



“It Never Hurts to Keep Looking for Sunshine”: The Motif of Depression in Works for Children and Youth Inspired by Classical Antiquity

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INTRODUCTION

Depression¹ is often called the “illness of the 21st century”² and is on its way to becoming the second most severe disease in the world (according to the World Health Organization). Statistics show that it affects a broader group of people every year, regardless of age.³

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2 Osińska et al., “Depresja – choroba cywilizacyjna XXI wieku” [Depression – civilization disease of the 21st century], 123–129.

3 World Health Organization, *Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates*.

Along with the growing numbers of individuals who suffer from depression, there is an increasing need to break the mental health taboo, still prevalent in many societies. One of the biggest challenges in this context is to explain these problems to the young, who are often not ready to understand how complex the human psyche can be, and who have often experienced difficulties in recognizing their mental states. To spread knowledge about psychological issues among children and adolescents, authors often decide to devote their works to this challenging topic. While the past centuries often considered psychological issues as incompatible with children's works of culture, it is becoming increasingly clear that this combination can be valuable.

The motif of depression seems to be one of the most discussed psychological disorders in contemporary works for children and adolescents. One can find it in many forms in all fields of culture: literature, picture books for younger children included (such as *Meh: A Story About Depression* by Deborah Malcolm, 2015; *The Princess and the Fog* by Lloyd Jones, 2015; *Den långa vandringen* [The Long Hike] by Martin Widmark and Emilia Dziubak, 2018), music (song 1-800-273-8255 by Logic, Alessia Cara and Khali, 2017, whose title is a phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the USA), internet lessons and animations (*Ted-Ed Kids* lesson about depression, 2017),⁴ or television series and films (*13 Reasons Why*, the controversial series for teenagers, 2017–2020, or *Inside Out*, an animation devoted to human emotions, where children can meet the character of *Sadness*, 2015).⁵ Not only depression in children, but also that of the parents is frequently discussed (for instance in *Why Are You So Sad: A Child's Book About Parental Depression* by Beth Andrews, 2002; or *Håret til Mamma* [Mamma's Hair] by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus, 2007). The issue is presented to younger children, especially in picture books, and to teenagers and young adults.

The authors of such works concentrate mainly on clarifying issues referring to the complexity of the human psyche. They discuss the symptoms and treatments of the condition, the different ways of perceiving this issue and dealing with it. Many explain to children the difference between “being sad” and “feeling depressed,” showing that sadness is an emotion that is a constant element

4 Farrell, *What Is Depression*, available online.

5 “Mind Set” channel, *What Causes Anxiety and Depression – Inside Out*, August 6, 2016, available online.

of human existence. At the same time, they try to point out that there might be a moment when grief will overcome the rest of the feelings in every person's life and that one should not be ashamed of this. There are many repetitive motifs used by the authors of children's culture to trigger the associations with the theme of depression or grief. English-speaking readers will be familiar with the color blue, related to the phrase "feeling blue," and with the black dog character, hinting at the metaphor for depression popularized by Winston Churchill.⁶

In parallel with children's authors who increasingly write about mental problems, recent decades have seen these topics actively entering the discussions of scholars studying children's and young adult literature and culture. One may start with the problem of "not-optimistic" children's literature explored by Nicholas Tucker in 2006, called, by him, "depressive."⁷ Studying attitudes towards children's literature, primarily in the English-speaking world, Tucker emphasizes the strong tradition of eliminating difficult topics or depicting problematic children as protagonists in the stories. According to Tucker, such an attitude was rooted in perceiving childhood as an "entirely positive time for all concerned,"⁸ and with the aim of making "achievement motivation literature."⁹ Notwithstanding, the author argues for the necessity of variety in literature for children:

And if young readers find characters in their fiction suffering from the same type of misery they may be going through at the time, some comfort can also be gained from the recognition that at least one writer seems to know what they are going through.¹⁰

Tucker emphasizes that one of the problems children have to struggle with is depression, which was "once thought of as something that only starts during adolescence."¹¹ Due to this, the presence of the problem in children's books is essential, as "children, even

6 The emotions associated with a depressive state also adopt various metaphorical representations, such as rain, clouds or cypresses, often used to denote sadness; a rose with thorns, which may signal suffering; the color black, which may reflect grief; and others.

7 Tucker, "Depressive Stories for Children," 199–210.

8 *Ibid.*, 200.

9 *Ibid.*, 202.

10 *Ibid.*, 203.

11 *Ibid.*, 205.

infants, have a right to know some of the less palatable facts about the world they live in.¹²

Identifying the young reader with the book's character mentioned by Tucker plays a significant role in understanding mental issues. Emotions and emotional states in children's literature are thus widely discussed in research on emotional development and education,¹³ emotions¹⁴ and mental disorders,¹⁵ be it in books for children and young adults or in advice manuals.

A growing amount of publications supports the social-emotional development of children and adolescents through the use of bibliotherapy. A case in point is *Using Picture Books to Enhance Children's Social and Emotional Literacy* by Susan Elswick,¹⁶ which presents activities and exercises that help parents and teachers to engage children in understanding their emotions. The author focuses on social-emotional literacy and its use in working with children and adolescents. She describes the use of "creative bibliography" to work with children, using various books for children "to teach a skill or process a need." Using a creative bibliography consists of adjusting the text to the child's needs to identify with the heroes. This can also mean presenting the characters' situation that metaphorically corresponds to the young recipient's problems. While working with the child on the text, parents or teachers can ask additional questions and perform additional activities, which help to understand the behavior and feelings of the characters (and so the child's feelings), showing the child how to deal with specific emotions or problems. During the recent pandemic, in which children were forced to spend time on their own, separated from their school communities and unable to participate in social activities, parents faced an even greater need to strengthen social and emotional competence in their children.

12 Ibid., 208. Tucker's term and the question posed are also discussed by Pearson, "Depressive Literature," 162–163.

13 See, e.g., Frevert et al., *Learning How to Feel: Children's Literature and Emotional Socialization*; Nikolajeva, *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*.

14 See, e. g., Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Emotional Connection: Representation of Emotions in Young Adult Literature," 127–138.

