

THE THEFT OF
PERSEPHONE

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you start the story.

- bittersweet**—both painful and pleasant
- blight**—anything that ruins or destroys plant growth
- blunt**—plainspoken; not sensitive
- chasm**—opening in the earth; deep gap
- contrary**—opposite
- deity**—a divine being; a god
- fasting**—the act of going without food
- haughty**—proud; stuck-up
- hospitable**—friendly to guests
- immortal**—undying; living forever
- nourishment**—food
- ominous**—threatening; unlucky
- pacify**—to make peaceful or calm
- perish**—die
- realm**—a kingdom
- reverence**—deep respect; great admiration
- rites**—ceremonies; special religious acts
- surged**—poured; gushed
- thrive**—grow; blossom
- yearning**—a strong desire

The Theft of Persephone

*Old age and death
have no power
over Greek gods.*

*Yet even the mightiest god
is the plaything of a
seemingly innocent force:
love.*

*And just as love can make
ordinary humans unhappy,
so it can tear a god in two.*

The gods never weep. Or so it is said. But if they lose a loved one, do they grieve, even without tears? If so, how do they express their grief? And how does their grief affect the lives of humans?



Without doubt, the gods know the meaning of love. Aphrodite,¹ the goddess of love, always made sure of that. Human or god, it made no difference. No one was safe from her spell. Not even the cold god of the Underworld and ruler of the dead, mighty Hades.²

Hades' time came one day as he rode in his chariot around Sicily.³ He drove wildly, calling his black horses by name. Aphrodite caught sight of the **haughty** Hades. At once she called her son to her side.

"Eros,⁴ take a look at that stubborn old rascal!" she exclaimed. "How unusual to see him riding here! And how lucky for us! To this day, he has refused to learn about love. But now we'll teach him. Go, child. Do your work."

Eros snatched up his bow and hurried away. He flew so fast, he managed to pass Hades. As he glided above the earth, he searched about.

Suddenly, in a nearby meadow, he spotted a young maiden picking flowers. Ah! Just what he was looking for. Here was the maiden to snare the heart of Hades!

The young maiden was actually the goddess Persephone.⁵ Her mother was Demeter,⁶ the goddess of the fields, who made all seeds grow. As much as she loved the earth, Demeter loved Persephone even more.

Eros smiled as he gazed at Persephone. She was such a lovely, flowerlike creature. Not surprisingly, she loved flowers more than anything in the world. In fact, she thought of little else. She spent days at a time picking them.

Eros readied his bow and arrow. Carefully he aimed it at a black dot on the horizon. The dot grew larger. Finally even a human eye could see it was the god Hades.

As Hades neared the meadow, Eros finally let loose his arrow. Faster than a hawk it flew through the air and struck

1 (af rō dī' tē)

2 (hā' dēz)

3 (sis' i lē) Sicily is an island off the southern coast of Italy.

4 (er' os or ē' ros)

5 (per sēf' ō nē)

6 (de mē' ter)

its target. Eros smiled contentedly. Then with one look back, he turned towards home. His work was done.

Meanwhile, Eros' victim paused over the meadow and looked down. Hades was very puzzled. He had hardly felt the tiny sting of Eros' arrow. Yet as he gazed at Persephone, he felt a strange pain.

"What is this odd **yearning**?" he wondered. "Many young women have died and come to my kingdom. I felt nothing for them. Now why should my heart ache at the sight of this one?"

The troubled god drove on to Olympus to speak with his brother Zeus.⁷ Zeus was the king of the gods and Persephone's father.

When he saw Hades approaching, Zeus shifted uneasily in his throne. "Not exactly a welcome guest," he thought to himself. "As much as I love my brother, his visits rarely lead to good."

But Hades was too wrapped up in his own problem to notice Zeus' reaction. He walked straight up to the throne and spoke. **Blunt** fellow that he was, he came right to the point.

"I want to marry your daughter Persephone. I have come to ask your permission."

