

### **How important is Book 11 to the overall meaning of The Odyssey?**

The overall significance of Book 11 to the epic is that it shows how things change over time (Anticleia's death, the suitors at his home), which can be missed if someone is not around. It also shows us that the Ancient Greeks believe in destiny and intervention from the gods. The sacrifices and prayers from Odysseus and the attention he pays to Teiresias about returning to Ithaca show this. If he did not pay attention to Teiresias he may have done something to displease the gods (such as killing the 'Sun-gods' cattle and sheep). This could have led to intervention from the gods to prevent Odysseus and his men from returning to their home. Book 11 also shows that they believed greatly in the afterlife, but unlike modern religions they believed that everyone went to Hades (Hell), with the exception of those souls who were left to wander the earth for all eternity. The afterlife was always thought to be a lot darker and bleaker than people now seem to think.

It is Circe who tells Odysseus of the trip which he and his men must take. He then has to tell all of his men. All of them are very distraught when they first find out that they must travel to the ends of the earth. They know it is going to be a journey of many perils. This is why Homer describes the men as 'heart-broken' telling us 'They sat down where they were and wept and tore their hair. But their lamentations achieved nothing.' (Book 10, lines 566-568.) This shows that they are greatly disheartened by the news, having thought that their next voyage would take them back to their homeland. They know that there is nothing that they can do to avoid this risk filled journey, which makes it an even more arduous a task for them.

It is probable that the men were aware that their end was fast approaching. Any journey to Hades made by a living mortal is going to be dangerous. It would only usually be made by the souls of the dead, who would not need to sail, as Odysseus and his men did. This would have most likely made the men think that they would not complete their trip to Hades or would not return from it. At this point of the voyage I don't think that anyone, with the probable exception of Odysseus, expects to see Ithaca or their family again. It is more likely that knowing they are heading for Hades, they think they are unlikely to leave again.

When they reached 'the furthest parts of the deep-flowing River of Ocean' Odysseus was very ritualistic in his sacrifices. He was very deliberate and precise in the order in which he poured the liquids for the dead, following precisely the instructions given by Circe. '...first with a mixture of honey and milk, then with sweet wine, and last of all with water. Overall this I sprinkled some white barley, and then began my prayers to the insubstantial presence's of the dead,...' (Book 11, lines 26-29.) Once the sacrifices had been made, and the sheep's blood drained into the trench, '...the souls of the dead came swarming up from Erebus -...' (Book 11, lines 33-34), just as Circe had warned. As Odysseus' men 'flayed the sheep', he had his sword drawn to keep away all of the other souls until he spoke with Teiresias. However, in the horde of souls was Elpenor, who had been one of Odysseus' men. He had died on Circe's isle, Aeaea, where he had fallen headfirst and broken his neck. Odysseus promises to go back to Aeaea to bury Elpenor so that he is not left '...unburied and unwept, in case I bring down the gods' curse on you.' (Book 11, lines 73-74.) It was not thought noble to be left unburied and unwept for; this was likely to be frowned upon. The only way that Elpenor would have been able to cross the river Styx into Hades would have been

to have a coin placed underneath his tongue to pay Charon, the ferryman. Next to approach Odysseus was his mother, Anticleia, but before speaking with her he questioned Teiresias. (He was told by Circe not to speak to anyone else before Teiresias. I think that it is a great shock to Odysseus to see his mother.

He questions Teiresias first to get the answers that he came to Hades for, and needs to get back home, but also it is possible that he does this to avoid the actualisation that his mother will not be there to greet him on his return to Ithaca. By postponing talking with her it is almost as if he is trying to delude himself that she isn't really dead.

This series of events adds in extra components to the poem. As well as bringing in Elpenor, who at this point is still awaiting burial, it brings in Anticleia, the doting mother who had been awaiting Odysseus' return for many years. It brings home just how much Odysseus has missed over the years, hearing of Telemachus, Penelope and dilemma with the suitors, as well as his father living alone and in poverty with old age approaching.

The writing here is vivid, giving the reader/listener a strong image of what Odysseus is seeing himself. '...if only you have the strength of will to control your men's appetites and you own from the moment when your good ship leaves the deep blue sea and approaches the isle of Thrinacie. There you will find at their pasture the cattle and fat flock of the Sun-god,...If you leave them untouched and fix your mind on returning home, there is some chance that all of you may yet reach Ithaca, though not without suffering.' (Book 11, lines 104-112.) To me this conjures up a picture of hungry men on a ship, sailing past a luscious island where they can see cows and fat sheep. I imagine them staring at the animals, thinking of what a feast they would make for them, but having to continue on past them, miserable through hunger, to make their way to Ithaca.

The significance of Odysseus' encounter with Elpenor is to show more foolishness from Odysseus' men. Not only are they dying because of war or the gods or beings such as the Cyclops or the Laestrygonian's, but their own thoughtlessness is also resulting in their deaths. Elpenor was foolhardy, as he did not use the ladder to climb down from Circe's roof. Even though he was drunk he could have used the ladder, if not so foolish, and would have been less likely to die.

