

STUDY PACKET—HOMER’S ODYSSEY

INSTRUCTIONS:

Read all of this packet carefully before reading Homer’s *Odyssey*. After you have read the background information, refer to the “**SUMMER READING ASSIGNMENT DETAILS**” (on **page 4** of this packet), and complete your reading and written assignment before the first week of school.

This assignment is worth **400 pts**

Historical Background:

One thing that has led centuries of readers to believe that Mycenae really existed is the vividness of Homer’s descriptions and the minute details of life in the late Bronze Age that dominate *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Even though most of Homer’s information must have been handed down through centuries of memorized refrains, the pictures he presents often have the accuracy of documentary film. His descriptions of the bronze-armored Achaeans, with their horse-plumed helmets, long spears, and figure-eight shields, present a picture of ancient Greek battle gear that has since been proven accurate by the discoveries of archaeologists. The detailed catalog of ships in Book 2 is practically a geography lesson, ranging over the entire Greek world. The battle scenes show a startling knowledge of human anatomy, and though they occur again and again—often in the same words—the episodes throw the reader right into the heat of the battle. Today we can still walk around the foundations of the walled cities of Troy and Mycenae and see the remnants of the places Homer describes. We can even learn about weaving, hunting, shipbuilding, plowing, shepherding and how to make offerings to appease the gods from Homer.

Greek tradition says that the Trojan War took place in the 12th century B.C. and archaeological evidence supports this claim. The Greeks—Homer refers to them at different times as Argives or Achaeans or Danaans—were an alliance of small kingdoms, each with its own rulers, powerful clans, and legends. In the Trojan War, a federation of these Greek kingdoms mounted a great political expedition across the Aegean Sea. They sailed to Troy (also known as Ilion), on the west coast of Asia Minor and finally sacked the city around 1184 B.C.

Why did these Greeks undertake such a complicated and faraway venture? If we are interested only in history, we might suggest that they wanted to capture the lucrative merchant trade monopolized by Troy, which was strategically located on the edge of the Black Sea between Asia and the West. If we are intrigued by poetry—and Homer’s *Iliad*, for all its historical accuracies, is above all a work of poetry—we must take into account the legend of Helen of Troy and move into the world of myth that surrounds the Greek warriors.

Mythological Background:

The Iliad (composed around 750 B.C., nearly 500 years after the fall of Troy) focuses on **one small part** of the Trojan War, nearly ten years into the siege. (Homer’s audience would have already known the details of how the war started and ended.) There are really two wars narrated in *The Iliad*—one between the Greeks and the Trojans and one among the gods themselves—and two legends explain the beginnings of these conflicts.

The first legend concerns Helen, the daughter of Tyndareus and Leda (though she is also said to have been sired by Zeus, who took the form of a swan to ravish Leda). Helen was the most beautiful woman in Achaea. When she was of marrying age, suitors flocked from all over Greece to offer her gifts and marriage, but her father was afraid to antagonize any of these powerful kings and princes by choosing one of them. Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, finally suggested that they all swear to support whoever among them was chosen. The lucky winner was the very rich Menelaus of Sparta, brother to Agamemnon.

The second legend concerns Paris (a.k.a. Alexandros), one of the sons of King Priam of Troy. King Peleus and Thetis (the sea-goddess) were married, and all the gods were invited except Eris, the goddess of discord. Angry at being excluded, Eris tossed a golden apple among the guests. On the apple was inscribed “for the fairest one,” and Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each claimed the prize. They finally chose the Trojan prince Paris, a handsome and unworldly young man, to decide which goddess was the fairest. Each goddess offered him a bribe and Paris chose Aphrodite’s—she promised to give him the most beautiful woman alive, Helen, who was already married to Menelaus, king of Sparta. From that point, Hera and Athena vowed revenge on Paris’s hometown, Troy.

These two legends then came together.

Paris went to Sparta as a guest of Menelaus and while Menelaus was away on a mission, Paris violated the sacred bond of hospitality by abducting his host’s wife. Menelaus then sought the help of his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and the most powerful ruler of his time, and the Greeks gathered together a massive naval force and mounted an expedition against Troy to reclaim Helen and sack the city.

