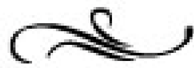

The Odyssey of Homer:

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Sam Johnson

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QUICK CARD

Reference	*The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. ISBN: 978-0061244186
Plot	After ten years of fighting at Troy, Odysseus finally sets sail for home. Along the way he encounters many trials and dangers that take another ten years of his life. He returns to his kingdom only to find that his wife is plagued by suitors who are trying to usurp his position.
Setting	• Mythical Greece • Ithaka, kingdom of Odysseus • In the years following the Battle of Troy
Characters	Odysseus Telemachos Penelope The goddess Athene The god Poseidon The messenger Hermes The suitors Circe, Kalypso, Nausikaa Various monsters Greek pantheon The sheepherd
Conflict	Man vs. Man Man vs. the gods Man vs. Fate Man vs. Himself
Theme	• The greatest journey is the journey home. • A strong marriage is the root of the home and the bedrock of society. • Intellect subdues force and strength. • Hospitality to strangers = a just heart and a godly mind.
Literary Devices	Stock Epithets Extended Simile Personification Irony Allusion

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING

In what country or region does the story happen? Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1a, c)

The height, depth, breadth, and intricacies of the questions that make up the meat and matter of this epic poem – questions of the human condition, divine interaction, love, death, justice, family, steadfastness, longing, faithfulness, identity, etc. – are seen just as expansively reflected in the topography of the Odyssey. Book I begins at the summit of Mount Olympus amidst the illustrious gods. Book XXIV plunges the reader into the shady depths of Hades' house. The broad ocean, enchanted islands, whirlpools, and pastoral landscapes make up the setting in between. Yet even on this immense scale, the most endearing familiarities of home life are not lost on Homer's subtlety. Odysseus himself from the very first lines of the poem is marked out as a man of "far journeys" who suffered on the wide sea and saw many cities. His lot was to travel from the ravaged plains of Ilium (and even the splintery insides of the wooden horse!) across the broad sea, hopping mythical islands to various cities and peoples all before setting foot on his homeland of Ithaka once again. In fact, a vital part of the birth of a hero in the Greek mythic tradition is that he *must* go on such a wide-ranging journey in order to be tested and proven by an equally wide number of challenges, and in order that his name might spread throughout Greece and beyond.

Is there anything symbolic or allegorical about the place where the story happens? (1i)

The sheer volume of locations that Homer includes in his work can be mind-boggling, let alone the bizarre Greek names, which may seem to simply meld into one another after reading only a few books of the text. Yet remember that each location is carefully selected by the author in order to illustrate important elements about that particular part of the story, and each helps to illuminate the main themes of the work as a whole. For example, in naming Circe's island "Aiaia," Homer evokes sorrow and mourning by way of an Ancient Greek onomatopoeia similar to our English word "woe." The island's very name alerts readers to be wary of this place as one in which mourning plays a central role, which indeed proves true. Not only is Odysseus' entire journey almost lost by Circe's wiles while on the island (which therefore brings about mourning), but he and his companions also cease to weep as they ought for their homes during their stay on Aiaia and grow forgetful of their calling to journey on. Even the strange, vowels-only name of Circe's island begins to draw out the multi-faceted riches of Homer's art!

Teaching your student that even the place names, as frustrating as they may be, can be a rewarding and even vital aspect of literary analysis is one of the most effective ways of displaying the art and fruitfulness of close reading.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? How do they live? (1h)

In the *Odyssey*, it is also extremely important to make note of the degree to which each location of Odysseus's travels is civilized. Upon arrival at every new location, Odysseus asks himself some form of this question: "Ah me, what are the people whose land I have come to this time, / and are they violent and savage, and without justice, / or hospitable to strangers, with a godly mind?" (for example VI.119-121). This is the question that we ourselves as readers must ask again and again of each new people group/character we encounter in the manifold locales of the *Odyssey*, since hospitality, the mark of "justice" and a "godly mind," is an overarching theme in this work.

How long a period of time does the story cover? (2b)

Odysseus' wandering, from the time he leaves home until his final return, takes twenty years. The story of the *Odyssey* spans the second decade, with the large majority of his story being related through narration in the last number of weeks after Odysseus is set free by Kalypso.

Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? What ideas were prevalent during the period of the story? (2d,f)

Most scholars will place the events of Homer's epics around the beginning of the 12th-century BC. Another epic poet, Hesiod, who wrote his epic poem *Works and Days* about a generation after Homer, describes these earlier men as a race of demigods, noble and with might that far exceeded any following generations. This was the Age of Heroes, and its myths often bridge the gap between utter fiction and true history, with lines blurred where one category ends and another begins. Thus the extremities of heroic capabilities abound in the *Odyssey* far beyond the realm of possibility in our own age, and yet the imaginary freely intermingles with what we would easily identify with in our own lives even to this day.

What does this mean for our literary analysis, though? Hesiod writes of the heroic race of men: "when Death's veil had covered them over, / Zeus granted them a life apart from other men" (Hes. W. 188-189). This "apartness" is something to which the readers of the heroic myths must pay special attention. The divergence from "normal" standards of human existence not only sets the hero apart from the rest of mankind, but because of this alteration and exaggeration is more readily able to teach those who study it. When something is larger, more expansive, it allows space for more thorough exploration and education. The themes drawn out by the life of a hero are easier to see because both he

and the world that surrounds him are magnified, thus in turn shedding light on the lives of the readers. The hero then offers himself as an enduring identity - like but not the same as a man - around which a community may center itself and learn. A careful observation of this mythic tradition will also find that the heroes are placed not only in the central space of Greek culture, but also in every aspect of human existence. Mortality and immortality, ethics, politics, fate, innocence, violence, knowledge, tradition, religion, law, and love are all pushed to the extremes of knowledge and practice by the heroes. It is within this tradition that readers must learn to see the figure of Odysseus framed.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? (2e)

Odysseus and Penelope are presumably in their forties or fifties by the time of Odysseus' final return, both having missed sharing their middle years of life with one another. But the question of age is most relevant for the inset story-arch of Odysseus' son, Telemachos. Telemachos was born after Odysseus had already left with the rest of the Achaians for Troy, indicating that he would be around twenty years of age at the time of the story, with many questions concerning his own identity. Is he worthy of his father's name and inheritance? Will he become a hero in his own right?

