

MYTHOLOGICAL ILLUSTRATIONS AND THEIR CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN PIETER BRUEGHEL'S PAINTINGS AND WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' POEMS¹

Mitolojik İllüstrasyonlar ve Bunların Pieter Brueghel'in Resimleri ile William Carlos Williams'ın Şiirlerinde İfade Ediliş Biçimleri

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ÖZET

Mitoloji, farklı kültürleri bir araya getirdiği ve insanların iletişimde ortak bir dil yarattığı için evrensel bir gerçekliktir. Mitolojinin gücü o kadar güçlüdür ki 15. yüzyılda yaşamış ressam Pieter Brueghel ile 20. yüzyılda yaşamış şair William Carlos Williams ortak bir noktada buluşur. Mitoloji iki farklı yüzyılı bir araya getirerek kültürel akış sağlar. Williams Brueghel'in resimlerini Kunsthistorisches Müzesi'nde gördüğünde, bunlarla ilgili şiir yazmaya karar verir ve bu *ekfrasis* şiirler mitolojik yansımaları gösterir. Bu sanatsal yapıtlar mitolojik öyküleri içinde barındırır ve çalışma mitsel illüstrasyonların yanında şiirlerin nasıl oluşturulduğunu ifade edecektir. Bu çalışma, şiirlerin mitsel öğeleri nasıl ifade ettiğini gösterecektir. Kelimeler ve resimler arasında oluşan köprü, Williams ve Brueghel'in kültürel yansımalarında mitolojiyle bütünleşir. Bu noktada, mitoloji her yerdedir ve etkileri tarihte hala devam eden süreçleri vurgulamaktadır. Mit ya da mitoloji, insanların zihninde her zaman üstün bir kavramdır ve mitolojinin bu üstün gücü insanlara sonsuz illüstrasyonlar gösterir. Pieter Brueghel bu gücü kullanan artistlerden biridir. Onun resimlerinde pek çok mitolojik referanslar vardır ve Brueghel'in dönemini anlamak açısından her biri öğretici niteliktedir. Bu mitolojik örnekler William Carlos Williams ile kelimeler aracılığıyla 20. yüzyılda tekrar hayat bulur ve mitoloji bağlamında iki farklı yüzyılın birbiriyle nasıl buluştuğunu samimi bir bağ ile gösterir. Mitoloji niçin evrensel bir gerçekliktir? Hangi yönlere Williams ve Brueghel sanatlarında bunu kullanır? Sanatta mitolojik yansımaların özü nedir? Bu çalışma, belirtilen sorulara cevap vermeye çalışacak ve sizi bir gezinti gibi 15. yüzyıldan 20. yüzyıla götürecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mitoloji, Pieter Brueghel, William Carlos Williams, Sanat, Modernizm, Şiir

ABSTRACT

Mythology is a universal truth and as it connects diverse cultures and creates a common language that all people use to communicate with each other. The power of mythology is so strong that 15th century painter Pieter Brueghel merges with 20th century poet William Carlos Williams. Mythology plays an important role in the cultural flows between two different centuries. When Williams sees the masterpieces of Brueghel in Kunsthistorisches Museum, he decides to write poems about them and these ekphrastic poems involve in mythological representations. This paper tells how these poems will be created besides the illustrations of mythic figures. The bridge between words and images merges with the mythology in the context of cultural responses of Williams and Brueghel. At that point, it can be said that mythology is omnipresent and its effects are continuing as an on-going process throughout history. Myth or mythology is always a superior notion. In the minds of human beings, the ultimate power of mythology gives eternal illustrations to people. Pieter Brueghel is one of the artists who uses this power in his masterpieces. There are many mythological references in his paintings and each one is a great allegory for understanding the society in Brueghel's period. These mythological embodiments are transferred into the words of William Carlos Williams and it indicates how two different centuries meet with an intimate connection within the context of mythology. Why is the mythology a universal reality? From which perspectives did Williams and Brueghel deal with myth in their works? What is the essence of mythological representations in art? This paper tries to reveal these questions and it will take you from 15th to 20th century like a journey.

