the general principle of mortality, as we discover when the sound of a bell tolling
the hour immediately makes her think of Doris Kilman:

The sound of Big Ben flooded Clarissa’s drawing-room, where she sat, ever so an-
noyed, at her writing-table; worried; annoyed. It was perfectly true that she had not
asked Ellie Henderson to her party; but she had done it on purpose. [...] Why should
she invite all the dull women in London to her parties? Why should Mrs. Marsham
interfere? And there was Elizabeth closeted all this time with Doris Kilman. Anything
more nauseating she could not conceive. Prayer at this hour with that woman. And
the sound of the bell flooded the room with its melancholy wave [...] (128–129)

Here, the intrusion of time into the (supposedly inviolate) privacy of the home
initially leads Clarissa to think of a dull acquaintance who would spoil her up‐
coming party – but her thoughts are then mysteriously propelled forward to her
daughter’s “nauseating” friendship with Miss Kilman, the history teacher with
German roots. The two passages thus illustrate Clarissa’s concerns with time: a
‘universal’ fear of mortality, and a very personal dislike of Doris Kilman. Both
these impulses express a desire on Clarissa’s part to stop time and halt the
progress of history. Therefore, if at first sight Clarissa’s dislike of clocks may
seem similar to Lucrezia’s, on closer inspection we find that the reasons for their
hostility are fundamentally different. Whereas Clarissa fears the idea of history
and mutability itself, Lucrezia dislikes clocks as symbols of a particular
socio-historical order and thus desires change (except in moments of existential
crisis – e.g. after her husband’s suicide – when even Lucrezia appreciates the
sense of order and predictability that clocks convey).

**Everyday Myths**

It is in the same context that we have to see the use of mythical elements in
*Mrs. Dalloway*, for myth should not only be conceived as a departure from the
“everyday time” that Mikhail Bakhtin sees as characteristic of the novel (“Forms
of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel” 128; see Walder 9); it also constitutes
an attempt to empty the past of its historical dimension. According to Franco
Moretti, rewriting an event in mythical form means “freeing it from the profane
world of causes and effects, and projecting into it the symbolic richness of the
archetype” (*Modern Epic* 248). And perhaps the most effective way of aban‐
doning the logic of cause and effect is to adapt myth’s non-linear conception of
time, which breaks down the distinction between past and present (Tobin 266).
Because of this different conception of time, Roland Barthes suggests, mythical
objects seem to “come from eternity”; they no longer appear in a linear, causal
sequence – as produced or chosen – and in consequence “history evaporates,”
together with any notion of human responsibility, since no one can be responsible for a state of affairs that is eternal and unchangeable (151). In short, then, myth is a kind of discourse that purports to discover, underneath the mundane historical surface of everyday life, a deeper, unchanging, eternal reality.

In Woolf’s novel, a concern with this shift from surface to depth is intimated continuously through the frequent use of water imagery. Such imagery is omnipresent, for instance, in the opening paragraphs of Mrs. Dalloway, in which Clarissa plunges into a London morning in June 1923 just as she had “plunged at Bourton into the open air,” which for her felt “like the flap of a wave” (3); we learn that she loves the city’s “waves of divine vitality” (7), and the beauty of flowers is to Clarissa like “a wave which she let flow over her and surmount” the hatred she feels for Miss Kilman, that stern woman with her unduly historical mind (14). Similarly Septimus, looking out of the window of the Warren Smith’s living room, notices how the “trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room” (153). In both cases, the narrator’s language associates everyday occurrences with images of watery depths and blissful submergence, and perhaps the pervasive presence of aquatic metaphors in Mrs. Dalloway has contributed to critics’ tendency to attribute a stream-like quality to Woolf’s prose style (e.g. Love 71; Nalbantian 84; Naremore 91; Judith Ryan 191). At any rate, the recurrence of water imagery in the novel suggests a continual tension between mythical depths and the flow of everyday reality.28

The novel’s most celebrated attempt to explore the mythical substratum of everyday life occurs in a scene in which an old beggar-woman sings a song in Regent’s Park. The focalizer at this point in the text is Peter (Booker, Techniques of Subversion 174), whose train of thought is interrupted by the sound of the old woman’s song, which “bubbled up” and “streamed away in rivulets over the pavement” – note, once again, the use of aquatic metaphors. Peter imagines the woman to have been singing “through all ages”: “Still remembering how once in some primeval May she had walked with her lover, this rusty pump, this battered old woman with one hand exposed for coppers, the other clutching her

27 See Juan Eduardo Cilot, who insists that water alludes to the “connexion between the superficial and the profound” (175); see also Sánchez-Vizcaíno for the significance of water imagery in Woolf, William James, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud. Many critics have, of course, noted Woolf’s use of water imagery – e.g. Janine MacLeod (55) or Roger Poole (266).

28 It might, incidentally, be interesting to pursue the theoretical link between this definition of myth and Fredric Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism as a schizophrenic “breakdown of temporality” that results in the experience of an isolated present of “heightened intensity” (Postmodernism 27).
side, would still be there in ten million years” (89–90). There are two reasons why the phrase “rusty pump” is important here. For one thing, it shows again that, when a lower-class character is implicitly dehumanized in Woolf’s novel (i.e. the woman is not regarded as human, but merely as a rusty, mechanical thing), the perspective is invariably that of a member of the Dalloway circle. For another, a pump is an instrument designed to tap sources that lie buried deep beneath the ground, just like the life-giving, mythical meaning that supposedly lurks somewhere beneath the surface of everyday reality.

For Peter, a poor beggar-woman singing a song thus becomes an awe-inspiring mythical presence related to the archetypes of the eternal feminine and the earth-mother (e.g. Fleishman 84; Viola 244; Wyatt 443) – a timeless being who already existed “in some primeval May,” and who “would still be there in ten million years”:

But the passage of ages had blurred the clarity of that ancient May day; [...] and she no longer saw, when she implored him (as she did now quite clearly) [...] black whiskers or sunburnt face but only a looming shape, a shadow shape, to which, with the bird-like freshness of the very aged she still twittered “give me your hand and let me press it gently” (Peter Walsh couldn’t help giving the poor creature a coin as he stepped into his taxi) [...] ; and her fist clutched at her side, and she smiled, pocketing her shilling, and all peering inquisitive eyes seemed blotted out, and the passing generations – the pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people – vanished [...]. (90)

History – “the passing generations,” the “bustling middle-class people” – disappears in this mythopoetic vision, and there remains only an ancient female lover with her eternal song. Crucially, the rhapsodic language of myth threatens to distract us from the ‘superficial’ sequence of events: Peter, when stepping into a taxi, is importuned by an old beggar-woman to whom he gives a shilling (though, it seems, rather unwillingly: he “couldn’t help giving”). At the same time, if there is an evasion of reality in this scene, then it is either Peter’s or the narrator’s, but not, as Michael Whitworth rightly insists, the novel’s as a whole (156), for the mythicizing sequence is immediately followed by Lucrezia Warren Smith’s correctly prosaic perception of the same beggar-woman: “Oh poor old wretch!” (90). Whereas, in short, the mythopoetic vision of the privileged flâneur threatens to dazzle us with symbolic richness, the perspective of a beleaguered middle-class wife with a foreign background returns us to the sparse, historical prose of everyday life.

It is thus no coincidence that, in Mrs. Dalloway, the ‘visionary’ characters who sense a mythical unity underlying everyday existence – Clarissa, Peter, and