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Lang Prize Reflection Essay

The inspiration behind this research paper was first born when Dr. Naomi Janowitz was discussing the Greek myth of Cronus in my RST 001G class during the Fall 2019 quarter. She briefly explained that the myth encapsulated the fears of an older generation being replaced by the youth. During that time, the “Ok Boomer” meme was both all over my social media feeds and the subject of many articles from mainstream news sources. I immediately made an intriguing connection to the topic of generational conflict from religious studies to the current meme from the Internet.

I shared my ideas with Dr. Janowitz during her office hours, where she directed me to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* as the prime example of paternal fears of their sons replacing them. She suggested that my paper should discuss another instance of the Oedipus complex in myths to provide contrast for the original Oedipus story. This discussion in office hours gave me an overall vision for my paper, which I would split into two subparts: the first half centered on arguing that Internet memes are modern-day myth, and the second half analyzing the “Ok Boomer” meme from the perspective of father-son stories. Dr. Janowitz also suggested that I meet with the research librarian for humanities, Roberto Delgadillo. When I explained my idea, Mr. Delgadillo wisely pointed out that I needed evidence and real-life examples to back up my assumption that the older generation actually harmed and mistreated those who would come after them. This piece of advice ensured that I would look for information about the real-life actions of the Baby Boomers that harmed their successors while also searching for sources about the Oedipus complex and memes. Since I was actively on the search for such a source, I was able to find Bruce Gibney’s scathing book *A Generation of Sociopaths*, which was full of data and facts showing how harmful the policies Boomers voted for and enacted were, giving my paper real-life stakes to the more theoretical analysis of myths I was focusing on. Mr. Delgadillo also taught me an especially helpful “life hack” to find scholarly sources: using Google Advanced Search to narrow down results to only PDFs or those with “.edu” in their URLs.

With this technique, I found several sources that were a good starting point for my research, including a dissertation by a PhD candidate on Internet memes as a device for political

discourse. Though I did not use or reference this source directly in my paper as it was written from a perspective centered on politics, it was a good example of how to academically analyze memes as a cultural product. It also referenced other sources that I did eventually use for my paper, with its bibliography directing me to two books on the topic of memes that I easily found in the Shields Library: Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* and Limor Shifman's *Memes in Digital Culture*. The former contained the unexpected etymological origin of the word "meme," giving me the framework to view memes as a product of a cultural environment. The latter extended Dawkins' idea to Internet culture and the author's observation that digital memes are a way for online users to spread cultural information, aided my argument that memes are equivalent to myth as collective products of a culture.

While finding sources for my first section was relatively straightforward, finding sources for the section comparing the "Ok Boomer" meme to traditional stories was much more reflective of the typical research experience of running into dead-ends and having to search extensively for an answer. The biggest dead-end I encountered was during my search for a story to contrast the Oedipus myth as Professor Janowitz suggested. I decided to look for traditional stories that contain filicide by a father, instead of the reverse act of patricide by a son like in *Oedipus Rex*. While there were many examples of such myths, I realized that these stories of paternal attacks toward their sons did not truly contrast the Oedipus myth as Laius, Oedipus' father, too commits acts of aggression toward his son. Instrumental to this realization was Leon Sheleff's article, which I found in a ProQuest database and in which Sheleff charges that there has been a bias favoring adults over the youth in academia and that writers have overlooked Laius' attacks on his son—something I was guilty of also.

This revelation led to changing the parameters of my search for a contrasting story. Since there were so many examples of paternal resistance to their sons replacing them, I decided to look for myths where the father relinquished his position to his son. This provided a challenge of its own as I spent countless hours over multiple days searching for such a myth. I asked Dr. Janowitz and my teaching assistant if they ever encountered a story of a sacrificing father and each said they could not think of one, confirming that such a myth was truly rare. After scouring multiple databases and skimming through seemingly promising books, I finally found a viable

option in Rachel McCoppin's *The Hero's Quest and the Cycles of Nature: an Ecological Interpretation of World Mythology*. In it, McCoppin describes certain mythic characters as "botanical heroes" whose character arcs mirror growth of plants and accepts death as a natural part of the life cycle. One example she gives is a father from a Polynesian myth who sacrifices his life for his starving son. I had finally found a great contrast and the euphoria I felt was a memorable part of my research efforts for this paper.

Though this project was probably the most intensive research endeavor I have ever done, it was incredibly enjoyable to integrate various topics together, including but not limited to classical literature, Freudian psychoanalysis, social interactions on the Internet, and recent American history. As someone who has made Internet memes as daily part of his life, I loved the fact that I was able to analyze them next to ancient myths, creating this odd but fascinating juxtaposition between works that have been revered for millennia and digital content that is, for the most part, been viewed as trivial or inconsequential by most. It was truly delightful to find parallels between the two kinds of cultural products and bring two seemingly unrelated topics together to make an argument that has significant weight and implications for my generation. As I continue to pursue research opportunities, I hope I can continue to employ the research skills I have developed through this project to discover insights about ourselves through unexpected synthesis between different subjects that fascinate me.