

📖 Topic Page: [The Odyssey](#)

Definition: **Odyssey, The** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Epic poem of 24 books attributed to Homer. The story of Odysseus tells of his journey home from the Trojan Wars after 10 years of wandering. He wins back his wife Penelope and his kingdom, after killing her suitors.



Image from: [Ulysses deriding Polyphemus- Homer's Odyssey in National Gallery Collection](#)

Summary Article: **Odyssey**

From *The Homer Encyclopedia*

In time, the tale of Troy became the center of a great cycle of songs, depicting and glorifying the regular heroic theme of an attack on a town. We can compare the stories of Thebes and of Oichalia, both attacked and taken by heroes. From the Trojan cycle, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* survive. We know something of the epic poems that have been lost from that cycle (see Cycle, Epic). There was another important set which told of the dark story of Thebes (see Theban Cycle), of parricide and incest and fratricide, of Laios and Oedipus and his doomed sons. That cycle is lost: a few fragmentary quotations are all that survive. It lies behind the Theban plays of the Athenian tragic poets. There was an early heroic poem about the Argonauts, too, which had some influence on our *Odyssey* (see *Argonautica*). These other epics did not become part of the literature studied in schools (see Education, Homer in), they ceased to be read, and hardly any fragments survive.

An important part of the Trojan story concerned the return of the victorious Achaeans to their homes and their wives. The outward voyage never became a comparably alluring theme. Singers and audiences, naturally, were impatient to get on with events at Troy. The theme of the return, by contrast, became a link which attached the foundation stories of many Greek cities to the greatest of all cycles of myth: they, too, could claim a connection with the Heroic Age. Trojan survivors had been forced westward and eastward. Greeks returning from Troy had lost their way, or had been forced to abandon their homes: by usurpers, by unfaithful wives, or by other mis-chances. They, too, had traveled on, settled down, and founded new cities overseas.

That mythical pattern was especially welcome in the West, where the rising Greek colonies felt acutely their own absence from the central Hellenic myths, mostly connected with Argos and Mycenae and with Thebes (see Colonization). The most momentous of such foundation stories, developed over the centuries with a long chain of historic consequences, would be that which told how Aeneas, a Trojan survivor, sailed to the West and laid the foundations of the imperial city of Rome. It would provide the story for the greatest work of Latin poetry: the *Aeneid* of Vergil.

In the early period, sailing the sea was an adventurous and risky business. Mariners, once back home, told strange tales: to dramatize their own daring, to exaggerate what they had seen, to warn potential competitors off their favored routes, and to explain why other men who had sailed away never came back. In a world without radio or telegrams, they had disappeared for ever.

We see in the *Odyssey* the sort of stories that explained their disappearance. Some of those mariners had eaten the lotus and forgotten their homes. Some had met with a witch and lost their human form by

enchantment; others were engulfed by a whirlpool, or devoured by an ogre. Those perils, with the Hellenic genius for giving to airy fantasy a local habitation and a name, took visible shapes: as the enchantress Kirke, and the maelstrom Charybdis, and the monstrous Cyclops Polyphemos - a one-eyed man-eating giant, as huge as a mountain peak.

There was an epic poem, now lost, called *Nostoi*, "Home-Comings," which formed part of the epic Cycle (see Returns). It told of the return of various Achaean heroes from Troy, with their adventures, both on the journey and on their arrival at home. That poem was, apparently, much shorter than the *Odyssey*, which is on a monumental scale; it has often been supposed that its great length was achieved in creative rivalry with an even longer poem, which seems to be slightly earlier: the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey* is, in fact, about 70 percent of the *Iliad* in length.

Those two great heroic songs survived alone. Both were divided, in the Hellenistic period, into twenty-four Books, indicated by the twenty-four letters of the standard Greek alphabet (see Book Division). The other early epics, now all lost, seem to have been much shorter: most were divided into two or four Books only. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, declares that they lacked true unity and were much inferior to the two great epics. Later Greeks agreed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were of a clearly higher quality than the rest. As far as we can tell from the wretched scraps that come down to us in quotations, Aristotle was right.

