

# Mythology

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information provided by <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/webssterm/ways.htm> (not written by member of this website) Ways of Interpreting Myth (LINKS) In a recent article on flood myths, Alan Dundes wrote: " Theories of myth interpretation may be roughly divided into two major groupings: literal and symbolic. Literalists tend to seek factual or historical bases for a given mythological narrative while advocates of one the many symbolic approaches prefer to regard the narrative as a code requiring some mode of decipherment. It is important to realize that the literal and symbolic exegeses [interpretations] of myths are not necessarily mutually exclusive" (167). As you read through what follows, you might want to classify each " way" of looking at myth as literal or symbolic. You will also want to remember what Dundes says about interpretations not being mutually exclusive: myths can be looked at in many ways, which often can be employed at the same time without contradiction. For example, in the story of Ra, Isis, and the snakebite, the possible political interpretation (Isis being advanced by her priests to position of top god) doesn't rule out a consideration of Ra as sun-god, or possibly seeing some ritual significance to his sickness and subsequent cure. As G. S. Kirk puts it, " a myth may have different emphases or levels of meaning." Since it often serves more than one purpose, " a tale about human actions [can] contain more than a single aspect and implication" (39). 1. As a belief system. Often books on mythology conveniently forget that myth stories were once all believed to be " true" (in some sense). The problem arises when we try to figure out in what sense. For example, most Greeks probably believed that there was a god in the sky named Zeus, but did they really believe that this god had all those

affairs with mortal women? Because belief is often so personal and individual, questions like this are hard to answer. The question of belief is especially difficult to unravel in polytheistic [" many gods"] systems, because worshippers often follow personal, family, or local gods rather than bothering about the pantheon [" all the gods"] as a whole. Also, polytheistic religions often lack centralized priesthoods and/or central sacred texts which are considered the word of god(s). In general, polytheistic systems allow for a greater latitude of belief than monotheistic [" one god"] religions do, if only because these systems offer a greater variety of deities to worship. In this course, students and the instructor will respect individual beliefs while also exploring the many ways of reading and understanding religious stories. 2. As disguised history. Early philosophers tried to rationalize the fantastic events in myth by claiming that they were distortions of historical fact. One of these fellows was a Greek named Euhemerus (c. 300 BC), who gave his name to any theory that claims that the gods were originally historical heroes who were later deified. While this sort of euhemerism (Zeus seen as an ancient tribal hero who gradually took on attributes of a god, for example) is considered naive by some, theorists still look for historical truths hidden behind mythological stories. For example, (sticking with Zeus for a moment) many scholars see the thunder god's many love affairs with goddesses and mortal women as a reflection of Greek religious history: nomadic, sky-god worshipping invaders from the north came into the Greek peninsula to find an agricultural, goddess-worshipping people. The invaders (and their god, Zeus) took over, but not before adapting aspects of the goddess-worship of the natives. Each " marriage" of Zeus would then signify that the two

religious traditions had been combined into one belief-system. (Sky-god marries earth-goddess: see " Gods and Men in Greek Religion" below.) Since the end of the 19th century, archeologists have searched for the site of the historical Troy. It is generally agreed now that a site near Hissarlik, in northwestern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) is the historical Troy. It is even most likely that the Bronze Age Greeks went to war with the Trojans: as M. I. Finley puts it, " War was normal in that world" (40). No one can say for certain, however, whether a 10-year war was fought over a woman by heroes with names and personalities like those in Homer. The chief differences between modern historical interpretation and ancient euhemerism are these: (1) the moderns are sometimes more cautious in sifting the historical evidence, (2) they have more evidence, archeological and textual, to sift, and (3) while modern euhemerists seem quite willing to investigate the historicity of heroes like Odysseus and Gilgamesh, no one seems willing to state that gods like Zeus and Prometheus were actually historical figures. 3. As disguised philosophy or allegory. Early philosophers were also disturbed by the seemingly immoral or amoral actions of their gods. The Greek philosopher Xenophanes (fl. c. 530 BC) wrote: " Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all the things that are shameful and scandalous among men: theft, adultery, and mutual treachery" (quoted in Curtius 204). In order to rescue myth (and the gods) from charges of immorality, the philosophers decided that these fantastic stories must be hiding deep truths beneath their improbable exteriors. This method of interpretation is called allegory (the story parallels and illustrates the deeper philosophical sense). Ernst Robert Curtius states that the allegorizing of myth

