Greek Mythology and Literature

If YOU were there...

As a farmer in ancient Greece, your way of life depends on events in nature. The crops you grow need sunshine and rain, though thunder and lightning scare you. When you look up at the night sky, you wonder about the twinkling lights you see there. You know that at certain times of the year, the weather will turn cold and gray and plants will die. Then, a few months later, green plants will grow again.

How might you explain these natural events?

BUILDING BACKGROUND

The Greeks lived in a time long before the development of science. To them, natural events like thunderstorms and changing seasons were mysterious. Today we can explain what causes these events. But to the Greeks, they seemed like the work of powerful gods.
Myths Explain the World

The ancient Greeks believed in many gods. These gods were at the center of Greek mythology—a body of stories about gods and heroes that try to explain how the world works. Each story, or myth, explained natural or historical events.

Greek Gods

People today have scientific explanations for events like thunder, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. The ancient Greeks did not. They believed their gods caused these events to happen, and they created myths to explain the gods’ actions.

Among the most important Greek gods were the ones in the picture below:
- Zeus, king of the gods
- Hera, queen of the gods
- Poseidon, god of the sea
- Hades, god of the underworld
- Demeter, goddess of agriculture
- Hestia, goddess of the hearth
- Athena, goddess of wisdom
- Apollo, god of the sun
- Artemis, goddess of the moon
- Ares, god of war
- Aphrodite, goddess of love
- Hephaestus, god of metalworking
- Dionysus, god of celebration
- Hermes, the messenger god
Gods and Mythology
The Greeks saw the work of the gods in events all around them. For example, the Greeks lived in an area where volcanic eruptions were common. To explain these eruptions, they told stories about the god Hephaestus (hi-FES-tuhs), who lived underground. The fire and lava that poured out of volcanoes, the Greeks said, came from the huge fires of the god’s forge. At this forge he created weapons and armor for the other gods.

The Greeks did not think the gods spent all their time creating disasters, though. They also believed the gods caused daily events. For example, they believed the goddess of agriculture, Demeter (di-MEE-tuhr), created the seasons. According to Greek myth, Demeter had a daughter who was kidnapped by another god. The desperate goddess begged the god to let her daughter return to her mother for six months every year. During the winter, Demeter is separated from her daughter and misses her. In her grief, she doesn’t let plants grow. When her daughter comes home, the goddess is happy, and summer comes to Greece. To the Greeks, this story explained why winter came every year.

To keep the gods happy, the Greeks built great temples to honor them all around Greece. In return, however, they expected the gods to give them help when they needed it. For example, many Greeks in need of advice traveled to Delphi, a city in central Greece. There they spoke to the oracle, a female priest of Apollo to whom they thought the god gave answers. The oracle at Delphi was so respected that Greek leaders sometimes asked her for advice about how to rule their cities.

Theseus the Hero
According to legend, Athens had to send 14 people to Crete every year to be eaten by the Minotaur, a terrible monster. But Theseus, a hero from Athens, traveled to Crete and killed the Minotaur, freeing the people of Athens from this burden.
Heroes and Mythology

Not all Greek myths were about gods. Many told about the adventures of great heroes. Some of these heroes were real people, while others were not. The Greeks loved to tell the stories of heroes who had special abilities and faced terrible monsters. The people of each city had their favorite hero, usually someone from there.

The people of Athens, for example, told stories about the hero Theseus. According to legend, he traveled to Crete and killed the Minotaur, a terrible monster that was half human and half bull. People from northern Greece told myths about Jason and how he sailed across the seas in search of a great treasure, fighting enemies the whole way.

Perhaps the most famous of all Greek heroes was a man called Hercules. The myths explain how Hercules fought many monsters and performed nearly impossible tasks. For example, he fought and killed the hydra, a huge snake with nine heads and poisonous fangs. Every time Hercules cut off one of the monster’s heads, two more heads grew in its place. In the end, Hercules had to burn the hydra’s neck each time he cut off a head to keep a new head from growing. People from all parts of Greece enjoyed stories about Hercules and his great deeds.

Let the Games Begin!

