World Mythology

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Myth, Metaphor, and Mystery

ANDY GUREVICH

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Contents

Attribution and OER Revision Statement

This text hopefully provides a resonate and dynamic approach to teaching mythology because it emphasizes the importance of mystery, awe, humility, and generative co-creation in the study of the world's wisdom traditions. We are, as Carl Sagan once said, the Cosmos getting to know itself. So this means, as the wisdom traditions have always taught, that each of us is a unique manifestation of the whole. That the virtues of diversity, equity, and inclusion that are finally becoming more mainstream in social and academic settings are woven into the symbolic tapestries and mythological narratives of our ancestors. The universe is a complex, animated, integrated and manifesting mystery. And we are, indeed, a reflection of all of it. The exterior world reflects what the interior landscapes also reveal during deep states of transformative mediation and ritual practice: the ultimate reality is ultimately a Mystery. For all we have learned, we have yet to scratch the surface of the infinite ocean of our collective being. So we *need* each other. We *are* each other. And the fluidity and permeability of essence we find within the mythic traditions honors the uniqueness of every being, of every tradition, every identity, while simultaneously exposing a common core of essential unity that reminds us of our ultimate home in each other.

This book seeks to honor the spirit of these traditions by presenting the material in ways that preserve and highlight the universal qualities of respectful cultural inquiry, deep engagement, transformative learning, and student empowerment.

"Bronze foot in the form of a sphinx ca. 600 B.C." by Collection of George Ortiz, Geneva, Switzerland; [with Robin Symes, London, England]; by 1989 and until 2000, collection of Howard J. and Saretta Barnet, New York; acquired in 2000, gift of the family of Howard J. Barnet., The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

(*Unless otherwise linked and noted, all versions of the myths in this text are from the Internet Sacred Text Archive or are in the public domain. Some historical and cultural information ha been adapted from the now out of print "World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths And Epics" by Donna Rosenberg McGraw Hill. 1999.*)

Introduction to the Course & Text

"What does our great historical hunger satisfy, our clutching about us if countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?"

–Friedrich Nietzsche

Ernst Cassirer writes in Language and Myth that myth is a "miracle of the spirit."

One of its distinctive features is that it doesn't necessarily refer back to an objective reality. It may refer to an internal, abstract, conceptual or emotional (invisible) reality. In as far as it tries to describe that which can't be known or named in an ordinary way-the mystical experience of God, or Gods-it is a language of symbols, of metaphors, a language of *correspondence* rather than *reference*.

"Medusa" by Alice Pike Barney, Smithsonian American Art Museum and its Renwick Gallery is licensed under CC BY 4.0

This text uses insights gleaned from the fields of anthropology, religious studies, depth psychology, literature, and archaeology to explore the fundamental wisdom of the world's great mythological traditions. Special attention is paid to connecting the symbolic narratives and ceremonies of the ancients to the experiences, thoughts, and beliefs of people living today across a wide spectrum of identities and cultural perspectives. The

material is updated regularly to be as relevant, engaging, and scholarly as possible.

Through readings, videos, journal and essay writing, discussion groups, and special projects, the students will not only come to learn more about the deepest truths expressed within these traditions, but be encouraged to respond in ways that express how these fundamental truths align with their own experiences, beliefs, observations, and values.

The text aligns with the Blackboard course **ENG 250: *World Mythology*** by Andy Gurevich at Mt Hood Community College.

Chapter One - What is Mythology?

ANDY GUREVICH

This week, we will begin to explore what myth *is*, no easy question to answer, and also look at some of the ways humans have developed and used their myths. We might discover as we go that the stories and mythological images of our ancestors speak to us today in more relevant and meaningful ways than we thought possible.

First we need to try to define myth. One textbook offers a simple definition at the beginning of the introduction,

"*Myths symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture.*" (Rosenberg xiii)

The problem with this definition is the phrase "symbolize human experience." Just what does that mean? It **is** what myths do, but it doesn't really give us much in the way of definition.

"Plaster sculpture of Apollo in medical mask" by Alena Shekhovtcova, World Mythology, Pexels is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Joseph Campbell, another somewhat famous scholar and mythologist who we'll be using often this term, defined myth as follows,

"A *whole mythology is an organization of symbolic images and*

narratives, metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and the fulfillment of a given culture at a given time."

"Metaphorical of…" Hmm. What does that mean, exactly? Onward.

Psychoanalyst Rollo May, in his book "The Cry for Myth" suggests,

"A *myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are the narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it.*"

You will soon see that although most scholars of mythology agree that it is a foundational component of how any society, culture, and individual define *themselves*, none can agree absolutely on how to define *it*. But this isn't really a problem. They may all be right, given the aspects of myth they are emphasizing in their different definitions.

That is why I encourage you to define myth for yourselves during your readings and ponderings.

From the many definitions of myth in books and on the web, we can see that myths have four basic attributes in common:

- They are **cultural**—they reflect the beliefs and values of a group of people.
- They are **sacred**—they concern the spiritual or divine aspects of existence that human beings cannot understand.
- They are **didactic**—they seek to explain the unexplainable, and they teach humans how to behave, live, and relate to each other and the gods.
- They are **foundational**—they provide basic rules, beliefs, and rituals for a culture to establish shared beliefs and practices.

Joseph Campbell adds that all living myth must serve four primary functions:

- **Cosmological**—Its cosmological function is to describe the "shape" of the cosmos, the universe, our total world, so that the cosmos and all contained within it become vivid and alive

for us, infused with meaning and significance; every corner, every rock, hill, stone, and flower has its place and its meaning in the cosmological scheme which the myth provides.

- **Mystical**—Its metaphysical function is to awaken us to the mystery and wonder of creation, to open our minds and our senses to an awareness of the mystical "ground of being." Many would say that this is the primary function of myth-to find a way to communicate whatever mystical insight has been gained on the journey: an understanding of the mysteries that underlie the universe; an appreciation of its wonders; the sense of awe or rapture experienced. Since this experience often can't be communicated directly, **myth speaks in metaphors, symbols, and symbolic narratives that aren't always bound by objective reality**.
- **Sociological**—Its sociological function is to pass down "the law," the moral and ethical codes for people of that culture to follow, and which help define that culture and its social structure.
- **Psychological**—Its psychological (or pedagogical) function is to lead us through particular rites of passage that define the various significant stages of our lives-from dependency to maturity to old age, and finally, to our deaths, the final passage. These rites of passage bring us into harmony with the "ground of being" (a term used by Campbell to refer to an unnamed, unspecified universal mystical power) and allow us to make the journey from one stage to another with a sense of comfort and purpose.

