**Classics 1 Lesson 6: What the Ancient Greeks Gave the World**

**Great Thinkers of Ancient Greece:**

There are many things which either have their roots in Ancient Greece, or have been inspired by events there. Philosophy, maths, medicine, democracy and culture have been influenced through the ages by the developments made in the Classical age. Some of the greatest thinkers of all time were Greek, and alive at a similar time, in fact the three most famous have a direct connection to one another. Socrates was the teacher of Plato, who in turn was the teacher of Aristotle (who then taught Alexander the Great!), all of them with ideas that have survived the last 2,400 years or so, albeit with significant advancements in that time.

**Socrates** was a philosopher, and whilst he is respected today, was sentenced to death for his views, which served only to inspire others to follow them. What we know of Socrates comes from **Plato** as Socrates did not produce any writing, or none that survived, whereas we have extensive evidence from Plato. Not everyone agrees that Plato’s accounts of Socrates are accurate, he wrote after Socrates death and may have exaggerated or used Socrates to boost his own standing, but it is clear that he inspired some of the finest minds in Ancient Greece. Plato himself was born around the start of the Peloponnesian War, in which Athens lost its dominance in the Greek world, and he takes Socrates ideas further. He has a significant impact on the field of philosophy, and although there was philosophy before Plato, his influence on how the subject is approached is so big that many people would credit him with inventing the discipline. Plato is credited with inventing Political Science as a discipline, and he wrote extensively on politics, idealism, metaphysics and even love; in fact today we continue to use the word platonic to describe love that is not romantic. Plato established a school, or university, in an area outside of Athens known as Hekademia which is better translated as **Academy**, and gives rise to the use of that word in connection with education.

One of the first students of the Academy was **Aristotle**. He was a natural philosopher who has influenced the study of Physics and other sciences through the way he approached his work, and some of his thoughts on motion, the elements, and astronomy, including his view that the earth was round based on maths and geology (he was not the first to suggest this, but offered further evidence). He is undoubtedly one of the most important thinkers in history, and whilst it is philosophy that these men are renowned for, it is important to realise that it was this work, and that of those who followed, which established the sciences as we know them, so these thinkers were the early scientists. Given the importance of science to the world in which we live, the influence of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to our understanding of our world has been immense. Many of their theories have been replaced by better understandings, but even 24 centuries later some of their work still stands. Their ideas spread far, partly because Aristotle tutored Alexander the Great who then ruled over most of Asia, Africa and Europe, but they continue to be studied today.

Other great thinkers include **Pythagoras**, who not only influenced the study of maths with his famous theory, but himself inspired Plato who came after him. **Hippocrates** is considered the father of medicine, as he separated medicine from philosophy, suggested that sickness was not from the gods, but from the body and environment, and brought in professional standards for dealing with patients. The most famous aspect of Hippocrates is the Hippocratic oath, which all of his students had to take, and which, heavily adapted, is taken by doctors all over the world today.

**Democracy:**

Of all the things that Ancient Greece is remembered for, Democracy is perhaps the one that springs to mind for most people. Any politics graduate will have been taught that Demos means people and Kratos means power and that Athens was perhaps the world’s first democracy. This is not necessarily a fact, the democracy of Athens would not stand up to modern standards, but there is no doubt that **Athenian Democracy** was the inspiration to others who have improved on it dramatically over the course of 2,500 years. Athenian Democracy was a form of direct democracy where everyone had a say in how the city state was run. By everyone, you can exclude women, slaves, foreigners, anyone who had not completed national service (mandatory army training) children and anyone with debts to pay or in trouble with the law. This means that about 10% of people had a say, so clearly not democratic at all by modern standards, but most men born in Athens and not a slave would be able to participate. Not everyone could attend every session, and sometimes only the first 6,000 people would be allowed in and several thousand more turned away, especially once payment for taking part was introduced. When the Spartans won the Peloponnesian War, Athenian Democracy was abandoned, it then made a return before the Macedon Empire abolished it for a time. Today, Greece is a representative democracy, like most countries, but whilst modern democracy is more like what the Roman Empire devised, they were inspired by the Athenians, and so it is clear that modern democracy is inspired by the Ancient Greeks.

**Art and Culture:**

One of the areas in which the myths themselves are most obvious is in relation to the art that has been inspired by the Ancient Greeks. Many of the great painters and sculptors have drawn inspiration from myth, such as Picasso, Cezanne, Matisse and Da Vinci. Perhaps the best known of the mythically inspired artworks is Boticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, Venus being the name that the Romans gave to Aphrodite, and in which she is seen emerging from the water.

Art is like myth in some ways, a piece of art may tell a story, for example the Anselmi painting *Apollo and Marsyas* which illustrates the myth in which Marsyas claimed to be a better musician than Apollo, and after a contest, was skinned alive by the god. Like myth though, art can also be abstract, in which the actual piece is conveying an idea rather than a specific story, much like how the myths could be allegorical or used to explain the world in which the Ancient Greeks were living. Newman’s *Achilles* is a particularly abstract example, but Picasso also used mythology in his work in order to hint at certain themes, and the Minotaur is the main subject in his work *Minotauromachy*, as well as making an appearance in his most famous piece of work, *Guernica*.

