



'The Odyssey' Notes

▼ Class

English I

Introduction	<p>Emily Wilson's introduction to <i>The Odyssey</i> explains her goal of creating a translation that is both faithful to the original text and accessible to modern readers. She aims to capture the essence and energy of Homer's epic while ensuring clarity and readability. Wilson provides context about the historical and literary significance of <i>The Odyssey</i>, highlighting its prime themes like heroism, identity, and the journey home, as well as its complex narrative structure.</p> <p>Wilson discusses her translation choices, emphasizing the balance between staying true to the ancient Greek and making the text engaging for contemporary audiences. She explains the challenges of translating Homer's language, focusing on how she maintained the poem's rhythm and dynamism. Throughout the introduction, Wilson showcases her commitment to producing a translation that honors both the literal and poetic qualities of the original epic.</p>
Book 1 (The Boy and the Goddess)	<p>The <i>Odyssey</i> kicks off with an invocation to the Muse, asking for inspiration to tell the tale of Odysseus. We learn that Odysseus is being held captive on the island of Ogygia by the nymph Calypso. Meanwhile, back in Ithaca, his home is overrun by suitors vying for his wife Penelope's hand. The goddess Athena, Odysseus's divine ally, convinces Zeus to let him return home. Disguising herself as Mentos, a friend of Odysseus, she visits his son, Telemachus. She imparts wisdom and courage, urging him to search for news of his father. Telemachus begins to assert himself against the disrespectful suitors, declaring his intention to journey for information about Odysseus.</p>
Book 2 (A Dangerous Journey)	<p>Telemachus, inspired by Athena, calls an assembly of Ithaca's elders to denounce the suitors and seek assistance for his quest, but the suitors mock him. During the assembly, Halitherses, a soothsayer, predicts Odysseus's return, but the suitors dismiss his prophecy.</p>

	<p>Telemachus, encouraged by Athena, now disguised as Mentor, secretly prepares for his voyage. He secures a ship and crew under the cover of night, setting sail for Pylos to seek guidance from Nestor about his father's fate. This marks Telemachus's first steps into adulthood and his determination to reclaim control over his household.</p>
Book 3 (An Old King Remembers)	<p>Telemachus arrives in Pylos, where he finds Nestor, the wise old king, conducting a grand sacrifice to Poseidon. Welcoming Telemachus warmly, Nestor recounts the aftermath of the Trojan War but admits he has no recent news of Odysseus. He advises Telemachus to visit Menelaus in Sparta for more information. To support Telemachus's quest, Nestor provides his son Pisistratus as a guide and companion. Telemachus, emboldened by Nestor's hospitality and advice, continues on his journey, showing growing maturity and resolve to uncover his father's fate.</p>
Book 4 (What the Sea God Said)	<p>At Sparta, Telemachus and Pisistratus receive a gracious welcome from Menelaus and Helen, who are celebrating the weddings of their children. Menelaus speaks highly of Odysseus and shares stories of their shared experiences during the Trojan War. Through Menelaus's tale, Telemachus learns that Odysseus is alive but stranded on the island of the nymph Calypso, as Menelaus learned from the sea-god Proteus. This crucial information reinvigorates Telemachus's hope. Meanwhile, back in Ithaca, the suitors plot to ambush and kill Telemachus on his return. Penelope learns of their scheme through a trusted servant but remains hopeful for her son's safety.</p>
Book 5 (From the Goddess to the Storm)	<p>Zeus instructs Hermes to order Calypso to release Odysseus. Reluctantly, Calypso helps Odysseus build a raft and provides supplies for his journey home. After seventeen days at sea, Poseidon, still holding a grudge against Odysseus, conjures a storm that wrecks his raft. Struggling against the waves, Odysseus is aided by the sea goddess Ino, who gives him a magical veil to keep him afloat. He finally reaches the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians, where he collapses, exhausted, under an olive tree to rest.</p>
Book 6 (A Princess and her Laundry)	<p>Athena appears in a dream to Nausicaa, the daughter of King Alcinous, urging her to go to the river to wash her clothes. Following the goddess's advice, Nausicaa and her maids head to the river, where they encounter the shipwrecked Odysseus. Struck by his plea for help and his dignified manners, Nausicaa provides him with</p>

