence describes a similar thing, calling it 'irresoluteness in her style,' and says that by writing like this 'Woolf invites the reader to enter and to clarify himself [sic], to complete the text.'[140] This distinctive feature of the novel, key to its unfamiliarity and innovation, is useful for understanding one of the literary functions of the aunt for *The Voyage Out*: as a mediating point of view in a novel which otherwise lacks what Hite describes as 'an attitude or pronouncement that can be recognized as authorially sanctioned.'[141] The main characters in *The Voyage Out,* Rachel, Helen, Hirst and Terence, are so unsure themselves of how to read the world and lacking the tools to communicate their experiences that the reader is left searching for a hook on which to hang the story. Of all the characters it is Helen who appears to have the most authority, for it is she who appears most knowledgeable of both the

---

[138] Molly Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's T*he Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', *Modernism/Modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 524.
[139] Hite, 524.
[140] Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 92.
[141] Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', 525.

outer world and the inner, psychological world. The value of having an aunt as a mediating point of view in a novel which offers so little instruction on how to read it is that she has a privileged position from which to observe the heroine. Helen has the most access to Rachel of any of the characters – and yet she has not spent much time with her niece before, giving her cause to observe, sit back, and evaluate in a way that would not make sense were she a closer relation. The distance of aunthood, located as it is on the cusp of familiarity, gives the reader some sense of Helen's opinion being an impartial one, in particular opposition to the maternal relationship (the narrator in *Night and Day* describes a 'kind of maternal scrutiny which suggests that, in looking at her daughter a mother is really looking at herself' – a charge that the scrutiny of aunthood can avoid).[142] As an affine aunt rather than consanguineal, Helen is only as invested in Rachel's success (either by conventional or unconventional standards) as she wants to be – which is sometimes not very – she has not been responsible for her niece, nor does her niece share her genes. She is not distracted by her children on the voyage, which would have given her an automatic allegiance and focus. The position of Helen's gaze, on the outside of the action (the marriage plot involving Rachel and Terence that can be said to be the crux of the novel's plot) looking in, but with a clear view and direct access to the key players, is perhaps an ideal one for a character through which to present the novel's actions – and it is a gaze quite unique to the aunt. But Helen herself does not provide a recognisable narrative voice. She is inconsistent, part of a familiar social world but critical of it, devoted to her husband but cynical about men. Any sense of security the reader may find in Helen's voice is promptly undermined. Helen will not conform to any one fixed idea of womanhood, which is disruptive not only for the characters but for the reader too. One cannot really say she is one thing or another – as so with the novel itself.

[142] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 179.

Hite provides in her article a list of '[c]rucial scenes where readers are denied clear directions telling them what attitudes to assume toward an event, character, statement or description,' evidencing the withholding of tonal cues:

> Rachel's reaction to Richard Dalloway's kiss; the two dream sequences—the first following on that kiss, the second when Rachel is in the coma that leads to her death; the trip into the interior of Santa Marina; and the characterization of Evelyn Murgatroyd.[143]

Her close reading of Rachel's reaction to Richard Dalloway's kiss demonstrates perfectly how this narrative technique manifests in the text, and inadvertently also shows how the reader is encouraged to turn to Helen, whose perspective on the events are characteristically complicated and inconsistent. The kiss itself is violent: 'he kissed her passionately, so that she felt the hardness of his body and the roughness of his cheek printed upon hers. She fell back in her chair, with tremendous beats of the heart, each of which sent black waves across her eyes.'[144] As Hite points out, Rachel's response to the kiss is with 'entirely physical reactions, to her uninterpretable, and presented in the text without interpretation.'[145]

> Her head was cold, her knees shaking, and the physical pain of the emotion was so great that she could only keep herself moving above the great leaps of her heart. She leant

143 Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', 525.
144 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 80.
145 Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', 531–32.

> upon the rail of the ship, and gradually ceased to feel, for a chill of body and mind crept over her. […] She became peaceful too, at the same time possessed with a strange exultation. Life seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at.[146]

'One of the great achievements of this description,' argues Hite, 'is that it tells a great deal about the incident without in social terms defining what has happened and thus without prescribing how readers should feel about and judge it.'[147] As a reader we cannot tell if Rachel feels assaulted and violated, or sexually aroused, or both: 'nothing in these accounts provides readers with unmistakable clues about Rachel's sexual preferences or attitudes, or even responses to this particular incident.'[148] As Hite also points out, it is not just the reader who is left not knowing how to feel:

> This passage withholds tonal cues from readers in the same gesture as it represents Rachel not knowing herself how she feels. She wanders among the possibilities encoded in ready-made expressions, telling Helen 'I like him,' 'I became terrified' and 'I shall think about it all day and all night until I find out exactly what it does mean.'[149]

Rachel brings her confusion to Helen; '"He kissed me," she said, without any change of tone.'[150] Rachel then tells her about being 'a good deal excited,' and 'terrified,' growing flushed

146 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 80.
147 Hite, 'The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*', 532.
148 Hite, 532.
149 Hite, 532.
150 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 85.

as she does so.[151] Helen shares the reader's position here, she 'started, looked at her, but could not make out what she felt.'[152] But this alignment of the reader with Helen does not last long, she quickly moves out of the reader's grasp and into strange territory when 'she had to keep her lips from twitching as she listened to Rachel's story.'[153] This action has various possible interpretations – just like the story that Helen is hearing. While it may be that she is trying not to laugh we have been given no indication thus far that what has happened might be considered funny – it is only after we hear that Helen's lips are twitching that Woolf writes that '[Rachel's story] poured out abruptly with great seriousness and no sense of humour.'[154] The twitching lips could be anger at Richard Dalloway, who has after all violated her niece. The interpretation which suggests itself perhaps most strongly is that she is excited or aroused by the story. She does tell Rachel afterwards that she is 'rather jealous, I believe, that Mr Dalloway kissed you and didn't kiss me.'[155] Of course she could be aroused by Rachel's excitement, if as Smith argues she has sexual feelings for her niece, or she could be excited by Rachel's terror, if she is as sadistic as DeSalvo reads her to be.[156] Her verbal response to Rachel is equally confusing. She tells Rachel that she 'oughtn't to be frightened,' that 'it's the most natural thing in the world,' but then that 'it's like noticing the noises people make when they eat, or men spitting.'[157] It is the most natural thing in the world, but one must tolerate it like one tolerates men spitting – the implication is that Helen accepts that women are unnatural: the most natural thing in the world is what men want – women, in their endurance of it, are quietly unnatural.

[151] Woolf, 85.
[152] Woolf, 85.
[153] Woolf, 85.
[154] Woolf, 85.
[155] Woolf, 87.
[156] DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making*, 37–39.
[157] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 86.

Whether she believes this or not the reader does not know, for she does kiss her husband, and is jealous of Rachel being kissed by Richard Dalloway. 'I don't mind being kissed,' she says, moments after describing male desire to Rachel as 'like noticing the noises people make when they eat, or men spitting; or, in short, any small thing that gets on one's nerves.'[158]

This episode – of Rachel coming to Helen not knowing how to feel, the reader being led to believe Helen is going to clarify for us what we as readers should feel, and Helen clearing nothing up at all – is a prime example of not only withheld tonal cues, as Hite and Bishop have noted, but of Helen's position as the murky lens through which the reader tries to see Rachel. Helen's viewpoint, on the edge of Rachel's world, interested but fairly impartial and unaffected by any consequences of Rachel's actions, is in itself a departure from a traditional female point of view: Helen's perspective is neither maternal nor solely romantic. This conversation between the two women is pivotal. Firstly, it is Rachel's sexual awakening – from Helen's implicit description of the relationship between men and women, and identifying for Rachel 'those women in Piccadilly' as prostitutes, Rachel has a revelation:

> 'So that's why I can't walk alone!'
>
> By this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull

[158] Woolf, 86.

> and crippled for ever—her life that was the only chance she had—a thousand words and actions became plain to her.[159]

Helen has been the key to the movement to knowledge from innocence – not Richard Dalloway, who left Rachel in mental paralysis. Secondly, it is this conversation which makes Helen interested in Rachel: once she sees just how poorly Rachel is prepared for a world away from her aunts' house in Richmond she decides that she will mediate what she describes as Rachel's 'experiments' in getting to know people, but which is really Rachel learning to be part of the world. Rachel explains to Helen that 'most people had hitherto been symbols; but that when they talked to one they ceased to be symbols, and became——— , "I could listen to them for ever!"'[160] She runs off to fetch her copy of *Who's Who,* 'laying it upon Helen's knee and turning the pages,' reading aloud to Helen like a child.[161] This confusion between really *knowing* another person, being 'intimate,' to use Helen's word, and knowing the facts about a person as might be set out in *Who's Who* is really the crux of the novel and Rachel's dilemma – or as Helen describes it 'this confusion between politics and kissing politicians.'[162] Thus Helen decides she must intervene: 'I think you ought to discriminate,' she says, wishing to prevent Rachel from being 'intimate with people who are—well, rather second-rate.'[163] She decides to invite Rachel to stay with her and Ridley in San Marino, thus steering the novel back towards a more traditional bildung plot – implying that she will be the key to Rachel's socialisation,

---

159 Woolf, 87.
160 Woolf, 89.
161 *Who's Who* is a reference text consisting of biographies of influential and prominent people in Britain. It has been printed annually since 1849.
162 Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 89.
163 Woolf, 89.

only for the reader to be surprised again as Helen's interest in her niece waxes and wanes. Helen does not believe in her own power over Rachel, as Castle points out, 'in the long run, Helen does not believe her influence will be persuasive: "people always go their own way—nothing will ever influence them."'[164] This prophesies the final scenes of Rachel's illness, during which it is Helen who insists that Rachel is dying and needs a better doctor, and Hewet whose will wins over because 'he was determined that Helen was exaggerating, and that Rachel was not very ill'.[165] Ignoring Helen proves fatal for Rachel, and in the face of being overridden Helen 'was like a child […] she clung to him like a child, crying softly and quietly upon his shoulder'.[166] Were Helen to remain 'strong and determined,' as Terence calls her, there might have been a different ending for her niece, and the whole novel would be a very different one indeed.[167]

Conclusion

In Woolf's first novel the aunt, a clearly identifiable fixture of the realist novel, is in places just what the reader might expect (Mrs Paley, the Richmond aunts, Hirst's Aunt Rachel) and yet where aunts are the focus they often signify a shift in the tone and narrative of the novel, towards something more uncomfortable and unfamiliar. As symbols, these aunts look like traditional realist aunts, but their function is quite different. Helen Ambrose, of course, resembles no aunt before her very closely, and as argued above allows Woolf to move away

[164] Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 223.
[165] Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 393.
[166] Woolf, 403.
[167] Woolf, 403.

from realism in various ways – demonstrating the versatility of the aunt as a narrative device and point of view.

In this chapter I have demonstrated the way that aunts on the diegetic level in *The Voyage Out* relate to materteral characteristics of the novel's form – qualities that we would normally consider as extradiegetic or even outside of the text. In doing this I seek to exemplify the potential for the materteral to move between diegetic levels; in the following chapter I continue to build on this approach to Woolf's writing: suggesting that the aunt is not only a role that we can read in movement between character and form but that it is her aunthood that allows her to move between these so often separate concepts – that aunthood for Woolf facilitates a porous boundary between diegetic levels. Understanding the characteristics of aunthood as Woolf presents them in *The Voyage Out* and, as I go on to discuss in Chapter Three, in *Night and Day* (1919), allows me to turn to a consideration of her narrative innovation and to demonstrate the shift that aunts make in *Jacob's Room* (1922) from the diegesis into a materteral narrative voice, via her 1920 short story, 'An Unwritten Novel.'[168]

[168] Virginia Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Dick (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), 112–21.

CHAPTER THREE: 'She was born to the knowledge': Aunts, Narration, and Materteral Form from *Night and Day* to *Jacob's Room*

> Conceive mark on the wall, K.G. & unwritten novel taking hands & dancing in unity. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover: the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance 2 weeks ago. I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce & Richardson to my mind: is one pliant & rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without it becoming, as in Joyce & Richardson, narrowing & restricting?[1]

This form that Woolf 'hit upon more or less by chance' was in her 1920 short story 'An Unwritten Novel.' The story features a narrator who is in a train carriage with a middle-aged woman and, like other stories of the period such as 'Sympathy' (unpublished in Woolf's lifetime but likely to have been written in 1919) and 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917), its plot is a narrating voice imagining a story based on what she sees around her.[2] In this case, the story which the narrator creates for the woman she observes is a story of aunthood: naming her 'Minnie Marsh', she imagines an unhappy life as a poor relative of her brother, nephew and niece. As Michelle Levy has argued, 'An Unwritten Novel' is different in its imaginings from the above-mentioned stories, which insist upon 'the existence of a knowable external world that exists independently of the mind' in that it:

---

1 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1981), 14.

2 Virginia Woolf, 'Sympathy', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 102–5; Virginia Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 77–83.

> makes a critical claim about the interdependence of imagination and its objects: without imagination, life appears 'bare as bone,' whereas without the external world, life lacks solidarity and a 'satisfying sense of reality.'[3]

In other words, the status of the imagined story, or the intradiegetic, is elevated above usual conceptions of it as just made up (though order is still restored – it is with a violent jolt that the narrator finds her 'Minnie' is not who she thinks she is, which I discuss below).

'An Unwritten Novel' is also distinct in many ways from 1919's *Night and Day* and its difference can be described as an entirely new approach to narrative voice. This approach was developed further in *Jacob's Room* and beyond, and arguably characterises Woolf's style as it is thought of by the wider reading public. She detailed her plan for what would become *Jacob's Room* in her diary in January 1920:

> Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in An Unwritten Novel—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn't that give the looseness & lightness I want: doesn't that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything? 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.[4]

[3] Michelle Levy, 'Virginia Woolf's Shorter Fictional Explorations of the External World: "Closely United . . . Immensely Divided"', in *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction*, Eds. Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 143.
[4] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*, 2:13–14.

This chapter argues that Woolf's modernism, her move away from realism in novels and stories, is a move towards a style that can be called materteral and whose roots are very clear in the experiments with form in 'An Unwritten Novel' and in *Jacob's Room*. What Woolf discovers in 'An Unwritten Novel' that takes her beyond her first two novels in narrative experiment is a narrative voice that moves between diegetic levels, narrating from a position between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic so that its position is unfixed. This enmeshing of character and form in the figure of the narrator leaves the reader with a first person, homodiegetic narrative unlike any that preceded it: the narrative voice is present – vital even – but not a character in the same way that other actors are in the diegesis and it is in this that Woolf's narrative voice mirrors the aunt throughout the nineteenth century (both in novels and, as discussed in Chapter One, in history). Aunts too have been present in so much of literature, but their aunthood is often critically ignored even when they are considered as characters. They are present, but invisible. They threaten patriarchal order in their refusal to be categorised – in the confusion over their place in the family romance. The features of aunthood explored thus far in this thesis are all crucial for understanding why it is a short story about an imagined aunt that was, for Woolf, the key to a narrative technique that would come to define her work.

To clarify the specific formal innovations in these texts (and to establish their place as a site of transformation for Woolf between *Night and Day* and *Mrs Dalloway*) it is useful to borrow some terms from narratology. It is the difficulty in categorizing the narrative form of *Jacob's Room* using existing narratological categories that is an important link to the aunt - who is both there and not there: in the family and outside of it. The hovering of the narrative voice of *Jacob's Room* around the periphery of the story and its fluid movement between stylistic categories is in itself, materteral.

The role that aunt characters play in *The Voyage Out* (their peripheral hovering with a channel to powerful family tradition, and their unique position from which to observe the story), coupled with a specific association developed in *Night and Day* between aunts and narrative control, leads to the dissolution of the boundary between character and narrative voice that we see in Woolf's writing post-*Night and Day.* This helps Woolf achieve her aim of developing a narrative form which 'gives the looseness & lightness' and yet 'encloses everything.'[5] This form is first exhibited in 'An Unwritten Novel,' where it is still tied to aunt-characters, and then further developed in *Jacob's Room.* By exploring how the narrative functions in these texts I seek to demonstrate that it is analogous to the contemporary cultural understanding of aunthood and can thus be called materteral form.

Briefly describing *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* in the terms which I will go on to use to talk about the later texts will allow us to see clearly where 'An Unwritten Novel' and *Jacob's Room* are particularly different. *The Voyage Out* has what Gérard Genette identified as a heterodiegetic narrator (not existing in the same world as the characters) who uses the third person. The novel moves between internal focalization (also Genette's term) where the narrator explores the fictional world through the eyes and mind of characters who each have their own limited perspective; external focalization, where the narrator views the characters and their thoughts from outside of them, with limited access to their inner lives; and zero focalization which corresponds to an omniscient narrator (although Genette argued that omniscience as a concept in fiction was 'literally, absurd' since 'the author has nothing to "know" [and] invents everything' – suggesting that perhaps for Genette there was some conflation of narrator and author).[6] This movement between zero-focalization and the use of Helen Ambrose as an internal-focalizer character (through whom we often experience the

[5] Woolf, 2:13–14.
[6] Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 153; Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 74.

story, whether explicitly or not) are both important factors in the study of Woolf and aunthood – though as argued in Chapter Two with reference to *The Voyage Out's* narration, Helen is not the only focaliser, but a key one at crucial moments of the novel. Ann Banfield, in her analysis of narration, describes a distinction between 'the two basic categories of sentences, those of narration and those representing consciousness, which give narrative fiction its characteristic form – a linguistic form.'[7] This distinction is largely maintained in realist fiction and through a close reading of a passage of *Mrs Dalloway* in which Septimus Smith daydreams, Banfield demonstrates how Woolf is not alternating between narration and consciousness but instead creating a form in which they coexist. In this passage, we see the dissolution of boundary between diegetic levels (or in Banfield's terms, between sentences of 'narration' and sentences 'of consciousness') which this chapter identifies as the innovation that so excited Woolf when she wrote 'An Unwritten Novel'.[8] The action taking place in the extradiegetic level of Septimus's daydream is presented in the same way as the diegesis, so that character and narration slip into one another. For example, these clauses, which are part of the same sentence, represent action respectively in the diegesis and then extradiegesis: '[h]e lay back in his chair, […] red flowers grew through his flesh.'[9] Banfield notes that:

> We can conclude nothing about what really happened from this passage, except that Septimus thought 'No crime; love' and fumbled for his card and pencil, that he lay back in his chair, and that the rest was indeed in his consciousness. That is, the parenthetical and its modifier function as pure narration, as does the later sentence

[7] Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Reading: Routledge, 1982), 223.
[8] Banfield, 223.
[9] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 74–75.

> describing his movement, in a complex interweaving of subjective and objective statement.[10]

Banfield argues that 'there is nothing to which the notion "narrator's point of view" can be semantically attached that is not equivalent to the character's point of view'.[11] In *The Voyage Out* we can see this clearly – particularly in Rachel's nightmares. The use of internal focalization in the novel is frequent – though not as frequent as in any of Woolf's novels post-*Night and Day*. *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, is nearly entirely internally focalized.

Night and Day also uses a heterodiegetic narrator in the third person, but its focalization is much closer to the zero focalization traditional to the realist novel. Using Frank Stanzel's distinction between teller-mode and reflector-mode (which he himself traces back to Plato's concepts of diegesis and mimesis) we can distinguish clearly between *Night and Day* and Woolf's other novels – it is more in teller-mode than any other.[12] I will go on to explore this further below. Both *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* are told in a linear fashion, and broadly speaking have little metalepsis (Genette's term for 'transgression of boundaries between narrative levels.') [13] Below I will argue that, in contrast, the narrative voices of 'An Unwritten Novel' and *Jacob's Room* are so much enmeshed with the diegesis that they become characters themselves; thus, it is possible to argue that both texts have first person narrators. In 'An Unwritten Novel' that narrator is homodiegetic, existing in the same world as the characters – but within her narrative or on the story level she narrates a narrative of 'Minnie Marsh', in which she is a heterodiegetic narrator. This shifting between homo-and-

---

[10] Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, 262.
[11] Banfield, 216.
[12] Frank Stanzel, 'Teller-Characters and Reflector-Characters in Narrative Theory', *Poetics Today* 2, no. 2 (1981): 6.
[13] Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 156.

heterodiegetic is the discovery which shapes all of Woolf's writing post 'An Unwritten Novel.' Genette calls this storytelling within a narrative intradiegetic, and it certainly requires more effort to distinguish between story levels because of this. In *Jacob's Room* the narrator is *mostly* heterodiegetic. As in *The Voyage Out* (but to an even greater extent) the focalization moves between internal, external and zero – though the combination of external focalisation with a homodiegetic first person narrator raises questions for the reader about just how much the narrator can, and does, know. The boundaries of her knowledge and power are unclear. There are many reflector-characters in the text, mediated by a narrator who is arguably a character themselves (which challenges the neat delineation of hetero-and-homodiegesis). In both 'An Unwritten' novel and in *Jacob's Room* we see metalepsis, or discursive metalepsis to use Marie-Laure Ryan's distinction.[14] Monika Fludernik describes discursive metalepsis as:

> the narrator imagin[es] him/herself, or the reader, to be present in the world of the protagonists or, conversely, the narrator imagines the characters existing, as it were, in his/her world, without this having any impact on the plot. For instance, the narrator invites the reader to enter the house of the heroine, or says he wants to shake hands with the hero.[15]

Woolf's metalepsis is more radical. For example, in *Jacob's Room*, in a scene which takes place in a railway carriage (creating a further specific link to 'An Unwritten Novel,' which

[14] Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Logique Culturelle de La Métalepse, Ou: La Métalepse Dans Tous Sesétats', in *Métalepses. Entorses Au Pacte de La Représen-Tation*, Eds. John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (Paris: Éditions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2005), 201–24.
[15] Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 156.

takes place entirely in a railway carriage), Jacob sits opposite a middle-aged woman called Mrs Norman. She becomes the focaliser, describing Jacob ('all was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious'), and the narrative slips into free indirect discourse ('do young men read the *Morning Post?*)'[16] The narration then moves, sentence by sentence, between the narrator and Mrs Norman, until the narrator says that despite the inadequacy of observation as a method of knowing another person, 'one must do the best one can with her report.'[17] The effects of this, as I explore in this chapter, are to position the narrator in a new space *between* narrative levels.

As we saw in Chapter One, aunthood's historical position throughout the nineteenth century was in the borderlands of the family (exemplified by the Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister legal debate) and was in question during Woolf's lifetime, as families became smaller and the model of the nuclear family more common. This chapter takes into account the unique position of the aunt that makes her so useful a narrative tool when she is a character. As demonstrated in Chapter Two with regard to Helen Ambrose – she is a party with just the right amount of vested interest, a prophetic woman with inconsistent knowledge of others, almost an ability to slip in and out of the mind of her niece and know what is true, and what is inevitable. The quote which opens this chapter suggests these qualities are what Woolf was searching for in the form for *Jacob's Room,* a mediating boundary between the story-world and the reader that is not so fixed as to become egotistical.[18] The very word 'crepuscular' refers to a time on the cusp of night and day, when the sun itself is below the horizon but the light from it remains: Woolf is searching for a narrative voice that can exist between diegetic levels.

[16] Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Vintage, 2000), 24.
[17] Woolf, 25.
[18] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*, 2:14.

In this chapter I trace the movement from *Night and Day*, through 'An Unwritten Novel,' to *Jacob's Room*, in which we can see the development of narrative voice alongside the particular relationship to aunthood that each text has. In section one of this chapter I read *Night and Day* as a novel about finding one's place in the narrative of ancestry and family and that gives aunts a firmer connection to narrative control. I then look closely at 'An Unwritten Novel,' demonstrating the clear link between aunthood and form or character for Woolf. I argue that in 'An Unwritten Novel' Woolf found a narrative technique that achieved what she had not been able to in *Night and Day* (and which she put into style in her subsequent novels). In the final section of this chapter I read *Jacob's Room,* closely analysing the form. Taking into account my first two chapters, and the work in this chapter on 'An Unwritten Novel' and *Night and Day*, I hope to demonstrate that while there are few aunts in *Jacob's Room*, the materteral presence has found a new expression in the narrative form and the narrator is aunt-like in the fullest possible way: so aunts are no longer needed on the level of diegesis. The qualities of materteral form, some of which I have detailed above, I demonstrate through close analysis of the text, in particular its narrative voice, which is fluid, ambiguous, alternately powerful and limited, hovering near Jacob – interested in conveying him to us but at the same time writing herself into the story as a character as well as a formal device: reaching inwards from the periphery.

The movement between these texts, then, begins with a deeper thinking about aunthood and its qualities in *Night and Day,* which strengthens the relationship between aunthood and narrative control but continues to maintain a separation between diegetic levels. Its aunt characters are important, because through them Woolf explores the relationship between character and narrative (in Mrs Hilbery as a portrait of Anne Thackeray Ritchie, in Lady Otway and in Aunt Celia). 'An Unwritten Novel' then sees the narration move away from heterodiegesis to create a narrative voice unlike any Woolf had used before. By *Jacob's*

Room Woolf is confident in this practice and writes the full novel in her new narrative voice: which exists between homo-and-heterodiegesis and is both part of, and contains, the story. She does not need aunt characters anymore, as she expresses what she had been using aunt characters to do using the narrative voice.

Night and Day

Night and Day is an important step between *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room* where we can see Woolf struggling with ideas about form (played out on the story level in Mrs Hilbery's long and ill-fated endeavour to write a book about her father – something I explore in more detail below) and about aunthood (in the many aunts in the novel). Where *Night and Day* is fundamentally different to its successors is that the characters exist on the diegetic level and the narrator in an extradiegetic level and there is no metaleptic movement between the two. Narrative voice and character are distinct; the story level and the narrator-level are discrete. While in this respect its narrative voice is more similar to a realist one than that of its predecessor, it goes further in expressing Woolf's conception of aunthood and develops, on story level, the relationship between aunthood and narration which would lead her to the materteral epiphany of 'An Unwritten Novel.'

Night and Day has a connection to aunthood in Woolf's own life. Mrs Hilbery, the mother of the central character, Katharine, was based on Woolf's Aunt Anny. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, the sister of Leslie Stephen's first wife, Minny, and biological aunt to Laura Stephen, Woolf's half sister. She was a writer herself, and the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray. Though she was not really aunt to Laura's siblings, she was called Aunt Anny by all of the Stephen children and, according to Elizabeth French Boyd's

Bloomsbury Heritage, she was 'Aunt Anny' to the Bloomsbury group too.[19] In Woolf's diaries and letters she does not make a distinction between her aunts by blood, marriage or otherwise, and speaks of her Aunt Anny without qualification. Likewise, Anny seems to have considered herself as aunt to the Stephen children, signing off letters to Woolf 'yours auntfully.'[20] Woolf wrote this portrayal of her aunt, which she described as 'made exactly like Lady Ritchie down to every detail,' not as the central character's aunt, but as her mother, Mrs Hilbery.[21] This raises two key questions: what does Woolf's portrait of her writer aunt in Mrs Hilbery contribute to a discussion of aunthood and narrative form; and why is Mrs Hilbery Katharine's mother, rather than her aunt?

