

## ***The Hunger Games***

### **The Myth of Theseus**

**Myths** are stories that are passed down from generation to generation. Often they answer questions about the world. For instance, the myth of Pandora explains why there is evil in the world.

Myths also often contain heroes who overcome obstacles by using superhuman strength or skill. Some, like the Greek and Roman myths, are thousands of years old. The popularity of books like *The Lightning Thief* is proof that even today people are captivated by the drama and adventure of myths.

The characters and events of the myth of Theseus are easy to imagine and difficult to forget. As you read the story, ask yourself what makes Theseus's adventures memorable.

#### **The Myth of Theseus: Hero and Adventurer**

Aethra had a darling little boy named Theseus. He was growing into a strong, smart young man, and Aethra knew that she would soon need to tell him about his father, Aegeus the king of Athens. Theseus had never met his father and didn't even know who he was. But Aegeus had planned for his son. Before he left Aethra and returned to Athens, Aegeus placed a sword and a pair of sandals under a boulder. Aegeus told Aethra that if their son could lift the boulder and retrieve the items, he should come to Athens and claim his inheritance as the heir to the throne of Athens.

The day arrived for Aethra to tell Theseus about his father and the boulder. *Would he be strong enough to lift it? He was.* He retrieved the sword and sandals and was ready to go to Athens to meet his father. Theseus could travel by land or sea. The journey to Athens over land was dangerous; the countryside was full of murderers, robbers, and villains. It would be much safer for Theseus to travel by sea. But in spite of advice to do otherwise, Theseus decided to take the more dangerous route and travel by land, to test his heroism and rid the countryside of evildoers.

Theseus didn't have far to travel before he came across his first challenge, Periphetes. Periphetes was a vicious man who used a club to kill anyone he met along the road. Theseus turned Periphetes's own club against him. As a trophy for his first victory, Theseus took the club. Next, Theseus met Sinis who was extremely strong. His nickname was "pine bender" because he liked to bend two pine trees down to the ground and tie his victim to the two trees. When he let go of the trees, the victim was ripped in two. Theseus defeated Sinis by using his own pine tree trick against him.

Theseus traveled on and encountered a giant sow that was terrorizing the countryside. He killed it and then traveled along a narrow coastal road where he met Sciron. Sciron liked to stop travelers and force them to wash his feet. While they were on their knees at his feet, Sciron shoved the travelers over the cliff where they fell into the sea and were eaten by a giant turtle. Theseus, *as you may have already guessed*, tricked Sciron. It was Sciron who ended up falling over the cliff into the sea.

Theseus's next encounter was with Cercyon, the king of Eleusis. Cercyon challenged travelers to a wrestling match. If they lost, Cercyon killed them. Theseus defeated and killed Cercyon and became king of Eleusis.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

Finally, Theseus was nearing Athens, but there was still one more obstacle for him to overcome: Procrustes. Procrustes offered travelers a bed for the night, which seemed nice, but there was a catch. Procrustes wanted to make sure his guests fit in the bed, so if guests were too short, he stretched them to make them longer. If guests were too tall, he'd cut off their limbs so they'd fit. Theseus used the bed against Procrustes and defeated the last villain on the way to Athens.

When Theseus arrived in Athens, he was a hero. People were happy he'd rid the countryside of its terrible inhabitants. Theseus went to see Aegeus and his wife Medea. Medea was a sorceress and she controlled Aegeus through magic. She realized that Theseus was Aegeus's son, and knew that if Aegeus accepted him and took him in, Medea would lose her power over the king. To turn Aegeus against Theseus, Medea convinced Aegeus that Theseus could not be trusted, and that Theseus was only there to overthrow the King.

Medea and Aegeus planned to give Theseus poisoned wine at a banquet. However, as Theseus was about to drink the poison, Aegeus recognized the sword Theseus was carrying as the one Aegeus had placed under the boulder. Aegeus knocked the poisoned wine away from Theseus and accepted him as his son. Medea, seeing her plans were foiled, left the kingdom.

*Now that Theseus is accepted as Aegeus's son and wicked Medea is gone, the story should have a happy ending, right? Not so fast.* Theseus then learns that the Athenian people have been forced to pay Minos, the king of Crete, an annual tribute. They must send seven boys and seven girls to Crete where they will be sent into the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a maze that is impossible to escape, but the worst part is the Minotaur that inhabits the labyrinth. The Minotaur is a creature that is half man and half bull. It feasts on the fourteen tributes.

When Theseus hears this, he is determined to go into the labyrinth and defeat the Minotaur. He volunteers to be one of the tributes to Crete. Aegeus begs him not to go, but Theseus is determined. Before setting sail, he promises his father that on his way back to Athens, he'll change the ship's sails from black to white as a sign that he's defeated the Minotaur. And so Theseus begins his next challenge.

Once they arrive in Crete, the tributes are paraded before King Minos. Minos' daughter Ariadne sees Theseus and falls in love with him. Before the tributes are sent into the labyrinth, Ariadne goes to Theseus and gives him a spool of thread. She tells him to tie the spool of thread to the gate of the labyrinth and unroll it as he walks through the maze so that he will be able to find his way back out again. Theseus enters the labyrinth and follows Ariadne's advice. He slays the Minotaur and escapes from Crete with Ariadne and the other tributes.

On their way back to Crete, they stop at the island of Naxos. There are different versions of the story of what happened next and why, but Theseus left Ariadne on the island and then traveled on to Athens. He forgot to change the sail from black to white, and when Aegeus saw the ship traveling back with a black sail, he thought his son was dead. In his grief, Aegeus hurled himself off a cliff and into the sea – which from then on was called the Aegean Sea.

Theseus returned to Athens and became king. *You might think that this is the end of the story, but it isn't either. Theseus went on to have more adventures. But then, that's to be expected when you're the hero of a myth.*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

### **Comprehension Check: The Myth of Theseus**

**Directions:** After reading the article on *The Myth of Theseus*, answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.

1. What is a myth?
2. What did Theseus's father do to ensure Theseus could one day claim his inheritance?
3. Recall the adversaries (enemies) Theseus must face on the journey to Athens.
4. Summarize the types of challenges Theseus faces on the road to Athens.
5. Infer the type of skills Theseus needs in order to defeat his adversaries.
6. What evidence do you find in the story that shows Theseus is a hero?
7. What conclusions can you draw about King Minos?
8. Why do you think Minos demanded that the tributes were children?
9. Why do you think Theseus didn't relax and enjoy being a king after he returned from Crete?
10. What part of the Theseus myth do you like best? Explain your answer.