

This section covers AO1
content and skills

Specification content

Complex form of mythical language that communicates values and insights into purpose of existence. Myths help to overcome fears of the unknown; myths effective way of transmitting religious, social and ethical values.

E: Religious language as non-cognitive and mythical

Complex form of mythical language that communicates values and insights into purpose of existence

In the world today, the term 'myth' is often synonymous with 'falsehood'. For many, a myth is another type of story that has fantastical elements to it, but bears no resemblance to the truths found within the empirical world. Myths, according to the view of many in contemporary society, are regarded as 'fairy-stories' – something to entertain children but which have little or no value beyond this particular sphere of life. However, to reduce a myth to these elements is to fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of this form of language.

This is particularly true within the field of religious studies, where myth is actually a highly specialised term that refers to accounts that contain truths which are communicated in the form of picture imagery and symbolic text. To **deconstruct** a myth purely by empirically based methods is to miss the meaning of these accounts. Such reductionist approaches, as were particularly popular in the 19th and early 20th century, led to the popular view today of myths being little more than fantasies, which provided simplistic views of the complexities surrounding the natural world, and, in particular, events such as the beginning of the universe or the formation of life on earth.

To dismiss myths as simplistic, as previously stated, is factually inaccurate. Myths do require interpretation but to do so requires care. Understanding the original context of the myth is important. German biblical scholars of the 20th century, when looking at the New Testament within the Christian tradition, spoke of the need to understand the '**Sitz im Leben**' (situation in life) of the New Testament writers, so that the meaning of those documents could be properly understood. They also cautioned against applying our own *Sitz im Leben* when interpreting them – because to do so was to add perspectives that would not have been relevant to the time of the writers, and this would lead to a misunderstanding of the original meanings of such documents. This is why a cautionary approach to interpreting myths would bring a more accurate understanding of the original context and purposes of the myth itself.

Myths exist in all human cultures. The very fact that this is so demonstrates the value that they have for all societies. Those myths provide insights into a range of elements that each society holds as significant though not all of these societies and cultures have myths for all of the same elements. There are commonly recurring ones such as the creation of the universe; the roles and persons of the gods; heroic myths; how and why the world operates in the way that it does (including ethical codes); the struggle between good and evil, etc.

Understanding mythical language is essential in helping us to understand those myths. However, studying myths and the language they are written in is a matter of interpretation. Therefore, armed with the best knowledge that we have, it should be remembered that these interpretations are not necessarily always definitive. The myth is a powerful form of literature, it is also, as has already been mentioned, extremely complex. As such, different times and different people may interpret the myth in different ways. As we look at different myths, later in this section, these differences of interpretation will be explored further, as appropriate.

Another issue with the myth is that many myths are remarkably similar to one another – if not in content many are so in structure. An example of this are the **ex nihilo** creation myths that begin with voids, water and a divine figure or figures.

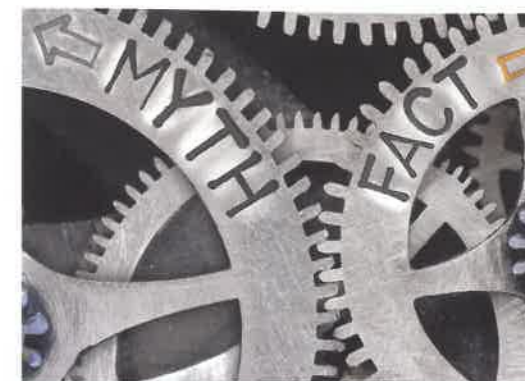
The ability to appreciate that these represent images and beliefs deeply rooted in the culture from which they arise, allows for the myth to be interpreted accordingly – so whilst the content may have similarities – the interpretations may differ somewhat.

So, myths are a complex form of literature. Mythical language is also complex, being formed of metaphorical, symbolic and analogical terms – having meanings 'hidden' beyond the literal reading of the text. Over the last century, with the work done on mythical language in religious studies, psychology and anthropology, scholars have determined that far from the simplistic and childish fantasies that many in contemporary society erroneously label myths, they serve a far more significant purpose. They talk about events surrounding the natural world and how it came to be, but not purely as simple narratives. Essentially they hold within them deep and lasting truths that are integral to the identity of the culture and society to which they belong. At their very heart, myths explore what it means to be human, what our relationship should be with the world which we inhabit, how we should relate to each other and what our responsibilities are to the powers which, they claim, we owe for our very existence.

Finally it should be understood that the role of myth within religion is integral. Many of the aspects of religion depend on myth to provide a means of expressing those fundamental religious truths that cannot be expressed in any other form of language – for to do so would be to simplify them or devalue them. Myths and mythical language, as has been stated, are highly complex and contain metaphorical, symbolic and analogical aspects within them. Thus attempting to find literal meanings to myths inevitably leads to error – both on behalf of those who may adopt a fundamentalist and literalist approach to their reading of religious texts and of those who may criticise religion as being meaningless in the contemporary scientific world. Meaningful discussion regarding myth needs to take into account the highly specific way in which myths employ language and then to begin to explore and understand the richness of the text as it unveils mythical truths about human existence, the universe we inhabit and, where appropriate, the Divine.

Key quote

The chief difference between the man of the archaic and traditional societies and the man of the modern societies with their strong imprint of Judaeo-Christianity lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected only with History. Of course, for the man of the archaic societies, the Cosmos too has a 'history', if only because it is the creation of the gods and is held to have been organised by supernatural beings or mythical heroes. But this 'history' of the Cosmos and of human society is a 'sacred history,' preserved and transmitted through myths. More than that, it is a 'history' than can be repeated indefinitely, in the sense that the myths serve as models for ceremonies that periodically reactualise the tremendous events that occurred at the beginning of time. The myths preserve and transmit the paradigms/ the exemplary models, for all the responsible activities in which men engage. By virtue of these paradigmatic models revealed to men in mythical times, the Cosmos and society are periodically regenerated. (Eliade)



The word myth is often misunderstood in modern society.

quickfire

4.17 What is the purpose of myth?



Myths can often signpost truths about the human condition.

quickfire

4.18 Why can the word 'myth' be problematic to define?