



The Odyssey: A Deeper Appreciation

Curriculum Unit 83.02.01

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Introduction

Heroes, horrors, divine interventions, human imperfections, the tug and pull of yearning for home and adventuring away from home combine to give *The Odyssey* elemental appeal to students of varying ages. And the breadth of this epic poem, the genius of its rhapsode, can best be seen by the timeless interest of students who follow the 'long-tried, royal' Ithacan as he struggles from Troy to home

while a student of less than average reading ability can enjoy the basic story, *The Odyssey* can be appreciated for more than the narrative by a ninth grade class of college level aptitude. And for any class reading a story of twenty-four books, a variety of activities offers diversion and interest.

Should not a student have a nodding acquaintance with the geography of the Mediterranean? For here is the world of Homer, the site of Troy, the island of Ithaca, and the conjectural landfalls of Odysseus and his crew.

Should not a student research the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Hisarlik and Mycenae? For the Greeks were at war in the ever volatile Near East and at home in the Peloponnesus.

Should not a student examine pictures of artifacts and relate what has been found to what has been read?

For here may be seen gold cups, tripods, and bronze swords inlaid with silver and ivory, the kinds of guest gifts a king might confer upon the stranger at his door.

Should not a student know the hierarchy of Greek gods and goddesses? For here is a civilization that offers libations to the gods, believes in intervention by them, and abides by advice and auguries from the gods. In short, one hopes that his class is temporarily but totally immersed in the period c. 1200-700 B.C., the age of Homeric culture.

General Objectives

The primary objective, then, is reading this epic poem and understanding its narrative element. This objective would be the same for all levels of students. And, although this unit relates to the teaching of this poem to upper level classes, one may note the Globe translations of the classics for students reading below grade level.

The secondary objective, 'total immersion' in the spirit of the age, is no less important and gives the student a deeper appreciation. What I hope to achieve is a balance and compatibility between the actual reading of the poem and activities which enhance and reinforce its meaning. In their subsequent high school years most college bound ninth graders will be asked to read outstanding literature. So much of this literature includes references to classical mythology because authors of this literature learned Latin and Greek or read popular translations of myths. For example, easy, cross-references may be made by the teacher of English between some of Shakespeare's plays and mythology. Ninth graders who read *Romeo and Juliet* may be referred to Ovid's *Pyramus and This be*. Upper class-men who read *King Lear* will note the common story pattern shared by it and *Oedipus at Colonus*. And the class which reads *The Odyssey* may draw ironic parallels between it and *Agamemnon*.

Specific Objectives

The reading of this story offers the teaches an opportunity to hone the skills of his class in the following areas:

1. vocabulary—Words particularly representative of myths may be selected from the text the student is using.
2. geography—The Journey of Odysseus may be traced so that the student learns the area of the Mediterranean.
3. memorization—The Greek gods and goddesses and their Roman counterparts should be learned.
4. oral reports—These afford the students an opportunity to develop poise and diction.
5. written reports—Students have to research places made famous in the story and classicists who continue to study the myths and the sites of the myths The students' reports should emphasize critical thinking.
6. outlining—Young high school students need practice in form and content. They usually cannot extract specific details general information.

Strategies

A teacher will note a natural, general division of the books in *The Odyssey* into two groups of twelve. The first twelve books deal with Odysseus away from home and the last twelve books with his return to Ithaca and his eventual reunion with Penelope

The first division may be read in three blocks of four books. Books are best assigned one at a time, but because the first book is replete with references which demand explanation, I believe it will take two days to complete. In the first several paragraphs, after an invocation to the Muse, one is drawn into a council on Mount Olympus, a reference to Aegisthus, and a plea by Athena for Odysseus. A student's question about any one of these necessarily spins off into references to the Trojan War, the judgment of Paris, the sons of Atreus. A teacher must be prepared to discuss these reference and to give abbreviated notes on the events leading up to *The Iliad* and narrated in that poem. Because of the difficulty for students in assimilating the myriad names and details in the first four books, it is a good idea to quiz briefly but often for details. (What is Ilium? Who is Clytemnestra? What is Mount Olympus? Who are the Atreidae?)

