

Pan's Labyrinth Analysis

The content of film may be thoroughly analyzed by exploring its ideas, symbols, and stories. It is very common to see mythological influences in film. The Spanish film *Pan's Labyrinth*, directed Guillermo Del Toro, uses several themes and aspects of mythology to help enhance the movie. Guillermo Del Toro is a famous Mexican director known for movies such as *Espinazo Del Diablo (The Devil's Backbone)*, *Hellboy*, and of course, *El Laberinto Del Fauno (Pan's Labyrinth)*. This fantasy tells the journey in Spain in 1944 of a young girl, Ofelia, whose identity is truly Princess Moanna of the Underground Realm. Unknowing of her true identity, Ofelia encounters a faun who guides her back to her kingdom. Faun asks Ofelia to complete three tasks to complete so that she may see her father once again in the other realm. This variation of a fairytale uses several themes of mythology to complement the storyline. Marriage, kinship, transformations, cosmic architecture, heroes and tricksters, animals and plants, and other mythological references are all aspects of mythology that can be explored in *Pan's Labyrinth*.

It is important to understand the historical times of 1944 Spain in which this film occurs. Spain had ended its civil war fairly recently on March 28, 1939. The war was fought do to disputes over the internal government of Spain, separating the Spanish into the Nationalists and the Republicans ("Spanish Civil War Ends"). After many were killed in battle, the Nationalists won resulting in an authoritarian Spain ("Spanish Civil War Ends").

From 1939 to 1975, the leader of the Nationalists party, General Franco, rose to power in Spain during this period titled the Franquist Period ("The Franco Years"). In the movie *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia's new step-father is a fascist leader, Captain Vidal. Vidal's aim is to encourage a fascist Spain by eliminating all oppositions, including the group of Spanish people who fought against this form of government and who encouraged having a state without government control.

Captain Vidal is a character who represents the contrast of gender roles in the film. Male superiority is dominant in this film. This is a common theme in many myths around the world. Superior social status may be examined in the Japanese myth of Izanami and Izanagi (Willis 34). This couple was thought to be a primal pair. Male dominance was established when Izanami, the female, greets Izanagi, the male, without him addressing her first. Izanami was punished with a child having monstrous characteristics (34). This myth is symbolic of the idea that for centuries in many societies, males have been a dominant figure.

Throughout *Pan's Labyrinth*, Vidal can be observed as being a male with authority over females. In several scenes Vidal is demeaning to his new wife, Ofelia's mother Carmen. The first time the audience is introduced to the Vidal, he controlling urges for Carmen to use a wheelchair instead of walking. Carmen is pregnant with Vidal's son; therefore he wants to protect the child that would carry his name. The relationship of this marriage worries Ofelia, as she questions to her mother, "Why do you have to get married?" (*Pan's Labyrinth*). This

question is significant because Ofelia is questioning the idea that the Spanish society at the time was following. Her mom's inability to fully answer her daughter represents her vulnerability to following female inferiority in this particular society. Vidal displays his supremacy once again at a dinner in which important guests attended. One of the guests asks Carmen how she and Vidal met. In her response, she shared her past of having a social status lower than Vidal's. Disapproving this notion, the Captain corrects her in order to maintain the order of respect that he demands as being someone with a high social status. The manner in which he comments is belittling to his wife, therefore further exposing his male dominance. Like the Japanese myth of Izanami and Izanagi, these scenes depict the notion that gender roles were unequal. Men had superiority over women.

It is typical that animals and plants to be represented in mythological stories. Often times, transformations occur with these organisms. When one creature changes into another, a transformation has occurred. Mythology is filled with myths of metamorphosis. Well known myths of transformation involve the nymph Echo (Willis 165). One of the myths is that which involves Pan, god of the woods and pastures. Coincidentally, this type of creature with legs and the horns of a goat is also seen in *Pan's Labyrinth* as the Faun. Echo is said to have been chased by Pan, but rejecting runs away from him. This angers Pan, who excites a group of shepherds to tear Echo to pieces. Echo's screams then transforms into a voice heard throughout the mountains, hence her name.