15 Cf. Church, "The Picture of Madness – Visual Narratives of Female Mental Illness in Contemporary Children's Literature," 119–139.

16 Elswick, *Using Picture Books to Enhance Children's Social and Emotional Literacy*.

Using stories for therapeutic purposes also helps young readers overcome various crises. Colorfully and sensitively illustrated publications, such as those in *The Storm and Storybook Manual: For Children Growing Through Parents' Separation*,¹⁷ as well as in *Therapeutic Fairy Tales: For Children and Families Going Through Troubling Times*¹⁸ by Pia Jones and Sarah Pimenta, develop children's creativity, encouraging them to cope with their emotions. Accompanied by the storybook manuals, they serve as tools for dealing with severe challenges, such as family breakdown, illness, or loss.

Turning back to classical mythology, it seems that myths provide rich material for such a "creative bibliography." The merging of concepts in children's literature and in classical myth, with all their therapeutic potential, seems to be quite natural. As Maria Nikolajeva states:

Many children's books use mythological subject matter, and reading becomes more rewarding if the reader is familiar with mythical intertexts. These do not necessarily have to be concrete mythical sources, however, but can consist of mythical thinking, manifested, for instance, in a myth-like organization of time-space relations or a use of the narrative components of myths.¹⁹

Although Nikolajeva broadens the term of "myth," this paper will focus on the texts which explore classical motifs and retell stories from Graeco-Roman mythology. However, these retellings are often made in a "myth-like" style themselves, where a story is a variation on a theme rather than a direct insertion of myth into the story (like in *Lore Olympus*, *Reflection* and *Therapy*).

Many original contemporary works for children refer to classical antiquity, which can be a metaphor for talking about young people's different issues.²⁰ This paper will discuss some of the motifs concerning the topic of depression inspired by classical myths. It will analyze several different contemporary cultural texts to present a potentially broader perspective of its complexity. The examples chosen

17 Jones and Pimenta, *The Storm and Storybook Manual: For Children Growing Through Parents' Separation (Therapeutic Fairy Tales)*.

18 Jones and Pimenta, *Therapeutic Fairy Tales: For Children and Families Going Through Troubling Times*.

19 Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*, 156.

20 Cf. the database *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, available online, where one can also search for works connected with depression.

come from different parts of the world (Italy, New Zealand, USA, and Russia) and have met with significant international response. They belong to various media, such as literature, internet comics, and animation, addressing the youngest as well as the more mature youth audiences. The first one is a fragment of Laura Orvieto's mythology (*Storie di bambini molto antichi* from 2014, first published in 1937), which is addressed to younger readers and represents mythology proper. The other three works imply a senior recipient – a webtoon, *Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe (2018–2020), an animation, *Reflection* by Patricia Satjawatcharaphong (2010), and an Instagram comic strip series, *Therapy* by Anastasia Gorshkova (2019–2020). We believe that texts and images based on classical myths can function as therapeutic tools, helping young people cope with their problems.

PROSERPINE'S MELANCHOLY IN LAURA ORVIETO'S STORIE DI BAMBINI MOLTO ANTICHI

Laura Orvieto (1876–1953), an Italian-Jewish author of children's books, is widely hailed for writing the first Italian mythology series directed at young readers.²¹ This work, *Storie della storia del mondo* (1911) [Stories of the History of the World], is still popular around the world.²² Orvieto is also known for writing another novel with the same theme – *Storie di bambini molto antichi* was her last work published before World War II (released in 1937 in Milan by Mondadori). The book's distribution was limited soon after its publication because of the racial laws in Fascist Italy.²³ Many years later, the novel reached a broader audience thanks to the Mondadori publishing house, which decided to publish it again, in the same form but with a new graphic layout.

21 For Laura Orvieto's biography, see Del Vivo, "Orvieto, Laura," in the Italian Women Writers database. For the history of Italian mythological literature, see Grandi, *La musa bambina: La letteratura mitologica italiana per ragazzi tra storia, narrazione e pedagogia*.

22 More about her output in Garulli, "Laura Orvieto and the Classical Heritage in Italy before the Second World War," 65–110; as well as in a short description by Rejter (Bazylczyk): "Italian Boots and Mythical Stories: The Wonderful Works of Laura Orvieto."

23 Fava, *Percorsi critici di letteratura per l'infanzia tra le due guerre*, 244.

The new version of *Storie di bambini molto antichi* was published in 2014 with illustrations made by a contemporary artist, Rita Petruccioli.²⁴ Thanks to the new bookbinding, Orvieto's collection of myths became more appealing to readers. The innovative spirit of the colorful and modern illustrations, combined with the ancient stories, encourages the young readers to familiarize themselves with the world of myths. The specific selection of characters and references to the *Italian novella* helps the young audiences understand the ethical kernel of the mythical stories.

Laura Orvieto's *Storie di bambini molto antichi* (1937) provide particularly thought-provoking reading in the context of depression. Their myth of Proserpine, *Storia di una bambina che si chiamava Proserpina* [The Story of a Girl Called Proserpine], touches on the topics of the human psyche and the perception of sadness. The story encourages interpretations by presenting two complex figures, Proserpine and Ceres. Both characters are particularly popular in children's culture, usually in their Greek version of Persephone or Kora and Demeter.²⁵

Orvieto concentrates on the emotions of Proserpine, rather than on the suffering and sadness felt by her mother. This is a less conventional approach, in contrast with frequent popular narratives of the myth rooted in the ancient depictions, where the focus is primarily on the character of Ceres (Demeter) and her pain after the loss of her daughter. It seems that Orvieto was inspired by the *Metamorphoses*, where Ovid mentions Proserpine's anxiety and grief in a story told to Demeter by Arethusa:

[...] ergo dum Stygio sub terris gurgite labor,
viva tua est oculis illic Proserpina nostris:
illa quidem tristis neque adhuc interrita vultu,
sed regina tamen, sed opaci maxima mundi,
sed tamen inferni pollens matrona tyranni!
(Ov. *Met.* 5.504–508)

Now it befell,
as I was gliding far beneath the world,
where flow dark Stygian streams, I saw
thy Proserpine. Although her countenance
betrayed anxiety and grief, a queen She reigned

24 Her work is available online on her website, www.ritapetruccioli.net.

25 More about the myth of Persephone in children's literature in Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*.

supremely great in that opacous world
 queen consort mighty to the King of Hell.²⁶

Although in this fragment, Arethusa is calming Ceres down and trying to convince her that Proserpine will gain power and a prosperous future, she also mentions the girl's anxiety and grief (*Ov. Met.* 5.506). The double negation (*neque interrita [vultu]*) emphasizes her sadness.

