



## Coming Home: Teaching Homer's Odyssey

Curriculum Unit 86.01.02

by Diana Doyle

As an English teacher at the Conte Arts Magnet School, I am always looking for ways to broaden and strengthen the reading experiences of my students. With a class of good readers, I try to challenge and stimulate them by introducing them to a wider range of books and exposing them to some “classic” literature. I have found that when my students are allowed to select their own books their reading taste is wide and varied, although sometimes predictable. The boys tend to read science fiction fantasy or Tolkien-like fantasy adventure—both violent and non-violent, and mystery, while the girls seek out mystery, non-threatening adventure, problem-teen stories and romance. However, most of my “good” readers read enthusiastically and are eager to expand their literary experiences.

I have traditionally used a mythology unit with my sixth grade English class. The students have always enjoyed this unit, and most of them find they are not as familiar with the stories as they thought they were. We begin by reading creation mythology of various cultures, because I want the students to understand and appreciate the universality of mythology. The students then have a long exposure to Greek mythology and finally Greek hero myths. Although the students have always been enthusiastic, I have felt a missing element in this unit, that the hero myths were not enough.

The exploits and antics of the gods and goddesses are fun, and the quests of heroes like Jason and Theseus are fascinating, but I think the students are ready for the literature that combines the whims of the gods and the real heroics of men: the story of Odysseus, his fight in the Trojan War, and his long journey home. The story is complicated and difficult, but full of energy and excitement. It involves young readers. The story has everything—heroics, jealousy, love, hate, revenge, anger, loyalty, patience and fortitude.

The story of Odysseus is the ultimate family story, a tale of a man trying to return home from a long bloody war to his wife and child. I shall use this homecoming desire as the theme and focus for the students—homecoming and reunion. The students can follow this idea and compare and contrast the actions of the central characters in *The Odyssey* with the other characters they have met.

For introduction and background my students will begin by reading *A Fair Wind for Troy* by Doris Gates. Other books contain the stories that form the background for the war but most of these books retell only one or two of these tales. This book relates all of the stories and legends that trace the beginning of the Trojan War.

Students are first introduced to the legendary beauty, Helen and the wooing of Helen by rich, powerful Greek suitors. We meet the young Odysseus, a clever young king without a great kingdom to support or interest in

such a beauty. He advises Helen's father, creates the compromise, the oath each suitor must take to support the choice of Helen and her father, the oath that each king will rally his men and ships if Helen is ever kidnapped. Students can see that even a rich, powerful king like Helen's father is apprehensive about the anger of rejected suitors. This can perhaps make the plight of Telemachus more understandable.

The book also details the marriage of Thetis and Peleus, the golden apple of discord, the prophecy about Paris the firebrand and the subsequent abandonment of Paris by his parents. The King and Queen of Troy are willing to sacrifice their son for the greater good of the city. Paris makes the fateful choice of Aphrodite as the fairest, earning the eternal enmity of Hera and Athena, and goes to Sparta to meet Helen.

Helen is now married to the wealthy king Menelaus, but falls in love with Paris and runs away to Troy. The outraged Greeks assemble to get her back. The cleverness of Odysseus now comes back to haunt him. The former suitors of Helen have been recalled by their oath. Odysseus is now happily married to Penelope and does not want to leave her and their infant son. Students see that Odysseus puts family before war and glory—at least at this point. He does not want to go. He even tries to pretend he is mad to keep from going, although his ruse doesn't work.

The book also gives the background of the great hero of the Trojan War, Achilles, the son of Thetis and Peleus, a nymph and a mortal. Thetis tries to protect her son Achilles, fated to be a glorious but short-lived hero. Students are fascinated by the story of the dipping of Achilles into the River Styx by his heel, leaving him vulnerable only in his Achilles' heel. They are further fascinated by the next attempt to protect him by sending him to a court dressed as a woman of the court. Achilles, of course, is found out by the clever Odysseus, who, once involved in the war, is in it heart and soul.

The last background story contained in the book involves Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus, and leader of the Greeks. Because of his great wealth and power, he has been chosen as the leader of the expedition. The Greek expedition has been becalmed. There is no wind to sail. Agamemnon has offended the goddess Artemis, and to appease her must sacrifice his daughter. Only then will there be wind to sail. To keep his command, to keep the war going, he will sacrifice his daughter. It should be pointed out to students that this is a very rare demand by the gods. The Greeks did not sacrifice to their gods. This demand by Artemis should illustrate the enormity of the arrogance of Agamemnon, and his intense desire to begin the war. He can be sharply contrasted to Odysseus, who puts his family first. Agamemnon puts the war to avenge his brother's honor first. His pride, his feeling for family honor, is greater than his love for his daughter. Like Priam and Hecuba, he is willing to sacrifice a child for his own interests.

