



VINTAGE WOOLF

STREET  
HAUNTING  
*and* OTHER  
ESSAYS

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## About the Book

Virginia Woolf began writing reviews for the *Guardian* 'to make a few pence' from her father's death in 1904, and continued until the last decade of her life. The result is a phenomenal collection of articles, of which this selection offers a fascinating glimpse, which display the gifts of a dazzling social and literary critic as well as the development of a brilliant and influential novelist. From reflections on class and education, to slyly ironic reviews, musings on the lives of great men and 'Street Haunting', a superlative tour of her London neighbourhood, this is Woolf at her most thoughtful and entertaining.

## About the Authors

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*. After his death in 1904 Virginia and her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, moved to Bloomsbury and became the centre of 'The Bloomsbury Group'. This informal collective of artists and writers, which included Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry, exerted a powerful influence over early twentieth-century British culture.

In 1912 Virginia married Leonard Woolf, a writer and social reformer. Three years later, her first novel *The Voyage Out* was published, followed by *Night and Day* (1919) and *Jacob's Room* (1922). These first novels show the development of Virginia Woolf's distinctive and innovative narrative style. It was during this time that she and Leonard Woolf founded The Hogarth Press with the publication of the co-authored *Two Stories* in 1917, hand-printed in the dining room of their house in Surrey. The majority of Virginia Woolf's work was first published by The Hogarth Press, and these original texts are now available, together with her selected letters and diaries, from Vintage Classics, which belongs to the publishing group that Hogarth became part of in 1987.

Between 1925 and 1931 Virginia Woolf produced what are now regarded as her finest masterpieces, from *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to the poetic and highly experimental novel *The Waves* (1931). She also maintained an astonishing output of literary criticism, short fiction, journalism and biography, including the playfully subversive *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a passionate feminist essay. This intense creative productivity was often matched by periods of mental

illness, from which she had suffered since her mother's death in 1895. On 28 March 1941, a few months before the publication of her final novel, *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf committed suicide.

Stuart N. Clarke has edited the *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* of the Virginia Woolf Society since its first number in 1999, and has edited volumes 5 and 6 of *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* for The Hogarth Press.

ALSO BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

Novels

*The Voyage Out*

*Night and Day*

*The Years*

*Mrs Dalloway*

*To the Lighthouse*

*Orlando*

*The Waves*

*Between the Acts*

*The Years*

Shorter Fiction

*The Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*

Non-Fiction and Other Works

*Flush*

*Roger Fry*

*A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*

*The Common Reader* Vols 1 and 2

*Selected Diaries* (edited by Anne Oliver Bell)

*Selected Letters* (edited by Joanne Trautmann Banks)

VIRGINIA WOOLF

# Street Haunting and Other Essays

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
Stuart N. Clarke

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



# INTRODUCTION

by Stuart N. Clarke

Virginia Woolf served a long literary apprenticeship. Shortly after her father died in 1904, she started writing reviews for the *Guardian*, a Church of England weekly of considerable influence in the nineteenth century but then in decline. She gradually moved her allegiance to the *Times Literary Supplement*, which had only been founded in 1902, and she remained loyal to it (with decreasing enthusiasm) until its editor Bruce Richmond retired at the end of 1937. Both journals published reviews anonymously and one might have thought that this allowed its contributors greater freedom. In fact, it did not, because the reviews were in effect the mouthpiece of each journal. Of course, as she began to write for other journals and gained in confidence, in time she found that she could allow herself to wander from the restrictions of the book under review.

When Woolf's husband Leonard became literary editor of the *Nation and the Athenaeum* in 1923, she gained an additional freedom, and for it she wrote signed reviews, short unsigned reviews, and even occasional anonymous one-paragraph contributions to miscellaneous columns, such as the following:

Can neither war nor peace teach the French to translate or even to spell English? Glancing through a catalogue of pictures the other day which was thoughtfully provided with translations into English and German, I came upon 'Le Dessert' translated 'Leavings', 'Le torso d'une jeune femme' translated 'Young woman's trunk', and so on and so on. No English proof-reader would dare pass such misquotations of Racine as

we put up with whenever Shakespeare is quoted in French. But there is a charm in the arrogance of French illiteracy, which takes it for granted that all languages save one are the base dialects of savages.<sup>fn1</sup>

Nevertheless, Woolf remained worried by the formal literary manner of many of her essays:

the Victorian manner is perhaps – I am not sure – a disadvantage in writing. When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar? On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud.<sup>fn2</sup>

