PART 1  FAR FROM HOME

"I Am Odysseus"

Odysseus is in the banquet hall of Alcinous (āl-sīn′ō-as), King of Phaeacia (fē-ā′sha), who helps him on his way after all his comrades have been killed and his last vessel destroyed. Odysseus tells the story of his adventures thus far.

"I am Laertes’ son, Odysseus.

Men hold me formidable for guile in peace and war:
this fame has gone abroad to the sky’s rim.
My home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaca under Mount Neion’s wind-blown robe of leaves, in sight of other islands–Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus–Ithaca being most lofty in that coastal sea, and northwest, while the rest lie east and south. A rocky isle, but good for a boy’s training;

1. Laertes [lā-ərt′ēz].

4. Ithaca [ith′ə-kə]: an island off the west coast of Greece.
I shall not see on earth a place more dear, though I have been detained long by Calypso, loveliest among goddesses, who held me in her smooth caves, to be her heart’s delight, as Circe of Aeaea, the enchantress, desired me, and detained me in her hall. But in my heart I never gave consent. Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass his own home and his parents? In far lands he shall not, though he find a house of gold. What of my sailing, then, from Troy? What of those years of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus? The wind that carried west from Ilion brought me to Ismarus, on the far shore, a strongpoint on the coast of the Cicones. I stormed that place and killed the men who fought. Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women, to make division, equal shares to all—but on the spot I told them: ‘Back, and quickly! Out to sea again!’ My men were mutinous, fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle, feasting—while fugitives went inland, running to call to arms the main force of Cicones. This was an army, trained to fight on horseback or, where the ground required, on foot. They came with dawn over that terrain like the leaves and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us, dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days. My men stood up and made a fight of it—backed on the ships, with lances kept in play, from bright morning through the blaze of noon holding our beach, although so far outnumbered; but when the sun passed toward unyoking time, then the Achaeans, one by one, gave way. Six benches were left empty in every ship that evening when we pulled away from death. And this new grief we bore with us to sea: our precious lives we had, but not our friends. No ship made sail next day until some shipmate had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost unloshed by the Cicones on that field.
The Lotus-Eaters

Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north
a storm against the ships, and driving veils
of squall moved down like night on land and sea.
The bows went plunging at the gust; sails
cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.
We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards,
unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee:
then two long days and nights we lay offshore
worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,
until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.
Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,
letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

I might have made it safely home, that time,
but as I came round Malea the current
took me out to sea, and from the north
a fresh gale drove me on, past Cythera.
Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea
before dangerous high winds. Upon the tenth
we came to the coastline of the Lotus-Eaters,
who live upon that flower. We landed there
to take on water. All ships' companies
mustered alongside for the midday meal.
Then I sent out two picked men and a runner
to learn what race of men that land sustained.
They fell in, soon enough, with Lotus-Eaters,
who showed no will to do us harm, only
offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus,
ever cared to report, nor to return:
they longed to stay forever, browsing on
that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.
I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,
tied them down under their rowing benches,
and called the rest: 'All hands aboard;
come, clear the beach and no one taste
the Lotus, or you lose your hope of home.'
Filing in to their places by the rowlocks
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf,
and we moved out again on our seafaring.
The Cyclops

In the next land we found were Cyclopes,°
giants, louts, without a law to bless them.
In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery
to the immortal gods, they neither plow
nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—
wild wheat and barley—grows untended, and
wine grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven’s rain.
Cyclopes have no muster and no meeting,
no consultation or old tribal ways,
but each one dwells in his own mountain cave
dealing out rough justice to wife and child,
indifferent to what the others do. . . .

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland,
at one end of the bay, we saw a cavern
yawning above the water, screened with laurel,
and many rams and goats about the place
inside a sheepfold—made from slabs of stone
earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged
towering oak trees.

A prodigious' man
slept in this cave alone, and took his flocks
to graze afield—remote from all companions,
knowing none but savage ways, a brute
so huge, he seemed no man at all of those
who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather
a shaggy mountain reared in solitude.
We beached there, and I told the crew
to stand by and keep watch over the ship;
as for myself I took my twelve best fighters
and went ahead. I had a goatskin full
of that sweet liquor that Euanthes’ son,
Maron, had given me. He kept Apollo’s°
holy grove at Ismarus; for kindness
we showed him there, and showed his wife and child,
his seven shining golden talents°
perfectly formed, a solid silver winebowl,
and then this liquor—twelve two-handled jars
of brandy, pure and fiery. Not a slave
in Maron’s household knew this drink; only
he, his wife and the storeroom mistress knew;

92. Cyclopes [sī-klo’pēz], plural
form of Cyclops [sī-k’lop]; a race
of one-eyed Giants.

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And they would put one cupful—ruby-colored, honey-smooth—in twenty more of water, but still the sweet scent hovered like a fume over the winebowl. No man turned away when cups of this came round.

A wineskin full

I brought along, and victuals in a bag, for in my bones I knew some towering brute would be upon us soon—all outward power, a wild man, ignorant of civility.

We climbed, then, briskly to the cave. But Cyclops had gone afield, to pasture his fat sheep, so we looked round at everything inside:

a drying rack that sagged with cheeses, pens crowded with lambs and kids, each in its class: firstlings apart from middlings, and the 'dewdrops,' or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both.

And vessels full of whey were brimming there—bowls of earthenware and pails for milking. My men came pressing round me, pleading:

'Why not take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back, throw open all the pens, and make a run for it? We'll drive the kids and lambs aboard. We say put out again on good salt water!'

Ah, how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished to see the cave man, what he had to offer—no pretty sight, it turned out, for my friends.

We lit a fire, burnt an offering, and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence around the embers, waiting. When he came he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it with a great crash into that hollow cave, and we all scattered fast to the far wall.

Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung high overhead a slab of solid rock to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,

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with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it over the doorsill. Next he took his seat and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling; thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey, sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets, and poured the whey to stand in bowls cooling until he drank it for his supper. When all these chores were done, he poked the fire, heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.

‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from? What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic? Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’

We felt pressure on our hearts, in dread of that deep rumble and that mighty man. But all the same I spoke up in reply:
We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course by shifting gales on the Great South Sea; homeward bound, but taking routes and ways uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it. We served under Agamemnon, son of Atreus—the whole world knows what city he laid waste, what armies he destroyed. It was our luck to come here; here we stand, beholden for your help, or any gifts you give—as custom is to honor strangers. We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge the unoffending guest."