Today, in our culture, we often dismiss myth as a falsehood, or fanciful, untrue stories, like urban myths or "false news.". This is not the definition of myth we will concern ourselves with. For each of the myths we read, the culture from which they arose believed them to be true and foundational to their individual and collective identities. It was how they understood the great mysteries of the universe and our place in it—How did the earth come to be? How

was mankind created? What is my purpose? Can I know god? Is there a life after death?

Today, we are still asking the same questions, and for many people, the answers are in their religious beliefs, many of which have their roots in the myths. Campbell once said, "a mythology is another person's religion, and a religion is your own personal mythology."

This first group of myths (Lessons 1 through 4) are Creation myths. They seek to explain "how it all started." There are 8 basic motifs (a recurring pattern or object) for creation myths:

1. **Conjunction**: mingling of waters or primal elements creates a first entity or a livable surface
2. **Divine emission**: blood or other body fluids create man or beings or other gods
3. **Sacrifice**: a god sacrifices himself or is sacrificed to achieve creation of the earth or humans
4. **Division/Consumption**: marriage of earth and sky or separation of earth and sky creates livable space for humans
5. **Cosmic egg**: all humans, and the earth sometimes, are contained in a great egg to be opened when the god wills it
6. **Emergence**: first "people" emerge from an original cramped or hostile world into a new world or a series of worlds
7. **Deus Faber**: the god consciously crafts the world and humans out of a substance necessary for the survival of mankind (like clay, mud, stone, corn)
8. **Ex Nihilo-out of nothing**: creation by thought, breath, dream or word

These eight methods are creation are easy to see in the myths we read. What might each method say to the people about their importance to the gods? Think about this question as your read the myths.

As you read, you will see that myths are **narratives**; they tell a story. It is the culture's way of trying to explain the creation of

the universe and mankind in a way everyone could understand. These stories (myths) were passed down through generations orally because they existed long before humans created writing.

We don't know for sure, but it is likely that the myths evolved over time as they were retold, perhaps to include new myths from other cultural groups, or to reflect man's more sophisticated understanding of the world and the gods.

Often these myths were retold in celebrations of a religious nature, such as a New Year celebration or the beginning of spring, or at the harvest.

The myths, although simple as narratives, are complex in trying to explain existence and the gods. In some cases, you will find contradictions, missing pieces, and some just plain confusing ideas. Remember, these are myths, not fact-based explanations. We need to read them differently than we would a history or science book. But when we know how to read them as intended, as metaphors for the journey of the soul back to the ground of its own being, then they can reveal timeless truth to us, whether we "believe" in them or not.

So…**A closer look:** It's about time!

- **Legend** is defined as a traditional story that may be based on historical facts, but is not easily proven to be historical (like the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table).
- **Folklore** is more like myth in that it is stories about traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community passed down through word of mouth. This definition is very much like myth, but as we will see, there is one attribute of myth that may be missing from folklore.

In the Indian (Hindu) creation myth, time is presented as cyclical—a constant repetition of creation, destruction and rebirth. The Mayan culture also saw time as cyclical as presented in their calendars. Most Western religions have from their beginning seen time as linear, having a clear, set beginning (On the first day, God

created…) and a clear, set ending. When our world ends, there is no indication that there will be a regeneration or re-creation as there is the Hindu myth.

Yet, everything about our world indicates that time is cyclical—the track of the sun and moon through the sky, the passing of the seasons, the celebration of recurring events like Thanksgiving and our birthdays, even our clocks are round.

Time is one of those puzzling questions that underlies many of the great questions of mankind. We are obsessed with time, and much of our language is devoted to time—we try to save time (a bizarre notion); we spend time; we think time is money; we take time; we waste time. We even upset our lives twice a year by setting clocks ahead and back.

Scientists and philosophers tell us time is an illusion, it isn't real, and we can't measure it. Why then does it seem so real to us? We can't function without schedules, or knowing what time it is.

So, think about this: how might believing in time as linear or cyclical influence a culture's attitude toward death or how we live our lives in the present time? What if we do come back for another try? What if X marks the spot and when we get there, there is no hope to return to life as we know it?

Now you are ready to read the myths (Please do not panic. Many of these are quite short and you can use open book and open notes to do your assignments.):

- The History & Functions of Myth
- The Enuma Elish: Historical Context
  - The Babylonian Creation Epic: The Enuma Elish
  - Click here for another version of the myth.
- The Mayan Creation: Introduction and Historical Context
  - The Creation (Mayan)
  - Click here for a video version.
- The Chinese Creation: Introduction and Historical Context

    - The Creation Myths:
        - Pan Gu
        - Nu Kua (or Nu Wa)
        - Yin and Yang
        - Click here for an alternate version of all three.

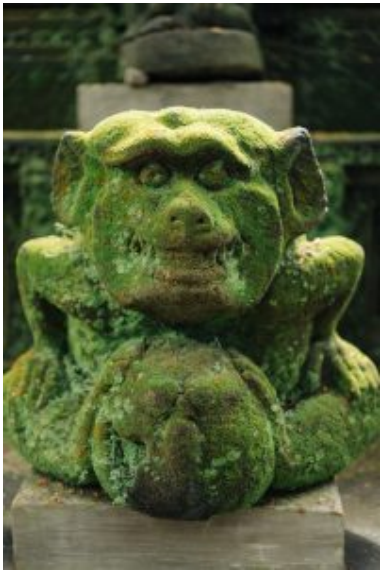
- The Indian Creation: Introduction and Historical Context
    - The Hindu Creation Myths
    - Alternative video versions of the Hindu Creation:
        - Hindu Creation Stories
        - The Hindu Creation Myth
        - Hindu Mythology Creation Story

Chapter Two - Myth & Metaphor

ANDY GUREVICH

The Greeks believed human thought functioned through two separate avenues, **Logos** and **Mythos**.

Logos is the analytical, logical method for dealing with the information and complexity of the world. It is governed by "rules" such as we still use in arguments and more formal logical exercises.



