

Echo and Narcissus

Groton and May Chapter 13



Nicolas Poussin *Echo and Narcissus* (c.1627/28)

Narcissus was a beautiful young boy, and everyone who saw him fell in love with him. One day, Echo saw him out hunting and yearned to speak to him. However, she had to wait and watch, following him, until he finally asked “Who’s here?” After a few exchanges she revealed herself, but Narcissus rejected her. Embarrassed and upset, Echo ran into the forest. From that time, she lived in caves until she finally wasted away. Her bones became rocks, and her voice was all that was left, still replying to anyone who spoke and still having the last word.

Echo was a mountain Nymph who was very talkative, and she loved to have the last word in a conversation. Often, when Jupiter would pay visits to various Nymphs and Juno would come in search of him, Echo would distract Juno with long conversations so that Jupiter and the Nymph could escape. When Juno finally realized what was happening, she decided to punish Echo for her deceit. She did not take away Echo’s ability to speak, but she made it so that Echo could only repeat the last few words which someone spoke. Echo would still always have the last word but would never be able to speak first.



Detail from J. W. Waterhouse's *Echo and Narcissus* (1903)



Another young man, spurned by Narcissus, cried out that Narcissus should be cursed to fall in love but never be able to have what he wanted. The goddess Nemesis heard this young man’s wish and led Narcissus to a mirror-like spring. When Narcissus saw his own image, he instantly fell deeply in love. He tried to speak to, kiss, and embrace the beautiful boy but found the two of them always separated by a thin layer of water. When he touched the water, it disturbed the reflection, and he could no longer see the boy. Therefore, Narcissus sat just staring at his image, refusing food or water, until he finally died. Echo, still mindful of her love, repeated Narcissus’s last “Goodbye” to the boy in the spring. The gods then turned him into a beautiful flower.

(This version of the story comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 3)



DAFFODIL FOLKLORE

- *Narcissus* is a genus which contains many different spring-flowering bulb plants. They are native to Europe and the Mediterranean.
- This family includes daffodils.
- Although the genus contains many different varieties, plants with flowers that have pale or white outer petals and a short yellow or orange trumpet are specifically called *Narcissus*.
- Because of their connection with *Narcissus*, the beautiful young boy, daffodils signify unrequited love, vanity, and excessive self-love.
- The distinct shape of the daffodil, with its blossoms “drooping” or facing straight out rather than up towards the sky, symbolizes *Narcissus* leaning over to gaze at his reflection in the water.
- The coronas or trumpets in the center of daffodils are said to contain *Narcissus*’s tears.

Another Tale about the Creation of Echoes

Longus, a Greek writer, tells another story about the nymph Echo in his novel *Daphnis and Chloe*. Echo’s father was mortal, and therefore, she was as beautiful as her mother, who was a Nymph, but Echo was also mortal. She was raised by the Nymphs and joined in their dances. The Muses taught her to sing all kinds of songs as well as how to perform on the pipe, the flute, and the lyre. Echo was very beautiful, but she avoided all males, whether they were human or divine. The god Pan was madly in love with Echo, and he became very angry when she rejected him; he was also envious of her musical abilities. Thus, Pan drove all the shepherds and goatherds in the area to madness, and they chased Echo around as if they were wolves or dogs. When they finally caught her, they tore her to pieces and scattered her limbs all over the earth. Miraculously, the limbs could still sing, just as the girl had in life. As a favor to the Nymphs, the Earth concealed all the limbs so that they would continue to sing out and imitate any sound that was made.