

The Odyssey

A Greek hero's journey home seems to never end.

By Homer • Adapted by Bryon Cahill • Illustrations by David Ho

CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Voice

Narrators 1, 2, 3

Penelope, *Odysseus's wife*

Sailors 1, 2, 3

Odysseus, *a hero on his way home*

Polyphemus, *a Cyclops*

Cyclopes 1 and 2

Eurylochus, *one of Odysseus's men*

Circe, *a nymph*

Hermes, *messenger of the gods*

Tiresias, *a dead prophet*

PROLOGUE

Voice: Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course, once he had **plundered** the hallowed heights of Troy. Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds, and many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea, fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.

Narrator 1: It has been 10 long years since the end of the Trojan War. Odysseus, a Greek warrior and hero, has yet to return to his home. His wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, wait for him in Ithaca.

Narrator 2: Rough waters, ill

fortune, and the **wrath** of Poseidon, god of the sea, have stalled Odysseus's journey.

Narrator 3: With Odysseus's whereabouts unknown, men of Ithaca swarm to his estate to try to win the love of his wife. Penelope holds these suitors off, for now, but for how long?

Penelope: *(to herself)* Odysseus, wherever you may be, I pray that you are well out of danger. Come home. Come home to me and Telemachus. Your house is being overrun by barbarians. Your son is too long without his father. And your wife ... oh, how your wife misses you. Where are you, dear Odysseus? Come home!

SCENE 1

Narr 1: At present, Odysseus is far away on the island of the Cyclopes, a race of giant, one-eyed monsters.

Narr 2: Odysseus leads a small party to explore the island.

Narr 3: A storm rages in from the sea, and Odysseus and his men take shelter in a cave.

Sailor 1: Odysseus, look! The cave is filled with meats and cheeses! There's even a flock of sheep in a pen! Quick, let's make away with all this food! We can bring it back to the ship, and we'll be well fed for months!

Sailor 2: Yes! Hurry! Before the monster that lives here returns!

Odysseus: No, we will have a feast here, and then return to our ship.

Narr 1: Reluctantly, Odysseus's men obey him. They build a fire and cook some of the meat for a meal. They also drink some of the wine that they had brought with them from the ship.

Narr 2: Just as they are readying to leave, the master of the house arrives. He is Polyphemus, a Cyclops and the son of Poseidon.

Narr 3: Polyphemus throws down a hefty pile of logs when he spots the intruders with his one monstrous eye in the middle of his forehead.

Polyphemus: Strangers! Now who are you? Where did you

* vocab

PLUNDERED: robbed of goods by force

WRATH: vengeful anger





men in his mouth and devours them whole—**entrails**, flesh and bones, marrow, and all!

Narr 3: As Odysseus and his men look on in horror, Polyphemus heaves a boulder in front of the exit.

Sailor 3: We are trapped! We are doomed!

Narr 1: Odysseus thinks up a plan to escape.

Odysseus: Here, Cyclops, try this wine—to top off the banquet of human flesh you’ve bolted down!

Narr 2: Polyphemus snatches the jug of wine from Odysseus’s hand and pours it down his throat.

Polyphemus: More! And make it a hearty helping!

Narr 3: One of the sailors offers the giant his jug. Polyphemus drinks it all in one swallow and then turns back to Odysseus.

Polyphemus: And tell me your name now, quickly, so I can give my guest a gift to warm his heart.

Odysseus: You ask me the name I’m known by, Cyclops? I will tell you. But you must give me a gift as you have promised.

Polyphemus: Yes, yes, you will have your gift. Tell me your name. Now!

Odysseus: Nobody. Nobody is my name. So my mother and father call me, and so do all my friends.

Polyphemus: Nobody, is it? Well, then I shall eat Nobody last. That is my gift to *you*.

Narr 1: The Cyclops laughs loudly, and the sound echoes horribly off the cave walls. He then topples over, sprawls flat on

his back, and lays there, sleeping. Wine and chunks of human flesh dribble out of his mouth.

