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English I – Unit 9: The Odyssey

The Trojan War

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Important Note to Instructors:

This unit is designed as a study companion to *The Odyssey* by Homer. The text of the poem is NOT included with the unit. While numerous public domain English translations of *The Odyssey* exist online, they make for difficult reading due to the style and remoteness of the translators' language.

We use and recommend the following Penguin Classics edition for its freshness, modern language, and accessibility to students:

Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox.
ISBN: 0140268863

(An online search using the ISBN number will lead you to vendors from whom you may purchase copies).

Additionally, the Fagles' translation is available in audio format, should you wish to have students listen (as the Greeks once did) to the epic.

About the Unit

This unit provides guiding commentary, study guides, a reading schedule, and quizzes and tests to structure the students' learning as they move through *The Odyssey* over a period of approximately six weeks.

Students will most certainly need guidance and support while reading. The poem is long—12,000 lines—but engaging. To facilitate understanding, encourage students to fill out the study guides as they read.

About *The Odyssey*

The Odyssey has been an educational staple for world literature in many a classroom. For one, it is a thematically rich, entertaining story—a true high adventure. For another, it is an important cultural artifact, recognized for millennia as one of the world's great literary works. The text illustrates the importance not only of the epic poem to ancient Greek culture, but the importance of literature to culture

in general.

As a foundational "classic," *The Odyssey* and its characters, themes, and conventions pervade cultures and works of literature from antiquity to today. Allusions to Odysseus's journey enrich much of Western literature and even find their way into contemporary popular culture. Because of its influence, therefore, a reading of *The Odyssey* enriches and illuminates subsequent readings of later literature.

A study of *The Odyssey* will help students become aware of the truth that the human struggle is constant across the ages—certain themes, questions, conflicts, and triumphs endure across time. As we read *The Odyssey* and works like it, we learn from those who came before us as we watch them wrestle with the issues that truly matter—issues like:

- marriage and fidelity
- hospitality
- coming of age
- the ways of the gods with humankind
- hubris (pride)
- temperance and restraint—stewardship rather than abuse of power
- temptation
- heroism
- leadership and decision making
- the good life (living well, dying well, the afterlife)

The ancient Greeks have been honored from antiquity, not necessarily because of their position on these issues, but simply for having raised them up for careful consideration, and in doing so, beginning what Mortimer Adler calls "the Great Conversation."

Important Considerations

The Odyssey, like other foundational literature, reveals the value system of the culture it celebrates. Students may find that some aspects of that system come into conflict with their own values. They will need guidance as they too wrestle with the issues that matter.

Homeric Greek culture, like others of its time, was warlike and valued violence in ways that ours may not. The result in *The Odyssey* is what some might consider a light treatment of violence in the poem as well as some fairly graphic scenes. You may find that not all the content is appropriate for your students. While our lessons do not emphasize some of the more controversial passages in the text, careful readers will find evidence of sexual situations, infidelities, mild adult language, alcohol consumption, possible narcotic abuse, and violence. For your convenience, we have selected what we have deemed to be the more controversial passages and list their locations below for your evaluation. Page numbers are based on the Fagles translation/Penguin edition described above.

pp. 121-122, 156, 157, 159, 200-203, 220, 223-224, 239-241, 278-279, 378, 386, 393, 439-454

Book 22, in particular, contains some extremely graphic battle scenes. Students are not assessed on the content of this book. Should you elect to have them skip it, they will not be penalized by our program. Other omissions may require more careful navigation of the lessons and assessment items.

Controversial passages notwithstanding, the poem, its story, and the central character of Odysseus offer students the opportunity to enjoy a rich work of literature that can serve powerfully to connect them to the

human experience across time and equip them for their own life journey.

Have you ever noticed that many of your friends are interested in some of the same kinds of things that you are? You probably have a number of favorite movies, TV shows, or types of music in common. When you get together, these things give you something to talk about; in fact, they help make your social group your social group.

The ancient Greeks were the same way, even though they had no television or movie theaters—not even an iPod®. But they had a story that they all knew. In fact, knowing this story was what made Greeks *Greek*. It was a big story, full of heroes and beauties and gods and goddesses and triumph and pain and loss and betrayal and love. Any Greek could walk up to any other Greek and discuss the rage of Achilles or the beauty of Helen. Ancient Greek culture was, at least partially, built around a single event. It was the story of the Trojan War.

