

Orpheus



Alice Low



There were nine goddesses called Muses. Born of Zeus and a Titan named Mnemosyne, each Muse presided over a different art or science.

Calliope, one of these sisters, was the inspiration of poets and musicians. She was the mother of Orpheus (a mortal because his father was one) and gave to her son a remarkable talent for music.

Orpheus played his lyre so sweetly that he charmed all things on earth. Men and women forgot their cares when they gathered around him to listen. Wild beasts lay down as if they were tame, entranced by his soothing notes. Even rocks and trees followed him, and the rivers changed their direction to hear him play.

Orpheus loved a young woman named Eurydice, and when they were married, they looked forward to many years of happiness together. But soon after, Eurydice stepped on a poisonous snake and died.

Orpheus roamed the earth, singing sad melodies to try to overcome his grief. But it was no use. He longed for Eurydice so deeply that he decided to follow her to the underworld. He said to himself, "No mortal has ever been there before, but I must try to bring back my beloved Eurydice. I will charm Persephone and Hades with my

music and win Eurydice's release."

He climbed into a cave and through a dark passage that led to the underworld. When he reached the river Styx,¹ he plucked his lyre, and Charon, the ferryman, was so charmed that he rowed him across. Then he struck his lyre again, and Cerberus, the fierce three-headed dog who guarded the gates, heard the sweet music and lay still to let him pass.

Orpheus continued to play his lyre tenderly as he made his way through the gloomy underworld. The ghosts cried when they heard his sad music. Sisyphus, who had been condemned to roll a rock uphill forever, stopped his fruitless work to listen. Tantalus, who had been sentenced to stand in a pool of receding water, stopped trying to quench his thirst. And even the wheel to which Ixion was tied as punishment stopped turning for one moment.

At last Orpheus came to the palace of Hades and Persephone, king and queen of the underworld. Before they could order him to leave, he began his gentle song, pleading for Eurydice.

When stern Hades heard Orpheus's song, he began to weep. Cold Persephone was so moved that, for the first time in all her months in the underworld, her heart melted.

Connecting Literature to Social Studies

What do these details tell you about the importance of music in ancient Greece?

◆ Build Vocabulary

inspiration (in' spə rā' shən) *n.*: Something that brings on creative ability; motivation

1. Styx (stiks) *n.*: River that flows around Hades.

"Oh, please, my husband," she said to Hades, "let Eurydice be reunited with Orpheus."

And Hades replied, "I, too, feel the sadness of Orpheus. I cannot refuse him."

They summoned Eurydice, and the two lovers clasped each other and turned to leave.

"Wait!" said Hades to Orpheus. "Eurydice is yours to take back to earth on one condition."

"What is that?" asked Orpheus.

"She must follow you, and you must not look back at her until you are on earth again."

"I understand," said Orpheus. "And I am forever grateful."

Orpheus and Eurydice left the underworld and made their way through the dark passage that led to the upper world. At last they reached the cave through which Orpheus had descended.

"I can see daylight ahead," called Orpheus to Eurydice. "We are almost there." But Eurydice had not heard him, and so she did not answer.

Orpheus turned to make sure that she was still following him. He caught one last

glimpse of her with her arms stretched out to him. And then she disappeared, swallowed up by darkness.

"Farewell," he heard her cry as she was carried back to the underworld.

Orpheus tried to follow her, but this time the gods would not allow it. And so he wandered the earth alone. He sang his sad songs to the rocks and the trees and longed for the time when he, too, would die and be reunited with his beloved Eurydice in the underworld.

Connecting Literature to Social Studies
What do these details indicate about the way the Greeks viewed the gods?

Meet the Author

Alice Low (1926–)

As a girl, Alice Low enjoyed making puppets and performing in plays. As an adult, she has written a musical play and many articles for magazines. She is famous for her retellings of myths and folk tales.

Guide for Responding

◆ LITERATURE AND YOUR LIFE

Reader's Response Would you have looked back to see if Eurydice was following you? Why or why not?

Thematic Focus How can myths help you explore the world of the ancient Greeks?

Journal Writing Write four or five sentences that you would say to Orpheus.

Check Your Comprehension

1. Why did Orpheus go to the underworld?
2. How did Orpheus get past Cerberus?
3. Why did Orpheus turn around to look at Eurydice?
4. What happened when Orpheus turned around?

◆ Critical Thinking

INTERPRET

1. What details in the myth indicate that Orpheus had remarkable musical talent? **[Support]**
2. What do the punishments of Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Ixion suggest about the gods' attitudes toward mortals? **[Draw Conclusions]**
3. Why do you think the gods put a condition on allowing Orpheus to take Eurydice? **[Speculate]**

APPLY

4. What lesson might this story teach to people today? **[Relate]**

EXTEND

5. Why do you think we call the words to songs "lyrics"? **[Music Link]**