Mythological Narratives

Course Outline

Contents

Mythological Narratives

Instructor: Ross Laird, Ph.D.
Email: ross@rosslaird.com
Website: www.rosslaird.com
Office: D308, Surrey campus (by appointment)

Basic Philosophy of the Course

Writing is a powerful, ancient, and yet delicate practice. We write — quietly, often in isolation, in tentative and mercurial moods. We revise, and turn back upon our own narratives, and wonder about the reception our work might meet in the world. Sometimes we hide manuscripts in drawers, or take deliberate action — as did Franz Kafka and Mahatma Gandhi — to prevent our words from making their way to an audience. Kafka and Gandhi were both unsuccessful in preventing their writings from being destroyed; but their impulse to do so, to keep hooded the hawk of their creativity, is common among writers of all stripes.

We're not sure that we have, really, anything to say; or we are afraid that if our words are not well met we might ourselves be wounded. Or we believe, as did the ancient Egyptians, that words have their own life, for good or for ill, and that writing is a means of seizing the power of the gods. This course attempts to explore this conversation — between the writer and the wider world — and to find ways of bringing our writing safely out of hiding.

We will be exploring myth, and writing craft, and method, and the strategic practices every writer must learn in wrestling with narrative. Each of us will examine our strengths — the ways in which the natural mood and flavour of our writing makes itself known — and our vulnerabilities as well: how we get stuck, or lazy, how we lost confidence and gain doubt. How we learn to shut down and hope the whole thing will go away.

This course is about creativity, writing, reading, and making a claim for the fundamental right of storytelling. Within that context, we will explore the ancient practices of myth-making (particularly as regards family and culture), the hurdles of writing (as they involve craft and precision and clarity) and the great gifts we might receive from others of our creative kin (that is to say, the long tradition of writers of writers and myth-makers).

The threshold between fact and fiction (which is not the same as that between truth and lie) is one of the territories of myth. In this course we stake out that territory, inspecting the geology of its forms and ideals, finding our own individual places to homestead. Myth involves the search for truth, and fidelity to fact, yet also an awareness that truth and fact are often provisional, and mythological; they are shapeshifters on the wide-open plain of creativity. We will explore what this means, and what to do about it.

And, finally, the goal of the course (from my point of view, at least), is to have fun: to preserve and nurture the creative and imaginative spirit that is the foundation of all the arts and sciences.

Learning Goals

- Read selected cultural, literary, historical and mythological texts and discuss their origin, development, and contemporary relevance
- Interpret multicultural literary traditions within the context of mythopoetic origins
- Exhibit knowledge of mythology as both an ancient and a current mode of transmission of important cultural, political, and psychological knowledge
- Evaluate diverse perspectives on the nature and role of myth
- Develop a research-based project on a topic related to mythology
- Compose writing compositions using mythopoetic narrative strategies

Learning Experiences

The course will include a variety of learning experiences contingent upon regular attendance and dedicated participation. Because creative writing and mythology are both interactive processes, much of the class time will be devoted to group experiential exercises, individual reflective tasks, collaborative endeavors, composition, and practical assignments.

We will create a collaborative environment in this class. We are not going to cobble together the type of group one often hears about in the arts: competitive, cut-throat, critical. Repeat: we are not creating such a group. Instead, we will direct our efforts toward building upon the individual strengths of each participant, finding ways for each of us to be self-reflective in terms of assessing our creative work, discovering a means of protecting the quality and integrity of our writing. The creative spirit is remarkably persistent, yet it is also fragile, especially at its inception, and we must be conscious of this fragility. Think about it: did you not experience, as a child, the strangulation of your creativity in school, by way of a culture of insensitive peers or teachers? Why do you think hardly anyone feels comfortable singing in public, or dancing, or drawing, or reading their written work to others? We have, most of us, been the victims of inappropriate feedback and judgment. We have to be careful about this, in our course, so that we do not harm one another.

Readings

Required Course Texts

Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999. Any edition.

Chabon, Michael. *Maps and Legends*. Harper, 2009. Any edition.

Terpstra, John. *Skin Boat: Acts of Faith and Other Navigations*. Gaspereau, 2009. Any edition.

Suggested Books

Butala, Sharon. *Wild Stone Heart*.
HarperFestival, 2000. ISBN 000255397X.

Calvo, César. *The Three Halves of Ino Moxo*.
Translated by Kenneth Symington.
Inner Traditions, 1995. ISBN 0892815191.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Mythic Image*.
Princeton UP, 1974.

Ellis, Normandi. *Dreams of Isis: A Woman's Spiritual Sojourn*.
Quest, 1995.

Hancock, Graham. *Heaven's Mirror: Quest for the Lost Civilization.*.
Crown, 1998.

Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*.
Anchor, 2003. ISBN 1400034639.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*.
Vintage, 1989. ISBN 0072435194.

