

Sources of Modern Fiction: Myths, Traditional Stories & Religious Works

Modern fiction is typically inspired by three different sources: myths, traditional stories, and religious works. Explore the role that shared heritage and these sources have played in shaping contemporary Western fiction.

Shared Heritage

Writers are some of the most creative people ever, but not everything they write is original. It's not that they deliberately copy anyone else's work, but they do very often draw ideas, themes, patterns, storylines, and even character types from many different sources. Everything they've ever read, heard, and seen is part of their mental landscape, spinning around in their imaginations, getting remixed, influencing creative process, and showing up in interesting ways in their final products.

Important elements in this mix are three sources that are part of the shared heritage of Western culture and civilization: myths, traditional stories, and religious works, especially the Bible. In this lesson, we're going to define each of these elements of our shared heritage and learn how modern fiction writers draw on them as influences and reinvent them in their own works.

Myths

Myths are ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes. People created myths to help them better understand the world and their place in it, to learn about human nature, and to explore human relationships. Nearly every culture has myths. We're most familiar with the myths of the Greeks and Romans that contain tales of gods and goddesses, like Zeus, Venus, Apollo, and Mars; stories of the hero Hercules and his great tasks; the accounts of the Trojan War and Ulysses' adventures as he tried to get home afterward; and the story of the founding of Rome by the brothers Romulus and Remus.

Other cultures also have interesting myths. Ancient Egyptians told stories about pyramids, mummies, and the great Sphinx. Native Americans enjoy tales about the natural world and the creatures in it. The people of Scandinavia share the tales of the gods Odin and Thor and the great world tree that holds the cosmos together.

Modern authors make good use of these myths, retelling their stories, adapting characters, and incorporating elements. In Rick Riordan's series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, for instance, the main character, Percy Jackson, discovers that he is the son of the Greek god Poseidon. He is suddenly plunged into the world of ancient mythology, which becomes all too real, and he must solve many exciting mysteries. J.K. Rowling, in the *Harry Potter* series, incorporates all kinds of elements drawn from myths. The Sphinx shows up, as do other mythological beasts, like dragons and the phoenix Fawkes. Harry is thrust into mythological-style quests and must learn how to be the kind of hero who also fights for good. J.R.R. Tolkien also uses mythology in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He draws heavily from Scandinavian mythology, naming his dwarves after mythological characters and perhaps even basing his ring partly on the tale of the god Odin's magical ring.

Traditional Stories

Along with using myths, writers also turn to traditional stories for inspiration. These include fairy tales and fables. **Fairy tales**, which are common all over the world, tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic creatures, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders. These stories help people see the world from new perspectives and understand human nature better. They are also quite entertaining. Most modern people are familiar with the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm.

Fables, on the other hand, are usually very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong. *Aesop's Fables* were written in ancient Greece, probably in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, but they are still very popular.

Modern writers often take old fairy tales and fables and turn them into something new. Disney's adaptations of *Snow White*, *the Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* are prime examples. The *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer uses fairy tale characters like vampires and werewolves but gives them a fresh spin as the human Bella falls in love with vampire Edward much to the dismay of werewolf Jacob. J.K. Rowling creates a whole new set of wizarding world fairy tales and fables in her book *Tales of Beedle the Bard*. One of these tales even helps Harry, Ron, and Hermione understand and achieve their quest in *The Deathly Hallows*. Other books, including *The Princess Bride*, *Ella Enchanted*, and *Beastly*, also remix old fairy tales in new and creative ways.

Religious Works

Another very important source for the themes, ideas, story lines, and character types of modern fiction is the **Bible**, which is the main religious text of the Western world. The Bible records the interactions of God and his chosen people throughout history. The Old Testament, or first part of the Bible, tells the stories of creation and of the covenants, or bonds of family love, that God made with the Jewish people. The New Testament records the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the early Christian Church.

