

CLAS203 Lecture 1 & 2 Notes

- There is no easy way to package myth into a simple definition. There are times where a story you recognize as a myth, but it does not fit into the definition of a myth.
- The word myth comes from the Greek word “mythos”, which means “utterance”, something that is said like a story of some kind, but not a written story but rather a spoken story.
- Myth is not limited to the Greeks; it is a universal phenomenon among human beings, and of every culture.
- Myths are as old as language itself, and before spoken language, myths could be portrayed in stone tablets, artworks, etc.
- Earliest written myth was *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which appeared around 7th century B.C.
- Myths are terribly difficult to define. While some like Hercules are well known, others like the many Titans or Giants are not always known individually. Therefore, it is hard to define myth itself.
- Myth is a “traditional story with collective importance.” Traditional from Latin: **trado** which means to ‘hand over’ by mouth generation after generation. During that time as one generation hands to another generation, the myth changes.
- Myths were orally transmitted.
- Myths maintain contact with past; the past of a particular culture or society.
- Myths transmit inherited experience to future; what were the experiences of the people living at the time of the creation of the stories of the heroes?
- One of the functions of myth is to explain society to itself, its concerns and values.
- Myths can have certain characteristics which apply to all myths:
 - Plot
 - Characters
 - Setting
 - Time: past or unreal
 - Place: real, surreal, past real
 - Transmission: spoken, anonymous
 - Subject to constant change
 - Teller: no claim of responsibility for content
- There are various ways of classifying myth:
 - By principal character (central character of story)
 - Divine myth: focus on **supernatural beings** (Gods, Goddesses, Deity)
 - Immortal
 - Personifications of natural forces (Sky, Sea, Earth)
 - Abstractions (Love; **Eros**)
 - Superior to humans in power
 - Control forces of nature
 - Supernatural characteristics: size, power, appearance
 - Events in unreal time and place
 - Legends: focus on **human beings**

- Hero: more than human (mortal)
- Extraordinary qualities: courage, strength, beauty, skill
- Divine parent/frequent divine input (most often from god, but sometimes goddess; sometimes not born from god, but affiliated afterwards to a god/goddess)
- Doers of great deeds
 - Great wars
 - Great quests
 - Slaying Monsters
 - Founding of cities
- Assumed by Greeks to have really lived
- Set in distant past/unreal places
- May contain element of historical truth
- Folktale: focus on '**ordinary men and women**'
 - Are ordinary men and women
 - Low social status
 - Victims, persecuted
 - Has some unrecognized virtue
 - Often has happy ending, just reward
 - Supernatural present as magic, spirits, etc.
 - Great variety of tales
 - Distinctive aspect: **motif** (regularly appearing, identifiable narrative pattern)
 - **Type**: Larger pattern of motifs
 - Most Greek myths: mix of legends/folktale
- By function
 - Etiological myths: (Greek *aition* 'cause')
 - Are myths that talk about why the world is the way it is (customs, culture, etc.)
 - **Divine myths**: explain the way the world is
 - The origins/destruction of the elements of the universe (i.e. 'creation myths')
 - **Legends**: Explain events in the human past
 - Explain and justify human present
 - **Folktales**: Explain patterns of human behaviour
 - Entertain, teach
- The study of myth:
 - Recording and compiling the myths of a given culture
 - Recorded by members of the culture for goals other than that of study/preservation of myth
 - Many variants: confusing, incomplete
 - Primary source: **literature**
 - Oral and written works differ significantly

- Written text not necessarily a true record of oral tale – may reflect previous literary versions
 - **Archeology:** Artifacts and art clues to myth not often clear as to: who told them, when/where they were told
 - Analysis of the role specific myths played within the culture
 - Examine functions of specific myths in context of a given society
 - Myths told by/to **someone** on **some occasion:** identify **teller, audience:** gender, status, etc. (Male usually told legends to audiences of men; women told legend NOT proper)
 - **Function:** etiological? Enhanced prestige of teller/listeners? Justified order of society? Expressed protest?
 - Study of how the myths of one culture are related to the myths of cultures
 - Examine migration patterns
 - Examine transformations and adaptations of myth to the needs and traditions of the adoptive culture (inter-culture myth, compare and contrast)
 - Assessment of the deeper human significance of myth (myth interpretation)
 - Long history of interpretation dating back to antiquity (what function does myth fulfill for us)
 - Allegorical, philosophical, psychological, structural, etc.
 - Never conclusive
- Maps to know:
 - **The Ancient Mediterranean:** inside front cover of textbook
 - **Greece. The Aegean Sea and Western Asia Minor:** inside back cover of textbook
 - **Southern and Central Greece:** page 21 of textbook
 - Become familiar with the places that are most prominent in lectures and reading material. Associate places with persons/gods, stories, why these locations are important, etc.