Kwan, Michael David. *Things that Must Not be Forgotten: A Childhood in Wartime China*.
Soho Press ISBN 1569472823

Laird, Ross A. *A Stone's Throw: The Enduring Nature of Myth*.
McClelland and Stewart, 2002.

Langewiesche, William. *American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center*.
North Point Press, 2002. ISBN 0865475822. (Also see *Inside the Sky*.)

Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*.
Anchor, 1997. ISBN 038542339X.

Macfarlane, David. *The Danger Tree: Memory, War and the Search for a Family's Past*.
Walker, 2001. ISBN 0802776167.

Merwin, W.S. *The Mays of Ventadorn*.
National Geographic Directions, 2002. ISBN 0792265386.

Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*.
Vintage, 1993. ISBN 0679746692.

Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.
HarperTorch, 2006 (reprint). ISBN 0060589469.

Saint-Exupéry, A. *Wind, Sand and Stars*.
Harvest, 2002. ISBN 0156027496.

Sanders, Scott Russell. *Writing from the Center*.
Indiana UP, 1997. ISBN 0253211433.

Sullivan, William. *The Secret of the Incas: Myth, Astronomy, and the War Against Time*.
Crown, 1996.

Books on Creativity and Associated Philosophies

Achebe, Chinua *Hopes and Impediments*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

Barron, F., ed *Creators on Creating: Awakening and Cultivating the Imaginative Mind*. New York: Putnam, 1997.

Benjamin, Walter *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*.
Penguin, 1999. ISBN 0140286802.

Bohm, David *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. London: Ark, 1980.

Bohm, David *Unfolding Meaning*. New York: Routledge, 1985.

Bohm, David *On Creativity*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Bronowski, Jacob *Science and Human Values*. New York: Harper, 1956.

——— *The Face of Violence*. London: Turnstile Press, 1964.

——— *A Sense of the Future: Essays in Natural Philosophy*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1977.

Degler, Teri *The Fiery Muse: Creativity and the Spiritual Quest*. Toronto: Random House, 1996.

Demos, John. *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*.
Vintage, 1995. ISBN 0679759611.

Flack, Audrey *Art and Soul: Notes on Creating*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Franklin, Ursula *The Real World of Technology*. Toronto: Anansi, 1999.

Fulford, Robert *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in an Age of Mass Culture*. Toronto: Anansi, 1999.

Goldberg, Natalie *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986.

Herrigel, Eugen *Zen in the Art of Archery*. New York: Random House, 1977.

Hildegard of Bingen *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*.
Boston: Shambhala, 1996.

Hyde, Lewis *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Vintage, 1983.

——— *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. New York: North Point Press, 1998.

Jiménez, Juan Ramon *The Complete Perfectionist: A Poetics of Work*. Edited and translated by Christopher Maurer. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Jung, C.G *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

London, Peter *No More Secondhand Art*. Boston: Shambhala, 1989.

Lorca, Federico *In Search of Duende*. Translated by Christopher Maurer. New York: New Directions, 1998.

Lyndon, Susan *The Knitting Sutra: Craft as a Spiritual Practice*. San Francisco: Harper, 1997.

Needleman, Carla *The Work of Craft: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Crafts and Craftsmanship*. New York: Kodansha, 1979.

Pye, David *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968.

Richards, Mary *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*. Middletwon, CT: Wesleyan UP.

Sarton, May *Journal of a Solitude*. New York: Norton, 1973.

Sennett, Richard *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Thoreau, Henry David *Walden*. New York: Norton, 1985.

Wilson, Frank *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language and Human Culture*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

Mythological Fiction

Joseph Conrad *Lord Jim, Heart of Darkness*

Thomas Wharton *Salamander*

Milan Kundera *Life is Elsewhere*

Carlos Fuentes *The Orange Tree*

Gabriel Garcia Marquez *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Jorge Luis Borges *Labyrinths*

Alberto Manguel (editor) *Black Water: The Book of Fantastic Literature*

Don DeLillo *Underworld*

Somerset Maugham *The Razor's Edge*

Philip K. Dick *The Man in the High Castle*

Keri Hulme *The Bone People*

Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children*

John Fowles *The Magus*

Stephen King *The Stand*

Philip Roth *Operation Shylock*

Walter Miller *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

Demonstration of Learning

Written Assignments

Three creative compositions are required for this course: a research project and two mythological compositions. The research project involves you choosing a specific mythological theme or thread and exploring it in some depth (not necessarily in writing). The creative compositions are opportunities for you to discover and explore the myths surrounding your own life or interests.

For philosophical reasons, I do not prescribe a particular length for the projects: a great mythological composition can be a few pages long (as we'll see). Yet it is difficult to craft a good mythological composition in less than a few thousand words. So, if you prefer a guideline for the length of the projects, I offer two recommendations: make them as long as they need to be; make them somewhere between two and five thousand words. There is no upper limit on the length of the projects.

