



Teaching Mythology: Gods and Heroes

Curriculum Unit 83.02.06
by Diana Doyle

This unit is designed to teach mythology to middle grade-primarily sixth-grade students of various reading abilities and interests. It is intended to be used in English classes to enhance and enrich the learning experience and as a motivating factor in writing.

Reading mythology is an easy way to motivate students in class. The students can all read or listen to and understand the stories of the myths. They usually enjoy them. The question is how much more can middle-grade students, especially low achievers, be expected to understand? What are the concepts that such students can be expected to absorb?

The answers, I feel, lie in the teacher's expectations of the children, I have written this unit for the student both to read and to enjoy the myths by learning and discussing while reading. Because mythology is a unique form, I think that it is important for a student to understand something of the nature of mythology. A student should have some idea of the universality of mythology, and some idea of the explanatory nature of many myths. I think that if students are reading Greek myths, they should become familiar with and remember the names of the major gods and goddesses. When the students read the hero myths, they should learn and discuss the qualities that make up a hero. Maybe not all the students will remember everything and respond to everything. Maybe those who do not will simply enjoy the myths. However, I think it is important that children be given the opportunity to experience more and to learn more. I think reading the myths becomes more meaningful to the students.

However, one cannot forget that this unit is for students of sixth grade age, and that translations of the original sources are therefore not appropriate. The students will not read the original versions, and they will not be given elaborate background information on mythology. They will read the myths in edited and watered-down versions, which are written especially for young people. Because of this, I have not found it to be relevant or important to 'research' background. What I have tried to do is to find books for the students to read, and to try to organize the unit into a whole,

Mythology seems to be a natural way to involve the student. Most children of any age love to hear and read myths, and even to write their own myths. The stories of the gods and goddesses seem to have a particular appeal for their imaginations. They become fascinated with the exploits of the gods. Students especially love, of course, to read about the involvement of the gods with mortals. Consequently, children love to learn about heroes. Heroes are important to them, Children have all kinds of heroes today-sports heroes, rock heroes,

movie heroes, cartoon heroes-and for different reasons. The heroes, however, who appeal to children the most, seem to have changed little over the years. These heroes are super-powerful, have some kind of magical power, are extremely brave, and are on the side of good. They are usually embarked on a quest which involves fighting some kind of enormous evil. One can immediately think of the tremendous popularity of Superman and *Star Wars* . The heroes in these films, as in other magical and 'mythical' films such as *Clash of the Titans* and *Sword and the Sorcerer* , are indeed such super heroes.

Children seem to find security in watching or reading about the victory of a hero. However, they also enjoy the quest and the great dangers that befall a hero. Perhaps this is because they feel sure that the hero will win out in the end, that good will triumph over evil.

Objectives

The objectives of this unit are the understanding and the appreciation of mythology that I would like the students to attain.

1. I would like the students to enjoy reading the myths and to have fun with them,
2. The students will understand something of the nature of mythology. They will understand some of the uses of myths and the reasons myths evolved.
3. The students will practice their writing skills by writing throughout the unit,
4. The students will gain an understanding of the nature of heroes—both modern and in the heroic age of myth.
5. The students will read independently and will present their findings to the class.
6. The students should become aware of literary devices used in the myths. Examples of these would be contrasts (the birth of light from dark night) and narrative structure (the movement in the creation myth from Chaos or disorder to order under Cronus to disorder or war to order again under Zeus). The discussions centering around the literary devices can be as simple or as complex as the students can handle.

Strategies

The students will begin the study of mythology with the beginning, the creation myth. It would be ideal to use a variety of creation myths from other cultures to underscore the idea that the Greeks were not the only groups to use or create myths. Students do find the idea fascinating, that other people had mythic gods. *The Creation Hymn* from Babylonia (1), a myth from Apache Indians and a myth from Nigeria (2) are good examples to use. The students will see the similarities and the same story patterns.

