

Book 21: The Test of the Great Bow

Like many unwilling princesses of myth, fairy tale, and legend, Penelope proposes an impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By so doing, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her true husband. The test will involve Odysseus's huge bow, which no one could string except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years ago.

Now the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.
Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago
1635 and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare
the doorjamb and the shining doors were set
by the careful builder. Penelope untied the strap
around the curving handle, pushed her hook
into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside
1640 and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound
as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—
a bellow like a bull's vaunt^o in a meadow—
followed by her light footfall entering
over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes
1645 lay there in chests, but the lady's milkwhite arms
went up to lift the bow down from a peg
in its own polished bowcase.

Now Penelope
sank down, holding the weapon on her knees,
and drew her husband's great bow out, and sobbed
1650 and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.
Then back she went to face the crowded hall
tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung
the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind her
maids bore a basket full of axheads, bronze
1655 and iron implements for the master's game.
Thus in her beauty she approached the suitors,
and near a pillar of the solid roof
she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks,
her maids on either hand and still,
then spoke to the banqueters:

1660 "My lords, hear me:
suitors indeed, you recommended this house
to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband
being long gone, long out of mind. You found
no justification for yourselves—none
1665 except your lust to marry me. Stand up, then:
we now declare a contest for that prize.
Here is my lord Odysseus's hunting bow.

1642. vaunt: boast.

Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow
through iron ax-helve sockets,^o twelve in line?

1670 I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,
my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever
to be remembered, though I dream it only."

*Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not a man can even
bend it enough to string it.*

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:
swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,
1675 one downcast as the other. But Odysseus
followed them outdoors, outside the court,
and coming up said gently:

"You, herdsman,
and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you,
or should I keep it dark?

No, no; speak,
1680 my heart tells me. Would you be men enough
to stand by Odysseus if he came back?
Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did?
Suppose some god should bring him?
Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?"

The cowherd said:

1685 "Ah, let the master come!
Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier
guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me
and how I manage arms!"

Likewise Eumaeus

1690 fell to praying all heaven for his return,
so that Odysseus, sure at least of these,
told them:

"I am at home, for I am he.
I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year
I am ashore in my own land. I find
the two of you, alone among my people,
1695 longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard
except your own that I might come again.
So now what is in store for you I'll tell you:
If Zeus brings down the suitors by my hand
I promise marriages to both, and cattle,
1700 and houses built near mine. And you shall be
brothers-in-arms of my Telemachus.
Here, let me show you something else, a sign
that I am he, that you can trust me, look:

1669. An ax-helve is the ax handle. The socket is a hollowed-out place lined with iron at the end of the handle. The ax slides into the socket and is secured. Shooting an arrow through a line of ax-helve sockets would be an "impossible task"—something worthy of a folk hero like Daniel Boone or the Lone Ranger, or Odysseus.

this old scar from the tusk wound that I got
boar hunting on Parnassus—" . . .

1705 Shifting his rags
he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew
and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping,
kissing his head and shoulders. He as well
took each man's head and hands to kiss, then said—
1710 to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—

"Break off, no more of this.
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.
Drift back in, but separately at intervals
after me.

Now listen to your orders:

1715 when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,
will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.
Defy them. Eumaeus, bring the bow
and put it in my hands there at the door.
Tell the women to lock their own door tight.
1720 Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms
or groans of men, in hall or court, not one
must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.
Throw the crossbar and lash it."

*Now Odysseus, still in his beggar's clothes, asks to try the bow.
The suitors refuse to allow a mere beggar to try where they have
failed, but Penelope insists that the stranger be given his chance.
The suspense is very great—by this act, Penelope has accepted
her husband as a suitor.*

*Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells
the nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family
chambers (the harem) and to bolt the doors. Odysseus had earlier
told Telemachus to remove the suitors' weapons from the great
hall. Now he takes the bow . . .*

1725 And Odysseus took his time,
turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,
for borings that termites might have made
while the master of the weapon was abroad.
The suitors were now watching him, and some
jested among themselves:

1730 "A bow lover!"
"Dealer in old bows!"
"Maybe he has one like it
at home!"

"Or has an itch to make one for himself."

"See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!"

And one disdainful suitor added this:

1735 "May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends
it!"