Teiresias is important to the epic as he is telling Odysseus how best to get home. As he is a prophet he knows what is destined to happen. He warns him that Poseidon is watching everything that happens on earth 'For I cannot think that you will escape the attention of the Earthshaker, who still nurses resentment against you in his heart, enraged that you blinded his beloved son.' (Book 11, lines 101-103.)

When Odysseus speaks with Anticleia he finds out about his family and what has been happening with them while he has been away. As well as several years trying to get home he was at war in Troy for nine years previous to this, so he has missed his son growing up, his last years with his adoring mother, and at this point he quite possibly thinks that he will not see his father again either. She also tells him of the suitors who are pilfering his animals and food, and are trying to gain Penelope's hand in marriage. When he is so far from all of this, I think it may be a small comfort that he still has

Penelope to return to. Odysseus knows that at least his wife never gave up hope of his return. Had he not spoken with his mother he would have been left completely unaware of the goings on in Ithaca. However, this could be a good thing, as now has the knowledge of the suitor ransacking his home to be anxious about, which he would not have been, had he not been told of this.

These encounters are used by Homer to make us feel for Odysseus, who has put up with so much on his journey. Bringing in Elpenor shows us how his men have added to his problems in their behaviour and their actions. They have also been known not to listen when Odysseus had suggested it was safer to leave places. With Teiresias it is to let him know how to get home, and to acknowledge Poseidon's wrath, and Anticleia is to let us know all that he has missed over the long years, which we can now see have been painful for his family as well as for Odysseus.

The significance of Odysseus' meetings with the shadows of the women is a reminder to us of the various women who have influenced his life and the lives of others in the poem. The women who they are similar to, in various different ways, have all had some relation to Odysseus and the situations that we find him in in the epic.

Like Odysseus, Antiope was a wanderer. After becoming pregnant to Zeus (who was in the guise of a satyr when he made love to her), she fled her home in Thebes, and found herself in Sicyon. Here she married King Epopeus, and it is thought that she may have been kidnapped by him (as Helen was by Paris). Subsequently her husband killed her father after he went to save her. To take revenge for his brother's death, Antiope's uncle, Lycus, then came for her. With her husband himself dead, the new king gave Antiope back to her family and she returned to Thebes. On her return she was imprisoned and abused by her aunt, Dirce. (Odysseus was imprisoned on Calypso's island, and had no means of escape until she gave him tools to build a raft, though this all happens after leaving Hades.)

A similar character to Clytemnestra, Eriphyle sends her husband, Amphiaraus, with the seven against Thebes, which she knew was a journey from which he would never return. She was also later persuaded to send her sons, Alcmeon and Amphilocheus on the dangerous journey of Epigoni against Thebes, but on his return (as Clytemnestra's children took vengeance on her), Alcmeon killed his mother. Eriphyle is in Book 11 to show the downfall of the adulterous Clytemnestra, and possibly to show how lucky Odysseus is to have a wife as devoted as Penelope.

The daughter of Erechtheus, Procris married Cephalus. Her husband was kidnapped by Eos (Dawn), who had fallen in love with him (as Calypso did with Odysseus). However, Procris was Cephalus' great love, and he was returned to her (as Odysseus finally returns to Penelope). As with Odysseus, Cephalus' appearance is changed by goddess so that he can find if his wife has been faithful. I think this is almost a warning to Odysseus of what is to come, and that is the relevance of his meeting with Procris.

Megara, the wife of Heracles, was a 'prize of war'. This mirrors Cassandra who was 'won' by Agamemnon. But on the other hand she also has something in common with Clytemnestra, were as Agamemnon murdered their daughter Iphigenia, Heracles killed his and Megara's children. I think this is used to reference Cassandra's

prophecies and also to take you back before the Trojan War when Iphigenia was 'sacrificed' by her father.

Odysseus' meetings with the souls of the dead heroes are significant in different ways. When he sees Agamemnon he looks sorrowful, and has around him the souls of those who died with him in Aegisthus' palace. When he recognises Odysseus, Agamemnon bursts into tears and tries to reach out to him. Being once a strong man, it is now said of Agamemnon 'all the strength and vigour had gone for ever from those once supple limbs.' (Line 393.) At this sight Odysseus is also 'moved to tears'.

At first Odysseus believes that Agamemnon died either on his way home or an aggressive tribe attacked him. I think he must have been shocked to find that the treacherous Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murdered him and his men. Farming links are made again, here comparing Agamemnon's death to that of an ox cut down by a man as it stands by its manger. His men 'like white-tusked swine slaughtered in the mansion of some rich and powerful lord, for a wedding, or a banquet, or a sumptuous private feast.' (Lines 413-415.) This is most likely in reference to Circe's enchantment of Odysseus' men. The various farm related references are possibly used to show that these fierce and mighty leaders are still humble. It is known that Odysseus kept animals, which the suitors ate, at his home in Ithaca.

