

A Study on Greek Mythology in College English Teaching

Linguo Ye

Xihua University, Sichuan 610039, China

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Abstract: College English teaching inevitably involves a lot of British and American cultural background knowledge. As one of the sources of western culture, Greek and Roman mythology has a profound impact on the social and cultural life of English-speaking countries. This paper attempts to explore the relationship between Greek/Roman mythology and English vocabulary, idioms, British and American literature, and the social and cultural life of the UK and the US. Hopefully, this research could benefit College English teaching, broaden students' horizons, deepen their understanding of the cultural connotation of the UK and the US and promote their interest in learning English.

1. Introduction

Greek mythology reflects the historical and social life of ancient Greeks from all aspects with its rich imagination and vivid plots. It has a great influence on the development of European literature and art and has become one of the birthplaces of the whole western culture. Greek mythology has penetrated into all aspects of Greek social life and has become the essence of Greek culture. Greek mythology has formed a complete system through the collection, processing and creation of Homer, Sappho, Pinder, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and so on. The spread of Greek culture has experienced three stages: 1). Hellenization of Roman culture, 2). Spread to European nations with the expansion of Roman Empire, 3). Spread to a larger world since the Renaissance. In College English teaching process, it is not difficult to find that the marks left by Greek mythology are closely related to teaching activities. [1] If we can introduce some Greek mythology and its related background knowledge to the students in time, it will further stimulate the students' enthusiasm for learning English, deepen their understanding of the knowledge, expand their scope of knowledge and improve the comprehensive ability of the students. This paper would research on the influence of Greek Mythology on English vocabulary, English idioms, British and American literature and the social and cultural life of UK and the U.S.

2. The Influence of Greek Mythology on English Vocabulary

Ancient Greek and Roman culture had a great influence on the development of English language. According to the statistics by Walter w. Skeat, a famous English etymologist, Greek and Roman words account for nearly three fifths of the whole English vocabulary. Greek and Roman mythology, with its perfect artistic expression and profound philosophy, reflects the essence of Greek and Roman culture, and has a great and profound influence on the meaning and composition of English vocabulary [2].

2.1. From the Perspective of Word Meaning.

Special nouns such as people's names and place names in Greek mythology, after a long history of evolution, constitute an important part of English vocabulary [3]. The sources of these words can be divided into the following categories:

2.1.1. From the Division of Duties of Gods in the Mythology

Because of the different division of duties of Gods, the names of the Gods in Greek and Roman mythology are transformed into English words with different meanings. Hades, for example, is the

God in charge of the underworld in Greek mythology. Therefore, Hades refers to "hell" in English. Muse represents art and science, so muse in English means "inspiration", and with the suffix *-eum*, it constitutes the word museum. Aphrodite is in charge of sex, so the evolved word aphrodisia means "sexual desire". Athena symbolizes wisdom, so Athena with a suffix *-eum* constitutes a new word Athenaeum, which means Science Association, reading room and other places full of wisdom. Mercury is the emissary of gods, who is in charge of business, so English root *-merc* evolved from Mercury means "business and trade" which formed some words like commerce(business,trade), merchant(businessman). Mars is the God of war, so the word martial means "belligerent". Bacchus is the God of wine, so *bacchanalia* means "feast and revelry".

2.1.2. From the Names of Places and People in the Mythology

Through long-term historical evolution, Some places and people in Greek and Roman mythology gradually refer to things with similar characteristics or experiences in English vocabulary [4]. Here are some examples in the following:

Narcissus was a beautiful young man in Roman mythology who fell in love with his reflection in the water. And after his death, he became a plant with white or yellow flowers which we call narcissus nowadays. Now the word narcissus refers to the plant "narcissus". And if we add a suffix *-ism*, it becomes "narcissism" which means auto-philia. Procrustes was a robber in the late time Greek mythology. Everytime when he caught captives, he forced them to lie on a bed and made them fit it by stretching their bodies or cutting off part of their legs. And step by step, the word procrustes was changed into an adjective *procrustean* which means " treating all people or things as if they are the same, without considering individual differences and in a way that is too strict and unreasonable ". Gorgon was one of three ugly and horrible sisters with snakes on their heads instead of hair, who can change anyone that looks at them into stone in Greek mythology. Now, it's translated as " an ugly woman who behaves in an aggressive and frightening way ". The Sphinx is a large ancient statue of a creature with a human head and a lion's body that stands near the pyramids in Egypt. In mythology, sphinx gave people puzzles to solve, and so a person who is mysterious or puzzling is sometimes referred to as a sphinx in English vocabulary. Augean is the name of the king of Elis in Greek mythology who had a stable where there are three thousand cows in it and no one cleaned the stable for thirty years. Therefore, the word *augean* means extremely filthy from long neglect. the word *labyrinth* derives from a complicated palace called "Labyrinth" constructed by Minos, king of Crete and it means " a complicated series of paths, which it is difficult to find your way through ".the word "stygian" derives from Styx, the river in the underworld which the souls of the dead had to cross in Greek myth [5].

