



The Odyssey

Structure & Themes

by

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The Odyssey

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy.

The Odyssey as translated by Robert Fitzgerald



In medias res

- ✦ Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* begins in the middle of the story. Information about all of the events that have occurred in the past nine years are presented in a series of flashbacks. While the *Odyssey* has a unified plot, the story can be divided into three major sections:

The Three Sections of the *Odyssey*

- ❖ The first four books of the *Odyssey* are sometimes referred to by scholars as the *Telemachia*. “The Quest of Telemachus.” describes the struggles of Odysseus’ son Telemachus with his mother’s suitors and his eventual coming of age.
- ❖ Books Five through Twelve recount the adventures of Odysseus. “The Wanderings of Odysseus” include folklore motifs not common in Greek myths such as monsters, magic, and witches.
- ❖ The final section, “Return and Vengeance” tells the story of Odysseus’ return to Ithaka and his reunion with his wife and son.

Hospitality

- ✦ Because Zeus is the patron of travelers, hospitality is an important religious value that places obligations on both host and guest. Hospitality is more than just “good manners. It is an important theme that runs throughout the stories in the *Odyssey*. Things often turn out badly for guests or hosts who act improperly.

Athena Intervenes

- * As the story begins, the Trojan war has been over for nine years. On Mount Olympus, Athena reminds Zeus that the Greek hero Odysseus has not returned home. She suggests that Hermes be sent to free Odysseus, who is a captive of the goddess Calypso. Athena goes to visit the home of Odysseus in Ithaca outfitted as a warrior and finds his house and family held hostage by a group of nobles who are courting his Odysseus' wife Penelope.



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The Quest of Telemachus



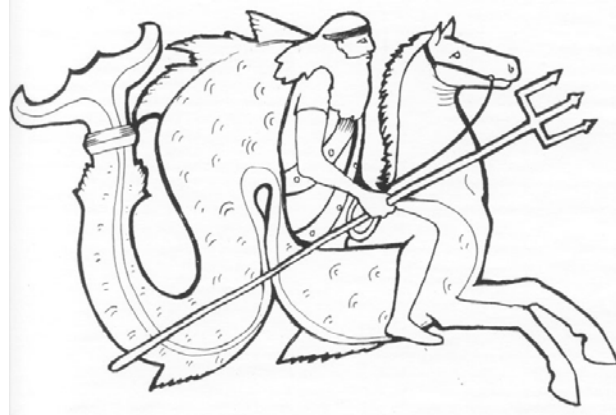
Athena is greeted by Odysseus' son Telemachus who apologizes for the rude behavior of the suitors. Athena advises Telemachus to visit his father's old friends Nestor and Menelaus and ask for news of his father. Most of Book One through Four are an account of Telemachus' Journey and his maturation into a young man.

The Wanderings of Odysseus

Books Five through Twelve describe the travels and adventures of Odysseus during the nine years that have elapsed since the fall of Troy. When Hermes arrives on Calypso's island at the beginning of Book Five, Odysseus longs to return to his home and family. With Calypso's help, Odysseus builds a small boat and sails for home.



Poseidon's Anger



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Poseidon, the sea god who bears a grudge against Odysseus, sees the small boat and unleashes a powerful storm. The small boat capsizes. Odysseus swims ashore with the aid of Athena and collapses in an olive grove.

Odysseus Among the Phaiakians



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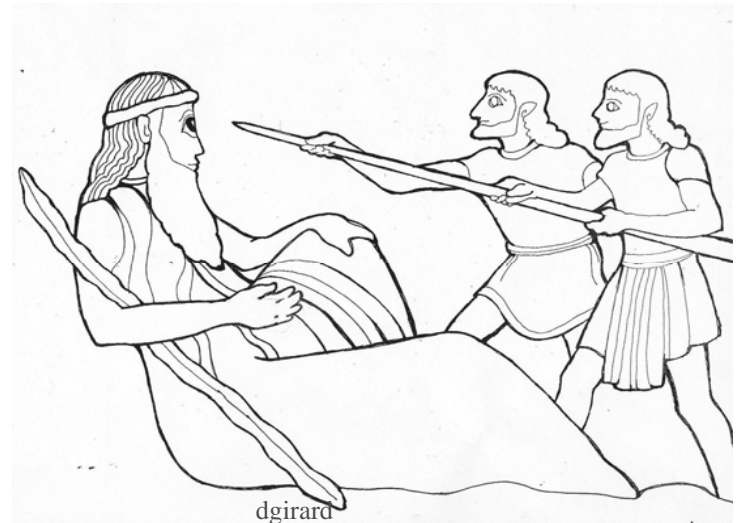
Odysseus awakes the following morning naked and exhausted. When he is discovered by Nausicaa, a princess, and her hand-maidens, Odysseus tries to cover himself with olive branches. Taking pity on the poor traveler, they feed and clothe him and take him to the royal palace where the king promises to aid him.