" was in harmony with one of the basic characteristics of Greek religious thought: the belief that the gods express themselves in cryptic form--in oracles, in mysteries" (205). Though some philosophers like the Roman Stoic Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) ridiculed allegory as " foolishness" (Seznec 85), still, the method won out. A sixth century Latin work such as the *Mythologiae* of Fulgentius interpreted the rape of Leda by Zeus (in the form of a swan) as the " coupling of Power and Injustice--the fruits of such a union being, like Helen, inevitable objects of discord and scandal" (Seznec 89). Most of the time, such allegories are non-historical wishful thinking (people didn't think of their myths as philosophy, but as a traditional religious story), but sometimes, the myths themselves invite allegorical interpretation, as when Zeus swallows Metis (" Wisdom" or " Cunning Intelligence") in order to become wise (Hesiod 85-86).

4. As fables illustrating moral truths. Using stories to illustrate a moral was very popular in the Middle Ages, when writers wanted to tell pagan myths without getting into trouble with Church authorities. Therefore, they asserted that the stories illustrated moral truths. For example, one Medieval poem, *The Romance of the Rose*, by Jean de Meun (1237--1305 AD) uses the story of Aphrodite (Venus) and Adonis to point up a moral about listening to one's lover. Venus warns Adonis not to go hunting, but he does anyway and is killed by a boar. Of course, the moral of the story is " listen to your lover's advice." This tacking of a moral onto the end of a story tends to focus interpretation on only one aspect of the tale (Adonis didn't listen to his lover), while ignoring other important elements (like Adonis' bizarre conception and birth.)

5. As allegories of natural events. No one would deny that ancient gods sometimes represent natural

phenomena or processes (Zeus, for example, is associated with thunder). However, how are we to understand this connection between gods and nature? Do the actions of the gods "explain" natural events? Are the gods directing nature, or are they in it? Some gods, like Gaia (the Earth) seem to be identical with it. G. S. Kirk has pointed out a further complication: some gods, like Kronos, may have nature-associations when worshipped but not when they appear in mythological stories (44-47). What do you suppose led early peoples to associate the divine with nature? Many scholars believe there is great difference between gods like Zeus, who are associated with natural phenomena, and a god like Yahweh of the Hebrews, who stands outside nature, creating and directing it. Another difference: most nature myths represent time as a cycle, a continuous birth, death and rebirth of generations and natural forms. However, Hebrew and Christian traditions represent time as linear: time begins with creation and ends with the advent of the Messiah or the Last Judgement. Seasonal cycles occur within this vast historical drama of birth and salvation, but they are not as important as this long-term linear notion of national (Hebrew) and personal (Christian) salvation.

6. As pre-scientific explanation. Myths often present themselves as explanations of how nature works or how a certain benefit or ill came about. For example, Hesiod says that men burn only the inedible parts of animals (bones and fat) as a sacrifice for the gods because Prometheus once tried to trick Zeus by giving him bones covered with succulent-looking fat and giving humans the good parts. These sorts of "explanations" are called aetiological ("the study of causes"). However, G. S. Kirk has pointed out that stories which supposedly give reasons or causes for things really don't explain them

in a scientific way: they present images, not causes (54). This kind of explanation seems less like scientific cause and effect reasoning than a kind of logic of association. This logic works by similarity or contact; it equates a story or image or symbol with " explanation." This sort of image-thinking is characteristic of non-literate or oral cultures, which do not develop philosophical modes of thought, but rather store their wisdom in more easily-remembered stories, proverbs and genealogies. 7. As charters for customs, institutions, or beliefs. According to this theory, myths are not primitive gropings for scientific explanation, but rather belief-systems set up to authorize and validate current social customs and institutions. Much as the Constitution provides a charter or fundamental social contract for our society, charter myths validate the social practices of the societies which produced the myths. (This approach looks at how a story functions in a society rather than seeing it as a response to a demand for an explanation.) The most obvious example of a charter myth we will study this semester is the Babylonian creation story, the Enuma Elish. In it, the world, humans, the agricultural system, and the city of Babylon are created for one purpose: to serve the gods. The myth thus defines the whole social system and its relation to the gods. However, the Enuma Elish is not only a charter for divine rule. It also tells a creation story that had a seasonal ritual function, as well as containing speculations on natural beginnings. We will also read some charter myths which narrate the founding of cities and the establishment of laws, customs, and dynasties (royal families). The story of Athena, Cecrops, and Erechtheus contains charter elements like these. 8. As religious power, or metaphors for the unknown. The Romanian-born theorist

