

## **The Resonance of Greek Mythical Archetypes in Literature: An In-depth Analysis from Classical to Modern texts**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research article is to show a comparative study between two distinct literary works, belonging to two distinct periods of time, implying how throughout ages we can see the evolution of archetypes inspired by Greek myths. This way, the paper discloses the variations we can find in the reference and the use of Greek archetypes by writers and authors all around the globe. Also to prove that themes and characters, and certain Greek Mythical archetypes do not necessarily have universal elements. To support such an argument we will apply available literary theories and criticisms. It is also a reflection upon the psychological perversion of archetypes from classical to contemporary writings showing marginal shift in its narrative. For ages, the world has witnessed various revolution and evolution in terms of its search for identity, meaning of life and purpose. Greek archetypes are the universal representation of universal symbols or patterns often found in story-telling, or even human experiences, emotions and conflicts that have a universal appeal that which is considered foundational for character development. By studying the various historical responses through the texts like “Midsummer Night’s Dream” or “The Circe”, “Ithaca”, “An Ode to a Grecian Urn” we will find the understanding of the readers of the time, and understand the critics view on Greek mythical archetypes and it’s understanding compared to a world decades ago to the world now. The purpose of this paper is also to prove that there is no singular or restrictive or limited interpretation of various Greek archetypes. This paper will also highlight the importance of the study of classical myths to understand various texts of literary value. In the end, the paper will conclude by proving how Greek mythical archetypes have seen a drastic change in its approach, purpose and meaning to a certain extent. From certain Age to a different Age, the vast difference in its implication and perception can be felt and seen that proves the loop in the universality of the archetypes.

**Keywords:** Greek myths, archetypes, comparative, identity, universality, psychological perversion.

## Introduction

Greek mythology has been captivating and inspiring writers from all ages, its influence can be felt in all the major writing cultures of the world, starting from the renaissance when Shakespeare began including the abundance of references from Greek myths, from Homer to John Milton, to John Keats and Thomas Hardy. Mythology stands out differently from the rest of the available genre of literature as it consists of universal themes and fundamental human experiences usually revolving around the themes of love, sacrifice, betrayal, war, creation, epic oral tales, and the struggle between the good and the evil. These themes continue to thrive and find its relevance even in influencing contemporary literature and famous works by Madeline Miller, Natalie Haynes, etc. The influence of Greek myth can be traced back to John Milton when he evokes the 'Heav'nly Muse' in his famous work Paradise Lost book 1.

## Greek Mythical Archetypes through the lens of New Historicism

Mythology in its definition can be understood as culturally deep-rooted and historically specific work of literature, in the sense that the Greek myths stand unique and separate from that of the western or the Asian. However, their structure remains the same as it revolves around familiar themes and ideas subjective to human understanding and experience.

Greek mythology serve as a major literary and artistic inspiration to countless works of literature, art, and music. Its influence can be traced in contemporary write-ups, as a method of re-telling, refreshing and familiarizing readers to the presence of myths, which were very much rooted in our culture and society, in a way it is the reflection of the Greek society from the time it took the concrete form and shape.

Greek myth has found an integral role in language, through expressions and phrases usually referred to or incorporated to enhance our language. Phrases such as "Herculean task," "Pandora's box" and "Achilles' Heel" are examples for such expressions. These resonate with the archetypal characters and themes that was initially introduced from the Greek mythology as it revolves around certain themes, characters, and plots that which are considered to carry universal and timeless themes and symbols. Moreover, the study of Greek mythology will expand the grasping ability of its readers, engaging with complex narratives and cultural traditions.

To provide concrete understanding of archetypes and their universality, we can look into the works of Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist who proposed the theory of archetypes to provide a way to interpret the influence of common myths and symbols on the human mind at both the subconscious and conscious levels. Carl Jung proposed the idea that, by understanding the universal symbols and patterns present in the collective unconscious of all humans, it would enable us to understand

the human psyche and therefore better understand ourselves and others.

Like the way Pandora's curiosity led to the opening of the box, ending earthly paradise, it in a way reflects the human curiosity that can lead to the downfall in some cases, while in some it doesn't but the consequences of disobedience and following one's own heart carries the story ahead. To continue with the example set by Pandora, the consequences that which she faced did lead her through a process of critical understanding of the world, curiosity is good as long as there is learning, however leaving one's curiosity unchecked, along with disobedience can get one into trouble. That in very much is rooted in our individual experiences.