"Stone mythical creature statue in jungle" by Nick Bondarev, World Mythology, pexels is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Then there is **Mythos** which follows our basic definition of myth: a collection of stories and beliefs held in common by a group of people. Unlike Logos, Mythos deals with non-logical, non-concrete, non-linear aspects of the world and our psyches. There are not rules governing how we interpret myths as they often deal with those things outside the realm of human consciousness and understanding.

The way that we can attempt to explain the unexplainable, those things beyond the world of Logos, is through metaphor. It takes a little work to wrap our heads around this concept, but it is important in helping us understand how to interpret the meaning of the myths. This idea of metaphor is not without controversy; it

encourages us to view myths (and religion) in a different way. I ask you to read and consider before you judge.

Let's start with a simple definition of metaphor: it is a comparison between two different things without using the words "like" or "as." Simple, right? Maybe not so simple. Here is a comparison using like or as:

> My love is like a red, red rose.

This clearly states a comparison, but let's look at it as a metaphor:

> My love is a red, red rose.

Makes a difference, doesn't it? What the metaphor does is invite us to take the statement literally; we sometimes miss the idea of a comparison.

Let's look at another metaphor:

> He is such a snake in the grass.

This we know not to take literally. The metaphor suggests a comparison between the person and the qualities or attributes we associate with snakes (evil, dangerous, slimy). Furthermore, we know that not all snakes are dangerous, and they are evil only because we are using the snake as a metaphor. The snake's association with evil is cultural. (More about snakes in the future.) So our metaphor—he is a snake—invites us to attach various ideas about the man through associating him with ideas we have about snakes, whether they are accurate or not.

We use metaphors every day to describe our feelings (I'm feeling blue) our troubles (My life is a train wreck) our happiness (I'm on cloud 9). Our dream are metaphors (dreams of flying, being chased, demons). We too often take our metaphors literally.

Myths are metaphors. The whole myth is a method of trying to convey things we don't understand in a way that we can begin to understand. How must it have felt, before science and technology, to look up at the night sky and try to explain all those points of

light? Or how do you explain the phases of the moon and its disappearance for three days? Even with a "scientific understanding" of the world, myths help us to create narrative containers for the awe we feel at the very mystery of existence itself. And metaphors are the primary vehicles of myths.

The use of metaphor helped ancient cultures understand. They created pictures with the brightest stars and named them after their gods. The moon became the goddess, dying and being reborn, just like the crops in the spring. The metaphors tied humans to the earth and the gods; they were both a part of creation, and separate from the gods.

Have a look at a illuminating encounter the late mythologist Joseph Campbell had with a radio host about the concept of metaphor by clicking here.

So, to sum up the main points:

- Metaphors suggest comparisons, although they don't explicitly state a comparison.
- Myths are metaphors.
- Metaphors can often reveal truths that are deeper and more lasting, but harder to unpack.
- We cannot take the metaphor (or the myth) literally and expect to understand its full symbolic value.

"Crozier Head (ca. 1350)" by Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Now you are ready to read the myths:

- History of Greek Myth

    - *The Creation of the Titans and the Gods*, Greece

- History of Norse Myth
    - The Creation, Death and Rebirth of the Universe, N. Europe

- History of Yoruba Myth
    - The Creation of the Universe and Ife

- History of Aztec Myth
    - The Creation Cycle

- History of Iroquois Myth
    - The Woman Who Feel from the Sky, Iroquois

Chapter Three - Myth & Archetype

ANDY GUREVICH

By now, you have most likely noticed that there are common ideas, themes or objects that recur in some of these myths. Take the flood, for example. If you look at myths from across the globe, almost all of them have a flood story of some sort. How can we explain this?

One way is that these myths contain a historical account of a great flood. We know there was a huge flood in the area of the eastern Mediterranean Sea into the Black Sea. Depending on the source, it happened anywhere from 11,000 BC to 3,000 BC. It is possible as the last great ice age ended, it did inundate this area. Check out this Historical Evidence for the Great Flood.

"The Deluge (ca. 1630–38)" by Pierre Brebiette, The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

But areas that are far inland, high in elevation and otherwise not likely to be flooded have these deluge stories too. How can historical fact explain this? Archeologists are fairly certain that the entire globe was not under water.

Another explanation may be that through trade routes or conquest, these stories were shared with new populations who found them so compelling they incorporated these myths into their own. Again the same problem presents itself: –were there trade routes between, say, Greece and Argentina or the southwestern

United States. It is unlikely. Remember these early societies did not have Facebook or Twitter; in fact, they were unaware the rest of the globe even existed.

One explanation that fits nicely, although there is no real proof in the scientific sense, is the idea of archetypes and the collective unconscious. These ideas were put forth by the 20th century psychiatrist, Carl Gustav Jung. His ideas are highly speculative, but they do offer an avenue for studying these recurrent ideas we see in myth.

Basically, what Jung said is that there exists in every human's mind the collective unconscious. This is the area of our psyche where dreams and myths are stored. They contain themes and ideas that humans have had in common since the beginning of human existence. We can see these ideas and themes in the myths: –the flood, the creation of man from clay (or other substance that is critical to sustain life), symbols like the world tree, or the world egg. These common symbols, themes and patterns are called **archetypes**. To clear up the difference:

- A **symbol** is an object that stands for something else or calls that something else to mind. A symbol is cultural, shared by a group of people. We do not naturally understand what a symbol means; we must learn its meaning. The alphabet and language are symbols. The logos of companies are symbols. Like the Nike swoosh, we need to learn to associate the symbol to what it is referring to (its referent).
- An **archetype** is a symbol that is not tied to one culture. It is shared by all cultures, across time. We can readily see, and respond to, archetypes we see in movies: –the villain, the hero, the wise old man (The *Lord of the Ring*strilogy is a good film to see archetypes). Archetypes can also be objects-the circle, the mandala. They can be themes-the hero's journey, travel to the underworld, fighting dragons (or some such creatures). The thing that distinguishes archetype from symbol is that all humans respond and understand the archetypes in similar

ways.

If we think back to myth and metaphor, it may be easier to understand the idea of the collective unconscious and archetype. Our myth and dreams are metaphors and they use the archetypes to manifest themselves to us. That accounts for the similarity of the ideas and symbols in myths and our dreams. So as an explanation for the existence of myth across the globe as well as the commonality of the ideas and symbols in myth, this explanation serves a purpose.

