

PART I

CLASS PRESENTATION MATERIALS: A DETAILED OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO GREEK MYTH

MAIN POINTS

1. The people of Athens (the city was named after the goddess Athene) built the Parthenon temple in her honor. Decorations on the Parthenon depict the birth of Athene, who springs fully armed from Zeus's head. This illustrates a mythical paradox, a male creating life without the participation of a female.
2. Zeus also gave birth to a male child, Dionysus, god of wine and intoxication, who emerged from his father's thigh.
3. Zeus's giving birth to these two children suggests that myth has the power to integrate polar opposites such as rationality and emotionalism.
4. When Zeus swallowed his pregnant first wife, Metis, he took into himself the cunning intelligence that she represented. Their daughter Athene was powerful like her father and wise in counsel like her mother.
5. Mythic events are subtly grounded in the values of the myth-producing society. Myth expresses a community's distinctive view of the world. Through story, it helps the members of the community to define, confront, and perhaps resolve tensions that its members perceive in the way their world works.
6. Myth has usefully been defined as "a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance." (Burkert)
7. The word myth (Greek: mythos) literally means "utterance" or "something one says."
8. Greek myth was originally an oral phenomenon, transmitted by word of mouth from one anonymous storyteller to the next. As such, it was liable to change with each telling. Consequently, most myths, inherently flexible, survive in several versions, which may even contradict each other in particulars.
9. Greek literature reflects the influence of myth. Aristotle defines myth as a plot-structure in a literary work. In addition to the epics, other works of literature including mythic elements are the Homeric Hymns, the tragic drama, and some lyric poems.
10. There have been attempts at recording ancient traditions faithfully: the Library, attributed (erroneously) to Apollodorus of Athens, contains a large collection of ancient tales. Pausanias's Guide to Greece also attempts to record ancient traditions. Plutarch recorded local beliefs and myths of his homeland.
11. Legends are traditions that have a nucleus in historical fact, although poetic interpretation may have embellished it. Sagas are stories about a particular city or family, usually about a military aristocracy, while folktales tell about the experiences of the common folk and usually do not include myth's preoccupation with the struggles of the human spirit. Some works based on myth may contain elements of folklore.
12. The mythic past, which Greek storytellers regarded as their prehistory, included everything from the beginnings of the world through the aftermath of the Trojan War. At the end of that period, the gods, who had previously mingled with humans on earth, withdrew to Mount Olympus.
13. Some archaeologists believe that myth has some basis in actual events. Schliemann searched for Troy and Mycenae under the same assumption, and his discovery of these sites may suggest that the siege and fall of Troy is legendary rather than purely mythic.

14. Many scholars believe that Greek myth originated in the Mycenaean world of the Late Bronze Age in Greece (between about 1600 and 1100 B.C.). The art and architecture of Mycenae were influenced by the older Minoan civilization on Crete.
15. There are significant contrasts between the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations: worship of the feminine principle versus introduction of a chief male deity; un-walled settlements often near the sea versus walled hilltop fortresses; and general lightness of artistic subject versus frequency of warlike depictions.
16. About 1100 B.C., for unknown and probably complex reasons, the Mycenaean civilization came to an end, plunging Greece into a Dark Age, which lasted for several hundred years. Mycenaean refugees settled and prospered along the coast of Ionia in what is now Western Turkey, where a Greek renaissance emerged.
17. The Greek “renaissance” occurred during the Archaic Age. Two important symbols of this “rebirth” after a period of isolation and relative material poverty were the institution of the Olympic Games and the production of the Homeric epics.
18. The label “Classical” belongs to the period of Greek history during which many works of literary and visual art that scholars have chosen as models of artistic achievement (“classics”) were produced.
19. The Greeks had no sacred text like the Bible or Torah or Qur’an. Instead, they learned about “holy things” (ta hiera) through customary rites, public and private, and by listening to stories about the gods and seeing the gods in visual art.
20. In the hands of the great poets, Greek myths acquire a focus on humanistic values, placing human consciousness in the center of the universe. Protagoras declared, “Man is the measure of all things.”
21. Although Greek myth emphasizes the great gulf between the human and the divine, in important ways the Greek gods resembled their human worshipers: they were anthropomorphic; while they could not die, they could be injured and “bleed” ichor; like humans they ate and drank, but the divine food was called ambrosia and the drink nectar.
22. The Greeks chose to organize their gods in a family characterized by the same tensions, affections, hostilities, and rivalry that marked their own intergenerational human families. Like human families in ancient Greece, the family of the gods was patriarchal.
23. According to one telling of Greek myth, gods and humans sprang from a common source—Gaea, Mother Earth. Humans often compete with each other and sometimes even with the gods, but such challenges to the divine powers usually have disastrous results for the vulnerable humans.
24. Greek myth emphasizes competitiveness and individualism. A character embodying individualism is Achilles; a tradition embodying competitiveness is the Olympic Games. The myths continually express the idea that the obsessive quest for preeminence is a noble goal, but it exacts a terrible cost—an element in the lives of the Greek gods as well as in the lives of the Greek heroes.
25. Ovid, a leading Roman poet during the reign of Augustus, created the most important collection of Greco-Roman tales: the *Metamorphoses of the Gods*.

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Athene, Zeus’s daughter and goddess of wisdom and military victory; protector of the city of Athens

Zeus, king of heaven

Dionysus, son of Zeus, god of wine and ecstasy

Metis, goddess of wise counsel or cunning intelligence, first wife of Zeus

Gaea, Mother Earth

Minos, legendary king of Crete

Achilles, the hero of Homer's Iliad, a Greek warrior at the battle of Troy

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Homer, Greek poet (eighth century B.C.)

Hesiod, Greek mythographer (eighth century B.C.)

Herodotus, Greek historian (fifth century B.C.)

Apollodorus of Athens, Greek mythographer (c. 140 B.C.)

Pausanias, Roman historian (second century A.D.)

Plutarch, Greek biographer (c. A.D. 46–c. 120)

Ovid, Roman poet (43 B.C. –A.D. 17)

Heinrich Schliemann, excavator of Troy/Hissarlik and Mycenae (late nineteenth century A.D.)