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Unit: What is a Myth?: An Introduction to Mythology

“For one thing, we know that narrative in all its forms is a dialectic between what was expected and what came to pass. For there to be a story, something unforeseen must happen. Story is enormously sensitive to whatever challenges our conception of the canonical. It is an instrument not so much for solving problems as for finding them. The plight depicted marks a story’s type as much as the resolution. We more often tell stories to forewarn than to instruct. And because of this, stories are a culture’s coin and currency.” – Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories*

### **Unit Rationale**

While students usually study some mythological text in their high school English classes, such as *Beowulf* and *The Odyssey*, these texts are often taught in isolation from other myths.

Their content is covered in much the same way as the content of a contemporary novel or short story, with priority given to the recall of specific plot details and the application of literary devices. In addition, because the structure of the English curriculum is often chronological by design, myths may primarily be presented as examples of ancient literature with no link to the present. The function of these myths for the societies that produced them is rarely the focus of instruction, except perhaps in the definition of terms such as hero and epic. While there is nothing wrong with studying mythology in the context of a literature class, approaching it this way has limitations. Given the opportunity to devote an entire semester to mythology, I have decided to take a different approach.

This unit, the first in a semester-long mixed-level course on mythology, is based on the premise that mythology can be more engaging and relevant for student with less attention paid to the particular literary content of each story and a broader focus on mythology as a subject in and of itself. This unit will encourage students to reflect on larger questions, such as the

perseverance of myths throughout time, explanations for the many recurring themes and motifs found in myths across geographically distant cultures, the relationship between myths and major shifts in human history, and the personal as well as society purposes of telling stories. As James Marshall advocates approaching the teaching of reading as a skill rather than a content area, the unit will emphasize how a reader can productively enjoy myths rather than superficial memorization of the myths themselves.

Studying mythology can be a uniquely positive learning experience for students because it encourages students to take a multicultural perspective and think about humanity in a very broad sense. Even before the dawn of agriculture and written language, people had myths. Myths have not only existed for as long as humankind, but they have also been produced by every culture all over the world. Much academic work on mythology, such as that of Claude Levi-Strauss, insists that it is a myth's structure rather than content which is most significant.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, mythology allows students to think about the differences between societies, but also think about how people may have shared universal experiences and stories across space and time.

Mythology gives students to opportunity to venture outside the familiar everyday sphere and develop a more global consciousness. This course's multicultural perspective will prompt us to venture outside the Western canon. Since literature classes tend to focus on Greek, Roman, and European myths, we will look at Indian, African, and Native American myths, noting the major similarities and differences that we find. Perhaps most importantly, mythology shows students the connection between our world and the stories we tell about ourselves. In my experience, insight into the necessity of narrative for all humankind has the potential to enrich one's appreciation of other subject areas, including literature and history.

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<sup>1</sup> Levi-Strauss, Claude, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1995) 39.

The title of this unit, “What is a Myth? An Introduction to Mythology,” addresses the question of defining mythology, a term that is often taken for granted. The definitions of “myth” and “mythology” will be the basis for the beginning lessons of the unit; the complex definitions of these terms will be visited again and again. The purpose of starting at this point is to prime student for the critical thinking that will be asked of them throughout, as well as to gauge their prior knowledge of mythology and clear up any potential confusion about the course’s perspective.

One early activity that students will engage in is the production of a “word web” around the definition of mythology. A word web is a concept map drawn collectively by students on the chalkboard, or in some other place visible to the entire class. The rationale for encouraging student-generated knowledge in this way is that it gives students the opportunity to teach and learn from each other. It also allows them to use their prior knowledge to forge a cognitive map for the learning that will follow. Taking active roles in class promotes engagement and a sense of classroom community. Definitions and examples pulled from the word web will fuel our discussion. Another benefit to the word web is that since each student will have already developed ideas and written them on the board, the teacher can ask any student to elaborate on those ideas without putting an unprepared student on the spot. I hope that early participation from every student will pave the way for active involvement in discussion for the rest of the course.

I expect the introductory activity to generate a variety of common definitions of “myth.” After students compare and contrast different definitions, I will lead a discussion on why “stories of deep cultural or spiritual significance,” or something like it, might be the most productive conception of myths for us to adopt as a starting point. We will acknowledge and discuss

definitions of myth such as “a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief,” but for the purposes of our class, we will not be concerned with the literal truth or falsity of myths. The purpose of this clarification is not to force students to commit to a particular definition of mythology, but to establish an inquiry-based approach and disassociate myth and falsity. While academics writing about mythology have adopted many different definitions with different emphases, none of these requires that myths are necessarily false. The Christian writer C. S. Lewis famously referred to the life of Christ as a myth “which is also a fact.”<sup>2</sup> This quote reflects an approach to myths that sees them first and foremost as narratives.

Mythology and religion are inseparable topics; several of the myths we will be studying were considered sacred texts at some time and place. This unit will be taught in a rural, conservative Christian district. As the teacher, I want to be able to freely explore the myths of many cultures with my students without bringing religious faith into the discussion. This course is open to students in grades 9-12, who undoubtedly fall in different places on a broad spectrum of maturity and experience levels. By establishing the course’s perspective early on, I want to avoid the possibility of creating an uncomfortable or threatening environment for any of my students. Some parents may be concerned about this approach to mythology because they may not want their child studying myths of other religions and cultures from such a neutral stance, preferring for their children to see the myths of other cultures as fairy tales. They may also be worried that if their child looks at myths without judging their historical accuracy, their child may begin to question the historical accuracy of myths from their family’s religion. This is certainly not the intention of the course, nor is it anticipated. However, if parents do express concerns such as these, I would explain the above rationale for defining myths as I do, leaving

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C. S., *God in the Dock*, p. 66.

the question of historical truth or accuracy out of the picture, and remind them that this unit is part of an elective course and is not required for any student.