I'm not interested in how much you can write but rather in the quality of your writing. Perhaps you write like Hemingway, perhaps like Melville or Tolstoy. I don't know, and maybe you don't know either. But I can tell you this: writing a shorter piece of great precision is more difficult than writing a longer, more relaxed and wandering work. In the context of smaller projects every word is on display and under scrutiny, whereas in longer works the sheer bulk of the material tends to hide various flaws. Melville, in fact, is a good example of this.

You may write short narratives in this course, but please do not write short form as a means of avoiding work. You will know, I will notice, and neither of us will be happy. Instead, make your work as long as it needs to be. If you compose a lovely, resonant, short piece, you will receive an excellent evaluation. But as I said, writing shorter pieces is actually more difficult.

The three written compositions are worth 25 per cent each of your final grade.

Assessment Criteria for Creative Compositions

Projects for this course are focused on creativity. Accordingly, the following criteria – which are based on the philosophy of creativity – are used to evaluate engagement and commitment to the projects:

- Willingness to take appropriate risks and to challenge oneself creatively.
- Willingness to try new things, especially when doing so provokes creative discomfort.
- Openness to personal and interpersonal process.
- Willingness to collaborate with others.
- Consideration of and responsiveness to others.
- Willingness to examine personal values, beliefs, and judgments.
- Ability to take personal responsibility and initiative for learning.
- Willingness to approach creativity as a skill with discrete steps and standards.
- Commitment to improvement in writing and other creative projects.
- Ability to be open and responsive to appropriate feedback.

Group Presentations and Overall Engagement

Each student will be a member of the class group and also of several different peer groups; each peer group will present to the class on various mythological motifs and characters. Beginning in week four, each class session will involve presentations. Class time will be given for preparing the presentations. The structure and content of the presentations will be discussed in class.

Presentation Methods and Goals

The central goal of the presentations for this course is to give you opportunities to practice interdisciplinary, mythological thinking and expression. As such, the presentations should be interdisciplinary. Essentially, this means that you should try to use multiple presentation strategies and modalities. These might include (but are certainly not limited to) any of the following:

- Storytelling
- Poetry
- Music (playing)
- Drumming
- Singing
- Dance
- Movement
- Sport
- Ritual
- Film (showing)
- Film making
- Photography
- Web content
- Craft work
- Art making
- Individual reflection
- Meditation
- Health practices
- Creative process (any type)
- Group communication
- Cultural practices
- Nature experiences

Whenever possible (and workable), try to mix together multiple modalities into a single presentation. For example, you might ask the group to do some individual reflection using the modality of poetry, then create a series of movements based on the poetry, then work in small groups to talk about and share the process. Many configurations are possible. The trick is to choose an activity that you enjoy, then find a way to apply it to the content (suggested presentation topics are listed below). Please do not create your presentations using only written and/or spoken materials. In other words, don't just stand up at the front of the class and talk about the presentation topic. Utilize the energy of the group. Remember that in interdisciplinary work divergences are valued as unique opportunities. So, feel free to experiment with activities and modalities that may not seem, on the surface, to be related to the topic at hand but which might, upon experiment, yield surprising connections and results. Be playful. Allow yourself to laugh at yourself, to be embarrassed, to engage with the process in novel and interesting ways.

In interdisciplinary work, riddles and puzzles are highly prized. Accordingly, the presentations should (ideally) not be complete explanations or presentations of material. Feel free to play with challenging exercises, with impossible scenarios, and other conundra. One way to think about this is to consider insoluble riddles, such as the one in *Alice in Wonderland*: Why is a raven like a writing desk?

> "Have you guessed the riddle yet?" the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.
> "No, I give it up," Alice replied. "What's the answer?"
> "I haven't the slightest idea," said the Hatter.
> "Nor I," said the March Hare.
> Alice sighed wearily. "I think you might do something better with the time," she said, "than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers."

The best interdisciplinary topics offer more questions than answers. They, are essentially, gateways into the mysterious — which, as Einstein will tell you, is an important place to be:

> The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.

Example Topics for Presentations

- Akhenaten and the invention of monotheism
- Albrecht Durer and alchemy
- Aristotle's book of comedy
- Chenrizi and the politics of China
- Chuang Tzu and the butterfly
- David Bohm's Implicate Order
- Dzogchen and Primordial Illumination
- Eugen Herrigel and the practice of archery
- Francis Yates and the *Art of Memory*
- Freud, Jung, and the "bosh" incident
- Fulcanelli and *Mysteries of the Cathedrals*
- Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition

- Godel, uncertainty, and mental illness
- Howard Carter and "wonderful things"
- Jacob Bronowski at Auschwitz
- Jacob Bronowski, Nagasaki, and *Science and Human Values*
- Jan Tschichold and the Nazis
- John Cage on the subway with the *I Ching*
- Kepler's *Somnium*
- Mary Shelley and the genesis of *Frankenstein*
- Nikola Tesla and universal energy
- Philip K. Dick, VALIS, and 2-3-74
- R.D. Laing and madness as reality
- Ramanujan's notebooks
- Richard Feynman and the invention of quantum mechanics
- Schwaller de Lubicz at Karnak
- Simone Weil and leading from desire
- St. Exupery flying into the desert
- The Reimann Hypothesis
- The Voynich Manuscript
- The visions of Hildegard of Bingen
- Thoth's legacy
- Walter Benjamin and the Angel of History
- Wendell Berry going *Into the Woods*
- Wilhelm Reich's Cloudbuster
- William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
- The Baalbek stones
- The mystery of the Olmecs
- Tibetan Tertons and hidden treasure
- The Kaaba stone and its tangled history
- The disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant
- The theft of the benben stone
- The lies and truths of Carlos Castaneda

- The Dogon and Sirius
- The grail, *sang real*, and pop culture
- Friday the 13th, the Templars, and the lost treasure
- The Ancients, the Aliens, and the History Channel
- Ganthet, Merlin, Gandalf, and other guardians
- The Tzolkin, the Maya, and the end of the world

Assessment Criteria for Group Presentations and Overall Engagement

This course utilizes experiential learning approaches, which depend upon student involvement and active participation. Accordingly, the following criteria are used to evaluate overall participation and engagement in the group presentations and the class:

- Willingness to take appropriate risks and to challenge oneself.
- Willingness to speak up and to lead.
- Openness to interpersonal process.
- Willingness to collaborate with others.
- Consideration of and responsiveness to others.
- Commitment to enhancing the interpersonal experience of everyone in the group.
- Willingness to examine personal values, beliefs, and judgments.
- Ability to take personal responsibility for learning.
- Willingness to deal with conflicts appropriately if and when they arise.
- Ability to be open and responsive to appropriate feedback.

The group presentations and overall course engagement are worth a total of 25 per cent of your grade.

Attendance and Participation

The expectation is that you will attend all sessions and involve yourself in the class process. Your willingness to engage creatively with the learning process, to take appropriate personal risks, and to participate in group activities are all central to your involvement in this class. Because developing a style of creativity is very much a process of blending your own personal awareness with skills and practical techniques, your own emotional involvement in the class is as important as your academic knowledge of the material.

Creativity is a unique process. Unlike many other fields, in which competence and skill may be measured objectively, using replicable and consistent means (tests of factual knowledge, for example), authentic creativity depends greatly on the interpersonal skills of the practitioner. Computer programmers can be assessed by their ability to write code; chiropractors can be evaluated based on their skill at manipulating the human skeleton; race car drivers can be clocked around a track. But for writers and artists there are no such fixed measures. The interpersonal skills upon which creativity so much depends are subtle, difficult to quantify, and complex beyond any measurement scheme.

And yet we can identify those who possess exemplary personal and creative skills. They are relaxed, open, responsive, kind. Often they exhibit skills that we tend to assign to the social sphere: personal warmth, consideration of others, hesitancy to judge, sensitivity to emotions. In our class we focus on these interpersonal factors as a foundation for our experiences with one another. And we itemize them as features along the continuum of self-awareness:

- Commitment to the development of self-awareness.
- Openness to interpersonal process.
- Ability to participate in appropriate self-disclosure.
- Consideration of and responsiveness to others.
- Commitment to enhancing the interpersonal experience of everyone in the class.
- Willingness to examine personal values, beliefs, and judgments.
- Ability to take personal responsibility for learning.
- Willingness to deal with conflicts appropriately if and when they arise.
- Ability to be open and responsive to appropriate feedback.

Each item on the above list is an aspect of the first item: self-awareness. The most foundational skill in creativity is self-awareness. Those who develop this skill consistently query their own responses, thoughts, and feelings. They ask themselves:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What am I thinking right now?
- Why am I reacting in this particular way?
- What do my thoughts, feelings, and reactions tell me about myself?
- Is there anything about my current behavior that suggests unresolved themes in my life?
- Is my perception of myself consistent with what other people tell me about the kind of person I am?
- When and how do I get stuck, and what am I doing to work on this?
- In what ways do I get overwhelmed, or shut down, or avoid?

These questions, and many others, require the capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness. As we continue in the course, you may wish to consider these questions as they apply to you. At the very least, you might wish to consider what you are currently working on in your life, in which direction your attention is drawn, into which of the innumerable themes of human nature you are now called to delve.

In my role as your instructor, I will be paying attention to how thoughtful you are in examining and responding to questions like those in the lists above. I will not be analyzing you, but rather noticing what kinds of things you do, what your reactions are to various situations. My goal in observing your behaviors and interacting with you is to assist you in developing greater self-awareness (and, by extension, greater creativity).

I will use the lists above, as well as the assessment criteria listed for each assignment, to assess your overall participation in the course. I will not be evaluating your level of self-awareness but rather your openness to the process of developing your self-awareness.

