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From the "Real English Way" to Chinese Eyes: Reimagining Elizabeth Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway*

Yiyi Zhang
East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai 200030, China
Email: 3358379626@qq.com

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Abstract

This paper examines the characterization of Elizabeth Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (1925), focusing on her Chinese-looking eyes and Oriental features. While previous scholarship has largely concentrated on Clarissa Dalloway's gendered identity and Septimus Warren Smith's wartime trauma, Elizabeth's characterization offers a less explored perspective on Woolf's engagement with cultural difference and postwar renewal. Through close textual analysis, consideration of manuscript revisions discussed by Serena Wong (2024), and examination of the intellectual climate of the Bloomsbury Group, this study investigates the transformation of Elizabeth's characterization from the "real English way" in the early manuscript to the Chinese and Oriental qualities emphasized in the published novel. It situates this transformation within the postwar crisis of Western civilization, Western intellectual interest in Chinese philosophy, and contemporary racial stereotypes associated with the "Yellow Peril." The analysis suggests that Elizabeth's Chinese eyes may represent more than a distinctive physical trait: they potentially evoke an idealized image of China associated with composure, gentleness, and peaceful coexistence. This paper argues that Elizabeth's characterization may reflect Woolf's broader concerns about the destructive consequences of war and the search for cultural and spiritual renewal.

Keywords

Mrs Dalloway; Virginia Woolf; Chinese Imagery

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is widely recognized for its innovative narrative techniques and its critical engagement with the psychological and social consequences of the First World War. While existing scholarship has devoted considerable attention to Clarissa Dalloway's negotiation of gender and identity and Septimus Warren Smith's experience of wartime trauma, Elizabeth Dalloway has received comparatively little critical attention. Yet Elizabeth's characterization offers a potentially significant perspective on Woolf's engagement with cultural

difference and the search for alternatives to modern Western civilization. In particular, the emphasis on Elizabeth's Chinese-looking eyes in the published novel raises questions about the relationship between her physical appearance, her characterization, and the cultural meanings attached to China in the early twentieth century.

Drawing on textual analysis, manuscript evidence discussed by Serena Wong (2024), and the intellectual context of the Bloomsbury Group, this paper examines the transformation of Elizabeth's characterization from the "real English way" of the early manuscript to the Chinese and Oriental features emphasized in the published novel. It situates this transformation within the postwar crisis of Western civilization, contemporary Western interest in Chinese philosophy, and the racial stereotypes associated with the discourse of the "Yellow Peril." Rather than treating Elizabeth's appearance as merely an aesthetic detail, this paper explores the possibility that her characterization reflects an alternative cultural imagination in which Chinese identity becomes associated with composure, gentleness, and the pursuit of peace. It argues that Elizabeth's Chinese eyes may serve as a point of entry into Woolf's broader concerns about cultural renewal, the destructive legacy of war, and the possibility of a more peaceful future.

2. An Analysis of Elizabeth Dalloway's Characterization

Mrs Dalloway, published in 1925 by the British modernist writer Virginia Woolf, is a canonical work of modernist literature, renowned for its stream-of-consciousness narrative and profound exploration of human psychology. Set over a single day in June 1923, the novel centers on Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class London woman preparing to host a dinner party. Through the interplay between objective, physical time, marked by the chimes of Big Ben, and the nonlinear time of consciousness, shaped by memories and associations, Woolf captures the "reality" of the mind. The narrative shifts between the perspectives of different characters, breaking away from conventional linear storytelling to explore the inner lives of Clarissa, Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran suffering from psychological trauma, Peter Walsh, Clarissa's former lover, and others.

Existing scholarship on the novel has focused primarily on Clarissa and Septimus. Some studies explore Clarissa's inner struggles and examine how her recollections of the past and anxieties about aging contribute to the construction of her identity (Lee, 1999, p. III). More recently, feminist readings have become increasingly prominent. From this perspective, scholars argue that Woolf uses Clarissa to illuminate the precarious position of women within the patriarchal society inherited from the Victorian era. Through Clarissa, Woolf is also understood to articulate a feminist vision in which women's capacity for consolation might help save humanity and foster a harmonious balance between the masculine and the feminine (Zhao Dongmei, 2014, pp. 130–133). As for Septimus, scholars have largely concentrated

on his wartime trauma and psychological well-being. Shen Dan (2008, pp. 33–38), for example, examines Septimus's madness to expose the destructive consequences of imperialist warfare, while Froula (2006, p. IV) investigates how Woolf uses his character to reveal modern society's neglect of mental health and the individual's struggle to cope with the psychological scars of war.

