The Odyssey

Part Two: (Books 5-12)

The Wanderings of Odysseus

Valley Southwoods: Tier 1 Edition
Book 5: Calypso, the Sweet Nymph

Again the story begins with the gods. Zeus, unable to resist the pleas of his favorite daughter, Athena, sends the messenger-god Hermes to Calypso’s island to order Odysseus released. It is important to remember that although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms—even her promises to make Odysseus immortal (he could live forever) threaten to lead the hero away from the straight and narrow path back to his wife, Penelope.

No words were lost on Hermes as he put on his beautiful, golden sandals to carry him over the water and over land in the wind. He also took his magic wand (that makes people fall asleep or wake up). Hermes began his mission by flying in the air, barely above the surface of the water, until the distant island of Calypso lay ahead. When he landed, he found the cave. Calypso, the mistress of the island, was now at home. There was a great fire blazing, and she was singing while weaving on her loom. Hermes entered the cave to face the magical Calypso. She recognized him right away (all immortal gods know one another even though they look like strangers). Hermes did not see the great Odysseus anywhere. Odysseus was sitting on the beach as he did every day, staring out across the sea. His heart was broken because he wanted to return home to his wife and son; his eyes were full of tears.

Hermes tells Calypson that the gods have ordered her to release Odysseus forever. And now, finally, the reader gets to meet Odysseus. Notice what this great “warrior” is doing the first time we meet him!

Hermes left Calypso who had to obey Zeus’s command to let Odysseus go. Hermes found Odysseus sitting by the sea, tears running from his eyes. The days of his life were running out being trapped on this island. Even though he was magically forced to sleep with Calypso every night (and she was beautiful), he could only dream of Penelope as he cried on the shore.

Hermes found him and said, “You sad man, you don’t have to be sorry any more. Your life stuck on this island is finally at an end! I am here to help you return home.”

Calypso promises Odysseus a raft and supplies to help him get home without harm (provided the gods helped him). Now Odysseus says goodbye to Calypso.

Calypso brought Odysseus back to her cave to say goodbye. Odysseus sat down, and Calypso gave him food and wine. She then sat down facing him while her serving maids brought even more food. When they had both eaten, Calypso said, “Son of Laertes, Odysseus, after all these years with me, you still want to go to your home? Well, I wish you a good trip. If you could only see your own future with this trip on the sea you probably would want to stay here with me. I could make you immortal—you would live forever! I know you miss your human wife. Am I less sexy than she is? Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can a human woman compare to me, a goddess?

To this, Odysseus answered, “My goddess, do not be angry. My quiet Penelope cannot begin to compare to your majesty. Being a human, she will grow old and die, unlike you. Still, the only thing I think of every day here is getting to see my home again, along with my wife and son.”

Odysseus then builds a raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon, still angry at Odysseus, is not going to let his trip home be easy. He soon creates a storm that destroys Odysseus’s raft. It is only with Athena’s help and another magical sea creature that Odysseus arrives, broken and battered, on the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians. He washes up on shore, naked. He has no idea where he is at, but he hides himself in a pile of leaves and falls into a deep sleep. He has survived.
The sun rose and woke up Princess Nausicaa from her dream. Down through the rooms she went to talk to her parents who were still at home. She went up to her father, the king, and whispered to him, “My dear Papa, could you send the mule cart around for me? The one with the pretty wheels? I must take all our things and get them washed at the river pools; our clothes are all dirty. You should always wear clean clothes, especially if you are going to a meeting with all the town’s nobles. Remember your five sons at home: two are married but three are still bachelors who need clean clothes when they go out dancing.”

She had not mentioned anything about her own wedding although her father saw her blush. The King said, “I cannot turn down your request for mules, or anything, for that matter. Go along, now; servants will bring the cart with the pretty wheels and put the storage box on it too. He spoke to the stableman, who soon brought the cart, harnessed with the mules. Meanwhile, Nausicaa went and got all the dirty clothes to load in the wagon box. Her mother packed a big picnic basket of food for her daughter and maids, and filled a skin of wine. When the Princess got on the cart, her mother handed her a golden bottle of olive oil to moisturize their skin once they were done bathing. Nausicaa took the reins and raised her whip, lashing the mules. What a noise! But off they went with princess, maids, and laundry.

When the cart got to the washing pools, the servant girls unhitched the mules to go free and eat grass. The maids then unloaded all the dirty clothes from the cart and brought them to the water. They scrubbed and washed the clothes and then spread them, piece by piece, along the beach (water had made all the pebbles on the beach clean). The girls then went swimming and rubbed the oil on their bodies afterward. Then they ate lunch while the sun was drying all the clothes.
The Princess and her maids were having a great time. They even played a game of ball. Soon it was time, she knew, to head home. The mules needed to be harnessed and the clothing folded. But the goddess, Athena, made the princess stay longer so that Odysseus might see her and have her guidance back to the town.

