

1-1-2016

Challenging Classical Legacy: Virginia Woolf' Mythical Method in *To the Lighthouse*

Alex Rucka
Marquette University

Alex Rucka
 Dr. Blair
 ENG 4997
 8 December 2015

Challenging Classical Legacy: Virginia Woolf's Mythical Method in *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a text at the intersection of Modernism and ✓
 Classicism. The novel's ^{is} concerns ^{ed with} ~~attend to the~~ complexity of modern life, while its symbolism
 clearly draws on the ancient past. In reading *To the Lighthouse* through a mythical lens that
 focuses on the novel's classical imagery and symbolism, consideration of what T.S. Eliot termed
 the "mythical method" in his 1923 review of *Ulysses* becomes essential. That review, which first
 appeared in *Dial* magazine under the title "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," articulates the so-called
 mythical method as "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance
 to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot,
 "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth"). He goes on to say that Joyce's *Ulysses*—which Eliot himself
 suggested Woolf read—establishes the mythical method as a new way to structure a novel:
 "Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method" (Eliot). By narrative
 method, Eliot refers to the more commonplace strategy of writing a novel realistically—in other ✓
 words, taking verisimilitude as its aim. In observation of Eliot's review, Denis Donoghue, in his
 article "Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method," defines a myth as "a story told for the benefit of
 the community to which it is addressed: it tells the members of that community how to live, what
 to do, which forces they should dread" (Donoghue, 2). He goes on to elaborate, "The myth
 proposes a foundational understanding, and inserts itself as mediation between the community
 and the natural world" (Donoghue, 3). It is clear that Woolf's interest in myth is along these

good -
 ~~~~~  
 ↳ well - not yet! You're going to argue  
 that...

lines, and that she similarly employs a form of Eliot's mythical method in *To the Lighthouse*.

The most obvious indication of such mythical allusion is Mrs. Ramsay's striking resemblance to Demeter. Her mythic resemblance participates in mediating the community of the Ramsay summer home with the natural world, with which she is so repeatedly associated as an earth goddess. Donoghue's (reflection) of Eliot explicates this mythic undertone, for, as he writes, "the mythical method is the juxtaposition of two levels of awareness, two planes of reality, at once similar and different: the meaning is the transaction between them" (Donoghue 4). Donoghue's juxtaposition is then an indispensable frame that can be used to make sense of *To the Lighthouse's* classical allusion. That is, many of the characters bear clear resemblance to mythical deities—Mrs. Ramsay (as Demeter), Mr. Carmichael (as Poseidon), Lily (as Persephone), and potentially even Mr. Ramsay (as an epic hero)—and Donoghue and Eliot offer accounts that analyze the significance of those resemblances. Undoubtedly, Woolf is juxtaposing two levels of awareness in *To the Lighthouse*: the mythical past and the "immense panorama of contemporary history"; the question then becomes to what end is she employing this juxtaposition.

Several critics have engaged with Eliot's mythical method to read *To the Lighthouse* through such mythical lenses, and they have done so to great effect. They claim that by superimposing a mythic structure over *To the Lighthouse* one can draw certain themes or emphases from the text. In fact, Joseph Blotner uses precisely that metaphor of superimposition to describe the benefit of such mythical treatment of the text:

"It is like laying a colored transparency over a sheet covered with a maze of hues to reveal the orderly pattern which otherwise resides within them unperceived. Thus, in *To*

*the Lighthouse*, the myths... superimposed momentarily upon the novel, provide a framework within whose boundaries and by virtue of whose spatial ordering the symbolic people, passages, and phrases of the book can be seen to assume a relationship to each other which illuminates their reciprocal functions and meanings" (Blotner 548).

Blotner's analogy is a <sup>we?</sup> poignant one, and given the amount of textual evidence that supports mythic arguments, as well as Woolf's well-documented interest in Classical Greek—not to mention her close friendship with the most famous female Classicist of her day, Jane Harrison—it seems that both Woolf's biographical information and the actual text of *To the Lighthouse* invite these readings (Elliot 360). Woolf herself even writes in her diary, in reflection on the completion of another of her novels, *The Waves*, that:

"What interests me in the last stage was freedom and boldness with which my imagination picked up, used and tossed aside all the images, symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them—not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest" (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 169).

