

Before You Read The Myth

Orpheus, the Great Musician

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

"Great music can pull you right out of your chair. It can make you cry, or laugh, or feel a way you've never felt before."

—Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg

Think of a time when music touched your life. Write briefly about the experience.

Literary Focus

The Underworld of Myth

You don't have to read many myths before you find yourself in that frightful place called the underworld. As you know from "The Origin of the Seasons," the underworld is a dark and gloomy place ruled by the stern god Hades. To reach Hades' home, you cross the River Styx (stiks) on a ferryboat rowed by Charon (ker'an). Then you pass through gates guarded by Cerberus (sar'ber·əs), a three-headed dog. Normally only the souls of the dead go to Hades.

Sometimes, however, living people attempt the dangerous journey, usually to reach someone who has died.

Reading Skills

Summarizing

In a summary, you mention only the most important information in a text.

The tricky part of **summarizing** is deciding what to include and what to leave out. When you summarize a myth, be sure to include:

- the title
- the author (the one who retells the myth)
- the main characters
- the conflict
- the main events
- the resolution

Vocabulary Development

Here are some of the words you'll learn as you read the myth.

inconsolable (in'kən·söl'ə·bəl) *adj.*: unable to be comforted; brokenhearted. *Orpheus was inconsolable and could not be comforted when his true love died.*

ghastly (gast'lē) *adj.*: horrible; ghostlike. *People shudder in fear when they enter the ghastly halls of the underworld.*

reluctance (ri·luk'təns) *n.*: unwillingness. *His reluctance to live without his love led him to brave the underworld.*

ascended (ə·send'id) *v.*: moved up. *They ascended the long narrow path up the mountain.*

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Identify elements of myth: the underworld.

Reading Skills
Summarize.

Go
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INTERNET

Vocabulary
Activity

Keyword: LE7 7-6

ΕΡΜΑΚΗΣ

ΟΡΦΕΥΣ

ORPHEUS, THE GREAT MUSICIAN

RETOLD BY OLIVIA COOLIDGE

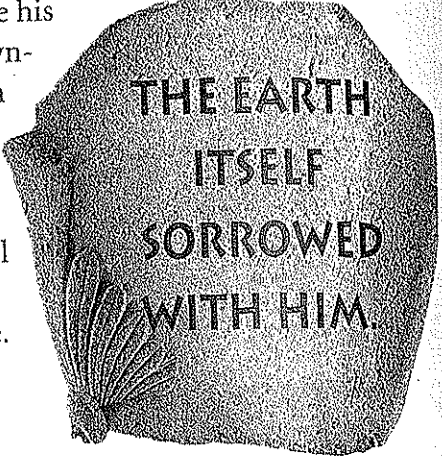
In the legend of Orpheus, the Greek love of music found its fullest expression. Orpheus, it is said, could make such heavenly songs that when he sat down to sing, the trees would crowd around to shade him. The ivy and vine stretched out their tendrils. Great oaks would bend their spreading branches over his head. The very rocks would edge down the mountainsides. Wild beasts crouched harmless by him, and nymphs¹ and woodland gods would listen to him, enchanted.

Orpheus himself, however, had eyes for no one but the nymph Eurydice.² His love for her was his inspiration, and his power sprang from the passionate longing that he knew in his own heart. All nature rejoiced with him on his bridal day, but on that very morning, as Eurydice went down to the riverside with her maidens to gather flowers for a bridal garland, she was bitten in the

1. **nymphs**: minor goddesses of nature, usually young and beautiful, living in mountains, rivers, or trees.
2. **Eurydice** (yŭō·rid'i·sē').

foot by a snake, and she died in spite of all attempts to save her.

Orpheus was inconsolable. All day long he mourned his bride, while birds, beasts, and the earth itself sorrowed with him. When at last the shadows of the sun grew long, Orpheus took his lyre³ and made his way to the yawning cave which leads down into the underworld, where the soul of dead Eurydice had gone.



THE EARTH
ITSELF
SORROWED
WITH HIM.

3. **lyre** (lir): small harp.

Vocabulary

inconsolable (in'kən·sōl'ə·bəl) *adj.*: unable to be comforted; brokenhearted.



Lyre player. Greece.

