

What do you understand by mythology?

Why are myths so central to many cultures?

Mythology, coming from the Greek 'mythos', meaning 'story of the people', is key to many cultures. Myths try to explain why things are the way they are: what does it mean to be human and who created us? What is our purpose and why are we here? Questions that have no real answers (so far) and that seem quite impossible to reply to. These are all questions that myths try to answer. Myths combine gods and supernatural humans and animals in stories in order to help explain complex topics and to provide an understanding of the world.

Humans have been telling stories since we have been able to speak, sometimes it's for entertainment and other times it's for tradition, but myths are specifically stories trying to answer basic questions. Since they have been around before humans could read or write, most myths would have been passed down orally and have been exaggerated over subsequent generations. That's why most myths sound so wild and impossible, something that could possibly have been plausible at the start, has through the myth turned into a 'crazy story' where the heroic/villainous deeds are almost unfathomable and supernatural. For example, there is the Greek myth of Hephaestus and Hera¹ which, although a bit strange, could be plausible if you think about it.

Hephaestus was born so frightfully hideous that, without a second thought, Hera chucked him down Mount Olympus. Unfortunately for Hera, Hephaestus survived the fall, and landed in the ocean. There is a bit of disagreement about what happens next, some say that Hephaestus was tended by the Oceanid, Eurynome or perhaps he was cared for by the Titaness Tethys (Eurynome's mother), or Thetis a Nereid. Whatever the case may be, Hephaestus grew up on the island of Lemnos, where he learned to forge metal, and craft delicate objects; he was said to be the 'greatest of smiths'. From being considered a runt who could do nothing because he looked so horrible, he became an important God. Now, it may seem very far-fetched that he survived the fall down the mountain, but there is a similar incident that happened in 2015², when a fourteen year old boy fell 762 meters down a mountain in the Alps and survived. Admittedly, this is not the same as a young infant falling down a rough and rocky mountainside, but because there was an ocean below Hephaestus, I would say the odds of survival were in his favour.

Myths and fables are extremely similar, they both tell a story and they both have a moral at the end of them. While with fables there is no 'good guy' or 'bad guy', this is not the case

¹ Fry, Stephen. *Mythos: the Greek Myths Reimagined*. Chronicle Books, 2019.

² Stubbs, Georgina. "ISurvive! Boy - and His Phone - Survive 2,500ft Mountain Plunge." *Mirror*, 5 Mar. 2015, www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/isurvive-boy-lives-after-plunging-5277367.

with myths, in most myths you will see a 'hero' and 'villain' comparison, to show people what was considered good and bad in their culture. Take for example, Prometheus stealing fire.

In this myth Zeus, the Greek King of the gods, tells Prometheus to **never** give fire to humanity, as he was afraid that people would gain too much power and stop worshipping him. Prometheus, hates to see his very own creation, humans, out in the cold, dying of famine and disobeys Zeus. To steal the fire he stole into Hephaestus's workshop and dipped a fennel stalk in the flames, waited for it to catch fire and then ran away with his prize. He climbed down Mount Olympus and gave the fire to humans. Before long Zeus noticed that the humans had fire and, outraged that Prometheus had betrayed him, he chained him to a boulder on the Caucasus mountains. Where, every day an eagle would come and peck out his liver. Since Prometheus as a god is immortal, his liver regenerated, making him endure the same merciless torture forever. In this story Zeus would definitely be seen in an unfavourable light, and Prometheus would be the hero of humanity. This would also make people scared of Zeus's anger and they would try not to anger him by doing 'bad things'.

Myths are central to many cultures, for example all cultures have a creation myth as people in all cultures struggle to understand where they come from. In ancient Greek culture, their creation myth is that the universe started with 'Chaos'. 'Chaos' meaning, 'the gaping void' in ancient Greek, is exactly what it says it is, a gaping chasm. Life came with Chaos, and so everything else followed. This creation myth also states that everything is destined to return to 'Chaos', it is an inevitable fate: 'Chaos' will fall into order then, fall back out again. This myth explained to the ancient Greeks how their world was formed, and how they were created. It is actually quite close to scientific understanding of the beginning of the universe through the big bang theory. Other culture's creation myths are very different, except for one thing: most creation myths believe that the world was crafted from a void or darkness. Take Celtic mythology³ for example, they believe that *'the great void produced a god and a goddess, named Donn and Danu.'*, or Norse mythology⁴ *'before the dawn of time and before the world was created in Norse mythology there was only a big dark vast emptiness called Ginnungagap.'* Creation myths explain to people how the world came to be and how it worked: this was before scientific understanding of how nature worked.

Myths are also used by many cultures and religions as stories that set a good example and provide rules to society to keep social order, take for example Midas and the Golden touch myth⁵. Midas was the king of Phrygia who ruled over his people from a lavish castle encircled by a stunning garden filled where *'roses grow of themselves, each bearing sixty blossoms and of surpassing fragrance.'* One day, some Phrygian peasants found a drunken old man in the garden, taking him to the king he turned out to be Dionysus' satyr Silenus.

³ ABORIGINAL_CULTURE, 2011, www.bigmyth.com/download/CELTIC_CREATION.pdf.

⁴ "Creation of the World in Norse Mythology." *Norse Mythology*, 31 July 2018, norse-mythology.net/creation-of-the-world-in-norse-mythology/.

⁵ "King Midas." *Greek Mythology*, www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Mortals/King_Midas/king_midas.html.

Instead of punishing him, he welcomed him in his castle, where, for ten nights, he fed him and entertained him. On the eleventh night, Midas personally took Silenus back to his master, Dionysus, who, in gratitude for Midas' hospitality, granted Midas one wish. Midas greedily asked for everything he touched to transform into solid gold: Dionysus granted his wish. He went away to test his powers, and sure enough, the rocks he touched turned into solid gold, so did the twigs and apples, he rejoiced but suddenly felt hungry and decided to start travelling home.

When he reached his castle, he demanded a meal and a drink, but when his lips, teeth and tongue touched the food, it turned into solid gold. Although he felt very hungry, he was not put off by this and went to sleep. The next morning he sprang out of bed and rushed into the garden, sure enough every rose and flower he touched turned into solid gold. *'I'm rich! I'm rich!'*, he cried happily. His cries did not go unnoticed and his wife and daughter hurried out to see what the commotion was about, he ran over to embrace them *'I'm rich! I'm-'*. His shouts suddenly stopped as he realised the burden of his wish, but shrugged it off as the opportunity to become one of the most prosperous men in the land was worth more than his family and health. This didn't last for long though, because on the third day of not being able to eat or drink, he gave in and went to visit Dionysus and begged him to take away his 'curse'. Dionysus told him to go *'wash yourself in the River Pactolus.'* His curse was removed and everything he had touched changed back into its natural state. This story clearly teaches us not to be too greedy and to be happy with what you have in life.

In conclusion, a myth answers questions such as, how was the world created? and tries to shape what people would think by giving them rules on how to live their life (do not be greedy, be happy with your fate) in order to build a peaceful society. Myths were created when people did not have science to help explain the things that happened in their world and as myths are based around gods, humans and mythical beasts they can make good stories that people can remember. All cultures need to explain the world they live in and their identity and myths help them do this.