

# Myth

## Definition of Myth

Myth is a legendary or a traditional story that usually concerns an event or a hero, with or without using factual or real explanations. These particularly concern demigods or deities, and describes some rites, practices, and natural phenomenon. Typically, a myth involves historical events and supernatural beings. There are many types of myths, such as classic myths, religious myths, and modern myths.

## Characteristics of Myth

Myth usually features ruling gods, goddesses, deities, and heroes having god-like-qualities, but status lower than gods. Often, the daughter or son of a god (such as Percy Jackson) is fully mortal, and these characters have supernatural abilities and powers that raise them above average human beings.

Myths are mostly very old, and happen to have ruled the world when science, philosophy, and technology were not very precise, as they are today. Therefore, people were unaware of certain questions, like why the sky is blue, or why night is dark, or what are the causes of earthquakes. Thus, it was myths that explained natural phenomena, and described rituals and ceremonies to the people.

## Examples of Myth in Literature

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### Example #1: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

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Roman and Greek myths, though originally not available in English, have deeply influenced English works. During the times of the ancient Greeks, they had a belief that some invisible gods, such as Zeus, had created this

world. We read in such Greek stories that passions for humans controlled the gods, and hence gods fought for them. Likewise, Romans had beliefs in such deities.

Due to mythological influences, many literary authors refer to the Greek and Roman myths in order to add meanings to their works. For instance, Shakespeare, in his play *Romeo and Juliet*, uses Greek mythology when Juliet cries out saying that,

*“Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,  
Towards Phoebus’ lodging.”*

In Greek mythology, Phoebus was god of the sun, and here Juliet urges that god to bring him home quickly, so that night could come, and she may meet her lover Romeo.

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### **Example #2: *No Second Troy* (By William Butler Yeats)**

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In another Greek myth, Greeks devastated the city of Troy in an outburst of the Trojan War, when Helen – the wife of king Menelaus – ran away with the prince of Troy. Apparently, Helen was a very beautiful woman from Greece, and was ultimately held responsible for the devastation of Troy.

Yeats also tried to use this Greek mythology in his poem, *No Second Troy*, by creating a similarity between Helen and Maud Gonne. He also brought a similarity between the Trojan War and revolutionary and anti-British [activities](#) of the Irish. Just like Helen, Yeats blamed and held Maud responsible for creating hatred in the hearts of Irishmen, and consequently they caused destruction and bloodshed.

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### **Example #3: *Paradise Lost* (By John Milton)**

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Biblical stories and myths have also played an important role in shaping English literary works. John Milton, in his poem *Paradise Lost*, plays out the Genesis story about the Fall of Man, and subsequent eviction, from the Garden of Eden.

Both John Steinbeck and William Golding, in their respective novels, *East of Eden*, and *Lord of the Flies*, played on the same idea in which they have presented Eve as a seducer responsible for bringing sin into this world. We can clearly see this [allusion](#) in medieval literature. We also have seen that many feminist literary critics of the twentieth century have made use of this myth in their research.

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#### **Example #4: *The Waste Land* (By T. S. Eliot)**

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T. S. Eliot uses two underlying myths to develop the structure of his long poem *The Waste Land*. These myths are of the Grail Quest and the Fisher King, both of which originate from Gaelic traditions, and come to the Christian civilization. Though Eliot has not taken these myths from the Bible, both were significant for Europeans, as they incorporated them into European mythology, and these stories focused on the account of the death and resurrection of Christ.

### **Function of Myth**

Myths exist in every society, as they are basic elements of human culture. The main function of myths is to teach [moral](#) lessons and explain historical events. Authors of great literary works have often taken their stories and themes from myths. Myths and their mythical symbols lead to creativity in literary works. We can understand a culture more deeply, and in a much better way, by knowing and appreciating its stories, dreams, and myths. Myths came before religions, and all religious stories are, in fact, retellings of global mythical themes. Besides literature, myths also play a great role in science, psychology, and philosophy.