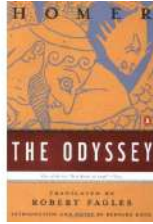


The Odyssey – Notes



Important Definitions:

Epic: *The Odyssey* is an epic, a long narrative poem about the deeds of gods or heroes who embody the values of the culture of which they are a part. The oldest epics were transmitted orally and the *Odyssey* has traits that suggest that it has roots in this tradition.

Epic Hero: The central hero of an epic, the epic hero has larger-than-life powers. Odysseus fills this role in *The Odyssey*. Epic heroes are not perfect. Odysseus has lapses in judgment. Nevertheless, epic heroes always seem to have courage and a fighting spirit that endears them both to the reader (listener) and the gods.

Epithets: Homer repeatedly describes many of his characters or objects in his story by repeating the same phrase that stresses a quality of the character. This phrase is called an *epithet*. Epithets are common epic elements which allow the reader to easily identify the character or object. The same character often is given several different epithets. The epithet was used by oral poets to help them "catch their breath" whenever they mention a major figure or describe something familiar and recurring. Examples of epithets used in the *Odyssey* are:

- "The great tactician" - This term creates the image of Odysseus as being intelligent, and probably comes from his being the initiator of the idea for the "Trojan horse."
- "The clear eyed goddess" - This helps the reader imagine that Athena is alert, and wise - farseeing.

Narrative drift: Homer is constantly interrupting the narration to elaborate on an aspect of what he is talking about; if he mentions a gift of wine, he will explain not only the history of the gift but the history of the giver. He rarely introduces a character without alluding to that character's genealogy and often follows this with an aside in the form of a story that is told with the same vividness as the main story. The most celebrated of these asides is the story of how Odysseus received the scar that Eurykleia recognizes in book 19.

Imagery: Many have wondered how Homer could possibly have been blind. He visualizes everything from Athena's blazing eyes to the wind dark sea to Alcinous' palace:

A radiance as strong as the moon came flooding
through the high roofed halls of generous Alcinous.
Walls plated in bronze, crowned with a circling frieze
glazed as blue as lapis ran to left and right...

Some of Homer's descriptions are clearly exaggerated, but many of them give us a sense of what the world of his time must have looked like, even when it is hard to picture everything he describes. (No one seems to have figured out how the axes Odysseus shoots the arrow through line up - we sense it is a failure of our imagination not his powers.)

First [Telemachus] planted the axes, digging a long trench,
one for all and trued them all to a line
then tamped the earth to bed them. Wonder took
the revelers: his work so firm, precise
though he'd never seen the axes ranged before.

Figurative Language:

Epic Similes: Homer loves similes (a comparison between two seemingly unlike things using "like" or "as"). They can be found everywhere in the *Odyssey*. Homer often expands upon a simile, putting it into motion so to speak; and these expanded similes are called **Homeric or epic similes**.

As a man will bury his glowing brand in black ashes,
off on a lonely farmstead, no neighbors near,
to keep a spark alive, so great Odysseus buried
himself in leaves and Athena showered sleep
upon his eyes.

Personification occurs in almost every book when "Dawn" arises with her "rose-red fingers": "Sleep" looses "Odysseus' limbs, slipping the toils of anguish from his mind"; "East and South Winds clashed, and the raging West and North/sprung from the heavens, roiled heaving breakers up."

Metaphors are less striking in the *Odyssey* than **similes**. They are frequently embedded in verbs: "Nine years we wove a web of disaster"; "that made the rage of the monster boil over"; "his mind churning with thoughts of bloody work"; "Terror blanched their faces" (note the personification of terror).

