

# ODYSSEY

## Homer

**Overview** Odysseus is the master figure of Homer's *Odyssey*, a long epic poem probably first written down around the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The epic Odysseus dominates retells the story of a great battle, The Trojan War, which has occurred around the city of Troy, in Asia Minor; a war which brought the heroic clans of Greece together, to reclaim a stolen bride (Helen, wife of a powerful land-king). Among the Greek lords mounting what turns out to be a ten-year struggle to capture Troy, Odysseus is a foremost spearhead. The bulk of the epic concerns the wanderings of Odysseus on the way home; under pressure he displays the traits of the warrior-hero, strength and daring, but to these he joins a personality rich and ironic—a man full of tricks, a witty risk taker, a lover, a survivor; one might say a Macgyver exalted to the highest level of ingenuity, where glimpses of the whole human condition can be seen.

### Story

If the *Iliad* is Homer's broad story of the ancient Greek assault against the fortress of Troy, and specifically of the several weeks toward the end of that assault, then the *Odyssey* is about ten years of returning home after the war, as seen in the person of the lingering and doughty and sometimes reckless Greek veteran Odysseus. Odysseus has been ten years away from home and wife, Penelope on the island of Ithaca, where she has been under constant suit by a band of feckless suitors. She has kept the suitors at bay by the pretend strategy of weaving (then at night unweaving) a burial shroud for Odysseus' grandfather. Meanwhile, as Penelope learns from her son Telemachus, who has gone in search of his father, Odysseus is still alive on the ocean, and making his way homeward to her.

By a wide variety of narrative maneuvers, Homer enables us to see the progress, delays and adventures of the hero, as he makes his way home. He is assaulted by one-eyed monsters, waylaid by natural forces, like whirlpools which threaten to consume his boat, by ocean demons who deceive him with magical transformations of shape, by sorceresses (like the demonic Circe), who attempts to turn him and his men into swine, or Calypso the goddesses who want to make Odysseus immortal, and keep him forever by her side. In each instance Odysseus is mortal enough to run straight into and through danger, and clever enough to figure out a way to the other side.

Odysseus' final drive, out of the haze of fantasy land, comes on Calypso's isle, where for nine years he has been a prisoner of love; he looks up one morning and on the horizon sees the smoke rising from his own home island, Ithaca—for all he knows from the hearth in his own kitchen. The longing for home overwhelms him. With the help of Calypso, who sees the handwriting on the wall, Odysseus builds a raft on which he sails, through turbulent seas but in the direction of Ithaca, to the last remaining obstacle, the island of the Lotus-eating, soft and comfortable Phaeacians, whose main pleasures are discus throwing and dancing. We get Homer's point. Odysseus is a vital man of this world, the opposite of the Phaeacian hippy, ready to re-emerge onto the stage of real life. It is no surprise that in the following, as we near the end of the epic, Odysseus is met on Ithaca by his crafty mentor the goddess Athena, who has throughout the epic tested and tutored his wits. Odysseus is at this point close to the ultimate challenge of cleansing his home and reclaiming his wife.

Once secretly reintroduced to his wife, wearing as he does the disguise of an old beggar, Odysseus must himself deal with Penelope's craftiness, for she wants ID guarantees from her husband, after their long separation and her own trials. Only by proving his secret knowledge does Odysseus finally convince his wife, and from there the pair, and their allies in the homestead, collaborate to defeat the suitors—in a test of strength and skill which brings peace and resolution to the tale of a great hero.

## Themes

**Fidelity** Both Penelope, over a twenty-year period, and Odysseus, always in his heart of hearts, remain faithful to their initial union, and to those secrets, like the great secret of the bed, which bind them.

**Adventurousness** Odysseus leaves the Trojan War hellbent to return to his home and wife, but as he starts out on the ocean he finds himself caught up in blockages, challenges, and every sort of adventure—which he is never inclined to reject.

**Craftiness** All the major players in the *Odyssey* are crafty: Athena knows how to lie creatively with her protégé Odysseus; Odysseus can trick the pants off of any one-eyed monster; Penelope could keep a queue of suitors waiting til the end of time, with her weaving trick.

## Characters

**Odysseus**, a wily and tough character in the *Iliad*, emerges in the *Odyssey* as a perfect example of post war veteran ingenuity. With skill and patience, he makes his way home, frees his home of suitors, and restores order.

