How much do our communities shape us?

Writing About the Big Question

Like many myths, "Arachne" teaches an important lesson. Use the following sentence starter to help you develop your ideas about the Big Question.

Stories that are passed down from generation to generation within a community often teach about such values as

While You Read Look for details that lead Arachne to learn an important lesson that reflects the values of ancient Greek society.

Vocabulary

Read each word and its definition. Decide whether you know the word well, know it a little bit, or do not know it at all. After you read, see how your knowledge of each word has increased.

- **obscure (əb skōor′) adj.** not well known (p. 860) I have never heard of that obscure artist. obscurity n. obscure v.
- **humble (hûm′ bel) adj.** modest; not proud (p. 860) Mark is a smart but humble boy. humbly adv. humbler adj.
- **mortal (môr′ təl) adj.** referring to humans, who eventually die (p. 862) Mortal men cannot move mountains. mortality n. immortal adj. immortality n.
- **indignantly (in dig′ nant le) adv.** in a way that expresses anger (p. 862) Zoe indignantly demanded to speak to a manager about the restaurant's poor service. indignant adj. dignity n.
- **obstinacy (əb stin sé) n.** stubbornness (p. 862) The willful child was punished for her obstinacy. obstinant adj. obstinantly adv.
- **strive (striv) v.** struggle; compete (p. 863) I will strive hard in the race. striving v. strived v.

Word Study

The Latin root *mortal-* means "death."

Unlike a god or goddess, who does not die, Arachne was a mortal—a human being, who cannot live forever.
Olivia Enson Coolidge was born and educated in England and has lived in both Europe and the United States. She has taught English, Latin, and Greek, but she is best known as a writer.

**Accuracy and Detail** In addition to writing about subjects from classical mythology, such as the Trojan War, she has written about colonial times in American history. Coolidge is known for the accuracy of her historical fiction and for her attention to detail.

**BACKGROUND FOR THE MYTH**

**Spiders**

Arachne is the name of the main character in this myth. *Arachnida* is the name of the class of creatures that includes spiders. Spiders live almost everywhere on the planet and are useful because they eat insect pests. The smallest spiders are anapids, which are no bigger than the head of a pin. The largest are tarantulas, some of which are as large as a dinner plate. Few spiders are harmful.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Coolidge says that she enjoys writing about legends and myths because she feels that they express ancient values that are still important today.
Arachne [ə rækˈnɛ] was a maiden who became famous throughout Greece, though she was neither wellborn nor beautiful and came from no great city. She lived in an obscure little village, and her father was a humble dyer of wool.
In this he was very skillful, producing many varied shades, while above all he was famous for the clear, bright scarlet which is made from shellfish, and which was the most glorious of all the colors used in ancient Greece. Even more skillful than her father was Arachne. It was her task to spin the fleecey wool into a fine, soft thread and to weave it into cloth on the high, standing loom within the cottage. Arachne was small and pale from much working. Her eyes were light and her hair was a dusty brown, yet she was quick and graceful, and her fingers, roughened as they were, went so fast that it was hard to follow their flickering movements. So soft and even was her thread, so fine her cloth, so gorgeous her embroidery, that soon her products were known all over Greece. No one had ever seen the like of them before.

At last Arachne’s fame became so great that people used to come from far and wide to watch her working. Even the graceful nymphs\(^1\) would steal in from stream or forest and peep shyly through the dark doorway, watching in wonder the white arms of Arachne as she stood at the loom and threw the shuttle from hand to hand between the hanging threads, or drew out the long wool, fine as a hair, from the distaff\(^2\) as she sat spinning. “Surely Athene\(^3\) herself must have taught her,” people would murmur to one another. “Who else could know the secret of such marvelous skill?”

Arachne was used to being wondered at, and she was immensely proud of the skill that had brought so many to look on her. Praise was all she lived for, and it displeased her greatly that people should think anyone, even a goddess, could teach her anything. Therefore when she heard them murmur, she would stop her work and turn round indignantly to say, “With my own ten fingers I gained this skill, and by hard practice from early morning till night. I never had time to stand looking as you people do while another maiden worked. Nor if I had, would I give Athene credit because the girl was more skillful than I. As

---

1. nymphs (nimfts) n. minor nature goddesses, represented as beautiful maidens living in rivers, trees, and mountains.
2. distaff (dis’taf) n. stick on which flax or wool is wound for spinning.
3. Athene (a thé’ ne) n. Greek goddess of wisdom, skills, and warfare.
for Athene's weaving, how could there be finer cloth or more beautiful embroidery than mine? If Athene herself were to come down and compete with me, she could do no better than I."

One day when Arachne turned round with such words, an old woman answered her, a gray old woman, bent and very poor, who stood leaning on a staff and peering at Arachne amid the crowd of onlookers. "Reckless girl," she said, "how dare you claim to be equal to the immortal gods themselves? I am an old woman and have seen much. Take my advice and ask pardon of Athene for your words. Rest content with your fame of being the best spinner and weaver that mortal eyes have ever beheld."

"Stupid old woman," said Arachne indignantly, "who gave you a right to speak in this way to me? It is easy to see that you were never good for anything in your day, or you would not come here in poverty and rags to gaze at my skill. If Athene resents my words, let her answer them herself. I have challenged her to a contest, but she, of course, will not come. It is easy for the gods to avoid matching their skill with that of men."