It"s an interesting look at the consciousness of mankind. We are really linked in our myths and dreams. Carl Jung says these symbols are never clearly defined or fully explained, as they are part of the unconscious. We can "learn" the meaning of archetypes, but they become understandable only on an individual basis. Again, Jung says that archetypes are, at the same time, image and emotion. When there is merely the image, then there is a word-picture with little consequence, but when charged with emotion, it becomes dynamic.

"Old carved metal lion head sculpture" by Plato Terentev Follow Message, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

I think of the Goya picture of Cronus devouring his children. It is both an image that is symbolic, but also arouses deep emotional responses. Think also of those images we relate to evil, like snakes. Many people are afraid of snakes, spiders, bats…things we fear and associate in ways with evil and danger. That"s how an archetype works. We unconsciously associate the image and emotion and respond.

(For more information on archetypes and the collective unconscious, see *Man and His Symbols* edited by Carl G Jung. Material on Jung is from this book.)

The myths for this week:

- History of Navajo Myth
  - *The Emergence*, (Navajo)
- History of Norse Myth
  - The Creation, Death and Rebirth of the Universe, (Norse)
- History of Aztec Myth
  - *The Creation Cycle*, (Aztec)
- History of Maori Myth
  - The Creation Cycle (Polynesia/Maori)

Chapter Four - Myth & Meaning

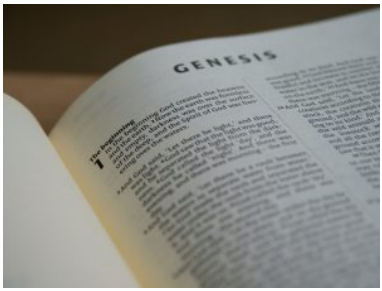
The collaborative construction of mythological meaning.

ANDY GUREVICH

Genesis is apart from other myths in that it has one god only; he is all-powerful and all-knowing, and doesn't seem to have the usual human-like failings of gods from other myths.

In a monotheistic belief system, God is generally removed from the people and is perceived as the creator who grants us life but demands pretty strict obedience.

If we proceed with the idea that myth is metaphor, let start with "on the first day"—is this literally a day as we experience it? Since we can't really know God, how can we know what a "god-day" is? So, is it literal or metaphor?



"Close-Up Photo of Bible" by Brett Jordan, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

After God creates the world, animal and plants, he creates Adam and Eve. There are two different accounts of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis:

- The first, Chapter 1, lines 26 and 27, has God creating both Adam and Eve in his own image.
- Then in Chapter 2, lines 7 and 21-23, we get the more familiar story of Adam being created from the earth and Eve being created from one of Adam's ribs. This picture of God giving life

to Adam is part of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. It is a Renaissance metaphor for creation. (You can see more images of the ceiling on line.)

Bible scholars agree that there were two authors of Genesis, referred to as J-E and P:

- J-E used the name Elohim (lords) and referred to god as Yahweh.
- The P version is believed to have been compiled for use by the priestly class.

The stories merged somewhere around the 6th to 7th centuries BC:

- The older version calls to mind many of the creation myths we have read so far.
- The second version of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib is unique. Do we take these literally? I think an important question to ask is why such a reversal here? A woman is born from man! (That's the metaphor).

The next big metaphor is the temptation by the serpent and the loss of the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve.

Our archetypal serpent plays an interesting role here. The serpent symbolizes many things, from evil (probably best elaborated in Genesis) to rebirth (it sheds its skin).

Keeping this complex symbol in mind, what does the snake actually accomplish? It tempts Eve to eat the fruit from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," despite God's warning that if they ate of this tree (which is in the center of the garden) they would "surely die." If this is so, why does Eve eat it and tempt Adam? Notice it didn't take much to get Adam to go along with this.

In the picture below, we can see the metaphor clearly. Notice that Adam and Eve here have covered themselves **before** they have eaten of the fruit. Genesis clearly tells us that they ate, then they became

ashamed of their nakedness, and *then* covered themselves. This picture shows the force of the metaphor on the human imagination.

"Adam and Eve (1504)" by Albrecht Dürer, The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

This tree is a great metaphor. Did Adam and Eve have no knowledge of good and evil before they ate? Let's go beyond the metaphor—what does it mean to have no knowledge of good and evil? This is an important idea to think about. By eating the fruit, they became ashamed of their nakedness (another metaphor) and they hid from God. But God knows all, so, of course, they disobeyed and were served punishment and kicked out of the garden. If god is all-knowing, did he know they would disobey?

There is a theme in myth of the one forbidden thing—Pandora's box is a good example. It is human nature to be told not to do something yet feel compelled to do it. Have you ever done something forbidden? Don't we feel a complex of guilt and exhilaration that we did it, even though we knew we shouldn't? The unspoken lesson we take from this is don't disobey god, but it also explains why life is so hard. The punishment accounts for the submission of women to men and the hard work we have to do just to be alive.

But it also casts a new light on innocence (no knowledge of good and evil) and awareness of it. Why is knowledge of good and evil such a bad thing? Does it make us god-like in some way? If you remember from the Mayan myth, the gods clouded the vision and reduced the wisdom of their "perfect" creations. What does god say to Adam and Eve when he discovered their disobedience?

This myth, more than telling a story, causes us to ponder very big ideas–the role of knowledge of good and evil–does that make us god-like? It certainly suggests that the fall from the Garden was a loss of a golden or perfect age, maybe like the first yuga in the Hindu cycle. God also makes sure Adam and Eve couldn't re-enter the garden. What reason does he give? Think about this on top of everything else!

This myth informs millions of people about their nature, our relationship to god, our relationship to each other and the world we live in. If we go beyond the metaphors, we can see the degree to which this myth has meaning for the way we live our lives.

We can do this with all the myths; it's easier to see with Genesis because many of us are familiar with it. For an online copy of the King James version of Genesis, go to: Genesis-Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

Wanadi

Now to Wanadi. This myth is unique in a few ways. If you read the introduction in the book, you know that the Yekuhana were so isolated that they were never conquered or Christianized. This makes the myth clean of outside influence.

The myth in some ways reflects some Christian beliefs, the idea of a last judgment, the duality of good and evil, to name a few. But it has a quite unique view of reality.

Briefly, this myth is pretty clear cut–it explains the existence of evil, how living beings were created (Was Wanadi smoking just tobacco?) It outlines how man should live his life and what happens at death. It does pose an interesting view of what is real.

