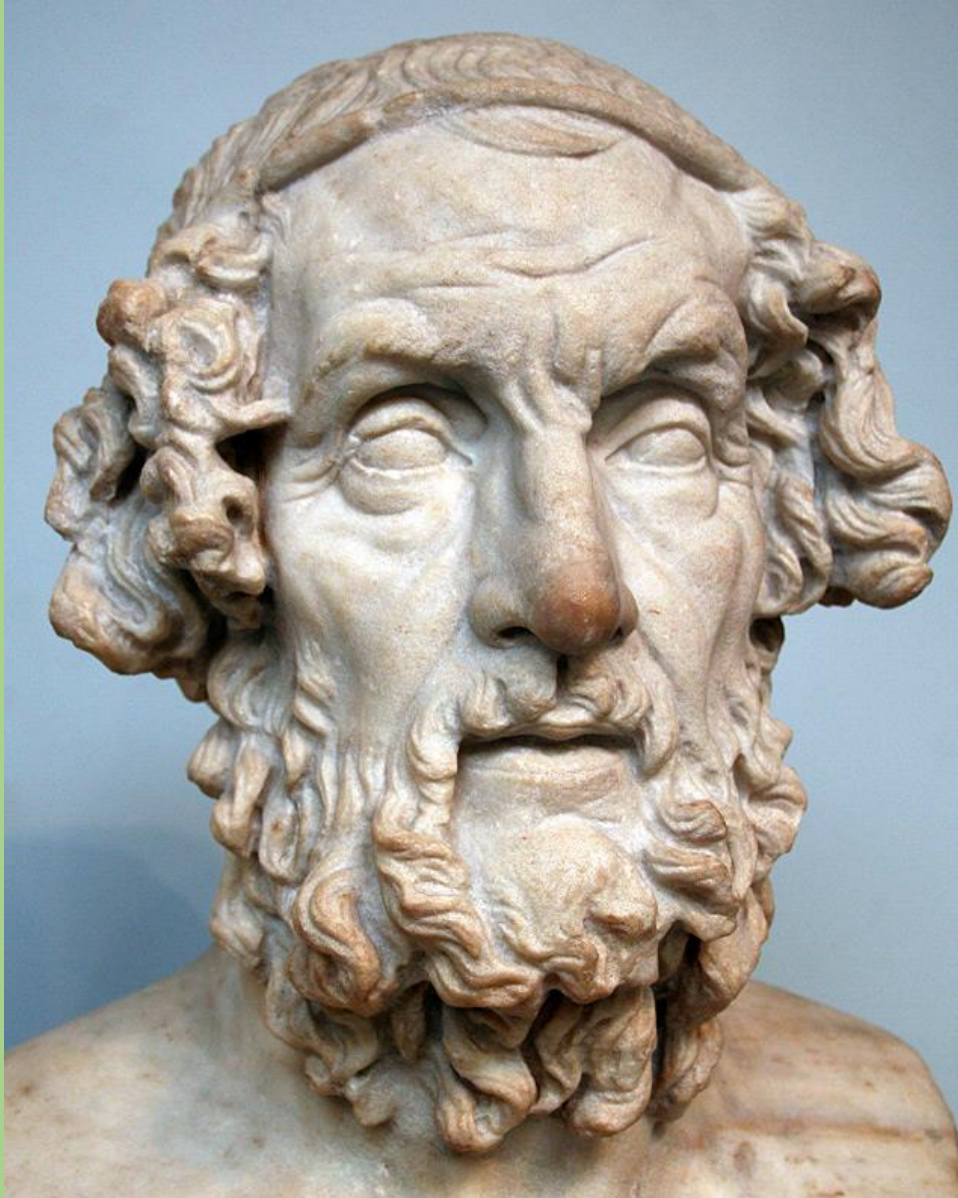


World of the Hero: Homer's Odyssey

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FOCUS:

The contrast between the **civilised, human, Greek world** (Ithacan books 13-24, and 'Telemachy' 1-4) and the **world of the 'adventures'** (bks 5-12)

