

Journeying to the Underworld

Learning Objectives:

- To understand Greek and Roman myths about journeying to the underworld
- To understand how the set texts depict and reflect ancient culture



Introduction

When someone died they went to the underworld, which was the realm of the god **Hades/Pluto**. Here they would be judged on their lives and their fate would be determined – the good would go to Elysium, a paradise; most people would go to the Asphodel fields, a neutral realm; and the bad to Tartarus, like hell. Once the soul received its judgement, a drink would be offered from the River Lethe, another river of the underworld, the waters of which resulted in forgetfulness, meaning that the soul would forget about its past life. The underworld was the exclusive realm of the dead and it was where all those who had gone before continued to exist as shades (ghosts of the deceased). The entrance to the underworld was guarded by Cerberus, a large three-headed dog, who ensured not only that the dead did not escape, but that the living did not enter. Entrance to the living, therefore, was not normally permitted, though the ancients did believe that certain places on the earth housed doorways to the underworld and, as we shall see, on some occasions certain people did make the journey there, and sometimes returned too.

Greek myths about journeys to the underworld

Persephone and Demeter

This story is about the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. One day, Hades saw Persephone and became infatuated with her. He abducted her and brought her down to the underworld, hoping to convince her to stay as his wife. Demeter was distraught and wanted her daughter returned to her. She searched to find out what had happened and ultimately was told by Helios, the god of the sun, that it was Zeus who had granted Persephone to Hades as his wife. Demeter left Olympus and dwelt for a while among mortals, and in her grief did not allow crops to grow, ultimately depriving the gods of their offerings. Zeus and the other gods implored her return, but she refused to return or allow the crops to grow until her daughter was returned. Having heard this, Zeus sent Hermes to fetch Persephone. Hades went to obey Zeus but gave Persephone a pomegranate to eat as he feared she would not return. As a result of this, however, Persephone had to spend a third of the year in the underworld with Hades, though the rest of the time she could spend with her mother. This story was used to explain the seasons. When Persephone was in the underworld her mother lamented, and as the goddess of the harvest this meant that crops could not grow. Winter occurred during this time. When Persephone returned, her mother rejoiced, resulting in summer and abundant crops.

Analysis of the myth as depicted in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter

This story is the subject of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. The underworld is part of the setting of the story and is consistently depicted as a dark and murky place. Also, the remoteness of the underworld is emphasised, for almost no one is able to hear the cries of Persephone as she is snatched away by Hades. Demeter, a goddess herself, is unable to determine what happened to her daughter until it is revealed to her, and once she knows she does not try herself to go down and take her daughter back. This all suggests that even for the gods it was difficult to perceive what was going on in the underworld. The part with the pomegranate sheds some more light onto the nature of the underworld. It symbolises how the underworld is separate from the world of the living, which is why it is significant that Persephone ate something that originated there. Another interesting element of this story is what it tells us about the Greeks' perception of the interaction between gods. The gods clearly came into conflict with each other and this could impact humanity as well, as in this case, where a Demeter angry at Hades stops crops from growing, which threatens humanity's food. On top of this, such conflict between gods often needs

the mediation of other gods. However, while Zeus does take into consideration both Demeter's and Hades' wishes, there is an expectation that his will ultimately will be followed. There are many mentions throughout about how Zeus's commands are obeyed by the other gods such as Hermes. Nevertheless, he cannot control the crops, only Demeter can, so he needs to make her return things to normal.

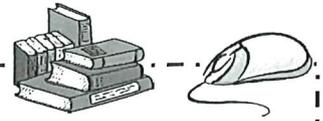
Roman myths about journeys to the underworld

Orpheus and Eurydice

This story is about Orpheus, a mortal who played music so skilfully it was worthy of the god Apollo. He married a girl called Eurydice, but sadly she died soon afterwards from a snake bite. Saddened greatly by her death, after much grieving Orpheus decided to see if he could bring her back, by going to the underworld himself. He came to Pluto and Persephone and sang to them while playing his lyre. He appealed to love and asked if Eurydice's life could be restored, saying that if it was not granted he would stay there himself as well. All of the underworld stopped and all were moved by his song, and so Pluto and wife could not resist Orpheus' plea. Orpheus was allowed to take Eurydice back with him to the world of the living, but on one condition. He could not turn around on his return to the upper world until he reached it, or his gift would be lost. They made the long journey back but near the end Orpheus feared that perhaps Eurydice was not following and he couldn't resist checking. Unfortunately, in doing so he broke his condition, and Eurydice's shade, which had been dutifully following him, was whisked back to the underworld, and Orpheus had to leave empty-handed. This story is often used to illustrate the importance of trust and faith. If only Orpheus had trusted that Eurydice indeed was following behind he would have got what he most desired.

Analysis of the myth as depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Once again the underworld is an important part of the story, and, similarly to the Greek description seen previously, it is presented as a dark place. Pluto, ruler of the underworld, is called both 'lord of the shadows' and the ruler of 'the joyless kingdom', emphasising the nature of the underworld as quite a grim place. Ovid goes further still, questioning whether love even exists in the underworld. In spite of all this, however, the spirits that reside in this darkness are all depicted as having been moved by Orpheus' song. Orpheus' ability, as a mortal, to achieve something like this seems like a rare example of a mortal trying to change destiny. This, however, is proven ultimately futile, for in the end he loses Eurydice again, showing how fate cannot be overturned. The inevitability of death is also a theme here, as Orpheus in his request to Pluto says that he is just asking to borrow his wife for a while longer, for 'All things are destined to be yours, and though we delay a while sooner or later we hasten home.' It is interesting that the underworld is called 'home' by Orpheus, his logic here being that 'Here we are all bound, this is our final abode, and you hold the longest reign over the human race.' This depiction of Pluto's position is interesting as it departs from the usual notion that he drew the short straw when the realms were divided among his brothers. The finality of death is also hinted at with these words, and perhaps foreshadows the tragic conclusion to this tale.



Independent Research

The stories of Persephone and Orpheus are not the only examples of journeys to the underworld in Greek and Roman myth. Research one of the stories below about someone travelling to the underworld. Focus on the detail of the myth as well as how the characters and the underworld are portrayed.

1. Odysseus' visit to the underworld in the *Odyssey*
2. Aeneas' visit to the underworld in the *Aeneid*

Consolidation Questions



- a) Why did crops stop growing when Persephone was taken by Hades?
- b) Who does Orpheus ask to get Eurydice back?
- c) What similarities are there between the Greek and Roman descriptions of the underworld?

Source Question



Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Read the source below.

Trojan, son of Anchises, sprung from the blood of the gods, it is easy to go down to the underworld. The door of black Dis stands open night and day. But to retrace your steps and escape to the upper air, that is the task, that is the labour. Some few have succeeded, sons of the gods, loved and favoured by Jupiter or raised to the heavens by the flame of their own virtue.

Virgil, *Aeneid*, 126-131

Explain how this source describes journeying to the underworld.