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS

Who is the story about? What does the character say about himself to other people? What do other characters think or say about him? (3j,k)

Featured heavily, though not centrally (like Achilleus or Hector) in the preceding *Iliad*, Odysseus becomes the focal character of Homer's second epic, which details the hero's journey from Troy to his beloved homeland of Ithaka. Though a mighty warrior of thoroughly heroic qualities, Odysseus is never counted among the very strongest, biggest, or swiftest of the Greek champions (as Aias or Achilleus), but stands out among his lordly companions in his cunning, his brilliant capacity for deception and trickery, his intelligence, and his luminous rhetoric (3.d.). Because of this, the epithet "resourceful," denoting all of these qualities, is often attached to his name throughout the *Odyssey* (for more on Homer's use of epithets, see "Questions about Style: Literary Devices."). Even Zeus, in his opening speech, describes Odysseus as being "beyond all other men in mind" (I.66).

When first picking up the *Odyssey*, though, one odd feature of its composition begins to emerge in regard to its central character: Despite being the obvious star and eponymous hero, Odysseus himself does not appear at all until Book V. In fact, the first four books appear to be *much* more about Telemachos, Odysseus' son, than Odysseus himself! Why might this be? Odysseus's strange and *quite* long absence from the beginning of his own book is a wonderful opportunity to discuss how authors might go about structuring their stories, and how both the absence and the presence of characters are equally important to understanding a story.

Instead of simply noting the odd length of Odysseus's absence here (and it is important to learn how to even note something of the sort in the first place!), the reader should also ask *why* Homer would choose to have his hero absent for such a length of time. Doesn't it make you wonder, as a reader, where Odysseus is? Ah, but isn't that the very thing that all of Ithaka, and especially Penelope and Telemachos, are wondering? Though the reader is given a glimpse in the first lines of Book I that Odysseus is being detained by Kalypso, the sheer number of lines stretching between that and his first appearance at the beginning of Book V performs in the very structure of the work the exact emotion of absence that Penelope and Telemachos are feeling. Odysseus is gone for so very long. His absence is felt not only in Ithaka, but in the reader, as book by book drags by without his appearance.

Do you see Homer's genius in the way he begins his work? No matter what the close-reader feels by Odysseus's absence in the beginning – whether confusion or even frustration – in the very act of reading, we are put in the position to be able to taste, even if only a little, the bitter loss and unseeing longing of his household.

Our first image of Odysseus finally arrives in Book V around line 81, where Hermes finds the hero weeping alone on the beach and looking out over the "barren water," mournfully choosing to long after his distant home rather than succumb to a life amidst the tempting riches of Kalypso's dwelling. This first introduction is of vital importance to understanding the character of Odysseus, his virtue and desires. His first words spoken in the work are of no less value to understanding his qualities: "Here is some other thing you devise…" (V.173). In only a few words, Odysseus's most defining heroic quality is made manifest: not only is he clever and cunning, but in this he is also aware of the cleverness in others. Not even when Kalypso promises the thing he most desires does Odysseus let down his guard. The way an author introduces a character, both in first images and in first words, are often the most important to understanding who that character is. Homer is a master of this, and you may want to help your student(s) begin to recognize and think through the way the first appearances and words of each character they encounter throughout the work explains who those characters are and what they do for and in the story.

Odysseus's most defining characteristic is self-acknowledged: "I am Odysseus son of Laertes, known before all men / for the study of crafty designs, and my fame goes up to the heavens" (IX.19-20).

Other characters are in complete agreement concerning his qualities and abilities:

Athene prophecies concerning him before the gods: "He will not long be absent from the beloved land of his fathers, / even if the bonds that hold him are iron, but he will be thinking / of a way to come back, since he is a man of many resources" (I.203-205).

The wise Nestor speaks of Odysseus's irreplaceable value at Troy: "Then there was no man who wanted to be set up / for cunning against great Odysseus; he far surpassed them in every kind of stratagem" (III.120-22).

His wife Penelope also praises her husband: "He knew how to say many false things that were like true sayings" (XIX.203) and adding that in regards to hospitality there was never "such as Odysseus was among men… / for receiving respected strangers and sending them off on their journeys" (XIX.315-316).

What does the character think is the most important thing in life? (3m)

The image of the weeping Odysseus on the shores of Kalypso's island proves indicative throughout the entire work of what is most valuable to the wily hero. Again and again he articulates that above all, "what I want and all my days I pine for / is to go back to my house and see my day of homecoming. / And if some god batters me far out

on the wine-blue water, I will endure it, keeping a stubborn spirit inside me, / for already I have suffered much and done much hard work / on the waves and in the fighting. So let this adventure follow" (V.219-224). And herein lies the true beginning to the main plot of the *Odyssey* and the adventure of Odysseus's journey home. "For nothing is better than this, more steadfast / than when two people, a man and his wife, keep a harmonious / household; a thing that brings much distress to the people who hate them / and pleasure to their well-wishers, and for them the best reputation" (VI.182-185). Not only does Odysseus prize a "harmonious" household above all others, but he places his "best reputation" – even over the glories of war – within it. Thus, even though he is promised endless riches, feasts, comforts, matchlessly beautiful companionship, and even immortality, Odysseus leaves both Kalypso and Circe as lovers, his reason steadfastly remaining that "nothing is more sweet in the end than country and parents / ever, even when far away one lives in a fertile / place, when it is alien country, far from his parents" (IX.33-36). Yet Odysseus hardly leaves either of them immediately without any dalliance whatsoever. Does this make Odysseus unfaithful?

Even if so, one must be careful of reading Christian moral ideals of marital fidelity into a text written out of a culture that had nothing of the sort. The chastity of the wife was of the greatest importance to the Greeks, but for the husband, not so much – at least as long as the woman he was with was unattached to a household of either a father or husband. Interestingly, dissatisfaction with this double standard is voiced by Calypso herself in Book V.118-136, only there in regards to the gods and goddesses. Odysseus has clearly done wrong in the eyes of a Christian ethic, but has he according to the ethic of the text? It may be fruitful to discuss with your students whether the text passes judgment on Odysseus for his philandering (does it cause harm to him or bring dishonor upon his character?), or if Homer sees him still as ultimately a model of fidelity, because "nothing is more sweet in the end" to him than his home.

How does the personality of the character reflect the values of the society (or individual) that produced the story? (3o)

Odysseus marks the emergence of a new kind of hero – one who excels not merely in strength of arms but also, and possibly primarily, in strength of intellect. Again and again, Odysseus's intellectual prowess is set against mere brute force, whether with monsters he meets whom he outsmarts (like the Cyclops), or in comparison to his fellow heroes whose pitfalls, even through all his sufferings, Odysseus avoids. When among the Phaiakians, who challenge one another to various games and competitions before sending their honored guest along his way home, one of the more outspoken of the young men declares that there is no greater glory for a living man than that achieved by "speed of feet" and "strength of hands," directly daring Odysseus to compete (VIII.148). Odysseus replies that the gods give many gifts to men, some in strength and swiftness, and others in goodness of mind and fairness of speech. He goes on, however, to prove himself heroic of body as well as of mind once given the challenge, with his ability to run being the only aspect of competition that the taxing voyage had compromised for him, and the one sport

at which the Phaiakians especially excelled. This scene not only further strengthens the "brain vs. brawn" theme as one of the most important in the work, but also it leads to a remarkably brilliant illustration of Homer's literary genius: The song of the bard Demodokos that immediately follows this encounter. This is no mere story for story's sake; it is in fact an illustration of the very theme that Odysseus's character seeks to prove.