Grade Inflation

Almost every semester there are students who do well on the assignments, complete all the associated learning goals of the course, participate well, and wonder why they do not receive a grade of one hundred percent (or 98, anyway). Here is the reason: almost every semester there are students who demonstrates a level of commitment that goes beyond the course requirement. Such students complete extra work, or hand in exemplary assignments, or undertake a significant amount of personal development in addition to the course expectations. Such students typically receive the highest grades.

If you do reasonably well in the course you will receive a reasonable grade. Very high grades are intended for extra or exemplary work. Unfortunately, over the past thirty years the post-secondary educational system in North America has participated in a process of grade inflation. Since the 1980's, the average grade for typical course work has been increasing by about 25 per cent each decade. Elevated assessments do not accurately reflect the work of most students. Even worse, grade inflation has caused many students to expect high grades for average work. I am not a overly stringent assessor; but I will not inflate grades artificially.

In this course a small number of students will (likely) receive high grades; most students will receive grades in the middle range; and a few students will struggle with lower grades. If you are uncertain about your assessment for a given assignment, or if you wish to know where, roughly, you are along the distribution curve of the class, or if you would like suggestions for how to improve your grade, please ask me for clarification.

If you wish to achieve a good grade, please do the following:

- Show up for class – every class. This course depends on student engagement. (This becomes especially important during the final weeks of the semester.)
- Be attentive and mindful to the various criteria listed for each of the projects and the course overall.
- Take the initiative to plan and develop your projects and presentations. This course is (very likely) more fluid and spontaneous than you are used to. Your ability to manage your time, commitment, and energy is crucial.
- Speak up in every class (review the criteria for group engagement and presentations).
- Don't look for the right answer to a question or challenge. Instead, find the answer that is meaningful to you.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Commit to your projects in a substantial way. Good projects take time. Rushed projects are obviously rushed.

Finally, please be attentive to the Kwantlen policies on academic honesty and plagiarism, which can be found at the following URLs:
Academic Honesty: `http://www.kwantlen.ca/__shared/assets/Honesty1432.pdf`
Plagiarism and Cheating: `http://www.kwantlen.ca/policies/C-LearnerSupport/c08.pdf`

Due Dates

Group presentation dates will be assigned in class
(and will fall between weeks three and thirteen).
Mythological composition one is due at the end of week four
(by midnight on Sunday of that week).
Mythological composition two is due at the end of week eight
(by midnight on Sunday of that week).
Composition three (the research project) is due at the end of week twelve
(by midnight on Sunday of that week).

Thematic Schedule

The class structure involves 14 sessions. These sessions will be balanced between presentations (by the instructor and students) academic material, group collaboration, and composition. The content for each session will evolve as the semester progresses. We will cover the following themes (though, perhaps not in the order listed below):

The Nature of Myth Definitions of mythology (a body of myths) and mythopoetic (the making of myths). Clarifications of common misunderstandings about myth (e.g. that myths are false, or that myths obfuscate factual information). An introduction to myths as carriers of cultural knowledge in the arts and sciences. Consideration of myths as versions of truth and as effective containers for sacred, social, political, or scientific information (e.g. in ancient astronomy and contemporary religion). Examination of myth-making as a fundamental and necessary function of human nature. Consideration of the persistence of the myth-making function and its role in the contemporary world (e.g. the mythologies evolving around 9/11). Examination of the relationship between myth and truth.

Myths of Ancient Sumer and Egypt Introduction to the historical background of the origins of Western mythology and literature. Explication of Sumerian and Egyptian world views, with particular emphasis on spirituality, mythological concepts, and approaches to the imagination. Reading of excerpts from core Egyptian and Sumerian texts, with particular emphasis on myths that form the foundation of the literatures of the West. Examination of the ways in which science and mythology were entwined in the practices and perspectives of the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians. Introduction to Egyptian hieroglyphic, the most elaborate writing system ever developed, and the role of hieroglyphs in the transmission of myth. Exploration of the transmission of Sumerian and Egyptian mythological ideas into the contemporary world (e.g. the eye on the American dollar bill).

Greek Influences Exploration of the transmission of myth from the Sumerians and Egyptians to the Greeks. Explication of Greek adaptations of and contributions to myth, with emphasis on the traditions of philosophy and theatre. Reading of selected Greek literary and mythological texts. Examination of the ways in which science and mythology were entwined in the practices and perspectives of the Greeks. Examination of the ways in which Greek texts subsequently influenced the development of European literatures.

