The Odyssey – Guided Questions (used for class discussions)

Book 1 Discussion Questions:

1. What does xenia look like in Ithaca? Who extends it? Who abuses it?
2. Characterize Telemachus. How does he change over the course of Book One?
3. What is the significance of the earlier narrative drift on Orestes?
4. What archetypal role does Athena play?
5. Characterize Penelope as a wife and mother.
6. Characterize the suitors, Antinous & Eurymachus.
7. Where do we see irony? kleos? nostos?
8. How can we tell this is an oral (storytelling) culture?

Book 5 Discussion Questions:

1. What is the role of gods in Odysseus’ fate? (How is Odysseus fated to return home? Does Book 5 suggest that his fate could be avoided or changed?)
2. How is Calypso characterized in Book Five? Look at her physical description, her words, & her actions. (Consider: How does the description of her home enhance her initial characterization?) How do epithets characterize her?
3. How would you rate Calypso’s xenia?
4. Putting aside epic hero traits, how is Odysseus characterized as a man? As a husband?
5. What epic hero traits does Odysseus exhibit?
6. How do the concepts of kleos and nostos apply in Book Five?
7. What epic similes did you find? What is being compared? What is the significance of the comparison?

Book 8 Discussion Questions:

1. How important is xenia to the Phaeacians? In what various ways is it demonstrated?
2. What do the names of the champions in the athletic contest say about the Phaeacian culture?
3. What do we learn from the narrative drift in Book 8?
4. If you didn’t know that Greece was a heavily oral culture, how would you be able to tell based on Book 8?
5. What is the significance of each of the three songs sung by the bard in Book 8?
6. What do we learn from the epic simile in Book 8?
7. What epic hero traits does Odysseus exhibit in Book 8?
**Book 9 Discussion Questions:**

1. According to Odysseus as he opens his tale, who is to blame for his delay in returning home?
2. At Ismarus, what tragedies befall Odysseus and who/what is to blame? How many men are lost?
3. How would you rate Odysseus as a leader in the Ismarus episode? Why?
4. Among the Lotus Eaters, what delays their journey and who/what is to blame?
5. How would you rate Odysseus as a leader in the Lotus Eaters episode? Why?
6. At the beginning of the Polyphemus episode, how does Odysseus characterize the cyclops and their society? What archetype does this fit?
7. What is the narrative drift and what is its purpose in this episode?
8. What is the role of xenia as it applies to the episode with Polyphemus?
9. In the Polyphemus episode, what roles do gods, monsters, temptations or hubris play in the difficulties Odysseus faces?
10. Who demonstrates metis and what is the result?
11. What is being compared in the epic similes, and what is the effect?
12. Explain the ironies in the Polyphemus episode.
13. How would you rate Odysseus as a leader in the Polyphemus episode? Why?

**Book 10 Discussion Questions:**

1. How would you characterize the xenia of the Aeolians?
2. After leaving the Aeolians, how is Odysseus’ journey hindered and who/what shares the blame?
3. How does their return to Aeolia increase their pain?
4. Based on the diction describing Telepylus, what does Odysseus notice that the other ships do not?
5. How do imagery and similes heighten the scene of disaster at Telepylus?
6. Who/what is to blame for the tragedy that befalls Odysseus’ crew at Telepylus? How many are lost?
7. After they land on Aeaea, characterize Odysseus initially as a leader.
8. Who/what is to blame for the problems that befall Odysseus’ men at Aeaea?
9. Once his men are in danger, how is Odysseus able to save them? (What skills/methods does he employ?)
10. What is compared in the epic simile and what is the significance of the comparison?
11. Characterize Eurylochus. What aspect of Odysseus’ character can be seen through their conflict?
12. What ultimately is the cost of landing on Aeaea? Who/what is to blame?
13. Why must Odysseus go to the Underworld before he can continue his homeward journey?
14. What specific instructions must Odysseus follow in the Underworld? (p. 246-7)
15. Who/what is to blame for Elpenor’s death?
• **Encounter with Elpenor**
  - What Greek cultural concept does this encounter reflect?
  - Which motif is emphasized: recklessness, temptation, monsters, gods, **hubris**?
• **Encounter with Tiresias**
  - What archetype does Tiresias fit?
  - The Prophecy
  - What does it echo?
  - What will the rest of Odysseus’s journey involve?
  - What must he do?
  - What, essentially, does Tiresias warn against?
• **Encounter with Anticleia**
  - What can we conclude about the relationship between Odysseus and Anticleia?
  - How does this encounter characterize Odysseus? Think about epic hero characteristics.
• What purpose does the **Intermezzo** on pages 260-262 serve? What does it remind us about the Greek culture?
• **Encounter with Agamemnon**
  - How does Agamemnon’s state now contrast with his state when Odysseus last saw him? Why is this important?
  - Upon whom does Agamemnon lay blame? What does this suggest about the Greek society?
  - What is the significance of his advice for Odysseus?
• **Encounter with Achilles**
  - In *The Iliad*, Achilles was given the choice between a long life with no **kleos**, or a short life with **kleos**. He chose the latter.
  - Now that he’s in the Underworld, What does Achilles say about **nostos** and **kleos**?
  - How might this relate to the rest of the epic?
• **Encounter with Ajax**
  - What can be learned from the end note about the source of Ajax’s anger toward Odysseus?
Book 12 Discussion Questions:

- **Circe’s instructions**
  - What specific advice does Circe give regarding the Sirens, choosing between Scylla and Charybdis, and the Sungod’s cattle?
  - How do Circe’s instructions relate Tiresias's prophecy?
- **The Sirens**
  - Given Circe’s advice, how should we judge Odysseus’s actions?
  - What metaphorical meaning can be derived from Odysseus’s response to risk?
  - What is being compared in the epic simile? What is the significance?
  - What motif applies here? What is the cost?
  - What metaphorical lesson about making difficult decisions?
- **Scylla & Charybdis**
  - Evaluate Odysseus’s leadership based on this event.
  - Based on Odysseus being “caught between a rock and a hard place” (a whirlpool and a six-headed, man-eating monster), what is the metaphorical lesson about making difficult decisions?
- **Thrinacia – Helio’s Cattle**
  - What role does Eurylochus play here? Explain his rationale.
  - What is significant about the imagery of the cattle?
  - Metaphorically, what does this teach regarding respect for authority and law?
  - What can we learn about the Greeks’ perception of the relationship between the individual and law/authority?
  - Evaluate Odysseus’s leadership based on this event.
  - Which motif applies and what is the cost of this episode?