The Bible is filled with familiar stories and themes that often show up in modern fiction. The tale of David and Goliath, for instance, tells how a small, seemingly weak and insignificant fellow defeated the greatest warrior of his day. In the Bible, the weaker and younger underdogs often come out on top. This theme appears in the *Harry Potter* books when Harry defeats Voldemort and in *The Lord of the Rings* when Hobbits Frodo and Sam are the ones to save the world by destroying the ring on Mount Doom.

Indeed, the battle between good and evil that the Bible reveals so clearly often shows up in fiction, too. The *Harry Potter* series, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are all about the defeat of evil by good, apparently against all odds. Good always wins.

Finally, modern writers often pattern their characters after biblical figures. C.S. Lewis' lion Aslan, for instance, symbolically represents Jesus Christ when he sacrifices himself for Narnia. Gandalf in *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* is a type of angel. Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* series can be viewed as a wise prophet and guide.

Lesson Summary

Let's review.

Writers of modern fiction often draw from three sources that are part of the shared heritage of Western culture and civilization: myths, traditional stories, and religious works, especially the Bible.

Myths are ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes. They help people better understand the world and their place in it, to learn about human nature, and to explore human relationships. Works of modern fiction that employ elements from myths include Rick Riordan's series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Traditional stories include fairy tales and fables. **Fairy tales** are stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastical creatures, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders. **Fables** are usually very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong. Many modern stories, including the *Harry Potter* series, Disney tales, and the *Twilight* series, incorporate elements of fairy tales and fables.

Finally, the **Bible** plays a major role in modern fiction. The Bible is the main religious text of the Western world that records the interactions of God and his chosen people throughout history. Biblical figures and themes (like the underdog overcoming the giant and the battle between good and evil) show up in such modern works as the *Harry Potter* series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Indeed, modern fiction is packed with fascinating elements from ancient sources and that helps to make it great.

Learning Outcomes

Once you are finished, you should be able to:

- Name the three sources from Western culture and civilization that heavily influence modern fiction
- Discuss the elements of myths, traditional stories, and the Bible that are found in modern fiction, providing examples

Teacher Tools

Share Lesson with Classroom

Learn how to assign Lessons



Play Interactive Quiz Game

Use this lesson's interactive quiz game in your classroom! [Learn More](#)

Recommended Lessons for You

[See All](#)



Literary Passage Analysis | Overview, Elements & Steps



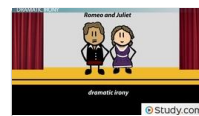
What are the Elements of a Story?



How to Find the Theme or Central Idea



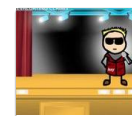
Inference | Definition & Examples



Irony in Literature | Definition, Types & Examples



Informative Speech | Definition, Types & Examples



Critical List: Definition & Examples

Like this lesson Share

Explore our library of over 88,000 lessons

Search

Browse Browse by subject

Search Courses & Lessons



Worksheet: Sources of Modern Fiction: Myths, Traditional Stories & Religious Works

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/sources-of-modern-fiction-myths-traditional-stories-religious-works.html>

1. What are fables?

- Very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- Ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- The main religious texts of the western world
- None of these
- Stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic beasts, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders

2. Which of the following is a source that modern writers draw on as they write their own works?

- None of these
- Traditional stories
- All of these
- Myths
- Religious works like the Bible

3. What is the Bible?

- A book of stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic beasts, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders
- A book of ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- The main religious text of the Western world that records the interactions of God and His chosen people throughout history
- A book of very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- None of these

4. What are myths?

- Very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- The main religious texts of the Western world
- None of these
- Ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- Stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic creatures, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders

5. What are fairy tales?

- Very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- Ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- None of these
- The main religious texts of the western world
- Stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic creatures, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders

Worksheet: Sources of Modern Fiction: Myths, Traditional Stories & Religious Works

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/sources-of-modern-fiction-myths-traditional-stories-religious-works.html>

1. What are fables?

- Very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- Ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- The main religious texts of the western world
- None of these
- Stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic beasts, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders

