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ORPHEUS AND THE FEMININE AGENT: WILLIAMS, COCTEAU, AND THE
POSTMODERN

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explore the concept of gender and agency as exemplified through the retelling of the Orpheus myth. In Ovid's version of the myth, Orpheus undoubtedly serves as agent. Yet, in two modern adaptations of the classic myth, an American play by Tennessee Williams titled *Orpheus Descending* and a French play by Jean Cocteau titled *Orphée*, the agent and the gender of the agent are reversed, and the Eurydice character takes the place of Orpheus as the mover of action. By exploring aspects of language and textual representations in each play, this paper analyzes the shift and addresses the purpose of Williams' and Cocteau's shift in agency and then addresses the purpose of evaluating both Williams' and Cocteau's commentary on artistic inspiration and how that commentary informs postmodernist theories on structure. The questions to answer are the following: how does the Orpheus myth establish Orpheus as agent and how does each adaptation reverse that establishment and feature Eurydice as agent? How does the issue of feminine agency affect our view of the role of artistic inspiration, and how does that view address postmodernist theory?

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Introduction

This essay analyzes the Orpheus myth, a myth whose earliest accounts we receive from Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both believed to be published in the 1st century of the Common Era. Yet, the myth was known long before to the people of Greece from both song and stage. The myth itself has not only lived on in the works of classical poets, but has garnered vast appeal in retellings in film, literature, art, and music. The story is a classic romance: a man journeys to the very pit of hell and back, all for love, and it is this love that keeps us coming back to Orpheus over and over again.

His story is universal, told and retold all over the world, including the 1607 Italian opera by Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, and the 1959 Marcel Camus film, *Orfeu Negro*. Orpheus never ceases to be in demand. Yet, whether it is his death-defying heroism in rescuing his beloved Eurydice from the Underworld, or his human frailty when he cannot help but turn back to look at her, that keeps us interested, Orpheus himself "embodies the power of art and the limitations - both the possibility of conquering death and the futility of the attempt. It is the very ambivalence of the myth he inhabits that accounts for its tremendous potency" (Sword 408). He has the power to sway the gods with his music and, in many ways, reaches godlike status himself through that music; he can control nature and even seemingly death but, despite our admiration for his talent and his power, we cannot help but become enamored by his failure. When he reaches the end, when he has come so close to his happiness, his own humanity, his fallibility, his doubt becomes his fatal flaw, and his Eurydice is taken back to the Underworld by one forbidden look.

In Ovid's myth in particular, Orpheus is the ultimate agent. He not only drives the action of the story, he is the only true action-taker of the story. When Eurydice dies, he journeys through the Underworld to the seat of Hades and his queen Persephone. Orpheus is the one who defies

death, entering the world of the dead as a living man. Once in the Underworld, he gains power and importance. He charms the rulers of the Underworld with his music, singing, “O worlds placed beneath the earth, into which we sink back whatever we are, born mortal, if it is permitted...the reason for my journey is my wife who trod upon a snake...we ask not for a gift; but for a loan” (Ovid 45). These words are the only words directly uttered in Ovid’s telling of the myth. In this version, Orpheus is the only one using the power of language fully. He has possession not only of words, but the use of words for the purposes of creativity, for music; his words are given all the more importance because of his art, and his agency is given all the more force by his use of language.

Language, here, serves as the great differentiator between those characters who act as agents and those who act as receivers of action. With his language, or rather with his song, Orpheus is able to carry out his ultimate act of agency, taking Eurydice, who once was dead, back to life. Yet, as Eurydice fades away, as we watch the effect of Orpheus’ agency carry itself to the ultimate moment, Orpheus interjects into the story once again. Eurydice’s death is not an act of fate, not an act of the gods, but an act of Orpheus and Orpheus alone: “And they were not far from the edge of the upper earth; he turned, afraid that she would give up, and eager to see her, he turned his eyes back lovingly, and at once she slipped back” (Ovid 47).

Yet what is Eurydice’s place in this Orphic kingdom? It seems that “Eurydice is, comparatively speaking, a mythological nobody...an impotent pawn of the powers-that-be, forever relegated...to the underground realm of darkness and death” (Sword 408). Eurydice survives in the myth, particularly in Ovid’s version, as the antithetic example to Orpheus as agent. She is the receiver of every action. Her existence drives Orpheus to act, but she is never the one to act herself. She is bitten by a snake and poisoned; she is not even the agent of her own death. In the Underworld, she waits, silently, until Orpheus arrives to save her, and when she is on the verge of life, Orpheus takes that life away. Eurydice is forced to endure the fruits of her unlucky

fate in silence. She is given no chance to complain about her fate, no chance to even mourn her love for Orpheus. Whereas Orpheus is given the power of language and the mastery of creative language through music, Eurydice is given not a moment of agency.

Yet, she does not remain this way. Over time, Eurydice's role in her fate has begun to change. "If for many readers, Eurydice's fate may seem frustrating and unfair, for others it has provided the very secret of her appeal" (Sword 408). For poets like H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Eurydice is given an opportunity to express the pleasure she takes in the Underworld and in being the farthest away from Orpheus that she can be. "Rainer Maria Rilke saw Eurydice as the embodiment of feminine mystery, possessing powers of self-fulfillment inaccessible even to her archetypal poet-husband" (Sword 408). Thus we come to understand her appeal to the storyteller. We see over time the Eurydice character has inspired others to make her story their focus, to find some way to explain her mystery, to explore the motivations and desires of the woman who inspired one man to defy death, in one of the greatest stories of classical mythology. No longer do artists approach this myth from the perspective of Orpheus, many have come to explore Eurydice's role, shifting agency from Ovid's Orpheus to his female counterpart, his Eurydice.

By turning to two examples of this shift, a play by Tennessee Williams titled *Orpheus Descending* and a play by Jean Cocteau titled *Orphée*, we are better able to understand the feminine agent now found in the character of Eurydice. Furthermore, this shift forces Williams and Cocteau to comment on the origins and the purpose of artistic inspiration, enlightening the reader on the philosophies of postmodernist theory and postmodernist influences on how we read a text.