Myths of China, Japan, and India Introduction to the historical background of the origins of Eastern mythology and literature. Explication of ancient Chinese, Japanese, and Indian world views, with particular emphasis on spirituality, mythological concepts, and approaches to the imagination. Exploration of the possible connections between ancient Indian myths and those of ancient Egypt and Sumer, with particular focus on Kundalini yoga. Reading of excerpts from ancient Chinese, Japanese, and Indian mythological texts, with particular emphasis on myths that form the foundation of the broader literatures of Asia. Exploration of the transmission of ancient Chinese and Indian mythological ideas into the contemporary world (e.g. Confucianism and Taoism in modern Asian business practices, and the Tibetan world view).

Shamanic Myths and Cultures Introduction to the mythologies of ancient aboriginal cultures from Canada, Australia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. Introduction to the mythologies of contemporary aboriginal cultures from Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. Explication of the shamanic world view, with particular emphasis on spirituality, mythological concepts, and approaches to health and healing

Reading of excerpts from transcriptions of ancient and contemporary shamanic myths, poems, and songs. Exploration of the transmission of ancient shamanic myths, by means of epic poems and songs, into the contemporary world (e.g. the art of the aboriginal peoples of the Northwest).

Europe and the Middle East Introduction to the transmission and adaptation of ancient myth in the European cultures of the Common Era. Exploration of the Hermetic traditions, the rediscovery of ancient texts, and the influence of these developments on European art and literature after 1500 CE. Examination of the integration of science and mythology in the development of the intellectual and political traditions of Europe and North America (e.g. the Washington Monument and the ground plan of the Mont-Royal neighbourhood in Montreal). Introduction to the Grail mythologies and their foundation role in Western literature from 1500 CE to the present. Reading of excerpts from the mythological texts of Europe and the Middle East. Examination of European myths and their relevance to contemporary politics, sports, entertainment and pop culture in Canada.

The Psychology of Mythology Introduction to the tradition of twentieth century myth scholars (Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mircia Eliade) and their attempts to integrate all myths into a single continuum of human inquiry and expression. Reading of selected texts by Jung, Campbell, and Eliade. Examination of the relationship between myth and personal psychology (e.g. dreams). Exploration of the psychological models used by scholars to describe the underlying impulses and functions of myths (e.g. the collective unconscious). Consideration of the myths of individuality, the psychological functions that derive from these, and the interplay between personal and social mythologies. Consideration of the necessity of myths and of the development of new myths.

Mythopoetics in Contemporary Arts and Literature Examination of the many ways in which myths pervade contemporary literary and creative traditions. Reading of selected contemporary and mythological texts from the genres of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Consideration of the ways in which myths are conjoined, truncated, and adapted for contemporary readers. Introduction to the artist as a mythological figure (the trickster), and to the mythological role of the artist in contemporary society. Exploration and application of mythopoetic writing strategies.

Mythology in the Contemporary World Consideration of current personal myths, familial myths, cultural myths, and world myths (e.g. myths of apocalypse, myths of the United States as the gunslinger, the myth of Canada as the North). Examination of popular myths, controversial myths, and myths which have persisted for hundreds or thousands of years essentially unchanged. Reading of excerpts from contemporary mythological texts in the political and social spheres. Exploration of the contemporary role of myth in world politics, religion, and spirituality. Consideration of the future directions of myth in literature, culture, and human nature.

Example Projects

Creative Composition: The World Tree

South of the riverbend, twenty minutes along a trail fringed with pink flowers of hardhack and gangly stalks of sweet gale, the World Tree stands against a spring sky. Through a lattice of dark branches restless with vigor, nomadic flecks of blue sweep toward the horizon. An eagle rides a crest of sea air, glances down, then spirals away. Underfoot, the ground is damp, yielding. A long skein of root twists out from the great trunk, meanders toward a bristled head of cottongrass. The bole of the tree is broad; black furrows streaked with umber climb skyward along its body. High up, a rustling brown blur – squirrel – cracks a narrow branch. The quick trill of a robin sounds nearby. Here, within earshot of the encroaching highways of suburban Vancouver, myth and dream and the rhythm of day collide in the slow unfurling of the world.

The low branches of this ancient black spruce – sweeping upward like fractured tusks, riddled with worm tracks – are the steps of an ancient ladder into the sky. Twenty feet up, a canopy of moss hangs from encircling boughs over the quiet clearing. The air breathes, exhales with the tang of Labrador tea. The World Tree, resting here in a glade at the edge of the bog, is the true axis of the earth. It extends from an unfathomable root in the underworld, through a trunk scaled like dragon-hide, turbulent as smoke, and reaches, with new and tender shoots, upward. A shimmering and deathless bird perches, vigilant, at its peak. It was here, beside the pool of memory and prophecy at the base of the tree Yggdrasil, that Odin surrendered his one eye in exchange for a single drink from the well. Even now, a pool of dark, standing water lies at the bottom of a hollow between two intertwined roots. The hole is lined with black soil. A small blueberry leaf spins slowly in the water.

