Mythology by Edith Hamilton

Concept Analysis

LITERARY TEXT:


PLOT SUMMARY

Hamilton starts the book with an introduction to Greek mythology. She points out that Greek myths are unique because they depict a people that had risen above the brutality and savagery of previous eras. Overall, myths show the mystery and beauty of humanity, and have influenced the thought and culture of America. Greek myths are the first to place humans at the center of the universe. Each myth contains realistic elements and heroes that are endowed with noble qualities rather than magical powers. The gods have human characteristics, making them more tangible for the everyday Greek rather than incomprehensible. This also means the gods can, at times, be unpredictable and subject to change much like humans.

The book then describes the main gods and how the universe was created. The swirling energy of chaos and darkness produced heaven and earth and many children. These monsters eventually created the Titans, who were ultimately overthrown by their children, the Olympians. Zeus is the chief Olympian and lives with his wife, and sister, Hera, on Mt. Olympus with the other gods. Zeus and his siblings, including Hades, Poseidon, and many others, created mankind and began to control them. Zeus would often come to earth in different forms to have relations with beautiful women. The offspring of these relationships would become the most notable heroes, and would fulfill epic tasks, while also destroying vicious monsters. While many of the heroes are half-divine, some are also all mortal. Some of most notable stories of heroes portrayed include those of Hercules, Perseus, Theseus and Achilles. Each story has its own purpose, whether to explain natural phenomena or merely to entertain. Overall, the book tells the stories of heroes and mortals as they interact with gods and their society. Their narratives often interweave and the book can be read sequentially or the reader can skip around between chapters.
to get more background knowledge. Edith Hamilton finishes the compilation of Myths with Norse mythology, which is often darker, depicting the battle between good and evil, with the eventual destruction of the gods.

**ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS**

There are 1200 years between the earliest and the latest writer of the myths featured in the book. Edith Hamilton has organized the myths, often written by different authors, into parts or sections that group the myths according to a shared quality.

The **first** part tells the story of the gods and the story of creation, along with the earliest heroes that came from this event. This provides the necessary background knowledge to understand the interactions with the gods in the rest of the myths. A chart at the end of the book sums up the complex relationships presented.

The **second** part groups the myths thematically under the category of stories of love and adventure. It tells the story of Cupid who was sent to make the beautiful princess Psyche fall in love with a monster but eventually falls in love with her himself. The section features eight other brief tales of lovers, good for Valentine’s Day, and finishes with the adventurous story of the Golden Fleece. Jason attempts to get his father’s throne back by assembling a group of heroes and is sent on a quest to procure the Golden Fleece.

The **third** part of the book features tales of heroes before the events of the Trojan War. This section features some of the most popular heroes, including Perseus, who kills Medusa, Theseus, who kills the Minotaur, Hercules, who must overcome twelve tasks, and Atalanta, a woman hero who bravely kills a boar along with performing other heroic tasks.

The **fourth** part features tales centered around the Trojan war, including the adventures of Odysseus and Aeneas, taken from Homer’s Odyssey and Virgil’s Aeneid respectively. The adventure of Aeneas is the only distinctly Roman myth featured in the book.
Part five groups myths from the great families found in Greek mythology. We read tales of the house of Atreus, the royal house of Thebes, including the famous stories of Oedipus and Antigone, and stories of the royal house of Athens.

Part six places judgment on various myths by labeling them as less important. This includes the tale of Midas, who wishes to have the power to turn everything into gold and then realizes he cannot eat or drink anything.

The seventh and final part presents the mythology of the Norsemen, featuring tales of heroes who fight for good despite facing impossible odds and the certainty of defeat.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION/ENDURING ISSUE

What defines a hero?

Naturally, Hamilton’s book deals with heroes because they are some of the central characters in Greek myths. Even when a myth deals solely with the gods, a discussion may be had about whether mankind should adopt some of the attributes they possess. Zeus may not be all-knowing but is he just? Surprisingly, many of the heroes fall short in countless ways. For example, Hercules constantly struggles with weaker impulses despite his more noble qualities. He is hailed for being strong and brave, yet some die needlessly at his hand and he lacks intellectually. He eventually ends up cowardly committing suicide. Yet, Hamilton explains that at the heart of his heroism is the ability to make a wrong right. Other heroes, such as Theseus are braver and smarter than their opponents. They stand out more naturally as heroes. They portray a similar journey also, being raised by foster parents eventually to set out on a heroic quest to take their rightful throne. While many of these heroes have divine attributes, it is their human side that Hamilton, and of course, Greek writers emphasized. These writers portrayed qualities that all Greeks could value and strive to develop to improve their society. After all, the heroes perform their heroics in real places for the Greeks, such as Thebes. This makes for an interesting discussion of the attributes of heroes in our time. Do we value the same qualities or has the definition of a hero changed?

