

# **The Odyssey Study Guide**

## **The Odyssey by Homer**

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# Plot Summary

The Odyssey is an ancient Greek epic telling the story of the hero Odysseus' journey home from the Trojan War. He battles monsters and magic, loses all his men, is shipwrecked, and finally washed up on the demi-goddess Calypso's shore. She keeps him with her for years before the gods intervene. He tells his story to the Phaeacians, who then take him to his home on Ithaca. He fights the suitors who have invaded his home and is finally reunited with his family.

The story begins with a council of the gods, where it is decided to order Calypso to let Odysseus go. Hermes, the messenger god, takes the message, and Calypso helps the hero to build a raft.

On Ithaca, Odysseus' home has been invaded by suitors who want to marry his wife. It has been twenty years since Odysseus left to go to war, but Penelope still holds out hope that her husband will return. The goddess Athene appears to Odysseus' son Telemachus and tells him to travel to Pylos for news of his father. Telemachus does so, and is received at both Pylos and Sparta by old friends of his father. He is treated well, and travels home with both gifts and hopeful news. Meanwhile, the suitors plan to kill Telemachus when he returns.

Odysseus is on his raft when the sea-god Poseidon, who hates the hero, sends a storm to wreck him. Odysseus is washed up on the island of Phaeacia, where the princess Nausicaa discovers him while washing her clothes by the river. He begs for help and she directs him to the palace, where he appeals to her father, King Alcinous, and her mother, Queen Arete. Odysseus is given hospitality, and he begins to tell the story of his travels to the gathered Phaeacians:

On his way home from Troy, Odysseus and his men first raided the Cicones' city, then came across a land where people ate a drug-like Lotus plant. They stopped off at the Cyclopes' island and were trapped in a cave by the Cyclops Polyphemus. Odysseus got the monster drunk and then blinded it, and he and his men escaped. However, he could not resist boasting of his great name to the Cyclops, and Polyphemus then called on his father Poseidon to curse the hero.

Next they were forced to flee from man-eating giants called Laestrygonians and were given a bag of winds by Aeolus, the lord of the winds, to help them home. Unfortunately, Odysseus' men were too curious and opened the bag, and so they were blown far off course. They next came to the island of the witch Circe, who turned Odysseus' men into animals. Odysseus saved them, however, and Circe then became friendly. She told them they needed to go to the land of the dead to consult the blind prophet Teiresias. They did so, and they were given advice about the future journey. They passed the Sirens, the monster Scylla, and the whirlpool Charybids. They stopped at Thrinacie. There Odysseus' men ate the cattle of the Sun-god, and their ship was wrecked as punishment. Now Odysseus' men were all dead, and he was washed up on the shore of Calypso's island, where the demi-goddess took him in.



Odysseus finishes telling the Phaeacians his story, and they are so impressed that they give him gifts and then take him home to Ithaca. There the goddess Athene gives the hero advice, and he goes in disguise to his servant's hut. With the help of his son, who has returned safely from his own journey, they discover which servants have remained loyal and which have not. Odysseus, in the disguise of a beggar, sees firsthand what the horrible behavior of the suitors is like.

Penelope has set a test for the suitors, hoping that none of them will be able to pass it. They have to string Odysseus' bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axes. None can do it, but then Odysseus tries and succeeds straight away. With the help of Telemachus and two loyal servants, he then kills all the suitors and punishes the disloyal servants. He is finally reunited with his wife and his father. With the help of the gods he settles the dispute with the suitors' families, and peace is established.



# Books One and Two – ‘Athene Visits Telemachus’, and ‘The Debate in Ithaca’

## Summary

The Odyssey tells the story of the ancient Greek hero Odysseus, who faces many adventures on his journey home from the Trojan War. A Cyclops, man-eating giants, the intoxicating lotus drug, Sirens, storms, the ghosts of the underworld, and vengeful gods are just some of the dangers that Odysseus and his crew face. After losing all his men, Odysseus is held captive for years on the island of the nymph Calypso. When he finally reaches home, twenty years after leaving it, Odysseus has to fight the suitors who are trying to claim his wife and his palace. Finally, he defeats all obstacles and is reunited with the family he loves.

When the story begins, it is now ten years since the Trojan War ended, and the rest of the Greek warriors have either died or returned home. Odysseus is still missing, held captive by the nymph Calypso, and though most believe him to be dead, his wife Penelope and son Telemachus have not given up hope. The gods decide that it is time to send Odysseus home again, and Zeus, the king of the gods, sends the messenger god Hermes to tell Calypso to let the hero go.

Athene visits Ithaca in the disguise of a family friend called Mentos. Telemachus treats her kindly, showing her hospitality even though the suitors have invaded his home. They are trying to compete for his mother and are acting very rudely. Athene tells him that she has heard news of Odysseus and that he should travel to Pylos to learn more. If Odysseus turns out to be dead, then Telemachus will have to come home and marry his mother to one of the suitors. If Odysseus is alive then they will all have to put up with the suitors until he returns to sort things out.

Athene then transforms into a bird and flies away, and Telemachus knows that he has been speaking to a god. With renewed confidence, he tries to stand up to the suitors, but they tell him that he will never be king and that they will not leave his house or stop eating all his food. The next day Telemachus calls an assembly and tries to stand up to the suitors again. The suitors tell him that Penelope has tricked them. She told them that she will not choose a new husband until she has finished weaving a funeral shroud for her father-in-law, but every night she secretly unpicks the stitches so that she can delay having to pick one of the suitors. Telemachus argues that this is hardly his fault and that they should do the honorable thing anyway. They should go to Penelope's father to ask her hand in marriage. The suitors ignore him.

Telemachus prepares for a sea-voyage to Pylos to find out news of his father. Athene disguises herself as Telemachus, and then as Mentor, helping to get things ready faster. Telemachus then slips away without telling his mother or the suitors where he is going.



## Analysis

The first two chapters (books) establish the situation at the beginning of the story: Odysseus is held captive on the nymph Calypso's island. It has been twenty years since he set out to war. The Trojan War itself lasted ten years, and Odysseus' journey home has taken up a considerable amount of time too. He has been held on Calypso's island for the rest of the time, making up twenty years in total. Since every other Greek warrior who went to Troy has made it home or died on the way, Odysseus is presumed to be dead. Only a few, including Odysseus' wife Penelope, still hold out hope of Odysseus being alive. Even Telemachus, Odysseus' son, has begun to doubt that his father will ever return.

Meanwhile, with Odysseus believed dead, suitors have moved into Odysseus' palace and are eating all his food and drinking all his wine. They are trying to convince Penelope to marry them, but she still hopes that Odysseus will return. She does not want to accept any of their offers, but they are not going to take 'no' for an answer. She tricks them into thinking they have a chance and that they simply need to wait. This keeps them from becoming violent or insistent. It also buys Penelope more time to wait for her beloved husband. However, the suitors are very rude and unpleasant. They are not only ruining Telemachus' peace and quiet, but they are also beginning to bankrupt him by staying longer than they are welcome.

It might seem odd to begin a story about Odysseus by focusing on his wife and son instead, but these early chapters actually give us a lot of vital information about the world. Telemachus is the son of the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, but he does not necessarily inherit leadership as a matter of course. In the Mycenaean period in which this story is set, the most skilled and the strongest tended to rule. If Odysseus had been around, then Telemachus would have been able to grow strong and mighty, and he would have taken over the leadership of Ithaca naturally. With Odysseus missing and Telemachus still a very young man, however, Telemachus' position is less secure. The suitors, other men who are older or stronger than Telemachus, wish to claim the palace and the wealth for themselves. To make this claim more legitimate, they wish to marry Odysseus' wife. By doing so, they secure themselves into the position that he has abandoned. They also desire Penelope because she is beautiful and clever, though her father's wealth and Odysseus' palace are certainly what attracts the suitors the most.

Telemachus is therefore in a vulnerable position. He could be pushed out of his home and his position, or perhaps even killed by scheming suitors who do not want a rival around. Telemachus is still seen as little more than a child, and he is treated with scorn. In these early chapters, Telemachus finally begins to stick up for himself a little more. He tries to stand against the suitors, and though they do not listen to him, it shows that he is beginning to grow up and to become a man. Athene wishes to send him on a mission to find news of Odysseus. She already knows Odysseus is alive, so she must have ulterior motives. In fact, what she is trying to do is to send Telemachus on his own quest, to boost his confidence and his leadership skills, to help him be the man his father will need to support him against the suitors when he returns.



Penelope is also in a vulnerable position, and her plight shows us the difficulties that women in this time period faced. If Penelope refuses the suitors, they will either become violent and take it out on her or her son, or they will go straight to her father and demand that she marry one of them. Penelope does not want to remarry yet, so she tries to stall them with a trick. This also means that she does not have to refuse any of them yet. If Odysseus is dead, then she will need another husband to take care of her, as women could not inherit and must be under the 'ownership' of a man in this world. Penelope would prefer Odysseus, but she has to think of her future, too. Poor Penelope cannot mourn properly for the man she loves because she must already consider how best to fare for herself and her son if he is dead.

There are several instances of disguise in these chapters, with Athene taking the form of various mortals, and, at one point, a bird. Disguise is an important theme in this story, which will occur many times in the events to come. Disguise represents trickery and cleverness, something that both Odysseus and Athene display. This is why Athene likes the hero so much and is so anxious to help him. The theme of disguise also demonstrates the idea that any person could actually be a god in disguise. So, it is better to treat everyone with respect. This is part of the laws of hospitality that are sacred to Zeus. Many times in this story, when people do not treat guests courteously, they are shown to be angering the gods.

The Odyssey is not a novel; it is an epic poem. It was written in verse and passed down orally for generations before it was written down and saved in this form. Some say that it was the blind bard Homer who preserved it in this way, but nobody really knows for sure. Throughout the book, there are many clues that this story was designed to be memorized and sung. There are certain phrases that are repeated over and over. These help the bards remember where they are in the poem, and they give them some breathing space to try to remember the next line. Characters often have 'epithets,' such as the 'bright-eyed' goddess Athene. These are also tricks to help bards remember. Finally, the little details in the story, such as weapons and armor and funeral rites, reflect several different times. This is because the story has picked up different elements from history as it has been passed down. Its setting is therefore much less rigid than other historical works. This is important to bear in mind while reading the story.

## Discussion Question 1

How do you think you would feel and react if you were trapped somewhere beautiful but could never go home? Why do you think Odysseus reacts as he does? What does this tell us about him?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Telemachus handles the situation with the suitors well? What could he have done differently?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the gods take such an interest in the mortal world? What does it say about Odysseus and his family that Athene is on their side?

## Vocabulary

resourceful, wander, citadel, anguish, comrades, folly, transgression, perils, yearned, homecoming, malice, lamentable, dissuade, wrung, malevolent, banish, mere, admirable, implacable, untarnishable, threshold, insolent, herald





# Books Three and Four – ‘Telemachus with Nestor’, and ‘Menelaus and Helen’

## Summary

Telemachus arrives at Pylos and Athene, in the disguise of Mentor, the family friend, encourages him to go to the king, Nestor, immediately. After a sacrifice to the gods has been performed, Telemachus asks Nestor if he has heard any news of Odysseus. Nestor tells Telemachus of the fates of various Greek heroes who went to the Trojan War, including Agamemnon, the great king who was killed by his cousin Aegisthus when he returned home. Agamemnon's son took revenge by killing Aegisthus, something that both Nestor and Telemachus praise. Unfortunately, Nestor has no idea what has happened to Odysseus.

Nestor thinks that Menelaus, the king of Sparta, might have a better idea of Odysseus' fate. So, he suggests that Telemachus should go to see him. Nestor then offers for Telemachus to sleep at the palace. Athene accepts on his behalf and then transforms into a vulture and flies away. Nestor realizes that she must have been the goddess Athene and tells Telemachus that he is blessed with divine favor. They then sacrifice a white heifer and make libations to the goddess before going to sleep.

In the morning, Nestor throws Telemachus a feast and gives him a chariot for his journey. Peisistratus, Nestor's son, accompanies Telemachus to Sparta. They spend the night at the house of Diocles where they are shown hospitality and given gifts of friendship. The next day they arrive at Sparta, where Menelaus is celebrating the double weddings of his son and daughter.

Menelaus greets them and takes them into his palace, which is filled with fabulous wealth. He tells them that he gained it all from his travels. However, while he was away his brother was killed. So, the wealth means little to him now. As they talk, Helen comes downstairs and comments that Telemachus looks just like his father. Telemachus is upset, and the others begin to weep for the loss of Odysseus, too. Helen secretly drugs their wine with a potion that will help to ease their suffering. She then tells Telemachus about his father's cunning nature. Odysseus had disguised himself as a beggar in order to sneak into Troy to gain information during the war.

Menelaus then tells a slightly different story of Odysseus' plan to hide soldiers inside a wooden horse and how Helen tried to lure out the men to their death, but Odysseus prevented this. After this story, they all retire for the night. The next morning they continue conversing, and Telemachus asks for news of his father. Menelaus tells him that when he was stranded in Egypt, he wrestled the sea-god Proteus to gain information that would help him reach home. Proteus also told him of the fate of the hero Ajax, of his own brother Agamemnon, and lastly of Odysseus, who is trapped on an island, held captive by the nymph Calypso.



Telemachus thanks Menelaus for the information. Menelaus gives him many precious gifts before he and Pisistratus set out to return to Pylos. Meanwhile, the suitors have found out where Telemachus has gone, and they have planned an ambush for him on his return.

## Analysis

In these chapters Telemachus is given the opportunity to gain more confidence by having to speak to two very important men. He must conduct himself well in their company. He achieves this and is pleased to see the respect they show him, not only as a son of Odysseus, but for his own sake, too. Telemachus also hears that Odysseus is still alive, though captured by a sea-nymph. This is news that can give him renewed hope. Unfortunately, the suitors are plotting to kill Telemachus. The fourth book ends on this cliff-hanger, leaving the readers/audience in suspense as to what will happen.

As Telemachus visits different people, he is shown hospitality by everyone. This emphasizes the importance of friendship and of being kind to guests. This was a very important code by which people were expected to live in ancient Greece. In times when a harsh winter could destroy a person's livelihood, neighbors needed to look out for each other. When storms or other dangers meant that travelers were vulnerable and often needed help, people were expected to provide travelers with food and shelter. Then, if you ever needed help in future, the hope was that you would be shown it. This was a code that ensured everyone's survival. It was mutually beneficial. Besides, one never knew if a guest was really a god in disguise, and guests were considered to be sacred to Zeus. To treat a guest badly was a mark of being impious and uncivilized. This is why both Menelaus and Nestor are so anxious to be good hosts and why Menelaus berates his squire for suggesting that they send the strangers on their way without first offering them food and shelter.

More important men were expected to be shown even greater hospitality. Those known to you, or those with a great reputation, should be given gifts. This is why Telemachus is given fine gifts by everyone with whom he stays. As the son of Odysseus, he commands respect and must be shown favor for his father's sake. His father would earn even greater gifts in his place. The amount and quality of gifts received is an indication of a person's fame and honor, which is extremely important to heroes. However, Menelaus says that all his gifts and wealth, gathered in his travels, mean nothing to him now that his brother was murdered. This is an extreme statement to make, considering how much honor these gifts would have brought Menelaus. This only emphasizes the supreme importance of family and home, which is a major theme in this story. Odysseus will be offered great wealth, beautiful women, and many pleasures throughout the story, but all he really wants is to return to his family and his home. This story teaches us that nothing is as important as the people and the home we love.

In these chapters, the fate of Agamemnon and Orestes is mentioned several times. This is brought up again and again because Orestes is meant to act as an example of filial piety – love and devotion to family – that Telemachus can follow. Orestes was about



Telemachus' own age when he avenged his father's death by killing the man who had usurped his home and his power. Now Telemachus faces a similar situation with the suitors. By hearing the story of Orestes repeated, hopefully Telemachus will gain the courage to help his father fight when he returns. The story of Agamemnon's death also highlights Odysseus' own loving family and situation. Agamemnon's wife had an affair with another man while he was away and plotted her husband's murder. Penelope, in contrast, has never stopped longing for Odysseus' return. She refuses to remarry and tries to keep the suitors from usurping his home. By contrasting her to Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, Penelope is shown to be the ideal wife. She is faithful, brave, clever, and a true friend.

Helen of Troy is an interesting figure in these chapters. It is quite hard to get a reading on her character, because we are given conflicting information. Helen appears to regret running away with Paris to Troy. Her actions started the Trojan War. Yet, she is clearly trying to appease her husband when she takes care to flatter him as much as possible. She also claims that she was manipulated by the goddess Aphrodite, which fits with the myth. Menelaus seems to have forgiven his wife, yet he tells a story of how she tried to get the Greek soldiers killed at Troy. Helen tells a different story, trying to paint herself as the friend of the Greeks during the war. She is also a very perceptive woman, who notices straight away who Telemachus is and then uses exotic drugs to relieve the men's suffering. She is mysterious, and she is the daughter of Zeus. It appears that the men do not quite know whether to respect her or to blame her.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Telemachus change and grow throughout his journey? How does his journey help him?

## Discussion Question 2

What impression of Odysseus do we get from the accounts of the people Telemachus visits?

