

The allusion to  
mythology of  
cassandra in  
cassandra with a tail  
and soliloquy for...



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Anton Chekhov once said “ Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice.” Clearly, this line suggests that knowledge lies not in knowing, but rather in its application.

Despite Chekhov’s views, people have always prioritized on the accumulation of knowledge. The question then is not how much knowledge one can have, but instead how can knowledge change the world for the better, and its consequences. It is with the creative use of allusion to the Greek mythology of Cassandra that both Blaga Dimitrova and Wislawa Szymborska are able to convince the audience of their perspective on their opinion on the role of knowledge in society. Cassandra in Greek mythology is a figure both of foresight and powerlessness, where the combination of her deep knowledge and incapability for change exemplify the tragic condition of humankind. As such, it is not surprising that we find frequent references to the mythology of Cassandra in poetry, two examples being *Cassandra with a Tail* by Blaga Dimitrova and *Soliloquy for Cassandra* by Wislawa Szymborska. At the heart of both poems, it revolves around a tragedy parallel to the mythology of Cassandra where the protagonist is destroyed by an impending tragedy that is beyond her control, but not beyond her awareness.

Contrarily, Dimitrova presents her poem in a modern relatable society where as Szymborska utilizes directly the ancient mythology of Cassandra. Alluding to the powerlessness of Cassandra, both poems exhibit the paradoxical idea that even when a person with the power of foresight will lack the ability to influence or alter the outcome.

In Greek mythology, Cassandra of Troy warns the Trojans of the inevitable fall of Troy, and due to Apollo’s curse, her prophecy was dismissed as simply

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her imagination. Troy fell, and Cassandra survived to witness the fall of her people. The poem “Cassandra with a Tail” by Dimitrova begins simply enough with extensive use of imagery to bring the reader into the poem. Early in the first stanza, Dimitrova employs a variety of imagery that portrays the cat as a wise and solitary being that alludes to the insight that Cassandra possesses: it spun a yarn of smoke into a ball. At night, it flickered half-moon eyes in the dark corners of the house...Wise.

With Cottony steps. (line 4-12) Evidently, the portrayal of the cat in the first stanza is a representation of Cassandra and her oracular powers. The use of extended metaphor such as “smoke” and “half-moon eyes” gives a mystical sense, but also illuminates obscurity and the cat’s acute sense of perception or prophecy. Moreover, it suggests that the cat prefers to interact with objects as opposed to people, and at night, it retreats into a corner of the house. Here, the cat is acting as an observer, silently watching the world around it, but not interfering. However, into the second stanza, the cat becomes more animated through the use of dictions such as “shot up”, “leapt”, “wailing”, and “exploded”. This shows that even being as wise as it is; it is becoming more agitated and desperate to warn the protagonist’s family of the impending tragedy. The purposeful use of diction creates an image of the prophecy being delivered in an urgent, shrieking manner that is clinging to the hope that it will not fall on blind eyes.

Here, the reader first gets a sense that despite the cat’s efforts, nothing has become of it. Ultimately, the “earthquake” a representation of the impending tragedy became a reality. Through this ordeal, the protagonist has become more aware and alert, a person greater wisdom and foresight, <https://assignbuster.com/the-allusion-to-mythology-of-cassandra-in-cassandra-with-a-tail-and-soliloquy-for-cassandra/>

hence “ But her miracle stayed with me” (line 26) Similarly, in the poem Soliloquy for Cassandra, Szymborska exhibits the narrator – Cassandra, as aware and knowledgeable, but incapable of preventing the forthcoming tragedy. The character trait of Cassandra as wise and knowledgeable is revealed early in the poem to the audience in the second stanza of the lines “ It’s true, I am triumphant./ My prophetic words burn like fire in the sky.” (line 5-6)The short direct line structure conveys a sense of confidence and pride within Cassandra, as a character who can perceive the future. All the while, the simile makes a direct comparison of the concrete element of Cassandra’s prophetic words to the abstract element of the sun – a representation of god’s influence as well as a symbol of his authority. Ultimately, the techniques attributes to a tone of self-righteousness as a result of Cassandra’s knowledge.

