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The Haunting Ghost of Jacob Flanders: Revealing War Trauma Through the Aesthetics of Absence in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922)

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

In *Jacob's Room (1922)*, Virginia Wolf recounts the life of Jacob Flanders, a young man who dies in combat during the First World War. Yet, this is not a traditional war novel. As if looking into a broken mirror, Woolf focuses on Jacob's pre-war world, collecting the memory fragments that shape his life from his childhood until his tragic fate. The topics of war and trauma are never explicit; instead, they are anticipated as shadows of presences, not quite seen, not quite unseen. The character of Jacob is therefore presented as a sombre and inscrutable ghost, rapidly shifting throughout the story, accentuating Woolf's sense of never-ending grief.

This paper argues that *Jacob's Room* addresses trauma through the ghostly figure of Jacob Flanders. I contend that the author breaks conventional narrative techniques by relying on the aesthetics of absence to portray a character who is never completely known to the readers and haunts the text through the uncanny traces he leaves behind. In doing so, Woolf uses absence as a substitute for the failure of language to translate the horror of war. In its elegiac essence, the narrative can be considered not only evidence of war trauma but also an experimental work of personal and cultural mourning.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, war representation, trauma, First World War, the trope of the ghost, haunting, the uncanny, absence.

0. Introduction

The following dissertation focuses on the representational crisis that resulted from the traumatic events surrounding the First World War, and on how the war changed conventional forms of representation to depict the pain brought upon the shoulders of society. In doing so, I will analyse Virginia Woolf's experimental work *Jacob's Room* (1922), paying special attention to its protagonist Jacob Flanders and to how his representation as a ghostly figure evokes phycological trauma. This paper has two sections. The first section will deal with the trope of the ghost as a means used to represent trauma, indicating the connection between the spectral haunting and trauma itself. The second section will deal with the evidence that suggests that Jacob's absence throughout the novel foreshadows his death and the uncanny experience resulting from the process of mourning.

The Great War left behind a scenario of unfathomable pain and sorrow: the horrors experienced during this time caused a shift in social consciousness and signified "a complete break with the past" (Tate 13). It represented a challenge for society in terms of how to translate its cruelty into words because framing war within the finite possibilities of language would result in a futile attempt. Although the war was not an alien concept before the twentieth century, the First World War served as the setting for human behaviour that not even the imagination had been able to conceive, for "the wounds of this intense, highly-industrialized warfare were fearsome and unprecedented" (Crouthamel and Peter 56). In this context, when thinking about the Great War today, it is not difficult to recognize that psychological trauma was one of its most devastating legacies.

While "the Greek word 'trauma' literally refers to a physical wound" (Henke 160), during and after the Great War, many soldiers who came back from combat did not

present any physical wounds; yet they suffered from symptoms of illness as though the wounds were inflicted on their psyche. Those who were far from the battlefield also suffered from the mental ravages that the war brought with it: guilt, anxiety, grief, and several other painful emotions disrupted families and the development of societies. Although the foundations of trauma pre-date Freudian psychoanalysis, the psychological studies of the time could not explain the avalanche of different cases that the war had caused; "the 'study of the "mind" was, in 1914, philosophic and introspective rather than scientific'" (Rae 267). It was not until the colossal impact of the First World War that studies in psychology strived to diagnose and assess the mental problems developed by returning soldiers. It was during this time that the psychological trauma of warfare was first known under the term 'shell shock', though it initially encapsulated a range of symptoms astonishingly diverse.

The ravages of this unprecedented war not only meant significant changes in the study of psychology, but also involved a challenge for writers since "war, like writing, shapes perception" (Tate 13). As it was no longer viable to portray a psychologically traumatized society with the existing means of representation and cognition, new forms of representation arose, causing a "shift in the relationship between language and the world" (Alperin).

Among the writers who experimented with language to portray war was Virginia Woolf. As a modernist, she created new forms of representation to picture the traumatized society in which she lived, particularly in terms of "how she appropriates the crisis of rationalistic language in the policy wars as an opportunity to develop a new literary idiom" (Sherry 253). Although not a combatant on the front lines, Woolf experienced the cultural trauma that four years of conflict and a massive loss of life brought upon society. In her emblematic novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the*

Lighthouse (1927), *The Years* (1937), *Between the Acts* (1941) and *Jacob's Room* (1922), Woolf shows a higher understanding of how the reality of war affects the lives of both soldiers and civilians. As Vincent Sherry claims, "the special intimacy that her background gives her with the fundamental assumptions of the liberal tradition makes her work the fully dimensional representation of this moment" (236).

