



# Creation Myths



# Myth

- a story about the origins of a culture's beliefs and practices
- usually derived from oral tradition
- set in an imagined supernatural past



## Myths are narratives (stories)

They ask questions about the world and human existence:

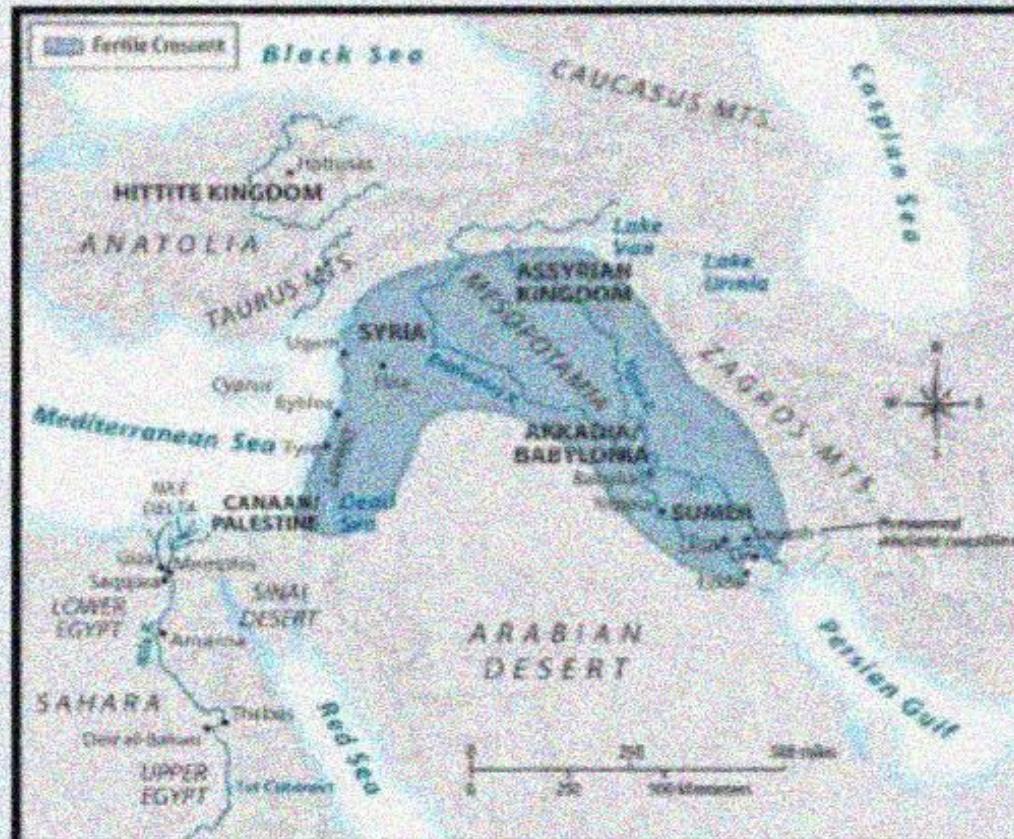
- How did the universe come to be?
- Who are we?
- How should we behave?
- What are the larger forces that regulate our lives?

# Cosmogony

"Cosmogony" is a technical term for "creation myth."

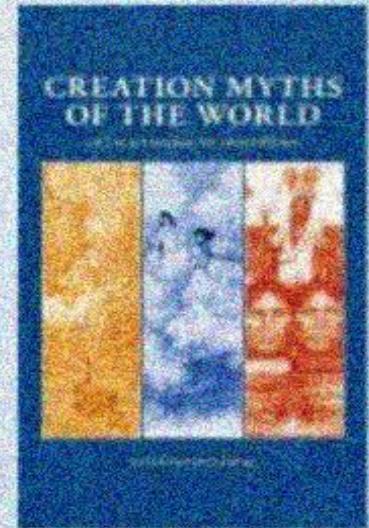
- derived from two Greek words meaning *order* and *beginning*:
- *cosmos (kosmos)* = order, form, arrangement, the world or universe
  - gony* = production, genesis, origination; used in the formation of compound words:  
*cosmogony, theogony*
- *theogony* = an account of the origin of the gods, a genealogical account of the gods
- earliest Western written cosmogony, or creation myth, comes from ancient Mesopotamia

