Demeter

SUMMARY

Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, describes what the world was like after her daughter, Persephone, left: it was winter and the ground was hard. Demeter would sit in a freezing room made of stone and use rough, gritty language, which she metaphorically compares to shards of rock, in an attempt to break through the frozen land. She even tried using her own broken heart to crack through the frozen lake separating her from Persephone, but it simply skipped along the ice.

Persephone eventually returned, coming from very far away. Demeter was relieved and delighted to finally see her child, her own daughter, walking barefoot over the land. Persephone brought springtime with her, flowers blooming once again across the earth in her wake. Demeter was sure she felt the air become gentler and warmer as Persephone approached. The sky at last was happy and blue, the faint crescent of the new moon appearing like a shy little grin.

THEMES

THE POWER OF MATERNAL LOVE

Though based on a Greek myth, "Demeter" explores a deeply human and relatable theme: the bond between mother and daughter. A heartbroken Demeter (the goddess of agriculture and the harvest) laments the abduction of Persephone, her daughter, by Hades, the god of the underworld. Demeter neglects her duties to the earth in her sorrow, casting the world into a dark winter that reflects the depths of her grief. Persephone's eventual return, however, heralds the arrival of spring: a season of fresh growth and rebirth. The poem thus celebrates the power and depth of a mother's love, treating this love as an essential, nourishing, and even life-giving force.

Demeter paints a bleak picture of a world without her beloved child. The earth is "hard" and frozen over with ice, mirroring Demeter's own grief-stricken heart. She sits in a "cold stone room" (a metaphorical description of the world in winter) and her "words" have grown brittle and sharp like bits of "granite" or "flint." Her separation from her daughter feels like a kind of death, a pain that has stripped her life—and the earth itself—of all light, warmth, and comfort.

Once Persephone returns, however, both Demeter's mood and the world transform. As the girl walks barefoot "across the fields," she brings "all spring's flowers / to her mother's house"—that is, spring returns to the earth. The air itself seems to "soften[] and warm[]," restoring life to the world and joy to Demeter's heart. Even the sky above smiles "with the small shy mouth of a new moon"—another image that connotes freshness, youth, and rebirth.

The poem thus links motherly love with the abundance and beauty of the natural world. It presents a mother's love and bond between parent and child not simply as a source of deep happiness, but as an essential part of life itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Where I lived ... and hard earth.

The title adds important context to the poem: the speaker here is Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture and the harvest. Her story provides an explanation for the changing seasons:

- Demeter had a beloved daughter named Persephone who was abducted by Hades, god of the underworld (and Demeter's brother). Hades wanted to marry Persephone and, knowing that Demeter would never approve, snatched her from the earth by creating a great hole in the ground.
- Demeter loved her child fiercely and was adamant that nothing would grow until she had her back. With Persephone gone, the earth became barren and unforgiving.
- Eventually, Demeter and Hades reached a compromise: Persephone would return to the earth for a set period each year. This led to the rhythm of the seasons: when Persephone is gone, it's winter; when she comes back, it's spring/summer.

With this context in mind, the poem makes more sense: readers can guess that the poem begins in winter, the time when Persephone is no longer by her mother's side.

Line 1 sets up a bleak atmosphere in which seemingly nothing can grow. It's cold ("winter") and the earth (where Demeter "live[s]") is "hard." Literally, the ground is frozen; more figuratively, this "hard earth" suggests that life itself is difficult and unforgiving.

The caesura in the middle of this line reflects that difficulty, the dash breaking up Demeter's speech almost as soon as it's begun:

> Where I lived – winter and hard earth.

The break in the line perhaps suggests Demeter's broken heart and the difficulty she has choking words out in her child's absence.

LINES 2-4

> *I sat in ...*
> *... break the ice.*

Demeter describes her life while she waits for Persephone to return. She's sheltered herself in a "cold stone room" (perhaps a metaphor for the earth in winter, or perhaps she's saying she's cutting herself off from the rest of the world). The long, round assonance of this phrase ("cold stone") subtly evokes an empty, lonely space.

Demeter goes on to say that she speaks using "tough words," which, in their brittleness and sharpness, are like pieces of "granite" or "flint." This metaphor suggests that Demeter's voice has lost its comfort and warmth; her grief has made her as hard and cold as the earth she calls home. (Of course, this inhospitable atmosphere is a direct *result* of Demeter's despair: again, in the myth, she refuses to let anything grow until she sees her daughter again.)

