

“Circe/Mud Poems” (*You Are Happy*, 1974)

1. How does the opening poem signal the theme of imperialism? Who are the invaders and why do they come to the island? What does the island represent here and throughout the poem sequence? How is Circe’s body represented as synonymous with the island? In what ways does this connect to the story of the Mud Woman?
2. How would you characterize Circe’s tone throughout the sequence? How does she view Odysseus? How does she see herself? What role does she believe she must perform?
3. In the unfolding relationship between Circe and Odysseus, how does Atwood explore gender roles and power politics? Who is the victim and who is the survivor? What are the tensions between guilt and innocence?
4. How are the seeming polarities of “masculine” and “feminine” desires represented in the poems? What do Circe and Odysseus want? In what ways do they try to possess or control each other? Does either succeed?
5. The theme or motif of transformation/metamorphosis is key to much of Atwood’s work (and Greek myth). What kinds of transformations occur in “Circe/Mud Poems”? Do they lead to a sense of wholeness or loss? How might this connect to Atwood’s exploration of dualisms? Are binary tensions resolved or further emphasized?
6. Compare the Circe of mythology (from Homer’s *Odyssey*) and Atwood’s version of her. What is Circe’s attitude toward her own myth? What kind of power does she possess, if any? In what ways does Odysseus view his own myth (according to Circe)? In what ways does Circe try to tempt him into a different story? Does she succeed? Or do they remain trapped in the old myths and/or gender roles?
7. What do you make of the theme of prophesy in the poems? How is this connected to storytelling as well as the temporal structure of the sequence? Atwood seems to suggest that men and women tell different kinds of stories because they have different experiences of time. How are those differences suggested in the poems?
8. How does Circe’s vision of “two islands” in the last poem of the sequence suggest two possible futures or pasts? How does this end loop back to the beginning of the sequence? What paradox is offered here regarding time and agency?