

The World of Myth Study Guide

The World of Myth by David Adams Leeming

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Plot Summary

"The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Leeming is a nonfiction work that explores and defines a series of ancient mythologies. Leeming is an author of world renown with a large body of work to his credit, much of which focuses on specific aspects of mythology, including its origins, plausibility, tradition, cultural influence, and how the myths create, support, and reinvent themselves over the course of centuries all over the world.

While the world of mythology is complex, Leeming manages to create a type of primer, introducing the reader to various myths while successfully interjecting enough explanation, theory and fact that the text will be enjoyable for the reader who already may know a fair bit about ancient myths.

Leeming is fond of separating out the myths and showing the reader how some of the elements may have come about, what they represent, and how they have been recycled throughout various cultures over the periods of hundreds of years, and even millennia.

Leeming recounts the oldest myths.

The oldest written myth was found in Egypt circa 3000-2200 B.C.E. The tale, referred to as the Pyramid Texts, was recorded in hieroglyphics on the Old Kingdom's inner chamber walls. The next Egyptian myth, titled the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom, originated around 2134-1660 B.C.E. Then came one of the most famous Egyptian myths found in "The Book of Going Forth by Day," also called "The Book of the Dead," which was recorded during the New Kingdom around 1550 B.C.E.

Another ancient myth was found in Mesopotamia. The Enuma elish, celebration of the high god Marduk, is thought to have been composed around the time of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in the 12th century B.C.E.

The Hebrew version of Genesis was composed around the time of the Babylonian captivity during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. The Greek myths were first recorded by Hesiod, a scholar who lived in the eighth century B.C.E.

Leeming does not waste time giving unnecessary details about the myths, rather the author just covers the very basic concepts before moving on to compare and contrast the myths. There is a great deal of symbolism in myths, a topic which Leeming explores.

Each section of the book is devoted to a specific topic and lists the myths that correspond to the subject, along with basic information, meaning, use of metaphors, and how the myth may have been recycled and integrated into other cultures. While most recycled myths remain almost identical except for changes in the names of the characters and locations, there are some that differ.

Some of the topics in "The World of Myth" include: "The Creation," "The Flood," "The Afterlife," "The Apocalypse," "The Pantheons," "Gods, Goddesses and Lesser Spirits," "Hero Myths," and "Place and Object Myths."



Part I: Chapters 1-5

Part I: Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

"The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Leeming begins by defining cosmic myth. According to Leeming, "Cosmic myths are myths of the cosmos." The word cosmos comes from the Greek "kosmos," which means "order." Cosmic myth belongs to cosmology, the scientific study of the universal order as a whole. Some of the topics that fall under cosmology are Creation, the Great Flood, the concept of afterlife, the Fall, and Revelation, which predicts the end of the world. Although cosmologies tend to be very different from one another, they all hold the basic concept of universal human concern from how the world was created, to the cleansing of sin, to the Apocalypse and the afterlife.

Leeming first analyzes the myth of Creation. This is referred to as a cosmogony, which also comes from the Greek and is defined as "order," and "genesis" or "birth." Typically, cosmogony deals with how the universe was developed, the creation of humankind, the fall from the state of perfection or grace, and the heavenly struggle of immortals or gods. Regardless of where they originated, cosmogonies are typically sacramental and represent the science of an individual or cultural truth. It is widely accepted that the concept of creation is a metaphor for birth. Leeming asserts that, by and large, cosmogonies are essentially female, and that the ancient cultures realize that without the Great Mother nothing - even humans - could be born. This includes the creation of God who, in nearly every story ever recorded, is born of a holy Mother.

Another psychological metaphor is the fact that many cultures see creation as being born from nothing, which is equated with the "awakening of consciousness from the unconscious." This almost always involves a godlike entity existing in human form to enable them to endow consciousness.

Leeming poses the question that if the gods were present in order to bring consciousness to the world, then why is it that humans tend to fall from grace rather quickly after their creation? It is often believed that the act of going from struggle and creation to fall from grace may suggest an eventual freedom from the earthly plane to enjoy formless perfection along with the culture's chosen Supreme Being.

The first creation story to be addressed by Leeming originated in Egypt. The first source of Egyptian mythology was discovered in the ancient Pyramid Texts, hieroglyphics discovered in 3000-2200 B.C.E. The hieroglyphs were inscribed on the Old Kingdom's inner chamber walls. That record was followed by the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom in 2134-1660 B.C.E. and was eventually followed by "The Book of Going Forth by Day," often referred to as "The Book of the Dead" recorded during the New Kingdom in 1550 B.C.E.



The central god in Egyptian creation myth is Re or Atun, the sun god of Heliopolis. There are various versions of the myth revolving around the original deity or word. There are also signs of a primeval gathering or mound of earth which becomes fused with the sun, which may represent the Pyramids. Like many cultures, the Egyptians repeated the creation myth during important rites such as coronations and funerals.

In Mesopotamia, the creation myth is referred to as Enuma elish which translates to "When on high." It is the first written creation myth ever recorded and is thought to have been composed around the time of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in the 12th century B.C.E. It is part creation myth and part celebration of the high Marduk. The Mesopotamian creation myth has many familiar elements, including the emergence from chaos, primal waters, the heavenly war, the emergence of a Supreme Being, and the creation of humankind from the body of the great Mother. Many experts have made a connection between the Christian Old Testament and myth of the Middle Eastern culture.

The Hebrew version of Genesis was composed around the time of the Babylonian captivity during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. Unlike the Babylonian creation myth, the Hebrew Genesis is more concerned with the role of humanity in the universe. Genesis actually contains two separate myths: Genesis 1 contains a version that most likely originated in fifth century B.C.E.; Genesis II is the older of the texts and was composed as early as 950 B.C.E. The most significant difference between the two is the creation of the first human.

