The first time I taught Virginia Woolf’s short story “The Legacy” I knew I had found a good way to introduce Woolf to high school students. Immediately after we finished the story, the class was divided into two distinct groups—one group sympathized with one of the two main characters and viewed the other as villainous while the second group espoused the reverse. I knew we were on our way to comprehending one of Woolf’s underlying beliefs about fiction, namely, that it should not present reality as absolute and neatly packageable but rather it should try to present it as it is subjectively experienced by individuals. In her essay “Modern Fiction,” Woolf explains that “life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf, 1967, p. 106). The task of the writer, according to Woolf, is to render this reality in all its “aberration and complexity” (Woolf, 1967, p. 106); our task as readers is not to look simply for symmetrically arranged gig-lamps.

“The Legacy” is told entirely from the perspective of Gilbert Clandon, a somewhat successful politician whose wife Angela has recently died. As the story opens, Gilbert is perplexed about Angela’s actions before her accidental death. She had arranged small gifts for all of her friends almost as if she knew she were going to die. No gift is left expressly for Gilbert, but he thinks she may have intended him to have the fifteen-volume diary she kept during their marriage. Gilbert’s thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of Sissy Miller, Angela’s long-time friend and secretary. Visibly upset, Sissy accepts the brooch Angela intended for her but declines the financial assistance Gilbert extends, instead offering him help if he should need it. After Sissy’s departure, Gilbert begins to read Angela’s diary. He randomly picks up volumes from the beginning of their marriage and is pleased to see all the references to himself and his career. As he progresses through the volumes he notes that his name appears less frequently while the initials B. M. enter and occur more and more frequently. As he reads, he learns that B. M. comes from the lower classes, discussed politics with Angela, and visits her while she is alone. In the final volume Gilbert reads that B. M. requests some behavior from Angela which she is not willing to do. Near the end of the diary Angela writes, “He threatened that if I did not . . . .” but then the remainder of the page is crossed out. Gilbert assumes B. M. asked Angela to become his mistress. He remembers that Sissy’s brother died unexpectedly only a few weeks before Angela’s death and calls Sissy to confirm B. M.’s identity. The story ends then with Gilbert telling us that “he had received his legacy. She had told him the truth. She had stepped off the kerb to rejoin her lover. She had stepped off the kerb to escape from him.”

The group of students who believed Gilbert had been wronged saw Angela as deceitful and adulterous and Gilbert as loyal and generous. In contrast, the students who sympathized with Angela viewed Gilbert as patronizing and self-centered. Furthermore, they were convinced that Angela was forced to find intimacy elsewhere. I would like not only to propose a third way of read-
ing “The Legacy” but also to suggest that the multiple interpretations were intended and that they contribute to the overall meaning of the story.

A strong case was made by the students who believed that Gilbert was a good husband who was wronged by an adulterous wife. To begin with, the story is told from his perspective and as readers we have been conditioned to trust and like our narrators. One generally assumes the truth is being spoken unless evidence proves otherwise, and Gilbert simply tells us they were happy and had a sound marriage. Likewise, we know he was a good provider, often buying her small gifts, taking her out to dinner, and vacationing with her in Europe. He tells us that they rarely argued and that he was extremely proud to have her as his wife. We see his kindness when he offers money to Sissy and also learn that he allowed Angela to do some volunteer work outside of the home. In the early volumes of Angela’s diary, we see that she is completely enamored of Gilbert, that she regrets that she cannot give him a son, and that she is more than happy to perform the duties of a politician’s wife. Into this rosy picture comes B. M. who fills Angela’s head with strange notions and apparently threatens suicide if she does not take him as her lover. Since B. M. and Angela kill themselves within two weeks of each other, Gilbert is left with the realization that his wife has betrayed him—or wanted to.

