

The Greeks and Romans had various myths and beliefs regarding what happened to the dead once they left the world of the living. Neither civilisation believed in heaven and hell. All the dead ended up in the same place, the underworld. In this topic you will study myths that surround the underworld. For Ancient Greece, you will study the myth of Persephone and Demeter, and for Ancient Rome, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. By exploring these two key myths, we will gain a greater understanding of the underworld and ancient beliefs around it.






Background to the Underworld and the Homeric Hymns

1	The Underworld	The Underworld was given to Hades by Zeus after the Titanomachy. The Underworld would be where all the souls of the deceased would go. No one was allowed in or out of Hades, but for a few gods and a few heroes.
2	Location	The Underworld exists on the outer edges of the earth and the oceans, and is accessible through some earthly areas by Greek Heroes. These Greek Heroes include Heracles, Odysseus, Theseus and Orpheus, as well as Roman heroes such as Aeneas.
3	The River Styx	The souls of the dead needed to cross the most famous of the five rivers surrounding the Underworld, the River Styx. The dead would be rowed by the ferryman, the god Charon, after receiving payment. The payment would be left in the mouth of the deceased when buried or cremated.
4	Homeric Hymns	The Homeric Hymns are a series of thirty-three poems dedicated to the Gods. The poems are called 'Homeric' because they share a similar style to the epic poems of Homer (The Iliad and The Odyssey).
5	Oral Tradition	The Homeric Hymns are a part of an oral tradition. This means that these poems were to be sung to audiences across the Greek world.
6	Epithets	Often in these poems, characters could be easily identified by epithets. For example, Demeter, is referred to as 'Demeter with the lovely hair' in more than one of the Homeric hymns.

Burial of the Body

16	Entrapment of Persephone	Lines 1 to 18	The first section of the hymn deals with the abduction of Persephone by Hades. Whilst out playing with the daughters of Oceanus, Persephone began to collect flowers, and was entranced by a narcissus grown by Zeus, as a trap for Persphone.
17	Abduction of Persphone	Lines 19 to 39	As Persphone was distracted by the narcissus flower, Hades emerges from the Earth and abducts. He rides off with her in his chariot, taking her to the underworld.
18			Only Helios and Hecate heard the cries of Persephone, who went protesting to the underworld. Before the hole that Hades emerges from closes, Persphone lets out one final cry, which was heard by Demeter.
19	Demeter searches for Persephone	Lines 40 to 89	Despite her close relationship with Zeus and Persephone being her daughter, it becomes very clear that Demeter had not been included in the decision made by Zeus to allow Hades to abduct Persephone.
20			Hearing her daughter's cry, she begins to search for her daughter. After nine days of searching, Hecate approached Demeter with news of her abduction. Unfortunately, she only heard Persephone's cries, but thinks Helios saw what happened.
21			Demeter visits Helios and asks him what he saw. Helios tells her that it was Zeus that had agreed that Hades could have Persephone.
22	Demeter's Lament	Lines 90 to 104	Having heard Helios' words, Demeter became enraged and left Olympus and disappeared. Disguised as an old woman she took refuge under a tree and mourned for her lost daughter.
23		Lines 105 to 300	This part of the poem is almost an aside to the main story. It tells of how Demeter stayed with a family who were unaware of who she really was. She looks after their baby and feeds it ambrosia (food of the Gods) to make it immortal.
24			She then, in a final act to make the baby immortal, attempted to throw him into a fire so he could shed his mortal skin. Before it could be done, the family enter the room and panicking at the situation snatch the baby from Demeter.
25			Annoyed at the ignorance of humans, and after explaining her plan, Demeter demands that the people of Eleusis build her a temple and altar so she could teach them how to worship correctly. The townsfolk agree.
26	Demeter's Rage and Zeus' intervention	Lines 301 to 334	During this section of the poem, we see Demeter's rage as she makes it the most brutal and grimmest year for humans. The humans experienced a year of famine as no crops would grow.
27			Zeus despaired and sent all the gods and goddesses of Olympus to offer gifts to Demeter so that she would allow crops to grow. She refused them all, and told Zeus that only the return of her daughter would bring about change.
28	Zeus' appeal to Hades	Lines 335 to 385	Realising that Demeter would not submit until Persephone was returned to her, Zeus sent Hermes to the Underworld to appeal to Hades.
29			Hermes bargained with Hades, and eventually Hades agreed to allow Persephone to return to the Earth's surface. As she was about to leave, he gave her a pomegranate to eat, of which she ate six seeds. This meant she was bound to the underworld for eternity.
30	Demeter and Persephone Reunited	Lines 386 to 474	Persephone leaves the underworld and embraces her mother, Demeter. Realising that Persephone ate whilst in the underworld, Demeter agrees that she must return to the underworld for a set period, one-third of the year; the other two-thirds she will remain with Demeter.
31			Persephone agrees and Demeter returned the harvest to humans.

Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Characters

7	Demeter	Sister of Zeus, and mother to Persephone. The goddess of the harvest.	
8	Persephone	Daughter of Demeter and Zeus, and wife of Hades. Is also known as the Queen of the Underworld.	
9	Zeus	Brother of Demeter and father of Persephone, and brother of Hades.	
10	Hades	Brother to Zeus, and husband to Persephone. Is also known as the King of the Underworld.	
11	Hermes	Son of Zeus, and messenger of the Gods. One of the only Gods allowed to visit the Underworld.	

Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Themes

12	Themes	The Homeric Hymn to Demeter has two main themes: (1) The relationship between the gods, and (2) the relationship between the gods and men.
13	Gods and Gods	The poem cleverly explores the nature of the gods. Although they are not mortal or human, they experience all the same emotions as humans. This includes love, hate, loss, and fear.
14	Gods and Humans	The poem also highlights the relationship between gods and humans, and how the gods decisions could have disastrous consequences on mortals, such as Demeter's decision to withhold the harvest.
15	Humans and Gods	However, the poem also highlights that humans had power over the gods as well. If Demeter's famines could have wiped out the human race and prevented the gods from having anyone to worship them, hence Zeus saved them.