The Odyssey — Study Guide

Homer — Classroom Edition

Part I: The World of the Epic

Homer, the Trojan War, and What is an Epic

Who Was Homer?

Nobody knows for certain. He may have been one poet or many. He may have been blind — later traditions said so. He probably lived somewhere in the Greek-speaking world around the 8th century BCE, though the stories he told are far older, passed down by generations of oral poets who memorized and performed them for audiences who could not read.

What we know is this: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer, are the oldest surviving works of Western literature. They were composed and performed aloud, before they were ever written down. This means the Odyssey was originally a song — a very long one, meant to be heard over the course of several evenings, with a singer accompanying himself on a stringed instrument called a *lyre*.

When we read it now, silently on the page, we are doing something Homer never imagined. Try, when you read the great passages, to hear them being sung.

The Trojan War: What You Need to Know

The Odyssey is a sequel. It assumes you already know the story of the Trojan War — a ten-year conflict between the Greeks (also called Achaeans or Argives) and the city of Troy, on the coast of what is now Turkey. The war began, according to myth, when a Trojan prince named Paris kidnapped the Greek queen Helen, and the Greeks launched a thousand ships to get her back.

The war lasted ten years. Troy fell when the Greeks hid soldiers inside a giant wooden horse, which the Trojans pulled into their city as a trophy. In the night, the soldiers crept out and opened the gates.

The man who thought of the horse was Odysseus.

The Odyssey begins after the fall of Troy. It is the story of one man's decade-long struggle to get home. Every other Greek hero has already returned, or died trying. Odysseus is still out there somewhere — a missing person, presumed dead, while his home falls apart without him.

What Is an Epic?

An epic is a long narrative poem that tells the story of a hero whose actions affect the fate of a people or a world. Epics have certain recognizable features: they begin in the middle of the action (*in medias res*), they involve gods and supernatural forces, the hero faces impossible odds, and the journey is both physical and internal.

But Homer does something that later epic poets — Virgil, Milton, Dante — never quite match: he

makes his hero cry. He makes him frightened. He makes him exhausted and homesick and sometimes simply wrong. Odysseus is the cleverest man in the Greek world, and cleverness in this poem is both his greatest gift and his greatest danger.

The central question of the Odyssey is not whether Odysseus will survive. We know from the very first lines that he makes it home. The question is **what the journey costs him** — and what kind of man arrives.

Two Timelines: Story vs. Song

Homer does not tell the Odyssey in order. He drops us into **Year 10** of Odysseus's journey — the hero trapped, his son searching, his house under siege. The great adventures (the Cyclops, Circe, the Underworld) only appear in Books 9–12, as a flashback narrated by Odysseus himself at a banquet. This is *in medias res* in action. The two timelines below make the difference visible.

What Actually Happened Chronological

Years 1–10
The Trojan War
Odysseus fights at Troy for ten years. The Greeks win by his stratagem of the wooden horse.
Year 10
Ismarus & the Cicones
Odysseus raids Ismarus on the way home. Six men per ship die — the first losses.
Year 10
Lotus-Eaters
Some crew eat the lotus and forget their desire to return home.
Year 10
The Cyclops
Polyphemus traps and eats Odysseus's men. Odysseus blinds him, but Polyphemus calls down Poseidon's curse.
Year 10
Aeolus & the Bag of Winds
Within sight of Ithaca, the crew opens the bag. Blown back to sea.
Year 10
Laestrygonians
Giant cannibals destroy eleven of twelve ships. Only Odysseus's vessel survives.
Year 10–11
Circe's Island (Aeaea)
Circe turns crew to swine. Odysseus resists with moly. They stay one year.
Year 11
The Underworld
Odysseus sails to the land of the dead. Speaks with Tiresias, his mother, Achilles, Agamemnon.
Year 11
Sirens, Scylla & Charybdis
Odysseus hears the Sirens. Loses six men to Scylla. Avoids Charybdis.
Year 11
Thrinacia — Cattle of the Sun
The starving crew eat Helios's cattle. Zeus destroys the ship. All die except Odysseus.
Years 11–17

Prisoner of Calypso

Odysseus is trapped on Ogygia for seven years. He weeps on the shore every day.

Year 20

Release, Shipwreck, Phaeacia

Calypso lets him go. Poseidon wrecks his raft. He washes up on Scheria.

Year 20

Return to Ithaca

The Phaeacians sail him home. Disguised as a beggar, he plots with Athena and Telemachus.

Year 20

The Bow, the Slaughter, the Reunion

Odysseus strings his bow, kills the suitors, and passes Penelope's test of the bed.

How Homer Tells It Narrative Order

Books 1–4

The Telemachy

We meet the *son*, not the hero. Telemachus searches for news of his father while suitors consume his household. Year 20 — Odysseus is absent.

Book 5

Calypso & Shipwreck

We finally meet Odysseus — weeping on a beach, seven years a prisoner. Zeus orders his release. Poseidon wrecks him. Year 20 — near the end of the story.

Books 6–8

Phaeacia

Odysseus washes ashore, meets Nausicaa, enters the palace of Alcinous. At a banquet, he is asked to tell his story.

