Metamorphoses – Ovid | Epic Poem Summary | Ancient Rome – Classical Literature

"Metamorophoses" (*"Transformations"*) is a narrative poem in fifteen books by the Roman poet **Ovid**, **completed in 8 CE**. It is an epic (or "mock-epic") poem describing the creation and history of the world, incorporating many of the best known and loved stories from Greek mythology, although centring more on mortal characters than on heroes or the gods.

Each story contains some sort of transformation (or metamorphosis) as the link that ties them all together. It has remained **one of the most popular works of mythology**, and was perhaps the classical work best known to medieval writers and strongly influenced medieval and Renaissance poetry.

Ovid begins by addressing the gods and asking them to bless his undertaking. He then begins **his tale of transformations** by describing how the earth, the heavens and everything else is created out of chaos, and how mankind **progresses** (or rather degenerates) from the **Gold Age to** the **Silver Age** to the **Age of Iron** (the **"Ages of Man"**). This is followed by an attempt by the giants to seize the heavens, at which the wrathful Jove (Jupiter, the Roman equivalent of Zeus) sends a great flood which destroys all living things except one pious couple, Deucalion and Pyrrha. This couple repopulates the earth by obeying the commands of the gods and throwing rocks behind them, which are transformed into a new, hearty breed of man.

The story is told of how Apollo's unrequited love for Daphne results in her transformation into a laurel tree. Io, a daughter of the river god Inachus, is raped by Jove, who then transforms Io into a cow to protect her from the jealous Juno. Jove

sends Mercury to kill Argus, Io's guard, and Io is forced to flee Juno's wrath until Jove forces Juno to pardon her.

Io and Jove's son, Epaphus, becomes friends with a boy named Phaeton, the son of Apollo, but when Epaphus does not believe that Phaeton is really the son of Apollo, he tries to prove it by borrowing his father's chariot of the sun, but he cannot control it and is killed. **Phaeton's sisters are so distraught,** they are transformed into trees, and his friend Cycnus, who repeatedly dived into the river in an attempt to retrieve Phaeton's body, is transformed into a swan in his grief.

Jove spots the beautiful nymph Callisto, one of Diana's handmaids, and rapes her. When Diana discovers her handmaid's impurity, Callisto is banished, and when she gives birth she is transformed by Juno into a bear. Finally, when her son is fifteen, he almost kills her, and Jove transforms them both into constellations, much to Juno's annoyance.

A **few shorter tales follow,** about how the Raven became black due to the evils of gossip, how Ocyrhoe the prophetess is transformed into stone, and how Mercury turns a shepherd into stone for betraying a secret. Mercury then falls in love with the beautiful Herse, which results in Herse's sister, Aglauros, being turned to stone for her envy.

Jove falls in love with the princess Europa and carries her off, disguised as a beautiful white bull. Europa's brothers go in search of her, but cannot discover her whereabouts. One of the brothers, Cadmus, founds a new city (later to be known as Thebes), and miraculously creates a new people by sewing the ground with the teeth of a serpent or dragon he had killed.

Many years later, Cadmus' grandson, Actaeon, inadvertently stumbles on Diana bathing, for which she turns him into a stag, and he is hunted down by his own

men and torn apart by his own dogs. **Jove's wife Juno** is jealous that Cadmus's daughter Semele is to give birth to Jove's child, and she tricks Semele into forcing Jove to let her see him in all his glory, the sight of which destroys Semele. **The child, Bacchus (Dionysus)**, however, is saved, and goes on to become a god.

Jove and Juno argue about whether men or women take more pleasure from love, and call on Tiresias (who has been both a man and a woman) to settle the argument. When he agrees with Jove, saying that he believes that women get more pleasure out of acts of love, Juno blinds him, but, as recompense, Jove gives him the gift of prophecy. **Tiresias predicts that the youth Narcissus is to die early**, which duly comes to pass when Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection and wastes away into a flower.

