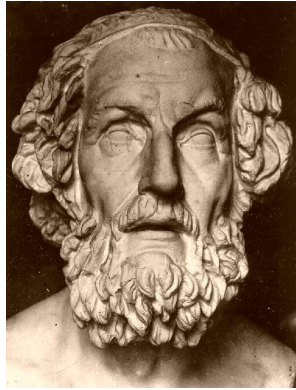


THE ODYSSEY

by Homer



THE AUTHOR

The two great epic poems of ancient Greece, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, have always been attributed to a shadowy figure by the name of Homer. Little is known of him beyond the fact that his was the name attached in antiquity by the Greeks themselves to the two great poems. That there was an epic poet called Homer, said to be blind, and that he played the primary part in shaping the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* - so much may be said to be probable. If this assumption is accepted, then Homer must assuredly be one of the greatest of the world's literary artists. Given the sparse information available, most scholars believe he lived in Greece or the Greek islands sometime in the eighth century BC. This study guide is based on the verse translation by Robert Fitzgerald.

PLOT SUMMARY

Book I - This sets the stage for the epic. The Trojan War is long over, and all have died or returned except Odysseus, who is captive on Calypso's island. The nymph holds him there, promising to confer immortality if he marries her. Meanwhile, back on Ithaca, Penelope is besieged by a virtual army of suitors seeking her hand, and helping themselves to Odysseus' food and wine at the same time. Young Telemachus is reaching maturity, and longs for his father's return. On Olympus, Athena begs Zeus to allow Odysseus to return. Hermes is sent to Calypso to order his release, while Athena goes to Ithaca to encourage Telemachus and advise him to go abroad and seek news of his father.

Book II - Telemachus tells the suitors to leave, but they refuse. He announces he is going to seek news of his father, and that if he finds that Odysseus is dead, he will give Penelope to one of the suitors. He then sets sail for Pylos.

Book III - Telemachus visits Nestor on Pylos, but the old man has no recent news of his father, and recommends that he seek out Menelaus in Sparta.

Book IV - Telemachus arrives in Sparta, and Menelaus tells him his father is alive and being held captive by Calypso. Meanwhile, the suitors plan to ambush and kill Telemachus on his way home.

Book V - Calypso releases Odysseus and gives him a small boat, but when Poseidon sees that Odysseus is free, he sends a fierce storm to destroy the boat. With Athena's help, Odysseus is washed ashore on the home of the Phaeacians.

Books VI-VIII - Alcinous and Arete extend their hospitality to Odysseus, though they don't realize who he is. At a banquet, stories of the Trojan War are recounted. The king and queen promise to assist Odysseus on his journey.

Book IX - Odysseus reveals his identity, and is asked to tell his story. He then begins a narrative of his wanderings in flashback style. After sailing from Troy, Odysseus' ship was caught in a storm. They first landed in the home of the Lotus-Eaters, who offered a narcotic that made men happy but caused them to forget their homes. Next, they went to the land of the Cyclops, and were captured by Polyphemus, who imprisoned them in his cave and ate several crew members. The rest escaped by blinding the Cyclops and tying themselves to the bellies of his sheep. This incident earned the ire of Poseidon, who was the father of Polyphemus.

Book X - They went to the island of Aeolus, king of the winds, who gave them the winds in a bag to keep them from being blown off course. The crew became jealous, thinking the bag contained treasure, and opened it when they were within sight of Ithaca. The escaping winds blew them far from home, to the island of Circe the enchantress. She turned some of the crew into pigs, but Odysseus avoided her spells with the help of Hermes. She fell in love with him and he stayed there for a year as her lover. When he decides to leave, she advises him to go to Hades to consult the seer Tiresias.

Book XI - Odysseus sails to the edge of the earth and performs animal sacrifices. Dead souls, attracted by the smell of fresh blood, begin to rise from Hades. Tiresias arrives and tells Odysseus that he will eventually reach home after many troubles, but will never know peace until he earns the forgiveness of Poseidon.

Book XII - On the journey home, Odysseus and his men must pass the island of the Sirens. The crew stops up their ears with wax, and Odysseus orders them to tie him to the mast so he can hear the song of the Sirens without succumbing. Next they must pass between the dual horrors of Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla eats six crew members, but the rest escape. They then land on the island of Helios, the sun god. Though they were warned not to eat the god's sacred cattle, contrary winds keep them there until their food runs out. The crew members succumb to temptation, earning the god's wrath. Zeus sends a storm to destroy the ship, and all the crew members are killed. Odysseus, after narrowly escaping Charybdis, is washed ashore on Calypso's island. This ends the flashback section of the poem.

