

The Greeks believed that almost all humans ended up in the Underworld. True, a few rare souls—such as Heracles—were asked to join the gods on Olympus. But everyone else died and became Hades' subjects.

Thus most Greeks respected and feared Hades. In fact, they invented other names for him to avoid using the word "Hades." They called him Pluto, or "giver of plenty," and Dis, or "the wealthy one." Sometimes they didn't even use a name at all, just polite titles. This was believed to be safer than speaking of him directly.

Even the worship of Hades was performed with caution. At the moment when an animal—usually a black sheep—was sacrificed to him, people turned away their heads.

Not that many sacrifices were performed anyway. The terrifying Hades had few altars.

Pigs are strangely linked with Demeter and Persephone. Some myths say that Demeter couldn't trace her daughter because pigs had trampled over Persephone's footprints. These same pigs fell into the chasm created when Hades split the earth.

In later worship of Demeter, pigs were thrown into a pit. Figures of wheat and flour were also tossed in. These strange sacrifices were meant to stand for the pigs and humans of the original story.

## ODYSSEUS AND THE CYCLOPS

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you start the story.

**civilized**—refined; cultured  
**contemplated**—thought about; considered  
**covered**—crouched in fear  
**dazed**—stunned; confused  
**defiled**—made dirty or unclean; polluted  
**deserts**—(an) earned reward or punishment  
**exquisite**—fine; excellent  
**groped**—blindly searched  
**hospitality**—friendly treatment of guests  
**mocked**—made fun of; scorned  
**natives**—lifelong residents  
**pathetically**—pitifully  
**potent**—powerful  
**rocked**—shook; trembled  
**scoundrel**—bad person; rascal  
**sinister**—threatening; evil  
**slaughtered**—brutally murdered; butchered  
**sneered**—smirked; snickered  
**sowing**—planting  
**vital**—very important; necessary

# ODYSSEUS and the CYCLOPS

from *THE ODYSSEY*

Can a man be clever enough to  
outwit the most dangerous foe?  
Can a man be so clever that he  
outwits even himself? Judge for  
yourself in this story of the  
cleverest of all Greek heroes.

**H**ave the gods forgotten me?" Odysseus' wondered.  
He had been sailing with his twelve ships for days now.  
A storm had separated them from the rest of the Greek  
fleet. And now they were lost—hopelessly lost.

<sup>1</sup>(ō dis' ūs or ō dis' sē us)



The Trojan<sup>2</sup> War was over, after ten years of bloody struggle. The Greeks had won a great but hard-earned victory. Odysseus had fought bravely and well. And he had looked forward to the journey home.

But some of the Greeks had gone crazy with the victory. They had **defiled** the temple of the goddess Athena in Troy.<sup>3</sup> Athena had supported the Greeks throughout the war, but this act made her wild with rage. She turned against the Greeks and plotted to destroy them. On their return voyage, she made sure they met a terrible storm.

Poor Odysseus was not really to blame for the temple's destruction. He had always been a religious man, favored by the gods. But now all he could do was wonder: "Have the gods forgotten me?"

It seemed as though they had. When the storm clouds cleared, Odysseus realized they were lost. Though they spotted land, it wasn't home. Yet at least the weary travelers hoped to find food and fresh water.

The ships landed, and Odysseus sent three men to explore. "Find out who lives here," he commanded. "Make friends with them. Tell them we need food and drink."

The men did as they were told. They hadn't traveled far before they met the **natives**. They were peaceful, gentle people. They offered the sailors flowers to eat.

"What kind of flower is this?" asked Odysseus' men. "The lotus," explained the natives. "They're all the food you'll ever need."

Odysseus' men ate the lotus. The sweet taste immediately delighted them.

Then a more **sinister** change began to occur. Their eyes glazed over. Their motions became lazy—almost dreamlike.

Slowly they made their way back to their ships. In their hands, they carried more lotus blossoms.

"Try some of these berries, Odysseus!" they called. They grinned from ear to ear. "You'll never long for home again!"

