Theories of Myth: Crash Course World Mythology #12

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=blFaiB5kj6I
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/blFaiB5kj6I

Hey there I'm Mike Riginetta, this is Crash Course Mytholgy, and in the first episode of this series we defined what we mean by myth. I also said that we weren't going to get too theoretical because the theory of mythology gets complicated quickly.

But you all have asked for an episode on theories of mythology and if you know me and the other things that I make, you know how I feel about talking theory. So, that's what we're going to do. And OK, that ask might have just been some strong arming from Thoth, but who can say no to that face.

[Opening music]

So let's look at how people think about mythology and give you some ideas on how to analyze myths yourself.

We're going to start with the definition of myth - ology. Unlike myths themselves, as we've already pointed out are difficult to define, mythology is pretty straight forward since in English -ology basically means the study of. Mythology is the systematic study of myths. A thing you have probably already figured out for yourself at this point in the series.

The real question is how are myths studied and for that we are going to jump in our time machine courtesy of Zurvan, the Zerastrian god of time. Check your divine flux capacitor and buckle up.

So, we start in Ancient Greece. In the first episode, I mentioned that critical analysis of myths has been around for a long time. As early as the mid-500s BCE, presocratic philosophers like Xenophanes were criticizing Hesiod and Homer for attributing all of the evil and shameful aspects of humanity to the gods.

Plato was among the first to equate myths with lying. And as we discussed in episode one, that idea has stuck. But Plato further complicated this issue because he claimed that myths about gods, heroes, and fantastical creatures were irrational, and therefore, false. Yet, philosophical myths, like the ones he put forward in "The Republic" served a rational purpose and were true.

Sorry Thoth, you're going to have to talk it over with Veritas, Roman goddess of truth. A little bit after Plato came an influential thinker Euhemeros. He assumed that people who lived before him were primitive with no concept of science, so they created fanciful versions of historical events to explain things they didn't understand.

In Euhemros' opinion, Zeus was an early human king whose deeds became legendary, and as those legends were retold he transformed into a god. Euhemerism has come to mean interpreting "myths as primitive explanations of the natural world or as time-distorted accounts of long past historic events." Although Euhmeros wasn't particularly influential in his own time, his ideas were picked up later by Roman thinkers. Especially Christians.

Early Church thinkers, like Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, took up the Platonic since of myth as falsehood, and upon it they based a new theory. The Greek and Roman myths were influenced by demons, who wanted the story to prepare the listeners for the story of Jesus, and to provide a contrast between him and the pagan gods. So, I mean, those are some pretty helpful demons, I guess?

These early mythologists set up a dichotomy between mythos, associated with falsehood, and logos, which Christian thinkers associated with transcendent truth. This synthesis between Plato and Christianity was the basis of Western mythology until the Renaissance.

For many centuries, Europian artists drew a great deal from classical Greek and Roman myths, but mythology as a study didn't really take off until the 18th and 19th centuries, drawing of the linguistic discover of the languages of India, Southwest Asia, and Europe are all related. The're all derived from a single language, now known as Proto-Indo-European.

The discovery of Proto-Endo-European landed some to posit that it was spoken by a group called Ayrians. Whose myths were the bases for all European, Indian, and Southwest Asian myths - purported explanation for their similarities. In addition, to the Ayrian hypothesis, this discovery also gave way to a broadly comparative mythology that focused more on content than function.

There is no real evidence that the Ayrians ever existed, but that didn't stop Romantic thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder who believed that their myths, along with other things, embodied the simplicity and purity of the German folk. Now, that sounds innocuous enough until we learn that the Nazis would later appropriate Herder's pro-German ideas to justify their atrocities and legitimize their hateful ideology.

The study of myth changes again in the 20th century when it joins forces with the new discipline of anthropology. Anthropologists wouldn't just read about myths in libraries, they would conduct field work to discover how myths functioned in living societies. Although, in the early days of anthropology, the object of study was still societies considered primitive, at least by those anthropologists.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

One of the towering figures in this new way of studying myths was the Scottish anthropologist Sir James Frazer, who could really rock a beard. His 12 volume book, *The Golden Bough*, centers on different versions of a myth in which sacred kings are slaughtered in order to ensure a bountiful harvest.

Frazer supported the concept of myths as primitive science, which attribute to the will of deities, people, or animals, that which modern science attributes to the impersonal functioning of various physical laws and biological processes. That's another way of saying, "Hey if you haven't quite mastered physics, blame a god. To be honest, that's what I do. Whooo... a god?"

One of the mythologist to follow Frazer, BronisÅ‚aw Malinowski, did field work in the Trobrland Islands and outlined the new anthropological of myth that grew out of working with living peoples. Studied alive, myth is not symbolic but a direct expression of its subject matter, a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man.