One way the ancient Greeks honored their gods was by holding sporting contests like the one shown on the vase. The largest took place every four years at Olympia, a city in southern Greece. Held in honor of Zeus, this event was called the Olympic Games. Athletes competed in footraces, chariot races, boxing, wrestling, and throwing events. Only men could compete. The Greeks held these games every four years for more than 1,000 years, until the AD 320s.

In modern times, people began to hold the Olympics again. The first modern Olympics took place in Athens in 1896. Since then, athletes from many nations have assembled in cities around the world to compete. Today the Olympics include 28 sports, and both men and women participate. They are still held every four years. In 2004 the Olympic Games once again returned to their birthplace, Greece.

ANALYZING INFORMATION

How do you think the modern Olympics are similar to the ancient Games? How do you think they are different?
Ancient Greek Literature

Because the Greeks loved myths and stories, it is no surprise that they created great works of literature. Early Greek writers produced long epic poems, romantic poetry, and some of the world’s most famous stories.

Homer and Epic Poetry

Among the earliest Greek writings are two great epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, by a poet named Homer. Like most epics, both poems describe the deeds of great heroes. The heroes in Homer’s poems fought in the Trojan War. In this war, the Mycenaean Greeks fought the Trojans, people of the city called Troy.

The *Iliad* tells the story of the last years of the Trojan War. It focuses on the deeds of the Greeks, especially Achilles (uh-KIL-ez), the greatest of all Greek warriors. It describes in great detail the battles between the Greeks and their Trojan enemies.

The *Odyssey* describes the challenges that the Greek hero Odysseus (oh-DI-see-uhs) faced on his way home from the war. For 10 years after the war ends, Odysseus tries to get home, but many obstacles stand in his way. He has to fight his way past terrible monsters, powerful magicians, and even angry gods.

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are great tales of adventure. But to the Greeks Homer’s poems were much more than just entertainment. They were central to the ancient Greek education system. People memorized long passages of the poems as part of their lessons. They admired Homer’s poems and the heroes described in them as symbols of Greece’s great history.

Homer’s poems influenced later writers. They copied his writing styles and borrowed some of the stories and ideas he wrote about in his works. Homer’s poems are considered some of the greatest literary works ever produced.

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**Biography**

**Homer**

800s–700s BC

Historians know nothing about Homer, the greatest poet of the ancient world. Some don’t think such a person ever lived. The ancient Greeks believed he had, though, and seven different cities claimed to be his birthplace. According to ancient legend, Homer was blind and recited the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* aloud. It wasn’t until much later that the poems were written down.

**Making Predictions** Why might scholars not be sure that Homer existed?

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the half woman and half bird Sirens sang sweet songs that made passing sailors forget everything and crash their ships. To get past the Sirens, Odysseus plugged his crew’s ears with wax and had himself tied to his ship’s mast.
Lyric Poetry

Other poets wrote poems that were often set to music. During a performance, the poet played a stringed instrument called a lyre while reading a poem. These poets were called lyric poets after their instrument, the lyre. Today, the words of songs are called lyrics after these ancient Greek poets.

Most poets in Greece were men, but the most famous lyric poet was a woman named Sappho (Saf-oh). Her poems were beautiful and emotional. Most of her poems were about love and relationships with her friends and family.

Fables

Other Greeks told stories to teach people important lessons. Aesop (EE-sahp), for example, is famous for his fables. Fables are short stories that teach the reader lessons about life or give advice on how to live.

In most of Aesop’s fables, animals are the main characters. The animals talk and act like humans. One of Aesop’s most famous stories is the tale of the ants and the grasshopper:

“Aesop, from “The Ants and the Grasshopper”

The lesson in this fable is that people shouldn’t waste time instead of working. Those who do, Aesop says, will be sorry.

Another popular fable by Aesop, “The Tortoise and the Hare,” teaches that it is better to work slowly and carefully than to hurry and make mistakes. “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” warns readers not to play pranks on others. Since we still read these fables, you may be familiar with them.
Greek Literature Lives
The works of ancient Greek writers such as Homer, Sappho, and Aesop are still alive and popular today. In fact, Greek literature has influenced modern language, literature, and art. Did you know that some of the words you use and some of the stories you hear come from ancient Greece?

Language
Probably the most obvious way we see the influence of the Greeks is in our language. Many English words and expressions come from Greek mythology. For example, we call a long journey an “odyssey” after Odysseus, the wandering hero of Homer’s poem. Something very large and powerful is called “titanic.” This word comes from the Titans, a group of large and powerful gods in Greek myth.

