

“Myths are a product of a specific time and place”. Discuss the extent to which this statement is valid in relation to your own reading of one of the texts you have studied on this module.

This essay will follow closely the ¹ *‘Homeric Hymn to Demeter’*, utilising the mythology embedded in it to consider the extent to which myths are simply a product of the time and place they are spoken/written in. First and foremost, the hymn is read as an ² aetiological myth explaining the origin of natural phenomena, in particular the cycle of seasons. Using a ‘mythical past’ to account for present day realities as opposed to modern research and scientific method, *does* convey to a noteworthy extent that it is merely the result of a pre-enlightened, ancient worldview. There *are* multiple themes contemporary to ancient Greece, showing that it is deeply rooted in specific religious, sociological and agricultural contexts of the archaic age of Greece. However, this essay will aim to show that even though the *‘Homeric Hymn to Demeter’* is a result of society and zeitgeist at that time, its exploration of grief, power and the cycle of change, have given it a universal meaningful and long-lasting resonance. This essay will also aim to highlight proof that the hymn articulates fundamentally human ideas, to show that it is not exclusively Greek, ancient or mythical.

One of the most striking ways to see the *‘Homeric Hymn to Demeter’* as a reflection of its time and culture is through its portrayal of marriage as a deeply patriarchal institution. The abduction of Persephone is not only an act of violence, it was an act explicitly approved of by Zeus, since he ³ “*gave her to Hades as his beautiful wife.*” This understanding shows that the event was a legitimate transfer of a bride rather than a wrongdoing. Persephone’s lack of consent isn’t an exception either, but rather mirrors the realities of ⁴ archaic Greek marriage customs, where women were often exchanged between male guardians with little say on the matter. This idea is reinforced at the beginning of the hymn, where Persephone is described as

¹ Nagy, G. (2018). *‘Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies.’* The Center for Hellenic Studies. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

² Shapiro, J.M. and S.O. (2017). *‘The Three Types of Myths: Aetiological, Historical, and Psychological.’* Accessed (23/03/26). Available at: <https://uen.pressbooks.pub/mythologyunbound/chapter/three-types-of-myth/>.

³ Nagy, G. (2018). *‘Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies.’* The Center for Hellenic Studies. Paragraph 75. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

⁴ Allison, C.Y. Sealey, R. (1991). *‘Women and Law in Classical Greece.’* Michigan Law Review. Vol. 89. Issue 6. Page 1610. Accessed (24/03/26). Available at: [https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2194&context=mlr#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20in%20classical%20Ath,37\).](https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2194&context=mlr#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20in%20classical%20Ath,37).)

being⁵ “*given away by Zeus*” without Demeter’s knowledge, which not only highlights her personal exclusion from decision-making but shows how maternal authority as a whole was sidelined due to a patriarchal framework. This dynamic is further emphasised in the fact that whilst Hades may have been the one who physically took Persephone, it was Zeus who ultimately permitted this action with prior consent, indicating that male authority operated with force and its collaborative nature was overriding. However, the hymn doesn’t just accept this system, we see indirect criticism through Demeter’s response when she⁶ retreats from Olympus and refuses to let the earth produce fruit. This poses a significant challenge to Zeus’ power, emphasising that female strength and voice, excluded from formal decision-making at this time and in the hymn, is crucial to the functioning of both the divine and human realms. Therefore, the hymn does indeed reflect the patriarchal norms of its historical setting, yet it reveals the tension of women possessing less agency and almost critiques the system as misogynistic by showing the power Demeter had over humanity. The myth is clearly more complex than being merely a passive reflection of its time and place, and reveals feelings toward marriage, patriarchy and subordination of women that are still felt and expressed today. In a way, the myth is capable of transcending its context which proves to some extent that it is more than just a product of ancient customs and was created to carry some truths that are universally and timelessly applicable to human beings.

⁵ Nagy, G. (2018). ‘*Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies.*’ The Center for Hellenic Studies. Paragraph beginning Line 1. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

⁶ Nagy, G. (2018). ‘*Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies.*’ The Center for Hellenic Studies. Paragraph beginning Line 90. Lines 305-314. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

'The Homeric Hymn to Demeter' is equally rooted in its historical context through its emphasis on agriculture and the fragile nature of human survival. It paints a picture of the agrarian society existing at that time in Greece, heavily reliant on successful harvests. Demeter's power over fertility is far more than symbolic in the story, it's a matter of life and death. This is evident as when she withdraws her favour, ⁷ "the Earth did not send up any seed," and even the hard work of farmers ["many a curved plow was dragged along the fields... all in vain"] was made futile. Contextually, this reveals a harsh reality of ancient Greek life, where a failed harvest could lead to famine and suffering, and so the hymn clearly serves as an explanation (aetiology) for the seasonal cycle and expresses the importance for Greeks at this time to maintain good relations with the gods. Furthermore, Zeus' eventual intervention wasn't just out of concern for humanity, ⁸ it was because without crops, mortals couldn't make sacrifices, meaning the gods lost reverence. This reflects a distinctly Greek religious perspective whereby ⁹ mortals and gods are mutually dependent. However, the hymn's exploration of agriculture goes beyond its immediate context and religious beliefs, since Demeter turned her personal grief into a humanitarian crisis by withdrawing her fertilisation of the earth, thus portraying a timeless philosophical train of thought, that human survival depends a lot on emotional stability and healthy relationships. The cycle of struggle and starkness to renewal and plentifulness, resolved through Persephone's partial return, parallels a modern understanding of life as intrinsically cyclical, governed by the recurring motions of loss and regeneration in human life, the ups and downs. In this way, while the hymn clearly reflects the agricultural worries of its time, it carries a more profound insight into the fragility and renewal of life even today, like how grief can have an altering impact on the direction and enjoyment of your life perhaps.