As mentioned, animals and plants frequently appear in mythology, as well as in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Many of the characters in the film transform as well. The stick-like bugs are one of the first creatures to undergo this type of change. Ofelia notices them, and they later experience a metamorphosis from a bug to a fairy. At first glance, Ofelia's instinct identifies the bug as being a fairy, though when she informs her mother of it, Carmen dismisses the idea telling Ofelia not to be so childish. Later, Ofelia's sleep is disrupted by one of the bugs. In front of her eyes, the insect transforms into a fairy, and leads Ofelia to the Labyrinth where she meets the faun.

Del Toro also includes a transformation involving a giant toad. As one of the first task of three from the Book of Crossroads, Ofelia must claim a key in which the gruesome toad has digested. Using stones that Faun gave Ofelia, she feeds the toad, making him expel his inside organs that contain the key. The toad then transforms into a deflated piece of steamy skin. In an interview by USA Today, Del Toro was asked why he chooses to use a toad in this particular scene. Del Toro responded that, "'Frogs are one of the most primal animals. They are powerful" (Wloszczyna). Amphibians such as frogs can be seen in mythological stories, including that of the first gods in Egyptian mythology. The Ogdoad, which represented the primeval state of Egypt, consisted of eight deities, sometimes including frogs (Willis 38). This illustration of the frog in this creation story characterizes this creature as being that "powerful" amphibian in which Del Toro is inspired by.

The mandrake root is a significant plant that may be seen in the film. Del Toro chooses to use this plant due to its inspiring folklore. Del Toro explains it stating, “You give birth to a homunculus, an artificial being, through a mandrake, but the recipe for it includes other human fluids” (Wloszczyna). With her mother being extremely ill, Ofelia has a hope that she can help to cure her. Ofelia places a mandrake root given to her by the Faun into a bowl along with a sufficient amount of milk. She slips the bowl under her mother’s bed, checking on it frequently, and feeding its daily serving of two drops of blood. The mandrake root transforms into a human-like being in which Ofelia adores. After the root is discovered by Vidal, Carmen throws it into the fire to prove to Ofelia that magic and fairytales are not real. A long squeal is released from the burning plant, then triggering Carmen into labor. Many legends include the mandrake as a magical plant where if dug up from the earth incorrectly, its screams would kill whoever hears it (Hastings 234). Carmen dies suddenly from the childbirth, and Ofelia does as well at the conclusion of the movie.

Heroes and tricksters are another common theme of mythology. Heroes tend to be the characters of a story that may be god-like, and sometimes possess supernatural capabilities (Willis 28). With courage and ability, heroes change a situation for the better (28). Heroes are seen in mythology, such as the Greek hero Perseus, who saved Andromeda by killing the snake-headed Medusa (134). The audience may perceive different characters as being heroes in the film *Pan’s Labyrinth*. The Faun is a trickster, for he is a guide for Ofelia, but never

fully trusted. Pan, whose name is a mythological reference to the god of pastures and the woods, helps Ofelia rediscover her identity as Princess Moanna of the Underground Realm. Because her memory was erased when she left the Underground Realm, and entered the human realm, Ofelia must be reminded who she is. When Ofelia is lead into the labyrinth by a green fairy, she shouts. "Echo, echo!" and she is then greeted by the Faun (*Pan's Labyrinth*). Her shouting this is perhaps another reference to the myth of Echo and the Faun mentioned earlier, especially when Ofelia asks him of his identity and he replies, "I am the mountain, the forest, the earth. I am... a faun" (*Pan's Labyrinth*). Del Toro forwards the reason he chose the Faun when he states in an interview, "the faun in classical mythology was at the same time a creature of destruction, and a creature of nurturing and life" (Spelling).

Throughout the movie, Faun gives Ofelia three tasks to complete before the moon is full that will help her go back to the world in which she came from. At some points of the movie, the audience may mistake the Faun as being a trickster. Del Toro describes the ambiguous traits of the faun when he comments,

The faun starts really old and blind and creepy, and she [Ofelia] doesn't trust him then, and as the movie progresses he becomes rejuvenated and beautiful and at the end he is really young and his eyes are full, and he's clean, and still she doesn't trust him (Spelling).

