

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1983 Volume II: Greek and Roman Mythology

# A View of The Odyssey

Curriculum Unit 83.02.02 by Anna K. Baker

I plan to teach Homer's Odyssey to a high school English class on an intermediate-advanced level. I teach at High School in the Community, where students are divided according to ability, interest and, at times, maturity rather than by grade level. I expect to have in my class sophomores, juniors, and seniors and perhaps a scattering of freshmen.

The purpose of this unit is to help students see themselves in the mirror that mythology holds up to us all. Times have changed and so has the pace of our lives; but people are confronted by the same basic choices today as when Homer decided to put the story of the wanderings, tribulations, and homecoming of Odysseus into his own words. Students who study this great epic poem which tells a fundamental myth of our civilization will read of witches, cannibals, and monsters as well as of Olympian gods, human princesses, and dead spirits out of the underworld. These students will also read a story about human beings, Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope, and Nausicaa, as well as about others who have experienced many of the same difficulties around growing up, making choices and becoming mature that people of today experience as they leave their childhood and enter the world of adolescence and adulthood.

Today's high school students are faced with a world that presents ever more complex choices: for example, careers, family, morality, and so forth. In order to choose wisely, young people need a strong sense of who they are, where they are going and what choices will get them there. Maturity is a quality not usually associated with the young. Rather, youth is associated with curiosity, a sense of adventurousness and a willingness to take chances, all of which involve a testing of who they, as young people, are. I feel that students who have been asked to grapple with the concepts of emerging identity and of maturity will be more likely to temper their adventurousness with wise choices in their lives. Students can be asked to see in the experience of Odysseus, the archetypal traveler, and his son Telemachus, a vision of their own search for identity. Although they are not travelers, Penelope and Nausicaa will be looked at as female counterparts to Odysseus and Telemachus,

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# **OBJECTIVES**

Students will be expected to:

- 1. read and study the Odyssey.
- 2. focus on the themes of maturation and identity in the Odyssey.
- 3. study the concepts of initiation, and the passage from youth to adulthood.
- 4. study the characters of Odysseus and Penelope as examples of adult people who are mature, although in some ways they are still growing.
- 5. study the characters of Telemachus and Nausicaa as young people who are just embarking on the road to maturity.
- 6. think about themselves as young people and about their own initiation into adulthood and the establishment of their own sense of identity.

# **STRATEGIES**

As students start to read the *Odyssey*, the teacher should ask them to focus their attention on the characterization of Telemachus, Odysseus, Penelope, and Nausicaa. Prince Telemachus is the first human character whom the reader meets. He is a young man whose character is just beginning to emerge. Like most of the high school students whom we teach, Telemachus is too young, too untested, too unsure of himself to have a firmly established sense of identity. Having grown up fatherless in a household full of insolent men who are besieging his mother and consuming his inheritance, he feels totally powerless. When he first sees Athena who appears to him in the form of a family friend, a captain named Mentes, Telemachus is

sitting there, unhappy among the suitors, a boy, daydreaming. What if his great father came from the unknown world and drove these men like dead leaves through the place, recovering honor and lordship in his own domains?  $^{1}$ 

When at last he turns to the Achaeans to plead for help against the suitors, he makes his speech and then in utter frustration throws his staff to the ground and bursts into tears. Later when he goes to Nestor, at the urging of Athena, to ask him for news of his father, he hears from Nestor how Orestes grew up and avenged the wrongs against his father Agamemnon. The vulnerable child in Telemachus speaks when he answers Nestor,

Nestor, pride of Akhaians, Neleus' son, that was revenge, and far and wide the Akhaians will tell the tale in song for generations. I wish the gods would buckle his arms on me; I'd be revenged for outrage on my insidious and

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brazen enemies. But no such happy lot was given to me or to my father. Still, I must hold fast. 2

The teacher should ask the students to consider how they would feel and how they would act if they were in the position of Telemachus. Would they, as teenagers, feel capable of taking the initiative to try to rid the household of the suitors, or would they, like Telemachus, feel paralyzed and resort to fantasies? Can they recall an incident or a situation in their lives where they felt unable to act without some magical or superhuman force such as the gods or fate or superman? Telemachus at this point, is still a child who is waiting to be told what to do by the "grownups" whoever they might be. The students should be invited to question whether they think of themselves more in terms of being children or of being adults.

