In late Greek mythology, a beautiful youth who rejected the love of the nymph Echo and was condemned by Nemesis, goddess of retribution, to fall in love with his reflection in a pool. He pined away, and a flower which appeared at the spot was named after him.

In psychology, narcissism signifies excessive love and admiration of oneself.

Narcissus was the son of the river god Cepheus and Liriope.

The Greek myth of Narcissus, whose pride caused him to fall in love with his own reflection, has inspired artists and writers since the classical period. Some people have seen the story as a warning against the dangers of vanity; others have viewed the tragedy of Narcissus as the result of his grieving over the death of his sister.

Narcissus was the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope; he was born when Cephissus enveloped Liriope in his waters. According to Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), who wrote about Narcissus in Metamorphoses, Narcissus’s mother was curious to know what sort of life awaited her son. She sought out Tiresias, the blind Greek prophet, and asked him how long Narcissus would live. Tiresias replied vaguely that Narcissus would enjoy a long life if he did not come to know himself. His mother wondered at the meaning of the prophecy, but was encouraged by the prospect of her son thriving to a ripe old age. It was not until Narcissus was 16 years old that his story began to unfold, and his life began to end.

Rejecting suitors
According to Ovid, the adolescent Narcissus was so beautiful that he was constantly fending off the advances of young men and women alike. One maiden in particular was so infatuated with Narcissus that she followed him when he was hunting in a forest. This maiden was the mountain nymph Echo, whom Hera, queen of the Olympians, had punished for distracting her attention with relentless conversation while her husband Zeus conducted one of his love affairs. Hera’s punishment was for Echo always to have the last word, but never the first—all the nymph could do was repeat the words of others.

As she followed Narcissus on his hunt, Echo’s passion grew stronger and stronger, as did her desire to reveal herself to the youth. When Narcissus became separated from his fellow hunters, Echo began to move among the shadows of the forest. Aware he was being watched, Narcissus called out, "Is there anyone there?" Echo, however, could only repeat his last words, and this exchange continued until he beckoned her out of the woods. When she tried to run into his arms, he resisted her advances, saying that he would rather die than let her possess him. Humiliated and hurt, Echo retreated into the hollows of the mountains and never showed her face again. Only her voice remained, which, for Greeks and Romans, served as an explanation of the echoes they heard in hills and valleys.

http://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/narcissus_greek_mythology
Condemned to self-love

While some suggest that it was Narcissus's rejection of Echo that brought about his fate, others claim that his treatment of Echo was part of a pattern the arrogant youth had established with previous suitors. He had scorned so many potential lovers that one of them, in a moment of vindictiveness, prayed that Narcissus might fall in love and not be able to possess the object of his desires. According to Ovid, this prayer was answered by Nemesis, the goddess of retribution. In other versions, the deity was the virgin goddess Artemis. Either way, the prayer was answered: while Narcissus rested by a pool to quench his thirst, he caught sight of his own reflection and was so captivated by it that he tried to embrace it. After trying repeatedly to grasp the image in his arms, he began to weep, but his tears only created ripples in the pool, thus hampering his efforts to see his own reflection. He ripped open his shirt and began to beat his chest in frustration and anguish. Narcissus was doomed, since he could not tear himself away from the image he saw in the pool. As he wasted away with longing he repeatedly cried, "Alas!" Echo, who was nearby, echoed his anguish with her own voice. At last Narcissus died, but even as his spirit made its way to the underworld it was fixated on its own reflection in the waters of the Styx River.

Not everyone agreed with Ovid's version of the myth. For example, Greek travel writer Pausanias (143-176 CE) maintained in his Description of Greece that the idea of Narcissus falling in love with himself was absurd. Instead, Pausanias suggested that the reflection that Narcissus saw in the pool reminded him of his dead twin sister, whom he adored.

When Narcissus died, his sisters—water nymphs known as Naiads—began preparing for his funeral, but they found in place of his body the yellow-and-white flower of a plant in the amaryllis family that became known as the narcissus in his memory. The flower, one of the earliest to bloom in spring, has a head that points slightly downward, as if Narcissus himself were still pining away, gazing at himself in the pool.

Flora and Fauna in Greek Myth

Just as the ancient Greeks and Romans developed stories to explain natural phenomena such as thunder—they believed that Zeus's weapon was the thunderbolt—so their myths explained the origins of different plants and animals. Ovid's Metamorphoses, which can be translated as "transformations," is a comprehensive collection of such explanatory myths. While many of Ovid's tales highlight the transformations of mythological characters such as Narcissus, who displeased the gods, the poet also treated his audiences to more compassionate myths. For example, when the youth Hyacinthus was accidentally killed, the god Apollo, who loved him, transformed him into the hyacinth flower. Another deity who fell in love with a mortal was the goddess Aphrodite, who pined for the beautiful boy Adonis. When Adonis died, Aphrodite caused the anemone flower to spring up from the drops of his blood. Ovid also included stories of couples whose love was commemorated in nature, such as the minstrel Orpheus, whose love for Eurydice survived in the song of the nightingales at the foot of Mount Olympus, and the elderly couple Baucis and Philemon, who were spared death by being transformed into intertwining oak and linden trees.

http://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/narcissus_greek_mythology
Like other members of the plant genus Narcissus, the daffodil appears to look downward, as if contemplating its reflection.

**Interpretations and inspiration**

As well as explaining the origins of the narcissus flower, the story of Narcissus perhaps served as a warning to Greek and Roman people that vanity and self-absorption were not characteristics that befitted members of their societies. Another, related suggestion is that the story owed much to the ancient Greek superstition that it was unlucky to look at one's own reflection. In the modern era, Narcissus has provided a name for a psychological condition. A person who has an excessive degree of self-esteem or self-absorption, and is thus unable to identify with the feelings of others, is often diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, or narcissism. The condition was first named by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, who believed that many classical myths provided insights into human psychology.

The story of Narcissus's demise has also served as inspiration for English poets Geoffrey Chaucer (c.
1342–1400), Edmund Spenser (1552–1599), John Milton (1608–1674), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and John Keats (1795–1821). Among the numerous paintings that depict Narcissus are nearly 50 murals found on the walls of houses excavated in the Roman city of Pompeii—which was buried in ash after a volcanic eruption in 79 CE—and works by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), Elihu Vedder (1836–1923), John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), and Salvador Dali (1904–1989). As a trait in people, narcissism was satirized in the 18th century in a comic play entitled *Narcissism, or The Self Admirer* by Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). The story of Echo and Narcissus also inspired a poem by French writer Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), which in turn formed the basis for the ballet *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* (The Young Man and Death) by French choreographer Roland Petit (b. 1924).

See also: ADONIS; APHRODITE; ARTEMIS; ECHO; HERA; NEMESIS; ORPHEUS; ZEUS.

Further reading


Citation


DEBORAH THOMAS

Copyright © 2012 Marshall Cavendish Corporation

http://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/narcissus_greek_mythology