Theories and Sources of Greek Mythology

From the Center for Learning’s guide to Mythology
Euhemerus – 300s to 200s B.C.

**Position:** Greek scholar (probably a teacher)

**Theory:** Historical theory

His was one of the oldest known theories about the origins of myths:

- Suggests that all myths are based in historical fact.

- To get to the source, scholars must strip away the supernatural elements in a myth.
  - Example – Zeus: Based on an ancient king of Crete who was so powerful that he inspired supernatural tales

- Basic weakness: modern scholars lack enough historical evidence to determine whether or not a mythical figure actually existed.
Frederich Max Muller – late 1800s

**Position:** German-born British language scholar.

**Theory:**

- All gods and mythological heroes represented nature divinities, and heroes were originally symbolic of the sun in one of its phases.
- Example – a hero’s birth stood for dawn. Triumph over obstacles stood for ___________________________. Death stood for __________.
Sir Edward Burnett Tylor – 1800s

**Position:** English anthropologist.

**Theory:** Soul theory

- Myths spring from man’s effort to explain unexplainable events.
  - Man’s first idea is that the body has a soul; the soul wanders while the body sleeps and has many adventures.
  - Then, man came to believe that animals have souls, which led to the belief that all things in nature have souls.
- Based on the “soul theory,” man could explain natural events (such as the eruption of a volcano).
Bronislaw Malinowski – early 1900s

**Position:** Polish-born British anthropologist

**Theory:** Frontier theory

- He disagreed with Tylor; instead, he theorized that a frontier exists between what man can and cannot explain logically, and man creates myth when he reaches this frontier.
- Myth relieves tension brought on by not understanding why something happens.
  - Example – thunder.
Sir James George Frazer – early 1900s

Position: Scottish anthropologist

Theory:
• Myths begin in nature – birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth.
• Societies throughout the world sacrifice symbols of their gods to keep these gods (and thus the world) from decaying and dying. These sacrifices appear in all world mythologies, either literally or symbolically.
What myths tell us about...

**Individuals:**
Carl Jung’s theory that myths reflect a personal and collective unconscious (we’ll get into this in a later lesson). These become *archetypes* that represent the psychology of individuals in a culture.

**Society:**
Emile Durkheim theorized that every society establishes certain social institutions and values, and those values are reflected in a society’s religion (or mythology). Mythologies and religions, then, determine acceptable social behavior.
Homework – due Tuesday

1. Read pages 13-21 in *Mythology*.

2. Answer the following questions:
   1. In earlier times, “the imagination was vividly alive and not checked by reason,” but the imagination of primitive beings differed from the imagination of the Greeks. Explain the difference between primitive and classical mythology.
   2. Specifically, how did the gods of Greece differ from the gods of Egypt or Mesopotamia.
   3. Edith Hamilton speaks of “the miracle of Greek mythology.” What does she mean?
   4. What are some of the “dark spots” to which the author refers?
   5. How does Hamilton define or explain mythology?
   6. How does the author explain the different views of the same god?