I contend that Mrs Hilbery's writing, which the narrative voice of the novel, internally focalized through Katharine, considers a failure (and teleologically speaking it is – within the book of *Night and Day*, Mrs Hilbery's book never comes to fruition), bears striking similarity to 'An Unwritten Novel' and *Jacob's Room* as Woolf describes it. Mrs Hilbery's 'unwritten' and Woolf's own 'Unwritten' (and the books following it) are linked. Consider the description of Mrs Hilbery's writing as it 'flickered over the gigantic mass of the subject as capriciously as a will'-o-the-wisp, lighting now on this point, now on that.'[22] Compare it to Woolf setting out her aims for *Jacob's Room* in her diary, as an extension of what she discovered in 'An Unwritten Novel': 'doesn't that give the looseness & lightness I want: doesn't that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything?'[23] Interestingly, in the essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), which is about communicating character in a new way (the implication being a cessation of hard boundaries

[19] French Boyd, *Bloomsbury Heritage: Their Mothers and Their Aunts*, 76.
[20] Lillian Shankman, 'Introduction and Commentary', in *Anne Thackeray Ritchie: Journals and Letters* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), 259.
[21] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1912-1922*, Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, vol. 2 (North Carolina: Mariner Books, 1978), 407.
[22] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 30.
[23] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*, 2:13–14.

between diegetic levels), Woolf uses the exact same phrase she uses for Mrs Hilbery's writing to describe the fictional Mrs Brown's character, once she gets past the external factors which are the focus of Bennett and Wells: 'She becomes a *will-o'-the-wisp* [emphasis mine], a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out the window'. This perhaps suggests that Mrs Hilbery's approach, in retrospect, might have been a more successful one than it seems in *Night and Day*.[24] The 'looseness & lightness' Mrs Hilbery does seem to achieve, but the enclosure (or the narrative form) is where she falls down:

> Mrs Hilbery had in her own head as bright a vision of that time as now remained to the living, and could give those flashes and thrills to the old words which gave them almost the substance of flesh. She had no difficulty in writing, and covered a page every morning as instinctively as a thrush sings, but nevertheless, with all this to urge and inspire, and a most devout intention to accomplish the work, the book still remained unwritten.[25]

She is not a bad writer, nor a lazy one, but even with the ordered and disciplined Katharine as her editor she cannot finish a book – the enclosure evades her. Other aunts in the novel specialise in narrativizing events in their gossiping and their letters, but their content, their stories, are detestable to Katharine – they have the enclosure but not the lightness and looseness. Thus, both the aunt-characters and the character-based-on-Woolf's-aunt are experimenting with different ways of writing, none of which are quite satisfactory.

[24] Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', 35.
[25] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 29.

Mrs Hilbery is not an aunt – at least not to the protagonist – and it would be remiss to read her as aunt without considering why Woolf chose to make her Katharine's mother. Partly, this may have been due to the practicalities of the story. If Katharine were a young woman living with her aunt and uncle, with a cast of fussing aunts in the background, the novel may bear too much of a surface similarity to its predecessor, *The Voyage Out.* But it may also be that Mrs Hilbery's motherhood and her position as wife and mother preclude the success of her writing. In one of the first depictions of Mrs Hilbery in the novel, where a narrative voice focalized through Katharine tells us that 'her mother's temperament' is the blockage for the book, the reader is shown Mrs Hilbery's writing practice:

> Katherine would calculate that she had never known her write for more than ten minutes at a time. Ideas came to her chiefly when she was in motion. She liked to perambulate the room with a duster in her hand, with which she stopped to polish the backs of already lustrous books, musing and romancing as she did so. Suddenly, the right phrase or the penetrating point of view would suggest itself, and she would drop her duster and write ecstatically for a few breathless moments; and then the mood would pass away, and the duster would be sought for, and the old books polished again.[26]

This is highly symbolic. Mrs Hilbery is distracted from writing by desire to preserve and present 'old books' and by domesticity – the duster which is a symbol of her drifting from her task. Here is a reference towards not only the creatively limiting pressure of literary ancestry

[26] Woolf, 29–30.

but also of domestic life – yes, the books have been dusted already (likely by a servant) but still that duster can be taken up at any time in purposeful activity to replace the act of writing.

The critical response to Woolf's portrait of her Aunt Anny has often found Anne's aunthood eclipsed by Mrs Hilbery's motherhood. In her introduction to the novel in 1992 Julia Briggs writes that:

> [Mrs Hilbery] combines two types of female creativity that Woolf would later see as distinctive, even as mutually exclusive: the types can be identified with the originating figures of Anny Thackeray Ritchie and Julia Stephen, with the mother as writer, and the mother as guardian of the family.[27]

I have found nothing to suggest that Woolf considered Anny a model of 'the mother as writer' – nor, I contend, is there evidence of 'the mother as writer' as a figure of interest for Woolf in her fiction. Mrs Hilbery is not an aunt because aunts, in this novel, can exert a narrative control that eludes Mrs Hilbery. If she is 'mother as writer,' she suggests that the two are incompatible (a reasonable reading of the text, though not what Briggs seems to be saying). Mrs Hilbery has spent her life trying, and failing, to write her father's life.

Likewise, if she is a guardian of the family, she is a poor one. While she is introduced, 'in virtue of her position as the only child of the poet' as 'spiritually the head of the family,' her family duties seem to fall to Katharine just as do her professional ones. This is most clear when, in an event that moves between the back and foreground of the novel, Katharine's cousin Cyril is found to be living with a woman he is not married to, and 'has two children,

[27] Julia Briggs, "Introduction," in *Night and Day* (London: Penguin, 1992), xxiii.

and another on the way.'[28] The reader finds this out when Katharine receives a letter from her Aunt Celia (to whom I will return later). The concern seems equally for Katharine to find a way to tell her mother the news as it is to find some resolution which satisfies the family. While Katharine is not herself incensed by the potential scandal, it is she who has been applied to by her aunt to uphold the reputation of the family name – something her parents seem unwilling or unable to do. Her father, when she discusses it with him, says that 'if the younger generation want to carry on its life on those lines, it's none of our affair,' and it is Katharine who suggests, 'wearily', that 'isn't it our affair, perhaps, to make them get married?' It is Katharine who decides that 'the rights of the family [must be] attended to.'[29] Mrs Hilbery appears coddled by her husband and her daughter. When Katharine does go to tell her about Cyril's relationship, the mother-daughter roles seem reversed: Katharine felt 'anxious only that her mother should be protected from pain,' while Mrs Hilbery 'leant her head against her daughter's body.'[30] Katharine's role of editor of her mother's work also emphasises this, with mother deferring to daughter on both the facts of the piece ('Did your grandfather ever visit the Hebrides, Katharine?') and on the success of the writing ('Katharine read what her mother had written. She might have been a schoolmaster criticizing a child's essay').[31] Woolf uses the infantilising image of Mrs Hilbery writing as if she were 'a child who is surrounding itself with a building of bricks, and increasing in ecstasy as each brick is placed in position.'[32] This building image is in interesting contrast to the 'making' imagery of 'An Unwritten Novel,' which is that of sewing. Sewing brings together separate parts which in the end make one, whole, product – as a metaphor for narrating a novel it suggests that the 'enclosure' Woolf seeks is one that brings together component parts and is

[28] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 97.
[29] Woolf, 87.
[30] Woolf, 94.
[31] Woolf, 93.
[32] Woolf, 91.

not a separate thing in itself. Building with bricks suggests a placing of discrete units together, but they do not transform when they come together in the way that thread, once woven, turns component parts into a whole – the narration (or the mortar, to continue the metaphor) remains discrete. What Mrs Hilbery's biography seems to lack is an overall vision for the finished building that will transform the bricks from their own discrete shapes into something bigger.

The novel is very concerned with how the past exists in the present, in particular with regards to the sprawling dynastic family which characterised middle-and-upper-class Victorian domestic life. Katharine's relationship to her mother's book is embedded in her struggle to live a life undefined by the weight of her ancestors:

> Katharine brooded, half crushed, among her papers; sometimes she felt that it was necessary for her very existence that she should free herself from the past; at others, that the past had completely displaced the present, which, when one resumed life after a morning among the dead, proved to be of an utterly thin and inferior composition.[33]

The manuscript, which 'Some ten years ago […] her mother had enthusiastically announced […] would soon be published,' proves incredibly difficult to shape.[34] It is symbolic of Katharine's attempts to make sense of her place in the order of her family that she struggles quite literally with the order of the pages – a further expression of Woolf's own struggle to find 'enclosure' for 'looseness' and vice versa:

[33] Woolf, 32.
[34] Woolf, 29.

> It was as much as Katharine could do to keep the pages of her mother's manuscript in order, but to sort them so that the sixteenth year of Richard Alardyce's life succeeded the fifteenth was beyond her skill.[35]

Mrs Hilbery believes that her motherhood gives her a special knowledge and understanding that the reader knows she does not have – and in this way she is sharply contrasted with the emerging characteristic Woolf is developing for aunthood via Helen Ambrose – that of an almost narratorial understanding of other characters in the diegesis. She does not understand the Cyril affair and believes Aunt Celia must have misunderstood: 'she tossed her head with a smile on her lips at Mrs. Milvain, as though she could quite understand her mistake, which was a very natural mistake, in the case of a childless woman.'[36] In fact, it is Mrs Hilbery who has been kept in the dark, and until Mrs Hilbery's matchmaking efforts draw the novel to an uneasy conclusion for the younger generation, it is the aunts who have control over the narrative – Celia forcing Cyril to marry, Lady Otway inspiring in Katharine the doubt about marriage on which the whole marriage plot turns.

While Katharine's admirer Ralph Denham identifies the difficulty of Katharine's illustrious family tree as producing pressure to succeed, asking her 'isn't it difficult to live up to your ancestors?', he does not perceive that the struggle Katharine has is not in *living up* to her great family, but in understanding her place within the Alardyce-Hilbery narrative.[37] The novel's concern with Katharine's struggle to understand where she fits is exhibited in confusion over her generational placing – something which is linked to aunthood (as

[35] Woolf, 30.
[36] Woolf, 97.
[37] Woolf, 10.

discussed with reference to Katherine Holden's work in Chapter One). When her father speaks to her about Cyril, he speaks to her as if she were his generational equal, describing Cyril as 'the younger generation' who are not 'our affair' – implying that Katharine is not part of that younger generation. Later, recalling eccentric women she has known as she and Katharine look at photographs, Mrs Hilbery alights upon 'Miriam,' who dressed in 'her coachman's coat.'[38] She tells Katharine: 'you young people may say you're unconventional, but you're nothing compared with her.'[39] There are two types of narrativizing of the family going on here: there are the public efforts of Mrs Hilbery and of Katharine's cousin Eleanor to write their father's lives (just as Anne Thackeray Ritchie wrote the life of her literary-heavyweight father) and there is the private effort within the family to control and create family stories and set characters, which plays out in gossip, conversation and in letters. A link between aunts and narrative control is established, a connection which was to be vital in the development of new form in 'An Unwritten Novel,' as argued in the second section of this chapter.

Aunt Celia, or Mrs Milvain as she is alternately called, is Katharine's aunt on her father's side. She successfully exerts her influence over the family by forcing cousin Cyril to marry, which she does to protect the family name from scandal (a clear parallel to Woolf's Aunt Mary preventing Vanessa Stephen from marrying Jack Hills, as discussed in Chapter One). Celia's letter to Katharine, informing her of her cousin Cyril's relationship and children, inspires action, though reluctant, in her niece. It forces Katharine to stay in the world of linguistic communication at a moment when she wants to retreat into the language of mathematics:

[38] Woolf, 95.
[39] Woolf, 95.

> At this moment she was much inclined to sit on into the night, spinning her light fabric of thoughts until she tired of their futility, and went to her mathematics; but, as she knew very well, it was necessary that she should see her father before he went to bed. The case of Cyril Alardyce must be discussed, her mother's illusions and the rights of the family attended to.[40]

The phrase 'rights of the family' is an interesting one – it is likely Aunt Celia's rather than Katharine's – for Katharine herself does not seem to feel the family's rights infringed by Cyril's behaviour. So, while the narrative voice here is Katharine's, not Celia's, the influence of Celia's letter has permeated not only the story level but the focalized narrative too.

Aunt Celia is described as 'a zealous enquirer into such matters' (i.e. the affairs of the family).[41] This is linked directly to her childlessness:

> She was elderly and fragile, but her childlessness seemed always to impose these painful duties on her, and to revere the family, and to keep it in repair, had now become the chief object of her life.[42]

Aunt Celia has time to police her family members' lives because she has little to occupy her in her own. In this same section, while Aunt Celia is visiting the Hilbery family, Katharine expresses her frustration with the narratives her aunt and Cousin Caroline share: 'How they talked and moralized and made up stories to suit their own version of the becoming, and

[40] Woolf, 87.
[41] Woolf, 85.
[42] Woolf, 97–98.

secretly praised their own devotion and tact!'[43] We learn later that Aunt Celia was successful in resolving the Cyril affair to her satisfaction, and 'had lately undertaken the task of marrying Cyril to his wife.'[44] Their stories, like their actions, are effective if not in favour of the younger generation of their family.

Celia is not the only aunt of Katharine's that visits during the novel, and not the only one who is linked to the transmission of important information which affects the plot. Her Aunt Millicent comes while Ralph Denham is present. Aunt Millicent and Aunt Celia both share family gossip, in particular about another aunt, Aunt Emily.[45] Aunt Millicent is well read, discussing De Quincey and George Bernard Shaw, and is very impressed by Ralph having read De Quincey too – even more so when she guesses that he might write, as well as read. It is Aunt Millicent who tells Ralph Denham that Katharine is engaged to William Rodney, a fact that causes him to escape the house in his pain. Another aunt, Aunt Eleanor, when attending a dinner party at the Hilbery's, is described thus:

> Although she had blunted her taste upon some form of philanthropy for twenty-five years, she had a fine natural instinct for an upstart or a pretender, and knew to a hairbreadth what literature should be and what it should not be. She was born to the knowledge, and scarcely thought it a matter to be proud of.[46]

[43] Woolf, 101.
[44] Woolf, 122.
[45] Woolf, 124.
[46] Woolf, 296.

Katharine's Aunt Charlotte -- Lady Otway -- imparts upon Katharine knowledge that challenges the course of the novel by delaying Katharine's marriage. In a scene where the materteral relationship is directly juxtaposed with the maternal, Katharine has an important conversation with her aunt about the need for a woman to 'give way' to her husband, while Mrs Hilbery, who was 'not much interested in these remarks,' is distracted by a bird out the window.[47]

> 'Most women know by instinct whether they can give it or not,' Lady Otway slipped in quickly, in a rather low voice, as if she wanted to get this said while her sister-in-law's attention was diverted. 'And if not – well then, my advice would be – don't marry.'[48]

As Julia Briggs notes, 'Lady Otway's words make Katharine reconsider her engagement, since they force her to see it as offering not self-discovery, but self-subordination.'[49] Tellingly, while Lady Otway is giving Katharine this advice, she is 'knitting methodically' – this image of making which seems so closely tied to creating a narrative (as I go on to discuss with reference to the sewing that takes place in 'An Unwritten Novel).'[50] While Suzanne Raitt argues that a key difference between Katharine and Rachel, protagonist of *The Voyage Out*, is that 'No one seeks to educate Katharine in quite the way that they do Rachel', I think that she misses the education that Lady Otway tries to offer, but can only go so far with without encroaching on Mrs Hilbery's maternal territory.[51] While I agree with Raitt that characters do

[47] Woolf, 178.
[48] Woolf, 179.
[49] Briggs, 'Introduction'. xxv
[50] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 176.
[51] Suzanne Raitt, 'Virginia Woolf's Early Novels: Finding a Voice', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38.

not seek to educate Katharine in the same *way* (perhaps partly because of her age, she is older than Rachel), it is notable that just as it is Helen, Rachel's aunt, who is her chief educator, it is Katharine's aunts who seek to educate *her* too – though they perhaps have more in common as characters with Rachel's aunts at home than with Helen. It would be quite a different novel were Katharine able to communicate more with her Aunt Charlotte before her mother swoops in to resolve the novel in marriages.

Formally, *Night and Day* is closer to a realist novel than its predecessor, *The Voyage Out.* While in the earlier novel aunts exert some control over the narrative form of the novel (often precipitating the novel's stranger moments of semiotic expression), in *Night and Day* the relationship between aunts and narrative control is explored more in the diegesis, in the characters and story. Like a traditional realist novel, it has a large cast of characters, moving freely around the country. It is narrated in the third person, and in the past tense. It is essentially a courtship plot, and critics have noted its debts to Shakespeare and to Jane Austen.[52] Jane de Gay argues that the novel's traditional style is a reflection of the story:

> Woolf's choice of an old-fashioned style goes hand-in-hand with her depiction of a social world which no longer existed. Thus, Woolf's use of the outmoded literary style of the courtship narrative (which in itself placed central importance on marriage, domesticity and the reproduction of the patriarchal family) can be seen as a way of immersing herself in, and examining in writing, the social order into which she had been born.[53]

---

[52] For example Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Robert Sawyer, 'Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Modernist Shakespeare', *South Atlantic Review* 74, no. 2 (2009): 1–19.

[53] Jane De Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 45.

What de Gay does not consider here is the way that the novel resists the courtship narrative – not quite as strongly as *The Voyage Out* resists the Bildungsroman, the traditional realist form with which *it* engages most directly – but enough that to write of *Night and Day* as if the style and content were harmonious is to suggest it a nostalgic endeavour, ignoring much in the text that suggests that the older and younger generation have reached a communicative impasse and that the novel's ending is not necessarily a happy resolution.

For like its predecessor, *Night and Day* is concerned with the inadequacy of existing linguistic forms to express the modern experience of life. Susan Leonardi suggests that 'Mathematics, symbolic to Woolf of "reality," offers Katharine a way to express what she cannot express in male sentences.'[54] Ann Marie Priest writes that:

> The novel is, in fact, deeply preoccupied with the failure of language to represent the reality of the characters and their experiences. In a sense, the action of the novel hinges on the incapacity of the word love to represent the relationship between Katharine and Ralph, and their struggles to make it do.[55]

In her reading of the novel Priest focuses on the two realms that it articulates: the 'life of the mind' (explored particularly through Katharine's trances) and the 'life of society' that is

[54] Susan Leonardi, 'Bare Places and Ancient Blemishes: Virginia Woolf's Search for New Language in *Night and Day*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 19, no. 2 (1986): 155.
[55] Ann-Marie Priest, "Between Being and Nothingness: The 'Astonishing Precipice' of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day," Journal of Modern Literature 26, no. 2 (2003): 72.*

expressed by the more traditional plot elements.[56] Her reading is a useful one for thinking about the differences between *Night and Day* and *Jacob's Room.* Priest argues that:

> The distinction Katharine makes between action and contemplation, the life of the mind and the life of society, is a conventional one (and a commonplace of religious thought); what is significant is her sense of the powerful reality of her 'contemplative' state, and her inability to enter or leave it without 'essential change.' The two realms are for her incompatible. In Woolf's later novels, this disparity fades into irrelevance. But here, the two edges of the 'precipice' cannot touch.[57]

This precipice between the realms of thought and the action is a formal distinction from *The Voyage Out,* where the action on the story level often takes on a bizarre dreamlike or nightmarish quality. As I argued in Chapter Two, the narrative voice of *The Voyage Out* contains dialogic oppositions clustered around 'the dialectics of inside and outside' that Laurence argues are characteristic ambivalences of the female experience.[58] Rather than existing on the cusp of inside and outside, mind and body, thought and action, the narrative voice of *Night and Day* maintains a distance from the characters that we do not see again in any of Woolf's novels, keeping the realist precipice between narration and interiority intact. Unlike the closely hovering moth-like narrators of 'An Unwritten Novel' and *Jacob's Room,* who slip into the text as characters themselves, enmeshing character and narration, the narration in *Night and Day* remains separate from the characters. There are some moments of free indirect discourse in the novel, usually enabled by a strong surge of emotion in one of the

[56] Priest, 67.
[57] Priest, 67–68.
[58] Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 135.

characters and most often in the form of questions. In the aforementioned moment when Katharine is angry with her aunt Celia's storytelling we see free indirect discourse; in reflector-mode the text goes into internal focalization for Katharine to express her anger.

> She was very angry, and yet impotent to give expression to her anger, or know with whom she was angry. How they talked and moralized and made up stories to suit their own version of the becoming, and secretly praised their own devotion and tact! No; they had their dwelling in a mist, she decided; hundreds of miles away—away from what?[59]

This perhaps suggests a similar enabling link between the aunt's presence and a diversion from realist narration that, as I argued in Chapter Two, we see in *The Voyage Out.* In contrast, when Katharine is angry with her mother, the reader is *told* of her intense experience, rather than the narrative form reflecting this:

> [Katharine] had suddenly become very angry, with a rage which their relationship made silent, and therefore doubly powerful and critical. She felt all the unfairness of the claim which her mother tacitly made to her time and sympathy, and what Mrs. Hilbery took, Katharine thought bitterly, she wasted. Then, in a flash, she remembered that she had still to tell her about Cyril's misbehaviour. Her anger immediately dissipated itself; it broke like some wave that has gathered itself high

[59] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 101.

> above the rest; the waters were resumed into the sea again, and Katharine felt once more full of peace and solicitude.[60]

Her anger is 'like some wave' rather than *being* a wave, and the reader is reminded that 'Katharine thought' – rather than the narrative drifting from action to thought without a heterodiegetic marker. This is more characteristic of *Night and Day*'s narration as a whole. In the following section we will see that despite Woolf's satisfaction with the novel in the immediate aftermath of its publication, she did not replicate the style in any other work. Below, I discuss the alternative use for aunthood that Woolf found in 'An Unwritten Novel,' building on the connection she establishes between the materteral and narrative control in *Night and Day.*

'An Unwritten Novel'

First published in 1920, and then again in *Monday or Tuesday* in 1921, 'An Unwritten Novel' is Woolf's most explicit conflagration of aunthood and narrative voice – and of character and narrative: its very narrative *is* the creation of one character by another, who imagines her. This story is the axis on which Woolf pivots from the insistently separate character and narrative voice of *Night and Day* (1919) to the loosely woven, free indirect style of *Jacob's Room* (1922). In this section I seek to not only identify the formal innovations in the story and mark its difference from Woolf's previous writing, but to address the questions: why did 'Minnie Marsh', the intradiegetic central character, need to be an aunt? How does her aunthood, as a character, relate to the narrative voice?

[60] Woolf, 94.

As in parts of 'Character in Fiction' (1924) and of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), the story is set in the carriage of a train and features a narrator spotting a middle-aged woman and constructing a narrative of her life.[61] As pointed out by critics such as Laura Maria Lojo Rodriguez, Rachel Bowlby and Thomas Lewis, Woolf found the setting of a railway carriage a useful one for writing about literary practice.[62] Lojo Rodriguez describes a connection between 'fiction-making and train-journeying' and Rachel Bowlby has argued that the train carriage represents an intersectional space for Woolf of literature, history and feminist identity.[63] This is evident in 'An Unwritten Novel.' The narrative moves freely between the narrator's imagined life for 'Minnie Marsh' on the intradiegetic level, and the narrator and the stranger in the train carriage, the homodiegetic narrative. There is not always an asserted distinction, as there is in *Night and Day*, between intradiegesis and homodiegesis – between the story and the story within it (which is imagined). This is what Priest, writing about *Night and Day*, calls the 'astonishing precipice' between thought and action – or, in the terms of this thesis, between the diegesis and the intradiegesis. For example, when Katharine daydreams in *Night and Day*, the narrative still remains in the diegesis and the diegetic levels are held apart by the repetition of phrases such as 'as if' and 'she seemed':

> She heard them as if they came from people in another world […] it was as if, lately dead, she heard the living talking […] she seemed physically to have stepped beyond

[61] Woolf, 'Character in Fiction'; Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'.
[62] Laura Maria Lojo Rodriguez, 'Parody and Metafiction: Virginia Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel"', *Links & Letters* 8 (2001): 71–82; Rachel Bowlby, 'We're Getting There: Woolf, Trains and the Destinations of Feminist Criticism', in *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 3–15; Thomas Lewis, 'Vision in Time: Virginia Woolf 's "An Unwritten Novel"', in *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 15–22.
[63] Lojo Rodriguez, 'Parody and Metafiction: Virginia Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel"', 76; Bowlby, 'We're Getting There: Woolf, Trains and the Destinations of Feminist Criticism'; Lewis, 'Vision in Time: Virginia Woolf 's "An Unwritten Novel"'.

> the region where the light of illusion still makes it desirable to possess, to love, to struggle.[64]

These separating words, 'as if,' affect the status of her daydreams within the narrative. They do not become part of the story, because we are reminded that Katharine, a character, is imagining them. Katharine's identity as a character in one diegetic level also never slips into one of narrator – the narration never moves between levels – because, as I have argued above, in *Night and Day* it is aunts who are skilled in narrative enclosure, and Katharine is not an aunt (and likewise aunts do not have access to the looseness of thought that Katharine has, thus the content of their narratives is detestable to Katharine). In contrast, in 'An Unwritten Novel,' the character's daydreams are where the story takes place, and the boundary between where she is narrating from (the diegesis) and where the story is happening (the intradiegesis) is blurry. Imagining a day in 'Minnie's' life where she is visiting her brother and his family, the narrator addresses her in the second person as if the narrator is present in the intradiegesis:

> Now, Minnie, the door's shut; Hilda heavily descends to the basement; you unstrap the straps of your basket, lay on the bed a meagre nightgown, stand side by side furred felt slippers.[65]

[64] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 209.
[65] Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', 1989, 114.

There is no ‘I imagine’ or ‘it was as if.’ Merely, before the first switch between diegetic levels, the narrating I asserts that ‘I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze’ – though as we find out, she has not read ‘Minnie’s’ message at all.[66]

Overall the narrator of the text is homodiegetic, but during the intradiegesis she is heterodiegetic: the narrator does not exist in the same world as her *imagined* ‘Minnie Marsh’. This is different to ‘Character in Fiction,’ which makes clearer where action is taking place on a story level and where the narrator is creating an intradiegetic story. For example, ‘one sees Mrs Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes. I thought of her in a seaside house,’ retains a clear boundary between the narrating ‘I’ who is doing the thinking, and the imagined space in which Mrs Brown is at the seaside.[67] This is in contrast to ‘An Unwritten Novel’s’ ‘the violet loops of ribbon in the draper's window spangled in the electric light catch her eye. She lingers–past six. Still by running she can reach home.’[68] In ‘Character in Fiction’ the ‘I’ remains assertive in their storytelling; in ‘An Unwritten Novel’ the ‘I’ of the diegesis disappears in the intradiegesis and becomes an invisible container. In ‘An Unwritten Novel’ there is also a fluidity of characters – sometimes when the narrator says ‘you’ they are talking to (or imagining talking to) ‘Minnie’, sometimes they are addressing the woman in the train carriage who has inspired ‘Minnie,’ and sometimes they are addressing the reader. It moves between first, third and second person, between present and past, between imagined and ‘real.’ ‘Minnie’, who is sometimes subject, sometimes object, but holds the story loosely together, is an aunt. In this section I explore the characteristics of ‘Minnie’s’ aunthood before moving on to close formal analysis of the narrative style, to evidence a link between the two.