## Discussion Question 3

How are hospitality and guest-friendship emphasised in these chapters? How do Nestor and Menelaus both treat their guests? Why?

## Vocabulary

brazen, firmament, immortals, stately, sacrifice, inspire, assembled, rites, beaker, sumptuous, accomplish, petition, fulfillment, venture, hostile, endured, indescribable, embarked, dissension, pondering, teeming



# Books Five and Six – ‘Calypso’ and ‘Nausicaa’

## Summary

The gods meet to discuss Odysseus, and Zeus sends Hermes down to Calypso. Hermes informs Calypso that it is the will of Zeus that she let Odysseus go. Calypso cannot refuse, even though she loves Odysseus and wants him to stay with her. So, she helps Odysseus build a raft to leave her island.

Poseidon sees Odysseus on a raft in the ocean and decides to give him some trouble before he reaches Phaeacia. He knows he cannot kill him, because Zeus has ordained for him to survive, but Poseidon hates Odysseus and wants to at least make him suffer a bit more before he reaches home. He sends a storm to wreck Odysseus' raft.

Odysseus is tossed about at sea until a sea-nymph called Ino takes pity on him and gives him her veil to tie around his waist as a mark of divine favor. As his raft breaks up, Odysseus does as she says and jumps into the sea. After two nights and two days of being thrown around by the waves, he sees land ahead and grabs a rock. He is then able to swim to a safer cove and the mouth of a stream. He pulls himself onto land and takes shelter under trees, where he falls asleep.

As Odysseus sleeps, Athene disguises herself as a young girl and visits Nausicaa, the daughter of King Alcinous, in her sleep. She tells Nausicaa to go wash clothes by the river, as she is no longer a child and will soon be married, and so must prepare for married life. When Nausicaa wakes up she does just this, taking maids and food with her down to the river. When they have finished washing the clothes, the girls play with a ball, shrieking as they throw it to each other. The sounds wake up Odysseus, who nervously wonders what land he has come to.

Odysseus decides he must speak to Nausicaa, but as he approaches, his sudden appearance frightens away the other girls. Only Nausicaa stands firm and listens to what he has to say. Odysseus flatters her, then tells her that he was shipwrecked here and needs help. She tells the girls to give him oil and water to clean himself with, and Athene breathes beauty onto him so that when he has finished with his bath he looks god-like. Nausicaa is impressed by him and agrees to help. She tells him to follow behind the wagon to the city, but there he must make his way to the palace alone so that the people of the city do not gossip about her. She advises him to seek out her mother and supplicate her first for help, as she is the one who really holds the power and influence in the family.



## Analysis

These chapters give us our first impression of the main hero of the story, Odysseus. Odysseus first appears weeping on the beach of Calypso's island. This might seem weak to a modern reader, but in ancient Greek epics and plays, men will weep openly without shame when they have something significant to cry about, such as family and home. This emphasizes that Odysseus is a loyal and loving man who just wants to return to his home and family. Even when he is faced with the possibility of immortality and of the dreamland that Calypso's island represents, where he is waited on hand and foot by beautiful nymphs, Odysseus still just wants his wife and son. He is a hero that people can relate to, a man who wants the simple yet most important pleasure in life.

Odysseus also shows himself to be brave, enduring, skilled and resourceful. He builds a raft from scratch using only the resources available of Calypso's island. He then sails through stormy waters. When he is wrecked he keeps going, not giving up hope. At Phaeacia he is tired and hungry, and he looks a mess, but he still manages to find the courage and the willpower to face Nausicaa. Despite looking terrifying, he conducts himself well and speaks persuasively, convincing Nausicaa to trust him. Earlier, he had also spoken well to Calypso, easing her anger by choosing just the right words. He is clearly a man who can command respect. When the sea-grime is washed off him, he is also an extremely handsome and impressive man. Athene helps him in secret at several points, and she seems completely dedicated to him. He must be an incredible man to win the favor of one of the most important and powerful goddesses. Athene is also not the only god who helps him. Poseidon might hate him, but both Ino and the river-god are moved to help him. Odysseus is not only impressive to mortals; he commands divine favor, too.

Odysseus does not want to die at sea, not because he fears death, but because he wants fame and honor. While being tossed around by the waves, he laments that he did not die at Troy. This is because he would have received a proper burial there and been mourned by all the other warriors. This would have been a glorious death, and his ghost could have rested easy. If he dies at sea, he will be unburied, and his family and friends will not be able to mourn properly. This was considered a very tragic fate by the ancient Greeks, for whom proper burial and mourning rituals were vitally important. Odysseus also cares a lot about his reputation and his fame. For the ancient Greeks, the afterlife was a bleak place, and the only real immortality a person could achieve was through the fame of one's deeds. Fame is a source of great pride for heroes, and particularly so for Odysseus. It is natural for a hero to want people to know him and talk about him, but Odysseus sometimes takes this too far. He is too proud, a common problem for the Greek hero, and one that constantly leads Odysseus into trouble. This is called his 'fatal flaw.'



## Discussion Question 1

This is our first real view of Odysseus on Calypso's island. What is your first impression of the hero?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Odysseus manage to impress Nausicaa? What does this show us about him?

## Discussion Question 3

In the storm, Odysseus despairs that he didn't die at Troy. Why do you think he despairs over this? Why would death in battle be preferable to death at sea?

## Vocabulary

illustrious, scepter, tyranny, languish, convey, quantities, spoil (bounty), boundless, loom, fragrant, thriving, rivulets, flourished, disconsolate, ambrosia, expanse, evade, communed, tremendous, salvation, eddying, sallies, suppliant



# Books Seven and Eight – ‘The Palace of Alcinous’ and ‘The Phaeacian Games’

## Summary

Athene disguises herself as a young Phaeacian girl and guides Odysseus to Alcinous' palace. At the palace Odysseus goes to Nausicaa's mother Queen Arete and supplicates her, asking for the Phaeacians' help in getting him home again. They offer him food and hospitality, and they promise to return him to his home on one of their ships.

Arete then asks Odysseus more about himself, and he tells her about being held captive by Calypso and then being shipwrecked on their island. He has still not told them who he is, but already Alcinous is impressed by him enough to offer him his daughter in marriage. Odysseus just wants to return home, however, and Alcinous says he would never stand in the way of that. They prepare a bed for Odysseus in the portico for the night.

The next day Alcinous calls an assembly, and Athene disguises herself as a Phaeacian. She runs through the town to make sure that everyone attends to see Odysseus. This will win him fame and glory. Alcinous instructs that a ship be prepared and asks for his guest to be entertained. Their bard, Demodocus, sings a song about the famous argument between Odysseus and Achilles, but the memories cause Odysseus to weep. He manages to hide this from the other men, but Alcinous sees and quickly suggests a change of entertainment: games instead of music.

The Phaeacian men compete in various sports, and then Alcinous' son Laodamas challenges Odysseus. Odysseus says that his heart is too heavy for games, but a man called Euryalus mocks him. Odysseus is angry and tells off Euryalus for his arrogant behavior. He then decides to compete after all. He throws a discus much further than the rest and boasts about his skills with all other sports, particularly archery. Alcinous steps in and placates Odysseus. He suggests that they entertain themselves by watching the dancers instead. Odysseus praises the dancers, and Alcinous is pleased. The king tells the men to give Odysseus gifts.

Odysseus then asks Demodocus to tell the story of the wooden horse. Demodocus sings about how the hero Odysseus came up with a cunning plan to construct a huge wooden horse and hide Greek warriors inside it. The Greek army then pretended to leave, and they hid their ships. The Trojans thought the Greeks had gone home and that the horse was an offering to the gods. They took it into their city, hoping to transfer divine favor to themselves. In the night, the Greek warriors emerged and opened the gates of the city so that the entire Greek army could enter. This was the famous stratagem that resulted in the Greeks finally winning the Trojan War.



Odysseus weeps again at the memories conjured by the song. Alcinous sees him and commands the bard to stop. He then asks Odysseus to tell them his name and his story.

## Analysis

Once again the theme of hospitality is emphasized. The Phaeacians are extremely welcoming and friendly, treating their guest with honor and respect despite not knowing who he is yet. They give him gifts, marking him out as someone special, and Alcinous deftly diffuses any unpleasant situations, taking care of his guest's feelings as well as his food, shelter, and entertainment. This focus on guest friendship shows that Odysseus has finally returned to civilization again after all his travels and troubles in strange, barbarian lands.

Not only this, but the Phaeacians actually go above and beyond what is expected of them, showing themselves to be a special kind of people. The description of their home emphasizes how beautiful and perfect a place this is, with ideal, fertile land, the magnificent palace and riches, the strong athletes, and the wonderful dancers. This is another amazing place where Odysseus could stay, but unlike Calypso's island, he could actually have a family and future here with other people and civilization, rather than having to stay separate from other men among the nymphs and the supernatural. This is a much more appealing place, and Nausicaa could be a very appealing wife for him. She is young and a little shy, but she is also brave, kind, and obedient. She is all the things that the ancient Greeks thought women should be. She also possesses cleverness, a trait that Odysseus particularly admires. However, Odysseus is not even tempted by all this for a second; he longs to return to his own home and his wife. This is an important point that is emphasized many times throughout the story.

The divine nature of bards is also emphasized in these chapters, and Odysseus says that they are people who should be respected and admired. Bards were men who played a lyre or other instrument and sang about the exploits of heroes, or about the gods. Demodocus, the blind bard in these chapters, sings about Odysseus and Achilles, the wooden horse, and about the gods. People might gather to listen while enjoying a feast, or watch dancers perform in time to the music. This was considered great entertainment at the time, and it was through these bards that famous stories and myths were passed down. Bards were therefore culturally very important. The *Odyssey* itself is an epic poem that would have been performed to music and sung by bards. They would memorize it and, perhaps, perform it in stages over many evenings. Or, a specific part might be requested, such as "tell us the story of how Odysseus left Calypso's island and arrived at the Phaeacian palace!"

By emphasizing the importance of bards, then, the bard who is singing this story is elevating himself. By this he might receive better payment or gifts, or gain greater fame. Bards would travel around Greece performing in towns and palaces. They relied heavily on the kindness of strangers. This is another reason why the importance of hospitality is a major theme in this story. The bard performing it is reminding the people that they are supposed to look after him well. If they do not treat him well, then they are as uncivilized





as barbarians or monsters. They will incur the wrath of Zeus himself. It is also possible that the blind bard Demodocus is a reference to Homer, who according to legend was also a blind bard. Demodocus might have been Homer's own addition to the story, elevating himself through the divine music of this character.

Just as the bards telling this story might be subtly trying to increase their own fame and glory, so Odysseus tries to build his reputation in these chapters. First, he reacts angrily when mocked by Euryalus, and immediately begins to show off and to boast. This is Odysseus' pride coming out; he cannot stand the idea of people not respecting him properly. Alcinous manages to diffuse this situation and Odysseus' ego is saved by the gift giving that Alcinous insists upon. However, this is not enough for Odysseus. He needs to make an even bigger impression, and cannot miss out on the opportunity to enhance his reputation even more. He tells Demodocus to sing about the story of the wooden horse, which was a cunning scheme devised by Odysseus that led to the Greeks winning the Trojan War. When Odysseus reveals who he really is after the assembled people have just heard this story about Odysseus' fame and cunning, he will make an even bigger impression. He can then go on to tell them about all his exploits, and his boasting will be believed because Demodocus has just confirmed what an incredible man he is. This is very clever of Odysseus, and it is just one example of how the hero is always looking to increase his fame.

## Discussion Question 1

The Phaeacians' home is presented as idyllic. In what ways is it a perfect place? Do you think it would be a good place to live? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Alcinous a good host? What does this tell us about Greek home life for the very rich? Why do you think hospitality is so important?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Odysseus ask Demodocus, the bard, to sing about Troy and the wooden horse? How might this elevate his position among the Phaeacians? What does the wooden horse story tell us about Odysseus?

## Vocabulary

mules, pitcher, formidable, surmounted, palisades, qualms, enterprises, overweening, devotion, disputes, radiance, frieze, consummate, dexterity, luxuriantly, briskly, eloquent, unseemly, libation, delicacies, disperse, imperishable, inhospitable, barren



# Books Nine and Ten – ‘The Cyclops’ and ‘Circe’

## Summary

Odysseus tells the Phaeacians who he is and then begins to tell the story of his travels home from the Trojan War:

After leaving Troy, Odysseus and his men come to Ismarus, the land of the Cicone peoples. They raid the city and kill the men, and Odysseus then divides the food, wealth and women among his men. Odysseus wants to get away quickly but the men insist on staying to feast on the Cicones' food. The surviving Cicones raise an army from the surrounding people and attack Odysseus' men. Six men from each ship are killed before the Greeks manage to get away.

Odysseus and his men sail away. They come to the land of the Lotus Eaters, people who eat the fruit of the Lotus plant. This plant acts like a drug that takes away men's memories of home and leaves them with only one desire: to keep eating the Lotus fruit. Odysseus sees the effect it has on his men and drags them back to the ships. He then quickly orders everyone to leave.

Next, they come to the island of the Cyclopes, one-eyed giants who tend goats. They do not farm or plow the land. A scouting party and Odysseus go inland, and they find a cave full of goat's cheese and milk. Odysseus' men want to take the food and leave, but Odysseus is curious about who lives here, and he hopes that whoever it is might show him hospitality and give him gifts. Unfortunately, the owner of the cave turns out to be Polyphemus, a vicious Cyclops who begins to eat Odysseus' men.

Polyphemus rolls a large boulder across the cave entrance and then goes to sleep. While he is sleeping Odysseus forms a plan. When the Cyclops wakes up, Odysseus gets him drunk and then blinds him with a large stake that he and his men had carved out of an olive tree. The Cyclops moves the boulder from the cave entrance to let his sheep out, feeling their backs to make sure none of the men escape with them. Odysseus ties himself and his men to the bellies of the sheep, and they all escape. As they are sailing away, however, Odysseus cannot resist calling out his name and boasting that he bested the Cyclops. Polyphemus hears him and calls for his father, the sea-god Poseidon, to curse Odysseus.

Next, they come to Aeolia, the island of Aeolus, a man who is favored by the gods and who controls the winds. He gives Odysseus hospitality and then gifts him with a bag containing all the world's winds. The only wind not trapped is the one that will blow him home to Ithaca. With this gift, Odysseus should have an easy voyage home, but his men get too curious about what might be in the sack. When Odysseus sleeps, they



open it, and the winds escape, blowing them back to Aeolia. Aeolus is less friendly this time, thinking they must be cursed by the gods.

They then sail to the Laestrygonian lands, home of man-eating giants, where they barely escape. Only one ship, Odysseus' own, now remains. After this, they come to Aeaëa, the home of the demi-goddess Circe. Circe is a witch. Odysseus sends out a scouting party led by Eurylochus, but Eurylochus returns to say that his men entered Circe's hut and never came out. Odysseus goes to investigate and meets the god Hermes on the way, who warns him that Circe's drugs will turn men into animals. He gives Odysseus a plant that will prevent her magic from working on him and instructs him on what to do. When her magic does not work on him, he threatens her with his sword, and she immediately shows him proper hospitality and turns his men into humans again.

The whole crew comes to Circe's hut. The men are given food and shelter. They have such a wonderful time there feasting and being entertained that they begin to forget about home. A year later, Odysseus' men ask to leave, and Odysseus agrees. Circe tells him that he is welcome to depart. But, before journeying home he must first call up the ghosts of the underworld and ask the prophet Teiresias about the journey. Before Odysseus can do this, Elpenor, one of his crewmen, falls from the roof while drunk and dies.

## Analysis

Odysseus' story, the main plot of the epic is actually told in the form of a flashback as he relates his adventures to the gathered Phaeacians. This makes it a story within a story, just one of the many examples in the *Odyssey* of storytelling being glorified and held up as something very important. Once again, this elevates the position of bards, ensuring that the storyteller of this story will be treated well. It is also important to remember that as Odysseus is telling his own tale, he is certainly a little biased. We never really know when he is embellishing to make himself seem better, such as the tendency for problems to be all his men's fault. It is they who linger too long in the land of the Cicones and open the bag of winds. Later, they will continue to make serious mistakes. In most of these circumstances, Odysseus is the sole voice of caution and reason, making him seem sensible and wise as well as a great fighter and leader of men.

However, although it is usually the men making all the mistakes, in the incident with the Cyclops, Odysseus does something very stupid. First, he lingers in the cave, hoping to receive gifts from whomever its occupant is. This is actually not primarily driven by greed. Odysseus hopes that through the gifts and loot he accumulates on his travels home, he will arrive at Ithaca with proof of his greatness. As Menelaus' palace indicated, coming home from travels with lots of gifts was an important part of being a hero and a way to compete with other heroes. It was a mark of a man's fame and worth. Unfortunately, this has very bad consequences for Odysseus and his men.



Still, Odysseus manages to use his cunning to get out of this sticky situation. He cannot fight the Cyclops with strength. So, he must use his mind instead. Odysseus often boasts of his cleverness and his stratagems, such as the incident with the wooden horse at Troy. This is part of Odysseus' fame and what marks him out as a different kind of hero from the usual strong brutes or skilled fighters of Greek myth. Odysseus is capable in combat and sport, but it is in strategy and plans that he really shines. This is something that proves itself to be a vital skill when facing the trials that Odysseus and his men come across. They are warriors in a world of magic and monsters, suddenly finding that their skills and strength might be useless. Odysseus' cunning and resourcefulness is sometimes all that gets them through, and this becomes a recurring theme throughout the story. This is also the character trait that causes Athene, goddess of wisdom, to admire Odysseus so much. It is why he is her favorite among mortal men.

