

Analysis of the Influence of Greek Mythology Upon English Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Greek mythology is the creation of ancient Greek people and is originated from the old Aegean culture. It is a representative of the brilliant civilization of ancient people in Europe. Through history, the Greek mythology has greatly influenced the development of the European culture. As an important part of European culture, the English culture has also been greatly influenced by the Greek mythology. This paper mainly discusses the influence of Greek mythology upon English culture, including the analysis of its influence upon English language and English literature. From the analysis, we can see that the impacts of Greek mythology cannot be ignored in the study of English culture. That is to say, the explanation and understanding of Greek mythology can help us to better understand the English language and English literature.

Keywords: *Greek mythology, influence, English culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

The word *mythology* which comes from Greek ordinarily refers to stories of gods or other supernatural beings handed down from ancient times. It often includes a body of folklore, myths and legends that a particular culture believes to be true. In ancient times, because of the underdevelopment of science and technology, people often explain nature, universe and social life through many supernatural ways. Those ideas and explanations constitute the nation's mythology. In the long history of human beings, there are various kinds of myths and legends among which the most influential one is the Greek mythology.

Greek mythology is a series of myths from ancient Greeks. These myths tell the origin and nature of the universe, involving various gods, heroes, and mysterious creatures. They also talk about the origins of various mysteries and religious rituals that the Greeks themselves participated in. Therefore, Greek mythology is an important part of ancient Greece and its culture and religion. Modern scholars are more inclined to study on the Greek mythology, because it actually reflects the religion and political and cultural environment of ancient Greece and the entire ancient Greek civilization. Moreover, in order to understand the essence of the Greek culture as well as the whole western culture, it is also quite important and necessary to understand the essence behind these myths [1].

One of the reasons why the Greek mythology is said to be great and influential is that it has a vast and permanent influence upon the whole western culture, especially the English culture. It is involved in almost every aspect of the western culture, such as language, literature, music, art, technology, and even people's way of thinking. This paper will give a brief analysis of the influence of the Greek

mythology upon English culture, mainly in the aspects of language and literature.

2. THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY UPON ENGLISH LANGUAGE

To discuss our topic, we should firstly talk about the connotation of culture. Generally speaking, culture means the total way of life of a people. It usually includes the patterns of belief, customs, objects, institutions, techniques, and language that characterizes the life of the human community. It virtually permeates every aspect of human life and influences predominantly people's behavior, including linguistic behavior. Therefore, it has a close relationship with language. On the one hand, as an essential part of human being, language permeates human's thinking and way of viewing the world. It expresses and embodies cultural reality. On the other hand, as a product of culture, language helps perpetuate culture. The Greek mythology has a strong influence upon English language. It greatly flourishes the English language. A great numbers of words and allusive idioms come from the Greek mythology. Since language is a necessary part of culture, the influence of the Greek mythology upon English culture can be clearly seen.

2.1 Allusive Idioms that Originate from the Greek Mythology

According to the dictionary, an idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learned as a whole unit. That is to say, an idiom is a special form of

expression which carries the meaning that differs from the words put together. Then an allusive idiom is a kind of idiom which alludes to the gods, heroes, or the events, tales etc. from some literary traditions. In the English language, a large number of allusive idioms come from the Greek mythology.

Here are some examples of those allusive idioms which can be used to show directly the great influence of the Greek mythology upon the English language:

1. Pandora's box

In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman. Zeus ordered Hephaestus to mould her out of Earth as a part of the punishment of mankind for Prometheus' theft of the secret of fire. Therefore, when she was created, she was endowed with suitably dangerous qualities by various gods and goddesses. Pandora had a magic box which contained all human evils. After she married Epimetheus, he opened Pandora's magic box out of curiosity. Then, after opening the box, all the miseries and evils flew out: disease, despair, malice, greed, envy, old age, death, hatred, violence, cruelty, etc. living only hope inside.

