

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Odyssey

by
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Book Information

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The hero Odysseus encounters Poseidon the sea god, fights monsters, and loses his crew as he returns to Ithaca.

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Main Characters

Aegisthus the murderer of Agamemnon and seducer of Agamemnon's wife

Agamemnon a famous Trojan War hero who was murdered by his wife's lover, Aegisthus, when he returned to his home

Ajax a Greek war leader who Odysseus sees in the Kingdom of the Dead

Alcinous the king of Phaeacia, who helps Odysseus return home

Antinous and Eurymachus the two vocal leaders of the group of suitors

Aphrodite goddess of love; a daughter of Zeus; wife of Hephaestus; lover of Ares

Ares god of war; a son of Zeus and Hera; Aphrodite's lover

Athena goddess of wisdom; a daughter of Zeus, who protects and aids Odysseus and Telemachus throughout the story

Calypso the goddess-nymph who enchants Odysseus on her island of Ogygia

Circe the goddess of the island Aea, who turns Odysseus' men into swine

Eumaeus Odysseus' loyal swineherd, who assists him in fighting the suitors

Eurycleia the old nurse of Odysseus, who recognizes him while washing his feet

Helios the Sun, who seeks revenge on Odysseus because his crew slaughtered some of his cattle

Hephaestus god of fire; a son of Hera; husband of Aphrodite

Hera protector of marriage; the wife and sister of Zeus

Heracles a son of Zeus and famous hero whom Odysseus visits in the Kingdom of the Dead

Hermes a son of Zeus and messenger of the gods, who helps Odysseus on Circe's island

Ino the sea nymph who gives Odysseus a magical scarf to keep him from being drowned by Poseidon

Laertes Odysseus' father

Menelaus the king of Lacedaemon; brother of Agamemnon; husband of Helen; he welcomes Telemachus into his home

Mentor a close friend of Odysseus whose body is used by Athena when she helps Telemachus and Odysseus

Nausicaa the daughter of Alcinous who discovers Odysseus shipwrecked in Phaeacia

Nestor the king of Pylos, who receives Telemachus as a guest

Odysseus the protagonist king of Ithaca, who journeys home to be reunited with his wife and son after fighting in the Trojan War

Orestes Agamemnon's son who avenges his father's murder

Paris the prince who abducts Helen; his action instigates the Trojan War

Penelope Odysseus' faithful wife, who scorns the multitudes of suitors

Persephone goddess of the Kingdom of the Dead; wife of Hades

Polyphemus a one-eyed giant Cyclops and son of Poseidon, who is blinded by Odysseus

Poseidon god of the sea; he seeks revenge on Odysseus for blinding his son Polyphemus

Scylla a man-eating monster that lives on a cliff near the whirlpool Charybdis

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Sirens the sea enchantresses whose song lures sailors to their deaths on dangerous rocks

Sisyphus a punished soul in the Kingdom of the Dead who must forever roll a boulder up a hill but can never reach the top

Tantalus a punished soul in the Kingdom of the Dead who is tempted by food and water but is eternally thirsty and hungry

Telemachus Odysseus' son, who develops into a man and a soldier by helping his father reclaim his throne

Tiresias a famous deceased seer who provides Odysseus with the prophetic advice he needs to return home

Zeus the king of the gods, who provides justice throughout the universe

Vocabulary

Cyclops a race of one-eyed giants

libations religious offerings in which liquid is poured out as a sacrifice

nymph a female spirit or immortal who generally inhabits woodlands or water

Olympus the mountain-top home of Zeus and the other major gods

pernicious destructive or harmful

quiver a container for holding arrows

Synopsis

The Greek epic *The Odyssey* is the story of the hero Odysseus and his return home after the Greek victory in the Trojan War. It extends Homer's Trojan War epic, *The Iliad*, by focusing on the exploits of the war's cleverest hero.

The story opens ten years after the Trojan War with Odysseus stranded on the island of the goddess Calypso. She has enchanted him with her powers and desires to keep him as her companion. In the meantime, Odysseus' home in Ithaca is being overrun by crowds of suitors who, assuming Odysseus is dead, desire to marry his wife, Penelope. These suitors are taking advantage of Odysseus' estate by consuming his food, depleting his fortune, and pressuring Penelope to remarry.

The goddess Athena, who serves as Odysseus' protector throughout the story, persuades Zeus, king of the gods, to order Calypso to set Odysseus free so he can return to Ithaca and rid his home of these suitors.

Athena then visits Odysseus' son, Telemachus, and persuades him to leave home and search for his father. This serves to build the youth's confidence and to get him away from the suitors, who are plotting his murder. Telemachus travels to Pylos and Sparta where he speaks to kings who tell him about his father's legacy.