In order to complicate the idea that mythology is necessarily a study of the ancient as well as to maximize student interest, I will incorporate both ancient and modern texts into the course. Excerpts from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and school-appropriate movie clips from George Lucas's *Star Wars* and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* will show students that mythology has been and still is pervasive in pop culture. While some people may be skeptical of using texts from outside the literary canon, I will connect these texts to the inquiries most central to the course, for example, by pairing *Star Wars* with excerpts from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which inspired it. I hope that using contemporary texts will provide students with a welcome reprieve from their occasionally drab textbook anthologies.

An important aspect of my text selection for this unit is that I will use a large number of excerpts rather than focusing on reading whole texts, especially longer ones. My rationale for this course, the benefits of studying a broad selection of texts outweigh the benefit of paying close attention to any one text. Shorter texts will keep the unit moving at a quick pace and help to ensure that the texts are accessible and appropriate for all students, regardless of their grade or ability level. It will also make it easier to differentiate instruction for the class when needed, such as allowing small groups of juniors and seniors to read different short texts than the freshman and sophomores.

### **Culminating Assessments**

Because I anticipate having freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors in this elective course, the unit goals will be differentiated according to grade level. However, the culminating goals for all students will have a creative and a research component. All students will compose original myths, incorporating aspects of the texts we study in class. To increase student motivation and engagement, the creative myths will have a genuine audience. Near the end of the unit, we will have a storytelling day when each student will present his or her myth to the class. The research component will vary more across grade levels and will consist of a researched report or essay on a level-appropriate concept. For all students, the creative and research component will be equally weighted.

### **Component I: Creative Mythology**

Each student will compose an original myth incorporating aspects of mythology covered in class. The only differentiation for level will be in page length: freshman and sophomores must write myths at least two full pages, double-spaced; juniors and seniors must write myths at least three pages, double-spaced. Students must also illustrate their myths by producing a color illustration of the central figure. Students will choose from the following two options to guide their composition:

**Option 1:** Dozens of cultures feature the “trickster” in their myths. Compose your own myth based on a trickster of your own. Remember that the trickster normally breaks society’s rules, uses cleverness, humor, and deceit to achieve some ends, may show gender variability, and that his/her actions usually have positive effects (think Bugs Bunny or Bart Simpson).

**Option 2:** Compose a hero myth. Send your greater-than-human hero on a quest, have him or her pass a test of will or strength, and return home. Show in your story why your hero is valued by his or her culture. Indicate your hero's strengths and weaknesses

Students will be notified in advance that the class will have a storytelling day in which we will share our myths with the group. Students may read their myth out loud or retell it more informally, as they wish. Students will also be asked to briefly explain the inspiration for their myths as they introduce them. Myths will not be graded on grammar or usage, but students should proofread their work for careless errors before submitting it.

Creative myths receiving a grade of 'A' will:

- meet the minimum page length requirements (2 or 3 pages double spaced, in Times New Roman 12 point font)
- be polished and proofread, without distracting careless mistakes
- incorporate all major characteristics of a mythic hero or trickster, depending on the option attempted
- include a full page, color illustration of the hero or trickster depicted that contributes to the class's enjoyment of the myth
- be introduced to the class with an account of the myth's inspiration (whether from class texts or a cultural object)
- exhibit exceptional creativity and entertain the class

Creative myths receiving a grade of 'B' will:

- meet the minimum page length requirement
- appear marginally proofread, with few careless mistakes
- incorporate most major characteristics of a mythic hero or trickster, depending on the option attempted, but may be missing one or two key elements
- include a full page, color illustration of the hero or trickster depicted that contributes to the class's enjoyment of the myth
- be introduced to the class with an account of the myth's inspiration
- exhibit some creativity and entertain the class

Creative myths receiving a grade of 'C':

- meet or nearly meet the minimum page requirement
- may not appear to be polished and proofread, with several careless mistakes
- incorporate some characteristics of a mythic hero or trickster, depending on the option attempted, but be missing several key elements

- include an illustration of the myth's central figure which may show a lack of effort
- may have only a vague explanation of what inspired the myth
- may lack creativity or only superficially modify an existing myth

Creative myths receiving a grade of 'D'

- fall short of the minimum page requirement
- do not appear polished or proofread, with several careless mistakes that distract from meaning
- incorporate few characteristics of a mythic hero or trickster, depending on the option attempted
- include a hastily drawn illustration of the myth's central figure
- may lack an explanation of what inspired the myth
- shows very little creativity and effort

Creative myths receiving a grade of 'F' may

- consist of one page or less, OR
- appear hastily written, OR
- not show an understanding of the mythic hero or trickster, OR
- lack an illustration, OR
- appear copied

## **Component II: Research Assignment**

The other major course goal besides producing an original myth is to write a researched essay investigating a particular topic in mythology. The topics and expectations will vary depending on grade level. Although students may not choose an essay assignment designed for a grade beneath them, underclassmen may choose a topic designed for a higher grade level if they find that more interesting. Students will have opportunities to conduct their research in the media center and the computer lab. I will explicitly explain directions for formatting, research, and citation. Students will have a great deal of support working on these papers.

## **9<sup>th</sup> Grade Assignment**

Write an essay that explains the three major types of myth: hero, fertility, and creation. Explain what each kind of myth does and provide an example of each, explaining why your examples fit into each category. Your essay should be at least three pages long, double-spaced, in Times New



Roman 12 point font. You must also include at least three credible sources on a Works Cited page.