Tiresias also predicts the death of Pentheus, whose refusal to properly worship Bacchus is punished by his being torn apart by his sisters and mother when they are in the throes of the Bacchic rites. The tale is then told of others who have perished for refusing to worship the gods, such as the daughters of Minyas, who rejected the divinity of Bacchus and refused to participate in his rites (preferring instead to exchange stories such as the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, the discovery of Venus and Mercury's adultery and the creation of the Hermaphrodite) and were turned into bats for their impiety. Juno, however, is furious that Bacchus is being worshipped as a divinity at all, and punishes the house of his forefathers, driving some mad and pursuing others. Cadmus himself, the founder of Thebes and Pentheus' grandfather, is only saved by his transformation into a snake, along with his wife.

Acrisius of Argos also objects to the divinity of Bacchus, as well as denying the divinity of Perseus, and in revenge Perseus uses the head of the snake-haired Gorgon Medusa to fill Acrisius' land with serpents born from drops of her blood.

He then turns the Titan Atlas into stone, and saves Andromeda from a monstrous sacrifice before marrying her (despite her previous engagement).

Several tenuously connected short stories follow, including the stories of **how Medusa's progeny**, the winged horse Pegasus, created a fountain with a stomp of his foot, how King Pyreneus tried to capture the Muses, how nine sisters who challenged the Muses to a singing contest were turned to birds when they lost, and how Arachne was transformed into a spider after beating Minerva in a contest of spinning.

When Niobe of Thebes openly declares she is more fit to be worshipped as a goddess than Latona (mother of Apollo and Diana) on the grounds that she has borne fourteen children to Latona's two, she is punished by having all her children killed and is herself turned to stone. Stories are then told of how Latona punished men who were rude to her by turning them into frogs, and how Apollo flayed a satyr for daring to challenge his superiority as a musician.

Five years after marrying Procne, Tereus of Thrace meets Procne's sister, Philomela, and immediately lusts after her to such an extent that he kidnaps her and tells Procne that she has died. Philomela resists the rape, but Tereus prevails and cuts out her tongue to keep her from accusing him. Philomela, however, still manages to inform her sister and, in revenge for the rape, Procne kills her own son with Tereus, cooks his body, and feeds it to Tereus. When Tereus finds out, he tries to kill the women, but they turn into birds as he pursues them.

Jason arrives at the land of King Aeetes on his quest to obtain the Golden Fleece for King Pelias of Iolcus, and **Aeetes' daughter Medea** falls in love with Jason and aids him in his task. They depart together as husband and wife, but when they arrive home to Iolcus they find that Jason's father, Aeson, is mortally ill. Medea

he then abandons her in Dia (Naxos) and Bacchus transforms her into a constellation.

Meanwhile, **Daedalus plots to escape Crete** with **his son Icarus** by **flying on wings** made of feathers and wax. Despite his father's warning, however, Icarus flies too close to the sun and falls to his death when the wax in his wings melts.

After his adventures in Crete, Theseus and some other brave Greeks go to **fight the Calydonian boar** which was sent by Diana to punish the king of Calydon for neglecting her tribute. Although the king's son Meleager slays the boar, he gives the spoils to the huntress Atalanta, who was the one to draw the first blood, killing his uncles when they object to this. Althaea, his mother, then kills Meleager and then herself, and Meleager's sisters are so distraught that Diana turns them into birds.

On his way back to Athens, **Theseus takes shelter during a storm** at the home of the river god Achelous, where he hears many stories, including the tale of how Achelous lost one of his horns, torn from his head in a battle with Hercules for the hand of Deianeira, which limited his power to change shape. The **centaur Nessus** then attacked them, only to be killed by Hercules, although before he died Nessus gave Deianeira his shirt which he convinced her has the power to restore love, when in fact it was cursed. Years later, when Deianeira fears Hercules is in love with someone else, she gives him the shirt, and Hercules, consumed by pain, sets himself on fire and is deified.

The story is then told of how Byblis confesses an incestuous passion for her twin brother Caunus, who flees upon hearing of it. Heart-broken, Byblis attempts to follow, but is eventually turned into a fountain in her grief. The wife of another man, named **Ligdus**, is forced to disguise her daughter as a son rather than put her

to death, **calling "him" Iphis**. Iphis, however, falls in love with a girl, and the gods intercede, changing "him" into an actual boy.

