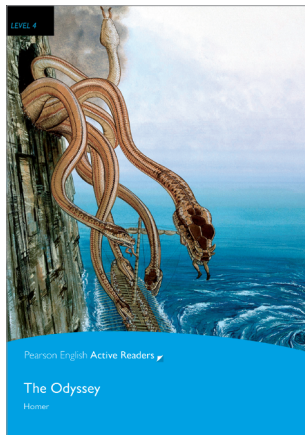


# The Odyssey

Homer



## About the author

No one is sure who Homer really was. There are many theories about him; some say he never existed, some argue that the work accredited to Homer was in fact the work of several people, created over a long period of time, and some argue that Homer wrote either *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, but not both. However, guesses aside, he is widely recognised as the author of these two epic poems. He lived around the eighth or ninth century BC and came from the Ionian region of Greece. Because he lived in a preliterate society, it is believed that his poems were delivered orally at first and then written down some years later. He probably made his living as a court singer and storyteller, and the fact that his writing makes references to the simple life of farmers and artisans confirms he was a man of that class. Homer has had a great influence on writers, from ancient Greece to the present day. The Roman poet, Virgil, used aspects of his writing in *The Aeneid*, Shakespeare was inspired by him to write *Troilus and Cressida* (1603) and James Joyce transported the adventures of Odysseus into twentieth century Dublin in his masterpiece, *Ulysses* (1922).

## Summary

Odysseus has been missing for twenty years and his family are tormented by a group of evil men intent on marrying his wife. Odysseus's son Telemachus sets out to find him. Odysseus is not dead, but is being held prisoner on the island of the goddess Calypso. She is in love with him, and only sets him free after Zeus orders her to. He arrived on the island after a series of adventures following the Trojan War. He and his men had fought a monster Cyclops, had nearly been enticed to their death by the Sirens, had escaped from the fearful Scylla and Charybdis, had been

turned into pigs by Circe, and had been shipwrecked several times. Eventually, Odysseus leaves the island and is reunited with his son on the island of Ithaca. Together, and with the help of the goddess Athene, they fight and kill the suitors. He convinces his wife Penelope that he really is her long lost Odysseus and they become husband and wife once more.

**Chapters 1–2:** In Chapter 1, the goddess, Athene, disguised as a friend of Odysseus, goes to the island of Ithaca to visit Telemachus, Odysseus's son. Odysseus has been missing, presumed dead, for twenty years, and his house is now full of disagreeable suitors who are all trying to marry Odysseus's wife, Penelope. Athene convinces Telemachus to go in search of his father and helps him find a boat and twenty men. Telemachus sets sail to Pylos on the first part of his journey. In Chapter 2, King Nestor of Pylos greets Telemachus warmly and recounts tales of the Trojan War in which he had fought alongside Odysseus. However, he has no news of Odysseus and advises Telemachus to go to Sparta and talk to Menelaus. He sets off to Sparta in a chariot and is welcomed by Menelaus. Menelaus tells him that his father is alive and a prisoner of the goddess Calypso, who is in love with him. Meanwhile, Antinous and the other suitors plan to kill Telemachus.

**Chapters 3–4:** In Chapter 3, Zeus sends the messenger Hermes to tell Calypso to release Odysseus. Calypso reluctantly agrees and Odysseus sets out to sea in a raft. The god Poseidon, angry with Odysseus, sends a terrible storm, which overturns the raft. Odysseus swims to the shore and falls unconscious on the beach. King Alcinous's daughter, Nausicaa, finds him and takes him to the entrance of the city. He enters the palace and falls at the feet of Queen Arete to everyone's surprise. In Chapter 4, Odysseus tells the queen his story and how her daughter had helped him. Then everyone goes to a meeting place to test each others sporting prowess. Odysseus, angered by a sportsman's taunts, displays some fine sporting skills. Later a dinner is organised and a poet sings of the Trojan War, and of the famous Trojan horse. Alcinous is puzzled when Odysseus starts to cry and questions him about the war.

