

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
**ODYSSEUS**

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**Odysseus** (in Homer, *Odyssey*) **Open**

**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.

**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?