



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1998 Volume II: Cultures and Their Myths

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## Discovering Persephone

Curriculum Unit 98.02.08  
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### Introduction

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Discovering Persephone is a curriculum unit intended to teach lessons about a group of Greek Gods and their ancestral origins in Greek mythology. The Greeks were able to explain natural phenomena and creation with highly imaginable and entertainable stories. The myths they created and believed are excellent for drama classes for which this unit will serve. The family tree of the Gods and their impressions left on Greeks and their culture will guide students to the story of Demeter, Goddess of grain, and her daughter Persephone.

Their legend centers around a story of maternal love and distress when the sheltered child is abducted from Earth by an overpowering and smitten uncle and taken to the underworld. The ramifications of the abduction are the seasons as they relate to Persephone's subsequent time spent on Earth and the underworld respectively for six months each. Students will also see the role of the mother-goddess ( Demeter) and how important she was to most cultures in the ancient world. She represents the creative power of all nature and the periodic renewal of life.

Comparisons of mother goddesses will be made between some found in diverse cultures of the ancient world like Isis ( Egypt ) and Mary ( Christianity ). Although this unit is intended for students in grades five through seven at West Hills Middle School, I have included material about fertility rites and cults that have developed through worship of mother-goddesses and attributes that linked fertility to vegetation.

It is up to the discretion of any teacher using this unit whether they would like to include, simplify, or bypass any material he/she might deem inappropriate for students of a certain age or lower maturity level.

A brief history of all sections is given and the bibliographies suggest further reading to inspire and enlighten. Lesson plans incorporate skills in dance and drama i.e. improvisation, oral recitation, choreopoems, and play readings.

### Objectives

The main objective of this unit is to introduce students to the world of mythology. Students at West Hills study Egyptian mythology in the seventh grade, Mayan mythology in the sixth, and Greek mythology in the eighth grade. This unit serves as a springboard into their studies with comparative edges that will be explored through class projects. Those projects are designed to enrich reading and promote creativity in the area of

performance arts ( a combination of music, poetry, acting, and dancing). Another objective is to produce and perform a play about Persephone and the students are expected to be motivated by poetry (Milton, Ovid) and express themselves through myths they will compose and act out themselves.

Through the process they will encounter cultural myths pertaining to vegetation, seasons, and the cycle of life and death. The renewal of the seasons definitely mirrors the continuous cycle of life and death. Mankind continues to use this comparison and it is evident in explanations today as it was in ancient cultures.

## **History**

The book of Greek myths by Ingri and Edgar Parih Davlaire is a great text that describes and explains the origin of the Greek gods and their wonder in detail. Students will use the text to begin to familiarize themselves with the most popular gods.

We will begin with the union of sky and Earth (Gaea and Uranus). Their union of love produced the Titans who were taller than the mountains. A second set of children were the Cyclopes. They were loved dearly by their mother but embarrassed their father who regarded them as unattractive. Three more children with fifty heads each were born and also despised by their father. He seized and flung them into Tartarus (a deep pit beneath the Earth).

Gaea was outraged by her husband's actions and coerced her son Cronus to dethrone his father so the his siblings might be set free.

Cronus became Lord of the universe and ruled over heaven and Earth with his wife/sister, Phea. He refused to set his monstrous siblings free and mother Earth began to plot his downfall as well. Cronus feared one of his children would dethrone him so he gobbled them up immediately after their birth.

Rhea and Gaea conspired against Cronus with his sixth child. He was given stones wrapped in clothing to swallow and Zeus was taken away to become strong enough to challenges his father. Zeus eventually became the reigning lord of the universe. Twelve Olympian gods came to sit on the thrones that reigned over Heaven and Earth. Zeus shared his power with five siblings and six of his children. They are listed below.

Demeter

Hestia

Hera

Zeus

Podeidon

Hades

Athena

Apollo

Artemis

Dionysos

Ares

Hermes

### **Lesson Plan 1**

Objective - Students will familiarize themselves with the twelve gods of Olympus. They will recognize characteristics attributed to each and create characters in smaller groups. In a class of twenty-five students there should be established groups of four or five. These groups will refine their character with costume, music, and mannerisms and produce a dialogue that explains the characters traits.

Procedure- Groups will present an oral choral reading to the entire class. Each group will present one or more Gods together with copies of their dialogue and character portrayal.

### **Lesson Plan 2**

Objective - Students will be able to identify the family tree of the Greek Gods.

Materials - Graph of the family tree with room for illustrations made by the students.

Procedure - Students will label the graph and illustrate the Gods.