Demeter uses these words "to break the ice." On the one hand, this phrase reflects the fact that the world has frozen over—that it's been enveloped by "winter" in Demeter's grief. But "break the ice" can also refer to breaking the *tension* during an awkward meeting (perhaps with someone you haven't seen in a long time).

- Worth noting here is the fact that, in some versions of the myth, Persephone actually falls in love with Hades. Perhaps, then, this phrase suggests the at-times troubled nature of mother-daughter relationships—particularly when the daughter has a new love interest that the mother doesn't approve of!
- Demeter's "tough words" might refer to her attempts to bring Persephone back using her motherly authority and/or her anger towards Hades.

The crisp consonance of these lines reflects the "tough" sounds of Demeter's "words" (listen in particular to the spiky /t/ and /k/ sounds of "tough," "granite," "flint," and "break"). The full-stop caesura after "ice" then creates a brief pocket of silence; for now, Demeter gets no response from Persephone.

LINES 4-6

> *My broken heart ...*
> *... the frozen lake.*

After the caesura following "ice" (line 4), Demeter describes trying to use her "broken heart" to reach Persephone.

Note how this caesura cleverly breaks the line itself in half. Note, too, how the polyptoton of "broken" and "break" links Demeter's shattered heart with the icy world outside. It reinforces the idea that the winter is a direct reflection of her own grief.

Demeter seems to envision her heart as another stone (like those granite/flint words), one that she's tried tossing along "the frozen lake" that separates her from her daughter. But instead of cracking through the lake (i.e., breaking the ice), her stony heart just skims across its surface. She remains cut off from Persephone.

Once again, the sounds of the poem evoke the harshness of the winter landscape. There's the sharp, spiky /k/ consonance of "broken," "skimmed," and "lake," for example, as well as the muffled /f/ alliteration of "flat" and "frozen." Together, these sounds add intensity to Demeter's tale. Note, too, how assonance of short /ih/ and /ah/ and long /eye/ and /o/ sounds give the line a bouncy rhythm that evokes the image of a heart skimming along an icy surface:

> I tried that, but it skimmed,
> flat, over the frozen lake.

By now, readers have a sense of the poem's form: it's broken mostly into tercets (three-line stanzas) and uses free verse (meaning there's no regular meter or rhyme scheme). Free verse is the norm for most contemporary poetry, and its use here brings Demeter's story into the present. That is, even though the poem is about an ancient mythological character, the poem's language keeps things feeling modern and relatable.

LINES 7-9

> *She came from ...*
> *... across the fields,*

So far, the poem has focused on what the world is like in Persephone's absence. Starting with this third tercet, the poem focuses on Persophone's *return*. Line 7 thus performs a change of direction similar to a sonnet's *volta* (though, in a traditional sonnet, this would usually appear in line 9).

Persephone is coming "from a long, long way," Demeter says, the epizeuxis here calling attention to just how much distance has separated her from her child (remember, Persephone is coming all the way from the land of the dead!). Demeter then slips into parataxis, using short, abrupt clauses as she describes her daughter's approach:

> but I saw her at last, walking,
> my daughter, my girl, across the fields,

Readers can sense Demeter's deep joy and even disbelief at her

child's return. It sounds almost as if she's had her breath taken away. The parallelism/anaphora of "my daughter, my girl" adds to this sense of intense wonder, and it also emphasizes the close bond between Demeter and Persephone.

Finally, note how Persephone doesn't walk across "ice" or a "frozen lake" but "across the fields." Already, the poem hints that the world itself is changing, thawing in response to Persephone's return.

LINES 10-12

in bare feet, ...
... as she moved,

In the poem's fourth (and final) tercet, Persephone draws closer to Demeter. She walks barefoot, an image suggesting both Persephone's intimate connection with the earth (and, thus, with her mother) and that the world has begun to thaw.

Indeed, this stanza shifts towards natural imagery of abundance and beauty that juxtaposes with the barren, wintry atmosphere of the first two stanzas. Persephone brings "all spring's flowers / to her mother's house," Demeter says. In other words, her return heralds the arrival of spring, and with it the freshness and beauty of new life. Demeter also says that the "air" grows gentler and warmer the closer Persephone gets, reiterating how being with her daughter transforms the whole world into a more comforting place.

