Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: The Lyre of Orpheus by Nick Cave ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1096. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Nick Cave

The Lyre of Orpheus

United Kingdom (2004)

TAGS: Eurydice Gods Hades Katabasis Orpheus Underworld





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Lyre of Orpheus
Title of the Album(s)	Abattoir Blues
Studio/Production Company	Recorded at Studio Ferber, Paris over 12 days in March and April 2004 / Label: Mute Records / Producer: Nick Launay
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Australia, United Kingdom, Europe
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2004
Running time	5:36 min
Official Website	Lyrics available at nickcave.com (accessed: July 23, 2020).
Awards	At the time of its release the album *Abattoir Blues / The Lyre of Orpheus* reached No. 5 on the ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association) Albums Chart. In Europe, it topped the charts in Norway, came top 2 in Austria and Denmark, and in the top 10 in Belgium, Finland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden.
Target Audience	Age restriction 18+
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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Creators



Nick Cave by Yves Lorson. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 2.0 (accessed: January 25, 2022).

Nick Cave , b. 1957
(Author, Screenwriter, Vocalist)

Nick Cave is an Australian singer, songwriter, composer, author, screenwriter and occasional actor. Born in Warracknabeal, a small town in north-west Victoria, he was educated in Melbourne. He briefly studied art before deciding to pursue music and forming The Birthday Party in the late 1970s. The band relocated to London, then West Berlin, establishing a cult following in Europe and Australia for their provocative live performances. Following demise of The Birthday Party in 1983, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds was formed with Mick Harvey, Blixa Bargeld, Warren Ellis, Martyn P. Casey, and Rowland S. Howard alongside an international group of musicians in an evolving line-up. The band's sound evolved from post-punk to alternative rock, though each album features a different musical aesthetic. Released in 2004, *Abattoir Blues / The Lyre of Orpheus* is their thirteenth album. Cave's lifelong preoccupation with the themes of violence, death, love and religion is played out throughout the seventeen songs on the double album.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 26, 2020);

britannica.com (accessed: July 26, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

Attention: age restriction 18+

With a discordant, seesawing melody and four-line verses organised into an ABCB rhyming scheme, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds perform a grim and grisly retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Orpheus is a depressive figure, sitting 'gloomy in his garden shed' when by chance he arranges 'a lump of wood, and a piece of wire' into a musical instrument. But while his rudimentary lyre sounds beautiful to him, it is abhorrent and destructive to others. When he plays it for his wife Eurydice, her head explodes in a gory mess. Orpheus is appalled at the sight, but 'in his heart he felt a bliss / which nothing could compare.' He goes frolicking through the fields, playing his instrument with enthusiasm, and wreaking havoc as 'Birdies detonated in the sky / Bunnies dashed their brains out on the trees.' It is a disturbing revisioning of Ovid's famous description of Orpheus' ability to enchant the animals, trees and even the rocks with his music (*Metamorphoses* 10).

When he plays a G minor 7 chord, he arouses God from a deep sleep. Up in heaven God grabs his hammer and throws it at the musician, knocking down a 'very deep well' to hell. With 'his brains all down his head', Orpheus finds himself in the Underworld, still carrying his lyre. He is reunited with his wife, who declares 'If you play that fucking thing down here / I'll stick it up your orifice!' Orpheus agrees to cease his performance, declaring 'this lyre lark is for the birds' and proposes that they remain together in hell to start a family, 'a bunch of screaming brats.'

In the final verse he plays one last time, staring into the abyss and feeling deep depression once more. He dedicates his final performance 'This one is for Mamma', leading into an extended version of the song's chorus, the repeated refrain 'Oh Mamma'.

Analysis

Attention: 18+

The Lyre of Orpheus suggests that music can be both transcendent and horrific, even simultaneously. It is a self-conscious observation to make within the context of a song that is itself not wholly pleasant to

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listen to. Opening with an understated, scratchy baseline, over five and a half minutes the drama of the music gradually increases to a powerful crescendo of voices and instruments. In reference to the myth's Hellenic origins, multi-instrumentalist Warren Ellis plays bouzouki on the track.

In this retelling, Orpheus is directly responsible for Eurydice's death, who in the traditional version of the myth dies from a snakebite on their wedding day. The song revises the story of tragic love into a grim tableau of married life. Neither Orpheus nor Cave himself seem to have much affection for Eurydice, who lies asleep in bed 'like a sack of cannonballs.' The relationship between husband and wife is characterised by depression and torpor, and while Orpheus agrees to put away his lyre and start a family in the underworld, his misery does not abate. In this version the katabasis is permanent; there is no return to the world above for either figure. Cave omits the romantic elements of the myth – Orpheus' grief over the loss of his beloved, and his failure to resist looking back at her as they return to the world. But while the couple remain together, they are each in their own private hell.

The song's chorus, calling on 'Mamma' is borrowed from Ted Hughes' poem 'Song for a Phallus', part of *The Life and Songs of a Crow* (1971), which retells the story of Oedipus with the same metre and comedic violence that feature in *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Peter Fydler writes 'There can be absolutely no doubt in my mind that Cave had read 'Song for a Phallus' and, either consciously or unconsciously, decided to produce his own version either as a parody of a parody or as homage.' (74)

God is an ambiguous figure within the song, devoid of specific characteristics that might connect him to a particular Olympian deity (he does wield a hammer like the Norse god Thor). It is also unclear whether his motivation for destroying Orpheus is on account of his destruction of the living creatures, Eurydice, or something else. Cave sings 'God was a major player in heaven', but it is left unclear whether the statement alludes to his ultimate authority or his own musical prowess.

Cave is well-versed in the canon of western literature, art and philosophy. Another song on the album, *There She Goes my Beautiful World*, describes the eccentric habits of writers, poets and artists at work including Nabokov, Marx, Dylan Thomas, and Gaugin, and

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	alludes to the experiences of writer's block and creative inspiration.Two other songs on the album reference the ancient Greek poet Sappho. *Hiding All Away* gives a sardonic critique of the poetic canon ('You searched through all my poets, from *Sappho* through to Auden / I saw the book fall from your hands, as you slowly died of boredom'). But *Nature Boy* is more romantic, describing an encounter in which a lover 'closed in, in slow motion / Quoting Sappho, in the original Greek'.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Eurydice Gods Hades Katabasis Orpheus Underworld
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Death Depression Emotions Invention Parents (and children) Punishment Relationships Storytelling
Further Reading	Peter Fydler "The Lyre of Orpheus: Ted Hughes and Nick Cave", *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* VII.1 (2018): 66–76. static1.squarespace.com (accessed: July 26, 2020). rollingstone.com (accessed: July 26, 2020).
Addenda	First Release Date: Album released on 20 September 2004. The Abattoir Blues Tour travelled through Europe between November 2nd and December 5th 2004. First Release Details: Double album of 17 songs. Running Time: Whole album 82:30

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Genre: Gothic rock song, ballad.

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