

Some Fascinating Creatures in Greek Mythology: Their Symbolic Significance and Depiction in Art and Literature

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Abstract

Since earliest times monsters have awed, terrified and enthralled us, and they have figured in the myths, stories, poetry and prose of numerous cultures down the ages. There are thousands of poems and passages about them in Classical (i.e. ancient Greek and Latin) literature, ranging all the way from the horrific to the humorous. Finding stories about these creatures which are highly entertaining in themselves, we acquire a basic grounding in literary criticism which will enable us to read narratives about monsters with more perception and more enjoyment. The depiction of monsters and fascinating creatures in literature reveals a lot about the cultures that produce them. The fact that there were so many Classical monsters makes it clear that they filled a need for the Greeks and Romans, for example by providing a safe thrill and scare. They show us what the ancients feared and also found fascinating, what worried them, and what was felt to be good and normal. They give us insights into a view of the human situation-the trials and horrors of life, and how they overcome the terrifying powers of wild nature.

Keywords: Literature, classical, monsters, insight, Greeks

Introduction

Gods, goddesses, demigods, horrible monsters, and beasts of hybrid forms roam the world of Ancient Greek mythology. Their heredity shaped many of the fictional and fantastical creatures of our time. From Sirens that lure sailors to their deaths by their sweet voice, the ravenous Sphinx guarding the entrance to a city, and evil Lamia who has an insatiable appetite for the flesh of small children. These Greek mythological creatures that combine female beauty with beastly ugliness have been titillating fantasies of

generations of artists, writers and have inspired them to create their well-known masterpieces. Here is a list of the most popular creatures and famous artworks devoted to them.

1) The Gorgons

While the description of Gorgons varies across Greek literature, the earliest source defines them as three sisters, Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa, who had hair made of venomous serpents. Whoever looks them in the eye immediately turns into stone. Whilst two of the sisters, Stheno and Euryale are immortal, Medusa, on the other hand, is slain by the hero Perseus. According to the legend, Perseus was given a shield by the goddess Athena and a scythe by Hermes, emissary, and messenger of the Greek gods. He chopped off Medusa's head with the scythe, looking only at her reflection on the shield. Of all the incredible creatures to emerge out of Greek mythology, the Gorgons must surely be the most terrifying. Female forms with snakes for hair, they had the ability to turn any living creature to stone with just a single look. Their name was derived from the Greek word "gorgos" meaning "fierce, terrible and grim." Medusa is, of course, the most famous Gorgon of all time, who was slayed by the almighty Perseus. But there are many more stories surrounding these fascinating and all-powerful monsters. In the most famous Greek myths, the Gorgons were three sisters with coiling snakes for hair, who could turn unwitting onlookers to stone in an instant. Without a doubt, Medusa was the most famous of the terrifying Gorgon sisters. Her name became known through the misadventures of the great hero Perseus, a man who achieved the seemingly impossible, removing the head of Medusa and turning it into a weapon on a stick to wave at his enemies. He managed to cut off Medusa's head by using the reflections in his shiny shield to find her without having to look directly at her. Different writers have described the Gorgons in varying ways. In very early examples of mythology, including those written by Homer, there is only one Gorgon. Ancient Greek writer Hesiod wrote some of the most popular and widespread versions of Greek myth and it are in his version of events that we find the three Gorgons namely Stheno, Euryale and Medusa. Later, the early Roman writer Ovid

expanded on Hesiod's version of the Gorgon's myth. In his story, Medusa was born as the beautiful sister to two Gorgons, but she was later transformed by the goddess Athena into a hideous monster like her sisters after being brutally raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. In Ovid's version of events, it was only Medusa who possessed the strange power to turn onlookers into stone.

Myth of Medusa in Literature

The disembodied head of Medusa is a common theme in art, craft and literature. Feminist theorist Hélène Cixous famously tackled the myth in her essay *'The Laugh of the Medusa.'* She argues that men's retelling of the narrative turned Medusa into a monster because they feared female. Medusa has sometimes appeared as representing notions of scientific determinism and nihilism, especially in contrast with romantic idealism. In this interpretation of Medusa, attempts to avoid looking into her eyes represent avoiding the ostensibly depressing reality that the universe is meaningless. Jack London uses Medusa in this way in his novel *'The Mutiny of the Elsinore.'* In 1940, Sigmund Freud's *'Das Medusenhaupt (Medusa's Head)'* was published posthumously. In Freud's interpretation: to decapitate means to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. The Medusa story has also been interpreted in contemporary art as a classic case of rape-victim blaming, by the Goddess Athena. Inspired by the #metoo movement, contemporary figurative artist Judy Takács returns Medusa's beauty along with hashtag stigmata in her portrait, #Me (dusa)too.

Symbolic significance of the myth of Medusa

The Gorgon's head (or the head of Medusa) is a symbol of terror, death and divine magical power, in Greek mythology. In the myths, any mortal who set eyes upon it was immediately turned to stone.

