

Modern Mythology and the hero's journey

by Joseph Campbell

The importance of myths



Why have we always created and exchanged myths?

Throughout history, humans have told each other stories to share their experiences of the world, to explore ways of dealing with life's problems and adventures, and to try to fathom the deeper meanings that underlie daily life. Some of these stories have become myths, with the potential to guide and inspire generation after generation of those who see and hear them. But what is a myth? What is magical about it? And how have Star Wars and The Lord of the Rings come to represent some of the great myths of our time?

Many of us had our first contact with mythological stories in school; we studied, with more or less enthusiasm, the Greek, Roman, Norse, African, or Asian myths about the creation of the world, the workings of nature, and the jealousies, wars, loves, and misadventures of a wide range of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines. These stories arose as ancient peoples struggled to answer the most fundamental questions about their humanity, such as why are we here? How can we live up to our highest potential? Is there a force that exists within and beyond us that we may call God? What is our relationship to this God, and how can this relationship guide us on life's journey?

In attempting to address these larger issues, certain archetypal stories, in which some elements of plot, character types, and locale all remain basically the same, have described the human experience with such universality that they have become lasting myths. The sense of a deep and abiding truth that such myths offer is part of their magic. But a myth does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it captures the spirit and concerns of the particular time and place out of which it has sprung, yet it manages to do so in a timeless fashion.

Perhaps this apparent contradiction is possible because at heart, we are all asking the same questions. Certainly this mixture of elements - the universal in conjunction with the

specific, the story rooted within a particular culture combined with the timeless tale for all humankind-is another magical aspect of myth.

"It has always been the prime function of mythology," wrote Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back."

A myth shows us what we're up against; it identifies the "bad guys" who often turn out to be within us, the part of ourselves that would hold us back-and it helps us find a way to defeat them. And that, finally, is part of the myth's magic too: it offers hope.

Mary Henderson, *Star Wars The Magic Of Myth*, 1997

1. Introduce the document
2. What is a myth? Use elements from the text to define it.
 - What is the use of it?
 - Explain what kind of answers it provides for people around the world.
3. What makes a myth universal or popular?
 - Why do some become « lasting myths »?

« Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind ».

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Answer the online quiz

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