

**MULTIPLE PATHS TO  
LITERACY:  
DIFFERENTIATED  
INSTRUCTION FOR  
DIVERSE STUDENTS**

The Fall of Phaeton

**Grade Level: 5–6**

4<sup>th</sup> primary school of tyrnavos

## OBJECTIVE

Students will be introduced to the Greco-Roman myth of Phaeton and how he created the Milky Way galaxy by critically analyzing *The Fall of Phaeton* by Rubens. They will then create their own constellation to be displayed in a classroom galaxy.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- Science (astronomy)

## MATERIALS

- Smart Board or computer with ability to project images from website or individual student computers
- White drawing paper and pencil
- Black construction paper
- White crayons
- Ruler and protractor
- Large empty wall or bulletin board
- Tape or tacks to display constellations

## WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- What do you think is happening in this painting?
- Why do you think it's happening in the night sky?

## BACKGROUND

(the myth): Helios, the sun god, drove a four-horse chariot across the sky each day, giving the earth its hours and seasons. He rose from a palace in the east and flew to another in the west. Each night, with his team and chariot, he boarded a golden ferry to sail home.

Helios had a mortal son named Phaeton. When the boy was taunted for claiming the god as his father, Phaeton asked



Helios for proof of his parentage. In response, Helios promised Phaeton anything he wanted. Phaeton's request was to drive his father's chariot. Although Helios realized that the boy lacked the strength and skill to control the horses, the promise had been made. With dread, Helios handed over the reins.

When Phaeton set out, the horses veered, first heavenward, cutting the swath of the Milky Way, then fell to earth. Winged figures representing the hours and seasons, gesture in horror as the pattern of night and day is disrupted. The blazing chariot scorched the earth creating deserts. The earth's very future was threatened. Zeus, the king of the gods, was called to intervene. He hurled a thunderbolt at the chariot, sending it in a fiery plunge to earth. The nymphs who recovered Phaeton's body were so bereft that they became trees and wept over him. Their tears became amber, the fossilized resin of trees.

Peter Paul Rubens was the most sought-after painter in northern Europe during the early seventeenth century. His rich colors, energetic brushwork, and lively compositions epitomize the exuberance of baroque art. Dominated by restless motion, his dynamic and emotional style is created through strong contrasts of color and light. The son of a lawyer, Rubens was a noted linguist and scholar, well schooled in ancient history and classical languages. He served the courts of Europe not only as a painter, but also as a diplomat, sometimes carrying out delicate negotiations while working on foreign commissions.

Rubens painted *The Fall of Phaeton* while he was studying in Italy from 1600 to 1608. He sketched a famous battle scene



painted by Leonardo da Vinci and used some of the horses in it as models for his own painting.

## GUIDED PRACTICE

- What moment of the story has Rubens depicted?  
*(The moment when Zeus' thunderbolt streaks in from the right and horses and Phaeton plummet to the fiery earth.)*  
What happened in the story leading up to this moment?  
What will happen next?
- How did the artist use color and line to make this painting look so dramatic?  
*(There isn't one calm horizontal or vertical line. All are diagonal to show action. Every figure and line is in motion, twisting and thrusting out diagonally. The strong contrast of highlights—on the horses, in the sky, and on the figure of Phaeton in the right foreground—and shadows throws the action into high relief and creates drama.)*
- What natural phenomena does the story explain?  
*(The origins of the Milky Way, deserts, and amber.)*
- Rubens painted butterfly-winged figures to symbolize the hours and the seasons. Why might they be reacting in terror to the chaos they see?  
*(The normal patterns of day and night, sunrise and sunset, even the seasons, are threatened.)*
- Helios made a promise, and usually promises should be kept. If you were Helios, would you have kept your



promise and allowed Phaeton to drive the chariot knowing what would happen to him and to the entire earth? Why or why not? How would you describe Phaeton's personality in insisting on driving the chariot? If you were Phaeton, would you have made the same choice? Why or why not?

## Activity

According to this myth, Phaeton's erroneous ways created a new galaxy—the one we live in—the Milky Way. There are 88 recognized constellations within our galaxy. Do you think Phaeton could have spurred on more constellations yet to be discovered?

- 1 Students will first explore our galaxy from the earth's perspective through an [interactive 360-degree view provided by CK-12 Foundation](#).
- 2 Now that students have become better acquainted with the night sky and how stars can be connected to create likenesses to people and animals, they will create their own constellation that could have been incited by Phaeton's disastrous ride.
- 3 To create their constellation, first, they will do a pencil line drawing on white drawing paper of what the animal, object, or person looks like. It should be a simple representation using as few lines as possible to make it recognizable.



- 4 Next, they will place dots on the line drawing at key points to effectively connect the lines. Remind them not to use too many dots, no more than a dozen, as constellations merely suggest an outline.
- 5 Lastly, students will transfer only the dots using white crayon onto black construction paper. They may wish to use a ruler and protractor to compare distances and angles from their original line drawing.

## Extension

Once all students have created their individual constellation, they will then assemble a class galaxy. Working together, students will affix their constellations to a blank wall or bulletin board. They should step back often to see how the stars come together into a unified galaxy, moving the individual constellations to create a cohesive universe. Some constellations might even want to share stars. Then, students will hypothesize what person or animal their fellow student astronomers depicted.



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