Lecture 10

Good morning and welcome to LLT121 Classical Mythology, the class in which we go to hell. What we're talking about today will be katabasis myth. You should know by now that when I take the trouble to print a word on the board this neatly, it's going to show up on the tests sooner or later. By the way, I do have your quizzes. I will be passing them back at the end of the hour and anybody who said "weltanschauung" automatically got two extra credit points. Buzzwords are cool. Katabasis is the ancient Greek word for quote/unquote a going down, a trip down. In the myths we're going to be studying, starting today, it involves, also, a trip down to the underworld—wherever that it—a learning experience. Somehow, the person who goes on a katabasis encounters the afterlife in some way, shape, form, or fashion, learns from it, speaks to people in the underworld, returns back to life as we know it, and then either may or may not share what he or she has learned with people in real life. In ancient times, a katabasis is literally that, a trip down to the underworld or wherever it is that dead people live—dead souls live. I think I suggested to you last time that a katabasis theme— the theme of descent into the underworld—could also be a descent into a symbolic underworld, return from a symbolic underworld, emergence into the light, and rebirth. You can look at it as a rebirth, if you will, with a new attitude, a new outlook on life. Such is the plot of the Star Wars movies, if I recall correctly, such as the plot of Apocalypse Now, and such as the plot of any Sylvester Stallone action movie and so forth. So be alert to the theme of katabasis. It's going to show up on the test.

When last we left off, I was telling you stories about the top 53 sinners of the ancient Greco-Roman mythology. This is a really nasty come on, because, if I tell the story correctly, you really could believe that you have to memorize 53 names for your next quiz. But, in fact, it's Ixion. What was Ixion's bad career move? He tried to rape Hera. What was his punishment? What happens when he goes down, down, down? Okay. Very good. Tantalus. What was Tantalus's bad career move? He served his child, Pelops, to the gods. What was his punishment, somebody who is not you? Moosehead. That's right. He gets tantalized. Sisyphus. What was Sisyphus's bad career move? He cheated death. What's his punishment? He has to push the rock up the hill and, whenever he gets it to the top, it rolls down. Tityus. What was his bad career move? Josh? Okay. Jared? No. Caroline? He tried to rape Leto. He gets staked out and vultures tear out his liver. Numbers 5-53 are the Danaides; the women who were 50 sisters married 50 ancient Egyptian brothers and 49 of them killed their ancient Egyptian husbands. Their punishment is? Your name is still Kristen, right? Good for me! Very dynamic. You get the impression that some of these stories have gotten exaggerated for effect, that somebody is trying to teach somebody a lesson.

That brings up the problem with what I am now about to call the Olympian View of the Afterlife. Okay, I saw your hand, but I'm going to write this on the board because I'm
going to be saying this all the time. Olympian View of the Afterlife, here's what I mean: I mean the viewpoint of what happens to you after you die, prevalent when people really believed, implicitly and fundamentally, in the Olympian gods. A good date for this would be 750 BC, the time period when both Hesiod and Homer were writing their poetry. This is what I want to discuss next. This is what people believed happened to them after they died. Now, Mark, your question. Yeah, well I think if you count correctly it's 5–53. Yeah, well, take him out behind Craig Hall and beat him up after class. Jeremy. You're Josh, and you're Jeremy. He spun round and round on a burning ring of fire. Okay, Olympian View of the Afterlife. Our best source for this is the Odyssey, by Homer, written about 750 BC. Let me give you just a—well, the plot of the Odyssey, as Aristotle and I believe, is very simple. It requires, basically, just a little bit of explanation, but not much more than that.

