

Homer's *Odyssey* in Brief Book Summaries

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The following summaries come from the Cave's
The Best of Homer's Odyssey.

BOOK 1 • THE GODS IN ASSEMBLY—ATHENA AND TELEMACHUS The action opens with the "man" Odysseus struggling to return home from Troy. He's trapped and depressed on Calypso's island. Many of the Achaeans have returned; many have not—the ones who are now dead. Although men typically blame the gods for such ill fortune, Zeus, in assembly with the other gods, declares their destruction is the result of their own foolish recklessness. Such is the case with Aegisthus, who wooed Agamemnon's wife contrary to the advice of Zeus. Thanks to Athena's prodding, the conversation turns to how Odysseus will return home from Calypso's island, Ogygia. Once a decision is reached, Athena flies down to Ithaca disguised as Mentos to motivate Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, to act. There she encounters the suitors, who want Penelope and her wealth now that her husband, Odysseus, is presumably dead. Athena-Mentos speaks with Telemachus. Once she departs, Telemachus boldly calls for an assembly.

BOOK 2 • THE ASSEMBLY AT ITHACA—TELEMACHUS STANDS UP Old and wise Aegypius wonders why the assembly has been called and who called for it. Telemachus rises to explain why he has called them together. He accuses the suitors of improper behavior, of wasting his wealth. The suitor Antinous in turn blames Penelope for tricking the suitors and putting them off with the burial shroud she was making for Laertes. She must marry one of them, he demands. Telemachus prays for revenge. In response, Zeus sends two eagles to foretell the suitors' destruction. The

birdwatcher Halitherses stands to confirm the bird sign and states that Odysseus is nearby and ready to slaughter the suitors. The suitor Eurymachus expresses skepticism. Telemachus asks for a ship to go and search for information regarding his father. Mentor stands to rebuke the suitors and the others who have let the suitors behave as they do. Odysseus will return, he asserts. The suitor Leiocritus declares they'll fight Odysseus if he returns. Then he breaks up the assembly. Telemachus prays to Athena, who appears as Mentor. She gathers a ship and men for the young man while he gathers provisions. Finally, they set sail for the mainland to gather news about his father.

BOOK 3 ▪ TELEMACHUS WITH NESTOR IN PYLOS—THE YOUNG MAN LEARNS TO SPEAK First stop, Pylos. With the encouragement of Athena-Mentor, Telemachus meets up with Nestor, who hosts him, telling him about the great suffering the Achaeans endured at Troy, and about the successful and unsuccessful homecomings of the many heroes. He relates how Agamemnon was murdered by Aegisthus, and how Orestes took revenge and killed his father's murderers. He tells of Menelaus' journey to Egypt and of all the gold he gathered there. After an overnight stay, Telemachus departs by chariot with Nestor's son Peisistratus to visit Menelaus in Sparta.

BOOK 4 ▪ TELEMACHUS WITH MENELAUS IN SPARTA—THE SUITORS PLOT TO AMBUSH THE YOUNG MAN Menelaus and Helen host Telemachus in Sparta. During a feast, they recall all the tragedy of the past. Menelaus doubts whether the wealth he has gathered is worth all the suffering he and the others endured at Troy and afterward. He mournfully speaks of his brother Agamemnon's murder, and about how he grieves for his good friend Odysseus. Hearing this, Telemachus weeps and is revealed as Odysseus' son. They all weep. After telling Menelaus about the suitors' behavior, Telemachus asks him if he has any news of his father. Promising the full truth, Menelaus tells of his time stuck in Egypt and his eventual getaway thanks to the help of Proteus, the old man of the sea. As for Odysseus, he explains that Proteus told him he was trapped with the nymph Calypso on her island. Meanwhile, the suitors conspire to kill Telemachus by means of an ambush at sea. Penelope hears of the plot and swoons.

BOOK 5 ▪ ODYSSEUS SAILS TO SCHERIA (THE PHAEACIANS)—THE PLOTTING OF THE GODS The gods assemble and decide what to do with Odysseus. Hermes carries out their plan by telling Calypso that she must let him leave her island home. After initially protesting, she does. Odysseus sails off on a raft. All is well for seventeen days until Poseidon spots him and angrily raises a dark storm. The sea nymph Ino advises and saves Odysseus. Although the going is rough, he makes it to Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians, and falls asleep beneath a pair of shrubs.

