

Mythology In A Modern World:

Reviving Myths In *Hadestown*

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01

Composer



Anais Mitchell

- A critically-acclaimed Vermont based singer-songwriter, playwright and the main brain behind the 2019 Broadway musical *Hadestown*.
- She is a frequent collaborator with the Indie folk singer Bon Iver and a lot of her earlier work reflected this as she was primarily a folk musician.
- Her earlier works such as “Young Man in America” explored timeless themes of love and loss and did a great job of balancing being political without ever feeling condescending.
- She developed the seeds for the idea of *Hadestown* in 2006 originally envisioning it as a sprawling concept album which set out to revitalize and give new life to the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in a modern context.

02
Characters



Orpheus is a passionately naive singer who hopes to change the world with song but comes to face the harsh realities of life

02

Hades is the authoritarian ruler of the underworld torn between his desire for control and his love for Persephone

04

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Eurydice is a weary, pragmatic woman drawn to the promise of survival even at the cost of her own freedom and love

03

Persephone is a conflicted goddess who shifts between joyful rebellion on earth and complicity in her relationship with Hades and the workings of the underworld.

03
Plot





Plot

- The world of *Hadestown* is plagued by dangerous weather and starvation.
- Eurydice and Orpheus meet and they have a connection.
- Orpheus in his quest to write the perfect love song to save the world, begins to neglect his relationship with Eurydice.
- Eurydice, starving decides to work in the hellish Industrial Underworld and give up her freedom to survive the cold and escape poverty.

Plot

- Persephone and Hades have marital troubles so Persephone parties on earth half the year.
- Orpheus heads to the underworld to rescue Eurydice.
- He inspires the workers to rise up against the capitalist system imprisoning them with song.
- Orpheus finishes his song and performs it for Hades and it opens the Lord of the Underworld's heart to work on his marriage.
- He lets Orpheus leave with Eurydice on the condition that he can't turn back to see her till they get back to earth.
- In a moment of inevitable doubt, Orpheus turns back and she is gone.



04
Songs



Why We Build The Wall

- This song is performed by the workers in the Underworld while they're doing grueling work.
- Some lyrics include "How does the wall keep us free? The wall keeps out the enemy" and "Because we have and they have not! My children".
- This song is a scathing, self aware critique of capitalism and anti-immigrant sentiment.
- It grounds the play in a modern context and relevance of xenophobia that is so rampant today and that listeners certainly know all too well and can see the connection.
- The out-group bias and the otherization of the "enemy" calls to mind the ways in which this country speaks of immigrants and paints them as the evil enemy who are trying to come into the country and take what we have.
- The song also reinforces the xenophobic and racist notion that the only way to truly be free is to ensure that others don't share what you have and those same freedoms.
- Finally, the use of "my children" makes me think of how the indoctrination of the youth through familial beliefs starts young as these kids are being taught to hate those who are not in the wall with them.

Why We Build The Wall (Secondary Reading)

- With this song being the center of a lot of themes in HadesTown, I think it's worth doing another reading of.
- Another way to look at this song is through the lens of the Industrialist, capitalist world these characters and we are living in and see the song through that lense.
- Some important lines for this reading are "We have work and they have none and our work is never done" and "The enemy is poverty and the wall keeps out the enemy."
- With the way our brains have been trained, we view money and things like financial security as freedoms and getting a job to cover your expenses and have these things feels like a freedom.
- In order for Eurydice or any other person to have these freedoms, we make a deal with a wealthy corporation or boss (in her case Hades) to give us work in exchange for our time, lives, and souls.
- We give up our limited time on this earth working to cover our basic needs and waste time in a factory, or office rather than outside in nature seeing the beauty of the world.
- The wall is an irony in itself because we build it to keep out of poverty and stay fed and warm and keep out those who want what we have but in reality, we're trapping ourselves in the wall with it.

Flowers

- Flowers is the center of Eurydice's emotional journey throughout *Hadestown*.
- It's when she realizes that in her desire to escape poverty and find freedom through the warmth of the underworld caused her to give away her freedom to live her life.
- Lyrics like "nothing gonna wake me now" and "I remember fields of Flowers" begin to show her regretting her decision to give herself up to the capitalistic, corporate underworld as she remembers the beauty of the world which she left behind in hopes of a more secure future.
- Despite leaving everything behind for security, she didn't even attain the freedom and warmth she was searching for because after giving everything up all she feels is cold.

05

Revived Myth



How Anais Mitchell Modernized Myth

Mitchell's creation of Hadestown demonstrates how ancient myths can be updated to reflect modern societal concerns, weaving a narrative that is both timeless and relevant.

- Mitchell's decision to merge the two myths of Orpheus and Eurydice with Persephone and Hades allowed her to explore connections of love, power, and sacrifice while “set in a darkly political, Americana dreamscape” (Anais Mitchell, *Electric Literature*).
 - This unique setting ties ancient themes of underworld hardships to contemporary labor exploitation.
 - Aligning with modern fears of dehumanization, “Hadestown is dark, dreary, and mechanical—a factory from which there is no escape” (Mitchell, *Electric Literature*).
- The most innovative element of Hadestown is the cyclical structure of its ending.
 - Despite the loss and pain Orpheus and Eurydice just endured, the play ends on a hopeful and wildly imaginative note as it ends where it begins.
 - Hermes sings “It’s an old song, and we’re gonna sing it again... Maybe it will turn out this time.”
 - Mitchell sees it as a “passing of the torch of hope from the artist Orpheus to the storyteller, who’s going to tell it again” (Mitchell, *Electric Literature*).
 - This ending emphasizes the enduring relevance of the myth and in turn makes it and its themes of love and survival eternal and timeless.

Adapting Characters To Fit A Modern Context

- *Hadestown's* modernizing of these characters from the ancient myth is exactly what makes them feel so real
- My favorite change is in the character of Eurydice.
 - In the original myth, she is bitten by a snake and dies getting sent to the underworld.
 - Here she is given the agency and feels more like a real person and not some victim of fate as she makes the active decision to go to the Underworld in hopes of safety and warmth, adding a lot more weight to this choice.
- Hades, who was once just a ruler in the myth is now a slick, suit-wearing, stand-in for corporation heads to better reflect the more modern concerns of capitalist greed and authoritarianism.
- Orpheus updated motivation to “bring the world back into tune” resonates with somewhat naive, but still hopeful concepts of artistic idealism as his journey mirrors that of other struggling artists in fiction.
- The addition of Hermes into the story is also a really interesting twist as the god of travelers and messages makes for an interesting divine guide for Orpheus in his journey through the Underworld and is the perfect conduit for the ending's themes of retelling the story in the hope of a different ending and different future.

Works Cited

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