Orpheus Descending Study Guide

Orpheus Descending by Tennessee Williams

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Introduction

Orpheus Descending, a play by Tennessee Williams (New York, 1958, currently in print, published by Dramatist's Play Service), opened in 1957 in New York City. Although Williams was at the time an established playwright, having had huge success with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and other plays, *Orpheus Descending* was harshly criticized and widely considered a failure. It was a play that Williams had labored over for more than seventeen years. The earliest version was called *Battle of Angels*, and was first produced in 1940. After *Battle of Angels* was almost universally condemned by critics, Williams rewrote it five times, reshaping it as a modern version of the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice.

In *Orpheus Descending*, a young charismatic musician descends on a small, repressive southern town. He forms a relationship with a passionate woman who is trapped in a bad marriage and who has a tragic past. The play exhibits many of the playwright's typical themes: loneliness and desire, sexuality and repression, the longing for freedom. Violence lurks just below the surface, and it bursts into the open at the play's end. The play is also rich in imagery, lyrical language, and symbolism. It is now recognized as one of Williams's weightier plays, although perhaps not on the level of his finest work.

Author Biography

Playwright, novelist, and short-story writer Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, the son of Cornelius Coffin (a traveling salesman) and Edwina (Dakin) Williams. Williams, whose first published story appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1928, attended the University of Missouri from 1931 to 1933, continued his education at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1936 to 1937, and then graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1938. Before he became a full-time writer in 1944, Williams worked various jobs, including clerk and laborer for a shoe company in St. Louis, and waiter, hotel elevator operator, teletype operator, and theatre usher in New Orleans; Jacksonville, Florida; and New York City.

In 1940 Williams's first major production, *Battle of Angels*, took place in Boston, but the play was a failure and was quickly withdrawn. However, Williams did not have to wait long for success. *The Glass Menagerie*, first staged in 1944 in Chicago and then running for 561 performances in New York City, won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and established his reputation.

In 1947 *A Streetcar Named Desire* was an even greater success, winning another Drama Critics Circle Award as well as a Pulitzer Prize. Williams then entered a prolific period, and over a period of a decade, a new play of his was produced every few years. These include *Summer and Smoke* (1947), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955; which won a Pulitzer Prize), *Orpheus Descending* (1957; a revised version of *Battle of Angels*), *Garden District* (1958; which became *Suddenly Last Summer*, 1964), and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961). Many, although not all, of these plays were highly acclaimed, commercial successes. But in the 1960s, Williams's critics became harsher, disturbed by the amount of violence and sexuality in his plays and what they saw as repetitious themes.

Williams had a mental breakdown in 1969 and was committed to an institution in St. Louis. Upon recovery, he continued to produce plays. These include *Out Cry* (1971), *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980). During this period, his reputation revived, and he was acknowledged as one of the foremost American dramatists. His plays were translated into many languages and many of them were made into films.

Williams also produced three volumes of short stories, two novels, a memoir, and essays. He died February 24, 1983, when he choked on a medicine bottle lid in a New York City hotel.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Prologue

Orpheus Descending is set in a dry-goods store in a small southern town. It begins with Dolly and Beulah laying out a buffet supper. As they talk they reveal that Jabe Torrance has had surgery in Memphis but he is dying. Beulah recalls how he had in effect bought his wife Lady, when she was eighteen and had just had her heart broken by David Cutrere. Beulah also recalls that Lady's father was an Italian immigrant who during Prohibition acquired an orchard and made a wine garden of it. But he made the mistake of selling liquor to a black man, and the incensed locals burned down his orchard. He was killed in the blaze. Beulah wonders if Lady knows that her husband, whom she hates anyway, was the leader of the mob. Beulah also explains that Lady is planning to reopen a "confectionery" (which will serve as a kind of nightclub) in another room in the store.

Act 1, Scene 1

Carol Cutrere makes a telephone call, while the Temple sisters gossip about her. Val Xavier enters, and shortly afterwards Vee Talbott arrives with one of her paintings. But it is Val, the stranger, who is the center of attention. Carol insists that she has met him before, in New Orleans, but Val denies it. Carol suggests they go out together, but Val, who is looking for a job, is not interested. Lady and Jabe enter. Jabe looks sick and goes upstairs to bed, but not before he and Lady reveal their mutual dislike. Carol continues to pester Val, and reveals to him some of her past. She used to be a civil rights campaigner, and once went on a protest walk wearing nothing but a potato sack. She was arrested for lewd vagrancy, and a vigilante group warned her to stay out of the county. Val picks up his guitar and leaves the store as the women continue to gossip.

Act 1, Scene 2

Two hours later, Val and Lady talk. Val complains about Carol's earlier attempt to seduce him. He shows Lady his guitar, which has been autographed by famous blues singers. Lady agrees to hire Val as a clerk, while insisting she has no wish to become sexually involved with him.

Act 2, Scene 1

A few weeks have passed. Val, who has been falsely accused by a woman of making a sexual advance on her, explains to Lady his past in New Orleans, where he indulged in wild living. He says he has now put that behind him. Outside, Carol constantly sounds her car horn, because the gas station refuses to serve her. Then she goes to a pharmacy, while Lady says she will provide Carol service if she comes into the store.

Carol enters, and her brother David calls to say that he is coming to fetch her. Lady says she will refuse to allow him, her former lover, in the store. Carol once again makes romantic declarations to Val, which he again shrugs off. It transpires that he did know Carol during his New Orleans days. When David enters, Lady sends Carol and Val out of the store, and confesses to David that she had been pregnant with his child when he discarded her, and she had an abortion. She tells him never to return.

Act 2, Scene 2

Val and Vee discuss Vee's painting, Church of the Resurrection, and Val understands her artistic gift. Vee's husband, Sheriff Talbot, arrives and visits Jabe upstairs. Vee and Val continue to talk, as Val shows great understanding of her work. He takes her hands in his and lifts them to his mouth. At that moment, Talbott comes down the stairs. He sees the gesture and angrily tells them to stop.

Act 2, Scene 3

Val tells Lady that he wants to stay in town, even though he does not feel safe. Lady offers to allow him to stay at the store, in a small alcove behind a curtain. She says it will make her feel safer if he is there, guarding the store. She is physically tense and he manipulates her head, neck, and spine to relieve the tension. He also strokes her neck, after which she leaves to get linen for the bed. While she is gone, Val removes some money from the cashbox and leaves the store. Lady returns and discovers the theft.

Act 2, Scene 4

Late that night, Val returns and replaces the money he took. Lady appears on the landing and Val tells her he is quitting his job because he has won money gambling. Lady is suspicious and finds out that Val borrowed money to gamble with. She accuses him of robbing her, saying she deliberately left the money in the cashbox to see if she could trust him. Val accuses her of hiring him because she wanted to take a lover, which she denies. Then she breaks down in sobs. As Val is about to leave, she begs him to stay, and they go together to the alcove behind the curtain.

Act 3, Scene 1

Early Saturday morning, just before Easter, Lady tells Val to get dressed and come out of the alcove, since Jabe is coming down and he does not know that Val lives there. Jabe sees the new confectionery and dislikes the way it has been decorated. At that moment, a circus calliope is heard, advertising the opening that night of the Torrance Confectionery. Jabe cruelly reminds Lady of her dead father, and then makes it clear that he was part of the mob that was responsible for his death. After he has gone back upstairs, the nurse returns saying that he is having a hemorrhage. Lady is stunned by Jabe's admission.

Act 3, Scene 2

At sunset, Vee enters the store and says she has been blinded by a vision of the risen Christ. She falls on the ground and as Val tries to lift her, her husband enters, furious. He orders Val not to touch his wife, and then interrogates him while Dog and Pee Wee point knives at him. Talbott asks to see Val's guitar, but as Dog touches it, Val jumps on the counter and kicks at the men's hands. Talbott tells him he has until sunrise the next day to get out of the county.

Act 3, Scene 3

Half an hour later, Beulah and Dolly discover that the confectionery has been decorated to resemble the orchard of Lady's father. Carol enters, trying to find someone to drive her across the river. She has heard that Val is leaving that night. Lady expresses surprise, and Val says he is not leaving with Carol. Lady is determined to continue with the opening of the confectionery that night. She wants to resurrect in spirit her father's wine garden, and show that she has not been defeated. Val emerges with his luggage; he has decided to leave since he has been threatened. Lady says if he goes, she will not pay his wages. He replies that he is going anyway. Lady grabs his guitar and says she will go with him, but they must wait until Jabe dies. She tries to persuade the nurse to give Jabe a fatal dose of morphine, but the nurse refuses. The two women quarrel, and the nurse blurts out that she believes Lady is pregnant. After the nurse leaves, Lady confirms to Val that she is pregnant and the baby is his. She tells him he must leave because it is dangerous for him to stay. Jabe appears on the landing with a revolver and fires, wounding Lady. He rushes out saying that Val shot his wife. Lady dies and then some men arrive, bent on murder. One of them has a blowtorch. They rush out, and cries of anguish are heard as they burn Val to death.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

This play, based on an ancient myth, tells the story of a young, sexy, mysterious drifter and the transformation he brings into the life of a bitter, angry woman. Rich in evocative language and imagery, the narrative dramatizes thematic issues relating to both revenge and its opposite, emotional and spiritual healing.

As Dolly and Beulah lay out a buffet supper to welcome Lady and Jabe home from the hospital, they gossip about Jabe's illness, which they believe is terminal, about how Lady and Jabe have separate bedrooms, a circumstance they compare to that of a jail, and about how Jabe and Lady ever got together. Beulah tells Dolly that Jabe bought Lady, after her heart had been broken by "that Cutrere boy," and then goes on to talk about how Lady's father, whom they refer to as "the Wop," moved to the area from Italy and brought with him a small monkey who danced to the music of a mandolin.

Beulah goes on to talk about "the Wop" made a lot of money off the sale of illegal whiskey during prohibition, which he used to buy land and plant a vineyard. She describes how the town used to party there, and how Lady used to meet there with her then-lover, David Cutrere. She goes on to tell how Lady's father sold booze to some "niggers," how the Ku Klux Klan (which she calls The Mystic Crew) burned the vineyard down, how Lady's father ran into the blaze calling for her, and how he was burned to death. She concludes by wondering aloud whether Lady ever learned Jabe was the leader of those Klansmen. Dolly reacts with disbelief to the idea that someone could stay married to the man who killed her father, but Beulah says people live together in hate-filled marriages all the time, and talks at length about how mutually accumulating hate often means that the marriage is accumulating money instead of love. Offstage laughter is heard, lights change, and the play's first scene begins.

Prologue Analysis

The essential purpose of this section of the play is to provide both exposition and foreshadowing - exposition defining the circumstances in which the story begins, and foreshadowing of elements that will appear as the story unfolds. Examples of exposition include the descriptions of Jabe's illness and of his life with Lady, as well as the story of Lady's father, the vineyard and the killing of Lady's father. This last serves as foreshadowing at the same time as it serves as exposition - Lady's memories of her father and of the vineyard, along with her sudden discovery of the truth of Jabe's involvement in her father's death, trigger many of her actions later in the play.

Another important foreshadowing is the reference to David Cutrere, who appears later in the play and whose past history with Lady is a powerful source of present-day tension. One last piece of foreshadowing, which also doubles as one of the play's more

potent symbols, is the reference to the monkey. In terms of foreshadowing, Dolly's comments here foreshadow Lady's more detailed telling of how her father came to own the monkey (Act 3 Scene 3). In terms of symbolism, it becomes clear later in the play, particularly through Lady's comments on the subject, that the monkey represents Lady herself - dancing to the "music" of other people. For Lady, that "music" can be metaphorically defined as the plans and perspectives of other people - her father when she was a girl, David Cutrere when she was together with him, and Jabe now she's married to him. It's important to note that throughout the play Lady repeatedly struggles against other people's control. For example, later in the play when the Town Women insist that she refuse to serve Carol, she insists that Carol will be served if she (Lady) wants to serve her. Another example can be found in her determined hiring of Val to work in the shop, her decision to enter into an affair with him, and her determination to open the shop (Act 3) in the face of Jabe's inevitable death. At the end of the play, her dying reference to the monkey having stopped dancing represents how, at the end of her life, her subservience to men is over.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Summary

In action that seamlessly blends into the prologue, the garishly made up Carol Cutrere comes in, hobbling because the heel on one of her shoes is broken. As Carol makes a phone call, Dolly and Beulah comment on how she must be desperate for attention to make herself look that way. Eva and Sister, Jabe's cousins, come down from upstairs and join in the gossip about Carol, who talks to them in her child-like voice about a superstition that says the broken heel of a shoe means true love is near. Carol's phone call is finally connected, and she chatters with someone named Bertie about how she's being paid by her family to stay away. As Carol is talking about her plans to drive straight home without stopping, Bertie evidently hangs up on her. Carol hangs up as well, takes out a revolver, and starts searching for cartridges to load it. Dolly, Beulah, Eva and Sister (The Town Women) comment on how she doesn't have a license, but Carol says if anyone tries to arrest her, she'll shoot them.

The Conjure Man, an elderly black man dressed in tattered clothes covered with strange talismans, wanders in. The Town Women back away from him, but Carol greets him with friendliness, looking at one of his talismans - the breastbone of a small bird, which she describes as still having bits of flesh clinging to it. She tells the Conjure Man to leave it in the sun to be bleached clean and purified. As the Conjure Man goes, Carol urges him to give his Indian cry, reminding the Town Women that he's part Choctaw. The Conjure Man shouts his eerie cry, and goes out.

