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Teaching Modernist Literature in a Women's College in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses how post-#MeToo consciousness, shaped by multiple factors in South Korea, has influenced the teaching of modernist literature at a South Korean women's college. It examines how texts like *Mrs Dalloway* and *St. Mawr* resonate with students who are rethinking marriage, gender roles, and national belonging. It also proposes pairing *A Room of One's Own* with the Korean novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, widely recognized as #MeToo literature and internationally circulated. The essay highlights how feminist pedagogy enables students to read canonical works as tools for navigating their own lived experiences, shaped by gendered violence, precarity, and a desire for alternative futures. It argues for a reading practice that bridges literature and life, fostering critical empathy and feminist imagination.

1 | No Country for Women

In South Korea, the #MeToo movement gained momentum between late 2017 and early 2018. A major catalyst was the public revelations made by poet Young-mi Choi and prosecutor Ji-hyun Seo. Choi, an award-winning poet and novelist, published a poem titled "The Monster" in the Winter 2017 issue of the literary quarterly *Hwanghae Review*, under the special theme "Gender War." Widely seen as an exposé of the male poet Ko Un—a then-perennial Nobel nominee—the poem opens with the following lines:

> Don't sit next to Mr. En[1]
>
> The poet K advised me, a young poet then
>
> He touches young women whenever he sees them
>
> I forgot K's advice and sat next to Mr. En and
>
> Me too
>
> The silk suit top I borrowed from my sister was wrinkled.
>
> (2017, 128)

The poetic speaker, closely associated with Choi herself, confesses that she once fled from "Mr. En," a "monster" who had published a hundred volumes of poetry, calling him a "cunning old man" (2017, 128). Each time his name was floated as a Nobel contender, she recalls thinking, "If En actually wins the Nobel Prize,/I must leave this country./I don't want to live in such a filthy world" (2017, 129). Nearly 5 years after publishing "The Monster," when asked in an interview about her greatest regret, Choi answered, "Being born a woman—which was not my choice—and not leaving South Korea" (Yoon 2023).

Around the same time, in February 2018, prosecutor Ji-hyun Seo—a graduate of Ewha Womans University—appeared live on JTBC's *Newsroom*, one of South Korea's major television news programs. In her interview, she publicly disclosed, for the first time, her experience of sexual harassment: on October 30, 2010, during a funeral, a senior prosecutor groped her waist and hips. Although she immediately reported the incident to her direct superior, she received no follow-up. Instead, she was summoned by the then-Director of the Prosecution Bureau, subjected to harsh reprimand, and subsequently faced a series of retaliatory measures: reassignment to a remote district office,

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internal audits, and transfers to non-preferred posts—clear forms of professional disadvantage and demotion.

These public revelations exposed two intertwined issues at the heart of South Korea's #MeToo movement: the "monstrosity" of powerful male figures and the pervasive, yet previously concealed, experiences of sexual harassment and assault faced by women entering or already participating in public life. In many cases, such incidents occurred during workplace drinking gatherings, a key feature of South Korea's corporate and professional culture that emphasizes socializing over alcohol as crucial to career advancement. The entrenched expectation that employees attend these gatherings created conditions ripe for abuse. As the movement spread across sectors—including law, education, journalism, the arts, entertainment, and politics—some perpetrators, under the weight of public scrutiny and criminal investigations, took their own lives.

The #MeToo movement's exposure of injustice, violence, and professional retaliation experienced by women across various fields has generated profound feelings of shock and anger among female college students who aspire to enter those same professions. Additionally, the recent visibility of gender-based murders—so-called *mudjima*, or "don't-ask-why," attacks targeting young women—has deepened their sense of anxiety, as many now perceive such violence as not random but deeply systemic. Although gendered violence is nothing new in Korean society, the #MeToo movement catalyzed renewed discourse around it, prompting broader societal recognition and emotional reckoning.

