



Narcissus

The story of the handsome youth Narcissus (när sis' əs) has been retold for hundreds of years. This popular Greek myth has also inspired many painters, who have shown Narcissus staring enchanted at his own reflection in the water.

Jay MacPherson (1931–), the author of this version of the myth, has lived most of her life in Canada and is best known for her poetry.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis means change from one form into another. In the imaginative world of myths, both gods and mortals can experience this type of change. The sea-god Proteus, for example, has the power to transform himself into any shape he chooses. Also, the gods can change humans into other forms. At the end of "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo," the gods take pity on the grief of Clymene and her daughters and change them into poplar trees. In "Narcissus," you will read about another metamorphosis.

Look For

Identify the metamorphosis that occurs in this myth. Look for the resemblance between the character and the thing into which he changes.

Writing

Metamorphosis is not limited to myths. Many remarkable changes take place in the world around you. Have you ever watched a caterpillar develop into a butterfly, or a person grow from a small baby to a school-age child? Freewrite about an "everyday" metamorphosis that you have witnessed.

Vocabulary

Knowing the following words will help you as you read "Narcissus."

courted (kôrt' əd) <i>v.</i> : Tried to win someone's love (p. 585)	unrequited (un ri kwīt' əd) <i>adj.</i> : Unreturned (p. 585)
marred (mărd) <i>v.</i> : Disturbed (p. 585)	haggard (hag' ərd) <i>adj.</i> : Looking worn from grief or illness (p. 586)
deluded (di lōōd' əd) <i>v.</i> : Fooled; misled (p. 585)	lament (lə ment') <i>v.</i> : Express deep sorrow for; mourn (p. 586)
disdained (dis dānd') <i>adj.</i> : Scorned; regarded as unworthy (p. 585)	

Narcissus

Jay MacPherson

As beautiful as Adonis¹ was the ill-fated Narcissus, who from his childhood was loved by all who saw him but whose pride would let him love no one in return. At last one of those who had hopelessly courted him turned and cursed him, exclaiming: "May he suffer as we have suffered! May he too love in vain!" The avenging goddess Nemesis² heard and approved this prayer.

There was nearby a clear pool, with shining silvery waters. No shepherd had ever come there, nor beast nor bird nor falling branch marred its surface: the grass grew fresh and green around it, and the sheltering woods kept it always cool from the mid-day sun.

Here once came Narcissus, heated and tired from the chase, and lay down by the pool to drink. As he bent over the water, his eyes met the eyes of another young man, gazing up at him from the depth of the pool. Deluded by his reflection, Narcissus fell in love with the beauty that was his own. Without thought of food or rest he lay beside the pool addressing cries and pleas to the image, whose lips moved as he spoke but whose reply he could never catch. Echo came by, the most constant of his disdained lovers. She was a nymph who had once angered Hera, the wife of Zeus, by talking too much, and in consequence was deprived of the use of her

tongue for ordinary conversation: all she could do was repeat the last words of others. Seeing Narcissus lying there, she pleaded with him in his own words. "I will die unless you pity me," cried Narcissus to his beloved. "Pity me," cried Echo as vainly to hers. Narcissus never raised his eyes to her at all, though she remained day after day beside him on the bank, pleading as well as she was able. At last she pined away, withering and wasting with unrequited love, till nothing was left of her but her voice, which the trav-

NARCISO ALLA FONTE
Caravaggio
Scala/Art Resource



1. **Adonis** (ə dān'is): A handsome young man loved by Aphrodite, the goddess of love.
2. **Nemesis** (nem' ə sis)

eler still hears calling unexpectedly in woods and waste places.

As for the cruel Narcissus, he fared no better. The face that looked back at him from the water became pale, thin and haggard, till at last poor Echo caught and repeated his last "Farewell!" But when she

came with the other nymphs to lament over his body, it was nowhere to be found. Instead, over the pool bent a new flower, white with a yellow center, which they called by his name. From this flower the Furies, the avengers of guilt, twist garlands to bind their hateful brows.

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. What does Narcissus do that causes him to be cursed?
2. How does Narcissus finally fall in love?
3. Why has Echo incurred the wrath of Hera? How does Hera get her revenge?
4. What does Echo do while Narcissus lies gazing at the object of his love?
5. How are Echo and Narcissus changed at the end of the myth?

Interpreting

6. How is what happens to Narcissus a fitting punishment for his pride?
7. What are two facts of nature explained by this myth?

Applying

8. Do you think there is a little bit of Narcissus in each of us? Explain.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis refers to a change from one form to another. In this myth, Narcissus experiences such a change.

1. Why is it appropriate that Narcissus becomes a flower?
2. Explain how the story would be different if Narcissus simply died, without undergoing a magical change.

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Understanding Word Origins

The English word *narcissism*, which refers to a certain way of thinking and acting, is based on the name Narcissus. You can therefore infer that narcissism is related to the way that Narcissus thinks and behaves in this myth.

1. What do you think the word *narcissism* means?
2. Look up the word in a dictionary to check your answer.
3. Write a sentence using the word.

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing Sketches About Metamorphosis

Imagine that the American Mythological Society has offered a \$150 award for the best article entitled *Metamorphosis: The Inside Story*. Most myths contain descriptions of metamorphosis from the outside. However, the Society wants you to describe what it actually feels like to undergo a magical change. Think of a transformation that you can describe. For instance, what would it be like to change into a flower, like Narcissus, or into a sportscar, a mountain, or anything else? Imagine that you are experiencing the metamorphosis and describe it in vivid terms. When revising your article make sure it is both unusual and convincing enough to win the award.