

Spring 2000

# Reading for \*class: Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Sylvia Townsend Warner

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**READING FOR CLASS:  
VIRGINIA WOOLF, REBECCA WEST, AND SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER**

**BY**

**LAURIE QUINN**

**BA, Boston College, 1992**

**MA, Boston College, 1994**

**DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
English Literature**

**May, 2000**



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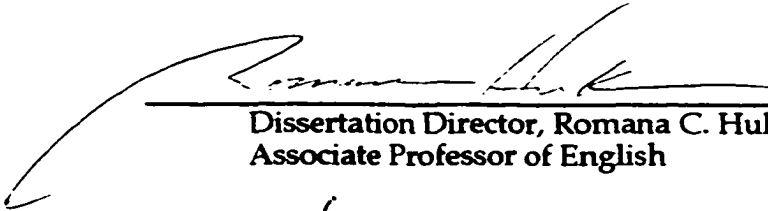
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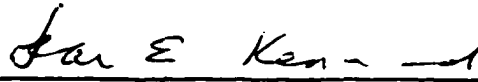
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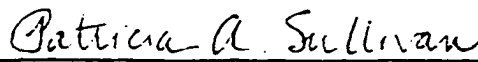
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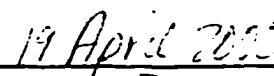
  
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## **Dedication**

**I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Marie Theresa English Quinn,  
my first and most loving teacher.**

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank the Graduate School at University of New Hampshire for awarding me a Dissertation Year Fellowship for the 1999-2000 academic year. Thanks also to the English Department at the University of New Hampshire for supporting my attendance at conferences where my academic work could be fostered and enhanced. My dissertation director and mentor, Professor Romana Huk, has been an unwavering friend to this project and to me. For her brilliance, her spirit, and her wisdom, I am more thankful than I can express. The other members of my dissertation committee have influenced the work represented here in various and significant ways. Professor John Ernest, whose intellect and dedication regularly inspire awe in his students, myself included, discussed issues of race and power with me in ways that proved vital to my thinking about this project as it developed. Professor Jean Kennard, who helped me become a scholar of Virginia Woolf's writing, has generously shared the fruits of her experience in the profession. Professor Patricia Sullivan has by her own example shown me the power of inspired teaching and courageous writing; her steadfast support of my academic interests, particularly in the field of class studies, has meant a great deal to me. Professor Aline Kuntz's expertise in political science and encouragement of my dissertation work have been of genuine benefit. I also want to acknowledge Professor Susan Schibanoff, devoted faculty sponsor of the English Department's doctoral dissertation workshop, and my brilliant fellow graduate students in that group, for their insightful readings of drafts of these chapters, and especially for their cherished friendship.

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**ABSTRACT**  
**READING FOR CLASS:**  
**VIRGINIA WOOLF, REBECCA WEST, AND SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER**

by

Laurie A. Quinn

University of New Hampshire, May, 2000

*Reading for Class* is a feminist materialist study of three twentieth-century British writers: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Rebecca West (1892-1983), and Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978). In triangulation, Woolf, West, and Warner provide the specific grounding for the project's more general exploration of the intersections between class issues and literature. The Introduction forges the eclectic critical method defined as reading for class, and articulates the historical-political purposes of the method and of the study itself. In Chapter One, analyses of two of Woolf's lesser-known texts, the "Introductory Letter" to the collection *Life as We Have Known It* (1931) and *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* (1965), are juxtaposed with a reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). In Chapter Two, West's early journalism is linked with her novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), which is explored at length. Chapter Three reviews Warner's early novels, her 1931 poem *Opus 7*, and her 1959 lecture "Women as Writers," and offers an extended discussion of her second novel, *The True Heart* (1929).

Class differences are represented within the writing produced by these authors in this period, but class is of equal significance in our critical appraisals of their work. In its double layering of class analysis, the dissertation reads for class not only in literary texts, but also in interpretations of them. In the postmodern context, class is a particularly illuminating difference. The method developed in *Reading for Class* reveals and repoliticizes class within a nexus of discourses that shape literary and critical texts.

## INTRODUCTION

### I. Triangulating Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Sylvia Townsend Warner

*Reading for Class: Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Sylvia Townsend Warner*

is a project that emerges from feminist literary scholarship and cultural materialism, to name its two most obvious contexts. It is a feminist materialist study of three twentieth-century British writers: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Rebecca West (1892-1983), and Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978). I triangulate Woolf, West, and Warner in order to model a way—not, I hasten to add, *the way*—of reading for issues of class difference. I read for manifestations of such difference within some of the writing produced by these women in the early twentieth century, and I read for the marks of classed<sup>1</sup> difference within our critical reconstitutions of the significance their work. In its double layering of class analysis, the project thus allows me to read for class on two principal levels.

I offer what I am calling “reading for class” as a useful and possibly transferable critical method, an eclectic theorizing process that works primarily through engagement with texts and, self-reflexively, with our readings of them. In applying the method to the writings of Woolf, West, and Warner, I demonstrate that in their cases, as perhaps in many others, class functions as a particularly illuminating difference, one that can work, once it is made visible, to reveal the nexus of other discourses, including those of gender, sexuality and race, which are also at work in the texts I read.

I foreground class in this project for two main reasons. First, as I will



argue further on in this introduction and within the chapters that follow, class is a form of difference that all three writers explicitly take up, in their work, within a historical and national context—early twentieth-century Britain—that often foregrounded class difference and class struggles. Class is thus particularly and historically in evidence within the texts, and, I will suggest, particularly and historically appropriate to a present-day reading of the texts. This brings me to my second reason for foregrounding class, which is to offer a corrective. The readings of Woolf, West, and Warner that have emerged, particularly in the context of North American literary criticism, all too often do not explicitly take up the issue of class as central in the work of these writers.

Indeed, it is in this latter sense that I think the study's more general implications may be inferred. For despite its specific (and, as I shall explain, quite deliberate) focus on Woolf, West, and Warner, the three figures through whose texts and critical contexts I practice my method of reading for class, the project aims simultaneously to critique—by positioning itself strategically against—a currently dominant tendency among literary critics in the U. S. This is the tendency to avoid reckoning with the full implications of class in literature and in literary studies. Often, critics mention class along with race and gender, but seem unable to translate a belief that class matters into their scholarly practice in ways that go beyond good intentions. Class issues are invoked, and suspended, or when discussed, frequently confined within the borders of the historicized or theorized text itself, and all-too-safely removed from the critic's own reading process. Though most academics would recognize that systems of class power are operating at many levels in the culture that includes their subculture, most also seem to enact, unwittingly, the same erasure of class

difference in their reading process that is enacted in the dominant American myth of a classless society. By practicing a different kind of reading, in which class is foregrounded, I hope to demonstrate the benefits of confronting, as fully as possible, the evidence of class, both in what we read and in how we read it. By privileging class as the first difference to notice in and around these writers and texts, and in noting the scarcity of sustained and consciously-classed readings of literature within the historical and cultural moment of this project, I do not mean to suggest that class should, in every other instance of literary critical work, function in this primary role. But a politics of reading that nods toward the importance of class, while never actually engaging with that importance, is shallow at best.

Instead of that all-too-common empty invocation of class, swiftly followed by the abandonment of it as a crucial term within literary analysis, I offer a different politics of reading, one which attends to the material and ideological conditions of its own practice and which argues that we are reading and writing in a time that demands a deep reckoning with class. I have chosen class as the primary term of my readings because for our fledgling twenty-first century, I see class analysis as the most widely useful method for resisting the (classed) problems that postmodernism's uneven attention to difference has wrought.

I am calling my method feminist materialist (in that order) because as a feminist, I believe that some versions of (mostly white) feminist literary criticism and theory, currently situated within those postmodern discourses of difference, are suffering from an enduring refusal to deal with class and race hierarchies, even as they continue to explore women's writing and notions of gender in otherwise sophisticated ways.<sup>2</sup> Given that feminist literary criticism is situated

just as inescapably in its historical moment as literary criticism in general must be, it is through the equally important insights offered by materialist analysis that feminist criticism can evaluate the political consequences of its prevailing practices.

I describe my way of reading as feminist materialist not only for the sake of discursive intervention in contemporary feminist criticism, but also for the sake of historical distinction from earlier forms of feminist criticism. At different junctures across the twentieth century, some feminists have argued that women can themselves be conceptualized as a class, and though this has sometimes proven to be a politically useful idea for feminist organizing, I do not find the conflation of gender and class into the idea of gender *as* class adequate to the present historical moment. Though my focus on women writers is a feminist choice, I am interested in seeing difference within and across the category of femaleness, and specifically differences of class.

Reading for class in a feminist materialist mode is a process that has recognizable roots in British materialist feminism, which centrally informed the development of North American materialist-feminist criticism. Judith Newton, in her revealingly-entitled book of 1994, *Starting Over: Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Critique* reprints an essay originally published with Deborah Rosenfelt in 1985. Newton describes this essay as “prefigur[ing] many current formulations” of what they then, in a North American context, chose to call materialist-feminist criticism. As that essay, “Toward a Materialist-Feminist Criticism” defines it:

Materialist-feminist criticism, then, while acknowledging the importance of the written, the spoken, and, more broadly, the discursive and symbolic

as a site of political activity, is skeptical of the isolation of it from other ways of thinking about struggle. While suspicious of an unrelenting focus on the symbolic and of theorizing for its own sake, however, materialist-feminist criticism is committed to theory and to symbolic analysis. It is particularly committed to the difficult task of exploring the making of meaning as a struggle over resources and power and the changing relationships among public written representation and discursively constructed social conditions and relations. (11)

As will become clear, the critical method described as “materialist feminist criticism” comes close to my own in this project, though with important modifications that take up theories of race and sexuality especially, and respond to historical developments such as the ascendancy of postmodern theory in literary studies. In other words, my feminist materialist method benefits from the ideas that have been in circulation since the idea of materialist-feminist criticism, itself adapted from British materialist feminism, was introduced in the U. S.

My readings, coming a full fifteen years after, are informed even more centrally than those of my critical predecessors by postmodernism. Indeed they must be, for in Terry Eagleton’s words, “[p]art of postmodernism’s power is the fact that it exists” (ix). My method adopts some specifically poststructuralist practices, such as deconstruction, and some broader postmodernist ideas and terms, such as the notion of the Other, though it resists what I see as the ultimately depoliticizing totalities of discourses of difference.

This depoliticizing tendency is particularly severe in terms of class, I think, and I thus practice reading for class as a *postmarxist* method, one which

seeks to interrogate the historical and material conditions of both literature and criticism. As Eagleton notes, comparing the trajectories of postmodernism with those of Marxism, “The intellectual history of Marxism is strewn with self-reflexive acts, as Marxists have sought to grasp something of the historical conditions of possibility of their own doctrines; to date, postmodernism has delivered nothing even remotely equivalent” (26-27). My project aims to participate in the Marxist self-reflexivity Eagleton describes (together with the feminist self-reflexivity of certain feminist traditions) within the acknowledged context of postmodernity. In his 1996 book *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Eagleton has offered an articulate statement of what I view as a political corollary to my reading practice. Criticizing postmodernism’s tendency to root any possible politics in difference, and arguing instead for a socialist recognition of postmodernism’s own rootedness in history, Eagleton writes:

A politics based upon difference alone will be unable to advance very far beyond traditional liberalism—and indeed quite a bit of postmodernism, with its zest for plurality, multiplicity, provisionality, anti-totality, open-endedness and the rest, has the look of a sheepish liberalism in wolf’s clothing. The political goal of socialism is not a resting in difference, which is then just the flipside of a spurious universalism, but the emancipation of difference at the level of human mutuality or reciprocity. And this would be indispensable for the discovery or creation of our real differences, which can only in the end be explored in reciprocal ways.

(120)

Eagleton is, of course, looking for a politically effective way to remake our postmodern awareness of difference, as am I. Indeed Eagleton’s notion of

“human mutuality or reciprocity” as a goal to be pursued in the political sphere is a broader version of my own literary-critical pursuit, which positions texts within the material-historical moments not only of their writing, but of their critical reading. Thinking of texts as fundamentally linked to the human processes by which they are created and interpreted, I offer a way of reading for class that coheres with Eagleton’s privileging of socioeconomic equality as “indispensable for the discovery or creation of our real differences.” In this project I am foregrounding class to (re)politicize our readings of some of these differences in the writings of Woolf, West, and Warner, and to forge, in the process, a way of reading that exposes and revitalizes class as a crucial issue for the politics of literary studies.

Though postmodernism’s focus on difference does inform *Reading for Class*, I adopt a reading practice that studies texts in detail to consider their authors’ class politics as they are functioning in representation, and that juxtaposes those texts and our readings of them in order to see class politics at work in our critical practice. Susan Stanford Friedman offers a concise articulation of the historically postmodern conditions within which I am claiming to be able to read for class, and doing so in a way that is, admittedly, taking the best of both theoretical worlds:

To use affirmatively the terms *identity* and *agency* breaks the silence poststructuralism has attempted to impose by declaring them illusory constructs of humanism. To emphasize the significance of language [its significance in the poststructuralist sense, as an inescapable part of any epistemological process] and the fluidity of what Julia Kristeva calls the *subject-in-process* is to bring the insight of post-structuralism to bear on

concepts that were produced in the discourses of the Enlightenment. (472)

So although it is clear that postmodern concepts are at work within, and often useful to, any present-day reading practice, I also claim enough self-reflexivity and agency to argue that reading for class, as I have outlined and historicized the method above, can not only be part of an explicitly political process of attending to class differences in our field, but is an especially necessary practice for literary critics now, precisely in the relative absence of such a politics.

Studying Woolf, West, and Warner as writers who help me to forge a class-conscious politics of reading, I have paid attention to the material conditions of literary work—then, since, and now—but I have not assumed that these conditions are exclusive to some distinctive form of difference we can see on its own. Although I view the neglect of serious engagement with class as one of the recurrent blind spots of otherwise progressive-minded literary criticism, especially feminist literary criticism, I think it would be foolish, politically and intellectually, in that order of priority, to pretend that class is the only difference that really matters. It is not.

Given that all three of the writers I discuss are women, I am of course aware of gender identity as central to their texts and within my study of them. When a writer is gendered female, that identity can function (in relationship with other facets of identity) as constitutive of her writing, opening up certain likely subjects and occluding others in ways that become foundational. Gender identity of course also functions as an element within writing, within the representational vocabulary, so that the details of female identity are manifested variously in women's texts. Within *Reading for Class*, versions of feminist consciousness are embodied by these three authors within their historical and

cultural circumstances and inflected in the writing they produced within those circumstances. Feminist consciousness also undergirds my own approach to these writers' texts and our critical discussions of them, but I do not attend to gender in isolation any more than I would wish to attend to class in isolation, since I think a properly feminist method should work with the various identities that structure women's shared and different experiences of gender.

Because I do not want to dissect differences one from the other, I have engaged in *Reading for Class* with helpful ideas in whiteness studies and postcolonial scholarship. Though I am by no means an expert in either field, I try here to attend to representations of whiteness and racialized language as part of my critical practice. Similarly, though I am not a scholar of queer theory or lesbian literary traditions, I try to avoid heterosexist assumptions in my readings of all three writers, and to be conscious of how differences of sexual identity/performance shape their writing and our study of it. I am, as will be clear by now, foregrounding class in my readings, but I see it as part of a whole nexus of difference that can no more be separated in (or from) literature than in our lived experiences of multiply-constituted identities. Rita Felski has made this point well in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, explaining that:

any detailed consideration of the relationship between feminism and literature immediately raises a number of questions which cannot be adequately explained in terms of a purely gender-based analysis. One of the main achievements of contemporary feminism has been to show that gender relations constitute a separate and relatively autonomous site of oppression, which cannot, for instance, be satisfactorily explained as a mere function of capitalism. But it does not follow that gender relations



can be viewed in abstraction from the complex web of historically specific conditions through which they are actually manifested. (18)

Felski lists these conditions as “the status and function of literature in contemporary capitalist society, divisions between ‘high’ and ‘mass’ culture and their implications for feminism, and indeed the historical significance of contemporary feminism itself as a social movement and a political ideology that constitutes an important part of the ‘crisis of modernity’” (18). Though these matters do arise as I read for class in Woolf, West, and Warner, so too do other specific kinds of difference—racialized and lesbian, for instance—that inflect quite class-specific ones.

The three authors and their texts work together to structure my project of reading for class, and share important characteristics, but the writers and texts differ in some key ways, which despite my conjoining of the three within the historically situated process of reading for class, I do not want to underestimate. I shall say more about the approach and structure I use further on in this introduction, but I hope the description I have offered of my method here can serve as a sketch, to be filled in once the subjects of the work have come into clearer view.

To begin with, differences among the writers’ own class positions certainly need to be noticed. Even subtle distinctions matter, perhaps especially so, in a theoretical discussion of class, just as they do in our everyday lived experiences within social class systems. Woolf was, as is fairly well-known, a daughter of the intellectual upper-middle classes. West’s class position was more liminal to begin with and shifted from respectable lower-middle-class poverty to prosperous middle-class comfort during her lifetime. Warner’s class

background places her somewhere between Woolf's and West's; she was the daughter of a Harrow schoolmaster, and thus had access to intellectual and cultural sophistication without enjoying quite the same level of financial security as Woolf.

These women's marriages and partnerships shape their class positions, too. Virginia Stephen's marriage to Leonard Woolf probably represented social descent, not so much because of his somewhat lesser class status as because anti-Semitism racialized his Jewishness as an even more negative marker of identity. West risked her family's respectability as a young woman, first by becoming a political journalist and then by becoming an unmarried mother, having a child with H. G. Wells. She would eventually marry Henry Andrews, a banker, though her own income always contributed at least as substantially as his did to their country-house life. For Warner, a secret thirteen-year affair with Harrow music scholar Percy Carter Buck, begun when she was twenty, would give way to forty years of lesbian partnership with the poet Valentine Ackland. Valentine had a privileged upbringing within her fashionable London family, but when she and Sylvia set up house together in Dorset, it was primarily Sylvia's income from published stories on which they relied. None of the women I study was a working-class writer; rather, they were all women for whom writing was a principal form of work, and together they represent class positions that bridge across the lower-middle to upper-middle classes. All three were, of course, inescapably embedded in the class structure, even as their positions may have varied within it, and even allowing for their sometimes critical approach toward it. All were politically progressive in their different ways, and their affiliations and actions are well-chronicled in the available biographies.

Woolf's involvement with the Labour party and the Co-operative Movement has been thoroughly documented by feminist critics who want to dispel the enduring idea that Woolf was apolitical. Any careful reading of her work demonstrates her awareness of and engagement with political issues and her strong inclination toward feminist critique of culture. In the tens and twenties, West was a Fabian socialist and suffragette, and her politics are impossible to miss in her early journalism, though they grow more complex within her writing over time. While West would take a stand against communism in the thirties, believing that progressives were being duped by its ultimately totalitarian ideology, Warner came to see it as the best available option for acting on behalf of the injustices she saw perpetuated against the disempowered. Leftist beliefs variously inform her writing, from accounts of the conditions in which her rural neighbors struggled, to political-historical fictions and responses to the events of her own time in Europe. A member of the Communist Party, Warner went to the International Congress of Writers in Spain and fell in love with the country; her Spanish Civil War activism and writing has begun to be acknowledged in feminist criticism. I focus on Woolf, West, and Warner in part because all three were thinking about and writing about class issues in their various ways. Taken together, they also help me to read for class as it has operated in and around their critics' readings.

It is in their relation to Woolf's writing that I think the classed resonances of West and Warner can be most distinctly heard at the present stage of feminist criticism. We still seem to need a sense of how "rediscovered" women writers help us to read the ones we have been reading for a longer while, and because I want to read Woolf specifically for issues of class, for reasons I will discuss

further on in this introduction, I need to situate West's and Warner's works with Woolf's writing. I choose West because she is, unlike some of the other noncanonical women writers of the early twentieth century, both a political journalist and a novelist within the same few short years during the nineteen tens, and because those two aspects of her writing life make for a revealing re-reading of Woolf's nonfiction and fiction in class terms. Like Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) engages with the First World War, but similarly expands in social and political commentary well beyond that particular historical context. Unlike Woolf's, West's essays are often scathing, and it is for this reason too that I place her next to the more canonized woman writer, as a way of asking what kind of feminist voice literary critics have been able to heed, and what the classed implications of our choices are. West's writing gives us a more explicitly classed way of understanding Woolf and understanding our constructions of her, and West herself is a figure whose writing deserves greater critical attention for its remarkable command of a whole range of genres and styles. Specifically, within the parameters of my study I will argue that we should attend to the relationship between the recognizably modernist aesthetics of West's early fiction and the feminist and socialist politics of her polemical essays.

Warner is an eccentric choice—by which I mean not only that her writing reflects eccentricity, but also that my enthusiasm for it probably reflects my own. Yet her writing is precisely the third point my triangulated reading for class needs. Warner reworked Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) into the lecture called "Women as Writers" (1959), and so seemed to invite placement with her sister writer. Just three years before West published *Harriet Hume*, in 1929,

Warner published *Lolly Willowes*, also a novel about a witch-like woman who tests cultural barriers in what might be called a feminist mystical mode.<sup>3</sup> Like West, Warner recognized the importance of Woolf's writing, but did not adopt a modernist style in her own works, which were also similar to West's in their genre-crossing and diversity of achievements. What at first looks like Warner's old-fashionedness, in her novels of the early twentieth century especially, contributed to my choosing her as the third writer in *Reading for Class*. Warner's writing reveals a thorough acquaintance with literary form, from poetry to fiction and beyond, and she uses this facility to infuse forms that have tended in the past to express class and other oppressions with a different content that certainly makes them new. I will suggest that Warner breaks the plots of these familiar forms to offer progressive literary-political interventions in her reworkings of them. To take one of many such examples, the cross-class lesbian partnership she chronicles, between an upper-class British woman and a gypsy Eastern European Jewish woman during the Paris revolution of 1848 in her novel *Summer Will Show* (1936) might look very much like a historical romance, except that in addition to these lesbian and classed rewritings, the novel also offers characters and situations that indict empire, rural aristocracy's relationship to its working-class neighbors, and traditional masculinity. The literary forms Warner adopts are put to brilliant use as vehicles for her for her politics, much as Woolf's own different forms are.

Warner's expertise in the history of music, which led her to work for ten years as part of a Carnegie Trust-sponsored project chronicling Tudor Church Music, speaks to her sense of history as vital to the arts. That historical bent shows in her use of more traditional literary forms, during a period of

experimentalism among many of her peers. But in the way Warner uses form, destabilizing reader's assumptions about what certain kinds of characters can do and say in certain kinds of poems and stories, she is not unlike the Woolf of *Flush* or *Orlando*. Warner pushes against the boundaries of plausibility, blending realism and modernism in what I see as a radically politicized aesthetic. Considering Warner's aesthetic helps me to re-read both Woolf and West, but reading her also helps me to examine the classed criteria that tend to determine writers' places in those classed constructions we call the modernist canon and women's literary traditions.

Though I am triangulating Woolf, West, and Warner because I view that configuration as a productive one within the terms of this project, I do not wish to suggest that they represent any ideal range of writing from the period in which my readings are grounded, or of women's writing, or of British literature. Indeed I acknowledge that a study of their works, even considered in their entirety, would remain a severely narrow view into the range that is twentieth-century writing, even taken within the boundaries of national literatures. The three are also, of course, all white British writers. In that they are British writers, they especially demand to be read for class, though as I have already suggested, I believe that reading for class is a method that can be applied more widely, to writers within other national and historical contexts, as long as the reader acknowledges the way such contexts inform the literary and critical texts at hand. As English writers of this period, these women are part of a particularly overdetermined context for class in the language and politics of their nation. As the historian Gareth Stedman Jones explains:

In England more than in any other country, the word 'class' has acted as a

congested point of intersection between many competing, overlapping or simply differing forms of discourse—political, economic, religious and cultural—right across the political spectrum. It is in this very broad sense that class, however we define it, has formed an inescapable component of any discussion of the course of English politics and society since the 1830s.

(2)

Though class is, or ought to be, inescapable with regard to these writers, I think it is no accident that their American critics have tended to underestimate the significance of class in their writings as in the work of so many other authors. I am of course part of this American literary critical context, and reading from an American point of view. Though I specialize in British literature, there are aspects of the British class system that I may not ever be able to understand with the same fullness that is provided by long-term lived experience with its workings. Like our own less-openly acknowledged class system in the U. S., Britain's is specific to it and in that specificity, highly complex. Of course, it is also true that no class system is unchanging over time, however persistent its inequalities or privileges. In any case, the fact that I am reading for class backward through history and across the Atlantic means that my project is founded on a somewhat acrobatic gesture.

Indeed, I have wanted especially to avoid what I see as a particularly American misinterpretation of things British, in which we take cultural phenomena out of the context of England and import them willy-nilly into our own cultural landscape, often with oddly re-classed effects. Naming just two examples, I would point to the American middle-class frenzy for the working-class Liverpool mannerisms and music of the Beatles (who of course themselves

began by importing African-American musical traditions into their early compositions), or to the upper-middle-class American fondness for PBS's rebroadcasts of British sitcoms, usually those which date from at least a decade ago. There is an always already weird cross-pollination effect, it seems, in the cultural exchanges between England and the U. S., of which my own project here is a small literary-critical part. I am of course no less embedded in my own national and historical context than are Woolf, West, and Warner in theirs.

Although I am reading for class in the work of three writers who are British, and focusing on texts published in England during the first half of the twentieth century, the specifics of the project lead by design toward more general questions. I do not intend, by rooting my reading for class in the writings of Woolf, West, and Warner, to limit the potential range of the method itself, which can be used (with appropriate modifications that suit the individual critic and the texts at hand) within the practice of theorizing about class in different periods and contexts. Because I am an American critic who reads British writers, and because I am emphasizing the idea that class studies should be grounded in particular ways of reading, I want to call attention to my own way of reading as not only classed, but specifically historical, situated in the year 2000; geographical, coming from an American vantage point; and discipline-specific, rooted in the fields of Anglo-American feminist studies and twentieth-century British literary criticism. Since all my readings explore not only the texts in their historical and political particulars, but also the critical traditions of reading that have constructed our ways of understanding these authors and their writings, the connections between the historical moments of production and the different historical moments of reading multiply. I envision these connections as threads



which unravel from and stretch past the writers' historical contexts and into the critics' own later historical contexts, including my own.

Along the way, the threads of connection form interesting knots and loops that allow us to see the effects of material-historical developments across the twentieth century. So although Warner is tied to Woolf's 1920s writing in *A Room of One's Own* by a strong thread when she gives her 1959 lecture, "Women as Writers," Warner is also, in the particular context of England in that year, tied into historical developments of that specific moment. In 1959, the concept of "classlessness" in England (a concept that a writer like Warner certainly would have wished to question) had emerged out of the ascendancy of Labour policies in British political life, the rise of the welfare system, and the sociocultural changes in British education and media since the interwar years. In the year she delivers "Women as Writers," her commemoration of and expansion upon *A Room of One's Own*, Warner speaks back through history to Woolf, but she also speaks from 1959 forward, to my own reading of British culture from the context of American literary criticism. I see from the vantage point of the year 2000 that she speaks in a cultural moment that is perhaps more thoroughly pervaded by issues of class than most others. "Women as Writers" was given as a lecture only two years after the publication of Richard Hoggart's landmark work *The Uses of Literacy*, and just one year after the publication of Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*. In my analysis of "Women as Writers," as in my discussion of developments in literary criticism, historical particulars such as these are intrinsic to reading for class. They provide the points of attachment in literary, critical, and cultural webs that stretch across the twentieth century. So while my method of reading for class has sometimes allowed me to travel across the

breadth of those webs, I have moved along political-critical threads spun by other theorists and textual threads spun by Woolf, West, and Warner.

Since I have chosen these three writers to forge a method of reading for class, I think it is imperative to point out that it was precisely a certain significant measure of privilege—as white British lower-middle to upper-middle class, variously educated and highly literate people—that enabled them to work as writers in the first place and to forge the politicized representations I am reading. I recognize that their place in “English literature” exists within a much larger context in which the making of literature (and the study of it) should be understood not as abstract presuppositions but as regulated powers. As Raymond Williams has written about the idea of “British Literature,” there is a “radical unevenness between literature and general literacy,” and these “inherited problems and contradictions” do not by any means “resolve themselves” (*Writing in Society* 212). To study class in literature, especially with feminist intentions, without acknowledging that literature itself is a deeply classed idea would be ironic at best. Indeed, given the position from which I read for class, I engage here with what Paul Gilroy has called “the meaning of being an intellectual in settings that have denied access to literacy” (43).

Mindful then of the wider cultural-historical-material context that makes “literature” and literary studies itself, I have chosen to read for class in these three because together they challenge some of the prevailing divisions within literary-critical traditions. Studies that focus exclusively on working-class writers, although they do vital scholarly work, have tended to reify—often while trying in principle to resist—the idea that “class” is a difference that shows up most evidently in writing produced by working-class people. In a related

problem, studies confined only to highbrow modernist writers that do not consider those writers' literary representations and critical reputations in class terms imply that canonical literature bears no marks of class difference. Here, I want to foreground the recognition that class constitutes an unstable but pervasive space of difference that no writer inhabits unproblematically. Put more simply, all writers have a class identity, and although paying specific attention to working-class fictions or to Bloomsbury traditions is not in and of itself a problematic critical practice, there is a way in which such groupings reinscribe the inside modernism/outside modernism binary within the (classed) study of twentieth-century writing.

I have thus made a sort of compromise in selecting the authors I consider in *Reading for Class*, choosing one writer who clearly "fits" into most traditional criteria of modernism, one who fits those criteria rarely, and one who almost never fits them. The triad consists of a canonized writer, a recognized but not canonized writer, and a virtually forgotten writer, respectively, and it is in their various levels of stature that the three particularly help us to read for class within literary criticism itself.

I situate my readings of Woolf, West, and Warner around the twenties because they are, for these three writers, years in which issues of class, along with those of gender, sexuality, and empire, are intriguingly embedded in fiction. It is precisely by studying fictions of the twenties—both the novels produced in this decade and the critical fictions constructed around their literary and political context—that I want to demonstrate the efficacy of reading for class. Although West's and Warner's careers extend for decades beyond Woolf's death in 1941, I have not read for the way class is shaped over the long term in their

writing within those developing historical contexts. If I were to read West's writing of the sixties, for instance, together with works from other historical contexts, that method would suggest that class is the right *primary* term of analysis for all works by certain writers, and I do not wish to make that claim, particularly about these three writers. To do so would de-historicize important contexts for their writings, and mystify what I want to call the practical and specific usefulness of class as term of literary analysis. I think class is the difference most worth reading for during a particular phase of these three careers, a phase that begins in the late tens and continues through the twenties.

In the tens and twenties, all three writers are of course no less implicated in their historical-political context than they are in, for instance, the thirties and forties, but I think their representations of class within those earlier years actually provide an especially revealing range of classed fictions. These decades are rich with complexities of class in part because the tens and twenties are remarkably transitional times, bridging from Victorian-era class beliefs and stratifications to increasingly radical interwar expressions against those old ways. Gareth Stedman Jones has described the first half of the twentieth century as a time in which the classed assumptions and practices of people like these three writers were, in the paradoxical way so characteristic of class relations, simultaneously both entrenched and (always partially) enlightened:

Removed from the daily worries of domestic toil by the continuing, if diminishing, availability of servants, the progressive middle classes possessed the consciousness, both locally and nationally, of being notables, untiring in the pursuit of good causes but expecting in return a deference due to their position as experts, teachers, scientists, doctors, civil

servants or preachers. The potential terms of alliance between such people and organized labour between the Wars was most vividly exemplified in the teaching professions, in the relationship between tutor and class in University Extension and the WEA (Workers' Educational Association). (247)

Jones' description speaks rather directly to Woolf's experiences, given that she kept servants, was a volunteer for Labour organizations, and taught at Morley College. It also speaks to West's and Warner's lives, though to a lesser extent. The former was a young writer whose journalism is certainly untiring in its pursuit of good causes, though she often undercuts precisely that middle-class expectation of deference from workers that Jones notes. Warner was involved in a legal battle to improve the treatment of servant girls in Norfolk when she lived there, and during her subsequent years in Dorset helped her neighbors to struggle against rural poverty. Like West's, her writing reveals an awareness of the issues raised in Jones's account of these years. All three writers were left-leaning in their politics, but in their times as much as in our own contemporary critical politics, contradictions were an inherent part of their progressivism.

I see the period in which I ground my readings as reflecting what Stallybrass and White have called, in their 1986 work *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, "the contradictory *political* construction of bourgeois democracy" (202). Woolf's, West's and Warner's works from this period, which in its transitionality is especially rife with class contradictions, sometimes confirm and sometimes refute Stallybrass and White's claims about the way that fears of the carnivalesque "low Other" (202) are inscribed into literary and other cultural expressions. As Stallybrass and White persuasively explain, these contradictions

create revealingly classist, and always classed, effects: “Whatever the radical nature of its [bourgeois democracy’s] ‘universal’ democratic demand, it had engraved in its subjective identity all the marks by which it felt itself to be a different, distinctive and superior class” (202). I find these marks of class identity, as well as the encoded marks of resistance to the privileges of that identity, in ample evidence during the writing of the tens and twenties, perhaps even more so than in the differently-activist thirties.

In the thirties, all three writers more explicitly engage than they previously did with forms of political struggle. In this different climate, Woolf amasses historical and material detail to shape the interconnected polemic of *Three Guineas* (1938); West delves deep into Balkan history and politics to write *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), and Warner applies communist ideas to specific times and places in such historically-conscious fiction as *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938). From the thirties onward, and of course around World War II, there is a different degree of reckoning, for these writers as for many others, with the political contexts for writing. While the historical context of the thirties seems to invite “political” readings, critics have been less likely to consider class at work around the twenties.

I have chosen to read novels published between 1918 and 1929, and other writings that range between the tens and the thirties, and even, in Warner’s case, from as late as the fifties.<sup>4</sup> But all the writing speaks in some way to class as a central issue around the twenties. What works from around this period manage to reveal when read together (and when fiction is read in conjunction with nonfiction, as I will explain further on) is that class is not at all marginal to these writers’ projects within the period on which I focus, but is in fact inscribed in

(and into) them in especially illuminating ways. *Reading for Class* situates its practice in a period during which class critique has sometimes been encoded in formal experimentation, and so interrogates the canonization of those forms, which have been enduringly class-ified by critics as “high modernism,” and the neglect of other forms, often favored by women writers. I contend that reading for class works quite well right around the years of the twenties, to open up both the literature of this period and the class-ifications that have been part of its periodization by critics.

Though the full range of Woolf’s, West’s and Warner’s careers are rich in opportunities for other critical readings, and though the biographical and historical archives offer fascinating views into their lives during a particularly complex and interesting stretch of the twentieth-century, these matters are, finally, peripheral to my project. I am most concerned, as will be evident from my sustained attention to their writing around the twenties, with how these three *represented* politics, especially the politics of class, and with how our readings of these writers suggest the politics of class operating in literary studies. Peter Hitchcock’s recent essay “They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation” expresses succinctly my own view of the political value of reading for class in literary texts. He explains that “while class relations may not be obviously represented, they are a precipitate in the moment and context of representation” (27), and further on in his essay, claims, “[p]eople come to think and feel in class ways through their relations to capital, but they do not represent these relations in unified or pure forms; indeed the nature of class as a relation denies this representation” (29). It is within the writing of Woolf, West, and Warner, in their richly disunified and relational

literary representations, and around our own critical representations of these writers, that I focus my reading for class.

*Reading for Class* begins with Woolf, the best-known and most-canonized of these authors, virtually a feminist patron saint of post-seventies academic culture in the U. S. I argue that the way we construct Woolf and discuss the significance of her work has considerable implications in class terms. Though my inclusion of Woolf reflects my own investment in her, and my attention to her work is itself a kind of homage, I think it is vital for Woolfians to consider much more critically how it is that she has “made it” into the modernist canon. Her inclusion is no simple victory for feminist champions of her work, who would do well to question the emergence of a “feminist canon,” an oxymoron constituted by our own scholarly and teaching practices within which Woolf has come to function as our Shakespeare—not so much like the Judith Shakespeare she invoked, but more like William himself.<sup>5</sup> I do not wish to caricature Woolf here, to dismiss the profound influence of her writing on me or anyone else, or to underestimate what I recognize as her genius, to use a class-loaded term. But I do think that if Woolf is to remain a heroine worth having, we need to continue and expand upon the work of critics like Jane Marcus, Mary Childers, Lillian Robinson, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, Kathy Phillips, Rachel Bowlby, and Gillian Beer, to name a few. As Robinson, in her 1997 collection *In the Canon’s Mouth*, has explained, we need to apply Paul Lauter’s claim about the canon to the feminist canon: “it is in the realms of ethics and politics that the question of the canon must now be construed” (124). In reckoning with Woolf’s now central place, we can work toward a more nuanced construction of her, one that allows feminists to mark the undeniable limits of what Woolf could know and could



represent without dismissing the limits of what she did know, and did represent so brilliantly. So let us think about what kind of genius Woolf is.

Virginia Woolf was a white, upper-middle class British intellectual woman, whose aesthetic emphasizes subtlety and the turning away from anger, whose writing uses language to render injustice and difference with spectacular brilliance, but whose works seldom break with a mood of essentially polite erudition or gorgeous abstraction. Her relationships reflect both conventionality and daring, in her marriage to Leonard and her love affair with Vita Sackville-West; these connections were complicated, of course, but represent a range of sexual identities that is likely to find acceptance with lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual feminists alike. The pain of her life, the incest and mental breakdowns, speaks to feminine victimization and feminist survival, while her suicide in the face of World War II is a tragedy that seems marked by both feminine sacrifice and feminist defiance. Unlike the two other authors I read in this project, Woolf removed herself from the conflicts of life even as her late work was beginning to show a strengthening sense of engagement with them. The particulars of Woolf's life have come to signify a whole range of projected needs for those who value her writing. What then does her hard-won acceptance into canonical modernism suggest about university culture and academic politics in general, and feminism's place within them in particular?

Our answers must grapple with the fundamental role played by issues of class, race, and sexuality in her tokenization as woman writer, rather than merely noting the influence of such differences within that tokenization. In some ways, Woolf can be (and has been, in what I might call, adapting Jameson's phrase, the cultural logic of late postmodernism) constructed as the kind of feminist writer

who rocks the boats of male modernism, Anglo-American feminism, heterosexual identification, and ruling-class dominance just enough to make her compelling, but not enough to make her so dangerous as to sink those boats. As my readings of two neglected nonfiction Woolf texts along with a canonized novel, and my discussion of examples from the vast array feminist criticism on Woolf will show, I want to sound something of an alarm about the co-optation of her politics and the way our readings of her can signal our own co-optation. I offer my reading of class within and across her writing, then, as one (more) option in the ongoing and always politicized construction of Virginia Woolf. And by placing her with West and Warner, (re)creating and complicating in my own text some of their real-life interconnections with one another, I resist leaving Woolf alone in a room of her own, but try instead to give her a place among others (and Others) in a house of feminist writers, a house that needs to be situated among many kinds of women's writing, in a growing neighborhood of difference.

Rebecca West is the second writer I read, because I perceive her to be, along with Woolf and Warner, an insightful cultural theorist of class whose theories emerge in a writing practice that can be fruitfully compared in this period to Woolf's and Warner's. As I have mentioned, West had a long and diverse career, writing in many genres and forging some hybrids herself. Studying West is inconvenient to anyone with an instinct for tidy categories of criticism, and rewarding for precisely the same reason. Working within what seems to be an emerging feminist tradition of criticism on West's early work, I consider primarily her writing up to 1918 here, specifically the journalism she wrote in the tens and her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, published in 1918.

In my readings, I position West as an accomplished and interesting writer in two quite different forms—polemical nonfiction essays and feminist modernist fiction from the period of the First World War.

Her early work, in all its incarnations, shows an acute attentiveness to class bias, especially as it marks—and as it constitutes, we might say now—the cultural discourses with which she engages. Although I do not explore her later work in any detail here, and so can be accused of contributing to the widening of a gap in readers' interpretations of her, I do think that her work over the great stretch of her writing life is consistently engaged, though across many different subjects, with questions of power and with the political effects of various kinds of difference.

West's own interest in binary constructions and Manichean dualism would have been piqued by the reinscription of those either-or distinctions within her critical reputation, for the critical inquiry into West has been strangely polarized thus far. It is extraordinary to see the politics of "reading the twentieth century" writ large—and sometimes crudely—across the existing interpretations of West's career. Too often, West is either a lifelong feminist, or an mere dilettante who quickly sells out; either she is an anarchic political skeptic or a Thatcher-esque conservative nationalist; either she is most at home writing within the spheres of women's culture (in *Vogue*, for instance) or most brilliant in her bold forays into traditionally male subjects (in *The Meaning of Treason*, 1949, for instance). Readers' class perspectives inform their interpretations, of course, so that West's writing for "popular" magazines on "low culture" subjects—usually and not coincidentally, also "feminine" subjects—such as relationships and clothing, is for some not as valuable as her other writing. In this classed

formulation, her “serious,” “high culture” writing on “masculine” subjects like art, treason, or history are read as her most enduring legacy.

Bonnie Kime Scott has described the difficulty of interpreting West’s career well, also pointing out West’s consciousness of its challenges for her critics in terms particularly applicable to my own work here:

Critics of West have tended to divide her works into phases and genre types, missing a complex and integrated sense of her negotiations with culture. As early as the 1930s, West was aware of the problems her variety would pose for scholars. She warned a young woman writing her thesis that ‘the interstices [of her works] were too wide’ for a good ‘picture of a writer’. She was not eager to be pigeonholed . . . (*Refiguring* 124).

Though *Reading for Class* does not divide West’s work according to genre—indeed I pair her journalism and fiction precisely to resist the classed problems raised in such a move—I do not try, as I have explained, to conquer the critical challenge of her whole career. I think a full study of West is a most worthwhile project, but I also think we must be careful to recognize that even such a study would be a particular construction of her, as is the closest approximation, Samuel Hynes’s 1977 compilation, *Rebecca West: A Celebration*.

Even as I acknowledge the tension between our ideas of the real and the constructed, I cannot but wonder whether anything like “the real” Rebecca West can be found in any of the mightily-contested constructions of her (as is of course just as true for our many constructions of Woolf, and our far few constructions of Warner). Superlatives seem particularly to abound in descriptions of West. As Woolf wrote, West was a woman of “immense vitality” and “great intelligence” (3L 501) who seemed fearless in exploring matters for herself confidently and

conspicuously, according to her interests, which were widely variable.

Significantly, West's way of being in her world proves both attractive to, and fearsome for, her acquaintance Virginia Woolf; in the latter's diaries and letters we see her responses to West take on revealingly classed language as she notices the details of West's clothing and grooming, and mentions her wild reputation.

I certainly do not claim to have found, nor am I actually looking for, "the real" Rebecca West. Rather, I am exploring some of the ways that her work can help us to read representations of class, both within her writings and in the way those writings have been, to a much lesser extent than Woolf's, read up to now. Bonnie Kime Scott has done the richest and most extensive feminist study of West's writing,<sup>6</sup> but there is much more to be done in the way of understanding her part in the history of women's writing, especially across generic boundaries and with regard to her entire career.<sup>7</sup>

I am reading for class in West's early work in part because feminist criticism has tended to focus its attention there thus far, and I wish to work from feminist understandings of West in my reading for class. But I also think that attending to the different forms Rebecca West's class-consciousness takes across her entire career will be a useful way for future critics to read the politics of her diverse works. Indeed I hope that my own project's discussion of class in her writing during the first decade of her career will foster class-conscious attention to her writing throughout the decades of her career. West was noticing something significant about the politics of literary culture when she wrote, in 1952: "If one is a woman writer there are certain things one must do—first not be too good; second, die young, what an edge Katherine Mansfield has on all of us, third commit suicide like Virginia Woolf, to go on writing and writing well just

can't be forgiven" (qtd. in Scott, *Refiguring* 241). In important ways, West can help us not only to re-read aspects of Woolf's writing but also to reconceptualize some prevailing (and classed) ideas about "women writers" within both feminist and male-dominated versions of modernism, and within the whole range of twentieth-century writing.

The chapter I devote to Sylvia Townsend Warner begins with a rather obvious circumnavigation back to Virginia Woolf: Warner's 1959 lecture "Women as Writers." As I have noted earlier on in this introduction, "Women as Writers," while reflecting its own historical moment in class-conscious ways, also explicitly acknowledges its debt to the earlier feminist insights of *A Room of One's Own*. Warner engages with Woolf's writing directly in this way, though her own aesthetic from the twenties onward is characterized by what we might call politically radical realism, and is usually markedly different from Woolf's. Like Rebecca West, Warner began writing when she was a young woman, made a living by her pen, and continued to write well into her eighties. Also like West, Warner wrote in a wide array of styles and genres, though she is much more prolific as a short story writer and poet than as an essayist. Both West and Warner found audiences in the United States receptive to their work; while West was a hit on the lecture circuit and in women's magazines, Warner's *Lolly Willowes* was the first ever Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and her short stories were regularly published in *The New Yorker*.

During what we now see as the period of high modernism, Warner was peripheral to but familiar with Bloomsbury culture, living a similar sort of bohemian life in London during the twenties but spending most of her time pursuing scholarly research into fifteenth and sixteenth-century Church music.

Not long after her first novel was published, in 1926, Warner met Valentine Ackland and began to make the gradual shift from London independence to country living in partnership with Ackland. The couple's fondness for this quiet life meant a certain degree of isolation for Warner from the literary milieu of her own generation, but in any case, it was T. F. Powys, twenty years her senior and a Dorset neighbor, who was the contemporary writer Warner most admired.

Her own writing is highly original, though as I have explained, she likes to rework traditional forms to radical political effect. Her style is often lighthearted, with a brand of humor that suggests that her geographical distance from other writers may well have meant a clear stylistic distance from the cynicism and weightiness found in so much writing by her contemporaries. Sylvia Townsend Warner has scarcely been registered in the chronicles of literary history, despite her long career. She has a place in *The Gender of Modernism*, Bonnie Kime Scott's important anthology of 1990, but her work remains largely out-of-print. As with West, the forms her writing most often took are not as likely to draw literary critics' attention, and Warner's style is not recognizably modernist by even revisionist "feminist modernist" criteria. Yet, as some critics have pointed out—Jane Marcus, Barbara Brothers, Terry Castle, and Jane Garrity, to name a few—Warner's writing is wonderful, as I hope my readings of it will help to show. When read for class, these works provide ways of rethinking class difference, especially in comparison to how Woolf and West have engaged with it. Warner's texts are also strongly feminist and generally anti-establishment, particularly in their treatments of and attitudes about class difference, lesbian sexuality, and racial difference. Our relative neglect of her writing is itself a classed neglect, as I will argue, and quite probably a heterosexist one; that

neglect impoverishes feminist histories of the range of women's writing in the twentieth century.

As will be evident, I think Sylvia Townsend Warner (like Rebecca West) ought to be more widely read, and her literary achievements better known. I believe that Warner's representations of issues of gender, class, race, and sexuality, to name some of the differences with which her books engage, deserve much more attention in both academic and other settings. But this desire, at work in *Reading for Class* and especially in my discussion of Warner's writing, exists no less than any other in a historically constituted and materially regulated context. In *Materialist Feminisms*, Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean comment on the kind of work I do here. They write:

To some extent feminist foraging outside the canon for increasingly obscure, marginalized, and so theoretically or politically or even antiquarianly interesting figures or contexts is a response to culturally imperative desires for the new, the fashionably novel, the previously unexploited. This cultural imperative often takes the particular name of clearing new professional space, but the space of the profession is not free from larger cultural contingencies. (57-58)

I am tentatively confident that Warner's range and complexity will help to resist any simple fetishization or commodification within academe or the wider market. Still, I admire Landry and MacLean's historicizing of the feminist tradition of recovering lost women writers, and I do think that the market forces of academic scholarship shape our recoveries of writers like West and Warner. It may be that West and Warner will become as iconic as Woolf one day, and if this is the case then the requisite multiplication of critical voices around them will at



least mean that their work is read and their books kept in print. Their writing can then be used, as I am using Woolf's, to map the culture's shifting needs within particular historical processes of canonization, and their more obvious literary indictments of class power can, in the meanwhile, be read as part of a trend in noncanonical women's writing of the period that has been largely excluded from view.<sup>8</sup>

In his book *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory has underscored some key issues at work within our notions of canonization. Arguing from concepts detailed in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Guillory discusses the school and the literary curriculum as the social-institutional site of symbolic struggles over "political" inclusions and exclusions. He warns readers about the collapse of the distinction between political representation and representation-as-political, and points out that these matters of canonization are largely ones of class, given that the debates occur within and center around higher educational contexts. Guillory's correctives are certainly valuable, and help to nuance my arguments for West and Warner especially. Yet it is his privileging of the political goal of "universal access" (340) to higher education, to precisely the kind of knowledge that allows us to have canon wars in the first place, that is in my view the most fruitful aspect of his argument. His book raises important questions about the tendency of feminist (and other progressive) academics to take the path of least resistance—abstraction—in discussions of insider and outsider status, focusing on "the canon" rather than on the university itself. Yet in the interim between our current radical exclusivity in higher education—more economic than intellectual, though the two often intertwine—and some (desirable) future of thrown-open doors, we do still need to read books by some people who aren't white men. We

can do so not from within the illusion that the political impact of our syllabus choices will be widespread, but in recognition of a truth: that students are sometimes changed by particular classroom experiences with particular books.

Those books are often the very ones which foreground issues of access and experience, knowledge and power, difference and oppression. There is no question that the way a work is taught has a lot to do with the way it is experienced by students, and the processes of teaching and learning are of course marked by struggles over meaning. But it is no small matter for teachers to work, over time, to foster that moment in which a) a student whose identity is devalued in white straight bourgeois patriarchy recognizes, by seeing the material evidence of texts by certain authors, that an author who shares one or more of their own identities has penetrated into the educational and cultural nexus of power, which must therefore be not entirely blind to his or her existence in the world, or b) a student who is variously privileged within those dominant terms sees, relatedly, that his or her experience of belonging to the educational and cultural nexus of power is not universal. In their different ways, Woolf, West, and Warner are writers who ought to be (and sometimes have been) deployed in academic culture in these pedagogical as well as in other scholarly ways, not least because students would probably take various pleasure in reading the texts, along with their teachers. West and Warner were, after all, much more popularly successful than Woolf. Though the class cadences of Woolf's self-consciously aesthetic projects should not go unheard, neither should the irony of feminist perpetuation of the highbrow (albeit politicized) feminist aesthetic, to the exclusion of the more formally-accessible text, be missed.

To a great extent, I agree with Guillory's assertion about aesthetics, that

“[t]he point is not to make judgment disappear, but to reform the conditions of its practice” (340), and I am indeed arguing for different criteria of judgment when it comes to all three of the writers I am studying here. I wish I were doing so under radically different conditions, not only in terms of material circumstances, but in terms of shared assumptions about how to read, including much more widespread self-reflexivity about the politicized practice of aesthetic judgment itself. For me, however, part of that self-reflexivity lies in remaining open to the idea that the conditions of judgment, and the (re)distribution of cultural capital through the process of aesthetic judgment itself, may well prove inseparable from the fiercely hierarchical conditions under which it was formed through history, and within which we still work. Thus, while I see the political problems that my aesthetic judgments of Woolf, West, and Warner’s texts raise, I try to resist, through my own reading process and in the structuring of these chapters, the reification of aesthetic judgment’s too-often depoliticized terms.

My method of reading for class is deliberately eclectic, taking cues from North American feminist “recovery of women writers” traditions; from the British cultural materialism of Raymond Williams and cultural studies of Stuart Hall; from socialist and materialist feminist scholarship; from African-Americanist theories of whiteness and Black British ones about Britishness; from a broad range of “difference studies,” particularly those engaging with differences of racial privilege or lesbian sexuality; and from theorized categories of poststructuralism, postmarxism, postmodernism. Within the terms of this project, then, how am I using the vexed terminology of class and engaging with the myriad traditions that have shaped our understandings of class?

## II. W(h)ither(ed) Marxism? Contexts for and Methods of *Reading for Class*

The most recent hegemonic manifestation of the vexed terminology of class, and the myriad traditions that analyze class through literary study is, of course, the first *PMLA* of the year 2000. Called "Rereading Class," this issue is a "Special Topic" edition of the most prestigious American journal in the field. The five essays that reread class are, not surprisingly, insightful and well-written models of literary scholarship, but their very contextualization within the academic class system vehicle that is *PMLA* strikes me as at least equally fascinating.

The varying conditions of academic work and the classed experiences of subjectivity in academe are acknowledged within two of the essays (see Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 41, and Hitchcock, "They Must Be Represented?" 31), which both reflect some awareness of the historical/ material conditions in which they aim to reread class. Felski, for instance, makes this point about the requisite pairing of upward mobility and higher education: "class does not have the same status as race or gender in debates over equal representations in academic culture, simply because that culture inescapably alters the class identities of those who inhabit it" (42). She also, importantly, remembers to mention those for whom that inescapability is somewhat less certain, those "part-time and temporary academic workers with high cultural capital but relatively low status and income, whose class position remains ambiguous" (41). The conditions and effects of academic work are raised still more explicitly by letter writers in the "Forum" section of the issue (see "Regeneration in the Humanities" 91-92, Catherine Liu's and Fay Beauchamp's letters), who speak as a pretenure assistant professor and a community college faculty member, respectively. *PMLA*,

January 2000, is a text that is marked with implicit tensions of “rereading class.”

In her introduction, “Millennial Class,” the well-known feminist materialist scholar Cora Kaplan seems not to notice these tensions. Kaplan writes that “[i]n thought about class, theory has won out against a defiantly empiricist or historicist perspective but is largely put to use in ways that are deeply historicized” (12). Kaplan does not explain precisely what she means by “historicized” ways of theorizing class, but she seems to refer more to critics’ attention to the historical contexts for the texts they read than to the self-reflexivity that would historicize the conditions of their readings. The first part of what I have quoted from Kaplan is a generally valid summary of the trends within class studies, but her discussion problematically mentions what she calls a “reinvestment in historical work in literary and cultural studies” (12) without attending to the ways that such reinvestment may facilitate the erasure of a different history: the classed history of the academic work itself. As academics use various kinds of theory to read literary and cultural representations of the past and even to read the contemporary scene, they seem to look less and less self-reflexively at the still overwhelmingly unequal class relations that make such knowledge possible within the academy itself, as part of present-day capitalism.