When **Hymen**, the goddess of marriage, **fails to bless the marriage of Eurydice and Orpheus, Eurydice dies**. Orpheus is given a chance to visit the underworld and restore her to life, and although he manages to soften the hearts of Pluto and Proserpina with his music, he cannot resist looking back for his beloved and she is lost to him forever.

The lonely Orpheus then sings some sad tales, including the story of Jove's theft of Ganymede (who had originally been a beautiful statue sculpted by Pygmalion, transformed into a real woman by Jove's wife, Juno, to be her cup-bearer); the tale of the death of Apollo's lover, Hyacinthus, who was accidentally killed by a discus thrown by Apollo (Apollo created a flower, the hyacinth, from his spilled blood); and the story of of Myrrha, who slept with her own father until he discovered her identity after which she was forced to flee, pregnant (out of pity, the gods turned her into a myrrh tree, and her baby, which tumbled from a split in the tree, grew up to be the beautiful Adonis, with whom Venus falls in love).

Orpheus then tells the story of how **Hippomenes won the hand of the swift althlete Atalanta** by using **golden apples** to beat her in a race, and how he forgot to thank Venus for her help in this affair, resulting in both he and Atalanta being turned into lions. Adonis must therefore ever after avoid lions and beasts like them, but he was finally killed while hunting a boar, and Venus turned his body in an anemone. **The familiar story of King Midas**, whose touch turned his daughter to gold, is then related. In a Bacchic frenzy, women tear Orpheus to pieces as he sings his sad songs, for which Bacchus turns them to oak trees.

Ovid next turns to the story of the founding of the city of Troy by King Laomedon (with the help of Apollo and Neptune), the tale of Peleus who kills his brother Phocus and is thereafter haunted by a wolf for his murder, and the story of Ceyx and his wife, Alcyone, who are turned into birds when Ceyx is killed in a storm.

The tale of the famous Trojan War is then told, beginning when Paris of Troy steals away Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, and Helen's husband Menaleus raises an army of Greeks to take her back. Details of the war are recounted, includings Achilles' death, the dispute over his armour and the final fall of Troy. After the war, the spirit of Achilles forces Agamemnon to sacrifice Polyxena, the daughter of Queen Hecuba and King Priam of Troy. Later, Hecuba kills King Polymestor of Thrace, in a rage over the death of her other son, Polydorus, and when Polymestor's followers try to punish her, she is transformed by the gods into a dog.

After the war, the Trojan prince Aeneas escapes and travels through the Mediterranean to Carthage, where Queen Dido falls in love with him, and then kills herself when he abandons her. After further adventures, Aeneas and his men finally arrive at the kingdom of Latinus (Italy), where Aeneas wins a new bride, Lavinia, and a new kingdom. Venus convinces Jove to make Aeneas a divinity and his son, Julus, becomes king.

Generations later, Amulius unjustly seizes Latinus, but Numitor and his grandson Romulus recapture it and found the city of Rome. The Romans fight against the invading Sabines, and eventually agree to share the city, which will be jointly ruled by the Sabine leader Tatius and Romulus. After Tatius's death, Romulus is made a god, his wife Hersilia a goddess. The Pythagorean philosopher Numa becomes

king of Rome, and Rome prospers in the peace of his rule. When he dies, his wife Egeria is so mournful that Diana transforms her into a fountain.

Even closer to the present day of Ovid, Cipus refuses to become ruler of Rome after he sprouts horns from his head, and he convinces the Roman Senators to banish him from the city so he does not become a tyrant. Aesculapius, the god of healing, cures Rome of a plague, after which the god Caesar becomes ruler of Rome, followed by his son, Augustus, the current emperor of Rome. As he closes his work, **Ovid** asks that time pass slowly until Augustus' death, and glories in the fact that, as long as the city of Rome survives, his own work will surely survive.

