



Orpheus Descending

Tennessee Williams

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A play in three acts by Tennessee Williams.

Orpheus Descending Details

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From Reader Review *Orpheus Descending* for online ebook

Grace Leneghan says

Very strong soap-opera vibes. The play takes place in a small Southern town where everyone knows everyone's business but the ultimate drama seemed to fall flat and felt cheesy. Yet, Williams is a stunning poetic playwright so the play itself is filled with gorgeous speeches, especially from Lady. But I can't help feeling like I wouldn't want to see this produced today. It feels dated... and at times is quite racist. A very mediocre 3 stars.

Jeff says

What a wonderful hot mess of a play--like the bastard child of Williams and O'Neil. This play is filled with some of Williams's most gorgeous speeches but at any moment seems about to collapse into hysterical camp.

Ivana says

A bittersweet sadness haunts the pages of this play. Gentle tragedy, melancholy and sorrow that for me defines the works of Tennessee Williams is doing its thing again in this play.

There is a sensitive Italian women capable of great love and passion reminiscent of protagonist in *The Rose Tattoo*, there is the Orpheus who (like his original in the Greek mythology) is seductive but lacking in strength and there is the Lady- reminiscent of Blanche- a women searching for love in the wrong places. However, Lady unlike Blanche finds at least a friend in modern Orpheus and I found that somehow very comforting. There isn't a lot of comfort to be found in this play, though. It is tragic in every sense of the word. It exposes human weaknesses and their tragedy.

Some think that this is one of his lesser play. Honestly, I don't see why. For me, it in a way ties all of his plays together. Maybe it is not my favourite play by him, but it is not inferior to other play. I don't know, the quality of his writing always seem to be at the same level, a pretty high level, and I don't think it has ever oscillated as with some writers. I actually cannot say which of his plays I consider to be the best.

Lauren says

A retelling of the myth Orpheus set in the American South, I liked the idea more than the execution. I don't think the setting and myth connected the way Williams intended, and for me, the result felt more like stilted melodramatic soap opera than an emotionally-searing drama about the darkness of the humanity.

But oh, how I love this idea – I can see why the idea captured Williams's imagination. Perhaps if I saw it staged, I would feel differently. But on page, the play falls short. Quasi-recommended.

Jim Leckband says

I agree with those who have commented that this isn't one of Williams' more successful plays. The drama of the play doesn't quite live up to a portentous title of "Orpheus Descending", in fact it seems a little soap opera-ish at times with the chorus of busybody ladies and the shenanigans between Lady and Val literally under Jabe's presence. The plot is essentially: "A Stranger Comes to Town".

Still, there are many things to appreciate: the closeted feel of a southern town where everybody knows everybody else's business and in fact thinks it is their business, the characterizations of Val and Lady, the surreal Conjure Man, and the associated Orpheus imagery that fit in nicely to Williams' own style.

Duffy Pratt says

After a while, these plays start to feel like mix and match. Variations on the same characters pass through, but their names change, and sometimes their orbits change a bit as well. I liked this one well enough, and I would like to see it performed someday. Basically, that is my biggest regret after reading any of his play. I am always left with the idea that it would be so much better on stage, especially with the minor characters. On paper, I find them to be a bit flat, but I know that a good actor and director can really find the life in them, and that the flatness is mostly the result of my laziness.

I didn't much like either of the two main metaphors. First, there is the idea of a leg less bird who must keep a flight it's entire life. The characters seem drawn to this image, which they see as a metaphor for freedom? But where is the freedom in it? It sounds like a terrible prison to me. Did Williams not see this, or did he see it, and make his characters too stupid to see it? Either way, it struck me as being both a mistake, and heavy handed. The other idea I didn't like so much is that we are all prisoners condemned to solitary confinement in our own skins. Yeah, I suppose it has a kind of profundity to it, but it is also just so much bullshit.

The townspeople in this play are truly horrifying. It seems that their main aim in life is to ostracize anyone who differs. And this is where a performance would help me so much. On paper, I see the. As simply shallow and evil. And maybe that is all there is. But I suspect that a good production could bring out more, and that would make the play both richer and more troubling.

Teemu says

Not Williams' best but quite strong nonetheless. All that's typical to Williams - women, men and atmosphere - are there although the theme is occasionally a bit hard to get a grasp of. At least the theme isn't as prominent and clear as it is in *The Streetcar Named Desire* or *The Glass Menagerie*.

Orpheus Descending was one of the very first plays I saw in a theatre, which might make it more memorable than it actually is. Subsequent reading didn't feel the same. But still, I'm a devoted fan of Williams.

Ivana Books Are Magic says

Orpheus Descending is a bold and powerful interpretation of the Greek myth. Williams retells the legend of Orpheus, shaping it in his own unique way, creating a story that is poignant with sorrow and just as capable of causing catharsis as those legendary Greek tragedies. As to why *Orpheus Descending* wasn't an immediate success, I must admit I'm a bit perplexed. Perhaps it was simply ahead its time with the strength of its imagism and the immense pain of its loneliness. Sexuality (either repressed or stressed) is always an important theme with Tennessee and this play is no exception. Whether that had to do anything with initial reception, I'm quite clueless but it might have had an impact of more conservative viewers. The character of Myra, with her open promiscuous ways, is a figure that might have raised a few eyebrows- and it still might. Recently I have learned that Williams wrote the character of Myra having the famous Hollywood actress Tallulah Bankhead in mind. Doesn't Myra sound just like her? With her panic fear of loneliness?

