

The Difference Between Myths and Folktales

As myths were told and retold over generations, they transformed. Not only their specific details, but also the purposes they served in their culture, changed. One of the storytelling forms that arose from the myth was the folktale.

A **folktale** is a story that is created by the “folk”- the common people- and passed along orally from generation to generation. Folktales include legends, fables, tall tales, fairytales, and ghost stories. Folktales differ from myths in several important ways:

1. Folktales, unlike myths, are secular, or nonreligious.
2. Folktales were created as much for their entertainment value as for the teaching of social or moral values.
3. Folktales feature magic, transformations, and enchantments, just as myths do . But although folktales may sometimes include gods and goddesses as characters, they are usually not central actors in the story.
4. Folktale heroes tend to be common, everyday folk who don't have special powers, unlike the heroes of myths, who are the superhuman offspring of gods or goddesses and human parents.
5. Folktales are not associated with religious rituals.

The most important difference between a myth and a folktale concerns the purpose of each storytelling form. Myths are a direct expression of culture's religious beliefs: folktales are not. But both myths and folktales explain important truths about life. They address our deepest needs and engage our sense of wonder. They are the stories of the human family.

Myths had specific purposes in their cultures. In every culture however, the main functions of myths were:

1. To explain the creation of the world and the universe.
2. To explain the human condition: how and why people were created, why they were flawed, why there is suffering in the world, why people must eventually die, and what happens to people after death.
3. To explain natural phenomena, such as the setting of the sun and the phases of the moon.
4. To explain the nature of gods and goddesses and how these deities and human beings interact.
5. To explain the meanings behind religious rituals, customs, and beliefs.
6. To explain historical events.
7. To teach moral lessons.