

TEACHING MATERIALS: DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

Main topic

Greek myths

Myths are probably the most familiar and most enduring contribution the ancient Greeks made to the modern world. For centuries right up to the present day, artists, poets, playwrights, novelists, musicians, composers and film-makers have made use of Greek myths in commercial and popular culture, as well as in so-called high culture. Many non-European cultures have reinterpreted Greek myths for their own purposes. The English language is rich in expressions drawn from Greek myths.

Greek philosophy

As a counterpart to myth, Greek philosophy was the system of thinking based on reason. The ancient Greeks began the whole tradition of western philosophy and the ideas and discussions of the two greatest Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, are still central to the work of modern philosophers. The great achievement of the Greeks in science and mathematics was to turn practical and descriptive techniques into analytical and explanatory disciplines. Some of the work of ancient Greek mathematicians remains valid to this day and even if in most areas modern science has gone far beyond the work of the ancient Greeks, it has done so by building on fundamentals they established.

Key ideas

The purpose of myths

Greek myths had a range of functions. Some were ways of representing fundamental aspects of existence: how the world came into being, where humans came from, the cycle of seasons etc. Myths could also serve to guide humans about their behaviour by telling of the punishment of crimes and mistakes or the rewards for virtue. At the same time, such myths define the relationship between humans and deities and demonstrate the fragility of human life. Myths also often explained human practices and institutions such as sacrifice and marriage and were frequently used by city-states to lend themselves legitimacy and prestige.

Myths and thinking:

The purposes of myths outlined above are all ways of thinking about the world: explanations, reasons for behaviour, reasons for human institutions. Modern use of the term myth to mean something untrue tends to suggest that people who used myth were primitive, with no other ways of explaining and representing their world. The continuing use of Greek and other myths today suggests that they have a power that is not best explained by asking whether or not they are true. Just as we use both highly developed science and stories, particularly religious ones, to represent our world and important issues in our lives, so the Greeks had both their traditional myths and complex philosophy.

Making the link

The clear link between the story and the main topic is the way in which this myth explains an aspect of the natural world.

Myths as explanations

The children will probably recognise without too much prompting that the story explains the origin of the seasons: in autumn and winter, when Persephone is in the Underworld with Hades, her mother allows the earth to die and nothing to grow; in spring, when Persephone returns, plants burgeon and animals are born.

You might ask the children which other stories they have listened to explain how things came to be. They will probably mention Ouranos and Gaia, Prometheus' creation of humans, Pandora as the first woman and perhaps too her release of evils into the world. Once they have a grasp of this idea of explanation, you have a good opportunity to introduce them to the word 'myth' and to discuss the three main characteristics of myths: that they are stories, that they usually have a purpose beyond just entertainment and that they are usually very old. It is also very appropriate to explain that myths were originally made up and passed down by word of mouth.

There is another less obvious explanation in this myth: it explains why the Greeks worshipped these two deities. You might begin by asking why this particular myth would be so significant to the ancient Greeks, bringing out that they were much more closely linked to the land and to agriculture than we are today. You could show them the cup below and ask them what they think is happening and how people would want to do their most to ensure the seed grew.

Cup showing ploughing

<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/black-figured-siana-cup-attributed-to-the-burgon-group/jQE0ISnptxmczQ>

This drinking cup shows a farmer ploughing with oxen while another man sows seed from a basket or bag; British Museum object number 1906,1215.1

Now show the other side of the cup (below) and identify it as a religious scene — they should recognise the altar from their work on the Prometheus story.

Other side of cup

http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00041/AN00041334_001_l.jpg

The other side of the cup, which is described in detail in the weblink above, shows a ritual with a group of women dancers at an altar. The seated figure on the left may be Demeter.

Discuss the connection between the two scenes. Discuss how the story of Demeter and Persephone identifies the goddesses whose favour the Greeks needed to seek to secure a good harvest.

Teaching the topic

The natural bridge, and one that the children will probably find quite easy to understand, is the notion that a story can serve to explain something.

The purposes of myths

Once the children have identified the explanations given by the Demeter and Persephone and the Creation stories, you can suggest that there are different sorts of things to be learned from other myths and ask them about the other stories they have listened to — it would probably be a good idea to focus initially on one story, perhaps a Midas story, to model what you mean. Two other kinds of function are likely to emerge:

1) what might happen to you if you are a certain sort of person, for example, foolish (Midas), greedy (Midas), proud (Phaethon), cruel (Aktaion)

2) what might happen if you behave in a certain way, for example, Orpheus and Pandora (who disobey orders or advice), Prometheus (who steals fire), Aktaion (who accidentally comes upon a naked goddess), Midas (who disrespects a powerful god)

The *Greek myths* sheet summarises the purposes of myths and also shows two later ways in which a Greek myth and a Greek god have been used, one in the royal symbolism of 18th century France, the other in popular culture. It includes questions you could explore with the children.