Early in the first week in which a class is reading, the teacher should devise a chart (1) of major gods and goddesses and their attributes and review it with his class. Then, at the end of this first block of Four books, I believe it is a good idea to quiz the class on the function of the gods and goddesses as well as their Greek and Roman names. This can be simply done by folding a paper vertically in quarters and by heading column with the words *Greek*, *Roman*, *Function*, and *Symbol* and staggering items in the various columns. For example, the students may be given as a function or attribute 'goddess of chastity' and complete the blank columns with Artemis, Diana, and crescent moon/stag. I believe that memorization is the first step to learning. This activity pulls together odd bits of information to which students have been exposed. And although few gods and goddesses appear in *The Odyssey*, they do figure in the preliminary discussion by the teacher and in the oral presentations of the students.

At the end of the reading of the first block of four books, the students will note with surprise that they have yet to meet the hero of this narrative epic. Book I clearly alludes to Odysseus who has suffered from overstepping the bounds of divine constraint. The Greek wanderer and his men have blinded the son of Poseidon, and Odysseus' surviving crew members have killed the cattle sacred to Helios, the god of the sun. And we are shown in Books II, III, and IV the dramatic contrast between the disorder in Ithaca at the absence of its ruler and the restoration of order in Pylos and Sparta at the return of Nestor and Menelaus.

But when the second block of books, five through eight, introduces the hero of the epic, Odysseus is pining on the shores of Ogygia, incredulous and wary at the announcement by Calypso that he is free to leave for home. Here is the crafty, mighty warrior, abject and crying. All of Odysseus' adventures do not compensate for his separation from hearth and home, from wife, from family. And so the social statement of the story, often overlooked because of the high interest and appeal of the narrative of adventure in Books IX-XII, becomes apparent. In *The Odyssey* we are to learn of a return to order deemed necessary by the gods and desired greatly by men, even a man who had attained the heroic stature of warrior extraordinaire.

Soon afterwards, however, Odysseus is thwarted by Poseidon again and finds himself on the island of the Phaeacians where, to King Alcinous and his household, he eventually relates the story of wandering and hardship from the time he left Troy some ten years past.

It is the third block of books, books nine through twelve, which contains the narration by Odysseus of his

journey, that fascinates students most. They have heard, seen, or read, somewhere, of the Cyclops or the Sirens, but they are surprised to discover how these stories originate in the text. In fact, the flashback narration becomes so engrossing that they are apt to forget that it is a flashback and that *The Odyssey*, itself, encompasses only the last five or six weeks in Odysseus' twentieth year away from home.

It is at this juncture in the reading of the text that an activity may be introduced which supports deeper appreciation. An outline map of the Mediterranean may be given to each student, who is asked to carry it to class for several days. The teacher should help the students orient themselves to familiar land masses or seas and then begin to plot the wanderings of Odysseus. I have become so fascinated by Ernle Bradford's conjectural journey for Odysseus that I use his text, *Ulysses Found*, to trace that journey. Bradford has used a contemporary maritime guide, the Admiralty Pilot, along with Homeric descriptions in the text, to sail the Mediterranean himself. He takes into account winds, currents, and sailing speed to approximate each landfall. With this recent work in hand and a blank map, students get diversion from the text and become acquainted with the Mediterranean world.

With this third block of books I also ask the students to outline books nine, ten, and twelve. (I outline book eleven for them on the board to include the details I think they should remember and to reiterate correct outline form.) The symmetry of the events in the journey becomes apparent, the actual trip is learned more easily, and a skill-building activity is encouraged.

The end of Odysseus' narration is a good place to stop and to test the students on the material in the first half of the epic. Also, the natural division here between Odysseus' absence from home and his return to home seems a good place to pause so that the teacher may assign topics for oral presentation drawn from a list of artifacts, sites, stories, and references relevant to the Homeric epics. I should like to have these subjects related to books of the poem or incidents in these books about which we read. One example is relating the restoration of Pylos to descriptions of Nestor's and Menelaus' palaces. I would encourage students to keep these topics within a time limit of three to five minutes and to use visual aids where possible. The listeners should take notes. Hence, several skills pertinent to the English class are used for this activity, and these reports certainly make the story of *The Odyssey* more meaningful. From the students the teacher will receive a written report from which the oral report has been given. It should be well-written and well-researched.

