

Of Men and Monsters: Homer's *Odyssey*, Questions for Thought and Discussion

There is a lot to think about in each and every "book" (chapter) of the Odyssey. For this reason, I recommend that you read one chapter per sitting, certainly no more than two. Come back later to read more if you wish.

These questions are an optional tool for parent-teachers to test reading comprehension and to inspire further discussion at the dinner table. Please don't hand them to me, nor do I want you to work on them while you read. Instead, use them as a tool to guide your thinking after each reading session.

Book 1

- What is the Greek attitude about hospitality?
- How would you characterize Telemachus? What are his strengths? his weaknesses? How does Athena plan to affect Telemachus?

Book 2

- What are the suitors' attitudes towards Penelope's reluctance to choose? Are their motives romantic or monetary? What does one of these guys stand to gain by marrying Penelope?
- Why do they think it is their right to "demand" that she choose?
- What are the two different interpretations of the omen?

Book 3

- How does Athena help Telemachus prepare for Nestor?
- **Do a little research: who is Nestor?** What is the myth surrounding him and his kingship?
- What does Telemachus learn about himself? about the meaning of being a son? about the treatment of guests? about sacrifices to the gods? These are all things a father usually teaches a son but Odysseus' absence has kept Telemachus from learning these lessons earlier.

Book 4

- How do Menelaus and Helen compare with Nestor as hosts?
- Who is Proteus? How does Menelaus catch him? With whose help?
- What does Menelaus tell Telemachus about Odysseus' whereabouts?

Book 5

- How long does Odysseus stay on Calypso's island?
- What will Calypso give Odysseus if he stays? What can we deduce about Odysseus when he refuses?
- Why does Zeus, despite his liking of Odysseus, allow Poseidon to make this journey such an ordeal?

Book 6

- Odysseus is entirely stripped of his identity when he wakes up, what significant thing remains?
- What do you think Odysseus' speech to Nausicaa tells us about him? How does Odysseus' reluctance to appear "heroic" differ from a Trojan War style hero?
- Why does Nausicaa not want to escort Odysseus to the palace? Is she being inhospitable or not?



Book 7

- What is the difference between how Odysseus greets Nausicaa and how he greets Arête?
- Why does Odysseus sit in the ashes?
- Why does Odysseus avoid the plain truth when asked to identify himself?

Book 8

- Why might Demodocus' blindness be significant to our story's author?
- What does Odysseus do to win the respect of the young Phaeacians? Do you think that his form of heroism is respected equally?

Book 9

- Where do Odysseus and his men go first after they leave Troy?
- What dangers do the lotus eaters offer to Odysseus' mission?
- What sin does Polyphemus commit? What mistake does Odysseus make as he sails away? Why is this mistake not normal behavior for Odysseus, but perfectly normal for most of the heroes he knows?

Book 10

- What sin do the Laestrygonians commit? After the attack from the Laestrygonians, how many ships are left out of the original twelve?
- What sort of character is Circe? What craft does she practice that Penelope also practices? Why (aside from her magic) is she able to turn Odysseus' men into swine? How do they offend her?
- How long does Odysseus stay in Circe's palace?

Book 11

- What ritual does Odysseus perform in order to meet people he knows in the Underworld?
- What does Agamemnon tell Odysseus and his own homecoming? Do you suppose Odysseus will be cautious as he comes back home because of this warning?
- What is the reason for Ajax's anger at Odysseus?
- Who are Tantalus and Sisyphus? What are their ironic punishments?

Book 12

- How does Circe help Odysseus?
- What does the episode of the Sirens tell us about Odysseus' character?
- What advice does Odysseus take about Scylla and Charybdis? What does this tell us about leadership?
- Why are the cattle of Helios' island so tempting? What does it say about Odysseus when he does not give in, even though his crew is weak?



Book 13

- How do Poseidon and Zeus interact in this book? What is the balance of power between them? How does Zeus assert his authority? How does Poseidon assert his displeasure?
- How does Odysseus first feel as he lands on Ithaca? What does this say about his attitude about life at this point?
- Does he change when he realizes it is Athena? How does she react to his caution?