The reading of *A Fair Wind for Troy* introduced the students to the main characters and to some of the conflicts within family relationships. Some of the family relationships which the students notice and focus on:

Agamemnon and Iphigenia—Why does he sacrifice her? Why does he tell her she is going to marry Achilles? What about his wife Clytemnestra, the sister of Helen? What is the effect on her? What will be the long range effect?

Helen and Menelaus—Why did Helen leave her family? What do you think of her?

Odysseus and Penelope—Why does Odysseus not want to go? Does this make him a coward? Why do you think he pick madness as his disguise?

The protection that Thetis desperately tries to find for Achilles contrasts sharply with the actions of Agamemnon and with Priam and Hecuba. Odysseus, also, admits his play-acting, rather than injure his son, and therefore has to go to war.

The emphasis in *A Fair Wind for Troy* is on getting to Troy to begin the war. The book introduces and establishes the personalities of the major Greek characters, and the students feel sympathy and antipathy towards them. They despise Agamemnon; dislike Helen; pity Iphigenia and admire Odysseus and Achilles.

The Trojan War itself is summarized in the last few pages of the book. It may be necessary to give the student more information on the war and the fates of the characters they have come to know so well. However, since the story of the war is found in flashbacks in the story of the voyage home of Odysseus, the students may understand and follow the sequence.

The story of the Odyssey takes place twenty years later. The longing of Odysseus to get home, the sorrowing of his son and the patience of his wife show much more feeling than the heroic actions of the Greek and Trojan warriors.

Sixth grade students cannot be expected to read the regular adult translations of *The Odyssey*. However, there are some fine versions written for students in which the authors have tried to capture the flavor and authenticity of the original. The most notable are *The Tales of Troy and Greece*, by Andrew Lang, which contains versions of both *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*, as well as some hero myths, and *The Children's Homer—The Adventures of Odysseus and the Tale of Troy* by Padraic Colum. My personal choice would be *The Children's Homer*, because it follows *The Odyssey* more completely, whereas the Lang book puts more emphasis on the Trojan War. Both books, however, are excellent for sixth graders. Wherever possible students should be given a chance to read, understand and appreciate the poetic translation, especially the version by Robert Fitzgerald. I think several chapters can be read and discussed in class, especially Book Six, the story of Nausicaa, and the story of Odysseus' trip to the underworld. This particular episode is omitted in the Colum version, and I think this trip in the Odyssey is too important to be ignored.

As the students begin reading the story of the long trip, they will see the characters and their personalities emerge. Telemachus, for example, has no memory of his father. He is alone and powerless, watching the suitors for his mother's hand eat, drink and waste his father's stores. Frustrated, he needs to learn more about his father, or to get away for a while, to go on an odyssey of his own. His actions at the beginning—defying the suitors, calling the Council in Ithaca, and leaving for Pylos—show a young man ready to come into his own, to make the leap into adulthood. When Telemachus returns from his odyssey, his quest to learn about his father, he is a young man, ready for action.

Penelope and Helen, the primary women in the story, are interesting to compare. The students look at Helen as the source of evil, as the person who caused the war and the death of so many heroes. She is the unfaithful wife, a woman who has left her child and her people. Usually students don't like her and feel she should be punished, and not be allowed to get away with her behavior. However, it should be pointed out to the students that neither the Trojans nor the Greeks blame Helen. The gods get the blame for Helen's actions. Aphrodite blinded Helen's mind and heart and led her astray. Helen was not responsible, because she could not help it. At the end of the war, she goes back to Sparta as the Queen, where she is honored and treasured. No one ever blames her except perhaps herself.

By contrast, her cousin Penelope is seen as the constant faithful wife, fending off ardent suitors even though she has lost hope of seeing Odysseus again. We see so little of Penelope that it is hard for students to get a

sense of her. The students see her through the longings of Odysseus to return to her. Yet she seems the perfect wife for Odysseus especially with her clever strategy of weaving by day and unweaving by night—a strategy that works for three years. Odysseus wants to return to her. He could stay with Circe or Calypso, and remain young forever with eternally beautiful goddesses. Instead he yearns for his mortal, aging wife. Why does he wish to return to Penelope? Why doesn't she recognize Odysseus when she talks to him? Why does it take so long to recognize him, to accept him? Does she really recognize him and not admit it? She has been alone a very long time and is used to not confiding. Does she suspect when she devises the contest with the bow of Odysseus that no one else can bend it? How else does she test Odysseus? Why does she need to be sure? When does it begin to change? What shows the change in the attitude of Telemachus towards his mother? Is Penelope an independent character or is she a puppet? These are some of the questions that can start discussions of Penelope as wife and mother.