THEMES:
Effects of jealousy and retribution

One of the major themes deals with jealousy, which often becomes a motivator to exact retribution. For example, after the success of his quest, Jason marries Medea. Jason then desires to marry the daughter of the king of Corinth. He leaves Medea, and the king banishes her and her children. In an act of jealously and violent retribution, Medea sends Jason's new bride a dress that bursts into flames when she wears it. It kills both the bride, and her father, the king. As if that wasn't enough, Medea also kills the two children she had with Jason. Even the gods are not exempt from feelings of jealousy. When Zeus' wife finds out about her husband's infidelity with Hercules' mother, she uses magic to make Hercules go insane and kill his wife and children as retribution. In many cases jealousy, and the retribution that follows, lead characters to irrational actions that destroy the families involved.

The inability to change fate

In many myths, the courses of people’s lives are not left to chance. It may seem that many actions are done on a whim, especially since the gods often act impulsively, yet the ultimate destiny of each character is unchangeable. Even Zeus cannot alter prophesies about himself. Despite this fact, many of the characters throughout mythology attempt to do so. They often learn of their fate from various oracles and then do all they can to change it. Many times they commit brave and daring acts, yet instead of changing the course of their lives, they often set up the conditions to fulfill the prophecies. One of the most famous examples is when the king of Thebes learns that his son Oedipus will kill him one day. He banishes his son hoping to avoid this fate but this causes Oedipus not to recognize his father years later during a confrontation on a road. Oedipus eventually kills his father, fulfilling the prophecy. Through exercising his free will, the king eventually ensures that fate has its way, a common theme in many Greek myths.

The dangers of pride

Despite the heroic qualities of many mythological characters, they often have a fatal flaw. This usually comes in the form of a lack of humility. When humans begin to compare themselves to the gods, setting themselves on an equal
plane with those on Mt. Olympus, the gods usually ensure they remember who is in charge. For example, Phaethon believed he could drive the chariot of his father, setting everything in his path on fire as he lost control. An accurate lightning bolt from Zeus was sent as a reminder. Niobe, who decides she is just like the gods, has the misfortune of having all her children killed. The gods often punish such pride, while in other cases pride often leads characters to unwise actions, ensuring they still receive a punishment because their actions place them in precarious situations.

Recompense for good and evil actions

In some cases the myths function as a way for the Greeks to teach moral lessons. This is complicated by the fact that sometimes the gods are fickle and change their loyalties for silly reasons. The reason Apollo leaves Hector when he faces Achilles is hard to determine. Also, the gods often act immorally themselves. Zeus has many relationships with women and attempts to hide them from his wife. His wife often punishes those involved because she can't punish Zeus himself. Nevertheless, the gods often reward good and punish evil. The innocent Perseus receives many tools from the gods in his quest to kill Medusa, including a mirror. On the other hand, Hercules is punished for carelessly murdering a boy who spilled water on him and a man who insulted him. He is sent by Zeus to be a slave for a queen who forces him to dress as a woman for a year. In another myth, Philemon is hospitable to Jupiter and Mercury, who reward him and destroy everyone else. The myths function as a way to show the blessings and curses for certain actions, thus establish a rough guide to moral behavior.

The human qualities of heroes

Hercules is notorious for his bravery and strength yet he lacks self-control and often has to fix his mistakes. Jason, who relies mainly on his friends to perform heroic deeds, leaves his wife to follow his royal ambitions. Perseus, possibly one of the most perfect of heroes, accidentally kills his grandfather with a discus. Despite Oedipus' heroic journey, he ends up putting out his eyes in an act of despair to show his disappointment that he has no control over his fate. As mentioned, Greek mythology is the first to give human qualities to gods and heroes,
giving hope that all might develop a portion of the good attributes these heroes have despite their weaknesses.

**SETTING:**

The setting varies as widely as the plots of the myths. The myths are obviously set in ancient times. They feature mythical places, such as Mt. Olympus and the underworld along with real cities such as Thebes and Corinth. Most myths occur in the Greek and Roman civilizations, but the Norse myths at the end of the book occur in Northern Europe. Generally, the setting is only described insofar as it affects the events of the story.

**POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE:**

Edith Hamilton is seemingly the narrator of the various myths. She inserts scholarly background information before each myth, letting the reader know the origin of the story and her thoughts about it. This allows the story to be narrated objectively and as the original authors wrote it. Hamilton often lets the reader know in the background information how the original authors attempted to portray the events. Thus, the voice might change depending on the author Hamilton has used to tell the myth. Generally, the narrator is omniscient, aware of both the main characters strengths and weaknesses. The main focus of the narrator is to relay the events and circumstances of the myth, rather than offer an interpretation or play with language.

**LIST OF LITERARY TERMS:**

Below is a list of literary terms that are important to teaching this book. Of course, it is not comprehensive.

**Allusion** - This term is important because Greek mythology is the subject of so many allusions in literature and culture. Characters are also alluded to in many of the myths.

**Characterization** - This term can be taught by discussing how a characters positive and negative attributes are represented in the myths.
Climax- All plot terms can easily be taught because each myth provides a short example of plot structure. Students can use the terms to identify the parts as they read.

Complication- There are often many complications on each hero's quest.

Conflict

Falling action

Flashback- Flashback can be taught when the author reveals prior events in a hero's life that effects their current situation. Many hero stories features the circumstances of their birth and then heroic events in their later life. If students are writing their own myths, this is an easy way to show them how to use flashback.

Foreshadowing- Students can understand foreshadowing when discussing the oracles and their prophecies. Of course, less obvious cases of foreshadowing are not as present in the myths.

Genre- Students can use this term when discussing the qualities of myths in general compares to other types of books and stories they have read.

Hero

Irony- Irony is present in many Greek myths. Situational irony can be understood when discussing how character's actions to prevent their determined fate often lead to what they were trying to avoid. Dramatic irony occurs as the reader recognizes events through the omniscient narrator that the protagonist does not foresee.

Narration

Plot

Resolution

Rising Action

Tragedy- Greek myths are always a good medium to discussion tragedy. The story of Jason and Medea might be a good place to start.
VOCABULARY ISSUES:

*Mythology* is a good book to help students understand new words contextually. The writing is generally accessible, but every so often there will be a word that students might struggle with. Since the narrator is presenting events, students can use these to speculate what the word might mean. Also, some of the words are specific to Greek mythology and can be used as a way to build prior knowledge. Below are examples of words found in *Mythology*, showing the context in which they were used.

Firmament- No wind, Homer says, ever shakes the untroubled peace of Olympus; no rain ever falls there or snow; but the cloudless firmament stretches around it on all sides and the white glory of sunshine is diffused upon its walls. (25)

Omnipotent- Nevertheless he was not omnipotent or omniscient, either. He could be opposed and deceived. (25)

Omniscient- Nevertheless he was not omnipotent or omniscient, either. He could be opposed and deceived. (25)

Oracle- His oracle was Dodona in the land of oak trees. The god's will be revealed by the rustling of oak leaves which the priests interpreted. (26)

Venerated- Nevertheless she was venerated in every home. She was the goddess married women turned to for help. (27)

Eminence- He was the rule of the sea, Zeus's brother and only second to him in eminence. (27)

Inexorable- He (Hades) was unpitying, inexorable, but just; a terrible, not an evil god. (29)

Beneficent- Apollo at Delphi was a purely beneficent power, a direct link between gods and men, guiding men to know the divine will showing them how to make peace with the gods. (30)

Redoubtable- He never was to them the mean whining deity of the Iliad, but magnificent in shining armor, redoubtable, invincible. (35)
Incalculable- For the most part the immortal gods were of little use to human beings and often they were quite the reverse of useful: Zeus a dangerous lover for immortal maidens and completely incalculable in his use of the terrible thunderbolt. (53)

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE:

Many students are familiar with myths and legends from popular movies and from reading fairy tales when they were younger. Students can establish a working definition of myths as they go along. Much of the necessary background knowledge is featured in the first few chapters of the book. Students need a basic grasp on the different gods and their roles because they play a role in the plot of many of the myths. They do not necessarily need to know its features beforehand. It would be beneficial for students to know a bit more about Greek civilization. They will be then prepared to determine if the values of the Greeks come through in their myths. A brief summary of the authors of the myths can also help students understand how we have these myths today.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF DIVERSITY:

While the myths in the book are Greek, Roman and European, they do deal with universal themes. The question of “What defines a hero?” will require students to bring their own experience and knowledge to the discussion. The myths also deal with archetypes such as the hero’s journey that may be present in another culture’s myths. A good assignment would be for students to research myths from their own background and culture so that students can connect their own heritage to the concepts being studied in the classroom. They might be asked the question “What does your culture value in its myths?” This type of assignment will help students see the common traits of mythology, making the book more relevant to their own culture and experiences.