Books 9–12

THE GREAT FLASHBACK

Odysseus narrates his own adventures — Cyclops, Circe, the Underworld, Scylla, the Cattle of the Sun — covering **Years 10–11**. This is the only place we hear these famous stories, told in the hero's own voice at a feast. The storyteller becomes the story.

Books 13–16

Homecoming in Disguise

Back to the present. Odysseus reaches Ithaca, is disguised by Athena, reunites with Telemachus in secret.

Books 17–20

The Beggar in the Palace

Odysseus enters his own home as a stranger. Recognized by his dog Argos and his nurse Eurycleia — but not yet by Penelope.

Books 21–22

The Test of the Bow

Penelope sets the contest. Odysseus strings the bow and slaughters the suitors.

Books 23–24

Reunion & Peace

Penelope tests Odysseus with the secret of their bed. Father and son visit Laertes. Athena brokers peace.

Notice how Homer withholds the most exciting adventures until the middle, and gives them to Odysseus to tell in his own words. The poem doesn't ask *what happened* — it asks what it means

to the man who survived it.

Key Term: *Xenia*

Xenia (ZEH-nee-ah) is the ancient Greek code of hospitality — the sacred obligation between host and guest. Zeus himself was believed to protect travelers. A host was required to feed and shelter a guest before even asking their name. A guest was required to behave with honor and not overstay their welcome. Violations of *xenia* are punished throughout the Odyssey. Watch for them.

Discussion

1. Homer was a storyteller before he was a writer. What difference does it make that the Odyssey was originally performed aloud, not read silently?
2. The Trojan War lasted ten years. Odysseus's journey home takes another ten. That's twenty years away from home. What do you think that does to a person — and to the people left behind?
3. Homer tells us in the first lines that Odysseus makes it home. Why would a storyteller give away the ending before the story begins?

Part II: The Son Searches for the Father

Telemachus's Journey

Ithaca Without Odysseus (Books 1–4)

The Odyssey does not begin with Odysseus. It begins with his son.

Telemachus is about twenty years old. He was an infant when his father sailed for Troy. He has grown up without him — raised by a mother who refuses to give up hope, in a house that has been invaded by over a hundred men who call themselves suitors. These men want to marry Penelope, Odysseus's wife. They are convinced Odysseus is dead. They have moved into the palace, eaten through its stores of food and wine, bullied the servants, and made Telemachus's life miserable. They know that whoever marries Penelope inherits the kingdom.

Penelope holds them off. She is clever — Odysseus's equal, as Homer will show us. She tells the suitors she will choose when she finishes weaving a burial shroud for her elderly father-in-law. Every night, she unravels what she wove that day. Three years pass before a disloyal maid betrays her secret.

Meanwhile, Telemachus has a problem. He is not yet king, and the suitors know it. He has no father to teach him how to be a man in a world that respects only force or cunning. He barely speaks in public. He is, at the start of the poem, a boy.

The goddess Athena — Odysseus's divine protector — decides to change this. She disguises herself as an old family friend and visits Telemachus. She tells him his father is alive. She urges him to call an assembly, rebuke the suitors publicly, and sail to the mainland to ask the old Greek heroes for news of Odysseus.

Telemachus does all of this. He is terrified, but he does it.

The journey to find his father is also a journey to become someone his father would recognize. By the time Telemachus returns to Ithaca, he is different. He is, just barely, ready.

What to Watch

Books 1–4 establish everything Odysseus is coming home to: a wife under siege, a son finding his courage, a house in decay, and a kingdom on the edge. Homer builds the destination before we meet the traveler, so that when Odysseus finally arrives, we feel the full weight of what he has been fighting toward.

Discussion

1. Telemachus grows up without a father. How does Homer show this absence shaping who Telemachus is at the start of the poem?
2. Penelope's weaving trick buys her three years. What does this tell us about the kind of intelligence Penelope uses to survive?
3. Athena visits Telemachus in disguise. Why might the gods in this poem never appear as themselves? What would be different if they did?

Part III: The Prisoner of Calypso

Odysseus Freed

Seven Years on an Island (Book 5)

Here, finally, is Odysseus.

We find him on a beach. He is sitting alone on a rock, staring at the sea, crying. He has been here for seven years. The goddess Calypso — a beautiful immortal nymph — has fallen in love with him and will not let him go. She has given him everything: a magnificent cave, food, wine, her own company. She has offered him the one thing no mortal can refuse and almost none refuse: immortality. She has offered to make him a god.

He sits on the rock and cries.

This is Homer's introduction of his hero. Not a warrior on a battlefield. Not a king on a throne. A middle-aged man, exhausted and heartbroken, who would trade everything — eternal youth, godhood, paradise itself — to smell the smoke of his own home again.

The gods convene on Olympus. Athena pleads Odysseus's case to her father Zeus. Zeus agrees: it is time. He sends his messenger Hermes to Calypso's island with an order she cannot disobey.

