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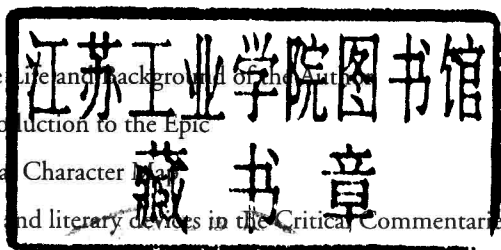
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Homer's The Odyssey

By Stanley P. Baldwin, M.A.

IN THIS BOOK

- Learn about the life and background of the Author
- Preview an Introduction to the Epic
- Study a graphical Character Map
- Explore themes and literary devices in the Critical Commentaries
- Examine in-depth Character Analyses
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How to Use This Book

This CliffsNotes study guide on Homer's *The Odyssey* supplements the original literary work, giving you background information about the author, an introduction to the work, a graphical character map, critical commentaries, expanded glossaries, and a comprehensive index, all for you to use as an educational tool that will allow you to better understand *The Odyssey*. This study guide was written with the assumption that you have read *The Odyssey*. Reading a literary work doesn't mean that you immediately grasp the major themes and devices used by the author; this study guide will help supplement your reading to be sure you get all you can from Homer's *The Odyssey*. CliffsNotes Review tests your comprehension of the original text and reinforces learning with questions and answers, practice projects, and more. For further information on Homer and *The Odyssey*, check out the CliffsNotes Resource Center.

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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

The following abbreviated biography of Homer is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Homer's *The Odyssey*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Homer's work and his life.

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The Author

After well over 2,500 years, we still cannot say for sure who created the *Odyssey*, exactly how it was composed, or precisely when it was written. Even though there is little autobiographical information in the epic and not much else to go on, we can make some educated guesses based upon research by top scholars.

Most early Greeks had no doubt that there once was a single individual named Homer to whom they attributed authorship of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and the “Homeric Hymns,” poems celebrating the ancient Greek gods. Although some seven different cities claimed to have been his birthplace, many thought Homer might have come from the island of Chios off the western coast of Asia Minor. In ancient times, a family bearing his name and living there was said to consist of his descendants.

Furthermore, because Homer composed his works in a form that blended Ionic and Aeolic dialects, it is likely that he was a native or resident of the western part of Asia Minor. He probably was a bard or rhapsode (a specialist in performing epics). Tradition has it that he was blind, a theory based largely on his portrayal of Demodocus, the blind singer of the Phaeacians (8.51), a passage in the “Hymns,” and the somewhat romantic notion (partly supported by fact) that many such performers were blind.

The Homeric Question

By the second century BC, editors of the epics had raised what we now call the “Homeric Question.” At issue are the authorship, origin, and means of composition of the works. Differences were noted in the styles and language of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Over the years, some critics have complained that the subjects and themes are too diverse for a single author. Some scholars even suggest that the works were the creation of a group. The dispute continues today.

In the past century, however, the preponderance of opinions seems to be on the side of single authorship. Some defend single authorship by citing William Shakespeare’s varying approaches to *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, which deal with fading kings but in contrasting ways. Others point out that *The Iliad* appears to have been composed first and demonstrates the work of a younger man while the *Odyssey* is more mature and reflects an older author. Still others cite folk influences and the various themes and content as justification of conflicting styles.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, an American scholar named Milman Parry revolutionized classical studies by demonstrating conclusively that both *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed in an oral, formulaic style based on tradition and designed to help the rhapsode perform a long piece from memory. The poems were recited, or more likely sung, to audiences in the way that similar works are presented in the *Odyssey*. The performer often accompanied himself with a lyre. Metrical phrases were used as mnemonic devices, and everyday language was altered to fit this poetic language. That would account for the “elevated style” that has long been attributed to the works.

Parry’s discovery clearly alters how readers look at the authorship of the epics. Some scholars, like Harold Bloom (*Homer’s Odyssey*, 1996, p. 8) think that Homer, if he existed, was no more than an editor or organizer of poems created by others, perhaps over generations. Others, such as Seth L. Schein (*Reading the Odyssey*, 1996, p. 4 ff.), credit the poet with considerable creativity while welcoming the evidence of oral tradition. Schein points out that Greeks apparently had access to the Phoenician alphabet by the third quarter of the eighth century BC and that a poet trained in the oral tradition could have written down (or dictated to a scribe) *The Odyssey* as readers now know it. He sees literary (written), as well as folk or traditional influences, in the creation of the epic.