The Odyssey Character list

Ithaca:

Odysseus
Penelope, his wife
Telemachus, his son
Laertes, his father
Eurycleia, Telemachus's nurse
Suitors, including Antinous, Eurymachus,

Odysseus's journey (humans):

Eurylochus, sailor on Odysseus's ship
Alcinous, King of Phaeacia
Arete, queen and wife to Alcinous
Nausicaa, their daughter

Odysseus's journey (deities and magical creatures)

Zeus, king of the gods
Athena
Hermes, messenger
Poseidon, lord of ocean
Circe
Calypso, a nymph-goddess
Polyphemus, strongest Cyclops and son of Poseidon

Famous people, as from the Trojan War:

Agamemnon, brother to Menelaus, killed by Aegisthus
Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon
Orestes, son of Agamemnon, killed his murderer Aegisthus
Aegisthus, stole Clytemnestra and killed Agamemnon
Dead heroes including Ajax, Achilles, Patroclus, Antilochus
King Priam, king of Troy
Cassandra, Priam's daughter

Organization: In Media Res

The *Odyssey* is not structured chronologically. Although it is clearly a poem about Odysseus, we do not meet the hero until book five (Note that the division of the *Odyssey* into 24 books is believed to have taken place long after Homer, perhaps as a result of transcribing the poem onto papyrus rolls which could only hold a limited amount of text). The term for beginning the story in the middle is: *in media res*. The books can be divided as follows:

Books 1-4:

Athena has received "permission" from **Zeus** to enable **Odysseus** to return to **Ithaca**, his home. She inspires his son **Telemachus** to stand up to the suitors who have been courting his mother **Penelope**, whom she has been deceiving in order to forestall a marriage to them. Odysseus has been away for almost twenty years and no one, including Telemachus, believes he will return. During the 3rd and 4th book, Telemachus visits two of the Captains who fought beside Odysseus at Troy. He learns from **Menelaus**, who surprisingly still seems "happily" married to Helen, that Odysseus is probably still alive, stranded on an island with the immortal nymph Calypso.

Books 5-8:

We meet Odysseus on **Ogygia**. He is by himself and weeping, longing for home, captive of the immortal nymph **Calypso**. **Hermes** on instructions from Zeus tells Calypso she must release her captive. Odysseus has a long, storm filled journey to **Phaeacia**, overcoming the wind and waves stirred up by **Poseidon**, who is angry at Odysseus for having blinded his son, the Cyclops, **Polyphemus**. After being virtually washed up on **Scheria**, the island of the **Phaeacians**, Odysseus is discovered by the king's daughter **Nausicaa** who, inspired by Athena, bathes him and invites him to the palace of **King Alcinous**, and **Queen Arete**. Once there, Odysseus is treated as an honored (and initially anonymous) guest and he stirs only when he is insulted at the "games." He responds to goading by hurling a stone discus long past any of the Phaeacian's efforts. Alcinous has noticed that Odysseus weeps whenever the bard **Demodocus** sings of Troy. Finally, he is pressed by Alcinous to tell his story.

Books 9-12:

After revealing that he is the legendary Odysseus, he tells of his life from his leaving Troy until his journey to Ogygia. In order, these adventures describe his men's foolish greed at the land of the **Cicones**, their temptation by the **Lotus Eaters**, Odysseus' wounding of the monstrous **Cyclops**, a squandered gift from **Aeolus**, a hazardous expedition to the land of the **Laistrygonians**, a year-long sojourn with the bewitching **Circe** who sends Odysseus to **Hades** so he can hear the prediction of his future from the blind seer **Tiresias**, and where he meets his mother and several of his fellow Captains from Troy, including **Agamemnon** who tells of his betrayal by his wife. After returning to Circe's island to bury a fallen comrade, Circe gives him advice that enables him to travel past the seductive **Sirens**, between the hideous **Scylla** and terrifying **Charybdis**, only to be blown onto **Thrinacia**, Island of **Helios**, the sun god, where, after a month, his men succumb to temptation and eat Helios' sacred cattle. When Odysseus and his men leave, Zeus strikes their ship with a thunderbolt. Odysseus, who did not eat the cattle, is spared, and clinging to the wreckage, he finally lands on **Ogygia**. At the end of the recounting of his story, Odysseus is offered a ship by Alcinous, many gifts, and a transport back to Ithaca.