2.2. According to the Morphological Structure of English Vocabulary, the Word Formation of English Vocabulary Originated from Greek and Roman Mythology can be divided into the Following Types

2.2.1. Affixes

During the Renaissance time,which is an important period of modern English language development, British people borrowed a large number of words like names of people and geography from Greek and Roman mythology as the root of English vocabulary. Together with other root words, prefixes and suffixes, they formed new words in English [6].

For example, Titan was the older God who was giant and strong in Greek mythology. After a long history, Titan has become the root of English vocabulary, meaning "giant". When we add a suffix *-ic* at the end of the word, it becomes *titanic* which means very huge. And the name of the luxury cruise ship in the American film *Titanic* is to show its huge and extraordinary style. A vast majority of English words are derived from Greek and Roman mythology. Linguists often use words like *Titan* with the names of people and geography in Greek and Roman mythology as roots of English vocabulary, plus other roots or prefix or suffix to form a new English word. For instance, the word *commerce* in English has a root *-merce* evolved from Mercury, God in charge of business. In Greek mythology, Hypnos is the God in charge of sleep, so hypnotic means making you feel as if

you are going to fall asleep. Hebe is the daughter of Zeus, the Goddess of youth, so hebetate means in adolescence. Psyche is Cupid's wife, the incarnation of human soul, so psychology means the scientific study of the way the human mind works and how it influences behavior. The root *-mnes* is evolved from Mnemosyne, the Goddess of memory, so amnesia means a medical condition in which somebody partly or completely loses their memory. The root *-somnia* is evolved from Somnus, the God in charge of sleep in Roman mythology, so insomnia means the condition of being unable to sleep.

2.2.2. Method of Transferred Meaning

In addition to the affixes, in English vocabulary originated from Greek and Roman mythology, there are also some words that are directly transferred the meaning of the words in the mythological stories. For example, Myrmidon is a brave and warlike tribe, who was loyal to follow Achilles, the Greek hero, to participate in the Trojan War. Therefore, myrmidon was translated as "a follower who carries out orders without question". Amazon was a tall, strong and manly female warrior tribe defeated by Theseus in Greek mythology, now it is translated as "a tall strong woman". Atlas was a giant defeated by Zeus and was punished with two shoulders to bear the sky. Thus atlas now is translated as "a book of maps".

3. Greek Mythology and English Idioms

The stories of Gods and heroes in Greek mythology have left many well-known allusions. The rich cultural deposits is often used for reference by British and American writers [7]. After a long history of evolution, they have become idiomatic allusions in English. Examples are as follows:

3.1. Pandora's Box

It is from the Greek myth in which Pandora was created by the god Zeus and sent to the earth with a box containing many evils. When she opened the box, the evils came out and infected the earth. Therefore, the meaning of the idiom is a process that, if started, will cause many problems that cannot be solved

3.2. Herculean Task

Hercules is a hero of the world in Greek mythology. He is not only powerful, but also intelligent. He went through many ups and downs in his life and finally completed 12 very difficult tasks. Herculean is an adjective derived from Hercules. Nowadays, people usually use Herculean task to refer to something that is very difficult to be done.

3.3. Oedipus Complex

From the Greek story of Oedipus, whose father Laius had been told by the oracle that his son would kill him. Laius left Oedipus on a mountain to die, but a shepherd rescued him. Oedipus returned home many years later but did not recognize his parents. He killed his father and married his mother Jocasta.

The famous Austrian psychologist Freud derived a new phrase Oedipus complex from this tragic allusion which means feelings of sexual desire that a boy has for his mother and the jealous feelings towards his father that this causes.

3.4. Electra Complex

Electra is the daughter of Agamemnon, the hero of the Trojan War in Greek mythology. Agamemnon returned from victory in the Trojan War, but was killed by his wife and her lover. Electra, as a daughter, hated her mother's killing and decided to help her younger brother Orestes avenge her father. And Freud called this Electra complex, that is, a young girl's unconscious sexual attraction to her father.

3.5. Helen of Troy

Helen, a famous beauty in Greek mythology, was lured away by Paris, the prince of Troy, which led to the Trojan War lasting for ten years. As time goes by, the idiom "Helen of Troy" appeared in English which means "the beauty of the city" and "the root of the disaster".

3.6. Achilles' Heel

This is another idiom from the Trojan War. Achilles was a great hero in the Trojan War. In Greek mythology, when Achilles was a baby, it was foretold that he would die young. To prevent his death, his mother Thetis took Achilles to the River Styx, which was supposed to offer powers of invulnerability, and dipped his body into the water; however, as Thetis held Achilles by the heel, his heel was not washed over by the water of the magical river. Later in the Trojan War, he was shot in the heel and died. Therefore, in English, the idiom Achilles' heel means "the fatal place" or "the only defect".