# Ancient Mesopotamia



## Some Features of Creation Myths

- a god or gods act upon pre-existing chaos
- the myth makes an affirmation of a culture's values and practices
- it asserts a central reality, then structures values in relation to it
- the myth is an integral part of religion
- the myth establishes an *axis mundi*, a "world axis," a point where the natural and divine worlds intersect



## Five types of creation myths

### *Ex Nihilo*

"out of nothing"

a diety (a god) creates the  
cosmos through thought,  
dream, word, or other means

Example: The Book of Genesis  
from The Bible



Creation of Adam

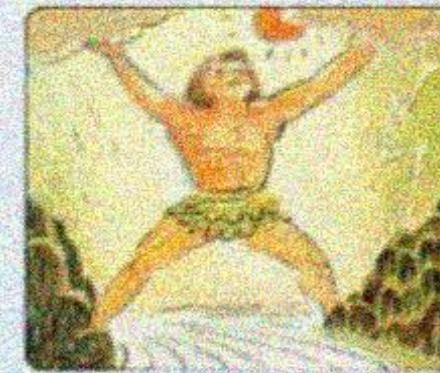
## Chaos or a Cosmic Egg

a breaking of primordial chaos to form a unity

Example: earliest Babylonian creation story, called Eridu Genesis

Example: a primal being, Pan Gu, is contained within an egg. When the egg breaks, Pan Gu appears as a giant who separates chaos into the many opposites of *yin* and *yang*, Chinese

Other cosmic egg myths have twins within the egg: for example, the Mande people of West Africa, have twins who represent male and female, who became the first people



Pan Gu

## Earth Diver

a deity sends a bird or animal down into the primal waters to bring up a bit of mud from which the earth is made

Example: a water beetle dives and brings up soft mud, Cherokee tribe

Example: a bird, the water wagtail, splashes water and stomps his feet to make pieces of earth, thus making islands where the Ainu people of Japan would live.

Example: in an Ojibwa myth, a giant tortoise rises from the primordial waters and the back of it forms land, called Turtle Island.



Turtle Island

# Emergence

Creation is a gradual process featuring human-like creatures who must travel through many worlds before reaching this one.

Example: three worlds below with events which shape the Fourth world, the one in which we now live, Navaho, but similar myths are common among many Native America tribes.

Example: Ra, the sun-god, emerging with new land after the annual flood, Egyptian



Hopi Emergence

## The World Parents

Two types:

1. A primal pair is separated, sometimes turning against one another, with little care for their offspring. The pair might be Sky and Earth or other features of nature.

Example: *The Epic of Creation (Enamu Elish)* where Apsu and Tiamat are fresh and salt water

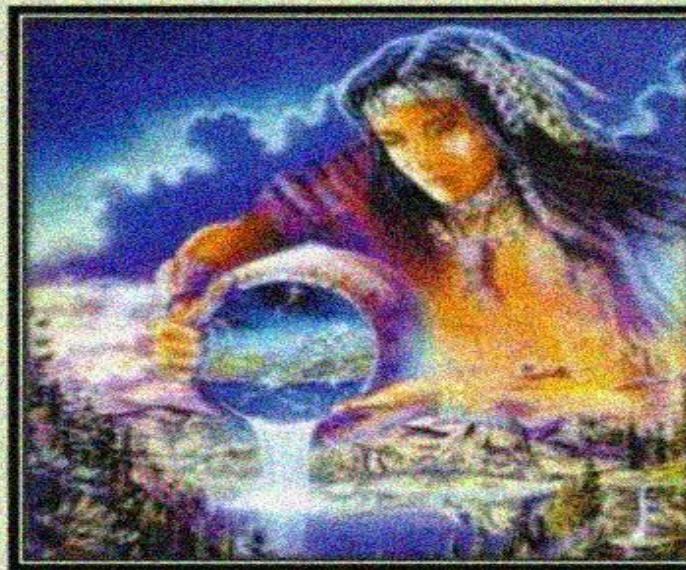
2. Creation comes from the dismemberment of one of the parents in order to create heaven and earth.

Example: *The Epic of Creation (Enamu Elish)*



Tiamat and Marduk

# Myths, Legends & Folktales



Storytelling is common  
to every culture.  
Most people enjoy  
listening to stories.

Storytellers have  
catered for the need for  
a good story since the  
beginning of  
civilization.





