

## **A Myth of Initiation in Modern English Poetry**

*June Hyatt*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This unit combines poetry and mythology for high-school classes from the 10th to the 12th grade. It focuses on one myth only, the myth of Ceres and Proserpine, mother and daughter, which inspired an array of poems that will engage the students because they relate in one way or another to their own experiences.

Exposure to the ancient myths will enhance the students' understanding and appreciation of literature. Hopefully they will be motivated to read more poetry as well as to express their own experiences and concerns creatively. In a time when our society is plagued with inner city problems, nationwide shootings in schools, and youngsters' low expectations concerning what the future holds for them, many will identify with the resolution of the drama of loss and separation that the ancient myths and the modern poetic adaptations represent. Because the story of the abduction of Proserpine symbolizes her initiation, and even though both protagonists are female, adolescents of both genders will identify with the problems of the passage into adulthood and will sense the possibilities of their resolution.

### **CONTENT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE UNIT**

This unit has five objectives:

- a) To expose the students to poems by modern English poets, so they will appreciate their quality and relate to their subject matter;
- b) To make them aware that the Anglo-Saxon culture as well as other cultures has not emerged from a vacuum but has ancient roots;
- c) To prompt them to understand that different authors may have different perspectives on one theme, and to help them interpret their points of view;
- d) To enrich their English vocabulary;
- e) To stimulate the students' creativity, be it verbal, pictorial, or performative.

I foresee that the entire unit will take five weeks. I offer below commentary on six poems, ancient and modern, summarizing succinctly the presentation I would make of each. Because each week would begin with the reading, explanation, and discussion of a particular poem, I point out the common themes and the varying perspectives I perceive in each of the sources. In the second part of this unit four lesson plans are included as examples, with the expectation that the same suggestions and techniques may be applied to other poems. Four ancient Greek representations of the myth and its characters are listed, with comments leading to their utilization in class.

The texts I have chosen are:

- 1) *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, anonymous, composed between the 8th and the 6th centuries BCE.
- 2) "Ceres and Proserpine," by Ovid, Roman poet (43 BCE-17 CE)
- 3) "Demeter and Persephone," by Alfred Lloyd Tennyson (1809-1892)
- 4) "The Garden of Proserpine," by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909)
- 5) "Song of Proserpine," by Algernon Charles Swinburne
- 6) "Prayer to Persephone II," by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

### **Overview of the myths and their themes**

The myth of the abduction of Proserpine, probably even more ancient than the sources that have come to us, has inspired ancient and modern writers and artists, and has not lost its actuality even now. It represents the marriage of a maiden and her separation from her mother as a trance so frightening that she imagines she is dying. The mother, in turn, lives the absence of her daughter as final and mourns her as if she had lost her forever. Even though the story is told almost always from the point of view of the feminine protagonist, it represents the coming of age of a young person so poignantly that adolescents of both genders may relate to it and ponder the experience of initiation that they themselves may be going through or may anticipate as forthcoming.

In the ancient myth as well as in some of the modern versions one can find examples of conciliation and compromise that bring to an end multiple conflicts. The father yields to the distraught mother; she accepts to share her daughter with a son-in-law; her anger subsides and, as death is conquered in what may be termed the resurrection of Proserpine, Ceres restores to the world the nourishment she had withdrawn. The cycle of the seasons offers a promise of renewal after deprivation and happiness after grief.

### ***Themes that can be recognized in the various versions of this myth***

- a) Loss and separation; final reunion
- b) The bond between mother and daughter
- c) Grief and anger
- d) Coming of age
- e) Death and resurrection
- f) Growth and renewal

## 1) “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”

This anonymous hymn to the goddess of agriculture is the earliest source we have for the story of the marriage/death of her daughter. It begins in a pastoral setting with the abduction of Persephone, the slender-ankled daughter whom Zeus has given to Hades, the god of the underworld, as a bride. Although she is not identified by name until line 335, she is described as the girl possessing a flower’s beauty (l. 9) lured with her companions to the scent and splendid sight of one hundred blooming irises, hyacinths and narcissuses. So lovely is this vision of spring that earth, sea, and sky resound in gleeful laughter. Overcome by the intensity of such beauty before her eyes, Persephone reaches out in an instinctive childlike gesture to pluck a flower. Then Hades emerges from a hole in the earth and snatches her into his golden chariot drawn by a team of charging horses (l. 118). Persephone is forced against her will and shrieks in her fear of the abrupt end of her idyllic life with her mother, Demeter. Perhaps out of her innocence, Proserpine is able to temper her grief with hope so that she is able to bear the experience (l. 37).