Chapter 1

Orpheus Descending

In Tennessee Williams' 1959 play *Orpheus Descending*, we see a new interpretation of the classic Orpheus myth. Williams places us under the restrictive societal umbrella of a small town in the United States South in the 1950s. Yet, within this restrictive setting, we find a rather unrestrictive interpretation of Orpheus and his Eurydice. Williams' Orpheus is no longer the mythic hero who went to hell and back, but rather a down-and-out drifter named Val who only serves to exist around the true center of Williams' work, his Eurydice and our Lady. Thus does Williams reevaluate the dynamic between these two mythical characters, shifting the role of agent from Orpheus to Eurydice.

The first sign of this reversal is given when we first meet Lady. We are given clues by Williams that she is his Eurydice, clues such as the relationship that blossoms between her and Val (Williams' Orpheus), her life in the hell of a small town, and her attempt to leave that hell with Val. These clues all serve as encouragement for critics like Judith J. Thompson to comment, "Val Xavier has the mythical attributes of Orpheus, while Lady Torrance is his Eurydice" (Thompson 161). Yet, Lady Torrance is far from the silent damsel in distress that is Ovid's Eurydice. She possesses one significant difference: speech. Lady speaks with a very particular Southern accent. Williams' gift of language to this character gives her a power that she was never given classically. Language here serves as the key differentiator and the key foundation for Williams' reversal of agency to Lady. She has her own voice and her own opinion, and, with that voice, comes the exercise of her agency.

Lady exercises her newfound power and authority from the very beginning of the play. In one of her first scenes with Val, the Orpheus character, a designation we can see from his primary role as the man in Lady's life as well as from his musical ability and his attempt to take Lady away from this small-town hell. Val appears late to the general store that Lady and her husband own. Her husband, Jabe, is very sick, and she is forced to tend the store on her own. In this scene, we see Lady as the true driver of action. Val tells Lady that he is looking for work, but she responds definitively, "Boys like you don't work" (Williams 259). Not only does Lady speak, but also she speaks with authority. She calls him "boy" rather than by name, a form of condescension that alerts the reader to the power that she possesses over him. All in all, Val, "...the reluctant stud, is a relatively passive character...women have the dominant voices in this play" (Clum 137-139).

Val's passivity is a contrast that emphasizes Lady's authority. In need of work, he must receive approval from Lady as the one in a position of power. Val continues telling her his story, acting as if the job of clerk already belongs to him, but Williams' Eurydice persists with her authority: "If I took on help here it would have to be local help, I couldn't hire no stranger...I got to go up now and you had better be going" (Williams 260). Lady is driving the action further and further along in this scene, bringing Val to one subject and then the next in a rapid interrogation in which this Eurydice truly exercises her power and her role as action-taker. She asks him question after question about his snakeskin jacket, about his guitar, about the names on his guitar, about his music, about his life. Whereas in Ovid, Orpheus is the unquestioned hero, with poetic and artistic talent, Williams adds an interesting dimension to his Eurydice; she scrutinizes the Orpheus character, questioning his art and his music. At the end of the scene, Lady succinctly decides that Val can stay, saying, "Leave it [his guitar] here if you want to" (267). The decision to make this Orpheus part of her life falls to this Eurydice. She decides to employ him, and thus takes control of her own fate and the inevitable doom that will befall Eurydice of the myth.

Lady continues to act as the agent of her own fate. She even serves to dictate Val's music. After telling Val to stay with her after work, again determining his action, she urges him to play: "Play something. I'm all unstrung" (293). With obedience, Val begins to play. Ovid's Orpheus would never dream of playing on command. He plays his music at his own volition, wooing all nature with his song. He plays his way to the Underworld, charming Persephone and Hades with the music from his lyre. Williams' Orpheus is just the opposite, for his music comes at the request of his Eurydice.

Every scene Lady shares with Val seems to be an interrogation. She questions him: "Where do you stay?...You want to save money?" (294). This Orpheus exists only in response to the questioning of his Eurydice. All power, all drive rests with her persistent questioning. Her eventual doom at the hands of Death becomes an invention all her own. She is the one who insists that Val stay in the general store with her: "There's a cot there. A nurse slept on it when Jabe had his first operation, and there's a washroom down there...I'll fix it up nice for you" (295). She pushes him, "Well aren't you going to look at it, the room back there, and see if it suits you or not?!...Well is it okay or what!" (295-296). While Williams' Eurydice refuses to be silent, Val, his Orpheus, is more reserved and slow to speak; all of his words are uttered in response to Lady's questioning.

In a pivotal scene, we see Williams' true reversal. Lady and Val have an argument, or rather Lady has an argument with herself and her feelings for Val. She tells him at first to leave, declaring, "No, no, no, I can't trust you, now I know I can't trust you, I got to trust anybody or I don't want him" (301). When this Orpheus does as he is told and prepares to leave, Lady drives the action in yet another direction, throwing herself against the door and blocking the entrance with her body, "NO, NO, DON'T GO...I NEED YOU!!!!...TO LIVE...TO GO ON LIVING!" (305). A pawn in the face of Eurydice's desires, moving whichever way she dictates, Val slowly retreats to the back room where Lady had instructed him to sleep and draws the curtain. Again

taking her destiny into her own hands, Williams' Eurydice pulls back the curtain and closes it behind her, shutting the door on her own doom, taking an active role in her own desires, and solidifying herself as agent.