**A myth** conveys a truth to those who tell it and hear it, rather than necessarily recording a true event.

Myths are often used to explain universal and local beginnings and involve supernatural beings.



**A legend** usually includes an element of truth, or is based on historic facts, but with mythical qualities.

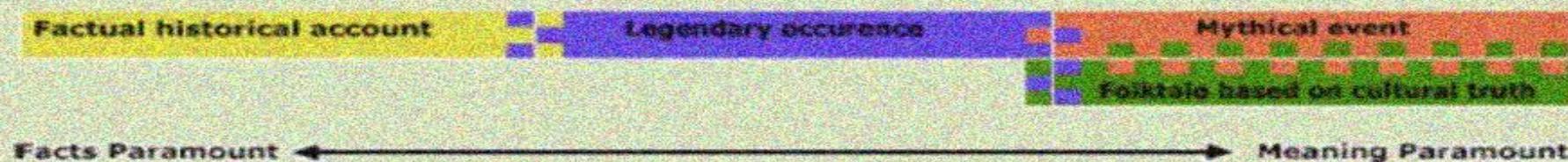
Legends usually involve heroic characters or fantastic places and often encompass the spiritual beliefs of the culture in which they originate.



**A folktale** is a popular story that was passed on in spoken form, from one generation to the next.

Usually the author is unknown and there are often many versions of the tale. Folktales comprise fables, fairy tales, old legends and even 'urban legends'.

Myths, legends and folktales are often hard to classify and often overlap.

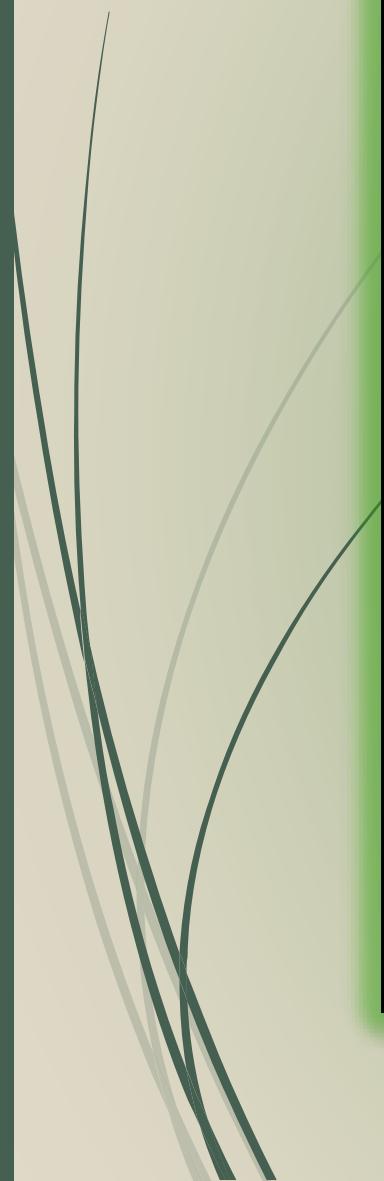
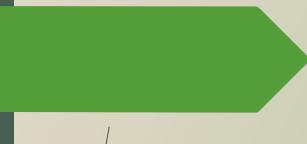


Why were these stories told?

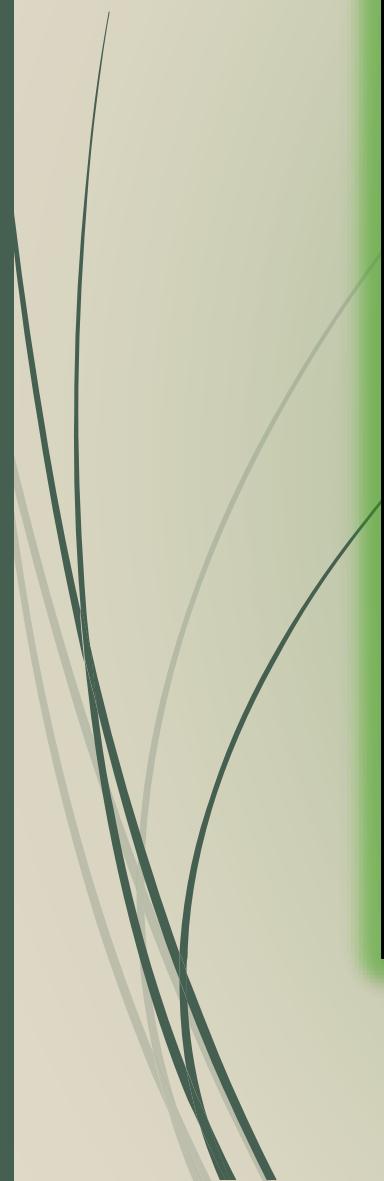




There are many reasons why stories are told and passed down the generations.  
Here are just a few of them:



**To strengthen the community and provide a common understanding.  
Stories often reflect the beliefs of the people who tell them.**



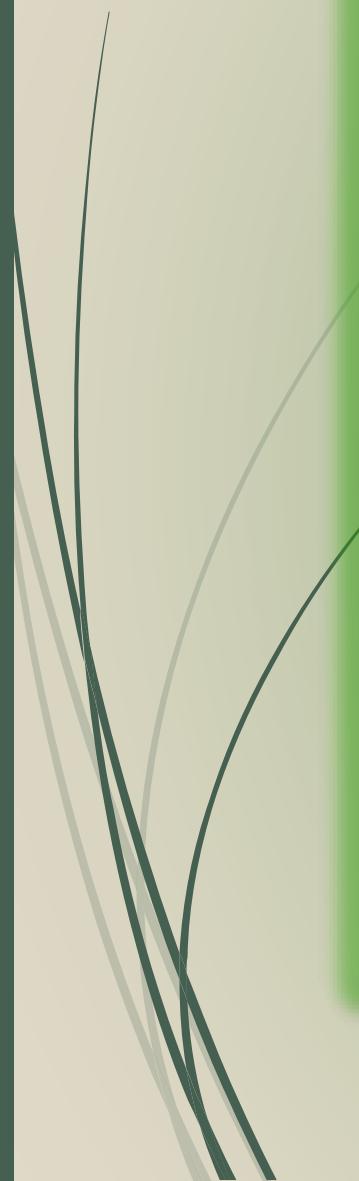
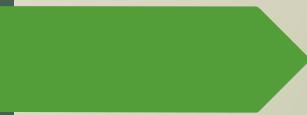
**As a way of providing moral guidance  
and to show people how they should  
conduct themselves.**

**The stories also warn of the  
consequences of not making the right  
choices.**

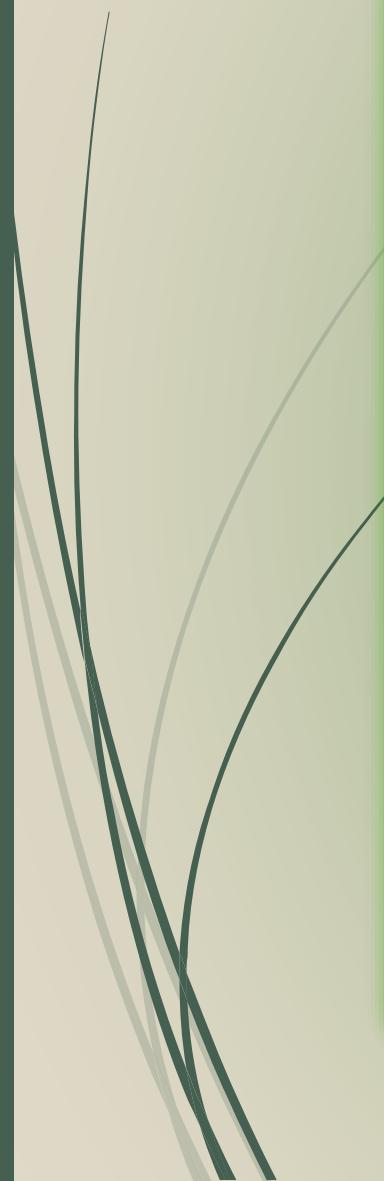
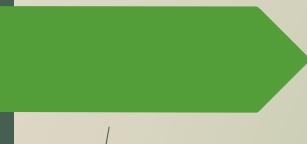


To explain how the world works, for example why the seasons change, and to explain strange happenings or phenomena such as eclipses.