Keywords: Mythology; Pieter Brueghel, William Carlos Williams, Art, Modernism, Poetry

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Introduction

In Bruegel's eyes, man-be he even a hero of mythology- is small and helpless before the forces of nature. (Friedländer, 1976, s. 20)

Mythology opens a new world with its creative imagination. It is a highly effective story upon life and even when they were created 2000 years ago, people have been still enchanted with its compositions. The Greek mythology dates back about 2000 BC. By the 700 BC these mythical stories became the part of western culture. This mythology probably (not confirmed by any source) was originated from the primitive religions, from the people of Crete, on the Island of Aegean Sea. It is said the first civilization sprouted from here some 3000 BC. (Bokhari, 2016, s. 103) Mythology captures people with its instructions that some are about religion or morality. The most significant thing in mythology is the creation of humankind. It is a kind of story and throughout history people need to believe in something. It comes from their natures with the aim of living in the world. Myths centres around the direct connection between man and nature. According to the ancient Greeks like Euhemerus, a renowned mythographer of 300s BC, and the writer of "the Scared History", the myths are the misrepresentation of actual historical events and all gods and goddesses are those heroes or heroines being glorified by men themselves. (Bokhari, 2016, s. 103)

In Greek mythology there are many gods and goddesses who are responsible of regulation from various aspects in life itself. Supernatural elements make stronger myths in that it provides to see the essential interactions between man and man. The Greeks believed the gods landed on Mount Olympus in Thessalia, Greece. They formed their society on that mountain and were recognized by the hierarchy of their power. Free to move around these gods were specifically of sky, sea and earth. The Olympians were 12 chief gods: Zeus – the head god, protector of all gods and people. Hera – wife of Zeus queen of all heavens and protector of marriages too. Hephaestus – God of heaven, metal works and fire. Athena – goddess of wisdom and war. Apollo – God of light, poetry and music. Artemis – goddess of moon and wild life. Ares – God of war. Aphrodite – goddess of love. Hestia – Hermes – Demeter were other gods performing duties of heaven. Poseidon – was the god – ruler of sea waters etc. (Bokhari, 2016, s. 104) Greek mythology reveals the power relations and there are the most powerful God Zeus and his wives such as Metis, Themis, Mnemosyne, Eurynome, Demeter, Leto and Hera. It comes from patriarchal society and it can be said that the Greek mythology is inspired from the structure of male hegemonic society. All people around the world know the Greek mythology and story of Zeus. This common outlook constructs the same ideas in humankind and it reveals the cultural similarities between different nations. Mystery is an interesting point in the field of mythology because it tries to solve mysterious phenomenon like the creation of the world. The appearance of truth gives relaxation for humanity as unknowingness is always a threat in the world. Thus, mythology indicates the limits of life and explains them. That's why it gathers all people and bonds diverse cultures.

Netherlandish painter Pieter Brueghel, who lived in 15th century, and American Modernist poet William Carlos Williams, who lived in 20th century, lived in different centuries, but the only one thing is the same and common for them: culture. With mythology their works of art integrate and it is called as an *ekphrasis* which means the "verbal representations of visual things" (Heffernan, 1993, s. 3). This new term expresses a new perspective with an interdisciplinary field because of dealing with poetry and painting together. Cultural representations in mythology can be regarded as the same for both because they are human and history is a repetition itself. Why did the mythology meet Williams and Brueghel? From which perspectives did they reflect mythological stories in their masterpieces? How did they meet with mythology? This paper tries to highlight these questions and it presents an authentic outlook in the field of mythological representations. At that

point, both reflect the story of Icarus in mythology and it constitutes a common language for them as in the way they connect each other from diverse centuries.

