

Phaethon literacy guidance

Length

8 min 11 sec

Themes

Family

Trust

Pride/hubris

Summary

Phaethon keeps pestering his mother to tell him who his father is. Finally, she reveals that he is the son of Helios, the sun god. He tells his friends, who refuse to believe him, so he prays to Helios to come and visit him. When Helios appears before him Phaethon demands proof that he is indeed the sun god. Helios says he will grant Phaethon any wish and in response Phaethon asks to be allowed to drive the chariot of the sun. Helios is unable to make Phaethon change his mind, with disastrous consequences. When Phaethon cannot control the chariot Zeus strikes him dead with a thunderbolt to prevent the whole world being scorched to a cinder. After a long search, Phaethon's sisters find his body and as they lean over it weeping, they are transformed into willow trees.

Starting-points

- Should we believe everything we are told by adults? Are some adults more trustworthy than others?
- *'Pride comes before a fall'* (or, in the words of the King James Bible, *'Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.'* Proverbs 16:19.): what do you understand by this saying?

Pause points

1 min 54 sec: *'Listen to him: 'My mother told me!''*

- How do you think Phaethon felt when his friends didn't believe that he was the son of Phaethon?
- What might he do next?

2 min 38 sec: *Ask for anything — anything. I will grant your wish.*

- What do you think Phaethon will ask for?

5 min 34 sec: *But Phaethon, bursting with pride, shook the reins.*

- What do you think is going to happen next?
- How do you think the story ends?

Questions for discussion

- What do we learn about Phaethon at the beginning of the story? How does the storyteller suggest there might be a link between Phaethon and the sun god?
- Why does Phaethon demand proof from Helios that he is the sun god?
- Why is Helios so desperate to persuade Phaethon to make a different wish? Why does he give in to Phaethon's request in the end?
- Does Phaethon deserve his fate?

Phaethon's character is established right at the outset of the story. In the opening sentence he is described as a 'shining son'. We are told that his appearance was striking: his hair was 'wild and red like fire' and his skin 'bright white'. He was 'hot-headed' too and on summer days he 'loved the fierce heat, the light'. Later, through his actions we learn that he is boastful and, more damagingly, unwilling or unable to take things on trust: first, shame drives him to demand that his father — a god

— appear before him; then, when he does appear, stubbornness and pride lead him to demand proof that Helios is indeed the sun god.

Suggested activities

- Tell the story through the eyes of one of Phaethon's sisters, starting from the point where Phaethon insists on driving Helios' chariot. What would it have been like on the ground as Phaethon lurched across the heavens? When would you have realised that Phaethon was missing? What would it have felt like to be turned into a tree?
- Write an alternative ending to the story in which Phaethon, instead of being killed, is transformed into a bird, animal, plant or tree. Think about the language you use to describe the transformation. Explain your choice of transformation.
- Read through the two paragraphs which describe Phaethon's doomed attempt to drive the chariot of the sun. Highlight the words and phrases which show
 - how difficult the horses were to control;
 - how much damage was caused by Phaethon's failure to control the horses.
- Look at this painting of the Fall of Phaethon (<https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.71349.html>) by the Flemish artist Rubens. How well does Rubens capture the moment after Zeus has let loose his thunderbolt?