Before Reading

Pyramus and Thisbe
Myth Retold by Ovid

What makes a CLASSIC STORY?

Two teenagers fall madly in love, but their parents forbid them to see each other. Defying their families, they plan to run away together, but a series of misunderstandings leads to their disastrous demise. Sound familiar? Some stories are so universally appealing that they appear over and over, in everything from ancient myths to Shakespearean drama to modern soap operas. “Pyramus and Thisbe” is one of these classic stories.

DISCUSS What are some other examples of classic stories? In a small group, talk about situations that are replayed in fairy tales and bedtime stories, in movies and books, and on TV shows and Broadway stages. What do these stories share? Thrilling plots? Insurmountable conflicts? Happy endings? With your group, come up with a list detailing five characteristics of a classic story.

Characteristics of a Classic Story
1. A serious conflict, like the family feud in Romeo and Juliet
2.
3.
4.
Why does the sun rise in the east every morning? What makes thunderstorms strike so violently? Why do the seasons change? Different cultures throughout time have attempted to answer similar questions about the world. Frequently, these questions became the bases of myths. A myth is a traditional story usually created to explain why the world is the way it is or why things in nature happen as they do. Myths are also a form of entertainment that people have enjoyed since ancient times. The stories myths tell are filled with colorful characters, suspenseful plots, and daring adventures. Most myths share these basic characteristics:

- They explain how things connected with nature or humans came to be.
- They tell about supernatural beings or events.
- They present lessons or morals.

“Pyramus and Thisbe” is a classic myth, here retold in the form of a narrative poem, or a poem that tells a story. Myths with enduring messages are often retold; many are even updated in more modern forms such as novels and films. As you read this myth, notice what it attempts to explain. Also, consider the lesson the myth teaches about the value of love.

**Review:** Narrative Poem

**READING SKILL: SEQUENCE**

Timing is everything—especially when it comes to myths. The tragic action in “Pyramus and Thisbe” all takes place in two days. As you read this myth, look for signal words, such as later, then, and after, that make the sequence of events clear. Record the myth’s main events in a sequence chain like this one.

**Meet the Author**

**Ovid**

43 B.C.—A.D. 17

**A Bright Start**

Ovid is considered to be one of the greatest poets of antiquity. But if Ovid’s father had had his way, his son would have followed a very different career path. Ovid’s father was determined to see his son become a public official in the Roman Empire. He sent Ovid to Rome to study rhetoric and law under the best teachers. Instead of studying, Ovid followed his natural inclinations and focused on writing poetry. Luckily, he achieved success with his first work, the *Amores*, a series of short, witty poems about a love affair. The poet quickly became popular in fashionable Roman society.

**A Lasting Legacy**

“Pyramus and Thisbe” is taken from the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid’s masterpiece. A long narrative poem, the *Metamorphoses* retells many of the most important myths from ancient Greece and Rome. Ovid breathed new life into the old stories, shaping them in imaginative ways and strengthening their structure. Ovid’s retellings have inspired writers for centuries—including Shakespeare.

**A Grim End**

Before Ovid was able to publish the *Metamorphoses*, disaster struck. In A.D. 8, the emperor Augustus banished him from Rome and sent him to live in exile in Tomis, a desolate fishing village on the edge of the Roman Empire. The exact reason for this cruel punishment is unknown, but in many of the poems Ovid wrote while in exile, he begs for permission to return to Rome. His pleas fell on deaf ears. Ovid died in exile in A.D. 17.
The house of Pyramus and that of Thisbe stood side by side within the mighty city ringed by the tall brick walls Semíramis had built—so we are told. If you searched all the East, you’d find no girl with greater charm than Thisbe; and no boy in Babylon was handsomer than Pyramus. They owed their first encounters to their living close beside each other—but with time, love grows. Theirs did—indeed they wanted to be wed, but marriage was forbidden by their parents: yet there’s one thing that parents can’t prevent: the flame of love that burned in both of them. They had no confidant—and so used signs:

with these each lover read the other’s mind: when covered, fire acquires still more force.