On the one hand, this transformation is quite literal: in the myth, seeing her daughter again makes Demeter happy, and she allows flowers to grow and life to flourish once more. But this tender moment also speaks to the way that the love between a mother and child can *feel* like an earth-shaking, life-giving force.

The phrase "I swear" in line 11 suggests that Demeter almost can't believe what she's seeing, so in awe is she of her child. The poem's sounds here also embrace this transition from icy grief to vibrant joy. Listen to the bouncy alliteration of "bare"/"bringing," for example. Assonance and consonance also combine to create musical internal rhymes, as in "bringing all spring's flowers" and "I swear / the air." There's sibilance here too, the hushed /s/ and humming /z/ sounds conveying Demeter's tender affection for Persephone:

> [...] spring's flowers
> to her mother's house. I swear
> the air softened [...]

LINES 13-14

the blue sky ...
... a new moon.

The last two lines of "Demeter" complete the sentence begun in line 11 with "I swear." Demeter continues to describe the earth's transformation upon her daughter's return, noting that the presence of the "new moon" (the faint, thin crescent that appears at the start of a lunar cycle) makes it look like the "blue sky" itself is "smiling."

This is an example of the pathetic fallacy. Demeter suffuses a piece of the natural world with the same happiness that she feels; the sky's joy is really Demeter's joy. Her personification of the sky also makes the whole natural world seem connected and establishes Demeter's maternal love as a source of growth and energy. This is quite *literal* in the myth: Demeter is the goddess of agriculture and the harvest, and she allowed the earth to flourish only after her daughter's return. Once again, however, Demeter's mythological story also reflects the intimate, human bond between mother and child; one doesn't need to be a mythical goddess to experience the kind of maternal love that makes the whole world seem to brighten and come alive.

Note how the poem presents the moon here: its "small shy mouth" refers to the fact that the new moon is typically faint in the sky. Metaphorically, however, this shyness might suggest the delicate, innocent, and even hesitant nature of new life. Such fresh growth requires tenderness and care (such as that given by a mother) to thrive. The moon is also a common symbol of fertility and womanhood (think about all the lore connecting the moon to menstrual cycles). Its mention here, then, reinforces the nourishing, life-giving power of a *mother's* love.

Note, too, that it was men (Zeus and Hades) who conspired to abduct Persephone, causing Demeter's grief and the world's deathly winter in the first place. This womanly love thus stands in contrast to male lust and selfishness.

Finally, while the stanzas in "Demeter" so far have been unrhymed tercets, the poem ends with a rhyming couplet. This, combined with the fact that the poem has 14 lines, makes it resemble a very loose sonnet. Shakespearean sonnets end with rhyming couplets just like the one seen here, which generally respond to the rest of the poem in some way. The bright rhyme of the couplet in "Demeter"—"too soon"/"too moon"—gives the ending a sense of soothing, satisfying feel that's far removed from the cold, lonely atmosphere at the poem's start. Demeter (and the earth) was on the brink of icy ruin, but her daughter arrived in the knick of time. The poem (and the entire collection in which it appears) closes with a sense of optimism and hope.

SYMBOLS

THE NEW MOON

It's no coincidence that a "new moon" appears just as Persephone returns to her mother (and the earth). This moon marks the start of a lunar cycle, and its appearance here symbolizes the rebirth of the world (and of Demeter

herself, in a way) in spring. That this moon is "small" and "shy" perhaps suggests the delicateness and fragility of such new life/joy. It must be carefully tended to in order to survive.

The moon is also often linked with femininity. Its appearance connects new life and growth to a mother's love, as well as to traditionally feminine traits (i.e., being nurturing, gentle, and tender).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "the blue sky smiling, none too soon, / with the small shy mouth of a new moon."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Demeter" uses alliteration to support its imagery and to capture its speaker's changing mood.

The first two stanzas are mostly full of harsh, spiky sounds. This is the winter section of the poem, during which Demeter grieves for her abducted daughter, Persephone. The bold alliteration in line 4's "**br**eak" and "**br**oken" reflects the intensity of her heartbreak, the /br/ working with the /k/ consonance ("bre**a**k," "bro**k**en," "s**k**immed," "la**k**e") to suggest sharpness and pain. The muffled /f/ sounds of "**f**lat" and "**f**rozen" likewise add intensity to the poem and perhaps subtly evoke the **f**rigid, sense-dulling cold that's fallen across the earth.

