

## Book 9: The Lotus Eaters and the Cyclops

Alcinous's call to Odysseus to reveal his identity is Odysseus's cue to begin telling of the adventures that will literally make his name. Homer's greatest hero is himself a famous storyteller. (Perhaps all successful heroes must contain aspects of their creators.)

The adventures that follow are the ones for which the epic is most remembered. Imagine the excitement of the Phæacians, having just heard Demodocus sing the story of the Trojan horse, when they discover the identity of their guest. Alcinous has just asked Odysseus to reveal his name:

645 Now this was the reply Odysseus made:

"I am Laertes' son, Odysseus.

Men hold me

formidable for guile in peace and war;

this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim.

My home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaca

650 under Mount Neion's wind-blown robe of leaves,

in sight of other islands—Doulkhion,

Same, wooded Zakynthos—Ithaca

being most lofty in that coastal sea,

and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.

655 A rocky isle, but good for a boy's training;

I shall not see on earth a place more dear,

though I have been detained long by Calypso,

loveliest among goddesses, who held me

in her smooth caves, to be her heart's delight,

660 as Circe of Aeaea, the enchantress,

desired me, and detained me in her hall.

But in my heart I never gave consent.

Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass

his own home and his parents? In far lands

665 he shall not, though he find a house of gold. . . ."

Odysseus now tells of his voyage from Troy—how many of his men lost their lives during a foolish raid on the Cicones, how Zeus punished the survivors by raising the North Wind against their ships, how they were made to drift aimlessly from place to place, for nine days. Finally, they stopped at the land of the Lotus Eaters. (The people of Southern Europe used to make a drink from the fermented fruit of the lotus plant. The drink was supposed to produce feelings of laziness and dreaminess.) Odysseus is still speaking:

εἴμ' Ὀδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, ὃς πᾶσι δόλοισιν  
ἀνθρώποισι μέλω, καὶ μὲν κλέος οὐρανὸν ἴκει.  
ναϊετᾶω δ' Ἰθάκην εὐδείλειον· ἐν δ' ὄρος αἰτῆη,  
Νήριτον εἰνοσίφυλλον ἀριπρεπέε· ἀμφὶ δὲ νῆσοι  
πολλαὶ ναϊετᾶουσι μάλα σχεδὸν ἀλλήλοισι,  
Δουλίχιόν τε Σάμη τε καὶ Ἰθήεσσα Ζάκυνθος.

The passage beginning "I am Laertes' son" in the original text.

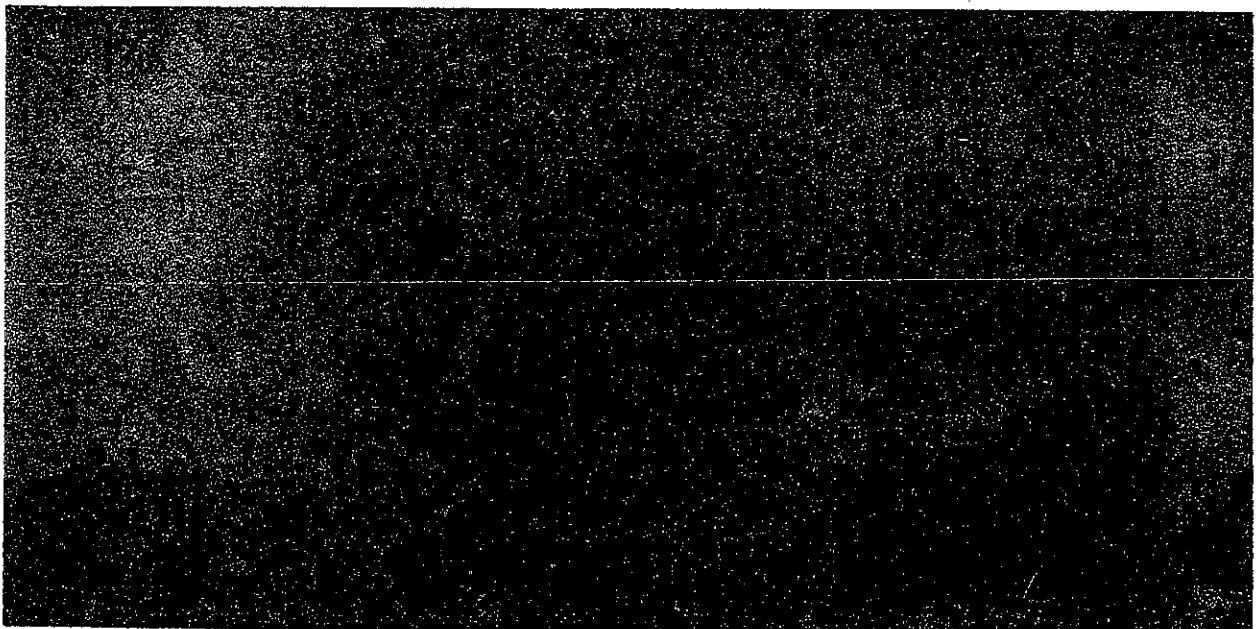
“Upon the tenth

we came to the coastline of the Lotus Eaters,  
who live upon that flower. We landed there  
to take on water. All ships' companies  
670 mustered alongside for the midday meal.  
Then I sent out two picked men and a runner  
to learn what race of men that land sustained.  
They fell in, soon enough, with Lotus Eaters,  
who showed no will to do us harm, only  
675 offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—  
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus,  
never cared to report, nor to return:  
they longed to stay forever, browsing on  
that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.  
680 I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,  
tied them down under their rowing benches,  
and called the rest: 'All hands aboard;  
come, clear the beach and no one taste  
the Lotus, or you lose your hope of home.'  
685 Filing in to their places by the rowlocks  
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf,  
and we moved out again on our seafaring.”

