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The Odyssey

Book 11 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

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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.

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THE LAND OF THE DEAD

SCENE: the land of the Cimmerians, Hades, and a few moments in the palace of the Phaeacians.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Elpenor, Tiresias, Anticleia (Odysseus' mother,) Arete, Alcinous, Agamemnon, Achilles, Telemonian Ajax, Tantalus and Sisyphus.

After arriving at the land of the Cimmerians and performing appropriate sacrifices, Odysseus moves to the land of the dead. Before he can reach Hades proper he's stopped by Elpenor, a crewman of his who died the last night on Aeaea . After Odysseus agrees to return to Aeaea and honor Elpenor with burial, he moves onto Hades where he follows Circe's directions and talks first to the blind prophet of Thebes, Tiresias, who predicts Odysseus' future and tells him what he will ultimately have to do to placate Poseidon. Odysseus then talks to other who have died, first Anticlea, followed by a number of illustrious women who had "known" gods. He also meets the fellow Captains at Troy who have died and two men, Tantalus and Sisyphus, whose "lives" in the Underworld are perpetual torment.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- The importance of treating the dead with respect (Elpenor): The ritual Odysseus performs in order to meet those in the Underworld. The prophesy of Tiresias and the importance of prophesy (this seems to underscore the inevitability of fate). The parade of women followed by a break in the narration for some Phaeacian reaction before Odysseus returns to his story. Agamemnon's rage at his wife's betrayal. How Ajax reacts to Odysseus. The cause of this reaction. What Achilles tells Odysseus about the misery of the dead.
- Commentary from the translator, Robert Fagles: "I love that marvelous meeting between Odysseus and Achilles. It brings back all the latent hostility between the two of them that you see in the Iliad, especially in the ninth book. Achilles, the great hero of the Iliad, is a ghost who yearns for life, and Odysseus is able to give him a form of life that's very precious--the depiction of the heroic life of Achilles' son Neoptolemus. As long as the son is leading that life, the father can leap triumphant across those fields of asphodel. Two things are being stressed: the extreme fragility of life and how terrible its loss, on the one hand, and how very precious the extension of life is into the next generation.
- "Odysseus plays such a crucial role because by giving the sheep's blood to the dead, he animates them. That's the power that the living have, to reanimate the dead--to reanimate memory. It's what we do. We are forever in conversation with these great ancestors."
(<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/news/96/q4/1114fagl.html>)

EPITHETS: Who is...

- "the seer of Thebes?"
- "famous Atrides, lord of men?"
- "Son of Peleus, greatest of the Achaeans?"

QUESTIONS:

1. What favor does Elpenor ask of Odysseus?
2. What ritual does Odysseus perform in order to meet those in the Underworld?
3. What does Tiresias do in order to speak to Odysseus?
4. What does Odysseus learn about his journey from Tiresias in Hades?
5. What does Odysseus learn from Anticleia? What does he try to do when after she speaks to him? Why does he fail?
6. What does Agamemnon tell Odysseus about how men should feel about women? Is it significant that earlier in the book we hear about celebrated women?
7. What is the reason for Ajax's anger at Odysseus?
8. What is the Greek Underworld (Hades) like?
9. What do you make of Tantalus and Sisyphus?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

And she [Circe] made the outer (15)
limits, the Ocean River's bounds
where Cimmerian people have their
homes - their realm and city
shrouded in mist and cloud. The eye
of the Sun can never
flash his rays through the dark and
bring them light,
not when he climbs the starry skies
or when he wheels
back down from the heights to touch
the earth once more -
an endless, deadly night overhangs

those wretched men.

But first (55)

the ghost of Elpenor, my
companion, came toward me.
He'd not been buried under the wide
way of earth,
not yet, we'd left his body in Circe's
house,
unwept, unburied - this other labor
pressed us.
But I wept to see him now. . .

"Don't sail off (79)

and desert me, left behind unwept,
unburied, don't,
or my curse may draw god's fury on
your head.
No bury me in full armor . . ."

"All this, my unlucky friend . . .
I will do for you." (88)

. . . But look, the ghost of my mother (93)
came!

My mother dead and gone now . . .
whom I have left alive when I sailed
for sacred Troy.
I broke into tears. . .but . . .I would
not let her ghost
approach the blood till I had
questioned Tiresias myself.

