BACKGROUND
No one knows for sure who Homer was. The later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel, or singer who went from town to town. He is known for the epic poems the *Iliad* (the story of the Trojan War) and the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* tells of the many adventures of the hero Odysseus on his ten-year journey home from the war. As this passage begins, curiosity has led Odysseus and his men to wait in the cave of the Cyclops.

THE CYCLOPS
In this adventure, Odysseus describes his encounter with the Cyclops named Polyphemus, Poseidon’s one-eyed monster son. Polyphemus may represent the brute forces that any hero must overcome before he can reach home. Now Odysseus must rely on the special intelligence associated with his name. Odysseus is the cleverest of the Greek heroes because he is guided by the goddess of wisdom, Athena.

*It is Odysseus’s famed curiosity that leads him to the Cyclops’s cave and that makes him insist on waiting for the barbaric giant. In this passage Odysseus is telling his story to the court of King Alcinous.*

“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 to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it with a great crash into that hollow cave,

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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
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
over the doorsill. B 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 withy1 baskets,
and poured the whey to stand in bowls
cooling until he drank it for his supper.

1. withy: made from willow twigs.
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? 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. A

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

We served under Agamemnon,² son of Atreus³—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 you give—as custom is to honor strangers. B

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, 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—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?’

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² Agamemnon (AG UH MEHM NAHN).
³ Atreus (AY TREE UHS).
He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this, and answered with a ready lie:

‘My ship?
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, but in one stride he clutched at my companions 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—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, 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 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 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 brace of men to make his breakfast, and whisked away his great door slab.

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4. brace: pair.
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind, reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.\(^5\) There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness. 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: a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—an olive tree, felled green and left to season for Cyclops’ hand. And it was like a mast a lugger\(^6\) of twenty oars, broad in the beam—a deep-sea-going craft—might carry: so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I chopped out a six-foot section of this pole 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 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, 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—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,

5. quiver: case for arrows.
6. lugger: type of sailboat.
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores. 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:

‘Cyclops, try some wine. Here’s liquor to wash down your scraps of men. Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried under our planks. I meant it for an offering if you would help us home. But you are mad, unbearable, a bloody monster! After this, will any other traveler come to see you?’

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down so fiery and smooth he called for more: ‘Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me, how are you called? I’ll make a gift will please you. Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow out of grassland and loam in heaven’s rain, but here’s a bit of nectar and ambrosia!’

Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down. I saw the fuddle and flush come over him, then I sang out in cordial tones:

‘Cyclops, you ask my honorable name? Remember the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you. My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends, everyone calls me Nohbdy.’

And he said:

‘Nohbdy’s my meat, then, after I eat his friends. Others come first. There’s a noble gift, now.’

Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward, his great head lolling to one side; and sleep took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping, he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.
Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike deep in the embers, charring it again, and cheered my men along with battle talk to keep their courage up: no quitting now. The pike of olive, green though it had been, reddened and glowed as if about to catch. I drew it from the coals and my four fellows gave me a hand, lugging it near the Cyclops as more than natural force nerved them; straight forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it turning it as a shipwright turns a drill in planking, having men below to swing the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove. So with our brand we bored that great eye socket while blood ran out around the red-hot bar.
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball hissed broiling, and the roots popped. (B)

In a smithy⁷

one sees a white-hot axhead or an adze⁸
plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—
the way they make soft iron hale and hard—
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.
The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him,
and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face
he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye,
threw it away, and his wild hands went groping;
then he set up a howl for Cyclopes
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.

Some heard him; and they came by divers⁹ ways
to clump around outside and call:

‘What ails you,
Polyphemus? Why do you cry so sore
in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.

Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man
has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave
the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:

‘Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me. Nohbdy’s ruined me!’

To this rough shout they made a sage¹⁰ reply:

‘Ah well, if nobody has played you foul
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain
given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.’

So saying
they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them. (C)

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7. smithy: blacksmith’s shop, where iron tools are made.
8. adze: axlike tool with a long, curved blade.
9. divers (DY VUHRZ): diverse; various.
10. sage: wise.
Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him, 
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone 
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide 
for any silly beast or man who bolted— 
hoping somehow I might be such a fool. 
But I kept thinking how to win the game: 
death sat there huge; how could we slip away? A

I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics, 
reasoning as a man will for dear life, 
until a trick came—and it pleased me well. 
The Cyclops’ rams were handsome, fat, with heavy 
fleeces, a dark violet.