**Penelope** Odysseus' crafty and patient wife, who by various wiles holds off the unwanted suitors in her house, eventually reuniting with her husband.

**Telemachus**, the ingenu son of Odysseus and Penelope. Driven by curiosity about his father, who seems never to return from war, Telemachus sets out in search and learns what the old man is up to.

**Calypso** The goddess who retains Odysseus for nearly ten years on her island of Ogygia. She offers him immortality if he will stay with her.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### ODYSSEUS (Open)

**Character** Odysseus is a package of traits—bold, adventurous, ingenious, witty, and above all open, ready to take on what comes—which he ignites by the spark of self-awareness. He not only is all of these vigorous personal styles, but he knows just what he is. When he fences with his guardian goddess, Athena, they trade long lying stories in order to tease out the other's identity. They understand each other as partners in craft. When Odysseus' sailors urge him to avoid listening to the song of the Sirens, he scorns their timidity, and laughs at them. When Nausikaa, the maiden daughter of the King of Phaeacia, comes upon Odysseus resting naked in the bushes, after a desperately hard sea passage on his way home, he flirts with her fascinatingly, holding a transparent branch of olives over his private parts. But he is not waylaid; he pushes ahead with determination.

**Parallels** Odysseus is a rich character, and has spawned many versions of himself, from the 'tricky Dick' implications of Sophocles' *Philoktetes* (409 B.C.) to his reputation as a transcendent world-experiencer in Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* (1938), or in the earlier *Ulysses* (1922) of James Joyce. (Joyce's Leopold Bloom experiences, on a single day in London, 'events' which parallel those of Odysseus on his return to Penelope.) World literature glistens with Odyssean reference: Tennyson's noble 'Ulysses,' in which he reviews the nature of his life (1833); Jean Giono's *The Birth of the Odyssey* (1923), with ironic twists worthy of Odysseus himself; Derek Walcott's *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, 1993, which shows the formal versatility of the *Odyssey*, which can assume many shapes.

### Illustrative moments

**Determined** Odysseus' first encounter, upon leaving Troy for the return home, is with the Lotus Eaters, a mythic tribe whose nourishment is the lotus plant, an edible and narcotic food to which Odysseus' men

quickly become addicted, with the result that they absolutely do not want to continue their trip. They forget home, and all other motivation, and choose to stay with the soft addicts who invite them to remain. As with the Phaeacians, in the visit that initiates Odysseus' narrative adventure, Odysseus is the voice of decision and then action. 'Though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches. Then I told the rest to go on board at once, lest any of them should taste of the lotus and leave off wanting to get home, so they took their places and smote the grey sea with their oars.'

**Forceful** When Odysseus and his men arrive on the island of the sorceress Circe, half of the men are sent out to investigate her compound, from whose chimneys smoke is rising invitingly. This advance group is met but then ensnared by the sorceress, who feasts and enchants them, then turns them into swine. Only Odysseus' aide de camp escapes, returning to his boss and reporting on the enchantment of the other adventurers. At this point Odysseus, armed with a magic herb named *moly*, makes his own assault on the mysterious compound, confronts Circe, and demands the return of his men, in human form. Compliant, Circe finds Odysseus' power attractive, frees his men, and gives them detailed instructions on the upcoming stages of their journey. Odysseus once again emerges as both gutsy and ingenious, and at the same time concerned with the welfare of his men.

**Life-affirming** After many close shaves and destructive behaviors on the part of his men, Odysseus finds himself a sole survivor, beached on the island of the witch/seductress/enchantress, Calypso. This island is the last stop on the adventurous journey he recounts to the Phaiacians (cf. # 1 above) and the point from which Odysseus will be able to see the smoke rising over his Ithaca homeland. Eager though he is to make the last step of his journey, he is nonetheless seduced for ten years by Calypso, who longs to make him her immortal consort. Odysseus is reluctant to leave such bliss, as he had been reluctant to shut out the beauty of the Sirens' song, but ultimately something like a will to be human, to remain true to the human condition, comes out in this life-affirming character. With determination he rejects Calypso's invitations, and invokes her help in building a craft that will be strong enough to take him back to Ithaca.

