

Echo and Narcissus

A Creation Myth from the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid



By John William Waterhouse

A painting of Echo and Narcissus by John William Waterhouse

Zeus, king of the gods, was famous for his cheating ways. His wife Hera was understandably jealous. Hera was the goddess of women, marriage, and family. She often followed Zeus to try to stop him from cheating on her. Zeus was very fond of spending time with the mountain nymphs. Nymphs were beautiful young women. They were neither human nor god, but something in between.

One sunny beautiful day, Zeus descended from Mount Olympus and into the hills to flirt with the mountain nymphs. Knowing that his wife would try to find him, Zeus told a talkative young nymph named Echo to stand guard. Her job was to delay Hera as long as possible so that Zeus could make a clean getaway.

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Echo was a well-known chatterbox who could talk the ears off of a fox. Zeus knew that if anyone could delay Hera, Echo could. And so she did, but with life-changing consequences.

Echo heard Hera stomping through the woods before she saw her. Echo cheerfully greeted Hera. Echo did as Zeus instructed her. She began to chatter and chatter and chatter. At first Hera was patient, as she loved all women. But she soon began to suspect Echo's real purpose and became angry. In fact, Hera became so angry that she cursed the young nymph. From then on, Echo could only repeat the last words spoken to her by somebody else. She would never be able to produce her own words again—she could only mimic what others said to her. Echo was so embarrassed that she fled to the mountain caves where she lived sad and alone for the rest of her life.

Soon after, a young man named Narcissus appeared in the woods. He was so beautiful that anyone who saw him fell in love, but Narcissus never loved anyone so much as he loved himself. Narcissus was a hunter. He was the son of the river god Cephissus [SEH-fi-sis] and a nymph named Lirioppe [leh-RyE-uh-pee]. One morning, Narcissus got separated from his usual band of hunters and wandered near Echo's cave. Echo spied Narcissus from the entrance of her cave and immediately fell in love. But the poor nymph had no way to let him know unless he spoke first.

Looking for his pals, Narcissus called out, "Is anyone here?"

To this Echo replied: "Here!"

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Surprised, Narcissus called, "Come to me!"

"Come to me," called Echo in response.

Not seeing Echo in her cave, Narcissus called "Why do you run from me?"

Frustrated and near tears, Echo could only repeat his words back to him.

Narcissus stood perfectly still, looking around him. "Here, let us meet together," he called to the mysterious voice.

Echo gladly answered "Together," and ran to him to give him a hug.

Startled, alarmed, and quite a bit grossed out, Narcissus ran away from her. As he fled, he said, "Keep your hands off of me! I'll die before what's mine is yours."

"What's mine is yours," was all Echo could say back.

Scorned, embarrassed, and completely alone, Echo's body soon wasted away and died. All that remained of Echo was her voice, which is a sound that will always live on. Today, this sound is known as an echo.



Nemesis, the goddess who punished evil deeds, saw what happened between Echo and Narcissus and how it led to Echo's lonely death. Displeased with the arrogant youth, Nemesis cursed Narcissus to fall madly in love with his reflection.

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One afternoon, hot and thirsty after hunting with his friends in the woods, Narcissus lay down next to a silver pool of water to drink. But before he could drink, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the water. He fell immediately and deeply in love with the young man on the surface of the pool—himself. Still thirsty, he dipped his hand into the water to drink. In doing so, he sent ripples through his reflection.

“Come back, come back,” he called to his reflection. Finally, the waters stilled and he gazed endlessly at his own reflection, still as a statue. Afraid to get up to eat or drink, Narcissus soon began to waste away with love just as Echo did. In the end, Narcissus died where he was. In his place grew a flower that was named Narcissus in his honor. However, you may know this flower by its more common name—daffodil.



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A narcissus flower, commonly known as a daffodil