With a little knowledge of Greek mythology, you can show your students this connection as well. Demodokos sings of a love affair between Ares and Aphrodite, the wife of Hephaistos. Ares is the mighty god of war, while Hephaistos the craftsman is known as the "lame god" because of an injury he received at birth, though he remains very clever. Demokodos's song forms a perfect parallel then to the dispute between Odysseus and the young and somewhat insolent Phaiakian man. Odysseus, like Hephaistos, is "lame" compared to the fleet-of-foot Phaiakians, but it is Hephaistos's cleverness that prevails, ultimately shaming the overstepping Ares. Note how the story delights Odysseus after it is told, and now we can more clearly see why!

Not only this, but remember also that the *Odyssey* itself was recited by a bard, and so we find the author himself reflecting on the values and abilities of his craft - the value of story-telling itself, that is, to bring light to our own life, to bring unity, to bring joy, to bring tears of remembrance and lamentation of the things that ought not to be forgotten, to warn, and to educate. On top of this, in a stroke of brilliance, Demokodos's song also warns about the dangers of marital infidelity, hinting at another mega-theme in the work.

This is one of the many good places in the *Odyssey* to pause and reflect on the power and nature of storytelling itself. Stories are told throughout the work – by the bards, by Nestor, Menelaos, and Helen, by the dead, and by Odysseus himself. If one pays special attention to each story and its teller, it should become clear that just as important to the basic narrative of the story is the *way* in which it is told. For example, Helen talks about her actions in Troy a bit differently than Menelaos speaks of them. Odysseus's seems to make even more of himself when weaving his Cretan tale to the swineherd than he was in his actual adventures. Learning to notice these subtle differences is what constitutes the beginning of a good education in close reading. Learning to interpret what these subtleties *mean* is what constitutes an education of a lifetime.

In the very act of composing his own story, Homer seems to have written a story about storytelling and the crucial significance of *how* a story is told. The *way* in which a story is told is what makes a great work great, and it is because of this that we read Homer instead of simply summaries of Homer. The way in which Homer tells his tale – and the way in which his characters within the tale tell their own tales – may be called the body of the story, while the basic narrative itself is the soul. You must have both to know the work and all that it offers to us in its fullness. Demokodos tells a story that is meant to honor Odysseus and reveal the righteousness and power of his character. To understand Demokodos's story in all of its subtlety is not simply to know a story, but to know

Odysseus himself better. In the same way, when we learn to read Homer, we do not simply come to know a story, but we come to understand how better to know the nature and meaning of man as Homer understood it – we learn how to read life itself. If the *way* in which the story is told is the body that reveals the soul of the work, then practicing the art of close reading may be at the same time both enjoyable in and of itself, *and* practice in how to understand what it is to be a person and to come to know other persons.

Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an "Everyman" with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? (3p)

To explore the role of Odysseus, and even any Greek hero in general, is to explore the outer ranges of what it means to exist in the world as a human being, just past the normal or even possible order of things. The way in which a heroic figure participates in such extremities (whether of place, body, or soul) is written just out of reach of human experience in order to reveal to its audience not only their own boundaries, but by exaggerating them to heroic proportions, also allows for a magnified look at the subject matter that particular hero myth explores. In this, Odysseus becomes a model of hospitality and goodness to strangers, the very things that constitute a just man of "godly mind," according to the work. He also embodies the human story of absence and return, as well as the virtues of fidelity, steadfastness, and long-suffering. He is often a paragon of thoughtful and wise decision making whose power lies in the exercise of his mind rather than merely of his arm, and through most everything he remains an icon of piety and righteousness before the gods. But most of all, in his suffering, Odysseus personifies the experience of bitter loss and aching longing that mark the human condition, with which we all may identify.

Who else is the story about? How old is the character? (3b)

As mentioned above, the first four books of the *Odyssey* more or less center around the character of Odysseus's son, Telemachos. Telemachos was born only just after Odysseus's departure for Troy, making him around twenty years of age at this point We find him faced with many questions regarding his own identity and whether or not he himself will be able to become head of his father's household as he comes of age.

Describe the character. (3f)

As is often the case with such great authors as Homer, the character of Telemachos is firmly established and displayed in just a few lines with brief but powerful descriptions. We are first introduced to him: "Now far the first to see Athene was godlike Telemachos, / as he sat among the suitors, his heart deep grieving within him, / imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back / and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter, / and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions" (113-117). In our first description of Odysseus's son, we find him exceptionally observant, perhaps indicating that he has developed a mind like his father's.

That he is, at the same time, grieving is very important to the establishing of his character. His grief shows that far from having forgotten his father or given him up, he is still deeply moved at the memory of him, longing for his return. Mourning in the *Odyssey* is often a signal of virtue, and marks the remembering of things that ought not to be forgotten; for forgetfulness is later shown to be a cause of much trouble and prevents homecoming, even unto death.

Just as important are Telemachos' first words: "Welcome, stranger. / You shall be entertained as a guest among us. Afterward, / when you have tasted dinner, you shall tell us what your need is" (122-124). Here again, he has not only noticed the disguised Athene, but welcomes her, displaying all of the qualities of generosity and godly hospitality that his father famously possesses.

Yet all is not yet right with Telemachos. The disguised Athene, when first she meets him, notices his resemblance to his father, and asks if he is the child of Odysseus. Telemachus answers a bit oddly: "My mother says indeed I am his. I for my part / do not know. Nobody really knows his own father. / But how I wish I could have been rather son to some / man, whom old age overtook among his possessions. / But of mortal men, that man has proved the most ill-fated / whose son they say I am" (I.215-220). Telemachos, as he nears adulthood, now must ask difficult questions of his paternity as he seeks to form his own identity, and perhaps even a heroic identity. He does not merely voice his doubts concerning whether or not he is a biological heir of his father, but rather concerning whether or not he is truly an heir of his father's greatness, or even more, as Telemachos fears as well, of Odysseus's ill fate. Is he worthy to be called a son of god-like Odysseus?

What do other characters think or say about him? (3k)

It may be helpful to note also how just a few lines earlier it was only Telemachos's head and his "fine" eyes that Athene picks out to most resemble Odysseus's. Thus, he appears even to the goddess to be observant and thoughtful like his father. Furthermore, Telemachos's name often is accompanied by the epithet "thoughtful," which certainly shows that a heroic mind lies within him. However, it has not yet matured into the cleverness of "resourceful" Odysseus.

