

Mythology Notes

Background:

Prehistoric (before a written language) peoples attempted to explain how the world began or the origin of different phenomenon in nature through stories called myths. Myths from around the world reflect the culture of its people -- their values, beliefs, and traditions. In the folkloric tradition, myths were handed down from generation to generation by word-of-mouth. Myths from around the world explain creation often using the same or similar elements in their stories. At the same time, myths from around the world often explain the same phenomenon in nature differently. Why are there similarities? Why are there differences? What can myths teach us about the culture it represents?

A category of writing is called Genre. Mythology falls in the category or genre of Folklore.

Folktales

- Generally known to be fictitious
- About a specific geographical area
- Often has magic

Examples: Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed

Legends

- Story based on a historic event, fact, or person
- Not typically moral
- Limited involvement of gods and supernatural forces

Examples: King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Atlantis

Fables

- Emphasis on the moral or the story
- Animals often talk

Examples: The Boy Who Cried Wolf, The Tortoise and the Hare

☞ Myths

- Explain how this began or why they happen
- Involve Gods and the supernatural
- Reflect the cultural beliefs of a particular people

Examples: The Odyssey, The Iliad

What you should know about Myths:

1. cultures create myths to explain their origins

2. all cultures use myths to preserve and spread values and traditions
3. similar myths exist in every culture
4. differences in creation myths reflect the uniqueness of each culture

What you should learn about Myths:

1. How do different cultures explain how the world begun?
2. How do different peoples explain how man was created?
3. What are the similarities and differences in creation myths from around the world?
4. What unique cultural traits are revealed in myths?
5. What can we learn about ourselves through myths?

Purposes of Myths:

Myths grant continuity and stability to a culture.

They foster a shared set of perspectives, values, history. Through these communal tales, we are connected to one another, to our ancestors, to the natural world surrounding us, and to society; and, through the myths which have universal (i.e., archetypal) themes, we are connected to other cultures.

Myths present guidelines for living.

When myths tell about the activities and attitudes of deities, the moral tone implies society's expectations for our own behaviors and standards. In myths, we see archetypal situations and some of the options which can be selected in those situations; we also perceive the rewards and other consequences which resulted from those selections.

Myths explain the unexplained.

They reveal our fate after death and the reasons for crises or miracles, and other puzzles -- and yet they retain and even encourage an aura of mystery. Myths also satisfy our need to understand the natural world; for example, they might state that a drought is caused by an angry deity. This purpose of mythology was especially important before the advent of modern science, which offered the Big Bang theory to replace creation myths, and it gave us the theory of evolution to supplant myths regarding the genesis of humanity. And yet, science creates its own mythology.

Myths offer role models.

In particular, children pattern themselves after heroes; comic books and Saturday-morning cartoons depict many archetypal characters, such as Superman and Wonder Woman. Adults, too, can find role models, in the stories of deities' strength, persistence, and courage.