The Land of the Dead

Odysseus and his men sail to Aeolia, where Aeolus, king of the winds, sends Odysseus on his way with a gift: a sack containing all the winds except the favorable west wind. When they are near home, Odysseus’ men open the sack, letting loose a storm that drives them back to Aeolia. Aeolus casts them out, having decided that they are detested by the gods. They sail for seven days and arrive in the land of the Laestrygonians, a race of cannibals. These creatures destroy all of Odysseus’ ships except the one he is sailing in. Odysseus and his reduced crew escape and reach Aeaea, the island ruled by the sorceress-goddess Circe. She transforms half of the men into swine. Protected by a magic herb, Odysseus demands that Circe change his men back into human form. Before Odysseus departs from the island a year later, Circe informs him that in order to reach home he must journey to the land of the dead, Hades, and consult the blind prophet Tiresias.

We bore down on the ship at the sea’s edge and launched her on the salt immortal sea, stepping our mast and spar in the black ship; embarked the ram and ewe and went aboard in tears, with bitter and sore dread upon us. But now a breeze came up for us astern—a canvas-belliing landbreeze, hale shipmate sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair; so we made fast the braces, took our thwarts, and let the wind and steersman work the ship with full sail spread all day above our coursing, till the sun dipped, and all the ways grew dark upon the fathomless unresting sea.

By night our ship ran onward toward the Ocean’s bourne, the realm and region of the Men of Winter, hidden in mist and cloud. Never the flaming eye of Helios lights on those men at morning, when he climbs the sky of stars, nor in descending earthward out of heaven; ruinous night being rove over those wretches.

We made the land, put ram and ewe ashore,
and took our way along the Ocean stream
to find the place foretold for us by Circe.
There Perimedes and Eurylochus⁴⁹
pinioned⁵⁰ the sacred beasts. With my drawn blade
I spaded up the votive⁵¹ pit, and poured
libations⁵² round it to the unnumbered dead:
sweet milk and honey, then sweet wine, and last
clear water; and I scattered barley down.
Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,
vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them
before she calved, at home in Ithaca,
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;
as for Tiresias,⁵³ 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,
letting their black blood stream into the wellpit.
Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,⁵⁴
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,
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 those sheep the bronze cut down, and make
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—
to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.⁵⁵
Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit
till I should know the presence of Tiresias.

One shade came first—Elpenor, of our company,
who lay unburied still on the wide earth
as we had left him—dead in Circe’s hall,
untouched, unmourned, when other cares compelled us.
Now when I saw him there I wept for pity
and called out to him:

‘How is this, Elpenor,
how could you journey to the western gloom
swifter afoot than I in the black lugger?’
He sighed, and answered:
Odysseus in the Land of the Dead from Homer's The Odyssey, N.C. Wyeth, Brandywine River Museum

UNIT 5 • Do heroes have responsibilities?
Son of great Laertes, Odysseus, master mariner and soldier, bad luck shadowed me, and no kindly power; ignoble death I drank with so much wine.

I slept on Circe’s roof, then could not see the long steep backward ladder, coming down, and fell that height. My neckbone, buckled under, snapped, and my spirit found this well of dark. Now hear the grace I pray for, in the name of those back in the world, not here—your wife and father, he who gave you bread in childhood, and your own child, your only son, Telemachus, long ago left at home.

When you make sail and put these lodgings of dim Death behind, you will moor ship, I know, upon Aeaea Island; there, O my lord, remember me, I pray, do not abandon me unwept, unburied, to tempt the gods’ wrath, while you sail for home; but fire my corpse, and all the gear I had, and build a cairn for me above the breakers—an unknown sailor’s mark for men to come. Heap up the mound there, and implant upon it the oar I pulled in life with my companions.’

He ceased, and I replied:

‘Unhappy spirit, I promise you the barrow and the burial.’

So we conversed, and grimly, at a distance, with my long sword between, guarding the blood, while the faint image of the lad spoke on. Now came the soul of Anticlea, dead, my mother, daughter of Autolycus, dead now, though living still when I took ship for holy Troy. Seeing this ghost I grieved, but held her off, through pang on pang of tears, till I should know the presence of Tiresias.

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 landways and seaways, why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe, 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, 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, not to be shaken from your track, implacable, 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 Thrinacia first 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. Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent, and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca. 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 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, 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 can tell you how: some passerby will say.'
“What winnowing fan 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,
and carry out pure hecatombs⁶¹ 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,
your country folk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell.’

“⁶¹ hecatombs (hek’ a tômz’): n. large-scale sacrifices to the gods in ancient Greece; often, the slaughter of 100 cattle at one time.”

