

## BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

*Circe the Witch gives Odysseus advice on how to pass a series of dangerous tests that lie ahead for the hero. One is the Sirens. Another involves the two monsters Scylla and Charybdis. They both lived in a narrow seaway between two cliffs. Sailors had to pick which monster they would rather face because there was no way to avoid them both. (Our modern saying “between Scylla and Charybdis” means choosing between two unpleasant choices.) The third involves the golden cattle of the sun god Helios. After reading “Circe the Witch,” read this piece about Odysseus’ further adventures.*



**B**efore Odysseus left the witch’s isle, Circe warned Odysseus of a treacherous strait he must navigate. Two monsters lived in this narrow sea-way. Three times a day, a gigantic underwater monster, Charybdis, opened its gullet, sucking the surrounding waters into the vortex of its mouth. When the terrifying whirlpool subsided, Charybdis would then spray the consumed water high into the heavens, destroying whatever had fallen into its clutches. If a ship kept close to the rocky edge of the strait in order to avoid Charybdis, it faced another monster named Scylla, a creature with six dog-faced, snake-necked heads, who picked sailors off the passing ships as an easy snack. Those who passed through the strait must choose between the twin terrors—between Scylla and Charybdis.

Odysseus set sail. They soon approached the strait that housed Scylla and Charybdis. They heard the roar of the whirlpool far away. Odysseus warned his men to row close to the shore. Although he planned to tell them of the threat of Scylla, he realized that this would only terrify them further, so he kept his knowledge to himself. The whirlpool monster appeared ahead, sucking the sea down into its belly. The crew rowed hard to shore, keeping the craft as close to the rocks as possible, avoiding the swirl of the current. As they did, Odysseus kept his eyes on the cliffs overhead. He knew Scylla was lurking there. Perhaps they would escape her notice.

At that moment Scylla struck. Six rowers disappeared from their posts in the same instant. The crew—covered with their comrades’ blood—stared helplessly as the six terrifying heads of Scylla swallowed her captives down raw, barely chewing with her razor sharp teeth. “Row! Row!” Odysseus yelled. “Before the monster takes us all!” With one final burst of speech, the ship passed through the strait—beyond the reach of Scylla and Charybdis—and out of danger.

Circe had warned Odysseus, if he did in fact make it past the strait of Scylla and Charybdis, he would come to the isle of Helios, her father. Odysseus and his men should not harm the cattle they found there, for these were Helios’ cattle. If Odysseus and his men harmed them in any way, the gods would take revenge.

Once Odysseus and his men were through the perilous strait, the island of Helios came into view. Odysseus knew they should simply sail on by, but his men begged him to stop. They were so hungry, so exhausted from the day's work. He reluctantly agreed with a warning: "Do not touch the golden cattle of this land."

His men obeyed, and they camped on the island for the night. In the morning they found the winds blowing against them. Many days passed in this way; the wind continued to blow against their port, and they could not sail. Supplies grew short, and Odysseus' men began to hungrily eye the shining cattle that grazed on the nearby hillside. When Odysseus went into the hills one day to call out to the gods, the men snapped: They slaughtered the cattle of Helios and cooked their golden meat. Even on the spit, the cattle continued to moo, and the cuts shone as the men gulped them down. When Odysseus returned and saw what had been done, he knew they were all doomed.

Soon enough the winds stopped, and the ship took to sea, yet they did not sail far before a raging storm overtook them. Helios had informed Zeus about the death of his cattle. As the black clouds boiled overhead, the lord of the gods himself aimed a thunderbolt at Odysseus' tiny craft. In a spray of planks and salt water, the ship was destroyed. Men flew into the brine. Only Odysseus survived—clinging to the single surviving piece of his vessel.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- Is it fair for Odysseus *not* to warn his men about the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis? Explain.
- Why do you think he chooses to withhold this information?
- After the episode involving the cattle of Helios, do you think Odysseus' men deserve to die? Explain.