

TALES FROM THE ODYSSEY

TALES FROM THE ODYSSEY by Mary Pope Osborne

By Mary Pope Osborne



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TEACHER'S GUIDE
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CONTENTS



About this Guide	2
The Ancient Greeks	3
An Interview with Mary Pope Osborne	4
Activities and Suggestions for Expanding Student Learning	8
Expanding the Meaning for Students	8
Character Development	10
Conflict Resolution	11
Building Vocabulary	11
Crossword puzzle and Search	14
Word Origins	14
Visually and Verbally Describing an Image	15
Understanding Figurative Language	16
About the Authors	17

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The *Tales from the Odyssey* has such rich symbolism, amazing action, and extraordinary characters that there seem to be limitless activities teachers can utilize to enhance their students' reading and learning. This guide will give focus and direction to teachers, so they can lead and mentor their students in the particular areas that reflect their students' needs and abilities. There are whole-group activities and discussion questions, activities for small groups, and activities for independent, individual student efforts. The suggested activities focus on various learning modalities, so that teachers can select the activities that best fit their students' learning styles and strengths.

What is an epic?

An epic is a long narrative poem that recounts the deeds of the gods and legendary or historical heroes. The Greek epics were originally part of a purely oral tradition. They were sung by wandering entertainers called *rhapsodes*, who improvised performances of their tales, accompanying themselves on a simple harplike instrument called the *cithara*, using a special verse form called *epic meter*. Originally, every sung version of an epic was different. But at some time, probably beginning in the eighth century B.C.E., as the practice of singing the epic tales was beginning to die out, the epics were written down. Two of the most famous Greek epics are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were originally part of a vast cycle of similar poems, most of them now known only in fragments. The *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey* recounts the adventures of Odysseus, king of the island of Ithaca, on his long journey home from that war. The Greeks loved the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which became central to their literary education.

What is a Greek myth?

A Greek myth is a story about the powerful gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. Some of these stories were first told to explain natural phenomena like the weather, volcanoes, and the constellations. Others were an important part of the Greeks' religion. These stories later became important sources for Greek poetry, art, and theater. They have continued to inspire writers and painters up to the present day. The oldest written versions of the Greek myths are found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Who was Homer?

Homer is the name traditionally given to the composer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as they have come down to us. Scholars are not sure if Homer was a real or legendary singer, or if there were several singers who shared that name. Many scholars believe that Homer was a famous rhapsode who lived around 850 B.C.E.—nearly 3,000 years ago. Like many other famous epic singers, he is said to have been blind.

What was the Odyssey's original written form?

The *Odyssey* was composed in a dialect of Ancient Greek. It was originally written down in twenty-four parts or books in long flowing lines that did not rhyme at the end, in the special rhythm called epic meter. Technically, this meter is called dactylic hexameter. It can be represented, using symbols for light (u) and heavy (-) syllables, as:

-uu | -uu | -uu | -uu | -uu | - -

The *Odyssey* has been translated into many languages, in both verse and prose.

THE ANCIENT GREEKS

The ancient Greeks were *polytheists*, people who believed in many gods and goddesses, each of whom ruled over a particular aspect of the world. There was a god of the sea, a god of war, the god of love, and so forth. But the god believed to be the most powerful of all was Zeus. Zeus was the god of thunder, and he was said to rule the entire mortal world and the heavens. The Greeks believed Zeus lived on Mount Olympus, and all the other gods and goddesses were his relatives. He also had a wife, Hera, the queen of the gods and goddesses. The Greeks also believed these gods and goddesses visited the earth, and that they became involved in people's daily lives. A list of the Greek gods and goddesses will help you become familiar with their names and their domains.