This paper, however, focuses on Elizabeth Dalloway, Clarissa's daughter, a female character whose physical appearance and temperament distinguish her from those around her. It seeks to explore why Woolf chose to endow Elizabeth with a distinctly "Chinese" or Oriental quality and to investigate the aspirations and meanings that may be invested in this characterization.

Elizabeth Dalloway receives relatively little narrative attention, yet Woolf repeatedly emphasizes her Chinese eyes and Oriental bearing. Three passages are particularly significant in establishing this aspect of her characterization.

First, when Elizabeth enters her mother's room, the narrator observes: "For the Dalloways, in general, were fair-haired; blue-eyed; Elizabeth, on the contrary, was dark; had Chinese eyes in a pale face; an Oriental mystery; was gentle, considerate, still" (Woolf 186).

Second, Elizabeth's Oriental characteristics are further emphasized in a scene involving Miss Kilman: "Elizabeth, with her oriental bearing, her inscrutable mystery, sat perfectly upright; no, she did not want anything more" (Woolf 199).

Finally, as Elizabeth waits for an omnibus in Victoria Street, the narrator reflects: "It was expression she needed, but her eyes were fine, Chinese, oriental, and, as her mother said, with such nice shoulders and holding herself so straight, she was always charming to look at" (Woolf 205).

Taken together, these passages demonstrate that Elizabeth's Chinese eyes and Oriental bearing are not incidental details but recurring elements of her characterization. The first passage explicitly contrasts her appearance with the fair hair and blue eyes of the Dalloway family, presenting her as an exception within her own family. The second associates her Oriental bearing with inscrutability and composure, while the third links her Chinese eyes to her physical attractiveness and restrained demeanor. Through these descriptions, Woolf constructs Elizabeth as a figure whose appearance and temperament distinguish her from the social and cultural environment in which she is situated. This distinctive characterization provides a basis for further examining the possible cultural significance of her Chinese features.

Yet a closer examination of Woolf's manuscripts reveals that Elizabeth was not originally conceived as a character with such distinctly Chinese or Oriental features. In her 2024 article, "Elizabeth Dalloway, Chinese Eyes, and the 'Real English Way'," Serena Wong examines Woolf's manuscript drafts of Mrs Dalloway, tracing the relevant passages and identifying changes in Elizabeth's characterization. The

following is the passage concerning Elizabeth reproduced in Wong's discussion of the early manuscript:

Buses ~~came and went~~ swooped; settled; were off. She had no preference. She had not acquired any habits ~~yet~~; ~~or nor displayed~~ she had no features to speak of; [nothing ~~that led see anybody to see to~~ but a sunburnt mask, ~~white teeth~~, slightly whitened with the finest down.] & if nature has given her a beautiful body, straight & with the ~~straight~~ legs & fine ankles of a racehorse, so that Miss Kilman always thought of her as a moving, in the open, her face was still ~~childish~~ in doubt; ~~&~~ more like her father's than her mother's, ~~tending~~ ~~that is to say~~ to the unexpressive: the handsome, ~~the stable~~ ~~with~~ Her eyes ~~would~~ were fine; & (~~so~~ Clarissa ~~had~~ said ~~a thousand times) &~~ with such nice shoulders, back, ~~& ankles should she be a she~~ & holding herself ~~perfectly~~ beautifully, she ~~certainly~~ must always look ~~charming~~; nice; ~~Expression at eighteen~~ Quite lately especially in the evening, when she was excited, she had looked almost beautiful in the ~~pure true~~ real English way, for hadn't the Dalloways been settled in Lincolnshire ever since the flood? ~~so that they~~ There was a great-grandmother very like her.

A comparison of this early draft with the published novel reveals that, although Woolf had already endowed Elizabeth with beautiful eyes—described simply as "fine eyes"—she had not yet explicitly identified them as Chinese or Oriental. Furthermore, the manuscript describes Elizabeth as having looked beautiful in the "real English way," a characterization markedly different from the Oriental quality emphasized in the published version.

Why, then, did Woolf substantially revise Elizabeth's characterization? Why did she choose to emphasize Chinese or Oriental features? The following sections explore these questions.