In *Jacob's Room*, the novel this dissertation will focus on, Virginia Woolf breaks with conventional narrative to faithfully depict a traumatized society that mourns the massive loss of lives during the war. Through fragmented memories of secondary characters, flashbacks, and glimpses of moments that jump from time to time, Woolf recreates the life of Jacob Flanders from his early childhood until his early death in war. Therefore, the focus of the story is placed on the loss of Jacob and his mourning rather than on the narrative of his life. Accordingly, he comes and goes throughout the narrative as a ghostly figure, haunting the memories of those that revive his fleeting passage through life.

Virginia Woolf relies on Jacob's spectral presence "as a symbol to overcome the past after coming to terms with it" (Ibarra 58). In this context, the trope of the ghost in *Jacob's Room* serves as a means to deal with deprivation because "trauma often resists language and precise representation" (Edmundson 55). Woolf relies on the aesthetics of absence to portray an unknowable, yet pivotal character. Jacob's absence is deliberate throughout the narrative and is articulated through Jacob's voicelessness, the lack of precision in the shaping of his character, and significant narrative gaps. Reviving Jacob while his absence testifies to his death, allows for the emergence of spectres and experiences of the uncanny that the present dissertation will explore to evidence how Woolf represents the psychological impact of war trauma.

1. Spectral Haunting: The Ghost of Jacob Flanders as a Form of Representational Trauma

"A tree—a tree has fallen, a sort of death in the forest. After that, the wind in the trees sounds melancholy" (Woolf 39).

It is inevitable to read *Jacob's Room* without the bitterness of loss and mourning. From the beginning, Woolf implicitly alludes to the death of Jacob Flanders when she relates the character, who is in his infancy, to the motif of the skull: "(...) he saw a whole skull-perhaps a cow's skull, a skull perhaps, with the teeth in it. Sobbing, but absent-mindedly, he runs farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms" (Woolf 7). When Woolf narrates Jacob's most innocent and lively years, she refers to the skull, though this object is far from evoking childhood. She even places it at Jacob's feet during his sleep time: "The sheep's jaw with the big yellow teeth in it lay at his feet" (Woolf 13). The skull remains a constant presence throughout the novel, even when Jacob is no longer a child. As a student at the University of Cambridge, Jacob spends most of his time in his dormitory, a room that Woolf describes relying once again on the motif of the skull: "over the doorway, a rose, or a ram's skull, is carved in the wood" (Woolf 93-94). When Jacob dies, Woolf describes the room once more, using the same repertoire of words: "over the doorways a rose or a ram's skull is carved in the Wood" (Woolf 246).

According to J.C. Cirlot, the skull "is an emblem of the mortality of man, as in the literary examples of Hamlet and Faust" (299); since the image is recurrent in Jacob's narrative, it is reasonable to relate it to his tragic faith. Yet, a symbol can indeed be interpreted in diverse ways. As Nathalia Brodskaya suggests, "nature tries to talk to man in its own language, but man is unable to understand it; this language is full of obscure symbols, and it would be vain to look for their solutions" (38). To tackle the ambiguity

around Woolf's symbols, N.C Thakur establishes that they are "created to suggest and give insight into the ineffable in human thought and feeling, or to heighten and make splendid the desired emotions and ideas" (4). In her essay *Modern Fiction* (1919), Woolf criticizes her realist contemporaries that rely on traditional ways of writing. For her, "so much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception" (Woolf). In this context, one can take for granted that Woolf uses symbolism to encode messages that require interpretation. As Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman assert when referring to Jacob Flanders in *Jacob's Room* (1922), and to Andrew Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), "in the wake of skulls collected by the boys, and crabs dissected or left to circle in a collecting bucket, we may suspect a more serious parable spun out by the deaths of Jacob and Andrew in World War I" (247). The motif of the skull not only encodes a message foretelling Jacob's tragic fate, but it also gives readers a clue to the way in which the novel itself must be approached.

The use of this type of imagery, closely associated with Jacob's death, suggests that, throughout the story, Jacob's presence is tenuously spectral. In addition, the impressionistic aesthetic of the narrative presents Jacob Flanders as a transient figure that appears and disappears between lines, between fragmented and blurred memories of different characters. The novel's structure evidences a leap in time that allows Jacob to be perceived as a fluctuating and ambiguous figure, just as memories are. It is in this line that Revered Andrew Floyd alludes to Jacob when he remembers him, both at the beginning and at the end of the novel.

First, Floyd remembers Jacob as the story of his attempted romantic relationship with Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, unfolds. When leaping into the future, it is

revealed that the union was never consolidated. Still, Floyd never abandons his appreciation for Betty, which leads him to keep the letter she sends him when she rejects his marriage proposal. It is at this point when the narrator reveals the accidental meeting between Floyd and Jacob, describing the latter as a reflection of the future that lacks precision, resembling more of a sketch of a thought than a real presence: “Meeting Jacob in Piccadilly lately, he recognized him after three seconds. But Jacob has grown such a fine young man that Mr Floyd did not like to stop him in the street” (Woolf 24).