Hermes Arrives

Lawrence describes Hermes's flight to the island in one of the poem's most sensory passages:

> *He bound on his feet the fair sandals of imperishable gold that carried him over the waters and over the boundless earth swift as the breath of the wind. He took the wand with which at will he closes the eyes of mortals in sleep, or wakes them. With this in hand the strong Argus-slayer flew.*
>
> *Past Pieria he swooped down from the upper air to sea level and then sped across the waves like a sea-mew that drenches its thick plumage in the sea's brine as it hunts fish through its perilous troughs. So Hermes rode the wavelets.*
>
> *When at last he reached the remote island, he left the violet sea for the land and went inland to the great cave where Calypso the nymph lived. He found her within. A great fire blazed on the hearth and the burning logs of split cedar and juniper wafted their fragrant incense across the island. Inside she was singing, moving before her loom and weaving with a golden shuttle.*

Notice what Homer does here: before we see the prison, he shows us how beautiful it is. The fire, the fragrance, the singing goddess at her loom. Even Hermes — a god — pauses to admire it before going in. This is the trap Odysseus is caught in. It is not ugly. It is not cruel. It is exquisite. And he still wants to leave.

> *"There is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his own people."*

Calypso is angry but not evil. She argues — rightly — that she is immortal and more beautiful than any mortal woman. She offers Odysseus everything Penelope cannot. Odysseus acknowledges all of this carefully, diplomatically, without giving offense. And then says he is going home anyway.

She provides him a raft, tools, provisions, and a fair wind. He builds the raft himself over four days

— Homer gives us the details of the construction: the timber, the tools, the rigging. Odysseus is not just a talker and a fighter. He is a man who knows how to build things with his hands.

He sets sail. He is almost home when Poseidon spots him and destroys the raft in a fury. Odysseus is thrown into the sea and battered for two days before washing up, barely alive, on the island of the Phaeacians — where a princess named Nausicaa finds him asleep under a pile of leaves.

Discussion

1. Calypso offers Odysseus immortality. He refuses. What does this say about what Homer values — and what Odysseus values — more than eternal life?
2. We first meet Odysseus weeping on a beach, not fighting a battle. Why might Homer choose this as the hero's introduction?
3. Homer describes Calypso's island in loving detail. What is the effect of making the prison beautiful?

Part IV: The Adventures

Monsters, Witches, and the Underworld

The Storyteller at Court

Odysseus has been found by Nausicaa and brought to the court of her father, King Alcinous of the Phaeacians. He is treated according to the laws of *xenia* — fed, clothed, honored — before anyone asks his name. At the evening banquet, a blind poet sings of the Trojan War, and Odysseus — still disguised — weeps into his cloak. Alcinous notices, and asks the stranger to reveal himself.

Odysseus gives his name. He tells them where he is from. And then he begins to speak.

Books 9 through 12 of the Odyssey are among the most famous adventure narratives ever written. But it is crucial to remember **who is telling them**: Odysseus himself, at a royal court, ten years after the events. He is a man telling war stories. He knows how to tell them for effect. He is not a neutral narrator.

Keep that in mind as you read.

The Lotus Eaters (Book 9)

After leaving Troy, Odysseus's fleet raids the Cicones — a brief, brutal episode in which the men's failure to obey orders costs them seventy-two lives. Then a storm drives them south for nine days, and on the tenth they land in the country of the Lotus Eaters.

The Lotus Eaters are not violent. They are welcoming. They give Odysseus's scouts a flower to eat — the lotus — and the scouts immediately lose all desire to go home. They want to stay, eating lotus, forever. Odysseus drags them back to the ships by force, weeping, and orders the fleet to sea before anyone else can taste it.

The Lotus Eaters are among the most frightening creatures in the poem, precisely because they are not frightening at all. Their island is not a trap. It is a choice — or rather, the surrender of choice. They represent something every reader understands: the temptation to stop, to rest, to let the world go on without you, to simply not care anymore.

Odysseus cannot afford not to care. He never allows himself to stop moving.

The Pattern of the Adventures

Every major adventure in Books 9–12 tests a different aspect of Odysseus's character. The Lotus Eaters test his will. The Cyclops tests his intelligence — and his pride. Circe tests his cunning and his self-control. The Land of the Dead tests his courage. The Sirens test his curiosity. Scylla and Charybdis test his ability to make an impossible choice. The Cattle of the Sun test whether he can control his men. He passes most of these tests. His men pass fewer of them.

The Cyclops (Book 9)

Setting the Scene

Odysseus lands on the island of the Cyclopes — a race of giant one-eyed beings who live without law, without community, without the sacred bonds of *xenia*. They farm nothing, build nothing, trade with no one. Each one rules his own cave alone.

His men beg him not to go to the cave. He goes anyway. This is important: Homer lets us see that the same curiosity that makes Odysseus extraordinary also gets men killed. He *has* to know what lives there.

They wait in the cave. At dusk, Polyphemus returns — Poseidon's son, the largest and most dangerous of the Cyclopes. He seals the entrance with a boulder so vast it would take twenty wagons to move. He lights the fire. He notices the men.

