Both Jacob’s Room by Virginia Woolf and Maurice by E. M. Forster feature a male protagonist who grows up prior to World War I, who shapes his sexuality in ways that do not conform to society’s prescribed opposite-sex attraction. Jacob is presumably bisexual, as he alternates freely between male and female lovers; Maurice, on the other hand, is exclusively homosexual. Because homosexuality was punishable by law during the early twentieth-century, authors publishing work about same-sex love affairs risked facing obscenity trials against their books. The threat of an obscenity trial made self-censorship necessary, so Woolf had to suppress explicit references to homosexuality to avoid detection, while Forster, who could have faced not only an obscenity trial but also trial for practicing homosexuality, simply decided that the work should be published posthumously. Despite nuanced language throughout the texts, both authors clearly separate hetero- and homosexual desire into different spheres: the appearance of heterosexual attraction is enforced in family homes and public areas, while homosexual love thrives in the unstructured natural world of the outdoors and within intellectual settings, such as Cambridge University rooms.

As noted previously, the title character in Jacob’s Room is presumably bisexual. As such, the rooms Jacob chooses as the settings for intimate moments vary depending on his lover’s gender. I argue that Jacob demonstrates heterosexual attraction primarily during parties, in public places, or in his London flat. His homosexual experiences, however, take place not only out of sight from the public, but also out of sight of the reader. If one wishes to find Jacob’s homosexual encounters in the text, one must look either within the private, intellectual spaces of his male counterparts, such as Simeon’s rooms at Cambridge or Richard Bonamy’s rooms at Lincoln’s Inn, or in the natural world—for example, drifting on the Cam in a rowboat or walking on Haverstock Hill in the night—which allows the characters a freedom that cannot be experienced under the watchful eyes of society.

Unlike Jacob, Maurice is strictly homosexual and does not engage in heterosexual intimacy. Within the rooms at Cambridge and when present in nature, Maurice is free to practice his homosexuality. While some locations force ideas of heterosexuality on Maurice and his first platonic lover, Clive Durham, the overarching presence of nature serves as a safe location for Maurice’s homosexuality to thrive with his second lover, Alec Scudder.

Cambridge

The Cambridge Apostles, a society that Forster and most of the men in the Bloomsbury Group belonged to, “preached what they believed to be an alternative creed of manliness and transcendental love” (Taddeo 197), referred to as Brotherly Love. During Lytton Strachey’s time in the Apostles, the term “Higher Sodomy” came to replace
the concept of Brotherly Love, though, as Julie Anne Taddeo argues, the term may be a bit misleading; it had actually little to do with consummated homosexual acts. “Higher Sodomy” referred to “the view that women were inferior to men both in mind and body” (Deacon 59). Taddeo notes that, to assume that the term “Higher Sodomy was merely a code name for homosexuality obscures the complex emotions and experiences that united, and sometimes divided, the Society members” (198); instead, Higher Sodomy represented the higher bonds of friendship and intimacy that males could experience with each other—higher, that is, than the type of bonds that they might experience with women.

For the homosexual men who joined the Apostles, Cambridge offered a sanctuary—a safe place for them to meet others who enjoyed the intimate company of men. It was easy for a meeting of men to take place without being suspected of indecency at the University, creating the opportunity for same-sex relationships to develop—Platonic or not. As Richard Deacon argues, the Cambridge Apostles held the belief that “love of a man for a man was greater than that of man for woman” (59); this love between men, combined with the intellectual stimulation that the Apostles experienced when sharing their writing and when debating, was what held the Apostles together. Unfortunately, the brotherly love practiced by the Apostles was only shielded within the walls of Cambridge; the members knew that “outside this protective atmosphere…any degree of intimacy between men called into question their respectability and masculinity” (Taddeo 200) and rendered them susceptible to charges of gross indecency under the Labouchère Amendment.