of religion Mircea Eliade views myth as an effort to recapture the creative power of the origin of the world. This kind of power is necessary to maintain the divine order of the world and the seasons. This is one way in which myth functions as a charter for a sacred order of the universe and of society. Eliade also notes that since every creation represents or recreates the first creation of the world, then each new creation (the founding of a city, for example) " has its foundation at the center of the world" (Eliade 18). We will see that many peoples regard their cult centers or holy cities as being at the center of the world. For example, the Greeks called Delphi, the seat of their most respected oracle, the omphalos, or " navel" of the world. Most of the myths we will study are predominately local or tribal in character; they concern local city gods or familiar landmarks (the Greek gods live on Mount Olympus). This local focus contrasts sharply with the universal claims made by the " higher" religions, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. The mythologist Joseph Campbell sees myth as metaphors or symbols of the unknown. This " unknown" is located in two places: in the spiritual realm and in the depths of the human psyche. Campbell reasons that even though the divine, or " God," or whatever you call it (him/her?) is ultimately unknowable by human thought, men still try to create images of the Godhead. These images and stories may vary from culture to culture, but they remain valid as metaphors which express our experience of something beyond the human. Remarkably, many of themes and motifs in myths reappear in stories told by widely scattered peoples, which for Campbell means that many of them must be inherent in the human psyche. Thus, myths can also tell us truths about our own psychology. (See item # 10 below and the page on " The Hero's



Journey," where I discuss Campbell's idea of the hero.) 9. As expressions of religious rituals. A ritual is an act or series of acts designed to bring men into contact with higher spiritual powers. An early theorist of ritual, Arnold van Gennep, noted that ritual acts can usually be divided into three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (15-21). For example in the Catholic sacrifice of the Mass, the host (bread) is separated from other pieces of bread by its size and shape and by a series of preparatory rituals. It then undergoes a transition (others would say this transition is symbolic, not real), into the body of Christ, after which it is consumed (incorporated) by the faithful. For the purposes of this course, we will distinguish four categories of ritual: sacrifice, initiation ("mysteries"), purification, and seasonal renewal. Often, these different kinds of ritual occur together. For example in Christian ritual, baptism is at the same time a purification (a cleansing of original sin) and an initiation (an entry into the Christian faith). Animal sacrifice is probably the most difficult ritual for us to understand. At the simplest level, it is a symbolic way of rendering the fruits of the earth back to the gods. It reaffirms a people's dependence on the gods for their livelihood while at the same time the people consume the gifts of the gods (they have a feast). Animal sacrifice may also contain elements from earlier hunting cultures' magic (rites to ensure that game remained plentiful; symbolic resurrections of the animal, etc.). College students who pledge fraternities or sororities should be quite familiar with initiation rituals. There is a separation (hazing), transition (pledges do the crud work), and finally incorporation, or full membership in the society. Initiations have been defined as "a ritual change of status" (Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* 8). There are many varieties of

such status changes. Perhaps the most common among tribal societies are puberty rites. (A Jewish bar mitzvah is an example of such a rite.) In this course, we will deal with two sorts of initiation: the mystery-rituals of Demeter at Eleusis, in which the person being initiated experienced " a personal change" through emotional rites designed to show him/her aspects of the sacred and the initiation of shamans (sorcerers, medicine men), which can throw some light on a curious text about the Norse god Odin. In ancient Greek religious thought, the sacred is opposed to the polluted (miasma). One cannot participate in sacred rituals (and in a larger sense, in the life of the community) if one is defiled. Pollution is caused by " more or less grave dislocations of normal life . . . birth, death, and especially murder" (Burkert Greek Religion 78). To remove the stain of miasma, one must undergo rites of purification (catharsis). We shall see that Apollo, the Greek god of purification (among other things) must himself be purified for the crime of murder. Purification rituals are extremely varied. One can be purified by fire, air, or water (all three have cleansing properties). The murderer was usually purified by having the blood of a sacrificial animal sprinkled over him (the stain or miasma is washed away by its likeness--note the Pentecostal phrase for conversion: " washed in the blood of the lamb"). Catholics who dip their hands in holy water and cross themselves before entering church are engaging in a simple ritual of purification. Often, rituals were performed to insure that the seasons would continue to follow one another and the earth would continue to produce its fruits. The granddaddy of all myth and ritual theorists, Sir James G. Frazer (1854-1941), thought that myths of seasonal renewal could be traced back to a single pervasive ritual in which a sacred

