***The Odyssey***

**Date:** 700 B.C.,
**Author:** Homer
**From:** *The Odyssey*, Bloom's Guides.

Menelaus narrates his own story: Being too scant in sacrifices to the gods, he was detained in Egypt. Becalmed and starving, he asks advice of Eidothea, who is the daughter of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea. She explains how to subdue and question her father, who knows all things. From Proteus Menalaus hears of the *nostoi* of other heroes. Ajax arrogantly taunted the sea, and was crushed by Proseidon's violent waters. *Hubris* against the gods incurred disaster. Menelaus first learns of the death of his brother, Agamemnon, whom treacherous Aegisthus tricked: he lay out a feast when the great king returned, only foully to do him in, "like an ox felled at the trough." The simile captures the indignity of this death, which does not befit so great a hero as Agamemnon. Proteus then tells of Odysseus, marooned at sea, detained by the goddess Calypso.

Odysseus answers Eumaeus' questions about his birth with the second "Cretan tale," the second in a series of fabricated histories with which Odysseus disguises himself on Ithaca. He claims he was born of Hylax, on Crete. He was a warrior, "no coward in battle," who fought for nine years at Troy. After Troy he made a profiteering and piratical excursion to Egypt. There, the "insolence" (*hubris*) of his crew rouses the Egyptians to attack them, and they are destroyed. He begs in supplication to the Egyptian king, who pities him and takes him in. He stays in Egypt for seven years. Then a deceitful Phoenician beguiles him into boarding a ship with the object of selling him to slavery. Zeus destroys the ship with a thunderbolt, and the nameless Cretan drifts to the Thesprotians, who had entertained Odysseus. It was from the Thesprotians, the nameless beggar tells Eumaeus, that he learned that Odysseus was alive and had consulted an oracle at Dodona about whether to come home openly or in secret. This second Cretan Tale exhibits elements of the true tale of Odysseus: the timeframe is identical, he warred at Troy, sojourned somewhere seven years, somewhere else one year, and was destroyed by the *hubris* of his crew. Truth and falsehood blend indistinctly.

Bloom, Harold, ed. "*The Odyssey*." *The Odyssey*, Bloom's Guides. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 4 Nov. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGTBJTO040&SingleRecord=True>.

## identity in *The Odyssey*

**From:** *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*.

*The Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus, "the man of twists and turns" (77). His identity—who Odysseus is—is a central [theme](http://www.fofweb.com/Lit/MainDetailPrint.asp?iPin=Gfflithem0832) in the poem. He is at once a "raider of cities" (192), "the man of many struggles" (184), and "the great teller of tales" (211). While Aeolus calls him "most cursed" and his dead mother says he is the "unluckiest man alive," he is also a great hero who uses his cunning to escape from a series of dangers (232, 256).

Although *The Odyssey* is the tale of Odysseus and his wanderings after the Trojan War, it is not until the fifth book that Odysseus himself appears. The first four books focus instead on his son, Telemachus, who was only a month old when Odysseus sailed for Troy. Now 20 years old, it is his identity that is at issue at the beginning of the poem. Is he ready to become a man, worthy of great Odysseus? After a meeting of the gods, Athena comes down from Mount Olympus to inspire Telemachus to action. The poem is filled with numerous disguises and attempts to hide one's true identity. Athena disguises herself as a stranger, a man named Mentes. Telemachus welcomes the man warmly, questioning who he is, where he is from, and who his parents are. Asked about his own identity, Telemachus is doubtful. He names Odysseus as his father, but then wonders, "Who, on his own, has ever really known who gave him life?" (84). But later when he tells the suitors about Mentes, he has an insight worthy of his father—"deep in his mind he knew the immortal goddess" (91). Athena disguises herself as Telemachus, gathering a crew and securing a ship so that the young prince can seek news of his father's fate. Telemachus travels to Menelaus and Helen, key figures from Homer's *Iliad*, both of whom recognize Telemachus as Odysseus's son before he reveals himself. Helen tells the story of how Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, infiltrated Troy, and she alone recognized him.

Odysseus himself is often slow to reveal his identity. When questioned by Queen Arete, he spins his tale slowly, not revealing his identity until a [muse](http://www.fofweb.com/Lit/MainDetailPrint.asp?iPin=Gfflithem0524) sings the story of the Trojan horse (another of Odysseus's cunning exploits). Finally he makes himself plain, saying "I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world for every kind of craft—my fame has reached the skies" (212). He recounts to Arete the tale of his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus. When the Cyclops first asks who they are, Odysseus wisely answers "Men of Achaea" (219). Polyphemus asks again as he drinks Odysseus's wine and devours his men, and this time Odysseus replies "Nobody" (223). After Odysseus blinds the Cyclops, Polyphemus calls for help and says "Nobody's killing me now" (224). The other giants refuse to help him, and Odysseus's ruse leads to his triumphant escape. But in his [hubris](http://www.fofweb.com/Lit/MainDetailPrint.asp?iPin=Gfflithem0391) Odysseus taunts the Cyclops as they sail away, revealing his true identity. Polyphemus's curse on Odysseus causes years more of wandering and suffering.

