

ANIMATED TALES — OF THE — WORLD™

Greece: The Myth of Persephone



Background

Why do the seasons change? Why do leaves and plants wilt and die during the winter and grow in the spring? The changing of the seasons is explained in *Greece: The Myth of Persephone*. Thousands of years ago, the ancient Greeks created a plethora of myths to explain the mysteries and complexities of the world around them. Many Greek myths explained the cycles of nature, plants and animals on Earth. Certain animals and natural occurrences were associated with the gods and goddesses. For example, Zeus was known for throwing lightning bolts and Athena was associated with an owl for wisdom. Folk literature terms relevant to this myth are provided below:

folk literature/folklore — Traditional tales, knowledge and beliefs handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

myth — A made-up story that explains the existence or complexity of a natural phenomenon, such as the origins of the world or why snow falls from the sky. Gods and goddesses are common characters because they were believed to have the power to make extraordinary things happen.

Program Summary

Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, yearns for love and waits for the day when she will be struck by the arrow of Eros, god of love. When Zeus attempts to send Eros to Persephone, Demeter insists that Persephone be left alone. An arrow is shot but instead of hitting Persephone, it reaches Hades, god of the underworld. As a result, Hades abducts Persephone and brings her to his home. At first, Persephone is angry that Hades abducted her but she soon grows to love him. Meanwhile, Persephone's absence devastates Demeter and the human world feels the effects of her pain. Flowers wilt, leaves fall off the trees and cold descends upon the land. Concerned that Demeter's sadness will devastate life on Earth, Zeus sends Hermes to negotiate Persephone's return. Hades agrees to return Persephone but feeds her the seeds of a pomegranate fruit before she departs. Persephone eats four seeds, meaning that she will have to return to Hades for four months of each year. Demeter rejoices at Persephone's return, but is sad each time she leaves, causing winter.

Pre-viewing Discussion

- Poll students to determine their favorite season and then discuss the scientific phenomenon that causes seasons to change.
- What are myths? Hypothesize about and then discuss why ancient people developed myths.
- Find Greece's location on a map. Discuss its location and the countries that border it. Use the map and other geographical information to make inferences about the landscape and people of that place. How might this information be relevant to a story set in this location?

Follow-Up Discussion

- Why did Zeus finally agree to negotiate Persephone's return? How would the gods and goddesses on Mt. Olympus be affected by her absence?
- Even though Zeus, Demeter, Hades and Persephone are gods and goddesses, they demonstrate a full range of feelings and emotions, like mortals do. Describe some of the feelings that they experience in this myth. Do their feelings change over the course of the story?

Follow-up Activities

- Ancient Greek art includes architecture, paintings, sculpture and pottery. Many historians and archaeologists have studied the designs painted onto pottery to learn more about the daily life, values and beliefs of the ancient Greeks. In fact, some of the pottery recovered features vivid illustrations of the myths and legends of the ancient Greeks. Visit www.museum.upenn.edu/Greek_World/Index.html to see some actual artifacts of ancient Greek pottery and encourage students to closely study how they were painted. (What colors were used? How are gods, goddesses, people and animals depicted?) Then, have students sketch a piece of pottery and decorate it with a scene from the myth of Persephone.
- Did you know that Demeter was the goddess of the harvest and vegetation? It was believed by the ancient Greeks that she spent her time on Earth making flowers and crops grow. Investigate the other gods and goddesses of this tale and create a cast of characters with a short description of each character and the powers they were believed to have. Visit the Homework Center at www.mythman.com/ to read short descriptions about the gods of Mount Olympus.
- *Greece: The Myth of Persephone* contains elements of a *pourquoi* tale — a story that attempts to explain a scientific event or phenomenon. This tale provided an explanation to ancient Greeks of why the seasons change. Have students consider this myth alongside *pourquoi* tales, such as *Alaska: Raven Steals the Daylight*. Students may also enjoy Margaret Mayo's *When the World Was Young: Creation and Pourquoi Tales* (Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1996). Discuss what each tale attempts to explain. Do these tales share any common threads? Encourage students to get creative and come up with their own nature myths or *pourquoi* tales to explain natural events or phenomena in their own community. Students' stories may explain the origin of a body of water or why an animal has certain characteristics. Students can write and illustrate their stories or prepare for a dramatic storytelling.
- Even though Persephone grew to enjoy being with Hades in the underworld, she still missed her mother. Students can write letters to Demeter from the perspective of Persephone in the underworld. Before writing, consider what Persephone might write about and what her mother would be interested in reading.
- Pomegranates are one type of fruit commonly found in Greece and were believed to be enjoyed by the gods. Have students find and report on other food and drink mentioned in Greek mythology. In addition, investigate traditional food enjoyed in Greece today. Students can compile their findings into a class book on Greek food and recipes. As a culmination, have a Greek food-tasting party to celebrate traditional foods, such as hummus, baklava and feta cheese, and to sample some of the food of the gods.

