

The Sensual Dead: Exploring the Non-Visual Paradigm of the Greek Afterlife

Death is often framed in terms of loss—loss of life, loss of body, and loss of sight; however, in ancient Greek literature, discussions of the afterlife often focus on the elements of existence that are preserved or gained, particularly the experiences of the non-visual senses. Despite their lack of physical bodies, the dead have a remarkable range of sensual experience. In Homer, they squeak like bats, suffer bloody wounds, and converse with each other as well as with living men after tasting blood (*Odyssey* 11, 24). In fact, rewards and punishments in the afterlife are often defined in terms of their effects on the senses. So, Tityus feels pain as vultures eat his liver (*Ody.* 576-579), Orphic initiates are extremely thirsty upon arrival in Hades (*Orphic Gold Tablets* 10-14 in Graf and Johnston 2007), and the blessed dead spend eternity feasting, either at symposia or on “honey-sweet” fruit (Hesiod, *Works & Days* 172-173). In this scheme, the sense that has the least importance is sight. Moreover, in descriptions of Underworld visits, there is a particular emphasis on the murky darkness of Hades, which makes it hard to discern the features of its terrain and inhabitants.

In this paper, I explore the sensual experiences of the dead and the associations of different existential states with various physical senses. I argue that the ancient Greek literary Underworld is configured as an alternate reality operating according to a non-visual paradigm. The experiences of souls center on the non-visual, implying that sight is a particular attribute of living beings and is as ephemeral as life itself. When taking a character into the Underworld, an author forces his audience to consider the importance of their sight-based lives, removing them from the words on the page and what they *see* in the main narrative. By formulating an existence that must be lived through the sounds, smells, touch, and tastes of the Tartaran space, the narrator

reaffirms the relationship between man and his world as well as a narrative and its tradition. Instead of dehumanizing a dead character, the focus on the non-visual senses re-asserts that ghost's connection to the natural world and integrates humans with a vivified environment. What is lost by death, therefore, is gained through an integration with the landscape of the Underworld which is responsive to the souls' mental and physical states. This representation of a sensual dead allows the Underworld space and its society to act as an oblique reflection of the real world, in which themes from the narrative are highlighted by presenting familiar figures and visual landscapes in new ways the blur the boundary between the human and non-human worlds.

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