> *'Who are you?' he cried. 'Whence came you sailing over the watery ways? Is yours a trading venture, or do you roam as pirates, sea-wolves who risk their lives to prey upon strangers?'*
>
> *His sudden booming voice and monstrous size overwhelmed us with terror. Yet I conquered my fear and answered: 'We are Achaeans of Agamemnon's following, bound homeward from Troy. Contrary winds and contrary seas have driven us astray. We pray you to show us hospitality, as the custom is. Respect the gods. We are your suppliants, and Zeus is the champion of suppliants and guests. He is the God of Guests, and has in his keeping the rights of guests.'*
>
> *He answered me pitilessly: 'You are a fool, stranger, or come from very far away, you who bid me fear the gods and avoid their anger. We Cyclopes care nothing for Zeus or his aegis, nor for the blessed gods. We are stronger than they. I would not spare you or your men for Zeus's anger, unless it pleased me.'*

He seized two of the men and smashed them against the ground. Their brains burst out and oozed into the earth. He tore them limb from limb for his supper. Homer does not look away. The violence is described with a terrible matter-of-factness, the way a survivor describes something he cannot forget.

Odysseus reaches for his sword — and stops. The boulder at the door. If Polyphemus dies, they all die with him, sealed inside the cave. This is the moment that separates Odysseus from other heroes. He does not act on his rage. He thinks.

The Plan

All the next day, while Polyphemus is out with his flock, Odysseus examines the cave. He finds a massive green olive-wood club, cuts a section off, sharpens it to a point, hardens it in the fire, and hides it. That evening, he brings the Cyclops wine — wine so strong it is normally diluted twenty parts water to one. He gives it straight. Polyphemus is delighted. He asks for Odysseus's name.

> *'You ask me my name, and I will tell it to you; but give me a gift, as you promised. My name is Nobody. My father and mother call me Nobody. So do all my friends.'*
>
> *He answered with a savage grin: 'Then I will eat Nobody last among his fellows, and eat the others first. That is my gift to you.'*

The Blinding

> *We thrust the sharp-pointed stake into his eye while he slept, and I threw my weight on the*

> *handle to twist it home, as a man bores ship-timber with an auger, his mates below swinging him round by the thong, hand over hand, to keep the drill ever pressing deeper.*
>
> *So we swung the fire-sharpened stake in his eye and the boiling blood poured out around it. His eyelids and brows were burned away as the eyeball sizzled and its roots crackled in the flame.*

He screamed, and the rocks rang with his screaming. The other Cyclopes came flocking and gathered outside the great stone door. *'What is wrong with you, Polyphemus? Is a man killing you by force or by cunning?'*

And out of the cave mighty Polyphemus answered: *'Nobody is killing me. Nobody is hurting me at all!'*

Back came their answer: *'If nobody is hurting you, then you must be sick. Pray to your father Poseidon.'* They went away.

And in my heart I laughed at how the false name had fooled them all.

Read that last line again: **in my heart I laughed.** He is still trapped in a cave with a blinded, howling giant. And he laughs. This is who Odysseus is.

The Escape and the Fatal Shout

Odysseus ties his men to the undersides of the rams — three rams each, the man lashed to the belly of the middle one. He rides beneath the largest ram himself. At first light the flock moves to the entrance. Polyphemus runs his hands over their backs — but cannot see underneath. One by one the men pass through.

They make it back to the ship. And then Odysseus stands up in the boat and shouts at the cave. His men beg him not to. He shouts anyway. When Polyphemus hurls a mountain-top toward the voice, the men plead with him to stop. He shouts again — and this time he gives his real name:

> *'Cyclops — if any man on the face of the earth asks you who put out your eye, tell him that Odysseus, the sacker of cities, blinded you. Laertes' son, whose home is in Ithaca!'*

The Cyclops prays to Poseidon: *grant that Odysseus may never reach his home. Or if he is fated to reach it, may he come late, in misery, in a foreign ship, having lost all his companions, to find new troubles waiting for him at home.*

The prayer is answered. Every word of it.

Discussion

1. Odysseus invokes the rules of *xenia* — and Polyphemus laughs at him. What does this scene suggest about the relationship between civilization and brute force?
2. The 'Nobody' trick is simultaneously brilliant and funny. Why does Homer give us comedy inside horror? What does the joke reveal about Odysseus?
3. Odysseus's men beg him not to shout. He shouts twice. Is this heroic pride, reckless vanity, or both? When have you known you should stay quiet and couldn't?
4. The Cyclops's curse comes true, point by point. Knowing this, do you feel any sympathy for Polyphemus by the end of the scene?

The Enchantress Circe (Book 10)

After further disasters — the bag of winds, the cannibals of Laestrygonia, which destroy all but one ship — Odysseus lands on Aeaea, the island of the goddess Circe. He sends twenty-three men to explore. Circe invites them in, serves them food and wine laced with a drug that makes them forget their homes, and turns them into pigs with a stroke of her wand.

Odysseus goes alone to Circe's hall. On the way, Hermes intercepts him and gives him a plant called *moly* — its black root and white flower make him immune to Circe's magic. When Circe strikes him with her wand, nothing happens. She realizes she has met her match. She frees the men, and invites Odysseus to stay.

He stays for a year.

When his men finally remind him of home, Circe does not try to keep him. Instead she gives him something no one else can: directions. Precise, navigational, dangerous directions — including the instruction that before he goes anywhere, he must first go down to the Land of the Dead and consult the blind prophet Teiresias.

