

What is a Myth?

What is mythology? It is an organized collection of stories (i.e., "myths") people use to explain their beliefs and their history.

Beneath the story-lines, myths usually confront major issues such as the origin of humanity and its traditions, and the way in which the natural and human worlds function on a profound, universal level.

Other myths, however, seem merely to narrate the deities' (gods) daily activities -- their love affairs and pleasures, their jealousies and rages, their ambitions and schemes, and their quarrels and battles.



Myths, legends, folktales, and fables. We commonly use the word "myth" interchangeably with the following terms, but some authorities have made distinctions (which, like many definitions, might not be valid in all cases):

1.Legends. Unlike many myths, legends generally do not have religious or supernatural content. Legends emphasize the story more than the significance of the story; we might still gain a philosophical and moral meaning from a legend, but we probably will not feel the intensity that permeates myths. An example of a legend is the tale of Atlantis.

2.Folklore. While legends and myths might be embraced as true stories, folktales are **generally known** to be fictitious. They are often told only within a **limited geographical area** -- one town, one mountain range, or one country. Examples include the stories of Paul Bunyan and Rip Van Winkle from early American history.

3.Fables. Even more so than folktales, fables are acknowledged to be fictional -- certainly when the characters include talking animals. A fable's emphasis is on a "moral." Examples include Aesop's fables, such as the stories of the tortoise and the hare, and the fox who complained about "sour grapes."



Wonder Woman. Adults, too, can find role models, in the stories of deities' strength, persistence, and courage.



We have had deities for many aspects of life.... The Egyptians had more than 2,000 deities; the Hindus have 333 million. Deities have governed virtually every possible activity, object, and emotion. In addition to the broad categories (e.g., war or the sea), we have had deities for individual items; for example, the Irish honored both the goddess of rivers (Boann) and the goddess of the Lagan River (Logia). There have been deities for individual cities (Athena for Athens), mountains (Gauri-Sankar for Mount Everest), lakes, tribes, plant species, temples, constellations, parts of the body, etc. In some cultures, each home possessed its own deity, to supplement the culture's "goddess of the home" (who was named Hestia in the Greek religion). Deities governed not only major phenomena such as agriculture or love or the sun, but also such common matters as leisure, reptiles, the kitchen stove, guitars, jeering, the nose, politics, singing, doors, willpower, firecrackers, gambling, face cream, and the toilet.



Ancient myths live in our culture. We find references to those myths in many contemporary words and expressions, such as Pandora's box, Colossus, and Olympian. Other words derived from mythology include Atlas, aurora (from Aurora), chlorophyll (from Chloris), chronology (from Kronos), discipline (from Disciplina), discord (from Discordia), eros (from Eros), fate (from Fate), fauna (from Faunus), fidelity (from Fides), flora (from Flora), fortune (from Fortuna), fraud (from Fraus), Hades (from Hades), Hell (from Hel), hygiene (from Hygieia), liberty (from Libertas), lunar (from Luna), museum and music (from Muse), mortality (from Mors), mute (from Muta), narcissism (from Narcissus), nemesis (from Nemesis), ocean (from Oceanus), -- and the names of the planets, and some of the months (including Janus for January), etc. Mars (the Roman war god) is remembered in words such as Mars (the planet), March (the month), and martial (as in martial arts).



We each have our own mythology. Consciously or unconsciously, we create our own myths. We have our deities -- the things which are important and valued and vibrant to us personally. We are heroes in "mythic journeys" by which we romanticize our various passages through life. Although we generally accept cultural myths to the extent to which we are a part of our culture, the truly satisfying and exciting myths are those which arise from our own passions, our own dreams, and our own visions.



Similar myths exist in every culture. The myths have different characters and different plot-lines, but we do find some common themes. Some of the recurring themes include a Golden Age, a fall from a heavenly state, resurrections from death, virgin births, worldwide floods, creation stories in which "one becomes two," and a future apocalypse. When Carl Jung examined the commonalities of myths, he developed his theory of archetypes, which are universal forces which influence us to manifest their particular trait.



Myths are metaphorical. Some people regard myths as mere fabrications, to be discarded in our enlightened age. Those people are repelled by the myths' preposterous elements (such as centaurs) and contradictions (within an individual myth, or in its revisions from one oral transmission to the next). But mythology's enduring worth is not in its possible historical or scientific accuracy; instead, myths are important because they are metaphors. We learn about life and people and values in a way which cannot be offered by dry historical or philosophical accounts; in mythology, we learn through imagination, as we feel and visualize the colorful adventures of the deities. Although mythology is not a literal rendering of a culture's history, we can still use myths to explore the culture -- its viewpoints, activities, and beliefs.



Part one

What is the difference between a myth and a legend?

Which of these is a myth? Which is a legend? Which is a folktale? Which is a fable?

The Miwok story of how Turtle created the world.

“It is a _____”

Why? _____

The story of the Bigfoot of Redwood National Park.

“It is a _____”

Why? _____

The Historical Story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

“It is a _____”

Why? _____

The native “Creature” in Loch Ness lake.

“It is a _____”

Why? _____

The story of the talking Tortoise and the Hare.

“It is a _____”

Why? _____

The Story of the love between the God “Cupid” and the maiden Psyche.

“It is a _____”

Why? _____

Should Mythology be taught in school? Why or Why not? _____

If something is a Myth, does that make it not true? _____
