

Invitation to World Literature: The Odyssey Video Transcript

Blake Nelson:

The Odyssey, more than anything, is an adventure story.

Zimmerman:

It just feels important. But more than important, it's dazzling.

Thomas:

I immersed myself in The Odyssey the same way I immersed myself in Superman, Batman, Captain America, that kind of thing.

Greenwood:

We're talking about a work that first began to circulate about two thousand seven hundred years ago.

Mendelsohn:

Strange creatures with their own agendas, who are trying to intervene and prevent you from getting home. It's very "Wizard of Oz," when you think—in fact, excuse me, The Wizard of Oz is very "Odyssey."

GRAPHIC: THE ODYSSEY

Zimmerman:

I remember very well when I first became acquainted with The Odyssey. I was five years old and I was living in England, although I'm from Nebraska. I sort of live more in these texts than I do outside of them. And I think they rescued me in childhood.

Greenwood:

My first encounter with reading The Odyssey was in a schoolroom at the age of fourteen, stumbling over Greek sentences.

Shay:

When I had a stroke at the age of forty, during my recovery Homer dug his claws into my imagination.

Blake Nelson:

Oddly enough, on Venice Beach every day after work, I was out there doing standup comedy. I would go to the beach and sit there reading The Odyssey.

Thomas:

Reading the Classics Illustrated comic about it when it came out in about 1950 or so, I was about ten, something like that.

Mendelsohn:

I remember making models of the Parthenon when I was nine years old using toilet paper rolls for columns.

Damrosch:

Often you know when you first encountered a striking book. With *The Odyssey*, I can't even remember. It's been on some level part of my life from childhood. I heard about the stories. At some point I started to read it, at some point I read it again. It's just always been there.

GRAPHIC: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Mendelsohn:

Oh you know, my train was late going home to Long Island, it was such an odyssey. Every time you say that word casually you're actually talking about an ancient Greek epic poem.

Damrosch:

The two Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are very tightly interwoven. *The Iliad* is a kind of prequel to *The Odyssey*, the story of the Trojan War, then *The Odyssey* tells the story of the aftermath as seen through Odysseus.

Mendelsohn:

The beginning of an epic always has to tell you what it's going to be about.

Nagy:

(speaks in Greek)

Greenwood:

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns. Driven time and time again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy.

Mendelsohn:

Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds.

Greenwood:

Many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea.

Blake Nelson:

Fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home. This is the story of a father and a husband after a very brutal war, the war that every one of us has heard about, the Trojan War. And all he wants to do is get home to his wife and his son.

Shay:

Homer tells us in the opening lines of *The Odyssey*, this is about a soldier's homecoming and all of the obstacles to coming home.

Blake Nelson:

And you cannot believe what he has to go through.

Nagy:

He's trying to get back to Ithaca but he's constantly deflected by one force or another.

Zimmerman:

Terrible sea storms that almost take you under; clashing rocks that will destroy your ship; whirlpools that will devour you. A sorceress who can turn you into a pig. The lotus eaters, which are drug addicts. Sirens who will sing such a beautiful song that all of your sailors would abandon ship. But there's another surrounding plot, which is the story of what's happening in Ithaca while Odysseus is gone, and that's the struggles of his son to protect his mother against all of these suitors who are trying to encroach on her and convince her her husband is dead and take over her land.

Thomas:

Telemachus is the dutiful son. He wants to be a man, he wants to grab up a sword or cudgel and beat them all, but he knows he can't do it.

Armitage:

Penelope, in crude terms, is the long-suffering wife. She's been left at home for nearly twenty years, ten years while Odysseus was fighting the war, another ten years while Odysseus is making his way back to Ithaca. But she doesn't know whether he's alive or dead.

Damrosch:

It draws you in from the very start. And then he has these amazing adventures, one strange culture after another, always struggling to get home to his wife and family.

GRAPHIC: ODYSSEUS

Thomas:

It's hard to compare Odysseus to any other hero in a way because they've all come after him. I mean he's almost the original hero. If they'd had an Odysseus costume I would have dressed up as Odysseus for Halloween, but nobody would have known who I was, because he didn't have an S on his chest or a bat or a big star like Captain America or anything like that.

Mendelsohn:

You know, I was actually never interested in superheroes, people with fantastical powers. Didn't seem nearly as interesting to me as this poor guy who has one fantastical power, which is the power of his intellect.

Greenwood:

He's polymetis, metis is a Greek word meaning "cunning intelligence," and Odysseus has lots of it. That's what the poly part means.

