

# FROM THE ARCHIVE

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## Greek Boy Got His Wings Using Greek Myths to Stimulate Student Poems

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*I am quite naturally drawn to a myth in which  
life and death meet face to face. —Jean Cocteau*



EVER SINCE CHILDHOOD, I've been attracted to the Greek myths, a lifelong fascination which has led me, as both a classroom teacher and a poetry workshop leader, to try to make these stories come alive for teenagers. The myths—with their timeless themes of journey and heroism, loyalty and passion, ambition and betrayal—give us vivid images to explore and offer voices or masks from which to speak. Their sensuous imagery and mystery continue to shed light on what it means to be human. Who can forget the warm drop of oil falling from Psyche's lamp onto sleeping Cupid's arm? Ariadne's golden thread winding through the labyrinth? Leda in the grip of the swan, or trees swaying to the rhythm of Orpheus' lyre? And what young person could not imagine the exhilaration of Phaethon's horses tugging on their reins? These images, if we let them enter our reverie and become translated through our senses, can become powerful sources for writing. When I ask students to write from figures in Greek mythology, my goal is to find ways for myth and personal experience to combine, so that students can imaginatively refigure both the ancient tale and their own lives.

One way to do this is to introduce Greek mythology through film, visual art, and poems. I take students to the Detroit Institute of Arts, where they can see a Leda and a Maenad within just a few feet of one another, or, in another gallery, Aristaeus, the Pan figure in the Orpheus myth from whom Eurydice was fleeing when she met her death. You don't have to look far into European art to find figures from Greek mythology. If you don't live near a museum, bring in postcards or art books with color reproductions. Bullfinch's *Illustrated Mythology* is a great resource. I also use Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, selections from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and a collection of contemporary poems that can make ancient themes come wonderfully alive. These include Hilda Doolittle's "At Ithaca," Katha Pollitt's "Penelope Writes," Stephen Dobyns' "Odysseus' Homecoming," Margaret Atwood's "Circe: Mud Poems," and Linda Pastan's "On Rereading *The Odyssey* in Middle Age"—all contemporary takes on Homer. A ninth-grade McDougal, Littell literature anthology presents the myth of Daedalus, retold by Bernard Evslin, along with a reproduction of Pieter Breugel's painting "The Fall of Icarus." I've supplemented these with modern poems such as WH Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," Anne Sexton's sonnet "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph," and Robert Hayden's "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home." Rita Dove's *Mother Love* recasts the Persephone myth into a rich collection of mother/daughter poems, with both contemporary and mythical settings.

As a classroom teacher, I've used the Greek myths to stimulate word study (requiring students to learn the meanings of *labyrinthine*, *halcyon*, *tantalize*, *herculean*, *panic*, and *lyric*, and their connections to Greek mythology), reflective writing, formal essays, discussion groups, and class presentations. Myth study can be lots of fun. It may, on occasion, result in

pleasant personal surprises for the teacher: one student's treatment of the Persephone myth, for example, cast me as the goddess Demeter rescuing its author from the death of inspiration, a bleak, imageless underworld where she'd been seduced by Hades, a.k.a. "Writer's Block Harry." A highlight from one ninth-grade class included an Oprah-style talk show that featured Orpheus (dressed as quite the dude, in a bright yellow suit and carrying a guitar) confronting the Maenads, and an intricate board game in which the winner was first to arrive at the Elysian Fields. The game included such pitfalls as the River Styx and a square labeled "Medusa's Lair: You are turned to stone. Lose one turn."

Another way to enliven the Greek myths is to use storytelling. The telling of a tale is a shared communal experience, a living act, that honors the oral tradition and builds common ground in the classroom. Telling a story is itself an act of imagination. When I tell a story, I somehow enter the world of that story. When students listen, they do the same thing: they create the world of the story for themselves. We may all hear the same words when Orpheus crosses the river into the underworld, but each one of us imagines his or her own river. Because myths are so rich, students will find different scenes, characters, or images that resonate for them.