Greek Gods and Goddesses (as listed in the books):

Zeus: king of the gods, god of thunder

Poseidon: brother of Zeus, god of the seas and rivers

Hades: brother of Zeus, king of the Land of the Dead, the Underworld

Hera: wife of Zeus, and queen of the Olympian gods and goddesses

Hestia: sister of Zeus, and goddess of the hearth

Athena: daughter of Zeus, and goddess of wisdom, war, and the arts and crafts

Demeter: goddess of crops and the harvest; mother of Persephone

Aphrodite: daughter of Zeus, and goddess of love and beauty

Artemis: daughter of Zeus, and goddess of the hunt

Ares: son of Zeus, and god of war

Apollo: god of the sun, music, and poetry

Hermes: son of Zeus, and the messenger god

Hephaestus: son of Hera, and god of the forge

Persephone: daughter of Zeus, wife of Hades, and queen of the Land of the Dead, the Underworld

Dionysus: god of wine and madness

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY POPE OSBORNE

1. What were your favorite types of books when you were a child?

I loved the great stories of the world—deep dramatic tales that involved adults as well as children. My favorite childhood book was *Egermeier's Bible Story Book* by Elsie E. Egermeier, which I read over and over again. I also loved Grimm's Fairy Tales and the stories of Hans Christian Andersen.

2. Did you like to read Greek myths when you were growing up?

Surprisingly, I was not exposed to many Greek myths. The one I most remember reading—and loving—was the story of the Trojan Horse. My first deep exposure to Greek myths came after college when I was camping in a cave on the island of Crete. I had a book of Greek myths with me, and read them by the light of a kerosene lamp.

3. What is your favorite aspect of Greek mythology?

I especially love the aspect of metamorphosis—people changing into animals—and the Greek gods and goddesses changing into mortals and visiting people on earth.

4. As I remember, you majored in religion in college. How does that play into your interest and writing about Greek mythology?

I loved studying the sacred stories at the core of the different “living” religions of today's world. Likewise, I enjoy reflecting upon the fact that the Greek myths were once the sacred stories of ancient Greece. The Greeks prayed and made sacrifices to their gods and goddesses, for they believed the gods were instrumental in determining the events of their daily lives.

5. What kind of research did you do before writing the *Tales From the Odyssey* series?

I read about ten different translations of the *Odyssey*. I had a number of book stands on my desk—in each was a different translation—so I would look at a passage in one book and compare it to the translation of the same passage in other books. After comparing and contrasting translations, I would write my own words—words I thought were faithful to the story told by Homer—and at the same time, were the most understandable to young readers.

6. Was there anything that was especially difficult about writing the *Odyssey* series?

Sometimes it was a big challenge to decide what to cut out of the original and what to include.

7. When you were writing the *Odyssey* series, did you create visual images or draw pictures before you wrote your descriptions?

A few times, I drew little maps to try to figure out landscapes and locations.

8. Did you read about hurricanes or other storms before you wrote about the fury of the seas?

I did read about storms—but mainly I trusted Homer's images to

help me “feel” the atmosphere. I love the simplicity of Homer’s writing: Just a few strokes of description can ignite your imagination and lead you to fill in the rest.

9. Do you think there are any character or personality similarities in the thoughts and actions of Odysseus and people in the world today?

It may sound strange, but I did not really “connect” to the challenges that Odysseus faced until after 9/11. When I worked on the *Odyssey* before that event, I had a hard time identifying with the terror and catastrophe that Odysseus and his men had to endure. After 9/11, however, I not only identified with their feelings of terror, but I understand the value of keeping one’s head and braving the unknown. I felt that our country collectively behaved as Odysseus.

10. Why did you decide to write the *Odyssey* series?

After the stories of the Old and New Testament, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are arguably the most significant stories in the literature of the Western world. It’s essential to know them, if you want to understand literary and philosophical references. For years, I’ve wanted to retell the *Odyssey*—not only to help young people know and enjoy the story, but so I could become deeply involved with it.

11. Why did you decide to write a series of books instead of one, large book?

Retelling the *Odyssey* in six books instead of one allowed me to linger over the many astonishing episodes of the epic. I also thought that the adventure series format would make a long and difficult story more accessible to young readers.

