**What Is Mythology?**

Mythology is more than just stories; it is the search for answers, explanations, and for all of the basic questions of humankind:

* Who are we?
* Where did we come from?
* Why is nature so beautiful and also so harsh?
* Who has power and how do I gain their favor?
* What is love and how do we overcome forbidden love?

What makes mythology difficult to understand, in our age, is that myths must be seen through the eyes of the individual but they require a foundation of cultural background. And even if you have studied that culture, that era of the culture has ended and you can’t see it. In this way, ancient myths are rumors.

Mythology works in two ways, and they are opposites: stories to explain true events and nature, or impossible stories to explain true ideas.

It is difficult to describe mythology since it is defined so differently in different groups. Here are just a few professional definitions.

1. **Oxford Dictionary:** A set of stories or beliefs about a particular person, institution, or situation, especially when exaggerated or fictitious.
2. **Merriam Dictionary:** 1- An allegorical narrative. 2- Ideas that are believed by many people but that are not true.
3. **The Free Dictionary:** A body or collection of myths that belong to a people and address their origin, history, deities, ancestors, and heroes.

**Definitions of myths defined by modern philosophers:**

**Frazer:** Myths are expressed through totems & rituals as pre-religion (then to religion, then science).

**Eliade:** Myths are meant to put us in touch with the sacred transcendent.

**Jung**: Myth is symbolic language used to connect to a collective unconscious.

**Geertz**: Myths are interpreted statements about how we choose to live.

**Malinowski**: Myth supports and reinforces existing sociocultural order.

**McClure**: Myths are narratives that attempt to answer the enduring and fundamental human questions.

**Joseph Campbell’s definitions of mythology:**

* “Myths are the stories of our search through the ages for the **truth**, for **meaning**, for **significance**… they are symbolic clues that support our search for an experience of being alive.”
* “Myths are organic; they **transform** by cultural and environmental change- as they must- or they will wither and lose their hold on living people.”
* “Myths are shared **stories** of deep meaning that attempt to make sense of life and how to experience it, however, myths are *not* *invented* as stories are; myths are *inspired*.”
* “They are expressed as psychic archetypes in our dreams, prophetic revelations, cosmological frameworks, sociological guidelines, and artistic enactments of the **unexplainable**, all through rituals, poetry and literature, dramatic performance (plays and films), and other artistic renderings.”
* “The basis of all mythology is that there is an invisible plane of being that is behind the visible plane and which is somehow **supportive** of the visible one to which we have to relate.”
* “Myths, primarily, are for fundamental **instruction**. They tell us how to behave and what to focus on.”

**"God made man, because he liked to hear a story." So say the Africans, and the rich variety of worldwide mythology proves that God chose wisely!**

Myths are stories that are based on tradition. Some may have factual origins, while others are completely fictional. But myths are more than mere stories and they serve a more profound purpose in ancient and modern cultures. Myths are sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience. Myths are as relevant to us today as they were to the ancients. Myths answer timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation. The myths of lost paradise, for example, give people hope that by living a virtuous life, they can earn a better life in the hereafter. The myths of a golden age give people hope that there are great leaders who will improve their lives. The hero's quest is a model for young men and women to follow, as they accept adult responsibilities. Some myths simply reassure, such as myths that explain natural phenomena as the actions of gods, rather than arbitrary events of nature.

The subjects of myths reflect the universal concerns of mankind throughout history: birth, death, the afterlife, the origin of man and the world, good and evil and the nature of man himself. A myth taps into a universal cultural narrative, the collective wisdom of man. An excellent illustration of the universality of these themes is that so many peoples who have had no contact with each other create myths that are remarkably similar. So, for example, cultures worldwide, from the Middle East to the distant mountains of South America have myths about great floods, virgin births, and the afterlife.

Unlike fairy tales, myths are not always optimistic. True to the nature of life, the essence of myths is such that they are as often warnings as promises; as often laments as celebrations. Many myths are instructive and act as a guide to social norms, taking on cultural taboos such as incest, fratricide, and greed.

Myths are also pervasive in the arts and advertising, for a very simple reason. From film to cars to perfume, advertising uses visual metaphors to speak to us. While artists of every generation reinterpret myths, the same basic patterns have shown up in mythology for thousands of years. A name, phrase, or image based on a familiar myth can speak volumes to those who have been absorbing these mythic tales since birth. When we hear the expression, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" or when we see a television commercial featuring a wooden horse full of soldiers, we recognize the reference to Odysseus, who tricked the Trojans into admitting an army into their city this way.

