

Signet Classics

*The*  
**ODYSSEY**

**HOMER**

TRANSLATED BY W. H. D. ROUSE

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION  
BY DEBORAH STEINER

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THE ODYSSEY  
The Story of Odysseus



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*Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

—JOHN KEATS

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## INTRODUCTION

HOMER'S *ODYSSEY* TELLS A SIMPLE AND FAMILIAR STORY: the return of a hero, a veteran of the Trojan War, who has spent ten trial-filled years wandering in exotic lands. Arriving at last in his homeland, Ithaca, he finds that domestic and community affairs have gone badly wrong in his absence. His wife, Penelopeia, is surrounded by aggressive suitors who presume her husband has perished abroad; his son, Telemachos, on the brink of manhood, lacks the authority to expel these unruly interlopers, who are eating him out of house and home. In this power vacuum, where lowly swineherds and housekeepers try to fill the roles vacated by their masters, Odysseus, slowly and painfully, begins to recover his position as master of his household and patrimony. Using first guile, and then force, he ultimately takes vengeance on those who are seeking to displace him, restores his household and reclaims his wife.

If the story is simple, Homer's narrative is brilliantly complex. Its opening is a notorious tease, a deliberate play on audience expectations and a taste of what this convention-breaking song will offer. The poem's first line springs a double surprise: where Homer's *Iliad*, the predecessor and countermodel to the *Odyssey*, begins by announcing in resounding fashion both the name of its protagonist, "Achillês, son of Peleus," and the prime mover of its story—the cosmic wrath that drives Achillês to destroy his nearest and dearest, and himself too—the second composition tells us only that it is about a man, "one who was never at a loss." From the outset then, Odysseus is a hero with a difference; alone among those celebrated in epic by the ancient bards, he allows himself

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## BOOK I

### *What Went On in the House of Odysseus*

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THIS IS THE STORY OF A MAN, ONE WHO WAS NEVER AT a loss. He had travelled far in the world, after the sack of Troy, the virgin fortress; he saw many cities of men, and learnt their mind; he endured many troubles and hardships in the struggle to save his own life and to bring back his men safe to their homes. He did his best, but he could not save his companions. For they perished by their own madness, because they killed and ate the cattle of Hyperion the Sun-god, and the god took care that they should never see home again.

At the time when I begin, all the others who had not been killed in the war were at home, safe from the perils of battle and sea: but he was alone, longing to get home to his wife. He was kept prisoner by a witch, Calypso, a radiant creature, and herself one of the great family of gods, who wanted him to stay in her cave and be her husband. Well then, the seasons went rolling by, and when the year came, in which by the thread that fate spins for every man he was to return home to Ithaca, he had not yet got free of his troubles and come back to his own people. The gods were all sorry for him, except Poseidon, god of the sea, who bore a lasting grudge against him all the time until he returned.

But it happened that Poseidon went for a visit a long way off, to the Ethiopians; who live at the ends of the earth, some near the sunrise, some near the sunset. There he expected a fine sacrifice of bulls and goats, and there he was, feasting and enjoying himself mightily; but the other gods were all gathered in the palace of Olympian Zeus.



Then the Father of gods and men made them a speech; for his heart was angry against a man, Aigisthos, and Agamemnon's son Orestês, as you know, had just killed the man. So he spoke to the company as follows:

"Upon my word, just see how mortal men always put the blame on us gods! We are the source of evil, so they say—when they have only their own madness to thank if their miseries are worse than they ought to be. Look here, now: Aigisthos has done what he ought not to have done. Took Agamemnon's wedded wife for himself, killed Agamemnon when he came home, though he knew quite well it would be his own ruin! We gave him fair warning, sent our special messenger Hermês, and told him not to kill the man or to make love to his wife; their son Orestês would punish him, when he grew up and wanted his own dominions. Hermês told him plainly, but he could do nothing with Aigisthos, although it was for his own good. Now he has paid the debt in one lump sum."

Then up spoke Athena, with her bright eyes glinting: "Cronidês our Father, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! I have nothing to say for Aigisthos, he richly deserved his ruin. So perish any one else who does a thing like that! But what about that clever Odysseus? I am anxious about him, poor fellow, kept from his friends all this while, in trouble and sorrow, in that island covered with trees, and nothing but the waves all round it, in the very middle of the sea! It is the home of one of ourselves, the daughter of Atlas, you remember, that creature of mischief, who knows all the depths of the sea; you know, he holds up the pillars which keep earth and heaven apart. It is his daughter who keeps the wretched man a prisoner. She is always coaxing him with soft deceitful words to forget Ithaca; but Odysseus would be happy to see as much as the smoke leaping up from his native land, and then to die. And you cannot spare him a thought, Olympian. Don't you owe him something for all those sacrifices which he used to offer in their camp on the plain of Troy? Why have you such an odd grudge against him, Zeus?"

