

46. **Aeolia** (ee OH lee uh) . . .  
**Aeolus** (EE uh luhs)

47. **Laestrygonians** (lehs trih GOH  
nee uhnz)

48. **singing nymph** . . . **hair** Circe.

## The Land of the Dead

*Odysseus and his men sail to Aeolia, where Aeolus,<sup>46</sup> 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,<sup>47</sup> 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  
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,<sup>48</sup>  
535 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,  
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 Eurylochus<sup>49</sup>  
 550 pinioned<sup>50</sup> the sacred beasts. With my drawn blade  
 I spaded up the votive<sup>51</sup> pit, and poured  
 libations<sup>52</sup> 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,<sup>53</sup> 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,<sup>54</sup>  
 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.  
 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.<sup>55</sup>  
 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.

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:

## NOTES

- 49. Perimedes** (pehr uh MEE deez)  
**and Eurylochus** (yoó RIHL uh kuhs)
- 50. pinioned** (PIHN yuhnd) *v.*  
 confined or shackled.
- 51. votive** (VOHT ihv) *adj.* done to  
 fulfill a vow or express thanks.
- 52. libations** (ly BAY shuhnz) *n.*  
 wine or other liquids poured  
 upon the ground as a sacrifice  
 or offering.
- 53. Tiresias** (ty REE see uhs)
- 54. Erebus** (EHR uh buhs) dark  
 region under the earth  
 through which the dead pass  
 before entering realm of  
 Hades.
- 55. Persephone** (puhr SEHF uh nee)

NOTES

56. **Telemachus** (tuh LEHM uh kuhs)

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

58. **Autolycus** (aw TOL ih kuhs)

59. **Thebes** (theebz)

‘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,<sup>56</sup>  
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 Aeaëa 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 cairn<sup>57</sup> 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,  
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,<sup>58</sup>  
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 Thebes<sup>59</sup> 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.  
Avoid those kine,<sup>60</sup> 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  
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 hecatombs<sup>61</sup> 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.’

## NOTES

### CLOSE READ

**ANNOTATE:** In lines 632–637, mark the words that describe Odysseus’ home and the words that describe what is in his future.

**QUESTION:** What do these contrasting words express?

**CONCLUDE:** What can you conclude about Odysseus’ goal and what will happen before he reaches it?

**60. kine** (kyn) *n.* cattle.

**61. hecatombs** (HEHK uh tohmz) *n.* large-scale sacrifices to the gods in ancient Greece; often, the slaughter of 100 cattle at one time.