UNDERSTANDING THE ODYSSEY

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents

Claudia Durst Johnson, Vernon Johnson
Understanding
The Odyssey
The Greenwood Press “Literature in Context” Series
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Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*, composed in Greece around the eighth century B.C., has resonated throughout the Western world for over 2,700 years, as few other works of literature have. Its title long ago became synonymous with the adventure-filled journey of a single hero, whether real or fictional, profound or mundane. Few literary odysseys or journeys have failed to draw on the ancient story of Odysseus, literally or metaphorically depicting engaging giants and monsters, the resisting of sirens and other temptresses, or a descent to the land of the dead.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of *The Odyssey*. The Greeks gave Homer the stature of a god and treated his works as sacred texts. Homer was the primary source for playwrights of classical Greece in the fifth century B.C., one of the two or three most illustrious periods of Western drama. Alexander the Great was just the first of many larger-than-life soldiers inspired by the warriors in Homer's epics. Homer's influence is also to be found in classical literary masterpieces of other countries: Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and even in Mark Twain's antiheroic saga, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the twentieth-century novel *Ulysses*, regarded as one of the most important works of fiction in modern English, the Irish novelist James Joyce takes his title, incidents, and themes from Homer's classic, transporting and translating them to modern-day Dublin. Charles Frazier's 1997 publishing phenomenon, the novel *Cold Mountain*, which sold 2.8 million copies, was also the story of a returning warrior, this time a wounded Confederate sol-
dier in the American Civil War, whose journey back home to the woman he
loves is very much in the vein of Homer's *The Odyssey*.

A remarkable illustration of the enduring power of *The Odyssey* can be ob-
served as recently as the turn of the twenty-first century, when Hollywood's
Universal Studios released a popular film, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*, de-
scribed as a comedic rendering of *The Odyssey*, this time set in the state of Mis-
sissippi in 1937. The major character, wily like Odysseus, is named Ulysses
Everett McGill. Just as Homer's Odysseus journeys to rejoin his wife Penel-
ope, so McGill is going home, after his imprisonment in the penitentiary, to
his wife, named Penny. Like Homer's Penelope, Penny has attracted suitors in
McGill's absence. A riverside baptism has the same narcotic effect on McGill's
companions as the Land of the Lotus Eaters has on Odysseus' men. They also
are tempted by sirens, and encounter a one-eyed villain (like Odysseus' Cy-
clopes) and a politician named Homer Stokes.

Homer has not only been an original source of inspiration for writers,
painters, sculptors, and filmmakers, he is our first source of information about
the mythology, history, and culture of ancient Greece.

*The Odyssey* is classified as an epic, a long poem delineating the mythic sto-
ries and, through them, the values of a nation at its inception. The epic fol-
 lows a single hero whose presence unifies the numerous episodic challenges
typical of the work. The larger-than-life central characters of epics take on
colossal challenges: escaping a one-eyed monster (as Odysseus does), slaying
a monster (as Beowulf does in the Old English epic), leading the enslaved Is-
raelites safely out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, as Moses does in Exodus,
and daring to pass through the gates of hell, from which no living human re-
turns, as Dante does in *The Divine Comedy*. The epic hero brings enormous,
godlike mental, physical, and spiritual power to the task of overcoming su-
pernatural enemies. In each instance, the epic hero reenacts defining moments
in the early development of a national culture.

Epics were sometimes literary constructs of a single, identifiable author and
sometimes part of folk traditions, told and retold, read and reread, not only
for entertainment but also to fortify a society, to encourage cohesiveness and
identity.

The impact and influence of *The Odyssey* are scarcely matters of debate, but
many issues surrounding the epic remain mysterious:

- Was *The Odyssey* composed by one person?
- Did a poet whom we call Homer actually exist?
- If so, when and where did he live?
- Was he blind, as tradition has it?
- Did the person who composed *The Odyssey* also compose *The Iliad*?
• Was the poet called Homer literate, that is, did he actually write the epic? Or did he transmit it orally, by singing or reciting it, as was the tradition?
• Was his an original story, or one he constructed of older legends and myths?

