

Mythology

Unit 4 of 6

Demeter and Persephone

Why the seasons change was one of the natural phenomena that mystified the ancient Greeks. Their explanation is explained in William Bennett's book, *The Moral Compass*. He writes, "This myth associates the warmth of spring and summer with a mother's devotion. It is remarkable that the ancient peoples linked something so encompassing and important as the seasons' cycles to the power of a mother's love. The image of Mother Demeter roaming the earth with her great torch in search of her lost daughter, Persephone, is one of the most stirring in classical mythology."

1. Make up your own mythological story about why the seasons change.

Demeter (Ceres) was the goddess of the grain and harvest. She was very important to the Greeks because their very well-being depended upon grain crops. She had taught them how to cultivate, but they still needed her divine assistance to provide enough rain throughout the growing seasons of spring and summer. Without it, food might be scarce in the winter, or they might even face starvation.



Demeter had one daughter by Zeus -- a beautiful young goddess named Persephone (Proserpina) who had caught the eye of Hades, Lord of the Underworld. One day as she was picking flowers with her friends, Persephone spotted a beautiful flower she had never seen before. Unable to resist the temptation, she picked several colorful blooms. At that moment, the earth opened up and out came Hades in his golden chariot drawn by four horses. As he scooped her up into his arms, she screamed in terror for her mother's help, but Demeter did not hear her cries. Not even Zeus interfered because he had previously arranged the abduction so that his brother would have a wife.

2. What do you think about Zeus choosing loyalty to his brother instead of his daughter?

Grief-stricken Demeter, carrying two lighted torches, searched the earth, but in vain. She abandoned her job of looking after the crops, so they began to fail. She refused to do anything until she found Persephone. Realizing there was the threat of famine and starvation, Zeus agreed to a compromise and ordered Hades to return Persephone to her mother.

The three Fates then decreed that if Persephone were to eat any food while in the Underworld, she could only live with her mother during the spring and summer months of the growing season, but had to return to Hades during the fall and winter months as Queen of the dark and gloomy Underworld. The crafty Hades had given her a pomegranate as a "loving" farewell gesture just before she departed back to earth, and she had eaten a small portion of it. (See Appendix 1 for a poem about Persephone, written in the voice of a mother).

Life is similar, in a way, to the seasons of the year. There is a pattern of progressions and changes in our lives. They pave the way to the next winding road we choose without a chance to go back again -- no matter the hurts or mistakes we make.

The Greeks created the myth to explain the change of seasons. We know that they come as a result of the earth's long journey around the sun, but can still represent the different phases in our journey through life.

3. **Compare a man's life with the seasons of the year. Would it be any different for a woman's life?**
4. **What popular grain food derives its name from Demeter's Roman name, Ceres? What is your favorite brand?**
5. **Make up a name for a god and a product that is named after the god in current times.**

Zeus (Jupiter)

Zeus was King of the Gods -- the Supreme Ruler of the Universe -- the Justice King -- the Sky King -- the Weather King. The Romans called him Jupiter or Jove.

You learned early in the course that Olympian gods and goddesses had symbols with which they were always associated. Zeus, as befits a king, had several outstanding ones. They were his thunderbolts which caused thunder and lightning, especially when he was angered; oak leaves in his crown, as the oak was sacred to the Greeks; an eagle nearby -- a symbol of strength, power, and the majesty of a sovereign; his aegis (pronounced *EEjjs*) which was a protective garment made of goatskin that served as a divine shield to make him indestructible; and his staff. A bald eagle is our national emblem and is used today to represent power and majesty. If you look at a dollar bill you will see an eagle on the Great Seal of the United States. The head of Medusa was engraved on the shields of Greek warriors.

6. **Think of an appropriate place for another one of Zeus' symbols.**

Zeus was concerned primarily with justice, and he tried to be fair in his decisions, but his punishments were often harsh and extreme. He listened to both sides of a case but, unfortunately, he was also the jury. Revenge was a serious flaw in his character, and you see it played out in the myths of Atlas and Prometheus.

