

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Seeing what makes a myth and how myths are shared
- » Examining common mythical themes and ideas about them
- » Introducing common mythical characters
- » Looking at famous American myths

Chapter 1

The Truth About Myths

Mythology is a way of understanding the world, and it's just as important and as "true" as the scientific or historical ways. In fact, science, history, and other logical ways of thinking simply fail to describe some very important things — things that folks care about. But myths can do the job.



REMEMBER

We take myths very seriously. Now, we're not saying that myths aren't funny; many myths are really funny, and they're supposed to be. Neither are we saying that our entire discussion of myths is serious, because it isn't. But when we say something is a myth, we're *not* saying that it's false or wrong. In other words, we don't think that science and history belong on one "correct" side and mythology belongs on another "silly" side. (We're big fans of science and history, by the way!)

That's what we think: that myths are important and worth taking seriously. And anything worth taking seriously should be fun to think about as well.

In this chapter, we show you how to spot a myth, what makes a story a myth, and the overlap among myths, legends, and folktales. We also explain how myths from long ago continue to survive today, the different kinds of myths, and what scholars and students of myth think these stories mean.



REMEMBER

We offer explanation wherever we can, but if you like quick, unambiguous answers, mythology is probably going to make you cranky. Myths exist, you see, to answer those human questions that don't have quick, unambiguous answers.

How to Spot a Myth a Mile Away

A myth is a story. The Greek word *mythos* means “story,” and sometimes it means “thing you say that gets folks to act in a certain way.” That’s the basic concept. But, of course, not just any old story can be a myth. Amy (one of the authors of this book) was served a whole pig’s head for dinner in Thailand; this story is a good one and worth telling, but it isn’t a *myth*. Chris (the other author of this book) once got shot at by some people in the woods — another good story, but not up to the standards of mythology.

Experts love to argue about difficult, hard-to-define subjects, and mythology has been a popular topic for argument for the last two centuries. Scholars argue about what’s a “true” myth as opposed to some other kind. Some mythology snobs insist, however, that no one confuse myths with other similar types of stories, such as legends, sagas, and folktales. (We define all four in the following sections.) But there is not a bright, obvious line between myth, folktale, legend, and factual historical accounts. (See “Different Types of Myths: Historical and Fictional American Legends.”)



TIP

Most stories known as myths have elements of legend or folktale in them and vice versa. These terms are useful in helping decide what’s a myth and what isn’t, but you shouldn’t get too hung up on them.

Specifics of mythological proportions

You may know a myth when you see it, but you still need some kind of definition before you can get down to the business of fully appreciating myths. *Myths* can be stories about gods, goddesses, and supernatural events and supernatural beings, and humans’ relationships with them; they can also be tales from “history” (whether factual or fictional). What’s common to all myths is that they explain truths or values and stories that help groups of people (such as a specific nationalities) identify themselves, understand their world, and define their values. Myths help validate the social order, such as hereditary kingships or social class structures. They also can provide a “history” of a kingdom that makes the existence and growth of a kingdom or nation seem inevitable.



REMEMBER

Because myths are often about humans and the gods, they’re also often about religion. Every myth in this book was or still is part of a religion people practiced seriously.

The word *myth* has come to mean “untrue” in some contexts; people say something is “just a myth” if no factual basis exists for it. But myths do have their own truths. They provide people with a view of the world and a set of values that can

be as important as any scientifically verifiable fact. (For some examples, see Chapter 3.)

Legends and Sagas

Legends are similar to myths (which we describe in the preceding section), but they're based on history. It doesn't have to have much of a historical basis; lots of legends hardly jibe with the historical versions at all. A legend or *saga* (a long story about a series of adventures), however, does have to include something that may actually have happened. For example, the story of King Arthur is a legend because an actual man (probably) served as the basis for the King Arthur people know of today.

But there is not a clear-cut line. If a legend gets told and re-told because it helps a community, nation, or culture understand itself, its values, and where it comes from, it certainly qualifies as a myth.

Folktales

A *folktale* is a traditional tale that's primarily a form of entertainment; in some cases it's used to instruct. Folktales involve adventures, heroes, and magical happenings, but they don't usually try to explain human relationships with the divine. Like legends, folktales can get promoted to myths depending on how it serves the needs and imaginations of the people who pass it on.



Fairy tales look like myths and folktales, but they're a little different. Fairy tales came out of the Romantic movement of the 19th century, when people such as the Brothers Grimm collected stories from local people and wrote them up in romanticized versions. The *Romantic movement* was a trend in art and literature, in the 1700s and 1800s, that re-emphasized depictions of nature and human emotions.

