

The Interplay among Mythology, Culture, and the English Language

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Abstract: Mythology refers to traditional stories often involving gods and heroes. Many of these tales have been widely popularized, and in turn, have been found to be of high significance in investigating the evolution of the English language and culture. As mythologies are often passed down through cultures, these tales heavily influence modern traditions and beliefs. They also play an important role in the evolution and development of certain languages. This paper discusses the relationship between mythology, language, and culture through the help of a comparative analysis of mythologies, vocabularies, literary works, and traditions regarding death. The analysis reveals that many English words and phrases originate from Greek and Roman mythology, and that an individual's belief is closely connected to the mythology of the culture they grew up in. This, in turn, proves that mythology cannot be ignored when investigating language and culture, and that an understanding of mythological tales will allow individuals to better appreciate both literature and cultural traditions.

Keywords: Mythology, English language, cultural traditions, afterlife beliefs, cross-cultural comparison

1. Introduction

The word mythology, formed from the compound of Greek words *mythos* (story) and *logos* (speech), refers to traditional narrative stories passed down from ancient times [1]. They generally revolve around gods and the supernatural and attempt to explain the origins and values of humanity and culture [2]. Though mostly from ancient times, mythology proves to have a heavy impact on our current system of knowledge. Whether that be language or literature, or to some extent, people's common beliefs, traces of mythological lore can be found. Thus, it is important to assess and look over the English language and culture today with relevance to the myths, as it would provide a holistic insight into the influencing factors and origin of Western culture.

Among the many myths and legends to exist in the vast expanse of human history, Greek mythology is arguably the most influential. The myths heavily reflect the religion and cultural environment of the ancient Greek civilization and are thus used by many scholars for their studies. Additionally, Greek mythology aims to delve deep into the human values of love, fate, and courage, making it rich in artistic and philosophical value [2]. It is necessary to understand the true implications of these myths so as to understand the culture of English-speaking countries.

Through analyzing multiple articles and theses, along with comparing English language and literature sample pieces side-by-side with popular mythology legends, this paper aims to give a brief overview of the impact of mythology upon the English language and culture, primarily referencing Greek mythology.

2. The Influence of Mythology on English Language and Literature

Language is an essential aspect of individuals and culture [3]. On one hand, it is a way of expressing beliefs and voicing thoughts. On the other, it helps to reflect cultural evolution and identity. Through the help of studies in Etymology, a linguistic field that traces the origin of words across different languages, it can be found that mythology has a close connection with language and linguistic terms. Many of its characters and tales have made their way into words or idioms. This linkage is especially strong when coming to Greek and English, as hundreds of words in the current English vocabulary are found to have been derived from myths of gods and heroes of ancient Greece.

2.1. Vocabulary

The Greek myths have contributed numerous vocabularies to the English dictionary today. These range from fields of biology, psychology, and even spoken English. This paper will look at some of the examples mentioned in Wallis' *An Etymological Dictionary of Classical Mythology* to provide a general insight into the intricate ties between mythology and language [4].

2.1.1. Arachnid

The word arachnid refers to the class of animals that include spiders, scorpions, mites, and ticks. It comes from the Greek myth of Arachne, a talented weaver who, after challenging the god Athena, got turned into a spider and was forced to spin and weave forever.

2.1.2. Lupine & Lycanthropy

Another example of words taken from Greek mythology about humans turned into animals is Lupine & Lycanthropy, meaning "wolfish" and "the state of being a werewolf" respectively. These words are derived from the tale of Lycaeon, a man who was turned into a wolf after attempting to murder Zeus, the king of the gods. Many other wolf-related vocabulary come from this tale.

2.1.3. Python

This is a common word used to describe large constricting snakes. This is from the word 'pytho', the site where god Apollo slayed a dragon to conquer Delphi.

2.1.4. Hyacinth

This flower gets its name from the tragic tale of Hyacinthus, Apollo's lover who was accidentally killed by a discus (heavy disk used in sport). The flower was said to have been spawned from the youth's blood as a memorial.