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,
like a musician, like a harper, when
with quiet hand upon his instrument

1740 he draws between his thumb and forefinger
a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly
Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang
a swallow's note.

1745 In the hushed hall it smote the suitors
and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered
overhead, one loud crack for a sign.

And Odysseus laughed within him that the son
of crooked-minded Cronus^o had flung that omen down.

1750 He picked one ready arrow from his table
where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still
in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.
He nocked^o it, let it rest across the handgrip,
and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

1755 Now flashed
arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle
through every socket ring, and grazed not one,
to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly

Odysseus said:

1760 "Telemachus, the stranger
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.
I did not miss, neither did I take all day
stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,
not so contemptible as the young men say.
The hour has come to cook their lordships' mutton—

1765 supper by daylight. Other amusements later,
with song and harping that adorn a feast."

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,
1770 and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze
stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

1749. Cronus: father of Zeus. His epithet is "crooked-minded" because of his schemes to destroy his children.

1753. nocked: fit to the bowstring.

Book 22: Death at the Palace

The climax of the story is here. Odysseus is ready to claim his rightful kingdom. But first he must deal with more than a hundred young and hostile suitors. The first one he turns to is Antinous. Antinous has been, all through the story, the meanest of the suitors and their ringleader. He had hit Odysseus with a stool when the hero appeared in the hall as a beggar, and he had ridiculed the disguised king by calling him a bleary vagabond, a pest, and a tramp.

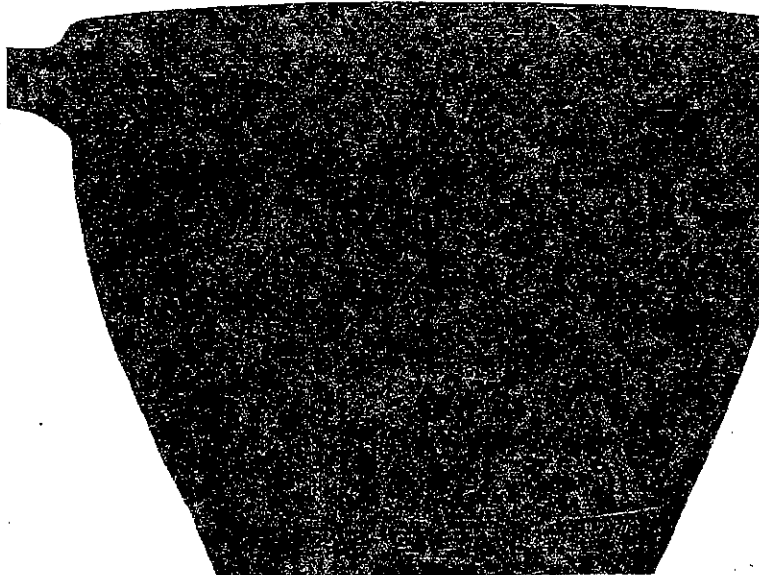
Now shrugging off his rags the wildest fighter of the islands leapt and stood on the broad door sill, his own bow in his hand.

He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver and spoke to the crowd:

1775 "So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over. Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before, if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo."^o

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup,

1780 embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers: the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of death? How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe indeed— could dare to bring death's pain on him and darkness on his eyes?



1777. Odysseus prays to Apollo because this particular day is one of the god's feast days. Apollo is also the god of archery.

Ulysses slaying Penelope's suitors
(c. 440 B.C.). Attic red figure vase.

Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
Photo: The Granger Collection,
New York.

1785 Odysseus's arrow hit him under the chin
 and punched up to the feathers through his throat.
 Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall
 from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted
 crimson runnels,^o a river of mortal red,
 1790 and one last kick upset his table
 knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.
 Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay
 the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,
 everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned
 1795 the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,
 not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and
 throw.
 All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:
 "Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!"
 "Your own throat will be slit for this!"
 "Our finest lad is down!
 You killed the best on Ithaca."
 1800 "Buzzards will tear your eyes out!"
 For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot,
 an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend
 they were already in the grip of death.
 But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:
 1805 "You yellow dogs, you thought I'd never make it
 home from the land of Troy. You took my house to
 plunder,
 twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared
 bid for my wife while I was still alive.
 Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide
 heaven,
 1810 contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
 Your last hour has come. You die in blood."
 As they all took this in, sickly green fear
 pulled at their entrails,^o and their eyes flickered
 looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.
 1815 Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:
 "If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back,
 all that you say these men have done is true.
 Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.
 But here he lies, the man who caused them all.
 1820 Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on
 to do these things. He cared less for a marriage
 than for the power Cronion^o has denied him
 as king of Ithaca. For that
 he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.

