After a brief review of Pater’s interest in classical mythology, the essay discusses the applications that he made of myth in order to highlight Victorian social anxieties. In this context, special attention is given to his treatment of the Dionysian-Apollonian antithesis. With a view to demonstrating that Pater had a genuine capacity for creating myths which reflect the consciousness of his own time, the second half of the essay concentrates on his discussion, in Hegelian terms, of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. This is followed by an examination of the impact that the Mona Lisa passage made on the work of such outstanding representatives of English Modernism as Henry James, James Joyce and W. B. Yeats.

By accident of birth and education belonging to the fag end of Romanticism, by sensibility and philosophy an early Modern, Walter Pater was uniquely equipped to salvage and adapt elements of Romanticism’s legacy for uses by the great Modernists. Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are all in his debt, and not even those who disliked or thought his influence harmful, like Henry James and T. S. Eliot, remained unaffected by his work. But, as is increasingly evident, his significance as a theorist of literature and a philosopher extends well beyond English literary Modernism. J. Hillis Miller, claiming that Pater “is the nearest thing to Nietzsche England has, as Emerson is Nietzsche’s nearest match in America,” calls him one of “the progenitors of modern subjectivistic, ‘impressionistic,’ phenomenological criticism,” and traces a line from Ruskin through Pater and Wilde to Proust, and beyond Proust to Walter Benjamin, Derrida, Paul de Man and Harold Bloom (Bloom 75–76). The area of research thus staked out is vast as well as potentially very profitable. Against such a background my objective: the charting of one of the ways in which Pater contributed to the evolution of English Modernism looks very modest. My thesis is that Pater brought the inherent (and irrepressible) mythopoeic tendencies of literature into line with the conditions in which that literature was to function at the end of the nineteenth century and for decades after. In elaborating this thesis I will first discuss Pater’s interest in myth, which in this context means myth of the classical variety; from this I will...
move on to some of his adaptations of myth; this will be followed by an examination of Pater's own mythopoeic experiments; I will wind up with some examples of Pater's influence on mythmaking techniques in Henry James, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce.

As a classical scholar (a fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, at the age of twenty-five), he was at home in the ancient world, and thus in Greek mythology. His writings are heavily laced with allusions to and analogies with antiquity. As someone has playfully suggested, the epigraph of his Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) might have been, “when in Rome, do as the Greeks.” He wrote a number of essays, mainly in the 1870s and '80s, about classical mythology, which were then published as Greek Studies (1894; GS in all subsequent references). The sense in which Pater uses the term myth is perhaps best conveyed by this impressively concise definition in “The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture” (1880): “Mythology is the reflex of characteristic facts” (GS 218), where reflex means “mirror image,” characteristic fact, as can be inferred from his interpretations of actual myths, is something fundamental to existence. The goddess Demeter, we read in “The Marbles of Aegina” (1880), reflects the spirit of life in grass, Dionysus stands for the spirit of life in the green sap, in other words, the fertility of nature (GS 254). The latter, as Dionysus Zagreus, the Northern (Thracian) god of winter, personifies the death of nature as well, according to “A Study of Dionysus” (1876) (GS 44–45). These observations are, of course, commonplaces of myth-criticism today, but they were already commonplaces in Pater's time. With Nietzsche in mind (The Birth of Tragedy was published in 1872), we are more interested in what Pater has to say about the significance of myth not as a dated historical but as a living force which has a meaning for his own time or, for that matter, for our own. For obvious reasons, one would assume that his reading of the myths of Dionysus and Apollo, who as embodiments of vitality and form occupy a particularly privileged position in Greek mythology, will offer the most rewarding lessons. Somewhat disappointingly, this does not seem to be the case; in the early essays of Greek Studies Pater celebrates the two divinities for their traditional virtues. Things begin to change, however, when in the “The Marbles of Aegina” he reconsiders the subject and identifies these antithetical figures with individualism and discipline–qualities that have more to do with his own age than with antiquity (GS 252–53)–the process ending with a greatly enriched picture of the two deities in Plato and Platonism (1893). Dionysus in this book is emphatically the embodiment of uncontrolled, chaotic, therefore dangerous and potentially destructive energies; he is an emblem of individualism, of the alien and Asiatic tendencies in Greek and European civilization–an Ionian-Athenian god. Apollo, on the other hand, stands for self-control, discipline, harmony, for the perfect form, the innate qualities that sustain European culture–a Dorian-Spartan divinity. Together they epitomize the centripetal and centrifugal or, in literary terms, the romantic and the classical tendencies in ancient Greece, and they are especially dear to Pater for the cautionary tale they enable him to tell the Victorians. He presents and interprets Plato’s writings brilliantly and with great empathy, but not at all “objectively.” The ostensible theme, as so often before in his work, becomes the vehicle for Pater to address his contemporaries on some great issue that he believes is in need of serious consideration. So when he claims that The Republic, in which Plato elevates