12. Did you and Troy Howell talk much about the characters and stories before he created the illustrations for the series?

Only a few times did we communicate about the characters. Since Troy and I have worked together on four collections of myths and fairy tales, I have tremendous respect for him and trusted him to contribute beautiful artwork—which he did.

13. If someone asked you to discuss the violence in the *Odyssey* and other myths, what would some of your thoughts and ideas be?

The violence of the *Odyssey* is shocking. But it is no more horrific than the violence that takes place in our world today—or the violence of

the wars of the 20th century. Perhaps studying the *Odyssey* can lead to classroom discussions about war and peace and about how we can work together to make the world less violent.

14. Where do you do most of your writing? Could you please describe your writing studio/or environment for us?

I’m a vagabond writer—I write on a laptop, in many different places at our home in Connecticut. On chilly days I might settle near the woodstove in our bedroom. On warm days I might sit outside on the deck. On rainy days I like to be upstairs in my office. If I’m staying in our second residence in the Berkshires, I work on the front porch or in the living room. I work on the train to New York. I work in restaurants. And I work in public libraries.

15. Once you start writing a story, how much do you end up changing later?

Most of it. I rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite. Then rewrite some more.

16. You acknowledged Frederick J. Booth, Ph.D., at the beginning of each book. How did he help you?

Dr. Booth read all my manuscripts and fact-checked them. He also helped me interpret certain events that I found hard to understand.

17. When you are writing a book, like the ones in this series, do you ever get frustrated and want to quit or start over?

Not really—because I spent a huge amount of time planning the first book, knowing that the other five books would depend on many of the decisions I made up front.

18. Can you offer any insights or ideas that might be helpful to children who also want to be writers one day?

Write and rewrite and rewrite. But all the time you’re working, try to have fun.

ACTIVITIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR EXPANDING STUDENT LEARNING

Helping Students Understand a Writer's Research

The *Odyssey* was written down more than 3,000 years ago. Many people have retold this famous story. Mary Pope Osborne explains that she read and consulted many retellings of the *Odyssey* as she researched and prepared to write.

1. Why would someone consult numerous translations?
2. What happens when people translate from one language into another?
3. Why would one writer choose different words from another in describing and telling a story?
4. Why would different writers create and allow differences in interpreting a story?

EXPANDING THE MEANING FOR STUDENTS

Expanding Comprehension

1. After a student, small group, or entire class has read all six books of Mary Pope Osborne's *Tales from the Odyssey*, have them outline the stories. Have them first focus on plot and action. As students outline the action, have them create a flow chart, showing how the action moves from one location or situation to another. The start and stop points should take them to and from Ithaca, Odysseus' home. Then, together, or individually, students can analyze the characters.

2. In the *Odyssey* and in Greek myths, the gods and goddesses can come to earth as mortals, and can also stay on Mount Olympus as gods or goddesses.

How is this an advantage for the gods and goddesses?

What do these "creatures" look like when they come to earth?

Why do they look that way?

3. In book 3, *Sirens and Sea Monsters*, Odysseus has many temptations.
 - What are some of those temptations?
 - What kinds of temptations do we have in our lives today?
 - How do we deal with those temptations?
 - What happens when we give in to temptations?
4. Odysseus reveals both his humor and his cleverness when he tells the giant Cyclops that his name is "No One." How does Odysseus' quick thinking help him and his men?
5. Have students choose a Greek god or goddess to read about. After they have read and researched their selected god, have the students write a paragraph about them to share with their classmates.
6. Have students research the names of the Greek gods and goddesses and also the names of the Roman gods and goddesses. Then, as a class project, make a chart that compares the names of the Greek and Roman gods.
7. Using the map that is inside the books of the *Tales from the Odyssey* series, have students trace and annotate the path that Odysseus followed on his lengthy voyage.
8. For advanced students or more able readers, have them study the text and identify key idioms, phrases, or figurative language. Discuss with the students whether they ever hear these idioms or phrases in their daily life. If so, what are the sources of these words? If students are aware of these words and phrases in their daily life, have them begin to collect data on how, when, and how often they hear them. Have them display their results in a chart.
9. In book six, *The Final Battle*, Odysseus tells Euryclia to "make a fire to purify the house." Are there any similar things in our culture that are used to purify a place (incense, blessing, washing, etc.)?
10. Odysseus had to wander for many years before he was finally able to return to his home in Ithaca. Write or discuss your response to the following:
 - Have you ever felt as if something important will never happen?
 - What do you do or can you do to keep your faith and focus?

11. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus explains storms and other violent occurrences as a result of the anger of the gods. How do we explain storms today? Why is it different today than in ancient times?

14. A cryptogram is a special message or statement that appears as a coded puzzle. It can be solved by figuring out the special code. Try to figure out the message by solving one or two words first, and then by matching those letters to the code to try to figure out more of the letters.

Visit our Web site at www.hyperionbooksforchildren.com to print out a cryptogram—look up any of the *Odyssey* books to locate the file.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

After escaping the Cyclops, Odysseus felt compelled to call back to the giant. If he had not called back to Polyphemus, Odysseus and his men could possibly have escaped with no further problems. Likewise, we often are tempted to call back to an enemy when we succeed in “escaping” a situation. We sometimes hear people taunt their enemies in these situations. What are some better ways to resolve our conflicts? Give some examples and some suggestions for better ways to resolve such situations.

BUILDING VOCABULARY

In each of the six books of the Tales From the *Odyssey* series, there may be words that are new to the reader. Usually, they can be figured out by using context clues, but it is also helpful to look those words up and use them in other contexts. Some of the suggested new or unfamiliar words are listed for you, to work with your students as you see the need.

Book One, *The One-Eyed Giant*:

dread	flailing
desperately	thickets
yoking	hideous
furrows	gruesome
despaired	heave
slew	distraught
sleek	bleating
valiantly	beckoned
provisions	lumbered
famished	yearning

Book Two, *The Land of the Dead*:

cast lots	raze
dismay	comrades
cannibals	hearth

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

1. After reading one or all of Mary Pope Osborne’s books, let students select a character. Have the students dress up as that character and tell their classmates about themselves. Be sure to have students focus on personality or character descriptors, such as determination, loyalty, perseverance, etc., when they describe themselves as the character.

2. After students have read Mary Pope Osborne’s *Odyssey* series, or part of the series, have students create character maps and analyses to help them understand the characters. Ask them to use examples from the story as evidence. In the map, have them list the characters, and then have columns for characteristics or ways to view that character. Examples follow:

- Character says....
- Character thinks...
- Character sounds like...

3. Describe the heroism or heroic characteristics of Odysseus.

harbor	quest
frantically	enchantress
foreboding	swine
moor	curse
scout	anguish
hurled	gnarled
stunned	yearning
thicket	disembark
desperate	hoisted
craggy	shrouded
roused	resolve
impending	soothsayer
condemned	

Book Three, Sirens and Sea Monsters:

wily	ghastly
famished	swooped
yelps	cawed
monstrous	billowed
slaughtered	hull
hideous	helmsman
wistfully	ferocious
unfathomable	lair
prophecies	emerge
ominously	roiling
eerie	cauldron
waft	writhed
lilting	raught
translucent	pummeled
yearned	appease
defied	tumultuous

cowered	lurching
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Book Four, The Gray-Eyed Goddess:

swagger	implored
defiling	soothsayer
guise	dashed
grievous	vehemence
suitors	heed
deception	bade
yearning	throng
cunning	

Book Five, Return to Ithaca:

vagabond	evaporate
haggard	passionately
minstrel	wretched
wondrous	boar
desperately	summon
suitors	hideous
quest	enchantress
ambush	lured
handmaidens	cauldron
harness	despair
tunic	cunning
lunged	shrouded
nymph	wretched
unkempt	pelted
suspicious	archaeological
poplar	splendor

CROSSWORD PUZZLE AND WORD SEARCH

In addition to having students look up the meanings of the words listed above and use them in their own sentences or in class discussions, you can also create puzzles to help students focus on those words in an enjoyable format. A crossword puzzle and a word search including the words found within the text of the Tales From the Odyssey have been created for your use. The words for these puzzles are from the text of Book 6, *The Final Battle*. The words in the crossword may be an alternative form of the words listed here. (For example, instead of *departure*, the word in the crossword is *departing*.)