Books XIII-XVI - Odysseus leaves the island of the Phaeacians and is transported to Ithaca in one of their ships (this angers Poseidon, who turns the ship to stone on its way back). He disguises himself as a beggar in order to conceal his identity and assess the situation. He arrives at the hut of his swineherd, Eumaeus, who has remained loyal during the twenty years of Odysseus' absence. Meanwhile, Telemachus has returned from Sparta, avoiding the trap of the suitors, and also goes to the hut of Eumaeus. Father reveals his identity to son, and together they plot the destruction of the suitors. At this point, they decide to tell no one the beggar's true identity.

Book XVII - Telemachus returns to the palace to tell his mother what he has heard, but she entertains little hope that her husband is still alive. Later in the day, Odysseus and Eumaeus arrive at the palace. The former, still disguised as a beggar, is insulted by his former servant Melanthius and assaulted by Antinous, the leader of the suitors. Penelope asks about this beggar who has come to the palace, and Odysseus agrees to meet with her and tell her his story.

Book XVIII - Irus, a beggar who fawns on the suitors, taunts and abuses Odysseus, and the suitors decide to stage a fight between the two. Odysseus tries to take it easy, but breaks the man's jaw. Odysseus also speaks out against Melantho, a servant who has become the mistress of the suitor Eurymachus. When things get dangerously tense, Telemachus tells everyone to go to bed.

Book XIX - Odysseus then meets with Penelope, telling her an invented tale about his adventures, and he claims to have known her husband. Penelope orders the old nurse Eurycleia to wash the beggar's feet. As she does so, she touches the scar on his thigh that enables her to recognize his true identity. He swears her to secrecy. Penelope then decides to hold a contest to determine which suitor she will marry - the one who can shoot an arrow from Odysseus' bow through twelve axe handles will win her hand. The beggar agrees that this is a good idea. He and Telemachus then hide all the weapons in the palace.

Book XX - Odysseus receives a promise of help from Athena and a good omen from Zeus. A soothsayer warns the suitors of their impending doom, but they ignore him. Odysseus meanwhile observes the behavior of the servants to determine who is loyal, and decides that the cowherd Philoetius can be trusted. The suitors begin another of their daily feasts at Odysseus' expense.

Book XXI - Penelope announces the contest to the suitors, who accept the challenge. Meanwhile, Odysseus pulls the swineherd and cowherd aside, identifies himself, and enlists their aid. None of the suitors is able to string the bow, so Antinous suggests the contest be continued the next day. Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, asks to be able to try the bow, but is refused. Telemachus intervenes, and gives the bow to Odysseus while the two faithful servants lock the doors of the hall. Odysseus easily strings the bow and shoots an arrow through the twelve axe handles. Telemachus then draws his sword and stands at the door by his father.

Book XXII - Odysseus kills Antinous with his next arrow, then identifies himself to the rest of the suitors. Eurymachus blames everything on the dead Antinous, but he is the recipient of the next arrow from Odysseus' bow. Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius fight at Odysseus' side until all the suitors are dead. The nurse Eurycleia then identifies the twelve maids who slept with the suitors, and they are forced to clean up the hall, then are taken out and hanged. Melanthius is mutilated and killed for his treachery, then the hall is fumigated.

Book XXIII - Eurycleia informs Penelope that her husband has returned and killed all the suitors, but she refuses to believe it. When she goes downstairs, she doesn't recognize her husband (after all, it has been twenty years!). She tests him by telling him his bed has been moved, but he tells her this is impossible, because it is made from an olive tree that grows through the center of the palace. Since only the two of them knew this fact, she realizes that he is indeed Odysseus. Athena extends the night so the two can enjoy more time together.