He answered this from his brute chest, unmoved: "You are a ninny, for else you come from the other end of nowhere, telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far. I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—you or your friends—unless I had a whim to. Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?"

191. Agamemnon [æg'ə-məm'nən]: Greek king who led the Greeks against the Trojans.
He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this, and answered with a ready lie:  

‘My ship? Poseidon” Lord, who sets the earth a-tremble, broke it up on the rocks at your land’s end. A wind from seaward served him, drove us there. We are survivors, these good men and I.’

Neither reply nor pity came from him, but in one stride he clutched at my companions and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies to beat their brains out, spattering the floor. Then he dismembered them and made his meal, gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—everything: innards, flesh, and marrowbones. We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus, powerless, looking on at this, appalled; but Cyclops went on filling up his belly with manflesh and great gulps of whey, then lay down like a mast among his sheep. My heart beat high now at the chance of action, and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went along his flank to stab him where the midriff holds the liver. I had touched the spot when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him we perished there as well, for we could never move his ponderous doorway slab aside. So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order, putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then, his chores being all dispatched, he caught another brace of men to make his breakfast, and whisked away his great door slab to let his sheep go through—but he, behind, reset the stone as one would cap a quiver. There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness. And now I pondered how to hurt him worst, if but Athena granted what I prayed for. Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:

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A club, or staff, lay there along the fold—a
olive tree, felled green and left to season for Cyclops’ hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—a deep-sea-going craft—might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I chopped out a six-foot section of this pole
and set it down before my men, who scraped it; and when they had it smooth, I hewed again
to make a stake with pointed end. I held this in the fire’s heart and turned it, toughening it.
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under one of the dung piles in profusion there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured along with me? whose hand could bear to thrust
and grind that spike in Cyclops’ eye, when mild sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,
the men I would have chosen won the toss—four strong men, and I made five as captain.

At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some shepherding whim—or a god’s bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck, and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
looking up, saying:

‘Cyclops, try some wine.
Here’s liquor to wash down your scraps of men.
Taste it, and see the king of drink we carried under our planks. I meant it for an offering
if you would help us home. But you are mad, unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,
will any other traveler come to see you?’

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down so fiery and smooth he called for more:

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'Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me, how are you called? I'll make a gift will please you. Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow out of grassland and loam in heaven's rain, but here's a bit of nectar and ambrosia!'"

Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down. I saw the fuddle and flush come over him, then I sang out in cordial tones:

'Band of warriors, you ask my honorable name? Remember the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you. My name is Nohbdy, mother, father, and friends, everyone calls me Nohbdy.'

And he said: 'Nohbdy's my meat, then, after I eat his friends. Others come first. There's a noble gift, now.'
Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward, his great head lolling to one side; and sleep took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping, he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.

Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike deep in the embers, charring it again, and cheered my men along with battle talk to keep their courage up; no quitting now.

The pike of olive, green though it had been, reddened and glowed as it about to catch. I drew it from the coals and my four fellows gave me a hand, hugging it near the Cyclops as more than natural force nerved them; straight forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it turning it as a shipwright turns a drill in planking, having men below to swing the two handled strap that spins it in the groove. So with our brand we bored that great eye socket while blood ran out around the red hot bar.

Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

In a smithy
one sees a white-hot axhead or an adz plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—
the way they make soft iron hale and hard:
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.

The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him, and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye, threw it away, and his wild hands went groping; then he set up a howl for Cyclopes who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.

Some heard him; and they came by divers’ ways to clump around outside and call:

‘What ails you, Polyphemus?’ Why do you cry so sore on the starry night? You will not let us sleep. Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:

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Nohbdy, Nohbdy's tricked me, Nohbdy's ruined me!

To this rough shout they made a sage reply:

'Ah well, if nobody has played you foul
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain
given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.'

So saying
they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them.
Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide
for any silly beast or man who bolted—
hoping somehow I might be such a fool.
But I kept thinking how to win the game:
death sat there huge; how could we slip away?
I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,
reasoning as a man will for dear life,
until a trick came—and it pleased me well.
The Cyclops' rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet.

Three abreast
I tied them silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,
but my men riding on the pectoral' fleece
the giant's blind hands blundering never found.
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came, weighted by wool and me with my meditations. The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest in the night cave? You never linger so, but graze before them all, and go afar to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way leading along the streams, until at evening you run to be the first one in the fold. Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue and his accurs companions burnt it out when he had conquered all my wits with wine. Nobody will not get out alive, I swear. Oh, had you brain and voice to tell where he may be now, dodging all my fury! Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall his brains would strew the floor, and I should have rest from the outrage Nobody worked upon me.
He sent us into the open, then. Close by,  
I dropped and rolled clear of the ram’s belly,  
going this way and that to untie the men.  
With many glances back, we rounded up  
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,  
and drove them down to where the good ship lay.  
We saw, as we came near, our fellows’ faces  
shining; then we saw them turn to grief  
tallying those who had not fled from death.  
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,  
and in a low voice told them: ‘Load this herd;  
move fast, and put the ship’s head toward the breakers.’  
They all pitched in at loading, then embarked  
and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,  
as far offshore as shouted words would carry,  
I sent a few back to the adversary:

‘O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?  
Puny, am I, in a cave man’s hands?  
How do you like the beating that we gave you,  
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests  
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!’

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke  
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.  
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank  
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave  
that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.  
I got the longest boathook out and stood  
fending us off, with furious nods to all  
to put their backs into a racing stroke –  
row, row, or perish. So the long oars bent  
kicking the foam sternward, making head  
until we drew away, and twice as far.  
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew  
in low voices protesting:  
‘Godsake, Captain!  
Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’

‘That tidal wave he made on the first throw  
all but beached us.’  
‘All but stove us in!’

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'Give him our bearing with your trumpeting, he'll get the range and lob a boulder.'

'Aye!

He'll smash our timbers and our heads together!'

I would not heed them in my glorifying spirit, but let my anger flare and yelled:

'Cyclops, if ever mortal man inquire

how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him

Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:

Laertes' son, whose home's on Ithaca!'