Perhaps the most stunning piece of art around the myths is a straightforward telling of the myth of Phaeton in Rubens’ *Fall of phaeton* in which the son of Helios tries to steer the chariot of the sun for a day, but cannot control the horses that pull the sun and dies. His plunge to earth is the subject of the painting which is a chaotic masterpiece. Rubens was fond of mythology in his work and is the creator of the most famous version of the *Judgement of Paris*, though others have painted that scene.

Mythology is also influential in other aspects of culture beyond art, including in literature. Shakespeare often used examples from mythology or drew on the myths for lines of dialogues in his plays. In fact mythological creatures or figures have speaking parts in six of his plays including the play *Venus and Adonis* (he usually used the Roman name for the myths). Shakespeare’s most famous work is arguably *Romeo and Juliet* and it is itself the retelling of a myth. The myth of Pyramus and Thisbe revolves around two lovers who cannot be together as their families are rivals. They arrange to meet, but Thisbe arrives first and is scared off by a lion, dropping her robe. When Pyramus arrives he sees the lion with the robe, and blood from its previous meal, and concludes that Thisbe has been killed. He kills himself and is then found by Thisbe who kills herself (in a scene painted by Pagani) – this is extremely close to the plot of Romeo and Juliet. Other playwrights have also been influenced by the myths, as have poets such as Byron and Tennyson, the latter writing *Tithonus*, a poem about the myth of Tithonus, a brilliant story of a man who becomes immortal but continues to age, eventually begging for death.

The Greek Myths have also inspired music, from classical pieces to the odd song, but they are most prevalent in opera, and the founding of opera itself is connected to Greek Mythology. Opera was founded at the end of the 16th century in Italy, and the first ever opera performed was *Dafne*, an opera about Apollo falling in love with Daphne. More than that one opera, though, the reason for the creation of opera as a form of theatre was a way of reviving Greek Drama, so even modern day operas owe a debt to the Ancient Greeks, a constant source of material and the inspiration behind opera itself.

**The Myths Around Us:**

One of the most obvious places in which we see the myths is on TV, either in dramas or in film. Movies such as Troy and the like have a very obvious connection, but there are some popular shows which owe much of their source material to the myths. Not only have the myths inspired stories about them, but some of the themes within the myths have been used successfully, for example *Star Wars* is arguably a version of the Greek Hero Story. In many of the major myths about heroes such as Hercules or Jason, they go on a journey, much like the plot of *Star Wars*. Hercules required training before he was ready to take on the tasks that would befall him, and this again has parallels with elements of the plot of *Star Wars*. Even video games have joined in on the act, with one version of *Assassin’s Creed* set during the Peloponnesian War.

Another way that we see the myths without necessarily always realising is in the names of companies or the logos that they use. Hermes, the delivery company, are named after the messenger god, whilst Nike was herself the god of victory. The jewellery company Pandora actually want you to open their boxes, whilst you may need to take care looking directly at the Versace logo, as the Medusa can turn you to stone with one glance. Others are a little less obvious, in naming a company that sells soaps and beauty products to women, you would look to Aphrodite for inspiration, but rather than her name it was the symbol commonly used in relation to her which gave the company its name, a dove.

The Ancient Greeks gave us much that we have built on, and their enduring influence has extended their reach almost three millennia. The advancements in science, philosophy, medicine, the arts, architecture, politics and a whole host of other areas mean that they will remain a much-studied people. Throughout all of that, though, the myths that they believed in, and which helped them to understand the world they lived in, help us still to understand their society and to get to know them better. They are also entertaining stories which have been told for thousands of years, and no doubt always will – I truly hope that you have enjoyed them.

**Classics 1 Task 6: What the Ancient Greeks Gave the World**

Please complete this week’s task as a word document and return it as an attachment on teams. The document title should be PUPIL NAME Classics week 6.

**Part A:**

This is the final task, and will take longer than the other tasks usually do, so your deadline will reflect that. You will produce a report, investigation or research piece in which you choose an aspect of Ancient Greek culture to focus on, and to expand your knowledge on. This can come from any of the lessons or from outwith the lessons, and some suggested topics are below, though you have free reign to choose your own if you so wish.

The Peloponnesian War

The Odyssey (Odysseus’ eventful journey home from Troy)

Jason and the Argonauts

Greek Drama

Women in Ancient Greece

The Lessons of the Myths

The Spartans

Athenian Democracy

Alexander the Great/ The Macedon Empire

The Greek Philosophers

You can choose any format, and have total control over what you produce, but to reflect the time given over to the task, an absolute minimum of 500 words is required, and you are free to significantly exceed that if you wish.

**Part B:**

The words in bold throughout the lesson form the last set of words for your glossary – a useful self-made guide to the myths for you to reflect on.

**Further Reading:**

You will find your own further reading for your research, but for general further reading either on the Greek myths, Ancient Greece, or myths in general, you should consider the following:

*The History of Ancient Greece –* Podcast by CLNS Media Network

[www.thehistoryofancientgreece.com](http://www.thehistoryofancientgreece.com) - the website of the above podcast has a resources section which will link you to literally hundreds of interesting videos, other podcasts, articles, pictures and more.

Crash Course Mythology – Crash Course World History Youtube Channel; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeX6CX5LEj0&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNCG9Vq7vdvJytS-F-xGi7_&t=0s> over 40 videos on a range of myths and legends and on the study of myths in general.

*Myths and Legends* – Podcast by Jason Weiser about general myths and legends, very entertaining.

*Mythos* by Stephen Fry – previously mentioned, but a fantastic book of the most popular Greek Myths and several less well-known ones too.