**Classics 1 Lesson 1: Myths of Creation**

**What is a Myth?**

**Mythology** is the term given to the study of myths, which are basically stories. These stories though, are of huge significance, because they often show us how an ancient civilisation explained how the world worked, or give us an insight into some of the practices in their culture, some of which might even still apply today. This unit focuses on the Greek myths, which are some of the most widely known and studied. They give us an insight into a period of history which is highly significant, and into a civilisation which has given the world so much. This period of history is between two and three thousand years old, and so the myths that have been passed down through the ages are a tremendous insight into how humans viewed the world then.

The Greek Myths themselves talk about a time that we would describe as **prehistoric**, or before history. This is because there was no reliable way of people recording history in that time, and so hundreds of years later when people (most notably Hesiod) were writing the myths down, they were doing so based on stories that were already very old and passed down orally. The myths should therefore not be taken too literally because they would have been distorted (that and because there weren’t actually Gods who could throw bolts of lightening, as fun as it is to study.)

**The Greek Creation Myth:**

The creation of the Greek universe is described in Hesiod’s famous work, ***Theogony***. It is immediately different from the creation of the universe that you may be more familiar with from the Judaeo-Christian religions because there is no creator God. The Greeks believed that the universe came from Chaos – capitalised because it is a name, rather than the use of the word chaos we understand today. Chaos is emptiness or nothingness, so in the beginning there was a nothingness, or perhaps a gap. The Greeks believe that from this nothingness Gaia, who is the earth, emerged. Following on from this, Tartarus came into being, he is the underworld, and Eros emerged, who is love. These four, who you might describe as emptiness, earth, the underworld and love, were the first gods, but there are some other gods who are included in the creation story and helped Greeks to explain the world around them. Gaia produced Uranus, Pontus and the Ourea (there were 10 of them) who are better described as the sky, sea and the mountains. Chaos also produced some gods of his own at this stage, Erebus is darkness and Nyx is night, but those two then produced Aether and Hemera, who are brightness and day. This completes what many call the first generation of gods, but it is only the beginning of the story. From this pretty dull beginning comes some of the most well known myths in human history, and one of the most violent family feuds.

Taking a step back for a moment, it is clear that the Greeks used the idea of gods to explain what was going on in the world around them. The first generation of gods establish the world that we live in and some of the most obvious aspects of that world such as the sky and the sea. Further generations of the Greek gods take that further, and there are some excellent myths behind why we have weather (Persephone, more later) and why humans suffer death (the famous story of Pandora’s box which we will also study later) among many others, including why bees die when they sting you (ask Melissa the bee).

Another interesting aspect is that once Uranus (sometimes written as Ouranos) is born of Gaia, he becomes the leader or ruler of this generation of gods. He is very clearly in charge, and although throughout Greek Mythology there are very strong and prominent females present, it is always a male who is in overall control. Just as the stories help us to see how the Greeks perceived the world around them, they also reflect how life was for the Greeks, and it is clear that women were discriminated against (much like in most societies throughout history, and in many ways still today) and power generally resided with men.

**Other Creation Myths:**

The Greek Creation Myth is the important one for us in this unit, but it is worth taking a moment to consider how other cultures believed that the world came into being. We are familiar with the idea of a **creator God** from most of the major world religions; in this situation God purposefully created the world, and people have been able to explain anything that happens by saying that God had planned for it to be that way. This is the most dominant version of events given how well known the book of Genesis is, which Jews and Christians follow. Other cultures take another view, for example the Aztec creation story involves a dual God who is able to have children with him/herself and who has to destroy a sea monster in order to create the universe. The Norse story is similarly bizarre in that the world is created out of the body, blood and remains of a giant who was murdered by other giants, and the story involves faraway lands, dwarves and gods such as Thor. Not every culture follows the same idea of there being a creation though, the Piraha Tribe in South America are believed to be unique among tribes and organised groups in that they don’t believe the world was created and have no creation story at all.

In our modern age, we use science to establish the facts of the universe around us, and many of the things that we have explained through gods or superstitions we now understand much better. There is still conflict, though, between the science of how the world has evolved, and the idea of a creator God, partly because it has not been possible to prove one side of the debate fully correct, and even with evidence of the evolution of people, animals and other life, there is still no fully proven theory for how the universe itself was created or came to be.

**Classics 1 Task 1: Myths of Creation**

Please complete this week’s task as a word document and return it as an attachment on teams. The document title should be PUPIL NAME Classics week 1.

**Part A:**

You learned what a myth was in the introduction to this lesson. Watch this video clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeX6CX5LEj0> and then using the lesson and the video prepare an answer in the region of 100 – 300 words stating your view on the statement “Myths are entertaining, but they serve no useful purpose.”

**Part B:**

You learned about Hesiod’s version of the Greek Creation Myth, before learning very briefly about other creation myths. You should now choose one of the creation myths to compare directly to that of the Ancient Greeks. There is a link provided, but you may require additional research. Choose from:

Aztec: <http://www.aztec-history.com/aztec-creation-story.html>

Judeo-Christian: <http://solar-center.stanford.edu/folklore/creation.html>

Norse: <https://norse-mythology.net/creation-of-the-world-in-norse-mythology/>

Piraha: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2006/mar/28/features11.g21>

You may wish to be creative with this task, and are free to produce a table, poster, diagram or other graphic which charts this if you prefer (or you can write an answer).

**Part C:**

Throughout the lesson there were some words in **bold**. This task is entirely optional, but you may wish to take a note of the words in bold and create your own glossary of key terms as you go through the unit.

**Next Time:**

In the next lesson, we will look at the second and third generation of gods, and the brutal war between them, quite literally the clash of the Titans (and where that phrase comes from). This will lead us to the most famous gods of Mount Olympus, and the ruler of them all, the mighty Zeus.

**Further Reading:**

If you are keen to find out more about the mysterious Chaos, then this short but excellent video is entertaining and informative in equal measure: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRrvq6DpzNE>

If you want to know more about creation stories in general, and enjoyed the Crash Course video from Part A of the task, then this is for you: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eVFgfQ2694>

If you want to know the details of Melissa the bee and how she ended up with her sting then this short article has everything you need to know: <https://crawliomics.wordpress.com/2019/06/12/zeus-the-honeybee-and-the-sting/>

And it’s early days, but if you just know that the Ancient Greek Myths are your thing and you want a whole book of them, then Stephen Fry’s book *Mythos* is the perfect book for you to read this summer.