The Indian culture contains many creation myths, much like the Egyptians. These myths can be found in Brahamananas, Upanishads, Vedas, and the epic tales of the Hindus. The creation myth contains familiar elements such as the creation God, the sacrifice of one human being split into two, the cosmic eye, the cosmic egg, and the primal waters. However, the main theme revolves around the emergence of the mind or soul from nothingness.

The myths of the Greeks may be among the most famous in modern history. Many of these records come from Hesiod, a scholar who lived in the eighth century B.C.E. Hesiod's Theogony revolves around the pre-classical Greek concept of the formation of the universe. Like most cosmogonies Hesiod refers to the creation from chaos, the heavenly war, and the creation of an organized heavenly monarchy. There is also reconciliation between the monarchy, which is often seen as a patriarchal order, and the female creative principle, often represented by Mother Earth, also referred to as Gaia.

The Christian religion relies heavily on John's Gospel, which was written around the time of 100 CE. The early biographies of Jesus were found in Egypt. The texts refer to the beginning of the world, which came from chaos in order to form the cosmos. The record also reveals that in the beginning was the Word, which is also referred to the Greek "Logos," the controlling and creative principle of the universe. Many experts find the Gospel of John significant, because he suggests that Jesus and Logos are one entity and that Jesus was the human form of what has always existed as the ultimate reality. This Gospel also introduces and incorporates Jesus' divinity.



The Hopi culture embraces the female creative principle, which is often referred to as the Spider Woman. Unlike many cultures, the Hopi culture is still matrilineal. The creation myth of the Hopis contains many familiar elements from the creative female principle and its association with the earth, to a mysterious divine being, Tawa; the division of divine parents into new forms, and the creation itself. Many cultures also believe that creation was developed through song and this thought can be related to the Anasazi-Hopi rituals. Perhaps most importantly, the concept of the Spider Woman is an emergent myth, the concept that views the earth as a womb. After people emerge from the earth as in childbirth, they grow in ability and knowledge until they are raised by "the light of the Sun God's power."

The Boshongo (Bantu) culture relies upon Bumba's creation, which is a patriarchal structure. The noted absence of the female creative principle is part of the patriarchal culture. In this myth, Bumba vomits up the earth, moon and stars, which mirrors the Egyptian's creationist myth of spitting and spilling of the seed. In this culture Bumba is white, suggesting that it is a more recent myth and akin to African mythology and denotes the presence of the white man in colonial Africa.

Modern myth favors the Big Bang theory. Like many creation myths. The Big Bang theory revolves around the culture's priorities, and how the culture understands its place in the universe.

Leeming discusses the flood myth, which is common to many mythologies because great floods, like other natural disasters, are highly memorable. When great floods occur, the devastation is often so severe that it seems they could only be caused by a higher being. Additionally, floods are often seen as cleansing and the removal of sin, which ultimately leads to rebirth. The flood is also used as a metaphor, akin to the primal waters, in which humankind emerged from water. The myth also reminds us that without death, there can be no life, or a complete circle. This concept is still used in modern times in the form of baptism. Psychologically speaking, the flood myth is a metaphor for the time one must spend in the dark and unconscious before experiencing rebirth.

The 11th tablet of the Semitic Babylon tale of King Gilgamesh reveals the flood myth that experts claim is the source for the story of Noah in the Old Testament. The story of Gilgamesh was based on a third millennium B.C. myth created by the Sumerians. In Sumerian myth, humankind is destroyed by a flood sent by the gods. Enki, a god who disagrees with the other gods' whimsical decision, instructs a man known as Ziusudra to build a boat to save himself and his family as well as the animals.

The Hebrew tale of Noah, which was clearly based on the Babylonian myth, focuses on the sin of humankind. This flood is seen as a form of punishment, and Noah, who is a righteous man, is spared in order to repopulate the earth. The Babylonian flood was created by the whim of gods, while the Hebrew flood is considered to be purposeful and harsh, but ultimately constructive.



The flood myth is one of the oldest elements in Chinese mythology and may have been created around 1000 B.C.E. The Chinese myth however is non-mystical and is more earth-oriented than God-oriented. According to the Chinese, the flood was a way to make it possible to cultivate the land.

The Indian flood myth revolves around Manu, who was chosen to be spared. Like many of the other main characters in the flood myths, Manu is spared by divine intervention and remains aboard his ship until he is guided to land upon a mountain.

The Greco-Roman story is also very similar in that Jupiter decides to punish humankind for sinful behavior through a great flood. The only ones spared from the flood are a husband and wife who are guided to board a boat. Like the Indian and Hebrew stories, the boat eventually docks on Mount Parnassus, a mountain which is considered sacred to the Greek culture.

In the Mayan culture, the flood myth has an unusual twist in that the great waters were sent to destroy an experimental form of humankind, rather than to wash away the sins of the people.

The next item to be discussed is the afterlife. The afterlife is a theme that is ubiquitous. In general, humankind finds it more disturbing to descend into blackness after death rather than to experience some form of afterlife. One of the first examples of an afterlife recorded was in Homer's *Odyssey* in which the author refers to the Land of the Dead as a place of despair and darkness. However, the Land of the Dead is not seen as a place where punishment is meted out. The concept of heaven and hell were created by cultures that believed in separation of good and evil.

In Egyptian afterlife, Osiris the Resurrection God is the ultimate goal for one who dies. At a funeral the name of Osiris was attached to the deceased, allowing it to form a new identity and be reborn as a soul.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the character Odysseus ventures to the Land of the Dead and provides the reader with what is considered to be a "complete vision of the Greek afterlife" myth. The Roman author Virgil also wrote about an afterlife that puts its emphasis on reward as well as punishment. It is considered to be an extension of the concept of the underworld as introduced by Homer.

Judaism does not focus heavily on the concept of an afterlife, but rather tends to focus on the concept of purgatory.

In the Koran, the sacred book of the Muslims, heaven is the destination for the true believer, while hell is the resting place for the sinner.

