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The Odyssey

Book 12 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

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Image source: http://www.beloit.edu/~classics/main/courses/classics100/museum2/art_museum2.html

Note: This site is designed to be used with Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*, published by Penguin USA. It was prepared for a 9th grade English class.

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THE CATTLE OF THE SUN

SCENE: Aeaea, dangerous waters (Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis), the island of Helios (Thrinacia); the sea; Ogygia.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Circe, the Sirens, Scylla, Eurylochus.

On Aeaea Odysseus fulfills his promise to Elpenor. A hospitable Circe repeats some of what Tiresias has warned Odysseus about, and also advises him how best to negotiate some upcoming perils. By following her advice, Odysseus is able to resist the Sirens' song and avoid most of the perils of the straight between Scylla and Charybdis. Then, though Odysseus had been told that landing on Helios' island Thrinacia could lead to a fateful error, his near mutinous men insist they need some rest. Once there, they break an oath to Odysseus and while he sleeps fail to resist the temptation of feasting on the Sun-god's sacred cattle. Helios, with the assistance of Zeus, has his revenge and only Odysseus survives a thunderbolt that sinks his ship. His destiny is to be swept to Ogygia.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- the burial of Elpenor
- Circe's helpfulness
- Odysseus leadership - its success and failures
- Eurylochus' role (remember he is the most reluctant to join Odysseus at the "party" on Aeaea)
- the South Wind
- the absoluteness of the Gods
- Odysseus' endurance.

QUESTIONS:

- Why has Odysseus returned to Aeaea?
- How does Circe help him?
- What does the episode of the Sirens tell us about Odysseus' character? Homer's understanding of the power of music?
- What advice does Odysseus take that Circe gives him about Scylla and Charybdis? What does this tell us about leadership?
- Why are the cattle of Helios' island so tempting?
- What warning does Odysseus give his men?
- This is not the first time Odysseus' warnings are ignored. Whose fault is this?
- This is also not the first time Odysseus's orders are defied. Does this absolve him of responsibility?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

And so we saw to his [Elpenor's] rites, each step in turn (16)

" . . . but listen closely to what I [Circe] tell you now . . . (41)
Whoever draws too close . . .

The high thrilling sound of the Sirens will transfix,
lolling there in the meadow, round them heaps of corpses
rotting away, rags of skins shriveling on their bones . . .
Race straight past that coast!

"But once your ships has passed the Sirens (61)
a choice of routes is yours . . .
On one side beetling cliffs shoot up, and against them
pound the huge roaring breakers of the blue eyed Amphitirite -
the clashing rocks they're called . . .
Not even birds can escape them . . .
No ship of men has ever approached and slipped past . . .

"On the other side loom two enormous crags . . . (81)
And halfway up against that cliffside stands a fog-bound cavern . . .
Scylla lurks inside it - the yelping horror . . .
a grisly monster . . .
She has twelve legs, all writing hanging down
and six long swaying necks, a hideous face on each. . .
and armed to the hilt with black death.

"The other crag is lower (112)
Atop it a great fig-tree rises, shaggy with leaves
beneath it awesome Charybdis drinks the water down
Three times a day she vomits it up, three times she gulps it down . . .
hug Scylla crag . . .
Better by far to lose six men and keep your ship

than lose your entire crew . . .

"Then you will reach the island of Thrinacia . . . (137)
 where herds of the Sungod's cattle graze . . .
 Leave the beasts unharmed, your mind set on home. . .
 but harm them in any way . . . you'll come home late,
 all shipmates lost and come a broken man."

I informed my shipmates point by point. . . (180)

. . . I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one. (193)
 They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship. . .

So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air (208)
 and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.
 I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free -
 they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder.

Up now, follow my orders, (232)
 all of us work as one . . .
 Keep her clear of that smoke and surging breakers.

Now wailing in fear, we rowed on up those straights (253)
 Scylla to starboard, dreaded Charybdis off to port,
 her horrible whirlpool gulping the sea surge down . . .

But now, fearing death, all eyes fixed on Charybdis - (263)
 now Scylla snatched six men from out hollow ship . . .
 Just as an angler poised on a jutting rock
 flings his treacherous bait in the offshore swell,
 whips his long rod - hook sheathed in an oxhorn lure -
 and whisks up little fish he flips on the beach-break,
 writhing, gasping out their lives . . . so now they writhed . . .
 lost in that mortal struggle . . .

And I was struck once more (298)
 by the words of the blind Theban prophet, Tiresias
 and Aean Circe, too; time and again they told me
 to shun this island of the sun, the joy of man. . .

"Eurylochus, (321)
 I'm one against all - the upper hand is yours.
 But swear me a binding oath . . .
 no man among us will slaughter an ox or ram."

They quickly swore the oath . . . (328)

But for one whole month the South Wind blew nonstop . . . (350)

At once they drove off the Sungod's finest cattle - (380)
 Surrounding them in a ring, they lifted prayers to the gods . . .

"Father Zeus . . . (398)
 you with your fatal sleep. You lulled me into disaster."

"Father Zeus . . . (405)
punish them all, that crew . . .
what an outrage!"

But once we'd left that island in our wake . . . (435)
then Zeus the Son of Cronos mounted a thunderhead . . .
a murderous blast shearing the two forestays off . . .

And the father of men and gods did not let Scylla see me . . . (482)

I drifted along nine days. On the tenth, at night, (484)
the gods cast me up on Ogygia . . .
home of the dangerous nymph with glossy braids.

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