Even gray Charon, the ferryman of the Styx, forgot to ask his passenger for the price of crossing. The dog Cerberus, the three-headed monster who guards Hades' gate, stopped full in his tracks and listened motionless until Orpheus had passed. As he entered the land of Hades, the pale ghosts came after him like great, uncounted flocks of silent birds. All the land lay hushed as that marvelous voice resounded across the mud and marshes of its dreadful rivers. In the daffodil fields of Elysium, the happy dead sat silent among their flowers. In the farthest corners of the place of punishment, the hissing flames stood still. Accursed Sisyphus,⁴ who toils eternally to push a mighty rock uphill, sat down and knew not he was resting. Tantalus, who strains forever after visions of cool water, forgot his thirst and ceased to clutch at the empty air.

The pillared⁵ hall of Hades opened before the hero's song. The ranks of long-dead heroes who sit at Hades' board looked up and turned their eyes away from the pitiless form of Hades and his pale, unhappy queen. Grim and unmoving sat the dark king of the dead on his ebony throne, yet the tears shone on his rigid cheeks in the light of his ghastly torches. Even his hard heart, which knew all misery and cared nothing for it, was touched by the love and longing of the music.

At last the minstrel⁶ came to an end, and a long sigh like wind in pine trees was heard from the assembled ghosts. Then the king spoke, and his deep voice echoed through his silent land. "Go back to the light of day," he said. "Go quickly while my monsters are

4. Sisyphus (sis'ə-fəs).

5. pillared: having pillars (columns).

6. minstrel: singer.

stilled by your song. Climb up the steep road to daylight, and never once turn back. The spirit of Eurydice shall follow, but if you look around at her, she will return to me."

Orpheus turned and strode from the hall of Hades, and the flocks of following ghosts made way for him to pass. In vain he searched their ranks for a sight of his lost Eurydice. In vain he listened for the faintest sound behind. The barge of Charon sank to the very gunwales⁷ beneath his weight, but no following passenger pressed it lower down. The way from the land of Hades to the upper world is long and hard, far easier to descend than climb. It was dark and misty, full of strange shapes and noises, yet in many places merely black and silent as the tomb. Here Orpheus would stop and listen, but nothing moved behind him. For all he could hear, he was utterly alone. Then he would wonder if the pitiless Hades were deceiving him. Suppose he came up to the light again and Eurydice was not there! Once he had charmed the ferryman and the dreadful monsters, but now they had heard his song. The second time his spell would be less powerful; he could never go again. Perhaps he had lost Eurydice by his readiness to believe.

Every step he took, some instinct told him that he was going farther from his bride. He toiled up the path in reluctance and despair, stopping, listening, sighing, taking a few slow steps, until the dark

7. gunwales (gun'əlz): upper edges of the sides of a boat.

Vocabulary

ghastly (gast'lē) *adj.*: horrible; ghostlike.

reluctance (ri-luk'təns) *n.*: unwillingness.

thinned out into grayness. Up ahead a speck of light showed clearly the entrance to the cavern.

At that final moment Orpheus could bear no more. To go out into the light of day without his love seemed to him impossible. Before he had quite ascended, there was still a moment in which he could go back. Quick in the grayness he turned and saw a dim shade at his heels, as indistinct as the gray mist behind her. But still he could see the look of sadness on her face as he sprung forward saying, "Eurydice!" and threw his arms about her. The shade dissolved in the circle of his arms like smoke. A little whisper seemed to say "Farewell" as she scattered into mist and was gone.

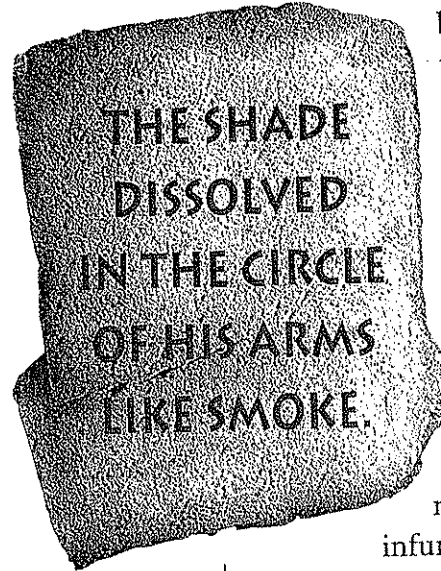
The unfortunate lover hastened back again down the steep, dark path. But all was in vain. This time the ghostly ferryman was deaf to his prayers. The very wildness of his mood made it impossible for him to attain the beauty of his former music. At last, his despair was so great that he could not even sing at all. For seven days he sat huddled together on the gray mud banks, listening to the wailing of the terrible river. The flitting ghosts shrank back in a wide circle from the living man, but he paid them

no attention. Only he sat with his eyes on Charon, his ears ringing with the dreadful noise of Styx.

