

# Mythopoetic Resonances: Intertextual Appropriation of Classical Mythology in Modernist British Poetry

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## Abstract

The incorporation of classical mythology in British modernist poetry is studied in this research as the works of forgotten British poets like Eliot, Yeats, and H.D. are placed under scrutiny based on how they appropriated ancient myths to tackle issues of their epoch. Analysing "The Waste Land," "Leda and the Swan," and H.D.'s Hellenic poetry, the research shows that modernist poets carved out a cultural critique from the fragments of their experiences shaped by classical modernist references. Eliot's objective correlative, the Celtic-classical synthesis of Yeats, and H.D.'s feminist reclamation portray different styles of mythological argumentation modernist poets followed. Combining intertextuality and mythopoesis, this paper demonstrates the shift of British modernist poets towards classical traditions in abstraction contemporary mythological consciousness, bearing the impacts of modern poetics and literary theory.

## Keywords

Classical mythology; intertextuality; mythopoesis; modernist poetry; cultural appropriation.

## 1. Introduction

Poetry has relied heavily on imagination inspired by classical mythology. Modernist British poetry marks a significant evolution in this relationship, coinciding with profound societal disconnect during and after World War I. As Ritchie notes, modernist writers cultivated imagination that systematically placed modern anxieties within classical narratives<sup>[1]</sup>. British modernist poetry is characterized by "mythologising" pre-existing narratives, where classical mythology functions beyond mere references to portray what Gandiya describes as cycles of "creation, destruction, and restoration"<sup>[2]</sup> in a fractured world.

Understanding classical mythology in modernist British poetry requires multiple perspectives, including Smith's merging of western and eastern philosophical traditions<sup>[3]</sup>. With these philosophies, one can better comprehend Alarauhio's case regarding the "literary technologies" modernist poets used to reshape ancient symbols with modern significance<sup>[4]</sup>.

Victorian approaches to classical mythology have been transformed in modernist poetry. While Victorian poets used classical references for moral instruction or nostalgia, modernist poets dismantled myths to reveal psychological and cultural relevance. Wilson observes that modernist writers sought "oceanic becoming"<sup>[5]</sup> through mythology to soothe their disintegrated reality. This transformation represents what Morris called "the unstable ground" beneath cultural traditions facing modern destruction<sup>[6]</sup>.

Modernism's engagement with classical mythology ranges from Eliot's scholarly mythical method to Yeats's Celtic-classical amalgamation and H.D.'s feminist reclamations. González notes that mythic figures like Persephone evolved from decorative elements to profound symbols of psychological evolution<sup>[7]</sup>. These transformational abilities, according to Cunha, demonstrate responsive mythopoetic structures addressing questions of existence in troubled times<sup>[8]</sup>.

Intertextuality highlights sociocultural issues including appropriation, heritage, and identity through classical mythology in modernist poetry. Sandten <sup>[9]</sup> demonstrates modernist poetry's impact on cultural hybridity and diasporic experiences, while Dimova's study on "synaesthetic metaphor" shows modernist engagement with mythology through interdisciplinary sensory explorations <sup>[10]</sup>.

This analysis examines transformation strategies of classical mythology by modernist British poets including T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and H.D. Modernist poets constructed classical variants expressing modern experiences, fulfilling Avramidi's notion of "a lyric of their own" <sup>[11]</sup>. Classical elements in diverse cultural contexts exist performatively in traditional forms' adaptive roles, as proposed by Martínez Jiménez <sup>[12,13]</sup>.

Combining Carden and Falk's findings on spatio-temporal placement of poets' works <sup>[14]</sup> with Pitari's criticism of modernism's "blurred boundaries between philosophy and literature" <sup>[15]</sup>, this study explores new poetic expressions enabled by mythopoeic techniques. As Falk and Carden elaborate <sup>[16]</sup>, and as Bai demonstrates in cross-cultural literary exchange <sup>[17]</sup>, modernist engagement with mythology participates in larger processes that Marfè characterizes as "following the songlines" of cultural tradition while simultaneously remaking them <sup>[18]</sup>.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Theories of Intertextuality**

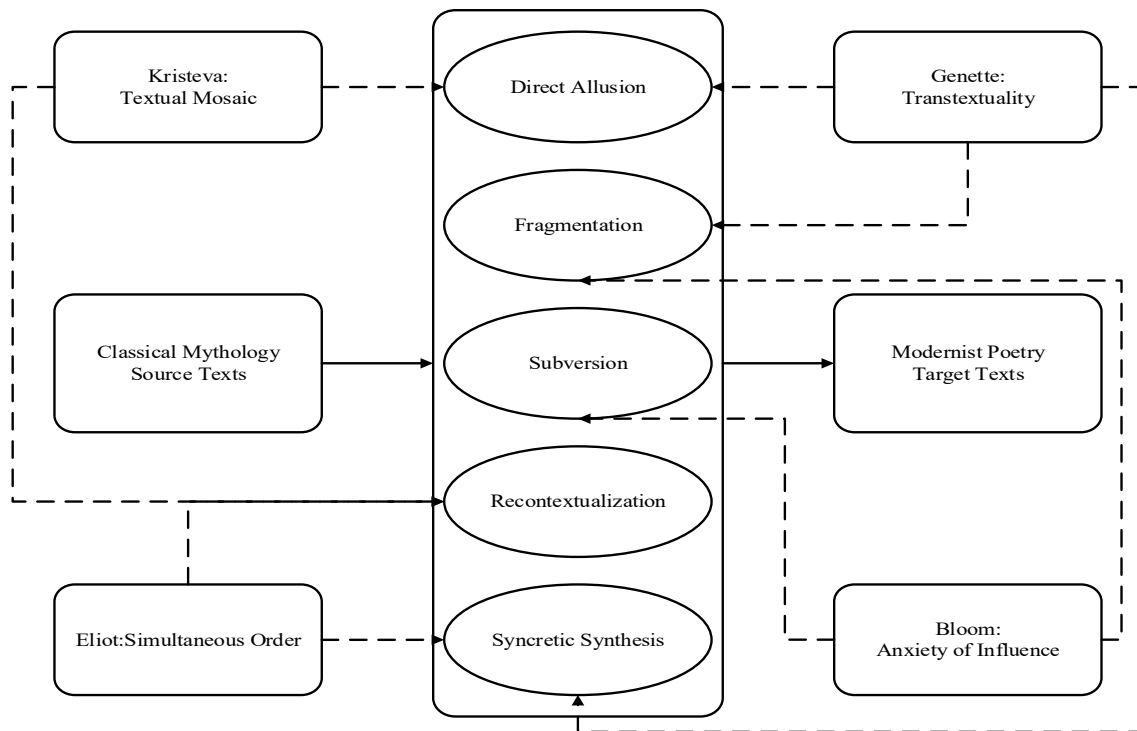
Intertextuality provides a theoretical foundation for examining modernist British poets' mythopoeic practices. Formalized by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, it describes texts as "mosaics of quotations" where "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1986). This understanding disrupts traditional notions of authorial originality and linear influence, suggesting instead a web of textual interrelations transcending chronological order. T.S. Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" proposed poetry exists in a 'simultaneous order' where past and present co-exist through transformation. For Eliot, the mythopoeic poet rearranges tradition, blending "the temporal and the timeless."

Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" theory offers another perspective on modernist mythological appropriation. Bloom characterizes poetic creation as competition with older works through "creative misreading" of precursor texts, evident in modernists' fragmentation, ironic distancing, and recontextualization of classical myths. These textual relationships exemplify what Genette termed "transtextuality"—citation and architectural allusion of narrative framework. The framework of intertextuality, depicted in figure 1, shows how modernist poets adapted classical mythology through multiple levels of reference, revision, and reconfiguration.

### **2.2. Mythopoeic Theory**

Mythopoesis examines how modernist poetry incorporates and reshapes ancient myths to express contemporary concerns. This process involves poets reconstructing mythological frameworks while connecting them to modern themes. Some theorists classify these new myths as recreative consolidations of existing mythologies. Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948) argues that literary myths across cultures share common realities, suggesting civilizations contain evidence of universal transhistorical mythic patterns.

Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism extends mythopoeic analysis. In "Anatomy of Criticism" (1957), Frye proposes that literature clusters around central archetypes, creating a "grammar of literary symbolism." These archetypal patterns—seasonal cycles, hero's journeys, fertility rites—provided frameworks modernist poets adapted. As shown in the table below, mythopoeic approaches vary within the theoretical frameworks, accounting for diverse strategies employed by modernist British poets.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework of Intertextuality in Modernist Mythopoeic Practice

**Table 1.** Comparative Analysis of Mythopoeic Theoretical Approaches

Approach	Theorist	Core Concept	Application to Modernist Poetry
Psychological	Jung	Collective Unconscious	Explains mythic patterns as psychological universals (Eliot's Fisher King)
Ritual	Frazer	Golden Bough	Links fragmented modern experience to ritual cycles ("The Waste Land")
Poetic	Graves	White Goddess	Framework for feminist reclamations (H.D.'s "Helen in Egypt")
Archetypal	Frye	Pattern Systems	Maps seasonal cycles onto modernist long poems
Symbolic	Cassirer	Symbolic Forms	Frames myth-making as creation of new symbolic language

As the table indicates, these frameworks complement rather than compete with each other, providing multiple perspectives on mythopoeic practice. Myths function not as casual references but as essential organizing principles for constructing meaning. Facing cultural disjunction, modernist poets employed mythopoesis as what Cassirer termed "symbolic formation"—creating continuity from disorder while acknowledging ruptures. This approach helped modernist poets use classical mythology not as antiquarian exercise but as vital resource for crafting distinctly modern narratives.

### 2.3. Modernism and Classical Reception

Modernist poets' engagement with classical mythology marked a pivotal shift in literary reception. Unlike Victorians who used classical references as moral illustrations or nostalgic evocations, modernists approached mythology with what T.S. Eliot termed "a sense of the present in the past." This transformed classical myth from static cultural inheritance to a dynamic language expressing modern fragmentation and psychological complexity. Ezra Pound's dictum to "make it new" guided modernists in applying juxtaposition and recontextualization to ancient works, revealing their enduring relevance.

Multiple cultural developments influenced this shift: Schliemann's discovery of Troy, Evans's excavation of Knossos, and Frazer's anthropological work *The Golden Bough*, which reinterpreted mythology through ritual and comparative frameworks. Simultaneously, British universities moved beyond philology toward cultural and aesthetic approaches. As shown in the table below, modernist poets developed distinctive strategies for mythological appropriation, reflecting larger modernist tensions between fragmentation and coherence, tradition and innovation.

**Table 2.** Strategies of Classical Reception in Major Modernist British Poets

Poet	Key Sources	Dominant Strategy	Representative Work
T.S. Eliot	Ovid, Greek drama	Mythical Method	"The Waste Land"
W.B. Yeats	Plato, Greek lyric	Syncretic System	"Leda and the Swan"
H.D.	Sappho, Euripides	Feminist Reclamation	"Helen in Egypt"
Pound	Homer, Latin poetry	Translational Transform	Cantos
Auden	Roman satire	Ironic Recontextualization	"Shield of Achilles"

As the table indicates, Eliot's "mythical method" represents just one approach within a multifaceted reception framework. What unites these diverse strategies is their use of mythology as fundamental organizing principle rather than ornamental allusion. For modernist poets confronting unprecedented historical ruptures, classical mythology provided not escape into nostalgia but a means to articulate contemporary experience. This reconfigured approach transformed both modernist poetic practice and our understanding of how ancient texts generate meaning across diverse historical contexts.

### 3. Historical Context: Classical Education and Mythology in Early 20th Century Britain

British modernist poets' engagement with ancient myths emerged from an evolving educational landscape at the twentieth century's beginning. Classical education dominated Oxford, Cambridge, and elite schools, providing modernists with strong classical foundations while simultaneously fueling their rebellion against traditional interpretive frameworks. Students received intensive training in Greek and Latin, translation, and canonical literature—what Richard Jenkyns called a "peculiarly English" classics approach blending philology with interpretative culture and moral perspective.

While classical literature was traditionally viewed as a repository of wisdom and ethical models, emerging scholarly frameworks began historicizing rather than universalizing ancient texts. As the table below indicates, most modernist poets were both products of these classical educational systems and rebels against such "classical drip," explaining their innovative mythological approaches.

