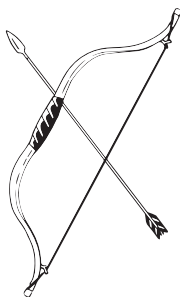


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

The ODYSSEY



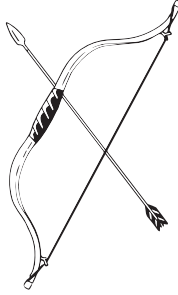
Dr. Louis Markos

*For Miguel Estrada,
mi amigo del alma*



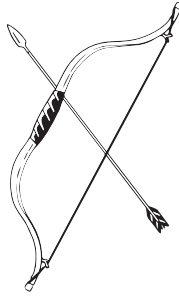
CONTENTS

Introduction	I
The World Around	3
About the Author	5
What Other Notables Said	7
Plot Summary, Setting, and Characters	9
Worldview Analysis	13
Quotables	23
21 Significant Questions and Answers	27
Further Discussion and Review	37
Taking the Classics Quiz	41



INTRODUCTION

If the *Iliad* is the first tragedy ever written, then the *Odyssey* is the first comedy. Whereas the first gives us man the warrior, seeking glory on the battlefield, the second gives us man the husband and father, seeking domestic bliss with his family. The first values strength and prowess; the second wit and perseverance. The first takes place in a world where the dividing line between good and evil is often hard to identify; the second in a world where virtue and vice are more defined.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

The reader who moves from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey* should notice immediately that the *Odyssey* takes place in a far more ethical world where the distinctions between good and evil are clearer for both the characters and the reader. Whereas we feel great remorse when Hector, the purported antagonist of the *Iliad*, dies, we feel no sorrow whatsoever when Odysseus kills the suitors.

In the last book of the *Iliad*, Achilles says that Zeus has two urns by his throne: one filled with blessings; the other with curses. When he showers on us the contents of the first, our lives are filled with joy; when the contents of the second rain down on us, our lives are destroyed by suffering and pain. How does Zeus choose which urn to draw from? No one can say; at least from Achilles' point of view, the choice is arbitrary.

In the first book of the *Odyssey*, Zeus himself rejects this point of view: "What a lamentable thing it is that

men should blame the gods and regard *us* as the source of their troubles, when it is their own transgressions which bring them suffering that was not their destiny” (I.32–25).³ Then, to prove his point, he tells the melodramatic story of how Agamemnon was killed by Aegisthus, the lover of his wife, Clytemnestra. Aegisthus was wrong to do this deed, asserts Zeus, and was justly killed by Agamemnon’s son, Orestes.

It is safe to suggest that Homer here agrees with Zeus, for, in telling the story of the family of Agamemnon, he leaves out those parts that muddy the ethical waters. Thus, in the fuller version of the story—later dramatized by the Greek tragedian Aeschylus in his trilogy, the *Orest-eia*—Agamemnon is killed by his wife (not by her lover), and Orestes follows his slaying of Aegisthus by doing the same to his mother. Matricide and wives-killing-husbands make for great tragic dilemmas, but that is not Homer’s focus.

To drive home the ethical worldview around which his epic is constructed, Homer skillfully parallels the Agamemnon-Clytemnestra-Aegisthus-Orestes subplot with his central story of Odysseus, Penelope, the suitors, and Telemachus. The suitors, like Aegisthus, are simple villains, and no taboos are broken when Telemachus, like Orestes, avenges the indignities paid to his father.

3. All quotes from Homer are taken from *The Odyssey*, trans. by E. V. Rieu, rev. by D. C. H. Rieu (London: Penguin, 1991). References from this prose translation will be given in the text by book and line number.