

Research Question

The pattern of social shifts and psychological stresses that make up modernity drew from early 20th-century writers the formal responses we know as Modernism. As these literary experiments indicate, modernity itself demanded new modes of perception and representation, and thus perhaps not surprisingly, esotericism often played a central role in Modernist works. Esotericism was especially important to the writings of those Modernist women writers who were exploring outlets for gender and spirituality that orthodox religion rejected. Such interests provide a bridge for the scholar to link writers firmly within the Modernist canon such as the imagist expatriate poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), newly “rediscovered” writers like the novelist Mary Butts and more popular writers such as the occult leader Dion Fortune (Violet Firth). By researching the place of esotericism in the works of these three writers I will be able to establish the importance of such concerns across both elite and popular readerships. I hope to discover how these three authors used esotericism within their art to create unique symbol systems attuned to the female psyche, and what role the world wars played as catalysts to these writers’ experimentation with alternative spiritual systems.

Project Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is twofold: it will allow me to gain deeper knowledge of esotericism’s place in the works of Modernist women writers and also establish the groundwork for possible future research in this area. By juxtaposing these three authors I will gain an understanding of the broader cultural dialogue in which they played a part, and the particular importance for women authors of this period of a spiritually-driven literature. On a practical level, this research will serve as the basis for my senior thesis, and also hone my research skills for my future as a graduate student in literary studies.

Project Impact

This project has valuable ramifications academically and personally. I see this project as my initiation into the world of serious scholarship, a first step toward graduate study. Indeed, this research into Modernist esotericism may prove to be the area of my graduate research, and the work has significance beyond my own career. Though works like Helen Sword’s Ghostwriting Modernism and Demetres Tryphonopoulos’ and Leon Surette’s Literary Modernism and the Occult Tradition show that interest in this field is growing, esotericism’s influence on Modernist literature has mostly been ignored. Furthermore, my work in linking elite Modernist authors to popular esotericism may be particularly valuable at a time when Modernist literary studies is increasingly open to tracing such high/popular connections.

Relationship to Previous Research

Although I have long been intrigued by the figure of Dion Fortune because of the unique didactic nature of those fictions she created in order to teach others of her own form of esotericism, I found that, surprisingly, there has been little academic research on her and her work. The few exceptions include the articles “The Integrated Alien: Ritual Magic in the Fiction of Dion Fortune” by John Alego and “The Occult Novels of Dion Fortune” by Susan Johnston Graf. Beyond these few articles, her exegesis of her work has been confined to the work of her acolytes, devotee of her own Society of Inner Light and other occult groups. After sharing my interest with one of my professors, Dr. Catherine Keyser, she encouraged me to consider pursuing research about Dion Fortune as a senior thesis and referred me to Dr. Debra Rae Cohen because of her specialty in British Modernist women writers. Through Dr. Cohen’s mentorship, I was introduced to the works of H.D. and Mary Butts and found that Dion Fortune’s works were part of a larger cultural dialogue. Indeed, Fortune’s work is most significant when seen in the broader context of gendered Modernist-era pressures. In the majority of Dion Fortune’s novels, such as The Winged Bull and The Sea Priestess, Fortune offers solutions to these pressures via esoteric rituals which elevate the role of women through spiritual practice. Mary Butts’ Armed with Madness, and H.D.’s “A Dead Priestess Speaks” and “The Master” present their own esoteric questions and solutions addressing Modernist-era gender pressures. Furthermore all of these authors grappled with the pressures of wartime through esoteric-driven writing, such as Dion Fortune’s The Magical Battle for Britain, H.D.’s Trilogy, and Mary Butts’ Ashe of Rings. For this reason, I have chosen to research the works of H.D. and Mary Butts along with Dion Fortune’s work tracing the writers’ commonalities and differences as artists and esoteric practitioners in order to understand the way gendered pressures expressed themselves across different Modernist groups and audiences.