Armitage:

When I came to dramatize it, I began to see the different sides to his nature. He's determined, he's full of pride for all the right and the wrong reasons.

D'Agostini:

Odysseus is a man with great loyalty. You know, he's willing to go off to war, but he has such a strong love for his home that what he wants more than anything in the world is just to return home to Ithaca, and is willing to fight through anything to get that.

Thomas:

In my mind, Odysseus looks like Kirk Douglas. When I was a teenager I saw the Dino De Laurentiis-produced Italian film called *Ulysses*, they used the Roman name, with Kirk Douglas as Odysseus. My favorite scene, like that of most people, I guess, is the one with the Cyclops. The idea of the little guy fighting the big guy, you know, it's David and Goliath, it's Sinbad and the various monsters he fought.

Nagy:

Odysseus and his men land on an island and go into a cave which is inhabited by this monster called the Cyclops, or Polyphemus.

Zimmerman:

He traps Odysseus and his men in his cave, pushes a big rock over it. Then he comes home at night and eats them, you know, and tears them in half and devours them. Well, Odysseus through his cleverness, gets him drunk, and when he's asleep, the soldiers ram this giant log that they've sharpened during the day into the Cyclops's eye. In fact, the scene when you read it in the book is terrifying.

Blake Nelson:

(reads) "So we seized our stake with its fiery tip and bored it round and round in the giant's eye till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft and the hot blast singed his brow and eyelids round the core and the broiling eyeball burst."

Greenwood:

As you delve deeper into it, then this encounter with the Cyclops takes on another dimension. When I teach the same book to my students, I point out that as Odysseus approaches the island of the Cyclops, the way in which he's described doing his reconnaissance of the island is very reminiscent of the way in which contemporary Greek colonizers would describe the attributes of a land that they were going to settle. Very reminiscent of colonialism, of the age of exploration.

Damrosch:

One of the functions of epic narratives has always been for peoples to figure out, who are they really? And one of the big questions in the ancient world for the Greeks is, what is it to be a Greek? And the Greeks had a sense of being caught between the really rough, primitive, almost Stone Age cultures around them in some directions, such as the

Cyclops really represents, and on the other hand these ancient, wealthy, sophisticated cultures like Egypt and Persia.

Mendelsohn:

The Cyclops is certainly the low end of the civilization totem pole. Civilization versus savagery, and civilization wins.

Greenwood:

(reads) "So the eye of the Cyclops sizzled around that stake." Poor Cyclops.

GRAPHIC: GODS

Blake Nelson:

These were works being written by people who came up with these incredible explanations for phenomena that would later be demystified by science. In The Odyssey, you have storms that aren't because of scientific phenomena, you have storms that shipwreck somebody because a god is pissed off.

Zimmerman:

Odysseus is sort of the plaything between a couple of the gods. He's adored by Athena. In fact I think she's a little in love with him.

Nagy:

She's the goddess of helmsmen, of pilots, of those who have to steer the ship in a way that the ship reaches its destiny.

Mendelsohn:

She is a goddess who is associated with wisdom and intellect, and he is the most brilliant of all mortals.

Zimmerman:

And because the Cyclops's father is Poseidon, the king of the seas, Poseidon just gives no end of trouble to Odysseus. is sort of tossed like a cork on the water between those two desires of those gods.

Mendelsohn:

It's the conflict with Poseidon that is the engine that drives The Odyssey. He can't get home because Poseidon is so angry at him, that he keeps making, storms happen, and shipwrecks, to keep him from getting home.

Armitage:

The Odyssey, I don't know whether it was intended to be full of humor, but there are very funny moments in there. Odysseus and his men once again washed ashore on an island, Circe's island, and stumble across this beautiful palace. And Circe appears to be waiting for them. A table is laid. They really can't believe their luck.

Zimmerman:

(reads) "Once they drained the bowls she filled, suddenly she struck with her wand, drove them into her pigsties, all of them bristling into swine, with grunts, snouts, even their bodies, yes."

Armitage:

Physically start turning into pigs: snouts, trotters, little tail. Men being greedy at the table being turned into pigs is superbly comic.

Zimmerman:

(reads) "So off they went to their pens. Sobbing, squealing, as Circe flung them acorns – common fodder for hogs that root and roll in the mud." (laughs) Have some acorns. I do think people say, Well, Circe turned the men into swine, but I sort of feel like the men turn themselves into swine, you know through their desire for her and through their beastly ways.