Not only does this reflection further validate mythical interpretations of the text, it also accounts for differing interpretations; Woolf did not intend for a one-size-fits-all, one-to-one mythic allusion, but rather meant to suggest mythical implications. Yet, even so, mythical readings of *To the Lighthouse* stop after having established the mythic link operating in the text. They conclude with somewhat vague implications, asserting claims such as "Woolf successfully appropriates a modernist method of composition, the mythical method, and turns it to her own... feminist purposes of representative self-empowerment..." (Barr 145). Certainly, Woolf does appropriate



the mythical method for feminist purposes insofar <sup>as</sup> ~~that~~ she is primarily concerned with female <sup>(feminine?)</sup> deities in *To the Lighthouse*; however, at the same time, Woolf also seems to borrow heavily from Harrison's conception of art and of group experience—the sharing of moments with a collective. In this way, I maintain that Woolf not only successfully appropriates Eliot's mythical method for a feminist agenda <sup>feminist ends?</sup>, but also questions the relationship between art and time. To that latter end, Woolf looks to the ancient past—in large part with respect to Jane Harrison's work—to recast Greek mythology as matrilineal and opposed to the male ego. Moreover, through the lenses of mythic criticism and Jane Harrison, *To the Lighthouse* reveals itself to be preeminently concerned with analyzing how the past informs our experience of time in the present. Woolf is concerned with Harrison's reclamation of the past as a time of maternal strength and <sup>feminine?</sup> female principle, and she communicates that classical interest via Eliot's mythical method in order to challenge the male preoccupation with posterity. Specifically, Woolf uses Lily's painting to argue that the experience of modernity ought to be unified and sensitive to the emotions of the other, rather than perpetually oriented toward discerning the truth and leaving a legacy no matter the emotional strife doing so causes. My project is then to more specifically articulate what these other critics have claimed to be a repurposing of the mythical method toward feminist ends. On my view, Woolf is, in essence, challenging the common conception of what is classic—something glorified in posterity, such as the Trojan War or Shakespeare—by means of the same tool: mythical allusion. Therefore, *To the Lighthouse* mounts an argument that the real way to achieve participation in the classic, the perennial, is not through glorious deeds or art that endures through the ages, but rather through group experience of the collective sublime. <sup>Very much prot.</sup>

Good.

In order to argue that Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* functions in part as a mythic text—that is, one that employs not a simple narrative structure, but rather a layout reliant, at least in part, on mythical allusions—one must first demonstrate that the central characters of the novel do bear at least some resemblance to deities or figures from antiquity. Of the characters in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is one of the most clearly mythical figures. Most notably, she (has been) *maybe?* likened to Demeter, goddess of agriculture and fertility, whose daughter, Persephone, Hades famously abducted, thereby creating the mythical explanation for the changing of the seasons. While Woolf herself never makes a direct allusion to equate the two, the text of *To the Lighthouse* makes plain that Mrs. Ramsay is to be understood symbolically when Lily, the novel's artist protagonist, observes her with her husband:

“For Mrs. Ramsay was wearing a green shawl, and they were standing close together... And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all... descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife” (Woolf 110-111).

To be sure, this passage invites symbolic, or mythical, readings that attend to Mrs. Ramsay's deification and likeness to Demeter. The most obvious evidence of such deification comes through Woolf's physical descriptions of Mrs. Ramsay, as well as other characters' reactions to her, for, as Joseph Blotner rightly observes in his article “Mythic Patterns in ‘To the Lighthouse,’” “Mrs. Ramsay has many physical attributes of a goddess” (Blotner 551). Woolf portrays Mrs. Ramsay as stunningly beautiful, and regally composed through the eyes and thoughts of her other characters. Mr. Tansley, a friend of Mr. Ramsay notable primarily for his espousing of egocentric male thought, takes pride in even being in her presence: “for the first

time in his life Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride... for he was walking with a beautiful woman” (Woolf 25). Similarly, Lily attributes “an august shape” and “royalty of form” to Mrs. Ramsay (Woolf 80, 47). While Lily narrates, she presents the actions of other characters as acknowledging her royalty. For example, we are told through her that Mr. Bankes “worshipped” Mrs. Ramsay (Woolf 75). Further, we are then told that Mr. Bankes, after hearing Mrs. Ramsay’s voice over the phone, imagines her “at the end of the line very clearly Greek, straight, blue-eyed... The Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face” (Woolf 47). This theme of antique beauty continues when Lily thinks of Mrs. Ramsay in the context of every-day life: “And all the time she was saying that the butter was not fresh one would be thinking of Greek temples, and how beauty had been with them there in that stuffy little room” (Woolf 291). Perhaps the most compelling of this abundance of evidence that details Mrs. Ramsay’s physical resemblance to a goddess is Lily’s description of her entrance to dinner:

“And, like some queen, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down up them, and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently, and accepts their devotion and their prostration before her... went down, and crossed the hall and bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty” (Woolf 124).

