



**THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA**  
**INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

**MODULE NO: 2**

**LIT 1100 – STUDIES IN WRITING SKILLS AND LITERATURE**

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## **Module Structure**

- I. Introduction
- II. The Aim of the Module
- III. Module Objectives [Learning outcomes]
- IV. Assessment
- V. Prescribed and Recommended Readings
- VI. Time frame
- VII. Study skills [Learning tips]
- VIII. Need help [Studying at a distance]

The module is divided into 4 units. Each unit addresses some of the learning outcomes. You will be asked to complete various tasks so that you can demonstrate your competence in achieving the learning outcomes.

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## Introduction

Welcome to Module 2 on Studies in Writing Skills and Literature (LIT 1100). In this module you shall have the opportunity to interact with the text of *The Odyssey*. In addition this module will enable you to analyse the text by means of essay topics and study questions.

### Aim

The aim of this module is to enable you gain a better understanding of the classical Greek epic by interacting with the text of *The Odyssey* and tackling questions relating to it.



### Objectives

By the end of the module, you should be able to:

- I. Demonstrate a reasonable understanding of the text of *The Odyssey*.
- II. Relate the Greek epic genre to the context of Greek society and the contents of this module.
- III. Analyse the contents of *The Odyssey*.



### Assessment

Your work in this module will be assessed as follows:

- One test worth 10%
- Two essays worth 40%
- A written examination set by the University of Zambia at the end of the module (worth 50% of the final mark).

In summary, you will be assessed as follows:

#### **Continuous Assessment: 50%**

2 essays – 20% each

1 test – 10%

Final Examination: 50%



## Prescribed Reading

Homer (2003). The Odyssey. Rieu, E V, trans. London: Penguin Books.



## Recommended Reading

1. Bulfinch, Thomas (1979). Myths of Greece and Rome. Harmondsworth: Viking Penguin Incorporated.
2. Campbell, W John (2000). The Book of Great Books: A Guide to 100 World Classics. USA: The Wonderland Press.
3. Homer (1991). The Iliad. Chapman, George, trans. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

You are encouraged, however, to read beyond the prescribed and recommended readings listed above in order to deepen and broaden your understanding of drama. You may find the references provided at the end of the module beneficial, but you are also encouraged to utilise other sources of information such as the University library, which is a wealthy source of data both from published books and unpublished theses. You may also do well to utilise public libraries, where available. Finally, learn how to use the internet as a vital source of data.



## Time frame

You are expected to spend at least 15 hours of study time on this module. However, you will also have contact with lecturers from the University of Zambia from time to time in the course of studying the module. You are advised to maximise the time available for study as well as contact with the lecturers in order to fully benefit from the course.

## Study Skills

In case you have not studied by distance before, we shall avail you a number of ideas on how to maximise your learning experience:

1. Set goals such as: I will succeed in this course. At the beginning of the module, break the lessons into manageable chunks. You might not have time to do a full

lesson in one night, so plan how much you can do, then stick to it until you are done.

2. Establish a regular study/learning schedule.
3. Determine what time is best for you to study.
4. Have a dedicated study place with all the supplies you might need.
5. Tell people what you are doing because only then are you more likely to stick to a course.
6. Ask someone to proofread your work before you submit it.
7. If you do not understand something ask your local learning centre or your tutor, who will be able to help you.
8. Search for the meaning of principles and concepts instead of merely memorising them.



### **Need help?**

In case you have difficulties during the duration of the course, please get in touch with the Director, Institute of Distance Education, or the resident lecturer in your province.

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## Unit 1

### The Odyssey

#### 1.1 Introduction

This unit will accord you the opportunity to look at the synopsis and context of Sophocles' play *The Odyssey* so that you can get a better understanding of the text and the times during which it was written.

#### 1.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

1. Explain the nature of *The Odyssey*.
2. Relate the contents of the text to the social and historical context in which it was written.



#### 1.3 Reflection

*The Odyssey* is classified as an epic poem. What is your understanding of an epic or heroic poem? Are you aware of another piece of literature that may be classified as an epic?

#### 1.4 Synopsis of *The Odyssey*

*The Odyssey* is essentially about the wanderings of Odysseus, also referred to by the Romans as Ulysses (Bulfinch 1979). Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, a city-state of Greece, leaves home to fight in the Trojan War. The war lasts ten years. After the war Odysseus spends another ten years wandering in his attempt to return home to his wife, Penelope, and son, Telemachus. During his wanderings, Odysseus is held captive for a period of seven years by the goddess Calypso on her island. After leaving Calypso's island Odysseus endures many physical and mental obstacles to his homeward journey, losing many of his men in the process. Meanwhile, in Ithaca, his wife is being courted by a group of 120 suitors, who are convinced that Odysseus will never return home. However, the suitors, who now live on Odysseus' wealth, are merely forcing their attentions on her because she is not interested in marrying any of them. Yet each of the

suitors is determined to marry her, and she and Telemachus, her son, are powerless to remove the suitors from their premises. It is only when Odysseus finally manages to reach his home, disguised as a beggar, that he gets rid of the suitors and is happily reunited with his wife.

