Why Mythology?

"Myth is an eternal mirror in which we see ourselves."
--J.F. Bierlein, *Parallel Myths*

Myth may be defined as those paradigmatic events, conditions, deeds outside ordinary human life yet basic to it. Set in a time different from historical time, often at the beginning of creation or at an early stage of prehistory, Myth provides models of human behavior, institutions or universal conditions.
--Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

"…myths evolved because people needed a way to explain where fire came from and why there was evil in the world."
--Sharon Creech, *Walk Two Moons*

"Contemporary man has rationalized the myths, but he has not been able to destroy them."
--Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

"Hey, Thompson, I read your thing," said Emilie.

"My *thing*?"

"Yeah," she replied. "You know: that thing you wrote on the Internet about why we have to study English."

"Wow!" I said, surprised that a ninth grader would willingly, and for no reward, read a seven-page treatise written by one of her teachers.

"But I still want to know why we have to do *mythology*!" The word *mythology* came out with the utter distaste of vomit. We had recently completed an extensive unit--complete with gigantic final projects--on Greek mythology, and it was apparent that Emilie still had not forgiven me. "Why do we have to learn *mythology*?! What good will that ever do us?"

Why *is* it important for students to understand mythology? Are they ever going to be tested on it? If so, does the test relate to anything even remotely connected to real life? Will knowing it ever help them get a job? Or, does any of that even matter?

There are different reasons people learn. One is purely to graduate from school and move on with life. That's the least important one. The second is to "succeed" in everyday life. The most important reason people learn is to spiritually uplift, to motivate, and to help us find purpose in our lives. The study of mythology does all these things.

Why do we have to study mythology? (The Academic Response)

Knowing Greek and Roman mythology is necessary to understand the countless allusions that appear in poetry and literature throughout your schooling and in the reading that you will do every day for the rest of your life. If you have ever been *tantalized*, if you've ever looked in an *atlas* or known someone who had the *Midas* touch or an *Achilles* heel, if you've ever seen the movie *Titanic* or listened to an old rock band called *Styx*, if you have ever been in a *pan*ic after reading *Frankenstein (the Modern Prometheus)*, if you've ever opened a *Pandora*'s box or written instructions in *chrono*logical order, if you've ever been on an *Odyssey* or heard a *siren*, if you've ever been stuck between a rock (Scylla) and a hard place (Charybdis), if you have ever made a *Herculean* effort to complete a *Sisyphean* task, or slept in a *procrustean* bed, you can thank mythology. Modern language is suffused with so many mythological references that it would be almost impossible to communicate without them. To fully understand and appreciate the richness of powerful literature, you must understand mythology. Shakespeare's plays are full of mythological references. Mercutio, the quick-witted rabble-rouser in *Romeo and Juliet* who calls Dido a Dowdy, is aptly named after the god Mercury, and Juliet reminds her young husband, "…at lovers' perjuries they say Jove laughs…." Later in the play, she wishes Phaeton's chariot would move the sun more quickly across the sky so that night (and her Romeo) would

arrive. If you don't know Mercury, Dido, Jove, or Phaeton, you don't fully understand the content of the play or the richness of the language. Part of the reason young audiences struggle so much with Shakespeare is not because they can't understand the words, but rather that they can't understand the mythological allusions. There are countless such references throughout all literature. In fact, Emilie's favorite book (*Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech) even contains a chapter called "Pandora's Box."

Why do we have to study mythology? (The Everyday Life Response)

Myths are still relevant. Although it is true you're not likely to see Zeus casting lightning bolts down Main Street, it is also true that the human condition is reflected in the characters presented in mythology, and we can learn from those characters. Pride is not a quality unique to Agamemnon, nor is sulkiness unique to Achilles. The disastrous consequences of these qualities are personified in these mythological characters, and if we see those qualities in ourselves or in those around us, we might learn from their example. The infidelity of Zeus and the suspicion of Hera do not a good marriage make. But was this true only in ancient Greece? Nope. It's still true today, and in a society where more than half the marriages end in divorce, it can't hurt to study these ancient examples and try to improve upon them in our own relationships. Yes, we are part of the modern world and myths are ancient, but if we continue making the same foolish mistakes that Zeus made, are we truly any more civilized?