A curse on the House of Atreus is held responsible for all that happened in Aegisthus' palace, as Zeus is 'a relentless foe'. However, they say that he works through women, as so many men died trying to save Helen, and then Clytemnestra formulates a wicked plot against her husband that results in many more deaths.

After telling him that a man should never be too trusting of their wives, Odysseus is told 'Not that *your* wife, Odysseus will ever murder you.' (Lines 444-445.), and also that she is 'far too loyal to her thoughts and feelings.' This would have been reassuring to Odysseus, and also to those hearing the story.

Having come to Hades for answers himself, Odysseus is quite annoyed at Agamemnon for asking if his son is alive. This is understandable as he is trying to get home, and Agamemnon would surely have seen his son in Hades if he had died.

We find Heracles holding a 'naked bow' and an arrow as though about to shoot. He is wearing a golden belt as a baldric (hanging over his shoulder). It has scenes of 'conflict and battle, bloodshed and the massacre of men. That baldric was a masterpiece that no one should have made.' (Lines 612-614.) He explains that he was set tasks that were thought too challenging to complete, but he achieved them all. This would give Odysseus encouragement and confidence that he would be able to get home, perhaps with a little help from the gods. If Heracles can take the Hound of Hell from Hades, this must give him belief that he may get home again.

Other heroes that Odysseus met included Peleus, who, as Laertes, is the father of a hero (Achilles). He also had adventures, like Odysseus, when he sailed with the Argonauts. Antilochus was the eldest son of Nestor and a friend of Achilles. King Memnon killed him at Troy when he rushed to help his father. Ajax was son of Telamon (who was a friend of Heracles). He felt bitter towards Odysseus as he beat him in the contest for the arms of Achilles, and even after death he did not forget this and does not speak to Odysseus. The half mortal, half god Achilles is told by

Odysseus that he is lucky because when he was on earth he was worshipped as a god, and now that he is in Hades he has great power among the dead. Odysseus also adds 'Do not grieve at your death, Achilles.' (Line 486.), but Achilles tells him not to make light of it as he would rather be a peasant on earth than 'King of the lifeless dead.' (Line 491.) This warns Odysseus not to take his life for granted.

The encounters add to our enjoyment of the text, as they not only return us to thoughts of characters who are not on the voyage with Odysseus, but they also refresh our memories of other relevant occurrences earlier in the poem. With it being an epic this is something that can be needed from time to time so that you do not forget about anything or anyone significant to the plot. As these meetings occur in Hades, it gives a darker feel to this section of the text, and I think that it is a time when Odysseus and the men think more about what their futures hold.

The interlude in the poem would have possibly allowed the Muse of Homers time to have a break himself, or to retire for the evening concluding the poem the next day. At the beginning of the interlude Odysseus tells Alcinous and Arete, et al, 'My journey home is in the gods' hands and yours.' (Line 333.) This shows them that he is willing to do as they please in order that they aid him in his voyage home.

Arete suggests more presents for Odysseus to her guests, asking them to be generous, as they all have the means to be. Alcinous understands that Odysseus wishes to return to Ithaca, but urges him on with the story with bribery 'But our guest, longing to return home, must make up his mind to stay till tomorrow, to give me time to add to my gifts.' (Lines 349-351.) Odysseus, 'the master-schemer', tells Alcinous 'I would be happy if you pressed me to stay among you even for a year, as long as you saw me safely back and loaded me with splendid gifts.' (Lines 355-357.) To me this is saying 'I'm quite happy here among your people, being given many gifts, and I would stay longer.' This is not just down to greed, but would also be a sign of Alcinous' status when Odysseus got home and told everyone how generous he was. This would bring even greater respect and the possibility of more trade for him.

Alcinous takes these words as Odysseus mistakenly thinking that they believe him a fake 'we are far from regarding you as one of those impostors and cheats whom this dark world brings forth in such profusion to spin their lying yarns which nobody can test.' (Lines, 364-366.) This too is a possibility, as Odysseus has no proof of what he is saying, and that could be another reason he has offered to stay up to a year. Alcinous then asks Odysseus to continue, as he has 'the artistry of a bard.' (Line 369.), asking more of his friends, their expedition to Ilium and their deaths, saying 'We have endless time ahead of us tonight, it's early for us to go to our beds.' (Lines 373-374.) Odysseus agrees to continue the tale, but does imply he is tired, saying that there is also time for sleep.

I think that Homer sees humankind as chess pieces, which the gods or destiny are playing with. From the prophecies made, and what we know to happen after them, it seems that occurrences in the poem have been pre-destined. I think in The Odyssey Homer sees humans as insignificant overall. They have little influence over their lives; the gods decide what will happen with them. The lives of mortals seem to be a game for the gods, where they all want their character to win. Athene wants Odysseus to win, but Poseidon does not.