At that moment, "as though the cry had brought him," Val comes in, holding the door open for Vee, who comes in and talks at length about how tired she is after painting all day. She and the Town Women make small talk about Lady and Jabe, and then Vee introduces Val. Stage directions describe Val as having a kind of wild beauty and Vee says Val is looking for work. Vee explains that she brought Val to the store because she heard Lady and Jabe needed some help around the place, what with Jabe being so ill. Vee and the Town Women go outside, and Carol approaches Val.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Analysis

Aside from introducing the narratively important characters of Val and Carol and the thematically important character of Vee, the central purpose of this section is to define the role played in the action by the Town Women. They are, essentially, a kind of Greek Chorus, a collection of individual characters with a group perspective. Choruses of this kind first appeared in Classical Greek theatre and, like the Town Women in this play, functioned to provide contextual information, emotional commentary, and additional perspective on the action. In this case, the Chorus/Town Women tend to be gossipy, small minded, and negative in perspective. As such, they represent and embody the attitudes against which free spirits such as Carol, Val, and Lady must struggle.

The use of a Greek Chorus in *Orpheus Descending* is appropriate, given that the story is named after a character in a Classical Greek myth - Orpheus, a wandering musician so gifted that he could even make rocks listen to him. According to one version of the myth, after the death of his beloved Eurydice, killed by a poisonous snake, Orpheus prays to the gods to be allowed to go to the underworld and bring his wife back to the land of the living. One day Persephone, Queen of the Dead, who takes pity on him and lets him try to reclaim his beloved, hears his prayer. Eurydice can return with Orpheus to the world of the living only if she follows him, and, while they are in the underworld, Orpheus never looks back at her. Orpheus journeys to the underworld, charms its guardians with his music, finds Eurydice, and starts back. When they are almost at the surface, he can no longer restrain neither his joy at neither their reunion nor his excitement at their being so close, and looks back at her. She fades back into the world of the dead, never to be seen again. Orpheus is now grieving more intently than ever, so he takes to wandering the world, playing mournful songs. A group of women, entranced by his music and in love with him, become infuriated when he refuses to marry and tears him to bits. Thus is he finally reunited with Eurydice. Elements of the Orpheus myth appear in various forms throughout the play and will be discussed as they appear.

Carol's reference to the bird bones on the Conjure Man's clothes is the first of several elements of bird imagery that appear throughout the play. In general, this imagery is built upon the premise that birds are the freest of animals. The imagery here, that of a dead bird with bits of flesh still clinging to the bones, carries with it a sense of death and destruction. There is the possibility, in fact, that the image carries with it resonance of the Orpheus myth, specifically the image of Orpheus' bones after he is torn apart by the angry women. That being said, there are other possible levels of interpretation to the imagery. The bones may represent Val, Lady or both, since both characters come into the play having been torn apart by violent events in their past, both have bits of their previous lives clinging to them, and both need to be purified (in the same way as the bird bones here).

The Conjure Man is a symbol and an embodiment of forces beyond the control of the characters. He represents fate or destiny, the unknowable and the unexplainable. It's interesting to note that Carol, the freest spirit in a play where the action is driven by characters desperate to be freer spirits, is the only character who offers the Conjure Man any respect. The suggestion here is that Carol, in spite of being an outcast, is nevertheless connected to a level of reality and experience that other characters have no experience of, belief in, or hope for.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Summary

Carol asks Val why he's acting as though he doesn't remember her, and whether he's afraid that she'll tell what she knows about him. After he says repeatedly he doesn't know her, Carol tells a long story about how they met in a bar, talked about his snakeskin jacket, and how he said he wished she hadn't touched it. Carol reminds him that she said "What on earth can you do ... but catch at whatever comes near you, with both your hands, until your fingers are broken?" She talks about how she never said anything like that before, how Val seemed to understand what she meant, and how afterwards he played his guitar and sang. She then says she'd like to party with him, but Val says he's too old to party. Carol responds saying no-one is ever too old, and Val ends the conversation by getting out his guitar and playing.

The Town Women rush in, followed by Jabe and Lady, who's helping Jabe to walk. As Lady urges Jabe to partake of the supper laid out by the Town Women, they greet the obviously-ill Jabe with flattery about how good he looks. Jabe excuses himself from the crowd saying he's tired and then complains about the changes Lady has made to the store since he's been ill. He and Lady argue, and Lady angrily tells him it's his store, so he can do whatever he wants. He tells her to never forget that and goes upstairs. The Town Women comment to each other that he'll never come down the stairs again, and then rush to Lady to ask what happened with the surgery. A knocking begins from above as they pester Lady with questions. Lady tells them the knocking is coming from Jabe, who wants her for something, so she goes up to him without answering their questions. After Lady is gone, Carol refers to a "knocking" in her car and asks Val to look at it. Val says he might do so tomorrow, but Carol says she can't stay - she's not allowed to stay in the county overnight. She then hears the Town Women whispering and angrily asks whether they're talking about her. This leads her into a long speech about how there's part of her that's an exhibitionist that wants to be talked about, but adds that what she really wants is to just be allowed to live her own life. She goes out, the Town Women's gossip gets louder, and Val, disgusted with them, takes his guitar and goes out.

As Val goes, Vee comes in calling for him. The Town Women tell her he's gone off with Carol. Vee comments that not everyone drinks and parties as they do; they accuse her of not being fair. Vee angrily rushes upstairs; the Town Women gossip about her and then go out with the untouched food from the buffet. As they go, Vee's husband, Sheriff Talbott, comes in, shouting for Vee to come down. Vee comes out of Jabe's room and tells Talbott to be quiet, but her husband tells her to come down right away and stop making a fool of herself over "every stray bastard that wanders into this county."

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Analysis

During the conversation between Val and Carol, it becomes clear that Val is intended to be a representation of Orpheus, the musical wanderer. Val's guitar is the equivalent of Orpheus' lyre, a classical Greek harp, while his attraction for Carol is the equivalent of Orpheus' attraction to women in general. The apparently enchanting nature of Val's music is the equivalent of the magical power of Orpheus' music, which could apparently make even the rocks dance. A somewhat more oblique relationship between Val and Orpheus can be found in the frequent references throughout the play to Val's snakeskin jacket. Orpheus's beloved, Eurydice, is killed by a snake, a motivating and defining source of pain in his life. Val's stories of having been "corrupted" during the time he lived in New Orleans (Act 2 Scene1) suggest that he has a similar defining source of pain. Orpheus never gets over his pain, but the fact that Val has a jacket of snakeskin suggests that he conquered and re-shaped his pain in a way Orpheus never does. The other aspect of snakeskin, of course, is that it sheds every time the snake goes into a new phase of growth. Val's jacket, therefore, suggests that he's constantly going into such new phases, reinventing himself and his life. Aside from reinforcing the previously discussed idea that unlike Orpheus, Val has transformed his pain, this aspect to the image of snakeskin suggests that Val, as he moves through the play, is going through another process of transformation. This transformation, in turn, can also be seen as taking place in Lady; therefore, the appearance of the snakeskin is not only symbolic on several levels, but is also a key piece of foreshadowing.

Carol's reference to catching what comes near you is a reference not only to her own free spiritedness and not only to her belief that Val is the same kind of free spirit. It also represents/foreshadows Lady's experience of grasping what passes near her. This is not only true of her grasping at Val and the emotional freedom he represents, but also refers to her grasping at the possibility of revenge when she finally becomes aware late in the play (Act 3 Scene 1) that Jabe was the leader of the gang responsible for the death of her father. A new piece of information passes near Val; she catches it, grasps it ... and to continue the metaphor, breaks her hands on it (i.e., ends up dead when she confronts Jabe and Jabe responds with fury).

At the end of the scene Talbott's angry comments to Vee about taking care of strays foreshadow Lady's taking care of Val - if ever there was a person who could be viewed as a stray, it's Val. It could, on the other hand, also refer to Lady, who was left with no-one after her father died. It could even refer to Carol, who has essentially been disowned by her family.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Carol's offstage laughter is heard as Val comes in and scrubs her lipstick off his mouth. As he picks up his guitar, Lady hurries downstairs without seeing him, and calls the drugstore for some medicine for Jabe. She swears in Italian, angrily says to the telephone operator that she doesn't care if it's late, and as she waits for the call to be connected, mutters that she wishes she were dead. Val tells her she doesn't wish that at all, startling her into raising her revolver. Val calmly explains that Vee brought him, that he's just been outside fixing Carol's car, and that she thought she could get him to make love with her. Their conversation is interrupted by the connection of Lady's call to the druggist and her angry confrontation with the druggist. Finally Lady hangs up, furious and complaining that she's cold. Val wraps his snakeskin jacket around her, saying that Snakeskin is his nickname and telling Lady he's looking for work. Their conversation at times seems flirtatious and at times just friendly as they talk about how Val ended up in that area, how Lady doesn't hire strangers, and how Val has nowhere else to go. Val comments that something about Lady strikes him as foreign. She tells him she's "the daughter of a Wop bootlegger burned to death in his orchard!" and then hears knocking again from upstairs.

As she starts to go up, Val tells her that it's his birthday, that he can do lots of odd jobs, and that he's been redeemed from a life of corruption by the peace he finds in his guitar. He shows it to her, talking reverently about various musicians whose work he respects, many of whom have signed his guitar. Lady asks for a reference and Val hands her the only one he's got, one describing him as a good worker but a "peculiar talker." She says that kind of reference won't get him very far, asks him a few questions to find out what kind of a salesman he would be, and then tells him he starts in the morning. She talks about her plans for decorating the store, so that it resembles her father's vineyard, which leads her into a brief reminiscence about how her father died.

Lady's memories are interrupted by the arrival of the druggist with Jabe's prescription. After a brief argument Lady comes back into the store and has an increasingly friendly conversation with Val that eventually leads him to liken himself to a bird he once heard about that has no legs and has to stay all its life in the sky. He goes on to say the birds are the color of the sky, so they can't be seen because they're camouflaged, and that they fly higher than the hawks, only touching the earth when they die. They agree that they'd both like to be one of those birds, with Lady commenting that to her it sounds like it's the perfect creature.

Jabe knocks from upstairs. Lady speaks of him with disgust, wonders aloud why she's revealing herself so thoroughly to a stranger, and then tells Val to be ready to work in the morning, adding that she's interested in nothing about him but his capacity to work. Val tells her she's just about the nicest person he's ever met, promises to work well and hard, and offers to teach her some of the tricks he's learned to help people get a good

night's sleep. He goes out to get some food. After he's gone Lady is still for a long moment, and then laughs happily.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

This scene contains the second example of significant bird imagery in the play, the first being Carol's comments in Act 1 Scene 1 on the Conjure Man's bird breastbone. It's fairly clear that both Val and the play itself intend for the bird to represent Val--mysterious and beautiful, his true self camouflaged (as the bird is camouflaged by the sky) by charm, a snakeskin jacket, and the reluctance to tell the full truth. There is undeniable appeal in this for Lady, a woman brought to the house of the living dead (she herself describes it in much those words during her death scene in Act 3 Scene 3). Here is where another parallel between the myth and the play comes into focus. Unlike Orpheus and Eurydice, Val and Lady were not lovers prior to the time when Val appears. But Orpheus does come to rescue Eurydice from the world of the dead. Given that Lady views Jabe, their home, and their life together in exactly those terms, i.e. it's a world of the dead, it's relatively clear at this point that if Val is Orpheus, Lady is Eurydice, the beloved whom Orpheus (Val) comes to rescue but who ends up dead as the result of his weakness for her. In that context, their meeting in this scene foreshadows the inevitable end of their story - first Lady's death, and then Val's.

Lady's reference to recreating the confectionary in the image of the vineyard foreshadows the moment later in the play when she becomes aware that Jabe was involved in her father's murder (Act 3 Scene 1). At that point she furiously wants him to be reminded of what he did, in order that he suffer guilt and regret, by seeing the recreated vineyard in his store. Her high emotional temperature is a far cry from where she's at when she's talking to Val. Her mood is much softer and reflective here. This is partly because she's still flirting with Val, but also because she's having one of her rare moments when her memories are driven by her love for her father, as opposed to hatred of the men who killed him.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

A few weeks later Lady tells Val she's just had a complaint from a woman who said Val behaved improperly towards her. Val says the only improper thing he did was refuse the woman's advances. Lady comments on how everything he does is suggestive. Val takes his guitar and starts to leave, saying Lady criticizes him too much. Lady says she's truly pleased with his work; they shake hands in apology to each other, and suddenly seem mutually embarrassed by the physical contact. This leads into a discussion about how human beings connect, which concludes by Val saying human beings are destined to live their lives "in solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on this earth!" Lady disagrees, but Val tells a story of how all his life he's waited for something to happen, for something to make sense, and how so many people live according to the make-believe answer - love. Val continues, telling how he himself fell for that make-believe answer, describing his intense feelings for a beautiful young woman whom he saw naked except for the shadow of a passing bird. This leads him into a story of how the goodness he learned from that experience was corrupted by his experiences in New Orleans.

Val's story is interrupted by the rushed arrival of the Town Women with news that Carol is making a fuss at a nearby gas station. They tell Lady that if Carol comes into the store Lady can't serve her, but Lady angrily refuses the Town Women's demands. At that moment Carol walks in. She and Lady greet each other coolly, arguing politely about whether Carol has actually come in to purchase anything. The phone rings, and on orders from Lady, Val answers it, returning with the news that Carol's brother David is coming to get her. Lady's temper erupts as she shouts that David is not coming into the store. The Town Women gossip about how David used to be Lady's lover; Lady shouts at them to leave, and they go out muttering. As they go Carol tells Lady she's got a message for Val. Lady thinks she knows what the message is, that Carol wants to have sex with Val, and tells Carol that Val isn't available. She goes out to watch for David, telling Carol that when David shows Carol is to leave the store pronto.