Orpheus arose at last and stumbled back along the steep road he knew so well by now. When he came up to earth again, his song was pitiful but more beautiful than ever. Even the nightingale who mourned all night long would hush her voice to listen as Orpheus sat in some hidden place singing of his lost Eurydice. Men and women he could bear no longer, and when they came to hear him, he drove them away. At last the women of Thrace, maddened by Dionysus and

infuriated by Orpheus's contempt, fell upon him and killed him. It is said that as the body was swept down the river Hebrus, the dead lips still moved faintly and the rocks echoed for the last time, "Eurydice." But the poet's eager spirit was already far down the familiar path.

In the daffodil meadows he met the shade of Eurydice, and there they walk together, or where the path is narrow, the shade of Orpheus goes ahead and looks back at his love.



Vocabulary

ascended (ə·send'ɪd) *v.*: moved up.

Meet the Writer

Olivia Coolidge

"I Write Because . . . I Almost Have To"

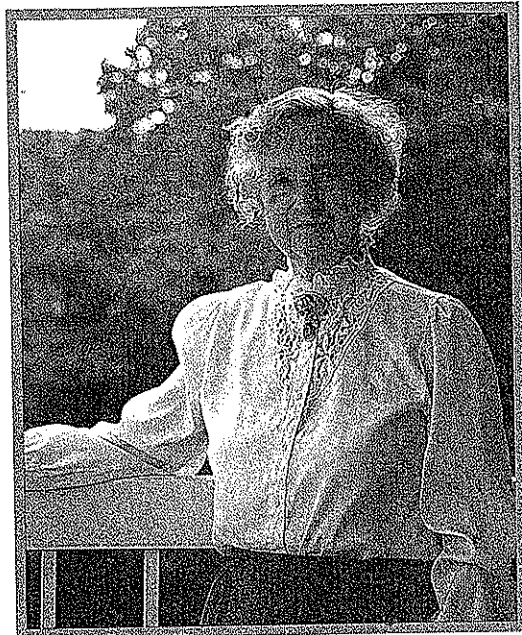
Olivia Coolidge (1908–) developed an interest in storytelling at an early age. She recalls:

“My sister and I used to make up fairy stories and tell them to each other . . . One day we decided that we would make a book out of them, but there was a drawback. . . . [N]either of us [was] very good at our copybooks, and we did not see how we could ever write one whole story, let alone a collection, down on paper.”

Although Coolidge didn't succeed in writing down her childhood stories, she began to write later in life and received awards and recognition for her work.

Coolidge has used her storytelling gifts mainly to make mythology and history exciting for young readers. She believes strongly in the power of the story:

“A good book should excite, amuse and interest. It should give a sense of seeing as a movie does. In other words, a good book needs imagination and the gift of a good



storyteller. I write because I like writing, because I want to write, and because I almost have to. I have a great many things I want to say, ideas I want to express and pictures I want to convey to other people.”

For Independent Reading

For more myths and ancient stories by Olivia Coolidge, look for *Greek Myths and Legends of the North*. To explore the ancient world from which these stories emerged, check out *The Golden Days of Greece*.

After You Read Response and Analysis


First Thoughts

1. If you were Orpheus, would you have looked back? Why or why not?


Thinking Critically

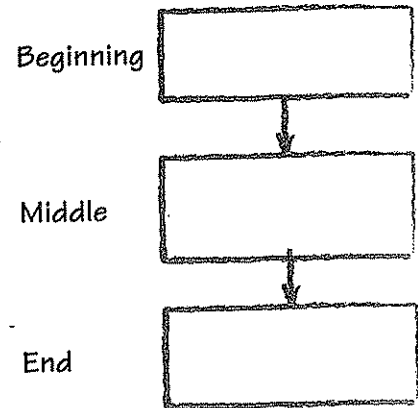
2. On the basis of this myth, how do you think the ancient Greeks pictured the afterlife?
3. Explain how the same feeling that prompted Orpheus's descent into the underworld also caused him to fail.
4. What lessons about love and death does this myth seem to teach? In this story, which is more powerful, love or death? Why?