All of this culminates in Athene's call to action for Telemachos : "You should not go on / clinging to your childhood. You are no longer of an age to do that. / Or have you not heard what glory was won by great Orestes / among all mankind, when he killed the murderer of his father, / the treacherous Aigisthos, who had slain his famous father? / So you too, dear friend, since I can see you are big and splendid, / be bold also, so that in generations to come they will praise you" (I.296-302). After this, Telemachos goes on to amaze both Penelope and the suitors with two daring speeches, and he takes the household upon himself in two swift and forthright actions of boldness – the very thing Athena encouraged.

Thus Telemachos sets out on the beginnings of his own heroic journey in search of knowledge concerning his father. And why does Athene have Telemachos wander? "It was I myself / who saw him along on that journey, so he would win reputation / by going there" (XIII.421-23)

Who else is the story about? Describe the character. (3f)

Mention must also be made of Odysseus' faithful and long-suffering wife Penelope. Her introduction follows: "When she, shining among women, came near the suitors, / she stood by the pillar that supported the roof with its joinery, / holding her shining veil in front of her face, to shield it" (I.332-334). Again and again Homer uses this exact formula to describe her appearance before the suitors. Remember that every little detail is important in such brilliantly crafted poetry, and here is another opportunity for you to ask your student(s) specific questions about the details of such a scene. Penelope is drawn up in close parallelism with the pillar of the household, making clear that her fidelity and wisdom has held the home together for Odysseus's return. This is emphasized even more luminously when it is noted that in Greek culture during that time, women were entirely veiled except for when they were before their husbands. In fact, the moment they were unveiled was the exact moment of marriage. So Penelope's vigilant guarding of her face with her "shining veil" by the pillar not only shows that she is the one upholding the household, but that she is accomplishing it brightly through her characteristic faithfulness. The home is supported because she keeps herself veiled.

Penelope, like her husband, is also "resourceful" and employs trickery to overcome those that would otherwise overwhelm her with their force, as in her weaving trick (described around II.95). Similarly, around Book XIII.380, she gives out promises to each suitor, secretly grieving for her husband's homecoming. Penelope is certainly as cunning and devious as her husband, and it even unites them: "She spoke, and much enduring great Odysseus was happy / because she beguiled gifts out of them, and enchanted their spirits / with blandishing words, while her own mind had other intentions" (XVIII.281-283). Note what Odysseus is attracted to here is her virtuous cunning, in opposition to what the suitors' find primarily appealing about her.

Penelope sees her beauty as intimately tied to her reputation and thus never compromises either (XVIII.124 & 128). In Book XXIV, the shade of Agamemnon summarizes her character perfectly: "O fortunate son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices, / surely you won yourself a wife endowed with great virtue. / How good was proved the heart that is in blameless Penelope, / Ikarios' daughter, and how well she remembered Odysseus, / her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never / die away, that the immortals will make for the people / of earth a thing of grace in the song for prudent Penelope" (192-198).

Is there a single character (or group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? In what way is he antagonistic? What actions does he take to oppose the protagonist? (4a-c)

Regarding antagonists, there is quite a list of those who to varying degrees hinder Odysseus's homecoming or increase his suffering along the way:

- Poseidon is angry at Odysseus for blinding and shaming his son Polyphemus, and is most active in stirring up the ocean and weather in order to prevent Odysseus's return.
- The suitors have been courting for the hand of Odysseus's wife, all the while feasting gluttonously on his possessions and taking advantage of his household. Athene first speaks of them in Book I: "How insolently they seem to swagger about in their feasting / all through the house. A serious man who came in among them / could well be scandalized, seeing much disgraceful behavior" (I.227-229). Though they themselves are guests in Odysseus's household, they do not prove hospitable in the least, shunning Odysseus when he comes in the guise of a beggar: "Do we not already have enough other / vagabonds, and bothersome beggars to ruin our feasting? / Or, now that men gather here to eat up your master's substance, / is that not enough, but you had to invite this one in also" (XVII.376-379). Though they are consuming his household, they are less than Odysseus in every way – in strength, in mind, in hospitality, and in virtue. Towards the end of the work, when it becomes clear that none of the suitors will be able to win Penelope's hand, one of their leaders, Eurymachos, grieves. Yet he is not saddened by the fact of not winning such a wife, but because all the suitors, himself included, have come so far short of Odysseus, "a shame for men unborn to be told of" (XXI.250). They are weaker and less virtuous than Odysseus, as well as cowardly. Just as important as the introduction of a character is that character's end, and so it is fitting that when the leader of the suitors, Antinoös, is finally killed by Odysseus in Book XXII, he is shot with an arrow through the throat, the part of the body through which he had both spoken haughty words and fed his greedy belly.
- The Lotus Eaters are not actively opposed to Odysseus's mission, but the magic of their lotus plants results in such a daze of forgetfulness that the journey is nearly lost then and there.
- The Cyclops is only one of many monsters Odysseus must overcome in order to make his homecoming, but he is certainly the most important. Polyphemus is uncivilized and "lawless of mind." He proves to be the very opposite of a hospitable host, making his guests his meal rather than making a meal for his guests. Once again, Odysseus must employ the very best of his cunning to escape the land of the Cyclopes alive with the remnant of his companions.
- The sirens' song would have tempted Odysseus to be consumed by his past and destroy his future in the process.

- Even Odysseus's companions prove to be somewhat antagonistic in their folly and their disobedience to their leader, most notably in their refusal to take orders from Odysseus regarding the cattle of Helios. This leads to their swift demise, as prophesied.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT

What does the protagonist want? Is the conflict an external one, having to do with circumstances in the protagonist's physical world, or is it an internal conflict, taking place in his mind and emotions? (5a, e)

Most fundamentally, the story is about Odysseus trying to reach home with his companions after ten grueling years of fighting the Trojans. Over the ten years of his journey home, Odysseus suffers conflicts in most every possible manner, yet largely they arise externally to himself. Though Odysseus certainly suffers emotionally and psychologically, he is never conflicted within over his deepest desires to go home. His virtue is tempted and even compromised at certain points, perhaps, but it is always due to some form of external conflict, and not one arising purely out of a tortured psyche.

Does God himself (or Providence, or Fate) oppose the character? (6l)

The vast ocean itself stands between Odysseus and his homecoming, and often it is stirred up by its lord Poseidon, who rages against Odysseus for the harm and insult the hero did to Poseidon's son, Polyphemus. Poseidon can never kill Odysseus, though, because Zeus, the arch-god, wills that Odysseus should make his homecoming successfully.

