

from the ODYSSEY

by Homer
translated by Robert Fitzgerald

BACKGROUND

No one knows for sure who Homer was. The later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel, or singer who went from town to town. He is known for the epic poems the *Iliad* (the story of the Trojan War) and the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* tells of the many adventures of the hero Odysseus on his ten-year journey home from the war. As this passage begins, curiosity has led Odysseus and his men to wait in the cave of the Cyclops.

A

READING FOCUS

Summarize this introduction.

THE CYCLOPS

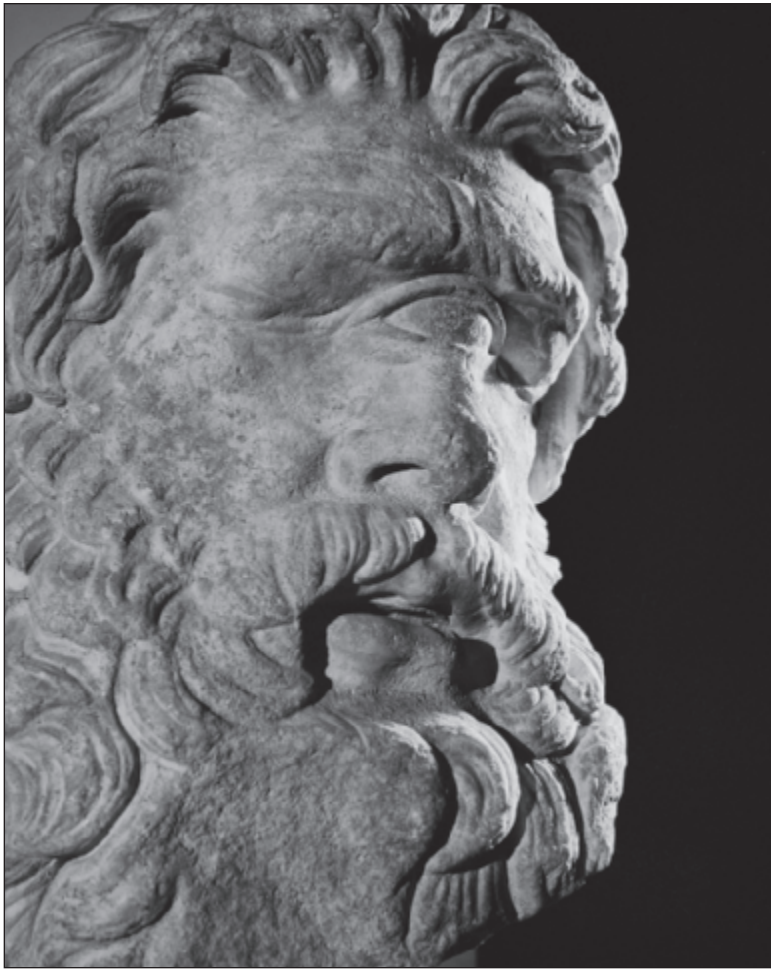
In this adventure, Odysseus describes his encounter with the Cyclops named Polyphemus, Poseidon's one-eyed monster son. Polyphemus may represent the brute forces that any hero must overcome before he can reach home. Now Odysseus must rely on the special intelligence associated with his name. Odysseus 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.

In this passage Odysseus is telling his story to the court of King Alcinous. A

"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
5 to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it
with a great crash into that hollow cave,

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B**LITERARY FOCUS**

Epic heroes must face **conflict** with mighty opponents in order to show their strength and resourcefulness. How does Homer show that the Cyclops is a fierce opponent?

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

10 and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung
high overhead a slab of solid rock

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

15 over the doorsill. **B** Next he took his seat
and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,

20 and poured the whey to stand in bowls
cooling until he drank it for his supper.

1. **withy**: made from willow twigs.

A LITERARY ANALYSIS

Based on what you have read so far, why do you think Odysseus and his men feel so anxious?

B QUICK CHECK

What have you just learned about Odysseus' past? What has happened to him before his encounter with the Cyclops?

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?

25 What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic?
Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives
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. **A**

30 But all the same I spoke up in reply:

'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.

35 We served under Agamemnon,² son of Atreus³—
the whole world knows what city
he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.

It was our luck to come here; here we stand,
beholden for your help, or any gifts

40 you give—as custom is to honor strangers. **B**
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest.'

He answered this

45 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
care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus

50 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—
around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?'

2. **Agamemnon** (AG UH MEHM NAHN).

3. **Atreus** (AY TREE UHS).

- 55 He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this,
and answered with a ready lie: **C**

'My ship?

Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth atremble,
broke it up on the rocks at your land's end.

- 60 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
65 to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.
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,
70 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,
75 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
80 move his ponderous doorway slab aside.
So we were left to groan and wait for morning. **D**

- When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose
lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire **E**
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,
85 putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace⁴ of men to make his breakfast,
and whisked away his great door slab

4. **brace:** pair.

C LITERARY FOCUS

What quality of an **epic hero** does Odysseus show in this sentence?

D LITERARY FOCUS

Why doesn't Odysseus kill the Cyclops at this moment? What quality of an **epic hero** is Odysseus showing?

E LITERARY ANALYSIS

Throughout the *Odyssey*, Dawn is described as having rose-colored fingers. Do you think this is a good description for this time of day? Why or why not?

A LITERARY ANALYSIS

What comparison is Homer making here? What does this say about the Cyclops?

B VOCABULARY

Selection Vocabulary

Profusion is a noun meaning "large supply; abundance." It comes from the adjective *profuse*. What do you think *profuse* means? Use a dictionary to check your answer.