Once Persephone returns, the poem's atmosphere transforms. Suddenly, the sounds of Demeter's language seem warm and inviting rather than forbidding and wintery. The /b/ alliteration of "**b**are feet" and "**b**ringing," for example, seems bouncy and bright rather than blustery, while sibilant alliteration casts a quiet hush over the poem's final lines:

> [...] I swear
> the air softened and warmed as she moved,
> the blue sky smiling, none too soon,
> with the small shy mouth of a new moon.

Compared with the spiky sounds of the first two stanzas, these lines come across as intimate and tender. The /m/ sounds of "**m**outh" and "**m**oon" then end the poem with a gentle, soothing hum.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "break," "broken"
- **Line 6:** "flat," "frozen"
- **Line 7:** "long, long"
- **Line 8:** "last"
- **Line 10:** "bare," "bringing"
- **Line 11:** "swear"
- **Line 12:** "softened"
- **Line 13:** "sky smilin," "soon"
- **Line 14:** "small," "mouth," "moon"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration and consonance, helps to bring the poem's images and atmosphere to life. In the first stanza, for example, the phrase "c**o**ld st**o**ne r**oo**m / ch**oo**sing tough words" uses round, open vowel sounds to suggest emptiness and isolation.

Assonance also adds gentle music to the poem, in turn building its thoughtful, lyrical tone. Listen to the long /aw/ sounds in "s**aw**," "w**a**lking," and "d**au**ghter" (lines 8-9), which lends a subtle intensity to Demeter's language as she sees her child again. The assonance and internal rhymes of "br**i**nging all spr**i**ng's" and "I sw**ear** / the **air**" have a bounciness to them that subtly conveys Demeter's renewed sense of joy upon the return of her daughter.

The assonance in the poem's final couplet suggests harmony and togetherness—"t**oo** s**oo**n"/"n**ew** m**oo**n"—as though the world has been restored to its natural beauty and abundance.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "cold stone"
- **Lines 2-3:** "room / choosing"
- **Line 5:** "I tried," "it skimmed"
- **Line 6:** "over," "frozen"
- **Line 8:** "saw," "walking"
- **Line 9:** "daughter"
- **Line 10:** "bringing," "spring's"
- **Line 11:** "swear"
- **Line 12:** "air"
- **Line 13:** "sky smiling," "too soon"
- **Line 14:** "new moon"

CAESURA

The are many caesurae throughout the poem. In slowing lines down, all this caesura generally adds to the poem's thoughtful, meditative tone.

At certain moments, caesurae also reflect Demeter's heartbreak and loneliness. Line 1, for example, features a striking dash in its middle:

> Where I lived – winter and hard earth.

Right away, it's as though Demeter is struggling to choke out the words amid her grief. There's then another caesura in line 4, which essentially breaks the line in half:

to break the ice. My broken heart –

This fractured line perhaps evokes the fracturing of Demeter's heart. Note, too, how the full stop after "ice" creates a brief silence in which the lack of response from Persephone rings out painfully clear.

In line 7, everything changes: Persephone returns, Demeter's mood brightens, and natural beauty/growth returns to the earth. Check out how caesurae in lines 8-9 combine with parataxis:

but I saw her at last, walking,
my daughter, my girl, across the fields,

It's as though Demeter's words are falling over themselves, so overwhelmed is she with joy and anticipation at the sight of Persephone. All these short, abrupt clauses suggest a speaker brimming with overwhelming excitement.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lived – winter"
- **Line 3:** "tough words, granite, flint,"
- **Line 4:** "ice. My"
- **Line 5:** "that, but"
- **Line 6:** "flat, over"
- **Line 7:** "long, long"
- **Line 8:** "last, walking,"
- **Line 9:** "daughter, my girl, across"
- **Line 10:** "feet, bringing"
- **Line 11:** "house. I"
- **Line 13:** "smiling, none"

CONSONANCE

Consonance adds music and emphasis to "Demeter," enhancing the poem's imagery and atmosphere in much the same way as alliteration and assonance. The sharp /t/ sounds of "tough," "granite," and "flint" in line 3, for instance, subtly call to mind the harsh, biting cold of Demeter's wintry surroundings.

Consonance is especially strong in the poem's final two stanzas, where it evokes the lushness and soothing beauty of the world in springtime. Listen to the /s/ and /z/ sounds (i.e., sibilance) in particular:

[...] spring's flowers
to her mother's house. I swear
the air softened and warmed as she moved,
the blue sky smiling, none too soon,
with the small shy mouth of a new moon.