Woolf's 'sidelong approach' and frequent irony gave her the means to slip controversial subject matter into her novel *Orlando* (1928) and it (just) passed the censors, while Radclyffe Hall's contemporaneous *The Well of Loneliness* was banned. Woolf never wrote a slashing review, so it is rare for her to write something as direct as: 'We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print.'<sup>fn3</sup> Although she was a generous reviewer, one book was to her so entertainingly bad that she was able to produce three reviews of it: for the *TLS*, the *Daily Herald* and the *Athenaeum*. This was of Constance Hill's *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (1920). It is obviously the kind of book that goes in for: 'as we looked upon the steps leading down from the upper room, we fancied that we saw the tiny figure jumping from step to step'. Woolf pretends to puzzle over why Miss Hill chose to write about Miss Mitford, and concludes: 'In the first place, Miss Mitford was a lady; in the second, she was born in the year 1787 ... Surroundings, as they are called, are invariably eighteenth-century surroundings.' Despite Miss Mitford's respectability, she had a father – 'terrible to relate' – an appalling, 'gluttonous, bibulous, amorous old man'. Woolf sums up: 'That is the

worst of writing about ladies; they have fathers as well as teapots.'

In various incarnations and editions *The Week-End Book* has rarely been out of print since its initial appearance in 1924. Woolf thought little of it and her review is written in the form of a description of a country-house party where the guests bicker about the book. She ends with enthusiasm for nature and the great outdoors: 'what did we like, as we trooped ... out of doors? Everything in the whole world ... but not, we agreed, as we rambled off into the vast and glorious freedom of the universe, that book.'

Woolf's irony ranges from the simple to the subtle. In 'Trousers', Woolf confesses that she is unable to grasp the author's thesis, 'Owing to native obtuseness, no doubt'. We have no doubts either: of course Woolf is *not* obtuse. On the other hand, it is easy to read 'Middlebrow' as an essay purely about class, with Woolf as a representative of the upper classes praising the working classes while despising the middle classes. Instead, she is challenging the assumption that high-, middle- and lowbrow correspond to those three classes.<sup>fn4</sup> She is careful to point out: 'I myself have known duchesses who were highbrows, also charwomen'. In 'Thunder at Wembley' it is the British Empire and the mediocrity of its Exhibition she is criticising, by pricing everything at six and eightpence (one-third of £1): 'Dress fabrics, rope, table linen, old masters, sugar, wheat, filigree silver, pepper, birds' nests (edible, and exported to Hong-Kong), camphor, bees-wax, rattans, and the rest - why trouble to ask the price? One knows beforehand - six and eightpence.' She does not jeer at the visitors, who have a 'dignity of their own', even when clustered around a model of 'the Prince of Wales in butter' (she kids you not).

Those who may have struggled with Woolf's modernist novels - *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*,

*The Waves* – will perhaps be surprised by the pellucid prose of Woolf's essays. In them there is none of the affected style that will sometimes be found in the writings of Edith Sitwell and Rose Macaulay. In her novels, Woolf needed to find a form that would express her vision. As she wrote about *Mrs Dalloway*, 'it was necessary to write the book first and to invent a theory afterwards'.<sup>fn5</sup> By contrast, her essays are immediately accessible, and she refused to write for avant-garde magazines with a specific artistic or political slant. She 'fought shy of magazines which have a declared character. Why lay down laws about imaginative writing?'<sup>fn6</sup> It has been said that she 'was arguably the last of the great English essayists'.<sup>fn7</sup> A reviewer wrote in 1932 that 'most readers ... will be enchanted ... whether or not they have read what she is writing about ... When a great novelist brings to the study of fact the qualities that give her such authority in fiction, lovers of fact must be grateful'.<sup>fn8</sup> He was reviewing *The Common Reader: Second Series*, which contains distinguished essays on *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, Donne, *Robinson Crusoe*, Swift's *Journal to Stella*, Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, among many others. Quentin Bell wrote that in Woolf's 'critical works one can sometimes hear her voice, but it is always a little formal, a little editorial'.<sup>fn9</sup> *The Common Reader: Second Series* deals with few contemporary authors, and only one essay from it, 'The Niece of an Earl', is included below.