One summer my fascination with myth and story led me to enroll in a workshop with Laura Simms at the Wellspring Institute in Mendocino, California. Laura, a master storyteller, helped us develop oral presentations of ancient tales and myths. We worked these stories through mime, meditation, and writing. We created theatrical tableaux based on our stories' characters; we researched the symbolism of plants and animals in our tales; we created maps and took others on a tour of our story's landscape; we told our stories to rocks, plants, and trees. These exercises were designed to help us achieve that capacity of the teller to "see" the story, a kind of imaginative staging through which the story comes alive for its listeners.

On our first night, Laura asked us to recall a memory from early childhood and to tell that memory to a small circle of people. The exercise appeared simple, yet each childhood memory seemed uncannily—and unconsciously—connected to the main story the participant was working on. One woman—who had chosen an Icelandic tale about a woman who had been a seal returning to the sea and leaving her human children behind—recalled a large, black stuffed animal that had been a source of childhood comfort after her mother died. A man, whose story was about a father leaving home to seek a fortune, told about his own father returning after a long absence. I had selected Orpheus as my story because I was intrigued by the figure of Orpheus as poet. The childhood memory I told was about stealing flowers from a neighbor's yard on the way home from kindergarten, then trying to plant them with a spoon in rock-hard ground. The flowers were tulips, so it must have been the first spring after the first winter I'd experienced. (We had just moved from California to Massachusetts.) To me, this memory has come to suggest Orpheus' journey to the underworld to recapture someone or something loved and lost.

This exercise helped me understand firsthand the connections that can occur between myth and personal experience. It also reminded me of how storytellers often say that their stories "choose them." It is these psychological, or perhaps pre-logical, dimensions of myth that I value most when using mythology as a source for poetry and imaginative writing. If anyone doubts that mythology can connect directly to a teenager's everyday reality, consider Justin's poem:

### **Grades**

Like Medusa's hair  
Grades are the sneakiest, crawliest  
And only thing wrapped around my head.  
I wish I had the shield of Perseus  
To protect me from the breath of those teachers  
The sword  
To slice through F's and D's  
Or the helmet  
To make me invisible  
From those annoying, fast-talking kids.  
When an assignment is due  
For some creepy reason  
Something happens. Those questions.  
Each one is a snake coming to attack.

How long does it have to be  
 does it have to be typed  
     what if I turn it in late  
         yes, mama, I finished my homework  
 take that out of your mouth, that's my homework  
     can I see that work from last night  
         can someone turn on a light for this stupid boy  
             I wish this bus would stop going over so many  
 bumps  
 I wish I had wings like Perseus  
 So I could get out of here.  
 —Justin Adams



I am fond of the voice in this poem, and the way the poem takes off toward the end in its crescendo of sneaky, snake-like lines—a deliberate typographical choice. It seemed to me that the poem was a breakthrough for Justin. The Perseus myth gave him a vehicle to tackle a sensitive subject with energy and humor. Without the Medusa figure, I doubt if a poem about poor grades would have worked as well.

Justin's poem shows how images from myths can express experience in unexpected ways. The Orpheus tale also consistently leads to poignant student writing. One year, we began our myth study by reading excerpts from Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. We also viewed the film *Black Orpheus* and discussed its symbols of love and death. Students were especially fascinated with the spiral staircase, the "underworld" voodoo scene with churchgoers speaking in tongues, and the Maenads presented as jealous "home girls." Soon after, as if on cue, a Detroit Institute of Arts film series screened Cocteau's *Orphée*. I took a group of students and asked them to jot down powerful or evocative scenes or lines of conversation. This film was no small cross-cultural stretch for my urban students—surrealism *and* subtitles—but they seemed to enjoy the experience. They compiled a collection of images and phrases, which I

typed up and gave them as a handout, adding some tips for working the lines into their own poems:

signing a statement as proof of love  
 a misty night  
 Death watching you as you sleep  
 messages you can't understand  
 Death will love you too much  
 a hand dipped in mercury  
 a map leading nowhere  
 shards of mirrored glass  
 Death in her upswept hair  
 a train crosses in front of you  
 judges sit in a panel before you  
 a hand reaching through a mirror  
 descending a spiral staircase  
 a breeze blowing through a room

Many of these phrases create elusive, mysterious effects in and of themselves. I am fascinated by the way a phrase, image, or single word can generate meaning, and I often use lists of lines or single words to trigger students' thinking. In this instance, the Orpheus story prompted several students to write poems about loved ones who had died. Some of the items from our list found their way, with interesting variations, into those poems.