BOOK 6 ▪ ODYSSEUS MEETS NAUSICAA—THE ENCOUNTER BY THE RIVER STREAM At Athena's prodding in a dream, the princess Nausicaa goes to wash her and her family's clothing in a stream near to where Odysseus is sleeping. When he awakens, he approaches Nausicaa and blesses her. She gives him directions to her house where the Phaeacian king and queen, her father and mother, live. She also tells him what to do once there. They set off for the palace.

BOOK 7 ▪ THE HOUSE OF ALCINOUS—ODYSSEUS MEETS ALCINOUS AND ARETE Thanks to Athena's help, Odysseus comes before Alcinous and Arete. They treat him honorably as a guest-friend. After the hero briefly explains who he is and how much he has suffered, Alcinous offers his daughter Nausicaa to him in marriage. Not wishing to restrain him, however, he also offers him conveyance home in a fast Phaeacian ship.

BOOK 8 ▪ FEASTING WITH THE PHAEACIANS— SONGS, GAMES, AND SORROW Alcinous calls an assembly and reveals the plan to sail Odysseus home. He invites the other sceptered kings to a feast. They eat and listen to the blind bard Demodocus. He sings about Odysseus' quarrel with Achilles, and Odysseus quietly weeps. Soon after, the Phaeacians compete in games—Odysseus reluctantly and angrily, after Euryalus insults him. He throws a discus farther than any other man. The Phaeacians dance, accompanied by the bard, who sings about the love affair

between Ares and Aphrodite, Hephaestus' wife. They later feast and listen to the bard again. Euryalus makes amends with Odysseus. They all return to the palace to feast again and listen to Demodocus recount the tale of the Trojan horse and the battle in Troy, including Odysseus' fight with Deiphobus. Hearing this, tears fall down Odysseus' cheeks. Alcinoos notices and asks him who he really is.

BOOK 9 ▪ DISASTER ON THE WAY HOME—THE CICONES, THE LOTUS EATERS, AND THE CYCLOPS Odysseus reveals himself and explains all the suffering he's endured since leaving Troy—the battle against the Cicones; the dreamy lethargy of the Lotus Eaters; the horror of the man-eating Cyclops, Polyphemus. Odysseus wisely escapes the Cyclops by blinding him and using the name, Nobody. In doing so, however, he incurs the wrath of the Cyclops' father, Poseidon.

BOOK 10 ▪ A YEAR WITH CIRCE—AEOLUS, THE LAESTRYGONIANS, AND CIRCE Odysseus and his men nearly reach Ithaca and home after a prolonged stay with Aeolus and his family, but Odysseus' men open the bag of winds that drive them off again. They next meet up with the monstrous man-eating Laestrygonians, who kill and eat many of them, destroying all the ships but one. They sail to Circe's island. The goddess turns half of his men into pigs with a magical potion. Nevertheless, Odysseus, with the help of Hermes, forces her to return their manly form, and they all become friends. They feast for a year until his men remind Odysseus of his fatherland and he resolves to leave for home. Still, Circe tells him he must make one last voyage—to the end of the world and Hades in order to speak with the seer Tiresias.

BOOK 11 ▪ THE UNDERWORLD—SPEAKING WITH THE DEAD Odysseus and his men sail to the edge of the world to communicate with the dead in Hades. After pouring out a libation and sacrificing two sheep, Odysseus speaks with the seer Tiresias, who tells him what he must suffer before returning home, how he will slaughter the suitors, and about the final journey he must make. After speaking with him, he converses with many women, including his mother, and sees many more—among them, Epicaste, the mother-wife of Oedipus, and Leda, the wife of Tyndareus. After the Phaeacians ask to hear more, Odysseus reports his conversation with Achilles, his attempted reconciliation with Telamonian Ajax, and how he saw many others—Minos, Orion, Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus, and Heracles.

BOOK 12 ▪ A VOYAGE WITH MANY DANGERS—THE SIRENS, SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS, AND THE ISLAND OF THE SUN Odysseus and his men return from Hades to Circe's island to bury Elpenor. Circe warns Odysseus about the dangers of the voyage ahead and, as Tiresias did, she warns him to stay away from the island of the sun god Helios and his cattle. Departing the following morning, they first encounter the Sirens before passing between Scylla and Charybdis. They eventually approach the island of the Sun and stop for the night. It is a big mistake. There will be no homecoming for Odysseus' men after they slaughter and eat some of Helios' cattle. Finally, Odysseus survives an encounter with Charybdis and drifts to Calypso's island.

