**Literature**

**The Voyage of Odysseus**

**Based on Homer's Odyssey, and retold by Margaret H. Lippert**

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| http://library.thinkquest.org/6339/lit/boat.gif |

**The story of Odysseus** is one of the oldest stories in the world. It was composed three thousand years ago by a Greek poet named Homer. He wrote the Iliad, which is about the Trojan War, and The Odyssey, which was about the voyage of Odysseus from Troy back to Greece. Parts of these long poems were written down, and parts of them were learned by storytellers and told from memory.

Odysseus was the son of the king of Ithaca. Odysseus had not wanted to leave his home, a beautiful island off the coast of Greece. He loved his wife Penelope and their infant son, Telemachus. But King Menelaus of Sparta had needed his help. So Odysseus set sail with other princes and kings of Ancient Greece. They went to Asia Minor to help King Menelaus recapture his wife, Helen, who had been abducted by Paris, a young prince of Troy. This was the beginning of the Trojan War.

For twenty long years Telemachus and his mother have waited for Odysseus to return. The Trojan War has been over for ten years, but still Odysseus has not come home. Telemachus decided to embark on his own voyage, to seek news of his father.

Telemachus stood before King Menelaus, the ruler of Sparta. He wanted, more than he had ever wanted anything, to hear that his father was still alive. But he was afraid that he would be told that his father was dead. He suddenly realized that King Menelaus had addressed him, and he tried to reconstruct what he had heard. The king was speaking again. "Telemachus, son of Odysseus, what brings you here?"

"Your Majesty,' Telemachus began, "I seek news of my father. He has not returned home yet from the Trojan War, and I am afraid that he may be dead. The kingdom of Ithaca is in turmoil. My grandfather, Laertes, is too old to rule, and wicked men are trying to seize power." His words were tumbling out rapidly, as he explained the tragedy that had befallen his home. "My mother is besieged by suitors, who in my father's absence, have moved into our palace. Each one wants to marry her, and take for himself what rightfully belongs to us. For years she has put them off, but now they are becoming more impatient and she may soon be forced to choose one of them."

King Menelaus nodded. He understood the disorder of a kingdom without a king.

Telemachus continued. He spoke more slowly now, and his eyes never left the king's gentle face. "Your Majesty, I want my father to come home. I need him, my mother needs him, the kingdom of Ithaca needs him. We wait for him, though we do not know whether he is alive or dead. If you know, tell me. Do not spare me."

"Telemachus, you are truly your father's son. He would be proud of you because you are not afraid to seek the truth. My news is mixed. Your father is alive, but he is being held captive by a nymph named Calypso. Seven years ago she rescued him from a storm; since then she has kept him on her island against his will. All of his companions have perished, his ship was destroyed, and he has no means by which to escape and return home."

In spite of the news that his father was a captive, Telemachus was overjoyed. "If Odysseus is alive there is still hope that he will come home," he said. "I must return to Ithaca to tell my mother." Telemachus left the palace at once. He sprang into the chariot and was off. It would be a long journey, first two days along rocky roads to the coast where his ship was anchored, then a full day of sailing from there to Ithaca, and Telemachus did not want to waste time.

As Telemachus journeyed, the gods gathered for a meeting on Mount Olympus. It was their custom to discuss the events of men, and to interfere when they wished. Each god and goddess had mortal friends and enemies, depending on who had pleased or angered them. Athena had befriended Odysseus, while her uncle Poseidon wanted to destroy him. Athena took advantage of the fact that Poseidon was traveling in Ethiopia. She could discuss Odysseus with Zeus, without Poseidon's interference.

"Father Zeus," said Athena, "Odysseus has suffered long enough. For ten years he fought the Trojan War, in which the Greeks were victorious because he devised the trick for the huge wooden horse. For the next three years he voyaged home, confronting and overcoming numerous hardships. For the past seven years he has remained captive on the island of Calypso. During the long years he was away, Telemachus grew into manhood, a brave son who recently ventured forth to seek news of his father he knew only through stories. I ask you now," pleaded Athena, "to assist Odysseus in returning home."

