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Mythology of Ancient Greece Spring 2021

Long Paper

Many modern movies and books have been known to hold aspects of ancient Greek mythology. One series in particular with strong ties to Greek myths is J.K. Rowling’s popular young adult book series Harry Potter. Whether on purpose or by coincidence, many of Rowling's characters show a strong resemblance to Greek heroes, gods, and goddesses.

The main protagonist of the book is Harry Potter. He is a young and powerful wizard with a big destiny to defeat the Dark Lord Voldemort. Many parallels can be drawn between Harry and the popular Greek hero Hercules. Near the end of the book series, Harry marries Ginny and has three children with her, and very similarly Hercules has three children with his wife Megara. Hercules is cursed by the goddess Hera to kill his children, so he sets out to atone for his wrongful actions (Badala). Harry’s mentor Albus Dumbledore dies, and Harry sets out to defeat Lord Voldemort who is indirectly responsible for Dumbledore’s death. Hercules plans to redeem himself by completing 12 labors and Harry plans to defeat Voldemort by destroying the 7 Horcruxes, fragments of the dark lord’s soul (Harry Potter Wiki).

Hercules 12 labors to redeem himself are: Slay the Nemean lion. Slay the nine-headed Lernaean Hydra. Capture the Erymanthian Boar. Capture the Ceryneian Hind. Clean the Augean stables in a single day. Slay the Stymphalian birds. Capture the Cretan Bull. Steal the Mares of Diomedes. Obtain the belt of Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons. Obtain the cattle of the three-bodied giant Geryon. Steal three of the golden apples of the Hesperides. Capture and bring back Cerberus (Badala). Harry Potter must find and destroy all 7 Horcruxes: Tom Riddle's diary, Marvolo Gaunt's Ring, Salazar Slytherin's Locket, Helga Hufflepuff's Cup, Rowena Ravenclaw's Diadem, Harry Potter (unknown to Voldemort until after he had destroyed it), and Nagini the Snake (Harry Potter Wiki). Many similarities can be found between the tasks of both these heroes. Hercules Second task is to kill the Lernean Hydra. The Hydra is a terrible sea monster with 9 heads, each of which grows back after they are cut off. Hercules is only able to defeat it with the assistance of his nephew Iolaus, Heracles cut off the heads and his nephew cauterized each stump to prevent regrowth (Badala). This creature is similar to the Basilisk which Harry had to kill to get to the Diary of Tom Riddle, the first Horcrux. While the Basilisk does not perfectly mirror the Hydra, it is similar to another mythological monster, Medusa. Much like Medusa, the basilisk can turn people to stone if they gaze upon it (Harry Potter Wiki). The parallels lie in how the sea creatures were defeated. Hercules has help from his nephew and Harry has aid from Dumbledore’s pet phoenix Fawkes.

Hercules's final task is very similar to another creature Harry must defeat. The 12th labor is to bring back the “hellhound that guards the underworld, the three-headed dog named Cerberus” (Badala). While this creature does not guard any Horcrux, Harry must get past a three-headed guard dog named Fluffy to get to Lord Voldemort. Both heroes receive aid to defeat the creature with Hercules receiving help from Hermes and Athena while Harry receives help from his two close friends Ron and Hermione. Both Harry Potter and Hercules are the heroes of their stories. Their quests are very similar and show a strong connection from a modern movie to ancient Greek myth.

While heroes are very popular in Greek myths, there are tricksters as well. The most well-known is Hermes, the “patron not only of travelers and merchants but of thieves and rogues as well” (Classical Mythology). Hermes is very similar to two twin pranksters in Harry Potter named Fred and George Weasley. These sneaky boys are known for playing tricks on others and taking what does not belong to them. In Fred and George’s very first year at Hogwarts, they stole an important magical item from the grouchy old caretaker of the school Argus Filch. This item is the Marauder's Map, “a magical document that revealed all of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Not only did it show every classroom, every hallway, and every corner of the castle, but it also showed every inch of the grounds, as well as all the secret passages that were hidden within its walls and the location of every person on the grounds, portrayed by a dot” (Harry Potter Wiki). With this map, the Weasley boys were able to use the secret passageways to play many pranks. The Greek god Hermes loved to play tricks as well and stole from his fellow gods. When he was only a baby, Hermes “impulsively stole 50 cows from Apollo, then still the herdsman of the gods” (Classical Mythology). Hermes denied stealing the cattle, but when he was caught, he was able to get out of trouble by trading with Apollo. Hermes created both a lyre and a reed-pipe which Apollo was enchanted by and exchanged his entire herd of cattle and his golden staff for the instruments (Classical Mythology). Hermes and his love of tricks and pranks reflect the mischievous Weasley Twins.

The final connection between Harry Potter and Greek mythology can be found in the second book in the series. Ginny Weasley, the sister of Fred and George Weasley, has a story very similar to the Greek myth of Persephone and Hades. Ginny is Persephone while Lord Voldemort is Hades. In this book, Ginny finds a diary, later revealed as the first Horcrux, which she confides in and writes her secrets. The diary can write back to her and lures her into opening the chamber of secrets. Voldemort explains to Harry how he tricked the young girl by saying “I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply loved me... No one's ever understood me like you, Tom (Voldemort)... I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in... It's like a friend I can carry around in my pocket... If I say it myself, Harry, I’ve always been able to charm the people I needed" (Rowling, ch.17). In the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, the young girl is picking flowers in the garden and notices a beautiful narcissus flower. “As she stooped down to pick the flower, the earth beneath her feet suddenly cleaved open and through the gap, Hades himself came out on his chariot with black horses. Hades grabbed the lovely maiden before she could scream for help and descended into his underworld kingdom” (Persephone). Persephone was tricked by the narcissus flower just how Ginny was tricked by the diary. Ginny is kidnapped by Voldemort but eventually found in the Chamber of Secrets by Harry Potter.

Another connection Ginny holds to Persephone is a protective mother. Mrs. Weasley is a very strict, but loving mother. She cares for all of her six sons and only daughter and wants to keep them all safe. Persephone’s mother is Demeter the goddess of harvest and fertility (Persephone). She loved her daughter so much and wanted to protect her, so she kept all men away from her. When Hades kidnapped Persephone, Demeter was so distraught that she took leave from her duties as the goddess of harvest and fertility. “The earth began to dry up, harvests failed, plants lost their fruitfulness, animals were dying for lack of food and famine spread to the whole earth, resulting in untold misery” (Persephone). Demeter cared so much for her daughter that she punished the earth for taking Persephone away. This persistence eventually led to an agreement where Persephone would live with her mother Demeter for six months of the year and then return to Hades for the other six months (Persephone). This overbearing and protective nature of Demeter parallels the character of Ginny’s mother and further shows how Persephone is Ginny Weasley’s ancient Greek myth counterpart.

In conclusion, the connections between J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series and ancient Greek myths are very evident. While most characters do not have an exact Greek counterpart, their stories and actions reflect the myths. These books show misfortune and loss, but also bravery and heroism. They are a reflection of modern society. This series is very well written with many characters worth rooting for. Harry Potter always does what is right and just no matter what. Fred and George, while pests at times show their fun and lovable sides when they care for their siblings and friends. Ginny is weak and timid at first but grows into a strong woman and a very capable wizard. All these characters and many more have a strong effect on the reader. These books create an incredible story and immersive world that brings the reader along on the journey.

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