

READ! IMAGINE! CREATE! STUDY GUIDE 2023 – 2024
***Circe* by Madeline Miller**

Genre – Is *Circe* a Myth? An adaptation? A fantasy?

The Oxford Dictionary defines:

Myth: A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.

Adaptation: The process of making a work of art upon the basis of elements provided by an earlier work in a different, usually literary, medium; also the secondary work thus produced.

Fantasy: A general term for any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world. The category includes several literary genres (e.g. dream vision, fable, fairy tale, romance, science fiction) describing imagined worlds in which magical powers and other impossibilities are accepted.

How is *Circe* a myth?

What natural or social phenomenon does it explain?

How is *Circe* an adaptation?

What earlier/ other works does it draw on?

How is *Circe* a fantasy?

What are some imagined impossibilities or magical powers that are accepted as fact?

How else would you describe the novel? A romance? An adventure?

What other genres do you see represented?

Symbolism

Circe is full of recurring symbols that reinforce, support, or add nuance to a situation or decision *Circe* is facing. Let's examine some of the prominent symbols in the novel.

The Sea

Much of the novel is set on *Circe's* island, *Aiaia*, making the sea a prominent presence in her experience. How does it shift or change in terms of what it means to her?

Think of the sea in terms of setting. How does the sea create or become the physical space that *Circe* inhabits at various points in the novel?

How does the sea offer protection?

How does the sea pose a threat?

How does the sea serve as a barrier or obstacle to *Circe*?

How does it serve as an opportunity to her?

Ships

Ships come and go from *Aiaia* throughout the novel. What are some things that ships represent?

As a character who is not allowed to travel past the shores of an island, what do ships mean to *Circe*?

What danger do they bring?

What comfort or reassurance do they bring?

Which ship do you think is the most important ship to come and/or go from her island? Why?

Looms and Weaving

Spinning and weaving have been common and essential tasks throughout history and across many cultures, often performed by women. Beyond the practical task that they are designed for, what do looms and weaving represent in the novel?

What is significant about the loom Daedalus gives to Circe? What does it tell you about Daedalus as a person? What does it tell you about the relationship between Daedalus and Circe?

How does the loom serve Circe in her loneliness?

Why is the loom significant for Penelope? What did Penelope's loom represent to her before she fled Ithaca?

What does it represent between Penelope and Circe? How do you imagine this influences the connection between the two characters?

What does the loom represent to Telemachus? Why?

The Color Gold

Gold recurs over and over again, often in surprising ways. Make a list everything gold-colored you can think of from the novel. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

How do we see this color existing in Helios and his family? What does it represent in terms of status?

Think about the gold blood bled by Prometheus and Trygon. What does this represent, beyond evidence of their injuries?

What does this color symbolize in modern-day culture?

How is this similar or different from what gold symbolizes in the novel?

Pigs

One of the most well-known stories of Circe is her casting a spell to turn men into pigs. What are the ideas and characteristics that are commonly associated with pigs?

Why do you think Circe decides that pigs are an appropriate animal?

How is turning men into pigs a demonstration of Circe's subverting the established power dynamic?

How do you feel about this habit of hers? Is it fair? Is it ethical? Do you understand why she does it?

Why or why not?

Big-Picture Themes – What are the Essential Questions or Ideas examined in *Circe*?

Let's explore some of the broader topics and themes found in the novel.

Time

What is Circe's relationship with time in the first sections of the novel? Why?

How is this reflected in the choices her family members make?

How does Circe's understanding of mortality affect the way she understands time?

How does her experience with time change once Telegonus is born?

We follow Circe from a very young child through adolescence, adulthood, motherhood, and an eventual embracing old age. What conclusions does Circe eventually draw about time and how to prioritize it?

How do we see this reflected in her behavior and decisions?

How do you think about time? Do you think about it at all? What experiences have you had that have caused you to change how you value your time?

Power

There are many power structures which Circe is subject to. How do we see her succumb to and/or overpower the following:

The power structure of Gods and Titans?

The power structure of Mortals and Immortals?

The power structure of Men and Women?

The power structure of Old and New?

What power structures do you live within? How do they affect your behavior and decision making?

How do you feel about it?

Family

Circe's father is Helios, who is the sun god, and her mother is Perse, who is a water nymph. How do you see the qualities of Sun and Ocean coming together in Circe's personality?

How do the presence of the sun (her father) and the moon (her aunt) affect Circe's sense of security, privacy, and well being? When, how, and why does this shift or change throughout the novel?

How does Circe's relationships with her siblings shape her own decisions? What does she learn from how she is treated by her siblings?

What changes in Circe once she becomes a mother?

Which familial relationship of Circe's do you relate with the most? Why?

Reverse Hero's Journey

The "Hero's Journey" is a common genre or trope in literature. Indeed, Homer's *Odyssey*, arguably the source material for most of Madeline Miller's *Circe*, is often considered the definitive Hero's Journey, in which the main character sets off on an epic quest and overcomes many obstacles in order to learn something about themselves. *Circe* is, in a way, a reverse Hero's Journey, as Circe is not allowed to leave her island, and cannot "journey." Still, there are many elements of a Hero's Journey within *Circe*. What are some of the main challenges and tests Circe must face and overcome?

What does Circe learn about herself through these challenges and tests?

Nostos is the ancient Greek word for "longing for home" or "loneliness." How is *nostos* exhibited by Circe? How do you see this shift over the novel?

Do you think Circe ever finds herself? Why or why not?

Describe a challenge or test you have faced. Did you overcome it? What have you learned from this experience? How has it changed your behavior or perspective?

Transformation

How does Circe discover her gift of transformation?

What effects does this discovery have on her? How does her understanding or perspective of herself change?

How does Circe use transformation as a weapon? Against whom?

How does she use it as a gift? For whom?

How does Circe herself transform?

How have you transformed in your own life?

IDEAS & SUGGESTIONS FOR PROJECTS

Literary Project Suggestions

- Write an original myth of your own which explains why the world or society is the way it is, involving one or many supernatural characters.

- Write a poem about a moment in the novel that resonated with you.

- Because the novel is written in first-person, we learn the entire story through Circe's perspective. Write a scene or short story from the perspective of one of the other characters. Perhaps we see the scene where Circe forbids Telegonus to leave through his perspective? Perhaps a story which explores Helios' feelings after he is forced to banish his daughter into eternal exile? How are their experiences different or similar to Circe's? How can we learn this through your short story?

Performance Project Suggestions

- Memorize and recite a passage as a monologue from the perspective of the character.
- Use a passage or some of the imagery to inspire a piece of instrumental music, a song, a rap, or a piece of spoken word poetry.
- Use the images, subjects, and ideas of one of the chapters to create a movement or dance piece. Perhaps a dance/movement piece that depicts Circe's encounter with Prometheus? Or a movement piece exploring Circe's joy at having her pet lion for companionship?

Visual Art Project Suggestions

- Paint, draw, collage an image based on the images, themes, or ideas in the novel.
- Create a sculpture or diorama of one of the scenes in one of the chapters. Perhaps a three dimensional landscape of the island?
- Draw or create a map of the area, including Circe's house, garden, and other notable landmarks.
- Decorate an item with personal meaning to you with images from the book, or with images from your own life that the book inspires.

Media Project Suggestions

- Create an animation (Computer Generated, Stop Motion, or Hand-Drawn) that incorporates the images, subjects, and themes of the book.
- Build a video game or puzzle game that incorporates the images, subjects, and themes of the book.
- Create a live action film with a passage recited as the background or "soundtrack," or use one or more of the chapters to create your own short film.