Objectives

- Identify the major events and characters surrounding the Trojan War.
- Recognize aspects of culture in literature.

Question #1MultipleSelect

Select the things that are part of the story of the Trojan War.

- ☐ heroes
- ☐ loss and betrayal
- ☐ business
- ☐ triumph and pain
- ☐ beauties
- ☐ gods and goddesses
- ☐ a famous mountain
- ☐ glory
- ☐ love

The Historical Troy

There may have really been a war around a city called Troy a long time ago. If there was, we know very little about it. A city thought to be Troy has recently been uncovered by archeologists, but the evidence of a great battle is disputed. In any case, the Trojan War addressed by literature is certainly not a historical account of an actual battle. Let's look at why.

The Most Beautiful Woman in the World

One of the most important figures in Greek mythology is a woman named Helen. One common version of her story tells of her birth. Zeus, king of the gods, fell in love with Leda, a mortal woman. Zeus turned himself into a swan in order to be near her. Later, Leda laid eggs instead of giving birth in the usual way. Among her four children that "hatched," one was Helen.

Key point!

The Greeks left us with many myths and many versions of the individual myths. The story of Helen's



"Helen of Troy"
by Evelyn de Morgan

parentage is one example. Some say that she is the daughter of Zeus and Nemesis, the goddess of retribution.

Helen did not have a pleasant childhood. When she was about twelve years old, she was kidnapped by the Athenian king Theseus, who wanted her for himself. Her brothers rescued her some years later.

By the time Helen was returned, the legend of her beauty spread throughout the kingdoms, and every available prince and king came to woo her. Her stepfather, King Tyndareus, became concerned. He knew that when she chose one, many others would become angry, so he feared for the safety of both Helen and his kingdom.

A wily Greek named Odysseus was a suitor, but never thought that he would win. He had his eye on Tyndareus' niece, Penelope. He offered a solution: every suitor must swear an oath to help whoever was chosen if any wrong was done to him as a result of the marriage. In exchange for this advice, Tyndareus allowed Odysseus to marry Penelope.

As soon as all the suitors took the oath, Tyndareus chose Menelaus. Menelaus was a little plain and a bit dull, but he was fabulously wealthy. The newlyweds set off to Menelaus' kingdom to begin their new lives.

Question #2 True/False

The actual war that took place at Troy was a central event in Greek culture.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Question #3 Multiple Choice

Which of the following most likely represents how Greeks viewed their myths?

- ☐ Written myths are sacred: they reflect the absolute truth about what happened.
☐ Written myths are interpretative: different poets had different versions of the same mythical events.
☐ Written myths are entertainment: they have no historical accuracy but make for fun stories.

The Apple of Discord

Some years earlier, a queen named Hecabe had a disturbing dream in which she brought forth a firebrand that destroyed her kingdom. The dream was interpreted to mean that the child she was about to give birth to would bring the destruction of Troy. When the child was born, King Priam gave the child to his servant

to be left on Mt. Ida to die of exposure.

The servant did as he was told. When he returned five days later, he found the baby had been nursed by a bear and survived. Not having the heart to kill the child again, he took him in, named him Paris, and raised him as a son.

Paris grew to be extraordinarily handsome, strong, and brave. A beautiful nymph and prophetess named Oenone adored him. When Paris asked her about the future, however, Oenone replied: "Don't ask."

Meanwhile, a hero named Paleus and a sea-nymph named Thetis threw a wedding party. They invited all of the usual gods and goddesses, except for Eris, the goddess of *discord*. When Eris found out, she was furious, and turned to her specialty. Knowing that it would cause conflict, she tossed a golden apple among the goddesses, and said that it was a prize for the most beautiful.

Goddesses are not the most humble bunch around. After a good deal of bickering and hair-pulling, they narrowed the contest to three finalists.

1. Hera— wife (and sister) of Zeus
2. Athena— goddess of war
3. Aphrodite— goddess of love

The three appealed to Zeus, king of the Gods, to be the judge. Zeus had his faults, but he was no fool. He knew there was no clean way out of the situation, so he suggested that Paris, the shepherd, should judge the contest. The goddesses agreed. Hermes, messenger of the Gods, was sent to fetch Paris.