Kaplan, in describing Rita Felski’s article about the lower middle class, seems ready to formulate the next new theory-product in an academic market whose forces operate unacknowledged within her own revealingly appropriative language: “[the lower middle class] may be just the class for our bad new times” (16). Though Felski’s own argument is quite carefully nuanced within her essay, in reading Kaplan’s words, I find myself bracing for the discovery / colonization by academic theorists of the lower middle class, a context which is largely the

one in which I live. For which “intellectuals” exactly are these “*our* bad new times,” I want to ask, and how precisely do they function as “bad”? Though Kaplan is perceptive in her discussion of the trajectories of criticism and of the workings of class outside academic culture, her occlusion of the tensions among intellectuals who are doing scholarly work under widely varying material conditions, tensions that surface elsewhere in *PMLA*’s “Special Issue,” is troubling.

Rita Felski’s article about lower-middle-class subjectivity and culture, and its relationship to, among other things, the valorization of the working class and the snobbish tendencies of the academic-professional class, offers a related and revealing view into the politics of class in literary study. Felski writes:

There is a noticeable silence about class in much contemporary cultural theory. This is certainly true of my field, feminism, which has been galvanized and transformed by issues of race but has yet to deal substantially with the current realities of class. While feminist critics sometimes give a cursory nod toward the importance of class differences, it is rarely acknowledged that class is a complex and contested idea, the present subject of wide-ranging intellectual and political debates.

(“Nothing to Declare” 34)

The first observation I want to make is that Felski is remarkably optimistic about the changes in the “field” of feminism with regard to race. “Galvanized?” Perhaps to some degree. “Transformed” by no means, in my view. Secondly, if there is such pervasive “silence about class in much contemporary cultural theory,” how does class also function as “the present subject of wide-ranging intellectual and political debates?” Is contemporary cultural theory, in its silence

on these issues of class, somehow existing outside of intellectual and political debates, however wide-ranging they may seem, and if so, how is it that theory has become quite so insular, even useless? Felski's language reveals that, wherever the debates in which class is supposedly being contested may be occurring, they are not usually occurring in places like *PMLA*, which features versions of what might well be described as "contemporary cultural theory." Class seems, in her formulation, to be everywhere but where we are. Class is being debated somewhere else, apparently, but there is also a noticeable silence about it in places where one might expect to find cultural debates. So where is class? Felski suggests, perceptively, that one place to look for class in academe is in the lower middle class origins of many within its ranks, who often adopt anti-lower middle class attitudes. I am paying close attention to Felski's language not because I want to be particularly critical of her ideas; indeed I admire her astute scholarly work here and elsewhere. My point is simply that her writing, particularly as contextualized within *PMLA*, embodies the very classed (and raced and gendered) vexations that are characteristic of discussions about class in literary studies at present.

Like Felski, I am theorizing about class to work against the silence she notes. My title tries to situate this project of theorizing about class quite explicitly within the reading process itself. In her investigation of the critical divides between modernism and postmodernism, Patricia Waugh has noted the importance of a text-based method: "Our awareness of postmodernism should remind us that those fictions which we call generalisations are used pragmatically by all of us as strategies of power in the mode of polemic. We absolutely need to do our theorising from and with texts, which resist our

totalising moves" (22). It is useful to juxtapose Waugh's book, which is a feminist reading of the theorized divide between modernism and postmodernism, with Paul Gilroy's black British reading of that divide. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy has exposed the way that the whole idea of dividing postmodernism from modernism occludes entire histories:

The concept of postmodernism is often introduced to emphasise the radical or even catastrophic nature of the break between contemporary conditions and the epoch of modernism. Thus there is little attention given to the possibility that much of what is identified as postmodern may have been foreshadowed, or prefigured, in the lineaments of modernity itself. Defenders and critics of modernity seem to be equally unconcerned that the history and expressive culture of the African diaspora, the practice of racial slavery, or the narratives of European imperial conquest may require all simple periodisations of the modern and the postmodern to be drastically rethought. (42)

I am mindful of the tendency within academe to draw dividing lines that are, as Gilroy explains so well, highly problematic reflections of critics' own (raced, gendered, classed, cultural-imperialist) needs. I try therefore to foreground the constructedness of such categories, which I sometimes call class-ifications. Indeed, there is one such division, the one between reading and theorizing, which I want especially to destabilize. I refer to the tendency within academe to take diverse theories, which are variously useful in our postmodern times, and to fetishize them as "Theory," by which I mean a regulated body of difficult knowledge that obfuscates its own power and excludes many readers.



As early as 1987, Barbara Christian offered a critique of theoretical language that “mystifies rather than clarifies” in order “to control the critical scene” (572). Christian offers her critique in an essay called “The Race for Theory,” in which “the race” takes on double meaning as both as an academic quest and as the group of African-Americans who, as Christian puts it, are “folk . . . [who] have always been a race for theory” (569). Christian makes her argument from within a specific context of study: African-American women’s literature, but her explanation of her doubts about the value of Theory, in that narrowly fetishized sense, for “some of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, female, Third World)” speaks powerfully to my own doubts about class and Theory, not least because I think Woolf, West, and Warner are writers who create (and help us to create) feminist theories of class. When Christian writes of African-Americans and, more obliquely, of white women: “I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb form rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms” (569), I see a connection to the kind of political thinking that shapes the literary work of Woolf, West, and Warner. Like Christian, I do not express my distaste for the fetishized sort of Theory that colonizes the texts it “reads” as in any way an affirmation of “the neutral humanists who see literature as pure expression and will not admit to the obvious control of its production, value, and distribution by those who have power—who deny, in other words, that literature is of necessity political” (571). Of course, any process that claims to be “reading for class” must attend precisely to those political conditions in which literature is made and read or unread. I therefore see Christian’s critique as related to my own critique of what I have called the blind spot of class, in that she works against the more

pernicious tendencies of dominant forms of literary scholarship in the U. S.

In an anthology entitled *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism*, Francis Mulhern writes an especially acidic description of the classed resonances of Theory:

The 'political' posture of radical literary studies is, at worst, a residual group mannerism; more typically, it combines a fanciful belief in 'subversion' *ordinaire* with a knowing disdain for revolutionary ideas, in a mutant creed that might be called anarcho-reformism. And at the center of this subculture stands its legendary achievement, a thing that no one, of whatever particular persuasion, would have thought to design: the institutional chimera named 'Theory.' Theoretical work is indispensable to all fruitful inquiry, and must be defended as such. But the latter-day culture of 'Theory' is an academic mystification . . . (17).

Though this description is certainly something of a caricature, it does describe some of the cultural and historical affect (and effects) of the "culture of Theory" in ways that are clearly linked to the specific academic context of its use, and to the kinds of critique I find valuable to the project I am calling *Reading for Class*.

Beverly Skeggs puts her critique in explicit terms of class and feminism, also taking up issues of race in her study, which is entitled *Formations of Class and Gender*. Skeggs may be read as detailing the consequences of what Christian called "The Race for Theory" in terms specific to feminist class studies, and she describes precisely the sort of pitfalls I am working here to avoid:

Class inequality exists beyond its theoretical representation. The movement in feminist theory from a Marxist perspective into more literary informed influences parallels a class movement, whereby feminist

theory becomes more 'up-market', drawing on the cultural capital of those who have had access to 'high culture' and higher education: in some cases feminist theory has become a vehicle for displaying 'cleverness' and masking the inequalities that enable 'cleverness' to be produced and displayed. (6)

As I suggested earlier on in this introduction, in my discussion of Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, such a merely clever use of theory is not at all appropriate to a classed reading process, or even to a critical practice that cares to notice class at work on the level of discourse. I hope to model a different kind of engagement with class issues in literature, a different version of feminist theorizing.

I describe my approach as working within what Susan Stanford Friedman has called a "post/poststructuralist moment" (466) of "negotiation" (481). That is, I am both working from within and seeking to historicize the insights of postmodernism's most influential thinkers. My project, to use Friedman's words, "theorizes history and historicizes theory by examining how each is present in the other" (483). And so, to use a micro-level example of this hybrid method, my readers will find that I refer to the writings I read as both "works" and "texts," two terms that signal different awarenesses within different theoretical frameworks. Indeed it seems to me that reading for class ought to recognize the mystification of the "literary work," and re-classify it as work of a literary kind. This means that we recognize the work of writing—the material and historical conditions of its production—while also remembering the way that work is produced by a constructed subject, overwritten by cultural scripts, and taken up in various discourses—in short, the way it is always already

functioning as a text.

In class studies, Marxism is of course often positioned as the first or at least most useful theory of class. It should be said that Marx's theories themselves are not as simplistic as the concept of "Marxism," variously embraced and spurned, has sometimes seemed to suggest. The very different uses to which Marxism has been put within recent critical developments demonstrate the elasticity and overdeterminedness of Marxism itself in discussions of class and literature.<sup>9</sup> For some, Marxism remains very much in the picture for the project of class analysis, as a theory that can resist or even transcend its own historical arc. For others, Marxism is an obstacle to better ways of thinking about class.

Julian Markels, in his 1996 article "Toward a Marxian Reentry to the Novel," explains, "Marxism's exposed theoretical shortcomings and massive political failures have left many like me undaunted. . . . Marxism's class analysis continues to produce for us a relevant critique and historicized yearning that in fact have acquired new impetus in the work of recent scholars" (197). Markels's reformulation of Marxism is, though he acknowledges that it is unfashionable "in today's theoretical climate" (197), seemingly motivated by the way he feels from inside his own historically fed-up subject position. Quoting a passage that is typical of Foucauldian analysis of literature, Markels then asks:

How often have you read that in the last ten years? But how often have you read someone asking just who writes these social narratives, or who inscribes the practices and discourses that define subject positions? In all too many academic venues the answer is too obvious to make the question worth asking. That answer is power: white power, male power, class

power, colonial power, heterosexual power. Power and its disciplines have us hopping like rabbits among our identity positions, and as a North American white male thrice-married middle class senior citizen left-handed Jew, I can't keep up with myself if I go for a walk and talk with my neighbor. (198)

Markels's parodic sense of the practical consequences of theory's problematization of subjectivity and notions of discourse would seem to prove that Barbara Christian's perceptive worries as expressed in "The Race for Theory" have been realized in quite diverse cultural spaces. I agree with Markels in so far as he wants to name those all-too-passively-evoked powers, to show that there is agency behind them, yet it is, ironically, postmodern ideas of discourse that help me to read his words, written ten years after Christian's, in relation to hers. Markels's article should in part be read as evidence of the erasure (which is more discursive in this case than individually intentioned) of African-American feminist criticism's early and ongoing critique of theory as an academic metanarrative. It is, I think, a reflection of Markels's own relative privilege as a subject in the academic economy that he can both acknowledge the way that postmodernism has complicated his self-awareness and can see a relatively unproblematized Marxism (which, as it tended to be used in the "good old days," did tend to ignore large numbers of people who needed the revolution differently, such as women and people of color, among others) as the best way back to class analysis for everyone. Class analysis, as I have suggested, cannot exist outside its historical conditions, which include, among others, postmodernity as an academic and cultural context for such analysis. Markels's reformulation of what he calls Marxism is thus problematic in my view, but is

also useful as a point of comparison with a second construction of Marxism, John Hall's, which would rather not even use the word "Marxism" in its eagerness to move past it.

Let us turn from Markels to Hall's essay, in the collection he edited that was published in 1997, *Reworking Class*. In his introductory essay, Hall discursively avoids the very invocation of Marxism that Markels so gleefully performs. Hall claims:

Only by abandoning the myth of bipolar class struggle can we hope to understand the socially constructed and historically contingent ways in which economic interests are articulated and pursued in the everyday capitalist world—through individual and collective action, within and beyond orientations of class. In turn, because class analysis has been a mainstay of both radical and 'mainstream' sociohistorical inquiry, reworking class analysis can have broader ramifications. It amounts to a prototype for a more general rethinking of inquiry in the wake of recent critical-theoretical, cultural, and poststructuralist challenges. (2)

What is striking to me in the passages I have quoted from Markels and Hall, respectively, is the way in which they both seek a renewed attentiveness to class analysis in literary study, while expressing their ideas in language which differs markedly in its hospitality to postmodernism as their inevitable historical context. In Hall's case, a postmodernist emphasis on constructedness mingles with what seems like a desire to use reworked theories of class to reread epistemology itself. Though Hall may be correct that the *bipolar* myth of class struggle is no longer particularly useful, the notion of class struggle is a fundamental part of what needs to be reworked, in my view. How does class

struggle happen in the present historical moment? What are its manifestations, conscious and unconscious, and its effects, economic and discursive? These are some of the questions that need sustained attention before we can make a “prototype for a more general rethinking of inquiry.” Hall’s ambitions for class theory may present a problem, given the ongoing resistance to class analysis itself within the critical context he hopes to transform.

Diana Coole has noticed this problem in her article, “Is Class a Difference That Makes a Difference?” in which she argues that the sort of debate I have sketched through my attention to Markels and Hall actually distracts us from dealing with class. Coole writes, “[w]hatever the lacunae of Marxism, one consequence of its fall from grace has been that criticisms of it have tended to spill over into suspicions about class as such” (19). In her article, Coole makes the connection between “the decline of Marxism” and the “[advent of] discourses of difference [that] have tended to situate themselves through opposition to Marxism . . . [whose] exponents have . . . emphasize[d] the novelty of their own approach” (19).

Marxism itself, for both Markels and Hall, becomes the battleground for nostalgically resisting the claims of postmodernism or for a desire to use postmodern theories (in Hall’s case “neo-Weberian” ones) to abandon Marxism as a totalizing myth. Marxism typically becomes the point of contention in discussions of how to do class analysis. I think that the issues for class analysis in literary study do not really come down to choosing a Marxism that has gotten away while we were reading other kinds of cultural theory, or in dismissing Marx’s more salient insights along with Marxism, that monolithic myth to which we cling at our peril. Fredric Jameson, whose interpretation of “Postmodernism;

or, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*" has since its publication in 1984 constituted a terrain of struggle over the meaning of Marxism and postmodernism, wrote in 1989:

Something is lost when an emphasis on power and domination tends to obliterate the displacement, which made up the originality of Marxism, towards the economic system, the structure of the mode of production, and exploitation as such. Once again, matters of power and domination are articulated on a different level from those systemic ones, and no advances are gained by staging the complementary analyses as an irreconcilable opposition, unless the motive is to produce a new ideology ... (48).

Though I think Jameson is correct in his sense that "something is lost" if the economic structures of a culture are disregarded in class analysis and are replaced with discussions of the postmodern-sounding concerns of "power and domination," I also think that class analysis need not always, as he claims, operate on the assumption that those latter are "articulated on a different level." Rather, I think it is precisely because of the impossibility of disentangling the functions of the economic system from those of power and domination that we need to consider both kinds of functions simultaneously. Indeed, Jameson ultimately suggests that studying class can be served by what he calls "complementary analyses."

The kind of class analysis I want to offer gets beyond the debate about whether or not "Marxism" must be a starting point of (re)embrace or abandonment. As Nancy Fraser's excellent *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition* points out, neither a strictly Marxist focus on class



revolution nor a strictly postmodernist focus on difference is practical. Fraser offers examples of how “the politics of difference is not globally applicable,” for instance in the notion of respect for such practices of “difference” as neo-Nazism and female genital mutilation, and how that politics is sometimes “askew of” but at other times “absolutely crucial for” fighting oppression (202). Historical and contextual specificity matters. Fraser argues that we should follow the model attempted by Iris Marion Young in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, which tries, as Fraser explains, to “integrate the egalitarian ideals of the redistribution paradigm with whatever is genuinely emancipatory in the paradigm of recognition [in which differences are recognized as worth celebrating]” (204). Given the complexity of such a project, with its balancing act of assumptions from both humanism and postmodernism, Marxism itself comes to seem rather beside the point. Marxism, as theoretical battleground, is itself embedded in history, and subject to the same sort of interpretive attempts as any actual battleground. But revisiting the battleground is not the same as understanding the war and its causes, or achieving a just peace, which is, after all, what Marx was trying to think his way toward well before Marxism.

I would like to circle back for a moment to Diana Coole’s article, which in questioning the power struggles around the notion of Marxism, aims to refocus our critical and theoretical energies on class itself. This refocusing is, of course, common ground between us. Yet she raises this issue in a way that I particularly want to address, given that I am working within what I have called a nexus of difference even as I foreground class in this project. Coole asks:

For if Marxist analysis tended to reduce all difference to class difference, is there not something about class itself, and the very power of its social

divisiveness, that tends to overwhelm other differences? The decentering of class, and of the materialist approach it involved means, however, that economic differences have become largely invisible, or at least mute or marginal, in recent discourses of difference. (19)

Coole offers a vital and well-argued corrective to the decentering of class, but her corrective is expressed in language that, I fear, sometimes risks an unproductive fetishization of class difference at the expense of other differences such as gender and race. Though she acknowledges the way class difference is interspersed into other kinds of difference, Coole separates “economic inequality” from what she calls the “plurality of horizontal differences” (22). I agree wholeheartedly with the spirit of Coole’s question when she asks, “[A]re the mute and gnawing pains of real deprivation not to be counted or politicized . . . [a]re they not an imperative that persists regardless of the circulations and discontinuities of shifting regimes of truth?” (23) Coole’s insistence on the reality of poverty, and on the disgraceful elision of that reality within cultural theory that claims to be politically radical, is a powerful articulation of compelling problems both in our economic system and in our ways of thinking about it—or not thinking about it. But there is a crucial distinction between the awareness that Other differences like race, gender, and sexuality, can *theoretically* coexist successfully in a culture that respects diversity, and the integration of such an awareness in practice, within what Coole discusses as a horizontal framework of diversity. In past historical practice and presently lived experiences of gender, race, and sexuality, hierarchy has been and is still inscribed on the bodies of Others to horrific effect. Indeed such violence can evidently coexist with the rhetoric of diversity in much the same way that the violence of poverty coexists with the American rhetoric of

individual opportunity. So although the distinction between class and more overtly “celebrated” forms of difference is worth attending to, in political practice we have more to gain from recognizing the ways that power persistently enacts hierarchy across different contexts.

Indeed, I think it is precisely the rhetoric of diversity without much acknowledgment of hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality that has aided and abetted the disappearance of class in contemporary American political discourse. Since I am reading for class from within the academic and cultural discourses of the U. S. in the year 2000, I need to reckon with the terms of those discourses within the historical moment of my reading (even as I take up the works of British writers, and explore other, equally important contexts for reading them). Class is, after all, quite possibly the most inconvenient difference to face in twenty-first century America, resisting any place in celebratory rhetoric in its obviously hierarchical functions. “Poor is Beautiful” is not likely to succeed “Black is Beautiful” as a political rallying cry. While the latter could emerge from an organized movement seeking to reappropriate white cultural assumptions about beauty and to shift consciousness on a mass level, the individualization and depoliticization of poverty in America, and the often-effective silencing of the poor within global discourses of power make a class version of such a move more implausible now than ever. John Guillory has noted the unlikely prospects for class identification “[w]ithin the discourse of liberal pluralism, with its voluntarist politics of self affirmation” (14). In a related way, Coole’s argument critiques celebratory rhetoric because of its occlusion of class. She writes, indisputably, “Liberal virtues of tolerance and respect are patently inappropriate when it comes to class, and a celebration or

fostering of differences becomes simply nonsensical" (22). But Coole also seems to buy into that rhetoric's efficacy with regard to forms of difference other than class. It seems to me that the idea of celebrating or fostering difference as it is currently circulating through our various discourses of cultural denial is itself often part of the problem, a perhaps particularly American way of not reckoning with hierarchies of various and interconnected kinds, not least those of class.

A more extended example may help to problematize these thinkers' otherwise perceptive points about class as a marginalized difference within prevailing discourses. To adapt my earlier example, would one wish to celebrate abject poverty as one might wish to honor an Asian heritage? The answer is obvious. But the idea of honoring an Asian heritage in the historical and cultural context of a violently racist culture is hardly unproblematic, as I have suggested above. We ought not to be fooled by the discursive deployment of difference at play and so be trapped into jealously wanting "our difference," class, to have its fair share along with race and gender. Class is, as I am arguing, finally inseparable from other identities anyway. At present there is little room within the peculiarly isolationist rhetoric of "diversity" to acknowledge, continuing with my example, that one's Asian heritage, *at the same time as* it is a positively-reclaimed racial one, might also be a problematically racist one, a classist one, a sexist one.

In what may at first sound like a strange proposition, I want to say as well that I think we would be mistaken, amid all this denial, to entirely foreclose the notion of self affirmation in class terms. Of course, the versions of this that tend to reach us in the first place are particular forms of self affirmation, made by those who have struggled—and importantly, those who have survived and to

varying degrees succeeded--within class hierarchy. Examples from popular culture include such figures as John Lennon, Roseanne Barr, and Chris Rock, for instance. There are also whole traditions of writing that consciously explore class identity, including a number of contemporary writers who have done so brilliantly, such as Dorothy Allison, Carolyn Kay Steedman, Tillie Olsen and Carolyn Chute, to name only a few within the context of Anglo-American women's literature. I am thinking here too of the growing body of essay writing by academics who reckon with their own difficult, shifting, and contradictory class positions.<sup>10</sup> Speaking up in self-reflexive ways about class identities as part of public discourse is an action which is almost always taken by people whose place has shifted within the class structure, and for whom classed experiences are thus de-naturalized.

It seems to me that if a broader and more radical discourse about class difference is to develop, the experiences of class identity and the political notion of class as privilege need to be strategically distinguished from one another. As Rita Felski notes in her discussion of the shifting anxieties that produce and foster divisions between the lower middle class and the academic professional class, "identifications . . . need to be clearly distinguished from identities" ("Nothing to Declare" 41). We must find ways not only to speak of class power and its effects on the have-nots, but also of class privilege, and its effects on the haves. Whiteness studies, which has developed out of African-Americanist literary and cultural studies and which works to see and to name privilege that operates by definition as invisibility, is one model for such a process.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, it is vital to recognize that peoples' experiences of difference as hierarchy produce shame, internalized self-hatreds, and guilt, all of which

influence the functioning of class no less than of any other form of difference. No one who has thought seriously about power and its effects would claim, without a profound sense of ambivalence, that they embrace their class identity with no difficulties, regardless of their economic background. Silence and guilt interconnect here in mutually constituting ways, and anxiety abounds. Felski writes that there is an "important and inevitable tension between class analysis and the logic of identity politics, because class is essentially, rather than contingently, a hierarchical concept" ("Nothing to Declare" 42). This is true of class, both in theory and in practice, though I think that it is crucial to remember that the kind of tension Felski notes exists not between two binary opposites—class analysis and identity politics—but interspersed among their various formations. Postmodern doubts about the usefulness of identity politics need not render the phrase discursively useless, a merely pejorative term by which the needs of the variously disempowered can be dismissed. If the Reagan-Bush ascendancy of the nineteen eighties was not the triumph of identity politics—white, capitalist, masculinist identity politics—then what was it? Notions of identity politics can be a part of, as well as in tension with, class analysis. Those of us who want to turn that inevitable tension toward a more effective political practice need to be creative and critical in our dealings with class.

From the broad and converging paths I have been making here—across histories past and present, geographies including England and the U.S., and political categories of class and feminism—I want to turn back now to nuance the central focus of my own project in *Reading for Class*. I would like to articulate more fully the ways that my work on the texts of Woolf, West, and Warner is, of

necessity, postmarxist. I take “postmarxist” to mean both developing out of Marxism and (inevitably) coming historically after it. By using the term “postmarxist,” I do not wish to offer anything like a rejection of the idea of class struggle or even of class revolution. When people are post-poor, post-exploited, post-miserable-because-of-their-class position, it might be time to speak in such terms, but that time is still a long way off. Rather, “postmarxist” is meant to acknowledge the vital historical role Marx’s theories have played in articulating aspects of the class system, and to implicitly signal that attempts to use a static, dehistoricized theory of class analysis amount to mere fetishization, and are unlikely to be of use to those who want and need to rethink class now.

My understanding of class is, as I have explained, both historicized and theorized, working to be both politically engaged with regard to a whole range of differences, and postmarxist. But there remains a particularly vexed term to consider: that of class itself. As Gareth Stedman-Jones, in his 1983 study of the British working class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Languages of Class*, explained, “the term ‘class’ is a word embedded in language and should thus be analysed in its linguistic context . . . because there are different languages of class, one should not proceed upon the assumption that . . . [the various linguistic contexts of ‘class’] all share a single reference point in an anterior social reality” (7-8). Though he was concerned as a historian with class as “an inescapable component of any discussion of the course of English politics and society since the 1830s” (2), I am no less concerned with class as an inescapable component of the discussion of English writers during the nineteen tens and twenties that my own project offers. How, then, do I use the term “class” in *Reading for Class*? I have noted a distinction between my use of “class difference”

and “classed difference” earlier on in this introduction, and the very slipperiness of this distinction itself is instructive, I hope, about the need for specificity when one uses the languages of class. Having discussed my method now at greater length, and contextualized it, I can explain that within the terms of the project at hand, “class” refers to an economic position experienced both individually and within groups: one’s money, possessions, property, employment, leisure, access to food, shelter, medicine, and education. “Class,” or more often in my usage, “classed,” also refers to the way one’s social position is constructed through those materialities and within a given historically particular system—which constructs one’s power over others, ability to speak and be heard, assumptions about meaning and value, expectations about exchanges with others, and so on. Even with a general definition in place, the elasticity of the term class can prove challenging, but that very elasticity can also be rather useful to my project, stretching as it does across the intersections of literature and criticism.

### III. Classed Juxtapositions of Genre

*Reading for Class* consists of three author-specific chapters, which are: “Complexities of Privilege: Class Constructions in and Around Virginia Woolf,” “‘Issues as Grave as This are Raised by Feminism’: Class-ifying Rebecca West,” and “Breaking the Plot: Sylvia Townsend Warner’s Variations On/ As Class-Conscious Literature.” The chapters share a similar structure; in all three, I work toward a detailed reading of a novel by each author, after first reading and discussing one or more texts that help me to read for class. I see these juxtapositions of the novels with other genres of writing as class-conscious ones, which implicitly and explicitly interrogate persistent assumptions about which



forms of writing are “literary” and which are “political.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, my discussions of other critics’ variously classed interpretations are interspersed throughout the readings I offer, appearing across the chapters and among their genre-crossings. By positioning other critical interpretations as an essential part of reading for class, I try to build an awareness of the politics of all readings—including my own—into the structure of the project.

In the chapter devoted to Virginia Woolf, I begin with readings of two little-known Woolf texts, and interpret them as biographical-literary moments which can situate my practice of reading for class in Woolf. The first of the texts is Woolf’s “Introductory Letter” to the collection of working women’s writings entitled *Life as We Have Known It*, edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies and published in 1931. I offer a close reading of Woolf’s essay-letter to open a discussion of Woolf’s class politics as they intermingle with her aesthetics and feminism. This essay-letter is rather obscure; the version I consider is not published in her *Collected Essays*, but published instead only within the edited collection, as an introduction. The second text I read is also largely-forgotten: Woolf’s children’s story *Nurse Lugton’s Golden Thimble*, first published in 1965, some fifteen years after Woolf’s death. My reading of the story, which was discovered wedged into a manuscript of her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), leads me toward a reading of that well-known and canonical feminist modernist text.

Moving into the West chapter, I work to bridge a split in the author’s early career by juxtaposing her journalism from the years 1912-1916 with a reading of her first novel. I discuss selections from the former genre, which though not in any sense part of the literary canon are part of the feminist recovery of British socialist feminist journalism. The readings of West’s journalism are followed by

a thorough exploration of *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), her novel of the First World War period. The novel and the journalism are on approximately equal noncanonical ground, but as a novel, *The Return of the Soldier* is of course more likely to be recognized as “literary.” It is about as equally well-known (usually as a “minor” modernist novel) in feminist criticism as is West’s journalism, but has rarely been discussed at any length.

The chapter which focuses on Sylvia Townsend Warner reads for class in a somewhat different way. Though critics have not completely ignored Warner, her work, almost entirely out of print, is certainly the least well-known of the three authors here, and the novel I discuss, *The True Heart* (1929), is scarcely considered within the small body of literary criticism that takes up Warner’s writing. Warner’s third novel, *The True Heart* is a good example of what I am calling her class-conscious reworkings of form, in this case of the Victorian novel which chronicles the life of a deserving orphan. I begin the consideration of Warner with a reading of her most obvious connection to Woolf: that lecture she gave in 1959, entitled “Women as Writers,” which I have discussed briefly here. As I explain more fully in the chapter, the lecture is both an homage to and a rewriting of Woolf’s feminist classic *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). “Women as Writers” has received some limited attention in feminist criticism, and I am arguing that it deserves more, particularly in its usefulness for rethinking the classed aspects of Woolf’s feminist nonfiction and for understanding Warner’s own body of writing. After my reading of “Women as Writers,” I provide something of an overview of the first half of Warner’s long career, discussing in some detail, among other more briefly-mentioned works, her first novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and her 1931 poem *Opus 7* in a more extended reading. Though

the first book sold very well in its time, Warner's poetry never quite garnered as much attention, in her lifetime or since. In the chapter I devote to Warner, the classed structure of generic juxtaposition works rather differently than for Woolf and West, since Warner's work is so little known in any genre. Therefore my reading for class in Warner, though as with Woolf and West delves deep into certain of the author's texts, is less a matter of discussing the classed interpretations of her writings than it is a matter of exploring why it is that her work remains so widely unread.

As I have explained, then, the structure of the project is no less class-conscious than its method. *Reading for Class* juxtaposes writing that is too often taken to be mere cultural evidence, historically relevant but not enduringly artistic, with writing that is more likely to fit into notions of literary legacy, more likely to be called "literature." It is my hope that the structure itself will work to destabilize these classed categories and will help me to create the kind of alternative method of reading for class that I have described in the preceding section.

#### IV. Situating My Reading for Class

My title puns on the idea of homework, of "reading for class" in the sense of preparing to attend to learning in a classroom, because it is to practice, especially to what I hope will be my own future teaching practice, that I wish to anchor my claims about class and literature/literacy. Conscious feminist practice is and has usually, though not always, been linked in my life to the world of the university, to my roles as student and teacher. Other roles—as daughter, as (nonacademic) worker, as partner, to name only three—have

profoundly shaped my understandings of class differences as they function within and outside academe. I have written of Rebecca West that she understood that complexities were inherent to the class structures that shaped her own lifetime because she lived on the borderline between poverty and respectability. I know what that means, and has meant, under the different historical conditions and personal territories of my own life. Carolyn Steedman explains in *Landscape for a Good Woman* what it feels like to experience one's consciousness of class as difference among groups of educated, middle-class-affiliated women: "I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't" (2). When what we revealingly call our personal class "background" enters the foreground of lived experience, and is embodied in our interrelationship with each other, we have a responsibility to search for language that can at least approximate the requisite negotiations of identity. If "doing theory" and "reading texts" are political, as many in the academy would continue to insist, such work ought to help us find ways to speak of these things, whether we are, in Steedman's formulation, the one who would have been cleaning the shoes, the one who would have been wearing them, or someone in between.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the terms “class” and “classed” in this project to distinguish between two related phenomena. “Class difference,” a compound noun, refers to the material variations between people in a social system or characters in a text. I use “classed” difference, though it can sometimes refer to those same material variations, as an adjective and noun pair, to signal the acting subject, the author or critic, behind the process of representing or interpreting class difference. So while there are class differences in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* between Doris Kilman and Clarissa Dalloway, those differences become classed by virtue of their manipulation in the author’s novel—that is, Woolf *classes* them by juxtaposing her characters in ways that reveal class differences. I describe our critical interpretations of texts similarly, as *classed*, to suggest variously-conscious kinds of actions (themselves part of a class system).

<sup>2</sup> I am generalizing here, of course. There are a number of feminist literary critics and theorists who do not view differences of class and race as less significant than those of gender, and I draw on their insights throughout this project. Still, I want to note the way that some influential writing by both lesbian and heterosexual feminists publishing over the last fifteen years has often assumed that “class” studies is the study of the working-class and “race” studies is the study of nonwhites. Such assumptions have occluded the recognition of certain class and race privileges, and have been intrinsic to the reification of white middle-class female experience as the basis for feminist analysis. This remains the case in even the recent work of prominent feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and can even be true when the analysis is explicitly anti-essentialist. One thinks of Judith Butler’s studies in gender as an example of the way that postmodern theory has given feminist thinkers new language in which to cloak some of these assumptions, which would otherwise be recognizable as similar to those ones that white, straight, middle-class feminists made in the seventies and have had to

question after the voices of Others entered the feminist conversation, and after the rise of postmodern academic discourses. In Butler's case, performativity offers us one interesting way to see gender, but may not be quite so universal as a freely available political tool for women or men whose class or race circumscribe their ability to perform identity.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of these two novels, see Marcus, "A Wilderness of One's Own."

<sup>4</sup> Since it is a reworking of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Warner's 1959 lecture "Women as Writers" speaks directly to the period on which I focus, though it does not emerge until the thirty year anniversary of Woolf's text, and though (as I have pointed out) it of course speaks at the same time from its own historical (and class) context of England, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> Brenda Silver has now made this point also, in her excellent recent study of Woolf's star status within academe and well beyond it. See *Virginia Woolf Icon*.

<sup>6</sup> I am thinking particularly here of Bonnie Kime Scott's excellent study, *Refiguring Modernism*. In the study, which centers around Woolf, West, and Djuna Barnes, Scott explains that "cooperatively these writers fill important gaps in [her] satisfaction with and understanding of modernism" (xviii). I have found that my own triangulation of Woolf, West and Warner works, for me, to do something similar with my own understanding of modernism, but I am less interested in the usefulness or instability of modernism, the central issue raised for Scott by her refigurings of the period, than I am in the way the writers I study help us to see class differences and feminism at work not only in and out of the modernist canon, but in our own classed refigurings of their "proper places." Though my work shares one of Scott's devices, a triangulation of authors, and indeed has two of the same authors as "points" in common, I am reading different texts than those on which Scott focuses, and

foregrounding class throughout the readings I offer of Woolf and West (and Warner).

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott's discussion of West's later work in *Refiguring Modernism* is in my view the best feminist analysis of the continuing threads of political thought within West's career, though it spans only a few pages (126-29). As Scott explains: "In both her fiction and her prose works of social analysis, West seeks to detect and explore patterns of dominance and difference that shape human behavior, particularly in the mechanized, war-torn, patriarchal world of the early twentieth century. She repeatedly calls these patterns 'myths,' suggesting their wide influence, but also their constructedness and susceptibility to challenge and eventual change. West reads her myths in theology, history, literature, art, clothing, crafts, architecture, and personal dialogues." I would agree with Scott when she writes of West, "The basic themes that concern [West] are consistent" (127).

<sup>8</sup> For an especially perceptive discussion of noncanonical modernist women's writing, see Schenck.

<sup>9</sup> In *Materialist Feminisms*, Landry and MacLean argue for a "more adequately materialist feminist reading of the texts of Marx" that "will require reading them *as* texts" along the lines of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "deployment of deconstruction in the service of a feminist and Marxist politics, including her use of the concept of catachresis to open up a text's most powerful contradictions" (65). Landry and MacLean offer a thoughtful discussion of the usefulness of deconstruction both as Spivak has practiced it and as an effective political tool for "class struggle" and "resistance to gender ideology" when used "in specific historico-political sites" (13).

<sup>10</sup> Collections include Zandy, Dews and Law, Ryan and Sackrey, Tokarczyk and Fay, and Tate. I also recommend "A Conversation about Race and Class" between Bell Hooks and Mary Childers, in *Conflicts in Feminism*.

<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" is a brilliant theorization of

the contours of whiteness at work within American literature. Morrison writes, "We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them" (378).

Morrison's essay is anthologized in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin's notion of the novel as a form that allows for heteroglossia is of note here. I do not mean to suggest that what he describes as the novel's ability to include both literary and extraliterary language is not at work in the novels I read. What I am working against is precisely the classed critical preference for the novel as the privileged, or perhaps the richest, locus of written meaning.



## CHAPTER 1

### COMPLEXITIES OF PRIVILEGE: CLASS CONSTRUCTIONS IN AND AROUND VIRGINIA WOOLF

*All these questions--perhaps this was at the bottom of it--which matter so intensely to the people here, questions of sanitation and education and wages, this demand for an extra shilling, for another year at school, for eight hours instead of nine behind a counter or in a mill, leave me, in my own blood and bones, untouched. If every reform they demand was granted this very instant it would not touch one hair of my comfortable capitalistic head. Hence my interest is merely altruistic. It is thin spread and moon coloured. There is no life blood or urgency about it. However hard I clap my hands or stamp my feet there is a hollowness in the sound which betrays me. I am a benevolent spectator. I am irretrievably cut off from the actors. I sit here hypocritically clapping and stamping, an outcast from the flock. (xviii-xix)*

*Therefore however much we had sympathised our sympathy was largely fictitious. It was aesthetic sympathy, the sympathy of the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and of the nerves; and such sympathy is always physically uncomfortable. (xxvi)*

*One does not want to slip easily into fine phrases about 'contact with life,' about 'facing facts' and 'the teaching of experience,' for they invariably alienate the hearer, and moreover no working man or woman works harder or is in closer touch with reality than a painter with his brush or a writer with his pen. . . . Indeed, we said, one of our most curious impressions at your Congress was that the 'poor,' 'the working classes,' or by whatever name you choose to call them, are not downtrodden, envious and exhausted; they are humorous and vigorous and thoroughly independent. Thus if it were possible to meet them not as masters or mistresses or customers with a counter between us, but over the wash-tub or in the parlour casually and congenially as fellow beings with the same wishes and ends in view, a great liberation would follow, and perhaps friendship and sympathy would supervene. . . . But, we said . . . what is the use of it all? Our sympathy is fictitious, not real. Because the baker calls and we pay our bills with cheques, and our clothes are washed for us and we do not know the liver from the lights we are condemned to remain forever shut up in the confines of the middle classes, wearing tail coats and silk stockings, and called Sir or Madam as the case may be, when we are all, in truth, simply Johns and Susans. And they remain equally deprived. For we have as much to give them as they to give us--wit and detachment, learning and poetry, and all those good gifts which those who have never answered bells or minded machines enjoy by right. But the barrier is impassable. (xxvi-xxvii)*

--from Virginia Woolf's "Introductory Letter" to the collection *Life as We Have Known It by Co-Operative Working Women*

#### I. Classing Virginia Woolf: Two Biographical-Literary Moments

In the epigraphs above, Virginia Woolf writes of the seemingly

“impassable” barrier between herself and the working-class women whose writings are collected in *Life as We Have Known It*. The editor of the collection, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, is the rhetorical “audience” for Woolf’s letter, written in May 1930 as a response to the editor’s request that Woolf write a preface to the collection. Woolf’s letter begins with the anecdotal tone familiar to readers of her nonfiction, a tone eerily disturbed, given Woolf’s suicide eleven years later, by the otherwise witty line, “I replied that I would be drowned rather than write a preface to any book whatsoever” (xv).

Written, then, in place of a preface, the letter is Woolf’s description of her memories of the Working Women’s Congress she attended as an observer seventeen years before, in 1913. Woolf is candid about her discomfort with her own privilege in that circumstance, and stops both her generalizing in the passage about “the working classes” as she sees them and her own musings about the potential for true dialog between herself and the workers with an acknowledgment of the divide as “impassable” (xxviii). Despite shared political ideals, these women’s lives and Woolf’s own were, as Woolf herself notes in detail, different indeed. While Woolf was a socialist who lived in economic comfort under the systems of capitalism and empire, the women she saw and heard at the Congress, those worn down daily in the name of capitalism, were those for whom socialism, as expressed through the Co-operative Movement, was both a political philosophy *and* an urgent practical need.

Margaret Llewelyn Davies, herself Secretary of the Women’s Co-

operative Guild, explains in her Editor's Note, "Co-operators thread[ed] the woof of intelligent spending on their own manufactured goods, thus gaining control of industry by the people for the people" (ix). The writings in the collection *Life as We Have Known It* are first person narratives from letters which detail individual women's daily lives and developing political visions; as workers, mothers, and wives, they traded goods they had produced, sharing any surplus, held voting rights in a socialist organization, and pushed for wider socioeconomic and political reforms in industrialized Britain. Theirs are powerful stories which allow us to hear a brief sample of the voices of women who, as Virginia Woolf's own writing sometimes reminds us, are silent in most of history and literature.

Woolf was uncertain about introducing the collection since, as she explained to Llewelyn Davies, she had "a strong feeling against introductions—and this one [was] full of difficulties" (*Letters* 4 191). Indeed, after receiving Llewelyn Davies' response to her first draft, Woolf replied in a personal letter to her that "to publish my version would give pain and be misunderstood—and that of course is the last thing we want. . . . Honestly I shall not mind in the very least (in fact in some ways I shall be rather relieved) if you say no. I have had my doubts from the first" (*Letters* 4 213). Later, when publication was set, Woolf refused any profit from the book, feeling that she was "paying [her] due" back to the Guild "for the immense interest [the women's] letters gave [her]"; she also came to agree with Llewelyn's earlier criticism "that [Woolf] made too much of the literary side

of [her] interest," explaining that "its [sic] partly a habit, through writing reviews for so many years. I tried to change the tone of some of the sentences, to suggest a more human outlook . . ." (*Letters* 4 287). Noting that she also added some description to one anecdote because "[a] little blue cloud of smoke seemed to me aesthetically desirable at that point" (*Letters* 4 287), Woolf's letter to Llewelyn Davies shows her still struggling with the balance of literary style and political honesty which the "Introductory Letter" eventually strikes.<sup>1</sup>

In the "Introductory Letter," her finally-published response to the editor's call for a preface, Woolf chooses a rather genteel genre, and addresses the letter not to the women whose writings will follow, but to Llewelyn Davies, whom Woolf knew personally within her own class and as a fellow socialist-pacifist. These choices are potentially troubling in that Woolf's decision to use the letter to Llewelyn Davies might be read as an unwillingness to engage in rhetorical conversation with the very women Woolf describes as struggling to overcome the silenced obscurity of their lives. As Leila Brosnan has written:

Initially it appears that the letter format reinforces differences, since Woolf does not write directly *to* the working women, but writes *about* them and quotes them in her own letter, potentially making them ventriloquist's dummies to her controlling voice. (125)

But, Brosnan goes on to argue, a more complex process is at work in the text:

Woolf reverses the power differential by quoting obscure women

rather than literary men. . . . Woolf brings the unrecognised to the fore by creating a space for them to speak in the public arena of the essay. Proving that women of all classes write letters, she involves them all in a discursive network which, while it is aware of class divisions, achieves a power of speech through gender and genre solidarity. So not only does the essay as letter allow Virginia Woolf to construct her own voice in response to other letter writers, thus establishing her right to speak, but by formally foregrounding the principles of dialogue and reciprocity, she gives those 'other' writers a voice by enclosing their writing in the 'literary' letter of the essay. (126)

Brosnan's attention to the "discursive network" Woolf creates is faithful to the complexity of Woolf's choices. Her *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism* is itself an important contribution to feminist rethinking of how the hierarchies of genre have shaped the texts we privilege; the book emphasizes the material-historical context of Woolf's writing, expanding the Woolf *oeuvre* itself into genres typically outclassed, as Brosnan notes, by Woolf's fiction.

In reminding us of Woolf's concern with form in both fiction and nonfiction, Brosnan's reading of this piece as part of Woolf's development of the consciously feminist "essay as letter" is illuminating. While I think it is true that Woolf uses the form to work against class hierarchies, I also think the form reflects Woolf's own classed power as a writer, her authority to create "a discursive network" in the first place. Unlike Brosnan, I would not

go so far as to claim that Woolf's generic innovations "allow[ ] her to *overcome* her difference, her sense of being a middle class visitor'" (125, emphasis added), but I shall argue here that the "Introductory Letter" allows Woolf to create a form which can hold and even display the very tensions she experienced at the event which inspired it, tensions I think she wanted the "Introductory Letter" to reveal.

It may be that for Woolf, the creation of a piece like the "Introductory Letter" allows the formal consideration of these very issues in ways that her diary entries, for example, recording frustration with particular individual women of the working classes, do not. In her introduction, Woolf specifically discusses the reasons why women of her class are ignorant of the realities of working-class lives. She thinks in detail about the social and material conditions of difference that keep her from understanding the working women's lives. But as Mary Childers argues in an article which asks some key questions about Woolf studies in general, Woolf's letter at the same time exhibits "denial" and "repress[ion]" particularly of the "interlocking" experiences of women of different classes—of the fact that women like Woolf herself were giving the domestic orders to servants such as these women writers (67). There is evidence of complicity and worse in Woolf's diaries, and the "Introductory Letter," though it is a more consciously-crafted piece of political writing, also reflects some of Woolf's class blind spots. Childers mentions "Woolf's insistence on aestheticized political arguments" as one of the problems her work should raise for feminist critics. While I think it is

important to resist the tendency that Childers critiques in feminist criticism, the tendency to privilege Woolf's versions of political arguments because they fit the classed criteria of worthy "literature," I also think that reading for class in Woolf must engage with the classed details of Woolf's reliance on intricate literary technique when crafting prose like the "Introductory Letter."

Though explicitly, and insightfully, pushing the celebratory assumptions of Woolfians in her reading, Childers tends herself to assume that Woolf's style obscures, rather than serves as an inextricable part of, her substantive political views. For instance, Childers sees some Woolf texts such as *Three Guineas* as performative in an almost dangerously subtle way, "seem[ing] to register complexity" while they "may also register complicity or simple evasiveness" (64). As I will argue in this chapter, it is precisely by attending to the classed details of Woolf's texts that we can see a particular (and canonized) version of class complexity at work. It is when Woolf critics ignore the workings of class in her texts and in their own readings that Woolf's style becomes not just a literary-political choice, but a political problem embedded in literature, a problem that then gets replicated in literary studies. Since class blindness has all too often marked the history of feminist Woolf criticism, I would agree with Childers's critique of the way Woolf is "overpersonaliz[ed]" (62) by feminist critics, with her claim that "[Woolf's] writing functions as an impediment to the development of feminist theory in certain sectors of the academy even today" (66).

As Childers very rightly notes, it would be an "illusion" to believe that

Woolf's "thought constitutes an entirely consistent totality" (62); indeed as I have explained, I think Childers offers an astute analysis of critics' tendencies to create a superheroine in Virginia Woolf without fully reckoning with class issues in her work. One nuanced approach to Woolf's *oeuvre*, offered by Sara Ruddick, seems to take heed of Mary Childers' important cautions against seeing Woolf's vision as consistently cohesive. In "Peace in Our Time: Learning to Learn from Virginia Woolf," Ruddick has perceived inconsistencies in Woolf's understanding of class and gender, explaining how "[t]he category 'woman' [Woolf] employs is alternately acutely aware of and arrogantly blind to class and race differences among women" (233). My own readings for class in both Woolf's writing and in our critical constructions of her are working to recognize the inconsistencies within feminist politics. There is no one political version of Virginia Woolf that can emerge from her range of writings, no simple answer to her ways of seeing or not seeing difference over the course of her life. However, it is equally important to recognize the significance of Woolf's beliefs about what writing is and does, since her writing is the means by which she comes to us. Her aesthetics are of course shaped by her class position, but they are also intrinsic to her efforts to resist the privileges of that position.

Woolf was in the inevitably vexed position of being both upper-middle-class and a socialist, and her feminism is not always sufficient to resolve the class tensions of that lived contradiction. Her writing reveals both the less successful moments of her struggle against the classed tensions



that mark her feminism, and the moments in which she recognizes more fully the complexities of her own politics.

I think that Childers articulates a crucial issue in Woolf studies which is, as she suggests, less about Woolf than about what we choose to find in her—an excuse for our own inconsistent attention to class and race, and a role model who reflects back the most flattering version of the liberal literate lady (perhaps with a radical heart) whom some of us in the academy are trying to be. Childers's reading of Woolf's place within feminist literary criticism raises vital questions about feminist constructions of Woolf and about how Woolf's class position sometimes undercuts her feminist awareness of what Childers calls "the nesting of class and gender" (62). Although I agree entirely with her assertion that "we remain in the grips of an expectation that literature can transcend class conflict" (68), I do not see Woolf's *writing*, especially taken as a whole, as "imped[ed]" (66) by that expectation to quite the same extent that critical readings of Woolf's work are, particularly those offered by her North American feminist critics. It is not that I perceive Woolf as somehow able, through a unique feminist genius, to transcend her class position or her historical moment, but rather that I see her as worth reading precisely because she was often conscious of that position, and pondered the possibilities for change in the class structure as she knew it.

Investigating the ways that Woolf's class awareness plays out in her writings—or gets trapped in them as class blindness—is a worthwhile practice of reading for class, because class studies ought not to be confined to writers

who identify (or who have been identified) as working-class, or to upper-middle class writers who can be shown to have been radically progressive in writing that is specifically about class. Reading for class must recognize and explore the more obvious marks of class in these instances, but must also notice the less obvious and sometimes more complicated workings of class in writing that does not seem to be in any specific way "about class." In fact I argue that it is especially important to study Woolf's fusion of form and content in detailed and classed terms, since she has become such an iconic figure under which to rally for many in academic feminist circles.

When the cover of a used copy of *Life as We Have Known It* caught my eye in the bookstore, some years ago now, it was the mention of Virginia Woolf's "Introductory Letter," featured on the cover, that confirmed my inclination to buy the book. Here was something written by Virginia Woolf that I had not known existed. When I read the book, I found that Woolf's careful framing of the writings by women whose names were not famous—Mrs. Layton, Mrs. Wrigley, Mrs. F. H. Smith, Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Yearn, and a few others—was, though interesting to me as a Woolf reader and critic, not more interesting than the working women's accounts of their lives. Because the women who wrote them were historically and materially unlikely to become published authors, their work strikes me as especially powerful, as does the combination of political foresight and persistence that has kept their work in print. We do not have very many writings that come from and speak to "Memories of Seventy Years" as a worker in this period of

British history, or to life "In a Mining Village," or to factory years as "A Felt Hat Worker." These are experiences that too often remain unwritten and unread, and the writers in the collection made them live for me.

How interesting, then, that it was my knowledge of Woolf as an author worth seeking out—a knowledge that I took on through women's studies, in the context of my own higher education—that would lead me to these writers in the first place. My decision not to read their accounts of working-class life in detail here is itself a classed one, I realize, but I concentrate on Woolf's introduction to their texts in part because I want to use her fame to replicate, in the different historical context of feminist literary criticism, the move she herself made when she agreed to write the "Introductory Letter." I hope that my own reading, drawing attention to class issues in Woolf studies, will lead others, through Woolf, to the very texts she thought were deserving of readers' attention. I want to acknowledge the class context in which I make this choice, while also hoping that the choice itself will become one way of reshaping that context. I focus on Woolf's "Introductory Letter" here for the same strategic reason that a publisher decided to put Woolf's name on the cover of *Life as We Have Known It*. I admit that I want to exploit the economy of Woolf's market value in feminist criticism to encourage not only a rediscovery of her "Introductory Letter," but also a wider reading of the collection she introduces, which she herself had been challenged and moved by on the occasion of her own reading.

I am therefore betting that reading for class, confined as I practice it (in

this chapter) to Woolf's own writing, can have wider consequences beyond my work here and in the chapters that follow this one. Within the terms of my study, I think that Woolf's legacy to us in the "Introductory Letter" is not only her own "letter of introduction" given on the working women's behalf, but her willingness to record, in a complex style faithful to her understanding of artful prose, her engagement with their writing. Woolf gives us a self-reflexive, upper-middle class version of participation in a working-class cause—first and less successfully at a political meeting, and then, more successfully, in a literary encounter. The aesthetic and political are, as always, inseparable for Woolf in specifically classed ways, even in such a practical request as a preface, but her aesthetics are, here as elsewhere, put into service for her politics.

Though it is essential that feminist critics read for the political within the literary, I think the "Introductory Letter," like any writing Woolf worked on over time, demands a close reading because it is self-consciously both political and literary. Within the classed politics of feminist literary studies, and in the historical context of 1992, Mary Childers offered her reading of Woolf as a corrective, and admittedly a perhaps "overdrawn" (78) one. Reading for class in a different historical moment, I believe we can keep Woolf honest for feminism without doing a disservice to Woolf's writing or oversimplifying what literary studies teaches us to notice—language and its processes.

I am arguing that we need to read Woolf in these terms, and indeed I

will go on here to do so, but I recognize that this process is problematic in its class assumptions. The terms of reading Woolf in this way tend to presume a trained kind of meta-literacy and the time to indulge in it. Nevertheless, it would be pointless to pretend that as literary critics we are not invested in precisely these sorts of classed readings, even if we do consciously bring politics to bear on them. As will probably be evident by now, I am mindful in the following analysis of the "Introductory Letter" of the fact that virtually all of the terms of this reading, and the writing to which I am turning, are classed.

The "Introductory Letter" demonstrates in varying ways just how much one needs to attend to the literary to get to the political in Virginia Woolf. Mentioning the moments at the Congress when the working women would make fun of "ladies"—their accents and their impracticality—Woolf ironically mimics and reveals her own partial complicity in the predictably defensive response of her class, summarizing the reactions of the middle-class visitors: "[I]f it is better to be working women by all means let them remain so and not undergo the contamination which wealth and comfort bring" (xxvi). When Woolf discusses the "Shakespearean colorfulness of working-class language" (68), as Childers paraphrases the piece, I think she is partly satirizing the stereotypical perspective of her own class and partly revealing her share in it. Though Woolf is clearly pointing out the limitations of what Brosnan calls "gender solidarity" (126), I do not read her here, as Mary Childers does, as "relegat[ing] all [political] issues back to the

realm of literature" (68). Rather, I think she is using literature to understand and to describe a sociopolitical reality of which she was ignorant. This was a process familiar to her indeed—her own education being the first extended example of it—a process in which literature brings to the circumscribed lives of some women a knowledge of particular ways of life or particular experiences. As feminist literary critics, we should recognize that Woolf, whose life contained both political action and literary production, used literature, even with all its classed complications, as a way to try to understand political and social difference.