The *Odyssey* assumes some previous narration of the return of other heroes. We hear at once that, of the Achaeans who took Troy, "All the others, those who had evaded sheer destruction, were now at home, survivors of the war and the sea" (1.11). Only Odysseus was still away, detained on her distant island by a loving and importunate goddess: the nymph Kalypso, whose name was taken to mean "Concealer."

Of all the stories of heroic return, the homecoming of Odysseus will thus be the last. From Troy in the East to his far Western island home, he had the longest distance to travel. It is also by far the greatest and the most interesting, and it has been made to include some of the other returns, too.

Old Nestor tells of his own homeward journey; he can also describe the departure of the Achaeans from Troy, after the sack of the city (3.254-328). That was a drunken and chaotic affair - as such episodes often were, no doubt, when successful marauders, laden with loot, scrambled drunkenly on to their ships. Nestor is a character clearly popular with the poets, both of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for his ability to introduce into their poems some good stories, set in the still more distant past. In both poems he is allowed to speak and reminisce at length (see Reminiscences).

Nestor also tells the sad and recent tale of the homecoming of King Agamemnon. Returning to Argos from Troy in triumph, the king was promptly murdered by his unfaithful wife and her ignoble lover (3.252-275). That is what might happen to Odysseus, too, if Penelope were less virtuous than she is: when he gets back home, he must be on his guard. The parallel is repeatedly drawn in the poem, and Odysseus maintains his incognito, once back in his own house, partly in order to check on the behavior of his blameless wife.

Menelaos gives more details, both of his brother's return and of his own (4.512-537); in the Underworld, we hear the dead King of Men himself tell the sad story of his betrayal and murder (11.397-434). The poet, we see, is concerned to fill in the events between the end of the *Iliad* and the opening of his own poem. He contrives to include the death of Achilles (Books 11 and 24), which at the end of the *Iliad*

was still in the future but known to be imminent, and that of Agamemnon, murdered once he returned home (Books 4 and 11). As for Menelaos, he was blown off course, going as far as Egypt, a strange and interesting place (Books 4 and 15); Odysseus, too, likes to talk of visiting the land of the Nile (14.246-297). There, with luck, one might get very rich.

The *Odyssey* has a more complex structure than the *Iliad*. It starts the action in two separate places: with Odysseus far away on Kalypso's island, and with Telemachos at home on Ithaca. The two strands of the story are brought together (Book 15) for an exciting conclusion: the battle with the Suitors, and the reunion of the hero with his son and his wife.

The divine assembly (1.27-95) sets the moral agenda of the poem (see Theodicy), but the action as such starts on Odysseus' home island of Ithaca (*Books 1 and 2*). Twenty years after he sailed away, and ten years after the fall of Troy, the hero's continued absence has convinced most people that he will not be coming back. The young bucks of Ithaca and the surrounding area are competing for the hand of his wife, Penelope. Not only is she, after all these years, still beautiful; it appears that the man who marries her will become king, cutting out Odysseus' son Telemachos.

That was never the Greek custom, and in the poem it is never quite spelled out or explained. It is demanded by the story: if the hero does not get back home in time - in fact, if he does not get home right now - he stands to lose everything. Some moderns view it as a survival of a very ancient matrilineal inheritance: the man who marries the queen becomes king. Others see it rather as resembling the logic of a fairytale: "So he married the princess and became king in his turn." It has been guessed that behind our *Odyssey* lies a simpler plot, in which the returning hero has no son, and the story tells only of the king and his wife. Giving the hero a son added to the complexity and the interest of the story, which now included a *Bildungsroman*, our first: the account of a boy growing up into a man (see Telemachy).

The Suitors are applying pressure on Penelope by feasting and carousing in the king's house. They are consuming the royal wealth, abusing the servants, and generally making life intolerable, until she shall agree to take one of them as her second husband. This shocking state of affairs has gone on for some time. Poor Telemachos is helpless against such numbers. At first, he was too young; and if he puts his foot down now, the Suitors will kill him. When he orders them out, encouraged by Athene, they do indeed try to ambush and murder him, way-laying him as he returns from his journey of inquiry to Pylos and Sparta (4.669-672). With Athene's help, he evades them. She will also help him to grow up, so that he can stand beside his father in the final battle (Book 22); that is a great day, indeed, for old grandfather Laertes (24.515).

