Excerpts from Book 11: “A Gathering of Shades”

Discussion before activity: Why must Odysseus travel to the Land of the Dead? Take notes here.

Summary of Book 11:
Odysseus and his remaining crew sail to the Land of the Dead. Following Kirke’s instructions, he digs a pit, pours libations (liquid offerings) to the dead, and promises to sacrifice a heifer and a black lamb in honor of the dead when he gets home. Then he slaughters a black ram and ewe provided by Kirke.

When the ghosts emerge from the pit and drink the blood of these sheep, they briefly recover their memories and power of speech. Odysseus must keep them away until Teiresias, who has retained his memory and speech in the afterlife, appears and drinks the blood, which will briefly restore his power of prophecy.

Odysseus sees the following ghosts:
1. His crew member Elpenor, who died on Kirke’s island without Odysseus’s knowledge and must be buried.
2. Teiresias the prophet, who tells Odysseus what lies ahead – including the challenge of facing the suitors.
3. Odysseus’s mother Anticleia, who died of grief. She tells him what is going on at home.
4. The ghosts of many women who are the mothers of famous sons.
5. Agamemnon, Odysseus’s commander at Troy, who tells Odysseus how he was murdered by Aigisthos.
6. Akhilleus, the greatest Greek warrior, who asks about his son and father.
7. Aias (Ajax) who committed suicide in Troy when O. was given Akhilleus’s armor instead of him.
8. More Greek heroes and tortured souls, including Herakles, Theseus, Tantalos, and Sisyphus.
9. Then the ghosts close in on him. He is filled with horror and runs back to the ship.

Focus on key passages:
Your group will examine the conversation between Odysseus and one of the ghosts above.
• Preview the questions below.
• Closely read and annotate the relevant stanzas.
• Discuss the passage with reference to the questions.
• Be ready to report to the class on your group’s assigned ghost and to take notes on other groups’ reports.

With your group, discuss and report:
• What does Odysseus learn from each ghost -- both in terms of valuable information and “life lessons”? 
• What cultural values are affirmed in these conversations?
• How do these encounters contribute to Odysseus’s transformation?
• Other comments?

As we discuss the chapter, keep these questions in mind:
• How would you map the “mini” hero’s journey contained in this chapter?
• What stage of his larger hero’s journey does his visit to the Land of the Dead represent?
• If you had to pick one, which ghost do you think has the greatest impact on Odysseus’s desire to return home?
• The land of Erebos, from which the ghosts emerge, means “darkness born of chaos.” How does this episode speak metaphorically to the idea that Odysseus, like all returning warriors, must pass through a “dark night of the soul”? What must he confront to move on?
Elpenor (lines 55-90)

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

'How is this, Elpenor;  
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;  
ignoble death I drank with so much wine.  
I slept on Kirke'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.  
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, Telemakhos,  
long ago left at home.

When you make sail  
and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,  
you will moor ship, I know, upon Aiaia 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;  
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.'

He ceased, and I replied:

'Unhappy spirit,  
I promise you the barrow and the burial.'

• Paraphrase lines 64–87.
• What does Odysseus learn from Elpenor?
• What cultural values are affirmed in this conversation?
• How does this encounter contribute to Odysseus's transformation?
• Other comments?
Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

"Son of Laertes and the gods of old, Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways, why leave the blazing sun, 0 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.'

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver, as be 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; 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. 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, hold fast to your intent, and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaka. 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 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 ..."

• Paraphrase lines 113-133.
• What does Odysseus learn from Teiresias?
• What cultural values are affirmed in this conversation?
• How does this encounter contribute to Odysseus's transformation?
• Other comments?
Antikleia (lines 192–232)

Odysseus speaking to his mother Antikleia:

"... But come now, tell me this, and tell me clearly, what was the bane that pinned you down in Death? Some ravaging long illness, or mild arrows a-flying down one day from Artemis? Tell me of Father, tell me of the son I left behind me; have they still my place, my honors, or have other men assumed them? Do they not say that I shall come no more? And tell me of my wife: how runs her thought, still with her child, still keeping our domains, or bride again to the best of the Akhaians?"

To this my noble mother quickly answered:

'Still with her child indeed she is, poor heart, still in your palace hall. Forlorn her nights and days go by, her life used up in weeping. But no man takes your honored place. Telemakhos has care of all your garden plots and fields, and holds the public honor of a magistrate, feasting and being feasted. But your father is country bound and comes to town no more. ...

He lies now even so, with aching heart, and longs for your return, while age comes on him. So I, too, pined away, so doom befell me, not that the keen-eyed huntress with her shafts had marked me down and shot to kill me; not that illness overtook me--no true illness wasting the body to undo the spirit; only my loneliness for you, Odysseus, for your kind heart and counsel, gentle Odysseus, took my own life away.'