3. Why Did Woolf Choose to Give Elizabeth the Chinese Eyes ?

The narrative of *Mrs Dalloway* is set in Britain after the First World War, a period of profound social, cultural, and psychological transformation. In the aftermath of the war, Western societies entered an era increasingly shaped by urbanization and industrialization, bringing dramatic changes to both material and spiritual life. Traditional values began to lose their authority, religion's central position was increasingly challenged, and interpersonal relationships became more complicated and alienated. The immense destruction and suffering caused by the war also prompted widespread doubt about the capitalist value system that had previously commanded confidence, intensifying the sense of disillusionment associated with industrial modernity. Although Britain emerged victorious from the First World War, its economic strength had been severely weakened, and it lost its former position as the world's banker. The war also devastated the prospects of an entire generation of British people. Although *Mrs Dalloway* was published in 1925, after the war had ended, British society remained deeply overshadowed by its consequences.

Perhaps it was precisely this bleak postwar reality, characterized by a crisis of faith and a spiritual vacuum in the West, that encouraged some Western intellectuals to seek renewal in Eastern thought. Indeed, the early twentieth century witnessed a growing appreciation of Chinese philosophy in certain Western intellectual and artistic circles. Unlike the European fascination with China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which tended to idealize Chinese political ethics and material civilization through a Confucian framework, the so-called "Oriental Renaissance" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increasingly turned toward Daoist philosophy and the aesthetics of classical Chinese art (Yang Lixin and Bai Weizhen, 2023, p. 125). During this period, numerous Western writers and artists came to regard the Chinese concept of the Dao, or Daoist thought more broadly, as a potential alternative to the materialism and industrialization that characterized modern Western society.

Several members of the Bloomsbury Group, to which Woolf belonged, also demonstrated considerable enthusiasm for traditional Chinese thought. Arthur Waley, a prominent sinologist associated with the group, discussed the formal conventions of Chinese and Western poetry in 170 Chinese Poems (1919, p. 17). He observed that Chinese poets often depicted reclusive figures engaged in activities such as playing chess or practicing calligraphy, as well as peaceful and harmonious rural life. These images bear certain similarities to Elizabeth's characterization in *Mrs Dalloway*. At one point, Elizabeth expresses a preference for being able to do as she pleases in the countryside, as she once did in the past (Wang Lijun, Lin Yueze, and Zhao Le, 2021, p. 289). Regarding her future occupation, she reflects that she might become a doctor or a farmer (ibid., p. 292).

In 1916, Waley also privately printed and distributed his translations of Chinese poetry, including *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, to members of the Bloomsbury Group. Woolf and her husband, Leonard Woolf, were among the recipients. Waley was not the only member of the group interested in Chinese culture. Lytton Strachey, another prominent member, described Chinese people as peaceful in temperament, industrious, down-to-earth, charming, and sincere. In his *Letters from a Chinaman: The Oriental View of Western Civilization*, he also contributed to an idealized image of China, including the figure of the farmer engaged in labor (Lu Yanming and Wang Yukuo, 2008, p. 16). Bertrand Russell, meanwhile, praised the Chinese as comparatively composed, refined, tolerant, and free-spirited.

Although Woolf herself did not explicitly express her views on China or Chinese philosophy in any known direct statement published around the time of *Mrs Dalloway*, the attitudes of her associates offer a possible context for interpreting her representation of Elizabeth. It is therefore plausible that the image of China circulating within her intellectual milieu informed, at least in part, the qualities

associated with Elizabeth: composure, mystery, gentleness, and an alluring sense of otherness.

The transformation of Elizabeth from a character associated with the "English way" into one marked by a "Chinese flavor" may also reflect Woolf's hopes for the younger generation that would eventually shape the nation's future. Her friend Bertrand Russell visited China in 1920 to deliver a series of lectures and subsequently published *The Problem of China* in 1922. In this work, Russell praised what he perceived as the Chinese disposition toward peace, patience, and tolerance, advocating the use of China's spiritual and philosophical traditions, particularly Daoist thought, to counterbalance Western material civilization.

Russell argued that Daoist philosophy, associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi, had gradually become deeply rooted in Chinese culture, thereby encouraging a way of life that was more composed, refined, tolerant, free-spirited, and introspective than its Western counterpart (Ding Zijiang, 2015, p. 236). He further suggested that the Chinese outlook on life, shaped by Daoist philosophy, could help counterbalance the aggressive and brutal tendencies of Western culture and rescue Western societies from conventional forms of civilization that had become moribund, habitual, and excessively instrumentalized (ibid., p. 235).