4. Greek Mythology and British & American Literature

Greek mythology, with its profound cultural connotation and philosophy, has greatly influenced the development of Western literature and art, especially the British & American literature and art. After the European Renaissance, many Greek myths were translated, studied and introduced to Great Britain by British scholars, which made many British writers use the cultural connotation, philosophy and moral meaning of Greek myths for their literary creation. And later, it also deeply influenced American literature [8]. In the teaching process of College English, if we can explain the relationship between Greek mythology and British & American literature, it will be more helpful for students to understand the connotation of British and American literature. In British and American literature, we can usually see:

4.1. Literary Creation with Greek Mythology as Its Theme

Many English and American literary masters love to directly use Greek mythology as the theme of their literary creation. For example, the story of Prometheus in Greek mythology creates a tall, just, not despicable hero image. In the age of romanticism, Shelley, an outstanding English poet, created *Prometheus Unbound* with this theme. Here, the image of Prometheus has a brand-new spirit of the times, full of love for modern human society and hatred of feudal autocracy, symbolizing the hero image of "liberation" and "Harmony". Pygmalion is the king and sculptor of Cyprus in Greek mythology. He was deeply attracted by the statue of the girl carved by himself. At last, his feeling of love deeply touched the God of love, Aphrodite, who gave life to his statue and kept the two together. *The Story of Pygmalion*, written by the great British play writer Bernard Shaw, also has a similar dreamlike meaning. The play describes a London street flower girl named Elizabeth Doolittle who, with the help of linguist Henry Higgins' training, entered the upper class with elegant manners and fluent & standard English. Later, educational circle quoted this allusion and thought that teachers' expectation of students would have an effect on students' achievements. So this effect is called Pygmalion effect. In the mythical epic *Odyssey*, Homer, the great Greek poet, describes a long and hard journey home of Odysseus, the hero of ancient Greece, after conquering Troy. Odysseus's story has many meanings, but its tireless and unswerving pursuit spirit is often enjoyed by British and American writers. James Joyce, the founder of stream of consciousness novel, wrote *Ulysses*, the Latin name of Odysseus, based on the story of *Odyssey*. The three parts of the novel coincides with the three stages of *Odyssey* and the structure is quite similar. In the book, the protagonist Leopold Bloom's mental journey seems to be Odysseus's long journey of suffering, which has a strong metaphorical significance for his perplexed and up and down life goals. In addition, *Cantos*, a masterpiece of the great American poet Ezra Pound, is also deeply influenced by *Odyssey*.

4.2. Literary Creation that Quoted from Greek Mythology and Allusions

The cultural connotations of the allusions in Greek mythology are rich and plentiful, so that many British and American writers cite them in their works to increase literary talent and achieve meaningful effects. We can have a long list here like Shakespeare in his masterpiece *Romero and Juliet* and other British and American writers such as Milton, Longfellow, Byron, and T.S. Eliot. They all like to use Greek mythological allusions in their works, which effectively enhancing the language expression techniques and making Greek mythology enduring in British and American literary works.

5. Greek Mythology and Social & Cultural Life in Britain and the U.S

Greek mythology is closely related to British and American culture. It can be said that democracy, humanism and individualism in contemporary British and American culture can all be found in Greek mythology. In Greek mythology, the Gods often discuss important issues openly and vote democratically. For example, in the famous Orestes case, in which Electra's younger brother killed his mother to avenge his father's death. Athena once called the 12 most influential people in Athens to open trial of this case as referees. This is the origin of the 12 person jury system in the modern Anglo-American Judicial System. So we can see that Greek mythology embodies the democratic consciousness of ancient Greeks. Moreover, the image of the Gods in Greek mythology are mostly half human and half god, they are not only superiors, but also have humanized emotions and desires. In the Renaissance, humanists often used Greek mythology to oppose the so-called authority of God in Christianity. It can be seen that Greek mythology has a profound humanistic spirit. The ancient Greeks also worshipped heroes very much. In Greek mythology, heroic legends can be seen everywhere [9]. For example, the story of Jason taking the Golden Fleece reflects the ancient Greek's adventurous spirit and personal heroism.

In addition, the cultural image in Greek mythology is also widely used in news reports and advertisements. For example, *Time* once described Nixon's visit to China as *Nixon's Odyssey to China*. Odyssey, as a heroic epic in ancient Greeks, who had a very difficult journey to go back home after occupied the city of Troy. The metaphor here refers to a long process of the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations. Moreover, British and American advertisements often use the associative meaning of Greek myths and allusions to describe characteristics of products, which not only endows products with strong cultural connotation but also stimulates customers' desire to buy. For example, Nike is the trademark of a kind of advanced sports shoes in the United States, which borrows the name of Nike, the Goddess of victory in Greek mythology. Daphne, the best-selling brand-name of women's shoe trademark, is a beautiful fairy who was once pursued by Apollo and turned into laurel tree in Greek mythology. Obviously, Daphne's cultural image of beauty is borrowed here to achieve the effect of commodity promotion.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, Greek mythology has a profound and huge influence on English vocabulary, idioms, British and American literature and social & cultural life of the United States and Britain. The traces of Greek mythology in College English books can be seen everywhere. Therefore, it is very important to introduce some Greek mythology stories to students in teaching at the proper time, which will further stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in learning English, deepen their understanding of British and American culture, and improve their comprehensive quality.

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