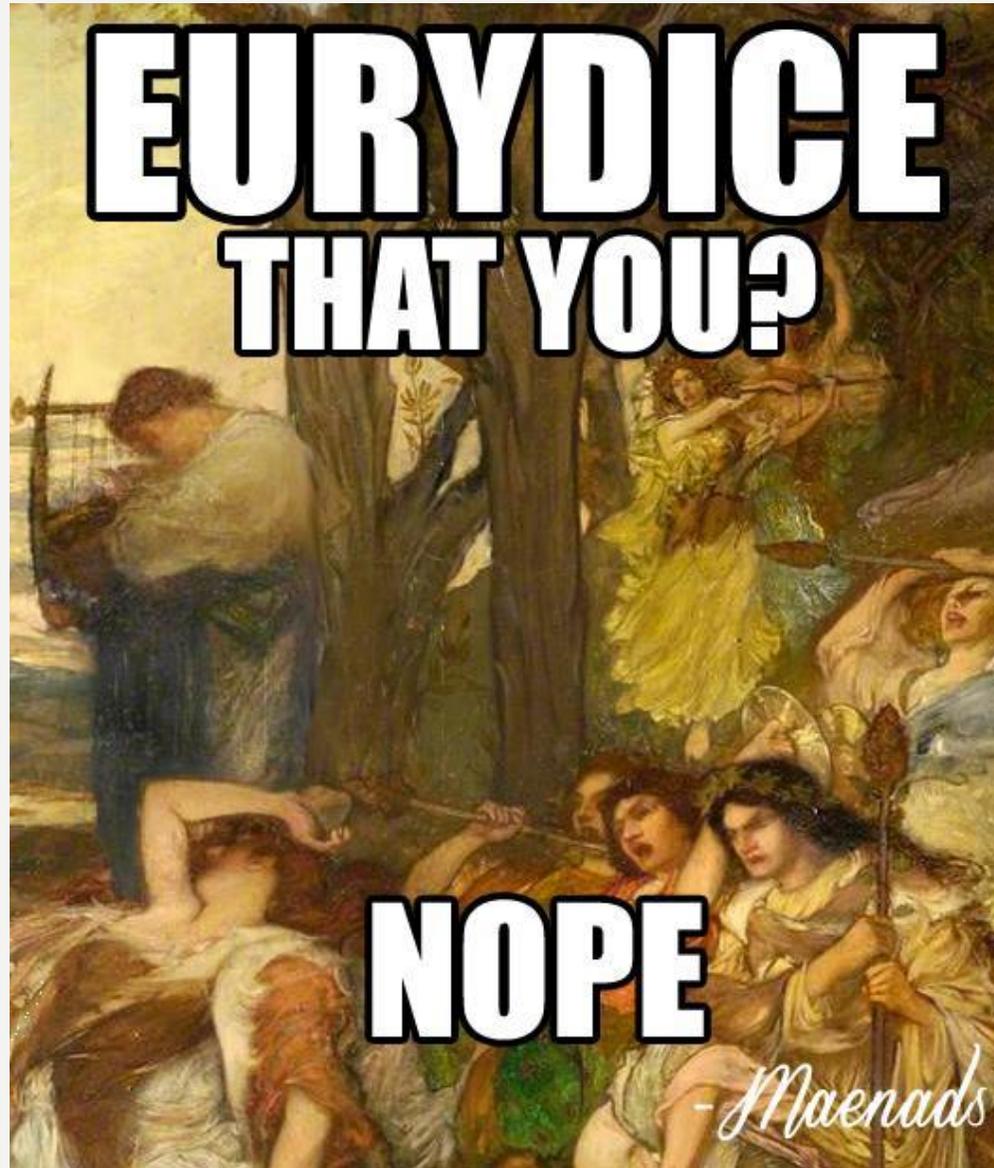


**ORPHEUS AND  
EURYDICE**

**EURYDICE  
THAT YOU?**



**NOPE**

*-Maenads*

# SUMMARY

- The story starts off with a pretty typical boy-meets-girl cliché. After they meet, Orpheus (who's a famous musician) and Eurydice fall in love and get married. The end.
  - Oh wait.
- Eurydice decides to get some fresh air. She takes a walk toward the river.
- In some versions of the myth, the lustful shepherd Aristeus (son of Apollo and Cyrene) surprises Eurydice. He's pretty hot for her, and he chases her along a nearby riverbank.
- Desperate to avoid his advances, Eurydice stops looking where she's going and stumbles across a poisonous viper. Uh oh.
- Sure enough, the snake bites Eurydice's ankle and she dies. The end.
  - Nope, still not.