Narr 2: Odysseus cannot bear the grotesque beast a second more. He grabs a long, sharp stake from the pile of wood spilled on the floor and heats it in the **embers** of the fire until it is red.

Odysseus: Courage, men! No panic! No one hang back now! Here is our escape!

Narr 3: Odysseus charges the giant, ramming the burning spear into his one eye. Polyphemus’s blood comes boiling out and up around the smoking shaft. He rages and roars so loudly that all the other Cyclopes hear. They call out to Polyphemus from outside his cave.

Cyclops 1: What is it, Polyphemus?

Cyclops 2: What in the world’s the trouble?

Polyphemus: Nobody! It is *Nobody*, my friends! *Nobody’s* killing me!

Cyclops 1: If you are alone, and nobody’s trying to hurt you, then it must be a plague sent to you by the almighty god, Zeus, and there is no escape from *that!*

Cyclops 2: You should pray to your father, Poseidon, for help.

Narr 1: The other Cyclopes wander back to their own caves. Polyphemus moves the giant boulder back from the exit and

stands in front of it, daring Odysseus and his men to try to get by.

Narr 2: Odysseus unlocks the latch to the sheep pen, and he and his men escape by tying themselves to the underbellies of the sheep. They run as fast as they can from the blind, screaming monster.

He grabs a long, sharp stake from the pile of wood and heats it in the embers of the fire until it is red.

Narr 3: When the men reach their ship and shove off to sea, Odysseus calls to the Cyclops.

Odysseus: Polyphemus! Hear me! Your filthy crimes came down on your own head, you shameless cannibal!

Narr 1: Polyphemus runs out of his cave and starts to hurl great rocks and boulders into the sea, nearly hitting the ship. Odysseus is not phased.

Odysseus: How dare you eat your guests in your own house?

Sailor 1: So headstrong! Why rile the beast again? That rock he flung into the sea just now ... if it had hit us, we’d have died on the spot!

Narr 2: Odysseus ignores him and continues to enrage Polyphemus.

Odysseus: Cyclops! If any man on the face of the earth should ask you who blinded you, shamed you so—say it was Odysseus, raider of cities! *He* gouged out your eye!

Narr 3: The ship is at last out of range, and blind Polyphemus kneels to the ground.

Polyphemus: Hear me, Poseidon, god of the sea. If I really am your son and you claim to be my father, then come grant that Odysseus, raider of cities who makes his home in Ithaca, never reaches that place. Or, if he is fated to see his country and his people again, let him come home late in life, a broken man—all shipmates lost, alone on a stranger’s ship, and let him find a world of pain at home!

Narr 1: Thunder cracks the sky. Waves rear up from the ocean’s depths. The wind blasts as the blind and bloody Cyclops grins.

SCENE 2

Narr 2: Odysseus and his men sail for many days and nights.

Narr 3: They are blown off course again and come upon an island. It is the home of Circe, a nymph.

Narr 1: Attempting to encourage his men, Odysseus addresses them on the shore.

Odysseus: Listen to me, my comrades, brothers in hardship. We can’t tell east from west, dawn from dusk, nor where the sun that lights our lives goes under the earth nor where it

sail from? Are you out on a trading spree or just roving the waves like pirates?

Odysseus: We come from Troy and are headed for our home in Ithaca. We have been driven off course many times by the warring winds. We are on a route that is on no map, and so we have come to you, mighty

Cyclops. We stand here, mortal men at the height of just your knees, in hopes that you will give us a warm welcome.

Narr 1: In response to Odysseus’s speech, Polyphemus lunges out with his giant hands, grabs two sailors, and knocks their heads against the ground.

Narr 2: Polyphemus pops the

* **vocab**

ENTRAILS: internal organs

EMBERS: the smoldering remains of a fire

rises. We must think of a plan at once—some cunning stroke. I doubt there's one still left. But I can see smoke drifting up through the woods ahead. Eurylochus, take a group of men, and lead them to the smoke. Find out whether friend or foe lives there.

Narr 2: Deep in the wooded **glens**, Eurylochus and a group of men come to Circe's palace. Mountain wolves and lions roam the grounds, but they do not attack. The animals come pawing around the men.

