

# ODYSSEY

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**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' grand father. 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.

## 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.

## 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.