

English

World Literature: Classics

Second Edition

High School Coursebook



Oak Meadow

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UNIT 2

Epic Greek Poetry

*“That was the most heartrending sight I saw
in all the time I suffered on the sea.”*

Homer, *The Odyssey* (translated by Emily Wilson)

In Unit 2, we'll explore the Greek epic *The Odyssey* by Homer. The story details the adventures of Odysseus as he journeys home after the Trojan War. Written around 600 BCE, this classic tale continues to be widely read and used as inspiration in literature, film, music, and art.



Map showing Odysseus's ten-year journey home (Image credit: Simeon Netchev/World History Encyclopedia)

Lesson

3

The Odyssey

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Write an argument to support your translation preference by analyzing two texts and presenting relevant evidence.
- Develop a topic by selecting significant and concrete details, relevant quotations, or other information and examples.
- Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

Lesson Introduction

In 2024, a robotic lander and pioneering spacecraft named *Odysseus* made its landing on the moon.

The act of naming this twenty-first-century lunar lander after *Odysseus*—the main character of Homer’s *The Odyssey* and one of the oldest and most well-known heroes in all of literature—recalls and honors the hero’s adventures and explorations in some of the unknown and remote parts of the ancient world, and it speaks to the present-day quest for new discoveries in our universe.

The Odyssey is a magnificent epic poem. These lessons will be a guide to discovering for yourself all that Homer reveals about the world *Odysseus* journeyed through.

In *The Library at Night*, Alberto Manguel emphasizes the role of the reader in exploring Homer’s epic work:

There is an unbridgeable chasm between the book that tradition has declared a classic and the book (the same book) that we have made ours through instinct, emotion, and understanding.
(218)

As you read *The Odyssey*, notice how the different threads of the story—mystery, travel, adventure, fantasy, supernatural, horror—weave together by means of your personal experience as you read and reflect on this timeless classic.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Familiarize yourself with the resources in two translations of *The Odyssey*.
- Read Books 1 and 2 in both translations.
- Read Books 3 and 4 in one translation.
- Write a reflective essay on your choice of translations.

Reader's Journal

As you read *The Odyssey*, create three lists in your reader's journal as described below. These lists will be the basis for an assignment in lesson 8.

1. Keep a list of names and places (aided by the glossaries of the two books), and write down relevant passages that are of interest to you.
2. Keep a list of all the ways Odysseus is described throughout the story.
3. Keep a list of how Penelope is described. She does not appear often in the beginning, so most of the adjectives referring to her are found in the later books.

Reading

1. In the materials for this course, you have two translations of *The Odyssey*. Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the following resources in each edition.

Wilson translation:

- Maps on pages 93–100
- Notes on pages 527–552 (including brief summaries of each of the 24 books)
- Glossary on pages 553–577

Fagles translation:

- Maps on pages 68–74
- Genealogy on pages 497–500
- Notes on the translation on pages 503–516
- Suggestions for further reading on pages 517–519
- Pronunciation glossary on pages 521–541

2. Read Books 1 and 2 in both translations.
3. Decide which translation you'd like to continue reading. Read Books 3 and 4 in your chosen translation.

You will continue to read your chosen translation for the rest of *The Odyssey*, but the two translations will be compared throughout these lessons.

Unless otherwise noted, direct quotations are taken from the newest translation, which is by Emily Wilson. If you are reading Fagles and wish to refer to his work, you can find the corresponding passages in his translation.

Notes on Form

When referring to an epic poem like *The Odyssey*, use the following conventions:

- Put the title in italics.
- When citing quotations, refer to the book number and line number instead of the page number. In parentheses, write the book number, followed by a period, and then the line numbers. Here is an example for how you would cite Book 16, lines 17–23: (16.17–23).
- Look at examples of citations in the introductions of both translations to become familiar with this format.

Writing Assignments

1. Which edition of *The Odyssey* did you choose to keep reading? Why? How does the wording in your preferred translation appeal to you and bring the story to life? Write a two-page reflective essay on your choice of translation.

Make sure you use examples from each book to explain your preference. For instance, you could contrast a particular scene or passage from both translations in order to illustrate what you liked and didn't like.

Refer to the box “Guidelines for Writing an Organized Essay” to help you create a polished piece of writing.

