

THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS

Introduction

People often use **allusions**, or references, to mythology to make their points more clear or show some sort of relationship between well-known situations and ideas present in the literature. When an allusion is used, a person is implying all the connotations (feelings, emotions) that go along with the reference.

It is easy to understand why writers make use of allusions: they get more mileage out of a few words. Mary Shelley used an allusion to mythology when she chose to subtitle her novel *Frankenstein* with the words *or, The Modern Prometheus*. Prometheus was a Titan (Go West!) who is found in both Greek and Roman mythologies. His name means "Forethought." Although there are several versions of the myths, the most famous are that Prometheus creates man and later steals fire from Mount Olympus to save mankind.

In this assignment, you will be reading excerpts from the legends of Prometheus, with the intent of better understanding why Mary Shelley chose to use this allusion in her title. Read each excerpt carefully and answer the questions that follow each.

Excerpt #1

The Roman version of the legend of Prometheus as written by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* states:

Whether with particles of heavenly fire,
The God of Nature did his soul inspire;
And, pliant, still retain'd th'ethereal energy:
Which wise Prometheus temper'd into paste,
And, mis't with living steams, the godlike image caste...
From such rude principles our form began;
And earth was metamorphosed into man.

Questions

1. In what ways can you compare Prometheus creation with Victor Frankenstein's creation?
2. What words from the excerpt can you compare with the story of Frankenstein's creation? (See the beginning of Chapter V of novel.)
3. To what extent does the word "metamorphosed" apply to the creation of Frankenstein's creation?

Excerpt #2

Prometheus created man, without woman, and according to Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, he

...thought out a way to make mankind superior [to animals]. He fashioned them in a nobler shape than the animals, upright like the gods; and then he went to heaven, to the sun, where he lit a torch and brought down fire, a protection for men, far better than anything else, whether fur or feathers or strength or swiftness.

Zeus was angry at Prometheus' actions and reacted out of revenge:

...For a long time, certainly throughout the happy Golden Age, only men were upon the earth; there were no women. Zeus created these later, in his anger at Prometheus for caring so much for men. Prometheus had not only stolen fire for men; he had also arranged that they should get the best part of any animal sacrificed and the gods the worst.

Zeus created woman, through Pandora, as "an evil to men, with a nature to do evil." Although beautiful to look at, Pandora (whose downfall was her curiosity) opened a box given to her by Zeus. She was told never to open the box. But because of her overwhelming need to know, she opened it and

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all the evils of the world --plagues, sorrow, and mischief-- flew out to torment mankind. However, one good thing was left in the box as she slammed the lid -- HOPE.

Questions

1. How does this part of the myth inform our understanding of key aspects of *Frankenstein*?
2. Can you compare this legend to any other creation myths?

Excerpt #3

After Zeus had punished mankind through the creation of Pandora, a woman, Zeus turned his attention to Prometheus and punished him by having his servants, Force and Violence, bind Prometheus,

To a high-piercing, headlong rock
In adamantine chains that none can break,
and told him,
Forever shall the intolerable present grind you down.
And he who will release you is not born.
Such fruit you reap for your man-loving ways.
A god yourself, you did not dread God's anger,
But gave to mortals honor not their due.
And therefore you must guard this joyless rock --
No rest, no sleep, no moment's respite.
Groans shall your speech be, lamentation your only words.

Questions

1. What was Shelley's overall purpose for her sub-title? What connections did she want her readers to see?
2. Is Shelley's use of the Prometheus allusion in *Frankenstein* valid?
3. Why do you think Shelley would connect *Frankenstein*'s virtues/values/beliefs to the Prometheus myth?
4. Remember that Prometheus' name means forethought. How does knowing this inform your understanding of the creature?
5. To what extent is it valid to allude to the Prometheus myth when discussing the work of genetic scientists?

Extension: Create your own allusion (does not necessarily have to be from mythology) for genetic scientists and genetic engineering. Explain your choice and what connections you are making.

Monster Etymology - Oxford English Dictionary

- **Classical Latin:** *Moneo* - a reminder or a warning
- **Old French (12th cent):** *Mostre* - prodigy, marvel

1. Originally: a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.
2. Something extraordinary or unnatural; an amazing event or occurrence; a prodigy, a marvel. *Obscure.*
3. A malformed animal or plant; a fetus, neonate, or individual with a gross congenital malformation, usually of a degree incompatible with life. *Medical.*
4. A person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman; a monstrous example of evil, a vice, etc.
5. A creature of huge size.
6. *gen.* An ugly or deformed person, animal, or thing.