

# Reading Club Guide

## INTRODUCTION

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can be found on every list of the world's greatest books. From the beginning of Western literature, readers have appreciated these two epic poems for their ability to make us reflect on the full range of human concerns and emotions as well as for sheer entertainment. The influence of these poems on the work of other writers is so pervasive that to be familiar with the characters, themes, and episodes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is to be familiar with some of the most significant motifs of subsequent literature.

Each poem is dominated by an extraordinary man and his fate. Though the stories are self-contained, the brief, brilliant life of the warrior Achilles at Troy in the *Iliad* contrasts sharply with the endurance of long-suffering Odysseus. While Achilles excels on the battlefield, Odysseus is the strategist, manipulating circumstances to the best advantage, moving behind and through the scenes as a diplomat and trickster. We see in the *Odyssey* these characteristics flourish not only in making war; they are also critical in the multifarious world beyond the battlefield and its clear-cut ranks of adversaries.

When Odysseus and Achilles meet in the House of the Dead, in the exact middle of the *Odyssey*, the contrast between them is stunning. The living Odysseus has risked his life to come to this place beyond all earthly boundaries in order to acquire the knowledge to complete his journey home. The shade of Achilles is despondent, deprived of the narrow arena of war by which he was defined and his fame was secured. Each hero has sought happiness through action in different ways—Achilles in a concentrated blaze of glory, sacrificing youth and life for fame that will last forever; Odysseus by striving to experience the full range of possible worlds. When Homer has them meet in the House of the Dead, the place of final resolution for all mortals, he seems to be asking us to consider a fundamental question: What is happiness, and what kind of life is conducive to it?

Choose any prominent theme in the *Odyssey*—fathers and sons; the relationships of men and women, especially husbands and wives; the responsibilities of leadership; piety; the obligations and transgressions of hosts and guests; the relation between revenge and justice—and it is possible to chart a course through the entire book with that particular theme in mind. However, each thread of the story is woven with so many others that focusing on one soon brings into view the entire warp and weft of the story's fabric. Like its hero, Odysseus, and its heroine, Penelope, the *Odyssey* eludes attempts to reduce it to a few simple meanings, less because it is so ambiguous than because it is so complex.

In essence, the story of Odysseus is straightforward. A veteran of a long war, ten years away from his wife, son, and realm, he sets out to return home with his men. As the result of calamities, some brought on by himself and others beyond his control, he wanders for ten more years, along the way experiencing

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the breadth and depth of the world. Finally, after his men are lost, he is alone. At last he returns, kills the unwelcome guests who have laid waste his wealth and besieged his wife, seeking to marry her; resumes his role as father, husband, and son; makes peace in his kingdom; and then drops from sight as the poem abruptly comes to a stop, if not an ending.

The way the story is told, however, is anything but straightforward. Even the "man of twists and turns" announced as the protagonist in the first line of the poem is not identified by name until twenty-three lines later. There are stories whose truth lies in their directness; others, in their oblique approach. The *Odyssey* proceeds by indirection, like the many tall tales Odysseus tells to gain credibility among strangers, and even among those closest to him. Through flashbacks, simultaneous events, reminiscences, narratives by those whose stories have no witnesses, through rumor and legend, the *Odyssey* moves toward the single-minded goal of its central character—homecoming and reunion. The structure of the poem seems to emphasize that no homecoming is straightforward, and that every return raises complex questions about what has changed and what has remained the same—for both the one who returns and those who remained at home. What, we may ask, remains the essence of the "man of twists and turns" that allows him to maintain his identity as Odysseus?

This indirection reaches its pinnacle in the lengthy Book 19, during the conversation between the disguised Odysseus and his wife, Penelope. In the middle of Odysseus' invented autobiography, which touches her deeply enough to make her weep, the narrator interjects, "Falsehoods all, / but he gave his falsehoods all the ring of truth" (p. 397). Her feeling for the stranger is strong before she even knows that he is her husband. On the surface, Odysseus' way of approaching Penelope after so many years is strategic; if he were to reveal himself too soon, he would risk failure in ridding his household of her suitors. More than that, he seems to be a suitor himself, winning again Penelope's love and loyalty because of what he is, not who he is. The facts of his tale are false; the sentiment is true. At the end of Book 19, as if by intuition, Penelope proposes a way to resolve the predicament of her unwelcome suitors—the contest of the bow and targets, which only Odysseus is likely to win. Has she recognized Odysseus? Homer is silent on this point, as if to make us ask ourselves where truth lies and how our shifting interpretations of fact and evidence can bring certainty and settlement.

### ABOUT HOMER

Nothing certain is known about Homer. By the time of the Greek classical age—the fifth century B.C.—there was already a widespread belief that he was the blind, inspired author of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and that he had lived somewhere in the island culture of Asia Minor two or three hundred years earlier. The events depicted in the two epic poems were thought to have occurred several hundred years before Homer's



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lifetime. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were considered fundamental writings at the time of Plato, and they frequently received dramatic public recitations. In addition, the poems were held to exemplify the ideals of virtuous behavior, civic duty, and religious piety on which all education should be based.

