CHAPTER: 3
MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY

The science of medicine, they say, grew out of black magic. The horned witch doctor was the forerunner of our physicians and surgeons. His cauldron of crabs, scorpions, vipers, hyena's teeth and noxious weeds was the first laboratory, in the world; and out of it grew the science of chemistry and medicine. Similarly, art, religion and philosophy had a low origin in myths.

To a child, the stone over which it slips and falls, and the thorny bush on which it hurts its fingers appear to be beings with a malicious intent. It kicks the stone and frowns at the bush. We all remember our childhood days when clouds and rocks, plants and flowers could frighten or please us. We used to fondle, clothe and feed inanimate toys. Night had unknown terrors for us, and in spite of the assurance of our parents and nurses, we seldom ventured into the dark. Now, humanity in the lump can be conceived as an organism with a being, and the fears, hopes, desire and curiosity of the childhood days of mankind are embodied in myths and legends and have come down to us in traditions sacred and profane.

Man is curious by nature and seeks causes of effects. To us moderns, science has been able to give satisfactory explanations for the immediate cause of phenomena, although the ultimate cause, to be sure, remains an enigma even to the most erudite. Take, for example, the case of rainfall. He beheld the pleasant wonder of water falling from the sky upon the parched earth, causing vegetation to grow and clothe the earth in green. But where did the water come from? Air,
obviously, could not support water. Nor could his primitive mind trace any connection between clouds and the ocean. His brain worked in the narrow sphere of his own limited experience and he concluded that there was a solid world above, capable of holding waters, and the lord of that world, well disposed towards man, released the waters of the celestial lake for the benefit of humans. To worship him was the duty of grateful man. Thunder, lightning and storm proclaimed his prowess, and the rainbow, the sun, the moon and the star-studded heavens, the splendour of his abode.

We must remember that science is very young. As late as the fifteenth century when Columbus made known his intention to travel westward to reach the East and thus put to test the theory of a round earth, wise men thought him mad. Many kings and learned doctors refused to listen to him, and he had to go begging from one European capital to another for a ship and crew. So deep-rooted was the Christian belief in a static earth and a geographical heaven people by Cherubim and ruled by Jehovah, that when Copernicus (in the 16th century) proclaimed that the earth is mobile, he was persecuted by priests as a heretic!

Before Columbus, the world was not correctly mapped. Even the Greeks, the most enlightened of ancient Europeans, knew little about the world and its peoples. They were acquainted with the races that inhabited countries bordering on the Eastern Mediterranean; of other people, their knowledge was based on travelers' tales. Herodotus, known as the Father of History (5th century BC) gives us, in his admirable history of the nations, a detailed account of all the
peoples then known to Greeks; and if you read this book, you will get an idea of how little the most learned knew in those days, how credulous the enlightened were. He says that ants dug out gold in India, and that Indians murdered and ate their infirm parents in order to save the trouble of supporting them! In addition, it was the time when the Buddha's doctrines were gaining ground in this country! Herodotus had travelled through Asia Minor to Egypt and back to Greece, and was considered one of the most widely travelled Greeks of his age. Only gods and Titans could travel beyond the enchanted Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar). Jason's voyage to Media (Persia) was recorded as a wonderful adventure. Ulysses lost his way in the Mediterranean and Homer wrote an epic about it.

Such a world was a fertile breeding place for myths. The most fantastic tales about distant countries and peoples were enthusiastically believed by the ancients. If some sailor or shipwrecked mariner returned to his homeland after a year's adventure in foreign lands and gave his countrymen exaggerated accounts of the people he saw, his audience were eager to exaggerate them still more and circulate weird tales about Cyclops with one eye and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders. Even in our own days, common folk are not above believing strange stories about foreigners. The idea of mythmaking is real enough in was time when the lowest passions of man rise uppermost and enemies are depicted in the darkest colour. Readers are familiar with cartoons depicting enemy leaders as beasts, demons and incarnations of the devil. They are often spoken of as dragons or gorillas ravishing the fair maid Liberty. It is
also interesting to note that some pious men have identified Soviet Russia with the mythical beast in the Revelation.

Enlightenment, all told, has not kept pace with scientific progress, and modern man retains most of the traits and tendencies of his primitive ancestor.

Where thought and reasoning are undeveloped, impulse is unrestrained and imagination wild. To the primitive man and whole nature was charged with weird possibilities; the air was filled with spirits, and demons lurked in canvas and the hollow trunks of old trees. He fell down in terror before every grotesque shape. Thunder and lightning inspired awe and dread in him. Floods, droughts, earthquakes and other calamities were thought to be caused by malicious spirits who had either to be destroyed by benevolent deities or appeased by the sacrifice of victims. On the other hand, the spring breeze, flower-laden trees, seasonal rains, good harvests and other pleasant phenomena filled man with a sense of gratitude towards the benevolent spirits who were supposed to cause them.

As humanity grew, the collection of stories about spirits, good and bad, were enriched by legends of heroes who fought for the tribe and vanquished their enemies, and of sages who, by invention or legislation, advanced the cause of the tribe. These legends increased in number and variety and, in course of time, passed into mythology. Many of the gods and goddesses worshipped by man at present were once human beings who trod this humble earth.
Nor are all myths the result of ignorance, malice or hero-worship. Poetry too has enriched mythology. The ancients lived in intimate contact with nature and their life was not as artificial as ours was. In those days, there were no cities, machines and mechanized means of transport. The habitations of ordinary people were not proof against wind and rain. They were literally sons of the soil. They had no sound system of irrigation, and agriculture was dependent upon the precarious rainfall. Their villages had no lights in the night, and the wolf, hyena, tiger and other beasts of the night and predatory tribes appeared under cover of darkness to devour and loot. Before the invention of agriculture, the plight of man was still worse and he wandered from place to place in search of pastures and game. Nor was that the beginning of the adventure of man upon this earth. There was a time when he lived in caves without knowing how to lay a fire or forge a weapon.

Therefore, the ancient were Nature's children and their pliant minds reacted to the beauty of Nature in a degree not possible for us to experience. At the very dawn of history when man beheld the glorious orb of the day shedding an effulgent stream of light on all that exist, the night studded with myriads of beautiful stars, the crystal rills rumbling in the limitless forests, in the midst of wild scenery, when man beheld a storm spreading gloom all around, how a gentle breeze made all nature bloom, he very naturally became contemplative. Amazed and awe-struck at the sight of these phenomena of the natural world, he put to himself the question - what do these things reveal to me? What is the in working light of all these? To the so-called uncivilized man living in that far-off age of faith, this panorama
presented by the universe revealed the will of faith, this panorama
presented by the universe revealed the will of some unknown powers,
unknown to him yet guiding him.

It is rare for a word to retain two precisely opposite meanings, each being selected according to the beliefs and prejudices of the user. Myth is such a word. Thinkers of many different disciplines have found that at all times myth represents an absolute truth, affords insight into the indescribable realities of the soul, or, as Malinowski says, is not in the nature of an invention... but a living reality. Such vital interpretations look like winning the day, yet their victory is far from complete. Thus in the august pages of the Oxford English Dictionary myth is defined as,

A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events and embodying some popular idea concerning natural history or historical phenomena.¹

This supercilious O.E.D. attitude is conspicuously maintained in everyday talk and journalism.

The use of the term myth as synonymous with fiction comes to us from nineteenth-century positivism and rationalism. Comte's famous Law of the Three States laid it down that the nature of man's thought had at first been theological, then philosophical and was now entering its
rational scientific or Positive state of enlightenment. The most extreme of the rationalist interpreters was to be Max Muller who suggested that myth was a disease of language, an abnormality of the human mind caused by an inability to express abstract ideas except by metaphor. He saw it as a disease that was at its worst in the early stages of human thought, but which had never been completely cured.

Myth is an ancient traditional story of gods or heroes especially one explaining some fact or phenomenon. It might be a commonly held belief without any radical foundation. It also refers to a story with a veiled meaning that has taken roots in a culture. Although it is difficult to draw rigid distinctions among various types of traditional tales, people who study mythology find it useful to categorize them. The three most common types of tales are sagas, legends, and folktales.

When a tale is based on a great historical (or supposedly historical) event, it is generally known as a saga. Despite a saga’s basis in very distant historical events, its dramatic structure and characters is the product of storytellers’ imaginations. Famous sagas include the Greek story of the Trojan War and the Germanic epic poem the Nibelungenlied (Song of the Nibelungs).

A legend is a fictional story associated with a historical person or place. For example, many early saints of the Christian church are historical figures whose lives have been embellished with legend. Legends often provide examples of the virtues of honored figures in the history of a group or nation. The traditional American story about
young George Washington and the cherry tree—in which he could not lie about chopping it down—is best described as a legend, because George Washington is a historical figure but the story about the cherry tree is recognized today as fictional.

Folktales, a third variety of traditional tale, are usually simple narratives of adventure built around elements of character and plot—for example, the young man who slays a monster and wins the hand of a princess. The Greek tale of Perseus is a good example of this theme. He saves the Ethiopian princess Andromeda from a sea monster and then marries her. Folktales may contain a moral or observation about life, but their chief purpose is entertainment.

Myths may include features of sagas, legends, and folktales. What makes one of these tales a myth is its serious purpose and its importance to the culture. Experts usually define a myth as a story that has compelling drama and deals with basic elements and assumptions of a culture. Myths explain, for example, how the world began; how humans and animals came into being; how certain customs, gestures, or forms of human activity originated; and how the divine and human worlds interact. Many myths take place at a time before the world, as human beings know it came into being. Because myth making often involves gods, other supernatural beings, and processes beyond human understanding, some scholars have viewed it as a dimension of religion. However, many myths address topics that are not typically considered religious—for example, why features of the landscape take a certain shape. Don Cupitt defines the term *myth* in the following lines:
We may say that a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in certain community and is often linked with a ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time or in the supernatural world, or may deal with comings and goings between the supernatural world and the world of human history; that the superhuman beings are imagined in anthropomorphic ways, although their powers are more than human and often the story is not naturalistic but has the fractured, disorderly logic of dreams; that the whole body of a people's mythology is often prolix, extravagant and full of seeming inconsistencies; and finally that the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate.²

Myth has always had a very significant position in human psychology and society from its beginnings as primitive religious narrative to its recent adaptation as an aid in the exploration of the unconscious mind. The term Myth has often suffered from a wrong connotation. In general, discourse it stands for something false,
fictitious and far removed from reality and history. However, the psychoanalytical approaches to criticism have made it possible to evaluate the concept of myth afresh.

Today, myth need not be a blatant tale of some fictitious character belonging to fictitious past; however, it can be a memory of the past, told in a fictitious way.

A myth is a legend of natural up growth embodying the conviction of people as to their gods or other divine personages, their own origin and early history and the heroes connected with it, the origin of the world, etc. (corresponding to Hindu story as given in Purana.) It is the record of the experience of multitudes and generations of people. The myth expresses a general truth, acceptable to all. Myth is a story of legend handed down from olden times containing the early ballads of a race, especially explanation of natural events, such as seasons. To describe the sun as the Sun God driving the chariot driven by seven horses and clouds his pathway is a myth. To say that the Moon-God come down to earth in the form of a cock with Lord Indra to seduce Ahalya, the wife of Saint Gautam is a myth. Therefore, myth is a literary form, which contains a secondary meaning deeper than is evident from its surface.

Myths are deep rooted in the psyche of the whole society and they are created to serve some function or to explain the mysterious natural phenomenon. The divine myths explaining the natural divine powers are the reflections of human thoughts and superstitions. Myths were the symbolic presentation of primitive man's instinct that his work-a-way world was interpenetrated with a super-rational or extra-
rational activity. They were fabulous fictions, which revealed psychic facts. Modern anthology sees all religion, art springing, and growing from this primitive root of symbolic transformation. By his symbol-making instinct man's knowledge and experience of outer and inner world were projected into direct sensuous embodiment, giving them life and outline and meaning.

In classical Greek *Mythos* signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology - a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals - set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies - but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals. If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually not called a myth but a legend. If the hereditary story concerns supernatural beings who are not gods, and the story is not part of systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale.

Myth is an anonymous story, rooted in primitive folk belief, presenting supernatural episodes to explain natural events and phenomena. Myths attempt to interpret creation, divinity and religion; to explain the meaning of existence and death; to account for natural
phenomena; and to chronicle the adventures of racial heroes. Myths have less historical background and more supernatural elements than legends. They are less concerned than fables with teaching morality, and they are the product of a racial or tribal group, rather than the creation of an individual. Every country and literature has its mythology.

The German intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg in his famous book *Work on Myth* (published 1979, translated 1985) proposes that the function of myth is to help human beings cope with the inexorability of given reality, a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances and rationality; that myths evolve according to a *Darwinism of Words*, with those forms and variations surviving that prove able to cope most effectively with the changing social environment; and that myth is best conceived not as collection of fixed and final stories, but as a *work* - an ongoing and ever-changing process that is expressed in oral and written narratives and includes the diverse ways in which these narratives are received and appropriated.

*Myth* originally meant *speech* or *word*, but in time, what the Greeks called *Mythos* was separated out from, and deemed inferior to, *logos*. The former came to signify fantasy, the latter, rational argument. Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture* points out that myth is a drive towards a verbal circumference of human experience. It is the external presence in the psyche. O. R. Dathrone defines myth as
A story, which depicts men as gods.

_The Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia_ defines the term _myth_ in the following lines:

In its usual sense, traditional story concerning supernatural events and gods. It differs from legends or sagas, which record human doings, and from fairy tales or fables, invented to amuse or to teach. Association of myth and religion is close, and religious rites often rehearse events of a myth. Myths combine religious purpose with an explanatory one (i.e., mythmaker tries to interpret nature by personification). In 4th cent. B.C. Euthemerus called myths exaggerated adventures of real people. Modern investigation of myths began with Max Müller, who considered them linguistic corruptions. The allegorical interpretation is that myths were invented to point out truth but later were taken literally; the theological, that they are foreshadowing of Scriptures or corruptions of them. Sir James Frazer, in 'The Golden Bough', stated that all myths originally were linked with idea of fertility in nature. Most anthropologists now do not believe in one general theory for all myths,
but in specific explanation for myths of a single people. Myths have been widely used in literature—but those that are borrowed from old religions and those reshaped for the writer’s own purpose (notably in works of James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot)

Oyin Ogunba suggests that "the attitude of intellectuals to myths is more secular and more artistic than religions" and though the myths apparently tell the story of gods, "Whatever their disguises, these stories are usually human stories and their relationships human relationships."

*The Hutchinson Encyclopedia* gives detailed information in the following lines:

Genre of traditional stories symbolically underlying a given culture. These stories describe gods and other supernatural beings with which humans may have relationships, and are often intended to explain the workings of the universe, nature, or human history. Mythology is sometimes distinguished from legend as being entirely fictitious and imaginary, legend being woven around an historical figure or nucleus.
such as the tale of Troy, but such division is difficult as myth and legend are often closely interwoven.\(^5\)

Mythology has provided the starting point for many writers. English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's lyric drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is an example of the rewriting of myth (in this case, an attack on God as the oppressor of mankind). Norse and Germanic mythology provided the basis for German composer Richard Wagner’s operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen / The Ring of the Nibelung* (1876)

Ancient mythologies and their chief gods include those of Egypt (Osiris), Greece (Zeus), Rome (Jupiter), India (Brahma), and the Scandinavian and Germanic peoples (Odin or Woden). Mythology embraces the examination of these stories and how they relate to similar tales told in other cultures

**Development of mythology**

The great myths are poetic expressions of early people's profoundest intuitions about the universe and life; it has been suggested that to some extent a mythology is an essential background to the development of a culture. Anthropological studies made among primitive peoples have revealed that myths have an important social function in providing an explanation for the society and its institutions, such as the distinction between chiefs and commoners, or the possession of land or magical powers by certain families. Mythology is not, however, confined to an early stage of society, and remains visible in advanced civilizations in the form of folklore.
Early interpretation

The study of mythological belief was initially skeptical and critical, although Plato, while demolishing the ancient Hellenic mythology, declared that the philosopher would have to invent other truer myths to take its place, and tried to provide this himself in *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, and the Symposium. Euhemerus, a Sicilian philosopher living around 316 BC, argued that all myths were founded in historical events, the gods being deified warriors and heroes from remote history. As late as 1825, Müller in *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie* explained mythology as a disease of language, the names of the gods merely expressing natural phenomena.