C READING FOCUS

Paraphrase, or retell in your own words, what Odysseus does to the staff he finds.

to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,
90 reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.⁵ **A**
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.
95 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 lugger⁶ of twenty oars, broad in the beam—
100 a deep-sea-going 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
105 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. **B C**
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
110 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.
115 At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some sheepherding whim—
or a god's bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
120 and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,

5. **quiver**: case for arrows.

6. **lugger**: type of sailboat.

A

LITERARY FOCUS

Do you think that the ability to persuade and lead others is an important quality for an **epic hero**? Why or why not?

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. A

- 160 The pike of olive, green though it had been,
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.
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
165 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
in planking, having men below to swing
the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.
170 So with our brand we bored that great eye socket
while blood ran out around the red-hot bar.



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Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball
hissed broiling, and the roots popped. **B**

In a smithy⁷

175 one sees a white-hot axhead or an adze⁸
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.

The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him,
180 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;
then he set up a howl for Cyclopes
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.

185 Some heard him; and they came by divers⁹ ways
to clump around outside and call:

‘What ails you,

Polyphemus? Why do you cry so sore
in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.

190 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!’

195 To this rough shout they made a sage¹⁰ 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.’

200 So saying
they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them. **C**

7. **smithy**: blacksmith’s shop, where iron tools are made.

8. **adze**: axlike tool with a long, curved blade.

9. **divers** (DY VUHRZ): diverse; various.

10. **sage**: wise.

B READING FOCUS

Explain how Odysseus and his men have injured the Cyclops, and **draw a conclusion** about why this might be preferable to killing him.

C LITERARY FOCUS

Odysseus’ fake name has prevented the other Cyclopes from coming to Polyphemus’ aid. Do you think this kind of trickery is characteristic of an **epic hero**? Why or why not?

A QUICK CHECK

Why can't Odysseus and his men leave the cave yet?

B VOCABULARY

Word Study

Homer is using a literary device called *anthropomorphizing* (AN THRUH PUH MAWR FYZ IHNG)—giving human qualities to nonhuman things. What is he anthropomorphizing here? What human qualities is he giving to this thing?

C READING FOCUS

One **question** you might have asked while reading might have been: "How are Odysseus and his men going to escape?" What answer does this section provide?

Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone
205 and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide
for any silly beast or man who bolted—
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? **A**
210 I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,
reasoning as a man will for dear life,
until a trick came—and it pleased me well.
The Cyclops' rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet.
215 Three abreast
I tied them silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
220 So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
225 So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.
When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose **B**
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
230 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 fleece¹¹
the giant's blind hands blundering never found. **C**
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,
235 weighted by wool and me with my meditations.
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

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

'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest
 in the night cave? You never linger so,
 but graze before them all, and go afar
 240 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.
 Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving
 over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue¹²
 245 and his accurst companions burnt it out
 when he had conquered all my wits with wine.
 Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.
 Oh, had you brain and voice to tell
 where he may be now, dodging all my fury!
 250 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.' **D**
 He sent us into the open, then. Close by,
 I dropped and rolled clear of the ram's belly,
 255 going this way and that to untie the men.
 With many glances back, we rounded up
 his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,
 and drove them down to where the good ship lay.
 We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces
 260 shining; then we saw them turn to grief
 tallying those who had not fled from death.
 I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,
 and in a low voice told them: 'Load this herd;
 move fast, and put the ship's head toward the breakers.'
 265 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,
 I sent a few back to the adversary: **E**
 'O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?
 270 Puny, am I, in a Caveman's hands?

D**READING FOCUS**

Briefly **paraphrase** the Cyclops's speech to his ram.

E**LANGUAGE COACH**

The adjective *adverse* means "harmful; unfavorable." An *adversary* is an "enemy or opponent." Use a dictionary to find one more word that is **related** to *adverse* and *adversary*. Use your new word in a sentence.

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

A LITERARY ANALYSIS

Odysseus' love of boasting is one of his traits. Do you think he is wise to taunt the Cyclops? Why or why not?

B READING FOCUS

What **effect** do Odysseus' taunts have on his men? Do you think that Odysseus should listen to his men? Why or why not?

How do you like the beating that we gave you,
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!' **A**

275 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.
I got the longest boathook out and stood
280 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
until we drew away, and twice as far.
285 Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew
in low voices protesting:

'Godsake, Captain!
Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!'

290 '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 lob¹³ a boulder.'

295 'Aye
He'll smash our timbers and our heads together!' **B**

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

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

13. lob: toss.

At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

‘Now comes the weird¹⁴ upon me, spoken of old.

305 A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,¹⁵
a son of Eurymus;¹⁶ great length of days
he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes,
and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus’ hands. **C**

310 Always I had in mind some giant, armed
in giant force, would come against me here.
But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—
you put me down with wine, you blinded me. **D**
Come back, Odysseus, and I’ll treat you well,
315 praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—
his son I am, for he by his avowal
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.’

320 Few words I shouted in reply to him:

‘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
325 toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:
‘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,
330 who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny
intend that he shall see his roof again
among his family in his fatherland,
far be that day, and dark the years between.

C**VOCABULARY****Academic Vocabulary**

Do you think that the meeting between Cyclops and Odysseus was *destiny* (meant to happen)? Why or why not?

D**LITERARY FOCUS**

Epic heroes and their opponents often have character flaws which can cause their downfall. What character flaw has led to the Cyclops’s downfall?

14. **weird**: fate.

15. **Telemus** (TEHL UH MUHS).

16. **Eurymus** (YOO REE MUHS).

A LITERARY ANALYSIS

Do you think the Cyclops's curse is likely to come true as Odysseus' journey continues? Why or why not?



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Let him lose all companions, and return
335 under strange sail to bitter days at home.' . . ." **A**

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.