In Poseidon's absence, Zeus was able to take action for Athena to help Odysseus. He sent Hermes to Calypso with a message that she was to release Odysseus and allow him to return to Ithaca.

Calypso had to obey. Although she would miss Odysseus, she did not want any harm to come to him. Thus she decided to assist him in building a seaworthy raft for his voyage home. Odysseus was overjoyed. Thoughts of his family and of the land he loved flooded over him as he set to work on the boat that would carry his home.

First Calypso showed Odysseus a place on the island where tall, straight trees grew. With an axe that she loaned him, he cut down twenty trees, smoothed them, and fastened them tightly together with wooden pegs. At the stern he built a rudder to guide his craft. Around the perimeter he made a low wall of tightly woven rushes. He set a tall mast in the boat and fashioned a yard-arm for the sail. Calypso presented Odysseus with a sail and with provisions for the voyage: a large skin filled with fresh water, a heavy sack of corn, and some special delicacies that she made for him so that he might enjoy the voyage and remember her friendship. When all was ready, as a parting gift she called fourth a warm gentle wind. He set sail then and turned toward home.

For seventeen days and nights Odysseus sailed, navigating by the sun during the day and by the stars at night. On the morning of the eighteenth day he sighted the shore of Phaeacia which was only a day's sail from Ithaca. Joyfully he looked up to adjust his sails, but was surprised and dismayed to see dark storm clouds gathering overhead. Before long the clouds had thickened and blocked out the light of the sun. The wind freshened, and the waves began rolling over the gunwales. As lightning flashed and thunder roared over the sea, the waves mounted higher and higher.

The storm was the work of Poseidon, who was on his way back from Ethiopia to Mount Olympus when he had spotted Odysseus. Furious that Zeus had arranged for Calypso to free Odysseus, Poseidon was determined to prevent his arrival home. To finish off Odysseus, Poseidon sent a mountainous wave which broke over the boat. Odysseus was washed overboard and was plunged deep into the raging sea. Poseidon continued to Mount Olympus to vent his fury against his brother.

Odysseus struggled to get his head above the water. Finally, his head broke the surface of the sea, and he took huge gulps of air. He looked around for his boat, but it had been torn apart by the force of the mighty waves. The beams once proudly joined for the kingly craft now floated singly on the waves. One bobbed not far from Odysseus, and realizing it was his only hope, he swam toward it. With the little strength he had left, he managed to lock his arms around it so that he could not be dislodged. Totally exhausted from his ordeal, he lay face down on the log, thinking only of his wife and son.

Athena who had been watching and waiting for departure of Poseidon, now calmed the storm winds and sent a strong onshore breeze to carry Odysseus toward Phaeacia. For two days he floated steadily toward land. On the morning of the third day Athena guided him between the jagged rocks that dominated the coast to a safe landing on a sandy beach at the mouth of a river. Odysseus lay on the shore, wet and cold, and realized at once that he must find a warmer place to rest if he still hoped to survive. he staggered up the beach to the woods that came down to the sand, and crawled through the undergrowth until he came to a clearing carpeted with a thick layer of leaves, and fell into a deep sleep.

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| http://library.thinkquest.org/6339/lit/feast.gif | Odysseus was awakened by the sound of voices and peeked through the trees to see a group of young women playing ball by the river. Seeking information that would help him get home, he approached them. One seemed to be the leader, and she told him that her name was Nausicaa. She was the daughter of King Alcinous of Phaeacia. Although she did not know who the stranger was, she realized that he need help. She gave him some food they had brought with them, then took him back to the palace with her.  |

At the palace, King Alinous was told of the arrival of the shipwrecked traveler. He ordered a feast prepared in honor of the visitor, and Odysseus was led to a seat next to the king.