GENDER ISSUES:

Many of the goddesses in the book are portrayed as beautiful, yet vain and jealous. At times they argue over who is the fairest and exact revenge on their husbands who have affairs with other women. The myths are generally male
dominated and male and female interaction, which may start off looking like true love, often deteriorates. Theseus takes Ariadne with him after she helps him in the maze, but then leaves her on an island where she dies. Medea kills all of Jason’s children after he leaves her. Many women are also seen as subject to men, such as Hades kidnapping of Persephone. Of course, there are goddesses and heroes that are every bit as powerful as men, such as Athena and Artemis. The warrior Atalanta is perhaps the strongest woman hero, known for killing a boar. Yet, at the end she is married after losing a race because she was distracted by shiny objects. Throughout the myths women and men have their problems, but an interesting discussion might be had about whether male and female heroes are valued for different traits according to the Greeks. How did they view women and men based on their myths? There are strong, independent women that can be brought out to provide balance when teaching the novel. It is generally the relationships between men and women that are filled with turmoil. The strong men and weak women stereotypes are present, but Hamilton provides exceptions to give some balance. Teachers should realize that guys will generally be more interested in the myths and should make efforts to interest the girls.

RESEARCH ISSUES/PROJECT IDEAS

Research:

- Research myths from your own cultural heritage and background

- What aspects of Greek mythology appear in our culture today?

- How did a certain myth appear originally? Who was the author?

- What adaptations have been made to a myth? Are their popular stories/movies today based on it? Does it appear in other cultures?

- If you could be a Greek god, who would you be? What powers would you have?

- What is a hero? They could look at modern heroes on CNN.com

Project ideas:
- Students could write a Facebook status for a hero and then have other characters comment on it based on their interactions in the story. For example, Jason could write for his status: “Just married the princess of Corinth. I just can’t wait to be king,” and Medea might comment saying “Congratulations you two. I made your wife a robe. It’s going to be smokin hot on her. Literally.” This could be extended to full Facebook profiles.

- Students could write their own myths. This project could follow the outline of the hero’s journey, requiring students to create their own hero. This could be composed into an anthology, or students could learn the elements of the oral tradition, eventually telling their myth to the class using storytelling techniques.

- Students could create a comic strip version of their own myths or one from the book.

- Students can take a myth and update it to describe what it might be like if it occurred today.

- Students could learn dramatic techniques to role play a myth from the book, one from their culture, or one they wrote.

- Students could find a picture book that tells a myth to share in small groups. They could synthesize the question of what does the book teach us about ourselves as humans.

- Students could use magazines to create a collage of the people and qualities society values today, reflecting on how that differs from the traits the Greeks valued.

- Students can create a soundtrack to a myth by finding songs that relate to its themes, plot, and characters.

- Students can write themselves into a myth, either solving or creating conflict.

- Students can create an advice column where Greek heroes from the myths write in and the student offers them advice to solve their problems.
- Students can create a movie or animated presentation that tells a myth in two minutes in their own words. They can use appropriate slang to modernize the story and tell it as they see it.

- Students can prepare to role play different characters on a class Dr. Phil show where they try to resolve the many relationship issues present in the myths.

- Students can write letters of application to a god that is retiring to explain why they should be chosen for the position.

**ENRICHMENT RESOURCES**

Clips from *Star Wars, Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief, Iron Man* movies to help students identify aspects of the hero’s journey.

It came from Greek Mythology Chart [http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/it-came-greek-mythology#section-20401](http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/it-came-greek-mythology#section-20401). Charts like this one can be used as anticipation guides to help students recognize how pervasive Greek mythology is in our culture.

Picture books: *The Hero and the Minotaur, Beowulf- a Hero’s Tale Retold, Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady, Theseus and the Minotaur*. These can help students talk about the hero’s journey and read the myths in condensed form. This will help them better picture and generalize about myths as a genre.

[CNN Heroes](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html) as a way to help students talk about modern heroes.

Pairing *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan to help students relate better to the myths.

Each of these articles from the English Journal provides ideas for teaching mythology, including poems that might be used in a mythology unit.


This interactive tool can be used to help students learn the stages of the hero’s journey. They can use it to outline the stages in a text they are reading or in a myth they are writing themselves. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/hero-journey-30069.html

Jim Burke has ideas and handouts for teaching The Odyssey and the hero’s journey on his website.

These websites provide background information on Ancient Greece and what life was like there.

www.historyforkids.org/learn/greeks/

www.ancientgreece.com/