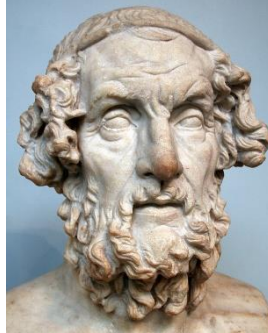


THE ODYSSEY

BY HOMER

Told by Betty Govinden

(Created for as background material for her grandchildren, who were reading The Odyssey)



WHO WAS HOMER?

Homer was a Greek poet who wrote the *Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. These were two epic poems, set in Ancient Greece, around the 7th Century BC.

EARLY LANGUAGES & BACKGROUND

It is believed that the stories were handed down orally, and then set down in Homeric Greek, which is an ancient version of the present-day Greek language.¹

They were translated into different languages, and the LATIN version became the most widely read. Latin was the language of Rome and the Roman Empire. We have learnt about these stories mainly through the Latin texts. I studied Latin at high school, and this is how I read some of these stories.

It is important to remember that ULYSSES is the Latin name of the Greek, ODYSSEUS. And we see that many of the influences of Homer's epic poem are derived from the Latin version.

The Greek and Roman cultures formed the Greco-Roman civilisation, which was also described as the Classical Civilisation, of the Ancient world.

When Shakespeare began writing, in the 17th century, he was writing in Early Modern English.

Homer's epics - *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* - are seen as the foundations of Western or European literature.

WHAT WAS THE *ILLIAD* ABOUT?

The story is set in Ancient Greece, which was divided into city states. The most famous city states were ATHENS and SPARTA.

¹ Remember that our present-day English also had earlier, ancient, forms, referred to as OLD ENGLISH and MIDDLE ENGLISH.

There was rivalry between two city states, Troy and Sparta, because Paris, the Prince of Troy, took Helen away from her husband, Menelaus, the King of Sparta.

The Illiad tells the story of Trojan War, and the story of the famous Trojan Horse, following this abduction of Helen.

The three main leaders are ACHILLES, AGAMEMNON and ODYSSEUS, who have all come from different city states to assist Menelaus. They lead their armies to fight against Paris, the King of TROY, to rescue the stolen Helen.



THE ODYSSEY

After the Trojan War, Odysseus plans to leave Sparta, and go back to his home, Ithaca, which is an island in Greece. His wife, Penelope, and his baby son, Telemachus, are eagerly awaiting his return.

However, he takes a long time returning home, and faces many challenges along the way.

The story of Odysseus's long return home is called *The Odyssey*, and is named after him.

The word "odyssey" is now used as a general term to describe a long journey, or QUEST, which may take different forms.

Homer's *Odyssey* narrates the different experiences that Odysseus encounters as he travels from one place to the next, in a long, circuitous journey back home. Some of these places may be located on ancient and modern maps, and some are mythical.

The Odyssey also shows both mortals and Gods and Goddesses taking part in these various dramatic events. Some actively support Odysseus, while some are opposed to him and place obstacles on his path.

SOME OF THE EXPERIENCES OF ODYSSEUS

THE LAND OF THE LOTUS EATERS



On their journey back to Ithaca, Odysseus and his men, with their fleet of ships, pass many islands and cross many seas.

Tossed by a storm, Odysseus and his men land at the City of Cicone, that is peopled by Lotus Eaters. The Lotus Eaters are a gentle tribe, and show much hospitality to the weary travellers.

However, the Lotus, when eaten, makes one lose one's memory.

STAY. EAT. FORGET.

And soon, a few of Odysseus's sailors, who go ahead to scout the land, are enticed by the Lotus Eaters. They eat of the fruit, and slowly forget about home, and their real purpose, which is returning to Ithaca.

Odysseus realises what is happening, and acts swiftly. He forcibly moves his men back to their ships, so that they will remember their purpose, and resume their long journey back to Ithaca.

ODYSSEUS AND THE CYCLOPS



As they journey on, Odysseus and his men come to an island that looks lush and inviting. They are very hungry and weary, and look forward to refreshments after their long days at sea.

They see cheese and milk and sheep in a cave, and enter, and prepare to help themselves.

However, Odysseus and his men are soon confronted by giants, called the Cyclops, who inhabit the island.

Their leader is Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, the God of the Sea, and he traps Odysseus and his men in the cave. He pushes a great rock at the opening of the cave, so that Odysseus and his men cannot escape. He then begins to eat the men for his meals!