## 1.5 *The Odyssey* as Epic

*The Odyssey* initially developed from the oral tradition of the Greeks, or from their oral literature. This means it was initially transmitted by word of mouth only before it was written down. It was composed orally and then recited to listening audiences. Its authorship is generally attributed to Homer.

*The Odyssey* is an epic, that is, a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, “about the deeds of warriors and heroes” (Cuddon1991: 284). Roberts and Jacobs (2007: 2112) describe an epic as “a long narrative poem elevating character, speech, and action”. It is also known as a heroic poem. It is classified as a narrative poem because it tells a story. An epic generally deals with a serious subject centred on a hero or semi-divine figure whose fate affects a nation, tribe or human race. Hence, as we shall see in the course of the module, *The Odyssey* is centred on the exploits and tribulations of Odysseus in his quest to return home to Ithaca, and his absence affects his people. He is one of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology. *The Odyssey* tells the story of a heroic past – a world of powerful kings living in vast, wealthy palaces and in charge of huge armies wielding bronze weapons.

Epics are classified in two main ways: (i) primary; (ii) secondary. The primary epic is what is also known as the oral or primitive because its origins are associated with the pre-literate societies of the world. Other scholars refer to it as traditional epics or folk epics. As you will probably realise, this is the category to which *The Odyssey* belongs, along with *The Iliad*, another work attributed to Homer, and other works such as *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*. All these works were only written down much later, after the invention of writing. Unlike the primary epic, however, the secondary epic, also known as the literary epic, is written down from the start, although, crucially, they were an imitation of the primary form.

## 1.6 Authorship of *The Odyssey*

*The Odyssey* is the second work of western literature, the first being *The Iliad*. There has however been controversy over authorship. Some argue that it was the work of Homer, a blind poet who was born in Ionia, the Greek-inhabited coast and islands off central western Turkey, and who lived around 750-700 BC. Indeed most people in ancient Greece believed both epics were the work of Homer.

However, the counter argument is that the two epics were the product of several Greek poets, with Homer only playing the role of “editor”. Roberts notes in the Introduction to *The Iliad* (Homer, 2003: x) that literary critics “are still divided over the question of whether Homer was a single man or simply an authorial fiction devised to give unity to poetry composed by many people”. Be that as it may, the position of most scholars, and indeed the position of this module, is that the two epics were composed by Homer.

## 1.7 Context of *The Odyssey*

*The Odyssey* was written between 750-675 BC, meaning the text is about three thousand years old. However, as already noted, the poem existed in oral form for a long time before it was actually written. Therefore, its actual age is not known. The actual events of the narrative poem last about 40 days in the autumn of one year. Of the 40 days, about three weeks are narrated in detail.

The action begins after the Trojan War, which is the main event of *The Iliad*. Thus, *The Odyssey* picks up the story of Greek heroes from where *The Iliad* leaves it. While *The Iliad* focuses on the heroic exploits of the great warrior Achilles, *The Odyssey* focuses on the exploits and tribulations of Odysseus. In *The Odyssey*, some of the characters narrate their earlier experiences, mostly in relation to the Trojan War, which occurs between ten and twenty years before the events of *The Odyssey*. While at Phaeacia, Odysseus, for his part, tells of how, after the defeat of Troy, he wanders for nine years.

The action in Books 1, 2, 13-24 happens in Ithaca, Odysseus’ rocky island homeland, mostly on his estate, which was once prosperous but, in his absence, becomes rundown, especially with the presence of the 120 suitors, who devour his wealth. Books 3 and 4 are set in Sparta and Pylos, two Greek cities near Ithaca, while Books 5-13 are set in Ogygia, the island of the goddess Calypso, and Phaeacia.

The Greek society as reflected in *The Odyssey* is not a historically accurate world, but a poetic creation with elements of Greek societies of different times. The social unit reflected in the story is a “household” including family, slaves, dependents, land, palace, animals and possessions. Slavery is a common feature of this society, although some slaves, such as Eumaios, gain wealth and freedom. The system of governance is an aristocracy, with wealthy and powerful individuals having a lot of control and influence over affairs of the society. Hospitality, especially towards strangers, is central to the fabric of the society. Thus strangers are respected and well attended to – an element which Odysseus exploits to disguise himself as a stranger in his plot to kill the suitors in *The Odyssey*.

### 1.7.1 The Trojan War

In order to get a better understanding of the context of *The Odyssey* and the poem's relationship with *The Iliad*, it is perhaps relevant to understand the Trojan War, which has been referred to above. The Trojan War happened around the ancient city of Troy, hence it being referred to as the Trojan War. Troy was also called Ilium – hence the title *Iliad*. The war began when the Greek gods asked Paris, son of the King of Troy, to judge a beauty contest.

Paris chose Aphrodite, the love goddess, as the winner of the contest, but only because she had bribed him with an offer of giving him the world's most beautiful woman as his wife. The world's most beautiful woman at the time, however, turned out to be Helen, wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta. With the help of Aphrodite, however, Paris went to Sparta and persuaded Helen to elope with him to Troy. It did not matter to Paris that Helen was another man's wife – all he wanted was to be given the world's most beautiful woman as promised by Aphrodite.

