

# SOURCES FOR *RETURN FROM TROY*

## HOMER AND HIS POEMS

Most of the storyline in *Return from Troy* is based on Homer's *Odyssey*, the title of which takes its name from the great Greek hero Odysseus, whose cunning wooden horse won the Trojan War for the Greeks. Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the earliest surviving works of ancient Greek literature.

The *Odyssey* consists of more than 12,000 lines, divided into 24 chapters, normally referred to as 'Books'. The central theme of the *Odyssey*, as Homer says in the opening line, is the adventurous journeys of Odysseus on his way home from Troy, after the city has been destroyed by the Greeks. Although this epic tale describes Odysseus' ten years of travels, much of the story is set in a very concentrated time-scale. All the events of Books 15 to 24, for instance, take place within five days.

Stories — and storytelling — play an important role in the structure of the *Odyssey*. In fact, the poem can be seen as a story about telling stories, where historical truths are changed into myth. Almost 70% of the *Odyssey* is in the form of direct speech between characters. A number of characters in the *Odyssey* tell stories, but the greatest of all the storytellers is Odysseus himself, whose true and untrue stories serve a number of purposes: to inform, to entertain, to move, to deceive and, very often, to benefit Odysseus.

Odysseus makes his first appearance in literature in Homer's earlier epic, the *Iliad*, but the depiction of Odysseus' character is quite different in the two poems. In the *Iliad* Odysseus is one of many great heroes, a strong warrior and resourceful leader whose idea for the wooden horse finally defeats the Trojans after ten years of warfare. The *Odyssey* shows us a very different side to Odysseus' character: a man who, after experiencing the ravages of war, struggles to return peacefully to his previous life. In his ten-year journey he endures hardships and adventures: the leader of men on the battlefield is washed up naked, broken and alone on the sea-shore and finally returns home 'alone and unknown, under a strange sail'. As well as being a story of mythical creatures, exciting adventures and daring do, the *Odyssey* can also be seen as a story which tells us of the difficulty of reintegrating into society experienced by those returning from war.

The oral nature of *Return from Troy* is in keeping with Homer's original poem, which was told rather than written, with the expectation that it would be heard not read. Daniel Morden and Hugh Lupton have composed this version of the story in the same way. The only stage at which their retelling was put down in writing occurred when a transcript of their oral performance was created for this Teacher's Guide. They have employed many of the same oral techniques used by Homer, such as repeated descriptions (e.g. the owl-eyed Athene) and story patterns, and the pictorial effects of extended similes. They have also slightly simplified the structure of the story, as Hugh described whilst being interviewed (**Interview with the Storytellers**):

"Hugh, have you had to leave bits out of the original?"

"Yes, we have. The original is a little bit complicated because it starts off with Odysseus' son going off in search of his father. And then it tells the story of how Odysseus starts to make his journey back to Ithaca and then at a certain point Odysseus stops and tells his story to King Alcinous. We thought that the story would be simpler if it goes in a straight line — if the timeline through the story is one event that follows another event that follows another event that follows another event — in kind of a straight line. So we have pared back, we have cut out some of that journey of Odysseus' son, some of that early part of the story, and we add it a bit later on so that things happen in their proper time as they would in someone's life. So, yes, we have reconstructed it a bit and one or two of the islands as well — there are lots and lots of islands — there are one or two islands that we have cut out because we wanted the really exciting adventures to keep people gripped."

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Episode	Source
1. A Stranger from Troy	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> Book 6 (Odysseus meets Nausicaa) Book 7 (Odysseus at Alcinous' palace), Book 8 (The song of Demodocus)
2. Odysseus Starts his Story	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 9
3. My Name is Nobody	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 9
4. The Calm Before the Storm	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 10
5. Bewitched	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 10
6. The Land of the Dead	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 11
7. Torment and Trial	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 12
8. Shipwrecked	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 12
9. A Stranger in his Own Land	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 14
10. A Beggar in his Own Palace	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 17
11. Setting the Trap	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 19
12. Home	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Book 21 (The Stringing of the Bow), Book 22 (Slaughter of Suitors), Book 23 (Odysseus & Penelope Reunited)

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## GREEK POTTERY AND VASE PAINTING

Vase painting is one of the richest sources for ancient depictions of myths and legend. Many pots and vases were decorated with pictures and artists would often draw their inspirations from Greek myths and legends such as the *Odyssey*. Stylised human figures and the telling of stories through art first appear on Greek vases from about 750 BC and continue to be the focus of attention up to the fourth century BC.

In this development of storytelling in art, certain pictorial traditions were used for the depiction of characters such as gods and goddesses. In the illustration **The judgement of Paris** (Episode 1) Hermes can be recognised by his winged sandals and staff (known as a 'caduceus') and Athene by her breastplate ('aegis'). More and more, however, thanks to the creativity of individual artists, the stories which were told and the scenes shown deviated from the tried and tested formulae and introduced fresh ideas, new groupings, or even subjects not before depicted. The painter of Telemachus' meeting with Penelope (**Penelope and Telemachus**, Episode 10), for instance, chooses to tell the story of Telemachus speaking to his mother, who sits discouraged by her loom, in her bedroom. It is an episode never mentioned in the *Odyssey*. The inclusion of the unfinished shroud on the loom reminds us of Penelope's resourcefulness, cunning and loyalty, and so hints at the important role she plays in the *Odyssey*.

Some parts of the *Odyssey* have attracted the painters' imagination more than others. The episode with the one-eyed Cyclops Polyphemus, for instance, was a favourite theme and features on a large number of vases. Other, more personal and more humane scenes, however, such as the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus, were not so popular. Is this because the Greeks preferred to depict acts of victorious violence over scenes that revealed a hero's humanity?

The illustrations invite pupils (a) to look into how the artists understand the myth, interpret it and extend its meaning, and (b) to broaden their own understanding of the stories they have listened to.