The class should consider the following two quotations by Bernard Lievegood. According to Lievegood, an important development during adolescence is

learning to accept oneself (and thereby being able to answer questions for oneself and making choices and decisions). This is the same as being able to start bearing one's own, individual, responsibility. <sup>3</sup>

To sum up, we may say that the central problem is: Who am I? What do I want? What am I capable of? The individual who has failed to ask these questions in this phase of life—even if only by realizing that he suffers from not knowing the answers—has failed to lay the foundations for the awakening of his psychological being, so that he runs the risk in the important middle phase of his life of finding himself stuck at the passionately vital stage, an eternal adolescent who in his appreciation of values remains dependent on what the world thinks of him, or who, on account of his own insecurity, continues to kick against the world. <sup>4</sup>

In class discussion students should be asked if they agree with the two statements by Lievegood and whether or not they have thought about these questions in regard to their own lives. Do they think that Telemachus could answer these questions if someone were to pose them to him? Would his answers to the question be different at the beginning of the Odyssey from what they would be at the end of the story?

At this point of discussion with the students, the teacher should invite them to think about the ideas of Charles W. Eckert. In an essay entitled "Initiatory Motifs in the Story of Telemachus" he describes the ordeals of Telemachus as a kind of education that is known as initiation in the ancient world and in modern primitive societies. <sup>5</sup> He compares these initiation rituals to Telemachus's secret night voyages to and from Pylos which are closely supervised by the supernatural goddess Athena. In these puberty rituals boys are removed from their mothers and their home, taken away secretly overnight, and instructed by "gods" in the myths, values, and rituals of the culture. The boys are then returned home having been transformed into men. Telemachus, after his voyage, returns to Ithaca ready to fight the suitors as a man and to rule in his father's place when Odysseus leaves. <sup>6</sup>

Do any events or rituals in the lives of the students function as an initiation or a ritual passage from childhood to adulthood? Christian children or teenagers, for example, are expected to go through the ceremony of Confirmation as a sign of being partially grown in the eyes of the church. Jewish young people undergo a similar passage known as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in which they show that they have reached the age of religious responsibility. In the eyes of the law, at sixteen teenagers are old enough to drive. At eighteen young people can take full legal responsibility for themselves. Also at eighteen in our society young people customarily begin to move out of the home and take jobs, go to college, or join the military. At what point in their lives do the students feel that, like Telemachus, they would be able to become head of a household and assume

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responsibility for themselves and other people in it?

The next character to consider in the discussion of the Odyssey is Odysseus. In contrast to the youthful Telemachus, Odysseus is a fully grown, mature man who is equivalent in age to the students' fathers and uncles. When we first meet him in the story, he has undergone ten years of war and ten years of traveling and has experienced many ordeals which have tested and retested his manhood. What does it mean to the students to be a mature man? What do they expect to be like when they are in their thirties, forties or fifties? Are there phases in a man's life just as there are phases in a boy's life? Bernard Lievegood comments on this period in a person's life.

I have said before that the beginning of the forties is a sort of a fork in the road leading to the rest of our lives. Either the road goes downhill, together with the biological functions of the body and mind, or it leads into totally new territory in which quite different creative powers are awakened. <sup>7</sup>

Who is Odysseus? Is he a vital hero with whom students can identify, or is he simply an older man past his prime, a hero from a by-gone era? First of all Odysseus is the son of Laertes, the husband of Penelope, and the father of Telemachus. He is one of the heroes of the Trojan War, an ancient historical legend which was the focal point of Homer's poem, the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a man of courage, of integrity, of complexity, and of maturity. He is also "nobody" as he introduces himself to Polyphemus, the Cyclops. To George E. Dimock, Jr. who translates his name literally from the Greek, odyssasthai, he is a "causer of pain" and a "sufferer of pain" or, in general, he is "Trouble".

"Trouble" is perhaps as good a translation of Odysseus's name as any. When a character in a western movie says, "Just call me Trouble, stranger," we take him to be a hostile type who makes trouble for other people, and so presumably for himself also. 8

Odysseus thinks of himself as strong and wily and smart, a man who can outwit and escape from the monstrous Cyclops, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, and the bewitching Circe. In his travels he goes where no living man goes—to Hades where he consults with the dead souls of people he has known such as his mother, Achilles, and Agamemnon. He also consults with the blind seer Tiresias and sees great men and women out of the past such as Heracles, Sisyphus, Tantalus, Ariadne, Phaedra, and Jocasta. After having spent seven years with the enchanting nymph Calypso, he knows better than to be entrapped by the Sirens or even by the beautiful young Nausicaa who thinks that perhaps he would make a fine husband for her.