Unfortunately, when Odysseus manages to get his men away from the Cyclops, he cannot help boasting and taunting the monster. This allows the blind Polyphemus to locate the ship, and he throws a large stone that almost wrecks it. The men beg Odysseus not to taunt the Cyclops anymore, but Odysseus cannot help himself. He had proved himself very clever earlier when he told the Cyclops his name was 'Nobody.' When Polyphemus shouted that Nobody was attacking him, the other Cyclopes took this literally, and they didn't realize that their help was needed. To leave the Cyclops thinking of him as a nobody, however, goes against everything that Odysseus stands for. He cannot bear the thought of going unknown, or of a clever deed not being attributed to him. He wants fame and glory, not anonymity, so he calls out his real name to the Cyclops. The very cleverness that had helped them to escape now pushes Odysseus into doing something idiotic. Now that Polyphemus has Odysseus' real name, he can ask his father, the sea-god Poseidon, to curse him. Poseidon listens and does indeed carry out this curse. It is because of Odysseus' pride, his fatal flaw, that all his men are eventually killed, and it takes ten years to reach home. Also, he must fight the suitors when he gets there.

Throughout his journey, Odysseus comes up against many different kinds of weird men and monsters. This represents the difference between Greeks and non-Greeks. The ancient Greeks considered themselves to be the only civilized people. Everyone else was considered to be a barbarian. This is shown mainly through a lack of hospitality. In almost every place that Odysseus comes to, he and his men are initially met with violence or trickery. At Aeolia they are treated with respect, indicating that this is a more civilized place than others, with Aeolus being the closest that they come to other Greeks. Even Aeolus' land is uncivilized, however, as basic laws of marriage are subverted, with sisters marrying brothers. In other places they might find lack of respect for the gods, cannibalism, or the plant-eating ways of the Lotus Eaters, which results directly in a loss of memory and humanity. Non-Greek lands and people are shown as being strange, dangerous, magical, and ultimately barbaric. Odysseus' journey could be seen as symbolic of the fight to refind civilization after the horrors and barbarity of war, as well as representing how all other peoples are inferior to the ancient Greeks.



## Discussion Question 1

What is so frightening about the danger of the Lotus flower? How does this fit with the story's theme of the importance of home and family?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Odysseus call out his name to the Cyclops? Do you think pride is Odysseus' fatal flaw?

## Discussion Question 3

Does Odysseus come across as a good leader of men? Consider the attack on the Cicones, the Lotus Eaters, the Cyclops' cave, the incident with the winds, losing ships at the Laestrygonians' island, and what happens with Circe.

## Vocabulary

intensified, stratagems, nurtures, detained, plunder, pitched battle, eluded, marshals, helmsman, untilled, established, luxuriant, innumerable, prow, yielding, exceedingly, moorings, hawsers, murky, bows (ship), allotted, mellow, tutelary, bouquet, foreboding, ferocity, laden



# Books Eleven and Twelve – ‘The Book of the Dead’ and ‘Scylla and Charybdis’

## Summary

After being given help and guidance by Circe, Odysseus and his men sail to the River of Ocean where the living world meets the entrance to the Underworld where the dead live. Odysseus offers libations and then sacrifices some sheep, pouring their blood into a trench. This attracts the spirits of the dead, which begin to flood up from the Underworld in great numbers. Odysseus stands guard with a drawn sword, not letting any of the ghosts drink until Teiresias has appeared. He sees the spirit of Elpenor, who asks for proper burial, which Odysseus promises to carry out.

Teiresias tells Odysseus that he and his men will come to Thrinacie, the island where the Sun-god keeps his cattle. If they eat the cattle then all his men will be killed, and Odysseus will reach home late, in a wrecked state and a foreign ship. If they do not eat the cattle, they will arrive home soon. Either way, when Odysseus has dealt with the suitors in his palace, he must take an oar and plant it in the ground inland, then make a sacrifice to Poseidon in order to appease his anger. After this, Odysseus will lead a long life and die happily of old age.

When Odysseus is done talking to the prophet, he sees his mother and offers her the blood. She tells him that she killed herself in her grief for him and that his father lives alone on his farm like a poor man, mourning for his lost son. She tells him that Penelope is still unmarried. She and Telemachus are waiting for him. When his mother has finished talking, Odysseus lets other women spirits drink the blood, and they tell him who they are. They are all mothers or daughters of famous men and heroes.

Odysseus pauses in his story here and the Phaeacians urge him to continue, promising to give him even more gifts as a mark of his greatness. He thanks them and continues his tale.

Odysseus next speaks to the ghost of Agamemnon, who tells him how he died and warns him not to trust women. Then Odysseus speaks to the ghost of Achilles, who tells him how terrible death is, but is heartened by news of the his son's brave exploits. Odysseus then sees more heroes, before witnessing the fate of terrible sinners who are punished in the Underworld. Last he sees Heracles, the famous Greek hero. He would liked to have stayed to talk to more ghosts, but then the spirits began to swarm up in thousands and he was afraid. The men hurried back to their ships and left the dead behind.

They return to Circe's house and bury Elpenor, and Circe then warns them about the dangers they will face ahead, including the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis. The next day they set sail again. They soon pass the Sirens, female creatures that sing beautifully



and lure sailors to their death on the rocks. The men stop up their ears with wax so they can't hear the bewitching song; but, Odysseus ties himself to the mast so he can listen in safety. After the Sirens they come to Charybdis, a huge whirlpool that sucks down water and then spits it back up again in a tumult. While they are inching past along the cliffs, a many-headed monster called Scylla, who lives in the cliffs, snatches up some of Odysseus' men. Odysseus tries to fight back, but this does no good. Eventually, they pass these dangers into safe waters again.

They arrive at Thrinacie, the island of the Sun-god Hyperion. Odysseus does not even want to land, but his men protest. He warns them not to eat any of the cattle, and then goes inland to pray. While he is gone, the men kill and feast on some of Hyperion's cattle. Hyperion is angry and demands that Zeus punish the men. As Odysseus and his men are sailing away, Zeus strikes the ship with lightning, wrecking it. All Odysseus' men are drowned, but he survives by clinging to the mast, and is eventually washed up on Calypso's island.

## Analysis

Book ten is full of moral lessons for the Greeks listening to the story being told. At the entrance to the Underworld Odysseus sees all kinds of different ghosts, from great heroes to terrible sinners, and he listens to their stories or sees the punishments they are subjected to in the afterlife. After he has gained his information from Teiresias and spoken to his mother, Odysseus sees rows of women spirits, the mothers, daughters and wives of great heroes. He listens to their stories, and then meets the spirits of warriors who fell at Troy. Agamemnon tells him how he was murdered by his wife, and he seems to now believe that all women are tainted and evil, and that none can be trusted. Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, Helen, Penelope, and the women spirits are contrasted, revealing ideas of what makes an 'ideal woman' for the ancient Greeks. Penelope is held up as the perfect woman: sensible, loving, and above all faithful. Wives who betray or kill their husbands are the ultimate evil. The women spirits show that women were primarily valued as mothers, and their worth tended to be judged on the kind of men they were married to and gave birth to.

Odysseus also sees the sinners Tantalus and Sisyphus, who are punished in the Underworld. Tantalus was the founder of the House of Atreus, a very unfortunate family in Greek mythology, which included Menelaus and Agamemnon. Tantalus was guilty of trying to test the gods by serving them human flesh to see if they would notice. Sisyphus also committed crimes against nature and the gods by tricking Death twice. Both these men are condemned to endless punishment because they dared to challenge the gods and the nature of the world. They tried to act like more than mortal men, and so committed the crime of hubris (excessive pride). This was one of the worst crimes according to the ancient Greeks, who believed strongly in respecting the gods and knowing one's place as a mortal on the Earth. Committing the sin of pride could have devastating consequences for generations, as shown in the misfortune of the line of Atreus, leading to Agamemnon being murdered by his wife, Menelaus' wife Helen



leaving him and beginning a ten year war, and Agamemnon's son Orestes being forced to kill his own mother to avenge his father.

Descending to the Underworld and then returning to the mortal world was a mark of a great hero in Greek mythology. Heracles, Orpheus, Theseus, and many others achieved this, so if Odysseus is to be admired as a truly great hero, he needs to make this journey too. However, Odysseus is not actually a demi-god as many Greek heroes were, and he has his crew with him, so he cannot journey into the depths of the Underworld itself. Instead he stays at the entrance and calls the dead to him. This is still very dangerous, as he has attracted the attention of all the dead as well as the gods of the dead lands. Odysseus stays firm and brave, getting the information he wants and even staying a little longer to talk to other heroes, before leaving when things get too dangerous. By facing death, he proves himself to be an admirable and mighty hero.

Odysseus is warned twice not to eat the cattle of the Sun-god and is warned by Circe not to try to fight Scylla either. He cannot help himself from trying to fight back against Scylla, defying the warning, but he does at least try to warn his men not to eat the cattle. Unfortunately, while Odysseus is asleep inland, his men disobey this command. For this, they are killed, and the prophecy and curse on Odysseus comes true. He does get shipwrecked, delayed, and washed up on foreign lands to return home in a foreign ship. There is a sense of inevitability about this; Odysseus and his men's fate was set the second Odysseus called out his name to Polyphemus and the Cyclops called down a curse upon him. Here, Odysseus makes it clear that not only was it his men's choice to eat the cattle, his own sleep was caused by a god. He wants to place all responsibility for the disaster onto his mutinous crew, conveniently moving any blame away from himself.

Now Odysseus' tale has finished and the flashback has come full circle. Odysseus ends his story with him washed up on Calypso's shore. From here, we see him arrive at Phaeacia, where he is now relating his adventures. Odysseus' adventures among monsters and the magic are over. He has entered civilization again, and he now must return home and reclaim what was his.

## Discussion Question 1

Achilles says it is better to be alive and poor than a dead hero. What do you think Achilles really means? Why is this important? How does it relate to Odysseus' own journey home from war?

## Discussion Question 2

Agamemnon talks about being murdered by his wife, and condemns all women because of it. Odysseus will soon be making his own homecoming to a wife he has left for 20 years. In what ways are the situations parallel? What does it show about Penelope, in contrast with Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra?





## Discussion Question 3

Could Odysseus have done anything to prevent the deaths of all his men? Was it their own fault, or ultimately his?

## Vocabulary

tresses, trench, insubstantial, heifer, pyre, throng, eerie, clamour, nimble, malicious, decree, forsake, barrow, prophet, resentment, wretched, livelihood, courting, ceremonial, prosperous, lingering, malignant, sinews, nourished, mouldering, repulsive, protrude, foliage, vigorous, kneading



# Books Thirteen and Fourteen – 'Odysseus Land in Ithaca' and 'In Eumaeus' Hut'

## Summary

Odysseus is given more gifts by the Phaeacians and then taken home to Ithaca on one of their ships. He is asleep when they arrive, so they gently lift him from the boat and lay him on the shore with all his gifts around him. They then leave, but Poseidon is angry that they helped Odysseus. As the ship reaches the coast of Phaeacia, Poseidon turns the ship into a rock offshore. The Phaeacians immediately begin trying to placate the god with sacrifices.

Odysseus wakes up, but in the mist he does not recognize where he's at. He thinks that the Phaeacians must have dumped him somewhere far from home. Athene walks up, disguised as a shepherd boy, and Odysseus asks where he is. Athene tells him that this is Ithaca, and Odysseus begins to make up a story about who he is because he does not want to reveal his true self yet. Athene then laughs and tells him who she really is and that she has been at his side throughout his adventures. She tells him that she could not appear to him until he was back on Ithaca, out of respect for her uncle, the god Poseidon.

Athene now helps him hide his gifts in the cave of the nymphs and warns him about the suitors in his palace. She reassures him that Penelope has remained faithful and explains that Telemachus is currently on a journey of his own, seeking news of his father. She also tells Odysseus not to reveal his true identity yet. She magically disguises him as a beggar.

Odysseus follows a path from the cove to Eumaeus' farm, where Odysseus' most loyal servant, the swine-herder Eumaeus, lives in a hut and tends his absent master's livestock. He welcomes Odysseus, thinking that he is just a beggar, and offers him food and hospitality. Odysseus makes up a story about who is, claiming to be from Crete, to have taken part in the Trojan War, to have wandered to Egypt where he was captured, and then on to an island where he heard news of Odysseus. He was almost forced into slavery by the treacherous crew who brought him home, finally escaping and arriving in rags at Eumaeus' hut. Eumaeus is sympathetic but does not believe the news about Odysseus, who he believes is dead.

Odysseus decides to test Eumaeus' kindness. He tells a story about an incident during the Trojan War when he was cold and told Odysseus that he had no cloak. Odysseus pretended to need someone to take a message to Agamemnon. One of the men leaped up, threw off his cloak, and ran to Agamemnon. Odysseus then gave him this man's discarded cloak. After this story, Eumaeus immediately gives Odysseus his own cloak



so that the stranger does not get cold in the night. Odysseus is pleased with Eumaeus' kindness. He goes to sleep in Eumaeus' hut.

## Analysis

Odysseus is naturally a very suspicious and quick-witted person. He initially thinks the Phaeacians have cheated him, and he is cautious enough to tell a shepherd boy, who is seemingly no real threat to him, a false story. He is cunning and good at spinning a tale. Athene reveals that this is what she likes best about him, that he is a mortal after her own heart. He is quick to think of a plan. He's a persuasive talker who is wise enough to not go rushing into danger. Far from his suspicious nature being a fault, this is what Athene praises, and she encourages him to continue to hide his true identity and to test those people he encounters on his way home. Odysseus does just that, telling Eumaeus another false story and testing him to see if he is kind to strangers. Eumaeus passes this test, showing Odysseus that he is in a safe place to spend the night.

Eumaeus praises his lost master over and over while talking to Odysseus, and he complains about the suitors who, according to him, are nothing compared to Odysseus. He proves many times over that he is still loyal to Odysseus and Odysseus' whole family. He longs for Telemachus' safe return and condemns those who would take advantage of Penelope's grief. Eumaeus is a good and honorable servant and a good person overall. He offers hospitality to a beggar. He refuses to harm him or turn him away on several occasions. He gives this stranger his own cloak and feeds him, offering what little he has, even though it is clear that he lives a poor life and does not have much to spare. The narrator of the *Odyssey* even speaks directly to Eumaeus, something he does not do for any other character, marking him out as an excellent human being and an example of how all men should behave. This once again reminds us that the *Odyssey* is not just an adventure story. It is also a moral story.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Athene like Odysseus so much? In what ways are they similar? How does she show this in how she acts towards him?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Eumaeus presented as a good man? What might his simple hospitality and friendship mean to Odysseus, who has been wandering for so long?

## Discussion Question 3

Can you remember all the different occurrences of disguise or subterfuge in the story so far? Why is Odysseus so fond of this kind of trickery, and is he good at it?



## Vocabulary

minstrel, tripod, recoup, lyre, ploughshare, aft, counterfeit, unfaltering, marvellous, descendents, headway, inkling, refrain, hemming, trepidation, interceded, inglorious, timber, aegis, revelled, spacious, trickster, subterfuge, irrepressible, intriguer, pre-eminent, scheme



# Books Fifteen and Sixteen – 'Telemachus Returns' and 'Odysseus Meets His Son'

## Summary

Athene flies to Sparta to encourage Telemachus to return to Ithaca. She speaks to him in his sleep, warning him about the trap the suitors have set for him and advising him to go around their ambush. Telemachus wakes and tells Menelaus it is time to leave. Menelaus and Helen present him with more gifts, and then they see an eagle fly overhead carrying a goose. Helen proclaims that this is an omen that Odysseus will return and have his revenge against the suitors.

Telemachus and Peisistratus leave and return to Pylos. Since Telemachus wants to get home quickly, he asks his new friend if he will drop him off at the ship rather than go on to Nestor's palace. On the beach a stranger called Theoclymenus asks if Telemachus will take him on his ship, as he is fleeing the kinsmen of a man he killed. Telemachus agrees, offering him hospitality.

Meanwhile Odysseus tells Eumaeus that he will go beg at the palace. Eumaeus urges him to wait until Telemachus comes home, as he will surely give the beggar a cloak and show him kindness. Odysseus agrees to wait and asks Eumaeus to tell the story of how he came to be a servant here, since he was obviously born a nobleman. Eumaeus tells him his story:

Eumaeus was the son of the king of Syrie, an idyllic island. One day a band of Phoenician traders arrived, and they seduced a serving woman in the palace, a girl of their race who had been carried off by pirates and sold into slavery. They offered for her to come home with them and see her parents again, and she jumped at the chance. She offered to bring the king's son with her, a boy she helped to nurse. This boy was Eumaeus. While sailing away, the serving girl died suddenly, and her body was thrown overboard. Eumaeus was sold to Laertes, Odysseus' father, when the Phoenician traders stopped off in Ithaca.