Then Zeus Cloudgatherer answered:



"My child, what a word to let out between your teeth! How could I forget that fine fellow Odysseus, after all! He is almost one of us. Wise beyond mortal men, ready beyond all to offer sacrifice to the lords of the broad heavens. But Poseidon Earthholder bears him unrelenting hatred, because of the Cyclops whose eye he put out; I mean Polyphemos, who has our blood in his veins, the most powerful of all the Cyclopians.

"Thoösa was his mother, the daughter of Phorcys prince of the barren brine; Poseidon possessed her in a hollow cave. Ever since then, Poseidon has kept the man wandering about, although he does not kill him outright. Come now, let us all try to think how we can persuade Poseidon to abate his anger and let him go home to his native land. Surely he will not be able to stand out against all the immortals, and keep up a quarrel all by himself!"

Then Athena said:

"Cronidês our Father, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! If all the gods now agree that Odysseus shall return to his own home, then let us dispatch our messenger Hermês Argeiphontês to the island of Ogygia; and let him announce forthwith to the nymph our unchangeable will, that Odysseus, after all he has patiently endured, shall return home. And I will myself go to Ithaca, to put heart into his son and make him do something. He shall call the people to a meeting, and speak his mind to all the would-be bridegrooms who have been butchering his sheep and his cattle in heaps. And I will send him to Sparta and to sandy Pylos to inquire about his beloved father, if he can hear that he is on his way home. That will be some credit to him in the world."

So saying, she fastened under her feet those fine shoes, imperishable shoes of gold, which used to carry her over moist and dry to the ends of the earth, quick as the blowing of the breeze; down she went shooting from the peaks of Olympos, and stood in the town of Ithaca against the outer gates of Odysseus upon the threshold of the courtyard. In her hand she held a spear of bronze, and she took the form of a family friend, Mentês, the chief man of the Taphians.

So there she found those high and mighty gallants. Just then they were amusing themselves with a game of draughts in front of the door, sitting on the skins of the cattle which they had killed themselves; and their orderlies and servants were all busy, some mixing wine and water in the great bowls, some wiping up the tables with oozing sponges and laying the dishes, some serving the meat, and there was plenty of it.

Telemachos saw the visitor long before the others. He was a fine-looking boy; and he sat there among the intruders in deep distress, with his heart full of his noble father. He wondered if his father would suddenly appear and make a clean sweep of them all, and take his own honourable place again, and manage his property.

These were his thoughts as he sat among them, and saw some one at the door. He went straight to the porch, indignant to think that a visitor should be left standing at the door. He took the visitor's right hand, and relieved him of the spear, and spoke to him in words that wing like arrows to the mark:

"Good day to you, sir. You will be welcome in our house. Refresh yourself, and after you have eaten and drunk you shall say what you have come for."

So saying, he led the stranger in. Then as soon as they were within the lofty hall he carried the spear to a tall pillar, and set it in a polished spear-stand in which other spears were standing: the spears of Odysseus, that patient man, a whole lot of them. Then he led his visitor to a seat and bade him be seated. He threw a rug over it, a beautiful rug, an artist's work; and there was a footstool ready at his feet. Beside him he placed an armchair of carven work, apart from the rest of the company; for he did not wish the visitor to be disgusted by the noise, and to lose all relish for his food as he found himself amongst a rabble of bullies. He wanted also to ask about his lost father. A servant brought the hand-wash for the visitor, and poured it over his hands from a jug all made of fine gold into a silver basin. He drew up to the seat a polished table, a comely maid brought in the vittles and put them on the table—all sorts of things, she did not spare her store; the carver added plates of all sorts



of meat, and set beside them cups of gold; an orderly kept their cups filled with wine.

