

Assignment 1 reading selection

What is mythology?

Mythology is the study of myths. What, then, is a myth? According to dictionary.com, a myth is “A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society.

In ancient times, the study of science had not yet evolved to explain things that happened in the natural world. Simple things like night and day, natural disasters, crops ripening, etc., were mysteries to ancient people. They couldn't understand what caused these things, or why they happened. So (a. they made up stories to explain them). These (b. stories often involved supernatural beings who were responsible for acts of nature). Eventually these (c. supernatural beings developed in the stories into gods and goddesses (deities),) and (d. the stories themselves evolved into a belief system, or religion).

Myths, then, are (a. stories) (b. ancient people made up) (c. to explain things in nature) (d. they didn't understand). We will be concentrating our study of mythology on the ancient belief system of the Greek and Roman people.

Why should we study mythology?

Much of our language today is derived from the names of people, places, and things found in Greek and Roman mythology. For example, our word “cereal” is taken from the Roman name of the goddess Ceres, who ruled over farming, wheats, and grains. The “Olympics” is taken from the word Mt. Olympus, which is where the mythological deities lived. The phrase “wise as an owl” is derived from the goddess of wisdom, Athena, whose symbol was an owl. We will look at many more examples during our study.

Studying mythology will give us an understanding of how many of the words and phrases we use in everyday life came about, and what they are based on.

Additionally, many scientific names and concepts are based on Greek and Roman mythology. This is interesting because when the myths were first formed, it was in part because there was no science to explain the natural world. As scientific understanding grew, scientists borrowed from mythology to apply names and labels to scientific terms.

One example of this is the names of the planets in our solar system. They are all based on either Greek or Roman names of mythological gods and/or goddesses.

Types of Myths

Remember that mythology is the study of myths, which are made-up stories. In Greek mythology, myths fall into one of two classes, either creation or explanatory.

The first type of myth is the creation myth. Creation myths were invented to explain the very beginnings of the universe, human beings, and deities. Generally, there is only one creation myth for a society. Therefore, in Greek mythology, there is one creation myth, and the rest of the myths fall into the other class, which we will discuss in a moment.

There is only one creation myth, but if you were to research it and look it up to read it, you might be surprised to find what at first glance looks like many different myths. If you read each closely, however, you would find that the basic story is the same.

Remember, myths were stories made up by a very ancient civilization. The stories were handed down for hundreds of years by word-of-mouth. Just like when you're playing the game Telephone, some details get changed as the story is told and retold and retold. However, the basic plot of the story remains the same. That is why there are often so many versions of the same myth.

The other type of myth is the explanatory myth. Everything else in mythology falls into this category. Recall why the ancient Greeks made up myths to begin with - to explain something that happened in nature that they didn't understand. That is the purpose of each myth - to explain something.