

THE MYTH OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE IN A JEST OF GOD

by
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In her novel *A Jest of God*, about Rachel Cameron, a spinster schoolteacher living in the mythical town of Manawaka on the Canadian prairies, Margaret Laurence reflects the myth of Demeter and Persephone in her portrayal of her protagonist and her relation to her environment.

In Greek myth Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and the earth-goddess Demeter. Persephone's abduction by Hades, god of the dead, her mother's search for her throughout the world, and the subsequent pact between Zeus and Hades permitting Persephone to spend a third (or a half) of each year in the underworld and the rest on earth with Demeter, is usually interpreted as a mythological expression of the annual vegetation cycle. Persephone thus has a two-fold character, as goddess of the dead and as one of the principal goddesses of the fertility of the earth; in the latter capacity she is the double of her mother, the two embodying the ripe and the young corn.¹

In the first chapter of *A Jest of God* Calla gives Rachel a potted hyacinth, "bulbously in bud and just about to give birth to the blue-purple blossom. 'Here you are. For your desk. So you'll be convinced spring is upon us.'" Persephone, personification of spring, was picking flowers including the hyacinth just before her abduction by Hades.

Rachel is living with her semi-invalid mother in a suite of rooms over the funeral chapel once owned by her now-deceased father. At the end of the first chapter Rachel's stream-of-consciousness indicates that this situation is a paradigm of the relationship of the upper to the lower world, and that her dead father functions mythically as king of the dead: "— Stairs rising from nowhere, and the wallpaper the loose-petalled unknown flowers. The stairs descending to the place where I am not

¹H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London, 1928), p. 91; Thomas Keightley, *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy*, 2nd edn. (London, 1838), pp. 171-176.

allowed. . . . The silent people are there, lipsticked and rouged, powdered whitely like clowns. How funny they look, each lying dressed in best, and their open eyes are glass eyes, cat's eye marbles, round glass beads, blue and milky, unwinking. He is behind the door I cannot open. And his voice — his voice — so I know he is lying there among them, lying in state, king over them" Here the "loose-petalled unknown flowers" on the wallpaper relate to the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades while she was gathering flowers. That Rachel's relationship to her dead father is symbolically that of a lover, the "shadow prince" of her erotic ruminations, is also indicated by the turquoise bracelet he gave her as a child.

Corresponding to Rachel's inner world of shadow and nightmare, the dense growth of spruce trees surrounding her house, with the Japonica funeral chapel downstairs, resembles the dark groves sacred to Persephone, the death-goddess, in ancient times.² Thus the death-like atmosphere of Rachel's life previous to her affair with Nick finds its appropriate analogue in the myth of Persephone's abduction to the realm of Hades. Rachel comes to feel that her father — who preferred the company of the dead to that of the living — has both chosen and rejected her as his bride in the kingdom of death.

Early in the novel Rachel finds symbols of sexual energy welling up from her subconsciousness — the "blue-painted dogmen" which she muses about in her classroom, and the orgiastic scene which runs through her mind before falling asleep. The Egyptian orgy with its melons and grapes contrasts with the bleak prairie environment and with Rachel's own inner desert, culminating in her expression of the death-wish. As a Persephone figure, she is a personification of both the death-oriented forces in society and the revival of nature in spring. Rachel longs to participate fully in the revival of nature, and she wishes no longer to be queen of the dead. Hence she disassociates herself from her mother's delight in watching funerals.

When her affair with Nick is beginning to develop, Rachel recalls how one spring she once picked some crocuses in a field "just beyond the cemetery." While she was doing this, she saw a boy and girl making love. Here Rachel's act of picking the crocuses relates to Persephone's picking of the spring flowers, including crocuses, and the cemetery in the distance reminds us of her symbolic link with the underworld. The boy and girl making love in the field relate to the fertility rites associated with the cult of Demeter, who lay with the Titan Iasion in a thrice-ploughed field.³ And Rachel's mother May (whose name seems appropriate for a fertility goddess) functions as a Demeter figure in this novel.

²See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (New York, 1957), I, 51.7; II, 124.b.

³Graves, I, 24.a.

