John William Waterhouse created two magnificent works, *Sleep and His Half-Brother Death* (1874) and *The Awakening of Adonis* (1899) (see Fig. 1). The paintings focus on the relationship of sleep and death.

Sleep resembles death, and, indeed, in the nineteenth century, some medical texts described sleep as a form of reversible death. In 1830, the Scottish doctor Robert McNish wrote,

"Sleep is the intermediate state between life and death; life being regarded as the frame in the full enjoyment of its functions, and death as that of their total suspension."

Waking up was often thought to transport one from the unknown mysteries of sleep back to the real world. Many artists have created inspirational images of awakenings. Such examples include Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* and *The Creation of Eve* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Sleep plays an important role in many mythological stories. Some of these have inspired artists to illustrate aspects of the stories. One story, which has several versions, is *Adonis and Aphrodite*. It is about life-death rebirth and has two main characters: the beautiful Adonis and the goddess of love (Aphrodite in Greek myths, and Venus in Roman myths). Not only did the story inspire artists (eg, Titian, Rubens), but this tale was the subject of Shakespeare’s first published poem in 1593.

The complex story includes incest, jealousy, love, seduction, rejection, prophecy, death, and an awakening from death — a climatic rebirth. Persephone, queen of the Underworld, and Aphrodite, goddess of love, competed over Adonis. The dispute was settled by Zeus (the most powerful Greek god), who ordered that Adonis would spend half the year with Persephone and the other half with Aphrodite. *The Awakening of Adonis* by John William Waterman shows the goddess of love awakening Adonis from his half-year sleep of death with a kiss (see Fig. 2).
This theme of being awakened from a death-like sleep state by a kiss has been popularized by the fairy tale by Charles Perrault, Sleeping Beauty. Waterhouse perfectly captured the awakening.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author has declared that he has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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References


Figure 2. Goddess of love, Aphrodite, waking up Adonis with a kiss.