Many places around the world today are also named after figures from Greek myths. For example, Athens is named for Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Africa’s Atlas Mountains were named after a giant from Greek mythology who held up the sky. The name of the Aegean Sea comes from Aegeus, a legendary Greek king. Europe itself was named after a figure from Greek myth, the princess Europa. Even places in space bear names from mythology. For example, Jupiter’s moon Io was named after a goddess’s daughter.

Literature and the Arts
Greek myths have inspired artists for centuries. Great painters and sculptors have used gods and heroes as the subjects of their works. Writers have retold ancient stories, sometimes set in modern times. Moviemakers have also borrowed stories from ancient myths. Hercules, for example, has been the subject of dozens of films. These films range from early classics to a Walt Disney cartoon.

Mythological references are also common in today’s popular culture. Many sports teams have adopted the names of powerful figures from myths, like Titans or

## Greek Influence on Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Greek Literature and Mythology…</th>
<th>Today…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achilles was a great warrior who was killed when an arrow struck his heel.</td>
<td>An “Achilles heel” is a person’s weak spot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hercules was the strongest man on earth who completed 12 almost impossible tasks.</td>
<td>When a person has a really hard job to do it is called a “Herculean” task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fox wanted to eat some grapes but he couldn’t reach the branch they were on, so he said, “Those grapes are probably sour anyway.”</td>
<td>When people pretend they don’t want something after they find out they can’t have it, they are said to have “sour grapes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Midas was granted one wish by the god Dionysus, so he wished that everything he touched turned to gold.</td>
<td>A person who seems to get rich easily is said to have a “Midas touch.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tantalus was punished for offending the gods. He had to stand up to his chin in water and he was always thirsty, but if he tried to drink the water it went away.</td>
<td>Something is “tantalizing” if you want it but it’s just out of your reach.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trojans. Businesses frequently use images or symbols from mythology in their advertising. Although people no longer believe in the Greek gods, mythological ideas can still be seen all around us.

**READING CHECK** Finding Main Ideas

How did Greek myths influence later language and art?

**Summary and Preview**

The myths, stories, and poems of ancient Greece have shaped how people today speak, read, and write. Like democracy, these myths, stories, and poems are part of ancient Greece's gift to the world. In the next chapter you will learn more about life and culture in ancient Greece.

**Section 3 Assessment**

**Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People**

1. a. Define What is mythology?
   b. Summarize Why did the ancient Greeks create myths?

2. a. Identify What are Homer's most famous works?
   b. Contrast How are fables different from myths?

3. a. Recall In what areas have Greek myths influenced our culture?
   b. Analyze Why do you think mythological references are popular with sports teams and businesses today?
   c. Evaluate Why do you think Greek literature has been so influential throughout history?

**Critical Thinking**

4. Analyzing Using your notes and a chart like this, explain the influence of myths and literature on the world today.

**Focus on Writing**

5. Putting Your Ideas Together Look at your notes from the previous sections. Think about the personalities you gave physical features and government leaders. Now imagine that those personalities belonged to gods. What stories might be told about these gods? Write down some ideas.
The Epic Poetry of Homer

from the *Iliad*

*as translated by Robert Fitzgerald*

**About the Reading** *The Iliad* describes one part of a ten-year war between the Greeks and the city of Troy. As the poem opens, the Greek hero Achilles (uh-KIL-eez) has left the battle to wait for help from the gods. When he learns that his best friend Patroclus is dead, however, Achilles springs back into action. In this passage, the angry Achilles sprints across the plain toward Troy—and Hector, the Trojan warrior who has killed his friend.

**AS YOU READ** Look for words and actions that tell you Achilles is a hero.

Then toward the town with might and main he ran magnificent, like a racing chariot horse that holds its form at full stretch on the plain. ¹

So light-footed Achilles held the pace.

And aging Priam was the first to see him sparkling on the plain, bright as that star in autumn rising, whose unclouded rays shine out amid a throng of stars at dusk—the one they call Orion’s dog, most brilliant… ²

So pure and bright the bronze gear blazed upon him as he ran. The old man gave a cry. ³ With both his hands thrown up on high he struck his head, then shouted, groaning, appealing to his dear son.

