

Phaëthon, Son of Apollo

BEFORE READING

Build Background

Cultural Context The heroes of ancient Greece were highly revered. A hero might have one parent who was a god and one who was a human, or a hero might simply be a person with exceptional attributes, such as beauty or strength. Many heroes were known for their bold and daring exploits. Both gods and heroes had character flaws similar to those of ordinary humans, and these flaws often led to their downfall.

Reader's Context When have you done something that others warned was dangerous? Why did you do it?

Set Purpose

Before you begin to read, look at the artwork that accompanies the story, think about the title and genre, and use these clues to predict the theme or message that the myth conveys.

Analyze Literature

Allegory A story that has a symbolic meaning in addition to its literal meaning is an **allegory**. Often, allegorical stories offer moral lessons. As you read "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo," think about the underlying meanings related to the characters and events.

Meet the Author

Olivia E. Coolidge (1908–2006) was born in London, England. She graduated from Oxford University in 1931 and went on to earn a master's degree. The first book she published was *Greek Myths* in 1949, which she wrote for children and young adults. She later published collections of Roman and Egyptian myths as well as biographies and historical fiction. Coolidge is acclaimed for her accurate portrayals of historical subjects and for her ability to bring ancient and mythical worlds to life.

Use Reading Skills

Draw Conclusions

Allegories convey truths or generalizations about human behavior or experience. As you read "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo," use a two-column chart to collect evidence and draw conclusions about the theme or message of the allegory.

Evidence	Conclusion
Phaëthon always had to be the first and best at everything, and he would take any risk to win.	

Preview Vocabulary

deference (de-fə-rən[t]s) *n.*
respectful yielding

implore (im-plōr) *v.* beg

dissuade (di-swād) *v.* deter a person from a course of action by persuasion

precipitous (pri-si-pə-təs) *adj.*, very steep

amber (am-bər) *adj.*, yellowish red; *n.*, hardened sap

Phaëthon, Son of Apollo



*The Chariot of
Apollo, 1907-1910.*
Dillon Redon,
Fitzwilliam
Museum, University
of Cambridge,
United Kingdom.

A Greek Myth retold by Olivia E. Coolidge

Phaëthon loved to boast of his divine father as he saw the golden chariot riding high through the air.

“Let me drive the chariot of the sun

Though Apollo always honored the memory of Daphne she was not his only love. Another was a mortal, Clymene,¹ by whom he had a son named Phaëthon.² Phaëthon grew up with his mother, who, since she was mortal, could not dwell in the halls of Olympus³ or in the palace of the sun. She lived not far from the East in the land of Ethiopia, and as her son grew up, she would point to the place where Eos,⁴ goddess of the dawn, lighted up the sky and tell him that there his father dwelt. Phaëthon loved to boast of his divine father as he saw the golden chariot riding high through the air. He would remind his comrades of other sons of gods and mortal women who, by virtue of their great deeds, had themselves become gods at last. He must always be first in everything, and in most things this was easy, since he was in truth stronger, swifter, and more daring than the others. Even if he were not victorious, Phaëthon always claimed to be first in honor. He could never bear to be beaten, even if he must risk his life in some rash way to win.

Most of the princes of Ethiopia willingly paid Phaëthon honor, since they admired him greatly for his fire and beauty. There was one boy, however, Epaphos,⁵ who was rumored to be a child of Zeus⁶ himself. Since this was not certainly proved, Phaëthon chose to disbelieve it and to demand from Epaphos the deference that he obtained from all others. Epaphos was proud too, and one day he lost his temper with Phaëthon and turned on him, saying, “You are a fool to believe all that your mother tells you. You are all swelled up with false ideas about your father.”

Crimson with rage, the lad rushed home to his mother and demanded that she prove

to him the truth of the story that she had often told. “Give me some proof,” he implored her, “with which I can answer this insult of Epaphos. It is a matter of life and death to me, for if I cannot, I shall die of shame.”

“I swear to you,” replied his mother solemnly, “by the bright orb of the sun itself that you are his son. If I swear falsely, may I never look on the sun again, but die before the next time he mounts the heavens. More than this I cannot do, but you, my child, can go to the eastern palace of Phoebus Apollo—it lies not far away—and there speak with the god himself.”