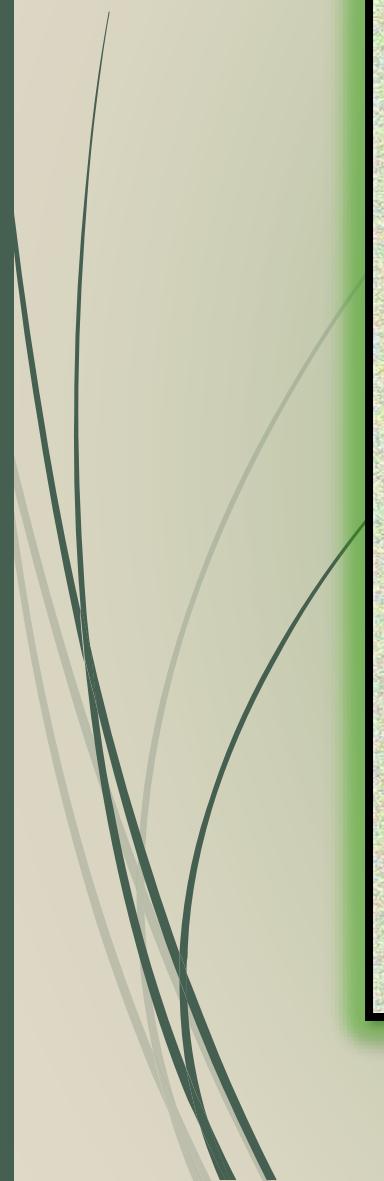
The reasons for these events were often unknown in early times.



Purely for entertainment. Stories were told to amuse and enthrall an audience in the days before TV and other forms of mass entertainment.



To pass on history and knowledge,  
such as the outcome of battles and  
tales of courage, in ages when many  
people could not read or write.



For fame, money or recognition – a good story could enhance the teller's status, line their pockets with gold or build their reputation.

# Myth, Legend or Folktale?



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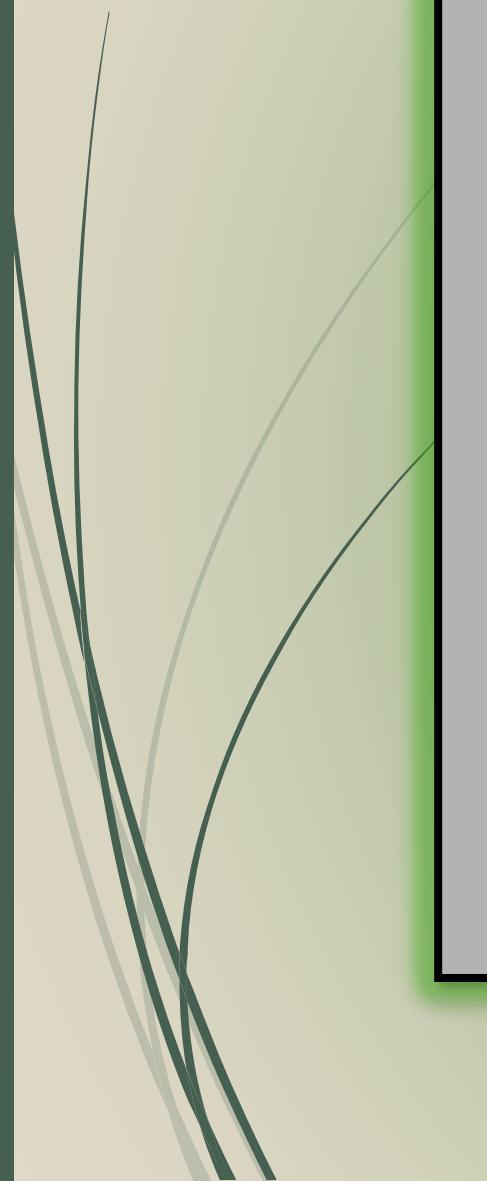
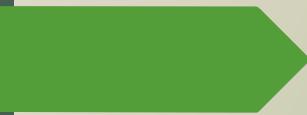


# Myth, Legend or Folktale?



# Myth, Legend or Folktale?





# **EPICS**

# Epic

- Long narrative poem
- Adventures of legendary hero
- The hero's accomplishments reflect the values of his/her culture

