

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 legendary for his cheating ways and his many affairs both on Olympus and on Earth. His wife Hera was justifiably jealous and often followed Zeus to try to prevent him from cheating on her. Zeus was particularly fond of spending time with the mountain nymphs, beautiful maidens that were neither human nor god, but something wonderful in between.

One bright beautiful day, Zeus descended from his throne on Mount Olympus to visit and flirt with the mountain nymphs. Knowing that his wife would try to find him, Zeus commanded a delicate young nymph named Echo to serve as his lookout and to intercept and delay Hera as long as possible so that he would have time to make a getaway if needed.

Echo, who Zeus knew was a talented chatterbox, could talk the ears off of a fox and he knew that if anyone could delay Hera, Echo could. Echo did as Zeus bade her, but with life-changing consequences.

Echo and Narcissus

Echo saw Hera coming as she stalked through the woods angrily looking for Zeus. Echo cheerfully greeted Hera, the great goddess of women, marriage, and family. Echo did as Zeus instructed her; she began to chat with Hera, speaking incessantly and with almost no pause for breath. 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 was so infuriated that she punished the young nymph with a curse to match her deeds. Hera's curse was that Echo would never again be able to produce her own words, but would only be able to mimic the last words spoken to her by somebody else. Echo was so embarrassed that she fled to the mountain caves where she lived miserable and alone for the rest of her life.

Soon after, a young hunter named Narcissus appeared on the scene. Narcissus, the son of the river god Cephissus [SEH-fi-sis] and a nymph named Liriope [leh-RyE-uh-pee], was such a beautiful youth that most anyone who saw him fell in love. But Narcissus was never interested in anyone else because he could never love anyone so much as he loved himself. One morning while hunting in the woods, Narcissus got separated from his hunting party and wandered near Echo's cave. Echo spied Narcissus and immediately fell in love, but the poor nymph had no way to let him know unless he spoke to her first.

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

To this Echo eagerly replied: "Here!"

Surprised, looking this way and that for the source of the voice, Narcissus called out, "Come to me!"

"Come to me," called Echo longingly in response.

Not seeing Echo, for she stood in the entrance to 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 and embraced him.

Echo and Narcissus

Startled, alarmed, and quite a bit repulsed by a stranger's unwanted advances, Narcissus ran away from her saying, "Keep your hands off of me! I'll die before what's mine is yours" as he fled.

"What's mine is yours," was all the despondent Echo could reply, her heart breaking with unrequited love.

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 and today 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.

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 and fell immediately and profoundly in love with the young man on the surface of the pool—himself. Still thirsty, he dipped his hand into the water to drink, but in doing sent ripples through his reflection.

By Martin Hirshleifer (Own work) via Wikimedia Commons



A narcissus flower, commonly known as a daffodil

"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, lest he lose sight of his own reflection. Narcissus soon began to waste away with love just as Echo did. He died, never moving away from that same spot next to the silver pool of water. In his place grew a flower called after his name: Narcissus. You may know this flower by its more common name: daffodil.