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THE ODYSSEY



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by

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THE ODYSSEY

INTRODUCTION

Odyssey is a Greek word, meaning "the tale of Odysseus." This book, one of the two epics composed by western Europe's first poet, Homer, is concerned with the adventures and exploits of Odysseus, a hero of the Trojan War.

Reading the *Odyssey* can be a valuable experience for nearly anyone, whether he be a student or a layman. The *Odyssey* is great poetry and one of the foundation stones of the western world's cultural heritage. It is also, in a sense, the earliest and one of the finest books ever written. It is in the *Odyssey* that the elements of romance and adventure, the psychological development of characters, and the tight movement of the plot we enjoy so much today were originated.

Although it is more than 2,500 years old, the *Odyssey* is an easy book to understand and appreciate, if one is willing to give it a chance. Some parts of this story are strange to people living in the 20th century, but, however odd they seem, it is not difficult to master them. Study in order to learn about the world in which Odysseus lived and to gain familiarity with the basic material of the tale. Then read the *Odyssey* in full, using some modern translations recommended by your instructor. Do not, by any means, feel that you know the *Odyssey* if you do not read it, for a good story is made of more than just a bald chain of events. It is also created by the profound knowledge and understanding of the characters that the reader develops and by the unique experience of exposure to the subtle and artistic techniques used by a master storyteller. No outline in the world can provide you with the joy of reading a well-constructed and narrated story. After you have finished the *Odyssey*, reread the outline. It will help to emphasize to you the main points of the epic and will, perhaps, serve to answer any questions that Homer's work has caused you to ponder.

THE LIFE OF HOMER

Little is known about Homer, the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and one of the great poets in the history of Western Europe. Ancient Greek tradition, as well as a study of the language and style of the poems, indicates that the poet probably lived and wrote sometime in the 8th or 9th centuries B.C., but no more definite date can be determined. In ancient times seven different cities claimed the honor of having been his birthplace. None of these assertions can be validated, but more than likely he came from the island of Chios, on the western coast of Asia Minor, for in historical times a family of the same name lived there which claimed him as an ancestor and devoted itself to the recitation of his works. Whether or not he did come from Chios, it is highly probable that he was a native and resident of some section of Asia Minor, for the dialect in which he composed his works is that of the Asian (Ionian) Greeks.

Tradition has visualized Homer as blind; however, there is no real evidence for this. This picture is based upon the portrayal of Demodocus, the blind minstrel in the *Odyssey*, who sings a poem about the fall of Troy, but there is no reason to believe that the poet was describing himself in this scene. One scholar has postulated that Phemius, the bard in the palace of Ithaca, is Homer's self-portrait, but again there is no evidence beyond that of one's own imagination. Throughout the two epics there is consistently no autobiographical information and no other literature of the period which might describe the poet survives.

The early Greeks unhesitatingly insisted that there had been a single individual named Homer to whom they ascribed the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and several minor works called the *Homeric Hymns*. During the Alexandrian period (after the 3rd century B.C.), what is now known as the "Homeric Question" was first propounded. Several of the grammarians of the time asserted that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, between which there are significant differences of style and concept, were actually composed by two different writers. This view has at times been supported by later European critics. There has also been a school of thought, originally instituted by

Friedrich Wolf in 1795, and especially popular in the 19th century, which claims that Homer never existed and that the two epics are the collective works of groups of anonymous bards to whom the name Homer was later applied. These scholars suggest that the two poems were constantly revised and added to whenever they were recited and did not reach their present form until the 6th century B.C. when, in Athens, they were written down for the first time.

Contemporary scholarship, in general, believes that each of the two poems has a consistency of style and outlook that shows them to be the work of one writer. This poet may have composed them completely or he may have utilized parts of the work of some earlier bards, altering to fit his own purposes and making them fully his own in the process. Since the people nearest the composition of the poems believed them to have been the product of one hand, the modern critic has accepted this view and has attributed the differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to their having been composed in different stages of the poet's life and to the differences in the themes of the works. Rather than take a defensive or apologetic position, the contemporary scholar insists that the burden of proof is on those who deny the existence of Homer. To date, this position has not successfully been challenged.

While little if anything is known of Homer's life, his works are an everlasting tribute to him. Progress is an ideal in most fields of human activity, but in epic poetry it is the two earliest examples which are the best. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have for thousands of years been the standards by which poets of all languages have measured themselves. Homer is magnificent for an understanding of human nature in all its aspects, for keen observation of the whole world in which men live, for essential sanity and good taste, and for superb control of all the technical devices of his medium.