At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

'Now comes the weird° upon me, spoken of old.

A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus, a son of Eurymus; great length of days he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes, and these things he foretold for time to come:

my great eye lost, and at Odysseus' hands.

Always I had in mind some giant, armed in giant force, would come against me here. but this, but you—small, pitiful and twiggy—you put me down with wine, you blinded me.

Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well, praying the god of earthquake° to befriend you—his son I am, for he by his avowal fathered me, and, if he will, he may heal me of this black wound—he and no other of all the happy gods or mortal men.'

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

'If I could take your life I would and take your time away, and hurl you down to hell! The god of earthquake could not heal you there!'

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

'O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands, if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:'

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grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never see his home: Laertes’ son, I mean, who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny intend that he shall see his roof again among his family in his fatherland, far be that day, and dark the years between. Let him lose all companions, and return under strange sail to bitter days at home.

In these words he prayed, and the god heard him. Now he laid hands upon a bigger stone and wheeled around, titanic for the cast, to let it fly in the black-prowed vessel’s track. But it fell short, just aft the steering oar, and whelming seas rose giant above the stone to bear us onward toward the island.

There as we ran in we saw the squadron waiting, the trim ships drawn up side by side, and all our troubled friends who waited, looking seaward. We beached her, grinding keel in the soft sand, and waded in, ourselves, on the sandy beach. Then we unloaded all the Cyclops' flock to make division, share and share alike, only my fighters voted that my ram, the prize of all, should go to me. I slew him by the seaside and burnt his long thighbones to Zeus beyond the stormcloud, Cronus’ son, who rules the world. But Zeus disdained my offering: destruction for my ships he had in store and death for those who sailed them, my companions. Now all day long until the sun went down we made our feast on mutton and sweet wine, till after sunset in the gathering dark we went to sleep above the wash of ripples.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines; and filing in to sit beside the rowlocks oarsmen in line dipped oars in the gray sea. So we moved out, sad in the vast offing, having our precious lives, but not our friends.
FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Odysseus begins his narrative when he and his men set sail from Troy. What does the episode of the Cicones reveal about Odysseus and his men?

2. Almost all of the adventures in the Odyssey illustrate some aspect of Odysseus' character. What specific characteristics are revealed in the episode of the Lotus-Eaters?

3. The land of the Lotus-Eaters has been said to symbolize *escapism*—that is, withdrawal from reality into a dream world. Do you agree? If you do, point out lines that support your view. If you do not, give reasons for your opinion.

4. Why does Odysseus consider the Cyclops barbarians?

5. Hospitality to strangers is a theme that recurs throughout the Odyssey. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods themselves sometimes came to earth disguised as humble strangers. How does the Cyclops respond to Odysseus' plea for hospitality?

6. Twice in the Cyclops episode Odysseus brings misfortune upon himself and his men by ignoring their good advice. Identify both instances and tell why Odysseus acts as he does.

7. Odysseus devises a plan that enables him and his men to escape from the Cyclops' cave and to prevent anyone coming to the Cyclops' aid. What is each stage of the plan?

8. What aspects of Odysseus' character are revealed in the incident with the Cyclops?

9. Reread the Cyclops' prayer to Poseidon (lines 467–476). What lines suggest that Odysseus will have to face other trials? How does this foreshadowing add to the suspense of the poem?
The Sirens

Odysseus and his crew arrive next at the island of Aeolus \[\text{æə-ləs}\], god of the winds, who helps them homeward by bottling up unfavorable winds and sending them a fair breeze. After nine days' sail, with Ithaca in sight, the men untie the bag of winds, and their ships are blown straight back to Aeolus' island. Realizing that their voyage is cursed by the gods, Aeolus drives them away.

In the land of the Laestrygonians \[\text{lēs'tri-gō'nē-anz}\], a race of cannibals, all the ships but one are destroyed and their crews devoured. Odysseus' own ship escapes and proceeds to the island of Aeaea, where the goddess Circe transforms Odysseus' men into swine. After Circe releases his men from the spell, Odysseus spends a year with her. He longs, however, to return to Ithaca. Odysseus sails to the land of the dead, where the ghost of the blind prophet Tiresias \[\text{tī-rē'sē-as}\] tells him what he must do to reach home. Before setting sail for Ithaca, Odysseus returns briefly to Circe's island. She warns him of the dangers that lie ahead, and Odysseus tells his men what Circe has predicted.

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne, and on the first rays Circe left me, taking her way like a great goddess up the island. I made straight for the ship, roused up the men to get aboard and cast off at the stern. They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks and all in line dipped oars in the gray sea. But soon an offshore breeze blew to our liking—a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair. So we made fast the braces, and we rested, letting the wind and steersman work the ship. The crew being now silent before me, I addressed them, sore at heart:

'Dear friends, more than one man, or two, should know those things Circe foresaw for us and shared with me, so let me tell her forecast: then we die with our eyes open, if we are going to die, or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens weaving a haunting song over the sea.'
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
al\nall sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
alone should listen to their song. Therefore
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.'

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.
Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
came over all the sea, as though some power
fulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios," lord of high noon. Going forward
I carried wax along the line, and laid it
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang:

'This way, oh turn your bows,
Achaea's glory,
As all the world allows—
Moor and be merry.

Sweet coupled airs we sing.

No lonely seafarer
Holds clear of entering
Our green mirror.

Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining
From her throat and my throat.
Who lies a-pining?
Sea rovers here take joy
   Voyaging onward,
As from our song of Troy
Graybeard and rower-boy
   Goeth more learned.

All feats on that great field
   In the long warfare,
Dark days the bright gods willed,
   Wounds you bore there.

Argos' old soldiery
   On Troy beach teeming,
Charmed out of time we see.
   No life on earth can be
    Hid from our dreaming.'

570

575

577. Argos' old soldiery: the soldiers from Argos, a city in ancient Greece, who fought in the Trojan War.

580
The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water made me crave to listen, and I tried to say 'Untie me!' to the crew, jerking my brows; but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes got to his feet, he and Eurylochus, and passed more line about, to hold me still. So all rowed on, until the Sirens dropped under the sea rim, and their singing dwindled away.

