
Fairy Tales, Myths, and Other Archetypal Stories Spring Semester 2007

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Course Description

Myths hold the wisdom of a culture. They are stories that explain the creation of the cosmos and the reasons for the characteristics of the Earth, animals, plants, and human beings. They pass on a culture's supernatural traditions, its gods, and its heroes. They reflect how the individual relates to his or her culture and to the universe. Myths come into our consciousness as revelations, and their stories are reenacted through ritual. Human beings use myths, fairy tales, and folklore to explain life's mysteries and make them bearable. Jesus explained his teachings through parables, giving his followers difficult problems in easy-to-understand form. Plato communicated abstruse philosophical concepts through simple myths and allegories. Myths have the mysterious capacity to contain and communicate paradoxes, allowing us to see through, around, and over the dilemma to the real heart of the matter. Not only do myths teach us how to live and help guide us through the psychological crises of life, but they also bridge our consciousness with transcendent, universal realms, instilling in us a sense of awe, humility, and respect for the mysteries of the universe.

And as human beings, we all have a deep psychological need for the mysterious; a need to connect our consciousness to ideas that are larger than us, and to realms that lie beyond our limited understanding. In the not-so-distant past, our ancestors filled this need by drawing from a collective matrix of myths and rituals passed down from generation to generation. But as our culture becomes more fast-paced and technologically sophisticated, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw from that ancient psychological well. In an influential essay titled "Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art," Joseph Campbell argued that the advances in science and technology that have so transformed world culture in the past century have also left us psychologically impoverished by eroding the power of our myths and religious institutions. According to Campbell, society has become schizophrenic, with individuals feeling increasingly cut off from one another and disenchanted with the official structures and institutions that are supposed to provide direction in life. Even our most fundamental religious beliefs—once accepted on faith alone—have been stripped of their ancient mysteries and subjected to the rigorous demands of science. We scour the mountains of Turkey for physical evidence of Noah's Ark, and dig beneath the streets of the Holy Land for proof that Jesus lived, all in a desperate attempt to align our religious beliefs with the model of the universe provided us by science. Even the stories of Genesis are now explained "rationally" using the rubric of "Creation Science." To paraphrase Campbell, we have tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and have lost our innocence.

In an attempt to fill the psychological void left by our technological culture, we turn—like our ancestors—to fantasy stories set in worlds not so easily explained; stories in which individuals can draw from themselves hidden powers to control their own fate and attain their destiny. One need only look to recent popular culture for examples: in television programs like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, and in books and films like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* to name only a few. Like the myths of old, these stories communicate to us in a language of what psychologist Carl Jung described as "archetypes," universal primordial images passed down from our ancestral past that reside in the "collective unconscious" of most, if not all, human beings. Thus the study of myths—past and present—is one way to tease out and examine those symbols and perhaps arrive at better understanding of our own psychological processes and needs, both as individuals and as a society.

In this course we will critically examine myths, fairy tales, and their distant cousins, urban legends. How have societies used these stories to create, preserve, and transmit their cultural values? We will address attitudes toward such subjects as sex, gender identity, good and evil, as well as other subjects or attitudes which we might discover as we proceed.

Because this is a writing-intensive course, our primary purpose will be to hone your critical reading and writing abilities and to prepare you for writing demands of the university. We'll devote lots of time to the writing process with special emphasis on style, structure, and revision.

Required Texts and Materials

The Classic Fairy Tales. Edited by Maria Tatar. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.)

Fairy Tales, Myths, and Other Archetypal Stories. Available at Johnny Print, 547 S. Limestone.

The Penguin Handbook. By Lester Faigley. (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2006.)

Student Award Winning Essays.

Grading

Grades are based on the following formula:

A=3.50-4.00; B=2.50-3.49; C=1.50-2.49; D=0.50-1.49; E=0.49 or below.

Your final course grade will be derived from the following components (all dates tentative):

20%	Attendance, homework, quizzes, in-class work
15%	Essay 1, 5pp. (due Feb. 12)
20%	Essay 2, 5pp. (due Mar. 21)
20%	Essay 3, 5pp. (due Apr. 11)
25%	Essay 4, 10pp. (due April 30)

General Policies

The course Web page contains a complete listing of course policies, assignments, schedules, grading criteria, and other supplemental material for this course. It will be updated regularly and you are responsible for all information contained on it. In addition, we will have a class listserv that will act as an electronic bulletin board for the entire class. The class listserv is private; only you, your classmates, and myself will have access to your posts. The listserv will serve as the preferred medium for class announcements. For instructions on signing up to the listserv, see the course Web site.

Class begins when I take roll. If you aren't in class then, you're absent for attendance purposes. Three consecutive unexcused absences will reduce your course grade by one letter-grade, whereas missing six times total—excused or otherwise—will deny you credit for the course. This policy is not negotiable under any circumstance. On the other hand, why you're gone is your business, not mine, and you're not obligated to explain your absence in any way. In any event, no absence can be designated "excused" until documentation has been provided and verified. See the "Writing Program Guidelines" or *Student Rights and Responsibilities* for the University's policy on absences.

Unless you plan on feeding everyone, no food of any kind allowed in class.

Turn off your cell phones. If I hear a cell phone ring, or catch you using one in class, you will be asked to leave.

Essay assignments will be marked down one half letter grade for being late, then another half grade for each calendar day they're late. Homework assignments cannot be turned in late for credit.

All out-of-class writing assignments—including homework—must be typed in 12-point type, double-spaced, with 1" margins, and MUST conform to MLA guidelines for style and documentation of sources. No hand-written submissions will be accepted, nor do I accept homework, drafts, or essay assignments via e-mail. See the sample on the course Web site for an example of proper format.

Feel free to come to my office during the above hours if you have any concerns about the class. If you cannot make it during scheduled office hours, let me know and we'll make other arrangements. You can also send me e-mail whenever you want; I'll try to respond quickly, but keep in mind that I'm usually only in the office three days per week.