Jacob is then remembered at the end of the novel through the same episode with Revered Floyd. This time the memory comes up during the notorious allusion to his death in combat: “The long windows of Kensington Palace flushed fiery rose as Jacob walked away; a flock of wild duck flew over the Serpentine; and the trees were stood against the sky, blackly, magnificently” (Woolf 242). With these lines, Woolf describes the twilight of a young life that is preparing to fade away until only memories prevail. The moment when revered Floyd meets Jacob is described as follows:

> ‘Now I know that face—’ said Reverend Andrew Floyd, coming out of Carter’s shop in Piccadilly, ‘but who the dickens—?' and he watched Jacob, turned round to look at him, but could not be sure—
>
> ‘Oh, Jacob Flanders!’ he remembered in a flash.
>
> But he was so tall; so unconscious; such a fine young fellow.
>
> ‘I gave him Byron’s works,’ Andrew Floyd mused, and started forward, as Jacob crossed the road, but hesitated, and let the moment pass, and lost the opportunity (Woolf 243).

In these episodes, Jacob does not seem to be aware that he is being watched. Jacob’s presence depends on Floyd’s existence and on his ability to evoke him. When contrasting the two mirroring events in which Revered Floyd evokes Jacob, it is possible to capture the ghostly essence of the character; Jacob’s appearance becomes a sign of the haunting that is taking place, in which one presence is always at the expense of the other.

There are several instances in the novel when Jacob can be recognised as assimilating a ghostly figure: “there he stood pale, come out of the depths of darkness, in the hot room, blinking at the light” (Woolf 18). This description coincides with Scarborough’s portrayal of ghosts as ‘pallid shades of the past’ who “with an unmistakable spectral form (…) sweep like mist through the air, or flutter like dead leaves in the gale—a gale always accompanying them as part of the stock furnishings” (Scarborough). Scarborough’s claim takes readers back to Cambridge, when Jacob leaves Simeon alone and goes back to his room:

> But Jacob moved. He murmured good-night. He went out into the court. He buttoned his jacket across his chest. He went back to his rooms, and being the only man who walked at that moment back to his rooms, his footsteps rang out, his figure loomed large. Back from the Chapel, back from the Hall, back from the Library, came the sound of his footsteps, as if the old stone echoed with magisterial authority: “The young man—the young man—the young man-back to his rooms.” (Woolf 59)

The ‘unmistakable spectral’ agrees with Jacob’s description when ‘his footsteps rang out’ and ‘his figure loomed large’; although he is not supposed to be physically present in separate locations at the same time, still the sound of his footsteps comes from different rooms fostering a sense of haunting.

Emily Dorothy Scarborough also states that “ghosts have always haunted literature, and doubtless always will” (Scarborough). She also suggests that war “has greatly energized the ghost (…) and given him both ambition and strength to do more things than ever” (Scarborough). The ghostly figure of Jacob Flanders is no exception to this premise. As a mortal victim of the Great War, he haunts the memories of a community that suffers and mourns his loss. As Roger Luckhurst points out, “ghosts are the signals of atrocities, marking sites of untold violence, a traumatic past whose traces remain to attest to a lack of testimony” (93). Accordingly, Jacob’s ghostly presence becomes a pivotal object to understand an event that has psychologically traumatized an entire generation and gives voice to the horrors silenced in the conflict. In this way, his

figure represents an element of catharsis that allows the community to cope with the massive loss of lives during the war.

To accept the ghostly figure of Jacob Flanders is to recognize that a haunting is taking place: “etymologically, ‘haunt’ refers to a place visited frequently” (Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen 63). Going beyond this initial concept, Avery F. Gordon claims that:

> Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. (16)

In his theoretical approach to ghosts, Luckhurst supports Gordon’s appreciation of hunting by claiming that a ghost ‘causes temporal disadjustments’ (62). To this, Ibarra adds that “the ghost pulls its story with it, breaking with the line of time” (60); and by breaking with the line of time, the ghost alters the traditional narrative. Virginia Woolf breaks with the linear narrative to tell the story of Jacob’s life. As evidenced in the passages alluding to Floyd’s memories, the narrative tends to jump in time, playing continuously with different instances of the past, present, and future, and repeating the same event on several occasions. Precisely, “what lies at the core of trauma is insistent repetition” (Ibarra 62), and *Jacob’s Room* anticipates modern conceptions of trauma as a form of a haunting because “it is the permanence of these haunting traces that link the ghost with trauma” (Ibarra 58).