Both Jacob and Maurice experience intimate moments during their education at Cambridge. These scenes are not explicit in their descriptions, but they do contain language that creates sexual tension between the characters and hints at male-male intercourse. In *Jacob’s Room*, a moment between Jacob and his friend Simeon at Cambridge demonstrates the homoerotic elements of the Apostles. The scene is, quite literally, dripping with nuanced language. The two are alone as Jacob stood “over Simeon’s chair…He appeared extraordinarily happy, as if his pleasure would brim and spill down the sides…[I]ntimacy—the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. Without need of movement or speech it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the lustre of pearl” (*JR* 45). Vara Neverow argues that the references in this passage suggest Jacob has an erection at the very least (154); additionally, “his pleasure…brim[ming] and spill[ing] down the sides” alludes to ejaculation, culminating in a pool of intimacy colored “with the lustre of pearl”—a subtle reference to semen. Rachel Hollander argues that female sexuality is represented in this scene as well: the “pool” (*JR* 45) of intimacy represents the feminine, and the pearly liquid “wash[ing] over everything” (*JR* 45) represents the masculine. The combination of these elements gives the scene an androgynous feel. Hollander finds that this androgyny makes the moment between Jacob and Simeon “free of social expectations and constraints” (59-60), which allows the intimacy of the moment to develop from a natural attraction between the two men and to be uninterrupted in its progression.

In *Maurice*, the title character meets Clive, his future platonic lover, while studying at Cambridge. As in the scene where Jacob and Simeon engage in their androgynous intimacy, Maurice and Clive experience a moment that is likewise sexually tense without being explicit: Clive “squatted on the rug close to Maurice’s chair,” and said, “Give me a cigarette. Put it in my mouth” (44). The proximity of their bodies implies that Clive’s
head would be nearly level to Maurice’s abdomen. Clive’s command that Maurice put the phallic-like cigarette in his mouth puts more emphasis on the sexual tension in the room and alludes to oral sex. After this, Maurice begins lightly hitting Clive in the head with his fists and pulling his hair, actions which lead to Clive falling “between Maurice’s knees” (45). The emphasis in this scene is on Clive’s head and mouth lingering around Maurice’s groin area, as well as Maurice—inadvertently?—causing Clive to fall between his knees. Evidently, even if they are not actually engaging in oral sex, there is the implication that the two are comfortable being in such positions with each other. This scene is more descriptive than the one between Jacob and Simeon, likely because Forster did not intend to publish Maurice and did not have to censor himself as much as Woolf did when writing Jacob’s Room.

**Nature**

In both novels, nature and the outdoors provide a safe location for the characters to express their homosexuality. As was indicated above, Woolf’s necessary self-censorship makes Jacob’s Room less explicit in its depictions of homosexuality than is Maurice. Nevertheless, references to semen and male-male love are present when Jacob and Timmy Durrant take a boat trip on the Cam together. Possible references to the pleasures of ejaculation and the pearly color of semen are to be found when the two are rowing to the island: “And the river too runs past…cloying the oar that dips in it and drops white drops from the blade, swimming green and deep over the bowed rushes, as if lavishly caressing them” (JR 35). The playful water and the semen-like white drops, as well as the rushes—probable phallic symbols—being “lavishly” caressed are all indications that Jacob and Timmy are enjoying the scenery in a way that is not entirely platonic.

If those sexual innuendos were not clear enough, Jacob also experiences an unexplained outburst as Timmy, “without getting up, shoved their boat closer to the bank” (JR 36) to avoid being seen by Lady Miller’s group of friends.

“Oh-h-h-h,” groaned Jacob, as the boat rocked, and the trees rocking, and the white dresses and the white flannel trousers drew out long and wavering up the bank.

