

Excerpts from *The Odyssey*

Excerpt A: Penelope Weaving

For many years, Penelope (pronounced puh-NELL-ah-pee) has been waiting at home on the Greek island of Ithaca for her husband King Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) to return from the Trojan War. Since she is a lovely, wealthy woman, she has many suitors who are convinced that her husband died in the war and that she should marry one of them. Vulnerable without the protection of her husband, Penelope tells the suitors she cannot marry until she finishes weaving a piece of cloth. She weaves all day, then unravels her work at night. After three years, the suitors find out that she has been delaying them with this excuse.



Excerpt

They rush the marriage on, and I spin out my wiles.

A God from the blue it was inspired me first
to set up a great loom in our royal halls
and I began to weave, and the weaving finespun,
the yarns endless, and I would lead them on: "Young men,
my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more,
go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until
I can finish off this web...

so my weaving won't all fray and come to nothing."

... Then, when the wheeling seasons brought the fourth year on
and the months waned and the long days came round once more,
then, thanks to my maids—the shameless, reckless creatures—
the suitors caught me in the act, denounced me harshly.
So I finished it off. Against my will. They forced me.
And now I cannot escape a marriage, nor can I contrive
a deft way out.

Stop Here
& Discuss

- How did Penelope delay marrying one of her suitors?
- How long was Penelope able to trick her suitors?
- Who told the suitors that Penelope unraveled her weaving at night?
- What did Penelope's suitors force her to do after they discovered her trick?

GREEK VALUES: athleticism, hospitality, ingenuity, intuition, justice, loyalty, respect, teamwork

Excerpt B: Odysseus and the Cyclops

On their way home from the Trojan War, Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) and his crew meet the Cyclops (pronounced SY-klops), a one-eyed giant. The Cyclops Polyphemus (pah-lee-FEE-muss) shuts them up in his cave and begins to devour the men, one by one. Odysseus must think of a plan to escape. He tells the Cyclops that his name is “Nobody.” Then, Odysseus stalls for time by giving the Cyclops glass after glass of wine. The Cyclops soon gets drunk and falls asleep. Odysseus and his men then take a large olive branch, heat it in the fire, and use it to blind the Cyclops. Then, they make their escape and return to their ship.



Excerpt

“So you ask me the name I’m known by, Cyclops?
I will tell you... ‘Nobody’—that’s my name. Nobody—
so my mother and father call me, and all my friends.”

...I thrust our stake in a bed of embers
to get it red-hot and rallied all my comrades:
“Courage—no panic, no one hang back now!”
...I dragged it from the flames, my men clustering round
as some God breathed enormous courage through us all.
Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point,
straight into the monster’s eye they bore it hard—

...he bellowed out for help from his neighbor cyclopes...
Hearing his cries, they lumbered up from every side
and hulking round his cavern, asked what ailed him.
“*Nobody*, friends”—Polyphemus bellowed back from his cave—
“*Nobody’s* killing me now by fraud and not by force!”

...They lumbered off, but laughter filled my heart
to think how nobody’s name—my great cunning stroke—
had duped them one and all.



- What did Odysseus tell the Cyclops his name was?
- What weapon did Odysseus make?
- What did Odysseus and his men do with the weapon?
- Why didn’t the other cyclopes help their neighbor?

GREEK VALUES: athleticism, hospitality, ingenuity, intuition, justice, loyalty, respect, teamwork

Excerpt C: Odysseus and Circe

After escaping from the Cyclops (pronounced SY-klops), Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) and his men sail to the island of Aea (pronounced ay-EE-ah). The crew anchor the ship and swim ashore, hoping to rest and find food and drink. The island is the home of the enchantress and magician Circe (pronounced SIR-see), who welcomes Odysseus's men and then casts a wicked spell on them. Odysseus is warned of Circe's power by his shipmate Eurylochus (pronounced yur-ILL-ik-uss), who distrusted Circe and secretly returned to the ship. The God Hermes (pronounced HER-meez) gives Odysseus a magic flower to protect him from Circe's spells, and Odysseus goes ashore. There he discovers what Circe has done, and rescues his crew.



