

Mythology

By Joshua J Mark, 31st October 2018

Mythology (from the **Greek** *mythos* for story-of-the-people, and *logos* for word or speech, so the spoken story of a people) is the study and interpretation of often sacred tales or fables of a culture known as myths or the collection of such stories which deal with various aspects of the human condition: good and evil; the meaning of suffering; human origins; the origin of place-names, animals, cultural values, and traditions; the meaning of life and **death**; the afterlife; and the gods or a god. Myths express the beliefs and values about these subjects held by a certain culture.

Myths tell the stories of ancestors and the origin of humans and the world, the gods, supernatural beings (satyrs, nymphs, mermaids) and heroes with super-human, usually god-given, powers (as in the case of Heracles or **Perseus** of the Greeks). Myths also describe origins or nuances of long-held customs or explain natural events such as the sunrise and sunset, the cycle of the moon and the seasons, or thunder and lightning storms.

Mythology has played an integral part in every **civilization** throughout the world. Pre-historic cave paintings, etchings in stone, tombs, and monuments all suggest that, long before human beings set down their myths in words, they had already developed a belief structure corresponding to the definition of 'myth' provided by Leach and Fried. According to psychiatrist Carl Jung, myth is a necessary aspect of the human psyche which needs to find meaning and order in a world which often presents itself as chaotic and meaningless.

What one calls "mythology" in the present day, it should be remembered, was the religion of the ancient past. The stories which make up the corpus of ancient mythology served the same purpose for the people of the time as the stories from accepted scripture do for people today: they explained,

comforted, and directed an audience and, further, provided a sense of unity, cohesion, and protection to a community of like-minded believers.

Types of Myth

There are many different types of myth but, essentially, they can be grouped into three:

- Etiological Myths
- Historical Myths
- Psychological Myths

Etiological myths (from the Greek *aetion* meaning 'reason') explain why a certain thing is the way it is or how it came to be. For example, in **Egyptian mythology** the sycamore tree looks the way it does because it is home to the goddess **Hathor**, the Lady of the Sycamore. Etiological myths can offer explanations for why the world is the way it is – as in the story from **Greek mythology** of **Pandora's** Box which explains how evil and suffering was released into the world – or how a certain institution came to be – as in the Chinese myth of the goddess Nuwa who kept creating human beings over and over and over until she grew tired and instituted the practice of marriage so humans could reproduce themselves.

Historical myths retell an event from the past but elevate it with greater meaning than the actual event (if it even happened). One example of this is the story of the **Battle** of Kurukshetra as described in the Indian epic **Mahabharata** in which the Pandava brothers symbolize different values and provide role models, even if they are occasionally flawed. Kurukshetra is then presented in microcosm in the **Bhagavad Gita** where one of the **Pandavas**, **Arjuna**, is visited on the battlefield by the god **Krishna**, avatar of **Vishnu**, to explain one's purpose in life. Whether the Battle of Kurukshetra ever took place is immaterial to the power of these two stories on a mythological level. The same can be said for the Siege of **Troy** and its fall as described in **Homer's Iliad** or **Odysseus'** journey home in the **Odyssey** or Aeneas' adventures in the work of **Virgil**.

Psychological myths present one with a journey from the known to the unknown which, according to both Jung and Campbell, represents a psychological need to balance the external world with one's internal consciousness of it. However that may be, the story of the myth itself usually involves a hero or heroine on a journey in which they discover their true identity or fate and, in so doing, resolve a crisis while also providing an audience with some important cultural value.

Probably the best-known myth of this type is that of **Oedipus** the prince who, seeking to avoid the prediction that he would grow up to kill his father, leaves his life behind to travel to another region where he unknowingly winds up killing the man who was his actual father who had abandoned him at birth in an attempt to circumvent that same prediction.