Discussion

1. Circe turns men into pigs. What is Homer saying about what happens to men who forget their homes and give themselves to pleasure?
2. Odysseus stays with Circe for a year — apparently willingly. Is this consistent with his desperate homesickness on Calypso's island? What's the difference between the two situations?

The Land of the Dead (Book 11)

Odysseus follows Circe's instructions exactly. He sails to the edge of the world, digs a trench, pours libations of honey and milk and wine and water, cuts the throats of two black sheep, and waits. The dead are drawn to blood — it is the only thing that restores them briefly to something like thought.

They come from every direction: brides, young soldiers in bloody armor, girls who died young in love. They make a sound Odysseus describes as thin and terrible, like bats disturbed in a cave.

The Prophecy

> *'Son of Laertes, Odysseus of the many wiles — I tell you the god will make your journey hard. I do not think you will outwit the Earth-Shaker, who has laid up bitterness in his heart against you for the blinding of his son.*
>
> *'Yet you may still reach home, though in sorrow, if you can hold yourself and your men under firm rein when you beach your ship on the island of Thrinacia and find there the cattle of Helios who sees and hears everything.*
>
> *'If you leave those cattle unharmed, you may yet reach Ithaca, though in great hardship. But if you harm them, I tell you plainly your ship will be destroyed, and your men. And even if you yourself escape, you will come home late, in a stranger's ship, having lost every one of your*

> *companions, to find trouble waiting in your house.'*

Homer gives us the ending of the poem before the poem is half over. Odysseus will make it home. He will find his house full of enemies. He will defeat them. And then — even then — there is one more task before he can rest.

After Teiresias, the dead press forward. Odysseus's mother appears — she died of grief while he was gone. He tries three times to embrace her and three times she slips through his arms like smoke. He speaks with Achilles, who chose a short glorious life and now asks urgently about his son. He glimpses Ajax — who went mad after losing to Odysseus — and Ajax will not look at him. Will not speak. Will not be forgiven.

The silence of Ajax is more terrible than anything else in the underworld.

Discussion

1. Homer tells us the ending early. How does knowing the outcome change the way you experience the rest of the story?
2. Odysseus cannot embrace his mother's ghost. Homer barely comments on this. Why might he handle such an emotional moment with such restraint?
3. Achilles chose a short glorious life over a long quiet one. Now he's a shade underground, and his first question is about his son. What is Homer saying about the choice Achilles made?
4. Ajax refuses to speak. In a poem built on the power of speech, what does it mean that the deepest wound Odysseus has caused cannot be answered with words?

The Sirens (Book 12)

Circe has warned Odysseus about what lies ahead. The Sirens come first — creatures who sit in a meadow ringed with the bones and rotting flesh of men who sailed too close. They sing. Their song is so beautiful that every man who hears it loses all will to survive, to go home, to do anything except hear more.

Circe gives Odysseus a choice: plug his men's ears with wax and sail past, or — and this is remarkable — have himself lashed to the mast and hear the song himself. He can experience the most dangerous thing in the world, if he accepts that he cannot be free while he does.

He chooses to listen. Of course he does.

> *'Hither, come hither, O much-praised Odysseus — come, great glory of the Achaeans! Beach your ship and listen to our song. No man rows past this point without hearing the honeyed music from our lips. He who listens goes his way delighted and knowing more than when he came. For we know all that the Greeks and Trojans suffered in broad Troy, by the gods' will. We know all that happens on the fertile earth.'*
>
> *The lovely voice came floating over the water and my heart was seized with longing. I frowned at my men to set me free — but they bent to their oars and rowed the harder. Perimedes and Eurylochus jumped up and bound me tighter.*

There is something almost funny about this scene: the greatest hero of the age, reduced to straining against a rope while his sailors ignore his frantic signals and row harder.

But Homer means something serious. The Sirens offer not just beauty but *knowledge*. They claim to know everything. And they are probably right. The temptation is the possibility of total understanding, if you are willing to stop and listen forever.

Odysseus has chosen not to know everything. He has chosen home.

Discussion

1. The Sirens offer knowledge, not just pleasure. Why is knowledge a temptation? What does it say about Odysseus that this is what almost unmakes him?
2. Odysseus chooses to be tied up so he can hear the song safely. Can you think of modern examples of people voluntarily limiting their own freedom to protect themselves from their own impulses?
3. Homer never gives us the song itself — only the Sirens' introduction. Why might that be exactly the right choice?

Scylla and Charybdis (Book 12)

A narrow strait with a monster on each side. Scylla is a six-headed creature living in a cave above the water, each head on a long neck, each head with three rows of teeth. Charybdis is a whirlpool that swallows the sea three times a day and spits it back.

There is no safe route. Circe's advice is cold and exact: hug the Scylla side and lose six men, rather than risk the whirlpool and lose everything. Do not try to fight Scylla. Row and accept the loss.

Odysseus tells his men about the route. He does not tell them about Scylla. He knows they would freeze. He does, however, put on his armor and take up two spears. He cannot resist the idea of fighting the monster. But Scylla cannot be fought.

