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STUDY GUIDE: MYTH SUMMARIES

ACHILLES: THE GREATEST OF THE GREEK WARRIORS IN THE TROJAN WAR.

When Achilles was an infant, his mother tried to make him immortal by dipping him into the River Styx. The waters of the river protected him from harm except for the place where his mother was holding onto him at his heel.

When the Greeks began to organize for war against the Trojans, his mother hid him on the island of Skyros, where he disguised himself as a girl, and lived until Odysseus, the King of Ithica, finally found him.

He fought many battles during the war and became known as the greatest of the Greek warriors. When Patroclus, his dearest friend, was killed by the Trojan prince Hector in a battle, Achilles killed Hector and dragged his body behind his chariot. The Fates had already predicted that Achilles would die shortly after Hector, so Achilles was ready for his own death. As he led the Greeks to the walls of Troy, Achilles was mortally wounded in his heel by an arrow fired by Paris.

THE ACHILLES TENDON WHICH ATTACHES THE HEEL TO THE CALF MUSCLE, WAS NAMED AFTER ACHILLES.

ADONIS

Adonis was a beautiful youth loved by both Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Persephone, the queen of the underworld. One day Adonis was killed by a wild boar while hunting. Aphrodite begged Zeus, the ruler of all the gods, to restore Adonis to her. Zeus decided that Adonis should spend the winter months with Persephone in the underworld, and the summer months with Aphrodite, so every spring, Adonis was resurrected, and every winter he died again and went to the underworld. This pattern became associated with the seasonal death of some plants and animals, and the return to living nature during the summer.

AGAMEMNON: THE KING WHO LED THE GREEKS AGAINST TROY DURING THE TROJAN WAR.

When strong winds seemed to hamper the passage of his Greek fleet on its way to Troy, Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter, Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis, which caused a curse to be put upon him.

After a 10 year siege, Troy fell to the Greeks, and Agamemnon returned home victorious. When he arrived home, he was greeted warmly by Clytemnestra. However, while Agamemnon was taking his bath, she threw a net over him. Her lover knocked him out by hitting him with a sword, and Clytemnestra beheaded him with an ax.

To avenge the death of their father, Electra and her brother, Orestes, killed both their mother and her lover.

APPLE OF DISCORD AND THE START OF THE TROJAN WAR

The goddess, Discord was very upset because she had not been invited to a banquet for the gods and goddesses. To cause trouble, she took an apple, wrote the words "For the Fairest" on it, and tossed it into the banquet hall. Immediately three goddesses: Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena, tried to claim the apple. Zeus sent the three contestants to Paris, the Prince of Troy, so he could decide which of the three was indeed "the fairest".

Each goddess offered Paris favors in an attempt to sway his decision in their favor. Both Athena and Hera offered him military power and success. Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris selected Aphrodite, which greatly angered both Hera and Athena. Aphrodite led Paris to Helen, who happened to be married to the King of Sparta in Greece. Paris immediately fell in love with Helen, and carried her off to Troy. This caused the start of the Trojan war, because the Greeks quickly concentrated their forces and went to Troy to recapture lovely Helen.

Naturally Athena helped the Greeks win the war, and she became the protector of Odysseus on his long journey back to Greece.

ARGUS: A CREATURE IN MYTHOLOGY WHO HAD 100 EYES.

Zeus fell in love with Io. Hera, his wife, became insanely jealous and threatened to harm Io. Zeus changed Io into a cow to protect her from Hera's threats. Hera stole the cow and had Argus guard Io so Zeus could not come and rescue her. Argus was the perfect choice for a guard, because he had 100 eyes, and while some of his eyes were sleeping, the others were wide awake.

Zeus, however, was determined to win back Io. He sent Hermes to rescue Io, which he did by playing music that caused all of Argus's eyes to close in sleep. Once Argus was asleep, Hermes cut off his head. Hera took the eyes of Argus and placed them upon the tail of the peacock.

ATLAS

Atlas fought with the Titans against the Olympians. After their defeat, Zeus punished Atlas by condemning him to support the earth and sky forever on his shoulders and his upper back.

Atlas was also the father of the Hesperides, the nymphs who guarded the tree of golden apples. One of the tasks of Hercules was to obtain the golden apples. Hercules approached Atlas and told him that he would take over the job of holding the earth and sky if Atlas would help him obtain the golden apples from his daughters. Atlas was thrilled to be removed from the heavy burden and readily agreed. When he returned with the golden apples, Hercules asked him to hold the earth and sky for a few minutes while he adjusted a pad to ease the pressure on his shoulders. As soon as Atlas took over the load again, Hercules grabbed the apples and walked away, leaving Atlas to support the world forever.

The term for a book of maps, an atlas, was named for this mythological character.

AUGEAN STABLES: ONE OF THE 12 LABORS OF HERCULES.

These stables belonged to King Augeas, who possessed a large herd of cattle, including 12 sacred white bulls. These stables had not been cleaned for many years, and Hercules was told to clean them in one day. Furthermore, King Augeas promised him one tenth of his herd if he could accomplish this seemingly impossible task.

