

The Odyssey

Book 8 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

[An Overview for the Student](#)

[Book-by-Book Study Guide](#)

[Literary Responses to the Odyssey](#)



Image source: http://www.beloit.edu/~classics/main/courses/classics100/museum2/art_museum2.html

Note: This site is designed to be used with Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*, published by Penguin USA. It was prepared for a 9th grade English class.

Books:

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [15](#) [16](#) [17](#) [18](#) [19](#) [20](#) [21](#) [22](#) [23](#) [24](#)

A DAY FOR SONGS AND CONTESTS

SCENE: The island of Scheria, land of the Phaeacians.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Athena, Alcinous, Demodocus, Odysseus, Laodamon, and Broadsea and the gods of Demodocus' tale, especially Hephestus, Aphrodite, Ares, Apollo, Hermes.

Alcinous responds quickly to Odysseus' desire for passage home and then invites the stranger to a dual entertainment: songs by the bard demodocus and a kind of Phaeacian mini-Olympics. Odysseus is distraught whenever he hears of Troy. He and we are

distracted from his grief by the games where Odysseus is challenged to show his mettle and goaded, he responds with a moment of prowess. Later, Demodocus distracts us with story of gods misbehaving but eventually he returns to another story of Troy. This time King Alcinous, who has noticed Odysseus reactions, as his guest to tell his story.

NOTE: this is a summary of the "story" that Demodocus sings after the games:

The bard sings of Aphrodite's infidelity with Ares. It's a somewhat "bawdy" story, a kind of comic relief from the stories of Troy that make Odysseus cry, and from the intensity of the "games." Aphrodite's husband, the crippled blacksmith god Hephestus, creates a net that catches Aphrodite and Ares in the act of making love. Hephestus has the other gods come to witness and to laugh.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- Alcinous' response to Odysseus' request for help on the way home.
- The speed with which the black ship is prepared.
- The different elements of the gathering: the song/storytelling of the bard; the athletic games; feasting; dance.
- The arrival of and respect paid to the bard Demodocus.
- The effect the song sung by the Demodocus has upon Odysseus.
- The games.
- The challenge of Broadsea
- Odysseus' response to the challenge.
- The dancing (420).
- The gifts presented Odysseus by the Lords of Phaeacia after the dancing.

EPITHETS: Who is . . .

- "the faithful bard the Muse adored, the famous harper?"
- "the long suffering hero?"
- "Crowned with Flowers?"
- "the Master Craftsman, the famous crippled smith?"
- "the Archer?"

QUESTIONS:

1. Why might Demodocus' blindness be significant?
2. With whom is Odysseus quarreling in the first song by Demodocus?
3. What does Alcinous do when he sees how Odysseus reacts?
4. What does Odysseus do to win the respect of the young Phaeacians? Why ?
5. What does Alcinous ask Odysseus at the end of Bk. 8?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

Alcinous rose and addressed his island people: (27)
"Hear me, lords and captains of Phaeacia,
hear what the heart inside me has to say.
This stranger here, our guest -
I don't know who he is, or whether he comes
from sunrise lands or the western lands of evening,
but he has come in his wanderings to my palace;
he pleads for passage, he begs we guarantee it.
So now, as in years gone by, let us press on
and grant him escort. No one, I tell you, no one
who comes to my house will languish long here,
heartsick for convoy home."

"Call in the inspired bard (50)
Demodocus. God has given the man the gift of song,
to him beyond all others, the power to please,
however the spirit stirs him on to sing."

In came the herald now, (71)
leading along the faithful bard the Muse adored
above all others, true, but her gifts were mixed
with good and evil both: she stripped him of sight
but gave the man the power of stirring, rapturous song.
Pontonous brought the bard a silver studded chair,
right amid the feasters, leaning it up against
a central column -hung his high clear lyre
on a peg above his head and showed him how
to reach up with his hands and lift it down.
And the herald placed a table by his side
with a basket full of bread and cup of wine
for him to sip when his spirit craved refreshment.
All reached out for the good things that lay at hand
and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink,
the Muse inspired the bard
to sing the famous deeds of fighting heroes -
the song whose fame had reached the skies those days:
The Strife Between Odysseus and Achilles, Peleus' Son ...
how once at the gods' flowing feast the captains clashed
in a savage war of words, while Agamemnon, lord of armies,
rejoiced at heart that Achaea's bravest men were battling so.

That was the song the famous harper sang (99)
but Odysseus, clutching his flaring sea blue cape
in both powerful hands, drew it over his head
and buried his handsome face,
ashamed his hosts might see him shedding tears.
Whenever the rapt bard would pause in the song,
he'd lift the cape from his head, wipe off his tears
and hoisting his double handled cup, pour it out to the gods.
But soon as the bard would start again, impelled to sing
by Phaeacia's lords, who reveled in his tale,
again Odysseus hid his face and wept.
His weeping went unmarked by all the others;
only Alcinous, sitting close beside him,
noticed his guest's tears,

I've held my place in the front ranks, I tell you, (208)
long as I could trust to my youth and striving hands.
But now I'm wrestled down by pain and hardship, look,
I've borne my share of struggles, cleaving my way
through wars of men and pounding waves at sea.
Nevertheless, despite so many blows,
I'll give your games a whirl. Your insults
cut to the quick -you rouse my fighting blood!"

A rippling prelude - (300)
now the bard struck up an irresistible song:
The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Crowned with Flowers . . .
how the two had first made love in Hephaestus' mansion,
all in secret. Ares had showered her with gifts
and showered Hephaestus' marriage bed with shame
but a messenger ran to tell the god of fire -
Helios, lord of the sun, who'd spied the couple
lost in each other's arms and making love.

Odysseus rose to the moment deftly, gently: (521)
"Nausicaa, daughter of generous King Alcinous,
may Zeus the Thunderer, Hera's husband, grant it so -
that I travel home and see the dawn of my return.
Even at home I'll pray to you as a deathless goddess
all my days to come. You saved my life, dear girl."

There, he sang, Odysseus fought the grimmest fight (582)
he had ever braved but he won through at last,

thanks to Athena's superhuman power.

That was the song the famous harper sang
but great Odysseus melted into tears,
running down from his eyes to wet his cheeks . . .
as a woman weeps, her arms flung round her darling husband,
a man who fell in battle, fighting for town and townsmen,
trying to beat the day of doom from home and children.
Seeing the man go down, dying, gasping for breath,
she clings for dear life, screams and shrills -
but the victors, just behind her,
digging spear-butts into her back and shoulders,
drag her off in bondage, yoked to hard labor, pain,
and the most heartbreaking torment wastes her cheeks.
So from Odysseus' eyes ran tears of heartbreak now.

True, there's an old tale I heard, (651)
my father telling once. Nausithous used to say
that Lord Poseidon was vexed with us because
we scorted all mankind and never come to grief.
He said that one day, as a well built ship of ours
sailed home on the misty sea from such a convoy,
the god would crush it, yes,
and pile a huge mountain round about our port.

