

Introducing Superhero Tales into the Classroom: Greek Myth and the Changing Nature of Story

This paper explores how superhero tales can be introduced into the classroom, as a way of helping students think about theory and narrative in relationship to Greek myth. In doing so I explore a handful of Batman tales primarily in light of Walter Burkert's ideas about myth with a brief concluding discussion of Fritz Graf's thoughts on vertical and horizontal traditions in narrative.

Over the years I have encountered two fundamental challenges while teaching Greek myth. (1) Students, when first coming to class, often view the study of myth as being an historical venture that is essentially unrelated to their own lives. (2) Moreover, students can also view Greek myths as being disconnected from their cultural or historical contexts. One way that scholars address the former challenge is to remind us how a common meaning of the word *mythos* in ancient Greek is “story” (which remains important to us here and now). In order to address questions about the function and changing nature of story, I often introduce the ideas of Walter Burkert (1979, 22-23): “The specific character of myth seems to lie neither in the structure nor in the content of a tale, but in the use to which it is put...” Before taking my students on a deeper dive into ancient literature and culture, however, we often begin by exploring something a little more familiar – the stories of contemporary American superheroes. Here I argue that much like Greek myth, the stories of Batman over the past century could be considered as a kind of traditional tale applied, even though they are fictional tales, not credence narratives.

After offering an introductory survey of Batman's history, I briefly compare earlier portrayals of Batman (such as *Detective Comics* 27) with *The Batman* (2022), a contemporary tale in which Batman is still fighting crime to keep Gotham safe, but the “use to which the story is put”

feels far removed from the 1930s. But even if the storylines and themes of these two Batman stories reveal vast differences, what does Batman have to do with Greek myth? The answer that I am putting forth does not seek to offer a comparison of heroes and heroines in the contemporary and ancient world, but instead to spark a discussion about the ways in which stories adapt to culture and speak to their audiences. Turning to Greek myths, there are numerous examples that offer valid comparisons, e.g. the depiction of Prometheus in Hesiod and Aeschylus or Agamemnon's homecoming in Homer's *Odyssey* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

This paper is in conversation with Burkert 1979, but updated to reflect the taxonomy of oral narrative genres in Hansen 2019 and ideas of vertical and horizontal narrative in Graf 1998. It draws from Batman comics and graphic novels, including *Detective Comics* 27, 1939, Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*, and the film *The Batman* (2022). Also relevant are Kovacs and Marshall 2011 and 2015.

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