Virginia Woolf is popularly perceived as remote, chilly and austere. So powerful is this image that even her spoof biography *Orlando* is sometimes seen as an aberration. Yet she wrote in her diary about it: 'I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (& this was serious) to give things their caricature value.'<sup>fn10</sup> While some critics have even taken seriously her preface to the book, her friend Raymond Mortimer, who is among those listed in it, was one of the first to describe

*Orlando* as a 'lark': 'The preface is a parody of prefaces and the whole book is written in tearing high spirits'.<sup>fn11</sup> Her friends and family took this aspect of Woolf for granted. Vita Sackville-West's younger son Nigel Nicolson remembered that 'when she was coming to stay ... Our immediate reaction was "Oh, good."' Her nephews and niece reacted similarly: 'Everybody said, "Oh, hooray, Virginia's coming to tea. Now we shall enjoy ourselves."' Because she was very enlivening and spiring.<sup>fn12</sup> Her effect on adults was similar. Her brother-in-law Clive Bell recalled

some dark, uneasy, winter days during the first war in the depth of the country with Lytton Strachey. After lunch, as we watched the rain pour down and premature darkness roll up, he said, in his personal, searching way, 'Loves apart, whom would you most like to see coming up the drive?' I hesitated a moment, and he supplied the answer: 'Virginia of course.'<sup>fn13</sup>

If you read Woolf's *Selected Letters* (also published by Vintage), you will get some idea of the enlivening personality that her family and friends experienced. Of her books, the one that most closely expresses her personality is *A Room of One's Own*. Her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell tells us that there 'one hears Virginia speaking ... she gets very close to her conversational style'.<sup>fn14</sup> When she contrasts the luxury of the men's colleges with the poverty of the women's in *A Room of One's Own*, she compares two meals: lunch in a men's college with 'partridges, many and various, [that] came with all their retinue of sauces and salads', while dinner at a women's college has only 'beef with its attendant greens and potatoes - a homely trinity, suggesting the rumps of cattle in a muddy market'. The dinner ends with biscuits and cheese: 'here the water-jug was liberally passed round, for it is the nature of biscuits to be dry, and these were biscuits to the core'.<sup>fn15</sup>

But there are streaks of humour, wit and above all irony that run through all of Woolf's writings, and we smile along with her. Here, for example, she slips this little remark into a review: 'In England the atmosphere is naturally aqueous, and as if there weren't enough outside, we drench ourselves with tea and coffee at least four times a day.'<sup>fn16</sup> In 'America, which I Have Never Seen ...', she imagines a country that she would never visit:

'The Americans never sit down to a square meal. They perch on steel stools and take what they want from a perambulating rail. The Americans have swallowed their dinner by the time it takes us to decide whether the widow of a general takes precedence of the wife of a knight commander of the Star of India.'

Most of the essays in this collection are fairly informal, and they were chosen with the principal intention of entertaining the reader. But, just as in that quotation from 'America, which I Have Never Seen ...', where there is an implied criticism of the British class system, behind the humour is Woolf's consistent view of the world: that books should be well written; that the British Empire, the class system and the patriarchy oppress; and that individuals have an intrinsic interest of their own.

The essays below have been allocated to somewhat arbitrary categories, including reviews of books she considered second-rate (although sometimes it is the subjects of the books that are second-rate) and critiques of Empire and of the class system. There is a section on the lives of the obscure: 'one likes romantically to feel oneself a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost'.<sup>fn17</sup> Woolf read all sorts of biographies by all sorts of people. Who would have expected her to have read *By Guess and by God*, which she calls 'a very exciting yet infinitely childish book' and which turns out to have been about the author's experiences in the submarine fleet in the First World War? In reality she

was so far removed from the fabled ivory tower that she always wanted to know what it was like – ‘being a conductor, being a woman with ten children and thirty-five shillings a week, being a stockbroker, being an admiral, being a bank clerk, being a dressmaker, being a duchess, being a miner, being a cook, being a prostitute’.

In the education section, Woolf touches on class, money, privilege, and women’s (lack of) education. The jokes in *A Room of One’s Own* were not just jests. Woolf exaggerates the differences between the men’s and women’s colleges so that the narrator (and the reader) will question: ‘Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?’

Finally, there is a disparate group of essays on places, ending with one of Woolf’s best and longest essays, ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’. Evocative and indeed haunting – how can we explain the significance of ‘the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer’s shop’? Here we find her writing the pure essay: ‘The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure’. It ‘must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world’.<sup>fn18</sup> In ‘Street Haunting’ Woolf walks us around her patch of London, introducing us to some of its denizens: fascinating, unthreatening, but ultimately mysterious. Like Woolf herself. She is the guide at our shoulder, but perhaps we also glimpse her suddenly at a distance:

the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some drawing-room, its easy chairs, its papers, its china, its inlaid table, and the figure of a woman, accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which – She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in?

