

Virginia Woolf, Orlando

Monthly Discussion Sections, ch. 1-2 , pp. 13-118

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.

- 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”?
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 Orlando’s attitude toward sex develop over time?
 - Is the treatment of sexuality realistic or mediated through the eroticism of Elizabethan and Jacobean 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 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 sixty years during chapters one and two?
7. In addition to the representation of time, what other elements of the novel are obviously and comically fantastic?