	<p>clothing and guides him to the city's palace. She instructs Odysseus on how to approach her parents, King Alcinous and Queen Arete, to seek their assistance for his journey home.</p>
Book 7 (A Magical Kingdom)	<p>Odysseus, with Athena's guidance and disguised as a young girl, reaches the palace of Alcinous. Upon his entrance, he is warmly received by King Alcinous and Queen Arete. Odysseus recounts his plight without revealing his identity, prompting the king to promise him assistance in returning home. Queen Arete, noticing Odysseus's clothing which Nausicaa had provided, questions him further. Odysseus explains his recent adventures and his encounter with Nausicaa, earning the royal family's compassion and assurance of safe passage back to Ithaca.</p>
Book 8 (The Songs of a Poet)	<p>King Alcinous calls an assembly of the Phaeacians to discuss Odysseus's journey home. They agree to help and prepare a ship for his departure. A grand feast is held, during which the blind bard Demodocus sings of the Trojan War, stirring Odysseus's emotions and revealing his identity through his tears. The Phaeacians hold athletic contests in Odysseus's honor, where he demonstrates his prowess by winning the discus throw. Another feast follows, where Demodocus sings about the love affair of Ares and Aphrodite, before Odysseus tells his hosts about his adventures, leading up to the point where he reached Calypso's island.</p>
Book 9 (A Pirate in a Shepherd's Cave)	<p>Odysseus begins recounting his adventures to the Phaeacians. After leaving Troy, his fleet is blown off course to the land of the Lotus-Eaters, where some of his men are seduced by the narcotic lotus fruit and forget their homes. Odysseus drags them back to the ships and they sail on. They next reach the land of the Cyclopes, where they encounter Polyphemus. Polyphemus traps them in his cave and begins devouring Odysseus's men. Using his wits, Odysseus blinds Polyphemus with a heated stake and they escape by clinging to the undersides of the sheep. As they sail away, Odysseus taunts Polyphemus, revealing his true name and provoking the Cyclops to curse him in the name of Poseidon.</p>
Book 10 (The Winds and the Witch)	<p>Odysseus's journey continues to the island of Aeolus, the god of winds, who gives him a bag containing all the winds except the west wind to ensure a safe voyage home. However, his curious crew opens the bag just as Ithaca comes into sight, releasing the winds and blowing them back to Aeolus, who refuses to help them again. They then encounter the Laestrygonians, giant cannibals who</p>

	<p>destroy all but one of Odysseus's ships. The survivors reach the island of Aeaea, home to the sorceress Circe. She transforms Odysseus's men into pigs, but with the help of Hermes, Odysseus resists her magic. After a year of feasting and rest, and obtaining directions for their return to Ithaca, they finally resume their journey.</p>
Book 11 (The Dead)	<p>Following Circe's instructions, Odysseus travels to the Underworld to seek prophecy from the blind seer Tiresias. There, he performs rituals to summon the spirits of the dead. Tiresias foretells the remainder of Odysseus's journey, warning him about Poseidon's wrath and the perils ahead, including the temptation of the Sirens and the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis. He also provides advice on managing the sacred cattle of Helios. Odysseus encounters the spirits of his mother, who informs him of the situation in Ithaca, and fallen comrades like Agamemnon and Achilles, who share their tragic tales. Laden with newfound knowledge, Odysseus prepares to return to the living world.</p>
Book 12 (Difficult Choices)	<p>Odysseus returns to Aeaea to give Elpenor, a crew member who died falling from Circe's roof, a proper burial. Circe warns him of the upcoming perils and advises him on how to navigate them. They sail past the Sirens, whose enchanting song tempts sailors to their doom; Odysseus plugs his men's ears with beeswax and has himself tied to the mast to listen safely. They then encounter Scylla, a six-headed monster, and Charybdis, a deadly whirlpool, losing six men to Scylla's attack. Finally, they reach Thrinacia, the island of Helios's sacred cattle. Despite strict warnings, Odysseus's men, driven by hunger, slaughter the cattle while Odysseus is asleep. Angered, Helios demands justice from Zeus, who sends a storm that destroys the ship and kills all the men except Odysseus. He drifts to Ogygia, where Calypso holds him captive, bringing his tale full circle.</p>
Book 13 (Two Tricksters)	<p>After recounting his adventures, the Phaeacians finally agree to help Odysseus return to Ithaca. They provide him with a ship and lavish gifts. As Odysseus sleeps, the Phaeacians transport him to Ithaca, where he awakens confused but is soon met by Athena. She disguises him as a beggar to protect him from the suitors and reveals the state of turmoil in his home. They hide the gifts in a cave, and Athena instructs Odysseus to seek out his loyal swineherd, Eumaeus. Meanwhile, Poseidon, furious with the Phaeacians for aiding Odysseus, turns their ship to stone as it returns home.</p>

