

Greek Mythology in English Literature

Harry Potter's Greek Connection

A Study of the Influence of Greek Mythology in J K Rowling's
Harry Potter Series of Books

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Ancient Greeks were people of exceptional wisdom and foresight so much so that thousands of years later too, in an age of computers, mobile phones and space travel we can see the impact of their mythology on various phenomena from daily life. Their influence on fiction and creative writing seems to be endless. J K Rowling's popular Harry Potter series of books draws immensely from ancient Greek mythology in characterisation, plot, theme, animals or imaginary creatures and various other aspects. This paper strives to trace as many parallels as possible in an attempt to decode the success value and appeal ancient Greek mythology holds for the present day reader.

Myth and Mythology

To begin with one needs to discuss what is myth and mythology. In classical Greek, 'mythos' signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance however, a myth is one story in a mythology - a system of stories of ancient origin which aimed to determine why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals - set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies but anthropologists disagree whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals. A number of modern writers have also asserted that an integrative mythology, whether inherited or invented, is essential to literature. James Joyce in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, T S Eliot in *The Wasteland*, Eugene O' Neill in *Mourning becomes Electra*, and many other writers have deliberately woven their modern materials on the pattern of ancient myths.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, 'myth' became a prominent term in literary analysis. A large group of writers, the myth critics - including Robert Graves, Francis Fergusson, Maud Bodkin, Richard Chase and (the most influential) Northrop Frye - viewed the genres and individual plot-patterns of many works of literature, including what on surface are highly sophisticated and realistic works, as recurrences of basic mythic formulas. As Northrop Frye put it, "the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature." According to Frye's theory there are four main narrative genres—comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony (satire) - and these are

‘displaced’ modes of the four forms of myth that are associated with the seasonal cycle of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

This forms the theoretical base of the discussion this paper purports to advance. Mythology, in itself, was a form of literature in ancient civilizations. However, the ideas in mythology proved to be a lot more enigmatic than a typical storybook. The ideas and elements that were created by mythology have exerted a strong influence over much of our modern day literature. In similar ways, mythology continues to affect modern literature with its view of heroism, like in the tales of Hercules and Perseus.

Mythology and Literature

Myths sprung up before religion. Every religion’s stories are retellings of universal mythic themes. The Creation of the World, the first Man and Woman, Heaven and Earth, a great flood, stories of heroes and heroines and dragons and serpents. A culture’s mythos is the storied foundation of the culture. Ancient Greek mythology forms the foundation of literature across the world. Aren’t we still fascinated by the truths of these mythic stories and by ancient peoples’ need for magic in their untamed world? And don’t we still cry out for magic in our (apparently) rational world? Don’t we seem to crave mystery more and more to counter our apparent understanding and mastery of the world? Are we meant to be totally rational, are we meant to be machines?

A culture’s mythology is a powerful tool for psychology, casting light on the culture’s *shared unconscious*. There is no better way to understand a culture deeply than to know and appreciate its mythos, its stories, its dreams. Indeed, many of the symbols in our dreams are universal (Jung’s archetypes), or at least culture-wide, symbols whose meaning is invested in the mythic stories that they inhabit. And there are those who believe that these symbols and these stories are encoded in the very cells of our species’ DNA.

The cultural historian Jacques Barzun has said: ‘What links myth with literature is ... the imagination.’ In northern Europe, the effect of Greek mythology was quite obvious on literature. Both Latin and Greek classical texts were translated, so that stories of mythology became available. In England, Chaucer, the Elizabethans and John Milton were among those influenced by Greek myths; nearly all the major English poets from Shakespeare to Robert Bridges turned for inspiration to Greek mythology. Jean Racine in France and Goethe in Germany revived Greek drama. Racine reworked the ancient myths — including those of *Phaidra*, *Andromache*, *Oedipus* and *Iphigeneia* — to new purpose.

