

Demeter and Persephone: A Reader's Theater

Cast: Narrator 1; Narrator 2; Narrator 3; Persephone; Demeter; Hades; Birds; Boy; Zeus; Hermes

Narrator 1 - Demeter means “Barley-mother.” Another name for her is Ceres, from which we get the word “cereal.” She was the goddess of the cornfield, mistress of planting and harvesting, lady of growing things. Zeus was very fond of her. He always obliged her with rain when her fields were thirsty. He gave her two children, a boy and a girl. The girl was named Persephone, and Demeter loved her very much.

Narrator 2 - Persephone was raised among flowers and looked like a flower herself. Her body was as pliant as a stem, her skin soft as petals, and she had pansy eyes. She took charge of flowers for her mother. She was adept at making up new kinds and naming them.

Narrator 3 - One day she went farther than usual – across a stream, through a grove of trees, to a little glade.

Persephone – Mother, I am off to the fields with my paint pot to make the world more glorious with my beautiful flowers!

Demeter – As I am the goddess of planting and harvesting, and of all things growing, I couldn't be more proud of you, Persephone.

Narrator 1 - She carried her paint pot, for she had seen a stand of tall waxy lilies she had decided to stripe. As she was painting their faces she saw a bush she hadn't noticed before.

Persephone – (humming) Oh! I have never noticed this bush before. The leaves are thick, green and glossy. The berries on the branches look like drops of blood. It is ruining the looks of my field of beautiful flowers with its ugliness. I must remove it immediately! (Pulls on bush)

Narrator 2 - But it was toughly rooted and hard to pull. She was used to getting her own way. She set herself and gave a mighty tug. Up came the bush; its long roots dragged out of the ground, leaving a big hole. She tossed the bush aside and turned to go back to her lilies, but she heard a rumbling sound and turned back. The noise that grew louder and louder was coming from the hole. To her horror, the hole seemed to be spreading, opening like a mouth, and the rumbling grew to a jangling, crashing din.

Narrator 3 - Out of the hole leaped six black horses, dragging behind them a golden chariot. In the chariot stood a tall figure in a flowing black cape.

Hades – (Evil Laughter)

Narrator 1 - On his head was a black crown. She had no time to scream. He reached out his long arm, snatched her into the chariot, and lashed his horses. They leaped in the air and plunged into the hole again. When they had gone, the hole closed.

Narrator 2 – Demeter was frantic when the girl didn't come home, and rushed out to search for her. The tall green-clad goddess rode in a light wicker chariot behind a swift white horse, a gift from Poseidon. She sped here and there, calling,

Demeter – Persephone...Persephone....

Narrator 3 – But no one answered. All night long she searched, and as dawn broke, she came to the glade. There she saw the uprooted bush and the trampled grass. She leaped from her chariot. Then she saw something in the grass that seemed to pierce her heart.

Demeter – (crying) Oh, please...no! It is Persephone's little paint pot. She would never have left her paint pot behind willingly.

Narrator 1 – She lifted her head to the sky and howled like a she-wolf. Then she fell still and listened. The sun was rising; the birds had begun to gossip. They told each other of the heedless girl and the strange bush and the hole and the chariot and the black rider and how surprised the girl was when he caught her.

Narrator 2 – Then Demeter spoke softly, questioning the birds.

Birds – Tweet! Tweet! It was Hades. Tweet! Tweet! Hades has taken your daughter. Tweet! Tweet!

Narrator 3 – They told her enough for her to know who had taken her daughter. She put her face in her hands and wept.

Demeter – (Crying) Why would Hades, my own brother, take my daughter away from me?

Narrator 1 – Just then a little boy came running into the meadow to pick some flowers. When he saw Demeter, he laughed. He had never seen a grownup crying before.

Boy – (Laughing and pointing at Demeter) Tehehehe!

Narrator 2 – But when she looked up, he stopped laughing. She pointed at him, whispering, and he was immediately changed into a lizard. But he hadn't learned to scuttle yet and just sat there looking at Demeter a moment too long, for a hawk swooped and caught him. He was a lizard for only a short while.

Narrator 3 – Demeter climbed back into her chariot and sped to Olympus. She charged into the throne room where Zeus sat.

Demeter – Justice! Justice! Your brother Hades has stolen my daughter—*our* daughter.

