

### Book Eleven Handout

Book Eleven of *The Odyssey* marks a pivotal time for Odysseus as he has to travel to the underworld to learn how to manage the remainder of his journey home. In this section of the epic, Odysseus fulfills the archetype of crossing the threshold (moving from the physical world in which he is familiar and comfortable into an unknown world of mystery and vulnerability). Many of the conversations that he has in this realm change him as a character. As you read excerpts of Book Eleven, use the guide below to help you keep track of the lessons that he learns.

#### Passage 1: The Sacrifice, lines 1-88, pp. 250-252

List the steps that Odysseus takes in gaining entrance to the underworld:

- The men must cross the threshold to the outer limits of the ocean--the Ocean River.
- Odysseus must dig a trench and pour in drink offerings to the dead.
- Odysseus must vow to slaughter a cow, load a pyre with treasures, and offer a black ram to Tiresias, the prophet when he returns home.
- Odysseus must sacrifice an animal and pour its blood in the trench.

Who is the first ghost Odysseus encounters? What is his request?

Odysseus encounters Elpenor, one of his men who died when he fell off the roof at Circe's house. The men, in their haste to get to the underworld, left his body behind. He begs Odysseus to give him a proper burial.

#### Passage 2: Tiresias, lines 89-232, pp. 252-256

The second ghost whom Odysseus encounters is Anticleia, his mother.

What does he learn about this ghost?

His mother, who was still alive when he sailed for Troy, has died of heartbreak awaiting the return of Odysseus. This recognition for Odysseus should be particularly convicting considering she probably died within the time that he was living a life of lust, luxury, and ease with Circe.

What warnings does Tiresias give Odysseus?

Tiresias warns Odysseus of the angry sea god, Poseidon, as well as the trouble waiting for his crew with the sun god if they choose to eat his cattle. He also warns Odysseus of the mob of suitors waiting for him back in Ithaca.

What questions does Anticleia ask of Odysseus?

She asks why Odysseus has not returned home and what the state of affairs is in Ithaca. (\*It is important to note that Odysseus had to be begged by his men to leave Circe's hall to continue their journey home.)

How did Anticleia die?

Anticleia died of grief.

In the middle of Book Eleven, there is a break in the narrative. (Remember that Odysseus is telling his story at the feast.) The hosting king, Alcinous, wants to know if Odysseus saw anyone else in the Land of the Dead. Each person whom Odysseus describes in his answer to King Alcinous offered him some kind of advice or warning while he was in the underworld.

As you read the following excerpts, use the graphic organizer below to keep track of the advice that Odysseus gathers from his journey to the underworld. You will need to look up the characters' background in a handbook of mythological terms, the glossary at the back of your text, or the Internet to understand the passages fully.

Character/ Passage	Character Background	Character's Advice/ Lessons Learned
Agamemnon  pp. 262-263 lines 436-504	Agamemnon was the commander of the Greek forces. He made some compromises to win the war (he allowed his own daughter to be sacrificed). As a result, his wife found a lover while he was gone. She and the lover plotted to murder him when he returned from the war.	Agamemnon tells Odysseus not to trust women--not even his wife.
Achilles  pp. 265-266 lines 541-573	Achilles was the greatest fighter of the Greek forces. He was known for his strength, pride, and physical prowess.	Achilles says that he would rather be a slave on earth than rule over the dead. He also suggests that he would give anything to be back with his family.

Ajax          pp. 267-269 lines 613-649	Ajax was another great Greek warrior. In the contest for Achilles's armor after his death, Odysseus defeated Ajax.	Ajax is still angry at Odysseus and will not speak to him. Odysseus ironically yells, "Conquer your rage, your blazing, headstrong pride!" at him, but Ajax stalks off, ignoring him (2.642).
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