Some believe that raising the army took ten years. According to the figures in Book 2 of *The Iliad*, the assembled force consisted of more than 1,100 ships and between 50,000 and 100,000 men. The Achaeans camped on the beachhead near the plain of Troy and besieged the city unsuccessfully for nine years, making occasional forays into neighboring towns, looting gold and carrying off women. This is where *The Iliad* begins—occupying a period of **less than two months in the tenth year of the war** and focusing on the rage of the great Argive warrior Achilles and his battle with the Trojan prince, Hector.

The Iliad never shows us the fall of Troy, though it certainly foreshadows it. According to legend, the Greeks later persuaded the Trojans to accept an offering of a giant wooden horse. Once the horse was inside the gates, the Greeks jumped out from their hiding place within it, opened the gates of the city, and sacked Troy. Menelaus then took Helen back and the Achaeans sailed for home. Homer’s *Odyssey* tells us about that journey home, focusing specifically on Odysseus’ voyage back to Ithaca.

The Great Olympians:

1. Zeus [a.k.a. *Jupiter*, a.k.a. *Jove*] – ruler of the earth
2. Poseidon [a.k.a. *Neptune*] – ruler of the sea, brother to Zeus
3. Hades [a.k.a. *Pluto*] – ruler of the underworld, brother to Zeus
4. Hestia [a.k.a. *Vesta*] – virgin goddess of the hearth (home), sister to Zeus
5. Hera [a.k.a. *Juno*] – goddess of marriage, sister and wife of Zeus
6. Ares [a.k.a. *Mars*] – god of war, son to Zeus and Hera

Other Children of Zeus:

7. Athena [a.k.a. *Minerva*] – virgin goddess of battle, protector of civilized life, daughter of Zeus alone
8. Apollo [a.k.a. *Phoibos Apollo*] – master musician and lord of the bow (archer)
9. Aphrodite [a.k.a. *Venus*] – goddess of love and beauty
10. Hermes [a.k.a. *Mercury*] – messenger of Zeus, known to be fast, shrewd and cunning
11. Artemis [a.k.a. *Diana*] – huntsman-in-chief, protector of youth, virgin goddess, twin sister of Apollo

Hera's Son:

12. Hephaestus [a.k.a. *Vulcan*] – god of fire, ugly and lame, *sometimes* regarded as the son of Hera & Zeus

The Traditional Folk or Oral Epic—Basic Definition:

The epic is a long narrative poem in an elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures that form an organic whole principally because of their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation, people or race. (*Holman & Harmon*)

Stylistic Devices of the Traditional Folk or Oral Epic:

- The poet opens by *stating the theme* or argument and *invoking the Muse*.
- The narration opens *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”).
- The poet includes detailed *catalogues* of warriors, ships and armies.
- The *setting* is vast, covering great nations, the world, or the universe.
- The *epic hero* is a figure of high stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance.
- The action consists of deeds requiring *superhuman courage* and *superhuman strength*.
- *Supernatural forces*—gods, angels, and demons—interest themselves in the action and intervene in it from time to time.
- The characters give frequent *formal speeches*.
 - presented either in dramatic monologues or informal dialogues
 - give the poem and its characters an immediate presence
 - may have offered opportunities for dramatics during recitals
- The poet often introduces a character and then presents a *capsule history* either of the character’s noble genealogy or his heroic deeds.
 - heightens the social nature of the poem
 - places characters within the context of their homelands and families
 - gave listeners a sense of their own past, their ongoing social order, and their values
- The poet makes frequent use of the *epic simile*—a formal and sustained simile in which the secondary subject is developed far beyond its specific points of close parallel to the primary subject to which it is compared.
 - often depict scenes of domestic life, animals, or natural catastrophes
 - remove us from the scene at hand and place us into other areas of human experience where events are equally tense and crucial
- The poet makes frequent use of the *stock epithet*—an adjective phrase used to define a distinctive quality of a person or thing. In Homer, this generally means a compound of two words used as a formula in referring to someone or something.
 - define characters by placing them in their social roles
 - show how a character’s heroic stature is usually due to a particular skill or virtue