**Trickster** Once returned to his home island, Odysseus colludes strategically with his patron goddess, Athena, with whom he has always enjoyed a subtle, lie-exchanging relationship. She helps him disguise himself as a simple beggar, a role from which he can reach out to old friends--his dad, son, and a swineherd—and draw them into a complex plot to kill the suitors at a bow-testing competition the following day. The competition appears to give all the advantages to the robust suitors, but in fact the wretched looking Odysseus, who throws off his ragged cloak in the midst of group argument, proves to be the one powerful male in the nest of self-indulgent suitors. The artist, clown, wit in Odysseus all contribute to his success in self-presentation; he appears from within his rags, mega bow in hand, and works with heroic determination to eradicate the suitors. Open to whatever comes, he is equally adept at confronting obstacles.

### Discussion questions

Odysseus is determined, not to be stopped on his return. But is he determined by the gods, or simply driven by his own will power? Poseidon does oppose him, and Athena does aid him, but does the power emanate from 'him'? He seems to be open to whatever will help to promote his return.

Why is Odysseus so adamant about resisting the seductions of Calypso, the wiles of Circe, and the narcosis of the Lotos Eaters?

What do you think of the likelihood that Odysseus is a fictional version of someone who was a true historical hero? Does that seem likely, in view of the character Homer presents us?

## **PENELOPE**

(Conscientious)

**Character** Penelope is regularly portrayed as patient, and such she is, for she willingly remains at home twenty years awaiting her husband's return. (Legend has it that, having promised to choose one of the suitors upon completing the weaving of a burial shroud for Laertes, Odysseus' elderly father, she managed for three years to unwind her weaving every night). However, when it comes to the crunch, rediscovering the authenticity of her husband, and collaborating in the suitor-killing finale, she is cautious, careful, hard-boiled, and strategical. She grasps the whole picture quickly, having been convinced of the authenticity of Odysseus. So she is sharp, conscientious, and decisive when the chips are down.

**Parallels** The Hebrew Christian text of Job turns around the sufferings of a man who feels he being unjustly attacked by God and simple fate, and that he has been abandoned even by his friends, who in fact berate him with scorn, for having brought down pain on himself. All Job has to sustain him is patience and faith in God, but he has enough to persevere through all his travails. The Virgin Mary, as the Christian tradition understands her, is the Mother of God, a mystery which she cannot in fact share, but which she must bear internally, pregnant with a meaning which englobes her, like the meaning of her existential setting as it gathers around Penelope.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Ritual** At the opening of Book 21 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope is brought into the sharp focus of deliberate behavior. She has long kept in her heart the knowledge of how to access the great bow of her husband, in the treasure chamber where he had left it, when he went to war. It was a holy site, and the time had come—her soi-distant husband had returned—when the bow was to perform its fatal role. 'She stretched forth her hand, and took the bow from off the pin, all in the bright case which sheathed it around.' She 'cried aloud and wept, and took out the bow of her lord.'

**Obedient** In the same Book of the *Odyssey*, Penelope acts through progressive stages of the difficult role she must play, in readying the bow for her husband (which she will soon know him to be) and then making certain that he is her husband. She asks Eurymachus, the prominent one among the suitors, to give due respect to the house's distinguished new guest (Odysseus). She asks a servant to 'give him the polished bow, that we may see that which is to be.' Upon being reminded by her son Telemachos, that only he now controls the behaviors of the house, she politely (and knowingly) returns to the women's quarters 'til grey-eyed Athena cast sweet sleep upon her eyelids.'

**Cautious** Careful, and reluctant to be persuaded, that the returning guest-tramp-hero, who is waiting to be accepted by her, is actually her 20 years absent husband, Penelope ponders whether she should 'stand apart, and question her dear lord,' or 'draw nigh, and kiss his head and hands.' She sits down over against Odysseus, in the light of the fire, and for a few agonizing moments both recognizes and doubts the person who has been the mainstay of her life, in absentia. So careful—it has been twenty years—is she, that her son Telemachus rebukes her again, and calls her 'an ill mother, of an ungentle heart.'

**Trapped** No longer able to make a decision, on whether the returnee guest is her husband, Penelope determines on a final test, to see whether the guy is genuine. She is determining whether he recalls the fact of the construction of their marital bed, which was hewed out of the living body of a tree, and was immovable. The yes answer Odysseus will provide—he knows the bed secret well—is finally the only key that will release the conviction of Penelope, and include her full understanding and energies in the assault upon the scum who have been rioting in her house for years.

### **Discussion questions**

There is an untraditional theory, that Penelope is actually enjoying being beset by a team of lusty bachelors, and that she prolongs the situation as long as possible. Do you see any merit to this idea?

