

## Part 3: Reading the Epic

Reading the *Odyssey* is a complex experience. On one level, the poem is an action-packed, tension-filled narrative that makes readers eagerly anticipate the hero's homecoming. On another level, it's a work of art to be appreciated and analyzed. Use the following strategies to help you make the most of your journey through the epic.

### READING THE EPIC AS NARRATIVE

- Note the changing narrators. Who is telling the story at any given point? Consider how the different narrators deepen your understanding of characters and events.
- **Visualize** the action and the settings by using details in the text.
- Track the events and conflicts and try to **predict** the outcomes.
- Use a chart like the one shown to keep track of the characters, including gods and goddesses and Odysseus' friends and foes. What does each do to either help or harm him?

### READING THE EPIC AS POETRY

- Try reading the lines aloud, as the epic was originally performed.
- Read the lines for their sense, just as you would read prose. Follow the punctuation, and remember that the end of a line does not always mean the end of a thought.
- Listen for sound devices such as **alliteration**, **assonance**, **consonance**, and **rhyme** and notice how they reinforce meaning. (Although the sound devices in English aren't the same as those in the original Greek, they do reflect the translator's attempt to capture the spirit and technique of Homer's verse.)
- Consider how the **imagery** and **figurative language**—especially the **epic similes**—help you understand characters and events.

### READING THE EPIC AS A REFLECTION OF ITS TIME

- Pay attention to the **character traits** of Odysseus, the epic hero, by looking closely at how he behaves and how he is described. What do these traits tell you about the values of the time?
- Think about what you've learned of Greek history and culture. What events may have influenced Homer?
- Remember that in Homer's time most Greeks believed that the gods took an active interest in human affairs and themselves behaved much like humans. How are these religious beliefs apparent in the epic?

### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

Characters Who Help Odysseus	Characters Who Harm Odysseus
Athena (goddess) • pleads with Zeus to help Odysseus escape Calypso's island	Poseidon (god) • stirs up nasty weather to create problems for Odysseus

from **BOOK 4: The Red-Haired King and His Lady**

but never have I seen one like Odysseus for **s**teadiness and a **s**tout heart. . . .

**Alliteration:** The repeated "s" sound emphasizes the strength of the epic hero.

Odysseus' Traits	Evidence
strong, skilled, and swift	frequently referred to as "master mariner and soldier"
quick-witted; thinks on his feet	described as "strategist" when he responds to a difficult question posed by Calypso (Book 5)

## Overview

### ● TEXT ANALYSIS: EPIC HERO

Common to myths, the **epic hero** is a larger-than-life character, traditionally a man, who pursues long and dangerous adventures. Alternately aided and blocked by the gods, he carries the fate of his people on his shoulders. The epic hero is an **archetypal** character—one found in works across time and cultures. Odysseus, one of the most famous heroes in Western culture, has shaped our ideas about the traits that a hero should have.

- extraordinary strength and courage
- cleverness and deceit, also known as guile
- extreme confidence and a tendency to dismiss warnings

Every epic hero embodies the values of his culture. As you read the *Odyssey*, consider how Odysseus faces various conflicts. What does this tell you about his character? What do his character traits tell you about what the ancient Greeks found admirable?

### ● READING STRATEGY: READING AN EPIC POEM

The strategies for reading an epic are very similar to those for reading any narrative poem.

- Keep track of the events.
- Visualize the **imagery**.
- Notice how **figurative language**, including **epic similes**, makes the story vivid and interesting.
- Read difficult passages more than once. Use the side notes for help in comprehension.
- Read the poem aloud, as it was originally conveyed.

### ▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Place each of the following words in the appropriate column.

<b>WORD LIST</b>	abominably	assuage	meditation
	adversary	beguiling	ponderous
	appalled	foreboding	profusion
	ardor	harried	travail

<i>Know Well</i>	<i>Think I Know</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

### Book 1: A Goddess Intervenes

The poet introduces Odysseus, a successful warrior who, after conquering the city of Troy, has wandered the seas for many years. Now he wants only to return safely to his home and family.