I bit my lip, rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her, and tried three times, putting my arms around her, but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable as shadows are, and wavering like a dream."

• Paraphrase lines 205–228.
• What does Odysseus learn from Antikleia?
• What cultural values are affirmed in this conversation?
• How does this encounter contribute to Odysseus’s transformation?
• Other comments?
Agamemnon (excerpts from lines 470-533)

"Son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways, neither did I go down with some good ship in any gale Poseidon blew, nor die upon the mainland, hurt by foes in battle. It was Aigisthos who designed my death, he and my heartless wife, and killed me, after feeding me, like an ox felled at the trough...

... There is no being more fell, more bestial than a wife in such an action, and what an action that one planned! The murder of her husband and her lord. Great god, I thought my children and my slaves at least would give me welcome. But that woman, plotting a thing so low, defiled herself and all her sex, all women yet to come, even those few who may be virtuous.'

'...Let it be a warning even to you. Indulge a woman never, and never tell her all you know. Some things a man may tell, some he should cover up. Not that I see a risk for you, Odysseus, of death at your wife's hands. She is too wise, too clear-eyed, sees alternatives too well, Penelope, Ikarios' daughter--- that young bride whom we left behind---think of it!--- when we sailed off to war. The baby boy still cradled at her breast--now he must be a grown man, and a lucky one. By heaven, you'll see him yet, and he'll embrace his father with old fashioned respect, and rightly.

My own lady never let me glut my eyes on my own son, but bled me to death first. One thing I will advise, on second thought; stow it away and ponder it.

Land your skip in secret on your island; give no warning. The day of faithful wives is gone forever...."

• Paraphrase lines 514–533.
• What does Odysseus learn from Agamemnon?
• What cultural values are affirmed in this conversation?
• How does this encounter contribute to Odysseus's transformation?
• Other comments?
Akhilleus (lines 563–596)

"Now that great runner, grandson of Aiakhos, recognized me and called across to me: 'Son of Laertes and the gods of old, Odysseus, master mariner and soldier, old knife, what next? What greater feat remains for you to put your mind on, after this? How did you find your way down to the dark where these dimwitted dead are camped forever, the after images of used-up men?'

I answered: 'Akhilleus, Peleus’ son, strongest of all among the Akhaians, I had need of foresight such as Teiresias alone could give to help me, homeward bound for the crags of Ithaka. I have not yet coasted Akhaia, not yet touched my land; my life is all adversity. But was there ever a man more blest by fortune than you, Akhilleus? Can there ever be? We ranked you with immortals in your lifetime, we Argives did, and here your power is royal among the dead men’s shades. Think, then, Akhilleus: you need not be so pained by death.'

To this he answered swiftly: 'Let me hear no smooth talk of death from you, Odysseus, light of councils. Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand for some poor country man, on iron rations, than lord it over all the exhausted dead. Tell me, what news of the prince my son: did he come after me to make a name in battle or could it be he did not? Do you know if rank and honor still belong to Peleus in the towns of the Myrmidons? Or now, may be, Hellas and Phthia spurn him, seeing old age fetters him, hand and foot.... Were I but whole again, could I go now to my father’s house, one hour would do to make my passion and my hands no man could hold hateful to any who shoulder him aside.'"

• Paraphrase lines 577-596.
• What does Odysseus learn from Akhilleus?
• What cultural values are affirmed in this conversation?
• How does this encounter contribute to Odysseus’s transformation?
• Other comments?
"Now other souls of mournful dead stood by, each with his troubled questioning, but one remained alone, apart: the son of Telamon, Aias, it was—the great shade burning still because I had won favor on the beachhead in rivalry over Akhilleus' arms. The Lady Thetis, mother of Akhilleus, laid out for us the dead man's battle gear, and Trojan children, with Athena, named the Danaan fittest to own them. Would god I had not borne the palm that day! For earth took Aias then to hold forever, he handsomest and, in all feats of war, noblest of the Danaans after Akhilleus. Gently therefore I called across to him:

'Alas, dear son of royal Telamon, you would not then forget, even in death, your fury with me over those accurst calamitous arms?—and so they were, a bane sent by the gods upon the Argive host. For when you died by your own hand we lost a tower, formidable in war. All we Akhaians mourn you forever, as we do Akhilleus; and no one bears the blame but Zeus. He fixed that doom for you because he frowned on the whole expedition of our spearmen. My lord, come nearer, listen to our story! Conquer your indignation and your pride.'

But he gave no reply, and turned away, following other ghosts toward Erebos."

- Paraphrase lines 658-672.
- What does Odysseus learn from Aias?
- What cultural values are affirmed in this conversation?
- How does this encounter contribute to Odysseus’s transformation?
- Other comments?