“Oh-h-h-h!” He sat up, and felt as if a piece of elastic has snapped in his face. (JR 36)

Up to this point, the motion of the boat has had no effect on either character. That Jacob has suddenly become seasick seems unlikely; rather, Timmy’s effort to hide their boat from Lady Miller and her picnic implies that Jacob and Timmy would rather not be seen by the group—presumably, from Jacob’s possibly climactic outburst, because they are engaging in intercourse. That Jacob feels as though “a piece of elastic” has snapped him in the face also alludes to “the elastic air” of May (JR 35), which sets up the springtime pastoral setting complete with “juicy and thick” (35) grass and shared sexual satisfaction (Neverow 155). The elastic could further represent Jacob’s return to reality after his orgasmic bliss; after his inability to see clearly, the sharp contrast between his moment of sexual pleasure and his reawakening, in a sense, could be as sharp as a snap of elastic.
Nature also appears in *Jacob’s Room* in one heterosexual encounter with Laurette the prostitute. Laurette’s room represents a false version of nature, however, which leads Jacob to an unsatisfying end to his sexual escapade. The room is described as follows:

The fire burnt clear between two pillars of *greenish* marble, and on the mantelpiece there was a *green* clock…As for pictures—a maiden in a large hat offered *roses* over the *garden* gate…and the curtains, accurately looped, were of *plush* and *green* too.

Laurette and Jacob sat…in two large chairs covered in *green plush*. (JR 109, italics mine.)

Here, Woolf is clearly highlighting the lush, green elements of Laurette’s room that are reminiscent of the lush grass on Jacob’s first boat trip with Timmy. However, Jacob’s reactions during the two scenes are remarkably different. This time, there are no orgasmic cries of “Oh-h-h-h,” but rather a quiet conversation. The aftermath of this sexual encounter between Jacob and Laurette is anti-climactic in comparison to Jacob’s experience with Timmy. This *faux* pastoral setting leaves Jacob feeling as though “something was wrong” (109) with the situation he has been in. These are not the feelings he has with Timmy in the outdoors, leading to the conclusion that Jacob finds his happiness in real nature where he is free to choose a male partner.

Maurice and Clive also enjoy some time in nature. They leave Cambridge for a day trip, which includes a short picnic. The scene is brief, but its peacefulness is evident: there are birds singing, the lush grass where Clive naps is soft, and the two begin “play[ing] up amongst the trees” (77), being silly, and bathing nude in the water. According to James Miracky, one of Forster’s “favorite images of male love” (58) is that of two men playfully wrestling, which implies that the playing in the trees is sexual in nature.

The natural atmosphere during their picnic makes allowances for, and even encourages, homoeroticism between Jacob and Clive. Matthew Curr argues that, “Nature and its beauty, fern and stream and towering tree, is the right setting for their natural union” (62). Though Clive’s attempt to keep their outing free from any physical displays of affection prevents any fully intimate sexual contact from happening here, nature is open and accepting to male-male love and desire. Their day trip is then, according to Deborah Raschke, “a Platonic afternoon in which the spirit wins out over the flesh” (123); the two enjoy each other in an intellectual, visually pleasing way, but avoid any explicit acts of homosexuality.

Maurice’s homosexuality is more deeply rooted in nature than the platonic ideals of Cambridge allow; after Clive forsakes Maurice to marry Lady Anne Woods, Maurice finds a second lover who literally comes to him through nature. Maurice is driving into town when he leans out the car window and sees “blossom after blossom” (178) of flowers, followed immediately by “the bright brown eyes of a young man” (179). These eyes belong to Alec Scudder, the groundskeeper at Clive’s family manor, Penge. Alec’s title—groundskeeper—itself implies that he spends the majority of his time outdoors; indeed, Jesse Matz states that “Scudder comes to Maurice not as another human being but, at least at first, as a force of nature” (17). This is clearly demonstrated by the juxtaposition between Alec and the flower blossoms along the road. J. H. Stape states that Alec represents “the natural
man” (143), but is also “mythically linked to the forces of Pan and nature and…functions almost exclusively as a symbol of sexual, instinctual, and life-force energies” (Stape 146). In this view, it can be argued that Alec’s connection to nature also connects him to instinctual sexuality—for Maurice, this means his innate homosexuality.3