Modern study

The late 19th century saw the development of the comparison and elucidation of world mythologies. Scottish historian and folklore scholar Andrew Lang, author of *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (1887), and James Frazer in his pioneering study of the origins of religion and sociology *The Golden Bough* (1890), interpreted mythology in terms of savage life and experience.

In 1931, the German ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt reviewed the various theories advanced to account for the origin of religion and its mythology in his *Ursprung der Gottesidee/Origin and Growth of Religion*. 
A characteristic 20th century interest has been to view mythology within a philosophy of symbolic forms, or as exemplifying a structured system of values and significations.

Classification of deities

The chief figures of various mythologies fall into well-defined groups. All systems include war-gods, water-gods, wind-gods, and gods of agriculture, gods of the hunt, gods of death, and many other deities attributed to aspects of common human concern. Many deities have more than one function; such as war-gods who are also gods of agriculture. Deities of death frequently preside over agriculture as the seed grows from their subterranean domain.

Cosmogony

An important aspect of mythology deals with the primitive notion of the world, its creation, and the origin of man. There is a remarkable likeness between cosmological myths in all parts of the world.

Myths are generally dateless, transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth, often retaining the kernel but undergoing transformation in details. Whether such people as found in the myths, really existed or not may be a moot point. What is important is the nature of a myth's basic content in which human wishes find both expression and fulfillment. The 'unhistorical-ness' of myths finds affinity with the mind of man, which, according to Jung is also
'unhistorical' as far as his racial memory, is concerned. It needs to be pointed out, however, that this 'unhistorical-ness' does not mean rootless-ness. Nor do myths become irrelevant to contemporary sensibilities. But they make the very concept of time fluid.

*Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia* (vol. vii) explains *myth* in the following lines:

Traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the worldview of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon. Myths relate the events, conditions and deeds of gods or superhuman beings that are outside ordinary human life and yet basic to it. These events are set in a time altogether different from historical time, often at the beginning of creation or at an early stage of prehistory. A culture's myths are usually closely related to its religious beliefs and rituals. The modern study of myth arose with early 19th century ROMANTICISM. Wilhelm Mannhardt, JAMES GEORGE FRAZER, and others later employed a comparative
approach. SIGMUND FREUD viewed myth as an expression of repressed ideas, a view later expanded by CARL GUSTAV JUNG in his theory of the "collective unconscious" and the mythical ARCHETYPE, that arise out of it. BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI emphasized how myth fulfils common social functions, providing a model or "charter" for human behaviour. CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS discerned underlying structures in the formal relations and patterns of myths throughout the world. MIRCEA ELIADE and Rudolf Otto held that myth is to be understood solely as a religious phenomenon. Features of myth are shared by other kinds of literature. Origin tales explain the source or causes of various aspects of nature or human society and life. FAIRY TALES deal with extraordinary beings and events but tack the authority of myth. SAGAS and EPICS claim authority and truth but reflect specific historical settings.
Myths come from racial collective unconsciousness and there may be real meaning concealed beneath its surface meaning. Mythology is a cultural document. Myths, however, can also be created for different or indirect motives. One group or class of people, or one gender can create myths to establish its supremacy and superiority over other groups, classes or genders. For example, in the Indian context Brahmins have created various myths to ensure their supremacy over other classes. They have created the myths of power and penance. Even Kshatriyas have also created and replied to the Brahmin myths by creating myths of their own supremacy. Parasuram (the 6th incarnation of Vishnu), a Brahmin who decimates Kshatriyas from the earth for at least twenty-one times. The study of Rama throws light on the war-like qualities of the Kshatriyas. Even in penance, we find the Kshatriya attempt to break the monopoly of the Brahmins and Kshatriya Vishvamitra ultimately being called Brahma Rishi. Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain* is the perfect example of the caste myths. The myths are created for ensuring the supremacy of Brahmins but unfortunately, they become hurdles in their own path and pursuit of happiness. Aravasu suffers because of his being a member of the superior class. Had he been of an inferior class he would not have suffered so much.

Myths of the gender bring about the superiority and supremacy of males over females. Most of these myths are focused on female chastity, virginity, purity, and sexuality.
Sitaji's Agni-Pariksha is a well-known example of this. Karnad uses one such myth in his *Naga-Mandala*.

Modern explorations of myths have completely altered the conceptions of their origins, nature and functions. Myth is no dead form, a relic of antiquity, an empty survival. It is true that the ancient stories that we call myths are primitive legends expressing man's existence. The mythical method is the presentation of experience in symbolic form, the earliest and still the most direct and immediate form of human expression. Long before man developed the power of logical discourse and intellectual interpretation, the material transmitted to his mind through his senses moulded itself into meaning the myth. It was the first step of primitive man 'towards order and form', the giving of imaginative shape and experience to the totality of his experience.

To some extent, modern man's worldly sophistication might have severed him from myths, but his primitive-perhaps congenital-interest in listening to stories has not waned; he has not been weaned off from the primary instinct of asking *what then?* Man's quest for knowledge and his unfailing interest in stories cater to a primeval desire to communicate concepts and ideas that often defy simple explanations.

It can be said that a mythology is a religion in which we no longer believe. Poets, however, after having ceased to believe in them, have persisted in using. The myths of Jupiter, Venus, Prometheus, Wotan, Adam and Eve, and Jonah for
their plots, episodes, or allusions; as Coleridge said, *Still doth the old instinct bring back the old names*. The term *myth* has also been extended to denote supernatural tales that are deliberately invented by their authors. Plato in the 4th century BC used such invented myths in order to project philosophical speculation beyond the point at which certain knowledge is possible. The German romantic authors F. W. J. Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel proposed that to write great literature, modern poets must develop a new unifying mythology, which will synthesize the insights of the myths of the western past with the new discoveries of philosophy and the physical science. In the same period in England William Blake, who felt *I must create a system of mythology*. He had himself created by fusing hereditary myths, biblical history and prophecy, and his own institutions, visions, and intellection. A number of modern writers have also asserted that an integrative mythology, whether inherited or invented, is essential to literature. James Joyce in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Eugene O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and many other writers have deliberately woven their modern materials on the pattern of ancient myths, while W. B. Yeats, like his admired predecessor Blake, undertook to construct his own systematic mythology, which he expounded in *A Vision* (1926) and embodied in a number of remarkable lyric poems such as *The Second Coming* and *Byzantium*. 
In the early stages of Greek civilization, as in other ancient cultures, the truth of myths was taken for granted. The Greek word *mythos*, from which the English word *myth* is derived, was originally used to describe any narrative. Early Greek authors who employed the term drew no rigid distinction between tales that were historical or factual and those that were not.

In the 6th century BC, however, Greek thinkers began to question the validity of their culture’s traditional tales, and the word *mythos* came to denote an implausible story. Greek philosopher Xenophanes, for example, argued that much of the behavior that the poets Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods was unworthy of divine beings. By the 5th century BC, serious Greek thinkers tended to regard the old myths as naive explanations for natural phenomena or simply to reject them altogether. Nevertheless, myths retained their cultural importance, even after they had come under attack from philosophers. The ancient Greek tragedies, which remained central to civic and religious life in Athens through the end of the 5th century BC, drew their subject matter largely from myths.

In the early 4th century BC, Greek philosopher Plato systematically contrasted logos, or rational argument, with mythos—which in Plato’s view was little better than outright falsehood. In his philosophical dialogue *The Republic*, Plato argued that the ideal commonwealth should exclude traditional mythological poetry because it was full of dangerous falsehoods. Plato himself nevertheless devised myths of a sort to explore such topics as the birth of the world.
and death and the afterlife, which in his view fell outside the boundaries of logical explanation.

After Plato, most thinkers either tried to apply reason to the supernatural elements in myths or interpreted them symbolically. Euhemerus, a Greek writer of the 4th century BC, traced the origin of the gods to the deification of human rulers by their grateful subjects. This explanation for the gods is consequently known as euhemerism. Philosophers known as the Stoics and—much later—the Neoplatonists interpreted myths as allegories (narratives that employ picturesque language and images to convey a hidden message). Even as classical Greco-Roman civilization went into decline in the early centuries AD, the older, more critical spirit of Xenophanes was kept alive by Greek essayist and satirist Lucian of Samosata. In the 2nd century, Lucian lampooned such myths as the birth of Athena from Zeus’s head, as well as the Judgment of Paris, which supposedly led to the Trojan War.

In the Hebrew tradition, the break from mythology took a different direction than it had taken among the Greeks. Here, the source of tension was not the incompatibility of myth and reason—as it had been with the Greeks—but the incompatibility of Near Eastern polytheism (belief in many gods) and Hebrew monotheism. Greek thinkers resolved the primary tension (myth versus reason) by identifying the divine figures in Near Eastern mythology as natural elements and forces, such as the sun and the wind. The Hebrew Bible resolved the primary tension (polytheism versus monotheism) by concentrating on the role of a supreme god and by minimizing or
eliminating the roles of all other characters that could be considered divine.

As classical civilization gave way to Christianity, Christian thinkers argued about the role of myth in their religion. The traditional myths had undergone criticism and reinterpretation by Greek writers from Xenophanes to Lucian, over a period of seven centuries. Most Christian thinkers found this philosophical critique—particularly euhemerism—useful in their struggle against pagan culture and its worship of many gods. They argued that the pagan gods were actually no more than human rulers who had been mistakenly deified by their followers. Some Christian thinkers, however, attempted to establish a parallel between Christian ideas and certain aspects of pagan mythology. In the 2nd century, theologian Justin Martyr drew a comparison between Hermes (the divine messenger) and Christ (the representative of God). In the 4th century, theologian Saint Augustine argued that Christians should utilize the traditions of the pagan world in furthering the Christian worldview.

In this spirit, pagan mythological themes were reinterpreted and used symbolically in early Christian art. For example, a common motif of pagan art was the figure of Odysseus bound to the mast of his ship so that he could hear the irresistibly sweet singing of the Sirens without danger of temptation. In Christian art, this motif was adapted to symbolize a soul bound to the wood of the cross, through which the believer enters the port of salvation. Other traditional pagan motifs that were used in Christian allegories include Helios on his chariot of
fire (Christ, the “light of the world” in biblical language) and the figures of Cupid and Psyche (Christ and the soul).

In the Middle Ages (5th century to 15th century) allegorical interpretation of the ancient myths predominated. Even the works of the ancient Roman poet Ovid, whose writings about the pagan gods were famous for their irreverence and bawdiness, received allegorical interpretation. For example, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* includes a story of how Zeus fathered Perseus by approaching Danae in a shower of gold; this tale was interpreted in light of the biblical story of Mary’s virgin conception of Jesus. The entire *Metamorphoses* offered a rich source of material for medieval Christian allegory, starting with its tale of the creation and universal flood, and continuing through the flight of Phaëthon (who foolishly tried to drive the chariot of the sun) to the long philosophical speech of Greek philosopher Pythagoras at the end.

Mythological interpretation in the Renaissance (14th century to 17th century) continued the allegorizing approach of the Middle Ages. An old idea that enjoyed a new vogue in the Renaissance was astrology, which associated the personalities of the pagan gods with the planets that bore their names - Venus, Jupiter, Mars, and so forth. In a more philosophical vein, the Neoplatonist thinkers in Italy - especially Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola - attempted to reconcile pagan mythology with Christian theology. Typically, however, Renaissance thinkers interpreted the material of pagan mythology in an imaginative rather than theoretical manner, drawing upon it for inspiration in painting and poetry.
During the Age of Enlightenment (17th and 18th centuries), with its emphasis on rationality, the allegorical interpretation of myths fell into disfavor. At the beginning of this period, myths were dismissed by intellectuals as absurd and superstitious fabrications, in part because of a climate of hostility toward all forms of religion. The so-called Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, in which the relative merits of classical and modern literature were debated, lent additional force to the devaluing of myths and myth making. French writer Pierre Bayle, in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Historical and Critical Dictionary, 1697), ridiculed the absurdity of the ancient Greek and Roman myths.

In the late 17th century, a different approach to mythology arose in the context of new information about myth-making peoples (especially those in the Americas). Europeans had become aware of these peoples in the course of the voyages of discovery of the 16th and 17th centuries. Working on the assumption that these cultures could provide insight into the experience of prehistoric societies, European scholars sought the origins of mythology in the 'childhood of man,' when human beings supposedly first formulated myths as a response to their physical and social environment. The studies made in this period were consolidated in the work of German scholar Christian Gottlob Heyne, who was the first scholar to use the Latin term *mythus* (instead of *fabula*, meaning 'fable') to refer to the tales of heroes and gods.

As more and more material from other cultures became available, European scholars came to recognize even greater
complexity in mythological traditions. Especially valuable was the evidence provided by ancient Indian and Iranian texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita and the Zend-Avesta. From these sources, it became apparent that the character of myths varied widely, not only by geographical region but also by historical period. German scholar Karl Otfried Müller followed this line of inquiry in his *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie* (Prolegomena to a Scientific Mythology, 1825). He argued that the relatively simple Greek myth of Persephone reflects the concerns of a basic agricultural community, whereas the more involved and complex myths found later in Homer are the product of a more developed society.

Scholars also attempted to tie various myths of the world together in some way. From the late 18th century through the early 19th century, the comparative study of languages had led to the reconstruction of a hypothetical parent language to account for striking similarities among the various languages of Europe and the Near East. These languages, scholars concluded, belonged to an Indo-European language family. Experts on mythology likewise searched for a parent mythology that presumably stood behind the mythologies of all the European peoples. German-born British scholar Max Müller concluded that the Rig -Veda of ancient India—the oldest preserved body of literature written in an Indo-European language - reflected the earliest stages of an Indo-European mythology. Müller attributed all later myths to misunderstandings that arose from the picturesque terms in which early peoples described natural phenomena. For example, an expression like *maiden dawn* for *sunrise* resulted first in personification of the dawn, and then in myths about her.
Later in the 19th century, the theory of evolution put forward by English naturalist Charles Darwin heavily influenced the study of mythology. Scholars excavated the history of mythology, much as they would excavate fossil-bearing geological formations, for relics from the distant past. This approach can be seen in the work of British anthropologist Edward Burnett Taylor. In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Taylor organized the religious and philosophical development of humanity into separate and distinct evolutionary stages. Similarly, British anthropologist Sir James George Frazer proposed a three-stage evolutionary scheme in *The Golden Bough* (3rd edition, 1912–1915). According to Frazer’s scheme, human beings first attributed natural phenomena to arbitrary supernatural forces (magic), later explaining them as the will of the gods (religion), and finally subjecting them to rational investigation (science).

The research of British scholar William Robertson Smith, published in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), also influenced Frazer. Through Smith’s work, Frazer came to believe that many myths had their origin in the ritual practices of ancient agricultural peoples, for whom the annual cycles of vegetation were of central importance. The myth and ritual theory, as this approach came to be called, was developed most fully by British scholar Jane Ellen Harrison. Using insight gained from the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim, Harrison argued that all myths have their origin in collective rituals of a society. This approach reached its extreme form in the so-called functionalism of British anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who held that every myth implies a ritual, and every ritual implies a myth.
Most analyses of myths in the 18th and 19th centuries showed a tendency to reduce myths to some essential core—whether the seasonal cycles of nature, historical circumstances, or ritual. That core supposedly remained once the fanciful elements of the narratives had been stripped away. In the 20th century, investigators began to pay closer attention to the content of the narratives themselves. Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud held that myths-like dreams-condense the material of experience and represent it in symbols. Freud’s pupil Carl Jung took this psychological approach in a different direction. Jung viewed myths not as relics of the infancy of the human race, but as revelations of humanity’s tendency to draw on a collective store of what he called archetypes - a set of patterns in the unconscious mind that people in all cultures express through similar images and symbols. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that the primary function of myths is to resolve contradictions between such basic sets of opposites as life and death, nature and culture, and self and society.

What has become clear is that myth making is an extremely varied and complex human activity. As in other creative activities, an enormous number of social, environmental, and personal factors come into play that make it difficult to summarize or explain myth-making from a single vantage point. While every theory offers something illuminating and useful to the understanding of some myths or mythological traditions, it seems unlikely that anyone will ever devise a theory that accounts for every type of tale that is classified as myth.

Mythology has exerted a pervasive influence on the arts in all parts of the world from the earliest times. In the Americas, people
expressed mythological themes using materials such as sand (in the sand paintings of the Navajo) and stone (in the jade masks of the Olmec). In Oceania, wood was a preferred material, used to created sculptures and masks. The indigenous peoples of Central and South America used ceramics for funerary urns and sculptures of gods and mythological figures. In ancient Europe as well, mythological themes were treated in a variety of media, including stone, wood, and metal.

