

Name: _____ Class: _____

Midas

By Thomas Bulfinch
From *The Age Of Fable* • 1855

Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867) was an American writer best known for Bulfinch's Mythology (1881), a compilation of his earlier works, including The Age of Fable. The following excerpt tells the myth of King Midas, "gifted" with the power to turn everything he touches into gold. As you read, consider the theme of the myth.

[1] Bacchus¹, on a certain occasion, found his old schoolmaster and foster-father, Silenus², missing. The old man had been drinking, and in that state wandered away, and was found by some peasants, who carried him to their king, Midas. Midas recognized him, and treated him hospitably, entertaining him for ten days and nights with an unceasing round of jollity.

On the eleventh day he brought Silenus back, and restored him in safety to his pupil. Whereupon Bacchus offered Midas his choice of a reward, whatever he might wish. He asked that whatever he might touch should be changed into gold. Bacchus consented, though sorry that he had not made a better choice.

Midas went his way, rejoicing in his new-acquired power, which he hastened to put to the test. He could scarce believe his eyes when he found a twig of an oak, which he plucked from the branch, become gold in his hand. He took up a stone; it changed to gold. He touched a sod³; it did the same. He took up an apple from the tree; you would have thought he had robbed the garden of the Hesperides⁴. His joy knew no bounds, and as soon as he got home, he ordered the servants to set a splendid repast⁵ on the table. Then he found to his dismay that whether he touched bread, it hardened in his hand; or put a morsel to his lip, it defied his teeth. He took a glass of wine, but it flowed down his throat like melted gold.



"one day when king midas was bored he took a walk in the garden..." is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

1. Bacchus, or Dionysus in the Greek mythology, was the god of the grape harvest, winemaking, wine, ritual madness, fertility, theatre, and religious ecstasy in the Roman mythology.
2. Silenus was a companion and tutor to the wine god Dionysus (Bacchus).
3. **Sod (noun):** grass and the part of the soil beneath it held together by the roots
4. The Hesperides was the collective name for the nymphs who, in the Greek mythology, tended a garden in which golden apples grew, apples that can produce immortality in those who consume them.
5. **Repast (noun):** meal or food

In consternation at the unprecedented affliction, he strove to divest himself of his power; he hated the gift he had lately coveted. But all in vain; starvation seemed to await him. He raised his arms, all shining with gold, in prayer to Bacchus, begging to be delivered from his glittering destruction. Bacchus, merciful deity, heard and consented. "Go," said he, "to River Pactolus, trace its fountain-head, there plunge yourself and body in, and wash away your fault and its punishment." He did so, and scarce had he touched the waters before the gold-creating power passed into them, and the river sands became changed into gold, as they remain to this day.

- [5] Thenceforth Midas, hating wealth and splendour, dwelt in the country, and became a worshipper of Pan⁶, the god of the fields..

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6. Pan was the satyr-god of the wild, shepherds and flocks, rustic music (i.e. the pan flute), and companion of the nymphs.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes a theme of the text? [RL.2]
 - A. Be careful what you wish for.
 - B. Be wary of the gifts of gods.
 - C. Greed does not feed the starving man.
 - D. Do not insult a greater force's pride.

2. PART A: What does the term "consternation" most likely mean as used in paragraph 4? [RL.4]
 - A. Cleverness
 - B. Foolishness
 - C. Confusion
 - D. Dismay

3. PART B: Which word or phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "unprecedented"
 - B. "hated the gift"
 - C. "had lately coveted"
 - D. "raised his arms"

4. Explain Bulfinch's subtle use of foreshadowing in the text. Cite textual evidence in your response. [RL.3]

5. Which of the following best describes the purpose of the myth of King Midas? [RL.6]
 - A. To spread King Midas' tale
 - B. To teach people to always take heed or care of the gods (i.e. proper worship and respect)
 - C. To warn people of greed, especially in contention of greater powers
 - D. To lecture people on the deceptive allures of gold

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Many modern references to King Midas – and his power to turn everything he touches to gold – in popular culture paint him as an icon of opulence. Is this an appropriate depiction of Midas? Why or why not?
2. How does this story and its theme relate to our modern culture?
3. In the context of this story, does money buy happiness? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.