Orvieto's version of the myth of Proserpine, when read literally, seems standard. However, it allows for metaphorical interpretation if the reader pays attention to the details. From the beginning of Proserpine's story, before Pluto kidnaps her, Orvieto describes her as a young person who is very often overwhelmed by an unexplained sadness:

Senza un perché, tutto a un tratto, senza che le sia accaduto niente di male, ecco che la malinconia la prende, e il viso si fa triste, e gli occhi le si riempiono di lacrime. Oppure si sveglia, la mattina, e non si sente per nulla felice. Perché? Non lo sa.²⁷

Melancholy takes her without any reason, all of a sudden, although nothing terrible is happening and her face becomes sad, her eyes are filling with tears. Even when she wakes up in the morning, she does not feel happy at all. Why? She does not know.²⁸

The author uses the term *malinconia*, from *μελαγχολία*, one of the first words defining the state of depression, as used by the Greeks. The same term is used when Proserpine sings "*Il ritorno del canto*," the poem written by Angiolo Orvieto,²⁹ Laura Orvieto's husband:

Su su per la collina con la melanconia;
 e cammina e cammina la lascerem per via.
 Si torni in compagnia d'un leggiadro cantare.³⁰

Up, up on the hill with the melancholy,
 walk and walk to leave it behind.
 Come back with the joy of singing.

26 Trans. by Brookes More.

27 Orvieto, *Storie di bambini molto antichi*, 137.

28 All the translations from Italian to English were made by Dorota Rejter.

29 Angiolo Orvieto (1869–1967) was an Italian poet, librettist and the founder of the *Il Marzocco* magazine.

30 Orvieto, *Storie di bambini*, 136–137.

To stress Proserpine's somewhat unusual personality, Laura Orvieto juxtaposes it with the behavior of her mother, Ceres. In the book, Proserpine's mother thoroughly "contrasts with her daughter's fragility"³¹ – she is presented as a cheerful and robust person, not able to understand why her daughter is always so sad, distant, and lost in her thoughts.

Proserpine's fate in the story could be seen as a metaphorical description of what happens when a person slides into depression. In this case, Proserpine's κατάβασις, her descent into the Underworld by Pluto's abduction, could be perceived as a metaphor for her unconscious immersion in the world of sorrow and sadness. As Elizabeth Hale states, "[i]n terms of the individual, [the term] *katabasis* also has psychological applications – the protagonist's confrontation with the demons of the past, or personal fears or weaknesses of character."³² This interpretation of Orvieto's myth can be reinforced by the passages describing that in the Underworld Proserpine continues to cry even more:

– No, no, e poi no! Proserpine ormai me la tengo. Non dico che sia comodo avere una moglie che piange sempre, ma insomma è meglio che niente.

– Come, piange sempre?

– Ma sì, dalla mattina alla sera e dalla sera alla mattina. È noioso.³³

– No, no, no! I am going to keep Proserpine. I do not say that it is convenient to have a wife who cries all the time, but still, it is better than nothing.

– What do you mean she cries all the time?

– Yes, from morning to evening and from evening to morning – it is so dull.

The next fragment indicating depression is the one where Ceres advises her daughter. The advice covers the girl's coping with her feelings while being in the Underworld and what she should do to spend the happier part of the year on Earth. Spring and summer seem to symbolize the time of healing and happiness:

– E come faccio a non piangere? – chiese Proserpine. – Se sapessi

31 Ibid., 137.

32 Hale, "Katabasis 'Down Under' in the Novels of Margaret Mahy and Maurice Gee," 257.

33 Orvieto, *Storie di bambini*, 146.

come sono sola, e come mi annoio.

– Sei sola perché non ti guardi intorno, e non vedi e non ascolti. Ti annoi perché non fai nulla.³⁴

– How can I not cry? – Proserpine asked. – If you only knew how lonely I am and how bored I am.

– You are lonely because you do not look around you, and you do not see and do not listen. You are bored because you are doing nothing.

– Guarda – Disse Cerere. – Ognuna di queste radici ha una sua vita e un suo sogno. Ognuna ti dirà qualche cosa, se tu l'interroghi e l'ascolti.³⁵

– Look – Ceres said. – Each of these roots has its own life and a dream. Each of them will tell you something if you will only ask them and try to listen to them.

The words of Ceres function as therapeutic elements, as she tries hard to help her daughter deal with her disease. Thanks to her guidance, Proserpine starts to see beauty, even in the Underworld. The girl starts to appreciate her position; she tries to stay positive, waiting for better days to come.

It seems that the illustrations made by Rita Petruccioli focus on the emotions of Proserpine. The first image shows her as a young, calm girl, weaving lace flowers. The colors used are light and cheerful. The next picture shows the dramatic kidnapping of Proserpine by Pluto. Its focus is on Pluto and his chariot, dominated by the shades of purple and black that strongly contrasts with the surrounding. In the last one, there are only black and grey roots illustrating the moment when Ceres tells her daughter how to survive in the Underworld.

The Story of a Girl Called Proserpine, read metaphorically, discusses depression among young girls. The relationship between the mother and the daughter, described in the text, can foster a conversation about two sides of a child's depression. One is the emotional state of a young girl. The other is the difficulty for parents to deal with their children's psychological problems. From this perspective, the myth emphasizes parents' and therapists' role in treating depression among young people.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

BLUE HADES AND PINK PERSEPHONE IN LORE OLYMPUS BY RACHEL SMYTHE

A somewhat different story of Hades and Persephone is presented in Rachel Smythe's digital comics, or webtoons, *Lore Olympus*,³⁶ where it seems that it is Hades who is depressed. Persephone is the one who brings color and love to his life while harboring her own problems with deep sadness as well.