The Harry Potter series of books revolves largely around a world that is exclusively mythical. Although it is not in itself an ancient myth, it embodies the many qualities of myths, with creatures borrowed from the mythical world such as griffins, and characters like wizards with arcane magic, similar to the heroes from the courts of King Arthur. Harry Potter may

not be directly advocating the various mythologies it derives its ideas from, but it provides to the reader the rich vast mythical world that is largely similar to that of its origins. However, in ways perhaps less enigmatic than in that of Tolkien, many authors, such as the famous William Shakespeare, also adopted the creatures of mythology. In his play “A Midsummer’s Night Dream”, many creatures such as nymphs make their appearance in a dreamy and mythical setting. These nymphs originate largely from Greek mythology, and its use by Shakespeare ensures that it continues to be propagated through other mediums of literature, continuing to exert its influence around the world through the changing times.

Intrinsic concepts

Many of us are familiar with concepts such as luck and fate. These have been accepted in society today, but what many people fail to see is how these concepts are derived from mythology. For sure, mythology did not construct these ideas, but it did give them physical embodiments.

The actual word ‘Fate’ in the English language is derived from the Greek goddesses, the fates. They were Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Clotho spun the thread of life, whilst Lachesis took the thread and assigned it destiny and luck, and Atropos would cut the threads at any time. The Fates were powerful goddesses, feared even by Zeus himself. The ancient Greeks used to pray to these goddesses especially at weddings, for a bright future. Other Greek creatures include the Hours, which is the divine embodiment of time. There was also Justice, who provided justice and fairness all around. There was Death, who took the life of people. There were Sleep and Dreams, goddesses that graced the night world. Ideas such as love are also cherished very much in mythology. The most famous character would be from Roman mythology, that of Cupid, the winged boy who shot arrows of love. The Greek equivalent of Cupid was Eros, who performed similar tasks. The inheritance of these concepts from mythology has led us, more often than not, to talk not of hoping to be lucky, but rather, to be praying for Luck, to be in Love, rather than be loving each other; to be afraid of Death, rather than be afraid of dying.

Harry Potter’s Greek connection

The prophecy

Apart from the obvious parallels in nomenclature, themes, characters and creatures from the Harry Potter series of books, which draw inspiration from Greek Mythology, there’s an intrinsic truth which manifests itself through the seven Harry Potter books put together and that is the fact that the Harry Potter stories are not fatalistic as they may superficially seem. The story primarily begins with a prophecy where the antagonist Lord Voldemort believes in the prophecy that the son of Lily and James Potter born on July 31 would kill him. The

actual prophecy states: “Neither can live while the other survives.” Now the most interesting fact is that this whole story which goes on in seven books revolves around the important fact that both Harry the protagonist and Lord Voldemort, the antagonist believe in this prophecy and therefore unknowingly facilitate it to come true.

Had they not believed in it, it would probably not have come true. Lord Voldemort’s killing Harry’s parents was also a result of his firm belief in this prophecy: had he not believed in it in the first place he would perhaps have not killed Harry’s parents and thereby there would have been no need for Harry to take revenge. The story highlights the massive impact of myth and how a crafty and talented writer can use it as an intrinsic truth to weave a tale seven books long, and one which sells over one hundred thousand copies, making her a millionaire in less than a decade!

Mythical origin

The English word “prophecy” (noun) in the sense of “function of a prophet” appeared in Europe from about 1225 from Old French *profecie* (12th century), and from Late Latin *Prophetia*, Greek *prophetia*, “gift of interpreting the will of the gods”, from Greek *prophetes*. The related meaning “thing spoken or written by a prophet” is from c. 1300, while the verb “to prophesy” is recorded by 1377. The word prophecy comes from the Greek verb *prophemi* which means “to say beforehand, foretell.”

Characterisation

Harry: Many characters from Greek mythology have personality traits like Harry’s. In one way one can compare Harry to Achilles, the bravest of the Greek warriors. Harry’s mother made him invincible by her love like Achilles was made invincible by his mother when she plunged him into the river Styx. Harry Potter has a lot of hero stereotypes and because of that you can compare him to almost any hero of Greek mythologies.

