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Unit-I

1. HOMER: *THE ODYSSEY*

STRUCTURE

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A. Study-Guide to *The Odyssey*

R. M. Kala

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

We divide our study of the *Odyssey* into two sections. In this section, we shall concentrate upon the text. In the summary of the epic, you will find exposition and interpretation included. These should help you to find your way through the text. Your prescribed edition is *The Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu (Penguin, 2003). All references have been made to this edition. The next section comprises a critical analysis of the *Odyssey*; examining various aspects of the epic. The aim of this study material is to;

- provide you with a close and careful study of the *Odyssey*;
- draw your attention to its structure, style, and characterization;

– familiarize you with Greek society, their beliefs and culture; and
– help you appreciate the importance of this epic in Western literature.

2. ABOUT HOMER

Homer is the first and greatest of European poets. Historians place Homer in the 9th or 8th century BCE. An ancient and universally accepted tradition has it that Homer came from the Greek coastland of Asia Minor, was blind, and that seven cities claimed to be his birth place. He is believed to have composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the first known works of Western literature. Linguistic, historical, and literary analysis of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* show them to date from perhaps the 8th century BCE. The style, construction, and temper of these poems imply the existence of a single author. That these poems are artistic wholes is in fact the only evidence of the existence of Homer. It is equally certain that his work was the culmination of a long tradition of bardic poetry; that to this tradition he owed his stories, his language, his metre, and many of his devices. The epics of Homer, though composed in the 8th century BCE, were set in writing much later. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been accepted as models for this mode of literature.

Archeological investigation has disclosed that the siege and destruction of Troy, described in the *Iliad*, took place in the 12th century BCE. However, the interest in Greek literature is not primarily historical. Greek literature commands attention because the Greeks invented and perfected certain types of literary art and produced masterpieces which still excite wonder and delight, despite the lapse of generations and vast changes in human outlook. In comparison with modern literature, Greek literature is simple and unadorned but this simplicity should not be compared with the simplicity of unsophisticated folk literature. This simplicity is achieved by omitting the unessential and emphasizing the essential. Their work is often oratorical, often difficult, but they had to address themselves to crowds and they grappled with many difficulties. Homer's two epics formed the basis of education and culture in the Classical age and have had an enduring impact on Western thought and imagination over the centuries.

Much of oral Greek literature is lost. For us, it begins with the name of Homer and his two epics – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The heroic Age of Greece was the mainspring of the epic tradition. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are celebrations of the heroic deeds of a generation. Their values coincide with the values of an age which judges everything by the standards of the heroic man who is equally notable in council and in war. The two epics are echoes of

events which shook the world and, like other heroic poetry, they were composed in the aftermath of war and conquest. Homer was already historically removed from the war he sings of in the *Iliad*, but he inherited the standards of the Heroic Age. He is an authentic bard, trained in the art of oral literature. He composed for listeners and not for *readers*, and his art grew in the courts of the Greek conquerors.

Into the ancient theme of retribution in the *Odyssey*, Homer has incorporated other stories equally ancient and produced a complex narrative structure. The story is less diffuse than the story of the *Iliad*. There is also a noticeable difference of temper between the two epics: the *Iliad* celebrates heroic strength, but the *Odyssey* celebrates heroic cunning and wit. At the same time, the two epics share certain common Greek characteristics – the generous understanding of humanity; pleasure in the good things of life; in eating and drinking; in wealth, courtesy, and hospitality; in skills at shooting and shipbuilding; in the numerous details of pastoral life; and finally in all the natural sights of the Greek world.

Homer's language is poetical; artificial in the sense that it was never spoken in ordinary life. His words are meant for themes more majestic than common life, full of synonyms and alternative forms, with a rich and adventurous vocabulary compounded from many sources. He owes the power of his language to the work of many earlier generations of poets of the oral tradition. To them he owes recurring epithets and many repeated phrases of great antiquity. Yet in spite of archaisms his style seems natural and appropriate. It is lucid and rich, and suits the heroic dignity of his poetry.

Activity

Read about the Trojan War and write a brief account of it; including approximate dates, main participants, and heroes. You will find many resources online.

3. THE STORY-LINE

The story line of the *Odyssey* originates from the *Iliad*. Odysseus, king of Ithaca, husband of Penelope and father of the infant Telemachus, leaves home and joins the Achaean forces at Troy. The Trojan War lasts for ten years. The city of Troy is ultimately sacked and Helen recovered. Then begins the homeward journey of the survivors. A few fortunate ones -

Menelaus, Nestor, Agamemnon - succeed, while quite a few are destroyed or lost among the seas. Odysseus belongs to the latter band of the unfortunate. Another ten years pass and he is still away from home; under the magical spell of the nymph Calypso, on the island of Ogygia. His long absence is taken for certain death by his wife, son and his people. A large number of suitors turn up at Ithaca to woo Penelope. They cause a virtual havoc in the house of Odysseus, with Penelope and Telemachus watching the plunder helplessly.

Homer begins his story at this point of time. He plunges "in the middle of things" (Horace). But if we unweave the whole narrative, we find that the starting point of the thread is in Book IX, where Odysseus recaptures, before the Phaeacian audience, his terrible and variegated experiences of homecoming. His narration continues through Books X, XI and XII. It is like a smaller but more, concentrated plot, within the larger plot of the whole epic. To know the story of Odysseus' homecoming we have to begin at the point of time where he leaves Troy with his ships and his men. Remember that the actual history of Odysseus' homecoming begins with Book IX; as narrated to King Alcinous and Queen Arete in the Phaeacian palace.

4. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Books I-II: Athene visits Telemachus; the debate in Ithaca

Invocation

Homer opens the *Odyssey* with an invocation to the "divine Muse." The poet claims not only divine sources of inspiration but also divine authority. In a word, he sees himself as a prophet. Homer's invocation utters a view about the epic - namely, that the poet is the spokesman of a deity and his own personality or subjective opinions count for comparatively little. With the aid of the Muse, the poet is able to narrate myths that incorporate eternal truths. The poet, in his garland and singing robes, as Milton says, performs a ritual. The invocation establishes the long-suffering Odysseus as the central figure of the epic.

The Council of the Gods

Homer begins his story at a point of time when Odysseus is on Ogygia, in the seventh year of his stay. He has been away from Ithaca for almost twenty years. Many of his co-fighters at Troy have come back, but he is still fated to remain on Ogygia. None of his skills can bring him back to his homeland. This is the time for divine intervention, which is initiated by

Athene. Pallas Athene, daughter of Zeus, is Odysseus' mentor: he possesses a few qualities of Athene herself, which we shall note as the narrative progresses.

In the Council of the Gods, Athene pleads Odysseus' case: "the wise but unlucky Odysseus" is pining on Ogygia, where Calypso does her best to banish Ithaca from his memory (p. 4). She asks Zeus why Odysseus must be punished in this way. Zeus informs her of the blinding of Polyphemus by Odysseus. Since then, Poseidon, father of Polyphemus, has been doing his utmost to delay Odysseus' return to Ithaca. As Poseidon is away at the moment, it is decided that Hermes will carry Zeus' orders to Calypso - to release Odysseus and help him in building his boat. Odysseus must travel to Ithaca on his own.

After the meeting is over, Athene appears in Ithaca in the guise of Mentes. The situation in Ithaca is nearly anarchic. It is assumed, because of his long absence, that Odysseus must be dead. Penelope, although now a middle-aged queen, is still desirable for three reasons – she is beautiful and wise; her reluctance to a remarry adds charm to her beauty; and she is the queen of Ithaca. The man who marries her will become king of Ithaca. A large number of suitors have turned up in Ithaca to woo Penelope. She keeps them at bay for years, saying that she cannot marry until she has woven a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. At night she secretly unravels what she has woven in the daytime.

Telemachus, who was a baby when Odysseus left for Troy, is now a grown-up young man. He is deeply grieved, like his mother, to see the property of his father being plundered by the unwanted suitors. Athene finds Telemachus sitting among the suitors, dreaming of how his noble father might come back and drive the suitors out. It is he who notices the presence of Athene in the form of Mentes. He welcomes her and offers his hospitality. She observes that Telemachus looks exactly like his father and remarks that the behavior of Telemachus' guests is unseemly. Telemachus expresses his anguish at the fact that there was "no famous end" for his father (p. 9). He is also puzzled by the behaviour of Penelope, who neither refuses nor accepts any of the suitors. Athene notices diffidence in Telemachus. She encourages him by remarking that he is no more a child. He should act like the son of Agamemnon, Prince Orestes, who avenged the murder of his father by Aegisthus. Athene's plan for Telemachus is to take a firm stand, and to set out in search of his father by contacting Nestor at Pylos and Menelaus at Sparta. They will give him specific information regarding his father.

After Athene's departure, Telemachus feels a change in himself. He is no more diffident and has a definite scheme with him. He guesses that the visitor must have been

some god. This change is reflected dramatically in his rebuke to Penelope: "I am master in this house" (p. 12). The suitors too notice the change in Telemachus' demeanour, when he orders them to feast themselves elsewhere. He expresses his wish to destroy them in no uncertain terms. The suitors are amazed at the audacity of Telemachus. Homer handles young Telemachus with superb realism. When Telemachus tries to assume authority as "master" of the house, he overdoes it, rebuking his mother, making empty threats, and filling himself with overconfidence.

Public Meeting

Since the departure of Odysseus, there has been no public meeting in the market place in Ithaca. Inspired by Athene, Telemachus calls a public meeting. The first speech is by an elderly hero, whose son sailed with Odysseus. He asks if Telemachus has some news of their king's return. Telemachus replies that he has no news of his father and wishes rather to denounce the suitors publicly. He explains that since he is too young and "quite untrained to fight," he is unable himself to make them behave properly, and asks the suitors to go about their courtship according to custom (p. 16).

One of the suitors, Antinous, criticizes Telemachus for putting the whole blame on them. He points out that Penelope is no less responsible for the state of things. The suitors have found out about her unravelling the shroud at night. For more than three years she has kept them on tenterhooks. Antinous calls Penelope, "an incomparable schemer" (p. 17). He advises Telemachus to send his mother to her father, thus officially recognizing the death of Odysseus. Telemachus refuses, and in the heat of his anger, prophesizes unwittingly that Odysseus will return and kill all the suitors. As he speaks, two eagles appear above them and fight until they are bloody. The Ithacan prophet, Halistheres, interprets this as a sign that Telemachus is right: "Odysseus is not going to be parted from his friends much longer" (p. 19).

Now Telemachus announces that he is going in a ship to get definite information of his father's welfare. If he learns that Odysseus is dead, he will come back, build him a mound, and give his mother's hand to a new husband. This diplomatic move saves the already explosive situation from precipitating. Both Penelope and Telemachus are wise enough to realize that they cannot fight the suitors as they are united in their purpose, however evil it may be. What is required is strategy. Penelope uses her strategy to ward off the suitors, Telemachus uses his. He has proved himself in "debate," now he has to prove himself in "action." Athene appears before him in the person of Mentor and remarks: "Today

has proved you, Telemachus," and adds that his father's "manly vigour" has descended to him. Telemachus is not found "lacking in Odysseus' wits" (p. 22). What he now requires is a journey into the world outside Ithaca; to meet men of significance, like Nestor and Menelaus.

Telemachus informs only his nurse Eurycleia of his journey, forbidding her to tell his mother anything till twelve days are over. Athene, disguised as Telemachus, gathers twenty of his men for the journey and then lulls the suitors to sleep. In Mentor's guise, she leads Telemachus and his men on their journey to Pylos.

Ithaca

Books I and II portray the world of Ithaca in detail. The "sea-girt" Ithaca is at present a melting-pot of trouble. The wife, the son, and friends of Odysseus keep on reiterating their wish for him to come back to settle accounts with the suitors, who are guilty of one of the worst kinds of Greek vices – excess. Odysseus is moderation itself, an important Greek virtue. The Ithacan society is projected as a society of swineherds and cowmen. Penelope is projected as an epitome of fidelity, and Telemachus, worthy son of worthy father, is set upon the process of gradual maturing by Athene.

Check Your Progress

i) Why, according to Zeus, is Poseidon punishing Odysseus?

ii) Disguised as, first, Mentes and then Mentor, Athene helps Telemachus. Illustrate how.

iii) Describe the behaviour of the suitors in Odysseus' home.

iv) How does Penelope succeed in keeping her suitors at bay?

Books III & IV: Pylos and Sparta

Telemachus reaches Pylos at dawn. The people of Pylos have gathered at the shore to offer a sacrifice to Poseidon. Athene, as Mentor, advises him: "you must forget your diffidence" (p. 27). But Telemachus is not diffident; he is "wary." He wants to know how he should approach Nestor. This is his first experience of preparing himself to see a man of importance.