Book XXIV - The dead souls in Hades are surprised when so many strong young men (the suitors) come together to join them, but are impressed when they hear what Odysseus has done. Meanwhile, Odysseus visits his father Laertes, and the two have a joyful reunion. At home in Ithaca, the relatives of the suitors, seeking revenge, arrive in a mob at the home of Laertes. As the threatened violence approaches, Zeus sends a thunderbolt as a sign that Odysseus was justified in his actions, and peace is restored. Odysseus regains his place as king of Ithaca.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Aeolus - Keeper of the winds, he puts all the bad winds in a bag and gives them to Odysseus, but his crew lets them out when they are within sight of Ithaca.
- Alcinous - King of the Phaeacians, husband of Arete and father of Nausicaa, he shows hospitality to Odysseus and sends him by ship back to Ithaca.
- Antinous - Leader of the suitors, he is cruel and greedy, and is the first slain by Odysseus.
- Anticleia - Mother of Odysseus, he encounters her on his visit to Hades.
- Arete - Queen of the Phaeacians, wife of Alcinous and mother of Nausicaa, she is kind and generous.
- Athena - Goddess daughter of Zeus who protects and helps Odysseus throughout the epic.
- Calypso - Sea nymph who keeps Odysseus captive on her island for nine years and offers him immortality if he will marry her.
- Charybdis - A violent whirlpool that destroys ships trying to avoid the cliff-top lair of Scylla.
- Circe - Enchantress who changes Odysseus' men into pigs but, unable to conquer Odysseus, takes him as a lover and helps him with advice and supplies on his voyage home.
- Demodocus - A blind minstrel who entertains at the banquets in the house of Alcinous (was Homer here writing himself into the story?).
- Eumaeus - Odysseus' chief swineherd, who remains faithful during his master's absence and helps him to regain his kingdom when he returns.
- Eupheithes - Father of Antinous, he leads a band of men to attack Odysseus and avenge the death of his son, but recognizes his error and apologizes.
- Eurycleia - Devoted old nurse of Odysseus who recognizes him by the scar on his leg.
- Eurymachus - The second leader among the suitors, he is as evil as Antinous, but more cowardly.

- Helen - Wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and the cause of the Trojan War.
- Hermes - Son of Zeus, messenger of the gods, he conducts dead souls to Hades.
- Helios - Sun god whose cattle are eaten by Odysseus' men, causing them to be shipwrecked at sea and lose their lives.
- Irus - Cowardly beggar who fawns on the suitors on Ithaca; Odysseus defeats him in a boxing match.
- Laertes - Father of Odysseus, now in retirement.
- Melanthe - Nasty and disloyal serving girl in Odysseus' palace who becomes the mistress of Eurymachus.
- Melanthius - Chief goatherd of Odysseus who sides with the suitors.
- Menelaus - King of Sparta, husband of Helen, he shows hospitality to Telemachus when he seeks news of his father.
- Mentor - Faithful friend of Odysseus and tutor to Telemachus.
- Nausicaa - Daughter of Alcinous and Arete, she is a charming young maiden who brings Odysseus to her father's palace when he is swept ashore on their island.
- Nestor - King of Pylos, one of the few survivors of the Trojan War, he too shows hospitality to Telemachus.
- Odysseus - King of Ithaca, the protagonist of the epic, renowned for his brain as well as his strength.
- Penelope - Wife of Odysseus, she holds the suitors at bay for twenty years using a variety of clever stratagems.
- Philoetius - Chief cowherd of Odysseus, he stands by his master in the battle against the suitors.
- Polyphemus - One-eyed Cyclops who eats several of Odysseus' men before being blinded by Odysseus.
- Poseidon - Younger brother of Zeus and enemy of Odysseus because he blinded his son, the Cyclops, as god of the sea he makes Odysseus' journey home difficult at every step.
- Scylla - A sea monster with six heads who eats six of Odysseus' men when the ship passes her lair.

- Sirens - Beautiful maidens who tempt sailors to their deaths by singing beautiful songs to them.
- Telemachus - Son of Odysseus and Penelope, he strives to live up to his duty as the maturing son of a hero.
- Tiresias - Blind seer who is consulted by Odysseus on his visit to Hades.
- Zeus - King of the gods, who decrees the fate of all mankind.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“My word, how mortals take the god to task!
All their afflictions come from us, we hear.
And what of their own failings? Greed and folly
double the suffering in the lot of man.” (Zeus, p.2)

“Friend, Excellency, come join our competition,
if you are practiced, as you seem to be.
While a man lives he wins no greater honor
than footwork and the skill of hands can bring him.” (Laodamas, p.129)

“You are a ninny,
or else you come from the other end of nowhere,
telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclops
care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus -
you or your friends - unless I had a whim to.” (Polyphemus, p.153)

“Let me hear no smooth talk
of death from you, Odysseus, light of councils.
Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand
for some poor country man, on iron rations,
than lord it over all the exhausted dead.” (Achilles, p.201)