The son of Clymene leaped up with joy at his mother’s words. The palace of Apollo was indeed not far. It stood just below the eastern horizon, its tall pillars glistening with bronze and gold. Above these it was white with gleaming ivory, and the great doors were flashing silver, embossed with pictures of earth, sky, and sea, and the gods that dwelt therein. Up the steep hill and the bright steps climbed Phaëthon, passing unafraid through the silver doors, and stood in the presence of the sun. Here at last he was forced to turn away his face, for Phoebus sat in state on his golden throne. It gleamed with emeralds and precious stones, while on the head of the god was a brilliant diamond crown upon which no eye could look undazzled.

Phaëthon hid his face, but the god had recognized his son, and he spoke kindly,

1. **Clymene** (klim' ə nē).

2. **Phaëthon** (fā' ə tən).

3. **Olympus**. In Greek mythology, the home of the gods

4. **Eos** (e' əs).

5. **Epaphos** (ep' ə fəs).

6. **Zeus**. Ruler of the gods, associated with the thunderbolt; he controlled thunder, lightning, and rain.

def•er•ence (de' fə rən[t]s) *n.*, respectful yielding

im•plore (im plōr') *v.*, beg

across the heavens for one day," he said.

asking him why he had come. Then Phaëthon plucked up courage and said, "I come to ask you if you are indeed my father. If you are so, I beg you to give me some proof of it so that all may recognize me as Phoebus' son."

god. His heart leaped; the blood rushed into his face. Now he felt that he was truly divine, unlike other men, and he did not wish to be counted with men any more. He looked up for a moment at his radiant father. "Let me drive the chariot of the sun across the

heavens for one day," he said.

Apollo frowned and shook his head. "I cannot break my promise, but I will dissuade you if I can," he answered.

"How can you drive my chariot, whose horses need a strong hand on the reins? The climb is too steep for you. The immense height will make you dizzy. The swift streams of air in the upper heaven will sweep you off your course. Even the immortal gods could not drive my chariot. How then can you? Be wise and make some other choice."

The pride of Phaëthon was stubborn, for he thought the god was merely trying to frighten him. Besides, if he could guide the sun's chariot, would he not have proved his right to be divine rather than

mortal? For that he would risk his life. Indeed, once he had seen Apollo's splendor, he did not wish to go back and live among men. Therefore, he insisted on his right until Apollo had to give way.

When the father saw that nothing else would satisfy the boy, he bade the Hours

SCIENCE ►► CONNECTION



Solar Models While ancient peoples told myths such as the story of Phaëthon to help explain the rising and setting of the sun, ancient astronomers were carefully observing the movements of the celestial bodies and forming theories about the universe. About AD 150, Egyptian scientist Claudius Ptolemy theorized that the Earth was at the center of the universe. According to Ptolemy's model, the Earth is stationary and the planets, sun, and moon move slowly around it. However, this Earth-centered, or *geocentric*, theory left many questions unanswered. It wasn't

until the sixteenth century that Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus began to establish the basis for the sun-centered, or *heliocentric*, universe. Though stories such as "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo" are scientifically unsound, why might they still be useful?

(Above) Portrait of Polish Astronomer Nicolas Copernicus, c. 1933.

The god smiled, being well pleased with his son's beauty and daring. He took off his crown so that Phaëthon could look at him, and coming down from his throne, he put his arms around the boy, and said, "You are indeed my son and Clymene's, and worthy to be called so. Ask of me whatever thing you wish to prove your origin to men, and you shall have it."

Phaëthon swayed for a moment and was dizzy with excitement at the touch of the

7. Phoebus (fē' bəs). Another name for Apollo

dis • suade (di swād') v., deter a person from a course of action by persuasion

bring forth his chariot and yoke the horses. The chariot was of gold and had two gold-rimmed wheels with spokes of silver. In it there was room for one man to stand and hold the reins. Around the front and sides of it ran a rail, but the back was open. At the end of a long pole there were yokes for the four horses. The pole was of gold and shone with precious jewels: the golden topaz, the bright diamond, the green emerald, and the flashing ruby. While the Hours were yoking the swift, pawing horses, rosy-fingered Dawn hastened to the gates of heaven to draw them open. Meanwhile Apollo anointed his son's face with a magic ointment, that he might be able to bear the heat of the fire-breathing horses and the golden chariot. At last Phaëthon mounted the chariot and grasped the reins, the barriers were let down, and the horses shot up into the air.

At first the fiery horses sped forward up the accustomed trail, but behind them the chariot was too light without the weight of the immortal god. It bounded from side to side and was dashed up and down. Phaëthon was too frightened and too dizzy to pull the reins, nor would he have known anyway whether he was on the usual path. As soon as the horses felt that there was no hand controlling them, they soared up, up with fiery speed into the heavens till the earth grew pale and cold beneath them. Phaëthon shut his eyes, trembling at the dizzy, precipitous height. Then the horses dropped down, more swiftly than a falling stone, flinging themselves madly from side to side in panic because they were masterless.

