

Women play an important role in *The Odyssey*; they are seductive, cunning and have influential roles in the development of the plot. Penelope is one such woman. She is in a vulnerable position throughout the whole poem, she doesn't know if her husband will ever return and she must endure her household being destroyed at the hands of the Suitors. In this essay I have chosen to examine Penelope and the role she plays in the development of the poem's plot.

The role Penelope plays in the plot can be seen as one that the reader must sympathise with. She is in a highly vulnerable state and has often 'wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband.' (1: 361) As a character, she appears to be one of fragility and sorrow which can be seen through her constant crying. The repetition of the passage 'wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband, till bright-eyed Athena closed her eyes in sweet sleep,' emphasizes how she is always crying for Odysseus and shows her vulnerability as Athena has to put her to sleep, therefore she is almost like a helpless baby being nursed to sleep.

Penelope also plays the role of a caring and good mother. While Telemachus has not yet come of age at the start of the poem, it can be seen that he is a well-mannered and well-spoken young man, shown when he meets the disguised Athena in Book I. This proves she is a good mother as she has raised this boy, with no father figure around and with all the troubles that have fallen on them. She also cares dearly for Telemachus and is heartbroken when she finds out that he has left to find out more information about his father, then when he returns home in Book VII, she is overcome with tears of joy and possibly relief that he has returned safely. Despite this, she does not stop Telemachus go on his journey which is key to his development as a character, and ensures that he will come of age and has matured in time for his father's return and the dealing of the Suitors.

She may be a caring mother, but Penelope, much like most women in the time period of the poem are very much second to men. Men's dominance over the woman can be seen in two examples, the first when Telemachus orders his mother to return to her room when she asks the bard to sing a different song as the other is too sad. (Book II) He also does it again in Book VII when he returns from his travels. By obeying Telemachus' orders, she is allowing him to try and regain control of the situation and shows that he is getting more confident in his abilities as master of the household although he can never truly be master.

Penelope also plays the role of the seductress in *The Odyssey*. While it is not as obvious as that of Circe, it can be seen when the Suitors see Penelope after Athena uses her powers to revitalize her appearance which means the Suitors '...went weak at the knees. Their hearts melted with desire, and every man among them voiced a prayer that he might sleep with her.' (*The Odyssey* 18: 212-14). Her seductive presence allows her to get lavish gifts from the Suitors, and the fact that many of the

men came from all over Ithaca, suggests that she is a very attractive woman. Her seductive manner, allows her to slow down the Suitors' advances allowing the plot development to progress the way it does.

Penelope's place in the poem is also to play the loving and loyal wife. She could be considered as the polar opposite of Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra who took a lover while he was away at war and was an accomplice in Agamemnon's murder. In contrast, Penelope has remained loyal to Odysseus and has not slept with anyone else in the time he is away and pines for him every night. This loyalty and commitment is one of Penelope's most important traits as her loyalty is what allows her and Odysseus to be reunited as she has chosen not to give up hope and remarry but has remained faithful and allows him to return and them to be together which is important in the development of the plot.

Despite her loyalty, when Eurykleia tells her Odysseus is home she thinks she is lying, and making fun of her. This shows that while she still misses Odysseus, she has been without him for so long that she almost doesn't want to believe that he is finally home. This can also be seen when she first meets him and does not embrace him or kiss him, a contrast to Telemachus' return, instead she sits opposite him trying to figure out if it really is Odysseus. This shows Penelope's optimistic side, especially when she decides to test if it really is Odysseus by saying that their marriage bed has been moved, to which Odysseus replies that it would be almost impossible to move. After his replies, she finally bursts into tears and embraces Odysseus after he passed her "test".

At the beginning of the poem, we see Penelope in a difficult situation. She is heartbroken seeing her household being overrun by the Suitors, with her husband gone and her son powerless to stop them, she must contemplate the possibility that Odysseus is not coming back and she will have to marry one of the Suitors – something she has avoided for many years. A notable example is the Shroud of Laertes where Penelope promises that after she finishes a burial shroud she will remarry; however she spends the nights undoing her work, resulting in a delay of four years before the Suitors eventually find out. This aids in the plot development as it buys her some time before she must choose which, in turn allows more time for Odysseus to return.

Penelope's decision to test Odysseus (23: 178-81) is also a key role she plays in the development of the plot. The marriage bed test also relates back to the Shroud of Laertes and the stringing of the bow as it shows her as a resourceful and cunning woman, not just a frail and fragile woman which is portrayed through her almost constant crying when she goes to bed, for example. These tests allow Penelope to control the direction of the plot and allow her to manipulate the men around her. The plot's development is key to these tests as if she never thought of the shroud,

then she would have four less years until she had to remarry and the bed is also key to the plot as it allows her to truly find out if the man was Odysseus and then they can be reunited, which is really the purpose of the story – for Odysseus to return home and be with his family.

The stringing of the bow test is also a crucial part in the development of the plot and tells us something about Penelope's character. The creation of this contest shows that she has possibly come to terms that Odysseus is not coming back and that she is now planning on who she is going to remarry. The fact that she 'burst into tears and wept aloud as she drew out her husband's bow' (21: 55-56) suggests that she feels guilty for setting up this task and is symbolic that her future husband will be decided with her current husband's bow. Despite this, it could be argued that Penelope knew or hoped that Odysseus is already back, and that the bow and arrow test is created in the belief that he will pick up the bow and be successful. Either way, the stringing of the bow is a crucial part in the development of the story as it allows Odysseus to reveal himself as Odysseus and vanquish the Suitors from his household.

To conclude, Penelope is one of few characters in *The Odyssey* who has the ability to effect the development of the poem's plot. She is a smart and resourceful woman which allowed her to keep the Suitors advances at bay. She is also a caring mother and her decision, or lack of, to not seek the return of Telemachus from his journey, allows him to mature and come of age. Her ability to test and trial the men of *The Odyssey* such as the stringing of the bow, and the marriage bed show that she is not only a character to feel sorry for, but a character set firmly in the development of the poem's plot.