Indeed, readers who apply this mythical lens to Mrs. Ramsay will find that the text verily abounds with support in the form of physical description and divine or royal allusion.

Having demonstrated that the text of *To the Lighthouse* supports reading Mrs. Ramsay as a goddess figure, one can then begin to see how the deity which she most resembles is Demeter.

As the mother of eight children, Mrs. Ramsay is certainly a figure of fertility, and the text of the *To the Lighthouse* amplifies and extends that image of fertility in much of what Mrs. Ramsay does. Her likeness to Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, can be seen particularly clearly through Mrs. Ramsay's association with fruitfulness and growth. We are told through Mr. Tansley's interior monologue that he envisions Mrs. Ramsay "Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair..." (Woolf 25). To his mind, even the thought of Mrs. Ramsay brings with it associations of flowers and nature. Lily, who shares her name with the flowers in which Persephone was standing at the time of her abduction into the underworld, also makes such natural associations in her perception of Mrs. Ramsay: nice touch.

"Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself... while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation" (Woolf 61).

She likens Mrs. Ramsay's action to a flower petal and her countenance to the rapture of creation. Not only is Mrs. Ramsay a deity in her beauty and regal bearing, then, but also in her life-giving, natural essence which the characters around her internalize. Moreover, Woolf augments these natural comparisons with details that all but explicitly claim Mrs. Ramsay is an earth goddess such as Demeter. Mrs. Ramsay is described several times as wearing a green shawl—green being associated with the growth of Demeter—which she later uses to cover a pig skull in the children's room. Her daughter Cam could not sleep with "that horrid skull" in the room, so Mrs. Ramsay "quickly took her own shawl off and wound it round the skull" (Woolf 172). She then

laid next to Cam and compared the covered skull to “a beautiful mountain... with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes...” (Woolf 172). Both Blotner and Tina Barr, who extends Blotner’s mythical interpretation, read this scene as a symbolic victory of fertility—represented through the green shawl—over death, or as a Demeter-like action of rescuing her daughter from death, as Demeter did Persephone (Blotner 558; Barr 137). Just as it is clear that Mrs. Ramsay is to be understood symbolically, so too is it clear that she is a natural figure, a Demeter, through this mythical lens. ✓

Another of the novel’s characters who bears plain mythical likeness is Augustus Carmichael. However, unlike Mrs. Ramsay, he does not so neatly conform to a mythical mold; rather, critics see resemblance to several different classical figures in his actions. Barr sees him as simultaneously Poseidon and a chief officiator (a hierophant) of Demeter’s ritual celebration, the Eleusinian Mysteries; Anne Hoffman posits that Mr. Carmichael is just Poseidon figure; and Jean Elliott takes an entirely different stance that Mr. Carmichael is actually most beneficially read as Proteus, the god known as “The Old Man and the Sea” (Barr 136; Hoffman 182; Elliott 360). It is clear from this diverse collection of readings of Mr. Carmichael that his character, like Mrs. Ramsay’s, exemplifies Woolf’s claim that she wanted her characters not to fit as set pieces of mythical figures, but rather as suggestions of them. Mr. Carmichael’s very name, Augustus, begins these classical associations because we are told that he reads Virgil by candlelight before bed, and as Hoffman notes: “It is, of course, fitting that Augustus read Virgil: the names are rendered equivalent by the code of literary allusion that runs through the text” (Hoffman 184). It is fitting that Mr. Carmichael read Virgil because he certainly is made to be a deity-like figure ✓

such as Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf even directly symbolically compares the two at dinner when Mrs. Ramsay thinks about the spread of food on the table:

“the grapes and pears... made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus... and to her pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit... That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them (Woolf 146).

