

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
TELEMACHUS

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Telemachus (In Homer's *Odyssey*) closed

Overview Homer's *Odyssey* concerns the return of the victorious Greeks from Troy, to their homelands in Greece. While the chief thread of the narrative concerns the wanderings of Odysseus, whose wanderings through the Eastern Mediterranean were legendary from archaic times, Odysseus's son, Telemachus, sets out on a mini odyssey of his own, to find out where his returning but long delayed father is. In the course of his search he encounters a number of distinguished returnees from the war—for example Helen and Menelaus, comfortably at home in Sparta—who treat him with noble courtesy, and slowly fill in his picture of the events of the war, from which the impatient teen ager, on his small island of Ithaca, has been frustratingly cut off.

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, Telemachus 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?