Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*: A Contemporary Myth

Ara Vito

Eurydice explores the universal truths within the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as retold by twenty-first century playwright Sarah Ruhl. Despite the sadness of the classical myth, the contemporary adaptation lends a sense of wonder and hope to the deeper themes of death, love, and loss. Through simplistic dialogue and a skillful reimagining of the time period to evoke the youthful innocence of the 1940s and 50s, Ruhl tells the story of a young woman who is caught between unity and disunity, romance and family, the world of life and the world of death. Without lessening the importance of the other characters, Ruhl artfully focuses on a female figure that has not been given a strong voice in previous adaptations, exploring the active inner life of a character that literary history has viewed as passive. This depiction of Eurydice, while whimsical and unorthodox, shows the power art holds to mirror the realities of the human condition.

Myths are retold because they are true. They may not be factual, but there is something in them that speaks to us or helps us to explain life’s mysteries—at the center, there must be something real or we would not continue to retell and reimagine these stories centuries later. “Eurydice” by Sarah Ruhl is the story of two people who are “a little too young and a little too in love” (2). Despite the sadness of the classic myth, the modern adaptation is full of imagery and illusion that lend a sense of wonder and hope to some of life’s heaviest subjects—love, loss, and death. It may be imaginative and even surreal at times, but it also conveys a sense of truth that makes it easy to connect with. Unity is an important part of the through-action in this play—wholeness in life that is threatened by death and the fear of being alone. Despite the fracturing of Orpheus and Eurydice’s unity that takes place as a result of her death, they are brought together in the underworld by overcoming their fears. Unity is broken by fear, and in turn, unity can be restored by overcoming fear. Orpheus is constantly trying to reach Eurydice, while she is growing accustomed to her new life in the underworld and experiencing a new unity with her father at the same time that she is experiencing disunity from Orpheus. The great struggle she faces is trying to decide between staying with her father in the underworld or going back to the real world with her husband. The play’s language, imagery, characters, and theme all serve to enhance this pattern and deepen the audience’s understanding of the pain of love and loss.

The language in the play deepens the innocence and youth that is evoked by Orpheus and Eurydice. It is simple and modern, with short sentences that seem very similar to the way we speak in modern day. Even with these brief sentences, both characters’ personalities come across. It is clear that they have different perspectives in life—Orpheus loves music almost as much as he loves Eurydice; at times, he almost seems more caught up with his melodies than with her. She is more
of a thinker and a reader, spending a lot of time reading books that have “interesting arguments” (6). The dynamic of their relationship is unusual—at times they even seem out of sync with each other, which can be true of the initial stages of young love. Orpheus tries to teach Eurydice his intricate patterns of melodies and rhythms, and when she tries and fails over and over to repeat it, she gives up and says “I don’t need to know about rhythm. I have my books” (8). Then, right after Orpheus proposes and they become engaged, Eurydice asks to know his thoughts:

Eurydice: What are you thinking about?
Orpheus: Music.
A pause.
Orpheus: Just kidding. I was thinking about you. And music. (Act 1 Scene 1)

Despite what may seem like a disconnect in the realm of interests, there is much evidence in the text to suggest their connection. Repetition is one technique that is used to create connectedness between the lovers; having one person repeating the other person’s words and phrases, or even actions, is one way to symbolize a unity between two people. This is used frequently in the first scene—which also happens to be a scene that demonstrates the highly romantic nature of Orpheus and Eurydice’s relationship—first with the repetition of Orpheus “giving” various parts of the landscape to Eurydice after which she kisses him each time. Later this connection is apparent with the repetition of certain words:

Eurydice: Yes. I think so.
Orpheus: You think so?
Orpheus: Yes?
Eurydice: Yes.
Orpheus: Yes!
Eurydice: Yes! (Act 1 Scene 1)

Punctuation is also very important in this scenario because it gives a different meaning to each word and creates distinct rhythms within the text.