Together, Mr. Carmichael and Mrs. Ramsay are united in their sharing of—via the bowl of fruit—what Elliott calls<sup>9</sup> “a symbol of the ‘eternal moment’” (Elliott 363). Not only are two Greek deities mentioned in this passage, but Ramsay and Mr. Carmichael also momentarily exist on this symbolic plane of meaning. They are the only ones to see symbolic meaning in the fruit bowl, and they become sympathetic to one another because of it. Woolf heightens the suggestive import of Mr. Carmichael during this dinner scene at the meal’s conclusion when Lily observes: “Augustus Carmichael had risen and, holding his table napkin so that it looked like a long white robe he stood chanting... and bowed to her as if he did her homage” (Woolf 167). Barr cites this passage as evidence that Mr. Carmichael also functions as one of Mrs. Ramsay’s (Demeter’s) ritual officiators, but regardless of the extent to which Woolf suggests some sort of ritual in this passage, Mr. Carmichael is obviously a figure symbolically equated with or likened to Mrs. Ramsay (Barr 136). Moreover, where Mrs. Ramsay is earthly and regal, Mr. Carmichael is associated with the sea, and he is both disheveled and wild. He is simultaneously a sea monster and god, a figure of wisdom such as Poseidon or Proteus. Lily, as she looks out at the sea considering how best to complete her painting, depicts Mr. Carmichael as more animal than man:

“Mr. Carmichael suddenly grunted. She laughed. He clawed his book up from the grass. He ✓  
settled into his chair again puffing and blowing like some sea monster” (Woolf 384). Yet, soon  
after she compares him to a god: “old Mr. Carmichael stood beside her, looking like an old  
pagan god, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident (it was only a French novel) in his ✓  
hand” (Woolf 309). Nowhere else in the novel does Woolf so explicitly claim similarity between  
a character and a mythical counterpart. Not only does Mr. Carmichael momentarily (before Lily  
accurately sees him) have the trident of Poseidon, he also looks like an old pagan god. Woolf  
hardly suggests here: Mr. Carmichael is indisputably mythic. Furthermore, if even this  
peripheral, almost secondary, character bears such overt similarity to pagan gods of the sea, it  
stands to reason, as it does with Mrs. Ramsay, that Woolf’s suggestive mythical method  
permeates the whole novel. *with.*

Just as Eliot’s mythical method is a formally useful framing tool—insofar that it  
describes the literary way by which Woolf presents her argument from allusion—so too is Jane  
Harrison’s influence on Woolf an essential frame through which one can view Woolf’s  
mythology. That both Harrison herself as well as her work influenced Woolf is quite plain  
because not only does Woolf affectionately refer to Harrison as “dear old Jane” in her diaries and  
letters; she also alludes to her in the often quoted passage from *A Room of One’s Own*:

“...and then on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden,  
came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby  
dress—could it be the famous scholar, could it be J—H—herself?” (Woolf, *Room of  
One’s Own*, 17).

*great  
transition  
here!*

The “J—H—” in this passage is without a doubt Jane Harrison, and given Woolf’s close personal relationship with her, it should come as no surprise that Harrison’s mythology and thought impacted Woolf’s understanding of the classical past. Jane Marcus notes that impact in her book, *Art and Anger*: “Harrison’s work on mothers and daughters in preclassical Greece, her study of the transition of the powerful myths of mother-goddess worship into patriarchal Greek thought as we know it, was very important to Virginia Woolf’s writing and thinking” (Marcus 85). As Marcus claims, it is Harrison’s focus on mothers, daughters, and mother-goddesses that most influenced Woolf. In particular, Harrison sought to, as Martha Carpentier writes, “resurrect the primacy of mother over father, of mysticism over rationalism, of merger over separation, of collectivity over individuality” in her work with Greek religion and ritual (Carpentier 173). Harrison herself articulates this agenda in her book *Ancient Art and Ritual* when she contrasts the epic heroes such as those found in Sophocles with choral dancers amidst a ritual celebration: “in the old ritual dance the individual was nothing, the choral band, the group, everything... in the heroic saga the individual is everything” (Harrison, *Art and Ritual*, 159). Per Harrison, epic poetry extols “klea andron, ‘the glorious deeds of men,’ of individual heroes; and what these heroes themselves ardently long and pray for is just this glory, this personal distinction, this deathless fame for their great deeds” (Harrison 159). To her mind, the central figures of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Achilles and Odysseus, exemplify this thirst for legacy and remembrance; whereas this image of choral dancers, lost in their collective participation of ritual celebration becomes a central symbol for Harrison’s promotion of collectivity over individuality. In her analysis of Harrison’s work, Carpentier posits that Harrison establishes a gender binary with



respect to her treatment of Greek religion (Carpentier 173). On the one hand, the Olympian Pantheon privileges individuality, and Harrison describes its gods as:

“fashioned on the highly personalized, individualized self, and the essence of the sense of self is separateness, or consciousness of the severance of one self from other selves, and of that self as subject and distinct from objects” (Harrison, *Themis*, 473).

