

Lost on Pandora's Island

One of the most provocative and ambitious cultural projects of the post-9/11 media landscape, ABC's *Lost* dramatized a fundamental human question: what drives individuals to commit acts of selflessness that pave the way to civilization, versus acts of violence that seek its destruction? In addressing questions of social origins and human nature, storytellers have always turned to myth. This paper argues that the series creators of *Lost* adopted the Greek myth of Pandora to shape a narrative and symbolic infrastructure that encompasses not only the characterizations and archetypal resonances of the major female characters, but also undergirds the mythology of the island in the final two seasons. The density of invocations of the Pandora myth suggests that the series creators reached beyond the most popularly accessible association with the myth to elements that rely upon scholarly interpretations (e.g. Zeitlin 1995, Hurwit 1995, Reeder 1995, Brown 1997, Neils 2005).

This paper begins from the popular invocation of the "Pandora's Box" trope in online *Lost* discussion forums with respect to The Hatch (cf. Harrison 1900, Panofsky 1956, Walcott 1961, Wuttke 1974). From there, it proceeds to lay out the prevalence of themes more specifically derived from the Hesiodic tradition: pregnancy as a source of existential anxiety primarily, yet also cautious hope; and the pointed repetition of the "femme fatale" narrative, especially cases in which women meant no harm but nevertheless caused death through their dangerously uncontrolled sexuality. Finally, these themes are combined with imagery associated with pregnancy, such as the womb as upside-down container, in the elaboration of the island's mythology: through the plot arc of the Dharma Initiative's fatal "unsealing" of a womb-like energy pocket; and the origin story of the ancient godlike twins Jacob and the Man in Black, whose visits to the cave containing the numinous force that controls the mortal condition

highlights the danger of the woman who guards it and feminine generative power. According to the series' mythology, to defeat the destructive impulses inhabiting the hearts of men, the very myth of Pandora must be undone—and the power associated with feminine sexuality contained.

By adducing the Pandora myth to interpret *Lost*, some of the most popular, and popularly reviled, elements of the series are clarified, demonstrating how cultural literacy continues to necessitate that once-standard knowledge of the classical tradition in order to appreciate one of the most ambitious narrative projects of our time.

Works Cited

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