# SUMMARY

- Orpheus is (obviously) overcome with grief at his wife's death.
- Orpheus decides to take action. His plan? Travel to the Underworld and ask Hades to let Eurydice go. Seems straightforward enough.
- As he enters the Underworld, Orpheus uses his music to charm the spirits and monsters who live there. Ever get serenaded by a cute guy with a stringed instrument? Hard to resist, right?
- Even animals love him. Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the entrance, stands motionless and lets Orpheus pass. Everyone else is moved, too: Sisyphus stops moving his rock, Tantalus stopped lunging toward the water, and the shades twittered gleefully to hear him play.
  - So yeah, guess he chose the right song.
- In any case, Orpheus finds Hades and Persephone, the King and Queen of the Underworld. Now the convincing begins.

# SUMMARY

- He makes a grand speech and plays his lyre to try to persuade these two to let Eurydice go. His strategy? He reminds Hades that he fell in love once, too (with Persephone).
- Orpheus' music melts the hearts of Hades and Persephone. Surprise, surprise. And – success! – they agree to free Eurydice.
- But there is a small catch. Hades says Eurydice must walk behind Orpheus as they travel back to the upper world – Orpheus is forbidden from looking back at Eurydice until they have exited the Underworld.
- Doesn't seem too tough, right?
- So Orpheus agrees, and the couple begins their ascent.

# SUMMARY

- Orpheus thinks he can hear Eurydice's footsteps behind him and before long, he can see the exit. He steps out of the cave and into the light. He made it!
- But (yes, there's a but – I know you saw it coming) due to the concern for his wife, Orpheus totally paranoid about Hades' warning and turns to look at Eurydice.
- Eurydice is just on the verge of exiting the cave, but she hasn't quite made it out.
  - NO!
- Orpheus and Eurydice lock eyes for a split second.
- Orpheus reaches for her – but he's grabbing at air. (How sad is this?)

# THEME: POWER OF MUSIC

- With Orpheus constantly strumming his lyre, this myth has more songs than an episode of Glee. He plays the blues when Eurydice dies and he uses music to charm the beasts and spirits of the Underworld. In fact, just by listening to his music, the Underworld creatures do all sorts of things that they've never done before: Cerberus the three-headed dog quits barking, and Sisyphus stops rolling his rock. Orpheus's concert is so moving that he's able to enter the Underworld unscathed. That's some pretty powerful stuff, don't you think?
- Ultimately, music serves two major functions in this myth. First, it allows Orpheus to express himself and second, it alters people's moods, actions, and ideas.

## Questions About The Power of Music

- Has listening to music ever changed your views on life?
- Lyre music was very popular with the Greeks. Can you think of any modern music that has been able to affect how large groups of people think and feel?

# THEME: DEATH

- The story of Orpheus is a KATABASIS story. *Katabasis*--a trip down to the underworld or wherever it is that dead people live.
- Death totally haunts this myth (pun intended). The story begins with Eurydice's fatal snake bite and continues with Orpheus' journey into the Underworld.
  - For a myth about escaping death, death sure feels pretty inescapable here.
- There's a pretty famous theory that says there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice spends a lot of time on stage 3: bargaining. When Orpheus meets Hades and Persephone, he convinces them to let Eurydice go, partly by talking about how, hey, everyone dies eventually, so why not let Eurydice live a little longer? They'll get her soul in the end, they should just be patient.
- But despite successfully bargaining for Eurydice's release, Orpheus ends up losing his wife to death a second time. The lesson here might be that although love is powerful, it's ultimately not as powerful as death, which (as Orpheus told Hades) eventually conquers everything. Well that's kind of a downer.

## Questions About Death

- Should Orpheus have accepted Eurydice's death the first time? Was it arrogant of him to argue against her death?
- Was it simply Eurydice's "time" to go? By trying to free her from the Underworld, was Orpheus fighting against Fate?
- Why does Eurydice die in unexpected, violent way? Does it make the story more interesting? What does it say about the nature of death?

# THEME: HAPPINESS?

- Twice in this myth, incredible happiness slips away from Orpheus and Eurydice. First, it disappears after Eurydice dies.
- Then, the joy that comes from Eurydice's release is destroyed when Orpheus looks back during their ascent to the upper world.
- Each time, the couple's extreme happiness is only temporary. In highlighting how quickly Orpheus and Eurydice lose their joy, the myth reminds us of the fleeting nature of happiness.
  - Hey, I didn't say this would be uplifting.