Hades saw the flicker of surprise on his brother's face. "Yes, Zeus, love is strange to me. But after seeing Persephone, I have been conquered."

Zeus fidgeted. So he had been right about this visit after all.

"Dear brother," Zeus finally said, "nothing would please me more. But you know the girl's mother, Demeter. Persephone is her most beloved treasure. I can tell you right now that she'll have none of this.

"And think of the girl," Zeus continued. "Why, all she knows of life is sunlit fields. Can she possibly find happiness in your dark **realm**?"

⁷(ō lim' pus) (zūs)

But when Zeus saw Hades' sad expression, he paused. "Ah, brother, I know that look. Haven't I felt love's pain all too often?"

Zeus shook his head. At last he sighed. "Very well, she shall be yours. You're as good a husband as any."

At once the sadness lifted from Hades' face. Yet Zeus couldn't help but offer one last warning. "Be careful, brother. Her mother must not find out about this marriage."

So Hades set about planning to steal Persephone. For a number of days he watched the meadow closely. Finally he saw the lovely girl return.

As usual, Persephone had come to pick flowers. She wandered around the meadow, stooping here and there to pick a bloom. Then her eyes fell on a delightful blossom.

"Such colors!" she sighed. "And such a wonderful scent! Surely, this is the most beautiful flower I have ever seen!"

As Persephone bent to pick it, Hades sprang his trap. At once the earth opened up beneath Persephone's feet. She stepped back dizzily. The terrible **chasm** below was pitch black. Persephone had never imagined such darkness, even in her dreams.

As Persephone moved to escape, she heard a roar of wind and the clatter of hoofs. Suddenly she saw a chariot rushing up out of the darkness. In an instant, Hades had lifted her into the chariot.

Persephone was overcome with terror. She struggled fearfully. All the lovely flowers she had gathered scattered everywhere. The belt about her waist came undone and fell to the ground.

"Mother!" she cried. "Mother, help me! Oh, please help me!"

But Demeter couldn't hear her daughter's cries. Only the god Helios* witnessed the deed. As master of the sun, he drove his golden chariot across the sky each day. Now from high overhead, Helios watched the terrible scene. For a

* (hē' li os)

moment, he considered coming to Persephone's rescue. But then he thought better of it.

"Poor girl," he said to himself. "The Underworld is no place for her. Still, it's best never to get mixed up in the business of one's fellow gods. Besides, I'm running late today as it is."

So without further trouble, Hades carried Persephone down to his kingdom. And there she was quickly crowned as his queen.

By evening, Demeter had noticed her daughter's absence. She went to the field where Persephone had been picking flowers. There she found Persephone's belt and the scattered flowers. But the chasm had sealed itself up. No hint remained of where Persephone had gone.

When Demeter saw these **ominous** signs, she nearly went mad. She ran wildly through the world, searching for her daughter. In grief, she tore at her clothes and called Persephone's name. But no answer came.

For nine days and nine nights Demeter searched. During all that time, she never slept nor ate. At night, she lit her way with two torches from the flames of a volcano.

At last, weary and starved, Demeter went to Helios.

"Sun-god, you see everything," she cried. "Whatever happened to my daughter, you must have witnessed it. Tell me! Out of pity, tell me! What happened to her?"

Helios decided it was best to tell the truth. "My poor woman," he said, "your daughter was carried off by Hades. She is now his queen in the Underworld."

"Do the other gods know of this?" asked Demeter.

"All, I'm afraid, except you," said Helios with sympathy. "Then I have been betrayed. There is no one on earth or in heaven I can trust."

Demeter was stunned with grief and bitterness. She wandered the earth aimlessly. But no one recognized her as a great goddess. She went disguised as an elderly woman, dressed all in black.

At last, Demeter's travels brought her to Eleusis.⁹ Every part of her ached—her bones, her heart, her spirit. Too weary to go on, she sat by the side of a stone well.

"I wish I were human," she said to herself. "If I were human, I could weep. If I were human, I could die."

While she sat there, four young sisters came to the well for water. They gazed curiously at Demeter. But she was too filled with grief to even notice them.

"You poor, sad woman," said the eldest, lifting the goddess' head. "What can we do to help you?"

"Leave me alone," moaned Demeter.

"But what terrible thing has happened to you?"

Demeter was not ready to reveal her identity. So she said, "I was captured by pirates. They planned to sell me as a slave. But I escaped and came here."

"Don't you have a place to stay?" asked the eldest sister.

"Don't let that worry you," said Demeter. "I can take care of myself. Besides, I can't trust you. I can't trust anyone. Even the gods hate me."

"But you don't understand," said the girl. "This is a very **hospitable** town. Any household would be glad to take you in. We'd be deeply pleased, though, if you'd agree to stay with us. Promise to stay here while we go ask our mother."

Too tired to quarrel, Demeter waited at the well. The girls returned before long, laughing with joy.

"Mother begs you to come at once!" they exclaimed. "She says you'll be our honored guest!"

And so Demeter followed the girls to their little home. They were met at the door by their mother, Metaneira.¹⁰ She was the wife of a wise old man named Celeus.¹¹

As Demeter stepped through the doorway, Metaneira stared at her. She sensed something special about the strange visitor.

⁹(e lū' sis) Eleusis was a town in ancient Greece. As this story explains, it became known for its ceremonies honoring Demeter.

¹⁰(met a nī' ra)

¹¹(sē' le us or sel' e us)

"I don't know why," she whispered to her daughters, "but this sad old woman brings us great fortune."

Metaneira quickly moved a chair forward for Demeter. Then she offered the goddess some wine.

However, Demeter refused. "Bring me some mint-flavored water," she said. "That's all I want." This pleasant drink always made Demeter think of the farmers in her fields. It was what they liked to cool themselves with on hot summer days.

After drinking the water, Demeter rose from her chair. "And now I must leave," she said. "I do not wish to be a burden to you."

"Please, don't go," Metaneira begged with a kind smile. "You must stay and be the nurse to my son, Triptolemus."¹²

At once Metaneira feigned her newborn baby and brought it to Demeter. The goddess Demeter held the baby and looked into his eyes. Triptolemus laughed and gurgled and touched her face. For the first time since Persephone's disappearance, Demeter's heart swelled with joy.

"Yes," Demeter said at last. "Yes, I will stay."

And so Demeter devoted herself to Triptolemus' care. The sweet baby didn't make her forget her own lost daughter. To the **contrary**, she only thought of Persephone all the more. But for a time, the baby reminded her that life must go on in spite of her grief. And it reminded her of her love for all humans.

Yet a fear nagged at her. "What if I lose this precious boy, just as I lost Persephone?" she thought. "After all, he is human. Someday he must die—someday all too soon. Oh, no! That must not be! I couldn't bear it!"

So she decided to make the child **immortal**. That very night she began carrying out her plan. First, she fed the child ambrosia, the food of the gods. And when the household was asleep, she held the baby by the fireplace.

"Don't be afraid, little Triptolemus," she said tenderly. "These coals will burn away all that is human in you. Just

¹²(trip tol' e mus)

the god in you will be left. My only wish is to make you live forever.”

With those words, she set the baby in the burning coals. Just as Demeter said, there was no cause to fear. The baby wasn't burned. Far from it. He smiled and giggled.

Night after night, Demeter fed the baby ambrosia and placed him in the coals. Triptolemus seemed to **thrive** on the treatment. He grew bigger and stronger by the hour. Everyone in the family was delighted by the baby's progress. Everyone except his mother, Metaneira, that is. “Somehow, I suspect this woman is practicing some strange magic,” she thought.

One night, Metaneira didn't go to sleep at her usual time. Instead she hid and watched Demeter. She saw the goddess feed the baby ambrosia. Then came the frightening moment as Demeter moved towards the coals.

With a cry of alarm, Metaneira burst from her hiding place. She rushed forward and seized the child.

“How dare you!” she cried. “I trusted you with my baby! And now you want to murder him!”

Demeter rose to her feet in a rage. “Foolish woman!” she shouted. “I would have made your child into a god! But now it cannot be.”

With those words, Demeter dropped her disguise. Gone was the dark-robed, sad old woman. The house was flooded with shining light. Metaneira stood face to face with a goddess.

“Truly, you are some **deity!**” she wept. “Who are you?”
 “I am Demeter. I am the goddess of the earth, the grower of all seeds. **Nourishment** and life is what I offer you, not death. I feel nothing but love for humans like you. And what thanks do you give me in return?”

Metaneira fell to her knees. “Forgive me, goddess!” she cried. “I did not know! But please, do not take my son's life because of my foolishness!”

Demeter's heart grew tender again. “Poor woman,” she said. “Surely you don't think I would kill this boy? I love

him more than any child I have ever known—except for my own lost daughter. He will grow to honor me. He will teach my ways to other humans.”

At that, Demeter wrapped herself in a cloud and disappeared.

The next day, a stunned Metaneira told her husband, Celeus, all that had happened. In turn, Celeus told the story to others. He also persuaded the townspeople to build a temple for Demeter.

The people worked long and hard on the temple. At last after many months, the beautiful building was finished. Then to their great joy, the townspeople learned that Demeter had returned to Eleusis. The temple had so pleased her that she made it her home.

But the goddess welcomed neither worshippers nor sacrifice. Still grieving for her daughter, she was determined to waste away forever.

The earth, too, suffered terribly. Demeter forgot her love for the land and allowed it to die. One month it rained too much. The next, it rained not at all. All crops, seeds, cattle, sheep, and goats began dying. People realized that before long, they would die as well. And all for Demeter's love of Persephone.

Persephone! What had become of her during this time? As Zeus had guessed, the girl so used to sunlight hated the gloomy Underworld. And she hated her husband for bringing her there.

Hades sensed this and tried to **pacify** her with rare jewels. But these gifts did not please Persephone. Instead, she threw them angrily away.

“Why do you bring these ugly stone flowers to me?” she cried.

“Because no flowers grow here,” replied her husband. “I want living things near me or nothing at all.”

Yet Hades kept bringing her jewels. In time, Persephone actually came to admire their cold beauty. They seemed to reflect her own sadness.

Queenhood grew on the young goddess as well. She wandered among the dead, sharing their memories of life in the sun. She also learned to share their sadness.

Truly, life in the Underworld deeply changed Persephone. Before going there, she cared for nothing but flowers. In Hades, she learned to care for human souls. And so Persephone grew to womanhood.

The goddess even learned to care for her husband a little. But she didn't dare tell or show him that. If she did, she knew there was no hope of ever seeing the sun again. So Persephone never looked upon her husband except with a frown. And she refused ever to eat.

Meanwhile, the horrible **blight** went on for a year. Finally Zeus knew that he must step in if humans were to survive. So he sent Hermes,¹³ the messenger god, to Demeter's temple with a summons.

When Demeter heard the summons, she spoke harshly to Hermes. "Take this message to the king of the gods. If he wants to speak with me, he must come here himself. And he must come here with my daughter. Then—and only then—will the earth live again."

Hermes returned with Demeter's message. Zeus listened in grim silence. Then he called all the other gods except Hades before his throne.

"Fellow deities," he said, "you know the dreadful thing that has happened. Demeter has forgotten the earth. Humankind itself will soon **perish**. I needn't tell you how terrible this will be for us. No more temples will be built in our honor. No more musicians will sing our praises. No more poets will tell of our adventures.

"But worst of all," he continued, "no sacrifices will be offered up to us. We will be immortal always. Yet our reason for immortality will be gone!"

Of course, this speech caused quite a stir. Zeus waited until the gods' angry voices died down. Then he said, "Demeter must be made to change her mind. It was I, I'm

¹³ (her' mēz)

¹⁴ Demeter was Zeus' sister and, at one time, his wife. (As the story mentions, Persephone is their child.)

afraid, who brought on her anger. She'll hear nothing from me. Only you can pacify her."

So, one by one, the gods of Olympus visited Demeter in her temple. They brought her beautiful gifts. Each begged her to be kind to the earth again. But, one by one, she turned them away—all except the last one, Hermes.

To him she said, "Tell Zeus that I shall come and speak with him. But tell him also that my heart hasn't changed. Only the return of my daughter will restore life to the earth."

Hermes delivered the message. And before long, Demeter left her temple and returned to Olympus.

Zeus met Demeter at his throne. "Sister,"¹⁴ he said, "heartlessness does not become you. You must remember your love for humankind."

"And you must remember what I have said," replied Demeter. "Unless my daughter is returned to me, nothing on earth shall live."

"I can imagine how you feel," said Zeus.

"You have no idea how I feel," Demeter coldly replied. "But be reasonable! You have no cause to disapprove of this marriage. Hades is one of the greatest of all the gods. In his own realm, he's as powerful as I am."

"In his own realm!" cried Demeter. "In the realm of darkness, you mean! In the realm of the dead!"

"And whom would you prefer to be her husband?" snapped Zeus. "Your daughter is a queen in the Underworld! Can you wish anything better for her?"

But then sensing her pain, Zeus spoke more soothingly. "Come now, Demeter. All parents must give up their children sooner or later. Bear this loss gracefully."

"I will bear nothing gracefully," answered Demeter. "The entire universe will know my grief forever. Only one thing can change that. And you know what it is."

"Then I see I have no choice," Zeus said. "I shall send for your daughter at once. But understand one thing.

Persephone cannot return to you if she has eaten anything in Hades' realm. This is not my decision but that of the Fates¹⁵ themselves. Nothing can change it."

"I have no reason to worry," said Demeter. "My daughter could never be happy in the Underworld. I know that she has wasted away there. Just as I have here."

Demeter returned to her temple to wait. And Zeus sent Hermes to fetch Persephone.

When Persephone heard Hermes' news, she was delighted. Oh, to see the sun again! But then she noticed her husband's heartbroken face. Pity for him **surg**ed in her heart. Still, she was careful not to show it.

As for Hades, his heart was torn. "I love her dearly," he thought. "How can I give her up? And yet, the poor girl is so unhappy here. And I cannot wish a life of sadness for her. What can I do?"

Guiltily, Hades realized he could not let Persephone go. But how could he keep her? Then he remembered what the Fates had said . . .

When the moment came to leave, Hades took Persephone by the hand.

"It is well that we part," he said. "You have found no joy in my realm. Still, there is one memory I would like us to share."

Hades held a pomegranate¹⁶ in his hand and broke it open. Then he said to Persephone, "To this day, you have eaten nothing in the Underworld. You have not allowed yourself one moment of joy. But now please share one happy moment with me. Let us both remember this little meal."

Persephone was touched. The pomegranate, after all, was a symbol of marriage. And she had been the wife of Hades, if just for a short while. Her wish was only to see flowering fields again, not to leave Hades unhappy.

"I've shown this lonely god nothing but coldness," she thought. "But now I know that I'm leaving. What harm

¹⁵The Fates were goddesses who decided the future of men and women. In some versions of the myths, even Zeus is forced to accept their judgments.

¹⁶A pomegranate is a large, thick-skinned fruit filled with seeds.

can it do to show him a bit of kindness?"

And so Persephone tasted the pomegranate. Its seeds were sweet and welcome after a long year of **fasting**.

The meal at an end, Hades brought forth his chariot. Then he and his wife headed for the land of sun.

When Persephone reached her mother's temple, the two of them rushed to embrace.

"Oh, let me look at you!" said Persephone.

"And let me look at you!" exclaimed Demeter.

Demeter was a little surprised at what she saw. This Persephone was almost a stranger. The girl had a new look in her eyes. In fact, she was not a girl at all but a wise and gentle woman.

Most of all, Demeter was disturbed that Persephone did not look thin and hungry. The little pomegranate had given her great nourishment.

"Can she have eaten something in the Underworld?" worried Demeter. "Oh, no. I can't even think of that."

And so the two of them talked and talked. Demeter told of her grief and her travels. And she praised the kindness of the people in Eleusis. Persephone, in her turn, spoke of life in the Underworld. She told both the good and the bad.

"He is a good man in his way," she confessed. "A fine husband, too—though not for me. But I did him one small kindness before I left. I shared a pomegranate with him."

Poor Demeter's face went white. She wanted to scream, but her throat was closed and dry.

"Mother!" cried Persephone. "What's wrong? What have I done?"

"I've lost you, my child," gasped Demeter. "I've lost you forever."

The earth, which had just begun to grow, began to wilt and shrivel again.

"Mother, tell me!" begged Persephone.

"The pomegranate!" wailed Demeter. "The pomegranate!"

But at that moment, they found themselves surrounded

by a strange light. They turned and saw that another goddess was present. It was Rhea,¹⁷ Demeter's mother, the oldest of gods. She stood before them, shining with wisdom.

"Do not grieve, Demeter," said Rhea. "Nor you, Persephone. My son Zeus has sent me with good news. Persephone shall spend only one-third of each year in the Underworld. The other two-thirds she shall spend above the earth."

The news was **bittersweet**. But mother and daughter embraced happily. Now they would not have to be separated forever.

And so for the next eight months, Persephone lived in the sunlight. During this time, Demeter allowed the earth to live and grow again. Crops and animals grew strong and healthy. Humankind was no longer in danger.

And Persephone roamed her fields again. But she no longer picked her beloved flowers. Instead, she looked upon them with love and **reverence**. She now knew that no earthly thing lives forever.

When her time on earth was over, Persephone went to the Underworld. During those four months, Demeter fell sad again. Once more she let the earth grow cold and lifeless. But with Persephone's return came spring.

Throughout the year, Demeter remained at her temple in Eleusis. She taught Metaneira's boy, Triptolemus, to be her priest. Each year at Persephone's return, he led the people of Eleusis in celebration. These were Demeter's holy "mysteries." Only humans chosen by Demeter knew the **rites**. So the goddess honored the townfolk and they honored her.

The story of Demeter and Persephone explains how the seasons came to be. But the story tells much more than that. It also reveals the seasons of the heart, the cycle of happiness and sadness. Both come to us time and time again.

To love is to grieve, and all gods and humans must do both. That is because the goddess Demeter lives in each of us.

¹⁷ (rē' a)

INSIGHTS

Demeter taught Triptolemus all the secrets of agriculture. She gave him the first seed of corn. She also showed him how to use oxen to plow. And she taught him how to plant a field with grain.

In turn, Triptolemus spread this knowledge all over the world. His travels were made easier by a gift from Demeter: a chariot pulled by two dragons.

From the Roman name for Demeter—which is *Ceres*—comes the word *cereal*. The reason is obvious since the goddess was in charge of agriculture, especially grain.

The religious rituals begun at Eleusis were very special to the Greeks. They were so special that the Greeks observed them for 2,000 years.

Parts of the ritual were surrounded in great mystery. (They are actually called the Eleusinian Mysteries.) But from what is known and can be guessed, they involved fasting and prayer. There was a more joyous side, too, as people paraded and danced.

The holiest moments of the rituals included a staging of Demeter's story. Then at the climax of the event, an ear of grain would be shown. Of course, this grain symbolized the goddess herself.

Perhaps the rituals don't seem so mysterious now. But those who watched the more private rituals swore on pain of death to keep them secret.

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