Modern Myths

Adding to America’s Cultural Heritage

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Thesis Document • Arts 790 • Fall A 2020
Modern Myths

MFA Thesis Project for Liberty University

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Research Problem

How do myths, legends and folklore survive for generations, and how might new myths be created through the use of design?

Research Statement

As children, we believe in the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny. We cower in fear when our friends talk about the Boogeyman, or how they’ll summon Bloody Mary in the mirror. We check our closets, in hopes of finding an entrance to Narnia at the back of them. The world is a mysterious place in which anything can happen, anything can exist.

As adults, these stories stick with us. They are an endearing part of our childhood and we relish the opportunity to pass stories and traditions on to our own children. Sneaking into a child’s room to steal away a tooth to replace it with money and a note from the “tooth fairy” is thrilling for parents. Magic is reignited when we witness a child’s joy Christmas morning when they see that Santa has indeed come to visit.

What makes these types of stories so special? How do they generate true belief? What propels a narrative from entertaining story to the status of myth, legend, or folktale? This thesis explores the enduring qualities of myth, which will then be used to create new myths for modern American society.
Myths often seek to explain the creation of the world, man’s place in the universe, and the origins of cultural beliefs and rituals. At the heart of every myth or folktale exists some creature or human with extraordinary abilities. The Greeks and the Romans had their gods and goddesses, but their myths are also filled with unusual creatures such as hippogriffs, satyrs, and centaurs. In Irish folklore, fairies are mischievous spirits that are very different from the tiny winged versions depicted in modern stories (Halpin). The inclusion of concrete details aids in understanding and memory, and this may play a crucial factor in the survival of myths, legends and folklore (Heath and Heath). These tales may have been passed down verbally, but the visual elements, specifically regarding unusual characters, may have contributed to their longevity. As weird as the creatures are in Greek myths, they are combinations of humans and familiar animals, enabling audiences to conjure up mental images of them. When we think of Davy Crockett, his raccoon-pelt hat springs to mind. The beautiful vampires in Anne Rice stories are very different from the sickly versions of Middle Age folklore, but it is the visual that either intrigues or terrifies (History.com Editors, Vampire History). The jolly, bearded Santa in red known all over the world is based on descriptions from Clement Clarke Moore’s poem, T’was the Night Before Christmas, and illustrations created by Thomas Nast (History.com Editors, Santa Claus).

The Tooth Fairy is a distinctly American tale that only dates back to about 1900. Although there isn’t a set image of what she might look like, it’s no coincidence that she gained cultural traction only after Disney started releasing films with fairy characters, such as the Blue Fairy in Pinocchio, the fairy godmother in Cinderella, and Tinker Bell in Peter Pan (Tuluja). Preliminary research points to the importance of visuals, which could be further explored.
Research Questions

- What are myths, and what sets them apart from other literary genres?
- How and why have some myths survived for hundreds of years?
- How are myths created? What are the origins of popular mythical characters such as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy?
- Are myths still valid in today’s society?
- What are some common themes found in mythology from across the world?
- Do illustrations help perpetuate oral stories?
- Why do people so readily believe in urban myths?
- Do illustrations help the audience believe in story content?
- What age group do myths have the greatest impact on?
- Is there a way to create a story with concrete imagery, but still give storytellers the flexibility to adapt it for future audiences?

Chapter 2

The Research

Purpose of Thesis

According to John F. Kennedy, “there is little that is more important for an American citizen than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future” (Kennedy). Myths help to pass down traditions and unite people within a culture. However, because the US is relatively new, it lacks the rich mythology of ancient civilizations. It is important that we build up our cultural heritage, and pass down cultural values, beliefs and customs that make us “American.”

During times of upheaval, the public craves myths and legends that can provide “security and certainty,” using them “to reinforce what they believe or to give solid form to what they fear” (Popham). During this time of crisis brought on by COVID-19, it seems important, now more than ever, to create stories that satisfy this need.
Target Audience

In pointing a specific target audience did prove challenging. Most children believe in mythical characters such as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy between the ages of 4 and 8 (Haridy). Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim argues that fairy tales “begin to exercise their beneficial impact... around the age of four or five” (Bettelheim 15). However, fairy tales, which are similar to myths in that they "provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system,” and pass down the “accumulated wisdom” of past generations, were originally written for adults rather than children (Windling). Tolkien admonished the banishment of fairy stories from adult bookshelves, “pushed into the nursery like furniture the adults no longer want” (Windling). He proved with his stories that fairy tales can, indeed, captivate adult audiences. Reading myths from around the world, it was clear that while they could be told to children, they weren't created specifically for them. Madeleine L'Engle advised against watering down content for children, since they are “far more tough than many people realize, and they have an openness and an ability to grapple with difficult concepts which many adults have lost” (Popova).

With L'Engle's advice in mind, appealing to an adult audience seems to be a logical course of action. The modern myths created as part of this thesis project won't shy away from complex themes, typical of world mythology, while still being appropriate for/appealing to younger audiences. The hope is that people will get something different out of the myth as they age.

The ultimate goal behind creating new myths is to have a beneficial impact on society. Myths are important cultural artifacts that serve to pass along valuable lessons and establish societal standards. They also bring people together, and help to shape one's cultural identity. Narrator Mike Rugnetta ends the Crash Course on Mythology with a question for the audience to consider: “what stories of today will become myth tomorrow?” (CrashCourse 08:07:38-08:07:47). Rugnetta hopes that future myths will “inspire more beauty than battle, more comradery than conflict” (CrashCourse 08:08:06-08:08:12). Rather than guess what current stories will last, the goal of this thesis is to purposefully create a collection of modern myths that contain constructive, wholesome messages. Backed with research on how myths survive, this new collection will have a better chance of having a lasting, positive impact on society.

Since the target audience is so large, 6 different personas were created. Although these personas are very different, the goal is to unite them by giving them a collection of myths they can all relate to in some way. Underlying all myths will be core American values.
1 • Dale  
**Hard-working, educated**

Dale is a college professor in his early 60s, married, with children and grandchildren. He is a self-made man; raised in a small country town, he went on to have a successful military career. He believes in the American Dream, which he proved can be achieved through hard work. He is a family man, with traditional, conservative beliefs. He has always enjoyed adventure stories.

