

Demeter and Persephone.

Version from 'Dramatherapy with Myth and Fairytale: The golden stories of Sesame' by Jenny Pearson, Mary Smail and Pay Watts, 2013. Abridged.

Demeter, goddess of the harvest and all growing things, had a daughter called Persephone who always helped with her work, tending the fields and the orchards. Day in, day out, the two goddesses went about their work together.

One morning, when Demeter was getting ready to go out and work in the fields, Persephone said, 'I don't want to go to the fields with you today. I want to visit with my sisters, the wood nymphs, and play among the trees and the wild flowers in the meadow.'

Demeter was sad at the thought of a day without her daughter, but she wishes her a happy day and went off to the fields on her own. Persephone ran to find her sisters and all day they danced and played together among the trees. Towards evening, Persephone found herself at the edge of the wood, looking at a meadow studded with wild flowers. It was so beautiful that she forgot about the game she was playing and wandered out among the flowers, entranced by their colours and shapes. There was a deep purple flower with a nodding head that she could not resist. She reached out to pick the flower and the earth at her feet cracked open. There was a rumble like thunder coming from under the ground, getting louder and louder. A chariot drawn by black horses and driven by a fierce charioteer burst out of the ground and Hades, lord of the Underworld, looked down from his chariot, entranced by her beauty. At once he recognised that Persephone was the one he needed to be Queen of this dark kingdom. He leant over and swept Persephone off the ground placing her beside him in the chariot. Though she begged him to let her go, he held on to her and drove on at great speed.

They raced across fields until they came to the side of a river and Hades had to reign in his horses. Persephone thought she might escape at this point, but Hades through a thunderbolt at the river and a huge chasm opened up in front of them. He cracked his whip and the horses plunged in, galloping down a dark tunnel into the Underworld. The waters of the river water closed over their heads and not a trace of them was left.

Additional activity:

Look back over your words for 'loss'. Now that you've heard the first part of the story, add any more words that come to mind.

As evening descended on the Earth and there was no sign of Persephone, Demeter went out to meet her. She asked the wood nymphs where Persephone was. They said they had lost sight of her when she wandered into the field of wild flowers. Demeter walked into the meadow but there was no sign of her daughter. Then she knew that something mysterious had happened and she would have to look for Persephone.

Leaving the city of Athens behind her, Demeter walked out into the country, asking people as she went if they had seen or heard anything of Persephone. At last she came to the river bank where Hades had thrown his thunderbolt. She walked beside the river, making her way upstream, and came to a little spring that gurgled and sang in the sunlight. She stopped to listen and the spring said, 'Dear goddess Demeter, I have something to tell you, something no mother would wish to hear. Persephone is a prisoner of Hades, King of the Underworld. He found her among the wild flowers and carried her away to his kingdom.'

Demeter was filled with anger. She went straight to Zeus, most powerful of the gods, and said, 'Oh father Zeus, do something to help me. Persephone, my daughter, is a prisoner of Hades. He has carried her away to the Underworld. You cannot allow this. Make him return her to the Earth where she belongs.'

Zeus did not want to intervene. Hades was as powerful in the dark world as Zeus himself in the world above, and together they held the powers of light and dark in a delicate balance that he didn't want to disturb. But Demeter wouldn't give up. She threatened that if Persephone did not return to her, she, Demeter, the goddess of all growing things, would neglect her duties and there would be no food. Everyone in the world would starve. When he heard this, Zeus recognised that in her grief Demeter could do great harm to his kingdom, the Earth. So he relented, saying, 'This much I can do for you. If you go down to the Underworld and find that Persephone has not eaten since she went down there, she can return with you to the Earth. But if any food has passed her lips since entering the Underworld, she will have to remain there.'

Demeter set off for the Underworld immediately, descending into the dark earth until she came before the throne room of Hades. She found him seated on his throne with her daughter, Persephone, seated beside him. Persephone rose to embrace her mother. Demeter returned her embrace and then she drew back, saying, 'Persephone, my daughter have you eaten anything since you came into this dark place?'

Persephone did not reply, but Hades said, 'This very morning your daughter ate six pomegranate seeds. It is the first food she has eaten since coming into my kingdom.'

Demeter left without another word, going straight back to Zeus to declare that she would not accept the loss of her daughter for six pomegranate seeds. She said, 'If you do not let her return to me, I will not attend to my work. Nothing will grow on the Earth again, no fruit, no cereal crops, no flowers. I cannot tend the earth without Persephone. I am too sad to bear fruit.'

Additional activity:

Look back over your words for 'waiting'. Add any more words or images that come to mind.

Great Zeus heard the grief in her voice and knew that she was speaking the truth. He recognised that, without Persephone at her side, Demeter would lose heart and be unable to tend the Earth. And so, for once, the all-powerful god tempered his judgement. He decreed that because Persephone had eaten six pomegranate seeds she must spend six months of the year in the Underworld, but at the end of that time she could return to the Earth and tend fields and orchards with her mother.

So it came about that the Earth experiences winter as a grey and barren time when Demeter grieves over her daughter's absence, but as winter draws to an end Persephone returns, bringing with her the joys of spring, and her mother greets her with sunshine and with flowers. The birds sing of happiness and the Earth produces fruit and harvest.

Additional activity:

Look back over your words for 'hope'. Add any more words or images that come to mind.