The Ithacans are greeted cordially by Nestor, who politely makes inquiries regarding their identity and the purpose of their visit. Inspired by Athene and helped by his dormant "native wit," Telemachus delivers a long speech worthy of a nobleman. He requests Nestor to tell him all about Odysseus. Nestor is happy to see the son of Odysseus and sings praises of

his wisdom, bravery, and strategic skills. Nestor reveals himself as a good storyteller and his descriptions are vivid. He narrates his homecoming in detail. It was not easy. He knows that Agamemnon, on reaching his homeland, was killed by Aegisthus; who was later on killed by Orestes, son of Agamemnon. He has also heard about the problems that Penelope and Telemachus have been facing in Ithaca. He hopes that Odysseus comes back and destroys the suitors. But Telemachus is not hopeful: "we can no longer count on father's return" (p. 33). Note how the story of Agamemnon keeps recurring as a motif in the *Odyssey*. In a later episode, Odysseus will meet Agamemnon's soul at the Halls of Hades. (Book XI)

Since Nestor is not in a position to tell Telemachus about the exact whereabouts of Odysseus, he advises him to go over land to Sparta to visit Menelaus. He offers his son, Peisistratus, the same age as Telemachus, as a travelling companion. Mentor (Athene) declines to go with them and disappears on her way back to the ship. After another great and elaborate feast, Telemachus and Peisistratus set out by chariot for the two-day journey to Sparta.

Pylos, like Ithaca, is a sea-port. Except for its greater wealth, it could not have been too different a society from what Telemachus already knew in Ithaca. Yet here are men who have seen his father ten years more recently than any Ithacan. For the first time, Telemachus moves out into the great world where he meets men who have fought in a great war and travelled long distances. The experience furthers the process of his maturing.

Sparta

As at Pylos, Telemachus arrives in Sparta during a feast. But here he does not need to introduce himself. They are recognized by Menelaus as aristocrats and that is enough for him. Both Telemachus and Peisistratus are cordially invited to the banquet. Menelaus talks about his travels to distant places and laments one man, Odysseus, "who toiled the hardest and undertook the most" at Troy. He still wonders whether Odysseus is dead or not. He surmises that Laertes, Penelope and Telemachus must be already "mourning him for dead" (p. 144).

Tears roll down Telemachus' cheeks when he hears of his father. Menelaus is puzzled and embarrassed. At this moment, Helen appears. She is the woman for whom the Trojan war was fought. For Telemachus and Peisistratus, she is a history book come alive before their eyes. Helen looks long at Telemachus and declares that he must be King Odysseus' son, "for never in man or woman have I seen such a likeness before" (p. 44). Menelaus agrees with her and now understands the meaning of Telemachus' tears.

Telemachus and Peisistratus now introduce themselves properly. Menelaus is overjoyed to see the son of his best friend who undertook all those heroic tasks "for love of me" (p. 45). He talks about the Wooden Horse in which he sat with Odysseus and the others. Odysseus' action in the Horse is another example of his "pluck and resolution." As the stories go on, Helen slips a sleeping potion in their wine so that they "forget the tearful mood" (p. 48).

Next day Menelaus tells of his adventurous homecoming. Like Odysseus, but to a much lesser degree, he was thwarted in his return, and had to wrestle with the sea god, Proteus. Menelaus' narration of his adventures foreshadows the much longer, more difficult and unfortunate adventures of Odysseus. The purpose of Menelaus' story at this juncture is to remind us that homecoming is no less difficult a task than fighting in a war. Menelaus tells Telemachus about what he heard from Proteus, the old Man of the Sea. Proteus told him the tragic story of his brother, Agamemnon, killed treacherously by his own wife and her lover; and Ajax, who drowned at sea. As for "the third" (Odysseus), Proteus saw him last in the Nymph Calypso's home. Menelaus invites Telemachus to prolong his visit, but Telemachus, having achieved what he had set out for, politely refuses the invitation and expresses the wish to go back.

At this point, Homer takes us back to Ithaca where two things have happened in the absence of Telemachus. The suitors have discovered that Telemachus has secretly departed and conclude that he has gone to Pylos and Sparta to seek help from the comrades of Odysseus against them. They, therefore, rig a ship and sail out to murder him on his return, around the cape between Ithaca and Samos. Antinous takes charge of the murderous expedition. Penelope has discovered Telemachus' absence and also finds out about the evil scheme of the suitors to kill her son. She is informed of it by Medon, the herald. That night Athene, in the form of Iphthime, Penelope's sister, visits her in a dream. Athene consoles her by saying that no harm will come to her son since Athene herself is escorting him. Penelope wants to know if her sister has heard of Odysseus also. But Athene gives her no information. The dream comforts Penelope's broken heart.

Note

Telemachus dominates the action from Book I to Book IV. It is also known as the *Telemachy*. Telemachus has to prove himself both in "action and debate." He reveals the dormant qualities that he has inherited from his father. By the time we reach Book IV, Telemachus grows from a diffident boy into a confident young man.

Homer establishes many things in the first four books. He has formed a frame for his larger story; showing us, in detail, the world from which Odysseus has come and to which he is about to return. A sense of urgency that Odysseus must return soon is created. We are shown a world that was plain and familiar to the Greek audience: a world of ships and farms, mothers and sons, and hospitality and sacrifices. This world is Odysseus' home.

Check Your Progress

i) Why are the first four books of the Odyssey called the Telemachy?

ii) What does Telemachus learn about his father from Menelaus?

iii) How does Athene comfort Penelope?

Book V: Calypso and Ogygia

In an assembly of the gods, Athene asks her father Zeus why Odysseus is "left to languish in misery, a captive on Calypso's island" (p. 63). Zeus assures Athene that it is "ordained" that Odysseus will be reunited with his family and friends. He orders Hermes to go the nymph Calypso, with instructions to release Odysseus. Homer takes us to Ogygia where Odysseus has been living under Calypso's magical spell for seven years after having arrived there all alone in a wretched state. This is the seventh year of his unwanted confinement. While his wife longs for his return and his son sets out to get definite information about him, Odysseus, sitting on the shores of Ogygia, "his eyes wet with weeping," looks across the watery wilderness (p. 65).

Ogygia is an island, with a paradise-like peace and beauty. Even the gods gaze at its beauty "in wonder and delight" (p. 64). Calypso is a beautiful nymph, a lesser goddess, who rescued Odysseus when he was drifting alone, astride the keel of his ship. She welcomed him with open arms, tended him, and hoped to give him "immortality and ageless youth." Odysseus never accepts her ambrosia as the image of his home keeps him safe from the final assault of Calypso. For the Greek mind, home was a term that comprised a man's wife, children, neighbours, country, and people. Home meant belonging. Ithaca stands nowhere before Ogygia in beauty and serenity. It is a rocky place populated by swineherds, whereas Ogygia is a miniature of the Garden of Eden, populated only by Calypso, animals and birds. Penelope is not as beautiful as Calypso and she is certainly subject to Time. She must have reached her middle-age now. But, then, Penelope is his wife whereas Calypso is not. It is not easy to define their relationship. Calypso really loves Odysseus, but she is not his mistress.

As a matter of fact, she keeps Odysseus. Although Odysseus sleeps with her, the relationship cannot be compared to his relationship with his wife. He pines for Penelope; he responds coldly to Calypso. He is a "cold lover with an ardent dame" (p. 67).

When Hermes reaches Ogygia with Zeus' specific orders, he finds her at home, singing in a beautiful voice as she works on her loom. Hermes enjoys the paradise-like scene and enters the cavern. Calypso, a goddess herself, recognizes him at once. At the moment, Odysseus is out at the shore "tormenting himself with tears, sighs and heartache" (p. 65).

Calypso welcomes Hermes, offers him ambrosia and asks the purpose of his visit. On hearing the orders of Zeus, Calypso is filled with bitterness: "A cruel folk you are, unmatched for jealousy" (p. 66). She knows well that she belongs to the godly society which prohibits a goddess from sleeping with a mortal. She recalls the tragic fate of Dawn and Demeter, two goddesses, who were punished for their ungodly conduct: their lovers were killed. Now it is Calypso's turn to incur "divine displeasure" (p. 66). She agrees reluctantly to help Odysseus in his attempt to go back home.

The first words of Odysseus in the epic are typical: he distrusts Calypso. He demands her solemn oath that she will not plot some new mischief against him. Calypso calls him "a villain" lovingly and remarks that his mind works in a "crafty way" (p. 67). Caution is one of the major characteristics of Odysseus. She convinces him of her good intentions. Then begin the preparations for Odysseus' departure. They eat, make love, and begin the four-day building of the boat. Homer describes the making of the boat in detail to satisfy the demands of his audience. When the boat is ready, Calypso calls up a gentle breeze and Odysseus sets sail.

Guided by the Great Bear constellation, Odysseus sails in the sea for seventeen days. It is a powerful image of a lonely man, all alone in the open sea, driven by hope to reach some human habitation. On the eighteenth day, Odysseus approaches the shadowy mountains of Phaeacia. But Poseidon has not yet settled his score with him. The sight of Odysseus sailing over the seas makes him furious. He knows that Odysseus is destined to reach home in the end. But he delays Odysseus' homecoming by sending a terrible storm.

The boat breaks into splinters and Odysseus is forced to swim. He would have drowned if the sea-nymph Leukotheo had not given him her magical veil. Athene too intervenes, causing the strong winds to calm down. Odysseus keeps on swimming for two days and two nights. It is a battle between the hostile forces of Nature and the "indomitable soul" of man. On the morning of the third day, he reaches the coast of Phaeacia. It is a

treacherous shore, promising no safe landing. Keeping his wits under control, Odysseus debates with himself the alternatives for landing. Finally, he discovers the mouth of a river. He swims in, gives thanks to the gods, and utterly exhausted, makes a bed of leaves for himself in a hidden place and goes to much needed sleep.

Note

Phaeacia too is an enchanted land like Ogygia. The only difference is that it has a human society. After twenty years of wandering among strange places, Odysseus reaches a place which has a unique position in the geography of the epic. Phaeacia is the place where the process of restoration of Odysseus in human society will begin. It is the place, between Ogygia and Ithaca, where we have to judge whether the terrible experiences of ten years have blotted from Odysseus' mind his knowledge of the morals and manners of a human settlement. Calypso's island is a model of supernatural bliss, a quiet paradise. Phaeacia is a model of human excellence in the art of living well. Neither is acceptable to Odysseus for the simple reason that neither is the home of his wife and son. He yearns for his hearth.

Check Your Progress

i) Describe Calypso's island?

ii) What message does Hermes bring for Calypso?

iii) How does Poseidon cause further trouble for Odysseus?

Books VI-VIII: Nausicaa; the Phaeacian Games

While Odysseus lies asleep in his bed of leaves, Athene appears in a dream to Nausicaa, the young daughter of King Alcinous. She appears as a friend of Nausicaa's and suggests that she should gather all the clothes that she will need for her wedding, take them to the clear springs near the sea and wash them. Too shy to tell her father the truth, she expresses a desire to wash the family's clothes. Pleased, King Alcinous provides her with a cart and a retinue of maidens.

The girls reach the mouth of the river, unyoke the mules and begin to wash clothes by treading upon them. It is more a game than work and the girls enjoy it. After washing and spreading the clothes to dry, the girls bathe in the river, and take their meals at the riverside. This is followed by a game of ball. This is one of the most beautiful evocations of youthful innocence in all of Classical Literature. Homer compares the girls with the nymphs and to the goddess Artemis.

Athene sees to it that the ball gets out of hand and falls into the river. The girls give a loud shriek and Odysseus is woken up in his hiding place. He wonders where he has arrived. He surmises from the female shrieks that the place is haunted by nymphs. Covering his manhood with leaves, Odysseus emerges from the bushes and moves towards the girls "like a mountain lion" (p. 79). He presents a horrifying sight and the girls run away, except Nausicaa. She stands her ground and waits. Odysseus wonders whether he should hold the girl round her knees and pray or remain at a distance and request her to give him clothing and direct him to the city. Finally, he decides to keep his distance.

Nausicaa is the first human female that Odysseus comes across, ten years since the fall of Troy. He has been with Circe for one year and with Calypso for seven years. It is to be noted that, in spite of all the physical and mental buffeting that he received during this period, he has not forgotten the morals and manners of human society. His speech to Nausicaa is strong evidence of the fact that Odysseus is still well aware of the ways of the human world. It leaves a favorable impression upon Nausicaa and she listens to his tale of travails in the sea with sympathy and comments that he has no choice but to endure as "it is Olympian Zeus who good fortune to men, good and bad alike" (p. 81). She informs him that the place is called Phaeacia and she is the daughter of King Alcinous.