In the meantime, Odysseus leaves Calypso's island on a raft loaded with provisions. His journey goes well until Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, discovers that Odysseus is on his way home and decides to renew his punishment for an earlier transgression against the god. Poseidon sends massive waves that destroy Odysseus' raft. Odysseus nearly drowns but is saved by a kindly sea nymph, Ino. Odysseus washes onto the shores of Phaeacia, an isolated country of people who are known for their skills at sea travel. While on the beach, Odysseus discovers the daughter of the Phaeacian king, who brings him to the palace as their guest.

Odysseus tells the king of Phaeacia the story of his adventures since he left Troy ten years earlier. After leaving Troy, he sacked the city of Ismarus, but he and his army celebrated their success too long. Consequently, his army was nearly wiped out when the opposing army returned with reinforcements. The survivors of the battle returned to the sea but were blown off course and landed in the land of the Lotus-eaters. Here Odysseus' soldiers ate the lotus fruit, which caused the men to lose all desire to return home. Odysseus had to forcibly drag his men away from this land.

They again set sail until they arrived at the land of the Cyclops. Here they went searching for provisions, and Odysseus and his small crew became trapped inside the cave of the giant man-eating Cyclops named Polyphemus, a son of Poseidon. After losing several men to the Cyclops,

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Odysseus and his crew blinded Polyphemus by ramming a sharpened stick into his eye. They then escaped by riding under the bellies of giant sheep. Poseidon, angry that Odysseus had dared to blind and taunt his son, persuaded Zeus to put a curse on Odysseus so that he would have to endure much hardship and the deaths of all of his men before he could return home.

Odysseus escaped the land of the Cyclops and sailed to the island of Aeolus, where everybody lived in comfort. The king of Aeolus gave Odysseus a bag containing all of the winds except the West Wind, and he sent Odysseus speeding home. Just as Odysseus sailed into view of Ithaca, however, his crew members grew jealous of the great gifts and treasures Odysseus had accumulated. They decided to look at the treasure, and one of the crew members opened the bag containing wind. The winds poured out of the bag with enough force to blow the ship all the way back to the home of Aeolus, where, this time, the king refused to help him.

Odysseus again set sail and, after an encounter with deadly Giants, landed on the island of the enchantress Circe. Circe lured some of Odysseus' crew into her home, where she gave them a potion that turned them into swine. However, Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, visited Odysseus and gave him an herb to make him immune to Circe's magic. Odysseus defeated the enchantress, and his men were returned to their human state.

He then sailed to the Kingdom of the Dead, where he received a prophecy that told him he would eventually return home. He left the Kingdom of the Dead and sailed a dangerous stretch of waters that included the Sirens (creatures that would lure sailors to their deaths with a song), the whirlpool Charybdis, and the man-eating monster Scylla.

After losing more men to these hazards, the exhausted crew stopped to rest on the island where the cattle of Helios, the Sun, grazed. Odysseus was warned by Tiresias not to kill any of the cattle, but he was unable to prevent his crew from doing so.

Helios was furious over this intrusion and persuaded Zeus to throw a lightning bolt at Odysseus' ship, killing every member of the crew except for Odysseus. Odysseus swam from the wreckage until he reached the shores of Ogygia, the island of the goddess Calypso. It is at this point that *The Odyssey* began.

The king of Phaeacia is impressed by the story and agrees to help Odysseus return home. During the voyage, Odysseus falls asleep and is left lying on the shores of his home by the Phaeacians. Poseidon, angry that the Phaeacians helped his enemy, turns their ship to stone before they can return home and piles mountains around the seaport.

When Odysseus wakes, he is greeted by Athena, who disguises him as a beggar. Athena then leaves to tell Telemachus to return home immediately, while Odysseus visits Eumaeus, his loyal swineherd. Telemachus returns to Ithaca and, with the help of Athena, is reunited with his father. After Odysseus and Telemachus plan their revenge, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, mingles with the suitors. Penelope announces to the suitors that she will marry the man who can string Odysseus' great bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axe heads lined in a row. Several of the suitors accept the challenge, but they are unable to string Odysseus' massive bow. Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, then amazes the suitors by completing the task and revealing his identity. Odysseus slaughters each of the suitors with the aid of the loyal swineherd, the cowherd, Telemachus, and Athena, who takes the form of Mentor, a close friend of Odysseus. The next day he goes to battle against the families of the suitors, who seek revenge. Finally, Athena demands peace throughout Ithaca and grants Odysseus serenity and peace in his old age.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

Odysseus and his crew make several blunders on their journey home. What are some of their worst mistakes, and who is responsible for the errors?

