

THE CYCLOPS

In his next adventure, Odysseus describes his encounter with the Cyclops named Polyphemus, Poseidon's one-eyed monster son. Polyphemus may represent the brute forces that any hero must overcome before he can reach home. Now Odysseus must rely on the special intelligence associated with his name. Odysseus is the cleverest of the Greek heroes because he is guided by the goddess of wisdom, Athena.

It is Odysseus's famed curiosity that leads him to the Cyclops's cave and that makes him insist on waiting for the barbaric giant.

Odysseus is still speaking to the court of King Alcinous.

220 "We lit a fire, burnt an offering,
and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence
around the embers, waiting. When he came
he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder
to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it
with a great crash into that hollow cave,
225 and we all scattered fast to the far wall.
Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered
the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams



The Cyclops (detail) (late 19th or early 20th century) by Odilon Redon.

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and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung
 high overhead a slab of solid rock
 230 to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,
 with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred
 the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it
 over the doorsill. Next he took his seat
 and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
 he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
 235 thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,
 sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,^o
 and poured the whey to stand in bowls
 cooling until he drank it for his supper.

240 When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,
 heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.

‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from?
 What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic?
 Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives
 245 like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’

We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread
 of that deep rumble and that mighty man.
 But all the same I spoke up in reply:

250 ‘We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course
 by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;
 homeward bound, but taking routes and ways
 uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.
 We served under Agamemnon,^o son of Atreus^o—
 the whole world knows what city

255 he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.
 It was our luck to come here; here we stand,
 beholden for your help, or any gifts
 you give—as custom is to honor strangers.
 We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
 260 for the gods’ courtesy; Zeus will avenge
 the unoffending guest.’

He answered this

from his brute chest, unmoved:

‘You are a ninny,

or else you come from the other end of nowhere,
 telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes

237. **withy baskets:** baskets made
 from willow twigs.

253. **Agamemnon**
 (ag'ə·mem'nān'). **Atreus** (ā'trē·əs).

Vocabulary

ravage (rav'ij) v.: destroy violently; ruin.



Rijksmuseum Kroller-Müller, Otterlo, the Netherlands.

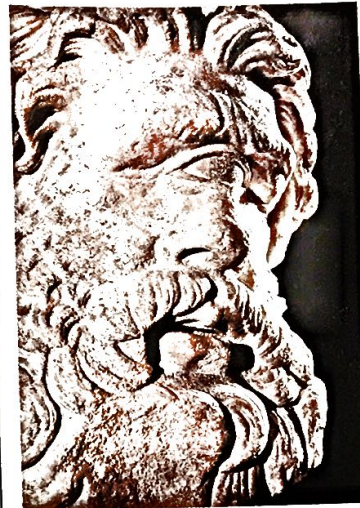
265 care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—
you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—
270 around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?
He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this,
and answered with a ready lie:

'My ship?

Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth atremble,
broke it up on the rocks at your land's end.
275 A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.
We are survivors, these good men and I.'


Neither reply nor pity came from him,
but in one stride he clutched at my companions
and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies
to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.
280 Then he dismembered them and made his meal,
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—
everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.
We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,
285 powerless, looking on at this, appalled;
but Cyclops went on filling up his belly
with manflesh and great gulps of whey,
then lay down like a mast among his sheep.
My heart beat high now at the chance of action,
290 and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went
along his flank to stab him where the midriff
holds the liver. I had touched the spot
when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him
we perished there as well, for we could never
295 move his ponderous doorway slab aside.
So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose
lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,
300 putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace^o of men to make his breakfast,
and whisked away his great door slab
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,
305 reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.^o



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The Cyclops Polyphemus. Detail from a marble statue (2nd century B.C.).

 289–295. Why doesn't Odysseus kill the Cyclops at this moment? What factors must Odysseus consider in devising a successful plan of escape?

302. brace (brās) *n.*: pair.

305. quiver (kwiv'ər) *n.*: case for arrows.

There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops
rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.
And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,
if but Athena granted what I prayed for.
310 Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:

a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—
an olive tree, felled green and left to season
for Cyclops' hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger° of twenty oars, broad in the beam—
315 a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I
chopped out a six-foot section of this pole
and set it down before my men, who scraped it;
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again
320 to make a stake with pointed end. I held this
in the fire's heart and turned it, toughening it,
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under
one of the dung piles in profusion there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
325 along with me? Whose hand could bear to thrust
and grind that spike in Cyclops' eye, when mild
sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,
the men I would have chosen won the toss—
four strong men, and I made five as captain.

330 At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some shepherding whim—
or a god's bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
335 and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward
340 holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
looking up, saying:

'Cyclops, try some wine.
Here's liquor to wash down your scraps of men.
Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried

Vocabulary

profusion (prō·fyōō'zhən) *n.*: large supply; abundance.

314. **lugger** (lug'ər) *n.*: type of sailboat.

Odysseus handing the drink to Polyphemus. Relief on a Grecian marble sarcophagus (1st century A.D.).

Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy.



under our planks. I meant it for an offering
if you would help us home. But you are mad,
345 unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,
will any other traveler come to see you?