2 • Summer  
**From a multicultural family**

Summer is a high school student. Her dad is first generation American, and her mom is from a white middle-class family. Her Columbian grandmother lives with the family, and is the primary caretaker since both parents work. Summer loves listening to pop, rock, alternative, and Latin music. Possessing a flare for the dramatic, she wants to become an actress one day.

3 • Nick  
**Fights for Justice**

Nick is in his 30’s, divorced, and has shared custody of his 2 young children. He has a degree in African American studies, but isn't sure what to do with it. He works as a personal trainer at a gym, but is thinking about getting into law enforcement. He likes action movies, horror films, and adult cartoon shows. He also enjoys playing Mario Cart and watching Pixar movies with his kids. He doesn’t let anyone push him around, and he teaches his kids to always stand up for themselves.

4 • Elizabeth  
**Idealistic, Materialistic**

She is in her 40s, her children are now young adults. She is an idealist who loves classic black and white movies and TV Land shows from the 1960s. She is a housewife always looking for new hobbies to remedy empty nest syndrome. She enjoys pampering herself, has a weakness for designer purses. She occasionally does yoga and Zumba classes. Appearances matter to her.

5 • Macy  
**Individualistic**

Macy is in her mid-20s, works in retail, and has been taking college classes. She lives with 3 roommates who are also in their 20s. She likes Japanese art, anime, and manga. She is drawn to cute, yet edgy designs. Hot Topic is her go-to store, and she is forever changing the color of her hair. She is awkward, yet quirky, and doesn’t like anything that is too “mainstream.”

6 • Johnny  
**Dreamer, Innocent**

Johnny is only 6. He isn’t aware of racial, cultural, or ethnic differences; everyone his age are potential friends. He wants to be a Rock’ n Roll star or a NASCAR driver when he grows up. He has a short attention span and an abundance of energy. Nothing scares him (except for the dark, but he won’t admit it)! Santa is very real. So are aliens and the Boogeyman.
here are several different sources of competition. First, there are existing myths that have stood the test of time. There aren’t many that are unique to the U.S. however. European myths are more prevalent than those of Native American tribes. American myths that were started to promote a sense of unity and patriotism are still spread as fact. Some examples include Patrick Henry’s "give me liberty or give me death" speech, the story of Molly Pitcher taking up her fallen husband’s place to fire a canon in battle, and the “shot heard ‘round the world” at the Battle of Lexington (Raphael). These myths, which really are more in-line with legends since they are very loosely based on historic events, lack a sense of mysticism present in classical mythology.

Stories surrounding the Tooth Fairy are perhaps the best known American myths. Various parts of Europe had myths about a rodent, to whom children’s teeth would be offered in the hopes of strong, rodent-like teeth growing in place of the missing tooth. Myths of a tooth “fairy” started circulating in America around the turn of the 20th century. Once Disney started producing feature-length films featuring fairies the idea of the Tooth Fairy really took off. Although stories of her vary from household to household, the central message is the same: the fairy will come in the night to exchange a lost tooth for currency. This exchange teaches young children the basics of a consumer economy (Tuleja).

It has long been argued that comic books are modern myths. In a sense, this is true. Comic book stories often feature humans or creatures with extraordinary powers, and American values lie at the heart of many classic comics. During the second World War and throughout the Cold War, they became a type of propaganda, promoting patriotism, bravery of the individual, triumph of good over evil, and democratic ideals to a young audience. However, nowadays, the market is flooded with comics that only seek to entertain, and lack the cultural lessons of traditional mythology.

There are countless other sources of fantasy stories. Many classical myths are being reinterpreted in art and in the media. The Norse god Thor has been reinvented first through comics, and more recently in Marvel films. Greek mythology been introduced to a younger audience through the Percy Jackson books and movies. The game Dungeons and Dragons gives players an opportunity to create their own fantasy storylines using character templates. However, none of these are quite the same as myths, in format or intent.
According to Harvard University linguist and philologist Michael Witzel, there are two evolutionary classifications of world mythology: Laurasian and Gondwanan. Laurasian myths are not as old as Gondwanan, and are found in Europe, Asia, and the Americas (Connor). Because they share common themes, focus was placed on Laurasian mythology, to include Norse, Greek, Roman, Japanese and Native American myths. The goal was to ascertain, first-hand, main themes found within them, and determine the prevalence of visual details.

Content analysis was also conducted on 20th century art. Artistic interpretations of myths can provide valuable insight into how classical myths have evolved and endured over time. Focus was placed on 20th century art specifically, to see how classical myths have been reinterpreted to reflect modern concerns, and to answer the following questions:

• What role does mythology play in modern society?
• What are the current attitudes towards mythological stories?
• Which myths do modern artists still find interesting and relevant?
Many myths have been inspired by observations and man’s creative attempt to explain strange encounters (Davies). There is a nearby Osteology Museum, which provided ample visual inspiration for mythological creatures during the design phase of the thesis. A couple of visits during this course have already yielded a better understanding of how some mythological creatures were born from imaginative observations.

Personas were created to help keep the project on track during the design phase. The target audience is quite large, the only real specification being “American.” Several Personas were created to represent different demographics found within the U.S., and reflect different interests and concerns. The goal is for the new myth to contain something for everyone, and unify the different personas by portraying core American values such as personal freedom, success through hard work, equal opportunity, etc.

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Concept Mapping was used to visually organize the information from the Content Analysis research. The wealth of information made it necessary to create several maps.

To assist with the design phase, and to determine the competition, an image board was constructed to collect visual inspiration. Mood boards created in Pinterest have proved to be useful resources for past projects. This type of research also revealed what sorts of mythological stories and designs are already in circulation.