66 Woolf, 114. Ibid.
67 Woolf, ‘Character in Fiction’, 41.
68 Woolf, ‘An Unwritten Novel’, 1989, 115.

The narrator establishes 'Minnie's' family situation (and aunthood) by first describing her dislike of her sister-in-law. The narrator discerns this from the woman in the carriage's mutterings: '"My sister-in-law"—the bitterness of her tone was like lemon on cold steel, and speaking, not to me, but to herself, she muttered.'[69] Entirely on the intradiegetic level, in the imagination of the narrator, this sister-in-law is called Hilda, and is the mediator between 'Minnie' and her brother, niece and nephew. Hilda is the conduit bringing 'Minnie' into the home. Laura Maria Lojo Rodriguez, writing about metafiction in 'An Unwritten Novel', describes Hilda as the person 'whose roof and children this lady, Minnie, shares.'[70] Referring to 'Minnie's' niece and nephew as her 'surrogate children,' Lojo Rodriguez's overlooking (or dismissal) of aunthood is characteristic, as we have seen, of much critical work on aunt-characters. She does not use the word aunt, niece or nephew, though there is no evidence in the text that the 'Minnie' of the intradiegetic story thinks of the children maternally.

As mentioned above, the plot of the text is the creation of a character, and thus tells the story of the act of narration. While characters trying to find a way to know each other are common in Woolf (perhaps the most obvious example being Lily Briscoe's attempt to capture Mrs Ramsay in paint, in *To the Lighthouse*), what is different in 'An Unwritten Novel' is a striking inequality between the narrating character and the person they are trying to decipher – because one is a character who exists firmly on one diegetic level (in the case of 'An Unwritten Novel,' the woman in the train carriage), and one exists between diegetic levels with knowledge and experience often presented as authorial. Not only is the narrator sometimes able to present information about other characters as if true (such as an omniscient, third persona narrator might) but as a character in the diegesis they retain the ability to wander into the text at any point and reach out to touch another character. Christine

[69] Woolf, 113.
[70] Lojo Rodriguez, 'Parody and Metafiction: Virginia Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel"', 77.

Reynier has pointed out that the stark imbalance between narrator and subject is emphasised by the violent language used to describe the way that the narrator tries to access another character, describing 'creation [in the short stories] represented as a sort of visual rape.'[71] She writes:

> In 'An Unwritten Novel,' observing and creating a character is presented as deciphering a secret, baring a character's soul, piercing through the envelope; it is a violent, painful, and aggressive act; in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass,' the process is analogous: 'one must prize her open with the first tool that comes to hand.' If creation means raping the other, it also means raping one's own self.'[72]

The nuanced differences between the relationship between narrator and subject in 'An Unwritten Novel' and that in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' (1929) are elided here.[73] I argue that while the language of 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' implies the narrator wanting to catch, own and consume her subject, in 'An Unwritten Novel,' the narrator wants to be *with* her subject ('I've read you right–I'm with you now') – a difference that suggests that 'An Unwritten Novel' is the more experimental of the stories in terms of narrative positioning. Despite this, Reynier's stark language to describe the act of narration is useful in highlighting just how radical Woolf's narrative choices were in her 1920 short story: not only does the narrative voice belong to a kind of super-narrator, who has access to all diegetic levels and creates the story herself without giving up the narratorial authority that a first

---

71 Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 96.
72 Reynier, 96–97.
73 Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', 1989; Virginia Woolf, 'Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 215–19.

person narrator might lose by being a full character in the diegesis – she is female. Describing this specific, materteral narrative act as a 'visual rape' also raises questions about the gender of aunthood as it is sometimes presented in Woolf's work – separate and distinct from the maternal. Below, in a close reading of the story, I explore the impact that that narrator has on different diegetic levels in the story.

The creation of story by imagining character on the intradiegetic level shares characteristics with the text itself: it veers towards chaos but retains links to a familiar order – thus creating a link between the creation of the intradiegesis (the narrative voice) and Woolf herself, the creator of the text. The characters that the narrator creates are read by Lojo Rodriguez as an 'ironic use of certain literary codes,' by which she means that they have been chosen here in order to parody a previous literary style (which she does not specify, but is implied that it is realism). Dean Baldwin, in 1989, and Elke D'hoker, in 2008, both agree. Baldwin says that the 'deciphering takes the form of clichés from popular fiction' and D'hoker that 'the narrator's imagination is heavily determined by existing literary stereotypes and conventions.'[74] I argue, though, that what we see with 'Minnie' is the narrator struggling to fit her character into a 'literary code' for aunthood, and that Woolf is experimenting with this narrative form to express the difficulty in presenting 'real' characters, of the kind she means to illuminate, in existing literary form. In other words, I think that the narrator cannot find an easy stereotype for 'Minnie,' and a close reading which pays attention to the more difficult passages (or, put another way, the least realist passages) suggests this tension. Like the narrative voice in the story, which is not quite heterodiegetic nor homodiegetic, the character of 'Minnie' is hard to fix, both for the reader and for the narrator creating her, and the narrator's trial and error approach to finding a character that fits for the woman she sees

[74] Dean Baldwin, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 22; Elke D'hoker, 'The Role of the Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction', *Journal of the Short Story in English* 50, no. Spring (2008): 4.

in front of her is evidence of her own, and Woolf's, curiosity rather than dismissal as a stereotype. One passage which begins in 'Minnie's' interior monologue before switching back to the narration with a jerk (literally – using the phrase 'here's a jerk') shows how entwined form and character are, as both veer towards chaos (or madness in 'Minnie's' case) and with a jerk are returned to order:

> Is there no one here who thinks of God? –just up there, over the pier, with his rod–but no–there's nothing but grey in the sky or if it's blue the white clouds hide him, and the music–it's military music–and what are they fishing for? Do they catch them? How the children stare! Well, then home a back way–'Home a back way!' The words have meaning; might have been spoken by the old man with whiskers–no, no, he didn't really speak; but everything has meaning–placards leaning against doorways–names above shop-windows–red fruit in baskets–women's heads in the hairdresser's–all say 'Minnie Marsh!' But here's a jerk. 'Eggs are cheaper!' That's what always happens! I was heading her over the waterfall, straight for madness, when, like a flock of dream sheep, she turns t'other way and runs between my fingers. Eggs are cheaper. Tethered to the shores of the world, none of the crimes, sorrows, rhapsodies, or insanities for poor Minnie Marsh; never late for luncheon; never caught in a storm without a mackintosh; never utterly unconscious of the cheapness of eggs. So she reaches home–scrapes her boots.[75]

'Minnie' nearly becomes a mad aunt, hearing voices, seeing meaning in fruit and placards and shop signs. Likewise, the narrative becomes a chorus of caught phrases, it mirrors the

[75] Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', 1989, 116–17.

twisting and turning of the action on the intradiegetic story level, as 'Minnie' rushes through the streets. The free indirect discourse ('Do they catch them? How the children stare!') is not identifiable as external focalization or internal focalization – 'Minnie's' thoughts or the narrator's. [76] It is 'Eggs are cheaper' on which the passage turns, and both the character and narrative voice are returned from the fantastic 'waterfall' of madness like a 'flock of dream sheep' to a world of luncheon, mackintoshes, eggs. It is curious of course that the phrase 'eggs are cheaper' should jolt the narrator as if spoken by someone on her diegetic level when in fact she has imagined those words too – they are part of the intradiegetic story, as are both the mad 'Minnie' and the ordinary 'Minnie' who returns to mundanity. In other words, the narrative moves from one diegetic level to another. The final sentence, 'so she reaches home—scrapes her boots,' is all the action that has taken place on the intradiegetic story level and could have replaced the whole paragraph – and yet we can see how much would be lost were 'Minnie' to be described to us in this way. The narrative style is achieved by what Ann Banfield calls, in her analysis of *Mrs Dalloway,* 'a complex interweaving of subjective and objective statement.'[77]

The price of eggs being the turning point is a nod towards another important feature of 'Minnie's' aunthood. She is poor, but financially independent (she lives alone, though receives charity when she visits her brother). She is, interestingly, not like the aunts that we see in Woolf's writing so far, who are well-off and either influential in their families (like Aunt Celia, Lady Otway or Helen Ambrose) or wealthy enough for their nieces and/or nephews to be dependent on them (like Mrs Paley). The price of eggs is relevant to her, a fact of which she is 'never utterly unconscious.'[78] Her brother and sister-in-law, as indicated by Hilda's limited charity, are not poor. Hilda stands at the doorway 'with a coin' to pay for

[76] Woolf, 116.
[77] Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, 262.
[78] Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', 1989, 117.

‘Minnie’s’ cab. Yet ‘with two children these days one can't do more,’ Hilda says to herself. This set-up of the aunt as poor relation, taken care of by her brother or nephew’s family, was a concern of the late-Victorians, as discussed in Chapter One. Eleanor Gordon and Gweneth Nair say that:

> Those women who did not live under the protection of a man and who were not attached to a family were regarded as a social problem, prey to the twin dangers of poverty and sexual impropriety.[79]

And yet the truth was rather different, as their demographic research demonstrates:

> These unmarried women tended not to be overtly dependent on a male relative, but lived in female-headed households. Just over half of the single women over 30 (51.4%) lived with a female head in 1851; this figure rose steadily until 1891, when two thirds (66.7%) of them lived in a female-headed household. Thus, it was always a minority of single women over 30 who lived under the social ‘protection’ of a male.[80]

For ‘An Unwritten Novel’ what is important about ‘Minnie’s’ financial relationship to her family is that she may be occasionally receiving their meagre charity – a coin for her cab – but she is living outside of patriarchal rule, not subject to the first family patriarch, a position which, as Gordon and Nair argue, was not as uncommon as one might think in Woolf’s

[79] Eleanor Gordon and Gweneth Nair, ‘The Myth of the Victorian Patriarchal Family’, *The History of the Family* 7, no. 1 (2002): 126.
[80] Gordon and Nair, 132.

lifetime. For Woolf, who argues very clearly that there is a link between patriarchal power and literary tradition (in many examples, but perhaps most clearly in *A Room of One's Own*) this aspect of aunthood is vital. The rejection of the patriarchal symbolic of realist fiction in favour of a narrative voice that moves between diegetic levels, existing as part of the story *and* containing it (suggestive of Plato's, as well as Kristeva's, conception of chora) is a new way of understanding the feminism embedded within Woolf's development of narrative form. Aunthood is like this narrative voice in the way that it has no biological imperative and so is not bound to the patriarchal order of the father. As a title 'aunt' can (and did, for Woolf) contain a multitude of oppositional identities, so Woolf's modernist narrative voice does.

There is another key feature of 'Minnie's' aunthood which is essential, and touched upon above: she is single. Bar a flirtation with Moggridge, she has had no romantic experience (and we assume has been celibate). In this story we see very clearly that a sexually active woman (a mother has, by definition, had sex) is incompatible with the creative process – with the continued development of narrative voice. For a character to be read as an aunt, her relationship with her children needs to be absent from the novel. Otherwise, she is more likely to be read as a mother-character. Likewise, any hint of romance and she is likely to be read as a marriageable character. The roles of mother and of lover overshadow the role of aunt – they have more familiar characteristics and have received far more critical attention. In *The Voyage Out*, Helen's children are physically far from her, so we can read her relationship to Rachel, her niece, as her primary role. In *Night and Day*, we consider Lady Otway's materteral relationship to Katharine because there are no scenes between her and her own daughter, Cassandra. The roles of mother, and lover, have an intrinsic connection to sex – either past or anticipated. Aunthood does not necessarily.

In 'An Unwritten Novel' the destructiveness of sex to the narrator's act of creating character is obvious. The narrator establishes Minnie on two occasions as being incompatible

with thoughts of sex. When she is trying to imagine the crime for which 'Minnie' spends her life repenting in church, she knows that the most obvious option would be a sexual indiscretion in her youth: 'They would say she kept her sorrow, suppressed her secret – her sex, they'd say – the scientific people. But what flummery to saddle *her* with sex!'[81] Then, the narrator looks at the woman in the carriage with her: '(let me peep across again – still sleeping, or pretending sleep! white, worn, the mouth closed – a touch of obstinacy, more than one would think – no hint of sex).'[82] 'An Unwritten Novel' ends when the woman and the narrator leave the train, and the woman is met by her son. The knowledge that this woman, who the narrator imagined as 'Minnie,' is a mother is catastrophic – not only does it shatter her fantasy of 'Minnie' the spinster aunt, but it seems to undo her own existence: 'Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life's bare as bone.'[83] The narrative act was dependent on aunthood. This aversion to motherhood that allows the narrator to create – to narrate – is challenged by the final paragraph in which the narrator, speaking as a writer creating character, describes a desire to 'follow' mothers and sons:

> Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. This, I fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as ashes; the water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you. I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world![84]

[81] Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', 1989, 115.
[82] Woolf, 116.
[83] Woolf, 121.
[84] Woolf, 121.

The story ends like this, with the narrator rather than 'Minnie', opening herself up to the possibilities of all the characters she can create. Except to create her own characters, as she does for 'Minnie', the figures must remain 'unknown' – drawn to her but not captured – because her creative freedom is in the illusions (or the intradiegesis). Comparing this to the ending of 'The Mark on the Wall,' whose last line 'Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail' suggests an acceptance of the authority of the known world of the diegesis, we can see a shift towards an understanding of the unknown as at least equally productive or valid.[85] This can be understood in terms of valuing the semiotic over the symbolic, or the instability of the materteral over the known maternal.

Spatially, the narrator imagines her relationship with 'Minnie' as if the narrative voice were a moth, hovering closely and then darting away. This is a metaphor for narration that we find again in *Jacob's Room***,** where the narrator hovers around the action like an insect, describing herself as she 'hum[s] vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all,' and bringing the reader in too – 'over him we hang vibrating.'[86] In 'An Unwritten Novel' the narrator ponders her position:

> Now, eyes open, she looks out; and in the human eye—how d'you define it?—there's a break—a division—so that when you've grasped the stem the butterfly's off—the moth that hangs in the evening over the yellow flower—move, raise your hand, off, high, away. I won't raise my hand. Hang still, then, quiver, life, soul, spirit, whatever

[85] Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', 83.
[86] Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 67.

> you are of Minnie Marsh—I, too, on my flower—the hawk over the down—alone, or what were the worth of life? To rise; hang still in the evening, in the midday; hang still over the down. The flicker of a hand—off, up![87]

In this passage the narration moves between the narrator and the narrated, both of whom are sometimes human (with hands) and sometimes moths (hovering). 'Move, raise your hand,' the narrator says to her character.[88] 'I won't raise my hand' – she is then another character in the story, an embodied character, not a narrative voice which is 'the moth that hangs in the evening'.[89] Then it is 'Minnie's' existence which is ethereal, 'Hang still then, quiver, life, soul, spirit' and the narrator is an observer again, an insect or bird – 'I, too, on my flower – the hawk over the down.'[90] In this muddle of flowers, insects, birds and heavy, hanging air the narrative is the oscillating container.

The text itself moves between first, second and third person. The frequent use of the second person suggests an intimacy that implies a first person narrator, though could technically (in terms of pronouns and vocabulary) also be an omniscient third person narrator – complicating the relationship between first and third person narrations. The narrator addresses 'Minnie' in the second person:

> Now, Minnie, the door's shut; Hilda heavily descends to the basement; you unstrap the straps of your basket, lay on the bed a meagre nightgown, stand side by side furred felt slippers. The looking-glass—no, you avoid the looking-glass. Some methodical disposition of hat-pins. Perhaps the shell box has something in it? You shake it.[91]

87 Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', 1989, 117.
88 Woolf, 117.
89 Woolf, 117.
90 Woolf, 117.
91 Woolf, 114.

The use of the second person has the effect not only of strengthening the reader's identification with 'Minnie' but also of positioning the reader *as* 'Minnie': further establishing the fluidity of 'Minnie's' character and obfuscating her location in the text. It also reduces the distinction between description and prescription – 'you unstrap the straps' could be description but it could also be a kind of command, an imperative statement.[92] The story self-consciously questions *where* the character of 'Minnie Marsh exists' – for the character in the intradiegesis is developed far more than the one on the diegetic level who inspired her: it is 'Minnie' whose character critics discuss, not the mother in the train carriage. When does the intradiegetic fantasy become real enough to constitute an element of the diegesis? The story or plot of 'An Unwritten Novel' *is* the creation of 'Minnie Marsh's' character – which all takes place in imagination. As Priest argues (and as discussed above), in *Night and Day* fantasy and imagination are clearly marked as separate to the 'real world' of the story level – and likewise the extradiegetic and diegetic levels are clearly demarked. From 'An Unwritten Novel' onwards, Woolf's novels do not maintain this barrier, and so like aunthood the narration is unfixed and not entirely knowable – challenging the symbolic patriarchal textual order and making its presence known in unfamiliar ways.

What we also see in the quote above is free indirect discourse. The voice moves seamlessly from that of the narrator, addressing the woman in the carriage, to the narrator addressing 'Minnie', to Minnie's own voice (although imagined), and back to the narrator's. 'The looking glass—no, you avoid the looking glass,' demonstrates this in one sentence – 'the looking glass' that opens the sentence is an idea in 'Minnie's' head – the description of her avoiding it is the narrator.[93] 'Perhaps the shell box has something in it?' could be either

[92] Woolf, 114.
[93] Woolf, 114.

and works just as well for both: for ‘Minnie’ wondering about the box, and for the narrator exposing her creative process – having an idea for where the plot could go next.[94] The blurring of the boundaries between homo- and heterodiegetic narration serve to disrupt even the boundaries between free indirect discourse and extradiegetic reporting – or between teller and reflector modes. We do not know for sure if we are reading free indirect discourse, or the internally focalized voice of ‘Minnie’, or if ‘perhaps the shell box has something in it’ is an extradiegetic comment from the narrator.

Sometimes even in one paragraph the narration moves from third to second person, and the narrative makes a metaleptic shift between the imagined life of ‘Minnie’ (intradiegetic, with a heterodiegetic narrator) and the homodiegetic narrative of the story level:

> Three o’clock on a December afternoon; the rain drizzling; one light low in the skylight of a drapery emporium; another high in a servant’s bedroom—this one goes out. That gives her nothing to look at. A moment’s blankness—then, what are you thinking? (Let me peep across at her opposite; she’s asleep or pretending it; so what would she think about sitting at the window at three o’clock in the afternoon? Health, money, bills, her God?)[95]

In one sentence we are in third person (‘That gives her nothing to look at’) and in the next, second person (‘what are you thinking?’).[96] The passage draws attention to the boundary between the story level and the diegetic level – between the act of imagining and creating for the narrator but also, interestingly, acknowledging that the woman in the carriage (in the

[94] Woolf, 114.
[95] Woolf, 114–15.
[96] Woolf, 115.

diegesis) has her *own* capacity for artifice – 'she's asleep or pretending it' – suggesting the potential for another narrative level within the intradiegesis that already takes place and reminding the reader that all those outside of the woman, including the narrator, cannot know her position.[97]

The focus on the act of making and creating is further emphasised by the imagery, first, of the narrator trying to make patterns out of shapes, and then by the story-level action of the woman in the carriage darning, suggestive of a transfer of narrative control between the narrator and the narrated. The narrator watches her companion 'lay across your knees a pocket-handkerchief into which drop little angular fragments of eggshell—fragments of a map—a puzzle.'[98] She wishes to make the image into a pattern – to imbue them with meaning. 'I wish I could piece them together!', she says.[99] Eggs have been mentioned previously in the intradiegesis and now have migrated into the diegesis, as if even objects can move between levels (something which I discuss with regards to *The Years* in Chapter Four). The woman in the carriage takes up her wool later in the story, and begins mending a glove:

> So, taking the glove with the worn thumb, defying once more the encroaching demon of what's called going in the holes, you renew the fortifications, threading the grey wool, running it in and out.
>
> Running it in and out, across and over, spinning a web through which God himself—hush, don't think of God! How firm the stitches are! You must be proud of your darning.[100]

[97] Woolf, 114.
[98] Virginia Woolf, 'An Unwritten Novel', in *Selected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1993), 117.
[99] Woolf, 117.
[100] Woolf, 120.

The woman has now become the one 'spinning a web' – and a web which will catch 'God himself.' This transfer of the making of the story between the narrator and the characters is an important development in Woolf's writing, particularly in light of future acts of creation in her writing – perhaps most famously Lily Briscoe's painting in *To the Lighthouse.*[101] In this disruption of the traditional power assigned to the role of narrator and the role of character, we find a challenge to patriarchal authority and to the categorisation of the symbolic. But what Woolf does is more than simply giving characters narrating power via intradiegesis or homodiegetic first person narration. She breaks down these categories so that they can no longer be used to fully describe narrative voice. The characters *are* given the power of narration – for example the narrator of 'An Unwritten Novel' is handed power normally held by the author, that of imagining character – but so too is narrative voice given power normally held by characters to exist in the world of the story, and to exist with suggestions of personhood. The power of creation is diffused across diegetic levels. Like fictional aunts in the nineteenth century, giving or withholding legacies – controlling family heritage through stories and property -- narrative voice in realist fiction exists at a step back from the real focus of the novel: the diegesis. By enmeshing narrative voice with character in a materteral narrative form Woolf mirrors the position of aunthood in the real world, existing both inside and outside of the family – and so by allowing story-making to occur on different diegetic levels responds to the huge power of the role of the aunt to challenge patriarchal, symbolic notions of hierarchy, categorisation and fixedness. I return to this point in Chapter Four, but it is worth making clear here just what a revelation 'An Unwritten Novel' was for Woolf and indeed for the novel more broadly.

[101] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin, 1992).

Returning to the text of 'An Unwritten Novel,' the imagined 'Minnie' (of the intradiegesis) is representative of the cultural understanding of aunthood demonstrated in Chapter One. She is financially under no man's protection. She has never married, has no children. She hovers around the first family, on the periphery of life, of their story. Yet she is not to be dismissed. The break Woolf makes between creation and maternity in her use of aunthood is the reason that the narrator, finding out that the woman she observes is a mother, cannot continue narrating. We can see more clearly than ever the relationship between narrative control and aunthood. The narrative voice, like 'Minnie', hovers around the centre, moving in and then darting away. It does not fit easily into familiar categories of narration. It does not conform to traditional realist generic traditions. It is a character with inconsistent knowledge and power within the story level. It moves between diegetic levels. Like the aunt, the narrative voice is a presence – a vital one – which we struggle to define and locate. For Woolf, this was inspiration for new potential for the novel, as we shall see in the following section.

One very obvious difference between *Jacob's Room* and the two novels before it is that in terms of the characters who exist on the diegetic level, there are only two named aunt characters, and the word itself only appears a handful of times. 'One's aunts have been to Rome,' the narrator says when talking about how children develop wanderlust.[102] Mrs Pascoe is an aunt, a character who appears for one page to listen 'submissively' to Mrs Durrant talk about potatoes, her only feature being an enviable St John's Wort bush growing by her front door.[103] The third and final mention of aunts is in a curious conversation between Jacob and his friend at Cambridge, Timmy Durrant. This conversation, while easily overlooked as

[102] Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 132.
[103] Woolf, 49.

nonsense, deserves a closer reading in the context both of aunthood and of critical work on conversation in Woolf's novels, which I undertake below.

Jacob's Room

Published in 1922, *Jacob's Room* is a great departure from Woolf's first two novels in content, character, form and most obviously in narrative voice (where what might traditionally be referred to as form and content intersect). The *New York Times*, reviewing it in 1923, saw it as emblematic of modernist style: 'No plainer manifestation of the modernist trend in contemporary English fiction,' they said, 'may be found than in Virginia Woolf's "Jacob's Room."'[104] In this review the *New York Times* argued that 'So much does style play a part in her work that it is of more importance to dilate on this aspect of her work than to enumerate the incidents that make up "Jacob's Room"', an opinion which can be found in various guises throughout contemporary literary criticism of the novel.[105] In Arnold Bennett's 1923 essay 'Is the Novel Decaying,' in response to which Woolf wrote 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', Bennett criticises new writers (or 'the young,' as he calls them) for being 'interested more in details than in the full creation of their individual characters.'[106] *Jacob's Room* is the only novel he mentions by name, saying rather patronisingly that it has made a 'great stir in a small world.'[107] While he praises its 'cleverness' (which in a previous sentence he has described as 'the lowest of all artistic qualities'), he says that 'the characters do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness.'[108]

[104] 'Latest Works of Fiction', *The New York Times*, 3 April 1923, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/17/specials/woolf-jacob.html.
[105] 'Latest Works of Fiction'.
[106] Arnold Bennett, 'Is the Novel Decaying? The Work of the Young', *The Register*, 25 August 1923.
[107] Bennett, 4.
[108] Bennett, 4.

What Bennett calls being 'clever' is really Woolf's development of character for the narrative voice without inserting the narrative voice into the text as a character on the diegetic level. It is the linking of character to narrative mode, which diminishes the focus on character and diffuses power throughout diegetic levels, disrupting the realist order of a fictional text, that Bennett objects to. In her introduction to the novel from 2000, Elizabeth Bronfen writes that, though deserving of its 'unique place in her oeuvre,' the novel is 'perhaps less pleasurable to read [than *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*], because a radical break with strict representation and the absence of clear marks for narratorial control can be very unsettling.'[109] In other words, its departure from realism is what makes it important (and the implication is that *Jacob's Room* is more innovative than later novels), but that these qualities are also what makes one less likely to read it. Bronfen has identified one of the key features of *Jacob's Room* in its break with strict representation: by which she assumes in realist fiction the reader knows who is being represented, and who is doing the act of representing (i.e. what is diegetic, and what is extradiegetic). In *Jacob's Room,* these categories of representation shift and narrative and character become far harder to separate, as we saw in 'An Unwritten Novel.'

While there is an obvious departure in style from the earlier novels, driven by what Bronfen calls the 'shattered narratorial voice,' and what Lawrence Norfolk describes as its 'radically democratic' narration, it is important to note that this is possible only because of the tremendous shift in focus of the types of 'incident' (to use the *New York Times*' word) that Woolf is writing about – in other words the form and the content have developed together in symbiosis.[110] *Jacob's Room* has a male protagonist who, unlike the protagonists of

[109] Elizabeth Bronfen, "Elizabeth Bronfen on *Jacob's Room*," in *Jacob's Room* (London: Vintage, 2004), xi–xix:xix.
[110] Bronfen xvi; Lawrence Norfolk, "Lawrence Norfolk on *Jacob's Room*," in *Jacob's Room* (London: Vintage, 2004), vii–x:vii

Woolf's first two novels, is not part of a marriage plot. As a young man he goes to Cambridge, makes friends, travels in Europe, goes to fight in the war. His world, by the very fact of his sex, is comprised of far more characters than that of Rachel Vinrace or Katharine Hilbery. In this way, his freedom from any kind of marriage plot aligns him with a fictional spinster aunt, often with her own income, who is often far freer than any young protagonist to come and go as she should please.