For Carpentier, the Greek Pantheon inhabits the male end of Harrison’s gender binary, which corresponds to male rationality and egoism. On the other hand, the more primitive religions of “mystery-gods” or “Year-Daimon,” such as Dionysus and his cult, occupy the other end of the gender binary. The Eleusinian mystery ritual of the cult of Demeter that Tina Barr argues operates in *To the Lighthouse* would also be on this female end of Harrison’s gender binary. Such cults, Harrison claims, “arise out of those instincts, emotions, desires which attend and express life” (Harrison, *Themis*, xii-xiii). Simply put, Harrison reads the Olympian gods as patrilinear, while she sees the “figure of Dionysos, his thiasos, and his relation to his mother and the Maenads” as matrilinear (Harrison, *Themis*, xxi). It is into this schema that Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* situates its mythical allusions. Plainly, Mrs. Ramsay is a positive, life-giving force, a Demeter figure concerned above all else with bringing people together, while Mr. Ramsay’s actions and concerns are more in line with those of an epic hero whose primary aim is kleon andron: “the glorious deeds of men.”

Furthermore, one can make sense of the central plot point of *To the Lighthouse*—the actual trip to the lighthouse—with respect to Woolf’s engagement with Harrison’s understanding of Greek religions. The novel begins with James, the Ramsays’ son, asking if the family will be able to go to the lighthouse near their coastal summer home on the following day. Mrs. Ramsay,

good  
synthesis is  
clear &  
direct.

whom we now understand to be symbolically representative of the earth goddess Demeter and as such a character that has arisen out of instincts, emotions, and desires which attend to and express life, originally responds by saying, “Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow” (Woolf 9). She disclaims that their going is contingent on the weather, but nevertheless her answer is positive. Mr. Ramsay, on the other hand, meets James’ hopeful question with the uncompromising pronouncement: “But... it won’t be fine tomorrow” (Woolf 10). Harrison’s delineation of the Greek gods helps here. Mr. Ramsay, as a force opposed to or opposite from Mrs. Ramsay, reveals his dedication to the truth in this scene, and can be read as an Olympian god who privileges reason above all else. In Woolf’s words:

“What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his own loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult... one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure” (Woolf 11).

Woolf constructs this passage in such a way that the contrast of Mrs. Ramsay’s concern for James’ feelings against Mr. Ramsay’s brutally honest forecast could not be clearer. In fact, Mr. Ramsay himself momentarily receives the narration and rages to himself:

“The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women’s minds enraged him... she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies” (Woolf 50).

Moreover, these passages present Mr. Ramsay’s rationale for assiduously pursuing the truth: truth has “the power to endure.” Just as homeric warriors were concerned with *kleon andron*, so

too is Mr. Ramsay participating in a classical tradition that glorifies posterity. Conversely, Mrs. Ramsay cares not at all about whether it will rain the next day, but rather cares entirely about James' reaction to the news. We are then told that she attempts to ameliorate her husband's damage:

“Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing,’ she said compassionately, smoothing the little boy’s hair, for her husband, with his caustic saying that it would not be fine, had dashed his spirits... This going to the Lighthouse was a passion of his, she saw... ” (Woolf 26).

Her concern is not to make James aware that life is difficult, as his father does; she is instead fearful of that reality's effect on James because she thinks “we are not going to the Lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life” (Woolf 95). Here, Mrs. Ramsay also takes into account remembrance, but not the endurance of truth that Mr. Ramsay idealizes. She does not want James to forever remember the disappointment he felt after his father harshly dispelled his hope.

endurance rather  
of  
disappointment?  
of feeling?

This critique of such a detached, disinterested search for the truth becomes a defining theme in *To the Lighthouse*. Several different characters take up this charge, but as was the case in the prospect of going to the lighthouse, Woolf's primary mouthpiece is Mrs. Ramsay via Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts. Mrs. Ramsay repeatedly considers problems and ideas from an emotional angle and appears frustrated by her husband's insistence on accuracy. For example, as she reflects on the shabbiness of the summer home's chairs, she muses:

“Never mind, the rent was precisely twopence half-penny; the children loved it; it did her husband good to be three thousand, *or if she must be accurate*, three hundred miles from

his libraries and his lectures and his disciples; and there was room for visitors” (Woolf 43, emphasis mine).

On her view, part of the summer home’s appeal is that—on an emotional level—while her husband is there, he might as well be three thousand miles from his life as an academic, despite the fact that he is actually only three hundred miles from his institutional work. With that qualification in her inner monologue, “if she must be accurate,” Mrs. Ramsay’s thought reads as ✓ if she implicitly heard her husband’s objection to her hyperbole. Mrs. Ramsay responds in a like manner to facts. After we are told that Mr. Ramsay “should be very proud of Andrew [another of their sons] if he got a scholarship,” we are immediately told that Mrs. Ramsay “would be just as proud of him if he didn’t” (Woolf 103). Clearly, Mrs. Ramsay operates apart from (facts) <sup>dispassionate?</sup> in favor of emotion, unity, and peace. Yet, Mrs. Ramsay does not object to what she considers male intelligence altogether. To the contrary, Mrs. Ramsay admires it:

“What did it all mean? To this day she had no notion. A square root? What was that? Her sons know. She leant on them... she let it uphold her and sustain her, this admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence, which ran up and down, crossed this way and that... upholding the world...” (Woolf 159).

