



Scientists today can explain many aspects of nature that people once explained through myths. The mythological explanations, however, still have a powerful imaginative appeal.

- As you read the myth of Demeter [di mē'tər] and Persephone [pər səf'ə nē], notice how in mythology personal emotions such as love and sadness may affect the course of the whole world.

Greek statue of Hermes, messenger of the gods.

*Retold by
Anne Terry White*

Demeter and Persephone

Deep under Mt. Etna, the gods had buried alive a number of fearful, fire-breathing giants. The monsters heaved and struggled to get free. And so mightily did they shake the earth that Hades, the king of the underworld, was alarmed.

"They may tear the rocks asunder and leave the realm of the dead open to the light of day," he thought. And mounting his golden chariot, he went up to see what damage had been done.

Now the goddess of love and beauty, fair Aphrodite, was sitting on a mountainside playing with her son, Eros.¹ She saw Hades as he drove around with his coal-black horses and she said:

"My son, there is one who defies your power and mine. Quick! Take up your darts! Send an arrow into the breast of that dark

monarch. Let him, too, feel the pangs of love. Why should he alone escape them?"

At his mother's words, Eros leaped lightly to his feet. He chose from his quiver² his sharpest and truest arrow, fitted it to his bow, drew the string, and shot straight into Hades' heart.

The grim King had seen fair maids enough in the gloomy underworld over which he ruled. But never had his heart been touched. Now an unaccustomed warmth stole through his veins. His stern eyes softened. Before him was a blossoming valley, and along its edge a charming girl was gathering flowers. She was Persephone, daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest. She had strayed from her companions, and now that her basket overflowed with blossoms, she was filling her apron with

1. **Eros** [ēr'os]: god of love.

2. **quiver**: case for holding and carrying arrows, usually slung over one shoulder.

lilies and violets. The god looked at Persephone and loved her at once. With one sweep of his arm he caught her up and drove swiftly away.

"Mother!" she screamed, while the flowers fell from her apron and strewed the ground. "Mother!"

And she called on her companions by name. But already they were out of sight, so fast did Hades urge the horses on. In a few moments they were at the River Cyane.³ Persephone struggled, her loosened girdle⁴ fell to the ground, but the god held her tight. He struck the bank with his trident.⁵ The earth opened, and darkness swallowed them all—horses, chariot, Hades, and weeping Persephone.

From end to end of the earth Demeter sought her daughter. But none could tell her where Persephone was. At last, worn out and despairing, the goddess returned to Sicily. She stood by the River Cyane, where Hades had cleft⁶ the earth and gone down into his own dominions.

Now a river nymph had seen him carry off his prize. She wanted to tell Demeter where her daughter was, but fear of Hades kept her dumb. Yet she had picked up the girdle Persephone had dropped, and this the nymph wafted⁷ on the waves to the feet of Demeter.

The goddess knew then that her daughter was gone indeed, but she did not suspect Hades of carrying her off. She laid the blame on the innocent land.

"Ungrateful soil!" she said. "I made you fertile. I clothed you in grass and nourishing

grain, and this is how you reward me. No more shall you enjoy my favors!"

That year was the most cruel mankind had ever known. Nothing prospered, nothing grew. The cattle died, the seed would not come up, men and oxen toiled in vain. There was too much sun. There was too much rain. Thistles and weeds were the only things that grew. It seemed that all mankind would die of hunger.

"This cannot go on," said mighty Zeus. "I see that I must intervene." And one by one he sent the gods and goddesses to plead with Demeter.

But she had the same answer for all: "Not till I see my daughter shall the earth bear fruit again."

Zeus, of course, knew well where Persephone was. He did not like to take from his brother the one joyful thing in his life, but he saw that he must if the race of man was to be preserved. So he called Hermes to him and said:

"Descend to the underworld, my son. Bid Hades release his bride. Provided she has not tasted food in the realm of the dead, she may return to her mother forever."

Down sped Hermes on his winged feet, and there in the dim palace of the king, he found Persephone by Hades' side. She was pale and joyless. Not all the glittering treasures of the underworld could bring a smile to her lips.

"You have no flowers here," she would say to her husband when he pressed gems upon her. "Jewels have no fragrance. I do not want them."

When she saw Hermes and heard his message, her heart leaped within her. Her cheeks grew rosy and her eyes sparkled, for she knew that Hades would not dare to disobey his brother's command. She sprang up, ready to go at once. Only one thing troubled her—that

3. **River Cyane** [sī'an]: river in Sicily, an island off the southwestern tip of Italy.

4. **girdle**: belt.

5. **trident**: spear with three sharp points.

6. **cleft**: opened.

7. **wafted**: carried along.

she could not leave the underworld forever. For she had accepted a pomegranate⁸ from Hades and sucked the sweet pulp from four of the seeds.

With a heavy heart Hades made ready his golden car. He helped Persephone in while Hermes took up the reins.

"Dear wife," said the King, and his voice trembled as he spoke, "think kindly of me, I pray you. For indeed I love you truly. It will be lonely here these eight months you are away. And if you think mine is a gloomy palace to return to, at least remember that your husband is great among the immortals. So fare you well—and get your fill of flowers!"

8. **pomegranate** [pom'gran'it]: round, golden-red fruit with many small seeds.

Straight to the temple of Demeter at Eleusis,⁹ Hermes drove the black horses. The goddess heard the chariot wheels and, as a deer bounds over the hills, she ran out swiftly to meet her daughter. Persephone flew to her mother's arms. And the sad tale of each turned into joy in the telling.

So it is to this day. One third of the year Persephone spends in the gloomy abode of Hades—one month for each seed that she tasted. Then Nature dies, the leaves fall, the earth stops bringing forth. In spring Persephone returns, and with her come the flowers, followed by summer's fruitfulness and the rich harvest of fall.

9. **Eleusis** [ē lōō'sis]: town in Greece northwest of Athens.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Recalling

1. Who is Hades? What causes him to fall in love with Persephone?
2. Where does Demeter place the blame for her daughter's disappearance? What does Demeter do to gain revenge?
3. Why does Zeus intervene?
4. What does Persephone do in the underworld that keeps her from leaving it forever?
5. How does this myth explain the changing of the seasons?

Interpreting

6. Give at least three examples from the selection of human emotions displayed by gods and goddesses.
7. Do you think the final decision of the gods is a fair compromise for all the characters? Tell why or why not.

Extending

8. Name at least one other aspect of nature that might be explained by the strong emotions of a god or goddess.

READING AND LITERARY FOCUS

Myth

A **myth** is an ancient anonymous story, usually about gods and heroes. Myths originally explained some aspect of nature or accounted for some human action. In other words, most myths grew out of particular historical events. They show us the imagination at work, creating literature out of the events of the real world.

Almost every culture created myths. There are myths about the beginning of the world, the first human beings, great wars, and movements of people from place to place. There are myths about why flowers grow, why birds fly, and why different languages exist. In fact, collections of myths—