The Cyclops

In the next land we found were Cyclopes,\textsuperscript{15} giants, louts, without a law to bless them. In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery to the immortal gods, they neither plow nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—wild wheat and barley—grows untended, and wine-grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven’s rains. Cyclopes have no muster and no meeting, no consultation or old tribal ways, but each one dwells in his own mountain cave dealing out rough justice to wife and child, indifferent to what the others do. . . .

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland, at one end of the bay, we saw a cavern yawning above the water, screened with laurel, and many rams and goats about the place inside a sheepfold—made from slabs of stone earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged towering oak trees.

A prodigious\textsuperscript{16} man slept in this cave alone, and took his flocks to graze afield—remote from all companions, knowing none but savage ways, a brute so huge, he seemed no man at all of those who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather a shaggy mountain reared in solitude. We beached there, and I told the crew to stand by and keep watch over the ship: as for myself I took my twelve best fighters and went ahead. I had a goatskin full of that sweet liquor that Euanthes’ son, Maron, had given me. He kept Apollo’s\textsuperscript{17} holy grove at Ismarus; for kindness we showed him there, and showed his wife and child, he gave me seven shining golden talents\textsuperscript{18} perfectly formed, a solid silver winebowl, and then this liquor—twelve two-handed jars of brandy, pure and fiery. Not a slave in Maron’s household knew this drink; only he, his wife and the storeroom mistress knew;
and they would put one cupful—ruby-colored, honey-smooth—in twenty more of water, but still the sweet scent hovered like a fume over the winebowl. No man turned away when cups of this came round.

A wineskin full

I brought along, and victuals\(^\text{19}\) in a bag, for in my bones I knew some towering brute would be upon us soon—all outward power, a wild man, ignorant of civility.

We climbed, then, briskly to the cave. But Cyclops had gone afield, to pasture his fat sheep, so we looked round at everything inside:

a drying rack that sagged with cheeses, pens crowded with lambs and kids,\(^\text{20}\) each in its class: firstlings apart from middlings, and the 'dewdrops,' or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both. And vessels full of whey\(^\text{21}\) were brimming there—bowls of earthenware and pails for milking. My men came pressing round me, pleading:

Why not take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back, throw open all the pens, and make a run for it? We'll drive the kids and lambs aboard. We say put out again on good salt water!"

Ah, how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished to see the cave man, what he had to offer—no pretty sight, it turned out, for my friends. We lit a fire, burnt an offering, and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence around the embers, waiting. When he came he had a load of dry boughs\(^\text{22}\) 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. 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

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19. **victuals** (vit' əlz) n. food or other provisions.

20. **kids** young goats.

21. **whey** (hwē) n. thin, watery part of milk separated from the thicker curds.

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**Literary Analysis**

**Epic Hero** What character flaw does the hero Odysseus reveal by refusing to leave the cave?

**Reading Check**

Where is Cyclops when Odysseus and his men enter the cave?
to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons, 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; thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey, sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets, 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, heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us. ‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from? What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic? Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’ 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, Achaean, blown off course by shifting gales on the Great South Sea; 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. It was our luck to come here; here we stand, beholden for your help, or any gifts 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.’ 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 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\textsuperscript{25} to.
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—
around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?’

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

‘My ship?

Poseidon\textsuperscript{26} 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.
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.
Then he dismembered them and made his meal,
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—
everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.
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.

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.
So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

When the young Dawn with fingertips 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,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace\textsuperscript{27} of men to make his breakfast,
and whisked away his great door slab

25. whim (hwim) n. sudden thought or wish to do something.

26. Poseidon (pô sî dan) god of the sea, earthquakes, horses, and storms at sea.

Literary Analysis

Epic Hero In what way does Odysseus’ response show that he is “formidable for guile”?

Vocabulary

dispatched (di spacht\textsuperscript{t}) v. finished quickly

27. brace (brä스) n. pair.

Reading Check

What does Odysseus tell the Cyclops happened to his ship?
cap a quiver (kwiv´ ar)  
close a case holding arrows.

din (din) n. loud,  
continuous noise; uproar.

Athena (a thē´ na)  
goddess of wisdom, skills,  
and warfare.

felled green and left to season  
chopped down and exposed to the weather to age the wood.

lugger (lug´ ar) n. small sailing vessel.

to let his sheep go through—but he, behind, reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.  
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:

a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—an olive tree, felled green and left to season for Cyclops’ hand. And it was like a mast a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—a deep-sea-going craft—might carry:

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 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’ eye, when mild 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, his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time, entered the cave: by some shepherding 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 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:

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

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

'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.'

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:

33. nectar (nek' tar) and ambrosia (am brō' zha) drink and food of the gods.
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.’

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,
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
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
as more than natural force nerved them; straight
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it
deep in his crater eye, and leaned on it
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill
in planking, having men below to swing
the two-handed strap that spins it in the groove.
So with our brand we bored\textsuperscript{34} 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

one sees a white-hot axehead 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,
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.
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?'

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:

'Ah well, if nobody has played you foul
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain
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.
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.
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.
The Cyclops' 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
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.

Literary Analysis
Epic Hero  What does Odysseus' gleeful response to his successful trick reveal about his character?

Reading Check
What do the other Cyclopes think Polyphemus is saying when he says, "Nohbdy's tricked me"?
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kingly belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
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 pectoral38 fleece
the giant's blind hands blundering never found.
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,
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
over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue39
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
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,
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.
Critical Viewing
Odysseus and his surviving men escape in their ship as the blinded Cyclops hurls boulders and curses. How does this illustration compare to your mental image of the scene? [Analyze]

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; 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, as far off shore as shouted words would carry,
I sent a few back to the adversary:
'O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?
Puny, am I, in a cave man'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!'

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.
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 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.'

'All but stoved us in!'

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

'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:

'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!'

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 wizzardry among the Cyclopes,
and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus' 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—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
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!
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:
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 father land,
far be that day, and dark the years between.
Let him lose all companions, and return under strange sail to bitter days at home.' In these words he prayed, and the god heard him. Now he laid hands upon a bigger stone and wheeled around, titanic for the cast, to let it fly in the black-prowed vessel's track. But it fell short, just aft the steering oar, and whelming seas rose giant above the stone to bear us onward toward the island.

There as we ran in we saw the squadron waiting, the trim ships drawn up side by side, and all our troubled friends who waited, looking seaward. We beached her, grinding keel in the soft sand, and waded in, ourselves, on the sandy beach. Then we unloaded all the Cyclops' flock to make division, share and share alike, only my fighters voted that my ram, the prize of all, should go to me. I slew him by the seaside and burnt his long thighbones to Zeus beyond the stormcloud, Cronus' son, who rules the world. But Zeus disdained my offering; destruction for my ships he had in store and death for those who sailed them, my companions. Now all day long until the sun went down we made our feast on mutton and sweet wine, till after sunset in the gathering dark we went to sleep above the wash of ripples.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines; and filing in to sit beside the rowlocks oarsmen in line dipped oars in the gray sea. So we moved out, sad in the vast offing, having our precious lives, but not our friends.