

The Problem of Homer's Blindness: Sanctity of the Story in *I Am One of You Forever*

Throughout the vivid history of literature in the southern Appalachian region of the United States, reference to the Classics is conspicuously absent. It is rare to find evidence of a discipline long stereotyped as elitist in an area conversely stereotyped as poor and uneducated, where, at first assumption, knowledge of the ancient world serves little to no purpose. That being said, author, poet, and Appalachian native Fred Chappell bridges this disconnect between eras in his 1985 novel *I Am One of You Forever*. Set in western North Carolina during the early years of World War II, main character and narrator Jess attempts to discover his truth in relation to those closest to him as he comes of age, and these truths are most often imparted through telling stories. The art and importance of storytelling come to the forefront in chapter six of the novel, aptly titled "The Storytellers," wherein Jess' family endures a visit from his eccentric Uncle Zeno. Zeno earns both admiration and ire with his random, nonlinear, and often fantastical retellings of events that supposedly occurred in the area Jess has lived in all his life—one of his many remarkable parallels to Homer—but while Jess finds himself enthralled, his father, Joe Robert, becomes wildly jealous. It is only after Zeno begins reciting his own version of a journey epic that Joe Robert swears to uncover the truth himself, hoping to prove Zeno a fraud in finding that none of his stories are based in reality—an endeavor Jess calls "playing archaeologist," alongside several references to Heinrich Schliemann (Chappell 107). Chappell's juxtapositions between his characters and figures of, and relating to, antiquity raise significant questions: is a story worth believing—or valuing—if there is no tangible truth to it? Is an evidence-based field

like archaeology truly such an antithesis to, or perhaps even detrimental to, the power of narrative?

This paper analyzes the larger role of storytelling in the novel, while paying particular attention to chapter six, in order to highlight the extent of Chappell's Classical references and how they might help reimagine the way the Classics are taught and received in such a specific region. Pulling from an extensive and rich history of oral storytelling traditions in southern Appalachia, from the Cherokee to the Scotch-Irish, Chappell draws a distinct and solid line between both them and the oral traditions of ancient Greece, and illustrates that these storytelling traditions are far more alike than not despite their different cultural contexts. He further proves that Homer's influence and role in recorded history are indeed felt in a region rarely considered "fit" enough to uphold and teach his legacy, and, in turn, that such a region is more than equipped to find meaning in stories of old. The stark contrast between Zeno's retellings and Joe Robert's skepticism provide insightful commentary on how tradition has the potential to enhance rather than hinder reception of the Classical in the modern world—and the lessons that Jess learns from the events of the chapter perfectly illustrate this. Even in a setting so far from Homer's ancient Greece, Jess' realization is striking: the question of legitimacy—or, as Jess' father calls it, "the problem of Homer's blindness" (Chappell 103)—pales in comparison to a story's greater meaning.

Work Cited

Chappell, Fred. *I Am One of You Forever: A Novel*. Louisiana State University Press, 1987.