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Opening the Box of Suffering, Unleashing the Evils of the World': Pandora and her Representation in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry

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Keywords: <i>Pandora</i> <i>Box</i> <i>Greek myth</i> <i>feminism</i> <i>misogyny</i> <i>patriarchy</i>	Abstract Nineteenth-Century American writers endeavored to establish a distinct literary tradition away from the dominant European canon, particularly after the War of Independence. They found in their new environment and local color a source of inspiration. Still, they also drew on Greek myths to comment on social issues and to frame their works within these legendary realities that are noted for their universality and aesthetic nature. For instance, rewriting and allusions to the myth of Pandora and her box can be found in the poems composed by both male and female American poets of the time. This research deals with the use of this myth in selected poems by Nineteenth-Century American poets, namely Emily Dickinson's "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers", Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Masque of Pandora", Samuel Phelps Leland's "Pandora's Box", and Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson's <i>The New Pandora</i> . It aims at investigating the difference in the use of this sexist myth in the writings of these male and female poets.
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تجسيد اسطورة باندورا وصندوقها الملعون في شعر القرن التاسع عشر الامريكي

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<u>الكلمات الدالة:</u>	
بانديورا	الخلاصة: طالما سعى ادباء القرن التاسع عشر الامريكيون لتثبيت الدعائم الاساسية لتقليد ادبي يميزهم عن الاسلوب الادبي السائد لإقرانهم الاوربيين وعلى وجه خاص في اعقاب حرب الاستقلال. وقد وجدوا ضالتهم في بيئتهم ولونهم المحلي الخاص بهم في العالم الجديد. اصف الى ذلك انهم عولوا على الاساطير الاغريقية بوصفها مصدر الهام في تناولهم لقضايا اجتماعية، نظرا للسمة المتجددة لهذه الاساطير ولملاءمتها لكل العصور والاماكن فضلا عن طبيعتها الجمالية. فعلى سبيل المثال، حاول الشعراء الامريكان نساء ورجالا على حد سواء اعادة كتابة اسطورة بانديورا الاغريقية وصندوقها الملعون. كما تجلت هذه الاسطورة في بعض الاشارات الضمنية في تلك الحقبة من تاريخ الادب الامريكي. يتناول هذا البحث بالدراسة تجسيد هذه الاسطورة في قصائد مختارة لشعراء القرن التاسع عشر الامريكيين، وعلى وجه التحديد، "للأمل جناحان" لاميلي ديكنسون و "قصيدة بانديورا المسرحية" لهنري وادزويرث لونغفلو و "صندوق بانديورا" لصامويل فيليبس ليلاند و "بانديورا الجديدة" لهارييت جين هانسون روبنسون. كما تهدف الدراسة لبيان الفرق بين استخدام هؤلاء الشعراء من كلا الجنسين لهذه الاسطورة التي تتميز بالتحيز الجنسي.
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الاسطورة اليونانية	كراهية النساء
الابوية	معلومات البحث
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1. Introduction/ Literature Review

Greek myths have been a source of inspiration for poets from the Renaissance to modern and contemporary times. This is mainly because of the universality of these myths and the way they explore human nature and fathom the human psyche. One of the early well-known Greek myths, the myth of Pandora and her box, can be traced in some American poems written during the nineteenth century. Surprisingly, no study has ever been made by any critic to show the significance of this myth in these poems. While the myth is nowadays associated with jewelry, cinema, idiomatic expressions, and a renowned publishing company of the same name, Pandora, few articles and books refer to the myth and its embodiment in literature (See for instance, Richter 1974 and Riverlea, 2011). This research focuses on the use of this myth in selected poems by Nineteenth-Century American poets, specifically Emily Dickinson's "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers" (1861), Samuel Phelps Leland's "Pandora's Box" (1866), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Masque of Pandora" (1871), and Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson's *The New Pandora* (1889). It aims at studying the difference in the use of this sexist myth in the writings of these poets.