BOOK 13 ▪ ITHACA AT LAST—ODYSSEUS AND ATHENA Odysseus feasts one last time with the Phaeacians before they speed him home with many gifts while he sleeps. Poseidon punishes the Phaeacians. When Odysseus awakes in Ithaca, he doesn't recognize where he is until Athena, at first disguised as a young shepherd, shows him that he's home. Now he's full of joy! Still, until Athena reveals herself as she truly is and that he is truly home, Odysseus prevaricates with a story. Once Athena changes form, she reveals all the suffering he must endure and the work he has to do. They hide the many gifts in a cave, then Athena and Odysseus plan how the suitors will be punished. But first, the hero must endure much sorrow and pain. The goddess changes his appearance.

BOOK 14 ▪ THE SWINEHERD EUMAEUS—LOYALTY AND HOSPITALITY The wandering, old stranger Odysseus visits

the loyal swineherd Eumaeus, who behaves as an ideal host. When asked who he is and where he has come from, Odysseus lies, saying he is from Crete and fought next to Idomeneus at Troy. He cunningly relates how he has come to Ithaca after several misadventures—one in Egypt, another in Phoenicia. Eumaeus doubts the news the stranger offers about Odysseus' homecoming—that he will soon be home. He believes his master is dead. Not only that but many others have offered similar tales, he explains. They feast on boar's meat and sleep after Odysseus tells one last story to win a warm covering for the night. Eumaeus sleeps apart from the others with the boars.

BOOK 15 ▪ STORIES AND RETURNS—TELEMACHUS SPEEDS HOME, EUMAEUS GIVES HIS STORY Leaving Menelaus and Helen in Sparta and avoiding contact with Nestor in Pylos given his need to speed home, Telemachus returns to Ithaca from his long journey abroad gathering information and earning a reputation. The seer Theoclymenus joins him. Meanwhile, Odysseus tests Eumaeus' loyalty. The swineherd passes the test and tells of his past life—how, with the help of his nurse, he was taken by Phoenician men from the island Syria and his kingly father and sold to Laertes. When Telemachus reaches Ithaca, he goes to see Eumaeus.

BOOK 16 ▪ FATHER AND SON—ODYSSEUS REVEALS HIMSELF TO TELEMACHUS Telemachus comes to Eumaeus' shelter. He asks the swineherd about the stranger. Telemachus is upset he cannot host him in his own house thanks to the suitors. The stranger Odysseus expresses anger at the suitors. Telemachus sends Eumaeus to report his homecoming to Penelope. Athena appears to Odysseus and strengthens him. In turn, he reveals himself to his son, and they plan how they will deal with the many suitors. Meanwhile, the suitors plot against Telemachus in the place of assembly. When they come back to the house, Penelope rebukes them for their insolent behavior. Eumaeus returns to his shelter.

BOOK 17 ▪ THE STRANGER AND THE SUITORS—ODYSSEUS RETURNS TO HIS HOUSE Telemachus returns to the city where he meets up with his mother, Penelope, and the seer Theoclymenus, who foretells Odysseus' return and plan for revenge. Odysseus and Eumaeus journey to town and the house. On the way, the goatherd Melanthius verbally abuses them. After seeing the dog Argos, Odysseus enters the house and begs for food. When Telemachus gives him some, he prays for his happiness, that he may get what he desires. Begging some more, Odysseus is battered by the suitor Antinous. Penelope curses the suitors and sends Eumaeus to fetch the stranger. Odysseus suggests they talk later in the evening.

BOOK 18 ▪ NAVIGATING A DANGEROUS HOUSE—ODYSSEUS BOXES IRUS AND DEALS WITH THE SUITORS The beggar Irus arrives and is rude to Odysseus. With the encouragement of the suitors, Odysseus boxes with him, knocking him out, thereby winning a prize and their blessings—at least for the moment. Odysseus warns Amphinomus that the fortunes of men rapidly change. He was once wealthy, he claims, but after behaving recklessly, he lost everything. The suitors should be careful. Penelope shows herself to the suitors. They are awed by her. After she chastises them for pursuing her contrary to custom, they bring her gifts. Later, the housemaid Melantho shamefully upbraids Odysseus. In turn, he threatens her with what Telemachus will do to her. The suitor Eurymachus makes fun of Odysseus. After his defensive response, the suitor throws a stool at him, but Odysseus ducks. There is such a racket that Telemachus orders them all to leave. Amphinomus backs him up, advising them not to abuse the stranger anymore. After one more drink, they depart.