Learning Assessment Rubric

Evidence of Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	Expectations	Areas for Growth
	<p>Comparison</p> <p>Multiple translations of a text are compared by identifying specific, key features that are similar and different.</p>	
	<p>Evaluation</p> <p>The effectiveness of the text is evaluated using personal opinion, critical analysis, and logical reasoning.</p>	
	<p>Structure</p> <p>The essay includes an introduction, focused and relevant ideas developed in a logical sequence, and a relevant conclusion.</p>	
	<p>Structure</p> <p>Information and supporting evidence are presented such that readers can follow the line of reasoning, organization, and development of ideas.</p>	

Guidelines for Writing an Organized Essay

An essay is an organized piece of purposeful writing that focuses on a specific topic or theme. Begin by creating an outline to organize your main ideas and examples from the text that you will use to support each idea. An outline will give you a solid structure for your essay and sufficient textual evidence before you begin writing your rough draft, which will save time in the long run.

There are three main parts to an essay:

The **introductory paragraph** gives an overview of the topic or theme and provides a thesis statement that explains the purpose of the essay. What are the important issues, concepts, or ideas you will explore? What message do you want readers to take away from the essay?

The **body paragraphs** are used to introduce, analyze, explore, and/or provide evidence for your main ideas. Each of your main ideas will be discussed in a separate paragraph, and the paragraphs should flow in a logical manner. Cite specific evidence from sources, using your own words to interpret their meaning and explain how they connect to the theme. Each paragraph will have its own topic sentence to introduce the paragraph's main idea, detailed sentences that expand on the idea, and a concluding sentence to emphasize the main takeaway. Use varied transitional phrases and structures to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

The **concluding paragraph** of the essay highlights the significance of the topic by summarizing your main ideas and how they connect.

After writing your rough draft, follow the remaining steps of the writing process—revising, editing, and proofreading—to create a polished piece of work.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher for feedback. Use the checklist below to organize your work submission.

- Reflective essay

If you have any questions about the lesson content, assignments, or submission methods, contact your teacher.

Lesson

4

Character Motivation

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
- Cite specific textual evidence to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is conveyed over the course of the narrative.

Lesson Introduction

In Books 1–4, Odysseus is a missing person. Ithaca is falling apart politically, and Penelope is alone and waiting for Telemachus to grow up and take charge.

During the travels of Telemachus, the homecomings of the heroes are relayed to him, and these stories provide the reader with plenty of backstory and context while also introducing the key theme of hospitality.

It isn't until Book 5 that Odysseus washes up on a new shore, at the very end of his adventures, which he will recount in a very long flashback in Books 9–12.

Reading

1. Before moving forward with the story, read the selected parts of the introductions in both translations as shown below.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read selections of the introductions in the two translations of *The Odyssey*.
- Read Books 5–8.
- Describe ways in which the introductions were useful.
- List attributes of different translations and describe one in full.
- Create your own translations and describe your emphasis.
- Analyze and reflect on what motivates and influences Odysseus's behavior.
- Choose a unit project theme and write down preliminary ideas.

Wilson translation:

- Wilson's introduction (1–5)
- “Who Was Homer?” (5–13)
- “When Was *The Odyssey* composed?” (13–16)
- “Homer's World” (16–23)
- “Friends, Strangers, Guests” (23–29)
- “Translator's Note” (81–91)

Fagles translation:

- “The Odyssey” (3–11)
- “The Language of Homer” (12–22)
- “Translator's Postscript” (489–496)

2. Listed below are additional components of each introduction that you might want to refer to when questions come up while you are reading. Also, these sections can provide excellent material for the project you select. (This is optional reading.)

Wilson translation:

- “Gods” (29–37)
- “Goddesses, Wives, Princesses, and Slave Girls” (37–48)
- “Becoming a Man” (48–57)
- “The Choice of Odysseus” (57–65)
- “Hated Odysseus” (65–71)
- “Endings” (71–74)
- “Reception” (74–79)

Fagles translation:

- “*The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*” (23–24)
- “The Western Seas” (25–28)
- “Voyager” (28–36)
- “Hero” (37–41)
- “Gods” (41–49)
- “Women and Men” (49–58)
- “The End of the Odyssey” (59–64)

3. Read Books 5–8 in your chosen translation of *The Odyssey*. Remember to add notes to your reader's journal (as instructed in lesson 3), specifically citing passages about how Odysseus and Penelope are described.