My faithful company rested on their oars now, peeling off the wax that I had laid thick on their ears; then set me free.
Scylla and Charybdis

Circe has warned Odysseus of another sea peril. He and his crew must pass between Scylla (sīl′ə-s) and Charybdis (kā-rōb′dīs). Scylla is a terrifying monster with six heads. She dwells in a high rocky cave, devouring sailors in ships that pass close by. Charybdis is a whirlpool. Three times a day she swallows the sea, then vomits it up fiery hot. Circe has advised Odysseus to sail toward Scylla’s crag, for it is better to lose six of his men—one to each of her heads—than for all to perish in the whirlpool.

But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air than I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.
Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
with no oarblades to drive her through the water.

Well. I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
every oarsman, saying gently,

‘Friends,
have we never been in danger before this?
More fearsome is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits
to find a way out for us?

Now I say
by hook or crook this peril too shall be
something that we remember.

Heads up, lads!
We must obey the orders as I give them.
Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back
hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.
Zeus help us pull away before we founder.
You at the tiller, listen, and take in
all that I say—the rudders are your duty;
keep her out of the combers and the smoke;
steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we
fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’
That was all, and it brought them round to action. But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I told them nothing, as they could do nothing. They would have dropped their oars again, in panic, to roll for cover under the deck. Circe's bidding against arms had slipped my mind, so I tied on my cuirass⁶ and took up two heavy spears, then made my way along to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there, the monster of the gray rock, harboring torment for my friends. I strained my eyes upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

⁶ cuirass (kwi-ras'): armor for the chest and back.
And all this time, in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire gorge of the salt-sea tide. By heaven! when she vomited, all the sea was like a caldron seething over intense fire, when the mixture suddenly heaves and rises.

The shot spume soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

But when she swallowed the sea water down we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard the rock bellowing all around, and dark sand raged on the bottom far below. My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike, whisking six of my best men from the ship. I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling high overhead. Voices came down to me in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

A man surf-casting on a point of rock for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod to drop the sinker and the bait far out, will hook a fish and rip it from the surface to dangle wriggling through the air:

so these were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den, in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—and deathly pity ran me through at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered, questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on.

The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too, and Scylla dropped astern.

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The Cattle of the Sun God

Odysseus urges his exhausted crew to bypass Thrinacia (θρίν-α'sha), the island of the sun god. The men, however, insist on landing. Odysseus makes them swear not to touch the god's cattle, for both Circe and Tiresias have warned him of disaster if the cattle are harmed.

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars that shone out in the first dusk of evening had gone down to their setting, a giant wind blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus shrouded land and sea in a night of storm; so just as Dawn with fingertips of rose touched the windy world, we dragged our ship to cover in a grotto, a sea cave where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors. I mustered all the crew and said:

'Old shipmates, our stores are in the ship's hold, food and drink; the cattle here are not for our provision, or we pay dearly for it.

Fierce the god is who cherishes these heifers and these sheep: Helios; and no man avoids his eye.'

To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now we had a month of onshore gales, blowing day in, day out—south winds, or south by east. As long as bread and good red wine remained to keep the men up, and appease their craving, they would not touch the cattle. But in the end, when all the barley in the ship was gone, hunger drove them to scour the wild shore with angling hooks, for fishes and seafowl, whatever fell into their hands; and lean days wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.

So one day I withdrew to the interior to pray the gods in solitude, for hope that one might show me some way of salvation. Slipping away, I struck across the island to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.
made his insidious plea:

‘Will you fight it?
Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
if ever that day comes—
we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.’

But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

Now on the shore Eurylochus
made his insidious plea:

‘Comrades,’ he said,
‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say.
All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,
but famine is the most pitiful, the worst
end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?
Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
if ever that day comes—
we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.’

But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

I washed my hands there, and made supplication
to the gods who own Olympus, all the gods—but
they, for answer, only closed my eyes
under slow drops of sleep.

697. **Olympus** [o-lim’pas]: Mount Olympus, believed to be the home of the gods.
Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured 'Aye!'
trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.
They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
having no barley meal—to strew the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine°
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,
with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.
Then, as they had no wine, they made libation°
with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

lust then my slumber
left me in a rush, my eyes opened,
and I went down the seaward path. No sooner
had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory
odors of burnt fat eddied around me;
grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:
'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, 
you made me sleep away this day of mischief! 
O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour! 
Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.'

Lampetia’ in her long gown meanwhile 
had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon: 
‘They have killed your kine.’

And the Lord Helios 
burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, 
punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening, 
now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy 
at morning when I climbed the sky of stars, 
and evening, when I bore westward from heaven. 
Restitution or penalty they shall pay— 
and pay in full—or I go down forever 
to light the dead men in the underworld.’

Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud made reply:

‘Peace, Helios: shine on among the gods, 
shine over mortals in the fields of grain. 
Let me throw down one white hot bolt, and make 
splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.’

—Calypso later told me of this exchange, 
as she declared that Hermes’ had told her.

Well, when I reached the sea cave and the ship, 
I faced each man, and had it out; but where 
could any remedy be found? There was none. 
The silken beeves of Helios were dead. 
The gods, moreover, made queer signs appear: 
cowhides began to crawl, and beef, both raw 
and roasted, lowed like kine upon the spits.

Now six full days my gallant crew could feast 
upon the prime beef they had marked for slaughter 
from Helios’ herd; and Zeus, the son of Cronus,’ 
added one fine morning.

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All the gales had ceased, blown out, and with an offshore breeze we launched again, stepping the mast and sail, to make for the open sea. Astern of us the island coastline faded, and no land showed anywhere, but only sea and heaven, when Zeus Cronion piled a thunderhead above the ship, while gloom spread on the ocean. We held our course, but briefly. Then the squall struck whining from the west, with gale force, breaking both forestays, and the mast came toppling aft along the ship's length, so the running rigging showered into the bilge.

On the afterdeck the mast had hit the steersman a slant blow hashing the skull in, knocking him overside, as the brave soul fled the body, like a diver. With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly a bolt against the ship, a direct hit, so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulfur, and all the men were flung into the sea. They came up round the wreck, bobbing awhile like petrels on the waves.

No more seafaring homeward for these, no sweet day of return; the god had turned his face from them.

I clambered fore and aft my hulk until a comber split her, keel from ribs, and the big timber floated free; the mast, too, broke away. A backstay floated dangling from it, stout rawhide rope, and I used this for lashing mast and keel together. These I straddled, riding the frightful storm.

