

“OK BOOMER” FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FATHER-SON DYNAMICS IN MYTH

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Introduction

In the fall of 2019, a pithy, two-word response was used by teens across the internet: “Ok Boomer.” Popularized on the social media platform TikTok, teens used the phrase as a reaction to the mundane but frustrating interactions they’ve had with the older generation as well as a retort to the all-too-common accusations by Boomers for not wanting to grow up or being too sensitive. The two words have been a response to older adults criticizing teens for their fashion choices, their addictions to their phones, or their decisions not to go to college. “Ok Boomer,” in short, is a dismissive hand wave by teens and young adults who now longer want to hear the out-of-touch criticism of an older generation.

The younger generation becoming fed up with the older generation and demanding change is nothing new—the conflict is mythic, finding itself in a variety of traditions. If that is the case, are “Ok Boomer” memes the modern-day myth being written in front of our eyes? And if the answer to that question is yes, that would suggest that the generational conflict being played out on our computer screens can be found in ancient stories as well. In this paper, I seek to prove that Internet memes in particular are the current-day iteration of myth, which allows us to draw parallels to the “Ok Boomer” meme from traditional stories of father-son relationships. I argue that the revelations these ancient myths hold can be applied to our current discourse around the “Ok Boomer” meme and have significant implications for the futures of Millennials and Generation Z.

What is an Internet Meme Anyway?

The unusual origin of the word “meme” would likely surprise many Internet users as it was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. Drawing from the similarities between cultural and biological evolution, Dawkins comes up with the name “meme” for the “unit of cultural transmission” analogous to genes since both duplicate and disseminate through imitation.¹ He provides examples, such as song melodies, fashion trends, and even the concept of God, to point out that memes are spread via one person hearing an idea and then sharing it with others. The meme is passed to others if those who hear it like it, a process that repeats until eventually it has multiplied throughout a society.² However, since not every meme can be popular enough to see widespread proliferation, memes also go through

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 206.

² Ibid.

competition similar to natural selection for genes, where some memes have a higher level of fitness than others.³

Today, the term “meme” almost exclusively refers to the humorous content, usually images, catchphrases, or videos, shared on the Internet. However, Dawkins’ concept still can be applied to this kind of digital content as a metaphor. Popular internet memes are first passed from individual to individual until they have propagated throughout a community, with some seeing very widespread popularity in digital spaces and even mainstream media coverage.⁴ Of course, not every meme created goes “viral” so these memes also go through selection like Dawkins’ memes.⁵ Similar to genes having varying fitness levels, some Internet memes are more suited to survive in the digital landscape than others. The favoring of one meme over another can be clearly seen through social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or Reddit, where users can both positively react to content they enjoy (by “liking” or “upvoting”) and negatively to content they do not (by “disliking” or “downvoting”). The more positive engagement a post gets, the higher its visibility to other users will be. As a consequence of this democratic process, memes that see the broadest fame will be a product of collective approval.

While using Dawkins’ concept is helpful to understand how Internet memes become a part of the Internet’s collective consciousness, it is not a perfect metaphor for Internet memes. Dawkins describes memes as parasites that use the human brain to propagate itself to other brains, very similar to a virus that takes over a cell to replicate and eventually spread itself to other cells.⁶ In other words, memes are “active agents” who are only concerned about maintaining their survival in their cultural environment.⁷ The survival of Internet memes in their digital environment, on the other hand, almost solely depends on human choices in creativity and expression. As Limor Shifman writes, “human agency is integral” to Internet memes and their spread is a “response to technological, cultural, and social choices made by people.”⁸ Even Dawkins himself has recognized this change in control over memes, acknowledging that “internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity.”⁹ Memes on the Internet no longer have agency but are at the mercy of the creative whims of users.

This distinction is important because it brings to the forefront the idea that Internet memes are a collective product of a digital community instead of a result of selfish moves made by the memes themselves. Both on the individual and communal level, Internet memes at each stage of their life cycle—from their creation, alteration, and spread—are determined by humans. Though memes in digital spaces no longer have agency over their propagation, Dawkins’

³ Ibid, 209.

⁴ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 18.

⁵ Ibid, 22.

⁶ Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 207.

⁷ Ibid, 211.

⁸ Limor Shifman, “An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 2 (March 2012): 189.

⁹ *Just for Hits*, performed by Richard Dawkins and directed by Marshmallow Laser Feast, Cannes, France, June 20, 2013. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFn-ixX9edg>.

observation that the most popular memes are the most “fit” and well-adapted for their cultural environment is still applicable to Internet memes.¹⁰ And if viral memes are the best suited for the community that popularized them, then it stands to reason they are also the best suited to reveal aspects of that same community. Internet memes can be seen as, to borrow the words of researchers Bradley Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, “artifacts of a participatory digital culture” that preserve aspects of the group that produced it.¹¹ While there are many cultural artifacts, from works of art to political discourse, that we can use to apply to the critical analysis of Internet memes, I for one would like to adopt the perspective that myths provide.