"What a good fortune that you have landed on our shore,"said the king. "You must have marvelous adventures of your travels to relate. But first, tell us your name, where you come from, and whither you are bound."

"You're most gracious, Your Majesty," responded Odysseus, "to welcome a stranger so warmly to your palace. Your kindness is matched by that of your daughter, who assisted me when I was near death, and so saved my life. I hope that I will be as proud of my own son, when I return home, as you must be of your own resourceful daughter. But here I am, thinking of my home, when I still have not told you my name. I am Odysseus."

The King was astonished to be seated by the legendary Odysseus, hero from the Trojan War, and long-lost wayfarer. "You are Odysseus, son of Laertes?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Odysseus, "I am."

"Then you are the rightful King of Ithaca. Your father is too old to rule, and your wife and son bravely await your return. Tomorrow morning you will go in one of my ships to Ithaca. My sailors will see you safely home."

"Thank you. I appreciate both the generous loan of your ship, and the haste with which I may set sail."

"But now," King Alcinous continued, "we have a whole evening before us. Tell us about your journey, your adventures, and your misfortunes. Why has the voyage from Troy to Ithaca, which can be made in five days, taken you years?"

"Telling you the story of my journey is the least I can do to repay your kindness," Odysseus said. "It is a story that begins with twelve proud ships and ends with one survivor. It begins ten long years ago and ends the this morning, on your shore; it covers many lands and many people.

"Ten years ago twelve ships, each carrying fifty sailors, left Troy with me. The wind bore us northward to the land of Cicones, who were allies of the Trojans. We plundered their town so that we might return home with treasure. Then I ordered the men back to the ships so that we could depart before the Cicones had time to retaliate. My men did not heed me. Rather, they lingered to drink wine and make merry. The towns-people then gathered men from the neighboring countryside to join them in attacking us, and before we could get away they had killed six men from each ship.

"We mourned our lost comrades, but gave thanks that we ourselves had been spared. We had not sailed far when a bitter north wind began to roar over the ocean. I ordered the men to lower the sails so they would not be ripped to shreds. For two days we rowed, then on the morning of the third day the storm subsided so that we could raise the sails and be carried again by the wind. With luck we would have rounded Malea and returned home in a day or two, but the wind and current conspired against us and pushed us far off our course.

"For nine days we fought the elements, and on the tenth we came to a strange land. We drew fresh water from a spring, and after our midday meal I sent three men to explore. The men never returned, so I went with several others to seek them. We found them bewitched.They had been given lotus plants to eat, which made them forget who they were. I had to have them carried back to the ship.

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| http://library.thinkquest.org/6339/lit/cyclopes.gif   | "Then we sailed on and came to the land of the Cyclopes, a giant people. They do not cooperate with another as we do. Each family lives in a separate cave and tends a herd of sheep and goats. I decided to go ashore to seek provisions for our voyage. Ordering the other boats to wait for us at sea, I sailed on into the harbor."As soon as we had anchored, I selected twelve of my strongest companions to accompany me. Wishing to take a gift for our hosts, I filled a wineskin with very strong wine. "Above us on the hillside we could see a yawning cavern. We climbed upwards and, seeing no one, entered the cave. At the back of the cave were pans filled with kids and lambs. Bowls and containers of every description lined one side of the cave, and great cheeses were stored on shelves above them. In the center of the floor was a smoldering fire."My companions begged me to take some cheeses and leave immediately, but unfortunately I did not heed their advice. I wanted to address the occupant and request gifts we might take with us.  |

"At twilight we felt the ground begin to shake, and we looked up to see a monstrous giant at the entrance. He was in the form of a man but had only one eye, which was right in the center of his forehead. We shrank back in fear and watched him guide his flocks of sheep and goats into the cave. After rolling a massive stone into the opening of the cave, he sat down to milk the ewes and nanny goats. Then he set half of the milk aside for his supper and curdled the rest to make cheese. When he was finished, he stirred the fire. We had been watching in frozen horror. Then one of us moved. The movement caught his eye, and his voice came thundering toward us: 'Who are you, who dare come uninvited into my home?'