**Critical Thinking**

1. **Key Ideas and Details:** (a) Before the meeting with the Cyclops, what had Odysseus received from Maron at Ismarus? (b) **Generalize:** What does the encounter with Maron reveal about ancient Greek attitudes regarding hospitality? Explain.

2. **Key Ideas and Details:** (a) How do Odysseus and his companions expect to be treated by the Cyclops? (b) **Infer:** What “laws” of behavior and attitude does Polyphemus violate? Explain.

3. **Key Ideas and Details:** (a) How do Odysseus and his crew escape from the Cyclops? (b) **Evaluate:** What positive and negative character traits does Odysseus demonstrate in his adventure with the Cyclops? Explain, citing specific examples from the text.

4. **Key Ideas and Details:** (a) What difficulty does Tiresias predict for the journey to come? (b) **Speculate:** Why would Odysseus continue, despite Tiresias’ grim prophecies? Explain, citing details from the text to support your answer.

5. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** Judging from Tiresias’ prediction, which heroic qualities will Odysseus need to rely upon as he continues his journey? Explain.

6. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** (a) What are Odysseus’ responsibilities as he reaches the land of the Cyclopes? (b) How well does he fulfill these responsibilities? Support your answer with details from the epic. [Connect to the Big Question: Do heroes have responsibilities?]
Circe Meanwhile Had Gone Her Ways...
The Sirens

Odysseus returns to Circe’s island. The goddess reveals his course to him and gives advice on how to avoid the dangers he will face: the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction; the Wandering Rocks, sea rocks that destroy even birds in flight; the perils of the sea monster Scylla and, nearby, the whirlpool Charybdis, and the cattle of the sun god, which Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to harm.

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne, and on the first rays Circe left me, taking her way like a great goddess up the island.

I made straight for the ship, roused up the men to get aboard and cast off at the stern. They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks and all in line dipped oars in the gray sea.

But soon an offshore breeze blew to our liking—a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.

So we made fast the braces, and we rested, letting the wind and steersman work the ship. The crew being now silent before me, I addressed them, sore at heart:

‘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, 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 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, 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.

The crew were on their feet 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—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 amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast, 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:

This way, oh turn your bows,
Achaea’s glory,
As all the world allows—
Moor and be merry.

Sweet coupled airs we sing.
No lonely seafarer
Holds clear of entering
Our green mirror.

Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining
From her throat and my throat,
Who lies a-pining?

Sea rovers here take joy
Voyaging onward,
As from our song of Troy
Graybeard and rower-boy
Goeth more learnèd.

All feats on that great field
In the long warfare,
Dark days the bright gods willed,
Wounds you bore there.
Argos’ old soldiery

On Troy beach teeming,
Charmed out of time we see.
No life on earth can be
Hid from our dreaming.

The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water 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. 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.

Scylla and Charybdis

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 wild alongside till the ship lost way, with no oar blades 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, 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?’
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 oar shafts in your hands, and lay back hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
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 and the smoke; steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we fetch up in the smother, 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, 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, the monster of the gray rock, harboring torment for my friends. I strained my eyes upon the cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,
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 seatide. By heaven! when she vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron seething over intense fire, when the mixture suddenly heaves and rises.

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 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.
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.

A man surfcasting 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
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.
The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
and Scylla dropped astern.

The Cattle of the Sun God

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
that shone out in the first dusk of evening
had gone down to their setting, a giant wind
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;
so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose
touched the windy world, we dragged our ship
to cover in a grotto, a sea cave
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.
I mustered all the crew and said:

‘Old shipmates,
our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink;
the cattle here are not for our provision,
or we pay dearly for it.
Fierce the god is
who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:
Helios; and no man avoids his eye.’

To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now
we had a month of onshore gales, blowing
day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.
As long as bread and good red wine remained
to keep the men up, and appease their craving,
they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,
when all the barley in the ship was gone,
hunger drove them to scour the wild shore
with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,
whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.

So one day I withdrew to the interior
to pray the gods in solitude, for hope
that one might show me some way of salvation.
Slipping away, I struck across the island
to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.
I washed my hands there, and made supplication
to the gods who own Olympus,\(^70\) all the gods—
but they, for answer, only closed my eyes
under slow drops of sleep.

Now on the shore Eurylochus
made his *insidious* plea:

‘Comrades,’ he said,
‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say.
All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,
but famine is the most pitiful, the worst
end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?

Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
if ever that day comes—
we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.\(^71\)
But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured ‘Aye!’
trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.
They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
having no barley meal—to strew the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine

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\(^70\) *Olympus* (ö lim’ pəs)
Mount Olympus, home of the gods.

\(^71\) *Lord of Noon* Helios.