Lore Olympus has been appearing on webtoons.com every Sunday since March 4, 2018.³⁷ Webtoons originated as digital *manhwa* and are designed primarily for smartphones. As a result, episodes are published in long vertical strips of various lengths. They may also be accompanied by music. *Lore Olympus*, based on Greek Mythology and made by a New Zealand author, ranks as the most popular among all the webcomics on the platform (rated 9.78; liked by 21.6m readers; having 3.9m subscribers), and also among the romance/drama genre, as well as among webtoons read by females in their 10s, 20s, and 30s.³⁸ Hence one may consider the cartoons as crossover literature read mostly by female audiences.

Rachel Smythe is a graphic designer, and *Lore Olympus* is her fourth comic.³⁹ She describes its idea as "a modern-day deconstruction of the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone"⁴⁰ and emphasizes that "the gods aren't so different from us after all, especially when it comes to their problems."⁴¹ The story underscores this with its opening quotation from a Homeric hymn to Demeter, specifically, from the speech of Hades to Persephone:

36 Smythe, *Lore Olympus*, from March 2018, available online. The authors would like to thank Elizabeth Hale for sharing information about these comics. See also a description of the webtoon in her *Children's Literature and Classical Reception: An Alphabetical Odyssey* (forthcoming).

37 Season 1 ended with the 115th episode on June 14, 2020. Smythe decided to continue the webtoon with the 2nd season.

38 Data on 13 June 2020, ranked by www.webtoons.com. The episodes have from 150,000 to 230,000 likes and plenty of comments from users registered on the platform. For example, the finale of season 1 got 13,723 comments and 118,772 likes a few hours after its publication on June 14, 2020.

39 More about her on lore-olympus.fandom.com.

40 An interview of Rachel Smythe in "On the Air" series, made by Webtoon on April 16, 2020, is available on YouTube.

41 Available online, on www.webtoons.com.

While you are here, you shall rule all that lives and moves and shall have the greatest rights among the deathless gods: those who defraud you and do not appease your power with offerings, reverently performing rites and paying fit gifts, shall be punished for evermore. (HH 2.364–369, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White)⁴²

The quotation emphasizes being the queen of the Underworld, and this topic recurs from the first episodes onwards.

The opening pictures are made in shades of blue; thus, Hades' image painted in this color does not surprise the viewer. The characters are drawn in various tints (Zeus is violet, Poseidon is green, Hera is yellow, Persephone is pink), and the blue is reserved for the Underworld, which reflects the mood of the place. Although Smythe confessed that she chose blue and pink for the two protagonists to boost the contrast,⁴³ the colors retain their symbolic meaning. The world of the gods is presented as a contemporary reality. The heroes have smartphones (Hades owns one with a pomegranate logo) and modern cars; they wear stylish outfits and live in glass apartments. The human world is depicted as ancient Greece.

The first episodes take place at a party held by Zeus. From the beginning, we see Hades being sad as his girlfriend Minthe⁴⁴ does not want to accompany him (Ep. 1).⁴⁵ After phases of anger and despair, the god shows concern for the fact that he has no wife (and, at the same time, no queen of the Underworld), contrary to his brothers Zeus and Poseidon (see also Ep. 30). His "deep feeling of loneliness" (Ep. 71) seems to be the main reason for his depressive state. Furthermore, Hades often goes to sleep without taking his shoes and clothes off (Ep. 5), is "really talented in insomnia" (Ep. 74), quickly takes the blame and feels guilty (Ep. 5; 40; 42; 94), has problems with "facing his feelings" (Ep. 77; also Ep. 47), attends psychotherapy (Ep. 25; 47; 94), and his best friends are dogs (Ep. 7; 9; 25), which is a problem according to his therapist (Ep. 94). This makes quite a clear depres-

42 Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. All translations from Hesiod and Homeric hymns are provided according to this edition. The webtoon includes an extensive reference paying tribute to the translator.

43 "I wanted Persephone to really pop out every time she is in the Underworld and vice versa," Q&A #18, available online.

44 Cf. Str. 8.3.14; Opp. *H.* 3.485–497; Ov. *Met.* 10.728–730.

45 The episode number in the main text, in brackets, refers to the list of episodes on webtoons.com. Frame numbers are not provided, as they do not appear in the webtoon.

sive pattern. Besides, Hades is infertile, according to the webtoon (Ep. 102). He admits that he "happen[s] to know a lot about being blue" (Ep. 26).

Hades' humor changes when he notices Persephone at the party (Ep. 2–3). The attraction is clearly there and in the next episodes, one can see smiles or care and support on the god's face, even hear him joking with Persephone (Ep. 26). While speaking with the girl, he looks like a person in love, not a desperate one, although being shy and unconfident (cf. Ep. 41; 74). A faux pas comment made by Hades ("Honestly, I think she [Persephone] puts Aphrodite to shame," Ep. 2) starts their story as the offended goddess of love arranges to get the girl drunk and brought to Hades' home, in order to humiliate both of them.

Persephone is depicted as a young⁴⁶ (19-year-old) girl in a big city (Olympus) for the first time, as her overprotective mother had previously restricted her from Zeus' "morally corrupt" world, keeping her in the mortal realm (Ep. 3). Being the goddess of spring (and fertility), she is usually cheerful and optimistic, as well as a little clumsy and naive (called "an adorable, pink, cinnamon roll" by Eros in Ep. 5; having "big, goofy" eyes, stripe #18 Q&A). However, in her speeches, she mentions loneliness ("I thought meeting all these new people would make me happy. But I just feel more lonely than ever," Ep. 4), insomnia (Ep. 74; 112), and lack of fun in her life (Ep. 53). It also appears that she has secrets to hide, and one of them was the changing of her name from Kore ("Maiden") to Persephone ("Bringer of Death") before her arrival to Olympus (Ep. 110; 115). The girl starts crying easily (Ep. 5; 40; 65; 85; 101). She even has to tell Hades this does not happen all the time (Ep. 26).⁴⁷ She frequently feels guilty, with or without a proper reason (Ep. 8; 40; 65; 88; 95; 108), and has problems with confidence (Ep. 56; 74), continually thinking about herself as being an unimportant and unremarkable "B-grade" goddess (Ep. 23; 26; 27; 58). Another symptom of Persephone's emotional problems is her sudden anger (Ep. 86; 87; 115). Sometimes, there are two personalities inside Kore/Persephone, as depicted in Ep. 111. Hades notices the goddess's mood and calls it a "melancholic quality" (Ep. 19).

