

# INTRODUCTION

The study of mythology is important for a variety of reasons. Mythology holds the key to the understanding of the religions and philosophies of the ancient world. It provides the earliest definitive literary record of the ideals, motives and manners of the ancients. Just as importantly, the knowledge of myths enhances the appreciation of the literature and art of the classical and modern periods.

The objective of this book is to introduce students to various mythologies and to give them a better understanding of the ancient cultures from which the mythologies sprang. It is also intended that the increased knowledge will better enable students to understand and appreciate the many allusions to mythology with which they come in contact in their academic and leisure lives.

I hope you enjoy your trip back in time to these ancient worlds!

## BLOOM'S REVISED TAXONOMY

<b>REMEMBERING:</b>	Retrieving, recognising and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.
<b>UNDERSTANDING:</b>	Constructing meaning from oral, written and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarising, inferring, comparing and explaining.
<b>APPLYING:</b>	Carrying out or using a procedure through executing or implementing.
<b>ANALYSING:</b>	Breaking material or concepts into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate or interrelate to one another or to an overall structure through differentiating, organising and attributing.
<b>EVALUATING:</b>	Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.
<b>CREATING:</b>	Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganising elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning or producing.

# WHAT IS MYTHOLOGY?

**Mythology** – noun (plural mythologies) **1.** A body of myths, as that of a particular people, or that relating to a particular person: *Greek Mythology*. **2.** myths collectively. **3.** The science of myths. [Middle English, from Late Latin *mythologia*, from Greek:legend]\*

Myths are primitive accounts of the origin, character and functions of the ancient gods, of the origin of humankind and of the condition of the visible world. The time in which these events occurred is completely different from our time frame.

In primitive cultures it was only natural for the people to have a sense of awe in the presence of the wonders of nature. They attributed to those natural wonders—the sun, the sky, the sea, the mountains and so on—a free will and personality such as they themselves had. Because they considered themselves inferior to those wonders, however, they believed them to have an even greater freedom, personality and power than they.

Earliest myths were based upon those phenomena that struck the emotions: the feeling of alarm at the crash of thunder, the feeling of gladness in the warm light of day, the feeling of terror in the darkness of night, and the feeling of dread when confronted with death. The first phenomena to strike the mind were probably the changes in night and day, the seasons and the weather. The earliest deities, therefore, were those who presided over the celestial sphere. As time went on, however, every phase of nature and human life was believed to have a controlling deity.

- 1.** Myths present extraordinary events without trying to justify them; therefore, people sometimes confuse them with fables. Analyse the difference between a myth and a fable.

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- 2.** The gods and goddesses were identified with the elements of nature over which they presided; therefore, incidents involving the elements of nature—storms, earthquakes, calm weather and so on—were believed to result from the activities of the gods. Create an original myth to explain a natural disaster such as the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the eruption of Mt St Helens in 1980 or the Queensland floods of 2009.

\*From *The Macquarie Dictionary, Fourth Edition* NSW: The Macquarie Library, 2005.

# INTERPRETING THE WILL OF THE GODS

The ancient Greeks interpreted the will of the gods in a number of ways. One custom, especially in cases of sudden emergency, was the use of augury, or interpretation of signs. For example, sometimes the augury was based on the direction in which a bird was observed to fly overhead. If the bird flew to the right of the augur as he faced north, good luck would follow; if it flew to the left of the augur, bad luck would follow.

Another custom was the consulting of oracles. Apollo, as a symbol of the light of the sun in the sense of an all-seeing and all-knowing power, was regarded as the great god of oracles. Delphi was the main centre of his activity. The oracle prophesied by uttering words and sounds while in a state of frenzy. Persons educated in deciphering her prophecies put the sounds into verse. Usually, however, they stated the prophecies in such a cunning way that there was a double meaning. In that way, if a prophecy did not come true, the oracle and her priests could blame it on the way it was interpreted. For example, when the Athenians asked the oracle at Delphi how to meet the approach of the Persian force, the answer was "Trust to your citadel of wood." The Athenians began to protect the Acropolis with wooden bulwarks, or defensive walls. Themistocles and some of the others, however, persuaded the rest that the "citadel of wood" referred to the fleet. The result was the great victory of the Athenians at Salamis.