Probably the worst error Odysseus and his crew make is slaughtering the cattle of the Sun. Odysseus is warned about this before they arrive at the island, but he allows his crew to land anyway. This reckless act causes Zeus to destroy their ship with a lightning bolt and kill every man aboard except Odysseus. Another preventable mistake is the mutinous crew's decision to open the bag of wind when they are close enough to actually see the shores of Ithaca. Odysseus could have shared more of his treasure with his crew to keep them satisfied or warned them of the bag's contents, but this negligence allows the greedy crew members to unleash a tempest that blows them far off course. There are many other blunders that Odysseus makes along his journey, and students will have varying ideas of who is to blame for the mistakes.

Literary Analysis

Odysseus is famous for both his valor and his intelligence. How does Odysseus solve most of his problems? Which do you think is quicker, Odysseus' sword or his wit? What talent enables him to be most successful?

Odysseus is in a weakened state throughout most of his journey home; therefore, he has to rely on his intelligence to get him out of trouble. When he does fight, such as in the attack on the city of Ithaca, he usually ends up losing much of his crew. But in the battles with Polyphemus and the suitors, Odysseus uses both his wit and his strength to defeat his enemies. Had he relied on violence or diplomacy alone, he would have been defeated in both cases. His knack for trickery enables him to win the Trojan War, conquer both mortal and immortal enemies, and return to his home and loving family.

Inferential Comprehension

Would Odysseus' journey have been different if he had not taunted Polyphemus after escaping from his cave? Why or why not?

Some students may argue that if Odysseus had not taunted Polyphemus and revealed his name, he would not have suffered Poseidon's wrath. Polyphemus did not know the real identity of his attacker until Odysseus announced it while leaving the island. Therefore, Poseidon would have been searching the earth for a mortal named "Nobody" while Odysseus returned home safely. Other students may argue, however, that Odysseus was fated to suffer a long, hard journey, and his travels would not have been made any easier by the gods who had been watching his actions. Poseidon would have probably discovered Odysseus' crime eventually, and Odysseus would have been punished for his actions.

Constructing Meaning

What are your impressions of the female characters in this story? Compared to other canonized works of "classical" literature, do you feel that women are fairly represented in Homer's story?

Students' answers will vary. Some students may dislike Homer's portrayal of women as seductive and dangerous villains, such as the evil Clytemnestra and the dangerous Circe and Calypso. They may also be upset by the chauvinism Odysseus and Telemachus display towards Penelope and other women in the story. Other students may point out that Odysseus would never have been able to complete his voyage without the assistance of Athena, Nausicaa, Ino, and even Circe and Calypso. Penelope is not only portrayed as a beautiful woman and loving wife, but as an incredibly intelligent person who fools the suitors and remains faithful to her family and goals. In contrast to many other works of classical literature in which women have menial or superficial roles in the story's plot, The Odyssey contains female characters who are central to the story and are just as compelling and complete as the male characters.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft *The Odyssey* is adapted from an oral tradition of storytelling. Have the students study some of the conventions of oral storytelling and allow them to practice in front of an audience. The class may wish to divide *The Odyssey* into sections based on the number of participating students and then commit their section of the story to memory. The students can then tell the story of *The Odyssey* by taking turns and building upon the storytelling of the person before, improvising whenever necessary. If convenient, you may wish to have the students narrate their story for another class.

Recognizing Details *The Odyssey* not only tells the story of Odysseus, but also narrates and alludes to the fundamental mythology of the ancient Greek culture. Have the students list and categorize as many characters as they can find in the story. There are over 300 characters mentioned in *The Odyssey*. These category headings can be defined by mortality, nationalities, accomplishments, or family trees. The students will find the connections between the characters and the myths interesting, and the class as a whole may wish to create a large poster to graphically display their findings.

Recognizing Cause and Effect In the first chapter of *The Odyssey*, Zeus proclaims, "Ah how shameless -- the way these mortals blame the gods. From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes, but they themselves, with their own reckless ways, compound their pains beyond their proper share." Have the students locate examples in *The Odyssey* of a god's intervention in the life of a mortal and then analyze how the mortal's own behavior may have compounded his or her problems. The students may share their findings in the form of an essay, a report, or a presentation.

Making Predictions Have the students write a short story in which Odysseus lives out the prophecy of Tiresias. The story should be about Odysseus traveling with an oar to a land of

people who have never known the sea, making a sacrifice to Poseidon, and then somehow dying and traveling to the Kingdom of the Dead. The students can creatively fill in the details of this journey and may decide to have the elderly Odysseus, and possibly Telemachus, encounter monsters and obstacles along the way. They may also wish to experiment with writing epic verse and model their story after a poetic translation.