Lacrimae Rerum: The Tears of a Classics Major

Drew Harmon

My contention is that we understand our world by narratives. In my short stay here at Millsaps, there have been many things to excite, challenge, and prod me through my studies. The Heritage program was a monster to my beliefs. It rose up, egging me to think critically and analyze my mindset and worldview. There have been few experiences more beneficial to my overall development as a human being than the idea of being challenged intellectually. In answering some of the raised questions, I chose classical studies, an ancient lens by which to view my modern context. Day after day, we read stories of daemons and monsters, gods and goddess, cosmologies and ideologies, while translating Homer, Virgil, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Paul the Apostle. So why classics? One word, story. I began to see the gripping narratives manifested in my own tale. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, we witness the profound solemnity associated with narrative. And as Aeneas perceives Carthage being constructed before his very eyes, he weeps. Aeneas sees his toils, triumphs, and fate in the etched narrative on the city doors. Similarly, I reflect on my Millsaps experience only to look forward, recognizing my past while gaining glimpses of the future. I have reaped the countless benefits of a Classics major, but no more significant than the power of story.

The idea of story is a popular literary convention, which many academics commit their life's studies towards; however, the term is frequently overlooked and taken for granted by students. Stories can connect two objects or events that initially appear to be unrelated. It might reveal a tale that states that one thing is both like and unlike another thing. Throughout literary history, stories have afforded readers entry into a magical imaginative land and have allowed children to think their brothers to be bears and their sisters as fairies. As we go about our time, we see the beginning, middle, climax, and conclusion of events and ideas. We see in even the most ancient texts that the
story is a powerful, sincere, and honest genre. For example, in the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*, the reader is captured by the gravity and weight with which the poet opens:

> Speak, Memory-
> Of the cunning hero,
> The wanderer, blown off course time and again
> After he plundered Troy's sacred heights. (Homer 241)

As readers, we are plunged headlong into the tale, asking questions about the "cunning hero" and "Troy's sacred heights." The story speaks to us, not simply because we find the language intriguing, although that component is present, but the proem begins a magical narrative of wit and pillage and the man behind it all. Homer's thoughtful provocation leads us into the land of fairy, as Tolkein explained, the land of the inexplicable made clear and foreign made familiar. This Troy is our land; this tale is our epic.

To begin to understand my love of stories; we must begin in the late eighties, in my bedroom with my mom sitting on the foot of my bed. Repeatedly, I begged her to read to me and tell me fairy tales. Along the way, I know she made up quite a few, but all seemed to take a piece of my life, a snapshot, and capture it in such a way that my dreams were always real and transparent unfoldings of my heart. She narrated the *Berenstain Bears* and *Amelia Bedelia*, *The Wind and the Willows* and *Snow White*, *The Giving Tree* and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. Every night, I was gripped, reveling in seemingly irrational tales of talking inanimate objects and abstract nouns brought to life. The moments of my mother reading the well-known tales were instances of time caught, like fireflies in mason jars on a muggy summer night. However, throughout middle and high school, I left the jar to sit on the windowsill, collecting dust and allowing my fervent love of story to dwindle.

Yet in college, the embers of my childhood were reignited. Although in a much more sophisticated and complex manner, I studied stories, tales from antiquity that paved the way for the Grimm brothers and Hans Christen Andersen. Literary conventions sprung to life, the civilizations of
the Greco-Roman world seemed to be the first expressions of modern day cultures, and antiqued myths cluttered my mind. I had become a classicist. Myths and dead languages were worked into my grid for understanding the world around me. No longer will I look at a tree without thinking of the dancing nymphs and dryads frolicking in Bacchic revelry, Philemon and Baucchus, dying and rising gods, and some sort of phallic representation. My world, once enchanted with great childhood tales, was now re-enchanted by means of language and its power in narration.

I was always good at math, yet it was a subject that I shied away from at Millsaps. It was the analytical approach to learning that really excited me and aided in the progression of my knowledge. I found this analytical outlet in the form of language paradigms. Much like in math, there was a set system, a sure answer, which my brain lay hold of. When I began to translate Greek, it was like a puzzle. Deciphering the ancient codes in front of me became not just a joy but also an exercise of reason. Matching cases, numbers, genders, nouns to adjectives, and verbs to adverbs showed me the patchwork quilt of the great language. While I often complained, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel, the freedom to read something once "so Greek to me." I hovered over verb charts, recited language paradigms to myself, and even dreamed in Greek and eventually Latin. And when I began to piece everything together, I saw the unraveling of a greater story that spoke volumes to my experiences and the world around me.