But Demeter hears her daughter’s cries echoing from the mountains and her stabbing pain is so great that she rips off her clothing and rushes like a wild bird searching for Persephone everywhere (l. 40). For nine days, she neither eats nor sleeps in her torment and anguish but carries torches to light her path throughout her nocturnal search.

On the tenth day following Persephone’s fearful abduction to the underworld, Hekate, who had heard Persephone’s cries, relates to Demeter that Persephone has indeed been abducted by a god but she cannot identify which one it is. However, the mother realizes her daughter has been overcome by force and Hekate identifies Zeus as responsible for giving Persephone to Hades, his brother, to be his queen of the underworld. One moment the girl is an innocent child playing with flowers in stark contrast to the next in which she suffers violence and loss of innocence. Such are the emotions the mother feels for her daughter. Yet Hekate advises the stricken mother that one could do worse than be the bride and queen of the underworld king (ll. 83-84)

When the full realization of her child’s fate strikes Demeter, she leaves Mt. Olympus in a state of grief and despair. Her physical appearance declines to the point that she appears to be old and haggard. In her wanderings among men, several mortal women see her and offer her aid. Demeter does not reveal her plight nor her identity but tellingly reveals her longings by wishing that their children may marry spouses of whom their parents approve (ll. 136-137). So fragile is Demeter’s emotional state that a touching scene occurs when she suggests to the women that she would enjoy working among them as a baby’s nurse as though closeness with any child might comfort her in her loss and separation from her own daughter. (l. 114)

Because it is difficult for mortals to recognize gods and goddesses, one of the young women, Kallidike, is not certain who Demeter is but takes her to her mother who needs a nurse for Demophoon, a young son born to her late in life. Still Demeter refuses even the most delicious foods and wine but accepts simple barley water. The goddess who has given all food to men does not eat in her mourning. Demeter rears the boy as a god and feeds him ambrosia (l. 238). But his natural mother, Metaneira, sees Demeter put her son in a flame to make him immortal and does not understand that Demeter is a goddess capable of keeping him from harm. Demeter is angered and reveals herself and that she might have made the boy immortal. His mortal sisters have trouble with the boy who has grown accustomed to a goddess' affection.

A temple is built to appease the goddess but she is nagged by the grief of her daughter's loss and separation which hangs over her incessantly. Demeter takes out her wrath and displeasure on the earth by causing a year of famine and drought. This attracts Zeus' attention and he tries to charm Demeter by sending to her gods and goddesses laden with gifts. But the goddess' anger is in proportion to her grief and she threatens to destroy the world if she cannot see her daughter's face. Zeus then dispatches Hermes to convince Hades that Demeter must see her daughter and be appeased so that nature will be spared.

Hades responds to Zeus' command from his bed with Persephone who has not given herself up completely and misses her mother. Hades allows Persephone to go to her mother but reminds her of the virtue of compromise. Persephone is overjoyed but Hades deceives her by giving her a pomegranate seed to eat which ultimately means she will never be able to live her life permanently above the ground in the sunlight with her mother. Ironically, the same carriage and driver who drove her to Hades drive her now to her mother's temple, at Zeus' command.

Mother and daughter race to one another and cling together in joyous reunion. But even as she rejoices, Demeter's instinct causes her to suspect that Hades has deceived them again when she explains the taboo and the consequences of eating underground. One third of the year, according to the hymn, Persephone will be forced to remain in Hades. Persephone herself speaks and explains to her mother how Hades tempted her to eat the pomegranate seed and forced it upon her. Then all the pent-up words spill out of Persephone and she tells her mother the whole dastardly story of her violent abduction and how the earth opened in an instant and her former life changed forever.

Nevertheless, mother and daughter soon forget the old grief and spend a happy day together. Zeus sends Rhea to inform Demeter that for one season, Persephone must remain with Hades. This prompts Rhea to plead with Demeter to release her anger and free the earth to bloom again. Demeter honors the reconciliation with her daughter and with Zeus and counsels the kings of the earth in her holy rites. The hymn to Demeter brings mother and daughter together as the seasonal rebirth brings fruit and harvest to men.

