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## ODYSSEY

**First compiled:** Eighth century B.C., first codified, early second century B.C.  
(English translation, 1616)

**Type of work:** Epic poem

The return of Odysseus to Ithaca nearly twenty years after his departure for Troy represents his personal struggle, often against larger forces, to restore the stability that war had cast aside.

Read at its most basic level, the *Odyssey* recounts Odysseus' struggles to return to his native island of Ithaca after ten years of fighting at Troy. It appears to be a highly particularized account of one warrior's struggles and sufferings. No doubt exists that Odysseus remains the focus; though names of his crew appear at intervals, they collectively constitute a vehicle that gets their master part of the way home, and all of them die long before their master reaches home. Even the mythic Phaeacians, who literally place the sleeping hero on his remote western island, remain peculiarly nameless, except for the family that rules them, but Alcinous, Areté, and Nausicaä merely approve this final phase of the journey. The seafaring Phaeacians themselves suffer permanent hardship for their good deed: Poseidon landlocks their harbors in retribution for Odysseus' having blinded Polyphemus the Cyclops, the sea-god's monster son.

Once Odysseus finally realizes that the Phaeacians have actually returned him to Ithaca, and not merely abandoned him on a forsaken island, in order to steal the treasure that their king had given to him, the hero proceeds to test everyone he meets, starting with Eumaeus, his swineherd, and Telemachus, the son whom he had had to abandon in infancy in order to honor his commitment to fight at Troy. He tests his old nurse, Eurycleia, who, when she recognizes his scar received in youth during a boar hunt, appropriately venerates him. He tests his wife, Penelope, who has waited for Odysseus more than nineteen years, resisting more than a score of much younger suitors. Her stratagem of weaving and unweaving a funeral shroud for the aging Laërtes, Odysseus' father, allows her to delay choosing a new husband, but it also allows this assortment of brash young men with decidedly uncourtly manners to move into Odysseus' great hall and deplete the wealth of his household through their ceaseless banquets and irresponsible behavior. This irresponsibility extends to the moral sphere as well, for the suitors, in short order, corrupt the handmaidens of the household.

True to form, Odysseus arrives disguised as a beggar, tests the suitors, finds that they have abused the laws of hospitality, and kills them all. He ratifies this action by pronouncing moral judgment on the handmaidens, as well. Once they have cleaned the great hall of the suitors' blood, he orders the handmaidens to be collectively

hanged in the courtyard. While this mass slaughter is in progress, Phemius, the court rhapsode, is ordered by Odysseus to sing as loudly as possible to the loudest of musical accompaniments in order to cover the screams of those being killed. Furthermore, Odysseus enlists both Telemachus and Eumaeus as accomplices. The first thing that Odysseus and his nineteen-year-old son do together is, in effect, commit mass murder, then retreat to the suburban vineyard at which old Laërtes is awaiting the arrival of the fathers of the suitors, who are avid for vengeance. Another slaughter is about to begin when the goddess Athene, the mentor of Odysseus from the outset, calls a halt, and the *Odyssey* ends.

Seen in this way, Odysseus does not appear to be a very nice man, and certainly not very heroic. Even so, his epithet *polutropos* (many-wiled) implies that there is more to his character, and correspondingly to Homer's poem, than this rather negative reading implies. Indeed, virtually every action of Odysseus admits of positive and negative interpretations. In this respect, Homer's Odysseus mirrors humanity at large. To assess Odysseus positively, it is necessary to consider external particulars more carefully than has been done above. It is also important to bear in mind details that Homer assumes his audience knows and therefore does not, given the limited parameters of epic poetry, feel particularly obligated to supply.