Some of the richest artistic traditions involving mythology are found in the cultures of West Africa. Particularly prominent in sculpture are the Nommo, celestial twins whose representations can be studied both in the way they have changed over time and in the way they vary across cultures. Despite the artistic value of pieces inspired by myth, it is misleading to isolate the art objects of myth-making cultures from their religious and intellectual context. The statuettes and masks of the Dagon people, for example, do not exist primarily to satisfy an aesthetic impulse, but to serve as instruments in religious acts.

Even apart from cultures in which myth making is bound up with ritual, myths have provided a wealth of material for the writer and artist since the beginning of recorded history. The divine characters employed by Homer in his epics - principally Zeus, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo, and Ares - became the common property of poets throughout antiquity. In addition, Greek writers of tragedy drew upon the traditional body of myth to create such human characters as Agamemnon and Clytemnestra (in the Oresteia of
Aeschylus); Antigone (in the play of the same name by Sophocles); and Electra (in the plays by Sophocles and Euripides).

The gods have also provided inspiration to many visual artists through the centuries. As an ideal of masculine beauty, Apollo figures prominently in artworks of all periods. The most famous representation of Apollo is the *Apollo Belvedere*, an ancient Roman sculpture copied from a Greek original, in the Vatican Museum in Rome. Many artists of the Renaissance and the Baroque Era (1600 to 1750) represented Apollo as well. The goddess Venus, equally renowned for beauty, has inspired many artists since ancient times. Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli copied an ancient sculpture in his famous painting *Birth of Venus* (after 1482, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy).

In literature and music, the debt to mythological themes is equally pronounced. Antigone, a daughter of Oedipus, became famous in the play by Sophocles, which portrays the conflict between obedience to the laws of the state and to the higher laws of the gods. Among those who later used themes from her life are French playwrights Jean Cocteau (*Antigone*, 1922) and Jean Anouilh (*Antigone*, 1942) and German playwright Bertolt Brecht (*Antigone*, 1948). Electra, the unhappy daughter of Agamemnon who seeks to avenge her father’s murder, has been the subject of plays by French playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (*The Flies*, 1943) and American playwright Eugene O’Neill (*Mourning Becomes Elektra*, 1931), and of a celebrated opera by German composer Richard Strauss (*Elektra*, 1909). It is no exaggeration to say that art, music, and literature
throughout the world would be unimaginably different without the influence of mythology.

Myth is both true and false at the same time. Therefore, to get at the truth contained in it one must always be prepared to accept the fact that myth, in certain respect, is a deception. It is used in all the arts, but itself is not art. It promises more. Its methods and functions are different. It is actually form of expression, which reveals a process of thought and feeling - man's awareness of and response to the universe, his fellowmen, and his separate being. It is a dramatic projection of fears and desires undiscoverable and inexpressible in any other way. The limits of individual life are defined with its opening up the boundless reaches of man's vision.

A large number of modern writers have employed myth and legends to convey their sense and view of life. In a way, this practice itself, like myth, is a recurrent pattern. In ancient India and Greece, myths served as the source material for drama and the re-telling or the re-enactment of old myths in modern terms underlines the universality of the experience that is embodied in these stories. Myth, says Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture*, is a drive towards a verbal circumference of human experience. Myth and Magic are closely allied; both are psychic phenomena. If myth is the eternal present in the psyche-Frye calls it the language of the present tense, Purana in Sanskrit means 'though old, ever
new', \textit{(Pura api navam)}, or 'old becomes new' \textit{(pura navam bhavai iti)} - Magic is the manipulation of psychic action.

\textbf{Origin of Myths}

Numerous theories exist as to the origin of myths, and most of them are to a greater or less extent tenable; here the main difficulty and confusion arise from the indiscriminate way in which one theory or another has been applied as a kind of universal key to solve all mythological problems. Most myths, and still most gods and other mythical personages, are of highly complex character, and are compounded of elements varying in origin as well as in stage of mythical development. Myths may therefore be classified, according to not only the phenomena, actions, or beliefs with which they are associated, but also according to the origin of the ideas, which they express.

\textbf{1 Meteorological:}

The tendency in a primitive age, to assign a personal existence to the sun, the moon, and other heavenly bodies has already been noticed. The stories that are told about them are for the most part such as might be told about any other god or hero, and give little scope to the elaborate allegorical or figurative interpretations that were applied too literally by Max Müller and other advocates of the 'solar myth.'

\textbf{2 Physical:}

This class corresponds to the myths connected with various natural phenomena, and need not here be further commented on.
3 Rituals:

Many myths originate in the explanation of ritual practices. The value of a ritual custom in preserving the tradition of some event is fully recognized; and a similar origin comes, partly by analogy, to be assigned too many practices, which had their origin in magic rites or other different sources. For instance, it was the custom for the Greek women of Thebes and other towns to conduct nightly dances on the mountains in honour of Dionysus at certain seasons; and hence arose the story that the god himself had once led his Menands over Citheron. Again, the common custom of celebrating annually in spring the departure or death and resurrection or return of a person representing the spirit of the year or of vegetation led to the growth of such beautiful myths as that of the loss and return of Persephone. It is difficult to set a limit to this influence of ritual on myth, for even in cases where the myth has a different origin the manner in which it is celebrated or commemorated often comes to react upon the tale itself.

4 Historical or Euhemeristic:

The philosopher Euhemerus, towards the end of the 4th century B.C., made the extreme application of this theory. He maintained that all myth was of historical origin, and that the gods were men who had performed great exploits or conferred benefits upon their fellows. In proof, he quoted the grave of Zens shown in Crete. The theory was recently rehabilitated by Herbert Spencer's attempt to drive religion from ancestor; but mythologists except within certain limits would not now accept it. We have already noticed that tales of historical events of persons often show mythical accretions or transformations.
However, the great mass of mythology cannot be explained as transmuted history.

5 Artistic:

When artistic representation of mythical subject exists, they often have considerable influence on the form of myths. The mixed Oriental monsters, which we know as sphinx and siren, e.g., were borrowed by Greek art merely as decorative types. There is no reason to suppose that even in the time of Homer these monsters were thought of under what later became their recognized forms. The representation of mythical scenes was often transferred from one tale to another, and so the artistic tradition came to influence the mythical one.

6 Ethical:

Some mythical stories seem either in origin or in form to be mainly ethical in character, to be, in short, tales with a moral. Aesop’s ‘Fables’ offer a familiar example; but it is uncertain how far these are of a traditional character. The same doubt occurs in other cases, such as the myth of the choice of Heracles. Though such myths usually have an artificial appearance, some of them may be of a primitive origin, especially those that tell of retribution following the breach of some divinely sanctioned law or custom, or of a prohibition to see or touch some sacred object.

7 Mystical or allegorical:
Mystical interpretations of myth have been prevalent at various times - e.g., among the Neo-Platonic school in Greece. However, such interpretations are mostly fanciful, and have very little connection with the origin of myths. It has been thought that such allegorical interpretations were taught in the Greek mysteries; but this is not now believed to have been the case, apart from the simplest and most obvious symbolism. Myths of an entirely allegorical character, such as that of Cupid and Psyche, are mostly of late origin.

It is clear that myths vary considerably according to the form in which they are repeated or preserved and the character or status of those who repeat them. The science of mythology is concerned mainly, if not exclusively, with myths of a genuinely popular character and of spontaneous growth, but these are often modified or transformed according to the media in which they are preserved. Thus official mythology, whether preserved in temple records and sacred books or in other works of a systematizing character, will tend to produce a deceptive uniformity by suppressing differences and variations which are often interesting and by passing over apparently irrelevant or unseemly details, which would often have given a due to the origin or meaning to the myths. The same is true to an even greater degree of the myth preserved to us in poetical form. The more serious poets often give them an ethical character, and use them to embody deep religious truths or subtle studies of character; others use them freely as themes for imaginative embroidery, so that it is difficult to distinguish the myth itself from mere fiction. Plato's rejection of the unworthy stories of the gods from his ideal state shows what treatment of mythology we must expect from philosophers; we have already
noticed the fanciful methods of interpretation of the Neo-Platonists, and the later artificial allegories. On the other hand, some quite early speculations of philosophers, both in the moral and in the physical world, may have come to be preserved in mythical disguise.

The study of mythology is for all these reasons obscure and difficult, but, when rightly and cautiously pursued, it abounds with evidence as to the primitive aspirations and beliefs of mankind, and as to the various stages of moral and intellectual development.

**Mythology**

Myths have a meaning. Just as strata of earth give an indication to the life of the earth and even of the progress of life through prehistoric times, myths are thought fossils which teach us in allegories and symbols the story of cultures and civilization that preceded ours, and the attempts of primitive man to solve various human problems. As reason and science advance, myths lose much of their religious and dogmatic character, but are not discarded entirely as futile. In fact, they still find a prominent place in the emotional life of the community, in art, poetry and folklore. The cathedrals and palaces of Europe, and the murals, frescoes, paintings and sculptures in them are still a joy to the onlooker, be he Christian, pagan or atheist. The artists of Christendom have liberally borrowed from Greek and Egyptian mythology, and Madonna, the Queen of Heaven, the main inspiration of renaissance art, is traced to the Egyptian Isis. Of the extent, mythology has influenced art in India, every cave and temple and the idols and frescoes within, bear eloquent testimony.
Apart from its relation to art, mythology has a scientific aspect too. By study of comparative mythology, ethnologists have been able to elucidate many obscure points of racial migrations and fusions. The similarity between certain myths of different peoples inhabiting distant regions is striking. It is true that human nature is fundamentally the same, and similarity in expression of emotions and reaction to phenomena can be coincidental. However, there are certain analogies, which, by their very nature, point to something more than a coincidence. In the *Khandogya Upanishad*, for instance, there is the myth of the mundane egg: *The egg broke open. The two halves were one of silver, the other of gold. The silver one became this earth, the golden one the sky; the thick membrane (of the yolk) the mist with the clouds, the small veins, the fluid, the sea; and what was born from it, the sun.* Professor Max Muller observes that there is a Finnish myth of the creation exactly similar to this one, and maintains that such striking identity can scarcely be accidental.

Mythologists trace many Hindu, Greek and Scandinavian myths to a common origin. Philologists even establish etymological identity of many names of gods and goddesses. They surmise, with good reason, that the Hindus, Germans and Greeks had a common homeland whence their ancestors migrated in prehistoric times to different parts of the world, and that their common language and religion underwent many modifications by contact with new and alien environments. However, even in these modified forms, there are striking analogies, which establish a fundamental unity.
In function, the following Hindu and Greek (or Roman) deities are identical:

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<tr>
<th>Hindu Deity</th>
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<td>Indra</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
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<td>Surya</td>
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<td>Chandra</td>
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<td>Visvakarma</td>
<td>Castor and Pollux</td>
<td>Sri</td>
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<td>Ganesha</td>
<td>Janus</td>
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<td>Eros</td>
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Deities have different names and functions, and conclusions drawn from too great an emphasis on etymology or function can, no doubt, be misleading. However, it cannot be denied that there is considerable evidence in support of the hypothesis of a common homeland for the people now known as Aryans. While the existence of a common Aryan home is generally accepted in theory, scholars have not yet been able to locate it. At one time controversy over this subject seemed to shake the foundations of the learned world. The dissertations of the controversialists were not always in the best interests of science, or particularly ethnology, but often took the form of racial arrogance and violent personal attacks. Practically every Aryan scholar claimed the common homeland for his own country and twisted and mutilated myths and proper nouns to fit in with his pet theory. Scholars who happened to be Semitic, on the other hand, took a malicious pleasure in ridiculing the whole things as a figment of the imagination. Because of this controversy, it became possible to make out a more or less plausible case for any part of the world to be
considered as the common homeland of the Aryans. When it came to this, Professor Max Muller, who was once an enthusiastic protagonist of the hypothesis, declared that the word 'Aryan' had only a philological and not an ethnological significance. By 'Aryan', he said he meant merely a group of languages allied to Sanskrit, and nothing more. The Arya Samajists, as we know, give an ethical interpretation to the word; according to them Aryan means noble and denotes no particular race. Thus, the common Aryan home was dissolved into air, fire and water.

Nevertheless, the idea of a pure Aryan race still holds sway among nations, particularly among Germans. Aryan myths indeed die-hard.

Another analogy that interests students of comparative mythology is that of the Egyptian to the Indian mythological system. Not only many myths, but also even manners and usages are found common to ancient Egyptians and Indians. Like Indians, The Egyptians had a sort of caste-system. Egyptians worshipped the bull Apis. Moreover, Nandi, Shiva's bull, holds a unique position in Hindu animal mythology. Osiris is identified with the Hindu Iswara. There is a striking resemblance between the legendary wars of the three principal gods in Egypt and India. As Osiris gave battle to Typhon, who was defeated at length, and even killed by Hours, so Brahma fought with Vishnu and gained an advantage over him, but was overpowered by Mahadeva, who cut off one of his five heads. In Egyptian cosmogony the sun-god Ra, we are told, shed tears of creative rays from which all beings sprang into existence; and in India,
we have the counterpart of the myth in Prajapati's creative tears from which all creatures are said to have come into being. The Egyptian Horus, like Brahma of the Hindu Triad, was born of a lotus. In the Chaos-Egg myth, Ra issues, like Brahma, from a golden egg.

There are numerous other points of contact between the two mythological systems. While parallels in mythological conceptions among races considered. Aryan can be explained by the hypothetical 'common homeland', Indians and Egyptians are ethnologically so different that we can only attribute this affinity to cultural contact through some unidentified medium. Probably both Egypt and Indian met in Babylon; or else, the priests of one country went to the other to be enlightened. Any way, we cannot scoff, as Max Muller does, at the conclusion of a scholar who expressed that 'Egyptian priests had come from the Nile to the Ganga and Yamuna to visit the Brahmins of India, as the Greeks visited them at a later time, rather to acquire than to impart knowledge.'

Although each religion claims for itself exclusive divine origin, classical literature and the sacred books of different nations reveal to us strange and striking affinities in thoughts, customs and cults. The ruins of Babylon enriched many an alien pantheon. Many Greek went to Egypt to learn science sacred and profane. Alexander's conquest opened up cultural contact between Greece and India. Before Alexander, the Persian king Darius had conquered Greece, and Cambyses Egypt. The Hebrews had learnt many things from Egypt and Babylon, though reluctant to acknowledge the source. Many of the present Christian mysteries and cults can be traced to the Manichees, a
sect that originated in Persia and became popular in Asia Minor and Mediterranean Europe. In ancient days, religious fanaticism was not as blind as in medieval times, and all nations borrowed ideas and gods more freely than in later times. Hence the fluidity of myths and legends.

Mythology is common to all races and every attempt to trace the pattern of man's development has to consider it. It is the expression of man's early efforts to find an explanation for the world he lived in, for the forces that governed his life—and his need to ascribe to them the good or evil things that befell him. When man gave names to these forces, he started on the path that led to the formalizing of belief and so to religion.

The gods, devils, heroes and monsters that arose from this process were as varied as the societies which produced them, ranging from the primitive to the sophisticated, and mythology was the mainspring of the thoughts that produced the lofty tragedies of Sophocles and the classic Hindu Ramayana no less than the folk memories familiar to us as Brer Rabbit or the Celtic stories of the Little People.

By Mythology is properly meant the scientific and historical study of myths; but the word is often used in a looser sense to mean the body of myths belonging to any people or group of peoples. Mythology is the body of myths of a particular culture, and the study and interpretation of such myths. A myth may be broadly defined as a narrative that through many retellings has become an accepted tradition in a society. By this definition, the term mythology might
include all traditional tales, from the creation stories of ancient Egypt to the sagas of Icelandic literature to the American folktale of Paul Bunyan.

Myths are universal, occurring in almost all cultures. They typically date from a time before the introduction of writing, when they were passed orally from one generation to the next. Myths deal with basic questions about the nature of the world and human experience, and because of their all-encompassing nature, myths can illuminate many aspects of a culture.