<sup>2</sup> (trō' jan)

<sup>3</sup> (a thē' na) (troi)

Odysseus angrily knocked the blossoms from their hands. "Get back on board," he commanded. "We sail at once." The three men hung back, gazing stupidly at their angry commander.

"Go? 'Go,' he says," **mocked** the first man. "And why should we? What do you offer us except rough seas and hard rowing? What chance do we have of ever getting home again? Why, the gods themselves have given us up!"

"And what if we do get home?" asked the second man in a sleepy voice. "What then? Our wives have forgotten us and taken new husbands. Our children have grown up not knowing us. They are happy without us. And we can be happy here!"

"These Lotus-Eaters are savages," barked Odysseus. "Do you want to be like them, lazy and useless? We are **civilized** men. And civilization takes sweat and hard work."

"Well, if they are savages, they are happier for it," laughed the third man.

But Odysseus wouldn't hear their plea. He hauled them back on ship by force and tied them to the ship's benches. They begged and pleaded. But Odysseus closed his ears.

Then he waved to the rest of his men. "Come aboard!" he shouted. "And whatever you do, don't eat any of that lotus plant!"

Reluctantly the rest of the crew returned and settled behind the oars.

As the ships sailed away, Odysseus considered his situation. "So far from home," he thought. "And so little hope of return! Were those three **dazed** fools right? Have we truly been forgotten by those who love us? Would it have been better to stay and join the Lotus-Eaters?"

Odysseus thought of his home, the island of Ithaca.<sup>4</sup> He also thought of his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus.<sup>5</sup> It had been ten years since he had seen them. Telemachus must be a young man by now. And Penelope—

<sup>4</sup> (ith' a ka)

<sup>5</sup> (pe nel' ō pē) (te lem' a kus)

could she have taken another husband? Could they have forgotten him?

But then he seemed to see Penelope waiting for him with open arms. Odysseus' heart filled with hope.

"What a fool I am to worry!" he thought with a rush of relief. "I know my dear Penelope has waited for me. And she always will for as long as any hope remains. As for my son, he is fine, strong, and eager to meet his father."

Just as night was about to fall, they sighted land again. More careful this time, Odysseus landed his ships on a nearby island.

It was night now. Yet with the moonlight as their guide, the crew quickly explored the island. They found it to be a rough wilderness. Short, twisted trees grew between grassy patches. Small streams of water dashed between rocks. And wild goats roamed everywhere.

Odysseus' men killed a few of the goats and sat down to a feast. As they ate, one man commented, "Surely, no one lives on the mainland. Otherwise, they would have farmed this island. They would have tamed these goats."

But Odysseus pointed to the mainland. As they stared, they spotted what their sharp-eyed leader had seen. The smoke from dozens of fires was rising into the dim moonlight.

"Someone lives there," he said. "And tomorrow we'll find out who."

At dawn, Odysseus ordered eleven of the ships to remain on the island. Then with only one ship, he set sail for the mainland.

Upon landing, Odysseus split the group. Half would guard the ship and half would explore. He himself set off at once with the exploring party.

They found the country was a tangled wilderness. Wheat, barley, and vines thick with grapes grew wild everywhere. They had to cut their way through the brush.

"What kind of people would let their crops grow like this?" asked one of the men. "Don't they know anything

of sowing or plowing?"

"Savages," said Odysseus, fighting his way through the growth. "But savages of a different kind than the Lotus Eaters. See there? Up on that mountain?"

Odysseus pointed to a cave high above them. The huge opening was surrounded by a great stone fence.

"These people live with their animals in caves like that. They probably know nothing of poetry or music. Or government and friendship. They may not even know each other's names."

He contemplated the cave for a minute. "Still, we'll pay that cave a visit. And we'll take some wine along to show our good will. If they're savages, let's hope they're friendly at least."

They climbed the slope to the cave and cautiously walked inside. There they found a few lambs penned up. They also saw enormous baskets of cheese scattered around.

The men darted forward at once to grab hunks of the cheese. Hungrily they bit into the rich food.

"Let's pack away as much of this cheese as we can," said one of Odysseus' men. "And then let's get out of here at once."

"A fine idea," said another. "I don't look forward to meeting the brute who lives here."