At the beginning of the "Introductory Letter," in passages which capture Woolf's observations of real-life workers, Woolf seems inclined to underestimate differences among flesh-and-blood women of the working classes, to overestimate their noble hardiness. Her narrative of the conference up to a certain point keeps circling back to her own inability to imagine the content of the lives described in the speeches of the women, whose names are sometimes listed in sequence, but who are mostly referred to without distinction as "they." In Woolf's eyes, "their" faces and clothing sometimes blend into an undifferentiated mass. But the text in which these descriptions appear is not a "real" letter; it is an even more self-consciously designed rhetorical performance. Woolf's construction of her "letter," like the letters in *Three Guineas*, is careful; the argument unfolds gradually and within the literary structure with which Woolf experiments. In the course of this unfolding, setting her first impressions and initial alienation up for a fall,

Woolf works toward an anecdote which shows us a Virginia Woolf who is capable of being shaken out of her class-based biases, of seeing, with the right influence, how to resist her privileged point of view from within it.

In the early part of her letter, “lowballing” her reader’s expectations for political transformation in a technique typical in her polemic writing, Woolf has described her sense of alienation, her guilt, and her perception of the impossibility of genuine connection between herself and the women attending the Congress; she recalls that during the lunch break on the first day of the Congress, she nearly went to tell Margaret Llewelyn Davies that “one was going back to London on the very first train” (xx). Woolf concludes her discussion of the conference in a tone which suggests hopelessness; she writes of big plans—“the world was to be reformed, from top to bottom, in a variety of ways”—and of their lack of fulfillment, of the women returning anyhow to their districts to “plunge[ ] their hands into the wash-tub again” (xxiii). Later on that summer, Woolf goes to Llewelyn Davies’ office in Hampstead to discuss her impressions of the Congress, and begins to detail the impassability of the divide she had been pondering when she was an observer.

During the visit, Davies, the activist desperate to raise the political consciousness of her literary-minded friend, unlocks a desk drawer to reveal to Woolf the pile of writings by the working women from whom Woolf feels alienated. It turns out that Davies has saved various letters and life accounts from the women in the organization, and Davies explains that if Woolf read those writings, the work of writers from the working class, “the women

would cease to be symbols and would become instead individuals" (xxix). Here is one key moment in Woolf's aesthetic structuring of the letter, her crafting of the argument. She signals the potential evolution of her own class politics through a reading experience, thus implying that readers of *Life as We Have Known It* might be able to be similarly changed.

Though Woolf is eager, in her retelling, to see the writings, Davies feels uncertain of whether showing them to a writer like Woolf constitutes a betrayal of the women who wrote them, and between this reluctance and the many interruptions of personal and wider history, it takes seventeen years for Davies to collect the papers and for Woolf to write the introduction to the collection by the Co-operative women. Fittingly, it is an activist woman, Davies, who first challenges Woolf's sense of futility, and it is in keeping with the real-life difficulties of such matters that it is only over a long span of time and through the mediating realm of language, through reading and writing, that Woolf discovers how to frame her letter and to draw appropriate connections between her own life and the lives of working-class women.

It is to Woolf's credit that she hesitated to presume she could understand these writers' lives, however eloquently they may have sometimes described them, and to her credit that she decided to try anyway, over time, and chronicled that effort in what would eventually become her "Introductory Letter." In crafting the piece, Woolf shows us that it is only after Davies' point of view collides with her own, and the writings gradually make their way into Woolf's line of vision, that she can begin to recount the



*particular* stories of the working women from the conference. After the rhetorical “turn” of Davies’ opening the drawer, Woolf’s inclusion of the personally specific details of the women’s lives, and the specificity of information about their work and their intellectual-political struggles, attest to her engagement with the women not as symbols, as they were in the first pages of her letter, but as individuals and as writers.

Woolf’s prose style here becomes a frame for their voices, while her incorporation of her own initial obtuseness and of the literary critic’s dissenting voice, right before the emergence of quotations from the writings themselves, deliberately sets those authority voices up for failure so that they become subsumed by the momentum of Woolf’s growing understanding and by the undeniable details of the women’s accounts of their lives. Woolf responds to those details with a reserved emotion which neither pretends to really understand the lives from which they come nor denies the realities of the literary and political climate into which the writings emerge. Importantly, it is her own claim for the power of reading and writing to change us politically that is enacted here. But it is not only or even principally Woolf’s political consciousness that effects change—rather, it is her encounter with the working women’s writings. Only after reading those can Woolf write her differently-classed version of literary persuasion, which is an effort to use her own measure of power to shape readers’ ways of seeing the writings she introduces. I read the “Introductory Letter” as an intricately-crafted narrative of Woolf’s learning, against the backdrop of a prevailing

tendency of her class to make left-leaning excuses, how to make a more legitimate connection to these working women writers and to take a more nuanced look at their lives. The letter is not a window into her unchanging classism, but a description of her shift in perspective over time, a shift made possible by the availability of writing that linked her mind to the minds and lives of working-class women. As she well knew, that writing would not have come to her without the practical political action which had forged the existence of the Co-operative Movement itself.

Woolf's letter does not fail to reckon with one of the issues which the powerful use in order to perpetuate the silence of workers who might be writers: the issue of literary merit. In a typical set-up for the investigation of this question, Woolf writes: "The papers which you sent me certainly threw some light upon the old curiosities and bewilderments which had made that Congress so memorable, and so thick with unanswered questions" (xxxvii). But Woolf immediately acknowledges the arguments and prejudices which will undercut the collection's potential to affect the reader who does not share her memories of attending the Congress: "It cannot be denied that the chapters here put together do not make a book--that as literature they have many limitations. The writing, a literary critic might say, lacks detachment and imaginative breadth. . . . Here are no reflections, he might object, no view of life as a whole, and no attempt to enter into the lives of other people" (xxxvii). Woolf seems to imagine the elite modernists' responses to such a collection, and though it is difficult to discern to what extent her own voice is

present within such a critique, she is clearly conscious of the way that the judging voices of the powerful, a group which to some extent, at least, includes herself, might shape the book's reception.

Given this awareness, it is telling that her next move is self-consciously to use her own measure of power, as one of the "literate and instructed," to turn from that voice of "the literary critic" toward the works themselves, to open a space for the working women's voices. She first acknowledges the material circumstances of creation as central to the artist's product, framing her praise for particular examples from the collection with the sentence, "And yet since writing is a complex art, much infected by life, these pages have some qualities even as literature that the literate and instructed might envy" (xxxviii). Having pointed to the quality of several examples, Woolf interjects with her own views, such as "Could she have said that better if Oxford had made her a Doctor of Letters?" and "It has something of the accuracy and clarity of a description by Defoe" (xxxviii). Though she finds she must use the only available terms of cultural and literary praise she knows, Woolf refuses to participate in the classed judgment that makes the determination about what is literature and what is not. She proceeds rhetorically to remove herself from the "debate" she has imagined: "Whether that is literature or not literature I do not presume to say, but that it explains much and reveals much is certain" (xxxix). Though she appears to leave open the question of whether or not the writings are "literature," she seems also to begin to forge her own standard here, hinting that whatever

“explains much and reveals much” is at least literary. Those who could “presume to say” whether this collection is worthy of being called literature would judge from a gender and class-based confidence, from a certain sense of entitlement in the realms of taste. Woolf, barred from that presumption as a woman though half-permitted by virtue of her class to try her hand at judging, wants to dissent from that presumption in all its classed resonances. In the “Introductory Letter,” Woolf tries to resist the “literature” debate because she sees that it is part of the classed discourses in which she finds herself, but of course she cannot fully escape such a debate any more than she can escape the cultural context for it.

I think Woolf may be articulating in this passage that a less stable, but far richer way of seeing the literary and the political is available to us, but I also think her rhetorical complexity is especially revealing. Her diffident tone and apparent self-erasure, followed by an insistence on the validity of at least part of her own answers to those rhetorical questions, are recurring characteristics in Woolf’s nonfiction, and suggest a central tension. These aspects of Woolf’s writing seem to me to be a reflection of her own simultaneous inevitable complicity in, and conscious political resistance to, systems of class power. Her feminism intermingles with this classed duality, and so Woolf often ends up creating an aesthetic that is multivalent because that aesthetic may be the only way to register the political intricacies of her position. It is as though her class (and other identity positions) predisposes her to aesthetic complexity, and her very reliance on aesthetic complexity

means that her writing takes on the classed qualities we have come to recognize as the signs of "literature."

As in other writings by Woolf, particularly *A Room of One's Own*, the letter invokes the classed terms of judgment, but it simultaneously reflects the gendered experience of self-doubt. When Woolf will not "presume to say" something, one can read that refusal to presume not only in class terms, but also as evidence of her internalization of patriarchal versions of femininity, which coexist in the letter with her ability to see through the tropes of power. Though this tension may have been fueled by the author's frustration at her exclusion from the formal education her brothers enjoyed, an exclusion which probably meant a sense of inadequacy as a literary critic in her own right, Woolf's feminist and class-conscious understanding of the biases of the male establishment allows her to destabilize the notion of aesthetic judgment.

Woolf concludes the "Introductory Letter" with her own passage describing the lives of the women whose writings follow her letter, the description revealing the materialist awareness which marks her accounts of women's experiences in *A Room of One's Own*: "These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity. . . . The writing has been done in kitchens, at odds and ends of leisure, in the midst of distractions and obstacles--but really there is no need for me, in a letter addressed to you [Margaret Llewelyn Davies], to lay stress upon the hardship of working women's lives" (xxxix). Woolf understood many of the fundamentally classed differences between

her life and these women's lives, and she understood how and why any woman's writing, when it got written at all, was often lost to literary history. She had recognized and eloquently articulated in the "Shakespeare's Sister" passage of *A Room of One's Own* what could happen to women who wanted to be artists under the wrong material conditions.

As to whether there can be any cross-class feminist connection between her fictional working-class Judith Shakespeare's imagined life and suicide as an aspiring woman artist and Woolf's own life and suicide as a class-privileged practicing woman artist, I think the problems of comparison are considerable. Certainly the class differences matter, since the whole point of Woolf's evocation of Judith Shakespeare as a character is to try to imagine a hypothetical writing career that she believes was not possible historically for such a woman. Those of us who would presume to say that there is a feminist connection between Woolf's own life and death and the fictionalized "life" and "death" of Judith Shakespeare must remember that the latter is herself a creation that comes from Woolf's own classed perspective. The still-raging (and deeply classed) debates about *William Shakespeare's* own "real" identity should forcefully remind us that the imagined histories of any writer, even one who leaves textual and biographical evidence behind, have a great deal to do with the class (and race and gender) positions of those doing the imagining. So just as Judith Shakespeare is the creation of a particular feminist's classed vision of what remains unwritten in literary history, the classed feminist visions of Woolf we construct through literary criticism tell

us at least as much about our own politics of critical reading as they do about “the real” Woolf.

This does not mean, however, that biographical and textual evidence is not immensely useful to Woolf criticism. Woolf’s diaries and letters—documenting a life one could hardly describe, regardless of her class security, as entirely charmed—and her other literary works are *available* to us, while Judith Shakespeare was a historically likely fiction. Feminist critics have uncovered evidence of real Judiths, but as Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* still brilliantly reminds us, there are many working class and female writers who are entirely lost to us because they never began to write or because their writing was destroyed in some way or another. Woolf herself hoped to collect what *was* available in a planned work which she wanted to entitle *Lives of the Obscure* (Marcus, *Art and Anger* 79).

She was both eager to acknowledge such histories and wary of the class position from which she would view them. As Susan Dick notes, despite several revisions Woolf never published her story “The Cook,” which was based on Sophia Farrell, the Stephens’ family cook, and Woolf’s writing about the Brownings’ cook in *Flush* remarks upon the silence and “invisibility” (within her world) of such women (123-125). As I shall argue in my readings for class in other Woolf texts, Woolf’s writing that tries to imagine a subjectivity for working-class women is particularly unable to resist its own classed ideologies. But such passages are relatively rare in Woolf’s texts, which in my view are no less important to feminism in their reflection of

Woolf's class position. Indeed, it is precisely by developing a way of reading for class that we can learn how class position structures the very literature, however politically progressive, whose insights we still too often universalize.

Indeed our resistance to a transcendent feminist politics of reading might well be grounded in the recognition of our own history as feminist literary critics. For it was within the historical-material conditions of the male-dominated spheres of publication and criticism that feminists recovered Virginia Woolf some thirty years ago. Even Woolf's extant body of writing, from which so many readers now take inspiration, was itself almost eclipsed. Virtually unread just a few decades after her death, relegated, when acknowledged at all, to the shadows of male modernism, only partially in print, depoliticized by her surviving relations, then (and still) variously misread and misconstrued, Woolf has emerged, through struggles over time, for feminist literary critics and many other readers, as the rescued/reconstructed, deserving genius. But as Woolf herself would have been quick to recognize, the genius we now claim for her could probably not have found voice in a woman who did not share at least some of Virginia Woolf's many privileges.

Thanks largely to the work of feminist critics in the U. S. during the seventies and eighties, whose recovery, editing and criticism of Virginia Woolf's nonfiction and lesser known fiction have (re)constructed her as the primary literary feminist foremother of this century, Woolf's legacies to



literary-intellectual-political history are clearer than they once were. In their range of incarnations, Woolf's ideas and art have given significant intellectual and personal richness to scholars who very much needed such legacies in the last thirty years.<sup>2</sup> Through the gradually increasing access to Woolf's papers, various constructions of Virginia Woolf have emerged; feminist ones have been central, and feminist studies among others have sometimes shown awareness of class, race and sexuality as issues of equal importance to gender in Woolf scholarship.

In literary-critical history over the last thirty years, the feminist combination of recovery work, critiques of a male-centered notion of Modernism, and revisions to the male-dominated Modernist canon has reframed the ways readers view Virginia Woolf and her writing. The publication of Bonnie Kime Scott's anthology *The Gender of Modernism* was a significant milestone in the opening-up of the modernist canon, collecting writings by many "lesser" women writers, contemporaries of Woolf, and raising enduring questions about constructions of modernism that isolated Woolf to make her a token woman. Postmodern readings of both traditional "major" and "minor" writers of the early twentieth century have also enriched our knowledge of these writers and given us new ways of reading them. Pamela Caughie and Patricia Waugh, for example, ask not only about the place of writers such as Woolf within (or outside of) "Modernism," but interrogate the category of modernism itself, which has been destabilized by postmodern developments in criticism and theory. My own readings are

certainly indebted to these important and still-emerging traditions within Woolf scholarship, and have been influenced in particular by critics who engage with what I have called the nexus of difference as it functions in Woolf's writing.

Given the proliferation of critical writing on Virginia Woolf, and the progressive politics of the author and of many who read her, critical analyses that explore the representation of a variety of differences within her works are plentiful. To provide my readers with a sense of the directions these traditions have taken, I will briefly discuss some examples, primarily taken from studies that read Woolf in terms of class and of postcoloniality and race. I will then move into an exploration of the classed constructions of Woolf that have been produced in Woolf studies more generally, but especially in North American feminist Woolf studies.

One of Woolf's critics, Juliet Dusinberre, has noted that Woolf "recognized, more than she has often been credited with, that differences of class separate women from other women more effectively than gender can divide them from men of the same class" (14-15). Dusinberre's study, which also touches on Woolf's complex position on race, has explored Woolf's diaries as expressing sometimes unenlightened (or downright nasty) attitudes toward servants and toward other races. This critic's observations about the "Introductory Letter" to *Life as We Have Known It* illuminate the key issue of Woolf's alienation from the working classes as something Woolf herself understood to be rooted in differences between her embodied

experience—mostly a *lack* of connection with the body—and the physical lives of the women at the Co-operative conference, whose labor shaped them differently in both body and mind.

Paying even closer attention to form as intrinsic to Woolf's political critique, Georgia Johnston has perceptively read *Between the Acts* as revealing Woolf's awareness of "class convention [as a] performance but a performance that creates and solidifies the power of those inside" (65). In Johnston's reading, Miss LaTrobe the artist and Woolf herself create a Brechtian "alienation effect for readers, an awareness of class construction" (72) which helps us to see what is otherwise naturalized. Similarly crediting Woolf's recognition of difference beyond gender, Marianne DeKoven reads *The Voyage Out* as exposing "the whole package of ideology [gender, empire, class] that Woolf's entire career will attempt to explode and replace" (103). DeKoven's analysis of the arguments for and against the political potential of modernist form exposes their tendency toward reductiveness, while her own explanation tries to show how "from within dualism, modernist texts imagine[ ] an alternative to it . . . an alternative that maintains difference while denying hierarchy" (25). Of course, a fuller reckoning with class in Woolf's writing would complicate the notion of maintaining difference while denying hierarchy, since class is, by definition, based on socioeconomic hierarchy.

Key insights about Woolf's views on "economics, gender, and war-making" (xi) emerge in Kathy Phillips' excellent *Virginia Woolf Against*

*Empire*, in which Phillips argues convincingly that “[f]rom her first book to her last, Virginia Woolf consistently satirizes social institutions. She accomplishes this criticism in her novels chiefly by means of incongruous juxtapositions and suggestive, concrete detail, which can be interpreted as metaphor” (vii). Phillips’s description of Woolf’s method is especially apt. Indeed I will be reading for class in *Mrs. Dalloway* because I view that novel as a major achievement of this method, in which the incongruity of Woolf’s juxtapositions and the material details in her text are foundational to its classed criticism of social structures.

Phillips’s *Virginia Woolf Against Empire* is, as its title makes clear, a reading of Woolf’s racial politics within the historical context of the British empire. Phillips’s insights are part of an important development in Woolf criticism which takes its cues from postcolonial and race studies. Jane Marcus finds that *The Waves*, which is traditionally considered only as an example of “apolitical” modernist aestheticism, is actually a radical critique of whiteness and imperialism; Marcus’s reading strives to make race studies an integral part of recent feminist scholarship on Woolf by explicitly politicizing the text that has, not surprisingly, been canonized as Woolf’s most “high modernist” work. Theresa M. Thompson, in “Confronting Modernist Racism in the Post-Colonial Classroom: Teaching Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* and Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle*” interrogates both Woolfs’ ways of seeing and means of appropriating colonial Others in their writings. Thompson’s reading emphasizes Virginia Woolf’s tendency to “focus[ ]

attention . . . on the colonization she understands and has experienced: the English desire to possess women, and the dangers and evils resulting from their attempts to colonize this space" (248). Thompson's attention to the politics of teaching Woolf as a modernist and feminist is astute: "How these writers, particularly Virginia, confront, ignore, perceive and misperceive, accept and reject patriarchal, imperialist and fascist narratives of their times informs all of their aesthetic developments. . . . These elements contribute to what we call 'modernism'" (249-250). Michelle Cliff's "Virginia Woolf and the Imperial Gaze: A Glance Askance" exposes Woolf's internalized racism, which she absorbed from the culture of empire and privilege. Cliff shows Woolf's blindness with regard to race, her inability to use language in ways that consistently break through racist dehumanization, though Cliff also notes Woolf's more conscious efforts to expose empire's cruelty, for instance in the opening scene of *Orlando*. In my view, these critical discussions of Woolf, empire, and race are most insightful when they acknowledge that Woolf was both (inevitably) immersed in and trying to rethink the ideologies of her historical and cultural context.

Within these still-expanding traditions of interpretation, Woolf has been used for diverse and interesting literary-critical purposes. Michael Tratner's fine study, *Modernism and Mass Politics*, is one kind of example, which though it focuses on canonical modernists (Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and Yeats), also perceptively accounts for class and ethnicity within constructions of modernism. In his writing about Woolf, Tratner links aspects of *To the*

*Lighthouse* with her radical politics. Woolf's flexibility for literary studies is evident when she appears in quite another vein, in Krista Ratcliffe's theorizing of her rhetorical style as precursor to Mary Daly's and Adrienne Rich's. Ratcliffe's study reflects a recognition not only of gender difference, but also of race and class differences, while putting Woolf's ideas about writing and reading into practice in the composition and rhetoric classroom.

Virginia Woolf has indeed been made and remade according to the needs of her critics and readers. To name just a few of these constructions in no particular historical order: Woolf has functioned for critics as fragile madwoman, as elitist aesthete, as feminist victim, as feminist visionary, as socialist heroine, as subject of empire, as resister of war, as closeted lesbian, as anti-Semite, as anti-fascist, as feminine genius. Although I would say that what one might call a more multifaceted Woolf has now emerged, largely through feminist criticism, I do think there is still much more work to be done that will vigorously interrogate the still-dominant white, middle-class, usually heterosexually-focused versions of Woolf in feminist criticism. These are, of course, versions of Woolf that reflect her critics' own needs, and the needs of the cultural and historical context in which they read her. Given my own (classed) cultural and historical needs, I would argue, together with Mary Childers, for the importance of a continued reckoning with the full implications of Woolf's class position, especially now that she has been constructed the foremost foremother of literary feminism.

Jane Marcus, whose work has been central to this canonization of

Woolf within feminist literary scholarship, has consistently explored class issues in her studies of Woolf, reading Woolf as entirely aware of her own privilege and honest about class snobbery even among the liberal reformers within her own circles: "Let us remember that she never privileged the oppression of women over the oppression of the working class, that her radical project of overthrowing the form of the novel and the essay derives from a radical politics" (*Virginia Woolf and the Languages* 11). Marcus sees Woolf as able at least to subvert and often to transcend ruling-class privilege, and her criticism shows an important engagement with the full range of Woolf's writing as support for her readings of the author's political merits. Arguing persuasively from Woolf's writing and from biographical evidence, Marcus explains that a common misreading of Woolf as a snob comes from critics who take a position Woolf herself disdained:

Woolf's fictional 'ordinary people' are not nice. She does not romanticize or make heroic her working-class characters. That she was telling the truth as she saw it is irrelevant to the 'liberal imagination.' Such critics ferociously bark from the secure position of the liberal bandwagon that Woolf was morally and socially unenlightened because Miss Kilman's dirty mackintosh frightens Mrs. Dalloway. But when the 'liberal' critics cry 'naughty, naughty' over the unsavoriness of Virginia Woolf's lower-class characters, they betray an utter failure to take into account her own standards of artistic honesty, not to mention the clearly radical political view stated in her essays. . . .

[Woolf] despised the reformer's temperament, the middle-class preacher in fiction or in politics who went as missionary to the masses to solve their problems for them. Because she respected her common reader she would neither lecture in her fiction nor hold her sharp tongue in her polemics. (*Art and Anger* 69)

I agree with Marcus that there has been a troubling tradition of misreading Woolf's characters as some sort of direct link to her own vision of the class structure, and I find her critique of simplistic "'liberal'" criticism astute. As I have suggested, however, we also need to consider the class assumptions and implications of our own investment in Woolf's brilliant complexity, which though it signals her "respect[ ] [for] her common reader," also offers critics the apparently depoliticized but highly-classed trap of serving as aesthetic code-decoders. If we do not read for class within our own critical texts, we risk becoming what Woolf was critiquing: reforming preachers, in this case, preachers of the True Political Woolf. I am advocating a method that is working to see class not just within the texts it reads or across an author's entire *oeuvre*, but as part of the metatext of literary criticism. Such a method, which I call reading for class, can help us to resist becoming the kind of readers who always say that we know best about the radical writer whose work we champion.

We might actually look to Woolf's own words for warnings about privileged liberal class-blindness. In her essay "Royalty," Woolf has scathing criticism for the liberal romantic's "most insidious and dangerous of current



snobberies, which is making the workers into Kings"; this type of writer "has invested the slum, the mine, and the factory with the old glamour of the palace, so that, as modern fiction [of the thirties] shows, we are beginning to escape, by picturing the lives of the poor and day-dreaming about them, from the drudgery, about which there is no sort of glamour, of being ourselves" (*Collected Essays* 4 215). Woolf demands that writers represent what they can understand from their individual positions, leaving alone what they cannot.

Her own radical experiments with literary forms, including the novel and the rhetorical essay, do make it especially necessary that readers who want to evaluate her politics fairly also understand her aesthetic project, not because it is superior in its modernist richness, but precisely because for Virginia Woolf, the aesthetic and the political were inseparable. This is, of course, one of the principal insights of literary feminism. In Woolf, the belief in it was often rendered almost literally for rhetorical effect. She is, after all, the writer who claimed in "Royalty" that "a republic might be brought into being by a poem" (*Collected Essays* 4 215), and who described words, in "Words Fail Me" as "democratic" (*Collected Essays* 2 250).

Late in her life, during May of 1940, in a lecture to the Worker's Educational Association in Brighton entitled "The Leaning Tower," Woolf articulates a clear recognition of an idea that is central to my claims about her writing. She explores how the tower of privilege which "decides [the successful writer's] angle of vision" (*Collected Essays* 4 138) has begun to lean; she suggests that "a stronger more varied literature in the classless and

towerless society of the future" (151) may be the result of such shifts in perspective. Woolf's experiments with language throughout her career, and her life as revealed through the diaries and letters, consistently show her interest in revealing how point of view, the position from which one can experience the world, both expands and limits literature and life. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has succinctly explained, "Woolf was interested in the political implications of 'point of view' as a narrative tactic, a way of showing that one sees differently from different social, gender, class, and age perspectives" (240). Woolf learned that the literary method which could best reveal the complexities of human life was one in which she self-consciously exposed the limits and the potential of point of view, both as an aesthetic category and as a political identity position. I think, too, that our points of view as critics—classed, racialized, gendered—must be part of any political analysis of Woolf. Indeed, some of the most important aesthetic and political issues that Woolf's writings might now help us to articulate have much more to do with her class—and the class positions of the critics for whom she has become, to various degrees, central—than with her gender.

Through critical practices within the specific field of Woolf studies, we can see particular class-ifications at work. I think it is troubling, for instance, that what we might call Woolf's least isolated texts are also her least canonized, as though she lost some classed credibility as an Artist when her writing mingled with other kinds of writing. This is true of pieces she published in magazines that become (de)valued according to the terms of

“high” and “low” culture, and of the “Introductory Letter,” which functions as a relatively brief frame for a much longer series of writings by authors who were not, and are still not, considered Artists. Woolf seems to have been more aware of what she could learn from positioning her own writing among other modes of writing in these ways than we have been inclined to see, or to learn from ourselves.

Woolf’s political activities and life choices—including delivering educational lectures to working-class audiences and doing volunteer work for Labour organizations—should also be allowed to speak for Woolf’s ideas about class politics, as Jane Marcus has often argued, though I think these choices are more complex in their impulses than Marcus makes them. Indeed, as evidenced by the epigraphs to this chapter, working-class women such as those from the Co-operative Congress whom Woolf herself saw en masse, make Woolf, in her awareness of her own privilege, uneasy. Though Marcus has argued that Woolf “does not romanticize or make heroic her working-class characters” (*Art and Anger* 69), I think Woolf’s lived struggles do translate into literary struggles for ways to depict working-class subjectivity, especially women’s. I would apply Marcus’s claim not to Woolf’s ability with working-class characters, but to Woolf’s ability to write complex lower-middle-class characters (like Doris Kilman and Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*).

Feminist literary critics and other students of Woolf need to understand her writerly method in specifically classed terms so we can see

how one feminist thinker engages with the difficulties—crystallized so remarkably in the “Introductory Letter”—that arise when writing about working-class feminist struggle and writing that reflects upper-middle class feminist socialism come together. If we read Woolf for these very sorts of classed interstices, rather than seeing the tensions as lapses in—or straightforward triumphs of—her political integrity, we may find ourselves more willing to make present-day feminist attempts—still, no doubt, imperfect—to grapple with class and race differences honestly and consistently. In her analysis of the class politics of feminist Woolf criticism, Mary Childers writes: “A willingness to hear the voice of the relatively privileged woman crack under the pressure of class position is essential to a feminism that acknowledges differences among and within women” (62). This is indeed vital to feminism and to feminist criticism, and Woolf’s voice does sometimes “crack” in this way. But my own reading of Virginia Woolf’s fiction and essays explores them not only as examples of “cracking,” but also as chronicles of a growing—and sometimes even successful—resistance to the expectations of class privilege. If we understand Woolf as a writer who learned some ways to work against privilege from within a literary mode that is itself complicated by class cadences, we can apply that understanding to the politics of feminist criticism.

Even within Woolf’s body of work, certain of her texts, often those which most explicitly invite us to wrestle with class, are still marginalized. As I have suggested, I think feminist critics have insufficiently challenged the

replication in our own writing of the genre hierarchies that tend to lead us to focus exhaustively on Woolf's novels and on her most obviously "literary" feminist nonfiction at the expense of her other writing, including lesser-known essays and journalism. It is with this tendency in mind that I offer my own reading for class of a canonized Woolf novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, within the specific context of the "Introductory Letter" and another "low genre," marginalized text: the only children's story Woolf ever wrote.

The manuscript of the children's story *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* was discovered wedged inside a heavily-revised manuscript of the well-known novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. I want to layer my reading of this story with my reading of the "Introductory Letter," and to see what reading for class can do when *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* is positioned as intrinsic to its material-historical context, the more famous fiction of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Perhaps to entertain her niece during a visit that took place during the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf wrote this story, which Leonard Woolf published in 1966 as *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble*. Though Leonard Woolf's brief forward claims that "[t]he story appears suddenly in the middle of the text of the novel, but has nothing to do with it" (4), it seems to me that Woolf probably recognized Clarissa Dalloway and Nurse Lugton as two poles of classed existence with gender oppression as a common ground. The first woman is stifled by but privileged within her circumscribed realm of social-domestic creation, the party, and the other stifled into devalued feminine work by virtue of her economic position. In the children's story, which

remained a separate text from *Mrs. Dalloway* but nested within the novel, Nurse Lugton is embroidering a wild animal motif on curtains she is making for her employer's "fine big drawing-room window" (7); after Nurse falls asleep by the fire, the animals come to life in a kind of artistic fancy. As long as Nurse Lugton is sewing, engaged in her labor, the pattern of animals and townspeople remains static, "[b]ut directly she beg[*i*n[s] to snore, the blue stuff turn[s] into blue air" and the fabric becomes a real scene. The story suggests that there is a whole world hidden within the "stuff" (7) of the literally *material*, a world invisible to the exhausted laborer who, though "mortally afraid of wild beasts" (11) when awake, is unconsciously holding power over the "beautiful sight" (11) spread "across [her] knees" (11). Nurse Lugton, believed by the "great dignitaries on business in the town [depicted in the fabric]" to be "a great ogress" with magical powers over the animals, is rumored, in the pattern-world, to have a "face like the side of a mountain, with great precipices and avalanches and chasms for eyes and hair, nose and teeth" (15). The important visitors to the town portrayed in the pattern, including the "old Queen," "the general of the army," "the Prime Minister, the Admiral" and "the Executioner" (12) suggest key figures in the world of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Nurse Lugton's body, made into a massive natural landscape as the backdrop for a particular scene, is not unlike the body of the woman who appears in *Mrs. Dalloway*, singing outside the Regent's Park tube station; both women become reminders of worlds feared by or avoided by the privileged.

Such characters seem to stand in for a timeless, nature-based power embodied in working-class women. Like Nurse Lugton's snores, the singer's song conjures an ancient, cyclical order that subsumes "bustling middle-class people" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 124). I think that a scarcely-changed version of Nurse Lugton may even appear in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in the scene at Regent's Park in which Peter Walsh falls asleep on a bench in the sun. Sitting next to him is a "grey nurse" who, as Peter begins to snore, "resume[s] her knitting . . . . In her grey dress, moving her hands indefatigably yet quietly, she seemed like the champion of the rights of sleepers" (85).

The knitting nurse character is specifically likened to "one of those spectral presences which rise in twilight in woods made of sky and branches" (85). Once again, Woolf resorts to an almost-mystical prose that explores natural landscapes as if they are extensions of the human psyche. A figure she evokes as "the solitary traveller" (85), who is perhaps meant to suggest Peter Walsh himself as he dreams, finds that "advancing down the path with his eyes upon the sky and branches he rapidly endows them with womanhood; sees with amazement how grave they become; how majestically, as the breeze stirs them, they dispense with a dark flutter of the leaves, charity, comprehension, absolution . . ." (85-86). Evoked in the narrative explicitly as an escapist fantasy, this figure as constructed in his imagination invites the "solitary traveller," to "never go back to the lamplight; to the sitting-room; never finish [his] book; never knock out [his] pipe; never ring for Mrs. Turner to clear away; rather let [him] walk straight

on to this great figure, who will, with a toss of her head . . . let [him] blow to nothingness with the rest" (87). Woolf's narrative clearly indicates these "visions" as shaping the "solitary traveller"'s interaction with, among others, a woman wearing "a white apron" who appears as "the figure of the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world" (87).

The sweeping descriptions Woolf offers give way to a domestic scene in which she marks the significance of the visionary projections for everyday, and classed, existence:

Indoors among ordinary things, the cupboard, the table, the window-sill with its geraniums, suddenly the outline of the landlady, bending to remove the cloth, becomes soft with light, an adorable emblem which only the recollection of cold human contacts forbids us to embrace. She takes the marmalade; she shuts it in the cupboard.

'There is nothing more to-night, sir?'

But to whom does the solitary traveller make reply?

So the elderly nurse knitted over the sleeping baby in Regent's Park. So Peter Walsh snored. (87-88)

Peter wakes up murmuring "The death of the soul," and recalls youthful days at Bourton when despite his adoration of Clarissa Dalloway, he could be annoyed by her sheltered attitudes and class privilege. In a grand and elaborate flight into what working-class women figures represent within the psyche of ordinary British masculinity, the narrative in effect links the nurse figure, the matronly domestic, with Peter's enduring delusions about Clarissa



as alternately his romantic conqueror and his fragile victim. Perhaps the narrative's juxtapositions are signaling here that Woolf had made the feminist connection between the pedestal on which Clarissa was placed and the essentialization of the woman-as-worker. Woolf may be using her feminist understanding of male-female hierarchies to try to reach, in an almost mystical exploration of an unconscious process, the classed hierarchies that encourage women like her not to see working-class women in their full humanity, but rather to make them visions and symbols.

Woolf's view of working-class women characters like the nurse, who become what I would call meta-characters, is nevertheless often remarkably simplistic, almost childlike. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that her most intimate contact with women below her own class was as a child, with her own nurses. As Kathleen Dobie has explained in her essay on *Jacob's Room*, Woolf tends to assign the realm of the fertile body to lower-class women, while upper-class women generally represent frigidity and illness. Though Dobie sees *Jacob's Room* as ultimately hopeful for cross-class conspiracy among women (206-07), the question of how to read working-class women figures in Woolf's texts remains a vexing one. In these passages from *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, I do think that the male "solitary traveller"'s point of view becomes a way for Woolf to ask a key question about the consequences of such visions. As I have suggested, Woolf seems to ask whether the working woman can be seen in her humanity, can be spoken to as a person, given the presence of such visions: "*To whom* does the solitary

traveller make reply?" (88, emphasis added). In this scene, if not in others from the same novel or in other writings by Woolf, the novel's language suggests that Woolf recognized those "visions" of archetypal caretaker women as linked to patriarchy.

Though his study does not treat *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, focusing instead on *To the Lighthouse*, Michael Tratner's reading of working-class women in Woolf's fiction is helpful to my own here. As Tratner sees it, had Woolf decided to leave the famous "Time Passes" section of *To The Lighthouse* as she had originally drafted it, in Mrs. McNab's internal monologue, one of the "central consciousnesses" of the novel would have been a Scots housekeeper, and thus a "working-class wom[a]n of 'minor' ethnicity" (50).<sup>3</sup> Tratner's interpretation of Woolf's revisionary decisions in *To the Lighthouse* serves as an example of the complex approach to class issues that is necessary in Woolf studies now:

The description of [working class women, specifically the housekeepers Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast] as 'not highly conscious' and 'lurching' is in part a reflection of Woolf's snobbery, and almost grounds enough for seeing Woolf's socialism as hypocritical, but . . . for Woolf to focus on nonconscious forces at work is to identify what liberalism overlooked . . . . [Woolf is] actually crediting the nonconscious force of the working-class masses with saving England from destruction. . . . [and] inscribing the birth of Labour itself as a visible and valued part of the English social order. (55-56)

As Tratner acknowledges, Woolf's position is complex, both very much of her historical moment and working to see past its classed limits. Pamela Caughie, in *Rereading the New*, has read this naturalization as still more problematic, as indicative of Woolf inability to recognize working-class conscious subjectivity, at least within her fictional forms (311). Eve M. Lynch, in an essay called "The Cook, the Nurse, the Maid, and the Mother: Woolf's Working Women," claims that Woolf's working-class domestic figures are "echoes of the nourishing and nurturing motions of matriarchal figures" (69), but notes that "the marginalization which this realignment suggests is complicated by a loss of voice to the [working] woman . . ." (70).

In my readings, I would emphasize the fact that Nurse Lugton is asleep—that she represents what Tratner calls "the nonconscious force of the working-class masses"—a fact that is certainly not insignificant to Woolf's classed vision. Very few of her fictions make any character or narrator truly omniscient, in the sense of being given the sustained ability to see the complexities of life from more than one gender, one species, one age, one particular angle of vision at any one time, though *Orlando* comes closest, through Woolf's stunning formal innovation. Woolf's working-class women figures complicate that anti-omniscient characteristic of Woolf's writing, since they often seem sub- or super-human, with all the complications attendant in putting a recognizably human character into such a category. Jane Marcus, in her Kristevan reading of these "mythologized" "charwomen" sees them as figures who point to "the origin and fount of

language" (*Virginia Woolf and the Languages* xv). Though Marcus reads these characters as Woolf's socialist "strategy in subverting the languages of patriarchy" (xv), and notes the contrast in Woolf's treatment of working-class women in private versus published writings, I do not see the working-class women characters as entirely unproblematic artistic visions, not even in the passage I have discussed as the most complex instance of Woolf's mythologizing tendency. The essentializing of their "natural" physical selves as conduits for ideas or visions, no matter how vital those messages, does tend to erase individual identity and exaggerate bodily power, and Woolf's point of view is the one that usually seems to be dictating those erasures and exaggerations. To borrow the Bakhtinian formulation developed by Stallybrass and White in their book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, I would describe Woolf's use of such figures as "carnavalesque" in a way quite characteristic of her political-historical context:

the carnivalesque was marked out as an intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it. The 'poetics' of transgression reveals the disgust, fear and desire which inform the dramatic self-representation of that culture through the 'scene of its low Other'. For bourgeois democracy emerged with a class which, whilst indeed progressive in its best political aspirations, had encoded in its manners, morals and imaginative writings, in its body, bearing and taste, a subliminal élitism which was constitutive of historical being. (202)

I think we need to read this aspect of Woolf's writing as problematic in a particularly historical way, as very much a reflection of what Stallybrass and White describe as the "subliminal élitism" characteristic of the contradictions of emerging "bourgeois democracy" (as it existed then and as it exists now). The identification of laboring women with nature, magic, and timelessness might be a feminist reclaiming of power, but it might also be a classist dehumanization which puts Other bodies back into service in that otherwise laudable attempt to remember women's mythic might. I see Woolf as caught in a classed historical bind here, searching for a way to represent what she perceives as a feminist, but unable to make her imaginative representations work in liberatory political ways across class lines.

The occlusion of such historically specific and specifically classed issues in Woolf criticism is, unfortunately, common. In Genevieve Sanchis Morgan's reading of *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, Morgan claims that "metafictional[ly] . . . Clarissa Dalloway the 'perfect hostess' (10) and Nurse Lugton the needle-worker become tropes for Woolf the domestic modernist" (102, emphasis mine). Woolf's depictions of women's work are not, in my opinion, generalizable within what Sanchis Morgan has called Woolf's "celebration of domestic art" (102). Rezia's hatmaking, for instance, which is a for-profit occupation, is not the same sort of creative attempt as Clarissa's party. Woolf is, after all, the feminist who wrote of the need to kill the Victorian "Angel in the House" and the writer whose own relatively unusual domestic life--a life including, along with

social obligations typical for a woman of her class, intellectual salons; a life without children; a life of marriage to a Jewish man; a life with a lover of the same sex; and a life interrupted by periods of madness often correlated to her career as a writer—certainly suggests that Woolf had a more complex view of domesticity and difference than a strictly celebratory approach would allow.

This reading serves as an example of two troubling tendencies in Woolf criticism: the tendency to allude to class differences only to dismiss them as ultimately insignificant, trumped in every case by gender, and the tendency to conflate Woolf's characters with Woolf herself. Though she no doubt projected aspects of herself onto many of her characters, and no doubt perceived some links among women's work of all sorts, Woolf is not so oblivious to—or so egalitarian about—class difference as to comment on her own writing via Nurse Lugton, the servant's, needlework. Morgan's reading elides crucial class differences between what happens when this aging woman, exhausted from her labor, *falls asleep*, with what happens when Clarissa, very much awake, sees that the evening she has had the limited power to design, the precarious creative triumph of her party, will succeed.

Feminist criticism that works from what has come to be called "French feminist theory" or from theories of women's culture must be especially careful not to minimize or forget the differences *within* the category of the female Other. Like much of Woolf's writing, the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is quite consistent about revealing class differences, and in it Woolf engages with a significant range of political issues even as she anchors her

commentaries within the context of English domesticity. The existence of the *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* manuscript inside the manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway*, and at the margins of feminist Woolf criticism, seems almost a material representation of the usually silent, classed Other who persists within the world of *Mrs. Dalloway*—no less than in our own contemporary one. A working-class woman character like Nurse Lugton is precisely the sort of silent figure to whom a character like Clarissa Dalloway cannot or will not grant full human presence. As I have suggested, this is also true, though to a lesser extent and in a more complex way, of their author herself.

## II. *Mrs. Dalloway*: Form as Political Content, or, Ways of (Re)Reading for Class

Having explored Woolf's positioning of herself with regard to working-class women in the "Introductory Letter," having highlighted some important critical approaches to issues of class in Woolf studies, and having explored *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble* as one of Woolf's fictionalized commentaries on working-class women, I will turn now to a reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's 1925 novel. Like many readers before me, I find *Mrs. Dalloway* a particularly rich example of many of Woolf's best qualities—her facility with language, her use of telling detail, her politicization of the apparently personal and particular, her fury at the human costs of violence, often masked by a subtle wit—there is plenty here to love. But this novel also serves as an especially revealing case study on issues of class as they operate in

and around Virginia Woolf's writing. Woolf wrote in her diary that she conceived of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a way to "criticize the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense," and self-reflexively added "but here I may be posing" (*Diary* 2 248). This moment from the diary suggests Woolf's ongoing sensitivity to the problem of critiquing the very system in which one enjoys privilege. The *New York Times Book Review* of *Mrs. Dalloway* noted that Woolf's novel was pointedly criticizing the upper classes.

Clarissa Dalloway was modeled on Kitty Maxse, a socialite friend of the Stephens family who died from a fall down the stairs in her London home as Virginia Woolf was struggling with the beginnings of *Mrs. Dalloway* (*Diary* 2 206-7). It is interesting that Woolf ultimately chose to leave Clarissa perched atop *her* fictional staircase at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, while the lower middle class war survivor Septimus Warren Smith leaps from a window to his death. Perhaps Woolf shaped the circumstances of Maxse's death into two distinct fictional characters, in an attempt to show how the forces of class and gender intersect with history. In her novel, such forces produce characters whose lives and deaths have wide-ranging political consequences.

Careful attention to points of view, to their individual limits and collective meaning-making when juxtaposed as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, can turn this novel into a lens through which we come to see Woolf's own careful process of aesthetic arrangement as illuminating, among other issues, her ideas about class. Woolf records in the early stages of writing the novel her struggle to shape the form of what would become *Mrs. Dalloway*, mentioning



the “excruciating hard wrung battles” (*Diary* 376) that her determination led her into. The process of crafting the novel seems fraught with uncertainty; Woolf remembers feeling that “Clarissa [was] in some way tinselly” until she “invented her memories” and debates with herself about the upper-class woman character: “But I think some distaste for her persisted. Yet again, that was true to my feeling for Kitty” (*Diary* 332). Woolf’s “distaste” for the very type around whom she would shape this novel may point to her own awareness that in less tumultuous historical times, she might herself have become more like Clarissa than she cared to recognize. The author’s development of the interconnected and shifting perspectives of the novel and its characters, whose consciousnesses give structure to *Mrs. Dalloway*, embodies in fictional form the historical fact that she lived in times when life narratives became newly unpredictable. But the enduring powers of the systems of class and gender are not lost on Woolf, as the novel consistently reveals.

This is a novel in which a party, which serves as an upper-class woman’s sphere of creative potential, becomes for Woolf a way of showing that the upper-class woman’s world can no longer enjoy the illusion of safety from war, madness, suicide or even encroaching technology. Clarissa’s point of view, as juxtaposed with other characters’ points of view, allows Woolf a deliberately limited fictional device which exposes the stifling narrowness and repression of the upper-class woman’s life—creatively, politically, emotionally, sexually—in order to simultaneously critique that construction

as no longer desirable or viable. Clarissa, as we shall see, is a painstakingly developed and carefully classed character whose point of view Woolf makes explicitly narrow. Clarissa's obtuseness about her own power and her gendered victimization have been interpreted by too many readers as charming; even the 1997 film adaptation of the novel pushes us to be seduced by the gorgeousness of Clarissa's world and to see the character as a more fully sympathetic soul than a politically progressive reading of the novel will allow. Aesthetic pleasure and beauty are not apolitical, not in this careful novel—and not anywhere, actually. As Kathy Phillips has written, "No matter how distinctive, complex, and poignant Woolf might make a few of her characters, both they and more schematic ones still serve to expose how anyone, including the reader, under similar circumstances of class, gender, and race, is likely to become warped" (xxv).

*Mrs. Dalloway* begins with the sentence "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself," followed by the sentence, "For Lucy had her work cut out for her." In this typically modernist, jump-in-the-stream-of-consciousness opening, Woolf makes an interesting move. This moment constitutes the reader's first exposure to the point of view which will dominate the novel, Clarissa Dalloway's, yet Clarissa is referred to as "Mrs. Dalloway," the designation that Lucy, whom the reader may infer to be a servant, would use to refer to her. In the references that follow, the narrative uses "Clarissa Dalloway" and then "Clarissa," rarely returning to "Mrs. Dalloway" except when others are referring to Clarissa. Before moving, then,

into the point of view that allows readers access to “Clarissa’s” thoughts, Woolf seems to set up the parameters of the classed perspective in which she will immerse her readers. First, she acknowledges the domestic distribution of labor with a rather subtle naming technique that points to the social constructedness of this upper-class heroine’s status as privileged wife. Juxtaposed with Lucy’s duties, which will remain virtually invisible as the reader follows Clarissa on her walk through London, “Mrs. Dalloway’s” announcement that she will “buy the flowers herself” marks that action as unusual, and points to its almost artificial specialness compared to the general “work” Lucy and her fellow workers, including “Rumpelmayer’s men” and others briefly visible later in the novel, will do behind the scenes in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Just a couple of pages later, when the reader sees Clarissa’s view of the city--“life; London; this moment of June” (5)--in typical Woolfian panoramic prose, it is clear that the supporting details Clarissa notices as she crosses Victoria Street, including people who hail from classes other than her own, specifically “the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps, drink their downfall” (5) are in fact explicitly represented as filtered through Clarissa’s naively inclusive perspective on “life.” Though who and what Clarissa sees is specific, her idea of the meaning of what she sees is vague, ephemeral, facile in its universalizing sweep. Such folk “can’t be dealt with, [Clarissa feels] positive, by Acts of Parliament” because “they love life” (5). I read Clarissa’s insensitivity to the realities of city life for those who do

not enjoy her own privileges and her inability to fathom the impact of social policy on their lives as revealing Woolf's critique of such oblivion, but suggesting simultaneously the author's resistance to any singular prescription for improvement. Clarissa's projection of her own zest for living in that moment onto those who lack her comforts is rendered foolish, even callous, but the language Woolf chooses also hints at the pitfalls of quick-fix governmental policy being applied to deep-rooted social problems.

Not coincidentally in a novel in which meaning emerges primarily through juxtaposition, the next paragraph alludes to upper-class women's experiences of the War and repeats three times, in a kind of narrative charm, the sense of relief at the War being "over; thank Heaven--over." In the same passage, the fact that it is the month of June is also repeated three times. Here Woolf marks Clarissa's need to know the time of year—not coincidentally, springtime with its rebirths—and her relief at the fact of the War's end, as if reminding readers of the wartime changes and chaos that undermined the social and economic positions of Englishwomen especially, and perhaps permanently. With passing thoughts of Mrs. Foxcroft and Lady Bexborough, whose comfortable lives have been changed by the deaths of their sons during the War, Clarissa abruptly interrupts her own sense of the irreversible changes wrought by violence by reaching for emblems of romantic renewal and English imperial power. Woolf writes, "[B]ut it was over; thank Heaven—over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace" (5-6). Offered against the references to massive upheavals in the upper-class

women's lives, these simple declarative sentences, with their focus on the authority of the calendar and the crown, underscore the need for such familiar authorities while suggesting both their ultimate unhelpfulness and their flimsy constructedness. As Big Ben booms out across the pages of the novel, the passing of time is similarly marked as artificial, made explicit to the reader's consciousness as "leaden circles" which despite their apparent solidity "dissolve[ ] in the air" (5).

It is immediately after this moment's atmosphere of desperation for an unattainable stability, that the "perfectly upholstered" (7) character Hugh Whitbread pops up in Clarissa's path. Hugh Whitbread, who has a government job at court, is described through the perspective of another character, Peter Walsh, as having "no heart, no brain, nothing but the manners and breeding of an English gentleman" (8). Peter Walsh, though critical of Whitbread's manipulation of the English class system, is himself shown to be criticizing the other man more because he is embittered about his own less central place within that system than because he is morally superior. Though he feels able to judge Whitbread's hollowness, Peter Walsh is portrayed by Woolf as specifically and utterly implicated in race and class politics, not least by virtue of his position in the British colonial occupation of India. Kathy Phillips' description of him is apt: "Instead of analyzing politics, Peter derives a kind of masturbatory glow simply from advertising his exotic role as colonial administrator, without questioning the effect of that role on others" (15). When he visits Clarissa, Peter's announcement that he is "in

love" with "the wife of a Major in the Indian Army" (67), a woman described later in the novel as "very dark" (238), anticipates what readers will come to see as a weakness in Peter Walsh: his boy-adventurer's need to exoticize and romanticize his own experiences and even those people whom he claims to love most, including Clarissa.

Woolf has introduced readers to many of the complexities of post-War social class distinctions in just the first few pages of Clarissa's walk, through the character's external encounters and inner thoughts. She has also hinted at one of her novel's key themes--the pitfalls of masculine competition--without compromising the consistency of Clarissa's point of view or failing to expose its privileged narrowness.

The obstacles around which Clarissa simply cannot see are not represented as aspects of her personality; they are instead external, cultural forces which have shaped her sensibility. For instance, when Clarissa is remembering her rejection of Peter Walsh as a suitor, she is led to recall at the same time her reaction to hearing that he had been married to a woman on the boat trip over to India. Clarissa's response to her own "horror" at the news was an alienation from emotion: "Cold, heartless, a prude he called her. Never could she understand how he cared" (10). Her next thought unmask the complexities of class and race which are among the structuring forces in her narrow life: "[T]hose Indian women did [care about physical passion] presumably--silly, pretty, flimsy nincompoops" (10). Peter's marriage to a white British woman, described from Clarissa's racialized and racializing

point of view as an "Indian" woman, is tainted by heterosexual lust as well as by association with the exoticized landscape of India. For Clarissa, in the process of squelching her feelings for Peter Walsh, "'Indian' women" become the dehumanized, individually indistinguishable Other of sexual passion and human emotions. Clarissa's fainthearted contemplation of "Indian women" can only fathom the British version; her point of view is colonialist in its ability to make an entire nation of actually Indian women and men disappear. The extent to which the politics of Woolf's own point of view shape Clarissa is difficult to measure, but through the form Woolf chooses, we are able to see how Clarissa's inability to reckon with the patriarchal, racist and homophobic powers that determine her own precarious, cramped existence keeps her isolated in her quiet suffering, and unable to see the more obvious oppressions experienced by racial and class Others.

Kathy Phillips has observed the complexity of Woolf's angle of vision in such passages, and explored the tension between Woolf's recognition of the evils of empire and her inability to fully escape racist ideology in her own life: "Although empire is a central topic in Woolf's books, she never directly portrays any of the colonized people as characters. Perhaps unwilling to speak for an experience outside her own, she does presume, from time to time [in her diaries and letters], to label people of color with all the unpleasant prejudice of her contemporaries" (xxxiv). Phillips offers an important reminder of the ways in which the assumptions inherent in cultural power structures invade individual consciousnesses, even when those individuals

struggle to resist dominant ideology.

For Clarissa, whose role in the culture Woolf is portraying is one of general ignorance and political irrelevance, indeed within a culture which needs *her* to be, ironically, the “silly, pretty, flimsy” upper class wife, even her own desires must be repressed, not the least of which include long repressed lesbian desire for Sally Seton. But lesbian panic takes a more virulent, cross-class form in Clarissa’s interactions with Doris Kilman.

The limits of Clarissa’s world and point of view surface especially in her interactions with and thoughts about Kilman, her daughter Elizabeth’s tutor. Miss Kilman is a mediating figure whose powerful role in shaping Elizabeth further alienates Clarissa and triggers rather vicious attacks of snobbery. Clarissa has just been musing about her deceased “old Uncle William,” who always said that “a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves,” and about her own requisite “passion for gloves” (15), when the novel makes, through her point of view, its first mention of Miss Kilman. Woolf gives another nod to the class-related changes the War has wrought when Clarissa recalls that “before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves” (15). Clarissa muses about the fact that her daughter Elizabeth, so far, has no interest whatsoever in such things. Elizabeth, we learn here, cares most about her dog, Grizzle, at this point in her life, an affection which Clarissa decides is preferable to Elizabeth’s caring for Miss Kilman.

Elizabeth’s bond with Kilman makes Clarissa especially nervous in part because Kilman represents various threats to Clarissa’s repressed existence.



Woolf's ironic touch emerges in Clarissa's projection onto Kilman, "who had been badly treated of course; one must make allowances for that," and whose "religious ecstasy," has made her, as Clarissa knows it generally to do, "callous (so did causes); dulled [her] feelings, for Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat" (16). Miss Kilman's transgressions, in Clarissa's view, have to do with the tutor's ability to see broadly, even globally, to expose the politics of human interaction, to remind one of the unpleasant realities of the body--"she perspired" (16). Perhaps worst of all, Kilman's "insensitive" lower-middle-class ways, which include her wearing of ugly clothes, make Clarissa feel her own class-based guilt rather acutely:

She was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be, all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it, her dismissal from school during the War--poor embittered unfortunate creature! For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants; for no doubt with another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she

would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No. (16-17)

Woolf lays bare a whole knot of denials, fears, and prejudices in this narrative of Clarissa's consciousness. There is the issue of projection onto Kilman what Clarissa herself is experiencing—the privilege of being, in class terms “superior.” There is, too, the mention of the War's effects in changing lives, particularly in this instance through making the lives of working people and women of all classes less predictable on (and at) many levels. And there is a curiously similar use of language in this passage's description of Kilman and Clarissa's own image of herself after her breakup with Peter Walsh: “she had borne about with her for years like an arrow sticking in her heart the grief, the anguish” (10). The similar image with which Woolf describes two different pains in two very different lives suggests what Clarissa cannot bring herself to see: the common human ground of loss which Clarissa and Kilman share.

