**Mythology Notes 9/11/2015**

**Why do we need stories?**

To help us understand the world around us

To try to answer the toughest questions of life

To help us escape reality by entering a world where the good always wins, the forces of evil are defeated, and love conquers all

To help define the roles of good and evil, so that we might recognize them in others and ourselves

To make us better people

**Mythologies create meaning. What is myth?**

An anonymous traditional story, orally passed from one generation to the next, is believed by the culture from which it comes, about gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, and fantastic creatures. It takes place in primeval times.

**Divine Myth/Etiological Myth:**

An etiological myth is a myth intended to explain a name or create a mythic history for a place or family.

**Major Concepts**

Three ways scholars have approached Mythology:

1. **Myth is grounded in Reality** – A reflection of natural forces and process or allegorical stories about reality. People based myth on what they knew (seasons, times). Myth is a reflection of social practices and classes, or relationships. Allegorized grander version of what has occurred. Myths are “primitive science” – Andrew Lang. Some within this belief system would call it Functionalism (Bronislaw Malonowski).
2. **Myth is grounded in the Psyche** – a reflection of the structure of the human mind. Myth is concerned with the psychic collective of mankind. Neo-union approach. A psychic database of stories or narratives. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung believed we possess a “collective unconscious” – which does not mean we all think the same, but rather that there are major concepts that all humans understand, no matter what their culture and background.
3. **Structuralism** – Myth is a means of structuring, understanding, creating human experience. It’s like how language can shape thought. A myth is the sum of all stories of a particular type within a cultural system; furthermore, the meaning and interpretation of the myth is only clear when one views how it relates to the other myths in the same system. There are several different Structuralist approaches to myth, but they share a common view that a myth cannot be interpreted in isolation but only has meaning within an entire cultural system or structure of myth. The key principle in structuralism, as far as myth is concerned, is that Claude Levi-Strauss believed that myths deal not with concepts, but structures, and that such structures correspond to the structure of the brain. Further, he saw dichotomy as the fundamental structure of everything, and asserted that myths are attempts to mediate between binary oppositions (raw/cooked, wild/tame, high/low, etc.) This, in my mind, is an extreme form of reductionism, however valid it may be in special cases.

**Major motifs in Ancient Mythology:**

**Xenia** – Guest-host rule. When you invite a guest to dinner, you will not harm them. Likewise, the guest can’t hurt the host. When you invite a guest, you cannot ask that person’s name until he/she is satisfied. These are rules to help govern because there was no law. Greek law trans. "guest-friendship" is the ancient Greek concept of hospitality, the generosity and courtesy shown to those who are far from home and/or associates of the person bestowing guest-friendship. The rituals of hospitality created and expressed a reciprocal relationship between guest and host expressed in both material benefits (such as the giving of gifts to each party) as well as non-material ones (such as protection, shelter, favors, or certain normative rights). You must not ask a guest his name until you have met his needs and you cannot do harm to one who is a guest. Likewise, a guest must honor and respect his host.

In another myth, Tantalus is entertaining the gods and serves his own son up as the entree for their meal. The only god to eat any of their meal was Demeter because she was distracted with grief for her daughter's abduction by Hades. Tantalus was punished for his violation of xenia by being sent to Tartarus and being suspended between food and water, never being able to reach either (where the word "tantalize" comes from).

**Miasma** – You don’t hurt a family member of you will be polluted.

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| |  | | --- | | ***MIASMA*** (Greek, "stench"): Literally referring to a stench or bad smell, the Greek term also metaphorically indicates a sort of ceremonial taint or spiritual stain that can result from various sorts of impurity. The ancient Greeks thought actions such as murder, incest, blasphemy, menstruation, or violations of [***xenia***](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_X.html#xenia_anchor) might cause a *miasma* around a person or place, and until the community took action to expunge the stain, misfortune such as disease, drought, or other blights would be the potential result. Normally, people thought to be stained by *miasma* were forbidden to pass the sacred marker (***[temenos](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_T.html" \l "temenos_anchor)***) separating the holy ground of a temple or a public forum from non-sacred space. The term is particularly applicable in the play *Oedipus Rex*, in which the entire community of Thebes has fallen under a curse because of a *miasma* in their midst. | |

In Greek mythology, a miasma is "a contagious power ... that has an independent life of its own. Until purged by the sacrificial death of the wrongdoer, society would be chronically infected by catastrophe."[1]

An example is Atreus who invited his brother Thyestes to a delicious stew containing the bodies of his own sons. A miasma contaminated the entire family of Atreus, where one violent crime led to another, providing fodder for many of the Greek heroic tales. However, attempts to cleanse a city or a society from miasma may have the opposite effect, that of reinforcing the miasma.

**Hubris –** Overweening pride. Trying to be like the gods and not man.

Means extreme pride or self-confidence. When it offends the gods of ancient Greece, it is usually punished. The adjectival form of the noun hubris is "hubristic.”

Hubris is usually perceived as a characteristic of an individual rather than a group, although the group the offender belongs to may suffer consequences from the wrongful act. Hubris often indicates a loss of contact with reality and an overestimation of one's own competence, accomplishments or capabilities, especially when the person exhibiting it is in a position of power.

Definition of Hubris – Hubris is the arrogance and pride exhibited by a character which ultimately leads to his downfall.

Hubris is one of the typical flaws for a character, often occurring when he occupies a prominent position, then miscalculates and overestimates his capabilities. This overestimation goes so far that the character loses his ability to be realistic and pragmatic. A character that has hubris tries to go beyond the limits of normal human strength and in the process violates moral codes.

**Fear** – The son will overcome the father.

The furies come from Cronus castrating his father – miasma creates the furies. From the foam of the sea up comes beautiful Aphrodite. So love and torment from the same.

**Archetypes**: An original model or type after which other similar things are patterned. In Jungian psychology, an inherited pattern of thought or symbolic image that is derived from the past collective experience of humanity and is present in the unconscious of the individual.

An archetype is a universal symbolic pattern. Examples of archetypal characters are the femme fatale, the trickster, the great mother and father, and the dying god. There are archetypal stories as well. Examples are stories of great floods, virgin births, creation, paradise, the underworld, and a final apocalypse. True to their universal nature, archetypal characters and stories appear again and again in myths across many diverse cultures.

Archetypal myths explain the nature of the world and life. Thus, many peoples have tales to explain the origins of places and objects: the city, the mountain, the temple, the tree and even the stone. Other archetypal myths serve to instruct. For example, the quest archetype is typically a journey where the hero or heroine must overcome their own faults and weaknesses in order to reemerge as a mature, productive member of their society.