

Chapter 9: Mythology, Legends, and Fairy Tales

Editor's note: The following excerpt is a portion of the 30 page chapter on mythology, legends, and fairy tales in the first three Harry Potter novels.

“A mythology doesn't come from the head; a mythology comes from the heart.” —Joseph Campbell

“Nurture your minds with great thoughts. To believe in the heroic makes heroes.”—Benjamin Disraeli

Introduction

Literary critics look for myths, legends, archetypes, and symbols because they know that these are the devices that subconsciously influence readers. In good literature, plot provides a structure through which subconscious influences can operate. Plot can evoke deep emotions in readers, but it cannot achieve a profound impact without tapping into our mythic subconscious. Harry's forehead has been branded with a lightning bolt, the primal symbol of fear produced by the most ferocious of gods, Zeus. Harry had been marked as an outsider who must fulfill some quest to explain his mark. Marking people for death is an ancient rite, and whether readers recognize it through Passover, the holocaust, *The Scarlet Letter*, or branding cattle, the pain and power of the mark itself, and the consequences it foreshadows becomes a fearsome symbol. That Harry's mark is a lightning bolt hurled his way by warring deities makes him an even more persuasive victim/hero entangled in a destiny he cannot escape. As Rowling superimposes layer upon layer of myths and their symbols, she creates a depth of instinctual response that turns readers inward to ask themselves questions far more important than the next twist in the plot.

Fantasy Framework

Giants and trolls, heroes and villains, spells and charms alert readers to the fantastical elements of the novels. These characters, objects, and expressions have their roots in mythology, legends, and fairy tales. Myths are stories that reflect cultural beliefs and traditions through symbolism; they also convey meanings that help people comprehend their environments. Connecting diverse groups who share universal concerns, myths offer explanations for such fundamental questions as how the universe was created or why death occurs. Myths can be presented orally or as art, games, dances, or rites such as ceremonies designed to improve the fertility of agricultural fields.

Myths—such as how ancient people believed the world was created—are usually set in a time separate from and preceding known human history and usually include supernatural elements. Such phenomenal factors provide clues about primitive religious practices of ancient people (see Chapter 10, Archetypes and Biblical Allusions). Scholars have interpreted the meaning, purpose, and application of myths differently based on their personal philosophies and intellectual and socioeconomic trends of the era in which they live. Many researchers have focused on how myths conflict with the logic of reason and history. Others examine the psychological and spiritual functions of mythology. Mythologists are interested in documenting the origins of tales and comparing adaptations as well as exploring the values and beliefs communicated in the stories and how they inspire creativity and imagination through retelling the original story.

Similarly, legends—such as Robin Hood—chronicle stories about heroes and villains who seem to be historically true but whose facts are not easily verifiable, causing listeners and readers to be unsure about their authenticity. Unlike legends, fairy tales are obviously fictional and their origins are unknown. The stories often are designed purposely to be misleading so that readers will be surprised by the plot's outcome. Fairy tales contain elements of truth and popular opinion. Related fictional forms include folklore, which is orally transmitted, and fables which are stories, often narrated by an animal, to emphasize a moral lesson or warn of danger. Like fairy tales, fables sometimes are intentionally deceiving to stress the dangers of evil. Tall tales exaggerate situations to emphasize the stories' objectives.

The study of mythology and its associated variations is complex. Literary scholars study how myth and legend are incorporated into fiction. Thousands of mythological characters, places, objects, situations, and motifs could be compared to similar components of the Potter series. The information in this chapter is intended to provide readers with basic ideas about recognizing such parallels and initiating further analysis and understanding of the mythological and legendary aspects of the Potter novels. Mythology is a vast subject and related to several other topics concerning the Potter series (see Chapter 3, Characters; Chapter 4, Setting; Chapter 10, Archetypes and Biblical Allusions; Chapter 11, History; and Chapter 14, Literary Qualities).

Patterns and Motifs

The fundamental Harry Potter plot is universal, appealing to humanity's mythic core and collective imagination. Characters, places, and events have their origins in fairy tales and fables that reiterate cosmic messages and cautionary tales. Harry is a powerful child hero, even stronger than Dumbledore, who outlasts a seemingly unconquerable villain (for discussion of the hero

archetype, see Chapter 12, Archetypes and Biblical Allusions). Most myths have a similar structure of a protagonist like Harry who undergoes a quest, fights evil, and restores order from chaos.

The mythical hero might be uncertain of victory against monsters that initially appear animalistic but usually are proven to be controlled by a human. In Books I, II, and III, Harry faces an animal foe—Fluffy, the basilisk, and the Grim—who are facades for a human opponent—Professor Quirrell, Tom Riddle, and Sirius Black. In the latter case, when Harry realizes that Black is actually an ally, Scabbers is exposed in his human form. The hero often suffers an injury or illness during his quest, and Harry's stomach is always queasy or he has an unquenchable thirst, which suggests that he must endure chronic sickness until he has defeated Voldemort. Sometimes the hero visits the underworld, such as Harry's descent to the chambers.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell asserted that in addition to subduing the seemingly impossible, a mythical hero must share aspects of the readers' cultures. Harry's innocence, vulnerability, and determination are traits recognizable to people throughout the world. Campbell believed that the mythical hero must become integrated as part of a group and realize his or her role in that society. Harry accepts his position as Hogwarts's crusader against evil and Gryffindor's Seeker of victory. He also meets Campbell's fourth criteria of acquiring self knowledge and maturing during his ordeals. By doing so, readers identify with Harry's experiences and recognize parallels in their lives. Such personal association is strengthened through the recognition of motifs which are symbols or ideas that reinforce overall meanings and themes in the series. Recurring motifs in the Potter novels include invisibility, identity, impostors, and invasion. Other mythical symbols and themes include storms, magical animals that guide mortals, a search for parents and self, hidden messages, repressed memories, and reversals of fortunes.

The Mythology Game: Can You Find Where Harry Came From?

The following list contains a brief description of characters and elements from classical (Greek and Roman) and Norse (Scandinavian) mythology, the legends about King Arthur, and fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm. These are but a few of the hundreds of mythical allusions in the Harry Potter novels. See if you can recognize any parallels in the Potter novels to these characters and situations before you read the analysis that follows this list. Make your own list of any additional mythical characters you think relate to the novels.