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down
so fiery and smooth he called for more:

350 'Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,
how are you called? I'll make a gift will please you.
Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow
out of grassland and loam in heaven's rain,
but here's a bit of nectar and ambrosia!'

355 Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.
I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,
then I sang out in cordial tones:

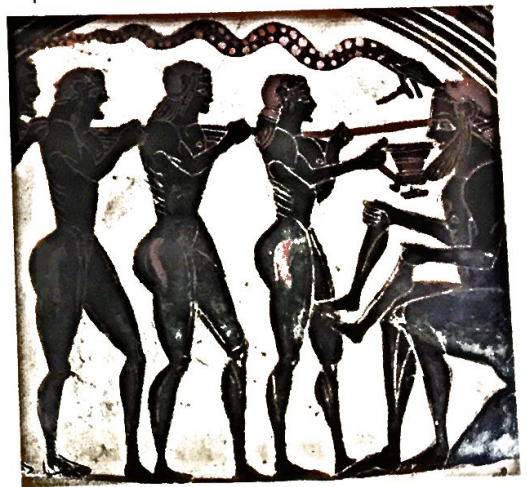
you ask my honorable name? Remember
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.
360 My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,
everyone calls me Nohbdy.'

And he said:

'Nohbdy's my meat, then, after I eat his friends.
Others come first. There's a noble gift, now.'

365 Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,
his great head lolling to one side; and sleep
took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,
he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.

370 Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike
deep in the embers, charring it again,
and cheered my men along with battle talk
to keep their courage up: no quitting now.
The pike of olive, green though it had been,
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.
375 I drew it from the coals and my four fellows
gave me a hand, lugging it near the Cyclops
as more than natural force nerved them; straight
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it
deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill
380 in planking, having men below to swing
the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.
So with our brand we bored that great eye socket



Odysseus and three companions
blinding Polyphemus. Detail from a
Cyrenean cup (6th century B.C.).
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

while blood ran out around the red-hot bar.
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball
hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

385

one sees a white-hot axhead or an adze^o
plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—
the way they make soft iron hale and hard—
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.

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The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him,
and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face
he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye,
threw it away, and his wild hands went groping;

395

then he set up a howl for Cyclopes
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.
Some heard him; and they came by divers^o ways
to clump around outside and call:

In a smithy^o

‘What ails you,

400

Polyphemus? Why do you cry so sore
in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.
Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man
has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave

the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:
‘Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me. Nohbdy’s ruined me!’

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To this rough shout they made a sage^o reply:
‘Ah well, if nobody has played you foul
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain
given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.’

So saying

410

they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them.
Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide

415

hoping somehow I might be such a fool.
But I kept thinking how to win the game:
death sat there huge; how could we slip away?
I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,
reasoning as a man will for dear life,

385. **smithy** (smith'ē) *n.*: black-smith's shop, where iron tools are made.

386. **adze** (adz) *n.*: axlike tool with a long, curved blade.

396. **divers** (dī'vərz) *adj.*: diverse; various.

404. **sage** (sāj) *adj.*: wise.



Odysseus and his men blinding the Cyclops. Hydria, or water jar (530–510 B.C.).
Collection Villa Giulia, Rome.



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510 B.C.
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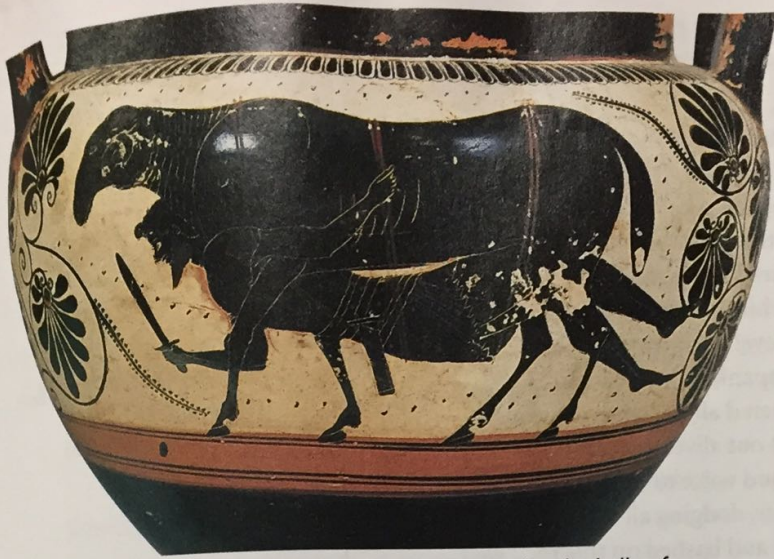
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Odysseus escaping the cave of Polyphemos under the belly of the ram. Detail from a krater, a vessel for holding wine (c. 510 B.C.).

Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, Germany.

420 until a trick came—and it pleased me well.
The Cyclops' rams were handsome, fat, with heavy fleeces, a dark violet.