1789. runnels: streams.

1813. entrails: guts.

1822. Cronion: another name for Zeus,
 meaning "son of Cronus."

1825 He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we'll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe^o of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
1830 Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger."

Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:

"Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
put up by others, would I hold my hand.
1835 There will be killing till the score is paid.
You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way
out,
or run for it, if you think you'll escape death.
I doubt one man of your skins by." . . .

*Telemachus joins his father in the fight. They are helped by the
swineherd and cowherd. Now the suitors, trapped in the hall
without weapons, are struck right and left by arrows, and many
of them lie dying on the floor.*

1840 At this moment that unmanning thunder cloud,
the aegis, Athena's shield,
took form aloft in the great hall.

And the suitors mad with fear
at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river
when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,
in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.
1845 After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as eagles
from eyries^o in the mountains veering over and diving
down
with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,
who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the
valley—
but the pouncing eagles grip their prey, no frantic wing
avails,
1850 and farmers love to watch those beaked hunters.
So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,
turning, turning to strike and strike again,
while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking
over the whole floor.

*Odysseus now calls forth the maids who have betrayed his house-
hold by associating with the suitors. He orders them to clean up
the house and dispose of the dead. He then "pays" them by
hanging them in the courtyard.*

1828. tithe: tax.

1846. eyries (er'ès): nests built in very high
places.

Book 23: Odysseus and Penelope

Eurycleia runs to Penelope to announce the return of Odysseus and the defeat of the suitors. The faithful wife—the perfect mate for the wily Odysseus—suspects a trick from the gods and decides to test her would-be husband. She succeeds in teasing him to distraction.

1855 Crossing the door sill she sat down at once
in firelight, against the nearest wall,
across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There

1860 leaning against a pillar, sat the man
and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited
for what his wife would say when she had seen him.
And she, for a long time, sat deathly still
in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed
she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,
but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.

Telemachus's voice came to her ears:

1865

“Mother,

cruel mother, do you feel nothing,
drawing yourself apart this way from Father?
Will you not sit with him and talk and question him?
What other woman could remain so cold?
1870 Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her
from wars and wandering, after twenty years?
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!”

Penelope answered:

“I am stunned, child.

1875 I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.
If really he is Odysseus, truly home,
beyond all doubt we two shall know each other
better than you or anyone. There are
secret signs we know, we two.”

A smile

1880 came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus,
who turned to Telemachus and said:

1885 “Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure.
Before long she will see and know me best.
These tatters, dirt—all that I'm caked with now—
make her look hard at me and doubt me still. . . .”

Odysseus orders Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd to bathe and put on fresh clothing . . .

Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
1890 lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
taller, and massive, too, with crimping hair
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
1895 Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one
whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus's head and shoulders.
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,

1900 the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
harder than any. Who else in the world
would keep aloof as you do from her husband
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

1905 Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penelope

spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,

if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.
1910 I know so well how you—how he—appeared
boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
1915 with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash raging:

“Woman, by heaven you've stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?

1920 No builder had the skill for that—unless
a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.
There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else's!



Mirror with the head of a woman
(4th century B.C.). Bronze.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Rogers Fund, 1907. (07.256)

1925

An old trunk of olive

grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.

1930 Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
hewed and shaped the stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest, I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold, and ivory,
1935 and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There's our sign!

I know no more. Could someone else's hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?"
Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
1940 grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
murmuring:

"Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

1945 No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together.
Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
1950 long ago against the frauds of men,
impostors who might come—and all those many
whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?

1955 No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours."
Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
1960 of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
longed for as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a
swimmer

spent in rough water where his ship went down
under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
1965 Few men can keep alive through a big surf
to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

Book 24: Odysseus and His Father

The ghosts of the suitors drift away through dank places to where the Dead dwell at the world's end.