Given this admiration, her critique of her husband and his friend Mr. Tansley becomes more nuanced. It is not the discerning crisscrossing of mathematics or analysis “on the character of Napoleon” that bothers her; rather, it is when that power to uncover the truth is irrespective of ✓ emotional costs that she detests (Woolf 159).

Not only is Mr. Ramsay the opposite of his wife in his rational approach to the world, he is also a figure whom Woolf constructs as fundamentally in need; whereas, Mrs. Ramsay is a

figure of giving. In reflection of Mrs. Ramsay's character, Lily observes "for that was true of Mrs. Ramsay—she pitied men always as if they lacked something—women never, as if they had something" (Woolf 129). Lily's observation is in complete accord with Woolf's characterization of the married couple because Woolf repeatedly describes them in comparison to the other. Even James is sensitive to his father's emotional dependence on his mother, and he scathingly notes that dependence when Mr. Ramsay disrupts his mother's reading to him: ✓

"There he stood, demanding sympathy. Mrs. Ramsay... seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force... and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare" (Woolf 58).

As this passage demonstrates, Mrs. Ramsay, in all her earth goddess glory, is a life-giving fountain, while her husband is the barren symbol of male sterility in need of the energy his wife provides. He is, in this way, once again akin to the Olympian Pantheon which was worshipped || mu h.c. ✓ through sacrifice. Unlike the primitive cults that Harrison describes, the Olympians needed tribute from their followers, and Mrs. Ramsay even directly claims that her husband similarly requires tribute: "If her husband requires sacrifices (and indeed he did) she cheerfully offered up to him Charles Tansley..." (Woolf 28). As in this passage, Mr. Ramsay is recurringly characterized as wanting validation, consolation, and sympathy. He needs Charles Tansley to praise his work as a philosopher because without it "he was a failure," by his own admission (Woolf 59). Somehow, Mr. Ramsay simultaneously pursues the truth, but conceives of himself

as a failure, so he needs flattery, acknowledgement, and praise from his peers, and especially his wife, in order to remain emotionally stable.

The divides between truth and emotion as well as giving and receiving serve as supporting points in Woolf's critique of classical legacy. It is this point that brings together Woolf's engagement with the past and her portrayal of gender. Furthermore, it is this point that she criticises most explicitly. Mrs. Ramsay presents her husband's mind and thought process in terms of the alphabet. According to this metaphor, the further along the alphabet one could discern and comprehend the letters—ending at “z”—the more intelligent the person. Mr. Ramsay is capable of reaching “Q,” while “Z is only reached once by one man in a generation” (Woolf 53-54). He laments his inability to go further in his thinking than “Q” because he equates going further with success. He also rationalizes his failure by admitting only one man in a generation ever reaches “Z”: “Is he to be blamed then if he is not that one? provided he has toiled honestly, given to the best of his power...” (Woolf 56). Both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay know of Mr. Ramsay's shortcoming, and his perceived failure then causes his need for his wife's emotional support. He incessantly wonders how long his writing would remain relevant during his own narration, and Mrs. Ramsay criticizes him in her own thinking:

“A question like that would lead, almost certainly, to something being said which reminded him of his own failure. How long would he be read—he would think at once. William Bankes (who was entirely free from all such vanity) laughed, and said he attached no importance to changes in fashion. Who could tell what was going to last—in literature or indeed in anything else?” (Woolf 161).

This passage demonstrates the contrast Mrs. Ramsay sees between men hamstrung in the present by their need to be remembered after their deaths, and men who live in and for the present. She goes so far as to equate her husband's preoccupation with his posterity to vanity; whereas, she is sympathetic to Mr. Banke's disregard of how he is remembered. She thinks that her husband "would always be worrying about his own books—how they would be read, are they good, why aren't they better, what do people think of me?" (Woolf 177). Woolf even characterizes the books in the summer home as open and "asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure?" (Woolf 191). Plainly, *To the Lighthouse* as a text objects to the notion of writing for time immemorable—writing for posthumous glory—for such ambition is fruitless. As Mr. Ramsay himself laments:

"It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter. His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? ... What, indeed, if you look from a mountain top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare" (Woolf 56).