Williams not only attributes action to Lady through her interactions with Val, but he does so in the sole exploration of her character, for hers is the only story we know intimately and in great detail. We receive almost no information about Val beyond the fact that he used to live a certain way and has decided to change. Again, Williams gives a very different interpretation than that of the myth. In Ovid's myth, the focus lies with Orpheus and his story, those he sang of, the feats he performed with his talent, and the legend of his journey to the Underworld. Here the story and the legend are associated with Eurydice, the story of her past, and her role as an outsider in this town. Lady is a distinct outsider, a characteristic which emphasizes her importance to the action, for it keeps her in perpetual opposition to those of the town. This opposing force, evident in the details of her past, gives force to her agency. She is of Italian descent, her father an Italian immigrant. Lady is the only character foreign to, not only this town, but to the country of Williams' setting as well. Her father, and presumably she as well when she lived with him, worked outside of the confines of the law, for he "picked up dimes and quarters in the saloons- this was before Prohibition" (230). He was murdered by a lynching mob for his bootleg production of alcohol; the nature of his death further lends evidence to his outside nature as well as that of his daughter. Coming from a foreign country and living outside of the law of the town, the two also lived geographically outside of town in an orchard.

By its very reality, an orchard is a symbol of nature and growth, and placed within a town of seemingly backward, stubborn, and stagnant mentality the orchard is truly a foreign thing. Not only is the orchard itself a symbol of the outside, but the purpose of the orchard also serves as an indication of Lady as an outsider. There the youth of the town, including Lady, would gather to have sex under the trees, to drink the forbidden drink (alcohol), to eat of the "forbidden fruits."

Yet, because of the natural and sexual role this orchard had and its threat to the sexual order of the town, the people of the town destroyed it. They, as we discover through Lady and the retelling of her story to Val, burned her father's orchard to the ground and he with it for selling moonshine to African Americans. His association with African Americans serves as another way to establish his daughter as an outsider, for the people of the town, due to their frequent use of racial slurs such as "Dago," "Wop," and "nigger," reject those of other races as well as those that associate with other races.

Williams' emphasis on the foreign nature of Lady serves as an aspect of her authority because much of her foreignness is what determines the nature of her agency. She lives in an unhappy marriage to a man whom she does not love, to a man responsible for the death of her father, "Because I sleep with a son of a bitch who bought me at a fire sale, and not in fifteen years have I had a single good dream" (266). Because her marriage is so unhappy, she decides to pursue an extra-marital affair with Val. As someone who does not belong in this town or in her marriage, she ultimately decides to leave Jabe and run off with Val. When she attempts to leave, Jabe murders her. Lady's relationship with Val and her eventual doom are all brought on by the fact that Lady lives in a town that does not understand her, that Lady lives in a town to which she does not belong.

Another aspect to Lady's agency that goes beyond her relationship with Val is Williams' emphasis on her womanhood. Williams is able to attribute action to his Eurydice character by highlighting the importance of her role as a woman over the role of Orpheus, or Val, as a man. Williams brings to light the element of gender, emphasizing Lady's role through her gender. Williams explores the power that Lady's gender attributes her by emphasizing her womb, which is empty. When she was young, Lady fell in love with a man of the town, David Cutere. He left her after her father died. Yet, in a conversation she has with David in the second act of the play, we see the first mention of her womb:

I carried your child in my body the summer you quit me...that summer they burned my father in his wine garden, and you, you washed your hands clean of any connection with a Dago bootlegger's daughter...I carried your child in my body the summer you quit me, but I had it cut out of my body, and they cut out my heart with it (285).

"I carried your child in my body," is repeated a few more times in this scene. With this repetition comes the emphasis on Lady's ability to carry a child in her body, on what makes her unique as a woman, what makes her the true agent of the play. Yet, that womb and her womanhood are dead with it, for what gives her power as woman is empty, devoid of life. However, that life is restored when she discovers she is pregnant with Val's child:

When a woman's been childless as long as I've been childless, it's hard to believe that you're still able to bear! We used to have a little fig tree between the house and the orchard. It never bore any fruit, they said it was barren... Then one day I discovered a small green fig on the tree they said wouldn't bear...I ran to a closet, I opened the box that we kept Christmas ornaments in!...And I hung the little tree with them...Unpack the box! Unpack the box with the Christmas ornaments in it, put them on me...(338).

Here Lady compares her womb to a fig tree; she equates the life-giving power of her womanhood with that of nature. In Ovid's Orpheus myth, part of Orpheus' agency is his power over nature, his ability to charm animals, trees, and flowers with his music. His ability to do so is equal only to the gods, but in Williams, his Eurydice is the character most closely associated with nature. Her womb possesses the power of nature, to give life as the fig gives life; his Eurydice, as woman, possesses a greater power of nature in that womb than any music or art could overcome.

The power her womb and her gender as woman contribute to her importance, for when Lady discovers her womb is alive again, her agency is at its height. She has decided to leave the town with Val, to leave her unhappy life, Williams' version of the Underworld. She has lived in this Underworld for too long, and she decides to take herself out of it; this is the ultimate moment

of reversal of agency for Williams, for it parallels the ultimate moment of action for Orpheus in Ovid. In Ovid, Orpheus is the one to take the greatest action, scouring the Underworld to take Eurydice with him. Yet, here Williams' Eurydice is the one who seeks to take herself from the Underworld, to leave the town with Val.

Yet, when Lady is killed by Jabe (From Williams' description of him as a yellow, gaunt, and diseased man we come to understand Jabe as Death or Hades), she remains in control of her own death. In Ovid, Orpheus is the agent of Eurydice's "second" death. He turns around due to his concern for Eurydice, and she is taken back to the Underworld. Yet, here, Eurydice takes her death into her own hands. She is the one exclaiming about her alive again womb, shouting to Val in happiness, when Jabe comes down the stairs with his gun. He attempts to shoot Val, but Lady throws her body on top of him.

Again, Williams reverses the roles. Ovid's Orpheus is the one who "saves" Eurydice before he kills her by looking at her. Lady is the one who assumes agency and saves Val, but ensures her own death in this act. Jabe shoots her; yet, even he cannot fully lay claim over her death. Lady, in her last moments, longs to be in the confectionary, a part of the store she has decorated to resemble her father's orchard and the happiness she knew then. She drags herself to the confectionary and, with acceptance, ushers in her own death, "The show is over. The monkey is dead..." (339). Her last words exemplify the power and control she has over her death and the agency she has assumed throughout the play. She ends her life with her own words, again exemplifying the authority she possesses by possessing language. There are no stage directions claiming that Eurydice is dead, only the words, "Music rises to cover whatever sound death makes in the confectionary" (339). Williams has ended her life with her words, a lasting sign of her role as agent of the play.

