

## **THE SYMBOLS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GREEK MYTHOLOGICAL GODDESSES IN RITA DOVE'S "DEMETER WAITING" AND "PERSEPHONE, FALLING"**

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### *Abstract*

*This article discusses the characteristics of the Goddesses of Greek Mythology through the symbols in Rita Dove's "Demeter Waiting" and "Persephone, Falling". The aim of this article is to analyze the symbols dealing with the characteristics of the Goddesses of Greek Mythology in Rita Dove's "Demeter Waiting" and "Persephone, Falling."*

*The technique that is used to collect the data is library research. The data consists of the ideas related to the characteristics of the Goddesses of Greek Mythology that are symbolized through Rita Dove's poems. The theory of meaning, symbol, and character were applied in this research. Moreover, the approaches that were used are structural approach, sociological approach, moral approach, and philosophical approach.*

*The result of this article is on Demeter's characteristics which are described as they are being passionate in teaching her daughter, being maternal, and being protective by sacrificing herself for Persephone. Next, it also tells about Persephone's characteristics, that is, unadorned, stubborn, and unstable emotionally. Furthermore, by analyzing the characteristics and the symbols of those goddesses, the researcher knows that their characteristics represent mother and daughter relationship in which they always protect each other.*

**Key Words:** *Greek Mythology, symbol, character*

### **A. Introduction**

Literature is important for human being life, because it is closely related to life. According to Rees (1973: 2) in *An Introduction for Foreign Readers*, "Literature is a writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feeling and attitudes toward life". People can convey their idea and build a motivation of life for other people surround them by using literary works. They may imagine something which is beautiful and express it through a poem. The researcher has to use imagination to understand the meaning of the certain poems because poem is the imaginative and creative writing that expresses someone's thought, feeling and emotion. Here, this research focuses on analysing the characteristics of the Goddess of Greek Mythology through the symbols in Rita Dove's "Demeter Waiting" and "Persephone, Falling". The setting of the poems is the part of the story when Persephone falls. It is an ambiguous meaning. First, it means that Persephone falls into Underworld and the second she falls from her mother's protection. Meanwhile, Demeter tries to save her daughter by making a deal with Hades. She always waits for her daughter in the spring, because Persephone has to stay in Underworld for a half of the year.

Additionally, the researcher is interested in Rita Dove because she is the first African American poet laureate of the United States. She published her poems "Demeter Waiting" and

“Persephone, Falling” in 1995 as a part of her collection *Mother Love*. It is about the relationship between mother and daughter. To build such an characteristic, Dove uses the story of the Greek goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, a famous mother-daughter pair. Persephone is a headstrong young goddess. She is abducted by Hades, the king of the underworld, because of her recklessness and she does not listen to her mother's advice. While Demeter is Persephone's mother who loves her daughter. She has maternal characteristic. On the other hand, the readers can take the positive message that is shown through the characters of those goddesses especially between mother-daughter.

The researcher applies some theories that are related to this research, they are the theory of meaning, symbol, and character. According to Lyons (1981:136), meaning is ideas or concepts, which can be transferred from the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader by embodying it in the forms of one literary work or another. Hence, meaning is used to convey the poet's idea to the reader in writing a poem. Moreover, in analyzing the implicit meaning that consists in a poem, the theory of connotation is used. Cuddon (1991:189) affirms that connotative is the suggestion or implication evoked by a word or phrase, or even quite a long statement of any kind, over and about what they mean or actually denote”. Connotative meaning is created when one mean something else, something that might be hidden. In a poem, symbol is represented by some words that have full of meaning. According to Perrine (1974:628), a symbol may be defined as something that means more than what it is. It means that symbol represents something beyond or it stands for something else. The theory of character is also used in order to make such a literary work alive. Based on Kennedy's statement (1979: 432), a character then, is presumably an imaged person who inhabits a story.

This research analyzes the characteristics of the goddesses in Greek Mythology. It tells about the adventures of the gods and goddesses and how obvious the other creatures may seem. Furthermore, the researcher finds some characteristics of Demeter and Persephone through the symbol in Rita Dove's “Demeter Waiting” and “Persephone, Falling.” The characteristics of Demeter are being passionate in teaching, being maternal, and being protective by sacrificing herself for Persephone. While the characteristics of Persephone are being unadorned, being stubborn, and being unstable emotionally.