Zeus – Peace, good sister. Compose yourself. Hades' wooing has been a trifle abrupt, perhaps, but after all he is my brother—*our* brother—and is accounted a good match. Think, sweet Demeter. It is difficult for our daughter to look beyond the family without marrying far beneath her.

Demeter – Never! It must not be! Anyone but Hades! Don't you realize this is a spring child, a flower child, a delicate unopened bud. No ray of sunlight ever pierces that dank hole he calls his kingdom. She'll wither and die.

Zeus – She is our daughter. I fancy she has a talent for survival. Pray, think it over.

Narrator 1 – Then Demeter noticed that Zeus was holding a new thunder-bolt, a marvelously wrought zigzag lance of lightning, volt-blue, radiant with energy. And she realized that Hades, who in his deep realms held all stores of silver and gold, had sent Zeus a special gift. It would be difficult to obtain justice.

Demeter – Once again, will you restore my daughter to me?

Zeus – My dear, when your rage cools, you will realize that this is a fine match, the very best thing for the child. Please, go back to earth and give yourself a chance to be intelligent about this.

Demeter – I will go back to earth, and I will not return until you send for me.

Narrator 3 – Weeks passed. Then Zeus found his sleep being disturbed by sounds of lamentation. He looked down upon the earth and saw a grievous sight. Nothing grew. The fields were blasted and parched. Trees were stripped of leaves, standing blighted, with the blazing sun beating down. The soil was hard and cracked, covered with the shriveled brown husks of wheat and corn and barley killed in the bud. And there was no green place anywhere. The people were starving; the cattle had nothing to eat; the game could find nothing and had fled. And a great wailing and lamentation arose as the people lifted their faces to Olympus and prayed for Zeus to help them.

Zeus – Well (examining his lightning bolt) I suppose we shall have to compromise. (Yelling) Demeter! I must speak with you immediately.

Demeter – Yes, brother?

Zeus – I have been thinking. Perhaps I have not been quite fair to you.

Demeter – No

Zeus – Do you still wish your daughter’s return?

Demeter – Yes. While she is gone, no crops will grow. No tree will bear, no grass will spring. While she is gone and while I mourn, the earth will grow as dry and shriveled as my heart and will put forth no green thing.

Zeus – Very well. In light of all the facts, this is my judgment. Your daughter shall be restored to you and shall remain with you. However, if any food has passed her lips during her sojourn in Tartarus, then she must remain there. This is the Law of Abode, older than our decrees, and even I am powerless to revoke it.

Demeter – She will have been too sad to eat. No food will have passed her lips. She shall return to me and remain with me. You have spoken, and I hold you to your word.

Zeus – I will have my messenger visit our brother, Hades. (Whistle)

Narrator 1 – Hermes, the messenger god, appeared. Zeus sent him with a message to Hades demanding Persephone’s release.

Zeus – You must go to Hades at once and tell him to release Persephone back to her mother, as long as she has not eaten or drunk during her stay.

Demeter – Will you ride with me to the gates of Tartarus? I have the swiftest horse in the world, given me by Poseidon.

Hermes – Thank you, good aunt. But I believe my winged shoes are even faster.

Narrator 2 – And he flew out of the window.

Narrator 3 – In the meantime, Persephone was in Erebus with the dark king. After the first few days of haste and brutality and strangeness, he began to treat her very gently, and with great kindness. He gave her rubies and diamonds to play jacks with, had dresses spun for her of gold and silver thread, ordered her a throne of the finest ebony, and gave her a crown of black pearls. But she made herself very difficult to please. She tossed her head, stamped her foot, and turned from him.

Narrator 1 – She would not speak to him and said she would never forgive him. She said she wanted to go home to her mother, and that she had to attend to her flowers, and that she hated him and always would. As she launched these tirades at him, he would stand and listen and frown and keep listening until she flounced away. Then he would go and get her another gift.

Narrator 2 – Secretly, though, so secretly that she didn’t even tell it to herself, she was rather enjoying the change. She did miss the sunshine and the flowers, but there was much to amuse her. Secretly she gloated upon her power over this most fearsome monarch. Secretly she enjoyed his gifts and his efforts to please her...and marveled at the way he was obeyed. Although she never forgot how he had frightened her when he came charging out of that hole in his chariot, she admired the lofty set of his black-robed figure, the majestic shoulders, the great impatient hands, and his gloomy black eyes. But she knew that part of her power over him was disdain, and so kept flouting and abusing him, and, which made him gloomier than ever, refused to let a crumb of food pass her lips.

