

College Guild
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Mythology

Unit 6 of 6

Halcyon

Myths are often about important things in life, including love. This last Unit has three popular stories. The first is about a king named Ceyx (SEE-iks) and his queen, Halcyon (pronounced HAL-see-on). Their marriage was a happy one. They loved each other dearly and did not want to be separated. But there came a day when Ceyx had to make a trip by sea to consult an oracle about the death of his brother. Halcyon tearfully begged him not to leave her. Because she was the daughter of Aeolus, king of the winds, she knew how dangerous the seas could be once the winds were let out. Even the heavens could strike out with lightning flashes. Nevertheless, Ceyx and his crew set sail. They were shipwrecked and drowned. His last words were a prayer to the gods that the waves would carry him back to Halcyon for burial.

Halcyon's grief was so moving that Hera ordered her messenger, Iris, the rainbow goddess, to go to Somnus, the god of sleep. She told him to send a vision to Halcyon that would convince Halcyon of Ceyx's death at sea. Somnus was so sleepy that he persuaded his son, Morpheus to deliver the message. Morpheus assumed the appearance of Ceyx and, dripping wet at her bedside, convinced her of the bad news.

Weeping and moaning, Halcyon ran to the seashore where she saw her beloved husband floating on the waves. By the mercy of the gods, Ceyx and Halcyon were both instantly transformed into birds, the kingfishers. The actual kingfisher bird is hardly larger than a sparrow, sea-blue in color, with a long beak. These birds breed at mid-winter for seven days before and seven nights after the winter solstice on what we call "halcyon days". It is at that time the seas are always calm and navigable. Aeolus forbids the winds to blow. No clouds cover the sky, no rain falls, and Ceyx and Halcyon raise their young in peace and tranquility. These calm and clear days actually do occur in the Mediterranean area. We use the expression to refer to times of peace and contentment, especially those gone by, never to return again.

1. Give a specific example (from your life, a fictional life, or that of a famous person) of some "halcyon days".

In almost every knitting magazine there is an advertisement for yarns and knitting supplies from "The Halcyon", with the logo of a kingfisher.

2. How do you think yarn and knitting are connected to the myth of Halcyon?

Iris, the swift-moving goddess of the rainbow wore a robe of gorgeous colors and was considered to have the power to connect the sky and the earth with the rainbow. Iris means "rainbow" in Greek.

3. In the Wizard of the Oz, Dorothy went over the rainbow. Does this qualify as a myth? Why or why not?

The name of Somnus, the god of sleep, is the Latin word for "sleep". The Greek name is Hypnos and he lived in a cave that was dark and misty. The River of Forgetfulness flowed through it. He is usually pictured lying on a comfy couch surrounded by his sons, one of whom was Morpheus.

4. Think of any words connected with Somnus, Hypnos, and Morpheus. Use two of the words in sentences.



Somnus and Morpheus



Iris



Kingfishers

Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus was a master poet and musician. His beautiful voice and accompanying lyre could calm the savage beast or man. Some say that the whole world would listen entranced. All creatures would follow him. Even the trees and stones listened to his songs. When Orpheus married Eurydice, a snake bit her on the heel. It killed her instantly, and she was separated forever from the one she loved.

5. Why are people so moved by music?

6. What's your favorite instrument and why?

Overcome with grief, Orpheus wandered the earth alone and stopped singing and playing his lyre. He then went to the Underworld to see if he could bring Eurydice back to earth. When he got to the river Styx where the guard dog, Cerberus waited, he started to play the lyre again. It was so beautiful, that Charon, the boatman, and the dog, Cerberus, let him pass. Because Hades was so moved by the music, he granted Orpheus his wish to have Eurydice go back to earth, BUT on one condition -- he must not look back until they were both completely out of the entrance, or she would return immediately to the Underworld.

7. Why do you think Hades didn't want Orpheus to look back at the Underworld?



Together, they left the dark and gloomy Underworld with fog so thick they could hardly see their way out. As they approached the light of the entrance, Orpheus was driven with longing to see her and took a quick look back to see her face. The Underworld shook with thunder as the dying Eurydice slid back forever. Orpheus reached for her but felt only air. Once more he had lost her. In the year that followed, he wandered alone until death claimed him and he was finally reunited with Eurydice.

8. Do you think Orpheus looked back because of fate or weakness? Explain your answer.

9. Does looking back in our own lives help us learn from our past mistakes or prevent us from moving forward?

"Orpheus in the Underworld" is a famous opera by the French composer, Jacques Offenbach. He transformed the tragic Greek love story into a comedy of mythological proportions. Orpheus is almost as eager to get rid of Eurydice as she is to run off with a new lover. The gods, Zeus and Hades (Jupiter and Pluto) are only too happy to assist in the breakup, as they are busy scheming to win Eurydice's affections. Along the way, all the gods and a few mortals join Hades in the Underworld as he throws a lavish party.

10. Pick any other myth and turn it into a comedy.

Pyramus and Thisbe

According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pyramus and Thisbe lived next door to each other and became lovers. Their parents would not allow them to marry. In the wall between their houses, there was a small opening through which they exchanged notes and kisses.