Extending Interpretations

5. What does this myth say about the power of music? How does this message compare with your own feelings about music? Be sure to check your Quickwrite notes. 
6. Do you think Hades was fair to Orpheus and Eurydice? Tell how you might change the outcome if you were a god or goddess.

Reading Check

Summarize the main events of the myth you have just read by filling in a diagram like the one below. Write two or three sentences in each box. 



Literary Skills
Analyze a myth.

Reading Skills
Summarize a myth.

Writing Skills
Compare myths.



INTERNET

Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE7 7-6

WRITING

Comparing Myths

Use a chart like the one below to compare this myth with "The Origin of the Seasons."

	"Orpheus"	"The Origin of the Seasons"
How the character faces the mystery of death		
How nature responds to the character's grief or joy		
The effect of breaking a taboo or rule		

Clarifying Word Meanings

PRACTICE

Each numbered sentence contains a word from the Word Bank. After reading the sentence, make up a reasonable answer to the question that follows. Write your answer.

1. The queen was inconsolable. What just happened to the queen?
2. The king saw a ghastly sight. What did the king see?
3. He ate the meal with some reluctance. What explains his reluctance?
4. The golden cloud ascended. Where was the cloud after it ascended?

Word Bank

inconsolable
ghastly
reluctance
ascended

Figurative Language

Figurative language describes one thing in terms of something else. Figurative language is not meant to be taken as literally true.

A **simile** is a comparison between two unlike things, using a word such as *like*, *as*, *resembles*, or *than*.

EXAMPLE "... a long sigh like wind in pine trees was heard from the assembled ghosts." [The sigh of the ghosts is compared to the wind in the pines.]

Personification is figurative language in which a nonhuman thing is talked about as if it were human.

EXAMPLE "... when he sat down to sing, the trees would crowd around to shade him." [The trees are given the human ability to crowd around someone.]

PRACTICE

Find the figurative language in each sentence. Tell what is compared to what. Then, tell if the comparison is a simile or personification.

1. "All day long he mourned his bride, while birds, beasts, and the earth itself sorrowed with him."
2. "The shade dissolved in the circle of his arms like smoke."

SKILLS FOCUS

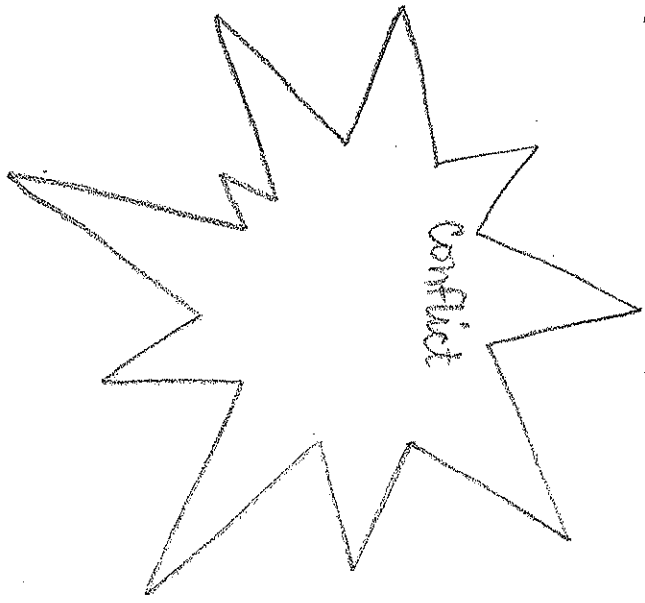
Vocabulary Skills

Clarify word meanings; understand figurative language.

Plot Diagram

Exposition

Rising Action



Climax

Falling Action

Resolution

Orpheus, the Great Musician-
Retold by Olivia Coolidge

Name: _____

Date: _____

Class: _____

Answer the following questions in complete sentences by restating the question and providing details from the myth.

1. What is Orpheus's great talent?
2. How and when does Eurydice die?
3. After Eurydice dies, where does Orpheus go?
4. What does Hades tell Orpheus?
5. Why is Eurydice unable to return to daylight?

Highlight the example of figurative language in the following sentences, then state whether it is a simile or personification.

1. When Orpheus sang a happy song, nature smiled. -
2. Orpheus's words poured down on the forest like a soft spring rain. -
3. As his song grew stronger, the woods began to dance with the breeze. -
4. For Tantalus, Orpheus's song was a soothing as a drink of cool water. -
5. Orpheus sang in a voice like sunshine after a storm. -