Athene is Telemachos' patron, as she is the patron of his father Odysseus. As with Diomedes and his father Tydeus, Athene has an hereditary connection with the hero and also with his son. That looks like an historic memory: on the Linear B tablets, she appears as the special goddess of the king. In mortal disguise, she now accompanies Telemachos on a quest for news of his father. She plans that the demoralized young man shall grow up and learn to mix with his equals.

Reaching Pylos together, they visit old Nestor, who has good stories to tell, about Odysseus and about Troy; Telemachos escapes hearing more of them by an unobtrusive departure, assisted and accompanied by Nestor's son Peisistratos (*Book 3*). In Sparta, they are entertained by Menelaos and Helen (*Book 4*; see also 15.1-184). Social comedy is a feature of both visits.

Helen also has her memories of Troy, and she effortlessly up-stages her husband with them. She is apparently untouched by her disgraceful escapade and its disastrous end. Daughter of Zeus, Helen is not a person who can be reproached; but hers was a grave fault, and our moral demands are satisfied when we hear her reproach herself, for having abandoned her “house, and child, and husband, who lacked nothing, either in mind or,” she tactfully insists, “in looks” (4.264-265). Young Telemachos, who has seen little of the world, is dazzled. Back home from Sparta, he tells his mother: “There I saw Argive Helen!” (17.118).

Nestor, Menelaos, and Helen each have something to add to the substance of the *Odyssey*, and to our picture of Odysseus' heroism at Troy and his central role in the taking of the city. The poem first introduced him as “the man who took the holy citadel of Troy” (1.2). That title is now given substance. We hear of the fatal Horse, which was his great device with Pallas Athene, and of his exploits during the sack of the city (8.500-530; see Wooden Horse).

With *Book 5*, we turn at last to Odysseus himself. Keeping the hero so long off stage has been a virtuoso piece of technique, showing considerable self-confidence on the part of the poet. We have been allowed to see the great gap left in the world by the disappearance of this man, whose stature is proved by the memories of him that are cherished by his heroic peers. The conventions of Homeric poetry do not present simultaneous events as truly simultaneous: one is depicted as succeeding the other, and the epic manner does not go backward in time. Thus, it seems that Odysseus himself cannot be put into action until we reach the end of Telemachos' activities. In our analytic terms, however, the actions take place at the same time (see Time).

The gods, gathered on Olympus, turn their attention again to Odysseus. Hermes, messenger of the gods, is sent to Kalypso, who is detaining Odysseus on her distant island, “where the navel is of the sea” (see Ogygia). Zeus commands: Odysseus must be released. Kalypso complains, pointing out that there is a double standard, in the matter of liaisons with mortals, for male and female deities - but obey she must. She does not tell Odysseus of the order from Zeus, letting him think that it is her own soft heart that has changed. The hero never knows the truth. The psychology of the scene is delicate, and Odysseus does what he can to spare her feelings.

We see, too, that Odysseus has declined Kalypso's offer of immortality, if he stays with her, far away from the human world, although, as he tactfully says, his mortal wife Penelope is (of course!) far inferior in beauty to Kalypso, a goddess. Odysseus handles the situation, always a difficult one, with skill, and they part on good terms. Vergil's Aeneas, leaving Queen Dido, will be much less adroit.

Odysseus builds a raft, and off he sails: not unnoticed by malignant Poseidon, still seeking satisfaction for the blinding of the Cyclops, his horrible son. Seizing the last chance to molest and delay the hero, who is fated to get back home alive, he sends a storm to wreck his boat. First clinging to the capsized keel, then swimming, and using a providential life-belt proffered by a kindly sea-goddess (see Ino), the hero struggles to land, naked and exhausted. He is on the beach of the Phaeacians, a people who are closer than we to the gods (*Book 6*). They, at last, will bring him back to his island home.

Odysseus is found by the charming young princess Nausicaa, who is naturally interested in this glamorous stranger. Athene has sent her a dream about getting married, and now there appears from nowhere a glamorous and mysterious hero. Odysseus is hospitably received by her parents. Concealing his identity, he moves among the Phaeacians like a god in disguise (*Books 7 and 8*; see also Theoxeny), allowing his true heroic nature to peep out. When an unmannerly Phaeacian calls him a (mere) trader, not

an athlete and a gentleman, he shows his quality by hurling a heavy discus an exceptional distance - "and they ducked to the earth, the Phaeacian lords of the long oars, men famous for their sea-faring" (8.190; see Euryalos [2]). The impressive formulaic titles take on a satirical color.