Despite the continual scholarly argument over these issues and many recent archaeological findings, the likelihood of ever reaching certainty on what is labeled “the Homeric Question” is remote. One credible assumption is that a single poet, referred to by the classical Greeks as Homer, was the single creator, from many ancient oral stories, of two unified epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey.* In part because the epics were first transmitted in Greek dialects used in Asia Minor, it is assumed that he came from the island of Chios, located near Asia Minor. The time of Homer’s life has been a matter of wide disagreement, different scholars placing him in the seventh, eighth, or ninth century, but the evidence at hand seems to point to his having lived somewhere around the eighth century B.C. Current historians have found little evidence for the traditional notion that Homer was blind, a view that developed as long ago as classical Greece, perhaps because of interpretations of his name in Greek and perhaps because he has been identified with the blind singer Demodocos in *The Odyssey.*

The stories in *The Odyssey* are considered by most scholars to have originated and been conveyed orally by professional singers over hundreds of years. Several traditions of these orally transmitted tales are apparent in *The Odyssey:* the repetition of short epithets like “wily Odysseus” or “Odysseus, Sacker of Cities,” and longer stock descriptions of such things as the entertaining of guests and of bathing. This has led some scholars to argue that the composition of the two epics was a group effort and, because of the difference in interests in the two epics, not the work of a single person. Others insist that though the stories had been transmitted orally for many years, they culminated or evolved into the two unified tales through the efforts of a single person, probably the man called Homer.

One part of the “Homer Question” is whether or not Homer actually wrote down the epics or only recited them. Some scholars argue that Homer was part and parcel of the Dark Ages (see chapter 5) in Greece, when there was no written language, and that *The Odyssey* was not actually written down until the sixth century B.C., some two to three centuries after Homer lived.

But those closest in time to Homer—the classical Greeks—assumed that he had written down the epics. And some current scholars (see Bernard Knox’s “Introduction” to Robert Fagles’ translation of *The Odyssey,* New York: Penguin, 1990) contend that Homer wrote *The Odyssey* after the Dark Ages, when a Greek alphabet had already appeared. Homer may well have either written the epics down himself or dictated them to someone else. If this were the case,
it is assumed that Homer honed the stories in oral performance and then gradually wrote down one episode at a time, all along unifying the whole, refining, and enlarging on them. Knox writes:

It is not surprising that many recent scholars in the field have come to the conclusion that writing did indeed play a role in the creation of these extraordinary poems. ... They envisage a highly creative oral poet, master of the repertoire of inherited material and technique, who used the new instrument of writing to build, probably over the course of a lifetime, an epic poem on a scale beyond the imagination of his predecessors. (p. 20)

Despite the controversies surrounding the author, *The Odyssey* continues to be one of the most frequently studied works of the ancient world. *Understanding The Odyssey* is intended to provide those coming to this extraordinary epic with a historical context as well as an investigation of the enduring issues in the epic that have relevance to contemporary society. To approach the matters of context and issues, the first chapter is a literary analysis of major themes in the epic, as a self-contained, self-evident work of literature. Chapters 2 through 6 are explorations of the context of the epic: the mythology and geography needed for an understanding of the work; the archaeological excavations that have thrown light on the time of Odysseus; the history of the period; the Trojan War, which lies behind Odysseus' return home and to which *The Odyssey* repeatedly refers; and the underlying class structure of slaves and servants so critical to the society in which Odysseus and his son Telemachos move.

The final three chapters are examinations of the contemporary relevance of themes in *The Odyssey*. The first of the three is about Homeric vengeance or retribution in contemporary life, with particular reference to ongoing conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the war between Israel and the Palestinians in the Near East, and the war that ensued in Afghanistan after the attacks by fanatical Muslims on America in 2001. The second current issue is athletics—a study of the importance and meaning of the athlete and athletics in Homer's day and in our own. The final chapter is on the evolution of the heroic ideal, from the time of Odysseus and Achilles to the heroes of World War I and World War II, the Vietnam War, and September 11, 2001.

Each chapter on the context and issues includes a comprehensive general introduction that provides a pertinent history of the idea under discussion and traces it through the text of the epic. Following the general introduction are documents relevant to the context: excerpts from ancient Greek history, drama, geography, poetry, and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeology
and mythology. The last chapters on contemporary relevance contain excerpts from diaries, citations, governmental hearings, and newspaper reportage. Each document is introduced with an essay identifying the excerpt and its author, explaining how the document is useful in the study of *The Odyssey*, and directing the reader’s attention to pertinent ideas within the document.