But what Wanadi does is answer questions. Genesis, on the other hand, perhaps raises more questions than gives answers. Myth will often do this as well. Forcing us to dig deeper into it, and into ourselves, to uncover its more precious and lasting meaning and relevance.

"Blue Yellow and Red Abstract Painting" by Mikhail Nilov, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Readings:

- The opening chapters of ***Genesis*** (also linked above)
  - **Genesis-Chapters 1, 2, and 3**

- **History of Greek Myth**
- **History of The Ages of Man**
  - ***The Ages of Man***, Greece

- **History of Venezuelan Myth**
  - ***Wanadi, The Creator***, Venezuela

Chapter Five - Myth & Ritual

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These fertility myths are metaphoric and archetypal. They involve some kind of journey into the underworld where the goddess symbolically dies.

Her death causes the desolation of the earth–crops shrivel, animals die, water disappears–and humans grow weaker. In time, all will die and there will be no one to praise the gods. These goddesses are tied to nature-they are the goddess of the earth, the crops, and all living things. Salvation of the earth occurs when the goddess somehow manages to return to the earth.

"Woman in Yellow Dress Standing on Brown Sand Under Blue Sky" by Engin Akyurt, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

But a deal must be made; either the goddess or a representative must return to the underworld for a season.

This explains winter, the season of no growing plants, and it explains the cycle of the seasons–spring is the return of the earth goddess; summer she produces the abundance of the earth; fall celebrates the harvest and the preparations for the goddess's return to the underworld.

These myths seek to explain the mystery of life and death and the afterlife.

These myths are also known as fertility or vegetation myths. The gods are called "**chthonic**" pronounced "tonic." The term means

subterranean, or below the earth, so you can see their association with growing plants.

But these myths evolved into a much deeper, much more complex meaning that goes beyond the fertility of the land. These goddesses represent life itself. If the goddess can return from death, is there hope for us?

The cycle of human life mirrors the cycle of the seasons-spring is our birth, summer, our growth to adulthood, fall our productive life when we bring forth new life, and winter, our old age when we still nurture, but will soon die. If the plants can be reborn in the spring, can we? These myths tell us that there is a life after our physical death. It is one of the great mysteries of our existence.

As rituals grew around the worship of these goddesses, they became more formal and became cults, not in our modern sense of cult. The most wide-spread cult was that of Isis. Originating in Egypt, it spread to Greece, Italy, and beyond. It persisted until the 4th century CE. The early Roman Catholic Church had an extremely difficult time suppressing it.

"Terracotta statuette of a draped goddess (late 5th–4th century B.C.)" by acquired in 2000, gift of Robin Symes, The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The next important cult was that of Demeter, in Greece. Historians from the earliest times knew little about this cult. There was an elaborate initiation ritual and certain requirements to join. Initiates had to be Greek-speakers, slaves could join at the consent of their masters. Every spring, initiates walked from Athens to Eleusis, the location of the shrine of Demeter.

The march was to honor Demeter's search for Persephone after she was abducted to the underworld by Poseidon. Initiates fasted, drinking only kykeon, a mixture of barley, water and honey. Once the initiates reached Eleusis, they sacrificed a pig, cleansed themselves in the waters, and prepared to be admitted to the cult. Once in the temple, the ceremony included specific rites performed.

The important thing about these rites was that they were secret. Once initiated into the cult, members were forbidden, under penalty of death, to speak about the rites.

Over time, scholars were able to piece together what we know about the cults today. As we can see from Homer's hymns to Demeter, part of the mystery involved a type of symbolic rebirth, giving a hope of life after death. Persephone, representing spring, is abducted by Hades, god of the Underworld. He intends to marry her (how's that for a metaphor!) Demeter searches in vain for her

daughter. In her grief, the land is rendered barren, and nothing can grow.

After Demeter's futile search, she finally bargains with Zeus for Persephone's return. But Persephone has already eaten a single seed of the pomegranate; she has eaten the food of the dead. So, she is allowed to return for the spring, summer and fall, the fertile seasons, but must return to Hades for the winter.

Check the following link to read about the rites of Demeter at Eleusis: Eleusinian Mysteries

Osiris, Isis, and Horus

For ritual and the message of life after death, the myth of Osiris, Isis and Horus clearly

shows the impact myths can have on a society. From the myth arose the complex burial practices of Egypt. The Egyptian Book of the Dead outlines the processes, the prayers, and the confessions one must perform in order to make the journey to the afterlife.

"Triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus (664–30 B.C.)" by Purchased from Stora Art Galleries, New York, 1942, The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Isis became a cult figure for several reasons: she did bring Osiris back to life for the purpose of becoming impregnated with Horus. Here, the myth closely ties life and death—from death comes life.

As your read the myth in our text, you will see that there is a close tie between death and sex; Isis fans life into Osiris and he lives

long enough to impregnate Isis with Horus. The cycle is complete, and the generations will go on. So, the message is, life comes from death. (For many centuries, people thought that every orgasm was like a little death: the French call it "la petite mort" literally the little death.)

Most religions address the issue of an afterlife in a very similar way to the Greek and Egyptian. Our funeral rites are a direct evolution of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Why would we want to preserve a body for as long as possible? But more than that, our religions have us look to a movement to a life different than that on earth, but a life nonetheless, often with rewards and comfort we do not get in our earthly lives.

It's a great metaphor for the rebirth of the soul into the afterlife. Isis is also the goddess of crops and other growing things. She is fertility. Isis is mother, the giver and sustainer of life. Osiris takes on the role of final judge in the soul's journey to immortality. It is he who oversees the weighing of the heart, hears the confession, and welcomes the soul into the afterlife.

"Topless Woman With Yellow and Orange Floral Headdress" by JEFERSON GOMES, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Sedna

How can a culture so far removed from the fertility of the Nile and Greece have such a similar myth? The Inuit do not grow any crops, yet Sedna represents fertility. Life comes from her very body.

Unlike the other myths, Sedna does not return in the spring, but stays beneath the seas. In place of winter, the fish and sea mammals are held back from the hunters when Sedna is angered because her hair is tangled. But notice the shaman must go down into the sea (the parallel of the underworld) to appease her and comb her hair so she will return the bounty of the seas to the people.

The same metaphors are here as in the other myths. Perhaps more so than the creation myths, these myths show the archetypal pattern of the descent into the underworld, and the return of the god or goddess with hope for life after death.