### Book 5: Calypso, the Sweet Nymph

Odysseus has been held captive for many years by the goddess Calypso on her island. Zeus sends the god Hermes to order her to release Odysseus; she offers her advice and helps him build a raft on which he can sail to Scheria, his next destination.

### Book 9: New Coasts and Poseidon's Son

Odysseus has met King Alcinous and begins telling him of his adventures since leaving Troy. He relates the tale of the Lotus Eaters and his encounter with the brutal Cyclops, a son of the sea-god Poseidon. Odysseus continues his tales in Books 10–12.

### Book 10: Circe, the Grace of the Witch

Eventually, Odysseus and his men arrive at the island home of Circe, a goddess and enchantress. She detains the men for a year, allowing them to go home only if they will visit the land of the dead and hear a prophecy from the ghost of Tiresias.

### Book 11: The Land of the Dead

Odysseus and his crew travel to the underworld, where Tiresias warns Odysseus against stealing the cattle of Helios, god of the sun. According to the prophecy, if Odysseus raids the cattle, he will lose his ship and crew and return home only after many years alone at sea.

### Book 12: The Sirens; Scylla and Charybdis

Odysseus and his men return to Circe's island, where she advises him on how to get past the bewitching Sirens and the horrible sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis. He successfully evades the Sirens but does not escape the monsters without losing some of his men.



## PART ONE: THE WANDERINGS OF ODYSSEUS

# BOOK 1:

## *A Goddess Intervenes*



1 Muse: a daughter of Zeus, credited with divine inspiration.

**harried** (hār'ēd) *adj.* tormented;  
harassed **harry** *v.*

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
the wanderer, **harried** for years on end,  
after he plundered the stronghold  
5 on the proud height of Troy.

He saw the townlands

and learned the minds of many distant men,  
and weathered many bitter nights and days  
in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only  
to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.  
10 But not by will nor valor could he save them,  
for their own recklessness destroyed them all—  
children and fools, they killed and feasted on  
the cattle of Lord Helios, the Sun,  
and he who moves all day through heaven  
15 took from their eyes the dawn of their return. **A**

Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus,  
tell us in our time, lift the great song again. . . .

*The story of Odysseus begins with the goddess Athena's appealing to Zeus to help Odysseus, who has been wandering for ten years on the seas, to find his way home to his family on Ithaca. While Odysseus has been gone, his son, Telemachus, has grown to manhood and his wife, Penelope, has been besieged by suitors wishing to marry her and gain Odysseus' wealth. The suitors have taken up residence in her home and are constantly feasting on the family's cattle, sheep, and goats. They dishonor Odysseus and his family. Taking Athena's advice, Telemachus travels to Pylos for word of his father. Meanwhile, on Ithaca, the evil suitors plot to kill Telemachus when he returns.*

11–13 *their own recklessness . . . the Sun:*  
a reference to an event occurring later  
in the poem—an event that causes the  
death of Odysseus' entire crew.

**A** **EPIC HERO**  
This invocation (lines 1–15)  
introduces us to Odysseus,  
"that man skilled in all ways of  
contending." What traits is he  
shown to have?



\*\* So, who were the Muses and what did they stand for?

Goddess	Inspire	Symbol Most Often Depicted
Kalliope	Epic Poetry	Wax Tablet
Kleio	History	Scroll
Ourania	Astronomy	Celestial Globe
Thaleia	Comedy	Comic mask, ivy wreath, shepherd's staff
Melpomene	Tragedy	Tragic mask, ivy wreath
Polyhymnia	Religion	Veiled and pensive
Euterpe	Lyric Poetry	Double Flute
Erato	Erotic Poetry	Small Lyre
Tepsikhore	Music, Song and Dance	Large lyre

