

Before You Read

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

Echo and Narcissus

retold by Roger Lancelyn Green

LITERARY FOCUS: RECURRING THEMES

You can probably think of a story whose main character accomplishes something great against all odds. Chances are that you have also read a story about the power of love. Stories are told by people all over the world, and they've been told throughout history. No matter where or when in history we live, people share the same kinds of dreams, fears, and needs. That is why the same **themes**—insights about life—come up again and again in stories. A theme that occurs over and over in literature is called a **recurring theme**.

READING SKILLS: USING CONTEXT CLUES

All readers, even skilled ones, come across unfamiliar words from time to time. Skipping over these words may lead to confusion. Using a dictionary to look up every unfamiliar word you come across would soon become tiring and would slow down your reading. An easier way to figure out a word's meaning is to use **context clues**, the words and sentences that surround an unfamiliar word and help you understand what the unfamiliar word means.

As you read "Echo and Narcissus," use the questions below to help you figure out word meanings.

- Does the surrounding text give clues to the word's meaning?
- Is there a familiar word or word part within the unfamiliar word?
- How is the word used in the sentence?
- Does the meaning I've guessed make sense in the sentence?

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand recurring themes.

Reading Skills

Use context clues.

Vocabulary Skills

Use context clues.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

You may be unfamiliar with these words from “Echo and Narcissus.” Take a few minutes to preview the words before you begin to read.

detain (dē-tān') v.: hold back; delay.

Echo was asked to detain Hera, so Hera’s husband, Zeus, could wander about.

vainly (vān'lē) adv.: uselessly; without result.

Echo tried vainly to attract the young man’s attention.

unrequited (un'ri-kwīt'id) v. used as adj.: not returned in kind.

Unfortunately, Echo’s love was unrequited, for Narcissus loved only himself.

parched (päřht) v. used as adj.: very hot and dry.

Narcissus’s throat was parched, so he eagerly knelt to drink the cool water.

intently (in-tent'lē) adv.: with great concentration.

Narcissus gazed intently at his reflection in the pool.

USING CONTEXT CLUES

In the Reading Skills for this selection, you learned how to use **context clues** to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words when you’re reading. Context clues include *definitions, examples, restatements, and contrast words*. The chart below gives examples of context clues for one of your vocabulary words. The context clues are in italics.

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Definition | My skin was parched , <i>dry and hot</i> , after the desert hike. |
| Example | The poor little dog must have been parched . He <i>drank his water thirstily</i> . |
| Restatement | The land was so parched that it wasn’t fit for crops. The <i>dried out</i> soil would produce no grain this year. |
| Contrast | Our neighbor’s lawn was parched , but we <i>watered ours regularly to keep it nice and green</i> . |

ECHO AND NARCISSUS

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IDENTIFY

Pause at line 5. Underline two words that describe Echo. Circle the words that tell who Hera was.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 13–15. Underline the details that tell why Hera becomes angry with Echo.

VOCABULARY

detain (dē·tān') v.: hold back; delay.

INFER

Pause at line 19. Underline the punishment that Hera gives Echo. What does this punishment reveal about Hera's character?

Up on the wild, lonely mountains of Greece lived the Oreades,¹ 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
10 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 **detain** 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.”

20 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 mountain-side 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.

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1. Oreades (ō'rē·ad'ēz).

There was a beautiful youth called Narcissus,² who was the son of a nymph and the god of a nearby river. He grew up in the plain of Thebes³ 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 **vainly** upon him.

One day Narcissus wandered farther up the mountain than usual, and all his friends, the other Theban youths, 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:

50 “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?”

2. **Narcissus** (nār-sis'əs).
3. **Thebes** (thēbz).

WORD STUDY

Scornfully, in line 34, describes the way Narcissus laughed. Underline the **context clues** nearby that help you understand that *scornfully* means “in a way that shows contempt or disdain.”

PREDICT

Pause at line 42. What do you think will happen when Echo and Narcissus meet?

VOCABULARY

vainly (vān'lē) *adv.*: uselessly; without result.

FLUENCY

After you've read lines 50–65, practice reading this boxed passage aloud. Use different voices that fit the two characters and their situation.

INTERPRET

Pause at line 77. In your opinion, if Echo could speak normally, would Narcissus's opinion of her change? Explain why or why not.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 79–83. Underline the words that tell who Aphrodite is.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 84–88. Underline the details that tell why Aphrodite decides to punish Narcissus. Circle the details that tell how she's going to punish him.

VOCABULARY

unrequited (un'ri-kwit'id) *v.*
used as *adj.*: not returned in kind.

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

60 “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.

70 “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.

80 And Aphrodite,⁴ 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 **unrequited** love!”

4. **Aphrodite** (af'rə-dīt'ē).

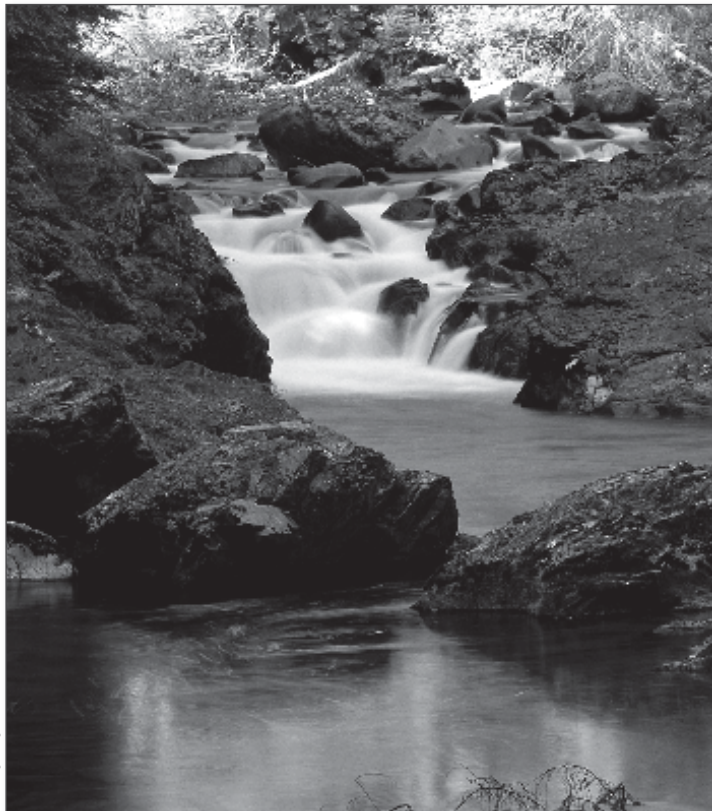
It was not long before Aphrodite made good her threat,
 90 and in a very strange way. One day, tired after hunting,
 Narcissus came to a still, clear pool of water away up the
 mountainside, not far from where he had scorned Echo
 and left her to die of a broken heart.

With a cry of satisfaction, for the day was hot and
 cloudless, and he was **parched** 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
 100 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



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VOCABULARY

parched (pärcht) *v.* used as
adj.: very hot and dry.

CLARIFY

Pause at line 103. What has
 happened to Narcissus?

VOCABULARY

intently (in-tent'le) *adv.*: with great concentration.

INFER

To whom is Narcissus speaking in lines 121–123?

IDENTIFY

“Echo and Narcissus” is an **origin myth**, a story that explains how something came to be. What two things in nature does this myth explain?

bottom of the pool. Drawing out his arms, he gazed **intently** 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 lay 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.

120 “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.



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