Nonetheless, her prophetic words ultimately end without any influence, hence “ It turns out I was right. But nothing has come of it” (line 37-38)Furthermore, both poems illuminate a sense of despair and torment in the narrator as a portrayal of the consequences in being knowledgeable. Up until the third stanza, the narrator’s life has been ordinary; however now, everything has changed, hence “ the oracular cat disappeared, with my childhood, forever.” (line 24-25) The loss of childhood signified a loss of innocence and ignorance, along with a loss of any connections to the protagonist’s previous life that was full of love and compassion. It is the person’s ability to connect the past with the present, and more significantly, convey a foreshadowing prospect of doom for the future to come that brings her torment. Simply, she has lost the little wonders of an carefree life. The

third stanza begins as if a new chapter has begun in the protagonist's life. In the midst of this new chapter, the protagonist is trying to send out a warning, much like the cat, to others who lack the knowledge and foresight.

In the poem the protagonist warns of impending doom of our "green careening planet". Like the cat, all her efforts of persuasion are announced unheard and it further torments her. Similarly, in the poem Soliloquy for Cassandra, her ability to foreseen future disasters brings misery, and sorrow into Cassandra's life. Every word and its placement, every punctuation mark and image works to convey an atmosphere of melancholy. I remember it so clearly-how people, seeing me, would break off in midword. Laughter died. Children ran to their mothers. I didn't even know their short-lived names.

And that song about a little green leaf-no one ever finished it near me.

Through the use of imagery, the reader is introduced to a reflection from Cassandra of how those around her alienated her and feared the future that she brings to them. In addition, the use of syntax in the line "how people seeing me, would break off in mid-word" emphasizes a stereotype that Cassandra must face. Szyborska employs personification in the line "laughter died" in which effectively develops a feeling of grief and develops an atmosphere of despair. Notably, she experiences a sense of loss of those whom she loved and she missed the small wonders of the world that brings about happiness. The curse of knowledge has blocked her off from others that remind ignorant; therefore she is rendered helpless and powerless. The use of various techniques helps to convey the conclusion that knowing will cause great pain and despair into ones self, since knowing does not

necessarily give one the power to truly change the course of the outcome,  
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but instead forces the that person to experience the outcome they could not alter. In “ Cassandra with a Tail”, the allusion to the Greek mythology of Cassandra can only perceived in the title.

There is no explicit reference to it throughout the poem. Instead, the poem takes place in a rather modern setting and in a life situation for which the readers can better relate. For instance, the use of diction such as “ ambulance”, “ atomic”, “ electronic” and “ robots” connects the reader to what they perceive in everyday life. In contrast, unlike “ Cassandra with a Tail”, in “ Soliloquy for Cassandra”, the mythological allusion is much more evident and takes physical form in the poem. The speaker in the poem is clearly Cassandra herself, hence “ Here I am, Cassandra”. Moreover, the purposeful structure of the poem itself further elaborates a sense that the story of the mythology is directly being told to the reader. The poem begins with an anaphora of the phrase “ and this is my..

..”, it also ends with the same phrase. Evidently the structure suggests an exposition and an end that is often used in the plot of a mythological story. In addition, although both poems employ simile to convey the prophetic words, Szyborska used simile to convey a sense of significance in Cassandra’s words, whereas Dimitrova convey a sense of ignored urgency. All the while, Szyborska makes a comparison to a modern object while Dimitrova compares to a more ancient god. In the poem soliloquy for Cassandra, Cassandra’s seemingly infinite amount of knowledge of the future, elevates the reader above the surface of this world and allows one to speculate on the world below without the feeling of belonging or connection to the world. Into the fifth stanza, the reader now sees that Cassandra has <https://assignbuster.com/the-allusion-to-mythology-of-cassandra-in-cassandra-with-a-tail-and-soliloquy-for-cassandra/>

elevated herself so far above the human world that she speaks as if she is not a part of it. Knowledge has not only enhanced Cassandra's self-importance, but also her isolation.

" Condemned. Trapped from birth in departing bodies. But in them they bore a moist hope," (line 30-32) her descriptions of humans are that of fascination and pity. " Condemned" and " Trapped" shows Cassandra's pity towards their unfortunate lives, and " a moist hope" signifies for Cassandra's fascination but also the lack of understanding towards the idea of hope. Contrarily, in " Cassandra with a Tail", the poem is more earth bound, and examines the world of the persona before and after the persona's change from naïf to wise. Therefore the challenges the persona faces are more understandable as well as more real. This gives the poem more elements of life and makes it easier for the reader to connect with as well as accept the moral of the poem. In both poems " Cassandra with a Tail" and " Soliloquy for Cassandra" knowledge was carefully incorporated.

Which leads to both poems in having a similar theme that knowledge alone does not bring about power, and can be of a great source of pain and despair since not everyone will understand the message. This theme is subtly incorporated into both poems through allusions, imagery, and other powerful literary devices. It is precisely these deep analysis and careful connection that makes these two poems great works of intelligent minds.