Addressing psychological trauma begs for a brief description of how the term emerged and developed over the years. Understanding how the term evolved from representing a physical symptomatology towards a mental one will allow me to explore

how it has been described in literature. Before being recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, in 1980, under the name of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma was already an issue in society, although for a long time it was misconceived and disregarded. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century that the issue began to be addressed. The history of psychodynamic psychology started to evidence important advances through "the work of Sigmund Freud, and then the progress of the law of tort regarding recovery of damages relating to the negligent infliction of 'nervous shock' since 1901, and then the role of military psychiatry and pension agencies across successive wars (…)" (Luckhurst 5). Most studies on psychological trauma followed these mentioned stages.

Cathy Caruth, on the other hand, has approached trauma from a postmodernist perspective. She has focused her studies on the languages of trauma and testimony, relying on psychiatric literature to do so. She states that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 3). She refers to trauma as an event that has not been "assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth 3). In her work *Unclaimed experience* (1996), Caruth engages with trauma via Freud. As Ruth Leys emphasizes "Freud is a founding figure in the history of the conceptualization of trauma" (19). To explain why a traumatic experience may not be assimilated or experienced at the time it occurs, Caruth relies on the Freudian theory which holds that "an event can only be understood as traumatic *after* the fact, through the symptoms and flashbacks and the delayed attempts at understanding that these sings of disturbance produce" (Luckhurst 6-7).

Following Caruth's premise that trauma cannot be experienced when it happens, it is then reasonable to assume that any attempt to depict it through traditional discourse

is futile. On this line of thought, Edmundson contends that “trauma often resists language and precise representation, and thus becomes that which is inexpressible or unreachable, returning again and again to haunt its object” (55). Bearing in mind the inability of words to depict trauma, it becomes necessary to resort to different forms of representation to attempt to capture its essence:

> This resistance is symbolized in the figure of the ghost or other supernatural event as a force which seeks to relay a message or to expose a hidden truth, but which often remains distant, mysterious and unknowable: the spectral becomes the embodiment of a pain that cannot be spoken of directly. (Edmundson 55)

As Edmundson states, the figure of the ghost becomes a way to evoke the suffering and loss that cannot be materialized through conventional discourse, as it happens with Woolf’s representation of Jacob.

Andrew Smith agrees with Leys’ views on ghosts stating that “the spectre is an absent presence, a liminal being that inhabits and gives shape to many of the figurations of trauma” (147). He also contends that “a ghost is the quintessential gothic trope for characters’ projections of unconscious anxieties and psychological trauma” (148). The ghostly figure of Jacob Flanders represents then this unvoiced suffering that torments the characters while reviving their memories of Jacob. His presence in the story is marked through the imprint of his absence amongst the minds of the people who knew him and loved him.

Following Ibarra’s claim that “haunting and trauma centre on the ghost and require the ghost to give reason to a fantasy that deals with the recurring return of a past that needs to be meaningful in the present” (68), it might be possible to align with those who claim that the memories of Jacob brought back by the characters around him are eventually the only source available to shape him and his life. All the flashbacks and sketches of thoughts that come to the surface, can be perceived as a means of memorial for Jacob and are remnants of him. Jacob remains preserved, yet invisible and lingers

dreamily through the text, projecting a collective sense of trauma that can only be represented by avoiding conventional means.

Representing trauma, either through the figure of the ghost or another functional means, allows for coping with the pain caused by the event. In his approaches to trauma, LaCapra has recognized the importance of literature in dealing with it. He argues that “historiography, literature, and other areas or fields have distinctive ways of approaching the inscription of trauma –writing about it and writing it” (LaCapra 205). He establishes a connection between writing about the traumatic experience and the process of working through:

> Writing trauma would be one of those telling aftereffects in what I termed traumatic and post-traumatic writing (or signifying practice in general). It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and "giving voice" to the past-processes of coming to terms with traumatic "experiences". (LaCapra 186)

LaCapra’s ‘working through’[1] becomes an elemental point in the approach to psychological trauma. It involves “coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling” (LaCapra 144). This approach proscribes Woolf’s need to tackle the issue in a time when society was losing its sons to the conflict. Therefore, the ghostly figure of Jacob not only gives voice to the horrors silenced by the atrocities of the war but also becomes a catalyst that allows evoking collective trauma, permitting in turn the celebration of a social ritual that assists the process of grief and mourning, necessary to deal with trauma.

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[1] Dominick LaCapra coined the terms ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ to represent the two different ways in which survivors grapple with trauma. While ‘acting out’ involves the tendency to repeat the traumatic episodes as if they were fully present, ‘working through’ refers to accepting that those experiences occurred in the past, allowing the distinction between past, present and future. Although they are different processes, they may conflate or overlap in the mind of the experiencer.

2. The Aesthetics of Absence: An Eternal Return to Jacob's Room

2.1. Anticipating Jacob's Death Through his Absence

I have argued that Jacob's characterisation attests to his ghostly presence throughout the novel and allows for the representation of the psychological trauma caused by war. This ghostly figure has been upheld through symbolism and by the repetition of events in which he tends to be an observer. In this section, I contend that what offers substantial evidence of Jacob's spectrality is his conspicuous absence throughout the narrative: Woolf relies on the aesthetics of absence inscribed in Jacob's voicelessness, the lack of precision in the shaping of his character, and the visual gaps in the narrative, to depict an unknowable, yet pivotal character which highlights a sense of loss and bereavement and alludes to a particular form of mourning.