Chapter 2

Orphée

In Jean Cocteau's 1926 play *Orphée* and its discussion of agency in the classic Orpheus myth, we see that Cocteau's approach is very different from that of Williams, "One...might argue that Cocteau was the writer most consistently devoted to the Orphic ideal – some thirty-five years at least" (Strauss 30), and so Cocteau displays his devotion to the Orphic myth by giving Eurydice agency not only through action, but also through a reinterpretation of the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice. Cocteau, like Williams, establishes her as agent by giving her language.

Like Williams, Cocteau introduces Eurydice as she questions Orpheus; in fact, her first lines are a question: "Can I move now?" (Cocteau 104). She not only is skeptical of Orpheus, but their relationship is filled with sarcasm and suppressed tension, frustration, and impatience. The reason for Eurydice's impatience is mentioned early on in the first scene: Orpheus continually brings his work home with him. We are given this clue to the tension in their relationship by way of Orpheus' pet horse. The horse is able to speak; what this horse utters has now become Orpheus' new form of poetry. Cocteau introduces an interesting take on the Orpheus and Eurydice relationship through this horse. Eurydice does not find the same enjoyment in Orpheus' art that he does, "How long before you learn that the horse's head is just as empty as yours is?" (104). Like Williams' Eurydice, Cocteau's Eurydice serves to question Orpheus' art. She takes on a newfound power in her judgment of Orpheus, and through her, Cocteau is able to open a new dialogue on the character of Orpheus. Through Eurydice, and through her action, Cocteau asks us

to question this hero of history, to question his renown as the ultimate artistic talent. Cocteau forces us to question the very nature of poetry and artistic expression.

Cocteau's aim is clearly articulated in Orpheus and Eurydice's first scene together. Orpheus is preoccupied with his horse; yet, in the background of his swooning and cajoling of this animal to give him another brilliant word, is a chorus of questioning and skepticism from Eurydice, "How many times do you have to ask him?...I can guess what's coming" (104-105). When Orpheus is finally able to, in a very Ouija-Board-like scenario, get the horse to spell "Merci," he is elated, "This is stu-pen-dous!" (106). Eurydice, asserting herself as the driver of the action with her questioning of Orpheus, is not so easily convinced, "Why is it stupendous? Of course *merci* means "thank you"- but so what?" (106). Cocteau's Eurydice is unwilling to allow Orpheus to take control, to express his art, to live, to act without being challenged. She takes on the role of critic, and thus undermines Orpheus' authority as artist. When Orpheus tries convincing her that the horse is a wonder, that his new poetry is of worth by reciting the horse's words again for her, "Lady Eurydice shall return from the underworld" (108), he is met with another wall; Eurydice's refusal to allow him to take agency from her, "That doesn't make sense" (108).

At times, Eurydice's control is in danger of being taken back by Orpheus, and Cocteau brilliantly displays this power struggle between the two, "The audience...Cocteau says...must balance its doubts and its skepticism against its credulity if the acrobats are to balance their roles in the play" (Oxenhandler 86). Cocteau must establish a struggle for power between Eurydice and Orpheus in order to keep the reader invested in the shift before Eurydice is named his agent; he must slowly breakdown the reader's perception of the Orpheus and Eurydice relationship before completely dismantling it. Therefore, Eurydice is constantly in danger of being overshadowed, first, by the horse, by its representation of Orpheus' poetry, and so she, in desperation attempts to cling to that power, "I have to do something while you talk to your horse, so I smash a window"

(Cocteau 111). Eurydice must divert attention from the horse back to her, so she breaks windows. Breaking a window may not seem the best way to remind a husband that he should be paying more attention to his wife, but the window is just a clever avenue to keeping her agency. When she breaks a window, the boy that fixes the windows must come, making Orpheus jealous, “Do you think I’m blind? You break one windowpane a day so that glazier will come to fix it” (111).

As long as Cocteau’s Eurydice is able to play the balance of Orpheus’ attention in her favor, she remains the agent. Yet, this Eurydice must solidify her new role, and she plans to kill the horse with a poisoned sugar cube. Cocteau makes an interesting commentary on attempting to wrest authority from the character of Orpheus. To take agency from Orpheus, Eurydice must put a stop to his poetry; his art is what distinguishes his character and what provides him with his important role. In Ovid’s myth, it is Orpheus’ art that allows him to carry out the major action of the myth; it is the power of Orpheus’ art that becomes the focus of his agency, not his love for Eurydice. “See how nervous the horse has made you! You used to laugh, kiss me, throw your arms around me...Now you spend your time petting that horse, interrogating that horse, waiting for that horse to answer you. It’s ridiculous!” (107). Eurydice has come to a point of desperation; her role is being threatened by Orpheus’ poetry, or rather by the horse that represents Orpheus’ poetry. Thus Cocteau’s Eurydice attempts to take that art from Orpheus and turn that attention toward his love for Eurydice, an attention that is often diverted, in order for her to remain agent.

When Eurydice tries to poison the horse and solidify her role, Cocteau shifts again. Orpheus appears before she can poison the horse, and instead of killing the horse-Eurydice licks a poisoned envelope and dies herself. Yet, Cocteau does not completely take agency from Eurydice; she orders the boy fixing the window, Heurtebise, to find Orpheus, “Hurry, find Orpheus for me. I’m going to die. I want to see Orpheus once more. Orpheus!” (119). Thus is Eurydice maintaining her authority, although it is being threatened by death. She alerts Orpheus to her death, thus driving him closer to rescuing her from the Underworld. Eurydice is the one

who makes Orpheus aware of her death; she continues to keep a controlling hand in the events of her life and Orpheus'. When Orpheus arrives, he finds the horse gone. Death has taken the horse; thus Cocteau relays the same theme of the myth but with a difference: Death can be conquered by nothing. The horse, Orpheus' poetry, although it may immortalize his name, cannot save his physical being from death, and so Cocteau has Death take the horse and his poetry.