Phaëthon dropped the reins entirely and clung with all his might to the chariot rail. Meanwhile as they came near the earth, it dried up and cracked apart. Meadows were reduced to white ashes, cornfields smoked and shriveled, cities perished in flame. Far and wide on the wooded mountains the forests were ablaze, and even the snowclad Alps were bare and dry. Rivers steamed and dried to dust. The great North African plain was scorched until it became the desert that it is today. Even the sea shrank back to pools and caves, until dried fishes were left baking upon the white-hot sands. At last the great earth mother called upon Zeus to save her from utter destruction, and Zeus hurled a mighty thunderbolt at the unhappy Phaëthon, who was still crouched in the chariot, clinging desperately to the rail. The dart cast him out, and he fell flaming in a long trail through the air. The chariot broke in pieces at the mighty blow, and the maddened horses rushed snorting back to the stable of their master, Apollo.

Unhappy Clymene and her daughters wandered over the whole earth seeking the body of the boy they loved so well. When they found him, they took him and buried him. Over his grave they wept and could not be comforted. At last the gods in pity for their grief changed them into poplar trees, which weep with tears of amber in memory of Phaëthon. ❖

pre • cip • i • tous (pri si' pə təs) *adj.*, very steep

am • ber (am' bər) *adj.*, yellowish red; *n.*, hardened sap



Think of a time when you overestimated your abilities. What happened? Why do you think people misjudge themselves in this way?

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Evaluating Cause and Effect

A cause-and-effect chart can help you identify the causes that led to an event or outcome. Fill in either the cause or the effect in the appropriate column.

Cause	Effect
	Apollo confirms that Phaëthon is his son.
Phaëthon was daring and handsome.	
	The horses begin a wild jaunt across the sky.
The horses fly out of control, too close to the earth, setting everything on fire.	
	Zeus hurls a thunderbolt at Phaëthon, killing him.
Clymene and her daughters grieve Phaëthon's death.	

AFTER READING

Name: _____

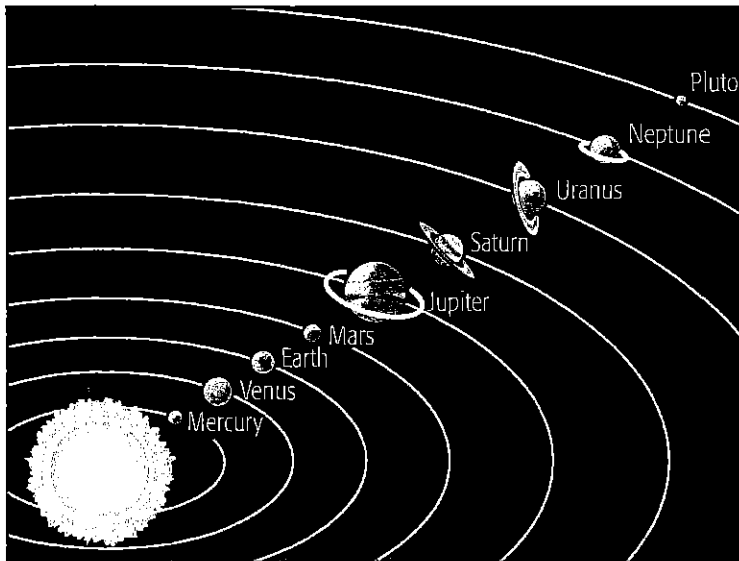
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Science Connection

Look at the image of the solar system. Match the description of the Roman gods and their corresponding planets. Use the Internet to help you complete this activity.

- | | |
|------------|------------|
| A. Pluto | E. Jupiter |
| B. Neptune | F. Mars |
| C. Uranus | G. Venus |
| D. Saturn | H. Mercury |



- _____ 1. The planet was named for its red color and is represented by the god of war.
- _____ 2. Only the sun and moon are brighter in the night sky are brighter than this planet, represented by the goddess of love and beauty.
- _____ 3. Also known as Zeus, the supreme god, in Greek mythology.
- _____ 4. This planet is known for its rings and is named for the god of agriculture.
- _____ 5. This blue planet is represented by the god of the sea.
- _____ 6. This planet, which is locked in perpetual darkness is named after the Greek god Hades, god of the underworld.
- _____ 7. Moving quickly across the sky, this planet is represented by the god of commerce, travel, and thievery.
- _____ 8. This planet is named after the Greek deity of the sky.