Do physical or geographical impediments stand in the character's way? (6a)

Other impediments that we today might consider natural take on a more mythical color, in the form of such creatures as Charybdis, the whirlpool monster who swallows Odysseus's raft and nearly Odysseus himself along with it.

Are there people who represent an obstacle to the character's pursuit of his goal? (6f)

Odysseus meets numerous obstacles along the way, such as the temptation to marry beauteous Kalypso or Nausikaa and settle richly with them, or the enchantments of Circe, whose food makes his companions "forgetful of their own country." At one time, Odysseus and his companions are even in danger of being eaten by the Cyclops Polyphemus when he catches them feasting on what is not their own.

Is the conflict a man vs. himself struggle? A man vs. man struggle? A man vs. God struggle? (6k,g,i)

Odysseus's own hubris and his companions' folly often result in even more perilous situations. For example, Odysseus's companions' greed and mistrust of the goodness of their leader results in their opening of the bag of winds, by which they are blown back to Aiolos as they are finally within reach of the Ithakan shore (the opening of Book X). Also, their unwillingness to heed the warnings of Odysseus results in their final destruction after they feast on the sacred cattle of Helios. In respect to Odysseus himself, he nearly brings about his own ruin as well as that of his companions when he cannot restrain himself from throwing proud words of defiance at the blinded Polyphemus as they leave his shore. Again and again such actions from within the heroic company itself nearly bring utter destruction on the journey and often drive the journeyers back and back again to the places from which they have just come, further and further from their homecoming.

The question of Odysseus's fidelity to his men is never in question, but his wisdom and ability in restraining himself does not always prove above reproach. Even his second-in-command Eurylochos dares to question his temperance, and perhaps rightly, saying that "it was by this man's recklessness" that many had perished by the hand of the Cyclops, as well as the one on Circe's island (X.437).

There is certainly a man v. man struggle, most clearly signified in the final battle between Odysseus and the haughty suitors. Man v. nature is also present, but in the mythic imagination, this struggle is closely tied to the man v. god struggle.

Man v. monster could also be included, many of which Odysseus must face before making his homecoming. The episode in the cave of Polyphemus is by far the most important of all of these. The Cyclopes are described as a people wholly uncivilized, with no semblance of democracy or community of which to speak (IX.105-115). Even Polyphemus "stayed away by himself," and "his mind was lawless" (IX.189). Odysseus describes him as "a man who was endowed with great strength, / and wild, with no true knowledge of laws or any good customs" (IX.215). Above all though, Polyphemus acts as a perfect example of an anti-host, acting unjustly before "Zeus the guest god" (IX.270). No relationship or conversation can be made with him. Polyphemus only kills and eats. He is the caricature of the insatiable feaster, governed by his strength and by his belly alone.

Even Homer's poetry beautifully articulates the nature of the monstrous man when the author compares Polyphemus's bludgeon to the size and shape of a mast (IX.322) in a beautifully metaphorical comparison. An instrument that Polyphemus uses for savage and blunt violence is compared to a very complex and advanced instrument of civilized technology. Odysseus had already commented specifically on the fact that the Cyclopes were not capable of shipbuilding, and this brutal bludgeon, both like and wholly unlike a ship's mast at the same time, is the very instrument that is used against Polyphemus, to *blind* him. Polyphemus's fundamental flaw, a lack of civility, is what

ultimately undoes him. At this point, a reader should begin noticing similarities between Polyphemus's flaws and those of other characters in the novel, especially the suitors. It almost appears as if, like the heroes, Homer uses the exaggerations of the monsters (what makes them monstrous) to reveal monstrosities, or inhumanness, in man.

What other problems are there in the story? Do characters' actions provoke further conflict or unrest in the story? (7b)

In addition to all of the difficulties Odysseus faces during his journey home, he is met with the problem of the reckless suitors who are consuming his household and courting his wife when he arrives. One of the chief injustices committed by the suitors centers around their feasting. These men, being too young to have joined in the toils and sufferings of war as well as the trials of homecoming with the other Achaians, are arrogant and unproven. They also take advantage of the absence of their lord, day by day glutting themselves on his riches and shaming his household. It should not be surprising then that the motif of feasting - both its joys and its dangers - appears again and again as central to the narrative of the Odyssean adventures. The giving and receiving of hospitality, particularly in respect to eating and drinking, become vital to the movement of the homecoming. With the singing of his story itself taking place during a feast, Odysseus relates that the very first misery to befall the Achaians was brought about by excessive feasting: "There I was for the light foot and escaping, and urged it, but they were greatly foolish and would not listen," choosing instead to drink and slaughter many sheep and cattle (IX.43-61). Due to this lack of wisdom and failure to honor the word of their lord, the Achaians' tarrying allowed the Kikonians time to gather more forces and strike back, resulting in the first deaths of the journey home. Those who do not honor Odysseus, choosing instead to revel uninvited in what had become enemy territory, receive their reward in death and destruction.

Are there other things in the story that distract the characters from the main goals? (7a)

Directly afterward, Odysseus and his company come upon on the land of the Lotus-Eaters. Once again, the food distracts the men, with the power of the "honey-sweet fruit of lotus" causing them to "forget the way home" (IX.97). Responsibility to the family, to the home, and to their lord is lost to their voracious desire.

The Kikonians and Lotus Eaters are set up as types of the two dangers that are most potent against Odysseus's homecoming – violence and forgetfulness. Both are brought about by feasting in some way. For the heroes of the story as well as the villains, intemperance always results in ruin.

When they come to Polyphemus's cave, Odysseus and the Achaians become themselves uninvited guests, thieving the rich stores of their host, unwelcomed (IX.231-233). Once again, their discourteous feasting and disregard for the host to whom the

meals rightfully belong result in the woe of those who participate. Then, coming upon Circe, the events of the narrative once again center around the table. Echoes of Ithaka abound not only in the feasting, but also in the figure of Circe herself, like Penelope in her godlike beauty and her work at the loom. Yet all but one of Odysseus's companions fall into the same trouble as they had with the Lotus-Eaters, when the enchantress's provisions cause them to forget their homeland and transform them into the pigs that they emulate (X.230-240). Odysseus is spared by his wisdom, telling his hostess: "Oh, Circe, how could any man right in his mind ever endure to taste of the food and drink that are set before him, until with his eyes he saw his companions set free?" (X.383-385). Out of devotion to his companions, Odysseus restrains himself from food and drink, and so avoids the dangers involved in the feast laid before him.

Festivities are fittingly absent from Book XI and the house of Hades, but appear straightaway upon the company's return in the beginning of Book XII as Circe offers them a generous meal (XII.16-24). Finally, Odysseus narrates: "But when they had put away their desire for eating and drinking, they remembered and they cried for their beloved companions" (XII.308-309). Memory only comes to serve the Achaians' piety when they put away their gluttonous tendencies. Both they and the suitors come to ruin because they never learned to fast. Because they do not put away their desire, they do not remember. Because they do not cry for their beloved companions, they will reap their own misery.

