

## THE ODYSSEY

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD ([Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu](mailto:Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu))

*TELL ME, O MUSE, of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after he had sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted; moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home; but do what he might he could not save his men, for they perished through their own sheer folly in eating the cattle of the Sun-god Hyperion; so the god prevented them from ever reaching home. Tell me, too, about all these things, O daughter of Jove, from whatsoever source you may know them.*

*So now all who escaped death in battle or by shipwreck had got safely home except Ulysses, and he, though he was longing to return to his wife and country, was detained by the goddess Calypso, who had got him into a large cave and wanted to marry him. But as years went by, there came a time when the gods settled that he should go back to Ithaca; even then, however, when he was among his own people, his troubles were not yet over; nevertheless all the gods had now begun to pity him except Neptune, who still persecuted him without ceasing and would not let him get home.*

The **Odyssey** tells the story of the Greek hero **Odysseus** (or **Ulysses**) as he travels home from the Trojan War (the Greeks having won it) to his home in Ithaca. Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* is traditionally thought to have been written by Homer, but is likely to have originated as an oral poem that was eventually written down. In this lesson, we'll be taking a look at one of the more famous scenes in the Odyssey: Odysseus's voyage to the land of the dead, where he chats with several of the heroes who died during the Trojan War, among other people.

### OVERVIEW: PLOT AND CHARACTERS

In comparison to the *Iliad*, which has a ton of characters, the *Odyssey* has only a few main characters. Nearly all of the book's action centers around Odysseus, his son **Telemachus**, and his wife **Penelope**. These three characters will eventually be reunited at the end of the book, and will defeat all of their enemies.

1. When the book begins, Odysseus has been taken prisoner by the nymph **Calypso** (she's something like a minor deity). He's been there for 7 years, having been captured on the way home from the Trojan War. We'll later find out that all of his men died on the way there, and that Calypso wants to marry Odysseus, promising him immortality if he does so. He won't. (He's one of the few characters in mythical/religious stories to simply turn down eternal life, apparently without it bothering him much). Unbeknownst to Odysseus, his patron goddess **Athena** has intervened with **Zeus** to let Odysseus (finally!) go home.
2. The actual action of the book begins not with Odysseus, but with his son Telemachus and wife Penelope, who are at home. Odysseus—the king of Ithaca—has been gone for almost 20 years (10 years in Troy, 3 years sailing around, and 7 seven years as a prisoner). Things are NOT going well in his absence, either for his family or his kingdom. Telemachus was an infant when Odysseus left, but is now on the verge of adulthood. Penelope's and Telemachus' home has been invaded by 108 suitors, all of whom are trying to convince her to marry them, on the assumption/hope that Odysseus is dead. The suitors are jerks: they ignore Telemachus' requests to leave (after all, who's going to make them, since the king is absent?), and their main interest in Penelope is in coercing her into marriage, in order to become king. They'd likely murder Telemachus if they ever succeeded.
3. We find out more about Odysseus in chapter 5, when Calypso lets him leave. He gets shipwrecked on the island of the Phoenicians (because he has angered the sea god **Neptune/Poseidon**), and ends up telling the story of his journey *before* ending up on Calypso's island. To make a long story short: he left Troy (after masterminding the **"Trojan Horse"** plot to seize the city), got in a fight with the cyclops (and son of Poseidon) Polymephus, got seduced and kidnapped by Circe (another goddess!), visited the land of the dead, braved "Scylla" and "Charybdis", and finally got in trouble when the men killed some of the cows belonging to the god **Helios/Sol**. Then, he was captured by Calypso.
4. After this, he makes it home. This takes several books. He disguises himself in order to trick the suitors (who he eventually kills). He and his family live happily after.

### THE VISIT TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD (BOOK 11)

*"And I said, 'Achilles, son of Peleus, foremost champion of the Achaeans, I came to consult Teiresias, and see if he could advise me about my return home to Ithaca, for I have never yet been able to get near the Achaean land, nor to set foot in my own country, but have been in trouble all the time. As for you, Achilles, no one was ever yet so fortunate as you have been, nor ever will be, for you were adored by all us Argives as long as you were alive, and now that you are here you are a great prince among the dead. Do not, therefore, take it so much to heart even if you are dead.'..." "Say not a word," he answered, 'in death's favour; I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man's house and be above ground than king of kings among the dead.'* (Conversation between Odysseus and Achilles, book 11)

In book 11, Odysseus tells the story of his visit to Hades—the land of the dead—in order to talk to **Tiresias**, who Circe has assured him can tell him how to get home. While visiting the dead, Odysseus chats with a number of people, each of whom have something interesting/revealing to say.