Odysseus's return to Ithaca is a series of disguises, ploys, and careful tests of identity. He pretends to be a foreigner, but he meets Athena, who knows the truth. She counsels him not to reveal himself to anyone (advice that hardly seems necessary, given how cautious Odysseus is). Odysseus meets his swineherd, and says he is from Crete. He talks with Telemachus, at which point Athena tells him to reveal himself. Telemachus refuses to believe at first, but finally recognizes his father. Odysseus urges Telemachus to say nothing, "if you are my own true son, born of my blood" (348). Faithful servants recognize him, though. His old hound Argos leaps with joy—and drops dead on the spot. His old maid recognizes his scar when bathing him. Odysseus tests his father when he meets him, then embraces him. Even Laertes asks for "some proof" that Odysseus is who he claims, so Odysseus reveals his scar (478). Odysseus is revealed to the suitors through the test of the great bow. None can string it, let alone fire an arrow through the axes. Odysseus strings it, fires it true, and he and Telemachus slay the suitors. The most significant drama of recognition is between Odysseus and Penelope. He tests her, she tests him, both sounding out the other's true feelings. She says that they have "secret signs" known only to each other, particularly the secret of their marital bed (459). His knowledge of it proves his true identity, and at last husband and wife are reunited.

####  Citation InformationMLAChicago Manual of Style

Ford, James. "Identity in *The Odyssey*." McClinton-Temple, Jennifer ed.*Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2011.*Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 4 Nov. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=ETL0577&SingleRecord=True>.

## *Odyssey* 9–12: The Wanderings

**From:** *Bloom's How to Write about Homer*

1. ***Xenia*** **("hospitality"):** Is Odysseus a good guest?

Among the Phaeacians, Odysseus is careful not to compete against Laodamas, the son of his host Alcinous, when the games are under way. He also eventually tells them his real name, as is proper for a guest. Still, he wheedles as much booty out of the Phaeacians as he can. He also accepts the offer of a convoy even after learning of the prophecy that one day Poseidon (the very god who he knows is angry with him) will destroy a Phaeacian ship and ring the whole place about with an isolating mountain in anger over their conveying "someone" over the sea. As Ahl and Roisman write, "The most terrifyingly consistent feature of Odysseusin the *Odyssey* is his ability to bring death and destruction, not life and new hope, upon everything he is associated with" (129).

As for the Cyclops, it was a strange or bold *xenia* for Odysseus and his men to enter the cave of their host before he got home (presumptuous, intrusive, hubristic behavior that suggests or mirrors that of the suitors) and begin eating his cheeses and sacrificing his animals, expecting to get a guest gift in addition to what they had already stolen. It is the savagery of the Cyclops's behavior—his brutal eating of three pairs of men, and hishubristic contempt for Zeus Xenias who presides over hospitality—that shocks us out of our awareness of this problem. Odysseus is more frank about the sheer imprudence of his confrontation with the Cyclops—it is the one time when his companions were right and he was wrong—but he is more interested in celebrating the cleverness with which he overcame Polyphemus than lamenting the foolishness (let alone the injustice) of his approach and of his disastrously boastful retreat. As if mirroring the Cyclops's hubris about Zeus near the beginning of the episode, Odysseusspeaks hubristically of Poseidon near its end: "not even the Earthshaker will be able to heal your eye … "
2. **Excessive eating and drinking:** Is wine a weapon in the *Odyssey?*

Another way to think of hubris is as "asking for trouble." The Cyclops does this not only by drinking too much wine but by drinking it full strength. Elsewhere we are told that this wine was to be mixed in a ratio of one part wine to 20 parts water. We also learn from Odysseus where he got the wine. It was not stolen outright from the Cicones; rather, Odysseuswas given it as a gift by Maro, a Ciconian priest of Apollo, as a gesture of appreciation for sparing his life. Yet the result was that Odysseus's men got drunk, ignored their commander's plea for an immediate departure, and stayed long enough to be seriously assaulted by the Cicones and their allies. Odysseus says he lost "six men per ship," which is a somewhat euphemistic way of saying that because he accepted the gift of the wine, seventy-two of his men were killed. The mistake certainly was not sparing the lives of Apollo's priest and his family—the plague in *Iliad* book I was surely a memorable lesson against threatening Apollo's priests and their families—but accepting the wine. Had he spared Maro and refused the wine, he would have been empty-handed with regard to that particular family (though there was plenty of livestock stolen from other Cicones), rather like Agamemnon after he had to return Chryses's daughter without any ransom; this could have been achieved without the harm that Agamemnon incurred in the form of the plague, and that Odysseusincurred in the form of the drunken crew and the counterattack. Odysseusthen uses the wine as a weapon against the Cyclops, much as Maro had used it against him. Now he offends not Apollo but Poseidon.

Hecht, Jamey. "*Odyssey* 9–12: The Wanderings." *Bloom's How to Write about Homer*. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2010. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 4 Nov. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=HTWAH011&SingleRecord=True>.