Nausicaa calls up her maidens and orders them to offer food and drink to the "unfortunate wanderer" and bathe him in the river. Zeus demands that all strangers must be offered proper hospitality. Odysseus chooses to bathe himself in a lonely spot. At this moment, Athene again intervenes and makes him seem taller and stronger. He appears handsome, graceful, and impressive in his new clothes. Now he looks like the gods and Nausicaa admits to her maidens: "That is the kind of man whom I could fancy for a husband, if he would settle here" (p. 82). She hopes that he will choose to stay.

Nausicaa describes the city to Odysseus and instructs him to follow her after a proper gap of time to her home. These are the social constraints of the human world. A young princess cannot afford to cause unpleasant gossip by appearing in the city along with a total stranger. She instructs Odysseus to wait for a while in the woods sacred to Athene. After some time, he must go to the city and reach the King's palace. Passing through the courtyard, he must quickly enter the hall and approach her mother, Queen Arete, who is a kind lady and will help Odysseus in his journey to his homeland. Giving these specific instructions, Nausicaa leaves with her maidens and Odysseus prays to Athene in her sacred grove.

While Odysseus prays to Athene in the poplar grove, Nausicaa reaches the palace and is greeted by her brothers. She goes straight to her own apartments. Meanwhile, Odysseus

walks to the town. Athene envelops him in a thick mist to ensure his security in his invisibility. On the way Odysseus is met by Athene, disguised as a girl with a wine jug on her shoulder. She directs him to the palace. While moving towards their destination, Athene informs Odysseus that Phaeacians have little affection for strangers and do not welcome visitors with open arms. They are a sea-faring people, though they have little contact with the rest of the world. They are, in fact, especially set aside by the gods as a happy, insular people whose prosperity and well-being are magically endowed. It is a kind of divine compensation for many years of trouble in their homeland before they came to Phaeacia. Phaeacians are thus a human society presided over with benevolence by the gods.

Odysseus is impressed by the docks he passes by unseen. He approaches the bronze threshold of the palace with misgivings. He is greatly impressed by the architecture of the palace. It is all bronze with golden doors swung on silver poles. The door handles are of gold. The outside walls have a covering of blue enamel tiles. Gold and silver dogs built by the divine smith Hephaestus guard the gates. Golden statues of athletes hold the torches that light up the great hall. Homer displays equal interest in the opulence of the magic orchards around the palace. Odysseus marvels at this natural and man-made wealth, displaying the Greek love of beauty and material things. Then he enters the palace. There he finds Phaeacian chieftains and counsellors offering libations from their cups to Hermes, the Giant Slayer. As advised by Nausicaa, he marches straight up the hall, wrapped in the mist, reaches Queen Arete and throws his arms around her knees. At the same moment, the magic mist evaporates and Odysseus becomes visible to the banqueters. They stare at him silently in great amazement. Odysseus pleads that he is a man of ill luck, given so many misfortunes by the gods that he cannot take the time to tell them.

King Alcinous generously offers Odysseus a seat of honour, feeds him and displays a great sense of hospitality that is similar to the hospitality offered to Telemachus at Pylos and Sparta. This gracious hospitality provides a deep contrast to the hard adventure on the sea that has just passed, and to the seven years of Odysseus' forced stay on Ogygia. King Alcinous addresses his counsellors, suggesting active help for Odysseus in his mission to reach his home. After the guests leave, Arete asks him who he is and where he comes from. More pointedly, she asks him who gave him those clothes, because she recognizes some that she herself has made.

Odysseus, in a guarded manner, narrates his horrifying adventure in the sea from Ogygia to Phaeacia. He also narrates how he was welcomed and treated kindly by the princess. Alcinous remarks that the princess should have brought him straight home with her.

To support Nausicaa, Odysseus observes that it would have been an immodest act and he himself declined to do so: "We men are naturally suspicious" (p. 92). Alcinous offers him his daughter in case he is willing to stay at Phaeacia. But if he wishes to go to his homeland, it would be improper to detain him. Alcinous promises to send Odysseus in one of his ships, escorted by his best sailors, to his country the very next day.

In the morning, King Alcinous calls an assembly of his citizens to announce that a ship must be prepared to carry the stranger (Odysseus has not revealed his identity as yet) to his native country, however far it may be. Once it is settled that a crew of fifty-two men will take Odysseus home in a black ship, the assembly moves to the palace to eat and drink and hear the bard Demodocus sing. This blind bard is a singer, like Homer himself. It has been supposed, since classical times, that Homer has inserted a self-portrait here.

Demodocus, accompanying himself on the lyre, sings a narrative poem about Odysseus and Achilles and their heroic deeds in the Trojan war. It is ironic that Odysseus has to hear about his own deeds. This also indicates that he and his deeds have become history, thus suggesting that people have taken him for dead. Many times, during the recital, Odysseus is moved to tears and hides his face from the audience. Observing this, King Alcinous orders the recital to stop and the games to begin; to change the sad mood of his guest.

Phaeacian champions come forward to wrestle, jump, throw the discus, and box. Homer lists the names of the champion Phaeacian athletes in four lines. The listing of names is an epic convention. Odysseus, still weary from his long swim in the stormy sea, does not participate in the games until he is provoked by an insult: "I should never have taken you for an athlete, good at any of the games men play" (p. 98). For a Greek hero, no remark could be more stingingly insulting. With a "black look," Odysseus retorts that Euryalus' speech is "an unbecoming speech." He leaps to his feet, picks up the biggest disc of all and, with one swing, launches it from his right hand. The Phaeacians cower down as the disc hurtles through the air and overshoots the marks of all the other throws. Then Odysseus challenges the Phaeacian athletes to compete with him in boxing, wrestling, even running. He gives a hint as to who he might be: "Philoctetes was the only one who used to beat me with the bow when we Achaeans practiced archery at Troy" (p. 99). The reference to Troy is enough to suggest his heroic stature. But the Phaeacians are too well-bred to press him to tell his name.

To divert Odysseus' mood of anger, Alcinous once again orders more music and poetry. This time, young Phaeacian men dance while Demodocus sings the comic tale about

Ares (God of War) and Aphrodite (Goddess of Love), who was the wife of Hephaestus. The song tells how Ares and Aphrodite became lovers and how Hephaestus found out about it and made a net of finely spun gold to catch them in a compromising position. Then he called the gods to witness the wrong. The gods roared with "inextinguishable laughter" at the comic situation. So do the Phaeacians and Odysseus.

After the entertainment, the Phaeacians offer Odysseus many gifts which he promptly locks up against theft, on the advice of Queen Arete. While he goes to join the men after having a bath, he meets Nausicaa who eyes him with frank admiration. She wishes him a good journey and hopes that he will remember her in his own country. Odysseus responds with warmth that he will always worship her since she saved him from certain death and gave him a new life. If we compare Nausicaa with Calypso, we notice that both save him and love him. Whereas Calypso was possessive and demanding, Nausicaa understands Odysseus' feelings for his wife and family and does not impose herself upon him.

Going to the men, Odysseus enjoys the good fare and praises Demodocus for his moving poetry. Then he requests the blind bard to sing of the Wooden Horse. Odysseus listens with mixed feelings of delight and grief to a recitation of history in which he played a major role. Once again, he breaks down. Tears flow down his cheeks. King Alcinous now considers it imperative to enquire about his identity. He orders the song to be stopped and politely makes inquiries about Odysseus' identity. Odysseus finally introduces himself and narrates his history of various adventures; from the point of his departure from Troy to the point of his arrival in Ogygia (Books IX - XII). His tale of strange adventures casts such a spell upon the listeners that there is complete silence. (Homer has here compressed ten years of Odysseus' life-history into one night's tale by using the clever device of making Odysseus the narrator.) King Alcinous sympathetically remarks that Odysseus has suffered much and reiterates his promise of sending him to his country in a black ship.

Note

This episode is a contrast to the previous episode of Odysseus' journey from Ogygia to Phaeacia. The former episode shows up the quality of heroic endurance in Odysseus. The latter episode reveals Odysseus as a cultivated man of intelligence and good breeding. The encounter of the naked Odysseus, modestly dressed in a leaf branch, and the aristocratic princess, the youngest of her family, has fascinated readers for two thousand years. It has the clarity of simple drama. A young girl falls in love with a middle-aged man at first sight. The man is equally charmed by her fresh youth and extraordinary beauty. The girl expresses her

wish to marry such a man, if possible. Homer leaves the situation unresolved, making the episode all the more intriguing.

Check Your Progress

i) Why does Nausicaa go to the riverside to wash clothes?

ii) Describe how Odysseus is received by King Alcinous and Queen Arete.

iii) What happens at the Phaeacian games?

iv) Why does Odysseus weep on hearing Demodocus sing?

Book IX: The Cyclops

Remember that the next four books, IX-XII, are in flashback mode and narrated by Odysseus. He tells how, after sacking Troy, the surviving Greek heroes embarked upon their journey back home. Odysseus has his own fleet of ships and his own men. They make their first disembarkation at Ismarus, the city of the Cicones, who supported the Trojans in the war. Odysseus, the "Sacker of Cities," finds moral justification in sacking Ismarus since it belongs to friends of the enemy. After the sacking, looting, and capturing of women, Odysseus orders a quick retreat as he expects retaliation from the Cicones, but his "fools of men" refuse and keep on drinking and butchering sheep on the shore. In the meantime, the Cicones gather their forces and counter-attack at dawn. A pitched battle is fought throughout the day. Towards sunset the Cicones gain the upper hand and break the Achaean ranks. Six of Odysseus' men are killed. The rest of them contrive to dodge the attack and make good their escape.

Mourning for the dead, they run into a terrible gale from the north. The ships are driven sidelong by the wind, causing disorientation in the course. The sails are torn to rags and tatters. The gale lasts for two days and two nights. On the third morning, a beautiful dawn ushers in. They are relieved but the North Wind has done damage. It has driven them off their course, drifting past Cytherea. On the tenth day, they reach the country of the Lotus-eaters. It is a land of sultry weather and tropical vegetation, inhabited by "a race that lives on vegetable foods." The Lotus-eaters do not kill Odysseus' men but they kill their will to go back home. Here the adventure is of a different kind, more psychological than physical, and, therefore, more dangerous and damaging. Only Odysseus can perceive the serious threat in the magic narcotic, *lotos*, which in Greek means 'forgetfulness.' His men wish to stay back in the place but he collects them forcibly and orders immediate departure. Odysseus is a man of

strong will and Homer keeps on putting his indomitable will against both brute force and seductive invasion through lazy submissiveness. But in his men the process of weakening of will has already been initiated.

The Cyclops

This is followed by the encounter with the giant, one-eyed Cyclops named Polyphemus. It is one of the most elaborate adventures of Odysseus and his men, who reach the land of the Cyclopes, "a fierce and uncivilized people" (p. 113). The Cyclopes have no assemblies, no laws, no settled customs. They live in hollow caverns with their families. But they have no definite social structure: "each man is lawgiver to his children and wives, and nobody cares a jot for his neighbours" (p. 113).

Odysseus and his men land at the Goat Island which is near the coast but uninhabited. It is a luxuriant island, covered with woods and home to innumerable goats. Odysseus observes that the Cyclopes know nothing about ships or they would have turned the Goat Island into a fine colony. Odysseus and his men are delighted with the view of the island. They hunt goats and eat and drink. Then Odysseus leads a foraging party to the mainland, enters the giant's cave, and is trapped there by the giant Polyphemus, when he returns to his cave with his goats. He closes the mouth of the cave with a huge boulder which no human power can move.

When Polyphemus notices the strangers in the cave, he wants to know who they are. Hoping that the giant knows the laws of hospitality and fears Zeus, Odysseus tells him who they are, where they are coming from and where they are going. But his hopes are dashed. The giant declares that the Cyclopes do not care for Zeus and the gods since they are much stronger than them. He wants to know where Odysseus has moored his ship. Odysseus is not taken in by the giant. He informs the giant that his ship was wrecked by Poseidon, the Earthshaker. Ironically, he does not know that Polyphemus is the son of Poseidon

Polyphemus picks up two of Odysseus' men, dashes their heads against the floor and eats them up. It is a gory sight, watched in horror by Odysseus and his men. When the giant lies down to sleep, Odysseus begins to think of a plan. He could kill the giant with his sword while he's asleep but then he and his men would perish in the cave since no one but the giant can move the huge boulder. He discards the idea and waits for a suitable opportunity. The giant wakes up in the morning, makes a gory breakfast of two more of Odysseus' men, turns his sheep out of the cave and goes out, replacing the huge doorstone.

Odysseus' brain begins to hatch a workable plan to get out of the difficult situation. Blinding the giant's eye in his sleep appears to him to be the only solution. All day long, Odysseus and his men prepare a pointed olive stake and hide it under the dung of the sheep. When the giant comes back in the evening, he makes a supper of two more men. Odysseus now offers him wine to wash down the human flesh. Three bowls of wine begin to fuddle the giant's wits. Odysseus tells the giant that his name is Nobody. The giant cruelly remarks that he will eat Nobody last. Then he topples over and vomits.