First of all, Odysseus had never wanted to fight at Troy. He had been perfectly happy as king of his rural island with his young wife, Penelope, and infant son, Telemachus. He had even feigned madness by sowing his fields with salt instead of seed in order to escape his obligation to restore Helen to Menelaus. Canny Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus, recognized immediately, however, that this was a typical Odyssean ruse. To test Odysseus' sanity, Agamemnon placed Telemachus in the path of the plowshare, and of course Odysseus had to turn the plow aside to spare the "seed" that he prized most of all: his son and heir. Homer knows that his audience will recognize immediately the disparate values of Odysseus and Agamemnon, for the latter would be willing to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigeneia in order to ensure a favorable wind for the departing armada. Agamemnon would, of course, pay the price for his moral lapse. Having escaped ten years of war with barely a scratch, his wife Clytemnestra, ironically Helen's half sister, would murder him on the day of his return as he emerged from his bath.

Placing these sets of events beside each other shows the essential difference between Odysseus and Agamemnon. Odysseus privileges the values of home and family; Agamemnon quickly recognizes affronts to the honor of his clan but is willing to avenge these at the cost of his immediate family. Yet it is clear that the Trojan War has no positive effect on Odysseus. It forces him to place domestic considerations to one side and use his wiles in order to survive. Odysseus is, above all, a survivor, and his stratagems of the theft of the Palladium (the great statue of Athene in the citadel of Troy) and of the wooden horse ultimately bring victory to the Greek forces. Without them, the war would have continued even beyond the ten years specified in the myths.

That is the knowledge that Homer assumes, and the first item that he includes among Odysseus' postwar exploits is that, after leaving Troy, Odysseus and his crew

sack a town, that of the Cicones, who had been Trojan allies. Like many warriors, Odysseus has trouble laying aside the ways of war. What would have been acceptable behavior in the context of war becomes unacceptable afterward, yet Odysseus cannot recognize this fact. When he and his men arrive on the island of the Cyclopes, the first thing that he and his men do is raid the stores of the Cyclops Polyphemus. Polyphemus is hardly a sympathetic creature. He is a giant, nonphiloprogenitive son of the sea-god Poseidon; like all Cyclopes, he has in the middle of his forehead an eye the size of a wheel. This heterotopic eye effectively makes Polyphemus a symbol of irrationality, corresponding to the displaced moral environment in which Odysseus has functioned in the years since leaving Ithaca.

As Odysseus had eaten the food of Polyphemus without leave to do so, it is justifiable by the irrational standards of Polyphemus for the Cyclops to eat some of Odysseus' crew, and he does so. When Polyphemus asks to know the name of their leader, Odysseus appropriately calls himself *Outis* (nobody), for he has, in effect, lost the dignity of a name derived from the infinitive *odyssasthai* (to be angry, wrathful). Wrath implies righteousness and reasonable cause, but the immediate history of Odysseus has allowed little chance for righteous anger. Once he blinds the Cyclops, however, Odysseus has neutralized one symbol of unreason in his world. When he follows this act by devising his crew's escape from the Cyclops' cave, strapping them to the undersides of Polyphemus' sheep, he declares not only his name but also his patronymic and epithet to the monster: He is Odysseus, son of Laërtes, the sacker of cities.

Ironically, Odysseus' bold insistence on his proper identity allows the anger of Poseidon to find its mark. Still, Odysseus has to identify himself fully in this way, even as he and his crew have to accept the consequences: long and hard struggles for the master and death by attrition for the crew. The crew, like the mass of humanity, satisfies itself with apparently easy courses of action and thereby defines life as existence that precedes death. As Homer kills them, singly and in groups, his audience wastes no mourning upon them; nor does Odysseus.

Though the crew appears largely as a collective entity, Homer makes clear that its individuals freely choose their doom. For example, the Lotos Eaters offer Odysseus' crew lotos-fruit, which, when eaten, causes them to forget home and enjoy the earthly paradise of the present in which they find themselves. Forgetting one's past is tantamount to abandoning the cause that produced the present and the impetus that impels the future. It is apparently easier to live in the eternal present, but doing so robs life's journey of reason. The crew members who eat the lotos-fruit accept a form of the irrational with the excuse of world-weariness, but the drug culture of the Lotos Eaters is merely death in life.