We would expect Helen's husband, Menelaus, to react – and indeed he was enraged by what Paris did. Determined to get back his wife, Menelaus mobilised an army of Greeks (also known as Achaeans, Argives, and Danaans) to fight the people of Troy. The army was commanded by Agamemnon, who was not only Menelaus' brother but also king of Mycenae. Another notable member of the Greek army was Achilles, a powerful warrior. You should also take note of the fact that Odysseus, as King of Ithaca, also contributed warriors to the Greek army and also fought in the Trojan War. When the Trojans are defeated after a war that lasts about ten years, Odysseus, like the other Greek heroes and kings, embarks on his ten-year journey back home – and it is the adventures of Odysseus during this period of his life that are captured in *The Odyssey* (Strouf 1998: 43).

### 1.7.2 Historical Background

The events captured in *The Odyssey* are associated with the Mycenaean or Achaean period of Greek history – that is, 1400-1200 BC, during the Bronze Age. The Greeks at the time lived in the Peloponnese, a body of land which forms the southern part of Greece. Several tribal groups existed at Pylos, Sparta and Mycenae. The society then was characterised by a strong bureaucracy and wide-ranging trade. There were also some writings in ancient alphabet. The Greek tribes had a loose agreement to assist each other in times of war.

However, somewhere between 1240 and 1230 BC the Greek tribes were militarily united by a mysterious event. Some scholars argue that the event was the Trojan War. We should note, however, that the hero-leaders of the time were Menelaus king of Sparta, Agamemnon of Argos (Mycenae), Achilles of Aegina, Nestor of Pylos, Ajax of

Salamis, and Odysseus of Ithaca. While archaeological evidence of the existence of Troy, Mycenae and Pylos has been found, there is no concrete evidence that the heroic men listed above actually lived.

During the Mycenaean age, the family was the main social unit of Greek society unlike later when the *polis*, or state, became the supreme social organ. The family, or *oikos* as the Greeks called it, consisted of a man's nuclear and extended family, the serfs, slaves and all his possessions. Three main reasons are offered for the centrality of the *oikos* during this period. First, the *oikos* gave one a name just as is the case today. Second, the *oikos* gave one a history in the sense that it enabled one to know their place in the family line. Third, since Greek society was patrilineal, the *oikos* gave sons the right of inheritance.

Despite the significance of family, Greek society at the time was class-conscious, with only nobles and the wealthy being recognised and respected. The poor and merchants were looked down upon, and this explains why they do not feature prominently in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which focus on the wealthy, powerful heroes of Greek society. The aristocrats that ruled Greek society did everything within their power to monopolise power and wealth. Odysseus was part of the aristocracy.

The Mycenaean Period was followed by the Dark Age, covering the period 1200-800 BC. This is referred to as the Dark Age presumably because the Greek civilisation of the Mycenaean period collapsed after the Trojan War due, in part, to invasion by the Dorian Barbarians. The alliance among the Greeks collapsed as they reverted to tribal enclaves and fought each other for control of the land. Even the trade among themselves collapsed, leading to poverty and disillusionment. Apart from losing their wealth, the Greeks also lost the art of writing, reverting to an oral culture. It is argued by some scholars that this was the period when the oral narratives that were later captured in verse by Homer developed as the people glorified the past to compensate for the dark present.

However, the dark period was followed by the rebirth of Greek society during the Archaic Period, from 800 to 500 BC. Profitable trade resumed through hard work and seamanship, and the old, conservative tribal chiefs were replaced by wealthy rulers. A common language was adopted and, with the evolution of a merchant class, Greek society became characterised by class divisions. It was also during this period that the ruling class began to sponsor the arts, although it is thought that they did this because they needed to have a sense of legitimacy. The lost art of writing was also regained and an alphabet was adopted. It was in fact during this period that Homer wrote his two masterpieces, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

## **1.8 The Odyssey as a Motif**

*The Odyssey* is based on Odysseus' journey from Troy to Ithaca after the Trojan War. In literature, the journey has become a motif – that is, a dominant idea which frequently appears or is used by authors. It is significant therefore that even the name of the epic, odyssey, has come to mean “long journey”. However, an odyssey is no ordinary journey; it is a journey characterised by difficulties and obstacles which must be overcome. By the end of the journey, the person on the journey is expected to have learnt some lessons and become more mature and wiser.

The journey as a motif has been used in a number of other literary works, including: *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan and *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. In African literature, the motif is used in such works as Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*.

### **1.8.1 Pilgrim's Progress**

*Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan, is centred on journey undertaken by Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City called Mount Zion. Burdened by inner spiritual turmoil, Christian embarks on the journey upon being advised by Evangelist. The journey is allegorical in nature, representing the spiritual journey of Christians in their pursuit of salvation.

### **1.8.2 Gulliver's Travels**

Written by Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, as the title of the book suggests, is centred on the exploratory voyages undertaken by Lemuel Gulliver, originally trained as a surgeon. However, when his business fails, he becomes a sailor, undertaking a number of voyages to discover new places and peoples. Each journey he undertakes bears its own significance.