There is a lot of tenderness in this novel. Val, the musician (our Orpheus) strand out in a variety of ways, but mostly because he is capable of sincerity and tenderness. He comes to this small dry shop searching escape from his 'night life', not running so much from live in the city, but from night life of the city, explaining that night and day city people live in different cities and don't really know one another. Little does Val know that he has come to a sinister place, an underworld of a sorts, where a beautiful lady is trapped. Val's tired of his life, of being lonely women's paid comfort. Val claims that his guitar can 'wash him clean of anything', but he years are catching up with him, that's why he must have left the (night) city. What is he looking for? Perhaps what we're all looking for. Genuine kindness and tenderness, sometimes known under the name of love.

On one level, the story seems pretty straight-forward and simple. The plot itself is, quite possibly, nothing exceptional or unheard of. Lady gives a job to Val, who immediately attracts negative attention from the closed, racist and xenophobic community. Not surprisingly, Lady, a woman who was forced into marriage to a man she doesn't love falls for Val, a young handsome guitar player. Not that I've read quite the same story before, but there must be similar ones. The irony is that Val is, in fact, innocent of just about anything he gets accused of. He just tries to comfort most women he talks with- we can see him as an embodiment of art itself. He brings solace to other people's life and as a musician's he understands other artists- for example the sheriff's wife- the naïve painter. As you might guess, the sheriff won't take too kindly to their talks.

Another woman Val is on friendly terms is Myra. She is a wealthy girl who is tormented by a terrible loneliness. She wears fantastical make up (modelling some dancer), drinks and drives around a lot, shocking everyone she comes across. At start she flirts with Val, but what happens between them ends up being something very akin to friendship. In one of their conversations, Val teases Myra, saying that being so slim and petite, she probably can't even take the weight of the man, and Myra responds quite seriously that the act of love making is absolutely painful for her, but that she endures it, because a person will endure everything for the sake of chasing the loneliness away. Now, doesn't that sound like Tallulah Bankhead who famously said to her doctor (after being discharged from hospital weighing only 70lbs (32 kg) due to vaginal disease complications): "Don't think this taught me a lesson!". I do wonder why Tallulah turned out that Myra role, she supposedly said that the play was impossible. Tennessee is brilliant when it comes to connecting themes of passion, love, sexuality and loneliness. Perhaps it is not his candid portrayal of human sexuality and desire that met with mixed reviews, perhaps it was his critique of the society.

For society is, without doubt, criticized in this novel. Perhaps it is even implied that society always senses 'an artist' as something intruding, 'an alien' of sorts, 'a foreigner' coming into familiar domestic and social structures and destroying them all. Society, does, as an entity, hate art instinctively. It may value artists, but only after a while, when they're dead and lost to the underground.

What is exceptional about this play is the story itself, but the way the story is told. The beauty of this play is in its characters, whose human fragility is almost celebrated. The myth of Orpheus is retold and art finds a wonderful and befitting personification in the character of Val. The play is certainly tragic but very touching and profound in its tragedy. Its poetry will sound familiar to those appreciative of Williams' talent. That kind of lyrical prose was something I expected. After all, the lyrical dialogues /monologues and the strong imaginary are among things this writer is celebrated for. What I did not expect from this play was the strength of its message, the way its characters and story merged into one. I won't talk about the plot because I don't want to spoil anything, but let's just say there were some twists and turns. In one way, this play can be read as a commentary on art itself, in another it can be read as a story. It is a play that is not only worth one's time, but one's heart as well. Read it and put some heart into it!

Camille says

Orpheus descending is the beautiful story of love and hate in a small town. Secrets and passion. Its simple and beautiful, my favorite of Williams' plays. This is something that everyone can relate to and it deserves to be read.

Katharine says

Not sure the story is quite as thrilling as his other works but I am drawn to Lady. To be honest, it's probably a superficial allure--I am probably drawn to her for the interesting thing she says because in the back of my mind, I am always on the look out for compelling monologues. I believe this deserves a close re-read. Williams (in my opinion) went a little heavy on the direction in writing this, in that he is more controlling in how he wants the action played out than some of his earlier work. From the eyes of a reader (and not as an actor or a director actively working on this piece) the directions get cumbersome and thus distracting.

Anyway... just a little technical complaint. Lady and Val are super interesting though. Mostly just because they have a juicy, sexy relationship. Maybe because I find the beginning part of a relationship, whether it is a friendship or something more, most fascinating. How people reveal bits of themselves to others: what they do reveal, what they choose to omit, etc. How people receive bits of other people and how it builds one's perception of another. When two people are really focused on absorbing all they can about another person, you can see the electricity crackle in the air. Most exciting.