Hence, in the English language, the idiom Pandora's box usually used to refer to any source of great and unexpected troubles, a present which seems valuable, but which is in reality a curse. For example, the sentence "The project, which seemed so promising, turned out to be a Pandora's box" means that the project which seems to show the possibility of achievement or excellence is actually a harm or disaster.

2. Achilles' heel

Achilles was a legendary hero in Homer's Iliad. He is the son of Peleus and Thetis. When he was still a little baby, his mother Thetis dipped him into the river Styx in the hope of making him invulnerable. Therefore, every part of Achilles' body became invulnerable except his heel, because his mother held onto him by his heel. Later in the siege of Troy, he was wounded by in the heel and finally died from it [2].

In English language, the idiom Achilles' heel is often mentioned in most speech and is still in common use in people's daily life. In modern English, Achilles' heel usually used to describe someone's fault or weakness which may not be apparent, but once discovered, can lead to his downfall. Here is an example: He is an excellent student in our class. He is almost good at all subjects of science, but he gets an Achilles' heel, he is weak in English. This sentence means that English is the student's only weakness which can be quite fatal to him.

3. A Herculean task

Hercules, also known as Heracles, is a divine hero in Greek mythology. He is strong, courageous and ingenuous with extraordinary power. By conquering dangerous archaic forces, he is said to have "made the world safe for mankind" and to be its benefactor. Since Hercules is an extremely powerful hero with great strength, the idiom a Herculean task is usually used to refer to a task which has to be done with great strength. This expression which originates its meaning from the Greek mythology is still in common use in people's daily life.

4. Apple of discord

An apple of discord is a reference to the Golden Apple of Discord. According to the Greek mythology, all the gods and the goddesses were invited to the wedding banquet of Peleus and Thetis except Eris, the goddess of discord. Therefore, Eris decided to take revenge. She made an apple which caused a violent dispute among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. The dispute finally led to the War of Troy. Since the story of the apple of discord from the Greek mythology is so famous that people often use the idiom figuratively to describe somebody or something which is a cause of an argument or a quarrel.

Those idioms above are very common-used in English language, even in people's daily life. In English language, there are numerous idioms which originate from the Greek mythology. From the above examples, we can see the strong influence of the Greek mythology upon English language.

2.2 Words that are Derived from the Greek Mythology

Except for numerous allusive idioms that originate from the Greek mythology, another influence of the Greek mythology upon English language is that it nourishes English words. The words which are derived from the Greek mythology cover many fields in English language, such as psychology, astronomy, scientific technology, etc. Even in oral English, there are a large number of words which people often use come from the Greek mythology, including some common nouns.

To talk about the words which are derived from the Greek mythology, a large number of words can be found. Here we will take a look at several of them to show the great influence of the Greek mythology upon English language.

1. atlas

The word atlas which means a book of maps comes from the figure Atlas in Greek mythology. Atlas is a god who has great power. He was punished by Zeus and was made to bear the weight of the heavens on his back. In the year of 1595, the Belgian geographer Gerardus Mercator used Atlas as the name of his collection of maps. The word atlas then got its meaning.

2. siren

The word siren also comes from the Greek mythology. In Greek mythology, Siren is one of a number of winged women whose songs lured sailors to their destruction. Later, the word siren gets its meaning which refers to a device that makes a long loud sound as a signal or warning. It can also refer to a woman who is regarded as fascinating and dangerous.

3. titan and titanic

In English language, the word titan (or Titan) means a person of great size, strength, intellect, importance, etc. While the word titanic means gigantic and immense. Both of them come from Titan in the Greek mythology which refers to any of the primordial giant gods who ruled the Earth until overthrown by Zeus.

4. nemesis

In common English, the word nemesis means the deserved and unavoidable punishment for wrongdoing. In the Greek mythology, Nemesis is the goddess of retribution.

Except for the examples above, there are many scientific terms which are derived from the Greek mythology. Take astronomy as an example, the eight planets of the solar system are all named after gods of the Greek mythology, namely Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Besides, the satellites of the planets are named after the people or gods who are in close relationship with the gods who bear the same name as the planets.