Book 14 (A Loyal Slave)	Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, finds Eumaeus, who shows him incredible hospitality despite not recognizing him. Eumaeus recounts the cruel treatment of their land under the suitors and expresses his longing for Odysseus's return. The swineherd offers food, shelter, and protection, embodying loyalty and devotion. Odysseus tests Eumaeus's loyalty by fabricating a story about his identity, and Eumaeus passes with flying colors, further earning Odysseus's trust. This chapter highlights the theme of loyalty and sets the groundwork for Odysseus's eventual return and reclaiming of his home.
Book 15 (The Prince Returns)	Athena visits Telemachus in Sparta, urging him to return to Ithaca and informing him of the suitors' plan to ambush him. Telemachus sets sail with gifts from Menelaus and Helen, while simultaneously, Odysseus and Eumaeus share more stories, deepening their bond. On the voyage back, an eagle carrying a goose appears as an omen of Odysseus's impending revenge on the suitors. Avoiding the ambush thanks to Athena's guidance, Telemachus safely lands in Ithaca and heads straight to Eumaeus's hut, where the stage is set for the father-son reunion.
Book 16 (Father and Son)	Telemachus arrives at Eumaeus's hut, greeted warmly by the swineherd. Odysseus, still in disguise, watches their interaction until Athena appears to him alone, transforming him back into his true form. The emotional father-son reunion unfolds, with Odysseus revealing his identity to Telemachus. The two plot their strategy to defeat the suitors, planning to conceal Odysseus's return and gather intelligence. Meanwhile, back in the palace, Penelope confronts the suitors, learning of their failed ambush and reprimanding them, yet still holding onto hope for Odysseus's return. The book concludes with the suitors plotting further, unaware of the reckoning approaching.
Book 17 (Insults and Abuse)	Telemachus returns to the palace and reunites with his mother, Penelope, who is overjoyed to see him safe. He instructs her to pray to the gods for help and keeps his recent activities a secret to protect their plan. Meanwhile, Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, sets out for town with Eumaeus. Along the way, they encounter Melanthius, a rude goatherd loyal to the suitors, who mocks and kicks Odysseus. In the palace, Argos, Odysseus's old and neglected dog, recognizes him and dies contentedly upon seeing his master again. The beggar Odysseus arrives at the palace, where the suitors, led by Antinous,

	<p>treat him harshly, even hitting him with a stool. Penelope requests to speak with the beggar, believing he might have news of her husband, but Odysseus delays the meeting until later.</p>
Book 18 (Two Beggars)	<p>A new beggar, Irus, arrives and challenges Odysseus to a fight, provoked by the suitors. With Athena's encouragement, Odysseus easily defeats Irus, earning grudging respect from some suitors and continued animosity from others. Antinous mocks Eumaeus and threatens Odysseus. Penelope intervenes, chastising the suitors for their conduct and extracting more gifts from them, exploiting their desire to marry her. After this, Odysseus engages in subtle mind games, indirectly confronting some suitors while still maintaining his disguise. The tension in the palace escalates as Odysseus and Telemachus prepare for the inevitable confrontation.</p>
Book 19 (The Queen and the Beggar)	<p>Odysseus and Telemachus prepare by hiding the palace's weapons. Penelope meets the disguised Odysseus, who tells her a convincing (and mostly fictitious) tale about encountering Odysseus on his travels. Penelope is moved to tears, and Odysseus promises her that her husband is on his way back. Eurycleia, the old nurse, offers to wash the beggar's feet and recognizes him by an old scar, but Odysseus stops her from revealing his identity. The encounter is loaded with tension and emotion, highlighting Penelope's unwavering loyalty and the hidden identity of Odysseus. That night, Penelope dreams of Odysseus's return, symbolizing her hope and the prophecy of the suitors' downfall.</p>
Book 20 (The Last Banquet)	<p>Odysseus spends a sleepless night worrying about the coming battle. Athena appears to bolster his courage and confidence, assuring him of victory. Penelope prays for a swift resolution to her troubles, appealing to the gods for release from her suffering if Odysseus does not return. The next day, Odysseus receives favorable signs from Zeus, confirming the gods are on his side. The suitors continue their reckless behavior and mockery, oblivious to their impending doom. Tensions escalate as the suitors plot against Telemachus, unaware of the god's omens that favor Odysseus. The day ends with a series of portents, including thunder from Zeus and an eagle clutching a dove, indicating divine support for Odysseus.</p>
Book 21 (An Archery Contest)	<p>Penelope, weary of the suitors and longing for Odysseus's return, decides to hold a contest: she will marry the suitor who can string Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axe shafts. The suitors struggle comically and fail to string the bow. Telemachus tries</p>

	and nearly succeeds, stopping at Odysseus's sign. Odysseus, still in disguise, takes the bow and successfully strings it with ease and shoots the arrow through all twelve axes, astounding the suitors and setting the stage for their reckoning.
Book 22 (Bloodshed)	The true action-packed climax: Odysseus sheds his disguise and takes his revenge on the suitors, beginning with the arrogant Antinous. A full-on battle ensues in the great hall, with Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius fighting bravely alongside Odysseus. With a little help from Athena and a lot of deadly efficiency from Odysseus, the traitorous suitors are put to the sword, and the hall is cleansed of their corruption. Eurycleia identifies the disloyal maids, who are then forced to clean up the gruesome aftermath before meeting their own grim fate.
Book 23 (The Olive Tree Bed)	Penelope, skeptical at first, tests the man claiming to be Odysseus by ordering their bed to be moved. Odysseus reacts with indignation, as only he knows that the bed cannot be moved—it was built around an olive tree. This secret known only by the two of them removes any doubt, and Penelope finally accepts that her husband has returned. The emotional reunion is both tender and complex, as they exchange stories and rekindle their love. The household is restored, and the couple retakes their place as king and queen of Ithaca.
Book 24 (Restless Spirits)	In the final book, we find Odysseus visiting his aged father, Laertes, in the orchard. They share an emotional reunion before Laertes dons his armor once more to stand with his son against the relatives of the slain suitors. However, before bloodshed can ensue, Athena, instructed by Zeus, commands peace among them. The poem thus concludes with Ithaca at peace and the royal family restored to power and status.