Clarissa's need to reassure herself of the order of things in “this world” shows the potential power of the recognitions she cannot bring herself to have: the recognition that she shares some experiences of emotion and even of oppression with people of different classes. Clarissa does not risk recognition of the injustices upon which her life rests, including the world of empire evoked by her description, a world in which “the white” are indeed “uppermost.” Again taking refuge in conventionality and abstraction, Clarissa cannot bring herself to personalize the injury; she pushes her feeling of hatred onto the “idea” of Miss Kilman, the angry and educated worker who has read and lived history. This sort of worker was an “idea” which had

become, as Woolf herself saw in the years after the Great War, politically powerful and rather terrifying to the upper classes.

The vision of Doris Kilman as a “spectre who stands astride” and drains the “life-blood” is an image of vampiric sexual power, and the description of Clarissa’s thinking “she would have *loved* Miss Kilman” immediately following the threatening images suggests that in this passage Clarissa is experiencing an instance of heavily encoded sexual/lesbian panic. Emily Jensen’s reading of this scene, which suggests that Clarissa’s violent ambivalence about Kilman, *masked as class guilt*, covers a primary lesbian guilt (171), raises a key issue. In privileging Woolf’s allusions to lesbian identity, though, Jensen limits what I would describe as Woolf’s multivalenced critique of the whole knot of heterosexual marriage, empire, class, medicine, and more, as that critique is made through juxtaposed points of view in the novel. Eileen Barrett has also noted that Woolf may be using Kilman to challenge “the sexologists and their stereotypes” (148), though class issues are evaded in her otherwise useful reading. *Mrs. Dalloway* is certainly a novel about lesbian repression, but I see no one element of what I am calling Woolf’s multivalenced critique as primary. Woolf herself wrote of the tensions among personal desire, androgyny, and the social-historical constructions of sexuality, most obviously in *Orlando* and also in her other works. In large part, the achievement of *Mrs. Dalloway* is rooted in Woolf’s ability to speak to a variety of oppressions through the same characters and within the same moments.

Clarissa's road to the florist, where she selects the arrangements that will help her to orchestrate a beautiful party, is hardly a smooth one. She progresses dangerously far in her contemplation of her own half-conscious feelings and their implications:

It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! . . . never to be content, quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred, which . . . made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful rock, quiver, and bend . . . as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love! this hatred!

Nonsense, nonsense! she cried to herself, pushing through the swing doors of Mulberry's the florists. (17)

Clarissa is not safe, as Woolf's emphasis on the precariousness of her character's belief system reveals. The limits to Clarissa's potential understanding of the changes that are transpiring in the social world of Britain are largely imposed upon her by a culture that insists she remain ornamental. The hatred she feels is portrayed not only as threatening to Kilman, but as damaging to Clarissa herself. The insight the novel gives us into Clarissa's turmoil as an upper-class woman may well be derived from Virginia Woolf's own familiarity with aspects of the kind of social world inhabited by Clarissa Dalloway. Woolf counterbalances her sustained attention to Clarissa's way of seeing in part through a comparatively brief sequence in which readers are allowed into the inner life and the point of

view of Doris Kilman.

As critics have noted, this lower-middle-class woman is not a likeable character. I do not see her, however, as much more repellent than Clarissa herself. Both are shown to be warped in different ways by their different oppressions, and by their places in the class system. Kilman uses religion and education as grudges against those with greater privilege, but her devotion to "Our Lord" (187) and to the Reverend Whittaker both parallel Clarissa's allegiances to male power. It is clear from *A Room of One's Own* that Woolf was displeased by the idea that female intelligence should be cramped by anger at patriarchal injustices, and in fact Kilman is rather like the Brontë of Woolf's criticism—her gifts are marred by the fact that she has axes to grind. Kilman's physical hungers and greedy eating are her way of consoling herself for her sufferings under the system in which women either have male protection through class and marriage or do not. When Clarissa, for all her other blinders, sees the isolation in which most people live—"here was one room; there another" and asks "Did religion solve that, or love?" (193), it is only her privileges, including faith in Englishness and marriage to Richard, that allow her to sense the inexplicable persistence of personalized loneliness, where Kilman perceives politicized injustices, and seeks solutions. Though less graceful than Clarissa's flowers and parties, Kilman's attempts to assuage her own hurts reveal a parallel need to escape into whatever available pleasures and answers she can find.

Tellingly, neither woman is able to acknowledge the lesbian desire

which is at play beneath the surface of both lives. Kilman struggles to overcome “the flesh” (194) in the scene immediately following those told from her point of view in the novel; she prays in Westminster Cathedral, an “impress[ive]” (203) woman. This portrayal of Kilman as capable of impressing many different sorts of people, her tenacity in seeking answers, suggests not that Woolf sets Kilman up for the greater portion of readers’ disdain, as some critics have thought, but that Woolf positions Kilman in a parallel situation to Clarissa’s; in the same kind of undecidable space, she kneels in the church much as Clarissa stands at the top of her stairs at the novel’s conclusion. Though Woolf takes less time to explore this lesbian/classed interrelationship between Kilman and Clarissa, her structuring of it is not unlike her parallel development of Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa across gender and class lines in the novel. By her very presence, and by her power to shape the next generation of children like Elizabeth, Kilman makes Clarissa Dalloway’s world hover on the verge of revealed wrongs and future changes.

Within the progression of the novel, Clarissa continues on her walk to the florist, repeating to herself the words “nonsense, nonsense,” and choosing her flowers with the help of Miss Pym, “who owed her help, and thought her kind” (18). Clarissa is soothed, though only fleetingly, by Miss Pym’s class-conscious service ethic, feeling “as if . . . Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when--oh! a pistol shot

in the street outside!" (19). What Clarissa mistakes for a pistol shot, for unpredictable violence, is actually technology of a different sort: the car of a person "of the very greatest importance" (19) has made the sound. In this scene, progress becomes intertwined with political change, as the people struggle to determine the sources of the unpredictable sounds and glimpsed sights which mark a modern city. Miss Pym's humble, apologetic way "as if those motor cars, those tyres of motor cars, were all *her* fault" (19), though it evokes a quaint past of gratitude for a lady's patronage, cannot really comfort Clarissa, especially amid evidence of such modern, technological force.

Clarissa speculates that the car must be the Queen's, and when she sees the traffic blocking the way, she focuses in on "the British middle classes sitting sideways on the tops of omnibuses with parcels and umbrellas, yes, even furs on a day like this . . . more ridiculous, more unlike anything there has ever been than one could conceive, and the Queen herself held up; the Queen herself unable to pass" (24). It is interesting to note Clarissa's insistence on the identity of the mysterious figure in the motorcar—for Clarissa, it must be the Queen, the female figurehead of the Empire—while Edgar J Watkiss, a workman, in sarcastic ceremoniousness, takes note of what he calls "'The Proime Minister's kyar'" (20). Point of view, the classed, gendered, otherwise specific perspective from which one sees, quite directly determines who and what can be seen in this novel.

In this passage, which is followed by an extended panoramic survey-in-prose of the "ripple" of change moving through the everyday events of

London and across the "Empire" (25), Woolf signals that despite the car's power to impress the people gathering at the gates of Buckingham Palace, it is the advertising airplane, soon to roar above their heads, that will provide the next fascinating distraction and emblem of relentless change. The people try to decode the letters of the advertisement being written across the sky as the car slips through the Palace gates unnoticed. Through it all, Clarissa remains unable to see beyond the world she has known: she can see only the middle classes' absurdities as they block the ceremonious path of monarchy.

Woolf's juxtapositions suggest the fleeting power that royal spectacle once had to awe the people of Britain, and the alienating but potentially equalizing effects of technology and consumerism. The fact that none of the people on the street, whatever their class credentials, can conclusively determine either the identity of the personage within the car or the message in the sky, points to the transitional historical space in which the novel is set. The recognizable cultural markers in London are slipping away, while language itself, crossed with technology and consumerism, opens up into myriad interpretative possibilities. Woolf seems to want readers to see the potential of such a moment, when authority is quite literally in transition—moving through the streets in disguise, flying across the sky with a roar—but she may also be revealing a fear that vapid consumerism will fill that void in the absence of more familiar authorities.

Within this scene, Woolf's use of juxtaposition is especially effective in revealing the class differences between Clarissa and another, more minor



character, Mrs. Dempster, who notices the airplane and whose imagination is inspired to a kind of longing upon seeing it. Mrs. Dempster is a lower-middle class woman musing in the park about her compromises in marriage and motherhood: "For it's been a hard life, thought Mrs. Dempster. What hadn't she given to it? Roses, figure; her feet too. . . . Roses, she thought sardonically. All trash, m'dear. For really . . . life had been no mere matter of roses . . . But, she implored, pity. Pity, for the loss of roses" (40). While the narrative moves through this woman's musings, chronicling her combined sense of regret and reality, Clarissa has been choosing flowers. Both women think about their wifely and maternal roles, but the differences between their class positions are specifically evoked. Indeed, the advertising plane which so inspires Mrs. Dempster is missed entirely by Clarissa, who enters the comfort of her fine house "as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only." Here is a life which is quite literally a matter of roses.

Having made the class distinctions between these two women clear, Woolf then moves into a scene which highlights Clarissa's version of confinement in marriage. Clarissa is feeling how "in daily life" one must "repay" to "servants, yes to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it--of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling, for Mrs. Walker was Irish and whistled all day long--one must pay back . . ." (43). As Clarissa is considering the way her husband's position in the world makes all the material details of her life possible, Lucy the servant tries to get Clarissa's attention to inform her that

Richard Dalloway is having lunch with Lady Bruton, a vicariously politically ambitious character who has excluded Clarissa from what promises to be an “extraordinarily amusing” (44) lunch party. Lucy interrupts Clarissa’s reverie with information that underscores the reality of her isolation, and in the passages that follow, Woolf again uses two women’s particular classed points of view to show how the “impassable” barrier between classes is built upon the particular daily details of life in the body, in the house.

Lucy shared as she meant to her disappointment (but not the pang); felt the concord between them; took the hint; thought how the gentry love; gilded her own future with calm; and, taking Mrs. Dalloway’s parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds, and placed it in the umbrella stand. (43-44)

Striking in this section are Lucy’s sense of security, her perception of what her employer needs, her thoughts of her future and her dutiful and dignified but not fawning actions. Through a slippage between Lucy’s point of view and the narrative’s description of how Lucy handles the parasol, Woolf reveals what remains unspoken in relationships between upper class women and their servants. Woolf shows the alienation women feel across class lines; even as they perform sympathetic womanly virtues, their class roles preclude any emotional connection. There is, however, a socio-economic interconnectedness between the employer and the servant, whose proximity to the private lives of the upper class is portrayed as a *disarming* power.

Clarissa's starring role as an upper-class woman in her culture seems to give way in the scene to Lucy's sense of her own future, but that future is, within the moment of the text, still undecidable. I think this scene raises a fascinating question about whether Lucy is "gild[ing] her own future" as an employee in the Dalloway house because of the classed calm that prevails there, or whether Lucy is a textual hint of well-disguised class conflict, which may be exposed once the "Goddesses" of the upper-classes have handed their "weapons" of elegance over to women of other classes. Woolf leaves us guessing about Lucy's future, but the language of the next scene makes it clear that Woolf thinks Clarissa's future will be rather bleak.

In contrast to the points of view readers experience in the bustling London streets, the mood of the next scene is solemn and lonely. Clarissa is described, after the moment between herself and Lucy, in this way: "Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs . . . There was an emptiness about the heart of life. . . . Narrower and narrower would her bed be" (45-46). Thinking how she has "failed" her husband in the realm of sexual passion, Clarissa then consciously explores her romantic and sexual feelings for women, recognizing that only with women did she "undoubtedly feel . . . what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough" (47). "Against such moments," Woolf writes, Clarissa has for contrast her isolated bed where she reads a baron's memoirs by the light of "the candle half-burnt" (47), and the amusing domestic foibles of her husband.

Clarissa retreats from this narrowness into her own memories of her

first love Sally Seton, the daring young woman she knew when, as a girl, she spent holidays in the country. Sally, mock-exoticized in the narrative's hint that she may have French ancestry, was then passionate, wild, shocking to her elders. One of the young women's pastimes was talking endlessly about "how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out. The ideas were Sally's, of course, but very soon [Clarissa] was just as excited . . ." (49). Once more Woolf intermingles the various desires--sexual, political, powerfully contagious but ultimately unfulfilled--of women both within and across classes. But within the confining dictates of Clarissa's class, the seemingly "dangerous" Sally Seton was only pursuing an upper-class version of rebellion by playing the radical.

Sally appears at Clarissa's party in the final scene of the novel. She is now Lady Rosseter, and the proud mother of five sons. In an especially brilliant juxtaposition on Woolf's part, in a move which underscores the outward social controls on the two women's bonding, the Prime Minister interrupts Clarissa's conversation with Sally. The character who personifies Government reminds the women, as Peter Walsh in the form of masculinity-about-to-join-empire did back when he interrupted their kiss one evening at Bourton, that their desire is unspeakable. Woolf suggests in this scene that these characters' hopes for changing the world's barriers of class and of sexuality are abortive, that they are inevitably made complicit by their own investment in privilege.

Though the future is quite predictable for women of Sally and Clarissa's class during their early adult years at Bourton, I think that Elizabeth Dalloway represents the undecidable future in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Elizabeth's caring for a fellow creature, her dog, marks a humanity in her which Clarissa is lacking; indeed in one of Peter Walsh's memory sequences from bygone days at Bourton, Clarissa feigns affection for a dog in order to appear kind. She tried, Peter recalls, to appear more gentle in his eyes because she was aware that he had thought her a sheltered snob when she expressed her horror at having met and spoken to a woman of the lower classes, whom Clarissa learned had married the country squire who got her pregnant (90).

Though a child of the upper class, Elizabeth Dalloway is not a predictable legacy of Clarissa and Richard's values in the post-War class and race upheavals of her own adolescence. Elizabeth is unmarked by the pre-War world of obvious class markers such as the perfect pair of gloves, and seems to hint at another world (already present within the heart of British privilege?) because of her "oriental" (204) features. In the longest scene focused around Elizabeth, as she ventures alone through the bustling streets of London, the sky above the city mirrors the very changability that she embodies. Woolf describes the clouds:

Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface; to change, to go, to dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible; and in spite of the grave

fixity, the accumulated robustness and solidity, now they struck light to the earth, now darkness (210-11).

Elizabeth's youth and potential are metaphorically projected here, and Woolf emphasizes that what appears permanent, in the sky as in the culture, may disappear in time.

In the final scene of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Elizabeth and her father Richard Dalloway are watching people leave their house, relieved that the party is ending. Richard has had a moment at the party of seeing his own daughter and wondering "Who is that lovely girl?" (295)--a not surprising reaction, given Elizabeth's role in the novel as a harbinger of potential changes in women of her class. As for Elizabeth, we learn that her father's praise for her looks "did make her happy. But her poor dog was howling" (296). Woolf recalls for readers Clarissa's thoughts about how Elizabeth does not care for the surface pleasures of gloves or shoes, instead enjoying her dog--which is miserable in the last scene--and her sessions with Miss Kilman.

Kathy Phillips writes of the howling dog as a "code" for "how much Elizabeth must give up" (24) as she becomes an upper-class woman, but Rachel Bowlby has noted the open-endedness of Elizabeth's future as "far from certain" (75). Audra Dibert-Himes sees Elizabeth as identified with country aristocracy, with her father's youthful days of caring for the animals at Bourton (227). I read the howling dog in this last scene as Woolf's insertion of the pain of the oppressed into Elizabeth's awakening consciousness at this key moment in her developing social-feminine identity. Indeed, on another

page of *Mrs. Dalloway*, such sensitivity is differently rendered through the eyes of Septimus Warren Smith, who in a fit of hallucination sees the “horrible, terrible” sight of “a dog becom[ing] a man,” and wonders “Why could he see . . . into the future when dogs will become men?” (102). These animal-human connections are not especially strange within Woolf’s works. She was, after all, the author of *Flush*, a biography written from the point of view of the Brownings’ dog; she frequently uses animals in her novels, especially *Between the Acts*, to register interruptions of social structures, and she and Leonard Woolf used animal nicknames for one another. Elizabeth’s tendency to treat her dog like a person is, I think, a sign of positive social change. Though Kathy Phillips has read Elizabeth as likely to become the corrupt “woman of the professions” figure that Woolf predicts in her feminist essays (24), I think the fact that Elizabeth, unlike her mother, dislikes London and finds it “much nicer to be in the country and do what she like[s]!” (287) suggests independence from any such cultural norms, as well as independence from predictable upper-class women’s roles present or future.

With regard to the future, the concluding scene of *Mrs. Dalloway* represents the elder generation as offering virtually no hope for change. Sally Rosseter and Peter Walsh are conversing about what they have learned over the years, and Woolf shows us the classed and gendered limits of both their points of view. Sally has decided that it must be Clarissa’s snobbery that has come between them, since Sally has married “a miner’s son. Every penny they had he had earned. As a little boy (her voice trembled) he had carried

great sacks" (290). Woolf exposes the sentimentality and hypocrisy that have followed from Sally's political passions as a girl and hints at the repression of either Sally's own desire for Clarissa or of her consciousness of Clarissa's desire for her. Now identified with men as the mother of "five enormous boys" (261), Sally decides at the party that she likes Richard after all, and will speak to him before she leaves. Through Woolf's use of Sally's formal name at this point in the text, the reader is reminded of the stifling constructedness and increasing narrowness of upper-class women's positions: "'What does the brain matter,' said Lady Rosseter, getting up, 'compared with the heart?'" (296). Sentimental ideology is still, ultimately, all that is available to Sally/Lady Rosseter in her complicity with the very social inequalities she laments.

The wandering Peter Walsh, despite his links to exotic lands, is similarly exposed as paralyzed by the weight of the past--in this case, by his adoration of Clarissa and all that she represents of aesthetic beauty and class power. Peter's vague sense of "terror" and "ecstasy," his "extraordinary excitement" (296) turns out to be signaling his awareness of Clarissa's presence. It is through Peter's gaze that the novel gives us its concluding vision of Clarissa. Perhaps we are meant to understand that Clarissa will remain captured in the romantic heterosexual male imperialist gaze, stuck at the top of the stairs in a metaphorical enactment of her class position.

Septimus Warren Smith, the lower-middle-class young man whose ghost presence at the party hovers at the edges of Clarissa's consciousness, is



sacrificed more immediately. Septimus is linked to Clarissa from the scene of the novel in which Clarissa, buying her flowers from Miss Pym, is startled by the noise from the motor car. Part of the crowd that reacts to the car, Septimus is introduced just then for the first time, and Woolf switches back and forth between his story and Clarissa's as the primary ones which structure the novel. After giving a somewhat routine physical description of Septimus watching the car, Woolf's signals that something is not quite right with him by mentioning his "look of apprehension," and including a question which is presumably bubbling up from within Septimus's consciousness: "The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" (20).

Septimus, a shell-shocked Great War soldier whose suicide will intervene in the genteelly constructed world of Clarissa's party, is a human register for many of the ills of the British systems of class and masculinity, and by virtue of his "treatments" by doctors, he is also a victim of the medical establishment. Indeed, Sir William Bradshaw, one of his doctors, is a guest who arrives late to Clarissa's party because of Septimus's suicide, as he discreetly explains to the company there.

It has been clear from early on in Mrs. Dalloway that Septimus is a threat to the dominant culture, in which he sees far too many of his earlier illusions laid bare. It is evident that he does not fit into culturally convenient categories, especially not in class terms:

To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile . . . but

not his lips altogether , for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely . . . so that he was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other, might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in back streets all his life; one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in the evening after the day's work, on the advice of well-known authors consulted by letter. (126-27)

It is Septimus's embodiment of liminality, within the class system, as described above; in the gender system, as hinted at in his desire for Evans, the military officer with whom he served; as a British man married to an Italian woman, Lucrezia; and as a shell-shocked reminder of the devastations of the Great War; that makes him irreconcilable to the world that dominates the novel. Yet this "border case," who as critics have noted shares some of the afflictions Woolf herself experienced in her bouts of madness, such as hearing the birds sing in Greek, has a vital role in the novel. He is the literal fall guy for the repressions of the culture in which Clarissa cannot love women, Peter cannot attain Clarissa, and almost no relationship can escape alienation.

Though his alienation is more profound, Septimus's life closely parallels Peter Walsh's life as it might have been shaped in a younger generation by different historical forces. Both men have youthful notions of adventure and romantic ideas about class ascendancy. Before the War, Septimus aspired to win the love of his respectable middle-class teacher Miss

Isabel Pole; indeed he is described as going off to War “to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (130). Of course, the War changes Septimus utterly, from a sensitive aspiring writer with abundant illusions to a person who feels incapable of feeling emotion. While Peter Walsh can disappear to India, (his “escape” only geographical since the class system and colonial system remain very much intact in that world), Septimus’s post-War isolation from the culture that made him an outsider with unbearable knowledge of its evils leaves *him* only death. Woolf’s narrative puts it plainly: “The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death” (138). In the novel’s terms, “human nature” is an idea put into service to protect the interests of straight white upper-class men, in ways that exact various sacrifices from all Other characters.

In the midst of Clarissa’s party, the pressure of keeping her own consciousness of the culture’s nothingness and isolation at bay makes her vaguely wish for “any explosion, any horror”(255) to unify the disparate (and desperate) guests. Woolf foreshadows the role that Septimus’s suicide will play at the party, which itself becomes a metaphor for Clarissa’s sheltered, precarious, beautiful, empty life. Though Clarissa will not consciously acknowledge the fact, her world rests upon the violence that has marked Septimus’s world and the realities of the other ugly worlds from which she usually averts her gaze in order to reassure herself of her own comparative blessings.

Indeed, Woolf signals that Clarissa's own position is constituted against her most threatening Other, Doris Kilman. When her party seems in danger of failing, Clarissa recalls Kilman and her classist rage buoys her spirits: "Kilman her enemy. That was satisfying; that was real. Ah, how she hated her . . ." (265). As Emily Jensen has pointed out, Septimus's repressed desire for Evans parallels Clarissa's lesbian repression (170), which as I have argued has direct bearing on her treatment of Kilman. But Clarissa is protected by class and gender from the violence and the explosively-awakened consciousness of "human nature" (213) that destroys Septimus. Just as Kilman embodies Clarissa's repressed sexuality, Septimus embodies the pain and despair of patriarchal culture that Clarissa will not allow herself fully to know. With Septimus's suicide, any likelihood of Clarissa's acknowledging her own losses also dies. Having been off on her own, contemplating the news of Septimus's suicide and its relationship to her own life, Clarissa at the end of the novel is on the verge of descending into an emptying room, much like Septimus flinging himself into empty space in his suicide leap.

In Woolf's novel, the upper-class woman can manage to hang on to her life, though she remains untouched by change only through massive denial. The lower middle class man dies in part because of, and in the service of, that very denial. I do not view Clarissa and Septimus as twin characters, similarly undone by the world, as some critics have suggested. Clarissa's "success," her ability to "feel the beauty . . . feel the fun" (284), is in fact fed by Septimus's losses and failures. Though Jensen reads this party as revealing

"the life [Clarissa] has denied herself" (170), I see it as focused on the relative *consolations* of Clarissa's party life, which is much more comfortable than the railings Septimus's body is broken on. Clarissa's punishment, though substantial, is not actual death. Septimus's death feels to her, in a telling phrase, like "her disgrace"; she experiences the news of his suicide as "her punishment, to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman . . . and she forced to stand here in her evening dress" (282).

Unable to see her future mirror image in the old lady going to bed across from her window, and thinking of how "she did not pity [Septimus]" (283), Clarissa sinks into the oblivion she can afford while the old woman, significantly, turns out her light in a gesture which reflects Clarissa's inability to see the full truth of her complicity. Clarissa naively identifies with Septimus: "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away" (282). Septimus's suicide helps Clarissa to excuse her own emotional paralysis; though she senses her complicity, it is he who actually renounces the emptiness and evil that she cannot bring herself to acknowledge except by proxy. Clarissa remains part of the system that perpetuates the very repressions and illusions that once exposed, finally destroy Septimus.

The Dalloways' upper-class guests seem to dine on the news of Septimus's death, each choosing the portion of the story which sates their own denials. Although Christine Darrohn reads this scene as "not fully ironized," and actually revealing Woolf's own inclination to "share[ ]

Clarissa's mood of jubilation" (101), I see Woolf's crafting of the scene as quite damning to Clarissa, particularly since the reader has already shared Septimus's point of view immediately preceding his suicide leap. It is not Woolf who uses "scapegoat mythology," (Darrohn 101) but Clarissa. After showing us, through juxtaposed points of view, the extent of the futility of Septimus's leap, Woolf leaves the narrative, like Clarissa herself, suspended in space and time, marking the ultimate fragility of the worlds of her characters given all the shifts of their times.

*Mrs. Dalloway's* aesthetic is one that destabilizes, through its formal juxtapositions of points of view, the notion that one way of seeing is sufficient to reveal the varieties of human experience and consciousness. I read three moments in *Mrs. Dalloway* as particularly confirming that Woolf means for her readers to see the political limitations of point of view. Even through her more sympathetic characters, Woolf underscores the moral failing in forcing any one way of seeing. I will explore these moments in the discussion that follows as especially helpful in revealing the classed resonances of Woolf's political aesthetic. The first is her narrative foray into consideration of "a Goddess" called "Conversion" (151); the second is her inclusion of the scene in which the solitary old woman sings outside the Regent's Park tube station; the third is her portrayal of Richard's walk home to visit Clarissa in the afternoon before the party.

While she uses Septimus's story specifically to expose the evil of Sir William Bradshaw's idol, "Proportion" (150), Woolf discusses Proportion's

sister goddess, "Conversion" (151), as equally dangerous. The narrative tangent in which she comments on "Conversion" quite specifically critiques some of the myths cherished by Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, Peter Walsh, Doris Kilman, Sally Seton Rosseter, Sir William Bradshaw, and other less central characters:

But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess even now engaged—in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London, wherever in short the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true belief which is her own—is even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance.

Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace. (151)

Here we see the very ideas that Woolf will also explore in key essays—the vanity and powermongering of reformers, the imposition of the will of the powerful on those who are expected to be grateful. The class commentary is as specific as the racial one:

At Hyde Park Corner on a tub [the goddess Conversion] stands preaching; shrouds herself in white and walks penitentially disguised as brotherly love through factories and parliaments; offers help, but desires power; smites out of her way roughly the dissentient, or dissatisfied; bestows her blessing on those who, looking upward, catch

submissively from her eyes the light of their own. (151)

In contrast to this self-conscious discourse on the way power functions in her culture, Woolf offers a scene that points to an entirely different sort of power, rooted in the timeless cycles of the natural world. This power, embodied by a working-class woman, emerges strangely from beneath the cultural landscape of the city through which the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* move.

Just as Peter Walsh is contemplating Clarissa's lack of sexual passion, her coldness, the novel interrupts its consideration of the rigid cultural roles of men and women from the middle and upper classes, and offers readers a scene which seems utterly alien to those considerations. The woman at the mouth of the tube station, whose otherworldly singing breaks Peter's thoughts and catches Rezia's eye, is a medium for a voice from outside of the gender, age, and culture systems that are the focus of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The character sings of her lover, but even that subject holds no specificity. She is human passion incarnate and inarticulate, singing nonsense words while the "bustling middle-class people" around her see her as a "poor creature" (124) or an "old wretch" (125). Those apparently regular people, Woolf's narrative voice assures us, will themselves become part of natural decay and cycles of renewal. Because the other characters see this figure as an outsider to culture and decency, they try to run from what she and her song signify—unfulfilled human longing and mortality. Peter Walsh gives her a coin and taxis away, while Rezia misreads her song as a good omen for Septimus's health.

In this novel about all that is concealed in the lives of these characters,



the singer keeps repeating the phrase “and if someone should see [the passionate expressions between lovers] what matter they?” (124) Though Woolf generally restricted herself to critiquing the kinds of cultural systems which become her subject in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this character’s sudden presence may be the author’s way of reminding us of the existence of other worlds into which neither she nor most of her characters can venture. In her reading, Kathy Phillips has suggested that this character reveals a desire to start over, to wash away the corruptions of English culture (26), but I think the very incongruity of the character’s image suggests that the world she conjures will never supplant the dominant one. Perched by the entrance to the subway, which itself stands for human progress under the surface of the earth that supports a man-made city, the singer serves as an awkward reflection of that city’s power (and Woolf’s own power).

One is relieved, given the extent to which the human body of the impoverished singer becomes merely a vehicle for this enduring primal message, that Woolf did not try to fully develop such characters, that she stopped herself from making these otherworldly human creatures anything more than reminders that there are whole worlds outside of the paradigms allowed for in the world(s) with which this novel concerns itself. Woolf did far better when she used animal characters rather than animalized poor folk to achieve such ends in her art. This scene represents one of those moments in which Woolf’s desire to represent a sort of primal, timeless consciousness takes a rather specifically historical and problematically classed

representational form.

Interestingly, the third scene I want to explore combines aspects of the first two. The scene in which Richard Dalloway, securely ensconced in the English male world of privileged civic-mindedness, is walking to give Clarissa the flowers he has bought to express his unspoken love for her and gratitude for their marriage, melds the notion of conversion with the threat of passionate expression. As he walks, contemplating the “miracle” (174) of his life with Clarissa, Richard is characterized as one who has “championed the down-trodden and followed his instincts in the House of Commons” (175); on his walk he notices people who might be in need of his benevolent protection—prostitutes, costermongers, children trying to cross the street unhelped by police officers. Thinking that “it is a thousand pities never to say what one feels” (175), Richard sees the poor in the same detached but vaguely sympathetic way as Clarissa does in her walk; he has more power to shape the worlds of those on whom his gaze falls, but also more power to harm them with his Conversionary missions.

One woman becomes briefly individually visible for Richard—a “female vagrant . . . stretched on her elbow (as if she had flung herself on the earth, rid of all ties, to observe curiously, to speculate boldly, to consider the whys and the wherefores, impudent, loose-lipped, humorous)” (176). Passing by this woman, who recalls the singer at the tube entrance in her elemental connectedness to the earth, Richard carries the flowers for Clarissa—those natural emblems made into cultural, conventional gestures of feeling—“like a

weapon" (176) and "smile[s] goodhumouredly" in response to the woman's laugh, while "considering the problem of the female vagrant" (176).

Richard's inability to acknowledge the woman's individual humanity, even as he senses it briefly in the "spark between them" (176); his pseudo-reformer's point of view, is underscored by the next object on which his gaze falls—Buckingham Palace. As he gets closer to his home, with Big Ben sounding in the air, Richard contemplates the impressive dignity of Crown and Empire. He is clearly very much a part of the oppressive systems in which he thinks his political efforts make such an important difference.

Richard's class position seems to link him to his wife even more than his feelings for her. When Richard brings Clarissa the roses, he fails to express his love as planned; instead of the exchange of emotion, Richard and Clarissa discuss people in their social circle and bond superficially over the difficulties of coping with Miss Kilman's visits. Clarissa comments too on "dull women" (180), such as her own cousin Ellie Henderson, who want to be included in her parties. Both she and Richard are described as sensing the distance, based on their different gender roles, between her world and his, a distance emphasized by Clarissa's inability to distinguish whether he is going off to a Committee that helps Armenians or Albanians (181).

In Richard's vision of London, in the relationship between him and Clarissa, in the relationship between Clarissa and Septimus as well as in the more briefly evoked stories of the other central characters, we find not so much narratives representing the personal or the individual, but rather

composites of ideology made into believable, complex character types. As Kathy Phillips explains Woolf's use of character, "Her works can be seen to de-emphasize the failings of characters in their personal relations and instead to investigate personalities as products of dangerous ideologies" (xiii). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf primarily uses point of view to expose political structures, as Phillips notes: "Whether she quotes characters directly or follows their thoughts through free indirect style, she lets characters condemn themselves" (xxiii). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there are multiple instances in which Woolf uses her characters to reveal what are at least limited, and sometimes even corrupted, ways of seeing, including in at least one instance her own problematically classed way of seeing.

### III. A Woolf with Political Teeth: Constructing The Twenty-First Century Woolf

Virginia Woolf's ability to capture most of the key sociopolitical events of the interwar years in a novel which appears to be about a nice British lady's party is striking. Woolf charts these narrow and broad worlds within the modernist narrative form which has been, ironically, read by some Marxist critics as the very form most thoroughly seduced by apolitical aesthetic beauty. This irony is further testament to the need for revised constructions of Woolf and her version of modernism, classed constructions that should also broaden our view of her feminism.

As we revise Woolf's particular kinds of modernism, we can continue

her interest in the "Lives of the Obscure" by revising modernism generally—by reading other women writers of the early twentieth century in Britain, whose own modernisms will offer new insights about class and other categories of difference. Though some vitally important work has emerged from the effort to uncover other women writers of the twentieth century, there is still plenty of feminist work to be done. Even as we return to Woolf, we need also to look in-depth at other feminist and class-conscious writers, to see how other women and men politicize the literary. Though she was particularly gifted in helping us to imagine silenced lives, especially women's lives, as they were lived in classes other than her own, I think Woolf would agree that those women could better speak to their own experiences than she could do. Most of working-class experience even now remains outside of literature, and "half hidden in profound obscurity" ("Introductory Letter" xxxix)—as Woolf herself put it back in 1931.

A feminist materialist politics must work to change the social and economic context in which certain lives matter enough to record as literature, and certain others do not. Indeed, part of such a politics will be various kinds of literary recovery work, a responsibility to which Woolf's writing often points. The recovery of writing by people whose words have not been classified as literature, and the reading of those writings, is a closely related and equally vital version of what I would describe as a necessary and more general practice of reading for class in literary criticism.

If we turn our energies to these other writers, who are in various ways

less secure than Woolf, she may not have to carry quite so many of the projected needs of feminist criticism, particularly when it comes to matters of class. I will work toward this in my own particular way through chapters on two writers who, though they were not silenced by class and still have a reasonable chance at being seen to have produced literature, as yet remain uncanonized: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner. To continue to acknowledge the oppression Woolf suffered as a woman without also grappling with her relative privileges as a white, upper middle-class, married, British intellectual is to ignore issues she herself consistently pointed to, often deliberately and sometimes by default. Instead of our criticism collaborating in locking Woolf into her famous room, financially secure but quite alone, a fully developed, consciously classed construction of Woolf can serve as a doorway to better understanding the worlds she knew best. Those critics who have worked to make her name known can reshape her progressive politics according to the needs and insights of our own historical context. In this way, we might better hear and work to break the silences still surrounding the lives of women and men for whom the metaphorical, rhetorically politicized dilemma of where to send three improbable spare guineas would never be anything more than the fancy of an utterly alien imagination. The title of a memoir/essay of Woolf's, "Am I A Snob?" asks a question that my discussion of her work in this chapter has tried in part to answer. But providing our literary-critical answers to this question is only a start in a much bigger feminist materialist project, in which scholars and teachers work to put into

conscious political practice Woolf's claim that "literature is no one's private ground," and take up her inspiring exhortation to us to "trespass at once!"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Given the extent to which the “Introductory Letter” was revised, and the political awareness with which Woolf approached those revisions, it is, as Jane Marcus notes in *Art and Anger* (172), troubling that Leonard Woolf chose to publish an early draft in *Collected Essays*. The fictionalized, personalized early draft published as “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild” in 1930 in the *American Yale Review* is much less nuanced and less insightful about class issues than the final version Woolf and Llewelyn Davies agreed upon—a version which pleased the Guildswomen writers themselves, according to Woolf’s mention of letters they sent her, in a June 1931 letter to Llewelyn Davies (*Letters* 4 341).

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Silver has usefully detailed the ways that feminist scholarship has shaped the “versions of Woolf” (“Textual Criticism” 217) readers now inherit. Indeed, she has recently published a book which expands the discussion to a broader cultural context. See *Virginia Woolf Icon*. In a transatlantic comparison, Laura Doan and Terry Brown have discussed the “two distinct Virginia Woolfs” (16) that emerge in prevailing American feminist versus prevailing British feminist ways of understanding Woolf, pointing to the nostalgic and universalized American Woolf’s limits while also noting the potential reductiveness of accepting British feminist views of Woolf.

<sup>3</sup> James Haule has detailed Woolf’s early drafts of *To the Lighthouse*, in which Mrs. McNab, the Scotswoman who is the Ramsay’s housekeeper, is “an ageless seer” and “a creative, saving force” (166).



## CHAPTER 2

### 'ISSUES AS GRAVE AS THIS ARE RAISED BY FEMINISM': CLASS-IFYING REBECCA WEST

*Therefore I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast. By hook or by crook, I hope that you will possess yourselves of money enough to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream. For I am by no means confining you to fiction. If you would please me—and there are thousands like me—you would write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science. By so doing you will certainly profit the art of fiction. For books have a way of influencing each other. (109)*

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

#### I. Daring to Trespass: Rebecca West's Political and Literary Troublemaking

Originally intent on becoming an actress, Cicely Fairfield came to London from Edinburgh in 1909, at the age of seventeen. She would take the name Rebecca West in 1912, after the character created by Ibsen in *Rosmersholm*. West found she needed a pen name to preserve her family's already fragile claims to respectability, since by the time she was eighteen, her passion for the suffragist cause, which she had espoused since she was a schoolgirl of fourteen wearing a "Votes for Women" badge, had led her into political journalism. With the publication of her first article in 1911, she began a diverse writing career that would span over seventy years. West wrote for various progressive and literary journals, imbuing her essays and reviews from the earliest days with opinionated socialist and feminist politics and with her distinctive wit. Much of West's early writing is strikingly bold, gutsy even by late twentieth-century standards. Here is one example, the opening lines from her discussion of "The Personal Service

Association," published in *The Clarion*, December 1912:

Charity is an ugly trick. It is a virtue grown by the rich on the graves of the poor. Unless it is accompanied by sincere revolt against the present social system, it is cheap moral swagger. In former times, it was used as fire insurance by the rich, but now that the fear of Hell has gone along with the rest of revealed religion, it is used either to gild mean lives with nobility or as a political instrument. (*Young Rebecca* 127)

Weaving socialist and feminist insights together, West explains her aversion to being placed on any traditional pedestal, and reveals her understanding of the subtleties of oppression:

Women know the true damnation of charity because the habit of civilisation has always been to throw them cheap alms rather than give them good wages. On the way to business men give women their seats on the tube, and underpay them as soon as they get there. In politics women are denied the right of self-government, and are given doles like the White Slave Traffic Bill, fatuous measures that do no good, but confer an irritating sense of obligation. Moreover, apart from this charity between the sexes, there are certain forms of philanthropy that press very heavily on the working man's wife. While her husband is out of work she has to bear the brunt of district visiting and, if she lives in London, the Personal Service Association. (128)

Examining a leaflet of this organization in great detail, West quotes and mocks the testimonials of these philanthropic-minded but meddling visitors, explaining how "[i]n every line [she] can detect the zoo spirit, the benevolence that offers

buns through the bars on an umbrella-point" (129).

She herself knew something about life inside the various cages of the British class system. In her family's case, the deterioration of past socioeconomic privilege within a generation allowed West to have a considerable and early understanding of downward mobility. Though her paternal ancestors had been genteel Anglo-Irish, and her father had spent his early years on a magnificent estate in County Kerry, Charles Fairfield's financial ineptitude, philandering, and ultimate desertion of the family when Cicely was a young girl left her and her two sisters relying on their mother's best efforts to make ends meet. Isabella Mackenzie Fairfield was an accomplished pianist whose musical training had been a benefit of her early privilege. She spent her childhood as part of a prosperous Edinburgh family that fell in stature after quarrels isolated the women and less capable men in the family from its more successful men, whose income could otherwise have sustained a leisurely life for the others. When she met and married Charles Fairfield, it seemed Isabella Mackenzie might avoid the struggle to support herself which had begun with her brief career as a music governess, but once her husband left the family, she worked to provide three daughters with the basics of life by doing typing for university students. Thanks in part to her mother's efforts, West would win a scholarship to a working women's college, but she was exasperated by the emphasis on conformity and meekness that plagued the education of women who, as she saw it, could ill afford such constraints within their already circumscribed courses of study (*Young Rebecca* 154).

As her writing proves, West put an agile and questioning mind to lifelong

use, despite this early encouragement toward a feminine, lower-middle-class compliance with the *status quo*. Having lived on the borderline of respectability while also having felt the stings of poverty, West understood that complex distinctions structured the class system as it functioned in early twentieth-century Britain.

In her early journalism, she interrogates such complexities, all the while railing against sexism. West displays considerable political courage in her writings, criticizing such diversely powerful contemporary figures as Lord Northcliffe, who launched the first mass-media style “human interest” tabloid publication in England, the *Daily Mail*, and Mrs. Herbert Samuels, whose husband was a prominent industrialist involved in politics. West is so unwilling to suffer fools gladly that she names them outright in many of her essays and reviews, though she was just twenty when she wrote the following, also from “The Personal Service Association”:

I would rather be attended to by the After-Care Association for the Recovered Insane, for it sounds tenderer. Well, if I had slowly fought my way back to sanity after a long period of mania, would it be fair to send Mr. J. L. Garvin [a fellow political journalist] to visit me? Ten minutes of his passionate conversation on the subject of Belfast and the Balkans would shatter the work of months.<sup>1</sup> Can an association that exposes the poor to such perils claim to be philanthropic? In such a state it would shake my nerves to be visited by Lord Northcliffe, that eager recipient of the gossip of murderers’ widows. And a visit from Mrs Herbert Samuel would cause prostration. (*Young Rebecca* 129)

West's combination of fearlessness and wit was delicious. It has survived in a frequently quoted "definition" of feminism she once offered: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what Feminism is: I only know that people call me a Feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute" (*Young Rebecca* 219).

Rebecca West was often called a Feminist, usually by antifeminists but also by her admirers, including to some extent Virginia Woolf, who, as Bonnie Kime Scott reminds us, used West in *A Room of One's Own* as the ideal of the modern woman writer who unsettles even apparently sympathetic male readers (*Gender* 568). Woolf recognized in West a kind of feminism that threatened with its frankness, its often polemic insistence on rights and wrongs as West understood them in her own mind and in various historical contexts, including the contemporary one of the British women's suffrage movement. Woolf seems to see men's reactions to West as a litmus test for their sympathy to feminism:

... Z, most humane, most modest of men, taking up some book by Rebecca West and reading a passage in it, exclaimed, 'The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!' The exclamation, to me so surprising—for why was Miss West an arrant feminist for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex?—was not merely the cry of wounded vanity; it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. (*Room* 35)

Rebecca West, for other feminists like Woolf as well as for men of whatever political stripe, embodied a rather direct challenge to the culture of polite disagreement. West did not defer, and was rarely demure.

Within the terms of this study, it is important to consider that it was Rebecca West who was held up by Virginia Woolf, herself now such an icon of feminism among politically progressive academics, as the most readily-identifiable feminist writer of Woolf's own time. In reading for class in Woolf, West, and Warner, I intend to reckon with such shifts in the reputations of these feminist writers as essential to understanding how their writing has functioned through time, and to rethinking what place that writing has found, or has not found, in feminist literary history and in the canon(s) of modernism. Though *A Room of One's Own* has now been widely read for some years, and has been anthologized in male-dominated canonical anthologies as well as in many feminist collections, Woolf's perception of West's importance as a cultural watermark for feminist progress has not led to a particularly wide or diverse interest in West's own work, though she has not been ignored entirely either.

Jane Marcus's enthusiasm for West has, fortunately, rippled across the feminist academic community somewhat; Marcus's collection of West's early work in *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917*, published in 1982, demonstrates that West played an important role in English journalism of this period, and specifically in her work for some of the publications that first accepted the writing of modernist authors. In 1990, selections of West's work were included in the pivotal anthology *The Gender of Modernism*, in which Bonnie Kime Scott wrote eloquently of West as "a unique and forceful female interpreter [of the twentieth century], who has yet to be adequately heeded" (560). In her discussion of West as an "interrupted influence" (568) on and part of modernism, Scott offers a summary of the difficulties that have marginalized West, including

the fact that “[t]he vast corpus of West’s writing defies usual categories of genre and period” and the fact that those works “written through the 1920s [which] can be related to canonical modernism . . . have not been canonized” (562).

There is also, as Scott recognizes, the classed issue of West’s achievements being tied to ghettoized writing traditions: “Journalism typically does not count toward a literary reputation, and a great deal of West’s energy flowed into this form, which offered necessary financial support, even though she valued it less than her novels” (562). There is no question that the prevailing understanding of West’s place in literary history is primarily a function of persistent classed distinctions between writing one does for money and writing one does for Art. Despite the recognition of her talent for expression in the language of journalism, reviews, travel writing, and so on, critics have tended not to see her as a writer who also had considerable powers of representation, or have tended to see her powers of representation in rather obviously classed and gendered terms.

Though her less perceptive readers have sometimes tried to fit West into hierarchical binaries, which are classed no less than gendered, her work often resists such class-ification because of its egalitarian eclecticism. For instance, the enormous *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), one of her most famous works, and still considered essential reading for journalists who travel to the Balkans, is judged by one of West’s critics to be her “masterpiece” (Hynes xiv). But describing its achievement is daunting, even for Hynes, who is clearly in awe of it. It is “a travel book about a trip to the Balkans in 1937 [read feminine, low-cultural],” “[b]ut it includes so much more, is at once so comprehensive [high-cultural, masculine] and so personal [low, feminine], that it has no genre, unless

one invents one, calling it an epic testament [and thus making it as high and as masculine as possible]" (xiv). Tellingly, Hynes goes on to compare the text to three "literary oddities" (xiv), all by men, and then emphasizes its "meditation on the patterns of Western history" and its "theory of the relations between East and West in Europe," finally summing the work up as "a moving response to the contemporary political, moral, and spiritual condition of Europe" (xiv). My point here is not so much to disagree with Hynes' descriptions of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, since his terms for the book are largely apt. But as is probably obvious from my bracketed interventions, I do wish to note his descriptions' embeddedness in the classed and gendered terms of critical judgment. It is not that Rebecca West could not write a book which fits these terms—indeed if any writer could, it would probably be she—but it is worth recognizing that the lofty mix some critics have seen in *Black Lamb* may have at least as much to do with their own (classed) versions of literary achievement as with the ambitions of West's project as she saw it. Perhaps it is no accident that Hynes starts referring to his subject as "Dame Rebecca" in these passages of his introduction to *Rebecca West: A Celebration*, while he often uses the simpler "Rebecca West" in others.

Bonnie Kime Scott's discussions of West are in my view the most perceptive within extant literary criticism. Scott offers an important insight about West's career, writing that "[s]ome of the tendencies that have caused feminists concerns have allowed others to deny West's feminist affiliations altogether. Skeptics of feminism typically gravitate to a different set of texts from those that attract feminist readers in order to make their point"<sup>2</sup> (*Refiguring* 127). Though in *Refiguring Modernism* Scott puts the problem rather mildly in her



summary of West's works, there is also the difficulty, for some feminist critics, of West's later career, in which feminism was at least a more hidden priority in her writing, and sometimes even seems at odds with elements of her complex political belief system. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, for instance, some readers have seen troubling evidence of rigid gender essentialism, while others have seen a feminist historical sensibility.

Though I can see the potential for finding contradictions of her socialist and feminist politics within some of West's works over the course of her career, I agree with Bonnie Kime Scott when she writes of West, "The basic themes that concern her are consistent" (*Refiguring* 127). Sue Thomas, who describes West as "renegeing on the overt radicalism of the early journalism," is not alone in her belief that West experienced a "shift from left to right politically" (90) over the years. Yet I think Thomas mistakes West's *engagement with* the major issues that shaped her historical context(s) for an unthinking *endorsement of* them as the major issues worth writing about. West was just barely an adult, aged twenty-one, at the start of the Great War, and she died in 1983 as conservatism was on a decisive upswing in both Britain and the United States. She lived through extraordinary years of massive social changes, two World Wars, and the dissolution of the British empire, to give a sketch that only suggests the range of her experience as a twentieth-century person. Never a party line sort of woman, West was interested in the political consequences of such forties and fifties developments as anti-communism, a position she herself took, but her writing on these central topics of her day seems to have led some of her critics, to see her, reductively, as therefore aligned with such travesties as McCarthyism. This is

not to say that West was never wrong about history—on the contrary, she was sometimes dead wrong, as in her view of the Rosenbergs—but her politics never changed so drastically as to be unrecognizable to the careful reader of her later work.

Perhaps West's consistencies are easier to see in her literary criticism and her writing for "popular" periodicals over the years than they are in her fiction, which develops across many different genres. Margaret Diane Stetz has written a perceptive account of West as a critic and author who was once a central figure within modernism and whose interest in the "idea of alliance and relationship" is evident in "almost any of her works of criticism . . . address[ed] from a broad range of perspectives" ("Rebecca West's Criticism" 48). To a great extent, I think the same may be said of West's other writing, across fiction and nonfiction and including most of her hybrids in between. As is true of her other work, which sometimes reshapes our understanding of the venues in which it appeared, West's writing for women's magazines such as *Vogue* "may be of great significance in reconsidering sixties feminist assumptions about the women's market [as inevitably ideologically conservative]" (Scott, *Refiguring* 233). Bonnie Kime Scott has offered a reading of West which makes the point about her consistency-in-diversity perceptively:

In both her fiction and her prose works of social analysis, West seeks to detect and explore patterns of dominance and difference that shape human behavior, particularly in the mechanized, war-torn, patriarchal world of the early twentieth century. She repeatedly calls these patterns 'myths,' suggesting their wide influence, but also their constructedness

and susceptibility to challenge and eventual change. West reads her myths in theology, history, literature, art, clothing, crafts, architecture, and personal dialogues. (*Refiguring* 129)

In part because she was both the insider evoked by her status as “Dame Rebecca” and the outsider suggested by her self-proclamation as “Rebecca West,” rigid formulations seldom work as critical terms that illuminate West’s writing. Indeed it was the fact that she dared to combine “high” and “low” subjects that provoked some of the more extreme responses to her writing over the years, both positive and negative. She inspired rather hysterical (male) defenses of James Joyce’s genius by discussing his *Pomes Penyeach* alongside her account of shopping for clothes within *The Strange Necessity* (1928), in which West’s primary achievement is precisely her wide-ranging critical consideration of art and the everyday.<sup>3</sup>

These classed judgments of West are one kind of dismissal of her art; there are also the nervous dismissals of West’s more obvious feminist politics by some male literary critics, whose views of her work, according to Scott, “suggest that the politics of gender have asserted themselves in West studies” (*Gender* 562). It is not surprising that, even now, West makes readers who are uncomfortable with feminism skittish. As she explained in 1924, characteristically unapologetically:

I am an old-fashioned feminist. I believe in the sex-war. I am, to use an expression that for some reason that I never can understand is used as a reproach, anti-man. When those of our army whose voices are inclined to coo tell us that the day of sex-antagonism is over and that henceforth we

have only to advance hand in hand with the male, I do not believe it. . . .

The woman who . . . does not realize that by virtue of her sex she lives in a beleaguered city, is a fool, who deserves to lose (as she certainly will) all the privileges that have been won for her by her more robustly-minded sisters. This is not to say that feminism need be shrill or hysterical. One can be as serene in a beleaguered city as anywhere else; but one must be vigilant. ("On a Form of Nagging" 1052)

West's political ideas about "the sex-war" were, as is evident, unflinchingly expressed. She had personally known women who suffered serious harm, even death, in the campaign for suffrage, and she had little patience for those who did not understand the stakes of the struggle, including women themselves.

Perhaps it is this unladylike impatience, coupled with fairly serious criticism, in class terms, of a feminist movement in which she herself participated, that makes West an unsettling figure for feminist literary criticism. Indeed, her critique of middle-class feminism's inattention to class issues in the early decades of the twentieth century sometimes applies quite directly to the dominant version of feminism among those very academic literary critics who might otherwise have taken up West's cause as they have Woolf's. Woolf's very different brand of eloquence is no less feminist, but is usually encoded within modernist aesthetics that, as I have suggested in the preceding chapter, allow literary critics to have both feminism (the white, upper-middle class sort) and modernism (the canonical, formally innovative sort) in some problematically classed ways that tend to occlude other women writers of the period, including West.

Feminist literary criticism has not yet succeeded in resisting the classed hierarchy of genres, in which "real literature," cannot include politically-charged journalism. Ironically, critics of the modernist period, a period in which now-canonized writers had many ties to journals and magazines of their day, tend to forget that the line we have drawn between "literature published in serials" and "journalism" might well constitute one of the least-examined and most-classed genre divisions in the field. That line is itself like a class barrier, difficult to explain precisely but impossible to miss. No less a modernism-maker than Ezra Pound was drawing such a line aggressively when he wrote of West that she was "a journalist, a clever journalist, but not 'of us.' She belongs to Wells and that lot" (*Refiguring* 89). Too often, feminist readers take on the assumption that if a writer, especially a woman, consciously crafted writing in pursuit of an income, she must not have been writing literature. This is particularly true when there is no obvious "literary" nonfiction method or style to unpack, as there virtually always is in Woolf's essays. Despite such largely-unexamined assumptions about the value of writers' artistic ambitions and about which kinds of texts merit our readerly labor, we profess to be interested no less in class difference (and race difference) than in gender difference. But if the texts we read are already confined by the terms of canonization—which reflect the ideas of a group of influential critics who shaped the modernist canon in gender, race, and class-biased terms—we may fail to examine the politics and style of works from the modernist era that don't seem to be self-consciously trying to be Art.

I intend here to model a method of reading for class in Rebecca West's work, and specifically in some of her most obviously feminist writing through

the tens and twenties. West is interesting not only as a feminist firebrand of the modernist period (whose feisty journalism marks her as much less genteel than Woolf, even when Woolf was writing as a journalist), but also as an author who in Scott's words, "helps us rewrite modernism" (568). Indeed, Scott's substantial 1995 work, *Refiguring Modernism*, makes great strides in that very rewriting, discussing Woolf, West, and Djuna Barnes in detail. Though I think that Scott's work on West is more invested than my own in finding a place for her in modernism, Scott is certainly not unaware of or content with the rigidity of the category, as her title suggests. In her introduction to *Refiguring Modernism*, Scott articulates her conception of the study she offers:

All three [writers] say things that matter about both writing and modernism, in syntax that challenges and involves readers. They defy a unified account, even of their modernism, and certainly of modernism in general. They bring a long line of critical work to a new accounting. (xl)

Scott's work on Woolf, West, and Barnes is almost alone within feminist modernist criticism, not because of the writers she studies but because of her decision to study them together in equally sustained attention to each.