The word “myth” was derived from the Greek word mythos, meaning “story” (CrashCourse). Today, myths are commonly associated with stories that are untrue, or are considered to be a form of “primitive science in primitive societies” (Doty). Defining myth as a false narrative is misleading, since many myths contain religious and quasi-religious elements that people vehemently believed to be true at one point or another. Myths often seek to explain the creation of the world and/or universe, man’s place in the universe, and the origins of cultural beliefs and rituals. Scientific studies may have disproven most myths, but viewing them solely as primitive explanations of the universe diminishes their importance. Even in modern times, myths contain truths about the human experience and “facts of the mind” (Campbell).

For the sake of this thesis, myth is being approached as a story with two primary characteristics: “staying power” and “significance” (CrashCourse).
Myths, legends, and folklore have subtle differences, but they all seek to explain and/or educate in an entertaining, creative format. Myths are “imaginative attempts to solve the mysteries of life and the universe” (Willis 10). They usually explain the origins of natural or social phenomena. Folktales focus on social and cultural issues; they are “domesticated myths” that typically address “social conflict and problems rather than the cosmic issues addressed in myth” (Willis 15). Legends are supposedly rooted in history, but also contain “elements or themes from earlier, mythical narrative” (Willis 15). All three are similar in that they aren’t typically attributed to a single author, have many versions/variations, and are traditionally spread through verbal retellings (Willis).

“Before the age of science, myth was how people dealt with the world” (Norell 1). When glimpses were caught of unusual creatures or events, humans used their imaginations to fill in the blanks in an attempt to explain what they saw and what it meant. Many mythical creatures are based on extraordinary animals, some of which are now extinct. These mythical explanations were embellished, and evolved further still through retellings, demonstrating the creative nature of man (Kendall). Scientists and historians have examined certain elements of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, and have come up with theories as to what might have inspired the strange things Odysseus encountered. The Cyclops is thought to have been inspired by the skeleton of a dwarf elephant; their large nasal cavities look like a single large eye socket.

On Circe’s island, Odysseus ingests a flower to protect himself from Circe’s spell. Botanists theorize that the flower was a snowdrop, or *Galanthus nivalis*, which can counter “the effects of stramonium poisoning” administered to the other sailors (Davies). The fearsome Scylla, or 6-headed, 12-legged cave beast, was probably invented from records of 2-headed snakes, a birth defect most commonly seen amongst reptiles. The myth of the whirlpool Charybdis does appear to have merit, as the tidal activity in the narrow passageway between Italy and Sicily is turbulent, and vertical eddies are known to occur in that region (Davies). These theories explain how certain aspects of Homer’s story were invented, and most likely served as warnings of both physical and moral dangers.
Myths, legends and folktales do more than offer creative explanations, however. They pass down the accumulated knowledge of generations, and “provide a framework or model for an individual’s belief system” (Windling 40). They reflect “the concerns of life as it was lived by each generation, each culture, each teller, or writer that the tales [pass] through,” evolving ever so slightly with each retelling to “fit the framework of [the current] time and culture” (Windling). The mythology of Ancient Greece and Rome, for example, reflects the values of their patriarchal societies. Women are typically depicted as evil temptresses, witches or helpless victims, always playing secondary roles to their male counterparts. Circe is a prime example, who first attempts to seduce and bewitch Odysseus and his men, but eventually yields to Odysseus. Her story is a warning to men about seductive women. Meanwhile, Odysseus’ wife, Penelope, waits patiently at home for him to return. Her 20-year demonstration of faithfulness, loyalty and chastity exemplifies the qualities of the “ideal woman” (Windling).

Similarities found in myths from different parts of the world could be coincidence, or could point to a common origin. This means some myths may have survived over 3,000 generations, which was made possible by the formal, ritualistic ways many myths were transmitted, “from teacher to student... from shaman to apprentice” (Connor). Harvard University linguist and philologist Michael Witzel claims “he can detect a big split in the evolutionary tree of mythology which gave rise to two broadly different lines of myths seen today,” which he classifies as Gondwanan and Laurasian myths. Gondwanan myths are older, and have survived in southern cultures of Africa, Australia, New Guinea and Melanesia. They don’t attempt to explain creation; the earth and universe are pre-existing. They do seek to explain the creation of man and culture. Laurasian myths are found in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. These myths have distinctive narrative storylines about creation, gods and goddesses, the fall of man, the end of the universe, and hope for a new world.

Despite the differences seen in the two lines of mythology, they all share a common purpose. According to early 20th century anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, myth “expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces mortality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (CrashCourse 02:21:24-02:22:01). Underlying all themes is the desire to explain the wonderful and mysterious, creating order out of chaos (CrashCourse).
Examining artistic renderings of ancient myths provides insight into how these tales were reinterpreted to fit later societal standards. In the last half of the 19th century, Greek and Roman mythology became a popular subject in art as part of the Aesthetic Movement. Classical revival paintings convey more about Victorian and Edwardian England than about ancient Greece or Rome (Wood). At the time, it was expected of the educated Victorian to be familiar with Classical history and literature. “Admiration for Greek and Roman achievements was a vital part of Victorian culture. It permeated not only the arts, but also literature, poetry, philosophy, education, theatre, fashion, politics, the Empire, war, even religion” (Wood 178). Artists looked to the works of great Renaissance artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, as a primary source of inspiration. However, their work differed in many ways, reflecting the current atmosphere of the time. Artists of the Aesthetic Movement were attempting to counter the ugliness of the Industrial Age, and they preferred images of contemplation and beautiful despair over action scenes (Wood). It “was comfortable, armchair sort of classicism” (Wood 181). They also avoided painting moments of intense passion and frivolity, which were viewed as uncomfortable topics. Artists did bring back nudes, however, which in the first part of the Aesthetic Movement were looked down upon by the Royal Academy and Victorian critics such as John Ruskin. Tragic or wicked women were a popular subject, and men were most often portrayed as their victims (Wood).

