

CHAPTER 9

LAND OF NO RETURN: THE GLOOMY KINGDOM OF HADES

MAIN POINTS

1. While the gods represent the Greek desire for perpetual youth, beauty, and eternal life, myths about the heroes show awareness of the finality of life and of every valued quality.
2. The terror that Odysseus felt when he learned that he had to descend into Hades's kingdom reveals the Greek dread of death. To Odysseus, death represented perpetual imprisonment in the dark. Traveling to the Underworld, Odysseus faces both his own mortality and the fate of the soul after death.
3. In the Underworld, Achilles tells Odysseus that he would rather be a poor man's living slave than king of the dead. His only joy in Hades derives from the news that his son Neoptolemus has become a well-respected and efficient warrior.
4. In the Homeric epics, death is final and satisfactory contact between the living and the dead is impossible.
5. The souls in Hades have lost memory, reason, and willpower.
6. Odysseus performs a ritual to summon the dead and communicate with them by digging a trench for them to drink from; the trench symbolizes both the grave and the boundary between life and death. The drink consists of elements of the earth's bounty as well as blood.
7. Odysseus travels westward to Hades across the River of Ocean, the earth's boundary. His journey parallels that of Gilgamesh traveling to the retreat of Utnapishtim.
8. The Homeric concept of the afterlife resembles Mesopotamian beliefs about the Underworld. According to the Hebrew Bible, all the dead, good and bad, reside in an underground region, Sheol, where there is nothing but inactivity.
9. Five rivers were said to flow through the Underworld: the Styx, the Acheron, Cocytus, Phlegethon, and a "river of unmindfulness" that runs through the plain of Lethe. The Romans called the river Lethe and maintained that a soul preparing for reincarnation first had to drink its waters of forgetfulness.
10. A few heroes are allowed to spend the afterlife in the Homeric paradise of Elysium or the Isles of the Blest. Menelaus received the privilege not because of his own virtue but because of his marriage to Helen, daughter of Zeus. This concept of Elysium echoes the Mesopotamian myth of Dilmun, where a few fortunate souls could live a pleasant afterlife.
11. Hades represents death, and Persephone, earlier associated with youth and flowers, takes on the same quality of pitilessness; only a few dead are allowed to return to earth, and they generally accentuate the inevitability of loss.
12. Hades is also the place for monsters such as the multiheaded hound of hell called Cerberus, the Furies, and the Gorgons.
13. Mythographers after Homer had the souls cross the river by boat to arrive in Hades. The ferryman, Charon, demanded money for his services, so it was a Greek custom to bury the dead with coins in their hands or mouth.
14. Two judges reside in Hades, Minos and his brother Rhadamanthus; Plato adds a third judge, Aeacus. In later traditions, these judges would determine the fate of the dead souls.
15. Thanatos (Death) has a brother, Hypnos (Sleep); Hypnos's son Morpheus, the god of dreams, shows himself to sleepers in human shape, sometimes bringing messages from the dead.

16. Because of his role as Psychopompos, the guide of dead souls to their final abode, Hermes is associated with the Underworld. Because he crossed the boundaries between life and death, Hermes became known as a repositior of occult secrets.
17. Hesiod introduces Tartarus as an elemental deity as well as an amorphous abyss into which the Titans are thrown. Tartarus foreshadows the Christian notion of hell.
18. Homer tells of three criminals suffering in Hades. Each had in some way overstepped his boundaries and intruded upon the divine prerogatives.
19. Tityus tried to rape Leto and is punished by being spread-eagled and having two vultures feed on his liver.
20. Tantalus, standing in a pool of water, is forever unable to slake his thirst, because the water recedes when he bends over; he can't reach grapes growing overhead for the same reason. There are various accounts of his crime: he stole the ambrosia of the gods and gave it to humans; he told secrets from the table of the gods; and he served the flesh of his son to the gods.
21. Sisyphus is forced to roll a boulder uphill, only to have it roll back again, so that he must endlessly repeat that meaningless task. Sisyphus is being punished for tricking the gods into letting him go back to earth from Hades once and hiding out until he died of old age.

NOTE: The character of Sisyphus became an important symbol for the existential philosophical movement of the mid-twentieth century: the French novelist Albert Camus sees him as a symbol of a human being, realizing that life is, in essence, absurd, since there are no preestablished, god-given rules. Each task is as meaningless as rolling the boulder uphill and watching it roll down again. Camus's twist to the story is to suggest that Sisyphus takes control of his life and obtains freedom from the slavery of absurdity by choosing to perform these meaningless tasks. See Chapter 21; see also Note on Odysseus's father in Chapter 12.