Hermione: Hermione, in Greek mythology, was the daughter of Helen of Troy (the face that launched a 1000 ships) and Menelaus, king of Sparta. Although she was betrothed to Orestes, king of Mycenae, after the Trojan War Hermione married Neoptolemus, the son of the Greek hero Achilles. Orestes later killed Neoptolemus and became Hermione’s second husband. Although this may seem far-fetched, maybe Hermione Granger has two men fighting over her Viktor Krum and Ron Weasley. Though there are no killings happening over Hermione in Harry Potter books, the existence of two contenders for her is good enough to draw the parallels.

Minerva McGonagall: There is a Roman goddess named Minerva and her Greek counterpart Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. Both were both fierce goddesses

of battle but also brought important knowledge to men. That fits Minerva McGonagall in our story. She is also the one that brings knowledge to the students (transfiguration is often described as the toughest of all subjects) but can also be fierce and merciless in punishing them if they do wrong.

Hogwarts: Hogwarts has similarities to the Greek mountain Olympus where the gods and goddesses lived. It was a high mountain that could not be reached by the human world. Hogwarts also cannot be reached by humans and is inhabited by the wizards who are also not human like the gods.

Hagrid: The Titans in Greek mythology are creatures of enormous size and strength and are older than the gods (Zeus the first god was a son of the Titans and defeated them in a battle and locked them away under the earth). It is said that the Titans spread chaos and destruction all over the world. They were very close to nature and drew power from it (Zeus could only defeat his father Chronos after he lifted him off the ground. After that Chronos wasn't invincible anymore). The Titans weren't that bright. Hagrid has some similarities with those creatures in his character. He is also of enormous size and strength and is very close to nature ... and not too clever sometimes.

Fluffy: The dog Cerberus in Greek mythology had fifty heads and was guarding the entrance of Hades, the underworld. In book one, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Fluffy is guarding the trapdoor and also has several heads. Like Cerberus he is a monstrous and voracious watchdog. There is also the story of Orpheus who tried to rescue his wife from the underworld after she got killed by a snake. He was a great singer and lured Cerberus into sleep with a lullaby played on his harp. This way he could sneak past the giant dog just like Harry does in the final showdown. I think Rowling took her ideas of the appearance of Fluffy from this part of Greek mythology.

Luna Lovegood: Luna is one of the new, yet important characters. She was introduced in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Her name 'Luna' means 'the Moon'. And it is also the Latin name for the Greek goddess Selene, who was basically the Moon. Just as the Moon gives light in darkness, Luna also shines in the later books when darkness i.e. evil prevails.

Cassandra Trelawney: She was Sibyl Trelawney's ancestor. J K Rowling has chosen these names with great care. Cassandra, in Greek mythology, was the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. The god Apollo, who loved Cassandra, granted her the gift of prophecy, but when she refused to return his love, Apollo made the gift useless by decreeing that no one would believe her predictions. Sibyl, in Greek mythology, was any

woman inspired with prophetic power by the god Apollo. The sibyls prophesied in a frenzied trance. Whenever Sibyl Trelavney makes a true prophecy she goes into a weird trance.

Severus Snape: This character is similar to Perseus Evans from Greek mythology. Perseus was a famous Greek who killed the Gorgon Medusa. Medusa was a Gorgon who had snakes for hair and anyone who looked into her eyes turned to stone. In *Harry Potter and Chamber of Secrets* there's a giant snake, which can kill people when they look at its eyes and can petrify ('turn to stone') people when they see it through a reflection. Medusa could be the inspiration for Basilisk. Incidentally Perseus was the great-grandfather of Heracles or Hercules. Perseus's granddaughter was Alcmena, the mother of Heracles. One can think of Harry as an equal to Heracles. Heracles was the savior of the Immortals, as Harry is the savior of the wizarding world. However, Snape is not all that old to be Harry's great-grandfather; he was as old as his parents, nor is he his half-brother or anything of the sort. But this leads one to think that perhaps Snape had something to do with Lily and Harry closely, which is quite true.