In the 20th century, some very different interpretations of classical myths started to emerge. Several artists explored mythological stories that mirrored situations in their own lives, presumably as a therapeutic outlet. Odilon Redon painted several renditions of Pandora and her box of plagues around the time of the first World War, focusing on the destructive nature of humankind (Kuesel). Picasso turned his attention to the subject of the Minotaur, a symbol of “forbidden desire, lust, and greed,” while he was going through a rough patch with his wife after impregnating his mistress (Kuesel). Many artists throughout history have explored the subject of Icarus as a warning against reckless ambition, and Achilles, as a tragic hero with his infamous weak spot (Kuesel). Ithell Colquhoun's painting of Athena, Aphrodite and Hera seeks to empower women, depicting the goddesses as powerful figures towering over Paris, humble and vulnerable at their feet. Modern artists started to question the lack of racial diversity in artistic depictions of these myths, even though Egyptians, Ethiopians and Carthaginians lived in close proximity to the Greeks and Romans (Calderwood). Each artistic interpretation is a reflection of the artist, to include their culture, society, and belief system.

There are several themes that continually pop up in 20th century art. The common presence of mythological themes may have been because classical mythology was still taught in schools, although it is argued that interest in myths didn't die out as emphasis on classical studies decreased within the classroom (Bernstock).
Psychology was a burgeoning field during this time-frame, and both Freud and Jung linked their psychological theories to Greek and Roman myths. These myths provided a popular frame of reference, Freud’s “Oedipus complex” being one of the most famous. By naming it for the well-known myth in which Oedipus kills his father and unknowingly sleeps with his mother, Freud is more easily able to explain his theories about the complex relationships between children and their parents. Jung believed that archetypes found in stories are part of a collective consciousness. Ancient myths played heavily into this theory; how else could one explain common archetypes found in stories from different centuries and geographic locations? It appears that modern artists were familiar with these new-fangled psychological theories, and explored them in their work. For many, exploration of the psyche and the nature of mankind appeared to be a therapeutic way to work through the horror and loss experienced during WWI and WWII, as well as the tension experienced throughout the Cold War era (Bernstock). Some of the popular figures artists seemed to relate to include Icarus, Oedipus, Venus, Apollo, Orpheus, and Odysseus. These characters and their stories represent larger themes such as the destructive nature of man, inner turmoil and fear of losing control, the consequences of excessive ambition, man’s inherent weaknesses, and the individual’s journey away from the home into adulthood (Kuesel).

Left: Minotaur with Dead Mare in Front of a Cave
Pablo Picasso, 1936

Pablo Picasso married Russian ballet dancer, Olga Khokhlova, in the summer of 1918. Their marriage became particularly rocky when his mistress, Marie-Therese Walter, became pregnant with his child in 1935 (Pak).

Below: The Judgement of Paris
Ithell Colquhoun, 1930
cholars have debated whether myths, legends, and folklore are still relevant in our current age of science and technology. Philosophers of the 19th century hypothesized that science would disprove myth to the point that these stories would disappear entirely. This has not been the case, however, because myths are so much more than primitive hypotheses of the unknown. If we view religious and mythological stories not as absolute truth, but as “imagined episodes projected onto history,” these stories and mythical characters begin to “represent facts of the mind” (Campbell 12). Myths have enthralled audiences for centuries because “not only are they filled with drama, but they represent aspects of the human condition that are as relevant now as when the Greeks first imagined them…. These myths explore love and lust, envy and rage, rejection and loss, violence and death, and every type of family relationship” (Cahill). Common themes and subject matter explored in myths include the origins of the world, life and death, supernatural creatures and gods, “heroes and tricksters as agents of change,” relationships between man and animals, the afterlife, and social order (Willis). While science reflects the outside world, myth points inward; when reading them, we get back in touch with these “powers that have been common to the human spirit forever, and which represent that wisdom of the species by which man has weathered the millenniums” (Campbell 14).

There is also debate over whether or not oral tales have any place in modern society. Although we live in a world of instant written communication in the form of emails, text messages, and direct messages, the spoken word remains a primary means of communication. The nuances of verbal exchanges convey emotions that text and emoticons can’t. Oral stories are often taken for granted because the seeming lack of permanence and consistency, but in truth they combine the best parts of both written and verbal communication. Unlike conversation, in its unedited immediacy, oral stories have been polished over the years. Even though they have been rehearsed, a good storyteller plays off the emotions and reactions of his audience, incorporating them into the experience. “Traditional stories can, in the oral versions, have each word weighted before speaking and yet benefit from flexibility, emotion, pacing, emphasis, and audience participation” (Peerless). This audience interaction is one of the appeals of myths; these stories have traditionally been told amongst people within the same social circles in casual settings, and thus the audience doesn’t feel preached to (Willis 16). These tales may convey valuable information about cultural heritage, but they are also meant to entertain.
The United States is still rather young, and as such lacks the rich mythology of ancient worlds. However, there are many myths that surround the origins of our nation that serve as a collective, idealized history designed to bring the American people together. Many of these are still included in textbooks as fact. These myths, such as Paul Revere’s ride, the “shot heard around the world” at the battle of Lexington, Patrick Henry’s “give me Liberty or give me Death” speech, and the story of Molly Pitcher taking up her fallen husband’s position at the canon during the Battle of Monmouth, were anecdotes constructed years after these historical events supposedly took place (Raphael). Most school children are familiar with the story of George Washington confessing to his father that he cut down his cherry tree; there is no historic evidence to support this story, but it serves to teach children about the value of honesty and illustrate the good character of our first president. In accounts of the Alamo, everyone perished tragically. In actuality, a dozen women and children were spared, but slight exaggeration of the tragedy helped to rally support for the Texian army and further villainize the Mexican army (TBS Staff). Tales of the Revolutionary War have been embellished with every retelling in “the art and sport of patriotic expression” (Raphael 2).