Post-#MeToo consciousness in South Korea has been shaped not only by testimonies and revelations disseminated through media, but also by a series of gendered public crimes and national disasters over the past decade, many of which resulted in the tragic deaths of young citizens. Notably, events such as the sinking of the MV *Sewol* ferry (2014), the Gangnam Station murder (2016), the "Nth Room" digital sex crime case (2018–2020), the Seoul Halloween crowd crush (2022), and the recent Al-based deepfake crisis (2024) unfolded during the formative years of today's female college students or while they were attending college. On the one hand, disasters like the *Sewol* ferry sinking and the Halloween crowd crush led to mass casualties—high school students on a school trip and Gen Z participants in a festive night out—resulting in deep national trauma. What is worse is that these moments of collective mourning were often politicized: the victims' families, in demanding accountability from the state, were stigmatized, and their expressions of grief were exploited for partisan purposes, making the process of national healing all the more difficult. The psychological toll of these events was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and vulnerability during a critical period of young women's social and political formation.

On the other hand, gender-based crimes such as the Gangnam Station murder, the widespread use of *molka*, or illegal hidden cameras, the Nth room, and the ongoing deepfake crisis, all of which target random young women, have contributed to a state of hypervigilance and collective unease around safety that already permeates women's daily lives. The Nth room case involved the digital entrapment, sexual exploitation, and distribution of images of minors and young women through encrypted chat rooms, while the deepfake crisis has enabled the mass production of non-consensual sexual images using AI technology. These crimes, deeply embedded in digital platforms, reveal how digital technology is not only a medium for violence but also a structural condition shaping how young people, especially women, experience threat, humiliation, and fear. The fact that such violations of safety and dignity have persisted or recurred despite repeated public outrage has fueled an extraordinary level of anxiety—one that continues to shape both their lived experiences and imagined futures.

Against this backdrop, a growing number of young women are now planning futures that no longer assume marriage as a default—or even desirable—path. As reflected in Young-mi Choi's own expression of regret, many also harbor aspirations to leave South Korea altogether. This paper focuses on how domestic students at women's colleges in South Korea, shaped by a distinctly post-#MeToo consciousness, are imagining futures that diverge sharply from the life trajectories of previous generations—marked by a rising pursuit of *bihon*, or non-marriage, and the desire to permanently leave their mother country, and on how this current reality influences my teaching of English literature.

Social scientists who examine the phenomenon of *bihon* note that the pursuit of childless singlehood stems from the incompatibilities between Confucian familism, which regards marriage and parenthood as tightly coupled, and the socioeconomic realities faced by young adults, as well as between married life and other life domains in Korea (K. H. Choi and Qian 2022, 526). These tensions have emerged as a result of rapid social changes that have occurred over a compressed period of time—a defining feature of Korean modern history since the end of the Korean War. While *bihon* is a phenomenon that is not strictly gender specific, I've noticed especially among young women a desire to leave Korea permanently. This trend is especially evident among students at women's colleges, who are navigating both structural constraints and shifting cultural expectations.

Indeed, women's colleges in South Korea offer a compelling lens through which to examine this generational shift. These institutions bear a complex historical legacy: they were founded on the premise that female education should differ from male education—whether rooted in Confucian gender segregation or in progressive efforts to challenge patriarchal structures. Historically, women's colleges functioned both as sites of feminist aspiration and as objects of patriarchal fantasy, imagined simultaneously as spaces for nurturing women leaders and as embodiments of the heterosexual male dream, in which highly educated, conventionally feminine women from prestigious colleges were seen as ideal future wives. Today, however, most women's colleges actively position themselves as spaces for cultivating professional women, and many students at women's colleges identify themselves as feminists. Ewha Womans University, where I teach, explicitly defines its mission as the education of women leaders. Many students enter Ewha with the goal of building professional careers, and in my experience, English Language and Literature graduates have gone on to law

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school, multinational corporations, government posts, international NGOs, the education sector, or graduate study in the humanities and social sciences.

In recent years, I have also consulted with many students whose primary life goal is to leave their home country. They tend to use their college years to find concrete pathways to build skills and pass qualification exams in order to secure permanent employment in Western countries. One of my students, who recently early graduated as an English major with remarkable GPA, told me on the final exam day of my senior-level class that she planned to take entrance exams to transfer to the Department of Nursing because she wanted a stable, permanent job abroad. She said, "Studying English literature is something I've always cherished—it's the first thing I want to return to later in life, and my greatest hope is to excel in it. But I've thought long and hard about this decision to become a nurse in order to immigrate." Her words captured the painful compromises many young women feel they must make between intellectual passion and economic survival, especially when imagining futures beyond the structural limits of their home country.