**Table 3.** Classical Education and Mythological Influences of Key Modernist British Poets

Poet	Education	Classical Sources	Characteristic Approach
T.S. Eliot	Harvard, Oxford	Ovid, Greek tragedy	Academic distancing; mythic frameworks for modern experience
W.B. Yeats	Limited formal training	Plato, Byzantium	Syncretic system-building; cyclical historical patterns
H.D.	Bryn Mawr College	Sappho, Euripides	Feminist reclamation; psychological reinterpretation
W.H. Auden	Oxford	Roman satire	Ironic deflation; political allegory

As the table shows, educational backgrounds significantly shaped modernists' classical engagement. Beyond formal education, early twentieth-century developments in classical scholarship provided new interpretive frameworks. Archaeological discoveries at Troy, Knossos, and Mycenae revealed a grittier, more primitive Greece that aligned with modernist sensibilities. Concurrently, Jane Harrison and the Cambridge ritualists reframed Greek myths as ritualistic expressions rather than purely literary constructs, while Freudian and Jungian approaches interpreted myths as manifestations of universal psychological patterns.

These intellectual currents, combined with classical education's declining dominance, World War II's cultural disruptions, and anthropological challenges to Eurocentrism, fostered revolutionary mythological approaches. For modernist poets, classical fragments ceased functioning as escapist devices and instead became a vibrant symbolic language articulating distinctly modern experiences while maintaining cultural continuity.

## 4. T.S. Eliot's Mythic Consciousness

### 4.1. Analysis of "The Waste Land"

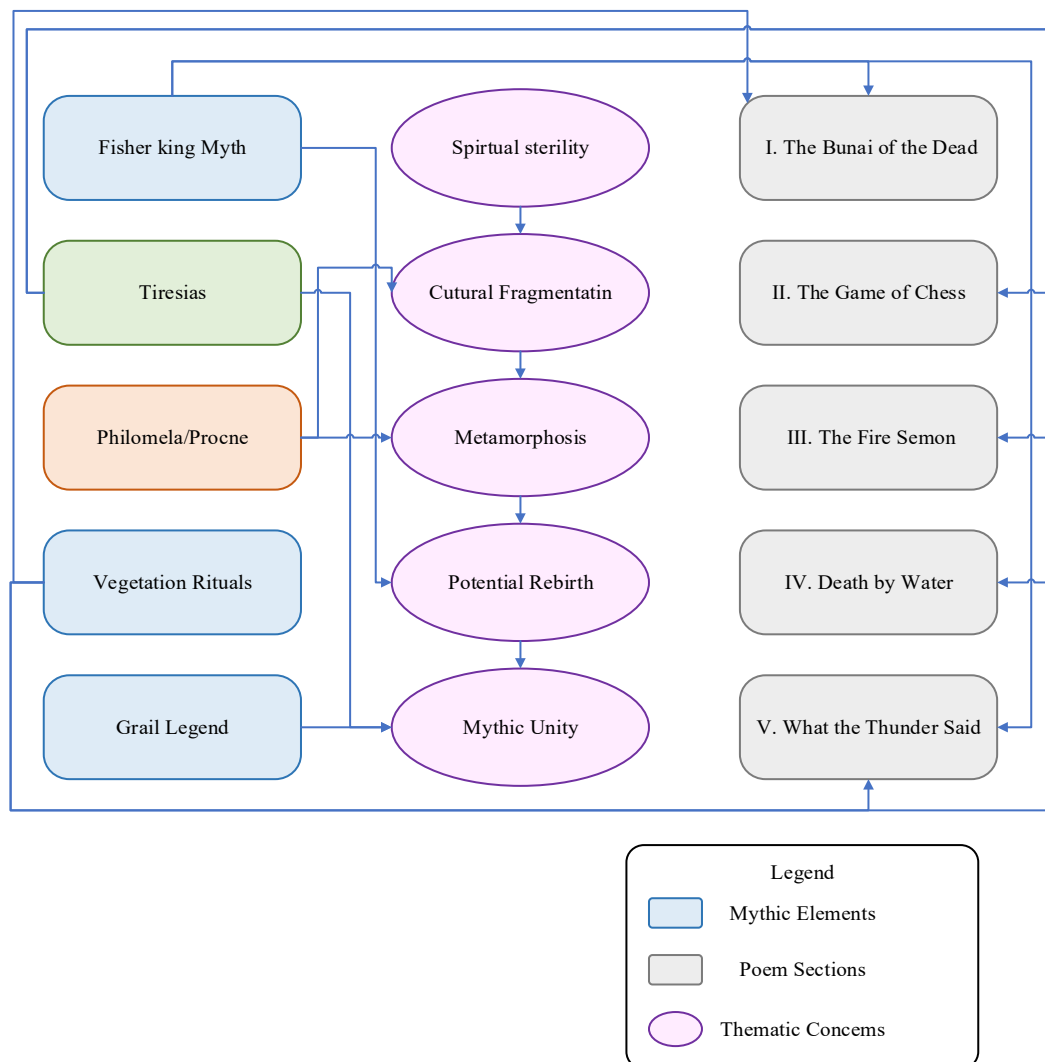
Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) exemplifies modernist fusion of complex poetry with classical mythology, using the latter as an organizing framework for modern fragmentation. Through what Eliot termed "the mythical method," the poem employs mythic intertext to provide structural unity while highlighting contemporary cultural disintegration. Central to this framework is the Fisher King legend from Jessie Weston's "From Ritual to Romance" (1920), which connects fertility rites with Grail mythology. Eliot deploys this narrative not as mere reference but as an organizing principle imposing patterns of death and renewal upon chaotic modern experience.

As depicted in Figure 2, the poem's mythological allusions create an interconnected symbolic network spanning multiple historical periods while addressing post-war disillusionment. This diagrammatic representation illustrates how Eliot integrates myths throughout his five-part poem, maintaining thematic coherence despite textual fragmentation.

Equally significant is Eliot's adaptation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses," particularly the Philomela narrative recurring in various forms throughout the poem. Philomela's transformation into a nightingale following her rape and mutilation resonates with the poem's exploration of violence, failed communication, and metamorphosis as survival strategy.

Perhaps Eliot's most innovative mythic deployment is Tiresias as unifying consciousness—"the most important personage in the poem," according to Eliot's notes. This blind Theban prophet who experienced life as both man and woman becomes the ideal mythic observer of modern spiritual and sexual desolation. Tiresias's capacity to transcend temporal boundaries—

"throbbing between two lives"—allows Eliot to collapse historical time, enabling ancient Thebes and modern London to coexist within a singular mythic framework. Through this technique, Eliot transforms classical material from static reference into dynamic interpretive system through which modern fragmentation achieves meaningful articulation.