This understanding of archetypal universality prevailed for a period of time, sooner or later it became rigid, leaving limited space for further understanding the intricacies of human psyche. The various factors in our lives have critically changed, especially the factors that influence and shape our thoughts, ideas, understandings of this world. Therefore, to call the archetypes characterized by the universality of its nature is subject to question, providing much scope for further studies to understand and define the nature of mankind. It's not concrete, neither is it ambiguous to definition.

Likewise, it is understood that an element of a story that reappears again and again in stories from cultures around the world, tend to symbolically stand for something universal in the human experience. In the works of Shakespeare, for instance in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" the framing device for the main story in itself takes reference to a particular Greek myth, the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Theseus was a Greek hero from Athens while Hippolyta was the daughter of Ares the war god. This particular drama reflects the direct reference and influence from the Greek mythical archetypal figures. It carries the message of marriage, the ideal, mature love, contrasting between the love that others within the play represented.

However, if we look into the influence and reference of Greek mythical archetypes from the contemporary works of literature we find a difference in their narrative approach, their central themes, the ideas employed and the plot change. Marriage in our world is understood from a certainly different angle. It is something very fragile and vulnerable to infatuated unsuccessful love stories.

Post structuralism approach elucidates the changing nature of these Greek mythical archetypes, while challenging Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" and the archetypes often encoded in myths which to him is universal and therefore intricately entwined with the understanding of the human mind and psyche. To elucidate upon the nature of Greek archetypes changing drastically over the ages, we have to study a classical text in comparison to contemporary texts. We compare and analyze the archetypal reference between "The Odyssey" by Homer and "The Penelopiad" by Margaret Atwood. Both these texts have the narratives telling the story of Odysseus' ten-year journey home after the Trojan War.

In the same way, the works of Natalie Haynes or Madeline Miller to name a few out of the many contemporary writers usually write from the feminist point of view, they are female narratives, providing a different perspective into the study and understanding of women's role from the Greek mythology.

In an open journal of Medical Psychology, Domina Petric in her review article "Psychological Archetypes" suggests that several of the famous archetypal characters taken from myths, art, and culture, represent the powerful source of artistic and scientific inspiration originating from collective unconscious. Thereby supporting the critical objection to the "collective unconscious" as suggested by Carl Jung. She suggests that the "collective unconscious" includes those elements that have never been experienced individually, but have come down from our ancestors.

Archetypes are those elements that are highly developed." She states the example of Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, daughters of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto. Medusa among her siblings who were monsters since birth, was the only mortal with a beautiful appearance and astonishing hair. She chose to devote herself to the servitude of goddess Athena in her temple.

Many have interpreted her appearance, giving her physical traits to dramatize her appearance and add an element of mischief. Domina Petric suggests that Medusa can be understood as a psychological archetype of a young and beautiful woman targeted and therefore, abused by a powerful man. Poseidon in this myth is represented as a lustful and manipulative god who abuses his powers to take advantage of a seemingly helpless virgin immortal serving her goddess.

Goddess Athena on the other hand portrays her envious and furious side to Medusa who severely victimizes Medusa and accuses her of something she was never responsible for. Medusa's new hideous appearance can be seen as a consequence of both sexual abuse and envious rage of Athena. The story of Medusa filled with rage, apathy, negligence, power domination and envy represents the post-traumatic embitterment disorder (PTED), which is defined as a pathological reaction to drastic life events that has no tendency to stop. This entire climax of her life brings her to her downfall, ultimately leaving her distasteful and abandoned.

Here we try to understand how history and context shapes and influences the source knowledge, the authors' inspiration and perspectives, their purpose of writing, their driving motivations, it all changes with time and context. As we move into the next chapter that captures the Renaissance and the Enlightenment Age, we witness yet again a change in the derivation of meaning of myths by the writers.

