

Persephone and Hades

The first living visitor to the Underworld, though an unwilling one, was the goddess Persephone. The only daughter of Zeus and Demeter (the goddess of grain, agriculture, and fertility), Persephone was an innocent maiden, a virgin who loved to play in the fields where eternal springtime reigned.

But Hades had other plans for Persephone: He would steal her innocence and virginity and turn her into the dreaded goddess of the Underworld. Hades, god of the Underworld, fell in love with Persephone and wanted her as his bride. His brother Zeus consented to the marriage—or at least refused to oppose it. Yet he warned Hades that Demeter would never approve this coupling, for she would not want her daughter spirited off to a sunless world. At Zeus's suggestion—or with his tacit understanding—Hades resolved to abduct the maiden.

Persephone was gathering flowers one day on a plain in Sicily. Hades suddenly appeared, thundering across the plain in his four-horse chariot. The god swooped down upon Persephone, scooped her up with one arm, and literally and figuratively deflowered her—leaving the plain scattered with blossoms of every color. The appearance, abduction, and disappearance happened so swiftly that none of Persephone's companions witnessed the kidnapping. And though she called out to them—and plaintively called for her mother—no one heard her pleas. The earth opened up before Hades' chariot and the god drove the jet-black horses down into the chasm. As Hades and Persephone disappeared into the depths, the hole closed up behind them.

Demeter soon came to collect her daughter, but could not find a trace of Persephone. Distraught and desperate, Demeter searched high and low for her daughter. She traveled to the farthest corners of the earth, searching for nine full days and nights without ever stopping to eat, drink, bathe, or rest. Demeter was in a fury. She destroyed lands, crops, and livestock as she bewailed the loss of her daughter. She threatened to make the earth barren forever and thus destroy all of humankind if she did not find Persephone. The painful separation of mother and daughter has been a common theme in mythology from Greece to Indonesia. Carl Jung, the pioneering psychologist and scholar of mythology, saw in such tales the universal pain of this ordeal—for example, when a daughter marries. Recognizing this universality gave rise to Jung's notion of “archetypes.”

Finally, on the tenth day, the goddess Hecate told Demeter that Persephone had been carried away, but she did not know by whom. The two goddesses went to Helios, the god of the sun, who saw everything that happened on Earth. Helios did tell her what had happened, but also tried to persuade Demeter that Hades—as Zeus's brother and ruler of one third of the universe—was not an unfit husband for Persephone.

Demeter refused to accept Hades as a suitable mate for her precious daughter. Enraged by the news of Persephone's abduction (and Zeus's possible complicity), she refused to return to Mount Olympus. Instead she roamed the earth in the guise of a mortal, forbidding the trees to bear fruit and the earth to nurture vegetables and herbs.

After a full year of famine had plagued the earth, Zeus realized that if he allowed Demeter to persist, all of humankind would starve—leaving no one to honor and make offerings to the gods. Zeus sent a parade of gods and goddesses to Demeter to beg her to come back to Olympus and to restore fertility to the earth. But Demeter refused to budge until her daughter stood by her side. Zeus had no choice: He relented, promising to bring Persephone back to her mother.

Hermes, summoned by Zeus, raced down to Hades to fetch Persephone. Hades shrugged compliantly and agreed to let her go. Persephone had not eaten a single thing—whether from sorrow, loss of appetite, or stubbornness—since her arrival in the Underworld. But before she left, Hades urged Persephone to appease her terrible hunger by eating a

single pomegranate seed. Sadly, this apparent act of kindness was a trick: Anyone who tastes the food of Hades must remain in the Underworld.

In another version of this story, Persephone innocently plucked some fruit from the trees in the gardens of Hades herself. To fight off her terrible hunger, she secretly ate seven pomegranate seeds. But a gardener of Hades had seen her and ratted her out to Hades. Persephone punished him for his indiscretion by turning him into a screech owl or Demeter punished him by burying him under an enormous rock.

The deed having been done, Rhea—the mother of Zeus, Demeter, and Hades—proposed a compromise that her children reluctantly accepted: Since Persephone had eaten there, she had to dwell at least part of every year in the Underworld. Rhea suggested that Persephone spend six months (or, according to some, three or four months) as Queen of the Underworld and the rest of the year with Demeter.

After agreeing to the deal, Demeter restored Earth's fertility and returned to Olympus with Persephone. But when the time came for Persephone to return to the Underworld, the earth became colder and less fertile until her reemergence months later.

Since the abduction of Persephone, spring and summer have given way to autumn and winter, and the earth's fertility has followed the progression of seasons. In the fall, seeds—like Persephone herself—were buried underground. But in the spring, Persephone and the earth's crops came out into the sun once more.

Although she spent only half of her life in the Underworld, little is known of Persephone's life above ground after her abduction, however, she was dreaded forever afterward as the goddess of the Underworld. So feared was she that mortals of name in curses.

Despite her forbidding image, Queen Persephone did sometimes show a capacity for mercy. When Alcestis offered her own life in place of her dying husband's, Persephone sent her back from the Underworld and spared them both. Persephone also exhibited strong maternal feelings when Aphrodite entrusted her with safeguarding the infant Adonis (see [The A Team: Olympians All](#)). Indeed, she became so enamored of the baby that she refused to give him back. (Zeus ultimately ruled that Adonis would spend one third of his life with Persephone, one third with Aphrodite, and one third with whomever he wished.)

An alternative version of the story of Alcestis and her husband Admetus can be found in *Alcestis* by Euripides. In this drama, Heracles restores Alcestis to life by wrestling with Thanatos (Death).

Persephone had no children by Hades, but she remained faithful to him—and saw that he remained faithful to her. When Hades attempted to seduce Minthe, Persephone transformed the nymph into a fragrant mint plant. Similarly, she thwarted her husband's attempt to seduce Leuce by changing that nymph into a white poplar tree.

Hades returned the favor when Peirithous journeyed to the Underworld in an attempt to abduct Persephone and bring her back to Earth as his bride. When Peirithous arrived with his friend Theseus and announced his intentions, Hades graciously offered the visitors a seat. The two sat down in the Chairs of Forgetfulness: stone seats that enveloped and intertwined with their naked flesh. Though Theseus was later freed by Heracles (see [The Labors of Heracles](#)), Peirithous remained in the Underworld forever.