# A Long and Difficult Journey, or The Odyssey: Crash Course Literature 201

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi, I'm John Green, welcome to Crash Course Literature!

You can tell I'm an English teacher because I'm wearing a sweater, but you tell I'm the kind of English teacher who wants to be your friend because I'm wearing awesome sneakers.

This is actually season two of Crash Course Literature. If you want to watch season one, you can do so over here. It's season four of Crash Course Humanities, it might even be like, season seven or eight if you count all the science stuff. Whatever let's just get started!

(Intro music plays)

We're going to start at the beginning of literature, or, at least, a beginning of literature. Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of a man who lets all his shipmates die, lies to everyone he meets, cheats on his wife with assorted nymphs, and takes ten years to complete a voyage that, according to Google Maps, should have taken two weeks. That man is, of course, one of the great heroes of the ancient world. Ladies and gentlemen, meet Odysseus, star of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Did I just say the odd at sea? That's a good pun. Not in the original Greek though.

Now everyone knows that you can't properly enjoy a book until you know a lot about its' author, so before we discuss *The Odyssey*, we're going to begin with a biographical sketch of Homer, the legendary blind poet of ancient Greece. What's that? Apparently we know nothing about him. Well in fact we know that whoever wrote them didn't actually write them, because they were composed orally. And was Homer even blind? Well, there are some verses about blindness in the Homeric Hymns and there's a blind bard who appears in *The Odyssey*, but if authors only wrote about characters who were like themselves, then James Joyce's characters would have all had one eye and I would be an astonishingly handsome seventeen-year-old.

As for the subject of Homer's poems, archaeological evidence tells us that the Trojan War occurred around the twelfth century BCE, although it probably included far fewer gods and similes than in the epics based on it. Then again, maybe not, it's not like we have pictures. Anyway, Homer composed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the eighth century BCE, so centuries after the events it describes. And then no one bothered to write them down for another two hundred years, which means that they probably changed a lot as they were passed down via the oral tradition, and even today there are arguments about which parts are original and which parts are additions.

There were a lot of competing poems about the Trojan War, but Homer's were by far the most famous, and they are now the most famous because they are also the only ones to survive the burning of the Library at Alexandria.

So *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are epic poems and we define an epic as "a long narrative poem; on a serious subject; written in a grand or elevated style; centered on a larger-than-life hero." By the way, that was an example of dactylic hexameter, just like you see in epic poems.

So the events of *The Odyssey* take place after those of *The Iliad*, so let's have a brief recap Thought Bubble. So Helen, the wife of Menelaus, runs off with Paris, a Trojan prince; or maybe she's abducted, it's not clear. Anyway, Menelaus's brother Agamemnon gathers allies and goes to Troy to get her back but the war drags on for ten years, at which point everyone is really tired and bored and wants to go home, until things suddenly get pretty tense because Agamemnon seizes a concubine of Achilles' and Achilles gets really angry and says he won't fight anymore. And things go really badly for the Greeks until Patroclus, Achilles' best friend and maybe also lover, it's not clear, goes into battle in his place and does a pretty awesome job until he's slain by Hector, the Trojans' great warrior. Which forces Achilles to reconcile himself with his own mortality and return to the field where he becomes the ultimate death-dealing machine, slaying hordes of Trojans including Hector, whose body he drags behind his chariot because that's how Achilles rolls, until Hector's father, Priam, comes and begs for his son's corpse and Achilles relents and they have dinner together, and then the book ends with the war still going on and nothing really resolved.

And that's *The Iliad*. When *The Odyssey* opens, it's ten years later and everyone is already back home except for Odysseus. His son Telemachus and his wife Penelope don't know if he's dead or alive, but Homer reveals that he's on the Isle of Ogygia, imprisoned by the nymph Calypso, who's so hot for Odysseus even though he spends his days laying on the beach and crying that she won't let him go. But finally the gods intervene and after a series of adventures and a whole lot of backstory he finally returns home to Ithaca in disguise and kills several dozen suitors who have been drinking all of his wine, eating his bees, annoying his wife and plotting to kill his son. And it seems like a cycle of violence is just going to continue on, probably forever, until the goddess Athena who loves Odysseus intervenes and restores peace. The end.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So, some of the big questions around *The Odyssey* are Odysseus' heroic characteristics, the epic's double standard for women, and whether you can ever actually stop a cycle of violence. Odysseus hardly appears in The Iliad and he's not a particularly great fighter; in fact, he's a pretty sleazy guy. He leads a night raid into the enemy camp and then kills a bunch of sleeping Trojans. That's not particularly glorious. But it is typical of Odysseus, who will pretty much do whatever it takes to survive. I mean, his distinguishing quality is *metis*, which means skill, or cunning. Odysseus is smart, he's really smart. I mean, he's an incredibly persuasive speaker and he can talk his way out of the stickiest of situations, even ones that involve, like, Cyclopes. He's also kind of a monster of self-interest, and if he weren't so smug and overconfident he might have gotten home in less than, you know, like, a gajillion years.

