

Name: _____ Class: _____

Orpheus and Eurydice

By Ovid, translated by Brookes More
1 BCE

Ovid (43 BC-17/18 BCE) was a Roman poet, best known for the Metamorphoses, 15 books consisting of over 250 myths. One of the myths shared in the Metamorphoses is the tragic love story of "Orpheus and Eurydice." In this classic myth, the singer travels to the underworld after his wife tragically dies, hoping to bring her back to earth. As you read, take notes on the details that hint at the story's ending.

[1] Veiled in a saffron mantle,¹ through the air unmeasured, after the strange wedding, Hymen² departed swiftly for Ciconian land; regardless and not listening to the voice of tuneful Orpheus. Truly Hymen there was present during the festivities of Orpheus and Eurydice, but gave no happy omen, neither hallowed words nor joyful glances; and the torch he held would only sputter, fill the eyes with smoke, and cause no blaze while waving. The result of that sad wedding, proved more terrible than such foreboding³ fates. While through the grass delighted Naiads⁴ wandered with the bride, a serpent struck its venomous tooth in her soft ankle — and she died. —



"Edward John Poynter (1839-1919), "Orpheus and Eurydice"" by Sofi is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

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1. a loose sleeveless cloak or shawl
 2. the god of marriage ceremonies
 3. **Foreboding (adjective):** implying that something bad is going to happen
 4. a type of female, fresh water spirit or nymph

After the bard⁵ of Rhodope⁶ had mourned, and filled the highs of heaven with the moans of his lament, determined also the dark underworld should recognize the misery of death, he dared descend by the Taenarian gate down to the gloomy Styx.⁷ And there passed through pale-glimmering phantoms, and the ghosts escaped from sepulchres,⁸ until he found Persephone and Pluto,⁹ master-king of shadow realms below: and then began to strike his tuneful lyre, to which he sang: — “O deities¹⁰ of this dark world beneath the earth! this shadowy underworld, to which all mortals must descend! If it can be called lawful, and if you will suffer speech of strict truth (all the winding ways of Falsity forbidden) I come not down here because of curiosity to see the glooms of Tartarus¹¹ and have no thought to bind or strangle the three necks of the Medusan Monster,¹² vile with snakes. But I have come, because my darling wife stepped on a viper that sent through her veins death-poison, cutting off her coming years. If able, I would bear it, I do not deny my effort — but the god of Love has conquered me — a god so kindly known in all the upper world. We are not sure he can be known so well in this deep world, but have good reason to conjecture he is not unknown here, and if old report almost forgotten, that you stole your wife is not a fiction, Love united you the same as others. By this Place of Fear this huge void and these vast and silent realms, renew the life-thread of Eurydice. All things are due to you, and though on earth it happens we may tarry¹³ a short while, slowly or swiftly we must go to one abode; and it will be our final home. Long and tenaciously¹⁴ you will possess unquestioned mastery of the human race. She also shall be yours to rule, when full of age she shall have lived the days of her allotted years. So I ask of you possession of her few days as a boon.¹⁵ But if the fates deny to me this prayer for my true wife, my constant mind must hold me always so that I can not return — and you may triumph in the death of two!”

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5. The refers to Orpheus; a “bard” is a poet who sings epic poems.
 6. a mountain range in Southeastern Europe
 7. The Taenarian gate leading to the Styx river forms the boundary between earth and the underworld.
 8. A “Sepulcher” is a small room or monument in which a dead person is laid or buried.
 9. the ruler of the underworld
 10. A “deity” is a god or goddess.
 11. a section of Hades (the underworld) reserved for punishing the wicked
 12. In mythology, the “Medusan Monster” was a winged human female with a hideous face and living snakes for hair.
 13. to wait
 14. **Tenacious** (*adjective*): tending to keep a firm hold of something
 15. An archaic term for “a favor or request.”

While he sang all his heart said to the sound of his sweet lyre, the bloodless ghosts themselves were weeping, and the anxious Tantalus¹⁶ stopped clutching at return-flow of the wave, Ixion's twisting wheel¹⁷ stood wonder-bound; and Tityus¹⁸ liver for a while escaped the vultures, and the listening Belides¹⁹ forgot their sieve-like²⁰ bowls and even you, O Sisyphus!²¹ sat idly on your rock! Then Fame declared that conquered by the song of Orpheus, for the first and only time the hard cheeks of the fierce Eumenides²² were wet with tears: nor could the royal queen, nor he who rules the lower world deny the prayer of Orpheus; so they called to them Eurydice, who still was held among the new-arriving shades,²³ and she obeyed the call by walking to them with slow steps, yet halting from her wound. So Orpheus then received his wife; and Pluto told him he might now ascend from these Avernian vales²⁴ up to the light, with his Eurydice; but, if he turned his eyes to look at her, the gift of her delivery would be lost. They picked their way in silence up a steep and gloomy path of darkness. There remained but little more to climb till they would touch earth's surface, when in fear he might again lose her, and anxious for another look at her, he turned his eyes so he could gaze upon her. Instantly she slipped away. He stretched out to her his despairing arms, eager to rescue her, or feel her form, but could hold nothing save the yielding air. Dying the second time, she could not say a word of censure of her husband's fault; what had she to complain of—his great love? Her last word spoken was, "Farewell!" which he could barely hear, and with no further sound she fell from him again to Hades. —²⁵

