
GRADE 9 ENGLISH HONORS STUDY GUIDE

Tales from Ovid translated by Ted Hughes

Please read the following selections from this book:

Introduction	Semele
Creation; Four Ages; Lycaon; Flood	Actaeon
Phaethon	Arachne
The Rape of Proserpina	Bacchus & Pentheus
Tiresias	Midas
Echo and Narcissus	Pyramus and Thisbe
Erysichthon	

If these stories are not recognizable by their titles, many will seem familiar when read.

INTRODUCTION & THEORY

Mythic literature has an air of familiarity about it. It is like a song whose tune leaps to mind after hearing just a few notes, even if the lyrics are forgotten. Like music, myths float across great distances of time and place to awaken memories we didn't know we had. To read them in the great poetry of their own era brings them alive in their time, and brings them into ours. Ultimately, myths are reflections of ourselves, our world, and our cultural heritage.

It is vital to study these myths for cultural literacy. Ted Hughes' translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides the foundations for the classical (ancient Greek) epics and plays we will read this year. They introduce the great gods as characters, and provide important landmarks referred to in other works. They will ground us in the mythic landscape of those epics, and will help us find our way through the cultural imagination of their time.

The tales themselves, like all great myths, can be read on a number of levels. Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* locates four functions of myth and the domains they explain to a culture. In a nutshell, the four levels are the:

Mystical:

The Mysteries, the unknowable and unknown; Death, God, Creation

Cosmological:

The shape of the Universe, observable natural phenomena, the realm of the senses, the present-day realm of science

Sociological:

The structure of society and our place in it

Pedagogical:

Individual, personal instruction on how to be a successful and fulfilled human being

On the most basic **pedagogical level**, these myths can be seen as cautionary tales, where the actions or attitudes of a character are punished (or occasionally rewarded) by a fitting transformation. A little more deeply, they provide metaphors for an individual's psychology, and show how a person's passionate adherence to certain priorities can transform his life permanently.

On a **sociological level**, these stories display the values of ancient Greek and Roman culture, and pass judgment on individual behavior in transformations that correspond with their crimes. This is where the reader derives a sense of Poetic Justice, with the authority of the culture's unwritten rules behind it.

On a **cosmological level**, the myths reveal the structure of the ancients' universe as they saw it. On a concrete level, the transformations can explain nature as Kipling's *Just So Stories* explain how the elephant got his trunk; *Metamorphoses* explains why the Narcissus grows by springs in the forest. But more profoundly, the gods themselves can represent the domains of sky, earth & sea, and the underworld; the powers of nature, and the ethical purpose behind them; and the powers of the human body and mind.

On a **mystical level**, these tales address the mystery of transformation itself, in all its forms and rites; physical and spiritual, old life to new life, life to death, death to memory. That humans are capable of transformation lends an air of mystery to human existence, seemingly supernatural and inexplicable in its suddenness and power.

STUDY QUESTIONS

For each of these stories, use following patterns of questions:

Plot:

1. Define the gods and their domains (what the god is in charge of, what the god values).
2. Define the characters and their relationships with the gods.
3. Locate the inciting event that starts the conflict between the character and the god.
4. Locate the character's transformation.
5. Explain why the transformation fits. Is the character successful or a failure, and why?

Analysis:

1. Evaluate each story using the four functions of myth. Which function does each story predominantly address?
2. Play with interpretation.
 - A) First, try to explain the story on the simplest cautionary level, or as the most concrete "Just So Story".
 - B) Then, move to a psychological level, and show how the individual character bears responsibility for his transformation.
 - C) Discover what motivates these characters. What do you feel in response to their suffering?
 - D) Then try to articulate the Greek cultural rules and societal values the story displays. Do those values still apply today?

Appendix: See the attached chart as a guide to the gods and their domains.

Work Cited:

Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. Betty Sue Flowers, ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1988.

Greek and Roman Gods

Greek Name	Roman Equivalent	Cosmic Domain	Human Domain
Zeus	Jupiter/Jove	King of Gods, the sky, lightning and Thunderbolts	Hospitality, protector of suppliants, signs, and omens
Poseidon	Neptune	Sea and Earthquake	
Hades	Pluto	The Underworld, Death	
Demeter	Ceres	Fertility, plants & grain, the harvest, seasons	
Phoebus Apollo	Apollo	Light, The Sun (also Helios)	Music, reason, justice, archery
Hephaestus	Vulcan	Volcanoes	Metal-smithing, craft
Hera	Juno		Women and marriage
Aphrodite	Venus		Love and beauty
Eros	Cupid		Lust and attraction
Ares	Mars		War, combat, and battle-lust
Artemis	Diana		Chastity, maidens, the hunt, archery
Pallas Athena	Minerva		Wisdom, tactical warfare, strategy (Metis), Weaving
Dionysus	Bacchus		Wine, ecstasy, dance, theatre
Hermes	Mercury		Messenger, trickster, protector of thieves
Hestia	Vesta		The hearth and home

Adapted from: <http://www.theoi.com/greek-mythology/greek-gods.html>