Essays receiving a grade of 'A' will:

- meet the minimum page length requirement and formatting guidelines
- include a thorough explanation of each kind of myth's major characteristics and functions and a solid example for all three
- include at least three credible sources on a Works Cited page
- show a great deal of effort and evidence of proofreading

Essays receiving a grade of 'B' will:

- meet the minimum page length requirements and formatting guidelines
- include a thorough description of each kind of myth's major characteristics and an example for all three, although the essay may show a fuzzy understanding of one myth type
- include at least three credible sources on a Works Cited page
- show a solid effort, but may contain a few careless mistakes

Essays receiving a grade of 'C' will:

- be at least two full pages long, but may have formatting errors
- include a description of all three myth types but may lack good examples or show a fuzzy understanding of two myth types
- include at least two credible sources on a Works Cited page
- show a marginal effort, perhaps with distracting careless mistakes

Essays receiving a grade of 'D':

- will be at least one full page long or ignore formatting guidelines
- lack good descriptions or examples for at least two myth types
- have only one credible source or lack a Works Cited page
- show very low effort

Essays receiving a grade of 'F' may:

- not be turned in or less than one page long OR
- show no understanding of different the types of myths OR
- not be typed OR
- lack a Works Cited page

### **10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> Grade Assignment**

Choose one myth from any culture (you will have an easier time with your research if you choose a well-known myth). Write a historical report of that myth. Your report should be at

least four (sophomores) or five pages long (juniors), double-spaced, in Times New Roman 12 point font. Be sure to include

- 1) a summary of the myth *in your own words*
- 2) any theories about the origins of this myth (Example: Gilgamesh may be based on a real king)
- 3) information about the myth's "heyday." Answer the following questions: Who were the people that primarily told this myth (Examples: African, Mesopotamian)? Where and when did they live? What purpose did the myth have for them? Was this myth part of their religion?
- 4) information about how this myth has been influential since that time (Examples: Renaissance painters depicted Greek gods in their work, *The Odyssey* inspired James Joyce's *Ulysses*).
- 5) a Works Cited page (this does not count as one of your three pages) with at least three sources.

Reports receiving a grade of 'A' will:

- meet the minimum page length requirement and formatting guidelines
- include a paraphrased summary of the myth
- include information about the possible origins of the myth
- answer all questions in the prompt about the myth's major audience and its sacredness
- include information about how the myth has been influential over time
- include at least three credible sources
- show a great deal of effort, presenting information in a fresh and coherent manner

Reports receiving a grade of 'B' will

- meet the minimum page length requirement and formatting guidelines
- include a paraphrased summary of the myth
- include information about the possible origins of the myth
- answer most questions given in the prompt
- may lack thorough information about the myth's influence
- include at least three credible sources
- show a decent effort, but may have some careless mistakes or minor organizational problems

Reports receiving a grade of 'C' may

- be at least two pages long, perhaps falling short of the page length requirement or having formatting errors
- include only a vague description of the myth

- lack information about the origins or whether they are known
- fail to answer more than one question in the prompt
- lack thorough information about the myth's influence
- include at least two credible sources
- show a marginal effort or no evidence of proofreading

Reports receiving a grade of 'D' may

- be less than two pages long or fail to use formatting guidelines OR
- include a confusing, incomplete description of the myth OR
- lack information about the origins or whether they are known OR
- fail to answer more than two questions in the prompt OR
- lack any information about the myth's influence
- cite only one credible source
- show poor effort and have many careless mistakes

Reports receiving a grade of 'F' may

- be not turned in OR
- be less than one page long OR
- lack several major elements of the report OR
- cite no credible sources OR
- appear to be copied
- show very little effort

## **12th Grade Assignment**

**Option One:** The move from hunter/gatherer societies to agricultural ones profoundly changed mythology. Using two detailed examples of myths as illustrations (one from a hunter/gatherer society, one from an agricultural society), explain *how* and *why* this major change affected that society's mythology, including the nature of the gods and the concept of life/death. Make sure you account for how mythology shows the transition between these two stages.

**Option Two:** This assignment draws on a larger academic debate that has framed our discussions. Write an essay discussing different explanations for the apparent similarities among myths in parts of the world that are geographically distant from one another, choosing an explanation and arguing why it is the most compelling (or you may argue that it is a combination of more than one). There is no 'right' answer I'm looking for, but you should consider

universalism/Jung's theory of the collective unconscious as well as diffusion theory. Your essay should address the counterargument and include at least two real examples from mythology to support your thesis.

**Both Options:** Make sure that your essay is at least five pages long (Times New Roman, 12 point, double-spaced) and lists at least five credible sources on a Works Cited page (you can use sources we've looked at in class).

*During in-class work days, I will individually meet with all seniors to discuss their final paper.*

*We will schedule an in-class conference at least one week before your paper is due. I will also be available to help you research and refine your argument.*

Essays receiving a grade of 'A' will

- meet the minimum page length requirement and formatting guidelines
- have a clearly stated thesis
- illustrate the thesis with at least two well-chosen examples
- acknowledge and refute the counterargument, if using second option
- appear polished and proofread
- cite at least five credible sources
- show exceptional effort and a nuanced understanding of mythology

Essays receiving a grade of 'B' will

- meet the minimum page length requirement and formatting guidelines
- have a clearly stated thesis supporting an explanation
- illustrate the thesis with at least two examples, although one example may be weak or vague
- if using option two, acknowledge a counterargument, but may fail to convincingly refute it
- possibly lack some polish
- cite five sources, although one may not be credible
- show a decent effort and a solid understanding of mythology

Essays receiving a grade of 'C'

- may be only 3-4 pages long or have formatting problems
- have a thesis with may not be clearly stated

- may include only one example or two examples that are weak or vague
- if using option two, may fail to acknowledge or refute the counter argument
- may lack some polish
- may cite fewer than four credible sources
- show a borderline effort and a basic understanding of mythology

Essays receiving a grade of 'D'

- may be only 2-3 pages long OR
- may lack a coherent thesis OR
- may lack thoughtful examples OR
- if using option two, may fail to acknowledge or refute the counterargument OR
- may not be proofread or polished OR
- may cite fewer than three credible sources OR
- show little effort

Essays receiving a grade of 'F'

- may not be turned in, be only one page long, or not be typed OR
- may lack a coherent thesis OR
- lack thoughtful examples OR
- if using option two, fail to acknowledge a counterargument OR
- may contain many very distracting and careless errors OR
- show no real effort

## **Introductory Activities**

### Day 1

*Attendance:* 10 minutes. Since this is the first day of the course, I expect the administrative issues will take longer than usual.

