

More Help with the Okri Assignment (allusion)

There are multiple ways of completing this assignment, and I'm not wedded to any one format. This is one obvious way of presenting this information in a coherent manner.

Since I'm not going to do the assignment for you, so the text I will be using is American poet Adrienne Rich's 1968 "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus":

I am walking rapidly through striations of light and dark thrown
under an arcade.

I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers
and those powers severely limited
by authorities whose faces I rarely see.

I am a woman in the prime of life
driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce
through a landscape of twilight and thorns.

A woman with a certain mission
which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact.

A woman with nerves of a panther
a woman with contacts among Hell's Angels
a woman feeling the fullness of her powers
at the precise moment when she must not use them
a woman sworn to lucidity

who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires
of these underground streets
her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind
on the wrong side of the mirror.

The way I'm going to set this up is in a list (mainly to spare myself formatting issues in the blog), though it would be easy to also do this in a chart or in paragraphs. My descriptions are fairly thorough, but I do not necessarily expect the prose to rise to quite the same level as a finished paper (though this obviously won't hurt your grade). What I do expect, however, is that your descriptions be precise and detailed. You can split your analysis between the original presentation of similarities and differences (as I have), or bullet point out the stuff at the beginning and save the explaining for the end. You can even bullet point out explanations, if they're detailed and precise enough.

You can group things together by topic (Orpheus, music, Eurydice, snake, Cerberus, underworld, Maenads were the topics from the quiz) or function (as I have done, since I believe it lends itself toward a more focused presentation). I've only done three categories because the poem is so short, and that's really all there are. I do not necessarily expect you to discuss every aspect of the allusion in "When the Lights Return," though, and am willing to entertain "quality over quantity" versions of this assignment (if you really wanted to really dig into three or four categories). The level of detail and analysis I provide here would be an example of the "quality" approach.

Orpheus' role as tragic hero

Myth: Orpheus is the protagonist, and it is unequivocally his story (Ovid speaks of the marriage of "Orpheus to Eurydice" [1, emphasis mine], for example). Eurydice's role in the myth is merely functional-- a catalyst to the plot (*his* plot) of his attempt to bring her back from Hades.

Poem: In Rich's poem, Orpheus is no longer the protagonist; rather, he is a passenger, Eurydice being the one who "[drives] her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce" (7). In this image, not only is Orpheus no longer in charge of the destination (compared to the myth, where Eurydice passively follows his lead), but the charge to return from the shadows is no longer his, as Eurydice is "a woman with a certain mission / which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact" (9-10). Even the title, "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," reverses their roles.

Conflation: none

Corrective and/or Single Reference Allusion: Rich diverges from the original in order to re-imagine the relationship in which their function in the story is reversed. Women in 1968 were no longer restricted to passive roles in a relationship with a man (helpmate, adornment, possession, etc.); instead she envisions a version of the story in which women are empowered enough to control their own destinies, to the point where they are not conceived in terms of their male partner.

Characterization of Eurydice

Myth: In Ovid, Eurydice possesses zero personality. She is not described at all, and the only indirect characterization occurs when she "dies" for the second time, saying farewell to her husband and refusing to blame him for his lack of self-control (4). In this, she is defined solely by passivity and negation. The word Ovid uses to describe her is the feminine form of the Latin *umbra* (*Metamorphoses* X.48), a word that can mean *ghost*, but it is also the same word used for *shadow*-- a particularly apt description given that she seems to exist only in relation to Orpheus and possesses no character of her own.

Poem: Rich describes Eurydice as active ("a woman with a certain mission" [7]); competent ("a woman with nerves of a panther" [9] and "a woman [...] who sees through the mayhem" [13-14]); and self-possessed ("a woman feeling the fullness of her powers" [11]). She is, in contrast to Ovid's poem, three-dimensional (fully "fleshed out," as it were). Eurydice does not see herself as dead ("a woman in the prime of life" [4]), and it is difficult to ascertain whether Rich intends for the reader to see her this way either-- euphemistically describing her current status as "walking rapidly through striations of light and dark thrown / under an arcade" (1-2). Rather than the "*umbras*" of Ovid, Rich's Eurydice is "a woman sworn to lucidity" (13)-- lucidity denoting a clarity of thought and the ability to understand her situation clearly, though the word also retains the older (and, here, more significant) meaning of "the quality of being suffused in light" (from the Latin *lucidus*, "to shine").

Conflation: Eurydice is described by Rich as driving a "black Rolls-Royce" (5), connoting her power and command in the poem (at the time the poem was written, Rolls-Royces were the most expensive cars in the world and a byword for luxury and status). However, her choice in vehicles as alludes to the various makes of the Rolls-Royce automobiles, all named after spirits (Silver Ghost, Phantom,

Silver Wraith, and Silver Shadow). In this way, the black car connotes death (the color obviously aids in this identification).

