

THE CATTLE OF THE SUN GOD

Odysseus urges his exhausted crew to bypass Thrinakia, the island of the sun god, Helios. When the men insist on landing, Odysseus makes them swear not to touch the god's cattle. Odysseus is still speaking to Alcinous's court.

845 “In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
that shone out in the first dusk of evening
had gone down to their setting, a giant wind
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;
so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose
850 touched the windy world, we dragged our ship
to cover in a grotto, a sea cave
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.
I mustered all the crew and said:
‘Old shipmates,
our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink;
855 the cattle here are not for our provision,
or we pay dearly for it.
Fierce the god is
who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:
Helios; and no man avoids his eye.’
To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now
860 we had a month of onshore gales, blowing
day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.
As long as bread and good red wine remained
to keep the men up, and appease their craving,
they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,
865 when all the barley in the ship was gone,
hunger drove them to scour the wild shore
with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,



*The Companions of Ulysses
Slaying the Cattle of the Sun
God Helios (16th century)
by Pellegrino Tibaldi.
Palazzo Poggi, Bologna, Italy.*

whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.

870 So one day I withdrew to the interior
to pray the gods in solitude, for hope
that one might show me some way of salvation.
Slipping away, I struck across the island
to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.
875 I washed my hands there, and made supplication^o
to the gods who own Olympus, all the gods—
but they, for answer, only closed my eyes
under slow drops of sleep.

Now on the shore Eurylochus
made his insidious^o plea:

‘Comrades,’ he said,

880 ‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say.
All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,
but famine is the most pitiful, the worst
end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?

885 Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
if ever that day comes—
we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.
890 But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

895 Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured ‘Aye!’
trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.
900 They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
having no barley meal—to strew^o the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,
905 with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.
Then, as they had no wine, they made libation^o

875. supplication (sup’lə·kā’shən) *n.*: humble requests; prayers.

879. insidious (in·sid’ē·əs) *adj.*: treacherous; more dangerous than is apparent.

878–894. What is Eurylochus’s “insidious plea”? If you were a member of the crew, would you be swayed by this argument, or would you heed Odysseus’s warning? Do you think murdering the cattle is justified, or is it an offense against the god Helios?

901. strew (strō) *v.*: scatter about.

906. libation (lī·bā’shən) *n.*: offering of wine or oil to the gods.

with clear spring water, broiling the entrails^o first; and when the bones were burnt and tripes^o shared, they spitted the carved meat.

910 Just then my slumber left me in a rush, my eyes opened, and I went down the seaward path. No sooner had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory odors of burnt fat eddied around me; grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

915 ‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, you made me sleep away this day of mischief! O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour! Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.’

920 Lampetia^o in her long gown meanwhile had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon: ‘They have killed your kine.’

And the Lord Helios burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

925 ‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening,^o now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy at morning when I climbed the sky of stars, and evening, when I bore westward from heaven. Restitution or penalty they shall pay—and pay in full—or I go down forever to light the dead men in the underworld.’ . . .”

(from Book 12)

When Odysseus and his men set sail again, they are punished with death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat, and all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives. Exhausted and nearly drowned, he makes his way to Calypso’s island, where we met him originally, in Book 5.

Odysseus has brought us up to date. He can now rest and enjoy the comforts of Alcinous’s court—but not for long. Ahead lies his most difficult task—reclaiming his own kingdom.

At this moment of suspense, Homer might have put aside his harp until the next night.

Vocabulary


restitution (res’tə·tōō’shən) *n.*: compensation; repayment.

907. **entrails** (en’tṛälz) *n.*: intestines; guts.

908. **tripes** (trīps) *n.*: stomach parts.

919. **Lampetia** (lam·pē’shē·ə): daughter of Helios. Lampetia guarded her father’s herds of cattle.

924. **overweening** (o’vər·wēn’in) *adj.*: excessively proud.

 921–930. What exactly has happened to cause the god’s fury?




Zeus seated on his throne, holding thunderbolts. Bronze statuette found on Mount Lyceum (6th century B.C.).

After You Read Response and Analysis

from the Odyssey, Part One

Reading Check


- In a chart like the one below, summarize the **external conflict** and its **resolution** in each episode. 

Adventure	Summary
Calypso	
Lotus Eaters	
Cyclops	
Circe	
Sirens; Scylla and Charybdis	
Cattle of the Sun God	

- What does Odysseus learn about his future from blind Teiresias in the Land of the Dead?

Thinking Critically

- “Nobody” in Greek is *outis*, which sounds like *Odysseus*. In his **conflict** with the Cyclops, how does Odysseus overcome the monster through a clever use of language? What curse at the end of this adventure **foreshadows** trouble?
- What conclusions about the deceptive nature of beauty can you draw from the Circe episode?
- Book 5 of the *Odyssey* focuses on Odysseus’s captivity on Calypso’s island. Suzanne Vega (see the **Connection** on page 755) expresses Calypso’s view of the affair. How does her song compare with Homer’s story? Whom do you sympathize with—Odysseus or Calypso?

- From what you’ve observed of Odysseus, how would you describe what the Greeks valued in a hero? Do we value these same traits today? Check your Quickwrite notes for page 749. 

Extending and Evaluating

- How many of the monsters or threats to Odysseus in this part of the epic are female? What do you think of the way women are portrayed so far?

WRITING

It’s Alive!

In “The Cyclops in the Ocean” (see the **Connection** on page 772), the modern poet Nikki Giovanni **personifies** a tropical storm—that is, she describes the storm as if it were a living creature. Write a paragraph personifying some other violent force of nature. Describe how it looks and sounds and what it does with its victims.

Cause and Effect

Characters in the *Odyssey* often use cause-and-effect arguments when they try to **persuade**. For example, when Odysseus asks the Cyclops for help, he warns the Cyclops of the effects of offending the gods by harming a guest. Calypso tries to persuade Odysseus to remain with her by mentioning the effects he will suffer if he leaves her. Choose one argument from the epic, and describe why it is persuasive or how you think it could be strengthened.

► Use “Persuading with Cause and Effect,” pages 834–841, for help with this assignment.



Literary Skills
Analyze characteristics of epic poetry, including heroes and their external conflicts.

Reading Skills
Monitor your comprehension.

Writing Skills
Write a paragraph with personification. Analyze a persuasive argument.



INTERNET

Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE7 9-10