The second half of the epic, Odysseus' return to his homeland, is easier for students to read because there are fewer new characters and a single-minded purpose—Odysseus must make Ithaca safe for himself and his family by killing the suitors. These men in all their arrogance were introduced in books two and four, as were Telemachus and Penelope. Certainly the skill of the bard is evident even more now when the family principals of the story, at divergent places in the first books—Odysseus on Ogygia, Telemachus setting forth on his own special odyssey to Pylos and Sparta—now converge on Ithaca for the final, climactic, delayed reunion with the epitome of faithfulness, Penelope.

I believe a teacher may assign two books for each reading assignment from books thirteen to twenty-four. Unannounced quizzes should be given to students to be sure they are actually doing the reading. Sample questions may be: Who is the Earth Shaker? How is Penelope shown to be as wily as her husband? Who is the son of Cronus? Name a function of Hermes in the second half of the poem different from one in the first half. Who is the clear-eyed daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus? List several omens from the gods—e.g. Helen's and Theoclymenus' prophecies, Telemachus' sneeze, Penelope's dreams, the thunderclaps. These later quizzes should demand more recall from students now that they have read more from which to recall. I suggest quizzing at the very beginning of class on the day following discussion of the chapters whose material is used.

Throughout the actual day-to-day discussion of the readings, the students should keep a three by five card as a bookmark on which to jot down notes, new words(or comments. There should be some running vocabulary list kept in a student’s notebook for words unique to the text and mythology, in general. It is for the teacher to decide how to incorporate this vocabulary in the unit. It may be part of the unannounced quizzing os an eventual, separate spelling test. A sample vocabulary list is appended at the end of the unit.

Once the reading of the poem has been completed, the teacher and class are ready for the oral reports assigned earlier. A class of twenty-five students should finish these reports in a week. The teacher has to decide the criteria for judging the oral and written reports and has to be sure that the class is aware of these in advance. I suggest a ditto for each student from which to make his choice. The grade for this report should bc separate from the grade of the final test on the basic narrative of the poem.

The entire unit—reading of the text, charts, maps, reports—will probably take forty to forty-five days, a marking period.

Supplementary Material for the Teacher

The Vaphio cups should prove interesting to the student researcher because they predate the actual stories of *The Iliad* and its companion epic, *The Odyssey*. They depict the capture of wild bulls, are believed to be of Minoan craftsmanship, and were unearthed in Vaphio in southern Greece. They remind the reader not only of the elaborate tableware used by Menelaus and Alcinous but also of the typical guest gift. (2)

The Warrior Vase has illustrated upon it a line of soldiers outfitted for battle. They are wearing greaves, probably of linen, carrying spears and shields, and are helmeted in what appear to be boar’s tooth helmets. Because the vase is dated c. 1200 B.C., it is Quite contemporary with the events in the Homeric epics. The shape of the shield as seen on this vase is one of several believed to have been used at this time.(3) Another shape, that of a figure eight, is seen in the motif on the walls of the staircase in the living quarters of the palace at Knossos and shows the dominance of Mycenaean culture in Crete. Still another, the ‘Dipylon’ type, is pictured on a Late Geometric vase. (4)

The archaeological finds of Heinrich Schliemann eclipse any other attempt at suggesting the reality behind the myths. There is such a wealth of information about his major excavations at Troy and Mycenae that two students are needed to summarize these. The lifelong fascination, begun, says Schliemann, when he saw in his German text the picture of Aeneas carrying Anchises from the burning city of Troy, is just as compelling for most students today. (5)

Because Odysseus’ adventures are so intertwined with the sea, the ‘black-bowed ships’ (cf. Palmer translation) have a real, practical function in the story. Students will be interested to learn that they are black because they were probably covered with pitch to keep them watertight and wormproof. Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., mentions natural pools of pitch found on the island of Zacynthos (Zante) just twenty miles south of Ithaca. (6)

Research on the Trojan War gives completeness to the study of Homer. Although the teacher will have given some brief instruction on this topic just before the actual study of *The Odyssey*, students will get an opportunity to discover for themselves the many incidents which led, eventually, to Odysseus’ prolonged

journey home.

Hesiod's *The Theogony* will be of interest to all the students who want to know where the gods and goddesses came from. Here (the teacher may have to remind the student researcher of the civility, the order, that rested with and culminated in Zeus. Here, too, the students will note the apportionment of power and duties to other divinities like the Fates and the Muses.

