

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks to learn of his destiny. The source of his information is Teiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes. The prophet's lack of external sight suggests the presence of true insight. Circe has told Odysseus exactly what rites he must perform to bring Teiresias up from the dead. Odysseus continues his story:

585 "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;
as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.
590 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 well pit.
Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,
brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,
595 **A** and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;
many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.
From every side they came and sought the pit
with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.
600 But presently I gave command to my officers
to flay^a those sheep the bronze cut down, and make
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—
B to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.^b
Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
605 **C** the surging phantoms from the bloody pit
till I should know the presence of Teiresias. . . .

Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward
bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

610 'Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,
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.'

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

601. flay: strip the skin from.

603. Persephone (pər-sef'ə-nē).

Persephone, queen of the
underworld, with her husband,
Hades (4th century B.C.).

British Museum, London.



'Great captain,

a fair wind and the honey lights of home
are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;
the god who thunders on the land prepares it,
not to be shaken from your track, implacable,⁶²²
in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.
One narrow strait may take you through his blows:
denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.
When you make landfall on Thrinakia 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,⁶³⁰ hold fast to your intent,
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
your own house filled with trouble: insolent men⁶⁴⁸
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,
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.
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I
can tell you how: some passerby will say,
"What winnowing fan⁶⁴⁸ is that upon your shoulder?"
Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf
and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:
a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,
and carry out pure hecatombs⁶⁵² 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
when you are wearied out with rich old age,
your countryfolk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell! . . ."

(from Book 11)

WORDS TO OWN


rancor (ran'kar) *n.*: bitter hate; ill will.

622. **implacable**: unyielding; merciless.

630. **Kine** and **beeves** (see line 632) are old terms for "cattle."

648. **winnowing fan**: device used to remove the useless dry outer covering from grain. (These people would never have seen an oar.)

652. **hecatombs**: sacrifices of one hundred cattle at a time to the gods.

 *What prophecy does Odysseus receive? Take notes on how you might dramatize this important scene in the underworld. How many actors would you need? What props would you use? You might sketch the scene as you visualize it.*