7. **Can anyone ever really be completely objective, or will opinions/feelings always get in the way? How can a judge work to be more objective?**

Zeus' outstanding attribute was his incredible strength. In Homer's *Iliad*, we read the warning Zeus gives to the other gods to stay away from the war with Troy. If they do not, he says that they will learn "how much stronger am I than all the rest of you gods. If you really want to know and to prove it to other immortals, let drop a golden cord from the heavens and seize the end, Oh all you gods and goddesses! Pull it with all your might, try as you will to drag me from heaven down to earth; you can not move me a bit! I am Zeus, the highest and the wisest. But, suppose I want to pull you up to the heavens. Up you would come, and behind you would come both land and sea. The cord I would fasten securely to the highest peak of Mt. Olympus leaving its burden to hang, twisting there in the wind. That is how far I surpass the wind in power, both gods and mortals!"

8. **Write a letter from a mortal to Zeus replying to this speech.**

One of the more popular Zeus myths is the flood story that shows the extent to which Zeus went to exact revenge. He always kept a close watch over men's actions for years after their creation. He became angered at how evil they had become as reported by the other gods. So, he disguised himself and went down to earth to see firsthand. It didn't take long before he returned to the heavens and called together a council of the gods. He told them he was going to destroy mankind. His first thought was to use his dreaded thunderbolts to kindle a fire, but he remembered the three Fates had decreed that the day was approaching when the earth and the sea and the lofty palaces of heaven would pass away in fire. So he opted for a great flood.

He ordered his brother, Poseidon, to stir up the seas, rivers, and streams, and Aeolus, the god of the winds, to call forth a mighty storm. All mankind, animals, and vegetation were destroyed with the exception of two mortals -- Deucalion, son of Prometheus, and his wife, Pyrrho. Prometheus had advised them to build a chest large enough to hold them and their provisions. After nine days and nights, the rains ceased and their "boat" landed on top of Mt. Parnassus. As they wandered the barren earth, Zeus ordered them to "throw the bones of their mothers and fathers over their shoulders." The stones they picked up symbolized the bones -- those of Deucalion became men and those of Pyrrho became women. You may recognize this myth as a creation story. This one closely resembles the Biblical story of Noah and the ark.

The Greeks had always believed that through a flood, the gods would be able to wipe away most of the evils of mankind. That way they could remold the mind of man.

9. What nonviolent way can you think of to help rid the "evils of mankind"?

Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system. It is so huge that its features can be seen with binoculars at certain times of the year. Its diameter is ten times the size of Earth.

There was an article that came out about a grateful lion named Jupiter -- one of the hundreds of animals being cared for by a volunteer.

10. What would be an appropriate animal to be named "Zeus"? What about "Persephone"?

The Three Fates



The Fates were three sisters, minor deities but important. They decided the course of everyone's life in Greek mythology from birth to death by spinning thread, which symbolized life. They were Clotho, the spinner; Lachesis, the measurer, who determined the length of a life; and Atropos, the most dreaded, who cut the thread with her scissors, thus ending a life. The gods were powerless against the Fates. Even Zeus tried unsuccessfully to intervene for his friends. Many Greek stories teach the futility of trying to outmaneuver the unyielding fate predicted.

Many people in modern society deny the existence of fate and insist that one's fate is unknown at birth. A person can be all that s/he wants to be. It isn't fate that determines success or failure, but our own limitations. The story of our lives is written as we live it and create it.

11. What's the single biggest factor leading to success, and the one leading to failure?

12. If a person knew his predicted fate, how would it affect his life?

13. Write a poem in the voice of one of the Fate sisters.

Typhon



The myth about the horrible monster, Typhon, involves the first major threat to the authority of Zeus as King of the Universe after the War of the Titans. (You may recall that Zeus threw most of the losing Titans who opposed him into the Underworld.)

Typhon's mother sought revenge and conceived Typhon, a gigantic monster who was larger and more terrifying than any of her other children. His appearance was grotesque. "Fifty dragons emerged from each shoulder. In each head, reptile-like tongues spewing forth fire and smoke flicked in and out. Moreover, each head spoke strange voices. Sometimes the immortal gods could understand Typhon's words but he usually barked, bellowed, or roared. His body was winged yet had legs around which hissing snakes coiled." This description was taken from Chapter 5 of *Mythology and You*, by Rosenberg and Baker.

Following his mother's directions, with terrible roars and hisses and spewing forth fire, Typhon advanced on Mt. Olympus to conquer Zeus. Zeus met him with his famed thunderbolts, creating terror among the other gods. Zeus ordered them to escape to Egypt where he would follow them later. Many battles went on before Zeus was able to conquer the monster and bury him under Mt. Aetna in Sicily where he exists as the largest volcano in Europe. It is still active today -- occasionally spewing out fire and debris and making threatening rumbles.