2. Which of the following is a source that modern writers draw on as they write their own works?

- None of these
- Traditional stories
- All of these
- Myths
- Religious works like the Bible

3. What is the Bible?

- A book of stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic beasts, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders
- A book of very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- A book of ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- None of these
- The main religious text of the Western world that records the interactions of God and His chosen people throughout history

4. What are myths?

- Very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- The main religious texts of the Western world
- None of these
- Ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- Stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic creatures, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders

5. What are fairy tales?

- Very short stories, often with animals as the main characters, that teach a moral lesson about right and wrong
- Ancient stories that feature the fantastic adventures of pagan gods and human heroes
- None of these
- The main religious texts of the western world
- Stories that tell of kings and princesses, tricksters, wizards and witches, fantastic creatures, and underdog heroes who rise to become great leaders

1.	Question: What are the three main sources from Western culture that influence modern fiction?
	Answer: Myths, traditional stories, and religious works, especially the Bible. Explanation: The text explains that these three sources are part of the shared heritage of Western culture and civilization, and they significantly influence the themes, storylines, and character types in modern fiction.
2.	Question: How do myths contribute to modern fiction?
	Answer: Myths contribute fantastic adventures, characters, and themes that help explore human nature and relationships. Explanation: Myths, like those of the Greeks and Romans, provide a rich source of material for modern fiction, offering fantastic stories and characters that are often adapted and reinvented in contemporary works.
3.	Question: Give an example of a modern fiction work that incorporates elements from myths.
	Answer: Rick Riordan's series "Percy Jackson and the Olympians." Explanation: In this series, the main character discovers he is the son of the Greek god Poseidon, showing how ancient mythology is woven into a modern narrative.
4.	Question: What are fairy tales and how do they influence modern fiction?
	Answer: Fairy tales are stories about kings, princesses, and magical creatures that influence modern fiction by providing themes of wonder and moral lessons. Explanation: Fairy tales offer a sense of magic and morality, which are often adapted in modern fiction to create enchanting and meaningful stories.
5.	Question: Name a modern fiction work that is influenced by fables.
	Answer: J.K. Rowling's "Tales of Beedle the Bard" in the Harry Potter series. Explanation: This book within a book creates new wizarding world fairy tales and fables, showing how ancient moral stories can be reimaged in contemporary fiction.
6.	Question: How does the Bible influence modern fiction?
	Answer: The Bible influences modern fiction through its themes, storylines, and character types, such as the battle between good and evil. Explanation: Biblical stories and figures provide a rich source of inspiration, often seen in the portrayal of moral struggles and character archetypes in modern fiction.
7.	Question: Provide an example of a modern fiction character patterned after a biblical figure.
	Answer: C.S. Lewis' lion Aslan in "The Chronicles of Narnia." Explanation: Aslan represents Jesus Christ, particularly in his self-sacrifice, showing how biblical figures can be symbolically represented in modern fiction.
8.	Question: What role do underdog themes from the Bible play in modern fiction?

Answer: They often depict weaker or seemingly insignificant characters overcoming great challenges, as seen in "Harry Potter" and "The Lord of the Rings."

Explanation: This theme, like David defeating Goliath, is common in modern fiction, symbolizing hope and the triumph of good over evil.

9. **Question:** How do modern authors use traditional stories in their works?

Answer: They often remix and adapt these stories, creating new narratives while retaining the core elements.

Explanation: Authors like J.K. Rowling and Stephanie Meyer take familiar fairy tales and fables and give them a fresh perspective, making them relevant to contemporary audiences.

10. **Question:** Why is it significant that modern fiction draws from myths, traditional stories, and religious works? **Answer:** It shows how contemporary writers are influenced by the shared cultural heritage, making their stories rich and relatable. **Explanation:** These ancient sources provide a wealth of ideas and themes that continue to resonate with readers, demonstrating the enduring power of these stories and their relevance in modern times.