

Class Notes for The Odyssey

The Odyssey:

The Theme:

The Odyssey is an epic poem: that is, a poem about heroic adventure, like the Greek Iliad, the Roman Aeneid, the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, the Old French Song of Roland, and the English Paradise Lost.

Subject:

The main subject of the poem is the homeward journey of one of the Greek princes who conquered Troy, and his struggle to recapture his wife and home. From his name comes the name of the epic, Odysseia, the story of Odysseus. (Ulysses is an Italian form of the name which was altered in transmission to the Romans) But the poem is more than that, because it contains many flashbacks -- such as Nestor's stories in Book 3 and Menelaus' in Book 4 and Agamemnon's description of his own murder in Book II it is really a sequel to the Iliad. The Iliad tells how the back of the Trojan resistance to the Greeks was broken when the greatest Greek hero, Achilles, killed the strongest Trojan fighter, Hector, but it does not go the story of the Wooden Horse and the capture of Troy. That story and the difficulties and dangers suffered by the Greek princes as they returned home, are told in the Odyssey. Its hero, Odysseus, took longer to get home and endured more trials (short of death) than any of the others.

The poem has another theme. It tells how Odysseus' son Telemachus, who has been living without a father's guidance, surrounded by the suitors of his mother, tough hostile intruders to his household, grows up and becomes a man worthy of his father. When we first see him he is helpless, and can only complain without taking action. But under the guidance of Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, he leaves his home, visits the homes of some of his father's comrades learns confidence from them, becomes mature, and returns fully capable of fighting beside his father, as he does in Book 22. Three times he is reminded of the bravery of Orestes, the son of the greatest Greek monarch Agamearnon. who avenged his murdered father: one by Athena in Book 1., once by Nestor in Book 3 and again by Menelaus in Book 4. Telemachus is just about the same age as Orestes-- twenty-- and although he is not called upon to do anything so tragic as Orestes, who killed his own adulterous mother, still, he acquits himself courageously in the end.

Structure:

The Odyssey is a skillfully structured epic. The Iliad with its many attacks, duels and rescues, is often confusing: if you open the book at random it is sometimes hard to tell where you are. But the Odyssey has clear outlines such as the outlines of a Greek temple.

Book 1-4 - Telemachus guided by Athena leaves his home, and is welcomed by old Nestor and gallant Menelaus.

5-8: Odysseus guided by Athena leaves Calypso's island, and is welcomed by the generous Phaeacians.

9-12: Odysseus tells the story of his adventures since the capture of Troy.

13-14: Odysseus lands on Ithaca and finds shelter.

15-16: Telemachus lands on Ithaca and meets his father.

17-18: Odysseus enters his home.

19-20: Odysseus and Telemachus prepare to attack the suitors.

20-22: Odysseus gets his bow and, with Telemachus and two servants, kills the suitors.

23: Odysseus is at last recognized and welcomed by Penelope.

24: In a later addition a vendetta by the dead men's friends is defeated through a miracle.

Father and son, so far apart at the beginning, are brought together stage by stage until they stand side by side to face the common enemy. The wife, who by cleverness and strength of will resisted so many men for so many years, finally resists her own husband--until she is convinced by his knowledge of a shared family secret.

All these adventures and excitements are compressed by the poet into forty days.

Language and style:

The Odyssey is written in a composite language. No one group of Greeks ever used it and it was difficult for the Greeks themselves to understand it. (There was no single Greek language until quite late in history, the third century B. C. when one dialect, the dialect of Athens became dominant.) Basically the speech of the Odyssey is Ionic dialect spoken in Greek colonies of west central Asia Minor. The "Homeric dialect" of the Iliad and the Odyssey may be said to be the language of epic poetry meant to be recited rather than read; it was international intertribed, interdialectal poetic speech. (In a certain way the language of the Old Testament is comparable to this.)

The title of the Odyssey can be understood at once when we recall that it was meant to be performed by a minstrel or band to the accompaniment of the lyre. The minstrel is chanting (telling) a famous story in phrases some of which he invents himself. This technique is the technique of oral poetry: that is, poetry created through improvisation by the man who recites it or chants it.

### Translation:

All translations of great literature are imperfect. It is impossible to translate Homer into English and still maintain the impact of the original. Every language has its own shades of meaning which can only be appreciated by those who understand the language, and every great writer uses his own language in ways which cannot be imitated in other tongues. Much also is lost when poetry is translated into prose--the student is therefore, urged to read more than one translation of Homer.

### Characters:

#### Odysseus:

Odysseus is a complex personality--highly emotional--resolute--a schemer who never abandons hope--not always wise, since he makes some dreadful mistakes--proud and often boastful, paradoxically he also submits to great humility--sometimes imprudently he takes outrageous chances probably because he counts himself a hardened adventurer. He rejects the offer of immortality from a beautiful enchantress to return home to his wife.

#### Penelope:

Penelope is drawn as a proud sensitive and honorable lady. She expresses loyalty and grief, and is quick witted enough to engage upon a clever deceit to trick the rude interlopers who are her suitors. She is seen in the Odyssey as a loyal wife and a concerned mother.

#### Telemachus:

Telemachus is seen at first as a youth who has no proper guidance. He has developed courtesy but is filled with bitterness in his resentment of the suitors. He matures rapidly on his travels and gains strength enough to resist the arrogant suitors. The great change is wrought in Telemachus because for so many years he suffered scorn from the suitors and after visiting the palaces of friends Nestor and Menelaus he is honored and singled out for special favor by the appearance of the guardian goddess. When he takes his place beside his father he has accepted his responsibility with honor and pride. We see him maintaining self-control and silence when his father is insulted (thus-self discipline) and finally we see him valiantly defending his beggar--guest, and fighting to save his life and home. He is a man. Like Orestes (but without Orestes' crime) he has avenged himself on the usurpers of his household.