But Odysseus only laughed. "Is that any way to thank our host for his fine cheese? Brute though he may be, we must stay and meet him."

Odysseus regretted his words almost at once, for a huge shadow suddenly darkened the cave. Odysseus and his men whirled. There in the doorway stood a gigantic monster. He had but one eye in the center of his forehead. A Cyclops!

The giant didn't see them at first. He was busy herding his flock of sheep into the cave. So the terrified humans had time to hide themselves.

As they **covered** in various corners, the Greeks fearfully watched the Cyclops. They saw him pick up a huge boulder

<sup>6</sup>(sī' klops)

with amazing ease. Then with a grunt, he shut the mouth of the cave behind him. Next he sat down and began to milk his goats and sheep.

Finally, with his milking finished, the Cyclops started a fire. As the flames flickered through the cave, the Cyclops at last saw the huddled men.

"Who's there!" he called out in a thunderous voice. His one eye darted to and fro. "Are you pirates who've come to steal? Or are you traders who've come to buy and sell? In either case, you're unwelcome."

Though terror shook him, Odysseus bravely stepped forward. "Neither pirates nor traders," he said as calmly as possible. "Just weary warriors, on our way home. All we ask is your **hospitality**. A little food and water—whatever you can spare. If you respect the gods, you'll treat us well. Zeus' always smiles down on a kind host."

The Cyclops threw his head back and laughed horribly. "Zeus! You little fool! You dare talk to me of Zeus! Why, I'm stronger than Zeus or any other god. None of them can stop me from doing whatever I like with you!" He gave another fierce laugh.

Suddenly he gave Odysseus a cunning look with his fierce eye. "But tell me something, little man, and maybe I won't hurt you. Where did you land your ship? Nearby or far away?"

Odysseus was too smart to fall for that trick. "Our ship was destroyed in a storm," he lied. "We clung to bits of wreckage. Many of our number drowned. These men and I barely made it to your shore alive."

Odysseus stood trembling for a moment. He wondered if the Cyclops believed him.

"That may be the last mistake you ever make," the giant chuckled. With a lunge, he grabbed two of the men. Raising them high in the air, he dashed their brains out on the rocks.

The others watched in horror as the Cyclops cut his two

victims limb from limb. Then with dreadful smacking sounds, he ate them greedily. Finally, quite happy with his awful meal, the Cyclops went to sleep.

The Greeks huddled in a corner of the cave, moaning with fear. They were truly trapped. All of them together could not move that boulder. They were forced to sit shaking in the dark through the long night.

Odysseus prayed hard while he waited. "Almighty Zeus, please help me," he pleaded. "Or if you have no help to give, just tell me what to do!"

No reply came. Odysseus was disappointed but not too surprised. In days gone by, the gods replied more willingly. Even the greatest heroes seldom relied on their wits alone. They simply asked some god for help or advice. And the gods often spoke to them.

Now, however, the heavens were often silent. "The gods seem to speak to us less and less these days," grumbled Odysseus. "Perhaps that's what comes from being civilized."

Yet though he complained, Odysseus was used to thinking for himself. Normally, he enjoyed the challenge. Now, however, he would have liked some help.

Odysseus scratched his beard thoughtfully. "It will take some brains to get us out of this mess," he muttered.

Odysseus studied the Cyclops while he slept. It would be easy for Odysseus to stab him with a sword. But that would be just a pinprick to this monster. He'd have to think of something else.

The next morning, the Cyclops arose. He milked his flock, then had his breakfast: two more of Odysseus' men. As he ate, he grinned and rubbed his belly with satisfaction.

"Time to leave you, little men," he rumbled. "But don't feel *you* must leave. In fact, I won't hear of it. After all, Zeus is always kind to those who are hospitable."

With an evil roar of laughter, the giant herded his flocks out of the cave. Outside, he paused and rolled the boulder

<sup>7</sup> (zūs) Zeus was the king of the gods and the ruler of the heavens.

back to the entrance. Once again Odysseus and his men were sealed in.

They sat all day and wondered what to do.