It is by no means easy to define a myth; but all myths seem to have certain characteristics in common. In the first place, they are traditional; this may mean that they go back to a mythopoeic age, which represents a certain stage in the development of human thought. However, some myths, such as those of Holy Grail or many legends of the saints have arisen in historic times. A traditional story must however, have had origins, often perhaps in some individual imagination. In such a case, it seems necessary that the story must so far express or coincide with the contemporary spirit as to be taken over by it and become common property. A myth is usually, directly or indirectly, in narrative form; its difference from ordinary tales seems to lay party in the fact that it is believed to be substantially true, at least by those among whom it is first repeated; it thus differs from a parable or allegory, as well as from a fiction or romance. Moreover, most myths, if not all, are anthological; that is to say, they grew up or were invented to explain certain phenomena, beliefs, or customs.
For mythology, by its explanations and illustrations of the nature and character of the gods or other powers, would help man to keep his relations with them on a right basis. The relations of mythology and ritual, or the various forms of religious worship, are also very close, since ritual supplies, the means whereby the desire contained in the above definition of religion can be effective; and these means evidently depend on the nature of the powers to be worshipped or propitiated.

In relation to magic, mythology serves a similar function, except that in this case the powers to be dealt with are of a lower and often of a malevolent order. Between mythology and folklore, it is not easy to draw a definite line. Much folklore is mythology in the making; much may be survival of broken down myth. In primitive ages, mythology and history are often mingled and many of the early speculations of natural science have been embodied in mythical form.

Classification of Myths

One of the chief problems that are met in the study of comparative mythology is the question how far similarity in myths must be held to imply a common origin, and how far such similarity may be due to psychological laws, to the tendency of human mind under similar conditions and in a similar stage of development to produce similar myths. In some cases, in European peoples, e.g., influence and reaction seem to offer the most probable explanation. However, when we find similar tales told to explain similar phenomena or customs in places so far removed from one another as Greece and Australia, direct influence from one on another seems
precluded. Here the analogy of art forms, and especially of decorative forms, is instructive, when we find identical patterns, arising independently from similar technical conditions, in early Europe and in America. It seems that in the case of myths also similar tales in remote regions may be of entirely independent origin. On the other hand, we often find side-by-side or even confused together in the mythology of the same people, myths belonging to strata remote from one another in the course of development. Such myths may either be survivals from a primitive or a more advanced stage. Any classification of myths is, for these and other reasons full of difficulties, and admits of a great deal of cross-divisions; it must in many cases involve a choice between various theories as to the origin of the myths. There are, however, many myths, which fall indisputably into one of the classes given below; they are classified according to the phenomena, institutions, or beliefs with which they are associated.

1 **Periodical natural changes and seasons:**

Myths are connected with the regular alternation of day and night and of winter and summer. The Sun and the Moon are usually, regarded as persons. In addition to tables connected with the daily course of the sun and his nightly voyage of return from west to east, we also find many others concerning his annual variations, and especially the winter and summer solstices. Rites on these occasions, often a magical character with fires and dances, exist throughout the world, and various stories are told to explain them. The god is often represented as absent or distant for half the year; but it is not easy to distinguish between such tales and those connected with the year
spirit', or the growth and fall of vegetation. The moon and its phases are commonly believed to have an intimate connection with the birth and growth of both animals and plants. Sun and moon are consorts in many mythologies, the sun being usually male and the moon female; but this relation is sometimes inverted. The stars also have a place in many mythologies especially in those of peoples who, like the Chaldeans in Babylonia, gave much study to astrology. The myths connected with the year spirit have attracted much attention from modern mythologies, and appear to be of almost universal diffusion; they also have an intimate connection with human activities, whether of a practical kind, as in sowing, harvest, etc., or in special rites or customs intended to stimulate or maintain the activity of nature.

These rites and the stories connected with them mostly represent the death or departure and the renewal, resurrection, or return of some person or persons on whose life and vigour the growth and fertility of crops, trees, and other vegetations are believed to be dependent. The tales of Adonis and Persephone suffice to show the kind of myth, which accompanies such rites. Sometimes the tale is not of death, but of departure and return, as in the celebration of the absence and return of Apollo at Delphi.

2 Other natural object:

It seems to be an almost universal tendency for primitive man to impute a personal existence to natural objects, especially conspicuous objects. In its most primitive form, the fetish or animistic stage, this may not lead to the production of myth; but the polydaemonic and polytheistic stages that follow lend themselves to extensive
mythological development. Trees, e.g., and bushes are in many parts of the world believed to be inhabited by beings who many either be identified with them or regarded as having a separate existence but taking refuse in them. The dryads and other tree-myths of Greece are a familiar example. Rivers are frequently thought as persons, and receive divine honours, and many tales are told of them. We also find that seem at first more like abstract impersonations, such as heaven and earth, the sea, etc. However, some of these appear to be quite primitive, though they do not often develop into myth., apart from their association with definite gods.

1 Extraordinary or irregular natural phenomena:

It is easy to understand how these, even more than the regular vicissitudes of nature, gave rise to stories explaining their origin or cause. Strange rocks or fissures were attributed to supernatural agency, just as they are still attributed in many countries for the gods of an earlier mythology. Eruptions and earthquakes are attributed to the straggles of subterranean monsters, storms and tempests to special gods. The winds, whether beneficent or maleficent, are in many places regarded as persons, often rushing on wild horses.

The tale of the universal flood and its survivors is known not only in Mesopotamia, but also in widely remote regions. Eclipses of the sun and moon are often regarded as due to a monster or dragon that tries to swallow them, and has to be driven away by human agency. Such swallowers, often of their own offspring, occur in many mythologies, perhaps not always due to a similar origin.
2 The origin of the universe:

Speculation as to the origin of the visual world occurs in many primitive mythologies; it varies between the two extreme notions of a creator existing independently of the world and fashioning all things by his will and some form of evolution. Many systems combine both theories in varying proportions. There often exists in the religion of primitive peoples a vague belief in a supreme god or all-father, which can hardly be derived from a more advanced monotheistic system. However, the creation of things is not as a rule attributed to him; it is usually assigned to some being or set of beings of an intermediated character. The notion of a primeval chaos out of which the cosmos is gradually evolved is not uncommon. Sometimes the earth is fished up out of the water by some creative agent; sometimes as in early Greek mythology, water is the origin of all, or else the marriage of earth and heaven.

3 The origin of the gods:

In many mythologies, both of a primitive and of a highly developed character, the gods, even if immortal, are not thought of as having always existed, and stories are told as to their origin, birth and family relations, and their substitution for an earlier dynasty of gods. Often these earlier gods have little mythological personality and are little more than abstractions, made up to explain the existence of their successors. Sometimes we find a belief that the present dynasty of gods, as it has begun, is also to pass away or be superseded; a familiar example is seen in the Scandinavian legend of the twilight of the gods. We also find tales of gods coming from elsewhere, as in the Greek
stories of the wandering of Apollo or of Dionysus. In some cases, these may actually record the route by which the worship of the god was spread; but there is here a danger of confusion with similar tales due merely to the annual vicissitudes of nature mentioned under (1).

4 The origin of animals and of mankind:

These two are often intimately connected, and the possibility of the one being produced by or transformed into the other is a common belief. It is especially found in connection with the system of totemism, in which particular animals or even plants are regarded as the ancestors or kindred of certain families or groups. A creator god is sometimes vaguely believed in; but the creation of living things, as well as of the universe, is very commonly assigned to some intermediate creator, sometimes in animal form; a well-known example is the mantis grasshopper, which is regarded as the creator in S. Africa. The tale of men being moulded of clay and then given life, known to us in Greece in the myths of Pandora and of Prometheus, is also found elsewhere. Another story of wide prevalence is that men were made from stones or rocks, as in the tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha, or that they sprang from the ground as the result of the sowing of some strange seed, such as dragon's teeth.

5 Transformations:

A belief in the possibility of transformation of man into animal and other forms is almost universal, and is implied in innumerable stories. For classical examples, we need only remember the title of
Ovid's 'Metamorphoses.' The power is commonly attributed to witches and wizards of all sorts, and also especially to sea-creatures and other elemental spirits, as in the case of Proteus and Thetis, and the tales in which men are supposed to change into a wolf, a leopard, or other beast of prey. The transformation of men or of beings in human form into trees or bushes is the basis of many tales; their transformation into stones is also common, and is often represented either as a punishment for some offence or as due to magic.

6 **Heroes, families, and nations:**

It is a usual thing for any family or tribe to trace its descent from a common ancestor, and traditions of relationship are often embodied in elaborate genealogies. Such tribal heroes are often regarded as capable of performing many things beyond the powers of modern men, and numerous and varied tales are told of their exploits in destroying giants or monsters, of their beneficial inventions, and of the social institutions which they founded. Tales of a heroic age may sometimes have no such racial relation; but it seems usually to be the case that the heroes of them are, if not regarded as ancestors, at least of a tribal or national character. Even the heroic saints who replace them in tales that are more recent are as a rule specially associated with some particular place or nation.

7 **Social institutions and inventions:**

All the arts of war and peace, the chief advances in civilization and social organization, and the material means by which they are attained are very commonly attributed to gods or to tribal heroes. The
gift of fire or the stealing of fire from heaven, attributed in Greece to Prometheus, is a subject for stories in almost every region of the earth; tales are also told of the invention of metal-working and other crafts. Customs and institutions, alike of primitive and advanced races, are frequently said to have been ordained by the gods or established by a legendary hero, and various tales are told both of their foundation and of the penalties that follow breaches in their observance.

8 Existence after death and places of the dead:

The belief in continued existence after death is almost universal, though this existence is often of a shadowy and unsubstantial kind. On the other hand, the dead are often thought of as having considerable power either for good or for evil, and are accordingly objects of worship. There are often found side by side the two inconsistent nations that the dead may be found or invoked near their tombs, where they are sometimes seen in the form of a serpent or other animal as well as in a human apparition, and that they go away to some distant and mysterious place of the dead. This is usually towards the sunset or the west, and is on an island or separated from the land of the living by an ocean or a river, which has to be crossed by boat. Charon, the ferryman of the dead, is familiar from Greek myth, and has his counterpart in many other regions. Sometimes the land of the dead is a dark and dismal region below the earth, approached by caves or chasms; many tales are told of men who have visited it and returned. Tales of the transmigration of the souls of the dead into men or animals are not uncommon. Tribal or national heroes are often believed to return and help their descendant or successors in times of
great stress. The belief that the happiness or misery of existence after
death depends upon conduct or ceremonial observance in life is very
widespread and many tales record instances to prove it.

9 Demons and Monsters:

The imagination of man often peoples wild or desolate places
with terrible or horrible creatures; it has been said that the savage is
never less alone than when he is alone; and even among civilized
people we often find an unreasoning fear of the dark or of the waste.
This often finds expression in the tales of beings that inhabit these
regions, whether of human or monstrous form. River also and pools
are inhabited, sometimes by nixies or water nymphs, sometimes by
horrible monsters. Floods and other disasters, such as the devastating
of the land, are often attributed to these monsters, and their destruction
or taming affords an opportunity for the prowess or power of heroes
and saints. The centaurs and satyrs too, are examples of wild creatures
of the wood and mountain. The struggle between gods and heroes and
such monsters often comes to symbolize many struggles between god
and evil, or between higher and lower ideals.

10 Historical events:

It is usually difficult and often impossible to draw any clear line
between history and myth. Many mythical traditions, such as that of
the seize of troy, are now generally considered to have a historical
bases; on the other hand, many historical personages, such as
Alexander in the East or Charlemagne in the West, have become the
centers of cycles of myths. The notion of what is historical evidence,
and also of what events are probable or possible, varies greatly from age to age and from place to place. In addition, while it does not follow that, because we find certain improbable or impossible elements in any story, the whole story is mythical, we are often confronted in such cases with the difficulty that what seem to us the probable and improbable elements often rest on precisely the same authority. It is impossible to lay down any rules for discriminating between historical and mythical tales; nothing is much help except a wide experience of such tales, coming from various regions and various strata of development. It is, e.g., often difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether some mythical heroes are early gods whose divinity has become humanized or actual men who have come to acquire divine or semi-divine honour. The question is of great importance in view of Euhemeristic theory, mentioned below, which would give history a leading place as a source of myth.

The above classification cannot of course, be regarded as exhaustive; but it includes most of the commoner classes of myths.

**Greek Mythology**

Greek Mythology is set of diverse traditional tales told by the ancient Greeks about the exploits of gods and heroes and their relations with ordinary mortals.

The ancient Greeks worshiped many gods within a culture that tolerated diversity. Unlike other belief systems, Greek culture recognized no single truth or code and produced no sacred, written text like the Bible or the Qur’an. Stories about the origins and actions
of Greek divinities varied widely, depending, for example, on whether the tale appeared in a comedy, tragedy, or epic poem. Greek mythology was like a complex and rich language, in which the Greeks could express a vast range of perceptions about the world.

A Greek city-state devoted itself to a particular god or group of gods in whose honor it built temples. The temple generally housed a statue of the god or gods. The Greeks honored the city’s gods in festivals and offered sacrifices to the gods, usually a domestic animal such as a goat. Stories about the gods varied by geographic location: A god might have one set of characteristics in one city or region and quite different characteristics elsewhere.

Greek mythology has several distinguishing characteristics, in addition to its multiple versions. The Greek gods resembled human beings in their form and in their emotions, and they lived in a society that resembled human society in its levels of authority and power. However, a crucial difference existed between gods and human beings: Humans died, and gods were immortal. Heroes also played an important role in Greek mythology, and stories about them conveyed serious themes. The Greeks considered human heroes from the past closer to themselves than were the immortal gods.

Given the multiplicity of myths that circulated in Greece, it is difficult to present a single version of the genealogy (family history) of the gods. However, two accounts together provide a genealogy that most ancient Greeks would have recognized. One is the account given by Greek poet Hesiod in his Theogony (Genealogy of the Gods), written in the 8th century BC. The other account, The Library, is
attributed to a mythographer (compiler of myths) named Apollodorus, who lived during the 2nd century BC.

According to Greek myths about creation, the god Chaos (Greek for “Gaping Void”) was the foundation of all things. From Chaos came Gaea (“Earth”); the bottomless depth of the underworld, known as Tartarus; and Eros (Love). Eros, the god of love, was needed to draw divinities together so they might produce offspring. Chaos produced Night, while Gaea first bore Uranus, the god of the heavens, and after him produced the mountains, sea, and gods known as Titans. The Titans were strong and large, and they committed arrogant deeds. The youngest and most important Titan was Cronus. Uranus and Gaea, who came to personify Heaven and Earth, also gave birth to the Cyclopes, one-eyed giants who made thunderbolts.

Uranus tried to block any successors from taking over his supreme position by forcing back into Gaea the children she bore. However, the youngest child, Cronus, thwarted his father, cutting off his genitals and tossing them into the sea. From the bloody foam in the sea Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love, was born.

After wounding his father and taking away his power, Cronus became ruler of the universe. However, Cronus, in turn, feared that his own son would supplant him. When his sister and wife Rhea gave birth to offspring—Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon—Cronus swallowed them. Only the youngest, Zeus, escaped this fate, because Rhea tricked Cronus. She gave him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes to swallow in place of the baby.
When fully grown, Zeus forced his father, Cronus, to disgorge the children he had swallowed. With their help and armed with the thunderbolt, Zeus made war on Cronus and the Titans, and overcame them. He established a new regime, based on Mount Olympus in northern Greece. Zeus ruled the sky. His brother Poseidon ruled the sea, and his brother Hades, the underworld. Their sister Hestia ruled the hearth, and Demeter took charge of the harvest. Zeus married his sister Hera, who became queen of the heavens and guardian of marriage and childbirth. Among their children was Ares, whose sphere of influence was war.

Twelve major gods and goddesses had their homes on Mount Olympus and were known as the Olympians. Four children of Zeus and one child of Hera joined the Olympian gods Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, Hestia, Demeter, and Ares. Zeus’s Olympian offspring were Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, and Athena. Hera gave birth to Hephaestus.

Zeus had numerous children by both mortal and immortal women. By the mortal Semele, he had Dionysus, a god associated with wine and with other forms of intoxication and ecstasy. By Leto, a Titan, Zeus fathered the twins Apollo and Artemis, who became two of the most important Olympian divinities. Artemis remained a virgin and took hunting as her special province. Apollo became associated with music and prophecy. People visited his oracle (shrine) at Delphi to seek his prophetic advice. By the nymph Maia, Zeus became father of Hermes, the Olympian trickster god who had the power to cross all kinds of boundaries. Hermes guided the souls of the dead down to the
underworld, carried messages between gods and mortals, and wafted a magical sleep upon the wakeful.