Val plays his guitar softly as Carol approaches him and tells Val that she'd love to hold him as tenderly as he holds his guitar. Val tells her she isn't strong enough to bear the weight of a man's body. Carol is surprised into admitting that he's right, that being with a man is indeed painful, but she bears it because the comfort of being with another human is worth the pain. Val tries to get her to go, but she refuses, angrily telling him that she had come to warn him he is in danger, and that she hopes he'll let her take him away.

Lady bursts in shouting that David's coming. Carol runs out just as David comes in, looking for her and accusing her of breaking the agreement to stay away. Carol nods silently, David says he'll take her home, and Carol prepares to go. Before they go out, Lady calls for David to stay. Val takes Carol out, leaving David alone with Lady. Lady

confesses that the summer David left her, she was pregnant with his baby, had an abortion, and wanted to end her life. Lady adds that instead of killing herself, she sold herself to Jabe in the same way as David sold himself to the rich society girl he married. In other words, they gave their bodies and lives to their spouses in exchange for money. She tells him she holds hard feelings about what happened, warns him to never come into her store again, and proudly tells him to not worry over her. As he goes, she shouts at him to remember their nights together in her father's vineyard, saying he hasn't had anything as good since. David shouts back that she's right, and goes out just as Jabe knocks from upstairs. Val comes in, and Lady angrily tells him she made a fool of herself.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Val's comment about human beings living in their skins resonates to the snakeskin jacket, and the idea that snakes shed their skins when they're beginning a new phase of life and/or growth. There is the sense here that Val and Lady both are shedding the skins that keep them from truly connecting with other people, and are actually able to touch each other not just physically, but emotionally and even spiritually as well. Meanwhile, Val's story about love and what happened in New Orleans offers hints about what the skin that Val is shedding might be - the skin he grew into during his period of corruption in New Orleans. The action of the play reveals what Lady's skin was/is - her hate-filled relationship with Jabe. She might actually be shedding off two - along with the Jabe skin, she also seems to be casting off (at least to a degree) the skin of bitterness and anger she's been bound up in ever since her father's death, as well as the even harsher bitterness she's lived with in the aftermath of David's betrayal of her love.

The brief scene between Carol and Val suggests there may be another possibility for what character Val's story of the mysterious bird (Act 1 Scene 2) is meant to represent. Carol is clearly as vulnerable as the bird, and she's clearly as unique a creation as Val and the bird. She isn't camouflaged, though - recall the comments made by the Town Women, and by Carol herself, on how she's made up and dressed to get attention. Neither is she brought down to earth. It seems that attempts are made to do just that, her being paid to stay away from her home county among them, but at the end of the play, Carol is still Carol--free spirited, independent, and maybe a little irresponsible. That isn't to say she's not one of those magical birds - she's just not a dead one, the way Val and Lady are at the end of the play.

Lady's confrontation with David contains the surprising revelation of Lady's abortion. The further along this play goes, the deeper the wounds to Lady's psyche appear. Her death is perhaps even more horrible than Eurydice's, in that Lady has died emotionally several times over. Eurydice only dies once, after being bitten by the snake--her "death" when she's taken back to the Underworld after Orpheus looks at her doesn't count because at that moment she's not yet fully alive. Meanwhile, since Jabe embodies/represents death for Lady, Jabe's repeated knocking is a repeated reminder of how present death is for Lady, thereby increasing her desperation to escape. This

increasing desperation leads to her eventual sexual union with Val later in the play - a temporary escape, but still an escape.

Another important aspect of this confrontation is that it introduces the idea of revenge, one of the play's important themes. The idea that revenge is a fundamental human urge is a common theme in many Ancient Greek myths, but a self-destructive one. Time and again, people who both experience the urge and act upon it are punished and/or destroyed. The experience of revenge in *Orpheus Descending*, which is based on one such myth but telling a particular story all its own, is no exception. Lady's angry revelation of her pregnancy is clearly intended to cause David pain in revenge for the pain he caused her. Her act of revenge here foreshadows her act of revenge in Act 3 when she learns that Jabe was involved in her father's death. That particular act of revenge contributes significantly to her death in Act 3 Scene 3, thus playing out the theme of those ancient myths - acting on the impulse for revenge leads to destruction.

Act 2, Scenes 2, 3 and 4

Act 2, Scenes 2, 3 and 4 Summary

Over the course of these three scenes, sexual tension builds up to the climactic moment in Act 2 - the beginning of the sexual relationship between Val and Lady.

Scene 2 - Later that day, Val is alone in the store when Vee comes in to see him. After some small talk about whether Val has attended church yet, Val unwraps the canvas she brought, leading them into a conversation about how Vee has an special kind of sight which enables her to paint. As she's describing a vision she once had, her husband, Sheriff Talbott, comes in to see Jabe. After he's gone upstairs, Val and Vee talk further, with Val saying that the things Vee paints and the way she paints them help her make sense of the world. Vee agrees, and Val tells her that she's managed to make beauty out of some awful things. He's about to kiss her hands when Talbott comes out of Jabe's room, sees them, and shouts at Vee to go outside. When she's gone, he tells Val that Jabe said to watch him. Talbott looks closely at Val then goes out. Val sits and plays his guitar.

Scene 3 - After Val has played for a few minutes Lady comes downstairs, asking him to play something to calm her and confessing she's worried about what she said to David. Val, meanwhile, is talking about how he doesn't feel safe in this county. As they talk, the sound of baying hounds is heard, which Val says is the sound of hunting dogs chasing down an escaped prisoner. After the dogs fall silent Val comments that the prisoner must have been caught and then starts to leave. Lady tells him he can sleep in the little alcove off the store - help him save some money at the same time as he's doing her a favor by helping keep the place secure. He doesn't seem quite sure.

After waiting impatiently for a decision, Lady shouts at him to go in and look at the room. He goes in to look, and after he's gone, Lady sits and pours herself a drink. Val comes back out of the alcove room to join Lady, and says there's a picture there that might keep him awake - a nude woman bathing. He asks why she's being so nice to him. Lady angrily tells him kind people really do exist, no matter what he believes. Val, seeing Lady is extremely tense, offers to teach her some of the relaxation tricks he talked about earlier. She's reluctant; he tells her to trust him, so she lets him massage her neck. He compliments her on being fair skinned where other Italians are dark, and she remembers her family, her fair-skinned mother's family, and an aunt who told her dying was a lonely thing. She suddenly changes the subject and goes out to get some fresh sheets for Val's bed. While she's gone Val takes money out of the cashbox, picks up his guitar and goes out. Lady returns, discovers he's gone, discovers that he's taken some money, and is about to call the police. But then she stops herself, becomes despairingly calm, and simply goes to the front door and looks out.

Scene 4 - Late that night, Val comes in with his guitar, puts money back in the cashbox, and is putting the rest of a large wad of money into the pocket of his snakeskin coat

when Lady appears. After some argumentative small talk over whether Val should have officially told Lady that he had accepted her offer of the room, Lady asks whether he just opened the cashbox. Val tells her he opened it twice, confessing to borrowing the money earlier and telling her he just put it back. He shows her the money he won, saying he can live on it for the rest of the year. Lady angrily tells him she feels sorry for him, and accuses him of robbing her. Val confesses to feeling disappointed in her, accusing her of lying about there being a cot in that alcove. Lady says she left that money in the cashbox on purpose to test whether she could trust him. Val then accuses her of wanting to use him for sex. Lady loses her temper, striking out at him. Val holds her hands still; she collapses into tears, so he starts to go, but Lady shouts out that she needs him. Val stares at her a long time and then goes into the alcove. Lady shouts that she needs him so she can go on living. Val starts playing his guitar and singing quietly. Lady picks up the sheets she brought down earlier and takes them into the alcove, closing the curtain behind her. The guitar continues for a moment, then stops.

Act 2, Scenes 2, 3 and 4 Analysis

At first glance it may seem as though the brief conversation between Val and Vee in Scene 2, doesn't have much to do with the rest of the play. Upon closer examination however, it becomes clear that in offering his respect to Vee, Val is honoring someone he sees as having a similar kind of artistic, transcendent sensibility as Val himself has. In other words, there is the suggestion here that Val perceives things differently, through music, in the same way as Vee perceives things differently through her paintings. The action of the following scene and the remainder of the play, once Val and Lady begin their affair, suggests that what Val is seeing is the wounded part of Lady that wants to be one of those magical birds. The irony, of course, is that Val, like Vee, loses the ability to see. Both reach a peak of otherness of experience (Val through his affair with Lady, Vee through a vision of Christ) and both lose their sight completely (Val is killed, and Vee is blinded by her vision).

The conversation about baying hounds functions on two levels. The first is to suggest that both Lady and Val are hunted. Lady is spiritually hunted by Jabe at this point in the play and later becomes actually physically hunted and shot. Val throughout the play is hunted by anyone who resents his strangeness, his beauty and his freedom. The second level of function to the baying hounds conversation is that both the sound of the hounds and the conversation itself foreshadow Lady's and Val's deaths in Act 3 Scene 3, Val's death being played out in offstage sound that evokes the same thing as Val's words do here - that of the pursued being caught and ripped apart. Herein can be found another echo of the Orpheus myth, in that Orpheus is ripped apart by women who would not allow him to live his own life.

The moment of the massage has the potential to be a very powerful one in performance. It marks the first time that Val and Lady touch each other with actual mutual interest; it begins to break down the protective skins (referred to in Act 2 Scene 1) that have prevented them from full, vulnerable, emotional contact up to this point, and it foreshadows the beginning of their sexual intimacy in Scene 4. It also holds echoes of

Carol's comment about grasping things (Act 1 Scene 1). During the massage in Scene 4, when Lady strikes out at Val, and he captures her hands in his, and at the end of the act when they seem to be about to make love, it becomes clear that both Val and Lady are grasping at each other. It's also clear that their grasping is so strong that their breakage in each other's hands, or at least because of the other's grasp, is inevitable.

The end of Act 2 Scene 4, is the climax of the play so far, the high point of emotion, of action (as Lady goes in to, presumably, make love with Val), and of mythic resonance. In the same way as Orpheus proves that he's real to the dead Eurydice by playing, so Val proves to Lady that his feelings and interest are real by playing for her.

Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2

Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2 Summary

Scene 1 - Val, barely awake, sits on the edge of the cot in the alcove. Lady races downstairs, telling him to get dressed and hide - Jabe is coming down, and he doesn't know Val sleeps there. As Val slowly gets moving Jabe appears, helped by a Nurse. They start downstairs, Lady tries to stall them, the Nurse insists, and then Jabe tires, sitting to rest and asking why Lady is so excited. Lady explains that she's happy to see him up and about. Jabe gets moving again; the Nurse helps him continue down the stairs, and Lady introduces him to Val, saying the Saturday before Easter is their busiest day in the store, and she needs all the help she can get. Jabe stumbles, but before either the Nurse or Lady can get to him, Val helps him to his feet. Lady urges Jabe to look at what she's done with the store. Jabe and the Nurse both comment on how "artistic" it looks. Jabe is interrupted by the sound of a steam calliope, which she says she hired to announce the re-opening of the confectionary. Jabe comments maliciously that Lady is just as lively as her father, "the Wop," and tells the Nurse the story of how Lady's father died, using the word "we" to describe the people who set the fire. He realizes he has made a mistake and retreats upstairs as Lady angrily asks him what he meant by "we." Jabe admits he was in on the killing and goes out. The calliope is heard again, and a Clown shouts through a megaphone about the opening of the store. The Nurse suddenly returns, shouting that Jabe is having a hemorrhage. Lady appears to be ignoring her as she asks Val whether he heard what Jabe said - "we" set the fire.

Scene 2 - Later that evening, Val is alone in the store when Vee comes in, saying she's been blinded by a vision of "her Savior" (Jesus). Val comforts her as she talks incoherently about how she'd been hoping for a vision the day before, Good Friday, and was surprised to get one when she did. She describes the pain of the light she saw, how a clap of thunder heralded the appearance of the blazing eyes of Christ in the sky, and how she felt the touch of His hand on her heart. Sheriff Talbott comes in shouting for Vee, pushing Val away when he tries to protect her, grabbing Vee, and shoving her out the door. As voices are heard outside gossiping about how Val was caught fooling around with Vee, Talbott interrogates him - is he wanted by the police? What did he do before he came to town? What do the names on the guitar mean? As Talbott examines the guitar, Val jumps at him, attempting to grab it away. As they scuffle the Nurse runs down and tells them to be quiet, explaining that she's got a sick patient, and Lady has disappeared. Jabe cries out for the nurse, and she goes back in to him. Talbott, meanwhile, backs away from Val, telling him he needs to get out of town before sunrise of the following day. He goes to the door and says before he steps out that he hates violence. He leaves, and Val steps into the alcove, closing the door behind him.

Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2 Analysis

The action of Scene 1, builds dramatic tension to the scene's climactic revelation that Jabe was involved in the fire that killed Lady's father. There are several important things to note about this moment. The first is that it gives lie to the assumption made by the Town Women in the Prologue that Lady knew all along he was involved. The second is that it awakens Lady's furious desire for revenge, adding a layer of angry meaning to her determination to recreate her father's vineyard in the confectionery. In Act 3 Scene 3, she makes it clear she wants Jabe to see the confectionery and to realize that it means Lady's not dead. In other words, her triumphant recreation of the vineyard is her Eurydice moment - after being emotionally and spiritually dead for so long, Lady is coming back to life. The sense here is that Val has triggered this transformation in the same way as Orpheus did for Eurydice, descending to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice is bringing her back to life.