### **1.8.3 The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born**

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, published in 1968, focuses on the experiences of a man who wrestles with the realities of post-independence Ghana, particularly the corruption that affects the young nation. The man is nameless and is simply referred to as The Man. He undertakes a bus journey that helps bring to the fore the corruption in Ghana.

#### **1.8.4 *Devil on the Cross***

Just like *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* is partly build on a journey that reveals the shortcomings of independent Kenya. The shortcomings, particularly corruption, are brought out in the course of a bus journey undertaken by Wangari, Gatuiria, Wariinga and Muturi on Robin Mwaura's bus – that is, *matatu*. As the journey unfolds the passengers and Mwaura engage in debate, in the process exposing the corruption and evils of independent Kenya.

## Unit 2

### Summary of *The Odyssey*

#### 2.1 Introduction

This unit focuses on giving you summaries of the 24 books of *The Odyssey*. However, this does not mean you should not read the text. It is mandatory for you to read the full text. However the summaries will enable you to understand the text better and faster.

#### 2.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

1. Summarise the contents of the text of *The Odyssey*.
2. Explain the key aspects of the text.



#### 2.3 Reflection

How helpful is the summary of a text? What is involved in summarising a text?

#### 2.4 Structure of *The Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* is written in dactylic hexameter, which is also known as heroic hexameter. This is a form of poetry traditionally associated with classical epic poetry in both Greek and Latin. The plot of the epic does not follow a chronological order of events. Instead, other parts of the story are narrated using flashbacks. The epic consists of 12, 110 lines divided into 24 books. Although the poem is focused on Odysseus as the protagonist, he is only introduced in Book 5. The first four books are focused on his son Telemachus, who has to stand up to the 120 suitors who are after his mother's hand in marriage, believing that Odysseus would never return to Ithaca. The first four books are also referred to as the Telemachy because of their focus on Telemachus. Books 6-8 focus on Odysseus' travels to the land of the Phaeacians where he is hosted. In Books 8-12 Odysseus narrates his journeys, while in Books 13-16 he returns to Ithaca and is reunited with his son Telemachus. In Books 17-20, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, meets the suitors and his wife Penelope. The poem concludes in Books 20-24 with Odysseus winning the bow contest, killing the suitors and revealing himself to Penelope.

## **2.5 Summary of Books of *The Odyssey***

### **2.5.1` Books 1-4**

Athena, the goddess of wisdom, requests Zeus, who is her father and king of the gods, to allow Odysseus to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. Zeus agrees despite the fact that Odysseus offended Poseidon, the sea god, by blinding his son, the Cyclops. Having obtained her father's support for the idea of having Odysseus return home, Athena disguises herself as a human being and visits Telemachus, Odysseus' son. Telemachus, who is having trouble with the suitors, receives Athena kindly though the suitors are rude and refuse to leave Odysseus' home. Upon assuming another disguise as Mentor, an old friend of Odysseus, Athena persuades Telemachus to visit the neighbouring kingdoms in order to search for information about his father's whereabouts. Telemachus visits two of his father's allies in the war, Nestor of Pylos and Menelaus in Sparta. He learns from the latter that his father is being held captive by Calypso. The young man sets out for home, but is in danger of being ambushed by the suitors, a piece of information which Penelope is aware of but has no way of warning him.

### **2.5.2 Books 5-8**

Zeus, the supreme god, intervenes to save Odysseus from captivity by ordering Calypso to free him. Thus Odysseus sets out to sea. However, after sailing for 18 days, near Phaeacia, the sea god Poseidon, still angry with him for injuring the Cyclops, sees a chance for revenge. Thus he sends a storm that nearly drowns Odysseus, who however manages to swim ashore and arrives at the home of King Alcinous and Queen Arete, whom he asks for help to get back home. They agree to help him, throwing a banquet in his honour the following day. He is touched by the songs sung in remembrance of the Trojan War, and the king asks him to tell his story of the war.

### **2.5.3 Books 9-12**

These books constitute a flashback, with Odysseus narrating what happened to him and his men when they started off for home after the Trojan War. He explains how they encountered many strange places and creatures, including the Kikones, whose town they destroyed, the Lotus-Eaters and the Cyclopes (plural for Cyclops, a one-eyed man-eating monster). He also narrates their experiences with Aiolos, king of the winds, the monstrous Laistrygones, who destroyed most of the ships they were travelling in; Circe the enchantress, as well as the dangerous Sirens, who tried to lure Odysseus and his men to their demise by means of seductive music. They also encountered the monster Scylla and the deadly whirlpool Charybdis, and the island of the sun god Helios.

It was Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops named Polyphemus that led to his conflict with Poseidon. The Cyclops trapped Odysseus and his men in his cave and ate several of the men for dinner. To escape, Odysseus got the Cyclops drunk and blinded him. For injuring his son Polyphemus, Poseidon punished Odysseus by ensuring that he did not reach his home for another eight years.