Excerpt

So he urged and the men called out and hailed her.
She opened her gleaming doors and at once stepped forth,
inviting them all in, and in they went, all innocence.
Only Eurylochus stayed behind—he sensed a trap....
She ushered them in to sit on high-backed chairs,
then she mixed them a potion—cheese, barley,
and pale honey mulled in Pramnian wine—
but into the brew she stirred her wicked drugs
to wipe from their memories any thought of home.
Once they'd drained the bowls she filled, suddenly
she struck with her wand, drove them into her pigsties,
all of them bristling into swine—with grunts,
snouts—even their bodies, yes, and only
the men's minds stayed steadfast as before.
So off they went to their pens, sobbing, squealing
as Circe flung them acorns, cornel nuts, and mast,
common fodder for hogs that root and roll in mud.



- Why didn't Eurylochus enter Circe's home?
- What did Circe do to Odysseus's men?
- How did Odysseus learn about what happened to his men?
- How was Odysseus protected from Circe's spell?

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Excerpt D: Odysseus and Elpenor in the Underworld

After leaving the island home of Circe (pronounced SIR-see), Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) goes down to the Underworld, the kingdom of the dead. There, he seeks advice from the prophet Tiresias (pronounced teh-REE-see-yuss) on how to get his ship home safely. First, Odysseus sacrifices two calves so the dead will speak with him. While Odysseus is waiting for the prophet, his shipmate Elpenor (pronounced ELL-peh-nor) appears. Elpenor was killed on Circe's island, and now pleads with his friend Odysseus to give him a proper burial.



Excerpt

But first the ghost of Elpenor, my companion, came toward me.
He'd not been buried under the wide ways of earth,
not yet, we'd left his body in Circe's house,
unwept, unburied—this other labor pressed us.
But I wept to see him now, pity touched my heart
and I called out a winged word to him there: "Elpenor,
how did you travel down to the world of darkness?
Faster on foot, I see, than I in my black ship."

... "My lord, remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off
and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't,
or my curse may draw God's fury on your head.
...Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar
I swung with mates when I rowed among the living."
"All this, my unlucky friend," I reassured him,
"I will do for you. I won't forget a thing."

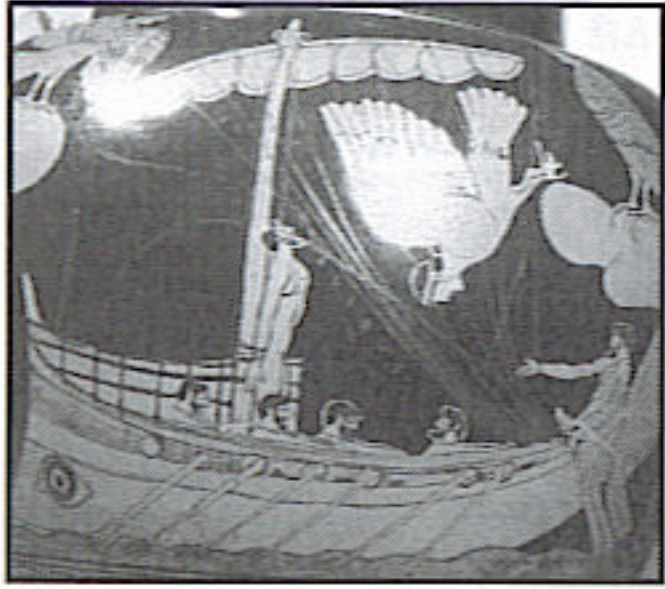


- Why did Odysseus go to the Underworld?
- Who was Elpenor?
- What did Elpenor beg Odysseus to do?
- What did Elpenor threaten to do if Odysseus ignored his plea?

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Excerpt E: Odysseus and the Sirens

Soon after the journey to the Underworld, Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) and his crew sail near the island of the Sirens. The Sirens are birdlike creatures with women's faces and arms. They sing beautiful songs that bewitch sailors and cause their deaths in shipwrecks. Odysseus knows how dangerous the Sirens are, but he wants to hear their exquisite songs. He blocks the ears of his crew with wax, and has his men tie him tightly to the ship's mast so he can listen without danger and continue sailing toward home.



