



## Teaching the Odyssey

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### Lesson 6: Lecture on Homer: "To Hades and Back Again"

#### Outline:

When we left Odysseus, he was sleeping protected in a pile of leaves. Moments later in Book 6, he will be discovered by Nausicaa and welcomed. This is his last stop on his way home—two days from Ithaca.

To explain how he got to the leaf pile, Odysseus has to tell the story of his past. This creates a temporal labyrinth. Charts, pictures, and timelines are recommended, not just for the plot. Homer's temporal complexity—flashbacks and flashforwards, stories within stories—deserves close study. Timing is everything, and his revelations hit hard.

Odysseus tells a tale of how he and his crew went to Hades and returned. We will concentrate on the return.

Odysseus is "twice dying." He has earned this "endearment" from Circe. When she gives up Odysseus, she tells him to go to Hades, and at this time he is the only man who has returned from the underworld.

- Yet Circe greets him upon his return with "unwearying, cruel, wretched, stubborn, reckless"—but her words are primarily pity mixed with admiration.
- Odysseus is not primarily death-defying, but rather twice as susceptible to death—dying twice. "Twice dying" suggests an ongoing state, always dying. Odysseus's trip to Hades was merely a short version of his whole mortal life. To be mindful of *nostos* is to commit oneself to dying by degrees, as one keeps in mind the limit of one's life. There is a parallel between Hades and Ithaca.
- Odysseus is in grief over going to Hades. But the fear of death makes you want to get it over with. Why do we want to live and care about daily concerns while the voyage to Hades waits at the end?
- Odysseus wears himself out crying, but goes to Hades. He says to the ghost of Achilles, "Ill luck dogs me everywhere. How I envy your lot... I find you a prince among the dead. To you, Achilles, death can be no grief at all."
- Achilles's reply is famous: "Do not make light of death before me, shining Odysseus. Would I were on earth a menial, bound to an insubstantial man who must pinch and scrape to keep alive, life so were better than king of kings among these dead men who have had their day and died." (There is much here of the heroic understanding of fame—dignity of public versus private life, etc.)



Achilles now believes that being alive is good in itself and that being dead is a poor, unreal shadow of being alive.

- Erebus (Hades) is terrifying. There is no “kingship” there for Achilles and the dead are pitiable.
- Homer wants us to consider that it is precious to be alive on the earth and capable of knowledge.
- Achilles understand this much but is still attached to kleos--glorious honors; unending, eternal fame. But it gives Achilles no wisdom. He asks for news of his son—and asks for nothing more than to know his deeds are of wide report.

We visit Hades again at the end of the epic in Book 24. Then it is Odysseus who enacts the wisdom of Achilles’s famous speech. Odysseus desires only to see the hearth smoke leaping up from his land. (“Hearth smoke” is an ever-winding thread through the epic.) Again in Book 10, Odysseus glimpses the Ithacan shore and the smoke going up from his land, he can finally rest. His longing to the point of death is momentarily answered by the sight of his homely subjects tending their own fragile fires of their ordinary lives.

- But his ship is driven far from home. It almost breaks his spirit—would drowning be easier than continuing to live? But he settled to endure and survive. He covered his head (the Greek uses a root of kalupso).

For him, the hope of nostos reduces him to mere endurance and survival.

- In his despair, Odysseus displays the heroic attributes Telemachus claims for himself and his father in Book 3—endurance. Telemachus knows he and his father must “hold fast.”
- Odysseus learns to become content with the indignity of mortal life only when he’s put to the test. Heroic death (transposition from mortal life into the rarified medium of song) must be shown to be empty.
- Odysseus must learn the inadequacy of kleos and experience what is lacking in it. In *The Iliad*, brave death is seen as the cure for mortality. But in *The Odyssey*, bravery takes another form. Here, death is no cure for dying. Odysseus must set his heart on living.
- The episode of the sirens of Book 12 is the most obvious moment in the education of Odysseus. They sing the songs of the heroes of Troy—they’ll sing you *The Iliad*, but they will sing away your mind. They will stop your ears to nostos. To listen to *The Iliad* is to forgo *The Odyssey*. The sirens celebrate kleos, but they sing only of the dead, not those survivors who make nostos.
- *The Iliad*, taken as a final description of humanity, has the ability to sing one’s mind away. Being alive, however inglorious, is better than being “gloriously” dead.
- Achilles’s tragic wisdom deserves to be heard, but homecoming stories, we learn from Odysseus’s actions, are better.



A repudiation of kleos as the final good for humans is not a repudiation of virtue in favor of the need to survive. Homer does not argue we should stoop to any viciousness or indignity in order not to die.

Rather, there are virtues attached to ordinary life that cannot be practiced on the battlefield. Glorious deeds of war deserve to be praised. But specifically human sorrows must be approached without spears and armor.

- Odysseus says he learned this truth most painfully with Scylla in Book 12, like the cyclops in Book 9. Odysseus compares them and admits he was in the wrong. His crew suffered terribly because he could not resist taunting the cyclops. It is because he gives his name and address to him that Poseidon punishes them later. Odysseus wants to know how to fight Scylla, who cannot die or be defeated. (Scylla can represent death, or the dog that guards hell.) He doesn't tell his crew about Scylla, since all they can do about her is panic. So then they are taken unawares by her. Odysseus attempts to use the arms of war here, and is never able to use them again once he washes ashore.
- There is another reason to consider the arrogant confrontation with Scylla as pivotal in the epic. Odysseus says he saw the most pitiful thing he would ever see, the most terrible death (it is paralleled with Cassandra's death)—his crew members about to be devoured call on Odysseus's name, naming his name. The Greek uses kledon (related to kleos), a terrible play on kleos—what does it mean to be the name on everyone's lips?
- Scylla is the most fitting punishment for Odysseus's arrogance. There is no taking up arms against death, and it was Odysseus's fault for covering up death's power to his crew.

Consenting to death, or at least telling the truth about it, is wiser than putting on Trojan armor. Face death, whatever panic that may bring.

Appropriate consent to death is the deeper answer to a question often posed about The Odyssey by scholars and readers: How do you get a warrior to come home? How do you temper bloodlust so a warrior can return to domestic life?

I would ask rather, how do you turn a man who seeks immortality on the battlefield into a man who is content just to see the smoke rising up from his homestead?

- Warriors have brief, brilliant careers of immediate struggle with death. No one on active duty has time to fear growing old and feeble and dying an ordinary death in peace time.
- This is the challenge of the epic poet—to make such a quiet hero compelling and comprehensible.
- How do you make a man who seeks death around every corner to be content to wait—perhaps for many years—for death to find him...?
- Tiresias's ambiguous prophecy in Book 11 tells Odysseus nothing certain but that he will die, but not soon. Domesticated Odysseus will have to reconcile himself to this special wait of mortality that belongs not to warriors but to



ordinary men. That special wait of mortality will be the main topic of the last lecture in this series.

Homer waits until Book 24 to tell us what we didn't know from *The Odyssey*—that Odysseus never wanted to seek the warrior's glory in the first place and tried to escape being conscripted into war.

This oblique mention in the last moments of *The Odyssey* is intentional and effective. Odysseus's desperate willingness to avoid a warrior's brilliant death is as centrally absent from *The Odyssey* as Achilles's brilliant death is centrally absent from *The Iliad*. With perfect tact, Homer waits until Odysseus is actually at home, and has completed his last act of war in his own household, to tell us that Odysseus never wanted that life at all.