In Buddhism, the concept of the "Pure Land" is the promise given to its followers regarding the afterlife. Buddhism, which is derived from Hinduism, believes in good and bad karma, a metaphor for self-identity and destiny, determined by one's thoughts and actions. The myth of the Pure Land is much like the Christian redemption in Christ and



instructs the believers that even the most entrenched destiny can be overcome and corrected.

Native American tribes tend to have a rather complicated version of the afterlife. Traditionally Hopis tend to be rather secretive about their religious beliefs and therefore are typically unwilling to reveal the innermost workings of their doctrine. However, what is known is that there is a myth regarding the afterlife, which includes a land where the good spirits will go after death, and the Hopi version of hell is referred to as "The Country of Two Hearts," which denotes falsehood and deception.

The Apocalypse is a revelation or a prophetic vision. In modern religion, Apocalypse is often equated to a vision of the "catastrophic end of the world." Leeming states that apocalyptic myth along with the study of the end of things is known as eschatology. The concept of Apocalypse is common in many cultures and often refers to the end of world so that a new world may emerge. Like many concepts of an afterlife, Apocalypse suggests the existence of a Supreme Being that will decide the end of the world. In many cases, the righteous will ascend and survive in an otherworldly place.

The Hebrew version of the Apocalypse is commonly seen in various texts in the Old Testament. The Hebrew prophets preach the consequences of being unfaithful to God and refer to the Day of Yahweh, or the Day of Judgment, when the enemies of God will be determined as well as who will ascend to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The final book of the New Testament is the book of Revelation of the Apocalypse of St. John the Divine. It is likely that this book was composed at Ephesus around 95 CE. John's Revelation takes the basis of the Apocalypse from the Old Testament and adds the concept of the Antichrist and the "Hour of Fulfillment." John makes clear what the four Gospels of the New Testament had hinted at, which is that "the Kingdom of God is at hand, and that the second coming of Christ is imminent."

The apocalyptic myth in the Hindu culture is set to take place in the fourth age of the world, referred to as the Kali Age. The main character in the myth is Vishnu, the preserver God, who will rule the earth before being reborn. The Hopis also have a millennial vision of the end of the world before the creation of a new plane of existence.

One of the most famous stories of the Apocalypse is credited to the Norse. The myth of Ragnarok is filled with natural disasters such as earthquakes, and the darkening of the sun as well as the appearance of monsters, Armageddon and a great fire, which will destroy the earth. As with most apocalyptic stories, there will be a rebirth.



Part II: Chapters 1-3

Part II: Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Regardless of a culture's definition of a Supreme Being, all mythology tends to be dominated by the concept of God and Goddess, whether the Supreme Being's name is God or Yahweh or Allah or Gaia. The gods are immortal beings and are a personification of the need to overcome the physical laws of life that bring about inevitable death. Leeming states the gods and goddesses are actually metaphors for the various elements of society. Zeus is seen as a patriarch, a husband and father; Hera is a wife and mother. Zeus is known as a philanderer and Hera is often jealous, traits which are generally attributed to humans. The gods are also representative of various elements such as earth, air, wind or fire, as well as human emotions such as jealousy, hatred or love.

Leeming discusses the pantheons, the official gods of a culture and how they reflect on the value system of that culture and how it views itself. For example, the Egyptian pantheon is centered on the obsession with death and resurrection, which may have been brought about by the blistering sun and routine flooding of the Nile. The Hebrew concept surrounds a single patriarchal god and his "chosen people," suggesting a sense of exclusivity and the importance of being on a mission. The Greek pantheon is seen in the immortal family that reigned on Mount Olympus.

Leeming believes that details of the lives of Zeus and Hera and their family personify a more realistic, yet skeptical, portrayal of human nature. No matter how the pantheons are structured, they can all be categorized as ontological and teleological, that is, metaphors for the attempt by humans to understand existence and its ultimate cause and purpose.

In the Egyptian pantheon, there is a constant struggle between various gods that desire supremacy. The struggle may be a metaphor for the ongoing major conflicts that occurred between the religious factor and political sector throughout Egypt as far back as 4000 B.C.E. At one point, the pantheon is ruled by Re, the Sun God. Akhenaton introduced monotheism with a central figure in the 14th century B.C.E. One of the most popular Egyptian gods is Osiris, the God of the underworld and grain. Osiris was married to Isis, who can be likened to Greek mythology's Demeter, the goddess of mysteries. Isis is also the goddess of the earth and the moon. In Egyptian culture, the son of Osiris and Isis, Horus, is the "divine child" and the spiritual force guiding the reigning Pharaoh.

The Greek pantheon is developed in stages. There are two dynasties that must be overthrown before Zeus can reign supreme on Mount Olympus. The Greek pantheon consists of a hierarchy with gods and goddesses that are patterned after human families. The most powerful family in Greece is the family of Mount Olympus, which is ruled by Zeus. This family is somewhat different than many of the other pantheons in



that it contains a great number of human characteristics. Among these are arrogance, stubbornness, and revelry in immortality. Some believe that these traits are also attributed to the upper, ruling class at the time.

The traditional Greek pantheon created in the era of Homer was comprised of 12 gods and goddesses. The oldest of all of the gods is the goddess Gaia or Mother Earth. As with many pantheons, Gaia created her own mate, showing that the original Supreme Being was a single matriarch.

The Romans took the Greek pantheon and altered it to suit their own needs. This was done through the presence of the Etruscans who were an important part of Italy between 900 and 500 B.C.E. Leeming states that the primary difference between the Roman and Greek pantheons is that Rome placed a stronger emphasis on the gods as personification of abstractions such as war, fortune and love; the Roman pantheon was rife with political metaphor.

In the Norse or Icelandic pantheon, the main god is Odin, who is married to Frigg. Like many of the father gods, Odin bears many similarities to Christ. The tales of the Norse pantheon are included in the Elder Edda, written in the 10th century C.E., as well as the Younger Edda, composed around 1220 C.E. In the Norse pantheon, the comparison to Lucifer can be seen in the god Hel, ruler of the underworld. Likewise, the serpent can be compared to the trickster god Loki.