This sense of returning to the world of the living, or of resurrection, is echoed and reinforced by the setting of these two scenes on Easter Weekend. In Christian faith and tradition, this is the time when Christ was crucified, spent a day dead in his tomb, and returned to life on Easter Sunday. The reference to Easter here supports the idea that Lady, in the same way as both Eurydice and Christ, is returning to the world of the living. There is another possible interpretation of this reference, however and that is to see Val as a Christ figure. Christ was persecuted and executed by small-minded, fearful, conservative, traditional people in the same way as Val. Val's persecution by Talbott at the end of Scene 2, combines with the image of the pursuing hounds in Act 2 Scene 2, and the sound images of Val himself being pursued and killed in Act 3 Scene 3, to reinforce this idea. In terms of the Orpheus myth, Val's persecution and execution echo the persecution and execution experienced by Orpheus at the hands of the rejected women.

The idea of Val as a Christ figure is reinforced by the action of Scene 2, in which Vee's being struck blind by her vision of Jesus has echoes of Lady's experience. Lady clearly sees Val as her savior in the same way as Vee sees Jesus as her savior. Lady has been struck metaphorically and emotionally blind by Val's appearance, seeing nothing but the brilliance, beauty and revelation of new truth Val has brought into her life. This blindness gets Lady into trouble in the same way that Vee's blindess gets her into trouble with her husband - Talbott's anger at the end of the scene, directed at both Vee and Val, foreshadows Jabe's anger at Lady and Val in the scene that follows, anger that brings the play to its tragic climax.

Act 3, Scene 3, Part 1

Act 3, Scene 3, Part 1 Summary

The Town Women appear, gossiping about how Jabe's bleeding has finally stopped and how Lady is planning to go ahead with the grand opening of the confectionery. Lady appears, fresh from the beauty parlor and shouts for Val. Beulah, one of the Town Women, asks Lady how long Beulah and Lady have known each other. Lady says it's been a long time, leading her into reminiscences of how Lady and her family arrived as immigrants, how she was no bigger than the dancing monkey her father had, and how the monkey died. As the Town Women comment sarcastically on how brave she is, Lady cries out that the monkey isn't dead yet.

Carol appears, and when Lady says the store isn't open to her, Carol replies that because her license has been suspended, she needs someone to drive her out of the county, adding that she heard Val was leaving and was hoping he'd drive her. When Lady asks who told her about Val, she says she heard from Talbott. Just as Lady is insisting Val is not leaving the Conjure Man comes in. The Town Women run out in fear and Lady tries to chase the old, part-Indian away, but Carol asks him for the Choctaw Cry. As he gives it, Val, as if it were a call for him, comes out of the alcove. Carol shouts with joy that there's still something wild in the county, tells Val she'll be waiting outside in her car for him and goes out.

Val and Lady discuss whether he's leaving--he says he isn't, what she needs him to do for the opening--she has a long list, and whether she's going to sit and listen to what Val is going to say--she doesn't want to. He tells her not to have her grand opening, but she tells him she's going to no matter what, telling him how she lost three lives in the vineyard fire--her own, her baby and her father, and how she's determined that the dying man upstairs (Jabe) is going to see the vineyard come back to life. She says it's something that's got to be done so she will not be defeated. She embraces Val, thanks him for his help, and tells him to get ready to work. Val goes out to the alcove, Lady busies herself with last minute preparations, and then Val comes back out of the alcove with his snakeskin jacket and his guitar, asking for his wages. Lady accuses him of getting ready to leave with Carol. Before Val can respond, the Nurse appears and asks Lady to talk with her about Jabe. Lady tells her she'll be up in a second, the Nurse goes back into Jabe's room, and Lady asks Val what's going on.

Val tells Lady he's been threatened by the law, that he loves her, and that he'll wait for her in another county. Lady tells him to stop talking about love, saying fiercely that if he leaves he'll get none of his pay. Val says that's fine. Lady insists that he stay, grabbing his guitar to keep him from leaving. Jabe knocks for her, and she shouts that it's death knocking for her, furious about what she's had to endure and how she's finally alive again. She tells Val that "death has got to die before we can go" and tells him again to get ready for the gala opening. Val rushes her in an effort to grab his guitar. Lady breaks free, shouts for the Nurse, who comes down curious about what all the shouting is

about. Lady tells her she had to get rid of a drunk, and then asks how long the morphine Jabe is on will keep him alive. When the Nurse says it varies, Lady asks whether it's true that sometimes people help those who suffer to die. The Nurse tells her that killing is killing, hinting that Lady wants to kill Jabe.

Lady reacts angrily, telling the nurse to never come back. The Nurse comments that Lady is only firing her because she knows what's going on between her and Val, adding that the moment she saw Lady, the nurse knew Lady is pregnant, and that Jabe isn't the father. She says Lady ought to be ashamed of herself, but Lady says she's happy and tells the Nurse to spread the word. The Nurse goes out.

Act 3, Scene 3, Part 1 Analysis

Lady's process of rebirth is dramatized in several ways in this scene. The first is her appearance - described in stage directions as looking as though she's just come back from the beauty parlor; she looks prettier, younger, sexier, and ready to rejoin the world. The second is her revisiting the monkey story. The previously-discussed sense that the monkey represents her (Prologue) is confirmed here, with her likening of herself to the monkey. In shouting that the monkey isn't dead, she's affirming her own new life. The irony is that later in the scene after being shot by Jabe, she comments that the monkey is dead. The third way Lady's rebirth is dramatized is through her insistence that the re-opening of the confectionery is going ahead no matter what anyone says. For both her and the audience, the re-opening is taking on an aggressively maintained pursuit of beginning a new life.

The fourth, and perhaps most vividly dramatic way, in which Lady's rebirth is dramatized is the Nurse's surprising revelation that Lady is pregnant. In the same way as she's giving new life to herself, she's giving new life to the world. One final way Lady's rebirth is dramatized is her interest in Jabe's potential death. Death has to die before she can be reborn, she says, and herein lies another echo of the play's Christ metaphor. In Christian theology and teaching, Christ's death and resurrection are often described as having destroyed death. Lady's curiosity about Jabe's death, and the sense that, in spite of what the Nurse says, Lady is going to go ahead and make sure Jabe dies sooner rather than later, takes this image and gives it a visceral, violent, perhaps sacrilegious, but nonetheless, seemingly justified twist.

This scene develops the theme of revenge, first introduced in Act 1 Scene 1, during Lady's confrontation with David. She's clearly determined to take revenge on Jabe by recreating the vineyard; thereby, recreating what she thinks is a source of guilt and shame in him. As isthe case in so many Greek myths, however, Lady is ultimately destroyed by her desire - her eagerness to see Jabe both humiliated and dead ultimately leads to her own death.

In the middle of all this is Val's determination to leave and take Lady with him. This resonates with the Orpheus myth, since Orpheus journeyed to the underworld with the specific purpose of taking Eurydice with him. In making plans to leave Val is not only

acting wisely, i.e. attempting to get out of town so Talbott doesn't arrest him, but on a metaphorical level, Val is fulfilling his role in the story - rescuing his beloved from eternity in hell.

Act 3, Scene 3, Part 2

Act 3, Scene 3, Part 2 Summary

Val asks whether what the Nurse said is true. Lady tells him to leave; it's dangerous for him to be there. She offers him his pay, reveals that the Nurse told the truth, and tells a long story comparing her experience of discovering that she's capable of bearing new life to the discovery that a barren tree in the vineyard could bear fruit. She recalls how she festooned that tree with Christmas decorations, and then deliriously calls for Val to get out the Christmas boxes again. She runs upstairs, shouting that she's won over Death, then suddenly turns and runs back down, having come face to face with Jabe. She runs to protect Val as Jabe fires the gun in his hand. Lady is hit twice. As Lady falls into Val's arms, Jabe comes downstairs and goes out the door, shouting that Val robbed the store and killed his wife. Lady looks around at the re-decorated confectionery, saying to Val "The monkey is dead." Lady dies, and Val runs out through the confectionery.

Sounds are heard of Val being pursued and captured by the men of the town, and of a blowtorch being tested - the sense is that Lady's "vineyard" is about to be burned down in the same way as her father's. The light from the blowtorch illuminates Carol, coming in with the Conjure Man, who holds Val's snakeskin jacket. As a cry of anguish is heard (presumably Val being beaten), Carol trades a ring for the jacket, talking about how wild things leave their skins and bones behind. Another, worse cry of anguish is heard (presumably Val being murdered). Talbott comes in, shouting for her to not move. Carol ignores him as she goes out the front door laughing. Talbott chases her, shouting for her to stop. The Conjure Man just smiles to himself.

Act 3, Scene 3, Part 2 Analysis

The Orpheus myth comes to its tragic end (Orpheus losing his chance of being reunited with his beloved) when Orpheus looks back at her as they're nearing their exit from the underworld. This situation is echoed in this play through Val's reaction to the news that Lady is pregnant. He's prepared to go, he's on his way, but his determination to leave is forestalled by whatever is going on emotionally for him in the face of this news. The text isn't quite clear, but he does stay - he's mystified, wonderstruck, terrified; he's any or all of these things. Whatever he feels, he stays - he looks back. As a result, his life and Lady's both end because they are rejoicing in their reunion in the same way Orpheus and Eurydice rejoice in theirs, in that last shared glance ... and eventually end up dead in the same way. Eurydice's death is more immediate, as is Lady's, while Orpheus' is longer coming, as is Val's. Granted his death is delayed by only a few minutes, but the point here is that the pattern is the same. The circumstances of both sets of deaths render the parallel stories classically tragic, a situation defined by the way essentially noble people are destroyed by one specific flaw. In both the myth and the play, the four

parallel characters are essentially good people, but are all destroyed by the flaw of loving too much.

The idea that Lady is being reborn is again reinforced by Christian imagery; in this case that of the Christmas decorations. In the same way as Christmas is a celebration of Christ's birth, by calling for the Christmas decorations, Lady is celebrating not just the birth of her child but her own re-birth. On the other side of the coin, her reference to the monkey dying concludes the metaphorical development of that particular image - in the same way as the monkey's life could not be extended by her father's love; Lady's life cannot be extended by Val's.

The sounds of Val's pursuit are a deliberate echo of the sound of the hounds in Act 2 Scene 3. There is the vivid sense here that Val is being hunted down and torn apart like an animal, a sense that itself echoes Orpheus' death at the hands of women outraged at his not behaving the way they want him to behave. Neither he nor Lady has acted in the way they've been expected to, meaning that it's possible to see their deaths as a thematic statement, warning against living an unconventional life. This idea is reinforced by the final confrontation between Talbott, who throughout the play has represented convention, and Carol, who represents freedom. The cost of living an unconventional life can be inferred from Carol's reference to how wild animals leave behind their flesh and bones, but what's interesting to note is that, even in the face of the tyranny of convention, Carol not only laughs in Talbott's face, but takes with her Val's snakeskin jacket, a symbol of his unconventional life. In other words, Carol seems determined to go on living as she's always done. This combines with the Conjure Man's mysterious smile to suggest that even though tragic death seems to be an inevitable response to living an unconventional life, there's some mysterious value to continuing to live in that way - to live the life of the mysterious, eternally soaring bird. The implication here is that even though Val and Lady and their dreams have been destroyed, somewhere in the universe, perhaps close to the sun, they're still soaring.

Characters

Beulah Binnings

Beulah Binnings is the middle-aged wife of Pee Wee. She gossips with Dolly about local events and people, and she plays an important role in the prologue, where her monologue serves to inform the audience about the tragic story of Lady's father.

Pee Wee Binnings

Pee Wee Binnings is a small, red-faced planter who keeps company with Dog Hamma. During Val's confrontation with the sheriff, he menaces Val with a knife.

Carol Cutrere

Carol Cutrere is David's younger sister. She looks over thirty years old and likes to gain attention by her appearance. Her face and lips are powdered white, her eyes are outlined with black pencil, and her eyelids are painted blue. She admits to Val that she is an exhibitionist who wants to be noticed. She likes to drink and dance and expects to get her way, but she is also, in spite of her exhibitionism, vulnerable and lonely. Her family is the oldest and most distinguished in the area, but she is unpopular in the county. Some years earlier she was involved in civil rights campaigning and, after going on a protest walk wearing nothing but a potato sack, she was arrested for vagrancy. As a result, she is not allowed to stay in the county overnight. The local people gossip maliciously about her, calling her corrupt and degraded. She once met Val in New Orleans, and when he appears in town, she tries to get to know him better, but he is not interested in her. She entices him out on the ruse that her car needs fixing, and Val returns wiping lipstick off his mouth and face. But, it is clear he rejected her advances. After Val's murder, Carol takes his snakeskin jacket as a reminder of the wild freedom he represented.

David Cutrere

David Cutrere is Carol's brother. He is tall and handsome, but with a hard look about his face and eyes. A plantation owner, he married a rich girl and now drives a Cadillac. Twenty years earlier, he had a romance with Lady Torrance, but he rejected her, breaking her heart in the process. He appears only in act two, scene one, when he comes to collect Carol, and Lady tries in vain to prevent him from entering the store. He and Lady have an emotional confrontation in which Lady tells him that when he jilted her, she was pregnant. He did not know this before and claims to have little memory of their affair.

Dog Hamma

Dog Hamma is Dolly's wife and a friend of Pee Wee Binnings. After Val is accused of misconduct with Vee Talbott, Dog joins with Sheriff Talbott and Pee Wee to harass Val. Dog rips Val's shirt open, then grabs his guitar. Dog is also one of the men who murder Val.

Dolly Hamma

Dolly Hamma is the wife of Dog. She gossips with her friend Beulah and seems to take pleasure in the misfortunes of others.

Uncle Pleasant

Uncle Pleasant is a black man, part Choctaw Indian, who comes from Blue Mountain. His ragged clothes are decorated with talismans and good luck charms. The locals call him the Conjure Man and regard him as crazy. When he enters the store, he frightens away the Temple sisters and Dolly. Carol knows how to talk to him and gets him to give the Choctaw cry, a series of wild barking sounds. It is the Conjure Man who brings the murdered Val's jacket back into the store, and his "secret smile" is the last action of the play before the curtain falls.