Paris came upon the three bathing goddesses on Mt. Ida. Their divine beauty proved too much for him to judge, so the goddesses took a more pragmatic approach.

Hera: "If you give the apple to me, you shall rule over all of Europe and Asia. You will be master of all you survey."

Thusly tempted, Paris was ready to appoint the fairest, but Athena had a proposition of her own.

Athena: "Choose me, and you shall excel at every art. You will be the greatest warrior in history, and you will lead the Trojans against the Greeks, and leave all of Greece in ruins."

This too appealed to Paris.
Aphrodite smiled slyly, because she had a proposition of her own.

Aphrodite: "Imagine the most beautiful woman in the world. No woman you have ever laid eyes on can compare. Jessica Alba—ho-hum. Angelina Jolie—ugly. Beyonce—not cute. This woman puts them all to shame. Give me the apple, and she will be yours."



Paris quickly made his decision.

"Men. So predictable." Aphrodite chuckled, holding the apple.

Little did Paris know, the most beautiful woman in the world was not single and had a band of mighty warriors as her chaperone. On one hand, his decision pleased a goddess, and he would have the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. On the other hand, he would make two very powerful enemies and set off a chain of events that would end with him, his home, his family, and his kingdom being destroyed.

Question #4MultipleSelect

Which of the following led to the Trojan War? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Zeus and Leda's love affair
- ☐ Achilles' hiding with the maidens
- ☐ Paleus and Thetis not inviting Eris to their wedding
- ☐ Paris' betrayal of Oenone
- ☐ Odysseus' killing of Palamedes
- ☐ the suitors' oath to Tyndarus

Question #5MultipleChoice

Why did Paris give Athena the golden apple?

- ☐ He was afraid of her wrath.
- ☐ He thought she was more beautiful than Hera or Aphrodite.
- ☐ Athena promised him the most beautiful mortal woman.
- ☐ He didn't. He gave the apple to Aphrodite.

Question #6MultipleChoice

What is the most likely reason Eris wasn't invited to the wedding of Paleus and Thetis?

- ☐ Wherever Eris went, conflict followed.
- ☐ Eris had angered Athena.
- ☐ Thetis accidentally forgot to send an invitation.
- ☐ Eris had a crush on Paleus.

War and Aftermath

As you will learn, good hospitality was very important to the ancient Greeks. So, when Paris showed up to Menelaus' house, he was warmly received. Menelaus took to the lad and offered him run of the house when he had to leave to attend a funeral.

"No, no, I insist," said Menelaus. "Stay here. Eat, drink, and stay for as long as you want. Helen will be here; she'll keep you company." With a manly handshake, Menelaus departed.

When Menelaus returned, he was concerned. His charming guest was gone. All of his valuables had somehow disappeared.

"Helen!" he screamed. "Where's all my stuff?" "Helen?"

Did you know?

Among the poets who wrote about Helen and Paris, there is little agreement on just how exactly Helen left. Traditionalists blame Helen's fickleness and assume she went willingly. Others say she was taken by force. One major account also has Helen whisked away to Egypt and a phantom image of her given to Paris.

Another argument claims that Helen could not resist the will of Aphrodite and was blameless. After all, she was promised to Paris by a goddess, so what could she have done? Furthermore, Aphrodite had cursed Tyndareus for forgetting a key sacrifice a long time earlier, and his punishment was that his daughters would be adulteresses. In any case, Helen's story seems to stir the imagination of poets.

Menelaus marched to the house of his brother Agamemnon, furious.

"Remember when you thought you had a chance to marry Helen? Remember that solemn blood-oath you took, promising to come to the aid of whoever was chosen?"

Agamemnon was the "king of kings." Word went out.

The kings rallied, eager to sail to Troy and plunder and pillage. Only the two greatest heroes, Odysseus and Achilles, could not be found. A messenger was sent to fetch Odysseus, who pretended to be crazy. Palamedes found the hero wearing a madman's cap, mumbling to himself, and sowing his field with salt. Palamedes, however, was not fooled. He grabbed Odysseus's infant son and put him in front of the plow. Odysseus turned the plow, proving he was not insane. Guess who started packing?

