Moulin Rouge! and Orpheus: A story about love

Monica Cyrino described the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as "one of the most influential myths, and certainly one of the most beautiful and powerful, to emerge from antiquity." She goes on to describe how this tale of "the power of love over death," has been used in many cultures and time periods as a vehicle of expression in various forms of art. Baz Luhrmann, like many others, incorporated the Orpheus theme in his film Moulin Rouge! In his film, he uses the Orpheus theme to symbolize the power of love and the inevitability of loss.

Luhrmann made it clear that his film was based on the Orpheus story in a series of interviews shortly after the films release. He said that the Orpheus story is, "is about the moment you realize there are things you cannot control...that's the story of the film." Even without Luhrmann's comments, there are plenty of similarities to connect the film and the myth. Both are talented musicians, both venture in a sort of "underworld," and both lose their beloved forever. More telling than these, however, are the similarities in their respective experiences with love.

In his film, Luhrmann attempts to communicate that love is fated and necessary for an enriched life. Christian came to Paris as a young writer looking for inspiration for his writings. His falling in love with Satine was unexpected, yet inescapable and fated to happen. Orpheus experienced something similar. On his journey with the Argonauts he unexpectedly encountered and fell in love with Eurydice. Like Orpheus, Christian's experiences with Satine ultimately proved to be heart wrenching and painful. However, Luhrmann uses Christian's experience to suggest, as stated in the film, "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love, and be loved in return."

Perhaps the most important of all the underlying themes of the movie is that of the overwhelming power of love. Orpheus went to the underworld and back to show his devotion to his bride. In a similar way, Christian's love for Satine overwhelmed his temporary contempt for her. As he was storming out of the theater in a fit of rage, Satine rises and sings their duet to him, causing him to look back once more. Of this moment Cyrino wrote, "In the end, his love for her is
too strong... he rushes to her, and they are reunited in a singing embrace onstage.”7 Any negative feelings Christian felt in that moment were no match for the deep love he felt for her, which prompted his turning around and returning to her.

One of the most essential elements of the Orpheus myth is that of “looking back,” and the relationship between love and loss. Orpheus thought by saving his bride from the Underworld that he had stayed death for a time, but death would ultimately claim her again as he looked back.8 Christian, upon turning back and going to Satine in the final moments of the film was indeed reunited with his beloved for a brief time, but only to lose her forever as she passed away in his arms. Of this relationship between loss and love Luhrmann said, “...There are things bigger than you - people die, some relationships cannot be - and you are destroyed by that. The scars of that experience and that loss allow you to grow internally and spiritually, and that's the adult journey.” 9 Had Christian never traveled to Paris he would never have met and fallen in love with Satine, and his life would not have been enriched by the experience of giving and receiving true love. The experience of love and not the way it ends seems to be what matters most.

Baz Luhrmann’s film “Moulin Rouge!” is a clever and moving usage of the Orpheus myth. Through the use of modern songs and underlying themes, Luhrmann has created an entertaining film that powerfully illustrates the power of love and the inevitability of loss.

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