

The Odyssey: Book Summaries

Important Characters in *The Odyssey*

(In Alphabetical Order)

Aeolus (Aiolos): King of the winds who entertained Odysseus at an early part of his journey. He presents Odysseus with a bag of the winds so that he may get home safely. When Odysseus' men release the winds and the ship is blown back, Aeolus has no pity.

Alcinous (Alkinoos): King of the Phaiakians (Phaeacians) who welcomes Odysseus and hears his long tale. He presents Odysseus with great treasure and gives him secure passage to Ithaca.

Antinous: The head suitor, son of a man Odysseus saved from death. He is the first of the suitors to speak at all times and plans to kill Telemachus. He is also the first of the suitors to be killed by Odysseus.

Apollo: The god of music, poetry, prophecy, and medicine.

Athena: Daughter of Zeus and the goddess of Wisdom. She guides Odysseus and Telemachus throughout the poem helping them find their way from place to place and defeat their adversaries. On several occasions she directly intervenes and enters battle or conflict in the form of a human.

Calypso (Kalypso): Nymph who kept Odysseus on her island for many years by means of enchantment. Hermes orders her to release him by the authority of Zeus at the request of Athena. She has him make a raft to journey on.

Charybdis: A dangerous whirlpool personified as a female sea monster. Odysseus and his men escape its grips.

Cicones: Allies of the Trojans, who live at Ismarus. They are the enemies of Odysseus, and Odysseus and his men raid their lands.

Circe (Kirke): Witch-like woman who at first turns Odysseus' men into pigs but is impressed when she cannot affect Odysseus. She lusts after him and he stays with her for a year. She tells him to go to the land of the dead and advises him to avoid the cattle of the sun.

Cyclopes (Cyclopeez): A race of one-eyed giants; an individual member of the race is a Cyclops. In order to free himself and his men from captivity, Odysseus tricks one of them.

Eurycleia (Euryklea): Odysseus nurse as a child and a servant in his house. She hides Telemachus' journey to Pylos and is the first woman to recognize Odysseus. She helps Odysseus sort out the good handmaidens from the bad ones.

Eurylochus (Eurylokhos): One of Odysseus' men. He is the man who does not drink from Circe's cup and warns Odysseus. He is also the one who convinces the Odysseus' men to stop at the Island of the Cattle of the Sun and is also the man who convinces them to eat the cattle.

Eurymachus (Eurymakhos): The second suitor, Eurymachus always speaks after Antinoos or in place of him. He is the second suitor to die.

Helios: The minor sun god who pastures his cattle on the island of Thrinacia. Odysseus' men ignore his warning not to feast on Helios' cattle.

Hermes: messenger of the gods, he delivers the edicts of Zeus to gods and mortals. He instructs Calypso to release Odysseus. He also accompanies souls to the land of the dead.

Laertes: Odysseus' father. He appears only at the end of the poem and prepares to stand with his son against the Ithacan mob.

Laestrygonians: Cannibal inhabitants of a distant land. They bombard Odysseus' ship with boulders, and he and some of his crew narrowly escape.

Lotus Eaters: Inhabitants of a land Odysseus visits. They eat the Lotus, which causes them to have no worries or cares in the world.

Odysseus: Odysseus is the main character of the Odyssey, a tale that chronicles his homecoming and his journeys since his departure from Troy. Odysseus was present in the Iliad but not with the same focus as this poem. The story focuses on his trials at sea and on land and how, once he gets home, he must avenge his family's honor from the suitors who have been besieging his house waiting for his wife to choose a new husband. He is aided by Athena in his journeys but thwarted by Poseidon.

Penelope: Odysseus' wife and mother of Telemachus. She remains loyal to Odysseus even after he is gone for twenty years. She constructs elaborate ruses such as weaving and unweaving at a loom. She has trouble believing that her husband has returned when she first sees him and is very cold until she gets undeniable proof of his identity.

Philoetius: Cowherd who helps Odysseus and Telemachus defeat the suitors.

Polyphemus (Polyphemos): Cyclops son of Poseidon who is blinded by Odysseus. Polyphemus is a shepherd who refuses to be a host to Odysseus and eats some of his men. He curses Odysseus and asks his father for revenge.

Poseidon: Zeus' brother and the god of the sea, he is upset with Odysseus first for not offering sufficient sacrifices to him. He is even unhappier after Odysseus blinds his son Polyphemus. It is Poseidon that Odysseus still must appease at the end of the poem. Poseidon keeps Odysseus from making it home on multiple occasions.

Scylla: A six-headed sea monster that devours sailors. Odysseus and his men escape its grips.

Sirens: Creatures, part woman and part bird, whose songs lure sailors to their death. Odysseus manages to hear their song and live to tell about it.

Telemachus (Telemakhos): Son of Odysseus and Penelope, this poem is nearly as much about him as it is about his father. The story begins with his anger at the suitors who are wasting away his estate. At the encouragement of Athena, he begins a journey to search for news of his father. When he returns to Ithaca, he helps his father overcome the suitors and regain his power.