Drawing on pedagogical approaches I have developed over the past few years while teaching British modernist literature at Ewha, one of South Korea's leading women's universities, I aim to propose new ways of reading English literature attuned to the questions and urgencies of the post-#MeToo era. While these approaches emerge from the particular sociocultural conditions facing Korean female students today, they may also resonate across national and institutional contexts, especially within the broader global discourse shaped by #MeToo.

2 | Teaching Modernist Rejections of Marriage Plot: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and D. H. Lawrence's *St. Mawr*

In my British modernist literature classroom, I once paired two modernist narratives from 1925—*Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *St. Mawr* by D. H. Lawrence—and framed them as explorations of gender roles, sex, and love relations, drawing on what Stephen Kern has referred to as the "courtship narrative." I found this framework useful for sparking student interest and enhancing their understanding of the new fictional selfhood that characterizes modernist literature. According to Kern, in the late 19th century, the traditional courtship narrative—based on rigidly polarized gender roles, sexual repression, and male dominance in love and marriage—began to unravel. Around 1890, emerging scientific discoveries and social movements challenged the Victorian ideal of absolute sexual difference, leading to what Kern calls "gender depolarization" (Kern 2011, 10). Women, in particular, began to adopt more active roles in both public life and intimate relationships, reshaping the norms of courtship, sexuality, and marriage that modernist writers would later critique and reimagine—an account that easily resonated with my students and helped them overcome the difficulties of reading modernist literature.

I began our discussion of *Mrs Dalloway* by asking students to consider the role of marriage in shaping the eponymous character's identity. The title itself invites reflection: the protagonist is identified not as Clarissa, but as "Mrs. Dalloway." I highlighted Elaine Showalter's remark that *Mrs. Dalloway*, unlike *Jane Eyre*, is so specific, signaling a woman whose identity has been "subsumed in marriage" (Showalter 2016). This led us to one of the novel's early moments, when Clarissa walks through Bond Street and reflects, "this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (Woolf 2000, 14). I then invited students to connect this passage with Sara Ahmed's observation in *Living a Feminist Life*: "Becoming Mrs. Dalloway is a form of disappearance" (2017, 44). From there, we considered how, although Clarissa performs her social role with outward grace, the novel is filled with subtle signs of internal conflict, from her wistful recollection of Sally Seton to her ambivalence about her marriage.

For many students, however, it was Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth Dalloway who resonates most deeply, as she is portrayed as envisioning female independence as a young woman. Elizabeth's spontaneous little adventure—riding a bus alone in London—and her vague but emerging career aspirations, partly influenced by Miss Kilman, reveal her as someone who, perhaps more than anyone else in the novel, envisions a future beyond courtship, marriage, and domesticity. When reading this brief segment devoted to Elizabeth, I encouraged my students to consider how Woolf approaches the theme of women's futures through this character.[2] Elizabeth's future-oriented sensibility is expressed through her stream of consciousness as she moves through London, observing buildings and people while imagining multiple futures for herself. Although her thoughts are scattered and often interrupted by her surroundings, her yearning is clear: she would like to have a profession.

> She liked people who were ill. And every profession is open to the women of your generation, said Miss Kilman. So she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer. Animals are often ill. She might own a thousand acres and have people under her. She would go and see them in their cottages. This was Somerset House. One might be a very good farmer—and that, strangely enough though Miss Kilman had her share in it, was almost entirely due to Somerset House. It looked so splendid, so serious, that great grey building. And she liked the feeling of people working. She liked those churches, like shapes of grey paper, breasting the stream of the Strand. It was quite different here from Westminster, she thought, getting off at Chancery Lane. It was so serious; it was so busy. In short, she would like to have a profession.
>
> (Woolf 2000, 115–116)