I think West is worth studying in-depth, not only because her brilliant journalism helps articulate (dare I say theorize?) ongoing questions for and issues within feminism, especially class difference, but also because her work disrupts the classed assumptions we make about literary modernism. Even more than helping us to rewrite our understandings of writing within the period, sustained attention to West's work and to her status in literary history reveals some of the underlying reasons that modernism, like all literary periods in all

their classed resonances of inside and outside, functioned to leave her outside in the first place. We could learn from Rebecca West's insightful eye for the way that power systems, including our own literary criticism, reveal the interconnectedness of class and gender biases.

Even almost ten years before she proclaimed herself "an old-fashioned feminist," West's sense of the embattled interactions between men and women were also, and significantly for my argument here, intricately linked to her awareness of class identities. In an April 1913 piece called "The Sex War: Disjointed Thoughts on Men," West again disdained Mr. J. L. Garvin, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, for, among other things, his refusal to acknowledge the role that the class system had played in the tragedy of the Titanic. Beginning her article on a more general note by raising the issue of gender politics, West explains that she is "tired of this running comment on the war-like conduct of [her] sex, delivered with such insolent assurance and such self-satisfaction." She writes, "So I am going to do it too," and pausing dramatically for the start of a new paragraph, adds, "Men are poor stuff." Briefly acknowledging a few women with whom she cannot be proud to share womanhood, West goes on to write, "But my sex has produced nothing like Mr. J. L. Garvin . . . I want Mr. Garvin to be disenfranchised. I want him to be imprisoned for life. I want to get up monster petitions against him" (*Young Rebecca* 175). Mr. Garvin's editorial commentary in his paper has angered West on several counts. As she explains, his "solemn, ghoulish enjoyment" (175) of the anniversary of the Titanic's sinking takes a turn toward elegiac, poetic reverie at the expense of facing reality. Echoing his lofty phrases, West explains, "Nothing is said about the proportion

of the children of third-class passengers who were obliged to turn up their faces to God," nor about "the shocking manner in which the American millionaires who sent out the liner with neither seamen nor boats had overlaid their spiritual side [with greed]" (175).

Castigating Garvin's politically irresponsible sentimentality, West makes an explicit connection between his erasure of the poor and his role as "the leader of the Tory press" who must "attack women and the weak for his country's sake" (176). In his other editorial, which attacks suffragettes, "[Garvin] wants the spiritual side of man's nature to direct a hail of stones and refuse on the women in Hyde Park [who are organizing for suffrage]. He wants the suffragettes to be torn limb from limb in order that they may show fortitude, constancy, self-sacrifice, self-control" (176). West exposes the class and gender contempt embedded in Garvin's journalism, and amply demonstrates her awareness of the connections between the two. In recognizing those connections between class and gender politics, West not only criticized men who used oppressive ideologies, as Garvin did, but women who bought into their own versions of the same ideologies.

Though she was energetically involved in the early twentieth century women's movement, West did not always endorse its class politics, and indeed openly criticized what she viewed as a lack of comprehensive social vision within the suffrage movement. In "The Future of the Middle Classes: Women Who Are Parasites," which appeared six months before, in *The Clarion* of November, 1912, West shows that her feminism is distinctly socialist by insisting on the complex interrelationship of the class and gender systems, beginning,



**“Life ought not to be divided into watertight compartments” (Young Rebecca 111). She criticizes the presumption that “the women’s vote will have no appreciable effect on the social structure” (111). West believes that**

**It is strange that the middle-class woman, who forms the backbone of the suffrage societies, should believe that one can superimpose the emancipation of women on the social system as one sticks a halfpenny stamp on a postcard. For in the social developments consequent upon the emancipation of woman she will probably play a great and decisive part. (111)**

**For West, the ideals of feminist revolution are, and should be, inseparable from those of class revolution. Women who support suffrage ought to realize, she argues, that their potential power to shape political and social life extends far beyond gaining the vote. Mindful of the fact that most women in the suffrage movement are from the middle class, West explains how such women’s middle-class identifications serve as a kind of unconscious denial of the consequences of their demand for the vote. West claims that the middle class as a whole is “in a state of chaos,” and goes on to use the example of a group of wealthy neighbors who have failed to see that they have allowed the very railway yard of which they are largely the owners to be situated at the outskirts of their own neighborhood. In West’s metaphor, the sounds and events which disturb the middle class are mostly of their own making, and “the world of work, which they refused to organise economically and justly, has its revenge on them by destroying their night’s rest” (112). West directly links the naïve political isolationism of the middle-class woman’s demand for suffrage to the seeming**

inability of the middle-class in general to recognize cause-and-effect, as dramatized in her railway yard anecdote.

England's time of prospering off of the slavery of colonies and the suppression of its own workers is ending, West claims in this essay. At this point, she explains, "we see that the poor, in asking for a greater share of the national wealth, are neither thieves nor beggars, but simply workers presenting an account for services rendered" (112-113). Two ideas have backfired on the middle-class man, according to West: one, "the idea about the thriftlessness and worthlessness of the working classes" and two, "snobbishness, which makes him love all lords . . . [and] feel deeply surprised when the rich and great do not assist him in his hour of need, but pick his left-hand pocket" (113). Given all these threats to middle-class prosperity in the coming generation, "[t]he middle-class woman will have to come out and work for her living. Not as the exception . . . but as the general rule. The middle-class woman will have to stop being a parasite" (113).

Not one to miss the political context for any social change, even the largely positive one of stopping middle-class women's parasitism, West wisely notes that women's capability as workers does not ensure that they will be justly treated. As she points out, having access to positions and training for employment does not mean that work will be made available to women at a decent wage. Indeed, it may be that women entering the labor force will create a crisis within it, and that they will be allowed in or not according to the needs of the powers that be. Given the wartime and peacetime manipulations of women's roles in the workforce during the forties and fifties in Britain and the U.S., which

West would witness some thirty years after she wrote this piece, we can see now that her insights were remarkably astute.

The “emancipation of women,” which is helped by but surely does not end with gaining the vote, is interconnected with a whole range of “social developments” which West spins out in this essay, imagining the best possible outcome even as she acknowledges that the conditions are ripe for the worst possible outcome, in which women’s liberation will be partial, and quickly co-opted. West points out that the labor market does not offer unlimited room for newcomers regardless of their skills; she notes that “although the feminist pride engendered by the suffrage agitation will probably prevent [women] from being blacklegs,” the influx of women workers will “lower the rewards of labour” (114) in terms of income. The fact that women are allowed in, West reminds her readers, does not mean that those who control industry cannot accordingly re-adjust the rules of the workplaces women manage to enter, particularly workplaces in which workers provide variably-valued services rather than making products that fetch a price. Offering another uncanny prediction about women’s evolving roles in the labor markets, West claims that “the occupations taken up by middle-class women, which will be mostly of a distributive or not directly productive nature, such as stockbroking or the practice of law and medicine,” will be particularly impacted. When women want access to these professions, the professions they enter will lose economic and social status in being opened to them. Thus, West concludes, some sort of revolutionary socioeconomic change is inevitable.

West doubts, though, whether the revolution will be “progressive,” “a

social readjustment which would enforce a more equal distribution of wealth," and fears it is more likely to be "reactionary," constituted by "a return to the happy conditions of the early eighteenth century, when the middle classes built their prosperity on the solid foundations of the slavery of the working classes" (114). Basing her fears of the reactionary revolution on the "signs of the times," which she reads as evidencing the "vicious anti-democratic temper of the middle classes today," West lists a number of troubling trends (still with us in their late twentieth-century, multinational capitalist incarnations) characterized in her time by middle-class enthusiasm for Conservative Party politics, particularly "[t]he loathing of trade-unionism, free education, and restrictions on child labour" (114).

Returning to her principal theme, the parasitic middle-class woman, West claims that because such a woman is expensive to maintain, because "[t]he nation is not wealthy enough to support a non-productive class," and because that nation "practise[s] the most determined concentrations of wealth," the conditions for the reactionary revolution are much stronger than for the progressive one. Explicitly linking women's suffrage with class and anti-imperial struggle, and working up to a rhetorically-charged finale, West writes:

It is not only a question of whether slaves will submit to supporting women, but whether women will submit to being supported by slaves. Issues as grave as this are raised by feminism. That is why women should not concentrate their intelligences too fixedly on the vote without preparing for the tremendous issues that follow. And that is why socialists should regard the woman's movement as something more

important than the fad of a few propertied ladies and women as humble beings to be satisfied by pious opinions concerning the advisability of free milk for babies. When woman came out of the home she came bringing not peace but a sword. Great things depend on how she uses that sword. (115)

By January 1916, when she published a short series of articles called "The World's Worst Failure" in the *New Republic*, West was brooding on the difficulties of getting the privileged woman to recognize her place in the fight—or her complicity with the system—in which she had been given a potentially mighty sword. The parasitic, self-obsessed woman, whose investment in heterosexual romantic power and class privilege dictated the limits of her vision, was a particular target of West's, though the series of articles also went on to lament several other versions of femininity, which West saw as the warped product of capitalist patriarchy. In this first article, combining her disdain for such a traditionally feminine creature with a strain of anti-French feeling, West uses the character of a Frenchwoman in a restaurant to rail against both the woman and the systems that produce her. Revealing an ugly tendency to think in terms of racialized types, whether "positively" or more obviously negatively, West writes,

One found in her that association of vividness of presence and absence of individuality which one finds in non-Europeans. When one meets the lithest and most beautiful of Hindus one speculates not about his personality but about the system of which he is manifestly a part and a product. And even so one forgot the soul that doubtless inhabited the

Frenchwoman, that doubtless knew ardours and loneliness, in her fitness and conspicuousness as part of the system of the *chic*. (*Gender* 581)

West's honesty about her response to Others who represent various systems in which she herself is a beneficiary—colonialism, femininity—notwithstanding, the ease with which racialized categories of Otherness become equivalent to contemptible gendered traits is revealing. The essay shows that West had a contemporary (and enduring) white liberal's blindness to the way that her "complimentary" exoticizations perpetuate racial stereotyping even as they aim to expose and unsettle gender categories. West buys into notions of "beautiful" Otherness in her dehumanizing description of the Hindu, as she does in noting earlier that a "touch of Jewish blood" (580) creates the Frenchwoman's only distinctive physical qualities. The general virulence of West's "explanation" of why "woman is the world's worst failure" (583) and the essay's substitution of West's usually incisive political wit with a kind of mean-spiritedness may be rooted in West's own gendered class position in 1916, as I will argue further on in this chapter.

The Frenchwoman's performance of femininity, the central preoccupation of "The World's Worst Failure," reveals the emptiness at the heart of her efforts to be worthy of the gaze. West as narrator, invited into the Frenchwoman's shiny world to be told the story of this woman's life, finds that "instead she showed me her hats and dresses, and it seemed to do the poor soul as much good" (581-82). The Frenchwoman, the narrator notes, has two photos of soldiers, her husband and her lover, and has "bec[o]me a part of what was . . . an even more ancient and relentless system than the *chic*": war. When the narrator

learns that the Frenchwoman's husband has been killed and her lover bankrupted, West quotes the only reply she can make to the woman's comi-tragedy: "Madame, it is the fate of all sensitive souls to discover that life would be simple if it were not for sex" (582). This maudlin piece of philosophy might indeed have cut close to the truth of West's own feelings at the time, given her unintended pregnancy in 1914, during the early years of her affair with the married H. G. Wells.

It is worth noting, for the purposes of the reading I will offer of West's 1918 novel *The Return of the Soldier*, the way that "ancient and relentless systems" can, for West, include everything from women's role as fashionable object to men's roles as soldier/provider. In this particular version of West's journalism we find a polemic against war's persistent destruction, class competition among women, and women's unthinking acceptance of the "feminized object" role, all rooted in the sketch of the Frenchwoman. These are some of the same gender and class-based indictments that will unfold more subtly, but no less powerfully, within the novel.

As the essay continues, the Frenchwoman and the narrator meet an American girl from Chicago, who believes "a woman ought to preserve her general interests and take part in the world's work, though she admitted it was necessary that we should retain the fragility which makes us worshipful" (582). As she uses the Frenchwoman to explain the power of the beautiful woman-as-object, West uses this alternate American-feminine type to explain how the "calculating coquetry" of this woman's face

explains the failure of women in industry and the professions. She and

her kind took up work not because they loved the world but in order that they might offer an appearance of strength which some man would find virile satisfaction in breaking down to weakness, an appearance of independence which some man would be proud to see exchanged for dependence upon him. And their half-hearted work made women workers cheap and ill-esteemed. Both these women were keeping themselves apart from the high purposes of life for an emotion that, schemed and planned for, was no better than the made excitement of drunkenness. One ought to pass into love reluctantly for life's sake . . . .

(583)

In her aversion to these two forms of feminine self-fashioning, West underscores their similarly contrived acquiescence to the needs of men. She also reveals a certain world-weariness about the costs of love for women living within a patriarchal culture. Though the idea of a twenty-four year old woman believing that "one ought to pass into love reluctantly" may seem odd, West was already well aware of the price she was to pay for her feminist interest in women's sexual emancipation.<sup>4</sup> By 1916, her son was a toddler, and with the encouragement of his famous father, West was being rather more accommodating in the interest of keeping up appearances than she might have found desirable or fair.

In "The World's Worst Failure," one can also detect West's disgust about Mrs. Jane Wells's socio-economic parasitism and open but publicly unspoken acceptance of her husband's many extra-marital affairs. In her more self-promoting moments, West might have compared the public wife's complicity with her own defiance of convention in loving H. G. Wells. But one can also



detect in the essay West's fear that she is no better than these two feminine types, both of whom look to the love they get from men as salvation and as an excuse for shirking their responsibilities to "the high purposes of life." This tension between a woman artist's potential for emotional and financial independence and her socially-conditioned acceptance of second-class status under the guise of "free love" principles, troubles West. Wanting to immerse herself in writing that might lead her toward "the high purposes of life," needing to indulge in what she would later describe as the "strange necessity" of immersion in art and literature, but also needing to earn a living, West ends this essay by questioning her own merits as a writer ostensibly interested in probing life's high purposes.

She embeds an almost literal self-reflexivity within the essay's imagery in an interesting manipulation of her own critical voice at the close of the piece. Indeed, the piece might best be described as deconstructing itself in its final move, as it turns to interrogate the connection between feminine material desire and the writing life itself. West's narrator looks across the room to see the Frenchwoman, the girl from Chicago, and herself reflected in one of the many mirrors mentioned in the essay's few short pages. She sees an inkstain on her own evening dress and is "immeasurably distressed by this by-product of the literary life" (583). Tellingly, West's narrator explains that she is "upsetting the balance of [her] nerves by silent rage" about the dress, and confesses, "in the end I would probably write some article I did not in the least want to write in order to pay for a new one" (583). West concludes, "In fact I would commit the same sin that I loathed in these two women. I would waste on personal ends vitality that I should have conserved for my work" (583).<sup>5</sup> West was no doubt feeling

that her literary work was being drained by such matters as love-worthiness, sexual attraction, and financial independence, since this piece dates exactly from a time in her life when these issues were foregrounded.

Like the novel *The Return of the Soldier*, which West had already conceived of and had partially completed by the time "The World's Worst Failure" was published in January 1916, the essay reflects a deep pessimism about love's potential for transcending, or even significantly challenging, the class and gender systems in which it is entrenched. Reading the essay, one might connect the three women reflected in the mirror to the three central women characters of the novel. Indeed, the Frenchwoman of the essay is only a slightly different version of the type that West created in Kitty Baldry, the materialistic beauty who marries the soldier Chris Baldry and sets up house in the splendor of his estate.

Perhaps feeling rather too much the dependent woman, particularly during this period of her life, West often ended up reviewing fiction such as she herself might have been producing in greater quantity if she had been less determined to make her own way financially. West wanted to be scrupulous about making her own money, and felt trapped when she could not manage the financial independence she sought. Earning one's own keep ensured the right to express one's opinion, and given the strength with which she expressed hers, she needed to create financial stability for herself. During her pregnancy and in the early months of her son's life, her ideals about independent womanhood became tangled up in the realities of her times, including the fragility of her social and professional position in comparison to Wells's. Always fond of fine clothes, good food, and other creature comforts, West struggled to balance the need to

protect her own integrity and outspokenness against what she believed was a rebellious woman's right: aesthetic and material pleasures. In an essay exposing the effects of ruling-class ideologies which presume that the deserving poor have no need for beauty or fun, she called for "riotous living" in defiance of the "stupid convention" that is "the ugliness of the world" (*Young Rebecca* 132). West could not miss the ironies of her position as the frank feminist who had become the financially dependent, hushed-up other woman. The self-reflexive turn of the narrative toward the end of "The World's Worst Failure" suggests that in the midst of these contradictions, West acknowledged her own implicatedness in the socio-economic realities of her times, her own complicity with aspects of the patriarchal system's sexual and social double standards.

West's beliefs in women's independence and what was, rather ironically, called "free" love, had led her into the relationship with Wells, whom she had criticized confidently in reviews which drew his attention. It is ironic too, given the impact the affair had on West's life, that she had mocked Wells as "the old maid among novelists" for his "spinsterish" treatment of women characters, especially their sexuality (*Young Rebecca* 64). But when, at twenty-two, West gave birth to their son Anthony, she tried to mitigate the scandal by living away from London. Her struggle to raise her son in various out-of-the-way locales--with visits from Wells replacing her active social and political schedule for a time, and various cover stories barely keeping vicious gossip at bay--doubtless confirmed her sense of the injustices and hypocrisies of the sex and class systems of the era. Though she was an active critic of the material and historical conditions of her times, especially as women experienced them, West was of

course inescapably implicated in that context too.

Indeed I think that West's liminality is the source, in many instances, of both political insights and, less often, of political blind spots. In terms of her family background, she was middle to upper-middle class, but for long stretches she did not have the money that went along with that status. Her struggles to have both material basics and comforts, both the necessities of life and some of its privileges, probably sensitized West to the hypocrisies of class power. Her experiences as both an outspoken feminist and a "fallen woman" may have had a similar effect on her, creating a certain consciousness of the range of women's cultural roles in the face of her own lived contradiction. I wonder too about Rebecca West's changing writerly moods, her vigorous political proclamations, which often suggest that change is imminent, and her deeply pessimistic visions, which seem to ask whether change is even possible. As I have shown, writing such as "The Personal Service Association" falls into the former category, while "The World's Worst Failure" tends toward the latter. The novel I want to explore in this chapter is a more mixed representation, in which West's liminality as a woman living within the class structure of early twentieth century Britain takes a complex representational form.

World War I was erupting when West's son Anthony was born, and *The Return of the Soldier* is certainly rooted in that historical and personal writing context. Though it was published in 1918, Samuel Hynes rightly notes in his 1997 introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel that it was written in "the dark dead center of the First World War" (vii). One might also say, from the feminist perspective its author shared, that *The Return of the Soldier* was written in

the “dark”—and here the racialized and sexualized Other converge in their linguistically-marked invisibility—dead center of West’s own encounter with a woman’s place in the reproductive economy of England in the early part of this century. When she wrote “The World’s Worst Failure” and while she was writing *The Return of the Soldier*, West was struggling with being the mother of a toddler, the mistress of a famous man, and the writer who wanted to earn her own living.

The gender system is certainly a target in this fiction, but West explores its resonances in conjunction with exposés of the class system, forays into psychology, and a deconstruction of the battlefield-homefront binary. In that same remarkable piece, “The Personal Service Association,” which West wrote in 1912, for *The Clarion*, she offered what I see as an early blueprint for the plot of *The Return of the Soldier*. West writes:

This mingling of the rich and the poor [as effected through The Personal Service Association, which she was attacking] will not do. There are too many irritations between them as there must always be between honest men and thieves. Least of all, can there be any easy relationship of patronage and respect between the rich and the poor woman. For both are failures. The rich woman is the most expensive luxury the world has indulged in. She is the most idle human being that has ever secured the privilege of existence, and with her furs and jewels and silks from strange places, commands more service than any emperor of the past. And her achievements are nothing. Art and science are beyond her grasp, and her growing sterility stultifies the last reason for her dependence. Perhaps she

feels the tragedy of her incompleteness, but luxury has bred a hard pride into her.

And hard work has made the poor woman ugly and clumsy. The working woman, whom childbearing and continual drudgery have made a bruised and withered thing at forty-five, feels herself an offence against beauty and life. She is too weak, too tired to shift the blame to those who ought to bear it, and feels humiliated. The poor and the rich can only meet when the poor have been exalted and the rich humbled by some moral passion. There lies the true significance of the feminist movement. (*Young Rebecca* 130)

## II. Class-ifications of and Contexts for *The Return of the Soldier*

In order to consider the “moral passion” that might, with the influence of the feminist movement, help the poor and the rich to meet, I want to examine West’s *The Return of the Soldier*. I will be arguing that this novel is a tightly pulled knot of Westian political analysis, a work that offers indictments of traditional gender roles, prescriptive class positions, and, less obviously, British colonial profiteering. It makes its political commentary on a small scale, in a primarily domestic setting and through the interactions of just four principal characters. West’s first published novel (1918), it is an early culmination, in well-crafted fiction, of many of the political themes raised by the insightful and sophisticated journalism she had been writing.

*The Return of the Soldier* uses the situation of the Great War as a cauldron in which the ingredients of the four principle characters’ lives might be

combined, but the novel ultimately shows West's skepticism about whether any lasting mixture can be achieved. In its concern with the immediate historical context of the War, *The Return of the Soldier* certainly reflects its times. Though some of the sociopolitical shifts of great significance to the early twentieth century seem peripheral to its plot, its class and gender preoccupations also demonstrate its embeddedness in that history. David Cannadine, in *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, has aptly summarized what he calls the early twentieth-century's "widespread dissatisfaction (and bewilderment) about the social order, which seemed to be changing in many ways, of which the extension of the franchise was only one indication" (110). During these years of swift change, Britain became "the most urbanized and industrialized nation in the world" (110). As Cannadine explains:

There was large scale labor unrest . . . while in Ireland (and to a lesser extent Wales and Scotland) there was unprecedented agrarian and nationalist agitation. . . . At the same time, the hold and appeal of established religion markedly weakened, and the growth of imperial dominion and the raising of imperial consciousness further differentiated the late Victorian and Edwardian era from the mid-Victorian period. . . . these disruptive developments meant that Britons thought about, talked about, and wrote about their social order with a renewed urgency and contentiousness. (110)

Add to this the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis as a way of explaining human behavior, and one can begin to grasp the remarkable historical conditions within which West was writing *The Return of the Soldier*. The novel is, I will

argue, a feminist and socialist interpretation of such diverse conditions, which to many of West's contemporaries seemed likely to create revolutionary political change.

I think this novel demonstrates that West's astute understanding of the political issues of her times, particularly of the connections and tensions between class and gender identities, could find expression in various forms. The novel's publication date of 1918 places it shortly after the height of West's early journalism, which I have explored above, and before the publication in 1922 of *The Judge*, which is, on the surface at least, a very different sort of work, semi-autobiographical and rooted in realist traditions. In its seemingly transparent politics, *The Judge* has more evident continuity with West's journalism, but *The Return of the Soldier* offers us a different view of Rebecca West's writing, which during these years explicitly and consistently explored feminist and class issues. In its politicized critiques of masculinity and femininity, and of the prevailing, pernicious ethic of sacrifice as it operates across both male and female gender roles, *The Return of the Soldier* certainly works as a vehicle for West's feminism. In this fiction, her feminist voice is filtered through formal techniques that allow for other equally strong resonances, particularly of class, and to a lesser extent, of race and empire.

Reading for class in *The Return of the Soldier* reveals that within the context of the First World War, West found a literary form that could represent her more pessimistic, more traditionally "literary" and modernist vision of the particular political intersections of class and gender. In its attention to form, particularly to narrative point of view, and in its interest in the relationship between individual



minds and the broader socio-historical contexts in which they are shaped, *The Return of the Soldier* rewards sustained critical examination in its linkage of modernist, feminist, and class studies.

It seems to me that the significance of the novel has been eclipsed even within feminist accounts of Rebecca West and of early twentieth-century writing. Part of the problem stems from the fact that West's literary reputation in general is not secure, particularly within the modernist canon and despite feminist critics' attempts at finding a place for West within their revisions of the period. Though in literary criticism the novel has remained fairly obscure, Claire Tylee has noted that *The Return of the Soldier* has been very popular with readers over the years, "reprinted and reprinted" and made into a film (142). Tylee's otherwise brilliant book *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* expresses serious doubts about the novel's political values and decides that it is "not at all the novel one might have expected from Rebecca West's journalism" (144). Missing the full implications of its form and taking its ironic moments rather straightforwardly, Tylee misreads *The Return of the Soldier*, I believe, as evidence of a Wartime about-face in West's politics. Although some of her insights about the novel are valuable, Tylee's suspicions about the work are themselves reflected in markedly classed terms, since she attributes its very popularity to what she sees as its lack of subversiveness: "Presumably *The Return of the Soldier* has continued to please because of its genteel snobbery, its nostalgia for an innocent, romantic love that transgressed class-barriers, and its final endorsement of the institution of marriage" (181).

In a different view of the novel, Bonnie Kime Scott has recognized *The*

*Return of the Soldier* as part of a trend within West's "fiction and fictionalized essays of the teens and twenties." As Scott explains, these works "took on modernist forms and psychological interests, though always with undergirding social analysis and feminism" (*Refiguring* 128). Though her sketch of the novel is astute, Scott does not focus on *The Return of the Soldier* in her study, instead turning her attention primarily to insightful and detailed readings of *The Judge* and *Harriet Hume*, and of West's writing through the 1930s. In *Refiguring Modernism*, West (and Woolf and Barnes) are positioned within various gendered "scaffoldings" and "webs" of modernism, in a way of reading that very perceptively contextualize West.

Most of West's writing was not a product of any deliberate search for a way to "make it new," in the modernist sense, although she would demonstrate a gift for creating particularly innovative forms that bridged multiple genres. Ironically, though, because most critics have tended not to see West as a typical modernist, *The Return of the Soldier*, which of all her novels probably best fits canonical modernist criteria, has been marginalized and sometimes misread. As I hope to show in the detailed reading that follows, the novel is not simply "good" in modernist terms—for it is those very terms that my project is working to problematize as classed. Rather, read together with West's journalism, which I have explored above, *The Return of the Soldier's* complex blend of formal technique and concentrated political commentary can help us to see class (and gender and race) operating within the period itself. The novel is after all the work of Rebecca West, who in 1912 already knew that "watertight compartments" enfeebled politics as well as art. Our own strategies of reading

for class in West's writing, especially within the triad of writers I have assembled here, can work to further destabilize the terms of division that reify not only categories but hierarchies.

### III. *The Return of the Soldier*: The Costs of Complicity and the Sins of Sacrifice

Any reading of *The Return of the Soldier* ought to begin by noting the significance of West's major structural choice: her entire story unfolds through the point of view of her narrator, Jenny. It is on this character's limited but perceptive vision that West, and her readers, will rely. West's storyteller is both a vehicle for the criticisms the author offers, and a manifestation of what the author criticizes, most evidently the socioeconomic and gender systems which create women like Jenny. When the novel opens, Jenny is waiting in the comfort of wealth for the return of her cousin, Christopher Baldry, from the War. A spinster, she is dependent on Chris's money and kindness, but her very marginality is foregrounded, made formally central, in West's choosing her as the narrator of the story, as Margaret Diane Stetz has pointed out in "Drinking 'the Wine of Truth': Philosophical Change in West's *The Return of the Soldier*," a perceptive article on the novel. As Stetz, adopting a rather Westian tone herself, puts it, "[t]o discuss *The Return of the Soldier* without giving proper attention to its central consciousness, that of the narrator, Jenny, is to make nonsense of the book" (64). Indeed, Stetz makes the salient point that West, who had written a study of Henry James in 1916, is in this novel demonstrating her "chief debt to James, who taught a generation of writers the importance of point of view" (63). Though I differ with some of her interpretations, Stetz's detailed reading of

Jenny's significance in the novel is valuable, particularly as it pushes against a trend toward oversimplification of, or flat-out ignoring of *The Return of the Soldier*.

Thus mindful of the importance of our narrator, Jenny, we can consider other essentials of the novel, particularly as they are encapsulated in its opening scene. *The Return of the Soldier* begins and ends at the family home, Baldry Court, which has been built with money from Mexican mining enterprises. Jenny lives there with Kitty, Chris's spoiled "trophy" wife, whose shallowness is gilded with material abundance and physical beauty. Kitty and Chris had a son, Oliver, who died from nothing more specific than constitutional frailty at age two, and his nursery, the sunniest room in the house, is undisturbed except when his mother sits by its window to dry her hair. Like the novel itself, which appears on the surface to be about the return of a soldier from battle in the Great War but is ultimately quite another kind of narrative, the deceased child Oliver's nursery is a space that will be filled only with substitutions for its apparent purpose, because there is not and clearly will not be another expected child in the progression of the story. Oliver's nursery seems emblematic of an emptiness at the core of West's characters' lives.

Into this paradoxically empty abundance, West will introduce the novel's fundamental complication: Chris Baldry's shell-shock, which takes the form of amnesia. Jenny and Kitty learn of Chris's disorder when they are visited by Margaret Grey, a married woman living at the fringes of poverty who was Chris's sweetheart fifteen years before, and who has received a love letter from him. Soon after Margaret's first visit to Baldry Court, Chris comes home. But the

return of the soldier from the front is unfulfilling for those who await him, because Chris returns burdened with a form of shell-shock in which he is convinced that it is the year 1901. As Samuel Hynes notes in his introductory comments for a recent edition of the novel, 1901 is a significant year in British history, the year of Queen Victoria's death, and the beginning of the Edwardian transition into the twentieth century (ix). West's omission of the actual battle which triggers Chris's shell-shock, like her deliberate vagueness about the cause of his son's death, signals that this novel will concern itself not with the male-coded conventions of action scenes and logical explanations, but with less tangible and more subtly destructive matters of ideology.

Specifically, as I will argue here, the novel will expose two fundamental political problems. Through Chris Baldry, it will reveal the illusions and deadliness which West saw as endemic to patriarchy and capitalism. Chris's shell-shock is his last, most desperate, and inevitably futile flight from British landed-class masculinity. Second, the novel will reveal the inability of the three women characters to identify their common feminist interests across the dividing lines—of class, especially—that have been drawn by the dominant culture in which they live. West's pessimism about the chances for lasting change, despite the War's function in her novel as an interruption in the trajectories of her characters, is evident. It is Kitty and Margaret's consistent conformity to their feminine roles within the class structure, exacerbated by Chris's resumption of his masculine role, that closes off their chances for transformation. *The Return of the Soldier* does not solve the political problems I have outlined; rather, it enacts them. The novel relentlessly exposes its readers to the full force of the ideologies

that West criticized in her journalism, and its formal circularity, in which both the soldier and the women are returned to their “proper” places, offers only the slightest hope, through the character of Jenny, of political change.

In creating the novel’s closed circuit, Rebecca West may have been recalling what she wrote in 1913, when she claimed that “a doormat race of women does not produce a good race of men” (*Young Rebecca* 377). As if to prove the truth of West’s claim, *The Return of the Soldier*’s doormat women characters cannot sustain motherhood even as they conform to the dictates of their other roles. In the bleak world of this novel, women give birth to male heirs who die in childhood—Kitty’s and Margaret’s sons die inexplicably. Jenny is childless in a patriarchal economy that, just as it demands production from Others, such as the men who work in the Mexican mines that make the splendor of Baldry Court possible, also demands reproduction from women.

West’s novel thus begins in a kind of classed and gendered stasis, which Jenny is both part of and resistant to, and which Margaret will arrive to interrupt. Margaret’s news is the domestic bomb that shatters the two women’s veneer of waiting, and threatens their already severely limited sense of purpose. As Laura Cowan has pointed out, women like Jenny and Kitty experienced the absence of their soldiers as “more than physical because most women’s identities were so dependent on the men in their lives.” Cowan explains, “If women’s lives suffered a curious passiveness as servers in conventional social life, this passivity was exacerbated by the war because it moved the focus of activity away from England (and home) to the war zone” (288). The novel’s opening scene emphasizes such passivity while demonstrating that the story will work against

the conventional understanding of where the important action is during the War. The two women are in the nursery, with Kitty looking into a mirror and whining her refusal to entertain Jenny's concern about Chris. He has not written for two weeks, but the illusion of impenetrable country-house bliss is locked down at Baldry Court by the sheer force of Kitty's beauty, by what Jenny calls the "little globe of ease" which "always ensphered her" (5).

Though she tries to participate in Kitty's splendid display, Jenny struggles with her nightmares about Chris's life at the front. Justifying her part in maintaining the illusions of Chris's domestic life, Jenny reveals to the reader her belief that Chris needs the women in his life to be part of, and to tend to, the beauty of Baldry Court. He especially deserves to be surrounded by the beauty that has "made happiness inevitable for him" (6), Jenny explains, because he has been particularly susceptible since childhood to a faith in "the imminence of the improbable" (7). Jenny's description hints that Chris does not fit into his role as a patriarch without a bit of extra help. He has a fragile commitment to the role, and seems distracted by an enduring belief that he can escape into some Other way of being within the culture.

Through Jenny, the novel will chart Chris's belief that he can be absorbed into Others regardless of his investment in the systems of oppression over which he is expected to preside. In fact, I see Chris as a character who embodies a different version of what Toni Morrison has described, in her analysis of the significance of whiteness as an ideology (for the character Ahab in the very different context of Melville's novel *Moby Dick*), as a state of being "overwhelmed by the philosophical and metaphysical inconsistencies of an

extraordinary and unprecedented idea [whiteness]" (382). I think Morrison's compelling description of the effects of whiteness on Ahab as a white man in nineteenth century America might well be applied to Chris Baldry, who as a white man in the different context of early twentieth century England, also experiences "trauma" (380) and "the severe fragmentation of the self" within the different but related terms of white British, masculine, colonialist, wartime ideology. In fact, for Chris, class and gender positions are inextricably linked to, indeed even based rather directly on, racial position, since his money, which allows him to keep his parasitic wife happy, comes from a business founded on the labor of Mexican miners. To the ideological quagmire that is Chris Baldry's "life," I am applying Morrison's explanation of the consequences of recognizing whiteness itself. Morrison writes that once whiteness is perceived in its own magnitude as "an inhuman idea" (382), that recognition can lead to a version of madness. Brilliantly, Morrison describes "the trauma of racism" as "a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis" (381), and this description works to explain how the ideologies that structure Chris's life not only cause his shell-shocked response but shape the terms of the madness itself no less than they shape its cure. Having sensed the magnitude of his own culture's racial, gender, and class oppressions, Chris retreats into a former self whose repression and denial was more thorough.

For Chris, madness is a temporary consequence of coming too close to conscious recognition of the traumas of his cultural position. The kind of madness Chris experiences, the wartime shell-shock in which he returns to the past, may be seen within Morrison's formulation as actually (and paradoxically)



part of an attempt to regain sanity within the culture's terms, by finding a more integrated subjectivity within his own past. West's novel prepares us quite carefully for the "return" of Chris Baldry to the "sane" present tense by hinting all along that although he is susceptible to imaginative projections of his own needs onto Others, Chris cannot ever really abdicate his roles within the culture.

Jenny explains that Chris's childhood playtime "expectation of becoming a Red Indian" has been traded in his adulthood "for the equally wistful aspiration of becoming completely reconciled to life" (8). Significantly, she tells us that Chris imagined himself turning into the racial Other when he was a child; even in his early imagination, shaped by privilege, he lived out the ideology of his culture by thinking that he could trade his whiteness for another color as part of play.

West's use of the exoticized Other as a counterpart to boring, even corrupt, whiteness resurfaces here in a different and perhaps more complex form than in her essay "The World's Worst Failure." In the essay, West turned her own gaze on the foreign feminine Other and revealed a tendency to conflate this version of Otherness with racial ones. Of course, in the novel a "Red Indian" is meant to be the absolute antithesis of Chris, to epitomize the racial Other whose body he expects to try on during boyhood play and whose identity will be unexpectedly interchanged with his own. West's language suggests that she recognizes that her character Chris Baldry is pursuing a delusional hope into his adulthood. But we have also seen that for West herself, certain racial Others such as the "beautiful Hindu" she mentions in "The World's Worst Failure" function as muses who can, in what she sees as their lack of specific human

distinction, inspire philosophical processes. Yet because the novel's racial Other, though obviously derived from West's own imagination, is presented through the form of the novel as a creation of Chris's imagination, a kind of rupture emerges in the text.

Here, as in Woolf's use of classed Others, West's formal choice with regard to point of view creates a slippage between her own views and the views of her characters, a slippage which makes room for political readings of the text beyond authorial intentionality. In the space created, we can see the marks of British whiteness, class power, and gender as ideologies that function within the historical moment of the novel, and we can deploy our own (equally historically-rooted) reading strategy that works to expose the complexities of the novel's representational politics. My reading of this aspect of the novel posits that as a boy, Chris has culturally-produced fantasies of being "saved" from his own whiteness. It is in the wood on the estate of Baldry Court that the young Chris has imagined these identity transformations, which include the transformation of a tree into an enchanted princess. Since his needs are temporarily answered by these illusions, which will persist into adulthood, Chris invests various landscapes with his own desire for an escape that will be, finally, impossible even inside the version of madness to which he retreats.

In his early adulthood, Chris will believe that his first sweetheart Margaret Allington, the gender and class Other, can save him from his adult male role. Though Jenny does not know the story of Chris and Margaret when we first meet her, the significance of the story is set up when she reveals early on that even after her cousin had become an adult, the "passionate anticipation"

with which Chris “went to new countries or met new people” demonstrated to her “that this faith [in sudden transformation] had persisted into his adult life” (8).

When he goes to the War, in which he must face the full magnitude of British masculine power, Chris’s faith in the power of fantasy as a way of avoiding consciousness of the costs of his own privilege becomes full-blown, as shell-shocked amnesia. His amnesia will return him to Margaret and will represent his search for safety, his return to what he can manage to see as a time of innocence. In the novel, this fantasy is linked directly to the magical landscape of Margaret’s exoticized former home, Monkey Island. This place, which Jenny calls “his secret island,” figures centrally in Chris’s shell-shocked retreat from reality; Monkey Island is, at the height of his mental illness, what he believes to be most “real” (33). Chris’s memory of Margaret and Monkey Island is itself incomplete. In the course of the novel, Jenny will learn from Margaret that Chris does not remember the last quarrel that he and Margaret had. This quarrel, in which they openly acknowledged the effects of their class difference, took place the night before Chris left to assume leadership of his father’s business; the repressed memory represents a level of consciousness about class difference and capitalist power from which the soldier has fled.

When Chris assumes his place in the family business, the imaginary “Red Indian” of his childhood becomes the all-too-real racial Other who works in the Mexican mines from which he profits as an adult. Jenny tells readers that she vividly remembers the evening before Chris left, before he “started for Mexico, to keep the mines going through the revolution, to keep the firm’s head above

water and Baldry Court sleek and hospitable" (53). We learn that it is on this night that she became irrevocably aware of her own marginality, of the fact that Chris "had never seen [her] at all save in the most cursory fashion" (53). Like his performance as a soldier in the War, this moment of Chris's entrance into his role as a prosperous businessman becomes a not only a literal point of departure for him, into his adult life, but a symbolic break, through which Jenny and Margaret experience their own class positions.

Shortly after he assumes charge of the mining business, the cross-class love that Chris hoped could redeem him is replaced with the kind of marriage sanctioned in dominant social and gender systems. While as a child he might have imagined being rescued from his own privilege and power, one of Chris's principal duties as a British patriarch is to keep those identity categories of whiteness, maleness, and ownership distinct. It is significant that the soldier's mental flight into his past is not back to the time of new fatherhood, when he had produced a son with Kitty like a responsible patriarch, but rather to a time when loving Margaret was a seemingly possible escape route. Among the versions of self-awareness that are available to him, Chris "chooses" through his shell-shock the one that is most cohesive and carefree, in the profoundly classed, gendered and racialized terms of his culture.

Though Chris makes the transition into his adulthood "successfully" for a time, he assumes the masculine role with scant understanding of its costs. Jenny explains in her opening descriptions of him that Chris always hoped to "have an experience that would act on his life like alchemy, turning to gold all the dark metals of events" (8). To use a current vocabulary, drawn from Althusser, we

can read Chris as virtually embodying ideology, as a character in whom the psychological and the social converge with little room for conscious critical knowledge of his situation. The language West chooses suggests that in this ideology, fictions of race and class intermingle, and Jenny's narration adds gender as a third term. Chris recognizes vaguely-rendered "events" as the "dark metals" of his life, in language that may allude to his ownership of mining interests. Yet he retains the hope of being suddenly relieved of his responsibilities within the systems of gender, class and empire, believing that some magic might turn those realities to "gold."

It is clear from the narrator's descriptions of him at the outset of the novel that Chris has always thought that boundaries of identity might be transgressed, and clear too that his own role in the culture has always rattled within him. West uses the War as a context in which the deadliness of the patriarchal line of father and son, the prisons of traditional masculinity and femininity, and the costs of exploitive economic systems, can be temporarily exposed. The War's traumatic intervention breaks Chris's hold on reality and intrudes into the lives of West's female characters to create a window of revelation for readers. The women's connections to the soldier are central to the narrative, and although class privilege seems in danger of shifting as Chris becomes detached from the present of the novel, and as Margaret's power over him supplants Kitty's, the resolution of the plot points to the persistence of the powers that structure both the class and gender hierarchies. Chris's wartime shell-shock triggers passing confusions for the other characters, but once he is returned to his "proper" role, the novel will show that those confusions have ultimately created little real

change.

In Jenny's early descriptions of Chris, we can see the extent to which illusion structures his life. We can also see that Kitty and Jenny are fundamental to, and implicated in, Chris's patriarchal role. As Jenny admits, with more than a touch of West's voice entering into her narrative:

Literally there wasn't room to swing a revelation in his crowded life. First of all, at his father's death, he had been obliged to take over a business that was weighted by the needs of a mob of female relatives who were all useless either in the old way with antimacassars or in the new way with golf clubs.

Then Kitty had come along and picked up his conception of normal expenditure and carelessly stretched it as a woman stretches a new glove on her hand. (8)

At the outset of the novel, the beautiful distractions of life enjoyed by Kitty and, to a lesser extent, Jenny, are disturbed by the news of Chris, delivered by Margaret, a woman who has become "repulsively furred with neglect and poverty" (10), according to Jenny's description. As if to emphasize Margaret's status as a projection of, and repository for, Chris's needs, she is the messenger who brings news of his shell-shock.

Margaret Allington, the girl Chris knew, has become Mrs. Margaret Grey. Margaret's changed name suggests her different functioning within his imagination; now more securely rooted in lower-middle class shabbiness, she is duly named to serve as the "gray" intermediary between the binary worlds of Chris's youth and his maturity. Since the novel will ultimately position Margaret

as the catalyst for Chris's "cure," her character may be seen as ensuring the needs of the characters that are her social "betters." While Kitty's world at Baldry Court is often described quite literally in black and white polarities, it is Margaret's liminality, particularly her personal access to past and future and her economic place between poverty and abundance, on which the plot of the novel turns. Even Margaret's ugly brick house is called "Mariposa," the Spanish word for butterfly, as she explains to Jenny, and to readers lest we should miss another reference to the desire for transformation amid the realities of class difference. There will be no metamorphoses in the novel, though it will consistently register the desire for such change in Margaret and in Chris. Though Margaret was once emblematic to Chris of escaping all that awaited him, the novel suggests that a sane recognition of reality—for her, for Chris, for Kitty and for Jenny—depends upon dispelling the mad notion that the culture they inhabit will allow people to transgress identity lines and dwell in such "gray areas."

Margaret's socially "impertinent" (14) advanced knowledge of Chris's shell-shock, and her kind attempt to share the news with Kitty as respectfully as the situation allows, is met with disdain from Kitty, who wants to be convinced that Margaret is a fraud looking for some money. West emphasizes the way that class difference shapes the characters' perceptions of truth; Kitty almost manages to disregard objective fact based primarily on her social superiority. Even after Jenny is certain Margaret is telling them the truth, and has understood that "Chris is ill" (17), Kitty continues to resent the implications of his mental illness in class terms, focusing jealously, even after Chris returns to make his illness evident in person, on the idea of "[t]hat dowl!" (30) having any power, past or

present, to shape her husband's actions. Kitty's gender identity depends so utterly on men's perception of her as sexually alluring that she responds to Margaret from her primary place of power over her as the "other woman": class identity. Once her husband has come home, Kitty's tormented loss of purpose is particularly evident. She works harder than ever to deserve the gaze, but when Chris persists in not remembering his role, she is increasingly convinced that he is "pretending" (31).

When Jenny manages to get Chris to trust her enough to converse openly without fear of the responses he might get from Kitty, Chris tells her delightedly of Monkey Island, where he wooed Margaret fifteen years before. The reader hears Chris's story of himself and Margaret through Jenny's retelling; as narrator, she explains at the close of the preceding chapter that what follows is "how I have visualized his meeting with love on his secret island," tentatively adding, "I think it is the truth" (33). West underscores the uncertainty of the narrative as if to suggest that what people are most capable of believing is real, what can most profoundly shape the courses of their lives, is always filtered through highly subjective experience. Jenny points to the subjectivity of "her" story quite consciously.

West uses narrative structure to complex effect in this chapter to show readers that though Jenny remains a vehicle for Chris Baldry's stories, she is not able to share directly in the gender power he enjoys, and her class power is rather sharply circumscribed by her spinster role. Jenny's secondhand reliance on the experiences of her male cousin is foundational; Chris Baldry's life is the basis of any stories she has to tell. If she has a truth of her own, she does not



know it yet. As Laura Cowan has observed, "Jenny's hero-worship of Chris really denies herself any identity" (288). Jenny retells the story of Monkey Island, in the process enacting this secondary status. She rarely uses the "I" pronoun, and when she does use it, makes only a brief, usually parenthetical insertion of her view. Her reliance on his version of the story not only underscores the extent to which Jenny depends on Chris for her identity, but also shows that the pleasure Jenny derives in her parasitism must also be vicariously linked to the corruptions of the culture in which she and Chris are both embedded.

By making Jenny the secondhand storyteller, West simultaneously marks Jenny's marginality and her complicity in the chapter about Monkey Island. It is thus positioned not only as a place of Chris and Margaret's memories, but as a fiction that Jenny's marginality perpetuates. In the novel, the characters' interconnected gender and class roles constitute and reinforce those of their Others. Monkey Island's name inevitably invokes Darwinian notions of evolution, as though Chris's wish to return there signifies a desire for intermingling with "lower" class Others in what the English class system, in its ordered stratification, might perceive as a threat to good breeding.<sup>6</sup> West signals the impossibility of Chris Baldry's recognizing how his love for Margaret is bound up with exoticizations of her as an unreachable part of himself, as an Other from the small island-within-the-island of England.

In the novel's formulation, the Monkey Island Inn that Margaret helps her father to run is accessible only by boat; the building itself was erected at the whim of an eighteenth-century Duke, complete with a Greek temple at the edge

of the lawn, which the Duke used for his "excesses" (41), as Margaret's father has explained to Chris. Sue Thomas has made an argument about West's early career that helps to explain how I interpret the significance of Monkey Island in this particular novel:

During the late 1910s and the 1920s West came to the view that an economic interpretation of women's oppression was inadequate; she began to articulate fictional and discursive arguments that masculine psychosexual neuroticism was manifested in patriarchal repression of women and that the primal scenes of fantasies, men's and women's, were culturally informed. She daringly neuroticized capitalist class relations.

(103)

I read *The Return of the Soldier* as a part of this project of "neuroticiz[ing] capitalist class relations," particularly with regard to West's self-conscious depiction of the primal fantasy realm of Monkey Island, which functions as an/Other place for Chris and Margaret. Margaret's home, to which she moves at the adolescent age of fourteen after her mother's death, becomes a place onto which both she and Chris can project their desire for escape from the class and gender systems which have expectations for each of them. The status of Monkey Island within their imaginations, as constructed by West, certainly does seem "culturally informed."

Along with Jenny, we learn about the last day Chris can recall, when after several visits during which he has become acquainted with Monkey Island, Margaret, and her father, he arrives there in April of 1901 to find Margaret, in her white dress which "shone like silver" (39) in the sunlight, managing the inn while her father has gone to town. Chris tries to convince Margaret to row away

from the island for the afternoon, but she “develop[s] a sense of duty” (39) about potential customers who might need her services, and when a couple arrives for tea, Chris pretends to work at the inn, and waits on them. Though “it should have been a great lark,” we learn that “suddenly he hated them, and when they offered him a tip . . . he snarled absurdly and ran back, miraculously relieved” (40). When Chris plays at being a worker, he cannot bear to get too close to the realities of Margaret’s life and the life of Monkey Island.

Right after this, the sole unpleasantness of the day as Chris recalls it, Margaret agrees to take a walk with him around the island. Laura Cowan, who reads *Monkey Island* as West’s use of the pastoral genre within the novel, has argued that “West stresses the artistic as well as the natural aspects of *Monkey Island* to insist that it is a product of the imagination working in harmony with nature” (302). This may be so, but I think it is worth noting how this pastoral scene is marked, and indeed undercut, by intruding evidence of Margaret’s father’s struggles to make the island inn more profitable. Cowan does acknowledge West’s “concern with the class system” and sees West’s decision to “exploit the pastoral tradition which . . . is grounded in a denouncement of the aristocracy” as demonstrating that “the socialist West was as ardently concerned about classism as she was about feminism” (303). I would argue that, given these awarenesses, West is not only working with the pastoral tradition, using it “to make radical social comment palatable” (Cowan 305), but pushing the political limits of pastoral in the scenes set on *Monkey Island*. Given that these scenes are rooted in Jenny and Chris’s point of view, and that West will balance them further on in the novel with Margaret’s more quotidian descriptions of *Monkey*

Island, I see the author questioning the pastoral's potential as a vehicle for such comment. West is not content with the traditional built-in subversions allowed by the pastoral, such as poking fun at the aristocracy from within a form that the aristocracy can enjoy "safely." She wants to expose some of the problems pastoral raises even as she uses some of its conventions, as I hope a closer reading of this chapter will suggest.

West wants readers to see, for instance, that Mr. Allington's livelihood depends on appealing sufficiently to the moneyed guests who might stay at his inn. In a sense, he must enact the pastoral for his betters in much the same way that his daughter must embody Chris's retreat from his duty. On Monkey Island, amid the "white willow herb and purple figwort" are some potato flowers, "last ailing consequence[s] of one of Mr Allington's least successful enterprises" (40). Similarly, a "rustic seat" is described as the "relic of a reckless aspiration on the part of Mr Allington to make this a pleasure garden" (40). Though Mr. Allington is a kind of Dickensian hapless character, one might also say that West's details show how he is forced to "ape" the Duke's aristocratic plan for the island at his own expense. In order for the inn to continue to attract people like Chris, who does not care to think about the labor involved in such hospitality, the practical evidence of utility and poverty must be decorated out of sight. Chris sees the evidence of someone else's attempt to earn a living as part of the charm of the place, but as we have seen in his reaction to the tip he received when he was playing at waiting on customers at the inn, he cannot cope with the reality of such a life. West shows her readers this behind-the-scenes evidence within Chris's romanticized vision of the past, building her critique of

his point of view into the narrative. This chapter is, as I have indicated, like the rest of the novel in being filtered through Jenny's point of view. But here the layering of past and present, of primary and secondary storytellers, particularly underscores the constructedness of the landscape being explored. West seems to want her readers to have information about the realities of life on Monkey Island while allowing them to grasp her characters' belief in its magical qualities as revealed in pastoral descriptions.

In the Monkey Island context, Chris and Margaret try to escape from their different responsibilities to impending adulthood. When "a heron flap[s] gigantic in front of the moon," Chris "gather[s] her into his arms. They were so for long while the great bird's wings beat above them" (40). Though the bird is not a swan, but a heron, this moment evokes the rape of Leda in its suddenness and intensity. If the echo of Leda and the swan in this scene signals a similar loss of sexual innocence through a violent experience of Otherness, West may be suggesting that Margaret and Chris are each experiencing the Other's embodied class identity through physical connection.

The narrative does not explain whether this moment represents any physical consummation of Chris and Margaret's "love"; the next paragraph begins with the elliptically suggestive, "*Afterwards* she pulled at his hand. She wanted to go back across the lawn and walk round the inn, which looked mournful as unlit houses do by dusk" (40, my emphasis). By then, the river has "taken to its bosom the rose and amber glories of the sunset smouldering behind the elms," while the inn's windows show Margaret a parlour filled with conventional lower-middle class belongings, and "sad with twilight" (41). The

natural landscape is marked as fiery here, and West uses the language of human physicality—"taken to its bosom"—to describe it. At the same time, the inn and its parlour seem mournful at the loss of Margaret's presence. She looks in on her own home from outside the window. When they finally go in, Margaret and Chris drink milk at the bar, and Margaret seems to see "familiar things" anew, "with an absurd expression of exaltation, as though that day she was fond of everything, even the handles of the beer engine" (41). Childlike, drinking nurturing milk in the room where she has worked serving beer to the inn guests, Margaret briefly sees her life through Chris's romanticizing vision.

Once this outside perspective on her life has taken hold, Margaret's objectification begins. Chris "dr[aws] her out into the darkness" and toward the "wrought iron" boundary at the edge of what the narrative repeatedly calls "the wild part of the island" (40-41). On this, the last night Chris can remember until his shell-shock injury, he and Margaret go to the Greek temple on the edge of the "gentle jungle" (40). West's use of the oxymoron recalls the fact that Monkey Island itself is functioning as an in-between space for Chris. Located not in some tropical colony but within England itself, in the Thames, Monkey Island, like its respectable but insufficiently sophisticated inhabitants, is both safe and exotic.