At first when Orpheus discovers the disappearance of the horse, all he can think of is its disappearance, "The horse! Where's the horse?" (126); all he can think of is his art. In fact, he blames Eurydice for the disappearance of his art, "I'll make Eurydice pay for this!" (126), but when he discovers that Eurydice is dead as well, the horse and his poetry are forgotten, "I don't care about the horse. I want Eurydice. I want her to forgive me" (127). The agency slowly returns to Eurydice. He claims he does not care about his art; he only wants Eurydice. He wants Eurydice to forgive him; he wants her to exercise her role for him, meaning he wants her to carry out the action of forgiveness on him. Eurydice's authority appears to be shifting away from her with her death by poison, but Cocteau keeps the agency from shifting completely to Orpheus. When Orpheus discovers his love is dead, it is not he who finds a way to bring her back from the dead, but Heurtebise. Heurtebise tells Orpheus to take Death's gloves that she left behind when she had come to claim Eurydice and give them back to her. He shows him the way to Death as well; he instructs Orpheus to go through the mirror.

Thus Cocteau, in contrast to the myth, does not give Orpheus full authority over his greatest possible act of importance, bringing Eurydice back from Death, rather he displaces that power to someone else in order to keep it from Orpheus, "Orpheus...Listen to me. Calm yourself and listen to what I have to say...I know one way to do it" (127). Thus does Heurtebise give Orpheus the means to bring back Eurydice. "Now you are going to return these gloves to their owner, give them to her yourself" (128). Again does Cocteau keep agency from Orpheus by taking his art, the means by which he asserts his role in the myth, away from him. In rescuing

Eurydice from Death, Orpheus does not use his artistic talent. He is told what to do by another character, becoming merely a pawn in the course of action, rather than the bringer of the action. When Eurydice returns, she is the authority in all her glory and the center of the plays attention, the first woman to defy death, “Yes, it’s me, the first woman whose husband’s love was strong enough to wrest her from the dead” (131).

At this point in the play, Eurydice is on the verge of complete and unquestioned control of the action. She is behaving very much as she did when we were first introduced to her, but, in many ways, her agency over Orpheus is more adamant. When Orpheus reminds her of the words of the horse, “Lady Eurydice shall return from the Underworld,” Cocteau’s Eurydice is quick to assert her power over Orpheus’ poetry and the horse, “Careful, dear. Remember your promise. You are never to mention that horse again” (131). As the scene progresses, Cocteau begins to shift the focus of action again. Cocteau has Eurydice take every chance she can to challenge Orpheus, to doubt him, to command him; yet, Cocteau begins to allow Orpheus to push back violently. The shift is soon to occur; at one point Eurydice mentions their now extended honeymoon of love, and Orpheus fires back with much the same command that Eurydice had fired at him earlier in the scene, “Eurydice, remember your promise! You’re not supposed to mention the moon again” (133). Orpheus uses parallel phrasing, “remember your promise.”

Orpheus then begins to test the limits of Eurydice’s agency, asserting his own, by turning around to almost face Eurydice on multiple occasions. Here Cocteau’s Orpheus begins to upset the balance of action, forcing Eurydice into a position of submission. She is afraid by his constant turning, “What a scare! Darling, without turning around, just feel my heart pounding” (133).

What we first believe to be a mistaken turn by Orpheus, we come to realize is a deliberate action. Seeing that she is afraid, Orpheus’ attack of her role becomes obvious, and he becomes more and more defiant, “You can’t imagine the effort it takes to carry out those stupid rules” (134).

Eurydice attempts to calm her husband and reassert her authority, but she missteps and mentions

the moon again, “There’s that moon again! You might as well call me nuts...Save the moon-talk for your old playmates” (134), her old playmates being Bacchante like worshippers of the moon. Cocteau begins to pick up the pace of Orpheus’ reassertion of agency. Eurydice begins to cry because of his berating, “I should have stayed dead” (135). She begins to lose her desire for control, wishing to return to Death. Then the horse returns to Orpheus’ mind, “It’d be the horse affair all over again” (135). At this point Orpheus remembers the horse, and his art and his agency begin to return. He swings around again, to almost face Eurydice, which encourages Heurtebise to call him “a dangerous man” (135). It is then that Orpheus realizes the full extent of his rising power, “I’ll be anything I want” (136). With these words, this assertion of his poetry, his autonomy, and his authority over Eurydice’s role, Orpheus carries out his final blow to Eurydice’s power. He turns to her, fully facing her, and sends her back to Death.

His turn, we discover through his own words, was a purposeful one, “It was inevitable...Now we can breathe freely...A man has to be firm with women, show he can get along without them. Otherwise, they lead you around by the nose” (136). It is in Orpheus’ assertion of women’s power that we understand Cocteau’s desire to shift agency. Eurydice, as representative of the feminine gender, has the power to lead her husband by the nose and undermine the great Orpheus of legend. Heurtebise asks the disturbing question, “Are you trying to say that you looked at her on purpose?” to which Orpheus replies, “How else would I look at her?...I lost my balance on purpose. I turned my head on purpose...I’m quite capable of congratulating myself for having looked my wife in the face” (136-137). Orpheus’ words are all we need to understand that he is threatened by his wife; Cocteau is able to shape Orpheus into a new kind of man, a jealous man, a man worried about his wife taking too much power from him, a wife asserting herself as the agent of his story.

At the height of Orpheus’ control of the action in Cocteau, he is uprooted again as that action-taker. The continual power struggle and Cocteau’s reinterpretation of the relationship

between Orpheus and Eurydice is his exact goal; his goal is to undermine or question the Orpheus character and to do so through Eurydice. In Cocteau's pivotal moment in questioning the Orpheus character, Orpheus' chance at agency is finally put to rest. Orpheus receives a letter about the poetry he plans to enter into a coming contest, a line given to him by his horse, "Lady Eurydice shall return from the underworld." In this letter, Cocteau refuses Orpheus agency by having his poetry be his downfall,

If you translated into French your sentence about Lady Eurydice returning from the underworld and take the first letter of each word, the result is a four-letter sentiment which may be construed as an insult to the judges of the poetry contest...there is a crowd of raving females on its way to your house now. The Bacchantes are with them, fanning their anger, screaming for your head (138).