Tiresias (Eurylokhos): Blind prophet who Odysseus goes to find in the land of the dead. He tells Odysseus how to get home and that he must appease Poseidon once he gets there.

Zeus: Father of Athena and King of the gods, Zeus appears frequently in this poem but mostly to give assent to another god who either wants to help Odysseus or hinder him. He gives Athena license to help Odysseus but also strikes Odysseus' ship with lightning after he has committed wrongs against the gods. He gives frequent signs to Odysseus and others in the forms of lightning or storms throughout the poem.

Summary of Books in *The Odyssey*

Book I: The gods agree that Odysseus must return home. Athene appears to Telemachus, telling him to make a plea to the suitors to leave his house and then go in quest of news of his father.

Book II: Telemachus calls an assembly, pleads with the suitors, and is taunted by them. Without Penelope's knowledge he then sails for Pylos.

Book III: Telemachus is welcomed by Nestor at Pylos and joins in celebrating the feast of Poseidon, but hears no news of Odysseus. He continues his journey to Sparta.

Book IV: Menelaus and Helen receive Telemachus gladly at Sparta. Menelaus gives him hope his father may be alive. In Ithaca, the suitors plan to murder Telemachus. Athene sends a reassuring vision to Penelope.

Book V: Hermes is sent by Zeus to Ogygia to tell Calypso to let Odysseus go. Odysseus builds a raft and sets sail. The raft is broken by a storm, but Odysseus battles the waves and reaches Scheria.

Book VI: Exhausted, Odysseus hides himself and sleeps. He is awakened by the voices of Nausicaa and her maidens. Nausicaa invites the stranger to the house of her father, Alcinous.

Book VII: King Alcinous and Queen Arete make Odysseus welcome and promise to send him safely home.

Book VIII: Alcinous gives a banquet for Odysseus, who displays his prowess in weight-throwing. The minstrel Demodocus sings of Troy.

Book IX: Odysseus reveals who he is and begins the story of his adventures. He tells of the Lotus-eaters and the escape from the Cyclops Polyphemus.

Book X: Odysseus goes on to tell of the visits to the isle of Aeolus, to the savage Laestrygonians, and to the enchantress Circe, with whom he and his men stayed feasting for a year.

Book XI: Odysseus describes his voyage to Hades, to consult the spirit of the prophet Teiresias and his conversations with the ghosts of his mother and of his old comrades.

Book XII: Odysseus tells of his return to Circe, and departure from her past the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, then of his landing on the island of Thriacia, where his men slaughtered the Sun-gods cattle. Zeus in punishment destroyed their ship, and Odysseus was stranded on Calypso's isle.

Book XIII: The tale ends. The Phaeacians heap gifts upon Odysseus, and Alcinous gives him safe convoy to Ithaca. Odysseus is carried sleeping ashore on his island. Athene appears later to counsel him and changes him into an old beggar.

Book XIV: In the hut of his swineherd Eumaeus, Odysseus learns the news of home. He spends the night here.

Book XV: Telemachus in Sparta bids farewell to Menelaus and Helen and returns to Ithaca. On landing, being suspicious of the suitors, he goes to Eumaeus' hut.

Book XVI: Telemachus sends Eumaeus into the town to tell Penelope of his return. Odysseus now reveals himself to Telemachus. The suitors learn that Telemachus is back and confer on how to rid themselves of him.

Book XVII: Telemachus is welcomed home by Penelope. Odysseus, accompanied by Eumaeus and in the guise of a beggar, returns to his house. He is abused by the suitor Antinous.

Book XVIII: Odysseus thrashes the town beggar Irus. He is ill-treated by the suitors and Telemachus censures them.

Book XIX: Penelope speaks with Odysseus, not knowing who he is. He assures her that Odysseus will return. The old nurse Euryclea washes his feet and recognizes him by the scar on his leg. Penelope orders a bed prepared for him.

Book XX: In the morning, Odysseus is heartened by omens from Zeus. His suitors, in spite of Telemachus' efforts, again abuse him. Disaster impends.

Book XXI: Penelope brings out Odysseus' bow as a test for the suitors. They are unable to string it. Apart, Odysseus reveals himself to Eumaeus and Philoetius. Then he strings and shoots the bow easily. The suitors are dismayed.

Book XXII: Odysseus and Telemachus begin the slaughter of the suitors, with the help of Eumaeus and Philoetius. The suitors are slain, and the traitorous housemaids hanged.

Book XXIII: Euryclea tells Penelope the good news. Penelope, convinced at last, embraces her husband and hears from him his story.

Book XXIV: The ghosts of the suitors gather in the house of Hades. Odysseus goes to find his father, Laertes. The men of Ithaca unite to avenge the dead by attacking Odysseus. Athene stops the fray and bids them all to make peace.