

The ORIGIN of the SEASONS

retold by Olivia Coolidge



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Demeter, the great earth mother, was goddess of the harvest. Tall and majestic was her appearance, and her hair was the color of ripe wheat. It was she who filled the ears with grain. In her honor white-robed women brought golden garlands of wheat as first fruits to the altar. Reaping, threshing, winnowing,¹ and the long tables set in the shade for the harvesters' refreshment—all these were hers. Songs and feasting did her honor as the hard-working farmer gathered his abundant fruit. All the laws which the farmer knew came from her: the time for plowing, what land would best bear

10 crops, which was fit for grapes, and which to leave for pasture. She was a goddess whom men called the great mother because of her generosity in giving. Her own special daughter in the family of the gods was named Persephone.

Persephone was the spring maiden, young and full of joy. Sicily was her home, for it is a land where the spring is long and lovely, and where spring flowers are abundant.

WORD STUDY

Many Greek names are pronounced in ways that are surprising to English speakers. For example: Demeter (di-mēt'ər) and Persephone (pər-sef'ə-nē).

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 14. Circle the names of the goddesses you are introduced to in this passage. What is their relationship?

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

Re-read lines 1–14. Underline the details that tell you why Demeter is adored by humans.

1. **reaping:** cutting and gathering the grain; **threshing and winnowing:** two ways of separating the grain from the husks.

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INFER

Re-read the sentences in lines 18–25. What does this myth-maker imply is the cause of thunder?

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FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage silently, and take note of the sequence of events. Then, read the passage aloud several times. Each time you read, strive to improve the smoothness of your delivery as well as your interpretation of the scene.

Here Persephone played with her maidens from day to day till the rocks and valleys rang with the sound of laughter, and gloomy Hades heard it as he sat on his throne in the dark land of the dead. Even his heart of stone was touched by her young beauty, so that he arose in his awful majesty and came up to Olympus to ask Zeus if he might have Persephone to wife. Zeus bowed his head in agreement, and mighty Olympus thundered as he promised.

Thus it came about that as Persephone was gathering flowers with her maidens in the vale of Enna, a marvelous thing happened. Enna was a beautiful valley in whose meadows all the most lovely flowers of the year grew at the same season. There were wild roses, purple crocuses, sweet-scented violets, tall iris, rich narcissus,² and white lilies. All these the girl was gathering, yet fair as they were, Persephone herself was fairer far.

As the maidens went picking and calling to one another across the blossoming meadow, it happened that Persephone strayed apart from the rest. Then, as she looked a little ahead in the meadow, she suddenly beheld the marvelous thing. It was a flower so beautiful that none like it had ever been known. It seemed a kind of narcissus, purple and white, but from a single root there sprang a hundred blossoms, and at the sweet scent of it the very heavens and earth appeared to smile for joy. Without calling to the others, Persephone sprang forward to be the first to pick the precious bloom. As she stretched out her hand, the earth opened in front of her, and she found herself caught in a stranger's arms. Persephone shrieked aloud and struggled, while the armful of flowers cascaded down to earth.

However, the dark-eyed Hades was far stronger than she.

2. **narcissus** (nār-sis'əs): family of lilies including daffodils and jonquils. "Echo and Narcissus" (page 104) gives the ancient Greeks' explanation of how this flower came to be.

INFER

Pause at line 86. Why do you think Demeter lies about her identity? Explain.



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La Primavera: Flora (detail) (1477)
by Sandro Botticelli.

IDENTIFY
CAUSE & EFFECT

Pause at line 93. Why does Demeter agree to become nurse to Demophoon?

account for herself, Demeter told them that she was a woman of good family from Crete, across the sea, who had been captured by pirates and was to have been sold for a slave. She had escaped as they landed once to cook a meal on shore, and now she was wandering to find work.

90 The four girls listened to this story, much impressed by the stately manner of the strange woman. At last they said that their mother, Metaneira,³ was looking for a nurse for their new-born brother, Demophoon.⁴ Perhaps the stranger would come and talk with her. Demeter agreed, feeling a great longing to hold a baby once more, even if it were not her own. She went therefore to Metaneira, who was much struck with the quiet dignity of the goddess and glad to give her charge of her little son. For a while thereafter

3. **Metaneira** (met'ə-nē'rə).

4. **Demophoon** (de-măf'ō-ăn').

**IDENTIFY
CAUSE & EFFECT**

Pause at line 138. What causes Metaneira to become suspicious of Demeter? What is the effect of Metaneira's suspicion?