Yeah, that "primitive peoples" part is a little hard to take. Early anthropology was pretty judgy. But his new approach had the advantage of focusing on what so-called primitive people know, rather than what they don't. Building on the work of anthropologists, recent mythologists have tried to connect their work to the lived experiences of actual human beings.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

At around the same time anthropology was gaining prominence, the new field of psychology was also looking to myths for an explanation of human experience. Two of the best known psychologists, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, posit that the source of myths is the human unconscious, and that mythical characters are projections of that unconscious. We're gonna return to these

thinkers in a later episode, but for now, it's helpful to understand the fundamental difference between the two.

For Freud, the unconscious is the true psychical reality, but our conscious minds, like Tom Cruise, "can't handle the truth!" So we make these terrible realities palatable by creating imaginative works, like myths, which are strategies for managing the internal forces that shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Jung similarly saw myths as a projection of the unconscious, but for him, the unconscious was collective and universal, not individual. It's like a reservoir from which we all drink. A reservoir with more dreams, and less fluoride. They put that in the reservoir itself, right?

Jung defined a number of archetypes that he saw as aspects of every person's psyche and in his estimation, the characters that appear in myths are versions of these archetypes. The collective nature of the human consciousness may be one reason we can find similar mythic characters from stories originating in many parts of the world.

And of course, we couldn't do an episode on theories of mythology without mentioning the best known mythologist of the twentieth century. Let's hear it for Joseph Campbell. Campbell became famous in the eighties for a television series, *The Power of Myth*, also with Bill Moyers. And George Lucas also credited Campbell with influencing Star Wars. Lucas..he's your father. More on that later.

Campbell's understanding of myth, and particularly, of hero stories is a reflection of the American valorization of rugged individuals. For Campbell, mythology is ultimately and always the vehicle through which the individual finds a sense of identity and place in the world. Campbell synthesized the ideas of psychoanalysts, comparative mythologists, and literary and cultural critics to create his own theory of a single mono-myth that underlies all mythical stories.

Meanwhile, French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, no relationship to the blue jeans, developed a theory for describing myths by looking at their structure. Structuralism holds that specific instances of culture, like myths, betray a much more complicated, underlying structure. What that structure is and how it works depends upon which structuralist you're talking to.

Levi-Strauss, arguably the first structuralist, was all about binaries. Culture is built on the relationship between male and female, hero and villain, even cooked and raw, among many others. For him, myths, like all units of culture, sit atop these inescapable opposing binaries.

And since many students of mythology will have heard of him and his theories, we should also mention Romanian religious historian Mircea Eliade, even though his personal politics have overshadowed his scholarship in many circles. Eliade was a Romanian nationalist who associated with a pro-fascist group, and thus his reputation, like that of Herder and Nietzsche, has suffered. Hey, mythologists, no more chilling with fascists, okay? I feel like I shouldn't even have to ask this.

Eliade was also a fan of binaries, particularly the sacred and the profane, as well as the archaic and the modern. For Eliade, archaic people were more in touch with the sacred. And today, myths allow us to escape the profane, to travel back to the past, and re-encounter the sacred. Structuralist theory was very popular at the end of the 20th century, but it also left a lot of people wondering "So what? What do we gain by reducing all myths to a set of patterns or even to one single pattern? What does that really tell us about why cultures use myth or how myth reveals culture?"

Contemporary approaches have pioneered some new methods of asking and answering these questions. William Doty proposes giving students of myth a tool kit, which includes a series of questions to ask when reading myths, centering on several concerns: the social, the psychological, the literary, textual and performative, the structural, and finally, the political. These provide a broader way of looking at myths.

Wendy Doniger provides an updated version of comparative mythology, asking myth readers to look also at the context in which the myth is told, exploring difference. These more contemporary ways of looking at myths fit well with the complex view of the world that we try to take here at Crash Course, but we're not gonna follow any one school of thought when it comes to how we -ology these here myths. We like being eclectic and have no interest in forcing you to see myths in one particular way. Hathor, Hungarian God of Force, got my eye on you.

Thanks for watching, we'll see you next time.

Check out our CrashCourse: Mythology Thoth tote bag and poster, available now at dftba.com.

Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana. It is produced with the help of all of these nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe and CrashCourse exists to the generous support of our Patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love through a monthly donation to help keep CrashCourse free, for everyone, forever.

CrashCourse is made with Adobe Creative Cloud. Check the description for a link for a free trial.

Thanks for watching, and you know what? I've been thinking about so I've gotta come clean: I don't feel great about that Star Wars joke earlier. I'm real sorry.