Three abreast

I tied them silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
425 then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
430 pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
435 and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,
but my men riding on the pectoral fleece^o
440 the giant's blind hands blundering never found.
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,

439. **pectoral fleece:** wool on an animal's chest.

weighted by wool and me with my meditations.
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

445 'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest
in the night cave? You never linger so,
but graze before them all, and go afar
to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way
leading along the streams, until at evening
you run to be the first one in the fold.
450 Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving
over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue^o
and his accurst companions burnt it out
when he had conquered all my wits with wine.
Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.
455 Oh, had you brain and voice to tell
where he may be now, dodging all my fury!
Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall
his brains would strew the floor, and I should have
rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.'

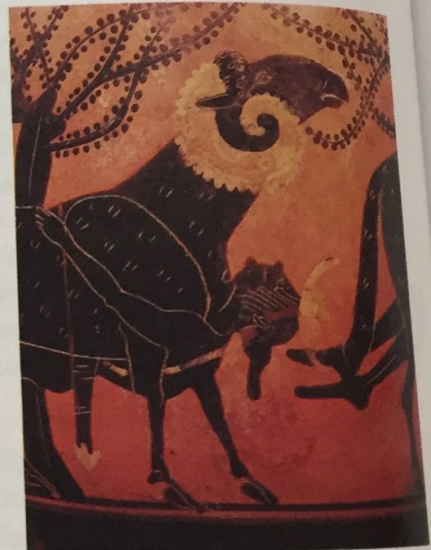
460 He sent us into the open, then. Close by,
I dropped and rolled clear of the ram's belly,
going this way and that to untie the men.
With many glances back, we rounded up
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,
465 and drove them down to where the good ship lay.
We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces
shining; then we saw them turn to grief
tallying those who had not fled from death.
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,
470 and in a low voice told them: 'Load this herd;
move fast, and put the ship's head toward the breakers.'
They all pitched in at loading, then embarked
and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,
as far offshore as shouted words would carry,
475 I sent a few back to the adversary:
'O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?
Puny, am I, in a Caveman's hands?
How do you like the beating that we gave you,
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests
480 under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!'

Vocabulary

adversary (ad'vər·ser'ē) *n.*: enemy; opponent.

421–442. Explain
Odysseus's trick. What do you
visualize happening in this scene?

451. **carrion rogue**: rotten
scoundrel. *Carrion* is decaying flesh.



Odysseus escaping under the ram.
Detail from a black-figured convex
lecythus (c. 590 B.C.), by the
Ambush Vase Painter.

Staatliche Antikensammlung, Munich,
Germany.

21–442. Explain
his trick. What do you
happening in this scene?

n rogue: rotten
Carion is decaying flesh.



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ack-figured convex
(B.C.), by the
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mmlung, Munich.

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave
that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.

485 I got the longest boathook out and stood
fending us off, with furious nods to all
to put their backs into a racing stroke—
row, row or perish. So the long oars bent
kicking the foam sternward, making head
490 until we drew away, and twice as far.
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew
in low voices protesting:

‘Godsake, Captain!

Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’

495 ‘That tidal wave he made on the first throw
all but beached us.’

‘All but stove us in!’

‘Give him our bearing with your trumpeting,
he’ll get the range and lob° a boulder.’

‘Aye

He’ll smash our timbers and our heads together!’

500 I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,
but let my anger flare and yelled:

‘Cyclops,

if ever mortal man inquire
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:
505 Laertes’ son, whose home’s on Ithaca!’

At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

‘Now comes the weird° upon me, spoken of old.
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,^o
a son of Eurymus;° great length of days

510 he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes,
and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus’ hands.

Always I had in mind some giant, armed
in giant force, would come against me here.

515 But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—

498. **lob** (lăb) *v.*: toss.

507. **weird** (wird) *n.*: fate.

508. **Telemus** (tel’ə·məs).

509. **Eurymus** (yōō’rē·məs).

you put me down with wine, you blinded me.
Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well,
praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—
his son I am, for he by his avowal
520 fathered me, and, if he will, he may
heal me of this black wound—he and no other
of all the happy gods or mortal men.'

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

525 'If I could take your life I would and take
your time away, and hurl you down to hell!
The god of earthquake could not heal you there!'

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness
toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:


530 'O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,
if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:
grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never
see his home: Laertes' son, I mean,
who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny
intend that he shall see his roof again
535 among his family in his fatherland,
far be that day, and dark the years between.
Let him lose all companions, and return
under strange sail to bitter days at home.' . . ."


(from Book 9)

Here we will imagine that Homer stops reciting for the night. The blind poet might take a glass of wine before turning in. The listeners would go off to various corners of the local nobleman's house. They might discuss highlights of the poet's tale among themselves and look forward to the next evening's installment.



Polyphemus. Terra-cotta head
(4th century B.C.).

 **538.** Take a few minutes to list what you think are the highlights of Odysseus's journey so far. What questions do you have? What do you think will happen next?

 Read "Welcome: A Religious Duty" on page 671. Then, as you continue reading the story, trace the ways Homer repeatedly dramatizes the importance of mutual respect among people. Think about your own ideas of hospitality today—what are the customs in your family and neighborhood? What are the customs in American society as a whole?