## **Daddy**

I reached to touch you, Daddy,  
trying to remember a message  
I couldn't understand.  
I walked and walked  
but I could not reach you.  
I ran to catch up  
but a train crossed between us  
and when it had finally passed  
you had disappeared into  
the dark, misty night.  
I searched and searched knowing  
I would never see you again.  
Just in my memory.  
Just in my memory—your hazel  
eyes, your funny walk with  
your head bouncing from side  
to side, your words of comfort  
breezing through my still  
attentive ears.

—*Rosalind Tarver*

## **Orpheus Variations**

### *1. Father*

Upon white satin and lace  
he lies motionless.  
His black, wavy hair and  
thin moustache complement  
the pale, cold skin.  
Pinstripes travel vertically  
down the navy blue suit  
like roads on a map  
leading nowhere now.  
The glint of a thin, gold  
pin accents the lapel.  
A cherry-red rose  
where the heart once lived.

### *2. Ghost*

A cool breeze flows through  
what used to be your bedroom.  
Three white hooded images  
approach my bedside.  
I know it's you.  
A masculine hand grasps  
the crown of my head,  
keeping me still.  
The hand is yours.  
Your voice whispers  
that everything's okay  
but angels hum like a church

choir and my scream for help  
goes mute as suddenly  
you disappear.

### 3. *Juanita*

I step through a mirror  
extending my hand to you.  
I'm here to rescue you  
from the unliving.  
You mustn't stay long  
or death will love you  
too much.  
Let our joyous emotions  
guide us. Let  
shattered shards of mirrored  
glass mark our presence  
and reflect our descent down  
the white spiral staircase.  
Welcome home, Juanita.

—NaShawn Reed

On a recent museum visit, I told the Orpheus tale to a group of students as we stopped to consider an Italian Renaissance chest featuring inlays of animals surrounding Orpheus with his lyre. As I told the story, I could see the students' eyes become glassy and focused far away, in the manner of much younger children who listen with wide eyes and mouths slightly agape—a sure sign that they are "in" the tale, the imaginative space they create as they listen. Later that day, Jerome turned to the Orpheus myth to write about one of his favorite themes, love for an idealized and unattainable female. Much to his (and my) delight, the poem was selected for the museum's annual student *Writing about Art* booklet, and its first line was chosen as the anthology's title.

### **Orpheus**

My poetry is music  
Mourning the loss  
Of her face,  
Her pearl pink laugh,  
Her feathered touch  
That mimicked the breeze.

Her voice  
Is in every strum  
Of my lyre.

I play my song  
Soothing  
Bringing peace,  
Tears  
To dazzling eyes  
That hurt  
With whispers  
Of what could be.

On my lips

Remains the hum  
Of her song  
As I ignore  
The rocks  
And stretch  
My heart  
To meet hers  
In eternity.

—*Jerome Williams II*

Another student wrote from the perspective of Hades:

### **Hades Speaks to Orpheus**

Eurydice of the serpent's wrath  
descends to lower airs  
tastes the golden coin  
dropped, dropped as a token  
while her funeral pyre  
soots the sky into bleak clouds.  
My collection of riches,  
metals and gems  
glitter with fire  
but cold they are  
in this heated dark.