Magical creatures from Harry Potter series and their mythological connection

Sphinx: Many people think that the Sphinx comes from Egypt. That's true, but the Sphinx, in Greek mythology, is a monster with the head and middle upper body of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird. Her name means "throttlr". This is just a reference to the many influences of Greek mythology in the books. The animal was a symbol of strength, power and nobility. It was also believed that sphinxes guarded treasure, and that's just what they do in Harry Potter books, standing watch over Gringotts Wizarding Bank.

Werewolves: Werewolves run amok in Harry Potter books, and the series depicts good and evil werewolves, most of whom turn up in folktales. One of the first references comes from Greek mythology, when King Lycaeon served a platter of raw human meat to the king of the gods, Zeus. Infuriated, Zeus turned Lycaeon into a wolf.

Griffins: Griffin mythology also originated in Greece. The fearsome creature had the front legs, wings and head of a giant eagle and the body' and hind legs of a lion, and served as Zeus' watchdog. The Greeks believed that griffins originated in Asia and India, where they found gold in the high mountaintops and built nests atop the treasure. In medieval times, images of griffins decorated valuable objects that needed to be guarded, such as jewelry boxes and caskets; the creatures play a similar role in Harry Potter's world.

Unicorns: In Harry Potter's world, the unicorn is a magical horse whose single horn is used in potions and whose blood can revive someone who is "an inch from death." Ancient Greek scholars also believed that a crushed unicorn horn could cure many illnesses, although the unicorns they imagined were not just stark white, but also red and black. The myth of the

unicorn resurfaced in European medieval tales, stating that drinking from the horn would protect one from poison.

Chimera: Another creature from Greek mythology, the chimera, was described in “The Iliad” as “a thing of immortal make, not human, lion-fronted and snake behind, a goat in the middle and snorting out the breath of the terrible flame of bright fire. The Greeks believed that this nasty beast spawned from an active, destructive volcano in Lycia, Asia A-Minor. The chimera is depicted as a monster who terrorized the Lycian countryside until she was killed by iron arrows shot by the Greek hero Bellerophon.

Centaurs: Living in the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, centaurs have the four-legged body of a horse but the upper body and head of a human. Centaurs are prominent in Grecian art and have also been depicted on ancient sculptured stones found in Scotland. There is a theory that the centaur stems from confused onlookers seeing men riding horses for the first time.

Phoenix: As Albus Dumbledore’s magical defender, Fawkes the phoenix looks very similar to earlier portrayals of the everlasting bird. Legend says that the scarlet-, amber- and gold-feathered phoenix can live for 1,000 years, at which point it bursts into flame and is reborn from the ashes. The phoenix represents the immortality of the soul and is present in Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Christian and Native American mythology.

Mythological names in Harry Potter books Professors and school personnel

Argus Filch: In mythology, Argus was a creature covered in one hundred pairs of eyes. He was used by Hera to spy on Zeus, but was killed by Hermes. Hera then turned him into a peacock. Argus Filch always seems to know where the troublemakers are, almost as if he had a few extra pairs of eyes.

Remus Lupin: Remus was a son of Ares and twin to Romulus. They are the legendary founders of Rome. The twins were raised by wolves, which is fitting seeing that Remus is a werewolf. Romulus killed Remus in a dispute over the naming of Rome. In Deathly-Hallows, Remus goes by the name “Romulus” during the Potterwatch segment.

Minerva McGonagall: In Roman mythology, Minerva was the goddess of wisdom, peace, needlework, and defensive war.

Pomona Sprout: Pomona was a minor Roman goddess of fruit trees, which is fitting because she teaches Herbology.

Aurora Sinistra: Professor Sinistra is the Astronomy Professor. In Roman mythology, Aurora was the Roman goddess of the dawn.

Sibyll Trelawney: In ancient Greek times, a sibyl was a prophet who under the influence of Apollo, prophesized without being consulted. It is interesting to note that Trelawney's famous great-great grandmother was named Cassandra - the seer who no one believed.

Other characters:

Alecto and Amycus Carrow: Amycus was a son of Poseidon and a nymph. He was a skilled boxer and king of Bebryces. Alecto was one of the three Furies who punished people in Hades. Her name literally means "unceasing in anger."

