

Contrary to custom, Odysseus took his bride back to his home on the island of Ithaca. The sea journey was rough for Penelope, and once they landed things weren't much better. Although Penelope quickly came to love Odysseus, she did not get along with her mother in law, Anticleia, and found Odysseus's former nurse, Eurycleia, to be very condescending. Penelope had no friends her own age or status. Penelope's only comfort was the birth of her son, Telemachus, and her love for Odysseus.

Eventually, Odysseus received word that Penelope's cousin Helen, whom Penelope despised, had left her husband Menelaus for a Trojan prince named Paris. Menelaus and several other men intended to lay siege to Troy in response. They came to search for Odysseus, who had sworn an oath to Menelaus to protect his rights to Helen. Odysseus tried to feign madness to get out of his obligation, but he was caught in the end. Odysseus sailed for Troy.

Time passed, Telemachus grew up, and Anticleia died. Penelope learned to manage Odysseus's estates in his absence. News came from minstrels about Odysseus's exploits during the war. Then, finally, news came that the Greeks had won the war. Expecting Odysseus to come home, Penelope looked for ships on the horizon, but none came. Minstrels brought strange tales of Odysseus's difficult attempts to get home, until one day the reports stopped coming. The Maids, during one of their commentaries, give a poem-form synopsis of the experiences that Odysseus supposedly had in the *Odyssey*.

Meanwhile Suitors began to show up at Ithaca, asking to marry Penelope in the hopes of gaining access to her dowry. Claiming that they were guests, the Suitors took everything they wanted from the estate, running it into the ground.

As the time of Odysseus's absence lengthened, the number of suitors grew bigger and they became more impatient. Penelope devised a plan to fend them off, saying that she would not pick one to marry until she had finished **weaving** a shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes. However, every night, Penelope and her Twelve Maids secretly unraveled the work that she had done that day, prolonging the process and buying her more time. Meanwhile, Penelope told the Maids to spend time with the Suitors and gain their confidence by sleeping with them and saying bad things about Odysseus and his family. The Maids obliged and told Penelope whatever they learned.

The Suitors finally learned of Penelope's trick with the shroud thanks to the loose lips of one of the Maids. They confronted Penelope about it. Penelope promised to finish the shroud quickly and then pick a suitor. Telemachus, growing impatient, secretly left to search for word of his father. When he returned, Penelope prayed to the gods once more for Odysseus's return. She then found Odysseus out in the courtyard, disguised as a beggar. Penelope did not let on that she recognized him, but sent him to Eurycleia for a bath. Eurycleia recognized Odysseus by the scar on his leg, but did not tell Penelope about his

identity, although, secretly, Penelope already knew. During his time in the palace, Odysseus overheard the Twelve Maids saying bad things about his family, unaware that they were acting according to Penelope's orders.

Penelope spoke with the beggar/Odysseus, still pretending not to know who he was. She said that she still missed her husband and remained faithful to him. She then asked his advice on her idea to have an archery contest to finally decide which Suitor should win her hand, knowing that the task she had set was one only Odysseus could succeed in. Odysseus/the beggar agreed this was a good idea, and he won the contest when Penelope held it that day. He then locked Penelope in her room and killed all of the Suitors.

After the Suitors' murders, Odysseus asked Eurycleia to point out the Maids who had been unfaithful to him. Eurycleia pointed to the Twelve Maids who had been spying for Penelope, and Telemachus **hung them**. Following the hanging, Odysseus "revealed" his identity to Penelope, who pretended to be surprised. Odysseus then set sail again soon after finally arriving back at home, to go on a quest to cleanse himself of the Suitors' murders.

In the afterlife, the Twelve Maids haunt Odysseus, following him everywhere. The Maids, in their commentary, evaluate their own murders from an anthropological perspective and then hold a mock trial for Odysseus to attempt to punish him for his deeds. Odysseus chooses to leave Penelope over and over again in order to be reborn and temporarily escape the Maids. Penelope, meanwhile, stays in the fields of asphodel, and the couple replays their estrangement over and over again in the world of the dead.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Penelope – Penelope is the daughter of King Icarius, the mother of Telemachus, Odysseus's wife, and the first-person narrator of the majority of the novel. Penelope, although not a beauty, is known for her cleverness, her devotion, and her modesty. Penelope is insecure about her looks and her ability to attract men, often comparing herself to her cousin Helen, whom she loathes. Penelope marries Odysseus at age fifteen and then returns to Ithaca with him. In Ithaca, Penelope finds herself with few friends. She loves Odysseus, however, and the two often lie in bed together, telling stories. Penelope gives birth to Telemachus a year before Odysseus leaves for the Trojan War. During Odysseus's absence, Penelope becomes an expert at managing Odysseus's estate independently, employing twelve of her Maids to help her spy on the Suitors who have come to beg for her hand in marriage. A skilled **weaver**, Penelope tricks the impatient Suitors by telling them that she will not select one of them for marriage until she is

finished making a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. She then unravels her progress each night with the help of her trusted Maids. In the afterlife, Penelope is haunted by the fact that Odysseus ordered her **Maids' deaths** when he returned home. Penelope never chooses to be reborn, preferring, like she did in life, to stay at home in the fields of asphodel.