Many cultures give human form to the Supreme Beings because of the lack of understanding of anything beyond the physical limitations. Leeming states it is as important to be able to recognize the god or goddess or its pantheon as both mask and metaphor, defined by the culture that cultivated it, along with their psychological and spiritual reasoning in the collective mind.

Leeming introduces the stories of the archetypal gods by first addressing the concept of the Supreme Being. In many myths, the Supreme Being is the chief god, one that represents the traditional patriarchal structure most often seen in society. The Supreme Being is the "embodiment of kingship, of the paterfamilias." The Supreme Being is often a Sun God and the giver of light and heat. However, this god tends to remain unapproachable. For example, the name Zeus was derived from the Sanskrit word "div," meaning light or day. Leeming goes on to discuss various archetypal gods in some of the aforementioned cultures including India, Hebrew, and modern society.

The concept of the Great Mother is a personification of the planet itself. While the chief god represents discipline and structure, the Earth Mother represents creation and nourishment. The Earth Mother was also the goddess of life, death and rebirth.

Over the centuries, the Earth Mother, who was the oldest God in many pantheons, eventually changed form and at the same time, lost some of her significance. Some of the entities that evolve from the Earth Mother, Gaia, are the Corn Mother, Demeter, the Great Goddess, Artemis, Isis, and Devi. The Earth Mother also gained a place in



folklore as a fairy godmother or a witch. In many cultures, the Earth Mother became a source only of light, such as the Madonna.

Some cultures, particularly earth religions, still worship the Goddess in the form of nature. The figure of Demeter, mother of the earth, crops and fertility, is also symbolic in the Greek myth which also credits the deity with winter. Every year, Demeter's daughter must return to the underworld to keep a pact she had made with Hades. When Persephone, the daughter, descends, Demeter mourns and the earth dies. When Persephone returns in the spring, Demeter rejoices and fills the world with life and color.

Leeming examines various pantheons surrounding the Great Mother from the Mesopotamian culture to modern society.

In all the aforementioned pantheons the story of the dying god is prevalent. It may be that the god dies and is reborn or is simply seen in the cycle of nature. It seems important for the cultures to experience a sense of resurrection. Leeming refers to various examples of the dying god from Jesus and Odin, who were both nailed to articles of wood, Isis and Osiris, Adonis, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and Quetzalcoatl.

Another common figure in the god myth is the presence of the trickster. The trickster is often both foolish and wise, a lover of practical jokes, always male and often promiscuous. The trickster is known to take animal form; therefore, the trickster, often speaks to the human's primal and animal nature, the more physical side of the personality. Some of these tricksters include the Greek Hermes, the Nordic Loki, Krishna, the Coyote, and the Raven. This character is often seen in more modern literature and entertainment such as Brer Rabbit, Davy Crockett, or the Pink Panther.

While the crux of most pantheons revolves around the major gods and goddesses, there is also a place for the lesser gods, goddesses, and spirits. For example, in the Greco-Roman pantheon, Prometheus is the archetypal god assigned to help humankind. Similar archetypes can be seen in Quetzalcoatl, Atlas, and Pandora.

Another common theme is the birth of a mortal from the Earth Mother. Some of the more popular mortals born from a major god include Narcissus, Jupiter, Echo, Eros, Apollo, Psyche, and Pan.



Part III: Chapters 1-4

Part III: Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

Hero myths are an important part of any culture. Stories may differ as to where the hero comes from, but in essence, the hero is the human persona who must leave his ordinary world, enter the world of the supernatural, vanquish his foes, and then return to his world filled with new powers and knowledge which he will share with his people. Leeming refers to the term "monomyth," to describe this pattern, a phrase which was coined by the writer James Joyce.

The monomyth is comprised of several elements which may or may not be acted out completely by each hero. Some heroes will ascend into the netherworld, while others find their foes in other areas. Typically, the hero is conceived in a supernatural way. For example, Jesus and Quetzalcoatl were born of virgins; the Buddha creates himself through his mother's dreams; Adonis is born from a tree, and the Native American Kutoyis was derived from a clot of blood. Heroes tend to be born during the times when they are most needed. This often coincides with the darkest part of the year or the winter solstice.

The hero's quest is the most significant aspect of the myth. The hero is "called" into action. This can be seen in the story of Moses when the voice of God emanates from the burning bush; the Holy Grail beckons Arthur's knights, and the Buddha is hearkened by the "four signs." Many times the hero does not answer the call. This may be due to a question of worthiness as is seen with Moses, Jonah, and Jesus in the Gethsemane. Heroes may also be guided by spirits that take form in a wise man or fairy godmother.

The first hero story to be discussed by Leeming is the Native American tale of the Water Jar Boy. Leeming refers to the story as a "wonderfully unusual representation" of the virgin birth and also contains the familiar aspect of the search for the father. The story resembles many fairy tales in its elements of the fantastic. A young girl was mixing clay for her mother when she mysteriously becomes pregnant. When the baby is born, it is in fact, a clay jar. The jar represents a child who is born with no arms or legs. Eventually, the jar breaks against a rock and out jumps a real boy.

The next tale is the story of the Greek hero Theseus. Like many other heroes Theseus was born from a supernatural spirit and a mortal woman.

In the Indian culture, Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, is considered to be a god but is often viewed as a human. Also in the Indian culture are the heroes Karna, and Buddha. Because each of these heroes was born through a miracle, the children often possessed a great number of adult qualities while maintaining innocence. Another hero that possesses all the necessary powers upon birth is the Irish Cuchulainn.



One of the most popular and most complex heroes in the Greek culture is Herakles (Hercules). Herakles is a supernatural being, unusually strong and intelligent. Herakles, like many heroes, was mortally threatened at an early age and lived to overcome the dangers.

There are many stories of the quests of heroes. One of the most famous is the 15th century French tale of Joan of Arc, Maid of Orleans. Joan of Arc was 14 years old when she first heard supernatural voices. Joan's mission was eventually unveiled to her through the voices as well as a series of manifestations. It was difficult for Joan to believe that she, a peasant girl, was destined to save France.