Mcrope Gaunt: In mythology, Merope was one of the Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters who were nymphs that attended Artemis. They all married gods, except for Merope who married a mortal. When the }' were put in the sky, Merope was shamed for not having married a god.

Dedalus Diggle: Dedalus was an inventor who created the labyrinth on Crete. King Minos later imprisoned him and his son Icarus. In order to escape, Dedalus made wings out of wax for himself and his son. However, while they were escaping, Icarus flew too close to the sun and his wings melted.

Hestia Jones: In Greek mythology, Hestia was the goddess of the hearth. She gave up her seat at Mount Olympus for Dionysus. She featured more prominently in Roman mythology under the name of Vesta.

Phineus Nigellus Black: Phineus was a king of Thrace and a prophet. However, his predictions were too close to accurate. For this, Zeus blinded him and set the Harpies on him.

Andromeda Tonks: Andromeda was the daughter of Cassiopeia. Cassiopeia bragged too much about Andromeda, and Poseidon sent floods and a monster to punish her. Andromeda was sacrificed to the monster, but was saved at the last minute by Perseus, who she later married.

Narcissa Malfoy: The name Narcissa is the female version of Narcissus. In mythology, Narcissus was a beautiful man who was very cruel. As punishment, the gods made him catch a glimpse of himself in the water and he fell in love with his reflection.

Draco Malfoy: There are many myths with differing stories about Draco. In any case, Draco was a dragon who was put into the sky.

Sirius Black: In mythology, Sirius was the faithful canine companion to Orion, the hunter.

Bellatrix Lcstrange: Bellatrix is also another word for an Amazon, a member of the tribe of fierce warrior women in Greek mythology.

Alecto Carrow: Alecto, or Alacteo in Greek mythology, was one of the three Erinyes, more commonly known by their Roman names, the Furies. The Furies were three infernal deities born from Uranus' blood, spilled when Saturn (Cronus in Greek) overthrew him and became the next king of the gods. The Furies did not acknowledge the Pantheon's power, and therefore were not required to comply with the gods' wishes and laws. The Furies are described as winged deities with snakes for hair who carry torches or whips and who often torture and kill people (fleeing is impossible from the Furies).

Even the description of the Furies resemble that of the Death Eaters and therefore Alecto; although the Death Eaters do not actually have snakes for hair, they have a unique relationship with the snake. Most Death Eaters are from the Slytherin house at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, whose founder could speak to serpents and whose mascot was a snake.

Merope Gaunt: Merope Gaunt was a member of a prejudiced Pureblood family, the daughter of Marvolo Gaunt, and a direct descendant of Salazar Slytherin. Her son grew up to become Lord Voldemort, the lead antagonist in the Harry Potter series. Merope in Greek mythology was a member of the seven sisters named the Pleiades, huntresses and followers of Artemis and the daughters of Atlas. Merope, as a divine being, was expected to marry another divine being, a person of the same status (just like Merope in Harry Potter was expected to marry within the Pureblood line). Instead, Merope married a mere mortal, the mythological equivalent of a muggle.

Draco Malfoy: The name shares its root with the word 'Draconian', which has come to mean harsh, receiving its meaning from the name of an Ancient Greek lawmaker, Draco: Details of his legislation are not now known, but the laws were notoriously harsh (hence the adjective Draconian') with nearly all offences punishable by death.

Conclusion

One can sum up from (he above analysis that Greek mythology has had a considerable influence on the shaping of the plot in all the seven Harry Potter books. It has helped the author to develop various human and non-human characters in these novels, and therefore has been able to strike a chord with the discerning reader. Allusions to mythological characters and instances have been more than a tool towards effective writing - they have actually been instrumental in developing the storyline, and have played a considerable role in the novels becoming immensely popular world over

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<http://www.politicsandculture.org> (August 16, 10 am): From edition 2010 Issue 1 By Craig T. Palmer & Kathryn Coe *From Morality to Law: The Role of Kinship, Tradition and Politics*. Published: April 29, 2010