The temple, the place where the aristocrat who built it had violated sexual codes, similarly combines wildness and tameness. Chris has "never brought Margaret [t]here before" because its original purpose as a place of sexual indiscretion made him uncomfortable—"it was in the quality of his love for her that he could not bear to think of her in connection with anything base" (41)—but this particular night is different. On this night, after he and Margaret have been

alone and arguably may themselves have transgressed sexual propriety, Chris needs more than ever to believe in Margaret's innocence, and his own. But the setting in which this effort occurs is clearly marked, not only with the carefully-managed threat of the nearby wilderness, but with evidence of class privilege—the Duke's temple on the island he built "for a 'folly.'"

The details of West's scene emphasize that in this moment her characters dwell precariously close to boundary lines. The language alternates between certainties, which signal Chris's need to control the scene-as-memory, and fluidities, which reveal the unsteadiness within that same setting. The narrative shifts without warning from Monkey Island to the horrors of battle:

He lifted her in his arms and carried her within the columns and made her stand in a niche above the altar. A strong stream of moonlight rushed upon her there; by its light he could not tell if her hair was white as silver or yellow as gold, and again he was filled with exultation because he knew that it would not have mattered if it had been white. His love was changeless. Lifting her down from the niche, he told her so. And as he spoke her warm body melted to nothingness in his arms. The columns that had stood so hard and black against the quivering tide of moonlight and starlight tottered and dissolved. He was lying in a hateful world where barbed-wire entanglements showed impish knots against a livid sky full of booming noise and splashes of fire and wails for water, and the stretcher bearers were hurting his back intolerably. (42)

Chris's shell-shock thus fuses this pivotal night when "there was nothing anywhere but beauty" (41) with the horrors of wartime battle. Chris's elevation

of Margaret, his treating her like a precious statue, both silences and dehumanizes her. Indeed, Margaret will melt away similarly at the end of the novel, after Chris has been "cured."

Margaret is little more, in this scene, than an idol Chris has raised to distract him from the true implications of his foray into her world. Margaret, whose hair is compared with silver and with gold as though Chris is looking for its value in the moonlight, might have silver hair after all; Chris insists to himself that he will love her always. Such a love, in such a place, springs primarily from Chris's own need to resist the changes about to be forced on him as a privileged white man. The "hard and black" columns of the Greek temple "totter[ ] and dissolve[ ]" (42) as he represses the phallic and "civilized" truths of his next fifteen years' "succeeding" in patriarchal culture. When Chris and Margaret enter that classed, and classical, microcosm of "civilization," the Duke's Greek temple, Chris's memory of the War is triggered; it is as though the sex and class secrets contained in the temple, and by extension the culture it represents, are exploded in Chris's experience of the War. Indeed, by any standard, the War seemed to be exacting a terrible price in shattering the minds of and slaughtering the bodies of sons of the privileged classes. All their illusions, as symbolized in this novel by the Greek temple on Monkey Island, were breaking apart. West's horror at the human costs of the War includes an understanding of the way that it both represents and ultimately reinforces patriarchal class relations.

West's language, steeped in Freudian overtones and peppered with binary images of light and black, substance and dissolution, points to the fact that Margaret, controlled like a doll in Chris's vision and literally washed away after



being briefly positioned in the moonlight, does not here wear the living (and classed) body of a woman, but stands in for all the projections of Chris's identity. While silver and gold suggest money, and indirectly invoke class value, the whiteness of moonlight prevails here to allow Chris the illusion of his love's triumphing over the differences between himself and Margaret. The racialized moment of whiteness in which they appear to overcome class difference is fleeting, but during it, the actual person of Margaret is, significantly, whitewashed out of the scene. Then, immediately, West's mock-pastoral dissolves into images from Chris's wartime experiences. In those images, from a time when he participates most inescapably in the hypermasculine world of the War, those who save him, the stretcher bearers, hurt him "intolerably." His awareness of his role as profiteer, as father of a son, as husband of a socialite, and finally, his consciousness of himself as a soldier risking his life for all that, short-circuits his memory. He returns to a time when being saved seemed as painless as his childhood wish of magically becoming a Red Indian.

The war trauma re-exposes the brutal truths of his life and sends him back to a time when, using a woman's Otherness as a vehicle for his desire to play a different patriarchal role, he could still believe he might resist his cultural inheritance. West, writing this novel in the middle of the Great War, shows that she remains an acute observer of the class structure in England and encapsulates in the novel the ways that the War, even at its halfway mark in 1916, seems to threaten class boundaries. Given that its killing power appeared to be unstoppable, West may well have wondered about the War's potential for reshaping the class structure. As men of Chris Baldry's class died in ever-greater

numbers, anxieties about probable social shifts no doubt grew. Without men like Chris at the top, what would happen to England's class hierarchy? What would women like Kitty and Jenny do if their parasitic socioeconomic roles could no longer find a male host on which to feed? West's novel exposes the anxiety surrounding some of these questions, of such significance to her characters. In the text, the trauma of the War is linked explicitly to the feared transgression of class lines, but the fears prove, like Chris Baldry's madness, to be passing concerns. This text is an expression of West's own fears that for all its waste of life and social upheaval, the War will finally produce little change in the nation of which she has been a consistent socialist and feminist critic.

In the final pages of this chapter of *The Return of the Soldier*, when the landscape of Monkey Island and the girl who lives there melt away, it is clear to Chris and Jenny as well as to the reader that the fantasy realm to which Chris has retreated will increasingly have to be subsumed by "reality," and West would not have us miss the fact that the reality that wins out in the novel will be just as strongly patriarchal. In the last sentence of the chapter, Jenny tells us that, as Chris blows out the candles in the room where she has been hearing his story, she and Chris "gripped hands, and he brought down on our conversation the finality of darkness" (42). Chris, even in his despair and seeming madness, is still in control of the terms of difference. Inevitably stuck, it seems, at the top of the class, race, and gender hierarchy, he summons darkness and light according to his needs.

Perhaps because she can enjoy the benefits of male power only secondarily, Kitty functions as an even more static representation of class and

race power. Her decorative instincts, as I have noted, tend toward the use of black and white; Jenny describes the “black and white magnificence that is Kitty’s bedroom” (25) and a repeatedly points to a recently acquired *objet d’art*, which Jenny fears Margaret Grey may knock over, a “shallow black bowl in the centre of which crouched on hands and knees a white naked nymph” (56). Tellingly, Jenny explains that Margaret seems dangerously disorderly in comparison to it: “Perhaps it was absurd to pay attention to this indictment of a woman [Margaret] by a potter’s toy, but that toy happened to be also a little image of Chris’ conception of women” (57). The woman with class power, Kitty, trumps the woman without it, Margaret, and the latter will have to make her class betters’ dreams come true. She will then melt conveniently away. But first, in the chapter following her Monkey Island melting, Margaret will have a chance to appear substantially. West wants us to see her as more than Chris, Kitty and Jenny’s projections, so that readers will understand the multiply tragic consequences of the ending, in which the needs of the powerful will triumph to erase Margaret. In the car taking Margaret from her all-too-real dilapidated house to Baldry Court, Jenny hears the all-too-real story of Margaret’s life of struggle, settling, and forbearance since that same magical night.

With Jenny, we learn Margaret’s version of the time after the last “magical” night of Chris’s active memory. Chris came to Monkey Island one evening shortly after that night to tell Margaret that he had to go to Mexico, and found her rowing and laughing with a boy she had known all her life. Jealous, Chris quarreled with her, and Margaret tells Jenny, “it struck me that he wasn’t trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class, and I told him so, and he

went on being cruel." Margaret exclaims: "Oh, don't make me remember the things we said to each other! It doesn't help" (52). Significantly, Margaret's claim that "it doesn't help" to remember is followed by an ellipsis. Whom does it not help, and not to remember what? West marks the unspeakability, even for Margaret, of the class differences between her and Chris, which were unmasked only a week after their first declaration of love. Margaret too, is embedded in the ideology that allows her to dream of cross-class romantic redemption despite the obvious material conditions of her life. Though she remembers quite well what she said to her young lover, she would rather not grapple with the way such awareness undercuts the very ideology that has resurfaced in her reconnection to Chris. It is also significant that in contrast to Margaret's recollection of their class-based quarrel, this very quarrel is, in the chronology of the story, the first forgotten memory of Chris's shell-shock.

Margaret's father dies soon after her quarrel with Chris, and she goes out to "embark[] upon an increasingly unfortunate career as a mother's help" (53). She meets and marries her husband five years after leaving Monkey Island, and does not find out, until she has been married some time and finally makes a return visit to the Inn, that Chris had written twelve letters to her. Since hearing of Chris's wounding in the War, she has allowed herself to read them, and she can only weep in response when Jenny asks about what was in them. It is fairly clear that Chris, though he got on with the life expected of him, never understood that their love would be unlikely to survive beyond Monkey Island's magical landscape. His shell-shock thus sends him back to the safest of delusions, the most unusual of his life memories. After a brief renaissance of

their love, it will fall to Margaret to remind him of his proper place, and to resume hers.

Because of Jenny's dependent status, it is she who must go to Margaret's shabby neighborhood to tell her Chris feels he shall die if he cannot see her. Jenny's view of Margaret shifts as she tries, sometimes successfully, to imagine Chris's youthful adoration of her kindness and beauty while also feeling aversion to Margaret's "ugliness" (47). As Margaret and Chris renew their bond with one another in her regular visits to Baldry Court, Kitty becomes more and more a broken lovely object on a high shelf, while Jenny struggles to disguise her growing consciousness of the lack of depth that has characterized her own experiences and emotions--an awareness brought to the fore by the radiance she imagines surrounds Margaret and Chris's intense return to their past. Though she is unwilling to reveal this new sense of the pettiness of her own life to the other characters, her narrative makes it plain to readers:

I felt, indeed, a cold intellectual pride in his refusal to remember his prosperous maturity and his determined dwelling in the time of his first love, for it showed him so much saner than the rest of us, who take life as it comes, loaded with the inessential and the irritating. I was even willing to admit that this choice of what was to him reality out of all the appearances so copiously presented by the world, this adroit recovery of the dropped pearl of beauty, was the act of genius I had always expected from him. But that did not make less agonizing this exclusion from his life. (65)

In a role which offers her only the shallowness of living vicariously through

Chris's experiences or the pain of acknowledging her own emotional marginality, Jenny finds no alternative but to leave Chris at the center of her life (and her narrative). But from this point in the novel, it will be the *lack* of Chris Baldry that dominates the story, as readers sense the increasing likelihood that we will witness the disappearance of a briefly discernable, madness-induced vitality in him.

West leaves little room in her characters' lives for change; her title's insistence on "return" is important in this regard. The first "Return of the Soldier," which we expect along with Jenny and Kitty, turns out not to be what we expected, because "the soldier" is a lovesick, boyish character who has returned only to his own past. And what becomes the *actual* "return" of Chris Baldry—not home from the front but back into the War as hollow man—is made possible through the collusion of the three women in his life.

Jenny, feeling utterly trapped in her life and having no sense of an alternative, is fearfully driven to agree with Kitty's desperate insistence that Chris must be cured by Doctor Gilbert Anderson. The scene in which Jenny ultimately conforms to Kitty's will underscores the fact that Jenny is economically parasitic in her role as the spinster cousin of the household; if Kitty can at least use her sexuality and beauty as a limited source of power over her husband, Jenny can only rely on Chris's kindness in a secondhand fashion. Jenny envisions, in one of her wartime dream sequences, that the world she and Kitty have made is captured in a crystal ball which shatters when Chris knocks it to the floor as he reaches for the image of Margaret in another crystal ball. For Jenny, even the shell-shocked Chris is positioned as still in control of the

destinies of all the women in his life. Jenny sees that “[t]he whole truth about [herself and Kitty] lies in our material seeming. . . . No one weeps for this shattering of our world” (67). She fleetingly recognizes that her true devastation is not in Chris’s rejection of her but in his lack of connection to her, his dispassionate view of her as a “disregarded playmate” and of Kitty as a “decorative presence” (65).

The gender system is the first of Jenny’s illusions to crack in this way, but not the last. Jenny explains that “many times in the lanes of Harrowweald,” Margaret’s suburban neighborhood, she had

stood for long looking up at the fine tracery of bare boughs against the hard, high spring sky while the cold wind rushed through my skirts and chilled me to the bone, because I was afraid that when I moved my body and my attention *I might begin to think*. (61-62, emphasis added)

Jenny is terrified of losing what little status she has as a hanger-on in Chris and Kitty’s world. In her vision of losing access to that world, Jenny sees a man she calls “the soul of the universe, equally cognizant and disregardful of every living thing, to whom I am no more dear than the bare-armed slut at the neighbouring door” (66). In this image, the loss of gender, class, and empire privilege are threatened. At Kitty’s bidding, Jenny sets out to collect Margaret and Chris for their appointment with Dr. Anderson, in the act of preserving her secondary part in the drama of the familiar, if stifling, world in which she can perhaps sustain the illusion of being “dear,” at least to a few privileged men and women.

Margaret and Jenny, upon returning to Baldry Court, see the doctor playing impromptu football outdoors, “[a] tennis ball which he had discovered

somewhere [having] roused his sporting instincts" (73). This foreshadowing of the doctor's complicity with the world of British masculinity is important; he will be part of the "team" that sends Chris back to the realities of his role and to the War, which was often described in sporting terms. As Misha Kavka notes in his article, "Men in (Shell-)Shock: Masculinity, Trauma, and Psychoanalysis in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*," "this therapy means an inevitable shoring up of the masculine order" (162). In a related hint at the novel's resolution, Jenny describes Margaret, herself a vital part of the curing team, as "that sort of woman" who "always does what the doctor orders" (74). Jenny confesses to a desire to "side-track" what she vaguely refers to as her "foreboding" upon returning to Baldry Court, and at first sight of the doctor wishes that she could dismiss him as a class interloper by "pronouncing him a bounder" (74). Since that doesn't quite work, she finds herself wishing "that like a servant [she] could give notice because there was 'always something happening in the house'" (74).

Jenny has a reaction to the situation that reflects her gender marginality and neatly divides her class allegiances: at first instinct, she is wishing she could escape into being a snob, but the next moment she is wishing she could escape from the household in the way that a working-class employee could. Jenny's peripheral place in Chris's household actually allows her to imagine her version of escape in more consciously classed terms; in a novel so concerned with the classed ramifications of gender, Jenny is thus an ideal narrator. This encounter with the doctor, and its effects on Jenny and Margaret respectively, is paired with a domestic version of privileged British femininity. The women leave Chris and



Dr. Anderson walking outdoors, and go in to meet Kitty in the hallway of the house.

Indoors, Jenny explains that the old ways may be losing their predictable power over her: “the white nymph drooped over the black waters of the bowl and reminded one how nice, how neat and nice, life used to be; the chintz sang the vulgar old English country house song” (74). She and Margaret are distracted from their vague sense of “despondency,” which is intensified by the house’s décor, by the arrival of Kitty, whom Jenny describes with a growing acidity. Wearing white, as is her custom, and having “reduced her grief to no more than a slight darkening under the eyes,” Kitty knows her seductive role well; she must convince the doctor to help execute her wishes. Jenny is dangerously close to politicized criticism in her description of Kitty, which includes references to the interdependent dynamics of empire and gender:

Beautiful women of her type lose, in this matter of admiration alone, their otherwise *tremendous sense of class distinction*; they are obscurely aware that it is their *civilizing* mission to flash the jewel of their beauty before all men, so that they shall desire it and work to get the wealth to buy it, and thus be seduced by a present appetite to a tilling of the earth that serves the future. (75, emphasis added)

Still needing to step back from the precipice of full consciousness, Jenny adds, ironically, the conventional wisdom that the world has “room for all of us; we each have our peculiar use” (75). Jenny’s own usefulness, at that moment, lies in once again assuming the modified servant role. She takes Margaret upstairs and encourages her to attempt to follow Kitty’s fashionably radiant example.

Margaret is described from here through the rest of the novel quite persistently as saintly and maternal, in alternately passionate and serene versions. As she enjoys the beauty of the house and its contents, Jenny explains that “[e]ven [Margaret’s] enjoyment [is] indirectly generous” (76). She notices the splendour of Jenny’s room and compliments her taste. Jenny, whose guilt is adding to her disproportionate valorization of Margaret, is aware of the irony: “The charity, that changed my riches to a merit!” Readers of *West* may well recall here what she wrote about the pernicious notions of charity she saw at work in the British class structure of those years.

In a strange metaphor that evokes gendered enslavement, Margaret compliments Kitty’s beauty to Jenny by saying that Kitty “has three circles around her neck,” while Margaret says she has “only two.” Jenny admits to the reader that she “could not for the life of me have told you how many circles there were round my neck” (76). *West*’s choice of this image suggests that women who have been conscious of the way their looks appeal to men, and the classed and racialized positions to which their looks entitle them, understand precisely their roles within patriarchy. Jenny, *West*’s liminal narrator, has not learned this script quite so proficiently as Margaret and Kitty have; their two faces are described in yet more evidently classed and racialized language as “so mutually intent, so differently fair, the one like a polished surface that reflected light, like a mirror hung opposite a window, the other a lamp grimed by the smoke of careless use but still giving out radiance from its burning oil” (75). In this moment of comparison, Jenny recognizes that both Margaret and Kitty participate in different ways in the system of feminine sexual/reproductive

desirability, in which Jenny remains marginalized. Chris has never seen her, nor has she ever seen herself, in such terms.

The key to the return of Chris Baldry to the adult masculine role of soldier, the epitome of all that constitutes Kitty and Jenny's dependent upper-class feminine identities, is Margaret's learning that both she and Chris have endured the deaths of their young sons. Margaret sees a photograph of Oliver in Jenny's room. She is at first devastated by the knowledge that Chris has also experienced such a loss, but then struggles to see the "mystic interpretation of life" (78) that might explain the deaths. Struck by the human depth of Margaret's reaction, Jenny describes feeling the "ground beneath [her] feet" shaking at the sight of the other woman in that moment. Jenny had been counting on Margaret's serenity to prop up her romantic world view; by her own admission, Jenny tells us, she has been mistaken in that hope and has "of late been underestimating the cruelty of the order of things" (78). Stetz reads Jenny as experiencing a "revolution in her own consciousness" (72) here, but given that there is much more significant experience coming to Jenny before the novel's conclusion, I read Jenny in this scene as not significantly more aware of her own place in that cruel order than she has been thus far.

West insists that we closely observe all three women characters reaping the consequences of their complicities within the class system. This system, together with the gender system, of course demands the greatest sacrifice from women like Margaret, but it demands too that Jenny and Kitty participate in the cultural nexus of sacrificial values, in which their world of material abundance is only made safe through the sacrifices of class and racial Others. Here, we hear

echoes of West's question to middle-class women about their willingness to be supported by systems of slavery.

Margaret, Jenny, Kitty, and the doctor discuss Chris's condition, and the doctor searches for some reason why Chris would subconsciously want to forget his life with Kitty and Jenny. Jenny admits that Chris's life was never quite a perfect fit for him, daring, in her earlier words, to "begin to think," and Kitty seethes with repressed rage, blinded by the fear that her own power to allure must finally have been inadequate. Margaret, having just learned from Jenny that Chris and Kitty's son died at age two, five years before, exactly as her own son had, tells the doctor that mentioning Oliver to Chris will recall him to the present. She believes that the strength of this memory of loss will be undeniable for Chris, and that this would be the most likely method of "curing" him. Though the doctor tells Margaret that she would be the best person to bring Chris some memento of his son and so force him into the present, she cannot at first bear the idea of cooperating. Margaret has a kind of "last stand" in the nursery, when she and Jenny try to stave off their impending participation in their respective duties.

Jenny sees Margaret in the nursery as similar to the images she has seen in paintings of the "Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, which do indeed show women who could bring God into the world by the passion of their motherhood" (83). "As Margaret stood there, her hands pressed palm to palm beneath her chin, and a blind smile on her face, she looked even so" (83), Jenny explains. The two women discuss the two young boys' different amusements; Margaret, who lives near the railway station, used to take her child to see the trains, while Oliver

Baldry had ample toys in his day and night nurseries and a “Scotch nurse” to care for him. This nurse’s status as Scotswoman is significant; in a novel so concerned with class and empire, her ethnicity reminds readers of a nation long treated as a lesser part of, and service colony within, Britain.

In a wonderfully sly Westian critique of the pious and maternal Christian imagery Jenny has been offering, an anecdote about Oliver’s mispronunciation of the prayers his nurse has taught him becomes an indictment of the mixed messages of patriarchal religion. Jenny tells Margaret that when saying the prayers, Oliver “would say ‘Jesus, tender leopard,’ instead of ‘Jesus, tender shepherd’” (84). The child’s words in this scene hint at West’s resistance to the culture of sacrificial piety, which she saw as fiercely destructive rather than protective, and in which Oliver would have grown to become a beneficiary.

For her part, Margaret seems impressed mostly by the material abundance of the nursery and the fact that “the Queen of Spain” also “has”—and the invocation of material ownership is, I think, intentional—a Scotch nurse for her child. Savoring the splendor of the abandoned nursery, Margaret is overwhelmed with her own memory of loss, and cries out, “I want a child! I want a child!” (85). She is recognizing that she will not produce a new life, but will probably instead have to play a sacrificial role, colluding in the unhappy return of the man she loves, perhaps to his own death. In addition to making sure readers realize how unfair Margaret’s situation is, West is undercutting Jenny’s beatifying narrative perspective on Margaret with growing evidence of the class differences between the women and with subtle references to religion’s role in maintaining systems of oppression.

In the nursery with Jenny, when Margaret says that both her son and Chris and Kitty's son have "each had only half a life" (85), readers might suppose that the boys' short lifespans are being invoked. But these boys, both of whom died at the age of two, have each had much less than half of a life, by any lifespan standard. Margaret's comment seems actually to refer to the disparity between her son Dick's environment and Oliver Baldry's nursery. In this moment, Margaret articulates a veiled awareness of how the class system, which offered Chris's son and her own such different material lives, would have continued to stunt both children's possibilities, and will continue to impact her life as well. Kavka has interpreted this moment persuasively, though slightly differently: "Chris and Margaret had each married the wrong person—though within the 'right' class—and in so doing had each begotten only half the child of their mutual passion" (160). I do not see thwarted passion as West's emphasis in her characterizations of Chris and Margaret, particularly in this scene, which seems quite clearly marked with evidence of how class structures the experience of loss so differently.

Despite the way class difference inflects *their* interaction, both Margaret and Jenny identify strongly with Chris's version of the patriarchal romance narrative of his and Margaret's changeless love, and both women want at first to believe that Chris's best chance for happiness would be to remain in the delusional world dominated by that narrative. Jenny feels "an ecstatic sense of ease" at the idea that "Chris was to live in the interminable enjoyment of his youth and love" (86). Then Kitty, who has assumed that the plan will proceed according to her own wishes, appears in the doorway of the nursery, looking

utterly fragile and lost. Jenny and Margaret see her there, and Jenny asks readers:

Now, why did Kitty, who was the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune with every kind of falsity, by merely suffering somehow remind us of reality? Why did her tears reveal to me what I had learned long ago, but had forgotten in my frenzied love, that there is a draught that we must drink or not be fully human? I knew that one must know the truth. (87)

Jenny imagines Chris growing old and pathetic in his delusion, and determines that Chris “would not be quite a man” (88) without an awareness of reality. Stetz claims that Jenny’s shift toward mature acceptance of the notion that “no one is exempt from tragedy” (“Drinking ‘the Wine of Truth,’” 73) is a transformation that occurs in this scene. Though she acknowledges the irony of Kitty serving as a vehicle for this awakening in Jenny, Stetz argues that Jenny’s “values” (75) are changed in this scene. In contrast, I read West’s language here as very much still critical of Jenny’s world view.

Kitty reminds Jenny of the realities of the world they inhabit precisely because Kitty embodies them. Kitty’s suffering is the suffering that matters in a culture that places Margaret and Jenny at the margins. This is what Jenny forgets and is made to recall. Neither she nor Margaret can abdicate their duty to that culture any more than Chris finally can. The irony in this scene comes from the fact that just as Jenny is recognizing what she calls “reality,” she is proving the persistence of her illusions about class power and masculinity.

As a secondary beneficiary, Jenny tells readers, “He who was as a flag flying from our tower would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the

countryside" (88) if allowed to continue in his fantasy. The nationalistic metaphor of the flag, the courtly image of the inaccessible tower, and the use of the word "queer" point to the interlocking gender and class role prisons of the era, despite the War's seeming impact on the status quo. Jenny buys into the heterosexual romance of male vitality and female passivity, trying to console herself with the idea that after Chris is returned to "reality," he will still have "physical gallantry," a quality she is drawn to that might be brought out more by a lot of horse-riding, which Jenny plans to try to arrange. Jenny is far from seeing the full picture here; the extent to which she ever has the turn-around Stetz describes is questionable, as I shall argue further on.

Indeed, both Margaret and Jenny know their roles all too well, though they try to deny them through the initially romantic vision of Chris as a perpetual boy-man. Chris Baldry cannot be both a man in body and a child in mind, as Jenny explains. Who better to know the dictates of patriarchal gender and class roles than Jenny, who by virtue of her own liminal status in both realms can see and tell what Chris and Kitty, in their more scripted performances, cannot? It is Jenny who finds the jersey and ball that Margaret will force herself to bring out to the garden, where she will use the objects to restore Chris's memory. Jane Gledhill, in an article which helps to place West's novel within modernist traditions, has offered an interesting reading of these objects. Gledhill has pointed out that West's technique here is comparable to the use of the compressed power of an image in poetry to combine thought and feeling: "The jersey and the ball speak, in themselves, of *everything* that Chris has lost" (185). These objects do indeed encapsulate what Kafka calls "the epitome



of English maleness" (153), but it is in the way the women decide to use them that patriarchal values are reified.

Amid all this womanly enabling of the *status quo*, West seems tempted to represent some version of women resisting it, but the closest she comes is the moment of Jenny and Margaret's kiss. This moment is severely undercut by Jenny's own description of it and by the "curing" of Chris that follows it. Admitting their mutual knowledge of the "truth," as Chris must be made to know it, Jenny and Margaret kiss passionately, "not as women, but as lovers do" (88); Jenny believes that they "each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love" (89). The novel does not prove that Jenny or Margaret recognize the potential subversiveness of this kiss, which Jenny describes as unifying two halves of Chris while also unifying the two women's lives as filtered through their connection to Chris. The characters are too enmeshed in the ideologies that have defined their lives to understand the kiss outside of those terms. But West may be using this moment of connection between the two women as a signal of the potential for solidarity that remains unrealized within the novel's progression.

Though marginal within the class system and gender system, both Margaret and Jenny are given power in the structures West chooses for her novel, Margaret as the one who determines past and present in the mind of the powerful male hero at the center of the plot, and Jenny as the one who tells the story. When the women unite, briefly and physically, they may embody the potential—a bitterly unrealized potential—to threaten the very myths and oppressions that keep them apart "as women." This fleeting representation of

unity is destroyed, however, because Jenny does not yet reveal any ability to see much beyond heterosexual romantic ideology, and because soon after the kiss, Margaret proves her own immersion not only in that ideology, but in class ideology as well. She leaves to tell Chris the difficult truths of his life, thereby ensuring her own erasure from his life and thus from her place in the novel's primary action.

West uses Margaret's returning of Chris Baldry to his possible death in the War to explode the notion of self-sacrifice, particularly by women. As Jane Marcus has written of Rebecca West, "it was the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice that she was attacking [in her writing for the *Freewoman* and other journals] as dangerous and reactionary . . . . Self-sacrifice was the most mortal of sins, a sin against life itself" (*Young Rebecca* 3). In *The Return of the Soldier*, the homefront and the War are locked in an embrace of death fueled by notions of sacrifice. Jenny describes Margaret, in her moment of reconciliation to her duty, tellingly: "The rebellion had gone from her eyes and they were again the seat of all gentle wisdom" (88). The "wisdom" Margaret accepts is rooted in prevailing cultural norms, which insist on her sacrifice for the class and gender powers that be. Indeed, Bonnie Kime Scott reads Margaret as a "restorative woman," a recurring character type which "emerges as an archetype of West's fiction" ("The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West" 281). The high price of that role, in social, political, and individual terms, I would suggest, is a key part of what West wanted to point to in her reliance on it.

In language dripping with ironic, and classed, religiosity, Jenny is relieved to have her belief that Margaret "could not leave her throne of righteousness for

long," confirmed, and it is then that the two women kiss. But the women, in embracing the myths of female self-sacrificial duty, can reproduce only deathly patriarchy. Margaret takes the two items from the nursery, "the jersey and the ball and clasp[s] them as though they were a child" (89), Jenny explains. Margaret will enable the re-birth of privileged English masculinity, in acknowledging the dead child for Chris. Margaret and Jenny, who are overwhelmed in this scene by the conventions of heterosexual romance and the momentum of womanly self-sacrifice in their world, can only (re)produce the trace material effects of a male heir to Chris Baldry's privileges. But the jersey and ball, those sporting relics of a son, will suffice to return the soldier to the realities in which the women are also forced to participate.

West reveals unrelentingly how the women in Chris's life will maintain the class and gender places they have known in the world only if they do their parts to ensure his participation in the patriarchal war machine. To Jenny's continued amazement at the lower-middle class woman's "wisdom," Margaret recognizes the need to swallow the "draught" of reality; Margaret echoes Jenny's thought that "'The truth's the truth,' smiling sadly at the strange order of this earth" (88). In a succinct commentary on the revealing phrase "'the truth's the truth,'" Kavka has written: "Truth thus functions in the service of masculinity, naturalizing it as self-evident and disguising both its constructedness and its constitution through trauma" (165). I would agree that masculinity is *one* important target in this novel's critique of the "strange order of this earth," though I wish to emphasize that it is not the only form of dominance West critiques in *The Return of the Soldier*.

In this order, West seems to suggest, masculine power will continue to be defined by a deathly responsibility to perpetuate itself, and where potential challenges to the endurance of that order exist, they will nearly always be swallowed up in its far-reaching ideologies. Margaret will be the sacrificial woman, her nurturance colluding with the latest version of masculine medical knowledge in the character of Dr. Anderson. Margaret's lower-middle class life will resume its ugly predictability and joylessness, and Kitty's upper-middle class emptiness will continue to feed off the far-off Others in the Mexican mines. Jenny will exist in-between. All three women, regardless of class, are trapped by their identification with Chris as the upper-middle class male center of their various worlds. As Kavka has noted in his description of Jenny and Kitty's world at Baldry Court, "this is a feminine space in thrall to masculinity" (153).

Indeed, all three women are equally in thrall to the class power represented in their particular masculine hero. Margaret, though not sharing in that class privilege, surely puts the systems of masculinity and class power, embodied pathologically in Chris, ahead of her own interests. Chris will re-enter a role that may well kill him, in a world that manifests its values most evidently in the carnage of the War. In an insightful reading, Kavka explains the novel as one which "relates the story of the (re)construction of English masculinity" (152). Reading the novel as "enacting an impasse amongst its three themes-- masculinity, trauma, and psychoanalysis" (152), Kavka claims:

The imbrication of themes in the novel—masculinity, trauma, psychoanalysis—makes of it a cultural nexus, for in the England of the Great War masculinity for the first time becomes traumatized,

individually and as a social construct, while registering the intractability of trauma within its order. . . . West's contribution, I argue, lies in introducing female desire into this complex, and shifting the cultural impasse into the terrain of gender relations. (152)

Though Kavka's article does note that "the entire novel can be read as a 'woman's novel' which distinguishes between women in terms of class (landed wealth versus dreary poverty) and desire (materialistic versus passionate)" (152-53), the focus on masculinity and trauma in this reading does not sufficiently emphasize, I think, the central role class identities and structures of class power play in the novel, though indeed *The Return of the Soldier* also functions in the ways Kavka describes. The traumatization of masculinity in the novel, I am arguing, has everything to do with the class positions of the man and the three women whose characters respond to that traumatization. Equally significantly, Margaret's "embodied and impassioned maternity" (Kavka 164) has marked class implications—her sacrificial duty, to mother the privileged male, is hers precisely because, as when she was a "mother's help," she has few if any other cultural and economic options.

Though her reading also underestimates the centrality of class, Laura Cowan has interpreted the novel's representation of "the strange order of this earth" perceptively, describing *The Return of the Soldier* as "a feminist interpretation of War, not because it portrays women in traditionally male roles, but because it questions traditional male and female roles and examines how they contribute to a dysfunctional society whose most malign symptom is war" (289). In my reading, this "dysfunction" includes the impossibility of solidarity

among women, the violence of the War, the misuse of scientific knowledge in the potentially insightful discipline of psychology, and the persistence of class and race privilege, all of which lead to the loss of love and of life.

In their conformity with “the strange order of this earth,” Margaret and Jenny, despite their shared marginality, collude in reinscribing the power that keeps them marginal. Here, in the novel’s embedded critique of misused power, West seems to encapsulate in fiction what Virginia Woolf argues later on, in her feminist nonfiction: that women’s identification with the powers of patriarchy is part of the explanation for those powers’ persistence. While Woolf would insist in *Three Guineas*, with World War II on the horizon, that women who had entered the professions had responsibilities toward the prevention of war, West’s female characters, immersed in the Great War context, facilitate war’s progressive destruction by returning their soldier to its real-time violence.

None of the women in *The Return of the Soldier* can seem to imagine any alternative to the perpetuation of the detestable but familiar classed and gendered scripts of sacrifice (Margaret), marginality (Jenny), and selfishness (Kitty). Far from offering any idealized vision of women working in sisterhood across class lines (which was a vision West was certainly politically experienced enough to question anyway), the novel relentlessly uncovers the women characters’ deep training in their class identities. Though she does not specifically name class as the problem, Laura Cowan has noted that the novel “counters commonplace myths about the unifying powers of the war by showing it—and the ideology which shapes it—posing women against each other, not bringing them together for mutual support” (296). That West is quite so

pessimistic in this novel would not be particularly hard to believe, given the Wartime environment in which she wrote and given the extent to which she herself was mired in restrictive gendered and classed social scripts at the time. But it is also worth noting the instability of the “resolution” she provides to her plot.

At Kitty’s impatient prompting, Jenny looks out from the window and sees Margaret “dissolv[ing] into the shadows” as evening falls in the garden. This dissolving recalls Margaret’s melting body at the conclusion of the chapter in which Chris tells Jenny of his days on Monkey Island. Margaret, despite her power as the character who shapes the events of the novel so profoundly for Chris, Jenny, and Kitty, is last seen “mothering something in her arms. Almost she had dissolved . . . in another moment the night would have her” (90). It is striking, since readers might at first think that it is Chris whom Margaret must be holding, that she is described as “mothering *something*.” Because Chris is described in the very next sentence as having “his back turned on this fading happiness,” it is clear that the “something” Margaret mothers just before she disappears from the novel is not Chris himself, but, I submit, the ideology represented by Chris. Perhaps still holding those material emblems of masculine sporting heroism, the ball and jersey, emblems which West has marked as equally suggestive of inexplicably cruel death, Margaret “mothers” no man literally, but patriarchy figuratively. West uses language and image carefully here to reveal the politics of Margaret’s classed and gendered sacrifice. Jenny’s dim perception of Margaret, who has played her part in forcing a man back into his masculine place, echoes the death of Margaret’s own son and suggests the

futility of her kindness in the face of the patriarchal magnitude of the War.

In the racialized logic of the novel, Margaret has had her brief taste of becoming as powerful, as white, as Kitty, but now, a growing darkness dissolves her. She is rendered invisible by the traditionally-coded “night.” Fleetinglly bathed in whiteness earlier on in the novel by the moonlight on Monkey Island, where she was exalted but silenced through the gaze of her naïve lover, Margaret is decisively silenced at the novel’s conclusion.

Given the limited scope of West’s story, readers cannot but be struck by the vaporization of such an essential character; in having watched Margaret’s place in this novel develop, we wonder about what happens to her after her “dissolution.” Kavka claims that “idealized femininity” in the novel, and “even the novel itself—in what we might call its ‘ideal ego’—thus function ultimately to uphold the masculine order, and do so, moreover in tandem with their own dissolution” (165). In my view, West erases Margaret not because the novel’s “ideal ego” wants to enable the “masculine order,” but because West consciously uses *The Return of the Soldier* to lay bare the myriad corruptions of that order. The unresolved “resolution” of Margaret’s role creates not only curiosity, but a sense of dismay, and I suggest that this is deliberately so. West’s novel enacts Margaret’s disappearance not only to show that Margaret is trapped in her sacrificial role, but because the author wants her readers to see how such women, once they have made the expected sacrifice, move beyond the field of vision of the culture that demands the sacrifice in the first place. West uses this device, in which Margaret fades from Jenny’s sight and our own, to show—and to make us feel the injustice of—the fact that the sacrificial lower-middle-class woman



becomes conveniently invisible. Rather than functioning to uphold the “strange order of this earth,” the novel allows readers to experience the multiply devastating consequences of it, and as Cowan puts it, “Chris [and, I would add, the women characters] is not transformed, but West hopes that her audience will be” (305).

*The Return of the Soldier* ends with Kitty’s satisfied whisper “He’s cured!” (90). Kitty’s victory is a brittle and ironic one, since her dependence on Chris for money and social identity makes her blind, or perhaps numb, to the likely consequences of that victory: his death in the War to which he will return. Kitty is so immersed in the class, race, and gender imperatives of her role that she cannot even love Chris; she takes a deathly satisfaction in his participation in patriarchy, and in the requisite benefits to her. Chris, still vaguely seeing himself in relationship to the exoticized Other, as embodied in his love for Margaret, walks back to the house “avoid[ing] a patch of brightness cast by a lighted window on the grass” (90). In shadow, he walks toward the house wearing “a dreadful decent smile” (90) that makes Jenny aware of the next terrible fate that awaits him, now that he has been “returned” to them: the return to fight “under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No Man’s Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead” (90).

It is not until the last page of her novel that West allows a glimmer of hope for future change to emerge, and it is a rather faint glimmer to be sure. Given the relative complicity of Margaret in embracing her invisibility and Kitty in protecting her parasitism, Jenny is the only possible locus of female resistance to the overwhelming power structures that largely win out in the novel. Yet

Jenny's consciousness of her own place inside and outside those structures has clearly shifted, after a narrative that chronicles her attempts at distraction and denial throughout the course of her vicarious participation in this story. In this final scene, as the other characters harden (or dissolve) into their class and gender roles, it is Jenny who may learn to see herself more honestly. For her, the romanticizing illusions that keep the others trapped have begun to waver. As she sees Chris walking back to the house, Jenny thinks, "bad as we were, we were yet not the worst circumstances of his return. When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back" (90). Always haunted by images of the War, Jenny recognizes that the patriarchal system in which she is a liminal beneficiary encompasses not only the War's insistent carnage, but also her and Kitty's burdensome dependence on Chris. While early in the novel she made defensive excuses for her part in the extravagances of Baldry Court, Jenny now sees the costs of her own role with greater critical self-awareness.

[L]ights in our house," Jenny now recognizes, "were worse than darkness, affection worse than hate elsewhere" (90). For Jenny, the old categories of good and bad have become unstable—the whiteness of light is suspect, revealing too much evidence of the power she and Kitty have wielded in their need for Chris to conform to masculine roles. The affection she used to see as vicarious romantic fulfillment is unmasked as burdensome parasitism. It is not only, as Stetz argues, that Jenny has seen that "not even the strongest parental figure can protect us from [suffering and danger] forever" (75), but that she has begun to see her own complicity in oppression.

The novel leaves open the question of whether Jenny will ever do

anything to act on this growing awareness of her class, gender, and race position. As West put it some years before, "great things depend" on how women like Jenny use their consciousness of oppression. As storyteller, Jenny takes on greater potential power in this conclusion than she has had at any time in the novel. Even with this glimmer of hope, West's unwillingness to flinch in the face of the odds against change leads her to foreground Kitty's "satisfaction" at the conclusion of the novel. Though Kitty's satisfied whisper, "He's cured!" (90) constitutes the novel's last word, and though the status quo has apparently triumphed, Jenny's awakened knowledge of her complicity may be a signal of change to come. Jenny's own last words as she struggles to describe Chris's appearance to Kitty are: "'Oh. . . .' How could I say it? 'Every inch a soldier'" (90). Though West's novel concludes by suggesting that certain kinds of change are literally unspeakable in 1916, and especially in the face of Kitty's triumph, it may be that Kitty will not, ultimately, have the last word in English socioeconomic life. West surely would have agreed with her readers who dared to hope not.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This reference to the Balkans reminds us that West would continue to demonstrate her considerable gift for political journalism by writing a monumental genre-crossing work based on her own travel in the Balkans during the 1930's, *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* (1941). After World War II, increasingly fascinated with various political instances of patriotism and treason, she would attend and write about the Nuremberg trials.

<sup>2</sup> Scott gives a helpful summary of these critical arguments about West, which have persisted in two quite distinct (but equally small) camps: those who would claim West for feminism, and those who would claim her as variously harmful to or dissenting from it. In my own interpretation, which certainly lands in the former camp in claiming West for feminism, and believing, as Scott does, that "[t]he basic themes that concern [West] are consistent" (*Refiguring* 126), I am striving for self-consciousness about these very politics of reading. As I hope will be evident here, I see critical interpretations, including my own, as mediated by the cultural and material conditions of critical practices.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the reactions to West's *The Strange Necessity* and her other appraisals of male modernists, see Briggs. See also Scott, "A Joyce of Ones' Own: Following the Lead of Woolf, West, and Barnes."

<sup>4</sup> Such a reluctance, though I am describing it as rather odd given West's age at the time, does follow something of a feminist tradition. One thinks particularly here of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, which express the same sort of dismay about the price, for women, of heterosexual coupling.

<sup>5</sup> Laing has offered an astute analysis of this essay's preoccupation with clothing in comparison to Virginia Woolf's interest in the subject and discussion of clothes in her

own work.

° Monkey Island, though seemingly ideally named for this novel's preoccupations, is an actual island in the Thames where West and H. G. Wells had spent time.

## CHAPTER 3

### BREAKING THE PLOT: SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER'S VARIATIONS ON/AS CLASS-CONSCIOUS LITERATURE

*If a great lady such as Marie de France chose to give her leisure to letters instead of embroidery, this was merely a demonstration that society could afford such luxuries—an example of what Veblen defined as Conspicuous Waste. No one went unfed or unclothed for it. Nor could she be held guilty of setting a bad example to other women, since so few women were in a position to follow it. So things went on, with now and then a literate woman making a little squeak with her pen, while the other women added a few more lines to Mother Goose (about that authorship, I think there can be no dispute). It was not till the retreat from the Renaissance that the extraneous vibration [of a woman writing a book] was heard as so very jarring. By then, many women had learned to read and write, so a literate woman was no longer an ornament to society. Kept in bounds, she had her uses. She could keep the account books and transcribe recipes for horse pills. But she must be kept within bounds: she must subserve. When Teresa of Avila wrote her autobiography, she said in a preface that it had been written with leave and 'in accordance with my confessor's command'. True, she immediately added, 'The Lord himself, I know, has long wished it to be written'—a sentiment felt by most creative writers, I believe; but the woman and the Lord had to wait for permission. (545)*

*A working-class woman may be as gifted as all the woman writers I have spoken of today, all rolled into one; but it is no part of her duty to write a masterpiece. Her brain may be teeming, but it is not the fertility of her brain she must attend to, perishable citizens is what her country expects of her, not imperishable Falstaffs and Don Quixotes. . . . Apart from one or two . . . women writers have come from the middle class, and their writing carries a heritage of middle-class virtues; good taste, prudence, acceptance of limitations, compliance with standards, and that typically middle-class merit of making the most of what one's got . . . So when we consider women as writers, we must bear in mind that we have not very much to go on, and that it is too early to assess what they may be capable of. It may well be that the half has not yet been told us: that unbridled masterpieces, daring innovations, epics, tragedies, works of genial impropriety—all the things that so far women have signally failed to produce—have been socially, not sexually, debarred; that at this moment a Joan Milton or a Françoise Rabelais may have left the washing unironed and the stew uncared for because she can't wait to begin. (546)*

--from Sylvia Townsend Warner, "Women as Writers"

#### I. Discursive Travels: From the Kitchen to the Palace

In 1959, Sylvia Townsend Warner evoked the ghost of Virginia Woolf by mentioning *A Room of One's Own* during her Peter Le Neve Foster Lecture.

Speaking to the Royal Society of Arts on the subject of "Women as Writers,"

Warner even adopts some of Woolf's characteristic rhetorical maneuvers; she

expresses her doubts about the “implication[s]” of her invitation to speak—she wonders aloud whether a “gentleman novelist” would be “asked to lecture on Men as Writers” (“Women” 538)—and uses an abundance of historical and hypothetical examples to help her listeners arrive before they know it, along with her, at seemingly inevitable conclusions.

“Women as Writers” is both an homage to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, which was published thirty years before, and a rewriting of it. *A Room of One’s Own*, Warner explains, “is not so much about how women write as about how astonishing it is that they should have managed to write at all.” She continues, “As they have managed to, there might still be something I could add” (538). What Warner adds is a different way of reading the story that Woolf tells about women and writing. As Jane Marcus has written in her discussion of “Women as Writers,” “[I]n its own dry, wryly ironic way it continues the work of its predecessor as feminist criticism” (*Art and Anger* 232). In reimagining such elements as women writers’ links to Shakespeare, and the culturally forbidden routes of access to writerly experience, Warner finds some positive meaning in the gaps and negatives of women’s literary history.

While Warner does claim some of women’s literary disadvantages as having produced “technical assets” (544), her analysis of how certain duties are expected from women according to class, and her critique of the persistent cultural distaste for women writers’ earning money, are interwoven with, and temper, what appear to be celebratory reclaimings of those disadvantages. It is important to note that her reworking is not, taken in context, a mere “look at the bright side” reversal of *A Room of One’s Own*. As the epigraphs above suggest,

Warner's careful attention to the class dimensions of women's struggles for literacy and for literature are foundational in her lecture.

I will be arguing that Warner's rewriting of *A Room of One's Own* is one instance of what I am calling her strategy of "breaking the plot." In many of her works, Warner breaks the plots of her culture's dominant fictions, especially those of class, gender, and empire, by adopting the literary forms they most often take and reworking them to her own different political purposes. In "Women as Writers," she is more respectful of the feminist narrative she rewrites than she is in most of her other adaptations, as we shall see further on in this chapter, but Warner renovates Woolf's essay especially in class terms. She creates a kind of rhetorical momentum in "Women as Writers" that turns the criteria of literary judgment back upon itself, using its own terms as Woolf herself sometimes did, for instance in the "Introductory Letter" I discussed in Chapter 1. But for every worry Woolf so eloquently expressed both in that essay-letter and in *A Room of One's Own* about the fragility of women's writing traditions, Warner has what we might call in our present-day political media-speak, a "spin."

Using rhetoric which turns women's cultural lemons into literary lemonade, Warner explains that women writers tend to share "the quality we call immediacy" ("Women" 542). In writing which features this attribute, an author does not intrude on the story or characters, but seems instead to make them appear before readers, and Warner notes that "[w]omen as writers seem to be remarkably adept at vanishing out of their writing so that the quality of immediacy replaces them" (542), though she concedes exceptions to this generalization. As though answering Woolf's call for impersonality and



androgyny, Warner declares that most women's writing already has such traits, offering an eclectic mix of examples from women authors of various eras and nationalities, including the scene from Woolf's *Orlando* in which Shakespeare is glimpsed writing a few lines. Warner explains how, in such writing, characters are not merely "written about," but become present, actually "there" (542), within the reader's field of vision. Warner's tendency to use the terms of the supernatural to subvert "reality"—in this case, by describing a processes in which the lines between characters and living beings are blurred—marks her other texts even more explicitly, as I shall explain further on in this chapter.

In "Women as Writers," by claiming "immediacy," Warner takes the fact of women's tendency toward invisibility within power systems and turns it into a literary asset. She does so by rewriting the accepted "plot" of literary history, in which women must remain invisible—the patriarchal version—or in which women play limited roles like *Cruelly Excluded* or *Writing But Angry*—Woolf's feminist version. By "breaking the plot(s)," as I am describing her aesthetic practice, Warner intervenes in their class, race, and gender politics. While Woolf acknowledges the limitations of women's roles in literary history, mourning what is lost and tracing what remains of women's literary legacies, Warner writes a new plot, as though those limitations were a kind of mirage which might be broken by her reclaiming some of the best distinguishing marks of much women's writing. The erasure of women in literary history metamorphoses in Warner's scheme into women's literary "gift" for vanishing from their texts to create the valuable effect of immediacy.

"Women as Writers" boldly recasts prevailing wisdom about women's

literature, and does so using some of the same terms of judgment which are employed in praise of canonical men's texts. This is a more self-consciously playful strategy than the one Woolf uses in *A Room of One's Own*, though Warner's seriousness of purpose is evident within "Women as Writers."

It is this mixture of whimsy and politics that gives much of Warner's work its particular appeal. She uses what Jane Marcus has called "feminist fantastic realism" (*Gender* 531) across genre in ways that foreshadow the work of later writers, especially, as Marcus points out, Angela Carter. In Warner's texts, familiar stories—boy meets girl and they procreate, hero conquers nature or "civilizes" natives, orphan inherits abundance—morph into versions that destabilize those dominant ideologies by changing their specific components. As an example, I want to sketch the revisions she makes to one plot through her novel *Summer Will Show* (1936), which might be described as a rewriting of the imperialist epic romance plot typically found in the historical novel genre. Warner's formulation is as follows: a trapped upper-class British woman meets a working-class Jewish woman; they fall in love and join the workers' revolution, in which the latter is killed by a boy who is the former's distant relation, the illegitimate West-Indian child of a colonialist's ancestor's affair. Warner relies on the general familiarity of the particular form itself—a story set in tumultuous historical times, in a foreign country, in which two lovers from different worlds meet—in order to help her readers take leaps of faith in suspending their disbelief about the new outcomes of such old plots. The complex political commentary which even this rough outline suggests speaks to what I view as Warner's remarkable grasp of the interconnections of differences and power.

I am arguing that in a less obvious way, "Women as Writers" similarly reworks the plot of women's literary history that Virginia Woolf traces in *A Room of One's Own*. Warner remakes the historical and representational details of Woolf's narrative, in which women writers are at least mocked and shut out by patriarchal powers-that-be, and at worst driven to suicide by the effects of such powers. She manages this through consistent attention to material specifics and through a gift for making the past come to life, and so signals implicitly the inescapable importance of history. Like some of her fictional characters, Warner has read her Marx, after all. But by the time she gives the lecture "Women as Writers," it is her carefully-developed rhetorical posture, her insightful attempt to re-cast the terms of representation in which her audience comes to see women as writers, that I see as Warner's real innovation.

While Woolf vividly evokes Oxbridge and its exclusionary history in *A Room of One's Own*, Warner's description of a women writer's outsider status is focused in her lecture around an even more explicitly classed metaphor. While Woolf rails against being shut out from the closed sanctuaries of learning, Warner tends to point out the disadvantages of exposure to such learning.<sup>1</sup> In Warner's version, the formally educated take on royal status; she asks us to imagine a palace, one affording the outsider occasional chances at glimpsing scenes at its open windows or hearing noises from within, or chances to meet the men who have enjoyed time inside. It is clear that being an educated writer—living inside the palace—is a privileged and desirable existence. Warner does not deny the material realities of insider life; indeed she exaggerates them to heighten the dramatic tension in the story of women's writing. She addresses

her audience directly, asking them to consider the outsider's state of mind now that the outsider sees a chance to enter the palace. It is worth noting how Warner's use of the second person pronoun allows her metaphor to unfold so that the audience's point of view becomes indistinguishable from the class outsider's point of view:

And then one day you discovered that you could climb into this palace by the pantry window. In the excitement of the moment you wouldn't wait; you wouldn't go home to smooth your hair or borrow your grandmother's garnets or consult the Book of Etiquette. Even at the risk of being turned out by the butler, rebuked by the chaplain, laughed at by the rightful guests, you'd climb in. (543)

Women, Warner explains, have made it inside literature in the same way—"breathless, unequipped, and with nothing but their wits to trust to" (543). Though she does not deny that women are "unequipped," Warner turns the uneducated interloper—who remains a victim in Woolf's imagined Judith Shakespeare—into the hero of her story.

Having made her arguments about the strengths of women writers using examples from various classes of literate women, and using classed images and metaphors, Warner goes on to show that the pantry window has seen some other traffic. Very soon after her list of the risks taken by palace interlopers, Warner coaches her audience to be ready for a key claim in "Women as Writers": the similarities between the literary break-ins of women and working-class men:

Do you see what we are coming to? I have put in several quotations to prepare you for it. We are coming to those other writers who have got

into literature by the pantry window, and who have left the most illustrious footprints on the windowsill. It is a dizzying conclusion, but it must be faced. Women, entering literature, entered it on the same footing as William Shakespeare. (544)

In a rhetorical maneuver which is itself as agile and surprising as a leap in a pantry window, Warner levels the ground for women writers by placing them on par with Shakespeare because of what they have in common with him.

Shakespeare, generally acknowledged as the greatest writer in the tradition, is evoked as the unprivileged forerunner of his *all* his writerly sisters. While Woolf mourns her imagined Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own* and sees, from her own relatively privileged historical vantage point, a tragic victim of patriarchal cruelties, Warner evokes William Shakespeare's class position to remind us that those women who have survived to write in the historical moment from which *she* speaks may be proud to share in a whole range of advantages that his writing most assuredly demonstrates. Of course the mere presence of "pantry window traits" in their writing does not by any means guarantee women writers comparison to Shakespeare. As Warner explains, in a phrase that signals her attention to the material history of writing, "The resemblance is in the circumstances. Women writers have shared [Shakespeare's] advantage of starting with no literary advantages" (544).

Women writers share with working-class male writers the quality of immediacy, and have the additional "advantage" of an ability to create women characters, given their experiences. Warner will explain that what she views as advantageous is rooted in everyday life, in which women of most classes run a

household, or visit or shop within a community, and so have contact with a variety of different classes of people. In Warner's view, it is this contact, coupled with women's own sense of their inner lives and outer behaviors, which gives women who write the "conviction that women have legs of their own, and can move about of their own volition, and give as good as they get" (544). According to Warner, some of Shakespeare's women might even be mistaken for creations of women writers, so believable are their actions. The bravado tone of Warner's reversals of her audience's expectations—we are expected to concede that at his best, Shakespeare might even be as good as a woman writer in creating women characters?—counters the eloquent patience of Woolf's exhortation to "work[] for" (*Room* 114) the second coming of Judith Shakespeare. Warner's pairing of women writers with Shakespeare creates a markedly different political rhetoric than Woolf's hopes for the potential political implications of connection between women, as signaled in the phrase "Chloe liked Olivia" from a *Room of One's Own* (82).