I drew a comparison between this passage and the novel's opening page, where Clarissa's stream of consciousness is introduced, both in terms of content and form, to show students how Woolf applies different stylistic techniques to different characters. While Clarissa's interior monologue is marked by long, meandering, unfinished sentences punctuated by dashes, commas, semicolons, and ellipses, Elizabeth's is characterized by short, fragmentary sentences that highlight her perception and thinking amid distraction. This fragmentary, associative

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style reflects Elizabeth's youth and openness to possibility, standing in contrast to Clarissa's more inward and reflective narration. Her fleeting thoughts—about becoming a doctor or a farmer, her fascination with public buildings and working people—express a future-oriented imagination grounded in the everyday act of riding a city bus. These moments of perception allow her to glimpse a life not yet fully articulated but no longer confined by inherited models of femininity.

To deepen my students' engagement with post-#MeToo consciousness—marked by intensified gender polarization and mutual resentment between young women and men—I facilitated a discussion that connected the novel's portrayal of war trauma to contemporary Korean society. We focused on the character of Septimus Warren Smith, a young veteran suffering from shell shock, to explore national trauma in the aftermath of the First World War. Analyzing Septimus allowed students to practice empathy across gender difference. I divided his narrative into pre-war, wartime, and postwar periods, encouraging students to trace how war shaped his psychological decline. We examined how his wounds reflect not only personal suffering but also the broader, unspoken trauma of postwar English society.

To extend the discussion, I asked students to consider how this form of historical trauma might resonate with the post-#MeToo consciousness shaping their own lives—particularly in terms of cultivating empathy across social divisions. By reflecting on the subtle connection between Clarissa and Septimus—despite their vastly different social positions—I invited students to see empathy as a possible bridge across boundaries of gender, generation, and experience. This felt especially urgent in the Korean context, where public discourse around gender justice has grown increasingly polarized. After all, I hoped the discussion would help students envision how a post-#MeToo ethics might not only challenge structural inequalities but also foster mutual understanding in a society marked by distrust and hostility between young women and men.

Moving on to D. H. Lawrence's *St. Mawr*, I aimed to highlight how its modernist representation of marriage and gender dynamics offer both shared concerns and divergent perspectives when read alongside *Mrs Dalloway*. As Hilary Simpson notes, "From the very first, Lawrence's work has been a focus for the discussion of sexual relationships and roles, and every serious reader and critic of Lawrence must, sooner or later, tackle the issue of 'Lawrence and women'" (1982, 13). While Lawrence's work is often approached through the lens of his controversial portrayals of gender and sexuality, *St. Mawr* invited a different kind of classroom conversation—one that resonated unexpectedly with post-#MeToo consciousness in South Korea. In a cultural context where gender roles, dating, and marriage have become flashpoints of generational conflict, the novel created space for students to reflect on shifting relational norms and desires. By inviting students to grapple with Lawrence's representations of women, *St. Mawr* encouraged reflection on contemporary feminist questions around intimacy, autonomy, and disillusionment with heteronormative ideals.

The narrative of *St. Mawr* begins with the sterile marriage of a young couple, Lou Witt and Rico, and follows Lou's soul-searching journey, catalyzed by her encounter with St. Mawr, a mysterious and untamable stallion from Wales. The horse functions as a symbolic disruption to the emotional deadness of her marriage and the broader malaise of postwar European society. Disillusioned by the superficiality of modern life and the failure of conventional romantic ideals, Lou leaves England and Europe behind, seeking refuge and renewal on a remote, desolate ranch in New Mexico, USA. Her gradual retreat from marriage and from the center of Western civilization invites students to think critically about what it means for a woman to reject social expectations and pursue a different kind of selfhood—one shaped not through romantic fulfillment but through solitude, intuition, and nonhuman connection. In the Korean classroom, this narrative arc offers a striking point of resonance for students who are similarly questioning the viability of traditional paths like marriage, especially amid the growing prevalence of *bihon* and the search for alternative futures.