It has long been argued that superhero stories are America’s modern myths. This comparison started early in the history of comics to combat the skepticism the medium faced during WWII. This idea was endorsed by psychiatrics and psychologists, as well as promoted by comic book publishers attempting to establish brand loyalty. Whether comics are myths is debatable, but there are similarities between them. While there are copyright issues that prevent comic book heroes from truly belonging to the public and not publishing houses, many of the early comics did not credit their writers. This helped link comics with myths, legends and folklore, since they share the same anonymity. Connections were also made between specific heroes and myths; Marston borrowed from Greek mythology in his Wonder Woman comics, and Superman was presented as a new American hero to continue the legacy Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill. However, both Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill are examples of “fakelore,” or tales that are pedaled as folklore but have “little to no basis in oral culture, deployed to sell products to a public” (984). Using the same logic, the argument can be made that Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman fall within the same “fakelore” category (Claverie).
Belief in Urban Myths

There are several reasons why people are so apt to believe in urban myths, such as Bloody Mary coming for those who say her name three times in a mirror, Slender Man stealing away wandering children, and people waking up in bathtubs of ice missing a kidney. These stories, which typically have “happened to a friend or friend-of-a-friend,” are told by a “reliable” source, such as a friend, family member, or well-known acquaintance. The urban myths that spread like wildfire are usually ones that evoke a strong emotional responses or prey on people’s fears. People who share these stories are either trying to pass along helpful knowledge or warnings, or are telling them for the sake of entertainment. Like myths, urban myths have “significant” content which is deemed worthy of spreading.

Another key component to the believability of urban myths is inclusion of “plausible detail” (Popham). If an implausible scenario is encased in concrete, realistic details, it adds credibility to the story. An urban legend about a woman giving birth to a frog sounds outlandish. However, the added details of a growth verified by doctors, a long, grueling labor, and the birth of “a live, grey-coloured frog,” had people believing that this was a real case (Popham).

Professor Lorenzo Montali argues that urban legends “become truly compelling” during periods “of war and crisis” (Popham). This is because “people use [urban legends] to reinforce what they believe or to give solid form to what they fear” (Popham). Myths spread the collective wisdom of past generations; urban legends are often spread under the same guise, using false narratives to warn against potential dangers. During times of upheaval and conflict, urban legends can provide “the security and certainty” that the public crave. In our current state of upheaval caused by COVID-19, our society may be craving bizarre, but believable, stories.

Closely related to urban myths are stories of creatures like the Yeti, Bigfoot, and the Lochness Monster. Cryptozoology is “the study of creatures rumored to exist” (Than). Stories of cryptids spread much like urban legends, and are fueled by supposed sightings. Some creatures, like the giant squid, were proven to be true. A creature of Norwegian myth, a Japanese research crew captured the giant squid on film in 2005. Other cryptids, such as the Thylacine, a Tasmanian wolf with tiger-like stripes, was real, but has since gone extinct (Than).
ew information is sometimes met with resistance, especially when attempting to change behavior. Authority and evidence isn’t enough; the information needs to be communicated in a highly effective manner. Visual stories, or storytelling combined with visual design, can be used to deliver persuasive messages and “inspire your audience to act” (Sykes, West and Malik 7). Use of visuals “plays a major role in ensuring that your audience will care about your message” (Sykes, West and Malik 194). Studies have proven that images are easier to remember, which has been labeled the “picture superiority effect.” There are many theories behind the memorability of illustrations. One theory is that illustrations reiterate the text, and it is the repetition that helps with memory. However, this theory did not hold up in studies on repetition; groups that were exposed to repetitious text still didn’t score as high as those exposed to text and pictures when it came to recalling the information. Another theory is that we spend more time and brain power processing images, and therefore they are more memorable. Yet another is that pictures are processed by the right hemisphere of the brain, and text and numbers are processed by the left. It is believed that memory and recall increase when both hemispheres of the brain work together to commit information to memory (Ghazanfari, Ziaee and Sharifianfar).

Images not only improve recall ability, but it contributes to comprehension as well. When we read, we construct a “mental model,” which “goes beyond the literal meaning of the text to embody spatial, temporal, causal, motivational, and person- and object-related information” (244). Previous experiences and memories contribute to this mental model. The brain activates relative information, bringing it into working memory, while suppressing unrelated information, enhancing comprehension. Being able to make these mental connections during the reading process is called inferencing, and it is a necessary component in “developing and maintaining coherent understanding” (244). Inferencing is a skill that develops with age, with “consistent and spontaneous making of inferences” is usually developed around the 3rd grade (Pike, Barnes and Barron).

It is believed that illustrations may serve as cues, helping children to make these mental models. They may also “serve to reduce the demands on the working memory when processing text” (245). A study was conducted with 73 students between the ages of 7 and 11, boys and girls testing their inferencing skills when reading stories with relevant illustrations, stories with illustrations that aren’t relevant to the text, and text without illustrations. The study found that “pictures are salient sources of information that children process in conjunction with the text and that pictures are used in the construction of meaning during reading” (253). The younger readers were more apt to be swayed by inaccurate illustrations in the inconsistent condition, making more inaccurate inferences (Pike, Barnes and Barron).
Concept Mapping & Image Boards

Concept Maps were created to organize the information found on mythological themes explored in modern art. They are organized by theme, and include images of the artwork that is referenced. When reading myths from around the world, the similarities between some of the stories were striking. Many of these similarities can be seen just in the creatures and characters from myths and folklore. Visuals were created for some of the common creatures seen in mythology, to include brief summaries and relative location of their origin. Brenda Rosen's *The Mythical Creatures Bible* was heavily used to compile this information. The resulting visuals are not concept maps, at least in the traditional sense, but they make it easier to instantly view the similarities.

The Museum of Osteology in Oklahoma City has been a great source of inspiration thus far, and will continue to be during the design phase. Sketches from a couple visits to the museum have been included as visual references.

A Pinterest Moodboard entitled “Mythology” was created to compile other sources of visual inspiration. It can be viewed at: https://www.pinterest.com/kathynewood/mythology. On Pinterest, there are countless versions of classical mythical creatures, some new hybrids comprised of real or mythical animal combinations, and technical drawings of what the internal structures of mythical creatures would look like. More pins will be added to this moodboard at the start of the design phase to generate ideas and learn more about what images and designs are already out there.
Modern Myths

Odisseus/ Ulysses

Legendary hero, epic 20 year journey

The modern individual's existential journey

Forced to leave home, fundamental solitude of man

Wanderer, search for home

Sense of hopelessness
Seeking refuge

(1) The Binding of Polyphemus, Matisse, 1935
(2) Return of Ulysses, Giorgio de Chirico, 1968
(3) Ulysses, Barnett Newman, 1952
(4) Odisseus and Calypso, Max Beckmann, 1943

(Endless sea of the voyage)

Oedipus

Solving the riddle of the sphinx

Human conflict between men and women

Murder of his father, marriage to his mother, self-punishment

Narcissistic self-discovery

Man's violent & tragic nature

Sexual uncertainty and search for origins

(1) Oedipus and the Sphinx, Giorgio de Chirico, 1920
(2) Oedipus Flayed, Andre Masson, 1930
(3) Oedipus, Adolph Gottlieb, 1945
(4) Oedipus Rex, Max Ernst, 1922
**Ormr**
**Norse**
The old Norse term for Dragon, the most famous Ormr is Loki’s offspring and Thor’s nemesis, Jörmungandr.

