

Gualberto Valverde, Rebeca. *Wasteland Modernism: The Disenchantment of Myth*. Publicacions Universitat de València, 2021, ISBN: 9788491348443.

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Modernist scholarship is an ever-expanding field that keeps incorporating new authors and texts that have been ignored heretofore. There is also room, however, for works that shed new light on canonised works in ways that develop or supersede previous analyses. Rebeca Gualberto Valverde's *Wasteland Modernism: The Disenchantment of Myth* is an example of this: the volume advances a renewed reading of several works of the US modernist canon through the lens of myth-critical analysis. Drawing on the now-classic contributions of the myth and ritual school, Gualberto Valverde's volume excavates the ideological implications of the revision of the pre-modern Waste Land myth in several works belonging to what is known as "wasteland modernism" (24). The author claims that these works, through the radical possibilities offered by modernist aesthetics, reinterpret certain primitive myths that had provided political, social and ideological stability until the then-unprecedented horror of World War I. The analytical cornerstone of the volume is provided by the myth of the Waste Land, an Arthurian legend whose earliest expression is found in Chrétien de Troyes (16)—a myth that is subverted, reinterpreted and rewritten by the works analysed in their attempt to grapple with the discontents of modernity. Preceded by a theoretical introduction where the author lays out the myth-critical approach that articulates the study, the volume is structured into six chapters, each of them focusing on a different modernist text.

The backbone of mythical revision undertaken by Gualberto Valverde's study is provided by T. S. Eliot's 1922 modernist masterpiece *The Waste Land*. The author offers a myth-critical analysis of Eliot's poem, focusing on how the proliferation of symbols in the poem involves the revision and rewriting of myth. The post-war context that the poem tackles is crucial to understanding how the pre-modern myth of the Waste Land is now articulated in degenerative terms, as opposed to the traditional regenerative paradigm. Eliot's mythical method, Gualberto

Valverde maintains, is here devoted to emphasising the emptiness and vacuity of ancient rites, especially those related to fertility, and to advancing the idea that communal regeneration, emblematised by the regeneration of the land, is no longer possible. The advent of water, a traditional signifier of fertility, redemption and regeneration, becomes a harbinger of death and sterility in *The Waste Land*, according to the author's myth-critical analysis. Gualberto Valverde masterfully unpacks the wealth of mythical referents contained in Eliot's poem, which, through its fragmented order, becomes index to the overarching theme of inescapable degeneration found in most modernist literature of the time.

Wasteland Modernism then proceeds to explore how the ideological implications of Eliot's revision of the Waste Land myth are reprised in John Dos Passos' 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer*. Drawing on Henry Adams' early-twentieth-century impression of the city of New York as a neurotic space (52), Gualberto Valverde's analysis focuses on the novel's symbolic portrayal of the modern city as a wasteland that forces its inhabitants to live in the permanent state of a "little life," a central motif in Eliot's poem. *Wasteland Modernism* argues that the representation of Manhattan as a sick urban environment—the symbolic correlative of a sick community—emblematises the dehumanising processes that affect the city's inhabitants, for whom the only possible escape, if there is one at all, is to leave the modern city for good. This option, however, is an individual one; communal regeneration is not possible in Manhattan and, by extension, in the post-war modern city. Through the analysis of the revisionist use of mythical symbols already present in Eliot's poem—fire, water, flowers—, Gualberto Valverde concludes that *Manhattan Transfer* abandons the possibilities of regeneration contained in the original Waste Land myth.

The idea of a sickened community is also central to Gualberto Valverde's analysis of Francis Scott

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Fitzgerald's best-known work, *The Great Gatsby*. Also published in 1925, *Gatsby* revolves around another urban wasteland, represented by the novel's symbolic landscape of the Valley of Ashes. Gualberto Valverde's chapter unpacks the meanings contained in the "foul dust" that taints all characters and environments of the novel (72), which have fallen prey to the ubiquitous corruption and violence that define life in the post-war world. The pre-modern Waste Land myth is reinterpreted in *Gatsby*, according to the author, in a way that cancels all possibilities of communal regeneration. Exemplified by the novel's mock use of archetypal figures in the US imaginary, such as the pioneer and his archetypal journey westward towards a mythical land of plenty (73), the author explains how *Gatsby* jettisons the dominant myth of America, reliant on the promise of Eden, by portraying "the rottenness of the community" (87) that inhabits the modern wasteland.