Two other Olympian divinities, Hephaestus and Athena, had unusual births. Hera conceived Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, without a male partner. Subsequently he suffered the wrath of Zeus, who once hurled him from Olympus for coming to the aid of his mother; this fall down onto the island of Lemnos crippled Hephaestus. The birth of Athena was even stranger. Zeus and Metis, daughter of the Titan Oceanus, were the parents of Athena. However, Gaea had warned Zeus that, after giving birth to the girl with whom she was pregnant, Metis would bear a son destined to rule heaven. To avoid losing his throne to a son, Zeus swallowed Metis, just as Cronus had previously swallowed his own children to thwart succession. Metis’s child Athena was born from the head of Zeus, which Hephaestus split open with an axe. Athena, another virgin goddess, embodied the power of practical intelligence in warfare and crafts work. She also served as the protector of the city of Athens.

Another of Zeus’s children was Persephone; her mother was Demeter, goddess of grain, vegetation, and the harvest. Once when Persephone was gathering flowers in a meadow, Hades, god of the underworld, saw and abducted her, taking her down to the kingdom of the dead to be his bride. Her grievestricken mother wandered the world in search of her; as a result, fertility left the earth. Zeus commanded Hades to release Persephone, but Hades had cunningly given her a pomegranate seed to eat. Having consumed food from the underworld, Persephone was obliged to return below the earth for part of each year.
Her return from the underworld each year meant the revival of nature and the beginning of spring. This myth was told especially in connection with the Eleusinian mysteries, sacred rituals observed in the Greek town of Eleusis near Athens. The rituals offered initiates in the mysteries the hope of rebirth, just as Persephone had been reborn after her journey to the underworld.

Many Greek myths report the exploits of the principal Olympians, but Greek myths also refer to a variety of other divinities, each with their particular sphere of influence. Many of these divinities were children of Zeus, symbolizing the fact that they belonged to the new Olympian order of Zeus's regime. The Muses, nine daughters of Zeus and the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, presided over song, dance, and music. The Fates, three goddesses who controlled human life and destiny, and the Horae, goddesses who controlled the seasons, were appropriately the children of Zeus and Themis, the goddess of divine justice and law. Far different in temperament were the Erinyes (Furies), ancient and repellent goddesses who had sprung from the earth after it had been impregnated with the blood of Uranus's severed genitals. Terrible though they were, the Erinyes also had a legitimate role in the world: to pursue those who had murdered their own kin.

Human existence is characterized by disorder as well as order, and many of the most characteristic figures in Greek mythology exert a powerfully disruptive effect. Satyrs, whom the Greeks imagined as part human and part horse (or part goat), led lives dominated by wine and lust. Myths depicted them as companions of Dionysus who drunkenly pursued nymphs, spirits of nature represented as young and
beautiful maidens. Many of the jugs used at Greek symposia (drinking parties) carry images of satyrs.

Equally wild, but more threatening than the satyrs, were the savage centaurs? These monsters, depicted as half-man and half-horse, tended toward uncontrolled aggression. The centaurs are known for combat with their neighbors, the Lapiths, which resulted from an attempt to carry off the Lapith women at a wedding feast. This combat was depicted in sculpture on the Parthenon, a temple dedicated to Athena in Athens.

The Sirens usually portrayed as birds with women’s heads, posed a different sort of threat. These island-dwelling enchantresses lured mariners to their deaths by the irresistible beauty of their song. The seafaring Greek hero Odysseus alone survived this temptation by ordering his companions to block their own ears, to bind him to the mast of his ship, and to ignore all his entreaties to be allowed to follow the lure of the Sirens’ song.

The Greeks had several myths to account for the origins of humanity. According to one version, human beings sprang from the ground, and this origin explained their devotion to the land. According to another myth, a Titan molded the first human beings from clay. The Greeks also had a story about the destruction of humanity, similar to the biblical deluge.

Conflicting Greek myths tell about the creation of humanity. Some myths recount how the populations of particular localities sprang directly from the earth. The Arcadians, residents of a region of
Greece known as Arcadia, claimed this distinction for their original inhabitant, Pelasgus. The Thebans boasted descent from earthborn men who had sprung from the spot where Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, had sown the ground with the teeth of a sacred dragon. According to another tale, one of the Titans, Prometheus, fashioned the first human being from water and earth. In the more usual version of the story, Prometheus did not actually create humanity but simply lent it assistance through the gift of fire.

Another tale dealt with humanity’s re-creation. When Zeus planned to destroy an ancient race living on Earth, he sent a deluge. However, Deucalion, a son of Prometheus, and his wife Pyrrha - the Greek equivalents of the biblical Noah and his wife—put provisions into a chest and climbed into it. Carried across the waters of the flood, they landed on Mount Parnassus. After the waters receded, the couple gratefully made sacrifices to Zeus. His response was to send Hermes to instruct them how to repopulate the world. They should cast stones behind them. Stones thrown by Deucalion became men, those thrown by Pyrrha, women.

According to myth, the various peoples of Greece descended from Hellen, son of Deucalion and Pyrrha. One genealogy related that the Dorian and the Aeolian Greeks sprang from Hellen’s sons Dorus and Aeolus. The Achaeans and Ionians descended from Achaeos and Ion, sons of Helen’s other son, Xuthus. These figures, in their turn, produced offspring who, along with children born of unions between divinities and mortals, made up the collection of heroes and heroines whose exploits constitute a central part of Greek mythology.
Myths about heroes are particularly characteristic of Greek mythology. Many of these heroes were the sons of gods, and a number of myths involved expeditions by these heroes. The expeditions generally related to quests or combats. Scholars consider some of these myths partly historical in nature - that is, they explained events in the distant past and were handed down orally from one generation to the next. Two of the most important of the semi historical myths involve the search for the Golden Fleece and the quest that led to the Trojan War. In other myths, heroes such as Heracles and Theseus had to overcome fearsome monsters.

Jason was a hero who sailed in the ship Argo, with a band of heroes called the Argonauts, on a dangerous quest for the Golden Fleece at the eastern end of the Black Sea in the land of Colchis. Jason had to fetch this family property, a fleece made of gold from a winged ram, in order to regain his throne. A dragon that never slept guarded the fleece and made the mission nearly impossible. Thanks to the magical powers of Medea, daughter of the ruler of Colchis, Jason performed the impossible tasks necessary to win the fleece and to take it from the dragon. Afterward Medea took horrible revenge on Pelias, who had killed Jason's parents, stolen Jason's throne, and sent Jason on the quest for the fleece. She tricked Pelias's daughters into cutting him up and boiling him in a cauldron. Medea's story continued to involve horrific violence. When Jason rejected her for another woman, Medea once more used her magic to avenge herself with extreme cruelty.
Jason and the same generation of heroes took part in another adventure, with Meleager, the son of King Oeneus of Calydon and his wife Althea. At Meleager’s birth, the Fates predicted that he would die when a log burning on the hearth was completely consumed. His mother snatched the log and hid it in a chest. Meleager grew to manhood. One day, his father accidentally omitted Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, from a sacrifice. In revenge, Artemis sent a mighty boar to ravage the country. Meleager set out to destroy it, accompanied by some of the greatest heroes of the day, including Peleus, Telamon, Theseus, Jason, and Castor and Polydeuces. The boar was killed. However, Meleager killed his mother’s brothers in a quarrel about who should receive the boar skin. In her anger Althea threw the log on to the fire, so ending her son’s life; she then hanged herself.

The greatest expedition of all was that which resulted in the Trojan War. The object of this quest was Helen, a beautiful Greek woman who had been abducted by Paris, son of King Priam of Troy. Helen’s husband Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon led an army of Greeks to besiege Troy. After ten years, with many heroes dead on both sides, the city fell to the trick of the Trojan Horse - a giant wooden horse that the Greeks built and left outside the gates of Troy while their army pretended to withdraw. Not knowing that Greek heroes were hiding inside the horse, the Trojans took the horse into the city. The hidden Greeks then slipped out, opened the city gates and let their army in, thus defeating Troy. The *Iliad*, an epic poem attributed to Greek poet Homer, tells the story of the Trojan War. The story continued with the *Odyssey*, another long poem attributed to Homer,
in which the Greek hero Odysseus made his way home after the Trojan War. Odysseus returned to his faithful wife, Penelope, whereas Agamemnon returned to be murdered by his faithless wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover.

Historians considered the Trojan War mythical until excavations in Turkey showed that there had been cities on the site of Troy and that fire had destroyed one of these cities at about the time of the Trojan War, sometime from 1230 BC to 1180 BC.

The deeds of the heroes Heracles and Theseus exemplify a central theme in Greek mythology: the conflict between civilization and wild savagery. Each hero confronted and overcame monstrous opponents, yet neither enjoyed unclouded happiness.

Heracles had been an Argonaut but left the expedition after being plunged into grief at the loss of his companion Hylas. In another story, a fit of madness led Heracles to kill his own wife and children. But he is best known for his feats of prowess against beasts and monsters, which began soon after his birth. The most difficult of these feats are known as the 12 labors, which are believed to represent efforts to conquer death and achieve immortality. Although Heracles died, his father, Zeus, gave him a place on Mount Olympus.

Theseus successfully slew the Minotaur, a monster that was half man and half bull. On his voyage home to Athens, however, he forgot to hoist the white sails that would have signified the success of his adventure. According to one tale, Theseus’s heartbroken father Aegeus, seeing black sails, believed his son had died, and committed
suicide. The Aegean Sea in which he drowned is presumably named after Aegeus.

No hero of Greek mythology has proved more fascinating than Oedipus. He destroyed a monster, the Sphinx, by answering its riddle. Yet his ultimate downfall served as a terrifying warning of the instability of human fortune. As a baby, Oedipus had been abandoned on a mountainside by his parents, King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes, because of a prophecy that the child would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Saved by the pity of a shepherd, the child - its identity unknown - was reared by the king and queen of the neighboring city of Corinth. In due course, Oedipus unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy, matching the horrific crimes he had committed with the equally ghastly self-punishment of piercing his own eyes with Jocasta's brooch-pins.

The Nature of Greek Gods and Heroes

In many respects, the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology resembled extraordinarily powerful human beings. They experienced emotions such as jealousy, love, and grief, and they shared with humans a desire to assert their own authority and to punish anyone who flouted it. However, these emotions and desires took supernaturally intense form in gods and goddesses. As numerous literary descriptions and artistic representations testify, the Greeks imagined their gods to have human shape, although this form was strongly idealized.
The Greeks, moreover, modeled relationships between divinities on those between human beings. Apollo and Artemis were brother and sister, Zeus and Hera were husband and wife, and the society of the gods on Mount Olympus resembled that of an unruly family, with Zeus at its head. The gods could temporarily enter the human world. They might, for example, fall in love with a mortal, as Aphrodite did with Adonis; Apollo with Daphne; and Zeus with Leda, Alcmene, and Danae. Or they might destroy a mortal who displeased them, as Dionysus destroyed King Pentheus of Thebes for mocking his rites.

Not all Greek divinities resembled human beings. They could also be uncanny, strange, and alien, a quality made visible in artistic representations of monsters. For example, the snake-haired Gorgon Medusa had a stare that turned her victims to stone. The Graeae, sisters of the Gorgons, were gray-haired old crones from birth. They possessed but a single tooth and a single eye between them. Typhoeus was a hideous monster from whose shoulders grew a hundred snakeheads with dark, flickering tongues.

Even the major deities of Olympus showed alien characteristics at times. A recurrent sign of divine power is the ability to change shape, either one’s own or that of others. Athena once transformed herself into a vulture; Poseidon once took the form of a stallion. This ability could prove convenient such as when Zeus assumed the form of a swan to woo Leda. Zeus turned Lycaon, a disrespectful king, into a wolf to punish him for his wickedness. The ability to exercise power
over the crossing of boundaries is a crucial feature of divine power among the Greeks.

Greek mythology also told how divinities interacted with heroes, a category of mortals who, though dead, were believed to retain power to influence the lives of the living. In myths, heroes represented a kind of bridge between gods and mortals. Heroes such as Achilles, Perseus, and Aeneas were the products of a union between a deity and a mortal. The fact that the gods often intervened to help heroes - for example, during combat - indicated not the heroes' weakness but their special importance. Yet heroes were not the equals of the gods.

With a logic characteristic of Greek myth, heroes typically possessed a defect to balance out their exceptional power. For example, the warrior Achilles, hero of the Trojan War, was invulnerable except in the heel. The prophet Cassandra, who warned the Trojans of dangers such as the Trojan Horse, always prophesied the truth but was never believed. Heracles constituted an extreme example of this paradox: His awesome strength was balanced by his tendency to become a victim of his own excessive violence. Nevertheless, the gods allowed Heracles to cross the ultimate boundary by gaining admission to Olympus.

The Functions of Greek Mythology

Like most other mythological traditions, Greek myths served several purposes. First, Greek myths explained the world. Second,
they acted as a means of exploration. Third, they provided authority and legitimacy. Finally, they provided entertainment.

Greek myths lent structure and order to the world and explained how the current state of things had originated. Hesiod's *Theogony* narrated the development of the present order of the universe by relating it to Chaos, the origin of all things. By a complex process of violence, struggle, and sexual attraction, the regime led by Zeus had eventually taken over. Another poem by Hesiod, *Works and Days*, explained why the world is full of trouble. According to the poem the first woman, Pandora, opened a jar whose lid she had been forbidden to lift. As a result of her disobedience all the diseases and miseries previously confined in the jar escaped into the world. Such a myth also makes a statement about relationships between the sexes in Hesiod's own world. Scholars assume that he composed the poem for a largely male audience that was receptive to a tale that put women at the root of all-evil.

One of the commonest types of explanation given in myths relates to ritual. Myths helped worshipers make sense of a religious practice by telling how the practice originated. A prime example is sacrifice, a ritual that involved killing a domesticated animal as an offering to the gods. The ceremony culminated in the butchering, cooking, and sharing of the meat of the victim. Hesiod recounts the myth associated with this rite. According to this myth, the tricky Titan Prometheus tried to outwit Zeus by offering him a cunningly devised choice of meals. Zeus could have either an apparently unappetizing dish - an ox paunch, which had tasty meat concealed within—or a
seemingly delicious one, gleaming fat on the outside, which had nothing but bones hidden beneath. Zeus chose the second dish, and ever since human beings have kept the tastiest part of every sacrifice for themselves, leaving the gods nothing but the savor of the rising smoke.

Myths charted paths through difficult territory, examining contradictions and ambiguities. For instance, Homer’s *Iliad* explores the consequences during the Trojan War of the Greek leader Agamemnon’s decision to deprive the warrior Achilles of his allotted prize, a female slave. Achilles feels that Agamemnon has assailed his honor or worth but wonders how far he should go in reaction. Is he right to refuse to fight, if that means the destruction of the Greek army? Is he justified in rejecting Agamemnon’s offer of compensation? One of this poem’s themes explores the limits of honor.

The dramatic genre of tragedy provides the clearest example of mythical exploration. The great Athenian playwrights of the 5th century BC - Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides - wrote tragedies that explored social questions by placing them, in extreme and exaggerated form, in a mythical context. Sophocles’s tragic play *Antigone* concerns just such an extreme situation. Two brothers have killed each other in battle: Eteocles defending his homeland, and Polynices attacking it. Their sister Antigone, in defiance of an edict by the city’s ruler, attempts to bury her ostensibly traitorous brother Polynices. Sophocles raises several moral issues. Is Antigone justified in seeking to bury her brother? Which should prevail, a religious
obligation to tend and bury a corpse, or a city’s well-being? The answers to these moral issues are far from clear-cut, as we might expect from a work whose subtlety and profundity have so often been admired.

Myths also had the function of legitimation. A claim, an action, or a relationship acquired extra authority if it had a precedent in myth. Aristocratic Greek families liked to trace their ancestry back to the heroes or gods of mythology. The Greek poet Pindar, who wrote in the early 5th century BC, offers ample evidence for this preference. In his songs, Pindar praised the exploits of current victors in the Olympian Games by linking them with the deeds of their mythical ancestors. In addition, two Greek city-states could cement bonds between them by showing that they had an alliance in the mythological past.

Finally, myth telling was a source of enjoyment and entertainment. Homer’s epics contain several descriptions of audiences held spellbound by the songs of bards (poets), and recitations of Homer’s poems also captivated audiences. Public performances of tragic drama were also hugely popular, regularly drawing some 15,000 spectators.

Our knowledge of Greek mythology begins with the epic poems attributed to Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey, which date from about the 8th century BC even though the stories they relate probably have their origins in events that occurred several centuries earlier. Scholars, however, know that the origins of Greek mythology reach even farther back than that.
Origins of Greek Mythology

Linguists have concluded that some names of Greek deities, including Zeus, can be traced back to gods worshiped by speakers of Proto-Indo-European, the common ancestor of the Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit languages. But it would be misleading to regard the people who may have spoken this language as originators of Greek mythology because many other elements contributed.