Project Design

The first stage of my research will consist of research for the contextual chapter of my thesis. This research will include additional readings of H.D., Dion Fortune, and Mary Butts while gleaning an understanding of the cultural influences on their work. I will be reading in both historical primary sources and critical work on Modernism, tracing the influence of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, popular Spiritualism, and The Order of Golden Dawn. After this stage of contextual work, I will have enough sense of how the broader cultural matrix affected Dion Fortune to be able to submit an abstract on the Fortune chapter to the yearly conference of the interdisciplinary scholarly organization The Space Between (of which Dr. Cohen is a member of the board). This year the conference's topic "Belief and Disbelief in the Space Between: 1914-1945" is about the various manifestations of faith during the interwar years and perfectly fits the topic of my thesis. After the submission of this abstract (due January 15, 2010) I will complete the contextual chapter of my thesis. With the foundational influences established, I will then pursue in-depth research on each author and conceptualize the ideological relationship between these three authors. This in-depth research will culminate in research of H.D.'s and Mary Butts' archives at Yale University's Beinecke Library. The main intention of this trip is to research Mary Butts' unpublished works, especially her unpublished correspondences, which may reveal her esoteric leanings and motivations at different stages of her life. With this archival research, I will finalize my presentation for the "Belief and Disbelief in the Space Between: 1914-1945" conference and my senior thesis.

Project Timeline

- August-December 2009: background reading of H.D., Dion Fortune, and Mary Butts; crystallization of thesis outline.
- January 2010: writing and submission of abstract for "Belief and Disbelief in the Space Between: 1914-1945" conference.
- February 2010-April 2010: complete draft of Dion Fortune chapters; preparation for research trip to Beinecke library; presentation at Discovery Day; review meeting with Dr. Cohen.
- May 2010: trip to Yale University's Beinecke Library; final preparation for "Belief and Disbelief in the Space Between: 1914-1945" conference presentation.
- June 2010: finish Butts and H.D. chapters for thesis, presentation June 17-19 at "Belief and Disbelief in the Space Between: 1914-1945" conference.
- July 2010: final editing of senior thesis and submission of senior thesis to Dr. Cohen and English Department.

Anticipated Results

From my study so far, I hypothesize that these three authors are related in their use of esotericism in their fiction, but diverse in their relationship with esotericism. I anticipate the research will reveal these three authors' use of esotericism is directly related to WWI and in some instances WWII, the overwhelming secularization of society, and the sexual revolution of the era. Beyond my senior thesis and presentation at USC's Discovery Day and the "Belief and Disbelief in the Space Between" conference, I plan to submit sections of this work for publication in journals such as *Religion and Literature*, a professional peer-reviewed journal and *The Oswald Review*, an international journal of undergraduate research and criticism of English. Part of this thesis will also serve as my writing sample when I apply to graduate schools next year.

Personal Statement

My path within academia is founded on a deep interest in literature's relationship with culture and the reading audience. It is this investment that has been my inspiration to pursue the Magellan grant. For me, a non-SC Honors College student, the Magellan grant will be the only funds with which I can work with in order to produce the most thorough research possible.

As with most journeys, my path as an English major has evolved since I first decided to pursue an undergraduate degree. While receiving my associate degree at Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College I thought that the only realistic option through which I could pursue my interest in literature was to teach literature at the secondary level. Through my mentorships within the English department at USC I have found that I have the potential to pursue a career in English literary studies. My senior thesis project gives me the possibility of bringing my passion for literature to the field of research, and it is with this passion that I am applying for the Magellan grant.

References

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Magellan Scholar BUDGET FORM

Student's Name:

Student salary	Hours	Rate	Subtotal
Taking classes			\$0.00
Summer	42.5	\$8.0/hr	\$340.00
Fringe: Student salary * student fringe rate ¹			
Taking classes	\$0.00	1.05%	\$0.00
Not taking classes	\$340.00	8.85%	\$30.09
Materials/Supplies			
			\$0.00
Travel			
			\$2,630.00
TOTAL			\$3,000.09

Budget Justification

Student Salary:

Over the summer: 4.25 hours per week for 10 weeks

Materials/Supplies:

No materials or supplies proposed.

Travel:

Travel to Beinecke Library at Yale University in New Haven, CT for archival research on H.D. and Mary Butts

Registration/ Entrance: FREE

Airfare (roundtrip) = \$500 (from Orbitz)

Lodging: \$150/night (incl tax) for 4 nights = \$600

Food: \$32 for 5 days = \$160

Taxis: (to and from airport) = \$80

12th Annual Conference of The Space Between Society: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945 in Portland, OR

Registration/ Entrance: FREE (as presenter)

Airfare (roundtrip) = \$450 (from Orbitz)

Lodging: \$150/night (incl tax) for 4 nights @ conference hotel = \$ 600

Meals: \$32 for 5 days = \$160

Taxis: (to and from airport) = \$80