When Telemachus and his men arrive back at Ithaca, they drop Telemachus off at the shore so he can go see Eumaeus. Telemachus asks his friend Peiraëus to look after the stranger, Theoclymenus. The ship then continues around the island to the harbor and the palace, while Telemachus takes the path to Eumaeus' hut. When he arrives, he asks Eumaeus to take news of his return to his mother. He offers to send food and clothes for Odysseus, who he thinks is a beggar, but warns him not to come to the house because the suitors are likely to treat him appallingly.



Just then, Odysseus sees Athene outside. He goes out to talk to her, and she tells him to reveal himself to his son. She takes away the beggar disguise and he returns to the hut, where Telemachus is astonished at the sudden change. He thinks Odysseus must be a god, but Odysseus reveals that he is actually Telemachus' father. The two of them plot how to deal with the suitors. Athene then restores Odysseus' disguise when Eumaeus returns.

Meanwhile, the suitors hear that Telemachus has returned. They begin to plot his murder. Penelope decides to confront them, and Eurymachus assures her that he will make sure no harm comes to her son, even as he secretly intends to kill him.

## Analysis

Telemachus' mini-odyssey comes to an end in these chapters. By mimicking his father's travels, albeit on a much smaller and less dangerous scale, he has taken the first steps into the adult world. When he leaves Sparta, Helen gives him the gift of a fine dress, woven by herself, telling him that it is for his bride when he gets married. This is symbolic of Telemachus becoming a man. Helen now thinks he is an adult who can think of grownup things such as marriage and war. Telemachus' journey has therefore been a success. He has increased his courage and his confidence, and he will return home with honor and many fine gifts. He has grown up and is ready to face the challenge of the suitors. He has become a man that his father can be proud to return to.

When Odysseus asks Eumaeus for the story of how he came to be Laertes' slave, a little more about slavery and piracy in the ancient world is revealed. Eumaeus is actually the son of a king, but he was kidnapped by Phoenician traders, little more than pirates, and taken to another Greek island to be sold as a slave. The woman who helped kidnap him was herself the daughter of a nobleman, kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery on a far off island. This shows that the cycle of slavery and violence seems to be self-perpetuating; the people who are sold as slaves are perfectly happy to sell others as slaves, and those whose people are stolen away in this manner are perfectly happy to buy slaves kidnapped from other places and similar circumstances. There is a strange acceptance of this as simply being the way of things, even though everyone involved seems to agree that this is a piteous fate and that those who do the kidnapping and the selling are bad people. No responsibility seems to be placed on the buyers of the slaves, only on the slavers themselves. Even though Odysseus now knows that Eumaeus was born a nobleman, he is still happy to treat him as a servant, even telling him to be grateful that he was sold to a kind master.

Odysseus is still being cautious and testing people in these chapters, even extending his suspicion to his own son. He maintains his disguise until Athene tells him to take Telemachus into his confidence. The two of them then plot what to do about the suitors, with Odysseus wanting to test all his farmhands and servants, and Telemachus advising him to only test the maids for now. Odysseus then re-establishes his disguise when Eumaeus returns; despite Eumaeus proving that he is a good man, Odysseus is still being cautious and trying to maintain the element of surprise.



Just as Eumaeus was given the opportunity to prove his own hospitality and goodness in the previous chapters, now it is Telemachus' turn. Telemachus shows himself willing to be kind to strangers on two occasions. First, he allows Theoclymenus to join him on the journey to Ithaca, and then asks his friend to make sure he is taken care of. Then, at Eumaeus' hut he shows kindness to Odysseus, who is currently in the disguise of a beggar. Theoclymenus was obviously a man of noble birth, but until Telemachus heard Odysseus' story, Odysseus appeared to be a poor man of low station. Telemachus still told him not to get up, and showed hospitality towards him. Later, he discourages him from going to the suitors as he does not want him to be hurt, and says that he will send food and clothes here for him instead. Good deeds such as these will reap good rewards in the end, once again showing readers and listeners that this is how civilized people act, and that it is beneficial as well as moral to do so.

## Discussion Question 1

Consider Eumaeus' story about how he became a slave. What does it tell us about attitudes to slavery in the ancient world? Do you think slavery is a vicious cycle, and why do the people seem to support it?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think omens and prophecies are so important in this story, such as that seen by Telemachus in Book 15? What does this say about the characters' view of the world, of fate, and the gods? Does the use of omens make Odysseus' story seem more, or less, heroic?

## Discussion Question 3

Telemachus finally meets Odysseus for the first time in Book 16. Do you think Odysseus is proud of his son? How are they alike and different? How has Telemachus grown after his own journey?

## Vocabulary

departure, rabble, futile, host, disposition, rugged, swineherd, harness, hastily, elaborately, valiant, keepsake, liberally, portico, talons, yoke, obstinate, spurred, tackle, flee, lowing, thoroughbreds, migrate, abundance, aggressiveness



# Books Seventeen and Eighteen – 'Odysseus Goes to the Town' and 'The Beggar in the Palace'

## Summary

In the morning, Telemachus goes ahead to the palace alone, telling Eumaeus to bring their guest into town later. Telemachus first reassures his nurse and his mother that he is well. He then tells Penelope the news he gathered at Sparta. He meets his friends Peiraeus and Theoclymenus, who had traveled with him back to Ithaca. He brings them both to the palace.

Later, Eumaeus brings Odysseus (in beggar disguise) to the town. On the way, they meet Melanthius the goat-herder, who mocks them and then kicks Odysseus on the hip. Odysseus is angry but manages to stop himself from killing the goat-herd and thus giving away his identity and just rebukes him instead. Melanthius laughs at him and then goes into the palace, where he sits with the suitors and is given food by them.

Outside the palace Odysseus' old dog Argus pricks up its ears because it can sense that its master has returned. Argus is too old to get up and come to Odysseus. It dies as soon as it sees him. The dog had only been holding on as long as it took to see its beloved master one last time.

Eumaeus enters the palace and sits at Telemachus' table. Odysseus begins begging around the tables, and Melanthius tells the suitors that Eumaeus brought him here. The suitors mock the beggar and Antinous reproaches Eumaeus for showing hospitality. Telemachus argues with Antinous, but he is only met with more laughter. Odysseus then goes to Antinous' table and repeats the fictional tale of how he came to be a beggar. He asks Antinous for pity and food. Antinous, however, reacts with disgust and throws a stool at the beggar's back.

When Penelope hears of this mistreatment, she is angry. She tells Eumaeus to send the beggar to her. Odysseus agrees, but he wants to wait until sundown so that this does not raise the attention and anger of the suitors.

Another beggar called Irus comes to the palace and shouts at Odysseus to move. Odysseus replies angrily, and Irus challenges him to a fight. The suitors think this is hilarious, and they all gather round to watch. Odysseus easily beats Irus, but he pulls his punches a little to not give away what a great fighter he is, in case the others begin to suspect he is not who he says he is. He drags Irus outside.

Penelope decides to come down and face the suitors. She tells them that they are not courting her properly, and they should return to their own estates and bring her gifts.





The suitors agree to bring gifts, but they refuse to leave the palace. They continue reveling into the night. Meanwhile, Odysseus tells the maids to go upstairs and comfort Penelope, but one of the maids, Melantho, openly mocks him for this. Odysseus threatens to tell Telemachus about her insolence, and the maids run away.

Eurymachus then resumes the mocking of the beggar, throwing a stool at him. Amphinomous, a more sensible suitor, tells the others to stop abusing the stranger, and they all leave for the night.

## Analysis

In Books Seventeen and Eighteen, Odysseus really begins to see how bad the situation at home has become. He gets first hand evidence of the suitors' terrible attitudes. He learns which of his servants have remained loyal and which have not. Eumaeus' excellent example serves as a point of comparison; in contrast to Eumaeus' friendship and respect, Melanthius mocks Odysseus openly and even aims a kick at him. He then tries to turn the suitors against him. Melanthius sits at the tables with the suitors and jokes with them, obviously trying to elevate his own position by sharing in their behavior and helping them. He has not remained loyal to his old master in his heart as Eumaeus has so clearly done.

The suitors also prove their own lack of hospitality and care for civilized ways. Antinous and Eurymachus both throw things at Odysseus, thinking he is just a beggar and so not deserving of respect. They have forgotten, or simply do not care about, the rules of Zeus and the gods, that a guest must be treated with civility and kindness. This is especially bad because they are themselves guests in another man's home, taking advantage of the situation by eating all Telemachus' food, and then treating his other guests appallingly. The suitors are therefore abusing both sides of the guest-friendship arrangement. They are also breaking the rules of courtship. Penelope and Telemachus both point out to them that the proper way to win Penelope's hand is to remain on their own estates, offering her gifts and presenting themselves to her father with offers of marriage. Instead, they are happy to sit around ruin Telemachus' household, trying to force an answer from Penelope, who has sworn not to re-marry until Telemachus is old enough to grow a beard.

Odysseus also sees his wife's love for him and sorrow at his absence, her good sense in trying to get the suitors to leave, and her persuasive abilities to get them to give her gifts. The latter will enrich the household and help increase both her own and Odysseus' fame. This is persuasive speech after Odysseus' own heart, and he is both pleased and admiring to see her manipulate the suitors in this way, gaining what she can from a bad situation. He also hears her keep her promise to him. She will not remarry until Telemachus is old enough. Unfortunately, that time is almost upon them, and Penelope will be forced to make her decision soon. Odysseus will have to make plans quickly.

Finally, Odysseus witnesses some of the maids laughing and mocking him. They are not paying attention to their mistress when she is in distress. When Odysseus points out



that they should be caring for Penelope, a maid called Melantho, who is sleeping with the suitor Amphinomous, speaks rudely back to him. By disguising himself as a beggar and sitting among them at the palace, Odysseus has gained vital information about the people around him that he would not have known if he had simply stormed in and announced his return. He now knows who to punish. He knows who has been loyal. These chapters set the scene for the retribution to come. It is made clear to readers which characters we should be sympathetic toward and which ones deserve their punishment. To the ancient Greeks this would have been clear; whether a modern audience will agree is another matter.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Odysseus feel the need to test everyone in the palace before revealing himself? Why do you think it might be important for him to discover which of the servants are loyal and which are not?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think the suitors' behaviour is bad? What do they do that is so unacceptable to Odysseus?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Odysseus delighted to see Penelope extorting more gifts from the suitors? In what ways is Penelope a great match for Odysseus?

## Vocabulary

lamenting, all and sundry, reckoning, endowed, supernatural, grace, brewing, evaded, chariot, pasture, concealment, infallible, javelin, hog, shabby, drovers, torrent, vulgar, roused, nauseating, fodder, grovelling, stance, rebuked, incompetent



# Books Nineteen and Twenty – ‘Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus’ and ‘Prelude to the Crisis’

## Summary

When the suitors have left, Odysseus and Telemachus begin moving all the weapons and armor from the great hall into a storeroom, on the pretence that the smoke from the fire is damaging them. Penelope then comes down to speak to Odysseus, who she still believes to be a beggar who may have news of her husband. She catches the Melanthe being rude to him again and rebukes her. She then tells Odysseus that she kept the suitors at bay for four years with the pretence of weaving a funeral shroud for her father-in-law. She refused to marry until it was finished, and unpicked the stitches every night so that it would never be done. Unfortunately her maids saw her doing this and the disloyal ones told the suitors.

Penelope then asks Odysseus about himself and he tells her the same fabricated story that he told Eumaeus. He pretends to have news of Odysseus, claiming that he will return soon. Penelope is thankful and offers him rich blankets, telling the maids to bathe him. He protests, saying that he would rather an old and trusted servant washed his feet. Penelope sends for the old maid Eurycleia, who was once Odysseus nursemaid.

Eurycleia uncovers his legs to wash them and sees a scar that Odysseus received long ago from a boar's tusk while hunting on his grandfather's land. She instantly knows that this beggar must really be Odysseus. She begins to cry and to exclaim in joy, but Odysseus grabs her and quiets her before she can tell Penelope. He tells her to keep his identity a secret until he has had his revenge on the suitors and unfaithful servants, and she agrees.

Penelope then tells Odysseus of her plan to test the suitors. She will line up the decorative axes and then bring down Odysseus' great bow. She will then marry any man who can string Odysseus' bow and then shoot an arrow through the holes of all twelve axes. Odysseus encourages her to hold this contest soon.

The next day Melanthius resumes his mockery of the beggar (Odysseus), but a new arrival, the cow-herd Philoetius, offers Odysseus a hand and is kind to him. He laments the loss of his old master, and Odysseus reassures him that his master will return soon. They all go into the great hall, where there is a feast underway. The suitors continue their abuse of the beggar, with Ctesippus throwing a cow's hoof at him.

Suddenly, there is a weird vision in the hall. The walls appear covered in blood, and a darkness descends on the suitors. Theoclymenus interprets this as an omen of violence to come. The suitors laugh at him, and he leaves to visit Peiraeus.



## Analysis

Now Odysseus has found out some more about the people in the palace and under his command. He has been further mocked and abused by the suitors and the maids, and he has heard how the disloyal maids betrayed Penelope. On the other hand, he now knows that he can trust Eurycleia and Philoetius too. He is gaining more allies, but he is still concerned about his fight with the suitors, asking for reassurance from both Athene and Zeus. When they give it, his heart is lifted and he begins to plan the downfall of the suitors.

Penelope is very like Odysseus in a lot of ways. She likes to test people too, and she is capable of being just as clever and cunning. She devised a trick to keep the suitors at bay, which worked for four years and then only failed because her maids, who should have been loyal and kept her secret, betrayed her. Now she is devising another plan, which she tells to Odysseus. She is going to arrange twelve axes and ask the suitors to shoot an arrow through them all. This is an extremely difficult task, made almost impossible because of Odysseus' great bow, which only a very strong and skilled man could even string, never mind use. Penelope seems to be secretly hoping that all the suitors will fail, thus either buying herself more time or getting rid of them completely. She knows that none of them will refuse her task, as it would make them look cowardly or weak to do so. Penelope, despite her vulnerable position, is still making sure she keeps the power in her hands for as long as possible. This is similar to what Odysseus is doing with his own disguise and scheming.

These chapters are full of omens and signs from the gods. When Odysseus is unsure, Athene visits him in the form of a young woman. When Odysseus and Telemachus are moving the weapons and armor out of the great hall, they see a vision of light that lets them know they are following the gods' plan. Later, Odysseus asks Zeus for a sign that he is with him, and Zeus immediately thunders (Zeus is the lord of the sky and thunder). Penelope tells Odysseus of a strange dream she had, in which an eagle attacked and killed a flock of geese. Odysseus tells her that this means her husband will return and take revenge on the suitors. Finally, in the great hall, when the suitors are behaving badly, there is a vision of darkness and blood on the walls. This means that violence is to come and that the suitors are doomed.

These kinds of divine omens are just one of the ways in which the divine is always present in the world of this book. The gods are always interfering in mankind's affairs, and they are always close and watching everything that happens. They may even disguise themselves and visit mortals, often to test them. This is why it is always important to respect the gods and give them proper sacrifice. Interpreting the world in terms of gods and the divine was a way to understand everything that happened, from nature to human emotion. Often in the *Odyssey*, a character will say that a god gave them a good idea, or put them to sleep, or enhanced their beauty, or aided their natural skills in something. In the Mycenaean world, it seems that it was important to always remember that everything – both bad and good – comes from the gods, and so it is essential to take their worship very seriously.



## Discussion Question 1

What are the differences between the loyal and disloyal servants? Why might these qualities be so important to Odysseus and others in his position?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the author paint the suitors in a bad light? What do they do and who are the worst ones? Why is this emphasised so much?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Odysseus' interactions with Penelope and Eurycleia affect your opinion of him? Do you think he is wrong to keep his identity a secret from his wife?

## Vocabulary

plotting, plausible, quarrelling, festivities, disgracing, stowed, tarnished, bossed, alcoves, distress, plague, wretch, vagrant, luxury, stalwart, upholding, ancestry, unremitting, tiresome, embellished, enhanced, plundering, shroud, magnaminously, connivance, densely



# Books Twenty-One and Twenty-Two – 'The Great Bow' and 'The Battle in the Hall'

## Summary

Penelope now sets up the axes and explains the test to the suitors. They must first string Odysseus' great bow and shoot an arrow through all twelve axes. Telemachus insists on trying first, and he almost succeeds. But, at a sign from his father he stops trying. Many suitors attempt the task but are not even strong enough to string the bow.

Meanwhile, Odysseus begins to sound out faithful servants. He asks for Philoetius and Eumaeus' help, and shows them the scar to prove that he is really Odysseus. They are overjoyed. He tells Eumaeus to be ready to bring the bow to him at his sign and for Philoetius to bar the doors so that the suitors will be trapped inside. They return to the great hall.

The suitors have now given up trying to string the bow, preferring to feast and drink and try again later. Odysseus asks if he might be allowed to attempt the task and the suitors are furious at the suggestion. Penelope tells them off, saying that the beggar just wants to have a go to test his strength and that he is not trying to win her hand. Telemachus backs her up, but also tells her to go upstairs while he deals with the situation. She obeys.