Nurse Porter

Nurse Porter is the caregiver for Jabe Torrance after he returns from the hospital. She has the false cheeriness of someone used to caring for the dying, and she is mean-spirited. She and Lady quarrel when she indignantly rejects Lady's suggestion that Jabe be given a fatal dose of morphine.

Sheriff Talbott

Sheriff Talbott is Vee's husband, a rough, bullying man who twice catches his wife and Val touching each other in ways that appear to him inappropriate. After the second occasion, he interrogates Val and then tells him he must be out of the county by sunrise.

Vee Talbott

Vee Talbott, the wife of Sheriff Talbott, is a heavy, sexually frustrated woman in her forties. She is a visionary painter and claims to have been blinded by a vision of the risen Christ. She finds in Val a sympathetic listener. It was Vee who first befriended Val when his car broke down in a storm and he needed a place to stay.

Eva Temple

Eva Temple is an elderly spinster who, like her sister, is curious about other people's business.

Sister Temple

Sister Temple is Eva's sister. They are so similar that sometimes people cannot tell them apart.

Jabe Torrance

Jabe Torrance is gaunt and sick-looking, with a gray and yellow appearance. He returns home from cancer surgery in Memphis, but he is not expected to live. Jabe dominates his wife Lady, and keeps banging on the floor of his upstairs bedroom to get her to come up to him. He dislikes her as much as she dislikes him, which has been the case for many years. Lady married him only because he had money. At the end of the play, Jabe shoots Lady to death and then calls in a mob to kill Val.

Lady Torrance

Lady Torrance is probably in her late thirties and still has a youthful figure. She is a passionate, emotional woman of Italian ancestry, whose state of mind borders on hysteria when she is under pressure. Physically tense, she must take pills to sleep at night. Lady is also lonely and bitter. She feels she has wasted her life, having been married for twenty years to Jabe, a man she hates. She was rushed into the marriage after she was jilted by her first lover, David Cutrere. Lady was pregnant with David's baby at the time, and she had an abortion. She still has hard feelings about David, and when she meets him again, she says he must never return to the store. Lady has also had to endure another tragedy. Her Italian immigrant father died in a blaze deliberately set at his orchard by a mob. She did not know it at the time, but finds out during the course of the play that Jabe was the leader of the mob. Lady has not forgotten her father and remodels the confectionery in the store so that it resembles his wine garden. It is her way of showing that she has not been defeated; she is determined to triumph over adversity. Lady feels liberated by her relationship with Val and becomes pregnant by him, and she exults in the fact that she is able to bear a child.

Valentine Xavier

Valentine Xavier is a wandering singer and musician of about thirty who is described in the stage directions as having a wild beauty about him. He wears a snakeskin jacket, mottled white, black, and gray. In the bars of New Orleans where he sang and lived wildly, he was known simply as Snake-skin. Val always carries a guitar with him, and he

describes it as his "life's companion." Music saves him whenever he gets into a bad situation. The guitar itself is covered with the autographs of famous blues singers. Val is a free spirit who does not fit into conventional society, and it is significant that the Choctaw cry given by the Conjure Man, a cry of wild intensity, coincides with Val's first entrance.

Val was raised in a place called Witches' Bayou, and he claims to have unusual powers of self-control. He can hold his breath for three minutes, stay awake for forty-eight hours, and not urinate for a day. He also claims that his body temperature is two degrees higher than normal, like a dog's. He left Witches' Bayou when he was in his teens and drifted to New Orleans, where he soon found that women were irresistibly drawn to him, but he eventually tired of their attentions and of the dissipated life he was leading.

Val is basically a good-hearted man who has insight into the deeper longings of life. He can sense what others really need and desire, and he knows how to give comfort when it is needed. He himself says that although he has lived among corruption (in New Orleans), he is not corrupted. In Two River County, however, people find his manner sexually suggestive, although he does nothing deliberately to cultivate this impression. However, because he is an artistic spirit who does not fit into the accepted ways of thought and action, and because he allows himself to be drawn into an affair with Lady Torrance, he is hunted down by the men of the town.

Themes

Loneliness

The main characters—Val, Lady, and Carol—are lonely, isolated figures. They do not fit into the environment in which they find themselves, are unable to communicate their deepest feelings and passions to others, or feel cut off. The uniqueness of their being is unable to find an outlet, or a fellow spirit, in a harsh world that continually frustrates human desires. Val sums up this theme when he says to Lady, "Nobody ever gets to know *no body*! We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!" Val himself is a free, unconventional, artistic spirit who is bound to be misunderstood and isolated wherever he goes in a narrow, repressive society. Lady is trapped in a loveless marriage, in which her passionate nature has no opportunity to express itself, except through hate and resentment over the past. She echoes the theme of loneliness when she reminisces about her dying aunt. As a girl, Lady had asked her aunt what dying was like. The response was, "It's a lonely feeling." And Val knows that Lady's motivation in allowing him to stay at the store is because she feels lonely and needs a lover. Her loneliness and great need to overcome it is expressed at the end of act 2, when she yells that she needs Val and will follow him wherever he goes.

The third character, Carol, tries to overcome her loneliness by her showy exhibitionism. This is really a desperate attempt to connect with others, to be significant to someone, and to get someone to take notice of her. During an emotional encounter with Val, she confesses that she uses sex for the same purpose. Even though lovemaking is physically painful for her, she endures it because "to be not alone, even for a few moments, is worth the pain and the danger."

In the world of the play, people's attempt to connect in a deep and meaningful way, to overcome the solitariness of their lives, is doomed to failure. Their happiness will be snuffed out almost as soon as it is gained. Val is correct: loneliness is the fundamental condition of humanity.

Sexuality, Freedom, and Repression

Throughout the play there is a contrast between the free expression of sexuality, presented as a positive life force, and the repressive, prudish mentality that prevails in the small town, in which the people are suspicious of anyone who does not conform to their narrow values.

Val is a very sexual figure. Women are attracted to him like bees around a honey pot. He exudes physical allure, and it is he who acts as a lightning rod for the suppressed longings of Lady and Carol. For example, after having established a sexual relationship with Val, Lady, who was full of physical and emotional tension, is restored to a new,

fresh, life-affirming state of being. This is particularly emphasized when she discovers she is pregnant and exclaims, "I have life in my body, this dead tree, my body, has burst into flower!" Formerly, Lady had frequently complained of being cold, suggesting the frozen state of her inner being. Val, on the contrary, is always warm—he even claims that the temperature of his body is permanently two degrees higher than normal. It is as if Val lends Lady his heat, and only then she can blossom.

The erotic energy embodied in Val also manifests itself in his dealings with the sexually frustrated artist, Vee. He understands the essence of her visions and creativity, and as he touches her hands she shudders with excitement. Then as he tells her that she started to paint as if God had touched her fingers—just as he himself is doing at the time—it is as if, in his empathy and eroticism, he is divine himself. This impression is strengthened later, in act 3, scene 2, when Vee is struggling to convey her vision of the risen Christ: "His hand!—Invisible!—I didn't see his hand!—But it touched me—here!" At that point, she takes Val's hand and presses it to her chest. As in the previous incident, it is not difficult to make the connection, perhaps subconscious in Vee's mind, that Val himself is Christ. A moment later, Vee is on her knees with her arms around Val as he tries to lift her up—a fine visual image of the earthbound human artist being lifted by divine aid.

Val's sexual potency is also symbolized by his beloved guitar. When Val arouses the hostility of the men of the town, it is his guitar that fascinates them. Talbott wants to know more about it. Dog touches it and pulls it towards him. If the guitar is viewed as a phallic symbol, it might be said that the older men are experiencing sexual jealousy of the virile younger man. Pee Wee and others produce knives during this scene, which gives a hint, at least symbolically, of their desire to castrate their young rival. (The guitar has another, more obvious function: it represents music, specifically the power of music to give expression to human hopes and desires in a way that spoken words cannot.)

If sexual energy, in Williams's romantic vision, is life-affirming, it is counterbalanced in the play by its opposite—denial, negation, and death. Val represents a kind of innocence (his former dissolute life in New Orleans notwithstanding) and primal power, but Jabe, the cancerous authority figure with his yellow and gray appearance, represents death. Lady even refers to him in the final scene as "Mr. Death." At the end of the play, it is the death-impulse that overcomes the life-impulse. Lady and her unborn fetus are killed, and Val is burned to death, just as, a generation earlier, Lady's father and his vineyard (another symbol of Dionysian life and ecstasy) were also destroyed by fire. It is a grim, generation-to-generation reminder that the forces arrayed against life are powerful, and any happiness and fulfillment can last only for a brief time.

Style

Imagery

The principal imagery in the play is that of birds and wild animals. Both are symbols of freedom. The bird image first appears in Val's extended poetic speech in act 1, scene 2, in which he tells Lady there is a kind of tiny, almost weightless bird that has no legs and so spends its entire life flying. Since these birds are the color of the sky, they are transparent and are invisible to the hawks: "[T]hey live their whole life on the wing, and they sleep on the wind . . . they just spread their wings and go to sleep and . . . never light on this earth but one time when they die!" The image suggests a kind of freedom, to which human life may aspire but not be able to reach. Lady, who knows that such a bird exists only in Val's imagination, responds, "I don't think nothing living has ever been that free."

The bird image occurs again in Val's reminiscence of the first time he made love to a girl. As he looked at the girl from afar, a bird flew by and made a shadow on her body, and he heard its call, "a single, high clear note." He interpreted this as a signal of the girl's willingness to make love—an act of freedom for both of them.

The stage set contains a visual image of a bird, visible throughout the play. It is on the drapery which covers the tiny bedroom alcove where Val and Lady get together. On the drapery are depicted fantastic white birds—suggestive once more of freedom, and a stark contrast to the dullness of the general store. This is particularly noticeable at the end of act 2, when the drapery, lit from behind by a bulb, becomes translucent.

The allusions to wild animals also suggest freedom, although of a wild, untamed kind that is certain to attract predators. At the beginning of act 3, scene 2, for example, Val stands stock-still "in the tense, frozen attitude of a wild animal listening to something that warns it of danger." Like a wild animal, Val has been hunted all his life, even when he was a teenager growing up in Witches' Bayou.

The image returns at the end of the play when Carol picks up Val's snakeskin jacket after it has been torn off him by the lynch mob. A snake renews itself by shedding its skin, and Carol takes the jacket as a sign that the wild, free spirit embodied in Val has indeed not been snuffed out but has been passed on:

> Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean
> skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and
> these are tokens passed from one to another, so that
> the fugitive kind can always follow their kind.

Earlier in the same scene, Carol had taken up the image of wildness and extended it, linking it to positive human values and contrasting it with the artificiality of the modern world:

The country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, with neon.

Religion and Myth

There are various hints of a religious dimension to the play in the many allusions to Christianity. Val's full name, Valentine Xavier, contains the names of two Christian saints, hinting perhaps at another element of his nature. It might seem that the sensual Val is an unusual candidate for sainthood, but he does boast of his capacity to overcome the demands of the physical body—a self-denying asceticism characteristic of some forms of saintly life. For example, he tells Lady that he can sleep on a concrete floor or go without sleep for forty-eight hours if he wishes.

Another religious element in the play is Vee, a visionary artist who paints representations of the Holy Spirit and of the risen Christ. The latter points to the significance of the fact that the play takes place near Easter; and Lady's plan to reopen the confectionery the night before Easter Sunday suggests an allusion to the resurrection of the dead. This is emphasized by the way she decorates the confectionery so that it resembles her dead father's wine garden; it is her way of showing that she is not defeated, just as Christ's resurrection showed that he had triumphed over death. This is shown visually on stage in the last scene, when the lights are switched on in the confectionery. It is as if, on the eve of Easter Sunday, light has entered the dark world. Up to that point, the confectionery has been, as Williams expressed it in his stage directions at the beginning of the play, "shadowy and poetic as some inner dimension of the play."

The play also has a mythic dimension, in that it alludes to the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus was a Greek demigod, whose songs were so beautiful that he was able to charm all of nature. When his bride Eurydice dies after a snake bite, Orpheus goes down to the underworld to bring her back. In the play, Orpheus is analogous to Val, who enters the underworld of the small southern town, to rescue Lady, who is enduring a living death in her partnership with Jabe.

Historical Context

In the 1950s in the American South, discrimination against black people was commonplace. In *Orpheus Descending*, Carol mentions that she protested against the execution of a black man named Willie McGee. This was an actual case that occurred in 1951 in Mississippi. McGee was accused of raping a white woman, although in fact he and the woman had a long-standing sexual relationship. McGee's defense counsel challenged the fact that blacks had been excluded from the jury, and that the death penalty for rape was used only against blacks, never against whites. During the trial and appeal, white supremacist groups threatened violence, and although the Supreme Court twice ordered a stay of execution, McGee was eventually put to death.

At this time in the South, many white people were vehemently opposed to any sexual relationships between blacks and whites. The practice was referred to as miscegenation, and many states had laws that banned it. During the 1950s and 1960s, fourteen states repealed those laws, but sixteen others, including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas, kept their anti-miscegenation laws on the books until the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in 1967.

The routine mistreatment of black people is obvious in the play, in which they are referred to by white authority figures such as Talbott and Jabe as "niggers." When Val is told to leave the county, Talbott mentions a county where a sign says, "Nigger, don't let the sun go down on you in this county." Carol and Val are the two characters who are keenly aware of these injustices. Val has the name Bessie Smith inscribed on his guitar, and he says, "Jim Crow killed Bessie Smith, but that's another story." He is referring to the fate of a famous black blues singer named Bessie Smith, who was known as the "Empress of the Blues." In 1937 Smith was involved in a car accident in Tennessee. What happened next has not been established beyond doubt, but some historians say that she was taken to a hospital that refused to admit blacks, and she died on her way to another hospital; other versions of the story say that the black hospital she was taken to was too poorly equipped to save her life. Either way, the story of Bessie Smith passed into local legend as an example of the injustices done to black people.