When the king’s daughter threw the ball into one of the streams near to where Odysseus was sleeping, the great warrior woke up hearing their shouts, saying to himself, “I’m in the presence of humans once again! But who are these people? Are they kind and do they fear and respect the gods? I need to get up and see for myself!”

Odysseus came out from the bushes (first grabbing some leaves to cover himself because he was naked). Imagine the way he looked—like a rain-drenched, wind-whipped mountain lion. With this wild look, Odysseus started to walk toward the young girls with pretty braided hair; his body was swollen from being in the sea so long and he was covered with sea brine. Odysseus terrified the girls so that they all ran away. Only King Alcinous’s daughter stood her ground (Athena had given her extra bravery). She faced him, waiting. And Odysseus came, wondering if he should drop to the ground and embrace her around the knees (as was the custom) or to stay standing a little ways away from her while asking how to get to a town and if he could borrow some clothes. He quickly decided to just trust his words, so he spoke to her from a distance. He said, “Mistress, please…are you a goddess or a human? If you are a goddess, you look most like Artemis. If you are a human, your father and mother are very blessed. I know their happiness must send tears to their eyes each time they see their wondrous child go dancing! Whoever marries you is definitely blessed. Never have I seen anyone so beautiful as you. I am speechless.

So now, my lady, I stand in awe so great that I cannot embrace your knees as is the custom. I am desperate! I have been in the dark stormy water for 20 days trying to escape from the island of Ogygia. The storm has left me stranded on this shore, and the gods have much more suffering for me before this is all over. Mistress, please help me! After all this work, I come to you, and you are the first person I have seen (I don’t know anyone else here). Tell me the way into town and please give me some rag that I can throw around me, some cloth you have brought along. If you do this for me, may the gods give you whatever you want—a home, a husband, and a peaceful marriage.”

Then Nausicaa replied, “Stranger, there is nothing evil about you that I can see. You know that Zeus gives out fortune to good and bad men as it pleases him. Zeus sent you hardship and you must bear it. But now that you have taken refuge here, you shall not lack for clothing, or any other comfort due to a poor man in distress. The town lies this way…and its men are called Phaeacians, who own the land and city. I am the daughter of Alcinous, who rules over the people.”

Turning, she called to her servant maids, “Come here! Does the sight of a man scare you? Or do you think he is an enemy? No one would be stupid enough to bring war to our island because the immortal gods love us. No, this man is a castaway, poor fellow; we must take care of him. Strangers and beggars come from Zeus: a small gift, then, is friendly. Give our new guest some food and drink, and take him into the river, out of the wind, to bathe.”
The maidens stood up and led Odysseus to the river bank, as they were told. They brought some clothes and a cloak and gave him some of the olive oil in the golden flask. They told him to take a bath in the river, but Odysseus responded, “Maids, keep away while I am bathing; let me wash the brine from my own back and rub on oil. It is not proper to bathe where you can see me, naked in front of young pretty girls.”

The maids left him and went to tell the princess what he had requested. And now Odysseus, jumping into the river, scrubbed the coat of sea brine from his back and shoulders and rinsed a clump of seaweed from his hair. He then put the oil on from head to foot and put on the clothes the princess gave him. Athena lent a hand too, making him seem taller, bigger, and by making his hair curl beautifully like flowers. Athena used her powers to truly make Odysseus handsome again. Then he went down to sit on the sea beach in his new glory. There, Princess Nausicaa looked at him and was amazed. She said to her maids, “I have something to tell you. The gods on Olympus cannot be against this man coming here to our island. I thought he looked like a wild man too, but now he looks like a god from the heavens. I wish my husband could be as fine as he is and that he would stay here on our island forever! But did you give our guest something to eat?”

At this, the maids hurried to bring bread and wine to Odysseus. He was so hungry that he ate and drank as much as he could. During this, Princess Nausicaa now folded her clothing and stored them in the cart. She got the mules harnessed and climbed up onto the cart, looking down to say to Odysseus: “Friend, let’s go back to town, and I shall have you talk with my wise father. You’ll also meet all the noble Phaeacians. You seem like a smart man…here’s how we need to do this: as we ride through the country and farmlands, stay behind and walk with my maids. When we get near the town, I have to protect my reputation in front of all the workers and sailors. I don’t want any bad gossip about me; some sailor might see you and think, ‘Who is the handsome stranger trailing Princess Nausicaa? Where did she find him? Will he be her husband? Or is she being hospitable to some sailor? A god, maybe? A god from heaven, the answer to her prayer, who has come down to make her his forever? Better, if she’s searched and found a husband somewhere else because no one from here is good enough for her.’ This is the way they might think and I too would think it shameful for any girl to insult her own parents by hanging out with another man before her marriage.”

