

Mythological Monsters

One of the most fascinating aspects of Greek mythology is that it is filled with all kinds of monsters. Recall that myths were stories made up by ancient people. As story-telling evolved, the storytellers began to make them more exciting. They had created superbeings (later evolving into deities), and had explained many different aspects of nature through their stories. They then added the element of entertainment to some of their myths, and began making up monsters.

The Greeks added monsters to their myths for many reasons. First, they were just plain interesting! What child doesn't like a good scary monster story? More importantly, however, monsters became a way for humans to prove themselves in the stories. Monsters could also be used by the deities to test humans, or punish them. Many mythological monsters had a specific purpose, a task to perform.

There are countless monsters in mythology, and we can't study them all. We will concentrate on just a few of the more famous ones. Before we start learning about specific monsters, though, let's look at some basic monster characteristics. The dictionary defines a monster as: *any animal or human grotesquely deviating from the normal shape, behavior, or character*. Therefore, most people tend to think of monsters as ugly, scary, mean, nasty creatures. And a lot of them are! But not all monsters in Greek mythology fit that description. A good definition for a mythological monster is this: a living creature other than a deity, demigod (half deity, half human), human, animal, or plant. Recall that ancient people believed that monsters generally lived on Earth, not on Mt. Olympus, or in the Underworld. There are only a few exceptions.

The ancient Greeks took two things into consideration when making up monsters: 1) the monster's personality, and 2) how the monster looked.

Mythological monsters tended to fall into one of the following categories as far as their personalities were concerned:

Evil: Evil monsters were destructive in some way – destroying nature, hurting or killing others, etc.

Good: Good monsters were helpful in some way – protective, instructive, etc.

Neutral: Neutral monsters didn't go out of their way to either help or hurt others. They generally minded their own business and kept to themselves unless circumstances forced them to do otherwise.

The Greeks were very creative in imagining what their monsters looked like, too. They tended to create monsters in one of two ways:

Amalgamation: An amalgamation is a combination of two or more different species, including humans. Snakes for hair on a woman, or a man's upper body connected to a horse, for instance, are amalgamations, because they mix two different creatures together.

Mutation: A mutation is one creature whose body has been changed in some way. A dog with three heads, or a giant human with one eye, for instance, are mutations.

As we study the following ten monsters, we will identify each as good, neutral, or evil, and as an amalgamation or a mutation.

<u>Monster</u>	<u>Amalgamation or Mutation</u>	<u>Good, Evil, or Neutral</u>	<u>Information</u>
Harpy	Amalgamation	Evil	The first monster we'll learn about is the harpy. Harpies were horrible creatures mixing the aspects of a bird and a woman. Therefore, they are amalgamations. They were usually pictured as ugly old women with birds' bodies, sharp talons, and feathers as tough as nails. Arrows couldn't hurt them. They flew as fast as lightning. Harpies were referred to as "robbers," "snatchers," and "those who seize," because they would steal anything they could get their claws on, especially food. People could tell when a harpy was near, because they smelled horrible. They also spread disease wherever they went. Some myths say that the deities used harpies to punish crime on Earth. They were said to carry off the criminal to the Underworld, inflicting punishment and torture. Those snatched by harpies were never seen again. Needless to say, harpies were evil monsters.
Siren	Amalgamation	Neutral	Harpies were horrible birdwomen. However, there was another kind of monster that also mixed features of birds and women – sirens. Harpies were ugly and awful-looking, but sirens were a beautiful amalgamation. Myths say that there were three of them, and that they lived on the Sirenun Scopuli island. For reasons that are unclear, the deities had inflicted a sad and unusual fate on the sirens. Whenever ships passed close to their island, the sirens had to sing and capture the sailors' attention. Their singing was so beautiful and so wondrous that sailors who heard it couldn't resist getting closer to them. Enchanted, they sailed their ships right up to the island's coast, often wrecking on the reefs and dying either in the wreckage or drowning trying to make it to shore. Those who survived were lured right up to the sirens' feet, where they sat enraptured by the music. These sailors became so entranced by the siren song that they couldn't tear themselves away, and eventually ended up dying of starvation right there. This might seem to make the siren an evil creature, until you know the rest of the story. Prophecy said that if any ship could make it past the island without succumbing to the sirens' songs, the sirens would have to leap into the sea and drown themselves. So, they had to do what they did in order to survive. They didn't want to kill the sailors, but had to in order to stay alive themselves. This makes them neutral monsters. The myth of the siren gives us yet another example of language influenced by mythology. We actually get the word "siren" from these monsters. When we think of a siren (police car or ambulance, for instance), we think of a loud insistent noise that gets our attention and focuses it on a certain thing (either pulling over or getting out of the way). That's exactly what the siren song did to the sailors – got their attention and focused it on them.