## 2) “Ceres and Proserpine,” in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* V, 385-570

The first scene in Ovid’s narrative highlights the innocence of Proserpine, who competes with other girls, gathering flowers in an idyllic landscape. In contrast, the image of the god of the underworld, Pluto, who abruptly ravishes her, is hellish. The frightened girl cries for her mother, who cannot hear her. Pluto cracks the earth open and plunges, with Proserpina in his chariot, to the realm of death.

There is compassion and indignation in the voice of Cyane, a nymph of Sicily who attempts to prevent the abduction, to no avail. Cyane, in despair, melts into water. This is one of many transformations or metamorphoses with which Ovid marks significant aspects of the myths he tells. Cyane’s predicament mirrors Proserpine’s.

Now Ceres is portrayed, roaming the world in search of her daughter. Rather than coming to the halls of a palace, as Demeter does in the *Homeric Hymn*, in Ovid’s story the goddess arrives at a poor cottage. While she is drinking a potion similar to the one she is offered in the Greek version, a boy mocks her and the goddess deals him quick and stark punishment, transforming him into a newt. Ceres’ distress has turned into anger.

The wrath of Ceres explodes, however, when she recognizes her daughter’s sash floating on the water of the pool Cyane. Now she curses the entire island of Sicily and brings upon it blight, sterility, and death.

Another nymph, Arethusa, pleading with the goddess to spare the land, tells her how, in her underground journey from Olympia to Sicily, she saw her daughter. A different vision of Proserpine appears in this passage: she is, though still in fear, the queen of the underworld and the “proud consort of its proud ruler.” Ceres then goes to Olympus to beseech Jove to bring Proserpine back. She does so appealing to Jove’s care for his daughter.

This is an interesting scene where the Roman poet, confronting mother and father, clearly foregrounds the authority of the father, yet shows him yielding to the mother’s plea. He will let Proserpine return, yet the Fates have set as a condition that she must not have eaten anything while she was below. When another boy, a son of Pluto, reveals that Proserpine has unknowingly eaten a pomegranate she plucked from the garden, making her return impossible, Ceres vents her anger once again against a young man and transforms him into a screech-owl.

Finally Jupiter fashions a balanced compromise between Pluto and Ceres. Proserpine will spend half of the year with each. In other words, she does not cease to be a daughter even though she is now a wife. Ceres is pacified and entrusts the gift of grain

to an Athenian hero, Triptolemos. Now that she is a mother again, Ceres is once again the nurturing goddess who fosters human civilization.

### 3) “Demeter and Persephone,” by Alfred Lloyd Tennyson

In this rendering of the myth, Persephone returns into her native land by way of her mother’s own temple in an almost lifeless state, resurrected from the dead in a literal sense. She has come back to the welcoming song of the nightingale. Her face is lit by moonbeams which chase any residual shadows left from the underworld. And yet her mother, Demeter, at first sees a frightening foreign expression in her lost child’s eyes.

For now, however, Persephone belongs to Demeter’s world of beauty and this moment of resurrection is joyous for the pair of goddesses. Mother and daughter are held in an embrace as the sun bursts through the winter sky and covers Persephone in light. Their separate disillusionment and loss has culminated in this glad occasion.

Demeter speaks of the strange serpentine look of death in her daughter’s eyes when she arrived on earth, which terrified her mother although she had often seen the look in the eyes of the dead lit by the fiery red light of Phlegethon, the river of the underworld. The reunited mother and daughter continue to cling together, as Demeter speaks on. She is astounded that her daughter’s resurrection from death is the first of its kind. Demeter believes that her cries for her daughter were so powerful that they penetrated the heart of all powers that be. As they walk in the garden of Enna, the black site of Persephone’s abduction breaks into blossoms at the touch of her feet, yet Demeter shudders reflecting how the earth split and Hades ravished her daughter.

Now, however, crocuses, a certain sign of spring, bloom at the site near Persephone’s feet. The pair have much to share with each other. Demeter tries to express the depths of her anguish at her separation from her child. She relates how she envied mortal wives, and even birds sitting on their nests, and how she nursed and healed sick infants to the amazement of their mothers. Then Demeter renewed her search for her own Persephone and asked where she was over and over. She could not understand why any moan or wail from nature had any other reason comparable to her own grief. In high mountains and deep caves, in storms at sea and among the tigers of the jungle she asked where her child might be found.