*Syllabus:* 20 minutes. Since this unit is the first in a semester-long course, I will go over highlights of the syllabus, explaining my expectations for daily preparation and providing a brief overview of the course. I will explain that we will be using a variety of short texts and suggest that students stay organized by collecting all of the course texts in a three-ring binder, along with lined paper for note-taking. I will also alert students of the protocol for assigned reading. Since the length of individual readings assigned for homework will be relatively short, students will be required to write at least three questions about each of the selections in their notebooks. These questions will provide the basis for many of our class discussions. I will then take any questions from students.

*Pre-Quiz:* 20 minutes. I will pass out the attached “PreQuiz” (Appendix A) in order to prime students for thinking about the meaning of mythology, assess their prior knowledge, and gather information about their specific interests. I will explicitly tell the students that the quiz will not be graded for right and wrong answers. I will also encourage students to elaborate on the final question, which asks them for any specific topics they are interested in covering. I will take student interests into account as I move forward.

### Day 2

*Attendance:* 5 minutes

*Word Web Activity:* 15 minutes. I will write the word “myth” on the whiteboard in front of the room. Students will be instructed to go to the front of the room, writing any definitions of myth that they can think of with a line connected to the word. Students may also build on to the web by adding to the definitions or appending them with comments or questions. Each student will be required to write something on the board.

*Follow-up Discussion:* 15 minutes. Using the definitions that students have produced in the Word Web, we will acknowledge the multiple meanings of the term, focusing especially on the distinction between the popular definition of myth that denotes falsity and the academic definition, which does not. We will establish that for our class’s purposes, we will not be concerned with the truth or falsity of myths but will be looking at them as stories that cultures pass down through time.

*Pre-Quiz Follow-up:* 15 minutes. We will go over the answers to the quiz questions, taking special note of ambiguous issues within mythology (such as items 2, 9, 10, and 15). Drawing on the Word Web and discussion generated by the quiz, we will begin to establish a class perspective on mythology. The obscure vocabulary words on the quiz will be discussed in class on later days.

### Day 3

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Overview of Genres:* 25 minutes. “Myth,” “Legend,” “Fairytale,” and “Folktale” will be written on the board when students arrive. Students will take out their notebooks and number the page from one to ten. I will list a series of ten stories with which most students will be familiar (familiarity will vary by grade, students will be explicitly told that they will not be penalized if they

are unfamiliar). For each item, students must write the genre in which they think the story belongs. If they are not familiar with the story, they may leave that number blank or guess. The items are:

- |                                 |                                    |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. The Adventures of Robin Hood | 6. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight |
| 2. Sleeping Beauty              | 7. Johnny Appleseed                |
| 3. The Odyssey                  | 8. Sasquatch/Bigfoot               |
| 4. Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby     | 9. Hansel and Gretel               |
| 5. Beowulf                      | 10. Oedipus Rex                    |

After we get through the list, we will go over each item out loud. I will call on students to volunteer their answers and defend them. For each item, we will bring disagreements about genre classification out in the open. I will not confirm student's answers but will review details of each story and write their reasons for defending their decisions under each term on the board, constructing a definition for each term and highlighting the differences between them. If students get stuck, I will prompt them by asking questions such as:

“Is it likely that this story is based on a real person?”

“Does this story have a definite historical setting?”

“Does this story have supernatural aspects?”

“How old do you think this story is?”

“Why do people tell this story?”

This process can be drawn out as long as possible to construct rich criteria for belonging in each genre.



*Definition Comparison:* 15 minutes. After we have reached a provisional definition for each term, I will present an overhead with Merriam Webster definitions for each term (Appendix B). We will discuss how our definitions line up with the dictionary definitions, whether such genre distinctions are helpful, and how including all the genres under the course heading of “mythology” will affect the content of our class.

*Homework Assignment:* 2 minutes. I will pass out copies of the African trickster folktales “Saving the Rain” and “Stuffing the Hyena” and assign them for homework.<sup>3</sup> Students will be reminded of their duty to write three questions they have about the texts and bring them to class tomorrow.

#### Day 4

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Notebook Checking:* 2 minutes. I will circulate the room and check that all students brought their questions to class. While I won’t check this everyday, I will check them sporadically for participation points.

*Storytelling:* 15 minutes. We will read “Saving the Rain” out loud in class (I will call on the first volunteer, after that students can call on one another).

*Discussion:* 25 minutes. Using the questions generated by students, we will discuss the characters in the story, also drawing upon “Stuffing the Hyena.” Drawing upon the qualities of the Jackal in “Saving the Rain” and the Hare in “Stuffing the Hyena,” we will begin to generate a list of trickster characteristics.

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<sup>3</sup> “Saving the Rain” and “Stuffing the Hyena” from *African Folktales*, edited by Roger D. Abrahams, Pantheon, 1983.

## Day 5

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Journal:* 10 minutes. Students will respond to the following prompt in the journal section of their notebooks:

Are there any stories that you feel belong to you? Where did you hear them (family, friends, neighbors)? How would you feel if a stranger wrote and published one of these stories? In what ways does the storyteller matter?

