

PHAETHON



**ONE DOES NOT
SIMPLY**

**LET PHAETHON FLY THE SUN AND
EXPECT NO DAMAGE**

SUMMARY

- There once lived a young kid named Phaethon. He gets into trouble for starting some beef with another kid named Epaphus, bragging that his father is the sun god.
 - (Some stories say it's Apollo, god of the sun, and others say it's Helios, a Titan associated with the sun. As far as this story's concerned, it's the same difference.)
- Epaphus calls baloney, and Phaethon zips off in search of his father.
- Apollo is told that his son is searching for him and sends a hawk to get Phaethon.
- Phaethon finds Apollo on his throne and tells Apollo about his argument with Epaphus
- Apollo swears on the River Styx to give him anything he asks for.

SUMMARY

- "Anything? Aaaaanything?" says Phaethon, as stupid ideas begin to explode in his head like a thousand low-IQ fireworks. "Well," says Phaethon at last. "How 'bout you fork over the keys to your sun-chariot? I'd like to see if I could hit triple digits on that sweet baby."
- Apollo, quite understandably, is super unhappy with this request.
- For after all, the sun-chariot is what Apollo uses to take the sun across the sky every day, and he's the only one who's authorized to drive it.
- The sun god tries to reason with Phaethon.
 - He going to have to deal with the fiery flying horses that pull the chariot are incredibly hard to handle.
- But, despite Apollo's level-headed protests, the little squirt won't give up.
 - Sound like anybody you know?

SUMMARY

- So, Apollo is forced to take his son to the chariot and give him some tips on how to drive it.
- The boy needs to keep his altitude at a medium level; if he goes too high or too low, really bad stuff will happen.
- "Yeah yeah, whatever Dad. I got this," says Phaethon as he puts on his sunglasses and cracks the whip across the horses' back.
- As he is driving the chariot, his pride gets the best of him.
- Phaeton wants to show everyone, especially Epaphus, that he's driving the chariot.
- He flies lower and all hades breaks loose as houses burst into flames.
- Phaethon freaks out and pulls the horses up, and he loses control.
- At this point, Phaethon is starting to see how terrible an idea this was.
 - (Bad idea. Really bad idea.)

SUMMARY

- The chariot goes so high that the earth starts to freeze. Then the chariot dives back down again.
- The sun's heat scorches rivers, melts the snow off of mountains, dries up rivers, and ruins a fair quantity of picnics and baby showers (or so one might reasonably imagine).
- Acting fast, Zeus hurls a thunderbolt at Phaethon, knocking the boy from the chariot.
- Phaethon plummets toward the earth (Um... ouch.)
- Phaethon dead body lands with a sizzle in a river.
- the Heliades (which is just a fancy name for Clymene's daughters) weep over his grave.
- Then, Apollo turns them into poplar trees and their tears turn to amber, wrapping up a tragic story with a bizarre ending.

THEMES: PRIDE

- The story of Phaethon is one of THE myths about the dangers of pride. The entire story is pretty much driven by pigheaded Phaethon and his ambitions. When another kid accuses Phaethon of not really being a son of Apollo, Phaethon's ego just can't take it, so he travels all the way to talk with Apollo. This wouldn't be such a bad thing, except when Phaethon's pride drives him to take a spin in his dad's sun chariot going flagrantly against his father's warnings, Phaethon ends up scorching the earth and falling to his death. In the story of Phaethon, we see one of Greek mythology's favorite themes: **hubris**, a.k.a. deadly, arrogant pride.

Questions About Pride

- Explain how Phaethon's pride destroys him.
- Why do you think Phaeton is so proud?
- How would this story be different if Phaethon were a humble person?

THEMES: IDENTITY

- The story of Phaethon can be seen as his quest for identity. He's always thought of himself as a demigod, meaning that one of his parents is a god. This sets Phaethon apart from those around him and makes him feel mad good about himself. When another kid tells him he's not really the son of Apollo, the boy is thrown for a loop. His whole identity is put in question. When Apollo confirms that he is in fact his son (Maury would love this), Phaethon goes even further to claim the identity of the son of the sun by trying to drive his Daddy's gleaming chariot. Unfortunately, he just doesn't have the skills to pay the bills, and Phaethon's quest for identity ends up destroying him.