In psychology, the influence of the Greek mythology can also be seen. The two famous psychological terms Oedipus complex and narcissism both come from the Greek mythology. As we all know, Oedipus is a famous figure in the Greek mythology who kills his father and then marries his mother. Therefore, in psychology, Oedipus complex now refers to the unconscious sexual desire of a child for the parent of the opposite sex and jealousy of the other parent. Narcissus is a beauty in the Greek mythology. He loved his shadow in the water but finally drowned and became narcissus, a kind of flower. Now in psychology, the word narcissism means the abnormal and excessive love or admiration for oneself.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY UPON ENGLISH LITERATURE

3.1 The Influence upon Ancient Literature

Literature and culture also have a close relationship. Literature can be seen as a kind of reflection of one culture. It is also a very important part of culture. Talking about the influence of the Greek mythology upon English culture, its influence upon English literature cannot be ignored. Moreover, it is necessary to analyse its influence upon ancient literature briefly, for those outstanding literary works later have a strong influence upon English writers and poets [3].

For the ancient people, one of the most important sources of their literature and culture is mythology. Many literary works of that time can be seen as the true reflection of ancient people. In ancient Greece, there are some distinguished poets and dramatists whose works have a permanent influence upon modern English literature.

In ancient times, the great influence of the Greek mythology can already be seen. The four most famous dramatists in ancient Greece, namely Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, have already drew their writing materials from the Greek mythology. Besides, the great literary giant Homer's masterpieces *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* are also originated from the Greek mythology. Those works then have a strong influence upon English literature.

3.2 The Influence upon Literature during other Periods of Time

In 16th century, the famous literary movement which is known as Renaissance spread into England. This movement involved a rebirth of letters and arts stimulated by the rediscovery and study of texts from classical antiquity, and the development of new aesthetic norms based on classical models. From then on, English writers, poets and playwrights began to compose their works by taking the materials from the Greek mythology and to use mythical allusions in their works. The most famous writers and poets include Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Keats, Shelley, Byron, etc. [4]

One of Shakespeare's famous tragedies *Troilus and Cressida* is a good illustration. This tragedy is a medieval tale. Although it is not completely a part of the Greek mythology, it is actually drawn from it. Another example is Milton's poem *Comus*. Although it is not so long, it contains more than thirty figures and tales from the Greek mythology. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* also uses the materials from the Greek mythology. Shelley borrows the figure Prometheus from the Greek mythology and portrays a new image of Prometheus to express his own ideas and feelings. This poem is full of Shelley's strong confidence to fight against tyranny and oppression. Keats also borrows some figures and stories from the Greek mythology. In his famous poem *Ode to A Nightingale*, he sings the praises of the eternal beauty, using Bacchus (the god of intoxication), Lethe (the river in Hades whose waters cause forgetfulness), Hippocrene (the fountain of the Muses), etc. All of those images come from the Greek mythology. Besides, Keats' *Hymn to Apollo*, *Endymion*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* all have a close relationship with the Greek mythology.

In modern times, British and American writers continue to use materials and themes borrowed from the Greek mythology. Irish novelist James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses* borrows the frame and the figure Ulysses from Homer's epic *Odysseus*. American dramatist Eugene O'Neill's work *Mourning Becomes Electra* which is based on Aeschylus's tragedy *Oresteia* also draw from the Greek mythology. Other examples include John Updike's *The Centaur*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, etc.

Until now, English writers and playwrights do not stop borrowing the materials and themes from the Greek mythology. The great influence of the Greek mythology has permeated into every period of English literature.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we can find out the great influence of the Greek mythology upon English language and culture. Except for those two aspects, the influence of the Greek mythology can actually be felt in many other aspects in English culture. For example, in the aspect of art, there are numerous stories to show the close

relationship between the Greek mythology and art. Even the word music itself comes from the god's name Muses in the Greek mythology.

To summarize, since the Greek mythology has such a strong influence upon English culture, it is quite necessary and important to know something about it for the English learners, for language and literature are not isolated, we have to have some background knowledge so that we can study it better and better.

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