**Figure 2.** Mythological Structure and Thematic Connections in "The Waste Land"

#### 4.2. "Sweeney Among the Nightingales"

Unlike "The Waste Land's" grand mythopoeic vision, Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1920) employs a more concentrated mythological intertextuality. Here, allusions function as ironic commentary on modern monotony rather than as organizing principles. "Begin the beguine" challenges declining civilization's inadequacies, while mythological references overlay modern sordidness with ancient tragic resonance, connecting post-WWI sexuality with Philomela's violation.

The poem presents Sweeney as contemporary masculine degeneracy's embodiment alongside Philomela's myth. Transformed into a nightingale after Tereus's assault, Philomela provides mythic counterpoint to modern hedonism's "squalid sty." Agamemnon's murder reference ("Alas... I am struck a deadly blow") evokes Aeschylus, positioning Sweeney as "Philomela's bestial companion" in Brooks's analysis.

As Kenner notes, Eliot's "mythological deflation" uses classical allusion to emphasize the gap between heroic mythic action and static modern existence. The nightingales that "sang within the bloody wood / when Agamemnon cried aloud" connect ancient myth, historical assassination, and contemporary club culture. This temporal compression demonstrates how classical myths highlight the stark contrast between mythic significance and modern existence's commonplace futilities.

### **4.3. Philosophical Underpinnings**

Eliot's myth-making methods stemmed from his classical philosophy and scholarly approaches to mythology. Central to his practice was the "objective correlative," which he defined in "Hamlet and His Problems" (1918) as a formula for specific emotion involving situation, objects, and events. Classical mythology provided Eliot with ready-made objective correlatives expressing emotions beyond personal psychology. Homer and Sophocles served not merely as literary references but as tools for understanding both philosophical construction and socio-political consciousness.

Eliot's mythological allusions transcended poetic choice, becoming metaphorical commentaries on mental constructs shaped by society and culture. His engagement with F.H. Bradley's idealism reinforced this approach, particularly the notion that experiential significance depends not on subjective perception but on recognizing patterns within experience.

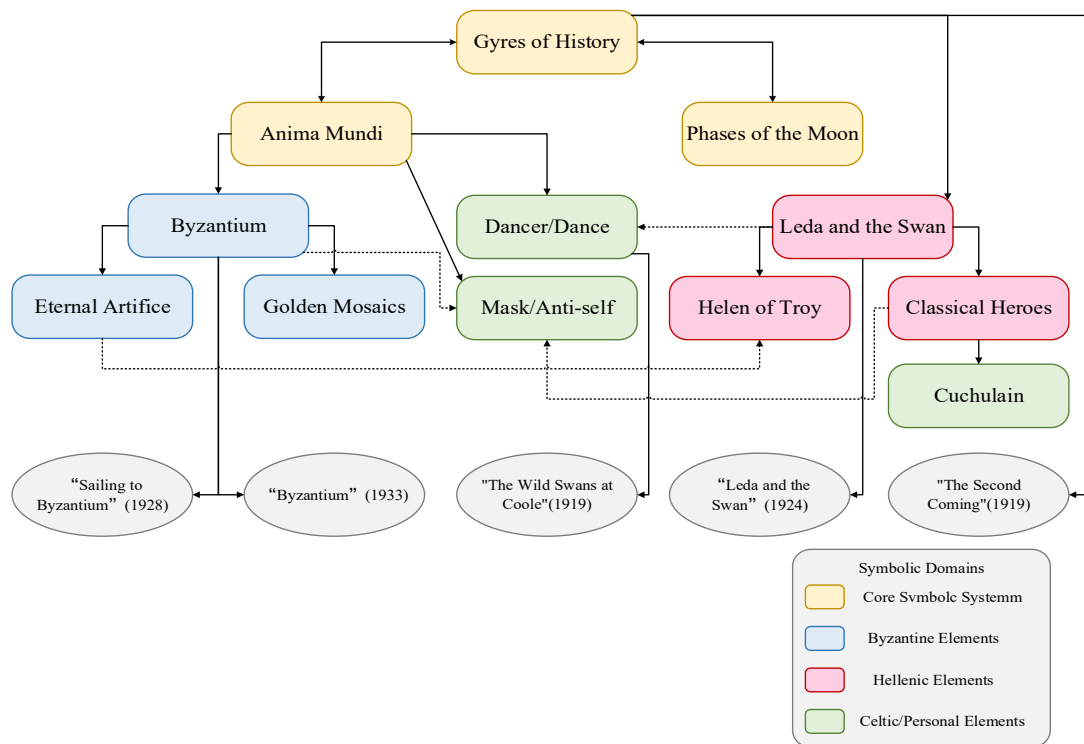
For Eliot, mythic structures integrated fragmented contemporary experiences into meaningful patterns. In his 1923 review of Joyce's "Ulysses," he praised the "mythical method" as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history." This statement reveals Eliot's philosophical conception of mythology as reasoning method rather than decorative element.

The mythical method functions epistemologically, providing cohesion amid modern fragmentation while acknowledging the impossibility of restoring classical unity. This philosophical dimension shifts Eliot's mythopoetic practice from literary technique to exploration of how consciousness engages with cultural legacy in an eroded society. Eliot's use of mythical structures advocates not pre-modern return but constructive engagement with tradition—recognizing its enduring value while acknowledging the distance between contemporary reality and classical experience.

## **5. W.B. Yeats and Celtic-Classical Synthesis**

### **5.1. Byzantine and Hellenic imagery**

Unlike Eliot's scaffolded approach, W.B. Yeats synthesizes Hellenic and Byzantine elements into a distinct personal symbolic system. Rather than employing classical mythology as framework, Yeats deconstructs elements of personal and national psyche, fusing them into what he terms 'phantasmagoria.' His treatment of Hellenic mythology represents not scholarly detachment but imaginative transformation combining Celtic mythology, occult symbolism, and personal elements. His later work develops a spiral system of history where West and East intersect through Byzantine and Hellenic influences. As Figure 3 shows, Yeats's mythological synthesis operates within a network of classical relations interwoven throughout his poetry.



**Figure 3.** The Syncretic Mythological System in Yeats's Later Poetry

As Figure 3 shows, the interconnected mythological features in Yeats's poetics demonstrate how his Byzantine- and Hellenic-infused Celtic imagery merges with his core symbol system to form a singular mythopoeic framework.

