

- 1) Background on Troy narrative in Sourcebook, the *Iliou Persis* ("Destruction of Troy"); note Odysseus' role in aftermath of the war.

Those in the wooden horse fall upon their enemies.

They kill many and take the city by force.

Neoptolemos kills Priam, who has taken refuge at the altar of Zeus Herkeios.

Menelaos murders Deiphobos,

he finds Helen and leads her down to the ships.

Aias [Ajax] son of Oileus takes Kassandra by force, dragging her away from the wooden statue of Athena.

The Achaeans, angry at this, want to stone Aias [Ajax] to death,

but he takes refuge at the altar of Athena,

and so is preserved from the immediate danger.

The Achaeans put the city to the torch.

They slaughter Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles.

Odysseus kills Astyanax.

and Neoptolemos takes Andromache as his prize ...

Then the Achaeans sail off.

while Athena plots destruction for them on the seas.

- 2) Longinus, *On the Sublime* (2nd century CE): Professor in Rome.

"...writing the *Iliad* in the heyday of his genius he made the whole piece lively with dramatic action, whereas, in the *Odyssey* narrative predominates, the characteristic of old age. So in the *Odyssey* one may liken Homer to the setting sun; the grandeur remains without the intensity.... We see the ebbing tide of Homer's greatness."

This is baloney.

- 3) [1] Relate to me, O Muse, of that many-sided [*poly-tropos*] hero who traveled far and wide after he had sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many were the people with whose customs and thinking [*noos*] he was acquainted; many things he suffered [*algea*] at sea while seeking to save his own life [*psukhê*] and to achieve the safe homecoming [*nostos*] of his companions; but do what he might he could not save his men, for they perished through their own sheer recklessness in eating the cattle of the Sun-god Helios; so the god prevented them from ever reaching home. ... [11] So now all who escaped death in battle or by shipwreck had got safely home except Odysseus, and he, though he was longing for his return [*nostos*] to his wife and country, was detained by the goddess Calypso, who had got him into a large cave and wanted to marry him. But as years went by, there came a time when the gods settled that he should go back to Ithaca; even then, however, when he was among his own people, his trials [*athloi*] were not yet over;

Many of the *Odyssey*'s themes are introduced (in grand, Homeric fashion) in this opening prologue.

- a) *polu-tropos*. Of many turns, ways, bents. (Compare *heliotropic*.) An excellent example: Ed vs. Robocop.

- b) **noos**: designates realm of consciousness, of rational functions; ‘intuition, perception’. Odysseus will only return home after learning about the *noos* of others – and implicitly, his own.
- c) **nostos**: ‘return, homecoming; song about homecoming; return to light and life’. The *Odyssey* will juggle with two different types of homecomings – a physical (Book 1-12) and just as important, a mental (in the *noos*, Books 13-24).
- d) **âthlos (aethlos)** ‘contest, ordeal’; **âthlêtês** ‘athlete’. Odysseus, like Herakles and Akhilles, will have to undergo challenges (contests, *athloi*) before coming home to his own identity.
- 3) *Nostos* is going to be what sets apart Odysseus from the *other* Homeric hero, Akhilles. Athena to Zeus, 1.80: I will also conduct [Telemakhos] to Sparta and to Pylos, to see if he can hear anything about the return [*nostos*] of his dear father—for this will give him genuine fame [*kleos*] throughout humankind.” Odysseus is going to obtain *kleos* as well as *nostos*. Compare Odysseus with the very testy Akhilles in the underworld.
- 4) This conjunction between *nostos* and *kleos* is made explicit throughout the *Odyssey* as Telemakhos learns what he is searching for. At 2.360: “I am going to Sparta and to Pylos to see if I can hear anything about the *nostos* of my dear father.” 3.79: “[Nestor,] I seek the *kleos* of my unhappy father Odysseus, who is said to have sacked the town of Troy in company with yourself.”
- 5) The first four books are often called the *Telemakhia* because Telemakhos (and *not*) Odysseus is the main focus. A **mistake** to discount the thematic significance of these books. An example:
- 6) Centrifugal forces at work also on the son: in order to have a *nostos*, Telemakhos too must leave home.
- 7) 1.267, Athena (in disguise) to Telemakhos: As for yourself, let me prevail upon you to take the best ship you can get, with a crew of twenty men, and **go in quest** of your father who has so long been missing. Some one may tell you something, or (and people often hear things in this way) some heaven-sent message [*kleos*] may direct you. First go to Pylos and ask Nestor; thence go on to Sparta and visit Menelaos, for he got home last of all the Achaeans; if you hear that your father is alive and about to achieve his homecoming [*nostos*], you can put up with the waste these suitors will make for yet another twelve months. If on the other hand you hear of his death, come home at once, celebrate his funeral rites with all due pomp, build a grave marker [*sêma*] to his memory, and make your mother marry again.
- 8) Telemakhos—‘he who battles from afar’—must go afar to search for his father. The two options for Odysseus: *nostos* or death (through metonymy with *sêma*).
- 9) Oral metapoetics: the song of Phemios. 1.325. Phemios was still singing, and his hearers sat rapt in silence as he told the baneful tale of the homecoming [*nostos*] from Troy, and the ills Athena had laid upon the Achaeans.... “Phemios,” [Penelope] cried, “you know many another feat of gods and heroes, such as poets love to celebrate. Sing the suitors some one of these, and let them drink their wine in silence, but cease this sad tale, for it breaks my