Questions About Identity

- Why do you think Phaethon's identity is so threatened when he's told he might not really be the son of Apollo?
- Why is being the son of a god so important to Phaethon's identity?

PHAETHON

- Whatever you think of him, you have to give it to Phaethon for having big ambitions. When another kid accuses him of not really being the son of Apollo, god of the sun, he doesn't take it lying down. Then, when Apollo offers him anything he wants in the world, Phaethon doesn't just ask for a life time supply of chocolate or some small fry like that, he says, "Dad, I want to drive your gleaming sun chariot across the sky."
 - Wow, you really can't knock this little demigod for being an underachiever.
- Of course, you can knock Phaethon for being a little too full of himself. (Strike that. Make it waaaaay too full of himself.) In fact, over the years, Phaethon has become a symbol of **hubris**, the Greek word for arrogant pride.
- If Phaethon wasn't so concerned about being cooler than everybody else, he could tell that other kid, "Whatever, I don't care who you think my dad is." If he didn't think he was all that, he would've heeded Apollo's warnings about how dangerous it is to drive the sun chariot, with its wild, flaming horses. Unfortunately for Phaethon, his pride causes his downfall, when he loses control of the horses, and Zeus has to zap him from the sky.

APOLLO

- Phaethon's Dad, Apollo, is the god of the sun. In some versions of the story, Apollo is actually Phaethon's Granddaddy, but whatevs... the story is better when he's Phaethon's Dad.
- The story of Phaethon shows a chiller side of Apollo that you don't get to see in lot of other tales. Yeah, he's the great and powerful god of the sun, but he's also a caring, concerned father. Apollo tries to show Phaethon that he cares by offering his son anything he wants in the world.
 - Sincere, though not the most responsible act of parenting.
- In the end, though, Apollo's generous gesture ends up causing his son's death (whoopsies). Phaethon demands that the god allow him to drive the sun chariot across the sky.
- Apollo knows this is a crummy plan, and he begs Phaethon to reconsider. Once again, he shows that he really cares about Phaethon by laying out all the dangers involved: unruly flaming horses, destroying life as humans know it etc. Unfortunately, Phaethon doesn't listen to his dear old dad and goes down in flames.
- Ironically, it's Apollo's care for his son that causes the boy's doom, the oldest facepalm on the books.

HELIADES

- These lovely ladies are both Phaeton's sisters and the daughters of Clymene and Apollo.
- They don't actually do too much until the very end of the tale, when they gather at the banks of the river and mourn the loss of their brother, who's fallen to his death in the waters.
- The Heliades are so sad that Apollo turns them into poplar trees. (makes sense, right?)
- It's said that even as trees they cry, but their tears are golden drops of sap that harden into amber.

STORIES THAT MATTER



- The name Phaethon literally means "the shining one." This seems a little ironic, since the kid tried to burn as bright as his Dad, Apollo, god of the sun, only to fall in flames to the earth where his light was quenched by a river (imagine a birthday cake with a hundred candles. Now imagine dropping that cake in a swimming pool.)
- Sometimes Phaethon was actually used as another name for the sun god, himself, which makes a lot of sense since it was the god's job to light the world with his gleaming chariot.
- These days, you'll find a bunch of cars named after Phaethon. That's a little weird. Why would you name a car after a kid who totaled his dad's wheels? As far as branding goes, it's a little short-sighted, doubling the irony since Phaethon's myth is all about the hazards of short-sightedness. (Whatever, car companies. Do what you want.)
- Phaethon was also the name of a hypothetical planet that some dudes thought once existed between Jupiter and Mars. Sadly for our bright-eyed buddy, that theory has been for the most part debunked. (Sorry, Phaethon. No planet for you. Maybe you should try and drive a little straighter next time.)