Yeats employs Byzantine symbolism throughout "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" as more than historical allusions—they represent aesthetic transcendence. For Yeats, "the artifice of eternity" embodies the ideal integration of spirituality and artistry, where passion achieves immortality through artistic form. His Greek mythological engagement in "Leda and the Swan" demonstrates how classical narrative becomes mythopoeic expression examining historical cycles: "the savage union of the swan and the woman gives birth to the cycle of history which leads to the Trojan War." The compressed violence—"A shudder in the loins engenders there/The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead"—exemplifies Yeats's belief in supernatural violence birthing historical reality. Through such mythopoeic compression, Yeats constructs a symbolic language challenging personal psyche, cultural memory, and metaphysical reality.

## 5.2. Yeats's System of Mythology

Yeats's personal and occult philosophies intertwine with his Celtic and classical symbolic system. His diacritical historical patterns parallel psychological development, positioning his cosmology within transcendent dynamic frameworks. His "syncretic" mythopoeic vision portrays history through interlocking cone-shaped spirals representing opposing forces that generate successive eras.

Unlike Eliot's objective mythology, Yeats embraced subjective Celtic mythology. He depicted ancient figures transformed through Celtic metamorphosis, drawing striking parallels between Greek Heracles and Irish Cuchulain—tragic heroes destroyed by uncontrollable violent passions. His ethnographic imagery expanded to include feminine deities, with Celtic divinities joining Pallas Athena as representatives of supreme wisdom mediating between mortal and divine realms.

Lunar symbolism in Yeats's occult system connects classical mythology with his personal framework, associating moon phases (new, waxing, full, waning) with distinct personality types and historical periods in his gyre vision. This approach reflects a modernist stance neither blindly accepting nor rejecting tradition, but forging a unique interpretation of classical elements as "metaphors for poetry."

These mystically synthesized worlds function as poetic technique exploring connections between disparate phenomena through personal psychology, national identity, and universal spiritual patterns. Within this framework, Yeats investigates spiritual causation leading to transcendent transformation, shifting the foundation of meaning throughout his mature poetic corpus.

### 5.3. Transformation of Classical Figures

In Yeats' treatment of classical figures incorporating Celtic mythology, his personal touch vividly comes alive, demonstrating the depth of his imagination. His use of stereotypical hero's traits shows the greatness of cross-cultural blend that goes beyond bare-bones allusion. Yeats does not extract the Hercules comparison to Cuchulain out of nowhere; it is the deepest rearrangement of myth where ancient Celtic culture and Greco-Roman culture shed light upon one another. Cuchulain, the Irish hero, undergoes a tragic death which Yeats romantically refers to as "The Death of Cuchulain". The Herculean elements are impossible to miss since both Cuchulain and Hercules die in the end; two warriors soaked in rage, superhuman strength and violence. Systematically, in the conversion of Cuchulain to Cuchulain, as shown in Table 4, Yeats claws through classical characters using distinct techniques reflecting his personal vision of poetry.

**Table 4.** Yeats's Transformation of Classical Figures

Classical Figure	Celtic/Personal Counterpart	Representative Works	Symbolic Function
Heracles	Cuchulain	"The Death of Cuchulain"	Tragic heroism and masculinity
Pallas Athena	Cathleen ni Houlihan	"A Prayer for My Daughter"	Wisdom transcending national identity
Helen of Troy	Maud Gonne	"No Second Troy"	Destructive beauty and political passion
Zeus/Jupiter	Aengus	"The Song of Wandering Aengus"	Divine creative force

The table makes it clear that Yeats's transformation of classical figures employs multiple techniques working simultaneously. He is especially innovative regarding the feminine divine figures, for Pallas Athena undergoes a profound transformation through the association with Celtic goddess attributes into a symbol of wisdom that reconciles opposing forces. This practice is not only a literary technique but a philosophical construction of cultural synthesis, where as he noted in his autobiography, "ancient salt is best packing." This system of mythology is modernist in the sense that it does not blindly accept traditional classical foundations nor does it outright reject; it creates a living dialogue between ancient archetypes and modern thought.

## 6. H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Feminist Reclamation of Myth

### 6.1. Imagist Technique and Classical Precision

H. D.'s handling of classical mythology marks a treatment of feminist recovery using Imagist techniques, which transforms mythology into modernist form. While Eliot's imposing framework gave classical mythology a scholarly approach or Yeats's system blended various ideas, H. D. employs clear language to extract the psychological aspects of classical mythology and simultaneously confront its socio-political mythological structures. Her handling of formless mythological material opens to exploration of epics within ancient Greece demonstrates remarkable economy of language—what Ezra Pound called 'the direct treatment of the thing'—resulting in poesy that reduces classical epics to their core and most potent emblems. H. D.'s treatment of classical sources, as presented in Table 5, sharply contrasts with the approach of his contemporaries owing to his distinct technical orientation and feminist views. In the line 'Leda', H. D. sculpts the physical change and mental self-exposition transformation of a myth in a way that modernists strike trenches into allusions to sculpt the modernist at the form. This sculptural aspect of her work stems from her engagement with Hellenic art, informed by her archaeological studies of Greece with Pound. This technique of poetry achieves what Susan Stanford Friedman calls "a palimpsestic vision," where the mythology is an artifact and the psyche an ancient one.

By paying extreme attention to language and form, H.D. composes mythopoeic poetry that both pays tribute to and undermines classical literature's patriarchal underpinnings, showing the possibilities modernist approaches could uncover within ancient stories.

**Table 5. Comparative Approaches to Classical Mythology in Modernist British Poetry**

Poet	Primary Classical Sources	Technical Approach	Representative Works	Key Features
H.D.	Sappho, Euripides	Imagist precision	"Leda," "At Ithaca," "Pursuit"	Sculptural imagery, feminist reclamation
T.S. Eliot	Ovid, Greek tragedy	Mythical Method	"The Waste Land"	Structural framework, academic distancing
W.B. Yeats	Plato, Byzantine art	Syncretic system	"Leda and the Swan"	Personal symbolism, cyclical history

### 6.2. Gender Transformation of Classical Narratives

Through a feminist lens, H.D.'s mythopoeic work fundamentally reconstructs the classical myths by undermining the patriarchal slant imposed upon myths while simultaneously recovering a woman's identity from the wreckage of myths. The reinterpretation of Helen of Troy marks, arguably, her most radical shift from classical material gender-wise, particularly in the epic poem "Helen in Egypt" where she explores Helen's interior consciousness and inverts traditional representations to move towards more positive portrayals. Unlike traditional depictions of Helen as the submissive female figure who is a mere canvas for male obsession or the spark of conflicts between powerful men evocative of ancient Greece, H.D. counter-mythologises and brings life to mythologically stale, lethargic, and fragmented constructions of women with complex psychological traditions. W.H. offers Helen a recollection of history, philosophy, and even an active role—qualities which are the backbone of feminine figures in mythology.