The students are then ready, after listening to and reading creation myths of other countries, to read and to discuss the Greek creation myth, the story of Gaia and Uranus. The myth can be found in varying detail in a number of books. (3) What should be emphasized to the students is that although the details may vary, the central idea of the myth is the same. In the beginning there was nothingness called Chaos, From Chaos came Night and then Erebus, a bottomless place where Death dwells. From Night came Eros, or Love, and therefore light and life, and then came Gaia and Uranus, Earth and Sky. From the union of earth and Sky came the Titans. The myth goes on to explain the eventual separation of earth and sky with the overthrow of Uranus by his son the Titan Cronus. The class, through oral reading and discussions, immediately enters into the world of the Greek gods and sees their violent nature, With the prophecy of the eventual overthrow of Cronus by his own son, the students are introduced to a repeating pattern of events. The students sense the prophecy will be fulfilled, They read on because they want to know how. Students suspect immediately that the world of the Greek gods is different in many ways from any others they have read about.

As the myth continues, Cronus tries to avoid the prophecy by swallowing his children and rules the world in an orderly fashion. The myth of the golden age of man is drawn from his reign. Zeus has been protected from his father and grows up to challenge Cronus, War breaks out between the Titans (elder gods) and the Olympians (younger gods). The battle rages until in one version, the Titan Prometheus steps in and helps Zeus.

This great battle. can be very exciting. There are vivid descriptions of it in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Although it may be too difficult for the students to read, it can be read aloud, and in this way, the battle becomes even more exciting and meaningful to the student.

This is also one place to try to explain the fantasy and make-believe elements of myth, the improbable elements, the need to suspend logical thinking, It is all right for the gods to marry their sisters, it is all right for Cronus to swallow his children, and it is all right for Zeus to swallow his first wife and become the father of the goddess Athena through his forehead. Everyone in the story is a god and everyone lives forever with magical powers. The everyday laws and rules we know do not apply to the gods. This is probably one of the hardest and yet one of the most important concepts for the students to understand.

After the battle of the Titans and Olympians is over, the hierarchy of the gods is established. Students sometimes get confused by the elaborate structure of the hierarchy. One way to help the class to learn and remember the names of the gods and goddesses is to have the students, either as a class or as individuals, create a family tree of the Olympian gods. Zeus alone is good for a full page! As the students chart the gods and goddesses and their various progeny, they also become aware of the many more myths to be read about these various characters.

Once the family tree is complete and the gods are put in their proper places, the students can begin to read the stories of the gods and men. They should look carefully at the personalities and characters of the Greek gods. They should become familiar with the moodiness, the temperament, and the quarrels of the various

gods. The more they read, the more human these immortals should appear to them.

For the creation of man, most versions written for children seem to use the myth of the Titans Prometheus and Epimetheus as the creators of mankind. (4) Epimetheus as 'afterthought' and Prometheus as 'forethought' split the task of populating the earth. Since Epimetheus carelessly gives the "good things" away to the animals, (i.e. furry hair, sharp teeth, great speed) Prometheus has to save man by putting him upright and giving him a brain. Prometheus is immediately seen as the friend of mankind, the creator of mankind.

This myth moves right into the 'Fire' myth. According to the version of the myth read, Zeus either withdraws fire from man, or will not let man have it. Therefore Prometheus, once the friend of Zeus (students can be reminded of how he helped Zeus win the battle against The Titans), sides with man against Zeus and steals fire from Zeus for man. Now man has a chance for light, for advancement, for knowledge. The importance of this myth is emphasized' if the students are read myths from other cultures which explain the beginnings of fire. (5) Many of these myths also involve a central figure who is willing to sacrifice himself so that man will have fire.

Zeus, angry at the new power possessed by man, devises some terrible punishments. Prometheus is chained to a rock, his liver eaten daily by a giant bird, waiting to be freed by a great hero.

