

## *The Odyssey I*

### **1. Background Information**

#### ***Very little is known about the life of the poet Homer***

- Composed two great epics (Iliad, Odyssey).
- Lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC in one of the cities along the Turkish western coast (probably Smyrna, today's Izmir).
- Was a professional poet associated with the nobility, possibly even of noble origin himself.

#### ***Literacy in Greece starts with a 'big bang'***

- Only shortly before the time of Homer the alphabet had been introduced to Greece (from Phoenicia).
- Homers' epics are the first major literary works of Greece (and Europe).
- The topics of Homers' epics are taken from a distant past (the Trojan War has to be dated around 1200 BC).
- However, they reflect the world of the nobility of Homers' days.
- Stories of the Trojan War were transmitted orally for a long time before Homer composed his epics > the contents of the stories were well known.

#### ***What is an epic?***

- An epic is a heroic story mixing real (historical) and fictional (gods, monsters) elements.
- An epic is composed to entertain the audience.
- Furthermore, an epic transmits important moral values of the society to the audience.

### **2. The story of Odysseus**

- The Odyssey tells the story of Odysseus' 10 years of wanderings after the end of the Trojan War and finally his homecoming.
- As the contents of the story were well known to the audience, Homer could focus on the central aspects of the story (only a period of 40 days is actually covered in the Odyssey).
- Homer divided the story into 24 books:
  - Book 1: prologue, in which by a council of the gods Odysseus finally is allowed to return home from the island of Kalypso.
  - Books 2-4 instead of setting Odysseus on his way home first tell the story of the journey which Odysseus' son Telemachos undertakes to find out news about his father.
  - Book 5: Odysseus builds a raft, by which he leaves Kalypso's island. On his way home to Ithaca he is shipwrecked once again and barely manages to reach Scheria, the island of the Phaiakians.
  - Books 6-12: Odysseus' stay on the island of Scheria (in books 9-12 he actually tells the story of his wanderings to the Phaiakians. This part is very important, as by retelling all his adventures Odysseus actually regains confidence in himself. Before, on the island of Kalypso, he was a desperate, broken man. To reclaim his place in his own kingdom and to restore order there, he has to become a hero again.
  - Book 13: Odysseus is finally being brought to his own island Ithaca by a Phaiakian ship. On the advice of Athena he disguises himself as a beggar.
  - Books 14-16: Odysseus first stays with the swineherd Eumaios and learns from him about the situation in his kingdom. In book 16 Odysseus reveals himself to his son Telemachos.

- Books 17-20: Odysseus in the palace, where he witnesses the unjust behavior of the suitors, how they actually insult and humiliate himself (in book 19 Odysseus is interviewed by Penelope, but he keeps up his disguise. The plan for the bow contest is proposed in the same book).
  - Book 21: the story of the bow contest, how all the suitors fail, and only Odysseus succeeds. Finally Odysseus reveals himself.
  - Book 22: Odysseus kills the suitors.
  - Book 23: reunion of Odysseus and Penelope, but not before Penelope has put Odysseus to a final test.
  - Book 24: the relatives of the killed suitors plan revenge, but peace is finally imposed by Athena.
- Homer did not need to tell the story in the right chronological order (Odysseus' adventures on his travels after the end of the Trojan war are told as stories by him while he is a guest of the Phaiakians in books 9-12)
  - The order of events in the books rather reflects the stages of his homecoming (book 1: general introduction, books 2-4: the situation in Odysseus' kingdom of Ithaca during his absence; books 5-12: Odysseus wanderings; books 13-16: Odysseus outside of his palace; books 17-22: Odysseus inside the palace; book 23: Odysseus in his own bedchamber)

### **3. *Odysseus: the person***

Odysseus; the king of Ithaca, is the hero of the story. He is characterized by a number of attributes:

- He is a hero (he can and does fight, if necessary). Examples of his strength are given in the story of the bow contest (book 21, 404-429).
- He is a pious man, always honoring the gods.
- Most important is his intelligence, his resourcefulness (it was not the brutal strength of Achilles that led to the conquest of Troy, but Odysseus' plan of devising a stratagem, the wooden horse (book 8, 492-495). It is not only a cleverness helping him to survive, but a genuine curiosity (Odysseus entering the cave of the Cyclops out of pure curiosity: book 9, 172-176; Odysseus' way of interrogating the spirits of the dead in the underworld: book 11, 228-635).
- He is able to endure suffering to achieve his goals.
- His determination: Odysseus uses all his resources to achieve one goal: coming home to his wife and son (> unheroic motivation?).

Odysseus has been characterized as the first modern man. It is the combination of his different attributes that make him one of the most fascinating characters in ancient literature. His resourcefulness and especially his genuine curiosity actually pave the way to the Greek enlightenment during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, when philosophers and historians show the same kind of curiosity.

### **4. *Ways of interpreting the Odyssey***

#### ***Moral values***

- Proper behavior in general: Man is (at least partly) responsible for his fate. Recklessness and wrongdoing will lead to punishment by the gods (or, in the case of the suitors, by Odysseus himself). On the other hand man does not entirely control his own destiny (see book 1, 16-17).

- Proper treatment of fellow humans: receiving of foreigners and guests (compare the correct behavior shown by Nestor (book 3, 34-74), Telemachos (book 1, 113-143) and the Phaiakians (book 7, 167-181) with the improper behavior of the Cyclops (book 9, 250-306). Also the guests themselves have obligations. The suitors in Odysseus palace clearly misbehave, and even insult other guests such as Odysseus, who is disguised as a beggar (book 17, 445-487).

### ***What makes human life valuable?***

- Fame. Although Odysseus is a hero, the Odyssey is remarkable for putting less stress on fame gained by heroic deeds or in battle (see the speech of Achilles in the underworld: book 9, 488-491).
- Reputation: being a just man (book 4, 686-695).
- Leading a proper life within ones family (cf. book 19, 332-334). It is basically the longing for his home and his family which let Odysseus endure all his misfortunes.

### ***Attitudes towards truth***

- Telling lies: when asked who he is, Odysseus several times embarks on a false story (books 13, 250-286; 14, 191-359; 19, 164-202). This he does not do for simple cheating, but to protect himself until he finds out more about the situation in his country (it should be noted that his false stories actually sound more credible than his real wanderings, as in the false stories no gods and monsters appear, and the places he names actually can all be located). It is also important to note that once Odysseus revealed himself, he does not tell false stories any more (from book 22 onwards).
- Truth is often hidden (also gods often appear in disguise!). The moral of the epic in this case certainly is that one should not accept things as they appear to be on first sight, but to seek for a hidden truth. Lying is not condemned in the epic (see Athena's speech to Odysseus in book 13, 291-310)

### ***Relations between man and gods***

- Gods are described with human characteristics. They quarrel; they are greedy and sometimes unjust. The only aspect which distinguishes them from humans is that the gods are immortal and have superhuman powers.
- Even if individual gods, such as Poseidon, behave in an unjust way towards Odysseus, the general idea in the Odyssey is that the gods, especially Zeus, represent justice.
- Gods do not only watch humans from far away, but actively engage themselves in human affairs, in a negative (Poseidon shattering Odysseus raft, book 5, 282-332) as well in a positive way (Athena advising and protecting Odysseus; even making plans together with him: book 13, 372-440).
- Gods are part of the human life, and are portrayed by humans according to their own image.
- Fate versus free will: Homer does not take a clear position here. While some lines indicate a strong belief in predestined fate (book 1, 16-17), other passages (book 1, 32-41: 'who by their own recklessness win sorrow beyond what is given,') show that humans will be punished or rewarded by the gods according to their actions, i. e. a certain room for free will is indicated.