This approach also dissects the world system of individual characters and transcends the confines of individual figures; H.D. begins to dismantle just as systematically as she constructs

maternal ancestry as well as legitimised knowledge of rituals, placing them at the centre animating the system and closing around the mythic frameworks tending to women's continuous historical existence instead of male-employed violence, war, and heroism. She uses what Susan Gubar described as "revisionary mythmaking," which changes the gender politics of the narratives marked within the myths. In works like "Eurydice" and "Demeter," H.D. undermines a set view line and positions the women in front instead of serving the male heroic narrative. Here, classical mythology emerges as a subject to explore women's autonomy and identity rather than uncritically accepting patriarchal supervision.

This is both a literary and political act at once, exemplifying how appropriating myths can subvert cultural asterisks concerning gender while simultaneously creating new avenues for poetic expression. Through deliberate shifts in the canonical view of mythology, H.D. executes what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls "writing beyond the ending"—redefining the telling of classical stories to fit a female perspective that has been pushed to the periphery of sociological frameworks. Her reinterpretations of classical stories construct systems of poetry that are in striking conflict with the established order and are highly adaptable to contemporary feminist frameworks in literature.

### **6.3. Palimpsestic layers in mythic writing**

H.D. achieves a striking intricacy in her mythopoeic practice by employing a unique methodology that fuses together the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman traditions. Unlike her modernist peers who limited themselves to Hellenistic and Roman themes, H.D. transcends the normative classical boundaries by incorporating elements of Egyptian mythology, thus constructing a cross-cultural synthesis. This blending of cultures indicates a more profound perception of ancient Mediterranean societies as an integrated system rather than isolated civilisations. In "Helen in Egypt," she controversially places Helen in Troy and Egypt simultaneously, blending the Egyptian and Greek mythic structures, so she becomes a multifaceted figure able to cast light on diverse cultural heritages. H.D.'s use of a palimpsestic technique creates an intricate system of mythological interconnections, as illustrated in Figure 4, which Eileen Gregory describes as transcending specific temporal and cultural delineations, crafting "a 'mythic consciousness'...that defies singular cultural identity."

The observation of temporal intertwining with personal experience, as well as cross-cultural syncretism, demonstrates the maintenance of the palimpsestic quality. In H.D.'s works, ancient myths are recontextualised within modern life, forming richly intricate symbolic systems. By intertwining autobiographical elements with classical narratives, H.D. transforms mythic figures into relatable subjects and brings forth the powerful individuality hidden within potent mythic structures.

The cycle of the personal legend and classical archetype creates what is referred to as a "psycho-mythological method" by Susan Stanford Friedman, which is distinct yet similar to Eliot's impersonal mythical method. As a result, the poetry is riddled with interpretative enigmas and layered meanings that the readers have to untangle, devoid of any single conclusion.

H.D.'s tracing technique reaches its zenith in her later works where contemporary trauma shaped through the lens of history is analysed using mythological structures. In "Trilogy" and "Helen in Egypt," written during and after the Second World War, she formulates the modern cataclysm using ancient mythological templates employing what Rachel Blu DuPlessis calls "a mythic dialectic" where experience and history from both sides shed light on each other. Perhaps this is her most notable contribution to the modernist mythopoeic paradigm, illustrating how old stories could be woven into the present reality, not through evasion but engagement by blurring the lines between bygone eras and contemporary realities through a layering approach. Through this sophisticated mythopoeic technique, H.D. constructs mountains of "spiritual archaeology"—as termed by Donna Hollenberg—where meaning across cultures, history, and personal experiences are unearthed.