Odysseus runs to the olive stake, heats it up under the ashes and drives it into the giant's eye. While his men seize the huge stake, Odysseus uses his weight to twist it home like a drill. The giant gives a dreadful shriek, pulls the stake from his blinded eye and raises a great shout for the neighbouring Cyclopes. The neighbours rush to the cave and demand to know who is trying to kill him. Polyphemus replies that "it's Nobody's treachery" (p. 120). The neighbours go back and the stupid giant goes without help.

In the meantime, Odysseus executes the latter part of his plan. Odysseus and his men hide themselves beneath the sheep in the morning, to evade the giant's searching hands. The giant opens the door and sends out his sheep to pasture. It is one of the moments of great tension in the *Odyssey* and one of Odysseus' cleverest tricks. Once outside the cave, Odysseus and his men run to the safety of their ships and put to sea.

Then, overcome with human vanity, Odysseus informs Polyphemus that his real name is "Odysseus, the Sacker of Cities, the son of Laertes, who lives in Ithaca" (p. 123). Polyphemus gives a groan and declares that the old prophecy has come to him with a vengeance. He invites Odysseus to come back and receive gifts from him. But Odysseus does not fall into the trap. The angry giant retaliates by throwing huge rocks at the ships, barely missing them. Polyphemus then prays to his father, Poseidon, to never allow Odysseus to reach his home. And if he is destined to reach his native land, he should arrive there late: all alone and in poor condition. The prayer is heard and granted by Poseidon.

This adventure is significant from two points of view. It reveals the strategic skills of Odysseus, his cool-headed temperament, and also his vanity which costs him a ten-year delay in his home-coming. It is also a turning point in the action. Instead of moving toward the human world, Odysseus is driven towards a super-human world.

Check Your Progress

i) Describe the Land of the Lotus Eaters.

ii) How do Odysseus and his men manage to escape from Polyphemus' cave?

iii) How does Polyphemus curse Odysseus?

Book X: Circe

Their next landfall is Aeolia, the floating island of the god of winds, Aeolus. All round this island runs an unbroken wall of bronze and below it, sheer cliffs rise from the sea. It is a place of supernatural strangeness. The atmosphere is pervaded with the fragrance of flowers and the sound of flutes. Here, Odysseus and his men spend a month, happy and content. It is a much-required relief after the harrowing experience of the Cyclops. At the end of the month, before sending him off, Aeolus gives Odysseus a leather bag, in which he has imprisoned the "boisterous winds," with directions not to open it (p. 125).

They sail on comfortably for nine days and on the tenth are in sight of Ithaca. They can see the people tending their fires. Odysseus, utterly exhausted, goes to sleep. His "fools of men" have a discussion regarding the bag given by Aeolus. They suspect that the bag contains rich gifts which Odysseus does not intend to share with his men. Evil counsels carry the day and the men open the bag. The results are disastrous. The winds rush out of the bag followed by a terrible tempest. The ships are carried away from Ithaca towards the open sea. When Odysseus wakes up, he is aghast to see the vanishing landscape of Ithaca. His instant impulse is to jump overboard, but he accepts the terrible situation with his characteristic stoicism. The whole fleet is driven back by the winds to Aeolia. Odysseus hopes that king Aeolus may help him again but, to his dismay, he finds Aeolus in a fury. He denounces Odysseus as a man of bad luck and refuses to entertain and equip a man detested by the gods.

Odysseus has no alternative but to keep on sailing. After a week, they reach Telepylus, the Stronghold of Lamus, in the Laestrygonian land. The Laestrygonians are a huge, ugly and cannibalistic people. They fall upon Odysseus' men with rocks thrown from the top of cliffs. It is total massacre. All the ships, except Odysseus', are destroyed. His men are killed and eaten. Using his presence of mind, Odysseus escapes with his ship and a few men in it. The significance of this terrible adventure lies in the fact that, gradually, Odysseus is being cut off from human companionship. The process reaches its climax on the island of Ogygia.

Circe

In due course, the lonely ship with its grieving crew arrives at the mysterious island of Aeaea, the home of the beautiful Circe, a formidable goddess, though her voice is like a woman's. Homer builds up this episode carefully and elaborately in stages. The strange aspect of the place is slowly and dramatically revealed. They land and mourn their dead companions for two days. On the third day, Odysseus goes off by himself. He sights smoke coming from a house, which is Circe's house. Odysseus is in two minds. Although a man of action, he thinks before acting. He decides to go back and send out a scouting team after they have had their meals. On his way back he hunts a huge stag. The rest of the day is spent in eating and the night in sleep. Odysseus perceives the demoralized condition of his men. Like a true leader, he boosts up their morale by declaring that they are not going down below just then.

The next morning, he gathers his men around and divides them into two well-armed parties with a commander for each. He takes charge of one party. Eurylochus is appointed the leader of the other party. Then they shake lots in a bronze helmet. It goes to Eurylochus' lot to explore the island with his party. The scouting team comes upon Circe's house, built of dressed stone and standing in the middle of a forest dell. The house is surrounded by prowling wolves and lions, who are actually victims of Circe's magic. They do not attack the men. Instead, they caress them and wag their tails in welcome. Their abnormal behaviour and huge size terrify the party. They take refuge in the porch of Circe's castle.

From there they can hear Circe within, singing in her beautiful voice while working upon her loom and producing dazzling fabrics for the goddesses. Eurylochus and his men shout to attract her attention. The next moment Circe comes out, opens the door and invites them in. Eurylochus suspects a trap and stays outside. His men are greeted with warmth and respect by Circe who offers them a dish which contains a powerful drug. The drug destroys their memory. Then Circe strikes them with her magic wand and the men turn into swine. She pens them in the pigsties. The suffering of the men is terrible. Although transformed physically, their intellect remains human. They shed tears at their helplessness.

Eurylochus is spared the misery as he stays out. Horrified, he rushes back with his terrible report. Odysseus at once gets ready and orders Eurylochus to escort him to Circe's house. But Eurylochus is so terrified that he refuses to accompany him. Odysseus goes alone as it is his "bounden duty" (p. 132). On his way, he comes across Hermes in the guise of a handsome young man. He understands Odysseus' plight and offers help. This is the first of many instances of divine help which come to Odysseus, mostly through Athene. Hermes

explains Circe's magic to Odysseus and gives him an antidote. Odysseus reaches Circe's house and calls. Circe opens the door and invites him in. Armed with the antidote, Odysseus is not affected by Circe's magic drug. And when she touches him with her magic wand, Odysseus draws his sword and rushes at her as though he intends to kill her. At once, Circe falls at his knees and surrenders. She guesses that he must be Odysseus, "the man whom nothing defeats" (p. 133). She implores him to trust her and become her lover.

Odysseus puts down his conditions: she must transform his men back into their human form and she must take an oath not to try any more of her magic tricks on him. Circe complies and advises Odysseus to bring his men from the ship to her house. They stay on the island for one whole year to restore their strength. At the end of one year, Odysseus' men reproach him for overstaying with Circe. They remind him of the basic purpose of their wanderings. Odysseus approaches Circe regarding the matter of sending him back home. Circe advises him to first visit the Halls of Hades and Persephone and consult Teiresias, the blind Theban prophet. Odysseus almost breaks down at the prospect of visiting the World of the Dead. But soon he collects himself and asks Circe how to reach the Halls of Hades. Circe gives him specific directions and instructions. Next morning, Odysseus and his men leave Circe's island but not without a casualty: one of Odysseus' men, Elpenor, dies after falling from the roof of Circe's palace.

The Circe episode has a significant position in the adventure tale of Odysseus. On the surface it resembles a fairy tale. But it assumes dramatic significance when considered in the context of the narrative. It occurs when Odysseus and his men are almost totally demoralized; both physically and psychologically. They reached Ithaca and missed it through their folly. Aelous refused to help and they lost all their ships and men at the hands of the Laestrygonians. Circe knows all they have gone through. She promises to restore them "till you are once more the men you were when first you sailed from Ithaca" (p. 136).

Prior to the Circe episode, all the adventures have depicted a world of dangers and peculiar modes of life, unknown to Homer's audience. Now the tone of the poem subtly changes. We are taken close to the world of the imagination where the natural and the unnatural are so woven together that all things are confused; as Odysseus' companions say, "We do not know where East or West is; where the light-giving Sun rises or where he sets" (p. 130). Bestial and human life are equated in the fantasy. Circe is both malevolent and benevolent. Her nymphs are supernatural, yet they accept human lovers. Odysseus, in particular, is to be trained for his long stay under the spell of Calypso in Ogygia.

Check Your Progress

i) What happens to Odysseus' men in Circe's palace?

ii) How does Hermes help Odysseus?

iii) What does Circe ask Odysseus to do, before leaving for Ithaca?

Book XI: The Book of the Dead

The exact details of how one sails to the kingdom of Hades are mysteriously smoothed over. Homer says that the entrance is in the land of Cimmerians, at "the frontiers of the world" (p. 140). It is a place of "Perpetual Mist." Odysseus and his men beach their ship and make their way along the banks of the River of Ocean till they reach the place that Circe has described. Following her specific instructions, Odysseus digs a trench "about a cubit long and a cubit wide" (p. 141). He pours libations to all the dead around the trench, offers prayers and invocations to them and fills the trench with sheep's blood, so that the dead can sip the blood to gain strength to speak.

Ironically, the first soul to appear is that of Elpenor, recently dead. Odysseus promises him a proper burial on his return to Circe's land. Next comes the soul of Anticleia, Odysseus' mother, who died pining for him while he was away fighting in the Trojan War. Both he and his mother are shocked and deeply moved to see each other so unexpectedly. But Odysseus does not let her sip the blood. He has to follow the instructions of Circe. He must hear Teiresias before any other.

Teiresias and his prophecy

Teiresias was a great prophet when he was alive: he was King Oedipus' seer in Thebes as we learn from the play by Sophocles. He is now the only ghost whose mental powers have not perished with the death of his body. The mind of Teiresias lives on in the Halls of Hades. This was a gift to him from Persephone, Queen of the Dead.

Teiresias knows that Odysseus is in search of an easy and short way to Ithaca. He warns Odysseus that he will not be forgiven by Poseidon for blinding his son, Polyphemus. Notwithstanding that, he and his men may reach Ithaca, but not without difficulties, if Odysseus keeps a strict control over himself and his men when their ship approaches Thrinacie, a place belonging to Hyperion, the Sun God. There they will come across the holy cattle of Hyperion. If Odysseus and his men leave the cattle untouched, there is a chance that

all of them may reach Ithaca. If they hurt the cattle, they and the ship will be destroyed. Even if Odysseus himself manages to escape the wrath of Hyperion, his passage to home has been ordained to be delayed. He will reach Ithaca all alone in a foreign ship and find trouble in his house; "a set of scoundrels eating up your stores, making love to your royal consort, and offering wedding gifts" (p. 143). He will be able to wreak vengeance upon the "scoundrels" either in a straight fight or through a calculated strategy. Teiresias warns Odysseus that his task does not end with the extermination of the unwanted suitors. He advises Odysseus to take a well-cut oar and go on till he reaches a people who know nothing about the sea and have never tasted salt. The exact clue will be someone mistaking his oar for a winnowing fan. At that point, he must stick the oar in the sand and offer a sacrifice to Lord Poseidon. As regards Odysseus' end, Teiresias predicts that death will come to him "far away from the sea" and after "an easy old age and surrounded by a prosperous people" (p. 143). The sea has been the cause of Odysseus' suffering and he will be spared further travails.

Anticleia

After Teiresias' prophecy, Odysseus speaks with the soul of his mother. She tells him about Penelope's sorrow and how she has "schooled her heart to patience" (p. 144). The kingdom of Odysseus is still in "peaceful possession" of Telemachus. But Odysseus' father has become a recluse in the country. Anticleia gives a graphic picture of Laertes' way of life. As for Anticleia herself; she died of "heartache" for her missing son. Odysseus is so deeply moved by his mother's words that he tries three times to embrace her, but each time he fails. The failure causes him an even sharper pain. Anticleia informs him that he is witnessing the laws of "mortal nature." One cannot hold the soul in one's arms since the soul has no substance.

After Anticleia, follows a succession of the heroic mothers and grandmothers of Greek tragedy, each with a story of her own. They are followed by the ghosts of the heroes who fought at Troy. The first to appear is Agamemnon, whose brother's wife Helen was the cause of the Trojan War. Odysseus knows nothing about the tragic fate of Agamemnon, who tells him that he and his companions were murdered on their return by Aegisthus, the lover of Agamemnon's wife, Clyaetemnestra. Aegisthus took them all to his own palace and while they were feasting, killed him as a man kills "an ox at its manger" (p. 150). It was a miserable end, not a heroic death. All round him his companions were done to death. But the worst murder was that of Cassandra, daughter of Priam, by Agamemnon's wife, Clytaemnestra. No other woman in the world could compete with her in brutality and infamy.