A box of death, a globe of life  
form drops of faded memory  
in my abode  
the shatter of iron tears  
that fall to sulfur pools  
when the dream of music  
plays with my ears.  
Orpheus slivers through  
opposite lands to implore  
for his wife, so one becomes two  
embrace, embrace, embrace  
the virgin lyre so I can hear  
the sweet mint plucks  
that glide from one to another  
before the taste casts off  
into rivers of desolation  
lands of air  
that can never be reached

obey, obey, obey  
may the dance of the trees  
whisk your wife away.

—*Wayne Ng*



Wayne's and Jerome's pieces illustrate how myths or legends can inspire persona poems, in which a myth becomes a mask to speak through. Margaret Atwood's poem "[Siren Song](#)" is a perennial favorite, and a fine model to use when asking students to develop a voice from a myth.

Other ways to experiment with persona and voice include retelling a myth as if it were the hottest gossip you'd ever heard or telling it from the point of view of an inanimate object in the story, a minor character, or an imagined character such as William Matthews' "Homer's Seeing-Eye Dog." I've also enjoyed having students take a "myth walk" (adapted from Laura Simms' exercises) in which they walk through the hallways or school grounds in pairs, taking turns telling their myths to their partner, either as straightforward narration or in the voice of a character from the tale. A walk like this is easy to structure. Give the first teller ten minutes to tell his or her story on the way out, the second teller ten minutes to tell one on the way back. The experience of telling while walking can lead to new, almost unconscious, discoveries as students present the myth in a relaxed, informal way.

I will often start my writing workshops based on the Greek myths by asking students what they know about a particular myth (usually more than they think). I ask them to jot down or volunteer elements of the story (images, objects, emotions), which I then write on the board as a source list for writing. I may present contemporary poems on mythological themes and ask students how *they* might bring the myth up to date. Or I may begin with a storytelling session, encouraging students to pay close attention to the mental pictures that come to them as they hear the story. Sometimes we'll discuss these pictures. I'll have them describe the scenes they see or feel most vividly. I may draw a directional compass on the board and ask them to share the different "maps" they've imagined, or ask them to give directions through their vision of the story. Does the huntsman turn left or right into the forest? Does the cottage face the rising or the setting sun? Other times, I'll simply wait a few moments for the spell of the story to recede before asking them to begin writing.

Recently, while conducting a poetry workshop at the Michigan Youth Arts Festival, I tried another approach. I had been spending some time thinking and writing about Icarus and Daedalus, and I wanted to see how that myth might inspire these talented students, whose poetry had won them an invitation to the annual festival. Since the labyrinth is such a dominant part of the story, I decided to start there.

Icarus' flight is an escape from both the imprisonment of the labyrinth and the societal shame and punishment related to the birth of the Minotaur. Initially, though, I did not mention this—I wanted the students to write without knowing where we were going. I asked them to start by freewriting on the idea of hiding. What kinds of things do we hide—stories, treasures, things we are ashamed of? Where do we hide? From whom do we hide? Is hiding pleasurable? What is it like to be discovered in hiding? Why do we feel the need to hide? After fifteen minutes or so of intense writing, I asked students to volunteer to read. One student had written of his father hiding his love from him. Others had written of hiding places, secrets, and the like.

Then I asked them to freewrite again, this time on the idea of flight. I asked them to imagine the physical sensation of flight and think of as many bodily details as they could. The kinesthetic capacity of words is often overlooked, I think, when we ask students to use the five senses in their writing; movement and action surely constitute a sixth sense. One student, whose poem follows, came up with the idea of backbones turning into wings. Others explored the feeling of flight, how skin or hair might flap in the air, and what to do with one's arms.

At this point, I introduced the Daedalus and Icarus myth. Many students knew parts of it, and were able to add details as we went along. I read several poems related to the myth, including a recent poem of my own in which I imagine Icarus taking off ahead of his father, seeking the warmth and light of the sun (as contrasted with the gloom of the labyrinth) on a bright and very cold day. We spent quite a bit of time discussing the story. The girls in particular were fascinated by Pasiphaë, mother of the Minotaur, whose lust for the bull was actually a punishment inflicted on her husband by the god Poseidon. We also considered what we could learn from Icarus' failure to heed his father's advice, and what it meant that Daedalus survived the tale and moved on into yet another story.