A blind singer entertains the company with a song about the Trojan War (see Demodokos). Odysseus hides his face and weeps, and the man changes the subject, to a jolly tale of adultery among the Olympian gods: what is deadly earnest here on earth, is on Olympos a matter for uproarious mirth (8.521). At last, Odysseus reveals his identity and recites to the spellbound company the marvelous tale of his adventures since the fall of Troy (Books 9 to 12; see Apologue). The poet avoids vouching for the truth of those stories, which contain monsters and magic. The most famous part of the poem, they are presented as sailor's yarns, told after dinner. As for believing them, that is up to the hearer to decide (see Odysseus' Wanderings) .

Odysseus, then, had to resist the temptation of staying for ever with the Lotus-eaters (see Lotophagi), drugged by their drowsy fruit and forgetting about his home. He entered the cave of the one-eyed giant Polyphemos, the cannibal Cyclops (*Book 9*), from which he needed all his cunning to get out. He visited the floating island of Aiolos, lord of the winds, who kindly gave him a bag containing all the winds that might oppose his homeward journey (*Book 10*). His foolish crew opened it and released the whirlwind; the hero, who was in sight of Ithaca and home, was blown back, weeping, hopelessly off his course.

Odysseus must be reduced from being commander of a contingent, a typical Iliadic hero. He sails past the cannibal Laestrygonians (10.80-132): they smash up all his ships but one. His flotilla destroyed, the captain of a single ship, he is entertained by Kirke, goddess and magician, who turns his men into pigs, but whose magic he is enabled to withstand (10.136-335). With her he spends a year of sensuality, till finally his men demand that he sail on.

He had to visit the land of the dead (*Book 11*; see Nekyia), where he saw the famous sinners of mythology undergoing their legendary punishments, and where he had touching encounters with his mother and with a newly dead member of his own crew (see Elpenor). Recent discoveries on papyrus allow us to see some overlap here with poems in the Hesiodic tradition, set in Boeotia, listing the amours of gods with mortal women: Odysseus saw some of those dead heroines, who told him their stories (see Hesiod). Regular figures of poetry, they have no particular connection with him; there has been some contamination in the tradition, with some hearers apparently desiring this familiar poetical feature.

Odysseus met murdered Agamemnon and reviewed those who died, at Troy. Achilles spoke warmly to him, but Ajax stalked away in silence, still resenting the award to Odysseus of the armor of Achilles. We are aware here that the *Odyssey* is familiar with the *Iliad* and presupposes it: hearers will welcome a glimpse of the leading characters from that great song.

The visit to the dead contains touching moments, as the hero meets his dead comrades and also his mother, who tells him that it was her yearning for him that caused her death (see Antikleia): Odysseus sheds some tears, as her shade slips through his embrace. But the whole Hades episode seems to make less impression on him than we might have expected, and it has little role in the action of the poem. The *katabasis* had more point in the stories about Herakles, who showed his unmatched power by overcoming Death. Odysseus met that supreme hero - or rather, a nervous after-thought interrupts to say, he met his wraith, *eidôlon* (11.601-603); Herakles himself, of course, is on Olympos, feasting

with the immortal gods. The lines were suspected in antiquity, rightly, as a pious insertion in the text (see Interpolations). Herakles is made to greet Odysseus as a kind of equal (11.617-619) - great promotion, indeed, for our Ithacan hero!

Vergil and Dante will do much more with the theme, a very ancient one, of the journey to the Underworld. We find precedents in the literatures of Mesopotamia (see Near East and Homer), and parallels in the stories of the shamans, or medicine men, right across Eastern Europe and Siberia. For Odysseus, it seems to be one more journey, one more hard trial, among all the others. The element of the horrendous is reduced to the minimum. We see here the extreme example of a general fact: the return of Odysseus has become the typical return story, hospitable to every feature that appeared in any such narrative. Perhaps that explains its great length, and also why none of the other return poems survived, not even that of Agamemnon - everything was included in the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus must pass the mental temptation of the Sirens (*Book 12*), who offer him the pleasure of listening to the song of his own stormy career (188-200). He must pass the six-headed monster, immortal Skylla, with the unavoidable loss of six men, snatched from his ship and devoured outside her cave: a grisly spectacle, as they vainly call on the hero for the help he cannot give (245-259). Pressure of starvation drives his men to slaughter the cattle of the Sun (320-373). That seals their doom: a thunderbolt smashes the ship, and they perish.

