

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Orpheus. 1950 Jean Cocteau. (1889-1963)

OVERVIEW

Myth. Cocteau's Orpheus is a modern take off on the classical Greek legend of Orpheus. In that legend, Orpheus, a great singer and musician—who had been taught the wonders of the lyre by Apollo himself--was out for a walk with his wife Eurydice. On the way, she is assaulted by a satyr, and falls into a pit of vipers, which is the death of her. She is transported into the underworld, where she is seemingly lost to her husband.

Interpretation. Orpheus, however, travels to the Underworld himself, sings and plays and proves himself, and is finally allowed, by Hades, to return to earth with his wife—but on the condition that he should never again look at her. On aspects of this ancient myth material, Cocteau builds a modern version of the Greek, allowing Orpheus two trips to the underworld, allowing for a death which both eats away at life, throughout the individual's existence, and forever counts our days, while at the same time honing us steadily for some condition in which we will be becoming immortal, such, as the poet Mallarme wrote, as we will one day find ourselves, 'in the condition into which eternity has changed us.'

STORY

In brief outline we can profile the plot developments through which Cocteau's play lets this mythical material develop. First of all, we are in contemporary, post WW II Paris. There are Rolls Royces and wireless signals, and plenty of visual techy tricks, like films that play backwards, or windows that reveal negatives when they open from inside a vehicle, or motorcyclists with knee length boots. Given all that background noise, however, there is a coherent attention to the questions of aging, immortality, death, and love, and this attention commands our watchful eye over the basic events.

Brawl. So there's a party in Paris, and the attendees are hip young poets, and arty types, and into this chaos steps a handsome and well known poet, Orpheus (acted by Jean Marais, Cocteau's lover at the time.) At the same time arrive a slinky Diva, the Princess, and a handsome young poet, Cegeste, whom the Diva is squiring. Cegeste gets drunk, starts brawling, and flees. The police arrive, to break things up, and at this point two motorcycles arrive, and run over Cegeste. In the midst of the brouhaha, the Princess drives off 'to the hospital' with Cegeste, with Orpheus in tow as witness —though in fact she is taking the guys to her chateau, accompanied by the motorcyclists. Poetry flows through the car radio, at first abstract in tone then shading off into the kind of code message by which the BBC communicated, during the War, with the Free French Forces.

Marriage. Arriving at the chateau, which is in ruins, the Princess reanimates Cegeste, who has died, then, with the two motorcyclists beside her, disappears into a mirror, leaving Orpheus alone. There he happens on Heurtebise, the chauffeur of the Princess, who drives him home to his wife, Eurydice. She is pregnant, and miserable because he, Orpheus, seems to take no interest in her. Orpheus invites Heurtebise to live in his house, storing the Rolls there; not surprisingly, Heurtebise falls in love with Euridice.

Conditions. When Euridyce is killed by death's henchmen, Heurtebise offers to take Orpheus down to Hades to recover her. In Hades, Orpheus finds himself caught up in a trial, which is intended to determine guilt in the case of Eurydice's death; it is determined that she can be returned to life, even accompanied by her husband, but only on the condition that he will never again lay eyes on her. (Here we link into the norm classical version of the theme.)

Culmination. The culmination is at hand. Eurydice and Orpheus are back together again, but living under the non-looking agreement they have accepted. One day, teased by her husband's continual sessions of radio listening, on the Rolls Royce radio in the garage, Eurydice enters the garage. Orpheus inadvertently looks at her in the mirror of the vehicle, and she disappears. Orpheus dies at the hands of a mob, on suspicion of having provoked the death of Cegeste; then in the underworld Orpheus declares his love of death. This time a tribunal orders Orpheus sent back to earthly life, with his bride Eurydice; neither of them remembers their experiences in the underworld. Orpheus is about to become a dad. Heurtebise and the Princess meander across a desolate underworld landscape.

THEMES

Selfhood. As Cocteau put it himself, the first theme is that of selfhood acquisition, after a sequence of harrowing experiences which drive one—as Orpheus was finally driven—to the limits of his viability on earth. One might say that Odysseus and Oedipus, in ancient Greek literature, were driven along similar paths to self-discovery.

Immortality. A second theme, which Cocteau himself disengaged from *Orpheus*, is that of immortality, which is introduced most directly by death, the Princess, when Orpheus has been sent down alone to the Underworld, separated again from Eurydice. This time death, perhaps feeling that Orpheus has won his relief in the end, confers immortality on Orpheus, and sends him back to life, without any remembrance of the travails that have won his release from death.

Mirrors. The film is concerned with mirrors through which we can slip away into another world, vanishing, or through which we can keep track of the toll time takes on us. Cocteau, a master of prestidigitation, is drawn to the tricks mirrors can fascinate us with.

Trendiness. This film, which spans the centuries with its ancient Greek myth foundation and its openness to the world of trendy music, hot styles, and the occasional Rolls Royce, takes a wide view of the human condition, closely watching it grow while remaining traditionally loyal to its roots.

CHARACTERS

Orpheus is the character on whom the bulk of the argument rests. It is he who must learn (twice) the secrets of the journey to the underworld, he who must lose (twice) his wife, he who, ever the artist, must be doomed to a fatal interest in the unintelligible code emissions from the BBC.

Eurydice. Eurydice is the wife of Orpheus, who though ignored by him, at the start of the film, falls in love with him anew by film's end, when Orpheus returns a second time from the underworld, and both of them are freed from their memories of Hades.

Princess. The princess is a personification of death, as well as a slinky and seductive lady who ultimately confers immortality on Orpheus, and sends him back to the upper world and to his wife.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ORPHEUS

Character Orpheus is the main character, a successful modern poet, a great musician drawn from myth, and in the end a kind of family man, with Eurydice. This figure is less a character, with distinctive traits, than a profile in myth. He represents the greatest of singers, the greatest of adventurers—to the underworld, and the immortal in the part of us that is song.

Parallels. When one thinks of the Hellenic underworld, Homer's *Odyssey* comes to mind, for there we see Odysseus and his men crowded over a seething pit, within which are the living, but death bound, souls of the departed. We think too of the great bards who, within Homer's poems, excel at recounting the

great events of the Trojan War. The power of poetry to confer immortality is the frequent theme of Shakespeare's sonnets--65, 104, 108.

Illustrative moments

Visiting. The film opens with Orpheus visiting the *Café des Poetes*, a trendy venue at which young artists gather to display their skills.

Oriented. After having been left behind, at the Princess' chateau, Orpheus makes the acquaintance of the Princess' driver, Heurtebise.

Closed. Taken back to his home, where Eurydice awaits, Orpheus is unable to feel his old affection for his wife. His mind is too preoccupied. He will not tell her what he did the night before, although she is burning to know what happened to Cegeste.

Relieved. After having been freed from his old slavery to the underworld, is Orpheus relieved to return to wife and family? Interestingly enough, yes. He reverts to the condition of family man.

Discussion questions

What is the relation between Orpheus and Eurydice before he makes his first visit to the *Café des Poetes*? Are they lovers? Have they a romantic past to look back to?

Is the Princess a power of death, or of death and destruction? Where does she get the power to confer immortality on Orpheus, at the end of the film?

Have Eurydice and Orpheus returned to a comfortable married existence at the end of the film? We now realize that Eurydice will carry Orpheus' child. What kind of parents do we imagine this couple will be?