

The Odyssey – Discussion Questions

Book 1

What do you think is the symbolic meaning of the Greek gods and goddesses? Are they meant to be taken literally? If not, what is it that they represent?

Think carefully about the speech of Zeus. What does it suggest about human behavior and the tragic fate of human individuals?

Where is Odysseus at this point in the adventure?

What is the relevance of Zeus' speech to Odysseus' plight?

Pay attention to the apparition of Athena to Telemachos.

What are the implications of the use of words like "daydreaming" and "dreamed"?

Why does Athena appear before Telemachos disguised rather than as herself?

What is the problem at Odysseus' house that Athena is trying to solve by advising Telemachos?

What is the implication of the description of the suitors as a "wolf pack"?

Book 2 (optional)

Pay very close attention to the description of the omen of the two eagles that appear to Telemachos and the assembled Ithakans.

Is the interpretation furnished by the prophet Halitherses the correct one? Why?

What exactly do the eagles mean?

Book 3 (optional)

Try to determine what it is exactly that Telemachos learns from the wisdom of Nestor.

How does Nestor feel about the Trojan War?

Pay attention to the disagreements that arose among the victorious Greeks after the fall of Troy.

Book 4 (optional)

What does Telemachos learn from Menelaos? Is it a similar lesson as that learned from Nestor?

How does Menelaos feel about the Trojan War?

Pay close attention to Menelaos' account of his encounter with the god Proteus, "the ancient of the sea."

What is the symbolic meaning of the use of the seal disguises?

What is the meaning of Proteus' ability to change shapes?

Do Menelaos and his men in some sense also change shapes by using a disguise?

What is the meaning of all these transformations?

Book 5

Is Odysseus trapped in Kalypso's island against his will?

What does Kalypso offer to Odysseus in order to keep him in her island? What is the alternative?

Think about the rescue of Odysseus by Ino (Leukothea) after leaving Ogygia Island. Is there symbolic meaning to the use of her veil?

Pay very close attention to the description of the shelter that Odysseus finds in Skheria Island under a pair of olive trees. Are those trees symbolic entities?

Book 6 (optional)

Think of Odysseus' choice of behavior at the moment when he meets princess Nausicaa.

What are his alternatives? How does he act? What does he look like? Does his appearance change during the encounter? Why?

Book 7 (optional)

What is the significance of the transfiguration of Athena into a small girl who guides Odysseus to Alkinoos' palace?

What about the fog that surrounds Odysseus as he walks through the city? Pay attention to Odysseus' behavior in this episode. Is he proud? Humble?

How does he act toward the Queen Arete? (The name "Arete" can mean "virtue" in Greek).

What do you make of Alkinoos' offer to give Odysseus the princess Nausikaa as his bride?

Book 8 (optional)

Why is the figure of the poet/singer Demodokos important? What or who does he represent?

Think about the tears of Odysseus upon hearing the songs of Demodokos. What does the poet sing about? Why does Odysseus cover his tears?

Consider very carefully the response of Odysseus to the challenge at the athletic games.

What is the wisdom implicit in this speech? Does Odysseus' subsequent throwing of discus contradict this wisdom? Consider the speech of Odysseus in response to Seareach's insults.

What is the significance of Demodokos' song about the love affair of Ares and Aphrodite?
How do the gods react to the revelation of the adultery? Why?

Think about Poseidon's reaction to the event. Is it different from the other gods'?

How does Odysseus behave toward Demodokos? Why?

Book 9

What is the significance of Odysseus' role as the teller of his own story?

What do you think of Odysseus and his men's behavior in the raid of Ismarus (the Kikones episode)?

What is the meaning of the Lotos Eaters adventure?

Pay special attention to all the details of the Kyklops episode?

What does the cannibalistic monster symbolize? Why does he have only one eye?

Why does Odysseus call himself "Nohbdy"?

Think about the use of the sheep to escape from the monster's cave? What does it symbolize?

Why does Odysseus reveal his name to the Kyklops? Is it wise to do so?

Book 10

What is the meaning of the bag of winds in the Aiolos adventure?

Is the adventure with the Laistrygones in some sense similar to that with the Kyklops? Why?

Is Kirke successful in turning Odysseus into a pig? (Think twice).

Why must Odysseus go to the Underworld (Hades) after his stay in Kirke's island?

What is the significance of the death of Elpenor?

Book 11

Pay close attention to the encounters of Odysseus with his mother Antikleia, with the prophet Teiresias, and with Agamemnon and Akhilleus in the Underworld.

In particular, what is the lesson that Teiresias teaches Odysseus concerning the problem of avoiding death and safely returning home?

What does Odysseus learn from Akhilleus and from Agamemnon?

Book 12

Pay attention to Kirke's warnings to Odysseus after he returns from the Underworld. What do you observe?