Archaeologists have shown that many of the places where mythical events presumably took place correspond to sites that had historical importance during the Mycenaean period of Greek history (second half of the 2nd millennium BC). Scholars thus consider it likely that the Mycenaeans made a major contribution to the development of the stories, even if this contribution is hard to demonstrate in detail. Some scholars have argued that the Minoan civilization of Crete also had a formative influence on Greek myths. The myth of the Minotaur confined in a labyrinth in the palace of King Minos, for example, might be a memory of historical bull-worship in the labyrinthine palace at Knossos on Crete. However, there is little evidence that Cretan religion survived in Greece. Nor have any ancient inscriptions confirmed that Minos ever existed outside of myth.

Scholars can demonstrate influence on Greek mythology from the Middle East much more reliably than influence from Crete. Greek mythology owed much to cultures in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, especially in the realm of cosmogony (origin of the universe) and theogony (origin of the gods). To take one example, a clear parallel exists in an early Middle Eastern myth for Greek poet Hesiod’s story
about the castration of Uranus by his son Cronus and the subsequent overthrow of Cronus by his son Zeus. The Middle Eastern myth tells of the sky god Anu who was castrated by Kumarbi, father of the gods. The weather and storm god Teshub, in turn, displaced Anu. Scholars continue to bring to light more and more similarities between Greek and Middle Eastern mythologies.

**Development of Greek Mythology**

Our knowledge of Greek myths comes from a mixture of written texts, sculpture, and decorated pottery. Scholars have reconstructed stories that circulated orally by inference and guesswork.

Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, stand at the beginning of Greek literary tradition, even though they almost certainly depended on a lengthy previous tradition of oral poetry. The *Iliad* is set during the Trojan War; it focuses on the consequences of a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, two of the leading Greek warriors. The *Odyssey* is about the aftermath of the Trojan War, when the Greek hero Odysseus at last returns to his home on the island of Ithaca following years of wandering in wild and magical lands. The Trojan War later provided subject matter for many tragic dramas and for imagery on countless painted vases.

Hesiod's *Theogony*, composed in the 8th century BC at about the same time as the Homeric epics, and gave an authoritative account of how things began. The creation of the world, described by Hesiod in terms of passions and crimes of the gods, is a theme that later Greek
philosophers such as Empedocles and Plato developed but took in new
directions. This connection serves as a reminder that mythology was
not a separate aspect of Greek culture, but one that interacted with
many other fields of experience, particularly the writing of history. For
example, in the 5th century BC Greek historian Herodotus employed
numerous themes and story patterns from Greek epics and tragedies in
writing his historical account of the war between Greeks and Persians.

Although the authority of Homer and Hesiod remained
dominant, the poetic retelling of myths continued throughout
antiquity. Myths were constantly remade in the light of new social and
political circumstances. The Hellenistic period of Greek history (4th
century to 1st century BC) saw many new trends in the treatment of
myths. One of the most important was the development of
mythography, the compilation and organization of myths on the basis
of particular themes (for example, myths about metamorphosis). Such
organization corresponded to a wish of newly established Hellenistic
rulers to lend legitimacy to their regimes by claiming that they
continued a cultural tradition reaching back into a great past.

Artists also portrayed myths. Statues of gods stood inside Greek
temples, and relief sculptures of scenes from mythology adorned
pediments and friezes on the outside of these temples. Among the
best-known examples are the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon in
Athens. These relieves include depictions of combat between centaurs
and Lapiths.

Other visual representations of mythology were more modest in
size and scope. The best evidence for the use of mythology in Greek
painting comes from painted ceramic vases. The Greeks used these vases in a variety of contexts, from cookery to funerary ritual to athletic games. (Vases filled with oil were awarded as prizes in games.) In most cases, scholars can securely identify the imagery on Greek vases as mythological, but sometimes they have no way of telling whether the artist intended an allusion to mythology because myth became fused with everyday life. For example, does a representation of a woman weaving signify Penelope, wife of Odysseus who spent her days at a loom, or does it portray someone engaged in an everyday activity?

The Greeks retold myths orally, as well as preserving them in literary and artistic works. The Greeks transmitted to children tales of monsters and myths of gods and heroes. Old men gathered to exchange tales in leschai (clubs or conversation places). Storytelling, whether in writing, art, or speech, was at the heart of Greek civilization.

Mythology formed a central reference point in Greek society because it was interwoven with ritual and other aspects of social existence. Yet the question of how far people believed the myths is a difficult and probably unanswerable one. Some intellectuals, such as Greek writer Palaephatus, tried to interpret the myths as having figurative (nonliteral) meanings. Writing in the 4th century BC, Palaephatus interpreted the stories of Diomedes, a king devoured by his own mares, and of Actaeon, a hunter torn apart by his own hounds, as concealing perfectly credible accounts of young men who had spent
too much money on their animals and so been figuratively eaten alive by debt.

Other thinkers, such as the 4th century BC philosopher Plato, objected to some myths on moral grounds, particularly to myths that told of crimes committed by the gods. Yet such skepticism seems hardly to have altered the imaginative power and persistence of Greek myths. As late as the 2nd century AD, the Greek traveler and historian Pausanias described the myths and cults in the places he visited as if they constituted a still-living complex of religious discourse and behavior.

The ancient Romans eventually took over Greek civilization and conquered Greece. In the process, they adapted Greek mythology, and myths remained a vehicle for reflecting on and coping with the world. In his poem the *Aeneid*, written in the 1st century BC, Roman poet Virgil used the theme of the wandering Trojan hero Aeneas and his eventual foundation of a settlement that became Rome. The *Aeneid* not only continues story patterns developed in Homer’s epics, but it also makes frequent and detailed allusions to the texts of Homer and other Greek writers. The long poem *Metamorphoses* by Roman poet Ovid embraces an enormous number of Greek myths, reworked into a composition that later had unparalleled influence on European culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Greek mythology survived during Christian antiquity by its interpretation as *allegory* (expressive of a deeper or hidden meaning). Early Christians incorporated pagan stories into their own worldview if they could reinterpret the story to express a concealed, uplifting
meaning. In the 5th century AD, for example, Latin mythographer Fulgentius gave an allegorical reading of the Judgment of Paris. The Greek myth told of a young Trojan shepherd faced with a choice between the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Each goddess tried to bribe Paris to name her the most beautiful: Hera offering power, Athena offering success in battle, and Aphrodite offering a beautiful woman. Fulgentius explained that the choice was actually a moral one, between a life of action, a life of contemplation, and a life dominated by love. The allegorical approach to the myths has never died out; we find it today in the writings of those who regard myths as expressions of basic, universal psychological truths. For example, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, borrowed from Greek mythology in developing his ideas of human psychosexual development, which he described in terms of an Oedipus complex and an Electra complex. Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that certain psychic structures he called archetypes were common to all people in all times and gave rise to recurring ideas such as mythological themes.

The influence of Greek mythology on Western art, music, and literature can hardly be exaggerated. Many of the greatest works of painting and sculpture have taken myths as their subject. Examples include the Birth of Venus (after 1482) by Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, a marble sculpture of Apollo and Daphne (1622-1625) by Italian baroque sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini, a terrifying Cronus Devouring One of His Children (1820-1823) by Spanish painter Francisco de Goya, and Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (about 1558) by Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel. In the Bruegel,
painting peasants continue with their daily toil oblivious of the mythological drama being played out in the sky above.

Musicians too, especially composers of opera and oratorio, have found inspiration in ancient myths. Operatic dramatizations of these stories begin with *Orfeo* (Orpheus, 1607) and *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (The Return of Ulysses to His Homeland, 1641) by Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi. They continue into the 20th century with *Elektra* (1909) by German composer Richard Strauss and *Oedipus Rex* (1927) by Russian composer Igor Stravinsky.

The impact of Greek mythology on literature has been incalculably great. In the 20th century the story of the murderous revenge of Orestes on his mother Clytemnestra (for killing his father, Agamemnon) has inspired writers as diverse as American dramatist Eugene O’Neill (in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1931), American-born poet and playwright T. S. Eliot (in *The Family Reunion*, 1939), and French philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (in *Les Mouches* [1943; *The Flies*, 1946]). Among the most notable of all literary works inspired by Greek mythology is *Ulysses* by Irish writer James Joyce. In this intricate novel, Ulysses (Odysseus) becomes Dublin resident Leopold Bloom, while Bloom’s wife, Molly, combines characteristics of faithful Penelope (wife of Odysseus) and seductive Calypso (a sea nymph who holds Odysseus captive on his journey home).

The influence of Greek mythology shows no sign of diminishing. Computer games and science fiction frequently use combat- or quest-oriented story patterns that have clear parallels in classical mythology. Greek myths developed in a specific ancient
society, but the emotional and intellectual content of the stories has proved adaptable to a broad range of cultural contexts.

**Ancient Roman and Greek Gods and their roles in Mythology**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Greek God</th>
<th>Roman God</th>
<th>Role in Mythology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aphrodite</td>
<td>Venus</td>
<td>Goddess of beauty and sexual desire (Roman mythology: goddess of gardens and fields)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>God of prophecy, medicine, and archery (late Greek/Roman mythology: god of sun)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ares</td>
<td>Mars</td>
<td>God of war</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artemis</td>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Goddess of the hunt (late Greek/Roman mythology: goddess of moon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asclepius</td>
<td>Aesculapius</td>
<td>God of medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>Goddess of arts and crafts, and war; helper of heroes (late Greek/Roman mythology: goddess of wisdom)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cronus</td>
<td>Saturn</td>
<td>God of the sky; ruler of the Titans (Roman mythology: god of agriculture)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demeter</td>
<td>Ceres</td>
<td>Goddess of grain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dionysus</td>
<td>Bacchus</td>
<td>God of wine and vegetation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eros</td>
<td>Cupid</td>
<td>God of love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaea</td>
<td>Tellus</td>
<td>Mother Earth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hades</td>
<td>Pluto</td>
<td>God of the underworld; lord of the dead</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hephaestus</td>
<td>Vulcan</td>
<td>God of fire; blacksmith of the gods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hera</td>
<td>Juno</td>
<td>Goddess of marriage and childbirth; protector of married women; queen of the gods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
<td>Messenger of the gods; protector of travellers, thieves, and merchants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hestia</td>
<td>Vesta</td>
<td>Guardian of the home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypnos</td>
<td>Somnus</td>
<td>God of sleep</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poseidon</td>
<td>Neptune</td>
<td>God of the sea and earthquakes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhea</td>
<td>Ops</td>
<td>Wife of Cronus/Saturn; Mother Goddess</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uranus</td>
<td>Uranus</td>
<td>God of the sky; father of the Titans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>Ruler of the Gods</td>
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Roman Mythology

Roman Mythology is the religious beliefs and practices of the people of ancient Rome. At first, the Romans envisioned their gods more as powers than as persons, and as a result, there is little mythology that is purely Roman. According to Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro, only after the Romans were exposed to Greek culture in the 6th century BC did they begin to represent their gods in human form. Over the last three centuries before Christ was born, writers such as Virgil and Ovid grafted the names and functions of Roman gods onto Greek literary and artistic tradition, creating a hybrid Greco-Roman mythology that has inspired poets and painters from antiquity to the present day. Most of what we know about ancient Rome and its mythology comes from the works of ancient Roman writers, from surviving artworks, and from archaeological findings.

The Romans believed that their religious practices maintained the pax deorum—or “peace of the gods” - that ensured the community’s continued prosperity. No private citizen was likely to undertake business of any importance without seeking the favor of the appropriate god, and the Romans held numerous public festivals to honor their gods.

The Romans did not develop a myth about the creation of the world itself, but they did attach great importance to the founding of Rome. Two distinct myths developed about the city’s beginnings: the story of the twins Romulus and Remus, and the tale of Aeneas.
The myth of Romulus and Remus is best known from its account in the work of Livy, a Roman historian of the 1st century BC. The twins were the sons of the god Mars and a mortal woman named Rhea Silvia. When they were infants, Romulus and Remus’s great uncle set them adrift on the Tiber River to die. The great uncle had stolen royal power from the twins’ grandfather and did not want the boys to survive to challenge his right to power. But a she-wolf found Romulus and Remus and cared for them until a shepherd discovered them. The shepherd and his wife took the boys in and raised them as their own children. Years later, after restoring their grandfather to his throne, Romulus and Remus decided to found a city of their own. However, the two quarreled, and in the ensuing brawl, Remus died. In some versions of the story, Romulus killed him; in other versions, Romulus’s followers did so. After his brother’s death, Romulus named the new city Rome and became its first king. According to Varro, the date that Romulus founded Rome was 753 BC.

The other legend of Rome’s founding traced the origins of the city to Aeneas, the son of the goddess Venus and the Trojan prince Anchises. Aeneas came from the city of Troy in Asia Minor, which according to tradition was conquered by Greek forces during the Trojan War. The war was fought in the late 13th or early 12th century BC, and it forms the setting for the epic poem the Iliad by the Greek poet Homer. Although Aeneas’s role in the Iliad is small, Roman legend holds that after the war he led a group of Trojan survivors who left Troy and eventually arrived at Carthage, where the queen, Dido, fell in love with Aeneas. However, he left her and traveled to Italy, where he founded Rome.
Scholars believe that the legend of Aeneas gained acceptance during the 3rd century BC, when Rome was developing as a nation and its citizens sought to enhance the city’s prestige by establishing a connection to the famous figures of Greek mythology. It was difficult, therefore, for later writers to reconcile the 400-year interval between the story of Aeneas, which took place in the 12th century BC, and the account of Romulus and Remus, which occurred in the 8th century BC. The poet Virgil resolved the problem in his epic the Aeneid, which describes Aeneas marrying Lavinia, daughter of the king of Latium, a kingdom that occupied the future territory of Rome. Through this marriage, Aeneas became the originator of a line of kings and a direct ancestor of Romulus and the Romans.

Most of the other early stories of Rome have to do with the traditional Seven Kings, who were the first seven rulers of Rome. One of the best-known stories about the reign of Romulus is the so-called Rape of the Sabines. According to this story, to ensure the future of Rome, Romulus and his band of followers needed wives who would bear children to ensure the future of the new city. They invited their neighbors, the Sabine people, to a festival and then kidnapped the daughters of the Sabines. A war broke out between the two communities, and peace was restored only when the Sabine women declared their preference for their Roman husbands. The Sabines then joined the Romans in a single community.

The second Roman king was Numa Pompilius, whom the Romans credited with inventing their religious institutions. Artworks depict Numa as a priestly figure with a long white beard. Legend tells
that the fourth king, Ancus Martius (whose name means warlike), conquered many neighboring towns and greatly increased Roman territory. The sixth king, Servius Tullius, developed the first census, or counting of the population and their property. According to tradition, Servius Tullius also built the first city wall.

The early Romans did not represent their gods in human or animal form, and the gods did not have well-defined personalities. Most Roman gods were, however, associated with particular places. For example, high hilltops and oak-groves were associated with Jupiter, the god of rain, thunder, and lightning. Any piece of land struck by lightning was dedicated to him. According to Varro, Romans worshiped their gods without images for 170 years after the city was founded. Only in the 6th century BC, under the influence of the Greeks and of neighboring societies such as the Etruscan civilization did the Romans first represent their gods in human form and build temples for them.

While the personalities of their gods were not important to the early Romans, they cared a great deal about the gods’ functions. Gods presided over every aspect of life and death, including the phases of the agricultural year. The Romans integrated their worship into the routines of public and private life. For example, the doorway of a house - an important threshold separating personal space from public space—fell under the protection of the god Janus, who was also the god of beginnings. The first month of the year, January, was named for him. The hearth, which served as the center of the home, was the
province of the goddess Vesta. A state shrine to Vesta featured a fire that was perpetually tended by priestesses called Vestal virgins.

Knowledge of early Roman religion is limited, but some evidence exists that the earliest Roman community had special reverence for the gods Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus. Jupiter was the Roman form of the sky-god whom the Greeks worshiped as Zeus. The Romans worshiped Jupiter as the special protector of the Roman state. Mars—later equated with the Greek god Ares—was a warrior-god whose sacred animals were the wolf and the woodpecker. Festivals in his honor took place in March and October and marked the opening and close of the military campaigning season. Mars also appears to have had some role in protecting farmers' fields. Quirinus remains a vague figure. The Romans associated him with the Sabine people, and he later came to be identified with Romulus, who had become a god.

