Myth

Phaethon

by Bernard Evslin

1 Long ago, when the world was very new, two boys were racing along the edge of a cliff that hung over a deep blue sea. They were the same size; one boy had black hair, the other had yellow hair. The race was very close. Then the yellow-haired one spurted ahead and won the race. The loser was very angry.

2 “You think you’re pretty good,” he said. “But you’re not so much. My father is Zeus.”

3 My father is Apollo,” said the yellow-haired boy, whose name was Phaethon.

4 “My father is the chief god, king of the mountain, lord of the sky.”

5 “My father is lord of the sun.”

6 “My father is called the thunderer. When he is angry, the sky grows black and the sun hides. His spear is a lightning bolt, and that’s what he kills people with. He hurls it a thousand miles and it never misses.”

Chunk 2

7 “Without my father there would be no day. It would always be night. Each morning he hitch up his horses and drives the golden chariot of the sun across the sky. And that is day time. Then he dives into the ocean stream and boards a golden ferryboat and sails back to his eastern palace. That time is called night.”

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
The dialogue between the two characters is indicated by quotation marks; however, in this section, the speaker is not always named. Decide who is speaking within each set of quotation marks: the yellow-haired boy or the black-haired one. How do you know? Mark your text to show who is speaking.

GRAMMAR & USAGE
Pronoun and Antecedents

A pronoun takes the place of a noun or another pronoun, called its antecedent. Look at paragraph 7 on this page. The pronoun he is used twice. Who is he? The antecedent, Zeus, is not in this paragraph, but it is stated at the beginning of the text so readers know that he (and father) refers to Zeus.

When using pronouns in your writing, make sure you have clearly stated the nouns to which your pronouns refer.

1 Zeus [zūs]: King of the gods in Greek mythology
2 Phaethon [fāˈθon]
8 “Sometimes I visit my father,” said Epaphus, the other boy. “I sit on Olympus with him, and he teaches me things and gives me presents. Know what he gave me last time? A little thunderbolt just like his—and he taught me how to throw it. I killed three vultures, scared a fishing boat, started a forest fire. Next time I go, I’ll throw it at more things. Do you visit your father?”

9 Phaethon never had. But he could not bear to tell Epaphus. “Certainly,” he said, “very often. I go to the eastern palace, and he teaches me things too.”

10 “What kind of things? Has he taught you to drive the horses of the sun?”

11 “Oh, yes. He taught me to handle their reins and how to make them go and how to make them stop. And they’re huge horses. Tall as this mountain. They breathe fire.”

12 “I think you’re making it all up,” said Epaphus. “I can tell. I don’t even believe there is a sun chariot. There’s the sun, look at it. It’s not a chariot.”

13 “Oh, what you see is just one of the wheels,” said Phaethon. “There’s another wheel on the other side. The body of the chariot is slung between them. That is where the driver stands and whips his horses. You cannot see it because your eyes are too small, and the glare is too bright.”

14 “Well,” said Epaphus, “Maybe it is a chariot, but I still don’t believe your father lets you drive it. In fact, I don’t believe you’ve been to the palace of the sun. I doubt that Apollo would know you if he saw you. Maybe he isn’t even your father. People like to say they’re descended from the gods, of course. But how many of us are there, really?”

15 “I’ll prove it to you,” cried Phaethon, stamping his foot. “I’ll go to the palace of the sun right now and hold my father to his promise. I’ll show you.”

16 “What promise?”

17 “He said I was getting to be so good a charioteer that next time he would let me drive the sun chariot alone. All by myself. From dawn to night. Right across the sky. And this time is next time.”

18 “Proof—words are cheap,” said Epaphus. “How will I know it’s you driving the sun? I won’t be able to see you from down here.”

19 “You’ll know me,” said Phaethon. “When I pass the village I will come down close and drive in circles around your roof. You’ll see me all right. Farewell.”

20 “Are you starting now?”

21 “Now. At once. Just watch the sky tomorrow, son of Zeus.”

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3 Epaphus [ә pә´ fәs]
4 Olympus [ә lim´ pәs]: A mountain in Greece where ancient gods were said to live

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And he went off. He was so stung by the words of his friend, and the boasting and lying he had been forced to do, that he traveled night and day, not stopping for food or rest, guiding himself by the morning star and the evening star, heading always east. Nor did he know the way. For, indeed, he had never once seen his father Apollo. He knew him only through his mother’s stories. But he did know that the palace must lie in the east, because that is where he saw the sun start each morning. He walked on and on until finally he lost his way completely, and weakened by hunger and exhaustion, fell swooning in a great meadow by the edge of a wood.