A Close Look into Pieter Brueghel and William Carlos Williams

Pieter Brueghel and William Carlos Williams are great artists in their time periods because of creating their works within a common outlook. Throughout history, the integration of poetry and painting are dealt by the artists. Plutarch states: "painters and poets represent the same subjects, and that the underlying purpose of both is the same" (qtd in Lee, 1940, s. 201). This approach meets Williams and Brueghel under the mythological stories.

In order to understand better it is important to investigate the lives of both artists. Pieter Brueghel is "in the engraving that shows him in profile, Bruegel looks wise, friendly, and serene. He was a zealous witness to life. His knowledge stemmed from what his eyes saw. He was rich in insights and notions that took on pictorial form" (Friedländer, 1976, s. 33). He has an outstanding perspective into nature and he loves to depict it in his paintings. Moreover, he admires to observe peasants' lives, which means the ordinariness. At that point, William Carlos Williams have closely connected to Brueghel because he is a pediatricist in a village and he really likes writing about the lives of ordinary people. Williams likes to engage in writing poetry as well as visual things. These make him approach to Brueghel somehow. When Williams went to Kunsthistorisches Museum and saw Brueghel's paintings, he was affected deeply and wrote his eleven poems in this way. These stories include many mythological images and representations, and they provide a connection between two artists. Many of them involve in mythology itself. The poems are collected in Williams' *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962) and they are the great depictions of Brueghel's paintings.

Mythology awakens the curiosity in the minds of people, and Williams is just one example who uses mythological references in his works of arts. The following quotation apparently shows how he is affected by his mother in that she is a 'mythical figure.' It is important to see how mythology changes the life itself. Even the thoughts of Williams are shaped with the results of his mother's mythologic-like character:

I was conscious of my mother's influence all through this time of writing, her ordeal as a woman and as a foreigner in this country. I've always held her as a mythical figure.[...] Her interest in art became my interest in art. I was personifying her, her detachment from the world of Rutherford. She seemed an heroic figure, a poetic ideal. I had not yet established any sort of independent spirit. (Williams, 1977, ss. 16-17)

Horace's famous simile *ut pictura poesis*- "as is poetry so is painting"- (Lee, 1940, s. 196) implies the sister arts like painting and poetry together. Therefore, the whole image under this notion creates "the best reflection for both poetry and painting because both of them integrate each other in terms of reflecting same issue interchangeably." (Ar, 2020, s. 104). Mythology is a crucial composition inside these two art forms as it helps an interdisciplinary field with a universal theme.

Brueghel's Visuality and Williams' Poetry: The Mythological Correspondence between two Genres



Fig.1. Brueghel, Pieter. *Landscape with the fall of Icarus*. (1558), Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. (from my personal photo collection)

II LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

The poem was written by William Carlos Williams. (Williams, 1962)