Although today we no longer need magical explanations for why the sun shines, why winter comes once a year, or why there is evil in the world, we can benefit from understanding human nature. Regardless of what job you end up doing, who you end up marrying, where you end up living, you will *have* to deal with other people. The characters in mythology all represent human qualities, the virtues and flaws that make us real. How then do myths help us in every day life? They illustrate for us those virtues we would do well to develop in ourselves and the idiosyncrasies we would do well to beware of in others. Understanding human nature is a key to success in any venture that involves people, and myths help us do that.

Why do we have to study mythology? (The Cosmic and Most Important Response)

Myths challenge us to question ourselves. If you don't think this is a good thing, then you aren't very secure in your own beliefs. If you are a student of the Old Testament, for example, you will find that much of it is similar to the stories of mythology. In fact, a fairly clear argument can be made that parts of the Bible are *based* on mythology. The creation story, offerings and animal sacrifices, and the idea that God once was directly involved in human affairs and regularly communicated with humanity (the burning bush, the Ten Commandments, Moses' miracles) are all ideas which appeared in classical mythology 2500 years before any Christian scriptures were written down. That's hard for some of us nowadays to stomach because it implies that our scriptures are the works of a bunch of ancient poets. And what if they are?

It is a dynamic world we live in, but many of our greatest stories, fondest entertainments, and legendary traditions started with mythology. Myths serve to show us that although the world and our knowledge of it may change, humanity remains the same. We are still searching for answers to unanswerable questions: *What happens when we die? What is our purpose for being? Why are we here?* Just as the ancient myths answered such questions for ancient peoples, modern religion attempts to answer them for us now. Mythology was once considered religion just as Catholicism, Judaism, and Mormonism are now. Mythology was as firmly believed as modern faiths. We may scoff at that, but does it trouble you to consider that human progress may one day turn our modern scriptures into myths that future generations will scorn? The study of mythology reminds us that we, as individuals, must think clearly about who we are and what we believe. Mythology challenges us to ask the difficult questions, and if we rise to the challenge, we find the answers within ourselves.

Why do we have to study mythology? (A Hodgepodge of Answers)

On a fundamental level, myths speak to the human psyche. The following statements by J.F. Berlein about mythology cover various reasons we should study it, and I'll try to address each with an eye toward Emilie's cynicism.

Myth is a constant among all human beings in all times. We should therefore study it to avoid making the same mistakes. Human nature doesn't change, but we can make the world a better place by being aware of what we did wrong before.

Myth is a telling of events that happened before written history. Since Emilie is considering a career in archeology, I don't think I need to defend the importance of this one.

Myth is a unique use of language that describes the realities beyond our five senses. This is what all good and entertaining writing sets out to do. Why not learn from the originals? In fact, in many ways, it is impossible to do anything completely unique anymore because all the essential ideas were addressed in mythology.

Myth is the "glue" that holds societies together; it is the basis of identity for communities, tribes, and nations. Societies around the world progress by realizing what they have in common, not by focusing on where they differ. Mythology is universal.

Myth is an essential ingredient in all codes of moral conduct. Morality is a good thing, is it not?

Myth is a pattern of beliefs that give meaning to life. And that's really what we do when we study language: search for the meaning of life. So it makes since to examine mythology in our quest.

And if all that still doesn't satisfy you, Emilie, then the only other reason I can give for studying mythology is that it is fun. Even though we doubt the reality of the myths, it's fun to believe that Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades are out there somewhere making thunder and causing earthquakes, and keeping us a little bit scared of all that stuff we don't really understand. Studying mythology is a way to hang on to the magic of childhood.

Does that answer your question?

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Speaker: _____

Occasion: _____

Audience: _____

Purpose: _____

Subject: _____

Tone: _____