

Topic Page: [Eros \(Greek deity\)](#)

Definition: **Eros** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

In Greek mythology, the child-god of love, traditionally armed with bow and arrows. He was the son of Aphrodite, and fell in love with Psyche. He is identified with the Roman Cupid.

In early times he was regarded as a powerful god of uncontrollable desire; the Greek lyric poet Sappho described him as 'bitter-sweet'.

He passed into philosophy with the work of the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, exemplifying the power of the attraction of opposites. Plato, pupil of the Greek philosopher Socrates, also mentions Eros in *Phaedo* on immortality and *Symposium* on love.

Summary Article: **EROS**

From *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

According to one source, Eros, the Greek god of sexual love, was one of the earliest deities, created out of the primeval chaos. He was the catalyst for many famous romances and tragedies.

Several different versions exist of the origin and personality of Eros. He is either one of the first deities to have come into existence or a divine child of the goddess of love. He is portrayed either as a handsome young man or a mischievous cherub armed with a bow and arrows of love. The earliest version of the god's origins comes from the Greek poet Hesiod (fl. 800 BCE), whose epic *Theogony* told how Eros, Tartarus, and Gaia were born at the beginning of time out of the primeval chaos. Whereas Tartarus, the darkest and most horrible part of the underworld, and Gaia, the earth, represented places, Eros embodied an emotion—sexual love. According to Hesiod, after Uranus (sky) emerged from Gaia, Eros brought about the union of these two, who became the parents of the first generation of gods. Eros also presided over the subsequent marriages of their offspring and eventually of humans. Therefore, Hesiod's Eros has an all-important place as the instigator of divine love and passion.

Other versions have it that Eros was the son of Aphrodite, goddess of love, and either Hermes, messenger of the Olympians; Ares, god of war; or Zeus, ruler of the gods. Perhaps because of his Olympian parentage, Eros was depicted in early ancient Greece as being strong, handsome, and athletic. He was also regarded as the protector of homosexual love among men and adolescent boys. In Athens the metics, resident noncitizens of Greek city-states whose status lay between that of slaves and citizens, erected a statue on the Acropolis dedicated to the memory of two young men, Meles, a citizen, and Timagoras, a metic. According to the legend, Timagoras loved Meles, but Meles rejected Timagoras's affections and commanded the metic to leap to his death from the Acropolis. As soon as Timagoras did so, Meles was so overcome by remorse that he followed Timagoras and also jumped to his death. At the statue the metics built an altar to Anteros, who was sometimes seen as the mutual-love aspect of Eros or as Eros's brother and deity of mutual love.

The depiction of Eros as a child with wings began to appear later in ancient Greece and was developed further by the Romans, who called him Cupid or Amor. The cherub Eros tended to have a quiver full of two kinds of arrows: sharp and gold-tipped, and blunt and lead-tipped. The gold-tipped arrows kindled

love, while the lead-tipped ones inspired loathing.



Permission: Corbis, Mimmo Jodice

This Roman fresco, referred to as Punishment of Eros, was uncovered from the ruins of a villa in Pompeii. It shows Eros (Cupid) as the winged child on the right, perhaps with his mother Aphrodite (Venus).

Eros in myths

Although Eros did not feature as a central figure in many myths, he was portrayed as the catalyst for several famous stories. One of the earliest stories concerning Eros tells how a group of powerful giants, under the leadership of Porphyron, attacked Mount Olympus. Eros shot one of his arrows at the chief giant's liver, changing Porphyron's anger and aggression to lustful love for Hera, wife of Zeus. Porphyron then tried to rape Hera, but this enraged Zeus so much that he struck the giant dead with one of his mighty thunderbolts.

Another example was when Eros made the witch Medea fall in love with Jason when he was on his quest for the Golden Fleece. Hera and Athena, goddess of war, were wanting to aid Jason in his quest, and they asked Aphrodite for help. They convinced the goddess of love to order her winged son to shoot an arrow into Medea's heart. As soon as Eros's arrow found its mark, Medea (whose father, King Aeetes of Colchis, possessed the Golden Fleece) helped Jason and his Argonauts steal the fleece and flee Colchis.

A more tragic example of the god's powers involves the god Apollo and Daphne, a nymph. One day Apollo, who boasted of his expertise with the bow and arrow, ridiculed Eros's archery. In revenge, Eros

secretly shot one of his gold-tipped arrows into Apollo, forcing him to fall in love with Daphne. At the same time, Eros shot a lead-tipped arrow into Daphne, causing her to reject Apollo's love. As the nymph fled from Apollo, she was transformed by her father, a river god, into a tree to escape his lustful clutches.