2.1.5. Narcissus & Narcissistic

From the story of Narcissus, a man who turned into a flower after staring at his own beautiful reflection in the pond for too long, the words narcissus -the flower- and narcissistic -quality of excessive self-admiration- are created.

2.1.6. Austral & Australia

The word austral, referring to anything “related to the southern hemisphere”, comes from the name of Austral, the Roman god of the south wind. The name of the continent ‘Australia’ also comes from the same origin.

2.1.7. East, West, Night

Even common words like East, West, and Night are found to have originated from names of Greek mythological deities. East comes from the Greek goddess of dawn, Eos; West comes from the Greek god of evening, Hesperus; and Night comes from the Greek god of night, Nyx.

Above are only some of the examples of common English words that are derived from Greek mythology. The heavy influence of these stories from another culture is seen in much more vocabulary, such as ‘atlas’ from the titan Atlas, and ‘nemesis’ after the Greek goddess of retribution. Nevertheless, the significance of Greek mythology in the English language is apparent.

Apart from Greek, Roman mythology is also observed to have significant impacts on the English language [4]. Months such as January -named after Janus, the Roman god of beginnings- March -after war god Mars- and May -after Maia, mother of Hermes- all have roots in the names of Roman deities. This study of etymology and mythology reveals that English has a strong linguistic connection with other Western cultures like Greece and Rome. The popularity and widespread of many mythology-derived vocabulary also help to prove the roles of Greek, Roman, and other cultures’ mythology in the formation and evolution of English.

2.2. Allusive Idioms

An allusive idiom is a phrase or saying involving references to literary traditions. They are commonly used to express feelings or ideas [5]. In English linguistics, many allusive idioms gain their meaning from mythological tales. Below are some common idioms originating from myths [6]:

2.2.1. Achilles’ Heel

In Greek mythology, Achilles was a hero who fought in the Trojan War. He was said to have been dipped in the magical river Styx when he was young, and that made him invincible. However, as he was dipped in the river by his mother holding his heel, his heel was not protected. Achilles died on the battlefield due to a poisoned arrow to his heel. Thus, the phrase ‘Achilles’ heel’ now refers to a fatal flaw or weakness.

2.2.2. The Midas Touch

In the Greek legends, Midas was granted the power to turn everything he touches to gold by the god Dionysus. He eventually found out that it wasn’t what he’d expected, as he had trouble eating and drinking. In the end, he paid for this greedy wish as he turned his daughter to gold. Nowadays, a ‘Midas touch’ refers to the power or talent to make money, much like the original power in the Greek myths.

2.2.3. Trojan Horse

This idiom is often used to indicate deception. In ancient Greece, during the battle of Troy, it was said that the horse was presented to Troy as a gift. However, when Troy allowed the horse in, it was revealed that the inside of the horse was filled with Greek soldiers. Thus, the “trojan horse” now refers to someone or something that appears normal/kind, but has evil intentions.

These are all extremely common idioms in the everyday English language. The fact that many connect with Greek mythology shows the importance of Greek myths and mythology as a whole in the evolution of the English language. Without these tales, English would lose a lot of its phrases and metaphors.

2.3. Literature

Literature is an essential part of a culture's identity [7]. It helps to record and reflect history. It not only brings to light traditions, beliefs, and religions but may also evoke emotions and ideas. Mythology from different places is heavily tied with English literature of different times. It is important to identify their use and significance to better understand the impact it has on the change of beliefs and the evolution of language.

In the 16th century, during the time of the Renaissance, classical texts were rediscovered and studied. That was the time when mythology was put into the light in the field of literature [7]. From then on, writers and poets began alluding to legends and myths in their works, of them the most famous including William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Keats, etc.