Another famous tale is the Greek tragedy of Oedipus. In this story the hero is on a quest for identity. When Oedipus was a child, the Oracle predicted he would kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus was sent away to live in the forest. Many years later Oedipus returned to the kingdom and unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. There is also the tale of Oedipus' daughter Antigone, whose quest entails fighting against the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Other Greek heroes include Herakles and Odysseus.

Probably the most famous tale of a hero quest is that of the Celtic King Arthur. King Arthur had opposition from the beginning when his father, the king, died. Opponents believed that Arthur was not fit to reign. When Arthur was the only one who could pull the sword from the stone proving his worthiness, he ascended the throne. Another hero in the Celtic culture is Percival, who was one of King Arthur's knights of the Roundtable, also on the quest for the Holy Grail.

The Hebrew myth of Moses started with the hero being called to the Promised Land from an angel in the burning bush sent by Yahweh. Like many heroes Moses originally refused the call but was converted. Other biblical quests include the stories of Jonah, Samson and Delilah, Abraham and Isaac, and Jesus.

Leeming also addresses the stories from other cultures, including the Australian Aboriginal story of The Pleiades. Leeming asserts that the story of the Pleiades bears a slight resemblance to the Greek tale about the priestesses of Artemis, daughters of Atlas, being turned into stars. Yet the story of the Pleiades is somewhat different than most hero myth in that the constellation is typically associated with light that came out of darkness and salvation.

Included in the work is the poem of Hiawatha, the Native American hero forced to fend off monsters. As with the story of the Buddha, Hiawatha's tale can be related to self-denial.

One of the oldest myths about the hero quest is the Mesopotamian myth of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is tempted by Ishtar, who is described as an "immortal femme fatale," and must fight off monsters and survive the descent into the netherworld. The story represents the quest for eternal youth and immortality. The story was uncovered in one

of the earliest recorded epic poems thought to be composed around the second millennium B.C.E.

An integral part of the hero myth is addressed in the chapter titled "The Rebirth, Return and Apotheosis of the Hero." Throughout the centuries there had been many myths that deal with resurrection from Jesus to Buddha to Odin. The stories are meant to show that there is something greater than the mortal world in the great beyond. Almost all the heroes meet with a tragic end, from crucifixion to fire. One exception may be the myth surrounding the Virgin Mary, around whom a myth was created in order for the church to allow worshipers a reference to the Great Mother.



Part IV: Chapters 1-8

Part IV: Chapters 1-8 Summary and Analysis

Although the presence of the hero is important, one cannot overlook the significance of places and objects in the myths. Objects and places are almost always associated with sacred properties which correlate with the fact that most myths are religious in nature. Each place or object has an archetypal significance, from the femme fatale to the devil to the Supreme Being. As one might suspect, the objects and places are typically metaphors and not actual places that can be found on a map. Often times these metaphors refer to various aspects in religion as well as culture and politics. For example, the mythological motif of the cross on which Jesus was crucified or the sacred tree on which Odin and Attis were hanged are all metaphors for the bridge between death and eternity. The rocks featured in the stories of Jesus, Arthur, Mithras and Isaac represent the maternal rock or link to the Great Mother.

Leeming admits that there are a great many sacred objects and places and only addresses a few.

The first sacred place Leeming addresses is the mountain. The mountain represents the cosmic center, where temples and cities are typically placed because it is the highest spot, closest to the supreme God and where the Word can be easily received by humankind. Some examples of the sacred mountain include the Golden Mountain, where Shiva sits; Mount Parnassus, Mount Olympus, Mount Ararat, and Mount Sinai. Examples of cities set on high include Athens, where Athena built her temple as well as the Acropolis. To illustrate this point, Leeming quotes the Bible.

The second sacred place to be addressed is the city. Leeming asserts that the city is "humanity's stand against chaos." The city itself represents the feminine, protection and nourishment, the entrance to which must be protected against all invaders. The fall of the city typically represents great tragedy, as can be seen in several myths. One of the most famous myths is the story of the Greek city of Troy. Virgil is most often credited with the tale of the fall of Troy in his work, the Aeneid. In order to invade Troy, the Greek warrior, Sinon, attempts to convince the Trojans, the people of Troy, that they want to give a peace offering to their sworn enemies. The gift is a giant wooden horse. The Trojans choose to ignore the advice of Laocoon, a priest of Apollo, who had warned them against accepting the peace offering. Laocoon is the victim of serpents sent by Poseidon and dies. The Trojans accept the horse and bring it into the city. The horse is filled with Greek soldiers, who capture the city and as a result, turn the cosmos into chaos.

Leeming includes the text from the Aeneid, which tells the story in full.

The next city to fall is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is an unusual city in that it is a sacred place to Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Jerusalem has been referred to as "beloved of God."



For many, Jerusalem is celebrated more as a metaphor than as a physical location. In this context, the city might exist anywhere or can also be a phrase used to describe the Kingdom of God. According to Leeming, the city's feminine nature is obvious in the Lamentations of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. Many experts believe that this book of the Bible may have been written during the exile of the Jews from Babylon.

Leeming includes the complete text of the lamentations of Jeremiah 1.

The last sacred city to be examined is the Greek city of Delphi. It is considered to be a city, although it is technically a sacred precinct. Like many cities of the ancient world, Delphi is the very center of the world, the navel. This is particularly clear when one looks at the conical stone located in Apollo's Temple. In Delphi there is a chasm in the earth that is said to give access to Mother Earth's womb.

The next topic addressed is the use of the temple. According to Leeming, "The temple is a microcosmic version of the city." Like the mountain, the temple is also representative of the feminine nature. The temple can be seen as the womb in which the hero plants the seed of humanity. European cathedrals are considered to be the body of Christ on a horizontal plane, representative of the mother mountain, which is vertical. In the Christian religion, these temples are often named after Mary, a church-approved version of the Great Mother. The cathedrals are intended to be an architectural depiction of the marriage between the hero and the mother-wife, with the church serving as the bride of the Lamb.