Eumaeus then brings the bow to Odysseus, who easily strings it and shoots an arrow through all the axes. The suitors are shocked, but before they have time to react, Telemachus has taken weapons and come to stand beside his father, and Philoetius and Eurycleia have barred all the doors. Odysseus then jumps onto the table and shoots an arrow straight through Antinous' neck. As the suitors cry out, Odysseus reveals who he really is, and all the suitors go pale with fear. Eurymachus at once tries to reason with Odysseus, claiming that Antinous was the one in charge and the rest of them are not to blame. He says that they will make full amends to Odysseus if he lets them go.

Odysseus refuses to let them go, so Eurymachus encourages the others to fight him. The battle in the great hall begins, and Telemachus runs to get the weapons from the storeroom. Unfortunately, Melanthius sees this and follows him, bringing back weapons for the suitors. Odysseus sends Eumaeus and Philoetius to take care of Melanthius. They tie him up and suspend him from a plank to torture him.

Meanwhile, in the great hall, Athene appears as Mentor to encourage Odysseus and Telemachus. They fight on and slaughter all the suitors. Phemius the bard rushes forward and clasps Odysseus' knees in supplication, asking for mercy. Telemachus tells



his father that both Phemius and Medon, the herald, have been loyal and deserve to be spared. Odysseus then asks Eurycleia to summon all the disloyal maids, all of whom he hangs. As his last act of vengeance, he tells Eumaeus and Philoetius to cut off Melanthius' hands, feet, nose, ears, and genitals. Odysseus then performs a ritual to rid the house of the pollution of death.

## Analysis

The suitors all have great trouble stringing Odysseus' bow. They do not make it as far as the second part of the task, which is to shoot an arrow through all the axes. Odysseus, on the other hand, strings the bow without any trouble and easily shoots the arrow through the axes. In this, he proves himself to be a hundred times the better of the suitors, as well as a great hero. He also shows himself to be worthy of the great Penelope and all the riches they have both accumulated, as well as of the gods' attention.

Later, in the great hall, Odysseus also fights with great strength and skill, killing a huge amount of the suitors. Until now, Odysseus has won through his adventures mainly using cunning and resourcefulness, something that is a special trait of his and what makes Athene admire him more than other heroes. However, it is also important to remind the audience that Odysseus is a great fighter too, something that the Greeks thought was an important mark of a man's worth. He took part in the Trojan War and did not disgrace himself there. In other words, Odysseus has it all. He is a heroic fighter as well as clever and persuasive. This is why the story takes care to mention each man that Odysseus killed. Both Odysseus and Telemachus are given a heroic killing spree in which they cut down the suitors like animals. Greek heroes are given: a list of deaths to prove their worth and skill. Here, Telemachus does not kill as many men as his father, but he does still prove himself to be a good fighter and a worthy son of Odysseus.

Odysseus takes his revenge on the suitors by killing them for their insolence. However, he exacts a much worse fate on the servants, who do not seem to have committed anywhere near as awful crimes. Melanthius is tortured. Then, his ears, nose, hands, feet, and genitals are cut off. The disloyal maids are made to clean up the blood and dead bodies of their lovers. For the ancient Greeks, they have all committed worse crimes than the suitors. The suitors disrespected laws of hospitality, but they are free men who are not supposed to be under the command of Odysseus. His servants (most of them slaves), however, are supposed to obey him and his family without question. Keeping disloyal servants would be dangerous, and so he sets an example by showing that the worst kinds of punishments come to those who are disobedient. This is unspeakably cruel to us, but it tells us a lot about the ancient Greek world and the power of a master over his servants and slaves.



## Discussion Question 1

Penelope has been pushed into having to make a decision, but she has one last trick up her sleeve - the contest of the bow. Do you think this is a clever idea? If so, why? What does it say about Penelope?

## Discussion Question 2

Odysseus has been shown as a clever hero, but we've never seen him fight until now. Does he prove himself as a skilled fighter? What about Telemachus? Do you think this is important?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think the punishments Odysseus metes out are fair or not? Why? Do you think they would have seemed fair to the ancient Greeks?

## Vocabulary

confront, ivory, wrought, afield, appropriated, bequeathed, bygone, supple, exploited, gallant, snivelling, peerless, witless, weakling, recklessness, lures, preposterous, tallow, tactfully, quiver, wily, privations, roving, privileged, stupefied, chieftan, spindle





# Books Twenty-Three and Twenty-Four – ‘Odysseus and Penelope’ and ‘The Feud is Ended’

## Summary

Eurycleia rushes upstairs to tell Penelope that Odysseus has returned, but Penelope finds it hard to believe. She thinks that a god may be playing a trick on her, and she asks Odysseus for proof that he is who he says. Odysseus instructs Telemachus and the servants to play music and dance as if there is still merriment inside the hall. Then passersby will think that the suitors are still alive. When their families hear of their deaths Odysseus will have to face and possibly fight them, so he wants to delay that moment for as long as possible.

Odysseus is bathed and dressed in fine clothes again, and then he goes to sit beside Penelope. Penelope still needs to test him, however, so she asks Eurycleia to move the marriage bed. Odysseus angrily asks who has moved the bed, and exclaims that it would be hard to move it since it is carved from the trunk of an olive tree, which Odysseus had built the room around. Penelope then knows that Odysseus really has returned, and she throws her arms around him and weeps. Athene holds back the Dawn as they talk. Finally, they retire to bed. After they have made love, Odysseus tells Penelope all about his adventures.

Meanwhile, Achilles and Agamemnon are talking about their deaths in the Underworld when Hermes arrives, leading the souls of the suitors into death. Agamemnon asks about how they came to die, and Amphimedon tells him all about Odysseus killing them. Agamemnon then praises Penelope's faithfulness.

On Ithaca the next morning, Odysseus sets off to visit his father on the farm. He insists on testing his father. So, he makes up a false story about who he is and then says that he was visited by Odysseus many years ago. Laertes pours dirt over his head in his grief, and Odysseus is suddenly overcome with emotion. He tells his father who he is, but this time it is Laertes who wants proof. Odysseus names all the trees that his father gave him when he was little, and Laertes knows by this that Odysseus is speaking the truth. They embrace, and then return to the farmhouse where Telemachus is waiting.

By now, rumor of the suitors' deaths has reached the suitors' families, and their fathers and brothers gather in the meeting place in town. Mentor tries to discourage them from seeking vengeance, explaining that the gods are on Odysseus' side, but the majority of the men still rush off to the farm to kill Odysseus. Odysseus, Telemachus, Laertes, and the farmhands arm themselves and prepare to face the suitors' families. They attack the front wave and kill some of the men, but then Athene shouts out for them to stop. The suitors' families are shocked and afraid, and they immediately turn around and run for



the city. Odysseus tries to chase them, but Zeus hurls a thunderbolt. Athene warns Odysseus to stop. They then establish peace between the two sides.

## Analysis

Odysseus' whole family seems to share his suspicion and need to test people. Penelope will not accept that Odysseus is really who he says he is until he proves it by knowing the secret of their marriage bed. Odysseus insists on testing his own father, but Laertes also wants proof before he will believe that his son has returned. Odysseus again proves himself by providing information that only he could know. This caution and ability to hold back one's emotions without acting rashly is something they all share. This is what Odysseus really admires in Penelope, as well as her cleverness. It is clear that Odysseus himself has inherited this from his father. Now, finally, all the testing has ended, and Odysseus is fully reunited with all his beloved family. Throughout the story family and home have been such an important theme. Now Odysseus shows how well suited his own family is to him. His world is complete when they are all reunited again.

It would not be realistic, however, if Odysseus did not have to deal with the suitors' families. In a society where vengeance could be taken so easily against the people who wronged you, and, in fact, vengeance was encouraged against those who killed family members, it was both natural and expected for the suitors' families to take up arms against Odysseus. Violence begetting more violence is a common theme in Greek myths. Usually the cycle never ends, or it is shown to be something that is very hard to bring to a full and complete end. For example, Orestes killed his mother to avenge the death of his father, but then the Furies torture him to take vengeance for the killing of his mother. Here, it takes the will of the gods to prevent this cycle of violence and revenge from spinning on and on without end. Athene and Zeus insist that peace must be restored, and this is the final stage in Odysseus reclaiming civilization after returning from war.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think Odysseus and Penelope have an appropriate reunion?

## Discussion Question 2

What kind of relationship do Odysseus and Penelope have? Why is this so important to Odysseus and Penelope, that both remained loyal even after 20 years?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it necessary for the gods to step in at the end? What would have happened if they had not done so?



## Vocabulary

bustled, spattered, gore, purifying, cherished, positive, perversity, wearisome, flint, community, wholeheartedly, decked, elegantly, haughty, gleaming, hazardous, insistently, discomfiture, harassed, disembodied, wraiths, horsemanship, unguents, antiphony



# Characters

## Mentor

Mentor is an old family friend of Odysseus. Athene takes Mentor's form several times while she is in disguise among the mortals.

## Ctesippus

Ctesippus is one of the worst suitors. He throws a cow's hoof at Odysseus while Odysseus is disguised as a beggar.

## Odysseus

Odysseus is the main character of the story, but we don't meet him directly until the fifth book. Until then we follow his son Telemachus on his mini-odyssey and hear others talk of Odysseus. From what they say, it is clear that Odysseus is well respected, feared by his enemies, and loved by his friends and family. He is a brave and skilled fighter who is known to be cunning.. He has some powerful and important friends.

Odysseus has been away from home for twenty years at the start of this story. He left to fight in the Trojan War with other Greek leaders. The war lasted for ten years, and it then took Odysseus another ten years to return. Some of this was spent sailing around to various strange places and being blown about by the wind. Most of the time, however, was spent on Calypso's island, where the nymph Calypso has been keeping Odysseus against his will, hoping that he will stay with her and be her companion forever. When the gods finally intervene and tell Calypso to let Odysseus go, he is blown to Phaeacia, where the Phaeacians show him hospitality and take him back to Ithaca on one of his ships. He then fights the suitors who are abusing the hospitality of his home. He is reunited with his wife, son, and father after twenty years away.

Odysseus is known as a great hero. At Troy he proved himself to be a great fighter, skilled in war. He is very clever, too. He helped the Greeks to win the war. He is the king of Ithaca and a good leader of men. He is the kind of person that others respect and listen to. The other kings who fought at Troy consider him a friend as well as a man to look up to. He has rightfully won fame and glory for himself. Several times in this story people talk favorably of Odysseus, even if he is not present or they do not realize he is listening to them. It is not just kings and noblemen who admire him, but his servants, too. Eumaeus and Philoetius remember him as an excellent master who treated them well and ran his estate sensibly. Elsewhere in the story, Odysseus proves his strength and skill many times. He fights monsters and suitors. He strings a great bow that others cannot string and shoots an arrow through twelve axes. Usually, the mere sight of him is enough to impress people. His appearance is often described as 'godlike.' These are all qualities that the ancient Greeks believed their heroes should possess.



However, Odysseus is also quite a unique hero, as Athene reveals when she explains why she favors him above others. Odysseus is cunning and clever. He is famous for his stratagems as much as for his fighting skills. He helped the Greeks win at Troy, not through strength, but through the clever plan of the wooden horse. At his suggestion, the Greeks built a wooden horse large enough to hide soldiers inside. They then pretended to sail away from Troy, leaving the horse behind. The Trojans thought the horse was an offering to the gods, so they brought it into their city to transfer the gods' favor to themselves. At night, the Greek soldiers hidden inside crept out and opened the gates of the city. The rest of the Greek army then entered the city and quickly defeated all resistance. This story is mentioned several times in the *Odyssey*, most notably by Odysseus himself when he is trying to impress the Phaeacians and earlier in Sparta when Telemachus is listening to stories about his father's ingenuity and renown.

On his adventures, Odysseus demonstrates this special trait many times. He comes up against magic and monsters, a very different threat from other armed men. The latter requires strength, but all the strength in the world could not help against magic. Instead, Odysseus' clever thinking and resourcefulness is what helps him win. For example, at the Cyclops' cave, Odysseus tricks the monster into drinking too much wine and becoming drunk, then fashions a stake out of an olive branch and blinds the Cyclops. He also convinces the Cyclops that his name is 'nobody' so that when the monster calls out for help from his friends, he claims that 'nobody is hurting me.' Naturally, his friends ignore him, allowing Odysseus and his men to escape.

Odysseus is not just cunning and quick-thinking; he is also a persuasive talker and good at coming up with made-up stories. At Ithaca he disguises himself and tells fictional tales to several people. In each case he succeeds in making them believe his tale. His use of disguises, which he also used at Troy, is another feature that links him to the goddess Athene, who also likes to visit mortals in disguise. Like the goddess, Odysseus uses his disguise to test people to see if they have been loyal, and to get a sense of what kind of person they really are when their master is not around. Athene tells him that this is one of the things she really admires about Odysseus, especially his ability to not get carried away by his feelings but to remain cautious when caution is needed. This, along with his ability to charm people through his persuasive speeches, such as on the island of Phaeacia, is what helps to keep Odysseus alive throughout his dangerous journey.

Odysseus might be skilled, cunning and resourceful, but he has a big weakness, too. His fatal flaw is his pride, a failing that was common among Greek heroes. Odysseus is very concerned about his reputation. He wants to win fame and glory so that everyone will know his name. He wants everyone to talk about and admire him. He has good reason to want this kind of everlasting fame. He has seen for himself how depressing the afterlife can be. He believes that the only way to win true immortality is in songs and stories about him told long after his death. He also loves the respect and gifts that come from being famous, and he understands that having such gifts also acts as proof of his fame; the more gifts he has, the more other people obviously respect him. This is why he lingers in the cave of the Cyclops, leading to the death of some of his men. He hopes that the owner of the cave might give him gifts. He also shouts out his name to the



Cyclops, determined to be remembered for his cleverness. Telling the Cyclops that he was a 'nobody' must have been very hard for a man like Odysseus, which is why he cannot resist setting the record straight even when his men urge caution. On Phaeacia Odysseus tries to paint himself in as good a light as possible, boasting of all the amazing things he has done in the hopes of gaining gifts and awe. Here, he is successful. The message seems to be that seeking fame and glory is a good thing, but only in the right circumstances. Improper pride can lead to downfall.

Odysseus is also a very loving man who longs to return to his family. Even in the face of immortality, the beauty of Calypso's island, the peace and perfection of Phaeacia, and the offering of the lovely young Nausicaa as his wife, Odysseus remains firm and only wishes to go home. He tells others that there is no joy like one's own home and loved ones. Penelope is more than a wife to him. She is a companion and a soulmate, someone who understands him and is suited to him perfectly. Odysseus' home is more than a place; it is where he belongs. Odysseus shows himself willing to endure anything to see his home and family again.

## Penelope

Penelope is Odysseus' wife and the mother of Telemachus. When Odysseus left to go to the Trojan War, she was left alone at home with a baby. She raised Telemachus herself, and now twenty years have passed. Telemachus is fully grown and ready to take on a man's responsibilities, and Penelope is no longer required to care for him or to look after the house and its servants. She is having some trouble letting go, as she has obviously been very close to her son. She is surprised when he begins to exert his authority a little more, but also proud of him. However, this also means that she will soon have to move out of the house in order to let her son have his inheritance. She will be expected to marry again.

In ordinary circumstances, Penelope would return to the care of her father and then be re-married. However, there are several factors preventing this. First, she has to raise her child and look after the family property, as there is no-one else to do it. Odysseus has no brothers, and his father has secluded himself away in his grief. Telemachus is still too young to inherit. If Penelope returns to her father's home with her baby, then someone else will likely seize Odysseus' palace and Telemachus will lose out on his inheritance. Besides, if Penelope is re-married, Telemachus will be even more vulnerable and his position unsecure.

Another factor making Penelope's marriage difficult is that Odysseus is not definitely dead. No-one knows if he is alive or lost at sea, and he could still return at any moment. Most people do not believe he will, but Penelope still holds out hope. While she stills believes Odysseus is alive, she cannot re-marry. Adding to this complication is the fact that Odysseus made her promise to re-marry only when Telemachus was old enough to grow a beard. This time has only just arrived, twenty years later, and so she would have been breaking her vow to her husband if she had re-married earlier. It is also obvious that the people of Ithaca think she should hold out, at least until there is definite news of



Odysseus' death. Penelope is therefore in a very awkward position. The expectation of society would be that a woman in her position should re-marry, but there are many things making this impossible.

To make matters worse, Odysseus' home has been invaded by suitors who are all vying for Penelope's hand. Ordinarily, potential husbands should send gifts and offers to Penelope's father if they want to marry her, but these suitors are not doing so. This is partly because Penelope is still living independently in Odysseus' house, but also partly because they are enjoying eating all the household's food and drinking all the wine, and generally taking advantage of laws of hospitality while Odysseus is away and so cannot stop them. They will not accept that Penelope does not want to re-marry, and so she has to keep them from forcing her by using clever tricks against them.

Penelope shows herself to be similar to her husband in many ways. She is clever and quick-thinking, and she knows how to make the best of a bad situation. She devises a trick to keep the suitors at bay, to prevent them from forcing her to marry one of them. She starts weaving a funeral shroud for Odysseus' father Laertes, a duty that a wife was expected to do, in preparation for the day he dies. However, every night she unpicks the stitches, meaning that very little progress is made. This trick convinces the suitors for years, and only fails when some of Penelope's disloyal maids give her away. Later, Penelope says she will marry the man who can bend Odysseus' bow to string it, and then can shoot an arrow through twelve axes. She knows that this task is almost impossible, and that the only person who has ever been able to string Odysseus' bow is Odysseus himself. This might buy her more time, or may get rid of the suitors once and for all. Finally, when Odysseus does return, she insists on testing him to make sure he really is who he says he is. With this she shows that she is just as cautious and quick-thinking as her husband is.

