



BOOK

SEA PERILS AND DEFEAT

TWELVE



**I**N BOOK 11, *Odysseus and his men visit the underworld, where the shades, or spirits of the dead, reside. During Odysseus' visit there, the spirit of the prophet Tiresias warns him that death and destruction will follow unless he and his crew act with restraint and control. Tiresias then reveals what Odysseus must do on his return to Ithaca. Odysseus also speaks with the spirit of his mother, who died of grief because Odysseus was away for so long.*

*Odysseus and his men then leave the underworld and return to Circe's island. While his men sleep, Circe takes Odysseus aside to hear about the underworld and to offer advice.*

“Then said the Lady Circe:

‘So: all those trials are over.

Listen with care

to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.  
Square in your ship’s path are Sirens, crying

**Guide for Reading**

2-3 In Circe, Odysseus has found a valuable ally. In the next hundred lines, she describes in detail each danger that he and his men will meet on their way home.

5 beauty to bewitch men coasting by;  
woe to the innocent who hears that sound!  
He will not see his lady nor his children  
in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;  
the Sirens will sing his mind away  
10 on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones  
of dead men rotting in a pile beside them  
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.

Steer wide;

keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen's ears  
with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest  
15 should hear that song.

But if you wish to listen,  
let the men tie you in the lugger, hand  
and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
so you may hear those harpies' thrilling voices;  
shout as you will, begging to be untied,  
20 your crew must only twist more line around you  
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade.  
What then? One of two courses you may take,  
and you yourself must weigh them. I shall not  
plan the whole action for you now, but only  
25 tell you of both.

Ahead are beetling rocks  
and dark blue glancing Amphitrite, surging,  
roars around them. Prowling Rocks, or Drifters,  
the gods in bliss have named them—named them well.  
Not even birds can pass them by.



30 A second course  
lies between headlands. One is a sharp mountain  
piercing the sky, with stormcloud round the peak  
dissolving never, not in the brightest summer,  
to show heaven's azure there, nor in the fall.  
35 No mortal man could scale it, nor so much  
as land there, not with twenty hands and feet,  
so sheer the cliffs are—as of polished stone.  
Midway that height, a cavern full of mist  
opens toward Erebus and evening. Skirting  
40 this in the lugger, great Odysseus,  
your master bowman, shooting from the deck,  
would come short of the cavemouth with his shaft;

12 flayed: torn off; stripped.

14 kneaded (nē'dīd): squeezed and pressed.

15–21 Circe suggests a way for Odysseus to hear the Sirens safely. Do you think he will follow her suggestion?

18 those harpies' thrilling voices: the delightful voices of those evil females.

25 beetling: jutting or overhanging.

26 glancing Amphitrite (ām'fī-trī'tē): sparkling seawater. (Amphitrite is the goddess of the sea and the wife of Poseidon. Here, Circe uses the name to refer to the sea itself.)

31 headlands: points of land jutting out into the sea; promontories.

34 heaven's azure (āzh'er): the blue sky.

39 Erebus (ēr'ē-bēs): a land of darkness beneath the earth.

but that is the den of Scylla, where she yaps  
 abominably, a newborn whelp's cry,  
 45 though she is huge and monstrous. God or man,  
 no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—  
 and there are twelve—are like great tentacles,  
 unjointed, and upon her serpent necks  
 are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,  
 50 with triple serried rows of fangs and deep  
 gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways  
 her head in air, outside her horrid cleft,  
 hunting the sea around that promontory  
 for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game  
 55 thundering Amphitrite feeds in thousands.  
 And no ship's company can claim  
 to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,  
 from every ship, one man for every gullet.

The opposite point seems more a tongue of land  
 60 you'd touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.  
 A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,  
 grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below  
 to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times  
 from dawn to dusk she spews it up  
 65 and sucks it down again three times, a whirling  
 maelstrom; if you come upon her then  
 the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.  
 No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship  
 through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn  
 70 six men than lose them all, and the ship, too.'

So her advice ran; but I faced her, saying:

'Only instruct me, goddess, if you will,  
 how, if possible, can I pass Charybdis,  
 or fight off Scylla when she raids my crew?'

75 Swiftly that loveliest goddess answered me:

'Must you have battle in your heart forever?  
 The bloody toil of combat? Old contender,  
 will you not yield to the immortal gods?

43–55 Circe presents a very unpleasant image of Scylla. To get a better idea of what Odysseus and his crew will be up against, try using this detailed description to draw a picture of Scylla.

66 **maelstrom** (māl'strām): a large, violent whirlpool.

68–70 What is Circe's advice for dealing with Charybdis?

72–85 Notice this exchange between Odysseus and Circe. What does Circe caution Odysseus against doing, and why?

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**abominably** (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-blē) *adv.* in a hateful way; horribly  
**lurk** (lŭrk) *v.* to lie hidden, ready to ambush