Other myths with this same basic archetype are Dionysius, Orpheus, Attis, Adonis, and Innana from Sumer/Babylon. You may want to read them, and they are easily found on the internet.

Readings:

- History of Egyptian Myth

    - Osiris, Isis and Horus, Egypt

- History of Greek Myth
- History of Demeter Myth
    - *Demeter and Persephone*, Greece

- History of Japanese Myth
    - *Amaterasu*, Japan

- History of Inuit Myth
    - *Sedna*, Inuit

Chapter Six - Myth & The Hero

ANDY GUREVICH

This week, we will be exploring the role of the hero in mythic contexts. Not all heroes look or act alike, and it will be important to explore the many ways we look to each other for help, rescue, and salvation.

We will begin at the beginning, and explore the very first hero story ever written. Or at least, the earliest surviving example of one. Gilgamesh is a great story; it has all the makings of a typical hero myth. Joseph Campbell briefly outlines the hero quest:

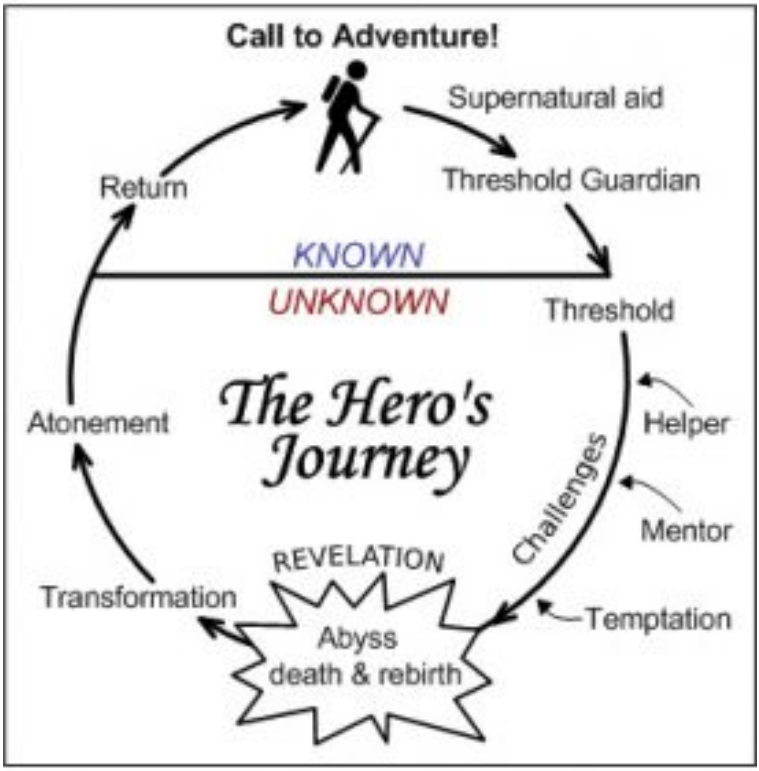
"Woman in Black Blazer Sitting on Wheelchair" by cottonbro, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

- **The call to the quest**–the hero consciously seeks the quest. In Gilgamesh, he seeks immortality. In another variation, the quest is thrust upon the hero–he or she may wander into a woods or area that is magical or strange and dangerous and have to navigate the dangers to return.
- **The going out**–the hero ventures out on the quest. There often are "helpers" along the way. Gilgamesh, in his first quest to kill Humbaba, has the help of Enkidu and other men, and the

god Samash.

- **Fulfillment of the quest**–after a series of tests or challenges, the hero completes the quest.
- **Return**–the hero return with a great gift or boon for his people. It may be a physical item like gold or a magical object, or it may be some great knowledge that will aid his people. (Moses is a great example–his return with the Ten Commandments set up the principles for a new society.)
- The hero undergoes tests that change him, usually for the good. We can see the pattern in the lives of Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus.

Here is a chart of the hero's journey based on the works of Joseph Campbell:



"The Hero's Journey" by scan from an Unknown authorUnknown authorpublication by an / anonymous poster, in a thread, gave permission to use it. Re- Vectorization: Slashme, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, World Mythology is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Reading:

“”Gilgamesh The King”” by Jim Burns, The British Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

- Please **read**:
  - The Epic of Gilgamesh History & Culture
  - The Epic of Gilgamesh History & Culture (Downloadable version)
  - The Epic of Gilgamesh
  - The Epic of Gilgamesh (Downloadable version)
- Please **watch**:
  - The Epic of Gilgamesh

I hope you enjoy it! Things to look for as you read:

- The early character of Gilgamesh—does he change in the end?
- The symbolic role of Enkidu—what does he represent in the story?
- The two quests—what is each one’s purpose and are they fulfilled?

- The second quest is nicely done up in archetypes. What are some of the archetypes?
- Is Gilgamesh a hero a modern audience can relate to? (Check out Wikipedia: *Gilgamesh in Popular Culture*.)

"Cuneiform tablet: fragment of the Weidner God List (ca. late 1st millennium B.C.)" by Acquired by the Museum in 1886, purchased from the Reverend William Hayes Ward., The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The story was one of the first written narratives, written in Cuneiform, a series of wedges pressed into wet clay. Unfortunately, these clay tablets break easily. There were also different versions; stories of Gilgamesh were found scattered throughout the region of what is now modern Iran, Iraq, and Turkey.

Scholars have pieced together the story as best they can, although we still have questions about certain events. For example, when Gilgamesh goes to find Urshanabi to take him across the Waters of Death, Gilgamesh smashes the sacred statues. We don't know what their purpose was or why Gilgamesh smashed them.

Gilgamesh goes on two journeys. His first is a physical quest-to kill Humbaba and bring cedar back to Uruk. He succeeds at both.

His second quest is a spiritual or intellectual quest. He seeks immortality after the loss of his friend Enkidu.

Look at the two challenges he faces: he must go through the 36 mile tunnel, suggesting death. When he exits the tunnel, he is in an orchard with trees which bore jewels. He was convinced he was in the garden of the gods. Then he must cross the Waters of Death. He meets with Utanapishtim, but is told he cannot have immortality.

So Gilgamesh fails to gain immortality. He is given a consolation

prize of sorts. If he can dive deep into the waters (what's the symbolism here?) he can gather a plant which will endow him with everlasting youth. He loses his plant to a snake (more symbolism), who immediately sheds its skin. Gilgamesh has failed in his journey. Or has he? What does Gilgamesh gain? What does he take back to his people? Does the experience change him?

