

Classical Allusions in *Longmire*

In recent years, classical receptions scholars have identified a close connection between Western film and works from classical antiquity. While this parallel is most commonly focused on Homeric epic, others have pointed to connections with tragedy, with episodes from mythology, or with themes such as the *katabasis*. Both the prevalence of these arguments and the diversity of the connections these scholars are making suggest that something important is going on here. This paper aims to explore further the relationship between Western film and Greek and Roman antiquity by examining the use of classical allusions in the A&E/Netflix series *Longmire*.

Longmire's protagonist Walt Longmire is in many ways a standard Western hero: he not only serves as sheriff in a violent Western territory where whites and Native Americans frequently clash, he also has the requisite traits of strength, toughness, perceptiveness, imperturbability, and laconism. In season two, however, the series begins to associate him explicitly with classical learning: he knows Latin (S2E2 and S3E10), threatens his enemies using a Homeric exemplum (S2E12), and even quotes Heraclitus (S3E5). His familiarity with classical antiquity, moreover, is emphasized by the contrast with his deputy Vic, who is at an utter loss when encountering Latin (S2E2) and who only learns of Socrates' association with hemlock by "Googling it" (S2E3).

While the hero's association with classical learning in this series initially seems at odds with our notions of the typical Westerner's nature, a deeper look shows that it strengthens the connections between the heroes of ancient epic and those of Western film. As Blundell and Ormand have shown, heroes in both these genres are men out of time, excluded from full participation in the societies whose progress their special skills enable. Likewise, *Longmire* contributing writer (and season four co-producer) Tony Tost has indicated that an overall

strategy of the series is to draw Walt as a man who “has outlived his proper society”; although it is largely through him that justice is served and order kept in Absaroka County, his estrangement from the society he protects is illustrated through his rejection of modern technologies and his characterization as a loner even in a crowd.

In addition, just as the heroes of epic are men torn between two paths – Achilles has his famous choice between a long life of obscurity and a short, glorious one; Odysseus is the consummate wanderer but longs for wife and home; and Aeneas is torn between settling down with Dido and the duty to found Rome – so too are Western heroes from *High Noon*’s Will Kane to *Unforgiven*’s William Munny drawn back into heroic duty despite domestic inclinations. Walt, likewise, is portrayed as a man divided: as Tost puts it, “if he didn’t have his daughter and his sense of obligation to his county...he’d probably just grab a bottle of whiskey [and] a copy of Dante’s *Inferno*, and head into the woods and never come back.”

Walt Longmire also embodies another important quality that characterizes heroes of both ancient epic and of Westerns: a close identification with his enemy. Just as Achilles confronts a version of himself when he faces Hector wearing his own armor; just as Odysseus replicates with Polyphemus many of the “sins” for which he holds the suitors responsible; and just as Aeneas succumbs in the end to the same *furor* condemned in Turnus throughout the epic; so too do the enemies of Western heroes like Shane (*Shane*) and Ethan Edwards (*The Searchers*) serve as mirrors of the protagonists themselves (see Day 2008). In *Longmire*, too, not only do we find a “dark undercurrent of mirroring” between Walt and Ed Gorski (Tost 2015), a similar dynamic is implied between Walt and the corrupt former tribal police chief Malachi Strand, as is suggested by scenes cut from S3E5, in which Malachi, too, demonstrates familiarity with Heraclitus (Tost 2015).

The classical allusions in *Longmire* not only serve to enrich the characterization of its enigmatic protagonist, but also further reinforce the important connections between the Western genre and classical antiquity, further exploration of which sheds new light on the canonical works of Greece and Rome and on our particularly American mythologies as well.

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