Woolf was very aware of the importance of the relationship between her new 'style,' to use her word (or 'method' to use Leonard Woolf's), and her subject.[111] While writing *Jacob's Room* in 1921 she voiced this in her diary: 'Suppose one of my myriad changes of style is antipathetic to the material?,' she asks, 'or does my style remain fixed? To my mind it changes always. But no one notices. Nor can I give it a name myself.'[112] This always-changing 'style' she refers to is, I argue, the enmeshed narrative and subject – the narrative voice that moves in and through the incident and character in the novel, rather than narrating from a fixed distance and perspective.

Formally, *Jacob's Room* departs from realism in many of the same ways as 'An Unwritten Novel.' It seems to be in the third person for the most part, with a mostly heterodiegetic narrator – but the reader is reminded by the occasional 'I' that actually the narrative at its broadest extradiegetic level is first person, and is not straightforwardly heterodiegetic, seeming in moments to exist as a character in the same way as Jacob himself. This has been ignored by some critics who have read the narrative voice as a realist one, for example Liesl Olson who, in an article in 2003, wrote that 'in a rare instance of authorial intrusion (which her subsequent novels generally avoid), an omniscient Woolfian narrator presents a theory' –

111 Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*, 2:186.
112 Woolf, 2:94.

conflating author with narrator and giving the narrator an omniscience there is much evidence to refute.[113]

The narration also uses the second person: 'If you look closer you will see that three elderly men at a little distance from each other.'[114] As well as the second person 'you,' there is much use of 'us' – a reminder of the narrator's constant presence and another blurring of the boundaries between characters and the narrator-character (for when she says 'us', she means herself and a character rather than herself and a reader): 'Yes. These changes of mood wear us out.'[115] Like the narrator of 'An Unwritten Novel,' the narrator's knowledge and power are inconsistent and we cannot easily see the boundary between narration and story, nor easily categorise the focalization. In 'An Unwritten Novel' this is because the distinction between what is real and what is the narrator's imagination is not always upheld, and so sometimes she can be omniscient and sometimes she acknowledges her limitations (for instance in not knowing whether the 'Minnie Marsh' in front of her is feigning sleep or not). In 'An Unwritten Novel' the narrator's power and knowledge are dependent on which world we are in – the train carriage where the events of the story take place, or the imagined life of Minnie Marsh out in the world, where the narrator *can* know everything because she is making it up. In *Jacob's Room*, there is no train carriage – we do not spend time on an extradiegetic level: while the narration has moments in the first person, we do not know of the world from which she narrates: there is no behind the scenes, as it were. Thus, the narrator's inconsistent knowledge is a more radical experiment, coming as it does without explanation. Neither does she exist above all the characters, with zero focalization, zooming in and out on a world about which she has all the answers. This narrator is not mimicking an

113 Liesl Olson, 'Virginia Woolf's "Cotton Wool of Daily Life"', *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (2003): 57.
114 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 60.
115 Woolf, 59.

author. She is hovering very close to the characters but remains disembodied, in another realm – or another mode of characterisation. 'Whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob's gloom as he sat naked, in the sun, looking at the Land's End,' the narrator wonders, 'it is impossible to say; for he never spoke a word.'[116] The narrator here has just as little access to Jacob as the reader. At other times though, the narrator knows the future, and addresses the reader as if acknowledging her editorial role: 'simple young men, these, who would—but there is no need to think of them grown old.'[117] Edward Bishop notes that:

> In Jacob's Room readers have been struck by how Woolf violates the chronology of a book that bears at least a superficial resemblance to a Bildungsroman, mentioning in the second chapter Jacob's meeting with the Rev. Floyd that occurs near the end of the book.[118]

As mentioned, where aunthood does stand out in *Jacob's Room* is in a conversation between Jacob and a friend, Timmy. This is the full conversation:

> 'Our friend Masham,' said Timmy Durrant, 'would rather not be seen in our company as we are now.' His buttons had come off.
>
> 'D'you know Masham's aunt?' said Jacob.
>
> 'Never knew he had one,' said Timmy.

[116] Woolf, 43.
[117] Woolf, 37.
[118] Edward L. Bishop, 'The Subject in *Jacob's Room*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (1992): 158.

‘Masham has millions of aunts,’ said Jacob.

‘Masham is mentioned in Domesday Book,’ said Timmy.

‘So are his aunts,’ said Jacob.

‘His sister,’ said Timmy, ‘is a very pretty girl.’

‘That's what'll happen to you, Timmy,’ said Jacob.

‘It'll happen to you first,’ said Timmy.

‘But this woman I was telling you about—Masham's aunt—'

‘Oh, do get on,’ said Timmy, for Jacob was laughing so much that he could not speak.

‘Masham's aunt…’

Timmy laughed so much that he could not speak.

‘Masham's aunt…’

‘What is there about Masham that makes one laugh?’ said Timmy.[119]

What is happening here is that Jacob is trying to talk about aunts and something of the topic makes both boys laugh so much that they cannot have the conversation. The exchange is heavily laden with subtext, the ‘conversation behind the conversation,’ to use Brigg’s term, is characteristic of the non-sequitur conversations in *The Voyage Out* and of the ‘curiously frustrated conversations and abortive utterances’ Nick Montgomery describes in that novel.[120] Laughter can be a sound, but it can also be the absence of sound, and here we are told twice

[119] Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 44–45.
[120] Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 165; Montgomery, ‘Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf’s The Voyage Out’, 34.

that it is laughter that means that first Jacob and then Timmy 'could not speak.'[121] In Chapter Two, I used Patricia Laurence's *The Reading of Silence* to consider the strange communications in *The Voyage Out,* and here too it is useful to acknowledge that where characters cannot speak in Woolf it is often because there is something unsayable being communicated.[122] Julia Briggs argues that in this approach Woolf emulates Henry James:

> James's combination of great precision and silence, [Woolf] recognised, is played off against what his society cannot speak about, and is indeed deeply reluctant to contemplate.[123]

Briggs argues that 'it was above all the First World War that came to stand for the unspeakable, the unspoken, exerting its silent pressure on the text of *Jacob's Room'* and perhaps there is something in the exchange about Masham's aunt that subtextually references the disappearing of a familiar world.[124] As discussed in Chapter One, part of Woolf's conception of aunthood is strongly associated with familial tradition; to the upper class dynastic family that was ceasing to exist by the time of the First World War. The name Masham itself suggests the same: Abigail Masham, Duchess of Somerset, was a great favourite of Queen Anne and a prominent figure in the Queen's Household in the early eighteenth-century. It is likely Woolf was well familiar with this: not only did Leslie Stephen publish a book on Swift in 1882, thus suggesting Swift's works would have been readily available to the young Virginia in her father's library, in 1925 she published her essay

---

121 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 45.
122 Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, 91.
123 Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, 165.
124 Briggs, 165.

'Swift's Journal to Stella' in the *Times Literary Supplement*.[125] The text comprised letters Swift wrote to two friends in which the Duchess Mrs Masham, as she is referred to there, features often.[126] A further link to English national history is Timmy's assertion that Masham 'is in the Domesday book' – suggesting that the family is one that goes back at least to 1086 (Masham, the name of a town in the North Riding of Yorkshire from which the surname comes, *is* in the Domesday book, with an earlier spelling of 'Massan', but no one with the family name of Masham was recorded).[127]

However, as Briggs acknowledges in her reading of *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, there is often something sexual lurking in the conversation behind the conversation (in the case of that text, what Briggs refers to as 'sexual relations between children and adults' but which surely should be referred to as the sexual abuse of children).[128] In the conversation about Masham's aunt, the impression is given that the thing which is so funny that neither boy can speak of is something to do with sex – and the incompatibility of sex with Masham's aunts. When Timmy ignores Jacob's comment that Masham's aunts are in the Domesday Book and says that Masham's sister is 'very pretty girl,' he is steering the conversation away from the aunt to a more familiar sexuality, that of an attractive, presumably young, woman. After Timmy says this, Jacob tells him that 'That's what'll happen to you, Timmy'.[129] This thing that will happen, that they tease each other with, is probably marriage, or romance, or sex. But it cannot distract Jacob from his attempt to assert Masham's aunt's existence. The conversation contains aunthood (for the specific aunt that Jacob is trying to tell Timmy about is one of 'millions of aunts' that Masham has); an embarrassment about sexual attraction or

---

125 Leslie Stephen, *Swift* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Virginia Woolf, 'Swift's Journal to Stella', in *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Andrew McNeillie, vol. 4, 6 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 293.
126 Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963); Woolf, 'Swift's Journal to Stella'.
127 'Masham', in *Domesday Book*, accessed 20 March 2019, https://opendomesday.org/place/SE2280/masham/.
128 Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw, The Aspern Papers and Other Stories* (London: Collins, 1956); Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, 165.
129 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 44.

romance; and an absolute inability on Jacob's part to narrate or to convey anything meaningful about this character of Masham's aunt. The themes are common in materteral discourse, but of course the aunt character herself is missing from almost the whole novel. How are we to read this? In her article on the philosophy of conversation in the work of Woolf, Bertrand Russell and Immanuel Kant, Erin Greer argues for a reading of conversation in Woolf 'indicated in the word's Latin roots of *con* (with) and *verte ře* (to turn).'[130] 'The moments of greatest connection between Woolf's characters,' she argues, 'are frequently moments when verbal conversation occurs alongside a different sort of "conversation."'[131] Greer says that conversation becomes its own aesthetic product, a method of collaborative communion independent of content and semantics, and that 'frequently [Woolf] contrasts wordless conversational attunement with the shallower and flawed efforts of characters to gain access to each other's inner worlds through speech.'[132] She demonstrates her argument in a close analysis of a section of *The Waves* (1931) in which all of the characters are at a dinner table. Bernard, one of the characters, says that:

> We have come together […] to make one thing. […] A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.[133]

Greer's analysis argues that:

---

130 Erin Greer, '"A Many-Sided Substance": The Philosophy of Conversation in Woolf, Russell, and Kant', *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 3 (2017): 2.
131 Greer, 2.
132 Greer, 3.
133 Woolf, *The Waves*, 95.

> Rather than conflating the flower with the *source* of their aesthetic solidarity, however, Bernard suggests that they *make* the flower. The flower does not provide a causal account for their feeling (as it would in a more traditionally Kantian schema), but rather it comes into being as though to explain their feeling, standing for the *sensus communis* that develops as the characters 'converse' in a disembodied mood.[134]

Greer's work enables a reading of the conversation between Timmy and Jacob in which we understand it not as a suppression or dismissal of aunts, but, as in the case of the flower in *The Waves,* a collaborative production of Masham's aunt as a being to 'stand in for the *sensus communis'* to use Greer's term, introducing a new function of aunts in Woolf's writing that we have not seen thus far.[135] In particular this moment of symmetrical unity, without any specified 'causal account for their feeling,' stands out in a novel in which characters struggle to understand each other and, as many critics have suggested, to be understood by readers:

> Jacob was laughing so much that he could not speak.
>
> 'Masham's aunt…'
>
> Timmy laughed so much that he could not speak.

[134] Greer, '"A Many-Sided Substance": The Philosophy of Conversation in Woolf, Russell, and Kant', 10.
[135] Greer, 10.

'Masham's aunt…'[136]

It is an aunt that holds Jacob and Timmy in this same psychological space, as it is a materteral narrative voice that holds them both in the textual space within the diegesis.

The subject of the text, Jacob Flanders, like Minnie Marsh, is inaccessible to the reader except via the intermediary narrator – but far more than with Minnie Marsh, Jacob is inaccessible to the narrator too. Rarely do we have access to Jacob's interior monologue – in fact Alex Oxner's analysis of the novel's drafts show that Woolf repeatedly erased moments where Jacob's interior monologue was availed to the reader.[137] The novel is short – less than half the length of her first two novels – the kind of length Woolf would not return to until *Between the Acts* (1941), and the galloping pace calls for a reading in one sitting. There are fourteen chapters, and within each chapter the text is broken up by empty spaces of four or five lines that mark a jump in the narrative. Sometimes these signal a change in narrative style – for instance between mimesis and diegesis – a paragraph of snatched conversation without explanation from which we can pick up gossip about Mrs Flanders is followed by a space, and then third person description of Mrs Flanders in a more traditional style.[138] Sometimes the spaces whirl us away to another character, another place, or another time – for instance a passage about Jacob reading a newspaper in London precedes, with a space, a passage about the frozen countryside and a shepherd in a field. Not until the end of this passage is any connection made with Jacob, but then – though separated by another long space:

---

136 Greer, 10; Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 44.
137 Alex Oxner, 'Characterizing Absence: Virginia Woolf's New Elegy in *Jacob's Room*', *The Explicator* 72, no. 3 (2014): 211–12.
138 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 9.

> The worn voices of clocks repeated the fact of the hour all night long.
>
> Jacob, too, heard them, and raked out the fire. He rose. He stretched himself. He went to bed.[139]

That final section, with its four short sentences, is the entire paragraph. The effect of these long spaces is to suggest each passage is its own unit of meaning, some with characters, places or incidents never mentioned again. *The Guardian*, reviewing the book in November 1922 in a review titled 'The Unconventional Novel', said that Woolf 'provides us with chunks of what seems arbitrary and is certainly not explicit, and leaves us to sort them' – but I contend that she does not ask the reader to sort them at all, nor has that been the function of her narrator.[140] The accumulation of these 'chunks' *are* where the novel as a whole makes its meaning, which is perhaps that human experience is something both excruciatingly personal and isolating (the characters do not seem to be able to really know each other, the philosophy is fatalistic, they are separated by these gulfs on the page) and universal (within this one book over two hundred characters are represented, on this site these experiences are brought together for the reader to draw patterns between).[141]

To an even greater extent than in 'An Unwritten Novel,' the narrative voice becomes a subject of the novel. Edward Bishop, in 'The Subject in Jacob's Room,' provides a useful

---

139 Woolf, 93.
140 'The Unconventional Novel', *The Guardian*, 11 March 1922, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/20/fromthearchives.virginiawoolf.
141 In her diary Woolf writes that Leonard described the characters of *Jacob's Room* as 'puppets, moved hither & thither by fate.' Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*, 2:186.

analysis of the narrator 'as both character and device.'[142] He points out that she is 'not a mimetic character' but 'a textual construct, so that the book is less about the possibility of knowing another person […] than it is about the making of a person in art.'[143] Though he is right that she is not a mimetic character – she has no name, no action in the novel, this is not a first person narrative story – she is certainly as close to being one as a narrator can get. She does have an 'I', though very few times: 'For though I have no wish to be Queen of England or only for a moment—I would willingly sit beside her,' she says; and 'For my own part, I find it exceedingly difficult to interpret songs without words.'[144] She is a 'she,' identifying herself as having 'ten years' seniority and a difference of sex' to Jacob.[145] The narrator of *Jacob's Room* is not identified as a named character and thus moves from one role to another: now she is narrator, now she is character.[146] Bishop argues that the shifting boundaries of the narration are unsettling for the reader, and certainly there is a sense that the narrator is offering herself in place of the Jacob which the reader has been led to expect to find.[147] Bishop says that:

> If we 'hang vibrating' over anyone it is the narrator herself, who, paradoxically, is characterized more fully as a mimetic character, as an autonomous self, than the ostensible focus of the text. It is her impulses we know, her voice we hear, where with Jacob all is denied. And yet we are continually jolted back from her as character to her as narrative device. The boundaries between her and the narrative are shifting and fluid. To what extent is she in the narrative created by a pseudo-author? To what

142 Bishop, 'The Subject in *Jacob's Room*', 163.
143 Bishop, 163.
144 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 63; Woolf, 91.
145 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 89.
146 Woolf, *The Waves*.
147 Henry James, *Washington Square* (London: Penguin Books, 1963).

> extent are we to conceive of her as producing this narrative? As in a Brechtian drama, in which an actor will engage us in a scene and then put up a placard and remove a prop in preparation for the next scene, the narrator continually violates the frame.[148]

This analysis of the narrator as a character who eclipses Jacob can inform a reading of the 'Masham's aunt' conversation discussed above as one in which the power of the materteral narrator has literally silenced Jacob.[149] It suggests a competition between Jacob and the narrator, and so the question of to what extent the reader is supposed to conceive of her producing the narrative, or to what extent the reader is to remember that there is an author creating *her* as a character, is difficult to answer. For at times, for instance where the narrator speaks about creating characters, about the art of writing, or expresses first person opinions, it does seem to the reader that the narrative voice is the author speaking to us. Writing about Woolf in 1982 Banfield argued that:

> A central theme of recent literary theory is that of silencing the author […] The functions previously seen as authorial are reassigned to the narrator. Whereas a nineteenth century criticism only had the one term 'author' this version of the author's disappearance from the text really has only the term 'narrator.' The author is banished from narrative theory altogether. The narrator is responsible for all the sentences of the text, as the speaker is in discourse; he is not a creation of the author, but the creator of the text's style and organization.'[150]

---

148 Bishop, 'The Subject in J*acob's Room*', 166.
149 Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 44–45.
150 Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, 183.

Should we be thinking less about Woolf's creation of the narrator and more about Woolf herself as writer and, of course, as an aunt? Bishop says that *Jacob's Room's* narrator's 'comments on art have a different status from those of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, for we are meant to believe in Lily as a character.'[151] This raises an important point about narrative voice and its perception – even when it is a character and exists somewhere between diegetic levels as in *Jacob's Room*, Bishop suggests the character of the narrator is not to be believed in. I suggest that this is another way in which the narrative voice is materteral: Bishop's attitude towards her is dismissive and denies her a full expression of character just as the materteral relationship is so often dismissed in favour of something non-familial (such as mentor, friend, companion), diminishing the aunt's position in the family.

These questions about narrative voice, aunthood and the author's identity are important to hold on to as we move on, in Chapter Four, to Woolf's final two novels *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941). In these we see non-parental familial relationships move to the fore, a diegetic choice reflected in the diffusion of narrative power and which we might also consider in the context of the semiotic – a shifting, unsymmetrical, fluid narrative voice resisting any absolute authority or symbolic categorisation. This is in dialogue with the historical moment – thus demanding a reading that unites poststructuralist and historicist criticism. Families, for Freud and many psychoanalysts after him, have been outside of history and static despite historical change. What I suggest is that Woolf's representation of families in her final two novels in a way which might be called semiotic – that is, non- linear, full of duplications and shifting identities and thus elevating the aunt's role as an emblem of

151 Bishop, 'The Subject in *Jacob's Room*', 163.

uncategorizable power – is a reaction to the shrinking family of the twentieth century which strengthened the importance of the parental relationship.

CHAPTER FOUR: 'Where does she begin, and where do I end?': Unfixing boundaries in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*

In this chapter I focus on Woolf's last two novels, *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941), which see the figure of the aunt return to the fore as a prominent character in the text.[1] But the fifteen-year period between *Jacob's Room* and *The Years* (1922-1937) saw the publication of arguably Woolf's most celebrated works: *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), as well as *Orlando* (1928), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *The Waves* (1931) and *Flush* (1933).[2] I discuss these novels below to demonstrate that the narrative technique Woolf had developed via aunthood in her early work continued to bear fruit throughout the 1920s and 30s, yet there is one crucial difference in particular between these novels and the ones that are the focus of this chapter (beyond having fewer aunts). The narrative voice in these novels is given in turn to various characters so as to offer a vision of multiple, individual subjective experiences of the same incidents. In some cases this is explicit, for example various characters trying to make out the sky writing in *Mrs Dalloway*, and many examples in *The Waves*. Sometimes rather than an incident it is a character portrayed from different perspectives, for example the characters in *To the Lighthouse* making various attempts to capture something of Mrs Ramsay, in whatever way they are able.

What the narrative voice of both *The Years* and *Between the Acts* does that the novels before it do not (and which I will go on to argue more fully in the this chapter) is to unify collective experiences into a whole – so that while the novels do still explore individual subjectivity they bring the narrative position back towards the reader, suggesting perhaps that

[1] Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (Chippenham: Penguin Classics, 1998); Woolf, *Between the Acts*.
[2] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*; Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas* (London: Penguin, 1993); Woolf, *The Waves*; Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Penguin, 2000); Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (London: Penguin, 2000).

while free indirect discourse may be the most direct way for the reader to access a character's thoughts, the narrator makes a vital contribution to the connection not only between characters but also between character and reader, and so the materteral functions in a different way than she has before. Instead of just the aunt's capacity for narrative control and ability to contain oppositional implications, the qualities of aunthood Woolf draws out in the materteral narrative voice of her final two novels are the aunt's unique way of connecting generations outside of a patriarchal familial line, and thus her capacity to dissolve symbolic boundaries and challenge a traditional organisation of power within the novel. In doing this she brings back aunts as key characters, while keeping the materteral narrative voice, so that the novels are her fullest expression of materteral importance.

While, as argued above, the connection of subjective experience is a feature of free indirect discourse, (and so there is an element of this narratorial role in *Mrs Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*) – it is in *The Years* and *Between the Acts* that Woolf brings this out explicitly. Consciousness, as presented in Woolf's final two novels, is porous and so one subjective experience can bleed into another – the characters in these earlier novels keep their consciousnesses relatively discrete, so that information can travel from character, to narrator, to reader, whereas in the later novels it can also travel between characters, as facilitated by the narrator. Understanding the development of the materteral in Woolf's work requires brief consideration of her publications between 1922 and 1937, which I address below before moving on to *The Years* and *Between the Acts.*

1922-1937

In 1925's *Mrs Dalloway*, the narrative voice so prominent in *Jacob's Room* has all but disappeared, and a third person, past tense, heterodiegetic, internally focused narrative moves

between characters (though a smaller number of characters than in *Jacob's Room*). Within the internally focused narrative sections of different time periods (sometimes past, sometimes present) are narrated, so the narrative has great temporal and spatial fluidity. The famous first line is in the voice of a narrator in free indirect discourse ('Mrs Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself') and then the narrative remains in the stream of Mrs Dalloway's consciousness almost entirely – the first few pages have only a handful of sentences that could even be argued to be in a narrative voice that is not hers, though of course always mediated by a narrative voice as she is never a homodiegetic narrator. As described above, while in an analysis of *Jacob's Room* we can identify where the narrator is speaking (and thus talk about her as a character, though on a different diegetic level), in *Mrs Dalloway* separating the narrative voice is harder because it is so deeply enmeshed with the focaliser characters: so while the novel has no homodiegetic narrators in the way that *Jacob's Room* arguably does, the narrative does *seem* to belong to characters who are all on the same diegetic level.

Clarissa Dalloway's aunt, Helena Parry, evidences something similar to the aunts in *Night and Day*: that aunts, for Woolf, are linked to narrative, are crucial to one's relationship with the past, and can be upholders of old-fashioned morality or, in contrast, rule-flouters who will not be fixed. Like in *Night and Day,* there is a link between aunts and writing. Miss Parry was a writer, and a successful one at that: 'No doubt it was forgotten now, her book on the orchids of Burma, but it went into three editions before 1870, she told Peter.'[3] She is also very closely linked to characters' memories of Bourton (which she has inherited, by the date of the party), where she appears to have been the regulating force. Sally Seton remembers her as 'the old aunt who used to be so cross when she stayed at Bourton. Never should she forget

[3] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 196.

running along the passage naked, and being sent for by Miss Parry!'[4] While in that context she is the upholder of rules, there is a suggestion of some kind of resistance to patriarchal power – she is not impressed by the titles of the men at the party and she 'did not care what the Prime Minister had just been telling her'.[5] Helena Parry's materteral presence in the diegesis is perhaps because, in comparison with *Jacob's Room,* the narrative voice is balanced more equally between characters on the diegetic level, and a narrator on the extradiegetic level. It uses a materteral narrative voice but does not offer it as much power as the narrator of either *Jacob's Room* or 'An Unwritten Novel,' thus a materteral presence is still needed on the story level.

To the Lighthouse has a heterodiegetic, third person, past tense narrator whose presence is more prominent than in its predecessor, dominating nearly the entirety of the much-discussed 'Time Passes' section of the novel.[6] There is more reporting and more describing, and while there are many instances of free indirect discourse the movement between these internally focalised sections of narrative are presided over by a narrator who tells us what characters are thinking. Like the narrator in *Jacob's Room,* they do not have access to *all* the thoughts of a character and they have an inconsistent knowledge, leaving the narrator, like the reader, to make guesses about the characters (though by no means to the extent of *Jacob's Room*). For example:

> But it tired Mrs. Ramsay, it cowed her a little – the plates whizzing and the doors slamming. And there would fall between them sometimes long rigid silences, when, in a state of mind which annoyed Lily in her, half plaintive, half resentful, she seemed

[4] Woolf, 198.
[5] Woolf, 197.
[6] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 137–56.

> unable to surmount the tempest calmly, or to laugh as they laughed, but in her weariness perhaps concealed something. She brooded and sat silent.[7]

So while the narrator in this passage knows Lily's thoughts, the narration is focalised through Lily and so the narrator can only guess that 'perhaps' Mrs Ramsay's weariness concealed another emotion. The narrative voice keeps characters discrete from one another, in particular contrast to *The Years* as I discuss below. Lily's reflection that 'One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with,' and that 'Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with' can be understood in narrative terms to wish for a container for fifty subjective experiences – which, I will argue, is what the narrative voice does in *The Years,* with its porous barrier between characters' consciousnesses and the narrator's.[8] Aunts are mentioned but never present in *To The Lighthouse*. Perhaps most interestingly Lily's aunt is the reason she has been to Paris (to 'see an aunt who was ill') and Mrs Ramsay thinks her aunt Camilla was 'the most beautiful woman I ever saw', though Mr Ramsay says that 'Nobody ever held up your Aunt Camilla as a model of virtue that I'm aware of'.[9] Again, aunthood is an unfixed signifier. Of all Woolf's novels, *To the Lighthouse* is where we see the most balance between extradiegesis and diegesis: the characters and the narrator share the narrative voice without the tension that we have seen between them in *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room* or the almost disappearance of a narrator's presence in the narrative that we have seen in *Mrs Dalloway.*

A Room of One's Own continues to experiment with narrative form, radically challenging traditional non-fiction in its inclusion of characters and intradiegesis. In her insightful article

[7] Woolf, 216.
[8] Woolf, 214.
[9] Woolf, 79; Woolf, 74.

in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Kathleen Wall describes the text in a way that demonstrates clear parallels with this thesis's reading of Woolf's novels. She challenges what she describes as a 'monologic' reading of the text, which might assume that there is one homodiegetic narrator/speaker and that the narrative remains on one diegetic level (such as in a monologue). She says:

> Woolf 's use of a double frame around her lecture on women and fiction, a double frame consisting of the words of her non-fiction narrator that open and close *A Room of One's Own* and the fictional narrative in Chapters 1, 2, and 6 that surround what we might term a lecture on 'Women and Fiction,' problematizes such a monologic reading of her compelling text. Rather, she allows these layers of text to explore a series of questions that resonate between the layers, allowing her to leave them unresolved.[10]

Wall goes on to consider the relationship between the intradiegesis and the extradiegesis, or the 'narrative frame and the framed text.'[11] I argue that the aunt is a crucial figure in this text. The fictional narrator's aunt is important to the diegesis of part of the text, being the very thing that provides the titular room:

> Society gives me chicken and coffee, bed and lodging, in return for a certain number of pieces of paper which were left me by an aunt, for no other reason than that I share her name.