However, it also became a symbol of protection and safety. Since it was popular among the Roman emperors and Hellenistic kings who often wore gorgon amulets on their person, the Gorgoneion became a symbol closely associated with royalty. The image of

the Gorgon remains in use even today, worn by those who still believe in its ability to protect them from evil. It is also used by businesses and contemporary designers. The symbol is most popular as the logo for fashion house 'Versace'.

2) The Sphinx

It is commonly known as a creature with man's head and the body of a lion, guarding the ageless pyramids of the Egyptian pharaohs. However, the Greeks adopted this mythical creature into their literature as a treacherous and merciless monster with the head of a woman, the haunches of a lion, wings of an eagle, and a tail with a serpent's head. It guarded the entrance to the Greek city of Thebes and asked riddles to travelers who wished to enter the city. Anyone who failed to answer was eaten alive. In 'Oedipus Rex', Sophocles described this creature called Sphinx, how she used to devour her preys mercilessly. Sphinx enjoyed batting around her prey before devouring them. Her favorite game was to allow her victims hope of escape by offering a riddle for them to solve. If the riddle was solved, not only would the victim escape death, but the Sphinx would also kill herself. Of course, this only served to raise the hopes of men before they were eaten, for no one was able to solve her riddles. The Sphinx lived in the mountains on the outskirts of Thebes. The king of Thebes was so distraught by the constant attacks on his people that he offered up the crown and the hand of his recently widowed sister to anyone who could solve the riddle and rid Thebes of the Sphinx forever. Several men tried, but all were devoured by the Sphinx. Finally, Oedipus was able to solve the riddle. Oedipus had wandered in from out of town and offered to help the city. He approached the Sphinx and she once more proposed her riddle: *"What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?"* Oedipus wasted no time in answering the monster: *"Man"*. Man crawls on all fours in the morning of life, walks upright on two legs during the afternoon of life, and uses a cane as his third leg during the evening of life. The Sphinx was so furious that she had been beaten that she threw herself off a cliff and was killed. The city of Thebes was saved, and Oedipus gained the throne and marriage to

the beautiful Jocasta. The British poet Oscar Wilde even devoted a fascinating male-fantasy poem '*The Sphinx*' to this mythical creature.

The Victorian era's famous writer Charlotte Bronte has also used the allusion of sphinx in her masterpiece '*Jane Eyre*'. In the novel Mr. Rochester in one of the conversations during one of the gatherings in the dining room at Thornfield Hall states to Jane, "*You are afraid of me, because I talk like a sphinx*" (chapter XIV). Mr. Rochester tried to start a conversation with Jane but he confused Jane and made her feel overwhelmed. When Mr. Rochester stated this, he was talking about the Sphinx, the creature that had a human head with a lion's body and was extremely wise. The Sphinx spoke in riddles, forcing those who were passing by to answer her riddle correctly. Those who failed were killed. This continued on until a man named Oedipus answered the riddle correctly and the Sphinx killed herself. When Mr. Rochester refers to himself speaking like the Sphinx, he says he was speaking in a confusing way. Jane is like one of the people passing by, she doesn't want to answer incorrectly and get herself "killed" especially since she is just getting to know Rochester and doesn't want to give him a bad first impression.

Symbolic significance of Sphinx

The myth of sphinx is one of the most beautiful and significant of Greek culture. This special character is as symbol of mystery an enigma. This creature also makes possible the fulfillment of Oedipus' unfortunate plan to kill his father and marry his own mother. This is why this myth has a special place in psychoanalysis. The sphinx was a mysterious and frightening creature due to the death and desolation it generated. At the same time, it was of the same nature of the muses as it used to sing riddles, which is why Sophocles referred to her as a 'cruel singer'. Symbolically, the myth of sphinx is more than an entertaining story. It is about the way in which some circumstances and situations conspires so that human beings end up trapped up in their own destiny, even though we may think we come on top when deciphering an enigma within our path.

3) Phoenix

A legendary bird without parent and without offspring, it nurtured itself on sunlight and sea spray. When about to die, it drew new life from those primal elements of fire and water and was born again. Its feathers were gold and red and blinding white as the sun; its eyes were green as the sea. It is sometimes described as building its nest in the form of a funeral pyre, setting the nest afire, and then, when consumed, rising from its own ashes. The ancient Greeks and Egyptians described this mythical bird, a magnificent creature that was a symbol of renewal and rebirth. According to legend, each Phoenix lived for 500 years, and only one Phoenix lived at a time. Just before its time was up, the Phoenix built a nest and set itself on fire. Then, a new Phoenix would rise from the ashes.

Phoenix in literature

A number of poets have written about phoenixes, drawing on these features of the mythical bird's symbolism. Indeed, phoenixes in English poetry are almost as old as English poetry itself: an anonymous ninth-century Anglo-Saxon poem, '*The Phoenix*' is a 677-line work included in the glorious '*Exeter Book*'. It's a loose translation of a Latin poem and has been attributed (tentatively) to Cynewulf.

