# ‘[T]he principle around which Modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity’ (John Carey). Are modernist texts elitist?

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Described by Julia Briggs as ‘modernism’s lost masterpiece’, Hope Mirrlees’ *Paris* provides a glimpse of a Parisian day in 1919 and takes its influence from both popular culture and classical studies.[1] However, does this combination of intertextuality and contemporary prejudices make *Paris* elitist? In writing the poem, Mirrlees intended to create a ‘holophrase’ (p. 3, l. 1), a single piece of work that could describe the city over the course of a single day. In this essay, however, I contend that the depiction of Paris that she creates is not of the real city, but of an idealised dreamscape, built on a classical structure too obscure for all but the most educated readers to understand. Elitism in *Paris* can therefore be seen in three aspects of the poem: its racism, glorification of wealth, and many complex literary allusions. These overshadow the universality of the Parisian experience and, because of this, I will be arguing that Mirrlees’ *Paris* is indeed an elitist text.

To a modern reader, the representation of minority ethnicities in *Paris* is one of the clearest signs of contemporary elitist views. Ethnic diversity in the poem is most notable in its absence and acknowledgement of the existence of minority ethnicities is limited to rare, subtextual instances, such as in Mirrlees’ invocation of the ‘ZIG-ZAG’ (p. 3, l. 3) brand of cigarette papers. Shoshana Kessler points out that Zig-Zag papers, at the time that *Paris* was written, were advertised using a picture of a Zouave, a French-African soldier.[2] This means that, from the first page of the poem, the reader is reminded of contemporary French colonialism, the poem’s narrator passing posters that bear the very image of colonial oppression. In line with this colonial thought, later references to minority ethnicities are overtly negative, describing them as ‘lizard-eyes’ (p. 12, l. 16) and as ‘the tart little race’ (p. 12, l. 17). These descriptions do not just explicitly portray minority ethnicities in a negative light – terms such as ‘lizard eyes’ and ‘tart’ emphasising the perceived barbarity of these people – but they also implicitly separate the narrator from the described groups. The narrator is never said to be white, but Mirrlees’ physical description of those of minority ethnic backgrounds implies that they are visually different to the rest of the Parisians. Their ‘lizard eyes’ are an example

[1] Julia Briggs, ‘Hope Mirrlees and Continental Modernism’, in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 261; Hope Mirrlees, *Paris* (London: Hogarth Press, 1919). All further references are to this edition.
[2] Shoshana Kessler, ‘Printing Paris: Exhuming a Modernist Masterpiece’, <https://www.artslant.com/sf/articles/show/48199-printing-paris-exhuming-a-modernist-masterpiece>, accessed 16.03.20.

of how they diverge from the white default portrayed by the narrator and the other characters described in the poem.

That Mirrlees sees divergence from the white default as undesirable is clear from her amoral depictions of minority ethnicities in *Paris*. Not only are their physical appearances criticised, but their cultural practices are viewed through a moralistic, external lens. The narrator is not a member of these communities and yet she states that the notes of jazz music 'have the heads of niggers and […] writhe in obscene syncopation' (p. 21, ll. 17-18), which presents black people as literal embodiments of the controversial music they perform. This derogatory language reflects contemporary racism, and is especially relevant to Paris, since African people were forced to perform traditional music in Paris Zoo as recently as 1903.[3] Therefore, there is a tacit suggestion in the poem that, though 'Paris […] carries a thousand villages in his heart' (p. 6, ll. 10-11), the validity of those homes comes from the familiarity of their culture, excluding people of other ethnicities in favour of a white elite. Indeed, the only positive depiction of a person of colour in the poem is in the mention of 'votive offerings from a converted Jap' (p. 20, l. 3), which bestows upon them a sense of piety on par with their white peers, but erases any sense of their identity in favour of the pejorative term 'Jap'. Moreover, the idea of 'a converted Jap' implies it is the conversion that makes them different to the rest of their race; their morality marks them as an outlier. In short, *Paris* is not a poem that explicitly glorifies whiteness, but the racist and colonialist tone of Mirrlees' writing makes it an elitist text.

