

A detailed marble relief sculpture from the Parthenon, depicting the mythological figures Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus, on the right, is shown in profile, wearing a tall, pointed helmet and a draped garment, with his hand near his face in a gesture of grief or contemplation. Eurydice, in the center, is shown in a similar pose, looking down with a sorrowful expression. To the left, another figure, possibly a companion or a deity, is partially visible. The background of the relief features inscriptions in ancient Greek, including 'ΕΥΡΩΔΙΚΗ' (Eurydice) and 'ΟΡΦΕΥΣ' (Orpheus).

ORPHEUS, THE GREAT MUSICIAN

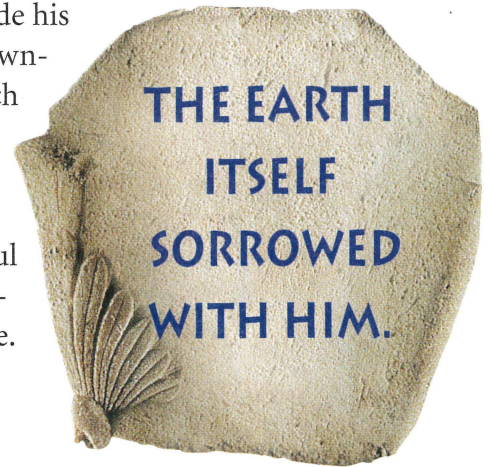
RETOLD BY OLIVIA COOLIDGE

In the legend of Orpheus, the Greek love of music found its fullest expression. Orpheus, it is said, could make such heavenly songs that when he sat down to sing, the trees would crowd around to shade him. The ivy and vine stretched out their tendrils. Great oaks would bend their spreading branches over his head. The very rocks would edge down the mountainsides. Wild beasts crouched harmless by him, and nymphs¹ and woodland gods would listen to him, enchanted.

Orpheus himself, however, had eyes for no one but the nymph Eurydice.² His love for her was his inspiration, and his power sprang from the passionate longing that he knew in his own heart. All nature rejoiced with him on his bridal day, but on that very morning, as Eurydice went down to the riverside with her maidens to gather flowers for a bridal garland, she was bitten in the

foot by a snake, and she died in spite of all attempts to save her.

Orpheus was inconsolable. All day long he mourned his bride, while birds, beasts, and the earth itself sorrowed with him. When at last the shadows of the sun grew long, Orpheus took his lyre³ and made his way to the yawning cave which leads down into the underworld, where the soul of dead Eurydice had gone.



1. **nymphs:** minor goddesses of nature, usually young and beautiful, living in mountains, rivers, or trees.
2. **Eurydice** (yŭō·rid'i·sē').

3. **lyre** (līr): small harp.

Vocabulary

inconsolable (in'kən·sōl'ə·bəl) *adj.*: unable to be comforted; brokenhearted.



Lyre player. Greece.

Even gray Charon, the ferryman of the Styx, forgot to ask his passenger for the price of crossing. The dog Cerberus, the three-headed monster who guards Hades' gate, stopped full in his tracks and listened motionless until Orpheus had passed. As he entered the land of Hades, the pale ghosts came after him like great, uncounted flocks of silent birds. All the land lay hushed as that marvelous voice resounded across the mud and marshes of its dreadful rivers. In the daffodil fields of Elysium, the happy dead sat silent among their flowers. In the farthest corners of the place of punishment, the hissing flames stood still. Accursed Sisyphus,⁴ who toils eternally to push a mighty rock uphill, sat down and knew not he was resting. Tantalus, who strains forever after visions of cool water, forgot his thirst and ceased to clutch at the empty air.

The pillared⁵ hall of Hades opened before the hero's song. The ranks of long-dead heroes who sit at Hades' board looked up and turned their eyes away from the pitiless form of Hades and his pale, unhappy queen. Grim and unmoving sat the dark king of the dead on his ebony throne, yet the tears shone on his rigid cheeks in the light of his ghastly torches. Even his hard heart, which knew all misery and cared nothing for it, was touched by the love and longing of the music.

At last the minstrel⁶ came to an end, and a long sigh like wind in pine trees was heard from the assembled ghosts. Then the king spoke, and his deep voice echoed through his silent land. "Go back to the light of day," he said. "Go quickly while my monsters are

stilled by your song. Climb up the steep road to daylight, and never once turn back. The spirit of Eurydice shall follow, but if you look around at her, she will return to me."

Orpheus turned and strode from the hall of Hades, and the flocks of following ghosts made way for him to pass. In vain he searched their ranks for a sight of his lost Eurydice. In vain he listened for the faintest sound behind. The barge of Charon sank to the very gunwales⁷ beneath his weight, but no following passenger pressed it lower down. The way from the land of Hades to the upper world is long and hard, far easier to descend than climb. It was dark and misty, full of strange shapes and noises, yet in many places merely black and silent as the tomb. Here Orpheus would stop and listen, but nothing moved behind him. For all he could hear, he was utterly alone. Then he would wonder if the pitiless Hades were deceiving him. Suppose he came up to the light again and Eurydice was not there! Once he had charmed the ferryman and the dreadful monsters, but now they had heard his song. The second time his spell would be less powerful; he could never go again. Perhaps he had lost Eurydice by his readiness to believe.