*Historical Context and Background Information:* 10 minutes. I will begin by asking students what they know about the Brer Rabbit stories. Then, I will *briefly* lecture to provide some historical background on the folktales as part of African-American slave culture, and discuss the controversy surrounding the stories – particularly concerning Joel Chandler Harris’s 19<sup>th</sup> century versions, on which the Disney film “Song of the South” was based. I will expand on the idea of ownership of stories (introduced with the journal prompt) and the use of stories by different groups for different ends. We will also review our discussion of the African trickster figures, noting that while the figure is dominant in African mythology, there is considerable diversity in the animal form he takes.

*Storytelling:* 10 minutes. I will pass out copies of “Brer Rabbit Meets a Tar Baby,” as told by American folklorist S. E. Schlosser (Appendix C). We will read the story out loud in class.

*Small Group Activity:* 17 minutes. Students will rearrange into pre-determined small groups of four students each and respond to the following prompt:

Imagine you are creating a character sketch of a trickster. Provide as much information as possible (what the trickster’s personality is like, how he relates to others, and how he behaves) so that if someone did not know what a trickster was, (s)he would still be able to

act like one. Use Jackal, Hare, and Brer Rabbit as your models. Then, brainstorm at least five trickster figures in popular culture (think of cartoon characters and comedy films).

EACH GROUP MEMBER MUST CONTRIBUTE.

I will circulate around the groups, listening and probing students to add more detail. At the end of class, I will collect the character sketches, which will be shared on Day 6.

### Day 6

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Presentations:* 27 minutes. The small groups will reconvene, briefly review their character sketches and examples, and then each group will have about 5 minutes to present their work to the class and answer questions.

*Storytelling:* 15 minutes. We will read out loud “The Solitary Fairies. Leprecaun. Cluricaun. Far Darrig.” From Yeats’s book *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (excerpt in Appendix D). Yeats, the narrator of this selection, is documenting information about various types of fairies in Irish folklore. He cites his sources (hearsay from different people) and acknowledges his own limited knowledge and the disagreements among Irish writers on the “facts.” All three types of fairies are “most sluttish, slouching, jeering, mischievous phantoms. They are the great practical jokers among the good people.”

*Journal:* 5 minutes, finish for homework. How do these fairies fit the character sketches we made of the trickster? What purpose do you think these stories serves for the Irish peasantry? Why do you think Yeats (a great Irish writer on his own) bothered to collect these tales?

### Day 7

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Follow-up Discussion:* 20 minutes. We will use journal entries from Day 6 to discuss the purpose of Yeats's fairy and folktale collection project. After students share their ideas, we will talk about how stories help constitute national identity. I will then ask students to brainstorm stories that are important to American identity (possibilities: the Brer Rabbit stories, Christopher Columbus discovering America and dispelling the notion that the world is flat, the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving, George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, Johnny Appleseed, and Paul Bunyan, the giant lumberjack). We will then focus on local folktales.

*Storytelling:* 27 minutes. Students will have the opportunity to share classroom appropriate local folktales about they have heard from relatives or friends.

*Overview of Interview Assignment:* 10 minutes. I will pass out the handout and rubric for the interview assignment (Appendix E) and go over it in detail. I will emphasize the importance of being a good storyteller and using appropriate and vivid language to retell the story. This project is due on Day 10.

## Day 8

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Progress Check:* 5 minutes. I will ask students if they have found a person to interview for the interview assignment. If not, I or the other students may be able to offer suggestions.

*Description of Chalk Talk:* 2 minutes. I will explain what a Chalk Talk is: a silent discussion on the board where students question and elaborate upon the comments of others.

*Chalk Talk:* What is a Hero? 10 minutes. I will ask, “What is a Hero?” on the white board.

Students will silently answer my question on the board and respond to the answers of others.

This activity can go on until the board is filled up or students have nothing else to say.

*Follow-Up Discussion:* 15 minutes. Using the Chalk Talk, we will generate a list of qualities that characterize a hero. We will then name as many examples of heroes as we can (real and fictional), asking along the way whether these heroes exhibit the traits we have named.

*Looking at the Archetype:* 15 minutes. Using an overhead transparency, I will introduce the term “archetype” and provide students with a list of ten qualities often found in the hero archetype.<sup>4</sup>

They are:

1. The hero’s mother may be a virgin.
2. The circumstances of his conception are unusual.
3. Some attempt is made to kill him at birth.
4. He may have foster parents.
5. There is a return to his former kingdom at adulthood.
6. He is victorious over a king or wild beast.
7. He may marry a princess and become king.
8. He loses favor and is driven out of his kingdom.
9. He dies, often on top of a hill.
10. His body is not buried.

We will raise examples of heroes who fit this profile to some extent (possible answers: Jesus, Moses, Romulus, Oedipus, Robin Hood, King Arthur). I will emphasize to students that matching a certain archetype is not related to the historical truth or falsity of stories about these figures.

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<sup>4</sup> Raglan, Lord. *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*. Dover, 2003.

## Day 9

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Review of Hero Archetype:* 7 minutes. Since the information presented on Day 8 may be confusing, we will take some time to review it and come up with examples of other archetypes.

*Video:* 18 minutes. We will watch “The Hero’s Journey” excerpt from the *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* documentary with Bill Moyers. While watching the movie, students will write down qualities of the hero and his quest.

*Follow-Up Discussion:* 15 minutes. Students will be asked to share the qualities they wrote down. We will discuss whether there are differences between the kind of mythic hero discussed by Joseph Campbell and the heroes we discussed yesterday.

*Video Clip:* 7 minutes. I will show the clip from Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* featuring Faun’s encounters with Ofelia (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=5z3u-iCbNxI>) Students will respond to the following journal prompt for homework:

1. Judging from the clip, how is Ofelia’s quest a heroic one? Do you think Faun is a trickster? Why or why not?
2. The mythic world coming alive and colliding with the real world is a common theme in literature and film. Come up with a few examples of this plot on your own. Why does this make for a good story?

