**Sisyphus (Graves)**

**Paper: Western Mythology: Introducing Classical & Judeo-Christian Myth**

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The term ‘myth’ originated from the Greek word ‘Mythos’ meaning a story or a plot which might be true or fictional. It was originally used in Greek Classical literature. In common usage, myth refers to a traditional story, originally believed to be true by a cultural group, which forms a part of a network of systematic connected stories where the protagonist has supernatural powers or has done a supernatural deed. The network of systematic connected stories of primordial origin is called ‘mythology’. Myth can be differentiated from legend and folklore based on the nature of the protagonist and the type of plot, respectively. If the protagonist is a mere human being doing great feats, the story is called a legend. If the story exists individually and is not part of a mythology, it is known as folklore.

In modern usage, myths serve the purpose of unfolding part of the worldview of why certain social practices are being followed and try to justify social rituals, among others. According to literary critic, M.H. Abrams in his work *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, “Myth…served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.”(179)

Writers and poets down the ages have also deliberately tried to create their own ‘myths’ by deliberately interconnecting their plots across different works. Such writers and poets include James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Eugene O Neil and W.B.Yeats among others.

In the middle of the 20th century their surged a renewed interest in the study of ancient myths and gave rise to a group of writer-critics called the ‘myth critics’ who started analysis the individual plot patterns of a varied works of literature and were interested in locating specific symbols, images, reoccurrences, reiterating characters, across different plots. Robert Graves, Nortorpe Frye to name a few.

Myth critic and poet, Robert Graves, who served in the Great War, apart from writing poetry and memoirs on his war experiences, also wrote at length on mythology. His most well known work, *The Greek Myths* is a lively retelling of the ancient myths and includes Heracles' labors, the Olympian tales, and the myths of Sisyphus, Midas, the Argonauts, and many others. In chapter 11, he talks extensively on the Greek myth of Sisyphus.

So who was Sisyphus? According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was believed to be the king and was supposed to be the founder of Ephyra, present day Corinth. He was the son Aeolus, the son of Hellen, whom the gods gave the control of the winds. According to Robert Graves, the name Sisyphus may be linked to Tesup (or Teshub) a Hittite sun-god. Sisyphus was married to Merope, one of the Pleiades. Sisyphus was glorified and stigmatized as “the most cunning of man” thereby having both the qualities of a warrior-hero and that of an intellectual.

Sisyphus’ major crime which created enmity with the gods was the fact that he witnessed Zeus, the god of gods, in the form of a giant eagle, abducting Aegina, the daughter of the river god, Aesophus and thereafter revealing to Aesophus what he witnessed. This angered Zeus who ordered Thanatos, the god of Hades (hell) to bring Sisyphus to the underworld. Sisyphus used his cunningness to deceit death. He outwitted Thanatos with his superior intellect and made Thanatos a prisoner in his house. Finally, Ares, the god of war, most affected by the absence of death in the world, set Thanatos free and together they delivered Sisyphus to the underworld. But to escape death for a second time, Sisyphus planned a new scheme. He asked his wife, Merope, not to give him the required burial rites. On reaching the palace of Hades, he complained to Persephone, the Queen of Hades that he was denied a proper burial by his wife and that he should be sent back to the upper world for the burial rites. Persephone accepted when he gave his word that he will return in three days. Being the trickster that he was known to be, Sisyphus broke his pledge and continued to live till his old age. Thus he was not only a rebel who opposed the gods, using his craftiness and immense longing to live, fooled death twice.

After Sisyphus lived for many more years, old age claimed him at last and his punishment awaited him. For his offenses to both Zeus and Thanatos, in Hades he was condemned to eternal punishment in Tartarus, the lowest region of the Underworld.

Sisyphus was eternally punished to roll a massive rock to the top of a steep hill. But his efforts were always left in futility, for whenever Sisyphus neared the top, the rock would roll down right back again. Sisyphus was thus forced to start his toil all over again. This way he was cursed and doomed for eternity

Sisyphus’ story has been interpreted differently throughout the ages. Many believes that the rock is a sun-disk and the mountain slope, the vault of heaven. According to the [solar theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_theory), King Sisyphus is the disk of the sun that rises every day in the east and then sinks into the west as the day ends.

Absurdist writer, Albert Camus in his groundbreaking work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, believes that heroism is defined by Sisyphus, someone who is fated to spend eternity pushing a huge boulder up a mountain only for it to roll back down so that he must start all over again. Camus sees Sisyphus as a tragic hero because Sisyphus is not ignorant that his effort is futile. But that perseverance in the face of futility is true heroism, even joy. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Camus writes. The sense that the human condition was about how one imposes meaning on meaningless work and the realization that this is one’s fundamental creative act. One a different thought Camus may have referred to those tasks which are hopeless but necessary, like fighting for justice or working in a hospital. People will die, new injustices constantly creep up, some problems are undefeatable, but realizing the fact that since the world goes on, one has to go on doing what is repetitive but necessary.

The name ‘Sisyphus’ has been etymologically related to the word ‘sesophos’ which means ‘very wise’ or overwise (Simon 431). Hence Sisyphus may be seen as the exemplary crafty human competitor with the gods or the ones in power. The myth of Sisyphus finds mention in many great literary works especially in Homer’s epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* among others. In modern usage, the term ‘Sisyphean’ is used to denote to a task which is laborious, endless yet necessary.

**References/Further Reading**

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