"Metamorphoses" is often **called a mock-epic**, as it is written in **dactylic hexameter** (the form of the great epic poems of the ancient tradition, such as ***"The Iliad"***, ***"The Odyssey"*** and ***"The Aeneid"***), unlike **Ovid**'s other works. But, rather than following and extolling the deeds of a great hero like the traditional epics, **Ovid**'s work leaps from story to story, often with little or no connection other than that they all involve transformations of one sort or another. Sometimes, a character from one story is used as a (more or less tenuous) connection to the next story, and sometimes the mythical characters themselves are used as the story-tellers of "stories within stories".

Ovid uses sources like **Vergil**'s ***"The Aeneid"***, as well as the works of Lucretius, **Homer** and other early Greek works to gather his material, although he also adds his own twist to many of them, and is not afraid to change details where it better suits his purposes. Sometimes the poem retells some of the central events in the world of Greek and Roman myth, but sometimes it seems to stray in odd and apparently arbitrary directions.

The recurring theme, as with **nearly all of Ovid's work**, is *that of love* (and especially the transformative power of love), whether it be personal love or love personified in the figure of Cupid, an otherwise relatively minor god of the pantheon who is the closest thing this mock-epic has to a hero. Unlike the predominantly romantic notions of love that were "invented" in the Middle Ages, however, **Ovid viewed love more as a dangerous, destabilizing force than a positive one**, and demonstrates how love has power over everyone, mortals and gods alike.

During the **reign of Augustus**, the Roman emperor during Ovid's time, major attempts were made to **regulate morality by creating legal and illegal forms of love**, by encouraging marriage and legitimate heirs, and by punishing adultery with exile from Rome. Ovid's representations of love and its power to damage lives and societies may be seen as support for Augustus' reforms, although the constant suggestion of the futility of controlling erotic impulses may also be seen as a criticism of Augustus' attempt to regulate love.

Betrayal was also one of the most harshly punished of Roman crimes under Augustus, and it is no coincidence there are many instances of betrayal in the stories in the poem. Ovid, like most Romans of his time, embraced the idea that people cannot escape their destiny, but he is also quick to point out that fate is a concept which both supports and undermines the power of the gods. Thus, although the gods may have a longer term view of Fate, it still exerts a force on them as well.

It is notable that the other Roman gods are repeatedly perplexed, humiliated and made ridiculous by fate and by Cupid in the stories, particularly Apollo, the god of pure reason, who is often confounded by irrational love. The work as a whole inverts the accepted order to a large extent, elevating humans and human passions

while making the gods (and their own somewhat petty desires and conquests) the objects of low humour, often portraying the gods as self-absorbed and vengeful. Having said that, though, the power of the gods remains a distinct recurrent theme throughout the poem.

Revenge **is also a common theme**, and it is often the motivation for whatever transformation the stories are explaining, as the gods avenge themselves and change mortals into birds or beasts to prove their own superiority. Violence, and often rape, occurs in almost every story in the collection, and women are generally portrayed negatively, either as virginal girls running from the gods who want to rape them, or alternatively as malicious and vengeful.

As do all the major Greek and Roman epics, *"Metamorphoses"* emphasizes that hubris (overly prideful behaviour) is a fatal flaw which inevitably leads to a character's downfall. Hubris always attracts the notice and punishment of the gods, who disdain all human beings who attempt to compare themselves to divinity. Some, especially women like Arachne and Niobe, actively challenge the gods and goddesses to defend their prowess, while others display hubris in ignoring their own mortality. Like love, hubris is seen by **Ovid** as a universal equalizer.

Ovid's *"Metamorphoses"* was an immediate success in its day, its popularity threatening even that of **Vergil's *"Aeneid"***. One can even imagine it being used as a teaching tool for Roman children, from which they could learn important stories that explain their world, as well as learn about their glorious emperor and his ancestors. Particularly towards the end, the poem can be seen to deliberately emphasize the greatness of Rome and its rulers.

However, during the **Christianization of late antiquity**, St. Augustine and St. Jerome among others apparently considered it "**a dangerously pagan work**", and

it was fortunate to survive into the medieval period. Indeed, a concise, "inoffensive" prose summary of the poem (which played down the metamorphosis elements of the stories) was manufactured for Christian readers in late antiquity, and became very popular in itself, almost threatening to eclipse the original poem.