Does anybody know what I have just drawn on the map? Zoom in, zoom in, zoom in. Greer, God bless you. You know, I one time had somebody say, "That's my mom!" No, it's not your mom. It's the Mediterranean Sea. Thank you. The city of Troy is more or less here. Odysseus and his buddies defeat the Trojans. They sacked the city of Troy and Odysseus, basically, wants to get home to his home island of Ithaca, to his wife, Penelope, to whom he has been faithful the entire time. By the time he gets back, he will have been gone 20 years and he has been faithful to her the entire time. Now, here's the action. Odysseus, basically, spends the whole poem sailing back and forth. He's lost. Here's Sicily, by the way. Then in the second half of the poem he actually winds up home, on his home island, but he has to take 12 books to get there. To get in there and say, "Hi, Penny, I'm home." I'll give you this as a little present. If you've ever been involved in a relationship with somebody that you really loved, then the two of you get really mad at each other, how many of you really relish being the first one to say, "I messed up. I feel really terrible. I blew it. Please forgive me." Ray, you're just fooling. You always try to make the other person say, "uncle" first. "You missed me didn't you?" It's the same thing with Odysseus and Penny. It's really a hoot. When we catch Odysseus telling his katabasis story, he is visiting this goddess—well, she is part goddess. Her father is the sun god. She's a local goddess who lives on an island named Circe. In the movie, she is played by Cher. Circe's a woman who turns men into pigs. I don't want to hear the rest of that joke, women. Then Odysseus gets her to turn him back into a man. I don't want to hear that joke, either. And after a year of spending time on Circe's island, Circe says, "It's time for you to go, Odysseus. It's time for you to go back to your beloved wife, Penelope, with whom you've been faithful the entire time." He says, "Well, yes, this is a good idea in principle, but how do I get home?" Circe, basically, tells him, "Go to hell. Go to the underworld. Go to the afterlife and consult the dead prophet, Tiresias." Not only is Tiresias a dead prophet, he is a dead, blind prophet. How he went blind, I'll tell you some other time. It's pretty cool, though. Tiresias lived down in the underworld. Odysseus has got to go down and visit him. Odysseus says, "Well, I guess, if
I have to I have to, but how do I go to hell?" Now this is also a punch line of a joke that's about 2500 years old. It was first given in Aristophanes' play, The Frogs. Do you remember that, Elizabeth, when Dionysus was asking Hercules, "Hercules, how do I go on a katabasis? How do I go to hell?" "Climb to the top of that tower." "Okay." "And, when I say jump, jump." That joke is literally 2500 years old.

Fortunately for Odysseus, the way to go to the underworld and find Tiresias is to sail west. Why to sail west? Yes, the west is the best, but why? The sun sets in the west, very good. They believed that the edge of the world was out here. The world was a giant frisbee. Have you ever seen the Hagar the Horrible cartoons where he's always sailing off toward the edge of the world and it just drops off? The ancient Greeks actually believed this. Then you make a right turn, and then another right turn, and you are in the underworld, the afterlife. The afterlife is located in the modern day country of Portugal. If I were to put a trick question on the exam. "Where's hell?" The correct answer is "Portugal." I apologize, by the way, to anybody who may be Portuguese, or know people who are Portuguese. It's just a matter of geography. It could have been anywhere, but it happens to be Portugal. You sail past the Pillars of Hercules—better known to us today as the Straits of Gibraltar—make a couple of right hand turns, and you're there. Keep in mind, too, the symbolism of the Pillars of Hercules, which actually look like this when you're trying to sail through them. It's like a door that you have to enter, a secret passageway. Think, also, of the symbolism of emerging back out through the door. The door can stand for a womb from which you emerge, reborn. Okay, having gone down, learned your lesson, and returned wiser, somebody who has been born again, somebody who had died and come back, and so on. I could harp on that for excruciating length, but I won't.

What I want you to do, though, is compare these three katabasis stories on the following features. It may or may not show up on a quiz. It could show up on an essay exam. I don't know how much more blatant I can be. How optimistic or pessimistic is the afterlife in this katabasis myth? I'll help you out. The afterlife, according to Odysseus's katabasis, is really depressing. Question number two is actually something that Mark brought up in our last class. Do people bear any responsibility for their personal actions? Finally, number three, what is the relationship of the body to the soul? Which is a particularly interesting question to me because, being brought up in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are told that the body is where your soul lives during this life. When you perish, your body becomes dust, but your soul, which is pure and immortal, survives. We're going to have to park that one for a little while. Okay, questions up to this point. Ray? Well, how about weltanschauung? That shut him up. Yeah. How optimistic of a weltanschauung does this particular katabasis story represent? This one's going to be a real four-alarm bummer. Okay? Trust me. Other questions? Mike? Okay, I was just practicing saying your name. Mike. Mike. Mike. Not Snakehead, Mike. Pardon? Okay, as Mike observed in our class last time, do people bear any responsibilities for their actions? Okay? Okay.
Odysseus is informed that he has to go see the blind prophet, Tiresias, in the underworld, which is located in beautiful Portugal. Mona, question? Okay.