king "dies" and is replaced by a new, more vigorous king. He posited the following correspondences: RITUAL MYTH 1) Sacred year-king guarantees fertility of nature, 2) suffers ritual death; 3) a new, vigorous king succeeds. 1) Year-god represents natural vegetative force, 2) dies, or is imprisoned in underworld; 3) rises again, is reborn. Most early myth and ritual theorists tended to insist that ritual came before the myth and thus explained it in some way. Nowadays, many scholars still believe that myths and rituals are connected, but they see the relations between the two as more complex than a simple "who came first." 10. As examples of psychological archetypes. Because certain images or motifs common in myth would appear in the dreams or psychotic fantasies of his patients, the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) reasoned that many of these motifs or themes must be the products of some sort of "myth-forming structural elements . . . in the unconscious psyche" (Jung 71). These elements he called archetypes (Greek, *arkhe*, beginning, original + *tupos*, mold, model). Jung further claimed that myths exhibit these archetypes because in the "primitive" mentality, the "conscious mind is far less developed in scope and intensity" than it is in our supposedly more sophisticated minds. For Jung, "the primitive does not think consciously but . . . thoughts appear" (72). Despite his rather patronizing manner towards "primitives," Jung may have a point here. Recurring themes or motifs in myth can be accounted for in at least two ways: 1) diffusion (someone borrowed the story) or 2) psychology (unconscious ideas or situations often recur among humans). For Joseph Campbell, hero myths are "a magnification" of van Gennep's initiation scheme of separation, transition, and incorporation. "A hero ventures forth

from the world of common day [separation] into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are then encountered and a decisive victory is won [initiation]: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man [return]" (Hero 30). Campbell says that in his encounter with this region of wonder, the hero learns about his true inner nature and identity, and about the ultimate reality beyond the physical, i. e., " God." For Campbell, the hero's inner and outer journey symbolizes psychic and religious discoveries that all humans ought to make, and hero myths can function even today as guides for humans through various stages of life. It's perfectly possible that repetitions of structure or motif point to some deep-seated human need or conflict. For example, what could be the psychological reality behind so many myths that tell of fathers trying to do away with their sons (Ouranos, Kronos) or sons who " accidentally" do away with their fathers or grandfathers (Oedipus, Theseus, Perseus)? 11. As stories. Since myths are traditional stories, they often exhibit characteristics of other sorts of traditional tales, most notably folktales. For example, the search to find the secret name of Ra (and thus his power) can be seen as similar to a motif in the folktale Rumpelstiltskin. (For the differences between myth, legend, and folktale, see " Myth FAQs.") Several psychologists and folklorists have noticed that traditional tales often exhibit the same or similar plot patterns. We will study at least two such lists of plot motifs (by Vladimir Propp and Lord Raglan) later in the semester. For an overview of the patterns caused by oral storytelling, see " Characteristics of Oral Composition." Besides studying plot motifs and tale types, folklorists also try to discover character types in stories from different cultures. For

example, types like hero twins appear in both American Indian and Roman myths. Probably the most widespread character type is the trickster. Trickster figures are quite common in American Indian myths, but they will also appear in the stories we study. As their name suggests, tricksters achieve their goals by trickery or cleverness, not by strength. Often, tricksters are culture-bringers like Prometheus or Enki, but they can also be socially disruptive characters like Loki. 12. As embodying irreconcilable structural conflicts in social systems. Often called "structuralist," this approach was invented by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and is probably the most difficult to summarize in 25 words or less. Basically, Lévi-Strauss says that myths embody in their structures elementary contradictions or problems which no society can resolve. (Examples: why is incest forbidden if we are all descended from one parent [the earth]? Or, why are humans allowed to cook and eat meat when the gods get only the smoke from altars?) Since these contradictions cannot be removed, they are hidden, or encoded in mythical stories. We can read the code by noticing pairs of opposites like raw vs. cooked (Prometheus and some Norse tales), high vs. low (sky gods vs. earth gods), male vs. female, men vs. gods, profane vs. sacred, wild vs. tame, waste vs. cultivated land, and (most importantly) nature vs. culture. These pairs of opposites sometimes appear in the tales only in symbolic form. Myths mediate these oppositions or contradictions, making them acceptable. Often, a term or image or figure will act as mediator in the myths. For example, Prometheus could be seen as mediating the gap or conflict between gods and men. Lévi-Strauss accounts for repetitions and variations of motifs by saying that the message embodied in