*Salvation from the next adventure requires the special intelligence associated with Odysseus's name. Odysseus is the cleverest of the ancient Greek heroes because his divine guardian is the goddess of wisdom, Athena. As a result of this confrontation with the Cyclops named Polyphemus, the one-eyed monster son*

*The Cyclop (detail) by Odilon Redon (1898). Oil.*

State Museum Collection Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, The Netherlands



of the god Poseidon, Odysseus incurs the wrath of the sea god. Polyphemus might be said to represent the brute force and a negative singleness of purpose that any hero must overcome before he can reach home.

It is Odysseus's famed curiosity that leads him to the Cyclops's cave and that makes him insist on waiting for the barbaric giant.

“We lit a fire, burnt an offering,  
and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence  
690 around the embers, waiting. When he came  
he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder  
to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it  
with a great crash into that hollow cave,  
and we all scattered fast to the far wall.  
695 Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered  
the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams  
and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung  
high overhead a slab of solid rock  
to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,  
700 with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred  
the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it  
over the doorsill. Next he took his seat  
and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job  
he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;  
705 thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,  
sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,<sup>o</sup>  
and poured the whey to stand in bowls  
cooling until he drank it for his supper.  
When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,  
710 heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.

‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from?  
What brings you here by sea ways—a fair traffic?  
Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives  
like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’

715 We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread  
of that deep rumble and that mighty man.  
But all the same I spoke up in reply:

‘We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course  
by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;  
720 homeward bound, but taking routes and ways  
uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.  
We served under Agamemnon, son of Atreus—  
the whole world knows what city  
he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.  
725 It was our luck to come here; here we stand,  
beholden for your help, or any gifts

706. withy baskets: made from willow twigs.

you give—as custom is to honor strangers.  
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care  
for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge  
the unoffending guest.'

730

He answered this

from his brute chest, unmoved:

'You are a ninny,

or else you come from the other end of nowhere,  
telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes  
care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus

735

or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.  
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—  
you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.  
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—  
around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?'

740

He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this,  
and answered with a ready lie:

'My ship?

Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth a-tremble,  
broke it up on the rocks at your land's end.  
A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.

745

We are survivors, these good men and I.'

Neither reply nor pity came from him,  
but in one stride he clutched at my companions  
and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies  
to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.

750

Then he dismembered them and made his meal,  
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—  
everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.

755

We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,  
powerless, looking on at this, appalled;  
but Cyclops went on filling up his belly  
with manflesh and great gulps of whey,  
then lay down like a mast among his sheep.

760

My heart beat high now at the chance of action,  
and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went  
along his flank to stab him where the midriff  
holds the liver. I had touched the spot  
when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him  
we perished there as well, for we could never  
move his ponderous doorway slab aside.

765

So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose  
lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire  
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,  
putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,

770

his chores being all dispatched, he caught

another brace of men to make his breakfast,  
and whisked away his great door slab  
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,  
reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.

775 There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops  
rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.  
And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,  
if but Athena granted what I prayed for.  
Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:

780 a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—  
an olive tree, felled green and left to season  
for Cyclops's hand. And it was like a mast  
a lugger<sup>o</sup> of twenty oars, broad in the beam—  
a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:

785 so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I  
chopped out a six-foot section of this pole  
and set it down before my men, who scraped it;  
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again  
to make a stake with pointed end. I held this  
790 in the fire's heart and turned it, toughening it,  
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under  
one of the dung piles in profusion there.

Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured  
along with me? Whose hand could bear to thrust  
and grind that spike in Cyclops's eye, when mild  
795 sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,  
the men I would have chosen won the toss—  
four strong men, and I made five as captain.

At evening came the shepherd with his flock,  
800 his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,  
entered the cave: by some sheep-herding whim—  
or a god's bidding—none were left outside.  
He hefted his great boulder into place  
and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes  
805 in proper order, put the lambs to suck,  
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.  
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.  
My moment was at hand, and I went forward  
holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,  
looking up, saying:

810 'Cyclops, try some wine.

Here's liquor to wash down your scraps of men.  
Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried  
under our planks. I meant it for an offering  
if you would help us home. But you are mad,

815 unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,  
will any other traveler come to see you?

783. lugger: a type of sailboat.



*Ulysses receiving the wine that will later be given to Polyphemus. Krater.*

Museo Boliano. Photo: Art Resource

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down  
so fiery and smooth he called for more:

820 'Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,  
how are you called? I'll make a gift will please you.  
Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow  
out of grassland and loam in heaven's rain,  
but here's a bit of nectar and ambrosia!'

825 Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.  
I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,  
then I sang out in cordial tones:

'Cyclops,  
you ask my honorable name? Remember  
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.  
My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,  
everyone calls me Nohbdy.'

830 And he said:

'Nohbdy's my meat, then, after I eat his friends.  
Others come first. There's a noble gift, now.'

Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,

835 his great head lolling to one side; and sleep  
took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,  
he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.

Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike  
deep in the embers, charring it again,  
and cheered my men along with battle talk  
840 to keep their courage up: no quitting now.  
The pike of olive, green though it had been,  
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.  
I drew it from the coals and my four fellows  
gave me a hand, lugging it near the Cyclops  
845 as more than natural force nerved them; straight  
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it  
deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it  
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill  
in planking, having men below to swing  
850 the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.  
So with our brand we bored that great eye socket  
while blood ran out around the red hot bar.  
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball  
hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

In a smithy°

855 one sees a white-hot axhead or an adze°  
plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—  
the way they make soft iron hale and hard—  
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.  
The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him,  
860 and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face  
he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye,  
threw it away, and his wild hands went groping;  
then he set up a howl for Cyclopes  
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.  
865 Some heard him; and they came by divers° ways  
to clump around outside and call:

'What ails you,

Polyphemus? Why do you cry so sore  
in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.  
Sure no man's driving off your flock? No man  
has tricked you, ruined you?'

870 Out of the cave  
the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:

'Nohbdy, Nohbdy's tricked me, Nohbdy's ruined me!'

To this rough shout they made a sage reply:

875 'Ah well, if nobody has played you foul  
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain

854. **smithy**: a blacksmith's shop, where iron work is done.

855. **adze**: a tool like an ax, but with a longer, curved blade.

865. **divers**: diverse, various.

given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,  
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.'

So saying

they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter  
to see how like a charm the name deceived them.

880 Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,  
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone  
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide  
for any silly beast or man who bolted—  
hoping somehow I might be such a fool.

885 But I kept thinking how to win the game:  
death sat there huge; how could we slip away?  
I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,  
reasoning as a man will for dear life,  
until a trick came—and it pleased me well.

890 The Cyclops's rams were handsome, fat, with heavy  
fleeces, a dark violet.

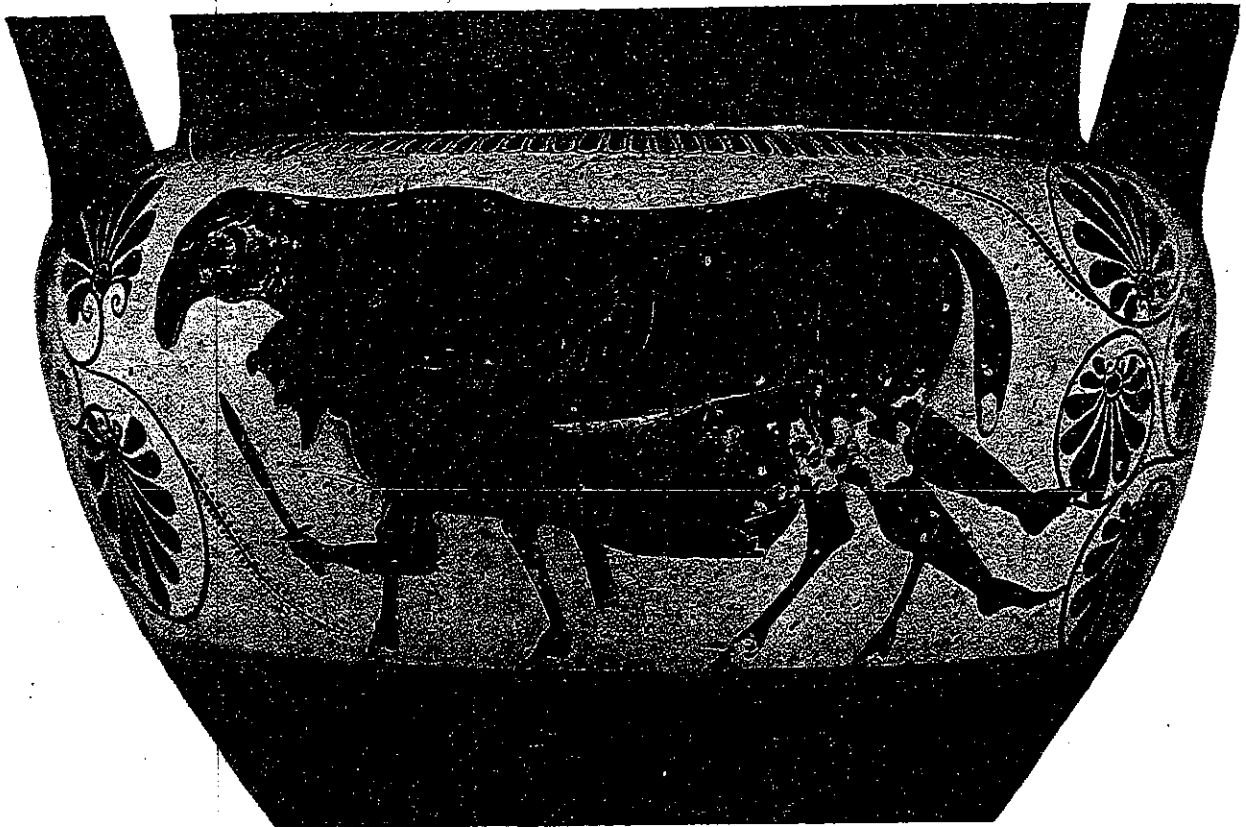
Three abreast

I tied them silently together, twining  
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;  
then slung a man under each middle one

895 to ride there safely, shielded left and right.

*Ulysses escaping from Polyphemus*  
(c. 510 B.C.). Krater.

Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe





So three sheep could convey each man. I took  
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,  
and hung myself under his kinky belly,  
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep  
900 in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.  
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose  
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,  
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens  
905 where dams with udders full called for a milking.  
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,  
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,  
but my men riding on the pectoral fleece<sup>o</sup>  
the giant's blind hands blundering never found.  
910 Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,  
weighted by wool and me with my meditations.  
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest  
in the night cave? You never linger so,  
915 but graze before them all, and go afar  
to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way  
leading along the streams, until at evening  
you run to be the first one in the fold.  
Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving  
920 over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue<sup>o</sup>  
and his accurst companions burnt it out  
when he had conquered all my wits with wine.  
Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.  
Oh, had you brain and voice to tell  
925 where he may be now, dodging all my fury!  
Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall  
his brains would strew the floor, and I should have  
rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.'

