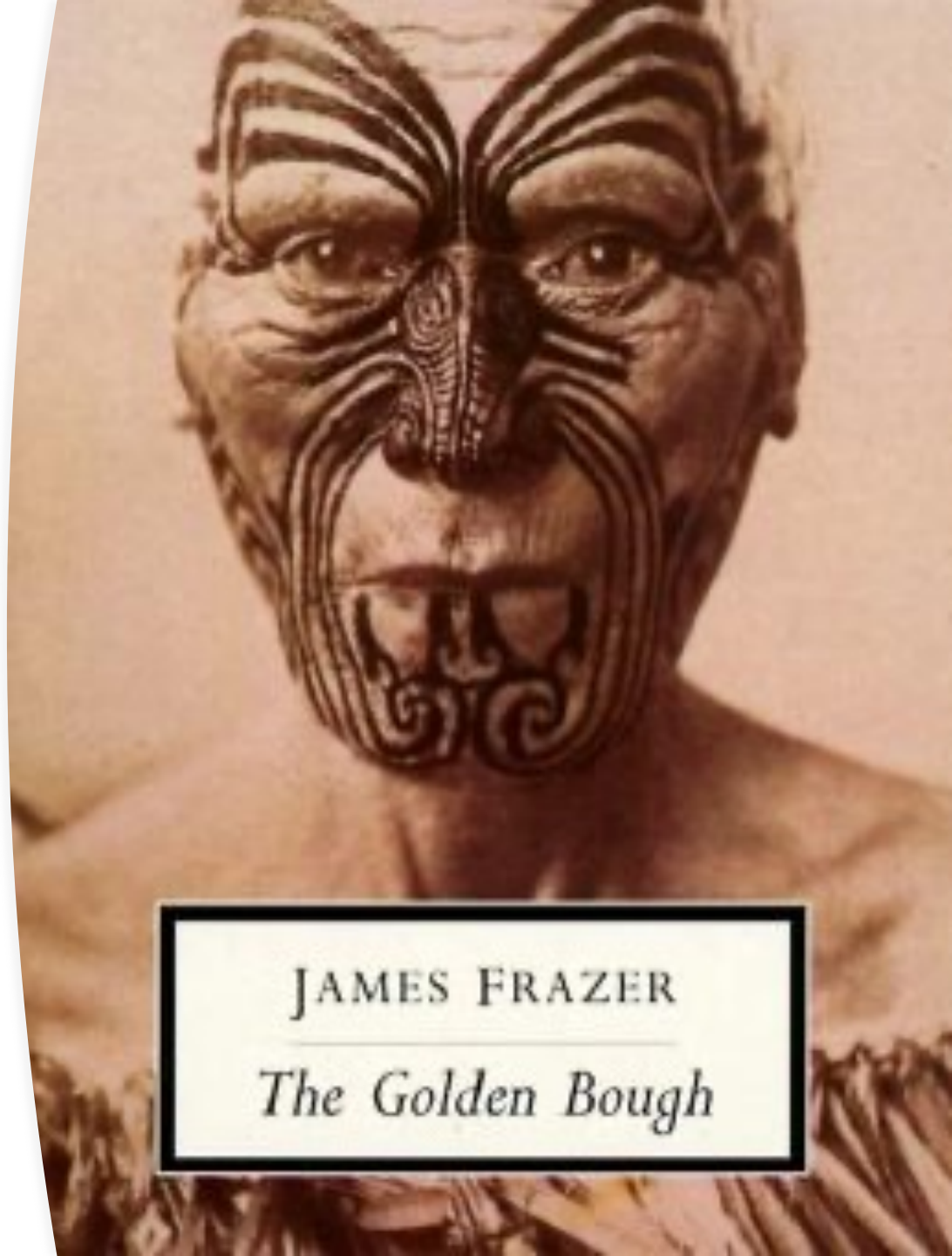# Mythology & Modernism

- Publication of Sir James Frazer's twelve-volume *The Golden Bough* between 1906-1915

- Very influential work of comparative mythology

- Argued that so-called "primitive religions" as well as Christianity were fertility cults that featured a dying king and a rebirth, tied to cycles of nature

JAMES FRAZER

The Golden Bough

From Ritual to Romance

- Book published in 1920 by Jessie Weston

- Examined King Arthur/grail romances to make connections between Christianity and pagan rituals

Myth & Modernism

Modernist writers very well acquainted with these two books.

Mythic Method

- T.S. Eliot's "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth"

- Argues that both Yeats and Joyce used "the mythic method," whereby a writer draws (or at least implicitly suggests) parallels between contemporary situations and events, on the one hand, and situations and events portrayed in mythology, on the other hand.

Fisher King Mythology

- Also called the "wounded king" or "maimed king"
- Key myth to modernists
- Fisher King is a character in medieval legends dealing with the quest for the Holy Grail

Fisher King, cont.

- Fisher King is keeper of the Grail relics, including the spear of Longinus, used to wound Jesus as he hung on the cross.

The Wound

- The Fisher King suffers from a wound inflicted by the same spear.
- Wound always said to be in the "thigh" or "groin"—believed to be a metaphor for the penis
- The wound destroyed the Fisher King's virility and, by a sympathetic transference, turned his realm into a wasteland.

T.S. Eliot

- Important theme in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland," a poem emblematic of the modern condition.

"Big Two-Hearted River"

- Similar imagery used in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River"
- Burnt out landscape in beginning of story associated with spiritual disillusion

The Sun Also Rises

- Jake Barnes' wound represents a similar transference?

