

# BOOK 11:

## *The Land of the Dead*

*Odysseus and his crew set out for the land of the dead. They arrive and find the place to which Circe has directed them.*

“Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,  
vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them  
before she calved, at home in Ithaca,  
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;  
5 as for Tiresias, I swore to sacrifice  
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.  
Thus to **assuage** the nations of the dead  
I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,  
letting their black blood stream into the wellpit.  
10 Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,  
brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,  
and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;  
many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,  
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.  
15 From every side they came and sought the pit  
with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.  
But presently I gave command to my officers  
to flay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make  
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—  
20 to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone. **R**  
Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep  
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit  
till I should know the presence of Tiresias.

One shade came first—Elpenor, of our company,  
25 who lay unburied still on the wide earth  
as we had left him—dead in Circe’s hall,  
untouched, unmourned, when other cares compelled us.  
Now when I saw him there I wept for pity  
and called out to him:

**assuage** (ə-swāj′) v. to calm or pacify

**10 Erebus** (ēr’ə-bəs): a region of the land of the dead, also known as the underworld or Hades. Hades is also the name of the god of the underworld.

**18 flay**: to strip off the outer skin of.

### **R ALLUSION**

In lines 17–20, Odysseus makes a sacrifice to “sovereign Death,” or Hades, and “pale Persephone” (pər-sěf’ə-nē), his bride, who was kidnapped and forced to live with him for six months of every year. Her mother, goddess of the harvest, grieves during that time, causing winter to fall. What does this background information tell you about Hades? Consider how this information affects your impression of the underworld.



*Ulysses Descending into the Underworld* (16th century), Giovanni Stradano. Fresco. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.  
Photo © Scala/Art Resource, New York.

‘How is this, Elpenor,  
30 how could you journey to the western gloom  
swifter afoot than I in the black lugger?’

He sighed, and answered:

‘Son of great Laertes,  
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,  
bad luck shadowed me, and no kindly power;  
35 ignoble death I drank with so much wine.  
I slept on Circe’s roof, then could not see  
the long steep backward ladder, coming down,  
and fell that height. My neck bone, buckled under,  
snapped, and my spirit found this well of dark.  
40 Now hear the grace I pray for, in the name  
of those back in the world, not here—your wife  
and father, he who gave you bread in childhood,  
and your own child, your only son, Telemachus,  
long ago left at home.

#### **ANALYZE VISUALS**

This 16th-century painting illustrates the descent of Ulysses (Odysseus) into the underworld. How has the artist distinguished between Ulysses and the dead, also known as shades?

When you make sail

45 and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,  
you will moor ship, I know, upon Aeaëa Island;  
there, O my lord, remember me, I pray,  
do not abandon me unwept, unburied,  
to tempt the gods' wrath, while you sail for home;  
50 but fire my corpse, and all the gear I had,  
and build a cairn for me above the breakers—  
an unknown sailor's mark for men to come.  
Heap up the mound there, and implant upon it  
the oar I pulled in life with my companions.'

**50–51 fire my corpse . . . cairn:** Elpenor wants Odysseus to hold a funeral for him.

55 He ceased, and I replied:

'Unhappy spirit,

I promise you the barrow and the burial.'

So we conversed, and grimly, at a distance,  
with my long sword between, guarding the blood,  
while the faint image of the lad spoke on.  
60 Now came the soul of Anticlea, dead,  
my mother, daughter of Autolycus,  
dead now, though living still when I took ship  
for holy Troy. Seeing this ghost I grieved,  
but held her off, through pang on pang of tears,  
65 till I should know the presence of Tiresias.  
Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward  
bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

**58 with my long sword . . . blood:** the ghosts are attracted to the blood of the sacrifice; Odysseus must hold them at bay with his sword.

'Son of Laertes and the gods of old,  
Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,  
70 why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,  
to see the cold dead and the joyless region?  
Stand clear, put up your sword;  
let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.'

**66 prince of Thebes:** Tiresias, the blind seer, comes from the city of Thebes (thēbz).

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard  
75 let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,  
as he bent down to the sombre blood. Then spoke  
the prince of those with gift of speech:

'Great captain,

a fair wind and the honey lights of home  
are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;  
80 the god who thunders on the land prepares it,  
not to be shaken from your track, implacable,

in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.  
 One narrow strait may take you through his blows:  
 denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.  
 85 When you make landfall on Thrinacia first  
 and quit the violet sea, dark on the land  
 you'll find the grazing herds of Helios  
 by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.  
 Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,  
 90 and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.  
 But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction  
 for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,  
 bereft of all companions, lost for years,  
 under strange sail shall you come home, to find  
 95 your own house filled with trouble: insolent men  
 eating your livestock as they court your lady.  
 Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!  
 But after you have dealt out death—in open  
 combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,  
 100 go overland on foot, and take an oar,  
 until one day you come where men have lived  
 with meat unsalted, never known the sea,  
 nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows  
 and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.  
 105 The spot will soon be plain to you, and I  
 can tell you how: some passerby will say,  
 “What winnowing fan is that upon your shoulder?”  
 Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf  
 and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:  
 110 a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,  
 and carry out pure hekatombs at home  
 to all wide heaven's lords, the undying gods,  
 to each in order. Then a seaborne death  
 soft as this hand of mist will come upon you  
 115 when you are wearied out with rich old age,  
 your country folk in blessed peace around you.  
 And all this shall be just as I foretell.' . . .” **S**

**89–91 kine; beeves:** two words for cattle.

**101–102 where men have lived with meat unsalted:** refers to an inland location where men do not eat salted (preserved) meat as sailors do aboard a ship.

### **S EPIC HERO**

An epic hero's fate is often a matter of great importance to the gods and to the hero's homeland. In lines 77–117, Odysseus' fate is the subject of a prophecy by Tiresias, a blind seer who now dwells among the dead. A prophecy such as this can serve as **foreshadowing** in an epic or other story. Do you think that Odysseus' fate will unfold exactly as Tiresias foretells it? Explain why you think as you do.

*Odysseus speaks to the shade of his mother. She tells him that Penelope and Telemachus are still grieving for him and that his father, Laertes, has moved to the country, where he, too, mourns his son. Odysseus' mother explains that she died from a broken heart. Odysseus also speaks with the spirits of many great ladies and men who died, as well as those who were being punished for their earthly sins. Filled with horror, Odysseus and his crew set sail.*