Wasteland Modernism's next chapter delves into the resignification of the Waste Land myth in Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The reinterpretation of the pre-modern Waste Land myth in this case is mainly focused on the impotence that afflicts the novel's main character, Jake Barnes, as a result of a war wound. A direct mirroring of the original myth's Fisher-King figure, the author contends that the protagonist's emasculating wound stands as a direct result from the unspeakable harm that the war has inflicted upon him and, by extension, all the characters in the novel, who constitute a pathologized community. Gualberto Valverde explores the novel's portrayal of fertility rituals, represented by Jake Barnes' involvement in Pamplona's San Fermín festivities, and bullfighting in particular—rituals that were once performed to ensure fertility but which now, in post-war Europe, are yet another signifier of the impossibility of regeneration, both in individual and communal terms. *Wasteland Modernism* concludes that frustration, barrenness and sterility become the main signifiers of a novel whose ideological implications attest to the "perpetually lifeless existence of those who are condemned to linger in an unredeemable Waste Land" (110).

The fifth chapter revolves around John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*, published in 1933. Another example of the "Waste Land mentality" (112) typical of US modernism, Steinbeck's novel focuses on the drought that affects its main character's once-fertile lands. Drawing on images of fertility and barrenness, the novel destabilises the original meanings of myth by depicting a highly ambivalent main character (119) who refuses to be interpreted in a totalising way. Indeterminacy is thus introduced in a typically modernist fashion that, consequently, opens the interpretive possibilities of myth. Gualberto Valverde analyses how Joseph's sickness is transposed onto his dying lands, once again signifying that "a meaningful restoration of order is no longer possible" in the post-war world (127). The author concludes that Steinbeck's revision of the Waste Land myth goes one

step further in its rewriting due to the ambivalence it introduces.

The book's last chapter is devoted to Djuna Barnes' late-modernist novel *Nightwood* (1937), which is considered by the author "an integral piece in the American modernist canon" (129). The novel's engagement with the masculinist myth of the Waste Land (140) involves a more radical revision of myth, according to Gualberto Valverde, insofar as it unveils the discursive nature of myth and its subsequent loss of authoritative origin. According to the author's analysis, Barnes' novel ironically draws on degeneration theory to destabilise ideas of normalcy and deviation. Barnes' novel thus becomes more radical in its mythical revision, Gualberto Valverde argues, because it does not attempt to reassemble myth after it has been deconstructed. Ideologically, the novel's refusal to "restore the symbolic order" (133), along with its suggestion that *everyone* is sick—as opposed to those traditionally considered "deviant"—poses liberating possibilities in terms of gender and sexuality. This is where the path set by Eliot diverges, according to the author: *Nightwood* does not transform regeneration into degeneration (146). Rather, it exposes the falsehood of myth and, necessarily, of the subsequent ideological structures it once legitimised.

The author concludes by observing that "the global sentiment of crisis" found in the works of US modernism (149) incorporates new ways of reading myth—a rewriting that, in turn, advances updated socio-political readings. One might wonder, however, if the myth-critical revision of the texts addressed in *Wasteland Modernism* can also be found in other modernisms beyond the US context. In other words, the reason why US modernism in particular is the subject matter of the mythical revision at stake in this study could have been developed more extensively. Likewise, the question remains whether rewritings the Waste Land mytheme have transcended the specificity of the literary and cultural modernist movement and permeated subsequent literary and cultural movements like postmodernism—especially given that the said "global sentiment of crisis" has remained a constant throughout western history and culture rather than a specific characteristic of modernism. Despite these minor objections, the volume remains an inspiring contribution both to the fields of US modernism and myth-criticism. Even though the texts analysed in the volume are canonical and well-established in literary criticism, Gualberto Valverde aptly manages to shed new light on the meanings they convey by establishing a complex, multi-layered myth-critical analysis.

The author's insightful study ultimately allows for a renovated understanding of these works and their wider cultural meaning—something that deserves praise given the wealth of criticism available on the works of high modernism. Against scholarly voices that have criticised the pervasive presence of the Waste Land myth and motifs as

a cliché (150), Gualberto Valverde succeeds in articulating the necessity of continuing to explore the rewritings of myth in modernist literature. The myth-critical analysis of the Waste Land mytheme found in US modernist literature is still pertinent because it “operates as an eloquent symbolization for the post-traumatic conditions of life after the

war” (151), and, as such, it deserves attention. *Wasteland Modernism* attests to the plasticity of myth in adapting to ideological turns and highlights the centrality of myth in modernist literature, and in doing so it proves to be an invaluable contribution to the critical voices on US modernism and myth-criticism.