The second group of students were not as trusting of Gilbert’s perceptions as the first group. They began to doubt his judgments by the second paragraph when Gilbert wonders how his wife could have foreseen her own accidental death; never does he suspect that the death may have been premeditated. In fact, he blames Angela’s death on her lack of thought, noting that “if only she had stopped one moment, and had thought what she was doing, she would be alive now.” As the story progresses, students noted that this attitude is not atypical for Gilbert; he consistently views his wife as intellectually inferior and childlike. While reminiscing about their trip to Venice, he notes that “she was still such a child” and that he enjoyed travelling with her because “she was so eager to learn.” He remembers that she would say she was “so terribly ignorant,” but he considers that “one of her charms.” When he reads in her diary about her political discussions with B. M., he remarks, “If only she had discussed the matter with him, instead of puzzling her poor little head about questions that were much too difficult for her to understand!” And while Gilbert acknowledges her assistance to him with his career, he remarks that her day-to-day existence was only made up of “little trifles.”

These students also noted that Gilbert is patronizing toward women in general. His attitudes toward Sissy Miller indicate that he does not view Angela simply as a particular case but that he perceives all women as inferior. With Sissy Miller, however, Gilbert also categorizes her according to her class. He says that “she was scarcely distinguishable from any other woman of her kind. There were thousands of Sissy Millers—drab little women in black carrying attache cases.”

Along with perceiving women as helpmates to men and their intellectual inferiors, Gilbert sees them as sexual objects and adornments. After acknowledging that “he had always been very proud to be her husband,” he admits that it is only because of Angela’s beauty. He is merely proud of being able to say, “She is the loveliest woman here!” when they dine out. Further evidence of Gilbert’s pompous attitudes toward women occurs when Sissy offers Gilbert help, “looking straight at him for the first time.” Gilbert asks himself, “Could it be that during all those years when he had scarcely noticed her, she, as the novelists say, had entertained a passion for him?” The one time Sissy emerges in his perception from the “thousands . . . of drab little women” and approaches him as an individual and as an equal, he interprets her offer as a sexual advance, never permitting her outside of the female stereotype she occupies in his mind.

The students also pointed to indications that Gilbert is self-centered and materialistic. He confesses that “he could not help admitting that he was still, as the looking-glass showed him, a very distinguished man,” and as the references to him in Angela’s diary decrease, he admits that “his interest slackened.” When he discovers that B. M. has been to dine while he was engaged elsewhere, he only remembers “his own speech” that night and not whether Angela acted differently or their rooms showed signs of a visit. Evidence of Gilbert’s materialism is suggested by his belief that the brooch Angela leaves for Sissy is a “rather incongruous gift,” a more appropriate one being “a sum of money or even the typewriter.” Likewise, his
idea of help for Sissy takes the form of financial assistance only.

Although students are unlikely to perceive this distinction, those familiar with Woolf’s writings will note that Gilbert, far from being the kind husband he envisions himself to be, is rather a good example of the patriarch Woolf abhors so much. She explains in *A Room of One’s Own* that men like Gilbert maintain their belief in their own “innate superiority” by “feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior. . . . It must indeed be one of the chief sources of their power.” Furthermore, Woolf sees a connection between Gilbert’s dominant position in the marriage and his dominant position in society. Woolf makes Gilbert a husband and a politician much like Charlotte Perkins Gilman makes John in “The Yellow Wallpaper” a husband and a doctor. As Beverly Ann Schlack in “Fathers in General: The Patriarchy in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction” explains:

For Woolf the authoritarian state is the patriarchal family extended. In the larger public world, the tyrants simply mass together into business and professions. Be they professors, clerics, doctors, men of commerce, lawyers, politicians, or policemen, they are instruments of the patriarch. (p. 58)

Schlack continues, “We need not wait for the explicitly bitter anger of *Three Guineas* to see that Woolf had always had a dark vision of connections between manhood and patriotism, politics, and war” (p. 70).

Once we recognize Gilbert as a Woolfian patriarch and realize how he perceives women, it is no longer possible to accept his portrayal of Angela without question. Woolf writes that when women are portrayed by men, they are “almost without exception . . . shown in their relation to men” (*Room*, p. 86). She continues:

And how small a part of a woman’s life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose. Hence, perhaps . . . the astonishing extremes of beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity.

Gilbert’s categories of dutiful wife and adulterous woman no longer suffice for us.

