Study Guide: Homer’s *Odyssey*

*BACKGROUND*

What does the title *The Odyssey* mean? In other words, what is an Odyssey?

Aristotle’s summary 63-word summary of 12,000 lines of verse: “A certain man has been abroad many years; he is alone, and the god Poseidon keeps a hostile eye on him. At home the situation is that suitors for his wife’s hand are draining his resources and plotting to kill his son. Then, after suffering storm and shipwreck, he comes home, makes himself known, attacks the suitors: he survives and they are destroyed.”

What is an epithet? Define the term, explaining why Homer uses them. Go ahead and use google 😊.

How does the role of women differ in each of Homer’s epics? Explain. Google it.

Never mind—I got this one.

The West’s first and most influential author is Homer (c. 750 BC). Possible composer of the Iliad and Odyssey, he paints a quite different picture of women in many roles — as wives, mothers or slaves. Population stability in the ancient world was a life-or-death matter. Unless every woman produced about eight children to ensure that two or three survived, the state would collapse: so essential was the unseen biological imperative of giving birth. Female roles, in other words, were limited in the main because the very existence of the state depended on a woman’s fertility.

So it was just not possible for a woman to hold down a tightly scripted chat show or run a top law firm. Her work as mother was far too important to society for that. Homer understands this, and the result is that husband-wife relationships are painted in terms of the Hector-Andromache scene — two worlds, each entailing separate responsibilities, skills and demands, with both parties united in respect for and commitment to each other, the family and its needs. Humiliation and subjugation do not come into it.

It is in later authors that the battle of the sexes flourished and women were either passed over in total silence or represented as a sex-mad, drunken, treacherous race in comedy, satire and prosecution material in the courts. That sort of male-generated public image is not exactly unknown today. But Homer, the first and greatest author of the classical world, bucked the trend as a feminist pioneer in delineating the unique capacities and abilities, with their associated duties and responsibilities, of women, in reciprocal and complementary terms to those of men.

The benefits of that ‘complementarity’ for the evolution of the species is obvious to us in a way the ancients would not have understood. But Homer ‘got it’ in a way few other classical authors seemed to.

We will cover sex and eternity in books 5 and 11. For now, it is a very interesting thought process. Again, I am treating you as almost adults—these topics are extremely important in literature as well as life. I expect us to be able to handle them. We can also look at gender roles across the millennia or centuries. The #metoo era. Pornography era—are people (male and female) who watch or read pornography more or less likely to have healthy relationships? *The Odyssey* does have a sexual vibe to it in places, but the lessons are fidelity and love—not being a nobody (faceless internet as well as important aspect of the Odyssey) All of these are great essay topics by the way.

How does Odysseus compare with Achilles, the hero in Homer’s *Iliad*? Again, go ahead and use google—if this were college, you would have read both the Iliad and The Odyssey in roughly the same time frame.

What does “The Genealogy of the Royal House of Odysseus” (page 497) tell you about Odysseus’ roots? Why might this be important in Odysseus’ trials?

What does the term “in media res” mean? How does this affect the telling of *The Odyssey*? Explain.

*STRUCTURE OF* THE ODYSSEY

Books 1-4: Telemachus leaves Ithaca to try to discover some news of his father. *The Telemachia*

Books 5-8: The reader meets Odysseus on the isle of Calypso. Odysseus leaves, is shipwrecked, and is washed ashore on the island of Phacacia, where he is given a banquet at court.

Books 9-12: *Odysseus tells the court of Phaeacia of his adventures, taking the reader back to Troy and recounting the story of how he got from there to the island of the goddess Calypso.*

Books 13-24: *Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, where he must fulfill his quest to become reunited with his wife and son and to reclaim his kingdom from the men who threaten it.*

*CHRONOLOGY OF THE STORY*

As you read the text, refer to this page to chronologically list the places Odysseus visits on his journey home from Troy to Ithaca. He visits some places twice…

1. Troy

2.

3.

4. Island of the Cyclops

5.

6.

7. Aeaea, the home of Circe

8.

9.

10.

11.

12. Thrinacia—Isle of the Cattle of the Sun God Helios

13.

14.

15.

16. Ithaca

*BOOK ONE: Athena Inspires the Prince*

Who are the following characters? What role does each play in the first book?

Odysseus Zeus

Athena Poseidon

Polyphemus Telemachus

Argives Antinous

Eurymachus Achaeans

1. What is foreshadowed of Odysseus’ adventures in the opening lines?
2. How does Zeus define Odysseus?
3. How does Athena appear to Telemachus?
4. What is the status in Ithaca—Odysseus’ kingdom—when the epic begins? Explain.
5. What does Telemachus believe about his father’s fate?
6. What prophecy does Athena make to Telemachus?
7. Describe Athena’s epiphany. What effect does it have on Telemachus?
8. How do Antinous and Eurymachus treat Telemachus? Describe their tone with him.

*BOOK TWO:* The Assembly meets and Telemachus tells the suitors they will be punished. He also announces his plan to search for Odysseus. Athena helps Telemachus organize a crew.

Characters— Icarius

Laertes

Haliitherses

Mentor

Preguntas:

1. Aninous tells the story of how Penelope deceived the suitors. What did she do? For how long? Why do you think it took that long for the suitors to figure it out?
2. We get our first “bird sign”. What is the sign and what does it mean?
3. On page 100 and 101, what does mentor tell the Achaens? Lines 267-270
4. What is Leocritus’ response to the above quote? (His name is not overly important—the attitude is)
5. What does Antinous attempt to do with Telemachus—lines 336-342 does it work?

*BOOK THREE:* Telemachus meets King Nestor of Pylos. Nestor tells Telemachus to visit Sparta, and gives Telemachus supplies and the aid of his son, Pisistratus.

This book is fairly difficult—unless you have read the Iliad. Homer’s audience would have known the characters and stories that Nestor explains. There are a few things of importance that happen and relate to culture.

Chaacters: Nestor

Pisistratos

1. Who is Orestes and what is he famous for? Why is that important to our story?
2. Lines 255-260 : what is Telemachus really saying?
3. What is Mentor’s response?
4. What does Mentor (Athena) do on line 415? WHY do you think she did this?
5. Line 521—we meet lovely Polycaste. Get your head out of the gutter. Why do you thinbk I bring this to your attention? 😊

*BOOK FOUR: The King and Queen of Sparta*

Who are the following characters? What role does each play in Book Four?

Nestor Pisistratus

Menelaus Helen

Proteus Eidothea

Penelope Eurycleia

What news does Menelaus reveal of Odysseus’ struggles?

What tale of Odysseus in Troy does Helen share?

According to Menelaus, how does Odysseus save lives within the Trojan horse?

How does Menelaus obtain information from Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea?

What does Menelaus learn about Odysseus from Proteus?

What plan does Antinous devise against Telemachus? Explain.

Who does Penelope call upon to save Telemachus? What is the result?