What do the Sirens sing about? Why are they so dangerous? What do they symbolize?

What is the meaning of the dangers posed by Skylla and Kharybdis?

What do the monsters symbolize?

Why must the Greek adventurers refrain from raiding the cows of Helios?

Why is Odysseus the only survivor? What saves him?

Book 13 (optional)

Pay very close attention to the speech of Poseidon complaining about the success of Odysseus in Phaeacia.

What is the meaning of the transformation of the Phaeacian ship into stone?

What is the meaning of Odysseus' meeting with Athena upon his arrival to Ithaka? What does she advise?

Book 14 (optional)

Why must Odysseus go first to the forest and to the swineherd's hut rather than to his own palace?

Why does Odysseus conceal his identity? Is there symbolic significance to this situation?

How are the false stories Odysseus tells in Ithaka somewhat revealing about the reality of his own life?

Book 15 (optional)

Notice the close proximity of Odysseus and Telemachos' return home. Can the perils and lessons of Telemachos' journey be somehow compared to those of Odysseus' travels?

What is the significance of the help that Telemachos gives to the fugitive prophet Theoklymenos?

Book 16

What do you think about the fact that Odysseus reveals his identity to his son?

What of their plot to kill the suitors? Is it justified?

Does it accord well with the principles of justice set forth in the *Odyssey*?

What do you think of Athena's eagerness to see the suitors killed? Is that proper in a divinity?

Is Athena, the goddess of wisdom, wise?

Book 17

Why does Odysseus wish to go to his own palace disguised as a beggar?

What does the beggar disguise symbolize?

Why is it important for him to show patience and self-restraint, even when hit and insulted?

What is the meaning of the death of Argos, Odysseus' old hunting dog?

Consider the advice of Athena to Odysseus. Agree or disagree. It is "wise" advice (from the Goddess of Wisdom).

Book 18 (optional)

What is the symbolic meaning of Odysseus' confrontation with the beggar Iros?

Why does Odysseus warn Amphinomos about the danger of his return and vengeance?

What are the elements of acceptable revenge in Ancient Greek culture? Does it differ from modern America's definition of acceptable revenge? Is vengeance a necessary part of life? Is it good or bad?

Book 19

Why does Odysseus withhold his identity from Penelope? Does he trust her?

Pay extremely close attention to the scenes when Eurykleia recognizes Odysseus? What gives him away?

Follow very closely the story of Odysseus' baptism by his grandfather Autolycus and of the boar hunt on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. What is the symbolic significance of these events in reference to the determination and shaping of Odysseus' character while he was still a very young boy?

Compare the passages describing the boar's hideout to those describing the shelter of Odysseus when he first arrives to Phaeacia. What are the implications of the similarities?

Who decides to set up the contest of the bow to find a new husband for Penelope? What does that decision imply about her fidelity to Odysseus?

Book 20

Notice the self-restraint of Odysseus. What can you infer from his self-restraint?

What is the meaning of his conversation with Athena?

Pay attention to the visions and prophecies of Theoklymenos.

Book 21

What does the contest of the bow symbolize?

Why can't the suitors string the bow? Can Telemachos string it? Pay extreme attention to the scenes when Odysseus strings his bow. Make an inference or an observation.

Why is the bow compared to a harp or lyre?

Book 22

What do you think of Odysseus' killing of the suitors? Is it justified?

What do you think of his killing of those who embraced his knees and begged for mercy?

What is the significance of his slaying of the prophet Leodes?

Notice the description of the victorious Odysseus as "spattered and caked with blood like a mountain lion."

Compare this description to that referring to the Kyklops (Book 9). What are the implications of this similarity?

What do you think of Telemachos' hanging of the maids and his mutilation of the goatherd Melanthios?

Do you see some similarities of character and behavior not only between Odysseus and the Kyklops but also between Odysseus and Telemachos?

Book 23

How does Penelope finally recognize Odysseus?

What is the symbolic meaning of the connection between the olive tree and the marriage bed?

Given the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope, can the *Odyssey* be regarded as a comedy? Why? Why not?

Book 24

How does Laertes, Odysseus' father, recognize Odysseus?

What is the symbolic significance of the fruit trees?

Is the anger of the suitors' relatives justified?

How does Odysseus propose to deal with this problem?

Is the ending of the *Odyssey* through Athena's intervention a convincing and meaningful way of putting an end to the struggle between the Ithakans?

Is it realistic to believe that the suitors' relatives simply dropped their weapons and went back home?

What is the problem with this ending?

Is it possible to suppose that Homer meant his readers to realize that the true ending of the *Odyssey* is something falling outside the scope of the poem and which the reader himself needs to envision on the basis of the events of the poem? In that case, do you think the *Odyssey* is a tragedy or a comedy?