Odysseus plans their escape. He gives Polyphemus wine, to make him drunk. Odysseus then pokes his eye with a long sharp spear that he had secretly prepared.

The next morning, when the blind Polyphemous opens the cave to let the sheep out to graze, he is not able to see that Odysseus and his men are hiding underneath the sheep as they leave the cave. A narrow escape!

But Odysseus has made Poseidon, the Cyclops' father, very angry, and the Sea God will wait to exact his revenge!

ODYSSEUS AND CIRCE



On his ongoing journey back home, Odysseus comes to the Island, Aeaëa, where he meets Circe, the daughter of the Sun God, Helios.

She appears to give them a generous welcome, and helps the men recover from their voyages so far, and rebuild their ships.

However, she has powers to change people, and soon turns Odysseus's men into swine.

Circe falls in love with Odysseus, and entices him to stay on on the Island. Although Odysseus spends a year with Circe, he refuses to be distracted any further, and decides to resume his journey back to his home and wife.

Circe provides Odysseus with information that is useful for the next part of his journey. She advises him to go to the Underworld, where Tiresias, a prophet from the Underworld, will advise him on how to deal with further challenges that lie ahead.

Circe also warns Odysseus that he will encounter the Sirens, who will mesmerise them with their singing, and distract them from their goal of returning to Ithaca.

They must also avoid the Winding Rocks, which will wreck their ships.

Tiresias also warns Odysseus about Scylla and Charybdis, and the difficult challenge related to them.

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS



On his ongoing journey, Odysseus comes to the Strait of Messina, where he is confronted by a terrifying choice. On the one side of the narrow Strait is Scylla, a six-headed sea monster, and on

the other is Charybdis, a terrifying whirlpool. Pitted between Scylla and Charybdis, he has to choose his route very carefully and steer the ship and his sailors safely through.

**Being “between Scylla and Charybdis” has become a popular idiom in English usage. It means that you are confronted with a dilemma – you are caught between two evils, and you have to choose which is the lesser of the two!*

After successfully navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus had to contend with further trials. He comes to the Island of Laestrygonians, who actually eat humans! As Odysseus and his men make a hasty getaway, the cannibals pelt the ships, sinking the majority of them.

ODYSSEUS ON CALYPSO’S ISLAND



Odysseus and his sailors find themselves on the Island of Ogygia, where Calypso lives. Calypso is the daughter of Titan Atlas, who holds up the Heaven and the Earth. Calypso seduces Odysseus into staying on the Island, and promises him immortality. Odysseus is held a willing captive for seven years, but is roused back to his main purpose, by the intervention of Hermes, a messenger of the Gods.

Calypso realises that Odysseus has to leave. She helps him build a raft and sets him on his way.

However, Poseidon was furious when he saw Odysseus making headway towards Ithaca. He causes a terrible storm that engulfs Odysseus, thereby exacting his revenge.

Ino, the sea goddess, comes to his rescue, and settles on his raft as if she were a seagull. She gives Odysseus her magic veil, to protect him from the raging sea, and keep him afloat.

Also assisted by Athene, Odysseus eventually arrives in the Land of the Phaeacians, Scheria, where NAUSICAA, the princess, helps him to present himself to her parents, King Alcinous and Queen Arete.

They are impressed with Odysseus, and want him to marry Nausicaa, but Odysseus tells them that his wife, Penelope, and son, Telemachus, are waiting for him.

At the farewell feast, the musician, Demodocus, plays the lyre, and sings plaintively about the wooden horse of Troy.

Odysseus is deeply moved, because it brings back memories. He then tells King Alcinous that he was in the wooden horse, and had personally helped in the Fall of Troy.

The king and queen give Odysseus beautiful royal clothes and many treasures, help him and his men to become sea-worthy again, and set them on their way back home...

RETURNING TO ITHACA



Penelope is waiting...

Odysseus finally lands on the Island of Ithaca, and is lying on the shore. He is assisted by Athene, who realises that his life is in danger if he is recognised. Since his absence, many suitors had gathered at the palace, hoping to marry Penelope. The suitors would kill him, as his arrival thwarts their own ambitions to marry Penelope and capture the throne.

Athene covers the beach with a magical mist, so that Odysseus cannot recognise his own home ground!

Disguised as a shepherd boy, Athene appears to Odysseus and reveals what she has done. She instructs him on what to do next.