So Odysseus and a ship full of his men sail out past the Pillars of Hercules, make a right, then another right, and wind up on this beach. Okay, even the ancient Greeks could not conceive of the underworld as a beach. So there's a big huge, deep forest. The underworld is very easily conceived of as a forest. Just in front of the forest, Odysseus digs a trench and fills it with the blood of sacrificed animals. The souls of all the dead people come rushing up, gibbering, to partake of the blood of the deceased animals. Odysseus has to fend them off with a sword until he gets to talk to the one he wants to talk to, who is Tiresias. Mitch, I noticed you making a face. Do you have something you would care to share with the class? Oh, be a wise guy. Go ahead. I think I know what you were thinking. Does anybody want to point out a kind of... Yeah. See, I knew that's what you were thinking, Mitch. You're supposed to share that with the class. It's a very good point. "What are you going to do? Kill me?" It's like the guy sitting there smoking in his death row cell. "What are you going to do? Execute me?" Mitch, it's a good question. Are you threatening me? I can't answer it. Obviously, it's intended to show, as a foretaste, if you will, of how dismal the afterlife is. Okay? That is to say that the afterlife is such a cold, dreary, depressing place that the souls will all come running, gibbering up there to drink cow blood out of a trench that somebody dug in the dirt.

But that's all right, Mitch, because it gets worse. Farrah Lynn? Pardon? Is there any River Styx? No, there is no River Styx. He doesn't get to see it, yet. Yeah. I might point out that I now understand what Homer went through, faced with two or three or more separate—and apparently mutually exclusive—traditions of the topography of the underworld. There will always be at least two wise acres in any group of 20 who will call you on it. You bad, Farrah Lynn. What happens is, it is in the woods, and it is never too clearly spelled out because even Homer can't patch all the pieces together, because it's there. There's Charon, Cerberus and all of that. But, for whatever reason, he's going to stress this theme. Yeah, actually it's the oldest one the ancient Greeks have, the oldest version of the Hades story that the Greeks have. I might point out, too, that Homer has all sorts of bizarre variance of myths in the Odyssey and the Iliad. One version in which Heracles wounds Hera in the left breast with a three pronged arrow. The ancient Greeks did not like to emphasize this one very much, either, okay? Because the point of this whole story is not to give us the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Underworld. To me, it's to point out just how pointless, meaningless, and depressing the afterlife really is. Tiresias gives Odysseus directions on how to get home. For what it's worth, he says, "You will get home. You'll get home all by yourself. You'll live to a ripe old age. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." He knows that. Once Odysseus has talked to Tiresias, he then interviews various other dead people.

One of these people is Achilles. Achilles is the son of Peleus and Thetis. Achilles is the fellow to the ancient Greeks—you ask any ancient Greek on the street, for over all of the
classical period, what ancient Greek would you like your kid to be like, they would tell you, Achilles. Achilles is the star of the Iliad. The Iliad was what the Greeks perceived as the high point of their civilization. The story of a guy who never took poop off of anybody, the story of a guy who kicked the butts of his enemies, sacked cities, and carried off women. That was one heck of a guy, the guy who made a name for himself, the guy who nobody ever messed with. The guy who was so great that the poem about him has survived for 3200 years. Achilles. And Odysseus says to Achilles, "Hey, Achilles how do you like life in the afterlife? How do you like having such a great name? How do you feel about the immense glory you have won through your exploits, now that you are dead? I even understand, Achilles, that you are especially respected here in the afterlife. You get extra perks." Although, Mitch, I don't know what those would be. Here's what Achilles says. If you can quote this, verbatim, on a test so much the better for you. It's in your book, too. "Oh, shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. I would rather follow the plow, as slave to another man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on, than to be a king over all the perished dead."