Developing her reclaiming of women writers' capacity to create character, Warner claims "It is extremely rare to find the conventional comic servant or comic countryman in books by women" ("Women" 544), because although privileged writers must make up what they have not experienced, those who are exposed to "low company" (544) have the benefit of moving in a variety of worlds with a variety of human characters. They can hear language in action as they "listen to every trade, every walk in life" (544) and benefit from intimacy with low genres like nursery rhymes. The historical validity of Warner's claims varies, of course, but she is less concerned with "the real" here than she is with

the rhetorical power of representation as a means for imagining political progress. She takes a seed of history—the fact that “a woman has to be most exceptionally secluded if she never goes to her own back door, or is not on visiting terms with people poorer than herself” (545)—and lets the seed germinate within her reworking of women’s literary history. In this way, the fact that “Emily Brontë was . . . the daughter of a clergyman, with her duty of parish visiting . . . [and therefore was] acquainted with human passions and what they can lead to” (544) shapes the historical possibility of *Wuthering Heights*.

Warner minimizes the obstacles to women’s literary achievement in such passages—forcing a sudden progress on the page that is harder to create in the world—but her attention, in the other threads of her lecture, to the material realities of women’s lives, demonstrates at the same time that she does not want readers to miss such obstacles. She expects, however, that we will use what history we do know to imagine the overcoming of historically-rooted problems, and she gives our vision a head start with her bold rhetoric. Warner’s polemical tone sometimes makes it seem as though privilege is a handicap for writers, and her strategy ultimately works as a corrective to Woolf’s hunger for access to writerly privilege.

Warner signals her own strategic practice by proclaiming early on in the lecture that “Women as writers are obstinate and sly” (540). She herself is of course both obstinate in her assertions about the meanings that should be ascribed to the history of women writers, and sly in her representation of those same meanings. Warner explains that the “distinguishing assertion” she makes about women writers being obstinate and sly is one she “deliberately make[s] . . .

in the present tense," as if to underscore that women writers are still doing their work in obstinate and sly ways. She thus points to her own participation in the women's "tradition" of obstinacy and slyness that she names. In what at first seems like a Woolfian move, she then undercuts the value of those traits, writing:

Obstinacy and slyness still have their uses, although they are not literary qualities.

But I have sometimes wondered if women are literary at all. It is not a thing which is strenuously required of them, and perhaps, finding something not required of them, they thank God and do no more about it. They write. They dive into writing like ducks into water. One would almost think it came naturally to them—at any rate as naturally as plain sewing. (540-41)

Warner emphasizes the constructedness of her own representation of women's gifts as "natural" by comparing their writing to the necessary but feminized craft of plain sewing. She uses the "form" of an oppressive cultural concept—the justification of women's patriarchal duties as ones to which they are "naturally" inclined—both to expose essentialism and to deploy it with different political effects. As I have suggested in my discussion of Warner's juxtaposition of the kitchen and the castle, and my exploration of her comparison between Shakespeare and women writers, these effects are classed as well as gendered.

Destabilizing the "natural" and using the "imaginary" and the "real" equally effectively, sometimes interchangeably; moving between hypothetical and historical figures, Warner places her examples of writers both male and female in specifically classed contexts, explaining that she finds it "not very surprising that



young Mr Shelley should turn to writing; it was surprising that young Mr Keats did, and his poetry reflects his surprise. It is the poetry of a young man surprised by joy" (544). The "pantry window traits" (544), as Warner calls them, make Keats fit to join Shakespeare in the accomplished company of ordinary women. Warner has problematized, as we have seen, the "natural" in terms of gender, and turns to two canonized Romantic poets to make a similar point about the highly constructed "naturalness" of class. Though attentive to class, Warner destabilizes the tendency to equate it with destiny, and certainly demonstrates throughout the lecture that there is hope in both the past and present for writers who are not "supposed" to become writers—depending on the values of their reader. It is precisely those more egalitarian values and politicized ways of seeing that Warner wants to enable through her use of the culturally familiar literary form.

Warner pays attention to the conditions of writers' work in a way that turns lack of access, through her sly rhetoric, into opportunity for originality, but she does not deny the necessity of Woolf's building blocks of a room and money. The difference is that while Woolf has taken the material basis of the thinking and writing life as given needs, and in effect bought into the classed assumptions about what it takes to make Art, Warner has exposed and destabilized the cultural construction of Art by playing with its own terms. Both women's perspectives are materialist—Woolf's in the practical sense of one's need for (particularly classed versions of) food, shelter, and time, and Warner's in the recognition that Art is both bound by its conditions of production and remade in the representational economy, in which language itself can shift our

understandings of what has value. Having interpreted, indeed having re-represented, literary history in a way that allows her to emphasize the assets of its apparent outsiders, Warner suggests to her audience that there are no absolutely predictable (or “natural”) paths for great writers while giving them a way to re-construct the class and gender politics of the whole idea of the “great writer.” Implicit in Warner’s emphasis on the unpredictability of the outsider’s path, of course, is the recognition that the power structures of culture and literature are so formidable and effective at excluding nearly anyone without birthright that the one who finds his or her way in must be exceptional indeed, must be, to use her own ironically-cadenced terms, “a natural.”

Warner’s rhetoric is striking and sophisticated in its forging of alliances across gender, based on class, but its simultaneous insistence on women’s specific difficulties within particular historical contexts is impossible to miss. “Women as Writers” discusses the way that any woman is judged adversely for consistently and intentionally earning her living by writing. For the middle-class woman, the cultural curiosity and condescension attached to success as a writer—instead of as a wife, mother, philanthropist, or equestrian—comes in the form of “polite pity” (545). As Warner wryly notes, “So much pity is ominous” (545). While she pushes their limits, she recognizes that cultural assumptions in their gendered and classed effects change very slowly.

For working-class women, the notion of duty is applied differently, as part of one of the epigraphs I have used demonstrates: “It is not the fertility of her brain she must attend to, perishable citizens is what her country expects of her, not imperishable Falstaffs and Don Quixotes” (545). Warner makes it clear that

working-class women face a greater disregard of their potential to pen masterpieces, and she acknowledges the different levels and forms of cultural resistance to women's writing. Against these various pressures subtle and overt, Warner uses her storytelling gifts to obstinately break the cultural and historical plot that represents women and men, workers and gentry, as having vastly unequal claims to literary merit.

"Women as Writers" juxtaposes examples so that women of different social classes and historical eras may appear together before the reader/listener. Like Woolf, Warner has a gift for infusing everyday detail with political cadence, for creating political effects through clever juxtaposition. For instance, within a line or two, Warner's audience must make the transition between a woman transcribing recipes for horse pills and another woman's account of being called by God. Warner's unwillingness to mark such pairings as surprising—her enactment of equal representation on the page regardless of class status—suggests that here as elsewhere she puts her egalitarian politics into artistic practice. Given that the audience she originally addressed in 1959 was comprised of members and guests of the Royal Society of Arts, a group of well-educated (and thus highly literate) listeners who would certainly have been familiar with prevailing notions of the literary, Warner's juxtapositions seem deliberately class-conscious. In her inclusion of two such apparently divergent subjects, she slyly combines two kinds of writing that a dominant (and classed) perspective would hierarchize as the everyday evidence of *literacy* (taking the decidedly "low" form of a recipe for horse pills) and the lofty account in *literature* of a profoundly spiritual (and therefore "high") experience. Reading for class in

the terms of Warner's list, we can see the irreverent politics of Warner's plot-breaking, in which the cultural imposition of a division between "high" and "low" forms of writing is destabilized and reworked to more democratic effect.

Similarly, Warner quotes, within a section, four different women's writings, two of which are instructions from a seventeenth-century recipe for custard and an eighteenth-century meditation on the omnipresence of God and the nature of sin. Warner explains that she has not "cheated over these examples. The two notable women, the two women of no note. I chose them almost at random, and went to their writings to see what I would find. I found them alike in making themselves clear" (542). Warner protests a bit too much here, and it becomes clear that her leveling of the generic hierarchies that would separate a recipe from philosophical text is part of a political strategy, one that tests classed and gendered assumptions about kinds of writing that have remained very much in force since 1959. Though she claims to have casually chosen these writers who can produce "tight, clear, consecutive writing" (541), Warner's linkage of them in her lecture, as part of a proof of their similar skill, also reshapes a women's literary tradition that allows working-class women to be read on equal terms with privileged women. Temporarily disregarding the differences in genre, content and context—pairing custard and divinity from two different centuries!—Warner focuses instead on the quality of clarity in prose, and as a side effect the reader (like her original listeners) can see both gender similarity *and* class difference in one pairing.

Significantly, Warner concludes "Women as Writers" with the speculation that it may be class, even more than gender, which has really been the stumbling

block for women writers. But "class" for Warner is not synonymous with "working-class" or "poor"—all women have a class identity, and in her estimation, the construction of class identity itself undercuts women's potential as writers. In several examples, among them the hypothetical "princess" who fails to meet the expectations for women of her social standing because she "would not tear herself from the third act of her tragedy in order to open a play-centre" (545), Warner shows her awareness of the different obstacles women face within their different classes. For Warner, the expectations of patriarchal culture are inseparable from the class structure; both inhibit women's production of art. She explores the forms of social pressure which affect women, including the amount of time consumed by their writing, the money they earn by writing, and the notion of female "duty" (545) in its various manifestations. She points out the problems inherent in any literature that is closed to certain voices. While middle-class women's writing suffers from its middle-class-ness, working-class writing, though revealing what she manages to re-cast as enviable "pantry window traits," is incomplete because predominantly written by men.

Warner, herself making a living by her writing, expands the notion of a room and income to a broader social context, while going rather further in her critique of ideology than Woolf had gone thirty years before. Not only do women writers need familial or self-earned concessions to their independence, but they may benefit from seeing their history as bound up with the history of class struggle, and remembering that representation can shape prevailing views of those who are coming to writing through the pantry window.

It is worth noting not only that Warner seeks within her lecture to

reformulate ideas about women as writers, but also that giving the lecture itself in 1959 was an intervention in the cultural valuation of a particular women writer: Virginia Woolf. "Women as Writers" builds upon Virginia Woolf's feminist insights in *A Room of One's Own* at a time described by Jane Marcus as "a low point in the history of Woolf's reputation as a writer" (*Gender* 535). At the end of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf urges women to take full and fast advantage of the concessions they have won from patriarchy in education, the law, and the vote, and of the experiences they may now amass; though her analysis is materialist, it is also a decidedly middle-class prescription for access to the literary world. The quietly burning anger animating *A Room of One's Own* flares up in the crafted indictments of *Three Guineas* (1938); the span between the two suggests a political progress within the writing career of one privileged woman. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf fully questions the whole matter of women's participation in patriarchal cultural systems, and stakes her claim in the Society of Outsiders. In "Women as Writers," Warner tests the political consequences of representing most women and some men as members of the outsider class, in a strategy that we might describe, using our own historical-cultural terms, as postmodern. Warner both destabilizes essentialism and appropriates discourses of power.

Of course, it is fair to ask whether Warner's rhetorical strategy, in its stretchings toward the ideal, actually undermines full acknowledgment of working-class and women writers' struggles and tragedies. Does Warner end up romanticizing the value of working-class experience? Does her praise for the "pantry-window traits" play into stereotypes about the "authenticity" of the

working class writer, unwittingly limiting expectations about the kind of literature such a person might produce? These are implicit dangers of her practice, but I read Warner's insistent attention to material conditions and her creative re-imaginings of feminist representation as offsetting the potential political fallout of her more hyperbolic moments. Though her rhetoric does not seem likely to take us closer to the "truth" of historical experience, Warner's bending of those truths, and her questioning of their very bases, are certainly not without political uses in the boldness of their imaginative leaps. The political strategy of her lecture worked in her time both to renew attention to Woolf's text and to rework its plot of women's literary history. In our own time, attending to Warner's sly practices in "Women as Writers" can help us to unsettle the different class and gender assumptions that are intrinsic to Woolf's version of the story.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* has been canonized by North American feminist literary critics especially as speaking to many women's experiences of writing and reading, despite its bleaker tone. It seems to me that *A Room of One's Own*, for all its many dazzling feminist insights and despite its core of hope, tends to reify women writers' feminine victimization in much the same way that our feminist canonization of a particular woman writer, Woolf herself, tends to reify a certain classed (and gendered and raced) version of feminism.

I submit that Warner's vision is useful too—especially because it helps to develop a collective politics in ways Woolf (in her writing at least, and according to some versions also in her life) edged rather slowly toward. By the publication of works like *Three Guineas* (1938) and *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf was

exploring more fully than ever the political possibilities of the individual feminist-as-citizen or as artistic visionary within the collective context. But she did not want the last word on the subject. Woolf wrote, in 1929 after giving *A Room of One's Own* as a lecture, "I wanted to encourage the young women—they seem to get fearfully depressed—and also to induce discussion. There are numbers of things that might be said, and that aren't [sic] said" (*Letters* 4 106). Warner's "Women as Writers," among other achievements, tries to say some of what Woolf does not say, or perhaps historically and personally could not say.

Indeed it is striking to compare Woolf's letters which mention *A Room of One's Own* to Warner's list of the pitfalls of some middle-class women's writing: "good taste, prudence, acceptance of limitations, compliance with standards" (546). In her letters, Woolf calls her masterpiece her "little book" and is "glad that [Goldsworth Lowes Dickinson, a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge] thought it good tempered" (106). She explains that "[her] blood is apt to boil on this one subject . . . and [she] didn't [sic] want it to" (106). I read Woolf's worries about the combination of anger and art, worries she expresses in these letters as well as in *A Room of One's Own*, as related to modernist notions about impersonality as the best position from which an artist can represent human consciousness, but I also read her worries as evidence of a classed and gendered clinging to politeness. Anger threatens Woolf's own participation in discourses of power, to which people like her are allowed access so long as they follow the rules of decorum and femininity. As Cora Kaplan has perceptively explained, in Woolf's aesthetic "[a]nger becomes the thread which links the imperilled woman writer by association to a whole chain of subordinate subjectivities—most of the



human race in fact—whose discursive resistance is personalized, pathologized, and used as the measure of good or bad writing” (“Like A Housmaid’s Fancies” 60). In a second letter, to Theodora Bosanquet, Henry James’s secretary, Woolf explains that she “wanted to be readable and good tempered for the sake of the young women, and was afraid that [her] serious intention had suffered in the process” (107). The desire to seem polite is palpably in tension, in both classed and gendered ways, with Woolf’s righteous rage. The context in which she discusses her book—with a Cambridge intellectual and a literary woman—suggests the limits of her representational options within it.

Warner seems to sidestep her own anger about injustice by deploying one of the tendencies she describes as characteristic of middle-class women writers, the knack for “making the most of what one’s got” (“Women” 546). The politics of Warner’s strategically more optimistic emphases should not be misread as what we would now call “backlash” against Woolf. Warner valued *A Room of One’s Own* and admired Woolf, but her writerly interests and abilities took her in different directions. Warner’s rhetorical strategy is its own form of protest against the class expectations that she too lived under—and her political commitments by 1959 are clearly leftist. The house of feminist literary history—still resisting the gentrification of the palace model, I hope—has rooms for both Woolf and Warner.

Given the differences between their aesthetics, it is interesting to recognize that Warner was not much more of an outsider than was Woolf; though neither was working-class, both consistently explore class difference and its implications in their writings. Woolf’s and Warner’s lives during the twenties especially were

at least likely to overlap, and their circles of acquaintance did have various people in common for many years. But one wonders about the different effects of experience on the two women's choices of literary form—while Woolf was a philanthropic young volunteer teaching workingmen at Morley, Warner was earning her own way in what Wendy Mulford describes as “a hard-working, thrifty independent life” (18). Though the War had lent a seriousness and hard-won political consciousness to virtually their whole generation of the middle-class, Warner's city life seems to have been less socially and economically privileged than Woolf's. Of course, Woolf's heterosexual marriage to Leonard also made for a different security than Warner's emerging lesbianism could provide. While Woolf opened her home to meetings and volunteered her time for progressive organizations, Warner had actually worked at a munitions factory during the War, a job which led to her first published writing—an essay about the experience. And though she too was haunting the neighborhoods of London after the War, Warner had “no ‘real money’, as Bloomsbury considered it—that is, unearned income” (Mulford 16).

Often, the differences between the writers' points of view emerge in the kinds of examples they choose to make similar feminist points. Woolf remarks in *A Room of One's Own* on how women can experience “a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall” (97), and sees this as a valuable gendered access to the outsider's vision. Warner explains a different kind of experience with the term “bi-location,” which allows a woman to “remember what she had to tell the electrician, answer the telephone, keep an eye on the time, and not forget about the potatoes” (“Women” 540). For Warner, bi-location

seems more a fragmented consciousness within chaotic domesticity than a dual consciousness within sophisticated urbanity. Jane Garrity notes this same instance of “intertextual dialogue” (241) between Woolf and Warner, but in a brilliant chapter from the 1995 collection *Lesbian Erotics*, Garrity uses the connection to show how Woolf’s idea of duality has lesbian resonances that link up with Warner’s “use of doubleness as a textual strategy” (243) to subvert heterosexual privilege. I think it is important to note a distinction between the two descriptions, however. There is a different class cadence in each of the two scenes. Warner’s domestic scene captures a blend of women’s traditional roles and emerging technology, while Woolf’s London street (and especially that London street, with its views of British governmental and royal power) captures a not unrelated but very differently-rendered feminist point of view. Both writers use everyday experience to comment on the political and psychological condition of women, but the details chosen by each reveal her particular perspective on just what constitutes the everyday.

While noting this kind of difference, it is interesting to think of Woolf and Warner as both producing writing which comments on the politics of the everyday during the very period that prevailing literary critical opinion has tended to see as signified mostly by Eliot’s mythic fragments of poetic vision and Joyce’s encoded revisions of the master narratives of Western literature. Feminist literary criticism of this period has explored the differences between Woolf’s modernist aesthetics and those of her male contemporaries. Celeste Schenck asks an especially important question along these lines within her discussion of Warner’s poetry, when she writes, “Will the motley multiple

determinants of literary modernism—gender, genre, geography, class, race, and sexual preference—finally force us to abandon a specious and essential, although for a time useful, difference between male and female Modernism?” (230).<sup>2</sup>

Yet feminist criticism has not yet given enough thought, especially in classed terms, to Woolf’s place in the range of *women’s* writing during these years.

Warner does not seem to have been much tempted by modernist innovation as it is typically understood. But reading modernism like Woolf’s in conjunction with Warner’s rewritings of plot reveals ways in which female traditions within the modernist period politicize the literary rule-breaking characteristic of the period as a whole. Jane Marcus asks an important question in this vein in *The Gender of Modernism*: “Can our present concepts of modernism expand from definitions of fragmented or lyrical fiction to include the feminist or Marxist historical novel as Warner conceived it?” (534). I think that Warner defies any simple inclusionary gesture within modernism, especially because her class-conscious reworkings of genres disdained by “high modernists” would not merely expand the definition of modernism, but would tend even more disruptively to expose, or perhaps even to explode, the politics of that literary-critical construction.

## II. Sylvia Townsend Warner: Breaking and Remaking Our Critical Plots

Sylvia Townsend Warner’s writing has frequently been relegated to the kind of no-woman’s land in which Rebecca West’s diversity has too often placed her. Yet Warner’s body of work is more consistent in its style than West’s. Warner’s aesthetic is rooted in a complex notion of realism that may be seen at

work even in her nonfiction writing. I have sketched, through my reading of "Women as Writers," the way it is informed by Warner's use of particular notions of reality and history, and I will discuss the development of her aesthetic through readings of some other texts, especially her novel *Lolly Willowes*, her narrative poem *Opus 7*, and, in an extended reading, her novel *The True Heart*. But the way I read Warner is of necessity contextualized by the way she has been read up to now.

Warner wrote "seven novels, nine books of poetry, ten volumes of short stories, a biography of T. H. White, a translation of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, and numerous essays and reviews" (Marcus, *Gender* 531). Warner's *oeuvre* is a varied treasure-chest for readers in part because her own interests were so diverse, but she remains widely unknown, probably because of that frustratingly unimaginative tendency, deeply rooted in literary criticism, to ignore what is difficult to classify. Of course, her noncanonical status is not only a matter of the diversity of her work, but also of her identities and her politics, which have quite likely been a source of discrimination within literary critical appraisals of that work. As Jane Marcus explains, "Left out of the literary histories of the Spanish Civil War presumably because she was a woman, she is left out of literary modernism because she was a communist and a lesbian. But she does not reappear in the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* or in Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land*" (*Gender* 531). It seems that in spite of writing nearly every kind of text, and having had a sixty-year writing career, Sylvia Townsend Warner is rarely remembered even in counter-canonical discourses. There is no one obvious way of categorizing her art or her life, though I will suggest here by

foregrounding class in my readings of Warner that such a method provides a useful start.

Biographical and literary-critical materials discussing Warner all remark on her historical absence from the various traditions in which she has earned a place, among them the historical novel, short story, verse novel, war literature, lyric and narrative poetry, literature inspired by Communist Party political commitment, feminist fairy-tales and magical realism. Warner's poetry and diaries have been collected by Claire Harman, who is also her biographer, and selections from Warner's letters and short stories have been published by William Maxwell, who was her editor during her years of writing for *The New Yorker*. Warner's correspondence with Valentine Ackland, her partner of nearly forty years, was edited by Susanna Pinney and published in 1998 under the title *I'll Stand By You*. Wendy Mulford, who knew Warner and lived in a house Warner had shared with Ackland, has written a frequently--and deservedly--praised biographical-literary account of Warner's middle years with her lover. The groundbreaking anthology of 1990, *The Gender of Modernism*, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, includes a chapter on Sylvia Townsend Warner, introduced by Jane Marcus, and featuring three selections: "Women as Writers," the poem "Cottage Mantleshef," and a feminist fable, "Bluebeard's Daughter." In several articles, Barbara Brothers has argued persuasively for Warner's writing, especially her work from the 1930's in response to the Spanish Civil War. Though her works remain largely out of print, Warner's revival seems to have finally begun, thanks in no small part to critical analyses of gender and sexuality in literature, and to work in lesbian literary studies.<sup>3</sup>

It is fitting that Warner's rediscovery should begin largely with feminist and lesbian and gay readers. Her depictions of same-sex relationships are rich and celebratory, and her critique of culture, especially of class, religion, and imperialism is consistently feminist. Subversion of heterosexual and patriarchal power structures is everywhere in her writing, though a few critics have managed to ignore this consistency within her diverse artistic forms. The attention she has received from literary critics of whatever stripe remains quite limited, but the best writing on Warner acknowledges the political edge in her writing. Wendy Mulford has written, describing Warner's early novels:

Each one of these first three novels has harsh things to say about the complacency, the arrogance, hypocrisy and exploitation of the bourgeoisie and its institutions, especially the Church, for which Sylvia had a finely tuned contempt bordering on loathing; but they are barbs buried beneath a light façade. It was not the social criticism which attracted her readers if they even noticed it, camouflaged in the dexterous narrative. (108)

It may well be that Warner's readers did not look for her social criticism; indeed it may be precisely because they were not looking for political messages that they did not mind finding them. But in addition to finding her political messages, Warner's critics, many of whom focus on her novel *Summer Will Show*, have been perceptive about her style as part of that politics, and their discussions help to create a context within which I will go on to read for class in her less often explored works. *Summer Will Show's* Marxist and lesbian content has invited a range of political interpretations that shape my own reading for class in Warner's other writing. Elizabeth Maslen, in an insightful article that explores ways that

women writers of the twenties and thirties engaged with their political and historical moment, describes “the expanded use that Warner makes of realism as a narrative mode capable of containing the games minds can play and the impact of those games on what can be observed objectively” (200). This recognition of Warner’s imaginative use of form is part of Maslen’s argument for reading “a broader range” (198) of Warner’s writing, a call I will take up in this chapter. Maslen’s discussion of Warner is motivated in part by a disjuncture between the interpretations of two earlier critics, Janet Montefiore and Terry Castle, who discuss Warner’s use of realism and fantasy in *Summer Will Show*.

Janet Montefiore, aiming to “re-open the question of political agency” through her reading of Warner, describes a poststructuralist stalemate over the politics of realism, and discusses how Warner’s historical novel *Summer Will Show* “subverts our current notions of realism as a mode which is hopelessly complicit with the notion of bourgeois subjectivity” (198). Montefiore’s insightful feminist reading ends, unfortunately, with what she describes as an “irreconcilable” gap between her own and another important reading, Terry Castle’s “Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction” (1990).

Castle uses *Summer Will Show* as a “paradigm” of “lesbian fiction” (146), which she views as having “[b]y its very nature”

a profoundly attenuated relationship with what we think of, stereotypically, as narrative verisimilitude, plausibility, or ‘truth to life’ . . . . [L]esbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as ‘realistic’ in surface detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical, or utopian



tendency. (144-45)

Castle values the ways that *Summer Will Show* “goes beyond plausibility” to the “not-yet-real” of lesbian literary subjectivity while Montefiore describes her “own socialist-feminist interpretation” as one which, in contrast, “values the novel for the way it enables the reader to share in the transformtion [sic] of a woman’s consciousness, not only of her own erotic desires (though these are crucially important) but of the material world of political struggle” (212). Both Castle and Montefiore privilege one aspect of Warner’s writing, her lesbianism and her socialism respectively. But Warner certainly would not have felt that she had to choose between lesbian subjectivity and socialist feminism, since she herself embodied the two simultaneously.

Nor would this author force us to choose, in an either-or proposition, between the “not yet real” and “the material world.” Indeed, as I have suggested, she is a writer who blurs these categories, often within the same forms. In her nonfiction, poetry, and fiction, Warner represents situations that might be described, in Castle’s words, as not-yet-real in the historical sense (or not recognizably “real” in the objective sense) in order to reconceptualize the meaning we ascribe to the details that constitute prevailing cultural “realities”—details such as those expressed in (and by) traditional plots. I think one of her principal accomplishments, visible in her writing across forms, lies in her ability to make stories come alive for readers, through what Wendy Mulford has described as “Sylvia’s characteristic relish for the details of material life” (108). I believe that when combined with her politicized plot machinations, those material details take on more than storytelling charm. Warner’s use of material

detail is what bolsters her rewritings of, to name just a few forms and structures over the broad political range of these rewritings, the marriage plot, the adventure story, the pastoral poem, and the orphan's triumph narrative.

Our critical constructions of Warner have usually been less complex than her own writerly constructions of such matters as sexuality, politics, and especially history. Her writing reflects the recognition that history can be a tool of oppression—a matter of privileging the most culturally sanctioned version of a whole range of possible stories—or a tool of revolution—an imaginative landscape in which alternative stories, including lesbian and socialist ones, can take root for contemporary politics.

Through her manipulation of form, Warner suggests that myth is inseparably intertwined with history, and can be reshaped in the public imagination. She uses fantasy to offer liberating reinscriptions, which are both political and sexual, often simultaneously so. Barbara Brothers, in *“Summer Will Show: The Historical Novel as Social Criticism,”* reads the novel as typifying the way Warner's literary choices—of detail, character, language—serve as part of her critique of class, sex, and race politics of the 1930s, through a story set in the 1840s (264-265). Taken together with her sophisticated understanding of history, Warner's use of arguably implausible elements, sometimes deployed within “historical” writings, reveals her equally sophisticated understanding of the enduring power of certain other kinds of story.<sup>4</sup>

Warner's reworking of form may be understood as a different sort of innovation within the literary-historical context that critics have tended to see as innovative only according to the terms of canonical modernist experimentation.

But as Elizabeth Maslen has pointed out, Warner's works use a "two-tier mode" (198) to both "engage with history" (originally Montefiore's phrase) and to "write new versions of reality, with a secondary level of interpretation . . . a psychologically plausible level of fantasy interpretation woven around a Joycean epiphany" (198). In an excellent reading of *Summer Will Show*, Thomas Foster also explores Warner's combined use of modernist and Marxist forms within the text; Foster foregrounds the novel's lesbian love plot and its various other political messages while attending to its formal complexity. Foster reads Warner's technique in *Summer Will Show* as "incorporating modernist assumptions . . . [to] resist[] the totalizing tendency of Marxist historical narratives while at the same time insisting upon historical representation as a pre-condition for (re) narrativizing same-sex relationships" (532). Foster's claim that, within a Marxist historical novel, Warner is using modernist representations in her depiction of a lesbian relationship and modernist technique in her "disruptions of narrative sequence" (547) is convincing. Chris Hopkins makes a related point in an article from the same year, noting that Warner's "political parable" novel (62) *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938) may be read as "a way of bringing some of the non-realist devices of modernism back into the revolutionary fold" (61).

Given that her works so interestingly challenge our own tendencies to separate modernism from realism, to contrive pat categories of form and genre, the enduring marginality of Warner's writing in feminist literary studies is especially troubling. It seems to me that Warner is caught in something of a critical double-bind, which the criticism of *Summer Will Show* makes especially

clear. Warner's lesbian reinscription of the "love story" form is crossed with her Marxist reworking of the historical novel in ways that force us to rethink the naturalized assumptions of both cultural and literary forms. She is both a lesbian writer and a Marxist writer, both an experimentalist innovator and a traditional formalist.

Though as I will show, Warner's lesbianism, feminism, and communism mark her texts in a variety of ways, depending on the form she is reworking, critical readings of her work too often make her either a Marxist feminist (minus the lesbian sensibility) or a lesbian modernist (minus the Marxist class politics). In his article on Warner, Robert Caserio has lauded the "uncanny mix" in her literary forms, perceptively noting that "our criticism does not yet have in play the terms best to comprehend and to value Warner's achievement" (255). The complexity of Caserio's own description of that achievement, hard at work to keep various descriptive critical terms in balance, testifies to this fact: "Warner's fiction represents a development in the English novel of a Marxist-oriented but Marxist-revisionist materialist analysis of history, in tandem with a radical challenge to realist traditions of representation, with which feminist and Marxist critics alike might well want to come to terms" (254). Unfortunately, Caserio's model for reading Warner is based on the notion of "chaste or celibate pairs of . . . sisters-in-revolution" (254). Though Caserio makes several excellent points along the way, and though he places Warner within a feminist tradition of sorts, his reading of Warner as a writer who roots her politics in sexual abstinence becomes a fundamental flaw, leading him at best to miss or at worst to tame Warner's complex evocation of lesbian and other culturally explosive

partnerships. By contrast, Jane Garrity, writing about what she calls Warner's "Erotics of Dissimulation," offers a key insight about Warner's work as a whole within her exploration of Warner's place in the lesbian modernist tradition:

In terms of narrative structure, Warner's fiction, far from conventional or conservative, frequently melds social realism, fantasy, allegory, and literary allusion—always with an eye toward subversion. The cumulative effect of her individually accessible sentence is never that of transparency. To carve a place within the canon for Warner's previously marginalized texts will necessarily alter our notions of canonicity; it will involve a rethinking of not only how Warner's work might conform to the aesthetics of modernism, but how the aesthetic itself is altered by her inclusion—the inclusion of a lesbian writer. (242-43)

Though Garrity acknowledges Warner's subversiveness, it is her lesbianism, for Garrity, that becomes a somewhat essentialized disruption of our critical categories. I think it is not so much her sexuality, but rather Warner's ways of melding forms to critique the classed (and other) ideologies at work in them, that makes her subversive. Though one compelling reason for reading Warner is her works' resistance to heterosexual paradigms, and though she is part of a lesbian tradition, it is not her lesbian identity in and of itself that makes her radical. It is her political identifications, and these are put to work in ways that demand a class-conscious reading.

I think it is significant, for instance, that reading Warner's works does not challenge the general reader on the level of comprehension, as the sort of modernist innovation that has been canonized tends at first to do. Her plots

usually metamorphose into highly politicized stories and provide their substantial challenges to readerly assumptions about “sense” and “reality” gradually, at the level of plot content rather than sentence form. Though reading Warner is not, on the surface, “difficult,” it is in her works’ interweaving of apparently traditional methods and decidedly untraditional storylines that their own politically unsettling kind of difficulty emerges. She can write a seductively absorbing narrative as well as any best-selling canonical writer (as well, for instance, as Charles Dickens), but Warner uses that skill to challenge conservative ideology, much as Woolf used modernist innovation, with its differently-classed and less accessible aesthetic, to do. In reading for class, I aim to question the assumptions we continue to make, too often within feminist criticism as well as in modernist criticism as a whole, about which kinds of works are Art—in Woolf’s case, for instance, art that has the added benefit of being politically progressive—and which kinds of works are not worth the same level of attention in our readings. Though their choices are always classed, as I am arguing in this study, I also think it is worth recognizing that writers can be politically effective in diversely imaginative ways. Attentive to such matters, Elizabeth Maslen has written that Warner’s writing reveals:

considerable ingenuity in luring readers in with what had come to be expected of realism, only to surprise them with a visit to fresh territory once they are involved with the narrative.

The need to lure readers and publishers in cannot be underestimated if ideas, socialist and feminist, are to reach a wide range of novel readers.

(202)

Because Warner knew how to craft characters and scenes (and poetic speakers and images) that enact the political—via plots that seem to take little notice of their own radical political implications—she could reach readers who would not have been privy to Bloomsbury notions of the aesthetic.

One of her best-known and best-selling novels, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), is a good example of Warner's strange magic. I see this novel as a forerunner of two women's writing traditions. These include the supernaturalist feminism that emerges in the work of writers like Angela Carter and the wryly political spinster feminism we find in Barbara Pym's novels. In terms of its own literary ancestry, Warner's *Lolly Willowes* might be descended from one of Jane Austen's novels, in which a woman who represents some sort of challenge to the heterosexual economy eventually finds love and class security. But as in *Summer Will Show's* rewriting of the love story as a cross-class lesbian passion, *Lolly Willowes* makes a surprising match for its protagonist. For the first two thirds of the novel, Laura Willowes lives a spinster-aunt's life of dependent, quiet (but deliberate) failure in the marriage market. But by the end of the novel, Laura/Lolly has moved from her brother's home in London to a country cottage of her own, and quite literally become a witch who is befriended by Satan. Satan is represented here as a variation on another literary tradition, in which he appears not so much as a raging demon, but as a rather ordinary type of person. One is reminded by Warner's depiction of Satan of the way devil(s) are portrayed in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, which is perhaps one of Warner's influences here. The appearance of Satan as a character in *Lolly Willowes* is just one part of Lolly's transformation, but his presence is certainly jarring to our expectations for the novel's plot. As

Robert Caserio has written, at the novel's turning point, readers are "still reading in the light of realist plausibility" and either

assume that Lolly is losing her mind. . . . [or] we might assume that the narrative is cultivating a modernist or postmodernist suspension of certainty. But this is not the case . . . . The narrative cancels our doubts about the actual fact of this alliance [between Lolly and Satan], and it asks us not to read the Satanic episodes as merely a political parable. (263)

Like the protagonist, the reader of *Lolly Willowes* is leaping into new territory, as radical content and challenges to notions of the real transform a seemingly familiar prose mode.

Having appeared for the majority of the novel to be as ordinary as the story we are reading about her, Lolly is suddenly conscious of her imprisonment one day while shopping in the market,<sup>5</sup> and begins to act boldly on her own behalf, demanding her inheritance from her brother and moving to the town of Great Mop to explore the countryside, sleep under the stars, and become the sometime companion of Satan, who is cast here as a benevolent, gender-ambivalent, fun-loving equal. Barbara Brothers, in her discussion of *Lolly Willowes*, describes Warner perceptively as "mock[ing] both social and literary conventions when she transmutes her seemingly innocent and comically realistic bildungsroman into a satiric fantasy, flouting literary conventions by combining the two types of fiction" (195).

Warner never actually breaks the "realistic" form in *Lolly Willowes*, but seems instead just to expect us to keep pace as she ventures into what we might call, in an understatement, radically unrealistic content that undoes the



ideological assumptions readers bring to this kind of story, especially in terms of class. Indeed I read Lolly's quest for economic independence, her desire to detach herself from the expectations that shape the life of an upper-middle class spinster, as a key part of her transformation. When she goes to her brother to demand that he return her share of the family money, Lolly learns that he has invested it unwisely. Warner does not miss her chance to comment on the interconnected politics of class, gender and empire at work in this scene. Lolly's brother, Henry, explains that he has chosen to make an investment on her behalf in the "Ethiopian Development Syndicate" but "owing to this Government and all this socialistic talk the soundest investments have been badly hit." The predictability of empire, with its seemingly-sound "investments" in the "development" of colonies, is being threatened by the socialist notions of equality that are influencing the government in much the same way that Lolly's own notions of independence are threatening her brother's control over her life. Though he reassures her that the shares "will rise again the moment we have a Conservative Government" (58), Lolly's loses her temper with him as she insists upon reclaiming her money at the lower rate. The terms under which Lolly begins to remake her life, and the profound extent to which it is remade, are explicitly politicized in this scene, in which the material details Warner chooses go far toward exposing the ideologies Lolly will reject.

Critics have discussed the links between Warner's innovations in *Lolly Willowes* and the historical context in which she wrote it. Jane Marcus has explored the implications of the novel's visionary twist in her essay entitled "A Wilderness of One's Own"; Marcus argues that *Lolly Willowes*, a "female

pastoral" (157), is "the direct result of political disappointment in the power of the struggle for the vote to change anything" (140). Warner (and Rebecca West, in *Harriet Hume*), Marcus explains,

envision a wilderness of one's own, away from family control of domestic space and male control of public space. Central to the concept of female wilderness is the rejection of heterosexuality. In the dream of freedom, one's womb is one's own only in the wilderness. (136)

Lolly's decision to break free from her already tangential association with her brother's household eventually shapes her into a quite remarkable version of a woman with money and a room of her own. In this plotline, respectable middle-class heterosexual partnership is portrayed as deadly, as Jane Garrity, in an excellent reading of the novel, has pointed out. Garrity explores the lesbian subtext of *Lolly Willowes*. She convincingly argues for "Warner's interest in encoding a lesbian thematic," and sees the "double valence" (248) of Lolly's spinster-witch status as Warner's attempt to comment on

the politics and culture of early twentieth century England, when feminism and lesbianism were not only highly visible, but frequently linked in order to discredit the suffragist cause. . . . By the time that Warner was writing *Lolly Willowes* in the twenties, the visibility of the spinster—and specifically the liminality of her status—was unmistakable; her appearance in the press and the novel ensured that the spinster, with all her homosexual connotations, was a part of public discourse, subject to speculation. While the novel never specifically engages these debates, the text contains several passing references to the controversy over women's

sexual and social autonomy. (248)

In a related reading, Bruce Knoll sees Warner working in this novel “to break down the dualism between aggressiveness and passivity” in order to offer a solution “which is neither a feminine passivity nor a masculine aggressiveness,” but rather what Knoll calls “a new dialectic, of which the outcome is separatism” (344). He sees the spinster Laura’s transformation into the independent Lolly as Warner’s way of finding a balance between culture and nature. Though the large conceptual terms that structure his reading (especially “culture” and “nature”) function rather problematically and seem to go unquestioned in his article, Knoll does offer some persuasive interpretations of Warner’s specific choices. Certainly, Knoll recognizes an important part of Warner’s project when he notes that what he calls Lolly’s “separatism” is feminist, and I would add, arguably lesbian, but that separatism is also specific to a character who remakes her classed economic role as much as she does her gendered and sexual role.

In my reading, this first of Warner’s novels consistently acknowledges the ways that upper middle-class womanhood circumscribes experience—socially and sexually—and then transcends that determinism, in part through what Brothers calls “flouting literary conventions” but also by rooting her indictments in the ideological rupture of a familiar, and classed, plotline. In other words, Warner is not only deploying her surprising combination of realism and fantasy forms but also exploiting the expected continuity of plot and character to classed and gendered political effect in *Lolly Willowes*. The author’s first novel, published in 1926, *Lolly Willowes* adopts a different model of innovation in the period and breaks the plot—any known plot—and makes it decidedly new, on

Warner's own terms.

In *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* (1927), and *Opus 7* (1931), there are similar ruptures in what at first seem to be the familiar fiction narratives and poetic motifs of British literature. *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* is a novel about an Anglican clerk-turned-missionary who travels to a "backward," "primitive" island culture in Polynesia to seek converts, but comes to see his own arrogance and ignorance amid the eruption of a volcano, the loss of his faith, and the struggles that result from his falling in love with a native boy with whom he eventually sets up house. Warner's novel contains many passages that unmask the colonialist politics of narratives in which the explorer brings knowledge, violently, to the native. In emphasizing the non-sexual tenderness between Mr. Fortune and Lueli, Warner also seems to be rewriting the heterosexual politics and rapist inscriptions of colonialism. Warner describes the process through which Mr. Fortune, rather than the native he "civilizes," becomes more fully human, by self-reflexively questioning in succession the various terms of his own colonialist subjectivity.

Though after many years on the island Mr. Fortune has lost faith in the foundational ideologies that provided his former sense of self, he has still not reached a full understanding of his beloved, or of the Polynesian island of Fanua. Afraid that his recurring inclination to "perpetual interference" will ultimately kill Lueli, Mr. Fortune decides to leave the island, though Warner never names his destination:

If he stayed on, flattering himself with the belief that he had learnt his lesson, he would remember for a while no doubt; but sooner or later,

inevitably he would yield to his will again, he would begin to meddle, he would seek to destroy.

To see everything so clearly and to know that his mind was made up was almost to be released from human bondage. (239).

So it is not in *Heart of Darkness*-ish horror that Mr. Fortune leaves the island, but out of fear that he will forget what he has learned, mostly through love, about not meddling in cultures he cannot comprehend. The adventure story, the colonialist narrative, turn inside out in Warner's plot machinations; she uses apparently familiar forms to unmask imperialism's racism while also depicting what I would call a homophilic bond within the novel. Readers are as absorbed as ever an adventure story allowed, but Warner de-naturalizes racial and sexual ideologies as the plot takes readers toward quite adventurous political conclusions.

If *Lolly Willowes* rewrites Austen or Brontë, and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* rewrites Rudyard Kipling or Joseph Conrad, *Opus 7*, a long narrative poem which Warner modeled on the style of Crabbe,<sup>6</sup> gleefully perverts the ruined cottage motif of Romantic poetry, most famously Wordsworthian. Warner undoes the classed underpinnings of this poetic genre. She seems explicitly to work against the ideology embodied in such poems as Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), in which the graves of the rustic poor serve primarily as a source of poetic inspiration.

Rebecca Random, Warner's poetic protagonist, has a good deal more agency than such figures. Rebecca resents the attempts of those who pass her cottage, where flowers grow as if by magic, to make art from what they see or to

find quaint solace from the city by trying to rent her home for themselves. A spinster who grows flowers rather than food and sells them as a kind of rebellion against thriftiness in a poor village where there is little room for impractical beauty, Rebecca uses every bit of her profits to buy gin.

Of course, Rebecca's impracticality is frowned upon and she is "mocked" for having "so rich a ground so idly stocked" (7). The poetic narrator addresses her readers with a question that signals the classed expectations that the dominant culture would have for an unthrifty peasant like Rebecca: "But where, you ask, where were the vegetables?— / the dues each rustic from however clenched soil should extort—potatoes duly trenched" (9). Warner makes it clear, in a way that recalls West's journalism in such pieces as "The Personal Service Association" and "A New Woman's Movement: The Need for Riotous Living," that one of the more oppressive effects of class judgment is the denial of beautiful surroundings and material pleasures to the poor. Those who cannot afford to spend their money on anything but sustenance are expected to conform to the versions of dutifulness and thrift that are all too often offered as a kind of "training" by those who have never had to sacrifice the influences of beauty in the greater comfort of their own lives.

Having noted, and classed, the "wastefulness" of Rebecca's choice, the poet moves into a meditation on war (most likely World War I) and its different kind of shameful waste: "I knew a time when Europe feasted well: / bodies were munched in thousands, vintage blood / so blithely flowed that even the dull mud / grew greedy, and ate men" (10). This frenzy of gluttony "at last to loathing turned," the speaker explains, and "Time . . . [came] to bear away the

scraps!" Readers learn, however, that Time cannot take all the consequences of this tragedy away, since "the bill" must be paid by those "pinched and numb" survivors who afterward "faced the wet dawn, and thought of army rum" (11). Warner's mention of army rum, along with her emphasis on Rebecca's alcoholic craving for gin, are indications of the need for escape in the face of the ruin of war and the desperation of poverty.

We come to understand that the economic wartime conditions Warner portrays are marked by struggling peoples' resentments. These are the conditions Rebecca hopes have finally ended on the day when peace is declared. She thinks that perhaps she can afford to go to the pub, now that she has a reason to celebrate with the drink she has been craving but for which she has been unable to pay. Since there is, however, "[n]o reduction in the price of gin" (12), a crippled soldier offers to buy Rebecca her drinks. A few months later, he stops at her cottage and tells her that he regrets fighting for England, which seems to him "rotten as a cheese" (14), and explains his plans to leave the country. Before he leaves, he asks Rebecca if he can purchase a bunch of her flowers, and the money he gives her provides her the means for gin and some new flower seeds.

Warner makes it clear in these details that Rebecca's unthrifty, imprudent choices are thus rooted, so to speak, in the mistakes of history as her "betters" have shaped it, including the costs of war, which only add to the unabated problems of the poor. Warner slips in a couple of noteworthy references to the classed ideologies of wartime "unity" by explaining the specific effects of such ideology on Rebecca. Under these conditions, Rebecca cannot get work outside the walls of her own garden because "shapely landgirls, highbred wenches all"

(12), have taken the farm jobs. Nor can Rebecca beg, since no “patriot purse / would to a tippler open, when its terse / clarion call *The Daily Mail* displayed: / *Buckingham Palace Drinking Lemonade?*” (12). The class powers that be persist during and after the war. Only Rebecca’s creative marketing of her own flowers to those she meets at the pub can provide her with an income. When Rebecca goes to the pub and tells her story of the mysterious soldier’s visit, the power of rumor takes over, and the townswomen’s embellishments of the story create a market for Rebecca’s flowers by associating them with the soldier’s visit to the village.

Rebecca is not at all Romanticized; she is herself “no flower,” though in the early part of the poem Warner suggests that there is hope for her heroine in political terms. Her garden becomes a place in which alternatives to the socioeconomic miseries within the English countryside might be grown. Her flowers thrive by “mixing company” (6) in a “new democracy” (5); Warner continues the social-political metaphor by adding that “all at peace together grew” (7). The vision of Rebecca’s garden is thus one that, though not wholly uninvaded by the corruptions of its context, is unusual precisely in its freshness. That freshness is described in peaceful democratic terms.

The poem does not sustain this mood for long, moving instead toward a politicized deconstruction of its own early hopes. Readers hear about Rebecca’s first busy day selling flowers to all the townswomen, who have heard the rumors Rebecca herself began and who want their souvenirs of variously evoked (and humorously inaccurate) versions of the soldier’s visit to the village. At this point, the poem becomes parodically Romantic. The turn is signaled by a comical



mention of the way that consumer desire for the material evidence of certain lofty figures seems inevitable: "Shelley, rare soul!—I have his trousers here. / So every dame must have her souvenir" (20). In that he was an aristocratic radical, Shelley is an interesting choice. Warner actually blends Wordsworthian, Keatsian, and Shelleyan voices into a poetic narrative that is infused with wry humor and implicit (though also rather reductive) political critique. This part of the poem begins, "O Spring?, O virgin of all virgins, how / silent thou art! I have pursued thee now / along so many winters, sought and snuffed / through last year's grass for thee" (21). After a lengthy meditation along these familiar lines, Warner undercuts the momentum and foregrounds both the process of writerly labor which constructs such poems and the political condescension she seems to see as inevitable to Romantic poetry:

How long this winter night! / And down what leagues of darkness must I  
yet / trudge, stumble, reel, in the wrought mind's retreat; / then wake,  
remember, doubt, and with the day / that work which in the darkness  
shone survey, / and find it neither better nor much worse / than any  
other twentieth-century verse. / Oh, must I needs be disillusioned, there's  
/ no need to wait for spring! Each day declares / yesterday's currency a  
few dead leaves; / and through all the sly nets poor technique weaves /  
the wind blows on, whilst I—new nets design, / a sister-soul to my slut  
heroine, / she to her dream enslaved, and I to mine. (23-24)

Warner's comparison of Rebecca's addiction to gin with the poet's own search for effective forms and lasting art is intriguing. In this section of *Opus 7*, she seems to be resisting some of the more oppressive politics of the Romantic motif

from within Romantic terms. Here again, though in a much different genre, readers find Sylvia Townsend Warner using “the real”—in this case, rural poverty and her own writing process—together with “the fantastic”—which here includes both Rebecca’s almost magically green thumb and powers of commercial persuasion, and the Romantic construction of the rural poor. The blend is astute in both literary and political terms.

There may well be a personal commentary interwoven here, since Warner’s own lover Valentine Ackland struggled with alcoholism. Once Rebecca is able to buy as much gin as she wants, her alcoholism itself dominates “reality,” and the poem turns toward a new version of struggle even as it continues its political critique in class terms. Rebecca finally dies trying to outdrink God Himself; she vows that she will “teach this God a lesson how to drink. / Let him look down, and envy her, and slink / crest-fallen back to his eternity!” (61). In the death scene, the poetic speaker, whose alcoholism is now full-blown, speculates that “Drunk as a lord must be / the Lord of heaven and earth! He, it was he, / who in his bottomless mixed cup pell-mell / poured all things visible and invisible” (60). This image of a divine drunkard is decidedly humanized in terms that comment on political and socioeconomic conditions. God is:

Inebriate with clay, / with flowers, with fire, with the slow diamond  
squeezed / from time, with tigers, and the never-eased / genital pain, and  
the fixed Indian snows; / into whose cup the stars like bubbles rose / and  
broke; who in immortal fury trod, / alone, the winepress, and drank on, a  
God. (61)

Explicitly casting God as a hedonistic, destructive, sexually cruel looter of

diamonds and lands, Warner shows that God is at a disadvantage in comparison to Rebecca, because he is “bound in husbandry of omnipotence” (61). God, in other words, cannot “hit bottom” as alcoholics supposedly must in order to recover, nor can He escape through death. God becomes a Dangerous Man, who is out of control and trapped within the terms of his own constructed power. This God is made in the image of British imperialist economic and gender powers-that-be, and it is He who remains in his cruelty long after Rebecca has lost her fight with him one night as she raves under “the brimming, bountiful, / gin-coloured moon” (62).

Warner’s political pessimism for England is suggested in the poem’s final turns. Her description of the village’s hypocrisy after Rebecca’s death reveals the classed and gendered way Rebecca is judged even then:

The coroner summed up as you’d expect: / Drink is a failing which the state deplores. / If drink you must, then please to drink indoors. / Such was his gist. He then grew fatherly, / opined the jury would be glad of tea, / and with the air of one who’s cleared a botch / went with the doctor for a double Scotch. (62-63)

Worse even than this enduring hypocrisy is the fact that Rebecca’s home becomes a kind of unimaginative cliché of the English Cottage. Bought by a couple who call it “picturesque,” it is subject to domestication of the modern sort: “That green stuff cleared, gravel put down, some quaint / checked curtains, and a lick of orange paint, / and within-doors some mugs and warming-pans.” The couple conclude that “this is the very cottage of [their] plans” (64), and the speaker explains that those plans have made returning to the cottage

disappointing. It has changed so much that not even the memory of Rebecca or her flowers can be conjured.

*Opus 7* ends with Warner's commentary, as the thirties begins, on the irrevocably changed point of view that her own historical moment offers, and on the class ideology through which a poet could come to create Romanticized rustic countryfolk. Rebecca Random's story unmasks these politics for the poetic speaker and for Warner's readers. Once, the speaker

looked / as children on an open story-book, / and the best-painted picture  
it could show / was still Rebecca's stratagem a-blow. / Now from the  
page the picture blurs and dims, / wavers, discolours, perjures itself,  
dislimns. / The flowers are withered, even from my mind, / their petals  
loosed, their scent gone down the wind; / and she, to whom they such  
allegiance bore— / I knew her once, and know her now no more. (65-66)

So concludes Warner's poem, not with a nostalgic point of view—for as we have seen, Warner problematizes the class politics that structure some of the better-known Romantic modes—but with what we might describe as a Marxist recognition that historical developments necessitate new ways of seeing.

Condescending Romantic visions of the poor are quite literally unknowable, to echo the poem's final words, and the poet's last emphasis is on the distinction between past and present. Warner's facility with literary forms, in all their classed resonances, allows her to intervene in the history of—indeed, almost to try to stop the historical momentum of—this particular poetic genre.

In fact, the ending of *Opus 7* seems to be an example of a tendency in Warner's work as a whole. Most often, Warner breaks the plots of these fictions

without necessarily offering a solution or future prediction. The endings of *Lolly Willowes*, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, *Opus 7*, "Women as Writers," and, as we shall see, *The True Heart*, often leave open to future interpretation those political questions that they dare to raise. Lolly is left roaming freely through the countryside, while Mr. Fortune's sailing away is marked, after the last sentence of the novel, by Warner's insertion of the following sentiment: "My poor Timothy, good-bye! I do not know what will become of you" (263). In *Opus 7*, Warner gives us a bleak sense of the future of the village, with the poetic protagonist who has structured the narrative having died, and her "democratic" garden having been paved over. In "Women as Writers," the tone is much more hopeful—leaving us with the thought of a woman writer, a "Francoise Rabelais" or a "Joan Milton" who "can't wait to begin" (546) having left her household chores unattended to make her start on some literary work. But in all cases, the plots leave us anchored in the present tense. I think Warner's tendency to do no more than hint obliquely at the future outcomes of her ideas, and sometimes not even to do that, suggests that she may have been working with what we could now call, after Raymond Williams, structures of feeling.

Reading for class in Warner's various plot-breaking works, including the one I will go on to explore in greatest detail, *The True Heart* (1929), shows that this writer's search for ways to represent class and other kinds of difference fits into the description Williams offers. He writes of "a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex" (*Marxism and Literature*

131). Williams's description of the way structures of feeling emerge in cultures can be applied to Warner's own representations within her texts, and his mention of "already articulate and defined" aspects of a culture suggests a way of understanding Warner's place within early twentieth-century writing.

