

Discussion Questions

Excerpts from “The Story of Prometheus” in *Old Greek Stories* by James Baldwin

1. Why does Jupiter refuse to give humans fire? What does this reveal about Jupiter’s character?

Students should understand that Jupiter doesn’t want to give humans fire because he is worried about losing control. Students should explain that Jupiter fears that humankind will gain knowledge and take over the Mighty Ones. While the humans are poor and ignorant, Jupiter and the Mighty Ones thrive and are happy. This reveals that Jupiter is worrisome and not overly confident. The Mighty Ones are also very lazy and are squandering everything. As a result, the world has turned into a terrible place for humans.

Students can use the following quotations to support their responses:

- “He found them living in caves and in holes of the earth, shivering with the cold because there was no fire, dying of starvation, hunted by wild beasts and by one another--the most miserable of all living creatures” (Baldwin 1).
- “Why, if men had fire they might become strong and wise like ourselves, and after a while they would drive us out of our kingdom. Let them shiver with cold, and let them live like the beasts. It is best for them to be poor and ignorant, so that we Mighty Ones may thrive and be happy” (Baldwin 1).

2. What motivates Prometheus to defy Jupiter? What does this reveal about Prometheus’ character?

Students should understand that Prometheus is upset that humankind is in such a bad condition. He remembers what it was like when Saturn was king of the gods, and Jupiter, the tyrant, is ruling in a way that is ruining humankind. Prometheus wants to help humans and return happiness and health to them as it was when Saturn was king. Prometheus wants to leave the world in a better condition--he wants humans to be better and wiser. Prometheus detests the laziness of the gods and that the gods are benefitting from the ignorance of humankind.

Students can use the following quotations to support their responses:

- “While the Mighty Folk were spending their time in idleness, drinking nectar and eating ambrosia, he was intent upon plans for making the world wiser and better than it had ever been before” (Baldwin 1).
- “He went out amongst men to live with them and help them; for his heart was filled with sadness when he found that they were no longer happy...” (Baldwin 1).
- “‘If they only had fire,’ said Prometheus to himself, ‘they could at least warm themselves and cook their food; and after a while they could learn to make tools and build themselves houses. Without fire, they are worse off than the beasts’” (Baldwin 1).
- “‘Mankind shall have fire in spite of the tyrant who sits on the mountaintop,’ he said” (Baldwin 2).

3. How are humans influenced by Prometheus’ decision to defy Jupiter?

Students should understand that humans benefit from Prometheus’ decision to defy Jupiter. They gain fire and Prometheus teaches them how to cook and protect themselves and make tools. The humans become more civilized and get rid of their animal-like ways. As a result of Prometheus’ actions, humankind becomes happy

once again. Prometheus declares “A new Golden Age shall come, brighter and better by far than the old!”

Students can use the following quotations to support their responses:

- “It was not long until they learned to cook their food and so to eat like men instead of like beasts. They began at once to leave off their wild and savage habits; and instead of lurking in the dark places of the world, they came out into the open air and the bright sunlight, and were glad because life had been given to them” (Baldwin 2).
- “After that, Prometheus taught them, little by little, a thousand things. He showed them how to build houses of wood and stone, and how to tame sheep and cattle and make them useful, and how to plow and sow and reap, and how to protect themselves from the storms of winter and the beasts of the woods. Then he showed them how to dig in the earth for copper and iron, and how to melt the ore, and how to hammer it into shape and fashion from it the tools and weapons which they needed in peace and war...” (Baldwin 2).

4. What is Jupiter’s punishment for man? What does it symbolize?

Students should understand that Jupiter becomes very angry when he realizes what Prometheus has done. Jupiter’s worry and fear leads him to seek revenge on Prometheus and the humans. So, he develops a clever plan in which he will ruin the happiness of humankind forever. Jupiter creates a beautiful woman, Pandora, and, with the help of Vulcan and Athena sends Pandora to Earth with her a box. Before Pandora goes to Earth, Athena tells Pandora not to open the box. Of course, Pandora, being curious, doesn’t listen to Athena and opens the box thinking there are jewels inside. Once Pandora opens the box, she releases pain, worry, and death into the world. One last creature, Foreboding, is kept from escaping. If he had escaped, man would be unhappy forever. Some hope is left, though, since Pandora is able to keep Foreboding inside the box. This punishment symbolizes the dangers humans encounter when they upset the natural order of things. Humans are ultimately flawed, and Pandora’s box represents what results when humans upset the natural order of things or try to gain control or knowledge of the gods when they have no claim to either.

Students can use the following quotations to support their responses:

- “These creatures flew into every house, and, without anyone seeing them, nestled down in the bosoms of men and women and children, and put an end to all their joy; and ever since that day they have been flitting and creeping, unseen and unheard, over all the land, bringing pain and sorrow and death into every household” (Baldwin 4).
- “The name of this creature was Foreboding, and although he was almost half out of the casket, Pandora pushed him back and shut the lid so tight that he could never escape. If he had gone out into the world, men would have known from childhood just what troubles were going to come to them every day of their lives, and they would never have had any joy or hope so long as they lived” (Baldwin 5).