Every step he took, some instinct told him that he was going farther from his bride. He toiled up the path in reluctance and despair, stopping, listening, sighing, taking a few slow steps, until the dark

4. **Sisyphus** (sis'ə·fəs).

5. **pillared**: having pillars (columns).

6. **minstrel**: singer.

7. **gunwales** (gun'əlz): upper edges of the sides of a boat.

Vocabulary

ghastly (gast'lē) *adj.*: horrible; ghostlike.

reluctance (ri·luk'təns) *n.*: unwillingness.

thinned out into grayness. Up ahead a speck of light showed clearly the entrance to the cavern.

At that final moment Orpheus could bear no more. To go out into the light of day without his love seemed to him impossible. Before he had quite ascended, there was still a moment in which he could go back. Quick in the grayness he turned and saw a dim shade at his heels, as indistinct as the gray mist behind her. But still he could see the look of sadness on her face as he sprung forward saying, "Eurydice!" and threw his arms about her. The shade dissolved in the circle of his arms like smoke. A little whisper seemed to say "Farewell" as she scattered into mist and was gone.

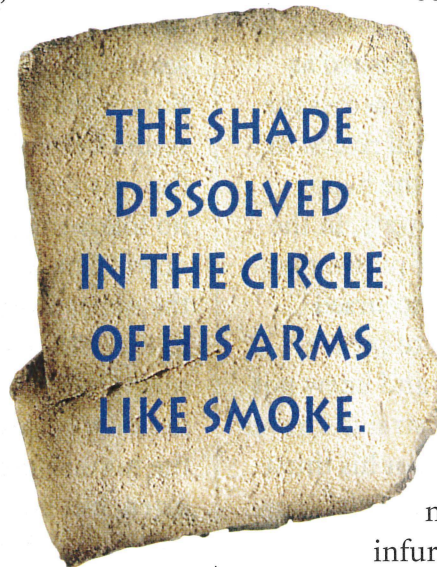
The unfortunate lover hastened back again down the steep, dark path. But all was in vain. This time the ghostly ferryman was deaf to his prayers. The very wildness of his mood made it impossible for him to attain the beauty of his former music. At last, his despair was so great that he could not even sing at all. For seven days he sat huddled together on the gray mud banks, listening to the wailing of the terrible river. The flitting ghosts shrank back in a wide circle from the living man, but he paid them

no attention. Only he sat with his eyes on Charon, his ears ringing with the dreadful noise of Styx.

Orpheus arose at last and stumbled back along the steep road he knew so well by now. When he came up to earth again, his song was pitiful but more beautiful than ever. Even the nightingale who mourned all night long would hush her voice to listen as Orpheus sat in some hidden place singing of his lost Eurydice. Men and women he could bear no longer, and when they came to hear him, he drove them away. At last the women of Thrace, maddened by Dionysus and infuriated by Orpheus's con-

tempt, fell upon him and killed him. It is said that as the body was swept down the river Hebrus, the dead lips still moved faintly and the rocks echoed for the last time, "Eurydice." But the poet's eager spirit was already far down the familiar path.

In the daffodil meadows he met the shade of Eurydice, and there they walk together, or where the path is narrow, the shade of Orpheus goes ahead and looks back at his love.



Vocabulary

ascended (ə·send'id) v.: moved up.

After You Read Response and Analysis


First Thoughts

1. If you were Orpheus, would you have looked back? Why or why not?


Thinking Critically

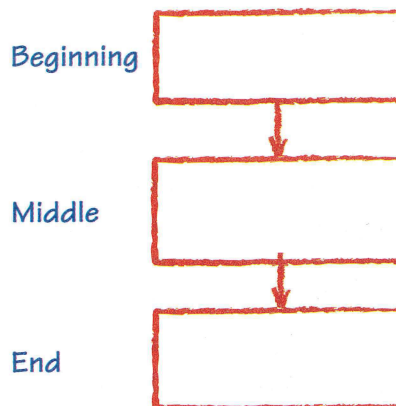
2. On the basis of this myth, how do you think the ancient Greeks pictured the afterlife?
3. Explain how the same feeling that prompted Orpheus's descent into the underworld also caused him to fail.
4. What lessons about love and death does this myth seem to teach? In this story, which is more powerful, love or death? Why?

Extending Interpretations

5. What does this myth say about the power of music? How does this message compare with your own feelings about music? Be sure to check your Quickwrite notes. 
6. Do you think Hades was fair to Orpheus and Eurydice? Tell how you might change the outcome if you were a god or goddess.

Reading Check

Summarize the main events of the myth you have just read by filling in a diagram like the one below. Write two or three sentences in each box. 



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Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE5 7-6

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Analyze a myth.

Reading Skills
Summarize a myth.

Writing Skills
Compare myths.

WRITING

Comparing Myths

Use a chart like the one below to compare this myth with "The Origin of the Seasons."

	"Orpheus"	"The Origin of the Seasons"
How the character faces the mystery of death		
How nature responds to the character's grief or joy		
The effect of breaking a taboo or rule		