Book 7: Odysseus Arrives at the Palace

Odysseus arrives at the palace and is utterly dazzled. The walls are covered in shining bronze. There were watchdogs made of gold and silver. As Nausicaa and Odysseus enter, the Phaeacian lords were amazed. Who could this stranger be? Nausicaa ignored the stares and brought Odysseus to her father and mother and explained how she found him. Odysseus lets them know that he has a long story to tell them and that they may not believe it, but that they’ll realize he knows too much to have made it up. The king knows he must not refuse hospitality to a stranger, so he invites Odysseus to a banquet which is already in progress. He promises him safe passage home after he has been entertained.

Book 8: The Song of the Minstrel

At the banquet, Odysseus is seated in the guest’s place of honor. The famous blind minstrel, Demodocus, is called. Odysseus gives the singer a gift of pork crisp with fat and requests a song about the wooden horse of Troy. Basically, he is asking for a song about himself.
Alcinous had his favorite poet and singer, Demodocus, perform for them. This blind old man, although seeming too weak to sing or play an instrument, had clear words and notes. He first sang funny stories of the gods, and Odysseus led the applause at this. Then Demodocus sang a second song about the Trojan War and the famous fight between Odysseus and Achilles. It was painful for Odysseus even to think of those years of war and his lost comrades. The minstrel sang of the soldiers hiding in the dark with Odysseus inside the horse in Troy; for Troy must perish. His men brought slaughter and death to the men of Troy. As he listened to the lovely sad song, Odysseus let his tears run down his cheeks, weeping the way a wife mourns for her lord who is killed in battle.

Here Alcinous notices Odysseus’s tears. He says nothing at first while dancers continue the celebration. Finally, Alcinous demands that his guest reveal his identity.

“Friend, we have given you the best of everything we have, and we’ve prepared a fine ship to carry you home. All I ask in return is that you now tell us your story as you promised. Who are you, where do you come from, and where have you been wandering these past twenty years? And why are you so stirred by songs of Troy? Did you lose some close relative or dear friend there?”

Odysseus could barely bring himself to speak. His story held so many bitter memories, told of so much loss. The crowd was silent in anticipation. At last, Odysseus spoke, “I shall tell my story and I shall do so, although it’s a long story full of misery and grief.” Odysseus paused and took a big drink of wine. “I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, and Ithaca – lovely, brave, rugged Ithaca is my home. I shall tell you my own story, the story of my wanderings, of the ten years that I’ve spent trying to get home.”

Book 9: The Lotus Eaters and the Cyclops

Homer’s greatest hero is himself a famous storyteller. The adventures that follow are the ones for which this epic is most remembered. Imagine the excitement of the Phaeacians, having just heard Demodocus sing the story of the Trojan horse when they discover Odysseus’s true identity. Odysseus begins by telling of his voyage from Troy—how many of his men lost their lives during a foolish raid on the Cicones (Odysseus’s men raided the town and killed many people), how Zeus punished the survivors by raising the North Wind against their ships, how they were made to drift aimlessly from place to place for nine days. Finally they stopped at the land of the Lotus Eaters (the people of southern Europe used to make a drink from the fermented fruit of the lotus plant. The drink supposedly produced feelings of laziness and dreaminess).

“On the tenth day we came to the coastline of the Lotus Eaters, who live on that flower. We landed there to get fresh water. I sent two men and a messenger-runner to find out what race of men lived on that island. They met the Lotus Eaters, who seemed like they didn’t want to harm us, only offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—but those who ate the plant, the Lotus, never returned to the ship; they wanted to stay on this island forever with that plant, totally forgetting Ithaca. I forced them back to the ship; they were all screaming and I had to tie them to benches on the ship. I warned the rest of my crew, ‘All hands aboard; let’s go…clear the beach and no one taste the lotus! If you do, you will lose hope of returning home.’ The men got into their places and the oarsmen dipped their oars in the water and we moved out again onto the sea.”