> *While we were taken up with Charybdis, Scylla pounced down suddenly upon us and snatched up my six best men. I was looking at once after both ship and men, and in a moment I saw their hands and feet high above me, struggling in the air as Scylla was carrying them off, and I heard them call out my name in one last despairing cry.*
>
> *This was the most sickening sight that I saw throughout all my voyages.*

He heard them call his name. He watches and cannot help. He says it plainly: this was the worst thing. Not the Cyclops. Not the dead. This.

The Cattle of the Sun (Book 12)

They land on Thrinacia, the island of the sun god Helios, whose sacred cattle graze there. Teiresias has warned. Circe has warned. Odysseus warns his men directly: do not touch the cattle.

They are stranded by storms for a month. The food runs out. Odysseus goes inland to pray, and falls asleep. While he sleeps, the starving men slaughter the best of the cattle. The gods send omens — the hides crawl, the meat bellows on the fire. The men eat anyway.

When the fleet sets sail, a storm rises and destroys the ship with a thunderbolt. Every man drowns. Odysseus alone survives — clinging to the keel, drifting for nine days, until he washes up on Calypso's island.

This is the point where we came in.

The Shape of the Story

Notice how Homer constructs the narrative: Odysseus tells us at the beginning of Book 9 that his men perished through their own sheer folly. Everything in the Adventures section builds toward that moment — the proof that Odysseus was not the one who destroyed his crew. The cattle are the final test, the one they fail. Odysseus survives alone not because he is the strongest but because he is the one who obeyed.

Part V: The Homecoming

The Beggar King Returns

Arriving in Disguise

Odysseus has finished his story. The Phaeacians are moved. King Alcinous loads him with gifts and puts him on one of their swift magical ships, which delivers him to Ithaca while he sleeps.

He wakes on the beach of his own island and does not recognize it — Athena has wrapped it in mist. When she lifts the disguise and he realizes where he is, he kisses the ground.

Athena appears and gives him the situation plainly: his house is full of over a hundred men who want to marry his wife and take his kingdom. Some of them have already plotted to kill Telemachus. He cannot simply walk in the front door.

She touches him with her wand and transforms him into an old beggar — stooped, ragged, his famous eyes dimmed to a watery blue. Then she goes to fetch Telemachus.

The Swineherd Eumaeus

Odysseus, in his beggar's disguise, finds his way to the hut of Eumaeus, his old swineherd, who has been loyal for twenty years to a master he believes is dead. Eumaeus does not recognize him. He invites the beggar in, feeds him, gives him a cloak against the cold, and speaks lovingly of his lost master.

Homer takes time with Eumaeus — more time than seems strictly necessary. He is not a king or a warrior. He is a servant. But Homer values loyalty wherever it appears, and he lets us see that the kingdom Odysseus is returning to has not entirely fallen apart, because people like Eumaeus have held it together quietly, out of love, for twenty years.

The introduction of servants as important characters is unusual in ancient epic. Homer seems to know something the genre usually misses: that ordinary faithfulness, in ordinary people, is as heroic as anything on a battlefield.

Discussion

1. Athena turns Odysseus into a beggar. Why does Homer need Odysseus to be invisible when he first returns home? What does this disguise allow the story to do?
2. Homer spends considerable time on Eumaeus the swineherd. Why might Homer elevate a servant to this level of importance? What does this say about what he values?

Part VI: The Faithful Dog and the Patient Wife

Recognition and Patience

Argos

Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, approaches his own palace for the first time in twenty years. At the gate, he passes a heap of dung where an old dog lies, too weak to stand. The dog was once Odysseus's — a hunting dog he bred himself before he sailed for Troy, and never once took out into the field. In the old days, the young men of the estate used him to track wild goats and deer. Now no one looks after him. He is covered in fleas and forgotten.

The dog's name is Argos.

He raises his head. His tail moves. He tries to get up and cannot. He recognizes his master — the only one, of all the people in the palace, who does — and then he dies.

Odysseus passes without stopping. He does not look at the dog. He wipes one tear away quickly, before Eumaeus can see it, and goes inside.

This is eight lines of the poem. Homer does not comment on it. He gives it no discussion question, no moral. He just puts it there and moves on, the way the poem moves on — the way Odysseus has to move on.

It has made readers cry for three thousand years.

The Beggar in the Hall

The suitors abuse the beggar — one pelts him with a footstool. Penelope, who has heard there is a stranger in the hall who claims to have news of Odysseus, sends word that she wishes to speak with him.

In a deeply tense scene, the disguised Odysseus speaks with his own wife, who does not know him. He invents an elaborate story about meeting Odysseus on his travels. He cannot resist praising him. Penelope weeps. He watches his wife cry over news of himself, and does not move.

Penelope asks the old nurse Eurycleia to wash the guest's feet — an honor she reserves for travelers. Eurycleia washes him and feels, under her hands, a scar on his thigh — from a boar hunt on Mount Parnassus in his youth. She knows it immediately. She looks up at him with the water still on her hands.

Odysseus grabs her throat, gently, and whispers: *tell no one.*

She doesn't.

Discussion

1. Argos recognizes his master after twenty years and dies. Why does Homer place this scene exactly here — at the moment Odysseus first crosses his own threshold? What does the dog represent?
2. Odysseus watches Penelope weep over news of himself and says nothing. What does this restraint cost him? What would he lose by revealing himself?