The earliest extant manuscript of ***"Metamorphoses"*** **is dated quite late** (during the **11th Century**), but it then became very influential among medieval scholars and poets, becoming the classical work best known to medieval writers. Perhaps more than any other ancient poet, **Ovid** was a model for the European Renaissance and the English Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, and William Shakespeare in particular used and adapted stories from the *"Metamorphoses"* in several of his plays.

European Classical literature
UNIT - V

Bacchus in Ovid's Metamorphoses Book

Ovid employs Bacchus as a means to linking different stories in Metamorphoses book 3; sexual themes are explored as Ovid's characters struggle to contain their affections within platonic boundaries. At the same time they often fail to identify themselves as either the subject or the object of their affairs. As a mortal longs for the corpus of their loved one in vain, they experience frustration that only death can rival in strength. Indeed, this is exactly what takes place; as the descendents of Cadmus attempt to rival the gods, their own passion is turned against them resulting in imminent death.

The tragic dynasty of Thebes endures its curse; as one death smoothly follows another, Bacchus seems to be the force behind the scene. Whether we see him impersonated and taking [illegible] aware of his presence. Ovid does this by reflecting ideas and qualities associated with Bacchus in his other characters. In the story of Narcissus and Echo, we see parallels being made between Narcissus and Bacchus. Both are youths of an androgynous age, not deprived of effeminate features.

Ovid reminds us that such an appearance portrays both sexes, and thus attracts either: 'Legions of lusty men and bevies of girls desired him' This theme of transsexuality is explored in the preceding account of Teiresias in book 3. Jove is contradicted by Juno when he says women derive more pleasure from sex then men. The joke becomes a legal dispute (Juno was infamously deprived of marital rights) and Teiresias is made the judge. Teiresias himself 'experienced love from both angles' as he was turned into a woman for seven years [illegible] ating in a wood.

Cruelly enough, he has to pay for his expertise: Juno deprives him of sight. An indirect reference to Bac[illegible] combining of two sexes generate violence. Similarly the cult of Bacchus was thought of as sadistic and extremely violent. Ovid's comment refers to pederasty, which in

Ovid's day, though frowned upon, was common practice. The soft unscathed features of a boy attract the men; it is the innocence and distance in Narcissus that liken him to a virgin girl.

The description of Narcissus' appearance is brimming with detail; this is done in order to draw attention to some of the main themes in Metamorphoses: 'Stretched on the grass, he saw twin stars, his own two eyes, Rippling curls like the locks of a god, Apollo or Bacchus' Ovid deliberately draws out attention to the boy's womanly hair; later on in book 3, the parallel to Bacchus will become obvious. Pentheus scorns the cult of Bacchus as effeminate and urges the dragon born warriors to defend Thebes against this degenerate invasion.

He argues: 'His gleaming armour is perfumed locks and womanish garlands' (line 555) Pentheus resists the bigenderous nature of Bacchus' worship; his death is therefore deeply ironic – he is killed by the women of his own natal family. Pentheus is punished for stumbling upon their secret act of worship no men are allowed to witness. However, there is another, more subtle link to Bacchus in Narcissus' description. As he stares affectionately at his own reflection he sees the duplicate of his own eyes, described as twin stars.

Just as Bacchus makes Pentheus see double, in the same way Narcissus is unable to identify the boundary between reality and imitation. He becomes bisected between two different identities, forced by divine punishment to become both 'votary and idol, suitor and sweetheart, taper and fire – at one and the same time' Although Bacchus is not actually present in the scene, the link is obvious: Ovid takes delight in playing on words on a grand scale as he toys around with the idea of confused identity.

Narcissus and the disappearance of Echo. The latter endures divine punishment: Echo distracts Juno while Jupiter chases after nymphs and is

consequentially deprived of independent speech. Narcissus, a pre-pubescent boy who has previously rejected many admirers, goes hunting and encounters Echo's voice, as she repeats his last words.