Shakespeare has also written a poem '*The Phoenix and the Turtle*' which is an allegorical poem about the death of ideal love. It is widely considered to be one of his most obscure works and has led to many conflicting interpretation. It has also been called '*the first great published metaphysical poem*'. But in more recent times, poets have used the phoenix to denote more personal love for someone rare and precious. The Irish poet W.B Yeats wrote the poem '*His Phoenix*', about his Muse, Maud Gonne.

Symbolic significance

The phoenix is a magical and majestic bird that symbolizes birth, hope, progress, death, rebirth and eternity. It represents the cyclic nature of life and its renewal. Recent additions to the legend of the phoenix claim that its tears have the ability to heal people. Within its decline and death is embedded the seed of the new. Thus, the phoenix

represents creation and eternal life. The phoenix dies, only to be reborn, rejuvenated and young. This holds the concept that the end is just another beginning. It's a symbol of fresh beginnings, positivity and hope. In modern use, the phrase 'rise like a phoenix' is used to denote overcoming adversity, emerging from a crisis stronger and more powerful than before.

4) Pegasus

The mythical immortal flying horse in Greek mythology was famous for helping gods and heroes achieve great victories. He is a popular and enduring figure who has special meaning to many people. For example, Pegasus meanings include freedom, power, and the eternal spring of imagination and creativity .Pegasus was an immortal flying horse. He was the son of the god of the Sea, Poseidon, and the winged and snake-haired gorgon Medusa. A powerful figure in his own right, Pegasus joined forces with Greek gods and heroes to help them achieve nearly impossible feat. Pegasus was born when the Greek hero Perseus cut off the head of the monster Medusa. From Medusa's headless neck, Pegasus sprang, fully formed, along with his brother Chrysaor .Because Pegasus was a land animal who could fly, he represents the ability for human beings to imagine a world that is more magical than that of everyday life.

Symbolic Significance

Pegasus is a powerful symbol for freedom and limitless imagination and creativity. This magnificent mythical creature symbolizes, living the life we were born to live without restraints or fears of being judged. It also represents striking and elegant strength and beauty.

The pegasus is a prominent symbol of inspiration in art and literature. Pegasus is the title character in the Pegasus book series by Canadian children fantasy writer Kate O' Hearn.

5) Nymphs

In Greek mythology, nymphs were minor female deities, or goddesses, associated with nature. Typically pictured as beautiful girls or young women, they could live for a very long time but were not immortal (able to live forever). Most nymphs were the daughters of Zeus, the leader of the gods, or of other gods. They generally had gentle natures and acted with kindness toward humans. Some stories, however, tell of nymphs who lured unsuspecting mortals to their deaths. Nymphs rarely had a central role in Greek myths. Usually they played supporting parts as the companions of gods and satyrs (creatures that are half human and half goat). The goddess Artemis (the goddess of wild animals, the hunt, and the vegetation and of chastity and childbirth) for example, often had nymphs attending her when she went hunting. Nymphs also became the lovers or wives of gods or heroes. The Dryad Eurydice married the poet and musician Orpheus. After Eurydice died from snakebite, Orpheus tried to retrieve her from the underworld, or land of the dead, but failed to meet the conditions set for her return.

In contrast to the most famous gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons (or collections of recognized gods), nymphs were generally associated with very specific locations. Small communities each had their own groups of nymphs that were recognized, and just as certain gods were linked with professions, these nymphs were an important part of the community's identity.

Symbolic Significance of Nymphs

Nymphs were considered symbols of beauty and femininity. This is illustrated by the number of gods and men that fall in love with them on sight or have love affairs with them, including Odysseus and Orpheus. Another theme present in the tales of nymphs is the close association of females with nature. All nymphs are said to be female and all represent different aspects of nature, such as trees, streams, mountains, and meadows. The nymphs themselves are symbolized by these objects. A Hamadryad, for example, is said to live in a specific tree, and, if that tree is harmed, the nymph perishes also. In this

way, it can be said that nymphs symbolize the beauty and fragile state of the natural world.

Nymphs in Art and Literature

Though the idea of nymphs in general has endured in art and literature, only a few specific nymphs have remained well-known. Eurydice is perhaps the most famous, appearing in paintings, operas, and even films. Echo was another nymph famous for her love of the vain Narcissus, a myth often captured in art and literature. The Muses are also nymphs and are popular in their own right as the goddesses who inspire creativity. More often, however, nymphs are portrayed less specifically, with many authors and artists depicting nameless nymphs of a certain type, such as Dryads or Nereids. Dryads have remained the best known of the nymphs and have appeared in literary works such as C. S. Lewis's, *'The Chronicles of Narnia'* and the poems of Sylvia Plath.

Conclusion

The depiction of monsters or mythical creatures in art and literature combines good and evil and usually intends to evoke a sense of horror, terror and mystery among the readers or audience. In every mythology, they have prominent places. These kinds of characters in mythology and in art and literature never fail to amaze the people plus they have many symbolic connotations and significance.

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