Now, while Phaethon was making his journey, Apollo sat in his great throne room on a huge throne made of gold and rubies. This was the quiet hour before dawn when night left its last coolness upon the Earth. And it was then, at this hour, that Apollo sat on his throne, wearing a purple cloak embroidered with the golden sign of the zodiac. On his head was a crown given him by the dawn goddess, made of silver and pearls. A bird flew in the window and perched on his shoulder and spoke to him. This bird had sky-blue feathers, golden beak, golden claws, and golden eyes. It was one of Apollo’s sun hawks. It was this bird’s job to fly here and there gathering gossip. Sometimes she was called the spy bird.

Now she said, “Apollo, I have seen your son!”

“Which son?”

“Phaethon. He’s coming to see you. But he has lost his way and lies exhausted at the edge of the wood. The wolves will surely eat him. Do you care?”

“I will have to see him before I know whether I care. You had better get back to him before the wolves do. Bring him here in comfort. Round up some of your companions and bring him here as befits the son of a god.”

*zodiac* [zō´dē ak]: An imaginary belt of the heavens, divided into 12 parts, called signs, and named after 12 constellations
ACTIVITY 1.12 continued

29 The sun hawk seized the softly glowing rug at the foot of the throne and flew away with it. She summoned three of her companions, and they each took a corner of the rug. They flew over a desert and a mountain and a wood and came to the field where Phaethon lay. They flew down among the howling of wolves, among burning eyes set in a circle about the unconscious boy. They pushed him onto the rug, and each took a corner in her beak, and flew away.

30 Phaethon felt himself being lifted into the air. The cold wind of his going revived him, and he sat up. People below saw a boy sitting with folded arms on a carpet rushing through the cold, bright moonlight far above their heads. It was too dark, though, to see the birds, and that is why we hear tales of flying carpets even to this day.

31 Phaethon was not particularly surprised to find himself in the air. The last thing he remembered was lying down on the grass. Now he knew he was dreaming. A good dream—floating and flying—his favorite kind. And when he saw the great cloud castle on top of the mountain, all made of snow, rise in the early light, he was more sure than ever that he was dreaming. He saw sentries in flashing golden armor, carrying golden spears. In the courtyard he saw enormous woolly dogs with fleece like clouddrift guarding the gate. These were Apollo’s great sun hounds.

32 Over the wall flew the carpet, over the courtyard, through the tall portals. And it wasn’t until the sun hawks gently let down the carpet in front of the throne that he began to think that this dream might be very real. He raised his eyes shyly and saw a tall figure sitting on the throne. Taller than any man, and appallingly beautiful to the boy — with his golden hair and stormy blue eyes and strong laughing face. Phaethon fell on his knees.

Chunk 4

33 “Father,” he cried. “I am Phaethon, your son!”
34 “Rise, Phaethon. Let me look at you.”
35 He stood up, his legs trembling.
36 “Yes, you may well be my son. I seem to see a resemblance. Which one did you say?”
37 “Phaethon.”
38 “Oh, Clymene’s boy. I remember your mother well. How is she?”
39 “In health, sire.”
40 “And did I not leave some daughters with her as well? Yellow-haired girls — quite pretty?”
41 My sisters, sire. The Heliads.”
42 “Yes, of course. Must get over that way and visit them all one of these seasons. And you, lad — what brings you to me? Do you not know that it is courteous to await an invitation before visiting a god — even if he is in the family?”
43 “I know, Father. But I had no choice. I was taunted by a son of Zeus, Epaphus. And I would have flung him over the cliff and myself after him if I had not resolved to make my lies come true.”

6 unconscious [un kon’ shəs]: Not awake
7 Clymene [klī men’ ə]
“Well, you’re my son, all right. Proud, rash, accepting no affront, refusing no adventure. I know the breed. Speak up, then. What is it you wish? I will do anything in my power to help you.”

Anything, Father?”

Anything I can. I swear by the river Styx, an oath sacred to the gods.”

“I wish to drive the sun across the sky. All by myself. From dawn till night.”