When comparing Warner's career to those of Woolf and West, and to many other writers' of her day, one has to note that she did not take up book reviewing or write any traditional literary criticism, at least not in the sense of explaining an aesthetic project (though as we have seen she tries to remake the literary criticism of *A Room of One's Own*). On the whole, then, Warner was not participating in the processes by which most of the writing of her day was made part of an articulated and defined tradition or counter-tradition, by being included in some version of realism or of modernism. What we find in Warner's work seems to be in "exceptionally complex" relationship to both of those articulated structures, but also its own emergent kind of literature. As Williams notes, these developments are informed by the social and by the material, but are characterized by "forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming" (133). Indeed, reading for class in Warner's political blends and literary breakings may allow us to see her innovations as structures of feeling that "appear[ ] to break away from [their] class norms, though [they] retain[ ] substantial affiliation, and the tension is at once lived and articulated in radically new semantic figures" (135). Her use of familiar plots and her attention to material detail, sometimes to specifically historical detail; her inventiveness in making political critique by attending to various kinds of difference at once; and

the elements of her work that might be described as “radically new” all make Warner a writer whose texts invite sustained attention.

### III. *The True Heart*: Warner’s Rewriting of the Deserving Orphan Narrative

In 1929, the Viking Press published Sylvia Townsend Warner’s novel *The True Heart*. *The True Heart* is set in England in the 1870s; it is the story of an orphan, Sukey Bond. In one of the very few mentions of this novel in Warner criticism, Elizabeth Maslen explains that the novel is “myth [a retelling of Cupid and Psyche, according to Warner’s 1978 preface] dressed up as historical realism . . . also reflecting the aspirations of 1929 feminism, with a woman taking her destiny into her own hands, against the odds” (199). Warner’s attention to the workings of class (and gender, and more obliquely, race) is expressed from the novel’s very first page. Sukey Bond is described in the novel’s opening scene, in which philanthropists of the upper classes attend an awards day at the orphanage, as having one principal attribute: a gift for obedience, “a knack that amounted almost to a genius” (7), as Warner writes it. Here is the novel’s opening:

It was the 27<sup>th</sup> of July, 1873, and prize-giving day at the Warburton Memorial Female Orphanage. Mr. Warburton, the son of the foundress, had come to give away the prizes. He sat under the shade of an evergreen behind a table covered with a crimson cloth, and as each girl approached, he rose and took up the prize indicated to him by Miss Pocock, the Matron. Holding it in his large, white, gentleman’s hands, he spoke of the pleasure it gave him to reward merit and to encourage an institution so

interesting to his family; then, with a slight bow, he gave the prize to the curtsying girl, and sat down again, amidst applause from the lady patronesses and the female orphans, who sat grouped around him, the lady patronesses in the shade and the female orphans in the sun.

It was extremely hot. The patronesses unbuttoned their kid gloves and fanned themselves, and as girl followed girl, Mr. Warburton's words of commendation became more and more fragmentary, and the gesture with which he handed over the prize suggested not so much bestowal as disencumbrance (3).

In the first two thirds of the section I have quoted above, Warner's description is essentially "objective"; her narrative voice surveys the scene and notes its details. At first, this is a voice that seems most interested in recording the actions and conveying the thoughts of the powerful characters. The narrative point of view notices only the curtsies and orderliness of the orphan girls, while the privileged characters are individualized by details—of their hands, their gloves. Yet the final detail offered in the first paragraph—the detail about the privileged sitting in the shade while the expected-to-be-grateful sit in the sun, is explicitly classed at the start of the second paragraph.

In the second paragraph, a shift in Warner's tone invites the reader to notice that her "objective" descriptions have all been infused with class consciousness. The information in the sentence, "It was extremely hot" is used here to underscore a subjective emphasis on class-based suffering. The orphans certainly have no claim to the shade even though the heat is severe, and it is Warner's matter-of-fact tone that both reveals class distinctions and



simultaneously emphasizes their unsurprising, if oppressive, ordinariness. As if to highlight the invisibility and predictability of the orphan girls' suffering—"girl follow[ing] girl" is all we get of their experience—Warner concentrates her description on the actions of the class-privileged characters. Having just made sure that readers understand the oppressiveness of the heat, and the greater exposure of the orphans, Warner uses narrative voice and perspective to demonstrate that it is nevertheless the experiences of the privileged that tend to remain most visible in stories like this.

The reader experiences the scene in a way that virtually ensures awareness of class oppression, because the positioning of the orphans' experience, slipped into the narrative as "naturally" as Warner's comments on the weather (indeed as inextricable from the weather), is immediately superceded by consideration of the actions of the powerful. The narrative precisely mimics the class protocols of who may be visible and who must remain invisible, as the reader is forced by the details provided (and those left out) to see particular powerful characters while not—or not yet—allowed to see the humanity of Others. In this way, Warner's technique is not unlike Virginia Woolf's modernist use of point of view in *Mrs. Dalloway*, or Rebecca West's use of a limited omniscient narrator in *The Return of the Soldier*.

In her striking opening scene, Warner prepares readers for the introduction of her heroine, Sukey Bond, who is directly addressed by Mr. Warburton in an "unexpectedly conversational" (5) moment during the ceremony after coming up to collect her fifth prize of the day. Readers learn that during this momentary break in the perfunctory formality, Mr. Warburton thinks

Sukey an “[o]dd little crow,” “[a]ll eyes and bones” (5). He has singled her out by asking aloud whether he has seen her before. Continuing her embedded commentary on the classed (and gendered) gaze, Warner implies that Sukey is expected to remember what Mr. Warburton has and has not seen of her life; presumably she will remember the honor of his gaze, while he will surely forget any momentary notice she attracts. But the gaze of the powerful, of which the powerless are expected to be mindful, is momentarily reversed in this scene, which sets readers up for the class transgressions of Warner’s heroine. Sukey seems to this man “all eyes and bones”; she embodies a composite of his own fears about the seemingly obedient poor. “All eyes,” Sukey returns the classed gaze, and so becomes marginally more human to Mr. Warburton. The description of her as “all eyes” also suggests an unusual ability to see, and perhaps to see through, injustices like those occurring on the awards day, despite the attempts to reinforce her docility by rewarding it. Sukey’s “bones,” made visible by poor nutrition and domestic labor, reflect the poverty that his “charitable” gaze looks past.

In this opening scene of *The True Heart*, Sukey’s orientalized name, like Elizabeth Dalloway’s “exotic” looks in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, or West’s Monkey Island landscape in *The Return of the Soldier*, signals that for Warner too, the ideology that creates the racialized Other is virtually inseparable from the ideology that creates the classed Other. Within the British context especially, what Edward Said has called the empire’s orientalism here bears close relationship to the class system’s functioning within England itself. Mr. Warburton mistakenly thinks, in his moment of trying to place Sukey, that her

mother was “a French ballet-dancer” (5), but Warner explains on the next page that “Mr. Warburton was out in his pedigree, for Mrs. Bond was a laundress and lived in Notting Dale” (6-7). The unrecognizable Other to Mr. Warburton in class as well as national terms, Sukey actually has English roots, a fact emphasized by Warner as if to suggest that the sense of foreignness among classes *within* England functions as a kind of upper-class blindness. Warburton’s tendency to exoticize Sukey’s “pedigree” (and to make her mother, a domestic worker, a washerwoman, into a foreign artist, a ballet dancer) is an attempt to distance himself from any real obligation to acknowledge her as a fellow citizen.

Mr. Warburton soon “resume[s] the god” and offers some pieties about Sukey eventually becoming “a useful member of society” (5)—like him, presumably. Again the irony of his comment is hard to miss—while his mind has been wandering into speculations about his upcoming hunting excursion, the orphans have been collecting prizes which reward them for their industrious mastery of skills that are indeed useful to society. After quoting his clichés of pseudo-encouragement, the narrative shifts into a quite different mode in which the invisible characters now come into view:

Every feeling orphan felt for Sukey Bond, so to be hauled back again and preached at, and to have to perform her curtsey twice over. . . . But Sukey was too much wrought up to a sense of destiny to be embarrassed, and as she carried back the prize for good conduct and laid it down beside the dress-length of brown calico and the ivory thimble, her movements were slow and precise, and her face wore a preoccupied look. A feeling of solemnity isolated her from her surroundings, and a sense of unknown

responsibilities weighted her steps with dignity . . . tomorrow she was going out to service. (5-6)

Now, and for the rest of the novel, it is Sukey, the working-class orphan, whose point of view and experiences, are foregrounded. She will travel to a farm on the Essex marshes where her “sense of destiny” will lead her to life-changing experiences. Warner is again subtly critical of the classist conditions of Sukey’s world in describing what Sukey’s new role in Essex will be. The sheer length of the list of expectations, and their loftiness in comparison to the wages she will earn, reveals the injustice of Sukey’s position:

Her wages were to be ten pounds a year, and nothing more was required of her than honesty, industry, cleanliness, sobriety, obedience, punctuality, modesty, Church-of-England principles, good health and a general knowledge of housework, dairywork, washing, mending and plain cooking. (6)

Warner’s sharp juxtapositions and crafting of language in this apparently innocuous description once again signal her attention to class exploitation. The ironic “nothing more was required of her” sets a biting tone.

Sukey herself does not yet know better than to idolize Mrs. Seaborn, the lady who has arranged her service position. Warner informs readers, in another acknowledgment of the power of the gaze, that at the awards ceremony Sukey will not “lift her eyes and scan these ladies in the face” to determine “which of the silken skirts [is] Mrs. Seaborn’s” (6). The reader is clearly invited to notice the tyranny of the privileged here and a few pages on, when the narrator mentions that Sukey would be willing to work unpaid for Mrs. Seaborn just to be

in her elegant presence, though Sukey does not dare to hope for such a chance (9-10).

As Sukey settles into her life at the Noman household on the marshes of Essex, significantly in a village called New Easter, Warner makes it clear that this place will become a scene of renewal and transformation. Images of old and new, of wildness and taming, alternate in the narrative. Sukey is struck by the notion that she works on land reclaimed from the ocean, “where once the fishes swam,” (21) and “takes the sea’s part” (20) as she contemplates the conquest of the sea by farmers who have pushed it back from the marshes. In this land-seascape, Sukey lives in a literal fog, her existence “insubstantial and dream-like” (20). Curious about the sea, exhilarated by its freshness and power but also fearful of the way it makes her feel, Sukey is described as “between two worlds” (24). She herself is much like the topography of the area in which she lives and works. She lives as though she has no past memories, and her consciousness of living on an island, “exposed to a special unprotectedness” (19), is consistently mentioned in the narrative.

In Warner’s descriptions, the Essex marshes evoke the Garden of Eden; Sukey even sees a snake during her first attempt to walk out to the sea. In a reversal of Eve’s conscious defiance, Sukey becomes “so intent upon not setting foot on a snake that she forg[e]t[s] that she [i]s in search of the sea, until she lo[ses] her footing completely” (24) and looks up only to glimpse the sea. Like Eve, Sukey experiences a “fall,” lower case *f*, but she does not consciously choose knowledge of the sea so much as stumble in its direction. She never reaches the edge of the ocean. Sukey feels at first that she can “spread sail and go laughing

and fearless over that expanse of sapphire, sparkling and distantly resounding” (24), but soon finds that she sinks into the mud and must “own herself beaten: she could come no nearer to the sea, and for all the way she had come . . . it looked as far away as ever, as joyous and as inaccessible” (24). At first believing that the sea itself would free her, Sukey actually finds that being in the saltings is preferable. Sukey discovers that being in between sea and land, “in a secret place between two worlds” (25), is the most exciting experience of her life, and she comes alive physically in the scene:

[P]utting her hand to her face to wipe off the sweat, she discovered that she smelled of this ambiguous territory—a smell of salt, of rich mud, of the bitter aromatic breath of the wild southernwood. She plunged her hands into a bush and snuffed into the palms. It was so exciting to discover herself thus perfumed—she, who till this day had never smelled of anything but yellow soap—that she suddenly found her teeth biting into her flesh, and that was a pleasure too, the bites were so small and even. (25)

Sukey, who has experienced only duty thus far in her life, begins to experience pleasure here. Warner, as she has done in works like *Lolly Willowes* and *Opus 7*, links her heroine’s emerging sense of power to a natural landscape.

Newly awake to her own physicality, Sukey determines that she will return to this place whenever she has a free day. She wonders, ““Why didn’t I come before? Why didn’t anyone tell me? But now I have found it, and I would rather that I found it for myself.”” In this scene, Warner dramatizes the power, for Sukey, of the “ambiguous territory” between the “sapphire” of the sea and

the restrained diligence of the marsh farmlands. Sukey is tempted; she gets close enough to the sea to experience its sensory richness, but the self-mutilation of her biting suggests that there is a danger in even this hint of satiation.

I read Sukey's biting of her own flesh on the in-between saltings as a metaphorical representation of the psychological consequences of her longing for a world of upper-class aesthetic beauty and security, metaphorically evoked in the "sapphire" of the distant sea. Never able to fully enjoy the sea's splendor, Sukey must be content to be intoxicated by her nearness to it, by its evidence on her own flesh. To experience even a little of that splendid world without first being conscious of her own human worth means that Sukey is in danger of losing herself. She acts out the potential harm involved in the process of changing one's class identification. I think readers are meant to be relieved that Sukey gives up on this self-destructive quest. "[S]trange to say," Warner's narrative explains, though Sukey leaves thinking that she will return whenever her work schedule allows, she never goes back to the sea. She comes to feel that she "had run some terrible risk by going there, and that when she stood on the saltings she had been made afraid" (25). This unnamed risk, I am arguing, is the risk of identifying with her class oppressor, Mrs. Seaborn, whose name (and out-of-reach social position) rather obviously invites a comparison with the glittering and unreachable sea.

Significantly, the very next sentence sets up a recollection of the orphanage awards ceremony: "The hot weather continued" (25). Sukey, in a scene that evokes Biblical descriptions of Eve covering herself, must make a new summer dress from the calico she won on prize day. Transported back by

touching the material, Sukey remembers the source of that gift: she realizes rather suddenly that “she had forgotten Mrs. Seaborn” (27). While Eve covers herself from shame-in-knowledge, Sukey’s shame comes from consciousness of what she has *forgotten*, in what we might call shame-in-forgetting. In a moment that recalls her orphan status, Sukey is described as at first “overcome with shame for her inconstancy and ingratitude—for had she not vowed everlasting worship to that most beautiful, most worshipful of ladies?” (27). But the shame, like the fear of being discovered insufficiently grateful, is short-lived.

Sukey’s “forgetfulness” is ultimately valorized by Warner. Like her experience on the saltings—her receding desire for what she thought she had to have and her turning away from the sea that she had been taught to fear and admire—Sukey’s forgetting to be in awe of Mrs. Seaborn is actually a signal of her eventual liberation from class servitude. Forgetting is reclaimed in Warner’s narrative as a positive action in Sukey’s un-learning of her “proper place” as a social being. Though initially she responds with a familiar sense of shame, we find that Sukey

had to admit the probability that she would forget [Mrs. Seaborn] again, for now all memories of her former life were disused, and her past thoughts were strange to her, little more than the thoughts of some girl read of in a story. Perhaps it was through living upon an island. (27)

Warner’s narrative gesture toward “the thoughts of some girl read of in a story” suggests the author’s quite deliberate rewriting of the plot of the deserving Victorian orphan. The events of Sukey’s prior life are not cast not as the typical sequence of narrative steps by which the Victorian heroine proves deserving of



access to class privilege—as in the familiar plots of Austen, Brontë, or Dickens. Instead, those events become the artificially constructed story of some utterly implausible character.

Sukey does live on an island landscape in Exeter, but of course all who live in England do too. Warner's use of the island-within-the-island allows her to comment obliquely on more than just the Victorian orphan plot. This seemingly throw-away line also undermines the colonialist narratives of island primitivism—primitive islands are those Britain takes, though Britain herself is civilized—that Warner critiques in *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, in which the colonialist impulse to be isolated from history, even from one's own memory, is exposed. If an island existence tends to make one forgetful, then the workers of England must begin to forget the literary and political narratives that point to their proper place; they must create new stories (like *The True Heart*) that reveal the workings of class power while imaginatively exploding the class structure. Warner breaks these plots, and makes of their pieces a new kind of marriage novel with remarkable class implications.

Originally mistaken by Sukey for one of her employer's sons, Eric is described in the narrative as inhabiting an in-between space of his own. Sukey works for a farmer named Mr. Noman. In/on No-man's land, Eric comes and goes as he pleases, and is expected only to milk the cows, a task for which he has a particular ability. Described along with Sukey's affection for the cows on the farm, Eric's "affinity" for animals goes so far as to position him as

belonging to some intermediate race between human beings and animals.

Intercoursing with both, he was distinct from either, going his way silent

and untrammelled. . . . He was like a pet lamb, grown too large for the house, whom the household had forgotten to put out of doors." (32)

Sukey and Eric, each liminal in their various ways, begin to seem a "natural" couple.

In an interesting continuation of the Edenic imagery, Eric first connects with Sukey, who has been admiring him in silence, by bringing her apples from the orchard to which he will lead her. But it is *he* who encourages *her*: "'Come with me and get some more'" (33). On their way toward the landscape that traditionally signals the female roots of original sin, Eric effortlessly leaps over a drain "that serpentine[s] hither and thither" (34), and they arrive into a landscape marked by both ruin and renewal. The orchard, accessible through thorn trees, seems to Sukey "a peaceful place in which to play at keeping house"; though at first intimidated by the ruins of the house and by the thorns, Sukey now "wonder[s] at her fears" (36) and stops to savor her opportunity to look at Eric. She recognizes her human kinship with him, and in her appreciation of his physical beauty, Sukey begins to see in a new way:

For the first time in her life, she apprehended the beauty of the human make: the beauty, not of fine eyes or a white hand, but of each hair distinct and wonderful, of the delicate varied grain of the skin. Thus admiring him, she no longer despised herself, and seeing her hands at their work, *she forgot* to think of them as red and coarsened with labour, observing only how deft they were in movement, how fit in their proportions. (37, emphasis added)

Sukey's forgetting of her proper class place is proceeding along very nicely,

although her ignorance of sexual and reproductive facts leads her to fear that she will have a child because she has been kissing Eric on their frequent visits to the orchard. When he suggests that they marry, she is relieved, but his utter impracticality makes their participation in an actual wedding seem hopeless.

Sukey's transformation culminates in a scene that complicates the scripts of class and gender, which Warner is still fairly subtly reworking. Called upon to kill a cockerel for another couples' engagement feast—Reuben Noman and Prudence, the overbearing servant Sukey has replaced, are to be married—Sukey finds that she cannot do it. First she despises the bird for its weakness and stupidity, then determines that to kill it would be cruel; she tries to get it to escape, while the rain makes the yard seem as if it exists "at the bottom of the sea" (60). Sukey's developing attitude toward the bird parallels her own classed view of herself, and Eric's arrival adds the complication of gender roles to the scene. When Eric finds her, he is confused by her urgency. Sukey feels that she is losing her connection to him because of his elusiveness and aloofness—she thinks, "I cannot bear to be left alone with my love for you any longer. Show yourself, be real to me, let me trust you, come alive and take this love that I cannot give to you properly unless you open yourself to it and take it in!" (62). In these descriptions, Sukey seems rather like one of Austen's heroines who hopes to be able to trust the upper-class male suitor, who might choose to embarrass her and her family with rejection. But instead of saying what she feels, Sukey adopts the domineering tone she has heard Prudence take with her fiancé Reuben, and challenges Eric to do the killing for her. It is in the sequence that follows that the cockerel becomes what I have interpreted as a

representation of Sukey's own class subjectivity.

Eric's gentleness cannot comprehend killing a defenseless and pathetic bird, and Sukey understands suddenly that it is Eric's absolute compassion which defines him, and which attracts her love. When Sukey finally sees the cockerel as a living being, her struggle is over:

'O my dear,' she said, 'forgive me! Poor Eric, of course you couldn't kill it!'

And taking the cockerel from his arms she looked at it through tears, and said: 'Poor bird!'

For though it had pecked her time and again, and though it had been the cause of all this turmoil, and though arbitrary death was the end of all cockerels, she was grieved for it and felt that it was a shame that it must be killed for Prudence's vindictive eating. At any rate, she thought, you shan't suffer more than you need. And, taking up the chopper, she aimed, and struck. (64)

Eric falls to the ground in a fit, moaning and clutching at Sukey's skirt as if himself attacked. Frantic, Sukey screeches for help, and in the subsequent confusion she vaguely recognizes that she has killed more than just the cockerel.

Warner has Eric mutely act out the awareness that Sukey has killed her former self—the ignorant, obedient, sacrificial self whose humanity she acknowledges, through her recognition of the bird, right before she puts it out of its misery. But the traumatic effect on Eric, to whom she can now bond with trust, completely distracts Sukey in dramatically gendered terms: "She was sure he was dead and she meant to die too. . . . She would tell them that they could

bury her too" (65). Though Sukey mistakes it for a death, this is the scene in which she is reborn in the aptly-named New Easter.

In the dialogue that follows this scene, Sukey's gendered reaction to Eric's pain—her feminine sympathy—is mediated by her own growing class-consciousness. For she learns not only that her beloved is considered mentally slow, but that he is the son of upper-class parents. Sukey hears from Prudence and Mr. Noman that Eric is actually "[y]oung Mr. Seaborn," "not in his right mind" and kept at New Easter by his mother, the very same Mrs. Seaborn. Warner's rewriting of the familiar Victorian surprise-family-connection plot reveals not the hidden generosity of long-lost relatives, but the cruelty of those Sukey once found most respectable. Cast off by his mother, Eric is embraced all the more fully by Sukey, who declares, in Warner's hilarious rewriting of the Victorian novel's emphasis on the transcendent, redemptive power of love across class lines, "I don't care if he is an idiot. I love him" (68).

In Warner's formulation, the physically-maimed upper-class male (one thinks especially of Brontë's Rochester in *Jane Eyre*) is a mentally-impaired hero. He is inferior, Warner implies, within the terms of his own class, because of his inability to be cruel to fellow creatures or to live out any of the expectations that dictate the life of a country gentleman. Eric is quite literally a gentle man, and it is precisely his gentleness that makes him a good match for the still-naïve Sukey. She wants him not for the security he represents to her, but because she knows that like her, he would be scorned in the class and gender system of marriage from which they are both exiled. When, in the aftermath of Eric's breakdown, from the window of her locked room, Sukey sees Mrs. Seaborn coming to collect

Eric, Sukey begins to fantasize about her life with him. Though her desire to believe in the goodness of his mother makes her fantasies of living with Eric in a cottage provided by Mrs. Seaborn seem silly to the reader, Sukey's new awareness of her class identity, and the way that her love for Eric has become part of her self-assurance, is evident:

I don't look to be made a lady of, thought Sukey, for that I could never be. I am Sukey Bond, and must stay what I am. Even if I had been to church and come out Sukey Seaborn, that wouldn't alter me, it would only be a new name in the register. But Eric is not quite a gentleman, he would never do to lead a gentleman's life. Mr. Noman said that Mrs. Seaborn sent him here because he pined in the rectory. Perhaps it is even as well that I am not a lady. For since my poor dear is an idiot, he might not find a lady to marry him, and even if he did, she might scorn him. (72)

Sukey finally begins to know who she is, and despite her lingering confusion about Mrs. Seaborn's goodness, begins also to see that being "a lady" involves having to scorn those perceived as lesser than oneself.

Convinced of her right to pursue Eric, Sukey breaks the windowpane in her passion for waving good-bye to him as his mother takes him away from New Easter. Sukey vows that she and Eric will be united soon. The breaking of the glass pane is explicitly detailed (75) as marking a new subjectivity for Sukey, who is now active in shaping her own future rather than passively submissive to events. She gives her notice, walks from New Easter to the Seaborns' house in Southend, and asks to see Mrs. Seaborn, who is vicious in the face of Sukey's declaration of the love she and Eric share, even striking Sukey when she, naively

mistaken about the consequences of kissing, claims to be pregnant.

In emphasizing her protagonist's naivete, Warner is clearly making Sukey's life a fictionalized exception to the experiences of most girls of her class and historical period. When Sukey is briefly taken in by the Seaborn's servants at the back door, their prying questions and gloating manner make her desperate to escape, despite her fleeting sense of their valuably superior sexual knowledge. The servant Mrs. Rew asks questions that discern Sukey's virginity, and Mrs. Seaborn, who has overheard the conversation, smiles in smug relief as a mortified Sukey runs out of the house. Though relieved of her fears about pregnancy, Sukey is more conscious than ever of being alone in the world, and Warner's versions of the Victorian novel's cast-off wanderer sequences ensue.

In her search for immediate food and shelter, and then for work to sustain her needs, Sukey has the "luck" typical of the Victorian orphan figure. First, she meets a kindly vagabond who feeds her and finds her a place to sleep; next, a generous lady calls her from the street into a comfortable house (one of ill repute, though Sukey never realizes it) for a cup of tea and a night's sleep; finally, her new employers take her on at their farm without the benefit of references. Interwoven with these familiar aspects of the Victorian novel are narrative destabilizations of their very familiarity. These destabilizations come through Sukey's point of view in comments which reveal her growing sense of self-worth and control. Wandering the streets of a town called Shoeburyness, Sukey envisions various solutions to her own narrative which are not unlike some of Warner's own fantastical literary "solutions" to the ideologies that structure the plots she is breaking. Sukey is described as believing in the likelihood of

precisely what is least “believable”:

Coming along the road she had fancied with decision how she would read in a window a card stating that a useful girl was required to apply immediately, or perhaps, even more romantically, assist a comfortable widow to rescue her cat from a terrier, an adventure which would naturally be followed by a conversation in which the widow would explain that the cat had got loose because there was no maid-servant . . . the cat might well be a monkey [if the widow’s husband had been a sailor]. Yes, a monkey would make it all much more probable, for, being of a roving disposition and also sly, it would be more likely than a cat to slip out and hazard itself among terriers.

But Shoeburyness proved barren of monkeys, destitute of comfortable widows (or if there were any, they were all keeping comfortably indoors) and Sukey walked up and down keeping her eyes open in vain. (120)

Sukey begins to read notices in the town windows.

She read of things lost: a pair of galoshes . . . a spaniel answering to the name of Shock. And coming to the police station she read of things found: not Shock, alas!—that would be too much like a story—but an old donkey, a roll of wire netting . . . But nowhere did she come upon a notice inquiring for a willing young girl . . . No, that would have been too much like a story also. (121)

Warner undermines the suspension of disbelief essential to the Victorian novel’s plausibility by suggesting, via her protagonist, that the unlikely story—not coincidentally, the same story that obscures class oppression—tempts us most.



The narrative plays with different notions of the possible. The stories Sukey knows are all infused with ideologies that set her up for economic failure and feminine naivete. Warner suggests that Sukey must find a way to rewrite her own story.

Readers might expect, from their other experiences with the author's reworkings of plot and of genre, to cheer for this kind of resolution, but Warner first makes sure we avoid complicity with this particular genre's suspect politics. She signals that the difficulties of Sukey's situation will be relieved only by a more liberatory kind of narrative "luck" that does not work to mystify the orphan character's classed reliance on it. Readers may also begin here to glimpse Sukey's evolving recognition, parallel perhaps to our own, of the classed story that is most often told about people in her class and of her gender. Sukey is recognizably a Victorian heroine through the details of this narrative, but she becomes a decidedly atypical vehicle for Warner's own beliefs about "reality" and "plausibility."

Not that Warner is above the Victorian novelist's dependence on coincidence. During Sukey's wanderings, she happens into a church where the Reverend Seaborn, Eric's father, is preaching. The narrative detours briefly and adopts Reverend Seaborn's point of view, offering insights into his struggles to cope with gossip about his wife's disgraceful rejection of an inconvenient son. Seaborn is restoring a church, dreading being on public display at its gala unveiling, and ends up dying just as it is completed. His death is announced in a newspaper being read by the Mullein family, with whom Sukey has found work.

*In The True Heart*, Warner layers Victorian fictional techniques with non-

linear, rather modernist uses of time, and with convergent points of view. Sukey is working at the Mullein's farm--which Warner names "Halfacres" in a signal that our heroine's journey is only partially completed--when she hears of Reverend Seaborn's death. Still intent on rescuing Eric once she has earned enough money, Sukey imagines ways of endearing herself to his mother, including planting flowers at Reverend Seaborn's grave marked with a label reading "*From poor Sukey*" (160). But Sukey is starting to see the limitations of that self-denigrating plot:

By day Mrs. Seaborn's heart looked less tractable, and the following night Sukey changed the ending. It was now Eric who came to the grave . . . .

One imagination followed another, and they served as a sort of comfort, though none of them seemed really likely to lead to much. But she was loath to admit that nothing could be done with Mr. Seaborn; it seemed wasteful that he should die and she make nothing of it. (160)

Sukey's emerging power to imagine and reimagine the fulfillment of her love for Eric mirrors Warner's own molding of the narrative. The author suggests, through Sukey, that she and her protagonist will indeed make something new of the imaginative elements of the Victorian orphan narrative. Sukey will begin to determine the direction of her own story as her sense of class shame erodes.

When Prudence, pursuing a flirtation with Mr. Mullein that began when he went to New Easter to retrieve Sukey's belongings, comes to visit Halfacres, Sukey hears a story that spurs her on to her most elaborate ambition yet. Prudence was in attendance at the unveiling of the restored church that had been Reverend Seaborn's last project, and tells Sukey and the Mulleins of how Mrs.

Seaborn, the talk of the town, was publicly snubbed by royalty—coldly sneered at by a Princess who came for the celebration—at the event. Sukey, for some time now quite taken with an engraving of the Mulleins called “The True Secret of England’s Greatness,” has a vision, inspired by this engraving, in which the elements of her story finally cohere into a somewhat outlandish plan.

After this story of Mrs. Seaborn’s disgrace is revealed, Sukey looks at the engraving, which has always drawn her curiosity, with a new level of passion. The engraving is the worst propaganda of racist Empire: an image of the Queen on her throne above “grouped statesmen, courtiers, field-m Marshals, bishops, pages and ladies-in-waiting” (163) handing a Bible to a prostrate “Negro, a heathen obviously, but how different from those other heathen, for with her gloved hand she was extending to him the gift of a Bible” (163). On the spot, “looki[ng] like someone who beh[e]ld[] an extremely exciting, extremely flattering vision” (176), Sukey develops her own plan to go to court. She has a vision of herself in the place of the Negro, “kneeling at the foot of the throne” to receive her own Bible from the Queen (176).

Sukey thinks, in another mistaken attempt to find a story that will help her imagine a fulfilling life with Eric, that the “civilizing” power of a Bible from the Queen can work magic for those who, like her and the Negro depicted in the engraving, must be believed to be both less than fully human and “civilizable” if they are to survive within the ideologies of class and empire. The alarming depiction of Sukey’s apparent willingness to subscribe to the oppressive ideologies of empire, even to be enraptured by her own self-denigration, is explained only briefly, as motivated by her love for Eric: “In her determination

Eric was already free, bartered for a Bible, ransomed by her slyness and by the open-handed gesture of England's Queen" (179). This passage is immediately followed by a whole series of plot twists which eventually eliminate the Mulleins from further serious consideration; Mr. Mullein is gored by his bull, and Mrs. Mullein joyfully plans a new life in America. As these events unfold, Sukey wrestles with her sense of duty to the Mulleins and the distinguishing feature of her obedience slips away.

Warner is gradually resolving the details of a complex Victorian plot in order to remake her heroine's political consciousness of her condition. Though Sukey once believed the hymns she had been taught at the charity orphanage were beautiful and poetic, when Mrs. Mullein signs an Easter hymn, Sukey "turn[s] over, bit[es] her pillow, and sh[akes] with hysterical laughter" (187). She bakes special cakes for Easter with images of rebirth on top only to see them as "a mockery. Christ rising, the ducklings breaking from their shells . . . all were escaping, had escaped; she stayed in prison and designed cakes which would be eaten but never admired" (187). When Mrs. Mullein, laid up in her bed, asks Sukey to answer the door for "gentry calling" (188), Sukey says defiantly, "under her breath" (188), "'As if they couldn't knock for themselves" (188). She soon leaves the Mulleins behind, catching a wagon for London, where she sits in Covent Garden trying to plan her visit to Buckingham Palace.

In the pages that follow, the Victorian novel's coincidence sequences take over, mixed with Warner's own blend of the fantastic and the political. With just as little fuss as Lolly Willowes meets Satan one evening, Sukey sees a blue dog in Covent Garden. The dog belongs to a gentleman; the gentleman is briefly

glimpsed, then disappears, only to reappear with a cup of tea for Sukey. Lord Constantine, recovering from slumming in Covent Garden the night before, is stereotypically eccentric, impractical, and sensitive to the poignancy of a pure story (and the need for a cup of tea). When Sukey asks him for directions to Buckingham, he races home to ask his sister, an equally “aristocratically unworldly” (217) lady-in-waiting, to get Sukey an audience with the Queen, and returns to retrieve Sukey.

Despite the fact that Sukey is moved into position in the storyline like a pawn, it is more and more her own ideal narrative which is being “implausibly” fulfilled. Her new awareness of class politics makes her story more and more one of shrewdly successful strategy, rather than deserving luck. Lord Constantine and Lady Emily are described as “no match” for Sukey, who knows that the exact details of her plan must be kept quiet if she is to avoid being thrust back into her proper place. Even as her narrative becomes more outlandish, her plan to win Eric more bizarre, Sukey is described as more conscious than ever of her culture’s power system. She knows “only too well that people have strong views on such matters as hers: they disapprove” (219); she also begins to wonder about the real source of her inspired plan—whether it came from “a good angel,” “Love whose strong wings will stoop to any cunning” (218), or whether the plan is just “the day-dream of a silly girl” (220). Warner comments specifically here on the power of belief systems, both as they shape Sukey and others within the text and as they speak to her readers’ experiences reading *The True Heart*:

These [fears of others’ powers] were open terrors. She had not come so far without looking them in the face. They were, when all was said and done,

only the disbelief of others, the common obstacle, the common enmity; and common discretion should be able to armour her against them. But suppose that she herself should begin to disbelieve? It was not enough to ward off the criticisms of others. She must keep her own at bay, lest in some unguarded moment she should find herself examining her own heart with the unbelief of a stranger. Then all would be lost. (220)

For the first time in the novel, Sukey has a self-conscious understanding of how faith in herself, in her right to pursue Eric even through a series of events which becomes more and more exaggerated, is the foundation on which the fulfillment of her hopes is built. Similarly, Warner suggests that readers who worry about the new level of implausibility she is stretching toward in this version of the “Victorian” novel need only suspend their own ideological assumptions about what can happen in such stories if they want to complete the journey demanded by this fiction. For Sukey and for Warner’s readers, an ability to believe in a new version of the story, despite its “implausibility” within dominant ideologies, is what makes possible the kind of literary-political rupture that *The True Heart* enacts.

Warner foregrounds her protagonist’s new sense of authority even among gentry. Sukey learns to use the beliefs and behaviors of her “betters” to her own advantage and protection, even in her audience with the Queen, once she gets past an initial feeling of “profound awe” (228). Sukey tells the Queen that Mrs. Seaborn, whom the Queen correctly presumes is mad, will be comforted against her conviction that she is offensive to royalty only by this magisterial gesture. In the scene between Sukey and the Queen, Sukey compares Mrs. Seaborn to the

“poor savage” (230) of “The True Secret of England’s Greatness”—in need of the Queen’s redemptive graces. Sukey will not take the prostrate role, for it is not she, any more than the Negro depicted in the engraving, who needs to be civilized. Rather, Mrs. Seaborn, who has literally been driven mad by her hyper-awareness of class distinctions, is the one who needs civilizing. It is not that Sukey has accepted the terms of the power structure—her unshakable belief in her right to Eric impels the entire narrative, after all—but that she has learned to read the signs of power. Recognizing that Mrs. Seaborn sees Eric as either an asset or liability to her honor, and that social jockeying and religious hypocrisy go hand in hand, Sukey adopts the terms of Mrs. Seaborn’s system and tries to shape a plan that fits, even exceeds, all its terms.

Just as Warner decodes the literary forms of English tradition to reveal their hierarchies, Sukey becomes a decoding reader of the politics of the engraving, which we ought to remember is called the “True Secret of England’s Greatness.” Sukey, recognizing the lies implicit in the true secrets of class, empire, and gender, uses those ideologies as a means to the end she seeks. In the process, Sukey herself is unencumbered from her pious observation, from the bottom, of the rules of England’s social, religious, and empire systems.

Sukey does receive her Bible for Mrs. Seaborn from the Queen, and Warner’s narrative commentary immediately problematizes this “success”: “She had got it at last; as surely as though she were a heathen it was hers” (233). Warner embeds, in the moment of Sukey’s “implausible” triumph, the notion that Sukey has both broken the rules of culture and somehow transgressed against her own principles. The heathen image cuts both ways. Though she

hasn't technically deceived the Queen about her intentions, Sukey feels disloyal, and the reader realizes that Sukey cannot participate in the system that oppresses her without oppressively putting someone else into the role of the deserving savage. Sukey, though she has skillfully used to her own ends the "civilizing" influences that would put her in the supplicant's posture, and tried instead to put Mrs. Seaborn in that place, feels that her love for Eric has driven her to deceitfulness, feels that though the Bible is her "dream embodied" (233), it has been falsely earned. Sukey's growing doubt about the very system she has used in her plan to win Eric is significant; even as she pursues her dream with authorization from the very top of British culture, Sukey begins to see that access to the kind of power structure she saw depicted in the engraving comes with a price of guilt and complicity.

Warner comments in these scenes on the ideological instability of the Victorian triumph narrative, implicitly questioning the consequences, for characters like Sukey, of being enfolded into upper-class ways. Though the deserving Victorian heroine never asked whether she ought to question the benefits of becoming gentry through marriage, Warner wants readers to see Sukey's disillusionment and confusion. Warner questions the political consequences of the Victorian novel's plot of class mobility, and deconstructs the idea of socioeconomic "success" when that success does not fundamentally alter the metanarratives of class structure.

Sukey leaves Lord Constantine and Lady Emily to go to Eric. When she tells Lord Constantine that the Bible is for her mother-in-law to be, Sukey also expresses her appreciation to him, and wishes she had some gift of thanks. He



says, in his whimsical way, that when she is married and keeps a hive of bees, she can send him some honey. Sukey, encouraged by his belief in the narrative she hopes will prove true, feels that his words are “like some gayer kind of *whom God hath joined together*, the words as good as wedded her” (236). Through Sukey’s interaction with Constantine, which gives her hopes a specifically imaginable form, Warner signals the power of our belief in narratives that authorize social change.

Sukey takes her train and goes off to the village where Mrs. Seaborn and Eric are staying, a village where Mr. Warburton has an estate. Mr. Warburton is recalled in all his self-serving meanness. Warner’s narrator explains that Mr. Warburton has used his class power to dictate the location of a supposedly equalizing technology, the train, in the country landscape. Thanks to him, the train station is surrounded by buffer fields, through which those who cannot afford a car must walk. Mr. Warburton, when the train came to town, felt that “the damned branch line could know its place; it would do the villagers no harm to walk; and as for the parson, he would give the fellow a lift occasionally—for in these disestablishing days one must stand by the cloth” (237-38).

One of these fields is the scene of Sukey and Eric’s reuniting; Warner’s idyllic description of their highly coincidental meeting provides the final undoing of Sukey’s belief in the Queen’s Bible as symbolizing a power she wants to wield. Sukey, reading of love in the Bible, falls asleep in the field and is discovered by Eric; they hide from his mother, who seems more mad in this scene than ever. Mrs. Seaborn picks up the Bible, reading it backwards, and then throws it down and walks on in her anguish. The last we see of this, the “True

Secret of England's Greatness," a spider is crawling across Deuteronomy, and so what seemed to Sukey like a source of power is discarded in a field. Here we might recall Warner's classed indictments of the way the Church-of-England principles the orphanage had so thoroughly instilled in Sukey functioned to keep her in her place. But now, the structures of class power are breaking down within the narrative. Sukey cannot benefit from a moralized blessing by her "betters," with their pretenses to benevolent civilizing power.

Instead of the Queen becoming the authorizing power for Sukey's story, instead of the Bible working its magic and making Sukey into the deserving inheritor of Eric, it is the harmless and hapless Lord Constantine whose offhand and improbable vision of Sukey's married life is realized. When they have left the field, Sukey and Eric cross paths with Mr. Warburton, whom Sukey recalls is Mrs. Seaborn's relative, and who asks them to come see him at his estate. Warner contrasts Sukey's interaction with Warburton at the novel's opening with Sukey's hard-earned self-possession as it emerges in this scene. Warburton has not changed; he asks Sukey the same question, "Haven't I seen you before?" as he did on Prize Day, and is concerned about Eric's future mainly because he has received letters from the parson trying to shame him into taking responsibility for his relatives. Sukey, however, is different indeed; she conducts herself as Mr. Warburton's equal, and arranges for him to provide her and Eric with exactly the married life she herself finds most appealing. She has finally found a story that works for her, and the whims and failings of powerful men become Sukey's opportunity for happiness much as the forms and plots of canonical writers become Warner's opportunity to theorize and remake the class ideologies at

work in them. Lord Constantine's pseudo-poetic vision, crossed with Warburton's regard for reputation and desire to dispose of Eric as a difficulty, make Sukey's dream a reality. The silliness and selfishness of the upper classes are turned into a material gain—and a fulfillment of true love—for Sukey. She does ultimately play the deserving orphan, her consciousness never so fully politicized that she cannot participate in the genre in which Warner has put her, but those with the power to determine whether Sukey is deserving have been quite thoroughly undermined in Warner's plot. There is no politically compromised earnestness in this version of a familiar plot, though the ending scene of the novel is clearly familiar in gender terms.

*The True Heart* ends with Sukey's impending labor; she is pregnant with Eric's child and remembering her maiden days. Sukey is about to be transformed, Warner's narrative explains, from a bold maiden "whose love is still her own to proclaim" (257), into a practical mother:

Suddenly, as though the maiden Sukey had flown into her bosom for a last embrace, she recaptured the past, and possessed her love in its entirety, and comprehended, as never before, as never again, the vehemence of that single purpose, the stubborn hope that had held out against all. (259)

This childbed scene is a subtle variation on the Victorian happy ending, since Eric's own mother, despite having mellowed some, remains a classed threat. She visits the couple once, and is described threateningly: "as of old, [still] a dangerous dove" (258). Ultimately, though, the novel gives no definite indication that Sukey and Eric's life will be disrupted by class-based intrusions

from the outside world.

Warner seems, however, to make a final feminist commentary on the power structures of the world into which this child will be born when Sukey decides that she will call a male child Sorrow, and a girl child Joy, as though the girl can more easily resist becoming complicit in the culture from which her parents, Sukey and Eric, are marginalized. Or perhaps Warner is expressing a belief that women have a better chance at joy through their reworkings of the patriarchal roles that confine men to a power that must bear more direct responsibility for sorrow. Here we see Warner's more usually postmodern destabilizing of cultural certainties take a somewhat essentializing turn, but the novel also ends with an important feminist move. It rewrites the prevailing narrative of working-class women's fertility. Sukey is not bearing a child in poverty, ignorance, or shame, but in joy. It is through her own development of dignity, facilitated importantly by class-conscious analysis of her own situation, that Sukey can finally make her claim to joy. Indeed, Sukey is in full possession of her past as she gives birth, crying out "Joy!" as both a name for the child and a declaration of her own fulfillment. In *Sukey Bond*, Warner creates a heroine who radically undermines the class ideology of the Victorian novel while significantly modifying its gender and racial politics. The present tense in which this plot leaves readers is one of "Joy," and also of hope, but as elsewhere in Warner's works, there is no absolute political closure to be found in the ending. *The True Heart* is thus in keeping with what I have described, through Williams, as Warner's literary version of a structure of feeling.

In my readings of her work, I hope I have demonstrated that Sylvia

Townsend Warner is not only deserving of greater critical attention for her range of innovations, but also that she is the kind of writer who challenges the classifications of literary criticism in some key ways. Warner's broken plots reveal what we can only now call a postmodern vision of the literary and political possibilities of her modernist moment in history. Formal and political daring mark Warner's writing in nearly every genre over her sixty-year career. She "deserves a major revival," as Jane Marcus wrote in 1988 (*Art and Anger* 280).

So what does the still-marginal state of Sylvia Townsend Warner's reputation suggest about feminist literary criticism now, if not that we remain largely complicit in the class politics of canon-making? Warner broke the rules of *content* in virtually everything she wrote, and embedded in different forms her own resistance to the same oppressions that Woolf and West were resisting in their other ways. I have argued in *Reading for Class* that these three twentieth-century British women are writers who can help us, in a twenty-first century critical context, to imagine differently-useful ways to read for class. I submit that we need all three of these versions of resistance, just as we need many others that I have not included in this study. In triangulating Woolf, West, and Warner, I have aimed to show that feminists' specific revisions of the category of modernism itself—as an aesthetics and as an era—must include a willingness to see the workings of class at the boundaries which determine those categories of inclusion or exclusion. Otherwise, writers like Sylvia Townsend Warner will remain largely invisible, and the classed ideologies through which we come to read some writers, and ignore others, will go unchallenged.

More generally, and finally more importantly, a feminist literary criticism

that remains blind to its own classed practices will not enable a revolutionary politics. Reading for class must be a flexible and multivalent practice that ventures outside the present limits of our criticism. Combining the wisdom of the writers I have studied here by paraphrasing their own words, I will end by claiming that because grave political issues are raised by feminism, we should take as a premise of our knowledge-building the notion that literature is no one's private ground, and should remember that it is still too early to assess what we may be capable of.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Warner once described herself as “very lucky” (*Collected Poems* xiv) not to have been formally educated along with her father’s pupils at Harrow in Middlesex, where he was a respected master; being turned loose to read what she liked ultimately seemed to her a benefit, though the exclusion stung her as a child when she was removed from kindergarten after mocking the teachers.

<sup>2</sup> Also commenting on Warner’s poetry (and her fiction) in “Through the Pantry Window’: Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Spanish Civil War,” Brothers writes: “Perhaps we can reclaim the legacy of those like Warner who illuminated our world of desire and conflict in language that did indeed combine an ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ reality” (171). For additional work on Warner’s poetry, see Spraggs. Mulford also offers insights into Warner’s poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Considerations of Warner’s lesbianism and its implications for her work include Garrity, Foster, Castle, and Spraggs.

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, one of Warner’s books is a biography of T. H. White, whose writing explores the worlds of knights and kings. Such tales are a blend of myth and history that have also intersected in particular forms with fantasy elements (wizards, dragons, and the like). Of course, a knight’s relationship to his king is itself a particularly classed version of masculinity, in which the ideologies of honor and chivalry sanction specific class behaviors. I see Warner’s interest in White as an extension of her own pursuit of literary experimentation that could blend myth and history in ways that allowed her to make political commentary.

<sup>5</sup> Warner’s use of the market as a context for feminist awakening leads me to wonder whether she is making an implicit reference here to Christina Rossetti’s extraordinary poem “Goblin Market.” (1862). Laura/Lolly’s name may itself be a

punning (and cunning) combination of the women characters in the poem, who are named Lizzie and Laura.

° The British poet George Crabbe (1754-1832) is described in *Poetry in English: An Anthology*, ed. M. L Rosenthal, Oxford UP 1980, as follows: “. . . Crabbe was oppressed by the country life of his impoverished family and the painful uncertainties of trying to escape . . . .” With regard to Crabbe’s style, the editor explains: “Unlike some of his contemporaries, he had no illusions about country life, and his poems are less sentimental about its benevolent force than Goldsmith’s. He subjects several rural persons and classes to severe scrutiny, using virtually novelistic tendencies of characterization, realistic portrayal, dialogue, and setting in narrative couplets. Crabbe relied on sense perception rather than poetic conventions for his view of reality, and refused to hide ‘real ills’ behind the ‘tinsel trappings of poetic pride.’” (466). Given Crabbe’s own working-class country background and the way his poetics engage with classed realities, he seems an ideal inspiration for *Opus 7*, in which Warner tries to engage, using his style, with similar realities.



## CONCLUSION

*Reading for Class* represents one version of a number of possible projects that I found compelling in the search for a way to combine class studies and feminist theory in my dissertation. As I have suggested, a full consideration of Sylvia Townsend Warner's writing is overdue, as is a full study of Rebecca West's career. Even in the seemingly saturated field of Virginia Woolf studies, there remains plenty to learn with regard to class issues, and to other matters that will no doubt emerge in forms of scholarship that her critics have not yet imagined. And there remains what seems more urgent to me than any of these: the ongoing theorization, in a whole range of ways, of class.

My specific project of reading for class finishes with Sylvia Townsend Warner's works, in part because Warner helps us to look both backward and forward from the postmodern context in which our twenty-first century reading practices are situated. In my introduction to these chapters, I explained that the language and insights of postmodernism would (inevitably) shape my readings of Woolf, West and Warner. Indeed, my readings of Warner's works may benefit most from the postmodernist terms and concepts that often allow me to name her aesthetic-political practices. Reading Warner is especially important now not only for what we can say about her work with the help of our present historical-cultural discourses, but also for how her texts themselves, especially when read for class, can reshape fundamental assumptions within those discourses.

One such discourse is the one that centers on finding the line of division

between modernity and postmodernity—or, depending on the critic discussing the issue, on the evidence of continuity between modernity and postmodernity. The chapters on West and Warner, though they do not take up these authors' works that were written in the later decades of the century, do remind us that such long careers trouble our classifications and periodizations in ways we have yet to properly recognize. My focus on class as a shaping element in critical discourses and in canonization practices should also, now that it has been elaborated in the three chapters, be understood as trying to disrupt the underlying political assumptions of, among other critical fictions, the modern-postmodern break. Readers can recall that I quoted, in my introduction, Paul Gilroy's claim about the racial foundations of such categories, in which white Western experience is universalized with deeply problematic political consequences. These writers, read in this particular sequence and using the particular method I use to read them here, allow us to consider how reading for class in the twentieth century might similarly help us to ask better critical questions of the literature and to interrogate at the same time the always politicized concepts we construct to help us read that literature.

I hope the in-depth analyses that comprise the author-specific chapters have demonstrated how reading for class works specifically in each case, and across the three cases as I have positioned them together here. While the readings of Woolf, West, and Warner I offer within the chapters devoted to their particular works do aim to shift the classed terms of discussion for each author, the triangulation of the three has also provided a way of seeing, through juxtaposition, some of the classed assumptions that structure our practices of reading within the academy and shape the discourses in which we participate. It

is in the interrelationships among Woolf, West, and Warner that those critical, institutional, and ideological modes come into clearer view, and form a kind of metatext—or perhaps more accurately, a recurring subtext—that needs to be read for class no less thoroughly than the novels, essays, and poetry I discuss. The chapter on Woolf, for instance, not only shows how certain of her works engage with class issues, but also argues that her status in feminist literary criticism need not lead to an unquestioning or totalizing vision of her politics or her works, particularly when her noncanonical texts are juxtaposed with her more famous ones and her own career is seen in relation to West's and to Warner's. While my introduction proceeded from the understanding that Woolf was the most widely-read of these writers, readers can see, after reading the chapters discussing West and Warner, some of what remains unseen in Woolf when she is canonized in isolation as a feminist modernist writer.

My discussion of West has worked to create a bridge between her early journalism and her early fiction. I hope not only that readers will discover or reconsider her journalism based on my analysis, but that they will rethink the complex achievement of *The Return of the Soldier*, which as I have demonstrated in my own in-depth reading has earned a place in feminist modernism and in World War One literature. I think that more sustained attention to West's later writings will reveal that there are also significant interconnections among her diverse works after the twenties, connections that become clearer when the classed assumptions of dominant literary criticism itself are made visible through a self-reflexive way of reading.

In the chapter on Woolf, as in the one on West, I have shown how the specific techniques of point of view and characterization matter in our readings

for class. I think these literary details are significant within such readings in much the same way that the material details of our own lives are significant to our class consciousness within them. Classed details provide us with what we need to construct and reconstruct class identities, and the close attention I have paid to Woolf's *West's*, and Warner's texts demonstrates the importance of such details for critics who want to theorize about class in literature. Capturing the complexities of class not only requires general methods and broad theories, but also demands that these be grounded in specific texts, characters, and critical/analytical contexts. Through reading for class, we can carefully historicize the texts we read without disconnecting them from the always already political-cultural spaces in which we do our readings.

As I suggested in my introduction by raising far-ranging questions and engaging with multiple discursive contexts, and as I have now shown through my discussion of the particular texts I have chosen, the specific and the general must interconnect in reading for class. From the specific text in its literary details, in its historical moment(s), in its political function(s), we watch more general issues emerge. Because texts have readers, and because reading for class is always occurring from within a particular individual's classed (and gendered and raced) body, these broader questions about class arise in the spaces and time spans between readers and the texts that they read.

Reading and re-reading for class, rethinking its effects on our lives, on academic and other kinds of work in the institutions where meaning is made and remade in culture—these are the trajectories I want to continue to follow. I have focused here on making particular versions of class visible to my readers, namely those versions of class that can emerge from studying texts by middle-class,

white, British, female authors of the early twentieth century, and from investigating a range of twentieth-century frameworks, both American and British, for the interpretation of those texts. At the same time, I want to emphasize one of the conclusions to which this specific project leads me. Ways of reading for class must be shaped by the perspectives of those who are poor, working-class, and lower-middle-class. Having seen from each of these shifting and even converging class viewpoints at different times during the last thirty years, I can claim some of the insight and some of the blindness that comes from each. I know that the material context of reading impacts how (and sometimes even whether) the reader reads, and I believe that methods of reading for class must work to undo the embedded belief that past a certain level of literacy, the act of reading becomes classless, and one's position within the class system becomes incidental. The ground between readers and texts, strewn with evidence of class, is not so stable as all that, and I have explained in some detail here how reading for class has allowed me to chart, within the terms of my study, where and when that classed terrain shifts.

The way this text has been shaped is, I think, not unlike the way the writings of the three women it studies were shaped, though I would not compare our results even on my most confident day. Sometimes, I have written in the bi-location Warner describes—with life's other responsibilities both mundane and more interesting sharing close quarters with the project. At other times, I have found myself dwelling so fully in this work that it occluded everything but the most rudimentary upkeep of a nonwriting life. In any case, for many months now, *Reading for Class* has in some way shaped or been shaped by its material and personal-historical moments, in ways I have yet to fully understand.

This project is marked, for me, as a document of passage, both academic and personal—as if the two were ever separable. It represents the first extended academic work I have done that addresses class. And it is a doctoral dissertation, a body of work that might be a ticket to take me part of the way toward a different class position than those I have known thus far. If *Reading for Class* comes to function as such a ticket in my life, to whatever extent it ends up marking the route to classed destinations of unknown distance, writing these chapters has convinced me that I will need, more than ever, to continue to try to know what it means to read for class—not only in literary and cultural texts, but in my life.

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