"I'm just saying," said Odysseus. "I've got a bad feeling about this"

Not one to hold a grudge, Odysseus waited until the army arrived at Troy before he had Palamedes killed.

Before they left, Odysseus was sent to get Achilles, the greatest, strongest, and most ferocious of the Greek warriors. At his mother's request, Achilles had dressed up as a woman and was hiding among the maidens at the court of Lycomedes.

"Look buddy," said Odysseus. "If I have to go, you have to go."

And one of the greatest wars in the history of Western literature began. The Trojans rallied around their champion, Hector. For the Greeks, it was Achilles. But neither of these extraordinary warriors could turn the tide of the war.

Keep in mind . . .

Remember that many of these events exist in different story versions. The most popular story has Achilles being hit in the heel with Paris' arrow. In this version, Achilles was dipped in the river Styx by his mother, making him invulnerable to injury except for his heel, which his mother was holding when she dipped him. Homer does not seem to follow this account, and in *The Iliad*, Achilles is a great warrior but has no supernatural invulnerability of that kind. Some poets refused to grant the honor of killing Achilles to Paris, and have him killed by the god Apollo. Another version has him ambushed trying to elope with a Trojan princess named Polyxena.

Achilles' story is told in Homer's *The Iliad*, but it doesn't end well. Shortly after killing Hector, Achilles is killed by Paris, of all people. Another Greek champion, Ajax, kills himself after failing to win a contest against Odysseus in Achilles' funeral games.

Paris is injured by a poison arrow. Only his ex-girlfriend Oenone, the one that he dumped for Helen, could save him. She, for some reason, refuses. He dies.

Agamemnon, the king of kings, returns home only to be murdered by his wife and her boyfriend. In fact, nearly all of the great heroes—Trojan and Greek —were either killed in battle or died while trying to get home.

Victory for the Greeks did not come from superior strength, but from trickery. Odysseus, "the man of many ways," once again comes up with a plan. He and some soldiers hide in a giant wooden horse that the Greeks present to the Trojans as a gift. They breach the Trojan walls, overcome the defenses, and sack the city.



Statue of Athena

At this point in the story, the Greeks make some key mistakes. One of the Greeks, Ajax, attacks a woman who is clinging to the statue of Athena, desecrating it. Odysseus tries to appease Athena by demanding the offender be killed; his fellow Greeks do not listen, and Odysseus is spared only by clinging to the statue just desecrated. Athena is not pleased. With the help of Poseidon, the sea-god, she kills many of the surviving Greeks in a storm as they are returning home.

The Trojan War lasted for ten years. The Greeks won, and Menelaus got his wife back, but it was not a happy ending.

Aeneas, a Trojan hero, escaped to found Rome. His story was told by the Roman poet Virgil in the *Aeneid*.

Everyday is a memory falling back onto itself. If I keep on remembering I

Helen and Menelaus, by most accounts, seemed to have worked out their differences and had a relatively uneventful life thereafter.

Odysseus survived the war. Famed for his wits, he also took the time to make all the proper sacrifices before attempting to return home. Still, as you will see, he had a little trouble getting home.

Question #7MultipleSelect

From what you read, which of the following can you conclude about the culture of the ancient Greeks? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Their culture did not allow them to marry more than once.
- ☐ Hospitality was extremely important.
- ☐ Their gods were "above" petty human emotions like jealousy.
- ☐ They believed everyday events were products of divine intervention.
- ☐ They believed that honesty and virtue always triumphed.
- ☐ Their heroes behaved perfectly.

The Trojan War was the central point in the Greek mythological view of the world. It was also the subject of the two most enduring works to come out of Greece. The two poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are not only central for Greek culture, they are also among the most important works studied ever since, and provide the same kind of cultural anchor for European literature as they did for the ancient Greeks.



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You learned in this lesson that the mythical Trojan War was instrumental in forming Greek culture. It has been said that there were no real "Greeks" before this, just relatively unconnected kingdoms in the land that would later be called Greece. How did the story of the war help "make" Greek culture? Select all that apply.

- ☐ It provided something for all Greeks to talk about.
- ☐ It gave Greeks a common history.
- ☐ It represented a moment when the different kingdoms came together for a common cause, unifying the different kingdoms into one Greece.
- ☐ It showed how Agamemnon conquered the lesser kingdoms and unified them under his rule.

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