

**Comment on the following passage, indicating the context and discussing any points of literary, historical or artistic interest.**

**Homer, *Odyssey* 19.557-91: “Odysseus, well-known for his intelligence...” to “I would never wish to go to sleep.”**

The passage in question from Book 19 of Homer’s *The Odyssey* is the final build-up necessary for the peripeteia and the climax of the story to happen: a dialogue where a husband in disguise promises vengeance on all those who have wronged him, and the wife sets up a perfect setting for him to accomplish that act of domestic violence towards the suitors of his wife. The husband, Odysseus, has just come home after 20 years of being away from his home in Ithaca, dressed as an old man so as not to be recognised, and he speaks to his wife, Penelope, foretelling and reassuring her that the suitors will receive punishment for their constant revelry.

The build-up seen in the passage is especially emphasised by the last significant exploration of the theme of disguise and its literary complement: dramatic irony. Because of Odysseus’ disguise, which was made with Athena’s help, he can act as a stranger to Penelope and learn her true intentions for the suitors without the possible bias that would be present if she knew she was talking to her husband. This dramatic irony evokes a sense of suspense in the reader because the two characters who have longed for each other for 20 years are finally in the same room and engaging in conversation, but the recognition is not mutual.

Furthermore, the lack of recognition adds an additional element to the theme of marriage in *The Odyssey* since Penelope is starting to get weary of waiting for her husband and prepares to marry a suitor that can complete her challenge of stringing Odysseus’ bow and shooting it through twelve axe heads, the number twelve likely being an allusion to the twelve Olympians, i.e., a symbol for a godly feat, or to the twelve labours of Heracles, i.e., a heroic feat. The tension and readers’ desire for a marital reunion are further enlarged by the mind games that “Odysseus, well known / for his intelligence” (Homer, 2018)(19.557-8) and “shrewd Penelope” (Homer, 2018)(19.563) play, both engaging in intellectual dialogue about the nature of dreams, which can either be prophecies or lies.

Additionally, the conversation about dreams being made either of ivory or horn is a play on words because the Greek word for ‘horn’ is similar to that for ‘fulfil’, and the word for ‘ivory’ is similar to that for ‘deceive’ (Stanford, 1948). The word play could be one of many signifiers that the story of *The Odyssey* was originally passed down as an oral tradition because it is much easier and more entertaining to hear word plays than to understand them by reading. Another element of oral tradition appearing in the passage is the amount of epithets for characters, which are used to make the dactylic hexameter of the epic to work, e.g., “shrewd Penelope” (Homer, 2018)(19.563), “scheming Odysseus” (Homer, 2018)(19.584), “Odysseus, the mastermind” (Homer, 2018)(19.588-9).

In conclusion, the passage explores deeper the themes of disguise and marriage by the literary technique of dramatic irony, and it gives insight into the elements of word plays and epithets in the oral tradition by which the story was passed down generation from generation.

## Bibliography

Homer, 2018. *The Odyssey*. New York: W. W. Norton Company.

Stanford, W., 1948. *The Odyssey of Homer*. London: MacMillan and Co.