Is there a conflict within the conflict? (7e)

On top of all of this, Odysseus does not yet realize that simply arriving back at home will only compound his problems, for his home is no longer his home completely. Another conflict, by the presence of the suitors, has arisen in the midst of the conflict of his journey towards homecoming. Telemachos sums up the layered conflict nicely in Book II: "There are two evils. I have lost a noble father, one who / was king once over you here, and was kind to you like a father; and now here is a greater evil, one which presently / will break up the whole house and destroy all my livelihood. / For my mother, against her will, is beset by suitors" (46-50). This particular combination of evil lies at the heart of this story.

However, it is important to note that the "greater evil" named here by Telemachos is not the loss of Odysseus, but the presence of the suitors. It would appear then that the *Odyssey*'s central conflict does not reside simply in Odysseus's absence, but rather in what his absence creates: an opportunity for the dissolution of marriage and the home. Thus it is of utmost importance to the work that Odysseus's final trial consists of proving his true identity to his wife as her husband. The way in which his identity is proven is no less important (beginning in Book XXIII.181). Only Odysseus knows that the entire structure of his household is built and sustained around the marriage bed, which in turn is carved from a tree with roots still deep in the earth. In this beautiful image, the marriage bed, symbolizing the unity of a husband and wife, is the well-set pillar around which the

rest of a home is built. When this unity is "beset," not only does the household suffer, but the entire society. This Odysseus – and no other mortal man – knows, and this knowledge is what ultimately reunites him to his wife, bringing peace to the land.

How is the main problem solved? Does the protagonist get what he's after? Is he helpless in the end to achieve his goal, or does he triumph by virtue of his own efforts? (9a,e)

Odysseus, with the warning voice of the shade of Agamemnon ensuring that he will not make the same mistake, finally arrives back at Ithaka. With all the artful cunning that he can himself devise, and with the help of the goddess Athene who disguises him as a beggar, Odysseus reunites with his son, tests his remaining servants to see who remains faithful to him, wins the archery contest that his wife had devised to broker her hand in marriage, and puts all of her presumptuous suitors to the sword. He is home and peace is finally restored to his household.

Is the situation pleasantly resolved, or is it resolved in a terrible way? Does the big conflict develop into a larger battle? (9c,f)

The main strings of conflict are pleasantly resolved in that all of the protagonists receive what they desire. However this resolution comes about with much bloodshed, both for the suitors and the servants who proved unfaithful. Even so, nearly all this peace is lost in the last book, when the men of Ithaka come to fight Odysseus and his household in order to avenge the death of their sons. They are angry, for at this point they see Odysseus as responsible for two whole generations of death. Yet Athene steps in once again, supernaturally restoring peace, and the story closes.

How does the story end? (10)

Following the battle, Eurykleia runs up to call Penelope. Penelope is wary at first, fearing further deception. Her reaction to seeing Odysseus for the first time is perhaps a bit unexpected, even prompting a stern rebuke from Telemachos. This, however, is most fitting for the family that survived both at home and abroad for a decade through their mistrust and intelligent carefulness. After Odysseus proves his identity by speaking of the singular way in which he made their bed, a fact that only he would know, Penelope believes and breaks down weeping in with joy. Given the final proof of his return, they are reunited, and share one another's respective stories through the night. The next day, Odysseus goes to his father Laertes to reunite with him, and they share a meal together. Despite their best efforts to mask the killing, the personified goddess "Rumor" goes about the town and makes the massacre known. The parents of the suitors gather to put Odysseus and his household to the sword, but another battle is averted by Athene. Finally, peace reigns throughout Ithaka. Very little is left for the dénouement after the final battle, and all of the last little pieces fall into place in a quite satisfying way, leaving no loose ends, except that Odysseus eventually must set out again on the journey that Teiresias foretold. Still, the opening scene in Hades at the beginning of Book XXIV is

nice, but has for many scholars seemed quite out of place. In fact many classicists suggest that the original story ended a book or two earlier, and that the last pieces are a later interpolation.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME

What is the main idea of the story? (13)

The complexity of Homer's epic often means that any kind of summary of his work often does violence to what he stages with such subtlety in the work itself. Still, certain threads may be found woven throughout the story that are vital to its composition and worldview. For example, Odysseus's skill of mind is matched only by steadfastness and long-suffering. Again and again, cleverness, cunning, and watchfulness overcome force, strength, and power, even at overwhelming odds.

The suffering of the protagonist is itself an important theme, offering the reader a cathartic and even empathetic experience as they recognize and share in Odysseus's own sufferings as an extreme icon and recapitulation of the suffering of human life in which we all share. Odysseus's journey home is a clear allegory for the journey of human life in general, and our own longing to ever return to peace. Fidelity of and to the home is the most basic substructure of the *Odyssey*.

The testing of character and of virtue, by the gods of man and by man to man, is also a thread of utmost importance to the unfolding of the Odyssean drama. Towards the end, the reason for the way in which Athene interacts with men is more explicitly unfolded: "She spoke, but did not yet altogether turn the victory / their way. She still was putting to proof the strength and courage / alike of Odysseus and his glorious son" (XXII.236-8).

This also brings to bear the question of the role of the gods in the *Odyssey*. In addition to the testing of Athene, the very first speech in the *Odyssey*, spoken by Zeus near the beginning of Book I, outlines what very well may be the basic theological position of the work:

> "Oh for shame, how the mortals put the blame upon us / gods, for they say evils come from us, but it is they, rather, / who by their own recklessness win sorrow beyond what is given, / as now lately, beyond what was given, Aigisthos married / the wife of Atreus/ son, and murdered him on his homecoming, / though he knew it was sheer destruction, for we ourselves had told him, / sending Hermes, the mighty watcher, Argeïphontes, / not to kill the man, nor court his lady for marriage; / for vengeance would come on him from Orestes, son of Atreides, / whenever he came of age and longed for his own country / So Hermes told him, but for all his kind intention he could not / persuade the mind of Aigisthos. And now he has paid for everything."

Whether or not this is truly the nature of the gods as shown in the rest of the work and as thought to be true by the other characters is one of the richest topics of discussion that can be had about the *Odyssey*. Wrestling through what it means to be pious and righteous before the gods, as well as the consequences of impiety, cannot be separated from the most basic discussions of this work's themes.

Another major subject of the *Odyssey* is the fear of obscurity and the importance of reputation, even everlasting reputation. This is most valued of all by the hero (and Ancient Greek society as a whole), for Odysseus would have rather died on the fields of Ilion than in obscurity on the sea. Death upon the sea is most terrible for him not because of the death itself, but because it would be a death with no way of memorial.