Eventually she came upon three Fates who answered in one voice that they decided destinies, but Persephone’s fate was decided by a Fate beyond their own. The answer to Demeter’s anguished question came in a dream in which Persephone’s shade or likeness revealed to her that the brightest god Zeus had conspired with the darkest god that Persephone would be Hades’ bride and queen of the underworld forever. Even as in the *Homeric Hymn*, Demeter cursed the gods and would not eat with them. Their rich food seemed poison to her. Her dropping tears killed flowers and her wailing silenced birds.

Nature was dying of neglect and man had no food. Demeter's grief reflected across the land casting a shadow of famine and a brutal, merciless winter that would not end. Men suffered and ceased to praise Zeus and offer sacrifices. Therefore, Zeus provided a solution, permitting Persephone to remain six months with Demeter and only three with Hades.

Although Demeter and Proserpine adjust to this compromise, Demeter remains unhappy with the gods and recalls the puzzling statement of the three gray-headed goddesses who revealed that there is a Fate beyond them. What does this knowledge mean to her? Perhaps she interprets that the existing gods might become spiritually enlightened and less petty and vindictive. Zeus, for instance, might hurl his thunderbolt against disease rather than in anger or perhaps the gods might decide to bring light into the dark underworld and force Proserpine's husband to love the light.

If this vision of Demeter's is realized, she could have her daughter in a perfect world through all the seasons of the year. And those men who faced their fear of her daughter as fear of death would be blessed by Demeter's Autumn harvest. Worship of Persephone is transformed in her mother's vision from fear of her as death to love of her as she and her mother bring nature to full fruition. In another sense, men learn to love the resurrection of the cycle of life.

#### **4) "The Garden of Proserpine," by Algernon Charles Swinburne**

This melancholic poem begins with a description of the beyond. The poetic voice (perhaps that of Proserpine herself) is weary of all earthly aspects of experience and the entire human condition, weary of emotions and passions. Only despair awaits those who sow in life. Time itself is tiresome and meaningless. Sleep appears as a welcome respite, in the garden of Proserpine where life and death are neighbors (l. 16).

In Proserpine's grim underground garden, nothing grows but her sacred flower, the poppy, which brings sleep. Even the poppy fails to bloom. From crushed buds the queen of the underworld makes wine for the dead. The one ambiguous glimmer of hope is short-lived, with the arrival of dawn above the fields of dead corn, as darkness lifts to dawn. But like the men, the corn is already dead. It is too late. The men and the corn plants are destined to die before they can live.

Death impartially takes all living things. It does not matter if one is the strongest man on earth or the most physically beautiful. In the end, love too goes down to death. The image of Proserpine as the pale woman with cold hands whose presence erases any vestiges of love from the dead as they enter her garden fulfills the gloomy, final destiny of every man. She meets the dead from everywhere and from all times.

Like a child who is abducted and then brainwashed by her captor, this Proserpine of the underworld garden does not remember her mother, does not concern herself with the

seasons of earth and feels no anxiety of separation. She is not reluctant to be the queen of Hades. Rather she waits for all nature to follow the same path to her garden that men follow. Bird song rings false there. Flowers wither. Love that does not endure, old love that becomes too old, shattered dreams and stray scattered beauty end up in Proserpine's land.

In life, neither joy nor sorrow is certain. One day dies into another. The allegory of Proserpine's garden and death makes no promise of resurrection, either. Mourning for lost love is short-lived. Paradoxically, out of the desolation of the finality of death comes the acceptance of death as a finality.

In the last two stanzas, death, now accepted, seems desirable. It is a respite and relief from excessive desire to live, from hope and from fear. We can be thankful that nothing is cursed to live eternally. We can be thankful the dead do not rise from their graves in rebirth and those who cling to life the longest will one day rest in peace. In the last stanza, we are assured that we will not be awakened from death by a sudden glaring light, nor startled from our sleep by thunderous waters of storms or creation.

#### **5) "Hymn to Proserpine," by Algernon Charles Swinburne**

In 313 CE Constantine the Great made Christianity the new faith of the Roman Empire. It is said that his nephew died uttering in Latin these words of the philosopher Epictetus: "You are a little soul, carrying around a corpse," which appear in l. 108. In this poem the speaker, a Roman who has heard the news and recognizes the victory of bemoans the defeat of paganism that he recognizes (the subtitle means "You have vanquished, o Galilean").