Excerpt

Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands and the wax grew soft, worked by my strength and Helios' burning rays, the sun at high noon, and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one. They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship—erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast—and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke. We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry, scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship was racing past, and burst into their high, thrilling song: "Come closer, famous Odysseus—Achaëa's pride and glory—moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song! Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips, and once he hears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man."

Stop Here
& Discuss

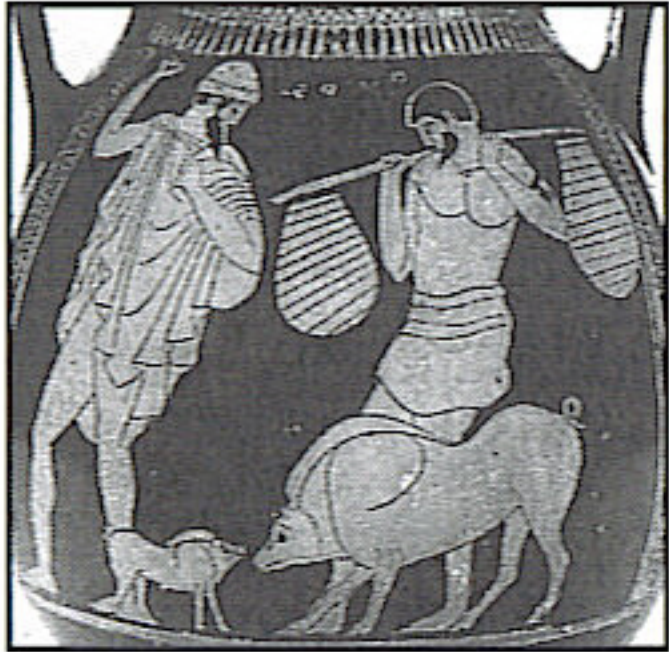


- Who were the Sirens?
- How did the Sirens kill sailors?
- How did Odysseus protect his men from the Sirens?
- Why did Odysseus have his men tie him to the mast?

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Excerpt F: Odysseus and the Swineherd

Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) finally arrives home on the shores of the Greek island of Ithaca. The Goddess Athena (pronounced uh-THEE-nah) tells him that his house is overrun with arrogant suitors who want to marry his wife Penelope (pronounced puh-NELL-ah-pee). She tells him they are behaving wickedly, disrespecting Odysseus's family, and wasting all of the goods in the house. Athena disguises Odysseus as an old man so he can return to his house undercover the next morning. Before she sends him home, Athena brings Odysseus—in disguise—to his loyal friend the swineherd Eumaeus (pronounced yoo-MAY-uss), who greets his unknown guest warmly and gives him food and rest for the night.



Excerpt

On that note,
 the loyal swineherd led the way to his shelter,
 showed his guest inside and sat Odysseus down
 on brush and twigs he piled up for the visitor,
 flinging over these the skin of a shaggy wild goat,
 broad and soft, the swineherd's own good bedding.
 The king, delighted to be so well received,
 thanked the man at once: "My host—may Zeus
 and the other Gods give you your heart's desire
 for the royal welcome you have shown me here."
 And you replied, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
 "It's wrong, my friend, to send any stranger packing—
 even one who arrives in worse shape than you.
 Every stranger and beggar comes from Zeus
 and whatever scrap they get from the likes of us
 they'll find it welcome."