Williams' poem called as *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is completely about mythology because of Brueghel's direct depiction of Icarus. It seems quite small in the painting and there are many symbolic meanings behind it. The story of Icarus is the same for everyone and that's why that Brueghel and Williams understand each other here. In the painting, Brueghel describes the peasants' lives in a brilliant atmosphere because of the choices of colours that reflect lively mood. The superiority of sky is emphasized with its broad area and Icarus is the symbolization of humanities' brutal ignorance as no one cares about him while he is drowning in the picture. Brueghel also uses an ironical perspective with his tiny depicted Icarus image. In the story, Icarus does not listen to his father's advices and approaches to the sun. Later, the sun melts his wings and he dies. This is a kind of warning story and Williams also alludes some word choices for creating this effect. He states: "sweating in the sun/ that melted/ the wings' wax/ insignificantly" (lines 13-16) and "a splash quite unnoticed/ this was/ Icarus drowning" (lines 19-21). All these lines illustrate how people are unaware of the death, and it comes from the hypocritic nature of humanity or their busy works. In both circumstances it is clearly seen that people cannot save the life of Icarus. Both artists agree on this issue and they reveal the story of Icarus with various genres such as painting and poetry. Brueghel is interested in nature and he always reflects its significance in his paintings. The following quotation shows his admiration to nature itself: "In Bruegel's eyes, man-be he even a hero of mythology- is small and helpless before the forces of nature. The light of the sun is what triumphs in the end. The picture was conceived by a painter" (Friedländer, 1976, s. 20). In the poem *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* Williams also uses juxtaposed images such as "Spring" signifying hope and new life and "Icarus falling" representing death and end in the lines "when Icarus fell/ it was spring" (lines 2-3). Moreover, Williams emphasizes the image of a farmer representing the brutal face of humanity because all people try to survive under hard circumstances with their indifferences and Williams points out this situation with the following lines "sweating in the sun/ that melted/ the wings' wax/ insignificantly" (lines 13-16) and "a splash quite unnoticed/ this was/ Icarus drowning" (lines 19-21). Brueghel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) reflects similar local statements about humanity and nature. These proverbs are sometimes ornamented in his paintings which give moral messages to the readers. Walter S. Gibson describes them "as generally acknowledged repositories of wisdom and as ornaments of rhetorical persuasion, have long been quoted much as modern preachers quote scripture" (qtd in Mori, 2015, s. 259). In the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* the proverb "no plough stops for a dying man" (qtd in Rocquet, 1991, s. 127) expresses the reality of mankind as people do not recognize morality or any other humanistic value in the modern world.

Ekphrasis is an important tool for getting Brueghel and Williams together and so it creates a visual and verbal bridge between two genres. The following statement clearly explains the idea of ekphrasis: "Ekphrasis is a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes." (qtd in Goldhill, 2007, s. 3) This close relation started in the ancient time and Greek essayist Plutarch (c. 46 AD - 120 AD) said "painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture," (qtd in Lee, 1940, s. 196). As clearly seen with these quotations, the history of ekphrasis starts in early ages and this new genre constructs an interdisciplinary area in the end. Williams' interests in visual arts bring him closer to the paintings of Brueghel and mythology plays an important role at that point. Its universality provides that both artists can see the same message in the mythological story. Multi-dimensional aspect from visual and verbal illustrations attributes a creative mind for readers because of thinking from different sides at the same time.

In the story of Icarus, nature is an important symbol because Icarus dies due to the effects of the sun which heat and cause high temperature over the wings of Icarus. Brueghel's desire in nature can be an ironical point because it leads to the destruction in this composition. Williams also mentions this catastrophic event with the perfect choice of words such as "a splash quite unnoticed/ this was/ Icarus

drowning” (lines 19-21). These lines illustrate an ordinary day in this context, but it is about life itself, and Williams tries to give the idea of indifference in the daily lives of people. It is a kind of hypocrisy and Icarus’ hubris causes his death. The mythological story implies this fact at the beginning and it is a great message for all humankind as people are trapped with their untamed desires. Herein, Icarus is captured with his mundane wishes and it causes his death. Whoever you are, even if the son of Daedalus who is the creator of Labyrinth, everyone will die in the end. It also involves mythic illustrations as the Labyrinth reflects a mysterious context. Death brings this mystery, and so it can be said that they are closely related each other. Brueghel masterfully chooses these images because mythology carries the cultural responses with its universal values and context.