To his mind, even the great bard himself cannot endure the ages as would a stone, so he asks how could he, a failed philosopher, even begin to hope that his work would be glorified in memory. Rather, he knows that "His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still" (Woolf 56). These passages are among the most intensely scrutinizing of the glorious deeds of men, for if Shakespeare, perhaps the most revered and preeminent author in Western canon, has no more lasting power than a common stone, it is quite clear that *To the Lighthouse* attempts to disabuse readers of the importance given to legacy. Further still, in this passage Mr. Ramsay even

acknowledges that his work will be subsumed and improved in coming years; in other words, he knows his work as an individual will give way to the overall work of the collective. | ✓

As a contrast to Mr. Ramsay's obsessive preoccupation with his legacy, Lily Briscoe, the novel's aspiring artist, rejects the pressure of legacy on her art, and does not care what happens to her painting after its completion. Instead, her focus is to have a vision and capture it on her canvas. Yet, her conception of what it is to represent something in paint seems to differ substantially from the standard by which she thinks the men around her judge her work. For, as she thinks, her painting was "bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealised... But then she did not see it like that" (Woolf 75). Lily is not trying to accurately represent the scene of Mrs. Ramsay's reading to James, but rather, she seems to paint for herself because she knows "[her painting] would never be seen; never be hung even" (Woolf 75). Moreover, Woolf puts Lily's painting in direct contrast with one of Mr. Bankes's paintings, the largest painting he owned, which depicts cherry trees on the banks of the Kennet. We are told that this is a painting "which painters had praised, and valued at a higher price than he had given for it" (Woolf 82). Such a painting as this appears to be representative of the standard Lily <sup>(from others)</sup> presumes in judging her own work. Furthermore, Bankes, in evaluating Lily's painting, is said to have raised his glasses in "scientific examination of her canvas" (Woolf 82). He would like her to explain it to him, assuming that her work takes reason as its organizing principle. However, Lily cannot verbalize any such reason to him; instead, she "could not show him what she wished to make of it... without a brush in her hand" (Woolf 82). For Lily, art need not win acclaim nor be understood. To the contrary, art, for her, becomes a barrier behind which she hides from such male scrutiny:



“She set her clean canvas firmly upon the easel, as a barrier... she hoped sufficiently substantial to ward off Mr. Ramsay and his exactingness” (Woolf 223). She cannot paint in his presence, which, on a symbolic level, suggests that concern for art as a means of achieving glory actually stifles and stagnates creativity. Certainly this stagnation is true for Mr. Ramsay because, as we are told, he has not written an influential text in many years. Yet, Lily’s art is not irrespective of time because she conceives of her work as “tunneling her way into her picture, into the past” (Woolf 258). Lily sees a profound connection between art and history, but it is not the relationship with which Mr. Ramsay is so obsessed.

Therefore, since Mrs. Ramsay—and by extension the text of *To the Lighthouse* as a whole—objects to truth and glory as ultimate objects, one must ask what Woolf proposes as a suitable replacement: that object, per Woolf, is unity. <sup>(dematerialized?)</sup> Woolf recurringly returns to this idea of oneness, of the beauty of the moment in the present and of being together with nature in the moment, wholly unconcerned with the hereafter, throughout the novel. Most tellingly, this argument for unity comes through Lily. One of her first musings of this idea comes when she is sitting on the floor by Mrs. Ramsay’s knees:

“Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language of men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee” (Woolf 79).

This passage is laden with meaning through the lenses of Woolf’s mythical method via suggestion and her understanding of Harrison’s classical religious gender binary. On the one hand, Lily rejects “inscriptions on tablets,” which one can easily understand as a type of

great job analyzing back to MML here!

proclamation or record of a glorious man's success—such as that of Augustus in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. Further, she admits that she does not desire knowledge, or at least the kind of knowledge for which both she and Mrs. Ramsay frequently criticize Mr. Ramsay (that callous pursuit of truth). She does not want to be able to determine whether or not it will rain on the next day because she is unconcerned with the future; she yearns for intimacy in the present, and she comes to this realization in the company of the novel's symbolic figure of female principle and nature. Mrs. Ramsay herself echoes Lily's thought as she considers the beauty of the lighthouse, the central metaphor of the novel, and its beam of light. Here, in a beautifully poetic interior monologue, Mrs. Ramsay ponders:

“She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they know one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself” (Woolf 98).