The wall their houses shared had one thin crack, which formed when they were built and then was left; in all these years, no one had seen that cleft; but lovers will discover every thing: you were the first to find it, and you made that cleft a passageway which speech could take. For there the least of whispers was kept safe: it crossed that cleft with words of tenderness.

And Pyramus and Thisbe often stood, he on this side and she on that; and when each heard the other sigh, the lovers said: “O jealous wall, why do you block our path? Oh wouldn’t it be better if you let our bodies join each other fully or, if that is asking for too much, just stretched your fissure wide enough to let us kiss!

1. **Pyramus** (pīr’ə-məs).
2. **Thisbe** (thĭz’bē).
3. the mighty city . . . had built: the walled city of Babylon (bāb’ə-lən), the ruins of which are south of Baghdad, Iraq. In Greek mythology, it was founded by Semíramis (sa-mir’a-məs), a powerful Assyrian queen.

**MYTH**
What is keeping Pyramus and Thisbe apart, and what do they do to overcome these barriers? From what you’ve read so far, decide what lesson about love this myth might teach.
And we are not ungrateful: we admit our words reach loving ears.” And having talked in vain, the lovers still remained apart.

Just so, one night, they wished each other well, and each delivered kisses to the wall—although those kisses could not reach their goal. But on the morning after, when firstlight had banished night’s bright star-fires from the sky and sun had left the brine-soaked meadows dry, again they took their places at the cleft.

Then, in low whispers—after their laments—those two devised this plan: they’d circumvent their guardians’ watchful eyes and, cloaked by night, in silence, slip out from their homes and reach a site outside the city. Lest each lose the other as they wandered separately across the open fields, they were to meet at Ninus’ tomb and hide beneath a tree in darkness; for beside that tomb there stood a tall mulberry close to a cool spring, a tree well weighted down with snow-white berries. Delighted with their plan—impatiently—they waited for the close of day. At last the sun plunged down into the waves, and night emerged from those same waves.

Now Thisbe takes great care, that none detect her as she makes her way out from the house amid the dark; her face is veiled; she finds the tomb; she sits beneath the tree they’d chosen for their tryst. Love made her bold. But now a lioness just done with killing oxen—blood dripped down her jaws, her mouth was frothing—comes to slake her thirst at a cool spring close to the tree. By moonlight, Thisbe sees the savage beast; with trembling feet, the girl is quick to seek a shadowed cave; but even as she flees, her shawl slips from her shoulders. Thirst appeased, the lioness is heading for the woods when she, by chance, spies the abandoned shawl.

4. **brine-soaked**: dew-covered.
5. **they’d circumvent . . . eyes**: They would sneak past their parents.
6. **Ninus’ tomb**: According to Greek legend, King Ninus was Semiramis’ husband. When he died, she marked his burial place with a tall monument outside the walls of Babylon.
7. **mulberry**: a type of tree that produces small, sweet berries, which are usually deep red or purple in color.
upon the ground and, with her bloodstained jaws,
tears it to tatters.

Pyramus had left
a little later than his Thisbe had,
and he could see what surely were the tracks
of a wild beast left clearly on deep dust.
His face grew ashen. And when he had found
the bloodstained shawl, he cried: “Now this same night
will see two lovers lose their lives: she was
the one more worthy of long life: it’s I
who bear the guilt for this. O my poor girl,
it’s I who led you to your death; I said
you were to reach this fearful place by night;
I let you be the first who would arrive.

O all you lions with your lairs beneath
this cliff, come now, and with your fierce jaws feast
upon my wretched guts! But cowards talk as I do—longing for their death but not
prepared to act.” At this he gathered up
the bloody tatters of his Thisbe’s shawl
and set them underneath the shady tree
where he and she had planned to meet. He wept
and cried out as he held that dear shawl fast:
“Now drink from my blood, too!” And then he drew
his dagger from his belt and thrust it hard
into his guts. And as he died, he wrenched
the dagger from his gushing wound. He fell,
supine, along the ground. The blood leaped high;
it spouted like a broken leaden pipe
that, through a slender hole where it is worn,
sends out a long and hissing stream as jets
of water cleave the air. And that tree’s fruits,
snow-white before, are bloodstained now; the roots
are also drenched with Pyramus’ dark blood,
and from those roots the hanging berries draw
a darker, purple color.