2. The Myth of Pandora and Her Box

The myth of Pandora and her cursed box/vase originated from Greek mythology. The myth says that before Pandora came into existence, the Titan Prometheus stole fire from the dominant deity, Zeus, to give it to the mortal humans. Zeus was infuriated because of Prometheus's defiant act. Thus, he decided to punish him by chaining him to a rock forever as a feast for the birds of prey, that would feed on his liver all daytime. Every night, Prometheus's liver regrew to be eaten by the birds the next day (Zeitlin, p.64). Zeus also decided to punish Prometheus by giving him *a woman*, Pandora (Hansen, pp. 48–50).

The Greek myth says that Pandora was the first mortal woman and was sent to Prometheus with a box full of evils. She attracted the attention of Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. Though Prometheus warned his brother not to accept Pandora, he ignored these warnings and insisted on marrying her (Conner, p. 37).

Before Pandora was sent into the world, people were said to live a carefree life, undisturbed by sickness, old age, and death. Pandora unwittingly opened an evil jar that brought all the mischief and suffering to the human beings (Room, p.229). As the first woman, she was accused of being the one who introduced falsehood and treachery into men's lives. Out of the box/jar she opened streamed cruelty, hate, poverty, hunger, sickness, and pain. Although she attempted to close the jar after she noticed the evil things released from it, her attempt came to no avail. What she trapped inside was hope (See West, pp. 169-170).

In the original myth, the ancient container that Pandora opened was a jar. Later, it was mistranslated as "a box". One version of the original myth makes it clear that it was Pandora's husband, Epimetheus, who opened the jar, but the unfortunate Pandora had to bear the blame. That is what makes Pandora's story so pessimistic. It also established the misogynic belief in mythology that women were sent to earth as a curse on humanity (Thomas, p.56).

The myth also depicts Pandora as a volatile female, unlike the tolerant Eve. Pandora was said to tolerate living with her husband when everything was affordable and settled home and to leave him in times of adversity and dearth (Hamilton, pp.527-528). The myth of Pandora and her ominous box was later developed into an idiom associated with evil and undesired consequences. Today, people used to say "to open a Pandora box" and "curiosity kills the cat". These idiomatic expressions originated from the Pandora myth and are used to refer to an act that causes many problems (*The Cambridge Dictionary Online*). Additionally, new concepts emerged from the myth, like "the Pandora Complex", which refers to people's curiosity and their search for forbidden knowledge (See Brown, pp.26-47).

The myth of the curious Pandora is often associated with the story of the Genesis. Commentators on the myth believe that Eve, like Pandora, was tempted to gain forbidden knowledge and was, thus, responsible for man's downfall from heaven (Kanaan, p. x and Jarrell, pp. 75-76). Since then, Pandora, like Eve, has been considered responsible for people's misfortunes and problems. The myth has also established a common patriarchal belief among people that views women as frail and impulsive creatures liable to temptation and destruction. Thus, they are in need of guidance and control (See Jarrell, p. 76).

It is believed that some of the well-known fairy tales, like the gothic story of Bluebeard's wives, were based on the Pandora myth (Barzilai, p.156). But while Bluebeard's wives' opening of the forbidden room has fatal consequences on their lives, Pandora's reckless act of opening the box, according to the myth, doomed all the humans to suffering and death.

Feminist scholars denounce the passive image of Pandora in misogynist myths, supposedly regarded as the first woman in Greek mythology, being presented as a gift to men. Instead of being a source of happiness, she is believed to be responsible for suffering and chaos. The first feminist scholarship that denounces this male-generated myth is Kate Millett's (1934-2017). Her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970) severely condemns the common belief that these patriarchal myths establish about women as being the source of evil to all humans. Millett also states that such patriarchal myths like Pandora's box and Eve's search for knowledge contributed to the sexist belief that women, generally speaking, "initiated sexuality in humankind" (Snodgrass, p.179).