Zeus creates a worse punishment for man in the form of Pandora, a beautiful woman, the 'all-gifted' or the 'gift' from all the gods. (This is a favorite myth, one that students could easily and quickly act out.)

The continuation of this myth, the destruction of man by a flood (sent by Zeus) because of lack of respect for the gods, and the creation of new people from stones, even more hardy than those made by Prometheus, finishes this series. Deucalion, the son of Prometheus, and Pyrrha, the daughter of Pandora, as the creators of this new race of man, seem to bring a sort of closure to these myths. Prometheus is seen as a hero in these myths, and Zeus, the head of all the gods, is portrayed as a tyrant

While the classroom reading and discussions are centered on these Prometheus myths, the students will be doing individual and group projects, reading stories of the individual gods and goddesses and then presenting them to the class. In this way the class can get to know more stories. The students will be expected to choose one of the Olympian gods or goddesses, find out as much as possible about the figure chosen, read at least one myth in which that deity is portrayed strongly and prominently, and present that information to the class. The report can be oral, or, with the help of classmates who have read the same myth, it can be a dramatic presentation.

The students will also be engaged in creative writing. To show an understanding of the personality and character of the god or goddess studied, the students will be expected to write a new myth centered around that god. The myth should be an adventure or situation which fits in with that particular god's personality. (Zeus in pursuit of a mortal girl, Hera stirring up trouble and Artemis protecting some wildlife are a few examples.)

Children like to write stories in which they are the main characters. Therefore, another follow-up assignment could be centered on a meeting with this god resulting in a special adventure. 'My Meeting with Apollo' or 'A Day with Athena' are types of titles for writing assignments.

The students could also create a hierarchy of new gods for the classroom, beginning with a single creation myth developed by the whole class. Each student could then develop a god or goddess, giving the deity

special powers and attributes, and creating a situation or a story for that god. This classroom pantheon could be developed as far as student interest continued, Myths involving several of these newly created gods could be written in small groups and then acted out for the whole class. A large mural depicting the hierarchy could be drawn by the class. The interest of the class will determine the development of the classroom pantheon.

The next part of the unit will be centered on heroes, a logical next step from the myths of the gods and men. Most of the great heroes in the myths were the off-spring of the gods.

Discussion questions at the beginning should center on what the students feel is a hero. These questions should start the students thinking about and discussing the nature of heroes.

References should be made to pop heroes of today, as well as to what the students know or think they know about heroes of the past. The students should write a short paper (two or three paragraphs) on what makes a hero, and who they think a hero is, These papers should be kept to the end of the unit to see if the students' ideas have changed.

Herakles is probably the best Greek hero to begin the reading and discussion, Most students are familiar with the name and have seen the character as Hercules in differing versions on television or in comic books. There are also many good editions of Herakles and his Labors.

The students readily identify with Herakles from his first adventure as a baby. As they continue to read about Herakles and his labors, his persecution by Hera, they can really understand the problems connected with the gods' meddling in mortal affairs.

The students should also become aware of some of the characteristics of hero myths:

1. The hero is usually a demi-god, or has a god in his family.
2. The hero has some kind of super-natural power or has the strong support of a god.
3. The hero is usually on a quest. He has a task or a challenge (or more than one) that an ordinary mortal could not carry out.
4. The hero is always seeking fame, glory and most important, honor. These are more important than life itself.
5. The hero is braver, stronger, bolder and some times more clever than most men. He is close to the gods.
6. The hero usually has a weakness, usually too much pride or a terrible temper. This can lead to problems for him, and usually to his downfall.

The class will read all the stories about Herakles and will then be able to draw some connections with other readings. This is especially true when Herakles slays the eagle which has been eating the liver of Prometheus. He thereby ends his suffering and brings the Prometheus stories to a conclusion also,

After reading the Herakles stories as a class, each student will be expected to read a hero myth, choosing from among the stories of Jason, Bellerophon, Perseus, Theseus, Adhilles, Meleager, and Atlanta. He or she will be expected to report to the class orally and if possible dramatically. Many of the great hero adventures could be dramatized quite easily and quite effectively, The students will be expected to point out the heroic qualities they find in each hero read about.

