

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Welcome to the Underworld

By Michael A. Signal  
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*In Greek mythology, the Underworld is where souls go after death. In this text, Hermes, messenger of the gods, gives readers a tour of the Underworld. As you read, take notes on the different things that can happen to a soul in the Underworld.*

[1] Hello and welcome! I'll be your tour guide for the day. No reason to be scared — well, there is some reason to be scared. But don't worry, for I will keep you safe. Your surroundings are, no doubt, frightful. As you look around, however, I am sure you will begin to understand. You see, you are no longer in the land of the living, a world commanded by Zeus. You are now in his brother's kingdom.

Ah, it's becoming clear now. I can see the understanding beginning to dawn<sup>1</sup> across your face. You have passed on to the land of souls: the realm<sup>2</sup> of **Hades**.<sup>3</sup> I am here to welcome you into this realm and to guide you through it. At the end of the tour, I will escort you back to the land of the living. Welcome... to the Underworld.



*"Fallen angels in Hell" by John Martin is in the public domain.*

Well, we're not exactly in the Underworld, not yet. First, we have to cross this river, which acts as a boundary between the living and the dead. It is called the River Styx, and we can't cross it alone. We have to wait here for the ferry.

Do you have the fare? Of course, you don't. In this world, there's a fare you have to pay in order to travel across the river. Typically, loved ones place coins in the mouth of the dead, knowing they will need the money to pay **Charon**, the ferryman of Hades. I have a coin that will allow us to board the ferry. And look, here is Charon now, wearing his long tattered<sup>4</sup> robe and carrying his ferryman's pole. We must give the coin to Charon before we can board his vessel.

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1. to begin to appear
  2. an area ruled by someone
  3. "Hades" can be used to refer to the Underworld, or the god that rules over it.
  4. old or torn

[5] Look there! See that figure in the distance? Yes, those are three heads. We are nearing the gates of Hades, guarded by a fierce hound named **Cerberus**. Cerberus is a massive, fearsome beast. I am sure you have heard tales of him, but seeing him in person can be intimidating.<sup>5</sup> He is not just a huge dog with three heads but a mixture of the Underworld's most monstrous creatures. You can see now that he has the tail of a serpent and the heads of many snakes growing from his back. I assure you, Cerberus will not harm<sup>6</sup> anyone unless they try to escape Hades. You see, Cerberus ensures that none but the souls of the dead enter the Underworld — unless accompanied by me! He also guards the gate so that no one can escape back into the world of the living.

Because Cerberus has allowed us safe passage through the gate, we are now in Hades. The Underworld is divided into three parts. First, there is paradise: the Elysian Fields. People earn the right to spend eternity<sup>7</sup> in the **Elysian Fields** through heroic feats and virtuous<sup>8</sup> deeds on earth. Many mortals strive to get here but, alas, only a small number of souls earn the right to spend eternity in paradise. Next, there are the **Asphodel Meadows**. It is not a land of pure delight, like the Elysian Fields. This is where people who have lived good but unremarkable lives come to stay after those lives have ended. And finally... let us move just a bit closer to the edge here. Look down. That is the pit of **Tartarus**. You should never want a closer look than this. Tartarus is a land of pain, despair, and punishment. It is reserved for only the most despicable<sup>9</sup> people who have spent their lives as scoundrels, thieves, and murderers.

Who determines who is good and who deserves to be sent to Tartarus? Every Greek knows that Zeus reigns<sup>10</sup> over all other gods. He presides over them and the living from his home on Mt. Olympus. And his brother, Poseidon, rules the oceans. Well, there is another powerful god who rules the dead here in the Underworld. **Hades**, brother of Zeus and Poseidon, is god of the dead. He has rule over every departed soul.

For those who are deserving, Hades will reward them in the Elysian Fields. But Hades will eternally punish those who cross him or anger the gods. **Sisyphus** and **Tantalus** were crafty, deceitful kings who were sent to Tartarus for the rest of time. Sisyphus was sentenced to push a heavy boulder up a steep hill forever. Every time he is close to reaching the top of the hill, it rolls back down, and he must start the process over again. Tantalus was sentenced to stand in a pool of water that sits beneath a fruit tree. No matter how hungry or thirsty he gets, he will never be able to reach for the fruit or the water. Imagine how *tantalizing*<sup>11</sup> that must be!

Sorry, that was a bad joke. This is serious. Don't worry, for most humans have not been so vile and wretched in life as Sisyphus and Tantalus. Few should fear this punishment... as long as they obey the laws of Hades.

[10] It is my job to know these things and to share with you this knowledge. I am **Hermes**, messenger of the gods and son of Zeus. I am also tasked with guiding souls to the Underworld. I hope that I have given you useful information and have answered any questions that you might have about the realm of the dead. Feel free to stop by again! After all, the Greeks believed that this would be their home for all eternity — it's not as if we are going anywhere!

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5. **Intimidate (verb):** to frighten someone or make them feel nervous
  6. **Harm (verb):** to hurt or injure
  7. **Eternity (noun):** time without an end
  8. **Virtuous (adjective):** having good moral qualities
  9. **Despicable (adjective):** deserving hatred and extreme criticism
  10. **Reign (verb):** to rule
  11. **Tantalize (verb):** to torment or tease someone with something out of reach

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## Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the main idea of the text?
  - A. The Underworld is a terrifying place that people spend their lives attempting to avoid.
  - B. Hades and the Underworld are unfairly judged by the living, despite offering the dead a pleasant afterlife.
  - C. The Underworld is a complex place, where Hades decides how the dead will spend their afterlife.
  - D. Hades makes it extremely difficult for people to travel to the Underworld, as he wishes to keep his territory a secret.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "You see, you are no longer in the land of the living, a world commanded by Zeus. You are now in his brother's kingdom." (Paragraph 1)
  - B. "You see, Cerberus ensures that none but the souls of the dead enter the Underworld — unless accompanied by me!" (Paragraph 5)
  - C. "That is the pit of Tartarus. You should never want a closer look than this. Tartarus is a land of pain, despair, and punishment." (Paragraph 6)
  - D. "For those who are deserving, Hades will reward them in the Elysian Fields. But Hades will eternally punish those who cross him or anger the gods." (Paragraph 8)
  
3. PART A: Which of the following describes Hermes' attitude towards the person he is taking on a tour of the Underworld?
  - A. Hermes is helpful and comforting towards the person on the tour, as he shows them the Underworld and tells them about it.
  - B. Hermes is apologetic towards the person on the tour for showing them the frightening sights of monsters and Hades.
  - C. Hermes is irritated towards the person on the tour, as it is clear that the individual is afraid of the Underworld.
  - D. Hermes is snobby towards the person on the tour, as he knows so much more about the Underworld than the other person.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "I am here to welcome you into this realm and to guide you through it. At the end of the tour, I will escort you back to the land of the living." (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "Cerberus is a massive, fearsome beast. I am sure you have heard tales of him, but seeing him in person can be intimidating." (Paragraph 5)
  - C. "Every Greek knows that Zeus reigns over all other gods. He presides over them and the living from his home on Mt. Olympus." (Paragraph 7)
  - D. "No matter how hungry or thirsty he gets, he will never be able to reach for the fruit or the water. Imagine how tantalizing that must be!" (Paragraph 8)

5. How does a person's life on Earth affect their experiences in the Underworld?

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