

Introduction to *The Odyssey*

Let's be honest: Most teenagers today have no desire to read a 400-page poem. Since we're being honest, let's also admit that most adults don't either. The number of living humans who actually know the entire story of *The Odyssey* shrinks as time passes. Even so, most American high school students are still vaguely familiar with the episodes including the cyclops and some of the other monsters, and the final battle in the great hall is a bloodbath on par with any modern *Avengers* finale, but few recognize names like Ithaca, Telemachus, or Penelope.

So, you may wonder, *why bother? What good does it do to study a story so old that most people know it only as the name of a Honda minivan? Is it ever going to get me a better-paying job?* Well, young cynics, *The Odyssey* is a text that challenges students with many curricular requirements of a language arts class: poetry, rhetoric, narrative, and multiple opportunities for writing of all kinds! In other words, studying it will make you more literate: a better reader, a more skilled writer, a critical thinker. And those qualities may indeed pay off for you later in life. But there is another, better, reason to study *The Odyssey* today: The fact that it has survived so long, that it was passed down orally and in writing (before the invention of the printing press, mind you!) and somehow made it all the way to us, indicates that this story has resonated with people throughout history. Your great-great-great-great-ancestors may have known this story, and some of them thought it important enough to remember and pass on so that it might make its way to you. Knowing that, would you ignore it? It survives for many of the same reasons Shakespeare's work survives (although *The Odyssey* is much, much older): It isn't just a story; it is about people and the things that make us human, no matter where or when we live.

But there are certain things it helps to know before diving into the dense text of this **epic**:

1. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are **primary epics**, meaning they were passed down in the **oral tradition** (by word of mouth). Because of this, there were many variations on the stories. Probably composed around 700 B.C., *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are said to be the work of a poet named **Homer** (*doh!*). He likely took the various versions of the stories that had circulated for hundreds of years and compiled them into the epics as we now know them. Some ancient traditions held that Homer was blind, which would have meant he composed orally and that his poems were written down by someone else. When writing was introduced to Greece (600-550 B.C.), *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were not only the first works of literature to be put in writing but also the first fully developed epics in western culture, and they influenced the form and content of all the epics to follow. In other words, these two epics are hugely important because they are the beginning of the western literary tradition and they are the foundation of every other literary work in our culture.
2. During his life, Homer travelled from place to place reciting (or singing) his epics from memory! *Can you imagine memorizing 400 pages' worth of text?* It makes sense that the stories were set in poetry with regular rhythmic patterns; for one thing, this would make them easier to remember and recite.
3. The English language as we now know it did not exist when *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were composed, and the original poetic meter is difficult to translate into English, but that hasn't stopped people from trying. There are more than 50 complete English translations of *The Odyssey*. Some are in poetic form and attempt to recreate the rhythms of the original Greek version; others are prose translations that attempt to do justice to the content of the story.
4. The original Greek version was in a complicated poetic form called **dactylic hexameter**: In ancient Greek, it is the *length* of the sound that counts, not the emphasis as is the case in contemporary English poetry. (Remember Shakespeare's iambic pentameter?) Attempts to bring this complex meter to English often create a challenge for readers who merely want to hear the story; hence, many prefer **prose translations**. One way or another, no matter which version you study in English, it cannot mimic the elevated style and meter of the Greek epics while remaining true to the content and themes.
5. In pre-literate ancient Greece, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were more than entertainment. How, after all, does a culture without writing explain the nature of reality? (We write all such things now in histories, law books, and religious texts.) The epics were educational tools that provided moral examples of how one ought to behave in practically every situation. These stories were used to transmit the traditional values, belief system, and moral framework of ancient Greek culture. This continued even after Greece became literate, and the mark of an educated person was knowledge of these epics.

6. Characteristics of Epics
 - A. The main characters are beings of national importance and legendary significance.
 - B. The setting is grand in scope, covering nations, the world, or even the universe.
 - C. The action consists of deeds of great valor and courage.
 - D. The language maintains a high tone and depth of detail even for simple matters.
 - E. Supernatural forces intervene in human affairs.
 - F. The epic begins with an invocation to the Muse (sometimes called a proem).
 - G. The story begins *in medias res* (in the middle of the action).