These two artistic forms are the cultural responses between each other because of dealing with the mythic figure Icarus in both verbal and visual illustrations. In mythology, there are some powerful figures who cannot manage very well like Icarus. He does not listen to his father who is seen as the masterful icon here. It is important to see how the instructions from elder people are crucial for life. The father of Icarus is an embodiment of wisdom in this story. Williams tries to give the idea of spontaneous and ordinary life with the words of ‘unsignificantly’ and ‘unnoticed’ in an ironic manner as he changes the word of ‘insignificant’ into the ‘-un’ prefix. Moreover, Williams emphasizes the image of a farmer representing the brutal face of humanity because all people try to survive under hard circumstances with their indifferences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mythology is an allegorical narrative with its cultural and religious instructions and it consists of many myths revealing moral lessons towards the humanity. Greek and Roman mythology indicate “the way the human race thought and felt untold ages ago” (Hamilton, 2011, s. 3). Thus, its stories are full of mysterious and untold events in that they create an imaginary world in the minds of readers. Mythic icons are always surprised for people throughout history as mystery creates unknowingness and it is the most fearful thing for humanity in life. Mysterious and universal truth in mythology gather people around the stories. The fall of Icarus is one of them. The son of Daedalus fell because of not listening to his father’s advices. The hubris causes his fall and it is also a moral instructive story all over the world. The messages are clear: “Listen to your elders. Do not exaggerate yourself. Be humble!” These kinds of instructions appear with the story of Icarus. Moreover, mythology presents these messages for people in all centuries like the 20th century poet William Carlos Williams and the 15th century painter Pieter Brueghel.

Williams and Brueghel show the power and universality of mythology with the ekphrastic examples. The bridge between words and images connects two different centuries each other and it is a great cultural response between Netherlandish and American cultures. Now both artists died, but it is important to see their works meet them and mythology is an essential source for combining two diverse genres and Brueghel uses allegorical messages with the idea of ‘life goes on’ and ‘hypocrisy of humanity,’ because Icarus is dead in front of other villagers. The painter Brueghel also tries to give the message that says there is no escape from death. Spiritual and religious icons are mostly used in the mythologies and so people believe its superiority with its allegorical interpretations and instructions. Therefore, it is a kind of moral responses towards humanity.

Greek Mythology is the traditional folklore that belongs to the ancient Greeks about their gods, goddesses; they are their heroes, depicting how the world was brought around, the origin and significance of their rituals. These folklores had religious connotations for those people at that time. They were mesmerized by their gods and goddesses having super human qualities moving around in real life. They used to relate themselves with them in their thoughts, running never ending illusions (Bokhari, 2016, s. 103). Thus, responses and human experiences can vary as

a result of the dilemmatic issues. For instance, Brueghel sees the fall of Icarus from the aspect of indifferences. On the other side, another painter can reflect the importance of elders' instructions. However, the message is common after hearing the story as mythology is omnipresent. There are different cultural responses for the mythological stories but its universality gathers the humankind together.

It is important to consider the vivid and energetic nature of ekphrasis, and in the study it constructs the lively bridge between words and images. It provides the fluid process from painting to poetry and vice versa. Brueghel's colors transmit the spirit of art into the words of Williams in verse. Moreover, the fluidity of two-dimensional processes illustrates how diverse genres connect each other and present the importance of "pattern" for both arts. Not only Brueghel but also Williams portrays their own examples in patterns because aesthetic beauty in art and poetry is significant in order to express the vivid nature of life itself. The painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and poem *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* have revealed the mythological story in that Brueghel stressed out the indifferent nature of mankind. Williams also underlines the same message with emphasis on details in his verse. In terms of comparison both works emphasize the image of Icarus with the drowning scene so the mythological allusion constructs the background of these arts. However, Brueghel draws the image of Icarus in a tiny depiction because he wants reality to be seen in details. Likewise, Williams refers to this situation with the use of 'insignificantly' emphasizing the tiny legs of Icarus in the painting. Both works underline a positive atmosphere in the spring time; however, the gloomy situation like the death of Icarus shows the real side of life. This cycle implying birth and death also expresses how two artists consider the life with diverse perspectives. The drowning of Icarus in spring time alludes to the cycle of nature: life and death. In the painting Brueghel uses bright colors in order to show the spring atmosphere; on the other side, he describes the drowning scene of Icarus in dark tones stressing out the death. In the poem, Williams constructs this impression with his choice of various words such as 'pageantry', 'awake' revealing the liveliness in contrast to 'drowning' and 'unnoticed' creating a gloomy atmosphere. The use of allusion to the mythological story of Icarus in both works is further emphasized with ekphrasis because it creates the bridge between visual and verbal statements.

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