Struck quite senseless by this double death of his dear wife, he was as fixed from motion as the frightened one who saw the triple necks of Cerberus,²⁶ that dog whose middle neck was chained. The sight filled him with terror he had no escape from, until petrified to stone; or like Olenos,²⁷ changed to stone, because he fastened on himself the guilt of his wife. O unfortunate Lethaea! Too boastful of your beauty, you and he, united once in love, are now two stones upon the mountain Ida, moist with springs. Orpheus implored²⁸ in vain the ferryman to help him cross the River Styx again, but was denied the very hope of death. Seven days he sat upon Death's river bank, in squalid²⁹ misery and without all food — nourished by grief, anxiety, and tears — complaining that the Gods of Erebus³⁰ were pitiless, at last he wandered back, until he came to lofty Rhodope and Haemus,³¹ beaten by the strong north wind.

- [5] Three times the Sun completed his full course to watery Pisces,³² and in all that time, shunning all women, Orpheus still believed his love-pledge was forever. So he kept away from women, though so many grieved, because he took no notice of their love. The only friendship he enjoyed was given to the young men of Thrace.³³

16. a king condemned to Tartarus, with food and water always remaining just out of reach
17. Ixion is a character in Roman mythology who is eternally bound to a spinning wheel of fire.
18. Two vultures punish the giant, Tityus, by eating his liver, only for it to grow back every night.
19. The "Belides" were condemned to Hades and compelled to forever pour water into a vessel full of holes as punishment for killing their husbands.
20. a utensil consisting of wire or plastic mesh
21. Sisyphus was forced to roll a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down and hit him for eternity.
22. female spirits who torment the guilty
23. a term for "ghost"
24. the valleys in the upper level of the underworld
25. In Roman mythology, Hades refers to the underworld.
26. Cerberus was a three-headed dog that guarded the entrance of the underworld.
27. Olenos was turned to stone, along with his wife, as punishment for her vanity.
28. **Implore (verb):** to beg someone desperately to do something
29. **Squalid (adjective):** extremely dirty and unpleasant
30. a personification of darkness
31. a king and queen changed into mountains by Zeus and Hera as punishment.

"Orpheus and Eurydice" from Metamorphoses by Ovid (1 BCE) is in the public domain.

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32. a constellation in the Northern Hemisphere
 33. Thrace is a historical and geographic area in southeast Europe.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses a main theme of the text?
 - A. People are motivated by their own fears and selfish desires.
 - B. True love is worth great sacrifice and can survive even death.
 - C. Being overcome by beauty has the ability to change a person's path in life.
 - D. People are incapable of escaping the finality of death.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "the dark underworld should recognize the misery of death, he dared descend by the Taenarian gate down to the gloomy Styx." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "While he sang all his heart said to the sound of his sweet lyre, the bloodless ghosts themselves were weeping," (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "in all that time, shunning all women, Orpheus still believed his love-pledge was forever." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "So he kept away from women, though so many grieved, because he took no notice of their love." (Paragraph 5)

3. PART A: What impact does the word "sputter" in paragraph 1 have on the mood of the story?
 - A. It demonstrates Orpheus' hope for his marriage to Eurydice, creating a happy mood in the story.
 - B. It parallels the potential and missed chances of the characters, contributing to the somber mood of the story.
 - C. It represents Eurydice's inner desire to be free of marriage, reflecting a tense mood in the story.
 - D. It foreshadows Orpheus' inner struggle with his grief for his wife and desire to move on, leading to a distressed mood in the story.

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "O deities of this dark world beneath the earth! this shadowy underworld, to which all mortals must descend!" (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "they called to them Eurydice...she obeyed the call by walking to them with slow steps, yet halting from her wound." (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "There remained but little more to climb till they would touch earth's surface...Instantly she slipped away." (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "Seven days he sat upon Death's river bank, in squalid misery and without all food—nourished by grief, anxiety, and tears" (Paragraph 4)

5. Explain how the reactions of “the bloodless ghouls” to Orpheus’s song in paragraph 3 are important to the overall theme of the story. Cite evidence from the story in your response.