When Jacqueline Kennedy referred to her husband's tenure as a new Camelot, we understand that she meant it was a golden age, like that of King Arthur. When the Greek government dubbed a campaign to rescue ethnic Greeks from behind the walls of the Iron Curtain "Operation Golden Fleece," we understood that they were invoking an ancient name to communicate that these people belonged to them. Each generation of storytellers adds another layer of fact and fiction to the myths, such that the themes and characters of myths are timeless, and endlessly relevant, as they are reinvented and reapplied to the lives of each new generation.

Myths were usually created as explanations for real-life phenomena or events. For example, Persephone's abduction and the seasons, or the Chinese folktale (which is also told in other parts of Asia) of the Herd Boy and Weaver Girl, which ends up explaining why magpies are a little bald-headed at a certain time of the year.

**Campbell’s 4 functions of mythology**

1. **Mystical**: Involves realizing what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are, and feeling awe before this mystery. (fantastical, existential, and the sublime) These elements are found in romanticism era works.
2. **Cosmological**: The dimension with which science is concerned- showing you what shape the universe is, but showing it in such a way that the mystery again comes through. (movies like *Interstellar*, *Contact*, the *Abyss*, and *Men in Black*) In ancient times, these were stories of the sun, moon, and stars.
3. **Sociological**: Supporting and validating a certain social order… (It is the sociological function of myth that has taken over in our world, according to Campbell) These are in the stories that support religion and politics which set the socially acceptable behaviors of a people.
4. **Pedagogical**: “The one that I think everyone must try today to relate to one’s self – how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances, to guide the individual through the normal crises of a lifetime, decently and harmoniously. And these crises are basically three: first, that of leaving the childhood mentality- becoming an adult (dependency to independency). Second, is self-discovery and gaining your world through work. Thirdly, the crisis of yielding yourself- all you’ve done and even your life to death.”

***Pedagogy*** means ‘teaching’ so this area is about teaching and learning how to live in our modern, global community where we have different mythologies, religions, and political beliefs in a community. This is where we learn to ‘live and let live’. (self-help books, modern fables, stories, and anecdotes)

**Joseph Campbell on myths and dreams**

“Dreams are private myths, myths are public dreams.”

“You can’t predict what a myth is going to be any more than you can predict what you’re going to dream tonight. Myths and dreams come from the same place; they come from realizations of some kind that have then to find expression in symbolic form. All the gods, all the heavens, all the worlds are within us. They are magnified dreams. And what dreams are manifestation, in image form, of the energies of the body in conflict with each other. And that is all myth is; myth is a manifestation in symbolic images, metaphorical images of the energies within us, moved by the organs of the body in conflict with each other. This organ wants this, another organ wants that. The brain is one of the organs. When we dream, we are fishing in some deep ocean of mythology. We are standing on the whale and fishing for minnows. We do not realize that the ground of being is the ground of our being and, outward turned, we see all these little problems here, but inward, we are the source of them all. That’s the big mystical teaching.”

“Dreams are private myths, myths are public dreams.”

“There is, in a myth, a kind of message from the unconscious to the conscious.”

“They arise from collective depths where human consciousness and the **ineffable** meet.” (ineffable means ‘too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words’)

**Joseph Campbell on the future of mythology**

“The only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not this city, not these people, but the planet and everybody on it. That’s my main thought for what the future myth is going to be. And what it will have to deal with will be exactly what all myths have dealt with: the maturation of the individual, the gradual and pedagogical way to follow from dependency through adulthood to maturity and then to the exit, and *how* to do it. And then how to relate to this society and how to relate this society to the world of nature and the cosmos. That is what the myths have all talked about. That’s what this one’s got to talk about. But the society that it’s got to talk about is the society of the planet. And until that gets going, you don’t have anything.”

**Mythology and Religion**

There is a good chance that we will be referencing religion during discussions in class. Please, please, please be respectful to all religions and belief systems.

