Use of the word “Odyssey” has become ubiquitous in our culture. A Web search on the word turned up over a million web sites. The first two pages alone included such varied uses of the word as the name of an automobile; an educational travel tour agent; an audio components business; a golf putting equipment business; a magazine, an e-commerce Web development company; a bicycle components and accessories business; a scientific project (NASA’s Mars Odyssey); a science fiction film (2001 A Space Odyssey); a program for students from kindergarten through college designed to foster their creativity and problem solving abilities (Odyssey of the Mind); a Library of Congress exhibit entitled “African American Odyssey,” and Web sites for such diverse purposes as interactive science activities for young people; conferences on Global Information Systems; and Internet based social studies projects for classes doing cultural studies. And that was only the first two pages! There were also many sites devoted to the classic itself, including a full-text copy of a translation by Samuel Butler.

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.


When the great city of Troy was taken, all the chiefs who had fought against it set sail for their homes. But there was wrath in heaven against them, for indeed they had borne themselves haughtily and cruelly in the day of their victory. Therefore they did not all find a safe and happy return. For one was shipwrecked, and another was shamefully slain by his false wife in his palace, and others found all things at home troubled and changed and were driven to seek new dwellings elsewhere. And some, whose wives and friends and people had been still true to them through those ten long years of absence, were driven far and wide about the world before they saw their native land again. And of all, the wise Ulysses was he who wandered farthest and suffered most.

He was well-nigh the last to sail, for he had tarried many days to do pleasure to Agamemnon, lord of all the Greeks. Twelve ships he had with him—twelve he had brought to Troy—and in each there were some fifty men, being scarce half of those that had sailed in them in the old days, so many valiant heroes slept the last sleep by Simoïs and Scamander, and in the plain and on the sea-shore, slain in battle or by the shafts of Apollo.

First they sailed north-west to the Thracian coast, where the Ciconians dwelt, who had helped the men of Troy. Their city they took, and in it much plunder, slaves and oxen, and jars of fragrant wine, and might have escaped unhurt, but that they stayed to hold revel on the shore. For the Ciconians gathered their neighbours, being men of the same blood, and did battle with the invaders, and drove them to their ship. And when Ulysses numbered his men, he found that he had lost six out of each ship.

Scarce had he set out again when the wind began to blow fiercely; so, seeing a smooth sandy beach, they drove the ships ashore and dragged them out of reach of the waves, and waited
till the storm should abate. And the third morning being fair, they sailed again and journeyed prosperously till they came to the very end of the great Peloponnesian land, where Cape Malea looks out upon the southern sea. But contrary currents baffled them, so that they could not round it, and the north wind blew so strongly that they must fain drive before it. And on the tenth day they came to the land where the lotus grows—a wondrous fruit, of which whosoever eats cares not to see country or wife or children again. Now the Lotus-eaters, for so they call the people of this land, were a kindly folk, and gave of the fruit to some of the sailors, nor meaning them any harm, but thinking it to be the best that they had to give. These, when they had eaten, said that they would not sail any more over the sea; which, when the wise Ulysses heard, he bade their comrades bind them and carry them, sadly complaining, to the ships.

Then, the wind having abated, they took to their oars, and rowed for many days till they came to the country where the Cyclops dwell. Now, a mile or so from the shore there was an island, very fair and fertile, but no man dwells there or tills the soil, and in the island a harbour where a ship may be safe from all winds, and at the head of the harbour a stream falling form the rock, and whispering alders about it. Into this the ships passed safely, and were hauled up on the beach, and the crews slept by them, waiting for the morning. And the next day they hunted the wild goats, of which there was great store on the island, and feasted right merrily on what they caught, with draughts of red wine which they had carried off from the town of the Ciconians.

But on the morrow, Ulysses, for he was ever fond of adventure and would know of every land to which he came what manner of men they were that dwelt there, took one of his twelve ships and bade row to the land. There was a great hill sloping to the shore, and there rose up here and there a smoke from the caves where the Cyclopes dwelt apart, holding no converse with each other, for they were a rude and savage folk, but ruled each his own household, not caring for others. Now very close to the shore was one of these caves, very huge and deep, with laurels round about the mouth, and in front a fold with walls built of rough stone, and shaded by tall oaks and pines. So Ulysses chose out of the crew the twelve bravest, and bade the rest guard the ship, and went to see what manner of dwelling this was, and who abode there. He had his sword by his side, and on his shoulder a mighty skin of wine, sweet-smelling and strong, with which he might win the heart of some fierce savage, should he chance to meet with such, as indeed his prudent heart forecasted that he might.

So they entered the cave, and judged that it was the dwelling of some rich and skillful shepherd. For within there were pens for the young of the sheep and of the goats, divided all according to their age, and there were baskets full of cheeses, and full milk pails ranged along the wall. But the Cyclops himself was away in the pastures. Then the companions of Ulysses besought him that he would depart, taking with him, if he would, a store of cheeses and sundry of the lambs and of the kids. But he would not, for he wished to see, after his wont, what manner of host this strange shepherd might be. And truly he saw it to his cost!

