# Essay Prep

Title: **Agamemnon or Polyphemus: what does Odysseus’ relationship to these two characters reveal about the major themes of Homer’s Odyssey?**

## Back in the Cave of the Cyclops

Source: Nieto Hernández, P. (2000) ‘Back in the Cave of the Cyclops’ *The American Journal of Philology* 121, 345-366

Themes:

* *Xenia*: hospitality/friendship.
  + “Stay here, the rest of you, / while with my boat and crew I go to check / who those men are, find out if they are wild, / lawless aggressors, or the type to welcome / strangers, and fear the gods.” (9.172)
* Civilisation
  + “Cyclopes represent one pole (the total absence of civilization), and the other pole – that of culture – is represented by the Phaeacians.” (source, p. 346)
  + The world of Cyclopes resembles that of the “Hesiodic Golden Age” of humans, where no one had to do any work (“remote from toil”, Hesiod’s *Works and Days*)
  + Cyclopes as man-eaters (anthropophagi), similarity to the Golden Age, reigned by Kronos, a Titan who also ate his children
  + Polyphemus cannot be described as only a savage, he is humanised in *The Odyssey* by his ability to speak and his one-sided conversation with a ram (the address “Sweet ram” (9.447) and noticing odd behaviour of a particular ram)
* Revenge
  + “in blinding Polyphemus, Odysseus arouses the wrath of the Cyclops’ father, Poseidon, who attempts to avenge the harm the hero has done to his son.” (source, p. 346)
  + **Agamemnon:** “Orestes avenging the murder of Agamemnon and Odysseus the predations of the suitors. The case of Poseidon and Polyphemus (father avenges son) inverts that of Agamemnon and Orestes (son avenges father)”
* Cleverness, problem-solving (*mētis)*
* Worship of the gods, sacrifice, libations, piety
  + “Odysseus […] invokes the respect that is due to Zeus as protector of guests”: “We are your suppliants, / and Zeus is on our side, since he takes care / of visitors, guest-friends, and those in need.” (9.269)
  + “My people / think nothing of that Zeus with his big scepter” (9.274), says Polyphemus
  + After escaping: “But in dividing up the flock, my crew / gave me alone the ram, the Cyclops’ favorite. / There on the shore, I slaughtered him to Zeus” (9.549)
* Leadership
  + Agamemnon and Odysseus both kings
  + “godlike Polyphemus, his [Poseidon’s] own son, the strongest of the Cyclopes”, Zeus (1.70-1)
* Comparison to gods (“godlike”)
  + The similarity of Zeus’ usurpation of Kronos and Odysseus’ escape
    - Kronos, Polyphemus eating smaller anthropomorphic beings and leaving protagonists for last
    - Zeus, Odysseus using trickery to escape death (stone-baby, wine and rams)
    - Zeus, Odysseus using force to escape (Titanomachy, wooden stake)
    - Kronos, Polyphemus “reduced to darkness” (Tartarus, blindness)
* Rebirth/change
  + The cave as “a symbol of the maternal womb”, in which the hero is “Noman”, but outside of it he is Odysseus, having regained his identity
  + Emphasises the bond between Odysseus and his companions as brothers
  + “knocked them hard against the ground / like puppies” (9.289): “infantile or newborn condition”
* Overcoming great challenges
  + “Polyphemus […] is of a totally disproportionate size.”
* Escape
  + “Odysseus is enclosed within the sea just as much as he is in the cave of the Cyclops. His purpose throughout his voyage is to find a *poros*, a pass or exit from the marine world in which he is trapped.”
* *Nostos*: return home
  + “When Odysseus returns home he, like Polyphemus, encounters there strangers who have violated the norms of hospitality and are in the process of consuming his goods.”
  + [**Agamemnon:** also returns home and is betrayed]
* Disguise:
  + “*Outis*, or “Nobody”, evokes the disguises of Odysseus, his versatility in adopting identities”
  + [**Agamemnon:** obvious lack of disguise led to his doom, Odysseus characterised as smarter, learns from others’ mistakes]

Stone in front of cave similar to the Phaeacian ship turning to stone: leaving everything sealed and isolated.