Orpheus is a musician, so his entire world revolves around rhythm. This comes across not only in the way he communicates behaviorally towards Eurydice but also in his speech patterns. The play is written more in the style of verse than in prose, so many of the sentences and phrases are broken up into separate lines. Even the larger speeches are not created by full, long sentences but rather by shorter sentences strung together. The stage directions, too, have a very particular rhythm which makes one take more notice of them. Sarah Ruhl’s writing is economical—she makes a clear point without using any more words than is necessary, and her writing is also intentional, so each word was clearly put there for a purpose. It is possible that she chose to write the stage directions in such a way because she wanted the actors or director to pay particular attention to them, and also because it contributes to the rhythm and poetry of the rest of the piece. For example, when
Orpheus teaches Eurydice his melody the stage directions indicate: “She sings the melody. She misses a few notes. She is not the best singer in the world.” (8) This poetic language contributes a great deal to the beautiful simplicity of the play.

Another important part of the language in this play is the use of silences and pauses. Pauses and silences within the sentences are used throughout the text to evoke unease or uncertainty or to create a distinct broken rhythm in a character’s speech patterns, while pauses before or after sentences are spoken are usually meant to highlight emotionally heightened moments or moments of tension or by creating space between important lines of text. For example, when Orpheus says something to Eurydice that the audience is meant to take note of or pay particular attention to, there is usually a pause indicated in the stage directions:

Orpheus: Maybe you should make up your own thoughts instead of reading them in a book.
Eurydice: I do. I do think up my own thoughts.
Orpheus: I know you do. I love how you love books. Don’t be mad.
Pause.
Orpheus: I made up a song for you today. (Act I Scene I)

Another case in which a pause is used effectively is in the second act when Eurydice is in the underworld and is struggling to remember details about what her life was like before she died. She does not know her true identity as a result of passing through the River of Forgetfulness, and she remembers that she had a husband but cannot call to mind his name or who he was. Then her father reads aloud a letter sent from above:

Father: You know I hate writing letters. I’ll give this letter to a worm. I hope he finds you. Love, Orpheus.
Eurydice: Orpheus?
Father: Orpheus.
A pause.
Eurydice: That word! It’s like—I can’t breathe. Orpheus! My husband.
(Act II Scene 6)

This is an especially arresting moment because she is remembering him for the first time since she came to the underworld, which means that there is hope that they might be able to find each other. The pause is important because it makes the audience take notice of what’s going on in the dialogue and pay attention to important details; it also makes us want to know what will be said immediately after the pause.

Sarah Ruhl’s poetic style also translates into her use of captivating and emotionally charged imagery. Powerful images are used in both the dialogue and the stage direction to convey unity, love, and separation, among other themes. The descriptions of music are some of the most noticeable pieces of imagery and
represent the connection that Orpheus and Eurydice have. In some instances, Orpheus speaks about Eurydice in terms of music, telling her “I’m going to make each strand of your hair into an instrument. Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and become a hair orchestra. It will fly you up into the sky” (12). In contrast, there is no music in the underworld. Music only comes to the underworld when Orpheus brings it in his attempt to win Eurydice back—music is his way of telling her that he misses her and it is his way of looking for her. The happy music playing at their wedding contrasts the music Orpheus plays when he loses Eurydice; he writes to her that “I play the saddest music now that you’re gone” (46). Water is another important visual and aural image that represents death and disunity. It shows that aspects of the underworld are echoed in real life such as when the “musty dripping sounds” (29) are heard in the Interesting Man’s apartment and are later discovered to be one of the only sounds in the underworld, which create an atmosphere of emptiness. When Orpheus is pining for Eurydice he dreams that that the strands of her hair are “little faucets” (51) with water running from them, which symbolizes her death and separation from him. Related to the image of water is another image—the River of Forgetfulness—which exists in the underworld and can represent both disunity, by the way it strips whoever passes through it of their memory, and unity by the way it brings the people in the underworld together and makes them all the same.