Zimmerman:

You know, I sometimes think I'm a director and that I work in the theater because I wanted to direct *The Odyssey* and I wanted to live in it in three dimensions for a while, instead of just in my imagination. I remembered that I'd done some drawings but I didn't remember any particulars of them. And right after I staged the show I found them in the basement. And I was really surprised to see that the same elements of the story that most drew me when I was little, remained my favorite episodes. I think it's sort of interesting.

Thomas:

I suppose in a way our version of *The Odyssey* is a little like CliffsNotes, SparkNotes, that kind of thing, except with pictures. I in particular wanted to intrigue people to then read the actual work. To me some of the most poignant moments are the scenes in hell, or not in hell but in hades.

Mendelsohn:

And he sees his mother.

Zimmerman:

He didn't know his mother died when he was gone and he sees a shade in the underworld. And when the woman turns he sees it is his mother.

Thomas:

(reads) "And she speaks, 'My long to know your fate, the force of my affection for you, these were the death of me.'"

Damrosch:

(reads) "'And I,' says Odysseus, 'my mind in turmoil, how I longed to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was. Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold

her, three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away like a shadow, dissolving like a dream." Tries to grab her once, twice, three times, and he can't hold her ghost.

GRAPHIC: HOMER

Greenwood:

When we talk about The Odyssey, we're so used to talking about it as one of the greatest works of literature, and yet arguably, when it first originated, it wasn't even a work of literature at all.

Damrosch:

People for a long time assumed it had to have been written. Who could remember that much? And then early in the twentieth century, a very enterprising classicist, a scholar named Milman Parry, went out into Serbia, just north of Greece, where there still were illiterate bards singing poems. They could recite a poem several thousand lines long from memory. Not because they knew it word for word by heart, but because kind of like, do a kind of like jazz improvisation. They would have a general sense of the outline, and then they would tell the story.

Mendelsohn:

You have to imagine a lot of traveling bards, you know, sort of freelance entertainers who go around these Greek cities, and you get enough of these guys, and they go around for hundreds of years, and these poems start to all coalesce. Eventually it gets written down.

Damrosch:

There never was one single poet named Homer. The name gets attached to a kind of collective process of gradual evolution over several centuries.

Mendelsohn:

The Odyssey, as far as we can tell, belonged to a whole series of poems called The Returns; about the homecomings of each of the major Greeks who fought in the Trojan War.

Greenwood:

The Odyssey offers us just one of these poems. This was the version that seized the imagination of the early audiences.

Nagy:

If we fast-forward to the fifth century before our era, in the greatest city of that time, Athens, the performance would be done by professional performers called rhapsodes, which is where we got the word rhapsody. There could be as many as twenty thousand listeners.

Greenwood:

From the time which it began to circulate in the Greek world, The Odyssey was acknowledged as a traveler's text. So Alexander the Great, when he set off to Egypt, had a copy of The Odyssey with him. Lawrence of Arabia is the other classic explorer who is famous for citing The Odyssey as his inspirational text. I've heard it said The Odyssey was a text that Columbus traveled with, and that in addition to the Bible, it was one of his master narratives for his New World exploration. There's seldom a period when The Odyssey falls out of view.

Damrosch:

Already in antiquity the story of Odysseus fascinated painters. They would put episodes on wine bowls. He becomes a character in Dante, he becomes the subject of a poem by Tennyson in the nineteenth century.

Mendelsohn:

The poem "Ithaca," the poem that was read at the funeral of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, which is about what it means to be Odysseus.

Greenwood:

Romare Bearden's Odysse[us] Suite.

Damrosch:

Margaret Atwood retells the whole story from the point of view of Penelope.

Thomas:

Ulysses by James Joyce, who used the framework as if somehow every man's life is an odyssey.

Greenwood:

Derek Walcott's famous poem Omeros.

Damrosch:

Franz Kafka has a haunting parable about the silence of the Sirens, who even tried to seduce Homer Simpson. The quest to return home is a very basic pattern that we see in all sorts of work today, whether it's The Wizard of Oz with Dorothy longing to come home, or E.T.

Blake Nelson:

Everything is influenced by The Odyssey, whether directly or obliquely. So it's not just O Brother, Where Art Thou?, which is based loosely on The Odyssey.

GRAPHIC: HOME

Greenwood:

The question that The Odyssey invites us to ask is how these heroes from Troy ever get beyond their Trojan experience and ever face life afterwards. And this is something that people have likened to the problematic reintegration of warriors, of soldiers in the

modern world. Jonathan Shay, for example, has done all this work, which maps the different stages of Odysseus's homecoming onto the experiences of veterans.