The Odes written by John Keats after the 1819 publication of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" reveals his deep intention which was inspired by the Greeks. According to Eva G. Linyuchkina and Elena A. Venidiktova- "John Keats' poetry introduced in English Romanticism an element of Hellenism,

new for that time, and also a cult of beauty and harmonious life pleasure.” They together published a study titled, “Culture of Ancient Greece in the Perception of John Keats”. This particular study further reflects on his first acquaintance with the culture of Ancient Greece occurred in March, 1817. Although Keats never visited Greece in person, he witnessed the grandness of the Greek heritage through the collection that was picked by count Elgin which contained a set of Ancient Greek samples of sculpture, generally from the Athenian Parthenon. Benjamin Robert Haydon, an English artist, examined the purchase of Elgin’s collection by the English government and recognized its huge art value. This indirectly gave John Keats a personal encounter to witness the grandness of the Greek heritage. Keats has also written two sonnets under the impression of acquaintance with the collection: “On seeing the Elgin Marbles” and “To Haydon.” As a sign of gratitude, Keats sends them to Haydon. In return, Haydon writes letters to Keats where he enthusiastically responds about the sonnets, which were still kept safe.

Centuries and ages later, another major author like Percy Bysshe Shelley in his retelling of the story of Prometheus showcases the difference in perspective between the writers with prominent centuries gap. From the lens of Aeschylus, we see a stark difference between his and Shelley’s apprehension of Prometheus. Aeschylus represents Prometheus as a tragic hero, who endures immense suffering with a sense of pride and defiance. He is flawed and trapped by his actions, but he evokes sympathy due to his noble intentions and unwavering spirit.

While on the other hand, Shelley desires to present Prometheus in a more of a romantic rebel form, he embodies the ideal of revolution and stands against all forms of oppression, including that of Jupiter. The focus in both of these major writers’ works is in the presentation and the acquisition of the character of Prometheus, where the motivation is driven based on the context that they both belonged to. While Aeschylus belonged to the golden age of Athenian democracy, his “Prometheus Bound” reflects concern about justice, political power, and the relationship between humans and gods in ancient Greece.

Shelley on the other hand wrote during the Romantic period, his Prometheus embodies the Romantic ideals of individual freedom, rebellion against the societal constraints, and the transforming power of imagination. Therefore, while Aeschylus represents a more complex and ambiguous portrayal, leaving the audience to grapple with the complexities of justice, power and consequences of transgression, Shelley’s play delivers a clear-cut message of hope and liberation, reflecting the Romantic spirit and its emphasis on individual freedom and the human potential to overcome injustice.

“The roots of Romantic Hellenism are distinct from the revaluation of classical tradition associated with the Renaissance. The redistribution of cultural forces can be traced back in part to English and French traveler in Greece and in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries who provided a new impetus towards an un-graphical and social specificity”(Yujie Su 2). By the early

nineteenth century, Greek mythology had found its permanent place in literature, influencing and shaping the ideas and imaginations of major writers, prompting them with ideas on intricate human psyche and relationships, the interplay of emotions, the game of themes and universal plot structures, the archetypes were finally taking proper shape in this age as we find traces of Greek myths in the texts written in that time period.

It might not necessarily be the exact age when writers were introduced to ancient Greek mythology, this age simply made Greece no longer an unfamiliar or remote knowledge to the world. “Keats believed that the Greeks had invented the ‘poetry of gladness’ and identified in them ‘the religion of the Beautiful and the Religion of Joy’”(Yujie Su 4). The evidence found in Ode to a Grecian urn, likewise in the other major works of John Keats, like his first ever poem “Endymion” stands as proof for the profound influence of Greek mythology.

### **Conclusion**

New Historicism as an approach provides a foundational base to understand and grasp the importance of history and context, and how it allows further shaping of the human imagination. Each generation and Age their own significantly unique perception of Greek mythology, that in turn leads to the ever-possible change in the universality of the archetypes. As we continue to delve into the study of various retellings of Greek myths, we find that there has been major changes in each Age. And by the time we reach the contemporary modern writers, we see a massive shift in the processing of these myths. That might lead to our question as to are archetypes really a dependable source of structuring or forming our characters? Are these archetypes really redefined and therefore changing their course of influence? Is the new perspective simply a further analysis and scoping of the Greek myths, showing us the possible presence of even more archetypes that weren't explained or understood before?

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