

A Teacher's Guide to

## ***The Odyssey***

By Homer

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

### General note

In what follows, guidelines sometimes divide into two tracks, depending on whether students have read all or part of Homer's *Iliad* before starting the *Odyssey*. It is greatly desirable to approach the *Odyssey* after first reading the *Iliad*, even if (as Mitchell assumes) the two works are by different authors.

We know that the *Iliad* preceded the *Odyssey* and was already well known at the time the *Odyssey* was composed. Hence the *Odyssey* at many points answers, responds to, or completes the *Iliad*, and the two works complement one another as portraits of a war and of the post-war era that follows it. Students can grasp this relationship even on the basis of a few well-chosen quotes from the *Iliad*, if there is no time in their course of study to read the whole work.

### Before You Read

1. Discuss how the character of Odysseus as it appears in the *Iliad* differs from the other Greek heroes at Troy. What is the significance of the fact that he relies on the bow, a weapon fired at long range and sometimes at an unarmed or unsuspecting enemy, as opposed to the sword or spear? Students might compare the use of high-technology drone weapons in modern warfare, which make it possible to kill one's enemy without incurring risk oneself. Does the bow make Odysseus a less heroic or less admirable figure than Achilles, Agamemnon, or Ajax? (Note that Odysseus, according to myth, won the armor of Achilles after that hero's death, but only after defeating his adversary, Ajax, by deceit.) Other distinctions should be pointed out: Odysseus is entirely mortal, unlike Achilles and many other heroes; he is king of an island rather than a mainland city; he is an only child himself and father of another; his great moment of prowess in the *Iliad* comes during a sneak attack at night (Book 10) rather than in open combat.

2. If the *Iliad* has been read, students are already familiar with Homeric gods and their role in directing or explaining the action in Greek epic. Students reading epic for the first time will need some preparation for the fact that gods are often participants in the action of the poems. It's important that this participation not be seen as manipulation or string-pulling, and that statements like "Athena put wisdom in his mind" not be taken too literally. It's also important that these Greek gods not be seen from the perspective of modern Judeo-Christian thought, which might make them seem petty, immoral, even abusive. Students can think of Homer's religious system as connected to a heroic code

rather than a moral one, though in the *Odyssey* the first stirrings of a religious morality, which would become more prominent in later Greek thought (Plato and Aristotle), can be felt.

3. Students coming to Homer for the first time should be made aware of how an oral epic, composed without recourse to writing and passed on by singers (like Demodocus, whom they will meet in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*), differs from literary compositions like the modern novel. It is not known whether the *Odyssey* was written down by its author or only later, but it has many features of oral epic, including formulaic repetition, use of epithets (some of these are omitted by Mitchell), and a wide admixture of dialect variants to make it easier to fit words into meters. At the same time, its structure is far more complex than that of the *Iliad* (as a glance at the table of contents suggests), and the two poems may have been composed by two different authors, one of whom could make use of writing in a way the other could not.

4. For students new to reading Homer's work, Greek names can be intimidating, and uncertainties about how to pronounce them can diminish their pleasure in reading (or dissuade them altogether). Point out that Mitchell's edition includes stress marks over unfamiliar names when they appear in the text, as well as a Pronouncing Glossary with phonetic spellings at the back. Give tips or practice on odd-looking vowel combinations like =ae- ("ee" in Mitchell's scheme), -oe- (also "ee" here), and =ea- (two syllables). Call attention to the diaeresis mark (umlaut), which signifies a separate syllable (-aüs is pronounced as two syllables; -au- as one). Try reading from Book 22, lines 238 – 263, as a practice exercise, where lots of names are heaped together. A little confidence-building goes a long way.

## Discussion Guide

### Books 1 – 4 (the Telemachy)

Zeus's opening dialogue with Athena, in which the return of Odysseus is first set in motion, gives a good opening to discuss causation in the *Odyssey*: Zeus complains that humans are always blaming gods, rather than themselves, for their troubles. This is a more humanistic outlook than was found in the *Iliad*. Values have changed during the 50 – 100 years that separate the two poems, and the idea that human beings are responsible for their own fates has become more prominent in Greek thought. The story of Telemachus told in Books 1 – 4—a young man trying to define himself and find his own way in the world, prompted by Athena but acting very much on his own—is a tale that exemplifies this new interest in the individual.