Nor had I yet seen the worst of it: for now the west wind dropped, and a southeast gale came on—one more twist of the knife—taking me north again, straight for Charybdis. All that night I drifted, and in the sunrise, sure enough, I lay off Scylla mountain and Charybdis deep. There, as the whirlpool drank the tide, a billow tossed me, and I sprang for the great fig tree,

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catching on like a bat under a bough. 
Nowhere had I to stand, no way of climbing, 
the root and bole\(^c\) being far below, and far 
above my head the branches and their leaves, 
massed, overshadowing Charybdis pool. 
But I clung grimly, thinking my mast and keel 
would come back to the surface when she spouted. 
And ah! how long, with what desire, I waited! 
till, at the twilight hour, when one who hears 
and judges pleas in the marketplace all day 
between contentious men, goes home to supper, 
the long poles at last reared from the sea.

Now I let go with hands and feet, plunging 
straight into the foam beside the timbers, 
pulled astride, and rowed hard with my hands 
to pass by Scylla. Never could I have passed her 
had not the Father of gods and men,\(^b\) this time, 
kept me from her eyes. Once through the strait, 
nine days I drifted in the open sea 
before I made shore, buoyed up by the gods, 
upon Ogygia\(^c\) Isle. The dangerous nymph 
Calypso lives and sings there, in her beauty, 
and she received me, loved me.

But why tell 
the same tale that I told last night in hall 
to you and to your lady? Those adventures 
made a long evening, and I do not hold 
with tiresome repetition of a story.”

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Odysseus maneuvers his men safely past 
the Sirens while he alone listens to their song. 
How do the Sirens tempt him?
2. Faced with a choice between Scylla and 
Charybdis, Odysseus does as Circe advises 
and chooses Scylla. He knows that six of his 
men will die, yet he withholds this information 
from his crew. Is this a strength or weakness 
in his character? Explain.
3. Consider each of the episodes you have 
read so far. How well does Odysseus control 
his men in each episode? How effective and 
responsible is he as a leader? Cite specific 
lines to support your answer.
4. Before Odysseus’ men feast on the cattle of 
the sun god, they perform a ritual of sacrifice 
to the gods. Why does the ritual fail to please 
the gods? How are the men punished?
5. Odysseus alone survives. How is he aided 
by Zeus?
PART 2 ODYSSEUS IN ITHACA

Father and Son

After hearing the story of Odysseus' wanderings, the king of Phaeacia offers him a boat and crew to take him home to Ithaca. Thus Odysseus returns to his own land after an absence of twenty years.

The goddess Athena appears to Odysseus and tells him to proceed cautiously. Believing that he is dead, many suitors have besieged his palace, eager to marry his beautiful wife, Penelope. Penelope does not believe that Odysseus is dead, but she is unable to make the suitors leave. They remain in Ithaca, eating and drinking at her expense. They are even plotting to murder her son, Telemachus (tə-lem'ə-kəs), before he is old enough to inherit his father's lands. Telemachus, who hopes for his father's return, has gone to Sparta to ask for news of him.

Athena disguises Odysseus as a ragged old beggar and sends him to the hut of Eumaeus (yoo'-mē'-əs), an old and loyal swineherd. She then directs Telemachus to return to Ithaca and tells Odysseus that it is time to reveal his identity to his son.

... From the air

she walked, taking the form of a tall woman,

handsome and clever at her craft, and stood

beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus,

unseen, though, by Telemachus, unguessed,

for not to everyone will gods appear.

Odysseus noticed her; so did the dogs,

who cowered whimpering away from her. She only

nodded, signing to him with her brows,

a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard,

she passed out through the gate in the stockade

to face the goddess. There she said to him:

Son of Laertes and the gods of old,

Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,

dissemble to your son no longer now.

The time has come: tell him how you together

will bring doom on the suitors in the town.

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I shall not be far distant then, for I myself desire battle."

Saying no more, she tipped her golden wand upon the man, making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him, ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard no longer gray upon his chin. And she withdrew when she had done.

Then Lord Odysseus reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck. Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away as though it were a god, and whispered:

"Stranger, you are no longer what you were just now! Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven! Be kind to us, we'll make you fair oblation and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!"

866. oblation: an offering to a god.
The noble and enduring man replied:

"No god. Why take me for a god? No, no.
I am that father whom your boyhood lacked
and suffered pain for lack of. I am he."

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks
as he embraced his son.

Only Telemachus,
uncomprehending, wild
with incredulity, cried out:

"You cannot
be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits
conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!
No man of woman born could work these wonders
by his own craft, unless a god came into it
with ease to turn him young or old at will.
I swear you were in rags and old,
and here you stand like one of the immortals!"

Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear
and said:

"This is not princely, to be swept
away by wonder at your father's presence.
No other Odysseus will ever come.
for he and I are one, the same; his bitter
fortune and his wanderings are mine.
Twenty years gone, and I am back again
on my own island.

As for my change of skin,
that is a charm Athena, Hope of Soldiers,
uses as she will; she has the knack
to make me seem a beggar man sometimes
and sometimes young, with finer clothes about me.
It is no hard thing for the gods of heaven
to glorify a man or bring him low."

When he had spoken, down he sat.

Then, throwing
his arms around this marvel of a father
Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears
rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.
So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
and might have gone on weeping so till sundown.
had not Telemachus said:

"Dear father! Tell me
what kind of vessel put you here ashore
on Ithaca? Your sailors, who were they?
I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!"

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea:

"Only plain truth shall I tell you, child.
Great seafarers, the Phaeacians, gave me passage
as they give other wanderers. By night
over the open ocean, while I slept,
they brought me in their cutter, set me down
on Ithaca, with gifts of bronze and gold
and stores of woven things. By the gods' will
these lie all hidden in a cave. I came
to this wild place, directed by Athena,
so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies.
Count up the suitors for me, let me know
what men at arms are there, how many men.
I must put all my mind to it, to see
if we two by ourselves can take them on
or if we should look round for help."