Three abreast
I tied them silently together, twining 
cords of willow from the ogre’s bed; 
then slung a man under each middle one 
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.

So three sheep could convey each man. I took 
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock, 
and hung myself under his kinky belly, 
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep 
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.

So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose B 
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture, 
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens 
where dams with udders full called for a milking.

Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound, 
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass, 
but my men riding on the pectoral fleece11 
the giant’s blind hands blundering never found. C

Last of them all my ram, the leader, came, 
weighted by wool and me with my meditations. 
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

11. **pectoral fleece**: wool on an animal’s chest.
'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest in the night cave? You never linger so, but graze before them all, and go afar to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way leading along the streams, until at evening you run to be the first one in the fold. Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving over your Master’s eye? That carrion rogue and his accurst companions burnt it out when he had conquered all my wits with wine. Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear. Oh, had you brain and voice to tell where he may be now, dodging all my fury! Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall his brains would strew the floor, and I should have rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.'

He sent us into the open, then. Close by, I dropped and rolled clear of the ram’s belly, going this way and that to untie the men. With many glances back, we rounded up his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard, and drove them down to where the good ship lay. We saw, as we came near, our fellows’ faces shining; then we saw them turn to grief tallying those who had not fled from death. I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up, and in a low voice told them: ‘Load this herd; move fast, and put the ship’s head toward the breakers.’ They all pitched in at loading, then embarked and struck their oars into the sea. Far out, as far offshore as shouted words would carry, I sent a few back to the adversary:

‘O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions? Puny, am I, in a Caveman’s hands?’

12. carrion rogue: rotten scoundrel. Carrion is decaying flesh.
How do you like the beating that we gave you, you damned cannibal? Eater of guests under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!' A

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us. Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore. I got the longest boathook out and stood fending us off, with furious nods to all to put their backs into a racing stroke—row, row or perish. So the long oars bent kicking the foam sternward, making head until we drew away, and twice as far. Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew in low voices protesting:

‘Godsake, Captain!
Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’
‘That tidal wave he made on the first throw all but beached us.’
‘All but stove us in!’
‘Give him our bearing with your trumpeting, he’ll get the range and lob13 a boulder.’
‘Aye
He’ll smash our timbers and our heads together!’ B

I would not heed them in my glorying spirit but let my anger flare and yelled:

‘Cyclops, if ever mortal man inquire how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye: Laertes’ son, whose home’s on Ithaca!’

13. lob: toss.
At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

‘Now comes the weird\textsuperscript{14} upon me, spoken of old.

A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,\textsuperscript{15} a son of Eurymus;\textsuperscript{16} great length of days he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes, and these things he foretold for time to come: my great eye lost, and at Odysseus’ hands. \textsuperscript{C}

Always I had in mind some giant, armed in giant force, would come against me here. But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—you put me down with wine, you blinded me. \textsuperscript{D}

Come back, Odysseus, and I’ll treat you well, praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—his son I am, for he by his avowal fathered me, and, if he will, he may heal me of this black wound—he and no other of all the happy gods or mortal men.’

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

‘If I could take your life I would and take your time away, and hurl you down to hell! The god of earthquake could not heal you there!’

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

‘O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands, if I am thine indeed, and thou art father: grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never see his home: Laertes’ son, I mean, who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny intend that he shall see his roof again among his family in his fatherland, far be that day, and dark the years between.

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\textsuperscript{14.} weird: fate.
\textsuperscript{15.} Telemus (TEHL UH MUHS).
\textsuperscript{16.} Eurymus (YOO REE MUHS).
Let him lose all companions, and return
under strange sail to bitter days at home.' . . .”

Here we will imagine that Homer stops reciting for the night. The blind poet might take a glass of wine before turning in. The listeners would go off to various corners of the local nobleman’s house. They might discuss highlights of the poet’s tale among themselves and look forward to the next evening’s installment.