Next, Odysseus and his men, using the single surviving ship, landed on the island of Aea, inhabited by the enchantress Circe. When he sends some of his men to explore the island, Circe turns them into pigs. However, Odysseus managed to have the men released, after which he became Circe's lover for a year. Circe told him to visit the underworld, or the world of the dead. With her help, he managed to reach the underworld, where he met Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek armies in the Trojan War, as well as Tiresias the prophet, who foretold his homecoming and the tribulations yet to come. The tribulations started when Odysseus and his men reached the island of Helios, where the men ate sacred cattle and were punished by Zeus by destroying their ship. Odysseus barely escaped the whirlpool Charybdis.

#### **2.5.4 Books 13-16**

Touched by Odysseus' story, the Phaeacians decide to escort him home to Ithaca, where they leave him with many gifts. As the Phaeacians return home, their ships are turned into stone by Poseidon, unhappy with their helping the man who had blinded his son. Athena then reveals herself to Odysseus for the first time and gives him news about Ithaca. To help him avoid being killed by the suitors, Athena disguises him as an old beggar. He visits his loyal herdsman, Eumaios, at his farm in the hills and is able to gather more information about the situation in his home. However, he does not reveal himself to Eumaios. Meanwhile Telemachus leaves Sparta in the company of the prophet Theoklymenos. He manages to avoid the suitors' ambush and visits Eumaios, where he meets his father but does not recognise him. However, Odysseus, prompted by Athena, reveals himself to his son, who is initially suspicious but eventually believes that the old beggar is indeed his long-lost father Odysseus. Father and son then scheme how to destroy the suitors by first hiding their weapons then attacking them.

#### **2.5.5 Books 17-19**

Telemachus goes to see Penelope while Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, approaches the palace with Eumaios. On their way the two men are abused by Melanthius, Odysseus' evil servant. Upon entering the palace, Odysseus is recognised by Argos, his old hunting dog, which dies soon after. Despite being saddened by the dog's death, Odysseus controls his feelings and enters the hall of the palace, to participate in the evening feast. The suitors are rude to him but he maintains his calm,

even begging from them to test their character. Dressed elegantly and looking beautiful, Penelope enters the hall, enabling Odysseus to look at her for the first time in 20 years.

Penelope and Odysseus talk, but she is unaware that the “beggar” is in fact her husband. While the two chat, Telemachus removes the weapons of the suitors, who are engrossed in feasting. She tells Odysseus about how the suitors have been pressurising her to marry one of them, and how she has managed, for three years, to delay giving them an answer. She has told them she will marry one of them upon finishing making a funeral shroud for Laertes, her father-in-law. She weaves the shroud by day and, each night, unravels it so that she has to restart the weaving the following day. Encouraged by her revelation, Odysseus, for his part, gives her encouraging news about the return of her husband.

Grateful but still doubting the beggar’s encouraging news, Penelope instructs Eurykleia, one of the servants, to bathe the stranger. However, being Odysseus’ nurse, the old woman recognises him by means of a scar on his leg. He swears her to secrecy. Later, Penelope tells Odysseus about a dream she has had in which an eagle killed her 20 geese. He tells her this is a good omen – it tells of the return of Odysseus and the destruction of the suitors. Still under pressure to marry one of the suitors, Penelope proposes to marry the man who, in a contest, will manage to string Odysseus’ bow and shoot an arrow through 12 axe-heads. Odysseus agrees with her plan.

### **2.5.6 Books 20-21**

In the night Odysseus receives an omen about the success of his plans. The following day, before the contest starts, Telemachus, now emboldened, snubs the suitors while giving Odysseus a place of honour. During the contest, the suitors fail to string the bow. Odysseus then decides it is time to reveal his true identity to Eumaios and informs him of his plans. When his turn comes to string the bow, Odysseus does so with ease and shoots the arrow through the 12 axe-heads. Meanwhile Telemachus sends Penelope from the hall and orders Eurykleia to bar the doors, denying the suitors any chance of escaping.

### **2.5.7 Books 22-23**

Aided by Athena, Odysseus, joined by Telemachus and the two herdsmen, kills all the 120 suitors. They capture and kill Melanthius and force the 10 treacherous serving women to remove the corpses and clean the hall – then they hung them while a singer plays wedding music to deceive passersby. Odysseus finally decides to reveal himself to Penelope. At first, however, she is not sure the stranger she all along thought was a beggar is in fact her long-awaited husband. To convince herself, she orders the servants to bring outside the matrimonial bed that Odysseus himself had made. When Odysseus sees the bed, he asks if someone damaged the bed because it has a living

olive tree as a bedpost and can therefore not be moved. This reaction convinces Penelope that the man is indeed Odysseus because only he could have known what the bed was like when he made it. Therefore, she takes him to bed for a wonderful reunion.

### 2.5.8 Book 24

Finally settled back home, Odysseus visits the farm where his father lives and they have a happy reunion. The families of the dead suitors, on the other hand, are determined to take their revenge on Odysseus. When fighting breaks out, however, Athena intervenes and brings peace between the warring parties.



### 2.6 Reflection

You are advised to read the full text of *The Odyssey* by this point in the module so that you are able to follow the lesson more effectively. Assuming you have read the text, would you say the tribulations and obstacles faced by Odysseus on his way back to Ithaca make him a better person? What reasons would you give?

