

"Twenty years gone, and I am back again . . ."

Odysseus has finished telling his story to the Phaeacians. The next day, young Phaeacian noblemen conduct him home by ship. He arrives in Ithaca after an absence of twenty years. The goddess Athena appears and informs him of the situation at home. Numerous suitors, believing Odysseus to be dead, have been continually seeking the hand of his wife, Penelope, in marriage, while overrunning Odysseus' palace and enjoying themselves at Penelope's expense. Moreover, they are plotting to murder Odysseus' son, Telemachus, before he can inherit his father's lands. Telemachus, who, like Penelope, still hopes for his father's return, has journeyed to Pylos and Sparta to learn what he can about his father's fate. Athena disguises Odysseus as a beggar and directs him to the hut of Eumaeus,¹ his old and faithful swineherd. While Odysseus and Eumaeus are eating breakfast, Telemachus arrives. Athena then appears to Odysseus.

1. Eumaeus (yōō mē' es)

. . . From the air
she walked, taking the form of a tall woman,
handsome and clever at her craft, and stood
1000 beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus,
unseen, though, by Telemachus, unguessed,
for not to everyone will gods appear.
Odysseus noticed her; so did the dogs,
who cowered whimpering away from her. She only
1005 nodded, signing to him with her brows,
a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard,
he passed out through the gate in the stockade
to face the goddess. There she said to him:

"Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
1010 Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,
dissemble to your son no longer now.
The time has come: tell him how you together
will bring doom on the suitors in the town.
I shall not be far distant then, for I
1015 myself desire battle."

1022 ♦ The Epic

Literary Analysis

Epic Simile and Imagery
Is the description of the goddess in lines 997-1007 written as an epic simile? Why or why not?

dissemble (di sem' bel) v.
conceal under a false appearance; disguise

✓ Reading Check

What does Athena reveal to Odysseus about his situation at home?

Saying no more,

she tipped her golden wand upon the man,
making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic
fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him,
ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard
1020 no longer gray upon his chin. And she
withdrew when she had done.

lithe (*lith*) *adj.* supple;
limber

Then Lord Odysseus

reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck.
Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away
as though it were a god, and whispered:

“Stranger,

1025 you are no longer what you were just now!
Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are
one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven!
Be kind to us, we'll make you fair oblation²
and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”

2. oblation (*äb lä' shən*)
n. offering to a god.

1030 The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no.
I am that father whom your boyhood lacked
and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

1035 Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks
as he embraced his son.

Only Telemachus,

uncomprehending, wild
with incredulity, cried out:

“You cannot

incredulity (*in' krə döō' lə*
tē) *n.* inability to believe

be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits
conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!
1040 No man of woman born could work these wonders
by his own craft, unless a god came into it
with ease to turn him young or old at will.
I swear you were in rags and old,
and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

1045 Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear
and said:

“This is not princely, to be swept
away by wonder at your father's presence.
No other Odysseus will ever come,
for he and I are one, the same; his bitter
1050 fortune and his wanderings are mine.

Twenty years gone, and I am back again
on my own island.

As for my change of skin,
that is a charm Athena, Hope of Soldiers,
uses as she will; she has the knack
1055 to make me seem a beggar man sometimes
and sometimes young, with finer clothes about me.
It is no hard thing for the gods of heaven
to glorify a man or bring him low."

When he had spoken, down he sat.

1060 his arms around this marvel of a father
Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears
rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great taloned hawk,
1065 whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.
So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
and might have gone on weeping so till sundown,
had not Telemachus said:

Then, throwing

1070 "Dear father! Tell me
what kind of vessel put you here ashore
on Ithaca? Your sailors, who were they?
I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!"

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea:

1075 "Only plain truth shall I tell you, child.
Great seafarers, the Phaeacians, gave me passage
as they give other wanderers. By night
over the open ocean, while I slept,
they brought me in their cutter,³ set me down
on Ithaca, with gifts of bronze and gold
1080 and stores of woven things. By the gods' will
these lie all hidden in a cave. I came
to this wild place, directed by Athena,
so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies.
Count up the suitors for me, let me know
what men at arms are there, how many men.
1085 I must put all my mind to it, to see
if we two by ourselves can take them on
or if we should look round for help."

replied:

Telemachus

Reading Strategy

Summarizing How does Odysseus explain the change in his appearance?