- often help to fill out the metrical line
- The poet makes frequent use of *repetition* and many phrases—sometimes whole passages—are repeated verbatim throughout the poem.
 - repeated phrases possibly part of a “fund” of stock phrases used frequently by the oral poets
 - repetition of stock epithets and names helps certain characters grow to legendary dimension
 - often occurs at the ends of lines to fulfill the demands of the meter

Setting of Homer’s Odyssey:

Present action takes place at *Mount Olympus*, the home of the gods; in *Ithaca*, Odysseus’ island kingdom; at *Pylos* with Nestor; at *Sparta* with Menelaus; on Calypso’s island, *Ogygia*; and in *Phaeacia*, where Alcinous reigns. During the flashback when Odysseus relates the story of his wanderings (Books 9-12), a number of other settings are described as Odysseus moves from Troy, through the Mediterranean, to Ogygia.

SUMMER ASSIGNMENT DETAILS

Part 1: Movie Analysis

Watch the movie *Troy* (2004), and write a 1-2 page essay (typed, double spaced) that answers the following prompt:

What were the causes of the Trojan War, and what mistakes did the Trojans make that led to their downfall? What major themes about Greek culture did the film reveal, and how did these also enable the success of the Greeks at Troy?

Part 2: Essay Analysis

After you have read the book, write a 2-3 page essay (typed, double spaced) that analyzes **THREE** of the following Greek Ideals, using specific examples and including **at least TWO quotes** from Homer’s *Odyssey* that help explain the Greek Ideals you’ve chosen.

Greek Ideals:

- *Respect for the Gods, Order, & Fate*
- *Homecoming, Vengeance, & The Restoration of Order*
- *Loyalty*
- *Hospitality & Generosity*
- *Intelligence*
- *Experience*
- *Growth & Maturation*
- *Courage, Strength, & Determination*

Part 3: Book Summary Study Questions

As you read Homer's *Odyssey* (NOTE: You only need to read the assigned books listed), pay attention to the issues presented in the following questions. You will need to write **FIVE responses (1-2 paragraphs for each)**. You will be able to choose ONE question from the following:

- Choose one question to respond to from **Books 1 & 5-8 (Skip Books 2-4)**
- Choose one question to respond to from **Books 8-12**
- Choose one question to respond to from **Books 13-16**
- Choose one question to respond to from **Books 17-20**
- Choose one question to respond to from **Books 21-24**

STUDY QUESTIONS

Book 1

1. Read Homer's invocation of the Muse (lines 1-12). (a) Which Greek ideals does Homer introduce in this passage? (b) If Odysseus is truly a hero of epic proportions, then why has he been unable to get home?
2. (a) What happened to Agamemnon upon returning home after the Trojan War? (b) Why might Homer have chosen to include his story at this point in the poem?
3. What has happened between Odysseus and Poseidon? Explain.
4. Characterize Athena. (a) What kind of a "person" is she? What does the reader learn about her in the opening book? (b) What is the purpose of her visit to Ithaca?
5. Characterize Telemachus. (a) What kind of a person is he at the beginning of Book 1? (b) How has he changed by the end of Book 1? (c) Which Greek ideals does he exhibit in Book 1?

Book 5

6. Characterize Calypso. (a) What kind of a "person" is she? (b) Why does she react the way she does to Hermes' message?
7. Why does Calypso never mention Hermes' visit or Zeus' command to Odysseus?
8. Homer finally introduces Odysseus in Book 5. (a) How has Odysseus been portrayed by other characters in the first four books? (b) Does he live up to this portrayal when we finally meet him in Book 5?

Book 6

9. Characterize Nausicaa. (a) What kind of a person is she? (b) What does the reader learn about her in Book 6?
10. (a) How does Odysseus approach and behave toward Nausicaa on the beach? (b) Why?
11. (a) In what sense do Nausicaa's instructions to Odysseus depart from the Greek ideal of hospitality? (b) Why does she choose to give him these instructions?

Book 7

12. (a) How does Odysseus react to the palace of Alcinous and Arete when he enters? (b) Why does he react this way? (c) What does his reaction reveal about him?
13. (a) How does Odysseus approach Arete? (b) How is this different from the way he approached Nausicaa in the previous book? (c) What might account for this difference?