Internet Memes as Myth

To argue that memes on the Internet are myths and can be analyzed with the same lens as traditional stories, I must first make clear what I think constitutes a myth. There have been several explanations of myth, but for the purpose of analyzing Internet memes, I will define myth as a collective story that a culture shares and therefore reveals the social fabric of that culture. This definition draws heavily from Bruce Lincoln’s: in one of his essays, he writes that myths are “the stories that everyone [in the group] knows and that everyone has heard before.”¹² This means that each retelling of a myth actively creates and re-creates groups by showing who belongs; those who know the story are inside the group, while those who do not are outside.

Myths also define groups because they have that group’s past experiences and core beliefs integrated into their story. Comparing the folklore of Europeans who immigrated to America with its counterpart produced by African Americans who were brought over as slaves, Lincoln notes that the stories share the commonality of the core plot being ancestors journeying over the Atlantic. The two differ in that the former’s stories focus on the glory of heroically exploring and seizing a new land, while the latter’s praise resistance of oppressors through trickery and adaptability.¹³ As in this example, a careful comparative analysis of myths can reveal the experiences and values the culture wants to transmit as the story is retold.

Lincoln’s framework of myth being something everyone in a community is familiar with can easily be applied to Internet memes as well. Popular memes are obviously familiar to those who frequent digital space regularly and develop what I would call “meme literacy.” Memes that a community enjoys will often reappear over and over, albeit with a little alteration each time from individuals who appropriate memes to fit the message they want to transmit. Often users use “meme formats” that can be employed for a variety of contexts. One such example is the “Hotline Bling Drake” format, which uses two stills of the rapper dancing in his music video “Hotline Bling.” The top image of the meme shows Drake holding his hand up as if he is

¹⁰ Shifman, *Memes*, 22.

¹¹ Bradley E Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, “Memes as Genre: A Structural Analysis of the Memescape,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (December 2015): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814535194>.

¹² Bruce Lincoln, “Mythic Narrative and Cultural Diversity in American Society,” in *Myth and Method*, eds. Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

repulsed while the bottom image shows a positive reaction of approval from him. Simple templates like this one allow users to create humorous content, broadcast their opinions on a variety of topics—or even do both at the same time.

Meanwhile, those who do not regularly visit these Internet spaces will likely lack the knowledge about the surrounding context and be confused by these memes. Meme formats are often repurposed and even synthesized in such a way that the original context is lost and the content takes on a rich intertextuality. A single meme can reference multiple popular memes and events the community has experienced, creating “inside jokes” only community members understand. As a result, Internet memes are the new myth in that they can be a way to signal who is part of the community and who is not. This also means these collective products hold the beliefs and values of the group that produced them and can be analyzed alongside stories from mythic tradition.

“Ok Boomer” as an Oedipal Story and Bias in its Interpretations

So what kind of myth is the “Ok Boomer” meme? It is clear to see that the phrase is clearly a byproduct of generational conflict as young Internet users are using it to dismiss and even criticize the older generation. At the same time, Millennials have become the largest generation in the U.S. workforce¹⁴ and are on their way to replace the Boomers as the biggest generational group in the American electorate.¹⁵ This cycle of the young replacing the old is a consistent theme of human history and myths naturally capture this cycle and the tensions it produces. These myths from tradition present such conflicts through father-son dynamics, with the paternal character representing the older generation and the filial character representing the younger generation. And of course, one of the most infamous stories of a conflict between father and son in Western tradition is that of Oedipus.

In the version of the myth found in *The Theban Plays* by Sophocles, Oedipus is destined to kill his father King Laius and lie with his mother, completely replacing Laius not only as king but also as the husband of his wife. Despite Laius’ efforts, the prophecy is inevitable as Oedipus by the end of the first play famously fulfills the prophecy in its entirety. This tale with its shocking conclusion, along with others like it such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, was infamously used by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud to argue for the existence of an unconscious and universal desire of sons to kill their father and sleep with their mothers.¹⁶ Freud’s ideas have given rise to the “Oedipal complex” and pervaded modern thought, including how scholars view intergenerational conflict. Protests by the youth, according to those adopting a Freudian perspective, are just a way for youth to resolve their unconscious resentment

¹⁴ Richard Fry, “Millennials Are Largest Generation in the U.S. Labor Force,” last modified April 11, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/>.

¹⁵ Anthony Cilluffo and Richard Fry, “An Early Look at the 2020 Electorate,” last modified January 30, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/an-early-look-at-the-2020-electorate/>.

