

Orpheus and Eurydice: Changing Through the Ages
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Orpheus and Eurydice by Auguste Rodin, 1893

Edith Hamilton retells the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in *Mythology*, but even though that version is detailed and accurate, it is by no means the first adaptation of the Orpheus myth, nor the last. The Orpheus and Eurydice tale has been told again and again. The tale is ever evolving to fit the perspective of the storyteller, but it has remained popular, while keeping its overall message.

The Tale:

The original Orpheus myth is essentially about the loss of love. Orpheus is a great player of the lyre, and he is said to be able to make the rocks and rivers sing with his song. One day, he marries a woman named Eurydice, and on the day of their marriage she is bitten by a snake and dies. Orpheus, outraged that his bride has been stolen by death, goes down to the Underworld in order to reclaim her. During his journey, Orpheus charms Cerberus, the three-headed dog, and makes his way to the thrones of Hades and Persephone. Hades doesn't want to let Eurydice go, but Persephone convinces him to do so, moved as she is by Orpheus' song. However there is one condition: until both Orpheus and Eurydice have crossed back into the mortal plane, he cannot look at her. Orpheus agrees to this and both he and Eurydice set off towards the world above. When Orpheus crosses the threshold, however, he is seized by the sudden urge to look back and see if Eurydice is still there. As soon as he looks back, Eurydice turns to smoke in his hands, and is dragged down to the Underworld forever. That is where the myth usually ends, but in other versions, Orpheus completely swears off women for the rest of his life. A group of women, giving praise to Bacchus, hear him and tear him apart in a fit of rage.

They toss his head into a river, and it is said that the head sings on the way down the river.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has been a popular subject for interpretation by artists throughout history. We will explore three of these paintings below.

Number 1: "The Death of Eurydice"



The first painting is *The Death of Eurydice* by Peter Paul Rubens. It was painted in the 17th century, around 1636. The colors in this painting are very dramatic, but the characters that seem the most important are not the men, but the women. Eurydice is dressed in pure white, which usually signifies innocence, purity, or reverence. Conversely, Persephone is dressed in black, which is the color that can be interpreted as sadness, unhappiness, and mourning. The women are connected not only by the colors that they wear, but by their expressions as well. Eurydice is looking back at Persephone with a kind of longing, and Persephone is waving Eurydice forward with a gesture from her hand. The women seem to be foils for each other, but the men seem very similar in their connectedness to their wives. Hades gives deference to his wife and her desire to let Orpheus and Eurydice go, so he looks as if he's looking to her for advice. Orpheus is dressed in red, a very passionate color which means the person wearing it would probably act first and think later, as in the case with Orpheus.

Number 2: "Eurydice Leaving the Kingdom of Hades is snatched by Orpheus"



The second work of art, a drawing by Henry Fuseli, entitled, *Eurydice Leaving the Kingdom of Hades, is snatched from Orpheus*, recalls the moment where Eurydice is taken back to the Underworld. The sketch, made in 1772, is much more romantic than the previous work of art. The sweeping curves suggest intimacy. In this painting Orpheus seems to be almost stepping back into the Underworld to try to grab Eurydice, and their arms are outstretched towards each other in a desperate attempt to grab hold of one another. The difference between this drawing the first painting is that here Orpheus has thrown down his lyre, indicating that the music is not as important to him as his wife. The shadows also play an important role. On the top left side of the drawing, the shading is non-existent, and light seems to be cascading down from that side, which is probably the re-entrance to life. On the other side of the drawing, there is a lot more shadow and shading, which is probably meant to signify death.

Number 3: Orpheus Leading Eurydice



The last work, a painting, is entitled *Orpheus Leading Eurydice*, by Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, was finished in 1861. The light is also used effectively in this painting as it was in the other two works. In the top right corner of the painting the sky is a dark gray, as opposed to the right, which is a light cream color. Once again this could be the transition between life and death, and because they are almost to the point where, in the myth, Orpheus will turn back and lose Eurydice. This Orpheus is the most apathetic to Eurydice out of all three paintings. He has Eurydice not by the hand, but by the wrist. He is also holding his lyre out in front of him almost as if he cannot believe what he has managed to accomplish, wondering at his own skill. Orpheus again appears in red, as in the first painting, but there is a special addition to this Orpheus. There is what seems to be a laurel wreath on his head. This shows the mindset of Orpheus at this point. He already believes that he has won, so he is a little short-sighted.

The drawing and two paintings are a sampling of the works of art depicting the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. There have also been operas, works of music, sculptures, plays, and even a video game. The story has been presented in a variety of mediums, with emphasis on different characters. Sometimes the main character is Orpheus, often it is Eurydice, and other times it seems as if Persephone is the focal point. Artists today feel the need to revisit the myth because the lessons it teaches are as true today as they were in ancient Greece: you have to fight for what you love, even though sometimes you may not get it.