This is a central conceptual and structuring device in the poem, attention to which helps enrich appreciation of:

- Literary technique (structure, plot, language)
- Cultural context
- Characterisation and 'heroism'

[The above three intersect with a variety of OCR's aims for *WotH*]

I will:

1. Set up the contrast between civilisation and its opposite in the poem.
2. Show some ways in which the *Odyssey's* fictional worlds have been contextualised from the external context of the poem (cultural context) and from within the poem (plot, poetics).
3. Suggest further reading (electronic access to selections of material to follow).

The *Odyssey* is divided between three worlds:

1. The '**wild**', **uncivilised world of the adventures** 'out there' (bks 5: Calypso/Ogygia, and bks 9-12: the adventures between the storm that follows the departure from Troy and Odysseus' arrival on Ogygia)
2. The **civilised Greek world of Ithaca** and other cities (Pylos, Sparta) in books 1-4 and 13-24.
3. The in-between **world of the Phaeacians** (bks 6-9 and beginning of 13) which combines elements of both worlds and is at once both a familiar community and a strange one. The Phaeacians transport Odysseus from the mythical world to human reality.

What makes the world of the adventures non-human?

- physically **monstrous** characters (Scylla, Cyclopes, etc),
- lack of agriculture
- no **sacrifices**
- no **cooking** – cannibalism [think: Polyphemus]
- no **hospitality** (think: Polyphemus, but also the suitors back home [reversal])

The story of the *Odyssey*:

Man returns from war but his boat is blown away by storm. He sees many different places and people. Returns home. Suitors are trying to marry his wife and take away his property and kingdom. He kills them and takes everything back.

The way it is actually told:

Bks 1-4: Gods discuss how good human behaviour is rewarded and bad behaviour punished. We move to Odysseus: home. Suitors are partying in Ithaca eating away (literally) all of Odysseus' cows. Wife Penelope is crying. Son Telemachus tries to drive suitors away but fails. Goes on journey to Pylos and Sparta to hear about Odysseus.

Bk 5: We see Odysseus on Calypso's island. He leaves on a raft. Storm. Swims to Scheria.

6-8: Meets the inhabitants of Scheria (Phaeacians), who host him. Their bard sings about Trojan war and Odysseus. Odysseus cries.

9-12: [Flashback] Odysseus tells the Phaeacians about all his 'adventures' from the moment he leaves Troy to the moment he reaches the island of Calypso [Lotus-eaters, Polyphemus, Circe, Underworld, Sirens, Scylla/Charybdis, Cattle of the Sun]

13: Phaeacians take Odysseus to Ithaca.

14-17: Odysseus in disguise stays at the swineherd Eumaeus' hut preparing his return. Reveals himself to son Telemachus.

18-21: Odysseus in disguise at home among the suitors.

22: Kills suitors.

23: Recognition with Penelope (wife)

24: Recognition with father, Laertes. Battle with suitors' relatives. Divine intervention leads to peace.

Are these three 'worlds' in the *Odyssey* poetic fiction peculiar to this work or part of a broader cultural context? How can we tell?

Vidal-Naquet, P. (1986) 'Land and sacrifice in the *Odyssey*: a study of religious and mythical meanings', in *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak, Baltimore: 15-38; also repr. in S. Schein (1994) *Reading the Odyssey*. Princeton.

Premise: the way the *Odyssey* divides its 'worlds' is based on archaic Greek cultural attitudes that defined 'civilisation' through conceptual oppositions (e.g. human agricultural labour vs hunting, cannibalism, or a pre-lapsarian 'Golden age')

How can we reconstruct such attitudes? Look for a common cultural logic in various sources from the period; the assumption is that shared elements betray a **common cultural logic** rather than just the individual creativity of their poets/authors.

Vidal-Naquet: anthropology, structuralism.