**Chapters 5–6:** In Chapter 5, Odysseus tells King Alcinous his name and about his experiences in the land of the Cyclopes, huge monster-like beings with one eye. He and his companions come across a Cyclops in a cave where the monster eats four of his men. After drugging

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the Cyclops, and driving a stick into its eye, they escape in their boat. In Chapter 6, after a terrible experience in the land of the barbaric Laestrygonians, they then travel to the island of Aeaea. Here they meet a woman called Circe who turns some of Odysseus's men into pigs with a magic potion. Odysseus meets Hermes on his way to rescue the men, and Hermes tells Odysseus to eat a flower to combat Circe's magic. He convinces Circe to turn the pigs back into men and they all become friends.

**Chapters 7–8:** In Chapter 7, Odysseus visits the Underworld and sees various ghosts, one of whom is that of his mother. They then continue their journey, but have to pass the island of the Sirens, whose singing had caused the death of many sailors. They also have to face the perils of Scylla and Charybdis. They then arrive on the island of the Sun-god. Despite warnings not to, the men kill some of the sacred cows. This angers the god and Odysseus's boat is overturned. He eventually makes it to Calypso's island. In Chapter 8, Odysseus thanks Alcinous and returns to Ithaca. Athene comes to him and turns him into an old man so no one will recognise him. He meets an old pig farmer, Eumaeus, who tells him about the evil suitors, and how much he misses Odysseus, his master.

**Chapters 9–10:** In Chapter 9, Athene goes to Sparta and tells Telemachus to return to his palace in Ithaca. Meanwhile, Eumaeus is recounting his life story to Odysseus in his hut. Telemachus arrives and asks Eumaeus who his guest is. Athene appears and turns Odysseus back into a young man. The overjoyed Telemachus and his father begin to plan the overthrow of the suitors. In Chapter 10, Odysseus, again disguised as an old man, travels to the city. He asks for food at the palace and one of the suitors attacks him. When the suitors have gone to bed, Odysseus and Telemachus hide their swords. Later, Odysseus has a conversation with his wife Penelope. She doesn't realise it is him, but a servant girl, while washing his feet, recognises a scar on his leg and knows he is Odysseus.

**Chapters 11–12:** In Chapter 11, Penelope announces that she will marry the suitor who can fire an arrow through twelve axe handles. They all try and fail. Then Odysseus asks if he can try and succeeds. He kills one of the suitors and a huge fight starts. By the end of the fight all the suitors lie dead.

In Chapter 12, Penelope is told that all the suitors are dead and that Odysseus killed them. By making Odysseus say something that only he could know, Penelope is now sure he is her husband, and they both retire to bed.

## Background and themes

**Adventure:** *The Odyssey* is an epic story of adventure. All the ingredients are there. It has travel, shipwrecks, monsters, magic and fighting. Indeed, some of the monsters such as the one-eyed Cyclops and the six-headed Scylla would be a match for anything created today.

**Love and fidelity:** *The Odyssey* is also a romantic tale of love lost and love found. Penelope grieves for her lost husband and is in the terrible predicament of having to marry someone she doesn't love. Odysseus returns and love is restored. During their period apart, Odysseus is tempted by beautiful women and goddesses but does not yield and Penelope refuses to marry any of the suitors. Calypso is also in love with Odysseus but is ordered to set him free by Zeus. King Alcinous wants Odysseus to marry his beautiful daughter, Nausicaa, but Odysseus politely declines, insisting he must return to his wife and his people.

**The gods:** The Greek gods play an important part in the book. The Greeks believed that each god was responsible for a particular aspect of life and had different powers. Some gods help Odysseus in his travels and some hinder him.

