

Final Paper Sample

Sample 2:

Hubris and Nemesis

Ovid uses divine punishment in *Metamorphoses* to demonstrate the inseparable connection between hubris and nemesis. Two contrasting cautionary tales illustrate this: Ceres' punishment of Erysichthon, and Latona's punishment of Niobe. While the first displays justified punishment, and the second portrays excessive vengeance, both are warnings against excessive pride. Ovid uses this disparity to show that hubris always has unpleasant consequences. Whether just or unjust, the result teaches the same lesson: be humble, gracious, and respectful.

Erysichthon exhibits unyielding hubris that leads to self-destruction. He shows his self-importance through word and action, cutting down ancient trees in Ceres' sacred grove (*Metamorphoses* 8.836-7) and killing the oak of Deo (*Metamorphoses* 8.856-74). With his axe held ready to fell the oak of Deo, Erysichthon boasts "Whether this be the goddess' tree, or even the goddess herself, it's coming to the ground" (*Metamorphoses* 8.851-2). Erysichthon holds nothing above himself and lets nothing stand in his way. He even beheads a slave who tries to stop him from cutting down the oak of Deo (*Metamorphoses* 8.57-66). Erysichthon brazenly murders anyone who defies him, and boasts that he would not hesitate to kill a goddess.

To match Erysichthon's insatiable desire for material items, Ceres decides to torture him with Famine (*Metamorphoses* 8.883). Since he cannot be satisfied with material possessions, he is cursed with eternal hunger, always wanting more, until "he began to take bites out of his own limbs, and in his misery fed himself by consuming his body" (*Metamorphoses* 8.988-90). This punishment is fitting, because Erysichthon previously held no appreciation for the things that were precious to others, such as their sanctuary, agency, and mortality. Despite this suffering, Erysichthon continues his previous behavior. Because he has never before been held accountable for his actions, his pride

knows no bounds. Thus, his discipline is also boundless. Through this tale, Ovid justifies Ceres' punishment of Erysichthon's hubris.

Like Erysichthon, Niobe also displays excessive pride that serves as the source of her devastating grief. Though wealthy in numerous forms, Niobe's main source of pride is her children (*Metamorphoses* 6.168-72). Secure with her abundance, Niobe proclaims that she could lose some of her children and still have more than Latona, ending her jest with "just how far from childlessness does that leave the goddess?" (*Metamorphoses* 228-9). Niobe's material excess gives her a sense of superiority over those with less of anything. Speaking to Apollo and Diana, Latona fumes about Niobe "daring to favor her children over you and to call me childless—may that come back to bite her!" (*Metamorphoses* 6.241-3). Latona has just as much pride in her children as Niobe, and reacts viciously when she does not receive the worship she feels entitled to.

At Latona's request, Apollo and Diana kill all 14 of Niobe's children, in retribution for her hubris (*Metamorphoses* 6.234-49). Unable to relinquish after the deaths of her seven sons and the suicide of her husband Amphion, Niobe again mocks Latona, which results in the death of her seven daughters (*Metamorphoses* 6.316-41). Niobe's arrogance keeps her from surrendering when she should and prevents her from saving some of her children. Latona's punishment of Niobe is extreme, but Niobe neither blunts her pride nor supplicates Latona until one child remains (*Metamorphoses* 6.338-41). A stranger to scarcity, Niobe does not grasp what she has lost until she has fewer children than Latona. In this tale, Ovid shows that conflict is inevitable when hubris meets hubris, and that a lack of justification will not prevent violence.

Erysichthon is justly punished for his acts of hubris against Ceres, but Latona's punishment of Niobe is unjustified and too severe. Ceres executes her punishment in response to the dryad sisterhood's request (*Metamorphoses* 8.875-83), showing that Ceres' punishment of Erysichthon is noble and justified. Ceres does not immediately discipline Erysichthon, instead carefully considering

his sentence. Latona's punishment of Niobe is severe vengeance because, like Niobe, she too is full of pride from her divine descent and divine children. Latona's response is immediate and far worse than Niobe's hubris.

Although Erysichthon has a right to mock the gods, his egocentrism leads to crimes which must be punished. Niobe is ill-mannered and arrogant, but no form of punishment is morally justified for her words or actions, for she has committed no crimes. Whether appropriate or extreme, both instances of divine punishment serve as cautionary tales. Ovid uses this contrast to show that hubris is intimately tied to nemesis. The underlying message is that the path to happiness requires humility, grace, and tolerance.

Grade: 10/10

Comments:

This is another concise, well-articulated response. Many students struggled to write a thesis that accounted for their additional passages, but this paper does so effectively.

You would not need to use "excessive fluff" or "empty words" to expand. What serves you well in your writing is sticking precisely to the evidence, and saying nothing more than it suggests. This is a good thing. Nevertheless, you could lengthen your analysis by examining some counterarguments, and then dispute them with further evidence. For example, you write that Erysichthon's punishment is justified. One might respond, "no, it isn't, because Ceres' punishment also harms his daughter. Is it justified that Erysichthon's child be repeatedly sold into slavery?" You might concede this point, but then explain, using the text, why it would be wrong to hold this view.

That is but one example of how you could expand without being wordy. At any rate, I have really enjoyed your writing this semester. Great work!