3. The Pandora Myth in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry

American writers, following the War of Independence (1775-1783), sought to establish a distinct literary tradition that could contribute to define their identity away from the influence of the European writers. These writers found in the New World's natural scenes, the wilderness, and the local color main sources of inspiration (Early, p.384). Yet, they also drew on Classical myths because of their universality and aesthetic nature (Richardson, p.167). The myth of Pandora and her box was not an exception and it was rewritten and alluded to by both male and female American poets.

3.1. Emily Dickinson's (1830-1886) "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers"

Emily Dickinson's 1861 poem "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers" is believed to be an oblique reference to the Pandora myth (See Greer, p.9). As the myth says that the only thing that Pandora trapped in the box was hope, this sounds to be a sign of optimism. This is apparently stated in Dickinson's poem. At least, people still have hope for a better future amidst the evils released from the box. Hope, in Dickinson's poem, is described as a bird, which is a symbol of salvation:

'Hope' is the thing with feathers -
That perches In the soul -
And sings the tune Without the words -
And never stops - at all. (Dickinson, ll.1-4, p.253)

Dickinson's optimistic tone shows that hope will never disappear even in times of hardships or storms:

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chilliest land
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of Me. (Dickinson, ll.5-12, p.253)

Dickinson's poem transforms the tragic tone of the original myth. It is an indirect revision of the story of Pandora that presents her, not as a curse as in the original myth but, as a source of hope and happiness.

3.2. Samuel Phelps Leland's (1839-1910) "Pandora's Box"

Samuel Phelps Leland's poem "Pandora's Box" (1866) presents Pandora as a curious woman, whose excessive confidence and sense of privilege in her husband's home are the source of her destruction. However, as the prelude to the poem reveals, Leland's intention is to correct the prevailing belief that Pandora has brought the box/jar in which all the evils lurk hidden. Leland argues that the legend does not make it clear that Pandora has brought the box/jar from heaven, but it already exists in Epimetheus's house.

Leland's Pandora speaks for herself and tries to justify her act, saying that she was driven by her good will to open the box, unaware of its contents. She justifies that because she has been created to be beautiful and has been endowed by many gifts that made her charming to men, she is searching for beauty inside the box:

I must look. There is something beautiful,
Else we would not forbidden been to see't.
I must! If this fair world can fairer be,
And here within some hidden beauty is,
I must see it. My curious spirit
Is on fire. I will raise the lid and look. (Leland, ll.22-27, p.25)

Still, like the original Pandora in the myth, Leland's Pandora acts rashly and opens the box, releasing the curses and evils that humanity will have to endure, "Without a hope to mitigate their pain" (Leland, l. 33, p.25).

3.3. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1807-1882) "The Masque of Pandora"

In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's long dramatic poem "The Masque of Pandora" (1871), Pandora is given a voice to communicate her misery to her husband, Epimetheus, regretting her rash act of opening the cursed box:

O Epimetheus, I no longer dare
To lift mine eyes to thine, nor hear thy voice,
Being no longer worthy of thy love.
.....
Forgive me not, but kill me.
.....

I pray for death, not pardon. (Longfellow, ll. 624-630, p.49)

In Longfellow's poem, Pandora's wish to be punished and her tendency for self-destruction, as she regrets her deed, make her different from her mythical counterpart in the sense that she does not desert her husband in his time of adversity after she brings misery to the world. Nevertheless, she also desires to be left alone which is, as she believes, another source of pain and retribution:

Why didst thou return?
Eternal absence would have been to me
The greatest punishment. To be left alone
And face to face with my own crime, had been
Just retribution. Upon me, ye Gods,
Let all your vengeance fall! (Longfellow, ll. 646-650, p.51)

Her husband's forgiving and consoling voice does not represent the mainstream male-dominated view that condemns Pandora for her selfishness and irresponsibility. Still, his speech is not devoid of blame and criticism imbedded within his sympathetic words:

I do not love thee less for what is done,
And cannot be undone. Thy very weakness
Hath brought thee nearer to me, and henceforth
My love will have a sense of pity in it,
Making it less a worship than before. (Longfellow, ll. 653-657,
ibid.)