These sounds are hushed and gentle, suggesting the tender love Demeter feels for his daughter. And the humming /m/ and /n/ sounds of the poem's closing couplet ("none too soon," "small," "mouth of a new moon") end things on a warm, hopeful note.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "tough," "granite, flint"
- **Line 4:** "break," "broken"
- **Line 5:** "skimmed"
- **Line 6:** "flat," "frozen," "lake"
- **Line 7:** "long, long"
- **Line 8:** "last"
- **Line 9:** "fields"
- **Line 10:** "bare," "feet," "bringing," "spring's," "flowers"
- **Line 11:** "mother's," "house," "swear"
- **Line 12:** "air," "softened"
- **Line 13:** "blue," "sky smiling," "none," "soon"
- **Line 14:** "small," "mouth," "new moon"

IMAGERY

Imagery is an important part of "Demeter": the two environments that the poem conjures are direct mirrors of Demeter's inner world.

The first two stanzas feature icy, wintry imagery, reflecting the fact that Demeter is grieving the loss of her daughter. As the goddess of agriculture and the harvest, Demeter has a direct, literal effect on the earth; she refuses to let anything grow in her despair. And the sharp, cold imagery of these lines creates a bleak picture indeed: Demeter describes a barren world of "winter and hard earth" (line 1) where she sits in her "cold stone room" (line 2). Life is lonely and difficult, the imagery makes clear.

When Persephone returns, Demeter becomes happy again; her joy transforms the world. Readers can envision the barefoot Persephone walking across the thawing "fields," fresh spring flowers springing up in her wake. Where there was once "ice" and "stone," now there are "smiling" blue skies and gentle, warm breezes. The thin crescent of a new moon hangs in the air, suggesting that this is a time of transition and renewal.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 12-14

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem presents two starkly different worlds that mirror Demeter's shifting moods. The juxtaposition between these worlds speaks to the magnitude of Demeter's love for her daughter, which has the power to literally transform the earth from a frozen wasteland to a place of blue skies and blooming

flowers.

The first two stanzas paint a bleak picture of a barren world. The ground is hard and inhospitable, lakes are frozen, and Demeter's heart is broken. Demeter won't allow anything to grow because she's so angry that Persephone has been taken away from her, and the icy earth reflects her immense grief.

Once Persephone returns, however, everything changes: the fields thaw, the air grows gentle and warm, and the barren earth begins to flourish. Whereas the earth of stanzas 1 and 2 is cold, hard, and unforgiving, the earth at the end of the poem is comforting and joyful; whereas the earth of stanzas 1 and 2 is inhospitable to new life, the earth at the end of the poem is a place filled with blooming flowers and "the small shy mouth of a new moon."

Juxtaposition thus demonstrates the power of the mother-daughter bond and the strength of Demeter's love for her child.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

PARATAXIS

Parataxis evokes Demeter's almost overwhelming joy and excitement upon her daughter's return. As Persephone approaches her mother, Demeter's language feels charged with intense anticipation, her words coming out in short, abrupt clauses:

> but I saw her at last, walking,
> my daughter, my girl, across the fields,
> in bare feet, bringing all spring's flowers
> to her mother's house.

The parataxis (and multiple caesurae) here create a sort of stop-start motion, subtly evocative of Persephone's steady steps "across the fields"—each of which brings her closer to her mother. Parataxis also makes it seem as though Demeter's words are almost tripping over themselves. The poem simply *sounds* like an authentic and spontaneous reflection of Demeter's emotions, as if she's recording exactly what she feels in real-time.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** "I saw her at last, walking, / my daughter, my girl, across the fields, / in bare feet, bringing all spring's flowers / to her mother's house."

METAPHOR

"Demeter" uses a few different metaphors to illustrate Demeter's powerful love for her daughter and her grief in Persephone's absence.

She compares her "tough words" to "granite" and "flint," for example, meaning that her language has grown as hard and sharp as shards of rock. Her pain has robbed her of any softness or gentleness. That she tosses her "broken heart" across "the frozen lake" (perhaps another metaphor for the distance between herself and her child, or perhaps a literal reference to the physical separation between Demeter and the underworld) suggests that her heart has figuratively hardened, turned to stone, in her grief; she has grown cold and callous.

