

PUTTING THE STORY BACK INTO HISTORY

— Alf Wilkinson

The story of Persephone

Persephone was the most beautiful girl in the world. Everyone, but everyone who set eyes on her immediately fell in love with her. Her mother, Demeter, was the Goddess of farming, of food, of things that grow. Every morning, Demeter would put on her bright clothes and, after breakfast, set off out into the world. She would walk through the fields, wave her arms, and the grass would grow, the crops would grow. She would walk through the woods and orchards, wave her arms and the buds would appear on the trees, fruit would appear and be ready for harvest. She would pass through fields of animals, wave her arms and the animals would be ready for slaughter. Meanwhile Persephone would be playing in her garden with her friends, until her mother came home.

One day, when she was in the garden picking flowers, a big dark chariot, led by four black horses, flew across the sky. This was Pluto, God of the underworld. He saw Persephone and immediately fell in love with her. But he knew that her mother, Demeter, would never allow her to marry him, because to do so would mean Persephone would have to go and live in the Underworld, and her mother would never see her again! So he decided to kidnap her, and force her to live with him in the Underworld. He waited his chance. One day he saw Persephone had wandered a long way away from her friends so, quick as a flash, he flew by, grabbed her and made off for the Underworld.

That night, when Demeter came home, she could not find her daughter. She was devastated, and looked everywhere for her, but could not find her. Next morning she put on dark tattered rags and instead of going across the fields making the crops grow, and through the woods and orchards making the fruit grow, and among the animals making them grow, she set off around the world looking for her daughter. Day after day she searched for her daughter, but could not find her. Meanwhile, the crops weren't growing, the grass wasn't growing, trees weren't growing, animals were dying, and finally there was no food so people were dying. Nothing could persuade Demeter to stop looking

Children love stories. They like the drama, the excitement, the chance to listen and to wonder. Narrative is a very important part of history and sometimes, by concentrating on facts or on skills, we tend to lose the view of the big picture, especially in the Key Stage 2 curriculum when we often jump from Egyptians to Victorians or Tudors to Vikings.

People in history can sometimes come across as two-dimensional, even a little boring, but story gives us the opportunity to flesh out people, figures and events, and to add some of the colour sights and smells that children love but often miss out on. It allows us to add some passion and excitement, and to involve our pupils in the events they are studying. Telling stories is a much more active skill than reading them from a book – it allows the grand gesture, the varying of voice level and pitch, the chance to enthral and involve the children in the process in a much more active way.

But how do you do it effectively? Like everything else, you practise until you are confident. You select an appropriate story for a lesson/topic you are studying. You choose the bits you wish to emphasise. You choose the events that will grab your pupils. You choose incidents that can make the people in it seem more human, more real. You choose a story that will add to your pupils' knowledge and understanding of the topic. Involve your pupils – ask them questions, such as what might happen next, what if... But don't stray too far from your story and theme.

You need to first put your story carefully into context. This example, from the Ancient Greeks, was used in a sequence of lessons about the Greek Gods. It shows that the Greeks thought that their Gods had supernatural powers, but also that they were quite human too, with feelings just like us, and with petty jealousies and irrational actions. It tells us of a power struggle between Zeus and Pluto, of the Gods' concern for the world, of the power that makes the crops grow and controls people's lives. It gives us a big picture of how the Greeks viewed their world.

It also tells us how the Greeks explained their world. We know that the seasons are caused by the orbit of the sun, by the sun moving between the tropics. But the Greeks had to find a way to explain the 'summer'

for her beloved daughter and start looking after the crops and animals.

Finally, Zeus, King of the Gods, was really worried. Pluto was in danger of destroying the world he had made, by killing off the population. He called a meeting of all the gods, to try to decide what to do. No-one could decide until finally, one of them suggested sending Hermes, the messenger of the gods, to see Pluto and ask him to release Persephone so Demeter would start doing her job again. Of course no-one could force Pluto to hand her over, but the gods thought it would be very difficult for Pluto to ignore a request from Zeus. So they sent for Hermes and asked him to go and visit Pluto, and ask him if he would let Persephone go.

Hermes, as the messenger of the gods, was able to move between the world and the underworld, so he went to see Pluto. Pluto knew he would never be able to marry Persephone, and because Zeus had asked him so nicely, decided to let Persephone rejoin her mother and sent for her. But first he asked her if she had eaten anything while she had been in the underworld. 'You know the rules,' he said, 'If you have eaten anything in the Underworld you cannot return to the world.'

'I haven't eaten a thing,' she said. But a gardener overheard this and called Persephone a liar. 'I saw you eat a pomegranate' he said. 'You reached up and picked one from the tree and ate it!' 'I didn't eat it,' she cried, 'I was so thirsty here in the underworld I did pick a pomegranate, but I didn't eat it. I put it to my lips and squeezed some of the juice down my throat, but I didn't eat it. So you must let me go.' Pluto reluctantly accepted that he would have to let Persephone go, because Zeus insisted, but ordered that as she had swallowed the juice from the pomegranate, she could only go home for six months of the year. For the other six months she must return to the underworld and live with him. Knowing he had to accept these terms, Hermes grabbed Persephone and took her home to Demeter.

Demeter was absolutely delighted to see her daughter again and, next morning, put on her bright clothes and went off across the fields, making the grass grow, through the woods making the trees and the fruit grow, amongst the animals making them grow too. People soon had plenty to eat, and the world was saved. But after six months Persephone had to return to Pluto. Demeter put on her dark ragged clothes and searched the earth looking for her daughter....Nothing would grow, until Persephone returned from the Underworld.



Persephone is depicted sitting upon a throne as Queen of the Underworld.

growing season and the 'winter' season. The story of Persephone, as well as being a cracking good yarn, explains the seasons. The six months in the Underworld equates to winter, and the six months in the world equates to the growing season. The Greeks themselves used the power of story to explain things they couldn't explain any other way.

Where you tell your stories is as important as how. Settle the children on the carpet, away from their tables, where there are no pens, pencils or anything else to fidget with. Encourage the children to sit comfortably and in a position to listen. Make sure you can see all the children and maintain eye contact with them by moving around. Vary your voice, use it as part of the story, to emphasise key points or to whisper to keep them wanting to know more. Bring out the actor hidden deep inside every teacher!

My advice is to take the bull by the horns and to go ahead and try telling stories. Children love them, and will appreciate you trying. They are quite forgiving if you fluff your lines, or forget an important point. Each time you tell the story it will be different, with emphases in different places. But that way the story will remain fresh and will be yours, not straight from the book. And the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. It gives you a great chance to add to your pupils' understanding of history in a way that is hard to achieve any other way.

Alf Wilkinson is Professional Development Manager of the Historical Association, and a history author and CPD provider.