However, more than just the language, it was also the context in which the language was placed. The Greco-Roman world revealed truths about modern American society today. The rampant individualism that brought down the empire was the same that pervades throughout postmodernism, and the desire for immortality and life eternal is still being pursued by new age religions and practices. In short, our world is the Greco-Roman world. I came to realize that there were no new problems or stories; they had just been manifested in new and novel ways. The *Iliad's*
and *Odyssey's* plots follow throughout many major motion pictures today. For Homer's tales echo the story in which we are a part. We struggle with life's hardships, we have a desire for our name to live, and we, if we are fortunate, see the world as enchanting and supernatural.

Throughout my studies in classics, I have experienced great moments of self-reflection. These times can best be expressed by the common idiom, Eureka, which finds its etymological origins in the Greek verb, *heureka*, and meaning, "I have found it!" While banging around John Stone Hall, I have had my share of exclamations. However, few remain more poignant in reflecting upon my Millsaps education than a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid*. I can remember sitting in Dr. Freis' Virgil class, talking about the great epic's context, conventions, and most of all, its riveting story. In the first book, Aeneas breaks because of what he witnesses. He, fated by the gods to found Rome, is brought to Carthage and shown the building of the masterful city:

Aeneas found, where lately huts had been, marvelous buildings, gateways, cobbled ways, and din of wagons. There the Tyrians were hard at work: laying course for walls, rolling up stones to build the citadel ... they laid the deep foundation of a theatre, and quarried massive pillars to enhance the future stage as bees in early summer in sunlight in the flowering fields hum at their work ... Aeneas said: "How fortunate these are whose city walls are rising here and now!" (Virgil 18-9)

While walking stealthily through the city, the great hero comes across the skilled artwork depicting the Trojan War. Aeneas then realizes the gravity of his previous trials and experiences; he is stopped in his tracks and weeps, *constitit et lacrimans*. He turns to his mate, Achatês, and asks, "What spot on earth, what region of the earth, Achates, is not full of the story of our sorrow?" (Virgil 20). These three lines that follow speak volumes not only truth about my short stay at Millsaps but also about life:

*Sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi;
sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangent.
solve metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem.* (Book I, Lines 461-463)

Or
Your privileges deserve praise;
They are the tears of things and earthly experiences touch the mind.
Don't be afraid; Tradition will grant you wisdom.

We, as readers, see that deeply embedded in just one small part of this grand work is the heart and life of a hero. In this passage, Aeneas is overcome with emotion when he sees Carthage being erected. The tales on the door are of the Trojans at war and the trials that he has endured. As a result, Aeneas sheds "the tears of things," *lacrimae rerum*. The hero sees his story in front of him; his life has been unpacked and revealed before his eyes.

These doors illustrate Aeneas' past undertakings, his present state, and grants foreshadowing to the eventual founding of Rome. Here, Virgil calls us not simply to focus on Aeneas and his internal struggles but our own. In much the same way, by studying classics, I have seen my past in a new light. My world has been enchanted, falling in love once again from the tales of my youth. I now understand my present situation by means of the power of narrative and story. Finally, I have begun to see glimpses of where I will be in the future, for ultimately, I know that there will be some grand plan worked out in my life, and the story, which pervades human history, will in turn be reflected in my life.

Life at Millsaps is unique. Professors speak as if you were an academic, while administrators respect you as if you were a leader with an impeccable resume. I have witnessed a place where the ability to think and articulate your thoughts is placed in highest regard. Aeneas shed the tears of things, reflecting on his life's struggles and experiences. In much the same light, I reflect on my time at Millsaps and the manner in which it has affected my life. Just as Aeneas was able to look back, so too am I, and just as Aeneas' episode foreshadows a great and glorious happening, so too will mine. For I now know where I have been and where I am going, and I shed the tears of things because of reflection, realization, remembrance, and possibility.
Work Cited
