

Orpheus and Eurydike

Length

11 min 26 sec

Pronunciation

The only names where the Greek spelling we have adopted makes a significant difference to pronunciation are Eurydike and Kerberos. This is due to the 's' sound of the Latin 'c' used in spelling them as Eurydice and Cerberus. We leave it to your discretion to use the spelling and pronunciation you prefer.

Summary

The marriage of Orpheus, a master musician, and Eurydike is marked by bad omens and the day after the wedding Eurydike is bitten by a snake and dies. After the funeral, Orpheus travels to the land of the dead and charms his way to the palace of Hades and Persephone. Hades, moved by Orpheus' music, tells the third Fate, who cuts the thread of life, to mend Eurydike's thread. He then commands Orpheus to leave and tells him that he must not look behind him as he and Eurydike head back to the upper world or she will be lost to him forever. On their way, Orpheus hears Eurydike stumble and turns to stop her falling. He catches one glimpse of her before she disappears, never to be seen again by Orpheus — at least, not until many years later, when he himself dies and joins her in the Underworld.

Starting-points

- See what the children remember about the Underworld from the story of Demeter and Persephone. (*It is ruled over by Hades and, for six months of the year, Persephone; it is dark and dismal; there is a river of forgetfulness (Lethe) which the dead must cross to enter the Underworld.*)
- Tell the children that they are going to hear a story about the power of music. Where have they already heard a story involving music? (*King Midas 2.*) Who is the god of music? (*Apollo.*) What is his instrument? (*The lyre.*) Who else in that story plays an instrument and what instrument does he play? (*Pan; the pan-pipes.*) What effect can beautiful music have on people? What powers might a brilliant musician have?

Pause points

1 min 4 sec: *This is a bad omen. Such things should never happen at a wedding.*

- What is an 'omen'? What has happened to make the priests shake their heads? (*The candles and lamps have given off oily black smoke.*)
- What do the children think is going to happen?

2 min 9 sec: *... Orpheus picked up his lyre and set off on a great journey.*

- Why does Orpheus head off on a journey after the funeral? Where might he be going? Why does he take his lyre with him?

6 min 44 sec: *'Fetch me the three Fates.'*

- Where have we encountered the Fates before? (*In the stories of Prometheus and Demeter and Persephone.*) Who are they and what do they do?
- Why do you think Hades summons the Fates? Will they come? (*Not necessarily — Zeus told Demeter that even he had to answer to the Fates.*)

Questions for discussion

- As with Pandora when she took the lid off the stone jar, so too Orpheus does something he has been specifically told not to do. Is it easier to understand Orpheus' or Pandora's behaviour? Have you ever done something you have been expressly forbidden to do? If so, what made you do it? Does the fact that you are told you must not do something make it all the more tempting?
- What sort of music makes you feel really happy or really sad? Are there particular musical instruments that affect your mood? Why do you think national anthems are played before international matches and at medal ceremonies?
- Does this story have a happy ending?

Suggested activities

- Play the children a selection of different types of music (classical, popular, jazz etc.) and ask them to write down as many adjectives as they can to describe how they are feeling as they listen to the music.
- Draw a map showing the journey of Orpheus through the Underworld from its entrance to the palace of Hades and Persephone. Make sure you include Charon, the ferryman, and Kerberos, the three-headed dog and bring in as many other aspects of the Underworld as you can.