Odysseus loses his last ship to the whirlpool Charybdis (12.426-446). The ship is wrecked. The hero saves his life by clinging to an overhanging tree, until the whirlpool vomits up a spar of his ship, on which, after nine days at sea, naked and alone, he struggles to the shore. There he will be found by the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa and set on the upward path that will bring him home. At last, his men all gone, he is a solitary and desperate adventurer; to escape the giant Cyclops, he even had to deny his name and call himself Nobody (9.366-367).

At last, the Phaeacian sailors deposit the sleeping hero on the beach of his own island of Ithaca, which is shrouded in mist and unrecognizable (*Book 13*). Waking, his first prudent thought is to count the lavish treasure that had been given to him by a general whip-round among the Phaeacian nobles; they will recoup the cost of that handsome gesture by collecting from the common people. We are relieved to hear that all is present and correct. It amounts, the poet tells us with anxious pride, to more than the booty that Odysseus had got, and lost, from the sack of Troy. We see here a very different style of heroism from that of the *Iliad*, whose great hero, Achilles, did not bother to count or to notice the treasures brought to appease him by the suppliant Achaeans.

But still, where is Odysseus now? Ithaca is unrecognizable in mist, and the hero sits down and weeps. Along comes Athene, in disguise, to help. But the world is full of thieves and tricksters, and Odysseus prefers to tell her the tale: "Oh yes, I have heard of Ithaca. As for me, I am a Cretan, deceitfully abandoned here by a man whom I trusted" (see Lies). The goddess smiles, strokes him with her hand, and acknowledges a kinship with a fellow deceiver. They sit together and plan his return to his house and the destruction of Penelope's outrageous Suitors (13.372-428). The relation of hero and goddess here is extraordinarily close.

Odysseus spends some time in the cabin of his swineherd Eumaios (who is of noble birth, stolen away in his infancy: 15.390-484; *Book 14*): it is here that he first meets his son (*Book 15*). He identifies himself to Telemachos (*Book 16*) and later to his two faithful retainers, Eumaios and the cowherd Philoitos. These two will stand beside Odysseus and his son in the battle with the Suitors.

Like a god, Odysseus moves about his own house unrecognized, disguised as a vagrant (*Books 17 to 20*; see also Argos [2]; Scar of Odysseus). He is abused and insulted. He observes his wife's conduct, watches the Suitors, and waits for his moment. There is a long buildup to the showdown. The pace slows almost to a halt. Here, more plausibly than anywhere else in Homer, scholars have suspected the combination of substantial existing poems, giving rather different versions of events, to form the one great epic. Attempts to separate them, however, have not led to any agreement.

Penelope, whose formulaic epithet is "prudent," and who is generally inscrutable, has contrived to hold the Suitors at bay for years; now, the more she is given hints that her husband is nearby, the more she seems prepared to give in and re-marry. Suddenly, she suggests the trial of stringing Odysseus' great bow, too stiff for ordinary hands, which - it surprisingly emerges - he left behind, when he sailed away to war. She will marry the man who succeeds in stringing it and shooting an arrow through the loops of a set of axes. We see a folk motif, which originally (doubtless) had no connection with Troy (see folktale).

Now Odysseus must get the bow into his own hands (*Books 21 and 22*). Tension is built up and maintained. At moments we see hints of a different version of the story, in which Odysseus identified himself to his wife first, and they planned the slaughter of the Suitors together; a high point would be the moment when she gives him the bow, knowing who he is, and how he plans to use it.