## Poor Polyphemus

Plautus

Sallust

Cicero, Lucretius

Costas - lecturer

Source: Newton, R. M. (1983) , ‘Poor Polyphemus: Emotional Ambivalence in "Odyssey" 9 and 17’, *The Classical World* 76, 137-142

Themes:

* Emotional and moral ambivalence
  + Polyphemus falls for a ruse, is blinded and abandoned by his neighbours.
  + P humanised by convo with ram
  + “Polyphemus now loses the only living creature to which he feels an attachment.”
  + Vivid imagery of the blinding [INSERT]
    - Connects to **theme of civilisation** with the similes of forges and smithing
* Cunning, *mētis*
  + “Odysseus draws comparisons from the technological and civilized worlds of carpentry and metallurgy.”
* Dichotomy of order and disorder, civilisation and savagery
  + P expresses some aspects of order and civilised life (dairy-farmer)
  + O expresses aspects of savagery with his delight in the violence of the blinding

## Agamemnon

Source: Olson, S. D. (1990) ‘The Stories of Agamemnon in Homer's Odyssey’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 120, 57-71

Themes:

* Intrigue
  + “The poet uses the tales of Agamemnon, however, to hint repeatedly to his audience that this Odyssey may end in a way they know it should not.”
* Human-god relationship
  + Odysseus contrasted with Aegisthus as a reverent god-worshipper (“Remember how he sacrificed to you […]” (1.61-3))
* Storytelling
  + Zeus tells the story (“with a distinctly masculine bias”: no mention of Clytemnestra) as a device for his argument (“This is absurd, / that mortals blame the gods! They say we cause / their suffering, but they themselves increase it / by folly.” (1.31-4)), Athena uses the story to contrast Aegisthus and Odysseus in order to save Odysseus
  + Athena reuses the story to inspire Telemachus to earn his reputation like Orestes: “You surely heard […]” (1.298). She doesn’t mention certain parts to better apply the situation: manipulation.  
    Telemachus is inspired by this and starts to think himself an avenger: “Mother, no, / you must not criticize the loyal bard […]” (1.345-6) and “Odysseus was not the only one / who did not come back home again from Troy.” (1.354-5)
  + Oresteia story as a set of roles that the main characters of *The Odyssey* could replicate
  + The whole Oresteia story used to increase tension and suspense in the audience, who don’t know whether Odysseus is going to live
  + Nestor gives the same advice to Telemachus as Athena: to be a good son (and avenge?) (3.193)
    - Though he may not be speaking about revenge as he remembers about the suitors only later
* Homecoming: obvious (me: **Restoration of order – contrasted**)
* Loyalty
  + Penelope = Clytemnestra

# Plan:

1. Intro
2. First theme: Return home (*nostos*)
   1. Agamemnon: gets killed, foreshadowing for Odysseus  
      Contrast: Restoration of order not achieved, unlike Odysseus’ plan
   2. Polyphemus: gets blinded, rule of hospitality (*xenia*) disrespected  
        
      Segue: before restoring his home, Odysseus must avenge his tarnished reputation
3. Second theme: Revenge
   1. Agamemnon: avenged by Orestes, Odysseus will be avenged by Telemachus
   2. Polyphemus: Poseidon avenges Polyphemus by continuing to endanger Odysseus’ life  
        
      Segue: Odysseus’ revenge can be achieved only by disguise
4. Third theme: Disguise
   1. Agamemnon: lack of disguise causes him to get noticed by city watch and ambushed  
      Contrast: Odysseus portrayed as intelligent by learning from the mistakes of others, comes to Ithaca in disguise
   2. Polyphemus: the whole “Nobody” schtick: Odysseus’ intelligence, trickery fools Polyphemus the Cyclops  
        
      Segue: Odysseus makes his disguise by storytelling
5. Agamemnon’s theme: Storytelling
   1. Oresteia story as a device to motivate characters, Odysseus portrayed as Agamemnon (nostos), Aegisthus (Polyphemus’ blinder, someone who has to be avenged), Orestes (avenger)  
        
      Segue: Polyphemus story told to Phaeacians (complimenting, praising them)
6. Polyphemus’ theme: Civilisation
   1. Odysseus contrasted as the symbol of civilisation (language of the blinding: forges, smithing, etc) while Polyphemus is a cave-dweller
7. Conclusion

Essay advice:

* No name (nor initial)
* Check Handbook for references
* Topic sentence, evidence, analysis
* Don’t use Odyssey to talk about ancient Greek society
* This is to get leet