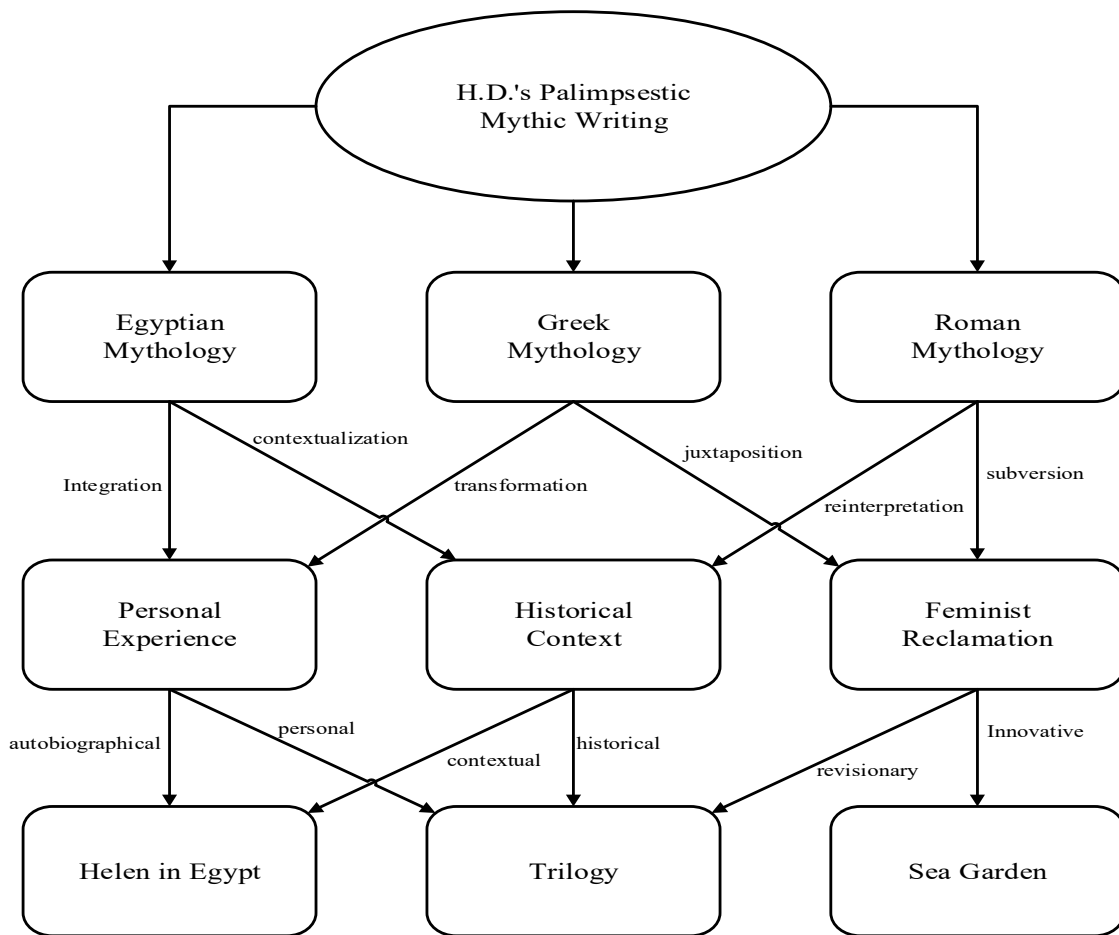


Figure 1: Palimpsestic Structure in H.D.'s Mythic Writing

**Figure 4.** Palimpsestic Structure in H.D.'s Mythic Writing

## 7. Auden, MacNeice, and Late Modernist Mythology

### 7.1. Ironic Deployment of Classical References

This marks a shift from the earnest mythopoeic works of Eliot and Yeats to a more Late modernism marks a shift from Eliot and Yeats's earnest mythopoesis to a more skeptical, performative use of classical references. This approach is exemplified in W.H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" (1952), which inverts the Homeric ekphrasis from Iliad Book XVIII, replacing heroic vision with modern desolation. Instead of pastoral scenes, Auden presents "a plain without a feature, bare and brown... a weed-choked field" populated by "unyielding multitudes" and tyrannical spectacles. As Kirsch notes, this "mythological counterpoint" highlights the disjunction between classical mythology and contemporary reality, demonstrating late modernist mythopoeia's deliberate transformation of cultural inheritance.

Similar irony appears in Louis MacNeice's "Autumn Journal" (1939), where classical allusions function simultaneously as cultural touchstones and objects of critical examination. Reflecting on his education at Marlborough and Oxford, MacNeice questions how the "glory that was Greece" relates to current political realities. Rather than employing high modernist mythical frameworks to impose order on chaos, MacNeice uses classical references to emphasize historical discontinuities, observing how the "classics master" speaks of "culture and civilisation" while "smug behind his vested right"—a critique exemplifying late modernist skepticism toward cultural traditions confronted by 1930s-40s political realities.

Late modernist mythological engagement is distinctively dialogic—classical references function not as authoritative frameworks but as conversational partners whose relevance requires negotiation. Unlike Eliot's mythical method, which assumed timeless psychological resonance, late modernists approach classical material with historical consciousness that acknowledges both enduring value and inherent limitations. This "critical inheritance," as Edna Longley terms it, simultaneously honors and questions classical traditions. Michael Longley characterizes this as "a conversation across the millennia," recognizing both continuity and unbridgeable gaps between ancient and modern sensibilities, transforming classical mythology from structural foundation to active participant in cross-temporal dialogue.

## **7.2. Mythology and Political Consciousness**

Late modernist poets integrated classical motifs with distinct political awareness, diverging from high modernists. While Eliot and Yeats employed mythology as elevating structures transcending politics, Auden, MacNeice, and Day Lewis "mythologized" concrete political issues including fascism, war, and class struggles. This political-mythological fusion appears powerfully in anti-fascist interpretations of classical myths as contemporary social critique.

In "September 1, 1939," Auden references Thucydides' Peloponnesian War account to characterize the "low dishonest decade" preceding World War II. His "Musée des Beaux Arts" employs the Icarus myth to critique collective apathy toward suffering during 1930s fascist expansion. These examples represent what Valentine Cunningham called "the leftward turn" in late modernist poetics, where mythological references became tools for critiquing social oppression rather than displaced historical references.

The classical world increasingly functions as political allegory in late modernist poetry, with ancient Rome reflecting modern imperial and authoritarian tendencies. MacNeice's "Autumn Journal" connects fascist propaganda with Roman imperial rhetoric, noting how both appeal to glory while concealing violence beneath civilization. This approach differs fundamentally from high modernism; while earlier modernists sought analogous myths to psychologically justify temporal patterns, late modernists identified historical inconsistencies to engage politically with contemporary issues. As Marianne Thormählen observes, this represents not abandonment but modification of mythopoetic approaches under totalitarianism and global warfare.

Late modernism's political mythology generated a dialectical consciousness simultaneously embracing cultural inheritance while questioning its relevance to contemporary challenges. Unlike socialist realism's dismissal of classical material as bourgeois, late modernist poets engaged politically with tradition. Stephen Spender's "Ruins of a Great House" dialectically examines imperial decline and classical roots of imperialism while acknowledging complicity in colonial cultural frameworks.

This politically reflexive stance represents late modernist mythopoetic imagination's key contribution: recognizing that classical mythology requires critical examination of its political implications rather than serving as neutral aesthetic framework. This political engagement transformed modernist mythology from high modernism's psychological and aesthetic marvel into an instrument of political and historical critique, demonstrating mythology's continued relevance in confronting contemporary tyranny and violence.

## **7.3. Transformation from High Modernism to Late Modernism**

The transition from high to late modernist mythological practice represents not merely aesthetic change but a profound shift in poetry's engagement with tradition, historiography, and politics. High modernism established mythology as a framework for cultural crisis, exemplified by Eliot's "mythical method" and Yeats's symbolic system. Late modernism, however, questioned mythology's ability to transcend historical conditions. James Longenbach termed this "the demythologising impulse"—a phenomenon preserving mythology's poetic

power while recognizing its limitations as an interpretive schema, thus navigating the tension between continuity and rupture.

This evolution reflects interwar cultural transformations. Post-WWI disillusionment birthed high modernist mythopoesis—seeking order amid historical chaos. Late modernism emerged from specific political crises including fascism, the Spanish Civil War, and WWII, demanding direct historical confrontation. This historicity transformed mythology from comprehensive framework to tool requiring contextual justification. Alan Wilde identifies "suspensive irony" in late modernist poetry—oscillating between employing myth and questioning its validity. Late modernism's demythologizing practices established traditions that subsequent movements built upon, creating new approaches to classical material. Poets began maintaining mythology's cultural significance while questioning its existential authority, developing what Michael Bell calls "contingent classicism"—reconciling contention with historical constraint. This ambivalent stance neither discards mythology as obsolete nor accepts it uncritically, instead creating a responsive framework where contemporary reality dialogues with classical heritage. This transformation demonstrates how late modernist poets evolved mythology into a viable form by embracing change, establishing a model for negotiating heritage and innovation.