“One night we came to a small wooded island and ran our ships up onto the beach and made our camp. It was next to a much larger island. After eating the meat of some goats, we noticed the glow of fires on the larger island. We also heard the bleating of sheep and goats, and from time to time, unmistakably human shouts.”
“It struck us as odd that people would live so close and yet not use the small island on which we camped. The flocks of wild goats were matched by good soil, lots of plants, and sweet-tasting natural springs. The thought that the island held some hideous secret made us uneasy as we prepared to sleep, but we decided to sail across to the larger island the next day. This was not a matter of idle curiosity. We wanted to find out where we were and get directions for our journey.

“The following day was beautiful. We sailed our ship to the other island, and I took twelve of my crew ashore. We had not gone far when we came to the entrance of a great cave. Walls of stone and timber formed a courtyard in front of it. Getting no response to our cries of greeting, we decided to investigate the cave for ourselves. It was dim inside, but pleasantly cool and airy, and as soon as our eyes had adjusted to the light, we saw pens full of lambs. Alongside these stood buckets of whey in rows and baskets of cheese stacked high, right up to the ceiling.”

“Whoever lives here must be a giant,” I joked as I looked around. ‘Anyone else would need a ladder to get to the top of those stacks and there’s no ladder here.’ My men were all for taking as many cheeses and lambs as we could and making our escape before the owner returned. I was outraged. ‘We’re not mean, sneaking burglars but men of honor!’ I exclaimed. ‘Besides, unless we wait for the owner, how do we find out where we are?’ This shamed them into silence. We lit a fire and helped ourselves to some of the excellent cheese while we waited.

“We did not have to wait long. As soon as we saw the owner I realized that it had been a terrible mistake to stay. He was not merely a giant, he was a colossus, with an ugly, savage face and a single, huge eye planted right in the middle of his forehead!

“He penned up his rams and billy goats in the courtyard and drove his ewes and milking goats inside. When he had sealed up the entrance to the cave with an enormous boulder which twenty strong men could not have shifted, he set about milking his flocks and curdling some of the milk to make cheese. Once he had finished, he rekindled the fire, ready to eat his supper and settle down for the night.

“All this while, we hid in the shadows, hoping by some miracle to escape his notice. But as soon as the firelight spread about the cave he saw us, his uninvited guests. ‘Who the heck are you?’ he growled. ‘And what are you doing here?’

“We were terrified, and I had to make a great effort to sound calm as I replied. ‘We are Greeks lost at sea on our return from Troy. We come to you in the hope that you’ll help us find our way, and, in the name of mighty Zeus, patron of all guests, we ask you to show us your hospitality.’ The giant bared his foul teeth and laughed in my face. ‘You can forget your mighty Zeus, little Greek. I’m a Cyclops, and we Cyclopes couldn’t care less about the gods. As for hospitality, you’ll have a chance to sample that in a moment. But first tell me more. Where have you moored your ship, and how many other little Greeks did you leave behind to guard it?’

“‘Our ship was broken on the rocks,’ I replied, thinking quickly. ‘We are only survivors.’

“The Cyclops grunted and spat in the dust at my feet. Then, without warning, he seized two of my companions and smashed their heads against the rock walls of the cave until their blood ran down and soaked into the floor. Before our sickened eyes, he devoured them whole and, smacking his big lips, washed down his last mouthfuls with two buckets of milk. We huddled in a corner, too shocked and disgusted to speak, as the Cyclops lay down among his animals and slept.
“I drew my sword with a trembling hand, ready to kill him then and there. But to do so would have been suicide, for we could never have shifted the enormous boulder that sealed the door. We passed the wretched night unable to sleep. Next morning the Cyclops rekindled the fire, milked his flocks, and ate two more of my companions for breakfast. Then, having shut us in, he drove his flocks off to the mountainside and left us in despair. We had to do something quickly, or in another two days this gruesome creature would have consumed us all. But what on earth could we do? I thought and I thought until at last I came up with a scheme.

“Alongside the pens lay a long tree trunk, the size of a mast on one of our ships. I cut off a length, sharpened it to a point, and, because it was still green, set it to harden in the fire. When I was satisfied with my work, I hid the weapon under layers of dung that lay around the cave. Too anxious to talk or eat, we waited for the monster to return.

“He came at nightfall, driving his flocks before him into the cave. Perhaps he sensed that he was at risk, perhaps some god had warned him, I don’t know, but this time he didn’t leave a single ram or billy goat out in the fenced courtyard. When all the animals were inside, he rolled the massive boulder back into place and set about milking his flocks as before. He put the lambs and the kids to their mothers, set some of the milk to curdle, then grabbed two more of my men and made his bloody meal of them. He was still belching and spitting out their bones when I decided to put my plan into action. There was no time to lose.