Eurydice, as the title suggests, is the protagonist of the play. As the one who is constantly caught between the two different worlds and two different loves, she has the most difficult choices to make of any character. Her intelligent yet childlike nature gives an endearing naiveté to her words and actions, but this quality also becomes something that is painfully inhibiting in terms of making those choices. The actions she takes often result from either naiveté or fear, both of which can be detrimental to love. There are two distinct types of love that Eurydice is affected by—romantic and familial—just as there are two distinct worlds, the realm of life and the realm of death. Romantic love is what takes place in the real world, while familial love lies in the underworld here is a constant struggle for Eurydice between the two worlds. It is obvious she loves Orpheus very much, but there is also the familial love she feels for her father. Orpheus and Eurydice sometimes seem disconnected, perhaps so blinded by love that they can’t see where their personalities do not match up. Eurydice and her father have a very strong bond despite the fact that she doesn’t remember him right away because she lost her memory in the River of Forgetfulness. When given the opportunity, she chooses to go back to the real world with Orpheus, but the choice is not an easy one when she sees how it affects her father:

Eurydice: I hear him at the gates! He’s come to save me!
Father: Do you want to go with him?
Eurydice: Yes, of course!
She sees that his face falls.
Eurydice: Oh—you’ll be lonely, won’t you? (Act 3 Scene 2)
An example of an action that results from naïveté is when she follows the Interesting Man to his home under the impression that he has a letter from her father and oblivious to the fact that the man wants her, despite his frequent insinuations, advances, and attempts to seem more attractive to her than Orpheus: “You need to get yourself a real man. A man with broad shoulders, like me. Orpheus has long fingers that would tremble to pet a bull or pluck a bee from a hive...” (30) She is trusting enough to go to his home and this eventually leads to her death.

When analyzing the actions of Eurydice it is important to note the intentional changes that were made in her actions from the text of the original myth. In all earlier versions of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, she dies by stepping on a snake on her wedding day, but in this version she trips and falls when she’s trying to get away from the Interesting Man and his high-rise apartment. This is a deliberate change made by Sarah Ruhl which shows that Eurydice’s death is more a result of her innocent and naïve nature than a mere accident. While the original story focuses on Orpheus and the grief he experiences from losing his wife, this story shows how Eurydice’s character and her choices were the cause of her death. Another key action change from the original myth is that when Orpheus comes to the underworld to get Eurydice back and she is walking behind him, she calls out to him whereas the original text says that he does not trust that she is behind him and turns around to make sure. Again, Ruhl’s version switches the focus and the instigation of action to Eurydice and demonstrates that her choice to call out is a result of her own innocent and childlike fear. This leads to her final important action, which is her decision to let Orpheus go as she dips herself in the river and lies down alongside her father. Although this is a result of a situation that has already happened and a circumstance that seemingly could not be helped—the loss of her chance to return to the real world once the conditions given by the Lord of the Underworld have been broken—but nevertheless, this final action is a choice she makes. Dipping herself in the river signifies that she is destroying the memories she has left and accepting the fact that she is truly dead, achieving a kind of solemn peace in doing so. Before she does this, she shows how much she loves Orpheus by writing a letter telling him to release himself from the bond he has with her: “Don’t try to find me again. You would be lonely for music. I want you to be happy. I want you to marry again” (99). She then goes on to write a list of instructions for his future wife, asking that she “be gentle...When he’s sad, kiss his forehead and I will thank you.” This is one of the most poignant moments in the play because it shows the depth of Eurydice’s love for her husband and the maturity she has finally reached. Her ability to let go and accept her death, while wishing for Orpheus to be happy in life, demonstrates a selflessness and depth of character that is not seen in the beginning. She is not naïve anymore. The stage directions then indicate that “She dips herself in the river” and “She lies down next to her father, as though asleep,” which indicates that she has achieved unity with him and will forever be part of the underworld. When Orpheus appears again moments later, it is implied that he has also died—either from grief or by taking his own life in order to be with her. He recognizes Eurydice but when he picks up her letter he finds that he cannot read it, showing that he has lost his memory of words just as Eurydice did. Even though this
is a stark contrast to the happy liveliness the two of them shared in life and they do not experience the same kind of union they wanted at the beginning of the play, they are still together in death and there is a sense of unity and wholeness in the final moment as "he closes his eyes" (100).