Also new, as compared with the *Iliad*, is the *Odyssey's* interest in family and domestic life. The royal palace of Ithaca stands as a paradigm of the household generally, and the effort to restore its proper order, by evicting the suitors, is a quest for a return to normality in the domestic realm. Students might relate this quest (as Jonathan Shay has

done in *Odysseus in America*) to the efforts of postwar societies, in all eras of history, to regain stability and restore familial bonds. They should contrast the tale of Agamemnon's homecoming, referred to by Zeus in his opening speech in Book 1 and related in greater depth by Nestor in Book 3 and Menelaus in Book 4, as the great negative paradigm of a family that fails to achieve this restoration. They should draw contrasts as well with the household of Helen and Menelaus, which Telemachus visits in Book 4—this shows us another kind of postwar domestic recovery, a very partial and somewhat disturbing one, aided as it is by the drugs of forgetfulness Helen administers. Storytelling is a great theme of the *Odyssey* and Books 3 and 4 contain wonderful examples, presenting us with tales of the Greeks' troubled departure from Troy, the lethal homecoming of Agamemnon, the adventures of Menelaus in Egypt (including the fabulous vignette of the encounter with Proteus), and some curious reminiscences of Odysseus at Troy. Two paradigmatic tales, told by Helen and Menelaus, show Odysseus conducting a secret reconnaissance inside Troy, and keeping a stiff upper lip while Helen, bizarrely, circles the Trojan Horse, calling out the names of the men inside. Students might think of these as "covert operations" and again contrast Odysseus's warrior virtues—stealth, secrecy, cunning—with those of more traditional heroes like Achilles and Ajax. It is appropriate to ask whether Homer finds these virtues wholly admirable; later Greek literature certainly has ethical problems with this side of Odysseus.

### Books 5 – 8

Our first direct glimpse of Odysseus, in Book 5, is a startling one: Demoralized, Odysseus sits alone by the shore and weeps. Again, the contrast with traditional heroic models is striking, as is the sense of Odysseus's isolation. Homer explores throughout the *Odyssey* the problem of Odysseus's integration into society, or lack of such (a similar problem surrounds Achilles in the *Iliad*). Odysseus stands between mortals and immortals, alienated from the former by his secrecy and advanced intellect, from the latter by the bonds that tie him to family, home, and to normative cycles of death and succession. The path offered him by Calypso, to stay with her and become a god, and his rejection of that path, are emblematic of his obligations to the mortal world. But the demands placed on him by Calypso, and the seven years he has spent with her, also define the gap that separates him from that world. The problem of integration versus isolation will be explored in greater depth through Odysseus's visit to Phaeacia in Books 6 – 8.

The Phaeacian adventure begins with the entry of Nausicaa, and students might already notice a pattern in which Odysseus is thrown together with women rather than fellow men. His encounter with Nausicaa has brilliant touches, putting the wiles of the crafty veteran into high relief against the naiveté and youth of the fairy-tale princess. The possibility of a romance between them is raised but never pursued; Nausicaa, like Calypso and later Circe, represents a path that the poem—for reasons that deserve discussion—regards as off-limits to Odysseus.

The magical land of Phaeacia, ruled by King Alcinous but even more so by Queen Arete, is portrayed in Books 7 and 8. Students can here get accustomed to talking about Homer's use of alternative societies and landscapes, preparing for what lies ahead in Books 9 – 12. Students should bear in mind that the *Odyssey* was composed during the Greek age of exploration, when non-Greek peoples (especially those of modern-day Sicily, France, and North Africa) first came into their ken, and when the great festivals and contests were founded that brought together Greeks from all parts of the Aegean. The Phaeacians are often thought to be an idealized version of the Greeks themselves, especially the Ionians who were leading the way in Greek exploration and colonization. Students can examine this idea, paying close attention in Book 8 to the bard Demodocus and his songs as an exemplar of the very Homeric tradition that produced the *Odyssey* and the Homeric Hymns.

### Books 9 – 12

The Fabulous Wanderings, the best-known part of the *Odyssey*, raise numerous questions and themes. A few courses have the leisure to discuss the episodes one by one, but most will discuss them synthetically in a single week or even a single class. The topics highlighted below are designed for such synthetic discussions, in which the whole of the Wanderings can be surveyed and Odysseus's progress charted as he moves from one port of call to another.

