

The Odyssey

Professors Kathryn J. Watson and Gary S. Meltzer

The Odyssey is the story of Odysseus's return to his home in Ithaca after the Trojan War. It is an entertaining adventure story of a hero's journey in which fate, the gods, and nature often seem to conspire against mortals. It is a story in which women—as goddesses, witches, monsters, and mortals—play a part. After all, if Paris had not abducted Helen from King Menelaus in the first place, there would not have been a Trojan War! It's also a story about the search for identity, and about life and death, home and family.

Like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey* is from the oral tradition; originally it was sung (probably over a period of three days) by a minstrel (such as Demodocus, the blind harper in Book Eight) to an audience who had heard the story many times. This epic poem is meant to be heard and spoken aloud—you may find that you will enjoy it even more if you read it aloud or take turns reading it aloud with a friend.

According to legend, the Trojan War was caused by Paris, who abducted from Sparta the beautiful Helen, wife of King Menelaus. The abduction caused Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus, to lead the Greeks into battle against Troy. In *The Iliad* (an epic which many scholars believe predated *The Odyssey*), Homer tells about the fall of Troy by describing the Greek and Trojan heroes as they engage in bloody conflict. In *The Odyssey*, we learn about what happens to Odysseus after the war has ended and the survivors attempt to return to their homes.

The Odyssey as Journey of Discovery

The term “odyssey,” which originally meant “The Story of Odysseus,” has come to mean any great voyage in which the hero survives against overwhelming odds. Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* have been enormously influential, but *The Odyssey* has inspired a particularly long series of adaptations that began in ancient times and continue till the present day. Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's first-century BCE epic, *The Aeneid*, undertakes a heroic journey similar to Odysseus'. The heroes of many action movies, who devise ways out of every conceivable predicament, may remind us of Odysseus.

Why have *The Odyssey* and its hero appealed to authors, readers, and viewers in so many different cultures and periods? In many ways it is the archetypal adventure story. It is fitting that we start the year with it, since in coming to college you have begun an adventure of your own. Entering college life is indeed a challenge and an initiation into a new way of life. Like the other texts in this course, *The Odyssey* invites you to ask yourself: what do you want your own odyssey through college, career, and life to be?

What lessons can you learn from *The Odyssey* and apply in your own life? You may be inspired by different role models in the poem—Odysseus, Telemachus, or Penelope. But let's focus for now on Odysseus, the central character. You may ask yourself how the hero not only

survives but also prevails over a range of obstacles and foes that include raging storms at sea, a one-eyed giant, and a sorceress that can turn men into swine. Once he arrives home, Odysseus has a swarm of unruly suitors to contend with. What qualities sustain him in his quest?

A couple of his key traits deserve mention. The first is highlighted by one of Odysseus' epithets. An epithet is a stock phrase that reflects a key characteristic of a person or a thing; like the invocation of the Muses that opens the poem, the epithet is one of the conventions of epic poetry. Odysseus is described as a man "of twists and turns." To understand an important aspect of this metaphor, notice how he keeps his head in a crisis, continually "turning over" his options in his mind. His cleverness, flexibility, and resourcefulness are some of his key heroic characteristics.

Another heroic trait is Odysseus' ability to control himself and his emotions. Throughout the poem he often suppresses his instinctive reactions and refuses to take the easy way out—to "escape" his plight by taking a pleasurable drug (like the lotus-eaters), to satisfy his hunger on some forbidden cattle, or even to accept a goddess' offer of immortality! Many of his fellow crew members die because they don't heed Odysseus' advice or follow his example of restraint. The importance of this trait is highlighted by the hero's one huge violation of this code of conduct: Odysseus brazenly identifies himself by his real name to the monster Cyclops, whose eye he has just poked out. This enables Cyclops to pray to his father Poseidon for revenge on Odysseus, and causes him many hardships.

Of course, Odysseus may embody some traits that you question or do not admire, and this is natural. A given society's heroes and deities say a lot about the culture that produced them. The Greeks had a god, Hermes, who excelled in lying and deception; Odysseus also excelled in these traits, which are presented in the poem as heroic. It's important to ask yourself what traits are valued and why in this eighth-century BCE text; what sort of hero—and heroic quest—is this? It's important for us to discuss these questions, because the values embodied by *The Odyssey* have influenced our own culture so strongly.

For example, the hero is strongly individualistic and focused on his own family and property. Furthermore, the story is told from a point of view strongly sympathetic to him, of course: this is a *male* paradigm of heroism. Although Penelope has some heroic traits and wins glory within her sphere, the lion's share of the glory goes to Odysseus. The poem largely presents women and goddesses as either helpers of the hero, or hindrances to him, and in so doing tends to reinforce some gender stereotypes such as the "faithful, good wife" (Penelope) and the "evil temptress" (Circe). In spite of its limitations, this poem asks important questions that many of our other texts will also ask: what is it to be a hero? What should a man or a woman do and be? What course of life is best? What goals are worth pursuing? What values should we live by, and what principles or higher powers should we respect? And finally, what is it to be human?

