

Myth: a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief. It is distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons). Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. The term mythology denotes both the study of myth and the body of myths belonging to a particular religious tradition.

As with all religious symbolism, there is no attempt to justify mythic narratives or even to render them plausible. Every myth presents itself as an authoritative, factual account, no matter how much the narrated events are at variance with natural law or ordinary experience. By extension from this primary religious meaning, the word myth may also be used more loosely to refer to an ideological belief when that belief is the object of a quasi-religious faith.

While the outline of myths from a past period or from a society other than one's own can usually be seen quite clearly, to recognize the myths that are dominant in one's own time and society is always difficult. This is hardly surprising, because a myth has its authority not by proving itself but by presenting itself. In this sense the authority of a myth indeed "goes without saying," and the myth can be outlined in detail only when its authority is no longer unquestioned but has been rejected or overcome in some manner by another, more comprehensive myth.

The word myth derives from the Greek *mythos*, which has a range of meanings from "word," through "saying" and "story," to "fiction"; the unquestioned validity of *mythos* can be contrasted with *logos*, the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. Because myths narrate fantastic events with no attempt at proof, it is sometimes assumed that they are simply stories with no factual basis, and the word has become a synonym for falsehood or, at best, misconception. In the study of religion, however, it is important to distinguish between myths and stories that are merely untrue.

Myth has existed in every society. Indeed, it would seem to be a basic constituent of human culture. Because the variety is so great, it is difficult to generalize about the nature of myths. But it is clear that in their general characteristics and in their details a people's myths reflect, express, and explore the people's self-image. The study of myth is thus of central importance in the study both of individual societies and of human culture as a whole.

Relation of myths to other narrative forms

In Western culture there are a number of literary or narrative genres that scholars have related in different ways to myths. Examples are fables, fairy tales, folktales, sagas, epics, legends, and etiologic tales (which refer to causes or explain why a thing is the way it is). Even in the West, however, there is no agreed definition of any of these genres, and some scholars question whether multiplying categories of narrative is helpful at all, as opposed to working with a very general concept such as the traditional tale. Non-Western cultures apply classifications that are different both from the Western categories and from one another. Most, however, make a basic distinction between "true" and "fictitious" narratives, with "true" ones corresponding to what in the West would be called myths.

If it is accepted that the category of traditional tale should be subdivided, one way of doing so is to regard the various subdivisions as comparable to bands of colour in a spectrum. Within this figurative spectrum, there will be similarities and analogies between myth and folktale or between myth and legend or between fairy tale and folktale.

Encyclopedia Britannica

Functions of myth and mythology

The most obvious function of myths is the explanation of facts, whether natural or cultural. One North American Indian (Abenaki) myth, for example, explains the origin of corn (maize): a lonely man meets a beautiful woman with long, fair hair; she promises to remain with him if he follows her instructions; she tells him in detail how to make a fire and, after he has done so, she orders him to drag her over the burned ground; as a result of these actions, he will see her silken hair (viz., the cornstalk) reappear, and thereafter he will have corn seeds for his use. Henceforth, whenever Abenaki Indians see corn (the woman's hair), they know that she remembers them. Obviously, a myth such as this one functions as an explanation, but the narrative form distinguishes it from a straightforward answer to an intellectual question about causes. The function of explanation and the narrative form go together, since the imaginative power of the myth lends credibility to the explanation and crystallizes it into a memorable and enduring form. Hence myths play an important part in many traditional systems of education.

Encyclopedia Britannica