Telemachus replied:

"O Father, all my life your fame
as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—
your skill with weapons and the tricks of war—
but what you speak of is a staggering thing,
beyond imagining, for me. How can two men
do battle with a houseful in their prime?
For I must tell you this is no affair
of ten or even twice ten men, but scores,
throng of them. You shall see, here and now.
The number from Dulichium alone
is fifty-two, picked men, with armorers,
a half-dozen; twenty-four came from Same,
twenty from Zacynthus; our own island
accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers,
Medon the crier, and the Master Harper, besides a pair of handymen at feasts. If we go in against all these I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance. You must think hard if you would conjure up the fighting strength to take us through."

Odysseus who had endured the long war and the sea answered:

‘I’ll tell you now. Suppose Athena’s arm is over us, and Zeus her father’s, must I rack my brains for more?’
Clearheaded Telemachus looked hard and said:  
"Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it,  
but throned in the serene clouds overhead;  
other affairs of men and gods they have  
to rule over."

And the hero answered:

"Before long they will stand to right and left of us  
in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—  
our nerve against the suitors' in my hall.  
Here is your part: At break of day tomorrow  
home with you, go mingle with our princes.  
The swineherd later on will take me down  
the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks,  
hangdog and old. If they make fun of me  
in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up  
your springing heart, no matter what I suffer,  
no matter if they pull me by the heels  
or practice shots at me, to drive me out.  
Look on, hold down your anger. You may even  
plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms  
to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you,  
rash as they are, facing their day of wrath.  
Now fix the next step in your mind.  

Athena,  
counseling me, will give me word, and I  
shall signal to you, nodding: at that point  
round up all armor, lances, gear of war  
left in our hall, and stow the lot away  
back in the vaulted storeroom. When the suitors  
miss those arms and question you, be soft  
in what you say—answer:  

'I thought I'd move them  
out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those  
bright arms Odysseus left us years ago  
when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire's  
hot breath came, they had grown black and drear.  
One better reason, too, I had from Zeus:  
Suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk,  
you might be crazed and bloody one another,  
and that would stain your feast, your courtship.  
Tempered  
iron can magnetize a man.

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Say that.

But put aside two broadswords and two spears for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby when we go into action. Pallas Athena and Zeus All-Provident will see you through, bemusing our young friends.

Now one thing more.

If son of mine you are and blood of mine, let no one hear Odysseus is about.

Neither Laertes, nor the swineherd here, nor any slave, nor even Penelope.

But you and I alone must learn how far the women are corrupted; we should know how to locate good men among our hands, the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers who take you lightly, as alone and young.”

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What makes Telemachus think that Odysseus must be a god? How does Odysseus convince Telemachus that he is his father?
2. Telemachus warns Odysseus that there are far too many suitors for the two of them to fight. How does Odysseus persuade Telemachus that they can win?
3. Odysseus outlines his plan in lines 958–990. What is Telemachus’ part in the plan?
4. Why does Odysseus want to keep his return a secret?
The Suitors

The next day, disguised once more as a beggar, Odysseus enters the hall of his home and passes among the suitors to beg. Antinous [án-tin’ó-as], the most arrogant and outspoken of the suitors, breaks into a rage.

But here Antinous broke in, shouting:

``God!
What evil wind blew in this pest?
Get over, stand in the passage! Nudge my table, will you?
Egyptian whips are sweet
to what you’ll come to here, you nosing rat,
making your pitch to everyone!
These men have bread to throw away on you
because it is not theirs. Who cares? Who spares
another’s food, when he has more than plenty?''

With guile Odysseus drew away, then said:

``A pity that you have more looks than heart.
You’d grudge a pinch of salt from your own larder
to your own handyman. You sit here, fat
on others’ meat, and cannot bring yourself
to rummage out a crust of bread for me!''

Then anger made Antinous’ heart beat hard,
and, glowering under his brows, he answered:

``Now!
You think you’ll shuffle off and get away
after that impudence? Oh, no you don’t!''

The stool he let fly hit the man’s right shoulder
on the packed muscle under the shoulder blade—
like solid rock, for all the effect one saw.
Odysseus only shook his head, containing
thoughts of bloody work, as he walked on,
then sat, and dropped his loaded bag again
upon the doorsill. Facing the whole crowd
he said, and eyed them all:

``One word only,
my lords, and suitors of the famous queen.

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One thing I have to say.

There is no pain, no burden for the heart
when blows come to a man, and he defending
his own cattle—his own cows and lambs.
Here it was otherwise. Antinous
hit me for being driven on by hunger—
how many bitter seas men cross for hunger!
If beggars interest the gods, if there are Furies°
pent in the dark to avenge a poor man's wrong, then
may
Antinous meet his death before his wedding day!''

Then said Eupeithes' son, Antinous:

"Enough.

Eat and be quiet where you are, or shamble elsewhere,
unless you want these lads to stop your mouth
pulling you by the heels, or hands and feet,
over the whole floor, till your back is peeled!"

---

1030. Furies: three goddesses who punished those crimes that went unavenged.
But now the rest were mortified, and someone
spoke from the crowd of young bucks to rebuke him:

"A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—
had business, if he happened to be a god.
You know they go in foreign guise, the gods do,
looking like strangers, turning up
in towns and settlements to keep an eye
on manners, good or bad."

Antinous only shrugged.

But at this notion
Telemachus,
after the blow his father bore, sat still
without a tear, though his heart felt the blow.
Slowly he shook his head from side to side,
containing murderous thoughts.

Penelope
on the higher level of her room had heard
the blow, and knew who gave it. Now she murmured:
"Would god you could be hit yourself, Antinous—hit by Apollo's bowshot!"

And Eurymone,°

her housekeeper, put in:

"He and no other?
If all we pray for came to pass, not one
would live till dawn!"

Her gentle mistress said:

"Oh, Nan, they are a bad lot; they intend
ruin for all of us; but Antinous
appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.
Here is a poor man come, a wanderer,
driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone
in hall gave bits, to cram his bag—only
Antinous threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!"

So she described it, sitting in her chamber
among her maids—while her true lord was eating.
Then she called in the forester and said:

"Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaeus,
and send him here, so I can greet and question him.
Abroad in the great world, he may have heard
rumors about Odysseus—may have known him!"
Penelope

Later that night Penelope meets secretly with the old beggar. She asks him if he has heard any news of her husband.