¹⁶ Leon Shaskolsky Sheleff, “Beyond the Oedipus Complex: A Perspective on the Myth and Reality of Generational Conflict,” *Theory and Society* 3, no. 1 (1976): 2.

toward their fathers who they project onto the authority figures they are protesting against.¹⁷ Thus, due to the dominance of Freudian ideas, the application of Oedipus' story is inevitable when studying the tensions between the young and old that "Ok Boomer" centers around.

Yet the instinct to view generational relations only from the lens of the Oedipal complex is not fully justified, as it provides a one-sided view of the conflict. Several writers have argued that Freud's interpretation of Sophocles' play was incomplete, since he ignored the aggression of Laius toward his son. Not only does Laius unsuccessfully attempt to murder his son when he is an infant, but he is also the one who provokes and attacks Oedipus first on the road before Oedipus in turn retaliates and kills Laius.¹⁸ Moreover, Laius does not know that the man he drives off the road is his son, making this also an unconscious act that sets the basis for a "Laius complex" of paternal antagonism toward his son. In the case of Laius, this aggression stems from a selfish desire to preserve his position as king of Thebes, even at the cost of his son's life. Laius is also not the only example from tradition: parental aggression toward children is seen in the Greek myth of Cronus, the biblical story of Jephthah, the Hindu tale of Krishna, to name a few.¹⁹

This raises the question of why such a phenomenon has been ignored. Leon Sheleff contends that the academic preference for Oedipal interpretations and the lack of attention on paternal aggression is a result of bias for the older generation. After all, the analysis of generational conflict is produced and approved by adults. Thanks to this dominance of the intellectual sphere by adults, combined with the popularity of Freud's incomplete ideas, generational aggression is usually shown as going in only one direction, the young toward the old, while the animosity of adults toward the youth is largely ignored.²⁰ The bias is also clearly present in the discourse surrounding the "Ok Boomer" meme. Some have criticized the phrase for being disrespectful and rooted in ageism, with one radio host going so far as to tweet that it is equivalent to "the n-word of ageism."²¹ These criticisms paint the youth as disrespectful and hostile, a conclusion that aligns with the aforementioned Freudian perspective that youth protests are just a way for the young to childishly rebel against authority and the father figures they represent. This characterization of the younger generation not only allows the older generation to dismiss the concerns of the youth are bringing up with their memes but also hold onto the power they have by unfairly playing the victim. Claiming "Ok Boomer" is ageist only adds to the narrative constructed by the older generation that hostility is solely in one direction, when that is clearly not the case.

Looking back at history shows that in many ways the Boomers were born with a leg up compared to today's youth and used it only for their advantage. Understanding the importance of

¹⁷ Sheleff, "Beyond the Oedipus Complex," 7.

¹⁸ Ibid, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid, 23.

²⁰ Ibid, 5.

²¹ Michael Brice-Saddler, "A Conservative Radio Host Compared 'Boomer' to the N-Word. Even Dictionary.com Was Appalled," *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/11/04/conservative-radio-host-compared-boomer-n-word-even-dictionarycom-was-appalled/>.

fiscal responsibility, the Boomers' predecessors were very willing to pay high taxes, with the highest marginal rate being 94 percent in 1945 (unfathomably high compared to its 2014 counterpart of 39.6 percent).²² Thanks to this tax revenue, Boomers reaped many benefits that they squandered upon becoming eligible voters and gaining control of the electorate with their massive population size. Though there are many examples of this, how they dealt with infrastructure and the public education system in particular shows the Boomers' mindset of only being concerned for themselves. Despite a congressional review in the late 1980s reported that the conditions of infrastructure was "fair to good" but "requir[ed] attention," the Boomers, figuring "fair to good" was good enough for them, decided to let infrastructure deteriorate to its current condition.²³ Once they graduated from college at an affordable cost, Boomers threw out subsidies, which they now saw as unnecessary, and allowed public tuition to rise. This lack of concern for future generations has led to current students to need to take on crushing student loan debt (which cannot be removed even through bankruptcy, thanks to Boomers changing the bankruptcy code in 2005).²⁴ Though Boomers are notorious for blaming Millennials' own choices for their inability to find jobs and financial security, it is clear they have played an active role in creating the very problems the youth are complaining about.

Contrasting the Actions of Laius and Boomers

While it is clear *Oedipus Rex* highlights the selfish aggression of a father and the older generation he represents, a single myth does not provide all the possibilities in father-son relationships or the generational relations they represent. Stories that tell of a father figure who sacrifices himself for his son that would contrast Laius' actions as a father. Despite these stories being extremely rare and the opposite being much, much more common, such an example can be found in the mythology of the Polynesians. They recount that at the beginning of time, the primordial father saw that one of his sons could not eat the red clay the family was all eating. He sacrifices himself but not before he tells his wife to divide up his body and bury the pieces. She does as she is told and the father's body becomes a breadfruit tree that provides nutrition for the boy to survive.²⁵ This is the Polynesian's myth for the origin of breadfruit, one of their staple crops.

