

Unit 1 Topic 4

Assignment 1

"How do Books 1-4 of the Odyssey prepare us for the introduction of the hero Odysseus in Book 5?"

Books 1-4 of the Odyssey (the Telemachy) contain much information on the character and reputation of Odysseus given in the opinions of the other characters, as well as setting out the situation in Ithaka, and the problems that Odysseus will face on his return. There remains, however, the possibility that the Odyssey as we know it is actually two poems: one of the Nostoi specifically relating to Odysseus, and another centring on his son, Telemachos, the two being joined at the start of Book 5.

The reader actually knows quite a lot about Odysseus before he finally appears in person in Book 5, thanks to the reminiscences of the other characters. This makes his first appearance, "breaking his heart in tears, lamentation and sorrow", on the beach of Kalypso's island, all the more surprising. Quite a pathetic image, rather than the glorious hero we had been expecting. The Books of the Telemachy also help to establish Odysseus as the one person who, due to all the excellent qualities we have heard about, can save Ithaka from ruin by the suitors. They include descriptions of Odysseus' kingdom and family, which help to provide the key element that would be lacking if the story began at Book 5: Odysseus' motive for returning home. Odysseus is willing to forego many things that other people would consider as blessings (for example, life with Kalypso or Circe), in order to return to his home and family.

As well as introducing the main character, the Telemachy also introduces certain themes that run throughout the book. Notable, how a household or kingdom goes down hill in the absence of a good patriarch, as Athene says "How great your need is of the absent Odysseus". Also, the rewards of fidelity/unfaithfulness, as exemplified by Penelope, Helen and Klytaimnestra, and the question, central to Odysseus' predicament, of whether human misfortune is caused by the gods or whether people are "destroyed by their own wild recklessness". The way this question is addressed prepares the reader for the way in which Odysseus' story will be handled, unlike the Iliad which is a dark tragedy, the story of Odysseus will be treated as a comedy (in the traditional sense). In this story the gods that abound are more like good or bad fairies in children's stories, than the pitiless and capricious deities or the shady image of Necessity, which

haunt the previous epic. It is established early on that while people may have their problems with the gods, they will not be quite the inescapable malign influences that they were in Troy, and things will end "happily ever after" even if Homer has to remove the old ending of the story, with Odysseus exiled and killed by his own son, to get his characters there.

If, as seems likely, the Telemachy was added to the Odyssey as a handy way to get the story rolling, we have to accept that it was done for a reason. The Telemachy provides a connection to this Iliad with the inclusion of several characters from the other poem, while showing that the Odyssey is going to have a different tone to the Iliad. It gives us an introduction to the situation on Ithaka and to Odysseus' family, and, perhaps most importantly, introduces us to Odysseus himself.