

Myths and Legends: Odysseus and his odyssey, the short version

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Escaping from the island of the Cyclopes — one-eyed, ill-tempered giants — the hero Odysseus calls back to the shore, taunting the Cyclops Polyphemus, who heaves a boulder at the ship. Painting by Arnold Böcklin in 1896. SECOND: A drawing of a cyclops, courtesy of CSA Images/B&W Engrave Ink Collection and Getty Images.

Greek mythology began thousands of years ago because there was a need to explain natural events, disasters, and events in history. Myths were created about gods and goddesses who had supernatural powers, human feelings and looked human. These ideas were passed down in beliefs and stories.

The following stories are about Odysseus. The son of the king of the Greek island of Ithaca, this hero was thought to be as wise as Zeus, king of the gods.

For 10 years, the Greek army battled the Trojans in the walled city of Troy. But the Greeks could not get over, under or through the walls that protected the city. Finally, Odysseus came up with the idea of a large hollow, wooden horse, filled with Greek soldiers. The people of Troy woke one morning and found that no army surrounded the city. They thought the enemy had returned to their ships and were finally sailing back to Greece. The giant wooden horse had been left behind,

so the Trojans brought it through the gates and into the walled city. That night the people of Troy celebrated their victory with food, drink and song and finally went to sleep. Odysseus and his men climbed out the horse and opened the gates of Troy. The Greeks had not returned to Greece. The Greek army attacked and the city of Troy fell.

Land Of The One-Eyed Giants

As Troy burned, the Greeks filled their ships with gold and other valuables. They set sail for home, but Odysseus had more adventures ahead. Ten more years would pass before he finally reached home.

It would be too much to tell of all the adventures that he had. Sometime in the future you might want to read about them in a book written by a great Greek poet named Homer. Here, we can tell of only a few of these exciting adventures.

Odysseus and his men came to the land of the Cyclops. The Cyclops were wild and lawless giants. Each had only one great eye in the middle of his forehead. They raised herds of sheep and cattle. With some of his men, Odysseus explored the country and soon found a great high cave, with much cheese and milk in it. They waited for the owner. The Cyclops soon appeared driving his herds into the cave with him.

When Odysseus and his men saw the giant Cyclops, they tried to run away. But the giant rolled a huge rock against the opening of the cave, so they could not get out. The Cyclops reached down and grabbed two of the men and ate them. The next morning he ate two more. Then he took his sheep and cattle out to fields. Before leaving, he rolled the rock back, so Odysseus and his men were still his prisoners.

Sneaking Out With The Sheep

Odysseus began planning a way to escape. He found a long stake in the cave and sharpened the point. When the giant returned, he ate two more men. Odysseus tried to become a friend of Cyclops by giving him some wine that they had brought with them. Cyclops got drunk and fell asleep. Then Odysseus and his men blinded the giant with the sharp stick.

Now the blind giant could not find them. That night they hid in the cave. The next morning, Cyclops rolled the rock away and opened the cave. He was moving his animals out to the fields, but he could not see so he felt the back of each sheep that went out. He could not see that Odysseus and each of his men were holding onto the belly of each sheep as they left the cave. They all escaped safely.

The West Wind

Poseidon, the god of the sea, was the father of the blinded Cyclops. He heard what they had done to his son. He became angry and planned to punish the men.



After leaving the land of the Cyclops, Odysseus came to the island of Aeolus, the god of the winds. They rested, ate well and stayed there for a month. As they were leaving, Aeolus gave Odysseus a strong sheepskin bag. This held all the winds of heaven. But the west wind was left out, so it would blow the ship gently home. After nine days, they were very near the shores of home. But while Odysseus was asleep, his men opened the bag of the winds to see what was inside. Suddenly, all the winds of heaven stormed out of the bag. They blew them back to the island of King Aeolus. This time the king did not help the group.

Poseidon Did Not Give Up

Next, they sailed to the island of Circe, the witch. She was the daughter of Helios, the god of the sun. At first she was angry and changed some of his men into pigs. But Odysseus bravely forced her to change them back into men. Then Odysseus and his men lived safely with her for a whole year. When they were ready to set sail again, Circe told Odysseus what he must do. She told him he had to go down to the world of the dead, and ask how he could return home safely. While there, he found out that Poseidon was planning to send storms to stop him because he had blinded the Cyclops. Odysseus also was told that he and his men would come upon an island where they would find the oxen of the sun. These oxen must not be harmed.

Then Odysseus returned to the upper world. Again, he and his men sailed for home and did come to the island of the sun god, Helios. They found the oxen of the sun and Odysseus made his men promise not to harm the oxen. That night, a great storm was sent by the angry Poseidon. For a whole month they could not leave the island. There was little food on the island and the men became hungry, so they killed and ate some of the oxen. This angered Helios who asked Zeus, king of the gods, to kill them.

As they sailed off, Zeus hurled a great thunderbolt, which destroyed their ship causing all the men to drown. Only Odysseus was able to escape. For 10 days he swam and floated on the mast of his ship until he came to the island of the goddess, Calypso. She fell in love with Odysseus and kept him with her for seven years. But he wanted to return to his wife and home, so Calypso finally let him go. She gave him a great raft and he set sail.

One More Battle At Home

For 17 days Odysseus sailed on in safety. Yet Poseidon was still angry and sent a great storm that wrecked the raft and Odysseus had to swim to a nearby shore.

This time he found the daughter of the king. When Odysseus told her his story, she took him to her father. At last, he was taken to his own home in one of the ships that belonged to this king.

Odysseus reached home, but his troubles were not yet over. Evil men had taken over his home and property. With the help of his son and a faithful servant, Odysseus defeated them and took back his house and lands. At last, he lived quietly and peacefully once more in the island kingdom.

From "Greek Gods, Heroes, and Men" by Caroline H. Harding and Samuel B. Harding, published in 1897.

Quiz

1 Read the sentence from the section "Poseidon Did Not Give Up."

As they sailed off, Zeus hurled a great thunderbolt, which destroyed their ship causing all the men to drown.

Which two words would BEST replace "great" and "destroyed" in the sentence?

- (A) giant; wrecked
- (B) spectacular; struck
- (C) amazing; ruined
- (D) large; surprised

2 Read the sentence from the section "Land Of The One-Eyed Giants."

The Cyclops were wild and lawless giants.

Which answer choice is the BEST definition of the word "wild" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) uninterested
- (B) natural
- (C) untamed
- (D) ridiculous

3 Read the section "The West Wind."

Poseidon would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?

- (A) Odysseus was a tricky and untrustworthy man.
- (B) Odysseus deserved punishment for blinding Cyclops.
- (C) Odysseus should not have gone to the island of Aeolus.
- (D) Odysseus placed too much trust in his men.

4 What effect did the gods have on Odysseus' journey?

- (A) They stopped him from ever seeing his family again.
- (B) They helped him win the war against Troy.
- (C) They supported him in overcoming many challenges.
- (D) They delayed his return trip home.