Longfellow's Pandora shares the same tendency for self-destruction and despair with Eve and Lilith, the first women in the ancient stories and myths of the Geneses. But, unlike Lilith, she accepts the degrading patriarchal belief that views women as innately weak and evil, and thus are untrustworthy and in need of a patriarch to guide and control them, lest they commit deadly sins. This is obvious in her concluding lines:

I am a woman;
And the insurgent demon in my nature,
That made me brave the oracle, revolts
At pity and compassion. Let me die;
What else remains for me? (Longfellow, ll. 662-666, p.52)

3.4. Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson's (1852-1911) *The New Pandora*

Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson's *The New Pandora* (1889) is a long dramatic poem that starts with Pandora's arrival on earth and her desires of a happy life with her husband. As he asks her whether or not she knows her fate, she answers:

I only know that life is sweet. All day
Through happy fields or sunny vales I roamed,
Companion of the white-winged messengers. (Robinson, ll. 101-
103, p.13)

She knows that she has been endowed with many gifts and that her name means the “all-endowed” (Robinson, l. 109, p.14). Her speech to Epimetheus shows that she also knows about Prometheus’s act of stealing fire from Zeus. It is until Epimetheus shatters her illusions of the beauty of life on earth, when he informs her of the possibility of her being a curse on the mortals, that she realizes the absurdity of her existence:

What! I, a curse? Great Jove!
Oh, why did he a woman me created?
And why, in high revenge for that the son
Of fair Clymene stole the fire from heaven,
should I, too, bear the blame? It was not I!
I did not ask to live. I had no choice. (Robinson, ll. 197-202, p.18)

Besides, she wishes to have the chance to go back to heaven, to be free of the sins which were not committed by her: “Ah! Let me go! Back to Olympus’ height,/ And leave this clogging, weary earth behind” (Robinson, ll. 203-204, p.18).

Pandora, in Robinson’s poem, blames her husband for accepting her as a gift from heaven, and, thus, being the source of her suffering: “Why didst thou take me from bright Mercury,/ And lead me here to earth?” (Robinson, ll. 214-215, p. 19). Unlike the traditional myth in which Epimetheus does not know of his wife’s subsequent rash deed of opening the cursed jar and releasing the ills of the world, Epimetheus tells Pandora about the place where she will do her uncalculated act. But she does not understand his references: “Why must I lift the lid and scatter ills?” (Robinson, l. 243, p. 20).

Robinson does not romanticize her Pandora. The latter is not happily married and she has to endure the pain of losing her baby which dies after drinking bitterness from her breasts. Robinson’s Pandora is a ‘New Woman’. Nevertheless, she is not totally rebellious in nature for in the end she does not separate from her mate. Instead, she accepts to live with him and to start a life different from her submissive existence as a sinner and a source of evil.

Robinson’s poem shifts the negative image of the title character by focusing on her role as a source of beauty and hope:

..... that
I am a woman doth not define my scope
Sex cannot limit the immortal mind
We are ourselves with individual souls,
Still struggling onward toward the infinite. (Robinson, ll. 2866-
71, p.148)

4. Conclusion

The myth of Pandora and her box is an addition to all the other misogynic Greek and Judeo-Christian myths of Eve and Lilith that depict women as deceitful, evil, and destructive females who unleashed all kinds of ills and troubles on mankind. Nineteenth-century American poets differ in their treatment of the Pandora myth. While the male poets present Pandora as a self-destructive female, following the original

myth, the female poets deal with the myth with a more optimistic tone. In the latter's poems, the hope that Pandora trapped inside the box becomes a means of salvation to them and to all people.

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