

Ceres and
persephone in 'the
pomegranate' and
'the bistro styx'



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As time passes, plants grow, people age and eventually the ones who hold most dear will leave your side. In the myth of Ceres and Persephone, the God of Harvest loses her matured daughter to the King of the Underworld. The tale continues on to display the search for the prolonged search for her dear daughter and the emotional turmoil that ensues from this abrupt situation. "The Pomegranate" and "The Bistro Styx" illustrate the complex mother-daughter relationship between a modern day Ceres and Persephone; while both poems depict the struggle of a mother accepting a daughter's coming of age, Boland shows a mother's eventual acceptance of this while Dove conveys a mother's denial and fight against it.

Both works efficiently showcase the similar internal battle the mother, the narrator, and Ceres silently face when realizing her daughter is ready to leave and move on in her life. Both narrators seem to be in denial. In "The Pomegranate", the speaker "walked out in a summer twilight searching for [her] daughter at bed-time. [She] carried her back past whitebeams and wasps and honey-scented buddleias" (Boland 13-18) creating a sense of tranquility, almost as if her daughter was never taken away by Hades. It is later revealed that she is fully aware of her daughter's departure as she rebukes the fruit that will eventually take her daughter away and emphasizes the fact that her daughter "could have come home and been safe and ended the story and all our heart-broken searching but she reached out a hand and plucked a pomegranate" (Boland 30-33). The mother is hopeful in a sense that she believes she could still "warn her [daughter]. There [was] still a chance" (Boland 42). Yet, will ultimately lose her daughter in the end. "The Bistro Styx" also shows a mother in denial. The narrator continuously

asks multiple questions and criticizes her daughter in order to make herself believe that her own daughter is not ready to be an adult yet. Their conversation is cold and short, almost distant. Like "The Pomegranate," despite her mental battle to keep her daughter, she too, will eventually lose her.

Boland depicts Ceres as a gentle, accepting mother, patiently waiting and preparing for her daughter to leave her in "The Pomegranate." The mother relates to the myth of Ceres and Persephone in various instances and states that "the best thing about the legend is [that she] can enter it anywhere" (Boland 6-7) and has. She too was "a child in exile in a city of fogs and strange consonants" (Boland 8-9) and knows what it will be like for her daughter. She, herself, has been a young girl reaching the prime of her life as well, although this time is different. The speaker will now experience a mother's pain when her child walks down a separate path rather than the child's joy of entering into the world as an adult. Instead of fighting against it, she accepts it. The mother is aware that her daughter's time will come and prepares for it patiently as she "stand[s] where [she] can see [her] child asleep beside her teen magazines, her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit" (Boland 26-28). The mother knows that "the legend [of Ceres and Persephone] will be her [daughter's] as well as her [own]. [Her daughter] will enter it. As [did she]" (Boland 50-51) and accepts it peacefully knowing that one day her daughter "will hold the papery flushed skin in her hand. And to her lips. [But she] will say nothing" (Boland 52-54).

In "The Bistro Styx," Dove shows Ceres as a seemingly harsh, judgmental mother who is feverishly attempting to reunite with her distant daughter.
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The poem begins to show a mother waiting for her daughter to dine with her in a French Bistro. Unlike "The Pomegranate," the daughter has already left her mother, rather than almost reaching adulthood, and has started her own life in Paris. The mother is cold and unkind. She continuously slams her daughter's new lifestyle in her own mind, never voicing her true intentions. The narrator may have kissed her daughter and continued onto small talk, asking questions such as "How's business" (Dove 15) and commenting about how she would "like to come by the [daughter's] studio" (Dove 41-42) but the mother is battling a war on the inside. She "hazarded a motherly smile" (Dove 15-16) only to act as if everything was normal and fine although the tension is evident between the two. In her mind she cried out rude comments such as asking her daughter if she "was content to conduct [her own] life as a cliché and an anachronism, the brooding artist's demimonde" (Dove 17-19)? Also, depicting scenes in which the narrator imagines and feels that her daughter is eating her alive due to the heavy emotional strain she is going through because of her daughter's decision to leave. Comparing her own heart to a "chateaubriand, smug and absolute in its fragrant crust, one touch with [her daughter's] fork sent pink juices streaming" (Dove 29-33). Throughout this meeting, her own daughter is attempting to prove to her mother that she is doing fine on her own and she no longer needs her. Dressing in "all gray, from a kittenish cashmere skirt and cowl down to the graphite signature of her shoes" (Dove 7-9) to create a look of maturity. The daughter continuously talks about her "gallery cum souvenir shop" (Dove 21) and how the "tourists love [them]. The Parisians are amused, though not without a certain admiration" (Dove 26-28) to assure her mother that her new life is thriving. Even apologizing that she was

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late, although she wasn't, to make herself look like a busy woman. Unlike the daughter in Boland's poem, she is aware that she is of age to leave her mother and made a conscious decision to do so. In the end of the battle of words, her mother asks if her daughter is truly happy, whispering it as though she was afraid of her daughter's answer. The daughter responds as if she didn't hear her, replying that "[her mother] really should try the fruit here" (Dove 68-70). The final sentence was a finishing blow for her mother as she calls for the check and immediately realizes that she has lost her. It is only then that she accepts that her daughter has truly moved on, although it still has a bitter tone for a resolve.

The two poems, "The Pomegranate" and "The Bistro Styx" conveys the internal conflict a mother must face when her daughter is old enough to lead her own life. While both works use the myth of Ceres and Persephone, "The Pomegranate" shows the mother to be accepting and preparing for her daughter to leave while the latter, "The Bistro Styx," displays a mother that is currently fighting against the will of her grown daughter, hoping that she will return to her. In the end, both poems conclude that the mothers, or narrators, have, or will eventually, lose their daughter. Nothing could be done to stop the ancient cycle of Ceres and Persephone.