

The Constraints of Literary Merit in Heidi L. M. Jacobs' *Molly of the Mall*:

Literary Lass and Purveyor of Fine Footwear

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to examine how Heidi L. M. Jacobs' *Molly of the Mall: Literary Lass and Purveyor of Fine Footwear* deploys Molly MacGregor's experience within the academy as a critique of the constraints that literary merit standards place on scholarly work. First, I analyze how Jacobs manifests this argument through Molly's professors, who criticize and penalize her for straying from the traditional essay format in her written assignments. Next, I look at how Molly's struggle to reconcile her identity as a Canadian writer functions as a commentary on the academic presupposition that authors can only achieve valuable content through the reproduction of canonical literary modes. Furthermore, I consider how Jacobs challenges the concept of literary merit by positing that written works that do not meet this standard can still have scholarly value. However, I argue that, because the novel centers around a white, heteronormative, academically-inclined protagonist, its investigation into the constraints of literary merit may be limited. I conclude that *Molly of the Mall* leaves readers to question what it means that even a character with a privileged relationship to the academy encounters these constraints.

KEYWORDS: academia, canonical narratives, exclusion, literary merit

In her novel *Molly of the Mall: Literary Lass and Purveyor of Fine Footwear*, Heidi L. M. Jacobs explores the constraining effects of literary merit standards within her protagonist, Molly MacGregor's, academic discipline. First, when Molly's professors disapprove of her departure from the formalities of scholarly writing, Jacobs criticizes the academy's insistence that following a particular format is required for a piece of writing to be considered meritorious. Molly also struggles to reconcile her Canadian identity with her writing aspirations due to the scholarly presumption that only texts that reproduce canonical narratives can be included in the literary tradition. Furthermore, through Molly's attempt to restore James McIntyre's poetry to the Canadian canon, Jacobs posits that literary merit, as it is defined by the academy, may not be the only valuable standard to which written work should be held. Nevertheless, the novel's investigation into the constraints of literary value may be limited because it only explores these limitations from the perspective of a white, heteronormative character who can navigate academic spaces with relative ease. Therefore, I argue that through Molly's relationship to her studies and environment, Jacobs is able to examine the limits of literary merit and their consequences; however, as a result of Molly's privileged perspective, this examination remains incomplete.

In my analysis, I will use the term 'literary merit' to refer to texts that meet particular standards of excellence as determined by scholars in the academy. Specifically, in her book, *The Ulysses Delusion*, Cecilia Konchar Farr suggests that scholars have established "traditional standards of aesthetic merit," to which writing must adhere in order to be granted literary value (19). Additionally, she explains that academics only identify value in texts by "serious literary artists' who tend to resemble the great writers who came before them" (24). In effect, literary merit is intrinsically related to both the academy and the reproduction of traditional literary models. I will, therefore, use the term 'literary tradition' to refer to the set of texts that academics have historically deemed valuable.

Through Molly's unconventional approach to her assignments, Jacobs highlights the constraints literary merit standards impose on academic work. For instance, when Molly completes assignments that do not conform to the traditional essay format, her professors question the literary value of her ideas. This scrutiny is most apparent when Molly submits "Pride and Prejudice: The Mixtape Paper," in the place of a formal essay (Jacobs, "Molly" 132). In response, Molly's professor admits that she is "uncertain how to mark

this assignment" because it does not adhere to the prescribed format and should, therefore, "undoubtedly deserve an F" (Jacobs, "Molly" 132). However, she notes Molly's "keen insights into Austen's work," and calls her ideas "masterful" and "pioneering" (Jacobs, "Molly" 132). Arguably, the quality of Molly's ideas should have earned her a perfect grade, but the professor gives her a B as a punishment for straying from the academic model (Jacobs, "Molly" 132). Here, Jacobs demonstrates how the university expects Molly to both adhere to the formalities of scholarly writing and reject ideas conveyed in alternative formats, thereby exposing a constraint within her academic discipline. Nancy DaFoe reinforces Jacobs' critique when, in the introduction to her book, *Breaking Open the Box*, she suggests that creative techniques lead students "to divergent thinking [and] to analyze in ways that might not have been considered prior to the writing process" (xxi). This point further supports Jacobs' claim that creative writing styles, like those employed by Molly, can benefit scholarly work and therefore should not be disregarded by the academic institution. So, while academia insists that scholarly language and format are prerequisites for achieving literary merit, Jacobs argues that this insistence hinders students' creativity, as well as their opportunities for success.