If a Tree Falls in the Forest and No One Writes It Down, Is It Still a Myth?

People haven't always had access to big books with titles like "Greek Mythology" or "World Mythology" that they could read to get mythological information. But these myths nevertheless have moved down through the ages through the spoken word and through art. After writing was invented, people preserved the myths on paper. What could be more interesting — for authors in antiquity or even yesterday — than writing stories from myths?

The oral tradition

Myths are stories, and stories get told. Stories that are passed down from one generation to the next are stories told in the *oral tradition*. In places and times where people don't use written language, oral tradition is one of only two ways of preserving knowledge from one generation to the next; the other is art, which we cover in the following section.



REMEMBER

Oral tradition is the most traditional way for myths to start, to spread, and to develop. Because each generation that tells a myth has its own unique needs and experiences, myths tend to evolve over time and to exist in different versions.

In cultures with oral traditions, people tend to have better memories. Societies with oral traditions often turn stories into poems or songs, which are easier to remember and to repeat word for word. In cultures that write down their material, people don't need particularly good memories because they have books, sticky notes, smartphones, and other ways of reminding themselves of things that they otherwise may forget.



TIP

Think of the oral tradition as the material that passes from person to person via email, text message, or social media. Stories can spread across the world from computer user to computer user, changing slightly all the while. Some of these tales may become the myths of the 21st century.

Art

Art is another way myths can survive from generation to generation. It can survive long after the people who made it have died, enabling archaeologists to uncover, restore, and interpret it. Art that helps preserve myths doesn't have to be fancy or sophisticated. Ordinary household objects often feature decorations that can tell modern archaeologists a lot about a society.

Literature

The poetry of Homer, a great source for Greek mythology, began life as an oral tradition of songs that singers would perform publicly. (Find more about that method in the earlier section "The oral tradition.") Eventually, of course, people put those myths in writing. This transfer is how myth becomes literature and why people learn about myths from literature.

Myths can serve as the inspiration for other kinds of literature. *Greek tragedies*, written texts intended to be performed as plays, often take their plots from Greek mythology; see Chapter 8. William Shakespeare used mythological themes for

many of his plays, borrowing from the mythology of the Mediterranean world and from northern European myths. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set at the court of the Greek hero Theseus during his marriage to the Amazon queen Hippolyta (read about him in Chapter 7). *Romeo and Juliet* is based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Chapter 13).

More recently, there have been a number of best-selling re-tellings of ancient myths, like Madeline Miller's novels *Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* books, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, and many of the characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

People have sought out oral traditions to record in writing for the purpose of study. So anthropologists may visit the indigenous people of Brazil or the people who live in the Sea Island community in South Carolina to listen to their stories and write them down. This written documentation helps preserve a culture and can provide insight into how myths evolve.

Comparative Mythology 101

Myths are tricky. Myths from around the world, from long ago and from recent times, often seem similar. Most myths appear to fall into certain categories, regardless of whether different cultures had much to do with each other. The following sections help explain what's up with that.

Theories about mythology

Anytime scholars find several factors that appear to follow a pattern, they try to find the rules that govern the pattern. During the 20th century, several scholars tried to explain what myths were all about and answer this age-old question: What's the purpose of all these stories? Because that truly is an unanswerable question, they devised several different theories, which gradually were incorporated into the fields of psychology, comparative literature, and anthropology.

Here's a quick summary of some of the more important theories about myths:

- » Myths define social customs and beliefs.
- » Myths are the same as ritual.
- » Myths are *allegories*, similar to *parables* like those in the Christian Bible. They use symbolism to describe general human experiences through fun, specific, and memorable stories.

- » Myths explain natural phenomena.
- » Myths explain psychological phenomena such as love, sex, and anger toward one's parents. (Sigmund Freud bought into this theory big-time.)
- » Myths contain *archetypes* (basic patterns of events) that reveal the *collective unconscious* of the human race, that is, stuff we think about all the time without really noticing that we're thinking about it. (Carl Jung believed this theory.)
- » Myths are a way of communicating and helping people work together, or they're a way for people to talk about things that cause anxiety. If you know the story of *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse*, you know that life in the countryside versus life in the city is something that divides people's experiences and can be hard to work around. The tension between the value of sticking with your family and the need to marry outside of your family is another example of this kind of conflict. This is the basis of the approach called *structuralism*, which was based on the work of an anthropologist named Claude Levi-Strauss (no relation to the blue-jean pioneer).

No one of these approaches explains each and every myth. But taken together, they can make thinking about myths more fun.