Corrective and/or Single Reference Allusion: As before, Rich reverses expectation, given Eurydice's active role in the poem. Rather than being Orpheus' shadow (literally and metaphorically), Eurydice is given the sort of detailed characterization that is reserved for Orpheus in the parent myth (with Orpheus being the one to fade into the background narrative). There is, in short, a vitality about her that belies her function in the myth (dead wife of Orpheus), as she emerges as the self-possessed protagonist of her own story-- very much in control of her fate.

Description of Hades

Myth: Ovid refers to death as an "unlovely realm of shadows," "full of fear," and a "yawning Chaos" (2). It is inhabited by gods (Hades and Persephone), monsters, and various humans who, in life, defied the gods and now must be punished forever. It is, in sum, a sinister and inhospitable place, especially to the living.

Poem: As in Ovid, there are shadows in the place where Eurydice resides, though Rich adds too the possibility of light ("striations of light and dark thrown" [1]), very much in keeping with the more optimistic sense of possibility for her heroine, and even the more direct euphemism for death ("landscape of twilight" [8]) still retains this idea of both light and dark, since twilight is the mingling of both. The idea of the chaos in the myth is referenced directly, as the "mayhem" (16) through which Eurydice must see through, and immediately afterward Rich restates this idea with the image of "smoky fires / of these underground streets" (16-17). That the streets are "underground" is an obvious enough identification with Hades (or Hell in general, conceptualized since ancient times as beneath the surface of the world), and the "smoky fires" are suggestive (as before) of a darkness that is lit by an inadequate amount of light-- the fire being characterized more by its obscuration than illumination-- as well as the formless chaos of the smoke itself. Rich is more playful with the description of those who inhabit Hades, referring to Eurydice's "contacts among Hell's Angels" (12), the biker gang with a rather sinister reputation, but again, there is ambiguity, for within the concept itself is idea of both "Hell" and "angel," exactly the sort of ambivalence in imagery as "light" and "dark." Finally there is the imagery in the last two lines, where Orpheus learns "to walk backward against the wind / on the wrong side of the mirror" (18-19), an implied opposition to reality as commonly experienced (insofar as it is its reversal). Note, however, that Orpheus must learn to travel in this way (as in the myth)-- whereas Eurydice is at home in this world, the description of her movement described as "driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce" (7), a much more purposeful, directed, and comfortable sort of motion when compared to Orpheus in the poem. Eurydice is not only much more at home in this world, she is a much more capable actor altogether.

Conflation: Eurydice travels through a "landscape of twilight" (8), obviously denoting a fading of light at the end of the day and broadly suggestive of death, given its status as boundary between the ending of the day and the coming of darkness. It is, however, also suggestive of T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" (described as a "twilight kingdom" in lines 38 and 65), though Eliot himself bases his description of death on Dante's medieval poem *Inferno*. In any case, the (possible) allusion is more casual than lending deeper significance to the poem (as there is a long tradition in Western Europe of describing death a place of shadows). The second part of the construction, "a landscape of

twilight *and* thorn” (8 emphasis mine) is also a possible casual allusion, as “thorns” in the Jewish poetic tradition of the Tanakh-- what Christians call the Old Testament-- are a common metaphor for barrenness and infertility (with dozens of instances of use throughout the Tanakh). Again, the sense of the poem does not rely upon this possible allusion, given that “thorns” connote the same idea even without the biblical tradition.

Corrective and/or Single Reference Allusion: Rich’s allusion to the Hades of the original myth is mostly single reference, given that she (mostly) retains the sinister connotations of the descriptions from Ovid. In both texts, it is both a place where one does not wish to be and an obstacle to be overcome. Where Rich’s poem differs, however, is in the possibility of transcendence of Eurydice’s original fate. There is an implied optimism in the juxtaposition of the light and dark imagery in the descriptions that is absent in the original (which is uniformly dark), and Eurydice herself is portrayed as much more capable than the Orpheus of myth. All of this suggests a sort of guarded optimism about the possibility of happily resolving the conflict (whereas Orpheus’ quest in Ovid is almost certainly doomed from the onset).

Thematic Statement

This is the paragraph that forms the second part of the assignment. DO NOT FORGET TO DO THIS.

Adrienne Rich’s “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” reverses the roles of the Orpheus myth, creating (in Eurydice) a capable, three-dimensional character very much in charge of her own destiny. Written in 1968, the poem is very much a document of its time and reflective of Rich’s own sympathies with second wave feminist ideals. Here is a Eurydice who, contrary to myth, does not require a man’s aid to untangle herself from difficult situations, a Eurydice who is both literally and metaphorically in the driver’s seat, and, contrary to myth, Rich suggests-- both through the competence of her protagonist and the counterbalance of hopeful to despairing images-- an optimism about the possibility of a more favorable outcome. All of this is suggestive of the powers and ability of women in the 20th century, as if women were now fully able to accomplish feats that before would have been impossible-- society having formerly denied women the opportunity to realize their full potential. Eurydice becomes, in this sense, the transformative ideal for all women and reclamation of agency from a patriarchal legacy of forced passivity.