It was evening when the Cyclops came home, a mighty giant, twenty feet in height or more. On his shoulder he bore a vast bundle of pine logs for his fire, and threw them down outside with a great crash, and drove the flocks within, and close the entrance with a huge rock, which twenty waggons and more could not bear. Then he milked the ewes and all the she-goats, and half of the milk he curdled for cheese, and half he set ready for himself, when he should sup. Next he kindled a fire with the pine logs, and the flame lighted up all the cave, showing him Ulysses and his comrades.

"Who are ye?" cried Polyphemus, for that was the giant’s name. "Are ye traders, or, haply, pirates?"
For in those days it was not counted shame to be called a pirate. Ulysses shuddered at the dreadful voice and shape, but bore him bravely, and answered, “We are no pirates, mighty sir, but Greeks, sailing back from Troy, and subjects of the great King Agamemnon, whose fame is spread from one end of heaven to the other. And we are come to beg hospitality of thee in the name of Zeus, who rewards or punishes hosts and guests according as they be faithful the one to the other, or no.”

“Nay,” said the giant, “it is but idle talk to tell of Zeus and the other gods. We Cyclopes take no account of gods, holding ourselves to be much better and stronger than they. But come, tell me where have you left your ship?”

But Ulysses saw his thought when he asked about the ship, how he was minded to break it, and take from them all hope of flight. Therefore he answered him craftily—

“Ship have we none, for that which was ours King Poseidon brake, driving it on a jutting rock on this coast, and we whom thou seest are all that escaped from the waves.”

Polyphemus answered nothing, but without more ado caught up two of the men, as a man might catch up the whelps of a dog, and dashed them on the ground, and tore them limb from limb, and devoured them, with huge draughts of milk between, leaving not a morsel, not even the very bones. But the others, when they saw the dreadful deed, could only weep and pray to Zeus for help. And when the giant had ended his foul meal, he lay down among his sheep and slept.

Then Ulysses questioned much in his heart whether he should slay the monster as he slept, for he doubted not that his good sword would pierce to the giant’s heart, mighty as he was. But, being very wise, he remembered that, should he slay him, he and his comrades would yet perish miserably. For who should move away the great rock that lay against the door of the cave? So they waited till the morning. And the monster woke, and milked his flocks, and afterwards, seizing two men, devoured them for his meal. Then he went to the pastures, but put the great rock on the mouth of the cave, just as a man puts down the lid upon his quiver.

All that day the wise Ulysses was thinking what he might best do to save himself and his companions, and the end of his thinking was this: there was a mighty pole in the cave, green wood of an olive tree, big as a ship’s mast, which Polyphemus purposed to use, when the smoke should have dried it, as a walking staff. Of this he cut off a fathom’s length, and his comrades sharpened it and hardened it in the fire, and then hid it away. At evening the giant came back, and drove his sheep into the cave, nor left the rams outside, as he had been wont to do before, but shut them in. And duly done his shepherd’s work, he made his cruel feast as before. Then Ulysses came forward with the wineskin in his hand, and said—

“Drink, Cyclops, now that thou hast feasted. Drink, and see what precious things we had in our ship. But no one hereafter will come to thee with such like, if thou dealest with strangers as cruelly as thou hast dealt with us.”

Then the Cyclops drank, and was mightily pleased, and said, “Give me again to drink, and tell me thy name, stranger, and I will give thee a gift such as a host should give. In good truth this is a rare liquor. We, too, have vines, but they bear not wine like this, which indeed must be such as the gods drink in heaven.”

Then Ulysses gave him the cup again, and he drank. Thrice he gave it to him, and thrice he drank, not knowing what it was, and how it would work within his brain.

Then Ulysses spake to him. “Thou didst ask my name, Cyclops. Lo! my name is No Man. And now that thou knowest my name, thou shouldst give me thy gift.”

And he said, “My gift shall be that I will eat thee last of all thy company.”

And as he spake he fell back in a drunken sleep. Then Ulysses bade his comrades be of
good courage, for the time was come when they should be delivered. And they thrust the stake
of olive wood into the fire till it was ready, green as it was, to burst into flame, and they thrust it
into the monster’s eye; for he had but one eye, and that in the midst of his forehead, with the
eyebrow below it. And Ulysses leant with all his force upon the stake, and thrust it in with might
and main. And the burning wood hissed in the eye, just as the red-hot iron hisses in the water
when a man seeks to temper steel for a sword.

Then the giant leapt up, and tore away the stake, and cried aloud, so that all the Cyclopes
who dwelt on the mountain side heard him and came about his cave, asking him, “What aileth
thee, Polyphemus, that thou makest this uproar in the peaceful night, driving away sleep? Is any
one robbing thee of thy sheep, or seeking to slay thee by craft or force?”

And the giant answered, “No Man slays me by craft?”

“Nay, but,” they said, “if no man does thee wrong, we cannot help thee. The sickness
which great Zeus may send, who can avoid? Pray to our father, Poseidon, for help.”