Writing Assignments

1. What stood out to you in Emily Wilson's introduction? What did you notice in Robert Fagles's introduction?

Write a paragraph about the parts of the introductions that were most compelling to you and that you felt were helpful in preparing you to read *The Odyssey*.

2. In Book 5, Odysseus is left clinging to the raft that he so lovingly made, adrift at sea after Poseidon's wrathful storm. A seabird alights and speaks. It is Leucothea, the white goddess. She gives him a magic cloth that he refuses, just as he refused Calypso's offer of immortality. Finally, he washes up on the shore.

Let's look at the short passage at the end of Book 5 that describes Odysseus washing up on the shore after being shipwrecked and almost perishing. In *Why Homer Matters*, Adam Nicholson gives four different translations of this passage: an eighteenth-century version by Alexander Pope, a nineteenth-century version by George Chapman, and two versions from the twentieth century, one of which is a translation by Fagles. For this assignment, Wilson's translation from the twenty-first century is included, for a total of five translations.

- a. Provide at least three adjectives (such as *beautifully worded*, *evocative*, *down-to-earth*, *detailed*, *brief*, etc.) for each of the following translations.

Pope translation (Nicholson 26–27):

his knees no more
Perform'd their office, or his weight upheld:
His swoln heart heaved; his bloated body swell'd:
From mouth and nose the briny torrent ran;
And lost in lassitude lay all the man.

Chapman translation (Nicholson 27):

Then forth he came, his both knee falt'ring, both
His strong hands hanging down, and all with froth
His cheeks and nostrils flowing, voice and breath
Spent to all use, and down he sank to death.
The sea had soak'd his heart through.

E.V. Rieu translation (written in prose) (Nicholson 27):

“Odysseus bent his knees and sturdy arms, exhausted by his struggle with the sea.”

Fagles translation (5.501–506):

His knees buckled, massive arms fell limp,
 the sea had beaten down his striving heart.
 His whole body swollen, brine aplenty gushing
 out of his mouth and nostrils—breathless, speechless,
 there he lay, with only a little strength left in him,
 deadly waves of exhaustion overwhelmed him now...

Wilson translation (5.453–457):

His legs cramped up;
 the sea had broken him. His swollen body
 gushed brine from mouth and nostrils. There he lay
 winded and silent, hardly fit to move.
 A terrible exhaustion overcame him.

- b. In one or two paragraphs, describe one of the above translations as fully as you can. For instance, Nicholson describes his choice of Chapman’s translation in this way:

Chapman’s English has absorbed the vengeful nature of the sea Odysseus has just experienced; has understood that his soul is as good as drowned; has not lost the governing physicality of Homer’s world, so that Odysseus’s heart appears as the organ of pain; and is able to summon a visual image of a marinated corpse, blanched and shriveled from exposure to the water, as white as tripe. (27)

3. Now that you’ve analyzed a variety of translations, you will create one of your own.
- a. Make an original translation based on the following passage, which is Nicholson’s “virtually literal translation of what Homer says as Odysseus emerges from the surf” (26):

he then bends both knees
 and his strong hands-and-arms; for sea has killed his heart.
 Swollen all his flesh, while sea oozes much
 up through mouth and nostrils, he then breathless and speechless
 lies scarcely-capable, terrible weariness comes to him.

Keep in mind that translations can be word for word, but they can also focus more broadly on the meaning.

If you prefer, you can translate this passage into another medium, such as a drawing or a song.

- b. Briefly describe what you were emphasizing in your translation.
4. At the very end of Book 5, Homer gives us this simile to describe the plight of Odysseus:

As when a man who lives
 out on a lonely farm that has no neighbors
 buries a glowing torch inside black embers
 to save the seed of fire, and keep a source
 So was Odysseus concealed in leaves. (5.487–491)

Odysseus continues to remain concealed, one way or another, through much of the rest of the story. Until the end of his stay with the Phaeacians, Odysseus does not even reveal his name. This brings up the question of Odysseus’s strategy in concealing his identity and his purpose once he has finally returned to land.

Why do you think he is so intent on returning to Ithaca instead of staying and marrying Nausicaa? Why did he not accept Calypso’s offer of immortality? Although these interactions offer a promising alternative, he still sets his sights on home. What motivates his behavior?