\* An excellent homework assignment to reinforce their knowledge of the Gods

### **Lesson Plan 3**

Objective - Zeus became the principal god and the ultimate ruler of Heaven, Earth, and the other gods on Olympus. He was married to his sister Hera but had innumerable affairs with goddesses and mortals. Demeter was the mother of his daughter Persephone. Zeus' lifestyle was definitely the stuff that trash talk shows are made of. Students will have fun with Greek characters and their stories while keeping it fresh in their minds.

Procedure - The students will use their dramatic skills and improvisation to produce a talk show or soap opera with the history they've learned.

Demeter

Demeter inherited most of her mother's (Rhea) characteristics. She became the goddess of vegetation and fruitfulness, especially corn. She represented the products of soils and seasons. and the generative forces that directed their abundance.

Her legend centers around her beloved daughter Persephone and Hades (whose love for Persephone caused Demeter heartache and pain). Hades inherited the underworld and made the dark, gloomy home of the dead his home. He was smitten by the beauty of Persephone and abducted her from Earth one day as she ran about freely picking flowers in a field. Demeter heard her daughter's cries from far away but could not find her or any witness who might lead her to the girl.

She was overcome with grief over the abduction of her child and roamed the Earth for nine days with two burning torches, searching for her child. She gave up eating, drinking, and bathing and let her grief transform her into an old woman. She maintained her human form on Earth and continued on in anger and frustration.

In her roaming, she put the ancient laws of hospitality to the test. Humans were unable to recognize her as a goddess. Where she met with rejection, she was quick to punish the offender. Where she was kindly received she bestowed favors to the mortals that befriended her eagerly. During her travels she went to Eleusis, a future site for mysteries held in her honor.

Demeter's wrath brought famine to the earth and she withheld fertility until her daughter was returned. Zeus feared the demise of mankind and ordered Hermes to bring Persephone back to her mother. Her return immediately allowed the sun to shine bright and flowers and plants to spring from their soil. The reunion of mother and daughter was a joyful one but was threatened by the fact that Persephone had eaten food (a pomegranate) in the underworld. As a result, Persephone was required to spend time in the underworld with Hades. Zeus Made a compromise that allowed Hades to spend part of the year with his wife in their dark kingdom. Demeter would be reunited with her for the second part. During her mourning, Demeter brought on fall and winter. Her reunion brought on spring and summer.

#### **Lesson Plan 4**

Objective - The role of the mother-goddess evolved from a primal state of being an unmarried mother to having a son or lover (excluding Mary and Isis). Students will research and study related stories and create poetry.

Materials - Stories that relate to Demeter i.e. - Isis (Egypt), the snake goddess (Minoan Crete), Aphrodite (Greece), Magna Mater (Rome).

#### Fertility Rites and Mystery Religions

Fertility rites are ceremonies with a religious nature and elements of magic that people used to ensure the continuity of life. People often used the rites in an effort to control their environment. The rites usually involved magical superstition and were based on the assumption that life and fertility were the same. A persistent theme of many ancient rites was the freeing of water which was believed to regenerate the Earth.

Sacred marriages formed part of some rituals. They were often reenactments that would stimulate fertility both figuratively and literally. Processions, plays, and dances were also part of the rites. The Maypole Dance of Britain originated from ancient fertility rites. This fact is of special interest because students often celebrate around the maypole with the coming of spring. This helps to link a rite of Spring to the story of Persephone and Demeter (the mother-goddess).

The most important cult activities in Greece Roman culture were the initiation rites of the Eleusinian mysteries. They were based on the power of Demeter and Persephone to encourage the yearly renewal of all life forms. The most important sanctuary built in their honor was in the city of Eleus in Attica. Religious festivals celebrated sowing, sprouting, and reaping grain.

The entire story of Demeter and her daughter was reenacted in the ceremony. A girl was chosen to portray Persephone and was carried off by someone playing Hades. Grain was thrown into fields and buried in the Earth to bring new life. When the grain grew up from the ground and was reaped to make bread, a girl was taken from her family. Her virginity was killed to bring forth offspring. When someone died, he would be buried to take part in a mystical plan to continue the cyclic renewal of life. The overall message of Eleusis was " out of every grave new life grows". Initiates held good hopes for immortality in the afterlife.

There were festivals celebrating Demeter throughout Greece, but the true Eleusinian mysteries were

celebrated in Eleusis. By participating in the mysteries, a man became a full member of the civic body. That all changed when Eleusis was added to the Athenian territory. Initiation became a religious ceremony. Every Athenian was invited to attend and later every Greek could attend. Not everyone participated because of the long walk to Eleusis.

Many people participated because they enjoyed the opportunity to have a good time. There was company, food, wine, and sometimes sexual pleasures.

The ceremonies were open to a deeper understanding that was not made clear by any theology. There wasn't a set of creeds either. The religious action itself contained the meaning and conveyed it to the initiates without words. Therefore, it wasn't possible to disclose the mysteries to the noninitiated people. It was considered treachery to reveal the secret dances.

