

“Echo and Narcissus”

retold by Walker Brents

Reader's Resource

HISTORY CONNECTION. The world of the ancient Greeks and Romans was populated with gods and goddesses. These supernatural beings were more powerful than humans, but they experienced human emotions such as jealousy and passion. The Greeks and the Romans worshipped many of the same gods and goddesses but had different names for them. In “**Echo and Narcissus**,” the gods and goddesses are referred to by their Greek names; in “**The Story of Dædalus and Icarus**,” the story that follows on page 11, they are referred to by their Roman names. Two of the gods named in these selections are Zeus, or Jove, the supreme god; and Hera, or Juno, his wife. Also important in “Echo and Narcissus” are nymphs, or lesser goddesses. Naiads were water nymphs who dwelled in rivers, lakes, and springs; dryads were tree nymphs.

Narcissus is a genus of plant belonging to the amaryllis (*Amaryllidaceae*) family of lilylike flowers. *Narcissi* have showy yellow or white blooms with cuplike centers. Jonquils and daffodils are types of *Narcissus*.

PSYCHOLOGY CONNECTION. Famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud first used the term **narcissism**, derived from this myth, to mean extreme self-absorption or egoism.



About the AUTHOR

Walker Brents (1959–) is a poet and storyteller who has studied myths since he discovered at the age of five the myths of Hercules and the Greek gods. After major-

ing in English and philosophy at Drury College in Springfield, Missouri, Brents worked with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in the early 1980s. It was while working at a refugee center in southern California that he was able to listen to the many stories of Vietnamese, Romanian, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees. Brents now tells Hindu, Japanese, and Chinese myths and folk tales at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and teaches at Berkwood Hedge School in Berkeley. He has published poetry in a number of literary magazines, including the *Berkeley Review of Books*, *Moksha Journal*, and *Galley Sail Review*. He has also been a featured performer at various cafes, as well as at the Marsh, a theater in San Francisco.



Literary TOOLS

SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF. Suspension of disbelief is the act by which the reader willingly sets aside his or her skepticism to participate imaginatively in the work being read. As you read, think about which elements of the story require you to suspend your disbelief.

ΜΥTH. A myth is a story that explains objects or events in the natural world as resulting from the action of some supernatural force or entity, most often a god.

Graphic Organizer

As you read, make a chart. On the left, list examples of natural phenomena that are explained in this myth. On the right, describe how the phenomena are explained.

Natural Phenomena	Explanation



Reader's Journal

What qualities do you find attractive in another person? Is physical appearance as important as other aspects such as personality or intellectual qualities? Why, or why not?

Echo
Echo
Echo



Echo & Narcissus

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Liriope the river nymph gave birth to a beautiful child. She brought him to the blind seer Tiresias to ask his destiny. Tiresias predicted that the boy would live a long life, but only if he never “came to know himself.”

The child was named Narcissus. As he grew, his beauty increased. His dazzling looks had a strange effect upon the woodland spirits, the naiads and the dryads,¹ around whom he spent his days. They all fell in love with him, but he was oblivious, interested only in hunting in the hills with his companions. His pride in his

beauty grew so great that he had nothing but scorn for the feelings of others.

How do others react to Narcissus? How does he treat them?

There was one nymph, Echo by name, who saw Narcissus chasing deer into nets in the hills. Echo was instantly seized by love and could not overcome it. Secretly, she followed him through the wilderness, waiting for her chance to make herself known to him—but one thing held her back: she could not initiate speech on her own. She could only repeat what was said to her. This was her condition, and it

1. **the naiads and the dryads.** Nymphs of the water and of trees

**words
for
everyday
use**

o • bliv • i • ous (ə blí'vē əs) *adj.*, unaware; lacking attention. *Pete cranked up the volume of the television, oblivious to the fact that he was disturbing everyone's sleep.*

had come about because one day the goddess Hera was questioning the nymphs about her husband Zeus. She asked them where Zeus was, suspecting that the unfaithful god had been chasing the lovely nymphs and dwelling among them. Indeed he had, and while he was making his escape Echo distracted Hera with a flow of entertaining conversation. When Hera learned she had been fooled, she cursed Echo, saying, “From now on your words will not be your own. You will only be able to repeat what is said to you. That way your powers to beguile and distract will be curtailed.”

Who has punished Echo? What is the punishment?

Thereafter Echo could only repeat the words she heard. She could not announce herself to Narcissus. She trailed him silently, hoping for the right circumstance to meet him and declare her love. One day Narcissus had wandered away from his companions, and was in the forest looking for them. Echo was nearby, but Narcissus did not see her. “Is anyone here?” he cried. “Here,” she answered. “Come to me,” he called out. “Come to me,” she replied. “Do not avoid me,” he pleaded. She said the same to him. “Let us meet,” he announced. This was her chance. She stepped out of hiding and stood before him smiling, saying, “Let us meet.” He fell back from her scornfully. “You are not the one I seek. I would die before I would be near you.” Echo advanced toward him, pleading, “I would be near you.” But he ran from her.

Haunted by his rejection and crushed by shame, Echo hid herself in caves and covered herself with leaves. She began to waste away and disappear. In the end only her bones were left, and these became rocks. But her

What happens to Echo?

voice remained. Travelers and wanderers heard it sometimes, answering them with their own words. Still Echo did not forget Narcissus.