At these words the old woman threw down her staff and stood erect. The wondering onlookers saw her grow tall and fair and stand clad in long robes of dazzling white. They were terribly afraid as they realized that they stood in the presence of Athene. Arachne herself flushed red for a moment, for she had never really believed that the goddess would hear her. Before the group that was gathered there she would not give in; so pressing her pale lips together in obstinacy and pride, she led the goddess to one of the great looms and set herself before the other. Without a word both began to thread the long woolen strands that hang from the rollers, and between which the shuttle moves back and forth. Many skeins lay heaped beside

4. shuttle (shut' el) n. instrument used in weaving to carry thread back and forth.
them to use, bleached white, and gold, and scarlet, and other shades, varied as the rainbow. Arachne had never thought of giving credit for her success to her father’s skill in dyeing, though in actual truth the colors were as remarkable as the cloth itself.

Soon there was no sound in the room but the breathing of the onlookers, the whirring of the shuttles, and the creaking of the wooden frames as each pressed the thread up into place or tightened the pegs by which the whole was held straight. The excited crowd in the doorway began to see that the skill of both in truth was very nearly equal, but that, however the cloth might turn out, the goddess was the quicker of the two. A pattern of many pictures was growing on her loom. There was a border of twined branches of the olive, Athene’s favorite tree, while in the middle, figures began to appear. As they looked at the glowing colors, the spectators realized that Athene was weaving into her pattern a last warning to Arachne. The central figure was the goddess herself competing with Poseidon for possession of the city of Athens; but in the four corners were mortals who had tried to cope with gods and pictures of the awful fate that had overtaken them. The goddess ended a little before Arachne and stood back from her marvelous work to see what the maiden was doing.

Never before had Arachne been matched against anyone whose skill was equal, or even nearly equal to her own. As she stole glances from time to time at Athene and saw the goddess working swiftly, calmly, and always a little faster than herself, she became angry instead of frightened, and an evil thought came into her head. Thus as Athene stepped back a pace to watch Arachne finishing her work, she saw that the maiden had taken for her design a pattern of scenes which showed evil or unworthy actions of the gods, how they had deceived fair maidens, resorted to trickery, and appeared on earth from time to time in the form of poor and humble people. When the goddess saw this insult glowing in bright colors on Arachne’s loom, she did not wait while the cloth was...
judged, but stepped forward, her gray eyes blazing with anger, and tore Arachne's work across. Then she struck Arachne across the face. Arachne stood there a moment, struggling with anger, fear, and pride. "I will not live under this insult," she cried, and seizing a rope from the wall, she made a noose and would have hanged herself.

The goddess touched the rope and touched the maiden. "Live on, wicked girl," she said. "Live on and spin, both you and your descendants. When men look at you they may remember that it is not wise to strive with Athene." At that the body of Arachne shriveled up, and her legs grew tiny, spindly, and distorted. There before the eyes of the spectators hung a little dusty brown spider on a slender thread.

All spiders descend from Arachne, and as the Greeks watched them spinning their thread wonderfully fine, they remembered the contest with Athene and thought that it was not right for even the best of men to claim equality with the gods.

1. Respond: If you were Arachne, would you have challenged the goddess Athene? Why or why not?
2. (a) What does Arachne value more than anything else? (b) Interpret: Why does Arachne refuse to accept the advice of the old woman? (c) Analyze: What character traits does Arachne reveal through her behavior?
3. (a) What design does Athene weave? (b) Infer: What is Athene's original intention toward Arachne? (c) Deduce: What makes Athene angry?
4. (a) Take a Position: Do you think that it was fair of Athene to turn Arachne into a spider? Explain. (b) Discuss: Share your response with a partner and decide together on a single answer to share with the class.

How much do our communities shape us?
(a) In ancient Greece, what important life lesson might this myth have taught its audience?
(b) What cultural value does the story, and its lesson, suggest?
After You Read  

**Arachne**

**Reading Skill: Cause and Effect**

1. What is the **effect** of Arachne’s skill as a weaver?
2. What **causes** Athene to visit Arachne?
3. Complete the chart to show causes and effects in “Arachne.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arachne challenges Athene.</td>
<td>Arachne’s design shows unworthy actions of the gods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athene touches the rope and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>touches Arachne.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Literary Analysis: Myths**

4. What does this **myth** explain about spiders?
5. What beliefs and values about behavior are taught through the **theme** of this myth?

**Vocabulary**

**Practice** Use a vocabulary word from page 858 to rewrite each sentence so that it has the opposite meaning.

1. The movie’s main character had superhuman qualities.
2. Everyone in the class had heard of the famous novel.
3. Her agreeable nature makes her easy to get along with.
4. Mr. Vallone was a rich and famous tailor.
5. “No thank you,” she said in a cheerful way.
6. The two brothers always tried help each other.

**Word Study** Use context and what you know about the Latin root **-mort-** to explain your answer to each question.

1. If an ancient Greek warrior received a **mortal** wound, would he recover?
2. How strongly embarrassed is someone who is **mortified**?

The Latin root **-mort-** means “death.”

**Challenge** Explain how the root **-mort-** contributes to the meaning of these words. Consult a dictionary if necessary.

**immortal**

**mortician**

**mortuary**