Reflect on these questions in one or two well-organized paragraphs, finding at least two passages that address Odysseus’s purpose at this point in his story. In a sense, his purpose is “the seed of fire,” the “source” in the quoted passage above.

Learning Assessment Rubric

Evidence of Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	Expectations	Areas for Growth
	<p>Character analysis</p> <p>Character motivation is interpreted using textual references that include what is specifically stated, what is implied, and what is left unclear.</p>	
	<p>Evidence</p> <p>Text references and quotations are used to support the development of ideas.</p>	

Guidelines for Writing Strong Paragraphs

Use the following format to write paragraphs that clearly communicate your ideas in an expressive and organized way:

- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that introduces the main subject of the paragraph.
- In the middle sentences of your paragraph, expand on your main idea. Cite specific textual evidence (with page numbers) and use your own words to analyze that evidence to show how it supports your ideas.
- End each paragraph with a concluding sentence that summarizes the key points, highlights the topic's significance, and/or connects to ideas in subsequent paragraphs.

Unit Project

1. You will create a project about *The Odyssey* that you will work on throughout this unit. Your project can be in the form of a digital slideshow, an illustrated presentation, a creative short story, or a research essay. Choose one of the project options below.

Option A: Homecoming stories

Everyone has a story to tell, and Odysseus is a great storyteller—Books 9–12 are devoted to his stories and adventures. In this project, you'll explore the theme of storytelling—truths, exaggerations, and lies—by writing a homecoming story drawn from your life. Recount your travels and what it was like to come home.

Notice the structure of *The Odyssey*, which moves back and forth through time. Think about how you can use flashbacks and memories to tell your story.

Option B: Themes related to hospitality

Closely aligned to the theme of homecoming is the theme of hospitality. As Wilson states, “[*The Odyssey*] is concerned above all with the duties and dangers involved in welcoming foreigners into one's home” (97). Besides sharing one's home with strangers, there is sometimes the need to defend one's home. The Trojan War began with a violation of the code of hospitality. In this project, you will examine hospitality and its rules as well as the need and desire to protect and defend.

Option C: Settings

There is a wide variety of settings in *The Odyssey*, and in this project, you'll explore the ones that interest you the most. For instance, you could design and illustrate at least three

settings Odysseus visits during his travels and/or his home on Ithaca. Or perhaps you could create a model of one or more settings. Include a written artist's statement that explains your choices and their significance in the story.

Option D: Creative characterization

Choose a character—human or god—to present through a creative project, such as writing a short story about them, drawing them, depicting them through music, etc. Gods you might choose include the powerful Poseidon, the shape-changing Athena, or the swift messenger, Hermes. Human characters include Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, and minor characters, such as Nausicaa, the shepherd Eumaeus, and the nurse Eurykleia.

Your research could begin by noting the descriptions and scenes written about the character and looking at material in the two introductions. For instance, in Book 4, Helen is seen as a figure of fascination. She imitates everyone's voice, and she recognizes Odysseus so easily. Is she a victim? Is she trustworthy? How could you convey these aspects of Helen (or any other character) through fiction, art, music, photography, or a mixture of media? What details would you focus on, and why? What would you leave out?

Option E: The trauma of the returning soldier

The trauma of the returning soldier is another key theme in this story. *The Odyssey* is filled with grief and postwar trauma because the entire culture has been touched by war—people are missing, and everybody keeps talking about what happened at Troy. The trauma is expressed in the first books and the book that takes place in Hades, and it erupts at the end of the epic on Ithaca.

You can trace this arc from the beginning to the very end, using any creative means: photography, illustrations, maps, music, or a combination of media.

Another approach would be to compare the experiences of the soldiers who returned from the Trojan War and the stories of those in Hades with accounts of present-day soldiers who have returned from war.

2. Once you have chosen your project option, jot down your initial ideas about how you might approach the project. What will you focus on? What will the end result be? These are just preliminary ideas—you won't be tied to them. This is just the start of your creative process.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher for feedback. Use the checklist below to organize your work submission.

- Thoughts about the introductions
- Attributes of different translations and description of one
- Your own original translation and emphasis

- Analysis of Odysseus's motivation
- Your ideas about your unit project

If you have any questions about the lesson content, assignments, or submission methods, contact your teacher.