The Meaning of Myths, Folklore, Legends, and Fairy Tales

They cannot all be lumped together as mere fanciful tales

One common myth that spans multiple cultures is that of a great flood.

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The terms *myth, folklore, legend,* and *fairy tale* are often used interchangeably, leading to the misconception that they mean the same thing: fanciful tales. Although it's true that these terms may refer to bodies of writing that answer some of life's basic questions or present commentary on morality, each type presents a distinct reader experience. They've all stood the test of time, which speaks volumes about their ongoing hold on our imaginations.
**Myth**

A myth is a traditional story that may answer life's overarching questions, such as the origins of the world (the creation myth) or of a people. A myth can also be an attempt to explain mysteries, supernatural events, and cultural traditions. Sometimes sacred in nature, a myth can involve gods or other creatures. It presents reality in dramatic ways.

Many cultures have their own versions of common myths that contain archetypal images and themes. One common myth that spans multiple cultures is that of a great flood. Myth criticism is used to analyze these threads in literature. A prominent name in myth criticism is that of the literary critic, professor, and editor Northrop Frye.

**Folklore and Folktale**

Whereas myth has at its core the origins of a people and is often sacred, folklore is a collection of fictional tales about people or animals. Superstitions and unfounded beliefs are important elements in the folklore tradition. Both myths and folklore were originally circulated orally.

Folktales describe how the main character copes with the events of everyday life, and the tale may involve crisis or conflict. These stories may teach people how to cope with life (or dying) and also have themes common among cultures worldwide. The study of folklore is called folkloristics.

**Legend**

A legend is a story that's purported to be historical in nature but that is without substantiation. Prominent examples include King Arthur, Blackbeard, and Robin Hood. Where evidence of historical figures, such as King Richard, actually exists, figures such as King Arthur are legends due in large part to the many stories that have been created about them.

Legend also refers to anything that inspires a body of stories or anything of lasting importance or fame. The story is handed down orally but continues to evolve with time. Much of early literature began as legend told and retold in epic poems that were passed down orally originally, then at some point written down. These include masterpieces such as the Greek Homeric Poems ("The Iliad" and "The Odyssey"), circa 800 BCE, to the French "Chanson de Roland," circa 1100 CE.
Fairy Tale

A fairy tale may involve fairies, giants, dragons, elves, goblins, dwarves, and other fanciful and fantastic forces. Although originally not written for children, in the most recent century, many old fairy tales have been "Disneyfied" to be less sinister and to appeal to kids. These stories have taken on lives of their own. In fact, many classic and contemporary books, such as "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Snow White," are based on fairy tales. But read the original Grimm brothers' fairy tales, for example, and you'll be surprised at the endings and how they differ from the versions that you may have grown up with.

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