Later that night, while sleeping at Penge, Maurice finds himself throwing wide his bedroom window and shouting “come!” (192) into the nighttime air. Alec suddenly appears, saying, “Sir, was you calling out for me?…Sir, I know…I know;” and touched him” (192). Miracky argues that, “At this transgressive moment, Alec literally becomes the answer to Maurice’s dreams by climbing through a window from the outside and crossing the threshold of class and sexuality” (58). In this bedroom scene, Alec creates a bridge between the natural world and the closed space of Maurice’s room; he does this by leaning a ladder against Maurice’s window to enter his room (192). Alec also accidentally marks Maurice’s room with mud (199) from his boots, thus literally bringing the outdoors inside.

**UNHAPPY ENDINGS**

Both novels contain elements of homoeroticism and homosexual love. These elements are found in various locations and situations, but they seem to thrive in locations that promote intellectual advancement, such as Cambridge, and in outdoor settings, which allow the characters to be free from society’s expectations for heterosexuality. One variation between the novels is that in *Jacob’s Room*, the intellectual and natural settings mesh, allowing for homosexual intercourse to occur in either of these locations. In *Maurice*, intellectual settings are the home of Platonic attachment;4 it is not until Maurice finds Alec, who embodies nature, that Maurice is able to consummate his physical desires for men. Alec’s closeness to nature makes it possible for Maurice to engage in intercourse in rooms that otherwise would not be considered part of the natural world, such as the Penge bedroom or their hotel room in London, where they consummate their love. Their final union takes place in the Penge boathouse, a space that floats between nature and interior. Because Alec is no longer employed by Clive and Maurice is no longer a guest, their sexual bond is fulfilled in a forbidden space.

Despite the constraints society placed upon homosexual relationships, and despite the censorship laws that prevented “obscene” novels from being published, Woolf was able to craft a novel full of coded sexuality; Forster, by choosing not to publish *Maurice*, was able to craft a blatantly homosexual novel to represent the challenges that a homosexual man would encounter in England in the early twentieth century. Both novels provide an example of the secrecy that would have had to surround homosexuality, as well as the locations that could accept, or even encourage, the expression of same-sex love and intercourse.

**Notes**

1. The Labouchère Amendment was added on to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. The Labouchère Amendment made it easier for the English legal system to punish acts that were not definable as “sodomy”—sexual acts in which penetration was involved—yet were perceived to be homosexual in nature (Cook, Mills, Trumbach, Cocks 112); in its wording, the law specifically forbade “gross indecency,” leaving the
actual definition up for interpretation by the enforcers of the law. Because forms of male-to-male attraction existed in multiple forms, a range including homosocial attachment, the homoerotic, the homosexual, as well as Platonic love, it was possible for any seemingly overly-intimate same-sex friendships to lead to an arrest and criminal charges on the grounds of homosexuality.

2. The word “semen” shook up the Bloomsbury group when Lytton Strachey asked if a stain on Vanessa Bell’s shirt was semen. Woolf writes of the incident, saying in her diary: “With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation” (Moments 173-74). With one word, Strachey managed to knock down the walls of censorship the friends had constructed around their conversations. This transformation created an atmosphere in which there was “nothing that one could not say, nothing that one could not do” within the Bloomsbury group (Moments 174), arguably opening the door for Woolf to write a novel such as Jacob’s Room, filled with scenes of intimacy, passion, and sex based, at least in part, on her homosexual friends and their experiences.

3. Diana Swanson notes the connections between nature—particularly gardens—and homosexuality as it relates to Alec and Maurice’s relationship (Swanson 21-25).

4. Of course, Maurice is not the ideal student; when he and Clive begin their Platonic love affair, Maurice snubs a Dean and is sent down (79)—the equivalent of expulsion. Maurice makes no apology for his behavior and ultimately decides not to return to Cambridge.

Works Cited