Narrator 3 – He tried every way he knew to tempt her into eating. His cook prepared the most delicious meals, and his servants bore them to her chamber. But she would pretend not to notice a thing and sit there holding her head high, not even allowing her nostrils to twitch, although the rich smells were making her wild with hunger. She swore she would not eat a mouthful until he had returned her to her mother.

Narrator 1 – He was desperate to please her. He set aside a corner of the palace grounds for a dark garden and gave her rare seeds to plant—magical blooms that did not need the sunlight. She grew a species of black orchid and mushrooms and nightshade, henbane, and hellebore. He gave her a little boy to help her garden, a very clever little gardener, a new spirit. He was very deft and good company too, although she noticed that his eyes were a bit lidless. She had no way of knowing that he was the same little boy her mother had turned into a lizard and fed to a hawk. But he knew who she was.

Narrator 2 – She had other amusements too. She liked to wander in the Elysian Fields and dance with the happy shades. She was fascinated by the torments, particularly the funny man trying to roll the stone uphill and always having to start over again. She pitied Tantalus, and when no one was looking, cupped some water in her hands and gave it to him to drink. And he thanked her in a deep sad voice. But after she left, it was worse than ever; he knew she would not remember him again, and this one flash of hope made the ordeal worse.

Narrator 3 – Still, she liked her garden best, and that was where she spent most of her time—more time than ever, because she was so hungry she didn't know what to do, and she didn't want Hades to see how she felt. She knew he would think up more delicious things to tempt her if he thought she was weakening.

Narrator 1 – Standing in the garden one afternoon, half-hidden in a clump of nightshade, she saw the little boy eating something. It was a red fruit, and he was eating it juicily. He saw her watching and came toward her smiling, his mouth stained with red juice. He held out his hand. It was a pomegranate, her favorite fruit.

Boy – (Whispering) We're alone. No one will see you. No one will know. quickly now—eat!

Narrator 2 – She looked about. It was true. No one could see them. She felt her hands acting by themselves, as though she had nothing to do with them. She watched as the fingers curled savagely and ripped the fruit across.

Persephone – I am really hungry, and pomegranates are my favorite fruit.

Narrator 3 – She dug in to the fruit, plucked out seeds, and offered them to her lips. One...two...three...she thought she had never tasted anything so delicious as these tiny tart juicy seeds. Just as she swallowed her sixth seed, a high glad yelling cry split the air, and the pomegranate dropped to the ground. It was a cry that any god recognized.

Hermes – Helloooooooooo!

Narrator 1 – Hermes' keen herald shout, meaning that he was coming with news, good or bad, but worthy of high attention.

Hermes – I come with news from the king!

Narrator 2 – She raced to the palace. The little gardener scooped up the pomegranate and raced after her. Sure enough, it was cousin Hermes, his hair tumbled from the wind, the wings on his feet still fluttering from the speed of his going.

Hermes – Good day, cousin.

Narrator 3 – Hades loomed next to him, scowling blackly.

Hermes – I bring you a message from your mother. She wants you home. And your host has kindly agreed to an early departure. How are you? Haven't eaten anything here, I hope. No? Good! Let's be on our way.

Narrator 1 – He put his arm around her, and they rose in the air. And Persephone, looking back, saw the little gardener rush to Hades with the pomegranate in his hand.

Narrator 2 – By the time Persephone had come home to her mother, Hades had already been to Olympus and had presented his case to Zeus.

Hades – Persephone has eaten six pomegranate seeds in my kingdom! According to the Law of Abode, she must return to my kingdom!

Zeus – That is true, it is the law. Because the girl had eaten six seeds of the pomegranate, she will have to spend six months with you in Tartarus each year.

Persephone – Never mind, Mother. Don't cry. We must be happy for the time that I am here.

Demeter – I suffer! I suffer! Here— (Points to her heart) Here—in my mother's heart. And if I suffer then everyone else shall suffer too. For the months that you spend with that scoundrel, no grass will grow, no flowers bloom, no trees will bear. So long as you are below, there will be desolation everywhere.

Narrator 3 – That is why summer and winter are the way they are. That is why there is a time for planting and a time when the earth must sleep under frost.