You have probably guessed by now that the word "Typhoon" is derived from the myth about Typhon. We should add it to our growing list of natural phenomena not understood by the Greeks. Even now we don't know everything about typhoons. The devastation they cause is beyond imagination.

14. What parts of the country are most affected by:

- a) hurricanes?
- b) forest fires?
- c) earthquakes?

15. To what extent can science predict and control these events?

Hermes (Mercury)

Hermes was the messenger of the gods. Zeus had given him a pair of golden, winged sandals so that he could travel about on his errands as fast as the wind. He was also given a wide-brimmed hat and a scarf, called a caduceus (pronounced *ka-DOO-see-us*) wrapped with two snakes. Some say that Hermes had originated in snake-form, and therefore the snakes were essential to the caduceus. This became the symbol of Hermes, and today it is used as the symbol for the medical

profession. You have probably seen it on prescription forms. The Florists Telegraph Delivery System FTD also uses it in their logo.

16. If you were reincarnated as an animal in a different life, what animal would you hope to be and why?



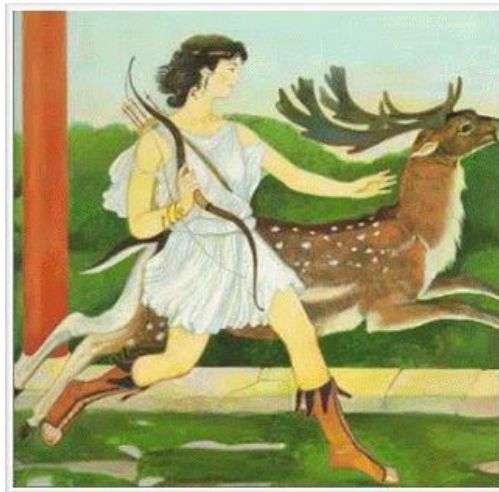
Hermes had jobs that kept him constantly on the go. Besides being the messenger, he escorted all the dead to the Under-world. Travelers worshipped him and many prayed to him for safe trips. It was Zeus who ordered him to bring back Persephone to her mother. It was Hermes who helped Perseus in his search for Medusa by giving him winged sandals. Zeus once sent him to the faraway cliff where Prometheus was chained to try and persuade him to tell whom the Fates had predicted would overthrow the great Lord of the Universe.

"Hermetic" is a word derived from the myth. It means to be tightly sealed from the entrance of air. It was thought that Hermes invented the method of a hermetically sealed sailing vessel.

17. Do you think the word "hermit" (someone who isolates him/herself from society) derived from the word Hermes? What could the connection be?

Atalanta

There are several myths about Atalanta; this one is taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 10.



Atalanta used to race against men and defeat even the fastest runners. It would be hard to say whether she was known more for her fleetness of foot or her beauty. All men wanted to marry her, and her father insisted that she marry. But when she consulted the god Apollo on the subject of marriage he replied, "You have no need of a husband, Atalanta. You should avoid any experience of one. But assuredly, you will not escape marriage and then though still alive, you will lose your own self." Atalanta was very frightened by this fate. She got rid of all her suitors by imposing these terms: "No man may have me," she said, "unless he first defeats me in a race. Compete against me, and the one who is swift of foot will have my hand in marriage as his prize, but death will be the reward of those who are left behind. Let us race on those conditions."

18. Why did Atalanta race against suitors? Why didn't she just refuse to race, since she didn't intend to marry?

19. If you were Atalanta, would you have accepted the fate decreed for you? What would you have done to escape it?

In a marathon, strategy is required. Many runners don't try to beat others. Instead, they aim to achieve an individual victory. It is a very personal event, each participant having his/her own goal to achieve, often just to finish.

20. What strategy would you use while running a marathon to maximize your chances of winning?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Appendix Mythology: Unit 4 of 6

Appendix 1

"Pray To Persephone" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

*Be to her, Persephone,
All the things I might not be;
Take her head upon your knee.
She that was so proud and wild,
Flippant, arrogant and free,
She that had no need of me,
Is a little lonely child
Lost in Hell, -- Persephone,
Take her head upon your knee;
Say to her, "My dear, my dear,
It is not so dreadful here."*

Citations

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