

1 Knowledge Map: The Odyssey (Overview)

This component is called the 'Literature Study' and will form 50% of the Homeric World paper. It is focused entirely on Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. This topic focuses on the plot of the Odyssey, with a particular focus on Books 9, 10, 19, 21, and 22. It also analyses the literary techniques employed by its author, Homer. Certain characters need to be analysed, particularly Odysseus, the main protagonist. The key themes that are threaded through the book, such as the concept of *xenia* (guest friendship and hospitality), must be examined.

Background to The Odyssey

1	Summary	The plot of the Odyssey is a relatively simple one: a man, Odysseus, seeks to return home to the island of Ithaca after twenty years away. In his attempts to sail home, he gets lost, and all his crew die in horrific circumstances. When he does finally return, his problems are not over; he has to reclaim his kingdom from his enemies.
2	Structure of Story	The story is complicated by the structure of the narrative. The story is not written in chronological order. The chronological order of events is not the same as the order that they occur in the story.
3	Flashbacks	Homer adopts a flashback technique in the story which explains why the story does not occur in chronological order. Often Odysseus will recount stories that have happened on his journey home.
4	Books 1 to 4	The early books of the Odyssey describe events that occur at the end of Odysseus' ten-year journey home and are generally referred to as <i>The Telemachy</i> and focuses on the return of Telemachus to Ithaca.
5	Books 5 to 8	Books 5 to 8 focus on the homecoming of Odysseus and his involvement with the Phaeacians. The Phaeacians, upon discovering his identity, agree to help him return to Ithaca.
6	Books 9 to 12	Books 9 to 12 are the flashback aspect of the story. He describes some of his perilous adventures to his hosts. These stories include his encounter with Polyphemus, the Cyclops, perhaps the most famous part of the book.
7	Books 13 to 24	Books 13 to 24 focus on Odysseus in Ithaca. He sees Odysseus test the loyalties of his friends and, with the help of Telemachus, he takes his revenge on the suitors of his wife. He is reunited with his wife and returns to his throne as king of Ithaca.

Themes of The Odyssey

8	The Power of Fate	It might be presumed that Odysseus was always 'fated' to return to Ithaca and reclaim his throne, but the Greeks believed differently in the concept of fate. This is more about how the gods determined, even pre-determined, the fate of humans through their actions; Odysseus is a key example.
9	Xenia: Hospitality and Friendship	In his journey, Odysseus is often dependent on the hospitality of strangers. The Greeks believed in a custom called <i>Xenia</i> where travellers would be given food, shelter, and protection. This theme is played out throughout the poem.
10	Deceit and Trickery	Despite seemingly negative characteristics of someone, the Greeks admired Odysseus' trickery and lies. The Odyssey is full of examples of his lies. Indeed Books 9 and 10 could be entirely fabricated as they are all told from the viewpoint of Odysseus who is prone to lying.
11	Civilisation and Barbarism	Throughout the book there is an examination of what it is to be civilised and uncivilised. It is often the monsters that are viewed as barbarous through their behaviour and failure to offer <i>Xenia</i> .
12	Revenge and Justice	This theme is examined throughout and, as readers, we are asked to question what is justice and what is revenge and can the two be linked. An examination of Odysseus' actions to the suitors asks whether he carried out justice or revenge.
13	Nostos	<i>Nostos</i> is the name given to the desire to return home, and is the root of the word nostalgia. It is essential for Odysseus to have this focus permanently in his mind to keep him focused on his journey home.

Key Characters (Gods)

14	Zeus	King of the Olympian Gods and fundamental to the story of Odysseus. He speaks the first lines of the book and makes the point that men blame the Gods for their troubles but are themselves responsible for what happens.
15	Athena	Athena plays a vital role in the book as Odysseus' protector. It is she who secures the release of Odysseus from Calypso, and supports Odysseus in his plans to defeat the suitors.
16	Poseidon	God of the Seas, who takes great offence at Odysseus, primarily because he blinds his son, Polyphemus, the cyclops.
17	Hermes	Messenger of the Gods, he appears in the story at two key moments: to order the release of Odysseus from Calypso under Zeus' instructions, and to provide Odysseus with an antidote to Circe's potions.

Key Characters (Mortals and Monsters)

18	Odysseus	The main protagonist of the story. He is King of Ithaca, a Greek island, and he wants to return home after having been away for ten-years fighting in the Trojan War. He employs guile as well as courage to return to Ithaca, defeat the suitors, and resume his proper place as king.
19	Penelope	Wife of Odysseus. Whilst Odysseus was away, she had to fight off over a hundred suitors who wanted to marry her thinking that Odysseus was dead. She is depicted as shrewd, resourceful, and faithful.
20	Telemachus	The son of Odysseus. He would spend the first part of the story trying to find his father. Telemachus was born just when Odysseus left for the Trojan War, so is about twenty-years old at the point of his return.
21	Lae rtes and Anticleia	Odysseus' father, the old king lives humbly and in solitude on a small farm where he mourns the absence of his son; once reunited with Odysseus, he is restored to dignity. Odysseus' mother, she dies grieving her son's long absence and sees him only during his visit to the land of the dead.
23	Alcinous and Arete	Alcinous is a Phaeacian king, and Arete his queen. He befriends Odysseus and helps him on his journey. She is descended from Poseidon, and is considered a wise woman in the story.
24	Euryclaea	A maid in Odysseus' palace, she is loyal to Odysseus and Penelope and helps in Odysseus' pursuit of the suitors. She would recognise him when he is disguised.
25	Eumaeus and Philoetichus	Odysseus' loyal swineherd and cowherd, who grew up on Ithaca with Odysseus. They would be loyal friends to both Odysseus and Telemachus and help them return to the palace to rid it of the suitors.
26	Melanthius and Melantho	Odysseus' disloyal goatherd and maid, who side with the suitors in Odysseus' absence. Each face a grisly death.
27	Agamemnon	King of Mycenae and commander of the Greek forces at Troy, he was assassinated by his wife (Clytemnestra) and her lover (Aegisthus). Odysseus sees him in the land of dead.
28	Antinous	One of the main suitors in the story. A violent and over-confident character who strives hard to take Odysseus' throne.
29	Eurydamachus	Another of the suitors. He is sly and manipulative, at one point fooling Penelope that he has no ill-intent. He arranges for the death of Telemachus, only to be outwitted by him.
30	Calypso	She is a goddess-nymph who keeps Odysseus captive and under her control for seven years. She only releases him when she is ordered to by Hermes after Zeus sends him to her demanding she release him.
31	Polyphemus	One-eyed giant of son of Poseidon, and one of the Cyclopes in the Odyssey. After eating some of Odysseus' men, Odysseus would blind him by driving a stake through his one eye.
32	Circe	Circe is an enchantress or witch and renowned for her vast knowledge of potions and herbs. She would transform her enemies into animals; in this case, Odysseus' men into swine.

The Odyssey: Map of Odysseus' Journey

