



# Teaching the Odyssey

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## Lesson 1: How to Read Homer by Eva Brann

### Outline:

The epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* both begin with Homer's call upon the muses to put words within him to tell the stories of Achilles and Odysseus—but first, Homer must hear and listen.

- Tip: *Be kept continually off-kilter by the recognition that you're missing a lot as you read.*
  - Think of Homer as a redactor, or the composer and overseer, of the transitioning of the last oral composition into written mode.
  - Be hungry for discoveries.
  - The ghost of a memory is enough to alert you if a thing or person suddenly acquires significance.
  - Example: Odysseus adds “my lord” to the message from Agamemnon to Achilles, but noticing this requires the oral memory of the original message 142 lines earlier.
  - *Have faith in Homer's artistry and you'll be more apt not to miss it, since it's everywhere.*
- Tip: *The Homeric epics at times require us to see what Homer doesn't explicitly say.*
  - Example: As Achilles is about to drive his spear into Hector, who is wearing the armor Achilles lent to Patroclus, Achilles is seeing not only Patroclus, but himself inside it. Yet Homer has not described this in detail—we must visualize and remember the armor's significance to grasp the full meaning.
    - *Always visualize, and the action will become more poignant.*
- Tip: *Learn Greek.*
  - Translations cannot always convey subtleties of meaning.
    - Example: Upon hearing of the death of Patroclus, Achilles cries out a Greek phrase that can mean both “Him have I lost” and “Him have I killed.” After all, Achilles allowed tender Patroclus to go into battle beyond his skill, and both meanings are true.
  - Meanings of names are often significant.
    - Example: The city of Phthia sounds like the Greek verb that means “dying.”
  - *Be aware that beneath your notice the poem is boiling away with intimations.*
- Tip: *It helps to hear what isn't said.*
  - Look for what is unspoken but acted upon.
    - Examples: When does Penelope recognize Odysseus? We may find one clue when she hears him speak. He speaks of her in



terms of kingly (and equal) similes. Another clue is when Penelope corrects herself as she instructs the nurse, “And wash your lord’s - age-mate’s feet.”

- *Be alert to quick twists away from the expected.*
- *Tip: Homer is the most subtle psychologist you’ll ever read.*
  - There isn’t psychological-type jargon, but rather very human actions.
    - Examples: Odysseus passes Penelope’s “test” by “going ballistic” over Penelope’s cutting loose their marriage bed. And Odysseus tells Penelope of all his adventures with females - except about the young one who shyly fell in love with him.
  - *Expect a sophistication concerning the human soul beyond what you’re used to in contemporary novels.*
- *Tip: Homeric similes require a double visualization.*
  - Lay the two images being compared over one another, as with two transparencies.
    - Example: In the comparison of the young dead Trojan soldier to a poppy, is the message one of despair, that human violence triumphs over nature? Or one of comfort, that war is part of nature?
  - *Take similes as incitements to seeing double and thinking that out.*

These are only a small number of the ways to read Homer. Most importantly, read Homer any way that suits you, as long as you do it!