

## *The Odyssey Study Guide*

### **Book 1**

1. What does the invocation (the first 12 lines) say the poem as a whole will emphasize?

Odysseus' journey home from the Trojan War will be emphasized according to the introduction.

2. What first impression does this book give us of the gods? How much of a role do they play in human affairs? What seems to motivate their actions?

The gods like to meddle in the lives of humans; they can be moody and vengeful and definitely have their favorites.

3. What is our first introduction to various characters? The suitors, for instance.... are they a homogeneous group, or are there differences among them? What qualities does Telemachus possess at the outset?

The suitors seem to be very like-minded; there are two who stand out as leaders, however: Antinous and Eurymachus. Telemachus seems to possess a lot of his father's thoughtfulness, but sometimes he acts like a child.

### **Book 2**

4. How, according to Antinous, do the suitors view Penelope's reluctance? Why do they think they are justified in behaving as they do?

They believe that Penelope is toying with their emotions. Since she is leading them on, they are justified (in Antinous' mind at least) in staying and eating all of her food until she makes up her mind.

5. How well does Telemachus handle the suitors' chief Antinous and his self-justification?

Telemachus handles Antinous fairly well in this scene. He cites the laws of the gods in saying that he has to allow his mother to stay and do as chooses because it would go against the gods not to.

### Book 3

6. How does Athena help Telemachus prepare to meet the old King Nestor?

She arranges a crew and ship for him, and gives him confidence that he will say the right things.

7. What is the purpose of this book? Why is it important that Telemachus go and visit old Nestor, aside, of course, from the fact that he's out for news of his father Odysseus?

He has to leave Ithaca in order to allow other events to unfold such as the suitors plotting his death.

8. What exactly does Nestor tell Telemachus about the War and the return home? Why does he dwell upon the fate of Agamemnon, killed by Aegisthus, the lover of Clytemnestra?

The story of Aegisthus is mentioned repeatedly because Telemachus is supposed to be drawing inspiration from it. Aegisthus killed Agamemnon and is eventually killed by Orestes (Agamemnon's son) in an act of vengeance.

### Book 4

9. How does Menelaus represent himself as responding to his wanderings on the way home to Sparta?

He explains that even though he came home very rich he would have given it all up to save some of his comrades who died on the way home.

(including his brother, Agamemnon)

10. Why does Menelaus still value and accept Helen, even though her elopement with Paris led to the Trojan War?

She is still very beautiful; he also blames the gods for her actions and not her.

11. How might Menelaus' story about the Old Man of the Sea, Proteus, be instructive to Telemachus in his quest to find his father? Why, for that matter, would Menelaus' response to the knowledge Proteus gives him be instructive for Odysseus?

The story could help Telemachus find his father if he could find the Old Man of the Sea; he also now knows that his father was still alive during that conversation. Odysseus should learn to trust on occasion he second-guesses many of the gods who try to help him.

### Book 5

12. What sort of character is Calypso? How long does Odysseus stay on her island? What is the source of Calypso's power over Odysseus? To what extent does she help Odysseus or hinder him once the decision to let him go is forced upon her by Hermes?

Calypso is a nymph; she has been keeping Odysseus on her island as her husband even though he longs for home until Zeus, via Hermes, orders her to release him. Odysseus has been on Calypso's island for seven years because she does not give him the means to return home. She aids him by giving him supplies and materials to build a raft.

13. How does Odysseus respond to the shipwreck that he meets upon leaving Calypso? Follow the motions of his spirit as he struggles to save himself - that is, track how the poet represents Odysseus' emotions and thoughts during and after the shipwreck.

Odysseus is initially afraid and wishes that he would have died at Troy, so he could have had a hero's death. He then becomes suspicious when the gods try to help him and shows his intransigent nature by not listening. He, however, does end up listening to the gods; he then prays to the gods for help, showing his humility, and he is saved.

### Book 6

14. How is the behavior of Nausicaa, the young Phaeacian princess who discovers Odysseus washed up on the shore, appropriate to the situation? What makes her an admirable character?

She is immediately shy upon seeing Odysseus' state of undress, but after being given courage by the gods she shows herself to be the epitome of a good hostess.

15. How does Odysseus treat Nausicaa?

He treats her with respect and deference.

### Book 7

16. What sort of kingdom is Phaeacia? How well is it governed, judging from the way the King relates to his family and subjects, and the way he receives the suppliant washed up on his shores?

Phaeacia seems to be blessed by the gods; it is a very wealthy kingdom. It seems to be governed well and they adhere to the laws of hospitality, evident by the way they receive Odysseus into the court.