Permission: Corbis, Kimbell Art Museum

The painting on this fifth-century-BCE vase depicts Eros as a young, handsome archer, the common presentation of the god of love in the early years of classical Greece.

Eros and Helen of Troy

Perhaps the most famous example of Eros's intervention was when one of his arrows caused the Greek queen Helen to fall in love with Paris. After Paris, a Trojan prince, had chosen Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess over Hera and Athena, the goddess of love promised Paris that he would have Helen as his mistress. Paris then visited Sparta, where Helen lived. Menelaus, king of Sparta and husband of Helen, entertained the Trojan prince but had to leave to bury his grandfather on Crete. While Menelaus was away, Eros shot his gold-tipped arrow into Helen's heart, forcing her to fall in love with Paris, and the couple fled to Troy. When Menelaus returned and learned what had happened, he gathered all the kings of Greece and set sail for Troy to retrieve his wife, thus starting the Trojan War.

Eros and Psyche

The most famous myth in which Eros appears as the central character is the romance between him and Psyche. The story comes from *Metamorphoses*, by Roman writer Lucius Apuleius (c. 124–c. 170 CE).

Psyche was so uncommonly beautiful that the populace ceased to worship Aphrodite (Venus) and turned their adoration to the beautiful mortal. However, Psyche longed not for divine adoration but for marriage. Nevertheless, Aphrodite could not bear the competition and ordered her son to make Psyche fall in love with the most odious creature he could find. Yet when Eros saw Psyche for himself, he too fell in love with her; he could not obey his mother's command. Instead he asked Apollo to give Psyche's father an oracle that she must be married to an evil spirit atop a certain mountain. The king obeyed, and Psyche was whisked off to a beautiful palace. Inside the palace she was waited on by invisible hands and a gentle voice that told her she had nothing to fear. When night came, she went to bed, where she was joined by Eros in human form. He told her that he was her husband, and that she would enjoy the most blessed of lives if only she would refrain from finding out who he was or attempting to see him.



Permission: Shutterstock, Michael Fuery

The young Eros is shown with his lover, Psyche, in this early 19th-century marble statue by the neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova (1757–1822).

Although she loved both her mysterious husband and living in the palace, after a few days Psyche felt lonely. To cheer her up, Eros allowed her to be visited by her sisters. The sisters were jealous of Psyche's life and lied to her that they thought her shadowy husband was really an evil serpent. Believing her sisters, Psyche went to bed that night concealing a lantern and a dagger. After Eros had fallen asleep, she lit the lamp and held it up to his face, raising the dagger to murder him. As soon as she saw the beautiful features of her husband, she was so entranced that she let a drop of the lamp's hot oil fall down upon his shoulder, waking him. Realizing that Psyche now knew his true identity, Eros flew away.

Psyche's tasks

Psyche wandered everywhere in search of Eros, eventually ending up at Aphrodite's palace. The goddess admitted Psyche into the palace, but only on condition that the girl become her slave; Aphrodite then gave Psyche various near-impossible tasks to perform.

First she was made to organize a roomful of assorted grains before nightfall. A colony of ants that felt sorry for Psyche came to assist her by dividing the grains into piles. Afterward, Venus told Psyche to retrieve a tuft of wool from a flock of flesh-eating sheep. This time, a reed told her how to safely obtain the wool while the sheep were asleep. Next, Psyche had to fill a vessel with water from the Styx, the mythical river that separated the land of the dead from the land of the living. An eagle, which owed Eros a favor, arrived just in time and retrieved the water for her.

Psyche's final task was to obtain a jar from Persephone containing beauty. This meant that Psyche must die, because Persephone was the queen of the underworld. Psyche climbed a high tower, determined to leap to her death. The tower, however, spoke to her and gave her specific directions of how to fulfill her task without having to die. She entered the underworld by way of Taenarum in the southern tip of the Peloponnese. When she finally arrived at Persephone's throne, the goddess gave her a tightly sealed jar in response to Aphrodite's request. Meanwhile Eros, who longed for Psyche, pleaded with Zeus for help, insisting that Psyche had been punished sufficiently. Zeus agreed.

Psyche had nearly reached the land of the living when her curiosity got the better of her. She opened the jar and was instantly overcome by a deathly sleep. Soon after, Eros found Psyche and brought her back to life. He then carried her to Mount Olympus, where the couple were given a marriage suitable for deities. Aphrodite put aside her anger, and Zeus made Psyche immortal. Shortly after, Psyche bore Eros a daughter, Voluptas, whose name means "pleasure."

See also: AENEAS; APHRODITE; ARES; CUPID; DAPHNE; HELEN; HERA; HERMES; MEDEA; PARIS; PSYCHE; ZEUS.

Further reading

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