The roots snake together at the base of the trunk. I follow them toward the mottled bark, looking for the spot where Odin hung on the tree, pierced by his own spear, for nine days listening and learning the vanished dream-songs of the earth. The rumble of a passing truck, too loud and too close in the afternoon air, reminds me how fragile, how precarious is the solace of this place. Burns Bog is the largest urban wilderness in North America. Its eventual fate – as park, industrial sprawl, or garbage dump – lies hidden in a labyrinth of divergent aims: community, business, government. The secret of its preservation ripples beneath the surface of the well. In Norse myth, Yggdrasil will be destroyed by a fiery sword during the final battle of the world. The earth will descend into the primordial sea. Yet one small forest will remain, Hodmimir, preserved by Lif and Lifthrasir, whose names mean “life” and “eager for life.” They are the inheritors of an unshadowed world rising from the waters of tumult.

I trace my fingers over the trunk, lost in old tales: the twilight of gods, a scorched and blackened tree, a luminous eye searching for wisdom. And one forest, a delicate landscape snatched from ruin. A droplet of clear sap hovers at the edge of a deep wrinkle in the bark. I taste it: sweet, like sugarcane, but with a spreading warmth.

The hinge of the world creaks around the trunk of this tree of storms. The surrounding bog, with its forest ramparts hiding ghost cougars and startled deer, is an archetype of all ancient and sacred places. Through their preservation, we drink from the ancestral well. Long draughts of memory, belonging, and sustenance. The trail curves back from here, toward the service road and the tractor sunk in the mud. I look up. The sun has drifted across the shell of the sky. Amber rays lengthen along the trunk of the World Tree. I turn and follow the path. The peat shivers as I move across it, pulsates with the rhythm of my steps. A pair of sparrows flits through the underbrush. They disappear behind a curtain of bracken ferns and emerge, darting and jubilant, on the other side. Life, and eager for life.

Research Project: Myths of the Primordial Waters

Plato wrote that the past is like the wake behind a boat; it spreads, and diminishes behind us, and merges with the surrounding sea. The past rolls under and is gone.

We stand upon the foredeck of Plato's boat, gazing forward, cleaving our path toward the future. Along the track of our traveling many things are lost – because we are always searching ahead, because the wake is jostling and turbulent, because our craft is small and the ocean is vast.

It is by means of this manner of journeying into the future that our knowledge of ancient peoples is vanishingly small. We know a fair amount about the last thousand years of our history, we surmise a sketch of the thousand years before that – and of the remote ages before that, we know very little. Snatches, really, vignettes gathered from scattered documents and fragmentary tales. For the great majority of the history of modern humans – a hundred thousand years, two hundred thousand, no one knows – we understand almost nothing. Along our own coasts, which once were at lower altitude than they are now, ancient villages lie hidden beneath the wake of passing boats above.

And yet, old stories have been handed down from that long, invisible stretch of years: fables, epics, mythologies of archaic and unknown origin. Among those ancient tales is a set of related motifs, from many cultures, that tell of seafarers who found their way to distant shores. In China, Polynesia, Japan, Egypt, Africa, Scandinavia – in most places bordered by the sea – we find fantastic tales of oceanic travel. On our own coasts – in Haida Gwaii, and along the sheltered eastern shore of Vancouver Island, and inland all the way to the Kootenays – similar stories are told of those who came long ago, and lived upon the land, and vanished.

For at least a century, since archaeology and anthropology became sciences based on hard evidence, such cultural tales have been dismissed as folklore and wishful thinking. The evidence simply did not support the stories. The timelines claimed by various cultures seemed inconsistent with what was surmised about technologies and methods from various historical and pre-historical periods. The ruins of ancient sites could not be found (near Atlin, for example, or near Telkwa, both sites where aboriginal tales describe cities of utmost antiquity). The longevity of known sites could not be established from existing data (the Nanaimo petroglyphs, for example). Eventually, the scientific consensus was that the claims of myth were just that: imagined tales, with no actual basis.

But within about the last decade, a wealth of new evidence challenges, and will likely soon overturn, traditional scientific views concerning human migration in the ancient world. The emerging data comes from various fields: genetics, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and the developing field of archaeo-astronomy. Working sometimes in concert and other times in conflict, these fields are leading us through a fundamental paradigm shift in our perspective of the past.

The history of science consistently confirms something we easily forget: that most of our certainties will turn out to be wrong. What's turning out to be wrong at the moment is our conception of the peopling of the Americas. The standard theory – the Bering land bridge, ice-free corridors, southward migration – has begun to give way to a more nuanced and complex view involving multiple waves of ancient immigrants arriving at different times and by disparate means.

Debates and developments within the scientific community typically take place in closed meetings at universities and at conferences not attended by the general public. But the conversation about ancient migration has become very public since the 1996 discovery of a skeleton known as Kennewick Man. He was found on the banks of the Columbia River, in Washington State, by a pair of spectators watching hydroplane races. Initially, local aboriginal groups claimed him as one of their own; an ancestor, perhaps a fallen warrior from long ago.

