

Primitivism and Orientalist themes in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Mrs. Dalloway, by Virginia Woolf, is a piece of modernist history that explores the passage of time, imperialism, feminism, and shell shock syndrome, now known as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). However, this essay focuses on the dissection of Woolf's character Elizabeth Dalloway as a caricature of orientalist views and the use of primitivism as a means to use racialized features as aestheticism for the European person.

In Woolf's texts, there is a constant use of racial monikers as adjectives, meant to utilize stereotypes to depict another white European. While addressing the usage of race in white art, Carole Sweeny in her book, *From Fetish to Subject*, writes that "representations and discourses of otherness have always approximately divided into two generic categories of otherness: the primitive and the exotic" (13). This primitivism and exoticism that is usually prescribed to the person of color stems from inherently colonialist beliefs. Nichola Crawford's "Orientalizing Elizabeth: Empire and deviancy in *Mrs. Dalloway*" explores the use of Elizabeth's racialized features under the lens of imperialisms. Crawford writes that "She represents a deviation from the norm but is not so alien as to be unrecognizable as a part of Clarissa herself. This view of Elizabeth is analogous to England's view of India and Empire in the novel. The country may be foreign, but it belongs to England" (25). The "belonging" that Crawford addresses is one of ownership and transaction. Thus, the "colored" or "racialized" world is meant to belong to England, and while Woolf may be a proponent of pacifism, she does so for the sake of the white English person rather than the subjugated.

This echoes sentiments explored by Edward Said in his text, *Orientalism*. Out of the many eye-opening insights he provides, Said writes that "The Orient then seems to be not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical

stage affixed to Europe” (63). Woolf demonstrates this through her observation of Elizabeth while at tea with Miss Kilman, writing that “Elizabeth, with her oriental bearing, her inscrutable mystery, sat perfectly upright” (128). The mystery that Woolf ascribes to Elizabeth directly stems from exoticism and primitivism often found within orientalist themes. What would be otherwise considered a normal white European girl is morphed into an exotic showpiece of a person. The line, “sat perfectly upright,” also harkens to ideas of strict and rigid formalism that the Asian woman is stereotyped to be the embodiment of it. Elizabeth may not be a target of racialization in this novel, but she does demonstrate a commodification of Orientalized features. Urmila Seshagiri, in her essay “Orienting Virginia Woolf,” provides insight on “London’s Orientalist fashion craze” and Virginia Woolf’s modernist participation in reductive race play, stating that “Nonwhite racial identities, freed from their dominant association with colonized subjects, became in Woolf’s world—as they were becoming for the English avant-garde—gateways into disruptive or subversive cultural possibilities” (63). This use of the avant-garde directly correlates to the foundation of primitivism in artistic endeavors.

White modernity uses the person of color as a trinket or a symbol for white commentary. Sweeney writes that “modernist primitivism was a variety of engagements with cultural difference that jostled up against each other in a dynamic field of diverse avant-gardisms, theory and praxis, production and consumption across high and popular cultures” (12). Thus, the racialized feature becomes a tool for white culture, allowing them to appropriate cultural objects, and because of their whiteness, it will not be met with disdain. As such imperialized beings are only acceptable when associated with white European-ness. Woolf demonstrates this when she writes about Elizabeth’s physical appearance, stating that she is “Chinese, oriental, and, as her mother said, with such nice shoulders and holding herself so straight, she was always charming

to look at” (132). Again, Woolf, through Clarissa, harkens back to the extremely formal orientalist belief; however, she demonstrates how primitivism transforms the orientalized person into a possession of Europe. They are metamorphosed into an object meant to be viewed and admired, so “charming to look at.” Thus, this relates to Edward Said’s analysis of the Orient becoming a theatrical stage meant to entertain and serve the European colonist.

In conclusion, Woolf’s character, Elizabeth Dalloway, serves as a historical reminder of White modernity, and its primitivism and orientalism to make its artistic commentary through the use of stereotypical adjectives and exoticism.

Works Cited

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