This is the role he plays in order to see if Ofelia is truly capable of returning to the other realm with him. Fortunately, all tests are complete, and the Faun greets her once again in her kingdom. Yet, her trust for the Faun is still not completely prevalent. The ambiguity of the faun

Tricksters on the other hand are just the opposite. These are characters of mischief, corrupt, and deceiving. A great example of a trickster in mythology is that of Eshu, a trickster of African myth. This god was a joker who gains enjoyment from leading mortals into temptations (29). In the film, a trickster or villain is the Pale Man. This distorted creature, pale, frail, and sagging skin, craves for flesh when people surrender to the culinary temptations laid out on the table he sits at. The Pale Man was the central character one of Ofelia's tasks, to retrieve the dagger from his underground "cave". Ofelia is tricked by the appetizing grapes laid out before her, ignoring the Faun's warnings not to eat them. The fairies try guiding her not to eat them as well, but the allure is too hard to resist. The Pale Man then awakes, situating an eyeball into both of his palms. Reaching, he destroys and swallows the heads of the fairies. He then proceeds for Ofelia, though fortunately she escapes him.

This particular scene is very much comparable to that of the Greek god Kronos. Like the Pale Man, Kronos had a cannibalistic nature about him. Kronos was the Greek god, married to Rhea, father of Zeus (129). Out of fear that his children would overthrow him, he

would devour each of his children as Rhea would give birth to them. When Zeus was born, Rhea saved him by fooling her husband as she gave a rock wrapped up in a blanket to Kronos, in order to portray a baby (129). Zeus sought revenge, and later as an adult, defeated his father (132). Spanish painter Francisco José de Goya depicts the cannibalistic nature of Kronos in his painting *Saturn Devouring His Son* (Goya). His painting depicts the mythical god Kronos violently devouring one of his sons.

Cosmic architecture is definitely a mythological theme explored in *Pan's Labyrinth*. In the film, an underworld, an earth, and a heaven are all settings for certain scenes. Ofelia is a princess of a kingdom referred to being located in an “underground realm”. However this kingdom is not the stereotypical underground setting, but is described as a heavenly place. This land is of good, where no one lies, nor is there pain and suffering. However, the landscape is dark, dreary, and the architecture is gothic. The princess then escapes, as the camera follows her occipital path upward a spiral rotunda of stairs. This spiral path foreshadows the one seen later leading down to the Labyrinth in which the faun waits for Ofelia. Like in *Pan's Labyrinth*, the other worlds may be entered through caves, similar to the rotunda in the center of the labyrinth. Princess Moanna leaves her kingdom because she wants to be in a place with sunshine, blue skies, and the human world. Otherworldly voyages have been told of in many myths. For example, in Celtic myths, many times voyages occur to the unknown world, and then characters return back to where they came from with a more

developed soul (Willis). Ofelia's soul develops from being a member of the human world. When she returns to the realm in which she is from, she appreciates her family and status more as a member of the royal court.

Another piece of cosmic architecture that may be explored in this film is the significance of the moon. In many myths, such as Chinese, American, and Japanese, the moon is seen as being masculine. In this film, the moon is related to Princess Moanna's father. His presence in the human world is distinct in many scenes. From the beginning to the end of the movie, the moon is a significant symbol used to express her father's presence on earth. When the faun meets Ofelia, he explains to her that it was the moon that bore her. The faun informs her stating, "Look on your left shoulder and you will find a mark that proves it" (*Pan's Labyrinth*). The evidence of Ofelia as a descendent of the moon is the crescent shaped birthmark which appears on her right shoulder. Ofelia is killed by Captain Vital at the end of the movie near the rotunda in the Labyrinth. After her death, there is a reflection of the moon glistening in the waters at the bottom of the well. The very next scene is that of Ofelia in front of the royal court that she belongs. The presence of the moon is important because it signifies that though Ofelia is on earth, her father and origins are still with her, even after her death. With this guidance, Ofelia is able to rediscover her identity and return to her father's kingdom as who she is meant to be, Princess Moanna.

When one analyzes a film, they may discover significant mythological comparisons and references. This “adult fairytale” helps to tell a story of a young princess who has entered a journey of rediscovering her identity and where she belongs. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, Del Toro tells the story with an intense amount of detail and symbolism that has made this movie to be such a respected piece of film. The use of marriage, kinship, transformations, cosmic architecture, heroes and tricksters, animals and plants, and the symbolism of the moon have benefitted Del Toro's purpose for the film.

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