At last he [Tiresias] came The shade (100)

of the famous Theban prophet,
holding a golden scepter, knew me
at once and hailed me:
"Royal son of Laertes, master of
exploits,
man of pain, what now, what brings
you here? . . .
Stand back from the trench . . .
so I can drink the blood and tell you
all the truth,

"And even if you escape, you'll (129)

come home late
and come a broken man - all
shipmates lost -
alone in a strangers ship -
and you will find a world of pain at
home ...
When another traveler falls in with
you and calls
that weight across your shoulder a
fan to winnow grain

then plant you bladed, balanced oar
in the earth
and sacrifice fine beast to the lord
god of the sea . . ."

"[Mother] What form of death (194)
overcame you, what laid you low?

...

Tell me of my father, of the son I
left behind . . .
Please tell me about my wife, her
turn of mind,
Her thoughts. . ."

"Surely, surely," (205)
My noble mother answered quickly,
"she is still waiting
There in your halls, poor woman,
suffering so,
Her life an endless hardship like
your own . . .
Telemachus still holds your great
estates in peace . . .

As for your
father,
he keeps to his own farm, he never
goes to town -
with no beds for him there, no
blankets, glossy throws . . .
. . .he lies in anguish . . .
and his grief grows as he long for
your return.

And I, my mind of turmoil, how I (233)
longed
To embrace my mother's spirit, dead
as she was!
Three times I rushed toward her,
desperate to hold her,
Three times she fluttered through
my fingers, sifting away
Like a shadow, dissolving like a
dream . . .
I cried out to her, words winging
into the darkness,
"Mother, why not wait for me?". . .

My noble mother answered me at (246)
once:
"My son, my son, unluckiest man
alive!
This is no deception sent by Queen
Persephone,
This is just the way of mortals when
we die . . .

And the first I saw there? Tyro, born (268)
of kings
. . .once she fell in love with the
river god, Enipeus
till taking his shape one day
the god who girds the earth and
makes it tremble
bedded her when where the swirling
river runs out the sea . . .
"now home you go, and restrain
yourself, I say,
never breathe you lover's name but
know -
I am Poseidon, god who rocks the
earth!"

And after Tyro I saw Asopus' (296)
daughter Antiope,
proud she's spent a night in the arms
of Zeus himself
and born the god twin sons...

And I saw Alcmena next, (302)
Amphytrion's wife,
who slept in the clasp of Zeus and
merged in love,
and brought forth Hercules, rugged
will and lion heart . . .

And I saw the mother of Oedipus, (306)
beautiful Epicaste.
What a monstrous thing she did, all
in innocence -
she married her own son . . .
who killed his father, then she
married him!
But the gods soon made it known to
all mankind.
So he in growing pain ruled on in
beloved Thebes
lording Cadmus' people -thanks to
the Gods' brutal plan -
while she went down to death who
guards the massive gate.
Lashing a noose to a step rafter,
there se hanged aloft,
strangling in all her anguish, leaving
her son to bear
the world of horror a mother's Furies
brings to life . . .

And I saw Leda next, Tyndaerus' (341)
wife,
who'd born the king two sons,
intrepid twins,

Castor, breaker of horses and the
hardy boxer Polydeuces,
both buried now in the life giving
earth, though still alive.
Even under the earth, Zeus grants
them that distinction,
one day alive, the next day dead,
each twin by turns,
and both hold honors equal to the
Gods.

*(Leda is also known to be Helen's mother -
her children the result of being raped by
Zeus in the form of a swan - it is interesting
that this is not a Homeric "story")*

. . . Phedra and Procis, too I saw, (364)
and lovely Ariadne,
daughter of Minos, that harsh king.
One day Theseus tried
to sprit her off from Crete to Athens'
sacred heights
but he got no joy from her. Artemis
killed her first
on wave-washed Dia's shores,
accused by Dionysius.

Odysseus paused . . . They all fell (378)
silent, hushed,
his story holding them spellbound
down the shadowed halls
till the white armed queen Arete
suddenly burst out,
Phaecians, how does this man
impress you now . . .
This stranger is my guest . . ."

[Alcinous] "Keep telling us your (424)
adventures - they are wonderful
I could hold court here till awns first
light
if only you could bear, here in out
halls,
to tell the tale of all the pain you've
suffered."

"Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, (458)
mastermind of war.
I was not wrecked in the ships when
Lord Poseidon
roused some punishing blasts of
storm winds, gust on gust,
nor did ranks of enemies mow me
down on land -
Aegisthus hatched my doom an my

destruction,
he killed me, he with my own
accursed wife . . .
he invited me to his palace, sat me
down to a feast
then cut me down as a man cuts
down some ox at a trough!
So I died - a wretched, ignominious
death
and round me all my comrades
killed, no mercy. . .
how we sprawled by the mixing
bowls and laded tables there,
throughout the palace, the whole
floor awash with blood.
But the death cry of Cassandra,
Priam's daughter -
the most pitiful thing I heard! My
treacherous queen,
killed her over my body, yes and I . .

.
dying, dying, writhing around the
sword.
But she, that whore, she turned her
back on me . . .
she even lacked the heart
to seal my eyes with her hand or
close my jaws.

So
there's nothing more deadly, bestial
than a woman
set on works like these - what a
monstrous thing
she plotted, slaughtered her own
lawful husband!
"But she -
the queen hell bent on outrage -
bathes in shame
not only herself but the whole breed
of womankind,
even the honest ones to come,
forever down the years!

. . . so even you r own wife - never (499)
indulge her too far.
Never reveal the whole truth,
whatever you may know . . .
the time for trusting woman's gone
forever!"

(Achilles) "What daring brought you (538)
down to the House of Death?-
where the senseless, burnt-out
wraiths of mortals make their home"

. . . "But you, Achilles, (547)
there's not a man in the world more
blest than you-
there never has been, never will be
one.
Time was, when you were alive, we
Argives
honored you as a god, and now
down here, I see,
you lord it over the dead in all your
power.
So grieve no more at dying, great
Achilles".

I reassured the ghost, but he (554)
broke out protesting.
"No winning words about death to
me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I'd rather slave on earth for
another man-
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who
scrapes to keep alive-
than rule down here over the
breathless dead.
But come, tell me the news about
my gallant son."

Only the ghost of Great Ajax, son of (620)
Telemon,
Kept his distance, blazing with
anger at me still
For the victory I had won by the
ships that time
I pressed my claim for the arms of
Prince Achilles.
His queenly mother had set them up
as prizes . . .
Would to God I'd never won such
trophies!
All for them the earth closed over
Ajax,
That proud hero Ajax . . .

"Ajax . . . the gods set up that prize (634)
to plague the Achaea - . . .
For your death we grieved as we did
for Achilles death -
. . . none's to blame
but Zeus. . .
Conquer your rage, your blazing,
headlong pride!"

And I saw Tantalus too, bearing (669)
endless torture.
He stood erect in a pool as the water

lapped -
parched, he tried to drink he tried to
drink, but he could not reach the
surface.
no, time and again, the old man
stooped, craving a sip,
time and again the water vanished,
swallowed down,
laying bear the caked black earth at
his feet -
some spirit drank it dry. And over
his head
leafy trees from high aloft,
pomegranates and pears, and apples
glowing red,
succulent figs and olives swelling
sleek and dark,
but as soon as the old man would
strain to clutch them fast
a gust would toss them up to the
lowering black clouds.

And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to (681)
his own torture
grappling his monstrous boulder
with both arms working,
heaving, hands struggling, legs
driving, he kept on
thrusting the rock uphill towards the
brink, but just
as it teetered, set to topple over -
time and again,
the immense weight of the thing
would wheel it back and
the ruthless boulder would tumble
down to the plain again -
so once again he would heave,
would struggle to thrust it up,
sweat drenching his body, dust
swirling above his head.

Tantalus - in Greek mythology, king of Sipylos, son of Zeus and father of Pelops and Niobe. He was admitted to the society of the gods, but his abominable behavior aroused their anger, and Zeus condemned him to suffer eternally at Tartarus. One legend says that he had divulged divine secrets and stolen the gods' sacred food. Another tells that he had murdered his son Pelops and served his body to the gods to test their omniscience. (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/T/Tantalus.asp>)
Sisyphus - in Greek mythology, son of Aeolus and founder and king of Corinth. Renowned for his cunning, he was said to have outwitted even Death. For his disrespect to Zeus, he was condemned to eternal punishment in Tartarus. (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/S/Sisyphus.asp>)



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