Greek myths information sheet

An information sheet for children with a summary of how myths were used by the ancient Greeks and two examples of subsequent re-use of mythical material.

If you wanted to look at examples of how a myth has been shown in different periods, you could explore the *King Midas image sheet* with the children. The sheet includes three suggested questions for the children to consider. They will probably come up with plenty of ideas about how they can tell it is the same story in both, but do encourage them to be specific and to look for multiple clues. There are several ways the pictures differ from ancient Greek images, but the main ones to bring out for the children are the musical instruments and the fashion of dress. They may need a little help with these, so remind them of Greek examples they have seen. The main thing to bring out is that the pictures dress the characters in the fashion of AD 1500 and 1829. The differences in the same details indicate that they are from different dates 300 years apart.

King Midas image sheet

A sheet with two prints of Apollo, Pan and Midas. Both use an alternative version of the story in which Midas is asked to judge the contest. The print on the left is by the Italian printmaker Benedetto Montagna and dates from AD 1500–1520. It may have been made as an illustration for a book of mythical stories. The one on the right is a satirical print made in London in AD 1829. It satirises a court case in which an inn-keeper (on the right) had requested a music licence. It was opposed by the man on the left and the final judgement was to refuse the licence.

You could have a closer look at the political use of myths in the ancient Greek world, by looking at the *Coin showing Demeter* (see below) from the Greek colony of Metapontion. Metapontion was famously fertile and most of the city's wealth was based on trade in grain, mainly barley. You could start by looking at the heads-side and asking the children what they can see and whether they know who it might be — any guesses can be accepted at this stage.

Now look at the other side and identify the ear of barley and ask if that helps. They may suggest Persephone, which is a good attempt, but settle finally on Demeter. Discuss what the use of Demeter and the link to her myths suggests about Metapontion and why the city would put her on its coins. There are similar examples for Athena and Theseus in the *History teaching materials* for Week 6.

Coin showing Demeter

<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/stater-of-metapontion-with-head-of-demeter-977>

A silver coin of about 400–340 BC from the Greek colony of Metapontion (modern Metaponto) in the 'instep' of southern Italy. It shows the goddess Demeter as a beautiful young woman. On the other side is an ear of barley. The other small object is the shell of a murex, a type of sea snail, from which a very expensive purple dye was obtained. The letters are the first four of the city's name.

Greek philosophers

You can use the idea of myths as ways of explaining phenomena to connect to the ancient Greek philosophers. Ask the children for other ways of explaining things. Science, maths and any social science will enable you to explain that the Greeks also used other ways of understanding the world and to introduce the philosophers.

You could use the *Greek philosophers* sheet (below) to provide more information. It also gives very brief examples of the views of a few philosophers. You could explore some of these in more detail: ask if they can see why Thales might think that the world is made of water; discuss what they think of Plato's idea that wise people should be rulers; what kind of life do they think Epikouros' idea would give rise to and would they enjoy it?

Greek philosophers information sheet

An information sheet for children showing how Greek thought was influenced by other cultures and giving examples of some philosophers.

Ancient Greek thinkers and writers

http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/knowledge/explore/exp_set.html

This website gives a list of more Greek intellectuals, including philosophers, scientists and writers. They can be grouped and each entry provides a brief idea of their achievements.

If you want to follow up some Greek mathematicians, you can find two very useful short articles on Pythagoras and one on Archimedes on this NRICH maths website: <https://nrich.maths.org/9399>

Continuing theme: Gods and goddesses

The children can now add the following to the chart they are compiling:

Eros

Persephone

Charon (from the Orpheus story)

Both stories provide examples of behaviour and character for other deities the children have met, Aphrodite and, in particular, Hades and Demeter.

If you have time you could explore the two pot paintings below of Demeter and Persephone and of Hermes and Charon. Both introduce ideas that the children could include on their chart.

Demeter and Persephone

http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00595/AN00595536_001_l.jpg

This scene on a deep drinking cup shows the young Athenian hero Triptolemos in his winged chariot. He has received the gift of wheat from Persephone on the right and is about to set out and bring it to humans. Demeter stands behind him. She and her daughter both carry lit torches. Triptolemos took the gift around the world and taught humans how to grow grain; British Museum object number 1873,0820.375

Hermes and Charon

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/251043>

On the left, Charon waits in his boat for his next passenger to the land of the dead. Hermes is on the right — he is recognisable by his wand. If you click on Additional images below this one, you will find the other side of the pot: the passenger is a young man; Hermes stretches his hand towards him. One of Hermes' roles was to lead the souls of the dead to the Underworld.