Odysseus is a man of intellectual curioysity who encounters a broad range of experiences which enlarge his vision. During his ten years of travel after fighting in the Trojan War, he mets many temptations which keep him from returning home. He also meets many obstacles in his path. The main obstacle is Poseidon whom Odysseus angered when he blinded Poseidon's son, the Cyclops. Odysseus does, however, learn from his mistakes. After having tangled with Polyphemus at the cost of the lives of many of his men, Odysseus is more careful to temper his curiosity with prudence. For example, although he intensely wants to listen to the Sirens, he knows that he will not be able to restrain himself when he hears them singing. As a result he instructs his men to tie him to the mast so that he will not be lured to shipwreck by their enchanting song.

Although Odysseus's intellectual curiosity enriches him with experience and wisdom during his travels, it does not lead him to stray from his original goal of returning to his home and his family. Homer's *Odyssey* is not a story of victory at war and plunder afterward. The *Odyssey* is rather a story of homecoming and peace, and Odysseus is its hero. It is his love of home, love of wife, and piety towards the gods that are the main values of Odysseus in this poem. Odysseus is not mainly a hero of raids and conquests. He brings home no stolen

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jewels, no stolen money, no concubines, no slaves. He refuses the offer of immortality and a life of leisure from the beautiful goddess Calypso in order to return to his wife, who is inferior in beauty and who has grown twenty years older since Odysseus last saw her. When the gods finally allow him to return home, he is a mature man who has grown wiser as a result of his many battles with men, women, and monsters. He returns as a begger in disguise, and, although he must fight alongside his son Telemachus to take possession of his family and his lands from his wife's suitor s, he fights to regain what is rightfully his rather than to plunder other men's riches.

In discussion with your students, ask them to consider Odysseus as a hero. Have them make a list of modern-day heroes—Superman, Wonderwoman, Princess Leia, Darth Vader, and Batman. What qualities do they admire in these heroes? What qualities do they admire in Odysseus? Is Odysseus past his prime—in which case all would be downhill from this point on—or can they imagine Odysseus going on to new adventures of the body and the spirit when he again leaves Ithaca? According to Tiresias the travels of Odysseus will continue until he appeases the anger of Poseidon. At the end of the poem Poseidon's wrath is still unappeased. Which fork of the road will Odysseus take? He cannot stop forever at Ithaca whatever his desire may be.

Although women in the *Odyssey* play a secondary role to the men, they are still very important. Can the students imagine an *Odyssey* without Penelope, Nausicaa, Calypso, Circe, and the Sirens? While the usual sexual double standard exists in Homer's story as it often still does in modern times (Odysseus expects Penelope to have been totally faithful to him but has no qualms about telling her of his adventures with Calypso and Circe), still Homer treats women with fairness and respect. In the *Iliad* women are seen primarily as possessions to be fought over. In the *Odyssey* womeen are intelligent, sophisticated, and powerful—some more-so than others. They are not simply men's possessions.

The most powerful women have both human and magical powers. Calypso is a sea-nymph who captures Odysseus and holds him prisoner for many years, hoping that he will marry her. She is able to tempt him, but her powers are not strong enough to sway him from his devotion to his wife and his home. Circe is a beautiful, sexually alluring enchantress whose powers are strong enough to change men into swine. Odysseus, with the help of Hermes and an herb called Moly, is able to save himself and his men from Circe's powers. The goddess Athena is the most powerful, intelligent, and influential woman in Odysseus's life. She saves him from the wrath of Poseidon by convincing Zeus and the other Olympian gods that Odysseus is worth saving. She encourages and helps Telemachus in his efforts to free his home from his mother's suitors, and she saves Odysseus from death and despair. Like Odysseus, Penelope has lived through many ordeals and suffered much for the twenty years that Odysseus has been away. Being mortal, she does not have the magical powers of Circe, Calypso, or Athena, but she is an intelligent, attractive, and loyal woman whom Odysseus continues to love and yearn for during his absence of twenty years. Because she is a woman, she has not traveled or engaged in physical battles with men and monsters. But she has had to raise a son, and handle a household alone; and, during the latter years of Odysseus's absence, she has had to engage in a battle of wits and endurance against a group of suitors who are trying to force her to choose a new husband from among them. She symbolizes the normal life of hearth and homeland that Odysseus finds lacking in his exciting and adventurous life overseas.