Writing assignments can be varied and interesting. A favorite among students is to be asked to write a Thirteenth Labor of Herakles, giving this hero one more almost impossible task to perform. More advanced students could create a hero, using those heroic characteristics with what they are already familiar. This newly created hero should be given a quest, an adventure in which he will have to deal with both gods and monsters. Class discussions and readings (while outside readings and projects are being prepared) would involve reading the myths of Orpheus and of Daedalus and comparing them as heroes.

Orpheus is the great hero-singer, whose quest took him to the home of Hades himself, Only a great hero would dare to invade the underworld to beg Hades for the return of his loved one, Eurydice, and only a great singer could move Hades to agree, Although these myths really detail this story, Orpheus is very involved in the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece.

Daedalus, the great craftsman and inventor, longed to escape the imprisonment of King Minos on Crete. He made himself and his son Icarus wings and dared to fly, dared to be lie a god. Although Daedalus was successful, he had to pay a price. He watched his son ignore his warning, flying too close to the sun. The heat melted his wings and Icarus dropped into the water,

Depending on the interest of the class, the discussion of heroes could move to the Trojan War and the wanderings of Odysseus. Certainly some passages and adventures from the travels of Odysseus could be read and enjoyed, especially the story of the Cyclops and the magic of Circe. No study of heroes is complete with out Achilles and his story should have some background of the Trojan War.

As a final activity, the students can read the essays on heroism they had previously written to see if their views had changed.

Suggested Lesson Plans

Creation Myths:

Readings: *Myths, Fables and Folktales* or *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*

Read the story aloud to the class if necessary, or if possible have the class read books or dittos. The myth selection read first should include Chaos to the overthrow of Uranus. I think the more detail included in a myth the better.

Discussion and questions:

Literal recall, Write or diagram the events on the board. These myths have a beginning-middle-end line structure that is readily apparent,

Introduction of some simple literary devices found in the myths. (These can be amplified or simplified depending on the ability and the interest of the group,)

1. Contrasting elements in the myth.
2. The progression from Chaos to order under Cronus. (It will be reversed in a later myth—order to war or chaos—and should be pointed out.)

Discussion of the term 'poetic justice', XX should be explained and children should be able to give an example once it is understood.

Questions:

What do you think will happen to Cronus? Do you think he can avoid his fate? Why or why not? What would you do?

Why doesn't Cronus kill his children? Why can't he?

Why do you think there is such violence in the lives of these gods?

Who do you think will bring about the downfall of Cronus? Why?

Lesson Plan: The Golden Age of Man Under Cronus

Readings: *Myths, Fables and Folktales*

Myths and their Meaning

Read the very short myth that retells the Golden Age of man under Cronus. Life was perfect for man in this period, paradise on earth. There was no war because there was no conflict. All men (there were no women) lived in peace and harmony. This age was followed by harsher, less pleasant periods.

Questions:

What does the fact that the golden men were all men tell you?

How real was the golden age? Could it have ever happened?

Why do you think the Greeks felt there was such an age? Why do you think the Greeks needed to believe there was such an age?

Why do you think such an age existed under Cronus and not under Zeus?

Writing Assignment: What kind of golden age would you create. Pretend you are Cronus. Create a golden age for today. What kinds of things would you include and exclude?

Lesson Plan: *Introduction to the Hero*

The hero section should begin with discussion and questions. The students by now are familiar with the gods and the way the gods become involved the lives of mortals, They should be ready to discuss heroes.

Questions:

What makes a hero? Does a hero have special qualities?

Did heroes only live a long time ago?

Are heroes superhuman? Do they have to be?