sorrowful heart, and reminds me of my lost husband for whom I have grief [*penthos*] ever without ceasing, and whose name [*kleos*] was great over all Hellas and middle Argos.”

Phemios is, in effect, singing the *Odyssey*, a baneful tale of *nostos*. (Phemios’ name means ‘the speaker’, the teller: his function is to broadcast *kleos*.)

10) Telemakhos’ first ‘adult’ act: [345] “Mother,” answered Telemakhos, “let the bard sing what he has a mind [*noos*] to; bards are not responsible [*aitios*] for the ills they sing of; it is Zeus, not they, who is responsible [*aitios*], and who sends weal or woe upon mankind according to his own good pleasure. There should be no feeling of sanction [*nemesis*] against this one for singing the ill-fated return of the Danaans, for people always favor most warmly the *kleos* of the latest songs. Make up your mind to it and bear it; Odysseus is not the only man who never came back from Troy, but many another went down as well as he. Go, then, within the house and busy yourself with your daily duties, your loom, your distaff, and the ordering of your servants; for speech is man’s matter, and mine above all others—for it is I who am master here.”

11) Penelope is simply *stunned* by Telemakhos’ speech and withdraws to her room. Telemakhos has just speech-acted the first literary criticism in Western literature. What makes a good song? It’s recent (‘top 40’) and it’s full of *kleos*: what could be better? If it’s full of *penthos*, that’s the bard’s choice: the bard who has a *noos*, a brain.

12) Brains are an important part of the first book. In the angry council scene in Book two, a suitor attacks Telemakhos and his mother: “We are not the ones who are responsible [*aitioi*] but your mother is, for she knows many kinds of craftiness [*kerdos*]. This three years past, and close on four, she has been driving us out of our *thumos*, by encouraging each one of us, and sending him messages that say one thing but her mind [*noos*] means other things.” Penelope has a fine, crafty *noos* and knows how to employ it to good effect: the trick of the funeral shroud. The name of the suitor? *Anti-noos* (no-brain, or ‘anti-brain.’)

13) Telemakhos’ journey: to discover the *nostos* (and the *noos*) of his father (cf. Nestor’s reply that 3.102: ‘in singleness of heart and purpose [*noos*], we advised the Argives how all might be ordered for the best.’) Nestor’s explanation of the journey home: [130] “When, however, we had sacked the city of Priam, and were setting sail in our ships as heaven had dispersed us, then Zeus saw fit to vex the Argives on their homeward voyage [*nostos*]; for they had not all been either wise [with *noos*] or just [*dikaios*], and hence many came to a bad end through the anger [*mênis*] of Zeus’ daughter Athena, who brought about a quarrel between the two sons of Atreus.

The qualities needed for a true homecoming: a *noos*; *dikê*; and the acquiescence of the antagonist god. [You can almost make a checkbox for each of these as Odysseus travels his *nostos*.]

14) Story of *Orestes*: comparandum to Telemakhos. [Return to this later in course.]

15) Next move: to Menelaus. Introduction of Helen. “Thus did [Menelaus] speak, and his words set them all to weeping. Helen wept, Telemakhos wept, and so did Menelaos, nor could Pisistratus keep his eyes from filling ...”. (4.168). One of the bizarre

moments of the epic: Helen and the drinks. She plants a drug (*pharmakon*) that is 'non-penthos, non-kholos, and full of *lethe* for all ills. Whoever drinks wine thus drugged cannot shed a single tear all the rest of the day, not even though his father and mother both of them drop down dead, or he sees a brother or a son hewn pieces before his very eyes.' (4.219). Result? Two stories about Odysseus. (Odysseus in rags while infiltrating city; Odysseus in the Trojan horse.) Odysseus is defined by the *pharmakon* as *penthos*: cf. the song 'man of constant sorrow' in *O Brother Where Art Thou*. The remembering of Odysseus normally brings sorrow.