Classroom: theme-focused side glances at other archaic epic sources:

- *Iliad*
- Hesiod: G. W. Most, 2018. *Hesiod*. 2 vols. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard UP
- Epic Cycle: M. L. West, 2003. *Greek Epic Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard UP

Vidal-Naquet, P. (1986) 'Land and sacrifice in the *Odyssey*: a study of religious and mythical meanings', in *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak, Baltimore: 15-38; also repr. in S. Schein (1994) *Reading the Odyssey*. Princeton.

Myth of races: a narrative of gradual decline of humanity from a primeval Golden Age to the current human world (Iron Age): Golden>Silver>Bronze>Heroes>Iron

Golden Age (*Works and Days* 109-120):

Golden was the race of speech-endowed human beings which the immortals, who have their mansions on Olympus, made first of all. They lived at the time of Cronus, when he was king in the sky; just like gods they spent their lives, with a spirit free from care, entirely apart from toil and distress. Worthless old age did not oppress them, but they were always the same in their feet and hands, and delighted in festivities, lacking in all evils; and they died as if overpowered by sleep. They had all good things: the grain-giving field bore crops of its own accord, much and unstinting, and they themselves, willing, mild-mannered, shared out the fruits of their labors together with many good things, wealthy in sheep, dear to the blessed gods.

Iron Age (*Works and Days* 236-7) those who 'do not turn from justice':

They bloom with good things continuously. And they do not go onto ships, for the grain-giving field bears them crops.

Cf. the myth of Pandora and man's fall from grace (*Works and Days* 90-92):

For previously the tribes of men used to live upon the earth entirely apart from evils, and without grievous toil and distressful diseases, which give death to men.

Vidal-Naquet, P. (1986) 'Land and sacrifice in the *Odyssey*: a study of religious and mythical meanings', in *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak, Baltimore: 15-38; also repr. in S. Schein (1994) *Reading the Odyssey*. Princeton.

What defines the human condition in the archaic worldview is

- **labour**
- **agriculture**
- **cooking**
- **sacrifice**
- **orderly sexual and family life within the *oikos***

Culture / Poetics:

This broader context of how archaic Greeks discussed what defines mortals does not mean that the *Odyssey's* structure of three worlds -

Adventure-world > Phaeacians/Scherie > Ithaca

--is simply an inert 'reflection' of culture to the exclusion of poetic creativity. We should also be looking for elements of creativity specific to the poem in the way 'Homer' re-deploys this scheme of civilised-vs-wild.

Gardener's World 1: Calypso's garden vs Laertes'

Adventure-world: Hermes arrives in Calypso's cave (5.63ff)

There was a growth of grove around the cavern, flourishing,
alder was there, and the black poplar, and fragrant cypress,
and there were birds with spreading wings who made their
nests in it,
little owls, and hawks, and birds of the sea with long beaks
who are like ravens, but all their work is on the sea water;
and right about the hollow caver extended a flourishing
growth of vine that ripened with grape clusters. Next to it
there were four fountains, and each of them ran shining water,
each next to each, but turned to run in sundry directions;
and round about there were meadows growing soft with
parsley
and violets, and even a god who came into that place
would have admired what he saw, the heart delighted within
him.
There the courier Argeiphontes [Hermes] stood and admired it.

Laertes' garden (24.330ff)

The resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered him
'First then look with your eyes upon this scar and know it.
The wild board inflicted it with his white tusk ...
[etc 'Odysseus' scar']

Or come then let me tell you of the trees in the well-worked
Orchard, which you gave me once. I asked you of each one,
When I was a child, following you through the garden. We went
Among the trees, and you named them all and told me what each
one

Was, and you gave me thirteen pear trees, and ten apple trees,
And forty fig trees; and so also you named the fifty
Vines you would give. Each of them bore regularly, for there were
grapes at every stage upon them, whenever the seasons
of Zeus came down from the sky upon them, to make them
heavy.'