[10] Kathleen Wall, 'Frame Narratives and Unresolved Contradictions in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29, no. 2 (1999): 185.
[11] Wall, 186.

> My aunt, Mary Beton, I must tell you, died by a fall from her horse when she was riding out to take the air in Bombay. The news of my legacy reached me one night about the same time that the act was passed that gave votes to women. A solicitor's letter fell into the post-box and when I opened it I found that she had left me five hundred pounds a year for ever.[12]

Typically in terms of Woolf's vision of aunthood, this is full of contradictions. The aunt, like Helena Parry in *Mrs Dalloway*, is a colonial figure much associated with the past – she dies the very day that women get the vote. There is no special relationship here; the legacy is ascribed to sharing a name and so dependent on a key patriarchal structure, and yet the impact of this legacy cannot be more clearly articulated by Woolf. If, here, we ask why an aunt has been inserted into the story, the answer might be suggested that Woolf's aunt Caroline Stephen did in fact leave her a legacy of five hundred pounds per year, and thus Mary is illustrating the situation in which Woolf found herself. This much is true, but in his chapter in *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace* (2010), John K. Young convincingly argues that this narrative – that Woolf was financially dependent on her legacy income – was a fiction too, 'masking Hogarth's commercial success, which by 1929 was generating for her considerably more than £500 a year', something he thinks that contemporary readers would have realised.[13] He writes that:

---

12 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, 33–34.
13 John K. Young, '"Murdering an Aunt or Two": Textual Practice and Narrative Form in Virginia Woolf's Metropolitan Market', in *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace*, Ed. Jeanne Dubino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 182.

> [g]iven the brand-name recognition she had developed for herself through the Hogarth Press, enough by 1929 to advertise *Room* with the Press's wolf's-head logo, Woolf could certainly have expected her readers to recognize the absence of the Press in her fictionalized explanation of her £500.[14]

Young's demonstration that Woolf did not need her aunt's legacy to write is further evidence that for Woolf the aunt was vital for reasons other than £500 a year – she did not need to include an aunt at all, but she did. Yet while Young does explain why Woolf might want to create a fiction of legacy and considers what the effect of this is for her readers, like other critics he leaves the *aunt* part of it unexamined. This thesis seeks to offer an answer to the question that Young raises, albeit implicitly: why an aunt? In a text that, as Wall describes it, is 'trying out' various narrative positions, the aunt's prominence is pertinent.[15] As an unfixed position culturally, it is a materteral approach that Woolf has shown in the narrative structure of *A Room of One's Own.* In the text it is the aunt that allows Mary the freedom of her own space, and it is this space that allows her to write. Woolf is making a clear and direct statement about the importance of the aunt for a writing practice that allows a multi-layered, multi-voiced text such as *A Room of One's Own* to exist: here the materiality of five hundred pounds per year is a synecdoche for the exploration and innovation the aunt has been used to create.

In *The Waves*, discussed in Chapter Three, Woolf structures the novel in a way that gives each of six main characters turns at focalising the narrative. Outside of this is a brief

[14] Young, 192.
[15] Wall, 'Frame Narratives and Unresolved Contradictions in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own', 207.

paragraph at the start of each section, describing the position of the sun in the sky. Kate Flint, in her Introduction to the 1992 Penguin edition of the novel, describes it thus:

> The life-span of the six, from their shared childhood and schooldays through to Bernard's death, is conveyed through a series of 'dramatic soliloquies' (as Virginia Woolf termed them), interspersed with passages of depersonalized prose which describe constantly shifting patterns of light and water passing from dawn to dusk, spring to winter, across the globe. Throughout all of this, no authorial comment or interpretation is offered.[16]

While I agree with Flint that there is no authorial comment or interpretation, Woolf has made the decision still to include a narrative voice separate from the characters: in other words she has not only split the text into first person, homodiegetic narration by each of the characters, but also includes third person interventions. Each individual consciousness is mediated by a narrator who keeps them separate from one another. This is somewhat at odds with Flint's description of 'their utterances [as] soliloquies, self-presentations and self-justifications, rather than acts of communication with one another' because they are not homodiegetic narrators and so not monologic in the way that 'soliloquy' suggests – while the novel is play-like, it is not a play.[17] What Flint's reading does suggest is that communication between characters happens somewhere other than the diegesis: I suggest that they are brought together by the narrative voice, something which would be lost if the novel were a series of homodiegetic narrators. The cocoon that the narrative voice provides for multiple individual

[16] Kate Flint, 'Introduction', in *The Waves* (St Ives: Penguin Books, 1992), ix.
[17] Flint, xi.

expressions is where the novel presents a materteral form, so that the narrative voice becomes connective and unifying, but plural (in that it features multiple characters with an 'I' in their sections of free indirect discourse). We see this type of narrative voice take on a greater presence in Woolf's final two novels, which I discuss in below.

Woolf's fictional-biographical novels, *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1931), approach narrative voice in a different way. *Orlando* is narrated by Orlando's biographer, whose endeavour allows Woolf to play with the limitations of narratorial knowledge using a framing device of intradiegesis, similar to *A Room of One's Own.* Elizabeth Cooley argues that the narrator of *Orlando* is similar to that in *Jacob's Room* (although crucially, the former is male and the latter is female) in that 'Woolf uses an intrusive narrator to reveal the frustrations and limitations of expressing character.'[18] I agree that while Woolf described *Orlando* as 'half laughing, half serious' (quite different to her approach to *Jacob's Room,* as discussed in Chapter Three), it does continue a similar endeavour.[19] The difference is that in *Orlando* the boundary between narrator and character, or between the diegetic levels, is very clearly established and not crossed.

In considering the texts above I have demonstrated that they are not without a chapter of their own in this thesis because the aunt was abandoned, but because the aunt was continuing to be present in a similar way to that in which Woolf had used aunthood in her previous work. While they strengthen what I have argued in previous chapters in their aunt characters (Helena Parry in *Mrs Dalloway* in particular), contradictory representations of aunthood (*A Room of One's Own*) and narrative form, it is not until *The Years* that use of the materteral

[18] Elizabeth Cooley, 'Revolutionizing Biography: *Orlando*, *Roger Fry*, and the Tradition', *South Atlantic Review* 55, no. 2 (1990): 75.
[19] Cooley, 75; Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 3: 1925-30*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1982), 168.

takes up a new function. Below, I consider the resumed intense presence of aunthood in the diegesis of that novel and the effect that this has on the novel's narrative position.

So far in this thesis, in writing about *The Voyage Out, Night and Day* and 'An Unwritten Novel' my central question has been 'why are there so many aunts?' In focusing on *Jacob's Room* I asked, 'why has the aunt disappeared?' In this chapter I turn to the publication of *The Years* in 1937 to ask, 'why has the aunt returned?' To answer that question, in this chapter I make a key argument for aunthood as an unfixed position, by which I mean that it has no biological or legal imperative. In the first section of Chapter One, I turned to other disciplines such as kinship studies to establish this conception of aunthood as unfixed. It is not just unfixed in kinship terminology, however; it is unfixed in Woolf's own writing, both in her diaries and letters and in her fiction as demonstrated so far in the thesis. This understanding of the aunt that Woolf has developed, I argue, leads her to these final two novels of diffuse perspective: she continues to react against the patriarchal symbolic, and to pose a challenge to traditional structures of meaning for the novel, but also goes beyond the transfer of narrative control between diegetic levels to suggest a narrative voice that can move through people, animals, and objects.

In the central thesis of this chapter I argue that, while aunts do make a return as characters in Woolf's last two novels, they are not in the same position (or fulfilling the same purpose) as the aunts of *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and 'An Unwritten Novel'.

To explore these questions of subjectivity, perspective, communication and relation, the aunt is a powerful figure to turn to. Even according to nineteenth-century European definitions and understanding of aunthood, an aunt can be either the sister of one's mother, the sister of one's father, the wife of one's mother's brother, or the wife of one's father's brother. Once we look beyond that culturally, the title aunt can be deployed on range of other

relations, consanguineal, affine, or neither. As James Harker describes it, 'Woolf is frustrated by the convention of representation — that a certain superfluous detail, a water bottle or the layout of a house — is supposed to conjure a particular kind of person.' This is a frustration not only with the significance given to objects by the Edwardians, but also, I argue, with the significance of fixed places within the system of family relations.[20] The fluid and elusive nature of aunthood (perhaps best evidenced by the very fact that it was possible for a legal debate over her status as family or not was able to run for 65 years without conclusion) explains its return to Woolf's work as she seeks a structure with which to explore families of characters without hierarchy.

Three Guineas and The Years

The Years brings aunts back to the fore, but as part of a cast of characters who each enact different family roles over time, so that kinship titles are plural and multiple. In this section I argue that Woolf uses the unfixed nature of aunthood as a framing device for a story about characters trying to communicate within the realm of the symbolic (wanting to grasp at and fix each other) but finding far more effective a semiotic communication. The narrative voice, while overall heterodiegetic, possesses a quiet power as it moves thought and feeling between and through characters in the diegesis, much like Woolf's aunt-characters in *Night and Day*, and her own aunts, have done for their families.

To best illuminate the semiotic qualities of *The Years*, it is useful first to consider *Three Guineas*, described by Brenda R. Silver as both 'companion and alter ego' to *The Years*.[21] In 1931 Woolf wrote in her diary of a new idea for a book: 'a sequel to A Room of One's

[20] James Harker, 'Misperceiving Virginia Woolf', *Journal of` Modern Literature* 34, no. 2 (2011): 3.
[21] Brenda R. Silver, 'The Authority of Anger: "Three Guineas" as Case Study', *Signs* 16, no. 2 (1991): 357.

Own—about the sexual life of women: to be called Professions for Women perhaps.'[22] Eventually this was to become *The Years* and *Three Guineas*.[23] I argue that *Three Guineas*, with its strong sense of specific historical time, precise use of facts, and its emphasis on patrilineal relationships, offers a more symbolic counterpart to *The Years* (whose semiotic qualities I emphasise below) and that it is the move away from patrilineality towards the materteral that facilitates the division between the two.

Three Guineas is a work of non-fiction, though, as with *A Room of One's Own*, using rhetorical techniques common to fiction in the creation of a narrator-character writing to fictional correspondents. It was not popular with her contemporaries: 'disliked and derided, then and now', Lee writes, 'by the male members of "our age"'.[24] The umbrage taken with the essay's angry tone was not limited to the male sex: in 1975 Sharon Proudfit described the text as using a 'bitter, strident, vehement, male-denouncing tone' and arguing that 'in *Three Guineas* Woolf assumes a voice unnatural to her, the masculine voice of the fighter she abhors, [thus] it is a painful irony that the presentation she makes betrays the cause she advocates'.[25] One can find a more critically alert and thoughtful reading of the anger in *Three Guineas* in Jane Marcus's article 'Art and Anger,' published just three years later in 1978.[26] It is undeniably Woolf's most forthright expression of the frustrations of a particular social class – that of the daughters of educated men – and as well as passionately calling for better educational and professional access for women. The essay is shaped by the question of how one can be the most effective anti-fascist possible: 'How can we enter the professions and yet remain civilized human beings; human beings, that is, who wish to prevent war?' Woolf

[22] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, 4:6.
[23] For a detailed account of the journey from idea to publication as *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, see Alice Wood, *Virginia Woolf's Late Cultural Criticism: The Genesis of 'The Years', 'Three Guineas' and 'Between the Acts'* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
[24] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 52.
[25] Sharon Proudfit, 'Virginia Woolf: Reluctant Feminist in *The Years*', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 17, no. 1 (1975): 60.
[26] Jane Marcus, 'Art and Anger', *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 1 (1978): 68–98.

asks.[27] In terms of theme, Woolf saw *Three Guineas* as addressing the same concerns as *The Years* – indeed both are concerned with professions for women, education, and fascism, and both intertextually reference *Antigone*. In terms of narrative technique too, despite one being a novel and the other an essay, there are some interesting interactions between them.[28] Evelyn Chan describes the 'boundary between these two genres' of novel and essay as 'porous for Woolf in general, and for these two works in particular' but below I argue that while the two have much in common their genres are quite clearly delineated, not least by the essay's emphasis on filial lineage and the parent-child relationship and the novel's denial of filial authority (discussed further below).[29]

Teresa Winterhalter's reading of *Three Guineas* in particular emphasises narrative features we find in Woolf's fiction; those which pose a challenge to patriarchal authority, to the symbolic order and thus to the fascism against which *Three Guineas* rails. Winterhalter argues that critics have tended to read *Three Guineas* as a text with a singular, unified viewpoint (which is perhaps natural, given the traditional use and conventions of the essay form) and she challenges this. The essay takes on the voice of three different characters: in Winterhalter's words 'a deliberately polemical voice, a mock man's voice, and a voice (to risk a cliché here) that speaks in the name of human decency'.[30] She argues that '*Three Guineas* reveals an intricate layering of voices, a shifting of narrative identities, and convoluted loops of argumentation that complicate such univalent conceptualizations of Woolf's rhetorical strategy.'[31] This poses a similar challenge to the symbolic authorial power

[27] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, 200.
[28] For reference to *Three Guineas* as a companion piece to *The Years* see for example, John Whittier-Ferguson, 'Repetition, Remembering, Repetition: Virginia Woolf's Late Fiction and the Return of War', *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 2 (2011): 232.
[29] Evelyn Chan, 'Professions, Freedom and Form: Reassessing Woolf's *The Years* and *Three Guineas*', *The Review of English Studies* 61, no. 251 (2010): 603.
[30] Teresa Winterhalter, '"What Else Can I Do But Write?" Discursive Disruption and the Ethics of Style in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*', *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 239.
[31] Winterhalter, 236.

that the diffusion of narrative and elevation of aunthood in her novels does, only in Winterhalter's reading this 'emphasizes the ethics of decentralizing authorial power' rather than just being a challenge to realist aesthetics (though the two are linked, of course).[32] As I have claimed already in this chapter, Woolf's late novels in particular destabilise the notion of a symbolic fixed authority by bringing aunts back to the fore – a kinship role whose representation in literature and in Woolf's diaries resists authority and embraces fluidity, contingence and liminality. While criticism has shown *Three Guineas* not to be as narratively direct as perhaps once perceived, the nature of the text as a direct response to a specific historical moment (the rise of fascism) keeps it within the realm of the symbolic whereas in *The Years,* while there are fixed historical markers, the text rarely directly addresses them. As Thomas S. Davis describes 'the most significant world-historical events that occur between 1880 and the 1930s are largely displaced from the center of the narrative.'[33]

As mentioned above, one marked difference between *Three Guineas* and the novels published either side of it is that the former is a text which, while narratively working to destabilise authority, continually emphasises filial lineage. The essay's refrain is 'the daughters of educated men', a phrase which runs throughout. In addition to that, Woolf gives an example of the 'narrative of the life of an educated man's daughter who was dependent on father and brother' and says that 'we are merely carrying on the same fight that our mothers and grandmothers fought'.[34] Part of the essay is dedicated to an examination of what Woolf calls infantile fixation; by which she means fathers who are obsessed with their daughters and restrict their freedom more than the norm.[35] This essay which argues against war – the very thing that took Woolf's own nephew Julian Bell – does not contain any acknowledgment of

[32] Winterhalter, 237.
[33] Thomas S. Davis, 'The Historical Novel at History's End: Virginia Woolf's *The Years*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 60, no. 1 (2014): 18.
[34] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, 159; Woolf, 258.
[35] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, 260–67.

collateral kinship. Since *A Room of One's Own* features an important aunt, we cannot assume that aunthood is only important for Woolf's fiction nor that Woolf was not using the aunt in this period since the novels either side of *Three Guineas* also feature both aunt characters and materteral form. Lee attributes the emphasis on the father-daughter relationship in *Three Guineas* to the fact that 'her social satire is inextricable from her experience of family life' and yet her family life was full of aunts and great-aunts, and indeed by then she had been an aunt for some time.[36] In its materteral focus and semiotic narrative voice (on which I extrapolate below), *The Years* seems to answer some of the questions that *Three Guineas* asks, about challenging the patriarchy when one's only tools to do so are within the patriarchal order. It emphasises feminism's need for semiotic expression and for a new form, which I argue is the materteral form exhibited in *The Years* (and other of her novels); for, while the narrative itself moves between modes in a challenge to the symbolic nature of a political essay, the story in the diegesis has a strong focus on history and change is restricted to a linear model of familial movement – things move from parents to children. It is in the collateral nature of the Pargiter family in *The Years* – inextricably linked to the diffuse narrative voice – that Woolf finds a way to unite narrative voice and character to provide a form whose need is articulated in *Three Guineas.*

The Years follows one family's collateral relationships over fifty years of English history, from 1880 to 'Present Day' (it was published in 1937). Woolf described it at one time as '*The Waves* going on simultaneously with *Night & Day*', at another as '*Orlando*'s first cousin.'[37] These comments are telling for the narrative form of *The Years.* Like *The Waves,* it continues to develop a narrative voice that holds together disparate experiences and perspectives, while also playing a role in the text itself. It does this in a more complex way than *The Waves,*

[36] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 53.
[37] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, 4:151–52; Woolf, 4:133.

weaving in and out of the consciousness of many more characters, over far greater length, and in such a way as to avoid suggesting neat divisions into one character's section or another. Its relationship to *Night and Day* may have less to do with the narrative form and more to do with the subject – both Katharine Hilbery and Eleanor Pargiter take on a maternal position in their families, though for different reasons, and perhaps we can see Eleanor as what Katharine might have been were she freed from the marriage plot. In reference to *Orlando,* Woolf might have meant that both novels have a strong historical sense, without fully being historical novels. Considering the novel's genre in his 2004 article, Thomas S. Davis wrote that:

> We might say that *The Years* participates in the genre of the historical novel without properly belonging to it. That particular form of participation amounts to what Jacques Derrida calls 'contamination' (59), a contamination which also spreads to the categorical divide between realism and modernism, a boundary that Woolf's novel, and much of late modernism, scarcely heeds.[38]

Steven Connor, in his introduction to *The Years* in 1992, also described the novel as semi-historical, using the calendar 'of the heart rather than the calendar of public history.'[39] As I argue in this section, it is not just the divide between realism and modernism, or between 'the heart' and the public that the novel resists, but categorisation in general and in this the aunt is key.

[38] Davis, 'The Historical Novel at History's End: Virginia Woolf's The Years', 4.
[39] Steven Connor, 'Introduction', in *The Years* (London: Vintage, 1992).

The Years was conceived of in late 1932 as 'An Essay-Novel, called the Pargiters—& its [sic] to take in everything, sex, education, life &c; & come, with the most powerful & agile leaps, like a chamois across precipices from 1880 to now.'[40] From the start, it was a novel that refused to be pinned down and even challenged the boundary between life and fiction for Woolf, who found herself 'in such a race, such a dream, such a violent impulsion & compulsion—scarcely seeing anything but The Pargiters.'[41] In her 1997 biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee says that:

> While she was writing [*The Years*], rather than retreating into a mental nunnery for 'The Lonely Mind', she found that everything she did and read seemed to overlap with it. Often she caught herself behaving or sounding like 'Elvira' Pargiter (the difficult, eccentric, critical 'outsider' in the novel, who would be renamed Sara), or absentmindedly writing a bit of the novel into her diary.[42]

The seeping of the novel into Woolf's real life is more apparent in her diaries than with any other novel she wrote. In March 1933 Woolf described the experience of writing Elvira (a character who, rather than simply being renamed Sara as Lee claims, would be split into Sara and Eleanor) as 'speaking in the person of Elvira Pargiter.'[43] Then, in contrast, a letter she has to write in real life she writes 'as Virginia Woolf', as if both women were characters whose voice she can step in to.[44] Sometimes the slippery boundary between the fictional world she was creating and the real world exhausted her: 'I think the effort to live in 2 spheres: the

[40] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, 4:129.
[41] Woolf, 4:133.
[42] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 640.
[43] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, 4:147.
[44] Woolf, 4:147.

novel; & life is a strain,' she wrote in August 1933. A year later she describes her creative process with *The Years* again, saying that 'I have to some extent forced myself to break every mould & find a fresh form of being, that is of expression, for everything I feel & think'.[45] When the novel was nearly finished she described it as 'psychologically, the oddest of my adventures'.[46] The boundary between what is writing and what is real life is not clear.

The novel brings the aunt back to the fore most obviously in the character of Eleanor Pargiter, but because of the multi-relational nature of the cast of collateral characters there are many other materteral relationships. In this section I argue that the prominence of aunthood in *The Years*, read in the context of both the French feminist readings of Woolf and of the kinship theories discussed above, suggests that the materteral can be applied to narrative technique in a way which allows us to understand the semiotic characteristics of a novel given little attention by Kristevan Woolf scholars. The fluid nature of the aunt's role and the challenge that it poses to patriarchal power presents itself in this novel as a challenge to the symbolic order of realist narrative (whose influence is felt more keenly in *Three Guineas*, as argued above, though both engage with historical events). Below I consider the formal features of the novel which we could consider both materteral and semiotic, from porous boundaries between diegetic levels and character consciousnesses to the refusal on Woolf's part to provide characters with a single fixed kinship role or category offered by the patriarchal symbolic order.

Midway through *The Years* Eleanor, the eldest female of the Pargiter children, contemplates porous boundaries:

[45] Woolf, 4:233.
[46] Woolf, 4:338.

> A little blur had come round the edges of things. It was the wine; it was the war. Things seemed to have lost their skins; to be freed from some surface hardness; even the chair with gilt claws, at which she was looking, seemed porous; it seemed to radiate out some warmth, some glamour, as she looked at it.[47]

The dissolution of boundaries between different worlds, fictional and real, is exhibited in the text in the same porousness of diegetic levels I have demonstrated thus far in Woolf's work (in particular from 'An Unwritten Novel' onwards). The skins between narrative voice and character, between diegetic level and intradiegetic, between past, present, potential and actual, all seem lost at moments of the novel. In her diary in April 1934, in the middle of the writing process, Woolf was thinking about the difference between drama and prose. 'The play,' she wrote, 'demands comings to the surface—hence insists on a reality wh[ich] the novel need not have, but perhaps should have. Contact with the surface. Coming to the top.'[48] She says she is 'working out my theory of the different levels in writing, & how to combine them: for I begin to think the combination necessary'.[49] These different levels, I hope to demonstrate in this section, could be argued to be diegetic, extradiegetic and intradiegetic.

While the narrative voice is heterodiegetic and is internally focused in free indirect discourse, the heterodiegetic narrator has a voice that reads like it is internally focalised, even when it is not – that is to say, it seems like a character. There is no 'I' as there is in *Jacob's Room*, but there are moments when the narrative voice seems to edit itself as if we were reading the thought process of a character, and not the carefully ordered recollection of some kind of heterodiegetic storyteller. For example: 'It was March and the wind was blowing. But

[47] Woolf, *The Years*, 210.
[48] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, 4:207.
[49] Woolf, 4:207.

it was not "blowing." It was scraping, scourging. It was so cruel. So unbecoming.'[50] Who is correcting who, when we read 'it was not "blowing"?'[51] The boundaries between character and narrative are further blurred by an almost telepathic ability of the characters to move through each other's subjective consciousnesses, an ability more obviously associated with a third person omniscient narrator. This results in a number of bizarre moments where characters seem to 'come to' and be unsure which character they are (as if it were the narrative voice coming to in one of the characters). One scene that exemplifies this is near the beginning of the novel, in '1880.' Rose, the youngest Pargiter, has been to the shop on her own in the evening when she had been told not to. On her journey, she is accosted by a man in the street who terrifies her – a man with 'a horrid face: white, peeled, pock-marked,' who leers at her, 'made a mewing noise,' and unbuttons his clothes.[52] Because she was not supposed to go alone, she cannot tell anyone what has happened to her. Eleanor puts her to bed, the young Rose still shaken and mumbling.

> 'I saw,' Eleanor repeated, as she shut the nursery door. 'I saw. . .' What had she seen? Something horrible, something hidden. But what? There it was, hidden behind her strained eyes. She held the candle slightly slanting in her hand.[53]

Here the narrative voice seems to be both Eleanor and Rose at the same time; or, Eleanor has been able to slide into Rose's consciousness. The key sentence is 'there it was, hidden behind her strained eyes'. This could be Eleanor describing Rose's strained eyes which hide 'it', but

[50] Woolf, *The Years*, 107.
[51] Woolf, 107.
[52] Woolf, 20–21.
[53] Woolf, 31.

the implication of the following sentence, 'she held the candle slightly slanting', is that it is Eleanor whose eyes are straining. The candle relates to Eleanor's ability to see. So 'there it was, behind her strained eyes' could be where the narrative comes out of free indirect discourse back to third person description, telling the reader that Eleanor can nearly reach a point of telepathy with her sister. This is further supported by Eleanor coming to as if out of a trance, straight after this moment with Rose: 'She paused, looking down into the hall. A blankness came over her. Where am I? she asked herself, staring at a heavy frame. What is that?'[54] It is not uncommon in Woolf for the narrative to move between internal focalisers, for the voice to be many voices. But what happens here is something different that we have not seen before: the *character* of Eleanor is acting as the *narrator* has in previous work. Eleanor has access to the consciousness of another character: 'There it was.' When the narrative voice returns to Eleanor there is a moment of confusion, as if it knew not where it had been.