The reading of Tennyson's poem, *Ulysses*, points out the high interest throughout literature of the epic and its hero. Tennyson's idealized treatment of Odysseus and his quest for adventure after his return home is highly individualized and quite different from Homer's concept. The older Odysseus, for Tennyson, is not content to rule forever at home but must ". . . seek a newer world" while Telemachus will inherit and maintain the stability of the kingdom. It is ironic that the good life for the younger man is the stability of rule while the older Odysseus seeks "newer worlds." Understanding the age in which Tennyson wrote, the majesty of England, the poet laureateship, one might assume political overtones for a country ". . . strong in will, to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The Odyssey: Reports

Assignment:

Choose one of the following topics in which you feel you may be interested. Write a two to three page report on the topic. Be ready to present a summary to the class.

Your written report should be well-organized and well-researched. Do not copy directly from a text. Use your own words in the best possible manner. List sources.

Your oral report should be succinct and well-organized.

Make an attempt to use visual aids. Do not read directly from your written paper but feel free to use notes.

Due Date

Written report (month and day)

Oral report (month and week)

Topics:

1. the Vaphio cups
2. Heinrich Schliemann (2 students)
 - a. site of Troy; artifacts
 - b. artifacts from Mycenae
3. Excavations at Pylos restoration of the Great Hall of the palace of Nestor
4. the Warrior Vase

5. a boar's tooth helmet (cf. drawing for lots and the epithet 'white-toothed boar')
6. a description of an Homeric sailing ship
7. *The Theogony of Hesiod*
8. Ulysses; *Alfred, Lord Tennyson*
9. Conjectural Journeys
 - a. Ernle Bradford
 - b. Victor Berard
10. the Muses
11. *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus
12. the Trojan War
 - a. the judgment of Paris
 - b. Agamemnon and Menelaus
 - c. Achilles and Patroclus
 - d. Hector, Aeneas, King Priam
 - e. the funeral games, Book XXIII, *The Iliad*
13. the Fates
14. Attic Vases Argos, Eleusis, and Aegina

The Odyssey: Vocabulary Enrichment

aegis: 1. shield 2. umbrella organization

hecatomb: oxen for sacrifice; lit. one hundred oxen

pyre: funeral mound with corpse which is burned

Mt. Olympus: site of the council of the gods

oracle: 1. place at which vague answers from gods were given to men by priests 2. answer given at oracle

nectar: drink of the gods

ambrosia: food of the gods

Elysian fields, place in Hades for deceased heroes

Tartarus: place in Hades for the damned

odyssey long, difficult journey

rhapsode: professional bard, singer, minstrel

Achaeans: Greeks, region of Achaea in the Peloponnesus

Argives: Greeks, region of Argolis

Danaans: Greeks, descendants of Danae

Homeric epithets(formulaic phrases designating qualities

Homeric similes: extended comparisons mainly of or pastoral nature

nether world, the underworld, Hades

libations: drink, generally wine, offered to the

caduceus: Hermes' staff, topped with wings and intertwined with snakes

prophecy: (noun): prediction

prophesy, prophesying, prophesied, prophesied: (v): to predict

arete: excellence, generally physical prowess

Contemporary Expressions Originating from the Text

to avoid Charybdis only to be devoured by Scylla

cyclopean

herculean

mentor

spartan

Aeolian harp

the face that launched a thousand ships

a temptress, a siren

he cannot bend Ulysses' bow

the threads of destiny

museum

caliope

Footnotes

1. James C. Head and Linda MacLea, *Myth and Meaning* , p. 13.

2 Sinclair Hood, *The Home of the Heroes: The Aegean before the Greeks* , pp. 101-104.

3 Donald E. Strong, *The Classical world* , pp. 30, 34.

4 J.V. Luce, *Homer and the Heroic Age* , pp. 112.

5 *Ibid.* , pp. 15-26.

6 Ernie Bradford, *Ulysses Found*, p. 18.

Books Recommended for Teachers

Boardman, John. *Greek Art*. New York, Washington, Frederick A. Praeger, 1964. A concise history of the development of Greek art from abstract geometrics to the more expressive paintings of the third-second centuries, B.C.

