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A Society Impaired: Why Students Must be Taught Mythology

by Elise Hayen

Introduction

During their time in grade school, it is almost inevitable that a student will encounter lessons from mythology. Often, myths will be in the curriculum for multiple years. Despite this, it is still widely agreed that society is less mythologically educated than it should be, and teachers note that despite their attempts, students are not equipped to read a book on mythology and understand it to an acceptable level (Jefferey 313). Both the way the students dedicate themselves to mythological studies and the way it is taught should be reevaluated. With a more diverse student population than ever, teachers must include myths that represent all kinds of cultures and lifestyles. Previously, mythology education was limited to Greek and Roman myths; however, schools now have access to stories from other cultures that better represent the diverse world (Kendall 29). Even at a collegiate level, teachers are finding that they can influence their classes to look at the world around them and find the mythological influences and the myths being created every day. If teachers can persuade students to learn about this ancient storytelling tradition, students will have the ability to change or affirm their personal myth: the way they perceive themselves and the world (Sartore 35). Schools of every level should emphasize mythology in their curriculum because doing so molds students into socially intellectual and influential people who are equipped for the future.

The Modern Resurgence of Myth

Mythological expert Joseph Campbell is the creator of the concept of the hero's journey. This journey is a list of events that serves as a format that heroes in mythology usually follow. The modern world has practically copied Campbell's outline and produced many successful

franchises. For example, elements of the hero's journey are shown in the *Harry Potter* series: according to honor student Victoria Applewhite, the hero (Harry) lives in the muggle world. Letters sent to his house inviting him to wizarding school were a call to adventure, signifying the beginning of the hero's journey, but because of his aunt and uncle, those letters were never read. This follows the pattern that an initial call to adventure is declined. Harry eventually accepts the call and crosses the threshold from the muggle world to the world of magic with Hagrid. Dumbledore, Potter's wise protector, is introduced at Hogwarts. Within each book and throughout the series of books, Harry and his friends (the helpers) face a series of trials. In a crucial battle, Harry loses his godfather, Sirius. He then seeks revenge for Sirius' death by defeating Voldemort. After laying down his ego and putting his life on the line in the apotheosis moment of the hero's journey, Harry faces Voldemort in the final battle and defeats evil. Harry returns to the muggle world with his newfound knowledge as a master of both worlds (Applewhite 9-50).

Aside from Harry Potter, the *Star Wars* movies, the *Percy Jackson* novels, and the *Lord of the Rings* books and movies were all created by people heavily influenced by the hero's journey, and all these franchises are now household staples. The internet is partly responsible for this rebirth of mythology, as analyses, fan fiction adaptations, and illustrations are at anyone's fingertips. According to author Katarzyna Marciniak, this gravitation to myth is because of its "unique trait... their fixed fundamental structure yet universal flexibility in adapting to individual needs" (434).

Not only are these myths fixed in structure, but they are also fixed in society. Whether they are recognized or not, lots of companies will use mythological characters, places, or items to imply something about their product. For example, Jeff Bezos' multibillion-dollar company Amazon was named after the Amazon River, the longest river in the world, to signify connection between all parts of the US. However, the Amazon River was named after the fierce female

warriors named the Amazons. Pandora, the music company, was named after Pandora and the Pandora's Box story. The creators of Pandora Music were captured by Pandora's curiosity and named their company after her in the hopes that their music collection, deemed the most comprehensive in history, would spark the curiosity of all consumers (Hanna). The issue arises when the intent behind these names is ignored. As consumers, people should note exactly what the companies are trying to convey to their customers because then they will make a purchasing decision that better reflects their needs.

