

Classical Myth

Lifelong Learning Course

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What is a Myth? prominent theories

myth |miθ| noun, mid 19C: from modern Latin *mythus*, via late Latin from Greek *muthos* (speech, thought, story). *Mythopoeia* |noun: making of myth or myths, origin in 1950s: from Greek *muthopoiia*, from *muthos* ‘myth’ + *poiein* ‘make.’
Mythopoeic or *mythopoetic* |adjective: of or relating to making of myth or myths.

Here are summaries of some leading thinkers on the understanding of mythology¹,
myth(s) is(are):

religious theorists

“the traditional vehicle of man’s profoundest metaphysical insights”

Ananda Coomaraswamy -- Ceylonese Tamil philosopher, metaphysician, historian

one way the divine realm reveals itself to mortals (implied in most religions, according to me)

“stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system; they are revered as true and sacred; they are endorsed by rulers and priests; and closely linked to religion. Once this link is broken, and the actors in the story are not regarded as gods but as human heroes, giants or fairies, it is no longer a myth but a folktale. Where the central actor is divine but the story is trivial ... the result is religious legend, not myth.”
(J. Simpson & S. Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore*)

social theorists

“a socially powerful traditional story” (Richard Buxton, classicist)

“a noble fiction” (Plato, *Republic*)

¹ several of these taken from Joseph Campbell, *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*

“a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group” (Émile Durkheim)

“We are unable to become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if we see nothing above us to which we belong. To free us from all social pressure is to abandon us to ourselves and demoralize us.” Émile Durkheim (male pronouns made plural)

psychological theorists

“a group dream, symptomatic of archetypical urges within the depths of the human psyche” (Carl Jung)

pragmatists

“a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature” (Sir James G. Frazer)

“a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages” (W. Max Müller)

“all of these . . . determined by the viewpoints of the judges. . . . as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age”
(Joseph Campbell)