

5-1-2002

The Relativity of Ancient Myth

Cassandra Palo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces>

Recommended Citation

Palo, Cassandra (2002) "The Relativity of Ancient Myth," *Forces*: Vol. 2002 , Article 49.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2002/iss1/49>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Collin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Forces by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Collin. For more information, please contact mtomlin@collin.edu.

THE RELATIVITY OF ANCIENT MYTH

Cassandra Palo

Human beings are creatures of societies that create cultures so that people can function while thinking. Ironically, many of humanities' greatest thinkers were people who lived individual lifestyles – non-conformists. Symbols, such as language and numbers, have been used to pass culture through generations. With the evolution of man and thought has come an evolution of culture. Thus, people living in the twenty first century have inherited culture so complex and refined that it is impossible to say exactly where a culture's origins lie. However, by analyzing historical civilizations, one can find similarities to his or her own (Macionis 36-38).

The ancient civilization known today as classical Greece is famous for its contributions to modern society. Scholars throughout history have pondered over the complexities of Greek society during such an industrially primitive time of

history. The works of Homer were of great importance to classical Greece and are thus just as important to modern culture. In saying this, however, one creates questions that have no answers because no one can say who Homer was, where he

lived, exactly when he lived, and what his exact intent was when creating his epics. One can only speculate, then, as to why it is important for people to have passed the stories of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for hundreds of centuries. It takes an incredible amount of cultural significance for a work of literature to pass the test of time; which leads one to the ultimate question: How does Homer's *Odyssey* relate to life in present times? The answer lies in creative interpretation – to seek out the ultimate pattern. If a philosophical theory was a painting, one must first create his canvas; in this case, one must know about the speculated origins of myth, Greek culture, and the importance of the epic poem to know the true beauty of the *Odyssey* – to interpret an ancient work into something relative to modern life.

Over time, many have heard the stories called Greek mythology. Yet, no one can say exactly why these stories originated, nor can anyone say, for certain, when they originated. The religion practiced by the ancient Greeks is no longer practiced, but holds such strong significance in modern culture that the colorful stories are still a large part of literature (Bullfinch 7). Many have speculated as to where the origins of mythology lie. Some respected philosophers thought, as

One can only speculate, then, as to why it is important for people to have passed the stories of Iliad and Odyssey for hundreds of centuries.

recently as a century ago, that the pagan myths were derived from the Bible (Bullfinch 276). This theory, however, ended with the discovery of carbon dating! Thomas Bullfinch, a learned member of Boston's elite at the turn of the nineteenth century, gives three more theories as to the origins of myth:

The Historical Theory

according to which all persons mentioned in mythology were once real human beings, and the legends and fabulous traditions relating to them are merely the additions and embellishments of later times. [. . .]

The Allegorical Theory

supposes that all the myths of the ancients were allegorical and symbolical, and contained some moral, religious, or philosophical truth of historical fact, under the form of an allegory. [. . .]

The Physical Theory

according to which the elements of air, fire, and water were originally the objects of religious adoration, and the principal deities were personifications of the powers of nature. (267-277)

It is important to keep in mind that no myth was written down until it was too late to find out the author's intent! Therefore, the anonymity of ancient myth leaves the modern intellectual a plethora of room in which to cogitate. The only known fact about ancient myth is that it has played a part in shaping the curriculum of every learned individual throughout western history. The greatest classical writers held in the highest literary esteem have alluded to mythology: Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Keats, Tennyson, etc. (Bullfinch). Mythology was an important part of Greek life, a cultural transmission of great importance to all of humanity.

Homer's *Odyssey* is the most important Greek cultural transmission, giving insight as to what the human condition of ancient times was. Thomas Blackwell, a Scottish linguist and thinker, studied Homer thoroughly and explains the difference between the ancient culture and that of his own by examining the ingredients of each culture's poetry. He contends that Homeric

poetry was judged by the use of “Encounters, Escapes, Rescues, and every other thing that can inflame the human Passions” (*qtd. in Grobman 188*). Homer’s mythology was regarded as absolute truth in ancient times, such as the Bible is believed to be in modern times. In Homer’s era, a bard was a well-respected member of society, much like the modern minister. A bard was well traveled, knowledgeable of his subject, and represented his people with objectivity. A translation of Homer’s language is much like the translation of Homer’s culture in that it has been refined and embellished over time (*Grobman 190-195*). The importance of Homer’s epic poems lies in the fact that they are stories still relative to modern times. As one literary critic writes, “The story of Odysseus traces, on an individual level, the same trajectory that ...[is] found in Western Civilization itself: the attempt to break free from mythology falls back

into mythology” (*Schmidt 833*). This leads one to a modern theory of how the story of the Odyssey relates to modern life, especially life in the United States.

With much consideration to coincidence, it is my theory that Homer’s Odyssey is a formula for life. The reasons why are that the cultural issues of Odysseus’ society are still relative at the present time. On an individual level, the Odyssey could be viewed as a standard formula of how to succeed in this world. As much as many people in the free world want to think the world they live in is more evolved, it really hasn’t changed much in the last few thousand years. Technology and industry have made the earth look different; disease has plagued many cultures, but underneath it all, the human condition is much the same as it always has been, and Odysseus’ lessons learned should be lessons to all people—even today. An interesting penetration

into the Odyssey is that it is much like a very complex mathematical equation in that it can be broken down and factored – especially by use of symbolism.