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- Because myths and tales originate from oral tradition, details sometimes shift or change as the story passes from one person to the next. A quick illustration of this is the classroom game of “Telephone” (also referred to as “Whisper Down the Lane”). The myth of Persephone is an often-told tale from Greek mythology and details sometimes differ from one version to the next. Share with students other versions of this tale. Consult *Bulfinch’s Mythology* by Thomas Bulfinch (Random House, 1998) or share Kris Waldherr’s *Persephone and the Pomegranate: A Myth from Greece* (Dial 1993). In what ways are they similar? How do they differ? Which version do students prefer?
- Act it out! Recreate this tale in your classroom. This can be done as a puppet show, a mime skit, a student play, etc. In preparation for the production, examine and critically think about the story’s elements of characters, setting and plot. Consider how the story might change if the setting was a different time and place.
- Before tales were written or turned into films, they were passed down orally, from one generation to the next. Introduce students to the art of storytelling. Discuss different ways in which the storyteller can engage listeners (e.g., using sound and gestures, giving vivid sensory details). Practice storytelling techniques by having each student retell a portion of this tale.
- Compare Greece today with the setting and characters portrayed in the tale. Organize these similarities and differences using a Venn diagram.

Suggested Internet Resources

- www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3395.htm
This site, by the U.S. Department of State, presents information on the geography, history, people, culture, government and economy of Greece.
- www.timeforkids.com/TFK/specials/goplaces/0,12405,227674,00.html
Discover Greece and what it is like to live there! This website by Time Inc. presents information about Greece’s famous sites, history, culture, art and language. A quiz is also included.
- www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/europe/greek/
Encyclopedia Mythica is a helpful resource for learning more about Greek Mythology. Profiles of Greek gods and goddesses are included as well as selected myths.
- www.darsie.net/talesofwonder/
This archive of folk and fairy tales from around the world presents a sampling of the many stories that make up our world’s oral tradition.

Suggested Print Resources

To learn more about the land and people of the Greece:

- Day, Nancy. *Your Travel Guide to Ancient Greece*. Lerner Publications, Minneapolis, MN; 2000.
 - DK Publishing. *Ancient Greece*. DK Children, New York, NY; 2004.
 - Heinrichs, Ann. *Greece*. Children’s Press, Danbury, CT; 2002.
 - Nobleman, Marc Tyler. *Greece*. Capstone Press, Mankato, MN; 2006.
- If you are interested in other myths from Greece, you might also enjoy:
- Burleigh, Robert. *Pandora*. Silver Whistle, Orlando, FL; 2002.
 - Climo, Shirley. *Atalanta’s Race: A Greek Myth*. Clarion Books, Boston, MA; 2000.
 - D’Aulaire, Ingri & Edgar Parin D’Aulaire. *D’Aulaire’s Book of Greek Myths*. Delacorte Books for Young Readers, New York, NY; 1992. One of the best-loved collections of Greek mythology.
 - Mayer, Marianna. *Pegasus*. HarperCollins, New York, NY; 1998. .

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