He sent us into the open, then. Close by,  
930 I dropped and rolled clear of the ram's belly,  
going this way and that to untie the men.  
With many glances back, we rounded up  
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,  
and drove them down to where the good ship lay.  
935 We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces  
shining; then we saw them turn to grief  
tallying those who had not fled from death.  
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up, and in a low  
voice told them: 'Load this herd;  
940 move fast, and put the ship's head toward the breakers.'  
They all pitched in at loading, then embarked  
and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,

908. pectoral fleece: fleece on the animal's chest area.

920. carrion rogue: rotten tramp (carrion is decaying flesh).



as far off shore as shouted words would carry,  
I sent a few back to the adversary:

945 'O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?  
Puny, am I, in a Caveman's hands?  
How do you like the beating that we gave you,  
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests  
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!



*Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* by  
J.M.W. Turner (1829). Oil.

The National Gallery, London.  
Photo: The Granger Collection,  
New York.

- 950 The blind thing in his doubled fury broke  
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.  
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank  
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave  
that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.
- 955 I got the longest boathook out and stood  
fending us off, with furious nods to all  
to put their backs into a racing stroke—

row, row, or perish. So the long oars bent  
kicking the foam sternward, making head  
960 until we drew away, and twice as far.  
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew  
in low voices protesting:

'Godsake, Captain!

Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!

'That tidal wave he made on the first throw  
all but beached us.'

965

'All but stove us in!'

'Give him our bearing with your trumpeting,  
he'll get the range and lob° a boulder.'

967. lob: toss.

'Aye

He'll smash our timbers and our heads together!

I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,  
but let my anger flare and yelled:

970

'Cyclops,

if ever mortal man inquire  
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him  
Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:  
Laertes' son, whose home's on Ithaca!

975 At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

'Now comes the weird° upon me, spoken of old.  
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,  
a son of Eurymus; great length of days  
he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes,

976. weird: fate.

980 and these things he foretold for time to come:  
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus's hands.

Always I had in mind some giant, armed  
in giant force, would come against me here.  
But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—

985 you put me down with wine, you blinded me.

Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well,  
praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—  
his son I am, for he by his avowal

990 fathered me, and, if he will, he may  
heal me of this black wound—he and no other  
of all the happy gods or mortal men.'

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

'If I could take your life I would and take  
your time away, and hurl you down to hell!

995 The god of earthquake could not heal you there!

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness  
toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

‘O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,  
if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:  
1000 grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never  
see his home: Laertes’ son, I mean,  
who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny  
intend that he shall see his roof again  
among his family in his fatherland,  
1005 far be that day, and dark the years between.  
Let him lose all companions, and return  
under strange sail to bitter days at home.’ ”

### Book 10: The Bag of Winds and the Witch Circe

*Odysseus and his men land next on the island of Aeolia. There the wind king, Aeolus, does Odysseus a favor. He puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. The bull's hide bag containing the winds is wedged under Odysseus's afterdeck. During the voyage, the suspicious and curious sailors open the bag (thinking it contains treasure), and the evil winds roar up into hurricanes to plague the luckless Odysseus again.*

*After more of his men are killed and eaten by the gigantic cannibals called the Laestrygonians, Odysseus's ship lands on Aeaea, the home of the witch Circe. Here a party of twenty-two men, led by Eurylochus, goes off to explore the island. Odysseus is still speaking:*

“In the wild wood they found an open glade,  
around a smooth stone house—the hall of Circe—  
1010 and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild  
in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil.  
None would attack—oh, it was strange, I tell you—  
but switching their long tails they faced our men  
like hounds, who look up when their master comes  
1015 with tidbits for them—as he will—from table.  
Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws  
fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes  
and feared them.

In the entrance way they stayed  
to listen there: inside her quiet house  
they heard the goddess Circe.

1020 Low she sang  
in her beguiling voice, while on her loom  
she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright,  
by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.

- No one would speak, until Polites—most  
 1025 faithful and likable of my officers, said:  
 'Dear friends, no need for stealth: here's a young weaver  
 singing a pretty song to set the air  
 a-tingle on these lawns and paven courts.  
 Goddess she is, or lady. Shall we greet her?'
- 1030 So reassured, they all cried out together,  
 and she came swiftly to the shining doors  
 to call them in. All but Eurylochus—  
 who feared a snare—the innocents went after her.  
 On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs,  
 1035 while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley  
 and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine,  
 adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose  
 desire or thought of our dear fatherland.  
 Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them  
 1040 with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—  
 bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all  
 swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.  
 So, squealing, in they went. And Circe tossed them  
 acorns, mast,<sup>o</sup> and cornel berries—fodder  
 1045 for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.
- Down to the ship Eurylochus came running  
 to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men!  
 But working with dry lips to speak a word  
 he could not, being so shaken; blinding tears  
 1050 welled in his eyes; foreboding filled his heart.  
 When we were frantic questioning him, at last  
 we heard the tale: our friends were gone. . . ."