Each chapter concludes with projects for oral and written exploration and lists of books for further reading.

The book is designed to be accessible to students and teachers alike.

In the following chapters, we have made use of a number of different prose and verse translations of *The Odyssey* that are available, identifying each by book and translator. Although any one of a number of translations is appropriate for study, we suggest that all members of the class read the same edition.
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A Literary Analysis of Homer's *The Odyssey*: Transformation and Return

The twenty-four books of dactylic hexameter that comprise the story of Odysseus' ten-year journey home after the end of the Trojan War encompass myriad themes that have resonated in thousands of works of literature, in every nation, for roughly twenty-seven centuries. In the nineteenth century, for the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson, Odysseus represented active, adventuresome, aspiring humanity: "strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." For the Dubliner James Joyce, *The Odyssey* provided the framework for a mythic journey, within one city in the period of a single day, of a twentieth-century Ulysses, that is to say, a middle-class, somewhat bumbling salesman who, as a Jew, is something of an alien in his own land.

In Western civilization, *The Odyssey* is the original, universal myth of the eternal journey; the longed-for, arduous return; the initiation into manhood; and the search for the father. It contains the elements of transformation, disguise, pretense, and trial on which such religious and psychological passages are constructed. Deception and storytelling contribute to two fundamental themes in *The Odyssey*: first, initiation, and second, return and resolution.

Before examining these particular elements in the work, however, it is important to have a clear grasp of the time frame of the epic; its major characters; the chronology of the events as they occur in the story of Odysseus and his son Telemachos; an understanding of the structure of *The Odyssey*, in which events are not presented in the order in which they actually occurred; and, finally, the technique of storytelling.
A representation of a scene of Odysseus' encounter with Circe (KIRKA), from a fifth-century B.C. Greek vase in the British Museum. Circe is presenting him with the magic drink. In the middle is her loom, and on the far right one of Odysseus' men is in the process of being turned into a swine. Source: Illustrations of School Classics. G. F. Hill, London: Macmillan, 1903, p. 115.

TIME FRAME

At the beginning of the poem, it has been twenty years since Odysseus left his home in Ithaca to fight in the war against Troy. That war lasted for ten years, and for the next ten years Odysseus has been trying to get home. The action of the story takes place in the last year of his journey. His adventures during the previous ten years are told by him in flashback. Telemachos, his son, had been an infant when Odysseus left for the Trojan War. As the narrative opens, he is in his early twenties.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The major characters in The Odyssey fall into several categories: there are, for example, mortals, gods, and those characters, like giants, who have superhuman strength but are not easily classified as either humans or gods. There are characters who share in the action of Odysseus' journey back to Ithaca and those who are equally important but who live only in memory and do not participate in the action at hand.

Although Homer makes reference to many gods in the Greek pantheon, three of them have major roles to play in The Odyssey: Zeus, the chief of all the gods and the one to whom Athena makes continual appeals on Odysseus’ behalf; Athena, Odysseus’ protector and the goddess of wisdom, who is also associated with warfare; and Poseidon, god of the sea, who causes most of the impediments to Odysseus’ return home. There are also the minor goddess Calypso, who imprisons Odysseus on her island for seven years, and Circe, an enchantress who keeps Odysseus with her after initially turning his men into swine.
A Literary Analysis of Homer's *The Odyssey*

The epic centers on the human character of Odysseus, and secondarily on his son Telemachos. The other major mortals whom Telemachos and Odysseus encounter on their journeys include the following:

Penelope: Odysseus’ wife
Laertes: Odysseus’ father
Antinoos, Eurymachos, and Amphinomos: leaders of Penelope’s suitors
Eurycleia: a faithful servant of Odysseus’
Nestor: an old warrior whom Telemachos visits
Peisistratos: Nestor’s son, who accompanies him
Menelaos: Greek warrior whom Telemachos visits
Helen: Menelaos’ wife, whose kidnapping by Paris twenty years earlier had provoked the Trojan War
Nausicaa: king of Scheria’s young daughter, who finds Odysseus washed up on the beach
Alcinoos: king of the Phaeacians of Scheria, who entertains Odysseus and helps him return to Ithaca
Demodocos: a blind singer of tales in the court of Alcinoos
Polyphemos: a Cyclops, son of Poseiden, whom Odysseus blinds in an attempt to escape
Telepylos: king of the giant Lestrygonians, who wreck all of the ships in Odysseus’ party save one
Eumaeos: a swineherd in Ithaca, loyal to Odysseus

Some of the dead whom Odysseus encounters in Hades include the following:

Anticleia: Odysseus’ mother
Tiresias: a blind seer, who warns him about dangers in returning home
Agamemnon: leader of the Greek or Achaean forces, who had fought beside Odysseus in Troy and returned home, where he was murdered by his wife’s lover
Achilles: greatest of the Greek warriors who died in battle

**CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS**

- The Trojan War ends
- Odysseus leaves, and is swept to the Cicones, where he and his men sack one city, kill the men, and take the women as slaves. Some of his men are killed in the process.
- Tempestuous winds carry them to the Land of the Lotus-Eaters. He has to drag his men back to the ship.
• They are imprisoned by the Cyclops, then blind him in their escape, taunting him as they speed away. This enrages the Cyclops’ father, Poseiden, god of the sea.
• Aelios gives Odysseus a bag of wind to help him navigate well, but his men open the bag and release the wind while he is asleep, thus blowing them off course.
• They are swept to the land of the giant cannibal Lestrygonians, who eat many of the men.
• From there they are swept to the island ruled by Circe, a witch who initially turns the crew to pigs, and then takes Odysseus as a lover. He stays with her for a year.
• Circe sends Odysseus on a trip to Hades, where he learns of his wife’s suitors and his own fate; he also meets and talks with many of the dead, including Achilles.
• Odysseus, now again headed home, successfully sails past the Sirens.
• He sails past Scylla and Charybdis, but not without losses.
• In Thrinacia, where the crew stops, the men disobey Odysseus’ directions and eat the cattle of Helios. The ship is destroyed in revenge.
• Odysseus drifts alone to the island of Ogygia, where Calypso holds him as her lover for seven years.
• When Calypso lets him go, at the urging of the gods, he drifts and swims to the land of the Phaeacians, where he is found by Nausicaa, is entertained by King Alcinoos, and outfitted for a return to Ithaca.
• Back in Ithaca in disguise, Odysseus reveals himself to his son Telemachos, who has escaped ambush by the suitors; slays them with Telemachos; and is reunited with Penelope.

NARRATIVE SEQUENCE

While the above chronology indicates the sequence in which Odysseus’ adventures occur, The Odyssey actually begins in medias res, that is, in the middle of things, with Telemachos’ journey as an adult to find news of his father and with Odysseus’ entrapment by Calypso. Only when Odysseus has been allowed to leave Calypso and finds himself in the land of King Alcinoos, does the reader discover Odysseus’ earlier adventures after the Trojan War, as he relates his story to Alcinoos’ courtiers.

LITERARY TECHNIQUE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling shapes The Odyssey, and Odysseus himself tells stories to survive and make possible his return home. The epic opens as an unidentified “I” begins telling the story of Odysseus, starting with an assembly of the Olympian gods, called to order while Poseidon, god of the Sea, who is furious with Odysseus, is in Ethiopia. This, we can assume, is the voice of the poet Homer,
A Literary Analysis of Homer’s The Odyssey

who was supposedly a court storyteller like those mentioned in his tale. Most prominent in the epic are the singer at the court of Menelaos; the blind poet Demodocos, at the court of King Alcinoos; and Phemios, the bard in Odysseus’ house, who sings for the suitors.

Homer begins telling a story that is composed of many true and false tales told by a variety of characters, not just the professional storytellers. Telemachos tells Athena (in disguise) the story of the disarray in his father’s house, and repeats it in the Ithacan assembly in a futile effort to convince the elders to stop supporting the suitors. Nestor and Menelaos tell Telemachos stories of the defeat of Troy, their difficulty in getting home, and the scandalous murder of their leader Agamemnon. Helen of Troy, now back home with her husband Menelaos, also tells Telemachos stories about his father and the Trojan Horse.

