

Virginia Woolf, Orlando

Bi-Monthly Discussion Sections, ch. 1-3 , pp. 13-152

1. In both Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, Woolf takes pains to speak from the perspectives of her varied characters, with only a few exceptions. In Orlando, however, the narrative voice of “the biographer” frequently intrudes, drawing attention to his/her process of telling the story of Orlando’s life and even to his/her problems in gathering information.
 - In what sense does “the biographer” become a character in the novel? What are his/her salient characteristics?
 - What is his/her opinion of his/her subject, Orlando?
 - Does s/he strike you as a reliable narrator?(We may note that Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, was the first editor [1885-1891] of the monumental Dictionary of National Biography, the standard reference work on notable figures from British history.)
2. How are we to take the following diatribe that Woolf—the avid reader, essayist, diarist, letter-writer, and novelist—gives to Orlando’s “biographer”: “For once the disease of reading has laid hold upon the system it weakens it so that it falls an easy prey to that other scourge which dwells in the ink pot and festers in the quill. The wretch takes to writing. . . . He has passed through the gates of Death and known the flames of Hell” (p. 75)?
3. The novel opens with Orlando “slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters,” imitating his ancestors who “had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters” (p. 13).
 - Why does Woolf begin her “biography” by calling attention to the long history of British imperialism and racism?
 - What thoughts do you have about the novel’s treatment of race, as mediated by the voice of “the biographer”?
 - Especially in the episodes of Orlando’s service as ambassador to Constantinople, followed by her sojourn with the “gipsies,” how does the novel represent the British imperial project?
4. Do you remember the few references in Mrs. Dalloway or To the Lighthouse to sexuality or erotic desire?
 - What thoughts do you have about the shift to make sexuality central to Orlando?
 - How does his/her attitude toward sex develop over time?
 - Is the treatment of sexuality realistic or mediated through the eroticism of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration poetry?
5. Orlando is an aristocrat with an ancestry that goes back to the Crusades, but this biography also includes “all the riff raff of London” (p. 56), a penniless poet, and Orlando’s

servants, like Mrs. Grimsditch, the housekeeper, and “the Blackamoor whom they called Grace Robinson by way of making a Christian woman of her” (69-70).

- How does the novel represent British class distinctions?
 - Does its representation differ from the treatment of class in Mrs. Dalloway?
6. We have talked a great deal about Woolf’s treatment of time in Mrs. Dalloway (set on one June day in 1923, but referencing eons of British history) and in To the Lighthouse (set during two days of vacation separated by ten years of decay).
- How does Orlando represent time?
 - How does “the biographer” both call attention to and elide the passage of over one hundred years during the first three chapters?
7. In addition to the representation of time, perhaps the most obviously fantastic episode in the novel is Orlando’s gender transformation?
- What happened?
 - Does the transformation have anything to do with his marriage to Rosina Pepita, the “gipsy” dancer? with the bloody and incendiary insurrection of the Turks against the Sultan? If so, why is this part of the story so brief?
 - Why does “the biographer” reveal the transformation through a much longer allegorical masque in which “Our Lady of Purity,” “Our Lady of Chastity,” and “Our Lady of Modesty” must be banished by the trumpet blasts of “Truth”? (See “Useful Background for Virginia Woolf, Orlando” for information about masques.)
8. Why can’t Orlando stay with the “gipsies”? Why is her view of “Nature” insupportable and does it have anything to do with her Englishness?