46 Especially when compared to Hades, who is over 2000 years old and looks about 40 in the comics.

47 Compare Hades complaining about the same problem in Orvieto's story.

Hades: When I first saw you at the party, you looked sad. / When I carried you into the house, you felt sad. / And you sound sad right now. (Ep. 26)

It seems that it was this sadness that attracted Hades, together with the beauty and sincerity of Persephone (cf. Ep. 26). He perceives them as being alike (Ep. 53; 80). The girl also falls in love with him as he was the first who did not “[treat her] like a child” (Ep. 23), respected her, and “made [her] feel important” (Ep. 17; 27; 64). Furthermore, it seems that this love is a cure for their melancholy.

Both protagonists have their reasons for being blue. For Hades, it is a post-traumatic stress disorder based on childhood trauma – being a son of Kronos, he lived in constant danger (Ep. 77) and was swallowed at the age of six (Ep. 25).⁴⁸ As a young adult, Hades participated in the Titanomachy, and we see him bandaged and seriously injured after the war (Ep. 78). As an adult, he still has nightmares (Ep. 25) and problems accepting himself and his father (Ep. 76; 77). It seems that his duties in the Underworld influence his mood (Ep. 45; 77).

As for Kore/Persephone, the goddess suffers from the overprotectiveness and control of her mother.⁴⁹ The mother even locked her up in a glass palace without doors at some point, “for [her] best” (Ep. 6). Even on Olympus, Persephone makes decisions based on how her mother will react (Ep. 89). Another important reason for her emotional problems takes place at the time of the story – Persephone was raped by Apollo (Ep. 24). Being young, she does not know how to stop him and decides just to wait until it is all over. She is left alone with her feelings, unable to discuss it with anybody for a long time until she can finally share it with Eros in Ep. 66:

Persephone: “I don’t know how to talk about it because I feel like my facts aren’t real? Everything is blurred together.”

Eros: “Yeah, it’s because your brain is trying to store the memories somewhere else until you’re ready to deal with it. It’s normal.”

The god advises her to see a therapist as “it’s OK to get help” (Ep. 66). The episodes concerning this topic are written in a very delicate way and include advice that may help readers. Nevertheless, they start with a warning about sensitive content and explain how to omit

48 Contrary to the ancient sources saying that all of Kronos’ offspring had been devoured after their birth (cf. Hes. *Theog.* 453–467; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.1.5–1.2.1).

49 The motif is also common for Kate McMullan’s *Phone Home, Persephone!*

reading these fragments, making the cartoon more child friendly. The webtoon corresponds with the understanding of Persephone as a victim of rape common for mythology; however, it changes the subject of the abuse.

Other characters are suffering from a depressive state in the webtoon as well, for example, Minthe after the break up with Hades (Ep. 104), Eros after leaving Psyche (Ep. 69–70), and Psyche herself (Ep. 69).

As a romantic story for teenagers, the comics shift the perspective and present the story of Hades and Persephone as one of mutual love⁵⁰ as the treatment for the prolonged sadness and melancholy of the protagonists. The author is delicate and openly discusses difficult topics, depression, trauma, and sexual violence; there is no didacticism or oversimplifying. The webtoon, having been created in real-time during an extended period, holds an open ending and evokes much empathy and involvement of the readers, as is evident from the numerous acclamatory comments.

THE SORROW OF MEDUSA IN REFLECTION BY PATRICIA SATJAWATCHARAPHONG

Reflection (2010)⁵¹ is a short six-minute cartoon animation devoted to the character of Medusa. It was created by Patricia Satjawatcharaphong, a visual designer from the United States. The music was written by Nik Phelps.⁵² The film has no age limit, but its cartoonish form and the Disney-style convention chosen to depict the protagonist indicate that it is intended for children and young adults. On the other hand, the solemn and sad music and the lack of dialogue or a narrator's voice suggest that the audience is not expected to be very young.

The movie starts with a quote from the Roman fabulist Gaius Julius Phaedrus (*Fab.* 4.2.5–7): "Things are not always what they seem; outward form deceives many; rare is the mind that discerns what is carefully concealed within." The sentence is a part of the introduction to his tale about "The Weasel and the Mice" (*De mustela et muribus*). The tale describes the deception of mice by an old weasel, which turns into a mousetrap having rolled itself

50 A similar allusion is also voiced through Ovid's Orpheus, *Met.* 10.26–29.

51 Available online.

52 For more about him, see his personal website, niksprocket.org.

in flour. However, in the animation's case, the point is ultimately the opposite: the hidden side proves to be injured and suffering. Using the ancient motto, Satjawatcharaphong indicates that she will focus on the main character's psyche, not on her appearance, and that a familiar stereotypical image of Medusa will be challenged.

In the entire animation, Medusa is presented as a woman and not a monster, except in the last scene. Her character contrasts with the popular gruesome depictions in children's culture (such as in the *Percy Jackson* series). She reminds the reader of other, more niche representations of this character, which describe her positively. One example is an animation titled *Mythopolis* (2013) by Alexandra Májová (Hetmerová),⁵³ which presents Medusa as the loving mother of a baby minotaur.

The film shows Medusa as a sad and lonely woman who lives in a cave and walks between the stone figures she has petrified. The movie has no dialogue – only at the beginning, there is a song, perhaps sung by Medusa herself. The woman describes her lonely life in her grotto: “Shadow, shape the wall, / pain, contempt my fall, / my heart grieves for one and only, / dark eyes glare at me [...]”

