

Shayne Jensen
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Alluding to Orpheus

In his poem *Orpheus*, Robert Kelley uses Orpheus to describe the general struggle of men seeing their wives as something greater than they are, and teaches his reader to view companionship as a personal struggle of perspective. Denise Levertov uses the same character to describe the revealing and uplifting power of music and memories. She seeks to enhance her reader with a memory of life-enhancing enlightenment. Both of these allusions to Orpheus show how their authors viewed the world and the Orpheus myth. By analyzing and comparing these two allusions, I seek to bring a more complete perspective of Orpheus's character described in Greek myth.

Both authors came to their symbolic interpretations of the myth from the original myth itself. Whether this symbolism was first viewed in the myth by these authors, or if they built upon the ideas of others does not matter. These authors chose the character of Orpheus because they saw that Orpheus represented something specific to them. To understand the perspective in which the authors viewed Orpheus, we must seek to understand what they are trying to portray with Orpheus; we must glean what Orpheus represents in each of these author's poems.

Robert Kelley uses Orpheus as a representation of a man's growing by progressing through the trials of a relationship. Orpheus represents a man because the author uses the instructive verb "must" in a second person point of view. Most parables and fables are written

in a second person point of view. This view provides an opportunity for the reader to see what another character is doing, and associate the character's actions to his own. By choosing this point of view, the author puts the reader in a situation which allows him to associate himself with Orpheus. If Orpheus "must," the reader "must" also.

Eurydice is also generalized to a non-specific "wife". Kelley has done this by describing her with general terms which can easily apply not only to all wives, but also to all women. Kelly's Eurydice is a "real woman" that "anybody could see with ordinary eyes". "She is not imaginary...but more real than any mere appearance." This description gives the reader absolutely no visual clues to what Eurydice looks like. She is only a "wife". This description forces the reader to provide his own visual image of Eurydice, provoked only by the clues previously discussed. Robert Kelly has created a scenario in which the reader will provide his own imagination with an image of his own "wife" or "real woman" and associate Orpheus's relationship with Eurydice to his (the reader's) relationship with his own wife (or "real woman").

Kelly's poem also shows an upward progression. The couple is moving "out of hell"; Orpheus "must keep his eyes firmly fixed on...Eurydice...before him...towards whom he has struggled all his life"; "he must move always toward that perfect image of his wife"; he cannot turn back or "he is lost." This imagery shows the two moving from "hell" to "perfection". This upward journey gives the reader a sense of growth. By associating himself with Orpheus, the reader is also experiencing growth in his own relationship. This association allows the reader to learn first hand from Orpheus's experience. As the reader reads on, he may also, for a short moment, view himself alongside his wife on a progression from "hell" to "perfection."

Denise Levertov uses Orpheus as a symbol of the sweet, enlightening memories of life which uplift and inspire. Like Robert Kelly's poem, Levertov's poem has a sense of progression. The poem begins with "white dawn" and "stillness" which move to "ripples" and then a "storm". The poem reaches a crescendo and then moves back to "stillness." The trees end in the same stillness they began in, only they have gained a memory of "music". The trees experience of meeting Orpheus enhances their lives. They stand in their "new life" as "what they have lived comes back to them". Their experience "lifts their branches" and the wind and birds sound "clearer". Where Kelly's poem leaves the reader with a sense of potential loss and danger, Levertov leaves her audience with a sense of something gained from an experience with someone who has been lost.

Levertov's Orpheus is also created in a way which allows association with the loved one of the reader. Orpheus brought new feelings and emotions to the trees as falling in love reveals new emotions to a person. Levertov seems to use this association with music and love as a strong sense of revealing and awakening. The trees:

"...in anguish, in haste, wrenched from the earth root after root, the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder -and behind me the others: my brothers forgotten since dawn. In the forest they too had heard, and were pulling their roots in pain out of a thousand year's layers of dead leaves, rolling the rocks away, breaking themselves out of their depths."

Orpheus's music brings freedom to the trees who "break themselves out of their depths" similar to the way Eurydice was led out of the depths of hell by the same music. This freeing

may be seen as symbolic of the freeing of a person's heart as that person experiences falling in love. The trees then "learn to dance" after following the music for a time. If music is associated with love, dancing is the joy that love brings. By its techniques of association, the poem is animating the heart of the reader in the same way Orpheus animated the stone-encumbered roots of the trees; as the trees feel the music and fall in love with its master, the reader remembers how the music of love sounded and will likewise remember "dancing" to the music which symbolizes the memory that love brings.

Both poems enhance the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. The two poems seem to be written from complementary perspectives. Robert Kelly's poem was written with the focus on Orpheus and shows that his focus is on moving upward towards perfection. Orpheus's progression comes from his work and devotion. Denise Levertov's poem sets its focus on the trees which see Orpheus. These trees follow the same pattern Eurydice followed in that they were freed by Orpheus's music; they followed him when they could not see him; and they were left in the same situation he freed them from—while Eurydice was sent back to her earthen prison, the trees roots were again settled in the rocks and soil of the earth (signifying a return to the underworld). These poems complement each other by connecting the bitterness of Orpheus's failure to obtain his goal, with the remembered joy of Eurydice (associated with the trees).

The two poems combine alternate emotions into the same myth. Kelly's poem brings senses of danger, risk, and duty to its reader. These emotions combine with the joy, love, freedom, and bittersweet sense of enlightenment Levertov's poem brings to the reader. We,

the audience, may feel that Orpheus failed in his task and feel sorrow from the loneliness the trees and Eurydice are destined to experience. Yet, like the trees, we are redeemed by the experience we have had:

“Perhaps he will not return.

But what we have lived

comes back to us.

We see more.

We feel, as our rings increase,

something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest

leaf-tips

further.

The wind, the birds,

do not sound poorer but clearer,

recalling our agony, and the way we danced.

The music!”

Our joy and sorrow are both expanded by our experiences. Falling in love may hurt when our loved one fails and is separated—whether by a failing of moral conduct and willing presence or by a failing of health at the expense of life—we become separated and hurt. Yet, the same memories which cause pain will also comfort and bring joy, and our world is no poorer from our experiences. The trees say, “perhaps he will not return,” but they are still expanded and uplifted by his memory. Now, they (and Eurydice) must look to the imaginal loved one before

them, remember the music he played, and know that they must one day be united again as all living souls will eventually arrive in the same place.

Works Cited

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