Stop Here
& Discuss

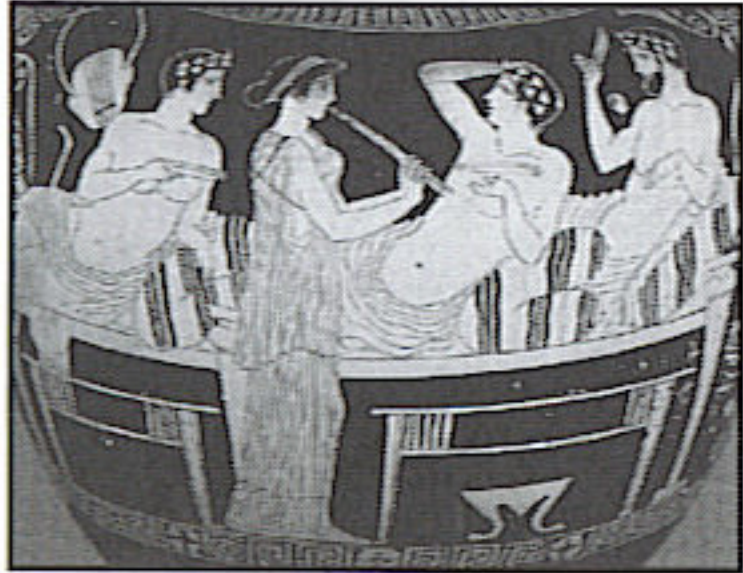


- How did Eumaeus show Odysseus that he was welcome in his house?
- How did Odysseus thank him?
- What does Eumaeus believe about helping strangers?
- According to Eumaeus, what Greek God looked after strangers and beggars?

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Excerpt G: The Archery Contest

The wicked suitors continue their rowdy behavior in the house of Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss). They feast and enjoy music played by slaves. They also force Penelope (pronounced puh-NELL-ah-pee) to choose one of them as a husband. She announces that she will marry the man who can string Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow from it. One by one the suitors try, but none have the skill to do the task. Odysseus, who had arrived at his house disguised as an old man, asks to join the contest. All of the suitors ridicule and laugh at the old man for trying to do something requiring great strength and skill. But the old man—who is really Odysseus—strings the bow and shoots the arrow with ease!



Excerpt

A suitor would glance at his neighbor, jeering, taunting,
“Look at our connoisseur of bows!”

“Sly old fox—

maybe he's got bows like it, stored in *his* house.”

“That, or he's bent on making one himself.”

“Look how he twists and turns it in his hands!”

“The clever tramp means trouble—”

“I wish him luck,” some cocksure lord chimed in,

“as good as his luck in bending back that weapon!”

So they mocked, but Odysseus, mastermind in action,
once he'd handled the great bow and scanned every inch,
then, like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song—
who strains a string to a new peg with ease,

making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end—

so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.

Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch

and under his touch it sang out clear and sharp as a swallow's cry.

Horror swept through the suitors, faces blanching white.



- How did the suitors react when Odysseus joined the contest?
- Why did the suitors treat Odysseus this way?
- How did the taunts of the suitors affect Odysseus?
- How did the suitors react when they watched Odysseus shoot the arrow?

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Excerpt H: The Slaying of the Suitors

The Goddess Athena (pronounced uh-THEE-nah) changes Odysseus (pronounced oh-DISS-ee-yuss) back from an old man to his young, strong self. The suitors who have been pursuing Penelope (pronounced puh-NELL-ah-pee) reach for their weapons to kill Odysseus, but their weapons have been hidden by Odysseus's son Telemachus (pronounced teh-LEM-ik-uss). Then, with the Goddess Athena's help, Odysseus avenges the wrongdoing that the evil suitors brought to his house. He kills them all, while the servants of the house watch in awe.



Excerpt

And now Athena, looming out of the rafters high above them, brandished her man-destroying shield of thunder, terrifying the suitors out of their minds, and down the hall they panicked—wild, like herds stampeding, driven mad as the darting gadfly strikes in the late spring when the long days come round. The attackers struck like eagles, crook-clawed, hook-beaked, swooping down from a mountain ridge to harry smaller animals that skim across the flatland, cringing under the clouds, but the eagles plunge in fury, rip their lives out—hopeless, never a chance of flight or rescue—and people love the sport—so the attackers routed the suitors headlong down the hall, wheeling into the slaughter, slashing left and right, and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—the whole floor awash with blood.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What did Athena do to the suitors?
- Where did the suitors go?
- How did the suitors react when they were attacked by Odysseus?
- What happened to Penelope's suitors?

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