Medusa's sadness seems to be communicated to the viewer at two levels – the aural and the visual. The elements and colors contained in the animation symbolize her grief and suffering. The violin parts in the layers of music seem to emphasize the character's dramatic situation, and the blue colors of Medusa's hair and dress direct the viewer's attention towards anxiety and depression. When she passes by the stone figure of her lover (the movie does not stress that he was a god), she begins to remember her past. The sculpture comes alive and grabs her hand. The two characters show their past and the moments of happiness in love. Unfortunately, their joy did not last for long. One day, the goddess Athena (corresponding to the Ovidian version of the myth in *Met.* 4.800–802) notices the couple kissing in her temple, and for this, Medusa was punished. The movie ends back in Medusa's cave and – significantly – showing her again as a normal woman, not a Gorgon. Only when she wipes her face in front of the mirror, she reveals her reflection, which is the image of a monster. However, this monster does not seem to be threatening and dan-

53 Alexandra Májová (Hetmerová)'s profile is available on *Vimeo*. Cf. also Zarzycka, “Mythopolis [Mitópolis] by Alexandra Hetmerova.”

gerous – tears flow from her eyes, and she covers her face with her hands in order not to see herself in the mirror.

Medusa's myth presented in the animation carries a powerful message about the consequences of exclusion. Even though the author of *Reflection* departs from the Ovidian version of the myth (mainly by omitting the topic of Poseidon's rape of Medusa from *Ov. Met.* 4.795–802),⁵⁴ she is still able to keep the atmosphere of the story by highlighting the paradox of her marginalization by Athena. Showing Medusa's extreme suffering and sadness by putting her in a stigmatized position, the author presents her as a victim. This makes the viewer wonder about the ruthlessness of the goddess and the idea of punishment. The lack of Medusa's voice (sometimes figuratively replaced by music) can refer to silenced women in general. Following Lynn Enterline's reasoning, the Gorgon's monstrous image can function as a "face deprived of the capacity to speak,"⁵⁵ as a symbol of women deprived of their rights in a patriarchal system. *Reflection* raises questions about otherness, exclusion, injustice, equality of human and gender rights, as does Májová in her animation.

The ending appears to be crucial as it emphasizes Medusa's tragic story and its psychological aspect. Difficult to understand for children, it may appeal to teens or young adults. In the final scene of the animation, the author attempts to explain Medusa's monstrosity. Satjawatcharaphong shows her real reflection in a mirror as the indirect image of her inner self. Medusa's hidden monster can be the result of her self-judgment and her self-petrification.⁵⁶ Medusa, perceiving herself in a mirror as a terrifying Gorgon, keeps her real face deep inside her, just as people hide their emotions, ashamed of their problems.

While lasting only a few minutes, *Reflection* puts forth questions that come up after reading the more complex and brutal version of Medusa's story. The animation suggests that "there is no good or evil – just sorrow"⁵⁷ in Medusa's world. Her story can provide an opportunity to talk about depression and women's exclusion.

54 The elimination of the subject of rape may be another indication that the animation had to be suitable for children.

55 Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, 16.

56 Baumbach, *Literature and Fascination*, 127.

57 See the description of the animation at Patricia Satjawatcharaphong's profile on *Behance*, available online.

THERAPY FOR GREEK MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS IN COMICS BY ANASTASIA GORSHKOVA

Another example of a story addressed to teenagers and young adults is the *Therapy* comic strip series created by Anastasia Gorshkova (b. 1994), a visual artist from Novosibirsk, Russia.⁵⁸ The fifteen illustrated stories,⁵⁹ which include around ten images each, have been emerging on her Instagram profile since March 2019, raising the problem of mental health in an entertaining and tragicomic way, full of sarcasm and irony. Each cartoon presents a short fragment of a therapy session, handled by the same modern specialist, with a Greek mythology figure as her client. The author's manner can be distinguished by the simplicity of forms. The monotonous and restrained color scheme focuses on the characters of the comics. The series deals with tough topics and does not refrain from using vulgar, even obscene expressions. Despite that, no age restriction is set. The webcomics effectively find their response among young audiences, their provoking topics are reminiscent of real communication.⁶⁰

Along with depression, *Therapy* discusses several other issues neglected in Russian-speaking public discourse. These include gender self-identification (comic 7, in which Heracles acts as a hostage to his masculine image), occupational burnout (comic 13, the case of Athena) or unhealthy spousal relationships (the unfaithfulness of Aphrodite and Hephaestus in comic 8, or of Zeus and Hera in comic 2; post-traumatic relationship disorder of Persephone and Hades, as well as Oedipus and Jocasta in comics 9 and 10 respectively). The depressive state, in turn, is represented in the series by several different means. Firstly, via its particular signs and symptoms, such as low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, or sadness. Secondly, by highlighting the factors that might provoke the disorder, such as self-loathing or social marginalization. Finally, by the corollaries, such as turning to drugs and alcohol (in order to numb emotions) and suicide attempts.

For the characters traditionally perceived as mythical beasts or monsters, namely Medusa, Minotaur, and Hydra, the reason to see a therapist lies, to a greater or lesser extent, in their exclusion from

58 Cf. Anastasia Gorshkova's profile on Instagram.

59 As of June 27, 2020.

60 The popularity of her webcomics can be glimpsed from the sheer number of her followers, 176,406 as of October 27, 2020.

society. As comic strip characters, they are humanized, not only by their ability to speak or by their human-like appearance but mainly because they get a voice, finally allowing them to express their sufferings and concerns. Nevertheless, despite their psychological problems, the clients have sharp tongues. Sometimes their reaction to the therapist is far from pleasant and can include insults.

Medusa (comic 3 in the series)⁶¹ comes into the picture after having been defeated by Perseus. Beaten but alive, she starts her monologue by saying: "My head, of course, has been sewn back on, but there's still an unpleasant aftertaste."⁶² Contrary to any version of the myth, she confesses her affection for the hero. Thus, the loss in the fight gets a metaphorical dimension, as the Gorgon literally "lost her head for him" and feels upset about being beheaded by the one to whom she was attracted. Perseus' action does not hurt her as much as the admission that she cannot build a relationship with a man. Being an Other, she suffers from a lack of acceptance. Like *Reflection*, the cartoon does not mention the topic of Poseidon raping Medusa (Hes. *Theog.* 278–279; Ov. *Met.* 4.799–800), although an advanced reader will keep this trauma in their mind as well. Speaking to the therapist, the Gorgon admits her complicated personality as "cockroaches in her head"⁶³ and perhaps snakes on it as well. She also regrets that her partners evade the discussion of problems. No wonder the petrified therapist does not interrupt Medusa's speech either. The sensitive Gorgon, baring her soul, has no place in the human hearts of stone. No longer a chthonic monster from Hesiod's *Theogony*, but still λυγρὰ παθοῦσα ("who suffered a woeful fate," Hes. *Theog.* 276), she uncovers callousness as the real monstrosity.

