

The Odyssey Book Review

1 Plot Summary

The story begins twenty years after Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, and ten years after he began his journey home to Ithaca. We enter the story in medias res – in the middle of things: Odysseus is trapped on an island with the lovesick goddess Calypso, while his wife and son suffer the transgressions of the suitors, noble young men who vie for queen Penelope's hand. The loyal queen has rebuffed their advances for many years, because she holds out hope that Odysseus may one day return. In the meantime the suitors have run free in the household, holding noisy parties and draining the resources of the estate.

The goddess Athena decides to intervene on Odysseus's behalf. She convinces Zeus to send the messenger god Hermes to disentangle Odysseus from Calypso's grasp, and she herself flies to Ithaca to give courage and guidance to the helpless young prince Telemachus. She inspires Telemachus to set sail to Pylos and Sparta in search of news about Odysseus; his newfound confidence and familial feeling alarms the suitors, who plot to murder him on his way home. King Nestor of Pylos can't give Telemachus any information about Odysseus, but King Menelaus of Sparta reports that he learned from the sea god Proteus that Odysseus is alive on the island Ogygia.

After he spends some time at court, he tells Alcinous and Arete the full story of his travels. He describes the Cicones, who punished Odysseus's men for recklessness and greed, and the Lotus Eaters, whose flowers sent his men into a happy stupor. He tells the king and queen how he blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus, who called on his father Poseidon to avenge him. The prophet Tiresias warned Odysseus to keep his crew from harming the Sun God's cattle, but the men killed a few animals when Odysseus was asleep. When they were once again at sea, Zeus sent down a punitive bolt of lightning that killed every man except Odysseus, who floated on a makeshift raft to Calypso's island, where he lived in captivity for seven years.

Here Odysseus finishes his story. The next day, Alcinous sends him home in a Phaeacian ship loaded with treasure. Athena apprises him of the dire situation in his household, warns him of the suffering still to come, and disguises him as a ragged beggar. She sends him to the farm of the loyal swineherd Eumaeus; she also advises Telemachus to hurry home from Sparta. Father and son reunite and plot their revenge against the suitors.

Odysseus, of course, shoots the arrow with grace and ease. Just then the slaughter begins. With the help of Athena, the swineherd, and the cowherd, Odysseus and Telemachus murder the suitors one by one; they also kill the disloyal maids and servants. Soon enough, Odysseus reunites with Penelope. The suitors' families gather to avenge the murders, but Zeus orders them to stand down. Odysseus must leave for a brief journey to appease Poseidon, who still holds a grudge. Nevertheless, Ithaca is once again at peace.

2 Review

Where do you start with a book such as this? An epic tale that has been around for almost three thousand years. I have no idea. What I do know is that I read it and loved it. I had little foreknowledge of the story and I haven't looked into the meanings or history too deeply. Instead, I've tried to appreciate the story on its own merits, getting swept away like Odysseus on the sea. There were quiet contemplative events and dramatic battles, personal struggles, and wider societal issues. Gods and heroes, kings and queens, nymphs and cyclops, a lot of deceptive weaving and a city full of ill-fated suitors, what more could you want?