

Theseus and the Minotaur

A long time ago, the island of Crete was ruled by a king called Minos. On this island too lived a terrifying monster, which was half-man and half-bull, called the Minotaur. This beast resided in the centre of a complicated maze called a labyrinth.

King Minos held a grudge against the people of Athens, a city in Greece. Many years before, the Athenians had killed Minos' son out of jealousy because the prince had won lots of prizes at the Athenian Games. This made Minos furious. He demanded that every nine years, fourteen young Athenians would enter the maze as a sacrifice and be killed by the Minotaur. If the Athenians failed or refused to send these young people, Minos would wage a war against them.

Another nine years had passed and it was time for the Athenians to send another fourteen boys and girls. This time the King of Athens' own son Theseus wanted to be one of the chosen ones. Theseus was a gallant and confident young man who thrived on adventure. He really wanted to be one of the fourteen young people sent to Crete because he wanted to destroy the Minotaur in revenge for what King Minos had been doing to the young Athenians.

The King of Athens, Aegeus, on hearing of his son's desires, was very distressed and begged his son not to go. "Theseus! Do not do this. It is not a wise thing to do and you will almost certainly be killed. The Minotaur is notorious – no-one ever escapes his lair alive. Do not make the journey to Crete!"

But Theseus ignored his father's pleas and told Aegeus with great determination in his voice, "I know I can slay this monster. Do not worry father. I shall be triumphant! When I return, I shall make sure the sail of the boat is white to show I have won and have returned home victorious."

Finally, the day arrived and Theseus set sail with the thirteen other young Athenians. They raised a black sail in remembrance of the previous young Athenians who had died at the hands of the Minotaur.

The journey was hazardous and dramatic and added to the tension on board the boat. The crew suffered terribly as they knew that this suffering was only leading to a more miserable fate.

Eventually they arrived in Crete where they were met by the king himself, Minos. With him was his daughter Ariadne. As the Athenians disembarked off their ship, Minos immediately recognised Theseus and was greatly angered by his presence.

"What are you doing here? The son of the King of Athens, a man I despise," Minos demanded.

"Your words do not frighten me. I have come to kill the Minotaur. I am here for my people who have suffered for many years because of what you demand!" declared Theseus boldly.

"HOW DARE YOU SAY THIS AFTER WHAT YOUR PEOPLE DID TO MY SON!" roared King Minos.

Ariadne, on hearing the courageous words of Theseus, fell head over heels in love with the young Athenian. She was impressed with his fearlessness both towards her own father and his mission. Thinking to herself, she promised she would help Theseus to kill the monster.

That night, Ariadne went to Theseus who was locked up in her father's prison in the palace. "Theseus. Theseus!" she whispered. "My name is Ariadne. I am the daughter of King Minos. Hearing your brave and courageous words today, I can see you are loyal to your people and I want to help you."

She proceeded to give Theseus a sword and a ball of golden thread. "Attach the thread to the labyrinth's entrance and unwind the string as you traverse through the maze. Be careful though. The labyrinth has many twists and turns and is it dark and eerie. When you eventually encounter the Minotaur, slay him with this sword and then follow the thread to guide you back out!"

Theseus, although initially suspicious of Ariadne's motives, could see she was kind and genuine and was thankful for her support. As a token of his thanks, he promised that he would marry her if he was victorious in his quest.

The very next day, Theseus, having listened to Ariadne's advice, took the precious sword and thread and journeyed to the labyrinth with thirteen petrified and anxious Athenians. He entered the maze and told his companions not to move from the entrance. Keeping as calm as he could, he followed Ariadne's instructions and tied the thread to the main door and took the first steps into the unknown.

Theseus proceeded to travel through the dark, complicated maze in his quest to find the Minotaur, trailing the thread along as he went. The maze was as Ariadne had described: dark, bewildering and frightening. As he progressed he could hear the roars and growls of the fearsome beast. This was the toughest of challenges but Theseus remained determined and ventured on.

Suddenly he came face to face with the terrifying monster. It was strong and fearsome; a mighty beast. He roared with anger and charged at Theseus. It was a difficult battle, the Minotaur was vicious and fought hard but Theseus would not relent and with a mighty swish of his sword successfully slayed the monster.

Success!

Exhausted but delighted, Theseus dashed through the maze, using the thread to guide him back to his friends. As he came into view, the Athenians initially gasped in horror at their blood-soaked friend but then ran to him, giving him hugs of celebration.

"We must leave at once," commanded Theseus, "before King Minos finds out what I have done."

So without a moment's hesitation, Theseus grabbed proud Ariadne's hand and with the other Athenians running behind them, ran to the island's shore and boarded their boat, leaving Crete forever.

After a few days of travel, Theseus decided that rest was required so the boat docked at an island. The crew relaxed and Ariadne was delighted to be with her love. She had never been happier. However, her dreams were soon crushed. Theseus realised that he did not truly love her and decided to abandon her on the island and return home to Athens. On seeing Theseus' ship sailing away towards the horizon, Ariadne was heartbroken by his betrayal.