Finally, another theme of the Odyssey that runs the course of the entire tale surrounds the question of what makes and sets apart a civilized people of hospitable generosity and of godly mind. Odysseus passes judgment on this theme and summarizes its immense consequence to Eurykleia directly after the climax of the final battle with the suitors: "Keep your joy in your heart, old dame; stop, do not raise up / the cry. It is not piety to glory so over slain men / These were destroyed by the doom of the gods and their own hard actions, / for these men paid no attention at all to any man on earth / who came their way, no matter if he were base or noble. / So by their own recklessness they have found a shameful / death" (XXII.411-418). This quote brilliantly ties together several of the themes in the book – god-man relationships, suffering, hospitality, etc. – while also pronouncing a moral judgment both in regards to the sufferers and to those who now bear witness to the climax of this story (embodied in Eurykleia and extending even now to us as readers).

Even the lowly are raised up when they prove to be hospitable, as the swineherd Eumaios is blessed by Odysseus not only because he is faithful to his lord, but also because he gives all of his best to a stranger: "May Zeus, stranger, and the other gods everlasting grant you / all you desire the most, for you have received me heartily" (XIV.53). Much of this theme culminates in reflection upon a community's call to responsibility for one another and any unfortunate stranger who may happen into their midst. Regarding this, one of the most important concluding quotes in book XXIV is spoken by one of the suitor's fathers to the rest of the Ithakan leaders: "It is by your own weakness, dear friends, that these things have happened. / You would not listen to me, nor to Mentor, shepherd of the people, / when we told you to make your sons give over their senseless / mood; for they, in their evil recklessness, did a great wrong / in showing no respect to the wife, despoiling the possessions, / of a lordly man" (455-60).

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES

Because we study ancient works of poetry in translation, some of the typical poetical devices you may look for in a more recent work of English are simply not present. The most important and foundational aspect to the art of Ancient Greek poetry, its meter, is simply untranslatable. Homer is a master of the epic meter (dactylic hexameter), but none of his subtleties make their way into English (for instance, the meter of the line that describes the boulder rolling back down after Sisyphus pushes it up in Book XI perfectly mimics the sound of a rock rolling down a hill). Similarly, any alliteration or rhyme that you may find in your translation may very be beautifully artful in its own right, but is utterly incidental to the translator and how he or she has chosen to unite their own art of translating to Homer's art.

Instead, the student should pay special attention to what *does* make it through the translation and is unique to Homer's style. For example, Homer will often repeat certain lines in a formulaic way to show the passage of time or to remind his listeners (remember it was orally passed down first!) of certain aspects of the story about which they may have forgotten.

Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)

Perhaps for Homer, this question would better be phrased in the opposite way: "Does the author use uncommon words and phrases to describe common things or events?" For example, again and again throughout the work, Homer describes a character speaking with "winged words." This is a figuratively rich way of describing the act of speaking: not only do words spoken out loud travel through the air as if on wings, but the wings spoken of here can also denote the "wings" of an arrow – the "feathering" that aerodynamically guides an arrow to its target. Thus "winged words" are words that are not only spoken aloud, but also are spoken with such excellence that they hit their intended mark forcefully and piercingly. A further example of this **figurative language** would be Homer's use of the phrase "eaters of bread" to describe men. Yet this phrase does not simply indicate any sort of man, but civilized men, for men who eat bread are also men capable of making bread, a process that requires a certain degree of technology and skill.

Stock epithets (oft-repeated descriptions Homer uses to identify his characters) are used by Homer to identify the central quality or qualities of a given character (usually a god or hero) and also help the poet's metrical composition with lines or half-lines to which he may often return while reciting such a long work. They are also helpful aids to the reader or listener's memory of all the different characters. Odysseus is "resourceful,"

Telemachos is "thoughtful," Poseidon is the "earth-shaker," Athene is "grey-eyed," and many may be "god-like" or "brilliant." One example of these stock epithets is of "rosy-fingered Dawn." This is less a metaphor than a reminder for the modern reader that the entire cosmos for the Ancient Greek was brimming with life and personality. Dawn, the goddess Eos, would arise every day to open the gates of heaven for Helios, fingers dripping with the rich colors of the morning dew. An abundance of such images can be found throughout Homer. One of the most important habits you can begin to inspire in your students is to not simply be struck by something strange and move on, but to be struck by something strange and to *pause*, to ask questions of it. It is not always fruitful to do so at first, but the riches that will begin to unfold for the reader once this habit begins to take hold, especially with Homer, are unparalleled in their beauty.

Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader's mind? (16)

One of Homer's most distinctive and masterful poetic strokes lies in his use of **extended similes**, and their beauty, from the quirkiest to the most poignant, is certainly not lost in translation. Rather than simply following the most basic formula of a simile (*x* is like or as *y*), an extended simile adds layer upon layer of detail upon the comparison, enriching it and illuminating all the more the central subject.

For example:

"Seeing this, long-suffering great Odysseus was happy, / and lay down in the middle, and made a pile of leaves over him. / As when a man buries a burning log in a black ash heap / in a remote place in the country, where none live near as neighbors, / and saves the seed of fire, having no other place to get a light / from, so Odysseus buried himself in the leaves" (V.486-491).

"As she listened her tears ran and her body was melted, / as the snow melts along the high places of the mountains / when the West Wind has piled it there, but the South Wind melts it, / and as it melts the rivers run full flood. It was even / so that her beautiful cheeks were streaming tears, as Penelope / wept for her man, who was sitting there by her side" (XIX.204-209).

"And as when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming, / after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship on the open / water, pounding it with the weight of wind and the heavy / seas, and only a few escape the ray water landward / by swimming, with a thick scurf of salt coated upon them, / and gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil; / so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him, / and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms" (XXIII.233-240).

The use of **personification** should also receive at least a brief note in passing, simply because in the Homeric imagination – growing as it does out of the rich Greek mythic tradition – personification is not simply a literary device, but a religious and cosmic reality. Almost *all* things are personified in some way, which is to say, they *actually* possess a sort of personhood in the work, and not that they simply *appear* to. Whirlpools are monsters, Rumor flits about a town whispering in men's ears, Dawn has

rosy-fingers, Odysseus addresses the river as “my lord” in hopeful prayer, and much, much more.

Does the author use the characters and events in his story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)

Though not a particularly common effect in Homer, the author does employ **irony** every so often, and when he does, it is important to take note. For example in XIV.156-157 the disguised Odysseus declares that he “detests” those who babble “beguiling falsehoods” as he detests the “doorways of Death,” while he himself is in the act of fabricating his entire life story before the swineherd. This should raise important questions in the reader’s mind about the role of falsehood and trickery in the *Odyssey*. Is Odysseus being intentionally ironic for comedic effect – speaking against falsehood while himself being false – or is there underneath the apparent irony an actual distinction being made between falsehood and cunning?