Agamemnon's sad tale offers a contrast between Penelope and Clytaemnestra in relation to the theme of fidelity. Agamemnon admits that Penelope will not murder Odysseus because she is "far too sound in heart and brain" (p. 151). Agamemnon calls Odysseus a lucky man who will find his faithful wife and grown-up son waiting for him. That is how things should be. But Agamemnon was not fated to a happy and loyal return. He was killed even before he could see his son, Orestes. Agamemnon offers Odysseus practical advice. Odysseus should not reveal himself when he returns to Ithaca. He should make a secret approach. Although "the wise Penelope" will not act like Clytaemnestra, women are no longer to be trusted. Odysseus must first find out the facts, in disguise, before revealing himself. Later on, we shall see that Odysseus follows Agamemnon's advice and appears in Ithaca in the disguise of a beggar.

Then appears Achilles, the great hero of the Trojan War. Odysseus tells him the heroic story of Neoptolemus, his son, who fought bravely and wisely. After the fall of Troy, Neoptolemus succeeded in reaching home safe and sound in his ship, without a single wound. Next, Odysseus sees those men who must suffer eternally for their sins: Tantalus and Sisyphus. Odysseus would have stayed longer in order to meet other heroes, but suddenly thousands of ghosts appear, raising their "eerie cry." Panicking at the sight, Odysseus and his men quickly leave the Halls of Hades.

The Hades episode deepens the seriousness of the epic. Death is present throughout the narrative but, in this episode, it is brought to the fore. The earlier adventures of Odysseus took him to far-off and strange lands, great distances upon the sea. In the Hades episode, the narrative mingles past, present, and future. Odysseus gets the latest news of his household from his mother and Teiresias. But he is also warned of the problems at home. Throughout, Odysseus is directed by the desire to return home.

Check Your Progress

i) What does Teiresias predict for Odysseus?

ii) How did Anticleia die?

iii) Mention some of the great warriors of the Trojan War whom Odysseus meets.

iv) What advice does Agamemnon have for Odysseus?

Book XII: Scylla and Charybdis

On his return from the Halls of Hades, Odysseus keeps his promise to Elpenor by giving him a proper burial. Then he narrates to Circe the whole adventure of the visit to the kingdom of Hades. Circe tells him what is going to follow. His next encounter will be with the Sirens. She gives him specific instructions to avoid the temptations of the Sirens. This will be followed by another encounter, more intriguing and dangerous, with Syclla and Charybdis. If he and his men succeed in passing through safely between Scylla and Charybdis, they will reach the land of Hyperion. Like Teiresias, Circe too warns Odysseus against harming the cattle of Hyperion.

The Sirens

Odysseus and his men set out under a favourable wind called up by Circe. Odysseus is perturbed by the prospect of difficulties waiting for them. He passes on Circe's instructions regarding the Sirens to his men. The Sirens are beautiful sea-nymphs (though many Greek pictures show them as part woman, part sea-hawk) whose sweet voices are irresistible. They are dangerous because "there is no homecoming for the man who draws near them and hears the Sirens' voices" (p. 156). With their sweet voices they cast their spell upon the listener and finish him. Odysseus has to save his men and himself from their magical spell.

When their ship approaches the Sirens' Isle, the breeze drops. Some power lulls the sea waves. The men draw in the sail and sit down at the oars. As instructed by Circe, Odysseus puts wax into the ears of his men. He asks them to tie him to the mast as a prisoner. They are ordered not to release him in any case. If he begs to be released, they should tighten his bonds. The Sirens invite him to their island in a very tempting manner. Odysseus had expected their songs to be a sexual temptation, but the song that he hears is full of praise for Odysseus' bravery as a fighter. The Sirens claim that they are all-knowing and can tell him anything he wants to know: "we know whatever happens on this fruitful earth" (p. 162). Odysseus signs his men to set him free but, as ordered by him, his men tighten his bonds. When they have sailed past the island, they take out the wax and release Odysseus. The adventure reveals a unique combination of curiosity and caution in Odysseus' character.

Scylla and Charybdis

Circe has told Odysseus that after passing the Sirens' Isle he will reach a point where he will find two passages ahead of him. One leads to the Wandering Rocks, which Odysseus should not follow. In the other direction there are two rocks. The higher of the two reaches up to the very sky. No man on earth can climb it for the rock is very smooth, promising no foothold.

But there is a mysterious cavern halfway up the rock. It is the home of Scylla, "the creature with the dreadful bark" (p. 159). Scylla is a horrible and extremely ugly monster. She has twelve feet, all dangling in the air, and six long necks, each ending in a horrible head with triple rows of teeth. Scylla is sunk in the depths of the cave, up to her middle, but her head protrudes from the mouth of the cave in search of victims. It is not easy to sail past Scylla's cave without loss of life.

The other rock is lower and the passage is a narrow strait between the two rocks. A huge fig tree grows upon the lower rock. Below, the terrible Charybdis sucks the water down. She sucks the water down three times a day and throws it up three times. She is so dangerous that not even Poseidon can save a man from it. Circe advises Odysseus to choose Scylla's rock, since he may lose all his men if he goes near Charybdis, whereas Scylla may only catch a few of his men. This is exactly what happens.

Odysseus does not tell his men about the on-coming disaster in order not to frighten them. His ship sails up the strait, but Odysseus does not get a view of Scylla. Sailing between Scylla and Charybdis requires great moral strength. Odysseus reveals this strength in this adventure. While his men watch the terrifying activity of Charybdis, Scylla snatches six of Odysseus' men from his ship. He is able to see the arms and legs of her victims dangling high in the air. Sacrificing six men to Scylla, Odysseus and the rest of his men escape the perils of the Rocks, Scylla and Charybdis.

The episode is significant in more than one sense. This is the second adventure after the Cyclops in which monsters appear, who are not under the influence of the gods. Poseidon cannot save men from Charybdis, identified as a whirlpool. On a deeper level, Scylla and Charybdis are visual representations of the eternal human dilemma of making a choice between two difficult alternatives. Compared to the Cyclops adventure, this episode is an example of high tension and pure terror. In the Cyclops episode, there is humour and scope for strategy. In the Scylla-Charybdis episode, there is no such scope, although Odysseus does intend to take on Scylla. But he cannot even see her. She is pure, invisible horror.

The Cattle of Hyperion

As predicted by Teiresias and Circe, Odysseus and his men reach the island of Thrinacie, where Hyperion, the Sun-god keeps his cattle. Odysseus informs his men of those predictions and orders them to sail clear of the island. By this time, his men are both physically and mentally broken. One of them, Eurylochus, representing the feelings of his comrades, promises not to stray from the ship if they are allowed to rest on the shore for one night. Odysseus makes them promise that they will not touch the cattle of the Sun-god.

In the third watch of the night, a terrible storm hits the island. The men beach the ship under the shelter of a cave. Odysseus tells his friends that they have plenty of food and drink on board the ship and therefore they should keep off the cattle of Hyperion. But, contrary to all expectations, the South wind blows without pause for a month; making it impossible to sail. By that time all the provisions are exhausted. The men hunt fish and birds, and Odysseus goes inland to pray to the gods to show him a way to escape. While praying, he is sent to sleep by the gods.

In the meantime, Eurylochus, the most vocal of his men, delivers another speech to his comrades. His argument is that death by starvation is of the worst kind. He suggests rounding up the Sun-god's cows and slaughtering them for food. If ever they reach Ithaca, their first act will be to appease Hyperion by building a rich temple for him. Eurylochus asserts that if Hyperion chooses to destroy their ship, he will dive into the sea and die happily. Soon the men gather the fat cows, pray to the gods, and slaughter the cattle and cut them into pieces.

At this point, Odysseus wakes up. When he reaches the coast, he is horrified at the sight. He rebukes the men but the damage is already done. Hyperion has complained to Zeus and sought his promise to punish Odysseus and his men. The hides of the slaughtered cattle begin to crawl and the meat bellows while they cook it. For six days, they suffer the horror. On the seventh day, the storm abates and they quickly embark and put out into the sea. But before the ship is gone very far, a storm rises from the west and Zeus strikes their vessel with lightning. His men are flung overboard: "There was no home-coming for them: the god saw to that" (p. 167). Teiresias' prophecy comes true. Odysseus is all alone in the tossing sea. Somehow, he manages to lash the mast and keel with a leather rope and fight the furious winds.

The West wind dies but soon the South wind rises: throughout the night, Odysseus is swept along and at sunrise finds himself at Scylla's rock and Charybdis' whirlpool. As Charybdis begins to suck the water down, Odysseus is flung up to the huge fig-tree, to which he clings like a bat. With great patience and courage, he waits for Charybdis to spew up his mast and keel. His practical sense pays. As soon as his improvised raft reappears, he lunges at it. He is fortunate not to have been seen by Scylla. For nine days he drifts in the sea and, on the night of the tenth day, he reaches the isle of Ogygia; home of the beautiful nymph, Calypso. Calypso receives him kindly and keeps him with her for seven years. But never for a moment does the idea of homecoming leave the mind of Odysseus.

Note

This part of the epic is narrated by Odysseus himself before the Phaeacian audience. Homer places this part almost in the middle of the plot. Odysseus' narrative of his adventures reveals quite a few qualities of mind and body – bravery, endurance, craftiness, resourcefulness, skills of strategy, curiosity and caution. In terms of space, the narrative describes Odysseus movement from Troy to Ogygia. It is a movement from the world of men to the world of the supernatural. By the time Odysseus reaches Ogygia, he has lost all his ships and his men. And he is removed far away to a world which has no resemblance to the worlds he has seen and known. It is also notable that Homer has already prepared Odysseus for this kind of experience on the island of Circe, where he stayed for a year. He is made to stay on Ogygia for seven years. Mating with a non-human is no new experience for him. The only significant difference is that now he does not have his men with him.

Check Your Progress

i) What advice does Circe give Odysseus before he leaves?

ii) Why doesn't Odysseus tell his comrades about Scylla and Charybdis?

iii) What happens on the Isle of Hyperion?

Book XIII: Odysseus lands in Ithaca

Book XIII begins to move more slowly than previous ones for it is the first stage towards the restoration of Odysseus to his throne. As promised, King Alcinous sends off Odysseus to Ithaca, with many gifts. He is brought to Ithaca by the Phaeacian sailors with great speed. They put him ashore in a remote cove sacred to nymphs. All this time, Odysseus is asleep. His treasure is also laid beside him. But the Phaeacian ship, along with the crew, is turned to stone by an angry Poseidon just as they reach their home. This act fulfills the old prophecy that, someday, the Phaeacians would be punished by Poseidon for bringing a stranger home.

On waking up, Odysseus finds himself in a strange place. Athene has thrown a mist over the place so that he does not recognize his native land. She herself appears in the shape of a shepherd and asks him who he is. Out of cunning caution, Odysseus concocts a tale. He says that he is a Cretan who has wandered far, got lost, and been put ashore by Phoenicians. Athene is amused by Odysseus' art of concocting a convincing, elaborate lie. Appearing in her true form, she observes that Odysseus was always "an obstinate, cunning and irrepressible intriguer" (p. 176). She advises Odysseus to hide his treasure, not to tell anyone

that he has returned, and prepare himself to bear insults at the hands of the suitors in his own palace. Odysseus is still not convinced that he is back home. Athene now disperses the mist and Ithaca appears before the eyes of Odysseus, with all its familiar features. Overjoyed at the sight, Odysseus kisses the soil and offers his thanks to Athene.

Athene and Odysseus sit down and discuss the strategy to encounter and overcome the "shameless Suitors" (p. 178). Athene transforms Odysseus into an old beggar, so that not even his wife and son are able to recognize him; this is necessary so that Odysseus is able to survey the whole situation at close quarters. Athene advises him to first meet his faithful swineherd, Eumaeus and stay with him for the time being. Meanwhile, Athene will go to Sparta to summon Telemachus. She had arranged the journey for Telemachus with the hope that he would "win fame from his journeys there" (p. 180). After planning their strategy, the two of them go their different ways.

Check Your Progress

i) What happens to the Phaeacian ship, after it has left Odysseus on the shores of Ithaca?

ii) What do Odysseus and Athene plan together?