During the 1940s and 1950s in Tennessee, however, there were already signs that things were changing. In 1948 a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed in Jackson-Madison County, Tennessee. In 1952 four black students were admitted to graduate programs at the University of Tennessee.

In 1954 the Supreme Court handed down its historic decision, *Brown v. Board of Education,* which declared that school desegregation must quickly be brought to an end. Earlier in that same year, however, Frank Clement became governor of Tennessee with the promise that he would never integrate the state's schools. And in the wake of the Supreme Court decision, there was much resistance to desegregation in the South, and this led to a resurgence of the white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan.

But the tide towards integration and civil rights for blacks was inevitable. From 1955 to 1959, Memphis State University began gradual desegregation, and in 1956 Clement called out the National Guard to integrate schools in Clinton. In 1959 the Federal government sued Tennessee's Fayette County Democratic Executive Committee after its officials refused to let blacks vote in a Democratic primary. It was the first lawsuit of its kind filed under the Civil Rights Act of 1957. In 1960, as the civil rights movement gathered momentum, black college students in Nashville, Tennessee, began sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters at Kress's, Woolworth's, and McLellan's stores.

It was not long before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin. Many challenges remained for the civil rights movement, however. In 1960 only 29 percent of blacks of voting age were registered to vote in the southern states, compared to 61 percent of whites. The problem of disparities in opportunities to vote was addressed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Critical Overview

In 1957 *Orpheus Descending* ran for sixty-eight performances in New York City; it was also produced in 1959 in London and Paris, and had an off-Broadway production in 1959. Critical response, however, was often harsh, and many considered the play to be a failure. Critics were ready to acknowledge the excellence of the poetic language and the touches of humor, but there were complaints about what was seen as a badly constructed plot, and the fact that Williams appeared to be repeating themes he had explored in earlier plays.

Henry Hewes argued in *Saturday Review* that the many revisions Williams had made to *Battle of Angels*, the play which in much revised form became *Orpheus Descending*, resulted in unnecessary complications to a simple tragedy, which made the action seem chaotic. Hewes did have praise for the occasions "when this play glows with Williams's magnificent awareness of the battle between the forces of life and death," and for the excellence of the language. Yet the play

> runs into trouble when it attempts to fly its poetry through a conventional stage atmosphere thick with gossiping old ladies, thefts from the cash register, and Saroyanesque comedy and pathos. The action becomes casual and accidental, a happy ending just as possible as the sad one.

When the play was revived two years later in New York at the Gramercy Arts Theater, Judith Crist in the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that the play lacked "the complexities, the shadings, the broader implications so clearly defined in earlier Williams works and in the subsequent *Sweet Bird [of Youth]*."

Orpheus Descending has been revived in major productions several times since its early days. In 1989 Peter Hall directed a production at Broadway's Neil Simon Theatre. According to Robert Brustein in the *New Republic,* Hall charged the play with Freudian significance, treating it as an oedipal revenge story. By this he meant that Val and Lady, the younger man and the older woman, embodied the oedipal complex, in which a man is sexually attracted to his mother. Lady's husband Jabe then becomes the avenging father figure who punishes the symbolic son for his transgressions. This production won some high praise from audiences and critics, but Brustein was a dissenting voice, arguing that Vanessa Redgrave was miscast as Lady Torrance, and that the necessary electricity between her and Kevin Anderson's Val was entirely absent. As for the play, Brustein regarded the plot as "never far removed from gothic soap opera."

Nearly half a century after its premiere, *Orpheus Descending* is still not regarded as one of Williams's best plays, although it does reflect his typical themes and characters. In 2000 a major revival of the play was staged at London's Donmar Warehouse, directed by Nicholas Hytner. Catherine Bates in the *Times Literary Supplement* singled out Helen Mirren's Lady for praise: "Helen Mirren plays Lady to perfection, casting off her

false selves as so many skins to reveal the despair behind the shrieking nerves, the pride behind the despair, and the girlishness behind the pride." John Lahr in the *New Yorker* also had praise for Mirren's "superbly controlled performance," and he had a positive view of the production as a whole, which allowed the audience "to see beyond the play's showy exterior to its compelling internal drama." For Matt Wolf, reviewing the production for *Variety,* "Hytner's is a surprisingly by-the-book reading of a defiantly showy play that flirts with melodrama and yet can, in the right hands, seem majestic."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the play in terms of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.

The legend of Orpheus and Eurydice has fascinated poets, playwrights, and composers from the Renaissance to the modern era. Since a central element of the myth is the power of music, it has not surprisingly been the subject of numerous operas, including a version of Williams's *Orpheus Descending*, with libretto by J. D. McClatchy and music by Bruce Saylor (1994). Plays such as *Eurydice* by French dramatist Jean Anouilh, and *Orpheus* by Jean Cocteau (1926; made into a film by Cocteau in 1950), and films such as Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus* (1959) are testament to the enduring nature of the myth.

The Orpheus story was not, however, part of Williams's original concept of the play, which initially emerged as *Battle of Angels*. In this play, one of Williams's earliest, Val Xavier was not a singer but a writer, and therefore no Orpheus. But when the play failed so miserably in 1940, Williams refused to abandon it. Over the course of seventeen years, he rewrote it five times until it reemerged as *Orpheus Descending* in 1957. Williams's typescripts show that the new title did not appear until 1953, and it is clear that the playwright was intrigued by the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.

Orpheus was a minstrel, the son of the god Apollo. He learned to play the lyre with such beauty that he could charm wild animals, and even trees and stones. The trees would uproot themselves and move, just to be nearer to his music. Orpheus's story is told most fully in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Orpheus married the nymph Eurydice, but on the very day of their wedding, Eurydice was bitten by a snake in a field and died. Orpheus mourned her but was determined to bring her back from Hades. Descending into the underworld, he reached Pluto and Persephone, the shadowy realm's king and queen, and appealed to them, accompanying his words with the music of his lyre. As he made his plea, the ghosts were in tears and everything else in Hades stood still. Moved, Pluto and Persephone granted Orpheus his request to take Eurydice back with him to the world of the living. There was only one condition, which was that Orpheus should not look back at her until they were safely home. As he led his wife back almost to the surface of the earth, Orpheus became afraid that Eurydice's strength was failing, and he also desired to see her. So he looked back. At that point, Eurydice faded away, dying for a second time, and was lost to Orpheus forever.

Williams's interest in the myth is apparent from the poem he wrote called "Orpheus Descending," which was published in his collection of poems *In the Winter of Cities* (1956). In this poem, Orpheus's attempt to bring Eurydice back from the underworld is doomed to failure:

for you must learn, even you, what we have learned,
that some things are marked by their nature to be not

completed
but only longed for and sought for a while and
abandoned.

And so it is that Val Xavier must fail. He is Williams's modern-day Orpheus who descends to the Hades of a small southern town where Lady Torrance, the equivalent of Eurydice, is enduring a living death. Although the parallels with the myth should not be pushed too far (Lady Torrance, for example, is a highly emotional and spirited woman, far removed from the passive Eurydice of the legend), they do explain the significant role ascribed in the play to music. As in Shakespeare's plays, music often has significance beyond its immediate context, as a symbol of harmony. It is also used as an indication of the kind of "lyric space" (a term used by Jack E. Wallace in his essay "The Image of Theater in Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*") in which deep and sincere feelings can be expressed, and life reaches upwards to a fleeting glimpse of freedom and transcendence. Furthermore, music is a symbol of purity, as Val's comment to Lady about his guitar makes clear: "It washes me clean like water when anything unclean has touched me." The power of music is also conveyed when Val explains to Lady about the autographs of musicians on his guitar. He points to the signature of Leadbelly (1885-1949), the legendary blues artist, and says, "Greatest man who ever lived on the twelve-string guitar! Played it so good he broke the stone heart of a Texas governor with it and won himself a pardon out of jail." Leadbelly is thus presented as a thoroughly authentic Orpheus figure, with the Texas governor playing the part of Pluto. And Val's having Leadbelly's autograph, as well as those of others, on his guitar has the effect of linking Val to a tradition of music-making that is larger than himself as an individual.

There are at least five moments in the play when music asserts itself and becomes part of the play's thematic texture. First, Val sings Williams's own song, "Heavenly Grass," or part of it, several times. It begins with the following verse:

My feet took a walk
In heavenly grass
All day while the sky shone clear as glass,
My feet took a walk
In heavenly grass.

Through the ethereal image of "heavenly grass," the song echoes the theme of freedom, which is embodied in all the main characters. Val, Lady, Vee, and Carol all long for "heavenly grass," each in his or her own way.

Music again adds weight to the freedom image in the second example. As Val gives his lyrical speech about the tiny legless bird that lives its whole life on the wing, music (details unspecified) fades in. Val accompanies the faint music on his guitar as he says, "They sleep on the wind and never light on this earth but one time when they die!" So like that mythical bird of paradise, music too can give expression to an unearthly reality, quite removed from the corruption of human life.

Third, music has the power to make people speak truthfully, or at least to highlight when they are doing so. In act 2, scene 1, music fades in as Carol, in a moment of tender sincerity, confesses to Val that she would love to hold something as tenderly as he holds his guitar. She then says, "Because you hang the moon for me!" This startling image well conveys how Val, and the music from which he is inseparable (his guitar, after all, is his "life's companion"), gives Carol the feeling that everything is right on earth and in the heavens. Everything is in its place, with the moon hanging exactly where it should be in an orderly cosmos.

For Renaissance composers such as Monteverdi who set the Orpheus myth to music, this cosmic dimension of music was an important part of their conception of the myth. In Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* (1607), for example, Orpheus sings in praise of his lyre:

When you play, the stars fall silent
at music so celestial,
and all the constellations
dance in measure with swift or slow
gyrations.

In other words, Orpheus "hangs the moon." His lyre is an expression of a cosmic harmony, what the poet Shelley called in *Prometheus Unbound,* "the deep music of the rolling world," as quoted in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers.

The fourth moment when music makes a significant contribution to the play's themes comes at the end of act 2. Lady and Val have quarreled over the money Val borrowed from the cash register, and he is about to leave the store for good when he is stopped by Lady's passionate outcry that she needs him just to go on living. Guitar music, "Lady's Love Song," fades in and continues during their tender reconciliation in the tiny alcove. This is a fine theatrical moment because visual and musical elements combine to reinforce the theme. The alcove is lit up, making the curtain that covers it, with its bizarre design of white birds and scarlet fruit, translucent. The alcove becomes a kind of sacred space in which love can triumph.

Finally, music accompanies Lady's dying moments as she walks unsteadily to the confectionery, having been shot several times by Jabe. Williams's stage direction is telling: "Music rises to cover whatever sound Death makes in the confectionery." In a contest between music and death, music triumphs.

At the personal level, of course, the tragedy is inescapable. Lady and Val die violent deaths. Val's demise, burned to death by a mob, has some vague similarity to the fate of Orpheus. The minstrel was torn to pieces by a group of Ciconian women, who were angry because Orpheus, after losing Eurydice, had renounced the company of women. And yet despite this grisly end, the ancient myth is not ultimately dark, because the principle of music survives. In Ovid's version of the story, after Orpheus has been killed, his head and his lyre are thrown into the river Hebrus. Miraculously, the lyre still plays,

the tongue of the dead singer still moves to the melody, and the riverbanks echo in lament. Orpheus is dead, but music lives on.

And so it is with Val Xavier. At the end of the play, his snakeskin jacket remains, and is gathered up by Carol. She runs off with it, in spite of Talbott's shouted order to stop. The jacket symbolizes a whole complex of meanings that it has accrued during the course of the play. It is the longing for "heavenly grass," for the bird that never touches the earth, for creative and sensual "wildness," for beauty, for authenticity in feelings, for an end to loneliness—and also for music, since the jacket was part of Val's identity as a singer in New Orleans, when he was known simply as Snakeskin. As Williams (quoted by Wallace) put it in a draft that was intended as a foreword to the play, the "impulse of song . . . breaks out of confinement and goes on despite all order to halt."

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Orpheus Descending,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

O'Sullivan writes for both film and stage. In this essay, O'Sullivan examines the use of both pagan and Christian motifs in Williams's play.

Orpheus Descending occupies a unique place in Tennessee Williams's body of work. *Orpheus Descending*, in fact, descends from Williams's first produced full-length play, *Battle of Angels*, which opened to disastrous reviews in 1940. Both *Orpheus Descending* and its antecedent concern the arrival of a virile stranger in the midst of a repressed Southern community. While the psychosexual dynamic that fuels most of Williams's work was present in the earlier play, a surfeit of incident coupled with an excess of religious and pagan imagery threatened to overwhelm it. This welter of sex and symbolism proved too much for early audiences and *Battle of Angels* was forced to close shortly after its opening. The playwright was undaunted and for the next 17 years, a period that witnessed his greatest artistic and commercial triumphs, he continued to rework the original material of *Battle of Angels*. The result of this relentless effort was *Orpheus Descending*, which premiered on March 21, 1957.

As Williams pointed out in the introduction to the published script, the basic plot of Battle remained intact. *Orpheus Descending*, he wrote, was "the tale of a wild-spirited boy who wanders into a conventional community of the South and creates the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop." Benjamin Nelson has pointed out in his study *Tennessee Williams* that "Much of the naive plot pyrotechnics have been eliminated in transition," and, he adds, "the physical plot is considerably tightened." Yet, despite these changes, Williams stubbornly clung to the surplus of symbolism that so baffled and infuriated *Battle of Angels*'s critics. *Orpheus Descending* did not fare much better. The play received poor notices and closed after a short run. Williams expressed his disappointment to Don Ross in a 1958 interview that ran in the *New York Herald Tribune:*

> I was terribly shocked by its reception. . . . I had invested so much of myself in it. I had worked longer at it than any other play. I thought it had lyricism, the feeling of tenderness, the striving to understand, the longing, but I did feel that the ending didn't come off quite right.