THE INFLUENCE OF HOMER

The two epic poems of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, must have been recognized as classics soon after their composition, for they had a rapid circulation. By historical times

they were known throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and the Greek colonies in the western Mediterranean. The poems were spread by the *rhapsodoi*, professional reciters who traveled through the Greek world, supporting themselves by the presentation of poetry. Such recitations were common, especially at religious festivals and public celebrations. It appears that the poems of Homer were first put into a standard written form by a committee of rhapsodists in Athens, around 535 B.C.

Homer's work was early accepted as the paragon of epic poetry, and his techniques and style were imitated by many later writers. Among the poets who came under his influence was Virgil, a Roman of the 1st Century B.C., whose greatest work was the *Aeneid*. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the common heritage of all Greeks and one of the most important ties binding them together. They soon came to be viewed as sacred, partly because of their great age and beauty, and served for the Greeks very much as the Bible did for the ancient Hebrews. The poems of Homer were accepted as the ultimate authority for information about morality, early history, and the Olympian theology.

With the passing of the ancient world and the triumph of Christianity, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* lost their sanctity, but they were still recognized and valued as great poetry. In the medieval period they were forgotten in most of western Europe, but were preserved in Byzantium, where they remained a subject of admiration, imitation, and study. In the 15th century, manuscripts of Homer were brought to Italy from Constantinople. The reintroduction of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was an important factor in the newly emerging humanism of the Renaissance, and since that time these two poems have had a lasting and revered place in the world of literature.

HOMER'S POETIC TECHNIQUE

ORAL POETRY

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are polished epic poems that can easily be classified with the best of any literature. Unlike most

later poetry, they are the product of a period in which literature was an oral, unwritten art form. The Greeks of the Homeric period, like many other early peoples at a pre-literate level of civilization, possessed a kind of heroic poetry which embodied their legends and history, and which was composed, recited, and transmitted orally, usually by a class of professional bards dedicated to this task. Demodocus and Phemius in the *Odyssey*, who chant old sagas accompanied by music from their lyres, are representative of these bards, while the medieval French *Song of Roland* and the *Beowulf* saga of Anglo-Saxon Britain are famous non-Greek examples of this heroic poetry.

It is generally believed that Homer was also one of these professional bards and that in origin the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were oral works, though probably of greater length than was common for such poems. Since the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were probably composed near the end of Greece's heroic age, there is a possibility that they were first set down in writing, incorporating parts of earlier oral poems. This is uncertain, but even if true, writing in this case would have been used only as an aid to the poet's memory. The style of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* maintains all of the usual characteristics of oral poetry and the poems were obviously meant to be heard, not read.

METER

Greek epic poetry was traditionally composed in a meter known as the dactylic hexameter. Each hexameter verse has five metrical feet. The first five can consist of a dactyl (a long and two short sounds, $-(\cup\cup)$) or the first five can consist of a spondee (two long sounds, $- -$). Whichever method is used the last foot must always be a spondee. The number of syllables in a line of hexameter verse may vary from a minimum of twelve to a maximum of seventeen, depending on the combination of dactyls and spondees used.

It often happened that poets had to add extra words to a line to fill it out to the proper number of stresses and accents. It was necessary in such cases that these words, needed only to fulfill the metrical requirements of the hexameter, should not confuse or change the meaning of the verse, and for this purpose the poets devised the

epithet, a conventional word or phrase which was attached to a noun (whether person, place or thing) and which could be added when needed without affecting the meaning of the sentence or phrase in which it was used.

EPITHETS

To the modern reader, who finds the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in an English translation and is unfamiliar with the technical requirements of the hexameter, which necessitated the use of conventional extra words, the epithet appears only as a sometimes confusing, sometimes meaningful, stock word or short phrase regularly applied to some person or thing. Typical epithets used in the *Odyssey* include “rosy-fingered dawn,” “bright-eyed Athene,” “sandy Pylos,” and “wise Odysseus.” Besides their technical function, epithets are a useful stylistic device, helping the audience better to visualize what is being narrated and aiding the poet in making concise characterizations or descriptions. In the hands of Homer the traditional epithet was also used to achieve brilliant effects of irony and understatement, by his contrasting of the meaning of a traditional epithet with the real nature of the person or thing to which it was applied. A good example of the way Homer does this is his frequent application of the epithet “brave” to the craven and wicked Antinous, leader of Penelope’s suitors.