However, I argue that *Paris* is not just elitist due to Mirrlees' depictions of race, but because it attempts to be a true representation of the city of Paris, which was at the heart of the French colonial empire. French colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was based on the premise that theirs was a 'mission civilisatrice' (civilising mission), which Alice L. Conklin describes as 'a universal mission [...] to uplift the "inferior races"'.[4] The native French saw themselves as superior to the people of their colonies, and yet, the premise of colonialism itself ran counter to French conceptions of humanity and justice, which created a juxtaposition between the libertarian ideals of Paris and the racist systems in place to prevent colonies' advancements.[5] In the early twentieth century, the lessening of French power over their colonies meant that minority ethnicities had a greater presence in cities such as Paris. Therefore, there is an argument for saying that Mirrlees' presentation of different ethnic groups in *Paris* is a contemporary attempt to represent the growing diversity of the city, terms such as 'converted Jap' (p. 20, l. 3) emphasising that the 'mission civilisatrice' has worked and the

[3] Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris 1900-1930* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) p. 23.
[4] Alice L. Conklin, 'Colonialism and Human Rights, A Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895-1914', *The American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), 419-442 (p. 420).
[5] Conklin, p. 425.

minorities can now experience the city as comparative equals.[6] However, to a modern reader, Mirrlees' presentation of minority ethnicities in Paris is not positive. She uses racist slurs and epithets to demean the people whom she describes and provides little characterisation beyond their physical appearances. Despite the era in which it was written, Paris' depiction of minority ethnicities can be seen as pejorative and xenophobic, and is therefore elitist.

The idea that *Paris* was written as an elitist text is substantiated by the sophisticated allusions present throughout the poem, which indicate that Mirrlees' intended reader was one with an extensive and prohibitively expensive education. For example, the river in *Paris* is named as the Seine, but functions as the Styx. From the first page of the poem, the narrator uses the river to establish that she is crossing from one place to another, stating that 'we are passing under the Seine' (p. 3, l. 10). A less educated reader could take this literally; the only indication of a true crossing is the onomatopoeic 'brekekekek coax coax' (p. 3, l. 10) of the train's wheels, which is the chorus' refrain in Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. This onomatopoeia signifies that, whilst the train is literally passing under the Seine, it is also making another journey, from the world of 1910s Paris to the spiritual world of Hellenic beliefs. In this way, the entire poem can be seen as a *katabasis*, the Greek trope of a descent to the underworld, sparked by the unattributed line 'vous descendez Madame?' (p. 3, l. 14). Over the course of the poem, the narrator progresses from being 'knee deep in dreams' (p. 16, l. 15) to saying that 'the dreams have reached my waist' (p. 16, l. 15). Taking the people and sights of Paris as memories and dreams, there is a clear Homeric influence to the poem. In Book Nine of *The Odyssey*, the spirit of Odysseus' mother states that the spirits of the dead are just memories, 'the soul slips away like a dream'.[7] In both *The Odyssey* and *Paris*, the protagonists make the journey down to the underworld, becoming more and more caught up in the dreams that surround them. It is only as they are almost overwhelmed by the sights and sounds that the *katabasis* may end, 'a friendly breeze' springs up, 'the sun is rising' (p. 22, l. 13), and the visit to the dead seems like nothing but a dream.[8]

To Mirrlees, who studied Classics at Cambridge, *Paris*' classical allusions would have been self-evident. However, they are subtle enough to go entirely unnoticed by a less educated reader, which, in addition to Paris' other literary references, makes the depth of the poem inaccessible to a broad swathe of 1910s society. If Mirrlees expected her readers to be able to understand both references to Macbeth, 'like Duncan, they slept well' (p. 8, l. 16), and bilingual wordplay such as 'the letter H' (p. 11, l. 4) on Père Lachaise's cloak being pronounced as the French 'ash' to represent the remains in the cemetery, then she was clearly writing for

[6] Conklin, p. 420.
[7] Homer, *The Odyssey*, ed. by Peter Jones, trans. by E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 11.221.
[8] Homer, 11.640.

a specific, elite audience. Briggs cites this as one of the reasons that Paris is an elitist text, since 'in addition to its sources in popular (and transient) culture, the poem assumes a familiarity with French and English literature'.[9] In short, though anyone can read *Paris*, and the poem contains many transient details a contemporary reader would appreciate, much of the analysis of the poem relies on an extensive knowledge of English, French, and Classical traditions, which was inaccessible to most people in the early twentieth century.

As a poem that focuses on a walk through the city, it is difficult to describe *Paris* as entirely elitist. Julia Briggs emphasises the poem's far-reaching universality in her analysis of it, stating that 'it threads a path between the past and the present, between the daily life of the city and its revenants, between the posters on the street and the paintings in the Louvre'.[10] Superficially, this does seem to be the case. Mirrlees uses the poem as a self-proclaimed 'holophrase' (p. 3, l. 1) which combines the small details of life in Paris with a broader cultural context. Whilst a contemporary Parisian audience would be intimately familiar with details such as the 'LION NOIR' (p. 1, l. 4) and 'CACAO BLOOCKER' (p. 1, l. 5) posters on the metro walls, a modern reader would find that these make the text more difficult to navigate, since *Paris* contains an almost equal weighting of what Briggs calls 'transient' popular culture and obscure metaphorical details.[11] However, when it was published, these aspects of the poem would have been culturally relevant to all Parisian readers and, in this way, *Paris* is not elitist.