Major types of myths

One reason so many scholars have tried pinning down the definition of myths is that myths can be similar across cultures, even in distant cultures. For example, Greece and Japan have stories about men who visit the underworld to retrieve their dead wives. The coincidence is freaky, as if some universal knowledge resides in human memory from the days when all people lived in caves. Here are some types that show up a lot all over the place:

- » **Creation myths:** Everybody wants to know where the world and its creatures came from. Generally, the world emerges from *primordial darkness* (the darkness before history and all human experience), often in the shape of an egg, through the work of a creator deity.
- » **Cosmogony:** Many myths describe the way the world, the heavens, the sea, and the underworld are put together and how the sun and moon travel around them.
- » **The origin of humanity:** Humans had to come from somewhere, and many mythologies describe their origin. They're often the pet creation of a deity dabbling in mud.

- » **Flood stories:** Many mythologies have a story about gods who were unhappy with their first version of humans and destroyed the world with floods to get a clean start. Usually one man and one woman survive.
- » **The introduction of disease and death:** Myths often describe the first humans as living in a paradise that's messed up when someone introduces unhappiness. The Greek story of Pandora's box is one of the best-known myths (see Chapter 3).
- » **Afterlife:** Many people think that the soul continues to exist after the body dies; myths explain what happens to the soul.
- » **The presence of supernatural beings:** Every body of mythology features deities and other supernatural entities. Individual deities often are in charge of particular aspects of the world or human life. Some supernatural beings are good, and some are evil; humans and the good gods fight the evil ones.
- » **The end of the world:** Although the world has already ended at least once in most mythologies (usually through a great flood), some myths also have a plan for how it will end in the future.
- » **The dawn of civilization:** Humans had to learn to live like people, not animals, and often the gods helped them. A common story tells of the theft of fire by a deity who brings it to humans.
- » **Foundation myths:** People who founded empires liked to believe that historical reasons helped explain why vanquishing their enemies and building a city in a certain place was inevitable. A myth can help explain these reasons as well as why the people who lived there before don't deserve to live there anymore.



REMEMBER

One reason myths recur is that people have always moved around and talked with one another. People carried myths to one another just as they brought trade goods or disease. For example, many North American Nations have flood stories as part of their mythologies. Some of the first Europeans they encountered were Christian missionaries, who told them Christian stories including, no doubt, the biblical story of Noah and the flood.

The details of these stories are significant and have had far-reaching consequences. For example, many people have used myths to justify male domination of women (think of Eve emerging from Adam's rib in the Bible — he was there first). Myths also have been used to justify the oppression of one social group by another, and it's still happening today.

A Who's Who of Mythological Players

Myths have a fairly standard cast of characters. They always include divine beings, called deities or gods. Also present are humans who interact with gods; some of the extra special humans get to be heroes. Magical animals and tricksters, who live to stir things up, complete the list of players.

Deities

All bodies of myth have supernatural entities that hold power over the world and the people in it. These entities often are called gods and goddesses — the word *deity* is a neutral term that means god or goddess. Some cultures have many deities, and some have only one. Generally a culture has at least one creator deity and several other divine beings who divide up jobs such as driving the sun and moon, herding the dead, making crops grow, and so on. With this division of labor, people automatically knew which deity to ask for help; for example, a woman seeking help in childbirth knew not to waste her time praying to the rain god.

The supernatural world isn't home only to benevolent deities; negative beings (*antigods*) also live there and walk the earth with humans. Myths contain stories of devils, demons, dragons, monsters, and giants; these creatures fight both the gods and humans. In Zoroastrian religion and mythology, for example, there is the top-god, Ahura-Mazda, and the anti-god, the enemy, Ahriman (we talk about this in Chapter 20).

Heroes

Many myths feature *heroes*, who perform amazing feats of daring, strength, or cleverness. Some heroes are human, some are gods, and some are half-and-half. One feature common of mythological heroes is that their definitive characteristics are evident from childhood.

Culture heroes appear in myths bringing specific benefits to humans; for example, Prometheus was a culture hero to the ancient Greeks because he gave humans fire. See Chapter 6 for more on about this ancient Greek. In the mythology of indigenous people of the Americas, the man who discovered tobacco on the spot where he'd (earlier) discovered sex was doubly a culture hero. Chapter 25 has the complete lowdown.

Other heroes serve as models of human accomplishment; for example, the Greek hero Heracles (also known as Hercules) is the biggest, strongest, most heroic guy ever. You can read more about him in Chapter 6. Heroes often play a role in the foundation myths we discuss in the earlier section “Major types of myths.”

