



The Odyssey

by Homer

In a Nutshell

Published sometime between 800 and 600 BC, the *Odyssey* is, along with the *Iliad*, one of the best known, and most stupendously awesome, works of ancient literature - make that *any* literature. To fully appreciate its awesomeness, you'll have to read it for yourself - Shmoop's just here to make it a smoother ride. First, though, we can fill you in on some background information.

Being an ancient epic, the *Odyssey* was originally composed in the classic oral tradition of...not being written at all. Well, at least that's what some scholars think, pointing to how the poem's use of repetition echoes that of oral poets, who used repetition as a memory aid. On the other hand, if Homer *did* compose it on paper, wouldn't it make sense for him to imitate the style of the oral poetry before him? It's your call; the jury's still out on this one. (For more information on this debate, check out our guide to the *Iliad*.) But this is missing the point. What really matters is the amazing power of Homer's poem, which you now get to experience for yourself.

On one level, the *Odyssey* is a sequel to the *Iliad* - but don't let any prejudice about sequels throw you off. Really, the two poems are more like night and day - they complement each other, and are equally great. That said, to echo Bob Dylan, the author of these poems can definitely "take the dark out of the nighttime, / and paint the daytime black." Even though the *Iliad* is all about war and suffering, it still finds time for moments of profound humanity. Meanwhile, the *Odyssey*, which is all about Odysseus's crazy adventures on his way back home from war, never lets us forget that, for him, most of those adventures involve a lot of suffering. Also, you don't have to read the *Iliad* first - the *Odyssey* itself fills you in on most of the relevant background information, though you might want to refresh your memory of the [Trojan War](#), if you're feeling a bit rusty. (Unfortunately, watching the movie *Troy* doesn't count.)

One more thing: if you haven't already stopped reading this introduction and picked up Homer's book, just think of all the generations of readers who have felt that the *Odyssey* speaks to them. Many of these readers have gone on to create their own, original artworks inspired by Homer's epic. In this category, you've got Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid*; Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "[Ulysses](#)"; James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*; countless paintings (check out Henry Fuseli's "[Odysseus in front of Scylla and Charybdis](#)"); Cream's song "[Tales of Brave Ulysses](#)"; the Cohen Brothers' movie [O Brother, Where Art Thou?](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190590/) - and the list goes on. Whether you're most interested in literature, visual art, music, or movies, you've got to read Homer's *Odyssey* to see where everybody's getting their ideas.

Why Should I Care?

Do you like stories full of adventure, danger, and suspense? How about stories set in fantastic worlds full of strange creatures like Cyclopes, witches, sirens, and gods? If so, then you're in luck, because Homer's *Odyssey* is Western literature's original adventure story, and its first foray into the fantasy genre.

If you need any proof of how much Homer's poem defined this genre, just consider the fact that we now use the word "odyssey" simply to mean adventure.

OK, you're thinking, so what if it's the first, that doesn't make it the best.

And you're absolutely right.

The real reason you should read *The Odyssey* is because it's an incredibly exciting story that also happens to contain profound reflections on heroism, love, and human life.

True, all of these themes are also dealt with in Homer's *Iliad*, but the *Odyssey* puts a different spin on them.

In contrast to Achilles, the raging warrior hero of the *Iliad*, Odysseus lives by his wits as much as by his strength.

Similarly, even though the *Iliad* contains nuanced portraits of several striking women, the *Odyssey* is unique in ancient literature for its numerous strong female characters, ranging from the cunningly faithful Penelope, to the mysterious Circe and Kalypso, to Odysseus's steadfast ally Athene, the goddess of warfare and wisdom.

By presenting the full range of human experience - including death, as revealed in Odysseus's trip to the Underworld - the *Odyssey* perfectly complements the *Iliad's* concentrated focus on the experience of war.

It will give you tons of stuff to think about - though you probably won't even notice, because you'll be having so much fun.