After witnessing the First World War from the homefront, that is to say, through what she read in newspapers and heard from those who had actually fought in the battlefield, Woolf writes *Jacob's Room*. As Nuckols states, "*Jacob's Room* as elegy does not seek to idealise or immortalise Jacob, but rather clings to his loss" (4). Yet, evoking loss in narrative represents a challenge in terms of language since it involves feelings that words fail to translate.

Before the Great War, Virginia Woolf was not alien to the concept of loss. Within the margin of eleven years she had lost various members of her family, including her parents. Particularly, the death of her brother Thoby Stephen painfully marked her young years and was registered in her diaries. She acknowledges the haunting of the sombre presence of his brother: "–& then Thoby's form looms behind—that queer ghost. I think of death sometimes as the end of an excursion which I went on when he died. As if I should come in & say well, here you are" (Woolf). The character of Jacob seems to stand as a reflection of Woolf's deceased brother since the two seem

to share some common traits and experiences, such as their vacation in Greece. Throughout the pages, Woolf accentuates her grief and the need to rewrite her brother's life, to bring him back, as the families of soldiers mourned for the sons they lost to war.

In this context, it is not strange that Woolf tried to find ways to evoke the unspeakable ravages that death had brought upon her life. She was in search of finding ways of representation that managed to capture the true essence of things, of life and death. When *Jacob's Room* was about to be published, Woolf was anxious about the opinion of critics as she was aware that the novel was far from being traditional and challenged the forms of representation of the time. She asserts: "now what will they say about *Jacob*? Mad, I supposed: a disconnected rhapsody" (Woolf). In another diary entry, she reveals that her husband, Leonard Woolf, read the novel: "he thinks it my best work. But his first remark was that it was amazingly well written. We argued about it. He calls it a work of genius; he thinks it unlike any other novel" (Woolf). Indeed, *Jacob's Room* was without precedent. In developing the character of Jacob, Woolf created a new form of representation that enabled her to speak a language of her own: "there's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice" (Woolf). This new-found voice, together with her traumatic experiences in life, allow her to successfully convey collective and personal mourning.

As said above, this new form of representation revolves around the deliberate absence of Jacob Flanders from the text. In *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music* (2014), Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhartwhich assure that significant absence can be "conceived of as encoded by the composer or the author on purpose so that they are loaded with intentional meaning or with at least one intended function" (7), this

‘intended function’ is to evoke loss, the loss of somebody who now remains in the memory of those who mourn his departure.

Then, how to portray a character that is at the centre of the story but whose early departure requires him to be absent? Woolf bets on creating a character from the memories of those who got to know him, and this leads to different perceptions. Accordingly, the reader must rely on other people’s experiences and testimonies that may conflict with Jacob’s unrevealed essence, and which make the character not fully readable. This unreadability emerges from an ethical commitment to traumatic memory and conveys the absence provoked by Jacob’s loss, “allow(ing) him to penetrate the walls of his would-be grave” (Oxner 213). It is Jacob’s immanent death that triggers his deliberate absence.

Before Jacob finds the skull, whose symbol has been discussed in the previous section, there is a pronounced warning that anticipates his death; one can still hear the echoing shouts of Archer, calling his brother Jacob:

> ‘Ja—cob! Ja—cob!’ shouted Archer, lagging on after a second.
>
> The voice had an extraordinary sadness, pure from body, pure from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking against rocks— so it sounded. (Woolf, 5)

In his study about Derrida’s “unsuccessful mourning”, Theodore Koulouris contents that in Derrida’s thought, “the name, uttering the name, (…) (and largely as well as explicitly in Woolf’s fiction) links the subject with the foundational prospect of death” (69-70). He also asserts that Archer’s shout “proscribes in the act of naming the significance of absence, an absence set to preoccupy us for the rest of the text” (Koulouris 69). Thus, Archer’s resonant shout sets the mood in which Jacob’s character must be read: although his life is the focus of the story, the narrative is conspicuous by Jacob’s absence. In parallel to Archer’s shout, there is a similar event at the end of the novel: when Bonamy visits Jacob’s room, he testifies to his absence: “‘Jacob! Jacob!’

cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again" (Woolf 247). This is another call to Jacob that remains unanswered. His absence becomes even more latent, evidencing the commemoration of loss through the recognition of the irreversible: his death.