The places visited, however, indicate that *Paris* is not intended to represent a walk through the entire city, but through the image of what Paris has come to represent. Mirrlees describes the poem as a 'holophrase' and, indeed, *Paris* is not supposed to be a comprehensive description of the city, but a summary, an ideal. The 'NORD-SUD' (p. 3, l. 2) train taken at the beginning of the poem is a key example of the selectivity of the narrator's journey. The Nord-Sud metro line runs from Montparnasse, where famous authors such as Hemingway and Jean-Paul Sartre lived, to Montmartre, the centre of the Parisian art scene during the Belle Époque. The fact that the narrator stops at 'CONCORDE' (p. 3, l. 17), the stop closest to the Louvre, indicates that she is not viewing the city as it is, but rather, as a piece of art. In this way, she passes the 'Tuileries' (p. 4, l. 1), the 'Arc de Triomphe' (p. 5, l. 16), and the 'Étoile' (p. 5, l. 22), the art from the Louvre mingling with the surrounding cityscape until it is unclear what is held inside the museum and what is part of Paris itself. The statue of a 'Roman boy picking a thorn out of his foot' (p. 6, l. 2), for instance, is mentioned in the same way as the 'Auvergnat' (p. 6, l. 8) selling chestnuts. To Mirrlees, they are both art, a romanticisation that glosses over the hardships faced by an immigrant forced to sell chestnuts

[9] Briggs, p. 267.
[10] Briggs, p. 261.
[11] Briggs, p. 267.

on the street. Many colours described in the poem are linked to expensive materials: 'gold' (p. 10, l. 1), 'wedgewood blue' (p. 15, l. 3), and 'saffron' (p. 22, l. 15). This gives *Paris*, the poem, a colour palette that is not matched by the reality of Paris, the city. As mentioned earlier, the narrator seems to be navigating an idealised, dream-scape version of Paris, and this is substantiated by the fact that Mirrlees presents wealth and beauty as linked, referring to the sight of the buds on the trees as 'jeunesse dorée' (p. 11, l. 16), a compliment reserved for the upper classes. Just as a walk past Kensington's museums does not show the entirety of London, and a walk past Manhattan's galleries does not show the entirety of New York, so a walk through the 1st arrondissement is favouring the wealthier side of Paris whilst hiding or romanticising the city's less aesthetically pleasing areas.

Furthermore, contrary to the superficial universality of the experience, I argue that the socioeconomic implications of the narrator's journey through the city are elitist. Though people in all positions of society lived in Paris, the narrator is wandering through the city in the manner of a Baudelairean flâneur.[12] The archetype of the flâneur, described by Merlin Coverley as 'the wanderer in the modern city, both immersed in the crowd but isolated by it', is an essentially elitist role because it assumes the privilege of having the time to wander and thus not having to work for a living.[13] The narrator's disconnect with the people she sees objectifies them; the 'hatless women in black shawls, [… ] workmen, […] barrows of vegetables, […] busy dogs' (p. 17, ll. 5-9) are all the same when viewed from the expensive top floor of a hotel, and, as the narrator remarks, 'they all seem very small' (p. 17, l. 11). Although the narrator views Paris, she is not part of it. The city is literally placed beneath them, allowing them to observe it from a divine height without being affected by the 'stories' (p. 17, l. 12), the people themselves. Such a perspective places the flâneur in them above the human. She sees the city at the expense of participating in the daily life of it. In their observance of Paris, Mirrlees marks the narrator as part of a non-working elite.

Since Mirrlees was a woman, however, she could not be a true flâneur, but was a flâneuse. As of such, the poem is written in the female voice and seems to discuss an entirely female, Sapphic experience. Mirrlees, whose sexuality is unconfirmed but, in private, called her relationship with Jane Harrison 'a marriage, imagining themselves the older and younger wives of a teddy bear that Harrison had once been given by a student', litters her poetry with references to the sexually liberated women of the Left Bank.[14] This can first be seen in the statement that 'those nymphs are harmless / fear not their soft mouths' (p. 4, l. 11). According

[12] Tori Young, 'Myths of Passage: Paris and Parallax,' in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920–1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 275-290 (p. 275).
[13] Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 3rd edn (London: Oldcastle Books, 2018), p. 60.
[14] John T. Connor, 'Hope Mirrlees and the Archive of Modernism', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37 (2014) 117-182 (p. 179).