The chief story within Homer’s tale is told by Odysseus, who relates his own adventures to the court of King Alcinoos. He has earlier assumed a fake identity and told the king a false story about himself; but after he has been in the court long enough to get a sense of their loyalties, he reveals his true identity and tells them what has happened to him. The story he tells begins with the defeat of Troy and ends with his imprisonment on the island of Ogygia by Calypso and his washing up on Phaiacia. There are stories within stories within stories: within Homer’s story is Odysseus’ story, and within Odysseus’ story are the stories he hears in the Land of the Dead, especially those of his mother, Agamemnon, and Achilles.

When Odysseus arrives back in Ithaca, he again assumes false identities and makes up stories about himself—to tell his friend the swineherd, his son, and his wife. He soon reveals his true self only to his son. As Odysseus is inventing wild tales to cover his deception, he is also hearing stories told by Telemachos, Helen, the swineherd, and a friendly visitor to Ithaca.

We see that these stories, many of them repeated several times, are not just forms of entertainment. They are also often ways of seeking assistance and ways of deceiving others and protecting one’s self. Sometimes in stories of the past there are warnings of future danger. Most important, however, storytelling is a way of seeking truth and value in personal and tribal remembrance.

INITIATION AND RESOLUTION: TELEMACHOS

One of the major themes running throughout The Odyssey is the transformation of Telemachos from a boy into a man, the story that begins and ends the epic. The reader learns that Telemachos was only an infant when his father went to aid Menelaos and Agamemnon in their war against Troy in order to retrieve Menelaos’ wife, Helen. As The Odyssey opens, however, Telemachos is twenty years old. Although he is physically an adult and the only male in
his father’s household, he is still a boy in the house because he is at the mercy of over one hundred of his mother’s unwanted suitors. They have invaded his house uninvited. There they play loud and disruptive games, take the household’s serving maids to bed, and are rapidly depleting Odysseus’ estate as every day they consume enormous quantities of wine, bread, and meat, a situation that has prevailed since Telemachus was about eleven years old. The beginning of his initiation into manhood at the age of twenty is marked by the appearance of a goddess, Athena, in the guise of a human, to whom he complains that the suitors are wasting his home away and there seems to be nothing he can do about it. Athena notes his immaturity by telling him that he is too old to cry and whine about the situation; such behavior is mere childishness. He needs to grow up and take action, she says.

In this case, as in others, the appearance of a god often signals a change in a character’s situation or mentality. Shortly after Athena disappears, Telemachos assumes a degree of authority and manhood, amazing his mother by his bold speech as he tells her to come into the house and resume her normal activities so that the household will be reassured, himself included. He asserts, “The power in the house is mine.” He also stuns the suitors by ordering them out of his house and vowing that if they don’t leave (and they don’t at this time), he will call on the gods for assistance in seeking retribution against them.

Telemachos’ growing maturity is further seen in his decision to call into session the assembly of Achaians, the first time the body has met since the departure of Odysseus. Telemachos presents his case to these older men, pleading with them not to encourage the suitors, many of whom are their sons. But at the end of this session, his command and composure break as he hurls to the ground the scepter (given to the person who is addressing the assembly) and, like a child, bursts into tears.

Two symbolic details mark Telemachos’ struggle toward manhood as archetypal, that is, part of the universal tradition of transformation: the guidance of a wise teacher and the journey over water, itself a symbol of rebirth and renewal. Telemachos has guidance in the form of the wise mortal, Mentor, and in the goddess Athena, who takes on the form of his teacher Mentor to arrange a ship, a crew, and provisions for him to sail to Pylos and Sparta to seek news of his father. This journey is seemingly the first that Telemachos has undertaken. Once in Pylos, he tells Athena, still in the guise of his teacher Mentor, that he has no experience, and desperately needs advice about how to conduct himself in approaching the renowned warrior Nestor.

In the aging Nestor’s account of what happened to the Greek warriors after the fall of Troy, Telemachos hears a parallel account of a son wanting vengeance against his father’s enemies, who have taken advantage of the warrior/father’s