



# Demeter and Persephone



The name Demeter means “barley mother.” The goddess of agriculture, her Latin name, Ceres, inspired the word *cereal*. Persephone, also known as Kore (Proserpina in Latin), was born to Demeter but was abducted by Hades and taken to the Underworld. Demeter disguised herself as an old woman and wandered the world, searching for Persephone. During her travels, she was befriended by Demeter, who retained Demeter to care for her infant son. Demeter suspected Demeter of harming her son, Demeter explained that she was a goddess. She gave Demeter’s elder son Triptolemus the gift of corn and a winged chariot to distribute it. After more searching, Demeter returned to her throne and decreed that the earth would become barren. Zeus intervened, forcing Hades to return Persephone. Unfortunately, Persephone had eaten the forbidden pomegranate seeds, and this forever linked her to the Underworld. Knowing that Demeter would continue to make mortals suffer, Zeus struck a compromise, sending Persephone to the Underworld for part of each year in what has come to be known as the winter season.

## Presentation Suggestions

The narrators can stand on opposite sides of the stage. Demeter should stand in the center. Hades and Persephone seated in chairs in front of her. Demeter and Triptolemus should be on one side of Demeter, with Zeus and Iris on the other side.

## *Props*

The stage could be decorated with corn stalks, flowers, and plants to represent Demeter's role as the goddess of agriculture. Hades should be dressed in dark, menacing clothing. Persephone and Demeter should be dressed in colorful or flowery clothes. Demeter could slip a dark robe over her clothes when disguised as the old woman. Metaneira and Triptolemus can be dressed in regular clothes, with Zeus and Iris in more regal clothing.

## *Delivery Suggestions*

The characters should adapt their voices to suit the story, varying the delivery as the story progresses.

## *Characters*

- ☐ Narrator 1
- ☐ Narrator 2
- ☐ Hades
- ☐ Demeter
- ☐ Persephone
- ☐ Metaneira
- ☐ Triptolemus
- ☐ Zeus
- ☐ Iris



## Demeter and Persephone

**Narrator 1:** Persephone was the beloved daughter of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. When Demeter sat on her throne, Persephone played on her lap, and Demeter always took Persephone along on her trips to Earth to watch over the crops.

**Narrator 2:** Persephone danced through life, enjoying every moment. She was such a delightful youngster that flowers would spring up under her feet. Everyone noticed her, appreciating her beauty and joy. Unfortunately, even Hades, god of the Underworld, who rarely noticed anything outside of his domain, watched the young beauty, falling in love with her grace and spirit. Hades vowed to have her for himself.

**Hades:** Persephone is indeed a rare young beauty, worthy of being my queen. I know her mother will never let me marry her, so I will simply have to watch for the chance to kidnap her.

**Narrator 1:** Before long, Hades saw that opportunity unfold.

**Demeter:** Persephone, play with the nymphs in the field for a while. While you play, gather some flowers that we can take home.

**Persephone:** I'll make a huge bouquet just for you, Mother!

**Demeter:** Just remember not to wander off by yourself, daughter.

**Persephone:** Don't worry, Mother. I have the nymphs to play with.

**Narrator 2:** But Persephone became so enchanted by the lovely flowers that she wandered away from the nymphs, giving Hades the opportunity he wanted.

**Hades:** There she is, just above my reach. I'll simply split open the ground, grab Persephone, and take her back to the Underworld with me. She'll adjust to her new life as my queen soon enough.

**Narrator 1:** Driving his dark chariot and black horses through a crevice in the Earth, Hades captured Persephone. Soon Demeter began to call for her.

**Demeter:** Persephone, where are you? Come and bring the flowers now.

**Narrator 2:** Demeter couldn't find Persephone, who had vanished from the meadow. Demeter had no idea that Hades was driving his chariot back to the Underworld, clutching the frightened child as he drove.

**Persephone:** Where are you taking me?

**Hades:** To my home, my dear, where you'll be crowned with gold and precious stones.

**Persephone:** But I don't want to go with you! I want to stay with my mother!

**Hades:** You'll forget about her in no time, Persephone.

**Narrator 1:** Hades seated her beside him on the throne, but Persephone was inconsolable. She cared nothing for the gold and jewels, wanting only to see the sun, flowers, and her beloved mother.

**Narrator 2:** Dead spirits crept out from their hiding places to see the new queen, but Persephone had no interest in their tortured souls. Hades encouraged her to appreciate his gloomy world.

**Hades:** Persephone, you must come see my garden. Perhaps it will lift your spirits.

**Narrator 1:** But Persephone found no joy in a garden of weeping willows and whispering poplars.

**Persephone:** This is hardly a garden. Where are the birds, the fruit, and the flowers?

**Hades:** Ah, but there is fruit here, the pomegranate. Come and have a taste from the pomegranate tree.

**Narrator 2:** Persephone knew that she shouldn't eat of the food of the dead, but she longed to try the pomegranate and ate two seeds. Meanwhile, Demeter continued to search for her daughter. Wandering the world in the guise of an old woman. She came to the home of Metaneira, the wife of Celeüs, and their newborn son Demophon. Metaneira recognized Demeter's grace and treated her with great respect.