There is nostalgia for the beauty and the delights of nature and love, the exalted celebration of life that must now come to an end. The poem laments the loss of Proserpine's power, unequal to the mother of Christ. Proserpine and the pagan religion may be vanquished, but she brings death and, with the passing of time, the new religion too will pass.

#### **6) "Prayer to Persephone II," by Edna St. Vincent Millay**

The speaker of this poem, a prayer, has a mother's voice asking that her child be fostered in her absence by Persephone, who also suffered the loss and separation from her own mother.

The poem's voice is that of a mother who asks Persephone to care for a girl who is lost in hell. She gives up her child in hopes that she will find her needs met by someone who can give her comfort in conflict although this girl had no need for her elder and was arrogant and free before she was lost. The speaker asks Persephone to comfort the daughter, to guide her through the dark side of experience, although the poem does not



specifically say what that is. Perhaps the allusion to Persephone would mean this girl has made a poor choice in love.

## **SAMPLE LESSON PLANS**

### **General suggestions**

For the sake of clarity I suggest a single general pattern for the lesson plans, yet each teacher will wish to adapt creatively the timing of the interpretative steps and the choice of activities to the challenges of the particular poem and to the level of the class.

The steps I propose are:

- a) Reading and explanation of the text. Especially in the case of the longer pieces, the poem can be read stanza by stanza by the teacher, who with leading questions will guide the students to an understanding of the text and an appreciation of the poetry. Individual students may then take turns in reading the poem to the class again.
- b) Reference to the symbolism of the ancient myth. The teacher may choose for the first lesson one of the ancient versions of the myth or may prefer to explain the myth in some detail at the start of the curriculum unit. The texts of the *Homeric Hymn* and/or Ovid's poem should at least be made available to the students. See below the selection of ancient art pieces that may also be presented by the teacher to illustrate the myths.
- c) Recognition and discussion of the themes. This discussion will be best limited to the themes each particular poem foregrounds. If the students tend to apply the same pattern to all the poems, the teacher will guide them so they focus on each piece for its own sake.
- d) Comparison and contrast with other versions and relevance to issues in the students' lives. This can be done in early class discussions or in a final presentation of students' essays or poems.
- e) Creative student activities. The students will be required and encouraged to carry out, during the week-long study of each poem, at least one of the following activities: an essay, a poem, a journal recording their personal response to class discussions, a brief sketch to be performed in class, an original drawing inspired, perhaps, by the ancient artistic representations presented.
- f) Presentation and discussion of ancient art relating to the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

## Lesson plans for the modern poems listed above

### 3) *Lesson plan for Tennyson*

Explain to the students that the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone symbolizes the cycle of the seasons. The abduction of Persephone represented the death of vegetation in winter, and the compromise that ensures her return for part of the year allayed the fear that winter might be forever. This and other similar myths in other cultures relate to the fear of death and offer a promise that there will be an afterlife. The students can be led to observe that Tennyson is not taking the myth of Persephone as an explanation of the cycle of the seasons.(ll. 17-18). Persephone's return is a real resurrection that could be compared with holy stories.

Have the students observe that the entire poem is a flashback, that the daughter has already been found and returned to life. The speaker of the poem is Demeter, and Persephone acts as an audience and foil to Demeter and is never developed as a character. The story is recollected from Demeter's point of view.

It seems natural that Demeter is at first afraid of the dead expression of her daughter's eyes (ll. 22-23). Demeter sees her come back to life in stages of restoration. She first realizes Persephone's return when her daughter calls her "mother." Point out that this is the only word Persephone speaks in the poem, except in a dream as a shadow (l. 21).

Mention that the two are like best friends who have been separated and want to know every detail of what happened to the other. It is Persephone who aids her mother in answering what has happened although this is told by her shadow in a dream. Students may observe that this closeness defies explanation. The mother/daughter relationship feeds on itself. Demeter begins to tell of her panic and grief. Explain how Demeter believes the power of her grief caused by the separation brings about the miracle of Persephone's resurrection. (ll. 31-32).

Students may relate the return of Persephone to books in popular culture which give accounts of near-death experiences. They will also be able to relate to situations of missing and exploited children. Because the poem presents the pair as human, the grief and loss are more poignant and realistic to students. Discuss how grief-stricken parents today search for lost children, with the help of the modern media, the FBI, etc. What resources are available to Demeter in her search?