In came the gallants, full of pride. They flung themselves down at once into chairs or settles, one after another, and the orderlies poured water over their hands, while the women piled up heaps of rolls in the baskets, and the boys filled the mixing-bowls with drink to the brim. Then they put out their hands to take the good things that lay ready. At last, when they had eaten and drunk till they wanted no more, their fancies turned to other things, singing and dancing: for these are the graces of a feast. An orderly brought a beautiful harp, and put it in the hands of Phemios, who used to sing for them because he could not help it. So he struck up a prelude for his song. Then Telemachos spoke to Mentês, who was really Athena, and he brought his head close, that the others might not hear;

"Kind sir, will you think me rude if I say something to you? You see what these fellows care about, music and song—easy enough, when some one else pays for the food they eat, a man whose white bones are lying on the ground and rotting in the rain, no doubt, or rolling about in the salt sea. That man! if they only caught sight of him here in Ithaca once more, they would gladly give a fortune of gold for a light pair of heels! But he is dead and gone in this miserable way, and there is no comfort for us, even if there are people in the world who say he will come back. No, the day of his return will never dawn.

"Well now, please tell me this: I want to know all about you. Who are you, where do you come from? Where is your country, what is your family? What ship carried you here? I don't suppose you walked all the way! How was it those sailors brought you to Ithaca? Who did they say they were? And another thing I want you to tell me: Is it your first visit, or are you a friend of our family? For a great many other men used to come to our place, since that man also was a traveller in the world."

Athena answered him, with her bright eyes glinting:

"Very well, I will tell you all about it. My name is



Mentês; I am the son of a clever father, Anchialos, and I rule over a nation of seamen, the Taphians. I have come here now with ship and crew, voyaging over the dark face of the sea to places where they speak other languages than ours; just now to Temesê for bronze, and I have a cargo of shining steel. My ship came to land some way from your town, and she lies in the harbour of Rheithron, under woody Neïon. Let me say that we are family friends from long ago, if you will only go and ask that fine old gentleman Laërtês; they say he does not come to town any more, but keeps far away in the country in a miserable plight, with one servant, an old woman who gives him something to eat and drink when his poor limbs are tired out with stumbling over the slopes of his vine-plot. And now here I am. They did say he was come home from his travels—your father I mean, but I suppose the gods have put something in his way. I tell you he is not dead yet, that grand man Odysseus, but he is still alive—a prisoner somewhere in the broad sea, in an island amid the waters; and dangerous men hold him fast, savages, who are keeping him no doubt against his will.

“Well, now, I will play the prophet, and tell you what is in the mind of the immortals, and what I think will come to pass; although I am no prophet really, and I do not know much about the meaning of birds. I tell you he will not long be absent from his dear native land, not if chains of iron hold him fast. He will find a way to get back, for he is never at a loss.

“Come now, please tell me this; I want to know all about *you*. Are you really his son—a boy as big as you the son of Odysseus? You seem terribly like him, that head and those fine eyes of yours—I can see him now! for we used to meet ever so often in the old days, before he embarked for Troy, when so many of the best men of the nation sailed away in that fleet. Since then I have not seen Odysseus, and he has not seen me.”

The boy answered politely:

“Very well, sir, I will tell you all about it. My mother says I am his son, but I don’t know myself; I never heard of any one who did know whose son he was. I only wish

my father had been a man who lived to grow old upon his own rich acres! But now!—there never was mortal man more unlucky than the man whom they call my father, since you ask me the question.”

Then Athena said, with her bright eyes glinting:

“I tell you one thing: the breed will not be inglorious in time to come, when you are what I see and your mother is Penelopeia; thank God for that. But come now, please tell me this. Feasting—company—what does it all mean? What has it to do with you? Banquet or wedding? It is clear that this is no bring-what-you-like picnic! It seems to me they are making themselves very much at home. Lords of all they survey! It is enough to make a man angry to see all this rough behaviour, if he had any decent feeling.”

The boy answered once more:

“Sir, since you ask me the question, this house might have been wealthy and beyond reproach, so long as that man was at home; but now the gods have willed otherwise. They have chosen to send trouble upon us. That man they have picked out of all the men in the world, and they have made him vanish out of our sight. If he were dead, it would not hurt me so much; if he had fallen before Troy among his comrades, or if he had died in the arms of his friends, after he had wound up the war. Then the whole nation would have built him a barrow, and he would have won a great name for his son as well in days to come. But now, there is not a word of him. The birds of prey have made him their prey; he is gone from sight, gone from hearing, and left anguish and lamentation for me.

“And that man is not all I have to mourn and lament, since the gods have sent other sorrows to trouble me, in this way: All the great men who rule in the islands, in Dulichion, and Samê, and woody Zacynthos, and all those who are lords in rocky Ithaca, one and all they want to marry my mother, and here they are, wasting our wealth. She hates the thought of it, but she neither denies nor dares to make an end of the matter, while they eat me out of house and home. Like enough they will tear me to pieces myself as well.”