Date of Composition

Although some scholars still maintain that the epic was written in its present form in the sixth century BC in Athens, mounting evidence indicates an earlier date. The weight of the scholarship implies that *The Odyssey* was probably composed and possibly written down about 700 BC. The most convincing argument is that *The Iliad* was written first. Both epics probably were created, in the form we know them, by the same poet—a theory that is consistent with the views of those who see unusual genius, as well as technical similarities, in each work. While this poet may have composed each work completely, he probably borrowed metrical phrases and content from other bards. These elements, after all, were the rhapsodes’ tools in the oral tradition, belonging to all. Although relying significantly on folk tradition and devices of oral creativity, the version of *The Odyssey* that we now have seems to have been influenced most strongly by a single poet, probably a veteran rhapsode, who likely dictated it to a scribe or wrote it down himself.

Let’s call him Homer.

INTRODUCTION TO *THE ODYSSEY*

The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the work. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the work and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

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Introduction

An epic is a long narrative poem in an elevated style that deals with the trials and achievements of a great hero or heroes. The epic celebrates virtues of national, military, religious, political, or historical significance. The word “epic” itself comes from the Greek *épos*, originally meaning “word” but later “oration” or “song.” Like all art, an epic may grow out of a limited context but achieves greatness in relation to its universality. It typically emphasizes heroic action as well as the struggle between the hero’s ethos and his human failings or mortality.

Increasingly, scholars distinguish between two types of epic. The first, the *primary epic*, evolves from the mores, legends, or folk tales of a people and is initially developed in an *oral tradition* of storytelling. *Secondary epics*, on the other hand, are literary. They are written from their inception and designed to appear as whole stories.

Note: References throughout are to Robert Fagles’ poetic translation, *Homer: The Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1996). Citations are by book and line; for example, line 47 in Book 3 is represented as (3.47).

The Odyssey as Epic

Composed around 700 BC, *The Odyssey* is one of the earliest epics still in existence and, in many ways, sets the pattern for the genre, neatly fitting the definition of a primary epic (that is, one that grows out of oral tradition). The hero is long-suffering Odysseus, king of Ithaca and surrounding islands and hero of the Trojan War. He has been gone 20 years from his homeland, his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus. Odysseus embodies many of the virtues of ancient Greek civilization and in some ways defines them. He is not, however, without his flaws, which sometimes get him into trouble.

Epics usually open with a statement of the subject and an invocation to the Muse or Muses—the nine sister goddesses in Greek mythology, the daughters of the king of gods, Zeus, and Mnemosyne (“Memory”). Certain Muses preside over song and poetry, which are joined in epics. Sometimes Muses are assigned to all the liberal arts and sciences. Clio is usually thought of as the Muse of history. Erato takes care of lyrical love poetry. Calliope is the Muse most often associated with *epic* poetry.

Having invoked the Muse, the epic poet then begins in the middle of the tale; teachers sometimes use a Latin term, *in medias res* ("in the middle of things"), to identify this technique. Beginning in the middle of the action, the poet then fills in significant prior events through flashbacks or narration.

The *Odyssey* also employs most of the literary and poetic devices associated with epics: catalogs, digressions, long speeches, journeys or quests, various trials or tests of the hero, similes, metaphors, and divine intervention.

Although few contemporary authors attempt to compose epics, the influence of the genre and of *The Odyssey* is extensive. Many critics consider James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), which uses Odysseus' Latin name ("Ulysses") for the title and places a very flawed non-hero in Dublin, to be the most important novel of the twentieth century. Other works that students might compare to *The Odyssey* include Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer" (in the collection *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*, 1964), and Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975).

The Setting of Ithaca

While it includes recollections of earlier times, most of the action in *The Odyssey* takes place in the ten years following the Trojan War. Historically, was there ever such a war? W. A. Camps (*An Introduction to Homer*, 1980, "Preliminary") argues impressively that there probably was but that it was much different from Homer's depiction in *The Iliad* or the recollections of the characters in *The Odyssey*. Archaeological evidence indicates that the war may have taken place around 1220 BC and that the city Homer calls Troy was destroyed by fire. *The Odyssey* was likely composed about five hundred years after these events.

