**Directions: Read and annotate parts of this article that help define and describe “myth.”**

**What is Myth?  
By Mary Magoulick**

**"Myth" refers to colorful stories that tell about the origins of humans and the cosmos. Attitudes towards myth vary greatly. Some regard it as a source of spiritual growth, while others see only falsehood. Some see in myth the distinct character of particular cultures, while others see universal patterns. Some regard myth as "contemporary" and "alive", while others think of it as "ancient" and/or "dead."    Gregory Schrempp, Indiana University (see the** [**Mythology Studies**](http://www.indiana.edu/~myth/) **program at Indiana University)**

**DEFINING MYTH**From the Greek *mythos*, myth means story or word. Mythology is the study of myth. As stories (or [narratives](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/narratives.htm)), myths articulate how characters undergo or enact an ordered sequence of events. The term myth has come to refer to a certain genre (or category) of stories that share characteristics that make this genre distinctly different from other [genres of oral narratives](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/genre.htm), such as legends and folktales. Many definitions of myth repeat similar general aspects of the genre and may be summarized thus: **Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values.**

**The classic definition of myth from folklore studies** finds clearest delineation in William Bascom’s article “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives” where myths are defined as **tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic character**s. Such myths, often described as “cosmogonic,” or “origin” myths, function to provide order or cosmology, based on “cosmic” from the Greek *kosmos* meaning order (Leeming 1990, 3, 13; Bascom, 1965). Cosmology’s concern with the order of the universe finds narrative, symbolic expression in myths, which thus often help establish important values or aspects of a culture’s worldview. For many people, myths remain value-laden discourse that explain much about human nature.

**There are a number of general conceptual frameworks involved in definitions of myth, including these:**

1. Myths are Cosmogonic Narratives, connected with the Foundation or Origin of the Universe (and key beings within that universe), though often specifically in terms of a particular culture or region. Given the connection to origins, the setting is typically primordial (the beginning of time) and characters are proto-human or deific. Myths also often have cosmogonic overtones even when not fully cosmogonic, for instance dealing with origins of important elements of the culture (food, medicine, ceremonies, etc.).
2. Myths are Narratives of a Sacred Nature, often connected with some Ritual. Myths are often foundational or key narratives associated with religions. These narratives are believed to be true from within the associated faith system (though sometimes that truth is understood to be metaphorical rather than literal). Within any given culture there may be sacred and secular myths coexisting.
3. Myths are Narratives Formative or Reflective of Social Order or Values within a Culture (e.g. [functionalism](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm#Functionalism)).
4. Myths are Narratives Representative of a Particular Epistemology or  Way of Understanding Nature and Organizing Thought. For example, [structuralism](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm#Strucutralism) recognizes paired bundles of opposites (or dualities -- like light and dark) as central to myths.
5. Mythic Narratives often Involve Heroic Characters (possibly proto-humans, super humans, or gods) who mediate inherent, troubling dualities, reconcile us to our realities, or establish the patterns for life as we know it.
6. Myths are Narratives that are "Counter-Factual in featuring actors and actions that confound the conventions of routine experience" (McDowell, 80).

**SOME BACKGROUND ON MYTHOLOGY (the study of myth)**There have been many other functions and implications attributed to myth. They are often highly valued or disputed stories that still intrigue us even though many of us do not recognize them as a living genre in our culture. As McDowell's definition (#6 above) indicates, myths often involve extraordinary characters or episodes that seem impossible in our world, but "the extraordinary feats and traits of mythic protagonists are possible only because they attach to a primary and formative period in the growth and development of civilization" (80); thus their various aspects or dimensions are best considered as "organically intertwined" (McDowell, 80). In fact the contemporary  connotation of myth as "a falsehood," often understood as being in opposition to science, probably stems from recognition of this attribute of myth (#6) in isolation. Myths also seem in opposition to science because they are not testable, which is the case (at least for origin myths) because of their primordial setting -- if events described are from a different, earlier world, then of course they would not be repeatable or logical in our world.

Both myths and science offer explanations of the cosmos. A key difference is that information about the universe presented in myths is not testable, whereas science is designed to be tested repeatedly. Science also depends on cumulative, frequently updated knowledge, whereas myth is based on passed down stories and beliefs. Myths may change over time, particularly after contact with other cultures, but they do not change and adapt to new periods and technological developments in the same way science does. Myths may be enacted through rituals and believed in absolutely, but they usually do not have physical effects in the real world, as in leading to new technology for building cars or providing medical treatment. People may believe they are cured through faith, and they may find important value-laden sentiments in myths, but these "real world results" are neither empirical nor usually repeatable (two standard criteria for science). Although science differs from myth in offering actual, testable control over the environment and producing real, repeatable results in the world, science is NOT completely divorced from myth. Many scientific theories are presented or understood in narrative form, which often end up sounding remarkably mythic, as scholars like Stephen Jay Gould and Gregory Schrempp have discussed (see [scholarship as myth](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm#Scholarship as Myth) section below).

Myths were considered by Victorian scholars as survivals of previous times (perhaps decayed or reflective of "primitive" ancestors who took them literally). Some saw them as evidence for social evolutionary theories of the 19th century. These Victorians scholars (like E. B. Tylor) believed that humans in all cultures progress through stages of evolution from "savagery" to "barbarism" and finally to "civilization." This final, most advanced stage was of course best represented by the men (Victorians) writing the theories. Such theories no longer seem reasonable. We have not, for instance, progressed beyond brutality, murder, war, and grave injustices just because we have more advanced technology (in fact we use our technology partly to more efficiently kills other humans). We also recognize the complexity, thoughtfulness, and beauty of many other cultures we may once have considered inferior to our own. Based on over a century of ethnology (anthropological fieldwork) and research in psychology, genetics, and other disciplines, scholars now accept that humans from all eras and parts of the world have equal intellectual capacity and potential. We understand as well today that our own theories may seem as foolish to our descendants as their conceptions of the universe sometimes seem to us (see [scholarship as myth](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm#Scholarship as Myth) section below).

