

The Land of the Dead

Odysseus and his men sail to Aeolia,⁴⁶ 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,⁴⁷ 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 Aeaëa, 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.

46. Aeolia (ē ō' lē e)

47. Laestrygonians
(lē trī gō' nī anz)

Reading Check

What does Circe say Odysseus must do in order to reach home?

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
 530 in tears, with bitter and sore dread upon us.
 But now a breeze came up for us astern—
 a canvas-bellying landbreeze, hale shipmate
 sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair;⁴⁸
 so we made fast the braces, took our thwarts,
 535 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,
 540 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;
 545 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 Eulylochus⁴⁹
 550 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.
 555 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
 560 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,⁵³
 565 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.

48. singing nymph . . .
 hair Circe.

Reading Strategy

Reading in Sentences
 Reread the sentences in
 lines 539–541 to explain
 what happens to their
 ship by night.

49. **Perimedes** (per' ə mə'
 dəz) and **Eulylochus** (yūlo'
 rīf ə kəs)

50. **pinioned** (pin' yənd)
 v. confined or shackled.

51. **votive** (vōt' iv) *adj.*
 done in fulfillment of a
 vow or pledge.

52. **libations** (li bā' shənz)
 n. wine or other liquids
 poured upon the ground
 as a sacrifice to a god.

assuage (ə swāj') v. calm;
 pacify

53. **Erebus** (er' ə bəs) dark
 region under the earth
 through which the dead
 pass before entering the
 realm of Hades.

From every side they came and sought the pit
570 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.⁵⁴
575 Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit
till I should know the presence of Tiresias.⁵⁵

One shade came first—Elpenor, of our company,
who lay unburied still on the wide earth
580 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
585 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.
590 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
595 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,⁵⁶
long ago left at home.

When you make sail
and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,
600 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,
605 and build a cairn⁵⁷ for me above the breakers—
an unknown sailor's mark for men to come.

Literary Analysis

The Epic Hero and Conflict Which outside forces and inner feelings does Odysseus confront as he faces the spirits of the dead?

54. **Persephone** (per seh a no) wife of Hades.

55. **Tiresias** (ti res see es)

Reading Strategy

Reading in Sentences As you read Elpenor's words, where do you pause if you read in sentences?

56. **Telemachus**
(ta lem' a kas)

57. **cairn** (kern) *n.* conical heap of stones built as a monument.

Reading Check

What does Elpenor say happened to him on Circe's roof?

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,

610 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,

615 my mother, daughter of Autolycus,⁵⁸
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.

620 Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes⁵⁹ 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,
625 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,
630 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,
635 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
640 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.

58. Autolycus (ô tâl' i kôs)

59. Thebes (thêbz)

Reading Strategy

Reading in Sentences

In ordinary language, rephrase the lines in which Odysseus puts away his sword.

Avoid those kine,⁶⁰ hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
645 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
650 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,
655 until one day you come where men have lived
with meat unsalted, never known the sea,
nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows

60. kine (kīn) *n.* cattle.

bereft (bi reft') *adj.*
deprived

 **Reading Check**

What does Odysseus
learn has happened to
mother?

and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I
660 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,
665 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,
670 your country folk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell.'

61. hecatombs (hek' ə tōmz)
n. large-scale sacrifices in ancient Greece; often, the slaughter of 100 cattle at one time.

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** What do you think of Odysseus' plan for escaping from Polyphemus?
2. (a) **Recall:** 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) **Recall:** How do Odysseus and his companions expect to be treated by the Cyclops? (b) **Infer:** What "laws" of behavior and attitude does Polyphemus violate in his treatment of the Greeks?
4. (a) **Recall:** How do Odysseus and his crew ultimately escape from the Cyclops? (b) **Evaluate:** Which positive and negative character traits does Odysseus demonstrate in his adventure with the Cyclops?
5. (a) **Recall:** Whom does Odysseus encounter in the Land of the Dead? (b) **Interpret:** Which character trait does Odysseus display in the Land of the Dead that he did not reveal earlier?
6. (a) **Recall:** What difficulties does Tiresias predict for the journey to come? (b) **Speculate:** Why would Odysseus continue, despite the grim prophecies?
7. (a) **Assess:** Based on Tiresias' prediction, which heroic qualities will Odysseus need to rely upon as he continues his journey? Explain.