Book XIV: Eumaeus and Odysseus

As advised by Athene, Odysseus goes to the hut of his faithful swineherd, Eumaeus. Since he is disguised as a wretched vagabond, the dogs at once set upon him and have to be called off by Eumaeus. Homer describes the swineherd, his hut and cattle in vivid detail. The purpose is to give the audience some glimpse of the lower section of Ithacan society. Eumaeus is shown as a man of strong loyalty who misses his master (Odysseus) deeply and feels keenly, as Telemachus does, the ravages of the mean, selfish and insolent suitors. The encounter is as delicious to Odysseus as to us, for we are aware of Odysseus' identity, and can appreciate the dramatic irony in the statements of Eumaeus.

Odysseus concocts another story to introduce himself. It is a long story, a kind of miniature *Odyssey*, about his wanderings. He claims to have known Odysseus at Troy and prophesizes the return of Odysseus within a month but Eumaeus doesn't believe him. Odysseus persists and strikes a bargain with his faithful swineherd. If Odysseus comes back, Eumaeus will give the beggar (Odysseus in disguise) a cloak and tunic to wear. If Odysseus does not return, Eumaeus can have him thrown down a cliff. Although Eumaeus does not

believe in the prophecy of Odysseus about himself, he finds him an entertaining old beggar. It is a stormy night and the swineherd offers his guest food and shelter.

The return of the king in disguise is a great dramatic device. Homer has used the device cleverly to bring out the irony of situation, in which Odysseus is shown sleeping cozily on his own property, for the first time in twenty years, among the pigs. The encounter between the master and the servant as equals, highlights Homer's humanistic concept of the order of society. Eumaeus is representative of the humblest station in the social hierarchy and yet he is made a critic of the disorder in Ithacan society at the time of Odysseus' return.

As for the art of concocting tales, Odysseus excels himself by inventing a more elaborate tale. Yet, in all his lies he is essentially conveying a truth, like a man speaking in riddles. His mask is partially transparent. And all the tales he tells from this point onwards are subtle ways of suggesting his return.

Check Your Progress

i) Describe Eumaeus' life in his master Odysseus' absence.

ii) How does Eumaeus look after his guest?

Book XV: Return of Telemachus

This book falls into three sections: Telemachus' journey from Sparta to Pylos, the story of Eumaeus' life, and the safe return of Telemachus to Ithaca. Athene arrives in Sparta and advises Telemachus to return home immediately to protect his mother. She also warns him of the suitors, lying in ambush to kill him. Her advice for him is not to confront them but to avoid them. Telemachus expresses his wish to Menelaus to leave for home. Menelaus and Helen give him many valuable gifts but Helen's gift is particularly valuable and appealing to the young Telemachus. It is an embroidered gown made by Helen herself, meant to be given to Telemachus' bride when he gets married.

As Telemachus and Peisistratus prepare to leave, an eagle swoops down and carries off a goose. Helen interprets this omen as a sure sign of Odysseus' return and the end of the suitors. (This omen is echoed at the end of the book when Telemachus lands on Ithaca and a hawk catches a dove in mid-air.) On reaching Pylos, Telemachus wishes to continue his journey in his ship. He knows that Nestor would force him, out of his strong sense of hospitality, to stay on in Pylos. Peisistratus appreciates Telemachus' urgency and agrees to

drop him near his ship. As he is about to set out, he is approached by a stranger who is fleeing avengers. His name is Theoclymenus and he belongs to a family of prophets. Telemachus agrees to give him passage in his ship.

While Telemachus is on his way to Ithaca, the scene changes and we are back in the hut of Eumaeus, who is narrating his life-history to Odysseus. Eumaeus was kidnapped from his native land as a child, by his Phoenician nurse. She died at sea and the Phoenicians sold the little Eumaeus to Laertes, Odysseus' father. Eumaeus was raised as a lad along with Odysseus' older sister Ctimene. But when Ctimene was married off, Eumaeus was sent to the farms to work as a swineherd. Eumaeus still misses the kindness and love of Odysseus' mother. He does not complain about his work but he is sad to note that Odysseus' house has "fallen on evil days and fallen into ruffian hands" (p. 204). Eumaeus' story reveals that he was a prince before he was kidnapped and sold off as a slave.

Once again, the scene shifts and Telemachus arrives in Ithaca, evading the hostile suitors lying in ambush for him. He disembarks at a landing away from the town so as to go directly to Eumaeus, as instructed by Athene. He orders his ship to be taken to the port. Twice in this book we are told tales of the lost and homeless: the kidnapped Eumaeus and the fleeing Theoclymenus. These tales are not mere digressions; they reinforce the overall theme of the *Odyssey*. A society with pirates and slavery was bound to generate personal tragedies. By way of contrast, these tales point out the dangerous possibility that Odysseus and Telemachus might have perished far from home.

Check Your Progress

i) What advice does Athene have for Telemachus?

ii) Mention the significance of Eumaeus' story and that of Theoclymenus.

iii) What does Telemachus do on returning to Ithaca?

Book XVI: Odysseus meets his son

On his return from Sparta, Telemachus is greeted warmly by Eumaeus, "like a fond father" (p. 210). This shows the close relationship between the young prince and the old faithful swineherd. He wants to know from Eumaeus whether Penelope is still in the palace or if she has married again. Eumaeus remarks that Penelope is still there: "She has schooled her heart to patience" (p. 211). Eumaeus requests Telemachus to take charge of the stranger (Odysseus) as his guest but Telemachus expresses his inability to oblige him, as he is still

doubtful about his position in his own house, vis-á-vis the suitors. They are many and he is alone and only an inexperienced young man. However, he promises to send food and clothing for the stranger so that Eumaeus is not burdened.

Only Odysseus can perceive the irony of the situation. His own son's inability to welcome his father in his own house speaks volumes about the seriousness of the situation. Not that the people of Ithaca have turned hostile to Telemachus, but the situation has gone out of control: "the house is infested by our enemies" (p. 213). Telemachus asks Eumaeus to go to the palace and inform Penelope of his return. No one else should hear about it. It is for Penelope to send the message to Laertes.

Athene appears but she is not visible to Telemachus. She signals to Odysseus to come out of the hut. She tells him that the time has come for him to reveal himself to his son. She is "eager for the fight" (p. 214). Athene touches him and he is transformed from a beggar into his real self. When he goes back into the hut, Telemachus is surprised to see the change in his appearance. Odysseus now reveals his identity. Although moved by Odysseus' parental kiss, Telemachus still has doubts. Odysseus explains the change in his appearance as the work of Athene. At last Telemachus softens, flings his arms round his father's neck and bursts into tears. They break down and sob aloud. Note how the Greeks were not ashamed of displaying elemental emotions.

After they have relieved themselves of grief through tears, they sit down and carefully hatch a scheme to thwart the evil purposes of the suitors. Telemachus has doubts. He points out that the strength of the suitors and their servants is not inconsiderable. There are 108 of them, not counting six valets, two servants, the herald and the bard. Odysseus reminds him that they have Zeus and Athene on their side and that makes a world of difference. Odysseus chalks out the plan. At dawn, Telemachus should go to the palace and present himself before the suitors. Odysseus will follow him later on with Eumaeus, after resuming his beggar's disguise. If he is insulted by the suitors in his own house, Telemachus should not take offence. He must steel his heart to his father's maltreatment. When Athene gives Odysseus the signal for the eventual fight, he will give Telemachus a nod. On getting the signal from his father, Telemachus should collect all the weapons lying about in the hall and hide them in the strong-room. He must invent some excuse to satisfy the suitors for doing so. Not a soul should hear that Odysseus is back. Not even Laertes and Penelope. Only father and son will fight the enemies by making them captives in the hall.

The scene shifts. Penelope receives the news that Telemachus has returned safely. The suitors are chagrined that they have failed to waylay Telemachus. They once again plot his death. At this moment, Penelope appears and admonishes them strongly. She reminds Antinous, the most evil and vocal of all the suitors, how Odysseus once saved his father's life and that makes his act doubly sinful. Eurymachus makes a deceitful speech to Penelope, assuring her that no harm will come to her son. Penelope goes up to her apartment with a heavy heart.

Eumaeus returns to his hut. By this time, Athene has transformed Odysseus back into a beggar. Eumaeus knows nothing about what has passed between father and son. The book is an interesting study in the interplay of appearance and reality. In this book, the process of Odysseus' recognition by his kith and kin is initiated. Telemachus is the first one to recognize his father. But he is instructed by his father to keep it secret till the right time comes. Telemachus has to balance appearance with reality. From this point onward, the action takes on a definite direction, evoking suspense and hope.

Check Your Progress

i) What is Odysseus' response to Telemachus' expression of helplessness?

ii) Why does Odysseus ask Telemachus not to inform Penelope about his return?

iii) Describe Penelope's confrontation with the suitors.

Book XVII: Odysseus goes to town

As instructed by his father, Telemachus goes to the palace at dawn. He is first greeted by his nurse, Eurycleia and then by Penelope. He tells her of his meetings with Nestor and Menelaus. He introduces Theoclymenus to Penelope. Theoclymenus prophesizes that even now Odysseus is in Ithaca. Penelope has heard so many rumours over the years that she does not take the prophecy seriously. This scene is brought to a close with a glimpse of the suitors at play and at dinner.

In the meantime, Odysseus and Eumaeus set out for the palace. On the way. they are made fun of and even kicked by the goatherd Melanthius, who supplies the suitors with meat from Odysseus' herds. When the pair reach the palace, Odysseus pretends that it must be the house of the famous Odysseus. There seems to be a streak of acting ability in Odysseus. His old dog Argus, sick and neglected, recognizes him even in his disguise but dies of joy before he can betray his master's identity.

Following Eumaeus, Odysseus enters the palace and sits down on the threshold. Telemachus sends him food through Eumaeus. Urged by Athene, he goes round begging for scraps of food with a view to judge the suitors from close quarters. All the suitors, except, Antinous, give him food. Antinous is infuriated with Odysseus and insults him in strong words. His assault upon Odysseus brings tears to Telemachus' eyes and Penelope prays to Apollo to strike Antinous dead. She orders Eumaeus to bring the beggar to her presence as she wishes to hear his story. However, Odysseus asks Eumaeus to tell her to wait till sunset, since the suitors are in a very hostile mood at present.

The dramatic impact of this book is to set the scene for Odysseus' eventual disclosure - the better prepared for, the more dramatically startling it will be when it comes. Practically every action and speech is rendered ironic by Odysseus' disguise. Every word gains double significance. We see the suitors unwittingly writing their death warrant. Odysseus is appalled at the chaos in his house. But patience and caution check his seething indignation. While Telemachus and Odysseus wait for an opportune time, Penelope is given a ray of hope, although she is too despaired to take it for real. This book brings Odysseus to the centre of the action.

Check Your Progress

i) How do the suitors behave with the beggar (Odysseus in disguise)?

ii) What does Theoclymenus predict?

Book XVIII: The Beggar in the Palace

The threshold becomes a bone of contention between the disguised beggar (Odysseus) and a real beggar, Irus. The irony of the situation gets keener when Odysseus has to fight with a common beggar for a small, insignificant place, even on the threshold of his own house. The suitors are delighted at the prospect of a fight between two beggars. The fight is soon turned into a match and it is declared that the winner will be permitted to join the suitors regularly at dinner.

While the fight is a "treat" for the suitors, it assumes a different significance for Odysseus. It will get him a permanent foothold in his own house, to be used as a launching pad for the final assault upon the suitors. Telemachus takes the responsibility to prevent anyone from interfering during the fight. Very cleverly, he seeks the assistance of Antinous and Eurymachus, appointing them as judges. Athene again intervenes to increase Odysseus'

"royal stature" (p. 241). When Odysseus bares his strong arms and thighs, the suitors are lost in amazement. With a single blow, Odysseus dislocates Irus' neck and wins the prize. Now Antinous presents him a big piece of food and drinks to his health and bright future. The dramatic irony is significant: the suitors allow themselves to be gradually drawn into the web of conspiracy woven by Odysseus and Telemachus.

Penelope is inspired by Athene to pay the suitors a visit, although she detests them. She also decides to warn her son against hobnobbing with the "unruly young men" (p. 243). Athene intervenes once again and gives her "the appearance of greater stature and size." Her appearance staggers the suitors and kindles the desire for her in their hearts. Penelope first addresses Telemachus and admonishes him for the ill-treatment of the stranger (Odysseus) in the house of Odysseus, known for his generosity and hospitality. Telemachus replies sharply: "I am not the child I was," expressing his inability to act sensibly as he is surrounded by "mischief makers" (p. 245).

Eurymachus interrupts the conversation between mother and son by commenting upon her extraordinary appearance. Penelope laments the loss of her graces since the departure of her husband. She recounts what Odysseus told her when he left Ithaca for Troy. She chides the suitors for forgetting "the good old way" for rivals to compete with each other, by offering valuable gifts to the object of their rivalry. Instead, they have exposed themselves as ungentlemanly suitors by enjoying "free meals at someone else's expense" (p. 246).