## Unit 3

### Characters and Themes of The Odyssey

#### 3.1 Introduction

We shall now turn our attention to the key characters and themes of *The Odyssey*, to enable you to get a deeper understanding of the text.



#### 3.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

1. Discuss the main characters of the text.
2. Explain the main themes of the text.
3. Illustrate the relationship between characters and themes of the text.



#### 3.3 Reflection

What is the significance of theme and character in a work of fiction?

#### 3.4 Key Characters of *The Odyssey*

The characters in the text are divided into two main categories (i) human characters – from within Ithaca and the surrounding areas; (ii) divine characters. Although there are many characters, we shall however concentrate on the main ones. Some are individuals, others are groups of people.

##### 3.4.1 Human Characters

###### (i) Odysseus

Aged between 40-45 years, Odysseus is King of Ithaca and one of the Greek warriors during the Trojan War. His life is full of contradictory qualities: while he is likeable and charming, he is also ruthless and vengeful; he is intelligent but also uses trickery to

survive. He tells the truth when narrating his experiences but also tells lies. Odysseus has a strong personality and perseveres in difficult situations. He is ultimately a survivor who also loves his wife and son.

**(ii) Penelope**

Aged about 35, Penelope is Odysseus' wife and mother to their son Telemachus. Apart from being beautiful and intelligent, she is virtuous, remaining loyal to her husband despite his many years of absence from home. She is strong-hearted and able to adapt to changing circumstances. Although sometimes torn between the belief that her husband will one day return and her fear that he might already be dead, she endures, cleverly resisting the suitors. Her patience during her husband's 20-year absence is rewarded with his return.

**(iii) Telemachus**

Telemachus is the son to Odysseus and Penelope and is aged about 20. Like his parents, he is intelligent and persevering. Initially weak and unable to know what to do with his mother's suitors, he progressively develops into a strong, mature individual. When his father returns they together scheme the destruction of the suitors, and he participates in their killing. He develops the type of bravery and fearlessness his father is known for.

**(iv) Eurykleia**

Odysseus' old nurse and trustworthy servant. She nursed both Odysseus and Telemachus when they were babies. She is a palace confidante because, despite knowing a lot of information, she is able to keep secrets. Thus, for instance, she keeps Telemachus' trip a secret, and also hides Odysseus' identity when she recognises the scar on his body while he is disguised as a beggar.

**(v) Eumaios**

When Odysseus arrives in Ithaca disguised as an old beggar, the gracious Eumaios hosts him, and takes him to the palace, despite not knowing it is Odysseus, his master.

Although he is a slave-herdsman on Odysseus' estate, he has managed to acquire some degree of wealth and remains loyal to his master. His love for his master makes him despise the exploitative suitors. When Odysseus reveals himself to him, Eumaios readily participates in the fight against the suitors.

**(vi) Cyclopes**

Singular – Cyclops. The cyclopes were one-eyed man-eating giant monsters. One such giant, Polyphemus, captures Odysseus and his men. To escape, Odysseus tricks the Cyclops and blinds it.

**(vii) Antinous**

The most arrogant of the suitors, and the first to die when Odysseus launches his attack on the suitors. He is portrayed in negative terms and leads the plot to kill Telemachus.

**(viii) Eurymachus**

One of the suitors, quite influential among them because of his charisma. He is not only deceitful but manipulative.

**(ix) Amphinomus**

Another of the suitors, though he is different from the rest because of them because he possesses a degree of decency. However, he is also killed with all the other suitors.

**(x) Laertes**

Odysseus' elderly father – lives on a farm in Ithaca in a state of despair due to the long absence of his son Odysseus. His spirits are revived, however, when Odysseus returns.

**(xi) Menelaus**

King of Sparta and the husband of Helen, the woman at the centre of the Trojan War. He mobilises Greek allies to help him get back his wife from Paris, the prince of Troy. He is also a brother to Agamemnon and is visited by Telemachus during the young man's efforts to find out about the whereabouts of his father.

**(xii) Helen**

Wife of Menelaus and queen of Sparta, it is her abduction by Paris that leads to the Trojan War. She is the most beautiful woman in the world. She offers Telemachus help in his attempts to find his father.

**(xiii) Agamemnon**

Brother to Menelaus and former king of Mycenae, he was the commander of the Achaean (Greek) forces at Troy. He was a fierce warrior whose triumphant homecoming after the war was curtailed when he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, through an ambush. We learn of his fate when Odysseus visits him in the underworld.

**(xiv) Teiresias**

Another character Odysseus meets on his visit to the underworld (Hades) in Book 11. He is a prophet who not only allows Odysseus to meet other souls in Hades but also guides him on how to return to Ithaca.

**(xv) Melanthius**

Opportunistic and disloyal goatherd who supports the suitors. Especially Eurymachus. He is a brother to Melanthis. He fails to observe the Greek principle of hospitality by mistreats the beggar who comes to the palace without realising it is in fact his master Odysseus.