Penelope also proves many times that she is incredibly loyal. She does not want to re-marry and betray her husband's memory, even after he has been gone for twenty years and missing for ten. She is contrasted with Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra several times in the story. Clytemnestra slept with another man while her husband was away, and then killed him when he returned. Penelope, on the other hand, remained completely faithful, and despite there being a whole group of people who would have killed her husband for her, she only ever longed for her husband's return. She even tried to prevent the suitors from damaging Odysseus' estate. Penelope is held up as an example of everything a good wife should be according to the ancient Greeks, whereas Clytemnestra is meant to symbolize the very worst kind of wife.

## Telemachus

Telemachus is Odysseus and Penelope's son. He was just a baby when Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War. It is now twenty years later, and Telemachus is a grown man. He is just beginning to think about the responsibilities and life he should be leading as an adult man in ancient Greek society. He tries to speak up against the suitors, but they still see him as a boy and do not respect him. Athene, in the disguise of a family friend,



sends Telemachus off on a mini-odyssey to visit Pylos and Sparta in hopes of hearing news of his father. During the voyage, Telemachus gains more confidence and begins to grow up. He meets old friends of his father, who treat him with respect and give him gifts, increasing his honor. By the time he returns to Ithaca, he has matured and is ready to face the suitors with his father.

Telemachus was a baby when Odysseus left, so he is too young to remember his father. He has only stories and the memories of others to go on, but he still misses his father because he misses what he should have had. He longs for his family to be back together again, and to meet the man who he takes after. Even though he has never known Odysseus, he is still loyal to him, and he still hopes that Odysseus will return. When Odysseus tests him, he discovers that Telemachus is also a good and kind man who treats strangers well. Elsewhere, we see that Telemachus is respectful of his elders and of the gods. Telemachus is a son that he can be proud of. This is largely thanks to Penelope, who is his soul mate and who has raised his son so well, in the way Odysseus would have wanted.

## Athene

Athene is the goddess of wisdom, civilization, and strategy. She is the daughter of Zeus, king of the gods, and so is a very important and powerful goddess. She favors Odysseus above other mortal men because, like her, he is wise and crafty, he wins through using his brains, and he remains cautious even when emotional. She has therefore taken an interest in his life and has decided to champion him, to try to keep him safe and to make sure he succeeds. She does this throughout his adventures by following him in secret, making sure others react well to him and give him gifts, breathing divine good looks into his appearance and making others respect him. When he is back on Ithaca she appears to him and helps him out in more significant ways, giving him advice and divine signs, and halting the suitors' families in their seeking of revenge.

Athene often intercedes on Odysseus' behalf with the other gods. She asks Zeus to protect him and to help him, and argues in favor of Odysseus at meetings of the gods. Zeus, in general, is inclined to agree with her. Odysseus has always been respectful of him, and he tends to favor heroes. He also likes his daughter and tends to agree with her. However, the gods do not always agree or get along. Poseidon hates Odysseus because he blinded his son Polyphemus, the Cyclops. Poseidon wants Odysseus to suffer as much as possible before reaching home. Because Poseidon is Zeus' brother, and so more powerful and higher status than Athene, Athene is forced to be respectful of him and so not directly interfere in Odysseus' journey. This is why she cannot appear to the hero until he is back on Ithaca. Even Zeus has to be careful not to be seen to side against his brother; he wants to keep peace amongst the gods if at all possible.

Athene also helps Telemachus and Penelope, as family of Odysseus and so deserving of her favor. She sends Telemachus off on his own mini-odyssey, which turns out to be a very clever thing to do. Telemachus gains confidence and wins respect and honor for





himself, as well as hearing good things about his father from other great heroes. Telemachus has never met his father, so this helps him to feel a better connection and to be proud of his family. This will also ensure his loyalty when Odysseus returns. Athene also makes Penelope more beautiful when she is facing the suitors, which causes them to give her more gifts, enriching Odysseus' estate. Athene shows that she can be very crafty in her methods to help Odysseus, not always taking the most obvious or direct path. She also seems to have a sense of humor, enjoying messing with Odysseus a little bit when he arrives at Ithaca and does not know where he is.

## Zeus

Zeus is the king of the gods, and the god of thunder, the sky, prophecy, and suppliants. The latter means that he looks out for vulnerable people who are asking for help from others. If a poor traveler, or a captured enemy, or someone else in need, clasps the knees of a more powerful person and asks them for help, and that person then hurts them, Zeus will be angry. If a person refuses to give shelter and food to a traveler in need, Zeus will be angry. If someone breaks a vow that was sworn in the name of the gods, Zeus will be angry. This is why the Greeks in the story think it is so important to show proper hospitality and respect towards guests and suppliants. This is also why they tend to take prophecies and omens very seriously, because Zeus is the god who sends them. Zeus is also the father of Helen by a mortal mother.

## Poseidon

Poseidon is the god of the sea and the brother of Zeus. He is very powerful and demands a lot of respect, and it annoys him when he thinks that mortals are not showing him the proper amount of respect. When Odysseus blinds Poseidon's son, Polyphemus, Poseidon is furious. From then on he tries to make sure Odysseus has as much trouble as possible on the way home. He sends storms and waves to wreck his ship and his raft, and he ensures that the Cyclops' curse comes true. The curse is that he will reach home without any of his men, after a long time, in a foreign ship, to find trouble at home. Poseidon does not care why Odysseus blinded Polyphemus. He takes vengeance even though Odysseus was actually just saving himself and his men from being eaten by a monster. The gods are not always fair.

## Hermes

Hermes is the god of messengers, and he is also the messenger of the gods. When Zeus decides to tell Calypso to let Odysseus go, he sends Hermes with the message. Hermes is also the one who takes the souls of the dead down to the underworld. On Circe's island, Hermes shows Odysseus the plant he can use as an antidote to Circe's magic.



## Ares

Ares, a son of Zeus, is the god of war. He has an affair with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who is married to his brother Hephaestus.

## Aphrodite

Aphrodite is the goddess of love. She is married to Hephaestus, the lame blacksmith god, but she prefers Ares, the god of war.

## Hephaestus

Hephaestus is the lame blacksmith god and the god of volcanoes. He is the son of Zeus.

## Hyperion

Hyperion is the Sun-god. He owns the cattle on the island Thrinacie that Odysseus and his men have been warned twice not to eat. When Odysseus' men do eat the cattle, Hyperion demands vengeance for their disrespect. As a direct result of this, Odysseus' ship is wrecked and all his men die.

## Calypso

Calypso is a demi-goddess who lives on an idyllic island. When Odysseus is shipwrecked on her island, she keeps him with her and makes sure he is waited on hand and foot by her nymphs, hoping that he will stay there forever. She falls in love with him and even offers him immortality, but all he wants is to return home. However, she does not let him leave until the gods tell her to. She then helps him to build a raft and gives him supplies for the journey.

## Ino

Ino is a sea-nymph who helps Odysseus reach Phaeacia safely when he is shipwrecked by Poseidon.

## Nausicaa

Nausicaa is the daughter of Alcinous, the king of Phaeacia. She is still a young girl but has reached the stage where she is beginning to think about marriage. She is the one who finds Odysseus stranded on the shore, and she agrees to help him. Later, Alcinous offers Nausicaa's hand in marriage to Odysseus, but Odysseus just wants to return



home. He does praise Nausicaa, however, and tells her that she will make a wonderful wife for someone one day.

## Alcinous

Alcinous is the king of Phaeacia, the land where Odysseus washes up after leaving Calypso's island. Alcinous treats him kindly and offers him hospitality. He is impressed by Odysseus and gives him many splendid gifts, and then sends him back to Ithaca on one of his own ships.

## Arete

Arete is Alcinous' wife and Nausicaa's mother. She is the queen of Phaeacia, and Odysseus is told that she is the real power behind the throne. Accordingly, when he makes his plea for help, he first supplicates Arete. 'Arete' means virtue in ancient Greek, and Arete is represented as a very sensible and virtuous woman.

## Demodocus

Demodocus is the blind bard who plays at the Phaeacian court. Odysseus praises his skills, and everyone respects the bard and shows him great honor. In the figure of Demodocus, Homer might be trying to elevate his own status by showing a blind bard as worthy of winning great favor. According to legend, Homer was the bard who first wrote down the Odyssey, and he was also blind.

## Polyphemus

Polyphemus is the Cyclops who traps Odysseus and some of his men in his cave. He eats some of Odysseus' men and threatens to kill the rest later. Odysseus persuades him to drink wine until he is drunk. Then, while the Cyclops sleeps, Odysseus fashions a stake out of an olive branch and uses it to blind the sleeping monster. Polyphemus is angry, but he cannot catch Odysseus or his men because they have tied themselves to the bellies of his sheep. When he lets his animals out to eat and drink, Odysseus and his men escape. Polyphemus shouts out to his Cyclops friends, but Odysseus has told him that his name is 'nobody.' When Polyphemus cries that 'nobody' is hurting him, the other Cyclopes ignore him.

Unfortunately, Odysseus cannot leave things there. He shouts out his real name to Polyphemus as they are escaping. Polyphemus is the son of the sea-god Poseidon, and he shouts out a curse that he asks his father to carry out. Because of this, Poseidon ensures that Odysseus faces a lot more trouble before reaching home, and that he arrives on Ithaca having lost all his men, and in a foreign ship.



## Antiphates

Antiphates is the chief of the Laestrygonians, a race of giants who eat humans. Odysseus and his men encounter him on their journey and are forced to flee.

## Circe

Circe is a witch and demi-goddess living on the island of Aeaea. She is skilled with magic, and when men come to visit her she turns them all into animals. When Odysseus arrives on her island, he sends a scouting party of men ahead. Circe turns all but one of them into pigs. Odysseus goes to their rescue, and, aided by Hermes and a magic plant, he is able to resist her drugs. He then demands that she change his men back into humans. After this Circe is courteous and friendly towards them, and they remain in a life of luxury on her island for a year. When Odysseus tells her that they are going to leave, she helps him by warning him of dangers to come. She directs him to the land of the dead where he must gain more information from the prophet Teiresias.

## Teiresias

Teiresias is a famous prophet from Greek mythology. He is dead by the time this story takes place, but death has not diminished his powers. Odysseus travels to the end of the world, where the living world meets the world of the dead, to speak with Teiresias. The prophet warns him of dangers to come and instructs him on what he must do when he returns to Ithaca, in order to appease Poseidon's wrath.

## Heracles

Heracles is a famous hero in Greek mythology. He is dead by the time this story takes place, and he has not yet risen to be a god. Odysseus therefore sees him in the underworld when he goes to speak to Teiresias.

## Achilles

Achilles was a famous Greek hero and a great fighter. He was killed at the Trojan War. Odysseus sees him and speaks to him in the land of the dead, where Achilles tells Odysseus that being dead is a terrible thing. He would rather be alive than have all the glory that he won. This does not necessarily mean that he regrets fighting at Troy and becoming so famous, just that he would rather be alive than dead. Life is something worth treasuring whether one is a great hero or a lowly farm worker.



## Scylla

Scylla is a monster with six heads who lives in a cliff facing the whirlpool Charybdis. When sailors skirt too close to her cliffs in order to avoid the whirlpool, she snatches men from their boats and eats them. Odysseus and his men encounter her on their journey.

## Eurylochus

Eurylochus is a mutinous crewman who defies Odysseus' orders on several occasions. He is the man who takes the scouting party to explore Circe's island and it is only he that is not turned into a pig. He takes news of this back to Odysseus, but he refuses to face Circe again. He would rather escape and leave the men to their fates. Later, it is Eurylochus that urges the men to stop at Thrinacie, and then later to eat the cattle of Hyperion. It is therefore Eurylochus' fault that they all die.

## Elpenor

Elpenor is one of Odysseus' crewmen. He falls off a roof while drunk on Circe's island and dies. From the underworld, he appears to Odysseus and asks for a proper burial. Odysseus grants this wish when he returns to Circe's island.

## Anticleia

Anticleia is Odysseus' mother. He sees her in the underworld and she tells him that she killed herself out of grief, thinking him dead after such a long absence. She tells him that his family has remained loyal and that his father grieves for him in seclusion on his farm.

## Nestor

Nestor is an old king of Pylos. He was a great hero who fought in many battles, including the Trojan War. He now lives at Pylos with his family, in comfort and happiness. Telemachus visits him to hear news of Odysseus. Nestor cannot tell him anything about what has happened to Odysseus, but he does tell him all about what a great man Odysseus was, and he shows Telemachus respect and kindness. He then suggests that Telemachus visits Sparta, and gives him a chariot to do so.

## Peisistratus

Peisistratus is Nestor's son, and he soon becomes Telemachus' friend. He goes to Sparta with Telemachus, giving him the support and confidence he needs to speak to such a magnificent king as Menelaus.



## Menelaus

Menelaus is the king of Sparta and the brother of the great king Agamemnon. Menelaus is also the husband of Helen, the woman fought over at Troy. It is not clear whether Helen was taken by Paris, the prince of Troy, or whether she went with him willingly, but the latter is certainly suggested. However, Menelaus treats Helen very well and appears to have forgiven her, perhaps won over by her charm, or, perhaps, out of respect for her father, Zeus, the king of the gods. Menelaus fought at Troy and won a lot of fame and glory for himself there. He speaks well of Odysseus and weeps for the bad things that may have happened to him. He also claims to have news that Odysseus is still alive on Calypso's island, which gives Telemachus hope. Menelaus is a very kind and respectful host, showing hospitality to Telemachus and honoring him with gifts.

## Agamemnon

Agamemnon is Menelaus' brother and a mighty king. He was the leader of the entire Greek army at the Trojan War. Unfortunately, when he returned from war he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, who was having an affair with his cousin Aegisthus. Agamemnon is now in the underworld, and he meets Odysseus when he comes to talk to Teiresias, as well as the suitors when they are brought to the land of the dead. He tells Odysseus about his fate and says that no woman can ever be trusted. Later, when the suitors tell him what happened, he praises Penelope's faithfulness and says that Odysseus had a better wife than him. Agamemnon's story is repeated many times in the *Odyssey*, perhaps to remind the audience that one can be a mighty king, but without a loving and safe home, he is not as lucky as a man like Odysseus.

## Clytemnestra

Clytemnestra was the wife of Agamemnon. When he returned from war she helped his cousin to murder him. Her own son Orestes then killed her to take revenge for his father's death. Clytemnestra was the sister of Helen, but by a mortal father, meaning that she is not a daughter of Zeus.

## Orestes

Orestes is Agamemnon's son. He killed his mother in order to take revenge for his father's murder. This story is told many times in the *Odyssey*, and his conduct is held up as the proper way for a son to behave. He is even used as a role model for Telemachus to try to live up to. In Greek mythology, Orestes was pursued by the Furies for the crime of killing his own mother, but this is not mentioned in this story.



## Helen

Helen is the daughter of Zeus and a mortal woman. She is also the husband of Menelaus. She was either abducted by the Trojan prince Paris, or left willingly with him, but either way that was what started the Trojan War. When Telemachus comes to visit Menelaus, he meets Helen too, who has now been brought back to Sparta by her husband. He appears to have forgiven her, and she says she is regretful of what she did. On the other hand, she tries to paint herself as well as possible by telling a story about how she secretly helped the Greeks all along. Menelaus then tells a story about how she helped the Trojans and tried to get the Greek soldiers killed.

Helen is a very hard character to work out. We cannot say if she really regrets anything, or if she is just cleverly playing both sides, making the best of whichever situation she happens to be in. Life must be very dangerous for the most beautiful woman in the world, and Helen appears to have developed the skills to make anyone like her. She is a persuasive talker and very charming. She treats Telemachus well and gives him a beautiful gift, as well as telling him nice things about his father. Despite being the cause of the war that led to Odysseus going missing, Telemachus also treats her with respect.

## Laertes

Laertes is Odysseus father. Overcome with grief at the absence of his son, he retires to a farm in the country and lives in mourning there. When Odysseus returns he tests his father, and he soon sees how much the old man loves his son. When Odysseus reveals himself, Laertes seems to gain new life, being reinvigorated and happy once more.

## Antinous

Antinous is the main suitor for Penelope's hand and the clear leader of the other suitors. He takes control, speaks forcefully, and regularly mocks both Telemachus and Odysseus in his disguise as a beggar. He is shown to be a rude and arrogant man. Antinous is the first suitor that Odysseus kills.

## Eurymachus

Eurymachus is one of the suitors for Penelope' hand. He appears to be the second in charge after Antinous, and he is just as rude and disrespectful.

## Eurycleia

Eurycleia is Odysseus' nurse, now an old woman. She loves him deeply and recognizes him, even in his beggar disguise, by the scar on his leg. He reveals himself and his plan



to her, and she faithfully keeps his secret. She points out all the maids who were disloyal and takes a slightly disturbing delight in their deaths.

