# Introduction

In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes: "There is no … system for the interpretation of myths, and there never will be any such thing."[[1]](#footnote-1) Nevertheless, to engage with mythology as an academic subject of systematized study, it is necessary to have *some* kind of guiding structure to help organize our thinking.

As with most subjects, there are many directions from which you can approach the study of Mythology.  You can look at the text and structure of the stories, in which case you’re studying it as literature.  You can look at the statues, carvings, cave paintings, mosaics, etc., left behind by past cultures, in which case you’re studying it as art and/or art history. You can look at the stories in relation to other environmental influences on the culture, in which case you’re studying it as history … and so on.

For our purposes, we want to study Mythology as an expression of *the experience of being human*, so we’ll look at it as art, history, theater, literature, music, sociology, psychology, philosophy, politics, and, yes, religion.

Joseph Campbell said that Mythology can “… teach you how to live a human lifetime, under any circumstances.”[[2]](#footnote-2)  In other words, through the study of mythology a person can come to know themselves as fully as possible, and thence to know themselves in relation to friends and family, tribe, neighborhood, community, city, region, nation, world, and the universe-at-large.

So, if we’re going to explore Mythology as an expression of culture and society, what do those terms mean?

“Culture” is defined as: “the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of a particular group or society,” and “society” is defined as: "the people who interact in such a way as to share a common culture".  The two terms are intricately related: A culture consists of the “objects” of a society, whereas a society consists of the people who share a common culture. More broadly, we can say for our purposes that “culture is who a people are” and “society is how people within a culture interact with one another”. Mythology was one of the earliest ways in which humans described these interactions to themselves.

Some things will be familiar and comfortable; other things will be different and challenging; everything will be interesting — because we’ll share the exploration and adventure together.

1. Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, ‎Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1949, 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (PBS, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)