**(xvi) Melanthis**

A maidservant in Odysseus' palace and sister to Melanthius. Like her brother, she is abuses the old beggar (Odysseus) and is having an affair with Eurymachus.

**(xvii) Nestor**

King of Pylos and, like Odysseus, is witty and fought in the Trojan War.

### 3.4.2 Divine Characters

#### (i) Zeus

He is the king of the gods and resides on Mount Olympus. Generally fair in his dealing with humans.

#### (ii) Poseidon

God of the sea who seeks to destroy Odysseus for blinding his son Polyphemus, the Cyclops.

#### (iii) Athena

She is the goddess of wisdom, warfare and womanly crafts, a daughter of Zeus. Unlike Zeus who is remote and somewhat detached from human events, she gets directly involved in much of the action in *The Odyssey*.

#### (iv) Circe

A beautiful enchantress occupying the island of Aeaea. Using her magical powers, she turns Odysseus' men into pigs.

#### (v) Calypso

A beautiful goddess inhabiting the island where Odysseus lands. She holds him captive as an unwilling lover for seven years, offering him immortality in exchange for marriage, but he refuses.

#### (vi) Hermes

Messenger of the gods who takes messages to mortals.



### 3.5 Reflection

To what extent and in what ways do you think God gets involved in human affairs? How does that differ with, and how is that similar so, the manner in which Greek gods got involved in human affairs as presented in *The Odyssey*.

## **3.6 Themes of *The Odyssey***

### **3.6.1 The involvement of the gods in human affairs**

The Greek gods were anthropomorphic in nature – that is, they had both divine and human qualities. They had divine powers as well as some human weaknesses or inclinations. Thus, for example, they could fall in love with humans, fail in a mission, fight humans (as does Poseidon against Odysseus). Some gods were known to have sired children with earthly women. The Greeks believed in 12 major gods, who were referred to as Olympians because they lived on Mt Olympus. While Zeus is the king of the gods, the rest of the major gods control specific aspects of the natural forces. Thus, for example, while Poseidon, as you have already seen, is god of the sea, Athena is goddess of warfare, wisdom and womanly crafts. Another example is Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and love. The gods have distinct personalities and relationships with each other and with mortals. Thus, for example, while Poseidon hates and attempts to destroy Odysseus, Athena loves him and helps him get reunited with his family. Hence, on the basis of the evidence in the text, we could say that the gods influence both emotions and events in the lives of mortals, and such influence can be positive or negative.

### **3.6.2 The role of the feminine principle in human affairs**

The text projects women, both humans and goddesses, as intelligent and key players in the events of the story. Athena plays a major role in the reunification of Odysseus and his family, particularly his wife Penelope, who, for her part, is strong-hearted and clever. The spirits Calypso and Circe love Odysseus and provide him with needed assistance.

### **3.6.3 The role of prophecy and omens**

In Hades, or the underworld, the prophet Teiresias prophesies the struggles and trials undergone by Odysseus. Omens are signs of the will of the gods or indications of what will happen in the future. In the story, most of the omens indicate the death of the suitors.

### **3.6.4 The significance of names**

In African tradition names tend to have meaning. Similarly, in *The Odyssey*, the names of characters bear symbolic significance and their meanings are related to the happenings in the story. Thus, for instance, the name of the protagonist, Odysseus, means “trouble” while Calypso means “hidden” – and she hides Odysseus for seven years. Similarly Alcinous means “sharp mind” – and indeed he is perceptive, while Polyphemus means “far-famed,” and Odysseus seeks fame by shouting his name to Polyphemus after blinding him and escaping.

### **3.6.5 Deception and manipulation as means of survival**

Odysseus repeatedly resorts to deception and manipulation to survive or escape difficult situations, but is himself a victim of deception and manipulation. He deceives and manipulates the Cyclops in order to escape, and deceives the suitors in order to destroy them. However, he too is manipulated by both Circe and Calypso for their own selfish interests. Penelope deceives the suitors by pretending to be weaving a shroud for her father-in-law.

### **3.6.6 Life as a journey**

At a symbolic level, our development in life can be likened to a journey towards our destiny. Odysseus’ story is characterised, largely, by his journey back home. In fact, most of the books in the text – 20 of out 24 to be specific – are concerned with his voyage back home. Odysseus’ journey is about homecoming and self-discovery; having been away from home for about 20 years, half of them fighting in the Trojan War and the other half striving to return home. His journey back home is however fraught with danger and obstacles.

### **3.6.7 Contribution of folk tales to the story**

The Greek oral tradition had no shortage of folk tales. In creating the story, Homer draws from the abundance of traditional folk tales, adapting them to suit the story. Thus, for example, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, the Cyclops and Circe have their origins in traditional folktales.

### **3.6.8 Cycle of concealment and revelation**

Throughout the texts there are cases of concealment followed by revelation, each of which has bearing on the story. Calypso hides Odysseus for seven years before he is released. Odysseus conceals his identity to Polyphemus by claiming his name is Nobody – as a survival ploy. When he manages to escape, he reveals his true identity by shouting out his name to the blinded and wounded Cyclops. Again, as a survival device, Odysseus hides his true identity by disguising himself as an old beggar, only revealing his true identity at appropriate times. In the case of the old nurse Eurykleia, however, it is his scar which reveals his identity. The scar symbolises Odysseus' roots, origins and real identity, though he got it when a boar wounded him before he killed it. As a symbol the scar is as significant as Penelope's act of weaving, which symbolises her endurance, intelligence and loyalty to Odysseus.