14. (a) How does Alcinous react when he finds out that his daughter helped Odysseus? (b) How does Odysseus respond? (c) In what way does Alcinous' reaction contradict the young girl's description of the Phaeacians at the beginning of Book 7?

Book 8

15. How does Odysseus react to the first song by Demodocus? Why?
16. What happens between Laodamas, Euryalus, and Odysseus during the games? Why?
17. Why might Demodocus have chosen to present the story of Aphrodite and Ares at this particular time?

Book 9

18. What is the significance of the events that occur with the Cicones in Ismaros?
19. What is the significance of the events that occur in the land of the Lotus-Eaters?
20. What do the events with Polyphemus reveal about Odysseus' character?

Book 10

21. What do the events surrounding Aeolus and the bag of winds reveal about Odysseus' character?
22. Why do Odysseus and his men remain with Circe so long before they begin to yearn for home?
23. Why might Homer have chosen to include the brief scene with Elpenor at the end of this book?

Book 11

24. (a) What does the ghost of Elpenor request of Odysseus? (b) Why might the poet have chosen to include this minor detail?
25. What is the significance of the task that Tiresias assigns to Odysseus? (See lines 119-128, page 161)
26. Why might the poet have chosen to repeat the story of Agamemnon at this point in the poem?
27. What might be the significance of the brief encounter between Odysseus and Ajax?
28. Why might Homer have chosen to include the long procession of famous women and men?

Book 12

29. Why might the song of the Sirens be so appealing to Odysseus?
30. (a) How does Odysseus respond to Circe's advice regarding Scylla and Charybdis? (b) What does his response reveal about his character?
31. Review the scene in which the cattle of Helios are slaughtered by Odysseus' men. What does this scene reveal about Odysseus?

Book 13

32. (a) How will Alcinous make up the loss of the extra gifts given to Odysseus? (b) Why might the poet have chosen to include this minor detail? (See page 192.)
33. (a) Describe Odysseus' trip back from Phaeacia. (b) What is ironic about this particular sea journey?

34. Why does Odysseus lie to Athena about his identity?

Book 14

35. Characterize Eumaeus. (a) What kind of a character is he? (b) What overall purpose does he serve?

36. Why does Odysseus lie about his identity and test Eumaeus throughout their conversation?

Book 15

37. Why is it necessary for Athena to tell Telemachus a false story about Penelope to convince him to return home?

38. (a) What favor does Telemachus ask of Peisistratus as they are returning to Pylos? (b) What is the significance of this scene?

39. Why is Theoclymenus introduced at this point in the poem?

Book 16

40. Describe the relationship that Eumaeus has with Telemachus.

41. (a) When Eumaeus tells Telemachus that their “guest” desires his protection, how does Telemachus react? (b) What might account for the difference between his behavior in this scene and his behavior toward Theoclymenus in the previous book?

42. (a) With which aspect of Odysseus’ plan does Telemachus disagree, and why? (b) Why is this significant?

Book 17

43. (a) What arrangement does Telemachus make with Peiraeus? (b) What does this action reveal about his character?

44. Characterize Melanthius. What function does he serve in the poem?

45. Why might Homer have chosen to include the minor detail about the death of Argus?

Book 18

46. (a) Characterize Irus. What function does he serve in the poem? (b) What is ironic about Odysseus’ victory over him?

47. Characterize Amphinomus. What function does he serve in the poem?

48. Why does Penelope appear before the suitors a second time?

Book 19

49. Characterize Melanthe. What function does she serve in the poem?

50. Characterize Eurycleia. What function does she serve in the poem?

Book 20

51. Characterize Philoetius. What function does he serve in the poem?

52. Why does Athena want “the pain to sink deeper into Odysseus’ bones” before he destroys the suitors? (See page 318, lines 311-312.)

Book 21

53. Why does Penelope devise the contest with the bow? (Remember: She’s not aware that Odysseus has returned when she devises this contest.)

Book 23

54. Why does Penelope respond so coldly to Odysseus? Why does she feel the need to test him?

Book 24

55. Why might Homer have decided to begin this book with the various remarks of Agamemnon and Achilles?

56. Why does Odysseus test Laertes? Why does he feel the need to “feel him out first”?