<sup>fn1</sup> An untitled paragraph in the ‘From Alpha to Omega’ column signed ‘Omicron’ in the *Nation and the Athenaeum*, 22 November 1924. It was introduced by ‘A correspondent writes:’. The offending catalogue has not been identified, but it is likely to have had *torse*, the French for *torso*. The paragraph

is reprinted in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, ed. Andrew McNeillie (Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 459.

fn2 *Moments of Being* (Pimlico, 2002), p. 152.

fn3 'The Modern Essay' in *The Common Reader* (Vintage 2003), p. 217.

fn4 See Melba Cuddy-Keane, 'Brow-Beating, Wool-Gathering, and the Brain of the Common Reader' in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (Pace University Press, 2001), pp. 58-66.

fn5 *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie (Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 550.

fn6 *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 6, ed. Nigel Nicolson (Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 252.

fn7 Introduction, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1, ed. Andrew McNeillie (Hogarth Press, 1986), p. ix.

fn8 Quoted in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 6, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (Hogarth Press, 2011), p. 477 n2.

fn9 Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (Pimlico, 1996), p. 144 in vol. 2.

fn10 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 203.

fn11 Raymond Mortimer, 'Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Strachey', *Bookman* (New York), February 1929, p. 628, reprinted in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (Routledge, 1975), p. 241.

fn12 'The Mind and Times of Virginia Woolf' (from 16' 44"), additional feature (2003) on *The Hours* DVD (Z1 D888844).

fn13 Clive Bell, *Old Friends* (Chatto & Windus, 1956), p. 118.

fn14 *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* p. 144 in vol. 2.

fn15 'A Room of One's Own' and 'Three Guineas' (Vintage, 1996), pp. 10, 16, 17.

fn16 'A Talk about Memoirs', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, p. 181.

fn17 'Taylors and Edgeworths', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 4, p. 119.

fn18 'The Modern Essay', p. 211.



## The Common Reader

There is a sentence in Dr Johnson's Life of Gray which might well be written up in all those rooms, too humble to be called libraries, yet full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people. '... I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours.' It defines their qualities; it dignifies their aims; it bestows upon a pursuit which devours a great deal of time, and is yet apt to leave behind it nothing very substantial, the sanction of the great man's approval.

The common reader, as Dr Johnson implies, differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole - a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing. He never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric which shall give him the temporary satisfaction of looking sufficiently like the real object to allow of affection, laughter, and argument. Hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds his structure, his deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out; but if he has, as Dr Johnson maintained, some say in

the final distribution of poetical honours, then, perhaps, it may be worth while to write down a few of the ideas and opinions which, insignificant in themselves, yet contribute to so mighty a result.

# Bad Books

# The Anatomy of Fiction

Sometimes at country fairs you may have seen a professor on a platform exhorting the peasants to come up and buy his wonder-working pills. Whatever their disease, whether of body or mind, he has a name for it and a cure; and if they hang back in doubt he whips out a diagram and points with a stick at different parts of the human anatomy, and gabbles so quickly such long Latin words that first one shyly stumbles forward and then another, and takes his bolus and carries it away and unwraps it secretly and swallows it in hope. 'The young aspirant to the art of fiction who knows himself to be an incipient realist', Mr Hamilton vociferates from his platform, and the incipient realists advance and receive - for the professor is generous - five pills together with nine suggestions for home treatment. In other words they are given five 'review questions' to answer, and are advised to read nine books or parts of books, '1. Define the difference between realism and romance. 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the realistic method? 3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the romantic method?' - that is the kind of thing they work out at home, and with such success that a 'revised and enlarged edition' of the book has been issued on the tenth anniversary of the first publication. In America, evidently, Mr Hamilton is considered a very good professor, and has no doubt a bundle of testimonials to the miraculous nature of his cures. But let us consider: Mr Hamilton is not a professor; we are not credulous ploughboys; and fiction is not a disease.