17. How might the impression Odysseus and we receive of Phaeacia be significant for Odysseus' subsequent return to Ithaca?

He is received well there, which might counterbalance his reception at home due to the fact that the suitors have infiltrated Ithaca.

18. What does Odysseus say when Arete questions him sharply and asks him to reveal his identity?

He admits the truth and tells her his story but neglects to say his name or the name of his kingdom.

### Book 8

19. What effect does the song sung by the harper Demodocus have upon Odysseus? Demodocus sings again later in the book - again, with what effect on Odysseus? Is the latter's response different from what we would expect of modern-day "heroes"?

Demodocus' first song is about a fight between Achilles and Odysseus - Odysseus cries.

Second song - Ares and Aphrodite - Odysseus is amused because Hephaestus defeats Ares by using his mind instead of his strength.

Final song - the fall of Troy - Odysseus breaks down His responses than a modern-day heroes because he is more free with his emotions.

20. How does Odysseus respond to the challenge of Broadsea? What Odyssean qualities shine through in this episode of athletic competition?

Odysseus rises to the challenge; after scolding Broadsea for being rude, he impresses them with his physical strength. The Odyssean quality of pride shines through in this episode; he will not allow himself to be embarrassed.

### Book 9

21. When does Odysseus reveal his identity? How has he been careful in keeping that information to himself from Books 5-8?

Odysseus has not given the Phaeacians his name to this point; he finally reveals his identity after being cornered by Alcinous after his emotional reactions to Demodocus' songs.

22. List Odysseus' tales in the order that he tells them. What patterns of meaning do you find emerging from this order?

Cicones

Lotus Eaters

Cyclops

Odysseus lists the stories in such a manner, initially as to describe why the gods turned against him. (Other answers possible)

23. Patterns aside, what do the individual stories Odysseus recounts tell us about him and his men? For example, what makes Odysseus a worthy leader? Does he make mistakes while leading his men? How is he better than his men? Are there dangers in his strengths?

Odysseus is brave and clearly cares about his men, which makes him a worthy leader. He and his men both get too greedy and arrogant from time to time, however. Odysseus pride also causes some problems, especially in the incident with the Polyphemus (the Cyclops).

24. This is actually a question for books 9-12 as a unit, but I'll ask it here: why is it important that Odysseus recount all his wanderings as past events? Why doesn't Homer simply construct his epic as a linear (i.e. "straight-line") progression of events from the Trojan War onward?

One of the qualities of an epic is that it begins in medias res ( in the middle of things); starting the epic when Odysseus is already nearing home makes the homecoming more profound. (opinion)

### Book 10

25. What sort of character is Circe? Why (aside from her magic) is she able to turn Odysseus' men into swine? What have they done to offend her, or what weakness do they show?

Circe is a minor goddess and sorceress. She is able to turn Odysseus men into pigs because they are being gluttonous and acting without manners, like pigs.

26. What makes Odysseus succumb for a time to Circe's enticements? What is his mistake here?

Odysseus gets too comfortable and is seduced by Circe; he loses his ambition to return home and becomes complacent for a while.

27. Why does Odysseus need to visit Hades (the Greek Underworld) and consult with Tiresias the blind prophet of Thebes?

He has to get information about the journey home, so he knows how to successfully complete it.

### **Book 11**

28. What does Odysseus learn from Tiresias in Hades? What other characters does Odysseus speak with, and what does he learn from them?

29. In general, how would you characterize Odysseus' attitude towards his journey to the Underworld? That is, what does the episode tell us about him?

30. What is the Greek Underworld (Hades) like? How is it unlike the Christian Hell?

### **Book 12**

31. Odysseus returns to Circe's island after his visit to Hades. What adventures still await him? Again, what do those adventures tell us about Odysseus as a hero?

### **Book 13**

32. How do Poseidon and Zeus interact in this book? What is the balance of power between them? How does Zeus assert his authority?

33. How does Odysseus handle his return to Ithaca? How much does he tell those he meets about his true identity and intentions? How much help does Athena give him?

34. How is this book pivotal regarding the action of the Odyssey as a whole? What necessary qualities, that is, does Odysseus show in this first step of his return to power?

#### **Book 14**

35. What is the function of Eumaeus the swineherd? How does he treat Odysseus, and how does Odysseus treat him? How much of the truth does Odysseus tell him?

#### **Book 15**

36. What is Telemachus' main diplomatic challenge in this book? How does Athena help him meet the challenge?

37. What role does Helen play in this book? What does the prophecy she makes reveal about her? Why might it be significant, in terms of the Odyssey as a whole, that Helen, whose misbehavior towards her husband set in motion the Trojan War, gives Telemachus a robe to bestow upon his future bride?