The lines between what's intended as literal and as metaphorical in the poem are a little blurry, given that this is set in the world of mythology. Demeter can *literally* transform the earth; she can *literally* stop things from growing and make the entire world feel like a "cold stone room." But these descriptions also speak to how the loss of Persephone makes her feel on a more figurative level. One doesn't have to be the goddess of the harvest to understand how losing a child can make the entire world seem icy and barren.

The poem's closing couplet features more metaphorical language:

> the blue sky smiling, none too soon,
> with the small shy mouth of a new moon.

The speaker personifies the sky, depicting it as a happy face; the thin crescent of the "new moon" becomes that face's "small shy mouth." (This can also be thought of as an example of the pathetic fallacy, in that Demeter is casting her own joy onto the surrounding world.)

The metaphor connotes hope and renewal, the world slowly regaining its freshness and beauty now that Demeter feels happy again. It's an undoubtedly joyful moment, but the "small shy[ness]" of the mouth might also suggest that it's not entirely without worry. After all, Persephone can't stay on the earth forever—she has to go back to the underworld. Perhaps this slight hint of tentativeness, then, represents the fact that this beautiful moment cannot last.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "I sat in my cold stone room / choosing tough words, granite, flint, / to break the ice."
- **Line 4:** "My broken heart –"
- **Lines 13-14:** "the blue sky smiling, none too soon, / with the small shy mouth of a new moon."

REPETITION

There are a few examples of repetition in "Demeter," all of which add emphasis to important moments in the poem.

The first example of repetition is more specifically polyptoton, which pops up with the repetition of "break" and "broken" in line 4:

to **break** the ice. My **broken** heart –

On one level, the emphasis on brokenness/breaking things simply gives the reader a sense of just how far Demeter has sunk into despair. This polyptoton also subtly links the external world—the ice—with Demeter's inner life. That is, it reflects the fact that the frozen *world* is in fact a reflection of Demeter's metaphorically frozen *heart*.

There's more repetition in line 7:

She came from a **long, long** way,

This is specifically an example of epizeuxis, and it calls readers' attention to just how far Persephone has had to travel in order to return to her mother (remember, she now lives in the underworld with Hades).

When Persephone does reappear, Demeter's mood lifts. She describes Persephone as "**my** daughter, **my** girl" (line 9), again turning to repetition to heighten the poem's language at an important moment. The anaphora and parallelism here create the sense of a speaker who can hardly believe what she's seeing; she's in delighted awe at the return of her child.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "break," "broken"
- **Line 7:** "long, long"
- **Line 9:** "my daughter, my girl,"

VOCABULARY

Granite (Line 3) - A type of rock.

Flint (Line 3) - A hard, gray rock historically used to make tools.

Skimmed (Lines 4-5) - Quickly skitted along the surface of something.

New Moon (Line 14) - The first lunar phase in astronomy. During this phase, the moon is either invisible or appears as a faint crescent in the night sky.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Demeter" consists of 14 lines broken up into four tercets (three-line stanzas) and a single concluding couplet. It loosely resembles an English sonnet, which also has 14 lines and ends with a rhyming couplet. Sonnets often focus on love, just as "Demeter" does (though, of course, the love in "Demeter" is maternal rather than romantic). In subtly linking the poem to such a classic form, Duffy elevates the love at the heart of "Demeter"; this is the stuff of great poetry, the poem's form suggests.

That said, this is again a very *loose* sonnet given that it uses tercets rather than the typical quatrains (four-line stanzas). The use of shorter, three-line stanzas makes the poem seem a bit more fragmented than a typical sonnet, and it might thus reflect Demeter's heartbreak.

The final couplet then provides the poem's only end rhyme, a satisfying pairing that reflects mother and daughter being reunited.

METER

"Demeter" uses free verse, meaning it has no steady meter. This keeps the poem's language feeling intimate, authentic, and honest. As most contemporary poetry is written in free verse, it also helps make an ancient myth feel more current and relatable. This meter-free language sounds much closer to everyday speech, in turn humanizing Demeter; she sounds like any grieving mother, not just a mythical goddess.

RHYME SCHEME

For the most part, "Demeter" has no rhyme scheme. This creates a conversational, intimate tone, almost as if Demeter is talking on a therapist's couch.

The poem does, however, save one rhyming couplet for the end:

the blue sky smiling, none **too soon**,
with the small shy mouth of a **new moon**.

