

Before You Read

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

“The Cyclops” from the *Odyssey*

by Homer

In ancient Greece, heroes in epic poems like the *Odyssey* represented the highest values of Greek civilization. In Homer’s day, heroes were thought of as a special class of men, somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings. As you read “The Cyclops,” see how Odysseus uses his special qualities to save himself and his men from becoming a monster’s meal.

LITERARY FOCUS: HEROES AT LARGE

Epics are long narrative poems that tell of the great deeds of a hero. In an epic, the **main character** is the hero. (In many epics the hero’s enemy is also a major character.) **Heroes** usually represent qualities that their society admires. Some people today, for example, see sports stars, popular singers, great scientists, or firefighters as their heroes. In epics told long ago, the heroes are often superhuman warriors, who set off on journeys to win something of great value for themselves and for their people.

The **conflicts**, or struggles between opposing forces, in an epic are usually **external**, as the heroes battle armies, monsters, or the forces of nature. Epic heroes can also face **internal conflicts**—caused by fear, doubt, weakness, and so on.

- First, read “The Cyclops” for enjoyment. Then, consider what the adventure reveals about the values of the ancient Greeks.

READING SKILLS: MONITOR YOUR COMPREHENSION

Good readers pause occasionally to make sure they understand what they have read. When you read a long, action-filled poem such as this one, it is important to stay on top of events—to understand what is happening.

Pause during your reading to ask yourself the following questions:

- What has happened so far?
- What has caused those events?
- What are the most important events in this episode?
- When do the events take place?
- What might happen next?



Literary Skills

Understand characteristics of epic poetry, including heroes and their external conflicts.

Reading Skills

Monitor your comprehension.

Vocabulary Skills

Learn words from Greek and Roman myths.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

The following words appear in "The Cyclops." Become familiar with them before you begin reading.

ravage (rav'ij) v.: destroy violently; ruin.

*The Cyclops planned to **ravage** Odysseus and his men by eating them.*

adversary (ad'vər-ser'ē) n.: enemy; opponent.

*Odysseus had to find a way to defeat his **adversary**, the Cyclops.*

profusion (prō-fyōō'zhən) n.: large supply; abundance.

*With such a large flock of sheep, the Cyclops had a **profusion** of milk, cheese, and wool.*

WORDS FROM GREEK AND ROMAN MYTHS

Many words we use in English today come from Greek and Roman myths. For example, a journey or quest is often called an *odyssey*, named for the *Odyssey*, the epic poem from which "The Cyclops" is taken. Other words from "The Cyclops" that have been handed down are *ambrosia*, meaning "food of the gods," and *nectar*, meaning "drink of the gods." Look at the chart below to learn of other words handed down from Greek and Roman myths.

Names from Greek and Roman Myths	English Words
Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture and fertility	cereal
Mount Olympus, legendary home of gods and goddesses	Olympics
Tantalus, character from Greek myth whose food and drink were kept just out of his reach, as punishment	tantalize
Titans, race of giant Greek gods and goddesses who came before the Olympians	titanic
Vulcan, Roman god of fire and metalworkers	volcano

“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,
 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. 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,
 sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,¹
 20 and poured the whey to stand in bowls
 cooling until he drank it for his supper.
 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.
 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;

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

INFER

Pause at line 3. Odysseus and his men are in the cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemus. To whom do the men burn an offering?

MONITOR YOUR COMPREHENSION

Who is the “he” in line 3?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 5–23, and pay attention to the Cyclops’s actions. What qualities does he have?

VOCABULARY

ravage (rav’ij) v.: destroy violently; ruin.

IDENTIFY

Hospitality to strangers was extremely important to the ancient Greeks. Re-read lines 38–43, and underline the words that tell what will happen if the Cyclops does not treat the Greeks well.

MONITOR YOUR COMPREHENSION

Pause at line 50. Does the Cyclops respect Zeus, as Odysseus does? Explain.

INFER

Pause at line 58. Why do you think Odysseus lies about his ship?

WORD STUDY

Underline the two gruesome Homeric similes—extended comparisons using *like* or *as*—in lines 59–65.

homeward bound, but taking routes and ways uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.

35 We served under Agamemnon, son of Atreus²—
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.
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
for the gods’ courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest.’

He answered this

from his brute chest, unmoved:

‘You are a ninny,

45 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
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—
50 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?’

He thought he’d find out, but I saw through this,
and answered with a ready lie:

‘My ship?

55 Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth atremble,
broke it up on the rocks at your land’s end.
A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.
We are survivors, these good men and I.’

Neither reply nor pity came from him,
60 but in one stride he clutched at my companions

2. Agamemnon (ag’ə·mem’nän’); Atreus (ā’tre’əs).

and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies
to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.
Then he dismembered them and made his meal,
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—
65 everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.
We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,
powerless, looking on at this, appalled;
but Cyclops went on filling up his belly
with manflesh and great gulps of whey,
70 then lay down like a mast among his sheep.
My heart beat high now at the chance of action,
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
75 when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him
we perished there as well, for we could never
move his ponderous doorway slab aside.
So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose
80 lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,
putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace³ of men to make his breakfast,
85 and whisked away his great door slab
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,
reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.⁴
There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops
rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.
90 And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,
if but Athena granted what I prayed for.
Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:

3. **brace** (*brās*) *n.*: pair.

4. **quiver** (*kwiv'ər*) *n.*: case for arrows.

HERO

How does Odysseus show both his bravery and his intelligence in lines 71–78?

WORD STUDY

Line 79 contains a famous **epithet**—a group of words used repeatedly to describe a character. How is Dawn described in this epithet?

MONITOR YOUR COMPREHENSION

Pause at line 87. What prevents Odysseus and his men from escaping when the Cyclops leaves?

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 105. What do Odysseus and his men do with the olive tree they find in the Cyclops's cave?

VOCABULARY

profusion (prō·fyōō'zhən) *n.*: large supply; abundance.

CLARIFY

Pause at line 111. Apparently, it was the custom among the ancient Greeks for men to toss coins, dice, or something else for the honor of participating in a dangerous task. Why is Odysseus happy with the outcome?

a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—
an olive tree, felled green and left to season
95 for Cyclops' hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger⁵ of twenty oars, broad in the beam—
a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I
chopped out a six-foot section of this pole
100 and set it down before my men, who scraped it;
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again
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
105 one of the dung piles in **profusion** there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
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,
110 the men I would have chosen won the toss—
four strong men, and I made five as captain.

At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some shepherding whim—
115 or a god's bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.
120 Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward
holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
looking up, saying:

5. **lugger** (lug'ər) *n.*: type of sailboat.