### **3.6.9 The lure of temptation**

In the text there are repeated cases of temptation often leading to wrong decisions and actions. Throughout his journey back home Odysseus faces temptation, especially in the form of women such as Circe and Calypso. He does not handle temptation as well as Penelope his wife, who is under pressure to marry one of the suitors and to give up her conviction that her long lost husband will return home. Odysseus' men fail to resist the temptation to eat the sacred cows of the sun god. Despite warnings not to, they also eat the fruit of the lotus and forget about their homes.

### **3.6.10 Suffering and personal development**

During his long journey back home Odysseus undergoes a lot of challenges, tribulations and temptations. While Odysseus is far from being perfect – and shows all the signs of a fallible and error-prone human being – he however develops into a better and wiser person in the course of his journey back home. In other words, the hard times he goes experiences help to develop and strengthen him.

### **3.6.11 Woman as a destructive force**

Some women in the story are the cause of the deaths of many men. To start with the whole story is a continuation of the events of another of Homer's works, *The Iliad*, which focuses on the Trojan War, as indicated above. Helen of Troy is the cause of the death of thousands of men as the Greek armies attempt to take her back to her husband, Menelaus. Helen is thus portrayed as a femme fatale, or seductress who lures men to their destruction.

Another woman portrayed as a destructive force in *The Odyssey* is Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, one of the heroes of the Trojan War. While her husband is away fighting in the war, she gets involved with a lover and, on his return home, gets him killed by her lover.

The third woman portrayed as a destructive force is Odysseus' wife, Penelope. She causes the death of the 120 suitors, all of them men taken by her beauty and unable to reason anymore. Penelope, however, is not a femme fatale. She is different from Helen and Clytemnestra because she does not invite the suitors to the palace, neither does she become unfaithful to her husband.

## Unit 4

### Essay Questions and Study Topics

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this unit you will be given the opportunity to further explore the text of *The Odyssey* by way of essay questions and study topics. As you attempt to deal with the questions and study topics you are expected to acquire a deeper and better understanding of the contents of the text. In addition you will have a feel of what to expect in the examination at the end of the course.



#### 4.2 Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

1. Answer the essay questions and study topics with a degree of confidence.
2. Analyse the various aspects of the text of *The Odyssey*.

#### 4.3 Reflection

From your understanding of the text of *The Odyssey*, do you think you are in a position to answer any question on the text?

#### 4.4 Essay Questions

- (i) Explain the role of the gods in human affairs in *The Odyssey*.
- (ii) Would you say women play a negative or positive role in the story?
- (iii) Evaluate the role of Athena in the story.
- (iv) To what extent and in what ways does Odysseus' trickery help him during his homecoming journey?
- (v) Analyse the role of names in the development of the story.
- (vi) Demonstrate the significance of each major stage of Odysseus' journey to Ithaca.

- (vii) Evaluate the significance of prophecy in the development of the story.
- (viii) Justify Odysseus' decision to hide his true identity from the Cyclops and upon returning to his palace, as well as his decision to later reveal his true identity to the Cyclops (by shouting out his name in triumph) and to his son and, later, his wife.
- (ix) What is the significance of the various stopovers Odysseus makes on his way back to Ithaca?
- (x) "Odysseus' journey to Ithaca is largely a journey of self-discovery." Evaluate this assertion.
- (xi) Demonstrate the centrality of hospitality to the Greek culture as presented in the text.
- (xii) Explain the concept of the anthropomorphic gods of the Greeks.
- (xiii)** Would you say Odysseus' marital unfaithfulness during his years of journeying was justified?
- (xiv) Are you aware of another story in which the journey motif is used? How are the events of the story related to the journey?

#### **4.5 Study Topics**

- (i) In chronological order, list the places Odysseus visits on his journey back to Ithaca.
- (ii) How many suitors seek Penelope's hand in marriage?
- (iii) Why does Odysseus visit Hades?
- (iv) Would you say Odysseus enjoys staying with Calypso?
- (v) List the divine beings encountered by Odysseus in his journey.
- (vi) What is the relationship between Odysseus' name and experiences?
- (vii) List the kings mentioned in the text and the names of the places over which they rule.
- (viii) List the servants working in Odysseus' household and the role of each of them.
- (ix) Which events would you say have the greatest impact on the direction of the story?
- (x) In what ways do love and hate influence events in the story?

## **Module Summary**

In this module you have studied 4 units which have enabled you to interact with the text of Homer's classical epic poem *The Odyssey*. You have also been accorded the opportunity to relate the contents of the module to the contents of the play. You have been provided with background information on the poem as well as a summarised version of its 24 books. In addition you have also been able to interact with the themes and characters of the poem hence getting a better understanding of the poem. You have also tackled questions on the text.

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