Narr 3: Suddenly, a spellbinding voice can be heard singing from inside the palace.

Eurylochus: Friends, there's someone inside playing a great loom, and how she sings—enthraling! The whole house is echoing in her song.

Narr 1: Sensing a trap, Eurylochus stays back while the other men enter the palace. They meet Circe, and she ushers them in.

Circe: Come in—you are welcome guests in my home! Have a seat at my table, and sample some cheese, barley, and pale honey. Eat! You look ravenous! Eat!

Narr 2: When the men are preoccupied with shoveling food into their mouths, Circe takes out her wand and turns them all into pigs. Eurylochus watches through a window in horror.

Narr 3: Eurylochus runs back to the beach to tell Odysseus what he has witnessed.

Odysseus: Lead me back there, Eurylochus, by the same way that you came.

Eurylochus: Don't force me back there, Captain. You will never return yourself, I swear. You'll never bring a single man back alive. Quick, cut and run with the rest of us! We can still escape the fatal day!

Odysseus: Eurylochus, you stay right here, eating, drinking, safe by our black ship. I must be off. Necessity drives me on.

They sail to a land where no mortal has ever been and no light has ever touched.

Narr 1: Odysseus, unconcerned with his own well-being, trudges forward through the woods. As he approaches Circe's palace, Hermes, the messenger god, steps in his path.

Hermes: Where are you going, my unlucky friend? The gods have been watching your journey from above, and I must say, you don't seem to be getting anywhere.

Odysseus: If the gods want to help me, then help me, Hermes. If not, then stay out of my way.

Hermes: So stubborn! All right then, I can save you.

Narr 2: Hermes hands Odysseus an herb and instructs him to eat it.

Hermes: The power of this herb alone will protect you from Circe's powerful spell. It is called *moly*. It will keep you human when all others turn to swine.

Narr 3: Odysseus eats the herb and enters the palace. Hermes flies back to Mount Olympus.

Narr 1: Inside the palace, Circe attempts to turn Odysseus into a pig. The herb stops her magic, and the hero draws his sword and advances on her.

Circe: Who are you? Where are you from? Your city? Your parents? I'm wonder struck that you are not bewitched by my spell! Never has any man withstood my magic! Never!

Odysseus: I am Odysseus, royal son of Laertes. I have been long trying to journey home, but the gods use me as their plaything. No more. Return me my men, and we will be gone.

Circe: Very well, Odysseus. I will do what you ask of me. But only if you agree to stay with me here, for one year, and be my lover.

Narr 2: Odysseus wants nothing more than to return to Ithaca. But he knows that he cannot leave his men to die as pigs.

Odysseus: As you wish.

Narr 3: A full year goes by, and Odysseus and his men, no longer pigs, are released. Before they board their ship, Circe offers some advice.

Circe: You are lost on your journey, and I cannot tell you how to return to Ithaca. No man, woman, or nymph alive can. You must travel to the



underworld and find the ghost of Tiresias. Only he can show you the way.

SCENE 3

Narr 1: Odysseus and his men return to their ship and sail off toward the kingdom of the dead.

Narr 2: They sail to a land where no mortal has ever been and no light has ever touched. Odysseus, unafraid, **disembarks** and makes an offer of milk, honey, wine, and water to attract the souls of the dead.

Narr 3: After a visit from a dead companion, Odysseus sees the ghost of Tiresias.

Tiresias: Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits, man of pain, what now? What brings you here, forsaking the light of day to see this joyless kingdom of the dead?

Odysseus: You know so much about me, wise prophet. Then you must know also that I seek my homeland, my Ithaca. I have been away far too long.

Tiresias: A sweet, smooth journey home you seek? Ah ... but a god will make it hard for you.

Odysseus: It is Poseidon you speak of. His rage is relentless.

Tiresias: You will never escape he who shakes the earth, still quaking with anger at you because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son. Even so,

* **vocab**

GLENS: small, secluded valleys

DISEMBARKS: goes ashore from a ship

you and your crew may still reach home, suffering all the way, if only you have the power to curb their wild desire and curb your own!