WORD STUDY

The word *vain* is used twice in the second paragraph on this page. *Vain* comes from the Latin *vanus*, meaning "empty." Something done *in vain* means that the effort is useless or futile; it will come to nothing.

**IDENTIFY
CAUSE & EFFECT**

Re-read lines 139–152, and underline the details that explain the effect of Demeter's neglect of her duties as harvest goddess.

Metaneira screamed loudly and lost no time in rushing forward, but it was Demeter who snatched up the baby.
130 "Fool that you are," she said indignantly to Metaneira, "I would have made your son immortal, but that is now impossible. He shall be a great hero, but in the end he will have to die. I, the goddess Demeter, promise it." With that old age fell from her and she grew in stature. Golden hair spread down over her shoulders so that the great hall was filled with light. She turned and went out of the doorway, leaving the baby on the ground and Metaneira too amazed and frightened even to take him up.

All the while that Demeter had been wandering, she
140 had given no thought to her duties as the harvest goddess. Instead she was almost glad that others should suffer because she was suffering. In vain the oxen spent their strength in dragging the heavy plowshare⁶ through the soil. In vain did the sower with his bag of grain throw out the even handfuls of white barley in a wide arc as he strode. The greedy birds had a feast off the seed corn that season; or if it started to sprout, sun baked it and rains washed it away. Nothing would grow. As the gods looked down, they saw threatening the earth a famine such as never had been
150 known. Even the offerings to the gods were neglected by despairing men who could no longer spare anything from their dwindling stores.

At last Zeus sent Iris, the rainbow, to seek out Demeter and appeal to her to save mankind. Dazzling Iris swept down from Olympus swift as a ray of light and found Demeter sitting in her temple, the dark cloak still around her and her head bowed on her hand. Though Iris urged her with the messages of Zeus and offered beautiful gifts or whatever powers among the gods she chose, Demeter

6. **plowshare**: cutting blade of a plow.

160 would not lift her head or listen. All she said was that she would neither set foot on Olympus nor let fruit grow on the earth until Persephone was restored to her from the kingdom of the dead.

At last Zeus saw that he must send Hermes of the golden sandals to bring back Persephone to the light. The messenger found dark-haired Hades sitting upon his throne with Persephone, pale and sad, beside him. She had neither eaten nor drunk since she had been in the land of the dead. She sprang up with joy at the message of Hermes, while the dark king looked gloomier than ever, for he really loved his queen. Though he could not disobey the command of Zeus, he was crafty, and he pressed Persephone to eat or drink with him as they parted. Now, with joy in her heart, she should not refuse all food. Persephone was eager

CLARIFY

Pause at line 163. Under what conditions will Demeter agree to resume her duties as harvest goddess?

INFER

Re-read lines 167–171. Has Persephone come to accept her fate as wife of Hades? Explain.



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La Primavera: Flora (detail) (1477)
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PREDICT

Pause at line 179. Why is Hades so eager for Persephone to eat? What might happen to her?

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IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

Pause at line 195. What effect did Persephone's eating seven pomegranate seeds have on the earth? Underline those details.

IDENTIFY

What natural occurrence does this origin myth explain? Hint: Think about the story's title.

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to be gone, but since the king entreated her, she took a pomegranate⁷ from him to avoid argument and delay. Giving in to his pleading, she ate seven of the seeds. Then Hermes took her with him, and she came out into the upper air.

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When Demeter saw Hermes with her daughter, she started up, and Persephone too rushed forward with a glad cry and flung her arms about her mother's neck. For a long time the two caressed each other, but at last Demeter began to question the girl. "Did you eat or drink anything with Hades?" she asked her daughter anxiously, and the girl replied:

"Nothing until Hermes released me. Then in my joy I took a pomegranate and ate seven of its seeds."

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"Alas," said the goddess in dismay, "my daughter, what have you done? The Fates have said that if you ate anything in the land of shadow, you must return to Hades and rule with him as his queen. However, you ate not the whole pomegranate, but only seven of the seeds. For seven months of the year, therefore, you must dwell in the underworld, and the remaining five you may live with me."

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Thus the Fates had decreed, and even Zeus could not alter their law. For seven months of every year, Persephone is lost to Demeter and rules pale and sad over the dead. At this time Demeter mourns, trees shed their leaves, cold comes, and the earth lies still and dead. But when, in the eighth month, Persephone returns, her mother is glad and the earth rejoices. The wheat springs up, bright, fresh, and green in the plowland. Flowers unfold, birds sing, and young animals are born. Everywhere the heavens smile for joy or weep sudden showers of gladness upon the springing earth.

7. **pomegranate** (pəm'ə-gran'it): round, red fruit containing many seeds that can be eaten.