

ANCIENT GREECE

Link to Literature

Greek myths have long been among the world's most popular literature. Historians believe myths were created, in most cases, to explain natural occurrences or other events. The following retelling focuses on the myth of Persephone, the daughter of the Greek goddess, Demeter, and her kidnapping by Hades, god of the Underworld. Persephone's name means "she who destroys light" in the language of ancient Ionia.

◆ *As you read the myth, think about how it explains a particular natural occurrence. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Myth of Persephone

Persephone was the daughter of Zeus, king of the gods, and Demeter, goddess of the seasons and the harvest. Demeter made the crops grow to feed humankind, and Persephone assisted her.

Persephone was very beautiful, and Hades, god of the Underworld, was smitten with her. Hades asked Zeus for permission to marry Persephone, but Zeus would say neither yes nor no. He knew that Demeter would never let her daughter marry the grim god of the dead.

So one day, in his frustration, Hades burst up through the ground at the place where Persephone was gathering flowers. He kidnapped Persephone, taking her in his chariot down to his dark kingdom. As they entered the dead realm, Persephone covered her ears to block out the snarling barks of Cerberus, the three-headed dog who kept the dead in the Underworld. Charon, the boatman, carried his king and the sobbing Persephone across the River Styx to Hades' lands.

When Demeter discovered that Persephone was gone, she fell into terrible despair. She stopped tending the crops and other green growing things to search the

world for her daughter. The grain withered in the fields, the fruit fell unripened from the trees, and famine spread.

After a time, Demeter discovered that her beautiful daughter was a prisoner of Hades.

She pleaded with Zeus to force Hades to set Persephone free. Soon the other gods pressed Zeus, too. Without Demeter's attention, crops could not grow and the humans would all starve. Who then, they asked, will make us offerings?

Reluctantly, Zeus commanded Hades to release Persephone. As long as she had eaten no food in the Underworld, he must let her go.

However, Hades was clever, and in his love for Persephone, also cruel. He tricked Persephone into eating just one seed of a pomegranate. Because she had eaten this, she could not leave the Underworld forever but had to stay with Hades as his queen for three months of each year.

So, every year after Persephone has gone to the Underworld, Demeter is cold and sad, and lets all plants die. When Persephone returns to Earth, her mother rejoices, and all green things grow and bloom again.



Persephone and Hades in the Underworld

Questions to Think About

1. What happened when Demeter discovered her daughter was missing?
2. Why did Persephone have to spend part of the year in the Underworld?
3. **Analyze Information** What natural occurrence is explained by this Greek myth? How did it explain this natural occurrence?