‘TWO LARGE FEET, IN TIGHT SHOES, SO THAT THE BUNIONS SHOWED’: MISSHAPEN FEET AS EMBLEMS OF CLASS CONSTRAINT IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S *THE YEARS*

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Virginia Woolf noted in her diary on Tuesday 25 April 1933 that she wanted *The Years* (1937) to capture ‘the whole of the present society—nothing less: facts, as well as the vision’ (D 4 151). This ambition to unite precise observation with imaginative reach shapes the novel’s long party scene, where Peggy Pargiter reflects on the limitations of the social class system and senses the faint outline of a more equitable future. Woolf grounds these reflections in the physical world, allowing a single, sharply rendered detail to interrupt Peggy’s idealism and return her to the social realities around her. The image of ‘two large feet, in tight shoes, so that the bunions showed’ (TY 372) condenses the novel’s social commentary into a concentrated emblem of classed embodiment. This article argues that this brief but potent moment shows how class leaves its mark on the moving body, revealing the pressures that shape and constrain individuals even in the midst of dance.

Turning to this moment in the party scene, Peggy sits at her aunt Eleanor’s feet and imagines hearing ‘country people singing, and the rattle of wheels on the road’ (TY 365, 372). This brief pastoral picture offers her a glimpse of a society less bound by the demands of class, a world in which voices join rather than compete. The image recalls the wish, expressed again in *Between the Acts* (1941), to loosen the rigid divisions that shape English life, where Miss La Trobe hopes her village pageant might ‘disrupt’ established ranks and ‘smash into atoms’ the habits that keep people apart (BTA 135). Peggy’s vision is similar in spirit: it gestures towards a more open, companionable future. Yet it lasts only a moment. As the scene comes back into focus, her imagined countryside recedes and she is returned to the present, where a dancer’s swollen, ill-fitting shoes bring her thoughts back to the pressures of class that shape everyday movement in the room around her.

As Peggy’s vision fades, ‘the blur became distinct’, and her attention settles first on the ‘line of the bookcase opposite’, then on a ‘wisp of muslin’, and finally on the pair of ‘feet, in tight shoes, so that the bunions showed’, which ‘stopped in front of her’ (TY 372). This sudden shift from her dream of social equity to this striking physical detail underlines the distance between what she yearns for and what she observes. The sight of the dancer’s feet—shoes painfully tight—embodies the pressures of class far more sharply than any abstract reflection could. Woolf uses this incongruous moment to show how the weight of social expectation leaves its mark on the body itself, interrupting Peggy’s hopefulness with the stubborn reality of stilted movement on the dance floor.

The bunions invite closer attention. Woolf selects a detail that is firmly rooted in the physical world, and its significance emerges from that very specificity. According to the National Health Service (NHS), bunions are painful ‘bony lumps that form on the side of the feet, usually affecting the big toe joint’ (National Health Service). While they can be hereditary, medical studies from Harvard Medical School show that bunions often develop when feet are repeatedly confined in narrow, pointed shoes, leaving individuals who stand for long hours—such as dancers or nurses—particularly vulnerable (Harvard Health Publishing). Read alongside this medical context, the dancer’s large feet, tight shoes and swollen joints reveal a body under strain rather than one moving freely across the floor. His steps are cramped and stymied, shaped by the pressure to appear suitably turned out even when the shoes cause pain. By placing this small but vivid detail before Peggy, Woolf grounds her reflections in a visible sign of the ways class can imprint itself on the body. In the ‘two large feet’ (TY 372), the demands of social expectation quite literally press into flesh and bone.

A clearer connection emerges when we recall the scene in ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’ (1927), where Woolf again uses a person’s gait to expose the artificial, carefully performed nature of class identity. A woman with dwarfism enters a shoe shop and tries on a pair of elegant shoes; Woolf describes her feet as ‘arched’, ‘aristocratic’ (SH 26), outward signs of status despite the fact that she is dressed shabbily. After purchasing the shoes, she steps back into the street and immediately begins what Woolf calls a ‘hobbling grotesque dance’ (27). The dance is grotesque because it exaggerates the very gestures through which the ‘elite’ display their distinction. Her movements set a small, visible choreography to which others on the pavement adjust, revealing class not as natural superiority but as a set of learned and awkward performances. Observing this, an old man is ‘overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle’ (27), a response that mirrors Woolf’s own quiet critique of such posturing, while also reminding us that her portrayals of the working classes could themselves be shaped by troubling assumptions. Seen in this light, the dancer’s bunioned feet in *The Years* take on added force: his tight shoes compel a strained, almost hobbling shuffle, echoing the distorted movements in

‘Street Haunting’. Together, the two scenes show how Woolf uses laboured movement to reveal the performed nature of class and the pressure it exacts.

Bringing these moments together, the bunioned feet Peggy Pargiter observes become a concentrated emblem of Woolf’s critique of social hierarchy in *The Years*. Like the ‘perfectly proportioned’ feet in ‘Street Haunting’ (26), which signal class privilege even as they produce a strained, contorted dance, the dancer’s misshapen feet materialise the pressures of social expectation, showing how even the ostensibly advantaged are shaped and constrained by rigid norms. Woolf presents this bodily distortion with deliberate understatement: the image itself, painful, contorted, and insistently corporeal, reveals the regulatory force of class, even though she offers no explicit commentary on it. As Thomas S. Davis notes, *The Years* reads as ‘a pained eulogy for the narrative of historical progress and the promises of human emancipation it could not keep’ (18), and the bunioned feet crystallise that uneasy balance between hope and disappointment (TY 372). The novel does not imagine a fully reconfigured social order, yet the dancer’s painful shuffle still gestures toward the desire for something better. In this single, seemingly minor image, Woolf shows how the body can bear witness to social constraint while simultaneously gesturing toward transformation—a testament to her subtle, enduring power as a social and literary critic.

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