Hercules accomplished the task by diverting the course of two rivers, the Alpheus and Peneus, so that they ran directly through the stable. King Augeas did not honor his deal with Hercules, and refused to give up one tenth of his herd, so Hercules sent an army against him, and killed both the king and his sons.

CIRCE: A POWERFUL SORCERESS WHO LIVED ON THE ISLAND OF AEAEA, NEAR ITALY.

Circe was able to change people into different creatures by potions and changes. The Greek hero, Odysseus, and his crew visited the island of Aeaea on their way back to Greece, and fell prey to Circe's powers. She changed the crew members into swine, but they retained their reasoning powers, and realized what had happened to them.

Odysseus, who was not with the crew when Circe found them, went in search of help. He encountered Hermes, who gave him herbs that would protect Odysseus from the powers of Circe. Odysseus then forced Circe to change his crew members back to humans. Circe was so amazed that anyone could withstand her enchantment powers, that she fell in love with Odysseus. They stayed with Circe for nearly a year, but finally decided to continue their journey toward Greece, leaving Circe on her island.

CYCLOPS AND ODYSSEUS: ONE EYED MONSTERS WHO IMPRISONED ODYSSEUS AND HIS CREW ON THEIR WAY BACK FROM TROY.

The Cyclops were shepherds and were a lawless, savage, and cannibalistic race who feared neither gods or humans. On his way back to Greece after the Trojan War,

Odysseus and his men were trapped in a cave by the Cyclops, Polyphemus, a son of Poseidon, the god of the sea. Polyphemus ate several of the crew, but Odysseus and the remaining crew members blinded him by thrusting a large pointed tree bough into his one central eye. They escaped the cave by clinging to the undersides of the sheep. Polyphemus felt the back of each of the sheep as it was sent out to pasture for the day, but did not locate the men who escaped with the sheep.

DAEDALUS AND ICARUS

Daedalus was a great inventor. He designed the Labyrinth, which was a vast maze on the island of Crete where the king of Crete kept the Minotaur. The Labyrinth was so confusing that very few people ever escaped.

Daedalus and his son, Icarus, were imprisoned in the Labyrinth. Daedalus designed huge wings for them from feathers and wax, and they rose above the Labyrinth and escaped the maze. However, Icarus flew too close to the sun. The sun melted the wax that held his wings together and he crashed to the sea and was killed.

JASON AND THE GOLDEN FLEECE

The Greek King, Athamas, was married to Nephele, and they had two children, Phrixus and Helle. He tired of his wife, and then married Ino. Ino hated her step children, especially Phrixus because he was male and would inherit the throne of his father. Ino wanted her own son to become the next king, and plotted to get rid of King Athamas's first children.

Nephele realized that her children were in danger, so she prayed to the gods for help. Hermes sent Chrysomallus, a winged ram with fleece of gold, to her aid. The ram snatched up the two children and flew away. As he was crossing the strait that divides Europe and Asia, Helle slipped from his back and was drowned. The strait where she was drowned was named for her: The Sea of Helle. The ram carried Phrixus to a country near the Black Sea, where he was warmly received.

To show his gratitude to the gods for delivering him safely to these lands, Phrixus sacrificed Chrysomallus, the ram. The Golden Fleece was put into a sacred grove of trees and guarded by a dragon that never slept.

A few years later, Jason, a cousin of Phrixus, who had also been cheated out of his throne by a step-brother, went in search of the golden Fleece, which rightfully belonged to their family. By regaining the fleece, he could regain his position as King.

Jason gathered a group of heroic young men from all parts of Greece to sail with him. They were called the Argonauts, and they sailed aboard the ship, the Argos. After many dangers and perils, Jason and the Argonauts reached Colchis, the county said he would give up the Golden Fleece if Jason would yoke two fire-breathing bulls with bronze feet, and gather the teeth of a slain dragon. From the teeth would arise an army of men who would fight against Jason.

Jason accomplished these tasks with the help of Medea, who Hera had secretly made fall in love with him. Medea gave Jason a charm to sprinkle on his weapons so that he could not be captured or killed. She also charmed the dragon who guarded the fleece,

so that Jason could steal it. He promised to always love Medea, and took her back to Greece with him, along with his crew and the fleece.

When he reached his homeland, he discovered that his stepbrother, Pelias, had forced his father to kill himself, and his mother had died of grief. Medea helped Jason avenge these deaths by tricking Pelias's daughters into killing him.

Two sons were born to Jason and Medea. After several years, Jason left Medea, and married the daughter of the King of Corinth. Medea was heartbroken, and killed his new bride. She then killed her own two sons. Jason was furious and determined to kill Medea, but she escaped in a chariot drawn by vicious dragons.

GORDIAN KNOT

Gordius tied the pole of his wagon to a yoke with a rope. The knot he tied was so secure that nobody could untie it. It was decided that whoever undid the knot would become the next king and ruler of all Asia. Many men tried to undo the knot, even Alexander the Great, but none of them were successful. Finally, in a fit of fury, Alexander the Great severed the knot by cutting through it with his sword, thus solving the problem in a different way.