## Day 10

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Journal Check:* 2 minutes.

*Storytelling*: 35 minutes. Students will read their completed Interview Projects to the class.

After each story we will entertain the class's questions and comments.

*Video Clip*: 10 minutes. We will end class by watching an excerpt from George Lucas's *Star Wars* that is discussed in the Joseph Campbell documentary.

## Day 11

*Attendance/Housekeeping*: 3 minutes.

*Intro to Ramayana*: 10 minutes. I will provide some background information on Hinduism and the Ramayana to provide some context for the story.

*Epic Hero Cycle*: 5 minutes. I will pass out the Epic Hero Cycle handout ([http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson\\_images/lesson587/HeroCycle.pdf](http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson_images/lesson587/HeroCycle.pdf)) and explain that we will be filling out the chart as we read parts of the Ramayana.

*Storytelling*: 23 minutes. We will read parts of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, out loud in class. We will use the translation included in *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* edited by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, Dover, 1967. I will fill in gaps in the story by telling the class what happens.

*Explanation of Creative Mythology Project*: 10 minutes. I will describe the Creative Mythology Project outlined in the Culminating Assessments section and pass out the rubric.

## Day 12

*Attendance/Housekeeping*: 3 minutes.

*Storytelling:* 17 minutes. We will continue reading the abridged version of the *Ramayana* in class.

*Epic Hero Cycle:* 15 minutes. Students will fill out more of the Epic Hero Cycle handout they received yesterday.

*Class Work on Creative Mythology Project:* 15 minutes. Students should be planning their creative myths, asking questions, or working on the illustration in class if they would prefer to start there (art supplies will be provided).

### Day 13

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Relocate to Computer Lab:* 2 minutes.

*Typing up Creative Myth Project:* 40 minutes. Since I am requiring that the creative myth be typed, I want to give students who may not have computer access at home the opportunity to type up their final paper. Students who would rather type at home must use this time to work on their illustrations.

*Clarification:* 5 minutes. I will remind students that creative myths will be due tomorrow and will have to be presented to the class.

### Day 14

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.



*Presentation of Creative Myths:* 47 minutes. Each student will have sufficient time to either read his or her myth verbatim or retell it more informally. The illustration will be presented and passed around the room.

### Day 15

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Explanation of Research Project:* 10 minutes. I will explain the guidelines for the research project laid out in the Culminating Assessments section.

*Storytelling:* 25 minutes. I will pass out copies of “Osiris, Isis, and Horus” from *World Mythology* and we will read it out loud (it’s only about six pages).

*Slideshow Presentation:* 12 minutes. Using the laptop overhead projector provided by the Media Center, I will show a slideshow of Egyptian art related to this myth. The images will be borrowed from [http://historylink101.com/lessons/art\\_history\\_lessons/egypt\\_main2.htm](http://historylink101.com/lessons/art_history_lessons/egypt_main2.htm).

### Day 16

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Relocate to Media Center:* 2 minutes.

*Research Day:* 45 minutes. Students will use the Media Center to find materials for their papers. I will give the Media Specialist a list of paper topics ahead of time so that he or she can pull the relevant materials. During this time, I will supervise student work, making sure that everyone is on task and finding the materials they need.

### Day 17

*Attendance/Housekeeping: 3 minutes.*

*Relocate to Media Center: 2 minutes.*

*Presentation on MLA citations: 20 minutes.* The Media Specialists, with advance notice, give a very useful presentation on research and citation that I think will be valuable for many of my students.

*Class Work on Research Projects: 25 minutes.* I will circulate to help students with their research and writing.

### Day 18

*Attendance/Housekeeping: 3 minutes.*

*Relocate to Computer Lab: 2 minutes.*

*Class Work on Research Assignment: 45 minutes.* I will cycle through the class, conferencing individually with each student about his or her paper and making last-minute suggestions. Students will be asked to bring a complete draft of their papers to class tomorrow for peer review.

### Day 19

*Attendance/Housekeeping: 3 minutes.*

*Preparation for Peer Review: 7 minutes.* I will go over proper protocol and etiquette for peer review. For each peer review, the reviewer will write his or her comments on a separate sheet of paper with a number that corresponds to the place in the paper he or she is commenting on. In the overall assessment of the paper, the reviewer should start and finish with positive comments. In between, he or she should put only constructive criticism. We will briefly discuss

constructive criticism and generate examples of appropriate and inappropriate comments. Since the papers are due tomorrow, I will point out that reviewers should restrict their suggestions to things the writer still has time to improve upon.

*Peer Review of Research Assignments:* 40 minutes. Students will be divided into four groups corresponding to grade level. Students will trade papers with another student in their group and make comments on them. After the first read through, each reader will explain his or her comments to the writer. Students will turn in their drafts with peer commentary on them tomorrow with their revised papers.

#### Day 20

*Attendance/Housekeeping:* 3 minutes.

*Collection of Research Assignments:* 2 minutes.

*Reflection on the Unit:* 15 minutes. I want to give students the opportunity to tell me what they thought of the myths we studied and what they want to know more about for the rest of the semester. They can write about this as this unit's last entry in the journal, which will be taken up.

*What I Learned:* 30 minutes. Students will form a circle and talk about what they learned from their research projects and how their research may have connected with topics in the class.

## Appendix A

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Mythology “PreQuiz”

Your grade will not be affected by how many correct and incorrect answers you give. In fact, some of these questions do not even have right answers. This “quiz” is only meant to bring your knowledge about mythology out into the open.