Our Views on the World, Ourselves, and Communication

It is well-known that Greek and Roman mythology were used in ancient times to try to explain the unexplainable-- why is there lightning? Why do the seasons change? People thousands of years ago had only their existing discoveries and their imaginations to research what people now have technology to research. With this, one sees another reason why mythology is imperative: there is first-hand documentation of ancient ideas. Mythology from that time "reflect[s] the social, scientific, and political thought of the ancients" (Donelan 201). When students grasp that myths were not a made-up story for entertainment but were a (supposedly) logical explanation for the mysteries of the universe, they can then gain perspective on how much the world has changed, how different life was in Ancient Greece and Rome, and how modern society has been impacted by this history. Understanding mythology also affects students' views of themselves. Mythology is either about the gods or the heroes (Fan 40). Because humans have always been deeply fascinated by the possibility of a higher being or beings, and because every person views themselves as a hero in some sense, myths are deeply personal. Richard Sartore explains that every student develops a personal mythology as they internalize feelings and create patterns and symbols for themselves. Everything students think is

processed through the lens of the established personal myth, and everything they do and live through is the result of the personal mythology. Though this means that the rejection of myth can lead to a lack of psychological development, it also means that mythology can change one's perception of a rocky upbringing or improve one's self-esteem (Sartore 35-36). If students understand that mythology can alter the course of their lives, they will allow themselves to be influenced by it.

It must also be mentioned that the English language is a descendant of the language used in ancient Rome and Greece. An estimated 56% of the English language derives from words used in Greco-Roman myth (Fan 38). The planet names, the month names, location names (especially in Europe), and plant names all originated from this civilization. In order to understand communication, one must understand where it came from. If students are taught about the mythological influence on the English language, they will better comprehend the meaning of the words they use and therefore be more sophisticated in their understanding of their vocabulary.

Starting Young: Mythology in Elementary School

Elementary school teachers have the difficult but important task of laying a foundation of knowledge in lots of subjects while making them understandable to young children. Because the subject of mythology involves antiquated language and long passages of text, teachers of young students usually steer clear of the topic. However, English teacher and mother Elizabeth Coolidge tested her hypothesis that children could understand mythology and proved that these young minds are more capable than one could predict. Following the advice of her son's teacher, Coolidge held a weekly reading time for him and invited his friends. The intention was to advance her son's reading level and prepare him for second grade (Coolidge 312). The weekly reading time turned into a six-week escapade for all of the neighborhood kids. The book that was read

aloud to them was none other than Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* and *The Wonder Book* (312). These stories were retellings of the Greek myths (Kalpakgian). The children listening were not only excited to hear this tale read to them week after week, but also, they were able to comprehend and understand the storyline. One girl even told Ms. Coolidge that she could not stop thinking about Theseus' rainbow (313). This shows that these young people can understand mythology if it is presented like their other books are. If young kids can view myths as they do fairy tales, they will understand that it has a similar purpose to a fairy tale—to tell a story that combines real and outlandish elements (Tigue 26).

Building off the Base: Middle School Mythology

Middle school is a crucial time in academic development. Traditionally, this is when Greek mythology is introduced, and the basic character names of main myths are mentioned. However, if students have been exposed to mythology in elementary school, middle school teachers can focus on diversifying this baseline of knowledge. A great way to expand students' mythological knowledge while keeping the instruction engaging is by introducing mythology from different cultures. In other subjects, teachers aim to teach material that serves their class demographic.

Mythology should be no different. Because of the rapidly growing technology available to teachers and the new artifacts being discovered daily, schools have access to Shinto mythology representing Asian culture (Kendall 31), Native American mythology that has been passed down in its spoken form (30), and mythology that represents the disabled community (30). These forms of mythology offer diverse exposure to recurring symbols in myth. They also bring up differences from the Roman and Greek mythology, which are important for students to learn so they can recognize the ways that cultures are different. Beyond the learning aspect of mythology, activities that exercise students' mythological knowledge in different ways would be

helpful in a middle school classroom setting. Hands-on instruction examples would be activities like creating different titles for myths based on a summary of the story, creating newspaper articles detailing the events of a myth, or taping mythological heroes and gods to the forehead of each student and giving them hints so they can guess their character (Ricks 111).

