

The Death of Narcissus – Teacher’s Notes

- Ovid published his *Metamorphoses* in the early 1st century AD. It was a fifteen-book collection of more than 200 different myths. In the story of Echo and Narcissus, Narcissus spots his reflection in a pool of water, and spends so long gazing at himself that his body gradually transformed into a flower – the eponymous narcissus. Narcissi (the family to which daffodils belong), often grows beside water, and often tip slightly forward so that they appear to be gazing downwards.
- **English Translation:**

‘Snatched away in the flower of youth, Narcissus lies hidden in this tomb for his fifteenth year. Whoever you are who approach, reader, you see a pitiable destiny: for a loving sister mourns the boy whom the Fates have stolen from me, a sister who laments her brother who has been stolen away; his mother has her son, bright light torments Florus. He received his seventeenth public corn-dole, he lost his sixteenth year.’
- **Notes on the Text:**
 - This verse epitaph was set up some time during the first century AD
 - **(line 12)** ‘His mother has her son’, i.e. mother and son have been reunited. Narcissus’ mother was already dead. His sister and father now mourn him.
 - The father’s name, Florus (‘Flowery’), may explain why Narcissus was given a flower-name.
 - **(lines 13-14)** ‘Bright light torments Florus’, i.e. Narcissus’ father can’t face another day. But the literal meaning of *torqueo* (I twist), also creates the metaphor that Florus is a flower shrivelling in the intense sunlight.
 - **(lines 15-17)** ‘He received his seventeenth public corn-dole’. Narcissus was registered as a member of the *plebs frumentaria*, one of the 200,000 citizens of Rome eligible for the monthly handout of grain by the state. Generally, only male citizens below equestrian rank, aged 11, or possibly 14, were eligible, and the fact that it is mentioned on several tombstones indicates that it was a source of pride in many families. Narcissus had been a member of the *plebs frumentaria* for 17 months when he died.
 - **(lines 18-19)** ‘He lost his sixteenth year’ Confusingly, the Romans often counted children’s ages by the number of the year they were currently *living through*, not the number of years they had *completed*. Babies started at 1, not 0. If Narcissus ‘lost’ his sixteenth year, it either means he didn’t complete it, meaning he was 15 when he died; or that he never attained his (Roman) sixteenth year at all, in which case he was 14 when he died.