The appropriate approaches that are applied in this research are structural approach, sociological approach, moral approach and philosophical approach. Meanwhile, the research is categorized as qualitative. According to Punch (2006: 155), qualitative research is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers. It means that the qualitative research uses non-numerical data which is used to represent the way of thinking based on the observation. Besides, some books that related with the data, articles, and some references from the internet are also used to support the analysis.

## **B. Discussion**

The data that are analyzed are the symbols of the characteristics of the goddesses in Rita Dove's “Demeter Waiting” and “Persephone, Falling.

### **1. The symbol of Demeter's characteristics**

#### **a. Being passionate in teaching**

Teaching means giving the education and knowledge for the children in order to

prepare them when they are ready to live their life. According to Bernhardt (1964: 84), “we have the responsibility of seeing that our children learn how to play, to entertain themselves, to find a variety of interesting satisfying activities that will persist throughout life and help to keep them happy and healthy.” A mother can show her love by teaching an education. Mother must also be aware of the children’s activities and behavior patterns. She must bring her children in the right way if her children’s behavior becomes inconsistent.

### 1) The Symbol of Being Preventive by Giving the Right Way

A mother can show her maternity through some symbols. Symbol is not only expressed by actions but also advice. Consider the following:

*Remember: go straight to school.*

*This is important, stop fooling around!*

(“Persephone, Falling”, line 9-10)

The word *remember* is used to strengthen the sentence uttered by Demeter to Persephone. It has the meaning that a daughter should not forget what a mother has said before. The line *go straight to school* symbolizes Demeter’s characteristic in giving Persephone the right way to face the world. *Go straight to school* means to stay in the right side. In line 10, *This is important, stop fooling around!* is the symbol that Demeter wants to alert her daughter to behave well when she goes out with her friends. She knows that a little influence can cause huge risks for her daughter if she plunges into it.

### 2) The Symbol of Being Cautious

Being cautious can be meant as giving warning. It is a kind of symbol that is used by a mother to give her daughter an advice. Sometimes, it looks unpleasant but it has a good reason. Hence, warning can be in the form of command, prohibition, and suggestion. In this case, Demeter gives a command to Persephone in order to prevent from the bad things happen. It is as follows:

*Don’t answer to strangers. Stick*

*with your playmates. Keep your eyes down*

(“Persephone, Falling”, line 11-12)

The lines above are the Demeter’s warning toward Persephone. Demeter gives some commands to her daughter about keeping herself from danger. She is a typical mother who is always worried if Persephone gets injured mentally and physically. The command *Don’t answer to strangers* is said by mothers in the world commonly. If someone meets the strangers, it is better not to give any responses because it can cause risks. Therefore, Demeter applies it to teach Persephone about the cruel of the world. The other symbols of being cautious is shown in the line *Stick with your playmates*. It means that Persephone should stay with her friends who often play with her, in order to prevent from the danger. The line *Keep your eyes down* means that Persephone must be careful when she faces something in the future.

## **b. Being maternal**

The symbol of maternal also can be expressed by caring and treating the child. Being maternal symbolizes Demeter's characteristics mostly when she loses her daughter. She does what she can do in order to save her daughter's life. It can be seen through how Demeter cares for Persephone.

### **1) The Symbol of Caring**

Caring is one of the symbol that describes Demeter's characteristics. She cares about her daughter's life even it causes some problems for the world. Demeter does not use her power to make the plants grow well. She spends her time to find Persephone. It is a kind of caring that she wants to show to her daughter. It is as follows:

*.. I will wail and thrash*

*until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes over. Then I will sit down to wait for her.*

*Yes. ("Demeter, waiting", line 12- 14)*

The line 12 and 13 tell about Demeter's caring to Persephone. It means that Demeter will not give up to make her daughter back to the world. The word *wail* means to cry so long because of pain or sadness. It symbolizes Demeter's caring for Persephone that nothing can stop her in her quest for giving back Persephone to her side even when something bad happens. It is shown in the line *until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes over*. In the line 14, Demeter proves her love by waiting for Persephone patiently. She says *Yes* in order to make the others believe that she does not make a joke and she keeps on her decision to wait for her daughter's return without considering the human in the earth who gets starving because of her.