A key moment in the novel comes with Lou's powerful monologue, which many of my students read as a declaration of *bihon*, or non-marriage. Lou says:

> I am not a marrying woman, [...] I'm not a lover nor a mistress nor a wife. It is no good. Love can't really come into me from the outside, and I can never, never mate with any man, since the mystic new man will never come to me ... I want my temple and my loneliness and my Apollo mystery of the inner fire. And with men, only the delicate, subtler, more remote relations. No coming near. A coming near only breaks the delicate veils, and broken veils, like broken flowers, only lead to rottenness.
>
> (Lawrence 2006, 159)

Significantly, this declaration comes after Lou has left England—the country of conventions, manners, and civilization—which she has come to perceive as toxic and stifling. Her retreat to a remote, almost wasteland-like region of New Mexico signals not only a geographical departure but a profound existential one: a rejection of inherited scripts of femininity, romantic partnership, and national identity. While *St. Mawr* was written in a very different historical and cultural moment, this passage resonates deeply with many young Korean women who are increasingly questioning the value of traditional marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and the societal expectations that accompany them. Lou's rejection of intimate union with men is not framed as bitterness or despair but as a form of spiritual clarity—an epiphany rooted in disillusionment. Rather than seeking wholeness through romantic fusion, she turns inward, embracing solitude, inner fire, and an almost mystical commitment to selfhood. For students navigating similar questions about autonomy and alternative life paths, Lou's voice offers an unexpected yet empowering model of refusal and reinvention.

Young female characters in modernist narratives such as Lou Witt and Elizabeth Dalloway resonate with the experiences and aspirations of young Korean women today, particularly within the context of post-#MeToo consciousness, by articulating a subtle but radical break from conventional gender roles and

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envisioning alternative futures shaped not by marriage or male validation, but by a deliberate refusal of societal expectations that many now find oppressive or untenable.

3 | Comparative Teaching: *A Room of One's Own* and *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

At a women's college like Ewha, where courses such as "Women and Literature" have consistently attracted strong student interest, I have found it particularly effective to pair Woolf's book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with Korean writer Nam-joo Cho's novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016) through a comparative literature approach that traverses historical, linguistic, and generic boundaries. This pairing enables students to engage with transnational feminist thought and to trace the continuity of gendered structures of power, while also locating their own experiences within a broader literary and political tradition. Reading these two texts together has proven especially fruitful for classroom discussions about how literature articulates gendered experiences across time and place.

The Korean #MeToo movement is closely linked to *Kim Jiyoung*, which became a million-seller and one of the most-discussed literary texts in South Korea upon publication. Often labeled as "feminist literature" or "#MeToo literature," the novel resonated widely with female readers for its portrayal of gender-based discrimination across a woman's life course. The story follows Kim Jiyoung, an ordinary woman born in 1982, who experiences systemic sexism from childhood through adulthood—in the family, at school, in the workplace, and in marriage—until she begins to exhibit signs of psychological distress. Her breakdown becomes a powerful metaphor for the cumulative impact of everyday misogyny. In early 2018, *Kim Jiyoung* was invoked by prosecutor Seo. In her widely circulated statement, Seo wrote, "If someone had told me, like the nameless woman in *Kim Jiyoung*, 'It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong', maybe I could have endured it a little more easily" (Hwang 2018).

Around 2016, when *Kim Jiyoung* was first published, a parallel trend emerged in the Korean publishing world: a surge in demand for *A Room*. Numerous publishers released new translations of Woolf's 1929 essay, often promoted as feminist classics essential for understanding contemporary struggles. A key strategy was the inclusion of forewords or commentaries by prominent Korean feminist critics. Woolf's call for "money and a room of one's own" struck a chord with young Korean women striving for independence amid neoliberal pressures and persistent gender inequality. Since 2016, at least 12 new Korean editions have appeared, and earlier versions were frequently reprinted to meet renewed interest.