In the interim, countless bards had worked over the stories. What we see (or hear) in Homer, is not a depiction of history but a world created out of legend, folk tales, at least one poet's imagination, and a little bit of history. The "Wanderings of Odysseus," as his travel adventures are often called, take place largely in a reality beyond our own; the settings vary widely. Ithaca, on the other hand, is a constant for Odysseus and Homer's audience.

Politically, the system in Ithaca is less formal than a city-state, but it does provide structure based on power. Odysseus is not just a great warrior or excellent seaman, although those are important talents. He also is the best carpenter that Ithaca has known, the best hunter of wild boar, the finest marksman, and the leading expert on animal husbandry. Odysseus can plow the straightest furrow and mow the largest stretch of meadow in a day. In fact, it is his superior skill, his intelligence, and his prowess that enable him to maintain his power even after many years of absence. As long as he or his reputation can maintain control, Odysseus remains king of Ithaca and surrounding islands.

Along with power, of course, comes wealth. Because Ithaca has no coined money, wealth is measured by livestock, household furnishings, servants, slaves, and treasure. Slavery is not only accepted and encouraged in Homer's world, but slaves are viewed as symbols of wealth and power. Piracy, war, and raids on foreign cities are all accepted means of increasing wealth. The first thing that Odysseus does after leaving Troy, for example, is to sack Ismarus, stronghold of the Cicones. In addition to plunder, he captures the women.

Social traditions are strong in this community; ironically, it is the social tradition of hospitality that proves dangerous for Odysseus's wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus.

Finally, the people of Ithaca believe strongly in fate and the right of the gods to alter human life at any time. They hope that virtue will be rewarded, but they accept the vicissitudes of fortune. If an Ithacan stubs his toe in the garden, he may say, "Some god sent that rock to alter my path!" Odysseus himself is proof that, if the gods choose, anything might happen, even to a king.

The Background of the Story

King Odysseus of Ithaca has been gone from home for 20 years. The first 10 he spent fighting heroically and victoriously with the Greeks in the Trojan War; the last 10, he spent trying to get home. From other sources, we know that the goddess Athena arranged for storms to blow the Greeks off course as they attempted to sail home from the war. She was outraged because a Greek warrior had desecrated her temple by attempting to rape Cassandra (daughter of the last king of Troy) in that sacred place. Worse, the Greeks had not punished the man. Although Athena intervenes on Odysseus' behalf repeatedly throughout the epic, her curse originally causes his wanderings.

With Odysseus gone, all that he has—his kingship, his wealth, his home, and his wife and son—is in jeopardy. His wife Penelope finds herself surrounded by unwanted suitors because she is the key to the throne and to Odysseus' wealth. Her new husband would, at the very least, have a distinct advantage in the competition for a new king. Like her son, Telemachus, Penelope lacks the power to eject the suitors who have invaded her home and are bent on forcing her to marry.

In his absence, Odysseus' son, Telemachus, is referred to as the heir apparent and, as such, is constantly in danger, the more so as he becomes a man and is perceived as a threat by his mother's suitors. Telemachus lacks the stature of his father, and although he can summon the Achaeans (Greeks) on the island to full assembly, he cannot accomplish his goals—namely to rid his home of the unwanted suitors who have abused a custom of hospitality. Not only does Telemachus lack power to maintain control, but he also has no formal system of laws or courts to support him. Telemachus himself acknowledges that he may, at best, be ruler only of his own house.

If Telemachus were to assume the crown without sufficient resources to defend it, which he currently lacks, he risk being deposed and, most likely, killed. If Penelope stalls much longer in selecting a suitor, Ithaca could find itself in civil war, and she and her son may well be among its first victims. If she chooses a husband, her son is still in danger unless he is willing to abdicate his claim to the throne. As repugnant as marriage seems, it may be necessary for Ithaca's and (possibly) her son's survival.

A Brief Synopsis

After an invocation to the Muse of poetry, the epic begins *in medias res* ("in the middle of things"). Odysseus has been gone from Ithaca for about 20 years—the first 10 spent fighting the Trojan War, the last 10 trying to get home.

Meanwhile, Odysseus' wife, Penelope, tries to fend off over 100 suitors who have invaded the royal palace, seeking her hand in marriage (and a chance of ruling Ithaca), and indulging in great amounts of food and wine at the hosts' expense. Telemachus, son of Odysseus and Penelope, is just coming of age (he is approximately 21) and is at a loss as to what to do about the suitors. Mother and son yearn for Odysseus' return.