Is it plausible that Penelope would have had so much difficulty identifying her husband? What was the 'wound of Odysseus' that needed identification before the process was complete?

How does Penelope deal with the new authority assumed by Telemachus, once his father was back on Ithaca? Is she at all amused by his quick transitions into the man of the house mode?

### **TELEMACHUS** (closed)

**Character** Telemachus is a teen ager, as he sets out in search of news of his father. We have seen him around the palace in Ithaca, basically a youngster under the control of his Mother; but he is restless to get out into the world, and to seek for his father. Fortunately for him the goddess Athena is on his side, both because she supports Odysseus, and because she wants the old man's son to start becoming a man. That he does, on the trip he soon undertakes, to search the great estates of the Peloponnesus for word of his dad—which he gets, indirectly, as through a filter. It is only at the end of the *Odyssey*, when Telemachus joins his dad and the swineherd in savage collusion against the suitors, that we see the young man morphing into a young aristocratic warrior, with his values all invested in the estate which will some day pass down to him from his father.

**Parallels** The young (or younger) man, setting out in quest of his lost father, is universal in literature, and digs deeply into the queries of psychiatry. Oedipus, (in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*), though no longer a youngster opens the play of his name by what is essentially a father-quest, a search, though he does not yet know this truth, for the father he has killed inside himself. Turgenev, in *Fathers and Sons* (1802) teases us with a brilliant portrait of a young man's tension between his father and a new world the youngster brings back to visit. Both Sophocles and Turgenev work with the fraught relation of Father to Son, a relationship in which every emotion from homicide to love is embedded.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Spurred** In Book 1 Telemachus receives a visit from the 'goddess, grey-eyed Athena,' in the guise of 'Mentes, son of wise Anchialus, who bears rule among the Taphians, lovers of the oar.' This alleged 'old friend' is actually, therefore, divine power telling Telemachus to get off his butt and to go in search of his dad. Telemachus accepts the suggestion that he is 'wondrously' like his father, though observing that 'never man yet knew of his own descent.' He is inspired with new courage by Mentes' assurance—he claims prophetic powers—that Odysseus is alive and that 'he will advise him of a way to return, for he is a man of many devices.'

**Growing** Upon the departure of Mentes, Telemachos is a changed man. He returns to his hall, to find the suitors taking it easy with their wine and listening to the sad tales sung by the great minstrel Phemius, about the painful returns of heroes from the war. At the top of the stairs appears Penelope, discreetly weeping, and asking to have the sad songs taken 'off the air.' Telemachus intervenes manfully, insisting that it is no fault of the bard if he sings of what is hot and new, for that is what interests everybody. He wraps it up: 'speech shall be for men, for all, but for me in chief; for mine is the lordship in the house.'

**Decision** The seeds of fury and rebellion have been planted in Telemachus, who can no longer co-exist with the suitors. After talking with the disguised Athena, he returns to his hall where he finds the 'noble wooers in the halls, flaying goats and singeing swine in the court.' The guys placate the obviously angry Telemachus, assuring him that if he just cools it, they will get ready a ship to transport him to Pylos, to look for Odysseus. Telemachus is enraged, says he has his own means of transportation, not to mention of revenge, and that he can no longer sit around and chew the fat with useless lounge lizards.

**Plotter** Far into the plot to annihilate the suitors, Telemachus is privy to secret planning unknown to his mother. A fist fight breaks out between a court beggar, Irus, and the disguised Odysseus, who has returned, and who easily whips the guy, offering a harbinger of his strength, but still short of revealing his identity to his wife. The beggar-victor is thereupon dismissed from the premises; when Penelope reproaches her son for lack of respect for the guest, he does not even intimate, to her, that the treatment accorded the beggar is part of the plot. He simply mutters, to her, that he would like to see the suitors dealt with as Irus was dealt with.

### **Discussion questions**

Athena is constantly prodding and prompting the young Telemachus, to get on the road in search of his father. Are we to understand Athena as a 'divine power,' or as a metaphor for psychological process?

Why is Telemachus eager not to reveal the suitor-destroying plot prematurely? What depends on the slow unfolding of the plot?

Has Telemachus any awareness that Mentos, the ship captain, is a goddess in fact? Or does Telemachus take the visit at face value, in the terms provided by Mentos?