Ask, How does the search for Persephone reveal the theme of loss and separation? The entire fourth stanza portrays grief at its most intense. Students may be taught to close-read for words revealing the tone of grief, listing words which represent her state of mind (ll. 51-86). She receives no relief and no answer. However, Tennyson interjects

three gray heads who puzzle Demeter with their insight.(ll. 82-86), which may be a catalyst to Demeter’s assimilation of her experience.

In lines 100--121, Demeter’s attitude changes to anger. Students will close-read these lines to find that Demeter’s objectivity begins when she questions whether the gods are even superior to humankind. This is the beginning of Demeter’s conscious growth and renewed strength. What consequences must Zeus suffer as a result of his conspiracy with Hades against Persephone? (ll. 107--114)?

#### ***4) Lesson Plan for Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine”***

The two poems by Swinburne selected, “The Garden of Proserpine” and “Hymn to Proserpine” may be taught in one or two weeks. Swinburne’s poems offer good examples of figures of speech. Imagery, alliteration, personification abound. The couplet form is useful in introducing students to writing poetry.

“The Garden of Proserpine” may be used productively both in English poetry and in Speech or Drama classes, since it lends itself to be used for creative interpretations.

Note the rhyme scheme. Have students write ABABCBCB stanzas. The poem may be acted in a class performance. Point out that identity of the speaker is ambiguous. It is the voice of one who experienced both life and now death, just as Proserpine and all humankind, too. Ask students to give opinions using the text to illustrate that the speaker may or may not be Proserpine. If so, when might a speaker refer to herself in the third person (ll. 57-64)? How might this be interpreted? In line 73 the voice is plural. Is she speaking for herself and the collective dead or does the voice change to the living? What is the tone of the speaker towards the subject of the garden?

This poem may be performed as a dramatic monologue delivered by Persephone as Death. Alternatively, students may be divided into two groups. In unison, one half reads up until the end of stanza 6, where the voice seems to change. The other half of the class will read in unison the remainder of the poem. If the speaker of the poem holds Swinburne’s view of death, what is his philosophy? What is his view of the afterlife?

#### ***5) Lesson Plan for Swinburne’s “Hymn to Proserpine (After the Proclamation in Rome of the Christian Faith)”***

This lesson plan may be used for interdisciplinary units, in History as well as English and Speech classes. Students may research the setting and historical impact of this occasion. Some teachers may deem the viewpoint of the poem too sensitive, especially for freshmen. It may be used in comparison with “The Garden of Proserpine” or in contrast with Tennyson’s “Demeter and Persephone”

Journal assignments in couplet form may be read in class. If the students have read

Shakespearean sonnets, reference can be made to their ending with couplets. Ask students to write essays from the point of view of a common man hearing the proclamation. Students may choose to take the position of the speaker of the poem and argue in favor of keeping the status quo. Discussions of forms of government and freedom of thought, speech, and religion, are possible.

The speaker of the Hymn addresses the goddess Proserpine directly twice, in identical lines (2 and 92), so the speaker is not ambiguous as in “The Garden of Proserpine,” yet the theme of the two works is essentially the same, that Proserpine rules the end of life and no afterlife exists.

Have students understand that the death of the myths would bring death in our memory to great civilizations which constructed beauty in the tradition of high art. The focus is not necessarily blasphemous in a religious sense, but it expresses nostalgia for the beauty of a dying culture. Whereas the Galilean is pale, his mother is no match for the goddess Proserpine, a blossom surrounded by seafoam. Ask, How would a Roman on the street in 313 CE react to this proclamation? How would a modern American react to such a proclamation?

Although we may not believe in the Greek and Roman gods, we study ancient cultures and revere the beauty of their art and myths. Students may list the messages of the ancient myth that they recognize in this poem. Refer the students back to Tennyson’s “Demeter and Persephone,” (l. 130), in which Demeter envisions younger kinder gods. This line is interesting when interpreted as an answer to Demeter by the pale Galilean in the form of Swinburne’s “Hymn” as new gods (ll. 15-16). Students may contrast the occasion and point of view in the two poems. Demeter seeks the kind of wisdom presented in the Christian resurrection whereas the pagan view is exalted in Swinburne’s “Hymn.” The speaker wants to cling to the old and cherishes the very system Demeter has outgrown in Tennyson’s poem.