Tricksters

Myths are full of trickster characters. Tricksters are popular mythical characters in myths from all cultures. Some of these tricksters are helpful to people by outwitting their enemies and bringing them gifts such as fire. The Greek trickster-hero Prometheus is like this (See Chapter 3). Others aren't so nice; Loki in Norse myths is sometimes downright evil. (See Chapter 12 for more about him.) The character Odysseus from Greek mythology (Chapter 7) tricks others for his own benefit. In the mythology of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the trickster characters are often animals that seem humanlike. Examples include the Coyote in the Southwest, the Mink in the Pacific Northwest, and Wisakedjak, a rabbit trickster hero known to Eastern tribes. (See Chapter 25.) African mythology has lots of cunning characters: rabbits, deer, and humans. (See Chapter 16.)

Tricksters subvert the social order and break the rules, stirring things up either to beat their enemies, save their own lives, or help other animals or humans.



The Europeans knew the Native American trickster-hero Wisakedjak as Whiskey Jack, who may well be the mythological ancestor to Br'er Rabbit, a figure in African American folklore (and mythology!). We talk about this mischievous bunny later in this chapter.

Different Types of Myths: Historical and Fictional American Legends

Some myths are firmly rooted in historical fact, and others are entirely made up. And they don't have to be super ancient. The easiest way to see the difference is to look at two American myths. One of these myths is based on a historical character and his historical actions. And another one is entirely fictional but an important myth nevertheless.

Johnny Appleseed, a cultural hero

Johnny Appleseed is a figure of mythology. He's also 100 percent historically factual. His real name was John Chapman, and he was a professional nurseryman (that is, he grew plants and sold them). He collected apple seeds from cider-making operations in Pennsylvania and then moved westward, planting a series of orchards between the Allegheny Mountains and Ohio. He gave away seeds to pioneers, but he also made a tidy profit off his enterprise.

But none of these historical facts is nearly as important as the mythological “truth” of Johnny Appleseed. As a figure of myth, he represents the pioneering spirit of the early history of the United States as people moved west to settle in different lands. He represents the conquest of the wilderness as settlers turned wild forests into farms. And he represents a set of values that Americans like to associate with the early builders of the nation: piety, charity, closeness to the earth, and independence.

Few folks would be particularly interested in the history of a dealer in agricultural products, but many people in the United States grow up knowing about Johnny Appleseed, the culture hero who helped the country grow.

Br’er Rabbit, American trickster

The myth of Br’er Rabbit is entirely fictional. Br’er (that is, “Brother”) Rabbit (see Figure 1-1) and his tricks and adventures appeared in an Atlanta newspaper in 1879. This work told the first of a number of stories about the tricky rabbit who outsmarts Mr. Fox, Mrs. Cow, and others again and again.

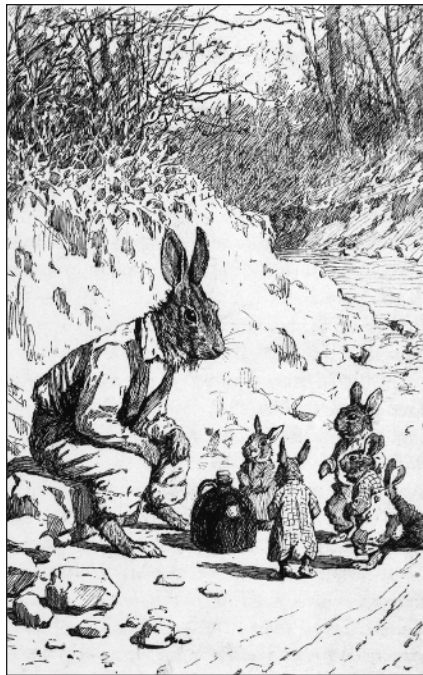


FIGURE 1-1:
Br'er Rabbit.

These stories, which are similar to and may be based on various African myths, were part of the folklore of the American Southeast before the Civil War and during the following period of Reconstruction. All segments of the population, particularly African American communities, enjoyed them. The Br'er Rabbit tales can be called myths because they convey important truths. For enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples, Br'er Rabbit represented a hero who won, again and again, despite being in the power of others.

When Joel Chandler Harris brought versions of these stories to the attention of a wider American audience, Br'er Rabbit became a shared American myth. Americans like to root for underdogs and to believe that a hero can use his wits and his initiative to overcome obstacles. Br'er Rabbit, the character, seems to have evolved from the stories of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, involving the tricky Wisakedjak (see Chapter 25), and stories from Central Africa involving the trickster named Uhlakayana (see Chapter 16). He represents truths that are important to Americans' ideas about themselves. He might be the (multicultural) mythological ancestor to Bugs Bunny.