As well as the narrative moving through (as well as between) characters in a way which we have not seen before, the boundaries between characters and their individual subjective experiences are diminished by their porousness: images, phrases and even objects move around between characters. Victoria Middleton argues in her article 'The Years: A Deliberate Failure' that 'sterility of repeated action is evoked through habits and gestures handed down from one Pargiter to another' – except they are not handed *down*, they are handed *across*, because *The Years* is concerned mostly with collateral relationships.[55] There is no implication in the novel that there is a genealogical inheritance of thought. Middleton's article is very useful, tracing as it does both actions ('the fumbling with the wick under the tea kettle') and

[54] Woolf, 31.
[55] Victoria Middleton, '*The Years*: "A Deliberate Failure"', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 1977, 163.

phrases as they journey through the lives of different characters.[56] For example, she traces the phrase 'poppy-cock' through the novel:

> Eleanor first hears it used at Renny's party in '1917' by Nicholas, who probably passes it on to his friend Sally. She includes it in a letter to North, who adopts the word and recalls it twice at the final party. The first time he is consciously trying to add it to his vocabulary; the second use is unconscious—it has dictated his thoughts.[57]

Where her argument is restricted, I think, is in its desire to remain within a model that needs coherent language (the symbolic) rather than seeing the power of non-verbal experience and communication: Middleton's need to explain that Nicholas 'probably' passed on the word to Sally, for example. In reading the novel as one in which the boundary between diegetic and extradiegetic novels is relaxed – where character and narrative voice are enmeshed – there is no need to suppose events that happen 'off-page'. Things (objects, thoughts, images, nervous tics) can move through the characters via narrative voice. Middleton's article came out before the influence of poststructuralist feminist readings of Woolf such as Pinkney's, and the difference between my reading of this specific example, of 'poppy-cock,' and Middleton's can be seen as a result of combining poststructuralism and historicism to understand the text as it functions beyond the page.

A further example of the semiotic function within the narrative voice is in the movement of the phrase 'take two coos, Taffy,' a nonsense-sound imitating the call of a wood-pigeon, throughout the novel. The phrase is not Woolf's invention. In 1866 Edward B. Tylor wrote

[56] Middleton, 163.
[57] Middleton, 164.

about the origin of the slight variation, 'take two cows', in *Fortnightly Review.*[58] The frequency with which it appears is noteworthy. Middleton says that:

> The pigeons' cooing echoes like a refrain throughout the book and is heard in turn by Kitty in '1880,' by Eleanor in '1891' and '1910,' and by the whole family assembled in 'Present Day.' An empty repetition, however, it does not serve to join multiple minds by connecting thought processes as do the plane and clock chimes in *Mrs Dalloway.*[59]

In fact, this does not emphasise quite how often the phrase is repeated. As Middleton says, Kitty does hear it first, in '1880', and then Eleanor in '1891.'[60] But in '1910' Eleanor hears it at a meeting, and then later in the same section when Sara recalls the meeting to her sister, Maggie, it is the sound that she passes on: '"There were pigeons cooing," Sara went on. "Take two coos, Taffy. Take two coos . . Tak . . . And then a wing darkened the air."'[61] Right at the very end of the novel, when the Pargiters are all gathering themselves to leave Delia's and head out into the dawn light to their respective lives, the pigeons return.

> 'Listen . . .' said Eleanor, raising her hand. Upstairs they were playing 'God save the King' on the gramophone; but it was the pigeons she meant; they were crooning.

---

[58] Edward B. Tylor, 'On the Origin of Language', in *The Origin of Language,* Ed. Roy Harris (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 81–99.
[59] Middleton, '*The Years*: "A Deliberate Failure"', 164.
[60] Woolf, *The Years*, 54; Woolf, 84.
[61] Woolf, *The Years*, 138.

> ‘That's wood pigeons, isn't it?’ said Kitty. She put her head on one side to listen. Take two coos, Taffy, take two coos . . . tak . . . they were crooning. [62]

Kitty knew what Eleanor meant; that she referred to the pigeons and not the gramophone. Like the narrative itself, this nonsensical sound has found a way to travel through the characters and, I argue in contrast to Middleton, brings characters together by offering a semiotic alternative to the symbolic language with which they struggle to communicate. This reading is strengthened by the sharp contrast with the song playing on the gramophone – the national anthem – with its deeply symbolic implications of monarchy, patriotism, and national history.

These instances of the transmission of thoughts, sounds and images in ways that cannot always be explained in the story are evidence of an innovative relationship between narrative and character. Where a heterodiegetic third person narrative voice might usually describe or reflect character, or in free indirect discourse might act as a mouthpiece for a character, *The Years'* narrative voice has more in common with a first person homodiegetic narrator in that it has its own part to play on the diegetic, as well as extradiegetic level, in moving knowledge between characters. It is an actor in the novel.

One of the main characters of *The Years* is Eleanor Pargiter, who is an aunt and has a strong materteral identity. In her character we can see qualities that compound aunthood, the novel’s narrative form and semiotic expression – making her crucial for this thesis. For example, a key facet of Eleanor’s character is that she seems to be able to access more than one strand of the narrative at the same time, like a heterodiegetic narrator. In particular, she seems aware of two narratives existing at the same time – a characteristic strongly linked to

[62] Woolf, 317.

aunthood as expressed throughout this thesis. Early in the novel, in '1880', this is suggested by her struggle to keep her thoughts in one moment, rather than two: 'When she was with the others she must stop herself from thinking of two things at the same time.'[63] As the novel moves on, though, this develops into a consciousness of the two worlds and then into an ability to exist in both. In '1891' Eleanor hears that Parnell has died and is struck by a desire to be with her sister Delia, who had 'cared passionately' for the politician.[64] As Eleanor travels across London she becomes 'conscious of the two worlds; one flowing in wide sweeps overhead, the other tip-tapping circumscribed upon the pavement'.[65] It is not clear what the characteristics of 'the two worlds' are, or in which Eleanor sees herself as existing. By the '1910' section Eleanor 'seemed able to divide herself into two', and Woolf describes this not as Eleanor being able to exist in two places (remaining a single character) but as a division into two separate people.

> One person followed the argument – and he's putting it very well, she thought; while the other, for it was a fine afternoon, and she had wanted to go to Kew, walked down a green glade and stopped in front of a flowering tree. Is it a magnolia? she asked herself, or are they already over? Magnolias, she remembered, have no leaves, but masses of white blossom . . . She drew a line on the blotting-paper.[66]

Within the diegesis, Eleanor is making notes at a meeting. In the intradiegesis, she is strolling in Kew Gardens. This is in contrast to a similar division in Katharine in *Night and Day,*

[63] Woolf, 23.
[64] Woolf, 82.
[65] Woolf, 83.
[66] Woolf, 129.

where we are reminded that she only 'felt herself possessed of two bodies, one walking by the river with Denham, the other concentrated to a silver globe.'[67]

The ease with which Eleanor can internally focalise a narrative in two places at once is particular to her character in the novel. In '1910' Edward, at the opera with Kitty, is greatly moved by the performance. The narrative at this point is internally focalised via Kitty (whereas Eleanor is commenting on her *own* consciousness of two worlds), but we read that Edward 'had forgotten her. He had forgotten himself.'[68] When he does 'at last' turn around, 'There was an odd look on his face as if he were in two worlds at once and had to draw them together.'[69] The act of drawing the worlds together is not one Eleanor performs – she can exist in both. As I argue with regards to the narrative voice in *Jacob's Room,* Eleanor is not confined to one diegetic level, but is able to move between them. Just as the power of the aunt in this period of history is in her ability to move between family and other, fully identifying with either, Eleanor moves between diegetic levels, and between family roles (sister, cousin, aunt), with ease. In doing so she seems to have an overview of the novel more similar to that of the reader. She grasps at questions of narration and structure, asking:

> Is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen? . . . a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure: that there was a pattern. But who makes it? Who thinks it? Her mind slipped. She could not finish her thought.[70]

[67] Woolf, *Night and Day*, 254.
[68] Woolf, *The Years*, 136.
[69] Woolf, 136.
[70] Woolf, 270–71.

Throughout the novel Eleanor seems to move closer to a consciousness of herself as a character, oscillating between diegetic levels. 'If I can't describe my own life,' she thinks, 'how can I describe him?'[71] She seems aware of herself as a product of the perspective of the people around her – in the final section she thinks that 'my life's been other people's lives'.[72] On one of the final pages of the novel, Eleanor returns to the idea of multiple narratives existing at the same time and seems to sum up the novel's concerns of perspective, multiplicity and epistemology, but also of narrative and what it is that a narrator does:

> There must be another life, she thought, sinking back into her chair, exasperated. Not in dreams; but here and now, in this room, with living people. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice with her hair blown back; she was about to grasp something that just evaded her. There must be another life, here and now, she repeated. This is too short, too broken. We know nothing, even about ourselves. We're only just beginning, she thought, to understand, here and there. She hollowed her hands in her lap, just as Rose had hollowed hers round her ears. She held her hands hollowed; she felt that she wanted to enclose the present moment; to make it stay; to fill it fuller and fuller, with the past, the present and the future, until it shone, whole, bright, deep with understanding.[73]

To 'enclose the present moment' is what a narrative does – it chooses a focus, a perspective, and presents it as if it were an absolute. Eleanor, the novel's most prominent aunt (whose

[71] Woolf, 270.
[72] Woolf, 269.
[73] Woolf, 313.

aunthood is more prominent than her sisterhood, daughterhood, cousinship), is given this heightened understanding of the challenges that faced Woolf herself as a writer.

If, as argued above, aunthood is a natural subversion of the symbolic, nested quietly within the structure of patriarchal lineage, bringing the role to the fore in the crescendo of *The Years* is a way of emphasising its powerful spearhead of resistance to the very notion of fixedness. Woolf does this by devoting much of the final section, 'Present Day', to internally focalised narration via Eleanor, whose aunthood is more prominent than her sisterhood or cousinhood here – she travels to the party with her niece Peggy and sits with her nephew North. Eleanor, I argue, often demonstrates and more frequently articulates Woolf's approach to narrative perspective.

The influence of aunthood is felt keenly throughout the text in the unsettling of previously fixed kinship roles – an unmistakeable disruption of patriarchal social structure. One way that Woolf achieves this disruption is by having the characters themselves express confusion at their relationship to each other. Eleanor's relationship with her father is described (in a moment of externally focused narration) as 'almost like brother and sister' (which would make her an aunt to her siblings).[74] This description seems to get inside Eleanor's head – just seventeen pages later, she goes to a shop to buy a present for her father to give his niece and tells the shopkeeper that she needs something 'For my niece — I mean cousin. Sir Digby's little girl.'[75] There are also more real questions about relationships resulting from rumours about an affair between Eleanor's father, Able Pargiter, and his sister-in-law, Eugenie. If Abel had fathered Sara or Maggie, they would be siblings to the Pargiters and not cousins. This is addressed explicitly only once, by Martin and Maggie, who are speaking quietly so as

[74] Woolf, 67.
[75] Woolf, 74.

not to wake Maggie's baby and Sara. They discuss love, and affairs. Maggie tells Martin about a woman her father had an affair with:

> 'Was he in love,' Martin asked her, 'with your mother?'
>
> She was looking at the gulls, cutting patterns on the blue distance with their wings. His question seemed to sink through what she was seeing; and then suddenly it reached her.
>
> 'Are we brother and sister?' she asked; and laughed out loud. The child opened its eyes, and uncurled its fingers.[76]

Once the baby is awake, their privacy is gone, and there is no mention of this again in the novel. The impact of this secret is not only to remind us of the many secrets that people in the novel keep from each other (partly just because they have no tools with which to communicate them) but also to destabilise what we think we do know about the Pargiter family and to call into question all of the familiar lineal family structure.

Another way that the power in the family is decentralised is by the establishing of kinship roles as being non-exclusive. This happens both explicitly (Eleanor introduces North as 'My nephew. My brother Morris's son') and implicitly in the way that the novel is focalised.[77] There is no one clear protagonist, so where we would usually read someone's primary kinship role in relation to one main character, the Ego of kinship studies, in *The Years* the characters are multi-relational. Jane Marcus reads this as a kind of political decision. In her

[76] Woolf, 180.
[77] Woolf, 208.

article reading *The Years* as Greek drama, she likens the democratisation of narrative to a championing of 'a people':

> Joyce seemed to Woolf childish and 'egotistical'. Her objection to Joyce was, in the first place, to his giving prominence to individual heroes, whose monologues or dialogues she considered of less interest than the voice and spirit of a people, especially as uttered in 'the chorus' of working men and women of all classes, once the serious 'song' of drama.[78]

Marcus sees this 'spirit of a people' represented in the narrative structure of *The Years.* While I would argue that it is quite a leap from the sharing out of narrative control among the Pargiters (with perhaps one extension to a lower class – their servant Crosby) to thinking of the text as a challenge to the social class order, there is no doubt that in structuring the novel as she does, without an obvious 'individual hero', Woolf is absolutely posing a challenge to *some* kind of patriarchal order. Likewise Lee reads the novel as one of resistance, saying that:

> There is no hero, no tragic or climactic plot, no resolution. Instead there is open-endedness, uncertainty, collective voices. The novel, by the very method of indirection and suggestion which cost her so much to achieve, resists the agents of tyranny.[79]

[78] Jane Marcus, '*The Years* as Greek Drama, Domestic Novel, and Gotterdammerung', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 1977, 37.
[79] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 677.

An impact of there being no hero is that kinship roles are not fixed – they are dependent on perspective at that moment in the narrative. While Helena Parry is clearly 'the aunt', because she is aunt to Clarissa Dalloway who is the protagonist, Eleanor Pargiter moves between roles. While in '1880' we might think of Eleanor as 'the sister' or 'the daughter' if not the protagonist, in '1891' the internal focalisation is more often via Kitty – which would make Eleanor 'the cousin'. 'Present Day' gives Eleanor a large portion of the narrative voice, but she shares this with her niece and nephew and their analyses of her – so that she becomes either the protagonist again, or 'the aunt'. This is not just true of Eleanor, but of all of the aunts in the novel. Whereas in the earlier novels we can identify the aunt characters as the women who are aunts to the main characters (Helen, whose aunthood is much more prominent than her motherhood because her children are absent and because Rachel is the main character; Lady Otway as Katharine's aunt; Helena Parry as Clarissa's), in this novel many women *are* aunts but they are also depicted in relation to their other family roles. Mrs Rose Pargiter, the matriarch, is also considered as a sister-in-law by Lady Lasswade and aunt to Eugenie's children; Eleanor is celebrated as a sister before she comes into her aunthood; Sara is aunt to Maggie and Rene's children but is sister to Maggie, cousin to Eleanor and so on; Eugenie is sister-in-law to Abel (and possibly lover), mother to Maggie and Sara, as well as aunt to Eleanor. Milly, Delia, Rose and Eleanor are sisters and aunts and cousins and in the case of Delia, a mother. This fluidity of roles is not only facilitated by a sprawling family cast of characters, but also by the novel's duration. Because so many characters remain present throughout the novel and we follow them over sixty years, the roles do not seem fixed in the same way novels with clearer protagonists, or novels set over a shorter period of time, do. It is also another demonstration of what Jeri Johnson describes as the novel's 'most frequently recurrent trope – that of an alternating rhythm of light and dark, illumination and obscurity'.[80]

[80] Jeri Johnson, 'Introduction', in *The Years* (Chippenham: Penguin Classics, 1998), xxvii.

Woolf illuminates particular facets of the characters in different moments, alternatingly leaving other parts in darkness.[81] Johnson argues, in her introduction to the 1998 Penguin edition, that the novel is:

> [f]ormally marked by its narrative interruption, alternation, discontinuity and ellipses, its movement from internal to external narrative perspective, its allusive evasions, its repetition with variation of tropes and events, its displacement of familiar objects into new and disorientating contexts.[82]

While Johnson does not mention aunts, this reading of the novel provides context for understanding the disruption to a tradition of patriarchal lineal family structures. From Johnson's summary we can understand *The Years* as a novel that refuses to stay still, that turns from one thing to another just when we think we have a hold of it (as Johnson argues is the experience of the novel's characters, 'catch[ing] a coherent image only to find it inexpressible, or to recognize a repeated motif in what appears to be a complex but integrated design only to have it slip away').[83] Compared to earlier interpretations of the novel's style of repetition and interruption (Jean Guiguet, for example, wrote of it in 1963 as a 'novel manqué, whose failure is perhaps the most significant symptom we have of the disequilibrium that made Virginia Woolf's originality and greatness—and which led to her undoing'), Johnson offers a much more positive reading of the productive qualities of this

[81] Johnson.
[82] Johnson, xxvii.
[83] Jeri Johnson, 'Introduction', in *The Years* (Chippenham: Penguin Classics, 1998), xxvii.

disruption.[84] This supports a reading that pays close attention to where Woolf does disrupt expectations (for example, with kinship roles).

Another way that Woolf achieves this disruption of fixed kinship roles is the repeated intrusion of Sophocles' play *Antigone* into not only the minds of the characters, but into the narrative itself. As pointed out by Clare Hanson in her article on *Antigone* as an intertext of *The Years*, the play appears multiple times in the novel:

> Sara Pargiter reads the *Antigone* in a scene which was, according to Woolf, to be central in the novel—she described it in her diary as 'the scene I've had in my mind ever so many months.... It's the turn of the book.' *Antigone* is also read by Edward in the '1880' section of the novel, and discussed by Edward, North and Eleanor at the party in 'Present Day'.'[85]

Hanson argues that 'the significance of this surely lies in the fact that Sophocles' play too is a meditation on "the law": *Antigone* dramatises an apparent conflict between individual and state.'[86] However I would argue that the significance of the play for the novel is in the way that the cast of characters are organised within their respective families – thus specifically about the law of incest and its breaking. *Antigone* is a text in which *all* family roles are unfixed, making it a kind of prototype (if a very extreme one) for *The Years*. The Oedipal family have multiple biological relationships to each other, and *Antigone* is a play whose central concern is how one prioritises the duty of multiple relationships. Antigone is the

[84] Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf: And Her Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 309.
[85] Clare Hanson, 'Virginia Woolf in the House of Love: Compulsory Heterosexuality in *The Years*', *Journal of Gender Studies* 6, no. 1 (1997): 58.
[86] Hanson, 58.

daughter of Oedipus and sister of Polynices, but she is also sister of Oedipus and thus aunt to her brother. She is niece *and* great-niece to Creon, daughter and granddaughter to Jocasta. Her betrothed Haemon is her cousin, second cousin and her fiancé. The patriarchal family structure is totally undermined, in this case by incest. As argued above in my introduction, the incest taboo is essential for the continuation of patriarchal, lineal family structure. Hanson argues that:

> In *The Years* incestuous relationships are hinted at between Abel and Eugenie, and between their children Martin and Maggie. There is also a very strong tie between the sisters Sara and Maggie (whose relationship perhaps bears similarities to that between Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell), and Mitchell Leaska argues that there is an incestuous attachment between Abel Pargiter and his daughter Eleanor.[87]

Hanson goes on to argue that instances of incest are to be expected in Woolf's work, given her own experience of 'a network of incestuous relationships in childhood.'[88] While Hanson's reading is somewhat confusing – Abel and Eugenie are in-laws not siblings and after 1921 would have been able to marry should Digby have died as well – and her psychobiographical explanation differs from my reading of the collaterally organised family model, her conclusion that 'they are not presented as transgressive or subversive, but as part of the everyday fabric of life' is one that I agree with.[89] As I go on to argue below, it is not just by suggesting the incestuous potential of relationships that Woolf destabilises patriarchal lineage. In creating parallels between the Pargiters and the families in *Antigone* Woolf

[87] Hanson, 58.
[88] Hanson, 58.
[89] Hanson, 58.

satirises any would-be attempt to delineate and fix family positions – thus privileging aunthood and its naturally fluid relational role.

The scene of Sara reading the play that Hanson references is absolutely key for understanding the relationship between what is happening with family roles in the novel and what is happening with the form. Sara reads it in bed one night, watching a garden party from her window. It is here, in the most obvious juxtaposition of the texts contained in the novel (though one of multiple mentions) that the boundary between diegetic and intradiegetic level dissolves:

> Quick, quick, quick with repeated jerks they struck the mouldy flesh. Yes. She glanced at the tree outside in the garden. The unburied body of the murdered man lay on the sand. Then in a yellow cloud came whirling--who? […] The man's name was Creon. He buried her. It was a moonlight night. The blades of the cactuses were sharp silver. The man in the loincloth gave three sharp taps with his mallet on the brick. She was buried alive. The tomb was a brick mound. There was just room for her to lie straight out. Straight out in a brick tomb, she said. And that's the end, she yawned, shutting the book.[90]

Immediately after reading, Sara herself seems to become Antigone, mimicking the burial scene:

[90] Woolf, *The Years*, 99.

> She laid herself out, under the cold smooth sheets, and pulled the pillow over her ears. The one sheet and the one blanket fitted softly round her. At the bottom of the bed was a long stretch of cool fresh mattress. The sound of the dance music became dulled. Her body dropped suddenly; then reached ground. A dark wing brushed her mind, leaving a pause; a blank space. Everything--the music, the voices--became stretched and generalised. The book fell on the floor. She was asleep.

In the first quotation above, the action in Sara's mind as she reads is presented on the same level as the action Sara takes in the diegesis: 'She glanced at the tree outside in the garden. The unburied body of the murdered man lay on the sand.' In the second paragraph, some of the world of the intradiegetic story (*Antigone*) seems to have crossed over into the diegesis – in particular the 'dark wing' that brushes Sara's mind, as if the vultures tearing at Polynices' body are in Sara's bedroom in Browne Street in 1907.

Gerhard Joseph, in his article 'The *Antigone* as Cultural Touchstone', references the 'brilliant hallucinatory fantasy released by the play' but contends that 'the climactic reference' occurs in the Present Day section.[91] In this section, Eleanor and Edward are with their nephew North. Eleanor says she has been reading one of the classics, 'the one about the girl who…' and Edward, correctly guessing she refers to *Antigone,* quotes a line in Greek.[92] The line is one spoken by Antigone to Creon; lines 590-591. She says 'I was born to join in love, not hate—that is my nature.'[93] When North asks Edward to translate, he refuses. Joseph reads this as 'conceivably because he recognizes the line's indictment of his own loveless

---

91 Gerhard Joseph, '*The Antigone* as Cultural Touchstone: Matthew Arnold, Hegel, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Margaret Drabble', *PMLA* 96, no. 1 (1981): 28.
92 Woolf, *The Years*, 302.
93 Sophocles, 'Antigone', in *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus* (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), 86.

existence', but in the context of this thesis more is happening here.[94] In hearing a language they do not speak, North and Eleanor are experiencing sound with meaning outside of language – an example of the semiotic. In refusing to translate, Edward preserves for them a semiotic experience, denying the moment's assumption into the symbolic order of conversation. This symbolic experience triggers in North an awareness of a universal feeling of fear. The narrative voice becomes internally focalised via North here. He articulates the distance between characters as if it were irreconcilable, projecting outwards from his own inability to understand his uncle and aunt:

> He can't say what he wants to say; he's afraid. They're all afraid; afraid of being laughed at; afraid of giving themselves away. He's afraid too, he thought, looking at the young man with a fine forehead and a weak chin who was gesticulating too emphatically. We're all afraid of each other, he thought; afraid of what? Of criticism; of laughter; of people who think differently […] That's what separates us; fear, he thought.[95]

This moment expresses one of the novel's bleakest philosophies. What Woolf demonstrates in a fairly unsubtle manner here is the insufficiency of language as a communication tool. Edward's experience of life is literally untranslatable to a younger generation. And because North cannot understand what Edward is saying, he fills in the gaps himself with a philosophy of permanent separation that he then applies to the world.

---

[94] Joseph, 'The Antigone as Cultural Touchstone: Matthew Arnold, Hegel, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Margaret Drabble', 28.
[95] Woolf, *The Years*, 303.

This challenge to the patriarchal institution of language, the symbolic, runs throughout the novel. Maggie and Rose discuss it:

> 'All talk would be nonsense, I suppose, if it were written down,' she said, stirring her coffee.
>
> Maggie stopped the machine for a moment and smiled. 'And even if it isn't,' she said.
>
> 'But it's the only way we have of knowing each other,' Rose protested.[96]

Many characters experience things that they cannot (or do not) express, and they are increasingly conscious of this fact – their frustrations are more and more frequent in the novel until they crescendo in 'Present Day.' Adult Rose remarks that children who have awful lives 'can't tell anybody'.[97] When she is with her cousins, 'she wanted to talk about her past; to tell them something about herself that she had never told anybody — something hidden' but she is unable to. 'What is the use', Rose thinks, 'of trying to tell people about one's past? What is one's past?'[98] This notion that we cannot understand ourselves – our own experiences – let alone communicate that to another, is one that becomes persistent in the final section of the novel: 'If I can't describe my own life, Eleanor thought, how can I describe him?'[99] There are sentences that could be from one of Woolf's essays on character, and the inability of the language of realist form to express it:

[96] Woolf, 126.
[97] Woolf, 116.
[98] Woolf, 123.
[99] Woolf, 270.

> These little snapshot pictures of people left much to be desired, these little surface pictures that one made, like a fly crawling over a face, and feeling, here's the nose, here's the brow.[100]

In particular in the latter half of the novel the narrative is self-conscious, so that even when the narrative voice is internally focalised through a character the act of creating (and the bluntness of the tools to hand) are acknowledged, in an almost metafictional way. When Peggy is trying to describe her aunt, only to herself, she says 'She's not like that — not like that at all', and she makes 'a little dash with her hand as if to rub out an outline that she had drawn wrongly'.[101]

In 'Present Day' Eleanor asks, 'why do we hide all the things that matter?'[102] The novel is full of secrets that the reader never really finds out, and that usually involve sex in some way. For instance, the frequent references to Charles Parnell's adultery ('they seem to be hushing things up'); Rose's traumatic childhood experience of indecent exposure; Eugenie and Abel's relationship ('didn't she have an affair with somebody?'); Eugenie's hints of an affair ('I will tell you the true story another time'); Abel's affair with Mira.[103] The secrecy seems to seep into the house at Abercorn Terrace, which Martin acknowledges (implying that really the secrets were not so well hidden): 'No wonder the house would not let. It had one bathroom, and a basement; and there all those different people had lived, boxed up together, telling lies.'[104] I suggest a connection between secrecy – that which whether deliberately or not remains both crucial and uncommunicated – and the ability of the kinship term aunt to (in

---

100 Woolf, 232.
101 Woolf, 245.
102 Woolf, 301.
103 Woolf, 88; Woolf, 21; Woolf, 105; Woolf, 112; Woolf, 6.
104 Woolf, *The Years*, 162.

English) cover a multitude of relationships. As discussed in Chapter One with relation to anthropology and kinship studies, all other kinship terms reveal: only 'aunt' and 'uncle' conceal. It is no coincidence that Eleanor, who as I argue is an embodiment of the characteristics of the narrative form used, seems to have control of the family narrative by the end of the novel, and in the moment where she is most identified as an aunt (at the party in 'Present Day').