Ovid presents the account as an actual conversation, this is seen in the latin: 'ecquis adest et 'adest' (Narcissus says 'who is present' and 'present! ' replies Echo). The juxtaposition of the same verb adest (adeo, adere – present) naturally emphasizes its multiple meanings that come with the change of speaker. When describing this exchange Ovid uses the word imago (means both echo and reflection) thus referring to the double nature of a misleading, aural and visual reflection. This reference provokes us to think about the recurring theme of misleading identities as Narcissus struggles to identify the object of his sexual desire as himself.

We witness the interchangeable roles of the subject/object of a love affair, and the tentative boundary between the desirer and the desired. In the case of Narcissus, this boundary is two-dimensional: 'all that keeps us apart is a thin, thin line of water'. Narcissus' frustration at his inability to physically depict his love is deeply ironic. As with Pyramus and Thisbe, this failure to touch causes death, in one way or another. In the case of Narcissus, his inability to cross the boundary exhausts his mentally and physically, because pure platonic admiration does not satisfy him.

Talking to his fading imago, Narcissus cries out in despair: "Don't hurry away, please stay! You cannot desert me so cruelly. I love you! ' he shouted. 'Please, if I'm not able to touch you, I must be allowed to see you, to feed my unhappy passion! ' The nature of this frustrated desire is obviously sexual; Ovid emphasizes this by including the noun alimenta (lit. food) in his description of Narcissus' emotional suffering. Unable to fulfill his sexual cravings, the young boy forgets about other pleasures and food is commonly associated with erotic foreplay, one lover teasing another.

It is ironic how in the case of Narcissus this never ending foreplay becomes tantalizing. Narcissus suffers, unable to cross the boundary between visual admiration and physical indulgence, and receives no satisfaction. The link with Bacchus is self evident: alcohol allows us to think we are able to transgress certain visual boundaries, when in fact this may not be true. At the same time, it is within Bacchus' power to disturb, distort and break down images: ironically, as Narcissus breaks down emotionally, his tears fall and disturb his reflection, his object of desire.

As the reflection breaks down, Narcissus, unable to deal with the loss of visual contact (the only contact he is able to experience), breaks down physically into a flower. Flowers themselves are, of course, sexual symbols. We only have to look at certain works of present day modern art to see a clear reminiscence a flower has to a vulva. At the same time, flowers often represent virginity; for instance the Virgin is often depicted with a white lily.

Those two ideas combined with the transformation of a self-absorbed male youth lead us to think about Freudian ideas of natural bisexuality. Narcissus is highly representative of this theory – his sexuality is in a state of constant flux. He seems to naturally embrace his sexual affection for a male, and the only thing he cannot accept is his inability to physically express it. Narcissus' transformation into a flower shows another link to Bacchus: a previously cold, untouched and unapproachable boy becomes vulnerable in his new physical state.

Flowers are easy to pluck, and so is virginity. 'The body, however, was not to be found – Only a flower with a trumpet of gold and pale white petals' This image is extremely violent, as we picture the defenseless, tender flower and simultaneously think of the rites of Bacchus. Brutality and vengeance are overshadowing this seemingly innocent scene. We have once again returned to

Bacchus' return and lack of mercy for all who think themselves better. The *paleness* of the flower reminds us of Narcissus' originally pale, untouched and *pure* skin.

Once again, we are able to sense Bacchus' presence who himself is often described as a pale young boy. Book 3 is entirely devoted to Bacchus, and every story, whether part of the main narrative or not, reflects the deity's powerful influence. Bacchus is shown to be the god of many things; his presence is constantly tangible throughout book 3 as each theme Ovid touches upon can be traced directly back to Bacchus. Each of these ideas, whether it involves identity, gender, boundaries or tangibility all have one thing in common: Bacchus is able to transgress them.

The extent of Bacchus' power becomes apparent to us as we come to realize Bacchus' divine ability to flow back and forth between reality and illusion; this is what makes him present in all accounts. Book 3 is rich with the deaths of Cadmian descendents, in fact the sheer number and predictability of these mortalities dulls our moral judgment. Instead of shock we develop a fascination with Bacchus' violent revenge on his own family, and this is perhaps the most striking aspect of experiencing the narrative: we forget our own moral principles, because the spectacle itself is so strikingly multi-dimensional.