Narr 1: Odysseus nods, thinking of Circe.

Tiresias: When you finally arrive home, and you will, you will find a world of pain. Crude, **arrogant** men are devouring all your goods and courting your noble wife. No doubt you will pay them back in blood.

Odysseus: Any man who dares threaten my home will surely die.

Tiresias: When, at last, your affairs are in order, you will sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea, Poseidon—a ram, a bull, and a wild boar—then journey home and **render** noble offerings up to the deathless gods who rule the skies.

Odysseus: So then I will reach Ithaca before death?

Tiresias: One day, your own death will at last steal upon you. It will be a gentle, painless death, borne down on you with the years of ripe old age. All your people will be there in blessed peace around you.

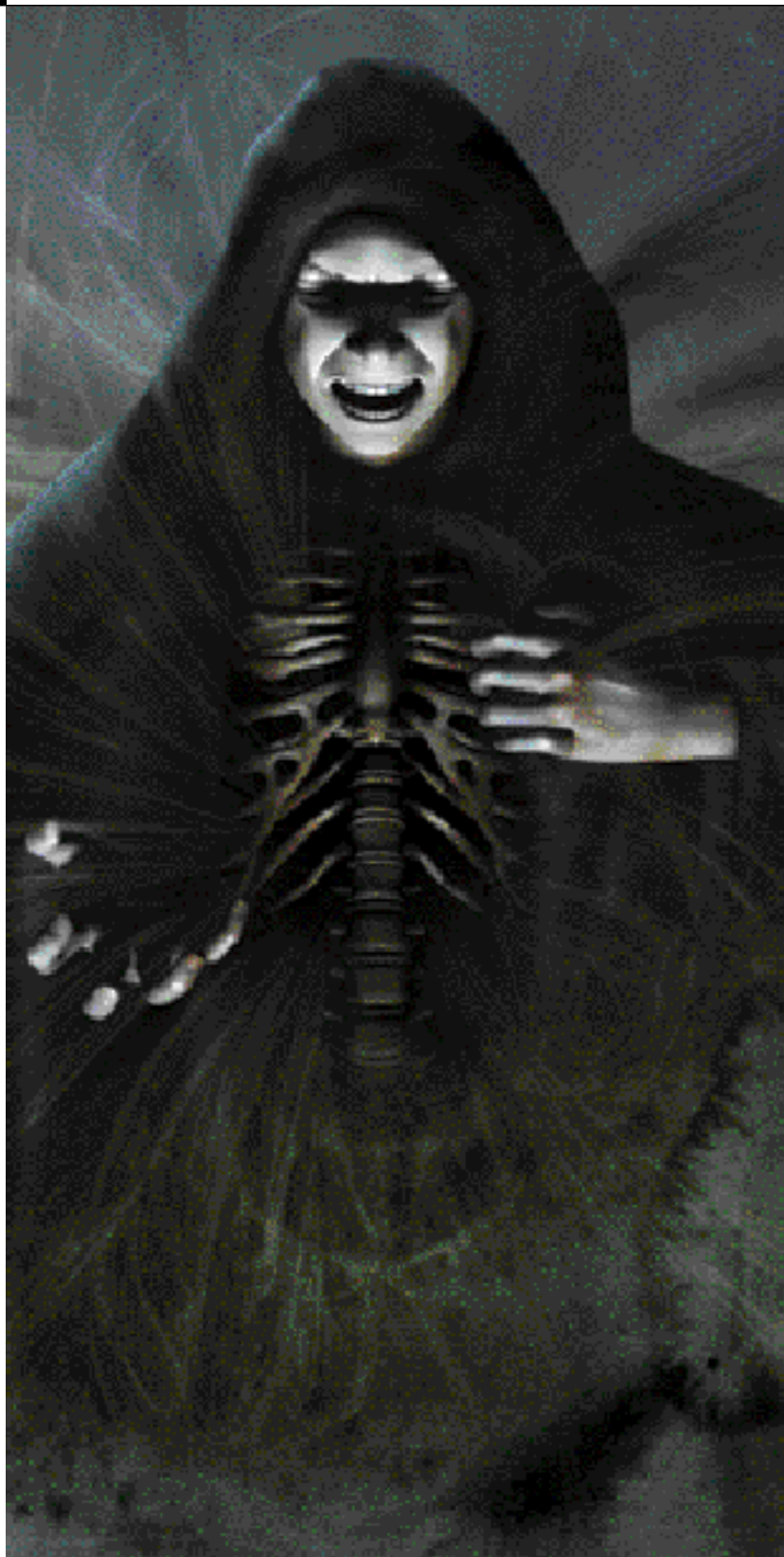
Odysseus: That sounds pleasing to me.