Jonathan says

Another GREAT play by Tennessee Williams. Val is, in some ways, a tragic figure and the embodiment of Dionysiac revelry, who tries to mingle with the people of a pseudo-/hypocritical-conservative Southern

community, where gossip and envy make him the perfect scapegoat. The characters are authentic, especially Lady and Val, and the play has the element of dreaminess, present in the Glass Menagerie, although 'Orpheus' is a more realistic play. All in all, a good read indeed -one that conveys the atmosphere of a film.

Ibrahim Saad says

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Phillip J says

I just finished playing the role of Val Xavier. A truly amazing experience that will live in me forever. I learned much more than was written in those pages. Thank you Tennessee Williams.

Hasan Abbasi says

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Samir Rawas Sarayji says

I really enjoyed this Williams play. There's a lot going on but it's all very focused and tightly woven together. The plot and the character developments of both Lady and Val are well balanced out. One can see that Williams was in total control here, and I like that the stage directions weren't overly intrusive, just well-elaborated at the start of a scene. I also found it refreshing that each Act had multiple shorter Scenes, rather than his typical long scenes; it helped the pacing a great deal. And unlike some of his other plays, including the good ones, even the secondary character were really interesting and could've been easily developed further were it necessary. Wish I could see this live.

Roland says

A revised version of Battle of Angels. Reading these plays in order has been fascinating, as it shows how an author defines concepts and characters over years of experience. Williams had already written three masterpieces by the time this came out, so his grasp of character improved on the characters in this play. Also, after spending time abroad and becoming enamored with Italy, he added the immigrant aspect into this play. Overall it's a stronger play than Battle of Angels, with Williams keeping what was good in the original and toning down some of the more outrageous character behavior.

Tom says

Despite a number of obvious flaws and a place of relative obscurity in Williams' body of work, I consider *Orpheus Descending* to be my favorite of his plays that I've read so far. It has all the hallmarks of his more well-known stuff: a faded southern belle, a cruel and rigid southern society, dreamlike environs, and doomed lust. But here I think everything is just about cranked up to eleven, and I'm sure a proper production could pass well beyond twelve. The title is a reference to the Greek myth of Orpheus, a musician who goes to the underworld to reclaim his lost love. No need to place your bets on how it turned out.

Our tragic central character is Lady Torrance, daughter of Italian immigrants and prisoner in a cage of her own design. Lady is a great example of an exceptional female lead; while not in a position of power, her strong will and layered love life make her the driving force of the show. She married a man who had a hand in the death of her father, which isn't a spoiler because it's one of the first things the chorus gossips about. Now, her passion is dying, her husband is dying, she's been stuck with his rotted general store, and she's surrounded by a community that doesn't respect her all that much.

Her foil comes in the form of Val, a traveling busker who's newly 30, full of poetic lines, and possessed of enough ambition for the both of them. He himself is not all that interesting or complex, despite a colorful analogy he makes about a bird of paradise that's supposed to encompass the entire play. No, what makes Val special is the effect that he has on nearly every woman he meets. He inflames them, excites them, becomes a kind of muse to emotional truth that small southern towns don't take kindly to 'round here (at least where the other men are concerned). The best conversations are reserved for him and Lady, but his role as a catalyst of both creation and destruction for all the women is fascinating—and it's made better by the fact that this baffles him to no end.

I think this one falls on shaky territory because of the blunt and unforgiving violence. Williams was never shy about the horrible things that happened to people who got in too deep with their emotions, as *Streetcar* and *Cat* readily demonstrate. But I have yet to experience violence as abrupt and cruel as the kind exacted in *Orpheus*, and this is in printed words alone. It's the kind of violence that's difficult to imply, but no easier to portray. And not only that, but several threats made throughout the play are treated almost comically, making the end result even harder to swallow. This I think could leave audiences less contemplative than crudely shaken. Though again, that's Williams' prerogative 9 times out of 10.

For a theatre experience that's as poetic as it is anti-sentimental, there's nothing quite like this one. Don't take the kids.

Chris Tutolo says

I think people tend to be most equipped to criticize the works of others, to reduce another's life works to single items they either like or dislike, and sometimes not even explain why. Why do writers write anyway? I like to think that Tennessee Williams wrote to entertain an audience; he was always trying to create dialogue that diverse people could enjoy equally and learn from. Of course, he may never have continued writing if he was not eventually recognized monetarily for his talent as a writer, but he struggled for many years when he didn't have to, working on stories that would be at the mercy of the public eye. To reduce his work to something liked or not would be unfair considering his own efforts to relate to us in a meaningful way. I believe with this play and within almost any hard work, there must be some value or a collection of values to take away from something I've invested my time in as an audience member.

Even if it was the way he wrote that single line, or the particular flaw he describes in one character that I found pleasing, I am convinced that these bits of value lie within all art and especially writing. Stating whether or not I like a complete work is as good a contribution as saying nothing at all.

Tennessee Williams is a brilliant writer, and as few have suggested below, continues to demonstrate his talent in many parts of this play.

Bunnyhugger says

Now that I've finished reading this, I feel massively bereft that I was not able to see this rarely produced play during its run in LA this January *with Gale Harold in the cast*. (Sobs piteously)

Tami Hough says

My all time favorite Tennessee William plays.
