

James Joyce Literary Supplement

Volume 37 | Issue 1

Article 3

2024

Woolf's Mythic Methods

Catherine Hollis
U.C. Berkeley Extension

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Joyce Literary Supplement by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Hollis, Catherine (2024) "Woolf's Mythic Methods," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*. Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/3>

Woolf's Mythic Methods

AMY C. SMITH, *Virginia Woolf's Mythic Method*.
Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022.
\$99.95 hardcover; \$49.95 eBook.

Catherine Hollis

Amy C. Smith's analysis of Virginia Woolf's "mythic method" takes as its starting point the difference between Woolf's use of myth and T.S. Eliot's. Drawing on Eliot's assessment of James Joyce in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923), Smith rightly argues that Eliot's description of Joyce's mythic method is more a projection of Eliot's own mode of "shoring fragments against ruin" in *The Waste Land* than it is an analysis of *Ulysses*. If Eliot's method is a means of ordering, shaping, and controlling the modern world by incorporating allusions to classical mythology, then by contrast Woolf's method—in Smith's reading—employs archaic, pre-Olympian mythology to celebrate both the disordering quality of myth and the indeterminate narrative structures of modernism.

Smith's argument distinguishes Woolf's mythic method from Eliot's because of its use of parataxis, the Greek term for placing side-by-side. "Paratactic storytelling," like Woolf's, in Smith's argument, is inherently modernist because by eliminating coordinating conjunctions in compound sentences, Woolf establishes a narrative indeterminacy that empowers the reader to draw their own logical connections between phrases, objects, and characters. Rather than drawing one-to-one parallels between modernist characters and their mythological predecessors, as Joyce does, Woolf often employs multiple mythical allusions associated with a single character. For example, Smith brilliantly identifies references to multiple pre-Olympian goddesses with respect to the character Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). By "disordering" the mythical allusions that attach to Mrs Ramsay, Woolf creates a character whose impact on those around her could be experienced as both nurturing and/or oppressive, allowing for interpretative openness. These multiple mythical referents are key to the underlying politics of Woolf's work, as will be discussed below, and point to the influence of Woolf's mentor in the reading of Greek, Jane E. Harrison.

Virginia Woolf's mythic method derives from the Classics professor Jane E. Harrison with whom Woolf informally studied. Smith specifically cites Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912) as texts that were influential to Woolf's use of myth in her modernist fiction. Harrison's focus on archaic, pre-Olympian mythology informs Woolf's allusions to chthonic Earth deities, vegetation gods, and goddess figures. Woolf's use of Harrison is not uncritical however, as Smith persuasively argues; Woolf doesn't suggest that a return to a maternalist pre-Olympian mythology would result in any kind of utopian social organization. Indeed, in the three chapters that *Virginia Woolf's Mythic Method* devotes to *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Smith is at pains to show how Woolf's goddess references portray modern women's enmeshment in patriarchal and militaristic structures of thought and affect.

In a wonderful close reading of the scene in which Clarissa Dalloway visits a flower shop, Smith shows how Woolf revises the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" to show Clarissa's participation in capitalistic and patriarchal economic and social structures. In the "Hymn," the flowers that Persephone and her fellow-maidens pick in the field, prior to her abduction by Hades, represent a

version of “Artemesian love” between young women, a love that Clarissa also experiences in youth with Sally Seton (35). While flowers denote female sexuality in both the “Hymn to Demeter” and in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa herself is so thoroughly bound by capitalistic and patriarchal structures that—in Smith’s reading—buying flowers from women lower in the class system almost constitutes an act of prostitution rather than a free exchange of desire. Smith does allow for a “sliver of hope” (49) in the return of Sally Seton at the end of the novel, but Sally’s return, like the promise of living within Artemesian, women-centred communities, is indeterminate and paratactic—that is, open to interpretation.

As a rhetorical move, parataxis is inherently open and multi-valent, and in Smith’s reading, deeply anti-fascist. Prioritizing interpretative freedom rather than one-to-one hierarchical correspondences, Woolf’s mythical method connects with her critique of patriarchy and militarism. For example, in a chapter on the character Septimus Smith as vegetation god and sacrificial victim, Smith associates Woolf’s description of *Mrs Dalloway* as “the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side” (*Diary* 2, 207) with her “paratactic commitment to balancing opposing perspectives” (Smith 51). Woolf’s critique of the rational materialism that kills Septimus (as practiced in war and by the medical establishment) is set against her hesitation at fully embracing the irrational mysticism that Septimus experiences throughout the novel. Smith suggests that Septimus’s visionary insight aligns him with a Nietzschean reading of Dionysius, in which the dissolution of self is both ecstatic and devouring. In other words, Smith argues that Woolf’s critique of militarism and instrumental reason is weighed against her hesitation to embrace a wholly Romantic, anti-rational response to the same. Woolf’s balancing act allows for the reader’s epistemological freedom.

Between the Acts (1941) offers the fullest expression of Woolf’s mythic method as a means of resisting totalizing models of thought. This novel, published posthumously, offers—in Smith’s estimation—two aesthetic techniques that use archaic mythology to challenge fascism. Woolf’s use of a fragmentary chorale structure from Greek tragedy in the village pageant sequence uses parataxis to disrupt and disorder any sort of coherent collective identity on the part of the audience, while Woolf’s use of multiple mythic sources when alluding to women characters similarly refuses a one-to-one correspondence between character and mythical source. The impossibility of assigning any one set of meanings from the pageant, and its celebration of the fragmentary and disruptive, is in Smith’s view, how “Woolf resists fascism and the structures of thought and perception that give rise to it” (135).

Virginia Woolf’s Mythic Method relies on careful and illuminating close reading; the work Smith does to tease out the multiple references to archaic goddess figures in Woolf’s novels is particularly inventive and convincing. Smith’s citations of Woolf scholarship are also exemplary and thorough, offering a masterclass in how to generously position one’s own scholarship against previous work. The material on Jane E. Harrison’s own work and influence on Woolf is spread out through various chapters; I found myself wishing for a complete chapter examining the biographical and historical contexts for the Woolf/Harrison relationship. Although this is work that has been done in part by various hands, this book would also benefit from a chapter focused on Harrison.

Virginia Woolf’s Mythic Method positions Woolf’s disruptive parataxis against T.S. Eliot’s use of classical myth as a means of establishing order and coherence; it does not offer a comparative analysis of Joyce’s own mythic method in *Ulysses*. This isn’t necessarily a shortcoming at all, but rather offers a chance for Joyce scholars to engage with Smith’s argument in their own field of study. How does Joyce’s use of Homeric myth compare to Woolf’s parataxis or Eliot’s ordering and shaping of modern life? Amy C. Smith’s work suggests that asking questions and dwelling in uncertainties is the very stuff of modernist art and politics.

—U.C. Berkeley Extension

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Two: 1920–1924*, edited by Anne Olivier Bell, with the Assistance of Andrew McNeillie. San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, Harvest, 1978.