Odysseus is the most interesting and likeable of the Greek heroes. As the story unfolds, and as the tale of the great war is told, we see many times just how heroic he is. He does not, because he can not, rely on superior strength or wealth. However, he is certainly as brave as any of the heroes, if not braver. He shows himself to be wily and resourceful, as well as courageous and strong. His escapades intrigue the students, capturing their admiration. In the past, my students have been particularly impressed by the tale of the theft of the Luck of Troy. Just as Odysseus fooled the Greeks and the Trojans, he fooled my students. They didn't realize the beggar being whipped by the gates of Troy was Odysseus. They were fascinated with his ability to make his disguise so authentic and without the help of Athena. Odysseus shows his worth so completely, that the students consider him, not Achilles, to be the hero of the Trojan War.

The Greek and Trojan heroes are sometimes looked at as puppets of the gods. Hector had no chance against armor made by the gods for Achilles, against a fate that already had been determined. This kind of determinism can be frustrating for students.

With Odysseus, one senses a little more control. Certainly Odysseus causes his own problems as well. On the trip home, after the fateful trip to the cave of Cyclops, who blinded Polyphemus? Noman . . . but what does Odysseus do? When his ship is almost safely out of range, he bellows up to the giant, "I am Odysseus, son of Laertes." Thus he gives Cyclops a chance to pray to his father Poseidon to keep Odysseus from reaching home. It is the anger of Poseidon which keeps Odysseus from getting home for ten years. What made Odysseus identify himself? Was it pride-pride that must be punished? His self-aggrandizement brings about his own misfortunes.

One of the difficulties in reading the stories of the war and the homecoming can be sequence, because so many of the stories are flash-backs, and from very different time spans. Since students can get confused very easily, they might work on time lines and murals to keep the story line logical and understandable. A large chart or map of Odysseus' voyage might also help to keep the story of his trip home clear.

There are three great family reunions in the story: father-son, son-father, and husband-wife.

Athena, who is prominent in this book as the mentor of both Odysseus and Telemachus, has disguised Odysseus well. He must reveal himself to the two people, wife and father, who could and maybe should recognize him. Only his nurse and his dying hunting dog know him under his disguise. All the others are or seem to be blinded by the rags and bearing of a beggar.

The Odysseus-Telemachus meeting is moving and straight-forward. The young man looks at his father in awe, almost as a god, yet he accepts him immediately and wholeheartedly. Father and son embrace and talk about

the past and plan the future. Odysseus tells his son he, the wily one, will devise a plan and Telemachus, trusting, is ready to carry it out.

The meeting between Laertes and Odysseus is very moving. The old man has given up all hope, and works in his vineyard, almost as a servant. Why doesn't Odysseus reveal himself immediately? Why doesn't Laertes recognize Odysseus? Odysseus finally comforts his father as he would a child as he proves his identity.

The reunion between Penelope and Odysseus is a powerful and puzzling scene. Two strong people need to test each other. Does Penelope really know who Odysseus is already? Why does she test him? Why does she move him to anger as she makes him prove himself? This scene, and the other two scenes, are ideal for reenacting by the students. The students can try the scene from different points of view. In one scene Penelope has known who Odysseus is and in another, she is still unsure and needs to test him. Which one do they like better? Which one seems to make more sense?

Once Odysseus finally reaches Ithaca, his troubles are not over. The suitors will not leave merely because the king is back. He has been gone too long. They are many and he is one. The students have trouble understanding this. They feel that because Odysseus is king, his subjects should welcome him and leave his wife and property alone. The students can be reminded of Helen's father who feared the wrath of rejected suitors. To remain a king, a king must be powerful. Odysseus, once more, must rely on his cleverness (and Athena) to catch the suitors off-guard. He must rely on his son, an untested young man, and two old loyal men. Tactics of surprise and guile must defeat the overwhelming numbers of suitors.

Comparison can be made with the homecoming of Agamemnon, who arrives home a victor and is soon a victim, killed by an unloving wife. Is this the result of the sacrifice of his daughter? Does Clytemnestra not wish to hand over the rule of the kingdom that she has had? She, unlike Penelope, has not been a loyal wife. She has allowed a "suitor" to rule the kingdom with her, taking Agamemnon's place. Why would a queen kill her husband? Do the students see any justice in or excuse for her actions? What about the subsequent actions of Orestes, her son? He, like Telemachus, is a loyal son. He must avenge his father. But to avenge his father he must kill his mother. Is this the act of a loyal son? Would Telemachus act the same way?

