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-belling 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 Eulylochus\textsuperscript{49}

\textit{pinioned}\textsuperscript{50} the sacred beasts. With my drawn blade
I spaded up the \textit{votive}\textsuperscript{51} pit, and poured
libations\textsuperscript{52} 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, 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 \textit{Erebus},\textsuperscript{53}
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 slay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—
to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.\textsuperscript{54}

Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit
till I should know the presence of Tiresias.\textsuperscript{55}

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 compelld 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:
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 backbone, 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:

a fair wind and the honey lights of \underline{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 \underline{herds of Helios}
by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.
\textcolor{red}{\underline{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,
\underline{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 \underline{fledge light hulls for dipping flight}.
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I
can tell you how: some \underline{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.’

Critical Thinking


2. (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?

3. (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?

4. (a) Summarize: 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?

5. (a) Compare and Contrast: Compare and contrast Odysseus’ reactions to the three ghosts he meets in the Land of the Dead—Elpenor, Anticlea, and Tiresias. (b) Analyze: What character trait does Odysseus display in the Land of the Dead that he did not reveal earlier?

6. (a) Summarize: What difficulty does Tiresias predict for the journey to come? (b) Speculate: Why would Odysseus continue, despite the grim prophecies?

7. Assess: Judging from Tiresias’ prediction, which heroic qualities will Odysseus need to rely upon as he continues his journey? Explain.

Do heroes have responsibilities?

(a) What are Odysseus’ responsibilities as he reaches the land of the Cyclopes? (b) How well does he fulfill these responsibilities?