Calypso's island

Hermes arrives at Calypso's cave (5.63ff)

There was a growth of grove around the cavern, flourishing, alder was there, and the black poplar, and fragrant cypress, and there were birds with spreading wings who made their nests in it, little owls, and hawks, and birds of the sea with long beaks who are like ravens, but all their work is on the sea water; and right about the hollow cave **extended a flourishing growth of vine that ripened with grape clusters**. Next to it there were four fountains, and each of them ran shining water, each next to each, but turned to run in sundry directions; and round about there were meadows growing soft with parsley and violets, and even a god who came into that place would have admired what he saw, the heart delighted within him. There the courier Argeiphontes [Hermes] stood and admired it.

Calypso hosts Hermes (5.92ff)

So the goddess spoke, and she set before him a table which she **had filled with ambrosia, and mixed red nectar** for him. The courier, Hermes Argeiphontes, ate and drank then, But when he had dined and satisfied his hunger with eating, Then he began to speak [...]

Spot the oddity: Calypso helps Odysseys build a raft to return home (5.234-6):

She gave him a great ax that was fitted to his palms and headed / with bronze, with a double edge each way, and fitted inside it / a very beautiful handle of olive wood, well hafted [ie provided with a handle].

Cf. a similar 'incongruity' in the Polyphemus episode (9.105-111):

... we sailed on, grieved at heart, and we came to the land of the Cyclopes, an insolent and lawless folk, who, rusting in the immortal gods, plant nothing with their hands, nor plow; but all these things spring up for them without sowing or plowing, wheat, and barley, and vines, which bear the rich clusters of wine, and Zeus's rain makes these grow for them.

But later in the story, wine is what distinguishes the civilised Odysseus from the wild Cyclops.

Gardener's World 2: Alcinous's garden vs Laertes'

Laertes' garden (24.330ff)

The resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered him
'First then look with your eyes upon this scar and know it.

The wild boar inflicted it with his white tusk ...

[etc 'Odysseus' scar']

Or come then let me tell you of the trees in the well-worked
Orchard, which you gave me once. I asked you of each one,
When I was a child, following you through the garden. We
went

Among the trees, and you named them all and told me
what each one

Was, and you gave me thirteen pear trees, and ten apple
trees,

And forty fig trees; and so also you named the fifty
Vines you would give. Each of them bore regularly, for there
were grapes at every stage upon them, whenever the
seasons

of Zeus came down from the sky upon them, to make them
heavy.'

Alcinous' garden on Scheria (7.112-32)

Outside the courtyard, close to the doors, is a great orchard of four
acres, and a hedge runs about it on each side. In it grow trees tall
and luxuriant, pears and pomegranates and apple trees with their
bright fruit, and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives. **The fruit of these
neither perishes nor fails in winter or in summer, but lasts
throughout the year; and continually the West Wind, as it blows,
quicken to life some fruits, and ripens others;** pear upon pear
waxes ripe, apple upon apple, grape bunch upon grape bunch, and
fig upon fig. There, too, is his fruitful vineyard planted, one part of
which, a warm spot on level ground, is for drying in the sun, while
other grapes men are gathering, and others, too, they are
treading; but in front are unripe grapes that are shedding the
blossom, and others that are turning purple. There again, by the
last row of the vines, grow trim garden beds of every sort,
blooming the year through, and in the orchard are two springs,
one of which sends its water throughout all the garden, while the
other, opposite to it, flows beneath the threshold of the court
toward the high house; from this the townsfolk draw their water.
Such were the glorious gifts of the gods at the dwelling of
Alcinous.