“I had with me a skin of dark, fragrant wine. This was powerfully strong wine, a drink for the gods, with a fragrance that made it irresistible. I filled a bowl to the brim and carried it to the Cyclops. ‘Poor Cyclops,’ I began, terrified that he would devour me then and there, ‘surely you’ve had your fill of human meat? You’ve eaten six of my men and there are only

seven of us left. I had intended to offer you this wine in return for your hospitality. Now I can only hope that its fragrance will soften your heart and turn your thoughts to mercy.’

“The grinning monster grabbed the bowl and swallowed the wine in a single gulp. He belched noisily and demanded another, which he drank off like the first. His grin slackened and he belched again, then smacked his lips and rubbed his stomach. ‘Well, well, well, little Greek, you’ve managed to surprise me. We Cyclopes make good wine, but this is in a different class. Give me more and tell me your name. In return for your excellent wine I’m going to do you a special favor.’ The Cyclops let out an evil chuckle. He slapped his sides and we could tell he was getting drunk. The Cyclops downed three more bowls. He began to slur his words, ‘Come on then, little Greek, I asked you your name. Out with it, no need to be shy.’

‘Mighty Cyclops, my name is Nohbdy; mother, father, and friends all call me Nohbdy.’

‘Well Nohbdy, this is what I’m going to do. I’ll put you at the bottom of the menu and eat all your friends first. That way you’ll be able to enjoy my hospitality a little longer.’ And with a final belch and laugh the monster passed out and began to snore. At once I pulled the wooden stake from its hiding place and thrust it into the embers of the fire. Within minutes it was glowing red hot. Trembling with fear, we carried it over to where the sleeping giant lay and raised it above his head. I gave the signal and my men drove the stake down into the monster’s single eye, while I hung from the top to push it in even more. There was a loud hiss as the burning wood pierced the watery membrane. The eye steamed for a moment; then the blood gushed out. The Cyclops woke with a hideous scream and we immediately scattered out of his reach. He pulled the stake out of his eye and hurled it against the wall. In the cave’s dim light I could see at once that his eyeball was burned right out. He would never see again.
“The cave echoed to his roars of pain and his flocks cowered in their pens as he crashed blindly about, searching for us. Terrified, like the animals, we huddled together among them until he gave up the search. He called out to his fellow Cyclopes across the island who came rushing to his cave.

“‘Polyphemus,’ they shouted, when they had gathered around the entrance, ‘what on earth is the matter? Has someone attacked you or stolen your flocks that you wake the whole island at this time of night?’

“‘Nohbdy has attacked me,’ the Cyclops shouted back. ‘Nohbdy is hiding in my cave.’

“‘If no one’s there then you must be having nightmares,’ replied the other Cyclopes, impatiently. ‘Go back to bed and let us get some sleep.’ With that they went away, leaving the blinded monster to groan alone. When his friends had gone he groped his way to the entrance and rolled the huge boulder aside. Then he sat in the opening and stretched out his hands on either side, hoping to catch us when we sneaked out.

“He should have realized by now that he was not dealing with fools. I chose the biggest rams with the thickest fleeces and fastened them together, three by three. I tied my men under their bellies and grabbed hold of the largest ram of all. Then we waited until dawn. As soon as it was light the rams crowded up to the entrance and began running out to pasture, while the ewes, with their full udders, clamored to be milked. In his anguish the Cyclops ignored the bleating ewes. He sat in the entrance, feeling the backs of the rams as they squeezed past him. He never thought to feel under their bellies. Once my six companions were through, I clung to the underside of my own ram and took my chance.

“Polyphemus stopped my ram at the entrance and plunged his hands into its thick black fleece. My heart was pumping so loudly that I thought the giant was bound to discover me. But he let it run free.

“I caught up with my men and untied them. Without wasting a moment, we rounded up dozens of plump sheep and drove to our waiting ship. My men began to feel sad for their lost comrades, but I coldly told them to save their tears for later; I was anxious to sail away from the land of the Cyclops.

“Once we were clear of the shore, I called out to the monster determined to torment him. ‘Polyphemus! Your cruel hospitality has been rewarded. Perhaps now you’ll learn to respect both gods and men.’ The Cyclops, who was stumbling blindly about the hillside, turned angrily toward the sea when he heard my voice. He tore an enormous rock from the top of the cliffs and hurled it toward us. It narrowly missed our ship and threw up a great wave, washing our ship back toward the beach. My men rowed furiously away and when we were twice as far from the shore as before, I turned to the Cyclops.

“My men tried to tell me not to, but I was angry and I cried out again, ‘Polyphemus, last night you asked me my name and I told you it was Nohbdy. You were stupid enough to believe me. Now I want you to know that it wasn’t Nohbdy who blinded you but Odysseus, son of Laertes, the destroyer of Troy!’

