

Demeter & Persephone

Length

10 min 5 sec

Story summary

Aphrodite makes Hades fall in love with Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the crops. He snatches her while she is picking flowers in a meadow with a nymph and takes her down to the Underworld. The nymph is left holding Persephone's torn dress but she weeps so much at her disappearance that she dissolves into a pool of salty water.

Demeter searches in vain for her daughter and in her sorrow ceases to care for the world. At last, however, she finds Persephone's torn dress in a pool and realises what has happened. She goes to Mount Olympus where she confronts Aphrodite and asks Zeus to restore her child. He agrees to do so provided Persephone has not eaten any food in the Underworld. When Demeter learns that Persephone has eaten six pomegranate seeds she threatens to make the earth barren if she does not get her daughter back. A compromise is reached — for half the year Persephone will live on earth with her mother; for the other half, she will live in the Underworld.

Starting-points

- How many of the six Olympian gods who were swallowed by Kronos can the class name? (*Demeter, Hades, Hera, Hestia, Poseidon and Zeus*)
- **Hades**, god of the Underworld (somewhat confusingly, Hades is also a name for the Underworld itself) plays an important part in this story. What do the children imagine Hades would look like? What would it be like to be god of the Underworld? What might the Underworld look like?
- **Demeter**, goddess of the crops, is also a central character in this story. What do the children think she might look like? What adjectives do they think might be appropriate to describe the goddess of the crops?
- Another goddess, **Aphrodite**, also features in this story. What did we learn about her in the story of Pandora? (*She is the wife of Hephaistos, god of fire and crafts; she is the goddess of love.*) See what else, if anything, the children know about Aphrodite. How powerful a goddess do the children think she might be?

Pause points

1 min 34 sec: *'Take both of them with one of your arrows!'*

- What do we learn about Aphrodite at the start of the story? (*She controls the hearts of both mortals and immortals.*) Does she sound like a caring, loving goddess? What does the storyteller mean when he says that mortals and immortals dance to her tune?
- What does Aphrodite ask her son, Eros, to do? (*She wants Eros to shoot Hades with one of his arrows so that he falls in love with Persephone.*) Why? (*She wants to control the hearts of everyone, even the god of the Underworld.*)

3 min 56 sec: ... *and then she was gone, into the darkness below.*

- How is Hades' kingdom described? (*A vaulted land of gloom, a dismal empty place.*) What happens when mortals' souls go there? (*They forget everything.*)
- How is Hades himself described? (*Magnificent; impassive; eyes as dark and deep as open graves; has cold, grey skin and cold, grey fingers.*)
- How do you think Persephone feels when the ground opens up and Hades appears?

6 min 2 sec: *At last she knelt to drink from a pool and found the water salty.*

- What does Demeter do when she hears a rumour that something awful has happened to Persephone? (*She searches night and day for her daughter. She pulls out her hair and tears her dress.*)
- Why is Demeter's behaviour potentially so damaging for mortals? (*Mortals depend on Demeter for all their food and, with the weather becoming so unpredictable there is a danger that the crops will no longer grow.*)
- Why is the water salty? (*It is the remains of the weeping nymph.*) What does the nymph have that might give Demeter a clue what has happened to Persephone? (*Persephone's torn dress.*) How do you think the story will unfold?

Questions for discussion

- What aspect of the natural world does this story help explain? Do you think it is a convincing explanation of the seasons?
- In this story who do you think is/are the most powerful of the Greek gods — Aphrodite, Demeter, Hades, Zeus or the Fates? Give reasons for your choice.
- Who do you feel most sorry for in this story — Hades, Demeter, Persephone or the nymph? Give reasons for your choice.

Suggested activities

- Imagine you are the nymph who was with Persephone on the day she was snatched by Hades. Write her account of the abduction.
- Choose an aspect of the natural world (e.g. thunderstorms, earthquakes, floods) and make up a story explaining its origins.