Odysseus – Odysseus is Penelope's husband, Telemachus's father, King of Ithaca, and the hero of the Greek myth of the *Odyssey*, upon which *The Penelopiad* is based. Odysseus is described as short-legged, barrel-chested, and extremely clever. He has a deep voice that contributes to his profound powers of persuasion and his superior storytelling abilities. Odysseus is also an expert sailor. Odysseus marries Penelope after cheating to win a running race for her hand. He is kind to Penelope, who falls in love with him. Odysseus's own feelings towards Penelope are less clear. After being summoned by Menelaus, Odysseus wages war against the Trojans. However, he does not return until long after the war is done. During the years he is gone, some suggest that he was completing the heroic deeds recounted in the *Odyssey*, while others suggest those stories were only to cover up his philandering and waywardness, and his lack of a desire to return home. When Odysseus does eventually return, he kills Penelope's Suitors and **executes** her Maids, leaving him with profound, irreconcilable guilt.

Helen – Helen is Penelope's cousin, Menelaus's wife, and Paris's lover. She is considered to be the most attractive woman in the Greek world and she uses her divine beauty to her advantage. Penelope characterizes Helen as vain, cruel, and flirtatious. Penelope feels that she is living in Helen's shadow and often compares herself to her. She worries that Odysseus prefers Helen to her. In Penelope's narrative, Helen runs away from Menelaus with Paris, a Trojan prince, inciting the Trojan War and causing Odysseus to leave Ithaca. In the afterlife, Helen continues to seek male attention. She often goes to séances and decides to be reincarnated in the world of the living.

Eurycleia – Eurycleia is Odysseus's former nurse and a servant in his household. Eurycleia is entirely devoted to Odysseus and always thinks she knows what's best for him. This annoys Penelope, who finds Eurycleia controlling and condescending. Still, Eurycleia is loyal servant and one of the few people who takes the time to show Penelope the ropes when she arrives at Ithaca. Eurycleia also helps Penelope deliver Telemachus and nurses him with care. Eurycleia is the one who points out Penelope's favorite Maids to Odysseus to be **killed** at the end of the book.

Telemachus – Telemachus is Odysseus and Penelope's only son and the Prince of Ithaca. Born only one year before Odysseus left for Troy, Telemachus knows of his father mostly through the stories his mother tells him. Penelope and Eurycleia raise Telemachus, spoiling him as a child. As a teenager, Telemachus

is angsty and rude to his mother, criticizing her for letting the Suitors eat away at his inheritance. Ultimately, Telemachus sails to find his father and helps him kill the Suitors and the Twelve Maids.

The Suitors – The Suitors are the swarms of men who come to beg for Penelope's hand in marriage after Odysseus's departure. The Suitors are generally much younger than Penelope. They profess to be in love with her, and to think she is beautiful and charming. However, behind Penelope's back, the Suitors talk about how Penelope is old and ugly, and they admit to only pursuing Penelope for her considerable dowry. The Suitors feast every day at Ithaca, eating away at Odysseus's fortune and Telemachus's inheritance. They recklessly disregard the property and they rape and seduce Penelope's Maids. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he and Telemachus kill all of the Suitors.

The Twelve Maids – The Twelve Maids are Penelope's twelve most trusted servants, whom she raised since they were children. Throughout the novel, the Maids, acting as a Greek Chorus, give their own perspective on the events of the plot, sometimes contradicting Penelope's account. The Maids are the daughters of poor women and slaves and they have spent their entire lives working for Penelope and her family. The Maids are devoted to Penelope and they help her during Odysseus's absence. The Maids spy on the Suitors for her, sometimes falling in love with or being raped by the men in the process. In order to gain the Suitors' trust, Penelope commands the Maids to say bad things about her and Odysseus. At night, the Maids also help to unravel the shroud that Penelope **weaves** for Laertes in order to procrastinate choosing one of the Suitors. At the book's end, Odysseus orders the Maids to be **killed**, and Telemachus hangs them. In the afterlife, the Maids haunt Odysseus.

King Icarius of Sparta – Icarius is Penelope's father and a King of Sparta. According to stories that Penelope heard growing up, Icarius tried to kill Penelope when she was a baby by throwing her into the **sea**. After the incident, Icarius was overly affectionate towards Penelope, but Penelope never felt at ease with him. Icarius had wanted Penelope and Odysseus to stay in the Spartan court, but they instead broke with tradition and sailed to Ithaca.

Penelope's Mother (The Naiad) – Penelope's mother is a Naiad (a Water Nymph, or kind of minor goddess), wife of King Icarius of Sparta, and a Queen of Sparta. Characterized as neglectful and cold, Penelope's mother shows little to no interest in Penelope's life, preferring to spend time swimming in fresh **water**. She does, however, give Penelope the advice to "be like water" in order to get what she wants, leading to Penelope's **weaving** scheme.