Apollo’s roar of anger shattered every crystal goblet in the great castle.

“Impossible!” he cried. “No one drives those horses but me. They are tall as mountains. Their breath is fire. They are stronger than the tides, stronger than the wind. It is all that I can do to hold them in check. How can your puny grip restrain them? They will race away with the chariot, scorching the poor Earth to a cinder.”

“You promised, Father.”

“Yes, I promised, foolish lad. And that promise is the death warrant. A poor charred cinder floating in space — well, that is what the oracle predicted for the earth — but I did not know it would be so soon . . . so soon.”

“It is almost dawn, Father. Should we not saddle the horses?”

“Will you not withdraw your request—allow me to preserve my honor without destroying the earth? Ask me anything else and I will grant it. Do not ask me this.”

“I have asked, sire, and you have promised. And the hour for dawn comes, and the horses are unharnessed. The sun will rise late today, confusing the wise.”

“They will be more than confused when this day is done,” said Apollo. “Come.”

Apollo took Phaethon to the stable of the sun, and there the boy saw the giant fire-white horses being harnessed to the golden chariot. Huge they were. Fire-white with golden manes and golden hooves and hot yellow eyes. When they neighed, the trumpet call of it rolled across the sky — and their breath was flame. They were being harnessed by a Titan, a cousin of the gods, tall as the tree, dressed in asbestos armor with a helmet of tinted crystal against the glare. The sun chariot was an open shell of gold. Each wheel was the flat round disk of the sun as it is seen in the sky. And Phaethon looked very tiny as he stood in the chariot. The reins were thick as bridge cables, much too large for him to hold, so Apollo tied them around his waist. Then Apollo stood at the head of the team gentling the horses speaking softly to them, calling them by name — Pyrocis, Eous, Aethon, Phlegon.

“Good lads, good horses, go easy today, my swift ones. Go at a slow trot and do not leave the path. You have a new driver today.”

8 affront [ə frunt’]: Insult

9 Styx [stiks]: In Greek myths, a river that led to Hades or Hell

10 asbestos [as bes’ tas]: A mineral that does not burn or conduct heat

11 Pyrocis [pi ró’ chis]

12 Eous [e’ us]

13 Aethon [a’ thon]

14 Phlegon [fle’ gon]
The great horses dropped their heads to his shoulder and whinnied softly, for they loved him. Phaethon saw the flame of their breath play about his head, saw Apollo's face shining out of the flame. But he was not harmed, for he was a god and could not be hurt by physical things.

**Chunk 7**

He came to Phaethon and said, "Listen to me, son. You are about to start a terrible journey. Now, by the obedience you owe me as a son, by the faith you owe a god, by my oath that cannot be broken, and your pride that will not bend, I put this rule upon you: Keep the middle way. Too high and the earth will freeze, too low and it will burn. Keep the middle way. Give the horses their heads; they know the path, the blue middle course of day. Drive them not too high nor too low, but above all, do not stop. Or you will fire the air about you where you stand, charring the earth and blistering the sky. Do you heed me?"

"I do, I do!" cried Phaethon. "Stand away, sire! The dawn grows old and day must begin! Go, horses, go!"

And Apollo stood watching as the horses of the sun went into a swinging trot, pulling behind them the golden chariot, climbing the first eastern steep of the sky.

At first things went well. The great steeds trotted easily along their path across the high blue meadow of the sky. And Phaethon thought to himself, "I can't understand why my father was making such a fuss. This is easy. For me, anyway. Perhaps I'm a natural-born coachman though . . ."

He looked over the edge of the chariot. He saw tiny houses down below and specks of trees. And the dark blue puddle of the sea. The coach was trundling across the sky. The great sun wheels were turning, casting light, warming and brightening the earth, chasing all the shadows of night.

"Just imagine," Phaethon thought, "how many people now are looking up at the sky, praising the sun, hoping the weather stays fair. How many people are watching me, me, me . . .?" Then he thought, "But I'm too small to see. They can't even see the coach or the horses—only the great wheel. We are too far and the light is too bright. For all they know, it is Apollo making his usual run. How can they know it's me, me? How will my mother know, and my sisters? They would be so proud. And Epaphus—above all, Epaphus—how will he know? I'll come home tomorrow after this glorious journey and tell him what I did and he will laugh at me and tell me I'm lying, as he did before. And how shall I prove it to him? No, this must not be. I must show him that it is I driving the chariot of the sun—I alone. Apollo said not to come too close to earth, but how will he know? And I won't stay too long—just dip down toward our own village and circle his roof three times—which is the signal we agreed upon. After he recognizes me, I'll whip up the horses and resume the path of the day.