What heroes do you know about? What makes them heroes?

Have we read about anybody who might be considered a hero?

Can a god be called a hero? Why or why not?

What is the main difference between Prometheus and a hero?

These questions should start the class thinking about heroes and the making of a hero. Since the class is moving from reading about gods to reading about heroes, the distinction between immortality and mortality should be made clear. Prometheus is, of course, a hero because of his gift to man and his sacrifice, yet the difference between gods and men should be reinforced. Prometheus, as a god, is not the same kind of hero as Herakles.

At this point, the students should write a very short paper describing what they think a hero is. The paper should be open-ended and allow for differences. Students may write about a real person they think is heroic or they may write from their imaginations. The papers should be kept to be looked at again at the end of the unit.

Readings: Stories of Herakles

Myth, Fables and Folktales Myths and their Meanings

D'Aulaire's Book of the Greek Myths

Since the students have all heard of Herakles, it is easy to begin the readings with his adventures, starting with the first danger from Hera when he is still a baby.

The students will probably become quite partisan and get very angry every time Hera appears to 'start trouble' for Herakles. Although there is no need to memorize the Labors, the students might want to pick a favorite Labor and illustrate it. They should also describe another adventure of Herakles or add the Thirteenth Labor.

Footnotes

1. *Beginnings, Creation Myths of the World* , Penelope Farmer, ed.,pp. 10-12.
2. *Myths, Fables and Folktales* , Albert R. Kitzhaber and Stoddard Malarkey, eds., pp 114, 118-119
3. Ibid., pp 21-27
4. Ibid., pp. 33-40
5. Ibid., pp. 116-117, 124-126 or Farmer, Op. Cit., pp. 68-69, 72-75

Teacher Bibliography

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Hendriks, Rhoda A., tr. *Classical Gods and Heroes* . Morrow, Quill Paperbacks, New York, 1974, Contains selections of translations from various sources. Could be read aloud by teacher or used by very advanced students.

Lattimore, Richmond, tr, *Hesiod* . The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1959. Translations of works by Hesiod. Selected passages could be read aloud.

Rose, H.J, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* . E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc. Paperback, New York, 1959. Discussion of all the myths.

Student Bibliography

Colum, Padraic. *The Golden Fleece and The Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles* , Collier Books, New York, Paperback, 1921, Very good telling of the story of Jason.

Coolidge, Olivia. *Greek Myths* . Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Boston, 1949. Good readable selection of myths.

D'Aulaire, Ingri and Edgar Parin. *Book of Greek Myths* . A Zephyr Book, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, 1962. Beautifully written and illustrated, a favorite with children and adults.

Evslin, Bernard and Dorothy, and Hoopes, Ned, *Heroes and Monsters of the Greek Myths*. Scholastic Book Services, New York, 1970. A good collection of the myths.

Farmer, Penelope, ed. *Beginnings: Creation Myths of the World* , Athenaeum, New York, 1979. An excellent selection of creation, seasonal, fire etc., myths from all over the world.

Gates, Doris. *A Fair Wind for Troy; The Golden God: Apollo Lord of the Sky: Zeus*

Mightiest of Mortals: Heracles Two Queens of Heaven: Aphrodite and Demeter The Warrior Goddess: Athena Viking Press, New York, 1976. A very good series of books, moderate reading level, well illustrated,

Graves, Robert. *Greek Gods and Heroes* , Doubleday and Company, Garden City, New York, 1960, Excellent retelling of the myths.

Herzberg, Max J. *Myths and Their Meaning* . Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston. Good collection. Could be used as a text with really good readers,

Kitzhaber, Albert R, and Malarkey, Stoddard, eds. *Myth, Fables and Folktales* . Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1974. A very good collection of myths. Can be used as a general reader.

Serraillier, Ian. *The Way_of Danger* . Henry Z. Walck, Inc" 1963. The story of Theseus;told in great detail.

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