**Metaneira:** You are welcome in our home and to our food and drink. Won't you join us for our meal?

**Narrator 1:** Demeter remained quiet, but she transferred her grief for her missing daughter to love for the young Demophon. Metaneira noticed her devotion to the child and decided to entrust his care to Demeter.

**Metaneira:** I see that you love babies. Would you like to care for Demophon?

**Narrator 2:** Demeter nodded and settled in to care for him with great devotion. Becoming quite fond of him, she decided to transform him into a god to ensure his immortality. Each night she anointed him with ambrosia, then hid him in the fire to destroy his mortal nature. The infant began to grow like a god, but Metaneira became suspicious and spied on Demeter, catching her as she put him in the fire.

**Metaneira:** What are you doing to my son? I'm taking him out now!

**Demeter:** You foolish woman! By taking him from the fire, you've doomed him to the life of mortals. I would have ensured that he would live forever as a god!

**Metaneira:** Who are you? How do you have these powers?

**Demeter:** I came to you in disguise, and I am truly Demeter. I know you think I have betrayed your trust, but I haven't, and I want to show my appreciation for your kindness. Bring Triptolemus to me.

**Narrator 1:** Metaneira believed Demeter, and sent for her oldest son, Triptolemus, who came at his mother's bidding.

**Demeter:** Triptolemus, I am giving you great gifts that will benefit both you and your people. Take these grains of corn, a most precious form of sustenance.

**Triptolemus:** Thank you, but what do I do with it?

**Demeter:** I will show you how to use a plough and how to harness oxen to do the hard work.

**Triptolemus:** What do I do after I have ploughed the fields?

**Demeter:** Sow the field with these grains and tend it with water. In time, corn will grow, which you may eat, but you must always save some grains for the next year.

**Triptolemus:** This will be a wonderful gift, and I will always be grateful for your generosity.

**Demeter:** There is one more gift, Triptolemus. I am giving you this winged chariot and these fine dragons to help you spread the grain across your earth. And now I bid you leave, as I must continue on my journey.

**Narrator 2:** Demeter continued to roam the Earth, giving gifts such as the olive tree. The Earth benefited from the gift of grain and the olive tree, but finally she returned to her temple at Eleusis and prepared to exact her revenge.

**Demeter:** I have searched throughout the world for my precious daughter, and no one has stepped forward to help me in my quest. No longer will I be the kind goddess helping the crops prosper so that bellies can be full and satisfied. From this day forward, the Earth is forbidden to produce any crops!

**Narrator 1:** With that heartless pronouncement, the Earth entered a cruel period of drought and devastation. The entire human race would have perished of relentless hunger if Zeus hadn't intervened.

**Zeus:** Iris, go to Demeter and try to convince her to change her mind.

**Narrator 2:** Iris went immediately to see Demeter.

**Iris:** Demeter, Zeus sends me to you, beseeching you to reconsider. The mortals are starving, and you alone can restore bounty to the Earth.

**Demeter:** Return to Zeus and tell him that until I have Persephone safely home, the Earth and all its inhabitants will suffer as I have suffered.

**Narrator 1:** Iris returned to Zeus with great haste.

**Iris:** Zeus, I bring distressing news. Demeter is determined to stay with her plan of revenge and refuses to reverse her directive.

**Zeus:** Thank you for trying, Iris. Send Hermes to me so that I can put pressure on Hades to return Persephone to Demeter.

**Narrator 2:** Hades agreed to return Persephone, but he knew that by eating the pomegranate, she would be forever bound to him. The reunion with Demeter was joyful at first.

**Demeter:** Persephone, what a relief to have you home with me. But I hope you remembered not to eat anything while in the Underworld.

**Persephone:** I'm sorry, Mother, but I couldn't resist tasting the pomegranate seeds. I missed fruit so much and had so little to enjoy there.

**Demeter:** My dear, you are lost to me again unless we can convince Zeus to intervene.

**Narrator 1:** Demeter took Persephone to see Zeus, explained the situation, and begged him to find a solution.

**Zeus:** You know that once Persephone ate the pomegranate seeds, she was bound to Hades forever. Still, I can't face another devastating year for the mortals. She will be allowed to spend most of her life with the gods, but for three months each year, she must return to the Underworld to fulfill her obligation to Hades.

**Narrator 2:** Demeter knew that Zeus had found a fair compromise, but she continued to grieve each winter when Persephone returned to the Underworld. This explains why, to this very day, there is a gray period of mourning each year when flowers, seeds, trees, and all that gives life sleeps until Persephone returns from the Underworld.