"An awful fix this is!" cried one of the men. "Farmed and **slaughtered** like the animals around us! He'll kill us two by two, until there are none of us left!"

"Not if I can help it," declared Odysseus. "I have an idea. It may not work, but we must try."

He pointed to the shepherd's staff which the Cyclops had left behind. This staff was a huge tree trunk, as long as a ship's mast.

Odysseus instructed his men to cut six feet off the end. Then Odysseus carved the pole to a sharp point. He burned the point in the fire to make it harder.

"But what are we going to do with this great stick of yours?" asked one of Odysseus' men.

"We're going to shove it into the Cyclops' eye," said Odysseus.

The men raised cries of protest.

"But that's impossible!" cried one.

"How can we even get near enough to him?" exclaimed another.

"Leave that to me," said Odysseus. "But I'll need four men to help me carry this pole."

The crew drew straws. Odysseus was pleased that the four strongest men were chosen.

When evening came, the Cyclops returned. Once again, he herded his flock inside and sealed the entrance. Then he milked his sheep, gobbled two more men, and built up the fire.

Now was the time to act. Odysseus brought out the wine he had carried along. It was delicious wine—and **potent**. Odysseus usually mixed it with twenty parts of water before drinking it. But now he poured it straight into a cup. Then taking a deep breath, he stepped forward.

"Most excellent monster," he said, "I hope you enjoyed your meal."

The Cyclops belched contentedly.

"Here," said Odysseus, holding out the cup. "Have some of this fine Greek wine to wash my friends down. I meant to give it to you when we first met. But you behaved so badly, I kept it to myself. Drink it now. Perhaps you'll like it enough to let us go."

"Most hospitable of you," sneered the Cyclops. He snatched the cup away from Odysseus and drank greedily. A slow smile crossed the giant's face.

"Well!" exclaimed the Cyclops. "This is an excellent drink indeed! I make fine wine from my own grapes. But I must admit, your wine is even better! Give me more of it!" And the Cyclops shoved the cup in Odysseus' face.

"Oh, but I had hoped to save some for my companions," said Odysseus.

"Come, come," said the Cyclops, "there's not that many of you left!" He laughed heartlessly. Then he stared more curiously at Odysseus. "So where do you and your fine wine come from, little man? Now that I think of it, I don't even know your name. Mine is Polyphemus.<sup>8</sup> What's yours?" Odysseus remained silent.

"Well, whoever you are," said the Cyclops, "*please* let me have some more of your wine. I'll give you a fine gift in return."

"Do you swear by the River Styx?"<sup>9</sup> asked Odysseus. Polyphemus grunted. "By the River Styx, I swear it!" So Odysseus poured another cup for the monster—and then another and another. The Cyclops began to sway drunkenly. His single eye drooped and grew foggy.

Odysseus saw his chance. "Good Polyphemus," he said. "It seems that you're enjoying my **exquisite** wine."

The Cyclops nodded stupidly.

"You asked my name," said Odysseus. "Since we're good drinking companions, I feel safe in telling you. My name

<sup>8</sup>(pol i fē' mus)

<sup>9</sup>(stiks) The gods swore by the River Styx when making a promise. This river flowed through Hades, the Underworld.

is Noman."<sup>10</sup> He paused and cunningly watched the giant. "Well, since we've been properly introduced, what about that gift you promised?"

The monster began to chuckle horribly. "Noman, eh? A fine name for dessert! I'll tell you what your gift will be. I'll eat all your friends before I eat you. You'll be the last to die."

Quite pleased with his joke, Polyphemus rolled over on his side. He was soon fast asleep. Wine dripped from his mouth. His snoring echoed through the cave.

Odysseus quickly motioned for the four chosen men to come forward. Together, they grabbed the pole and shoved it into the hot ashes of the fire. There they held it until it was white hot.

"It's ready," Odysseus whispered. "Now back up and take your places. Ready? Forward! Straight for his eye!"

With a mighty rush, the men charged towards the Cyclops and thrust the blazing point into his eye.

Drunk though he was, Polyphemus felt that pain! He sat up with a roar that shook the walls of the cave. In one quick motion, he'd seized the burning post and yanked it out of his eye. Still he roared.

