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Mythology and Literature

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Discussion Research ID	DPR-2026-1193
Year	2025
Field	Arts and Humanities
DOI	10.34293/sijash.v12is3-jan.8841
Licence	CC-BY-SA
Original source	Shanlax International Journal of Arts Science and Humanities
Permanent link	https://discussionpublishers.com/research/f7d10aaa-e1fa-47c0-ae3a-c2e80cabfc9d
Publisher	Discussion Publishers discussionpublishers.com

Abstract

Deeply entwined throughout human history, mythology and literature have shaped and influenced one another throughout civilisations. As old stories, myths provide the basis of storytelling customs as they offer themes, archetypes, and moral guidelines that endure in literature. In turn, literature modernises, reinterpretes, and criticises these mythical components thereby ensuring their relevance to changing society. Examining how myths have shaped literary works from ancient epics to contemporary fiction, this paper investigates the link between mythology and literature. It addresses how mythology shapes symbolic motifs, character archetypes, and literary ideas. It also explores how modern authors rework tales to mirror psychological depth, societal change, and current ideas. The book also emphasises how mythology shapes other literary forms, including poetry, science fiction, and fantasy. Understanding this link helps us to see how literature always transforms stories to fit new generations while preserving their timeless quality.

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Cite as: P. Kalaiyarasi (2025). Mythology and Literature. Discussion Publishers, DPR-2026-1193.

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OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 3

Month: January

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:
Kalaiyarasi, P. "Mythology and Literature." Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities, vol. 12, no. S3, 2025, pp. 61–63.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS3-Jan.8841

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Keywords : Mythology, Literature, Storytelling, Archetes, Symbolism, Folklore, Epics, Modern Reinterpretations, Fantasy, Cultural Narratives

From the birth of human civilisation, mythology and literature have been naturally entwined. Originally oral traditions, myths were the first means of narrative that could explain supernatural interventions, human nature, and natural events. As a written form of narration, literature developed by changing and expanding upon these legendary stories. From ancient epics like The Iliad and The Ramayana to contemporary books and films drawing on mythological themes, mythology has offered basic frameworks for creative works throughout civilisations. Tracing its development and influence on narrative, this essay investigates the dynamic link between mythology and literature.

Mythological Significance in Literary Works

Mythological Affect on Epic and Classical Literature

Mythology permeates classical writing extensively. Prime examples of writing moulded by mythical traditions include ancient epics such Virgil's Aeneid and Homer's Odyssey. Apart from narrating fabled stories of gods and heroes, these works represent the values, ideas, and social systems of the many civilisations. Likewise, Hindu epics such as The Mahabharata and The Ramayana combine myth with reality to function as both holy scriptures and literary masterpieces influencing many versions.

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Literary Arches and Symbolism

The relevance of mythical archetypes in writing was underlined by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. Stories from many civilisations and eras have characters such the Mentor (Merlin, Dumbledore), the Trickster (Loki, Anansi), the Hero (Odysseus, Hercules), and the Shadow (Satan, Sauron). These generally identifiable archetypes assist to organise stories. Likewise, symbols taken from mythology—such as the phoenix signifying rebirth or the snake signifying transformation—continue to enhance creative works.

The Function of Mythology in Philosophical and Religious Texts

Mythological stories abound in religious and philosophical works to highlight moral and existential concerns. For instance, Milton's Paradise Lost reinterpretes Biblical tales, whereas Dante's Divine Comedy is much inspired by Christian mythology. Likewise, legendary components abound in Buddhist and Taoist works to elucidately cosmic order and spiritual truths.

Mythography in Contemporary Writing

Modern writers may rework old stories to mirror modern concerns. Emphasising underprivileged voices, writers such as Margaret Atwood (The Penelopiad) and Madeline Miller (Circe) recreate Greek stories from fresh angles. Likewise, Neil Gaiman's American Gods highlights the changing character of myth in literature by reimagining ancient gods battling for relevance in the contemporary society.

Fantasy and science fiction writers generally take from mythology to create new worlds that reflect old legendary systems. While C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia combines Christian symbolism, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings is influenced by Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythology. Science fiction also explores mythological subjects; Frank Herbert's Dune, for instance, uses messianic tales, while Star Wars tracks the Hero's Journey described in mythology.

Modern writers seek psychological depth by use of mythical ideas, therefore serving symbolic purposes. While Toni Morrison's Beloved explores pain and memory by using African mythology, James Joyce's Ulysses is a modernist rereading of The Odyssey. According to Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, myths are a great weapon in writing as they mirror basic human experiences, which helps them to be relevant throughout civilisations.

Mythology's Development in Literary Works

Whereas ancient mythology was essentially religious or explanatory, contemporary literature often employs myth for artistic, psychological, or political ends. Writers modify stories to challenge historical accounts, question societal mores, and investigate identity. Mythology is still a live element in literature, always changing depending on the viewpoint of every age.

Oral Customs and Old Stories

Early stories passed down orally explained natural events, human behaviour, and divine powers as answers for natural occurrences. These myths were foundational for religious texts, folklore, and early storytelling traditions.

Examples: Greek mythology (The Iliad, The Odyssey), Hindu epics (The Mahabharata, The Ramayana), and Norse sagas.

Classical Literature and Mythological Epics

With the development of writing, myths were recorded and expanded into structured literary works. Epic poems and classical plays integrated mythological narratives to explore themes of heroism, fate, and morality.

Examples: Virgil's Aeneid, Ovid's Metamorphoses, and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex.

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Religious and Philosophical Adaptations

Mythology influenced religious texts and philosophical literature, merging divine myths with moral and existential questions. Writers used myths to address the nature of good and evil, free will, and the afterlife.

Examples: Dante's Divine Comedy, Milton's Paradise Lost, and Biblical allegories.

Medieval and Renaissance Mythological Reinterpretations

During the medieval period, myths were Christianized or merged with folklore to align with religious beliefs. The Renaissance revived interest in Greco-Roman mythology, inspiring artistic and literary works.

Examples: Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream (drawing on classical mythology), Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene.

Romanticism and National Mythologies

The Romantic era saw a resurgence of interest in myth and folklore as symbols of national identity and personal expression. Writers emphasized the mystical, heroic, and supernatural aspects of myths to celebrate cultural heritage.

Examples: Goethe's Faust, William Blake's mythic poetry, and Norse mythology in Scandinavian literature.

Mythology in Modernist and Psychological Literature

The 20th century saw the reinterpretation of myths through psychological, existential, and social lenses. Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell's theories on archetypes and the Hero's Journey influenced literature.

Examples: James Joyce's Ulysses (modern retelling of The Odyssey), T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (mythic symbolism), and Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis.

Contemporary Retellings and Mythological Subversion

Today's literature often revisits myths from diverse perspectives, challenging traditional narratives and giving voice to marginalized characters. Feminist, postcolonial, and psychological reinterpretations have reshaped myths for modern audiences.

Examples: Madeline Miller's Circe, Neil Gaiman's American Gods, and Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad.

Mythology and literature share a deep and enduring connection, with myths providing a foundation for storytelling across cultures and eras. From ancient epics to contemporary novels, mythology continues to inspire and evolve within literature, shaping themes, archetypes, and symbols. As literature adapts and reinterprets myths, it ensures their survival, keeping them relevant to modern audiences. Understanding this interplay enhances our appreciation of both mythology and literature, revealing their shared role in preserving and transforming human storytelling traditions.

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