Along this line of thought is derived the following parallel to the Odyssey:

As the Trojan War (WWII) ends with the story of the Trojan Horse (nuclear bomb), Odysseus and his crew journey to return home. One of their first stops is the island of Kyklops (start of Cold War). Odysseus finds himself feeling trapped (McCarthyism) by the threatening giant, Polyphemus, and uses trickery to get him out of a tough situation. Odysseus blinds the giant, but doesn’t kill him. For this, the giant’s father Posiedon (Communist allies) sends Odysseus and his crew on a journey (conflicts America got into because of its stance on Communism) everywhere but home – to Penelope. (After WWII, women never returned home from the work place*, greed spread like a wildfire through America’s pockets, and our government leaders made more corrupt decisions than ever).

The next stop for Odysseus and crew is the island of cannibals (guerilla warfare, civil war world wide). Then, they go the island of Aiola, where Odysseus receives the gift of good wind (modern leaders who tried to bring about social renaissance), but temptation causes his crew to open it and keep them from returning home (assassinations of J.F.K.

**This is not in itself a bad thing, but no supervision in neighborhoods has caused a rise in delinquency and has created an atmosphere where some people are too busy to be neighborly or hospitable.*

Formulas for Characters:

Odysseus = America; (Government + Civilians) / (human flaw x industrialization)

Zeus = (Democracy + Capitalism) / Politics

Athena = (the Constitution, our rights and liberties) / Globalization

Penelope = America’s social conscience (moral+ values+ health)

Telemakus – America’s global perspective (foreign policy) - humility

Kyklops = Communism

Polyphemus = U.S.S.R.

and Martin Luther King Jr.). This causes a chaotic loss of hope in Odysseus and he begins to separate himself from much of his crew. The next stop is the island of Kirke. The first crew members to discover Kirke's lair are turned into swine (Bay of Pigs). Odysseus tricks Kirke into trusting him, so that he can use her to get his men back, as well as satisfy his desires with her sexual talents (power abuse in government). He goes back to camp and tells his men that it would be prosperous for them to go back and use Kirke's luxurious resources (Vietnam). At this, one of Odysseus' men retorts:

*'Where now, poor remnants? Is it devil's work you
long for? Will you go to Kirke's hall?
Swine, wolves, and lions she will make us all,
Beats of her courtyard, bound by her enchantment.
Remember those the Kyklops held, remember
shipmates who made that last visit with Odysseus!
The daring man! They died for his foolishness!
(10.466-72)*

(The preceding represents draft dodgers, war protests, and the loss of patriotism that resulted from our occupation of South Vietnam.) So, Odysseus and crew stay on the island of Kirke for a long time, only to accomplish nothing.

When Athena and Zeus decide they should send Odysseus on his way, the next stop for them is the underworld—for Odysseus must see the soothsayer Tiresius. The experience in the underworld is like a rebirthing experience for Odysseus—it is a chaotic time of enlightenment (the sexual revolution, feminist movement, political changes, civil rights movement, and a reinvented sense of culture). Odysseus also has to make a decision about which route he will choose to get home—Skylia or Kharybdis (Gov't either drops all morals, or keeps a few/ Nixon era...government shows how corrupt it's gotten). After the underworld, Odysseus' ships must pass the island

of the Sirens (mass media): sea nymphs who lure sailors to their deaths by the power of singing sweet songs. (The rise of mass media has caused as many problems as it has convenience: lack of parenting, mass morals/ values, opinionated media, filtered information, manipulated truths, violence, laziness, etc.) Odysseus ends up on the island of Kalypso—and I'm not sure he's left yet! Meanwhile, at home, the same men Odysseus helped in war are at his home, enjoying his food and wine, terrorizing his wife, and turning his slave girls into playmates. Some of the suitors are even from his homeland (deviance at home and abroad). When the suitors really start to threaten

WORKS CITED

- Bullfinch, Thomas. *Bullfinch's Mythology*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Grobman, Neil R. "Thomas Blackwell's Commentary on Oral Epic." *Western Folklore* 38(3) 1979: 186-198.
- Homer. "The Odyssey" Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. 6th ed. Vol. 1. Ed. Magnard Mack et al. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1992. 208-525.
- Macdonis, John J. *Society: The Basics*. 6th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Schmidt, James. "Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialect of Enlightenment." *Social Research* 65(4) 1998: 807-838.

As much as many people in the free world want to think the world they live in is more evolved, it really hasn't changed much in the last few thousand years.

Telemakus' home, two eagles fly through the sky and rip the head off of a third unsuspecting bird (terrorist acts). Telemakus then journeys off to find his father.

My story ends here because I am not so sure America has united with its social conscience. While Odysseus is on the island of Kalypso, he mourns every day for Penelope, yet sleeps with Kalypso every night—like the way America has dealt with many humanitarian and/or social issues. There could be a countless number of ways, that by thinking sociologically, one can find parallels between Homer's *Odyssey* and life throughout

history. Odysseus was a hero with great will and strength, as well as an asset to his culture. Current events tell us that in spite of America's flawed history and character, it still, like Odysseus, has a larger than life impact on the rest of the world. Homer's imprint on society is present in every life of every civilized culture.

Quiet Walk

Robert Sturm

Scene in the corner
Cut from eye
What is the view
I stand steadily by

Darkness emerges
I catch a glimpse
There is nothing to see
Says my mind to me

Something running
A stone, a dagger
Not alone
I stumble; I stagger

Blood in my hand
To floor I crash
The pain, the pain
Then I find the gash

Tear from my eye
Running amuck
Blinded by fear
Someone calls me queer

I begin to rise
As I feel their despise
A sudden thump
And a blow to the head
Killed by bigotry
I lay there dead