Between the Acts, a novel whose very title describes a state of being neither one thing nor another, is a novel about a group of people coming together at fictional house Pointz Hall to watch an annual village pageant about the history of England. As the title also suggests, it is a novel about a play in which the boundaries between the reader, narrator, audience (characters in the novel) and actors (characters in the novel playing other characters in an intradiegetic story) are porous – suggesting that *Between the Acts* may answer Woolf's 1934 call for a novel that 'com[es] to the top' by constantly setting up and then breaking the fantasy of its own diegetic and intradiegetic creations.[105]

Between the Acts

All of the plot in the diegesis of *Between the Acts* takes place on a summer's day in 1939. Among the cast of characters is Lucy Swithin, sister to the hall's owner Bart Oliver, and aunt to his nephew Giles. Lucy, the pageant and the novel seem to express the same message, which I explore in this section with relation to the narrative technique, that 'we are members of one another. Each is part of the whole'.[106] I argue that the novel's narrative technique seeks not just to articulate a variety of individual subjective consciousnesses (as in Woolf's earlier

[105] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*, 4:207.
[106] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 172.

novels) but to use the narrative voice to join these together, in a continuation of the semiotic unfixedness present in the narrative of *The Years.* As in *The Years* the aunt is brought back to the fore and is a woman who refuses stereotypes and cannot be pinned down, mirroring the narrative voice. In this final section of this chapter I demonstrate a further commitment on Woolf's part to a materteral narrative form, as well as an elevation of the aunt (and all that this thesis has demonstrated about her) in Lucy Swithin's clear alignment with not just the individual history of the family, but the history of all humanity. Its interest in history has previously tended to make it of less interest to poststructuralist critics. On this, Laura Marcus has argued:

> Whereas a feminist criticism centred on feminine writing, identity and sexuality turned primarily to the poetics of *A Room of One's Own*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, those critics concerned with a more overtly feminist Woolf – one whose feminism is an aspect of political and social engagement with the events of her time – have tended to focus on *The Years*, *Three Guineas* and, though to a lesser extent, *Night and Day* and *Between the Acts*.[107]

But the novel is a fecund site for exploring the semiotic, and is especially useful in understanding the way that aunthood navigates the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic. The argument of this thesis is that a specific historical and cultural moment has led Woolf to use the aunt in this way, and so in particular analysis of *Between the Acts* is a site for convergence of what Laura Marcus has described as oppositional approaches.

[107] Marcus, 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', 162.

A far shorter novel than *The Years*, *Between the Acts* caused Woolf far less turmoil in the writing process if her diaries are anything to go by. She writes about it first in March 1938, describing it as 'Summers night: a complete whole', and finishes in November 1940, describing the finished novel in her diary as 'an interesting experiment in a new method'; 'more quintessential than the others'; and 'certainly a fresher [sic] than that misery The Years'.[108] Often she talks of it as a relief from other writing tasks, for example her biography of Roger Fry, which she was writing at the same time – 'I rush to it for relief after a long pressure of Fry facts' – and when it was finished she said that she had 'enjoyed writing almost every page'.[109] The period in which she was writing was an unsettled one, though. Woolf's nephew Julian Bell died in the Spanish Civil War in July 1937, and Woolf played a great part in supporting her sister in her grief, as well as hosting the other Bell children, Quentin and Angelica, at Monk's House.[110] She was very aware of the build-up of war and then of the effect of air raids close to her home on the coast in the South-East of England. In some ways, then, writing *Between the Acts* was a form of escapism for her. Galia Benziman argues that while the novel is 'harassed by threats of extinction that are fundamentally national, cultural, political, and social', quite natural given the period of writing, 'the author's anxiety regarding these aspects of existence repeatedly drive her back—along with her characters—in the direction of the personal and the subjective.'[111] I agree, and while the experiences expressed in free indirect discourse are personally subjective they are all portrayed as equally valid – parts of one common whole which is to experience the novel. It portrays an England where we have more in common than we do that separates us, and its narrative voice reflects this in a chora-like space inclusive of both human and animal life.

---

[108] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 5: 1936-41*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell, vol. 5 (London: Penguin, 1985), 133; Woolf, 5:340.
[109] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 5: 1936-41*, 5:193; Woolf, 5:340.
[110] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 5: 1936-41*, 5:106.
[111] Benziman, '"Dispersed Are We": Mirroring and National Identity in Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts', 54.

This challenge to a patriarchal symbolic order in which, for example, one name would correspond to one named thing or object, and individual characters would be discrete from one another and clearly contained, is a development of the materteral: being, as the aunt is, many things under one name.

In the early days of its conception, when the novel was still called *Poyntz Hall,* Woolf described her vision for it:

> 'I' rejected: 'We' substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? 'We'. . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow. [sic] Unified whole—the present state of my mind? And English country; & a scenic old house—& a terrace where nursemaids walk? & people passing—& a perpetual variety & change from intensity to prose. & facts—& notes.[112]

The transformation from 'I' to 'we' is achieved by the novel having a similar narrative style to *The Years*. Both have narratives that are largely internally focalised, use free indirect discourse and move between third person heterodiegetic narration and a narrative voice that has a sense of character. But Woolf's 'whole' narrative voice of *Between the Acts* includes the voices of animals too – going beyond *The Years'* 'take two coos'.[113] In her ecocritical reading of *Between the Acts*, Louise Westling describes the narrative voice as 'embrac[ing] dramatic cacophony'; and in this novel characters not only share the narrative voice with each other, they share it with the natural world as well.[114] Westling's article 'Virginia Woolf and

[112] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 5: 1936-41*, 5:135.
[113] Woolf, *The Years*, 54.
[114] Westling, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', 868.

the Flesh of the World' provides a useful way of thinking about the dissolution of boundaries between characters (and by extension between character and narrative voice) by reading Woolf through the lens of metaphysics and philosophy, in particular the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and positioning Woolf's work in opposition to a Cartesian separation of subject and object.[115] Westling explores the idea that humanity is part of the flesh of the universe, not experiencing things as separate to ourselves but by sensing them and thus entering into a cooperative relationship. She focuses on *Between the Acts,* full as it is of non-human forces vital for generating the novel's meaning. The character of Lucy Swithin, along with that of Miss La Trobe, she argues, 'understand[s] and communicate[s] what seems the central vision of the book'.[116] As in *The Years,* Woolf gives a character who is an aunt (be it among other things) the task of articulating (or embodying) the philosophy of the narrative voice, and the novel as a whole. Westling argues that:

> Because Lucy does not herself presume to summarize her philosophy, all we have to guide us is the generosity of her impulses, her attitude of reverence for the world, and her fascination with prehistory. Lucy's religious faith is mocked by other characters and has usually been dismissed by the novel's critics as well. Nevertheless, it is she more than any other character who shares the narrator's attention to the nonhuman world, and she who is full of the kind of wonder at natural energies and creatures that animates the whole novel.[117]

[115] Westling, 856.
[116] Westling, 870.
[117] Westling, 868.

Benziman too reads Lucy as a representation of a philosophy rather than as a character in the way that we might understand it traditionally:

> Lucy Swithin—representing an archetypally feminine prehistory—does not seem to have a self that is intrinsically hers, a personal identity, a biography, or any private recollections. Her entire existence evolves around the collective and the universal. For her, everyone, herself included, is merely a particle in a huge, inseparable self.[118]

This description bears striking similarity to how we might describe an entirely heterodiegetic third person, omniscient (or zero-focalised) narrator. What Benziman calls a 'feminine prehistory' implies that history is necessarily linked to the semiotic – if, as my reading of *Between the Acts* here suggests, we understand the semiotic as a kind of phylogenetic relationship to the world, rather than simply the ontogenetic semiotic of poststructuralism. David McWhirter's reading of Lucy is also suggestive of this relationship to both history and a semiotic interpretation of communication:

> Significantly, the one character who is untouched by the novel's pervasive malaise – Bart's sister, Lucy Swithin – is also distinguished by her sweeping rejection of the idea that the self is in any sense historically constituted. With her religious conviction that 'we have other lives' and that 'we live in others,' Lucy, as William Dodge recognizes, doesn't 'believe in history.' Lucy's belief in the power of the individual consciousness to unify, order and transcend the contingencies of self and history

[118] Benziman, '"Dispersed Are We": Mirroring and National Identity in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*', 56.

> through epiphanic moments of 'one-making' signals her descent from characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay.[119]

It is interesting that McWhirter describes Lucy's 'descent' from Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay, given the collateral families featured in Woolf's last two novels. What is missed is that it is the unfixed nature of Lucy's character, a product of her aunthood, that allows Woolf to use a character in this way. Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay are fixed in their respective places as wives – even their names belong to their husbands. Lucy relates to the world via multiple names (a feature of the novel which I discuss below), reflecting the plurality of narrative voice of the novel.

Kermode said that 'not to see that the book is deliberately placed on the threshold between peace and war, between a known past and an unknown but probably appalling future, is to miss what used to be the most obvious thing about it.'[120] This compliments the understanding this thesis has of the aunt as channel between outside and inside, past and present, them and us – but they suggest this might be achieved not by the aunt's existence *between* these things, but in her encompassment of all of them: her resistance to a fixed category is not because she is neither, but because she is both (or as Beziman says, she is universal). Neither Lucy nor the novel exist in a discrete, fixed place between past and present or war and peace, but on a plane that can encompass all of these things: Lucy's brother even describes her as if she were a body inhabited by a spirit, wondering why 'in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being?'[121] But then he describes her as if a spirit without a body: 'Was it that she had no body? Up in the clouds, like an air ball, her mind touched ground now

---

[119] David McWhirter, 'The Novel, the Play, and the Book: *Between the Acts* and the Tragicomedy of History', *ELH* 60, no. 3 (1993): 794.
[120] Kermode, 'Introduction', xv.
[121] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 23.

and then with a shock of surprise.'[122] The being described goes beyond a character in the diegesis and implies something other than human: something godly (or narratorial).

Westling argues that the human and non-human characters are equally part of the novel's Lebenswelt, that 'Woolf's speakers are part of an interwoven, participatory community that lives not just *on* the land but *within* it', and it is possible to think of the implications that this argument has for the composition of narrative voice.[123] Her description of the finale of the novel's pageant and its cacophony of human and animal voices is an excellent description of the novel itself: 'a giddy tangle of forms and beings within each kind dances its own rhythm, irrepressibly intertwined.'[124] The narrative voice does not describe the characters from a distance, like a realist narrator might: instead narrative voice and action and character are 'irrepressibly intertwined'. One example that is particularly striking is a moment experienced by Isa Oliver after the pageant. She has spent the day unhappy, worrying that her husband Giles is having an affair. The pageant has finished and everyone heads back to the house:

> Preening and peering, between backs, over shoulders, she had sought the man in grey. He had given her a cup of tea at a tennis party; handed her once, a racquet. That was all. But, she was crying, had we met before the salmon leapt like a bar of silver . . . had we met, she was crying. And when her little boy came battling through the bodies in the Barn 'Had he been his son,' she had muttered . . . In passing she stripped the bitter leaf that grew, as it happened outside the nursery window. Old Man's Beard. Shrivelling the shreds in lieu of words, for no words grow there, nor roses either, she

[122] Woolf, 105.
[123] Westling, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', 866.
[124] Westling, 867.

> swept past her conspirator, her semblable, the seeker after vanished faces 'like Venus' he thought, making a rough translation, 'to her prey . . .' and followed after.[125]

Here we see the narrative voice given to Isa, with knowledge only she could know (the cup of tea, the tennis party) and then alternate in the same sentence between her thoughts and an image of her from the outside – and even more strikingly her thoughts not only out loud as usual in free indirect discourse but as if they were being spoken to another character in the novel ('had we met, she was crying').[126] The past and the present come together, what might have been and what was existing together too in the same moment. In the phrase 'handed her once, a racquet' even the clauses seem to have been reversed – as if the order of actions is disrupted even on the level of sentences. By the 'he thought', it is not clear who 'he' is. But Isa has 'no words' for her feelings, and so the narrative voice seems to have stepped in to express them in other, formal, ways.

To an even further extent than *The Years*, the narrative voice of *Between the Acts* has a sense of character, leaning back towards the hetero/homodiegetic combined narrative voice in *Jacob's Room.* It is even harder in *Between the Acts* to know if what is being said is free indirect discourse or if it is the voice of the narrator – and if it is free indirect discourse, it is not always possible to identify to whom it belongs. In other words, the question of who is speaking is even harder to answer than in any of Woolf's novels so far. Like Eleanor, who realises that 'my life's been other people's lives', the narrative voice is so made up of other voices that it is very difficult to tell if there is a voice there that is separate to character at the centre of it all, existing in the extradiagesis.[127] For example, on the first page of the novel: 'A

[125] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 187.
[126] Woolf, 187.
[127] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 23.

bird chuckled outside. “A nightingale?” asked Mrs Haines. No, nightingales didn’t come so far north. It was a daylight bird.’[128] Whose knowledge of birds is this? The conversation moves away after that, it is not returned to. Another example: when the lily pond at the house is described we are told that ‘ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered. Alas, it was a sheep’s, not a lady’s.’[129] But we never find out whose disappointment that ‘alas’ conveys, if not the narrator’s. As in *Jacob’s Room,* the border between character and narrative voice is hard to draw. This is facilitated by Woolf’s understanding of the aunt as being not only between things but (as explored through Westling and Benziman’s readings of Lucy Swithin above) as being able to be multiple things at once.

Between the Acts, like *The Years,* has no individual protagonist but diffuses the narrative power through a cast of characters as they live out one day. It too shows characters playing multiple kinship roles, building on the aunt as a channel into thinking of all relation positions as multi-layered and dependent on perspective. Lucy Swithin, one of the novel’s central characters, is an aunt to another character (Giles) but she is also a mother, and a sister to another central character, Bartholemew. Since characters are not fulfilling one kinship role, but multiple ones, there is an increased sense of character as unfixed – supporting a reading of the novel as one that levels people, understanding them as parts of the whole that is humanity.

One way that *Between the Acts* emphasises the multiplicity of self is in its preoccupation with naming.[130] Having multiple names is of course tied to having multiple kinship roles, and so we see a particular concentration of this phenomenon with Lucy Swithin. In the novel she is called, in this order: Mrs Swithin (when she is first introduced); Lucy (in her own memory

[128] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 3.
[129] Woolf, 40.
[130] For a summary of critical work on naming in Woolf, see Harker, ‘Misperceiving Virginia Woolf’, 13–15.

of her mother talking to her); Cindy or Sindy (when her brother Bart has narrative control – 'it could be spelt either way', we are told); Old Flimsy (her nickname from the local villagers); Mother Swithin (by the servants); and, finally, by her nephew Giles, Aunt Lucy.[131] Even the cat in this novel has two names: 'She would save a slice for Sunny—his drawing-room name Sung-Yen had undergone a kitchen change into Sunny.'[132] By naming all the different portraits we see of the same character, Woolf levels them so that one is not more important than another. Aunt Lucy is just as much Lucy Swithin (though it implies seeing her from the perspective of her nephew, Giles) as is Cindy and Old Flimsy. When Edward Bishop considered the obsessive naming of minor characters in *Jacob's Room* he argued that:

> This naming of everybody mocks the notion of naming as a way of knowing the person, stresses the notion of interpellation, of naming as a way of calling the individual into being as a subject.[…] Rather than augmenting the mimetic, rather than constructing a background for the central character, this random naming has a levelling effect; we do not know who is important.[133]

This is useful too for thinking about the naming of one character multiple times. As understood by James Harker, Bishop is arguing that 'the "leveling" of important and unimportant characters echoes the way that the modern, particularly urban, environment both particularizes and homogenizes'.[134] If we apply Bishop's argument to *Between the Acts,* accepting that naming everybody means that 'we do not know who is important', the

131 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 7; Woolf, 9; Woolf, 19; Woolf, 25; Woolf, 31; Woolf, 43.
132 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 29.
133 Bishop, 'The Subject in *Jacob's Room*', 161–62.
134 Harker, 'Misperceiving Virginia Woolf', 14.

levelling in this novel echoes not the homogenising urban environment but the position of the aunt in contemporary cultural understanding. Just as is exemplified by the Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Act, the aunt fulfils many positions whose importance is entirely dependent on perspective and cannot be rationally fixed from an impartial standpoint, except perhaps on an individual basis as demonstrated in the legal proceedings for said debate in the early nineteenth century.[135] Giles struggles with this, desiring a fixed notion of Lucy as aunt so much that he wonders 'How […] had she ever borne children?'[136] So Lucy's seven names are again a channel to thinking about representing multiple subjectivities as equally true and rejecting a notion of fixed character.

In this novel we see again the important relationship for Woolf between the role of aunthood and narrative control: it is Lucy who is the keeper of history, only unlike in *Night and Day* where the stories the aunt keeps are of the family, the implication in *Between the Acts* is that Lucy is representative of a much broader, national, perhaps even human history. She guides guest William Dodge through the family home, as if through their history, taking him up floor after floor until they stop at the top of the house where her life began:

> 'Here,' she said, 'yes, here,' she tapped the counterpane, 'I was born. In this bed.'
>
> Her voice died away. She sank down on the edge of the bed. She was tired, no doubt, by the stairs, by the heat.
>
> 'But we have other lives, I think, I hope,' she murmured. 'We live in others, Mr. . . . We live in things.'[137]

[135] *First Report*.
[136] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 106.
[137] Woolf, 64.

Like Eleanor Pargiter, she believes in existing in multiple places, in multiple times even. Her nephew's wife, Isa, tries to fix Lucy as a Victorian, but she resists:

> 'Were they like that?' Isa asked abruptly. She looked at Mrs. Swithin as if she had been a dinosaur or a very diminutive mammoth. Extinct she must be, since she had lived in the reign of Queen Victoria.
>
> Tick, tick, tick, went the machine in the bushes.
>
> 'The Victorians,' Mrs. Swithin mused. 'I don't believe' she said with her odd little smile, 'that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.'
>
> 'You don't believe in history,' said William.[138]

As mentioned above, Lucy believes in something which transcends history, but is deeply historical in a phlyogenetic sense. The history that Lucy rejects is a symbolic one, of linear time and specific place – what Lucy does not believe in is symbolic division and categorisation. Thinking of Westling's reading of *Between the Acts* as a text about everything being part of one whole, and of the easy way the narrative moves between characters, animals, a narrator-character – Lucy's version of time as something that resists fixed categories is fitting.

[138] Woolf, 156.

Finally, the story of the play acted out as part of the pageant is of an aunt wrestling with her niece for control of the family fortune: a nod to the relationship which has been a way into narrative innovation for Woolf. For twenty pages the reader experiences this intradiegesis, an inheritance drama titled *Where there's a Will there's a Way.*[139] Westling states that 'Woolf must have got the idea for the pageant from her friend E. M. Forster's *England's Pleasant Land,* a work that was performed three times in July of 1938 and published by the Hogarth Press in 1940.'[140] But while Forster's pageant play was in Westling's words 'to celebrate the landscape and inveigh against its degradation by real estate developers', the backdrop for Woolf's pageant was the 'destructive forces of warfare', 'bombs smashing cities into rubble and falling planes from both sides plowing up the landscape'.[141] The pageant performed in *Between the Acts* is no countryside idyll – and its performance is fragmented by unfortunate events such as the rising wind carrying off performers' voices, so that 'the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came', and by eruption of 'cow after cow' into 'yearning bellow'.[142] Westling describes the pageant's importance thus:

> Woolf's narrative persona and her characters question the meaning of their lives as the pageant reflects them. The pageant itself is fragmented and sometimes seems incoherent to its audience. One of its central refrains is the phrase 'scraps, orts, and fragments' which seems to indicate all we can know and all that culture can preserve. Yet meaning is shaped from these fragments by the characters in the novel and by ourselves as readers

139 Woolf, 113–33.
140 Westling, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', 865.
141 Westling, 865.
142 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 125–26.

> negotiating the silences and confusions, as well as the various propositions and symbolic suggestions of the text.[143]

If, as readers, we are to shape fragments into meaning, the centring of a large portion of the pageant around an intradiegetic narrative about aunthood supports my reading of Woolf's work, and the aunt's central position within it. *Where there's a Will there's a Way* tells the story of 'Lady Harpy Harraden, in love with Sir Spaniel Lilyliver, Deb, her maid [sic]. Flavinda, her niece, in love with Valentine, Sir Spaniel Lilyliver, in love with Flavinda'.[144] Flavinda's fortune is dependent on her marrying 'to her Aunt's liking'.[145] Her aunt, Lady H.H. as she is referred to in the drama, has a plot to steal her niece Flavinda's fortune by working with Sir Spaniel to encourage Flavinda to marry him, on the proviso that Lady Harraden and Sir Spaniel will split the fortune. Flavinda loves someone else, and elopes to Gretna Green with him. Lady Harraden suggests to Sir Spaniel that they marry, but he rejects her. The play ends with soliloquy from Lady Harraden, lamenting that she is 'Sans niece, sans lover; and sans maid.'[146]

It is a satire of conventional tropes of aunthood and in stark contrast to the most central aunts of Woolf's oeuvre: Helen Ambrose, Eleanor Pargiter, and Lucy Swithin. What Flavinda is offered by 'my Aunt's cracked mirror' is a deliberately misleading vision of herself and of the world.[147] Helen, Eleanor and Lucy on the other hand seem to be able to access an understanding of the reality of life in their respective novels and can thus offer other characters something like truth, by way of their unique, narrator-like powers of intuition,

---

143 Westling, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', 865.
144 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 113.
145 Woolf, 118.
146 Woolf, 133.
147 Woolf, 121.

premonition and almost-telepathy (Lucy shares a name with St Swithin's day, a day 'supposed to determine whether it will be wet or fine for the next forty days').[148] These aunts hold a special power to exist not only between diegetic levels, between nuclear family and extended, but to exist fully in all parts. Moreover, their individual stories within the diegesis resist literary traditions of aunthood: their characters are shifting and elusive. So that while I do argue that aunthood *itself* is a position of betweenhood – a shifting unfixed kinship role that makes it a perfect vehicle for Woolf to explore narrative voice and its relationship to characters on the diegetic level – I also wish to emphasise that these aunts in particular do something beyond that, something that is all the more clear when Woolf does offer us a portrait of a caricature aunt such as Lady Harraden.

[148] Kermode, 'Introduction', xix.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have identified a feature of Virginia Woolf's writing that has so far gone unexamined – a plethora of aunts. The aim of this work has been to understand their function in the text, and in focusing on the aunt figures in Woolf's writing I have found a subject whose influence goes beyond her role in the diegesis and so demands an approach that allows for a fluid relationship between character and form. I have demonstrated that aunthood, for Woolf, was a rich and complex role – far too ambiguous to be written off as a poor maternal substitute. I have shown that by paying close and careful attention to the nuances of aunthood – to its particulars – we can see what a powerful role aunts play in Woolf's work and so gain a greater understanding of the mechanisms by which her writing continues to astonish.

I began this thesis by considering the role of the aunt during Woolf's lifetime, and in the period shortly before. Using legal, historical and social research I have constructed a reading of the aunt which, alongside Woolf's diaries, allow us to understand the aunt's unique cultural position and its connotations for Woolf in particular. In Chapter One, where setting out the framework in which I am reading the aunt, I sought to demonstrate the ways in which the subject has driven the approach. In his 2013 book, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory*, Derek Ryan calls for just such work:

> If we are to consider the relationship between Woolf and theory today, it is not simply to be a return to the poststructuralist or postmodernist readings of Woolf that were influential in the 1980s and 1990s but a turn towards new theoretical paradigms that

> seek to address the limitations of those approaches while building on their subversive potential.[1]

While not motivated to do the work in this thesis by a particular consideration of Woolf and theory, the aunt as a figure has demanded such revaluation of critical paradigms. To see how the materteral functions in Woolf's work requires theoretical approaches that connect language and text to conceptions of consciousness and subjectivity. Yet, given that there is no materteral theory and where one has been approached it is often subsumed into the maternal, there is no complete framework with which to understand the relationship between subject and aunt. Developing a theory of aunthood would be an entire and separate project in itself, and using this framework only to analyse literature would come with the limitations of ahistoricism levelled at poststructuralism as discussed in Chapter One. It would also be a step backwards, missing the richness that an intersection of theory and materiality can achieve, and thus ignoring recent critics of modernism such as Derek Ryan and Stephen Ross whose works argue, respectively, that we must 'rearticulate the links between the modernist literature and the theoretical debates of the latter decades of the [twentieth] century' and that 'the affinities between modernism and theory […] demand exploration.'[2] Likewise, a purely historicist reading of aunts in Woolf's work and their relationship to aunthood during the period would fail to understand materterality on a narrative level. It is the intersection of these approaches, a direction towards which it seems Woolf studies may be heading, that provides a fresh perspective from which to view and comprehend the startlingly innovative narrative feats Woolf performed. Chapter One both explained this approach and undertook it, describing the theoretical framework and how it relates to early-twentieth-century historical

[1] Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 11.
[2] Ryan, 6; Ross, *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, 2.

contexts, particularly focusing on the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act, the discourse around which so neatly describes the aunt's relationship to the subject.

In Chapter Two I moved from aunthood in the world to aunthood in the text, considering Woolf's debut novel *The Voyage Out.* Here I situated my reading of aunthood in the existing critical work on Woolf and liminality, and argued that while it is possible to read the aunt as being between many oppositional concepts she is often, for Woolf, alternately one and then the other in stark extremes. I explored the character of Helen Ambrose, and in particular demonstrated the invisibility of aunthood in many critical appraisals of her role in the novel. I consider the relationship between aunts and the unsayable, drawing on the aunt's association with incest and challenge to the incest taboo. Most importantly in my analysis of *The Voyage Out,* I begin to consider how the aunts in the diegesis were related to the whole novel's narrative form. Closely reading key passages of the text reveals a crucial materteral influence on the novel's narrative form, distorting realist conventions. Helen's impact on the form, as well as the story, is early evidence that Woolf is attributing the materteral with the power to influence, communicate through, and move between, diegetic levels.

In Chapter Three I looked at the development of the aunt in three Woolf texts: *Night and Day,* 'An Unwritten Novel' and *Jacob's Room.* In this chapter I focused on the development of a narrative technique which problematises the realist-traditional relationship between the writer, narrator and subject – and thus between form and character. I posited that 'An Unwritten Novel' is arguably the key text for this reading of Woolf – in its being the jumping off point for the narrative technique which she was to use for the rest of her writing career. I argue that the short story builds on connections Woolf has made in the narratively-more-traditional *Night and Day* between aunts and narrative control, and consider the place of *Night and Day* in the trajectory of aunthood in Woolf (being that, while full of aunts, it is perhaps less experimental than its predecessor). Chapter Three is where I establish the

concept of a materteral narrative voice, arguing that in *Jacob's Room* the aunt has transitioned from the diegetic to the extradiegetic: the novel's narrator. I made connections between the ability of the narrator to exist somewhere between diegetic levels and the qualities of aunthood set out in Chapter One as non-contingent. This chapter offers a beginning of a theory of materteral literary technique and shows that study of aunthood need not be limited to novels with many aunt characters.