*Odysseus leaves the ship and rushes to Circe's hall. The god Hermes stops him to give him a plant that will act as an antidote to Circe's power. (Homer calls it a molu; it might have been a kind of garlic.) Odysseus uses the molu and the witch, overcome by the plant's magic, frees Odysseus's men. Now, Circe, "loveliest of all immortals," persuades Odysseus to stay, share her meat and wine, and restore his heart. After many seasons of feasting and other pleasures, Odysseus and his men beg Circe to help them get home:*

- "Son of Laertes and the gods of old,  
 Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
 1055 you shall not stay here longer against your will;  
 but home you may not go  
 unless you take a strange way round and come  
 to the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone.<sup>o</sup>  
 You shall hear prophecy from the rapt<sup>o</sup> shade

1044. mast: various kinds of nuts.

1058. Persephone (pär-sef'ə-nē): wife of Hades and Queen of the Underworld.

1059. rapt: completely absorbed in his thoughts.

1060 of blind Teiresias of Thebes, forever  
charged with reason even among the dead;  
to him alone, of all the flitting ghosts,  
Persephone has given a mind undarkened.

At this I felt a weight like stone within me,  
1065 and, moaning, pressed my length against the bed,  
with no desire to see the daylight more."

### Book 11: The Land of the Dead

*Odysseus is not alone among the ancient heroes who must descend to the Land of the Dead. The Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, the Greek heroes Theseus and Heracles, and many other heroes made similar journeys. It is as if the ancient myth-makers are telling us that the truly significant voyages in life involve journeys to the deepest parts of ourselves, and a confrontation with the darkest reality of all—death.*

*In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks his destiny. The source of his information is Teiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes, whose lack of external sight suggests the presence of true insight. Circe has told Odysseus exactly what rites he must perform to bring Teiresias up from the dead. Odysseus is speaking:*

*Ulysses descends into Hell. Fresco.*

Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Photo: Art Resource



"Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,  
 vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them  
 before she calved, at home in Ithaca,  
 1070 and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;  
 as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice  
 a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.  
 Thus to assuage the nations of the dead  
 I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,  
 1075 letting their black blood stream into the wellpit.  
 Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,  
 brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,  
 and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;  
 many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,  
 1080 battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.  
 From every side they came and sought the pit  
 with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.  
 But presently I gave command to my officers  
 to flay<sup>o</sup> those sheep the bronze cut down, and make  
 1085 burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—  
 to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.  
 Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep  
 the surging phantoms from the bloody pit  
 till I should know the presence of Teiresias. . . .  
 1090 Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward  
 bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:  
  
 'Son of Laertes and the gods of old,  
 Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
 why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,  
 1095 to see the cold dead and the joyless region?  
 Stand clear, put up your sword;  
 let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.'  
  
 At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard  
 let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,  
 1100 as he bent down to the somber blood. Then spoke  
 the prince of those with gift of speech:  
  
 'Great captain,  
 a fair wind and the honey lights of home  
 are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;  
 the god who thunders on the land prepares it,  
 1105 not to be shaken from your track, implacable,<sup>o</sup>  
 in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.  
 One narrow strait may take you through his blows:  
 denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.  
 When you make landfall on Thrinakia<sup>o</sup> first  
 1110 and quit the violet sea, dark on the land  
 you'll find the grazing herds of Helios  
 by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.

1084. flay: strip of skin.

1105. implacable: inflexible, not to be pacified.

1109. Thrinakia (thri-nā'kē-ə): island where the sun god Helios pastured his sacred cattle.



Avoid those kine,<sup>o</sup> hold fast to your intent,  
 and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.

1115 But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction  
 for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,  
 bereft of all companions, lost for years,  
 under strange sail shall you come home, to find  
 your own house filled with trouble: insolent men

1120 eating your livestock as they court your lady.  
 Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!  
 But after you have dealt out death—in open  
 combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,  
 go overland on foot, and take an oar,

1125 until one day you come where men have lived  
 with meat unsalted, never known the sea,  
 nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows  
 and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.  
 The spot will soon be plain to you, and I

1130 can tell you how: some passerby will say,  
 ‘What winnowing fan<sup>o</sup> is that upon your shoulder?’  
 Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf  
 and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:  
 a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,

1135 and carry out pure hecatombs<sup>o</sup> at home  
 to all wide heaven’s lords, the undying gods,  
 to each in order. Then a seaborne death  
 soft as this hand of mist will come upon you  
 when you are wearied out with rich old age,

1140 your country folk in blessed peace around you.  
 And all this shall be just as I foretell.’

When he had done, I said at once,

‘Teiresias,

my life runs on then as the gods have spun it.  
 But come, now, tell me this; make this thing clear:

1145 I see my mother’s ghost among the dead  
 sitting in silence near the blood. Not once  
 has she glanced this way toward her son, nor spoken.  
 Tell me, my lord,  
 may she in some way come to know my presence?’

To this he answered:

1150 ‘I shall make it clear  
 in a few words and simply. Any dead man  
 whom you allow to enter where the blood is  
 will speak to you, and speak the truth; but those  
 deprived will grow remote again and fade.’

1155 When he had prophesied, Teiresias’s shade  
 retired lordly to the halls of Death. . . .”

1113. *Kine* and *beeves* (see line 1115) are old-fashioned plural words for cattle (cows and oxen).

1131. *winnowing fan*: a device used to separate wheat from chaff. (These people would never have seen an oar.)

1135. *hecatombs*: sacrifices of one hundred cattle.