BOOK 19 ▪ THE STRANGER SPEAKS WITH PENELOPE—ODYSSEUS PLANS FOR THE SUITORS' DEATH At the direction of Odysseus, Telemachus stores the weapons away from the suitors. Penelope enters the hall from her chamber. The handmaid Melantho abuses Odysseus. After reprimanding her handmaid, Penelope interviews the stranger, who praises her for her well-known glory. She explains her misfortune—how now, after having deceived them for so long, she must marry one of the suitors. When asked about himself, Odysseus claims he is Aethon from Crete. He

says he once hosted Odysseus and gives proof. Not only that, he declares, but Odysseus is on his way home. Penelope is skeptical. The old nurse Eurycleia washes Odysseus and recognizes him by the scar above his knee. He swears her to silence. Penelope tells the stranger about the dream she had of the eagle that killed her geese. Odysseus confirms its truth—the suitors will die. No, says Penelope, he won't come home. Instead, she will hold a great contest to determine the suitor she will marry. They go to sleep.

BOOK 20 ▪ ODYSSEUS ENDURES—THE SUITORS' DESTRUCTION WILL COME Odysseus endures the insolent women in his halls. Athena encourages him when he worries about how he will fight so many men. With her, she promises, he can accomplish the deed. Still, Odysseus asks for a sign. In response, Zeus sends an omen—thunder and the words of a woman—portending destruction for the suitors. The herdsman Philoetius meets the stranger Odysseus, wishing him well and explaining his own plight with the suitors. When the stranger predicts Odysseus' return and the slaying of the suitors, Philoetius prays for fulfillment. And, he assures him, he'll help in the fight! Within the hall, the suitors are amazed at Telemachus and his bold words. Athena drives them on in their foolishness. The seer Theoclymenus sees blood on the walls and dead men descending to Hades. Soon the suitors will pay.

BOOK 21 ▪ THE CONTEST OF THE GREAT BOW—ODYSSEUS PARTICIPATES Penelope retrieves and presents the great bow of Odysseus to the suitors for a contest. Whoever strings the bow and shoots an arrow through twelve axes will win her hand in marriage. The suitors try without success. Meanwhile, Odysseus reveals himself to Eumaeus and Philoetius, who assure him of their loyalty and willingness to fight. Contrary to the suitors' wishes, he takes up and attempts to string the bow.

BOOK 22 ▪ SLAUGHTER IN THE HALL—THE SUITORS PAY Odysseus and his men—Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius—kill the suitors, showing mercy only to a few. After the slaughter, and after Eurycleia identifies the women who betrayed Odysseus, the twelve guilty serving women clean the hall. They punish these same women with a shameful death, as well as the goatherd Melanthius. Once the work of revenge and cleansing is complete, the other women, including Penelope, come into the hall and see Odysseus for the first time.

BOOK 23 ▪ ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE—SIGNS AND RECOGNITION Eurycleia reports Odysseus' homecoming to Penelope, who is still doubtful. Penelope goes to see for herself, and though she is standoffish at first, she finally comes to believe the stranger is her husband when Odysseus reveals the sign of the olive tree bedpost. And so, they are finally happily reunited. Lying in bed in love, they tell each other what has happened over the past twenty years. In the morning, Odysseus arms with Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius. They leave the city for the fields.

BOOK 24 ▪ THE LAST BATTLE—PEACE AT LAST The souls of the suitors descend to Hades and encounter Achilles and Agamemnon, among others. Agamemnon speaks with Amphimedon and praises Penelope. Odysseus meets his father Laertes and, after testing him, reveals himself. The suitors' relatives meet in the assembly place to discuss what to do. Half, led by Eupeithes, want to find Odysseus to seek revenge. The other half, persuaded by Medon and Halitherses, do not fight. Those led by Eupeithes march off to one last battle. In the end, Zeus and Athena engineer a peace settlement.

So ends "Homer's *Odyssey* in Brief—Book Summaries." See you in another item.



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