## Discussion activities

### Before reading

- Research:** Ask the students to look for information using the Internet about the following characters from Greek mythology: Zeus, Athene, Circe, Poseidon, Hermes, Calypso, Scylla, Charybdis. *What part of the world was each one responsible for? What were they like? What famous story is associated with each character? Who were the parents of each character?*  
Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the information they have found and to choose one character they would like to be and why.

### Chapters 1–2

#### After reading

- Team game:** Write the following characters on the board: *Athene, Telemachus, King Nestor, Proteus, Penelope*. Put students into small groups and give them 5–10 minutes to think of true sentences about these characters without looking back at the book. Then, each group in turn has to say a true sentence about one of the characters. Sentences cannot be repeated. If the sentence is right, the team scores one point. After ten minutes, the team with the most points wins.

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## Chapters 3–4

**While reading** (at the end of p. 21)

- 3 Role play:** Put the students into pairs and ask one of them to play the role of Calypso and one of them the role of Odysseus. Calypso has to try and convince Odysseus to stay with her, and Odysseus has to give his reasons why he doesn't want to.

## After reading

- 4 Write and guess:** Write 'Odysseus left the island on a boat.' on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (He left on a raft). Now students choose a sentence from Chapters 3–4 and rewrite it changing one word. Students mingle, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

## Chapters 5–6

**While reading** (at the end of Chapter 5, p. 40)

- 5 Discuss:** In small groups the students make a list of all the monsters they can think of. The monsters can come from films, books or folklore. Get feedback from the whole class and write the names of the monsters on the board. Then the students discuss which of the monsters is the most powerful and why.

## After reading

- 6 Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *sheep, pigs, bag, rocks, flower, father*. Ask the students, in pairs, to talk about how these words were used in Chapters 5–6.

## Chapters 7–8

**While reading** (p. 49, after 'the ghost of my mother, Anticleia, came towards me.')

- 7 Discuss:** Ask the students to discuss the following questions:  
*Do you believe in ghosts? Have you ever seen a ghost? What famous ghost stories do you know? What do you think of people who believe in ghosts? What do you think of the Ancient Greeks belief in an underworld? What beliefs do you have in your country about what happens to you after you die?*

## After reading

- 8 Write, ask and answer:** Write 'What do the sailors put in their ears?' on the board and elicit the answer (Pieces of wax). Now tell students to write similar questions about Chapters 9–10. Students then mingle with each other, asking and answering each other's questions.

## Chapters 9–10

**While reading** (p. 69 after 'father and son discussed their plans.')

- 9 Discuss:** Ask the students to discuss in small groups the different ways that Odysseus and Telemachus could remove the suitors and take control of the palace.

## After reading

- 10 Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 9–10. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

## Chapters 11–12

**While reading** (p. 84 after 'the floor was a lake of blood.')

- 11 Write:** In small groups the students have to write a modern day sensational newspaper article on the battle between the suitors and Odysseus and his men. Include interviews with the main characters. The students think of a headline. Encourage them to focus on the following points:  
*Did the suitors deserve to die? There were many suitors and very few on Odysseus's side. How did they win? There could have been intervention by the gods. If there was, was it fair? The battle was very bloody. What will happen next? Will Odysseus and Penelope live together happily ever after?*

## After reading

- 12 Circle a number to show who you think does bad things to Odysseus and who you think does good things. Talk to a friend. Do you think the same?**

	bad				good
Athene	1	2	3	4	5
Zeus	1	2	3	4	5
Calypso	1	2	3	4	5
Poseidon	1	2	3	4	5
King Alcinous	1	2	3	4	5
The Cyclops	1	2	3	4	5
The Sirens	1	2	3	4	5
Circe	1	2	3	4	5
Teiresias	1	2	3	4	5
Scylla	1	2	3	4	5
Eumaeus (pig farmer)	1	2	3	4	5
Antinous (suitor)	1	2	3	4	5
Amphinomus	1	2	3	4	5
Eurycleia (girl servant)	1	2	3	4	5
Melanthius	1	2	3	4	5