## Questions About Fleeting Nature of Happiness

- Some versions of the myth say that the gods were punishing Orpheus and Eurydice for being too happy. Do you think they were being punished, or do you think their tragedies were random and unplanned?

# THEME: LOVE AND TRUST

- Love is a powerful motivator. It can make people do irrationally amazing things ("look, honey, I baked a giant cake in the shape of your face!") and irrationally stupid things (see first example). In the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, people find instances of both amazing and stupid things done in the name of love.
- Orpheus is so heartbroken when he loses Eurydice that he travels to the Underworld for her, which is irrational and awesome. But then, as they make their way to the upper world, he turns around to look at her. This is irrational and way less awesome, since he knows that doing so will send his wife plummeting back to Hades.
- This second example is definitely an exercise in trusting the ones we love. Orpheus thinks he can hear his wife's footsteps, but he's never quite sure that she's there. Had he been able to hold out, and simply trust that Eurydice was behind him, they might have made it back to Earth and lived happily ever after.

## Questions About Love and Trust

- Why do you think Hades made a rule that Orpheus was not allowed to look at Eurydice until they reached the upper world?
- Different versions of the myth give different reasons for Orpheus turning around. Some say that he got excited and forgot his instructions. Others say he was plagued with doubt, and needed to make sure that Eurydice was still there. Why do you think Orpheus looked back?
- Some endings of the story imply that Orpheus and Eurydice never see each other again, while others say that they are reunited in the Underworld after Orpheus dies (specifically, in the beautiful Elysian Fields). Which ending is more powerful? Why?

# ORPHEUS

## Music Man

- The son of Calliope, Orpheus has music in his genes – in a big way. He's famous for playing moving songs on his lyre, a small stringed instrument made from a tortoise shell. Orpheus could charm humans and animals with his tunes, but even rocks and trees loved his stuff, too. It was a pretty diverse fan club, that's for sure.
- In his early days, Orpheus sailed around with Jason and the Argonauts, encountering one adventure after another as they searched for the Golden Fleece . (It's definitely worth reading up on Jason and the Argonauts.) Orpheus basically served as the entertainment on their ancient cruise ship. Whenever the men needed a little pump-up music, Orpheus would whip out his lyre and lay down some sweet tracks. He also used his music to get the men out of sticky situations. Once, when they sailed past the Sirens – known for luring men to their deaths with beautiful music – Orpheus saved the crew's lives by drowning out their songs with a ballad of his own.

# ORPHEUS

## A Sensitive Dude

- Orpheus is probably most famous for his role in this myth with his leading lady, Eurydice. And it's here that he proves himself to be a man of great emotion. In fact, few Greek myths showcase male grieving like this one – when Orpheus loses Eurydice, his sorrow is limitless.
- It's not just his tears that prove Orpheus' sensitive side. Let's face it, he clearly loved his wife dearly: heck, he followed her into the Underworld to face its super-creepy citizens. He was also bent on remaining loyal to his lady, and that kind of fidelity was pretty uncommon in Greek mythology.
- Orpheus's passion for Eurydice might be why he looked at her before the pair had reached the upper world.
- Ultimately, it's hard to say whether Orpheus' journey to the Underworld was worth it. On the one hand, he was able to fight for his love, and had the chance to see Eurydice one last time. But on the other hand, he lost his wife *twice*, and had to live with the failure of screwing up her rescue attempt. It's probably a safe guess that even if Orpheus hadn't tried to retrieve Eurydice, he would've spent the rest of his life mourning her. No matter what, you're left with a really depressed musician.

## What Did We Ever See in Him?

- You might be shocked to hear this (not really): as a symbolic figure, Orpheus is associated with music, sadness, and being unable to let go of a lost love.

# EURYDICE

- In life, Eurydice was a pretty happy-go-lucky gal. She was a wood nymph, she loved sexy musicians, and she had a habit of running through meadows like she was in a *Vogue* photo shoot.
- Unfortunately, Eurydice is far less upbeat after she died. (Makes sense, right?) She is ghostly, cold, and walks with a limp from that nasty snake bite. In some versions of the myth, she's also a little hard on Orpheus when he turns around to look at her. While some writers say that Eurydice utters a single, mournful word ("Farewell!"), others say she just chews him out. Eek!
- Since the ancient writers didn't spend much time describing Eurydice, playwright Sarah Ruhl decided to fill in the gaps. In her play *Eurydice*, Ruhl tells the story from Eurydice's point of view. She follows the young wife as she descends into the gloomy Underworld and meets the creatures who live there. It's a more modern (although still very depressing!) take on the myth, and received a wonderful review in the *New York Times* when it appeared off-Broadway.
- These days, Eurydice is associated with beauty, love, and tragic death. And not surprisingly, she has become a symbol for deceased loved ones, who were unfairly taken from life too soon.