The motif of Jacob's voicelessness also testifies to his absence, and certainly, the novel shows a Jacob that is rather taciturn, passive, and immersed in his own thoughts. Jacob's voicelessness is pointed out by other characters in the novel who regard him as "the silent young man" (Woolf 95). They refer to Jacob's mutism exclaiming that "if he is going to get on in the world, he will have to find his tongue" (Woolf 95).

Jacob's lack of participation also contributes to his voicelessness. As an example, there are several episodes in which Jacob remains distant and silent: "he smiled; but said nothing" (Woolf 81); "because Jacob was silent" (Woolf 228). Even when he decides to speak, his words lack precision, or he does not actually finish the sentences: "and perhaps Jacob only said "hum" or said nothing at all. True, the words were inaudible" (Woolf 59). Giving Jacob a voice would have prevented the process of mourning or disrupted this very manifestation of grief, for the character needs to be absent so that those who are still alive can celebrate the proper rituals.

In addition to voicelessness, Jacob's absence is manifested through the choice of narrator. As Judy Little claims, "the narrator as voice or subject (or implied "self") is a strong, well-elaborated female consciousness who dominates, even monopolises the narrative space" (241). Jacob's thoughts are filtered through the narrator's reflections, as in the following passage: "though all this may very well be true—so Jacob thought and spoke—so he crossed his legs—filled his pipe—sipped his whisky, and once looked at his pocket-book, rumpling his hair as he did so, there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself" (Woolf 97). The

reader is therefore compelled to recreate a character through sources that lack precision. Not even the narrator manages to assemble the puzzle that Jacob represents: "it is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (Woolf 37). By being relegated "to the status of the 'muted' other" (Little 241) Jacob remains in the realm of the uncertain, which is essentially ambiguous and obscure.

The text reflects the impact of traumatic memory. There are significant narrative gaps in place of explicit war scenes or violence, and this raises interesting questions about Woolf's articulation of trauma. It seems Woolf articulates trauma in an oblique way. In his article "Mind the gap: Spaces in *Jacob's Room*", Bishop claims that Woolf, in developing the novel, "did care very much about the space breaks" (34). He further argues that breaking the spaces "or even a variation in the size can affect our response to the text" (Bishop 38), as it happens in the American edition of the novel. Accordingly, the deliberate gaps translate into the impossibility of appreciating, portraying, and understanding a character that is simply not there. If there are gaps in between memories, then there is no registered information about Jacob that one can access to continue shaping the character. The four-line space left after the narrator alludes to Jacob and to his communication with her mother, illustrates what Alperin calls "silent spaces and frames (…) halting the narrative progression" (1). Jacob is visiting Versailles and is supposed to tell his mother about his experiences, yet there is a visual gap in the paragraph:

> Jacob had nothing to hide from his mother. It was only that he could make no sense himself of his extraordinary excitement, and as for writing it down—
>
> "Jacob's letters are so like him," said Mrs Jarvis, folding the sheet. (Woolf 180)

The doubt about Jacob's readiness to write about himself and disclose his feelings hangs over the gap between the lines. Although the next paragraph seems to resolve that doubt, it offers only the assurance that 'Jacob's letters are so like him'. The text leads the readers to speculate on their own, relying on the white space where both Jacob and the memories are inaccessible. In addition, as Bishop states, "with the gap we continue our tunnelling into the past, without it we slip easily back into the unfolding present" (37). The last visual space in the text testifies to Jacob's death:

> Darkness drops like a knife over Greece.
>
> 'The guns?' said Betty Flanders, half asleep, getting out of bed and going to the window, which was decorated with a fringe of dark leaves.
> 'Not at this distance,' she thought. 'It is the sea.' (Woolf 247- 248)

Woolf relies on a metaphor— "Darkness drops like a knife"—to convey loss. What comes later is his mother's foretelling Jacob's tragic fate. Jacob's ghostly presence hangs over this ultimate gap; then it is no use to resort once more to memories of the past because Jacob clings right there: between his death and the feeling of a mother that soon will mourn her son's early departure.

In the process of abandoning the textual to rely on the visual spaces, Woolf goes one step further: she focuses on Jacob's room as the ultimate reminder of his absence. While evidencing the process of mourning of Mrs Flanders and Bonamy, the narrator refers to different objects in the room that evoke Jacob, among them, the armchair that seems to miss him: "one fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there." (Woolf 247). This alludes to a lost presence: the space that once was occupied by Jacob and now seems to be haunted by him, raising spectres and the experience of the uncanny, which will be discussed in the next section.

2.2. Jacob's Uncanny Traces: A Testimony of his Absence

In its elegiac form, *Jacob's Room* represents the experience of the uncanny since Jacob's early departure results in collective grieving that constantly attempts to revive his presence; this process of mourning reveals a desire to recover a world that was once comfortable and familiar, but which has become uncertain and unfamiliar after Jacob's death. In order to provide evidence of the uncanny, it is necessary first to address the very concept. To do this, I will mainly rely on Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919). Then, I will focus on the inherent relationship between death and the uncanny, relying on Woolf's use of imagery that illustrates Freud's postulates.