Books 13-24:

The last half of *The Odyssey* follows Odysseus from his landing on Ithaca to his eventual reunion with Telemachus, the defeat of the **suitors**, and his reunions with Penelope and his father. Following the advice of Athena, who is never far from him during these books, he is disguised as a beggar until he reveals himself to the terrified suitors at the beginning of Book 22. During this time, he has endured humiliations at the hands of many of the suitors, including his **goatherd**, but he has also discovered the loyalty of the **swineherd** and the **cowherd**, as well as that of his son, his wife (who, like the swineherd and the cowherd, do not recognize him) and his old nurse, **Euryclia** (who, because of a scar from childhood, does recognize him). Through the help of the swineherd and Telemachus, and the sporadic inattentiveness of the somewhat drunk suitors, he manages to be allowed to enter a contest to string his old bow. After he succeeds, he reveals himself. His onslaught is ferocious but not without a moment when Athena feels the need to chastise him for his lack of spirit (and faith in her). After reuniting with Penelope (who stubbornly refuses at first to recognize him) and his father **Laertes**, he has a final showdown with the families of the suitors who have come to revenge the deaths of the children. After a brief skirmish, Athena (in disguise) and her "team" rout the Ithacans to route. The poem ends when Athena restrains Odysseus from wreaking further havoc.

Locations

Islands: Ithaca; Ogygia (Calypso); Scheria (Phaeacians); Aeolia (Aeolus); Aeaea (Circe); Thrinacia (Helios).

Mainland: Pylos (Nestor); Sparta (Menelaus); Ismarus (Cicones) Cimmeria (Cimmerians, bordering the land of the dead)

Some places are known by their inhabitants: Land of the Lotus Eaters; Island of the Cyclops; Land of the Laistrygonians. And last but not least - the **Kingdom of the Dead**.

Themes

Hospitality: Hospitality was crucial to the ancient Greeks. As sailors and travelers through wild countries, they depended on strangers. They might ask to be hosted, fed and given gifts as guests. At same time, they might raid, kill, steal, & kidnap women. Odysseus does both.

Respect for the Gods: shown through the numerous descriptions of sacrifices and offerings. Before feasting, the ritual involves "cutting the first strips for the gods" having them "wrapped in sleek fat . . . sprinkling barley over them" then "burning the choice parts for the gods that never die." Libations are also poured. Disrespect for the Gods inevitably leads to disaster; the Gods do not forget disrespect and are not easily appeased.

The Importance of Lineage: Almost every time we met someone significant the narration pauses and we learn of the lineage.

Loyalty: Penelope's loyalty to Odysseus, Athena's loyalty to her "Odysseus" and vice versa, the loyalty of the servant Eurycleia, etc.

Pride and Honor: Some examples: Odysseus is guilty of excessive pride when he gives his name to Polyphemus (Book 9). The suitors seem dangerously proud, especially when Odysseus returns. In the end, the suitors have dishonored Odysseus and must pay for this.

Resisting Temptation: Generally, Odysseus resists temptation. But he does boast to Polyphemus, and he does seem reluctant to leave Circe's island. His men are tempted by the Lotus Eaters as well as Circe; and by greed several times - causing them to stay too long at the land of the Cicones, to open Aeolus' gift, and finally to eat the cattle of the sun (though in some ways this is more out of desperation than anything else).

Self-discipline: Foolishness and the lack of self-discipline lead to the loss of men with the Cicones and the loss of the crew on the Island of Helios. Odysseus loses his self-discipline with the Cyclops, but demonstrates it almost everywhere else, often in contrast with his crew.

The Importance of Leadership: This is a top down society. The leaders we meet (Odysseus, Nestor, Alcinous etc.) do not rule democratically. Rule is by "divine right" and by force of character. Probably the most important quality of leadership is courage.

Justice: Odysseus will eventually be a deliverer of justice. Justice takes time. Odysseus cannot act immediately. When he does act, justice is not tempered by mercy.

Revenge: Homer seems to think that revenge is well justified and people are entitled to it.