She creates a disguise for Odysseus, turning him into a poor, wizened, old beggar. She then tells him to go to the swineherd, Eumaeus, and lodge with him, and then cautiously approach the palace.

Athene tells Telemachus, his son, of her plan. She assists Telemachus, who had gone in search of his father, to return to Ithaca, to meet Odysseus, so they can both plan a successful return to the palace.

Odyssey and Telemachus appear at the palace, and the suitors and Penelope do not recognise him.

In a poignant moment, his dog, Argus, now old and faint, recognises him, and begins wagging his tail. The faithful dog then breathes his last, having finally seen his beloved master after waiting for his return all those long years.



A little later, his nurse, Eurycleia, also recognises him, when she sees the signature scar on his leg! But he whispers to her to keep his identity a secret.

Still in disguise, even from Penelope, Odysseus devises a plan to defeat the suitors.

With the help of Telemachus, he hides the arms in the palace.

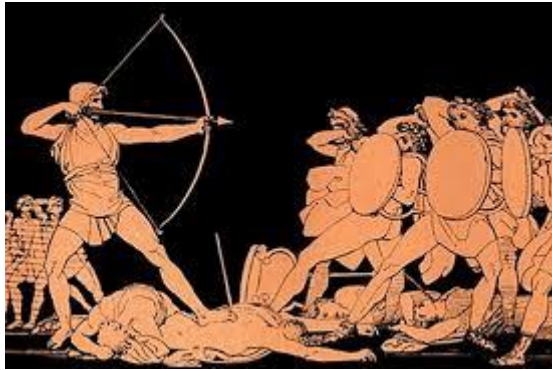
He then asks Penelope to set up a contest, where each suitor must string Odysseus's bow, and then shoot through 12 axe handles!

The person who wins can marry Penelope!

Stringing the bow, and shooting through the axe handles, requires special expertise.

Of course, all the suitors - one by one - fail dismally!

Then Odysseus has his turn. Highly skilled, he rises to the challenge successfully!



Soon, he and Telemachus use the arms, that were stashed away, to kill all the suitors.

He is now able to claim Penelope.

Penelope, for her part, cannot believe that this is truly her long-lost husband, Odysseus!

She commands that their nuptial bed be removed and brought downstairs, so that Odysseus can have his own bedroom.

But Odysseus protests, saying that the bed cannot be removed, as it is hewn from an olive tree, that is still rooted in the bedroom.

Penelope immediately receives this as confirmation that standing before is her beloved husband, Odysseus, and no other, as the origin of the bed is a secret that only they share!!

And they all lived happily ever after!!!

Clearly, Odysseus is a changed person after his ODYSSEY.

He has learnt many lessons along the way.

The most important is that you should never be distracted or enticed or tempted, and forget your goal.

You should always RETURN HOME!!

PS. The Odyssey may be seen as an extended PARABLE. Our own lives are a perpetual, winding, circuitous journey. Consider some of the present-day experiences we might have which are similar to those that Odysseus encountered...

ADDENDUM

LITERARY INFLUENCES OF HOMER'S ODYSSEY

There are many stories, over the centuries, that draw from *The Odyssey*.

These are a few:

Ulysses [Poem]... by Tennyson	[1842]
<i>Ithaka</i> [poem] ... by C P Cavafy	[1911]
<i>Ulysses</i> [novel] ... by James Joyce	[1920]
<i>Mrs Dalloway</i> [novel]...by Virginia Woolf	[1925]
<i>Ithaka</i> [novel]... by Adele Geras	[2005]

Meadowlands [novel]..by 2020 Nobel Laureate, Louise Gluck [1996]
The Penelopiad [novel]... by Margaret Atwood [2005]
The Cry of Winnie Mandela [novel]...by Njabulo Ndebele [2003]²
Star Trek Voyager – set in 2371-2378 [1995]
The Lord of the Rings..by J R R Tolkien [2001-2003]
Harry Potter series.. by J K Rowling [1997-2007]

***“...Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
With what pleasure, what joy,
You come into harbours seen for the first time...”³***

² Njabulo [inspired by Penelope] uses the motif of waiting, in relation to Winnie Mandela and 3 other women, who wait for their husbands' return.

³ Lines from Cavafy's poem. A longer excerpt from "Ithaka" was read at Jacqueline Kennedy's funeral in 1994.