But archaeologists who studied Kennewick Man found a curious thing: he is not aboriginal. His remains are old – approximately 9,300 years old – but he is not an ancestor of any current aboriginal population. In fact, he's Asian. He may be an ancestor of modern Pacific Islanders, or of the Ainu people of northeast Asia. In either case, he traveled here more than ten thousand years ago, likely with a small population of others like him who made their careful way inland and across the Pacific Northwest.

Kennewick Man is not the only oddity of the ancient human landscape. Many so-called anomalous remains and sites have been found in both North and South America: Monte Verde, for example, in Chile, and the entire collection of colossal stone remains in Mexico known as the Olmec culture. Along British Columbia's Inside Passage, near the Yuculta rapids, stone sculptors carved somber faces into twenty-six granite boulders on the shore, more than at any other site on the Pacific coast. The carvers are long gone, vanished but for these stone traces of mystery.

As the number of anomalies has accumulated, the trajectory of the scientific conversation has changed too: from dismissal, to caution, to contention, and finally to a new consensus. That final, new consensus has not yet fully emerged, but its basic elements are already in place: many groups of migrating people came to North and South America – ten, twenty, perhaps as much as thirty thousand years ago – in separate and commingling waves of odyssey, exile, and accident.

And how did they come? By boat.

Imagine those ancient mariners, navigating by the stars, uncertain of their destination, traveling in what might have been open canoes or out-rigged rafts or makeshift kayaks. No compass, no map, no protection against the sea's indifference. Nothing but sheer guts and necessity.

They came at different times and, no doubt, by varying means: from Japan, Russia, Southeast Asia, Polynesia (likely from Europe, as well). They established settlements here, lived upon the land for some stretch of time, then disappeared. Perhaps they were subsumed into existing or descendant groups. Perhaps most of them were wiped out by an asteroid impact 13,000 years ago (as one recent theory suggests). But no one knows. The descendants of the original, pre-migration peoples still exist in Japan, Russia, and Polynesia. They are the Ainu, the Jomon, the Polynesians; and they are still here, thousands of years after small clusters of their people sailed across the sea.

The puzzle of the most archaic groups is deepened by the fact that sea levels are now as much as 30 metres higher than they were 10,000 or more years ago. Villages that once lay at the seaside are now long immersed, swept by the amnesia of the waters, erased beneath Plato's persistent wake.

However, anomalous underwater stone sites have been found in Japan, Cuba, Malta, Egypt, and elsewhere. After the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, stone artifacts from an ancient and fabled submerged city, once dismissed by archaeologists as mythological, were washed up on the beach by the force of the tsunami. These artifacts include six-foot high statues of the head and shoulders of an elephant, a horse in flight, and a reclining lion.

In Haida Gwaii, traditional myths tell of the ancient rise of the sea, of ice floes moving across the land, of sudden and drastic upheavals that transformed the islands. And those Haida myths also speak of an earlier people, now gone, who inhabited that mystic place long ago, and of whom nothing is now left but ghosts.

Those ghosts take many contemporary forms: the sea-wolf petroglyph south of Nanaimo, the unique Christina Lake petroglyph, the funereal mound at Keremeos, the persistent tales of the fabled city of Dimlahamid in northern British Columbia, between the Bulkley and Skeena rivers. And Kennewick Man, of course, who may have known, when he was alive, the meaning of the stone sculptures at Yuculta, or might himself have carved images into stones scattered across a river delta. His people were here, after all – in what is now Vancouver, and Victoria, and inland by way of the rivers – and the settlements of our people today are laid over those of his people by thousands of years of rainfall, wind, and memory.

And yet the ancient evidence swells, and spreads, and cannot be laid to final rest: scattered human remains, colossal in their age; Polynesian chicken bones found in Peru; genetic anomalies among various cultural groups (the Scots, for example, may be descended from ancient seafaring Egyptians).

The old boats are gone, of course, long undone by the alchemy of salt water on wood. But the tales remain, and have not surrendered their claims of authenticity. And now, finally, science is coming forward to meet the mythological narrative. The new and shared story, woven together by the threads of both science and cultural memory, is this:

No single people came first to the Americas, but instead many came, in small sorties and great armadas, during a period of human history about which we are profoundly ignorant. Before the Ice Age and after it they arrived, and made homes for themselves, and left only the tiny traces typical of the human story. Their cultures appeared and vanished again (as our cultures will also).

These disparate groups were united by the sea, the great trackless track that challenged and delivered them. The mariners of today are the descendants, in spirit, of those early nomads who first harnessed the wind. We pass over their graves, somewhere between the shore and the deep water. Watch for that place – 30 metres of depth – and recognize, as you pass over that line, the legacy you inherit: love of the wide waters, the quest for adventure, the longing for what lies over the horizon. These are the gifts of the vanished peoples, whom we will never know except by the ways in which we are stirred, even now, by their ancient dreams.