

## **“Two Large Feet, in Tight Shoes, so that the Bunions Showed”: Misshapen Feet as Emblems of Class Constraint in *The Years***

On 25 April 1933, Virginia Woolf noted in her diary that she wanted *The Years* (1937) to capture “the whole of the present society—nothing less: facts, as well as the vision” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* [D] 4 151). In the novel, this dual ambition, at once documentary and discerning, structures the extended dance scene where Peggy Pargiter contemplates both the collapse of the existing social order and the possibility of a truly egalitarian future (*The Years* [TY] 306-404). Woolf achieves this melding of ‘facts, as well as vision’, not through abstract generalisation, but by forcing vision to encounter facts in a series of stark, material images (D4 151).

One such moment occurs when Peggy imagines “country people singing” (TY 372). In this representation, the singers figure an egalitarian society through a chorus of voices that resist hierarchy, producing social cohesion via shared participation. Peggy’s vision suspends rigid class divisions, reimagining society as collective and harmonious rather than fragmented and conflictual, and resonates with the more explicit artistic programme of Miss LaTrobe in *Between the Acts* (1941), whose drama seeks to “disrupt” and “smash into atoms” entrenched social strata (*Between the Acts* [BTA] 135), linking aesthetic form to a critique of social hierarchy.

As Peggy’s visionary perception of social equality begins to recede, “the blur became distinct,” writes Woolf, and she gradually returns to the present moment (TY 372). Her gaze settles on a “wisp of muslin,” the “line of the bookcase,” and finally “two large feet, in tight shoes, so that the bunions showed” (TY 372).<sup>1</sup> The focus shifts from Peggy’s vision of equality to the concrete reality of the dance around her, contrasting the seriousness of her insight with the slightly absurd sight of two misshapen feet, disproportionately large for their shoes, that “stopped in front of her” (TY 372). The dancer’s outsized, almost absurd feet draw Peggy—and the reader—away from an expansive perception of social parity, redirecting attention to the immediate, tangible reality of the dance. In so doing, Woolf registers both the materiality of the body and its embedded social significance, linking the striking incongruity of the feet to broader questions of material fact and social significance.

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). They can be hereditary, but 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). In emphasising the dancer’s large feet, ill-fitting shoes, and the resulting swollen joints, Woolf highlights the physical affliction and the distorted gait to which he is reduced, producing, at best, an agonised shuffle rather than graceful movement across the floor. The image also functions symbolically: the contorted feet signify the constraining pressures of

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the word “feet” recurs throughout *The Years*, creating a steady yet irregular pattern that stipple the text, subtly emphasizing bodily movement without imposing a uniform rhythm.

class identity, a system in which strict social expectations can impair the individual. Therefore, the prominence of the “two large feet” that appear in Peggy’s sequence of observations signals a striking culmination, indicating both physical distress and the social ranking that marks the ostensibly privileged (TY 372).

Where in *The Years* the dancer’s misshapen feet expose the pressures of social ranking, in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1927), Woolf similarly turns to the corporeal—most notably the feet—to illustrate the constraints of upper-class privilege under a grotesque class system. A woman with dwarfism, whose diminutive stature symbolizes the impediments of social hierarchies, has feet described as “arched” and “aristocratic” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” [SH] 26), indicating her elevated social position. Notwithstanding Woolf’s observation that she is “shabbily dressed,” her aristocratic feet mark her status, and she takes delight in them, stepping this way and then that: “Look at my feet, she seemed to be saying” (27). Leaving the shop, she joins the “hobbling grotesque dance” that overtakes the street (27). The “hobble and tap of the dwarf’s dance,” observed by an old man “suddenly overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle” (27–28), renders visible the distorted, regimented choreography of social status, exposing the preposterous and unsightly ways in which rank dictates and warps individual and collective movement.

In sum, the bunioned feet that Peggy observes stand as a striking emblem of Woolf’s critique of social hierarchy in *The Years*. Like the “perfectly proportioned” feet of the woman in *Street Haunting* (26), which signal privilege even as they participate in a distorted, constraining dance, the dancer’s misshapen feet in *The Years* materialise the pressures and deformations imposed by class, showing how even the socially advantaged are constrained by social expectations. Woolf conveys this corporeal distortion with remarkable subtlety: the image itself, painful, contorted, and insistently material, articulates the injustices of the class system without overt commentary. Although *The Years* stops short of presenting a fully realised alternative to social stratification, the dancer’s agonised shuffle nonetheless gestures towards a more equitable future, suggested symbolically yet impossible to ignore. In this singular image, Woolf compresses critique and hope, making the “two large feet, in tight shoes, so that the bunions showed” an enduring emblem of both the burden of class hierarchies and the latent yearning for change (TY 372).

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