SIMILES

The most prevalent form of imagery used in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the simile, a poetic comparison of an individual, thing, or event to something else of greater familiarity to the audience. A typical Homeric simile is this one in which the starving Odysseus is described as he emerges from behind some bushes to confront Nausicaa and her maids (*Odyssey*, Book VI):

Then he advanced on them like a mountain lion who sallies out, defying wind and rain in the pride of his power, with fire in his eyes, to hunt the oxen or the sheep, to stalk the roaming deer, or to be forced by hunger to besiege the very walls of the homestead and attack the pens. The same urgent need now constrained

Odysseus, naked as he was, to bear down upon these gentle girls.

By making his comparisons with the objects and experiences of everyday life, Homer not only made the heroic content of his poem far more understandable to his audience, but also created some fine effects of contrast and some short lyrical passages of great beauty.

FORMAL RHETORIC

A great part of the *Odyssey* is made up of long, formal speeches by the characters, even in scenes which are meant to include conversation. This is because shorter, more realistic dialogue would have been difficult to recite and hard to understand in an oral presentation. In addition, the stateliness of the oratory composed by Homer adds to the dignity of his story and helps to counteract the more fabulous aspects of some of its episodes. Throughout their history, the Greeks had a great fondness for public speaking and viewed oratory as a practical communications medium and also as a creative art form. To a great extent this was because of the authoritative example set by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

REPETITION

Modern readers quickly notice another characteristic feature of oral poetry—the frequent repetition of epithets, similes, speeches, and episodes. Such repetition is typical of oral poetry for obvious reasons—it reduced the difficulties of composition and made the poem easier to memorize. In addition, repetition helped refresh the memories of listeners during recitations and enabled them to recognize or anticipate certain developments or kinds of action. Since poems as long as the *Odyssey* were too long to be recited in a single session, such repetition would have been more helpful and less distracting to an ancient audience than to a modern reader.

LANGUAGE

The language in which the Homeric poems are composed is an artificial literary dialect with many archaic elements, comparable in this regard to the language used by the translators of the King James version of the Bible. The language of the *Odyssey* is basically a form

of the Ionian dialect of Greek spoken in Asia Minor and Attica, but has many Aeolian words and constructions.

GENERAL COMMENT

Although many aspects of Greek epic technique were traditional and did not originate with Homer, he brought a new spirit and skill to their use. It was natural for him to do his work in the style already developed and accepted in his society. In the same manner, all writers and poets have worked within the framework prepared for them by their predecessors. The best of them, like Homer, have surpassed the tools with which they were provided and have molded the conventional forms they inherited into unique and highly personal modes of artistic expression.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

HUMAN BEINGS

Alcinous	Melanthius
Antinous	Melantho
Arete	Menelaus
Demodocus	Mentor
Elpenor	Nausicaa
Eumaeus	Nestor
Eurycleia	Odysseus
Eurylochus	Peisistratus
Eurymachus	Penelope
Halisthernes	Philoetius
Helen	Telemachus
Irus	Theoclymenus
Laertes	Tiresias
Medon	

GODS AND SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

Aeolus	Charybdis
Athene	Circe
Calypso	Hermes

Hyperion
Leucothoie
Polyphemus
Poseidon

Scylla
The Sirens
Zeus

SYNOPSIS OF THE ODYSSEY

Odysseus, king of Ithaca, sails with his army to take part in the mighty Achaean expedition led by Agamemnon against the city of Troy to restore Helen to Menelaus. After ten years of bloody warfare, the city is sacked and the Achaean heroes sail for home. When the *Odyssey* begins, an additional decade has passed since Troy fell and Odysseus still has not returned home. All the other chieftains have safely arrived in their native lands or died, but there is no news at all of the ruler of Ithaca. In his absence, the noblemen of Ithaca and the surrounding states have converged upon his palace, hoping to win the hand of Penelope, his wife. She, ever faithful to her husband's memory, will not remarry and while they remain at the palace, trying to change her mind, the suitors grossly waste the wealth of Odysseus' estate for their own pleasure and corrupt many of his servants. As soon as he has grown old enough, Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, visits various Achaean lords, hopefully trying to learn whether his father still lives.

During these ten years Odysseus has wandered throughout the world, undergoing an unbelievable series of adventures and torments, caused by the malice of the god, Poseidon. All his ships and men have been lost and only he of the whole brave army that sailed to Troy survives. Finally, with the aid of the king of the Phaeacians, Odysseus returns to Ithaca. Assisted by the goddess Athene, whose favorite he is, Odysseus punishes the suitors and re-establishes himself as king. He is reunited with his wife, son and father, and a potential civil war on Ithaca is averted by the intercession of the gods.

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

BOOK I

ATHENE ADVISES TELEMACHUS

Summary

The *Odyssey* opens with Homer's invocation to the muse of poetry, in which he states the subject of the epic and asks for her guidance in telling his story properly. It is, he says, the tale of a lonely man who has wandered throughout the world for many years and who has suffered many hardships before his attempt to return home was successful.

