**The Plot**

The myth of **Orpheus and Eurydice** is one of the most famous and beloved Greek myths; it is about love, passion, and the weaknesses of the human spirit.

**Orpheus** was the son of Apollo and Calliope, the Muse. Apollo gave his son a lyre and taught him how to play; Orpheus did so to such perfection that even Apollo was surprised. It is said that nothing could resist his music and melody, neither friends nor enemies nor beasts. Even trees and rocks were entranced by his music.

Orpheus fell in love with **Eurydice,** a woman of unique beauty; they got married and lived happily for many years. However, a prophet predicted that their happiness would not last. Soon after, Eurydice was wandering in the forest with the Nymphs, when Aristaeus, a shepherd, saw her and was beguiled by her beauty. He started chasing her and making advances on her. Eurydice got scared and tried to escape, but she was bitten by a snake and died.

Orpheus sang his grief with his lyre and managed to move everything in the world, living or not; both humans and Gods were deeply touched by his sorrow and grief.

**Orpheus to the Underworld**

Apollo then advised his son to descend to the Underworld to see his wife. Any other mortal would have died, but Orpheus, protected by the Gods, went to the Underworld where he managed to charm Cerberus, the three-headed dog. Orpheus presented himself in front of the God of the Underworld, Hades, and his wife, Persephone.

Orpheus started playing for them, and even the cold heart of Hades started melting due to the melodies coming from Orpheus’ lyre. Hades told Orpheus that he could take Eurydice back with him under one condition: Eurydice would follow him from the caves of the Underworld, but he should not look at her before coming out to the light of the world above because then he would lose her forever. If Orpheus was patient enough, then he would have Eurydice as a living woman again.

**Orpheus and Eurydice ascending to life**

Orpheus was delighted; he thanked the Gods and left to ascend to the world. He was trying to hear Eurydice’s steps, but he could not hear anything so he started believing that the Gods had fooled him. Of course Eurydice was behind him, but as a shadow, waiting to come to light to become a full woman again. Only a few feet away from the world above, Orpheus lost his faith and turned to see Eurydice behind him; therefore, her shadow was whisked back among the dead. Eurydice was gone forever.

Orpheus tried to return to the Underworld, but a man cannot enter the Underworld twice, not alive anyway. Here, there are two different versions of the same myth. According to the first version, Orpheus started playing a mourning song with his lyre, calling for death so that he could be united with Eurydice forever. Beasts tore him apart, or maybe the Maenads, in a frenzy. According to another version, Zeus decided to strike him with lightning because Orpheus could reveal the secrets of the Underworld to the humans.

In any case, Orpheus died, but the Muses decided to save his head and keep it among the living people to sing forever, enchanting everyone with lovely melodies.

**Setting Details for Understanding**

* There are five main rivers:
  + Acheron – River of Lamentation
  + Cocytus – River of Woe
  + Lethe – River of Forgetfulness
  + Phlegethon – River of Fire
  + Styx – River of unbreakable Oath or River of Hate
* All the names were meant to reflect emotions dealing with death.
* All rivers appear in both the real world and the Underworld.

**Discussion Questions for Literary Analysis in Class**

1. One theme of the myth is longing.  What does Orpheus long for, and how is the plot of the myth’s narrative resolved as a result of his conflicts and choices?
2. An epic hero is the character who faces insurmountable obstacles and returns home triumphant.  He or she has helpers and tyrants along the way and is often assisted by the Gods.  A tragic hero often starts off the same as an epic hero, but he or she has a flaw that ultimately brings about his or her downfall.  Based on these definitions and your comprehension of the original myth, do you think Orpheus or Eurydice (choose one) is an epic hero or a tragic hero?  Use events from the myth to support your answer.

**Reflection Questions for Homework**

1. Western drama is an art form created by the Greeks to show ways in which mortals dealt with the Gods.  As theatre evolved into modern storytelling, drama has remained a way for actors to share universal truths with audience members and explore the human condition.  What is the biggest lesson you personally took from seeing *Orpheus and Eurydice*?  Was there a theme, a moment, an image, or an idea that struck you?  If so, explain its impact on you.
2. Choose one element from Aristotle’s Six Elements of Drama to comment on.  What did you like or dislike about your chosen element?  Be specific to the production of *Orpheus and Eurydice* and make direct reference and examples.

Aristotle devised Six Elements of Drama:

1. Plot -- the story line

2. Character -- the people in the story you root for

3. Thought -- the ideas the playwright is trying to communicate

4. Diction -- the poetry of the language

5. Music -- the sounds of the world of the play

6. Spectacle -- the production aspects of a play (lighting, set, makeup, costumes, props, staging, choreography)