Odysseus has one more duty. He must go to old Laertes, his grieving father, who lives alone outside of town. A natural storyteller to the end, Odysseus cannot resist teasing his father. He pretends to be a traveler, who had entertained Odysseus five years ago. As Laertes hears his son spoken of, the old man's eyes fill with tears . . .

- 1970 A cloud of pain had fallen on Laertes.
Scooping up handfuls of the sunburnt dust
he sifted it over his gray head, and groaned,
and the groan went to the son's heart. A twinge
prickling up through his nostrils warned Odysseus
1975 he could not watch this any longer.
He leaped and threw his arms around his father,
kissed him, and said:

"Oh, Father, I am he!

Twenty years gone, and here I've come again
to my own land!

Hold back your tears! No grieving!

- 1980 I bring good news—though still we cannot rest.
I killed the suitors to the last man!
Outrage and injury have been avenged!"
Laertes turned and found his voice to murmur:
"If you are Odysseus, my son, come back,
1985 give me some proof, a sign to make me sure."
His son replied:

"The scar then, first of all.

- Look, here the wild boar's flashing tusk
wounded me on Parnassus; do you see it? . . .
Again—more proof—let's say the trees you gave me
1990 on this revetted^o plot of orchard once.
I was a small boy at your heels, wheedling
amid the young trees, while you named each one.
You gave me thirteen pear, ten apple trees,
and forty fig trees. Fifty rows of vines
1995 were promised too, each one to bear in turn.
Bunches of every hue would hang there ripening,
weighed down by the god of summer days."
The old man's knees failed him, his heart grew faint,
recalling all that Odysseus calmly told.

1990. revetted: walled in.

2000 He clutched his son. Odysseus held him swooning
until he got his breath back and his spirit
and spoke again:

“Zeus, Father! Gods above!—
you still hold pure Olympus, if the suitors
paid for their crimes indeed, and paid in blood!”

2005 . . . They went home, the two together,
into the stone farmhouse. There Telemachus
and the two herdsmen were already carving
roast young pork, and mixing amber wine.
During these preparations the Sikel woman^o
2010 bathed Laertes and anointed him,
and dressed him in a new cloak. Then Athena,
standing by, filled out his limbs again,
gave girth and stature to the old field captain
fresh from the bathing place. His son looked on
2015 in wonder at the godlike bloom upon him,
and called out happily:

“Oh, Father,
surely one of the gods who are young forever
has made you magnificent before my eyes!”

The families of the dead suitors arrive with revenge in their hearts. A blood feud seems inevitable, and a battle has already begun, when Pallas Athena, directed by Zeus, ends once and for all, the power struggle in Ithaca.

“Now hold!”

2020 she cried, “Break off this bitter skirmish;
end your bloodshed, Ithacans, and make peace.”

Their faces paled with dread before Athena,
and swords dropped from their hands unnerved, to lie
strewn the ground, at the great voice of the goddess.
2025 Those from the town turned fleeing for their lives.
But with a cry to freeze their hearts
and ruffling like an eagle on the pounce,
the lord Odysseus reared himself to follow—
at which the son of Cronus dropped a thunderbolt
smoking at his daughter’s feet.

2030 cast a gray glance at her friend and said:

Athena

“Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways,
command yourself. Call off this battle now,
2035 or Zeus who views the wide world may be angry.”

2009. The Sikel woman is Laertes' servant.
Sikel might refer to Sicily.

He yielded to her, and his heart was glad.
Both parties later swore to terms of peace
set by their arbiter, Athena, daughter
of Zeus who bears the stormcloud as a shield—
2040 though still she kept the form and voice of Mentor.



Statuette of Zeus (Etruscan,
c. 480 B.C.). Bronze.

Collection of the J. Paul Getty
Museum, Malibu, California.

Responding to the Epic

Analyzing the Epic

Identifying Facts

1. Just before he steps forward to try the bow, Odysseus reveals his true identity to two other people. Who are they, and why does he reveal himself to them?
2. As the epic reaches its **climax**, two signs are sent from Olympus to indicate the gods' approval of Odysseus. What are they?
3. List at least five **images** and **similes** that help you picture some of the most tense or most horrifying moments in the battle.
4. The tables are turned on the wily Odysseus near the end of the story. How does Penelope test Odysseus after the battle? What characteristic of their marriage bed suggests the strength and endurance of their love?
5. What proofs does Odysseus give his father, Laertes, that it is indeed he, Odysseus, who has returned to Ithaca? How does Athena now transform old Laertes?
6. What is Athena's role at the **resolution** of the epic?