11. Why do you think their parents would not allow Pyramus and Thisbe to marry? Do you think parents should have a say in who their children marry?

One night, they decided to meet each other at a pre-arranged place under a white mulberry tree at the well-known tomb of Ninus. Thisbe arrived first in the dim light of evening, and after waiting a while, began to walk away. Suddenly, she spied a lion that had come to the fountain to drink. His jaws were bloodied from a fresh kill. As she ran to escape, she dropped her shawl. The lion picked up the shawl and tore it to pieces.

Now Pyramus arrived and, seeing the bloodied shawl, concluded that Thisbe had been killed. He drew out his sword and killed himself beneath the mulberry bush. Thisbe returned to find his lifeless body and killed herself. To this day the mulberry bush produces deep red berries, which the Greeks claimed was the result of the blood of the lovers that had seeped into the roots of the white mulberry bush.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is very similar to the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe. Juliet and Romeo are two lovers from feuding families who end up dead because of a miscommunication.

12. Come up with a myth that explains why daisies have yellow centers.

Chiron, the Centaur

The Centaurs were a race of beings with the head and torso of a man and the body and legs of a horse. With the exception of a few noted Centaurs, the race was brutal and savage. They show up frequently in myths most always violent and ready for battle. There were two centaurs who did not fit this description. Both highly respected Centaurs, they were wise, hospitable, and shunned violence. They were teachers, physicians, prophets, and sages. Here is a famous myth about one of them, Chiron, the god of tutoring.

One of the best adventure stories is the ancient tale of Jason and the Argonauts, which is probably 4,000 years old. On their quest for the Golden Fleece, Jason and his fearless crew meet up with dragons, monsters, and a merciless god of the sea.

Jason agreed to bring back a famous Golden Fleece that was guarded day and night by a huge fire-breathing dragon. He immediately began to enlist a crew and build a ship. He knew that the trip would be a long, dangerous one. There were many famous sailors, called the Argonauts, who joined the crew. Among them were Hercules, Atalanta, and Orpheus. All of the crew members were chosen for a particular skill. Athena was even involved in the shipbuilding, which is a good example of how gods and goddesses often became involved in affairs of mortals they liked.

13. Argonauts were known as fierce adventurers. Write a letter to a modern-day Argonaut.

Among the creatures they encountered were the Harpies. These were dreadful flying creatures with the heads of women and the bodies of vultures with hooked beaks and iron claws. They made frightful, shrieking cries. Their name is related to the Greek word meaning "to snatch", and that is just what they did. Once angered by a poor, unfortunate king, Zeus sent the Harpies to swoop down upon his food just as he was beginning to eat. They snatched most of his food and fouled the rest of it, which gave off a horrible stench. The king was unable to eat and was slowly starving. Zeus later called off the punishment.

Today, when we call someone a "harpy", we are insulting them, comparing him/her to the hideous creatures of mythology who not only had a terrible appearance but a horrific stench. The term is most commonly used to describe an ill-tempered, person, especially a woman.

14. Describe a modern-day "harpy".

Argus

Hermes (Mercury), was the messenger of the gods. The most celebrated of the many stories that demonstrated his brilliant talents was that of Argus, a monster with a hundred eyes. Argus was sent by Hera (Juno), jealous queen of the gods, to spy on Lo, one of Zeus' favorite lovers. On Zeus' orders, Hermes killed Argus. It was a difficult task, which he accomplished by playing sweet music on a shepherd's pipes and by telling endless stories until Argus fell asleep and his last eye was closed. Overwhelmed with grief, Hera transformed Argus into a peacock, her favorite bird, setting his hundred eyes into his tail as a memorial. A male peacock in full plumage is the most beautiful and spectacular pheasant in the world. Their tail feathers are brilliant shades of green and blue. In our vocabulary today, "argus-eyed" means an ever-vigilant, keen observer of the world.



15. Name three examples of what an "argus-eyed" individual might observe.

16. In what profession or occupation might one hundred eyes be a distinct advantage?

Janus



There was a Roman god, Janus, who also had the gift of many eyes. A person -- or a god -- would need to have eyes in the back of his/her head to be able to stand in a doorway and see what was going on inside and outside at the same time. That was what the Romans believed the god Janus could do. He was thought to have lived in and watched over every gate, doorway, and passageway in the land. You could too if you had two heads -- which also means two faces. He was the doorkeeper of heaven and the patron of beginnings and endings. He had two faces, one for the rising sun and one for the setting sun. January gets its name from the god. His chief temple was in Rome, which was aligned east and west and had double doors front and back. There was an interesting custom at that time for the chief magistrate to ceremonially open the gates to the temple during war, but they remained closed during peacetime.

17. What do you think was the reasoning for the custom of the doors?

18. What is the current meaning of "two-faced"? Why did it evolve to mean something negative?

19. Write a poem about a sunrise or a sunset.

Since this is your final Unit, we'd appreciate any feedback or suggestions you have for improving the Course!

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Appendix Greek Mythology: Unit 6 of 6

Citations

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