When the story proper begins, all the survivors of the Trojan War have safely reached their homes, with the exception of Odysseus. He is being detained by the nymph Calypso, who hopes to make him her husband, and while most of the gods are sympathetic to him, Poseidon, ruler of the sea, bears him a grudge and makes him undergo many torments.

In the absence of Poseidon, a divine council is called on Olympus by Zeus, the king of the gods. After his introductory speech about the punishment of Aegisthus, the murderer of Agamemnon, Athene interrupts her father. She reminds him of poor Odysseus, separated from family and loved ones on a distant island, and demands that the gods resume their former friendship to him. She points out that while Poseidon is bitter because Odysseus has blinded one of his sons, yet he can still be made to submit to the combined will of the other gods. She suggests that Hermes be sent to Calypso, ordering her to free Odysseus, while she will disguise herself and go to see Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. Zeus and the other gods agree to this suggestion.

Athene outfits herself as a mighty warrior and goes at once to Ithaca, the home of Odysseus. There she finds the hero's house overrun by a horde of petty princes and young noblemen who are

ostensibly courting his wife, but who are, at the same time, having a constant series of banquets and feasts at which they waste all of Odysseus' property.

Athene, identifying herself as Mentès, a Taphian chieftain and an old friend of Odysseus, is welcomed by Telemachus. The two sit down to dinner and the young man apologizes for the crude behavior of the suitors. He asks Athene for news of his father, if any. Athene reassures Telemachus that Odysseus is still alive somewhere and that he will eventually return home to recognize his son and punish the suitors. Telemachus describes the problems caused by his father's absence and explains how Penelope, his mother, has refused to remarry. Athene recommends that Telemachus call a meeting of the Assembly at which he can give the suitors notice to leave his house and can at the same time announce his intention of seeking news of Odysseus. Then, the goddess advises, he should sail for Pylos and Sparta to learn what he can from Nestor and Menelaus. Furthermore, Athene points out, if Odysseus is dead, then it is time for Telemachus to face his responsibilities, by claiming his inheritance, having his mother select a new husband, and by punishing the suitors. The goddess leaves, and the two part as friends.

Meanwhile, at the banquet of the suitors, a bard sings of the adventures of the Achaeans at Troy. Penelope appears and is upset at this reminder of the long absent Odysseus, but Telemachus orders her to leave the hall, where the entertainment is, after all, for men and not for sensitive women. The suitors then attempt to question the youth about his recent guest. He announces that he will call the Assembly the next morning as well as his planned voyage in quest of information and his intended punishment of them all. They are surprised at his sudden assertion of manliness, but continue with their wasteful feasting. Telemachus goes to bed and dreams of his impending journey.

Commentary

The *Odyssey*, like all epics, begins with an invocation to the muse of poetry in which Homer announces the theme of his poem and asks for divine assistance in telling the story. The custom of

invoking the muse is based on an ancient belief that the ability to create poetry, which was also thought of as the ability to give a kind of immortality to the people whose stories were told in the poem, was a mysterious and godlike art that could only be practiced with supernatural help.

The method of storytelling in ancient Greece was very different from our own and this is reflected in Homer's narrative style in the *Odyssey*. Greek epic poems told stories about things which had taken place in the legendary past and which were believed by the Greeks to be historical, so the details of the stories, or at least their general outlines, were already well known. Because of this the epic poet could not use many of the storytelling devices that are common today, such as the surprise ending or the development of suspense. He concentrated on interpretation and explication of the old tales and on achieving a high level of artistry in retelling them.

Since his audience was already familiar with the story told in his poem, Homer was able to omit many unimportant details included in the original legends and could start the *Odyssey* at a more dramatic point in the story than its chronological beginning. No summary of earlier events was necessary and he did not have to introduce or give the backgrounds of his characters. This technique, which is characteristic of all epic poetry, is known as starting *in medias res* (a Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things"). It serves immediately to capture the attention of the audience at the beginning of a recitation. In conjunction with this technique, background information and the story of the first nine years of the wanderings of Odysseus are presented by use of flashbacks at points in the poem where they have added meaning or a more striking effect. This helps to make the poem more dramatic and tightens the integration of the many diverse elements of its plot, so that, as a narrative poem, the *Odyssey's* plot has much more unity than the more loosely organized plot of the *Iliad*.

Although the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have many features in common, there are some significant differences between the two epics. One immediately apparent even in the first book and fundamental to the entire mood of the *Odyssey*, is that it contains much less historical