THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS

Introduction

People often use **allusions**, or references, to mythology to make their points more clear. When an allusion is used, a person is implying all the connotations (feelings, emotions) that go along with the reference. For example, one might say, "I woke up in the morning, having the strength of Hercules." This allusion to Hercules illustrates that the person felt as if he could do anything. It also implies that he felt the self-confidence that physical strength brings -- that anything could be accomplished because of the strength. Someone who has read the stories of Hercules would understand the allusion. Another common allusion from mythology is the term "Pandora's Box". If a person says, he is afraid to bring up a subject because it would be like opening Pandora's Box, he is referring to the myth of Pandora. According to the myth because of her curiosity, Pandora opened a box from which all the evils of mankind escaped, causing all the problems of the world. Thus, the term has come to imply disorder, chaos, and a sense of evil foreboding.

It is easy to understand why writers make use of allusions: they get more mileage out of a few words. Mary Shelley used an allusion to mythology when she chose to subtitle her novel *Frankenstein* with the words *or, The Modern Prometheus*. Prometheus was a Titan who is found in both Greek and Roman mythologies. His name means "Forethought." Although there are several versions of the myths, the most famous are that Prometheus creates man and later steals fire from Mount Olympus to save mankind.

**Excerpt #1**

The Roman version of the legend of Prometheus as written by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* states:

Whether with particles of heavenly fire,

The God of Nature did his soul inspire;

And, pliant, still retain'd th'ethereal energy:

Which wise Prometheus temper'd into paste,

And, mis't with living steams, the godlike image caste...

From such rude principles our form began;

And earth was metamorphosed into man.[1]

**Excerpt #2**

Prometheus created man, without woman, and according to Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, he...

...thought out a way to make mankind superior. [to animals] He fashioned them in a nobler shape
than the animals, upright like the gods; and then he went to heaven, to the sun, where he lit a torch and brought down fire, a protection for men, far better than anything else, whether fur or feathers or strength or swiftness.

Zeus was angry at Prometheus' actions and reacted out of revenge: ...For a long time, certainly throughout the happy Golden Age, only men were upon the earth; there were no women. Zeus created these later, in his anger at Prometheus for caring so much for men. Prometheus had not only stolen fire for men; he had also arranged that they should get the best part of any animal sacrificed and the gods the worst.[3]

Zeus created woman, through Pandora, as "an evil to men, with a nature to do evil." Although beautiful to look at, Pandora (whose downfall was her curiosity) opened a box given to her by Zeus. She was told never to open the box. But because of her overwhelming need to know, she opened it and all the evils of the world -- plagues, sorrow, and mischief-- flew out to torment mankind. However, one good thing was left in the box as she slammed the lid -- HOPE.

Excerpt #3

After Zeus had punished mankind through the creation of Pandora, a woman, Zeus turned his attention to Prometheus and punished him by having his servants, Force and Violence, bind Prometheus,

To a high-piercing, headlong rock

In adamantine chains that none can break,

and told him,

Forever shall the intolerable present grind you down.

And he who will release you is not born.

Such fruit you reap for your man-loving ways.
A god yourself, you did not dread God's anger,

But gave to mortals honor not their due.

And therefore you must guard this joyless rock --

No rest, no sleep, no moment's respite.

Groans shall your speech be, lamentation your only words.