

Echo & Narcissus

Greek myth – Retold by Roger Lancelyn Green

Up on the wild, lonely mountains of Greece lived the Oreades, the nymphs or fairies of the hills, and among them one of the most beautiful was called Echo. She was one of the most talkative, too, and once she talked too much and angered Hera, wife of Zeus, king of the gods.

When Zeus grew tired of the golden halls of Mount Olympus, the home of the immortal gods, he would come down to earth and wander with the nymphs on the mountains. Hera, however, was jealous and often came to see what he was doing. It seemed strange at first that she always met Echo, and that Echo kept her listening for hours on end to her stories and her gossip.

But at last Hera realized that Echo was doing this on purpose to detain¹ her while Zeus went quietly back to Olympus as if he had never really been away.

“So nothing can stop you talking?” exclaimed Hera. “Well, Echo, I do not intend to spoil your pleasure. But from this day on, you shall be able only to repeat what other people say – and never speak unless someone else speaks first.”

Hera returned to Olympus, well pleased with the punishment she had made for Echo, leaving the poor nymph to weep sadly among the rocks on the mountainside and speak only the words which her sisters and their friends shouted happily to one another.

She grew used to her strange fate after a while, but then a new misfortune befell her.

There was a beautiful youth called Narcissus, who was the son of a nymph and the god of a nearby river. He grew up in the plain of Thebes until he was sixteen years old and then began to hunt on the mountains toward the north where Echo and her sister Oreades lived.

As he wandered through the woods and valleys, many a nymph looked upon him and loved him. But Narcissus laughed at them scornfully for he loved only himself.

Farther up the mountains Echo saw him. And at once her lonely heart was filled with love for the beautiful youth, so that nothing else in the world mattered but to win him.

Now she wished indeed that she could speak to him words of love. But the curse which Hera had placed upon her tied her tongue, and she could only follow wherever he went, hiding behind trees and rocks, and feasting her eyes vainly² upon him.

One day Narcissus wandered farther up the mountain than usual, and all his friends, the other Theban youth, were left far behind. Only Echo followed him, still hiding among the rocks, her heart heavy with unspoken love,

Presently Narcissus realized that he was lost, and hoping to be heard by his companions, or perhaps by some mountain shepherd, he called out loudly:

“Is there anybody here?”

“Here!” cried Echo.

Narcissus stood still in amazement, looking all around in vain. Then he shouted, even more loudly:

“Whoever you are, come to me!”

“Come to me!” cried Echo eagerly.

Still no one was visible, so Narcissus called again:

“Why are you avoiding me?”

Echo repeated his words, but with a sob in her breath, and Narcissus called once more:

“Come here, I say, and let us meet!”

“Let us meet!” cried Echo, her heart leaping with joy as she spoke the happiest words that had left her lips since the curse of Hera had fallen on her. And to make good her words, she came running out from behind the rocks and tried to clasp her arms about him.

But Narcissus flung the beautiful nymph away from him in scorn.

¹ Detain –v.: hold back; delay.

² Vainly - adv.: uselessly; without result.

"Away with these embraces!" he cried angrily, his voice full of cruel contempt. "I would die before I would have you touch me!"

"I would have you touch me!" repeated poor Echo.

"Never will I let you kiss me!"

"Kiss me! Kiss me!" murmured Echo, sinking down among the rocks, as Narcissus cast her violently from him and sped down the hillside.

"One touch of those lips would kill me!" he called back furiously over his shoulder.

"Kill me!" begged Echo.

And Aphrodite, the goddess of love, heard her and was kind to her, for she had been a true lover. Quietly and painlessly, Echo pined away and died. But her voice lived on, lingering among the rocks and answering faintly whenever Narcissus or another called.

"He shall not go unpunished for this cruelty," said Aphrodite. "By scorning poor Echo like this, he scorns love itself. And scorning love, he insults me. He is altogether eaten up with self-love... Well, he shall love himself and no one else, and yet shall die of unrequited³ love!"

It was not long before Aphrodite made good her threat, and in a very strange way. One day, tired after hunting, Narcissus came to a still, clear pool of water away up the mountainside, not far from where he had scorned Echo and left her to die of a broken heart.

With a cry of satisfaction, for the day was hot and cloudless, and he was parched⁴ with thirst, Narcissus flung himself down beside the pool and leaned forward to dip his face in the cool water.

What was his surprise to see a beautiful face looking up at him through the still waters of the pool. The moment he saw, he loved – and love was a madness upon him so that he could think of nothing else.

"Beautiful water nymph!" he cried. "I love you! Be mine!"

Desperately he plunged his arms into the water – but the face vanished and he touched only the pebbles at the bottom of the pool. Drawing out his arms, he gazed intently⁵ down and, as the water grew still again, saw once more the face of his beloved.

Poor Narcissus did not know that he was seeing his own reflection, for Aphrodite hid this knowledge from him – and perhaps this was the first time that a pool of water had reflected the face of anyone gazing into it.

Narcissus seemed enchanted by what he saw. He could not leave the pool, but laid by its side day after day looking at the only face in the world which he loved – and could not win – and pining just as Echo had pined.

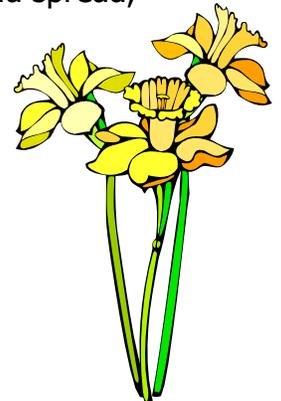
Slowly Narcissus faded away, and at last his heart broke.

"Woe is me for I loved in vain!" he cried.

"I loved in vain!" sobbed the voice of Echo among the rocks.

"Farewell my love, farewell," were his last words, and Echo's voice broke and its whisper shivered into silence: "My love... farewell!"

So Narcissus died, and the earth covered his bones. But with the spring, a plant pushed its green leaves through the earth where he lay. As the sun shone on it, a bud opened and a new flower blossomed for the first time – a white circle of petals round a yellow center. The flowers grew and spread, waving in the gentle breeze which whispered among them like Echo herself come to kiss the blossoms of the first Narcissus flowers.



³ Unrequited – v. used as adj.: not returned in kind.

⁴ Parched – adj.: very hot and dry.

⁵ Intently – adv.: with great concentration.