The psychological concept of the uncanny was first developed by Ernst Jentsch in his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906). Jentsch establishes that the German word *unheimlich*, translated into English as 'uncanny', alludes to an experience in which the subject "is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease'" (Jentsch), and "the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him" (Jentsch). This postulate follows the equation in which *unheimlich* is the opposite of *heimlich,* as the latter refers to something familiar or that belongs to home. The uncanny is, therefore, an experience that results in intellectual uncertainty. However, this same definition would apply to fear since that which is unknown or unfamiliar also triggers a similar emotion. It is necessary then to make a distinction between both experiences.

In his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud focuses on E.T.A Hoffmann's *The Sandman* (1816) to explore the uncanny in literature. Freud begins by revising Jentsch's definition of the concept and then reformulates it relying on Schelling's view of the *unheimlich.* Freud notes that for the uncanny to occur, "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar" (221). Then in Freud's view, there is a change in the relationship between these two concepts: "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which

develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (Freud 226). Therefore, the uncanny involves an experience that was once familiar and comfortable, but then becomes unfamiliar, uncertain, and unsettling; it is not merely a situation of intellectual uncertainty as Jentsch upholds. To reach this conclusion, Freud revises the concept of *heimlich* and reveals that it not only addresses that which "is familiar and agreeable," but also that which "is concealed" (223). This second meaning agrees with Schelling's views because according to him, the *unheimlich* implies everything "that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Schelling, 1837, quoted in Freud 225). This is when *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*.

Consequently, Freud adds two variants to the equation of the uncanny: repression and reality. First, he contends that the uncanny is something "which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 241). However, Freud remembers that not everything that recalls repressed desires is "on that account uncanny" (Freud 244). This is when he resorts to the attribute of reality: we may have suppressed beliefs imposed by our ancestors which seem to have been surmounted; but when the occasion arrives "we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny" (Freud 248).

Taking all the aforementioned into account, Freud concludes that "an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud 249). With this idea in mind, it is

possible then to address the inherent relationship between death and the uncanny and its tendency to raise spectres in elegy.

The confrontation with death and its representations leads to an uncanny experience because the unconscious enters in conflict with the animistic repressed belief and the reasoning around the subject of death. That is to say, on one hand, a 'mature' grown-up must repress the animistic belief, renouncing the idea that the dead can come back as a spirit because there is no scientific basis to support this primitive idea; and on the other hand, the same lack of scientific information around the subject opens the possibility for the same 'mature' grown-up to revive this repressed belief, triggering, therefore, the uncanny.

Death often involves the loss of a loved one and the desire of reviving their presence while mourning their departure. In Kennedy's approach to elegies, he asserts that precisely the concepts of desire and the uncanny "lack of critical attention" (582); however, in Kennedy's view, both concepts need to be addressed since they seem to be related: "if desire in elegy is acknowledged as something that insists on its own work, it produces hauntings, ghosts, and uncanny spaces" (Kennedy 589). To address the definition of desire in elegy, Kennedy resorts to Lacan's former formulation claiming that desire is "'desire of the Other' or 'desire of the Other's desire'" (Lacan, 1964, quoted in Kennedy 592); thus, Kennedy contends that in terms of elegy, death "gives life to desire" (Kennedy 583) since elegy provides a safe space for desiring the presence of that who is absent. He also refers to Lacan's argument which states that "in naming it [desire], the subject brings forth a new presence in the world" (Lacan, 1964, quoted in Kennedy 582). This is seen when the characters in *Jacob's Room* evoke Jacob, shouting aloud his name. In this context, desire cannot be deflected because of Jacob's death but

is brought forth into reality as the aforementioned ‘new presence’ or spectre. Thus, this desire, testifying the absence of the loved one, emerges as an uncanny space.

As mentioned previously, in *Modern Fiction* (1919), Virginia Woolf criticizes some of her contemporaries calling them ‘materialists’. She emphasizes that “they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (Woolf), contrary to modernists whose “point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (Woolf). Then, in her search to avoid convention, Woolf goes beyond materialism, addressing Jacob’s death through that which revives his soul, not his material body. She uses memories and, especially, objects that are defined by loss and “may offer the only way to understand the perspectives of the absent” (Sorum 143). In this way, the objects frequently enter the realm of the Freudian uncanny, for they serve as means to capture the heart and soul of the characters in challenging the autonomy of the subject, instead of being just an ornament in the scene.