Although Penelope is a key character in the poem, students may have a hard time identifying with her life. I think that a modern teenager would have difficulty imagining a faithful, twenty-year wait for a husband who might never return. Penelope is not the usual Twentieth Century heroine. She is, however, a woman of great inner strength who manages to outwit the suitors for three years by unweaving at night the shroud for

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Odysseus's father Laertes that she weaves by day. When she finally yields to the pressure to choose a husband from among the suitors, she devises the test of the bow since she is unwilling to settle for a new husband who is less than the equal of Odysseus. She outwits Odysseus, the master of trickery and cunning, by telling the servant to take the bed that Odysseus used to sleep in and place it outside the room. Odysseus falls for her trick; he protests that he himself had constructed his bed, building it into the trunk of an old olive tree that grew in the bedroom. Such a bed could not be moved anywhere. At this point Penelope finally lets down her guard and agrees that the man who had arrived in Ithaca as a ragclad beggar has passed her test of identity and must be her husband. Thus Penelope, wise, shrewd, and prudent, is reunited with her husband. Whether or not the students identify with the life of Penelope, they are likely to be able to appreciate her strength, her intelligence, and her cunning throughout the ordeal of her long wait for Odysseus.

As Penelope is an untraveled female counterpart to Odysseus, so Nausicaa is an untraveled female counterpart to Telemachus. When Nausicaa, daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete of the Phaeacians, meets Odysseus on the shore of the island of Scheria, she has just been told by Athena in a dream that her maidenhood must end and that she must prepare for marriage by washing her clothing and her linens in order to fill her wedding chest. Like Telemachus she is young, untested, and unsure of what she wants in life. When she first meets Odysseus, he emerges briny and naked, like a mountain lion from a bed of leaves where he had been sleeping after washing ashore from the shipwreck. She is displeased by his rough appearance but charmed by his graceful words. Here Odysseus represents raw male force confronting youthful female innocence. Shortly thereafter, when Odysseus has washed and clothed himself, Nausicaa finds herself thinking that he might be a good husband even though she knows almost nothing about him. She is, after all, very young and still very beholden to her parents whom he has not yet met. Nausicaa lets Odysseus know indirectly that she is unmarried and available. Later, when it becomes clear to her that Odysseus will leave her and her land, she asks him not to forget her when he returns to his home.

Can the teenager in high school today identify with Nausicaa? Is she too innocent, too tied to her parents and the strict behavioral code that they impose on her? She has not had the travels of Telemachus to initiate her into the wider world. She is, however, a person of the students' own age who faces many of the same problems that they do. Will she marry? Whom will she marry? How will she hoose her husband? How will she please her parents and the society in which they live, and, at the same time, please herself? While she does not have the freedom of many young girls today, she is direct and assertive and confident in her dealings with the naked stranger. She is graceful and gracious in her manner and also sensitive and perceptive in the way that she sizes him up. How would the students treat such a stranger in similar circumstances? Can they appreciate the qualities of a girl like Nausicaa?

In my treatment of the *Odyssey* I have concentrated mainly on how high school students who read this epic poem would react to and identify with four of the main characters, Telemachus, Odysseus, Penelope, and Nausicaa. In my teaching strategies I have used questions designed to encourage students' critical thinking and discussion about these characters and the parts that they play in the *Odyssey*. The lesson plans which follow include activities that will supplement the discussions that I outlined above. I include writing assignments, audio-visual aids, suggestions for dramatic readings and acting, and field trips which will encourage students to study and experience the *Odyssey* through different kinds of approaches. I also include a final project in which students will write their own odyssey.

I close this part of the unit with suggestions for a discussion on the *Odyssey* as a whole and how it relates to the lives of high school students who will read it. Our students, especially those who live in the city, face an increasingly difficult world. Although we no longer believe in giants and monsters and multiple gods whose

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lives become entangled with ours, we still face the unknown as we leave our homes and enter the streets. Teenagers, especially as they travel through the city by bus or on foot, encounter danger and temptation in the form of thieves and muggers, drug pushers, and attractive or not-so-attractive strangers who would prey upon them. The *Odyssey* contrasts the value of civilization with the forces of raw nature, the dangerous and destructive elements against which the main characters in the *Odyssey* must battle in order to survive and achieve their goals. In the poem Homer defines the importance of human society, the value of working for a living, of acting civilized even when others do not, and of loving family, home and peace. He includes in his poem people who are in different stages of maturity who confront adventures and crises on their journeys and at home with integrity, cunning, loyalty and strength.

# SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

These writing assignments and activities are intended to supplement the discussions which I outlined earlier.

1. Writing Assignment — "Phases in the Life of a Teenager

Objective: Students will reflect upon their own lives and on the phases through which they have gone,

Preliminary Activities: Students will read and discuss Books 1-4 of the Odyssey. (Books 16-24 could be included if the teacher would rather use this lesson after the students have read the whole book.) Students will discuss the concepts of phases, ceremonies, and initiation rites in the lives of teenagers.

Follow-Up Activites: Students will describe the experiences, initiations, ceremonies, adventures, and crises in their lives that have moved them from one phase of their life to the next. They will write about several experiences in depth and explain how the experiences helped them to develop their identity and to become more mature.

2. Visual Aids and Student Drawing

Objective: Students will make use of visual aids in order to understand and appreciate the Odyssey more fully. They will also make their own original drawings.

Preliminary Activities: Students will look at the illustrations in several different translations of the Odyssey and in The Adventures of Ulysses by Erich Lessing. They will look at the drawings, paintings, and sculptures of Odysseus and at the pictures of the historical sites in Greece and the surrounding regions that Odysseus visited on his journey.

Follow-Up Activities: Students will make their own original drawings of scenes from the Odyssey . Students will make a mural illustrating their favorite scenes from the Odyssey .

3. Field Trip—Yale Art Gallery & British Art Museum

Objective: Students will learn to appreciate ancient Roman and Greek art and sculpture and later paintings on mythological themes by famous artists.

Preliminary Activities: Students will visit the Yale Art Gallery and the British Art Museum in New Haven. The Education Department of each museum will take the students on a tour of their works of art that relate to the study of the Odyssey.

Follow-Up Activities: Students will choose a piece of sculpture or a painting that interests them. They will describe the piece of art in detail. They will explain how it relates to their study of the Odyssey and why it appeals to them.

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#### 4. Role-Playing

Objective: Students will experience the Odyssey by putting themselves in the place of one of the characters and dramatizing thepart.

*Preliminary Activities*: Each student will participate in impromptu acting. The student will be given index cards on which a short scene from the *Odyssey* is described. He or she will have one or two minutes in which to decide how to act out the scene. The sudent will choose another member of the class to participate if there is a need for a second character. The scene will be acted out in front of the class

Follow-Up Activities: Each student will choose a character from the Odyssey and compose a speech that the character could have made during one of the scenes from the story. The student will practice the scene at home and recite it in class. Some teachers might want to have the students write a script based on scenes from the Odyssey and rehearse and perform a dramatic production .

5. Final Project—Writing Assignment — "An Odyssey"

Objective: Students will reflect upon their own past, present, and future. They will consider their lives as an odyssey and write an odyssey of their life.

*Preliminary Activities*: Students will interview people out of their past and present: for example, parents, friends, and teachers. Students will note down on index cards important experiences in their lives which have affected their lives in a significant way. They will also write down on index cards important experiences that they think will happen to them or that they wish or fear would happen to them. They should consider how their past and present experiences have affected their sense of identity and their maturity. They should also consider how their future experiences might affect these qualities.

Follow-Up Activity: Students will write an odyssey of their own lives using the index cards and any other useful materials and information that they select.

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### **NOTES**

- 1 Robert Fitzgerald, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer*, by Homer (Garden City, New York: Double Day & Co., Inc., 1963), p. 5
- 2 Fitzgerald, p. 41.
- 3 Bernard Lievegood, *Phases*, trans. H. S. Lake (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1979), p. 56.
- 4 Lievegood, p. 65.
- 5 Charles W. Eckert, "Initiatory Motifs in the Story of Telemachus," Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Odyssey, ed. Howard W. Clarke (N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983), p. 38.
- 6 Eckert, pp. 38-51.
- 7 Lievegood, p. 84.
- 8 George E. Dimock, Jr., "The Name of Odysseus," *Essays on the Odyssey*, ed. Charles H. Taylor, Jr. (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1963), p. 59.

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