A great number of Shakespeare's tragedies include allusions to gods and heroes. For instance, in Act 2 Scene 2 of *Macbeth*, Macbeth says "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand?" [8]. The allusion to Neptune, the Roman god of the seas, helps the writer to place an emphasis on the severity of the guilt. Other examples include the occurrence of characters Theseus and Hippolyta, both heroes and characters in ancient Greek mythology, in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [9]. Shakespeare was also said to have been heavily inspired by the Greek poet Homer's *Iliad* for the above works [10]. Additionally, the formation of complete characters, not just simple allusions, depicts the heavy influence of mythology, especially Greek, on the works of Shakespeare.

The same holds true for poet John Keats. Like Shakespeare, he was mainly influenced by Greek and Roman mythology. In his classic poem *Ode to A Nightingale*, references 'Lethe' (river in Hades where when drank, causes people to lose memory of their past life), 'dryads' (tree nymph), 'Gaia' (godly embodiment of mother earth) and many other characters of Greek mythology can be found [11]. There are also traces of Roman mythology with the implied allusion to Maia, a goddess [11]. The subtle comparisons with allusions in this poem are what make it both fantastical and romantic at the same time. Keats carries out his style of combining literature with mythology in his other works including *Hymn to Apollo*, *Endymion*, etc.

Similarly, implied allusions to mythology can also be found in modern literary works. An example of this is *Harry Potter*, a popular novel about a universe of magic. Upon scrutiny, it is apparent that many of the novel's characters have certain relationships with characters from Greek mythology. Minerva McGonagall, for example, aligns with the Roman goddess Minerva, who was the goddess of war and wisdom [12]. These traits correspond well, as Minerva McGonagall in *Harry Potter* is seen as a strict teacher and a fierce fighter. On the other hand, the character Hagrid is thought to have taken inspiration from a type of creature: the Titans [12]. In Greek mythology, the titans were creatures of enormous size and very close to nature, they are also prone to spread chaos. These descriptions are all fitting with the character of Hagrid. In addition to characters, many magical creatures had origins in Greek, for example, werewolves, griffins, and unicorns [12]. Overall, Greek mythology has had a considerable impact on the plot and characters of *Harry Potter* and has helped the author create stories that connect with the reader.

In conclusion, from the 16th century until recent days, mythology has been popular in works of literary. Poets, playwrights, and authors have all alluded to it in their works, and it has helped them to imply universal themes and emotions like guilt. The analysis of mythology and literature helps to bring out the role of mythology in language, and that is that there is common knowledge and emotions

which people, especially writers, can easily refer to. Mythology has also helped with the shaping of culture and thoughts, as it has been a primary source of inspiration and has also encouraged writers to think deeper about their lives, much like how Keats talks about ideal beauty and reality in *Ode to A Nightingale*. Without mythology, English would have had much less weight and beauty to it as it has been today.

3. The Influence of Mythology on Cultural Traditions and Afterlife Beliefs

There has always been the general question of where humans go after death. While there are multiple existing theories, the most popular ones believe that there exists something after death, an afterlife. These ideas were most probably influenced by mythology, as many mythological tales discuss the idea of death. Different regions who have different cultures and different mythologies also seem to have different practices and interpretations of death, suggesting a possible link between the two. Therefore, by examining the relationship of 'death' with local mythologies, it might be possible to trace the origins of theories of the afterlife.

First examined will be the traditions of the Mexicans. Made popular by the film *Coco*, the Day of the Dead is a tradition where Mexicans 'celebrate' life and death and the dead are said to visit the living world. Many small practices have connections with ancient Aztec mythology. For example, the popular dog breed Xoloitzcuintli, Miguel's dog in the film which passed freely through the worlds of life and death, is actually a reference to the god Xolotl [13]. This was the god of thunder and death in Aztec myths. It was said to lead the deceased into the world of the dead and is often portrayed as a dog similar to a Xoloitzcuintli. In addition, the popular Avenue of the Dead is located in San Juan Teotihuacán, whose name means the place where the sun and moon are created. This is another reference to Aztec mythology as the myths include tales of the creation of the moon and the sun [14].

