

The 2nd Runner Up of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Tsang Mavis Olivia

Name of School : Diocesan Girls' School

Book Title : *Circe*

Author : Madeline Miller

Publisher : Back Bay Books

Born to the sun god Helios and the ocean nymph Perse, Circe is detested for her wicked witchcraft, which results in her exile by the Olympians to Aeaea, a deserted island. She is notorious for her luring of oblivious sailors to transform them into pigs, which led to her love affair with Odysseus, and the birth of their son Telegonus. However, in *Circe*, Madeline Miller adapts this conventional narrative. Instead, she empowers women through portraying Circe as benevolent and persistent, and discusses the influence of family.

Circe's life is intricately woven together with mythological references, some of which depict her as malevolent. And yet, when told from Circe's perspective, we readers learn of her motivations and humanity. According to Greek mythology, Circe loses her lover Glaucos when he turns his attention to Scylla, and therefore, she transforms Scylla into a horrendous monster. However, in *Circe*, apart from hearing of her cruel actions, we also witness her experience of jealousy, which grows into her desire for revenge. Our understanding of this human emotion allows us to connect with her, thus, instead of condemning her, we sympathise with her. Additionally, Miller paints Circe as a victim of the alienation from gods and the ill intentions of mortals. For instance, similar to the plot in *The Odyssey*, she turns innocent sailors into pigs. And yet, in *Circe*, she does so out of self-protection: with no gods willing to aid her and mortals harming her, she resorts to witchcraft. The sorrowful life and reasonable motives of

Circe urge readers to empathise with her, instead of perceiving her as a malicious sorceress who uses witchcraft to inflict harm on others.

In contrast, Odysseus, who is often portrayed as valiant and witty, is now painted as a ruthless and distrustful tyrant. Whilst we still hear of his wondrous war achievements, his heroism is diminished by his brutal killing of his wife's suitors, and his skeptical and uncaring interactions with his sons. Miller's repainting of Odysseus offers an intriguing alternative to The Odyssey's narrative, and suggests that Circe's life, just like Odysseus', has other possible interpretations - perhaps one where she is kind instead of evil, and human instead of monstrous.

In addition, Miller explores multiple themes, one of which being the worth of women. Through various female characters, Miller criticises the reduction of

women to the benefits their sexuality brings. Helios was given permission to bed Perse by her father to maintain good relations, while Circe is told that she is worthless because a marriage cannot be arranged for her. These reveal how women hold no power over their own marriage, and are treated as rewarding goods - in return for being raised, women are expected to be married off to aid their family's interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the belief that women's value lies in their sexuality is demonstrated by Perse's devastation when she is forbidden to bear any more of Helios' children, and the raping of servant girls and Circe herself.

To illustrate how such beliefs are far from the truth, Miller emphasises the emotional strength women possess through Circe's independence and perseverance. Circe faces countless misfortunes, from being banished by gods who fear her powerful witchery, to finding lovers after years of solitude, only to lose them. However, she

refuses to succumb to these tough situations: she befriends a lion on Aeaëa, soldiers on throughout the sickness and pain caused by her pregnancy, and raises Telegonus as a single mom with no experience or help whatsoever. Circe not only proves to society that women's worth should not be defined by their sexuality, but also serves as a reminder to women that they are resilient - no matter how unfairly they are treated or how arduous life gets, they can always draw up their inner strength to overcome such obstacles.

Furthermore, Miller looks into the importance of family in satisfying our emotional needs. Circe's main conflict is finding her place in the world: she does not belong with the gods, nor does she fit in with the mortals. She is rejected by the gods upon her birth because of her thin voice that resembles that of mortals, while her immortality is incomprehensible to most mortals, who are wary of those they cannot understand. Circe thus

spends the majority of her life yearning for acceptance and searching for a home. She finds temporary comfort in lovers, who unfortunately end up leaving her willingly or due to circumstances, leaving her feeling even more empty and lonely. This demonstrates how love from our family is imperative in providing emotional satisfaction. Ultimately, she finds a lasting home with Telemachus, a mortal who truly loves and respects her. He also helps her realise that she belongs with the mortals, whose compassion she values.

Additionally, Miller illustrates the influence of family on our personality through the juxtaposition of Circe and her siblings' characters. As Circe is scorned by her family, she is distanced from their cruel deeds, and learns of the emotional hurt mockery inflicts. Therefore, her kind and empathetic nature freely grows. While the gods entertained themselves with Prometheus' suffering, Circe reached out a helping hand and cared for him; while the

gods never once tried to shield innocent sailors from Scylla's monstrosity, Circe spent her isolated years in regret, and sought to revert her misuse of witchcraft once she had the chance to do so. In contrast, Circe's siblings, who are welcomed by their parents, are cruel. This is because we naturally turn to those who embrace us, and pick up on their ideals during our interactions, forming our own character. Thus, unlike Circe, they mirror Helios and Perse's viciousness, as shown by their use of sorcery to torture and enhance their influence over others.

With riveting mythological references, vivid characters and a fresh perspective, Circe offers a magical retelling of the titular nymph's life - a rollercoaster of loneliness, loss, and love. Its inspiration to females about the strength they possess, encouragement to all readers to be compassionate, and exploration of the impacts of family make it an even more meaningful read.