## Eumaeus

Eumaeus is Odysseus' swineherder, and he proves himself to be very loyal to his old master. Odysseus, currently in disguise as a beggar, meets him at his hut and is given hospitality. He quickly sees not only how loyal Eumaeus remains to him and his family, despite thinking him dead, but also what a good man he is. Eumaeus helps Odysseus in his fight with the suitors by barring the doors and bringing weapons.

## Theoclymenus

Theoclymenus is a stranger whom Telemachus meets at Pylos. He is fleeing men who want to kill him, so Telemachus offers him passage on his ship. Then, he tries to offer him hospitality when they are back on Ithaca, but the suitors drive him away. Theoclymenus is skilled in prophecy and predicts that Odysseus will soon return to take revenge on the suitors.

## Medon

Medon is the suitors' favorite herald, who attends all their meals. He is afraid of them, but he must obey them. He remains loyal to Odysseus. Telemachus vouches for him, and so Odysseus spares his life.

## Melanthius

Melanthius is Odysseus' goat-herder. He supports the suitors and is disloyal and even rude to Odysseus. Odysseus takes revenge by cutting off his hands, feet, nose, ears, and genitals.

## Phemius

Phemius is Odysseus' bard and one of the servants who remains loyal.

## Irus

Irus is the nickname of Arnaeus, the beggar who challenges Odysseus to a fight. Odysseus is disguised as a beggar at the time. He easily beats Irus.





## **Amphinomous**

Amphinomous is one of the suitors. He is sleeping with the maid Melantho.

## **Melantho**

Melantho is the worst of the disloyal maids. She is sleeping with the suitor Amphinomous.

## **Philoetius**

Philoetius is Odysseus' loyal cow-herder. He helps in the fight against the suitors by barring doors and bringing weapons.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Sacrifice and Libations

Proper worship of the gods in this story, and in the ancient Greek world, involved sacrifice. Sacrifice is the offering of an animal's life to the gods, or to a specific god or goddess. The animal's neck would be cut, and then a portion of the meat burned as a gift to the gods. The rest of the meat was then consumed by the worshipers in a feast. The whole process, including the initial processions, the ceremony, the sacrifice and the feast, was all part of celebrating and honoring the gods. Libations are like a sacrifice, but using liquid rather than meat. Oil, milk, wine, or blood are all examples of liquids that could be offered. This was most common when honoring the spirits of the dead.

## The Trojan War

The Trojan War was a ten-year war fought on the plains outside the city of Troy. It started when the Trojan prince Paris visited Menelaus in Sparta and then ran away with King Menelaus' wife, Helen. The Greeks joined forces to bring her back and to teach Troy a lesson. The insult was very personal. It was an affront to Menelaus as well as all the Greek leaders who respected him, but this was also a great opportunity for Greek heroes and leaders to earn fame and glory and to come back with some of Troy's wealth. Odysseus was one of the fighters at Troy. Eventually, after ten long years, the Greeks finally defeated the Trojans.

## The Greek Gods

The ancient Greeks believed in a pantheon of gods, and these are the same gods of this story. Most of the gods were joined in one large family. The most powerful is Zeus, the king of the gods and the lord of the sky. His wife is Hera, goddess of marriage, who is also his sister. Zeus' brothers are Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Hades, the god of death. Zeus and Hera's children are Ares, god of war, and Hephaestus, god of volcanoes and blacksmithing. Hephaestus is married to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and one of the oldest of the gods. She is technically Zeus' aunt. However, Aphrodite prefers Ares and they often have affairs. Zeus also has a daughter called Athene, the goddess of wisdom, who sprang fully formed from his head. Hermes is the messenger of the gods. There are many more gods and even more minor demi-gods in the world, but these are the important ones in this story.

The gods sometimes bicker among themselves, but are also respectful of each other and even display love and affection for each other. They act just like any large mortal family might. The gods are also very interested in the mortal world and are constantly interfering in it. This is why the Greeks in the story have to take great care not to anger the gods and to show them proper respect with sacrifices and prayers.



## Hospitality and Gift-giving

Hospitality is very important among the people in this story. It is expected that a stranger will receive friendship, food, and shelter if he asks for it. It is the law of the gods that suppliants must not be treated badly. If the host is rich and the guest is important enough, gift-giving would also be expected, with the amount and quality of the gifts directly reflecting the receiver's fame and the amount of respect he deserves.

## Lyre

A lyre is a stringed instrument a little like a small harp. It is played by bards as a form of entertainment several times in this story, sometimes accompanied by dancing and/or singing.

## Bard

A bard is an entertainer who sings about great heroes, or gods and myths, or famous incidents, in order to amuse a king's or nobleman's guests. In this story, bards are often described as divine or very important. This is because the *Odyssey* itself would originally have been sung by a bard, and so the storyteller is trying to win himself as much respect and goodwill as he can.

## The Wooden Horse

The Wooden Horse was a scheme devised by Odysseus to win the Trojan War. The Greeks built a giant wooden horse big enough to hide armed men inside. They then pretended to leave with their entire army. The Trojans thought the Greeks had given up and gone home, and that they had left the wooden horse as an offering to the gods. The Trojans believed that they could transfer any divine favor earned by the horse to themselves instead of the Greeks, if they brought it into the city. They did so. At night, the Greek soldiers climbed out and opened the city gates for the rest of the Greek army. The city fell quickly, and the Greeks won the war. This story is told by the Phaeacian bard after Odysseus requested it, as well as in Sparta where Telemachus is trying to gain information about his father.

## Cicones

The Cicones are a race of people whom Odysseus encounters on his way back from Troy. He lands near one of their cities, Ismarus, and sacks their home, taking their food and women and killing their men. The rest of the Cicones soon come to take revenge, however, and Odysseus and his men are forced to flee.



## Cyclopes

Cyclopes are one-eyed giants who live on an island, raising livestock and living simply. They have no farms or laws or ideas of what it means to be civilized, one of them tries to eat Odysseus' men, and they do not even respect the gods properly. Odysseus disapproves of this, thinking them nothing more than barbarians. The singular of Cyclopes is Cyclops. Polyphemus, the monster who eats some of Odysseus' men and is then blinded by the hero, is a Cyclops.

## The Lotus Eaters

The Lotus Eaters are people who eat the flowery lotus fruit, giving in to its mind-altering drugs. Odysseus and his men encounter these people on their way home from Troy.

## Laestrygonians

Laestrygonians are giants whom Odysseus and his men encounter on their journey. The men are forced to flee when the Laestrygonians try to eat them.

## Odysseus' Bow

Odysseus' bow is a treasured gift. It is so mighty that it can only be strung by Odysseus himself. To put a string on a bow, the bow first has to be bent. This is the part that the suitors have so much trouble with, but Odysseus can do the task easily.

## The Twelve Axes

Penelope sets a task for the suitors to shoot an arrow through twelve axes. This probably means through the rings on the axe-handles, from which they were hung from the walls. Only Odysseus succeeds at this task.

## Odysseus and Penelope's Bed

Odysseus himself made his and Penelope's marriage bed. It is built out of an olive tree's trunk that grows through the centre of the bedroom. It is therefore impossible to move the bed out of the room.



# Settings

## Eumaeus' Hut

Eumaeus' hut is a tiny house in the countryside where Eumaeus lives and takes care of Odysseus' swine. This is the first place that both Odysseus and Telemachus come to when they return to Ithaca after their journeys, and both are given hospitality here.

## Ithaca

Ithaca is a rocky Greek island to the left of the mainland. This is Odysseus' home.

## Troy

Troy is a foreign city near the Black Sea, where the Greek army went to wage war and return Menelaus' wife Helen. The Trojan War was fought on the plains outside the city of Troy. By the time this story takes place, Troy has fallen and been sacked by the Greeks.

## Pylos

Pylos is a city on the Greek mainland where Telemachus goes for news of his father. Nestor is the king of Pylos.

## Sparta

Sparta is a city on the Greek mainland. It is situated in a meadow area called Lacadaemon. This is where Telemachus goes for news of his father. The king of Sparta is Menelaus, and the queen is Helen.

## Phaeacia

Phaeacia is an idyllic island where Odysseus is washed up after being wrecked at sea upon leaving Calypso. The Phaeacians treat Odysseus well and send him home on one of their ships. The king of Phaeacia is Alcinous, and the queen is Arete.

## Ogygia

Ogygia is Calypso's island, the place where Odysseus was held captive by the nymph for many years before the gods ordered her to let him go.



## Ismarus

Ismarus is the Cicone city that Odysseus and his men sack on the way home from Troy.

## Aeaea

Aeaea is Circe's island, where some of Odysseus' men are turned into pigs. When Odysseus resists Circe's magic, she becomes friendly. Odysseus and his men spend a happy year in her home, being waited on and eating good food.

## Erebus

Erebus is one of the names for the land of the dead, the place from which the souls emerge to talk to Odysseus.

## River of Ocean

The River of Ocean is a mythical river that feeds all the oceans of the world, where the living world meets the land of the dead. This is where Odysseus goes to talk to the dead prophet Teiresias.

## Thrinacie

Thrinacie is the island of the Sun-god, where he keeps his cattle. Odysseus and his men land there, and despite warnings, his men eat the cattle. As a result of this, the ship is struck by lightning. All of Odysseus' men die.

## Odysseus' Palace

Odysseus is the king of Ithaca, and so he lives in a palace with a large estate on the island. This is where Penelope and Telemachus are left for twenty years while Odysseus is away, and where the suitors move in when they are taking advantage of the hospitality of the missing Odysseus' home.

## The Throne Room

The throne room, also called the great hall, is in Odysseus' palace. It is where the suitors like to feast on Odysseus' food and wine. This is where Odysseus kills them all when he finally gets his revenge.



# Themes and Motifs

## Monsters, Gods, and Magic

The supernatural is always present in this story. Odysseus faces many different monsters and magical dangers on his journey home from the Trojan War. These cannot necessarily be fought with brute strength or skill in fighting, and so Odysseus must use a different kind of heroics in order to win out. He uses his cunning, his resourcefulness, and his clever plans. When all else fails, he relies on sheer endurance to get through. Monsters and magic are not always rational, and it is clear that they have no place in civilized society, in the Greek world. They represent the fear of the unknown, the terrible kinds of people that might live far away, outside the civilized world. They are monstrous because they do not respect the laws of the gods and of society; they do not show hospitality, they eat people, they turn men into animals, they eat magical drugs, or they marry their own sisters and brothers. Odysseus overcomes them all, and is thankful when he returns to safe, civilized Greek waters once again.

Magic in this story, and in other Greek myths too, is often shown as the realm of women. Circe, the witch who turns Odysseus' men into animals, is a woman, as is the demi-goddesses Calypso, Scylla, and Charybdis. Two of the fearsome monsters that Odysseus faces also have women's names. The Sirens, who lure sailors to their deaths on the rocks with their magical singing, are female. The ancient Greeks did not trust women, and they believed that women should remain in the home and controlled by men. The idea that women could be strong or could have power was very frightening to the ancient Greeks. Womanly power was not something you could fight with weapons, as Odysseus discovers when he faces these monsters and sorceresses.

Most of the time Odysseus and his men are forced to run away, but the one time Odysseus does conquer the danger, he does so in a way that reinstates his masculine dominance. He resists Circe's drugs with the help of the gods, but then he threatens her with his sword. When she gives in, he has to bed her immediately, asserting his control over her. She then takes on a typical woman's role, bringing the men food and weaving at the loom. This is like an ancient Greek man's power fantasy. It tells men that women's power can be controlled if they are kept within a certain role. To let them outside of that realm is dangerous.

The gods are also ever-present in the world of this story. They are not simply watching events, but they are interacting with mortals and continually interfering in their affairs. Athene is always helping Odysseus in small, hidden ways. He is saved by a sea-nymph near Phaeacia, and then by a river god. Hermes helps him against Circe. Poseidon constantly tries to kill him. Hyperion, the Sun-god, demands that Odysseus' ship is wrecked. Athene reveals herself directly to Odysseus when he lands on Ithaca and helps him plan what to do about the suitors. She appears in disguise to Telemachus and several other people, steering events while Odysseus is away. She also makes people more attractive or better speakers on several occasions. All the gods agree to let



Odysseus go from Calypso's island, and Hermes takes the news to her. When Poseidon is angry with the Phaeacians, he turns their ship into a rock. These are just some of the ways in which the gods interfere throughout the story.

It is easy to see why worship of the gods would be so important to the characters when the gods are so active in their lives. Respect for the gods was vital, and offering the proper sacrifices could make a huge difference. Sacrifices are described in detail many times in the story, emphasizing the importance of worshipping the gods in the correct ways. This shows how the ancient Greeks understood the world. To them, everything was influenced by the gods, and everything that happened, both good or bad, was caused by the gods. Natural phenomena could be taken as an omen, and so a message of the gods' favor or displeasure. Even seemingly small things, such as a person having an idea, tends to be translated into a god's favor. To have a god on one's side marked one as a very special person. This tells us that Odysseus is a great hero indeed.

## Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the most important themes in *The Odyssey*. On Odysseus' journey he looks for hospitality at the many places he stops, but he rarely finds it. Hospitality is shown as something that should be expected. It is not only grossly bad behavior to neglect the rules of hospitality, but also a crime against the gods, for Zeus is said to protect guests and strangers. Accordingly, good people are shown to be kind to strangers. Menelaus, a great and respected fighter and Odysseus' friend, shows hospitality to Telemachus even before he knows who he is. He tells off his squire, who had suggested turning the strangers away, explaining that showing hospitality to strangers is the same as respecting the gods. Nestor also shows great hospitality to Telemachus, so much so that Telemachus has to avoid him on the way home for fear of being kept too long with feasting. The Phaeacians show Odysseus a similar kind of hospitality, taking him in before they know who he is, offering him gifts, inviting him to a feast and entertainment, and showing him plenty of respect.

Hospitality is not just something the very rich are supposed to show. Even the poorest man is expected to treat others kindly when they come to him in need. Eumaeus, Odysseus' loyal swine-herder, shows Odysseus kindness while he is disguised as a beggar. Eumaeus does not know this is his master. So, he does not have to help him. Nevertheless he still gives him shelter, food, and a bed. He even lends him a cloak for the night. Eumaeus is poor, so he cannot give gifts or throw great feasts, but he still does what he can, showing that he is a good person and that the laws of the gods apply to all men.

Hospitality is what civilized people do, which is why it is lacking among the monsters and barbaric people that Odysseus visits. Odysseus' journey represents a return to civilization after war, and so it is a moral story meant to teach people how they should behave towards each other. While Odysseus is amongst strange people, he is received badly, threatened and even attacked. He meets monsters who eat people, and





encounters dangerous magic. The Cyclops Polyphemus sums up the barbarian attitude when he says that he cares nothing for the laws of hospitality and nothing for the gods. When Odysseus returns to Greece however, he encounters civilization again. The Phaeacians, so near to Greece, treat him well and send him home. In Ithaca, Eumaeus treats him with exemplary courtesy. Telemachus, while wandering Greece, unlike his father in the barbarian non-Greek seas, encounters nothing but friendship. This, the poet seems to be telling us, is how Greeks should behave.

The suitors are then used as an example of how bad people behave. They are uncivilized and rude, and they both abuse and disrespect the laws of hospitality. They take advantage of Telemachus and consume more than they should. They treat Telemachus' guests poorly and they even show violence towards Odysseus when he is disguised as a beggar. They are shown to get their proper, deserved punishment for this when they are killed.

Hospitality was important to the ancient Greeks because it was a time in which travel could be very uncertain. Roads were unsafe and threatened by bandits, and storms could easily wreck ships. A bad winter might also ruin crops and kill livestock, and could cause a man to starve. When times were hard, people needed to stick together and help one another in order to survive. Kindness to strangers, and helping those who seek your aid, was therefore seen as an important duty that came with being a member of society. It was essential to help others, as you may very well need help yourself one day. Ships were also not designed to spend long periods in open waters, and could not hold many supplies. This meant that sailors would have to sail close to the coast and stop off regularly on voyages. Being able to expect hospitality was part of what kept sailors and travelers alive. We can see this in the *Odyssey* from the amount of times that Odysseus and his men stop off at islands or towns along the way, instead of simply sailing on for home. They were forced to stop to look for food. Offering hospitality is therefore an important theme because it was so essential to keeping society and civilization running amongst the Greeks.

Hospitality also involves the giving of gifts. Telemachus is given gifts by Menelaus and Nestor, and Odysseus is given them by the Phaeacians. At Polyphemus' cave, part of the reason Odysseus tarries is to see what kind of gifts he might receive. Strangers of worth or renown might expect gifts from their hosts, just as their hosts will expect gifts in return if they are ever the visitor. Gifts mark a person's status and fame, and so the more and the better the gifts, the greater respect and honor one has been given. This is why Odysseus is always so anxious to ensure he receives the best gives, and so tells the Phaeacians persuasive stories about himself designed to impress them. This is much more than simple greed. The gifts will be a mark of Odysseus' fame and worth as a hero.

## Family and Home

Family and home are major themes in this story. Odysseus spends the entire poem longing to return to Ithaca and to his family there – his wife, son, father and mother.



When the story begins, Odysseus has been away for twenty years, ten of them at Troy and ten of them lost at sea. He longs to see them again, and they miss him terribly. His mother has committed suicide out of grief, his father has removed himself to a secluded farm, his wife cannot bring herself to remarry, and his son is desperate for any news of his father that he can get. A family means love and devotion and a strong attachment that can never be broken.