Those screams **rocked** the cave. And they were also heard by every Cyclops in the area. Though not exactly neighborly, they came running to Polyphemus' cave.

"What's the matter with you, Polyphemus?" asked his closest neighbor. He rapped on the boulder blocking the entrance. "Why are you waking us up at this time of night? Is someone trying to kill you?"

"It's Noman!" wailed Polyphemus. "Noman is killing me!"

"Well then, if no man is killing you, why kick up such a fuss? If you're sick, don't expect us to help you. Say your prayers to your father Poseidon.<sup>11</sup> Now go back to bed and

<sup>10</sup>(nō' man)

<sup>11</sup>(pō sī' don) Poseidon was the god of the sea and bringer of earthquakes. He was also Polyphemus' father.

keep quiet. Let the rest of us sleep."

Odysseus could hardly keep from laughing aloud. But silence was **vital** at this point. He and his men scarcely dared to breathe as Polyphemus staggered about, trying to find them.

At last the giant went to the entrance of the cave and **groped** for the boulder. With a shout of rage, he pushed it away from the mouth of the cave. Then he sat squarely in the middle of the entrance. He stretched out his arms so that no one could pass by unnoticed.

"What an old fool!" whispered Odysseus to his nearest companion. "Does he really think we'll try to just walk out?"

"And what else do you suggest?" hissed his companion. Odysseus abruptly realized that he had no idea. He briefly considered a quick prayer to Zeus. But there was no time for that. He had to think fast.

The bleating of a fat sheep gave Odysseus an idea. With a glance around the cave, he found what he was looking for. As cautiously as possible, he tiptoed over to the Cyclops' bed. It was made of slender, flexible twigs.

Busily, Odysseus removed some of those twigs. Then he braided them together into lengths of rope. Next he gathered some of the rams together and roped them into groups of three.

Finally he beckoned to his men. "I'm going to tie you beneath these rams." His voice was the softest of whispers. "That way you can escape the cave in the morning when Old No-Eyes lets out his sheep. He shouldn't be able to find you if you stay beneath the middle ram."

Odysseus carried out his plan. But with everyone else safely tied, there was no one to help him. So he climbed beneath the biggest, finest ram and clung to the wool for dear life. He and his men stayed under the rams all night long.

Dawn came. The rams began to wander out of the cave. Polyphemus fingered their wool, searching for the men. Each group of three rams passed, one by one. Polyphemus

groaned in pain and misery, failing to find a single man.

At last, the great ram carrying Odysseus came to the entrance. Polyphemus stopped the ram and touched him.

"Ah, my faithful old fellow," he cried **pathetically**. "You're always the first out of the cave. But not today! What's the matter? Perhaps it's pity for your master's eye that slows you. Oh, how I wish you could talk! You'd tell me where that rascal Noman is hiding! But I'll find him yet! I'll find him and smash his head in!"

Finally Polyphemus let the ram pass, with Odysseus underneath. Odysseus waited until he got a good distance from the cave. Then he dropped off the ram and freed his companions. Together, they chased the beasts down to the ship.

The men who had stayed to guard the ship were delighted to see their lost companions again. But upon hearing the fate of the missing, they wept and cursed.

"There will be time for tears and oaths later!" barked Odysseus. "Get as many of these beasts on board as you can. We're showing off!"

The men rowed like fury. Before they were very far away, Odysseus shouted to the Cyclops.

"Hello, most excellent monster!" he yelled. "Your dessert got away, did he? Ah, well, that's your just **deserts**, you might say! That's what you get for being a poor host who eats his guests! That's what you get for mocking Zeus!"

At the sound of Odysseus' voice, Polyphemus came charging out of his cave. "Noman!" he screamed. "This is what you get for mocking *me!*" He picked up a boulder as big as the ship. Then he threw it violently into the sea.

The huge stone crashed into the water just ahead of the ship. It raised a great wave which swept the ship backward. Before they knew it, Odysseus and his companions were beached again.