#### True/False

- 1) \_\_\_ A myth is a story that is not true.
- 2) \_\_\_ Myths are always ancient.
- 3) \_\_\_ Myths help cultures to define themselves.
- 4) \_\_\_ The myths of different cultures have nothing in common with one another.
- 5) \_\_\_ Myths are teaching tools.
- 6) \_\_\_ A myth must have a hero.
- 7) \_\_\_ Myths are usually about the creation of something.
- 8) \_\_\_ Myths can explain something about the natural world.
- 9) \_\_\_ Myths always have supernatural elements.
- 10) \_\_\_ Myths are always about gods or goddesses.
- 11) \_\_\_ There is an “official version” of every myth.
- 12) \_\_\_ Myths sometimes describe the basis for important rituals.
- 13) \_\_\_ Heros are people who followed all the rules of their society.
- 14) \_\_\_ Myths are timeless stories that are told over and over again throughout history.
- 15) \_\_\_ Religious stories are myths.

In the space below, briefly list the first few myths that come to your mind.

Below is a list of obscure words that relate to mythology. If you happen to know what the word means, circle it. If you have seen it before, but aren't sure exactly what it means, underline it.

Archetype  
Trickster

Taboo  
Collective Unconscious

Matriarchy

Deluge  
Catastrophism

List any myths or aspects of myth that you are especially interested in studying this semester. Continue on the back if you need more room.

## Appendix B

### Dictionary Definitions for Genres

Source: Merriam Webster ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com))

#### **Myth**

1 a: a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon b: parable, allegory

2 a: a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; especially : one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society <seduced by the American myth of individualism — Orde Coombs> b: an unfounded or false notion

3: a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence

4: the whole body of myths

#### **Legend**

1 a: a story coming down from the past; especially : one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable b: a body of such stories <a place in the legend of the frontier> c: a popular myth of recent origin d: a person or thing that inspires legends e: the subject of a legend <its violence was legend even in its own time — William Broyles Jr.>

2 a: an inscription or title on an object (as a coin) b: caption 2b c: an explanatory list of the symbols on a map or chart

#### **Folktale**

: a characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among a people

#### **Fairy tale**

1 a: a story (as for children) involving fantastic forces and beings (as fairies, wizards, and goblins) —called also fairy story b: a story in which improbable events lead to a happy ending

2: a made-up story usually designed to mislead

## **Brer Rabbit meets a Tar Baby**

retold by S. E. Schlosser

Well now, that rascal Brer Fox hated Brer Rabbit on account of he was always cutting capers and bossing everyone around. So Brer Fox decided to capture and kill Brer Rabbit if it was the last thing he ever did! He thought and he thought until he came up with a plan. He would make a tar baby! Brer Fox went and got some tar and he mixed it with some turpentine and he sculpted it into the figure of a cute little baby. Then he stuck a hat on the Tar Baby and sat her in the middle of the road.

Brer Fox hid himself in the bushes near the road and he waited and waited for Brer Rabbit to come along. At long last, he heard someone whistling and chuckling to himself, and he knew that Brer Rabbit was coming up over the hill. As he reached the top, Brer Rabbit spotted the cute little Tar Baby. Brer Rabbit was surprised. He stopped and stared at this strange creature. He had never seen anything like it before!

"Good Morning," said Brer Rabbit, doffing his hat. "Nice weather we're having."

The Tar Baby said nothing. Brer Fox laid low and grinned an evil grin.

Brer Rabbit tried again. "And how are you feeling this fine day?"

The Tar Baby, she said nothing. Brer Fox grinned an evil grin and lay low in the bushes.

Brer Rabbit frowned. This strange creature was not very polite. It was beginning to make him mad.

"Ahem!" said Brer Rabbit loudly, wondering if the Tar Baby were deaf. "I said 'HOW ARE YOU THIS MORNING?'"

The Tar Baby said nothing. Brer Fox curled up into a ball to hide his laughter. His plan was working perfectly!

"Are you deaf or just rude?" demanded Brer Rabbit, losing his temper. "I can't stand folks that are stuck up! You take off that hat and say 'Howdy-do' or I'm going to give you such a lickin'!"

The Tar Baby just sat in the middle of the road looking as cute as a button and saying nothing at all. Brer Fox rolled over and over under the bushes, fit to bust because he didn't dare laugh out loud.

"I'll learn ya!" Brer Rabbit yelled. He took a swing at the cute little Tar Baby and his paw got stuck in the tar.

"Lemme go or I'll hit you again," shouted Brer Rabbit. The Tar Baby, she said nothing.

"Fine! Be that way," said Brer Rabbit, swinging at the Tar Baby with his free paw. Now both his paws were stuck in the tar, and Brer Fox danced with glee behind the bushes.

"I'm gonna kick the stuffin' out of you," Brer Rabbit said and pounced on the Tar Baby with both feet. They sank deep into the Tar Baby. Brer Rabbit was so furious he head-butted the cute little creature until he was completely covered with tar and unable to move.

Brer Fox leapt out of the bushes and strolled over to Brer Rabbit. "Well, well, what have we here?" he asked, grinning an evil grin.

Brer Rabbit gulped. He was stuck fast. He did some fast thinking while Brer Fox rolled about on the road, laughing himself sick over Brer Rabbit's dilemma.

"I've got you this time, Brer Rabbit," said Brer Fox, jumping up and shaking off the dust. "You've sassed me for the very last time. Now I wonder what I should do with you?"

Brer Rabbit's eyes got very large. "Oh please Brer Fox, whatever you do, please don't throw me into the briar patch."

"Maybe I should roast you over a fire and eat you," mused Brer Fox. "No, that's too much trouble. Maybe I'll hang you instead."

"Roast me! Hang me! Do whatever you please," said Brer Rabbit. "Only please, Brer Fox, please don't throw me into the briar patch."

"If I'm going to hang you, I'll need some string," said Brer Fox. "And I don't have any string handy. But the stream's not far away, so maybe I'll drown you instead."

