CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Jacob's Room

Virginia Woolf · *1922 · original English text*

Betty Flanders writes on the sand that there is nothing for it but to leave. The book that follows is the life of her son Jacob, seen in fragments, rooms, and other people's thought, until the room is empty and she holds out a pair of his old shoes. The hosted text is the original English, Project Gutenberg #5670, complete.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How should a reader hold together a life that is given in glimpses, and what is left in a room when the young man does not come back?

“"So of course," wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, "there was nothing for it but to leave."”

Chapter One

Jacob Flanders is never fully possessed by the narrative. He is seen on the beach, at Cambridge, in London, in Greece; other minds move around him. The war is heard before it is named as his end. The last chapter is the empty room, the letters left as they were, and the shoes. Teach the form, and teach the death with gravity. For older students.

KEY CHARACTERS

Jacob Flanders
The young man whose life is given in glimpses, and whose room is left empty

Betty Flanders
His mother, who opens the book on the sand and closes it with the shoes

Richard Bonamy
The friend who stands in the empty room and calls Jacob's name

Clara and the Durrants
Figures in the London and later life around him

AN EMPTY ROOM

> *“"So of course," wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, "there was nothing for it but to leave."”*
>
> Chapter One

> *“"He left everything just as it was," Bonamy marvelled. "Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?" he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob's room.”*
>
> Chapter Fourteen

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

On the Sand

CHAPTER ONE

Betty Flanders writes, pressing her heels in the sand, that there is nothing for it but to leave. The childhood by the sea, the boys, the widow's household, open the book.

- The first sentence of the story is exact, including the quotation marks around Betty's writing
- Jacob is a child here; the book will not stay in childhood
- The sea and the Cornish or Scarborough weather are already a weather of loss
- Woolf's method is already visible: a life in flashes, not a solid block

> *“"So of course," wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, "there was nothing for it but to leave."”*
>
> Chapter One

02

Cambridge, London, and the World Around Him

THE MIDDLE CHAPTERS

Jacob goes up to Cambridge, then into London rooms, friends, and talk. The book keeps leaving him in order to look at the people and streets around him.

- Bonamy, Clara, and the Durrants belong to this life
- The method is the point: Jacob is often most present when he is just out of view
- An empty-room sentence already appears earlier than the close: “Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain”
- Do not try to turn the book into a conventional plot summary only

> *“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.”*
>
> repeated, and again in Chapter Fourteen

03

Greece, and the Sound of Guns

THE LATER TRAVEL, AND CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jacob is seen in Greece. At home, Betty Flanders, half asleep, hears a dull sound and thinks of the sea, of sons fighting for their country, of chickens and of the house at night.

- “Darkness drops like a knife over Greece” is in the hosted text near this movement
- “The guns?” said Betty Flanders, half asleep; she thinks, “It is the sea.”
- The war is present as sound, absence, and rumour before the last chapter names the empty room
- Teach this approach to the war with gravity; the book does not give a battlefield set-piece

04

The Empty Room and the Shoes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bonamy stands in Jacob's room. Nothing is arranged. He wonders whether Jacob thought he would come back. Betty Flanders bursts in, and holds out a pair of Jacob's old shoes.

- “He left everything just as it was,” Bonamy marvelled. “Nothing arranged.”
- The listless air in the empty room returns; then “Jacob! Jacob!” cried Bonamy, standing by the window
- The last gesture is the shoes: “What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?”
- Do not invent a last letter or a battlefield death scene the book does not write

> *“"He left everything just as it was," Bonamy marvelled. "Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?" he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob's room.”*
>
> Chapter Fourteen

05

The Hosted File

PG #5670

The hosted text is complete, original English, 1922. A short novel, and a hard one, for older students.

- This may be read with To the Lighthouse as Woolf's method continued and altered
- Quote the hosted wording, including the hyphen in “arm-chair” and “any one” as two words in the last chapter
- The book is a war book without a battle: the death is an empty room
- Prepare a class for the form; the fragments are the way the life is given

A Life in Glimpses · Mother and Son · Friendship · War and Absence · Time · What a Room Holds

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The story opens: “So of course,” wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, “there was nothing for it but to leave.”
2. Jacob is seen in fragments. The method is the point; do not force the book into a conventional plot only.
3. The close is the empty room. Bonamy wonders whether Jacob thought he would come back. Betty Flanders holds out a pair of his old shoes. Teach the death with gravity; the book does not write a battlefield.
4. “Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain” appears more than once, and returns in Chapter Fourteen.
5. The hosted text is complete, PG #5670, original English, 1922. For older students.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #5670, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/woolf-jacobs-room/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.