“The Cyclops groaned, ‘Now I understand; this was predicted years ago, but I never suspected that Odysseus would turn out to be a puny little wretch like you. I should have killed you when I had the chance. Now I must pray to my father, Lord Poseidon, god of the sea, to heal my injured eye.’

“Hear me, my father, Poseidon the earthshaker, and grant your son his prayer. May Odysseus never see his home again; however, if it’s in his fate to return, make sure his journey is long and miserable and that all his companions die.’

“Poseidon heard his prayer, and the curse of the Cyclops has followed me ever since.”
Book 10: The Bag of Winds and the Witch Circe

Odysseus and his men land next on the island of Aeolia. There the wind king, Aeolus, does Odysseus a favor. He puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. The bull’s hide bag containing the winds is wedged under Odysseus’s ship deck. During the voyage the suspicious and curious sailors open the bag (thinking it contains treasure), and the evil winds roar up into hurricanes to throw Odysseus and his men off again.

After more of his men are killed and eaten by the gigantic cannibals called the Laestrygonians, Odysseus’s ship lands on Aeaea, the home of the witch Circe. Here a party of 22 men, led by Eurylochus, goes off to explore the island. Odysseus is still speaking:

“We waited anxiously all day until evening, when Eurylochus came bursting out of the trees and collapsed at our feet. He was pale, trembling, and breathless. ‘Odysseus, my lord, we went as you told us, through the forest and onto the plain. We came to a magnificent palace. Outside the palace, lions and mountain wolves roamed freely. To our amazement, instead of attacking us or running away, they approached us and fawned over us as if they expected something from us. The were obviously drugged or under a magic spell, and the look in their eyes was strangely human and sad. As we stood and stared at them, we heard a beautiful song coming from the palace. It was a woman’s voice, and it sounded so lovely that I knew at once that it belonged to a goddess. We listened in wonder until the singing stopped. Then Polites called out, and soon the shining doors of the palace opened. There stood the goddess. She smiled at us and invited us in. Without hesitation, my companions entered. I alone remained outside. I don’t know why exactly, but she made me uneasy. There were the lions and wolves too. There was something about that look in their eyes that I couldn’t get out of my mind.’

Odysseus leaves the ship and rushes to Circe’s hall. The god Hermes stops him to give him a plant (moly) that will act as an antidote to Circe’s power. Odysseus uses the moly and Circe, overcome by the plant’s magic, frees Odysseus’s men. Now Circe “loveliest of all immortals,” persuades Odysseus to stay, share her meat and wine, and restore his heart. After staying there a year enjoying all her pleasures, Odysseus and his men beg Circe to help them get home.

“‘Your way home won’t be easy. Poseidon seeks to destroy you. His brother Zeus has decided that you must descend to the underworld and visit the spirits of the dead before you can go home.’ I didn’t think this was possible because no one had ever returned from Hades. Circe continued, ‘The North Wind will take you there. At the entrance to the underworld you must sacrifice a ram and black ewe which I will give you. Their blood will call up the spirits of the dead. Burn the sheep and pray to Hades and Persephone, the gods of the underworld. Then spirits will talk to you. When your visit is over, come back here to refresh yourselves before your journey home.’

“I sat on the ground and considered what to do. I decided to find out what was going on so I crept around the walls and looked through a great window. I could see my comrades with the goddess and her maids. At first everything appeared normal. They were laughing and talking as they ate and drank wine. Before long, however, their eyes glazed over and they slumped drunkenly in their seats. The goddess then pulled out a wand and touched each of them. They ran around on all fours, grunting like pigs. Their faces began to sprout snouts and bristles. Together with her maids, the goddess drove them out to her pig sties beyond the palace walls.’

‘‘When she left, I saw my comrades had really been turned into pigs. Only their eyes remained human, and I saw their desperate looks. I then slipped away and ran back here.’“
Book 11: The Land of the Dead

Odysseus is not alone among great ancient heroes who descend to the Land of the Dead. It is as if the ancient storytellers are telling us that the truly significant voyages in life involve journeys to the deepest parts of ourselves to confront the darkest reality of all—death.

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks his destiny. The source of information is Teiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes. Circe has told Odysseus what he must do to call Teiresias up from the dead.

“The North Wind directed us to where we needed to go. The Ocean had become a stream and we reached the very entrance to the underworld. We stopped and my men dug a trench; I then took my knife and slit the throats of the ram and black ewe. Their blood gushed into the trench. Immediately, the spirits of the dead appeared at the entrance to the underworld, drawn by the scent of blood. I could not harm any of them because they were dead, but they seemed to be afraid of me. Then, my companions skinned the dead sheep and burned them, praying to Hades and Persephone.