Unmoved, Lord Hector stood in the gateway, resolute to fight Achilles.

Stretching out his hands, old Priam said, imploring him:

“No, Hector! … don’t try to hold your ground against this man, or soon you’ll meet the shock of doom…”

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**WORD HELP**

- main: strength
- resolute: determined
- imploring: begging

1. To what is Achilles being compared?

2. Priam, Hector’s father, knows that the gods have protected and strengthened Achilles.

3. Achilles’ armor was made by the god of metalworking. *Why might the very sight of this armor make Priam afraid?*

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**Literature in History**

The painting on this vase shows people fighting in the Trojan War.
from the *Odyssey*

**About the Reading** The *Odyssey* takes place after the Trojan War has ended. It describes the adventures of another hero, Odysseus (oh-DIS-ee-uhs), as he makes his way home to his kingdom of Ithaca. His voyage is full of obstacles—including the two sea monsters described in this passage. The idea for these monsters probably came from an actual strait in the Mediterranean Sea, where a jagged cliff rose on one side and dangerous whirlpools churned on the other.

**AS YOU READ** Try to picture the action in your mind.

And all this time, in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron seething over intense fire, when the mixture suddenly heaves and rises.

The shot spume soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain. But when she swallowed the sea water down we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard the rock bellowing all around, and dark sand raged on the bottom far below. My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike, whisking six of my best men from the ship. I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling high overhead. Voices came down to me in anguish, calling my name for the last time . . .

The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too, and Scylla dropped astern.

**CONNECTING LITERATURE TO HISTORY**

1. **Comparing** Many Greek myths were about heroes who had special abilities. What heroic abilities or traits do Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus share?

2. **Analyzing** The Greeks used myths to explain the natural world. How does the *Odyssey* passage illustrate this?
Analyzing Costs and Benefits

**Understand the Skill**

Everything you do has both costs and benefits connected to it. **Benefits** are what you gain from something. **Costs** are what you give up to obtain benefits. For example, if you buy a video game, the benefits of your action include the game itself and the enjoyment of playing it. The most obvious cost is what you pay for the game. However, there are also costs that do not involve money. One of these costs is the time you spend playing the game. This is a cost because you give up something else, such as doing your homework or watching a TV show, when you choose to play the game.

The ability to analyze costs and benefits is a valuable life skill as well as a useful tool in the study of history. Weighing an action’s benefits against its costs can help you decide whether or not to take it.

**Learn the Skill**

Analyzing the costs and benefits of historical events will help you to better understand and evaluate them. Follow these guidelines to do a cost-benefit analysis of an action or decision in history.

1. First determine what the action or decision was trying to accomplish. This step is needed in order to determine which of its effects were benefits and which were costs.

2. Then look for the positive or successful results of the action or decision. These are its benefits.

3. Consider the negative or unsuccessful effects of the action or decision. Also think about what positive things would have happened if it had not occurred. All these things are its costs.

4. Making a chart of the costs and benefits can be useful. By comparing the list of benefits to the list of costs you can better understand the action or decision and evaluate it.

For example, you learned in Chapter 8 that because of Greece’s geography, the early Greeks settled near the sea. A cost-benefit analysis of their dependence on the sea might produce a chart like this one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sea was a source of some food.</td>
<td>Would have paid more attention to agriculture than they did.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t have to depend on Greece’s poor soil for food.</td>
<td>Had to rely on trade with other peoples for some food and other necessities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became great shipbuilders and sailors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became great traders and grew rich from trade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settled colonies throughout the region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on this chart, one might conclude that the Greeks’ choice of where to settle was a good one.

**Practice and Apply the Skill**

In 546 BC a noble named Peisistratus overthrew the oligarchy and ruled Athens as a tyrant. Use information from the chapter and the guidelines above to do a cost-benefit analysis of this action. Then write a paragraph explaining whether or not it was good for the people of Athens.
CHAPTER 8
Reviewing Vocabulary, Terms, and People

Unscramble each group of letters below to spell a term that matches the given definition.