Our ancestors understood metaphor as well as we. This does not mean our ancestors lived exactly as we do, or that we conceive of the world in identical ways. But myths serve us better as means of understanding our ancestors if we accept their capacity for complex intellectual and artistic expression. Theories allow us to do our work as scholars, though our best efforts come with self-awareness of the theories and methods we employ as scholars. We now understand and discuss traditional myths and other such texts as emergent and intricately connected to performance situations or context. The more we can understand of the context of a myth, the culture it came from, the individual who told it, when and for what purpose, the audience who received it, etc., the better chance we have of offering an accurate interpretation. Of course, the further back in time one goes, the harder it becomes to study context. Nonetheless, the greater the attempt to understand context one makes, the better one's potential to interpret myths becomes. And even if we can't fully understand another culture's myths, that does not mean those myths are insignificant, useless, or "primitive" (a very offensive term these days in cultural studies).

Myths, as explanations of the cosmos and how to live, are parallel to science in many ways. Yet because of their differences from science, they often appear insignificant, whimsical, useless, or primitive to contemporary people. Many people lament the decline of myths, because they promise moral guidance and comfort that helps enrich life. For these reasons, many people remain interested in myths and seek to revive or revere them. Additionally, myths continue to intrigue us because of their rich symbolic,  metaphorical, and narrative appeal. Some people believe classical music, movies, and even novels have filled the places myths used to occupy culturally. In our post-modern world many people believe myths exist in new, combined, or revived forms. One of the functions of all art is to reconcile us to paradox. Another is to suggest fundamental patterns of life and the universe. Even if they are no longer associated with religious rituals, belief systems, or primordial moments of creation, "myths" of heroic characters who mediate the troubling paradoxes of life will always compel us and can, I believe, still be found in our culture.

**Characteristics of Myths** *Given the cautions (above) about how much the definition of myth has been debated and written about, take the following characteristics of myth in the spirit in which they are intended: general guidelines gleaned from what many people have noticed as often being true of myths. Remember these characteristics are neither absolute nor all-encompasing.*

**1. A story that is or was considered a true explanation of the natural world (and how it came to be).**

**2. Characters are often non-human – e.g. gods, goddesses, supernatural beings, first people.**

**3. Setting is a previous proto-world (somewhat like this one but also different).**

**4. Plot may involve interplay between worlds (this world and previous or original world).**

**5. Depicts events that bend or break natural laws (reflective of connection to previous world).**

**6.  Cosmogonic/metaphysical explanation of universe (formative of worldview).**

**7.  Functional: “Charter for social action” – conveys how to live: assumptions, values, core meanings of individuals, families, communities.**

**8. Evokes the presence of Mystery, the Unknown (has a “sacred” tinge).**

**9. Reflective and formative of basic structures (dualities: light/dark, good/bad, being/nothingness, raw/cooked, etc.) that we must reconcile. Dualities often mediated by characters in myths.**

**10. Common theme: language helps order the world (cosmos); thus includes many lists, names, etc.**

**11. Metaphoric, narrative consideration/explanation of “ontology” (study of being). Myths seek to answer, “Why are we here?” “Who are we?” “What is our purpose?” etc. – life’s fundamental questions.**

**12. Sometimes: the narrative aspect of a significant ritual (core narrative of most important religious practices of society; fundamentally connected to belief system; sometimes the source of rituals)**

**Do myths have to be** **SACRED?**

Definitions of myth are gleaned from over a century of collection and classification of tales, beginning with the **Grimm brothers**, who believed, “Divinities form the core of all mythology” (1882-83, xvi-xvii). Myths are distinguished from other commonly collected narratives such as folktales and legends. Myths were defined as stories of ancient times believed to be true.

**Malinowski** added that they must be sacred, and discussed how they serve society as a charter for action. Many great social theorists from the 19th and early 20th centuries (**Freud, Frazer, Muller, Jung**, etc.) used myths (usually collected by others) as evidence of their universal truths – their a priori theories (see “scholarship as myth” section below). Many fieldworkers like **Lévi-Strauss, Franz Boas (and his students), and Dell Hymes** used deductive methods in analyzing myths.

More recent scholars, like **William Hansen**, argue that the sacred element of myths is a recent attachment to definitions (perhaps beginning with the Grimms and then solidified by Malinowski). But in his studies of ancient Greek myths, Hansen notes that NOT all myths had a sacred element. They were not necessarily connected to religious beliefs, but were often secular stories.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY (works cited and suggested readings)**

Bascom, William. AThe Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives@ in *Journal of American Folklore* 78, 1965: 3-20.

Bauman, Richard. AGenre@ in *Folklore, Cultural Performance, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Boas, Franz. AIntroduction to James Teit,@ *Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia. Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, VI, 1898.

Boas, Franz. *Kwakiutl Culture As Reflected in Mythology* (American Folklore Society Memoirs). Washington, American Folklore Society, 1936.

Dundes, Alan, ed. *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press, 1984.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Antelope Wife: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, March 1998.

<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/defmyth.htm>