To best judge the play on its intrinsic merits, independent of the strengths or shortcomings of any given production, one must look at the elements woven into the fabric of the play, particularly on the promiscuous use of symbolism from conflicting traditions. The success or failure of the play can, in large part, be measured by the degree to which Williams has been able to fuse both pagan and Christian imagery.

The play abounds in symbols. There is an excessive commingling of motif from the pagan and Christian traditions. The weight of these symbols threatens to founder the play, freighted as it is with too many allusions. If, as Williams claims in the introduction

to *Orpheus Descending*, the play is "a lyrical play about memories and the loneliness of them" he risks burying these memories under an excess of symbols. It would be well, then, to discuss some of the motifs, both Christian and pagan, which Williams employs in his story of light against dark, life against death.

There is a marked Mediterranean aspect of the play, rich in classical allusions. The fallen debutante Carol Cutrere has evolved from the character of Cassandra Whiteside, who appeared in *Battle of Angels*. In classical mythology, Cassandra was a seer whose prophecies were not believed.

In act 2, scene 3, a fugitive from a chain gang is pursued by dogs offstage. Val and Lady listen as the dogs' baying "become almost a single savage note." "They're tearing him to pieces!" says Val. This both illustrates Val's affinity for the fugitive kind and foreshadows the tragic denouement that closes the final act. It also carries with it the connotation of the rending of Actaeon by his own dogs, after he spied the goddess Diana bathing. Again, Williams has demonstrated his ability to load—or overload—a scene with multiple layers of meaning. As the baying of the dogs dies out, following a single gunshot, the couple make the first tentative steps towards the coupling that will both rejuvenate Lady and threaten her life.

Dolly, Beaulah, and the Temple Sisters function as a sort of Greek Chorus, commenting on events as they happen and providing the audience with background information.

The character of Lady Torrance, an Italian immigrant whose father was burned alive, along with his wine garden, for selling wine to blacks, is derived from *Battle of Angel*'s Myra Torrance. The shift in Mrs. Torrance's ethnicity and the manner and place of her father's death serve multiple purposes. On the level of plot, the immolation of Lady's father presages the violence of act 3. The vines of Papa Romano and the wine made from them also evoke the wine-wreathed Dionysus, god of excess, inebriation and, incidentally, theater. Dionysus, who gave wine to humankind, is associated with orgiastic revels, unbridled passions, and irrational violence. The effect the god has on his female followers, the Maenads, is akin to the effect that Val has on the town's women, from the nymphomaniacal Carol Cutrere, to the visionary Vee Talbott, to the repressed Lady Torrance.

The title change is, perhaps, the most telling. In the Greek myth, adopted by the Romans, Orpheus descended into Hades to retrieve his beloved Eurydice after she had been bitten by a deadly snake. He so charmed the guardians of Hell with his lyre playing that he was allowed to lead Eurydice out of the Underworld with the condition that he must not look back at her until he had left Hades. He, of course, looks back, with the fatal consequence that she is lost to him forever. Grieving over the loss of Eurydice, he sang of his love for her until Maenads tore him to pieces. The classical scholar Michael Grant points out in *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* that Orpheus, who was first associated with Apollo, who gave him his lyre, later came to be contrasted with him, "So Orpheus combined both Apolline and Dionysiac tendencies in Greek religion."

Val Xavier, a writer in the earlier version of the play, is now a guitar-toting drifter in a snakeskin jacket. The change of occupation emphasizes the identification of Val with the lyre-strumming Orpheus. He is now something more than a mere "fox in the hen house." Val's arrival has an intoxicating effect on the local womenfolk, inciting the jealousy and resentment of the town's men. As Nelson points out in *Tennessee Williams* "Val's music does not affect everyone but his presence certainly does. He descends into the under-kingdom to help Eurydice but his mission goes awry. The enchanted minstrel descends into the under-kingdom and is defeated."

Yet, in classical mythology, Hell is not a place from which no one may return. Michael Grant points out that there have been many Harrowers of Hell, including Heracles, Theseus, Dionysus, Orpheus and Aeneas. And, of course, the Christian tradition begins with Christ's own descent into Hell. Perhaps most pertinent to this play, however, is the example of Persephone. As the queen of Hell she welcomed Orpheus into the Underworld. According to myth, she was carried off by Pluto and forced to spend half the year underground. Her time underground was associated with the germination of seeds and the regeneration of spring, thus becoming an important symbol of rebirth.

While evocative of the temptation in the garden, Val's snakeskin jacket also resonates as a symbol of rebirth. The snake sheds its old skin, to make way for the new, just as the fallow time of winter makes way for the renewal of spring. And, as will be shown the thematic of rebirth or resurrection is the central element of the Christian symbolism, which shares, or competes for space, in this play crowded with symbols.

The Christian motifs commence with Val Xavier's name, "pouring symbolism through every letter," as Nelson states in *Tennessee Williams.* Val is short for Valentine, a Christian martyr whose feast day, February 14, is associated with romantic coupling and links, in one image, both death and regeneration. While it is clearly intended that Val be associated with the Orpheus of the title, it is worth noting that, according to Grant in *Myths of the Greeks and Romans,* "the Christians identified him with the Prince of Peace in Isaiah." Nelson remarks of Val's descent, "once in the Underworld his role as Orpheus becomes conspicuously confused with Christian symbolism and he is presented as a Christ figure, raising up the local Magdalenes." The violent denouement of the play evokes both Greek tragedy and, most scandalously, the Passion of Christ.

While Cassandra's prophetic vocation has been downplayed with the name change to Carol, another seer, the religious visionary Vee Talbott is highlighted. Vee is another of the frustrated women suffocating in this small Southern town in whom, as Nelson points out "sexuality has been so perverted that it is hopelessly confused with religious exaltation." It is a running gag that the visions of apostles that Vee commemorates with her religious paintings all bear the likeness of local men. In act 3, scene 2, Vee has a vision of Christ in the cottonwoods, evidently in the form of Val Xavier, which helps precipitate the play's final crisis. Vee has witnessed the sky split open: "I saw, I tell you, I saw the TWO HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS CHRIST RISEN!—Not crucified but Risen! I mean Crucified and then RISEN!—The blazing eyes of Christ Risen!" Vee's ecstatic religious passion exceeds even Carol Cutrere's erotomania, and when Vee places Val's hand on her chest to show her how Christ touched her, his fate is sealed.

The fact that the play has two seer figures, each representing a different tradition, rather than settling on a single figure that could fuse the two traditions, demonstrates some of the problems presented by Williams's design. Whether this doubling of the visionary motif deepens or confuses the concept is open to question.

The play's climax occurs between Good Friday and Easter, deepening the association of Val with Christ: the fox has now become the lamb. In a recurrence of the Orpheus motif, Val tarries when he learns that Lady is bearing his child, thus losing the chance to save himself. This Eurydice, evidently, has no plans to abandon her Hell.

Val is not torn apart by Maenads; instead, he falls prey to the lynch mob. Yet, his demise manages, in its characteristic excess, to jumble together the disparate imagery that has both marred and enriched the play. As Nelson notes, "Val's destruction at the conclusion is symbolic of many things: the crucifixion of Christ, the destruction of the bringer of light, the rending asunder of Dionysus, the god of fertility and rebirth, and the punishment of Orpheus."

Source: Kevin O'Sullivan, Critical Essay on *Orpheus Descending,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Traubitz examines the complexity of myth in Williams's Orpheus Descending.

Tennessee Williams's first professionally produced play, *Battle of Angels* (1940), failed during its Boston tryouts. However, the play did not die. Williams continued to rewrite, to add, to modify and in March, 1957, with the great successes of *Glass Menagerie* (1945), *Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) behind him, he committed *Battle of Angels,* now titled *Orpheus Descending*, to another Broadway production. "I honestly believe," Williams wrote, "that it is finally finished. About 75 percent of it is new writing, but what is much more important, I believe that I have now finally managed to say in it what I wanted to say . . ." Few plays have been so long meditated and so staunchly believed in by their creators, yet after seventeen years of perpetual revising by America's most successful playwright and one of the most influential figures in the international theater, *Orpheus Descending* played only sixty-eight performances.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest through an analysis of the myths creating the dramatic structure that *Orpheus Descending* is a better play than its dismal performance record suggests, a play which has yet to fulfill its potential in production but which even in the printed text represents a significant attempt to recreate myths in the context of our own time.

Although I will consider only those myths with obvious referents in the text to the exclusion of whatever subconscious archetypes we might posit, Williams' autobiographical impulses are important, as he superimposed and strengthened the Orpheus myth upon the myth of the battle between light and dark, the good and evil angels who war in heaven. Williams does not suppress this battle-in-heaven myth, as Hugh Dickenson clearly demonstrates in his comparison of the two published versions of the play. Rather, Williams comes to emphasize the responsibility which love places upon the poet/ singer Orpheus and the pull toward life and fruitfulness that the Orpheus figure creates in those dead souls he meets in the hades of the Torrance Mercantile Store. Williams himself always considered *Orpheus Descending* autobiographical. "Well," he wrote, "nothing is more precious to anybody than the emotional record of his youth, and you will find the trail of my sleeve-worn heart in this completed play . . ." The hero/savior Orpheus or Val, as Williams calls his hero, embodies the playwright as he chooses to see himself, heart on sleeve, "a wild spirited boy who wanders into a conventional community of the South and creates the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop."

In the play itself we are able to distinguish five separate myth patterns: the loss of Eden, the battle of angels, Christ, Orpheus, and Adonis. The setting of the play is the Torrance Mercantile Store, from late winter in Act I through the dark night before Easter dawn at the end of Act III. Throughout the play we are aware of rain, occasionally in torrents and at points accompanied by thunder and lightning, perceived through a giant "dusty"

window looking out on "disturbing emptiness." Dogs, the hounds of hell, bark with varying degrees of menace. The store interior is almost entirely bare, but does contain "the black skeleton of a dressmaker's dummy" and "a sinister-looking artificial palm in a greenish-brown jardiniere." A much smaller bedroom alcove contrasts with the larger set. Across the alcove hangs an oriental drapery picturing two major myth motifs of the play, "fantastic birds" and a golden tree with scarlet fruit, a tree of life. Before the action of the play begins, the conflict is clearly announced in this set: life, fruitfulness, freedom against sinister artificiality, barrenness and death. The conflict will be played out within the mercantile hell where there are only the ones who are bought, the buyers and those few who have never been branded.

The setting is completed by a prologue "treated frankly as exposition", in which two of the local inhabitants act a Chorus filling in background and emphasizing the myths. The play is set in Two River County, at once introducing the Eden motif. We learn the power in the play, Jabe Torrance, embodies sterile impotence—he and his wife have money instead of children and do not sleep together—and is dying of a spreading cancer. Jabe "bought" his wife, Lady, and brought her into his hades from a different country and race. She is a "Dago"; her father, Papa Romano, was a "Wop from the old country" who built a garden of wine, music, and love. Lady had known love "like a fire" in her father's "wine garden," but the garden and with it Lady's father were burned by the local vigilantes, the Mystic Crew, led by Jabe Torrance, when Papa Romano violated their commandment and "sold liquor to niggers." Lady now plans to recreate her father's wine garden by opening a confectionary adjacent to the store on the Saturday before Easter. The Chorus introduces their husbands, two slouching, red-faced henchmen of death, Dog and Pee-Wee, and the Temple sisters, two old maid vestal virgins who prowl about the store. In both the store and the living quarters above it, they tel1 us "everything is so dingy and dark . . ." Surrounded by all this death, Beulah discovers the olives set out for the funeral-like reception for the dying Jabe are not stuffed but have seeds in them.

The action of the play begins with the entrance of Carol Cutrere, the outcast member of the oldest and most distinguished family in the county. In the earlier version of the play her name was Cassandra and she retains her function as a prophetess. At her behest the Negro Conjure Man gives the magic Choctaw cry and Valentine Xavior materializes in his snakeskin jacket and carrying his guitar. Almost immediately behind him is Vee, short for Veronica, wife of Sheriff Talbott. Her entrance fixes Val in the Christ role, for like Saint Veronica, who gave Christ her veil to wipe his forehead on his journey up Calvary, Vee dispenses mercy. She has sheltered Val and hopes Lady will accept him as a clerk in the store. Like Val, she is a creator, a primitive painter, capable of visions. She comes bearing gifts, pineapple sherbert for Jabe. Symbolically, her effort to bring together the pines of sterility and the apples of fruitfulness is "reduced to juice."

As the play progresses, Vee clearly identifies Val as a savior, painting him as Christ in her long contemplated picture of the Last Supper. Val understands her visions, which seek to metamorphose the horror and corruption of life among the living and dead into something of beauty. In their final confrontation, Val kneels to her as she sits in the shoe-fitting chair, symbolically reenacting the ritual washing of the feet of the disciples.

She recognizes him as the figure of Christ in her vision, a vision of such brilliance it has nearly destroyed her physical sight by an influx of spiritual insight.

—I heard this clap of thunder! Sky!—Split open!—
And there in the split-open sky, I saw, I tell you, I
saw the TWO HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS
CHRIST RISEN!—Not crucified but Risen! I mean
Crucified and *then* RISEN!—The blazing eyes of
Christ Risen!