The problem of appetite/hunger/temptation, and resistance to these forces, pervades the Wanderings. Odysseus's men are lured to their destruction by food (Cyclops, Circe, Cattle of the Sun), by greed (Aeolus's bag of winds), and by narcotic oblivion (the Lotus-eaters). In most cases Odysseus alone possesses the fortitude to resist appetite and tries to restrain his men also; in Circe's palace however, where sexual appetite is also at issue, it is Odysseus who gives in and the men who resist. The antitype to Odysseus's restraint is seen in the Cyclops, a primitive being who eats voraciously (so also Scylla) and is defeated by his lack of resistance to wine. Odysseus himself gives in to a different kind of desire.

Odysseus also wrestles with curiosity/thirst for knowledge as he makes his way through these books, especially in the Cyclops and Sirens episodes and the visit to the Underworld. It was partly a desire to know what sort of being the Cyclops was that led Odysseus into the monster's cave (hunger was also a motive). Odysseus's desire to hear the Sirens' song, which Homer has imagined as imparting a kind of omniscience or insight, also helps define him as an explorer or pathfinder. The knowledge he gains in the Underworld goes far beyond his ostensible purpose in going there, to find out his route home from Tiresias. At the other extreme stands the Land of the Lotus-eaters, where happiness is gained through oblivion—an outcome unthinkable to Odysseus, or to Homer.

The Wanderings also develop a pattern of interdependence/mistrust in the relations between Odysseus and his crewmen. The men rely intensely on Odysseus but also recognize that he stands apart from them and conceals things from them. In the episode of Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus must willfully mislead his crew, and sacrifice six, in order to save the rest—a horrible dilemma that causes Odysseus genuine anguish. Yet the men harbor suspicions about Odysseus’s true intentions, and he about theirs. The episodes of Aeolus’s bag of winds and the Cattle of the Sun show the breakdown of trust, leading to destruction in both cases.

The visit to the Underworld in Book 11 (sometimes called the Nekyia) touches on all these themes and many more. Students should be given time to discuss each of the encounters of Book 11 in turn, especially those of Odysseus with Ajax, with his mother, and with Achilles. The idea of a descent into the underworld that puts the hero face-to-face with his past was transmitted from Homer to Virgil to Dante, and from there to many modern authors. It is a work of brilliant insight that stands, not coincidentally, at the very center of the poem.

### Books 13 – 15

Storytelling, both false and true, becomes central again as it was in Books 3 and 4. The false accounts Odysseus gives of himself to Athena in 13, and to Eumaeus in 14, are balanced by Eumaeus’s (presumably) true life story in 15. The glibness and ease with which Odysseus invents new versions of himself are an important facet of his character, warmly appreciated by Athena in 13 as an endearing quirk but likely to cause more disquiet in readers, especially when it is later practiced on his loved ones in 19 and 24. Students can discuss the purpose of these lying tales, each of which is different (though they do not need to be) while sharing similar motifs and having points of contact to Odysseus’s real history. Homer seems to be providing a “theme and variations” illustrating the instability, chanciness, and uprootedness of a world recovering from the Trojan War.

Downward mobility is another prominent theme of these tales, especially that of Eumaeus, born a prince but fallen to the level of swineherd. Eumaeus’s character, like that of the beggar Odysseus who will dominate Books 18 – 20, attests to the *Odyssey*’s deep interest in how social class, or even physical appearance, diverge from innate moral worth. The aristocratic suitors in the palace behave with callous cruelty while the noble Eumaeus—uniquely addressed by the poet in the second person—and the beggar Odysseus strive for upright behavior. (Those who have read the *Iliad* might contrast the figure of Thersites, both ugly and morally base.) How far does Homer’s worldview extend toward the egalitarianism of the later Socrates? Note that both Eumaeus and Odysseus are royalty in disguise, not true peasants.

### Book 16

The reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus should be one of the emotional high points of the poem, yet Homer curiously makes it understated and brief; the accompanying simile, comparing the cries of joy of the two men to the laments of birds stripped of their young, even gives it a mildly uncomfortable twist. Readers might here look into the question of Homeric similes generally: How deliberately has the poet selected the m, and what is the psychological impact of this one? Why does the reconnection of father and son seem almost perfunctory in this poem, as compared with the later reunion of husband and wife?

### Books 17 – 21

The long lead-up to the slaughter of the suitors will feel familiar to students, accustomed as they are to similar patterns in modern action movies. Indeed, classroom discussion might involve a comparison with such movies, if the instructor deems such a topic apt (Clint Eastwood's beleaguered and disguised Western heroes, prone to repay slights with explosive acts of violence, might be usefully brought in). Homer gives Odysseus many opportunities to exercise the self-control he learned, or honed, in the Fabulous Wanderings (especially the episode of the Cyclops' cave, where any action stemming from outraged pride would have spelled death.) Discussion here can hearken back to Books 9 – 12 and situate these more squarely within the continuum of the poem. How have the experiences of those books shaped Odysseus and prepared him for his homecoming?