The speech delights Odysseus' heart. It reveals Penelope's fidelity and shrewdness. Soon gifts arrive and the suitors once again indulge in entertainment and feast. The rest of the book is given over to scenes where Odysseus watches, with his own eyes, the extent of plunder and insult that his house has had to bear. The celebrated orderliness of his household has given way to total chaos. The book is concerned entirely with creating scene after scene, in which Odysseus is allowed to witness the suitors' conduct and to accumulate evidence against them to justify his final assault on the day of their reckoning. By devoting one whole book to the description of the topsy-turvy state in Odysseus' palace, Homer builds up Odysseus' anger as well as our sense of justice. The punishment of the suitors becomes imperative.

Check Your Progress

i) Describe the beggar's appearance.
ii) How is the beggar rewarded by the suitors?
iii) Describe the gifts the suitors give to Penelope?

Book XIX: Odysseus, Penelope, and Eurycleia

The book opens with the execution of the first stage of the strategy hatched by Odysseus and Telemachus. All the weapons are removed from the banquet hall and put in the store-room. Odysseus also instructs Telemachus not to reveal the real purpose of the removal to the suitors, not even to Penelope. As a master strategist, he knows that the power of an assault lies in surprise. No suitor can even begin to imagine a threat in a beggar, although in his fight with Irus, Odysseus has given them a glimpse of what is to come to them. But, blinded by pride and complacency, the suitors overlook the trailer of the main action.

This is followed by a long scene between Penelope and Odysseus. The scene has to be long, for it is the first meeting between them after the considerably long period of twenty years. Homer begins the scene on a low key with Melantho, the sluttish maid, insulting Odysseus and getting reprimanded by Penelope for it. Penelope orders a seat for Odysseus and, once again, Odysseus spins a tale about himself. He talks about his meeting with Odysseus in Crete, nineteen years back. He gives her an accurate description of himself at that time in order to convince her of the authenticity of his tale. When Penelope begins to cry on hearing the description of Odysseus, he cleverly slips in the veiled news of his return: "he is safe and will soon be back. Indeed, he is very close." He prophesizes that Odysseus will be back between "the waning of the old moon and the waxing of the new" (p. 257).

Eurycleia is called in to bathe Odysseus. She at once recognizes, on his thigh, the scar that he got when he was a boy; from the white tusk of a boar when he went on a visit to his maternal grandfather, Autolycus. She recalls how it was Autolycus who had named him Odysseus, "the victim of enmity" (p. 260). Eurycleia is filled with "delight and anguish" on recognizing Odysseus. But before she can expose his identity, Odysseus puts his hand over her mouth and orders her to keep quiet and wait.

Penelope, at this juncture, requests Odysseus to interpret a dream of hers. In her dream, she saw a great eagle sweep down and kill twenty geese which she keeps in the house. The dead geese lay in a heap on the floor. Penelope cried in the dream. The eagle came back

and told her that it was "not a dream but a happy reality" and that the geese represent the suitors and the eagle was her husband (p. 263). At this point the dream was over. Odysseus declares that Penelope's dream has already been interpreted in her dream itself. There can be no other possible interpretation.

Commenting that dreams are "awkward and confusing things" and cannot always be depended upon, Penelope announces her intention to set a task for the suitors, to settle the matter once and for all (p. 264). She will proclaim that she will marry the man who succeeds in stringing the bow of Odysseus and shoot an arrow through the holes in the handles of twelve axe-blades, set in a row. There is a suggestion that Penelope knows that no suitor will be able to perform the task. Odysseus is impressed by Penelope's clever strategy to expose the suitors through the test. He suggests that the contest be held without delay in the palace hall.

Note

Before this book we are given brief glimpses of Penelope's character. Now it emerges in its entirety. She is shown, finally, as worthy wife of a worthy husband, strong and well-rounded, matching perfectly in cunning, with her formidable husband.

Apart from revealing Penelope as a total woman, this book is significant from the point of view of plot too. It provides a framework for three of the *Odyssey's* most significant passages: Odysseus' description of himself to Penelope, the story of Odysseus' scar, and Penelope's prophetic dream. Each passage is designed to recover parts of the past that must be known at this point in the narrative, yet each is self-contained, a complete poem in itself. More significantly they are dramatically unified by Eurycleia's recognition of Odysseus' scar.

Check Your Progress

i) Why does Odysseus ask for an old maid to wash his feet?
ii) How did Odysseus get his name? What does it mean?
iii) What task does Penelope plan to set for the suitors?

Book XX: Prelude to the Crisis

While Odysseus lies down to sleep, he hears the voices of the women servants, who are the suitors' mistresses. The moral degeneration among the womenfolk in the house of chaste Penelope infuriates Odysseus. He is tempted to dash after them and put them to death, but he

fights his "repressed fury" (p. 266). He reminds himself of his patience and caution in the cave of the Cyclops. Unable to sleep, he keeps on planning alternative strategies to put the suitors to death. Athene appears and asks why he is sleepless in his own house. Odysseus replies that he is alone and the suitors are many. How will he be able to take them on? And even if he succeeds, where will he go for safety? Athene reminds him that she has never ceased to help him in his past adventures and assures him of her help in the future too.

While Odysseus prays to Athene and receives assurance, Penelope prays to Artemis, the chaste goddess, to send her death as she can no longer withstand the indignity and disgrace of her situation. Odysseus is disturbed by the sound of Penelope's distress. He prays to Zeus to "send a good omen" for him and show some other sign (p. 268). The moment he finishes his prayer he hears a thunderclap (Zeus' usual sign of approval) and the sound of a faithful maidservant complaining about the hard work thrust upon the servants, owing to the unwanted presence of the suitors. She prays: "May this be their last dinner" (p. 269). The ominous words of the female slave and the thunderclap fill Odysseus' heart with hope and joy.

The Feast of Apollo falls the next day, which is a public holiday. Preparations are made for the feast in the palace. Eumaeus and Philoetius, the cowman come to the palace. Once again Odysseus is insultingly taunted by Melanthius, the goatherd, but he does not retaliate. The suitors discuss ways and means to murder Telemachus. At this moment a bird of omen appears on their left. It is a soaring eagle carrying a terrified dove in its talons. The omen is interpreted by Amphinomus, one of the suitors, as a warning against such an evil scheme. He proposes they move to dinner.

The grand feast begins. Telemachus asks the suitors to refrain from "all provocation and violence." Telemachus' menacing tone astonishes the suitors but they are afraid of killing him since the bird of omen has warned them against it. At the height of the riotous feast, the suitors demand that Telemachus go and order his mother to choose a husband on this grand occasion. Declaring that his "childhood is a thing of the past," Telemachus refuses to "drive her from the house against her will" (p. 273-4).

At this juncture, Athene fuddles the suitors' minds in such a way that they receive Telemachus' words with "peals after peals of helpless merriment" (p. 274). This is followed by the appearance of blood on the food they ate. This is noted by Theoclymenus, who declares that the air is "ablaze with lamentation" (p. 275). The signs of the impending doom are alarmingly vivid. The bodies of the suitors are "veiled in night." The panels and the walls

are splashed with blood; the porch is filled with ghosts, and the sun is blotted out. But the befuddled suitors take no notice of this warning. Instead, they laugh at him. It is a terrible scene, contrasting merriment with a ghostly vision of the dead bodies of the feasters.

With this book, Homer completes his case against the suitors "since the first step in villainy had been theirs" (p. 276). What follows in the next two books is poetic justice. The land of Ithaca has to be purged of the plague of the suitors.

Check Your Progress

i) Odysseus prays to Zeus to send him a good omen and receives three. Describe these.

ii) What does Theoclymenus predict for the suitors?

Book XXI: The Great Bow

Penelope brings out Odysseus' bow and iron axes from the store room and challenges the suitors to try their skill on the bow. She proclaims that she will marry the man who strings the bow and shoots an arrow through the holes of the handles of the axes, lined in a row. It is a tense situation. A number of suitors try to string the bow but none succeed. While the suitors try the bow and get disgraced in succession, Odysseus calls Eumaeus and Philoetius aside and reveals himself to them. He gives them specific instructions to cause a situation in which he gets a chance to string the bow.

The suitors rationalize their failure; saying it is due to the fact that the day belongs to the archer god, Apollo. Perhaps the next day may be more propitious. At this juncture, Odysseus begs to have a try and is roundly mocked at. Penelope orders that he be given a chance; clarifying that even if he wins, she will only gift him new clothes and weapons and send him home. Telemachus, who is aware of the next stage of the strategy, sends her to her apartment. Philoetius and Eumaeus bar the doors from the outside. The suitors are now completely trapped in the banquet hall.

The suitors keep jeering at Odysseus, even while he lifts the bow like an expert. Keeping his head cool Odysseus, like "a minstrel skilled at the lyre," strings the bow effortlessly (p. 287). The twang of the string sounds like the lovely voice of a swallow. But the sweet sound is the death knell for the suitors. They are confounded and grow pale. After this, Odysseus easily sends an arrow through the aligned axe-blades. Then he gives Telemachus the significant nod. Instantly Telemachus, "son and heir," grips his spear and

takes his stand by the chair of his father, "armed with resplendent bronze" (p. 287). Odysseus and Telemachus string themselves for the final battle.

Note

No book in the *Odyssey* better demonstrates Homer's dramatic skill. Homer adds flavour to the moment of revenge by inventing the most unexpected source of revenge as far as the suitors are concerned. No suitor could have imagined of the beggar's triumph at the bow. This book also marks the moment where Telemachus comes of age; when he takes position by his father's side.

Check Your Progress

i) How did Odysseus acquire the bow?
ii) What does Odysseus ask Eumaeus and Philoetius to do?
iii) Why do the suitors panic after Odysseus manages to string the bow?

Book XXII: The Battle in the Hall

Shedding his rags, Odysseus leaps onto the threshold, the only way out, and declares: "The match that was to seal your fate is over" (p. 288). Then begins the gory process of slaughter. Odysseus first shoots Antinous through the neck. The sudden collapse of Antinous creates panic all around. The suitors run about in search of weapons but find none. Odysseus calls them "curs" and pronounces their doom. Realizing that Odysseus is back, the suitors are petrified with terror. They cry for mercy. Eurymachus pleads that Antinous, "the prime mover in these misdeeds" is already dead and promises that they will repay what they have used, adding gifts as well (p. 289). Odysseus' response to the plea is an arrow through the nipple of his breast. Now the battle begins in earnest. Telemachus has brought the armour. And the four men; Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius, armed with spears and arrows, begin a systematic slaughter.

Melanthius slips through the door of the armoury room that Telemachus has foolishly left open and grabs arms for the suitors. On his next trip, he is caught by Eumaeus and tied to a board and hung upside-down from the ceiling. Athene, disguised as Mentor, comes to join Odysseus. The slaughter is total. Only the bard, Phemius and the herald, Medon are spared. The dead bodies of the suitors lie there "like a catch of fish" (p. 297).

Odysseus calls in Eurcyleia to inform him of the disloyal women-servants. He is told that twelve of the fifty women-servants are guilty of taking to "vicious ways" (p. 298). The

twelve faithless maidservants are ordered to carry the dead bodies of the suitors to the portico of the walled courtyard. They are made to wash the blood from the floors and the walls. Afterwards they are hanged in the courtyard by Telemachus. Melanthius is horribly mutilated and thrown out into the courtyard. After the cleaning, begins the process of fumigating the house by burning sulphur. Only after that does Odysseus permit the women of the house to come out and welcome him.

Note

The battle scene is gory, systematic, calculated and total. Only the awful battle scenes in the *Iliad* are as accurate and vivid. To the modern mind, the massacre may appear an utterly uncivilized mode of behaviour. But, placed in the context of Homer's time, the scene is totally justifiable. Homer has already prepared a strong case against the suitors right from Book I. Their punishment cannot be questioned. The mode of punishment is gory but that was the only way of vengeance and retribution in those times.

Check Your Progress

i) Who helps Odysseus in the battle in the hall?
ii) Why does Odysseus spare Medon and Phemius?
iii) How are the disloyal women servants punished?

Book XXIII: Odysseus and Penelope

Odysseus' homecoming cannot be complete till he is united with his wife, the centre of the family. Eurcyleia informs Penelope of the happenings in the hall. Her disappointment over the years has been too deep for Penelope to believe in her words. In her opinion, Eurycleia has gone crazy. But when Eurycleia declares that the beggar is in reality Odysseus come back, Penelope's heart leaps with hope. But her characteristic prudence does not permit her to hastily run to the man supposed to be her husband. She has to make sure of it herself. She enters the hall and takes a chair opposite Odysseus, who is sitting by one of the huge columns. For quite some time she watches Odysseus without uttering a single word.