Homer’s work is also highly **allusive**, as he constantly draws not only from the *Iliad* but from many other aspects of the Greek mythic tradition, which in turn buttress and beautify his own poetic endeavor. One of the most important allusions he employs is to other Greek heroes, and – especially for the major themes in the *Odyssey* – to the house of Agamemnon. Agamemnon was the brother of Menelaos and one of the mightiest heroes of the Achaian army. Before he reaches home though, his cousin Aigisthos has seduced Agamemnon’s wife, Klytaimestra, and taken over Agamemnon’s household. The two lovers then plot Agamemnon’s murder, and he is violently killed at the very feast thrown to welcome him home from Troy. Agamemnon and Klytaimestra’s son, Orestes, then avenges the murder of his father by killing both his mother and Aigisthos and restores the household to its rightful heir, himself. This story is referenced again and again throughout the entirety of the *Odyssey*, and each of its major characters corresponds to one of the major characters in the *Odyssey*. Homer makes this allusion with the intention of heightening the suspense, that is developing the internal story conflict. Will Odysseus suffer the same fate as Agamemnon? Will he stumble into a trap, or will he in his defining cleverness choose to make his arrival stealthily, mistrustingly testing each member of his household before he makes himself known? Will Penelope prove to be a wife of the same character as Klytaimestra? Will Telemachos show himself worthy of his father’s line as Orestes, taking vengeance upon those that would seek to disrupt his household and corrupt his mother? Homer often employs such rich allusions in order to illuminate certain aspects of the story that would not be seen otherwise, or to form the sort of questions in his reader’s mind that he desires his audience to be wrestling through as they read the work.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT

Who is the author? (18)

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are traditionally ascribed to Homer, the most famous and earliest of Greek epic poets, who likely lived somewhere between the 9th and 8th centuries BC, marking these works also as the very beginning of Western Literature. Sadly little to nothing is known concerning any specifics about "Homer"– so little, in fact, that most scholars believe it likely that "Homer" is simply a traditional name given to a collective authorship of multiple poets who each had a hand in the composition of the poems over the course of several generations. Perhaps the most we can gather from the elusive figure of Homer is that, as a rhapsode, his life and the worlds he wrought in verse oriented themselves entirely around song, and thus: "The gods did this, and spun the destruction / of peoples, for the sake of the singing of men hereafter" (VIII.579-580).

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SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. What sets Odysseus apart from the other Greek heroes alluded to throughout the work, and how does this quality (or qualities) contribute to his success and longevity? How is he similar to the other heroes? Do the similarities harm him or help him or both?
2. Does Zeus's opening speech concerning the role that the gods play in men's fates prove true? If not, are there other moments in the *Odyssey* that put forth a different theological vision? Does the work make a final judgment on this subject, or simply present different views?
3. What makes a hero in the *Odyssey*? What are the characteristics that must be proven? Must he be given anything? Must he go anywhere? Can any of characters besides Odysseus be called heroic? Why?
4. Though cunning and trickery often save the lives of the protagonists of the story, is deceit always seen as a universal good in the moral vision of the *Odyssey*? If so, how does it differ from mere lying or falsehood? If not and it appears to be more akin to the use of fire (both dangerous and beneficial), what situations or ways of employing it make the use of deceit good or bad?
5. Do the imaginary or mythical aspects of the story (whether in the creatures, lands, divinities, or abilities) serve a purpose beyond merely making the story exciting? Do the imaginary or mythical things shed light on those aspects of life that are more common? For example, does the monstrous Polyphemus shed any light on the monstrous characteristics of the suitors? How?
6. Research some of the allusions to other parts of Greek myth that seem important to the story, and show how they might clarify or bring light to one of the major themes in the work.
7. What is the role of storytelling as seen within the *Odyssey* itself? What is the importance of bards, and why do so many of the characters throughout the work tell stories, with Odysseus himself being the chief storyteller? Do the stories change based on the situation the character is in or whether the character is speaking of him/herself or of another person?
8. What does the work deem to be justice and/or godliness? Does it portray a clear vision of what living a good life looks like? What is this vision?
9. According to this work, what's a good marriage, and what good is marriage? That is, did the ancient Greeks esteem marriage as a good? If so, why? How did they distinguish between a good marriage and a bad one? Whom did a good marriage benefit? Merely the spouses? Others? Why?

10. According to this work, what is a good man? Telemachos, approaching his own manhood, longs to discover this truth. Does he? How did the ancient Greeks (via Homer) quantify manhood? And how does this bear on their understanding of fatherhood?
11. Faithfulness is a quality central to the text. We read of faithful Penelope, watch Odysseus test the faithfulness of his servants upon his return, and are told he himself was a faithful man. According to Homer, what is faithfulness?

STORY CHARTS

The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics.* As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the ***climax*** and central ***themes*** of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central ***conflict***. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

The Odyssey of Homer: Story Chart

SETTING

A Greece of the mythic past, from the heights of Olympus to the depths of Hades, from the breadth of the wide ocean to the warmth of Ithaka's hearth.

CHARACTERS

Odysseus the ever resourceful far-wanderer;
his faithful wife Penelope,
their coming-of-age son Telemachos,
the haughty suitors, a vast array of peoples, monsters, heroes, and gods

Exposition:
Odysseus has yet to return from the sack of Troy. Meanwhile, suitors court his wife and have all but consumed his household. Only Telemachos longs for his father's return.

Rising Action:
Telemachos sets out to find news of his father; Odysseus must encounter all of the temptations and dangers of a decade-long heroic journey; the suitors grow impatient.

Climax:
Odysseus returns, reveals himself, reclaims his household, and takes vengeance on the suitors;
Telemachos discovers in his father the example and encouragement he needs to become heroic himself.

Denouement:
The unfaithful servants are punished; Odysseus proves his identity to his wife and they reunite; Odysseus goes to his father and they feast.

Conclusion:
Athene halts a final battle between Odysseus and the suitors' fathers, and peace is made in Ithaka at last.

THEME:

The greatest journey is the journey home.
A strong marriage is the root of the home and the bedrock of society.
Intellect subdues force and strength.
Hospitality to strangers = a just heart and a godly mind.

PLOT

CONFLICT

Will resourceful Odysseus at last achieve his longed-for homecoming despite the wrath of Poseidon, and will he be able to rescue his marriage and household from the grasp of the reckless suitors? Will Telemachos prove himself a man worthy of his Father's heritage?

The Odyssey of Homer: Story Chart