Bradford, Emle. *Ulysses Found*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1963. A gem of a book which teases the reader into acknowledging Bradford's conjectural landfalls as real.

Camps, W.A. *An Introduction to Homer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. A detailed, erudite essay giving comparisons between *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in stories, characterizations, and poetry. Copious footnotes.

Finley, M.I. *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal*. Oxford Clarendon Press, 1981. Professor Finley edits a series of essays on such topics as Greek politics, philosophy, and Homer and the epic. An update of an earlier book with the same title.

Finley, M.I. *The World of Odysseus*. New York: The Viking Press, 1954. An insight into the Mycenaean period which includes warrior culture, social, and moral matters. An interesting but unresolved area is that of men seeking lasting friendships with other men.

Fitzgerald, Robert. *The Odyssey. Homer*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963. A contemporary translation considered best at adhering to the poetic qualities of the epic.

Gladstone, Rt. Hon. Wm. E. *Landmarks of Homeric Study*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1972, authorized facsimile. An 1898 study based mostly on observations and comparisons of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* with references to the "recent" archaeological finds of Schliemann.

Grant, Michael. *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*. Cleveland and New York: Mentor Books, 1964. Informative and detailed account of the background to major myths and themes.

Head, James G. and Linda MacLea. *Myth and Meaning*. Evanston, Illinois: MacDougal, Littel and Co., 1976. An easy-reading text of comparative mythology.

Love, Iris C. *Greece, Gods, and Art*. New York: Viking Press, 1968. A compendium of Greek art as it illustrates the ancient culture. Worthwhile commentaries, texts on the photographs.

Luce, J.V. *Homer and the Heroic Age*. London, England: Thames and Hudson, 1975. This book coordinates the most recent scholarship with diagrams and illustrations. It is a worthwhile addition to one's personal library and a must for the teaches of Homer.

Page, Denys L. *History and the Homeric Iliad*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959. The reader should take a cautious approach to Page's speculations: he weighs Greek descriptions to artifacts and presumes that spears were probably ash wood, greaves probably were worn by Achaeans but not Trojans, and that the traditional 1,186 ships sailing to Troy may have been dictated by meter rather than by fact.

Rose, H.J. *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1959.

Schefold, K. *Myth and Legend in Early Greek Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1966. Dr. Schefold develops early Greek culture from myths and legends as revealed on vases, amphorae, and reliefs from buildings or shields. A most scholarly compilation.

Audio-Visual Aids

Film. *Search for Ulysses*. Indiana University Audio Visual Center, Bloomington, Indiana, 47405. A fifty minute color film narrated by Ernie Bradford on location in the Mediterranean. Rental fee \$19.50.

Books Recommended for Students

Bradford, Ernie. *Ulysses Found*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1963. (cf. "Books Recommended for Teachers.")

Christ, Henry I. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Globe Book Company, 1968. This is a sixth-seventh grade reading level abridgement which omits books one through four.

Fitzgerald, Robert. *The Odyssey Homer*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963. (cf. "Books Recommended for Teachers.")

Grosvenor, Melville Bell. "Homeward with Ulysses." *National Geographic*. Volume 144, Number 1, July, 1973, pp. 1-39. A modern exploration of the Ionian islands from aboard the yawl *White Mist*.

Hood, Sinclair. *The Home of the Heroes: The Aegean before the Creeks*. New York: Mcraw-Hill Book Co. , 1967. In this short book the author outlines archaeological discoveries from the Old Stone Age to the Bronze Age. He suggests that the tablets of Pylos are not Seek but Aegean and that these people destroyed the Mycenaean culture.

Love, Iris C. *Greece, Gods, and Art*. New York: Viking Press, 1968. (cf. "Books Recommended for Teachers.")

Ruskin, Ariane and Michael Batterberry. *Greek and Roman Art*. New York, San Francisco, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961-64, 1968. Highly informative, easy to understand, well-illustrated.

Strong, Donald E. *The Classical World*. New York and Toronto. McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965. A beautifully illustrated book arranged in chronological order from the Bronze Age through the Roman Empire and pagan and Christian art.

Webster, T.B.L. *From Mycenae to Homer*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1959. A study of early Greek literature in art with several pages of illustrations appended.

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