Poetics: unpacking the juxtapositions between the three worlds -- dogs

Phaeacia: The dogs of Alcinous (7.81-94)

Odysseus went to the glorious palace of Alcinous. There he stood, and his heart pondered much before he reached the threshold of bronze; for there was a gleam as of sun or moon over the high-roofed house of great-hearted Alcinous. Of bronze were the walls that stretched this way and that from the threshold to the innermost chamber, surmounted by a cornice of cyanus. Golden were the doors that shut in the well-built house, and doorposts of silver were set in a threshold of bronze. Of silver was the lintel above, and of gold the handle. **On either side of the door there stood gold and silver dogs, which Hephaestus had fashioned with cunning skill to guard the palace of great-hearted Alcinous; immortal they were and ageless all their days.**

'Home': Odysseus' dog Argos (17.290-327)

Thus they spoke to one another. And a dog that lay there raised his head and pricked up his ears, **Argus, steadfast Odysseus' dog, whom of old he had himself bred**, but had no joy of him, for before that he went to sacred Ilium. [...] So saying, he entered the stately house and went straight to the hall to join the company of the lordly suitors. **But as for Argus, the fate of black death seized him once he had seen Odysseus in the twentieth year.**

'Adventures': Circe's 'dogs' (10.212-19)

Within the forest glades they found the house of Circe, built of polished stone in a place of wide outlook, and round about it were mountain wolves and lions, whom Circe herself had bewitched; for she gave them evil drugs. Yet these beasts did not rush upon my men, but indeed, wagging their long tails, stood on their hind legs. And as when dogs fawn around their master as he comes from a feast, for he always brings them bits to delight their hearts, so about them fawned the stout-clawed wolves and lions; but they [Odysseus and crew] were seized with fear when they saw the dread monsters.

Poetics: unpacking the juxtapositions between the three worlds -- dogs

- On these and other contrasts within the *Odyssey*: S. Goldhill, 1988. 'Reading differences: the *Odyssey* and juxtaposition' *Ramus* 17: 1-31
- Starting point for thinking about the place of mortality as a central theme within the *Odyssey*: J.-P. Vernant, 'The refusal of Odysseus.' In: S. Schein, ed. 1996. *Reading the Odyssey*. Princeton UP:
 - Odysseus chooses to become a hero again which means a return to the world of mortals and acceptance of mortality on Calypso's island (bk 5 elaborates the distinction between mortal and immortal in various ways). How is Argos' recognition attuned to this larger preoccupation of the poem?

Poetics: A trail of significant objects -- olive trees in unlikely places

- **Calypso's axe (bk 5, discussed earlier)**
- **The mixed, wild/olive bush of Scheria (5.474-77):** (Odysseus is washed ashore on Scheria) Then, as he pondered, this thing seemed to him the better: he set out for the wood, and he found his spot near the water beside a clearing; there he crept beneath two bushes which grew from the same place, one of thorn and one of olive.
- **Blinding Polyphemus' with an olive-wood stake** (contrast the opening description about lack of agriculture) (9.318ff): Now this seemed to my mind the best plan. There lay beside a sheep pen a great club of the Cyclops, a staff of green olivewood, which he had cut to carry with him when dry.
- **When Odysseus reaches Ithaca the first thing he does is to embrace this very essence of the human condition (Od. 13.344-355):** [Athena speaks] But come, I will show you the land of Ithaca, so that you may be sure. This is the harbor of Phorcys, the old man of the sea, and here at the head of the harbor is the long-leafed olive tree, and near it is the pleasant, shadowy cave, sacred to the nymphs that are called Naiads [...] Long-suffering great Odysseus was gladdened then, rejoicing in the sight of his country, and kissed the grain-giving ground, then raised his hands in the air and spoke to the nymphs, praying.
- **Recognition with Penelope (Od. 23.179-214).** The token of the recognition is the couple's bedframe, which is a live olive tree, still rooted in the ground below the palace.

Poetics: unpacking the meaning of 'olive' / 'tree'. The recognition with Laertes (24.330ff)

Laertes' garden (24.330ff): what kind of recognition and return does it signal?

The resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered him

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[etc 'Odysseus' scar']

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Was, and you gave me thirteen pear trees, and ten apple trees,

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stage upon them, whenever the seasons

of Zeus came down from the sky upon them, to make them heavy.'

