

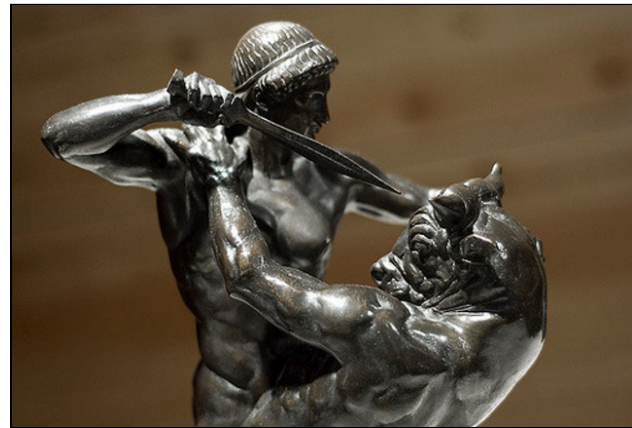
Name: _____ Class: _____

Theseus and the Minotaur

By E2BN.org
2006

In ancient Greece, people told myths to explain the ways of the world. Myths often portrayed brave heroes and vicious monsters. The ancient Greeks also believed in powerful gods who watched over Earth and intervened when they saw fit. In this particular myth, a prince from Greece's capital city of Athens travels by sea to another city, Crete, in order to fight a monster. As you read, take notes on how Theseus' actions and characteristics help drive the plot.

- [1] King Minos of Crete was a powerful man, feared by the rulers of the lands around him. When he demanded goods or men for his great armies, they felt they had to agree. When he demanded they send tributes¹ to honour him, they sent them without question. It was the only way they could stop him going to war with them. But his demands on Athens became too much for them to bear.



"Antoine-Louis Barye's 'Theseus Slaying The Minotaur'" by Timothy Vogel is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

King Minos had a great palace built for himself. Inside this palace, Minos had built a giant maze, a labyrinth, and, at the centre of the maze, he kept a terrifying creature – the Minotaur. Now this was no ordinary animal; it was a monster, half man and half bull.

It was powerful and savage,² and it loved to eat the flesh of the humans who had been shut into the labyrinth by King Minos. They would wander through the maze, completely lost, until at last they came face to face with the Minotaur. Not a great way to die, really.

As for Athens, Minos demanded that every year King Aegeus of Athens send him seven young men and seven young women.

- [5] "Why do we send these young people to Crete every year?" Theseus, the King's son, asked his father. "And why is it that none of them ever return?"

"Because if we did not send them, Minos would wage war on us and it is a war that we would not win," said King Aegeus. "And they do not return because they do not go to Crete as slaves. They go as food for the Minotaur."

"Father, this is terrible," shouted Theseus, "we cannot let this go on. We cannot sacrifice any more of our young citizens to this tyrant. When it is time to send the next tribute, I will go as one of them and I vow that it is the last time the Minotaur will be fed with the flesh of any of our people."

1. In this context, a tribute is a payment made by one state or ruler to another, especially as the price of peace, security, protection or to recognize authority
2. **Savage (adjective):** fierce, violent, or uncontrolled

Try as he might, his father could not persuade him to change his mind. Aegeus reminded him that every year, other young men had sworn to slay this terrible beast and they had never been seen again.

Theseus insisted that he understood the dangers but would succeed. "I will return to you, father," cried Theseus, as the ship left the harbour³ wall, "and you will be proud of your son."

- [10] "Then I wish you good luck, my son," cried his father, "I shall keep watch for you every day. If you are successful, take down these black sails and replace them with white ones. That way I will know you are coming home safe to me."

As the ship docked in Crete, King Minos himself came down to inspect the prisoners from Athens. He enjoyed the chance to taunt the Athenians and to humiliate⁴ them even further.

"Is this all your king has to offer this year?" he jeered. "Such puny⁵ creatures. Hardly even a snack for the mighty creature within the labyrinth. Anyway, let's get on with it. I am not a hard-hearted man, so I will let you choose which one goes first into the Minotaur's den. Who is it to be?"

Theseus stepped forward.

"I will go first. I am Theseus, Prince of Athens and I do not fear what is within the walls of your maze."

- [15] "Those are brave words for one so young and so feeble.⁶ But the Minotaur will soon have you between its horns. Guards, open the labyrinth and send him in."

Standing behind the king, listening, was his daughter, Ariadne. From the moment she set eyes on Theseus, Ariadne fell in love with him. As she listened to her father goading⁷ and taunting the young prince, she decided that she would help him. As he entered the labyrinth and the guards walked away, she called softly to him.

"Theseus, take this," she whispered. "Even if you kill the Minotaur, you will never find your way out again."

She threw him a great ball of string and he tied one end of it to the entrance. He smiled at her, turned and began to make his way into the maze, the string playing out behind him as he went.

Theseus walked carefully through the dark, foul-smelling passages of the labyrinth, expecting at any moment to come face-to-face with the creature. He did not have long to wait. Turning a corner, with his hands held out in front of him feeling his way, he suddenly touched what felt like a huge bony horn.

- [20] In an instant his world turned upside-down, quite literally. He was picked up between the Minotaur's horns and tossed high into the air. When he landed on the hard cold stone, he felt the animal's huge hooves come down on his chest. Every last breath seemed to be knocked out of him and he struggled to stay alive in the darkness.