Fortunately, Angela is not without a voice in the story—she leaves behind a fifteen volume diary. For Woolf, however, the diary serves as more than just a way to bypass Gilbert’s spectacles. The bare act of writing for Woolf was an act of disobedience. In “Thinking Back Through Our Mothers” Jane Marcus explains that Woolf felt that writing was a conspiracy against the state, an act of aggression against the powerful, the willful breaking of a treaty of silence the oppressed had made with their masters to ensure survival . . . . If language was the private property of the patriarchs, to “trespass” on it was an act of usurpation (p. 1).

From Gilbert we learn that Angela never allowed him to read her diary and that their only arguments occurred because of this refusal. Even at the beginning of their marriage then, when Angela was at her most dutiful, she kept a small part of her existence separate from him. And since Gilbert only first reads the diary six weeks after her death and very casually at that, one can infer that he was less interested in the content than in the fact that she did not devote herself entirely to him.

The content of Angela’s diary depicts her growing dissatisfaction with the marriage. At first the volumes show her enjoyment and gratification with being Gilbert’s wife. For example, she writes, “When Gilbert sat down the applause was terrific. The whole audience rose and sang: ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow.’ I was quite overcome,” and then observes, “How proud I am to be his wife!” Later volumes reflect the fact that Gilbert is becoming “more and more absorbed in his work” and that Angela is increasingly left alone. We learn that while she regrets not being able to have a child, Gilbert never regrets it because “life had been so full, so rich” for him. Her loneliness and sense of usefulness reach the point at which she asks Gilbert for permission to do some volunteer work in a poor district of London. She is afraid to ask him the diary makes clear because “it seemed selfish to bother him with [her] own affairs,” and Gilbert remembers that “she had told him that she felt so idle, so useless. She wished to have some work of her own.” Angela’s references to B. M. occur after she begins her volunteer work. We learn that at first she has an adversarial relationship with him. “Had a heated argument about socialism with B. M.” and “B. M. made a violent attack upon the upper classes. . . . I walked back after the meeting with B. M. and tried to convince him. But he is so narrow-minded.” B. M. and Angela became more than intellectual sparring partners. He begins to lend her books, they go to the Tower of London together, and she has him over for dinner. One of
her last entries reads, “Dined alone with B. M. . . .
He became very agitated. He said it was time we
understood each other. . . . I tried to make him
listen. But he would not. He threatened that if I
did not . . . “; the remainder of the entry is care-
fully blotted out. After B. M.’s death, her only
entries are “He has done what he threatened” and
“Have I the courage to do it too?”

Just as Gilbert serves as the universal patriarch,
Woolf intends Angela to represent more than
simply a particular individual. Except for keeping
the diary, Angela is the ideal wife, one of the
“women [who] have served all these centuries as
looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious
power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its
natural size” (Room, p. 35). After a few years she
realizes her existence is not fulfilling and begins
to look outside of the marriage for meaning for
her life. She works with the poor, reads books on
economics, attends political meetings, and even-
tually comes to question her upper class status.
She once records, “B. M. told me the story of his
childhood. His mother went out charring. . . .
When I think of it, I can hardly bear to go on
living in such luxury. . . .” and admonishes her-
self, “Three guineas for one hat!” That she
crosses out an entire page near the end of her
diary by writing “Egypt. Egypt. Egypt” over it
indicates that she saw a connection between her
husband’s treatment of her and his role in society
which she was beginning to abhor.

Evelyn Haller in her article, “Isis Unveiled: Vir-
ginia Woolf’s Use of Egyptian Myth,” explains that
at the time Woolf wrote, Egypt was seen as a “sub-
versive element” and its study was viewed as “a bold
undertaking, for it undermined the Victorian
world view” (Haller, p. 109). Haller explains that
Woolf in particular “sid[ed] with Egypt against
imperialism, Christianity, and patriarchy” (Haller,
p. 110). Although the evidence is slight and not
always firsthand, it seems clear that Angela is
decidedly more than just a good wife who falls in
love with another man and kills herself because
her lover does. Rather, she is an example of a
woman who comes to realize that the roles of gen-
der and class are interdependent and constric-
tive.

