

THE MYTHOLOGY OF ORPHEUS AND THE MYSTERIES

Maria E. Daniels, M.I.L., S.R.C.

Excerpted from the article “Mythology,” by Maria E. Daniels, this essay was originally published in the Rosicrucian Digest, Dec. 1969, 459-460. Adapted for contemporary readers, the article demonstrates vividly how the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was connected to the Mysteries at Eleusis, and is still very much alive with meaning for our spiritual journey today.

In order to understand the history of all people, of all great religions, of all the great cultures, it is both interesting and necessary to study their myths with their veiled meaning and the principles that inspired them. Mythology, like music, is to be felt and not to be explained. If it were possible, music would be explained and not created. But how are we to explain the unexplainable?

Nowadays, humanity tries to guess at what its distant origins have been, attempting to relive all that it has forgotten of its past. Up to this day, strange stories of this past still survive in the collective consciousness of people. They are what we call myths, or legends. Suddenly, however, an archeological discovery, the unearthing of a historic



Orpheus and His Lyre in Hades, Virgil Solis (1563), illustration for Ovid's [Metamorphoses](#), from [Ovid Illustrated](#).

object, or the deciphering of an old inscription, confirm the story that was thought to be but a fable. The legend, then, takes on a new meaning and is narrated in history books as an incident in the early history of humanity. This is why there is so much interest in the world today concerning the study of mythology.

The Myth of Orpheus

In order to grasp what mythology is, let us turn to the myth of Orpheus. The legend tells us that Orpheus married Eurydice—the symbol of Light and Truth. Thus, Orpheus did not marry a woman made of flesh and bones, but rather a mystical ideal. One day, while Eurydice was walking on the banks of the river Peneus, near Tempe, the hunter Aristaeus saw her. The hunter, in all mythology, symbolizes confusion, the one who kills.

Thus, where confusion reigns, there is no understanding, there is no love, for whoever kills cannot love. Aristaeus pursues Eurydice, trying to force his attentions upon her, but she escapes, and treads on a snake that kills her with its sting. Orpheus cannot become accustomed to the idea of living without his Eurydice, or without Truth, as



Satyrs and Women of the Dionysiac Mysteries, [Villa of the Mysteries](#), Pompeii.

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it were, and he resolves to fetch her from the World of the Dead.

With his beautiful singing, Orpheus persuades Charon, the boatman, to let him cross the river, from the Bank of the Living, to the Bank of the Dead. He thus begins his weird and unearthly journey into the unknown world. The beauty of his singing enchants the Great Dogs, symbols of loyalty and vigilance, which guard the door to the World of the Dead, and thus let him through. Still singing, Orpheus reaches the Goddess of the Dead. Charmed by his singing, she promises to return Eurydice to him under one condition: that he shall return to the World of the Living without once looking back, and Eurydice will follow him.

Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries

In the mysterious science of the initiations of Dionysus, the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the Hermetic ceremonies, the various directions were associated with destinies, the functions of the human actions in time. Ahead, lay the Future, Revelation. Behind, were the Past, Sin, and Doubt. To return, or to look back, meant that the candidate was irresistible to Evil, and the renouncement to the higher powers of the spirit. The initiate who turned back was unworthy of Truth and would be restored to his or her former spiritual state; such an initiate was incapable of “knowing” and, therefore, had no right to approach Knowledge.

This was the meaning of the initiations at Eleusis. To look back was to return to the Past. It destroyed the bond of good thoughts that, unbeknownst to the candidate, were

bestowed upon the initiate. If the initiate into the mysteries of Dionysus or Eleusis lost everything by merely looking back, it was because this act signified that he or she was spiritually unable to achieve a definite conquest of Knowledge.

Orpheus, therefore, promises not to look back, and begins his return journey. He crosses, once again, the dark passages and forests and the gigantic mountains of the World of the Dead. Having received all that he desired, Orpheus returns in silence, because he does not feel the need to sing. In silence, however, he notices how gloomy and frightening those landscapes are, and he begins to doubt: had he not been duped? Was Eurydice really following him? He tries not to think and to will himself into believing that Eurydice is, in fact, walking behind him, and continues his return journey, for how long, no one knows, as it is always night in the World of the Dead.

Doubt grows in his mind . . . and suddenly he turns around to check whether Eurydice is, in fact, walking behind him. And lo! There she is! For one quick moment confusion prevails, and Eurydice disappears. Orpheus was not prepared to see the Light in the World of the Dead, and therefore lost her forever.

For each one of us, in life, there comes a moment when we feel the doubt of Orpheus. How often have we not thought: “How do I know that all this is worth it? Is there something afterwards? Will it not be in vain?” But we should not allow doubt to impair our judgment, for we would also lose faith in ourselves.



Members of the 1969 Rosicrucian Tour at Eleusis.