In England we have been in the habit of saying that fiction is an art. We are not taught to write novels; dissuasion is our most usual incentive; and though perhaps the critics have 'deduced and formulated the general principles of the art of fiction', they have done their work as a good housemaid does hers; they have tidied up after the party is over. Criticism seldom or never applies to the problems of the present moment. On the other hand, any good novelist, whether he be dead or alive, has something to say about them, though it is said very indirectly, differently to different people, and differently at different stages of the same person's development. Thus, if anything is essential, it is essential to do your reading with your own eyes. But, to tell the truth, Mr Hamilton has sickened us of the didactic style. Nothing appears to be essential save perhaps an elementary knowledge of the A.B.C., and it is pleasant to remember that Henry James, when he took to dictation, dispensed even with that. Still, if you have a natural taste for books it is probable that after reading *Emma*, to take an instance, some reflections upon the art of Jane Austen may occur to you - how exquisitely one incident relieves another; how definitely, by not saying something, she says it; how surprising, therefore, her expressive phrases when they come. Between the sentences, apart from the story, a little shape of some kind builds itself up. But learning from books is a capricious business at best, and the teaching so vague and changeable that in the end, far from calling books either 'romantic' or 'realistic', you will be more inclined to think them, as you think people, very mixed, very distinct, very unlike one another. But this would never do for Mr Hamilton. According to him every work of art can be taken to pieces, and those pieces can be named and numbered, divided and sub-divided, and given their order of precedence, like the internal organs of a frog. Thus we learn how to put them together again - that is, according to Mr Hamilton, we

learn how to write. There is the complication, the major knot, and the explication; the inductive and the deductive methods; the kinetic and the static; the direct and the indirect with sub-divisions of the same; connotation, annotation, personal equation, and denotation; logical sequence and chronological succession – all parts of the frog and all capable of further dissection. Take the case of ‘emphasis’ alone. There are eleven kinds of emphasis. Emphasis by terminal position, by initial position, by pause, by direct proportion, by inverse proportion, by iteration, by antithesis, by surprise, by suspense – are you tired already? But consider the Americans. They have written one story eleven times over, with a different kind of emphasis in each. Indeed, Mr Hamilton’s book teaches us a great deal about the Americans.

Still, as Mr Hamilton uneasily perceives now and then, you may dissect your frog, but you cannot make it hop; there is, unfortunately, such a thing as life. Directions for imparting life to fiction are given, such as to ‘train yourself rigorously never to be bored’, and to cultivate ‘a lively curiosity and a ready sympathy’. But it is evident that Mr Hamilton does not like life, and, with such a tidy museum as his, who can blame him? He has found life very troublesome, and, if you come to consider it, rather unnecessary; for, after all, there are books. But Mr Hamilton’s views on life are so illuminating that they must be given in his own words:

Perhaps in the actual world we should never bother to converse with illiterate provincial people; and yet we do not feel it a waste of time and energy to meet them in the pages of *Middlemarch*. For my own part, I have always, in actual life, avoided meeting the sort of people that appear in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*; and yet I find it not only interesting but profitable to associate with them through the entire extent of a rather lengthy novel. ‘Illiterate provincial people’ – ‘interesting but profitable’ – ‘waste of time and energy’ – now after much wandering and painful toil we are on the right track at last. For long it seemed that nothing could reward the American people for having written eleven

themes upon the eleven kinds of emphasis. But now we perceive dimly that there is something to be gained by the daily flagellation of the exhausted brain. It is not a title; it has nothing to do with pleasure or with literature; but it appears that Mr Hamilton and his industrious band see far off upon the horizon a circle of superior enlightenment to which, if only they can keep on reading long enough, they may attain. Every book demolished is a milestone passed. Books in foreign languages count twice over. And a book like this is of the nature of a dissertation to be sent up to the supreme examiner, who may be, for anything we know, the ghost of Matthew Arnold. Will Mr Hamilton be admitted? Can they have the heart to reject anyone so ardent, so dusty, so worthy, so out of breath? Alas! look at his quotations; consider his comments upon them:

‘The murmuring of innumerable bees’ ... The word innumerable, which denotes to the intellect merely ‘incapable of being numbered,’ is, in this connection, made to suggest to the senses the murmuring of bees.

The credulous ploughboy could have told him more than that. It is not necessary to quote what he says about ‘magic casements’ and the ‘iniquity of oblivion’. Is there not, upon page 208, a definition of style?

No; Mr Hamilton will never be admitted; he and his disciples must toil for ever in the desert sand, and the circle of illumination will, we fear, grow fainter and farther upon their horizon. It is curious to find, after writing the above sentence, how little one is ashamed of being, where literature is concerned, an unmitigated snob.