**Python**
**Greek**
A monster with the upper body of a woman and the lower body of a dragon, she was the guardian of the Oracle of Delphi until she was slain by Apollo.

**Draco**
**Roman**
An enormous winged serpent which breathes fire, he can stun his victims with his sheer luminescence.

**Lung/Long**
**Chinese**
They have long serpent bodies, lizard legs, eagle talons, and horns and whiskers on their heads. They were used as an imperial symbol to represent nobility, power, and wisdom.

**Rong/Long**
**Vietnamese**
Its serpent-like body has 12 sections to represent the months of the year. The Dragon Lac Long Quan wed Au Co, a fairy, and they gave birth to 108 sons. Vietnamese people are descendants of these sons, and call themselves Con Rong, “Children of the Dragon.”

**Ryu**
**Japanese**
They are sleek and serpent-like, with antlers atop their heads and only 3 claws on each foot. They are usually benevolent, but there is a myth of an evil dragon, Yamata-no-Orochi, who has 8 heads, 8 tails, and 8 claws.

**Rainbow Serpent**
**Australian**
Aborigines associate this dragon with fertility and rain. It has the head of a kangaroo, the body of a snake, and the tail of a crocodile. They are known to cause floods to punish the sins of men.
Mermaids

**Mermaids**

- **Greek**
  - According to Pliny, mermaids are "rough and scaled all over" (1st century CE); according to the bestiary, they are "wonderfully shaped as a maid from the navel up and as a fish from the navel down" (6th century CE).

- **Atargatis**
  - Assyrian
  - According to an Assyrian myth, a priestess, ashamed of a pregnancy, jumped into the sea and transformed into a goddess with the tail of a fish.

- **Yawkyawk**
  - Australian
  - Associated with fertility. Yawkyawk are water spirits with fish tails, female torsos, and long seaweed-like hair. They are shape-shifters, sometimes taking the form of crocodiles, snakes, swordfish, and even fireflies.

- **Selkies**
  - Celtic
  - These creatures are seals that shed their pelt to become lovely women. In various myths, a fisherman falls instantly in love with a selkie, steals her pelt, and marries her. As soon as she finds her pelt, the selkie returns to the sea.

- **Ningyo**
  - Japanese
  - Ningyo means "human fish"; they have the mouth of a monkey, the tail of a fish, and the head of a human. Those who eat ningyo are granted immortality.

- **Mami Wata**
  - African
  - She is an African mermaid with the torso of a beautiful woman and the tail of a fish or serpent. She wears jewelry and clothing of the latest fashions, and is accompanied by a large snake.

- **Sedna**
  - Inuit
  - She is a mermaid goddess of the Arctic, with the tail of a seal and torso of a human. She rules over sea creatures such as seals and whales, and when she is angry, she causes violent storms.
Hybrids

**Tikbalang**
Philippine
The creature has the body of a man, the head and hooves of a horse, and long, sharp claws. They mimic the voices of people travelers know to lure them into the woods, never to return.

**Gulon**
Scandinavian
A symbol of glutony, it is a large dog with the face and ears of a cat. It has long brown fur and long sharp claws. It feeds on carcasses of animals killed by other predators, eating so much the belly swells enormously.

**Nuc**
Japanese
It has the head of a monkey, tail of a snake, legs of a tiger, and the middle body of a raccoon dog. It can transform into a dark cloud to plague people with nightmares and illness as they sleep.

**Manticore**
Persian
The name comes from the Sanskrit word for “maneater.” It has the body of a lion, face of a man, three rows of sharp teeth, and a tail with poisonous quills that he can shoot at victims.

**Saxyr**
Greek
Lusty fertility spirits, they are men from the waist up, with pointy ears and goat horns, and goats from the waist down. They are often depicted playing panpipes.

**Yale**
European
Also known as a Cerberus, it has the head of a goat, feet of a horse, tail of an elephant, with large horns that can swivel around to point forwards or backwards in order to defend themselves.

**Aliuzovi**
Mexican
A “water monster,” it is the size of a dog with the face and hands of a monkey. They have a human-like head at the end of their tail that they use to pull victims underwater where they consume their eyes, teeth, and nails.
**Cu Síth**
*Scottish*

This enormous fairy-bound has long green fur and a beaded or curled tail. Its large footprints vanish along the trail. Young hatchlings lick their dooms when they hear 3 barks, which means it is looking for a milk supply for its babies.

**Fenris**
*Norse*

He is an enormous wolf who will bring about the destruction of the Earth. He is bound by a magical chain, Gleipnir, made of “the footsteps of a cat, the roots of a mountain, a woman’s heart, the breath of fishes, the sinews of a bear, and a bird’s epistle.”

**Wampus Cat**
*Cherokee*

She is half-woman, half mountain lion. She was once a lovely Native-American woman, but was punished by a medicine man for eaves-dropping while sacred stories were being told by elders.

**Jackalope**
*North American*

This horned creature, a cross between a pygmy deer and rabbit, wanders the plains of Wyoming. It lures human voices to lure victims into the wilderness.

**White Hart**
*British*

The appearance of this magical stag signifies the approach of noble, anxious or knightly adventures. One is said to have appeared at the wedding feast of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere.

**Pegasus**
*Greek*

He is a winged, white stallion born from the neck of Medusa when she was slain. He lives with the Muses on Mount Helicon, and like them, is a symbol of creative inspiration.