The Structure of *The Odyssey*

Homer didn't divide *The Odyssey* into chapters or provide chapter titles. These were later additions by scholars, probably those working in Alexandria during the third and second centuries, BCE. Structurally, you may find it helpful to consider this epic as six tetrads (units of four books):

1-4	The Story of Telemachus
5-8	Odysseus leaves Calypso and meets the Phaeacians
9-12	Odysseus tells about his wanderings
13-16	Odysseus and Telemachus return to Ithaca and are reunited
17-20	Odysseus returns to the palace and Penelope sets up the contest of the bow
21-24	Odysseus takes his revenge and recovers his place as king

Only by attentively reading *The Odyssey* will you be able to begin to enjoy, appreciate, understand, and interpret it. Only by such close reading of this (or any) text will you be able to engage in an authentic discussion and seek deeper meaning and significance in the text. Thus, we recommend that in preparation for each class you respond to the following sets of questions (based on the books assigned for each class). As a consequence of preparing these “do ahead” study questions, you will then be able to discuss more intelligently the kinds of questions on subsequent pages which we refer to as Suggestions for Discussion.

Books 1, 2, and 5

Be sure to mark passages in your text which support your answers to and reflections about these questions.

1. [Note that the poem begins with a ten-line “invocation” to the Muse, a convention in epic poetry.] What do you learn in Book One about:

- The gods?
- Athena's attitude toward Odysseus?
- Poseidon's attitude toward Odysseus?
- Telemachus, Penelope, Eurycleia?
- The situation in Ithaca (such as the suitors, customs, hospitality)?
- The use of disguise?

2. How would you characterize Telemachus from what you learn in Book Two? What can you infer about the community of Ithaca from the assembly?

3. List the characters whom you meet in Books One and Two and what you learn about each. You may even want to list some of the many “epithets” (a word or phrase used to characterize someone) Homer uses to describe these characters. Why do you think some words and phrases are often repeated?

4. The first four books of *The Odyssey* are referred to as “The Telemachy” because in them we meet Telemachus and learn of his search for his father. We don't meet Odysseus in person until

Book Five; why do you think Homer started the poem by focusing on the son of Odysseus instead of on Odysseus himself?

5. *The Odyssey* opened with an assembly of the gods in Book One. In Book Five we see the gods on Olympus again. How are these two assemblies alike and different? What do you infer about Athena's relationship to Zeus? What do you learn about the other gods? What role does Hermes play in Book Five? How does Poseidon behave?

6. You'll notice many similes (figures of speech introduced by like or as in which two objects are compared) in Book Five. Mark these in your text and be prepared to discuss them.

Books 8, 9 and 10

7. In Book Eight, Demodocus sings of the love affair between Ares and Aphrodite. What is the moral of the story, and how would you compare the marriage of Aphrodite and Hephaestus with other marriages portrayed in the poem?

8. In Book Nine, through flashback, Odysseus begins to narrate his adventures. List in order of his telling all the places and people he visited. Note how he describes the Cyclops: how does their "culture" differ from that of the Phaeacians? How does Odysseus trick Polyphêmos? What do you learn about the guest/host relationship in Book Nine?

9. Book Ten opens with the arrival of Odysseus and his men on Aeolia. Describe the setting of Aeolia and the events which lead to Odysseus' contemplating suicide. Who are the Laestrygonians? How do they compare to the Cyclops? What happens on Aeaea, Circe's island? What is the purpose of the moly? Who is Elpenor?

Books 11, 12, and 21

10. Book Eleven presents the journey to the underworld. Note in your text the individuals Odysseus encounters. What does Odysseus learn from his visit to the land of the dead? What do you infer from Achilles' statement that he'd rather be a slave on earth than king of the dead?

11. What is Circe's role in Book Twelve? How does Circe prepare Odysseus for his encounters with the Sirens; the Clashing Rocks and Scylla and Charybdis; and the Island of the Sun?

12. How is Odysseus tested in Book Twenty-one? What is Penelope's role?

Books 22, 23, and 24

13. Homer brings *The Odyssey* to its bloody conclusion in the final three books. In Book 22, what happened to Antinous? How do you feel about the treatment of the maidservants and Melanthius? Why do you think some people regard Book 23 as "Penelope's Book"? What is

Eurycleia's role in Book 23? What is significant about Odysseus' and Penelope's bed? Note that Book 24 begins with a digression: why do you think that is? How does Laertes fit in?

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe that Telemachus and Odysseus resemble each other in any way(s)? Cite passages which support your analysis.
2. Why do you think Penelope doesn't just tell the suitors to leave? Is it really "good" for her to remain unmarried if indeed Odysseus is dead?
3. When do you think Odysseus is "fully himself"? When he's wandering? When he's at home? When he's with his wife?
4. Why do you think philoxenia (hospitality) was a touchstone of the society depicted in *The Odyssey*?
5. Calypso's name is derived from the verb, kalypto, a common word in Greek for "burying". What do you think Homer may have intended by this choice for her name?
6. What do you think was a "properly constituted household" to the Greeks?
7. How are the gods similar to and different from the mortals in *The Odyssey*?
8. Why do you think Books Eleven and Twelve begin with Elpenor? How is he significant?
9. What do you think are the most important things Odysseus learned from his visit to the Underworld?
10. Compare and contrast the various portrayals of wives, husbands, and sons in *The Odyssey*.
11. Why do you think so many of the monsters in *The Odyssey* are females?
12. What do you think will happen in the lives of Odysseus and Penelope now that he's returned home?