In view of May Cameron's heart condition and tyrannically demanding attitude to Rachel, it might seem odd to refer to her as a fertility figure; but her ill health finds its analogue in the myth of Demeter, who pined away during her daughter's sojourn in the underworld and lost her gaiety forever. The phase of the myth which that part of the novel dealing with Rachel's affair with Nick represents is the period when Persephone was permitted to rejoin Demeter; and May Cameron, for all her precarious health, is clearly portrayed as a fertility figure in such passages as the following: "Japonica Street is filled with morning light, and Mother in her new flowered-silk coat walks along like a butterfly released from winter. Really, she is amazing for her age."

The close bond between mother and daughter in this novel is also explicable in terms of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. As Rachel remarks of her mother, "She cares about me. I matter to her." Again: "I do care about her. Surely I love her as much as most parents love their children. I mean, of course, as much as most children love their parents." Although she seems to be bound to her mother primarily by ties of filial obligation, Rachel's depth of concern for her mother is a force to be reckoned with, modulating as it does into the discovery after her operation that "I am the mother now." And the novel significantly ends with Rachel accompanying her mother to the West Coast.

Rachel's affair with Nick also qualifies her as a fertility figure in a way which reinforces her mythic role as Persephone. Symbolically she unites life and death, as when she and Nick make love by the river where he and his twin brother — now dead — used to play, a spot which Nick says is "private as the grave." And later they make love at a place from which they can see the cemetery where Nick's twin brother is buried. Rachel's abhorrence of contraception, which is stressed several times in the novel, adds to her portrayal as a fertility figure, as does her decision at the end of chapter nine to have a child of her own.

The ambivalence of Rachel's symbolic role as Persephone is resolved in chapter seven when, returning home from one of her trysts with Nick, and unable to sleep, she sees a light on in the funeral chapel below and accepts the omen. She goes down stairs that were carpeted the year her father died and are decorated with a floral motif (roses, which were among the flowers picked by Persephone prior to her abduction by Hades) in a symbolic descent to the underworld. She recalls her father's Accounts book — "Accounts, like the roll of Judgement" — which reminds one of Hades judging the dead, and she recalls too that her father discouraged her from coming there. Hence this descent is a major symbolic action in which Rachel comes to terms with past and present, the living and the dead. She is like an initiate participating in the Eleusinian mysteries associated with the cults of Demeter and Persephone, and Hector Jonas is her heirophant. He offers her rye whisky, reminding one of communion rites associated

with the Eleusinian mysteries, where a barley drink was used.⁴ When Hector takes Rachel into the chapel and plays for her a hymn on the automatic organ, the comic perspective becomes evident in her bawdy interior jest about the instrument (jesting and raillery formed part of the Eleusinian mysteries⁵), and it is evident that the ghosts of the past have been laid. Paralleling her affair with Nick, Rachel's symbolic descent to the underworld is thus a crucial step towards her maturation.

In chapter nine Rachel, confronting the dilemma of her supposed pregnancy, dallies with thoughts of suicide and takes one of her mother's blue and crimson sleeping capsules, washing it down with whisky, then throws the remaining thirteen out the window, where they land on Hector Jonas' lawn beneath. This somewhat ritualistic action may be compared to Persephone's eating of the pomegranate seed, the food of the dead. Rachel is once more accepting one aspect of her role as Persephone and rejecting the other.

Rachel's discovery after her operation that "I am the mother now" represents by means of ironic reversal the fulfilment of the quest of Demeter for her lost daughter, just as the tumor represents the ironic fulfilment of her role as Persephone, who was also childless after her descent to the underworld. The novel begins in spring and ends at the close of summer, when the grain is beginning to ripen in the fields: "the grain beginning to turn the pale colour of ripeness with autumn coming on." The prairie environment thus participates in the fertility which Rachel and May Cameron now, as they prepare for their westward journey, fully embody.

In "Ten Years' Sentences," published in the Tenth Anniversary Issue of *Canadian Literature*, Margaret Laurence remarked of Rachel: "Her emergence from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood is a partial defeat — or, looked at in another way, a partial victory. She is no longer so much afraid of herself as she was. She is beginning to learn the rules of survival." We may conclude that in *A Jest of God* Laurence's mythic imagination at once undergirds and outstrips the typically Canadian caution of this retrospective analysis.

⁴S. v. "Mystery," *Encycl. Brit.*, 11th edn.

⁵Rose, p. 92.