

## Fact Sheet

### Mythology - Hard

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.

The infinite Jung references is the numinous quality of the mysterious, holy, and powerful which provides the underlying allure of mythological tales and themes because it gives a final meaning to human existence. The concept of something greater and more powerful than one's self gives one the hope of direction and protection in an uncertain world. According to Leach and Fried, the mysterious, holy, and powerful is "a concept of the human mind from earliest times: the basic psychological reaction to the universe and environment which underlies all religion"

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.

Scholar Joseph Campbell notes how mythology is the underlying form of every civilization and the underpinning of each individual's consciousness. In his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he discusses what he calls the "monomyth", the similarities in theme, characters, purpose, and narrative progression of myths from different cultures, at different times, around the world and throughout history

Mythology explains, empowers, stabilizes, and elevates the life of a believer from a mundane existence to one imbued with eternal meaning. On the most basic level, a myth explains a phenomenon, tradition, place-name, or geological formation but it can also elevate a past event to epic and even supernatural significance and, most importantly, provide a role model for one's individual journey through life.

Etiological myths (from the Greek *aition* 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.