"Drown me! Roast me! Hang me! Do whatever you please," said Brer Rabbit. "Only please, Brer Fox, please don't throw me into the briar patch."

"The briar patch, eh?" said Brer Fox. "What a wonderful idea! You'll be torn into little pieces!"

Grabbing up the tar-covered rabbit, Brer Fox swung him around and around and then flung him head over heels into the briar patch. Brer Rabbit let out such a scream as he fell that all of Brer Fox's fur stood straight up. Brer Rabbit fell into the briar bushes with a crash and a mighty thump. Then there was silence.

Brer Fox cocked one ear toward the briar patch, listening for whimpers of pain. But he heard nothing. Brer Fox cocked the other ear toward the briar patch, listening for Brer Rabbit's death rattle. He heard nothing.

Then Brer Fox heard someone calling his name. He turned around and looked up the hill. Brer Rabbit was sitting on a log combing the tar out of his fur with a wood chip and looking smug.

"I was bred and born in the briar patch, Brer Fox," he called. "Born and bred in the briar patch."

And Brer Rabbit skipped away as merry as a cricket while Brer Fox ground his teeth in rage and went home.

# THE SOLITARY FAIRIES.

## LEPRACAUN. CLURICAUN. FAR DARRIG.

"The name *Lepracaun*," Mr. Douglas Hyde writes to me, "is from the Irish *leith brog--i.e.*, the One-shoemaker, since he is generally seen working at a single shoe. It is spelt in Irish *leith bhrogan*, or *leith phrogan*, and is in some places pronounced Luchryman, as O'Kearney writes it in that very rare book, the *Feis Tigh Chonain*."

The *Lepracaun*, *Cluricaun*, and *Far Darrig*. Are these one spirit in different moods and shapes? Hardly two Irish writers are agreed. In many things these three fairies, if three, resemble each other. They are withered, old, and solitary, in every way unlike the sociable spirits of the first sections. They dress with all unfairy homeliness, and are, indeed, most sluttish, slouching, jeering, mischievous phantoms. They are the great practical jokers among the good people.

The *Lepracaun* makes shoes continually, and has grown very rich. Many treasure-crocks, buried of old in war-time, has he now for his own. In the early part of this century, according to Croker, in a newspaper office in Tipperary, they used to show a little shoe forgotten by a *Lepracaun*.

The *Cluricaun*, (*Clobhair-ceann*, in O'Kearney) makes himself drunk in gentlemen's cellars. Some suppose he is merely the *Lepracaun* on a spree. He is almost unknown in Connaught and the north.

The *Far Darrig* (*fear dearg*), which means the Red Man, for he wears a red cap and coat, busies himself with practical joking, especially with gruesome joking. This he does, and nothing else.

The *Fear-Gorta* (Man of Hunger) is an emaciated phantom that goes



through the land in famine time, begging an alms and bringing good luck to the giver.

There are other solitary fairies, such as the House-spirit and the *Water-sheerie*, own brother to the English Jack-o'-Lantern; the *Pooka* and the *Banshee*--concerning these presently; the *Dallahan*, or headless phantom--one used to stand in a Sligo street on dark nights till lately; the Black Dog, a form, perhaps, of the *Pooka*. The ships at the Sligo quays are haunted sometimes by this spirit, who announces his presence by a sound like the flinging of all "the tin porringers in the world" down into the hold. He even follows them to sea.

*The Leanhaun Shee* (fairy mistress), seeks the love of mortals. If they refuse, she must be their slave; if they consent, they are hers, and can only escape by finding another to take their place. The fairy lives on their life, and they waste away. Death is no escape from her. She is the Gaelic muse, for she gives inspiration to those she persecutes. The Gaelic poets die young, for she is restless, and will not let them remain long on earth--this malignant phantom.

Besides these are divers monsters--the *Augh-iska*, the Water-horse, the *Payshtha* (*píast* = *bestia*), the Lake-dragon, and such like; but whether these be animals, fairies, or spirits, I know not.

## Appendix E

### Interview Assignment

For this assignment, you will need to find an adult to interview who is willing to tell you a story.

#### THE STORY MUST BE SCHOOL APPROPRIATE!

Think of people you know who love to tell entertaining tales. This person could be an older family member, someone you know in the community, or another teacher. You may want to write about a story you have already heard this person tell. You can certainly do this over the Internet or phone.

First, ask your subject questions such as:

- When and where did you first hear this story?
- Who originally told it?
- How old do you think this story is?
- Do you think this story has changed over the years or stayed the same?
- Do you think this story has ever been written down?

Then, let the storyteller tell you the story. If possible, you should tape record the story so you won't have to take notes while you are hearing it. Then, rewrite the story in your own words.

Use the interview questions you asked about the story to write a short introduction for the tale. Your introduction should also credit your source (the person who told you the story). If your introduction and story are not substantial enough to take up a whole page, you should find another story or include more detail!

	<b>To earn an A:</b>	<b>To earn a B:</b>	<b>To earn a C:</b>	<b>To fail:</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	The introduction tells what is or is not known about the story's background and credits the storyteller.	The introduction does not fully help us understand where the story came from, but does identify the storyteller.	The introduction credits the storyteller OR provides background on the story, but not both.	There is no clear introduction or it does not draw on the interview.
<b>Content</b>	The story is appropriate, sufficiently detailed, and entertaining.	The story is appropriate but lacks vivid detail and diction.	The story is appropriate but lacks detail and is vague and confusing.	The story is inappropriate, too sparse, or plagiarized.
<b>Usage</b>	There are few careless grammatical or spelling errors; they do not interfere with meaning.	There are some careless errors. There is no evidence of editing.	There are plenty of careless errors; they interfere with the story's meaning.	The story is not retold with complete sentences. It shows little effort.