Jacobs' novel also exposes the ways in which literary merit standards exclude narratives that do not conform to canonical writing models. It makes this argument particularly clear through Molly's attempt to marry her identity as an Edmontonian with her writing aspirations. In her article "Talking Back to a Tote Bag: Or, How a Tote Bag inspired *Molly of the Mall: Literary Lass and Purveyor of Fine Footwear*," Jacobs explains that Molly "assumes Edmonton is not worthy of literary depiction because she never [witnesses] anything like it in the literature she reads" (2). Put differently, Molly struggles to imagine how a text set in Edmonton could achieve literary merit because her city differs significantly from those depicted in canonical novels. Instead, she imposes existing literary models onto Edmonton in an attempt to "remedy [its] literary invisibility" (Jacobs, "Talking Back" 2). She deploys this strategy when she rewrites "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon" (Jacobs, "Molly" 149) by Robert Burns in order to feature Edmonton's neighbourhood of the same name (Jacobs, "Talking Back" 2). Through this example, Jacobs suggests that literary merit standards depend on the reproduction of existing writing models and consequently fail to make space for new ones. As a result, she asserts that literary merit standards are limiting because they exclude texts that neglect and challenge these standards from the academic canon.

After emphasizing the restrictive effects of literary merit standards, Jacobs disputes the presumption that texts must meet certain requirements in order to be granted access to academic discourse. This challenge is most evident in Molly's "Adopt-A-Canadian Poet" (Jacobs, "Molly" 199) assignment, for which she chooses the poet James McIntyre with a desire to restore "his place of glory within the Canadian literary tradition" (Jacobs, "Molly" 235). The narrative emphasizes that critics have excluded McIntyre from this tradition because they consider his poetry to be cheesy, poorly written, and focused on the "local, the mundane, and the minute" ("Molly" 240). Notably, Molly's parents and her professor, who are all connected to the university, disapprove of Molly's adoption of McIntyre. Their disapproval is reflective of academia's deciding influence on which texts are considered to possess literary value. However, in her assignment, Molly claims that McIntyre's role in this tradition is "not his aesthetic importance, but his insistence upon writing the Canadian experience as he saw it" (Jacobs, "Molly" 241). Furthermore, she posits that while "'literary merit' is not what we should be seeking in McIntyre's poetry," it is still important to "include [his] work within discussions of the Canadian literary tradition" (Jacobs, "Molly" 241). In other words, Jacobs' novel insists that the literary tradition suffers a loss due to its exclusionary nature and goes as far as to claim that literary merit is not the only important metric by which to assess written work. Farr similarly argues that texts "aren't only...products of genius," and that their value lays in their ability to be "both accessible and skilled" and bridge "the everyday and the artistic" (26). These points reinforce Jacobs' problematization of literary merit standards, particularly that a text should not have to meet this standard in order to be considered worthy of academic study.

Molly's privileged position relative to the academy may limit the novel's investigation into the constraining effects of literary merit standards. Notably, Molly comes from an academic family and has been versed in scholarly discourse and the literary canon since childhood. Her experiences and ideas are also informed by her position as a white, heterosexual intellectual. Therefore, while the ways in which Molly presents her ideas challenge the academic system, they originate from and effectively reinforce this system. This reinforcement is most evident in Molly's attempt to restore McIntyre to the Canadian literary canon. While her work contests literary merit as a concept, the restoration of a white male poet does not challenge the canon's existing structure or, more specifically, its lack of diversity. Admittedly, Molly faces certain barriers to achieving success in the academic sphere, as she is a woman in a

male-dominated environment. However, she ultimately has the tools to navigate these spaces, unlike people who are actively excluded from them. For example, in her article "Notes on Leslie Marmon Silko's 'Lullaby': Socially Responsible Criticism," Jo-Ann Episkenew states that, as a result of colonization and the ongoing effects of residential schools, early Indigenous writers "could not be expected to be familiar with the language of academia" (320). Episkenew further explains that while Indigenous writers have become more versed in academic language, they continue to write intentionally in a way that ensures that "their works are accessible to a variety of educational levels and not solely for an academic audience" (320). As a result, Indigenous authors are often excluded from academic study and the Canadian literary tradition (Episkenew 320). Based on Episkenew's argument, it seems that Jacobs' critique of literary merit is incomplete because it fails to evaluate this standard's constraints on those who do not have privileged access to the literary world.

I have argued that, while Jacobs' novel functions as an exploration of the limits of literary merit through Molly's unconventional approach to academia and her relationship to her environment, these limits are only tested from a position of privilege. Specifically, Jacobs claims that academic work should not need to conform to a particular format in order to achieve literary merit. Similarly, the novel suggests that there should be space in the literary tradition for different kinds of narratives and that these scholarly standards are not the only important factor to consider when including a text in academic discourse. However, because of her protagonist's identity as a white, heteronormative academic, Jacobs can only explore the constraints of literary merit through a privileged lens. Therefore, Molly of the Mall may encourage us to consider what it means that Molly encounters these constraints in spite of her scholarly and social advantages. What does her struggle mean for those who do not benefit from a similar privilege?

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