## **c. The Symbol of Being Protective by Sacrificing herself for Persephone**

As a mother, Demeter always puts her daughter in the first place. She is demanded to pay more attention to the well being of her daughter. Demeter teaches Persephone to experience a great sadness by sacrificing herself in waiting Persephone's return. Her daughter cannot have the experience of great pain if a greater joy has not come before it. Hence, the parents should be a good example for the children all the times. Consider the following:

*She is gone again and I will not bear*

*it. I will drag my grief through a winter of my own making, refuse*

*any meadow that recycles itself into hope. Shit on the cicadas, dry meteor flash, finicky butterflies.*

*("Demeter Waiting", line 7-12)*

In "Demeter Waiting" describes more about Demeter's condition when she waits for her daughter's return. In the line 7, tells that Demeter does not let anyone hurt Persephone. When she knows that Persephone has been kidnapped by Hades, she becomes more sensitive because her daughter cannot live with herself thoroughly. The next line, *I will drag my grief through a winter of my own making* symbolizes Demeter's characteristic of being protective that she insists to have happy ending with Persephone. Therefore, Demeter sacrifices herself to restrain her great sadness in the spring, while in the barren winter she begins to grieve and brings

on the cold. At the same time, she does not fertilize the crops in the world even it is her responsibility as the goddess of the earth, agriculture, and grain. Although she feels dying, she still has a hope to make Persephone as hers. The lines 9-12 symbolize Demeter's pain and grief which have great love and beauty behind it. That is the great secret that a mother must keep waiting patiently for her daughter to find it out on her own.

## 2. The Symbols of Persephone's Characteristics

### a. The Symbol of Being Unadorned

Being unadorned is one of Persephone's characteristics which expresses in Rita Dove's poem entitled "Persephone, Falling". It describes Persephone as an unadorned daughter who has no education about the unkind and cruel things in life. Persephone is symbolized through a beautiful flower called narcissus, because it is a unique flower just like Persephone. She can catch the other gods' attention. Consider the following:

*One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful flowers, one unlike all the others!* ("Persephone, Falling", line 1-2)

*One narcissus* symbolizes Persephone's vanity to get what she wants. She acts like an innocent girl who does not know the consequence of her behaviour. It is based on Greek Mythology, when Persephone is attracted to pluck the beautiful flower, *narcissus* from the ground, she does not know that Hades has been intended to kidnap her. Hades falls in love with Persephone for the first sight because Persephone is very beautiful and charming. He has been attracted by her enchantment. Unfortunately, Hades is not allowed to marry Persephone by her parents. Therefore, he takes Persephone away forcefully. In this case, *narcissus* is the symbol of Persephone's characteristics that represent the youth, innocence, and beauty. The line 1 and 2 describe that Persephone is the most beautiful and unique goddess who can attract the other gods to possess her.

The effect of being unadorned is being reckless. Actually, being reckless is caused by the things that occur around the environment. The symbol of being reckless can be shown through some actions such as disobeying a mother's advice. It happens to Persephone when she is attracted to get a *narcissus*, the beautiful and poisonous flower. Her mother has warned her not to stay away from her attention but she does not obey her mother's advice. She approaches the flower, then the big hole opens and Hades comes out from the ground. It is as follows:

*flowers, one unlike all the others! She pulled, stooped to pull harder—*  
("Persephone, Falling", line 2-3)

Persephone becomes reckless because she cannot totally control herself by nature. She cannot restrain to pluck one of the *narcissus* when she plays with her friends in the meadow. Her recklessness is symbolized through the line *She pulled, stooped to pull harder—* which is meant that Persephone falls into a Hades's trap. She plunges into the Underworld because of her ignorance that the world is very dangerous. Her recklessness causes her self to face a new fate in her life.