What he is saying is that he would rather be a sharecropper working for the poorest farmer on earth, eating dirt every day of his life, than to be the king of all the dead. It's pretty eloquent testimony, I think, to just how meaningless and terrifying and useless and boring and depressing the afterlife was, according to the Olympian View of the Afterlife. Odysseus also speaks to his mother. His mother's name is Anticlea. In one of the very first guilt trips in ancient literature, Odysseus walks down, encounters the soul of his mother and, you know: "Mom, what are you doing down here?" "I died of longing for you, my beloved son, Odysseus." "Great mom. The first thing she says to me in 17 years is a guilt trip." But she does explain to Odysseus what happens after a human being dies. Here's what she says. I'll say it in translated ancient Greek. Then I'll say it in English. "The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together. And once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury. But the soul flitters off like a dream and flies away." It's almost as easy as putting two and two together. The ancient Greeks of Homer's and Hesiod's time, the so-called Olympian View of the Afterlife, held the view that a human being is made up of a body and a soul. At death, the body and the soul separate, and all that's left is the soul. The body perishes and the soul is condemned to an eternal meaningless, boring, dull, cheerless, useless afterlife, a life in which no pleasures can be experienced because the body has perished. Even Achilles, the guy who sacked all the cities and carried off all the babes and had all the money and the fame and the glory, wishes that he could live, even if it meant being a sharecropper of the poorest farmer on earth, who eats dirt everyday for a living.

This, by the way, is why I really think that Odysseus loved Penelope, because now Odysseus knows just how depressing the afterlife is. Odysseus knows what's going to happen to him and to Penelope after he dies. Life is nasty, brutish, and short, and then, my friend, you die and it gets worse. But it goes on. Obviously, this is an example of a
society that has a very negative weltanschauung. We've seen it before. We've seen it in Hesiod's account of the Ages of Humankind, in which Zeus destroys the people of the earth four different times. We have seen it in the story of the creation of womankind as a punishment for men. Life is nasty, brutish and short. The gods don't care. Then you die and then it gets worse. Do people bear any responsibility for how they lived? Well, yes. If you feed your child to the gods, or you cheat death, or you try to rape an immortal goddess, yes, or you kill your husband, there will be a very bad punishment for you. But, to get back to Mark's excellent point of our last class period, the average shmucks and shmuckettes like you and me are going to wind up in the afterlife Odysseus has just described no matter how bad or how good we are. There is no compulsion to lead a particularly moral lifestyle, no compulsion to help little old ladies cross the street, no compulsion not to grab their handbag and go spend it on drugs. Or, as it says in my lecture notes, no responsibility, no purpose for life, no clue. You can imagine how well this Olympian View of the Afterlife went over. I don't see any of you rushing out the doorway to convert to it. It is the product of a time period that was not very technologically advanced. It was the product of a civilization that, as of yet, suffered from a pretty low weltanschauung. Heck, it's the Iron Age. This is the age that Hesiod himself said, "I wish I hadn't been born during this age. I wish I had been born earlier or later." God, I can almost hear, faintly, off in the distance, the world's smallest violin playing. Around 375 BC, Plato, in his book, The Republic, tells us another katabasis story, the so-called Myth of Er. Plato's Republic, in many respects, is the granddaddy of public affairs statements. The Republic of Plato is an attempt to define and expand upon how to bring about the ideal city with the ideal government. Plato actually tried to put this into practice once, even, and it failed miserably. What a guy! You've all heard of Plato? You all hear of Socrates? Who is Socrates? He was the single most annoying person in the history of ancient Greece. Socrates was a stonemason. He had a wife named Xanthippe. He had a couple kids named Socrates, Jr., and Socrates III. I just made that up. He did have a couple of kids. His wife was always yapping at him. "Socrates, why don't you go out and make a living?" But Socrates liked to hang around with guys and ask them really annoying questions. Socrates had the reputation of being the wisest man in the whole world. This was confirmed by the Delphic Oracle. The Delphic Oracle is right 100 percent of the time. Socrates knew that he was, indeed, the wisest man in the whole universe, because he was the one man in the universe who knew that he knew nothing about anything. He, and he alone, understood how ignorant everybody in the human race was. The rest of us think we all know something. Whereas Socrates knew he was just dumb as a box of hammers, and he loved it.
Socrates's style was to go around and ask annoying questions of people, then never really answer them himself, which proves that he was really smart. He would just toss out some exploding time bomb of a question and then no matter how you tried to answer it, he'd make you look like an idiot. Like, "What is justice?" "Um, doing what comes to people,
what they deserve." "Well, okay, let's say that Phil shoots me in the beginning of class. Should I shoot Phil?" "Yes, that would be justice." "But what if Hughes was about to kill Mark, and Phil shot, you know? And so on and so forth." No matter what you said, Socrates would find some argument to prove you are an utter blithering idiot. He had weird ideas about gods and stuff like that. He thought that, "Well, I don't really think the Olympian gods really exist or ever existed. But there is such a thing as God. It's just that we, being humans, don't really understand. Can't understand." Well, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, Socrates never got a job. What he did get, of course, was killed when he was tried on a charge of corrupting youth. They put him to death by making him drink hemlock.