The study of fertility rites provides another link to the Egyptian goddess Isis. In ancient Egypt she was known as the mother goddess of nature and fertility. Her worship involved her husband/brother, Osiris, and their son, Horus. By hellenistic times she came to inherit attributes of Demeter. Isis' cult focused on the celebration of the mysteries associated with the death and resurrection of Osiris. The cult of Isis persisted during the first four centuries of the Christian era. The threat of persecution brought a halt to all cult of Isis activities.

Isis was the embodiment of the faithful and loving mother. She introduced marriage and taught the people of Egypt to make bread, spin, weave, and cure disease. Isis became a goddess of magical power when she tricked the sun god Re, who had become old and senile. By mixing some of his saliva with mud she created a poisonous snake whose bite sent Re into agonizing pain. Isis offered to cure him on condition that he revealed his secret name. It was said to contain the power of life and death when it was said out loud. Re accepted her offer and recovered soon after. Isis became a very powerful goddess and surpassed even the power of Re. Isis married her brother Osiris, the first king on earth. He was a popular god loved by all. He was murdered by his jealous brother, Seth, who hid the body and usurped the throne for all its power. Isis was inconsolable. She searched the world until she found her dead husband's body. She hovered over him in the form of a sparrowhawk and fanned him back to life long enough to have sexual intercourse with him and conceive her son Horus. She then embalmed the body of her Osiris and restored him to eternal life.

Thereafter, Isis was the protector of the dead. She devoted her life to her son by shielding him from danger with magic and trickery. She was usually portrayed in human form suckling the infant Horus, or with a crown of cow horns and a solar disk because of her association with the cow goddess Hathor as the ideal mother. In her temple at Philae stood a statue with an inscription that read, "I am that which is, has been, and shall be. My veil no one has lifted. The fruit I bore was the Sun."

#### Rites of the Cult of Isis

A period of preparation preceded the initiation mystery of Isis. People were required to fast for eleven days, abstain from sexual activity, and stay away from wine and meat. They were segregated from the common people and housed in special apartments. Candidates confessed their sins and were baptized as part of the ceremony. The baptism was thought to wash away sins and impart a new way of life.

The festivals of the Isis religion were connected with the three Egyptian seasons caused by the cycle of the Nile. Narratives of rites and goddesses were preserved on papyrus. The last part of the *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius is an Isis text that narrates details of initiation into Egyptian mysteries.

Students will look at the differences and similarities of the two mother-goddesses (Demeter and Isis). This also serves as a catalyst to introducing Egyptian mythology (all seventh grade students in West Hills explore myths during their study of Africa and Egypt).

## Conclusion

The material provided will give students a comprehensive look at famous Greek gods and diverse mother-goddesses. Drama students will be encouraged to use creativity to develop plays, movement, poems, and skits with their accumulated knowledge of mythology. The study of Persephone will serve as a spring board for original myths developed by the students. Performance is an integral part of drama class. Students will use the Performance Arts process to produce plays for their peers. Teachers who are interested in motivating students will provide scenic detail and inspiring music (such as Stravinsky's musical retelling of Persephone).

## Greek Theater

The Greeks placed considerable emphasis on the voice because they judged actors by the beauty of vocal tone and the ability to adapt mood and manner of speaking to mood and character. Plays demanded three kinds of delivery: speech, recitative, and song. Facial expression was not important because the actor was always masked. In tragedy, gesture and movement were simplified and broadened. Movement seems to have been likened to mimetic dance. Liberal use of song, recitation, choral passages, dance, and masks led to stylization.

Chorus- serves several functions in the play. It gives advice, expresses opinions, asks questions, and sometimes takes an active part in the action. It sets a standard against which the action is judged. It adds movement, dance, and song to heighten theatrics. It creates pauses where the audience should contemplate what has just happened. And it serves as the spectator by reacting to the actors in the play like an outside audience member would.

Costumes and Masks-Visual style was achieved through costumes. It was usually a sleeved tunic with decorations. Masks were larger than the actors head with exaggerated features . They usually included a hairstyle, beard, ornaments, and other features.

Students will study the effects used in early Greek drama when producing their play about Persephone and Demeter. We will study theater from the fifth and sixth centuries (Which includes dramatic tragedies concerning Dionysus). This will help the students put the play in perspective as well as perform a traditional Greek myth using historical data. A workshop on costumes, masks, and makeup will help them authenticate their work while producing it themselves. The entity of the chorus will enable all to have a speaking part and allow movement and dance to be incorporated into the play also. Although Greek architecture was columns and pillars with little props, I will encourage the students to use both when producing the play.

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