

News Gram

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Fire, Women and Myth

A recent series of fires stretching from Mexico through the San Bernardino Mountains into the Lake Arrowhead region had California in a state of siege. At one point, firefighters feared the individual fires might coalesce to produce a gigantic crescent of flame that would block escape eastward. Cooling temperatures and decreased winds helped bring the conflagration under control.

In spite of the tragedy and devastation that followed in the wake of this catastrophe, there is the additional human fascination with fire, with its awesome power and its strange manifestations. Fire has been the subject of mythological, religious, psychoanalytic and scientific curiosity. What is it about this phenomenon that draws so much interest toward it?

—continued on page 2

Fire, Women and Myth

—continued from page 1

For the Greeks, fire was one of the four basic elements out of which the world was made. Together, with earth, air and water, these substances composed all the things that populated the universe. Of all these substances, it was fire that seemed possessed of a mysterious power, able to illuminate itself, heat a room or destroy a forest. It never stood still and took on an infinity of forms. Combined with its capriciousness, it was readily elevated to a mystical or divine status by numerous cultures.

Not far from the Greek peninsula were the Zoroastrians, a religious group in ancient Persia, who regarded fire as the earthly representative of the sun. Since they worshiped the sun, fire was sacred to them. Among the various mythologies of the world, fire has commonly been regarded as sacred. An example of the elevated status of fire in the ancient world can be found in the

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Greek colonies, each of which was founded as a kind of distant “suburb” of a parent city. The fire lit in the colony was literally brought to it from a fire in that city.

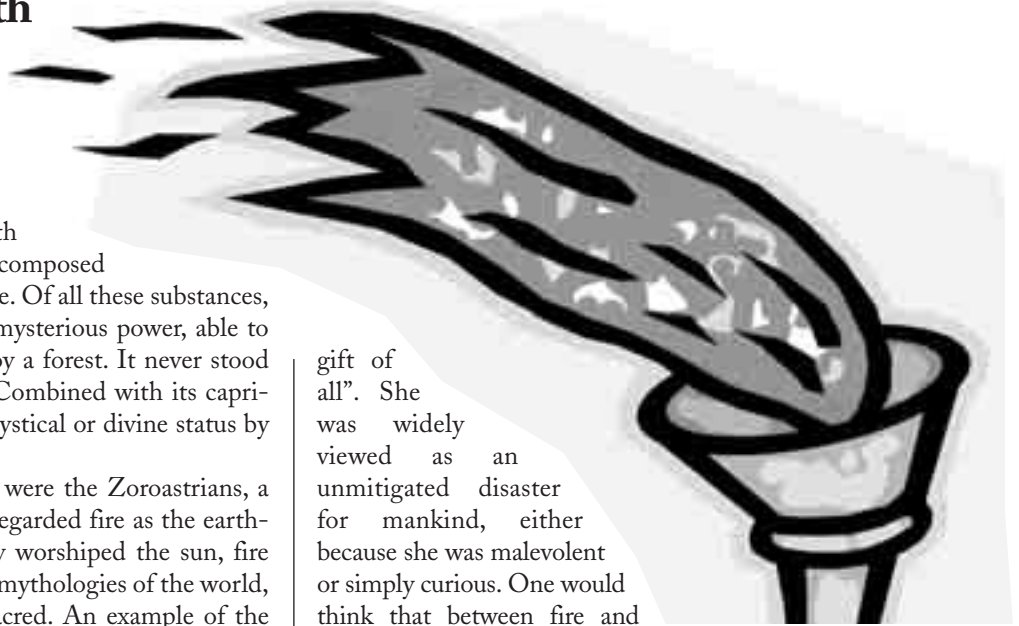
Of course, the story of Prometheus, the fire bringer, is well known. Prometheus, whose name may be translated as “fore-thought”, was one of the Titans, the earliest of the Greek deities. It fell to him to create mankind, and upon doing so he brought to his newly hewn creatures, fire. This single act infuriated Zeus who chained him to a rock upon which

An eagle red with blood
Shall come, a guest unbidden to your banquet.
All day long he will tear to rags your body.
Feasting in fury on the blackened liver.

It was many years before Prometheus was liberated from his torture.

There is much this Greek myth tells us about the attitude human beings have toward fire. Clearly, it was the greatest gift of all, a tool whose utility would never be exhausted. Having fashioned these creatures to appear as the Gods did, fire seemed to Prometheus to be a suitable gift.