In comic 5,⁶⁴ the Minotaur, stigmatized as a monster from birth and hence put into the maze, declares himself feeling lost. In response, the therapist cannot help laughing – how can the labyrinth dweller get lost in his own home? However, the depicted Minotaur is not a murderous beast, nor can the maze be considered his beloved residence. His introspection resembles that of Asterion from *The House of Asterion* by J. L. Borges (1947), but despite staying in his domain,

61 Gorshkova, "Therapy, part 3," Instagram slideshow, April 19, 2019.

62 "Голову мне, конечно, пришили обратно, но осадок остался."

63 "To have cockroaches in the head" is a Russian expression (close to "to have bats in the belfry" in English), which means that a person is marked by eccentricities and peculiarities. In the case of Medusa, it has no negative connotation and probably corresponds to the fact that she has snakes on her head.

64 Gorshkova, "Therapy, part 5," Instagram slideshow, May 22, 2019.

the comic strip character does not know the place, nor has he that kind of sympathy towards the walls entangling him. Feeling lost seems to be the result of his futile attempts to escape. Minotaur turns out to be a prisoner, recalling Plutarch repeating after Philochorus that the maze could be a “dungeon, with no other inconvenience than that its prisoners could not escape”⁶⁵ (Plut. *Thes.* 16.1), and Ovid describing the creature as being “shut” in it (“quo postquam geminam tauri iuvenisque figuram clausit,” *Met.* 8.169–170). Wandering in the labyrinth may be interpreted both literally and figuratively concerning his inner state: alone, lost, and abandoned, he does not even hope to find his own Ariadne’s thread.⁶⁶

It is the loneliness within society that matters in the story of Hydra, comic 14.⁶⁷ The heads complement each other, indicating the “difficulty to get rid of the unpleasant feeling everyone is avoiding them,” as “in the modern [...] world appearance remains so important.”⁶⁸ Hydra’s social exclusion is emphasized by the fact that the therapist herself consults them online and had started doing so two years before the pandemic, as Hydra mentions. “Little Fabio,” the only silent Hydra head, looks especially dispirited – covered by a paper bag with traces of tears on it. At the end, when the therapist interrupts the session pretending to have lost the connection, one can see, as the paper bag is torn, that Fabio has two heads. Although the reason for his trauma is not given, one may assume that he not only suffers from the perception of his outward distinctiveness (even among mythical beasts) but also from the post-traumatic stress disorder. As two new Hydra heads grew in the place of the one smashed (Ov. *Met.* 9.193–194; Apollod. 2.5.2), it is possible that Fabio was the victim of an attack. Consequently, this story evokes questions. Should peculiarity be considered as ugliness? Could people deal with it in any other way than attempting to get rid of the apparent monster?

However, one does not have to be repellent or unwanted in order not to be understood. Among the depressed characters of antiquity,

65 Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives*, English translation by Bernadotte Perrin.

66 Cf. “The Labyrinth” by Asaf Avidan. The authors would like to thank Zofia Kowalska for sharing this song.

67 Gorshkova, “Therapy, part 14: The Lernaean Hydra,” Instagram slideshow, April 23, 2020.

68 This approach is present in another of Májová’s animations about mythical monsters, “Swimming Pool,” available online.

Narcissus from comic 4⁶⁹ merits particular attention. This handsome young man is not narcissistic, although he is undoubtedly aware of his beauty. It has proven to be his curse since people adore his body, treating him like "flesh" (and the blushing and flirting therapist is no exception). Unlike Ovid's vain Narcissus (from *Met.* 3.352–354, 400–401), this one suffers from harassment and sexual objectification, based on the fact that his inner world is devalued and reduced to an image.

Pandora from comic 17⁰ is also tormented by the misunderstanding of the people around her. Pointing out that it is her twelfth try in turning to medical assistance (as every previous doctor drove her out from the session), she admits being powerless against these situations, both looking for help and managing her persisting guilt. Contrary to Hesiod's narration, this Pandora is deprived of "lies, crafty words and a deceitful nature" (*Hes. Op.* 78–79), as well as fatal curiosity. Unable to understand her motifs and redeem herself, she feels profound and bitter remorse for all the misfortunes in the world, including the death of the therapist's dog and her family problems. The therapist slaps Pandora in the face and throws her out as the predecessors did. The sense of guilt, typical for a depressive state, could nevertheless be surmounted by a detail. This is the Hope that "remained there in an unbreakable home within under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door" (*Hes. Op.* 96–99).

The gods, even those mostly viewed as cheerful, are still prone to depression, and to no lesser extent. Adolescent Cupid in comic 12⁷¹ is forced to see the therapist after a failed suicide attempt. Calling himself a loser, he explains trying to shoot himself with a bow out of desire "to feel anything." With his words that love has always been lethal, the therapist offers help – to help Cupid understand that everyone would be better off without him. Unlike Ovid's *lascivus puer* ("wanton boy," *Met.* 1.456) who knows *saevam iram* ("vengeful spite") or the tender young god from Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche, the Cupid from the cartoon is crushed by apathy and sees the only solution in death.

69 Gorshkova, "Therapy, part 4: Narcissus," Instagram slideshow, May 12, 2019.

70 Gorshkova, "Myths and Legends of Cranky Greece," Instagram slideshow, March 24, 2019.

71 Gorshkova, "Therapy, part 12: About *Amor*," Instagram slideshow, February 4, 2020.

Another god, Dionysus from comic 6,⁷² chooses what is scarcely a better way to fight his mental state. He runs away from an unpleasant reality by turning to alcohol and drugs, as is obvious from his bloodshot eyes, as well as from his hands, alternately carrying a glass of wine, a smoking joint, and a bong. The character calls it “true hedonism,” which allows him to feel real. As for the therapy, Dionysus says he showed up there by accident (“to ask for a lighter”). Medical studies affirm the link between the use of alcohol and marijuana and depressed moods during adolescence. Many are stressing that substance abuse can increase the risk of developing both major and longer depressive episodes and can lead to severe substance-related problems.⁷³ Thus, the Dionysian origin can lead to chaos and destruction (including self-destruction) by depriving it of the Apollonian antipode.