When Odysseus' crew taste the potion of the witch Circe, she transforms them into swine. Their almost unanimous collective identity had at least been human. After their transformation, they lose rationality, the highest human faculty; that happens because they had made insufficient use of the faculty. Hermes, Zeus's messenger but also, fittingly, the guide to the Underworld, warns Odysseus' to prepare himself for

Circe's magic by applying the *moliū* (wild garlic), which he finds at his feet, before encountering the witch. Hermes also admonishes Odysseus to extract a promise from Circe not to emasculate him. In both respects, Hermes' advice focuses on the need to preserve a sense of personal identity and power. The herbal drug is as secondary in importance to the state of mind that it produces as the lotos-fruit had been in the Lotos Eaters episode. What is important is its obvious availability and the self-assurance that follows its use. It is worth noting that Odysseus temporarily loses sight of his personal mission to continue life's journey, for he remains on Circe's island until pressured to resume his adventures. In doing so, he comes dangerously close to accepting the paradisiacal present, essentially what the Lotos Eaters had offered. This lapse from obligation characterizes even the most heroic, however, and it underscores the fact that life's journey is nonlinear; it rather assumes varying degrees of circularity that resemble the past, which spring from it but always differ. Life returns to its origins at its end, though the origins themselves appear other than what they had been.

Perhaps the Aeolus episode emphasizes the difference between Odysseus and his crew most profoundly of all. The king of the winds entrusts Odysseus with a sack filled with all winds, which could conceivably oppose Odysseus' homeward journey. Aeolus appears to offer Odysseus an easy passage to his destination, but Odysseus must stay at the tiller nine days and nine nights, since he needs all his faculties to maintain his course. Within sight of Ithaca, Odysseus falls asleep, and this temporary loss of reason is enough to allow the jealousy and curiosity of his crew to surface. The crew resents the universal recognition that Odysseus receives and opens the sack thinking that it contains some special treasure that Odysseus does not wish to share. Immediately, the hostile winds blow Odysseus and his crew away from his homeland, and when the Ithacans reappear before Aeolus to request a second sack, the king refuses. This refusal is only right: Any benefaction requires personal responsibility for its proper use. Absent this responsibility, it becomes an imposed control that predetermines an outcome. Reaching the goal of the journey ultimately requires the skill of the traveler, not counting on the good fortune of meeting one's personal equivalent of a sympathetic Aeolus to smooth the passage.

Even as the Phacacians are returning Odysseus to Ithaca, Telemachus, at the instructions of Athene disguised as the traveler Mentos, is about to set sail in search of Odysseus' whereabouts. The first four books of Homer's poem thus belong firmly to Telemachus and represent the young man's personal odyssey. Telemachus has never known his father, has seen only the aberrant, extended family that the arrival of the suitors has caused. His adventures in *Odyssey* 1 to 4 show him one family that respects moral values (that of Nestor of Pylos) and one that is entirely secular (that of Menelaus and Helen). Menelaus and Helen appear content, though the unease of their relationship is plain. It is only through an anodyne, which Helen adds to their wine, that they maintain this fragile equilibrium. They, like the crew members who had succumbed to the lotos-fruit or Circe's potion, have chosen existence rather than life. Telemachus also refines his understanding of the laws of hospitality through gifts

mutually offered and tactfully refused, as well as through his sagacity, the polytropic quality that characterizes his father. He manages to elude the suitors, who plan his assassination upon his return, and returns to the other side of his island and to the hut of Eumaeus, to be reunited with Odysseus and plot the extermination of the suitors.

### Summary

One could question whether even Odysseus and Penelope could recapture the same degree of happiness that they had enjoyed before the Trojan War and before the arrival of the suitors. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in his poem "Ulysses," strongly implies his hero's disgust both with the Ithacans and with an "aged wife." Nikos Kazantzakis, in his *Odyszia* (1938; *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, 1958), even more definitely describes Odysseus' need to face death in the midst of an active life. Happiness takes the form of completing the heroic mission, and Homer's Odysseus and Achilles do this. For Achilles, completing the mission consists in the willingness to accept the destiny of a brief but glorious life, the only kind appropriate to his heroic nature. The life of Odysseus is longer, perhaps even more demanding because of its challenges, but no less worthy.

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