"My men were speechless, but I answered, 'We are voyagers, who have come to ask you for gifts to take back home with us.'

"The giant roared with laughter. 'You ask for gifts of Polyphemus, son of Poseidon? What have you to give me?'

"I brought forth the wine and offered it to him. He took it and greedily drank his fill. 'This gift is good,' he said. 'Tell me your name, and I will give you a gift after all.'

"I answered craftily, 'My name is Nobody.'

"Nobody, my gift to you is that I will eat you last,' he laughed and at once he picked up two of my men. before we could rescue them, he swallowed them whole, washed down by the milk he had saved.

"The rest of us would soon be dead unless I could devise a plan by which we could escape. I encouraged Polyphemus to have more wine so that he would fall into a deep sleep, and when he was snoring, we set to work.

"There was a huge wooden log in the cave, from which we cut off a piece about a fathom long. This we smoothed and sharpened to a point, then we heated it in the fire. When it was ready to burst into flame, we thrust the red-hot poker into his eye, blinding him instantly. He leaped up in agony, and cried out for help. His neighbors came running.

"Move the rock away,' Polyphemus called, 'and let me out. Nobody has blinded me.' When the other Cyclopes heard that, they went away, calling that if nobody had injured him, then surely the gods must be punishing him.

"Now Polyphemus was angry. He was determined to catch us as we tried to escape from the cave. He moved the rock aside a little, and blocked the opening with his huge hands so that he could grab us and eat us as we ran out. I then thought of a trick whereby we could leave safely. I bound each of my men under a sheep, and tied the sheep together in groups of three. As the sheep began to leave the cave to go to the pasture, Polyphemus felt along the backs and sides of each group to see if we might be riding them to safety. But he never thought to check underneath them. I myself was the last one out, and because there was no one to tie me on, I clung to the wool on the belly of the largest sheep and so escaped with my men.

"We rushed back to our ship and weighed anchor, meeting the other ships at sea. I was thrilled that my ruses had worked so well and good not resist a parting taunt.

Thus I called back over the water, 'Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, it was not Nobody that blinded you, but Odysseus himself.' In a rage, he broke off the top of the cliff and heaved himself in the direction of my voice. It just missed our steering oar, and so we were able to sail out of danger.

"Our next stop was the Aeolian islands, where we spent a month entertaining Aeolus, the king of the winds, with tales of the Trojan War and our adventures. On our departure he gave me a parcel containing the storm winds, which he directed me not to open. We sailed for nine days and were in sight of our homeland when my sailors became impatient and opened the package containing the fierce winds. They escaped and blew us back the way we had come, all the way to the Aeolian islands, and beyond to the land of Laestrygones.

"There we saw a lovely harbor, so enticing that all the other ships entered it. I alone was suspicious and anchored my ship outside. Several unfortunate sailors went up to the town and were shown to the palace of the king. There they were attacked and killed by the king and his family, even as the king was giving orders for our ships to be destroyed. The Laestrygones stormed down the cliffs and hurled rocks onto the helpless sailors. All eleven ships, and every man aboard, were lost, and we were only saved because we had not entered that awful place. Swiftly I cut the anchor rope that we might escape, and we sailed off, grieving for our lost comrades.

"Before long we came to the island of Aeaea, home of the enchantress Circe, where she offered us rest and rich food. Here we stayed for a year, recovering from our ordeals and preparing for our return home. At the end of the year, I decided to visit the land of the dead and speak with the spirit of seer Tiresias, so that I might ask him to foresee the future and tell me what I must do to return home.

"We set sail for the ocean at the end of the world. There lies the land of the Cimmerians, wrapped in mist, where I went ashore and entered the underworld. I found the spirit of Tiresias and received a reassuring prophecy indicating that I would survive many tribulations and return home to die an old man, in peace.