Perhaps, influenced by the broader social climate as well as by the views of her friends and fellow intellectuals, Woolf hoped that the younger generation of British people might cultivate qualities resembling those she associated with the Chinese under the influence of Daoist thought. Such individuals would be peace-loving, composed, and self-possessed, helping to spare the world and its people the devastation and suffering of future wars.

4. The Distinctive Significance of Elizabeth's "Chinese Eyes"

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf repeatedly uses the term "Oriental" to describe Elizabeth's bearing, yet she explicitly identifies Elizabeth's eyes as Chinese. Moreover, she does not attach an overtly malicious connotation to this feature. This is noteworthy because such a positive representation of Chinese physical characteristics was relatively uncommon in the Western world of the early twentieth century.

At the time, the ideology of the "Yellow Peril" was widespread in Western societies. On the one hand, many Westerners regarded white people as racially superior and Western civilization as inherently more advanced, while portraying the Chinese as morally inferior and degenerate. On the other hand, they feared that China might eventually pose an economic and military threat to the West. The Boxer Uprising of 1900, which emerged in opposition to foreign intervention and imperialist aggression in China, further intensified these anxieties.

During the uprising, Western residents in China sent numerous reports back to their home countries. These accounts frequently exaggerated negative representations of the Chinese, sensationalizing the alleged brutality of Boxer attacks against

foreigners and condemning the Qing government as treacherous, conservative, and xenophobic. Although many such reports were distorted or exaggerated, their impact on Western public opinion was considerable. As a result, descriptions of the Chinese as barbaric, backward, deceitful, and arrogant became prominent in Western perceptions of China.

A similar stereotype appeared in Sax Rohmer's *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*, published in 1913. Rohmer, one of the most commercially successful writers of the first half of the twentieth century, popularized the fictional image of the Chinese villain Fu Manchu, characterized by slanted eyes, sharply angled eyebrows, high cheekbones, a goatee, a thin, bald head, and traditional official robes. This figure quickly became a cultural symbol used to sensationalize fears associated with the "Yellow Peril," appearing in popular novels, operas, films, and comics across several Western countries.

These representations suggest that, for much of the Western world at the time, China was not generally associated with the gentle, composed, and considerate Oriental sensibility attributed to Elizabeth in Woolf's novel. Rather, Chinese-looking eyes were frequently used as a visual marker of sinister or threatening otherness.

Woolf nevertheless chose to emphasize Elizabeth's Chinese eyes. One possible explanation is that her intellectual environment, particularly the interests of certain members of the Bloomsbury Group, exposed her to alternative perspectives on Chinese culture and philosophy. Such influences may have enabled her to look beyond the prevailing discourse of the "Yellow Peril" and resist accepting its negative stereotypes uncritically.

By giving a character portrayed in an appealing and sympathetic light a pair of Chinese eyes, Woolf may have challenged dominant Western prejudices and expressed a more favorable attitude toward China and its cultural image. From this perspective, Elizabeth's distinctive appearance does more than differentiate her from other members of the Dalloway family: it may also represent a subtle departure from the racial and cultural assumptions prevalent in her society.

5. Conclusion

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf criticizes the devastating consequences of the First World War and its profound damage to the human psyche. Elizabeth Dalloway's transformation from a character associated with the "English way" into one marked by a "Chinese flavor" may also reflect an intellectual tendency among Western writers and artists to seek alternatives and renewal in Eastern, particularly Chinese, thought.

Elizabeth's Chinese eyes and Oriental bearing can be interpreted as reflecting an idealized image of China, potentially shaped by the influence of members of the Bloomsbury Group. Through this characterization, Woolf may have expressed a sympathetic view of China while also projecting her hopes onto the younger

generation of Britain. She may have wished for young people to become more peace-loving, composed, and reflective, cultivating qualities that could help humanity move beyond the destructive tendencies of modern Western civilization.

Ultimately, Elizabeth's Chinese characteristics may be understood not simply as an aesthetic feature of her characterization, but also as a possible expression of Woolf's broader concerns about war, cultural renewal, and the future of humanity. By associating Elizabeth with qualities that contemporary Western intellectuals sometimes attributed to Chinese philosophy, Woolf may have imagined an alternative set of values through which a more peaceful world could be achieved.

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