After the wrongs have been righted, *The Odyssey* ends on a note of peace and harmony. All is right in the world and family of Odysseus. He has one more task to perform, but it should be peaceful and appease the god, and not take him away from his family. He has come home. I hope my students will sense the fitness of the ending, the just slaying of the suitors, the happiness of Penelope and the young manhood of Telemachus. I look forward to teaching this unit. I think my students will enjoy reading and understanding the experiences of Odysseus and his family.

## Lesson Plans

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### I Telemachus—Understanding his Character

It is very hard for students to understand and to sympathize with the utter helplessness of Telemachus. They say, "Why doesn't he just tell the suitors to go?" They find it hard to imagine a period when young men could just hang around for years and no one could do anything to stop them. Telemachus, of course, has been too young to do anything up until the time of his father's homecoming. Now he is twenty, now he is old enough,

now Athena appears to him and gives him a push. Yet Telemachus does it himself. He stands up to the suitors by himself, and tells them to leave. He calls a Council of the men of Ithaca, the first one that has been called since his father left, and asks them to help them. Both of these actions are very brave ones for this young man, so brave that the suitors get worried, and plot his death.

The odyssey of Telemachus to find news of his father is the third brave action of the young man. This marks his passage of growing up. He was a boy when he left, he is a young man when he returns.

Class discussions should bring out most of the above points. The students should be able to find evidence of changes in Telemachus as he grows up. Writing assignments would focus on personal growth. The students keep a journals and can use these as references to mark signs of change. Sixth grade is a year of change and maturing for many students. What signs can they note? What would be a personal odyssey?

## **II Book Six—Using the Fitzgerald Version**

Nausicaa is an interesting female character, in some ways the female counterpart of Telemachus. She is young, has not grown up, and only dreams of growing up. Athena appears to her and tells her that her maidenhood must end and she must prepare for marriage by washing her clothing and linen to fill her wedding chest. She is young and untested. When she sees Odysseus, he is wild looking, but she does not run away. She is the daughter of a king and she stands her ground.

Book Six of the Robert Fitzgerald translation can be read by the students. It should be read orally and before reading the Colum version. I think the students should be able to read this with pleasure and understanding once they get the feeling of the lines. I think this should be a whole class activity, without silent reading, to ensure class concentration and comprehension.

After reading Book Six, the students should read the corresponding pages in Colum, pages 133-140. Comparisons can be made of language, description, sound, feeling and enjoyment.

Where do you sense the beauty and dignity of the young Nausicaa? Where do you see the activities of the goddess Athena? Where do you get a feeling for the emotions of a young girl, close to your age? How does she feel about Odysseus? Why? Why is she interested in Odysseus when he is obviously too old for her? How are the students like Nausicaa? Where do they see similarities? Are they, like her, afraid of what people will think? Have they ever let this feeling change their actions?

Discussions can be in small groups and whole class. Students may want to compare the growing up experiences of Telemachus, Nausicaa and themselves. With whom do they identify more? Is Telemachus more vulnerable simply because he is more helpless or is Nausicaa because she is a protected sheltered girl?

## **III Odysseus—Using Fitzgerald**

Other passages from the Fitzgerald translation could be duplicated for the students to read, most notably Book Nine, which tells the Cyclops story and parts of Book Eleven which is the story of Odysseus' trip to the underworld and which has been left out of the Colum book. Book Nine is always a favorite with students, because it is excitingly gory and because it shows Odysseus at his wily best. I would use at least the passages from Book Eleven where Odysseus meets his mother, who had died while he was away at the war and his friend the great Achilles, slain during the Trojan War. Achilles had opted for a short glorious life instead of a long, quiet uneventful one. Now he tells Odysseus, "Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand for some poor country man, on iron rations, than lord it over all the exhausted dead." He had made the wrong decision.

Reading of any of the Fitzgerald translation, as well as some of the Colum, should always be oral to allow for explanation of particular passages as well as enjoyment of the poetry. Discussion questions on these passages could center on the use of guile to get out of trouble. Could Odysseus have thought of a better plan, one in which he didn't have to lose more men? Why did he call himself "No man"? Why did Odysseus identify himself when he's not away? What did that mean? How did that affect his trip? Why does Odysseus have to visit the spirits of the dead? What does it mean to him to learn of the death of his mother? How does he feel when he talks to Achilles? What do you think of Achilles' statement? Remember Achilles as the young golden hero seen in *A Fair Wind for Troy* . He was eager for war and for glory. How have his feelings changed?

Writing assignments could center on ideas such as—Can one be too clever? Is it good to be able to lie and disguise yourself and fool everyone? We find this admirable in Odysseus. Would people find this admirable in us, or would we in others?

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