Many of my students at Ewha—if not all—have expressed enthusiasm for *A Room* and a strong desire to understand it more deeply. Pairing a text they found familiar (*Kim Jiyoung*) with one they were eager to explore (*A Room*) proved pedagogically effective. By reading *Kim Jiyoung* alongside Woolf's essay, students were encouraged to reflect on genre conventions, gender and writing, aesthetics and politics, literature and reality, and authorial voice. Both texts invite questions about women's access to space, education, and authorship. The imagined figure of Shakespeare's sister in Woolf's essay becomes a valuable lens through which to examine Jiyoung's mother—a woman of great potential who was forced to sacrifice her ambitions for the success of her brothers. Woolf's famous assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" resonates powerfully in classroom discussions of Jiyoung's economic dependence, unpaid care work, and curtailed aspirations—an all-too-typical case of *gyeongnyeok danjeol* (career discontinuity), a term widely used in South Korea to describe the phenomenon of women leaving the workforce due to marriage, childbirth, and caregiving responsibilities. Many students, in reflecting on this issue, are prompted to think about their own mothers' interrupted careers and deferred ambitions, bringing the text into conversation with their personal and familial histories.

One especially effective classroom exercise involves revisiting the passage in *A Room of One's Own* where the narrator critically reviews the fictitious novel *Life's Adventure* by a young female writer named Mary Carmichael. I provided the following excerpt to prompt reflection on the literary criticism of women's writing:

> Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence. [...] Perhaps she had done this unconsciously, merely giving things their natural order, as a woman would, if she wrote like a woman. But the effect was somehow baffling; one could not see a wave heaping itself, a crisis coming round the next corner. [...] For whenever I was about to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death, the annoying creature twitched me away, as if the important point were a little further on.
>
> (Woolf 2005, 90)

After reading this together, I asked students to imagine Woolf's narrator reading *Kim Jiyoung*: what might she admire or critique, and in what context? The narrator's observation that Carmichael "broke the sentence" and "broke the sequence," while highlighting the novel's unconventionality as a new experiment in women's writing, can be compared with critiques by some male Korean literary critics who dismissed *Kim Jiyoung* as "unliterary" or "lacking esthetic qualities" because of its plain, report-like prose and its overly linear structure. This comparison led us into a discussion of literary reception. While *A Room* positions its narrator as a female critic reflecting on how women's writing is received, *Kim Jiyoung* has faced backlash from conservative commentators who accuse it of inciting gender conflict and lacking artistic value. In our classroom, we examined such reactions as part of a broader cultural structure that undermines women's testimony and narrative authority. Reading the two texts together allows students to consider not only which stories are told, but also how they are received, interpreted, and politicized.

Ultimately, this comparative framework encourages students to think across boundaries: between literature and life, fiction and

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fact; between aesthetics and activism; and across different national and historical contexts. It enables them to practice critical interpretation while situating their reading within a broader feminist tradition.

4 | Conclusion

Teaching modernist literature in a women's college in South Korea today means teaching with and through history—both literary and lived. It means recognizing how students' own sense of social vulnerability, agency, and collective identity is shaped by post-#MeToo consciousness—and how this, in turn, informs the interpretive frameworks they bring into the classroom. When students read Woolf's depiction of Clarissa Dalloway's ambivalence about marriage, Lawrence's portrayal of Lou Witt's refusal of intimacy, or the narrator's feminist literary criticism in *A Room of One's Own*, they are not merely learning about early twentieth-century Britain—they are engaging in an active dialog with their own contemporary realities.

This pedagogical context—one in which young women are rethinking life scripts, rejecting heteronormative expectations, and imagining alternative futures—makes canonical modernist literature newly legible and urgent. Rather than viewing these texts as remote or elitist, students discover in them voices that resonate with their own questions and dilemmas. At the same time, the comparative practice of reading these works alongside contemporary Korean texts like *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* enables a deeper understanding of genre, form, and cultural specificity while cultivating a shared feminist vocabulary.

What emerges is not only a critical method but an ethics of reading—one that affirms literature's capacity to both reflect and reimagine gendered experience. In this light, English literary studies in a post-#MeToo era becomes not a retreat into the past, but a site for collective reflection, political awareness, and transformative possibility.

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The author has nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

Endnotes

[1] "Mr. En" appears in the original Korean as a pseudonym that sounds like the letter "N" in English. It is widely understood to allude to Ko Un while avoiding direct naming.

[2] I have discussed how Elizabeth Dalloway can be understood as a woman of the future in my article, "Do we live in the same time?: feminist temporalities and women's future in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*," published in *Feminist Studies in English Literature*, 32(2), 5–32 (2024).

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