

What Are Myths?

Myths are stories, often with imaginative characters and violent plots. Greek and Roman myths contain gods and goddesses, human characters, and other fantastic creatures.

In the Greek and Roman myths, gods and goddesses intervene in the lives of humans, often to help and sometimes to hurt them.

What Purposes Do Myths Serve?

People of many cultures have created myths to explain their world and themselves: For example, myths can be used:

- To explain elements of the natural world (why there are seasons, how the ocean was created)
- To explain the origins of good and evil (why there is suffering in the world)
- To teach valuable moral lessons about living (lessons about controlling anger, overcoming greed)
- To explain human behavior (understanding about love, jealousy, hate)

Since such explanations are not logical or scientific, they probably require a different kind of thinking than you're used to. But can you remember how much you learned from hearing stories read to you when you were little? Just like children's stories, myths help their listeners make sense of the world.

How Are Greek and Roman Myths Related?

There are many similarities between the personalities in Greek myths and those in Roman myths, which came later. Often the only differences are in the names given to the figures.

Myth, The Museum of the Mind

In a museum, you may already have seen a statue of a Greek goddess or a Roman gladiator. If so, you know how people looked long ago and how they imagined their gods looked.

By reading myths, you can also discover what people thought long ago, what they feared and what they hoped for—even which character traits they admired and which ones they disliked.

What kind of people created these myths? First of all, they were imaginative and capable of telling stories that have lasted for thousands of years.

They were observers of the natural world around them, but they were also in awe of it. They invented stories to account for thunderstorms, floods, eclipses, even the changing seasons, because such occurrences, once explained, seemed less frightening.

They were curious about how the world began and how the first human beings were

created; they speculated about death and life after death.

They lived by a moral code that required children to obey parents, parents and children to be reverent to the gods, and all people to be generous to one another.

They pictured their gods as looking and acting as they did themselves. Thus, gods quarreled and were jealous or fell in and out of love, but they were also wise and just. Gods could change their outward forms at will, had superhuman strength, and were immortal. In these last three characteristics, they differed from people.

Since ancient people revealed so much about themselves in their myths, reading those myths, like visiting a museum, makes the past come to life.