The hymn is again, evidently influenced by the cultural backdrop of its time, in how it portrays life and death as well, highlighting the boundary between the living world and the underworld. In ancient Greek thought, death wasn't usually seen through the lens of morality as the basis of reward, instead *everyone's* afterlife would be spent in a shadowy domain sovereign by Hades. This specific worldview is clear in the myth with the depiction of Persephone's abduction into a ¹⁰ "misty realm of darkness," a place of loss rather redemption. This religious

⁷ Nagy, G. (2018). 'Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies.' The Center for Hellenic Studies. Paragraph beginning Line 305. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

⁸ Burkert, W. Raffan, J. (1986). 'Greek Religion.' Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Chapter 2: Ritual and Sanctuary. Page 57. Accessed (28/03/26). Available at: https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/paul-in-athens/wp-content/uploads/sites/1400/2025/03/Religion_Burkert-Greek-Religion-54-118-compressed.pdf.

⁹ Mikalson, J. (2010). 'Greek Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy'. Chapter 2: Prayer, Sacrifice, Festivals, Dedications, and Priests. Pages 40-70. Accessed (28/03/26). Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/book/36185/chapter/314750502>.

¹⁰ Nagy, G. (2018). 'Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies.' The Center for Hellenic Studies. Paragraph beginning Line 75. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

belief contemporary to ancient Greece, is also grounded in the ¹¹ rituals of Eleusis, where Demeter ultimately creates sacred rites that promise ‘initiates’ a more favourable fate after death. This reveals some sort of effort within Greek religious thought to soften the harshness of death. The story of Demophon adds to this cultural narrative, as ¹² Demeter’s attempt to grant the child immortality shows the natural desire to escape death as well as the limits on this concept of transcendence. Although these themes within the hymn are clearly tied to Greek religious beliefs, its exploration of life and death reflects existentialist philosophy that goes beyond its immediate context. Demophon failing to become immortal due to human limitations reflects the existential idea that we are bound by our mortality, ¹³ reflected in the work of Camus, ‘*The Myth of Sisyphus*’, in which humans strive for permanence (seek meaning amongst the absurdities of life) but are ultimately restricted in the finite and meaninglessness of existence in actuality. In other words, the hymn’s cycle of loss and renewal precedes the logic of the ‘absurd’ because meaning emerges from endurance, not transcendence. Additionally, ¹⁴ Persephone’s journey of constantly going between the underworld and the upper world, also reflects a philosophical view of existence that isn’t as clear cut and final, but repetitive and unclear, which pulls into question the definitive nature of death and guaranteed fates of either paradise or damnation. So even whilst reflecting the view of the time that there is a meaning in human life given by the gods, it seems to touch somewhat on modern thought too, that meaning is actually created through action. Arguably, the hymn includes thoughts explored in the modern day within existentialism of whether death can be a cycle involving renewal rather something absolute. Therefore, the hymn might appear to be rooted in a strictly Greek and ancient understanding of the afterlife, but provided a broader contemplation of mortality that was contrary to the widely accepted religious beliefs of the time. This would mean the myth is more than just a product of its time and customs and rather transcends its time and contributes to human thought in the modern day and around the world/across cultures.

In conclusion, the ‘*Hymn to Demeter*’ is both an aetiological myth, rooted in the features of culture and customs in its time and location *and* a timeless, meaningful exploration of

¹¹ Nagy, G. (2018). ‘*Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies*.’ The Center for Hellenic Studies. Paragraph beginning Line 480. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

¹² Nagy, G. (2018). ‘*Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies*.’ The Center for Hellenic Studies. Lines 234-249. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

¹³ Camus, A. (2000). ‘*The Myth of Sisyphus*’. Penguin Modern Classics. Translation by O'Brien, J. Accessed (29/03/26). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=zaPoAQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT7&dq=the+myth+of+sisyphus&ots=iXNchFgyfp&sig=YOQU9VbM53ln_DEQR-EHBahqsaA#v=onepage&q=the%20myth%20of%20sisyphus&f=false.

¹⁴ Nagy, G. (2018). ‘*Homeric Hymn to Demeter – The Center for Hellenic Studies*.’ The Center for Hellenic Studies. Lines 445-448. Accessed (14/03/26). Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb/>.

humanity through the concepts of marriage, patriarchy, agriculture, survival, existence and death, with insight into each of them that is valuable and thought about today. Therefore, whilst it is obvious the myth is a product of its time and place, it is equally apparent that it is more than a myth, more than a product of a certain environment, but an extremely meaningful and insightful record of human thoughts that are timeless. Therefore, the extent to which we can label it merely as the former, is narrowed down.

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