Interpreting Meanings

7. In setting up the test of the bow for the suitors, how is Penelope really saying that she is looking for Odysseus?
8. When Odysseus takes the bow in his hands at line 1736 (page 785), a **simile** compares him to a musician or harper. At what other points in the story has Odysseus been associated with singers of tales? What is significant about this simile and its use at the climactic moment of the *Odyssey*?
9. Is Odysseus's revenge on the suitors and maids excessive? Discuss this question from Odysseus's point of view (remember he was the rightful king) and from your own modern point of view.
10. When Odysseus was held by Calypso on her island, he told the nymph that he wanted to get home to see his wife. Calypso wondered what it was about Penelope that drew Odysseus homeward (see page 734). Now that you have met Penelope, how would you answer Calypso?

11. What important Greek value do you think is expressed in Odysseus's last action—his visit to Laertes? Do we share this value today?

Writing About the Epic

A Creative Response

1. **Setting the Epic in Modern Times.** Write a proposal in which you suggest ways that the *Odyssey* could be made into a movie set in contemporary times. In your proposal, which will be directed to the people who will produce the movie, you will have to explain how you would modernize the *Odyssey*. Use the following chart to organize your ideas. Write two or three paragraphs:

1200 B.C.	Today
a. Trojan War as a background	a.
b. Hero is soldier who fought in war	b.
c. Journeys home around Mediterranean and down to Underworld	c.
d. Uses ships with oars and sails	d.
e. Meets Lotus Eaters, Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis	e.
f. Is tempted by Circe and Calypso	f.
g. Is rescued by a teen-age princess	g.
h. Fortune hunters at home hound his wife	h.
i. Dog lives on garbage heap	i.
j. Son is insulted	j.
k. Gods dominate the action	k.

2. **Casting a Woman as the Voyaging Hero.** Write a brief essay in which you explain how an *Odyssey* could be written with a woman as the voyaging hero. Consider these points in your essay:
 - a. Occupation of the heroine
 - b. Reason for being away from home
 - c. Situation at home
 - d. Trials of journey home
 - e. How the people blocking the heroine are defeated

A Critical Response

3. Explaining the Epic's Relevance to the Twentieth Century. A work of literature cannot be important to us unless it speaks to us and to our lives. In a paragraph, name at least four ways in which the *Odyssey* speaks to you in the twentieth century. You might consider how it says something about these values:

- The values of courage, trust, and discipline
- The value of home and family
- The value of obedience to the divine world
- The value of courtesy and respect for all classes of people

4. Explaining a Theme. On page 723 the three major themes of the *Odyssey* are very briefly stated. Take one theme, and in an essay explain how it is developed in the epic.

5. Analyzing the Elements of the Epic. Write a brief essay in which you cite incidents from the *Odyssey* that show how the epic includes these elements:

- It portrays the adventures of a larger-than-life hero.
- This hero is on a quest for something of great value.
- The epic is huge in scope and portrays domestic life as well as life in the divine world.
- It expresses the values of a particular society.

6. Analyzing Character. Various epithets describe Odysseus as "wily," "versatile," and a "strategist." In a brief essay, explain how Odysseus shows his cleverness and wit in the episodes with Nausicaa, with the Cyclops, and with Penelope at the end of the story. Consider also the hero's decision not to tell his men the whole of Circe's prophecy (page 764). At the end of your essay, explain how you feel about the character of Odysseus: Is he totally admirable? Is he believable? Is he like a modern hero, or does he seem old-fashioned today? Give at least one reason for your response.