**Hippogriff**
*Roman*

They are part Griffin, part horse. They have the head, claws, and wings of an eagle, and body of a horse.
Sketches from the Museum of Osteology
Myths serve an important purpose in society by passing along crucial cultural knowledge and beliefs to younger generations. They help form cultural identity, uniting people within a common culture/society. Myths share a lot in common with folklore, legends and fairytales, but it is their explanation of the cosmos that sets them apart from other literary genres. They have survived because of their “significant” content, deemed worthy enough to pass along through verbal or written retellings. Although some people have dismissed myth as primitive explanations of the universe that science has since disproven, myths contain themes about the human spirit that transcend time and geographic distance.

Myths are typically very brief, with limited visual details. It is the underlying themes, rather than flashy descriptions, that have ensured their survival. However, it is widely accepted that visual images aid in reading comprehension and memory recall. Providing strong illustrations and character designs to go along with newly created myths may help them to stick in the minds of a modern audience.

Research Conclusions

Chapter 3

Proposed Visuals: Initial Design Plan

Using research conducted on classic myths, the original intent was to create a small collection of new myths for modern American society. The collection would then be assembled in the form of an illustrated book, with one illustration per myth. Deliverables would have included:

- 6-10 original myths in written form
- Appendices including the visual, historical, and/or mythological inspiration for each story; this may aid other writers and illustrators in their own creative journeys
- Character designs and Turnarounds for the creatures described in the stories
- At least one full illustration, detailing an action scene or pivotal moment within the story, for each myth
Considerations

The largest constraint of this thesis is time. In addition to significant content, a defining feature of mythology is “staying power” (Crash Course). Research can be used to heighten the chances of having an impact on the target audience, but there is no real way to test longevity.

Another constraint is that these myths will be in print. Traditionally myths were passed onto younger generations through verbal retellings. This gave them the advantage of both verbal and written forms of communication. Myths were taken very seriously due to their significant content, thus storytellers would rehearse and perfect their retellings. However, storytellers would also adjust timing, emphasis and embellishments based on the reactions of the audience. Creating myths in print gives them a rigidity that traditional myths didn't have.

Design Constraints

The intent was to publish the collection of myths as a self-published, illustrated book. For the book to be published through Amazon/Kindle Direct Publishing, it must be formatted to the company’s specifications, to include page size, borders/bleed, file size, etc.
As per the proposal timeline, the outlines for 8 myths were submitted during week 2. Initial character sketches were also created. The following stories were proposed:

**Buffalo Maiden**
This is an American version of the Selkie and Crane Maiden tales, found in Irish and Chinese folklore. Buffalos have the ability to shed their hides in the light of the full moon, taking human form. After the hide of one buffalo maiden is stolen, she is unable to transform back into her animal form. She falls in love with a human man, and even after finding her hide once again, she chooses a life with him and their children.

This story reflects American values of individuality, and having the courage to take control of one’s own fate.

**The Trend Setter**
Inspired by tales of shape shifters, in this story a humanoid creature transforms into current standards of beauty. Over the centuries she grows bored, and tries out bizarre looks contrary to current beauty standards. To her surprise, others copy what she is doing.

This tale emphasizes America’s obsession with beauty while also celebrating individuality.

**Lessons of the Past**
The spirit of George Washington is reincarnated in a form of a bald eagle and human hybrid, similar to the Tengu spirits of Japanese myths. Dissappointed with the entitled, lazy nature of modern youth, he teaches three different teenagers the value of hard work.

At the heart of this tale is the message of success through hard work.

**Burden of Laziness**
In this myth, laziness is personified in the form of a demon that drapes itself over the shoulders of its victims. Like the Night Mares of Norse mythology, the demon plagues its victims with defeatist thoughts and sluggish movements.

Once again, the value of hard work is taught in this tale.

**The Directors**
Similar to The Fates of Greek mythology, “The Directors” seek to control humankind, leading them down the path of least resistance. Two brothers feel the influence of The Directors. One follows their whispers, and initially seems to do alright. Eventually, however, things start to go wrong as certain decisions come back to haunt him. The other brother fights the urgings of The Directors, and although his decisions lead to an uphill battle at first, he finds peace in the end.

Like a couple of others within the collection, this story is about taking control of one’s own destiny.
The *Spirit of Halloween*
Halloween traditions in the U.S. are quite different from those in other countries, and this story seeks to explain them. A creative, Autumnal spirit inspires people to face their worse fears, helps them to express individuality through the creation of costumes, and uplifts morale as the cold months set in.

The *Cardboard Prince*
A younger sibling keeps waking up her older sister when she suffers nightmares. The older sister invents a story of a cardboard prince, a guardian who hides under the younger sister’s bed and fights Night Mares. The older sister plants “evidence,” and soon the younger sister believes whole-heartedly that the Cardboard Prince is real. Much to the older sister’s surprise, the pure faith of her younger sibling brings the Cardboard prince to life.

This story celebrates imagination, the beauty of innocence, and the power of faith.

The *Adventurer*
A young woman travels west during the CA Gold Rush. She enjoys seeing strange places, meeting new people, and having adventures she only dreamed of as a child. After a while she grows thirsty for even grander adventures, and turns her eyes to the sea. Her adventurous spirit and sheer power of will transform her into a sea creature.

This myth is about big dreams and becoming whoever, or whatever, you desire in order to pursue them.
Entering the design phase, it quickly became apparent that an illustrated collection of stories was not an ideal format for modern myths. Myths were traditionally passed along through verbal retellings, giving them a certain degree of flexibility. Although myths were rehearsed and refined, storytellers could make adjustments based on the reactions of their audience. This flexibility and adaptability have ensured the survival of classic myths, allowing each generation to relate to them in their own way. Presenting new myths in a concrete literary form would ignore this crucial aspect of mythology.

Instead of creating an illustrated collection of written stories, a single myth will be created in the form of a picture book. A written version will be included in the back of the book, but an introduction to the book will encourage the audience to “read” the pictures and fill any blanks with their imaginations. They can then compare their interpretation to the written version provided in the back. The introduction will also encourage readers to share the book with others and compare/contrast their versions to that of their friends’. The picture book will essentially allow each reader to become a storyteller who can then pass it along.

