

Myth

Origin of the Word

Mythos—a story or plot, either true or false. Myths involve rituals (prescribed forms of sacred ceremony), and each myth represents one story in a *mythology*. A mythology is a system of hereditary stories once believed as true, but which we no longer believe.

Poets use myths and mythology as literary conventions and devices because they appeal to a common knowledge and emotional response. Often myths operate as metaphors. In most cases, poets choose their myths carefully and use them symbolically as archetypes for certain traits. Poets often use myths to synthesize the insights of the western culture and past with the new discoveries of philosophy and physical science.

Some Views of Myth

Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, sums up various theories and definitions of myth: “Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a product of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man’s profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God’s Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. . . . For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.” (382)¹

- A story—a symbolic fable which sums up an infinite number of more or less analogous situations
- A myth expresses the rules of conduct of a given social or religious group (morals)
- Myths never have an author—their origin is obscure
- An expression of collective and common facts
- The most profound characteristic of myth is that it wins us over, usually without our knowing
- Uses sacred principles
- A myth arises whenever it becomes dangerous or impossible to speak plainly about certain social, religious, or affective matters
- Disruptive power of reason breaks myths down
- “Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (Campbell *Hero* 3).

Legend

Myth of a person.

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 1949.

Folktale

Myth of supernatural beings.

Archetype

Archetypes reflect universal, primitive, and elemental patterns whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the reader. They manifest as narrative designs, character types, images identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, myths, dreams, and ritualized modes of social behavior. Anthropologist J. G. Frazer, in his work *The Golden Bough*, suggests that an archetype represents elemental patterns of myth and ritual recurring in legends and ceremonies of diverse cultures. Carl Jung sees archetypes as “primordial images” or “psychic residue” of repeated types of experiences in the lives of our ancient ancestors that present themselves in the “collective unconscious” of the human race and give rise to myth, religion, dream, fantasy, and literature.

Archetypal Patterns

These patterns often recur as underlying patterns or motifs in literature:

1. Death / rebirth—grounded in the cycle of seasons and organic circle of human life (Christ, phoenix)
2. Journey underground (Odysseus, Aeneas)
3. Heavenly ascent (Mary)
4. Search for the father (Telemachus)
5. Paradise
6. Promethean rebel-hero
7. Image and role of women as Eve (*femme fatale*) or a Madonna (earth goddess)

Archetypal Approach to the Genre of Epic

The cyclical form of the classical epic is based on the natural cycle, which has two main rhythms: the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm that brings cities and empires to their rise and fall (individual—national). The total action in the background of the *Iliad* moves from the cities of Greece, through a ten-year siege of Troy, back to Greece again. The total action of the *Odyssey* is a specialized example of the same thing, moving from Ithaca back to Ithaca. The *Aeneid* moves the household gods of Priam from Troy to New Troy (Rome). The foreground action begins at a point described in the *Odyssey* as “somewhere” (*in medias res* convention of the epic)—actually it is far more carefully chosen. *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* begin at a kind of nadir of the total cyclical action—*Iliad*: at a moment of despair in the Greek camp; *Odyssey*: with Odysseus and Penelope farthest from one another, both wooed by importunate suitors; *Aeneid*: with its hero shipwrecked on the shores of Carthage, citadel of Juno and enemy of Rome. From there, the action moves both backward and forward enough to indicate the general shape of the historical cycle.

The appearance of an ambivalent female archetype appears in the epic, sometimes benevolent or sinister: Penelope, Calypso, Circe, Dido, Duessa, Eve, Beatrice, Helen, etc.