The letter Orpheus receives requires some explanation, "the acronym of that famous message from the beyond spells out the word *MERDE*" (Strauss 32). If translated into French, with the first letter of each word taken together to form one word, "Lady Eurydice shall return from the underworld," the symbol of Orpheus' poetry and his art, spells "M-E-R-D-E" translated into English as "S-H-I-T." Thus Orpheus' poetry means nothing more than "shit." With this clever addition Orpheus' art is now nothing. His role of power and authority is no longer. His horse is dead, Cocteau's stage direction reads, "The horse magic has completely disappeared. Orpheus is a changed man" (Cocteau 139). He is no longer the man of myth, no longer the agent, and he finally gives up that role, "Eurydice was right... There is only one thing left for me to do...Join Eurydice" (138-139).

In releasing his claim to the authority role, Orpheus offers himself fully to the power of feminine agency by stepping out on his balcony and giving himself to the swarm of angry women waiting to tear him to pieces. Cocteau then ensures that Orpheus can never be agent again, and he is beheaded. With his head separated from his body, Orpheus is now no longer whole; he can no

longer be of one mind and body, and that creative and artistic mind is now separated from the body; he is no longer fully Orpheus, and his head is helpless. Still speaking, Orpheus' head is scared, alone, and he seems to in a figurative manner of speaking, lost his head, "Where am I? It's dark in here. My head aches. Where's my head?...Help!" (141). At his most helpless point, all Orpheus can do is cry for Eurydice, "Eurydice!...Eurydice...Eurydice" (141). Then she appears, stepping through the mirror, the same mirror from which Death had earlier come, "Cocteau here uses the device of the mirror as the medium of transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead... 'Mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes'" (Strauss 33). In this scene, Eurydice emerges for the first time after finally being firmly established by Cocteau as agent. She assumes the role of Death, the all-powerful force that is able to overcome Cocteau's Orpheus but Ovid's Orpheus as well. She has the power to pass through the mirror, to bring others to their death; she, in the place of Death, is the death that overcomes Orpheus' art. In the myth, his art is able to take him far, but his art is not enough to save Eurydice. Death has the power in the end. Here Eurydice, as Death, becomes that ultimate power to overcome Orpheus' art.

Eurydice, as agent, leads Orpheus' headless body through the mirror and to death, "There hand in hand. Now, walk. You mustn't be afraid. Just come along with me" (Cocteau 142). Here we see her agency in full force. She commands him to walk, taking his hand and leading him away from his head and away from his poetry. Orpheus asks, as if a child hand-in-hand with its mother, "Where's my head... Where's my body... But my head, Eurydice... my head... where did I put it?" (142). Eurydice answers with, "Forget your head, darling. You'll never have to worry about your head again" (142). Orpheus as former agent has been beheaded, and he will never need that head again; Eurydice is now that head, she is now the mind that decides, the mouth that speaks. She is now the agent.

Cocteau leaves us with a final view of Eurydice's new power. She is the last doer of action. Orpheus and Eurydice are in the after-life with Heurtebise, seated, ready to eat. Heurtebise asks if he should pour the wine, but Orpheus, as a sign of the power he has relinquished as agent, respectfully (as the stage direction reads) corrects him, "Let Eurydice do it" (150), as if to say "Let Eurydice be the agent now. I have given her my action and my role." Eurydice takes that role gladly, she fulfills the last action of the play. The stage direction reads, "Eurydice pours him a glass of wine" (150). It is with this final action of the play's agent, Eurydice, that the action of Cocteau's *Orphée* ends.

Chapter 3

Feminine Agency, Artistic Inspiration, and the Postmodern

The question, however, still remains: why does each playwright shift the agency to the feminine? Why do they give agency to Eurydice? In evaluating each play, we see both Cocteau and Williams using their feminine agent to make a commentary on artistic inspiration. Williams' Eurydice romanticizes the love she has for Val, putting their story more in line with the "great love" Ovid's myth is able to perpetuate classic and archetypal figures. Yet, Williams undermines the romanticism of his text through setting and through the lives of the characters themselves. Cocteau's Eurydice does just the opposite of Williams as a feminine agent; she is constantly questioning Orpheus' artistic inspiration, approaching his creativity with a skepticism that we do not see in Williams. Yet, Cocteau undermines his text's interpretation of artistic inspiration just as Williams does; Cocteau undermines his text mainly by way of the very work of art, his play *Orphée*, that he has created and immortalized. The way both of these plays and their playwrights deal with the concept of artistic inspiration and force the reader to question their own texts serve as a commentary on postmodernist theory.

When looking to Williams' *Orpheus Descending*, we see Lady's romanticism of artistic inspiration, "Most of the plays [Williams'] include someone in the cast...that cannot function in the real world. [S]he reaches for the unobtainable and often fashions an idealistic fiction to replace a frustrating reality" (Niesen 81). Lady is this cast member in *Orpheus Descending*. The tendency of Williams' Lady to romanticize is shared by the playwright as well. Williams desired to give "a mythic dimension or stature to the characters" (Thompson 142) in his plays. Williams' worldview was always one of the romantic, "He saw himself as the archetypal outside: a poet in a

practical world, a homosexual in a heterosexual society” (Tischler 147), and Williams was able to use his self-imposed status as outsider to explore a world of fantasy and drama with his characters.

Living in the ‘Century of Progress,’ he preferred candlelight to electricity. A Southerner who lamented the loss of a dignity, elegance, and sense of honor; he was never satisfied with the dreary present and its flat speech. Williams yearned for ‘long distance,’ for ‘cloudy symbols of high romance’...His characters love a lost, idealized past... and they live for a dangerous, problematic future...It was romantic dreamers...whom he celebrated in his poems, stories, novels, and plays. Romanticism was the very fabric of his life and work - woven throughout (147-48).

