

Discussion Questions, *The Odyssey*

1. The first twelve books of *The Odyssey* deal with Odysseus' journeys as he strives to return to his homeland. These books deal with strange, far-away lands and have a dream-like quality which is unlike the everyday, real quality of the last twelve books, which deal with Odysseus' homecoming. It has been suggested that the first twelve books of *The Odyssey* are a dream, or a myth that evokes the attempt of man to live among the gods. Read in this manner, the exploits of Odysseus and his men among the gods is disastrous, and it is only when Odysseus returns to the land of men that he can resume a normal, if somewhat tumultuous, life as a man. What events or passages might contribute to this view?
2. Odysseus seems to fall asleep at inopportune times. What purpose does his sleeping play in *The Odyssey*? Does his sleeping contribute to the theory that the first twelve books of the *Odyssey* deal with dreams or myths relating to man's interaction with the gods?
3. The theme of Zeus acting as a protector of travelers recurs in the *Odyssey*. In every case but one (that of the Phaeacians), those people who protect and sustain suppliants fare well; those who do not protect suppliants fare poorly. Why is the protection of suppliants so important to the work, and why are the Phaeacians (who protect suppliants) punished?
4. In book eleven, Odysseus and his men visit the underworld. While in the underworld, Odysseus meets with groups of women, heroes, and men who are punished for their transgressions. How do these meetings further the themes in *The Odyssey*? How do these meetings further the concept of the afterlife, as developed during Homer's time?
5. In book nine, Polyphemus curses Odysseus and his men for putting out his eye. This curse leads to a series of problems for Odysseus and his men. Later, in book thirteen, Odysseus curses the Phaeacians and their city is destroyed. Are these curses the proximate cause of the troubles of Odysseus, and the destruction of the Phaeacian city, and if so, why are they so powerful?
6. In book twenty-four, after Odysseus has killed the suitors and revealed himself to Laertes, the townspeople gather together to seek retribution for the killing of their sons and relations. Medon, seeking to avoid further bloodshed, appeals to the townspeople to avoid confrontation with Odysseus, Telemachus and Laertes. The townspeople reject Medon's appeal and journey to Laertes' homestead to seek retribution for the killing of their relations. At the last minute, Athena and Zeus intervene, marking an end to further bloodshed.

This ending is similar to the "Deus ex machina" ending which can be found in several Greek dramas. It is strikingly similar to the ending of *The Oresteia*, in which Athena intervenes in the prosecution of Orestes for manslaughter.

Does the ending in any way diminish the story of Odysseus? Is the ending intended to demonstrate the wisdom of the gods, since left to themselves, the men of Ithaca would have engaged in continued acts of retribution? Does the ending add to the circular nature of the story, since the epic began with Zeus and Athena discussing Odysseus' future, and homecoming in Ithaca?

7. Curses are uttered three times in the *Odyssey*, and in all three cases, the curse comes true. The first curse is uttered by Polyphemus in Book nine. The second curse is uttered by Odysseus in book thirteen. The third curse is uttered by Penelope in book seventeen. In each case, the curse is uttered by someone who suffers at the hands of another. Why are these curses effective? Does the effectiveness of the curse of Polyphemus, who himself has wronged Odysseus; make the curse seem less of a punishment for evil and more of an invocation of the power of the gods? Is there a concept of morality hidden in these curses, or is the curse designed to address a perceived wrong?
8. The theme of the good host and suppliant recurs in the *Odyssey*. In book fifteen, Menelaus relates his understanding of the role of suppliant and host to Telemachus. Menelaus seems to imply that there is a reciprocal relationship between the suppliant and host. In fact, a case can be made that the violation of this relationship was at the heart of the Trojan War, and that the violation of this relationship forms the basis for the *Odyssey* as well. Is Menelaus' conception of the duty of host/suppliant the most nearly correct view when looking at the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in total?
9. During the course of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus falls asleep at inopportune times. We also see Penelope sleep at various times in the epic. In the case of Odysseus, we are not told of his dreams, but in the case of Penelope, we are informed of her dream in book nineteen. Why is the concept of sleep and dreams so important in the *Odyssey*? Is Penelope testing Odysseus when she relates her dreams to him? Why does Penelope say, just before relating her dream to Odysseus, in chapter nineteen, "if he (Odysseus) ever existed"?
10. Throughout the last twelve books of the *Odyssey*, there are several portents shown, which are either sent by the gods, or requested by characters from the gods. In each case, the portent is favorable for Odysseus and Telemachus, and unfavorable for the suitors. Despite the assurances of both Athena and Zeus, Odysseus continues to request portents that point to a favorable outcome. Why does Odysseus continue to seek portents, when he is told by Athena that he will prevail? Does Odysseus' continued request for portents indicate a lack of belief or trust in the gods?