Centaur	Amalgamation	Good	A famous Greek monster is the centaur. The centaur had the body and legs of a horse, with a man's torso sprouting from where the horse's neck would have been. This makes this creature an amalgamation. Many centaurs were wild and savage, but most were considered to be extremely intelligent, gentle, and wise. They were also patient and brave. They tended to keep to themselves, and interacted with humans only as teachers. They taught me how to ride, and more importantly, how to shoot bows and arrows. Centaurs were exceptionally talented archers. The Zodiac constellation Sagittarius is often depicted as a centaur archer. Centaurs liked to party, and would sometimes have a tendency to drink too much. Because of the knowledge and skills they shared with humans, they were considered to be a good monster, even though they sometimes looked very fierce.
Cerberus	Mutation	Neutral	Another famous Greek monster is Cerberus. He is one of the rare ones who didn't live on Earth. There is a myth that refers to Cerberus being overpowered and dragged up to Earth from the Underworld, but we'll talk about that when we discuss heroes! We know that Cerberus patrolled the banks of the River Styx for his master, Hades. He is a dog with three heads, making him a mutation. Some myths say that he wore a huge snake wrapped around his neck. His job was to guard the entrance to the Underworld, making sure no living mortals entered, and also ensuring that no shades would leave. No one was permitted into the Underworld unless they were a shade, but for different reasons, some living mortals would try to enter. Knowing that Cerberus was on guard, these mortals came prepared. Cerberus absolutely loved honey, and so mortals trying to get into the Underworld would bring some with them to bribe Cerberus into letting them pass. Cerberus would accept the bribe, and gobble down the honey. He would then also gobble down the person who had tried to bribe him! Only one living person was able to get past Cerberus and into the Underworld, and that person didn't use honey! Cerberus didn't go out looking for people to kill and eat; he only ate those trying to do what they shouldn't – get past him into the Underworld. Therefore, he is a neutral monster.
Chimera	Amalgamation	Evil	A particularly horrific monster that showed up occasionally in Greek mythology is the chimera. The chimera was a female fire-breathing monster said to have the head of a lion, body of a goat, and tail of a serpent or dragon. Most depictions of the chimera, however, show her as having three heads – goat, lion, and dragon. Because she is a mixture of these three creatures, she is an amalgamation. The fire she breathed was full of deadly fumes. She terrorized the lands, and killed and ate humans. Needless to say, she was a very evil monster. Today, scientists use the term "chimera" to refer to an organism composed of two or more genetically distinct tissues, an organism that is partly male and partly female, or an artificially produced individual having tissues of several species.
Cyclops	Mutation	Evil	Another mythological monster many people are familiar with is the Cyclops. The Cyclops was a mutation, a giant with a single eye in the middle of his forehead. The stories say that long ago they lived in the bowels of Olympus, creating thunderbolts for Zeus. But he punished them for some fault, and exiled them to a remote island. Once there, they forgot their smithcraft and did nothing but fight with each other for the herds of wild goats, trying to find enough food to fill their huge bellies. They loved storms, and often caused terrible ones. Storms meant shipwrecks, and shipwrecks meant sailors struggling in the sea, where they could be plucked out and eaten raw. The food the Cyclops loved best was human, flesh, making them a very evil monster, indeed.
Medusa	Amalgamation	Neutral	Most people have heard of Medusa. What many people may not realize, however, is that she wasn't always a monster. She and her two sisters were once beautiful women with gorgeous hair. They were so beautiful that Poseidon fell in love with Medusa, and romanced her in Athena's temple. This made Athena very angry, and since she couldn't punish another deity, she decided to punish the poor mortal instead. She changed Medusa's beautiful hair into a hideous nest of snakes. Some myths say that she also covered Medusa in iron scales, gave her clawed brass hands, sharp fangs, and a beard. To prevent Medusa's beautiful sisters from tempting other deities into dishonoring her temple, Athena also transformed them, and all three women became gorgons, amalgamations of women and snakes. These newly created monsters were so horrific that anyone meeting their eyes was turned to stone. Of course, the sisters could no longer live among other humans, so they moved to the ultimate west, near the ocean, and guarded an entrance to the Underworld. They couldn't help turning people to stone; it wasn't their choice. This makes them neutral monsters. One of mythology's most famous heroes, Perseus, ended up cutting off Medusa's head, and it's said that the winged horse Pegasus sprang up from her blood.
Minotaur	Amalgamation	Evil	The Minotaur is another mythological monster many people have heard of. This amalgamation had the head and shoulders of a bull and the body of a man. Myths say that it was the terrible and hateful offspring of a queen who, under a spell, had fallen in love with a huge white bull. The queen's husband, the king, had a great labyrinth built, and imprisoned his wife's horrible child inside it. For political reasons, every year fourteen young children from another city-state (Athens) were sent into the labyrinth to be sacrificed to the minotaur, who killed and ate them. This evil monster was eventually killed by another famous Greek hero, Theseus.
Griffin	Amalgamation	Neutral	Griffins were huge and powerful beasts, amalgamated creatures combining the face, beak, talons, and wings of an eagle with the body of a lion. These winged monsters would find gold in the mountains and build nests of it. Their eggs resembled agates, and they guarded treasure, most notably emeralds. They guarded the golden mountains and could sniff out buried treasure no matter how deeply it was hidden. This lured hunters, so griffins kept a very close guard over their nests, killing and eating any men who came to rob them, and devouring their horses. They were neutral because they only killed those who came to take their nests, eggs, or treasure. They didn't go out looking for people to kill. Griffins were well known for their speed, ability to fly, and having eyes like an eagle, as well as the strength, majesty, and courage of a lion. No one could block a griffin, or cross its path unpermitted. They eventually came to be the symbol of guardianship and protection.
Hydra	Mutation	Evil	The final monster we'll discuss is the hydra. It was a mutation, a serpent with many heads. Myths disagree about the exact number of heads. Most myths say there were nine, while others cite up to a hundred. They all agree, however, that as soon as one head was beaten down or chopped off, two more instantly grew in its place. The hydra lived in swamps and would ravage herds and crops, causing the villagers nearby to starve to death. Its breath was so poisonous that whoever smelled it fell dead. It was often hunted by mortal heroes, for its blood was also poisonous and could be used to dip the tips of arrows in. Most who hunted it ended up being killed by this evil monster. Eventually, Hercules was able to defeat it.