Critical Thinking and Mythology: High School

In high school, students come to their English courses with lots of knowledge about mythology and how it varies depending on the culture. What they will not know is *why* it is important and how it is used in literature. This piece of the puzzle is crucial in high school, as writing giants such as Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Emerson are introduced, who all heavily allude to mythology. Because of the necessity of mythology to understand literature and the difficulty associated with analysis, a course on mythology alone would best benefit the students. Most high school teachers will do a study on mythology during a year-long or semester-long English course. While this is undoubtedly helpful, students are missing out on deeply comprehending some of the most repeated stories in history. Learning myths does not just benefit a student's knowledge in English. A greater understanding of mythology will benefit students in their studies in religion by presenting the polytheism of ancient cultures, art by learning about the characters and events that many painters and sculptors were inspired by, and architecture by explaining how the worship of gods demanded special architectural practices. While some may view an isolated mythology course as impractical, it is clear that this course would involve interdisciplinary learning, strengthening the student in all subjects (Miley 527).

Making it Your Own: Mythology in College

A college mythology course is not a requirement for all college students, as they begin crafting their schedules to fit their future careers. However, if they are lucky enough to take a

mythology course, they will have a decade's worth of prior knowledge. To some, this could mean that the course will be too easy, but there is another level of understanding mythology to be had: creating your own spin on mythology. A college professor described his strategies for teaching college mythology. He let his students redefine what a myth is throughout the semester and assigned his students to “create something—a story, poem, musical composition, drawing, dance...” (Porter 434) based on mythology. As the class progressed, the definition of mythology that they had was muddled by a different story or culture. What the students discovered was that mythology is hard to fit in one box; in reality, the requirements for a story to be a myth are not concrete. For this reason, students must learn to look for deciding factors to distinguish between myth and other story forms. The creation activity assisted students in analyzing how myth could be translated into an art form they were familiar with. For example, a student who is passionate about music might ask themselves, “how would this battle sound? What kind of music should be played as the hero crosses the threshold?”. In transferring the feelings from the mythological text to a different form of communication, students are analyzing the emotion behind the myth. These assignments make mythology an evolving, current topic instead of a collection of historical artifacts and nothing more.

What Happens When it Goes Right?

It is important to recognize that mythology impacting students' lives and their society *has* happened; it is not an unrealistic hope. For example, a high school Illinois English teacher, Mr. Zehr, used his passion and knowledge about *Star Wars* to teach his mythology class. Meanwhile, he spent his time outside of teaching creating a *Star Wars* podcast that is beloved by tens of thousands of fans (Borrelli). In a lesson about heroism and different mythological similarities, Mr. Zehr asked his students to look for connections between Greek myth, Egyptian myth, and a

scene from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. While some people are suspicious of his teaching style, Mr. Zehr explained that “‘Star Wars’ ... is our literature, our contemporary mythology...it can tell us how we navigate the world, define ourselves or place obstacles in the way” (Borrelli). Students are also using their background in mythology to impact their surroundings. A theater group from Lake Zurich High School based their “The Foul Mess in Thebes” production off the twelve-hour mythology play “All Our Tragic”. The students said that this production helped them see the real-world applications of myths and why they are important. They closed the production knowing that their audiences and their fellow actors had all learned something (Rockrohr). These examples are just a glimpse of what mythology can do for people. If teachers and students invest their time into mythology, the reward will be multifaceted, as they will grow psychologically in their perception of the world, intellectually in all subjects, and relationally in their understanding of other people’s actions.

Conclusion

Mythology is all around us. When one examines the world, one can see the effects of myths from all cultures. Though people are constantly surrounded by myths, they are not constantly impacted by them. The education system can fix this ignorance by being intentional about why, when, and how mythology is taught. The benefits that the population will get from being exposed to myths earlier, being introduced to culturally diverse mythology, and being urged to apply their knowledge to other subjects will be transformative. People will be savvier about the movies they watch, the books they read, and the brands they purchase from. They will be more aware of how their personal myth has affected their perspective and will be knowledgeable about how that myth can be changed or expanded upon. Students will understand the words they speak and their origin. Society will see the history of mythology and why it was created. People will make connections between myths and their areas of interest, whatever they might be. Mythology is far too interesting

and important to be compacted into one play, one book, one course, or one school level. Studying mythology means studying the most intimate parts of the human mind and soul.

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