Menelaus – Menelaus is Helen's husband, Odysseus's friend and ally, and a King of Sparta. Rich, loud, and not especially

good looking, Menelaus is a powerful ruler who won Helen's hand in a contest. When Helen ran away with Paris, Menelaus came to Ithaca to ask Odysseus to join him in a war against the Trojans, since Odysseus swore an oath to protect Menelaus's claims to Helen. Later, Telemachus goes to Menelaus's palace to seek news of his father.

Laertes – Laertes is Odysseus's father, Anticleia's husband, and Penelope's father-in-law. Laertes is faithful to his wife Anticleia because he is afraid of her. Laertes lets Odysseus rule the island and, after his disappearance and Anticleia's death, Laertes takes up a quiet life as a farmer (possibly because he has gone a little crazy). It is Laertes's shroud that Penelope **weaves** in order to trick the Suitors.

Uncle Tyndareous – Uncle Tyndareous is Penelope's uncle, Helen's father, and King Icarius's brother. He and Icarius share the throne of Sparta. Tyndareous is characterized as mean, selfish, and conniving. Penelope believes that Tyndareous helped Odysseus cheat in the running competition for her hand in marriage so that Odysseus would take Penelope away to Ithaca and Tyndareous's children could inherit the Spartan throne.

Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks – Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks is one of the Twelve Maids and a particular favorite of Penelope's. She often has a speaking role in the Maids' poems, plays, and songs. When Penelope told the Maids to insult her and her family to gain the Suitors' trust, Melantho threw herself into the role whole-heartedly.

Palamedes – Palamedes is a man faithful to Menelaus who goes with him to press Odysseus into joining them in a war against the Trojans. Palamedes is the one who places Telemachus in front of Odysseus's cart, thereby proving that Odysseus is faking his madness to try to get out of going to war.

The Fates – The Fates are mysterious figures in Greek mythology that decide the destiny and lifespans of mortal humans. They are three old women who **spin thread**, measuring it out to determine the length of people's lives. The Fates are more powerful than the other Greek gods and goddesses (even Zeus) and cannot be tricked by mortals.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Autolycus – Autolycus is Odysseus's grandfather and supposedly a son of the god Hermes. He is known for being a skilled liar, cheater, and storyteller. Autolycus may have tried to get Odysseus killed by a boar in order to keep from having to hand over Odysseus's inheritance to him.

Anticleia – Anticleia is Odysseus's mother and Penelope's mother-in-law. Anticleia is harsh towards Penelope, often criticizing her and commenting negatively on her youth. Anticleia dies after Odysseus's disappearance, leaving Penelope to manage the estate alone.

Actoris – Actoris is one of Penelope's maids and a gift from her father, Icarius. Penelope brings Actoris with her to Ithaca from Sparta. Actoris is unhappy in Ithaca and greatly misses her friends at home. Actoris, who is middle-aged, dies soon after arriving on the island.

Theseus and Peirithous – Theseus and Peirithous are Greek heroes who abducted Helen when she was twelve, intending to marry her when she was old enough. According to Helen, the two men were in complete awe of her beauty. Helen's brothers went to war with Athens in order to get Helen back.

Paris – Paris is a Trojan prince and Helen's lover. He is supposedly extremely handsome. After secretly wooing each other during a feast in Paris's honor at Menelaus's palace, Paris and Helen ran away together, inciting the Trojan War.

Agamemnon – Agamemnon is Menelaus's brother, who goes with him to press Odysseus into joining them in a war against the Trojans.

Teiresias – Teiresias is a blind prophet who Odysseus supposedly meets during his journeys. According to Odysseus, Teiresias gave him advice on his journey home when he went to see him in the underworld, and told him that Poseidon had a vendetta against him since he killed the Cyclops.

Antinous – Antinous is one of Penelope's Suitors that Odysseus kills with an arrow. Antinous turns into a corpse every time he sees Penelope in the fields of Asphodel, clearly still angry about the circumstances of his death.

Medon – Medon is a herald who tells Penelope about Telemachus secretly leaving to find Odysseus after Penelope has already learned of his departure from her Maids.

Iphthime – Iphthime is Penelope's sister, who appears to her in a dream to tell her that Telemachus will return home safely.

Sisyphus – According to rumors, Sisyphus is Odysseus's real father. Sisyphus is known for being an extremely tricky man who cheated death several times.

Piraeus and Theoclymenus – Piraeus and Theoclymenus are friends that Telemachus makes during his trip to find Odysseus. They eat dinner with Telemachus at Ithaca when they return.

Poseidon – Poseidon is the Greek god of the sea. He has a vendetta against Odysseus, and according to the stories, he prevents Odysseus from reaching home.

Athene – Athene is the Greek goddess of wisdom. She helps Odysseus in his endeavors.

Hermes – Hermes is a Greek god and messenger who is associated with thievery and trickery. Odysseus is supposedly descended from Hermes.

Zeus – Zeus is the leader and most powerful of the Greek gods, and supposedly the real father of Helen.

Artemis – Artemis is the Greek goddess of the hunt and of virginity.