- Spiritual wasteland reflected in the impotent physical body

Bulls and Bull-fighting

- Bulls important in many myths and legends discussed by Frazer and Weston

- Ritual slaying of bulls frequent component

- Often for purposes of fertility, resurrection

Osiris

- Egyptian fertility god
- Torn into 14 pieces by his brother Set and his body thrown in the Nile
- Resurrected by sister/wife Isis
- Explains natural cycle of the seasons

Minotaur

- Half bull, half man
- Imprisoned at center of Daedalus's maze, in Crete
- Had to be killed by Theseus, an Athenian
- (Another ritual killing)

Dionysus

- Greek God of resurrection, often associated with the bull

- Myth in which Dionysus is slaughtered as a bull calf and eaten by the Titans

Greek and Roman Cult of Mithras

- Central element ritual sacrifice of bull
- Such rituals linked to Christianity through the sacrifice of Christ (sacrament of communion)

Hemingway and Modern Fragmentation

(The ideas in the next few slides come partly from "The Real Thing"? Representing the Bullfight, And Spain, in *Death in the Afternoon*," by Peter Messent)

- In *Death in the Afternoon,* Hemingway includes a section called "A Natural History of the Dead"

- Recalls a real-life incident he experienced during the war-- collecting the "fragments" and "detached bits" of female corpses after the explosion of a munition factory near Milan

- Hemingway quote:

   We agreed…that the picking up of the fragments had been an extraordinary business; it being amazing that the human body should be blown into pieces which exploded along no anatomical lines, but rather divided as capriciously as the fragmentation in the burst of a high explosive shell (135-7).

- Catherine's fiancé right at the start of *A Farewell to Arms* that "They blew him all to bits" (20).
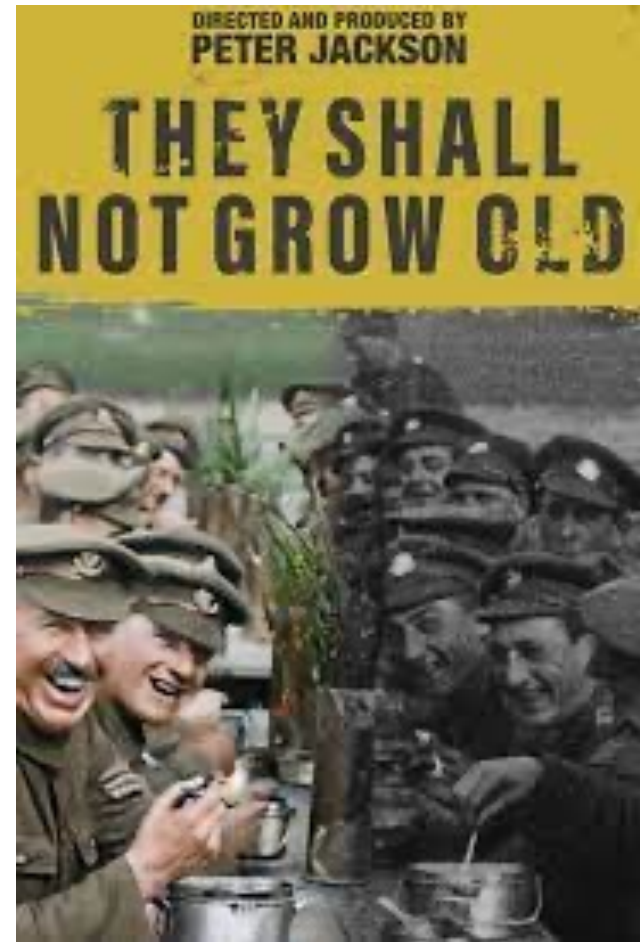
Modernity robs individual agency

- The broken bodies and senseless actions of "A Natural History of the Dead" represent a modernity where the individual is completely powerless, out of kilter with an impinging and threatening world.

- Hemingway uses the First World War in his fiction to allegorically signify a modern world where larger, dislocating and uncontrollable forces operate.

- In this world, the human subject is metaphorically fragmented (literally so in the War), unable to function in any "whole," autonomous, or socially significant way.

Bullfighting and Ritual

- Hemingway saw bullfighting as a ritual tragedy as opposed to the random violence and grotesque forms of death that mark modern warfare

- For him, Spain and bullfighting remained untainted (or pre-modern), vibrant, and meaningful.

- The ritual killing of the bull is linked to pre-modern mythology—the bullfighter is an active rather than a passive subject as he challenges the bull within the ring in a type of "mythical drama"

- Ritual provides the form and structure to face and begin to understand death, something missing in the war

Bullfighting in *Sun* more complex

- In his fiction, Hemingway often tends to give a more complicated and ambiguous picture of things than in his non-fiction, and this is true of his representation of bullfighting.

- In *The Sun Also Rises*, he emphasizes the gaps between the ritual of the bullfight and the larger culture that contains it— bullfighting is not presented simply as representative of the untainted pre-modern state of Spain itself.

- *Sun* foregrounds disparities between the bullfight code and the "everyday" fabric of community existence; which are almost never apparent in *Death in the Afternoon*.

- In the novel, the waiter's comment on the useless death of Vicente Girones, killed "All for sport. All for pleasure…. All for fun" while running the bulls, leaving a wife and orphaned children behind him, taken together with his comment on bulls as just 'Animals. Brute animals' (Sun: 197), opens up an alternative reading of bullfighting, even within the context of Spanish culture.

- Bullfighting for the waiter is a sport rather than a tragedy. It is not an organic and integral part of Spanish culture, but a circumscribed form of activity peripheral and damaging to the business of that life.

For Discussion

Status of *Afición* in the Novel

- Valued?
- Corrupted?
- Presented ironically?