

Myths, Legends and Folktales

Human beings have been telling stories since they first learned to speak. Their stories have been passed down, retold, translated, adapted and, more recently, written down. These stories are myths and legends.

What are Legends?

A legend is usually based on some event in the past – perhaps true, perhaps not true. However, the story may have changed over time to take on some special dramatic features. By the time a legend becomes a legend in literature, the story has been changed so much that it no longer can be considered a “true story.” For instance, the **ILIAD** is based on a war that took place in Greece 1200-1400 years before Christ, but little else about the story is realistic. The Legend of **Gilgamesh** has some connection to an ancient king of the Sumerians, but the story is too wild to be literally true. At the least, legends are exaggerations. But they tell the story of what matters to the people of a nation and a culture.

Legends usually have a hero at the center of the story, but he is only slightly related to any real person. And they are often set in fantastic places. The story will have been passed on from person to person, sometimes over a very long period of time. The fact that so many people have taken the trouble to keep the story alive, usually tells you that it has some very important meaning for the culture or region in which the story was first told.

Finally, a legend usually tells a story about the origins, the culture, and the character of the people of a particular nation. The Iraqis have the legend of GILGAMESH. The Greeks have the ILIAD and the ODYSSEY. The Romans have THE AENEID. The British have BEOWULF. The Americans have GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE REVOLUTION. These legends express something important about a nation and its people.

What are Myths?

A myth is not quite the same as a legend. A myth is a story that has been created to teach people about either about:

1. some natural phenomenon such as the origin of the earth, the stars, the seasons, the animals, or something natural.
2. Or it tells about something very important and meaningful to humans – such as how love, hate, family, sex, jealousy, death, growing, aging, or dying came to be.

Myths are often used to explain the world and major events – events which, at that ancient time, people were not able to understand scientifically: earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, the rising and setting of the sun, illness and death, and other such things. Many of the myths relating to such events have survived for a very long time,

sometimes for thousands of years, as it is only in recent times that we have begun to understand why some of these things happen.

What is the difference between legends and myths?

It is hard to list the differences between myths and legends. The main differences have to do with how much the story

- a. seeks to explain the world,
- b. how much the story is based on a true event,

What we call legends are generally stories which have some actual historical event or person as their starting point – even if the connection is weak.

Myths are expressed in a way makes them useful to teach people how to behave or to give an explanation of the world around.

It's not really so important to spot the difference between the three types with such accuracy as to pass some test. It is more important is to see that these distinctions exist at some level.

Remember:

1. A myth explains the origin of the world, the origin of important human traits, and the origin important natural phenomena.
2. A Legend is a story about how a nation, a culture and its heroes came to be what they are.