1. **An ignoble end, and desire for fond remembrance.** The first person he meets is **Elpenor**, one of his crew. Elpenor died while staying on Circe's island, after having too much to drink and falling off the roof (he apparently couldn't find the stairs). Odysseus and his men didn't have time to have any sort of funeral, and Elpenor is upset about this. (Who wants to fall off a roof, die, and have your friends leave your body to rot on the beach? It's a bad way to go!).
2. **A short, threatening prophecy.** He then talks to Tiresias briefly, who promises him success in killing the suitors and reuniting with his family. He warns him to keep his men from eating the sheep/cows of the sun god (spoiler: his crew does it anyway, and they all die). Tiresias also notes that he has angered Poseidon, and will need to make a voyage (and a big sacrifice) to make it up to the god.
3. **Things we can't get back: A chat with mom.** Odysseus then talks with his mom, who tells him that she died of heartbreak, while waiting for him. She also tells him that his father is in bad straights, sleeping outside, or on the floors of stranger's houses. She also relates the suffering of his wife and son. This is a stark reminder that being gone for 20 years has real costs! (By contrast, the various gods/immortals that Odysseus encounters don't seem to care about time at all, and repeatedly waylay him for years at a time).
4. **The women "favored" by the gods.** Odysseus briefly notes all the famous women he sees in Hades, many of whom had dalliances with gods. These dalliances ended well for the gods, but less well for the mortal women (who are now dead, and often violently so).
5. **The sad end of heroes: Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles.** Odysseus's hosts *really* want to hear about the heroes from the Trojan War (who wouldn't?), and so he tells them a bit about who he talked with. Almost universally, things didn't go well for them. **Agamemnon** (the Greek leader) made it back to Greece, but was immediately murdered by his wife (who'd found a new lover in the 10 years he'd been gone). Odysseus *tries* to talk to **Ajax**, but finds he's still upset at Odysseus about a fight over who would get Achilles' armor (Ajax got so upset about this, he ended up going mad and ends up killing himself after attempting mass murder). Finally there is **Achilles**, who seems now to regret his choice to die heroically (as opposed to going back to Greece, and living out his remaining days): he hates being in the land of the dead, and says he would happily take the lowest position in the land of the living.
6. **The tortured: Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus.** Odysseus now sees (though doesn't speak with) some people who *really* have it bad, even compared to the women and men he's chatted with. Tityus (a half-mortal who tried to rape a god) is having his liver repeatedly pulled out by vultures, Tantalus (who stole food/drink from the gods to give to mortals) is tortured by having drink forever just out of his reach, and Sisyphus (a mortal who repeatedly cheated death by tricking the gods) is forced to eternally roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down again.
7. **Hercules' happy end.** The ONLY person that Odysseus meets who is happy is **Hercules**, the legendary Greek hero who accomplished so much that the gods agreed to let him (and his wife) live with them after he died. If this is what is required to have a good afterlife, things look pretty bleak!

#### THEMES: ODYSSEUS THE HERO?

Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* was a "foundational" text for not only Greek culture, but later Roman and European culture. It was the kind of text that any "educated" adult would be expected to know (in this sense, it was somewhat analogous to the religious texts of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam). Given this importance, it's worth asking: What kind of world-view is presented by the *Odyssey*?

1. **No escape from mortality.** Odysseus is continuously, painfully aware of the fact that both he and his loved ones are mortals, who have only a fixed amount of time to live. In the twenty years he is gone, he misses his son's entire childhood, and his absence subjects his wife, mother, and father to all sorts of torment (poverty, fear, and death). His visit to the land of the dead reinforces the idea that no "afterlife" can possibly make up for this. Odysseus, for his part, turns down even a more "ideal" afterlife (when Circe offers him immortality), since it would prevent him from returning to his (mortal) family.
2. **There are no rules in love or war.** Odysseus, even in comparison to figures like Achilles, cares little for the "rules." He constructs the "Trojan Horse" to trick the Trojans into letting Greeks into the city (who then kill and enslave everyone). He repeatedly lies to people, disguises himself, and kills his rivals (such as the suitors). For the ancient Greeks, Odysseus's cleverness and ruthlessness in pursuit of his goals (victory in war, defense of his family) were to be admired. For later writers—especially Roman and Christian ones—Odysseus seemed more like an "anti-hero." (For example: think how Odysseus compares to the ideal of an honorable, heroic medieval "knight"—he's almost the opposite!).
3. **The fickleness of the gods (and of the world).** Odysseus is both blessed and cursed by the gods. Several goddesses want to marry him, and Athena eventually takes up his cause, and helps him get home (as always, Zeus seems pretty indifferent to the fate of mortals). On the hand, Poseidon (the god of the sea) and Helios (the god of the sun) both end up being angry with him, and do all sorts of terrible things to Odysseus and his men. The world of the *Odyssey*, then, is NOT a world where people get what they deserve, or where good can be expected to prevail (even in the long run). Odysseus' attitude toward the gods is (understandably!) different from the way that later religious writers would conceive of God and the world. In some ways, though, Odysseus's conception of

nature is more in line with a “scientific” worldview, where “laws of nature” govern the world, without any regard for human well-being.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does Odysseus compare to contemporary “heroes”? Give an example of a contemporary book/movie/comic that involves “heroes” of some type. Now, consider what would happen if \*Odysseus\* were the main hero? What might he do differently? Do you think Odysseus is an admirable hero?
2. Is there a way of designing an afterlife that avoids the problems of Hades (e.g., it kind of sucks!)? Do you think Odysseus would be excited about going to your afterlife? Why or why not?
3. Consider a problem in your own life (either now or in the past). How might Odysseus have handled this problem?