Echo and Narcissus

All the goddesses liked to run through the silent woods on Mount Olympus, playing and chasing the deer. There was Queen Hera, soundless as the sun’s rays; there was Diana, quiet as moonlight; there were the wood nymphs flitting like thistledown … and then there was Echo.

Echo was always chattering, arguing or shrieking with laughter. The deer scattered as soon as Echo opened her mouth.

“Echo!” said Hera sternly to her one day. “You’ve done it again!”
“What? Didn’t do anything,” said Echo pertly.
“Yes you did. You talked. You’re always talking.”
“I’m not!”
“You are. Don’t tell me you’re not.”
“Not,” said Echo, who always had to have the last word. “Not, not, not.”
Hera was so angry that she pointed a magic finger at Echo. “Once and for all, be silent!”
The nymph was struck dumb. She put her hands to her throat, her fingers to her lips, and looked around in horror.

“Let this be a lesson to you. You always wanted the last word. Now you shall have nothing else!”
“…nothing else,” said Echo. She found the words in her mouth, and they were the only ones she could speak.

“You may go now,” said the queen of the gods.
“...go now,” said Echo, without meaning to.

Echo ran sobbing off the mountain and wandered about miserably in the foothills. There, amid his flock of sheep, she saw a shepherd boy. He was combing his curly hair into ringlets and brushing the grass off his tunic. This was Narcissus, and Narcissus was as beautiful as any god. The shepherdesses could not lay eyes on him without falling in love.

Echo was no different from the shepherdesses. She fell in love with Narcissus at first sight, and what she would have given to be able to tell him so! But her lips were sealed like a locked door. All she could do was follow him about, her hands full of flowers and her eyes full of love.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, when he saw her gazing at him.

“...for you...for you,” said Echo, and laid the flowers at his feet.

Unfortunately, Narcissus was quite used to women falling in love with him. It happened all the time. He knew how handsome he was and that made him very, very vain. Worse still, he did not much like women, did not want their sickly, syrupy love. Echo only annoyed him, trailing along behind him, saying nothing, staring with her mouth open.
“Everywhere I go, you follow”, he complained.
“…follow…follow”, said Echo.
“Stupid girl. I suppose you think you love me”.
“…love me…love me,” pleaded Echo.
“You bore me. Leave me alone!”
“…alone! alone!” wailed Echo. The word filled her with horror.

Day after week after month she dogged Narcissus’ footsteps. In her unhappiness she grew pale and thin, and when all her beauty had faded because of her love for him, he said, “Oh do go away! I hate the sight of you. Do you really suppose I could ever care for a stick-insect like you? Look at yourself!”

“Look at yourself! …Look at yourself!” sobbed Echo.
“Gladly”, said the vain young man, and went to the pool in the centre of the forest and examined his reflection.

Echo’s love turned to hate, and though she had no words, she wished a wicked, wordless wish. She wished that Narcissus should one day love as she loved him, and suffer for it as she was suffering.

Then she wandered away into the forest where, in her misery, she grew thinner and thinner, paler and paler. At last her body faded away altogether. Only her voice was left to blow about with the leaves.

All this while, Narcissus sat by the pool staring at his reflection. Somehow he could not seem to tear himself away. The more he looked, the more he liked what he saw. Narcissus fell in love with the face in the water, just as Echo had fallen in love with him. He longed to kiss those lips, just as Echo had longed to kiss his. At
last, leaning down towards the shining pool, he kissed the water—and the face reflected there dissolved into ripples.

“Oh don’t go!” Narcissus reached out and plunged his hand into the water, but only managed to shatter the reflection altogether. So he sat very still and gazed and gazed and gazed...
Activities to use with Echo and Narcissus

1. A narcissist is someone who loves himself excessively. Pretend that you are a narcissist. Write your autobiography from that point of view.

2. Is there ever an appropriate time to love yourself? Take a position and defend your point of view.

3. Do you think Nemesis’ punishment of Narcissus was fair? Have a panel discussion of why or why not.

4. A nemesis is anyone or anything that seems to frustrate or defeat someone. Do you have a personal nemesis? Is it a person or a thing? Are there any positive steps you can take to help the situation? Write down three goals you would like to work towards in dealing with your personal nemesis.

5. Pretend you are Echo and retell the story from her point of view. Or, if you prefer, retell the story from Narcissus’ point of view.

6. Select one of the characters in the myth and design a personal shield for that person.

7. What causes an echo? Use reference books to find out. Be prepared to report your findings to the class.

8. Write a letter to the goddess, Nemesis, to try to persuade her not to punish Narcissus. Or write a letter to Hera to try to persuade her not to punish Echo.

9. Pretend that you are a television reporter. If you were to interview each of the following people, what questions would you ask? Zeus, Echo, Nemesis, Hera, Narcissus, A maiden who loved Narcissus. Find six people to play the roles of the above characters. Practice interviews. Present them to the class.

10. The opposite of narcissist is an altruist. An altruist is someone who shows unselfish concern for the welfare of others. With altruist at the top of a one to ten scale and narcissist at the bottom, how would you rate yourself? Why? Choose at least five famous people and rate them. Be sure to have arguments for your ratings.