The Odyssey · Book I

Homer · c. 700 BC

The gods sit in council on Olympus while Odysseus wastes on Calypso's island, ten years after Troy. Athena takes the likeness of a stranger and goes down to Ithaca, where the wooers of Penelope eat Odysseus's house bare and his son Telemachus sits among them grieving. By nightfall the boy has been told to call an assembly, find a ship, and go looking for his father. The first of twenty-four books, read complete.

The whole of Book I, every word, in A. T. Murray's 1919 prose translation. Nothing is cut or modernised; the Greek names are Murray's.

LISTEN FOR

— How the poem begins at the end: the invocation tells you the crew will die before you meet any of them.

— The three councils in one book: the gods on Olympus, the stranger and the youth apart at their table, and Telemachus facing the wooers at night.

— Who is told what: Telemachus never learns that Mentes is Athena, and the poem says so in its last line about him.

— The fixed phrases: 'flashing-eyed Athena', 'wise Telemachus', 'winged words'. They return every time, and they are how a singer kept a poem this long.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

Odysseus	the man of many devices · ten years gone
Zeus	the cloud-gatherer · father of gods and men
Athena	the flashing-eyed goddess · as Mentes of the Taphians
Poseidon	the earth-shaker · who rages against Odysseus
Telemachus	son of Odysseus · sad at heart among the wooers
Penelope	daughter of Icarius · wife of Odysseus
Antinous	son of Eupeithes · a wooer
Eurymachus	son of Polybus · a wooer

THE PLACES

Olympus · Ithaca · Troy · Pylos · Sparta · Taphos

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	The invocation
1:34	The gods in council
6:22	Athena goes down to Ithaca
9:32	The feast
10:13	Mentes
16:19	Athena's counsel
20:23	Penelope and the minstrel
24:16	Antinous and Eurymachus
26:40	Night

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

The Odyssey Twenty-four books, composed in Greek hexameters in the eighth or seventh century BC and credited to Homer. This is A. T. Murray's prose translation of 1919 for the Loeb Classical Library; Book I has 444 lines.

The cattle of the Sun The crime of Book XII, told here first: the crew eat the cattle of the sun-god on Thrinacia and are drowned for it. The poem begins at the end.

Calypso The nymph of the island Ogygia, who has kept Odysseus seven years. Her name means 'she who hides'.

Aegisthus and Orestes Aegisthus seduced Clytemnestra and killed her husband Agamemnon on his return from Troy; their son Orestes killed Aegisthus. The poem holds the story up as a mirror for Telemachus throughout.

Polyphemus The one-eyed giant of Book IX, son of Poseidon and the nymph Thoosa. Odysseus put out his eye with a heated stake to escape his cave.

Mentes of the Taphians The Taphians were sea-traders and pirates of the islands off Acarnania, north of Ithaca. Athena chooses a guest-friend of the family whom no one in the house has seen.

The stranger The law of hospitality: a stranger is fed and seated before he is asked his name. Telemachus does it rightly, and the poem notes it; the wooers, who are guests, break it daily.

Phemius The household bard, who sings 'perforce', under compulsion of the wooers. Homer's own trade, shown from inside; he will be spared in the slaughter of Book XXII.

Penelope Her first appearance: veiled, between two handmaids, at the door-post, weeping. She speaks and is sent back upstairs by her son.

Speech shall be for men Telemachus's first act of authority, learned that afternoon from Athena. Penelope wonders at it; the Greek has her 'lay the wise saying of her son to heart'.

Eurycleia Odysseus's own nurse, bought by Laertes for twenty oxen, the price of a very valuable slave. She will know Odysseus by his scar in Book XIX.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy."

The first sentence. What the Muse is asked for, and what is left out of the asking.

"Look you now, how ready mortals are to blame the gods. It is from us, they say, that evils come, but they even of themselves, through their own blind folly, have sorrows beyond that which is ordained."

Zeus's first words in the poem, before anyone has mentioned Odysseus.

"Hail, stranger; in our house thou shalt find entertainment and then, when thou hast tasted food, thou shalt tell of what thou hast need."

Telemachus at the gate: food first, questions after.

"My mother says that I am his child; but I know not, for never yet did any man of himself know his own parentage."

Telemachus answering the stranger's question about his father.

"Nay, go to thy chamber, and busy thyself with thine own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid thy handmaids ply their tasks; but speech shall be for men, for all, but most of all for me; since mine is the authority in the house."

Telemachus to Penelope, in front of the wooers, a few hours after Athena has left him.

"So spoke Telemachus, but in his heart he knew the immortal goddess."

The last line of his scene with the wooers.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Zeus opens the council with Aegisthus, not Odysseus. What does the story of Aegisthus and Orestes have to do with the house in Ithaca, and why might the poet want it in the listener's mind before Telemachus appears?

2. Athena blames Zeus for forgetting Odysseus; Zeus blames Poseidon. Who, in this book, is responsible for the ten years' delay? Keep to what the text says.
3. Athena comes to Ithaca as Mentes, a stranger, rather than as herself. What does she gain by it? What does Telemachus do for a stranger that he could not have done for a goddess?
4. Watch the order of the first meal: water, bread, meat, wine, and only then a question. What is the poem showing us about the house of Odysseus, and about the wooers, who eat there every day?
5. Telemachus says he cannot know whether he is Odysseus's son. Is that modesty, doubt, or something else? What does Mentes see in his face?
6. Athena's counsel comes in three parts: call an assembly, send the wooers home, take a ship. Which of these does Telemachus do in this book, and how does he do it?
7. Why is Orestes named twice? What is Telemachus being asked to become, and what would it cost?
8. Penelope asks Phemius to stop the song of the returns; Telemachus tells her to go upstairs. Read his speech again. What has changed in him since the afternoon, and how do the wooers take it?
9. Antinous and Eurymachus answer Telemachus very differently. What does each want, and which of them is the more dangerous?
10. The book ends with the nurse bolting the door and the boy lying awake. Why end there, and not with the gods?
11. The poem calls Athena 'flashing-eyed' and Telemachus 'wise' every time they speak. Does 'wise' fit him yet? Is the epithet a description or a promise?

Homer, The Odyssey, Book I, in the English of A. T. Murray, The Odyssey with an English Translation, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1919), from the Perseus Digital Library's edition of that text. Public domain in the United States (published 1919); the Perseus digitisation is CC BY-SA 3.0.
Produced by a human who read the book. With help from computers, like everything these days.
stagedBooks · stagedbooks.com