7. The journeys, quests, and trials for a hero/heroine that make up the Heroic Cycle are still popular in modern entertainment (*Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*), but there are some literary and poetic devices associated with epics that are not as familiar (or tolerable) to modern audiences:
 - A. **Epithets**: Nicknames! So many nicknames! Athena, who is a significant character in the story, is variously referred to as “the grey-eyed goddess,” “the goddess of wisdom,” “bright-eyed daughter of Zeus,” “the hope of soldiers,” “third-born of the gods,” “Pallas,” and “the tireless one.” If you don’t know that all these epithets refer to Athena, you’re going to get lost.
 - B. **Epic Similes** (*aka Homeric Similes*) are long comparisons that stretch for so many lines that you sometimes forget what is being compared and start to wonder why Homer changed the subject so abruptly: *What the...? I thought he was describing a monster, but now he’s talking about fishing!?!* [The monster is snatching men off the deck of the ship like a fisherman snatches fish from the ocean, but Homer describes the fisherman in agonizing detail, which makes the comparison much more specific and gruesome; however, you have to have an attention span longer than that of a fruit fly in order to appreciate it.]
 - C. **Allusions** to other characters and stories in Greek mythology are everywhere. Homer spends a lot of time reflecting on the Trojan War, a story which would have been well-known to all of Homer’s listeners, but some of the references to cultural expectations of hospitality to strangers, the rites that accompany a meal, and the multiple gods and goddesses who play parts in the epic are confusing to modern readers. You must have at least a basic knowledge of Greek mythology and the ending of the Trojan War to appreciate *The Odyssey*.
 - D. **Divine Intervention**: Speaking of gods and goddesses, they mess around in human affairs throughout *The Odyssey*. Whereas the God (proper noun) of Christianity tends to let the chips fall where they may, the gods (common noun) of mythology will meddle in human affairs in a direct way, advocating for mortals they like and making life miserable for those they don’t.
 - E. **Catalogs**: Imagine how frustrating it would be to watch an Olympic sporting event if it began with a list of every person who had ever received a medal in that event since the time of Heracles. Well, there are moments like that in *The Odyssey*. Homer might list all the warriors who died in a battle or all the beautiful women of the past. These catalogs can stretch to many lines, interrupting the narrative to remind listeners of past glories, etc.
 - F. **Long Speeches as Dialogue**: When characters converse, they never speak in the rapid-fire back-and-forth dialogue so common in modern literature and movies. Most conversations are extended, formal speeches that sometimes cover many pages.
 - G. **Digressions**: Homer sometimes takes a temporary departure from the main subject of the narrative to focus on apparently unrelated topics or explaining background details. After these temporary digressions, he returns to the main topic and continues the tale. Digressions are often thematically related to the main story even though they may not seem at first to have anything in common. Arguably, the first four (of 24 total) books of the epic are a digression: Odysseus is hardly mentioned.

8. **The Value System of Ancient Greece** troubles many modern readers. The culture was patriarchal, slave-holding, monarchical, and polytheistic. (Get your dictionary! No, really! Get it! You need to know these!)
9. **Complicated Narrative Structure**: *The Odyssey* is not told in chronological order. If you wanted to read it that way, you would have to begin with Books 9-12, continue to Books 5-8, then finish with Books 13-24. Books 1-4 are the adventures of Telemachus, and they take place at the same time as Books 5-8 but in a different part of the world. In other words, the plot structure is very complicated!

Now that you know this introductory information, let’s begin with an Invocation: “Sing in me, Muse....”

Name: _____ Period: ____ Date: _____

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All responses should appear as complete sentences.

The **writer/speaker** of this article is _____.

Textual Evidence [Brief quote from the article] that supports your answer: _____

Elaborate: _____

The intended **audience** of this writing is _____.

Textual Evidence [Brief quote from the article] that supports your answer: _____

Elaborate: _____

The **tone** of the writer/speaker is _____.

Textual Evidence [Brief quote from the article] that supports your answer: _____

Elaborate: _____

Ithaca, Telemachus, and Penelope are mentioned in the first paragraph. Based on the wording of the paragraph, what conclusion can you draw about these names? (Who/What are they?) How can you tell? [Skill: Inference]

What is the purpose of comparing a scene in *The Odyssey* with a modern *Avengers* finale? _____

Explain two reasons *italics* are used in the second paragraph. _____

What is the purpose of the **rhetorical question** (“...would you ignore it?”) in the second paragraph? _____

Explain the **allusion** (“*Doh!*”) in Section 1: _____

The last sentence in Section 1 is elaboration. Finish this one for the end of Section 2:

For example, _____.

At the end of Section 3, we encounter the clause “do justice to the content of the story.” Explain what it means and how you know that:

In Section 4, what inference can you make about “iambic pentameter”? _____

From context (Section 4), we can conclude that a **prose translation** of *The Odyssey* is _____

Based on the information in Section 5, identify something in modern America that would serve the same purpose for us as *The Odyssey* did for pre-literate ancient Greeks. Explain your reasoning.

In Section 7A, what is the implication of the final sentence (“...you’re going to get lost.”)?

In Section 7B, what is implicit in the final sentence about attention spans?

Why does Section 7D begin with the phrase “Speaking of gods and goddesses,...”?

Describe the **diction** (7D) of “...they mess around in human affairs”: Formal or informal? Why?

Elaborate on Section 7F (Long Speeches as Dialogue). What effect would this have on a modern audience?

From context, we can tell that the word *digression* (7G) means _____.

Describe the values of Ancient Greece (Section 8): _____