Visit our Web site at www.hyperionbooksforchildren.com to print out the crossword puzzle and word search. Look up any of the *Odyssey* books to locate the file.

WORD ORIGINS

There are many words in the English language that derive from Greek. Several examples are given here. Have students look up the words in a dictionary and note their Greek origins and component meanings.

alphabet

autograph

crisis

museum

orgy

patriarch

Now have students add to their list of Greek derivatives, noting their origins and current meanings.

VISUALLY AND VERBALLY DESCRIBING AN IMAGE

1. In book two, *The Land of the Dead*, Mary Pope Osborne writes about a “she-monster” (page 39). Ask students to draw a picture of what they think a “she-monster” would look like. Then after they have drawn their pictures, they write a paragraph describing the monster.

2. In book three, *Sirens and Sea Monsters*, Mary Pope Osborne describes the monster Scylla (page 27). Using her description, have your students draw a picture of what they think Scylla would look like.

3. Odysseus has a continuing vision of returning to Ithaca, his home. His vision helps him be strong, and eventually attain his goal.

Ask students to write a paragraph (or have a small group discussion) about how they establish goals for themselves. Then have them write down some of their goals.

UNDERSTANDING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

1. Mary Pope Osborne utilizes metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech. Ask students in their own words to describe or restate the comparisons that are made in the *Odyssey*. Here are some examples:

- As Penelope hears a story about her lost husband, she is brought to tears: “Just as the snows melted by the east wind run down the mountainside so did the tears run down her lovely cheeks” (book six, page 34)

- “I promise,” Euryclia whispers, “I shall be as silent as a stone” (book six, page 38)

2. In book four, *The Gray-Eyed Goddess*, Athena tells Odysseus, “...take my veil, for it is enchanted. You will come to no harm as long as you possess it” (page 98)

- What do people carry for good luck?
- Do you have anything that you believe brings you good luck?
- How do good luck charms or tokens work or affect people?

3. Sometimes people think certain objects or happenings are signs of bad luck or omens. In book six, *The Final Battle* (page 45), the phrase, “an eagle soared overhead, gripping a dove in its talons” is used to describe an ominous event or warning.

- What are some things people associate with bad luck or omens today?

4. In *The Final Battle*, Mary Pope Osborne writes about the “mysterious world called Mount Olympus.” Either in words or with pictures, describe the following images of Mount Olympus:

- hidden behind a veil of clouds
- never swept by winds
- no rain
- inhabitants never age
- inhabitants never die

5. When Penelope sees that Telemachus has returned to the palace, she calls him “sweet light of my eyes” (book six, page 18).

- What are some other terms of endearment that we use for those we love?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Pope Osborne is the author of more than fifty books for children and young-adult readers, including picture books, early chapter books, middle-grade biographies, and young-adult novels. She lived in many different places while growing up, because her father had a career in the U.S. Military. She has a twin brother, an older sister, and a younger brother. Mary worked at many different jobs before she became a writer. But she now thoroughly enjoys writing, because it gives her the chance to share fascinating, wonderful stories with children the world over. Mary and her husband, Will Osborne, live in Connecticut with their dog, Bailey.

About the author of this guide:

Donna L. Knoell is an educational consultant who works with schools and school districts worldwide to help them improve their instructional programs in reading/language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics. She is a former classroom teacher and has also taught at the university level. She lives in Shawnee Mission, Kansas.