Icons within churches tend to reinforce the theme of marriage. There are also many symbols within the church that represent the Great Mother, from the font into which a candle is plunged on the Holy Saturday, to the altar/tomb/throne that is the site of sacrifice, the Great Pyramids, the Ziggurat of Babylon, the Chapel Perilous, the Holy Grail, and the gopuram of the Tamilnad temples of the Great Goddess, Shiva, and Vishnu.

The next temple to be addressed is the European Chapel Perilous in which Galahad found the Holy Grail.

The first of the objects to be discussed are the genitals. The loss of the genitals is associated with the planting of the seed in the womb of the Great Mother. Examples of the use of genitals in Greek myth can be seen in the bizarre tale of Teiresias, often told by Ovid. The tale recounts the story of a person of androgynous nature, who possesses the power of complete unity as well as prophecy.

Other examples of the genitals can be seen in the Apache myth about the Vagina Girls and the Greek story of the fig phallus of Dionysos.

The next sacred object to be discussed is the stone or the rock. The symbol can be seen in many tales such as that of King Arthur and Theseus. Both men remove a sword from a stone, the sword representing the phallus and the stone representing the womb.



In the myth of the Phrygian religion, there is another story where the rock is purely feminine. This can also be seen in the myth of Erathipa from the Australian Aboriginals, where the fertility stone possesses a feminine opening. The final stone to be discussed is the Bethel stone of the Hebrew religion. In this case, the stone, much like the omphalos stone at Delphi or the Ka'ba stone at Mecca, represents the gates of heaven, the house of God and is another version of the navel of the world.

The tree is also a powerful sacred symbol. One of the reasons may be that the sacred tree's roots reach in to the center of the earth, and the tree can also reach into heaven with its branches. Therefore it is seen as a complete symbol of life as it brings together the eternal and the temporal. Some examples can be seen in the cross of Crucifixion, the Bhodi tree, and the trees in which Osiris was found and Adonis was born.

There are three myths involving trees that are examined by Leeming. The first is the Indian Cosmic Tree. According to the ancient Upanishads, the Cosmic Tree, known as Asvattha is the representation of the Brahman. In the Bhagavad-Gita, the Cosmic Tree also incorporates the concept of humanity. The most famous example of the cosmic tree can be found in Norse myth. The Norse tree Yggdrasil is considered to be the Tree of Life as well as the Tree of Wisdom or Knowledge.

The final tree to be examined is the Hebrew Tree of Knowledge. The Tree of Knowledge appears in Genesis and is considered to be the core to the mythic tradition of the Christian culture. The tree is the source of knowledge, the predecessor to the Tree of Life. It is also the precursor to the cross on which Christ was crucified.

Another series of sacred objects and places address The Garden, the Grove, and the Cave. These places are feminine in nature, and their energy is derived from a relationship with the great mother. This can be seen in some myths surrounding birth, as in the story of Buddha and Dionysus. These sites may also be the ideal places for withdrawal or meditation, and perhaps even in rebirth, which can be seen in the tales of Muhammad and Jesus at Gethsemane. The garden is also the sacred place of the Tree of Life as well as the site of the heavenly Garden of Eden.

Leeming refers to the Muslim myth surrounding Muhammad's cave. Muhammad, when burdened, often retreated to a cave at the foot of Mount Hira where he hoped to gain the insight of his ancestors and of the creator.

The final sacred object is the labyrinth. The labyrinth is the symbol for the journey into the unknown, which more often than not, contained some great danger. The most effective tale of the labyrinth is the story of Theseus who created a labyrinth to house the Minotaur. The labyrinth itself was built in the shape of the double ax to signify sacrifice.



Characters

David Adams Leeming

David Adams Leeming is a biographer, author, and the son of an Episcopal priest born in Peekskill, New York. Dr. Leeming received his PhD from New York University with the thesis, "Henry James and the French Novelists," after serving a year as a professor in Istanbul. After Leeming graduated, he worked for the iconic author James Baldwin, who would later become the subject of what critics refer to as Leeming's finest work, "James Baldwin: A Biography." Leeming also wrote other significant biographies on Beauford Delaney and Stephen Spender.

Leeming has served as a traveling lecturer as well as Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. Leeming is well known for his significant body of work regarding the study of myth, which includes works such as "World of Myth," "God: Myths of the Male Divine," "Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine," "Oxford Companion to World Mythology," "Jealous Gods and Chosen People: The Mythology of the Middle East," "Dictionary of Asian Mythology," and "The Mythology of Native North America."

Leeming is often seen as controversial in that he does not fear questioning the stereotypes of religion and cultural traditions.

Jesus

Jesus is considered to be the living embodiment of the Supreme Being of the universe, most commonly referred to as God. As in many myths, Jesus was born of a virgin.

Jesus' purpose on earth was to teach the world about the Kingdom of God and one's place in it should one choose to embrace the Father and follow the doctrine of Christianity. This is often a conflicting role due to the fact that Jesus was Jewish and therefore, the concept of the Son of God is quite confusing to some.

There has been a great deal of controversy over the idea of Jesus the man versus Jesus the myth. Regardless of what one believes, the story of Jesus' birth, life on earth, crucifixion and resurrection are common themes in the world of mythology. Many secularists argue that the story of Jesus has been told many times before and can easily be compared to the rising of the phoenix or to the stories of the gods Odin and Attis.

All the dying god and resurrection myths reveal a sense of suffering and entrance into the afterlife. Upon the resurrection, the central character returns to impart otherworldly information regarding the Kingdom of God, Valhalla, or other similar versions of the afterlife and eternal bliss.



Zeus

Zeus is the king of all the Greek gods.

Odin

Odin is the king of all the Norse gods.