## **8. Comparative Analysis: Techniques of Mythological Appropriation**

### **8.1. Structural Approaches**

Classical mythology serves as a critical component of modernist poetry, with significant stylistic variation among major poets. These practices range from direct reference to subtle allusion, each serving distinct purposes. Eliot's extensive footnoting in "The Waste Land" provides an interpretive frame for contemporary reality through classical allusions. Ricks characterizes this as "disclosed mythology," where references intentionally highlight classical origins to unite ancient and modern sensibilities. Conversely, Stevens and Moore employ "watermark mythology" (Vendler's term)—subtle classical echoes perceptible only through close reading. These contrasting approaches reflect fundamental differences in poetic engagement with tradition.

Beyond individual allusions, myth functions structurally to organize entire compositions. Eliot's "mythical method" represents the most sophisticated application, using mythological parallels as ordering structures for fragmented modern experience. Discussing Joyce's "Ulysses," Eliot described this method as "controlling, ordering, giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Similarly, H.D.'s "Helen in Egypt" employs mythological palimpsests to create complex layered meanings, demonstrating how classical materials could impose integrative order within modernist fragmentation.

The relationship between myth and poetry evolved throughout modernism. Early modernists adopted mythology as stabilizing device, while later practitioners embedded it within chaotic, fragmented constructions emblematic of modern life. This versatility allowed mythological material to function simultaneously as foundation and fragment, a self-destructing framework. Mythology's use as amplifying structure reveals modernist poetry's multifaceted engagement with tradition—transforming classical design into innovative poetic structures expressing contemporary civilization while preserving cultural continuity.

### **8.2. Linguistic Transformations**

Classical mythology provided not only inspiration for modernist poets but also material for verbal manipulation. Translation—and creative mistranslation—stands as a particularly innovative approach. Hugh Kenner identifies Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius" as exemplary "creative mistranslation," establishing "conversation across time" rather than

accurate rendition. Similarly, H.D.'s Greek fragment translations intentionally preserve gaps and broken sentences, highlighting both absence and connection to classical texts. These approaches reflect the modernist conception of language as reality-shaping rather than merely descriptive, demonstrating how creative linguistic engagement could revitalize dormant mythological elements.

Etymology served as another powerful tactic, with modernists tracing linguistic roots to construct frameworks connecting past and present. In Eliot's "The Waste Land," "hyacinth" functions simultaneously as flower and mythological reference to Hyacinthus, merging multiple temporal dimensions. Joyce's "Ulysses" employs contemporary Dublin constructions interwoven with Homeric elements, revealing ancient myths beneath modern linguistic surfaces. This etymological insight enabled modernists to envision language as palimpsest—modern expression inscribed upon ancient mythological foundations.

This verbal reinvention of classical mythology produced what Kenner termed modernism's "pound note"—distinctly modern yet resonating with ancestral echoes. This preservation and adaptation becomes especially powerful in modernist neologisms derived from classical languages, exemplifying what Perloff calls "etymological discovery" connecting ancient and contemporary consciousness. Through such techniques, modernist poets demonstrated that classical mythology could transform not only into poetic themes but into revolutionary language redefining reality while simultaneously connecting to civilization's archaeological roots.

### **8.3. Cross-cultural Mythological Synthesis**

British modernism engaged with classical mythology beyond Greco-Roman elements, integrating diverse traditions that expanded mythopoeic boundaries. This approach exemplifies what Maud Ellis terms "comparative mythography," establishing rich intertextual relationships across cultural frameworks. Yeats's syncretic system, blending Celtic and Classical mythology, creates cultural interplay transcending national limitations. Late modernists further augmented classical allusions with Eastern philosophy, reflecting what Michael Levenson describes as modernism's "cosmopolitan imperative"—seeking universalism through cultural inclusivity rather than Western cultural dominance.

This mythological synthesis coincided with contemporary anthropological developments. Frazer's "Golden Bough" enabled poets to incorporate diverse cultures while maintaining essential connections. H.D.'s combination of Egyptian and Greek mythologies creates what Stanford Friedman calls "mythological palimpsests," where different cultural traditions mutually illuminate each other, challenging Eurocentric perspectives and fostering innovative mythic expressions. However, modernist engagement with non-Western cultures revealed underlying tensions—when engaging Indigenous Canadian myths, for instance, modernists often ethnocentrically appropriated rather than authentically integrated these traditions, demonstrating ambivalence toward cultural difference.

Nevertheless, this cross-cultural integration provided foundation for postmodern mythmaking by positioning Western classical mythology within global conversation rather than European containment. This approach demonstrated mythology's capacity to transcend cultural boundaries while remaining historically grounded, establishing a model of dynamic, multi-directional engagement with cross-cultural mythology that continues to influence contemporary poetics.

## **9. Conclusion: The Legacy of Modernist Mythopoesis**

The modernist appropriation of classical Western mythology by British poets constructed transformational frameworks which still endure today. Matheson's consideration of their intermedial spaces reveals the dynamic reinterpretations of culture these systems enabled

(Matheson, 2025) <sup>[19]</sup>. Alem combining the ancient and modern consciousness characterisation with modern ‘imaginative cosmologies’ further sheds light on why such transformative approaches resonate so deeply [20]. The modernist mythological project runs parallel to the transcultural efforts of the avant-garde, described by Adrián as a ‘dynamic cultural synthesis across geographical boundaries’ <sup>[21]</sup>. Brown’s work builds on the comment that further carries the modernist focus on myth within poetry as a “system of strategies,” revealing how these foundational approaches perpetually shaped contemporary critique with “recursive engagement with tradition” <sup>[22]</sup>. This enduring influence even reaches postcolonial literature. In Sá Júnior’s analysis, modernist mythopoeic strategies are shown alongside the attempt to palimpsestously ‘reconfigure cultural memory’ as modernist techniques used to portray “memory” embedded in “revealed” layers of culture <sup>[23]</sup>. Such intricate uses of classical mythology by modernist British poets shaped a discourse that deeply connects ancient narratives with modern literature, revealing how mythology is capable of both articulating fragmentation and continuity with the essence of tradition.

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