Then I asked them to check back over their freewrites about hiding and flight and to look for images or lines that might fit into or trigger a poem about Icarus. I suggested that they either retell the myth or use it to shed light on a personal

experience. I added that they might want either to address their poems to Icarus or to write in the voice of Icarus. (As always, I gave them the option of writing about something else if they chose.) They wrote, intensely, for nearly half an hour, then we shared their pieces. One of my favorite first lines was "Greek boy got his wings." Some students chose to write in the voice of Icarus. One developed a childhood memory of attempting to fly from the roof of her garage. Eluehue—influenced by rap—set Icarus' voice to a playful music, in which this adult reader can't help hearing echoes of bossa nova, Smokey Robinson, and Charlie Parker:

### **Sun Kite Falling**

(once)

I get fly  
tango music and  
maraca cha-cha-cha  
I bumble up in  
my be-bop  
scat a lil higher  
fire fire and desire  
cause I've got sunshine

(twice)

I get so high and so close that I  
blind the sun with my smile. I take  
handfuls of sun pulp to eat and savor.  
I bathe and breathe in the sun,  
mango wine and kissing shine  
eat and smile and lather  
my sunfruit and summerwater.  
I am purged in it, yellow liquor-fire,  
gold skin and teeth  
lungs and laugh dissolve to  
thinness and the sun births me  
sun spit I fall smiling.

—*Eluehue Crudup II*

Lauren's Icarus was much darker, unable to shake the labyrinth:

### **Icarus' Destination**

The labyrinth winds its way to a slow  
strangle around my heart.  
I know what it means to angle upward  
and no longer be shackled by a mason's work.  
No more tangle in meaningless conversations  
with an uninterested beast.  
I am not a canary, putrid yellow, sunk deep in my feathers.  
When those wings were strapped upon my aching shoulders  
I lost every ounce of anger in my insect soul.  
I wanted to stretch my arms into the sun's welcome blaze  
and bring my finger to her lips, the heat so necessary.  
But these wings could not take me there.  
Destination slips coolly as I proceed downward.  
Arms extend toward father's face.



Waves engulf me with a bitterfrost glass glare.

—*Lauren Fardig*

Other students connected the myth with personal experience or family story:

My grandmother told me once that our  
backbones are wings, more  
than useless bone under paper flesh.  
Some day they will grow, she said.  
They will rip your mortal t-shirt  
and bend your child-back.

I wonder what Icarus knew about backbones.  
If he had lain quiet  
on his back on the cool labyrinth  
floor, he may have felt them, hard  
against the grey. His silent  
life was burdened by the threat of walls  
around him, sky above and ground below.

Daedalus had a mind of steel:  
creator of cages and places to hide away.  
He kept his son cupped in the palm  
of shame. Icarus yielded to the curve  
of his father's hand, expected no escape.

Daedalus aimed for wings of wax.  
"The sun is on our side," he thought.  
"The sun is like an India rubber ball, and I can toss it far into the sky."

—*Meghan Van Leuwen*

### **The Sun Is Lit from Behind by a Wax Candle**

Was it 1929 or 1931  
when your great-uncle  
that Butch Cassidy type  
jumped from the sixteenth  
story of a Chicago building  
above ancient gridiron train bridges  
because he knew  
that the eastern express would come  
knock him flat,  
v-shaped,  
before he could even  
attempt the great Icarus mirror trick of long ago:  
flying with skin flapping loosely,  
bald head lapping up the sound waves,  
the breath of papery wax feathers landing sweetly on his neck,  
ground hitting him like the thunderclap of truth,  
his feet cut in two,  
his money lost flat,  
twinkling like constellations below the

trackstrackstracks,

easy clickings underfoot.

—Stacey Tiderington

As these poems show, the enduring imaginative legacy of the Greek myths is something students can explore with personal revelation and aesthetic delight.



Photo by: I, Sailko

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