#### **6) Lesson Plan for “Prayer to Persephone II,” by Edna St. Vincent Millay**

The teacher may want to point out that this poem does not necessarily represent an experience in the author’s life. It may depict an imaginary situation which is the experience of many readers of the poem.

Explain how the road to independence begins when a young person finds his or her self-identity. Sometimes an adolescent seeks his own identity by becoming rebellious. Such may have been the case of the child in St. Vincent Millay’s poem: her rebellion may have prompted the mother’s prayer. Each of us wishes that our coming of age does not result in extreme pain or the loss of those who loved and cared for us in childhood. The speaker of this poem seeks a peaceful passage for this loved one who must realize that the perils of growing up need not destroy parental love nor the individual himself.

Persephone is depicted here as capable of nurturing and comforting others much as her own mother cared for her

Persephone may illustrate the theme of the modern daughter who finds herself at odds with her mother's dreams for her and the mother/daughter, parent/child relationships which surface in adolescence.

## **ANCIENT ART EXAMPLES**

Copyright restrictions do not permit publication of the graphics, but all of these—and many other images, both ancient and modern—are downloadable from the web for educational purposes. Teachers are also allowed to print and duplicate such images for their students.

### **1) Great Eleusinian Relief: Demeter, Persephone, and Triptolemos**

Illustration of Athens, National Archaeological Museum 126

Downloadable from:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?lookup=1998.01.0024>

The teacher will help the students identify the characters in this relief that dates back to 440 to 430 BCE. Demeter is on the right and Persephone on the left, and a young man stands between them. He is perhaps Triptolemos, the bearer of Demeter's gift of grain to mankind. Students will be prompted to interpret the scene. Encourage them to comment on the way the figures are dressed. They may point out that Persephone appears regal and mature. She carries a torch to lighten the darkness of the underworld. Ask whether this scene exemplifies the resolution in Tennyson's "Demeter and Persephone" (ll. 134-35), where Demeter envisions Persephone as the torch-bearer who brings noon into the sunless halls of Hades. Call the students' attention to other possible parallels between this fifth-century BCE sculpture and Tennyson's poem, written in the nineteenth century of our era.

### **2) Persephone and Hades**

Locri, votive relief, ca 480 BC, Mythmedia Project at Haifa University.

Downloadable from:

<http://web.uvic.ca/grs/bowman/myth/images/haifa/h05.jpg>

Here is Persephone on the throne with Hades. This relief depicts their marriage as functional and the king and queen of the underworld as playing a productive role in the cycle of nature. The benevolent aspect of the couple, holding a branch and ears of wheat, suggests that they represent growth and rebirth. The cup that Persephone holds shows what mortals offer them. The depiction of Hades as a happy husband to a happy wife indicates that the god was not evil but a giver of the fruits of the earth.

### 3) Triptolemos in a winged chariot

London E 140, London, British Museum.. 490-480 BCE

Downloadable from:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?lookup=1990.14.0329&type=vase>

Triptolemos in his winged car is departing to carry to mankind the wheat from Demeter. Persephone, on the right, pours a libation in farewell or perhaps pours the liquid as if to water the seed to nurture it underground. Triptolemos' hair is long and curly, his chariot dazzling, and he wears a wreath on his head. Persephone, who wears a diadem and earrings, carries a torch. Demeter, behind the chariot, wears a richly embroidered robe and carries a torch and an ear of grain.

Students may construct models of this chariot and scene to bring to class. In Speech classes, they may dramatize the scene of departure. In English classes they will write their own description of the scene and relate it to the ancient myth or to the modern poetry they have read. They may perceive the unity of the two goddesses and the hero working together for the renewal of nature. This vase might be used to illustrate Swinburne's sense of the loss of the beauty associated with the ancient beliefs.

### 4) Seated Demeter and Persephone

ArtServ at the Australian National University

Downloadable from: <http://web.uvic.ca/grs/bowman/myth/images/32.jpg>

Demeter on her throne faces Persephone. Parent and child seem to share adult responsibilities. Both hold torches. Have students interpret the interesting fact that the heads of the two are at eye level although one is seated. Is the expression on Demeter's face one of acceptance of her daughter's initiation into adulthood?