Williams’ Lady is the very embodiment of her creator’s romanticism. She lives an unhappy life, the wife of a “son of a bitch” who bought her at a fire sale and a woman that hasn’t had a single good dream in fifteen years (Williams 266). Her dreary day-to-day consists of work at the general store, which she runs in the place of her husband that has now become an invalid. There is certainly not much for Lady to look forward to, but when Val falls into her lap as if by fate, she cannot help but romanticize their “love.”

The artistic elements of the play enforce the romanticism of their relationship. At different moments, Lady is entranced by Val’s music. When they first meet, and he comes to her for a job as clerk, Lady is adamant about not hiring him. When he shows her his guitar and begins to play for her, she is intrigued, “Can I see it?” (261), and she softens to him. In these first moments between Lady and Val, Williams’ romanticism begins to emerge. Val’s music becomes inspiration for Lady to be artistic as well, “Well – you see that other room there, through that arch there? That’s the confectionary...it’s going to be reopened in a short while...I’m going to redecorate...Artificial branches of fruit trees in flower on the walls and ceilings! It’s going to be like an orchard in spring!” (263). Thus artistic inspiration through Williams seems to perpetuate

itself. There is a magical and powerful portrayal of artistic expression through Val's musical talent and its effect on Lady. There is something almost otherworldly and cosmic that Williams attributes to Val's guitar, which is adorned with names of legendary musicians, who are surrounded by their own myths. "Greatest man 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...That name is immortal, Lady" (261). By calling these men and women immortal, and, having Val explain the lore surrounding their music and their artistic expression, Williams is able to contribute an air of mythic proportion to his story of Lady and Val.

Lady's behavior around Val enforces the romanticism of Williams. She is almost pathetic in her relationship with Val. Not once during the play does Val express explicitly any sort of loving feelings for Lady; yet, she throws herself at him, at one point, screaming at him on her knees, "I NEED YOU!!!!...TO LIVE...TO GO ON LIVING!" (305). Lady's behavior is clear evidence of Williams' romantic view. Lady turns what she believes is her love for Val into a great work of art. Her language is dramatic and emotional, "Ask me how it felt to be coupled with death up there" (333), she compares her life with Jabe, her husband, to death, "My skin crawled when he touched me. But I endured it. I guess my heart knew that somebody must be coming to take me out of this hell! You did [Val]. You came. Now look at me! I'm alive once more!" (333). In the eyes of Lady, Val is her savior. He is the valiant prince, soaring into her miserable life, married to a horrible husband (Death himself), in this Hell, sweeping her off her feet, and making her come alive again with his love. Williams, through Eurydice, is taking the fame and immortality of the Orpheus myth and comparing the relationship between Val and Lady to the "great love" and the "great art" of the Orpheus and Eurydice of Ovid. He attempts to establish Val and Lady as an archetypal love and to establish his play as a work of art comparable to legend, but this text, whether the intention of Williams or not, undermines its great romance by over-romanticizing the Val and Lady love story.

The “love” between Val and Lady is mainly due to the dramatization and imagination of a neglected woman. Lady’s expression of “love” for Val is often pathetic and overdone. The over-dramatization of this relationship serves only to emphasize its ridiculous. The very setting of the play undermines the “great art” of their love of which Lady tries so hard to convince us. This play is set in a small, nameless Southern town, in a nameless state, hardly a memorable or legendary setting. The people of the town live relatively dreary lives, with Williams creating a largely generic formula for the dynamic of the town. There is a town pariah or harlot, the wives of the town are simple women with nothing much to do but gossip, their husbands are self-important and ignorant; there is a no-nonsense sheriff, and a church that the whole town frequents on Sundays.

Williams’ town could be any small town in the United States at almost any time. Yet, rather than this unoriginality contributing to the archetype of Williams “myth,” it only serves to engender indifference. Lady is not a great beauty, nor is she a particularly independent or vibrant woman. She is largely forgettable, as is her male counterpart, Val. He is a drifter, and that is most of what we are told about him. He speaks very little and possesses a passivity and lethargy as the play’s archetypal male that makes him wholly unremarkable. In the end, Lady is shot, and the men of the town chase down Val. There is no after-life, no fantastical moment, only the predictable end for a woman in a small-minded town with an unstable husband being caught in an extra-marital affair.

Thus, through his setting and his characters, Williams undermines his own work. His is a story that through his feminine agent’s control seeks to be “great art,” seeks to be comparable to legend and to the classical Orpheus myth, but that in the end only undermines its own goal of archetype and fame with a mundane setting of characters that over-dramatize and over-romanticize their forgettable lives.

We then look to Cocteau's Eurydice and the commentary on artistic inspiration that he advocates through her. We find that Cocteau's commentary on artistic inspiration is quite the opposite of Williams. Where Williams is prone to romanticize artistic expression and the inspiration for art, Cocteau seeks to tear it down. Through Eurydice, we see a skepticism about Orpheus' source of artistic inspiration; we see her questioning his art, and because of her agency, Orpheus' artistic inspiration is broken down.

Just as Lady's romanticism in Williams is the very product of the playwright's writing tendencies, so too is Cocteau's Eurydice. "Cocteau devoted a great part of his critical writing to discussing his conception of the poet and of art in general" (Crowson 94), and we see example of this devotion in his *Orphée*. The play centers on the role of the poet and his artistic expression, and, as we see in the agency of Eurydice, that role is greatly questioned and in many ways unstable:

...the poet lives under a curse, because Cocteau implies that the very knowledge which makes him an artist makes him a divided human being...No longer able to exist comfortably within any framework, he finds himself alienated from the world at all levels as well as from himself...Therefore, his very nature resides in a kind of unhappy but resolute balancing of opposites and in a refusal of compromise that affronts and disturbs those around him (95-96).