According to Roman tradition, a dynasty of Etruscan kings ruled the city in the 6th century BC. During this period, Rome adopted a group of three Etruscan gods as the focus of state worship. Because the Romans worshiped these gods in a grand temple on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, they were known as the Capitoline triad. The triad consisted of Jupiter and the goddesses Juno and Minerva. At this time Jupiter was viewed as the sovereign, or head, of the Roman state. Juno was both the protector of women in marriage and childbirth and was the patron deity of several communities in ancient Italy. The Romans worshiped her under several names, including Juno Sospita (Juno the Savior) and Juno Regina (Juno the Queen). Minerva, who later came to be identified with the Greek goddess Athena, was the goddess of
handicrafts. Her temple on the Aventine Hill in Rome was a center for organizations of skilled craftspeople.

According to tradition, in 509 BC, the dynasty of Etruscan kings ended and the Roman Republic was founded. The republic was ruled by two chief magistrates, called consuls, who were elected by the people to one-year terms. During the time of the republic, the Capitoline temple became the most important public shrine of the Roman people and the focus of public worship. Each January, the new consuls offered sacrifices to open the New Year, and provincial governors took their vows before departing for their provinces. At other times, victorious generals led triumphal processions up to the Capitoline temple, where they offered sacrifices and gave thanks for their victories.

As Rome's sphere of influence expanded, the Romans encountered the older and richer religious and mythological beliefs of the Greek civilization, and the beliefs of other cultures of the eastern Mediterranean Sea region. Major innovations in Roman religious life occurred because of this contact, most notably the Romans' acceptance of gods from these other cultures. New gods and heroes were traditionally given temples outside the *pomerium*, the ritual boundary of the city, rather than in the city center.

Among the earliest of the Greek gods to be accepted by the Romans were Castor and Polydeuces, divine twins who were believed to have intervened in the Romans' favor at the battle of Lake Regillus in 484 BC. This battle marked an early victory for the young Roman Republic against a force of surrounding Latin peoples. Later in the 5th
century BC, on the advice of an oracle, the worship of the Greek god Apollo was introduced in Rome to avert a terrible plague. Apollo later became a symbol of Roman virtue and austerity. Other Roman gods that took on characteristics of Greek divinities were Diana (Artemis), Mercury (Hermes), Neptune (Poseidon), Pluto (Hades), Venus (Aphrodite), and Vulcan (Hephaestus).

The Romans also adopted Greek heroes into their mythology. Perhaps the best-known figure was the Greek hero Heracles, who became known in Rome as Hercules. According to Roman historian Livy, Hercules once stopped at the site of Rome before Rome’s founding, and there killed a monster that had terrorized the local people.

Rome also imported gods from other regions of the Mediterranean world, sometimes to fill particular roles. In 204 BC, armies from the rival city-state of Carthage, led by the Carthaginian general Hannibal, threatened to invade Rome. In this emergency, Roman priests consulted the Sibylline Books, which contained collections of oracles or prophecies, and recommended that the Romans begin to worship the goddess Cybele from the city of Pessinus in Asia Minor. To worship Cybele, the Romans dedicated a spot to her on the Palatine Hill in the heart of Rome. The Romans eventually defeated Hannibal.

As Rome expanded and became a hub of international commerce, more and more foreign gods found their way into the culture. Especially popular were the so-called savior-gods of religious orders known as mystery religions. Savior-gods such as Mithra, the
ancient Persian god of light and wisdom, offered the promise of individual salvation through the belief in the immortality of the soul. Mystery religions such as Mithraism were open only to the initiated. As a result, many people saw them as offering a greater sense of community than traditional Roman religion. Scholars have noted similarities between mystery religions and the early Christian church, which took root in the Roman world when mystery religions were popular and widespread.

A later development in Roman religion was the worshiping of emperors as gods. As the Romans expanded their holdings to the east, they encountered the phenomenon of divine kingship. At first, they rejected the idea that a human ruler should be worshiped as a god. But in 44 BC, Roman ruler Julius Caesar permitted a statue to be erected to himself bearing the inscription *deo invicto* (to the unvanquished god), and declared himself dictator for life. That same year Caesar was assassinated by citizens who were unhappy with his dictatorial regime and wanted to see a return to Rome’s earlier republican ideals. While Caesar’s heir, Octavian, took the name Augustus and made himself the first emperor of Rome, he also avoided any claim to divinity. In the first century of the Roman Empire, the idea of the divinization of emperors was often ridiculed. The philosopher and playwright Seneca mocked the imperial divinization of Claudius I as the Pumpkinification of Claudius.

As the government of the Roman Empire became more and more autocratic, giving rulers almost unlimited power, emperors eventually accepted divine honors, and sacrifice to the emperor came
to be required as a token of loyalty. The requirement of sacrifice became a significant source of conflict between early Christians, who resisted the practice, and the Roman political authorities who enforced it. The period of emperors being considered gods ended in the 4th century AD, when Emperor Constantine the Great became the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. By the end of the 4th century, Emperor Theodosius I, who was a supporter of orthodox Christianity, officially banned the practice of the old Roman pagan religion.

Because many of the early religious practices of the Romans originated in a period when Rome was a small, agricultural community, these customs reflected the needs and concerns of the farming community. Long after Rome had become a busy commercial center, the religious calendar of Rome continued to reflect the cycle of the agricultural year.

Romans worshiped their gods on both individual and communal levels. Each part of a Roman house had a god associated with it. The hearth was sacred to Vesta, and during the main meal of the day, people would throw a small cake into the fire as an offering to her. Roman houses had a penus, or storeroom for grain, over which gods called the Penates, presided. They also received daily offerings. Closely connected with the Penates were the household gods known as Lares, to whom families would pray and perhaps offer a small gift of wine or incense. The god Janus presided over the main door to the house. Janus was envisioned as a human figure that faced both directions at once and was thus suited to watch over the doorway. The
Romans believed that if they paid due respect to these gods each day, they could be confident of enjoying divine blessing for their daily activities.

Romans also paid respect to the gods of the fields. For example, the Terminalia was an annual festival at which farmers with adjoining property decorated boundary stones with garlands. Each family’s property was purified once a year in one of the oldest Roman festivals, called the Ambarvalia, in which families took part in a procession around their fields and sacrificed a pig, sheep, and bull and offered prayers to the god Mars for the health and prosperity of the fields, flocks, and family. After the sacrifice, they feasted and celebrated.

Each stage of life was also marked by religious observances. At the birth of a child, men would strike the threshold of the house with agricultural implements to ward off the wilder spirits of the fields. At puberty, a boy set aside the bulla, or protective amulet of childhood, and exchanged his boyhood toga for the toga of manhood. The modern tradition of the bridal veil goes back to the Roman practice of veiling a young woman who was leaving the protection of her father’s home for that of her new husband, and who was therefore in a temporary state of religious vulnerability. Similarly, she would be carried over the threshold of her new home to avoid the bad omen that would result if the newest member of the household were to stumble upon her first entry into the house. When someone died in a house, the corpse was removed feet-first to discourage the ghost from returning. At the festival of the Parentalia, in February, the living family members
would make offerings of flowers, corn meal, and wine on the graves of their family’s dead.

An important communal Roman religious celebration was the Lupercalia, held annually on February 15. The ceremony took place at the Lupercal, a small cave on the slopes of Rome’s Palatine Hill, where the Romans believed that Romulus and Remus had been suckled by the she-wolf. During the ceremony, two groups of young men sacrificed goats and a dog and then cut the goatskins into strips. Clothed only in these strips, the young men then ran a race along a specified course, tapping female bystanders with the strips of their goatskin garments as they passed. This rowdy festival was so popular that it was not abandoned until AD 494, well into the Christian era, when Pope Gelasius I replaced it with the Christian Feast of the Purification of the Virgin. The same pope also made the day before the celebration (February 14) the feast day of two 3rd century Roman martyrs named Saint Valentine, creating the basis for Saint Valentine’s Day. The modern holiday retains some of the fertility aspects of the ancient Lupercalia by its association with romance and courtship.

**Roman Mythology in Literature and Art**

After the Romans were exposed to the Greeks in the 6th century BC, the identities of the Roman gods and the Greek gods tended to meld into Greco-Roman combinations. For centuries, these deities and the stories told about them have inspired writers and artists.
Virgil’s poem the *Aeneid* was a literary celebration of the supposed Trojan origin of the Roman people. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil took Zeus and Hera, who the Greek writer Homer had earlier portrayed as somewhat petty and complaining, and transformed them into the awe-inspiring Jupiter and the vividly angry Juno. Writing just after Virgil, Ovid produced works that were witty and popularly entertaining. He wove the diverse strands of Greek mythology into a single tapestry in his 15 volume work the *Metamorphoses*, which covers the history of the world from creation to Ovid’s own time.

In later centuries, numerous musicians, writers, and artists drew on the stories that Virgil, Ovid, and other Roman writers told, incorporating the Roman literary images into their own works. In music, one of the best-known adaptations of Roman mythology is the opera *Dido and Aeneas* (about 1689) by English composer Henry Purcell. The opera dramatizes an episode from the *Aeneid*. Two of the most prominent writers to dramatize Roman mythology were Dante Alighieri of Italy, author of *La divina commedia* (1321?; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), and Edmund Spenser of England, who wrote the epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596). British writer Anthony Burgess retold the story of Aeneas’s travels in his novel *A Vision of Battlements* (1949). Aeneas’s journey through the underworld was also the subject of a poem by 20th century American writer Reynolds Price.

Ovid’s vivid descriptions also lent themselves to representation in the visual arts. *The Birth of Venus* (after 1482, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy) by Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli is a
famous rendition of how Venus first appeared. Italian Renaissance sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini created the *Fountain of the Triton* (1642-1643?) in Rome, which depicts the moment in Ovid's narrative when the sea-god Triton delivers a ringing blast from his conch horn to signal the end of the universal deluge. Aeneas was treated several times by 19th century British painter J. M. W. Turner, who depicted Aeneas in the company of Dido, Mercury, and other figures from legend. Dido is also the subject of several paintings by 19th century English painter Edward Burne-Jones.

**Egyptian Mythology**

The religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians were the dominating influence in the development of their culture, although a true religion, in the sense of a unified theological system, never existed among them. The Egyptian faith was based on an unorganized collection of ancient myths, nature worship, and innumerable deities. In the most influential and famous of these myths a divine hierarchy is developed and the creation of the earth is explained.

According to the Egyptian account of creation, only the ocean existed at first. Then Ra, the Sun, came out of an egg (a flower, in some versions) that appeared on the surface of the water. Ra brought forth four children, the gods Shu and Geb and the goddesses Tefnut and Nut. Shu and Tefnut became the atmosphere. They stood on Geb, who became the Earth, and rose up Nut, who became the sky. Ra ruled over all. Geb and Nut later had two sons, Set and Osiris, and two daughters, Isis and Nephthys. Osiris succeeded Ra as king of the Earth, helped by Isis, his sister-wife. Set, however, hated his brother
and killed him. Isis then embalmed her husband's body with the help of the god Anubis, who thus became the god of embalming. The powerful charms of Isis resurrected Osiris, who became king of the netherworld, the land of the dead. Horus, who was the son of Osiris and Isis, later defeated Set in a great battle and became king of the Earth.

From this myth of creation came the conception of the ennead, a group of nine divinities, and the triad, consisting of a divine father, mother, and son. Every local temple in Egypt possessed its own ennead and triad. The greatest ennead, however, was that of Ra and his children and grandchildren. This group was worshiped at Heliopolis, the center of Sun worship. The origin of the local deities is obscure; some of them were taken over from foreign religions, and some were originally the animal gods of prehistoric Africa. Gradually, they were all fused into a complicated religious structure, although comparatively few local divinities became important throughout Egypt. In addition to those already named, the important divinities included the gods Amon, Thoth, Ptah, Khnemu, and Hapi, and the goddesses Hathor, Mut, Neit, and Sekhet. Their importance increased with the political ascendancy of the localities where they were worshiped. For example, the ennead of Memphis was headed by a triad composed of the father Ptah, the mother Sekhet, and the son Imhotep. Therefore, during the Memphite dynasties, Ptah became one of the greatest gods in Egypt. Similarly, when the Theban dynasties ruled Egypt, the ennead of Thebes was given the most importance, headed by the father Amon, the mother Mut, and the son Khonsu. As the religion became more involved, true deities were sometimes
confused with human beings who had been glorified after death. Thus, Imhotep, who was originally the chief minister of the third Dynasty ruler Djoser, was later regarded as a demigod. During the fifth Dynasty the pharaohs began to claim divine ancestry and from that time on were worshiped as sons of Ra. Minor gods, some merely demons, were also given places in local divine hierarchies.

The Egyptian gods were represented with human torsos and human or animal heads. Sometimes the animal or bird expressed the characteristics of the god. Ra, for example, had the head of a hawk, and the hawk was sacred to him because of its swift flight across the sky; Hathor, the goddess of love and laughter, was given the head of a cow, which was sacred to her; Anubis was given the head of a jackal because these animals ravaged the desert graves in ancient times; Mut was vulture-headed and Thoth was ibis-headed; and Ptah was given a human head, although he was occasionally represented as a bull, called Apis. Because of the gods to which they were attached, the sacred animals were venerated, but they were never worshiped until the decadent 26th Dynasty. The gods were also represented by symbols, such as the Sun disk and hawk wings that were worn on the headdress of the pharaoh.

The only important god who was worshiped with consistency was Ra, chief of cosmic deities, from whom early Egyptian kings claimed descent. Beginning with the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BC), Ra worship acquired the status of a state religion, and the god was gradually fused with Amon during the Theban dynasties, becoming the supreme god Amon-Ra. During the 18th Dynasty, the
pharaoh Amenhotep III renamed the Sun god Aton, an ancient term for the physical solar force. Amenhotep's son and successor, Amenhotep IV, instituted a revolution in Egyptian religion by proclaiming Aton the true and only god. He changed his own name to Akhenaton, meaning He who is devoted to Atone. This first great monotheist was so iconoclastic that he had the plural word gods deleted from monuments, and he relentlessly persecuted the priests of Amon. Akhenaton's Sun religion failed to survive, although it exerted a great influence on the art and thinking of his time, and Egypt returned to the ancient, labyrinthine religion of polytheism after Akhenaton's death.

Burying the dead was of religious concern in Egypt, and Egyptian funerary rituals and equipment eventually became the most elaborate the world has ever known. The Egyptians believed that the vital life-force was composed of several psychical elements, of which the most important was the ka. The ka, a duplicate of the body, accompanied the body throughout life and, after death, departed from the body to take its place in the kingdom of the dead. The ka, however, could not exist without the body; every effort had to be made, therefore, to preserve the corpse. Bodies were embalmed and mummified according to a traditional method supposedly begun by Isis, who mummified her husband Osiris. In addition, wood or stone replicas of the body were put into the tomb in the event that the mummy was destroyed. The greater the number of statue-duplicates in his or her tomb, the more chances the dead person had of resurrection. As a final protection, exceedingly elaborate tombs were erected to protect the corpse and its equipment.
After leaving the tomb, the souls of the dead supposedly were beset by innumerable dangers, and the tombs were therefore furnished with a copy of the Book of the Dead. Part of this book, a guide to the world of the dead, consists of charms designed to overcome these dangers. After arriving in the kingdom of the dead, the ka was judged by Osiris, the king of the dead and 42 demon assistants. The Book of the Dead also contains instructions for proper conduct before these judges. If the judges decided the deceased had been a sinner, the ka was condemned to hunger and thirst or to be torn to pieces by horrible executioners. If the decision was favorable, the ka went to the heavenly realm of the fields of Yaru, where grain grew 3.7 m (12 ft) high and existence was a glorified version of life on earth. All the necessities for this paradisiacal existence, from furniture to reading matter, were, therefore, put into the tombs. As a payment for the afterlife and his benevolent protection, Osiris required the dead to perform tasks for him, such as working in the grain fields. Even this duty could, however, be obviated by placing small statuettes, called ushabtis, into the tomb to serve as substitutes for the deceased.

**Scandinavian Mythology**

Scandinavian Mythology, pre-Christian religious beliefs of the Scandinavian people. The Scandinavian legends and myths about ancient heroes, gods, and the creation and destruction of the universe developed out of the original common mythology of the Germanic peoples and constitute the primary source of knowledge about ancient German mythology. Because Scandinavian mythology was transmitted and altered by medieval Christian historians, the original
pagan religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices cannot be determined with certainty. Clearly, however, Scandinavian mythology developed slowly, and the relative importance of different gods and heroes varied at different times and places. Thus, the cult of Odin, chief of the gods, may have spread from western Germany to Scandinavia not long before the myths were recorded; minor gods—including Ull, the fertility god Njord, and Heimdall—may represent older deities who lost strength and popularity as Odin became more important. Odin, a god of war, was also associated with learning, wisdom, poetry, and magic.

