

Part 2: The Language of Homer

Because the language of Homer was ancient Greek, what you will read is an English translation. The *Odyssey* has been translated many times, and each translator has interpreted it differently. Read these two versions of the opening of Book 2. The first is written in verse and has a more formal **tone** and **diction**—closer to the original—while the second is written in prose and is less formal.

TRANSLATION 1

When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky
her fingers of pink light, Odysseus' true son
stood up, drew on his tunic and his mantle,
slung on a sword-belt and a new-edged sword,
tied his smooth feet into good rawhide sandals,
and left his room, a god's brilliance upon him.

—translated by Robert Fitzgerald (1961)

TRANSLATION 2

Dawn came, showing her rosy fingers
through the early mists, and Telemachus
leapt out of bed. He dressed himself,
slung a sharp sword over his shoulder,
strapped a stout pair of boots on his lissom
feet, and came forth from his chamber
like a young god.

—translated by W. H. D. Rouse (1937)

The Greeks who first experienced the *Odyssey* did not read a written version; they heard it as a live performance. Singing or reciting, a poet kept the audience enthralled with **epic similes**, **epithets**, and **allusions**.

- A **simile** is a comparison between two unlike things, using the word *like* or *as*. Homer often develops a simile at great length, so that it goes on for several lines. This is known as an **epic simile**. In this passage from Book 20, an angry Odysseus is compared to a sausage being roasted over a fire.

His rage

held hard in leash, submitted to his mind,
while he himself rocked, rolling from side to side,
as a cook turns a sausage, big with blood
and fat, at a scorching blaze, without a pause,
to broil it quick: so he rolled left and right, . . .

- An **epithet** is a brief descriptive phrase used to characterize a particular person or thing. When a poet needed to fill out a line, he'd add an epithet with the right meter and number of syllables. Odysseus is known by various epithets, including "son of Laertes" and "raider of cities."
- An **allusion** is a reference to a famous person, place, or event. To help his audience picture what he described, a poet might have made an allusion to something they already knew. For instance, when Odysseus' son first sees the palace of Menelaus, he says, "This is the way the court of Zeus must be." Every Greek would have understood this allusion to the ruler of the gods.

MODEL 1: EPIC SIMILE

In this excerpt, Odysseus is watching the performance of a bard (a poet like Homer himself). Suddenly he finds himself listening to the story of the fall of Troy and of his own part in it. Notice the epic simile that is developed over this entire passage.

from **BOOK 8: *The Songs of the Harper***

- And Odysseus
let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,
weeping [like] the way a wife mourns for her lord
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting
the day of wrath that came upon his children.
- 5 At sight of the man panting and dying there,
she slips down to enfold him, crying out;
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,
and goes bound into slavery and grief.
- 10 Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks:
but no more piteous than Odysseus' tears,
cloaked as they were, now, from the company.

Close Read

1. What two things are being compared in this epic simile?
2. In the boxed lines, the wife cries first for her dying husband, then for herself. Consider what this might suggest about Odysseus' feelings. What might the epic hero be crying about?

MODEL 2: EPITHET

Here, the goddess Athena speaks to her father, Zeus, on behalf of Odysseus. Reminding Zeus of sacrifices made to him during the Trojan War, she begs him to let Odysseus return home. Athena has told Zeus that Odysseus is so homesick that he "longs to die."

from **BOOK 1: *A Goddess Intervenes***

- "Are you not moved by this, Lord of Olympus?
Had you no pleasure from Odysseus' offerings
beside the Argive ships, on Troy's wide seaboard?
O Zeus, what do you hold against him now?"
- 5 To this the summoner of cloud replied:
"My child, what strange remarks you let escape you.
Could I forget that kingly man, Odysseus?
There is no mortal half so wise; no mortal
gave so much to the lords of open sky."

Close Read

1. One epithet of Zeus is boxed. Find another.
2. What epithet does Zeus use to refer to Odysseus?