Meanwhile, Narcissus too fell victim to a curse. Another nymph had fallen in love with him, but was also spurned. This one cried to the heavens for vengeance: “May Narcissus fall into a love that is not returned!” The goddess of righteous anger, Nemesis, heard these words. And so it happened that on a sunny and hot day Narcissus found himself at a pond to which no shepherd’s flocks had been, from which no goats had drunk. It was a wild place. A green meadow surrounded it, and tall trees shaded it from the sun and sheltered it from winds. Putting his face to the waters in order to quench his thirst, Narcissus caught sight for the first time of his own reflection. He was astonished by the beautiful face that met his eye.

What happens to Narcissus as he bends over the pool for a drink?

“What star-like eyes are these; what smooth skin! That forehead, that jaw, that gorgeous flowing hair!

Who are you? Draw near to me!” He reached his hands to the water, but the reflected image disintegrated. He waited for it to reappear. “Only the surface of these waters parts us. No fortress gates nor city walls; no long rocky highway, no impenetrable forest nor unclimbable mountain stands between us. Yet I cannot reach you! How can this be?” He cried to the endless skies, “How is it that when I find my love his very nearness keeps us far apart?” But there was no answer.

Narcissus could not leave this place. Entranced by his own reflection, he began to waste away from hunger and thirst. His strength and his life ebbed away and did not return. Echo

**words
for
everyday
use**

be • guile (bi gīal´) vt., lead by deception; distract. *When my little brother screamed for a toy he wanted, I beguiled him with the promise of an ice cream cone.*

cur • tail (kər tāl´) vt., make less as if by cutting away a part. *The dictator’s power was curtailed when his army was defeated.*

dis • in • te • grate (di sin´ tə grāt´) vt., break apart. *The note disintegrated into tiny pieces after it had accidentally gone through the wash.*

ebb (eb´) vi., decline; fall to a lower or worse state. *My determination ebbed, and I became depressed as I realized how difficult it would be to reach my goal.*

hovered around him, invisible and unforgetting. Her disembodied voice repeated his final word, which was “Alas.” He died, and his spirit left his body. Even on the boat of souls, crossing the river between this world and the other one, Narcissus leaned over the edge, looking into those waters, trying to catch a glimpse of the image that so captivated him.

The nymphs heard of his death and went to the pond to retrieve his body for the funeral

ceremony. But when they got there, they found no corpse, only a new blossom with snowy petals and a yellow corona.² The flower came to be called “Narcissus,” in honor of one who, in the enigmatic words of Tiresias, “came to know himself,” and fell in love. ■

How is Narcissus transformed?

2. **corona.** Trumpet-shaped cup of flowers such as the daffodil

art note



Narcissus, 1600. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

The brief and violent life of Caravaggio (1573–1610) was as dramatic as his paintings. Although this painting is more subdued than most of Caravaggio’s works, it has the same *chiaroscuro*, or severe contrast between light and shadow. What films or television shows can you think of that use this method of lighting?

words for everyday use

en • ig • ma • tic (e´ nig ma´ tik) *adj.*, mysterious; hard to decipher. *Julia is so enigmatic; I can never seem to understand where she is coming from.*

Respond to the SELECTION

Do you feel sympathy toward Narcissus, or do you think he deserves his fate?

Investigate, *Inquire,* and *Imagine*

Recall: GATHERING FACTS

- 1a. What is unusual about Echo's speech? What caused this peculiarity?
- 2a. How is Narcissus described? What effect does he have on other creatures? How does Narcissus respond to Echo?
- 3a. With whom does Narcissus fall in love? Who caused this to happen?

→ **Interpret:** FINDING MEANING

- 1b. How does Echo manage to express herself despite her speech limitation? How well does she succeed?
- 2b. How would you describe Narcissus's character?
- 3b. Why does Nemesis punish Narcissus?

Analyze: TAKING THINGS APART

- 4a. What metamorphoses, or transformations, occur in "Echo and Narcissus"?

→ **Synthesize:** BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER

- 4b. This story explains two phenomena in nature. What are these phenomena, and how are they explained?

Perspective: LOOKING AT OTHER VIEWS → **Empathy:** SEEING FROM INSIDE

- 5a. From the nymphs' perspective, what is Narcissus's crime? Explain whether you think Narcissus's punishment is appropriate to the crime.

- 5b. Imagine you were Narcissus and everyone was instantly captivated by your exceptional good looks. Would you find this annoying? How would you react?

Understanding *Literature*

SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF. Review the definition for **suspension of disbelief** in the Handbook of Literary Terms. The willingness to suspend disbelief, to participate imaginatively in a story being read, is the most important attribute, beyond literacy, that a person can bring to the act of reading literature. Which elements of the story require you to suspend your disbelief? Why?

MYTH. Review the definition for **myth** in the Handbook of Literary Terms. Features of myth are shared by other kinds of literature. *Fairy tales* deal with extraordinary beings and events but lack the authority of myth. *Sagas* and *epics* claim authority and truth but reflect specific historical settings. Discuss how the selection shows the characteristics of myths.