***Odyssey* Literary Analysis**

**The Author and His/Her Times**:

Greek literature begins with two masterpieces, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are attributed to the poet Homer. Nothing is known about Homer except his name. The Greeks believed he was blind, perhaps because the bard Demodokos in the *Odyssey* was blind, and seven different cities put forward claim to his birthplace. They are all in what the Greeks called Ionia, the western coast of Asia Minor, which was heavily settled by Greek colonists. It does seem likely that he came from this area; the *Iliad* contains several accurate descriptions of natural features of the Ionian landscape, but his grasp of the geography of mainland, especially western, Greece is unsure. But even this is a guess, and all the other stories Greeks told about him are obvious inventions.

**Form, Structure, and Plot:**

The *Odyssey* is an epic poem divided into 24 books dealing with Odysseus and the ten years wandering the sea after the fall of Troy. The tense of the poem is in the Past and large portions of the poem (especially Books 9–12) are narrated in flashbacks. The following foreshadowing can be seen in the poem: Agamemnon’s fate at the hands of his wife and his vindication by his son foreshadow the domestic troubles and triumphs Odysseus faces when he returns to Ithaca; Odysseus is nearly recognized by his wife and servants several times in Books 18–19, foreshadowing the revelation of his identity in Book 22.

**Major Conflict**: Odysseus must return home and vanquish the suitors who threaten his estate; Telemachus must mature and secure his own reputation in Greek society.

**Rising Action**: The return of Odysseus to Ithaca; the return of Telemachus to Ithaca; their entrance into the palace; the abuse Odysseus receives; the various omens; the hiding of the arms and locking of the palace doors; Penelope’s challenge to the suitors; the stringing of the bow

**Climax**: The beginning of Book 22, when the beggar in the palace reveals his true identity as Odysseus

**Falling Action**: Odysseus and Telemachus fight and kill the suitors; they put to death the suitors’ allies among the palace servants.

**Point of View (Narrative Perspective):**

The narrator speaks in the third person and is omniscient. He frequently offers insight into the thoughts and feelings of even minor characters, gods and mortals alike; Odysseus narrates Books 9–12 in the first person. Odysseus freely gives inferences about the thoughts and feelings of other characters.

**Setting:**

Time:  Bronze Age (approximately twelfth century B.C.E.); the *Odyssey* begins where the *Iliad* ends and covers the ten years after the fall of Troy.

Place: Odysseus’s wanderings cover the Aegean and surrounding seas and eventually end in Ithaca, in northwestern Greece; Telemachus travels from Ithaca to southern Greece.

**Themes:**

Intelligence, wit, and cunning are more powerful than brute, physical, strength.

(Odysseus as a man of “twists and turns”)

Temptation can lead one to pitfalls and astray from intended goals.

(Circe, the lotus, the Sirens’ song, the cattle of the Sun)

Experience and harsh, physical journeys may lead to emotional maturation.

(Odysseus’s and Telemachus’s respective journeys)

**Memorable Quotations:**

“Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns  / driven time and again off course, once he had plundered  / the hallowed heights of Troy. / Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds, /  many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,  / fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.”

“But you, Achilles,  / there’s not a man in the world more blest than you— /  there never has been, never will be one.  / Time was, when you were alive, we Argives /  honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,  / you lord it over the dead in all your power.  / So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.”

“Of all that breathes and crawls across the earth,/  our mother earth breeds nothing feebler than a man. / So long as the gods grant him power, spring in his knees, / he thinks he will never suffer affliction down the years./  But then, when the happy gods bring on the long hard times, / bear them he must, against his will, and steel his heart. / Our lives, our mood and mind as we pass across the earth, / turn as the days turn . . .”

**Title:**

The work is titled after its protagonist Odysseus. In Book 19, Odysseus’s name is explained: “so let his name be Odysseus . . . /  the Son of Pain, a name he’ll earn in full.” Indeed, Odysseus earns his name in full through his painful Odyssey, both physically and emotionally.

**Things Unusual, Unique:**

The *Odyssey* may have been fixed in something like its present form before the art of writing was in general use in Greece; it is certain that it was intended not for reading but for oral recitation. The earliest stages of its composition date from long before the beginning of Greek literacy—the late eighth century B.C. The poem exhibits the unmistakable characteristics of oral composition. It is the second—the *Iliad* being the first—extant work of Western literature. Besides being alluded to in countless works of art it’s impact can be seen in James Joyce’s modern novel, *Ulysses*, where every episode has an assigned theme, technique and correspondences between its characters and those of Homer's *Odyssey* and Charles Frazier’s novel *Cold Mountain*. In addition, movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* pay homage to the epic poem.

**Additional Comments and Analysis:**

Wow! This work is awesome! I can’t wait to tell all my friends at parties about Homer’s epic *Odyssey*. It totally reminded me of the Coen brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, Cream’s “Tale of Brave Ulysses,” Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” and Dante’s journey through his *Inferno*. Homer totally blew my mind away.

**STYLE STRATEGIES**

**Tone:**

Celebratory and nostalgic; the poet views the times in which the action is set as glorious and larger than life.

**Figurative Language (Tropes):**

**Similes**: Homer loves similes (a comparison between two seemingly unlike things using "like" or "as"). They can be found everywhere in the Odyssey. Homer often expands upon a simile, putting it into motion so to speak; and these expanded similes are called Homeric or epic similes.

“Weak as the doe that beds down her fawns in a mighty lion's den - her newborn sucklings - then trails off to the mountain spurs and grassy bends to graze her fill, but back the lion comes to his own lair and the master deals both fawns a ghastly, bloody death, just what Odysseus will deal that mob - ghastly death.”

**Personification** occurs in almost every book when "Dawn" arises with her "rose-red fingers". As the gods have distinctly human characteristics, they display a non-linguistic personification even amongst themselves. They also appear disguised as people, and the Mentor we know is always the "personification of Athena. Other things are frequently personified: "Sleep" looses "Odysseus' limbs, slipping the toils of anguish from his mind"; "East and South Winds clashed, and the raging West and North/sprung from the heavens, roiled heaving breakers up."

**Metaphors** are less striking in the *Odyssey* than **similes**. They are frequently embedded in verbs: "Nine years we wove a web of disaster"; "that made the rage of the monster boil over"; "his mind churning with thoughts of bloody work"; "Terror blanched their faces" (note the personification of terror). Odysseus is "fated to escape his noose of pain," and when he finds himself near the land of the Laestrygonians, he places his ship "well clear of the harbors jaws."

**Symbolism:**

Symbols are also associated with the gods. Eagles, usually swooping down, are often seen as manifestation of Zeus, but they are also portents that foreshadow Odysseus' return. As such they need interpreters gifted at reading signs (Halitherses, Theoclymenus, Helen, and even Odysseus, himself, when he interprets a dream of Penelope's). Many gods are associated with specific symbols: Zeus, the thunderbolt; Poseidon, the scepter; Apollo and Artemis, arrows; Athena the loom. The loom itself is associated with all the major female characters, Calypso, Circe, Helen and, most memorably, Penelope. Other symbols include: food; the wedding bed; the great bow; symbols of temptation (Circe, the lotus, the Sirens’ song, the cattle of the Sun)**.**