Books 1–4

The first four books deal with Telemachus' struggle (in fact, Odysseus does not appear in the epic until Book 5). A secondary plot in *The Odyssey* is Telemachus' coming of age, his own quest, which scholars sometimes refer to as the "Telemacheia."

The goddess Athena appears to the young prince in disguise and advises him to gather an assembly of the island's leaders to protest the invasion of the suitors. Soon after, he is to visit King Nestor of Pylos and King Menelaus of Sparta, old comrades of his father's, to gather from them any news of Odysseus.

At the assembly, the two leading suitors—the aggressive Antinous and the smooth-talking Eurymachus—confront the prince. They accuse Penelope of delaying too long in her choice of a new husband. Telemachus speaks well but accomplishes little at the assembly because the suitors are from some of the strongest families in the area and are impatient with Penelope's delays.

As Telemachus secretly sets off for Pylos and Sparta, the suitors plot to assassinate him. At Pylos, Telemachus learns little of his father but is encouraged to visit Sparta where King Menelaus reports that Odysseus is alive but held captive by the goddess nymph Calypso.

Books 5–8

Homer leaves the story of Telemachus as the suitors are about to ambush his ship on its return to Ithaca. At Athena's urging, the gods have decided to free Odysseus from Calypso. Hermes, the messenger god, delivers the order to Odysseus' captor. Odysseus has spent seven years with the goddess, sleeping with her at night and pining for his home and family during the day. Calypso is a beautiful, lustful nymph who wants to marry Odysseus and grant him immortality, but he longs for Penelope and Ithaca. Reluctantly, Calypso sends Odysseus on his way.

Poseidon, the sea god, spots the wayfarer and, seeking revenge because Odysseus blinded Poseidon's son Cyclops, shipwrecks Odysseus on Phaeacia, which is ruled by King Alcinous. The Phaeacians, civilized and hospitable people, welcome the stranger and encourage him to tell of his adventures. Through Odysseus' narration, the reader goes back 10 years and hears his tale.

Books 9–12

Known as “The Wanderings of Odysseus,” this section is the most famous of the epic. At the end of the Trojan War, Odysseus and his men sail first to the land of the Cicones. The Greeks succeed in raiding the central city but linger too long and are routed by a reserve force. Hoping to sail directly home, the flotilla instead encounters a severe storm, brought on by Athena, that blows them far off course to the land of the Lotus-eaters. These are not hostile people, but eating the lotus plant removes memory and ambition; Odysseus is barely able to pull his men away and resume the journey.

Curiosity compels Odysseus to explore the land of the Cyclops, a race of uncivilized, cannibalistic, one-eyed giants. One of them, Polyphemus (also known simply as “Cyclops”), traps Odysseus’ scouting party in his cave. To escape, Odysseus blinds the one-eyed monster, incurring the wrath of the giant’s father, Poseidon.

Aeolus, the wind god, is initially a friendly host. He captures all adverse winds and bags them for Odysseus, who is thus able to sail within sight of Ithaca. Unfortunately, his men suspect that the bag holds treasure and open it while Odysseus sleeps. The troublesome winds blow the party back to Aeolus, who wants no more to do with them, speculating that they must be cursed by the gods.

The next hosts, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, sink all the ships but Odysseus’ in a surprise attack. The remaining Greeks reach Aeaea, home of the beautiful enchantress Circe, who turns several of them into pigs. With advice from Hermes, Odysseus cleverly defeats Circe and becomes her lover. She lifts the spell from his men and aids in the group’s eventual departure a year later, advising Odysseus that he must sail to the Land of the Dead. There, he receives various Greek heroes, a visit from his own mother, and an important prophecy from the seer Tiresias. Odysseus resumes his journey.

Barely surviving the temptations of the Sirens’ songs and an attack by a six-headed monster named Scylla, Odysseus and his crew arrive at the island of the Sungod Helios. Despite severe warnings not to, the men feast on the cattle of the Sungod during Odysseus’ brief absence. Zeus is outraged and destroys the ship as the Greeks depart, killing all but Odysseus, who is washed ashore at Calypso’s island, where he stays until released seven years later.