22. Ixion assaulted Hera and is in Hades bound to a perpetually rolling fiery wheel.
23. Later myths view Tartarus as the place where all human souls go to be purged and punished.
24. In Greco-Roman myth, only a few heroes travel to the netherworld (katabasis) and come back alive, usually as part of a trial.
25. Through the katabasis, the hero symbolically endures death and rebirth and renews his purpose in life. Examples: Odysseus, Aeneas.
26. The hero's successful descent is usually sponsored by an Olympian protector: Athene supports Odysseus and Herakles; Aphrodite protects Aeneas. Eros (Love) motivates the journeys of Orpheus and Dionysus.
27. Heracles, initiated into the Mysteries of Demeter and sponsored by Athene and Hermes, travels to the Underworld as the last of his Twelve Labors to kidnap the hound Cerberus. With Hades's (Pluto's) permission, he captures the dog with his bare hands; in addition he liberates Asclepius and gets Theseus released (Theseus had been imprisoned there for trying to kidnap Persephone).
28. Heracles can return to the gods in spirit, but his image must remain in Hades. Homer here anticipates the later theory of the dual nature of immortal mind and mortal body.
29. Orpheus travels to Hades to rescue his beloved wife, Eurydice, dead from a snake-bite. With his music he moves Hades and Persephone to tears, and they let him take her with him, provided that he promises not to look back during the ascent. However, he can't help himself; when he turns around to see her, he loses her to Hades forever.

30. Orphism was based on the belief that, having been in the underworld, Orpheus possessed esoteric knowledge of the afterlife; Orphism thus fostered a belief in metempsychosis—the transmigration of the soul by rebirth into a series of new bodies.
31. The doctrine of the soul’s transmigration seems to have been first articulated by Pythagoras, a philosopher who established a society in Croton in southern Italy during the sixth century B.C. Pythagoras claimed to recall his previous incarnations and to hear the music of the spheres. Empedocles, a poet and philosopher from Sicily, was influenced by his teachings, as was Plato.
32. Even in the Homeric Underworld, the soul retains some of its individuality. The Homeric view of Hades is like a Freudian or Jungian dreamlike state of paralysis.
33. The most important influence on the evolving Greek views of the afterlife was Plato, who argued that the human soul, originating in heaven, descends to earth and is trapped in a mortal body. In “The Myth of Er” Plato describes what happens to the soul when death releases it from the body. His tale, narrated by a soldier named Er, draws heavily on Orphic doctrines regarding purification and regeneration.
34. Greek philosophers came to believe that moral absolutes exist and that souls will be dealt with after death according to the moral quality of their lives. Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and others envisioned a compartmentalized Hades.

NOTE: Pythagoras reportedly believed in reincarnation, and there is some evidence (in the dialogues *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*) that Plato may have agreed. In *Phaedrus*, Plato lets Socrates describe the cycle of life and death as a movement of the soul between the world of matter and the world of spirit. While in the world of spirit, the soul is all-knowing and shares the company of the Forms, the eternal ideas that give meaning and reality to life on earth. Then, because of an imperfect previous life, the soul is compelled to be reborn into the world of matter, the world we know as reality, which for Plato is a shadowland of imperfection. However, the more we realize that the world of the Forms is the true reality (in other words, the more we become true philosophers), the closer we are to not having to be reborn again.

35. The notion of the Underworld has a dual nature: the place for the psyche’s destructive potential and a projection of the hope for immortality.
36. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil portrays Aeneas’s descent into the land of the dead as an exploration of the human subconscious. For Virgil, the Underworld is both the tomb and the womb of life.
37. According to early Christian writers, Jesus entered the netherworld on Good Friday to retrieve righteous souls who died before he had opened the way to heaven, a *katabasis* that medieval theologians called “the harrowing of hell.”

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Odysseus, the Homeric hero of Troy and the eponymous hero of the *Odyssey*

Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*

Neoptolemus, Achilles’s warrior son

Thanatos, the personification of death

Circe, a sorceress in the *Odyssey*

Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk

Enkidu, his friend

Sheol, the Hebrew Underworld

Styx, Acheron, Cocytus, Phlegethon: rivers in Hades

Lethe, a plain in Hades (Roman: the river of forgetfulness)
Elysium, a paradise for select heroes
Menelaus, the husband of Helen of Troy
Aidoneus, another name for Hades (Pluto)
Persephone
Orpheus, a musician, the inspiration for Orphism
Cerberus, the hound of hell
Charon, the ferryman of Hades
Minos, Rhadamanthus, the Aeacus: judges in Hades
Hypnos, the god of sleep
Morpheus, the god of dreams
Tartarus
Tityus, a sinner in Tartarus/Hades, punished by vultures feeding on his liver
Tantalus, a sinner in Tartarus/Hades, punished by eternal hunger and thirst
Sisyphus, a sinner in Tartarus/Hades, punished by being made to repeatedly roll a rock uphill
Ixion, a sinner in Tartarus/Hades, punished by being bound to a rolling wheel of fire
Heracles, the strong demigod
Athene
Hermes
Psychopompos, Hermes's name as a guide of the soul
Er, a native of Pamphylia, killed in battle

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Homer (ninth century B.C.)
Anacreon, Greek lyric poet (sixth century B.C.)
Pythagoras, Greek philosopher and mathematician (sixth century B.C.)
Plato, Greek philosopher (c. 427–347 B.C.)
Virgil, Roman poet (70–19 B.C.)
Socrates, Greek philosopher (c. 469–399 B.C.)