16) Odysseus himself is a pretty sorrowing guy as well: 4.148: She found him sitting upon the beach with his eyes ever filled with tears, his sweet life wasting away as he wept for his homecoming [nostos]; for he had got tired of Calypso, and though he was forced to sleep with her in the cave by night, it was she, not he, that would have it so. As for the daytime, he spent it on the rocks and on the sea-shore, weeping, crying aloud for his despair, and always looking out upon the sea.

17) The micro-narrative image of Proteus. Again, another story with 'too much information': Menelaus goes on at great length about the capture of the sea god Proteus. Especially notice: 4.444: The moment you see that [Proteus] is asleep seize him; put forth all your strength [*biê*] and hold him fast, for he will do his very utmost to get away from you. He will turn himself into every kind of creature that goes upon the earth, and will become also both fire and water; but you must hold him fast and grip him tighter and tighter, till he begins to talk to you and comes back to what he was when you saw him go to sleep; then you may slacken your hold [*biê*] and let him go;

This description applies equally well to Odysseus, the 'man of many turns': it is only after many struggles, and many self-fashionings, that Odysseus will 'come back to what he was': before he left Ithaka. The Odysseus is a poem of shifting identities.

18) The set-up for the 'entrance' of Odysseus: 4.842: Meantime the suitors went on board and sailed their ways over the sea, intent on murdering Telemakhos. Now there is a rocky islet called Asteris, of no great size, in mid channel between Ithaca and Samos, and there is a harbor on either side of it where a ship can lie. Here then the Achaeans placed themselves in ambush. The Telemakhia ends with two suspended *nostoi*: both father and son must return to Ithaka (and implicitly to each other). For each, the journey is full of danger.

Exercise: Our first introduction of Odysseus doesn't actually involve him at all: it is through the *memory* of him.

Helen: "Menelaos, son of Atreus, and you my good friends, sons of honorable men (which is as Zeus wills, for he is the giver both of good and evil, and can do what he chooses), feast here as you will, and listen while I tell you a tale in season. I cannot indeed name every single one of the exploits [*athlos*] of Odysseus, but I can say what he did when he was in the Trojan *dêmos*, and you Achaeans were in all sorts of difficulties. He covered himself with wounds and bruises, dressed himself all in rags, and entered the enemy's city looking like a menial or a beggar, quite different from how he looked when he was among his own people. In this disguise he entered the city of Troy, and no one said anything to him. I alone recognized him and began to question him, but he was too cunning for me. When, however, I had washed and anointed him and had given him clothes, and after I had sworn a solemn oath not to betray him to the Trojans till he had got safely back to his own camp and to the ships, he explained to me the whole plan [*noos*] of the Achaeans. He killed many Trojans and got much information before he reached the Argive camp, for all which things the Trojan women made lamentation, but for my own part I was glad, for my heart was beginning to long after my home, and I was unhappy about the wrong [*atê*] that Aphrodite had done me in taking me over there, away from my country, my girl, and my lawful wedded husband, who is indeed by no means deficient either in looks or understanding."

[265] Then Menelaos said, "All that you have been saying, my dear wife, is true. I have traveled much, and have learned the plans and *noos* of many a hero, but I have never seen such another man as Odysseus. What endurance too, and what courage he displayed within the wooden horse, wherein all the bravest of the Argives were lying in wait to bring death and destruction upon the Trojans. At that moment you came up to us; some *daimôn* who wished well to the Trojans must have set you on to it and you had Deiphobos with you. Three times did you go all round our hiding place and pat it; you called our chiefs each by his own name, and mimicked all our wives. Diomedes, Odysseus, and I from our seats inside heard what a noise you made. Diomedes and I could not make up our minds whether to spring out then and there, or to answer you from inside, but Odysseus held us all in check, so we sat quite still, all except Antiklos, who was beginning to answer you, when Odysseus clapped his two brawny hands over his mouth, and kept them there. It was this that saved us all, for he muzzled Antiklos till Athena took you away again."

Questions:

- 1) What do we learn about *Odysseus* in these passages: what are his characteristics?
- 2) What do we learn about *Helen* in these passage: what are *her* characteristics?