"I returned to my ship and sailed back to Circe. She warned me of dangers we would encounter on our homeward voyage, and told me how I might best overcome them. Then we departed.

"The first peril was the song of the Sirens, which was said to be so sweet that suspecting sailors were lured to their deaths on the rocks. Circe had advised me to have myself bound to the mast so that I might listen to the song without endangering the lives of my men. I was to fill their ears with beeswax so that they could not hear the bewitching song. I did as she advised me, and all went well. When hearing the lovely song, I struggled to get free and sail myself to death, but the sailors bound me more tightly. Not until we were safely by did they remove the wax from their ears and free me from my bonds.

"The next hazards were the threats of Scylla and Charybdis, who dwelt on opposite sides of a strait so narrow that an arrow could be shot from one side to the other. Charybdis was a whirlpool who swallowed everything nearby three times a day. Scylla was a six-headed monster who plucked six sailors, one for each head, from every boat that passed. Circe advised me to sail as far from Charybdis as possible, even though by doing this I would come close enough to Scylla to lose six men, because otherwise I might lose my entire ship and every one of my men. I did as she advised, but was still surprised and shocked when Scylla reached forth and grasped six of my best and strongest sailors to satisfy her hunger. I could only be thankful that most of us had been spared.

"The last danger was one that proved to be the downfall of the rest of my men. Circe warned that we should not hunt the cattle of Helios, the sun god, on his island.When we arrived there all went well at first. My men feasted on food given to us by Circe, and they did not disturb the cattle. Then the wind shifted so we could not sail. We were forced to stay there a month, our food ran out, and my men grew restless. At last one day they did kill some of the fattest cows. When we finally set sail, Zeus sent a thunderbolt to strike our ship in retribution. The mast crashed to the deck, the ship was destroyed, and all of my companions were drowned. I alone was spared. I rode for ten days on a piece of the mast and finally was carried to Ogygia, the island of Calypso, where I was held captive for seven years, and from which I have now come."

King Alcinous sighed. "The gods favor you, Odysseus. Come it is time to rest, for you have the end of your journey before you tomorrow."

In the morning, King Alcinous bade Odysseus farewell and showered him with gifts. After loading the ship, they were off. Now relieved of having to captain and navigate the ship himself, Odysseus fell asleep. When the ship arrived, the sailors gentle carried Odysseus to shore and laid him on the soft grass with his rich gifts around him.

Upon waking Odysseus hid his gifts in a nearby cave, then went to look for assistance. Athena appeared to him and advised him to disguise himself as a beggar, and to enter the palace incognito, so that he might gain an advantage over the traitors living there.

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| http://library.thinkquest.org/6339/lit/overboard.gif | He could then overpower them one by one, and claim his wife and land for his own. First, however, Athena arranged a special welcome for Odysseus. She led him to a nearby hut, then brought a handsome young man to greet him. Odysseus took one look at the man and recognized himself standing there. For a moment he was confused, then realized it was not himself he was facing but his own dear son.  |

He took Telemachus in his arms and wept for joy. "Father," gasped Telemachus,"it really is you. I knew you would come back to us. When I heard you were still alive after all these years, I returned home to wait for you. I cannot believe my waiting is over."

"Telemachus, my son, I never stopped thinking of you. I never stopped dreaming of you. But I never knew how much I loved you until this very moment. Now, sit down and I will tell you the plan for defeating those who have betrayed our trust." Father and son talked together long into the night. As the moon rose, Odysseus said, "Now it is time for you to return to the palace. Remember, tell no one I have returned. We must surprise our enemies. Soon they will be destroyed, and peace will return to our land."

Telemachus rose and walked to the door of the hut. he embraced his father, then stepped out into the moonlight. Odysseus watched his son until his shadow blended into the night and he could see him no longer. Then he turned and entered the hut. His voyage was over, but the next day a new struggle would begin. Love for his brave son and his faithful wife filled him with joy, and he looked forward to the new day.