“Friend, let me ask you first of all: who are you, where do you come from, of what nation and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world should have a fault to find with you. Your name has gone out under heaven like the sweet honor of some god-fearing king, who rules in equity over the strong: his back lands bear both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright, new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy, so that his folk fare well.
O my dear lady, this being so, let it suffice to ask me of other matters—not my blood, my homeland. Do not enforce me to recall my pain. My heart is sore; but I must not be found sitting in tears here, in another's house: it is not well forever to be grieving. One of the maids might say—or you might think—I had got maudlin over cups of wine."

And Penelope replied:

"Stranger, my looks, my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy, Odysseus my lord among the rest. If he returned, if he were here to care for me, I might be happily renowned! But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain. Sons of the noblest families on the islands, Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus, with native Ithacans, are here to court me, against my wish; and they consume this house. Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant or herald on the realm's affairs? How could I? wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here they press for marriage.

Ruses served my turn to draw the time out—first a close-grained web I had the happy thought to set up weaving on my big loom in hall. I said, that day: 'Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead, let me finish my weaving before I marry, or else my thread will have been spun in vain. It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier. The country wives would hold me in dishonor if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.' I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed. So every day I wove on the great loom, but every night by torchlight I unwove it; and so for three years I deceived the Achaeans. But when the seasons brought a fourth year on,
as long months waned, and the long days were spent, through imprudent folly in the slinking maids they caught me—clamored up to me at night; I had no choice then but to finish it. And now, as matters stand at last, I have no strength left to evade a marriage, cannot find any further way; my parents urge it upon me, and my son will not stand by while they eat up his property. He comprehends it, being a man full-grown, able to oversee the kind of house Zeus would endow with honor.

But you too confide in me, tell me your ancestry. You were not born of mythical oak or stone."

The beggar invents a tale of how he had seen Odysseus twenty years ago in Crete, when Odysseus was bound for Troy. He convinces Penelope that the story is true by describing Odysseus' clothes in detail. Then he tells her he has heard that Odysseus is about to set sail for Ithaca.

"You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed homeward now, no more to be abroad far from his island, his dear wife and son. Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this, god of the zenith," noblest of the gods, and Lord Odysseus' hearthfire, now before me: I swear these things shall turn out as I say. Between this present dark and one day's ebb, after the wane, before the crescent moon, Odysseus will come."

**FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

1. A number of years have passed since Odysseus' adventure with the Cyclops. How has Odysseus changed?
2. Penelope represents characteristics that the Greeks admired in women. What qualities does she reveal about herself in her discussion with her housekeeper (lines 1065–1071)? In her interview with the beggar? How was she able to trick the suitors for three years? What does this ruse show about her?
3. The scene in which Penelope meets her husband Odysseus disguised as a beggar is an example of *dramatic irony*, for the reader knows something that Penelope does not know. Why do you think Odysseus keeps his identity a secret from his wife?
The Challenge

The suitors summon Penelope to the hall and demand that she choose one of them at once. Penelope announces a challenge: she will marry whoever can string Odysseus’ great bow and shoot an arrow through a row of twelve ax-handle sockets, as Odysseus used to do. One by one the suitors try but fail to even bend the bow. The old beggar then asks for a turn. The suitors protest until both Penelope and Telemachus insist that he be given the bow.

... And Odysseus took his time, turning the bow, tapping it, every inch, for borings that termites might have made while the master of the weapon was abroad. The suitors were now watching him, and some jested among themselves:

"A bow lover!"
“Dealer in old bows!”

“Maybe he has one like it at home!”

“Or has an itch to make one for himself.”

“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”

And one disdainful suitor added this:

“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!”

But the man skilled in all ways of contending, satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft, like a musician, like a harper, when with quiet hand upon his instrument he draws between his thumb and forefinger a sweet new string upon a peg; so effortlessly Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.

Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it, so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang a swallow’s note.

In the hushed hall it smote the suitors and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered overhead, one loud crack for a sign.

And Odysseus laughed within him that the son of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down. He picked one ready arrow from his table where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still in the quiver for the young men’s turn to come.

He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip, and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow, aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle through every socket ring, and grazed not one, to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly Odysseus said:

“Telemachus, the stranger you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you. I did not miss, neither did I take all day.

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stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound, 
not so contemptible as the young men say. 
The hour has come to cook their lordships' mutton—
supper by daylight. Other amusements later, 
with song and harping that adorn a feast.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus, 
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear, 
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze 
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.
Odysseus’ Revenge

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands
leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in
his hand.
He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the
quiver
and spoke to the crowd:

“So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.
Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,
if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow
for Antinous
just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful
drinking cup,
embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his
fingers:
the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of
death?
How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of
friends
who would imagine a single foe – though a strong foe
indeed –
could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness
on his eyes?
Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin
and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted
crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,
and one last kick upset his table
knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.
Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay
the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,
everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned
the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,
not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take
and throw.
All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:

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"Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!"

"Your own throat will be slit for this!"

"Our finest lad is down!
You killed the best on Ithaca."

"Buzzards will tear your eyes out!"

For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot, an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend they were already in the grip of death. But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

"You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder.

. . . You dared bid for my wife while I was still alive.

Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven, contempt for what men say of you hereafter. Your last hour has come. You die in blood."

As they all took this in, sickly green fear pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered looking for some hatch or hideaway from death. Eurymachus’ alone could speak. He said:

"If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back, all that you say these men have done is true. Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside. But here he lies, the man who caused them all. Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on to do these things. He cared less for a marriage than for the power Cronion has denied him as king of Ithaca. For that he tried to trap your son and would have killed him. He is dead now and has his portion. Spare your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make restitution of wine and meat consumed, and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart. Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger."

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Odysseus glowered under his black brows and said:

"Not for the whole treasure of your fathers, all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold put up by others, would I hold my hand. There will be killing till the score is paid. You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out, or run for it, if you think you'll escape death. I doubt one man of you skins by."

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard Eurymachus for the last time rallying them.

"Friends," he said, "the man is implacable. Now that he's got his hands on bow and quiver he'll shoot from the big doorstone there until he kills us to the last man.

Fight, I say, let's remember the joy of it. Swords out! Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows."
After me, everyone: rush him where he stands.
If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass into the town, we'll call out men to chase him.
This fellow with his bow will shoot no more.

