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Hadestown: Performative Social Critique

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PART 1: ELEMENTS OF CRITIQUE: DOES HADESTOWN CRITICIZE CAPITALISM?

1. Summary Of musical

Hadestown is a musical written by Anaïs Mitchell and published in 2016 that retells the classic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the show, Orpheus and Eurydice are lovers who live in a "depression era." Due to a lack of resources and shelter, Eurydice signs a contract to live and work in Hadestown, a capitalist hellscape in order to survive. Orpheus comes to rescue her, but he is told he cannot bring Eurydice back to the land of the living. Orpheus inspires the workers/members of Hadestown and puts Hades in an ultimatum. He allows Orpheus to leave with Eurydice only if he doesn't turn around. Orpheus fails this task and the revolution fails as Eurydice is sent back to Hadestown forever.

2. Depiction of the workers

The workers are mindless drones who don't remember their names or any human elements. Every day, they work, building a wall that will never be completed. They sing the song, "Why we build the wall." This song is all about ideology. They sing, "The war is never won The enemy is poverty And the wall keeps out the enemy And we build the wall to keep us free That's why we build the wall, We build the wall to keep us free." One of the most important takeaways from the song is that the workers believe they are free. They are constantly working on a project that will never be completed, they are completely dehumanized, yet they believe they are free.

3. Depiction of the Revolution

Orpheus goes to the Underworld and he sees the workers and the conditions they are in. Orpheus looks around, questions the system, and inspires the workers. Hades is forced into an ultimatum. He lets Orpheus and Eurydice go on the condition we're familiar with. He can leave if he doesn't look behind him. You can view this and say "If Hades is going to succeed, he needs Orpheus to fail on his own." For the system to be most successful, it needs to make it appear that those who fail in the system fail because of their own limitations, their own faults. This is how the system is perpetuated. We also know that Orpheus fails, and with him, the revolution fails.

4. Why does the Revolution Fail?

We can interpret Orpheus failing from a capitalist lens instead of from a character lens. I believe the revolution fails because it doesn't come from the workers. It comes from Orpheus, an outsider. They don't know if "it's true what they say." They need Orpheus to show them the way, to show them how to escape. And Orpheus is a victim to the fates, who are whispering in his ear. They tell him how can he win? How could he beat the entire system? He's not standing with the workers, he's standing alone. He is alone. And so doubt comes in and he fails, and the revolution fails with him. The show ends with everything being reset to the beginning. The system is perpetuated.

5. Conclusion of Part 1

There are multiple ways the show critiques Capitalism. First, the show depicts and compares the capitalist landscape, and subsequently capitalism as hell, Second, the show calls for a world better the one we live in now, a world where if no one takes too much, there will always be enough. Third, the workers are depicted as mindless drones who slave on doing meaningless tasks for someone who doesn't care about them. This is the show saying that Capitalism breeds meaningless and dehumanizing lives. Fourth, the show depicts the act of Orpheus failing, and consequently the revolution failing, as tragic. They characters on stage explicitly call this show a tragedy. The perpetuation of capitalism is a tragedy

PART 2: MERIT OF CRITIQUE HOW DOES HADESTOWN LIVE UP TO ITS CRITIQUE

6. LIVING UP TO CRITIQUE

Unfortunately, Hadestown does almost nothing to reflect the ideas that the show promotes in real life. The show calls for a world better than the one we live in, except as a Broadway Musical, it perpetuates and succeeds in capitalism in the same way all Broadway Musicals do. No steps have been taken by Hadestown to make the world we live in reflect the world that it calls for in its messages. The show calls for a system where everyone can have enough. If the show means everyone deserves to have their basic needs met to survive, I couldn't find any research or evidence suggesting that Hadestown donated any money to make that call a reality. It can comfortably critique the system and say, "people deserve to have their basic needs met," without doing anything to provide those needs for people. In that way its critique is simply performative: it can pretend to care about these issues while benefiting from the system its critiquing.

7. FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are two ways we can measure whether a piece of media succeeds in its critique: First, if a piece of media succeeds in convincing the public that capitalism is exploitative and unjust and inspires more people to learn about and critique the system they live in, then we can call that a successful critique. That being said, it's not enough for a general audience to simply acknowledge that a work is a critique of capitalism, it has to go further than the act of critiquing. Secondly, if the critique is more subtle, as in the general audience doesn't understand that this is critiquing capitalism, this piece of media can only succeed if it goes further than just delivering its message: If it can reflect its message in the real world, or do more than just perpetuate capitalism in the same way that all pieces of mainstream media do, then the critique itself holds more merit, and we can call it a successful critique. Hadestown fails on both accounts.



Figure 1: Orpheus, the workers, Hades
(Left to right)



Figure 2: Hadestown set depicting the underworld