The central theme of the play is jeopardized unity. Eurydice wants to find unity with Orpheus in life and with her father in death, but she struggles to maintain these connections and, caught between the struggle of remembering life or succumbing to death, she must eventually make a decision about where she is going to stay. This is seen in the action through Orpheus and Eurydice's engagement which makes her painfully aware of the separation from her father, her involvement with the Interesting Man which leads to her death and her separation from Orpheus, her father's efforts to connect with her in the underworld and Orpheus's efforts to bring her back to the realm of the living, and her second death which results in a permanent separation from her father. The imagery is connected to the theme by certain key elements that represent either unity or disunity, such as music or the lack of music, and the recurring mention of water. Character choices connect to the theme in that they show the great lengths the central characters—primarily Orpheus and Eurydice—must undergo in order to be near each other, since there is so much that separates them.

This dynamic between two central characters is significant when considering the time period of the play. There is no a specific time period definitively stated in the script, but the mention of Orpheus and Eurydice's 1950s-inspired swimwear in the beginning scene and other vintage details in costumes, songs, and dance styles indicate that the real world should be set sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s. This was a time period that focused on youth and innocence which echoes the nature of the two young lovers. The silhouettes of '50s clothing, especially those of the bathing suits, were meant to accentuate the lines of the body which enhances the idea of Orpheus and Eurydice's infatuation with each other. The dance styles mentioned, such as the jitterbug, are meant to be fun and upbeat which will enhance the cheerfulness of the real world in contrast with the underworld, and the music sung in the wedding scene has the same effect. The song "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" was a popular song during WWII with soldiers and their lovers who were separated by the conflict; while the melody sounds upbeat, it provides foreshadowing for the situation of separation faced by Orpheus and Eurydice. There should be a stark contrast between the underworld and the real world; the underworld is timeless and never changes, so these period details should not be apparent when the transition between worlds takes place.

This contrast carries over into the casting as well. Specifications for the physical appearances of Orpheus and Eurydice are not mentioned in the script; the most important thing about the casting of the two lovers is that their ability to portray youthful innocence. They should be able to convey the subtext that the simple, minimalistic dialogue implies and should "resist the temptation to be classical" (2). Their vibrancy in life can be offset by the stoicism and dignity of Eurydice's father
and the general abnormality of the characters in the underworld. The Lord of the Underworld and the Interesting Man should be played by the same person, and the Chorus of Stones may be played either by children or by adults who behave like children.

Because there is such a contrast between the real world and the underworld, the lighting and color schemes for each world should look different. It is important to note that the underworld is not hell or what we might think of as a punishment for wrongdoing. It is, in fact, a pleasant place that resembles Wonderland more than anything else. The color scheme being used in the real world is pink, light blue, and gray; this pink color intensifies to red in the underworld, gray becomes black, and the light blue becomes a deep, rich navy. The lighting undergoes similar changes—the colors would be pinks and golds in the real world to highlight the innocence and youth of the central characters. The background light would gradually change to a deep red when Eurydice is with the Interesting Man, leading up to her death when the light would be the brightest. As she dies, the light fades to blue, which is how it remains in the underworld. There should be an obvious difference between the cheerful light of the real world and the dim, almost smoky blue light in the underworld. The set would consist of a two-story platform in which the top level is connected to the bottom level by both a staircase and an elevator. The top represents the world of the living while the bottom will be the world of the dead, with the elevator as a connecting factor. The underworld may be dark, but it is still beautiful. According to the stage directions, it should “resemble the world of Alice in Wonderland more than it resembles Hades” (2). This should be someplace where Eurydice might actually want to stay, making her emotional pull between the two worlds even more apparent.

The retelling of “Eurydice” is by no means traditional, but is filled with vibrant imagery and poignant characters that bring to life the ideas of love, separation, fear, and the power of memory. Through imagery, language, and character choices, Sarah Ruhl skillfully and poetically demonstrates the story of a girl who is caught between unity and disunity, romance and family, the world of life and the world of death. All of these are universal themes which are only made more beautiful by the way they can be shown onstage and held up as a mirror to our own lives, reminding us that while pain may be inevitable, loss unavoidable, and death inescapable, the bonds of love surpass them all.

Works Cited


Songfacts.“Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree (with Anyone Else but Me).” Songfacts.com, 2014. Web. 2 Dec 2014.