After Socrates's death, one of his faithful companions, one of the guys who followed him around, a fellow by the name of Ariston, thought it would be a really neat idea to write down Socrates's greatest hits, the great Dialogs of Socrates. You know him better as Plato. Plato, in ancient Greek, means "Wide-shouldered, Burly Dude." That was his nickname. Plato was a wide-shouldered, burly dude. Nobody really thought he was particularly very smart. I guess he showed them. In The Republic, they talk for nine books, nine weary books—many of which I've read in ancient Greek—about who rules the ideal state. What are the rights of citizens in the ideal state? Okay? What are they to learn? What is the role of education? What is the role of the military? And so on and so forth. But, in Book Ten of the Republic—well, we're all ready, "Yes, yes, Book Ten!"—somebody brings up the question, "How are we going to oblige citizens to lead moral lives when we're stuck here with this Olympian View of the Afterlife, in which case it doesn't matter if Phil shoots me, then Kristin shoots Phil, then we all—oh, I don't know—break into the 7-11 and steal all of the Bavarian cream doughnuts because we're all going to the same place after all?"

You know? Why shouldn't I lie to you people? Why shouldn't we cheat on our spouses and set things on fire? Plato wants to know how we're going to get around this. So, what he does is he trots out the quote/unquote Myth of Er. It's another katabasis story.

I might point out, before we get into the Myth of Er, that it's a parable. It is an allegory. It is a story told, not as a literal truth, but as illustrative of an important truth that is, otherwise, too hard to comprehend. You're familiar with the parable of the Good Shepherd, who has the 99 sheep back at home. He tracks down the one and is very happy about it. This Myth of Er, I'm quite sure, is not intended as an example of what really happens to you after you die. It's Plato's way of suggesting, through Socrates's mouth—or maybe Socrates really did say all these things and there's no Plato in here, whatsoever. I don't think so—a way of suggesting what does happen to you after you die that we humans can't really comprehend. Er was a soldier. He got killed in battle. They put him on the funeral pyre. He lay on the funeral pyre for 12 days. Then, when they were just about ready to light the funeral pyre, he jumped up and said, "Boy, do I have a story to tell you." And to think that dead men tell no tales. According to Er, in the Tenth Book of Plato's Republic, once a person dies, he is either punished or rewarded ten times
over for a period of 1000 years. Right then and there, punishment and reward in the afterlife. If, for example, Greer is addicted to telling bald jokes, you can guess what's going to happen to him. J.R. helped a little old lady across the street. You get rewarded. Now, I know there is some wise acre, some skeptical child of the 20th century sitting in this room who's going to say, "What happens if, like most people, you lead a life that is neither utterly evil nor utterly good, but kind of off there in the middle somewhere?" To which I say, "Are you threatening me?" Although the last person who asked that question, I think, is starting his PhD program in theology. I mean, it's a good question. I can't answer it. After a period of 1000 years of either being punished or rewarded for what you did in your lifetime, this is, by the way, your soul that is being punished, not your body. The body has perished. Your soul is punished. No, I don't know how you punish a soul... I do, too. You make the soul sit there in the big room listening to a jukebox from hell playing Feelings and Having My Baby and Mandy, over and over again. So I've discovered you can punish an immaterial being—subject it to bad music, forever. After the soul has been punished or rewarded for 1000 years, it is then given the opportunity to select a new life. I think this point at which the soul selects a new life will be best left for our next exciting class meeting