*Now Odysseus meets a familiar ghost, his mother Anticleia, who died of a broken heart when her son failed to return from Troy.*

"I bit my lip,  
 rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,  
 and tried three times, putting my arms around her,  
 1160 but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable  
 as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.  
 Now this embittered all the pain I bore,  
 and I cried in the darkness:

"O my mother,  
 will you not stay, be still, here in my arms,  
 1165 may we not, in this place of Death, as well,  
 hold one another, touch with love, and taste  
 salt tears' relief, the twinge of welling tears?  
 Or is this all hallucination, sent  
 against me by the iron queen, Persephone,  
 to make me groan again?"

1170 My noble mother  
 answered quickly:

"O my child—alas,  
 most sorely tried of men—great Zeus's daughter,  
 Persephone, knits no illusion for you.  
 All mortals meet this judgment when they die.  
 1175 No flesh and bone are here, none bound by sinew,  
 since the bright-hearted pyre° consumed them down—  
 the white bones long exanimate°—to ash;  
 dreamlike the soul flies, insubstantial.

You must crave sunlight soon.

1180 Note all things strange  
 seen here, to tell your lady in after days.'"

*The afterlife envisioned by Homer was not a happy place of rest. This society, which so relished the joys, accomplishments, and passions of the physical life, found little pleasure in an eternal life among mere shadows. After many more encounters in the Land of the Dead, Odysseus returns to Circe's island for further instructions.*

## Book 12: The Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis

*The witch Circe is speaking. She warns Odysseus of the perils that await him—the forces that would prevent him from achieving his destiny.*

1176. **pyre**: a huge fire on which a body is burned in a funeral rite.  
 1177. **exanimate**: lifeless.

“Listen with care  
to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.  
Square in your ship’s path are Sirens, crying  
beauty to bewitch men coasting by;  
1185 woe to the innocent who hears that sound!  
He will not see his lady nor his children  
in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;  
the Sirens will sing his mind away  
on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones  
1190 of dead men rotting in a pile beside them  
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.

Steer wide;

keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen’s ears  
with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest  
should hear that song.

But if you wish to listen,  
1195 let the men tie you in the lugger, hand  
and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
so you may hear those harpies’° thrilling voices;  
shout as you will, begging to be untied,  
your crew must only twist more line around you  
1200 and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade. . . .”

1197. *harpies*: monstrous winged women,  
greedy for victims.

*The next peril lies between two headlands with sheer cliffs. Circe  
continues:*

“ . . . That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps  
abominably, a newborn whelp’s° cry,  
though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,  
no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—  
1205 and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,  
unjointed, and upon her serpent necks  
are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,  
with triple serried° rows of fangs and deep  
gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways  
1210 her heads in air, outside her horrid cleft,  
hunting the sea around that promontory  
for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game  
thundering Amphitrite° feeds in thousands.  
And no ship’s company can claim  
1215 to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,  
from every ship, one man for every gullet.

1202. *whelp*’s: puppy’s.

1208. *serried*: dense, compact.

1213. *Amphitrite* (am-fi-trit’ē): goddess of  
the sea, wife of Poseidon.

The opposite point seems more a tongue of land  
you’d touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.  
A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,  
1220 grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below  
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times

from dawn to dusk she spews it up  
and sucks it down again three times, a whirling  
maelstrom;<sup>o</sup> if you come upon her then  
1225 the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.  
No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship  
through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn  
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too. . . .

Then you will coast Thrinakia, the island  
1230 where Helios's cattle graze, fine herds, and flocks  
of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks are seven,  
with fifty beasts in each.

No lambs are dropped,  
or calves, and these fat cattle never die. . . .

Now give those kine a wide berth, keep your thoughts  
1235 intent upon your course for home,  
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.  
But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction  
for ship and crew.'"

*The Ithacans set off. But Odysseus never reveals to them Circe's last prophecy—that he will be the only survivor of their long journey. Odysseus is still speaking to Alcinous's court:*

"The crew being now silent before me, I  
addressed them, sore at heart:

1240 'Dear friends,  
more than one man, or two, should know those things  
Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,  
so let me tell her forecast: then we die  
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,  
1245 or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens  
weaving a haunting song over the sea  
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore  
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I  
alone should listen to their song. Therefore  
1250 you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,  
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,  
and if I shout and beg to be untied,  
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.'

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,  
1255 while our good ship made time, bound outward down  
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.  
Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm  
came over all the sea, as though some power  
lulled the swell.

