



Teaching the Odyssey

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Lesson 4: Lecture on Homer: "The Leaf Bed"

Outline:

At the beginning of Book 5 of The Odyssey, after four books of introduction, we finally meet our hero, Odysseus, in person. We meet him in a beautiful, idyllic setting. Calypso is singing - she wants to keep him there.

- But Odysseus is sobbing.
- [Hannah here reads from the prose translation by T.E. Lawrence—yes, Lawrence of Arabia. It is not strictly a literal translation but is a good entry point and good for young readers. But the original Greek is the best way to read Homer.]
- What are we to make of this first glimpse of Odysseus? Out of all the stories of Odysseus, why does Homer begin with this one: Odysseus crying in paradise?

We must watch him refuse Calypso's offer of immortality. All other tales may be seen in light of this one decision.

- The action is as nearly as possible "one action" (per Aristotle's Poetics): suffering Odysseus returns home.
- Because The Odyssey is episodic, Odysseus's single decision to return home, to make nostos (the Greek word for homeward voyage), is restaged a hundred times before the final scenes, sometimes in the most devious mirrorings.
- Every episode is directed to the nostos/his return, with aids or impediments. Sometimes they are external (gods, goddesses, and monsters), but more often those things that keep him from home or impel him toward it are within Odysseus himself—his own internal compasses and mazes.
- His own desire for homecoming is polytropos, "many turning"—the hero who turns.
- His desire to make nostos means embracing a mortal life—a term that is something of a contradiction—dying life, living mortally.

The first two lines hint at this complexity. We are Tithonus's bedside. He was the lover of Dawn, who made him immortal, and he forever regrets his choice to become immortal. She keeps him from death but cannot keep him young. He ages forever but never dies. In fact, the line break is between "Tithonus" and "arose." Even in the word order, the goddess leaves him behind in his eternal deathbed.

What can we draw from the contrast?

- Odysseus does not prefer death to living and he does not suicide himself, nor does he take sullen Achilles's path. Rather, Odysseus's rejection of Calypso,



and several reflections of the same choice, demonstrate Odysseus's choosing of the third thing—mortal life. To continue to delight in life and set his heart on living, even while his body reminds him he is subject to death.

- This embrace of life and death, enjoying and weeping, sets him apart as a wholly different kind of hero than Achilles, for whom mortality is a grievous daily rebuke.

[In future lectures, I will touch on the five most famous homegoing moments of Odysseus: 1) parting from Calypso, 2) the bed of leaves, 3) Odysseus goes to Hades in Books 10–11, 4) confrontation with Scylla, Book 12, and 5) the slaughter and eating of the cattle of the sun at the end of Book 12. For those who are reading and teaching for the first time, I hope you find a few different ways to enter the epic and at least one thread to follow to the end.]

Meanwhile, the immortal Calypso still thinks she has a chance with mortal Odysseus—she doesn't mention Dawn and Tithonus's tale, but offers stories of goddesses losing a mortal lover to the jealous wrath of other divinities.

- Her stories don't help her argument in the long run: Dawn and Orion—Orion dies by a divine arrow; Demeter and Iasion—Zeus kills him by a thunderbolt. Calypso blames the gods, but the stories don't help her understand Odysseus. The man himself, not the gods, has rejected paradise.
- Calypso's puzzlement makes her pitiable. If only she could give her arguments a quarter-turn, she might understand that she cannot truly secure his immortality.
- The mortal himself, even after sleeping with her, is the one creating difficulty. Her offer is more a hope than a promise. Does Odysseus understand this? He does already understand that immortal life, though relentlessly tempting, is not for him.
- Calypso must give Odysseus up according to Zeus's edict. She promises to help him go, though she persists in not understanding his decision. She is especially rankled by the idea of Odysseus's mortal wife as the rival of herself, a goddess.

Odysseus concedes that his wife falls short. She is mortal. Yet he chooses her.

- This answer is not satisfying to many. Freshmen usually are puzzled by this—is Odysseus being honest? Why this choice? Why can't he give a clear answer? Does the epic give us the answer?

Book 5 ends with Odysseus having hauled his waterlogged body from the wreck. He sinks into a bed of leaves and covers himself, rejoicing, with them. Odysseus, "like a neighborless man," schemes to keep himself alive there for a time. It is a rehearsal of his own funeral. Yet he plans for the next day. He is both the seed of fire, and the man who hoards and prepares it before bed. He is aware of both its value and its fragility.



- The words used here is kalupsato and later kalupsas. Homer repeats the word and the goddess's name often here and elsewhere, perhaps to remind us of Odysseus's choice. He has traded Calypso's protections for the less stifling, temporary, mortal, incomplete respite of sleep.
- Kaluptein also means "to hide" and he will have to do that to survive.
- Athena gives a natural gift of sleep as she covers his eyes, which contrasts with Calypso's unnatural offer.
- Another contrast is between our first meeting with Odysseus, weeping at his choice to reject Calypso's offer, and his rejoicing, exhausted, to find a way to survive in the leaf bed and perhaps eventually find his way home.

Later when he discovers his dead mother in Hades, she describes his father, Laertes's "covering"—in the ashes, in the dead leaves, sighing for Odysseus's return. Later, when Odysseus tests his father, Laertes covers himself with ashes of grief. Will he give way to despair, as Odysseus has been tempted to do?

Yes. Laertes has given up his authority. To be old, to him, is to be dead.

- He is so divorced from the action of the epic that some scholars even think that Laertes might be imported from another ancient poem. But this distraction is at the center of the tale. Remember that Penelope's infamous weaving is in fact Laertes's death shroud—before he is dead.
- Odysseus, unlike his father, sets store in the little life that remains to him.

Kusin, the homely pile of leaves, is used also in Book 19 in the "flashback" with Odysseus's nurse...she catches sight of the scar on his leg and discovers who he is.

- Odysseus's grandfather was responsible for his name and his "joy." His name means "odiousness" and "trouble," "difficulty." When Odysseus gets his "joy"—it is to be wounded and scarred by a wild boar. It is the most lasting thing that he brings home with him from his journeys.
- With the same phrases as used of the first sleep in the leaf pile—kusin--of Book 5, Homer describes the boar's appearance.

The resonance between the scenes gives us a sense of poetic déjà vu (as Homer often does). These connections between similar but distant scenes produce a tension and a vibration so that the fabric of the story becomes a unified whole. The episodic becomes the epic. Such an instance of resonance is good to puzzle over—there's usually something deep to discover there.

- The two leaf piles show us Odysseus rejoices in his identity, his name, his burden, and his scar when he returns to that "same" pile of leaves. It is home—both womb and tomb, both wound and preservation, his source of identity as a mortal, a place of weakness and strength. The place toward which and away from which mortals are always tending. Birth and death are our defining limits. Yet Odysseus finds happiness within his limits.
- Odysseus is vulnerable—but he does not rail against it as Achilles does. Odysseus's wound is a hardened scar. It is a sign that he has a history. Achilles's wound is his future, but Odysseus carries his already.