* **Mythology** and **religion** can be a hot topic because mythology has become associated with “myth” meaning false or not valid (think Mythbusters), but a mythology is really just a story to help explain a truth, belief, or value. Sometimes they may have actually happened historically, and sometimes they have not. **Mythology does not care if the story is historically accurate!** Mythology has nothing to do with accuracy and facts. The word ‘myth’ stems from the word ‘logos’ which means oral communication, or explaining things so it makes sense for the audience. The connotation of this word split at some point and became ‘storytelling’ (mythology) and ‘public speaking’ (logos) but started as the same thing. When we think of logos today, we think of argumentation and speaking to support a claim with evidence and facts. This split caused people to see mythology (myths) and fact-finding as opposites, and thus myths became seen as non-truths. This is simply not the case, since the meaning/purpose of the story is to communicate a truth, belief, or value that we need. I want you to keep this in mind when the topic of religion comes up. A quote from Quora.com explains this well:

“**Religion** and **mythology** differ but have overlapping aspects. Both terms refer to systems of concepts that are of high importance to a certain community, making statements concerning the supernatural or sacred. Generally, **mythology** is considered one component or aspect of **religion**. One can compare religion to mythology, science, and astrology. Religion is the broader term: besides mythological aspects, it includes aspects of ritual, morality, theology, and mystical experience. A given mythology is almost always associated with a certain religion such as Greek mythology with Ancient Greek religion.”

Joseph Campbell states that, “The word ‘religion’ means ‘religio’ – “linking back”. Linking back the phenomenal person to a source. If we say it is the one life in both of us, then my separate life has been linked to the one life—religio – linked back.” “Read other peoples’ myths as well as those of your own religion because your own religion you begin to interpret in term of facts. But if you read myths not of your religion, you begin to get the message that is beyond the two of them. By comparing, the message comes through.”

Please note that there are only a handful of **religions**, but these religions contain many **faiths**.

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| **Religions of Identity**  **(Eastern and ancient peoples)** | **vs.** | **Religions of Relationship**  **(Western and modern peoples)** |
| One with life source |  | Personal relationship with God |
| Focus is on the group/collective/ecosystem |  | Focus in on the individual over the group |
| Pray/meditate to quiet self |  | Pray/meditate to communicate with life source,  nature, or God |
| Learn to harmonize with life source, nature, destiny/path of life (often predetermined) |  | Learn to negotiate and navigate through life experiences using free will and agency |
| Life is seen as cyclical and generational |  | Life is seen as historical and linear  (has a beginning, middle, and end) |

Note: Your faith may be a hybrid of the two, and this chart may be missing elements in your faith.

As we study mythology, keep in mind that actual wonderful people either believed these stories or saw value in them enough to keep them alive. There are people today who continue these beliefs and I would like you to keep an open mind and be respectful when we talk about what people have and do belief as they are special, significant, and sacred.

**Mythology: the Truth We Need, the Desires We Share**

**Through mythology, we see mankind’s needs and desires for the following elements:**

* **Power**
* over others
* over death
* over the cosmos/fate
* Through wisdom/knowledge
* **Harmony (balance/connection)**
* with original archetypes (renew/evolve), and nature
* with your place/calling in life (bliss)
* with life source, God(s), and spiritual world
* with fate and destiny
* **Ego** - our subconscious self that is ***opposite of harmony*** which
* is constrained by fear of failure and loss
* focusses on self over others / pleasure over virtue
* seeks justice at any cost
* can have a blind attraction/fixation on goals
* is achievement/possession drivenwhich can lead tojealousy and pride
* **Love**
* for others over self
* through a connection
* through a sacrifice
* 3 P’s: Procreate, Protect, Provide
* **Amusement** (muse)
* for inspiration
* for validation
* for alternate realities to compare to
* to satisfy our drive and restlessness

**Instructions for the Mythology Final**

You may choose one of the following approaches for your final:

**One 4 page paper Must tie in at least 6 myths to support one element**

**OR**

**Two 2 page papers Must tie in at least 3 myths to support each element**

**OR**

**Five 1 page papers Must tie in at least 2 myths to support each element**

**Your final should be double-spaced in Times New Roman and size 12 font.**

You should be taking notes and looking for this/these element(s) in EVERYTHING that we read/discuss**.**

I imagine the final paper(s) with a thesis like, “The element of **harmony** is essential to the human experience as seen in mythology.” Then you break the topic into subtopics and discuss them from your own perspective and use anything that we discussed or read as support for your paragraphs.