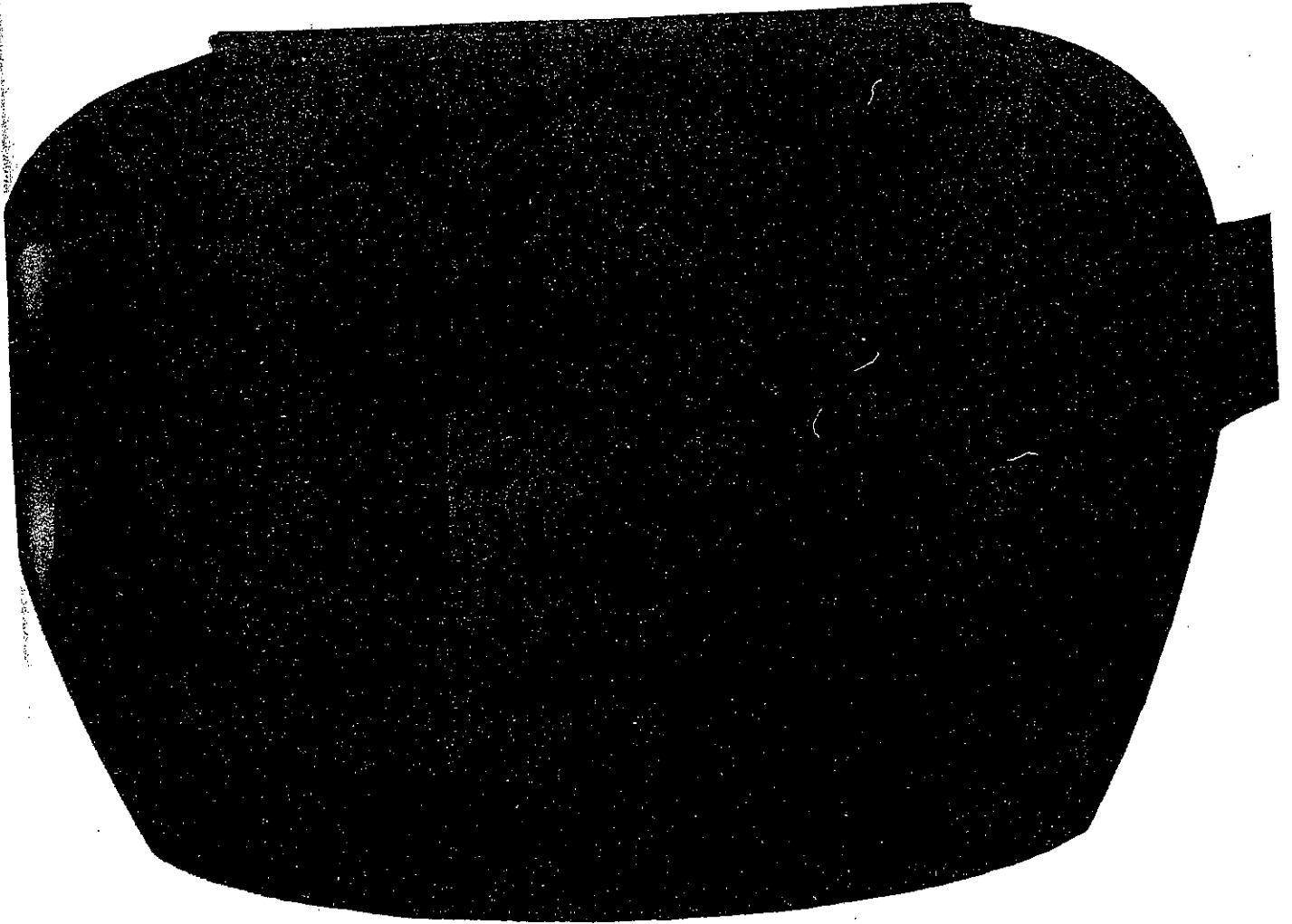
1224. maelstrom: whirlpool.

The crew were on their feet  
1260 briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,  
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades  
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved  
a massive cake of beeswax into bits  
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—  
1265 no long task, for a burning heat came down  
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward  
I carried wax along the line, and laid it  
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb<sup>o</sup>  
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
1270 and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,  
as we came smartly within hailing distance,  
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship  
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .

1268. **plumb**: perfectly vertical.

*Ulysses and the Sirens* (c. 475 B.C.).  
Attic red vase.

Reproduced by courtesy of The  
Trustees of The British Museum.



The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water  
1275 made me crave to listen, and I tried to say  
'Untie me!' to the crew, jerking my brows;  
but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes  
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,  
and passed more line about, to hold me still.  
1280 So all rowed on, until the Sirens  
dropped under the sea rim, and their singing  
dwindled away.

My faithful company  
rested on their oars now, peeling off  
the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;  
then set me free.

1285 But scarcely had that island  
faded in blue air than I saw smoke  
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—  
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.  
Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking  
1290 wild alongside till the ship lost way,  
with no oarblades to drive her through the water.

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,  
trying to put heart into them, standing over  
every oarsman, saying gently,

'Friends,  
1295 have we never been in danger before this?  
More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops  
penned us in his cave? What power he had!  
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits  
to find a way out for us?

Now I say  
1300 by hook or crook this peril too shall be  
something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!  
We must obey the orders as I give them.  
Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back  
hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.  
1305 Zeus help us pull away before we founder.

You at the tiller, listen, and take in  
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;  
keep her out of the combers<sup>o</sup> and the smoke;  
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we  
1310 fetch up in the smother,<sup>o</sup> and you drown us.'

That was all, and it brought them round to action.  
But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I  
told them nothing, as they could do nothing.  
They would have dropped their oars again, in panic,

1308. combers: waves.

1310. smother: turmoil.

1315 to roll for cover under the decking. Circe's  
bidding against arms had slipped my mind,  
so I tied on my cuirass° and took up  
two heavy spears, then made my way along  
to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,  
1320 the monster of the gray rock, harboring  
torment for my friends. I strained my eyes  
upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere  
could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,

1325 in travail,° sobbing, gaining on the current,  
we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port  
and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire  
gorge° of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she  
vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron  
seething over intense fire, when the mixture  
suddenly heaves and rises.

1330 The shot spume  
soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

But when she swallowed the sea water down  
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard  
the rock bellowing all around, and dark  
1335 sand raged on the bottom far below.  
My men all blanched° against the gloom, our eyes  
were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear  
of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike,  
whisking six of my best men from the ship.

1340 I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen  
and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling  
high overhead. Voices came down to me  
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

1345 A man surf-casting on a point of rock  
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod  
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,  
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface  
to dangle wriggling through the air:

so these

1350 were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.  
She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,  
in the dire grapple,° reaching still for me—  
and deathly pity ran me through  
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered,  
questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on.

1355 The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,  
and Scylla dropped astern.

1317. cuirass (kwi-ras'): armor for the  
breast and back.