Name: _____

Date: _____

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Selection Quiz

Multiple Choice

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line.

- _____ 1. amber
A. yellowish red
B. dark blue
- _____ 2. implore
A. beg
B. investigate
- _____ 3. dissuade
A. deter a person from a course of action by persuasion
B. soft, smooth synthetic material
- _____ 4. deference
A. impolite consenting
B. respectful yielding
- _____ 5. precipitous
A. very rainy
B. very steep

True or False

Write *T* if the statement is true or *F* if the statement is false.

- _____ 6. Phaëthon is a Greek myth.
- _____ 7. Phaëthon is the son of Apollo.
- _____ 8. Apollo is happy that Phaëthon requests to drive the sun chariot.
- _____ 9. Phaëthon drives the sun chariot skillfully and effectively.
- _____ 10. Phaëthon dies when one of the horses falls on him.
- _____ 11. At the end of the myth, Phaëthon's mother and her daughters are turned into poplar trees.
- _____ 12. "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo," shows how pride and foolishness lead to a hero's downfall.

AFTER READING

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Lesson Test

Multiple Choice

Identify the choice that best completes the statement or answers the question.

for Phaëthon, Son of Apollo

- _____ 1. To see his father, Phaëthon journeys to
- A. the ocean.
 - B. a dark cave.
 - C. an underground river.
 - D. Apollo's eastern palace.
 - E. the top of Mount Everest.
- _____ 2. Apollo protects Phaëthon's face by rubbing it with
- A. a piece of leather.
 - B. water of the gods.
 - C. ashes from a fire.
 - D. rays from the sun.
 - E. a magic ointment.
- _____ 3. Which word best completes the following sentence? I tried to dissuade her, but she would not _____.
- A. brag
 - B. think
 - C. smile
 - D. listen
 - E. remember
- _____ 4. Why do the gods change Clymene and her daughters into poplar trees?
- A. to cheer them up
 - B. to teach them a lesson
 - C. to make them goddesses
 - D. to let them be with Phaëthon
 - E. to put them out of their misery
- _____ 5. It is reasonable to conclude that Phaëthon
- A. was stronger than Apollo.
 - B. did not really like Apollo.
 - C. is not really the son of Apollo.
 - D. should have listened to Apollo.
 - E. will someday take over Apollo's duties.

- _____ 6. When the chariot starts moving, what does Phaëthon do?
- A. He panics.
 - B. He is liberated.
 - C. He feels triumphant.
 - D. He no longer wants to live.
 - E. He decides to cause trouble.
- _____ 7. Apollo's horses
- A. outwit Apollo.
 - B. are resentful of Phaëthon.
 - C. are not easily controlled.
 - D. enjoy scorching the earth.
 - E. only obey full-blooded gods.
- _____ 8. This story suggests that when bad things happen on Earth, it is because
- A. humans are not strong.
 - B. humans are fighting the gods.
 - C. humans are challenging each other.
 - D. there is a problem involving the gods.
 - E. the gods are being ignored by humans.

Read the following passage. Then answer the question(s) below.

Most of the princes of Ethiopia willingly paid Phaëthon honor, since they admired him greatly for his fire and beauty. There was one boy, however, Epaphos, who was rumored to be a child of Zeus himself. Since this was not certainly proved, Phaëthon chose to disbelieve it and to demand from Epaphos the deference that he obtained from all others. Epaphos was proud too, and one day he lost his temper with Phaëthon and turned on him, saying, "You are a fool to believe all that your mother tells you. You are all swelled up with false ideas about your father."

- _____ 9. In this passage Phaëthon demands but does not show
- A. effort.
 - B. respect.
 - C. courage.
 - D. honesty.
 - E. obedience.
- _____ 10. In this passage, neither Phaëthon nor Epaphos can be described as
- A. boastful.
 - B. insistent.
 - C. intolerant.
 - D. self-centered.
 - E. mild mannered.

Matching

for Phaëthon, Son of Apollo

Choose the best description for each of the following.

- A. Ethiopia
- B. Zeus
- C. Dawn
- D. Clymene
- E. Ptolemy
- F. Phoebus

- _____ 11. killed Phaëthon
- _____ 12. opened the gates of heaven
- _____ 13. another name for Apollo
- _____ 14. where Phaëthon lived
- _____ 15. Phaëthon's mother
- _____ 16. said the sun revolves around the earth