38. Who is Theoclymenus, and why is it appropriate that Telemachus should treat him kindly?

39. What is Eumaeus' own story, as he recounts it to Odysseus? Does the story indicate why Eumaeus is especially loyal to Odysseus? If so, what's the reason?

#### **Book 16**

40. In this book Odysseus reveals his identity to Telemachus. What does the reaction of the two characters tell us about the Greeks' attitude towards the expression of emotion? How does their attitude differ from ours?

41. In what ways does Telemachus show in this book that he has matured?

#### **Book 17**

42. In Elizabethan revenge tragedies, it is common for the villain to declare himself a thorough rascal. In what way do Melanthius the goatherd and the suitors throw away a chance to redeem themselves in this book? Why do they fail?

43. Around line 480 Odysseus tells a "resourceful" tale, namely that he was sold into slavery in Egypt. Although the tale is a lie, what purpose does it serve, aside from establishing some cover for Odysseus in concealing his true identity?

### **Book 18**

44. Why is it appropriate that Odysseus disguise himself from the suitors (with Athena's help) as a beggar?

45. Why is it significant that Odysseus overcomes the swaggering beggar Irus?

46. What part does Athena play in this book? That is, what effect does she have on Odysseus and the suitors?

### **Book 19**

47. Penelope questions the stranger (Odysseus in disguise) closely, and he claims to be Aethon from Crete. Do you think that Penelope knows or suspects Odysseus' real identity? Why or why not?

48. Whether she suspects anything or not, how does Penelope test the stranger? What qualities does she manifest in this book that make her a worthy match for Odysseus?

49. Interpret the dream that Penelope relates to the stranger towards the book's end. Does it reveal things about her stance towards the suitors that would probably surprise even her?

50. Why does Penelope tell the stranger about the contest to string Odysseus' bow that she is planning to announce?

### **Book 20**

51. What portents announce the struggle to come? How does Odysseus react to them?

52. Athena inspires the suitors to behave even more inappropriately than usual. Why does she do that? What effect does their behavior have on Odysseus and Telemachus?

### **Book 21**

53. Penelope fetches Odysseus' bow and announces the contest to the suitors. How do the suitors again prove that they deserve the "blood wedding" that awaits them?

54. The suitors mock at the stranger for wanting to take his turn with the bow. Penelope tells them to let him go ahead - why?

55. Odysseus strings his own bow at the book's end. How does Homer handle this moment? For example, why don't we hear anything from the suitors right after Odysseus shoots his first arrow?

### **Book 22**

56. As logic dictates, Antinous is the first to die. How do the remaining suitors try to appease Odysseus? Why, in view of the Odyssey's task as we

have discussed it in class, would it be inappropriate for Odysseus to accept their arguments or pleas?

57. At what points in the struggle is Athena active? How much does she help Odysseus, and how much credit is mainly his?

58. Why might it be significant, in light of the Odyssey's task as we have discussed it in class, that around line 400 Odysseus, in Fagles' translation, refers to the work that remains to be done in the book as "household chores"?

59. How do Odysseus and Telemachus deal with Melanthius the goatherd and the women who sported with the suitors? Consider the intensity of the violence throughout this book - do you find it unsettling or "over the top"? Why or why not? Does the epic narrator take up an attitude towards the violence?

### **Book 23**

60. Why does the text refrain from making Penelope recognize Odysseus outright? Why does Penelope insist on testing Odysseus even after all that he has done in the hall?

61. Why is it appropriate that the couple's bed should be involved in the main test of Odysseus' identity?

62. Around line 300, Odysseus recounts the prophecy that Tiresias had made about the King's further adventure and death in old age? Why would Homer remind us of this prophecy, just as the poem achieves its goal of bringing Odysseus home and reestablishing him successfully as master of Ithaca?

#### **Book 24**

63. Describe the interaction of the suitors' shades with others in Hades. How do Agamemnon and Achilles view each other's fates?

64. How does Odysseus test his father Laertes, now living a hard life, after the slaughter has been accomplished? What's the point of testing his father?

65. What problem remains for Odysseus to deal with, even though he has rid himself of the suitors and their hangers-on? What reason do the suitors' surviving kin give for their attempt to kill Odysseus? Is it grief alone, or something different?

66. How does the reconciliation between Odysseus and the surviving kin occur? Without Athena's divine assistance, what would be the prospects for immediate or eventual reconciliation?