

Aktaion literacy materials

Length

7 min 14 sec

Summary

Aktaion is a skillful hunter and a follower of Artemis (known by the Romans as Diana), goddess of hunting and chastity. One day, after a successful morning's hunting, he wanders away from his companions and stumbles upon a pool where Artemis is bathing. Seen naked by Aktaion, Artemis is filled with rage and throws a handful of water at him. Aktaion is transformed into a stag — only his mind remains human — and, when he tries to run away, his own hounds chase him down and tear him to pieces.

Starting points

This is a story of crime (or accident) and punishment. Should you always be punished whenever you do something wrong — even if you do so unintentionally? The actions of Aktaion and Artemis here should be handled carefully and sensitively, but they provide a good opportunity to discuss personal boundaries, privacy and consent as appropriate to your classroom. Aktaion's encounter with Artemis might be best explored in terms of her discomfort and upset, rather than his possible arousal.

You may also want to explore students' views on hunting and the relationship between the hunter and the animals they hunt. Is killing animals ever justified? Is hunting ever justified? Is there a difference between hunting for survival and hunting for pleasure? Is it acceptable to hunt potentially dangerous animals such as lions and tigers? Is it acceptable to hunt animals that some people see as pests?

Pause points

3 min 32 sec: *And there they were — a goddess and her attendant nymphs, beautiful beyond words and stark naked.*

- How do you think Aktaion reacts to seeing Artemis and her nymphs naked?
- How do you think Artemis and her nymphs react to being seen by Aktaion?
- Why do you think Artemis reacts like this?

3 min 48 sec: *Suddenly she swung round and flung the water into Aktaion's face.*

- What do think happens to Aktaion? (Remember what Apollo did to Midas after the music contest.) What transformation do you think would be suitable in the circumstances?

Questions for discussion

- How does the storyteller suggest that Aktaion and his friends' hunting had been excessive? ('All morning they'd been hunting until the ground was soaked red with the blood of wild animals, and their nets, spears, arrows and knives were clogged and caked with sticky gore'.)
- Does Aktaion deliberately do anything wrong in this story or does he just make a mistake? (The storyteller tells us, 'As Aktaion followed the stream towards the sound of the waterfall, he suddenly heard the rise and fall of women's voices, talking and laughing. He hurried towards the sound'.)
- Exactly why does Artemis punish Aktaion?
- When does Aktaion understand the full horror of his punishment? (As soon as he felt the antlers bursting from his brow? When he saw his reflection in the water? When he realised he could no longer speak?)
- What is so dreadful about Aktaion's punishment?
- What do we learn about Artemis' character in this story? Do you think that she and her brother, Apollo, have similar traits?

Suggested activities

- Working in pairs, retell the beginning of the story to your partner. To begin with, read together the first three paragraphs of the transcript and pick out words and phrases that the storyteller uses to bring the scene alive. Try to use some of these words and phrases in your own retelling.
- Draw a picture of Aktaion just after Artemis flings water into his face. How can you show that he is being transformed into a stag? Compare your picture with this painting by Titian showing Aktaion's transformation: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-the-death-of-actaeon>(link is external). How well does Titian capture the moment? To what extent does the story, as told in Titian's picture, differ from that of the storyteller? (Artemis is clothed and has her bow; the hounds are attacking Aktaion at the moment of transformation.)
- Tell or write the story from the viewpoint of Artemis, one of the hunters, or one of the hounds.
- Draw up a list of reasons for and against hunting a) in ancient Greece b) in England today. Then have a class debate on the motion, 'Hunting is always a crime'.