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Texts:

- 1) *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, anonymous, in *The Homeric hymns*, translated and annotated by] Susan C. Shelmerdine, Newburyport, MA, Focus, 1995
- 2) “Ceres and Proserpine,” in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Rolfe Humphries, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1955, Book 5, ll. 385-570.
- 3) Tennyson, Alfred Lloyd, “Demeter and Persephone,” in *The poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, New York, Norton, 1972.
- 4) “The Garden of Proserpine,” and 5) “Song of Proserpine,” by Algernon Charles Swinburne, in *The works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, Philadelphia, D. McKay, 1910.
- 6) “Prayer to Persephone II,” by Edna St. Vincent Millay, in *Collected poems*, ed. by Norma Millay, New York, Harper, 1956.

### Books for Teachers

#### *Sources on Greek mythology*

- 1) Dowden, Ken, *Death and the maiden : girls' initiation rites in Greek mythology*, London and New York, Routledge, 1989. An insightful presentation of the myth of Persephone and other myths of feminine initiation.
- 2) Grimal, Pierre, *A concise dictionary of classical mythology*; edited by Stephen Kershaw from the translation by A.R. Maxwell-Hyslop, Oxford, England and Cambridge, Mass., USA, Blackwell, 1990. A comprehensive dictionary that can be useful as a reference tool.
- 3) Morford, Mark and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, Longman, 1999. This book offers a comprehensive background in myths of Greece and Rome. It includes extensive translations and excellent art reproductions, as well as references to theatre and film inspired by the myths.

#### *On modern English literature inspired by the classical tradition*

- 4) Carter, Susanne, *Mothers and daughters in American short fiction : an annotated bibliography of twentieth-century women's literature*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1993

- 5) Donovan, Josephine, *After the fall : the Demeter-Persephone myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989.
- 6) Feder, Lillian, *Ancient myth in modern poetry*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1971.
- 7) Hight, Gilbert, *The classical tradition : Greek and Roman influences on Western literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1957, rp. of 1949.
- 8) Mayerson, Philip, *Classical mythology in literature, art, and music*, New York, Wiley, 1971.
- 9) Murray, Gilbert, *The classical tradition in poetry*, New York, Vintage Books, 1957, rep. of 1927 ed. Charles Eliot Norton lectures.

### **Books for Students**

#### *Sources on Greek mythology*

Some of these titles are geared to younger readers. Numbers 2) and 3) above can be read by students in the 10th. to 12th. grade.

- 10) Bulfinch, Thomas, *The age of fable, or, Stories of gods and heroes*, with Introductory essay by Dudley Fitts, Illustrated by Joe Mugnaini, New York, Limited Editions Club, 1958. Perhaps the best collection of retold myths. See below the information on the website based on this book.
- 10) D'Aulaire, Ingrid and Edgar Parin, *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*, Doubleday, 1962.
- 11) Philip, Neil, *The Illustrated Book of Myths: Tales and Legends of the World*, Illus. Nilesh Mistry, Dorling Kindersley, 1995.
- 12) Burrows, David J., Frederick R. Lapidus, and John T. Shawcross, *Myths and Motifs in Literature*, New York, Macmillan, 1973. Excerpts from literature that reflect mythological themes and characters.

#### *On Demeter and Persephone*

- 13) Gates, Doris, *Two Queens of Heaven: Aphrodite, Demeter*. Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, New York, Viking Press, 1974. A retelling of the myths in which Aphrodite and Demeter play major roles.



- 14) Proddow, Penelope, *Demeter and Persephone*, Illus. Barbara Cooney, Doubleday, 1972. A version of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.
- 15) Waldherr, Kris, *Persephone & the Pomegranate*, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1993.

**Web Sites (for both teachers and students):**

Perseus: An Evolving Digital Library on the Ancient World

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

This multimedia source is invaluable. The search engine on this web site is easy to use and pulls from a vast and rich collection of databases.

Bulfinch's Mythology,

<http://www.bulfinch.org/fables>.

A very rich repository of retold myths, with numerous links and complete text of English literature inspired by the myths.

Electronic Resources for Classicists: the Second Generation (Univ. of California, Irvine)

<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/~tlg/index/resources.html>

An extensive collection of links on Classics; many are useful to K-12 teachers.

Classical Myth: The Ancient Sources, by Laurel Bowman, U ov Victoria, Canada

<http://web.uvic.ca/grs/bowman/myth/>

This website has links to ancient texts and images of the gods.