The father in this myth does not see his self-sacrifice as a grandiose act, like it often is portrayed in Western movies; rather, to him, death is a normal but a necessary part of the natural life cycle, a belief that is shared by nature-centered cultures. People who lived in tough environments with limited food supply, such as the Arctic, venerated the animals they killed to

²² Bruce Cannon Gibney, *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Boomers Failed America* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), 11.

²³ Ibid, 177-178.

²⁴ Ibid, xxxi.

²⁵ Rachel S. McCoppin, *The Hero's Quest and the Cycles of Nature: an Ecological Interpretation of World Mythology* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland et Company, 2016), 155-156.

eat because without them they could not survive.²⁶ Life, as a result, was seen as intertwined and even reliant on death, so submission to the end of life came naturally; it is no coincidence the father turns into a plant, which dies so that its seeds can spread and produce the next generation. These cultural beliefs are embodied in the mythical father who is unconcerned with his own survival and acknowledges the natural cycle of one generation taking the place of the previous.

Laius, on the other hand, fails to recognize that cycle and tries to avert the oracle's prophecy at all costs. He creates a new cycle resistant to nature: one where the older generation does everything to prevent being challenged and defied and replaced by the next generation. In the second play of Sophocles' trilogy, *Oedipus at Colossus*, Oedipus' son, Polynices, after being banished by his brother in a coup over the throne, pleads to be released from Oedipus' curse so he can take back the throne that he sees is rightfully his. However, this means that Oedipus will be completely replaced by his son, so Oedipus rejects this plea. He instead calls upon the curse and prays that both Polynices and his brother will die in their quarrel over the kingship of Thebes. Polynices does die which becomes the catalyst for the main conflict in the third play, *Antigone*; the titular character, Oedipus' daughter, defies the decree made by Laius' brother Creon not to bury Polynices' body. Creon's son Haemon reasons with his father why he should get rid of the harsh law but Creon does not listen since he believes his position of authority as king and father are being threatened. Here, the father dismisses his son's concerns and pleas, claiming it is not right for someone as young as Haemon to challenge his age and experience. The result of this is unsurprising for those who read the other two plays: more deaths, including those of Antigone and Haemon. In both cases, as Sheleff notes, the older generations dismiss the younger, despite the latter trying to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict.²⁷

Unfortunately, it seems that Millennials and Generation Z have inherited this cycle of selfishness. They have been cursed with issues that their predecessors refuse to take responsibility for and dismissed for being too young and inexperienced. As a result, the younger generation finds itself in the same treacherous position of Oedipus. Being hurt by Laius, Oedipus has no empathy for Polynices, even though his son recognizes they are suffering the same fate of being exiles. After all, if his father did not care about him, why should Oedipus, now a father himself, care about his son? The same attitude may potentially be adopted by Millennials and Generation Z: if Boomers disregarded our wellbeing, why shouldn't we do the same to the next generation when we gain power? But the father from the Polynesian origin myth offers a different, albeit difficult, option. Though the Boomers did not worry about the infrastructure or public education system of those who would come after them, the Millennials, who are going to be the dominant generation in the electorate, will have to institute the costly policy moves, such as higher taxes, to ensure that the generation to follow is cared for. Self-sacrifice may be too high of a call for Millennials and Generation Z, who are struggling with student loan debt and

²⁶ Ibid, 134.

²⁷ Sheleff, "Beyond the Oedipus Conflict," 12.

unknown economic futures, but the kinder model from the myth of the breadfruit shows how it is necessary for the children to come to thrive.

Conclusion

Analyzing the “Ok Boomer” meme alongside myths about father-son dynamics presents that the older generation can see the eventual replacement by the successive generation as either something to resist or something that is natural. Myths, such as the one about Laius’ actions, forecast the future of those who pick the first option: the adoption of a mentality of self-preservation that figuratively blinds (and in the case of Oedipus, literally) them to the harm they are inflicting on the next generation. The Boomers, unfortunately, have followed in Laius’ footsteps and selfishly made policy moves that benefited only them while completely disregarding the wellbeing of those who came after them. Such selfishness can produce a destructive cycle where the father’s offspring continue to be unconcerned for their own offspring—something Millennials and Generation Z could potentially choose. However, there is a second choice, one presented by myths like the Polynesian one, where the older generation chooses to sacrifice for the survival of the next. And though their predecessors refused to do it, we can only hope that Millennials and Generation Z can be more countercultural than “Ok Boomer” and make the hard choice of sacrificing—perhaps not their lives but at the very least their hard-earned money.

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