Chapter Seven - Myth & The Anti-Hero

ANDY GUREVICH

"Peleus and Talamon, from the series 'Vessels of the Argonauts,' for the wedding celebration of Cosimo de' Medici in Florence, 1608" by Remigio Cantagallina , The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The story of Jason and the Argonauts is among the most popular of hero myths. It has adventure, danger, the intervention of the gods, the great prize–the fabled Golden Fleece. But, as you will see as you read Jason and the Argonauts and Medea, there is a darker side to this hero. This version, written in the 3rd century BC by Apollonius, is the earliest, most complete version of the myth. It is edited in our book. The original is a much longer story.

What is interesting here is to see how Jason changes throughout the story. Change is a characteristic of the hero, but how he or she changes is important as well. Jason's change is caused by a flaw in his character, what the Greeks referred to as hubris–pride. Pay attention as well to Medea. The author, Apollonius, was quite sophisticated in her character development and insight into her thought processes.

We also get a good insight into the relationship between the gods and Jason and Medea. One thing to think about as you read this is, do Jason and Medea really have a choice in what happens?

As you read, you will notice the repetition of phrases that can be annoying to modern readers. The repetition comes from the oral

tradition. The phrases are like aids to the oral storyteller, kind of like the refrain of a song. Try not to let them distract you.

An **anti-hero** is a protagonist who lacks the characteristics we typically associate with a hero—nobility of mind and spirit, humility, compassion, things like that. Modern audiences don't expect our heroes to be perfect; that would make them pretty predictable and boring. But there should be limits on how imperfect a hero can be before he turns into a villain. Jason perhaps walks the line. You decide.

I have given you a brief chapter by chapter overview. I ask a lot of questions in the sections. I do not expect you to answer them. They are just things to look for as you read, and maybe think about as you answer the questions.

Chapter 1

Jason does start out with good intentions. He is to avenge the theft of the kingdom of Iolcus from his father, Aeson. The bad guy is his uncle, Pelias. Jason seems a little short-sighted early on. He seems to set himself up to find the Golden Fleece, a dangerous and long trip to a faraway kingdom whose ruler has a very scary reputation. In fact, Pelias is convinced that Jason will never return. Jason sets off with the Argonauts, one of whom was Pelias's only son.

It is important to note the role that Hera plays in the story. What are her reasons for getting so involved? What is her plan? How does this affect the way you evaluate the actions of Jason and Medea?

Chapter 2

There are a lot of messages and hidden warnings for Jason from Phineus. Do you feel he helps Jason? What is the cause of Phineus's fate? What lessons does his life have for people? In this chapter we are introduced to Medea. How is she presented? What's your first impression of her? How is Hera using her?

Chapter 3

Jason finally gets to Colchis, land of the Golden Fleece. On a quest, there are tests or adventures one must perform in order to move forward. What is the task here and what does is show that Jason must have? On page 182, Jason says "Why should my heart flood with fear? Heroes and cowards alike share the same fate." What does this say about his role as hero? Do you agree with this statement? Jason also realizes he cannot perform the task set out by Aeetes, so he realizes that Medea can be a great help. "I will even rely on a woman!" he states. (I'm already not liking him.) Medea goes through mental turmoil. What are her concerns? What position is she in?

Chapter 4

After a long internal struggle, Medea decides to help Jason. She has the powerful herbs that will make him invincible and meets with him. She gives him the herbs and tells him exactly what he must do to complete the tasks. She promises she will help him get the Golden Fleece from the serpent who guards it. She is totally in love with him at this time, which plays into Hera's plan nicely. Jason is

warming up to Medea, promising her to be remembered and have her name known.

There is also a very strange ritual she performs that is a great archetype of rebirth. (This will be important when we read Medea next week.) She kills him, makes Jason stew, and brings him back to life, strong, renewed and ready for the challenge. Jason pledges his undying, everlasting love to Medea in an over the top way (see page 191). As they plan to flee after getting the fleece, Jason insists they take Medea's little brother with them, as an insurance policy, and this will become important at the end of the myth.

Chapter 5

Of course Jason is successful in plowing the field taming the bulls and defeating the warriors. Aeetes is pretty smart and realizes the Jason must have had help to succeed, and the only person capable of this kind of help is Medea. She is now a traitor. Aeetes decides that Jason has not earned the fleece. He plots to kill not just Medea, but Jason and all the Argonauts.

Chapter 6

Jason, with a lot of help from Medea, acquires the Golden Fleece. They prepare to flee, taking the fleece and Medea's little brother, Apsyrtus. On page 197, Medea reminds Jason of all she has done for him and begs him to save her from her father's anger, and to take her away and not hold her in contempt. Do you find this odd? Do you think she realizes Jason may not be as he seems? He promises to take her to his home and marry her, and love her until death. They all safely escape Aeetes.

What are Jason's first words after he gets the fleece? Does he change as a result of having the fleece?

Readings:

- Jason and the Golden Fleece (Historical Background)
- Jason and the Golden Fleece, Greece **[This is a longer one!]**

Mostly for next week, but it will help to dive in to this as soon as you can as well:

- Medea (Historical Background)
- Medea, Greece **[This is a longer one!]**

Chapter Eight - Myth & Revenge

ANDY GUREVICH

In addition to some pretty horrific events that take place in *Medea*, the way the characters of Jason and Medea degenerate is pretty profound. It has all the making of a Greek Tragedy.

Aristotle set out the characteristics and requirements for tragedy in The Poetics. The intention of a tragedy is to bring about a feeling of pity and fear in the audience which leads to the purging of powerful emotions.

A good tragedy causes us to place ourselves in the place of the tragic hero, and evaluate the reasons for his downfall. The hero is usually someone above the ordinary man—he is a part god, or super hero. His position and his fall remind us that no one is exempt from those great flaws in character that cause a downfall.

For the Greeks one of the great character flaws is pride, overbearing pride, hubris, the Greeks called it. It is a pride that causes the hero to think he is like the gods.

Does Jason fill this bill? If you remember Jason's first words once the Golden Fleece was in his hands was "What a great prize I have won!" In fact, he did very little to gain the fleece. He quickly forgets about all Medea has done. She has to remind him, and he realizes he still needs her help to escape from Colchis and Aeetes.