Now the girl
again seeks out the tree: though trembling still,
she would not fail his tryst; with eyes and soul
she looks for Pyramus; she wants to tell
her lover how she had escaped such perils.
She finds the place—the tree’s familiar shape;
but seeing all the berries’ color changed,

8. fail his tryst: neglect to meet him.
she is not sure. And as she hesitates, she sights the writhing body on the ground—the bloody limbs—and, paler than boxwood,\textsuperscript{9} retreats; she trembles—even as the sea when light wind stirs its surface. She is quick to recognize her lover; with loud blows she beats her arms—though they do not deserve such punishment. She tears her hair, enfold her love’s dear form; she fills his wounds with tears that mingle with his blood; and while she plants her kisses on his cold face, she laments: “What struck you, Pyramus? Why have I lost my love? It is your Thisbe—I—who call your name! Respond! Lift up your fallen head!”

He heard her name; and lifting up his eyes weighed down by death, he saw her face—and then he closed his eyes again.

She recognized her own shawl and his dagger’s ivory sheath. She cried: “Dear boy, you died by your own hand: your love has killed you. But I, too, command the force to face at least this task: I can claim love, and it will give me strength enough to strike myself. I’ll follow you in death; and men will say that I—unfortunate—was both the cause and comrade of your fate. Nothing but death could sever you from me; but now death has no power to prevent my joining you. I call upon his parents and mine; I plead for him and me—do not deny to us—united by true love, who share this fatal moment—one same tomb. And may you, mulberry, whose boughs now shade one wretched body and will soon shade two, forever bear these darkly colored fruits as signs of our sad end, that men remember the death we met together.” With these words, she placed the dagger’s point beneath her breast, then leaned against the blade still warm with her dear lover’s blood. The gods and parents heard her prayer, and they were stirred. Her wish was granted.

Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

\textsuperscript{9} boxwood: a white or light yellow type of wood.

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\textbf{Language Coach}

\textit{Roots and Affixes} A word’s \textit{root} often contains clues to the word’s meaning. Linguists believe that the ancient Indo-European root \textit{wer}, meaning “to twist,” led to many words that begin with \textit{wr-}, including \textit{write, wrist, wrench,} and \textit{wrestle}. What do you think \textit{writhing} (line 114) means?

\textbf{MYTH}

Why does the mulberry tree produce deep red berries?
Comprehension

1. **Recall** Describe how Pyramus and Thisbe communicate with each other at the beginning of the myth. Why can’t they just talk face to face?

2. **Summarize** What secret plan do Pyramus and Thisbe make?

3. **Clarify** What happens to ruin the lovers’ plan?

Literary Analysis

4. **Analyze Sequence** Review the sequence chain you created as you read. How might the myth’s ending have been different if Pyramus had left for the rendezvous at the same time Thisbe did? Cite evidence to support your answer.

5. **Analyze Myth** Use a chart like the following to explain how each characteristic of myth appears in “Pyramus and Thisbe.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of Myth</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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6. **Evaluate Theme** “Pyramus and Thisbe” is an ancient myth, passed down orally and in writing for generations before Ovid recorded it some 2,000 years ago in the form of a narrative poem. Explain whether you think the theme, or message, of this classic story is still relevant to contemporary audiences.

Reading-Writing Connection

**WRITING PROMPT**

**Extended Response: Compare and Contrast**
Many great writers have looked to myths for inspiration. “Pyramus and Thisbe” was retold by Ovid long before Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, and Ovid was one of Shakespeare’s favorite authors. Compare and contrast *Romeo and Juliet* with “Pyramus and Thisbe” in terms of plot, conflict, characters, and theme. Consider how the genre of each text affects these elements.

**REVISING TIP**

Review your response. Did your comparison clearly present the selections’ similarities and differences, including the effects of genre? If not, revise your response accordingly.

What makes a **CLASSIC STORY**?

How do classic stories influence modern literature?