3. Only Eurycleia recognizes him — by a scar, not by his face. What does it mean that the body remembers in ways that even twenty years cannot erase?

Part VII: Test of the Bow

The Suitors' Reckoning

Penelope's Contest

Penelope descends to the storeroom. She unlocks a chest and takes out Odysseus's great bow — the one he left behind twenty years ago when he sailed for Troy. She takes it to the hall, where the suitors are drinking, and makes an announcement:

She will marry whoever can string the bow and shoot an arrow through the holes in twelve axe-heads set in a line.

The suitors know instantly this is an impossible task. Odysseus's bow is famous. It is huge, stiff with age, and stringing it alone requires a strength none of them can produce. One by one they warm the wood, grease the string, brace the bow against the floor, and fail.

Meanwhile, Odysseus has slipped outside with the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius and revealed himself to them. He shows them the old scar. He tells them what is about to happen. He posts them at the gates.

The Stringing of the Bow

Now, in his beggar's rags, Odysseus asks to try the bow. The suitors are furious — a beggar, trying where they have failed? But Penelope insists. The doors are locked.

> *Odysseus, when he had taken it up and examined it all over, strung it as easily as a skilled bard strings a new peg of his lyre and makes the twisted gut fast at both ends.*
>
> *Then he took it in his right hand to prove the string, and it sang sweetly under his touch like the twittering of a swallow.*
>
> *The suitors were dismayed and turned color as they heard it. At that moment Zeus thundered loudly as a sign, and the heart of Odysseus rejoiced.*
>
> *He took an arrow that was lying upon the table and laid it on the centre-piece of the bow, and drew the notch and the string toward him, still seated. When he had taken aim he let fly, and his arrow pierced every one of the handle-holes of the axes from the first onwards till it had gone right through them.*
>
> *Then he said to Telemachus: 'Your guest has not disgraced you, Telemachus. I did not miss what I aimed at, and I was not long in stringing my bow. I am still strong.'*

The Slaughter

Odysseus drops his rags and stands on the pavement with the bow and quiver. Telemachus takes his place beside him, armed. The swineherd and cowherd move to guard the doors.

The first arrow kills Antinous — the worst of the suitors, their ringleader — as he is lifting a gold cup to his lips. He falls backward, feet kicking, overturning the table. The other suitors look for

weapons and find none. Telemachus has already moved them.

Odysseus tells them who he is. Eurymachus tries to bargain. Odysseus refuses. The fighting is brief and absolute.

> *They fled to the other end of the court like a herd of cattle maddened by the gadfly in early summer. As eagle-beaked vultures from the mountains swoop down on the smaller birds that cower in flocks upon the ground, and kill them, for they cannot either fight or fly — even so did Odysseus and his men fall upon the suitors and smite them on every side.*
>
> *They made a horrible groaning as their brains were being battered in, and the ground seethed with their blood.*

Homer does not look away from this either. The poem was composed in a world where such things happened. He reports it and moves on.

Discussion

1. Penelope proposes the bow contest without knowing Odysseus is in the room. Is this coincidence, or is Homer suggesting she knows something she doesn't consciously know?
2. The bow string 'sang like a swallow'. Why does Homer use a simile comparing the sound of a weapon to birdsong at this moment?
3. The slaughter of the suitors is brutal and total. Homer describes it without apparent judgment. Do you feel it is justified? Does the poem seem to?

Part VIII: The Final Test

Reunion and Peace

The Test of the Bed

Eurycleia goes upstairs to Penelope's chamber. She is nearly laughing with joy. She shakes the sleeping woman awake and tells her: Odysseus is here. He is downstairs. He has killed all the suitors.

Penelope comes down slowly.

She sits across the hearth from the stranger and studies him for a long time without speaking. At one moment she looks him full in the face. Then she looks away. The shabby clothes confuse her. She cannot quite see him.

Telemachus is furious. He tells her she has a heart of stone. No other woman would sit this far from her husband after twenty years.

Penelope answers quietly that if this is truly Odysseus, she and he will know each other. There are things between them that no one else knows.

She turns to the servants and gives an order: *bring the bed from the master's chamber, move it outside, and make it up with good blankets.*

> *At her words Odysseus was stung with sudden anger. He rounded on her: 'Woman, this is a bitter thing you have said. Who has moved my bed? That would be hard even for a skilled man — though a god could shift it without trouble. No living man, however young and strong, could pry it loose.'*
>
> *'For here is a great secret in the making of that bed. I built it myself, with my own hands. There was a young olive tree growing inside the court, in full leaf, sturdy as a pillar. I built my bedroom around it, fitting the stone walls, roofing it, hanging the close-jointed doors. Then I lopped the branches from the olive, trimmed the trunk from the root upward, shaped it with bronze tools, trued it to the line, and made it my bedpost. I drilled it and fitted the frame from it, and finished it, inlaying it with gold and silver and ivory.'*
>
> *'That is what I know of our bed. But has someone cut the tree at the root and moved it? I do not know.'*