to Megan Beech, the word 'nymph' is evocative of the 'nymphae – the inner folds of the labia minora' and, indeed, the 'soft mouths' of the nymphs could refer to both facial and genital lips.[15] There is a sense of both innocence and sensuality in this line, the nymphs – often taken to be prostitutes – are 'harmless', but the 'softness' of their mouths implies both that the narrator has kissed one before, and that she is tempted to do so again. As if to emphasise that this poem exists in a context that is more accepting of Sapphic relationships, Mirrlees introduces an outsider, an American, who states that she dos not 'like the gurls of the night-club – they love women' (p. 21, l. 22). The fact that the American sees Paris as 'the Masque of the Seven Deadly Sins' (p. 21, l. 21) indicates that the sins in question – pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth – are all associated with various parts of the city. Due to Paris' reputation as a lesbian haven, it can be taken that the sin the Americans see in the Left Bank is the sin of lust. 'Transactions between and among women who loved women [...] contributed richly to the production of culture in Paris between the wars', as well as contributing to the modernist movement as a whole, so it is easy to forget that Hope Mirrlees was writing during a time when all female expressions of sexuality, let alone homosexuality, were seen in a less egalitarian light.[16] Mirrlees does not denounce the image of Paris as a place of sexual proclivities, but further plays into it, making overt the affairs that were kept private in the 1910s. In this way, Paris is less of an elitist text because it represents the experience of a marginalised group that was severely underrated in the early twentieth century: homosexual women.

However, even if Mirrlees' poem is representing the interests of a marginalised group, she is still only representing the interests of the most privileged within that group. As previously analysed, the narrator of *Paris* still speaks disparagingly of minority ethnicities, the less educated and, as I will outline below, the working classes. In order to maintain her position as a flâneuse, the narrator must be rich without working and, as of such, she is critical of the working classes, who work without being rich. This can be seen when she belittles the conversation of the 'ouvriers', stating that they discuss:

> La journée de huit heures,
> Whether Landru is a sadist,
> The learned seal at the Nouveau Cirque (p. 10, ll. 11-13).

In stating that the workmen talk about unions, murderers, and circuses, Mirrlees is conflating the three and thus implying that unions are also the talk of people who enjoy sensational

[15] Megan Beech, '"Obscure, Indecent, and Brilliant": Female Sexuality, the Hogarth Press, and Hope Mirrlees,' in *Virginia Wolf and the World of Books*, ed. by Nicola Wilson and Claire Battershill (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 70-75 (p. 72).
[16] Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, Introduction, *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. xx.

gossip. This indicates that she has no understanding of, or no sympathy towards, working class concerns, reinforcing the idea that *Paris* is an elitist text. In this way, the narrator is put on a pedestal above the poor, who, like the rest of the city, become spectacles for her to view and move past, protected by the privilege that she does not have to worry about earning a living. Although the sex workers are only briefly mentioned, Mirrlees further dehumanises them when she states that 'some Pasteur made the Gauls immune against the bite of Nymphs' (p. 4, ll. 13-14). Pasteur refers to Louis Pasteur, who discovered the concept of vaccination, but can also be taken to mean pastor. Since the sex workers are said to 'bite' like animals, the men who sleep with them can be seen as the victims of their 'bite', which Julia Briggs states 'may refer to venereal disease'.[17] Here, Mirrlees is implying that there is something about the men, whether it is God's blessing or the medical advances they can access, which means that they are above contracting the same diseases that plague the poorer women. In a city with as vast a level of socioeconomic disparity as Paris, this shows that the health and opinions of the upper classes are protected by privilege, portraying the experience of the poem as one of the wealthy elite.

*Paris* by Hope Mirrlees purports to be a 'holophrase' (p. 3, l. 1), a single poem that encapsulates the experience of an entire city and, indeed, Mirrlees represents many facets of Paris over the course of the poem. This is the holophrase that she intends to write, capturing the idealised essence of the city. However, although it is arguable that the references to contemporary Parisian culture make *Paris* accessible to Mirrlees' audience, her depiction of an idealised city excludes people who are not white, wealthy, or well educated. Furthermore, comparisons between the narrator and Baudelairean flâneurs suggest that the full experience of wandering through the city is also confined to a wealthy elite, especially considering the poem's degradation of minority ethnicities and the poor. Through this, it can be seen that *Paris* is a poem that sets out to represent the artist's ideal of the city of Paris, but does so at the expense of the less aesthetic people and places, rendering it an elitist text.

[17] Briggs, p. 270.

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