1. olpsi—a Greek city-state
2. iciznets—people who have the right to participate in government
3. ntaryt—a person who rules alone, usually through military force
4. comdeyacr—rule by the people
5. bleafs—stories that teach lessons
6. tsrarciotas—rich landowners
7. coiglhary—rule by a few people
8. siclalacs—referring to a period of great achievements

Comprehension and Critical Thinking

SECTION 1 (Pages 228–233)
9. a. Describe How did geography affect the development of the Greek city-states?
   b. Compare and Contrast What did the Minoans and Mycenaeans have in common? How were the two civilizations different?
   c. Elaborate How did the concept of the polis affect the growth of Greek colonies?

SECTION 2 (Pages 236–241)
10. a. Identify What roles did Draco, Solon, and Peisistratus play in the history of Greek government?
    b. Contrast The Greeks tried many forms of government before they created a democracy. How did these various forms of government differ?
    c. Evaluate Do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Representative democracy works better than direct democracy in large countries.” Defend your answer.
SECTION 3 (Pages 242–249)

11. a. Recall Who were some of the main gods of Greek mythology? Who were some of the main heroes?

b. Analyze What are some of the topics that appear in ancient Greek literature, such as the Iliad and the Odyssey?

c. Predict Do you think the language and literature of ancient Greece will play roles in Western civilization in years to come? Why or why not?

Reading Skills

Greek Word Origins Look at the list of Greek words and their meanings below. Then answer the questions that follow.

| archos (ruler) | monos (single) |
| bios (life) | oligos (few) |
| geo (earth) | pente (five) |
| micros (small) | treis (three) |

12. Which of the following words means rule by a single person?

a. oligarchy  
b. monarchy

c. pentarchy  
d. triarchy

13. Which of the following words means the study of life?

a. biology  
b. geology

c. archaeology  
d. pentology

14. Is something that is microscopic very small or very large?

Using the Internet

15. Activity: Comparing Greek Governments Greek government had many forms: tyranny, oligarchy, direct democracy, and monarchy. Use your online book to research Greek government, and then create a three-dimensional model, a drawing, or a diagram to illustrate what a person’s life under each type of government might have looked like. Include information about the type of government you are representing.

Social Studies Skills

16. Analyzing Costs and Benefits Under Cleisthenes’ leadership, Athens developed the world’s first democracy. Create a chart comparing costs and benefits of this event. Then write a sentence explaining whether or not it was good for the people of Athens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Reviewing Themes

17. Geography How do you think Greek society would have been different if Greece were a landlocked country?

18. Geography How did Crete’s physical geography both help and hurt the development of Minoan civilization?

19. Politics Why was citizenship so important in Athens?

Focus on Writing

20. Writing Your Myth First, decide if your main character is going to be a god or if it will be a human who interacts with the gods. Think about the situations and decisions that your character will face, and how he or she will react to them.

Now it’s time to write your myth down. Write a paragraph of seven to eight sentences about your character. You may want to include terrible monsters or heroes with great powers. Don’t forget that a myth is supposed to explain something about the world.
DIRECTIONS: Read each question, and write the letter of the best response.

1. The content of this passage suggests that it was written by
   A  Homer.
   B  Zeus.
   C  Apollo.
   D  Cleisthenes.

2. What type of ancient Greek literature would most likely describe the deeds of a great hero?
   A  fable
   B  epic poem
   C  lyric poem
   D  oration

3. Which was the main cause for the independence of city-states in ancient Greece?
   A  the Greeks’ location on the sea
   B  the threat of warlike neighbors to the north
   C  the geography of mountainous peninsulas
   D  the spread of Minoan culture

4. Athens was ruled by a single person under the type of government known as
   A  direct democracy.
   B  representative democracy
   C  oligarchy.
   D  tyranny.

5. The citizens’ assembly in ancient Athens was an example of
   A  trial by jury.
   B  rule by aristocrats.
   C  direct democracy.
   D  representative democracy.

Connecting with Past Learnings

6. Recently you learned about Hebrew history and beliefs. The ancient Hebrew and Greek civilizations shared all of the following characteristics except
   A  great written works.
   B  democratic governments.
   C  strong political leaders.
   D  influence on later civilizations.

7. You know that early towns in India were controlled by small groups of priests. Like ancient Greek government, this early Indian government was an example of
   A  oligarchy.
   B  tyranny.
   C  monarchy.
   D  democracy.