The prolonged deception of Penelope by Odysseus in Book 19 has given rise to much speculation that Penelope in fact recognizes her husband and that the two are playing an elaborate chess game with each other. It is hard for students without knowledge of Greek to form any conclusions on this question, but the very possibility can make for a lively discussion. The characterization of Penelope, which was scant in Books 1 and 2, now becomes fuller, especially with the long speeches and the tale of the weaving-unweaving trick in Book 19. As the first fully formed female character in western literature, Penelope deserves an in-depth discussion, and useful contrasts can be posed to the other heroes' wives represented (directly or indirectly) in the poem, such as Helen and Clytemnestra.

The episode that ends Book 20 contains one of the poem's most modern touches, a hallucinatory vision of the prophet Theoclymenus accompanied by manic laughter among the suitors. Homer seems to be experimenting here with symbolic or impressionistic poetry, a precursor of Aeschylaeian tragedy (where many courses will next be headed). The simile that ends Book 21, comparing Odysseus stringing his bow to a bard tuning his lyre, raises interesting questions about Homer's self-identification with his hero.

### Book 22

The brutality of this book should shock readers and raise uncomfortable questions. Was a wholesale slaughter of the suitors necessary? Some were leaders, others followers, and one at least was an unwilling follower; yet all (except the bard and herald) die equally violently. Leodes the soothsayer makes the point that Odysseus is not distinguishing among degrees of guilt, yet he too dies a gruesome death, unarmed, while pleading for his life. Questions about morality of war can be brought into play here, especially for students who have read the *Iliad* and/or are going on to read the Aeneid. Achilles's slaughter of Trojans in the corresponding Book 22 of the *Iliad* was a burst of sheer frenzy, in which no ethical concerns could impinge; Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors is more premeditated and rational, and the setting is not a tumultuous battlefield but a household banquet room, in which the enemy has no access to weaponry.

Similarly, Odysseus's hanging of the twelve faithless maidservants and mutilation/castration of Melanthius the herdsman stand outside anything that could today be called a code of justice.

### Book 23

The reunion of Penelope and Odysseus is delayed by a final ruse, the testing of Odysseus's knowledge of the marriage bed. The rootedness of this bed is one of Homer's finest touches, standing in for the permanence and stability of the royal marriage and of family. Students should note the poem's interest in marital harmony and sexual fidelity, themes that gives this poem more in common with the modern romance or novel than with ancient epic. The question can perhaps here be raised as to whether we can imagine that this poem and the *Iliad* were both produced by the same author (Mitchell agrees with Martin L. West that they were not). Students who have read the *Iliad* can discuss the portrayal there of Hector's relationship to Andromache, the only other instance in early Greek literature of a stable, faithful husband-wife pair.

### Book 24

Mitchell prints the first 204 lines of this book in an appendix, on the grounds that it may have been added by a later hand than the one that composed the *Odyssey*. Discussion can start with the question of why this episode was spliced into the poem (assuming it was). The descent of the suitors to the Underworld, and the conversation overheard there between Achilles and Agamemnon, will make most sense to students who have read the *Iliad*; indeed, this priceless vignette reads like a coda to the two-volume set that began with the *Iliad*, providing as it does a description of Achilles's death and burial.

Odysseus's encounter with his father, Laertes, raises again the question of Odysseus's integration/isolation problems. His first impulse upon seeing his father again after twenty years is to pretend to be someone else, then comment rather coldly on his father's ragged condition. In the end he has to show his scar in order to convince Laertes

of who he is. Having posed so often as “No-man” and other alias personas, Odysseus cannot seem to stop, and his reconnection to his family is therefore troubled and partial. Through Tiresias’s prophecy, his family (and readers) are made aware that Odysseus will not stay in his palace, but will wander far from home, indeed far from any coastline (to a place where oars are not recognized), where a peaceful death will come to him “from the sea” (whatever that mysterious phrase means). This gentle ‘fade-out’ is hardly the end one expects for a traditional hero, and presents a marked contrast with the violent deaths of Achilles, Agamemnon and Ajax.

*Guide written in 2013 by James Romm, Professor of Classics, Bard College.*

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