Next examined would be China's mythologies. Death is not discussed much in ancient Chinese tales, but it is said that when the god Pan Gu and the hero Kua Fu died, their body parts became parts of the universe that helped to protect their descendants [14]. Their sacrificial spirit aligns with the values of Confucianism as well as the idea in many poems, which is that people should live their lives to the fullest and not care too much about the afterlife. However, China values respect for elders, especially for the deceased. This may be tied in with the sacrificial religion, as many Chinese citizens believe in the idea that your elders have all contributed to making your life better. Thus, there are traditions in China where you visit and clean the tombstones of the deceased elders.

Lastly, Egyptian mythology places a heavy emphasis on the life after death. Ancient Egyptians believed that death did not mean an end to life, rather when people die, they enter a better eternal life. Their myths stated that a person's soul is a combination of Ka (the soul that enters the afterlife when you die) and Ba (a soul that stays in the mortal world, it is free to roam around after death but must merge with the body at night) [15]. At night, the Ba can actually enjoy and use the buried objects, and it was believed that if Ba died or if the corpse was rotten, Ka would also fail to achieve eternal life [16]. Thus, Egyptians had the practice of creating mummies and burying a lot of objects along with the deceased.

In summary, there is a high possibility that people's view about death is influenced by their culture's mythologies. Many practices and traditions are based on beliefs originating from legends and myths. Furthermore, most mythologies, like Egyptian, Mayan, Greek, Roman, Norse, etc., emphasize that there is another life after death. This might be the reason why many religions, not just Christianity, hold similar views, and many people subconsciously believe that their acts in the mortal world would affect their afterlife. It would be worthwhile to examine this relationship of death and mythology even closer, as it could continue to reveal useful information about cultures and individuals.

4. Discussion

This paper identified the heavy significance of mythology, especially Greek, to the English language, as well as identified possible connections between interpretations of death and mythology in different cultures. The high frequency of mythology in both linguistic vocabulary and literary works indicates that Greek mythology in particular had an important role in the development of the English language. The use of allusive idioms as well as allusions in literary works helps to prove that mythologies are widely accepted and they help to convey subtle emotions in a way simple denotation cannot. Moreover, by examining how practices and traditions of death originated from cultural mythologies, it is apparent that mythological tales have shaped cultures, which in turn subconsciously shaped the thoughts and beliefs of individuals. These results are worth inquiring deeper into as they could help identify how ancient tales impact current individuals and societies and will be of great value in discussions about the evolution of either language or human thinking. Admittedly, this study is only a brief overview with the help of limited comparative analysis, and it does not come close to the deepness in which mythology, language and culture are connected. As there are already many sources and studies on the relationship between mythology and language, further focused investigation into mythology and culture, specifically people's views of death, is encouraged.

5. Conclusion

This paper is an analysis of mythology's relationship with both language and culture. From the analysis of language, it is made clear that mythologies have a close tie with both vocabulary and idioms, and its depth of thinking also places it as a primary source of inspiration for literary works. It is safe to assume that without mythology or the popularization of mythologies during the Renaissance, the English language would lose much of its vocabulary and idioms today, and classic literary works would fail to become popular, with some even ceasing to exist. Similarly, mythologies have a heavy influence on culture and traditions, especially on the abstract idea of 'death', and individuals' own beliefs are seen to be impacted by ancient mythologies. As this paper was a brief comparative overview of just a portion of mythology's influence on language and culture, there exist limitations such as the broadness and depth of such subjects. This paper is by no means a deep and detailed review of the impact of mythology, and only a narrow spectrum of examples is used. Mythology has a much more significant impact on both language and culture than this paper outlines, and it is strongly recommended for readers to continue diving into the intricate relationship between mythological tales, language and literature, and traditions and beliefs.

This paper makes clear the significance of mythology on language, literature, and culture, and how without mythology the English language will lose much of its beauty and convenience. Mythology also has a heavy impact on the way different cultures and individuals treat the concept of life and death. This goes to justify how significant mythology is in an analysis of language or culture, and it is quite necessary to have knowledge of mythologies when studying the above. Only when keeping these mythological tales in mind can individuals truly appreciate the development of language and culture.

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