Some ideas: Civilisation. Rootedness. Natural rhythms of human time and Odysseus' reintegration. Passage of time and Odysseus' development. Language/naming of trees. Generations. The growing orchard (legitimate ownership of the king) vs the diminishing livestock (suitors' parasitic aristocracy).

Cf. Henderson, J. 1997. 'The name of the tree: recounting Odyssey xxiv 340-2. *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117: 87-116.

Home vs 'out there': some reversals

- 'Home'/Ithaca is a place of danger (suitors) that reverses norms of civilisation and wilderness.
- The suitors behave like Polyphemus.
- Some slaves are more noble than the aristocrats.
- Odysseus needs to change: suppress identity instead of boasting about lineage. This reversal leads to a slow and purposeful re-examination in the Ithacan books of all the social ties and relationships that constitute the central character of 'Odysseus at home'

>The poetics of the *Odyssey* go well beyond a static 'mirroring' of culturally ingrained concepts of civilisation and its opposite.

Closural gestures and new problems:

- The poem consistently encourages the audience to see in the conclusion a restoration of order and to embrace the morality of Odysseus.
- But at the same time, it has been pointed out often, the *Odyssey* also questions several aspects of Odysseus' successful return 'home':
 - Odysseus' 'recklessness', the death of his companions, and the debates about the suitors.
 - Odysseus still needs to expiate the bloodshed of the suitors, as he himself recognises (bks 23-24)
 - The assembly of bk 24 gives voice to the accusers of Odysseus and the divine intervention that brings closure is abrupt and leaves questions open.
 - The upside down social world of the Ithacan books (evil aristocrats, virtuous slaves, Odysseus ventriloquising an abject beggar) probes the social organisation of 'home' in a way that cannot be fully erased by the triumph of Odysseus' kingship in the end.

Closural gestures and new problems:

These issues may very well be beyond the intentions and design of the poem. But we need to appreciate (in the words of the OCR specification):

When studying literature learners will be required to show knowledge and understanding of:

- ways in which writers shape meanings in classical texts
- ways in which classical texts might be interpreted by different readers or audiences both in an ancient and modern context
- ways in which classical texts relate to the historical, social, political, religious and cultural contexts in which they are written and received

Thinking along the lines of a multiplicity of ancient receptions, we need to appreciate the ways in which the poem both upholds the various ways in which Odysseus is successfully reintegrated to his 'home' and (at the same time) probes and questions them.

Cf. -Burgess, J. S. 2014. "Framing Odysseus: the death of the suitors." In Christopoulos, M. and Paizi-Apostolopoulou, M. eds. 2014. *Crime and Punishment in Homeric and Archaic Epic*. Ithaca. 337–54.

- N. Felson & L. Slatkin, 2014. 'Nostos, Tisis, and Two Forms of Dialogism in Homer's *Odyssey*' In Christopoulos, M. and Paizi-Apostolopoulou: 211-222.

-Van Nortwick, T. 2008. *The Unknown Odysseus: Alternate Worlds in Homer's Odyssey*. Ann Arbor.

Recap

The *Odyssey* is divided between three worlds:

1. The **'wild', uncivilised world of the adventures** 'out there' (bks 5: Calypso/Ogygia and bks 9-12 the adventures between the storm that follows the departure from Troy and Odysseus' arrival on Ogygia)
2. The **civilised Greek world of Ithaca** and other cities (Pylos, Sparta) in books 1-4 and 13-24.
3. The **world of the Phaeacians** (bks 6-9 and beginning of 13) which combines elements of both worlds and is both a familiar city and a strange one. They transport Odysseus from the mythical world to human reality.

What makes the world of the adventures non-human?

- physically **monstrous** characters (Scylla, Cyclopes, etc),
- lack of agriculture
- no **sacrifices**
- no **cooking**
- no **hospitality**
-

The conceptual oppositions of civilised/uncivilised are deployed dynamically and with creativity within the poem (not a static 'reflection' of culture). Tracing how the poem negotiates these oppositions enriches our understanding of the meaning(s) of the *Odyssey*.