1324. travail: agony, pain.

1327. gorge: throat and jaws.

1336. blanched: grew pale.

1351. dire grapple: terrible fight.

Then we were coasting  
the noble island of the god, where grazed  
those cattle with wide brows, and bounteous flocks  
of Helios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.

- 1360 From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard  
the lowing of the cattle winding home  
and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart—  
the words of blind Teiresias of Thebes  
and Circe of Aeaëa: both forbade me  
1365 the island of the world's delight, the Sun. . . .”

*Because they are dying of starvation, Odysseus's men disobey his orders, and shortly after they land, they eat the sacred cattle of the sun god, Helios. When they set sail again, they are punished by death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat and all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives. He makes his way to Calypso's island, where we met him originally in Book 5. Odysseus the storyteller has brought us up to date. He can now rest.*

---

## Responding to the Epic

### Analyzing the Epic

#### Identifying Facts

1. Describe the **internal conflict** Odysseus and his men encounter in the land of the Lotus Eaters.
2. Describe three strategies that the wily Odysseus uses to outwit the Cyclops Polyphemus. What mistake does the hero make near the end of the Cyclops adventure?
3. What curse concludes the Cyclops adventure—**foreshadowing** trouble ahead for Odysseus?
4. What are Circe's powers? How does Circe first treat Odysseus and his men?
5. Homer's audience would have known who Teiresias was and they would have known that the prophet could not possibly be wrong. Summarize all that Odysseus finds out from Teiresias about his own future.
6. What does Odysseus's mother tell him about death and the soul?
7. Describe the threats posed by the Sirens and by Scylla and Charybdis. How does Odysseus survive these perils?
8. What happens to his men?

### Interpreting Meanings

9. What **simile** does Homer use to help his audience see what happens when Scylla whisks six men from Odysseus's ship? What do Odysseus's feelings here tell you about his **character**?
10. It is important to remember, as we listen to Odysseus's adventures, that the *Odyssey* was used as part of Greek children's education for centuries after the poem was written down. How could the adventure with the Lotus Eaters teach them about the temptation to “forget” one's troubles by dropping out? How could the Cyclops adventure be used to teach the dangers of violence and of curiosity?
11. Explain what we can learn about the deceptive nature of beauty from the Circe episode.
12. Odysseus considers the Cyclopes to be barbarians. Describe Polyphemus's home and his way of life, especially his attitude toward the treatment of guests. Explain how the Cyclopes and their society contrast with what we have seen on Ithaca and on Pylos and Sparta.



13. Recall that Books 9–12 of the *Odyssey* are a long narration delivered by Odysseus at the Phaeacian court of King Alcinous. As he tells his adventures, do you ever sense that Odysseus is boastful or arrogant, or do you think he is just being confident? What incidents support your evaluation of his **character**?
14. Books 9–12 of the *Odyssey* tell of Odysseus's most famous adventures; in fact, this is all that many readers know of the *Odyssey*. Why do you think these particular adventures continue to fascinate people? How did you feel about these favorite parts of the *Odyssey*?

you write, fill out a chart like the following, to help you see the ways in which the stories are alike and different:

	Odyssey	Other story
A small person vs. a giant		
Intelligence vs. brute strength		
A surprise upset victory		

## Writing About the Epic

### A Creative Response

1. **Personifying a Force of Nature.** Homer describes a whirlpool and a dangerous rock as if they were living monsters. In this sense, Scylla and Charybdis are **personified**: they are inanimate (non-living), but the poet describes them as if they have life. In a paragraph, personify some other violent force of nature. Use details that suggest that the force is a monster with destructive intentions. You might describe one of these forces:

A volcano  
 A tornado  
 A tidal wave  
 Thunder and lightning  
 Snow

Include details that tell how the monster looks; what it sounds like; what it hunts for; and what happens to people it captures.

2. **Narrating the Fulfillment of a Prophecy.** In lines 1122–1141, the prophet Teiresias tells Odysseus about his future. Several writers after Homer have tried to imagine exactly what this mysterious prophecy means. Write your own story based on this prophecy. Tell **what** Odysseus did, **where** he went, and **when** it happened. In your story be sure to include all the details contained in the prophecy.

### A Critical Response

3. **Comparing Stories.** The story of Odysseus versus the Cyclops has parallels in other stories told throughout the ages. In a paragraph, compare this story to another one you have read. Before

## Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

### The Prefixes *Poly-* and *Mono-*

One of the most useful of the many Greek prefixes adapted into the English language is the prefix *poly-*. We find it used in the *Odyssey* in the name given to the monster Cyclops, Polyphemus. The prefix can mean “many or more than one,” “excessive,” or “of many kinds or parts.” Use a dictionary to answer the following questions:

1. What word uses *poly-* to name a kind of fabric manufactured from several resins?
2. What word uses *poly-* to describe a person who has more than one husband or wife at the same time?
3. Why do you think a growth in the nasal passage or colon is called a *polyp*?
4. What word uses *poly-* to name a belief in many gods?

Use a dictionary to write out the definition of each italicized word in the following sentences:

1. The Lower East Side is a *polyglot* neighborhood.
2. Hawaii is part of *Polynesia*.
3. The geometry teacher drew a *polygon* on the chalkboard.

The prefix *mono-* is opposite in meaning to *poly-*; it means “one,” “alone,” or “single.” Use a dictionary to answer these questions:

1. What word uses *mono-* to name the worship of one God?
2. Why is the infection called *mononucleosis* so named?
3. What word uses *mono-* to describe people who have only one spouse at a time?