

Legend

Definition of Legend

Originated from Latin *legendus*, legend means “something which ought to be read.” According to J. A. Cuddon, a legend is “a story or [narrative](#) that lies somewhere between myth and historical fact and which, as a rule, is about a particular figure or person.” Traditionally, a legend is a narrative that focuses on a historically or geographically specific figure, and describes his exploits. Similar to a myth, a legend can provide an etymological narrative, often filling in historical gaps.

Difference Between a Legend and a Myth

There are marked differences between a legend and a myth. While legends are made up stories, myths are stories that answer questions about the working of natural phenomenon. Myths are set in olden times, even in pre-historic times. However, legends are stories about people and their actions, or deeds they perform to save their people or nations.

The people mentioned in legends might have lived in recent times, or sometime in known history. Legends are told to serve a specific purpose, and can be based on facts – but they are not completely true. People mentioned in a legend might not have really done what the story of the legend relates. In some cases, legends change the historical events.

King Arthur, Beowulf, and Queen Boadicea are some popular English legends. However, it is also important to understand that some of the stories about the Knights of the Round Table, and Merlin the Magician may not be true. The common point between a myth and a legend is that they both have been passed down from generation to generation in oral form.

Examples of Legend from Literature

Example #1: *Faust*

Faust is the major [character](#) in the classical German legend. According to the legend, Faust was a dissatisfied scholar. On account of his dissatisfaction, he makes a deal with the devil in exchange for his soul. The deal promises him a great deal of knowledge, and limitless pleasures of the world. However, he meets his tragic end, as the devil takes his soul after his death.

In fact, the legend of Faust presents an over-ambitious man, who surrenders his [moral](#) integrity for the achievement of worldly powers and success for a limited period of time. This kind of character teaches us the lessons of moral integrity, and the value of ethical uprightness.

Example #2: *The Flying Dutchman*

The Flying Dutchman is the legend of a ghost ship. According to the legend, the Flying Dutchman is cursed to never dock at a port, being doomed to sail in the oceans forever. It is likely that the legend has originated from the nautical [folklore](#) of the 17th century. The oldest surviving version of this legend dates back to the late 18th century. During the 19th and 20th centuries, there were reports of sighting the ship as a hull glowing with ghostly light. When another ship tried to make [contact](#), the crew from the Flying Dutchman tried to send messages to land, or to people dead long ago. According to the lore, seeing the Flying Dutchman is an omen of doom.

Example #3: *King Arthur*

According to medieval histories, King Arthur was the British leader who led the British army against the invaders in the 5th and 6th centuries. It is mainly folklore that led to the composition of the legendary King Arthur story. Some literary inventions have been made in the story, but historical existence of King Arthur has always been questioned. There exist a few historical sources, such as the *Annales Cambrige*, the *Historia Brittonum*, and the writings of Gildas, which may be attributed as sources of the legend of King Arthur.

Function of Legend

In literature, the function of a legend is to present the story of human actions in such a way that they are perceived by the [audience](#) to be true. Actions are presented as if they have taken place within human history. For its audiences, a legend has to include happenings that are not outside the realm of possibility, but it may include miracles. Change has certainly occurred in legends over time, giving them a freshness, vitality, and a realistic taste. On the contrary, a large number of legends function in the realm of uncertainty; neither believed, nor doubted by the audiences.