Shay:

When Odysseus is finally taken home, he doesn't recognize Ithaca. There are enormous problems returning to civilian life. Problems of adjustment, problems that many returning combat veterans have with trust. We can learn new things about real soldiers from these poems that are at least twenty-eight centuries old. That's pretty amazing!

Damrosch:

From the very beginning of the epic, we're told that what Odysseus really desires is homecoming, nostos. He feels nostalgia, which means an ache of the heart for a return home. The homecoming is elaborate and deeply moving. There's a whole series of adventures and encounters that he has to have.

D'Agostini:

You know, his house is besieged by these suitors, who want to essentially take over his kingdom. When he comes home and he sees this, he kills them all.

Thomas:

When you finally have that first suitor fall, killed by Odysseus, it's a very satisfying moment. At least it is for somebody like me. Now maybe somebody else would resent the bloodshed. But, you know, in a work of literature like this, he's gotta kill 'em. Where he shoots the guy through the neck, is it? Yeah, I like that one. (reads) "And off to the side he pitched. The cup dropped from his grasp, as the shaft sank home. And the man's life blood came spurting from his nostrils. Thick, red jets. Food showered across the floor. The bread and meat soaked in a swirl of bloody filth." That's the way a hero does it (laughs).

Nagy:

I think in a modern novel, you would expect a husband and wife to recognize each other before any other recognition scene happens, but in *The Odyssey*, that relationship is so complex and so deep that when it has been severed, it takes a very long and hard time to rebuild.

Zimmerman:

Penelope is the wife of Odysseus, and she's a perfect match for him because she's just as crafty as he is, just as devious, just as careful, and just as imaginative. She's keeping all of these suitors at bay in her house who are just clamoring to marry her and take over the castle and the lands of Odysseus by telling them, "Oh, you know, I have to weave a shroud for my poor father, and I just have to finish this." And so she weaves it every day, and then at night she unweaves it, so it's never ever done. So, even though he comes and he says, "I'm home, it's me, it's your husband," she wants one test.

Armitage:

It's highly symbolic; it's all to do with the marital bed. When they were married, Odysseus didn't simply have a bed made for them, it was almost as if he constructed the palace around the whole bed.

Zimmerman:

So it's permanent and it's unmovable. So she says to Odysseus something aloud that she doesn't quite mean to see if it really is Odysseus, 'cause only Odysseus would know that this bed isn't moveable. (reads) "'Come, Eurycleia, move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber, that room the master built with his own hands. Take it out now, sturdy bed that it is, and spread it deep with fleece, blankets and lustrous throws to keep him warm, putting her husband to the proof.' But Odysseus blazed up in fury, lashing out at his loyal wife, "Woman, your words, they cut me to the core! Who could move my bed? Impossible task, even for some skilled craftsman, unless a god came down in person, quick to lend a hand, lifted it out with ease and moved it elsewhere. Not a man on earth, not even at peak strength, would find it easy to prize it up and shift it. No, a great sign, a hallmark lies in its construction. I know, I built it myself, no one else. I gave it ivory inlays, gold and silver fittings, wove the straps across it. Ox hide gleaming red. That's our secret sign. I tell you, our life story! Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm? I don't know, or has someone cut it away, chopped it away, that olive trunk, and hauled our bedstead off?' Living proof. Penelope felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender, recognizing the clear, strong signs Odysseus offered. She dissolved in tears, rushed to Odysseus, flung her arms around his neck, and kissed his head and cried out. 'It was the gods who sent us sorrow.'"

Thomas:

If I ran into a person who didn't want to read *The Odyssey*, who said "Why should I read *The Odyssey*? It's the kind of thing you assign in an English class, and, you know, it happened a long time ago, if it happened at all. Why should I be interested in it? I would just tell them it's a good story.

Zimmerman:

Isn't it just a sort of conspiracy of high school teachers that it's still current? An episode of a sitcom made in 1977 is going to be far more dated, and far more obsolete, and far more not of its time than something like *The Odyssey* because *The Odyssey* is addressing fundamentally what it is to be a person.

Mendelsohn:

It is so enormously encompassing of every aspect of human experience.

Damrosch:

It gives us a chance to think about every conflict we're going through in our own lives.

Nagy:

It is very archetypal and I think it is perfectly legitimate for us to talk about our own odysseys--our own journeys of soul.

Mendelsohn:

You know, this is not something that's good for you, like broccoli. You know, this is like eating cupcakes morning, noon and night.

Zimmerman:

It's really good. It's a good story.

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