Odysseus is completely devoted to his family. He spends the whole story trying everything he can to get back to them. When he is held captive on Calypso's island he spends his days weeping on the shore. He sleeps with her at night, but we are told that this is only because it is not wise to refuse a goddess, and that his heart is not really in it. When she asks him why he would prefer his wife over her, he does not pretend that Penelope is more beautiful than a goddess, but tells the truth. Penelope is a friend to him, a soul mate who understands him, and with whom he wants to grow old. He even refuses the offer of immortality that a life with Calypso represents. As soon as he is released, he builds a raft and sets off. When he is shipwrecked on Phaeacia he resists more temptation, this time in the form of a potential young wife and an idyllic land. Odysseus could be very happy here, but it is not his own land and his own family, and nothing can ever replace them. This shows that there is a connection to family and home that goes deeper than simple pleasures. It is part of who we are, and we cannot imagine life without them.

Penelope and Telemachus are completely loyal to Odysseus. Penelope is often contrasted with Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon, who cheated on her husband and then killed him when he returned from war. She represents the danger of putting trust in others when they may not deserve it. Agamemnon expected his own family to be loyal, but he was wrong, and his own home was not the safe haven he thought it was. This is shown as being a terrible fate, to be usurped in one's own home and betrayed by one's own wife. Penelope, in contrast, remains faithful to Odysseus, and even tricks the suitors who are trying to usurp him. She is the opposite of Clytemnestra. Odysseus' wife and home really are everything an ancient Greek man dreams of. In the story of Agamemnon's murder, Orestes is often used as an example of great loyalty and dedication to a father. He is a role model for Telemachus, and one that Telemachus does indeed live up to, helping his father to fight the suitors.

There are other families in the story too, emphasizing the importance of this connection. When Telemachus arrives at Sparta, he finds Menelaus and Helen celebrating the weddings of their son and daughter, who are both being married off at the same time. This is a celebration of family, once again reminding the audience of how important family is. Menelaus even expresses the feeling that all his fame and riches are not worth the fact that his brother was killed at home, and he could do nothing to save him. This clearly shows how important family is, if it can even come above a hero's reputation and wealth. When we meet Helen, we are reminded that an entire ten-year war was fought to return a wife to her husband and a mother to her children. Now Menelaus and Helen appear to be very happy again; they have already re-established the joys of home and family, something that Telemachus and Odysseus will soon do, too.



At Pylos Telemachus meets Nestor and all his sons, and once again sees a man happy amongst his family and in his home. Alcinous is another symbol of a happy family and home. Phaeacia is a wonderful place and Alcinous rules it well. He takes great pride in everything here, including the food, music, athletes and dancers. He lives happily with a sensible and loyal wife, Arete, and a beautiful, polite daughter who is just approaching marriageable age. Like Menelaus, Alcinous is shown to be enjoying all the rewards of raising and protecting a strong family. It is also no accident that the reason Poseidon hates Odysseus and makes trouble for him is related to a family bond. Odysseus wounded his son, and now Poseidon wants revenge. Poseidon is as justified in this as Orestes was in avenging his father Agamemnon. The gods also show family relationships. Zeus loves his daughter Athene and wants to help her in her plans, but he cannot be seen to favor her too much over his own brother. Athene also does not want to offend a respected uncle. Family ties are everywhere. Family and home are shown to be essential to society, security, and happiness.



# Styles

## Point of View

The Odyssey does not have an obvious point of view, and at first appears to be told in a third person voice-of-god style. However, the storyteller himself does occasionally speak to characters, revealing his own personality. He asks the muses to help him to tell the story well, and later he addresses Eumaeus as 'you' because he likes and admires the character so much. This begs the question, who exactly is the narrator of The Odyssey?

The Odyssey is an epic poem from ancient Greece, which was passed down orally from generation to generation. This means that it does not have one obvious author. It also means that the story itself would change with each retelling, as each bard who told it changed certain scenes a little, added parts, took away parts, or emphasized different ideas. The poem as we have it was recorded in its final state at some point in Greece's archaic age. Legend tells us that it was a blind bard called Homer who first wrote down The Odyssey and so cemented it in its finished form. The 'narrator' could therefore be Homer, or it could be an amalgamation of many different bards who have all added a little of their own personality to the tale as it was passed down. We will never know.

By telling the story from a removed point of view, the narrator can show us what is happening in different locations, such as with Odysseus and on Ithaca, as well as in different planes of existence, such as the mortal world and the realm of the gods. The audience therefore knows more than any of the characters, except for the gods, increasing anticipation and dramatic tension.

There is a flashback section in the middle of the story in which Odysseus tells the tale of his journey to the Phaeacians. This lasts for several chapters, and during these the story is told by Odysseus, in first person and from his point of view. In these sections it is therefore difficult to know if he is exaggerating or twisting events to make himself look good.

## Language and Meaning

The language in the Odyssey is incredibly rich. The story is full of beautiful imagery that evokes the narrator's love for Greece and for life. The Odyssey can therefore tell us a lot about ancient Greece, from the food they ate and the clothes they wore, to what the land looked like, how they farmed and what animals they raised, and what their ships were like. There is, in particular, a lot of farming imagery and nautical imagery in the Odyssey, reflecting the important themes of civilization and ordinary life, and of travelling.

There are many extended similes used in the Odyssey. The author uses them to help his audience understand things that might not be familiar to them. A bard telling Odysseus' story might not be speaking to fighting men, but there will be men who are



familiar with rising livestock. Comparing a warrior stalking another to a predator stalking a vulnerable animal will be an image his audience can understand. Comparing deep sea waters to the color of wine or comparing a shipwrecked man holding a rock to an octopus being pulled from its layer along with coast are similes that fishermen can understand.

Throughout the *Odyssey* there are many cases of language being used to help the narrator to remember his story. Since the story would originally have been passed down orally, the bards had to memorize every detail. Certain tricks make this easier. One trick is to include a lot of repetition. The *Odyssey* contains many repeated phrases, such as 'as soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy fingered.' This acts almost like a marker to the bard; if he can remember how many of these there are in the poem, he will then know roughly where he is in the story and what should come next. Another kind of repetition comes from the repeated epithets, the descriptive phrases or words attached to certain people and places. For example, Menelaus is usually described as 'auburn-haired Menelaus' or 'Menelaus of the loud war-cry.' Athene is usually described with 'flashing eyes.' These epithets ensure that the bard does not have to remember a new description every time.

Readers might also notice that *The Odyssey* contains many sentences that seem very long and rhythmic, as if reading a song or poem rather than a story. This is because *The Odyssey* actually was performed as a song. It had a set rhythm, the rhythm that all epics were set to, and it would have been accompanied with music and, perhaps, dancing as well. When *The Odyssey* is translated into English, the exact rhythm is lost, but if read in the ancient Greek the story's poetry is clear.

## Structure

*The Odyssey* begins after Odysseus has been missing for twenty years. The gods discuss Odysseus' unhappy fate and decide to make Calypso let him go. Events are therefore propelled forwards after a long impasse during which Odysseus has been helpless and his family have been waiting. Now, things are starting to happen, making this a great place to begin the story.

The story then goes to Ithaca to see how Odysseus' absence has affected his family and his home. Athene sends Telemachus on his own mini-*Odyssey* to find out news of his father, and the story follows this journey very closely. Before Telemachus can return to Ithaca, however, the story switches to follow Odysseus as he is released from Calypso's island and comes to Phaeacia.

Odysseus then begins to tell the Phaeacians what has happened to him since he left Troy. The middle section of the book is therefore a flashback, told from Odysseus' point of view, in first person. This goes in chronological order through Odysseus' adventures, through the loss of each of his ships and eventually all of his men, until he is washed up on Calypso's island. Odysseus ends his story here. At this point, the story has come full circle, back to where it began, with Odysseus held captive by Calypso.



After Odysseus has finished his story, the story stays with him as he travels back to Ithaca and then plots the downfall of the suitors. The remaining story is in chronological order as Odysseus tests people, takes his revenge, and is finally reunited with his family.

The story can therefore be seen to have four separate parts. First is Telemachus' journey. Second is Odysseus' fate after leaving Calypso's island, until he reaches the Phaeacian court and begins his story. Third is Odysseus' flashback, his story of his journeys until he reached Calypso. Fourth is what happens when Odysseus gets back to Ithaca.



## Quotes

Cyclops, if anyone ever asks you how you came by your blindness, tell him your eye was put out by Odysseus, sacker of cities, the son of Laertes, who lives in Ithaca.

-- Odysseus to the Cyclops (Book Nine, p123 paragraph 3 (line 501))

**Importance:** Odysseus cannot resist calling out his name and address to the Cyclops he has just blinded. This is his fatal flaw showing - his pride. Because of this, the Cyclops' father, Poseidon the sea god, now knows exactly who to attack. This is why Odysseus suffers so much on his way home.

Tell me, Muse, the story of that resourceful man who was driven to wander far and wide after he had sacked the holy citadel of Troy.

-- Narrator (Book One, p3 paragraph 1 (line 1))

**Importance:** This is the famous first line of the Odyssey. This is spoken by the bard, asking for divine inspiration to tell the story correctly and well. The gods were important to the ancient Greeks, so much so that even a story like this starts with a prayer. Other epics and songs would have begun in a similar way.

His death itself, if he had fallen among his men at Troy or died in friendly arms at home with all his fighting done, would have caused me less distress. For in that case the whole Achaean nation would have joined in building him a mound, and he would have left a great name for his son to inherit.

-- Telemachus (Book One, p9 paragraph 2 (line 235))

**Importance:** It is better for a hero to die in battle, where he can earn glory and receive proper burial, than to be lost at sea. This shows three things. First, fame and glory were extremely important to Greek heroes. Secondly, a proper burial was vitally important for the Greeks. Finally, Telemachus and his mother are suffering so much from not knowing if Odysseus is dead or alive, that it would simply be better if he were dead.

Don't stray too long or too far from home, nor leave your wealth unguarded with such a set of arrogant brutes in the place, unless you want them to share it out, to eat up all you have, so making your journey futile.

-- Nestor talking to Telemachus. (Book Three, p35 paragraph 2 (line 314))

**Importance:** Telemachus is in danger, and even Nestor can see it. This is exactly what the suitors are doing right now, and so this reminds us of the danger. Nestor shows that it is not just Telemachus who is angry with the suitors; other great Greek heroes also think the suitors are behaving badly.

When Dawn came, fresh and rosy-fingered...

-- Narrator (Book Three, p37 (and many times throughout poem) paragraph 4 (line 403))

**Importance:** This phrase is repeated often throughout the poem, or varied slightly, e.g.



"As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered". This is one of the things that lets us know this was originally an oral poem, sung and performed, not written down and read. Not only does this line have a sing-song quality, the repetition helps the bard to remember where he is, and to break the story into manageable chunks. This is probably the most famous line of the whole poem, and the one that readers tend to remember.

You and I enjoyed much hospitality from strangers before we reached our homes and could expect that Zeus might grant us a life without suffering in time to come.

-- Menelaus talking to his squire (Book Four, p42 paragraph 1 (line 32))

**Importance:** Hospitality was vitally important to the ancient Greeks. It is one of the major themes in this story. Here Menelaus is reminding his steward of the importance of hospitality and that they must always show others the kindness they received themselves.

Alcinous, it is unseemly and unlike your royal ways to let a stranger sit in the ashes at the hearth, while the guests around you must patiently await your lead.

-- Echeneus, a Phaeacian elder (Book Seven, p89 paragraph 3 (line 159))

**Importance:** This is another quote that demonstrates the importance of hospitality. Alcinous will be thought a bad host if he does not welcome a stranger and offer him food and comfort. Alcinous' other guests will also look bad by association, and might be angry with him for not treating another guest with courtesy.

Once let me see my own estate, my servants, and the high roof of my great house, and I shall be content to breathe my last.

-- Odysseus to Alcinous (Book Seven, p90 paragraph 3 (line 223))

**Importance:** The importance and joys of home and family is one of the biggest themes in the Odyssey. Here Odysseus is telling King Alcinous that his home is the most important thing to him in life. He might be enjoying Alcinous' riches and friendship, but all he really wants is to go home.

All men honor and respect bards, for the Muse has taught them songs and she loves the minstrel fraternity.

-- Odysseus to Alcinous (Book Eight, p106 paragraph 6 (line 479))

**Importance:** Remember that this story will have been performed by a bard. By inserting a line like this (about how wonderful and divinely inspired bards are), the performing bard hopes that his audience will look favourably on him and might give him fine gifts.

To any man with the slightest claim to common sense, a guest and suppliant is as close as a brother.

-- Alcinous (Book Eight, p108 paragraph 2 (line 544))

**Importance:** This is another quote showing the importance of hospitality. One aspect of proper hospitality was giving guests gifts to match their status, or to show how much





they had impressed you. Alcinous is reminding all his other guests of this. It is significant that he says a guest and suppliant is as close as a brother. Guests and suppliants were protected by Zeus, the king of the gods, and so should indeed be treated as close family.

I am Odysseus, Laertes' son. The whole world talks of my stratagems, and my fame has reached the heavens.

-- Odysseus (Book Nine, p110 paragraph 4 (line 19))

**Importance:** This is the first time Odysseus has introduced himself to the Phaeacians, and it marks the beginning of his story, the flashback revealing his long travels and battles against monsters and magic. Odysseus loves to boast, and he begins the story with one of his best. He emphasises the things that are most important to him, and how he would wish the Phaeacians to remember him: as a clever strategist, and a man who has won great fame. Odysseus' reputation is very important to him. He wants to make sure the Phaeacians are suitably impressed so that they will talk about him and honor him.

And I, for one, know of no sweeter sight for a man's eyes than his own country.

-- Odysseus (Book Nine, p110 paragraph 4 (line 26))

**Importance:** This is another reminder that home is important.

Good sir, remember your duty to the gods; we are your suppliants, and Zeus is the champion of suppliants and guests. He is the god of guests: guests are sacred to him, and he goes alongside them.

-- Odysseus to the Cyclops (Book Nine, p117 paragraph 1 (line 269))

**Importance:** Odysseus reminds the Cyclops of the importance of hospitality and respecting the gods. The Cyclops ignores him. It is a mark of civilization to welcome guests and to respect the gods. Time and again the strange people Odysseus meets will not honor these traditions. This is supposed to mark them as barbarians in comparison to the civilized Greeks.

...grant that Odysseus, sacker of cities and son of Laertes, may never reach his home in Ithaca. But if he is destined to see his friends again, to come once more to his own house and reach his native land, let him come late, in wretched plight, having lost all his comrades, in a foreign ship, and let him find trouble in his home.

-- Polyphemus, the Cyclops (Book Nine, p124 paragraph 1 (line 529))

**Importance:** This is the curse the Cyclops calls down on Odysseus after the hero blinds him. This whole curse will come true, enforced by Poseidon, the god of the sea. The blinding of the Cyclops is therefore the cause of everything that happens in the story, and it is these words that set events in motion.

I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be King of all these lifeless dead.



-- Achilles (Book Ten, p152 paragraph 5 (line 489))

**Importance:** Achilles is generally believed by the ancient Greeks to be the greatest warrior who ever lived. For him to claim that death is horrible, and that it is better to be living, even if you are poor, than it is to be a dead hero, is incredible and a little disturbing. Achilles went to Troy knowing that he would die, putting his fame and glory over his own life. The Odyssey, however, is a poem about life, and about those who survive war. We see Nestor and Menelaus happily getting on with life after the war, and Menelaus says he would give up his wealth to have his brother back. Now Achilles says that being alive is better than being dead. This allows Odysseus to be perceived as a great hero, even though he didn't die at Troy like other great heroes. There is no shame in living, this poem tells us, and in getting back to normal life after war.

And that is why I cannot desert you in your misfortunes: you are so persuasive, so quick-witted, so self-possessed.

-- Athene (Book Thirteen, p177 paragraph 3 (line 331))

**Importance:** Athene is the goddess of wisdom, and she loves Odysseus because he is cunning, quick witted, and suspicious. These are traits she values above being a mighty warrior. Odysseus is a different kind of hero from the burly warriors of other Greek myths, but he is still skilled and special enough to be favoured by one of the most important of the gods.

All his life a guest remembers the host who has treated him kindly.

-- Peisistratus (Book 15, p196 paragraph 3 (line 52))

**Importance:** This is another reminder of the importance of hospitality. Peisistratus wants to give Menelaus a chance to give them gifts before they leave. This is because he likes the idea of receiving gifts, and Menelaus deserves the chance to show his generosity and to be remembered fondly for it.

My son has saved you so that you may know in your heart – and tell others – that doing right is a much better policy than doing wrong.

-- Odysseus to Medon (Book Twenty-Two, p297 paragraph 2 (line 373))

**Importance:** The Odyssey is a moral poem, and sometimes its messages are stated quite obviously for the audience to hear and remember.

These men fell victims to the will of the gods and their own infamy. They paid respect to no one on earth who came near them – good or bad. And now their own transgressions have brought them to this ignominious death.

-- Odysseus (Book Twenty-Two, p298 paragraph 2 (line 413))

**Importance:** In other words, the suitors got what they deserved. This is another moral lesson, but also the storyteller reminding us that Odysseus was justified in killing the suitors.