“The first spirit to visit me was my mother, Anticleia. When I saw her the blood drained from my face. Twelve years before, I left her happy and well, now she was dead. I wanted to talk to her about Penelope and Telemachus but she didn’t even recognize me.

“Soon another ghost approached me; it was an old man with a golden staff. ‘Clever Odysseus, famous destroyer of cities,’ he began in a small whisper. ‘I see your bad luck has finally brought you to me. I am Teiresias, the prophet. Because of my wisdom in life, Persephone has made me spokesman for the souls of the dead. Stand back from the trench and let me taste the fresh blood; then I’ll tell you what to expect on your journey home.’

“I drew back and the blind ghost lowered his face until his lips reached the pool of dark blood. It was a horrifying sight; when he raised his head, the wet blood glistened on his shadowy lips.

“‘Unluckiest of men,’ Teiresias began, ‘you are desperate to return home, yet the god of the sea is determined to prevent you. He wants revenge for his son, Polyphemus, and he’s sworn not to give up until you’re either dead or safely home in Ithaca. You may eventually get there, but your journey will be dangerous. Above all, avoid the island of Thrinacia, where the sun god Helio’s sheep and cattle graze. If any of your men lays a finger on those animals, then your ship and crew will be destroyed by Zeus. As for you, if you reach home at all it will be many years later, and you will find many unwelcome guests in your house. Only if you overcome these pretenders to your bed and throne can you look forward to a long life and a happy old age. And remember, beware Poseidon. He has a long memory.’

“‘Wise Teiresias,’ I replied, “I shall remember your warnings. But now, please tell me, how can I speak to these other ghosts? There are so many things I have to ask them.’

“‘All you have to do is to let them drink from the blood.’ Teiresias disappeared into the crowd of ghosts. My mother, Anticlea, came forward at once, and I let her drink her fill of blood; she recognized me immediately.

“‘Odysseus, my dearest child, what has brought you to this place of death and sorrow? Are you still wandering the seas, far from home?’

“‘Dearest mother, my story is too long. But how did you die? How is my family?’

“‘I died over my grief and sadness for you my son, who never came home.’
‘Back in Ithaca, Penelope has remained loyal all these years and still longs for you. There’s pressure on her to take another husband in your place; the people say they need a king. Telemachus will soon be old enough to help her. He’s already a fine young man, a son you can be proud of.’

‘There were other ghosts that I talked to in the Land of the Dead. But it became unbearable for me so I found my way outside and returned to the ship.

Book 12: The Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis

When Odysseus’s men return to Circe’s island for further instructions, she warns Odysseus of the dangers that await him—the forces that will try to prevent him from returning home.

‘From my island you must steer south; Toward evening you will come to the island of the Sirens, three cruel enchantresses whose sweet song is irresistible to men. They will beg you to come ashore, but once ashore you will be lost. Their heavenly song will turn to shrieks as they tear your flesh apart. I shall give you a special wax to block up you and your crew’s ears, for if you are deaf to their music you will be safe. But if you wish to listen, let the men tie you to the mast in the boat and then plug their ears. You will beg them to untie you but your crew must continue on until the songs fade.’

Circe continues:

“‘You will pass between two cliffs. An awesome monster, Charybdis, lies on the bottom of the sea there. Three times a day she stretches her vast tentacles out and swirls the water around, then sucks it greedily down, devouring whatever the whirlpool brings her.’

‘Halfway up the taller of the two cliffs you will see the entrance to a cave. Deep in its foul recesses lives the hideous sea hag Scylla. Scylla has twelve legs and six monstrous heads. She sits in her own dung, whining and yelping like a little puppy, waiting for her prey. She will certainly seize a man with each of her gruesome heads as you pass by. Nevertheless, I urge you to go that way. Far better to lose six men than to risk losing your ship and all your lives. Finally, remember what Teiresias told you and avoid Thrinacia altogether. If you are forced to put ashore there, then, whatever you do, be sure to leave Helio’s sheep and cattle alone. Otherwise you will lose your ship, your men, and perhaps even your life.’