CHARACTERS FOR AN EPIC TALE



# **Elements of the Epic**

**Epic Hero**  
**Heroic Quest**  
**Valorous Deeds**  
**Divine Intervention**  
**Great Events**

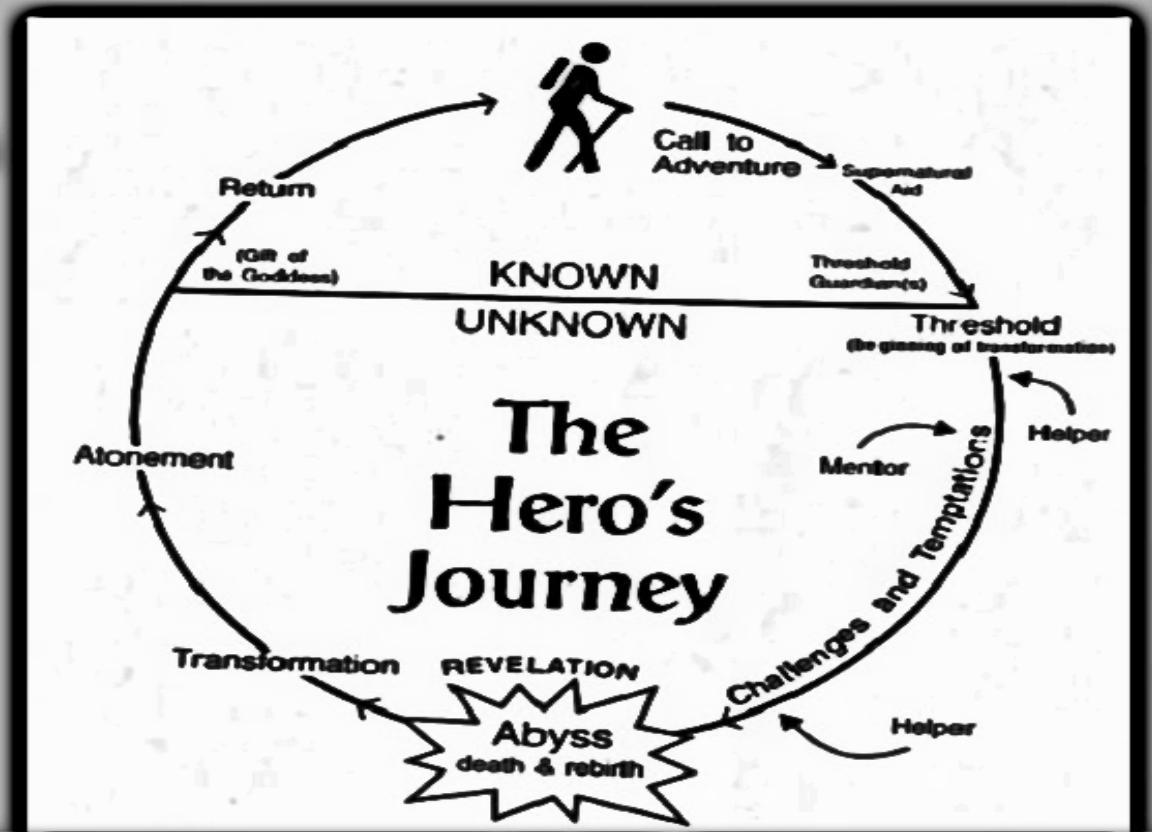
# Epic Hero

- Larger-than-life
  - Typically Noble
  - Courageous, Skilled
  - Virtuous, Good
  - Fights Evil

Evil  
Intrepidity  
Selfless  
Courage  
Bravery  
Hero

# Heroic Quest

- Long, Dangerous Journey
- Proves Heroism
- Wins Honor and Renown
- Aids Others



## **Valorous Deeds**



- Demonstrate Hero's Courage, Strength, or Virtue
- Make up most of the Action
- Battles Evil Forces
- Saves Others