In this moment, readers are invited to share Mrs. Ramsay's experience. Woolf's prose attempts to capture this reflective scene of an old woman simultaneously seeing and feeling the lighthouse's light; she is in unity with nature and her surroundings. Moreover, Mrs. Ramsay claims this feeling of unity in the present is an irrational one and is therefore heightened by her status as an emotive female earth deity in Demeter. It is this kind of moment that Lily longs to represent in her painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James: she wishes to capture that moment of presence which she felt when she first saw them. Therefore, when Lily considers the likely possibility that her painting would be destroyed, she is taking a stance on the purpose of art.

Once she has “had [her] vision,” she is finished; she does not worry herself about the future, for, as she thinks “But what did that matter?” (Woolf 310). After ten years of waiting, Lily finally captures that moment of unity, of collective sublime—like that of Harrison’s choral dancers—and through her *To the Lighthouse* ends with a message that not all art must receive glory to be beautiful. ✓  
Great.

In conclusion, *To the Lighthouse* offers a detailed and nuanced critique of the patriarchal classical tradition that extols leaving one’s mark on the world; and it does so by means of a modernist style, the mythical method, that in other works—namely those written by men—perpetuates kleon andron. So to claim that Woolf appropriates and repurposes the mythical method to feminist ends is to claim that she challenges this classical notion of legacy. ✓  
YAY!

The implications of her argument are fascinating. When Mrs. Ramsay questions who could blame the the epic hero—the model to which her husband bears so much resemblance—for putting off his armor to be with his wife and child, to do “homage to the beauty of the world” rather than desperately seek to ensure that the world remembers him, she questions some of the most archetypal figures in the Western Tradition (57). For example, Hector of Troy from Homer’s *Iliad* comes quickly to mind. Hector’s insistence on dueling Achilles because of societal pressure and threat of shame should he remain inside Troy’s walls perfectly captures the classical value system against which Woolf argues. After all, his wife Andromache does implore him to stay within Troy, to bolster their fortifications, and to be with his wife and child. She begs him to think of his family and his community rather than his own glory. One implication of this reading of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is then that Hector misguidedly pursues posterity and individual recognition—as the defender and martyr of Troy—instead of surrendering his desire ✓

for personal glory (or fear of personal shame) to care for the emotions and well-being of the collective. He fails to take as his main object unity with his family and the concerns of the present rather than apartness from them outside of Troy's walls and glory as a martyr through his legacy. Woolf's novel then, presents readers with a subversive repurposing of Eliot's mythical method, and one that should be kept in mind in discussions of modernism and time.

Ⓐ Alex - this is a masterful study - you are synthesizing a truly impressive range of primary & secondary materials to make a real intervention into the ongoing discourses about Modernism's relationship to time, to traditional aesthetics & notions of legacy & permanence, and the role of (even presence of) a feminist countercurrent in British modernism. Your readings are lucid and astute, your ability to move among texts is beyond that of many graduate students and - indeed - faculty whose work I have read in the context of my editorial position. Huzzah. I love the way this all came together, the way you were able to pull together your Classics & English Concentrations - an exemplary Capstone Project, which I will (may I?) use as example in years to come. Definitely submit this to our repository & for the Dittman - phenomenal achievement here!

-Abe

## Works Cited

- Barr, Tina. "Divine Politics: Virginia Woolf's Journey toward Eleusis in *To the Lighthouse*," *boundary 2* 20.1 (1993): 125-145.
- Blotner, Joseph L. "Mythic Patterns in *To the Lighthouse*," *PMLA* 71.4 (1956): 547-562.
- Carpentier, Martha Celeste. *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Gordon and Breach, 1998. Print.
- Donoghue, Denis. "Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method," *The Sewanee Review* 105.2 (1997): 206-226.
- Eliot, T.S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." University of Virginia. Web. Retrieved November 2015: <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/eliotulysses.htm>
- Elliott, Jean. "The Protean Image: The Role of Mr. Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse*," *Studies in the Novel* 12.4 (1980): 359-368.
- Harrison, Jane Ellen. *Ancient Art and Ritual*. New York: Holt, 1913. Print.
- Harrison, Jane Ellen. *Themis*. London: Merlin Press, 1963. Print.
- Hoffman, Anne. "Demeter and Poseidon: Fusion and Distance in *To the Lighthouse*," *Studies in the Novel* 16.2 (1984): 182-196.
- Kolocotroni, Vassiliki. "Still Life: Modernism's Turn to Greece," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.2 (2012): 1-24.
- Marcus, Jane. *Art & Anger*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1988. Print.

Phillips, K. J. "Jane Harrison and Modernism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 17.4 (1991):

465-476.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1929.

Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Writer's Diary*. Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press, 1954. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume 1: 1888-1912*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson. New

York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1927. Print.

Impressive range of  
sources! Kudos!