Tales of Magic and the Supernatural

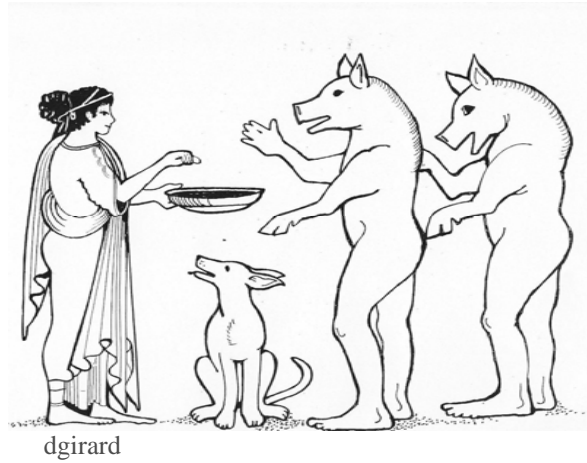
- ✦ The Phaiakians show courtesy and generosity to the unknown traveler. Odysseus reveals his identity during a great banquet and entertains his hosts with tales of his travels. The adventures in Books 9-12 include many well known magical and supernatural ***motifs*** - recurring narrative element used in traditional folktales like those collected by the Brothers Grimm.

Odysseus and the Kyklopes

- ✚ This story contains several famous motifs such as a giant who eats men and the hero's use of the name "Nobody" to trick the giant.
- ✚ Polyphemos' disrespect for the law of hospitality serves as a prime example of how not to treat a guest.



Kirke and the Trip to the Underworld



- ❖ Kirke's transformation of Odysseus' men into animals is another example of a common folklore motif. The enchantress informs Odysseus that he must travel to Hades and consult the spirit of the prophet Teiresias to ensure a safe trip home.

Teiresias' Prophecy

Odysseus sails to the edge of the world and sacrifices a ram and a ewe. Souls of the dead appear including that of the blind seer Teiresias who warns Odysseus about the dangers that await him and that he will return home friendless and unknown. Odysseus also converses with the souls of his dead mother and Achilles



The Seirenes

- ✦ The Seirenes, another common motif, lure sailors to their doom with their songs and beauty. Odysseus plugs his crew's ears with wax but has himself tied to the mast so he alone can hear their song.



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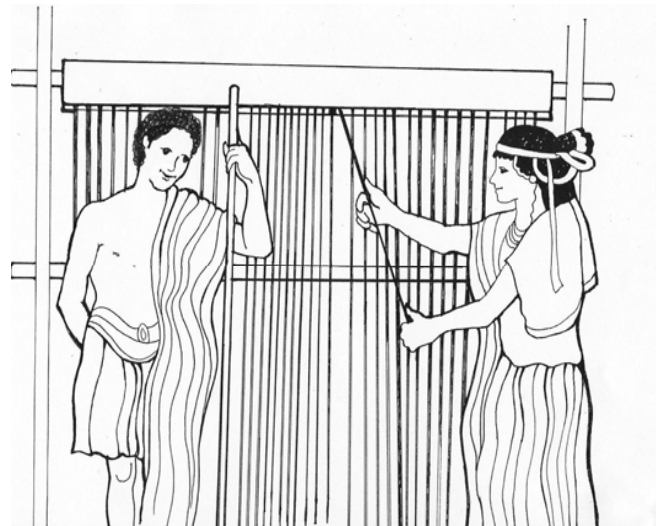
The Homecoming



- ✦ Odysseus returns to Ithaca in the guise of a beggar. While many servants demonstrate their lack of loyalty, Penelope, his wife, his son Telemachus, and several servants remain true and treat the beggar with proper respect. While washing the traveler's feet, Odysseus' nurse maid, Eurykleia, realizes his true identity from an old hunting scar.

Telemachus and Penelope

- ✦ By the end of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus has grown from a naïve boy into a confident member of his father's household (*oikos*).
- ✦ Penelope's fidelity during her husband's 20 year absence, her decorum, and her ingenuity in outwitting the suitors make her the ideal wife.



Restoration of the Hero

- ✦ Odysseus' return to Ithaka ties the stories of son and father together. With the help of his son and a few loyal servants, order is restored.
- ✦ The suitors who have repeatedly broken the laws of hospitality are slain, the disloyal servants are punished, and order is reestablished to Odysseus' *oikos*.