He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine bronze, honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and loud he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in his liver.
The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell aside, pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat, were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed on the ground. Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out, he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist closed on his eyes.
Amphinomus now came running at Odysseus, broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make the great soldier give way at the door. But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit him between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell forward, thudding, forehead against the ground. Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long dark spear planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with a sword at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the tables to his father's side and halted, panting, saying:

"Father let me bring you a shield and spear, a pair of spears, a helmet. I can arm on the run myself; I'll give outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd. Better to have equipment."

Said Odysseus:

"Run then, while I hold them off with arrows as long as the arrows last. When all are gone if I'm alone they can dislodge me."

Quick upon his father's word Telemachus ran to the room where spears and armor lay. He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears, four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes, and ran back, loaded down, to his father's side. He was the first to pull a helmet on and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap. The servants armed themselves, and all three took their stand beside the master of battle.

While he had arrows he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down one of his huddling enemies. But when all barbs had flown from the bowman's fist, he leaned his bow in the bright entryway.
beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm, horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head, then took his tough and bronze-shod spears . . .

Odysseus, Telemachus, and the two faithful servants kill every suitor. Several times Athena saves Odysseus' life by turning aside the suitors' deadly blows.

And Odysseus looked around him, narrow-eyed, for any others who had lain hidden while death's black fury passed.

In blood and dust he saw that crowd all fallen, many and many slain.

Think of a catch that fishermen haul in to a half-moon bay in a fine-meshed net from the whitecaps of the sea: how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for the salt sea, twitching their cold lives away in Helios' fiery air: so lay the suitors heaped on one another.

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. At what point in this episode does Odysseus reveal his identity to the suitors?
2. Eurymachus tries to convince Odysseus to spare the suitors' lives. Restate his arguments in your own words. What reason does Odysseus give for refusing?
3. Do you think Odysseus' revenge is excessive? Give reasons for your opinion.
4. Why are the stringing of Odysseus' bow and the slaying of the suitors considered the climax of the Odyssey?
Penelope Tests Odysseus

After twenty years of waiting for Odysseus, Penelope hesitates to acknowledge the stranger as her husband. She tests him with a secret only Odysseus could know.

Greathearted Odysseus, home at last, was being bathed now by Eurynome and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair in curls like petals of wild hyacinth but all red-golden. Think of gold infused on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art Hephaestus taught him, or Athena—one whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished beauty over Odysseus’ head and shoulders. He sat then in the same chair by the pillar, facing his silent wife, and said:

"Strange woman, the immortals of Olympus made you hard, harder than any. Who else in the world would keep aloof as you do from her husband if he returned to her from years of trouble, cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast."

Penelope spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

"Strange man, if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely. I know so well how you—how he—appeared boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia. Place it outside the bedchamber my lord built with his own hands. Pile the big bed with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen."

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With this she tried him to the breaking point, and he turned on her in a flash raging:

"Woman, by heaven you've stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?
No builder had the skill for that—unless
a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar. There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else's!

An old trunk of olive
grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors. Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest. I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There's our sign!
I know no more. Could someone else's hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?"

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
murmuring:

"Do not rage at me, Odysseus!
No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together. Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,
impostors who might come—and all those many
whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .

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But here and now, what sign could be so clear as this of our own bed?
No other man has ever laid eyes on it—only my own slave, Actoris, that my father sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache of longing mounted, and he wept at last, his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms, longed for as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer spent in rough water where his ship went down under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea. Few men can keep alive through a big surf to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind: and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband, her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

Postscript

The following morning Odysseus and Telemachus set out for the country estate of Laertes, Odysseus' father. Their happy reunion is interrupted by the arrival of angry relatives of the slain suitors, armed for battle. Athena appears and commands them to make peace. So ends the Odyssey, with Odysseus restored to his family and to his kingdom.

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does Penelope imply by the phrase “if man you are” in line 1356?
2. What test does Penelope devise to tell whether the stranger is really Odysseus?
3. How does Penelope show that she and Odysseus are well-matched?

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPIC

Homeric Simile
As you know, a simile is a comparison of two dissimilar actions or objects that are usually linked by like, as, or some other connecting word. A Homeric simile is an extended comparison of two actions or objects that develops
mounting excitement and usually ends in a climax. In this passage, Scylla seizing Odysseus' men is compared to a fisherman landing a fish:

A man surf-casting on a point of rock for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod to drop the sinker and the bait far out, will hook a fish and rip it from the surface to dangle wriggling through the air:

so these were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

Notice how the simile is extended by describing the actions of a fisherman and the parallel actions of the monster. How does Homer's choice of details make the action rise in excitement?

Look at the simile Homer uses to describe Odysseus' stringing of the bow (lines 1166—1170). Why is this simile strikingly effective?

Find other examples of Homeric similes and tell how the comparisons make the actions more vivid and gripping.

The Epithet

Like the extended simile, the epithet is a favorite device of the ancient epic poets. An epithet is a word or phrase used to characterize someone or something, as in "the wine-dark sea." Homer refers to Odysseus as "raider of cities," "the wiliest fighter of the islands," and "Laertes' son." The gods and goddesses are often identified by epithets. Zeus, for example, is called "Father of gods and men," "god of the zenith," "the lord of cloud," and "All Provident." Find other epithets Homer uses in the Odyssey.

FOR COMPOSITION

Analyzing Odysseus as Epic Hero

In the opening lines of this translation of the Odyssey, Odysseus describes himself as "formidable for guile in peace and war." Do you think Odysseus characterizes himself accurately? Why or why not?

The hero of an epic is generally larger than life. He is stronger, braver, and more clever than the other characters. Sometimes his powers are superhuman. Write a brief composition in which you analyze Odysseus as an epic hero. Use evidence from the poem to support your analysis.

Analyzing the Role of the Olympians

In Homer's epics the Olympian gods and goddesses frequently intervene in human affairs. In the Iliad, they join the battle of the Greeks and the Trojans on the plains outside Troy. They take sides: Athena and Hera fight for the Greeks, Apollo and Aphrodite for the Trojans. The gods intervene in several ways—by starting arguments, by shielding warriors, or by changing the course of an arrow.

How do the gods and goddesses affect the action of the Odyssey? Choose several episodes that illustrate divine intervention and tell in a brief composition the motives for these interventions and their consequences.