The final journey home was full of excitement, happiness and renewed hope. The Athenians had defeated the Minotaur.

However, in the excitement of the victory Theseus forgot one very important thing as the ship made its final voyage towards Athens – to change the sail to white! As the ship came into view, King Aegeus, who was waiting impatiently, eventually saw the black sail and immediately thought his son had been killed by the Minotaur.

"Theseus!" cried Aegeus. So distraught was the king on seeing the doomed black sail, that he cast himself off the rocks into the sea and to his death.

On landing, Theseus was told of this terrible tragedy. He wailed with unhappiness, realising the huge error he had made.

And so as the city of Athens celebrated the return of their people and the death of the Minotaur, it was with sadness in his heart, that Theseus became the next King of Athens.

Jenny Turner

Theseus and the Minotaur

1. What does the word resided mean? (AF4)
2. “King Minos held a grudge against the people of Athens.” What does this mean and why did King Minos hold this grudge? (AF4/AF2)
3. Why do you think the Athenians would send fourteen young people to King Minos every nine years? (AF3)
4. Why do you think King Aegeus is upset at the beginning of the text? (AF3)
5. What does Aegeus mean when he says the Minotaur is notorious? (AF4)
6. How would you describe Theseus’ response to Aegeus when the king begs his son not to go on the ship? (AF6)
7. “The crew suffered terribly as they knew that this suffering was only leading to a more miserable fate.” What do you think the author means as the Athenians travel to Crete on the boat? (AF5)
8. What does “disembarked” mean? (AF4)
9. Why are some of King Minos’ words in capital letters? (AF5)
10. In your own words, what does Ariadne think of Theseus? (AF3)
11. Ariadne tells Theseus that she thinks he is loyal to his people. What do you think she means here? (AF4)
12. How might Theseus be feeling as he travels through the maze? (AF3)
13. Describe what you think the maze was like in your own words. (AF3)
14. Theseus “with a mighty swish of his sword successfully slayed the monster.” What literary device does the author use here? (AF4)
15. Why would Ariadne be proud of Theseus as they escape from the island? (AF3)
16. How do you think Theseus feels at the end of the story? (AF6)

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1. What does the word resided mean? (AF4) **To live, inhabit, dwell**
2. "King Minos held a grudge against the people of Athens." What does this mean and why did King Minos hold this grudge? (AF4/AF2) **Minos is angry and has a grievance against the Athenians because they had killed his son because the prince had won lots of prizes at the Athenian Games and they were jealous.**
3. Why do you think the Athenians would send fourteen young people to King Minos every nine years? (AF3) **They do not want King Minos to begin a war with them.**
4. Why do you think King Aegeus is upset at the beginning of the text? (AF3) **He does not want his precious son, the next King of Athens, to venture on this journey and be killed by the Minotaur.**
5. What does Aegeus mean when he says the Minotaur is notorious? (AF4) **It means that the monster is famous for being bad.**
6. How would you describe Theseus' response to Aegeus when the king begs his son not to go on the ship? (AF6) **Theseus is determined and ignores his fathers pleas. He is strong-willed and refuses to listen.**
7. "The crew suffered terribly as they knew that this suffering was only leading to a more miserable fate." What do you think the author means as the Athenians travel to Crete on the boat? (AF5) **The journey is stormy and difficult but this only makes the Athenians feel worse. They are already nervous and anxious as they believe that they are heading to their death with the Minotaur.**
8. What does "disembarked" mean? (AF4) **To get off/alight from a ship.**
9. Why are some of King Minos' words in capital letters? (AF5) **To make it clear that King Minos is shouting the words very loudly in anger.**
10. In your own words, what does Ariadne think of Theseus? (AF3) **She admires him for his bravery, fearlessness and courage. She completely falls in love with him and such is her devotion to him she decides she will go against her own father and help Theseus kill the Minotaur.**
11. Ariadne tells Theseus that she thinks he is loyal to his people. What do you think she means here? (AF4) **It means she thinks Theseus is devoted to his city of Athens and will do anything to save/protect his people.**
12. How might Theseus be feeling as he travels through the maze? (AF3) **Anxious and tense although perhaps a nervous excitement too.**
13. Describe what you think the maze was like in your own words. (AF3) **The maze is very difficult to get through for a number of reasons – it is gloomy and dark as well as being very complicated.**
14. Theseus "with a mighty swish of his sword successfully slayed the monster." What literary device does the author use here? (AF4) **Alliteration**
15. Why would Ariadne be proud of Theseus as they escape from the island? (AF3) **She has complete admiration for the bravery and skill Theseus has shown in killing such a terrifying beast.**
16. How do you think Theseus feels at the end of the story? (AF6) **Theseus would have been distraught and felt guilty that he is the cause of his father's death due to one forgetful moment. Although he is now king, he has received this at a terrible price.**