## DOUBLE TROUBLE

You are a famous oracle. The Prime Minister of Australia has asked your advice on a current issue. You want to be sure you can say your prophecy was correct no matter how the Prime Minister interprets it!

Issue

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Prophecy

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Meaning 1

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Meaning 2

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# ECHO AND NARCISSUS

Echo was a beautiful mountain nymph. She had but one fault: she loved to talk and always wanted to have the last word. One day the great Zeus came to her to ask a favour. His wife Hera was very jealous and would not let him out of her sight. He asked Echo to detain Hera so that he could get away from her for a while.

Echo managed to keep Hera busy with her idle chatter, but when Hera learned of the conspiracy against her, she was furious. She said to Echo, "As you have tricked me with your words, from now on you will no longer be able to speak your own words. You will only be able to repeat what others say to you."

Echo sadly wandered about the forest. Soon it happened that she saw the beautiful youth Narcissus. She immediately fell in love with him and followed him around.

When Narcissus finally heard the noise of her footsteps, he called out, "Is anyone here?"

All poor Echo could answer was, "Here."

When he called out, "Let us meet," she repeated his words and ran to him with outstretched arms.

But Narcissus loved no one but himself and he ran away from her shouting, "I would rather die than you should have me."

From that time on, Echo lived in grief in caves and among mountain cliffs. At last, her flesh shrank away and her bones turned into rocks. All that was left of her was her voice, which, as Hera had ordered, continued to have only the last word.

But Narcissus's actions would not go unavenged. One day one of the many maidens who loved Narcissus in vain uttered a prayer. She prayed that he might know what it was like to love with no return of affection. Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, granted her wish; she caused Narcissus to fall in love with his own image in the water. Narcissus tried time and time again to kiss or touch the image, but each time it fled. There he remained to gaze upon the image until at last he pined away and died. The gods changed him into a beautiful flower which bears his name.



1. Pretend that you are a narcissist. As such, write your autobiography.
2. Do you think the punishment Nemesis inflicted upon Narcissus was fair? Explain.

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# WHAT IS MYTHOLOGY?

1. The Latin word *fabula* originally had a meaning similar to that of the Greek *muthos*; it denoted “word” in the sense of a final pronouncement. Both myth and fable, however, have come to mean a fictitious or untrue story. True myths, however, are not presented as fictitious. No attempt is made to prove or justify the extraordinary events in myths because myth is a form of religious symbolisation.

A fable is a story made up by an individual. The characters and plot are made up; the author does not expect the readers to believe that either are real. Rather, the author merely uses the story as the vehicle for moral or didactic instruction.

A myth, on the other hand, is of anonymous origin. It is constructed by generations of people as an interpretation of natural events. Although no attempt is made to prove the events, the events are accepted by the people as true.

3. Students should include the following facts: The accounts are presented with an implied authority. The events surpass the ordinary world but are, nevertheless, basic to that world. The time is usually inconceivably long ago. Some or all of the characters are not ordinary beings, but are gods, demigods or other extraordinary beings.
4. The Abnaki myth tells of a lonely man who meets a beautiful woman with long, silky blond hair. She promises to be with him always if he follows her instructions. He makes a fire and drags her over the burned ground as she instructed. In time a corn stalk appears, and he sees her silken hair. Whenever the Abnaki see the silken hair of the corn, they know the beautiful woman is still with them to keep them from being lonely.
5. Paul Tiliach (1886–1965), a theologian, and philosophers Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and G. Gusdorf were among those to argue that there is a mythological dimension to science.
6. Students might be given a list of poets and authors to research. Some suggestions are George Byron, William Cowper, John Dryden, John Keats, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Milton, Thomas Moore, Alexander Pope, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Alfred Tennyson.
8. Before the introduction of writing, myths were preserved in the oral traditions: the sacred ceremonials of priests and the narratives chanted by minstrels and by professional bards who wandered from village to village. Most of what we know today about the mythology of these ancient cultures comes from a few important sources.