Not so in the case of women. The first woman Prometheus placed upon the earth was Pandora, whose name means the “the



gift of all”. She was widely viewed as an unmitigated disaster for mankind, either because she was malevolent or simply curious. One would think that between fire and woman, the choice would be the latter. Not for the Greeks, though. Fire was an unambiguous good, whereas woman led man astray and brought upon him a continuum of catastrophe.

Were the ancient Greeks to experience the kind of fires that ravaged southern California, they would likely have blamed a female influence of some sort. When Pandora opened her infamous box, out jumped innumerable plagues, abundant sorrow and interminable conflict for all of mankind. She, the progenitor of all women, was, in their eyes, also the source of human misery.

A derivative of the Greek view of women can be found in a remark by Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who confessed that he understood women far less than men. This small revelation is important, since he believed that at the heart of all human conflict is the sex drive. And where would that be without two sexes?

All of which comes down to the idea that the attitudes of each sex toward the other has a great deal to do with the innate constitution of men and women. The Greeks saw power and creativity in fire, while they saw conflict and tragedy in women. But they also saw one more thing in Pandora’s box that changes the equation considerably – hope. So, for all the darkness women may represent in Greek thought, and even in the collective unconscious of Western culture, they are also the fount of hope, novelty and perhaps, even inspiration.

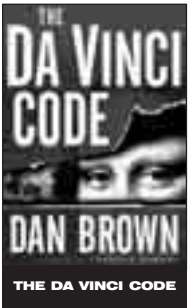
It is no mistake that Freud believed there to be two drives – aggression, i.e., fire, and libido, i.e. sex. We can’t know which one is harder to live without since we can’t divide ourselves into two parts. And anyway, there must have been a twinkle in Zeus’s eye when Hercules finally slew the eagle and liberated Prometheus from his bonds. He must have recognized that this was one Titan who stood for freedom and justice in spite of human mischief. In the end, Prometheus demands of the creatures he created that they rise above their biological inclinations and seek higher values that would make the Gods pleased he created them in the first place. —IS

SAVODNIK'S PICKS

A Monthly Review of Dr. Savodnik's Favorite Books-on-Tape

The Da Vinci Code

by Dan Brown



Listen up! Wanna learn about religious symbolism, pagan rites, Renaissance art, Church history and some pretty strange ideas about the meaning of life? Well, you're in the right place. Dan Brown's figured out how to write the ultimate page turner – or cassette popper. It's hard to say this book is well written or literary or, well, some kind of classic in the making. But it's been on the New York Times Best Seller List for the past eight months and only recently has dropped into second place.

In place of carefully pruned prose, Brown has given us a story that spans centuries, involves intrigue, mystery and religion and taps into some deep themes of Western culture. He says things about Leonardo da Vinci that are revealing, about church politics that are more than a bit provocative and about history that are strange indeed.

Robert Langdon is an art history professor at Harvard. Unmarried, insulated from worldly worries, and fascinated by the arcane, he finds himself the target of a murder investigation in Paris. The only way out is to solve the mystery behind the crime, a mystery that seems without end.

Langdon's only hope is Sophie Neveu, a cryptographer working for the French equivalent of the FBI. It's her grandfather who met with an untimely death, and who left a series of clues about the reason for his murder. The two team up and start running.

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Brown knows the formula for holding the reader. First, there's the secret society – in this case, Opus Dei, a part of the Catholic Church whose operations are obscure, at best. Second, there's a hidden message, part of which is scribbled in blood. Third, there's a monumental historical figure in the personage of Leonardo in whose paintings reside additional clues to the mystery. Finally, run three intertwining stories simultaneously.

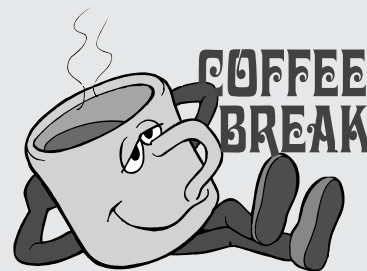
The result is a best seller. Simple, right? Not exactly. Brown is a talented guy and he's written a book you won't want to stop listening to until the last word is uttered. There's plenty of action in this story. And there's plenty of culture, history and art. It's hugely enjoyable and is apt to keep you glued to your car seat when you're supposed to be in the office.

Enjoy! —IS

THE COFFEE BREAK QUIZ

'Neurosis'

- A. is no longer used as a diagnostic term
- B. refers to an unconscious conflict
- C. was used by Sigmund Freud to explain certain psychological phenomena
- D. All of the above



Answer: D.
The concept of neurosis is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis, a theory of the mind and a form of therapy devised by Freud. It had been part of the vocabulary of American psychiatry but was eliminated in favor of a more "scientific" vocabulary.

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