

DEAD MEN DO TELL TALES

At last Odysseus and his men tire of the continuous feasting at Circe's house. Circe advises Odysseus that before continuing his journey, he must first sail to the border of the Underworld and consult the soul of Tiresias, a famed blind prophet. Following the witch's suggestion, Odysseus sails to the very edge of the world, and going ashore on the unearthly ground he finds there, he digs a trench and sacrifices a ram and a black ewe so that their blood fills it to brimming. Sensing the fresh blood of the animals, ghoulish figures appear on the horizon—souls from Hades—and crowd in close around Odysseus' offering. The silent spirits frighten the adventurer by pressing in so closely, and he swings his sword, warding them off from the blood until the soul of Tiresias arrives.



Tiresias, the blind prophet, finally appears and comes forward to drink of the animal blood. Once he has done so, the soul of the prophet regains the power of speech. Tiresias tells Odysseus that he still has many more dangers ahead and will only reach his home when he regains Poseidon's favor. He also comforts Odysseus by telling him that he would not die upon the sea.

After his prophecy has been delivered, Tiresias fades away, and many more familiar faces from Odysseus' past press forward and drink of the blood in order to tell their tales. The ghost of Agamemnon appears and tells his old friend how he died: The King had arrived home in Greece, only to be murdered by his wife and her lover. He tells Odysseus: "The time for trusting women's gone forever" (Book 11, Line 518).

Achilles is there, too, among the dead, and Odysseus hails his mournful spirit by praising the honor the warrior won in life.

*But you, Achilles,
there's not a man in the world more blest than you —
there never has been, never will be one.
Time was, when you were alive, we [Greeks]
honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,
you lord it over the dead in all your power.
So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.*

(Book 11, Lines 547–553; Fagles, 1996, p. 265)

Achilles does not agree with Odysseus' evaluation of his glorious life. It is better to be a slave and see the sun than to be the greatest king in Hades, the hero laments. Achilles asks Odysseus pressing questions about his elderly father, Peleus, and his son, whom he never had a chance to meet. "Oh to arrive at father's house—the man I was," the spirit of Achilles mourns, "for one brief day" (Book 11, Lines 570–571). The warrior Ajax is there, too, behind his cousin Achilles. Odysseus tries to hail him, but Ajax refuses to speak. He still holds a grudge against Odysseus over Achilles' armor.

The most shocking ghost Odysseus encounters is the ghost of his mother, Anticlea, who has recently died of grief over her son's absence. She tells Odysseus that his wife Penelope still waits for him and has not taken another husband. Three times Odysseus desperately tries to embrace his mother.

*Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her,
three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away
like a shadow, dissolving like a dream . . .*

(Book 11, Lines 235–237; Fagles, 1996, p. 256)

Heartbroken and disturbed after conversing with many famous souls, Odysseus returns to his ship and sails back to Circe. The witch sets a course for him: He must first make it past the dreaded sirens, creatures whose song is irresistible. These creatures—whom no man has seen and lived to tell about it—lure sailors to their island never to return. To save Odysseus and his crew from this fate, Circe instructs Odysseus to plug the men's ears with beeswax. The witch gives Odysseus further instructions about the obstacles he will face after the Sirens and sends him and his men on their way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is Odysseus's trip into the Underworld a different challenge than the other tests he has faced?
2. What does Odysseus' adventure in the land of the dead have to say about the Greek afterlife? Explain.
3. Why does Achilles regret his short but glorious life? What lesson can we learn from this? Explain.