However, even in ancient times, there were dissenting opinions. A few scholars believed that Homer was fictional and that the two epics were composed by different authors. Later, others questioned whether Homer was the author or merely the editor or scribe who first wrote down the poems, organizing a long oral tradition. Even the language of Homer obscured his identity: he composed in a highly stylized form of Greek that was not known to be particular to any geographical region, but conveyed the stories of Achilles and Odysseus in an elaborate and flexible poetic meter. Modern scholars have enriched the debate with intricate theories about how oral poetry is memorized and transmitted through many generations of reciters, opening up the possibility that the Homeric epics are not the creation of an individual author, in our contemporary understanding of the word "author."

What transcends all the differing opinions concerning the identity of Homer is the remarkable interwoven complexity and profound consistency of the two epic poems themselves.

At the very beginning of the long sequence of political and cultural development commonly referred to as Western civilization, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* powerfully and coherently delineated the narrative patterns that literature has adopted ever since to convey the meaning of human experience.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Since Athena knows that Odysseus is alive, why doesn't she tell Telemachus, rather than sending him "in quest of news of your long-lost father"? (p. 86)
2. When she and Menelaus tell their stories about past times in Troy and the missing Odysseus, Helen drugs the wine so no one will feel any pain. Are we to think that she is wise or unwise in doing so?
3. Why does Odysseus reject Calypso's offer of immortality?
4. In Phaeacia, why doesn't Odysseus immediately identify himself to Alcinous and Arete?

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5. In telling the story of the Cyclops, Odysseus says that he led some of his men to their deaths and then further endangered the rest of his crew by taunting Polyphemus as they escaped by boat. Since there are no other witnesses present when he tells this story, why does Odysseus show himself in such an unfavorable light?
6. How are the fate and death of Odysseus, as prophesied by Tiresias, different from those of Agamemnon and Achilles, both of whom Odysseus meets in the House of the Dead?
7. Why does Odysseus tell such long, elaborate, untrue stories about his life to introduce himself to Athena, Eumaeus, and Penelope? Are the stories in some sense truthful?
8. Why doesn't Penelope bring the suitors' courting to an end when she knows for certain that they have plotted to murder Telemachus?
9. Does Odysseus mean to warn Amphinomus about his plan to kill the suitors so that he can save himself? Why has Athena nevertheless "bound him fast to death"? (p. 381)
10. Why doesn't Odysseus explicitly reveal himself to Penelope before proceeding with his plans?
11. Why does Telemachus hang the serving women "so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death" (p. 454) instead of killing them as his father prescribes, cleanly with swords?
12. Why does Odysseus think it best to probe and test his aged father Laertes in every way, instead of revealing himself at once?

### For Further Reflection

1. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, we are told that Odysseus suffered much on his long journey homeward. How much of his suffering was the result of his own choices and how much was beyond his control? How are the two distinguished?
2. Odysseus has been absent from Ithaca for twenty years. What must he do to reclaim his standing as king, husband, and father, beyond killing the suitors? In returning home after a long absence, how can there be a balance between how we are remembered and what we have become?

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### Related Titles

\* C.P. Cavafy, "Ithaka" (1911)

Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, this Alexandrian poet interprets the meaning of Odysseus' wanderings and, by implication, that of all human wanderings.

\* Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI (1321)

Consigned in Dante's Hell to the region in which the sin of fraud is punished, Ulysses (Odysseus) tells of his last overreaching voyage, extending the Homeric story.

Homer, *The Iliad*

The epic story of the warrior Achilles' all-consuming anger and its consequences for both his fellow Greeks and for the Trojans defending their city. A profound depiction of the meaning of heroic human achievement in a world of war and strife, the *Iliad* is the essential complement to the *Odyssey*, showing Odysseus in his role of soldier, commander, and diplomat.

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)

Like Odysseus, the protagonist of Joyce's novel, Leopold Bloom, undertakes a complex journey consisting of encounters that test his sense of personal identity and his resolution to restore his domestic life with his wife, Molly. In innovative, many-layered language that captures the inner life of its early twentieth-century Dublin characters, Joyce encompasses two millennia of Western literary tradition, beginning with Homer.

\* Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"; "The Lotos-Eaters" (1842)

The Victorian poet expands on Homer's episodes and comments on the temptations of forgetfulness and enervation, emphasizing the insatiable restlessness of Ulysses (Odysseus).

Virgil, *The Aeneid*

Modeled on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, this grand Latin epic poem follows the Trojan hero Aeneas from the destruction of his city by the Greeks to his invasion of the Italian peninsula and the founding of Rome. Superficially a glorification of Roman imperial ambitions, *The Aeneid* is also a subtle critique of personal and public responsibilities and the costs of great political dominance.

Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (1990)

Imagining the journeys of a present-day Odysseus in the postcolonial world of the Caribbean, the 1992 Nobel Laureate's epic poem is an exploration of cultural identity and a meditation on the persistence of suffering and displacement.

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\* Cavafy's "Ithaca," Canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno*, and Tennyson's "Ulysses" and "The Lotos-Eaters" are all based on, and implicitly comment on, the story and characters of Homer's *Odyssey*. Read together, these poems challenge us to reflect further on the nature of Odysseus and his journey.