# HADES

- King of the Underworld and ruler of the dead, Hades isn't known as a big softie. So it's a bit surprising that Orpheus is able to talk him into letting Eurydice go. But eloquent Orpheus finds a way to pull on the one tender string inside Hades' dark heart: his love for Persephone.
- Hades had been so smitten with Persephone that he kidnapped her and forced her to be his wife (not the healthiest way to start a relationship, but he was kind of a twisted guy). In any case, by comparing his love for Eurydice to Hades' love for Persephone, Orpheus successfully bonds with the grim god.
- Of course, Hades doesn't take kindly to people who don't follow instructions, and he *certainly* doesn't give favors twice. So when Orpheus looks back at Eurydice after being explicitly told not to, Hades snatches her back to the Underworld without a second thought.
- Yeah, that's more like the Hades people know.

# PERSEPHONE

- Persephone, the unwilling Queen of the Underworld, is the daughter of Zeus (king of the gods) and Demeter (the goddess of agriculture). Hades was so taken with her beauty that he kidnapped her from earth, much to the distress of her mother. After some squabbling, Hades and Demeter reached a compromise: for most of the year, Persephone can stay above ground, but she must return to the Underworld for at least a few months. When Persephone is away, Demeter is so depressed that nothing will grow in the land.

# WHY IT MATTERS NOW

- There's a reason we're still reading *Romeo and Juliet*, after all. But the story of Orpheus and Eurydice was popular long before anyone wrote their story down: way back when, images of the doomed lovers appeared on a variety of Greek pottery, murals, and other works of art. Usually, the couple was depicted at the moment when they get separated from each other for a second time, but images of Orpheus' decapitated head was also quite popular. Yeah.
- As with most famous stories, there are many versions of this tale. Virgil and Ovid wrote the most famous accounts, but several other poets talked about the myth long before those two literary giants.
- The Greek philosopher Plato name-drops Orpheus in his *Symposium*. Unlike other versions, which celebrate Orpheus as a hero, Plato paints Orpheus as selfish and cowardly. According to this famous philosopher, Orpheus only travels to the Underworld to see if he can make it there alive. (Whoa, that *is* a different take on it...) And because Orpheus isn't willing to die for his love, Hades punishes him by presenting him with a fake Eurydice – an "apparition." In Plato's version, when Orpheus is torn to shreds by a bunch of crazy women, his death is treated as a just punishment.
  - Which version do you like better?

# WHY IT MATTERS NOW

- Next come our heavy-hitters, Virgil and Ovid. Virgil wrote his version first in *Georgics* (29 BCE), a super-long poem about nature and Greek myths. Ovid followed up roughly forty years later by including the story in his *Metamorphoses* (roughly 8 CE), another lengthy poem. Both versions tell a similar tale of doomed love, and portray Orpheus as a brave, woeful hero.
- But not so fast: there *are* a few key differences between the stories, namely in what happens before Eurydice is bitten by the snake. Virgil claims that she is chased by Aristaeus, while Ovid thinks she is dancing joyously in the meadow with her BFFs (a group of forest nymphs called the Naiads). Also, Ovid doesn't include Orpheus' gruesome death in his version. Instead, he writes that the sad musician simply wanders around singing sad songs for the rest of his life. Overall, Ovid's version is a bit kinder than Virgil's.
- In most retellings of the myth, Orpheus stays faithful to Eurydice long after her death, swearing off the advances of all other women. Such displays of loyalty are actually pretty rare in Greek myths, especially for male figures (think about the number of affairs Zeus had!). We could compare the guy to Perseus, the Greek hero who never cheated on his wife Andromeda. But the closest comparison would be with a loyal woman: Odysseus' wife Penelope stayed true to her husband during his long journey, despite the pleas of a whole host of suitors. Both Orpheus' and Penelope's incredible love for their absent partners prevent them from "moving on." Sad, but majorly noble.
- The twenty-first century has had its share of fun with the myth, too. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* also references the myth: while searching for the Sorcerer's Stone, Harry Potter must use music to put a giant, three-headed dog to sleep, just like Orpheus did. (Bet you didn't catch that when you were reading, huh?)