Jacob’s room is essentially a place that evokes the experience of the uncanny. After Jacob’s imminent death, Woolf alludes to the place with the following words:

> ‘He left everything just as it was,’ Bonamy marvelled. ‘Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for anyone to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?’ he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob's room.
> (…)
> Bonamy took up a bill for a hunting-crop.
> ‘That seems to be paid,’ he said.
> There were Sandra's letters.
> Mrs. Durrant was taking a party to Greenwich.
> Lady Rocksbier hoped for the pleasure….
> Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (Woolf 2046-247)

Through the process of mourning, the chair, the curtains, and Sandra’s letters come to life as a remembrance of Jacob. The room, which is a former symbol of “individuality—of private thoughts” (Cirlot 274), opens to the people who are grieving Jacob’s loss. Thus, the space that was once familiar suddenly becomes ‘unhomely’

transmitting not only a sense of loss but also of discomfort, and even dread. According to Freud, "it is in the highest degree uncanny when an inanimate object (…) comes to life" (246), and all the objects around the room and the room itself become animated, for they seem to evoke Jacob as though he was there. Whenever Woolf wants to address the sense of loss and emptiness left by the absence of Jacob, she returns to his room as though the room was this animated space that preserves, in its foundations, the essence of Jacob. Another example of the animation of an object that is never meant to come to life, takes place at the end of the novel when Betty holds out to Bonamy a pair of Jacob's old shoes, asking "'What am I to do with these, Mr Bonamy?'" (Woolf 247). The object emerges as a catalyst of the uncanny since, although familiar, it has become alien to the point of not knowing where the shoes belong.

According to Freud, another aspect of the uncanny is a "compulsion to repeat" (238). Woolf tends to repeat situations or describe objects using the same words, such as the room, which appears twice throughout the narrative, the episode between Jacob and Mr Floyd previously mentioned, or the out loud calls that remain unanswered. These situations in conflation with the nature of elegy result in a panorama in which the compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny. Furthermore, repetition often leads to the overlapping of time frames that results in "the analogy of destinies and a cyclical view of time" (Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen 37). Then Woolf, by overlapping memories of Jacob, creates intervals where past, present and future are forced to co-exist. Therefore, different versions of the same Jacob are created; this alludes to another aspect of the uncanny that Freud discusses: the presence of 'the double' or Doppelgänger.

Freud contends that the presence of the double occurs when "there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (234) which can be represented in "the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the

same names through several consecutive generations" (Freud 234). Thus, the presence of the double is also noted in episodes that infer Jacob's 'interchanging of the self'. When Jacob goes to Cambridge, Woolf introduces him through the memory of Mrs Norman: in a train journey to Cambridge, she describes Jacob as a "powerfully built young man" (Woolf 35) mentioning that "he was just the same age as her own boy" (Woolf 37). She also notes that "he was in some way or other –to her at least—nice, handsome, interesting, distinguished, well built, like her own boy?" (Woolf 37). Although the comparison is put into question, the relationship established between the two young men persists. The question is actually formulated by an unnamed self-conscious narrator who affirms that "one must do the best one can with her report" (Woolf 37).

As an elegy, *Jacob's Room* attests to an experience of the uncanny; all familiar objects, including Jacob's room itself, lose their original essence after Jacobs's tragic fate. The uncanny resonates with those dealing with psychological trauma "as it entails an unexpected, painful encounter of a rupture with what the psyche conceives of as normal or foreseeable experience" (Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen 63). For a traumatized society that lost its sons to war, reviving them results necessary to their mourning process; and thus, Jacob remains, haunting through uncanny traces the memories of the people who mourn and grieve his loss.

3. Conclusion and Further Research

The present dissertation has analysed the representation of the psychological trauma of war in Virginia Woolf's experimental work *Jacob's Room*. It has been argued that the representational crisis that resulted from the unprecedented events of the First World War led to more experimental literature that departed from conventional war narratives to convey the sense of loss and mourning that society experienced during and after the conflict.

Woolf's representation of trauma has been upheld through the ghostly figure of Jacob Flanders. This connection has been argued, first, through the relationship between trauma and haunting that Cathy Caruth established in her work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996); second, through the textual description of Jacob Flanders in which he is depicted as a spectre; and third, through LaCapra's theory of 'working through' that establishes the need to undisclosed the past to cope with the issues of the present.

Furthermore, it has been argued that to address Jacob's ghostly presence in the text, Woolf relies on the aesthetics of absence. I have explored Jacob's deliberate textual absence by revealing his inability to act as a vocal agent, the lack of precision in his depiction, and the narrative aspects that textually allude to his absence: Jacob's room itself and the visual gaps in the narrative. Besides, special attention has been paid to Jacob's uncanny traces in the text that result from reviving him through the process of mourning.

For further research, a logical step forward would be to explore the aesthetics of absence in Virginia Woolf's experimental novel *The Waves* (1931). It would be interesting to analyse the character of Perceval who, like Jacob Flanders, doesn't act as a vocal agent and lacks participation in the novel, although his presence is crucial in the narrative.

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