The story of the Buffalo Maiden was chosen, although the others may one day be made into picture books as well.
An additional Pinterest moodboard was created to collect visual inspiration for the myth about the Buffalo Maiden. The bulk of the story is set during the second half of the 19th century in the American midwest, which influenced decisions about the character designs and costumes. Pins include images of the midwest, Native Americans from that region, clothing of the 19th century, images of Buffalos/Bison, and various illustration styles.

Pinterest Moodboard: https://www.pinterest.com/kathrynewood/american-myth
A trip to Woolaroc, OK provided further visual inspiration. Woolaroc, named for the “woods, lakes and rocks” found on the property, is a picturesque nature preserve and museum. Animals that freely roam the property include deer, longhorn cattle, zebras, ostriches and American bison.
Character Designs

The Buffalo maiden in human form is meant to reflect her animal counterpart, with a curly mane of hair and the same coloring.

The Buffalo maiden’s husband was made to look Native American, but with distinctive golden eyes. The eyes are a distinguishing factor that makes the transformation at the end of the story more obvious.

The couple’s three children have traits of both parents, to include hair color/texture, skin tone, and facial features. Per the story, they have dark eyes, like their mother, flecked with the golden color of their father’s eyes.

The fabric patterns were inspired by clothing and blankets seen in the museum at Woolaroc. No particular tribe was portrayed to avoid the perception of it being a Native American myth.
**Thumnail Sketches**

The storyline was further fleshed out in the form of thumnail sketches. It was suggested that a gestural style may be an interesting direction, but ultimately a more representational style was used. Since the illustrations had to accurately convey the central storyline, they needed to be as clear as possible.
The next step in the design phase involved inking the pages, completed in Photoshop. During this stage, it was crucial to communicate key points of the story.

**Story Themes**

In addition to key points, the following themes should be communicated throughout the story:

**Freedom of Choice**
Although remaining human wasn’t initially the Buffalo Maiden’s choice, she does get to make that decision for herself later on.

**Family Loyalty**
When she gets her hide back, the Buffalo Maiden does not abandon her husband and children.

**Individuality, Diversity**
Although the Buffalo Maiden is of a different breed, she is welcomed with open arms into the tribe.

**Consumerism**
She trades her one valuable possession for the hide.

**Sacrifice**
A common theme found in world mythology, the Buffalo Maiden sacrifices her bracelet for the fur, but in turn sacrifices her life in the wild for a life with her family.
Key Points:

• In the beginning, North America was mountain terrain

• Divine creatures descended to Earth, taking form of Buffaloes

• Their hooves flattened the earth into prairies
Key Points:

- In the moonlight, they can transform into man
- At dawn, they turn back into Buffaloes by putting their hides back on
Key Points:

• Humans come and hunt the Buffaloes

• One day, a young hunter finds the tracks of a Buffalo

• A young hunter follows the tracks, separating from his hunting party
Key Points:

- He finds it and sees the Buffalo transform into a woman
- He steals the hide
Key Points:

- The maiden is unable to turn back into a Buffalo without her hide
- She makes clothing for herself
- She sees a man on a horse approaching
Key Points:

- She is afraid of the man
- He means her no harm
- He offers her a carrot
Key Points:

- A thunderstorm rolls in
- Afraid of the storm, she agrees to go with the man
Key Points:

- The maiden is welcomed into the man’s village
Key Points:

• The maiden falls in love with the man

• They marry, and have their first child

• The husband gives his wife a bracelet as a gift

• They have 2 more children
Key Points:

• The couple enjoys a happy family life

• As happy as she is, the Buffalo maiden sometimes misses her herd

• One day a trader comes into the village

• Among his wares is a Buffalo hide
**Key Points:**

- The Buffalo maiden recognizes it as her hide
- She trades her only possession of value, the bracelet from her husband, for the hide
- At home, she contemplates the decision before her
- She chooses her family
Key Points:

• As her children and husband grow older, she remains the same.

• When her husband is old and sick, she pulls the Buffalo hide back out from where she stashed it.
Key Points:

- She covers herself and her husband with the fur
- As dawn breaks, the couple transforms into a single Buffalo
- They rejoin her old herd
The final product is a 33-page picture book entitled *The Buffalo Maiden*. It includes an introduction in which readers are encouraged to interpret the images, using their imaginations to fill any gaps. They can then read the written version at the back of the book and compare it to their own interpretation. Readers are then encouraged to share the book with others to compare their versions with what their friends come up with. Essentially, each reader becomes a storyteller in their own right.

**Introduction**

What are myths? At their core, they are stories that serve to pass along valuable wisdom and cultural information. The United States, being a relatively young country, lacks the rich mythology of ancient civilizations. The Buffalo Maiden is a myth that seeks to add to America’s cultural heritage, celebrating diversity and the belief that one can control their own destiny.

Myths are traditionally rooted in oral tradition, being passed down through the generations through verbal retellings. Myths were rehearsed, as their content was considered sacred by those entrusted with their fate. However, storytellers could add their own embellishments based on audience interaction and the concerns of their time.

As you read this visual story, I invite you to read aloud, filling any gaps with whatever your imagination brings to mind. A written version is included at the end, but don’t let that version dictate your interpretation! Instead, compare your version to what is written after interpreting the images on your own. Myths rely on storytellers spreading their messages, so share this with your friends and family. Let them “read” the images, and compare and contrast your version with theirs.
Sample pages from the finished book:
Conclusion

In conclusion, the final objectives were met:

- It was determined that myths survive because they contain content worth sharing, which leads to long-term staying power.

- Flexibility of oral retellings has allowed myths to evolve; while oral stories are rehearsed, good storytellers adapt them for their audience. The content can be adjusted to reflect the attitudes and concerns of the current audience.

- A new myth was created featuring American values, characters, and settings, and told through images rather than the written word.

- Telling a story in this format allows for flexibility, similar to what storytellers enjoyed with oral retellings.

This format could be used to develop other myths, such as *The Cardboard Prince* and *The Trendsetter*, in the future.
Works Cited