Gaia

Gaia is the feminine deity that is the center of many religious doctrines. Gaia is also referred to as the Great Mother, the Earth Mother, and the Great Goddess.

Osiris

Osiris is the Egyptian god of the sun and the brother-husband to Isis.

Isis

Isis is the Egyptian goddess of the moon and the sister-wife to the god Osiris.

The Madonna

The Virgin Mary, also known as the Madonna and the mother of Jesus, is a Christianized version of the Great Mother.

The Earth Mother

The Earth Mother is the guardian of the earth and the mother of all. This concept is referred to by a myriad of names from the Great Goddess to Gaia.

God

God is the Supreme Being in many cultures. Often referred to as the masculine creative principle, God is referred to by many different names including the Great Father, the Great God, Allah, and Yahweh.

Prophets

There are many characters in myth that have the gift of prophecy, from the gods themselves to certain chosen mortals or those born from unusual circumstances.



Objects/Places

Earth

The Earth plays a significant role in all the myths addressed in "The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Lemming. The Earth is seen as the greatest creation of the creator of the universe, regardless of the culture's concept of the Supreme Being(s).

In many myths, the Earth is seen as the feminine creative principle, personified as Mother Earth, the Great Mother, or one of many other similar incarnations. It is a widely-held belief that the Earth is the Mother of all Creation, while the Sky is the Father. Through the use of various metaphors, the Mother and Father procreate, either spiritually or in a sense related to the physical.

There are many references to the feminine principle in regards to the birth of humankind, including creation of the lesser gods as well as some noteworthy mortals. The Earth is also seen as the Mother of the Divine, in that the use of the concept of the virgin birth has given life to mortal deities such as Jesus.

One of the common methods of attempting to marry the Earth to the Sky was through the building of cities and temples on high so that mortals, and even Gods, would be able to receive divine information and blessings from on high.

Sky

In all myths, the Sky is seen as the masculine creative principle, personified as God, Heaven, the Father, or one of many other similar incarnations. It is a widely-held belief that the Sky is the Father of all Creation, while the Earth is the Mother.

There are many reasons why the Sky is considered to be the home of Creator of the Universe and the heavens. Analysts believe that many ancient cultures worshiped nature as well as the divine spirit, which was often revealed to them through natural occurrences such as floods, constellations, the sun and moon, and thunder and lightning. As these cultures did not have significant scientific knowledge to understand the nature of the elements, it was assumed that these things were sent by the Creator.

It is common that the Sky, and therefore the Creator, is masculine. The reason for this has many roots. Regardless, it is a common theme that the Creator married the Great Mother in order to unite the temporal and eternal and to create humankind.

Nordic countries

The Nordic countries are responsible for some of the oldest myths on records as they appeared in the Elder Eddas. Among the gods in Norse mythology are Odin and Thor.



Heaven

The concept of Heaven is similar in most mythologies, thought to be the home of the Supreme Being where one would go in the afterlife to experience an eternity of bliss.

Egypt

Egypt is rife with mythology and is considered to be the source of the first documented myth. Notable Egyptian gods and goddesses include Isis, Osiris, and Horus.

Gethsemane

Gethsemane is the site at which Jesus had a period of doubt regarding his role as the Son of God.

Australia

There are many myths that were created in Australia by the Aboriginals. One of the most popular is the myth of the Pleiades.

Rome

Rome is considered to be the center of various mythic and religious cultures. The Romans adopted many of the Greek myths and incorporated them into their own socio and political atmosphere.

Athens, Greece

Home to many myths of the Greek gods. Athens is also the site on which the goddess Athena, daughter of Zeus, built her temple as well as the Acropolis.

Greece

The country from which a great deal of myth was created and cultivated, including the gods from Mount Olympus which were ruled by Zeus.



Themes

Recycled Myths

One of the main themes in "The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Lemming is the recycling of myths from one culture to another over a period of centuries or millennia. The basis of almost all myths is the existence of a Supreme Being, an entity that is both omniscient and omnipotent, creator of the universe. In some cultures, this deity is patriarchal; however, there is typically a matriarchal figure as well. In fact, the majority of myths and religions center on at least one feminine entity, whether the focus is as a divinity or human being.

Even in the instances in which the main deity is seen as the masculine creative principle, it may have been born of a mother figure. Virgin births are quite common in myth and credit the mother with the birth of the divine child. Two excellent examples of this can be seen in the story of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, and the myth of Gaia, mother of the earth.

The feminine creative principle takes many forms throughout mythology. Some of the representative figures include: The Great Mother, the Great Goddess, Mother Earth/Earth Mother, and Gaia. The Christian church casts aside the concept of the Great Mother because it interfered with the concept of the Holy Trinity, which is composed of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the concept of the Great Mother was redefined and presented as the Virgin Mary.

Other prime examples of recycling myths can be found in the tales involving the dying god and the resurrection. These are common themes including the death and rebirth of Hercules, the Crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the hanging and rebirth of the gods Odin and Attis, and the tale of the phoenix rising from the ashes.

Greek Myth

Greek mythology may be the most recognizable series of myths outside the stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, and Jesus, as presented in the Bible. The accuracy of the Bible has been in question for more than a thousand years and yet many do not refer to the texts of the Bible as myth because there have been elements of the texts thought to be proven through historical fact and scientific data.

Greek mythology is often referred to in modern culture, its stories and icons integrated into the fabric of daily life. Certain gods and lesser spirits seem to be recognized by a majority of the modern world. Some of the best known gods are: Zeus, Athena, Eros, Aphrodite, Apollo, Poseidon, Medusa, Oedipus, Hercules, and Pandora. Groups of gods or lesser spirits are also highly recognizable, including the muses, the Titans, Nephilim, Sephalim, Seraphim, cherubim, angels, and other agents of the Supreme Being and the devil.



It is in Greek mythology that mortals are introduced to gods, mortals with supernatural abilities such as unusual strength or the gift of prophecy, or mortals or gods who are able to appear in partial or complete animal form.