"Medea (ca. 1715)" by Charles Antoine Coypel (French, Paris 1694–1752 Paris), The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Chapter 1

Early on, Medea realizes the truth about Jason, but she continues to help him, with horrifying results. What does Medea do as they are escaping from Aeetes and his fleet? What is the meaning of the goddess Athena's words? It's not in this version, but in trying to return to Greece, the Argos traveled all over, lost, for years. The return voyage bears several similarities to the places in the *Odyssey*. Here is a copy of a map of Jason's travels (there are several variations).

In order to be safe, Medea must be married to Jason so the king of Phaeacia will protect her from Aeetes. A quick wedding is prepared and Hera blesses their union.

Chapter 2

When Jason is back in Iolcus, he must take revenge on Pelias. This

is all part of Hera's scheme to punish Pelias. Again, Medea takes the lead. In an ironic and cruel plot, Medea uses her powers on Pelias the same way she did on Jason. If Medea is aware of Jason's falseness and self-centeredness, why does she continue to help him? Hera is pleased with the outcome; she has her revenge on Pelias. Take note of what Hera does now that her plot has come to fruition.

Chapter 3

The son of Pelias, Acastus, is now the king of Iolcus. He was also one of the Argonauts and friend to Jason. He is another person between a rock and a hard place. The law gives him leave to kill Jason and Medea, but he can't, so he banishes them. They have no home, but come to Corinth where they are accepted by King Creon. For ten years they live happily, having two sons.

We are told by the Apollonius that Medea wore the crown of modesty on her head. So what causes this happiness to come unraveled? Medea's only flaw here is that she grew old. Jason is disgusted by Medea and seeks out the beautiful young daughter of King Creon, Glauce. What is his motivation?

What "loophole" does Creon find in Jason and Medea's marriage that would allow Jason to freely marry Glauce? Why does Medea's being a barbarian become an issue after ten years of marriage?

At the end of Chapter 3, Medea makes a remarkably modern speech about the status of women in the society and her own status in particular. It gives a good insight into the position of women in ancient Greece.

Chapter 4

Medea and Jason argue at the beginning of this chapter. It's almost like we are eavesdropping because the conversation is so realistic and modern in many of the points each one makes. Who do you think is more justified in their anger? Does this conversation reflect the character and personalities of Jason and Medea?

Chapter 5

While Medea ponders her fate, King Aegeus from Athens comes. Medea knows the king and greets him. She tells him that Jason has abandoned her. In this scene, one can feel sympathy for Medea through Aegeus's words. He says, "For those who dishonored you are inviting the gods to judge them." Medea begs Aegeus to take her to Athens and he agrees. Maybe because she knows she will have a safe haven, she plots some terrible revenge on Creon and especially Glauce. For Jason, she has another plan—to deprive him of everything he loves, including his sons.

Chapter 6

Medea anguishes over her plan to kill her own sons. She considers taking them into exile with her, but realizes she must not spare them. Pay attention to the reasons she gives early in the chapter for killing her sons. What do they say about her? Did you expect her to offer reasons like this? One thing to note is that the Greeks very often would leave unwanted children on hillsides to die, so there may not have been the same respect and reverence we have for children today. From the ancient Greek perspective, this act may not have been as profoundly horrid as it is to us.

A messenger arrives to tell the story of the death of Glauce and Creon. In Greek drama, graphic deaths took place off stage and were reported by a messenger. The death is pretty ghastly. Afterward, Medea puts all love, passion and tears aside and gives her sons herbs to put them in a deep sleep and kills them.

Jason arrives soon after, and Medea presents his dead sons to him. How does Jason react? Read his response carefully as it provides great insight into his character. Some versions show how Jason wandered, homeless and unhappy, and sought shelter on the Argos. One day, while he was sleeping under the stern of the boat it collapsed and killed him.

The ending of this story is a bit ambiguous. Medea has killed her own brother, King Pelias, Glauce, Creon, her two sons. The most difficult to imagine is her killing her sons. Wouldn't the gods punish her? How come Jason didn't try to kill her, after all he has just lost everything. Helios, Medea's grandfather, arrives from the heavens and takes her and her sons away to Athens (some versions say she went to Mt Olympus). Is the author, Appolonius, trying to justify her behavior to us?

Finally, there is Jason's final words about man's suffering. It is a remarkable statement Jason makes—"...the deathless gods are not to blame. For there are no gods!" Jason, the first atheist? Why does he say this? Does this provide a clear insight into Jason's character?

With all of this to consider, let's turn to Jason as a hero. Does he fit the hero's journey? He does get the Golden Fleece. He has help, maybe too much, from Medea. He returns with the prize. Everything is good. What, then, causes the tragic events of this story? How much is Medea to blame? So, do Jason's character flaws make him less of a hero, even an anti-hero? More importantly, what lessons do we learn from this story?

Readings:

Make sure to revisit the "History and Culture" materials for this myth in the previous chapter.

- Jason and the Golden Fleece, Greece, **[This is a longer one!]**
- Medea, Greece, **[This is a longer one!]**

"Terracotta column-krater (bowl for mixing wine and water) " by Attributed to the Orchard Painter, The Met Museum is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Chapter Nine - Final Thoughts

ANDY GUREVICH

"Kwan Yin (Goddess of Mercy)" by Unidentified (Chinese), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of John Gellatly is licensed under CC BY 4.0

"A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are the narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it."

-Psychoanalyst Rollo May, The Cry for Myth

"The person who thinks they can live without myth, or outside it, like one uprooted, has no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within them, or yet with contemporary human society. This plaything of their reason never grips their vitals."

-C.G. Jung

Please remember that our journey with these transformative narratives continues as long as we are alive, perhaps longer. Through myths, we are able to engage with the consciousness that is the ground of being itself. Thank you for spending time on this journey with me and with each other, and thank you for bringing your full selves to the experience as well.

I hope you will continue to engage with the folktales, myths, stories, and cultures of the living world of our ancestors. These rich narratives provide a vivid, experiential context of understanding that both honors the uniqueness of each individual and culture while simultaneously uncovering a deep human connection at the basis of all of them. The myths of our ancestors tell the stories of our shared becoming. The stories we tell today, of our struggles, our hopes, our fears, and our triumphs, will be the myths of future generations who look to us, their ancestors, for the eternal hope and spiritual grounding that only myths can provide. I pray you have enjoyed the course and our time together. I look forward to engaging you final projects.