Little has been written about “The Legacy,” but
what has been written generally treats the story as
a misunderstanding between two people and not
as an indictment of class and gender roles. For
example, Jean Guiguet in Virginia Woolf and Her
Works remarks, “It is just a special case of the dif-
ficulty all human beings have in understanding
and knowing one another, an example of the igno-
rance and loneliness from which we try in vain to
escape” (Guiguet, p. 339). Robert Kiely in Beyond
Egotism: The Fiction of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and
D. H. Lawrence describes “The Legacy” simply as
a story about marriage told by two authors, a hus-
band and a wife. He believes the “moral outrage”
Gilbert feels at the end “gives way to shock and
despair at the extent to which human beings,
including married couples, are isolated from one
another” (Kiely, p. 88). Only recent criticism rec-
ognizes the importance of class and gender in
understanding “The Legacy.” In “What is to Con-
sole Us?: The Politics of Deception in Woolf’s
Short Stories,” Selma Meyerowitz explains that in
“‘The Legacy,’ a rather typical plot involving an
extramarital love relationship is transformed into
a perceptive statement about the destructive
effects of class and status on human values and
interpersonal communication” (Meyerowitz, p.
242).

The third interpretation of “The Legacy” is
more a variation of the second than a completely
different reading. Students who grew to mistrust
Gilbert and ultimately sympathized with Angela
believed Gilbert received his comeuppance at the
end by realizing what had actually been going on.
The few critics who have written about “The Leg-
acy” also hold this view. Robert Kiely writes, “The
crux of the tale is the husband’s realization that
his wife—the one person he supposedly knows
through and through, a woman he thinks belongs
to him—is capable of a life . . . that he cannot
share” (Kiely, p. 88). Jean Guiguet writes that
“The Legacy” begins as a “riddle” and ends with
a “solution,” crediting this particular story with
“more firmness and clarity of outline” (Guiguet,
p. 341) than any of Woolf’s other short stories.
Rudolf Villgrader believes that Woolf uses the
notions of illusion and reality to structure “The
Legacy,” arguing that illusion is eventually
stripped away, thereby exposing reality at the end
of the story (Villgrader, p. 288). Even Selma Mey-
erowitz believes Gilbert arrives at a “final under-
standing of the illusions he maintained about his
wife and his marriage” (Meyerowitz, p. 246).

I would like to suggest that Gilbert’s realization
at the end is a mock realization, and that instead
of bringing the story to closure, it points out how
little we really know. Throughout the story, we
have seen Gilbert repeatedly stereotype others
according to gender and class. Even a person he has never met is not exempt; in reference to B. M., Gilbert claims he “knew the type, and had no liking for this particular specimen, whoever B. M. might be.” We also have ample evidence that Gilbert makes assumptions which later turn out to be false. He blithely assumes his wife’s death is not premeditated; he assumes that because he is remembering Angela and Sissy working together “no doubt Miss Miller was thinking of that, too”; and after Sissy confirms that B. M. was her brother, he assumes he now knows the truth. Even when Sissy asks if he would like an explanation, Gilbert refuses. By the end of the story we should mistrust Gilbert enough to be suspicious when he claims that he has the truth, that “she had stepped off the kerb to rejoin her lover.” Instead of figuring out the riddle of Angela, Gilbert only sees a woman who prefers another man sexually. Instead of enlightening him as to what has really been going on, Gilbert’s final “realization” will probably only confirm his stereotypes about women. Angela remains, despite Gilbert’s claim of knowledge, basically unknown.

“The Legacy” does not just make the connection between class and gender; it makes the connection among class, gender, and traditional fiction—Gilbert is husband, politician, and narrator. His authoritative voice presents reality as “a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged,” and even in a moment of crisis and in the face of contradictory evidence, he adheres strictly to his myopic depiction of it. Not only is this rendition of reality false, according to Woolf, it is, like class and gender, a form of oppression which at times can be deadly.

**Works Cited**


Ann Lavine formerly taught in Verona High School, Wisconsin.