

What is a Myth?

When you look up at the sky, you see the sun, moon, clouds, meteors, comets, planets, and stars. You may recognize certain star patterns (called *constellations*) such as the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper (also called the Big Bear and the Little Bear). You might know the names of the nine planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Did you know that many of the names of these heavenly bodies come from myths?

What are myths?

Myths are stories of a special kind. They are created to give values to persons, places, and things. Myths respond to our need for some kind of reassurance and meaning in the universe.

Myths are traditional tales of a particular people—Indians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others—and are especially connected with religious beliefs and rituals performed at public festivals. These rites were believed to invoke a type of magic that would aid the growth of crops and promote stability in the land. Out of these rituals came songs, poems, and stories which explained how people acquired basic things like simple speech, fire, grain, wine, oil, honey, agriculture, metal work, and other skills and arts.

A myth is an attempt to explain other things, as well, such as a certain custom or practice of a human society (like a religious rite), or a natural process, like the apparent daily motion of the sun across the skies. In their imaginations the Greeks of ancient times saw a man driving across the heavens in a chariot drawn by fiery horses. When evening came, he dipped into the western ocean, and while he slept he was carried back eastward along the earth's northern rim in a golden boat shaped like a bowl. Even today children might hear their parents say at sunset: "Now he's going down—now his feet, now his body, and now the top of his head." Sometimes it's fun—even for modern people—to give human characteristics to non-human objects.



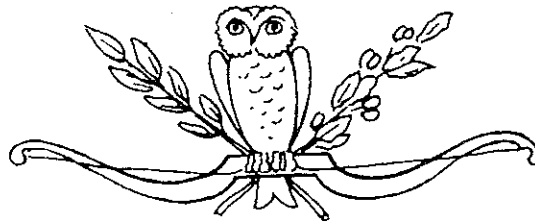
Myths were passed down by storytellers from generation to generation.

Myths are mixtures of morals, poetry, and history that were used to teach humans proper behavior. Mythical gods, the Higher Powers, with all their own shortcomings, had certain standards, rules, and expectations with regard to mortal men and women—they must show hospitality to strangers, and they must keep pride within reasonable bounds (in the eyes of the gods, excessive pride, or *hubris*, was the worst offense and deserved the worst punishment).

Myths, then, are stories about certain characters—gods, goddesses, men, and women—and especially heroes. The stories of their adventures, triumphs, tragedies, devotion, and vengeance provide a history of the beliefs of ancient people.

People of more modern times create myths and heroes, too. For example, George Washington was mythologized by Parson Weems in the story of the cherry tree—a story about an event that never actually happened but was used to illustrate a moral truth about young George’s character. Stories are told about other famous Americans, such as Ben Franklin and Abraham Lincoln, making them larger than life and heroes in our minds. Still other American myths include the stories of Paul Bunyan, John Henry, and “The Little Engine That Could,” who demonstrated that great things can be accomplished through self-confidence.

In the ancient myths, the gods are immortal—they can never die. They reach out and touch the lives of mortal humans who *must* die, even threatening and invading them at times. The relationships between gods and men are always dangerous, always at risk. But they are relationships which make the study of history and literature more interesting and—FUN!



Research and Discussion:

1. Observe the sky on a starry night. Find the Big Dipper (Big Bear). What is the Pole Star? How is it used for finding directions?
2. Observe the sun at sunset. Though it looks like it is “going down,” what is the real explanation for this apparent movement?
3. Research the lives of Christopher Columbus, Ben Franklin, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other “big names” in American history. What stories about their deeds show them to have been people of “mythic” qualities, legendary types?

Define:

| | | |
|----------|---------------|--------|
| myth | god | hero |
| goddess | mortal | morals |
| immortal | constellation | hubris |

Name _____ Date _____

What is a Myth?

1. Myths are stories created to give _____ to persons, places, and things.
2. Myths are tales from traditions of certain peoples and cultures, such as the _____, the _____, and the _____.
3. They are especially connected with _____ beliefs and rites.
4. These rites were thought to invoke a type of _____, designed to help _____ grow.
5. Myths explain how people acquired basic things like _____, _____, _____, and _____.
6. The sun seems to move. The Greeks explained this by seeing it as a golden chariot drawn by fiery _____.
7. Myths were used to teach humans proper _____.
8. The gods considered _____, or excessive pride, to be the worst offense, deserving the worst punishment.
9. People of modern times have created myths about such American heroes as _____, _____, and _____.
10. American myths also include the stories of _____ and _____.