### b. The Symbol of Being Stubborn

A trouble and unhappiness come from a stubbornness. It happens toward Persephone. She gets trouble and unhappiness when she becomes stubborn. She does not realize the danger she is in. Consider the following:

*when, sprung out of the earth on his glittering terrible carriage, he claimed his due  
It is finished. No one heard her.  
No one! She had strayed from the herd.*  
(“Persephone, Falling”, line 4-8)

The lines above tell that Persephone stays away from her mother’s attention to pluck a *narcissus*. It means that she is a stubborn daughter who does not listen her mother’s advice. It is symbolized in “Persephone, Falling” lines 7 and 8. The line *It is finished. No one heard her. No one!* means that no one knows where Persephone is because she goes out far from her mother and friends. It also symbolizes a modern daughter who is provoked by something which is incompatible with her mother. Hence, when Hades takes her, nobody hears her crying. If Persephone does not determine to do what she wants, she will not face the terrible action from Hades. Then, the line *She had strayed from the herd* describes that Persephone is no longer to live with her mother completely. Because of her stubbornness, she has to move outside her comfort zone and lives in the Underworld as a wife and also a queen of Underworld.

### c. The Symbol of Being Unstable Emotionally

Persephone is known as the loss of innocent daughter. She has been kidnapped by the god of Underworld, Hades because of her innocence and beauty. Therefore, she becomes unstable emotionally in deciding something. She is very easy to be influenced by Hades. Although, her mother always warns her to be careful when she meets the strangers, she still cannot control her self. It can be seen in the following:

*This is how easily the pit  
opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground.*  
(“Persephone, Falling”, line 13-14)

The line 13 and 14 are Demeter’s advice to Persephone. It can be symbolized as Persephone’s emotion which is still unstable. The line *This is how easily the pit opens* is used to warn Persephone that she should be careful about the temptation that can influence her easily. The word *pit* means a large hole in the ground, but in this case it symbolizes the bad situation that can attract Persephone if she cannot control her emotion. Her mother always reminds her to be careful in deciding her choice by walking in the right track. It also reminds the readers that falling into this pit may be easier than what people think. The lines *This is how easily the pit opens* also represents the condition about bad effects that can influence an adolescent to do negative things easily. It happens toward Persephone when she is trapped by Hades. In the Underworld, Persephone not only has a role as a wife of Hades but also a queen of Underworld. It is based on the line *This is how one foot sinks into the ground*, means that Persephone has an unstable characteristic. The word *one foot* symbolizes Persephone’s unstable mental while the word *ground* represents Hades’s trap. Therefore, Persephone has been trapped by Hades to eat

some pomegranates. It can cause Persephone to live in Underworld for several months and she will live with her mother for the rest of the months. Persephone is very sad because she cannot live with her mother completely. In other part, she can enjoy her role as a queen even it is in the Underworld. It means that Persephone has been sunk in Hades's trap.

### C. Conclusion

This research focuses on the symbols of Greek Mythological goddesses in Rita Dove's "Demeter Waiting" and "Persephone, Falling." Hence, the data are analyzed by using the theory of meaning, symbol, and character. Furthermore, the symbols of Demeter's characteristics in Rita Dove's poems are found. The first is being passionate in teaching that is symbolized when Demeter attempts to teach Persephone to stay with her because the world is full of strangers. The second is being maternal. It is symbolized by her care to wait her daughter faithfully. The third is being protective by sacrificing herself for Persephone which is symbolized by disobeying the earth because everything dealing with Demeter's power can affect the earth and she is willing to do it for her daughter. Moreover, the researcher also finds out the symbols of Persephone's characteristics. The first is being unadorned which is symbolized by a *narcissus*, a beautiful flower. Then, Persephone becomes reckless which is symbolized when she is attracted by a *narcissus* and she tries to pull it. The second is being stubborn. It is symbolized when she wanders away from her mother's attention to pick a *narcissus*. She does not know the consequence that she will get. The third is being unstable emotionally. It symbolizes Persephone who is sad because she is separated from her mother, but in other part she enjoys her role as a queen of Underworld. Finally, after writing this research, it can be learnt that it is not easy to have a responsibility as a perfect mother and daughter. The relationship between mother and daughter should be supported by the condition surround them, because there are some temptations that can influence bad effects for them easily. The most important point is how a mother and daughter can develop a good relationship to each other in order to live their lives better.

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