The best example of this is probably Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops. So Odysseus and his men land on the island of the Cyclops and he and several of his guys settle into the Cyclops' cave, feasting on the delicious goat cheese that the Cyclops has hoarded, and then expecting the Cyclops to return and offer them gifts, because that's what you do when someone breaks into your house. I mean yes, there was an ancient Greek tradition of hospitality, but that's taking it pretty far; and for the record, it's also pretty much exactly what the suitors are doing in Odysseus' house, for which he kills them. So the Cyclops comes home and he's so thoroughly not psyched about these guys in his cave that he begins to eat them, and in response Odysseus gets the Cyclops drunk and then blinds him with a flaming spear, which is fairly easy to do because of course he only has one eye. Odysseus has given his name as Noman, so when the Cyclops cries out "No man is hurting me! No man is killing me!" the other Cyclopes don't come to his aide, because you know they think there's no man hurting him. It's a pun. It's a blindingly good pun. But then when it seems like Odysseus might get away with it, he can't tolerate the idea that "no man" is going to get the credit so he announces his actual name, causing the Cyclops to call down curses on him, which culminates in all of his men being killed. Just as a rule of thumb, you do not want to be friends with Odysseus, and you also don't want to be his enemy. Just stay away.

So Odysseus is a trickster and a liar and a pirate and a serial adulterer and he's responsible for the death of a lot of people and

he also has probably the worst sense of direction in all of Greek literature. But is he a hero? Yes. To the Greeks heroism didn't mean perfection, it meant that you had an extraordinary attribute or ability, and Odysseus definitely does. It's not for nothing that he's the favorite of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. I mean she applauds all of his tricks and stratagems and she encourages us to applaud them too, even though from our contemporary perspective, he's a pretty shady dude.

Speaking of contemporary perspectives, one of Odysseus' least stellar qualities is his attitude toward women. He's really big on this sexual double standard in which the exact same behavior types women as sluts and men as studs. Actually the whole epic in general is incredibly—wait, why is my desk moving? Oh, the secret compartment is open. It must be time for the open letter. What have we got today? Well, it's Medusa, a representation of woman as a monstrous serpent.

An open letter to the patriarchy: how are you so incredibly resilient? Also, please explain something to me. How is it that the only way for someone to become like a good heroic strong man is to have sex with lots of women, but if a woman has sex with lots of men she's like tainted and impure and horrible? Now patriarchy, I don't want to get too deeply into math but in order for men to have sex with a lot of women, a lot of women have to have sex with men. That's it, that's the only way, patriarchy! So basically you're saying that the only way for men to achieve manliness is for women to fail at womanliness! It's bad! Actually, it's evil! I hate you! Best wishes, John Green.

Yeah so the whole epic is incredibly paranoid about female sexuality. I mean the story that haunts *The Odyssey* is that of Agamemnon, the leader of the Achaeans, who returns victorious from the war, only to be murdered by his wife and her lover. And then when they meet in the underworld, Agamemnon's ghost warns Odysseus that he better come home in secret because Penelope might try and have him killed too. And the misogyny doesn't end there; I mean this is a book full of monsters and Cyclops aside, a lot of them are female; like the Sirens who lure men too their deaths, or Scylla, who's basically an octopus with teeth. Then of course there's Charybdis, a hole that sucks men to their doom. You can explore the Freudian implications of that one over at Crash Course Psychology.

Meanwhile Odysseus sleeps with like every manner of magical lady and nearly marries an island princess, but he assures us that he was always true to his wife in his heart. Which is nice, but it would be even nicer if he were true to his wife in his pants. Stan, who is ever the stickler for historical accuracy, would like me to acknowledge that Odysseus didn't wear pants because they weren't a thing in Greece yet, so he wasn't true to his wife in like his toga or his loincloth or whatever.

Anyway, even as he's sleeping around, Odysseus is incredibly concerned with whether or not Penelope is chaste. If she isn't, he'll likely kill her. After all he later executes all the housemaids for sleeping with the suitors and he's not even married to them. The epic seems like it's building to a climactic scene wherein Odysseus is going to test Penelope's faithfulness, but instead it's Penelope who tests Odysseus. When he reveals himself to her, she doesn't recognize him. She forces him to prove himself by speaking the secret of their marriage bed, and only then does she embrace him in one of the most beautiful lines in all of Homer: "And so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband, her white arms round him pressed as though forever."

Some ancient commentators believed the poem should end right there like any good romance would, with Odysseus and Penelope blissfully reunited, but it doesn't. See Odysseus and a couple of his friends, with a big assist from Athena, have slaughtered all the suitors and the serving maids, and that's a problem, because this isn't *The Iliad*. They aren't at war. T*he Iliad* is a poem of war, and it's main concern is *kleos*, which means glory or renown achieved on the battlefield that guarantees you a kind of immortality because your deeds are so amazing that everyone's going to sing about you forever. Achilles didn't get to go home. He had two choices: he could stay and fight and win glory, or he could go home and live a long and quiet life. In *The Iliad*, Achilles went for glory. But *The Odyssey* is about the alternative. It's about what we do after a war, how we put war away. Odysseus isn't particularly good at this. He's sort of an ancient example of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He's been through so much that he doesn't know how to adjust to peacetime; his response to young men taking over his dining hall and barbecuing all of his pigs is mass slaughter. And the slaughter of the suitors leads to their relatives coming to try to slaughter Odysseus, and if Athena hadn't descended from Olympus, conveniently, and put a stop to it, pretty soon there would have been no one left on Ithaca alive. And that's a sobering final thought: if it weren't for divine intervention, the humans in this story might have continued that cycle of violence forever. *The Odyssey* is a poem set in peacetime, but it reminds us that humans have never been particularly good at leaving war behind.

Next week we'll be discussing another story with lots of sex and violence and Greeks: *Oedipus*. Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.

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