That is not what happens in our poem. The main plot insists on Penelope's ignorance: during the great battle, she is asleep upstairs. Her psychology is subtly drawn. Too often disappointed and deceived, she finds it hard to believe in her husband's return, even when confronted with the dead bodies of the Suitors (*Book 23*): perhaps, for their sins, a god has slaughtered them (23.62-67)? Odysseus must identify himself to her, by showing that he knows an intimate secret of their union: their marriage bed, built round a mighty tree trunk, is immovable.

We see that as a symbol. The episode is also the crowning instance of the poem's interest in feminine psychology. The heroic achievement of killing the Suitors was not, after all, enough; Penelope is no mere prize, passively waiting to be won. She has her own mind and her own ruses, in which she resembles her tricky husband. She is, in fact, Odysseus' worthy and appropriate wife. She succeeds in getting a great rise out of him, by ordering that the bed be pulled out. The immovable bed is an emblem of their unshakable union.

Other examples of interest in psychology are plentiful in the poem, especially in the portrayal of women. We see a complete gallery of female types. There is Nausicaa, the ingenue, just beginning to think about getting married, who finds a wonderful man and dreams of him as her husband; the hard-boiled Kirke, who can take it or leave it, and who makes no difficulties when Odysseus wants to be off; and the loving Kalypso, who asks nothing better than to marry the hero, until heaven forces her to let him go. There is Nausicaa's mother Arete, too, with a careful motherly eye on her daughter and this glamorous stranger.

Then there is the faithful wife Penelope, keeping the hero's house; and the energetic virgin goddess Athene; and the monstrous queen of the cannibal Laestrygonians. Together, they all make up a splendid gallery of the female types whom one may meet, as one knocks about the Mediterranean. It does not, of course, follow that the author is a woman, the fantasy of Samuel Butler (Butler 1897; see further Reception, from the Enlightenment to the 20th Century). A man, perhaps, is more likely to find women so interesting.

Some ancient scholars regarded the conclusion of the *Odyssey* - that is, everything after Book 23, line 297 ("So they came, with delight, to the old ritual of their bed") - as not forming part of the original poem (see Aristophanes of Byzantium). There are, in fact, many problems of detail and of language about the last Book, and that ancient verdict, which gives the poem a more romantic conclusion, has much to commend it. But, in the standard text, events go on to include Odysseus' recognition by his ancient father and the ghosts of the Suitors flocking down to the Underworld (*Book 24*).

Analysis shows that some of Odysseus' adventures are set in the West. That is where Skylla and Charybdis were always located. Others are without definite location, such as the floating island of Aiolos, which may be anywhere. But Kirke and the Laestrygonians are regularly located in the north-east: that is where Jason and the Argonauts encounter them, on their journey to fetch the Golden Fleece from the far end of the Black Sea. The *Odyssey* actually refers to the journey of "the Argo, interesting to everyone" (12.69-70). It seems right to take that as an acknowledgment of a source, the first in European literature. From the Argo story, too, have come the Clashing Rocks (Planktai), the mythical peril that deterred intruders from invading the lucrative trade with the Hellespont and the Black Sea. We see that, by a process impossible to reconstruct, the tale of Odysseus has become *the* tale of heroic voyaging, which has absorbed material from various sources. The formulaic Homeric manner (see Formula) successfully imposes on all its episodes a convincing uniformity of language, manner, and style.

Antiquity was unanimous in regarding the *Iliad* as the greater of the two epics. The mass of ancient commentary and exegesis which survives on the *Iliad* is much greater than that on the *Odyssey*, and the poem was much more frequently quoted (see Quotations). Modern taste has often preferred the *Odyssey*, with its wider range of events and settings, its marvels and monsters, its happy ending, and its greater interest in psychology and in women - two subjects which seem to go together, as men find the other sex fascinating but inscrutable and unpredictable.

The *Odyssey* provided the framework for the first half of Vergil's *Aeneid*, and it was the ultimate model for most of the episodes in Books 1 to 6. It has been crucial to the development of the novel in Europe, all the way from picaresque tales like *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe* to the very different *Odyssey* of Nikos Kazantzakis, to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and to the Space *Odysseys* of 20th-century cinema.

See *also* Narrative.

References and Suggested Readings

Page 1955; Kirk 1962; Finley 1978 [1954]; Griffin 1987; Schein 1996; Danek 1998; de Jong 2001; Hall 2008.

See here for references.

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