Cocteau explores this very concept in his *Orphée* when Orpheus refuses to find a compromise between his poetry and Eurydice. In the very start of the play, Orpheus cannot see past the ridiculous nature of his talking horse, "...one of the most astonishing sentences the world has ever heard. And I intend to use it to change the face of poetry. Here I am immortalizing my horse and you wonder why he says 'thank you'..." (Cocteau 106). Orpheus is too preoccupied with the words of the horse, or his medium for artistic inspiration. He will not even think to pay attention

to Eurydice's constant questioning of this medium. "It's ridiculous!" (107), she tells him, but Orpheus refuses to compromise on his poetry.

He refuses to pay attention to the other aspects of his life; when leaving his home, he kisses the horse goodbye, "Does he love his poet?...Until tonight" (112). Orpheus speaks to the horse, his means of inspiration, as if the horse were his lover. His life and his love are his poetry, and just as Cocteau defines the life of a poet, he "affronts and disturbs" the people that are around him by refusing to see beyond his art and is alienated. Eurydice has no choice but to poison his horse and destroy his source of inspiration, for his inspiration has become an affront to their love, "See how nervous the horse has made you! You used to laugh, kiss me, throw your arms around me...But then that horse came into your life...Now you spend all your time petting that horse, interrogating that horse, waiting for that horse to answer you..." (107). Orpheus seems to be spending his life dedicated solely to his art, but instead of focusing on Orpheus' as poet, Cocteau gives us the other side to the life of the poet. He gives voice to those whom the poet alienates in his refusal to compromise; he gives voice to Eurydice, and she is able to offer us the skeptic perception of artistic inspiration as that chosen voice.

She is constantly pushing to break down Orpheus' source of artistic inspiration throughout the play. Not only does she try to poison the horse, but when Orpheus brings her back from the Underworld, she attempts to exercise power over him. She wants him to forget about his poetry and his inspiration as she is now the one he has chosen over that poetry. He went to Death to save her, "I don't care about the horse. I want Eurydice" (127). He is ready to forget his poetry to keep her alive; yet, his choice of Eurydice does not last for long. In the scene of Eurydice's return, she begins again to question his artistic expression, telling him, "Remember your promise. You are never to mention that horse again" (131). Yet, as a poet, Cocteau cannot allow him to compromise, and he returns once again to his inspiration by deliberately turning to look at Eurydice and sending her back to death.

Cocteau, however, does not allow Orpheus happiness in his artistic inspiration for long. When Orpheus receives the letter informing him that his poetry is “MERDE,” Cocteau is restoring our skepticism of Orpheus’ art. After his source of inspiration becomes as useless as a pile of feces, Orpheus denies his inspiration, “Eurydice was right. The horse was a bait in a trap they set to catch me” (138). Orpheus thus becomes skeptical and doubtful of his own inspiration; he is ready to throw it away and join Eurydice in death.

Cocteau undermines his own commentary on artistic inspiration and the doubt of that inspiration he explores through Eurydice’s agency, for he himself is creating a work of art. In *Eurydice*, Cocteau seeks to break down artistic inspiration, to cast it in a different and more questionable light. He tells us not to trust artistic inspiration and the art it creates in this play; yet, his play will stand as an immortal fixture of his art and of his artistic inspiration. Not only does he create a play that is to be represented as the product of his own inspiration, in which he asks us to find meaning and truth, but Cocteau is ready to broadcast this work of inspiration as his own. At the end of the play, the commissioner of the police is investigating the death of Orpheus. He sees Orpheus’ head sitting on a pedestal, and he mistakes it for a bust of Orpheus’ head. He asks Heurtebise, “Who’s it by?...Didn’t the artist sign it” (145). Here Cocteau is demonstrating the importance of artistic ownership and of making clear that a work of art is the inspiration of a particular artist. Thus the commissioner is later asking Heurtebise his name, Orpheus’ head speaks his name, “Jean Cocteau...C-O-C-T-E-A-U” (148). Cocteau names the artist of his work; he places his signature on this play through the very mouth of Orpheus. He is very willingly to embrace and represent this play as his work of art. By creating a work of art himself, by representing an inspiration so adamantly as his own, Cocteau is undermining the skepticism of art that he wishes to establish through his feminine agent.

Thus, through these two works and their shift in agency, the conversation that agency encourages about artistic inspiration, and the undermining of that artistic inspiration, serve as an

interpretation of postmodernist theory. Postmodernists seek to reinterpret the structures of all areas of expression especially literature. Critics like Jacques Derrida emphasized the idea of “deconstructing” a text, looking for ways to upset the structural hierarchy of a text, for instance how a text undermines itself: “The author’s text need not refer to some object...The notion that texts must mean something specific and refer to something concretely outside of themselves are no longer viable propositions” (Calcagno 36-37).

Williams exemplifies this concept by undermining the view of artistic inspiration that his female agent encourages by over-romanticizing his text. Cocteau undermines his view of artistic inspiration as encouraged by his female agent by creating a work of art himself. By undermining their texts, Cocteau and Williams inform Michel Foucault’s theory of power. For Foucault, power is a socialized phenomenon that creates the structures within our society. Foucault explores the destructive nature of power but he also discusses its creative nature and how the structure that power creates determines our notion of art. Cocteau and Williams by shifting agency from Orpheus, the traditional authority, to the figure of Eurydice are emphasizing the socialized and fluid nature of structure that postmodernism encourages. Cocteau and Williams by shifting agency and undermining their texts are replacing a previous notion of agency or art and thus have created something new.

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Honors and Awards

- Dean's List, Pennsylvania State University, Fall 2009–Fall 2012
- The President's Freshman Award, Pennsylvania State University, Fall 2009
- Schreyer Honors College Scholarship, Pennsylvania State University, Fall 2009-Spring 2013
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Professional Experience

- Proposal Editorial Assistant, Health Advocate Inc, May 2011- Present
 - Edited and wrote Request for Proposal (RFP) answers for questionnaires sent by potential clients
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