Then they departed; and Ulysses was glad at heart for the good success of his device,
when he said that he was No Man.

But the Cyclops rolled away the great stone from the door of the cave, and sat in the
midst, stretching out his hands, to feel whether perchance the men within the cave wouldst seek
to go out among the sheep.

Long did Ulysses think how he and his comrades should best escape. At last he lighted
upon a good device, and much he thanked Zeus for that his once the giant had driven the rams
with the other sheep into the cave. For, these being great and strong, he fastened his comrades
under the bellies of the beasts, tying them with osier twigs, of which the giant made his bed. One
ram he took, and fastened a man beneath it, and two others he set, one on either side. So he did
with the six, for but six were left out of the twelve who had ventured with him from the ship.
And there was one mighty ram, far larger than all the others, to this Ulysses clung, grasping the
fleece tight with both his hands. So they waited for the morning. And when the morning came,
the rams rushed forth to the pasture; but the giant sat in the door and felt the back of each as it
went by, nor thought to try what might be underneath. Last of all went the great ram. And the
Cyclops knew him as he passed, and said—

“How is this, thou, who art the leader of the flock? Thou art not wont thus to lag behind.
Thou hast always been the first to run to the pastures and streams in the morning, and the first to
come back to the fold when evening fell; and now thou art last of all. Perhaps thou art troubled
about thy master’s eye, which some wretch—No Man, they call him—has destroyed, having first
mastered me with wine. He has not escaped, I ween. I would that thou couldst speak, and tell
me where he is lurking. Of a truth I would dash out his brains upon the ground, and avenge me
of this No Man.”

So speaking, he let him pass out of the cave. But when they were out of reach of the
giant, Ulysses loosed his hold of the ram, and then unbound his comrades. And they hastened to
their ship, not forgetting to drive before them a good store of the Cyclops’ fat sheep. Right glad
were those that had abode by the ship to see them. Nor did they lament for those that had died,
though they were fain to do so, for Ulysses forbade, fearing lest the noise of their weeping
should betray them to the giant, where they were. Then they all climbed into the ship, and sitting
well in order on the benches, smote the sea with their oars, laying-to right lustily, that they might
sooner get away from the accursed land. And when they had rowed a hundred yards or so, so
that a man’s voice could be heard by one who stood upon the shore, Ulysses stood up in the ship
and shouted—
“He was no coward, O Cyclops, whose comrades thou didst so foully slay in thy den. Justly art thou punished, monster, that devourest thy guests in thy dwelling. May the gods make thee suffer yet worse things than these!”

Then the Cyclops, in his wrath, broke off the top of a great hill, a mighty rock, and hurled it where he had heard the voice. Right in front of the ship’s bow it fell, and a great wave rose as it sank, and washed the ship back to the shore. But Ulysses seized a long pole with both hands and pushed the ship from the land, and bade his comrades ply their oars, nodding with his head, for he was too wise to speak, lest the cyclops should know where they were. Then they rowed with all their might and main.

And when they had gotten twice as far as before, Ulysses made as if he would speak again; but his comrades sought to hinder him, saying, “Nay, my lord, anger not the giant any more. Surely we thought before we were lost, when he threw the great rock, and washed our ship back to the shore. And if he hear thee now, he may crush our ship and us, for the man throws a mighty bolt, and throws it far.”

But Ulysses would not be persuaded, but stood up and said, “Hear, Cyclops! If any man ask who blinded thee, say that it was the warrior Ulysses, son of Laertes, dwelling in Ithaca.”

And the Cyclops answered with a groan, “Of a truth, the old oracles are fulfilled, for long ago there came to this land one Telemus, a prophet, and dwelt among us even to old age. Thus man foretold to me that one Ulysses would rob me of my sight. Bit I looked for a great man and a strong, who should subdue me by force, and now a weakling has done the deed, having cheated me with wine. But come thou hither, Ulysses, and I will be a host indeed to thee. Or, at least, may Poseidon give thee such a voyage to thy home as I would wish thee to have. For know that Poseidon is my sire. May be that he may heal me of my grievous wound.”

And Ulysses said, “Would to God I could send thee down to the abode of the dead, where thou wouldest be past all healing, even from Poseidon’ self.”

Then Cyclops lifted up his hands to Poseidon and prayed—

“Hear me, Poseidon, if I am indeed thy son and thou my father. May this Ulysses never reach his home! or, if the Fates have ordered that he should reach it, may he come alone, all his comrades lost, and come to find sore trouble in his house!”

And as he ended he hurled another mighty rock, which almost lighted on the rudder’s end, yet missed it as by a hair’s breadth. So Ulysses and his comrades escaped, and came to the island of the wild goats, where they found their comrades, who indeed had waited long for them, in sore fear lest they had perished. Then Ulysses divided amongst his company all the sheep which they had taken from the Cyclops. And all, with one consent, gave him for his share the great ram which had carried him out of the cave, and he sacrificed it to Zeus. And all that day they feasted right merrily on the flesh of sheep and on sweet wine, and when the night was come, they lay down upon the shore and slept.