The poem leaves readers with a clear, satisfying end-rhyme, creating a sense of soothing music that reflects Demeter's pleasure at her child's return. Now that mother and daughter are back together, the sounds of the poem fall perfectly into place.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is Demeter, the ancient Greek goddess of agriculture and the harvest (she's also often associated with fertility).

Demeter is the mother of Persephone. According to myth, Hades, god of the underworld, abducted Persephone and made her his bride. The grief-stricken Demeter refused to allow anything to grow until her child was returned to her. Eventually, she and Hades reached a deal: Persephone would spend a portion of the year in the underworld and the rest of the year on earth with her mother. The time Persephone spends with Hades corresponds with winter, while her return to Demeter corresponds with spring and summer.

The poem doesn't mention any specifics about the myth, however, choosing instead to explore the story through the lens of Demeter's love and grief. The poem is less concerned

with retelling a classic myth than it is with exploring the deep bond between mother and daughter.

SETTING

The poem begins in winter, a time when the earth is "hard" and cold and nothing can grow. The barrenness of the earth reflects Demeter's grief: this is the time of year when she's separated from her beloved daughter, Persephone.

About halfway through the poem, however, the world begins to change: the "fields" thaw and the skies grow blue and warm as Persephone makes her way back to her mother. Demeter says that she brings "all spring's flowers / to her mother's house"—that house being the earth itself. This shift in the poem's atmosphere represents Demeter's shifting emotions: she's overjoyed at being reunited with her child, and that joy is reflected in the abundance and beauty of spring.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years.

"Demeter" was published in Duffy's fifth poetry collection, *The World's Wife* (1999). In this collection, Duffy writes from the viewpoints of the wives, sisters, and female contemporaries of famous and infamous men. Some of her characters include Mrs. Pilate, Queen Kong, Mrs. Sisyphus, Frau Freud, Elvis's Twin Sister, and Pygmalion's Bride. In witty, conversational language, *The World's Wife* subverts traditional male perspectives, examining instead the ways that women's stories have been ignored, overlooked, or misrepresented.

"Demeter" is actually the final poem in this collection, ending the book on a warm and optimistic note that speaks to the nourishing, hopeful power of maternal love. Women caring for each other, the poem's position in the collection suggests, can help counter their mistreatment by a patriarchal world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Duffy was born in Scotland in 1955 and came of age during second-wave feminism. While early feminism had been focused primarily on securing women's right to vote, second-wave feminism addressed a wider range of issues including reproductive rights, domestic violence, workplace equality, and more. Second-wave feminism was responding to many of the restrictive gender norms of the mid-20th century, including the idea that women's purpose in life was to become demure mothers and wives.

The poem itself takes place in the timeless world of ancient Greek mythology. Demeter's story dates back thousands of years, with many different versions appearing throughout history. The basic gist of the story remains the same, however: Demeter is one of the principal gods in the Greek pantheon, sister to both Zeus and Hades. She's also the goddess of agriculture and the harvest, making her a very important deity to human beings.

Demeter has a daughter with Zeus named Persephone (sibling gods often had children together in Greek myth!). Hades kidnaps Persephone and brings her to the underworld to be his bride. Distraught at the loss of her child, Demeter refuses to let anything grow. With humanity on the brink of famine and death, Zeus helps broker a compromise: Persephone will spend some of the year with Hades in the underworld and some of the year with her mother on earth. This leads to the cycle of the seasons: Persephone's absence coincides with winter and her return with spring.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Carol Ann Duffy — Learn more about Duffy's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Demeter's Mythology — An article tracing the different versions of the Demeter/Persephone myth. (https://endicottstudio.typepad.com/articleslist/death-and-return-in-the-myth-of-demeter-and-persephone-by-kathi-carlson.html)
- Duffy on the Power of Poetry — Read an article about Duffy's recent Pandemic Poetry project, in which she discusses how poetry can help people through troubling times. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/20/carol-ann-duffy-leads-british-poets-coronavirus-imtiaz-dharker-jackie-kay)
- The Poem Out Loud — "Demeter" read by the poet herself. (https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/23656/auto/0/0/Carol-Ann-Duffy/DEMETER/en/tile)
- Persephone on Broadway — Persephone appears as a major character in the Tony-winning Broadway musical "Hadestown." Watch a rendition of her number "Our Lady of the Underground," a song showing a very different side of the goddess. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AZtyMnVpL0&ab_channel=Hadestown)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep

- Anne Hathaway
- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Education For Leisure
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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