myth is redundant, repeated over and over so that it will get through even if part of the transmission is lost. (This idea should remind you of theories of oral poetry.) Since the message appears many times in different stories, Lévi-Strauss thinks we can ignore the order in which events occur in traditional tales and look only at the repeated patterns and their structural relations to each other. Students who want a fuller introduction to structuralist myth interpretation might wish to consult Edmund Leach's book on Lévi-Strauss. Summary If we think of myths as true, if we believe in them (way #1), then obviously, we are thinking in religious terms. But belief is also psychological: some say humans need to believe in some power greater than themselves. Others, like Joseph Campbell, see the origins of myth and religion in the psychological response of early man to the trauma of death. Thus, belief in a greater power arises when humans are faced with the mystery of what happens after death. The earliest efforts to rationalize myth by seeing it as disguised history, as disguised philosophy, or as fables illustrating moral truths (ways 2-4) all proceeded from a desire to make the seemingly irrational and immoral actions of gods and men appear rational and moral. Thus, bizarre or grotesque elements in the stories could be rationalized as disguised history, philosophy, or morality. However, these early rationalizers often ignored elements of the myths which did not fit into their allegorical schemes and made little attempt to look at myths psychologically or symbolically, or to place them in their proper historical context. (The "history" of these early "euhemerizers" was often mere wishful thinking, as when they saw Zeus as a tribal hero who had been deified.) But myths do embody historical, philosophical, and moral elements;

we must search for them more carefully than early mythologists did. Ways 5, 6, and 7 all see myth as an explanation, whether for natural events, for puzzling phenomena, or for local customs and institutions. Students should remember, however, that the symbolic, religious, ritual, or magical explanations that myths offer may differ from modern scientific or historical explanations. Something as great as God may be quite difficult for limited human minds to comprehend. Joseph Campbell says we can only know God through stories and symbols, or myth (way #8). But our stories are human and limited, and thus cannot, according to Campbell, tell literal truths, but all can and do tell metaphoric and symbolic truths. Ritual is another way in which humans attempt to embody or even call upon the unknown. Ritual patterns may reappear in myths and mythic motifs may be reflected in rituals (way #9). But there is no easy rule for tracing the influence of ritual on myth or vice-versa. Mythologists continue to argue whether the repetitive patterns of motifs and plot seen in many myths stem from ritual patterns (way #9), or from psychological archetypes inherent in humans (way #10), or from the repetition common in oral forms of storytelling (way #11). Probably all three are in some way responsible for the patterns we see in stories, along with diffusion or borrowing. Structuralists assert that the patterns they see (way #12) lie in the stories themselves, and ultimately are the patterns of the culture that produced the stories. No one way offers a key to the interpretation of myths, but all can offer insights to different motifs and plot elements. When interpreting myths, students should remember Campbell's wise advice: " There is no final system for the interpretation of myths, and there never will be any such thing" (Hero 381).

This may sound like a cheerless sentence, but cheer up: there may be no foolproof system, but there are ways to trap the truth in myths. According to Campbell, myths are like the god Proteus (sometimes called the Old Man of the Sea) in the *Odyssey* who "always speaks the truth" (Homer 52, my emphasis). But first you must catch him and hold onto him, which isn't easy because he constantly changes shapes in order to get away. "He will turn into all sorts of shapes to try you, into all the creatures of that live and move upon the earth, into water, into blazing fire; but you must hold him fast and press him all the harder" (Homer 53). Great advice for any student of myth! Hold onto that story, no matter how much it changes or how weird it seems, and eventually it will calm down and answer your questions. But Proteus only answers the specific questions put to him. So, to get good answers, you have to ask a lot of different questions. That's one reason why there I ask so many questions in class. Works Cited Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*.

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