Mythology & Modernism

• Publication of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* between 1906-1915
• Very influential work of comparative mythology
From Ritual to Romance

• Book published in 1921 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

- 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 Fisher King suffered from a wound inflicted by the same spear.

The wound destroyed the Fisher King’s virility and, by a sympathetic transference, turned his realm into a wasteland.
“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)