Book 14

- Consider Eumaeus behavior to Odysseus disguised as a beggar. What does this disguise test best?
- Odysseus tells the swineherd he is from what kind of background? Suffered what kind of hardships? How does Eumaeus react to Odysseus' story?
- Who gets the "boar's long loin . . . the cut of honor" in Eumaeus' shelter?
- What does Eumaeus' behavior say about his quality? (compare him to all the sources of sorrow in Odysseus' journey)

Book 15

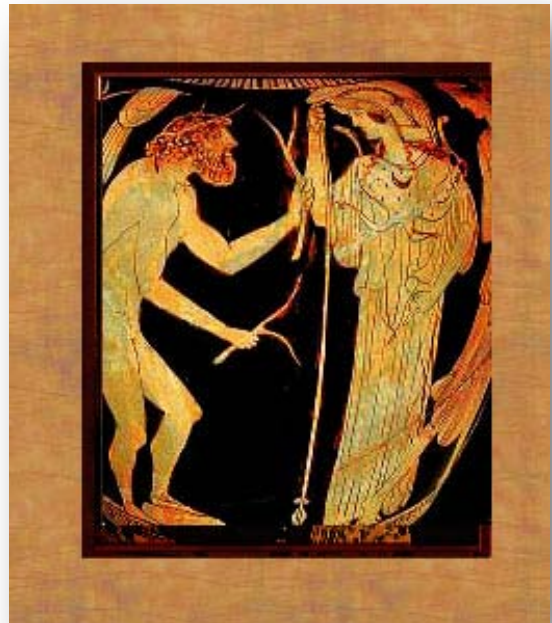
- Who gives going away presents to Telemachus? What does this signify?
- What is the portent which precedes Telemachus' departure?

Book 16

- How does Eumaeus greet Telemachus?
- How does Telemachus react when Odysseus identifies himself?
- What are the three major points of strategy in the plan which Odysseus tells to Telemachus?
- How does Penelope learn what the suitors are thinking?

Book 17

- What does Telemachus leave out of his "true" story when he talks to Penelope; what does he leave in?
- Where has Argos been lying in the absence of his master? What is Odysseus' reaction to seeing Argos?
- How does Odysseus handle his "humiliation"? Does he seem more at ease with it than Eumaeus and Telemachus?
- Do any of the suitors object to the poor treatment of beggar Odysseus and if so, do they redeem themselves?



Book 18

- What is Antinous' reaction to the unfriendly words Irus speaks to Odysseus?
- Has Telemachus fully reached manhood yet? Why is this important? What is the symbol of manhood?
- What is the implication of the maids' inappropriate behavior? (and what type of judgment is passed because of this behavior?)

Book 19

- What ruse does Odysseus tell Telemachus to carry out at the beginning of the book?
- How does Penelope react to what she hears of Odysseus? How does Odysseus react to her reaction?
- What foreshadowing prediction does Odysseus give to Penelope?
- How did Odysseus obtain the scar that Eurycleia recognizes?
- How does Penelope plan to test the suitors to see which one she will marry? (Is this really a way to choose or is it actually a way to put off the choice yet again?)

Book 20

- Why do the suitors behave even more inappropriately than usual?

Book 21

- What must the stringer of the bow do with his shot?
- How does Odysseus prove his identity to the cowherd and the swineherd?
- What is the purpose of the "biography" of the bow? (Look for the guest/host bond in this story)

Book 22

- What is Antinous doing when Odysseus shoots him (how ironic)? Why is he the first victim?
- How do the other suitors try to make an appeal to Odysseus? Why doesn't he listen?
- How much does Athena help Odysseus, and how much is the victory his own?
- The dead suitors are compared to what kind of creatures? Is this meant to be very tragic or lighthearted?

Book 23

- What future problems does Odysseus see as a result of the killing of the suitors?
- What does Odysseus want those outside his palace believe is happening within the palace?
- Where does Penelope order Eurycleia to make up the bed? How does Odysseus react to this?
- Who made the bed and what is remarkable about it?

Book 24

1. 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?
2. Why do Odysseus and Telemachus feel so fatalistic about the near future?
3. What does Athena (disguised as Mentor) do to insure that the families will not succeed in revenging the suitors' deaths? What does she do to ensure that Odysseus won't cause further havoc?