**Epic Hero**
How are the values of Eurylochus different from those of Odysseus?

**Comprehension**
Who owns the heifers and sheep on the island?
How does the inclusion of real places make the story’s imaginary events more believable?

and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings, with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.

Then, as they had no wine, they made libation with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first; and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared, they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber left me in a rush, my eyes opened, and I went down the seaward path. No sooner had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory odors of burnt fat eddied around me; grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, you made me sleep away this day of mischief! O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!

Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.’

72. contrived (kən trıv’d’) v. thought up; devised.
Lampetia in her long gown meanwhile had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:

‘They have killed your kine.’

And the Lord Helios burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening, now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy at morning when I climbed the sky of stars, and evening, when I bore westward from heaven. Restitution or penalty they shall pay—and pay in full—or I go down forever to light the dead men in the underworld.’

Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud made reply: ‘Peace, Helios: shine on among the gods, shine over mortals in the fields of grain. Let me throw down one white-hot bolt, and make splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.’

—Calypso later told me of this exchange, as she declared that Hermes had told her. Well, when I reached the sea cave and the ship, I faced each man, and had it out; but where could any remedy be found? There was none. The silken beeves of Helios were dead. The gods, moreover, made queer signs appear: cowhides began to crawl, and beef, both raw and roasted, lowed like kine upon the spits.

Now six full days my gallant crew could feast upon the prime beef they had marked for slaughter from Helios’ herd; and Zeus, the son of Cronus, added one fine morning.

All the gales had ceased, blown out, and with an offshore breeze we launched again, stepping the mast and sail, to make for the open sea. Astern of us the island coastline faded, and no land showed anywhere, but only sea and heaven, when Zeus Cronion piled a thunderhead above the ship, while gloom spread on the ocean.
UNIT 5 • Do heroes have responsibilities?
We held our course, but briefly. Then the squall struck whining from the west, with gale force, breaking both forestays, and the mast came toppling aft along the ship’s length, so the running rigging showered into the bilge.

On the afterdeck the mast had hit the steersman a slant blow bashing the skull in, knocking him overside, as the brave soul fled the body, like a diver. With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly a bolt against the ship, a direct hit, so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulphur, and all the men were flung into the sea. They came up ’round the wreck, bobbing awhile like petrels on the waves.

No more seafaring homeward for these, no sweet day of return; the god had turned his face from them. I clambered fore and aft my hulk until a comber split her, keel from ribs, and the big timber floated free; the mast, too, broke away. A backstay floated dangling from it, stout rawhide rope, and I used this for lashing mast and keel together. These I straddled, riding the frightful storm.

Nor had I yet seen the worst of it: for now the west wind dropped, and a southeast gale came on—one more twist of the knife—taking me north again, straight for Charybdis. All that night I drifted, and in the sunrise, sure enough, I lay off Scylla mountain and Charybdis deep. There, as the whirlpool drank the tide, a billow tossed me, and I sprang for the great fig tree, catching on like a bat under a bough. Nowhere had I to stand, no way of climbing, the root and bole being far below, and far above my head the branches and their leaves, massed, overshadowing Charybdis pool. But I clung grimly, thinking my mast and keel would come back to the surface when she spouted.
And ah! how long, with what desire, I waited! till, at the twilight hour, when one who hears and judges pleas in the marketplace all day between contentious men, goes home to supper, the long poles at last reared from the sea.

Now I let go with hands and feet, plunging straight into the foam beside the timbers, pulled astride, and rowed hard with my hands to pass by Scylla. Never could I have passed her had not the Father of gods and men, this time, kept me from her eyes. Once through the strait, nine days I drifted in the open sea before I made shore, buoyed up by the gods, upon Ogygia Isle. The dangerous nymph Calypso lives and sings there, in her beauty, and she received me, loved me.

But why tell the same tale that I told last night in hall to you and to your lady? Those adventures made a long evening, and I do not hold with tiresome repetition of a story.”

Epic Hero
In what way do lines 994–997 remind you that Odysseus is telling his story to an audience?

Language Study

Vocabulary The italicized words in each numbered item appear in the Odyssey, Part 1. Using your knowledge of these words, identify the word in each group that does not belong. Then, explain your response.

1. plundered, robbed, donated
2. dispatched, hesitated, completed
3. assuage, soothe, increase
4. ardor, spirit, fear
5. insidious, traitorous, friendly

Word Study

Part A Explain how the Old English prefix be- contributes to the meanings of bemuse, belittle, and befriend. Consult a dictionary if necessary.

Part B Use the context of the sentences and what you know about the Old English prefix be- to explain your answer to each question.

1. If people begrudge your success, are they happy for you?
2. What happens if a sailing ship is becalmed?