Like Saint Veronica, who received her veil back from Christ with the lasting impression of His face upon it, Vee—who "was born with a caul! a sort of thing like a veil" and who on the Saturday afternoon before Easter meditated on the "mysteries of Easter, veils!"—recognizes Val Xavior as the Christ of her vision, Christ harrowing the hell of Jabe Torrance's store in Two River County. "*She collapses, forward, falls to her knees, her arms thrown about Val. He seizes her to lift her."* Vee's recognition of Val as Savior ensures his destruction; from this moment in the play he is turned over to the forces of corruption, the devils, to be tormented by Sheriff Talbott, Dog, Pee-Wee and then by Jabe before he is hung upon the tree and lynched by blowtorch, tying together both sacrifice and purification.

However, the legend of Christ and Saint Veronica as embodied by Val and Vee is fraught with ambiguities. Vee paints her Church of the Resurrection with an all too blatant red phallic steeple. Although Val kisses her "soft woman hands" that paint "as if God touched your fingers", in her vision Val/Christ touches her bosom. Their whole relationship is one of highly charged, barely repressed physical desire.

Structurally, the Val/Vee confrontations appear in the second scene of each act and always during the daylight hours. Vee is intensely aware of the light, "a blaze of light" outside the store, while Lady complains of darkness inside the store in an early speech. "We always had a problem with light in this store." Vee and Val agree that "a world of light and shadow is what we live in, and—it'sconfusing . . ." While Vee is associated with daylight, Lady belongs to the dark night in hell.

Val's function as Orpheus is less ambiguous than his function as Christ. In their first meeting, Lady, unaware of Val's presence, mutters, "I wish I was dead, dead, dead . . ." to which Val responds quietly, "No, you don't, Lady." Lady cannot sleep. She is obsessed with the fire which destroyed her father and his wine garden, and with her desire to recreate it in the confectionery. She is also "cold." Val immediately gives Lady the snakeskin jacket, symbolic of regeneration, to wear and introduces the guitar, a phallic life-giver. He also tells her he is a light-bringer. "I do electric repairs." His supernatural qualities are quickly established. His temperature is always "a couple of degrees above normal and he is above such human needs as sleep, breathing, and elimination. "I can sleep on a concrete floor or go without sleeping, without even feeling sleepy, for forty-eight hours. And I can hold my breath three minutes without blacking out . . . And I can go a whole day without passing water." And, ominously, Val can "burn down . . . any two-footed woman." Against Lady's wish for death, Val juxtaposes the

vision of the transparent birds with no legs who soar in the high blue sky near the sun and sleep on the wind, touching earth only in death. In the Orpheus myth, Orpheus is reincarnated as a swan, thus the transparent birds associated with both the dove of the Holy Spirit and the Orphic swan help to fix Val in the roles of Christ and Orpheus. Lady accepts the vision of life Val offers and although at first she is not interested in anything but a "working relation" with Val, she would "give this mercantile store and every bit of stock in it to be that tiny bird the color of the sky."

Val and Lady establish the sexual liaison which creates life in the depths of hades when Lady/ Eurydice realizes Val/Orpheus offers life. "I NEED YOU!!!" she cries, "TO LIVE . . . TO GO ON LIVING!!!"

He looks up gravely at her from his guitar. She closes the curtain behind her. Its bizarre design, a gold tree with white birds and scarlet fruit in it, is softly translucent with the bulb lighted behind it. The guitar continues softly for a few moments; stops; the stage darkens till only the curtain of the alcove is clearly visible.

With his music and his vision of earthly life and love, Val is almost able to bring Lady out of hades. But Lady refuses to leave until Jabe is destroyed and the wine garden recreated. She tells Val, "I guess my heart knew that somebody must be coming to take me out of this hell! . . .—but DEATH has got to die before we go . . ." But Death survives. Lady/ Eurydice will not escape hades nor will she bear life within it. Her suspected pregnancy confirmed by Jabe's nurse, Lady dismisses Val—"You've given me life, you can go!"—and, in a lovely image, compares herself to the barren fig tree in her father's wine garden:

Time went by it, spring after useless spring, and it almost started to—die . . . Then one day I discovered a small green fig on the tree they said wouldn't bear! . . . I ran through the wine garden shouting, "Oh, Father, it's going to bear, the fig tree is going to bear!"—It seemed such a wonderful thing, after those ten barren springs, for the little fig tree to bear, it called for a celebration—I ran to a closet, I opened a box that we kept Christmas ornaments in!—I took them out . . . I decorated the fig tree with glass bells and glass birds and stars and tinsel and snow! . . . I've won, Mr. Death, I'm going to bear!

The fig tree brings together the pagan and Christian myths. The difficulty of fertilizing fig trees led to symbolic marriages between human representatives of male and female fig tress and human sacrifice among the ancient Greeks. Adam and Eve used fig leaves to cover their nakedness after eating the fruit of the Forbidden Tree (Genesis 3:7) and Christ cursed the barren fig tree (Matthew 2:19). The shape of the fig has lent itself to

symbolic associations with both the testicles and the womb. By hanging Christmas decorations on the fig tree Lady celebrates not only her fertility, but foreshadows resurrection and eternal life. Among her decorations are the transparent "glass birds" but also "icicles and snow" of death. In her triumph Lady has stopped to look back at Jabe and Val has stopped to look back at Lady. The strangely rejuvenated Jabe shoots Lady and sets the waiting vigilantes on Val. What happens to Val is never completely clear. The vigilantes take rope and a blowtorch from the store and they repeatedly expostulate "—Christ!" However, we also hear dogs and remember that Vee and Val have seen chain-gang dogs tear fugitives to pieces, and Val and Lady actually hear a convict torn as the Maenads torn Orpheus.

The ambiguities in the Val/Orpheus—Lady/ Eurydice myth are not entirely the result of an overlap with the Val/Christ—Vee/Saint Veronica or the wine garden/Eden myths. Val is an extremely handsome young man appearing for the first time on his birthday. His attraction to the older Lady seems less strong than her's to him. He becomes almost a prisoner unable to escape Lady's need for him. We are reminded here of Adonis, so handsome at birth he is loved by Aphrodite. Aphrodite entrusts her mortal lover to Persephone, but Persephone, Queen of Hades, loves him too, and refuses to give him up until Zeus intervenes, giving him half the year to Love and half the year to Death. Surrounded by hunting dogs, he is eventually gored to death by a maddened boar . . .

Both Romano and Val are outsiders, superior to the local population of Twin River County; and both have descended into a hell in Twin River County through the traditional pattern. They have crossed water to reach Twin River County; they confront there the spirits of the dead. Both do battle with the monstrous tyrannical figure of Death, Jabe Torrance, and a host of demimonsters, the Mystic Crew, the Sheriff, Pee-Wee and Dog. Both are associated with the beautiful Lady and each loses her to the monster as she, through her unborn child, is about to triumph over death and sterility. Val, whose descent is more fully chronicled, receives aid from the traditional helper with more than human powers, Carol Cutrere.

Unlike the cyclical heroes, Campbell's hero with a thousand faces, neither Romano nor Val rises from his descent. Death prevents their crossing the second river and Carol Cutrere's sky-blue Cadillac waits for Val in vain. The play ends in the dark night before Easter dawn. While Williams does not complete the expected pattern in his hero's quest, he does transfer the symbol of reemergence and regeneration to Carol Cutrere, the embodiment of the transparent bird symbol, who knows love and life are "unbearably painful" and "dangerous." Carol also knows dead people chatter like birds, "but all they say is one word and that one word is 'live . . .'" Her exit from the hell of the store is perhaps as close as Williams can come to assent and affirmation. "Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind . . ."

Occasionally, the relationship between the myth and its referent within the naturalistic context of the literal action becomes tenuous. For example, we can accept Val as Jesus or Orpheus but can we also accept him as Adonis without completely reassessing

Lady's character? Jesus, Orpheus, and Adonis never physically consummate their love. Can we accept physical love as analogous to divine love? Jesus, Orpheus, Adonis, and Adam all have divine progenitors, Val is a drifter with hazy origins, something of a reprobate, who, although he refuses Carol's offered ride back across the water to safety, still poses a problem as to how willingly and deliberately he sacrifices his life. While Val's jacket associates him with the ancient's snakeskin symbol of regeneration, it also carries overtones of both the serpent's bite which sent Eurydice to hades, and the snake disguise assumed by Satan in the Garden of Eden. Val thus becomes a fallen angel, but his function in the Orpheus and Eden myths becomes ambiguous. Jabe is so viciously a god of death that even the most Romantic reading of Genesis cannot easily relate him to the God of fiery justice in the myths of Eden and the fallen angels myths. Despite such ambiguities, the myths of *Orpheus Descending* are integral to the dramatic structure, never imposed on the naturalist action or introduced self consciously. The emphasis and shading of a direction and cast have overcome far more serious ambiguities in far less worthy plays. Even if we approach the play as text rather than production, Williams has managed, to a remarkable degree, to integrate five major myths into a dramatic structure.

Source: Nancy Baker Traubitz, "Myth as a Basis of Dramatic Structure in *Orpheus Descending,*" in *Modern Drama,* Vol. XIX, No. 1, March 1976, pp. 57-66.

Adaptations

The Fugitive Kind, a film version of *Orpheus Descending,* opened in December 1959 in New York, starring Marlon Brando as Val and Anna Magnani as Lady and directed by Sidney Lumet. The film is available on VHS.

Orpheus Descending was made as a movie (shown on television) in 1990, starring Kevin Anderson as Val, and Vanessa Redgrave as Lady Torrance.

Topics for Further Study

Obtain a copy of the movie *The Fugitive Kind,* which is the film version of *Orpheus Descending*. Write an essay asserting whether or not you believe it effectively captures the spirit of the play. Does Marlon Brando make a convincing Val? Are the changes made in the ending justified and do they improve on the original or spoil it?

Orpheus Descending is in part about the place of the artist in society. What role should the artist play? Is the artist always likely to be marginalized, like Val, or misunderstood, like Vee, in a conventional, materialistic society? For what should the artist stand, if anything? What values do you believe should motivate him or her?

Williams wrote in his introduction to the play (in Tennessee Williams: *Eight Plays*) that *Orpheus Descending* is about "unanswered questions that haunt the hearts of people." Some of the characters simply accept prescribed answers, Williams wrote, but not the four main characters—Val, Lady, Carol, and Vee. They continue to ask questions. What might those questions be, and what answers, if any, do these characters find?

Research the history of race relations in the South from the 1950s to the 1960s. Who were some of the major historical figures of the time? What major changes came about during the period?

In the play, Carol bitterly recalls the execution of a black man for the rape of a white woman. Research the history of capital punishment in the South from the 1950s to the present. Based on your research, write an essay explaining whether or not the legal system in death penalty cases is biased against minorities.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The American South is largely segregated, with many public facilities designated for "whites only." During the 1950s, the modern civil rights movement begins.

Today: Overt racial discrimination has largely ended and laws are in place to ensure that it does not recur. However, race relations remain problematic in many ways. Minorities complain of the practice of "racial profiling," in which African Americans or Hispanics are sometimes targeted by police just because of their race, not because there is any evidence linking them personally to a crime.

1950s: Sexual attitudes throughout American society are conservative, especially in the so-called Bible Belt in the South. Pre-marital sex is frowned upon.

Today: After the freedom of the 1960s and 1970s, sexual mores once more tilt to the conservative, largely because of the risk of contracting the deadly disease AIDS. However, American society has not returned to what many regard as the sexually repressive 1950s. Sex before marriage is no longer universally viewed with disapproval, and single mothers whose children are born out of wedlock are no longer subject to the social stigma that occurred in former generations.

1950s: For decades, American theater has been dominated by realism. Williams, the leading playwright of the decade, goes far beyond these realistic conventions, particularly in his highly lyrical style and his use of cinematic effects through music and lighting.

Today: Realism is no longer the dominant dramatic form. Theatergoers now regularly enjoy absurdist works by playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, the surrealism of Edward Albee, and the minimalism and unusual dialogue in the plays of David Mamet.

What Do I Read Next?

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) is one of Williams's most famous plays. Readers will recognize in the character Blanche Du Bois some similarities to Lady Torrance from *Orpheus Descending.*

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams (1997), by Donald Spoto, is the first complete critical biography of Williams. Spoto examines the close connections between Williams's dramas and his turbulent and finally tragic life.

Like Williams in *Orpheus Descending,* Canadian writer Alice Munro explores the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in her short story "The Children Stay," which can be found in Munro's collection *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998).

Along with Williams, Eugene O'Neill is another of the great figures in American drama. His *Long Day's Journey into Night,* written between 1939 and 1940 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize in drama for 1957, covers just one day in the tragic lives of the four members of the Tyrone family.

French dramatist Jean Anouilh wrote *Eurydice* in 1941, updating the Orpheus legend to 1930s France. Orpheus is a young musician who makes a paltry living from performing on the streets, and Eurydice is a young actress traveling around in a theater troupe. The play can be found in Anouilh's *Five Plays* (1991).

Further Study

Griffin, Alice, *Understanding Tennessee Williams,* University of South Carolina Press, 1995, pp. 172-96.

This is an in-depth analysis of nine of Williams's most successful plays, including *Orpheus Descending.* Griffin considers language, characters, themes, dramatic effects, and staging.

Hirsch, Foster, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams,* Kennikat Press, 1979.

Hirsch analyzes Williams's play *Battle of Angels* and shows how it developed into *Orpheus Descending.*

Jackson, Esther Merle, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams,* University of Wisconsin Press, 1965.

Jackson describes the major characteristics of Williams's dramatic form and emphasizes the changing idea of theater that is reflected throughout his work.

Kataria, Gulshan Rai, *The Faces of Eve: A Study of Tennessee Williams's Heroines,* Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1992.

Kataria studies Williams's plays from an archetypal, Jungian perspective and views Lady Torrance as an example of the amazon archetype.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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