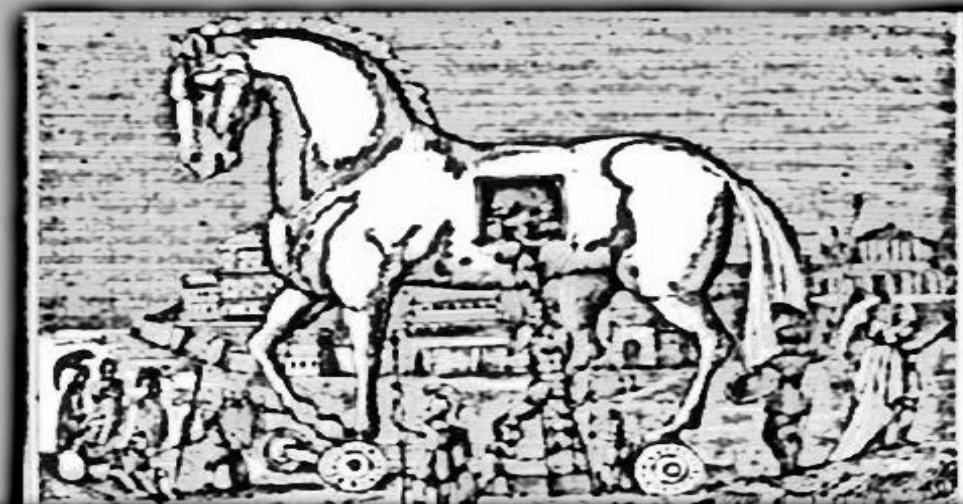
## Divine Intervention



- Hero receives Help: God/Supernatural Force takes interest in Hero's Quest

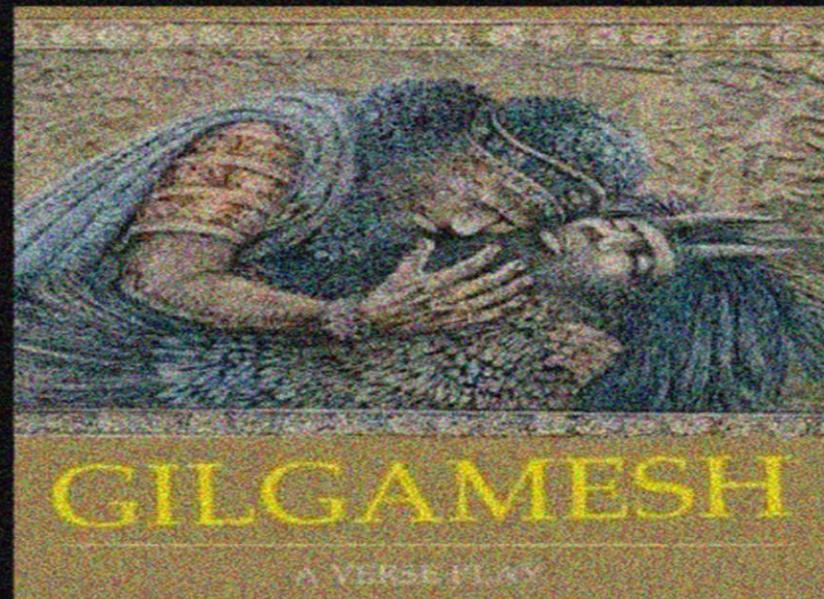
## **Great Events**

- Historical/Mythological events as Backdrop for Epic
- E.g.: The *Iliad*, Trojan War



## Folk Epics

- Oral Tradition
- Written down long after first composed
- Examples:
  - Beowulf (Anglo-Saxon)
  - Gilgamesh (Sumerian)



# Literary Epics

The Aeneid



Virgil

- Written by individual authors
- Examples:
  - Iliad and Odyssey by Homer
  - Aeneid by Virgil
  - Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri
  - Paradise Lost by John Milton

# Epic Conventions

- Shared Literary Characteristics
- An Epic Usually...
  - States subject/purpose
  - Muse helps tell story
  - Plot begins in middle
  - Serious tone
  - Long speeches
  - Lists of battles, weapons, royal gifts

**H**IÆT FE GARDR. Ni ingeni dagum, hea cymysal  
hym se hwanon hude stelingas ell  
pre medom, oft scyld icepus seahes  
hwanum monegu meghim meodo seala  
of eadis esode eadil syðlum. Eadis regn  
fer icewa fundor hefia. Noƿne seba  
pax undri poleniam peora myndam hulu  
ad hūm aghycle þara ymb sitterdum  
open hwan, pade hyan scoldo somban  
galdan fras god cymys. Lan aƿrau paf  
icewi cerned ƿards megaridum hore god  
sende folce tofrofie fyros. Danife on  
gare þine ahdianon alda manife lange  
hpile him hef lif froun ful dæg, forldas  
popold upre for gær. hainule piw hwan a  
blæd pde hwaning fer da, ræppas icewa  
landum in. Ðas froun aƿr aƿr mea ƿa  
ce wætan gnean, geþingan, unƿigd.



**THANK YOU  
FOR  
YOUR  
ATTENTION!  
ANY QUESTIONS?**