“Men’s lives are short.
The hard man and his cruelties will be
cursed behind his back, and mocked in death.
But one whose heart and ways are kind - of him
strangers will bear report to the wide world,
and distant men will praise him.” (Penelope, p.363-4)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the following: “While in American thought there has been a tendency to view the wilderness as pure and unsullied and civilization as a corrupting influence, Homer’s *Odyssey* presents exactly the opposite picture.”
2. The world of Homer’s *Odyssey* is a pagan world. Compare and contrast the moral values of that world with those found in a Christian society.
3. The world of Homer’s *Odyssey* is a polytheistic world. What role does polytheism play in the narrative? How might the epic differ had it been written from a Christian world view?
4. Differentiate between the views of good and evil presented in a pagan narrative such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and those that make up part of a Christian understanding of the world.
5. Compare and contrast the views of home and family presented in Homer’s *Odyssey* to those presented in the Bible.
6. Discuss the role of women in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Include considerations of power and submission, societal double standards, and role expectations.
7. Discuss how the incident with Polyphemus the Cyclops in Homer’s *Odyssey* illustrates the truth that without the fear of God, there can be no morality.
8. Discuss the implications of the events on Circe’s island in Homer’s *Odyssey* for the impact on man’s nature of being ruled by sensuality.
9. Discuss the concept of life after death presented in Homer’s *Odyssey*. What does the picture of the afterlife imply about what is important in this life? How are those values worked out in the rest of the narrative?
10. Discuss the role of hospitality in Homer’s *Odyssey*. How important is it in distinguishing between good and evil characters? To what extent may it be said to be the ground of all virtue in the Greek world view?
11. Discuss the concept of the hero as it appears in Homer’s *Odyssey*. What makes a true hero? What characteristics detract from the exercise of heroism?
12. Discuss the respective roles of human choice and divine intervention in Homer’s *Odyssey*. To what extent is man’s fate the product of his own choices, and to what extent is he the helpless victim of the whims of the gods? Compare and contrast this view with that of the Bible.

13. Discuss the role of signs in Homer's *Odyssey*. How do these signs differ from the concept of divine revelation found in Christian thought?
14. The concept of faith plays an important role in Homer's *Odyssey*, in that many of the most sympathetic characters spend most of the narrative ignorant of whether or not Odysseus is still alive. Yet, because they are good, they live in the hope that he will return some day. Compare and contrast this view of faith with that characteristic of Christian thought.
15. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Fate operates independent of the gods. Zeus has the responsibility of enforcing the dictates of Fate, but he may not alter them. Contrast this view of the direction of human life with the Christian concept of divine sovereignty.
16. In Homer's *Odyssey*, when the Phaeacians are staging games for the entertainment of Odysseus, the king's son Laodamas says, "While a man lives he wins no greater honor than footwork and the skill of hands can bring him." Compare the role of sport in assessing the worth of an individual in Greek society to its role in our own.
17. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope is held up as the model wife. But what about Odysseus? Is he a model husband? Why or why not?
18. One of the stylistic features of Homer's *Odyssey* is imbedded narrative. The poet tells a story of men telling stories in a variety of settings. Given that the epics of Homer had their origins in oral tradition, what would be the value of such a stylistic technique?
19. Discuss the subplot in Homer's *Odyssey* involving the coming of age of Telemachus. In what ways does he develop toward manhood from the beginning of the story to the end? What do these developments tell us about the Greek ideal of manhood?
20. When the suitors and disloyal servants are slaughtered at the end of Homer's *Odyssey*, the gods approve. Was this carnage indeed justifiable? What does this incident say about the differences between the Greek and Christian world views?
21. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus invents many stories about himself when he is disguised. Choose one of these stories and analyze its resonance with the actual narrative of Odysseus' life. Why are these stories so close to reality? What is their purpose in the overall narrative framework?
22. Critic Andrew Lang, writing in *The Illustrated London News* in 1891, compared Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Homer's *Odyssey*, noting that, not only do both stories center on long and varied journeys, but also the protagonists of both demonstrate their cleverness and resourcefulness by inventing false identities for themselves in times of crisis. To what extent is Lang's comparison valid? Do you find any similarities beyond the ones mentioned? Consider thematic and moral issues in your answer.

23. Compare and contrast the voyage of the *Pequod* in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to the journey of the protagonist in Homer's *Odyssey*. Both are sea voyages, but have very different outcomes. To what extent are the themes of the stories similar? Note in particular the relationship of the protagonists to the gods and to the cosmos, and the role played by fate in the two stories.
24. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and Homer's *Odyssey* are both quest narratives. Compare and contrast the two stories, considering the protagonists, what they seek, what they experience, and how they are changed by their adventures.
25. The two great epic poems ascribed to Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are very different in content despite their similarities in form. Which do you consider the more enjoyable story? Why? Be sure to cite specifics from both poems to support your conclusion.
26. Both J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Homer's *Odyssey* are tales of a hero undertaking a quest. Compare and contrast the heroes, the quests they undertake, and the outcomes of those quests. To what extent may the differences be accounted for by the Christian and pagan frameworks in which the two authors were writing?
27. The role of Fate in human experience was a major theme addressed often in the writings of Classical Greece. Compare and contrast how Fate determines the destinies of the protagonists in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Are the gods who direct man's fate cruel, benevolent, or simply arbitrary? How do these two classic works reflect the worldview of the ancient Greeks?