Most information about Scandinavian mythology is preserved in the Old Norse literature, in the Eddas and later sagas; other material appears in commentaries by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus and the German writer Adam of Bremen (flourished about 1075). Fragments of legends are sometimes preserved in old inscriptions and in later folklore.

Besides Odin, the major deities of Scandinavian mythology were his wife, Frigg, goddess of the home; Thor, god of thunder, who protected humans and the other gods from the giants and who was especially popular among the Scandinavian peasantry; Frey, a god of prosperity; and Freya, sister of Frey, a fertility goddess. Other, lesser gods were Balder, Hermod, Tyr, Bragi, and Forseti; Idun, Nanna, and Sif were among the goddesses. The principle of evil among the gods was represented by the trickster Loki. Many of these deities do not seem to have had special functions; they merely appear as characters in legendary tales.
Many ancient mythological heroes, some of whom may have been derived from real persons, were believed to be descendants of the gods; among them were Sigurd the Dragon-slayer; Helgi Thrice-Born, Harald Wartooth, Hadding, Starkad, and the Valkyries. The Valkyries, a band of warrior-maidens that included Svava and Brunhild, served Odin as choosers of slain warriors, who were taken to reside in Valhalla. There the warriors would spend their days fighting and nights feasting until Ragnarok, the day of the final world battle, in which the old gods would perish and a new reign of peace and love would be instituted. Ordinary individuals were received after death by the goddess Hel in a cheerless underground world.

Scandinavian mythology included dwarves, elves and the Norns, who distributed fates to mortals. The ancient Scandinavians also believed in personal spirits, such as the fylgja and the hamingja, which in some respects resembled the Christian idea of the soul. The gods were originally conceived as a confederation of two formerly warring divine tribes, the Aesir and the Vanir. Odin was originally the leader of the Aesir, which consisted of at least 12 gods. Together all the gods lived in Asgard.

The Eddic poem Völuspá (Prophecy of the Seeress) portrays a period of primeval chaos, followed by the creation of giants and gods and, finally, of humankind. Ginnungagap was the yawning void, Jotunheim the home of the giants, Niflheim the region of cold, and Muspellsheim the realm of heat. The great world-tree, Yggdrasil, reached through all time and space, but it was perpetually under attack
from Nidhogg, the evil serpent. The fountain of Mimir, source of hidden wisdom, lay under one of the roots of the tree.

The Scandinavian gods were served by a class of priest-chieftains called godar. Worship was originally conducted outdoors, under guardian trees, near sacred wells, or within sacred arrangements of stones. Later, wooden temples were used, with altars and with carved representations of the gods. The most important temple was at Old Uppsala, Sweden, where animals and even human beings were sacrificed.

Indian Mythology

India is a fertile land of rich, varied and endless mythologies. Even the smallest village of the nation has one or the other myth to offer. Myths are so popular in India that even a school-going child is aware of them. In a way, myths are the part and parcel of Indian way of life. It is reflected in various shades of colours in the everyday life of the people of the nation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Indian life and Indian culture are based on the solid foundation of her myths. Vedic mythology, religious mythology, mythologies of great kings, warriors, saints, donors, Rishies, rulers etc. are spread everywhere. Indian mythology is one of the richest elements of Indian culture, which enriches it further and makes it a unique one in the world. Through generations, different stories in Indian mythology have been passed from generation to generation either of word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures. Articles and stories of Indian mythology not only make educational reading but also make a good source of recreational reading. These valuable stories and events,
which form the backbone of Indian mythology, are a great medium for people especially parents to inculcate interest in Indian culture in the younger generation and to impart values of Indian culture to them. The interesting aspect of the stories in Indian mythology is that they are usually meant to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily lives. Who does not enjoy a well-written story? Naturally, story telling is the best medium for conveying even powerful messages. The stories in Indian mythology vary from subtle maxim conveying tales of Panchtantra and Jatak-tales to subtle life paradigm defining stories from the Bhagavad-Gita, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata. A key point to note is that there are usually multiple stories expanding the same fact or occasion of festival. Therefore, each version is right in its own merit. This is a result of the natural evolution the stories might have gone in the process of being handed over from generation to generation for centuries.

The mythology of India could be said to describe every experience and emotion of man. The people of India possess a mythology reaching back over 3,500 years, and from the beginning they have written it down.

The epics and legends are read by the scholars and learned by the children; they are told and retold by the story-tellers of every village and market place. The wisdom, adventure and romance contained in them are a part of the life and thought of every Indian today.
Every level of feeling finds expression; love and hatred, exalted courage and base cowardice, nobility and meanness, compassion and wit. Indra is the king of gods – but he gets drunk and his roving eye does not miss a beautiful woman; Savitri follows her husband to the edge of the underworld and tricks Yama, the god of death, into restoring his life; King Yudhisthira reaches the very gates of heaven, but he will have none of a paradise that will not honour his faithful dog; the hero Arjuna, on the eve of battle, shrinks from the thought of the blood that will be shed and is given strength by Krishna to do what every man must do—his duty (the episode of the sublime Bhagavad-Gita).

Indian mythology dates back to as early as 7200 BC when the first human of the Rig Veda was composed. The hymns of the Rig Veda are the first and the freshest expression of the sense of beauty and gladness awakened in the Aryan race by the charms and the bounty of nature. What began as a celebration of natural elements such as Air, Water and Fire was converted into the worship of cosmic elements. Thus formed the triad of early Vedic Gods-Agni, Vayu and Surya. The Vedic gods are mere abstractions, intangible and allusive personifications of the powers of nature. It is in the post-Vedic phase or in the Puranas, the gods assumed substantial shape and individual character.

In the late Vedic period, the two epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were compiled. The heroes of the Vedic age gradually took place of the shadowy gods of the Vedic Gods and found their places in the Puranas. This formed the phase of post-Vedic gods or the
Puranic Gods who had their seeds and roots in the Vedas giving rise to the concept of Trimurti.

Hindu mythology is more than mythology. It is a living religion. Throughout India can be seen idols of gods and goddesses worshipped at present as was done hundreds of years ago. Most of them are true to type and could have easily stepped out of one of the Puranas.

Hinduism is essentially a religion of variety. While some of the thinkers reached the highest peak philosophy have ever dared to climb, the lower classes practiced idolatry, animism and the perversions peculiar to some of the objectionable cults. The Bacchanalian orgies of Greece and Rome are outdated. However, in Indian villages during certain festivals, crowds with phallic emblems can be seen parading the streets, singing obscene songs. Kali may not, at present, claim human victims but is content with the meat and blood of goats and fowl; her form, however, is not changed. In temples dedicated to her, she is still seen in her characteristic dancing pose, wearing a garland of human skulls, her mouth dripping blood, ready to devour the worlds if her lust for blood is not sated. Ganesha, the elephant-god, and Hanuman, the ape-god are also widely worshipped in India.

The Revealed Wisdom of the Hindus is called Srutis and consists of the four Vedas. The rest of Hindu sacred literature is known as Smritis or tradition. The eighteen Puranas and the two epics (The Mahabharata and the Ramayana) form the bulk of the Smritis. From the point of view of the mythologist, the Smritis are more
important than the Srutis. In the former, Vedic myths have been elaborated and new myths added.

The study of the Vedas was the exclusive privilege of the Brahmins. For the common folk, the Smritis were considered good enough. They learnt stanzas of them by heart or listened to recitations by priests. Even now, Katha (story telling) is regular institution and Brahmins, learned in sacred lore, can be seen reading passages from the Puranas or epics to enraptured audience and explaining to them the meaning of myths and legends. While the lower classes are generally ignorant of the teaching of the Vedas and the philosophic schools, practically every Hindu is conversant with the tales of Rama and Sita, of the doings of Hanuman, of the adventures of the Mahabharata heroes and of the various activities of Krishna. In spite of the efforts of the Arya Samajists, the Hindu revivalists, to bring the Veda to the masses, the religion of the vast majority of Hindus remains Puranic that is mythological.

The myths in the Vedas are comparatively simple. The deities are magnified humans who cause rainfall, thunder, lightning and storms. Some of the hymns of the Rig Veda are poetically sublime and express the awakened soul's wonder on beholding the rosy dawn, the glorious sun rising above the hills, and the majesty and splendour of the heavens. The Vedic deities are resplendent, warlike beings who ride fleet horses, fight and vanquish the foes of their devotees, exhilarated by the juice of the Soma, or engage themselves in creative sport. Compared with the fantastic deities of the Puranas, they are almost human.
The reason for this simplicity of the Vedic myths is that, in the early Vedic times, Indo-Aryans were a semi-pastoral people who had just learnt the art of agriculture and were constantly on the move for new pastures. They had not yet settled down permanently, and the wants and occupations of a vagrant life prevented them from falling into a great many superstitions, which are the offspring of idleness. They were surrounded by hostile tribes and cattle-lifters against whom they had to put up a continuous fight. They had no use for lean and hungry philosophers who could wield neither sword nor club. They prayed for sturdy sons to ride fleet horses and confound the marauding Dasyus. Their gods too were of the same mettle. Rig Vedic Aryans did not delight in abstract principles thinner than air, but offered libations of Soma to Indra, the terrible wielder of the thunderbolt, who fought and scattered the enemies of Aryans.

In course of time, however, they subdued the neighbouring tribes, agriculture was developed, and settlements became more or less permanent; and those with a contemplative turn of mind found enough security and leisure to give rein to their fancies. Kingdoms were founded; schools of philosophy developed and people whom the lure of Maya troubled abandoned the pleasures and comforts of the world, and retired into forests to ponder over the mystery of life and death, other worlds and their inhabitants. Most of the Puranas are the works of these forest hermits. They saw visions, experienced the horrors of nightmares, and had moments of ecstasy and despair; and they confided their experiences to their disciples who carefully memorized and passed them down to posterity. Each Purana, though attributed to a single author, is in reality a collection of tales told by different
Rishis at different times, and has a range of many centuries. The 
manner of weaving tales into tales, familiar to those who have read the "Arabian Nights," made interpolation easy to practice.

Coherency is not one of the strong points of Hindu mythology. Most of the Vedic deities underwent a complete transformation in the Puranas and epics. Indra, the most important deity of the Vedic pantheon, degenerates, in the epic, into a second rate celestial profligate. In one myth, sun is male, in another female. Sun and moon are in one place mentioned as rivals, elsewhere as husband and wife. The dog is extolled as a deity in one place and, in another, mentioned as a vile creature. Sectarian quarrels have also corrupted the whole mythological system, each sect trying to establish the precedence and omnipotence of their own particular deity. Thus while the Vaishnavas claim the descent of Ganga from the foot of Vishnu, the Shaivas attribute her origin to the head of Shiva. Shakti, the widely worshipped goddess of India, is variously described as the consort of Shiva or Vishnu, or identified with Maya, the energy of the Supreme Being, who, in union with her, produced all beings. In addition, pantheism justifies everything.

Ever since the conquest of India by Aryans, there have been many irruptions of alien races into India. Religion, in those days, was not so well organized and exclusive as it became in later times, and Indo-Aryans no less by necessity than by the synthetic character of their religion, absorbed many cultures alien to them, and these substantially enriched Hindu mythology. Every race that invaded and settled down in India found a place in the Hindu social system, and
their gods, in the pantheon. The Nagas (snake worshippers), the Gujarases, from whom Gujarat takes its name, Scythians, Parthians, Huns and several other peoples were conquerors of India whom Indo-Aryans conquered culturally.

Thus emerged the transition of Hindu mythology from Vedic Gods (the Cosmic Trinity) to Purnanic Gods (the Hindu Trinity) who took more significant form and entity and have been worshipped in various forms ever since.

Myths have been a very important phenomenon in world literature.

Myths are the eternal source of inspiration for the creative writers. According to Jung, myths are expression of the primordial images in the collective unconscious of man. In the beginning, man had certain experiences and received them in his psyche in the form of images. Since they are the first images, they are called archetypes of the collective unconsciousness.7

It is a historical fact that drama in its early stages of development depended upon myths; the myths provided the fables - a complex of action and character –, which assumed the shape of drama. Indian English drama, flourished as much
possible during the last hundred years, has tried to deal with philosophical views, religious convictions, political issues, social problems, psychological matters, etc. through myths, legends, historical events and day-to-day happening. Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T. P. Kailasam, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Uma Parameswaran are among the Indian English dramatists who have made a frequent use of Indian as well as foreign myths in their writings, particularly in plays.

Girish Karnad is no stranger to the world of Indian myths, including the epics and puranas. As his contemporary playwright Vijay Tendulkar puts it aptly, Karnad was "groomed in mythology". Karnad has found myths a powerful vehicle to carry the complex ideas of the modern times. Besides, the use of myths enables him to link the continuity of emotions from the beginning of the civilization to the present age. Thirdly, he is able to interpret the past in terms of the present and vice versa. The following remark of Hazel E. Barnes is relevant in the context of Girish Karnad.

In a period when values are relatively stable, authors tend to use the classical myths merely allusively, enriching the poetic quality of their work with layers of older connotations. In an age more obviously transitional, there is likely to be more of new interpretations.8
Karnad too has admitted on more than one occasion that he grew up with "a lot of myths". It is not surprising then that his very first play Yayati is based on Adiparva, the first book of the Mahabharata. Interestingly, the story of Shakuntala is also from the same book Adiparva. Like his illustrious and immortal predecessors Kalidasa and Shakespeare, Karnad has mostly adapted his plots from various sources. Like them again, he has endowed his borrowed stories with a new lease of life by adding his own share of myths. Chitralekha in Yayati and Hayavadana in Hayavadana are good examples of his myth making imagination.

Karnad's plays testify to a larger cultural matrix of mythic modes, oral folk forms, and narrative conventions than any other plays written and performed in the recent times. His re-writing of myths and folktales instills unique emotional and intellectual angles to the given prototypes and this attains a larger frame of reference-psychologically complex. The stories of the past from 10th century BC to the present intersect and in displacement and reverberation, we sense their presence in our personal and public life in the contemporary world.

Karnad's favourite text, the Mahabharata, about 3500 years old in its origin, in Sanskrit language runs to hundred thousand stanzas in verse. By far the largest of the world epics, along with the Ramayana it embodies the very essence of Indian culture and heritage laying down values of Indian
life and society, which have shaped the texture of Indian life. Numerous intersecting stories of the epic have served as parables revealing the secrets of human nature and have explained the need for ethical life.

Karnad employs mythical, historical, and folk themes as the skeleton for his plays, but they are identified with the contemporary scene. They come as amusing satires on the many social and political forces at work in present-day India. As we read these plays, we feel history and Purana repeating themselves. Karnad has done great service to introduce the folk tradition into his drama and thus expand the very horizon of the Indian stage. It would not be an exaggeration to say that thematically Karnad’s whole corpus can easily be divided into two categories: Myth plays and History plays. In Naga-Mandala, Yayati, Hayavadana, and The Fire and Rain we find the predominance of mythical element and structure. In Tale-Danda and Tughlaq, we find a predominant historical structure. However, Karnad also treats history as a myth and rather than writing a strictly factual historical play he gives it symbolical reshaping to reinforce the contemporary issues. His Tughlaq mythicizes history; Hayavadana derives its idea from Vetalav Panchavimsati; Yayati, The Fire and the Rain present re-telling of episodes from the Mahabharata; Tale-Danda is inspired by life of Basavesvara, the Virasaiva social reformer. While the earlier plays deal with human imperfection and the theme of responsibility, the later ones dramatize contemporary communal strife and caste-based
politics in India. When we view his total dramatic output, we are impressed by the loftiness of his artistic perception and creative ingenuity. Karnad culls anecdotes, parables and ideas from forgotten conventions, scrapes and fragments of Indian history and mythology and welds them in the contemporary stories / histories of India. The universal pleasure that people get from stories require that they resonate with the lives and imaginative experience of their readers, however magical or improbable the incidents related may be. In this sense, every drama is a story enacted for those who are directly or indirectly the subject of the story they are seeing and are doubly represented - as characters and spectators.

The playwright's immense interest in past which is loaded with mythology is there because it remains an integral part of the living culture of India. The deities of the Indian pantheon are part and parcel of the day-to-day life of the people. Because of their long association with the deities, the supernatural world is more a fact than fiction. Hence, living in the age of reason and science, Karnad does not lose touch with tradition. Mythology and history remains a repository of ideas for him.
References:


