

Module 5: Text 2 Origin of Seasons Myth

<http://myths.e2bn.org/mythsandlegends/textonly19837-demeter-and-her-daughter-persephone.html>

Demeter and Persephone

Have you ever wondered how the seasons came about? Would you believe that it was all the result of a family drama? Let me begin at the beginning. Zeus, King of all the Gods, had three sisters: Hera, Queen of the Gods, was also his wife and the Goddess of Marriage; Hestia was the Goddess of Home and Hearth and Demeter was Goddess of the Harvest, responsible for the crops and for feeding the people.

Demeter was loved by all humans for her gift of soil and gentle, mild weather to grow their crops. They worshipped her for her caring and kindness. She was very much a 'hands on' and 'happy to help' sort of Goddess.

Persephone was Demeter's only child. Like her mother, she was kind and caring, with a happy nature and the most dazzling smile. She was the sort of person who spread light and happiness wherever she went and so, naturally, she was loved by everyone but most especially by her mother.

Demeter liked nothing more than to spend hours in the company of her delightful daughter, chatting and laughing, watching her grow into a radiant young woman and seeing the way she enchanted those around her.

So you can imagine how distraught Demeter was when her beloved daughter disappeared one day.

It happened like this. Persephone was wandering with Artemis and Athena in the meadows gathering flowers for Demeter. She moved happily through the grass, picking fragrant blooms. Wafting on the gentle breeze, the most exquisite perfume caught her attention. "I must have this for my mother," she thought and followed the delicious scent as it led her away from her friends. Then she espied the narcissus and stooped to savour its perfume in full.

Unbeknown to Persephone, Hades, mighty ruler of the Underworld, had spied her on one of his trips to the world above. He was dazzled by her beauty, her elegance and her charm. He decided that he must have her as his wife. Knowing that Demeter would never agree to her daughter living with him in his gloomy world of the dead, he decided to visit his brother, Zeus, to discuss the matter. Surprisingly, the great god Zeus agreed to Hades' plan, to abduct the young woman and take her to his realm.

Persephone glanced up from the magical bloom and noticed little birds anxiously twittering and fluttering like trapped moths in a spider's web. The sky began to turn grey and then darkened still further until it was black. There was a deep rumble that seemed to shake the very air around her and the ground began to shift and shudder. A crack suddenly appeared in the surface of the earth and, as Persephone watched in fear, in awe, a great chasm opened up before her.

With a deafening boom, a hiss of steam and clouds of inky-black, billowing smoke Hades appeared, driving his horse drawn chariot of black and gold. Persephone froze in shock, the freshly picked flowers spilling from her fingers. Hades leant from the chariot, scooped her up and turned his horse's back towards the opening.

At last Persephone screamed, "Mother, mother, help me", as down, deep down, into the widening crack in the earth the chariot plunged. Cavernous rocks split apart to make way. It was a world of sparse light; all black and grey.

Hades had led a sad and lonely life in the depths below. But now, enlivened and enchanted by the fair Persephone, could the dark lord of the underworld really be in love? Using all his powers of persuasion, he pleaded with her to stay and be his bride, to rule with him in the underworld. But this was not the world in which this beautiful, bright young woman wanted to live.

At first, Persephone cried and cried, until she had no more tears left to weep. She refused all offers of food, for she had heard the legend that those who eat in the Underworld can never return. So she determined not to let a morsel of food pass her lips.

Each day, Hades would visit the splendid chamber he had prepared for Persephone, bringing dainty morsels to tempt her and declaring his love. Each day, she turned away, refusing to listen to his honeyed words. However, gradually, she began to look

around her and could not help but admire the tasteful but luxurious decorations, the soft, silky furnishings and the sparkling bejewelled surfaces.

One day, as he entered, she turned and looked at Hades himself. A dark, strong face and hypnotic eyes, filled with sadness, affection and a little cunning looked back. He stretched out his hand and the girl tentatively put hers into it. "Come, my love, let me show you my domain. Come and see the world to which you bring such light and of which you can be Queen, if only you will marry me."

Meanwhile, Demeter was beside herself with grief. Her daughter had not returned and no trace of her was found apart from a few wilting flowers. Demeter roamed the countryside, searching and seeking far and wide. At first, she was angry that anyone could have taken her beautiful daughter but soon her fury turned to sadness and despair and, as a consequence, the earth was sad along with her.

The crops did not thrive, the land became barren and sorrow began to creep over the earth like a thick fog.

"Who will help me find my daughter?" wailed Demeter with her arms lifted towards the sky.

It was at that moment that Helios, God of the Sun, took pity on the distraught Demeter and told her the truth, for he had seen clearly what had happened whilst on his daily journey across the sky and felt sorry for the grieving mother.

"Hades has stolen your daughter and taken her down to his dark realm to be his bride," he explained.

"What? He has dared such a wicked act under the nose of the great Zeus?" Demeter shrieked. Helios gulped.

"Fair Demeter, I only tell you what I know. I am sorry to be the one ... but Zeus himself agreed to the union."

At that, Demeter's wrath knew no bounds. Anger most terrible and most savage flared in her heart. She strode to the foot of Olympus and called upon Zeus and all the gods to hear her oath.

"Never again shall I set foot on Olympus and never again shall I let the ground be fruitful and yield its crops, until I once again behold my beloved daughter whom you have conspired to steal from me."

Zeus, watching from on high and listening to his sister's words, became worried by how events were turning out.

"If the crops fail the people will be hungry," he thought to himself, "and they will blame me and then who will worship me?" He knew he had to do something.

"Hermes!" exclaimed Zeus. "I shall send my messenger, he usually sorts things out and manages to smooth things over."

Indeed, Hermes was good at his job and agreed to start on his journey to the Underworld immediately and to bring Persephone back.

Each day now, Persephone would let herself be led by Hades to explore his kingdom. Her inner sunshine lit up the once gloomy world. Her kind heart was moved by the plight of the souls first arriving in the underworld; they were lost and bewildered, in need of sympathetic help and guidance, which she could give.

No less was Persephone's kind heart moved by Hades himself, his sincerity and patience were winning her over. She still missed her mother terribly, but she had begun to enjoy the company of this elegant, powerful and adoring god, and was intrigued by the idea of being Queen of the Underworld.

As Hermes arrived, in the distance he saw Persephone and Hades sitting together on a sumptuous couch. Hades held a pomegranate in his hand.

"Persephone, my love, I am so worried that you will fade away if you do not eat. Look at this sweet fruit, taste just a little for pity's sake." Looking deep into his eyes, the

girl carefully reached out her hand and took the luscious fruit to her lips. Deliberately, she swallowed a few seeds, just six.

“Oh no!” Hermes thought, “I’m too late.” Persephone was now committed to Hades and the Underworld.

If he was going to fulfil Zeus’ command, he was going to have to use all his negotiating skills to strike a deal with the powerful ruler. But that was what Hermes was so good at.

“Great Hades,” he began, moving forward in the dim light. Hades knew why Hermes was here, and knew that he would have to part with Persephone. But now she had eaten of her own free will, he also knew she would have to return to him.

“She has eaten six seeds,” said Hades triumphantly. “I am willing to let Persephone go to her mother for six months each year and for the following six months she will return to rule with me as my Queen.”

And so, it was agreed. Every Spring Demeter makes sure flowers blossom on the meadows and the mountains bloom to welcome home her loving daughter Persephone.

Every Autumn Demeter cries, the leaves fall and the crops are at an end, as her daughter returns, willingly, as Queen of the Underworld to Hades, her husband.

Until the Spring, when the cycle starts again!