THE HARPIES, JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS

The Harpies were terrible creatures having the heads of old women, and the wings, beaks and claws of birds. They flew swiftly, and their feathers served as armor. They snatched up mortals and carried them off to the underworld, leaving behind a horrible, sickening smell.

While searching for the Golden Fleece, Jason and the Argonauts encountered a band of Harpies who were torturing an old man. Before the man had time to eat his food, they ruined it, so he could not eat. The poor man was starving. When Jason and his crew witnessed this behavior, they wanted to kill the Harpies, but Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, persuaded them to drive the Harpies away instead of killing them.

HERCULES AND HIS 12 LABORS

Hercules was noted for his great strength and his accomplishment of 12 impossible tasks. He was Zeus's son, but was not the son of Hera. Hera was jealous of the child and sent two serpents to kill him when he was just a baby. However, Hercules strangled the snakes. As a young man he killed a lion with his hands and wore its skin for a coat. Hera never got over her jealousy and sent a fit of madness upon Hercules causing him to kill her own wife and children. He was told that he could be forgiven for this terrible deed by doing whatever his cousin, Eurystheus, told him to do. Encouraged by Hera, Eurystheus assigned 12 impossible tasks to Hercules. Hera was sure that Hercules would be killed doing one of these horrid tasks, and her jealousy would be over.

The 12 Labors of Hercules:

1. Kill the lion of Nemea, a beast that could not be wounded with a weapon. He stunned the lion with a club and then strangled it.
 2. Kill the Hydra monster that lived in a swamp and had 9 heads. When one of the heads was chipped off, two more grew back in that place.
 3. To capture alive the stag with golden horns and bronze hoofs that was sacred to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt.
 4. To capture the great boar that nobody had ever gotten near.
 5. To clean up the Augean stables of 30 years of filth left by thousands of cattle, and accomplish the feat in one day's time.
 6. To drive off a huge flock of man-eating birds.
 7. To deliver the mad bull sent by Poseidon to terrorize Crete, back to Eurystheus.
 8. To bring back the man-eating mares of Mycenae to Eurystheus.
 9. To bring back the girdle of Queen Hippolyta.
 10. To capture and bring back the oxen of the three-headed monster called Geryon.
 11. To fetch the golden apple from Hesperides. This is where Atlas, Hesperides's father, was tricked into helping Hercules.
 12. To bring back the three-headed dog, Cerberus, from the lower world. Hades, the god of the dead, agreed to let Hercules take the dog, if he could do so without using any weapons. Hercules captured the dog, took him back to Mycenae, and then brought the dog back to the Underworld.
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MEDUSA AND PERSEUS

Medusa was one of the best known Gorgons. According to the legend, anyone who looked at her would turn to stone. Perseus was sent to kill Medusa. Hermes and Athena helped him accomplish this task by giving him winged shoes, a magical sword, and a polished shield. He flew down on Medusa from the air, used the shiny shield as a mirror, and without looking directly at the monster, cut off her head with the magical sword.

NARCISSUS

Narcissus was a beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He became so engrossed with his reflection that he was unable to move from the pool, and he wasted away and died by the water. Today, narcissists are people who are too involved in themselves.

PANDORA'S BOX

According to mythology, Pandora was the first woman on Earth, created by Hephaestus at the request of Zeus. The gods gave Pandora a box of gifts, but warned her never to open the box. Pandora's curiosity got the best of her, and she opened the box despite the warning. All the evils and miseries of the world flew out at her, and spread to all mankind. The only thing that remained in the box was hope.

PROMETHEUS AND FIRE

Prometheus was a Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to the mortals. As a punishment, Zeus ordered Prometheus to be chained to a rock. He sent an eagle to continually chew off pieces of Prometheus's liver. Prometheus refused to give up, and was eventually rescued by Hercules, who killed the eagle.

PYGMALION

Pygmalion was a sculptor who had always hated women until he created a lovely statue of a female. He fell in love with his statue, and begged Venus, (or Aphrodite), to find him a woman just like his statue. Venus changed his statue into a real woman.

This myth was the basis of the play "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw. In this play, a professor takes an illiterate girl. He teaches her to speak properly and act like a lady. In the course of time, he falls in love with her.

TROJAN HORSE

The Trojan Horse was designed by Odysseus and used by the Greeks to win the Trojan War.

It was a huge wooden horse that was hollow in the center. Greek warriors were hidden inside the horse, and the horse was positioned outside the gates of Troy. A messenger was sent to tell the Trojans that the goddess, Athena, would be pleased if the Trojans would bring the horse into the city and worship it. Laocoon, a wise Trojan, did not want to bring the horse into the city. He said, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." Cassandra agreed with him and urged the others to ignore the horse, but the majority of the Trojans were pleased with the gift. They wheeled the horse into their city. Immediately, the Greek warriors rushed from the inside of the horse. They opened the gates of the city to allow other waiting Greeks to enter. The Greeks overtook the Trojans, burned the city of Troy, and the war was won by the Greeks.

The story of the Trojan War is told in the Iliad, a book by Homer.