Odysseus and his men set off, but Odysseus never reveals to them Circe’s last words...that he will be the only survivor of their long journey. Odysseus is still speaking in the court of Alcinous:

“I repeated Circe’s warnings to my men, although I did not tell them about Scylla. If there was nothing we could do to avoid her, it would only have caused panic in the men. We sailed on through the day, and toward evening the island of the Sirens loomed over the horizon. I took the ball of soft wax that Circe had given me and started plugging the ears of all the crew. When I finished I shouted to test my work; not one of them heard me. Then I got my men to tie me to the mast and waited. The first sounds of their heavenly song drifted to me across the water. I was instantly seduced by the sweet sound of their voices, drunk on the nectar of their song. If strong ropes had not held me, Circe’s warning would have counted for nothing. I was desperate to go..."
ashore, but my men were deaf to my pleas and kept rowing. We got close enough to the island so I could see the three sirens. When they realized we weren’t coming ashore, a hideous change came over them: the beautiful women turned into scary hags—half woman and half-vulture—and their songs became shrieks.

“Once we had rounded the headland, the horrible sound faded and my men untied me and unblocked their ears.

“Now we made good progress. The wind was still with us; the twilight sky was clear and the sea calm. At sunrise, we saw the straits ahead of us in the distance. We entered the straits, and before long the fateful cliffs of Scylla and Charybdis came into view. The two cliffs stood opposite each other at the narrowest point of the straits. At first they looked harmless enough, but, closer in, a large area of water in front of the smaller cliff appeared to be simmering. Soon the water began to steam and churn around, until a huge whirlpool formed where Charybdis sucked the water down. My men froze in terror as our ship was drawn to the edge

“‘For the gods’ sake, row—before it’s too late!’ I screamed, only just in time. The ship was slowly beginning to turn before we pulled clear.

“We escaped Charybdis, but only into the shadow of the larger cliff. I could see the entrance halfway up the rock but no sound came from the cave. Suddenly there was a thunderous boom across the water. We turned to see a towering fountain thrown up as Charybdis blew the whirlpool out. While our backs were turned and the hot spray of water fell on our cheeks, a ghastly yelping broke out in our midst. Then Scylla’s six heads, all fangs, foul breath, and matted hair were among us and seized six of the crew. They wriggled helplessly in her ugly mouths as she drew in her scaly necks. Then she devoured them alive on the ledge outside her cave. There was nothing we could do, and, sick at heart, we rowed away from the cliffs.

“As we swung out into the open sea, fierce winds and currents drove us back toward Thrinacia. Even with the best of our efforts, the men were exhausted and we had to land on the coast of Thrinacia, the island of the sun god.”

“In the twilight, we could make out the shapes of sheep and cattle moving around on a hillside. My men began to lick their lips. It had been a long grueling day, and they looked forward to a feast….”

Because they were dying of starvation, Odysseus’s men disobey his orders, and shortly after they land, they ate the sacred cattle of the sun god, Helios. When they set sail again, they were punished by death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroyed their boat and all of the men drowned. Only Odysseus survived. He made his way to Calypso’s island, where we met him originally in Book 5. Odysseus, the storyteller, has brought us up to date on his wanderings. He can now rest.
### Questions for Books 5-8:

**Book 5:**
1. Who does Zeus send to persuade Calypso to release Odysseus?
2. What does Calypso offer Odysseus if he would agree to stay?
3. Why is Poseidon angry with Odysseus?

**Book 6:**
1. What does Nausicaa ask her parents permission to do?
2. Why were Nausicaa and her maids so surprised and scared of Odysseus?
3. What decision does Odysseus have to make about how he will first greet or approach the princess?
4. Why does Nausicaa want Odysseus to travel behind her with the servant maids as they return to town?

**Book 7:**
1. What does Alcinous promise the stranger (Odysseus)?

**Book 8:**
1. Who does Alcinous call on to sing for the feast?
2. What does Alcinous see the stranger do during the song that tips him off to his identity?
3. What does Odysseus request of Demodocus?
4. When Odysseus reveals his identity, he also tells the guests how long he has been trying to get home since the end of the war in Troy. How long has it been?

### Questions for Books 9-12:

**Book 9:**
1. What did eating the lotus flower do to Odysseus’s men?
2. What name does Odysseus give the Cyclops when he first asks?
3. What part of the Cyclops’ body does Odysseus injure?
4. What big mistake does Odysseus make that allows the Cyclops to curse him?

**Book 10:**
1. How does Odysseus’s crew unleash the fury of the winds?
2. What does Circe offer the men that turns them into pigs?
3. What does Hermes give Odysseus to help him resist the spell?

**Book 11:**
1. Why did Odysseus’s mother die?
2. What must the ghosts do to be able to communicate with Odysseus in the Land of the Dead?

**Book 12:**
1. What does Circe tell Odysseus to do in order to resist the Sirens?
2. Why does Odysseus decide not to tell his men about Scylla in advance?
3. How many heads does Scylla have?
4. What do the men do that causes Zeus to kill them?