Literary Analysis

Epic Simile In this epic simile, what is being compared?

3. **cutter** (kut'er) *n.*
small, swift ship or
boat carried aboard a
large ship to transport
personnel or supplies.

✓ Reading Check

Why is Telemachus initially doubtful of Odysseus' words?

1090 "O Father, all my life your fame
 as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—
 your skill with weapons and the tricks of war—
 but what you speak of is a staggering thing,
 beyond imagining, for me. How can two men
 do battle with a houseful in their prime?⁴
 For I must tell you this is no affair
 1095 of ten or even twice ten men, but scores,
 throngs of them. You shall see, here and now.
 The number from Dulichium alone
 is fifty-two picked men, with armorers,
 a half dozen; twenty-four came from Same,
 1100 twenty from Zacynthus; our own island
 accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers,
 Medon the crier, and the Master Harper,
 besides a pair of handymen at feasts.
 If we go in against all these
 1105 I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance.
 You must think hard if you would conjure up
 the fighting strength to take us through."

Odysseus

who had endured the long war and the sea
 answered:
 "I'll tell you now.
 1110 Suppose Athena's arm is over us, and Zeus
 her father's, must I rack my brains for more?"

Clearheaded Telemachus looked hard and said:

"Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it,
 but throned in the serene clouds overhead;
 1115 other affairs of men and gods they have
 to rule over."

And the hero answered:

"Before long they will stand to right and left of us
 in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—
 our nerve against the suitors' in my hall.
 1120 Here is your part: at break of day tomorrow
 home with you, go mingle with our princes.
 The swineherd later on will take me down
 the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks,
 hangdog and old. If they make fun of me
 1125 in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up

Reading Strategy

Summarizing Summarize Telemachus' response to his father in lines 1089–1092. What is his concern?

4. in their prime in the best or most vigorous stage of their lives.

▼ Critical Viewing

Why do you think scenes such as this were depicted on Greek pottery? [Speculate]



your springing heart, no matter what I suffer,
no matter if they pull me by the heels
or practice shots at me, to drive me out.
Look on, hold down your anger. You may even
1130 plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms
to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you,
rash as they are, facing their day of wrath.
Now fix the next step in your mind.

Athena,

1135 counseling me, will give me word, and I
shall signal to you, nodding: at that point
round up all armor, lances, gear of war
left in our hall, and stow the lot away
back in the vaulted storeroom. When the suitors
miss those arms and question you, be soft
1140 in what you say: answer:

'I thought I'd move them
out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those
bright arms Odysseus left us years ago
when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire's
hot breath came, they had grown black and drear.
1145 One better reason, too, I had from Zeus:
suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk,
you might be crazed and bloody one another,
and that would stain your feast, your courtship. Tempered
iron can magnetize a man.'

Say that.

1150 But put aside two broadswords and two spears
for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby
when we go into action. Pallas Athena
and Zeus All-Provident will see you through,
bemusing our young friends.

Now one thing more.

1155 If son of mine you are and blood of mine,
let no one hear Odysseus is about.
Neither Laertes, nor the swineherd here,
nor any slave, nor even Penelope.
But you and I alone must learn how far
1160 the women are corrupted; we should know
how to locate good men among our hands,
the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers⁵
who take you lightly, as alone and young."

Reading Strategy

Summarizing Summarize
Athena's role in Odysseus'
plan.

Reading Strategy

Summarizing Summarize
the events of Odysseus'
reunion with Telemachus.

bemusing (bi myōōz' in)
adj. stupefying or
muddling

5. shirkers (shurk' ərz)
n. people who get out
of doing (or leave
undone) something that
needs to be done.

✓ Reading Check

How does Odysseus tell
his son to respond if the
suitors "practice shots"
on Odysseus?