Earth Meets Sky

In every myth mentioned in "The World of Myth: An Anthology," there is an element of Earth Meets Sky. The basic premise behind the concept is that through myth, the mere mortal can reach into the heavens and be a part of the divine. It can also be seen as the potential meeting of the eternal and the temporal. This can be viewed in many different ways, but the basic idea remains the same.

In some myths, the earth is the realm of the Great Mother, while the sky is the home of the patriarchal god. In this way, when earth meets sky, it is as if the mother and father deities are being brought together in a union much like marriage. There are many references to the unity of the male and female deities, regardless if the myth was created in a matriarchal or patriarchal culture.

The location of many sacred temples and cities were built to be as close to the sky as possible, in order to be near the heavens and the Supreme Being. The close proximity also allowed the prophets to receive the Word of God. Examples of the choice of location can be seen in the use of Mount Parnassus, Mount Olympus, and the city of Athens.



Style

Perspective

The perspective used in "The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Leeming is that of an author who obviously enjoys the topic of the work. Leeming is an academician, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut. Leeming is also known as a traveling lecturer, having spent semesters at colleges and universities around the world.

The world of myth is so large that it is impossible to give an in-depth explanation of each culture and its many myths. Instead, Leeming touches on the most significant myths known to modern society as well as the most well known and recognizable cultures, such as the Greeks, Romans, Muslims, Egyptian, and Norse. Leeming also introduces some of the lesser known myths in comparison to the aforementioned, namely the myths of the Australian Aboriginals, some Native American tribes, and the Latin American cultures.

Overall, the perspective used in "The World of Myth" is that of one who has extensive knowledge of the topic and the ability to sort out the basis of mythology and how it relates to modern society.

"The World of Myth" is like an appetizer to whet the appetite of the reader who may go on to read one of Leemings other works, which delve into more defined and specific areas of myths, cultures, and peoples.

The role of the academician can also be seen in Leeming's objective tone in describing and explaining the various metaphors and symbols used in every culture.

Tone

The tone used in "The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Leeming is for the most part, objective. The purpose of the work is to introduce myths that were created and have evolved over the centuries.

At no time is the tone of the work combative, regardless of the subjective nature of myth.

In some cases, particularly when discussing the feminine creative principle, the reader gets the sense that Leeming does not subscribe to the concept of a traditional patriarchal God. This is an interesting insight, particularly since Leeming is the son of an Episcopal priest. Additionally, Leeming carefully suggests that the texts of the Bible may be seen as myth, questionable due to the lack of historical evidence. The stories of Creation, Jesus, the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Revelations have been seen and

heard in various forms throughout many cultures long before Christ was born, which causes Leeming to plant the seed of doubt from an academic point of view.

Leeming's tone makes the work seem interesting and the author's obvious enthusiasm is likely to capture the attention of the reader.

Structure

"The World of Myth: An Anthology" by David Adams Leeming is a work of non-fiction that consists of four parts totaling 348 pages. Part I is 90 pages in length; Part II is 123 pages in length; Part III is 98 pages in length; and Part IV is 35 pages in length. The average number of pages for the parts is 86 pages.

Each part is divided into chapters, each addressing a specific area of myth, such as the Creation and the gods and goddesses. In Part I, Leeming dedicates four chapters to address "The Creation" stories from many cultures and their similarities; "The Flood" and the effects of natural disaster on peoples and mythology; "The Afterlife," including heaven, hell and purgatory; and "The Apocalypse."

Part II is comprised of two chapters. The first chapter is centered on "The Pantheons;" the second chapter focuses on "Gods, Goddesses and Lesser Spirits."

Parts III and IV are both dedicated to a single topic. Part III defines and examines "Hero Myths," including conception, birth, childhood, journey quests, death, rebirth and apotheosis. Part IV explores "Place and Object Myths," giving examples of several physical and metaphorical locations and sacred objects as they are used throughout the world of mythology. Among these are the use of the mountains, cities, temples, trees and the labyrinth.

In addition to Leeming's descriptions, the author also includes a bibliography for each chapter.



Quotes

"In recent times, we have gradually broadened our understanding of myth."
Page 4

"The connection between dreams and myths is crucial for a proper understanding of the significance of the latter."
Page 5

"The events surrounding one's birth are a celebration of the miracle of individuality."
Page 15

"The dominance of the Spider Woman, the female creative principle, befits a culture that remains to this day matrilineal."
Page 36

"The belief in some sort of afterlife is ubiquitous."
Page 64

"An apocalypse, strictly speaking, is a revelation, a prophetic vision."
Page 76

"In our depictions of divinity, we humans have given form to our sense of the ultimate source of our own significance."
Page 123

"The Supreme Being, who emerges from the many world myths about the chief god, is one who embodies the prevalent patriarchal arrangement of society."
Page 124

"The modern scientific mind has continued to consider and be fascinated by the idea of the Supreme Being, at least as a metaphor for the transcendent, imminent, and unifying ultimate reality."
Page 133

"The concept of Mother Earth or, as the Greeks called her long ago, Gaia, has been widely held throughout history and has been the basis of a belief which still coexists with the great religions."
Page 145



"The story of Osiris, the God of maize and of the underworld, and his sister-wife, Isis, is rooted in or closely associated with mummification practices in ancient Egypt."
Page 147

"Divinity finds many paths to the doorway to human life."
Page 221

"The femme fatale figure is by no means always evil."
Page 258



Topics for Discussion

Do you think the ancient myths have significant bearing on today's concept of religion?

How do scholars and historians explain that the story of Christ resembles the stories of Odin and other mythical figures?

Which myths seem to continue to have a stronghold in today's society?

Do you feel that today's religions mirror the matrilineal aspect of ancient myth?

With which mythological character or deity can you identify?

Discuss your favorite myth, including its era and cultural influences.

Why do people still cling to myths when there is no evidence that they are anything more than the figment of a creative mind?

If you could possess one of the other worldly powers of a mythical character, what would it be? Why?