3. A harbour is a place on the coast where ships may find shelter

4. **Humiliate (verb):** to make someone feel ashamed or foolish

5. **Puny (adjective):** small and weak

6. **Feeble (adjective):** lacking physical strength, especially due to age or illness

7. **Goad (verb):** to provoke or annoy in order to create a reaction

But Theseus was no ordinary man. He was the son of the King, he was brave and he was stubborn. As the Minotaur bellowed⁸ in his ear and grabbed at him with its hairy arms, Theseus found a strength which he did not know he possessed.

He grabbed the animal's huge horns, and kept on twisting the great head from side to side. As the animal grew weak, Theseus gave one almighty tug on the head, turning it almost right around. The creature's neck snapped, it gurgled its last breath and fell to the floor with an enormous thud.

It was over, he had done it. The Minotaur was dead. All he had to do was make his way out of... and then he realised the awful truth. In the struggle, he had let go of the string, his lifeline. Theseus felt all over the floor in the pitch darkness and kept thinking he had found it, only to realise that all he had was a long wiry hair from the Minotaur.

Despair⁹ set in and Theseus wondered if this was where his life would end, down in the dark, all alone, next to the stinking body. Then, his hand brushed a piece of string and, with a whoop of delight, he knew he had found the thread which would lead him back out. As he neared the entrance of the labyrinth, the darkness began to fade and he made out the figure of Ariadne, waiting for his return.

[25] "You must take me back to Athens with you," she cried, "My father will kill me when he finds out that I have helped you."

"But of course you must come with us," said Theseus, "it would be cruel to leave you here." Quickly and quietly, they unfurled¹⁰ the great black sails of their ship and headed for home.

"I cannot believe how my life has changed," said Ariadne, as they sailed across the calm seas towards Athens. "To think that I am free of my cruel father and that I will soon be married to a great prince."

"Married?" said Theseus, "Oh, yes, that will be... er... wonderful." But in truth, Theseus did not really find her attractive.

So, when their ship docked at an island on their way home, to collect fresh water, Theseus sent Ariadne off to find bread and fruit. The moment she was gone, he set sail and left her on the island. Now, you might think that this was a bad way to reward someone who had helped him and had saved him from certain death.

[30] The Gods clearly thought the same thing, for they had a further horror in store for him, as a punishment for his ungrateful treatment of the young girl.

In his haste¹¹ to get away, Theseus forgot to change his sails to white. King Aegeus, waiting on the headland, saw the ship approaching with its black sails flying in the wind.

"My son has failed and he is dead," he cried. And in despair, he flung himself from the cliff into the raging waters below. From that day on, the sea was named in memory of Theseus' father, and to this day, it is known as the Aegean Sea.

8. **Bellow** (*verb*): to shout in a loud or deep voice

9. **Despair** (*noun*): a feeling that everything is wrong and nothing will get better

10. to open something, like a flag, so that it is spread out

11. **Haste** (*noun*): speed or hurry, often made with urgency

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How does the author characterize Theseus in the story? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

2. PART A: How does the interaction between Theseus and King Minos in paragraphs 12-15 contribute to the plot as a whole?
 - A. It establishes King Minos as Theseus' central challenge in the labyrinth, setting up the king's battle with Theseus.
 - B. It creates an atmosphere of fear which remains with Theseus as he travels the labyrinth.
 - C. It helps the reader to fully visualize the new setting of Crete through the eyes of Theseus.
 - D. It further contrasts King Minos' villainous ways with Theseus' bravery, setting Theseus up as the hero.

3. PART B: Which later quote from the story confirms your answer to Part A?
 - A. "Theseus walked carefully through the dark, foul-smelling passages of the labyrinth, expecting at any moment to come face-to-face with the creature." (Paragraph 19)
 - B. "He was picked up between the Minotaur's horns and tossed high into the air. When he landed on the hard cold stone, he felt the animal's huge hooves come down on his chest." (Paragraph 20)
 - C. "As the Minotaur bellowed in his ear and grabbed at him with its hairy arms, Theseus found a strength which he did not know he possessed." (Paragraph 21)
 - D. "Theseus felt all over the floor in the pitch darkness and kept thinking he had found it, only to realize that all he had was a long wiry hair from the Minotaur." (Paragraph 23)

4. PART A: What does the word "tyrant" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 7?
 - A. A person who runs a country
 - B. A leader who torments people
 - C. A soldier who is ready to fight
 - D. An innocent young citizen

5. PART B: Which quote from later in the story best supports your answer to Part A?
- A. "As the ship docked in Crete, King Minos himself came down to inspect the prisoners from Athens." (Paragraph 11)
 - B. "He enjoyed the chance to taunt the Athenians and to humiliate them even further." (Paragraph 11)
 - C. "Those are brave words for one so young and so feeble." (Paragraph 15)
 - D. "Standing behind the king, listening, was his daughter, Ariadne." (Paragraph 16)

6. How do the actions of Ariadne help further the plot? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. If it weren't for Ariadne, do you think Theseus would have been able to get out of the maze? Use details about the maze and Theseus' character to support your ideas.
2. How does the ending of the story change your opinion of Theseus' character? Do you think the gods should punish him? Why or why not?
3. The Ancient Greeks often told myths to explain how things came to be and to teach a lesson. What do we, as readers, learn from this myth about power? How can power corrupt people? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of this myth, what makes a hero? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.