

Study Guide

The Odyssey

Lecture 5 The Cyclops

Suggested Readings

- Homer, *The Odyssey*, trs. Robert Fagles, Book 9

Outline

0:00-10:48 — Odysseus' Tale

- In response to King Alcinous' request to identify himself, Odysseus declares himself to be "Odysseus, son of Laertes" from "sunny Ithaca," closing the door to a potential marriage with Nausicaa. He then becomes "the great teller of tales" as he recounts his journeys thus far since Troy.
 - After leaving Troy, Odysseus and his men sack the city of the Cicones, but are driven back to sea when the Cicones launch a counter-assault.
 - They then travel to the land of the Lotus Eaters who offer his men lotus flowers that make them forget their desire to return home. Odysseus must drag them back to the ships.

10:49-24:30 — The Cyclops

- The men sail to another island, populated by the Cyclopes, "a lawless people." These one-eyed, cave-dwelling, giant shepherds do not have a political community. They have no *xenia*—care for guests.
- Tarrying too long in one of the caves, Odysseus and his men come face-to-face with the Cyclops, Polyphemus who traps Odysseus and his men inside of the cave. After questioning Odysseus, he promptly devours two of his men and falls asleep.
- Odysseus devises a plan, using his cunning to defeat a stronger foe.
 - While the Cyclops is out tending his flock the next day, Odysseus and his men create a giant, fire-hardened stake out of the Cyclops' club.



- Upon Polyphemus' return, Odysseus gets the Cyclops drunk on wine he had brought, and tells him his name is *outis*, "Nobody."
- Once the Cyclops falls into a drunken sleep, Odysseus and his men drive the stake into the brute's single eye, blinding him.
- When the Cyclops calls out to his fellow Cyclopes, they do not aid him because he tells them "Nobody" is defeating him by fraud and not by force.

24:31-31:43 — Escape and Blunder

- When Polyphemus lets his sheep out to graze next morning, Odysseus and his men sneak out of the cave lashed to the bottom of the sheep.



- As Odysseus and his men are sailing away, Odysseus boasts that he, Odysseus, had punished Polyphemus for lacking hospitality.
- The taunt allows Polyphemus to fling a boulder in their direction that almost destroys them and allows to pray to his father Poseidon and curse Odysseus now that he knows his name.
- Odysseus here reveals who he is out of a desire for *kleos*, heroic greatness. Without prudence, this revelation becomes disastrous for Odysseus and his crew.

Key Terms

Techne (τέχνη) – craft, skill, technical knowledge

Key Passages

Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point,
 straight into the monster's eye they rammed it hard—
 I drove my weight on it from above and bored it home
 as a shipwright bores his beam with a shipwright's drill
 that men below, whipping the strap back and forth, whirl
 and the drill keeps twisting faster, never stopping—
 So we seized our stake with its fiery tip
 and bored it round and round in the giant's eye
 till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft
 and the hot blast singed his brow and eyelids round the core
 and the broiling eyeball burst—its crackling roots blazed

and hissed—as a blacksmith plunges a glowing ax or adze
in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam
and its temper hardens—that’s the iron’s strength—
so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake!
He loosed a hideous roar, the rock walls echoed round
and we scuttled back in terror. The monster wrenched the spike
from his eye and out it came with a red geyser of blood—
he flung it aside with frantic hands, and mad with pain
he bellowed out for help from his neighbor Cyclops
living round about in caves on windswept crags.
Hearing his cries, they lumbered up from every side
and hulking round his cavern, asked what ailed him:
“What, Polyphemus, what in the world’s the trouble?
Roaring out in the godsent night to rob us of our sleep.
Surely no one’s rustling your flocks against your will—
surely no one’s trying to kill you now by fraud or force!”
“*Nobody*, friends”-Polyphemus bellowed back from his cave—
“Nobody’s killing me now by fraud and not by force!”

— Book 9, lines 427-455



Discussion Questions

Why do Odysseus and his men sack the city of the Cicones? What effect has the Trojan War had on the Greek soldiers?

Why does Homer repeatedly emphasize that Odysseus defeated the Cyclops through fraud and not force?

Does Odysseus seem like a responsible leader to his men so far? How important is it for him to bring them safely back to Ithaca?

Notes