The men quickly picked up poles and pushed their ship away from the shore. "Row if you love your lives!" Odysseus shouted to the men. And row they did.

Odysseus waited until they were twice as far from the shore as before. Then he shouted again, "Thinking of revenge, Polyphemus? Want to kill me, do you?"

One of Odysseus' shipmates angrily grabbed him. "Odysseus, you fool!" he exclaimed. "You got us out of danger with your cleverness. Will you kill us now through your stupidity?"

But Odysseus shoved the man away and kept shouting to the shore. "Maybe our paths will cross again some day! In that case, you'll want to know my name. And no, it's not Noman. I am Odysseus, the conqueror of Troy.<sup>12</sup> And I live in Ithaca. One day soon, if Zeus is willing, you can find me there!"

A great cry of misery rose up from the island. "Then it was true! A wise man once warned me of this! He said I would be defeated by a man named Odysseus! But I didn't expect it would be you. You seemed so small and weak. I expected a giant like myself—only stronger."

Polyphemus groaned again in rage and pain. "Come back to me again, Odysseus!" he wailed. "I've learned my lesson! This time I'll be kind to you! And this time, I have a real gift to offer! I'll pray to my father Poseidon to give you a safe journey! Maybe he'll cure my eye as well!"

Odysseus sneered. "No one will ever give you back your eye! I'm sure of that! I only wish I were as sure of your death!"

An awful silence followed. Then the men heard the giant praying to Poseidon.

"My father, lord of all the seas! Make sure this **scoundrel** never reaches his native land again! Or if he must, make sure it is only after long suffering and unhappiness!"

Then Polyphemus picked up one more huge rock and hurled it into the sea. This one fell just short of the ship.

<sup>12</sup>Odysseus came up with the plan for the Trojan Horse. The Greek army followed his suggestion and built a huge, hollow, wooden horse. Then they hid in the horse and were towed inside Troy. At night, they emerged and conquered the city.



It raised another great wave, which pushed the ship forward to the island.

There Odysseus met his waiting companions and their eleven ships. They had all been deeply worried and felt greatly relieved to see the survivors. But they also grieved for those who had died.

The men divided up the rams evenly among all the ships. All the sailors agreed that Odysseus should keep his great ram.

But Odysseus didn't plan to keep the beast for himself. While the others feasted into the night, Odysseus led his ram away. On a lonely hill, he sacrificed it to Zeus.

As he finished, Odysseus raised up this prayer: "Lord Zeus, king of the heavens, I did a foolish thing today. I taunted Polyphemus, the son of your brother Poseidon. And he brought down a terrible curse on me. It was wrong to do, and I regret it. Can you help me? Can you save me?"

But no answer came from the god.

The next day Odysseus set sail with his men, more unsure than ever.

He had every reason to worry, for Poseidon had heard his son's prayer. Odysseus and his men were no longer forgotten by the gods. Soon—very soon—they would wish they had been.

## INSIGHTS

**O**dyseus is a rare hero in Greek myths. He was much more famous for his wisdom than his muscles. That wisdom won him respect—and sometimes jealousy. After the great warrior Achilles was slain in battle, Odysseus and another Greek rescued his body. This second Greek, Ajax, was known for his bravery and strength.

As a reward for their mission, both Greeks hoped to receive Achilles' armor. It was left to Thetis, Achilles' mother, to decide which hero was more deserving. She chose Odysseus, thus placing wisdom before strength. Afterward, Ajax went mad and then killed himself out of shame.

Odysseus was definitely not the battle-hungry type. In fact, he wanted to avoid going to the Trojan War altogether. Therefore, he decided to pretend he was mad. Yoking the odd team of an ass and ox to his plow, he began to plant salt.

But, Palamedes, the Greek who was sent to recruit Odysseus, suspected trickery. So he placed Odysseus' young son Telemachus in the path of the plow. Odysseus turned away, showing that he was no madman.

It's unfortunate for Odysseus that his trick with the plow didn't work. For he spent ten long years fighting in the Trojan War. Then his difficult journey home took another ten years. Thus his name gave birth to the word *odyssey*, which means a long adventure or quest.

*continued*