7. Comparing Stories. Some of the story elements used in the *Odyssey* are found in legend and folklore. In a four-paragraph essay, explain how at least four situations found in the *Odyssey* are also found in another legend or folktale. Before you write, fill out a chart like the following one:

	Odyssey	Other Story
Magical weapon that works only for one person		
Scars or other signs that reveal true identity		
Divine beings (or fairy godmothers) who assist hero or heroine		
Magical transformations of hero or heroine		

8. Contrasting Two "Return" Stories. After any war there are homecoming stories, and the Trojan War was no different. One of the great homecoming stories to come out of that war is Odysseus's. Another homecoming story, which Homer's audience also knew very well, was the horrible story of Agamemnon's return to Mycenae and his wife Clytemnestra. In fact, Odysseus meets Agamemnon in the Land of the Dead and hears the old commander's tragic story. In a good sourcebook on mythology, look up the story of what happened when Agamemnon returned to Mycenae after the war. Then write an essay in which you contrast that homecoming with Odysseus's return to Ithaca and Penelope. (Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* will give you the information you need.) Write three paragraphs. Use the following chart to organize your main points.

	Odysseus	Agamemnon
The faithfulness of the heroes' wives		
The wives' motives for their behavior		
The reception each hero got upon being reunited with his wife		
The children's roles in the stories		

9. Supporting a Critical Response. Use one of these quotations as the basis of an essay on the *Odyssey*. Cite specific passages from the epic that you think support the ideas in the statement. If you disagree with the statement, cite specific passages from the epic to support your

own opinion, which you should make clear in your topic sentence. Write at least three paragraphs.

... what has made Homer for three thousand years the greatest poet in the world is his *naturalness*. We love each other as in Homer. We hate each other as in Homer. We are perpetually being interfered with as in Homer by change and fate and necessity, by invisible influences for good, and by invisible influences for evil . . .

—John Cowper Powys

... the whole problem of the *Odyssey* is for Odysseus to establish his identity.

—George S. Dimock, Jr.

There are many women, young and old, enchantresses and queens and serving maids [in the *Odyssey*]. In the "society," as we say, of the *Odyssey*, women can be very distinguished: Athena is powerful in the highest circles, Arete holds equal power with her husband in Phaeacia, Helen has been re-established in the power of her beauty, which if I am not mistaken she makes Telemachus feel. Three of the principal adventures of Odysseus are with exquisite young women of great charm and spirit . . .

—Robert Fitzgerald

Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

Words from the Epic

Even today, a difficult journey full of adventures and possible hardships is called an *odyssey*. In fact, any kind of wandering, or journey in search of something, is an *odyssey*. We speak of a scientist's "odyssey" in search of the secret of DNA. We speak of Alex Haley's "odyssey" in search of his African roots. John Steinbeck wrote of his "odyssey" in search of America in *Travels with Charley* (his poodle Charley rode with him). (See page 389.)

Here are some questions about some names from the *Odyssey* and some related English words. To answer the questions, you'll need a good dictionary. Look up the words in italics. Right after the word itself in the dictionary, you'll find information in parentheses that gives you the word's history.

1. The Cyclops was a giant with a single enormous eye. What does the word *Cyclops* have in common with our word *cycle*?
2. The Sirens were beautiful women with enchanting voices that lured sailors to steer their ships toward the rocks. Why do you think the warning horn on an ambulance or police car came to be called a *siren*?
3. *Siren* and *sinew* have a common root word, meaning "to tie." How did the Sirens "tie" men who heard their songs? How does the word *sinew* relate to the sense of "tie"?
4. Homer and Demodocus, both great bards, open their epic poems with a prayer to the Muse. There were nine Muses in mythology. They were goddesses who inspired people working in the arts and sciences. How is our word *museum* related to the *Muses*?
5. What does our word *music* have to do with the *Muses*?
6. Athena is often disguised in this epic as *Mentor*, a captain who was a friend of Odysseus's family. As Mentor, she guides the young Telemachus on his own "odyssey" to find his father and reclaim his rightful inheritance. What do we mean today when we say someone is a *mentor*?
7. Olympus was believed to be the home of the gods—it is a real mountain that can be seen today in Greece. Why were the *Olympics* named for this dwelling place of the gods?
8. The gods were believed to remain immortal by eating nectar and ambrosia. You find these divine foods mentioned several times in the *Odyssey*. What does *nectar* have in common with the medical term *necrosis*, which means "the death of tissue"?
9. Why do you think people named a fruit the *nectarine*?
10. The singer Homer and other bards were called *rhapsodes*. What does our word *rhapsody* mean today?