**Hercules Summary from Sparknotes (pages 166-180)**

**From *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton**

Hamilton draws her story of Hercules mostly from later writers but also borrows from Greek tragedians. Hercules, born in Thebes, is the son of Zeus and Alcmene, a mortal whom Zeus deceives by disguising himself as her husband. Hercules’ demi-god status allows him many liberties. He can challenge the gods and often win, as when he offends the Oracle at Delphi and quarrels with Apollo. He also helps the gods defeat the giants with his superhuman strength; above all else, he is remembered as the strongest man who ever lived. Only magic can harm him, as he overpowers all else. His unequalled strength makes up for deficiencies in intelligence and patience—he can be impetuous, emotional, and careless, and once threatens to shoot an arrow at the sun because it is too hot. Nonetheless, he has boundless courage and a noble sense of right and wrong.

Hercules’ strength is evident from his infancy. One night, two giant snakes attack him and his half-brother, Iphicles, in their nursery, but Hercules strangles them both at once. While still a youth he kills the legendary Thespian lion of the Cithaeron woods, taking its skin as a cloak he always wears thereafter. In his youth he also demonstrates a tragic weakness that haunts him his entire life—he rashly and unthinkingly kills one of his teachers, not knowing his own strength. After conquering the warlike Minyans, he marries the princess Megara. He has three children with her, but then Hera, jealous of Zeus’s infidelity with Hercules’ mother, uses magic to make Hercules go insane and kill his wife and children. Recovering his sanity and seeing what he has done, he rushes to kill himself, but Theseus convinces him to live. Knowing he must purify himself, Hercules goes to the Oracle at Delphi for advice. She tells him to visit his cousin, Eurystheus of Mycenae, who will devise a penance.

Spurred on by Hera, Eurystheus devises a series of twelve impossibly difficult tasks. The first of these Labors of Hercules is to kill the lion of Nemea, a beast that cannot be harmed by weapons; Hercules chokes it to death. Next, he must kill the Hydra, a monster with nine heads, one of which is immortal. A new head grows whenever one of the other heads is chopped off—a problem Hercules solves by burning the neck-stumps and burying the immortal head. In the third task, Hercules captures the sacred golden-horned stag of Artemis and brings it back alive. The fourth task is to capture a giant boar. The fifth, cleaning the stables of King Augeas in a day. The king has thousands of cattle whose manure has not been cleaned in years, so Hercules redirects two rivers to flow through the stable. Athena helps Hercules with his sixth task, which is to rid the people of Stymphalus of a flock of wild birds that terrorize them.

All the other tasks involve the capture of things extremely resistant to captivity: a beautiful wild bull of Minos; the flesh-eating horses of Diomedes; the girdle of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons; the cattle of Geryon; a three-bodied monster (it is on the way to fulfill this labor that Hercules balances two giant rocks at Gibraltar and Ceuta, on either side of the strait between Spain and Morocco). The eleventh task is to steal the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, the mysterious daughters of Atlas. Journeying to find Atlas, the only one who knows the Hesperides’ location, Hercules stops to free Prometheus from his chains. Atlas offers to tell Hercules only if he holds up the world—normally Atlas’s job—while Atlas fetches the Apples for him. Atlas gets the fruit but decides he prefers walking around without the weight of the world on his shoulders. Hercules tricks him into taking the earth back, saying he needs to be relieved for a moment to place a pad on his shoulders. Finally, for the twelfth labor, Hercules has to bring Cerberus, the three-headed dog, up from the underworld. Before leaving Hades, Hercules frees his friend Theseus from the Chair of Forgetfulness.

Hercules undergoes other various adventures after his labors, defeating Antaeus—a wrestler who is invincible as long as he touches the ground—and rescuing King Laomedon’s daughter, who is being sacrificed to a sea serpent. Hercules also carelessly kills several others along the way: a boy who accidentally spills water on him and a friend whose father, King Eurytus, insults him. As punishment for this last murder, Zeus sends Hercules to be a slave to Queen Omphale of Lydia, who forces him to dress and work as a woman for a year (though some say three years). Despite his errors, Hercules almost always has a clear sense of right and wrong as well as the need to make things right. On the way to kill the wicked Diomedes (owner of the flesh-eating horses), Hercules gets drunk at the house of his friend, Admetus, not knowing that Admetus’ wife has just died. When Hercules learns of his friend’s loss, he feels so bad about his inadvertent disrespect that he fights and defeats Pluto (Hades) to bring Admetus’s wife back from Hades.

One time, however, Hercules refuses to see the error of his ways, and this leads to his death. Angered that Zeus had punished him for inadvertently killing King Eurytus’s son, Hercules kills Eurytus and razes his city. One of his captives is a beautiful girl, Iole. Deianira, Hercules’ wife, feels threatened, and recalls some magic she earlier acquired, when Hercules shot a centaur named Nessus who insulted Deianira. As Nessus died, he told Deianira to take some of his blood as a potion to use if her husband ever loved anyone more than her. Deianira secretly rubs some of the potion on Hercules’robe. When he puts the robe on, pain surges through his body. He does not die and must end the agony by killing himself, building a giant funeral pyre where he burns himself to death. Ascending to Olympus, Hercules reconciles with Hera and marries her daughter, Hebe.

On a separate sheet of paper, respond to the following questions.

Questions:

1. How do these retellings of Hercules’ stories differ from those that you have seen or heard?
2. What is familiar about these retellings? What did you already know?
3. Why do you suppose Hercules’ stories have lasted through time? Why is he still a popular figure today?