I began Chapter Four with an acknowledgement of the novels on which this thesis does not focus – those published between 1922 and 1937. In full awareness that these are often considered the quintessential Woolf texts, I briefly consider each novel in turn and demonstrate the continued impact of Woolf's discovery of materteral narrative form. To spend longer on them would be to repeat what has already been demonstrated in Chapter Three, and so I focus in Chapter Four on the texts which bring the aunt back to the centre of the diegesis – *The Years* and *Between the Acts* – suggesting that use of the materteral has shifted. In my reading of these novels I argue that Woolf's focus on collateral relationships (rather than lineal) is reflected in a further diffusion of narrative control. In my work on *The Years* I consider the novel's aunt-characters and its resistance of fixed family roles. I discuss the new qualities of the narrative voice in this novel and how it, like the aunt, is able to move between diegetic levels and in the case of *The Years*, can move sounds and thoughts between characters in the diegesis. In my reading of *Between the Acts* I consider the important role of the aunt in the extradiegetic story of the pageant, and its dialogue with Lucy Swithin in the diegesis. I argue that the narrative voice has become more plural than any of Woolf's previous work, and includes animals and the natural world so that in the almost cacophonic voice it becomes difficult to identify to whom any particular free indirect thought belongs.

By tracing the trajectory of the materteral in Woolf's work I have been able to demonstrate that the aunt is such a key figure for reading Woolf that a reading of aunthood

need not be limited to specific aunt characters. While there is very little literary scholarship specifically about aunts, what there is has tended to focus on individual aunts. For example, Colm Toibin's 2011 article, perhaps due to the short length of the piece, considers the use of aunts only as actors on the story level.[3]

This thesis is not a cultural history of aunthood, even of the specific period in which it is focused; nor does it present a theory of aunthood that can be picked up and applied to any text or period. What it does do, I hope, is highlight just how little research there is on aunthood across all fields of study. Where there has been consideration of literary aunts (and this has been common, given that there are so many aunts in literature), they are very often stripped of their aunthood and considered only in terms of their relationship to the maternal. Alternatively, critics have used frameworks for reading aunts that are specific to a model of the family from which aunts are excluded (the transfer of attachment from the mother to the father). This erasure of aunthood is not limited to literary studies, as I discuss below.

While I have pointed out that there is very little work specifically on aunts, it is important to consider the work that has been done, and to note that in calling for more attention to be paid to the role of aunthood my voice joins those of others before me. Sociologists and kinship scholars Laura L. Ellingson and Patricia J. Sotirin, whose work I use in Chapter One, have been publishing work which looks at the specifics of the materteral role since 2006.[4] With reference to their own field they note that 'with few exceptions, studies of kinship relationships gloss the aunt role in favor [sic] of framing motherhood as the essential role of women.'[5] Their studies are of contemporary aunthood across different cultures, and so while

3 Tóibín, 'The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)'.
4 Ellingson and Sotirin, 'Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts'; Laura Ellingson and Patricia Sotirin, 'Academic Aunting: Reimaging Feminist (Wo)Mentoring, Teaching, and Relationships', *Women & Language* 31, no. 1 (2008): 35–42; Laura Ellingson and Patricia Sotirin, *Aunting: Cultural Practices That Sustain Family and Community Life* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).
5 Ellingson and Sotirin, *Aunting: Cultural Practices That Sustain Family and Community Life*, 3.

not particular to Woolf's period of writing (hence why not used more in this thesis) they do offer descriptions of aunthood generally which chime with those specific to Woolf, particularly on the power attributed to the role *because* it is part-outsider. As they note:

> First, aunts are defined within the kin network but outside of the nuclear family. The biological, marital, and/or fictive relationships that create both connection and 'third-party' perspectives for aunts and their nieces/ nephews are part of what made aunts powerful in their lives. That is, whether an aunt was wonderful, weird, dull, absent, or unpleasant, her position as nonparent and nonsibling is an integral part of her identity *as an aunt*. Occupying a niche outside the nuclear family enables the aunt to avoid the deep identification, responsibility, and vulnerability of the parent–child bond that (ideally) leads both to closeness and to children's need to rebel to establish their own identity.[6]

These similarities suggest that a theory of contemporary aunthood certainly could be used in a project that looks at the aunts in Woolf's work. What Ellingson and Sotirin's work also does is make clear how increasingly relevant aunthood is to the modern family and indeed the modern person. They point out the accessibility of the role, saying that 'Aunting is a *choice* that is available to *everyone*—women, of course, but also men, children, and people in all walks and seasons of life. Biology and legal ties (i.e. marriage, divorce, adoption) are not destiny.'[7] In these terms aunthood becomes a tool with which to resist the patriarchy, one which is freely accessible and not limited by symbolic structures and divisions – it becomes something radical and defined by action, not existing relationships. Indeed, they even call for an introduction of aunting as a verb, so tied is the role to its effect:

---

[6] Ellingson and Sotirin, 'Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts', 496.
[7] Ellingson and Sotirin, *Aunting: Cultural Practices That Sustain Family and Community Life*, 5.

> We encourage readers to think of the aunt not as a person or even a role, but as a practice, as something people *do.* That is, we think of aunt as a *verb*; to aunt, to engage in *aunting.* Rather than rely on traditional models of family structure, we follow recent research that emphasizes family as a dynamic experience rather than as a static accomplishment.[8]

Their work stands out as one of very few studies coming to aunthood from a position of curiosity about its difference from, rather than similarity to, the maternal. I echo Ellingson and Sotirin in highlighting the gap in critical evaluation of the role, and suggest that, as social theories of aunthood develop, the potential for understanding how aunts in literature function grows.

The subject of this thesis, of course, is not aunthood itself, but the writing of Virginia Woolf, and it is in this context of literary studies that this thesis will be read. In suggesting that aunthood in Woolf has been ignored because of the bifurcation of historicism and poststructuralism, when aunthood specifically requires a hybrid theoretical framework, this thesis seeks to open up avenues of research that might also require a hybrid approach.

There has not been space in this thesis for comparative studies of aunthood as used by Woolf and her contemporaries, though I suggest that Chapter One of this thesis contextualises aunthood in a way that might facilitate such research. There are narratively experimental novels in the same period which also feature aunts significantly – perhaps most notably May Sinclair's 1919 novel *Mary Olivier: A Life* – but also novels by Henry James, E.M. Forster, and Sylvia Townsend Warner.[9] Given that literary aunthood in all periods and genres is somewhat neglected, one could of course take the approach of this thesis and apply it to any

[8] Ellingson and Sotirin, 4.
[9] May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (London: Virago Press, 2002); James, *Washington Square*; E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes or The Loving Huntsman*.

text, writer, or period, with an understanding that the cultural conception of aunthood at the time might require application of other theory.

The neglect of aunthood has wide-ranging implications for fields from the social sciences to the arts, but also for Woolf studies specifically. It is undeniable that, in Woolf's writing, the figure of the aunt is everywhere – so too is it clear that aunts were a large presence in her life, and that she felt ambiguous about what aunthood represented. Until we have a more careful reading of aunthood in Woolf's writing, we are missing out on the true richness of its innovation and also of its relationship to the world. Considering the aunt forces us to go beyond the broad poststructuralist claim that Woolf's formal innovations are anti-patriarchal. The aunt raises the stakes in terms of literary experimentation by showing us how the antipatriarchal forms in her writing are connected to real, live patriarchal structures in the world, thus cementing Woolf further as a crucial figure in women's writing without losing focus on the extraordinary texts themselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abel, Elizabeth. ‘Elizabeth Abel, Narrative Structure (s) and Female Development: The Case of *Mrs Dalloway*’. In *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, Eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland., 161–85. New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1983.

Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland. ‘Introduction’. In *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, Eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland., 3–19. New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1983.

Anderson, Nancy F. ‘The “Marriage with a Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill” Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England’. *Journal of British Studies* 21, no. 2 (1982): 67–86.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. London: Pan Books, 1972.

———. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.

Bakay, Gönül. ‘Virginia Woolf’s Gendered Language’’. *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 142–47.

Baldwin, Dean. *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.

Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. Reading: Routledge, 1982.

Barrett, Michèle. *Imagination in Theory: Essays on Culture and Writing*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1998.

Beer, Gillian. ‘Introduction’. In *The Voyage Out: Centenary Perspectives*, Eds. Sarah M. Hall, Mary Ellen Foley, Lindsay Martin, Claire Nicholson., FIND. Southport: The Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain, 2015.

Bennett, Arnold. ‘Is the Novel Decaying? The Work of the Young’. *The Register*. 25 August 1923.

Benziman, Galia. '"Dispersed Are We": Mirroring and National Identity in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*'. *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 1 (2006): 53–71.

Bishop, Edward L. 'The Subject in *Jacob's Room*'. *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (1992): 147–75.

Bishop, Elizabeth. 'Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*'. *Twentieth Century Literature* 27, no. 4 (1981): 343–61.

Bloch, Maurice. 'Kinship Terms Are Not Kinship'. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 5 (2010): 367–416.

Boes, Tobias. 'Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends'. *Literature Compass* 3, no. 2 (2006): 230–43.

Bowlby, Rachel. 'We're Getting There: Woolf, Trains and the Destinations of Feminist Criticism'. In *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*, 3–15. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Briggs, Julia. 'Introduction'. In *Night and Day*, xi–xxxv. London: Penguin, 1992.

———. *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Bronfen, Elizabeth. 'Elizabeth Bronfen on *Jacob's Room*'. In *Jacob's Room*, xi–xix. London: Vintage, 2004.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Castle, Gregory. *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006.

Caughie, Pamela. 'Postmodern and Poststructuralist Approaches to Virginia Woolf'. In *Palgrave Advances in Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith., 143–68. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

———. *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest & Question of Itself*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Chan, Evelyn. ‘Professions, Freedom and Form: Reassessing Woolf’s *The Years* and *Three Guineas*’. *The Review of English Studies* 61, no. 251 (2010): 591–613.

Chase, Karen, and Michael Leveson. *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Christiansen, Rupert. *The Complete Book of Aunts*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

Colebrook, Claire. ‘Feminist Criticism and Poststructuralism’. In *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, 214–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Connor, Steven. ‘Introduction’. In *The Years*. London: Vintage, 1992.

Cooley, Elizabeth. ‘Revolutionizing Biography: *Orlando*, *Roger Fry*, and the Tradition’. *South Atlantic Review* 55, no. 2 (1990): 71–83.

Corbett, Mary Jean. *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2008.

———. ‘Husband, Wife, and Sister: Making and Remaking the Early Victorian Family’. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35 (2007): 1–19.

Curteis, W.C. *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Ecclesiastical Courts at Doctors’ Commons*. London: Saunders and Benning, 1842.

Davis, Thomas S. ‘The Historical Novel at History’s End: Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 60, no. 1 (2014): 1–26.

De Gay, Jane. *Virginia Woolf’s Novels and the Literary Past*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Deceased Brother’s Widow’s Marriage Bill, 45 5 § (1921). https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1921/jun/28/deceased-brothers-widows-marriage-bill.

DeSalvo, Louise. *Virginia Woolf’s First Voyage: A Novel in the Making*. London: Macmillan Press, 1980.

D'hoker, Elke. 'The Role of the Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction'. *Journal of the Short Story in English* 50, no. Spring (2008): 1–12.

Di Battista, Maria. 'Realism and Rebellion in Edwardian and Georgian Fiction'. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel*, 40–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Eldridge Miller, Jane. *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.

Ellingson, Laura, and Patricia Sotirin. 'Academic Aunting: Reimaging Feminist (Wo)Mentoring, Teaching, and Relationships'. *Women & Language* 31, no. 1 (2008): 35–42.

———. *Aunting: Cultural Practices That Sustain Family and Community Life*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010.

———. 'Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts'. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 23, no. 3 (2006): 483–501.

Esty, Jed. 'The British Empire and the English Modernist Model'. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel*, 23–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

———. 'Virginia Woolf's Colony and the Adolescence of Modernist Fiction'. In *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899-1939*, Eds. Richard Begam and Michael Moses., 70–90. Duke University Press, 2007.

First Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State and Operation of the Law of Marriage as Relating to the Prohibited Degrees of Affinity, and to Marriages Solemnised Abroad or in the British Colonies. Vol. 28. Command Papers, No. 978. London, 1848.

Flint, Kate. ‘Introduction’. In *The Waves*, ix–xxxviii. St Ives: Penguin Books, 1992.

Fludernik, Monika. *An Introduction to Narratology*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

Forster, E.M. *Howards End*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Fox, Alice. *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

French Boyd, Elizabeth. *Bloomsbury Heritage: Their Mothers and Their Aunts*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976.

Frye, Joanne. ‘*The Voyage Out*: Thematic Tensions and Narrative Techniques’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 26, no. 4 (1980): 402–23.

Galbiati, Maria Alessandra, and Peter James Harris. ‘Reality and Language in *The Voyage Out*, by Virginia Woolf’. *Acta Scientiarum. Language and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2010): 67–72.

Garrett, Eilidh, Alice Reid, Kevin Schürer, and Simon Szreter. *Changing Family Size in England and Wales: Place, Class and Demography, 1891-1911*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Gente, Magali. ‘The Expansion of the Nuclear Family Unit in Great Britain Between 1910 and 1920’. *The History of the Family* 6, no. 1 (2001): 125–42.

Gibbon, Edward. *Memoirs of My Life and Writing*. London: Penguin Classics, 1984.

———. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 8 vols. London: The Folio Society, 1990.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Goldman, Jane. *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Gordon, Eleanor, and Gweneth Nair. ‘The Myth of the Victorian Patriarchal Family’. *The History of the Family* 7, no. 1 (2002): 125–38.

Greer, Erin. ‘“A Many-Sided Substance”: The Philosophy of Conversation in Woolf, Russell, and Kant’. *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 3 (2017): 1–17.

Gruner, Elizabeth Rose. ‘Born and Made: Sisters, Brothers, and the Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill’. *Signs* 24, no. 2 (1999): 423–47.

Guiguet, Jean. *Virginia Woolf: And Her Works*. London: Hogarth Press, 1965.

Hale, Dorothy. ‘The Art of English Fiction in the Twentieth Century’. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel*, 10–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Hanson, Clare. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Macmillan Press, 1994.

———. ‘Virginia Woolf in the House of Love: Compulsory Heterosexuality in *The Years*’. *Journal of Gender Studies* 6, no. 1 (1997): 55–62.

Harker, James. ‘Misperceiving Virginia Woolf’. *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 2 (2011): 1–21.

Hatton, Timothy J., and Richard M. Martin. ‘Fertility Decline and the Heights of Children in Britain, 1886–1938’. *Explorations in Economic History* 47, no. 4 (2010): 505–19.

Hawkes, Ellen. ‘Introduction to “Friendships Gallery”’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no. 3 (1979): 270–74.

Higgins, Charlotte. ‘Literary Aunts: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’. Online Newspaper. *The Guardian: Charlotte Higgins on Culture* (blog), 25 March 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2011/mar/25/classics-janeausten.

Hite, Molly. ‘The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins’s *My Little Sister*’. *Modernism/Modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 523–48.

Holden, Katherine. *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914-60*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Holtby, Winifred. *Poor Caroline*. London: Virago, 2011.

Hope, Alexander James Beresford. ‘The Report of Her Majesty’s Commission on the Laws of Marriage, Relative to Marriage with a Deceased Wife’s Sister: Examined in a Letter to Sir Robert Harry Inglis, Bart M.P’, 1849. http://www.jstor.org/stable/60101130.

Jackson, Louise A. *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*. London: Routledge, 1999.

James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw, The Aspern Papers and Other Stories*. London: Collins, 1956.

———. *Washington Square*. London: Penguin Books, 1963.

Johnson, Jeri. ‘Introduction’. In *The Years*, ix–xxxix. Chippenham: Penguin Classics, 1998.

Joseph, Gerhard. ‘*The Antigone* as Cultural Touchstone: Matthew Arnold, Hegel, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Margaret Drabble’. *PMLA* 96, no. 1 (1981): 22–35.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Kermode, Frank. ‘Introduction’. In *Between the Acts*, xii–xxxiv. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998.

Kimber, Gerri. ‘Review of Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*’. In *Annotated Bibliography of English Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Klingel Ray, Joan. ‘Jane Austen’s Case Study of Child Abuse: Fanny Price’. *Persuasions* 13 (1991): 16–26.

Kristeva, Julia. ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’. In *The Kristeva Reader*, Ed. Toril Moi., 89–136. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Kuper, Adam. *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England*. United States: Harvard University Press, 2009.

‘Latest Works of Fiction’. *The New York Times*, 3 April 1923. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/17/specials/woolf-jacob.html.

Laurence, Patricia. *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*. California: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Leaska, Mitchell A. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

Lee, Hermione. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*. London: Methuen, 1977.

———. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage, 1997.

Lennox, Charlotte. *Henrietta*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

Leonardi, Susan. ‘Bare Places and Ancient Blemishes: Virginia Woolf’s Search for New Language in *Night and Day*’. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 19, no. 2 (1986): 150–63.

Levy, Michelle. ‘Virginia Woolf’s Shorter Fictional Explorations of the External World: “Closely United . . . Immensely Divided”’. In *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf’s Short Fiction*, Eds. Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Lewis, Thomas. ‘Vision in Time: Virginia Woolf ’s “An Unwritten Novel”’. In *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 15–22. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975.

Lindberg Brekke, Maja. ‘The Discomfort of Civilisation: Destabilising the Bildungsroman in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob’s Room*’. University of Bergen, 2017. http://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/12105.

Lojo Rodriguez, Laura Maria. ‘Parody and Metafiction: Virginia Woolf’s “An Unwritten Novel”’. *Links & Letters* 8 (2001): 71–82.

Mao, Douglas, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. ‘The New Modernist Studies’. *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737–48.

Marcus, Jane. ‘Art and Anger’. *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 1 (1978): 68–98.

———. ‘The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination’. In *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*. London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

———. ‘*The Years* as Greek Drama, Domestic Novel, and Gotterdammerung’. *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 1977, 279-.

Marcus, Laura. ‘Woolf’s Feminism and Feminism’s Woolf’. In *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, 142–79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

‘Masham’. In *Domesday Book*. Accessed 20 March 2019. https://opendomesday.org/place/SE2280/masham/.

McDowell, Frederick P W. ‘“Surely Order Did Prevail”: Virginia Woolf and *The Voyage Out*’. In *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, Ed. Ralph Freedman., 73–96. California: University of California Press, 1980.

McWhirter, David. ‘The Novel, the Play, and the Book: *Between the Acts* and the Tragicomedy of History’. *ELH* 60, no. 3 (1993): 787–812.

McWilliams, Ellen. *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Middleton, Victoria. ‘*The Years*: “A Deliberate Failure”’. *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 1977, 158–71.

Milardo, Robert M. *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. ‘Psychoanalytic Approaches’. In *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith., 60–82. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

———. *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Methuen, 1985.

Montgomery, Nick. ‘Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (2000): 34–55.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987.

Newman, Herta. *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.

Nikolchina, Miglena. ‘Born from the Head: Reading Woolf via Kristeva’. *Diacritics* 21, no. 2 (1991): 30–42.

Norfolk, Lawrence. ‘Lawrence Norfolk on *Jacob’s Room*’. In *Jacob’s Room*, vii–x. London: Vintage, 2004.

Olson, Liesl. ‘Virginia Woolf’s “Cotton Wool of Daily Life”’. *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (2003): 42–65.

Oxner, Alex. ‘Characterizing Absence: Virginia Woolf’s New Elegy in J*acob’s Room*’. *The Explicator* 72, no. 3 (2014): 210–14.

Perry, Ruth. *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Pintilii, Alina. ‘On the Representations of Parent-Child Relationships in Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë’. *Cultural Intertexts* 1, no. 1 (2014): 30–38.

Priest, Ann-Marie. ‘Between Being and Nothingness: The “astonishing Precipice” of Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day*’. *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (2003): 66–80.

Proudfit, Sharon. ‘Virginia Woolf: Reluctant Feminist in *The Years*’. *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 17, no. 1 (1975): 59–73.

Raitt, Suzanne. ‘Virginia Woolf’s Early Novels: Finding a Voice’. In *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Sellers., 29–48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Read, Dwight W. ‘Kinship Theory: A Paradigm Shift’. *Ethnology* 46, no. 4 (2007): 329–64.

Reynier, Christine. *Virginia Woolf’s Ethics of the Short Story*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Rigel Daughtery, Beth. ‘Feminist Approaches’. In *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith., 98–124. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Roberts, Elizabeth. *A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women 1890-1940*. Oxford: Blackwood, 1984.

Ross, Stephen. *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*. Oxford: Routledge, 2009.

Ryan, Derek. *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. ‘Logique Culturelle de La Métalepse, Ou: La Métalepse Dans Tous Sesétats’. In *Métalepses. Entorses Au Pacte de La Représen-Tation*, Eds. John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer., 201–24. Paris: Éditions de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2005.

Sawyer, Robert. ‘Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Modernist Shakespeare’. *South Atlantic Review* 74, no. 2 (2009): 1–19.

Schlack, Beverley Ann. *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf’s Use of Literary Allusion*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979.

Scott, Peter. ‘Did Owner-Occupation Lead to Smaller Families for Interwar Working-Class Households?’ *Economic History Review* 61, no. 1 (2008): 99–124.

Seccombe, Wally. ‘Starting to Stop: Working-Class Fertility Decline in Britain’. *Past & Present* 126 (1990): 151–88.

Shankman, Lillian. ‘Introduction and Commentary’. In *Anne Thackeray Ritchie: Journals and Letters*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994.

Silver, Brenda R. ‘The Authority of Anger: “Three Guineas” as Case Study’. *Signs* 16, no. 2 (1991): 340–70.

Sinclair, May. *Mary Olivier: A Life*. London: Virago Press, 2002.

Smith, Patricia Juliana. *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women’s Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

———. ‘“The Things People Don’t Say”: Lesbian Panic in *The Voyage Out*’. In *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, Eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer., 128–45. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Sophocles. ‘Antigone’. In *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, 59–128. London: Penguin Classics, 1984.

Sretzer, Simon. *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Sriratana, Verita. ‘Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels/Virginia Woolf and December 1910: Studies in Rhetoric and Context’. *Woolf Studies Annual* 21 (2015): 166–71.

Stanford Friedman, Susan. ‘Spatialisation, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*’. In *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology & British Women Writers*, Ed. Kathy Mezei., 109–36. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Stanzel, Frank. ‘Teller-Characters and Reflector-Characters in Narrative Theory’. *Poetics Today* 2, no. 2 (1981): 5–12.

Stephen, Leslie. ‘Gibbon’s Autobiography’. In *Studies of a Biographer*, 1:147–87. London: Duckworth and Co., 1910.

———. *Swift*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Sundt Urstad, Tone. ‘“Real Things under the Show”;: Imagery Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*’. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 9, no. 2 (1998): 161–95.

Swanson, Diana L. ‘Lesbian Approaches’. In *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Ed. Anna Snaith., 184–208. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Swift, Jonathan. *Journal to Stella*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

‘The First Book of Moses, Called Genesis - Chapter 2’. In *The Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge University Press*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1611.

‘The Unconventional Novel’. *The Guardian*, 11 March 1922. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/20/fromthearchives.virginiawoolf.

Tóibín, Colm. ‘The Importance of Aunts (in the 19th Century Novel)’. *London Review of Books* 33, no. 6 (2011): 13–19.

Townsend Warner, Sylvia. *Lolly Willowes or The Loving Huntsman*. London: Virago Press, 1993.

Transue, Pamela J. *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1986.

Tylor, Edward B. ‘On the Origin of Language’. In *The Origin of Language*, Ed. Roy Harris., 81–99. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996.

Wall, Kathleen. ‘Frame Narratives and Unresolved Contradictions in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*’. *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29, no. 2 (1999): 184–207.

Westling, Louise. ‘Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World’. *New Literary History* 30, no. 4 (1999): 855–72.

Westman, Karin E. ‘The First “Orlando”: The Laugh of the Comic Spirit in Virginia Woolf’s “Friendships Gallery”’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 1 (2001): 39–71.

Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Whittier-Ferguson, John. ‘Repetition, Remembering, Repetition: Virginia Woolf’s Late Fiction and the Return of War’. *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 2 (2011): 230–53.

Winterhalter, Teresa. ‘“What Else Can I Do But Write?” Discursive Disruption and the Ethics of Style in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*’. *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 236–57.

Wohl, Anthony. ‘Sex and the Single Room: Incest Among the Victorian Working Classes’. In *The Victorian Family*, Wohl, Anthony., 197–216. London: Croom Helm, 1978.

Wood, Alice. *Virginia Woolf’s Late Cultural Criticism: The Genesis of ‘The Years’, ‘Three Guineas’ and ‘Between the Acts’*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Woolf, Leonard, and James Strachey, eds. *Virginia Woolf & Lytton Strachey: Letters*. London: Hogarth Press, 1956.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own/Three Guineas*. London: Penguin, 1993.

———. ‘A Sketch of the Past’. In *Moments of Being*, 71–159. London: Triad/Panther, 1978.

———. ‘An Unwritten Novel’. In *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Dick., 112–21. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989.

———. ‘An Unwritten Novel’. In *Selected Stories*, 25–36. London: Penguin, 1993.

———. *Between the Acts*. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998.

———. ‘Character in Fiction’. In *Selected Essays*, Ed. David Bradshaw., 37–54. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1992.

———. *Flush: A Biography*. London: Penguin, 2000.

———. ‘Friendships Gallery’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no. 3 (1979): 270–302.

———. *Jacob’s Room*. London: Vintage, 2000.

———. ‘Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection’. In *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, 215–19. London: Hogarth Press, 1985.

———. ‘Modern Fiction’. In *Selected Essays*, Ed. David Bradshaw., 6–12. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1992.

———. ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’. In *Selected Essays*, 32–36. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

———. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

———. *Night and Day*. London: Penguin, 1992.

———. *Orlando: A Biography*. London: Penguin, 2000.

———. ‘Swift’s Journal to Stella’. In *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Andrew McNeillie., 4:293. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.

———. ‘Sympathy’. In *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Dick., 102–5. London: Hogarth Press, 1985.

———. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1920-24*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. 2. 5 vols. London: Penguin, 1981.

———. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 3: 1925-30*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. 3. 5 vols. London: Penguin, 1982.

———. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: 1931-35*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. 4. 5 vols. London: Penguin, 1983.

———. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol 5: 1936-41*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. 5. 5 vols. London: Penguin, 1985.

———. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Vol 1: 1888-1912. The Flight of the Mind*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson, Assisted by Joanne Trautmann. Vol. 1. 6 vols. London: Hogarth Press, 1975.

———. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Vol 2: 1912-1922*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. Vol. 2. 6 vols. North Carolina: Mariner Books, 1978.

———. 'The Mark on the Wall'. In *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Susan Dick., 77–83. London: Hogarth Press, 1985.

———. '"The Tunnel"'. In *Contemporary Writers*, 120–22. London: Hogarth, 1965.

———. *The Voyage Out*. Reading: Oxford World's Classics, 1992.

———. *The Waves*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

———. *The Years*. Chippenham: Penguin Classics, 1998.

———. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Penguin, 1992.

Young, John K. '"Murdering an Aunt or Two": Textual Practice and Narrative Form in Virginia Woolf's Metropolitan Market'. In *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace*, Ed. Jeanne Dubino., 181–95. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.