> *At those words her knees went weak, and her heart dissolved, for she recognized the proof. She burst into tears and ran straight to him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing his face.*
>
> *'Odysseus, do not be angry with me — you who were always the cleverest of men. The gods kept us apart; they begrudged us the joy of being young together and growing old together. Do not hold it against me that I did not embrace you the moment I saw you. My heart was always shaking with fear that some man would come and deceive me with his words. But now you have told me the secret that only you and I know, and our one trusted handmaid. You have convinced me. Hard of heart though you may think me — I am convinced.'*

> *And then the faithful Odysseus melted. He wept, holding his good and faithful wife.*
>
> *As a swimmer, exhausted, feels the blessed earth under his feet after Poseidon has broken his raft and battered him through the waves — as he drags himself up onto the shore, salt-crusted and grateful, barely alive, and the land feels more precious than anything in the world — even so Penelope was precious to Odysseus, and he could not let go of her hands.*

The Meaning of the Ending

The olive tree. The bed rooted in the living wood of the earth, unmovable, built by his own hands. This is the secret password of their marriage — not a word or a ring or a letter, but a thing Odysseus made himself, in the house he built, on the island he loves.

Notice the simile Homer uses at the moment of reunion. It is Odysseus who is like the drowning man, finally feeling solid ground. **Penelope is the shore.** She is the home. She is what he has been swimming toward for twenty years.

He has spent the entire poem getting back to her. And here, at the moment of arrival, Homer makes her the ground itself — not the destination at the end of a journey, but the thing that makes the earth solid under a man's feet.

> *"Even so Penelope was precious to Odysseus, and he could not let go of her hands."*

There is still, technically, more story. Odysseus visits his elderly father Laertes and tells him he is home. The families of the slaughtered suitors demand revenge. Athena intervenes and makes peace. The poem ends there — not with a triumph, but with a settlement, a truce, ordinary life beginning again.

And Teiresias's prophecy is still in effect. One day Odysseus must take an oar and walk inland until someone mistakes it for a shovel. Only then will Poseidon be satisfied. Only then will the sea let him go.

But that is a future story. For now, it is enough.

Discussion

1. Penelope tests her husband even after Eurycleia has identified him. Is this cruelty, wisdom, or simply who she is? What has twenty years of waiting taught her that she cannot unlearn?
2. The secret of the bed is not a word or a name — it is something Odysseus built with his hands. Why does Homer choose this as the password? What does a bed rooted in a living tree suggest about what marriage means in this poem?
3. Homer makes Penelope the shore and Odysseus the drowning swimmer. Reread that final simile. What does it say about who has been doing the harder work — the man traveling, or the woman waiting?
4. Teiresias told Odysseus there is still one more journey after he gets home. Why can't the story simply end with the reunion? What does the remaining task suggest about the relationship between Odysseus and the sea?
5. You have now read the full story of the Odyssey. What kind of man is Odysseus? List three words that describe him — and for each one, find a scene in the story that proves it.

Quick Reference

Key Characters and Key Terms

Key Characters

Odysseus

King of Ithaca, hero of the poem. The cleverest of the Greek heroes, guided by Athena. His greatest strength and his greatest flaw are the same thing: he cannot resist knowing.

Penelope

Odysseus's wife. His equal in intelligence, his superior in patience. Holds the kingdom together for twenty years by skill and willpower alone.

Telemachus

Their son. Begins the poem as a boy without a father and ends it as a man who can stand beside one.

Athena

Goddess of wisdom. Odysseus's divine protector. She helps him not by making things easy, but by making him sharper.

Poseidon

God of the sea. Odysseus's divine enemy. His hatred of Odysseus for blinding Polyphemus drives the entire plot.

Calypso

The nymph who holds Odysseus prisoner for seven years, offering him immortality. Not evil — simply in love with a man who cannot love her back the way she wants.

Circe

The enchantress who turns men to pigs, then becomes Odysseus's ally and lover. Practical, powerful, and completely honest about what she is.

Polyphemus

The Cyclops. Poseidon's son. He breaks the law of *xenia* and pays for it — but not before breaking something that cannot be fixed.

Teiresias

The blind prophet of Thebes. His prophecy is the spine of the poem's second half.

Eumaeus

The swineherd. The image of loyalty in the poem: a man who serves faithfully for twenty years to a master he believes is dead.

Key Terms

Xenia

The Greek code of hospitality. Sacred. Protected by Zeus. Violated by the Cyclops, the suitors, and Circe (before Odysseus disarms her magic).

Kleos

Glory, fame, reputation. What a Greek hero fought and died for. The *Iliad* is largely about *kleos*. The *Odyssey* quietly questions it.

Nostos

The homecoming. The entire word *nós-tos* gives us the word *nostalgia*. The Odyssey is, at its heart, a poem about nostalgia — the ache of homesickness so acute it becomes a kind of pain.

In Medias Res

'Into the middle of things.' Homer begins the Odyssey ten years into the journey. The adventures (Books 9–12) are told in flashback, by Odysseus himself, at a banquet.

Epic Simile

A long, extended comparison that temporarily slows the narrative to create an image. Homer's similes often compare the heroic world to ordinary domestic life — farming, fishing, weaving — grounding the extraordinary in the familiar.