Tiresias: All that I have told you will come true.

*** vocab**

ARROGANT: overbearing pride in oneself

RENDER: to present



POSTSCRIPT

The play you have just read was adapted from a very small section of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. The entire poem is separated into 24 books. The main sections of the play (Cyclops, Circe, and the kingdom of the dead) take place as flashbacks in Books 9–11.

Odysseus's journey home is one of the longest, most arduous tales ever told! Every time he gets close to his destination, something (or some god) stands in his way, and he is once again swept to the ends of the earth.

Meanwhile, in Ithaca, Odysseus's wife, Penelope, longs for the day when her husband will return to her. Their son, Telemachus, is just reaching manhood, and yet he is still too young to fight off the countless suitors that raid his father's home. All lives are in disarray.

Will Odysseus ever make it home? Well, if you believe Tiresias, the dead prophet, then yes, he most certainly will. The better question to ask would be: What, if anything, can we learn from Odysseus's impossible journey?

Take a closer look at Odysseus's character. What are his strengths? What are his flaws? Are there ways he might better handle situations?

Make your predictions, and then (if you're feeling zealous) you can read the entire poem at www.online-literature.com/homer/odyssey. ■

WHO WAS HOMER?

Scholars believe that the epic poet Homer was born in Ionia in Asia Minor more than 2,000 years ago, somewhere between 800 and 700 B.C.

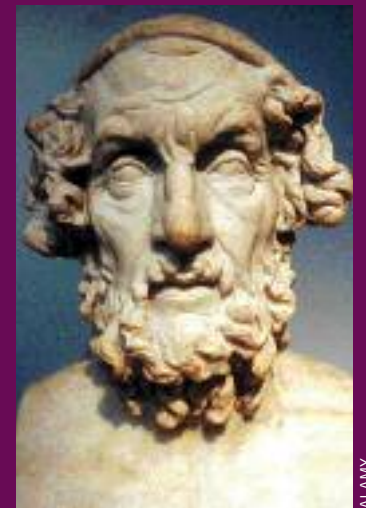
Because Homer lived so long ago, there is little evidence of who he was. When relaying the details of Homer's life, historians often use the words *probably* or *most likely*.

There is a long-running controversy about Homer's epic poems. Some scholars believe that *The Odyssey* and its companion, *The Iliad*, were written by several different poets. Other scholars are adamant that Homer is the one true author of the poems.

If Homer is the true author, he would have had to memorize more than 28,000 lines of both poems. Poets traditionally sang or chanted their works to captive audiences.

There is another unproven theory that Homer was blind, because of the description of a blind minstrel who sang about the fall of Troy in *The Odyssey*.

Despite all that is unknown about Homer, the endurance of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* is a sure thing. For thousands of years, many poets have measured their own creations against those important works.



ALAMY

WRITE ABOUT IT

Odysseus's wife, Penelope, has only a brief role in the play's prologue. In the epic poem, however, she has a much greater role. She has to be very clever to keep all those suitors at bay! How do you suppose she continuously wards off their advances?

Write a story that shows Penelope as a steadfast woman who somehow manages to hold off her suitors. Send your stories to word@weeklyreader.com. Write *Penelope* in the subject line of your e-mail, and we will publish the best stories on our blog at www.readandwriting.com.