Therapy webcomics overturn the conventional mythological world. Mental and psychological disorders appear to be expected for everybody, for monsters and gods alike. The illustrations and their characters allow readers to immerse themselves in their experience and see people around them from a different perspective, introspective of the Other. More importantly, the displacement of heroes to present times shows that these characters have left the ancient Greeks’ minds. They now live, suffer, and battle with their problems, which are very much like ours, in our midst.

CONCLUSIONS

Various texts of children’s and young adult culture, including the ones analyzed and mentioned above, show that ancient myths are still a viable form of explaining the world, and that they can speak to humanity’s current problems. As Lisa Maurice observes: “The depictions and adaptations of the ancient world have varied at different times, however, in accordance with changes in societies and cultures.”⁷⁴ This applies perfectly to the contemporary culture of children and youth. Works inspired by myths – appropriately adapted to the regional contexts and current conditions – can help young people face the challenges posed by the rapidly changing world of the twen-

72 Gorshkova, “Therapy, part 6: Dionysus,” Instagram slideshow, June 12, 2019.

73 Cf. Deykin, Levy, and Wells, “Adolescent Depression, Alcohol and Drug Abuse,” 178–182.

74 Maurice, “Children, Greece and Rome: Heroes and Eagles,” 1.

ty-first century. As Maurice continues: "Children's literature, often the first meeting point with the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, is arguably one of the most important experiences in forming perception of that culture."⁷⁵ Following this, one could add that children's works inspired by classical myths can not only become a tool for children that influences their perception of antiquity but can also be turned into a universal key to understanding themselves and the world around them.

Similarly, Katarzyna Marciniak underscores this extraordinary feature of children's works based on antiquity:

We receive special help with how to overcome difficult experiences and to preserve the good ones. This help is offered by childhood literature, one of the kinds of which is common in nearly all the national literatures – the books for children and young adults inspired by Graeco-Roman Antiquity – both ancient myths and history.⁷⁶

This helpfulness of children's works inspired by classical antiquity is particularly visible in texts that (literally or metaphorically) concentrate on mental issues, including depression. This kind of reception of antiquity seems to be vital in the context of contemporary children's culture, where there is a vast demand for texts which are able to present children both with timeless and contemporary values.

As variability and scope of interpretation are inherent for classical mythology, choosing myths as a base allows talking to children and youth in an open and non-didactic way. Taking this opportunity, the authors of the works analyzed have not only broken taboos, voicing among others the problem of depression and various traumas, but also shattered stereotypes about gods and monsters, heroes and villains, forcing the audience to think about the imaginative realm and their own surroundings. It is worth noting that ancient sources, in most cases, raise similar questions and allow parallel interpretations. The children's and young adult texts prove to be rooted in classical antiquity, especially in Ovid's oeuvre, in a more significant measure than just making allusions to mythological characters or events. The authors themselves are paying conscious tribute to classical culture.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁶ Marciniak, "In the Mirror of Antiquity," 36.

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes a handful of works for children and youth that are based on mythology and deal with depression, a topic that is becoming more frequent in contemporary children's and young adults' culture, mainly because of the need to break the mental health taboo. These are the newest edition of Laura Orvieto's *Storie di bambini molto antichi* (2014, first published in 1937), Rachel Smythe's digital comics *Lore Olympus* (2018–2020), Patricia Satjawatcharaphong's short animation *Reflection* (2010), and the webcomic series *Therapy* created by Anastasia Gorshkova (2019–2020). They provide examples from literary and audio-visual culture for very young readers and more adult teenagers and youth, raising the issue of deep sadness utilizing storytelling and not in a didactic way. Some of the protagonists struggling with the problem are far from lively characters in conventional interpretations of the myths (including Hades, Hydra, or Medusa), so the texts play upon stereotypes entrenched in the culture. It appears that children's works inspired by classical antiquity have significant interpretative potential and educational value – as well as the ability to surprise the audience.

KEYWORDS

mental health, Greek mythology, Laura Orvieto, Rachel Smythe, Patricia Satjawatcharaphong, Anastasia Gorshkova

IZVLEČEK

»Nikoli ni narobe, če še naprej iščeš sonce«:

Motiv depresije v delih za otroke in mladino, vezanih na antiko

Prispevek analizira več del za otroke in mladino, ki izhajajo iz mitologije in govorijo o depresiji, temi, ki stopa vse bolj v ospredje tudi v sodobni kulturi otrok in mladostnikov, predvsem zaradi potrebe po odpravi tabuja v zvezi z duševnim zdravjem. To so nova izdaja dela Laure Orvieto *Storie di bambini molto antichi* (2014, prvič objavljena leta 1937), digitalni stripi Rachel Smythe *Lore Olympus* (2018–2020), kratka animacija Patricie Satjawatcharaphong *Reflection* (2010) ter *Therapy*, serija spletnih stripov Anastasie Gorshkove (2019–2020). Gre za primere iz literarne in avdiovizualne kulture za zelo mlade bralce ter najstnike in mlade odrasle, ki vprašanje globoke žalosti izpostavljajo z uporabo zgodb in na nedidaktičen način. Nekateri protagonisti, ki se spopadajo s to težavo (vključno s Hadom, Hidro ali Meduzo), so prikazani zelo drugače kot v običajnih in živahnih interpretacijah mitov, saj besedila spretno preigravajo stereotipe, ki so se ustalili v kulturi. Zdi se, da imajo otroška dela, ki jih navdihuje klasična antika, velik interpretativni potencial in izobraževalno vrednost – pa tudi sposobnost za presenečanje občinstva.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

duševno zdravje, grška mitologija, Laura Orvieto, Rachel Smythe, Patricia Satjawatcharaphong, Anastasia Gorshkova