**Chunk 8**

He jerked on the reins, pulled the horses' heads down. They whinnied angrily and tossed their heads. He jerked the reins again.

"Down," he cried. "Down! Down!"

The horses plunged through the bright air, golden hooves twinkling, golden manes flying, dragging the great glittering chariot after them in a long flaming swoop. When they reached his village, he was horrified to see the roofs bursting into fire. The trees burned. People rushed about screaming. Their loose clothing caught fire, and they burned like torches as they ran.
68 Was it his village? He could not tell because of the smoke. Had he destroyed his own home? Burned his mother and his sisters?

69 He threw himself backward in the chariot, pulling at the reins with all his might, shouting, “Up! Up!”

70 And the horses, made furious by the smoke, reared on their hind legs in the air. They leaped upward, galloping through the smoke, pulling the chariot up, up.

71 Swiftly the earth fell away beneath them. The village was just a smudge of smoke. Again he saw the pencil-stroke of mountains, the inkblot of seas. “Whoa!” he cried. “Turn now! Forward on your path!” But he could no longer handle them. They were galloping, not trotting. They had taken the bit in their teeth. They did not turn toward the path of the day across the meadow of the sky, but galloped up, up. And the people on earth saw the sun shooting away until it was no larger than a star.

72 Darkness came. And cold. The earth froze hard. Rivers froze, and oceans. Boats were caught fast in the ice in every sea. It snowed in the jungle. Marble buildings cracked. It was impossible for anyone to speak; breath froze on the speakers’ lips. And in village and city, in the field and in the wood, people died of the cold. And the bodies piled up where they fell, like firewood.

73 Still Phaethon could not hold his horses, and still they galloped upward dragging light and warmth away from the earth. Finally they went so high that the air was too thin to breathe. Phaethon saw the flame of their breath, which had been red and yellow, burn blue in the thin air. He himself was gasping for breath; he felt the marrow of his bones freezing.

74 Now the horses, wild with change, maddened by the feeble hand on the reins, swung around and dived toward earth again. Now all the ice melted, making great floods. Villages were swept away by a solid wall of water. Trees were uprooted and whole forests were torn away. The fields were covered by water. Lower swooped the horses, and lower yet. Now the water began to steam—great billowing clouds of steam as the water boiled. Dead fish floated on the surface. Naiads moaned in dry riverbeds.

75 Phaethon could not see; the steam was too thick. He had unbound the reins from his waist, or they would have cut him in two. He had no control over the horses at all. They galloped upward again—out of the steam—taking at last the middle road, but racing wildly, using all their tremendous speed. Circling the earth in a matter of minutes, smashing across the sky from horizon to horizon, making the day flash on and off like a child playing with a lamp. And the people who were left alive were bewildered by the light and darkness following each other so swiftly.
ACTIVITY 1.12

Chunk 9

76 Up high on Olympus, the gods in their cool garden heard a clamor of grief from below. Zeus looked upon earth. He saw the runaway horses of the sun and the hurtling chariot. He saw the dead and the dying, the burning forests, the floods, the weird frost. Then he looked again at the chariot and saw that it was not Apollo driving, but someone he did not know. He stood up, drew back his arm, and hurled a thunderbolt.

77 It stabbed through the air, striking Phaethon, killing him instantly, knocking him out of the chariot. His body, flaming, fell like a star. And the horses of the sun, knowing themselves driverless, galloped homeward toward their stables at the eastern edge of the sky.

78 Phaethon’s yellow-haired sisters grieved for the beautiful boy. They could not stop weeping. They stood on the bank of the river where he had fallen until Apollo, unable to comfort them, changed them into poplar trees. Here they still stand on the shore of the river, weeping tears of amber sap.

79 And since that day no one has been allowed to drive the chariot of the sun except the sun god himself. But there are still traces of Phaethon’s ride. The ends of the earth are still covered with icecaps. Mountains still rumble, trying to spit out the fire started in their bellies by the diving sun.