Telemachus is angered by Penelope's cool demeanour and accuses her of having a heart "harder than flint" (p. 303). Penelope says that the shock has numbed her heart. Noting Penelope's wisdom and caution, Odysseus diverts Telemachus' attention to the problems they are going to face shortly. As soon as news of the slaughter is known, the fathers of the suitors will arrive to avenge their sons. But that eventuality can be delayed through a trick. There

should be loud music in the hall to fool the people into believing that the suitors are enjoying a grand feast. His plan is to meet the enemies in the hills at his father's farm. Meanwhile, they are safe for the night.

After taking a bath and putting on his kingly dress, Odysseus reproaches Penelope for "her sheer obstinacy" (p. 305). Any other wife would have run into her husband's arms at such a moment. He orders Eurcyleia to prepare his bed to sleep in alone. Penelope responds by ordering Eurycleia to shift his bed outside and cover it with fleece. This is her way of putting Odysseus to a sure test. The bed is a very intimate token of recognition, known only to Odysseus and Penelope. Odysseus, not perceiving Penelope's intention, flares up and declares that it would be a miracle to shift the bed from its place. He describes, in minute detail, how he had made the bed. One of the bedposts was carved out of the trunk of an olive tree that grew in the hall, thus making it impossible to move the bed. Penelope is overcome by "the complete fidelity of his description" (p. 306). Now she bursts into tears and runs to him. Odysseus and Penelope are united at long last. They go to bed, make love, and then Odysseus tells her about the prophecy of Teiresias and narrates his adventures. Next day Odysseus and Telemachus, accompanied by Eumaeus and the cowman, sneak out of the palace and the town, hidden in the darkness thrown over them by Athene.

The Recognition Scene

This book contains the famous Recognition Scene which has been critically admired by scholars of Greek Classical Literature over the years. It is both dramatic and intriguing. The *Odyssey* is basically an epic but, in this scene, Homer reveals his genius as a dramatist. As the action proceeds, a joyous and spontaneous reunion is expected but Homer exploits the situation skillfully and transforms it into a drama of wits. Before Penelope and Odysseus are re-united, Odysseus must pass a test. Odysseus accuses Penelope of behaving coldly towards him, even though he has returned home after twenty years. Penelope has her own reasons for not displaying her emotions and passion. She has been faithful and chaste for twenty years. She must be sure that the man really is Odysseus. Only the most intimate and secret token of the bed can resolve the problem. Before that happens, she must behave with the dignity and grace of a queen. The moment Odysseus passes the test, she is all spontaneity, warmth, and passion.

The bed has a double symbolic significance. The bedroom is the most intimate part of a man's house. And the bed itself is the centre of his existence with all its sexual, emotional and personal overtones. Penelope's instruction to Eurycleia to move the bed infuriates Odysseus, for it signifies his rejection by his wife. At the same time the bed, within the

context of the epic, is symbolic of Odysseus' identity. To Penelope, he would not be Odysseus if he did not know the secret. It goes to Penelope's credit that she does not ask a straight question regarding the secret but cleverly forces Odysseus to blurt it out in a moment of anger. If he were not Odysseus, he would not be infuriated and Penelope knows it too well.

Check Your Progress

i) Why does Telemachus accuse his mother of being cold?

ii) Describe how Odysseus built the bed?

iii) Why does Odysseus want to go to Laertes' farm?

Book XXIV: Peace

We are back to the Halls of Hades, where the souls of the suitors are being led by Hermes. The great Greek heroes, who have already appeared in Book XI, are talking about how Achilles, who died on the Trojan battle field, earned "great glory," and was mourned for seventeen days. Achilles wishes Agamemnon had also died in the battlefield, instead of meeting with a "pitiable death" in his own home (p. 312). Seeing Hermes leading so many young souls, and recognizing Amphimedon, Agamemnon questions him. Amphimedon narrates the whole story of the suitors in the land of Ithaca and their ultimate destruction. He blames the "scheming" Penelope and "cunning" Odysseus for their downfall (p. 314). Agamemnon responds to the story by praising the chastity of "constant Penelope" and contrasting it with the infidelity of his own wife. It is to be noted that the Agamemnon-Clytaemnestra story is contrasted with the Odysseus-Penelope story right through the narrative. The purpose of the scene in the Halls of Hades in the last book is to clinch the issue: man's honour lies in his woman's chastity. (It is significant that the motif of woman's chastity is at the centre of classical literatures all over the world.)

Homer shifts the scene to the farm of Laertes, Odysseus' father, whom he finds in his gardener's dress. Odysseus cannot help telling his father a false tale about himself. It is quite in character. Moreover, the prospective joy of reunion with his father inspires him to play a little drama before revealing himself. But Laertes is as skeptical as Penelope and demands some definite proof. Once again, there is a recognition scene between father and son. Odysseus offers two proofs of his identity; shows Laertes the scar, and mentions the gifts his father gave him when he was a little boy: thirteen pear trees, forty fig trees, ten apple trees and fifty rows of vines. If the bed is the secret token between Penelope and Odysseus, the trees are the secret tokens between father and son.

In an assembly in the town, Medon warns the angry people to desist from seeking vengeance, as it was "not against the will of the deathless gods" that the suitors were killed (p. 322). Halitherses reminds them how their sons were "guilty of a great wrong" (p. 322). Though some people are dissuaded, the others go to find Odysseus.

Realizing that the situation is too desperate, Laertes arms himself for the first time in many years. It is a matter of life and death for his royal line. It is also a matter of honour. The small group stands to fight off the townspeople, who are seen climbing up the edge of the farm. The two groups face each other. Laertes kills Eupeithes, father of Antinous, for denouncing Odysseus as "the inveterate enemy of our race" (p. 321). Odysseus and Telemachus follow suit and begin to fight with spears and swords. Three generations of a royal family join hands in their fight for their existence. A total destruction of both sides is a foregone conclusion. So, Athene intervenes once again. She appears in the form of Mentor and demands that the feud be stopped. Zeus sends down a thunderbolt to support her view. Both sides see the wisdom of a halt to a blood feud that might last generations. With the blessing of the goddess Athene, they part in harmony. Peace is established at last between the two contending forces.

Note

The *Odyssey* is a poem of peace and social order, as the *Iliad* is a poem of war and disorder. The largest theme that runs through the epic is that of the control of brute violence by the force of intellect and reason. No quieter ending could be imagined for the poem than a sudden, god-ordained cessation of the violence that has been building up for over half of the narrative. Without divine intervention only two things could have happened - a feud or an exile for Odysseus and his family. The purpose of classical epics was the establishment of social order, which was a civilizational necessity of classical times. The *Odyssey* ends in a triumph of sanity and civilized life.

Check Your Progress

i) How does Laertes recognize Odysseus?

ii) What does Medon tell the assembly of Ithacans?

iii) What does Zeus tell Athene to do?

5. THE PLOT

If you look at the plot diagram of the *Odyssey*, you will note that the whole action of the epic covers over about forty days, whereas the time of the story expands over ten years. The narrative can be roughly divided into three sections:

Plot Diagram

	Book	Location	Event	Time
Telemachy	I	Ithaca	Athene persuades Telemachus to go out to seek information about Odysseus.	One day
	II	Ithaca	Telemachus calls an assembly and declares his intention. Leaves for Pylos at night.	One day
	III	Pylos	Telemachus visits Nestor, who directs him to Menelaus.	One day
	IV	Sparta	Telemachus visits Menelaus and Helen. Menelaus tells him that Odysseus is on Calypso's island.	One day
	V	Ogygia	Hermes orders Calypso to free Odysseus. Odysseus makes a raft which is wrecked by Poseidon. Odysseus arrives in Phaeacia.	Twenty-four days
Wanderings of Odysseus	VI	Phaeacia	Nausicaa welcomes Odysseus and invites him to her father, Alcinous' palace.	One day
	VII		Odysseus goes to the palace. Welcomed by Alcinous and Arete. Alcinous promises Odysseus' passage to home.	One day
	VIII		The Phaeacian entertainment and games. Alcinous wants to know about Odysseus' identity.	One day
	IX-XII		Odysseus introduces himself and narrates his adventures, while wandering from Troy to Ogygia.	One day

Return of Odysseus	XIII	Ithaca	Arrival in Ithaca. Meeting with Athene. The plan is prepared.	Seven days
	XIV		Odysseus, disguised as a vagabond, meets Eumaeus in his hut.	
	XV		Return of Telemachus to Ithaca.	
	XVI		Meeting of Odysseus and Telemachus. The planning of a strategy.	
	XVII		The entry of Odysseus as a beggar into his palace.	
	XVIII		Fight with Irus. Odysseus' win, leading to his placement in the arena of the action.	
	XIX		The scar of Odysseus.	
	XX		Preparations for the battle. Signs and prayers.	
	XXI		The contest of the bow, where Odysseus wins.	
	XXII		The slaughter of the suitors.	
	XXIII		The Recognition Scene.	
	XXIV		Peace.	

1. Books I - IV

The first section is spread over the first four books. This section is devoted to Telemachus and is often referred to as the *Telemachy*. The narrative begins in the twentieth year of Odysseus' absence from Ithaca. Ten years of this period were spent by Odysseus, fighting in the Trojan War and ten years in his wanderings. At the moment, we are told, he is living in Ogygia, a captive of the nymph Calypso. Books I to IV describe the anarchic state of affairs in Ithaca. We are also told, through a prophecy, about the possibility of Odysseus' return. This creates a sense of suspense which continues till Odysseus reveals himself to Penelope in Book XXIII. We learn about Penelope's strategy to keep the suitors at bay, the gradual maturing of Telemachus with the help of Athene, and the decision of the gods to release Odysseus from the spell of Calypso. There is a sense of foreboding in this section.

2. Books V - XII

The second section is devoted to the wanderings of Odysseus. The scene shifts from Ithaca to Ogygia, and then to Phaeacia. Using the device of compression, Homer makes Odysseus narrate ten years of his wanderings in one day. Odysseus' narration is placed almost at the centre of the plot. The starting point of the narrative thread lies in Odysseus' narration to King Alcinous and Queen Arete, which forms the core of the epic. Homer does not begin the action of the epic from the starting point of the story-line but at a point where Odysseus' adventures are almost over and his home-coming is due. In this section, we get a close look into the kind of personality possessed by Odysseus. We get the impression that only a man like Odysseus can settle accounts with the suitors and restore order and normalcy to the Ithacan society.

3. Books XIII - XXIV

The third section is devoted to all the three major characters - Odysseus, Telemachus and Penelope in that order. We are back in Ithaca and watch Odysseus and Telemachus plan and execute the strategy to demolish the anti-social elements represented by the suitors. The theme of vengeance and retribution gains prominence in this section. Homer has spread this part of the action over the remaining twelve books. One purpose is to demonstrate Odysseus as a master of strategy. Another purpose is to build up suspense and tension before the climax of the action. This section amply demonstrates Homer's skill in designing the plot. The action ends with peace between the two feuding parties. Order is restored in Ithaca and Odysseus' homecoming is complete.

Homer does not follow the chronological order of narration found in some other epics. He begins near the end and weaves a pattern of events in such a way that we get a sense of reading a modern novel. For this reason, Homeric scholars and critics have rightly observed that the *Odyssey* is the ancestor of the modern novel.

In his narrative, Homer skillfully uses the device of flashback to inform us of past happenings. The best use of this device has been done in the compression of Odysseus' adventures, covering about ten years, in Books V- XII. There are other flashbacks from other characters, such as Eumaeus and Eurycleia.

There are prophecies too, which whet our anticipation of the coming events; notably those made by Teiresias and Theoclymenus. The epic has numerous digressions. The bard Demodocus singing about the love affair of Ares and Aphrodite; Menelaus narrating his encounter with Proteus, the sea-god, and Eurycleia narrating the incident where Odysseus got

the scar on his thigh; these are a few examples of seemingly irrelevant incidents embedded in the narrative, but they contribute to the overall theme.

Because he composed for recitation, Homer's narrative lacks the close cohesion of written literature. He has to emphasize the important points and neglect the rest. He omits much that might give greater completeness, and once he has finished with one episode he dismisses it summarily, not worrying about tidying the loose threads of the narrative. But this approach helps the rapid movement of his poems. The story is always the first consideration of the poet. However, what unites the different parts of the epic is the theme of homecoming. All of Odysseus' adventures and the situation in Ithaca are united by his quest to reach home.

B. Critical Analysis of *The Odyssey*

P. P. Dhobal

1. THE EPIC FORM

An epic is a narrative of some length which "deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war. It gives a special pleasure because its events and persons enhance our belief in the worth of human achievement and in the dignity and nobility of man." (Bowra: *Heroic Poetry*)

According to Aristotle, an epic is a poem about men in action. Ezra Pound, a modern poet and scholar of the classical tradition, defines the form as "a poem containing history." By "history" he means history of a civilization and culture. The archaeological findings of the ruins of Troy have confirmed the historicity of the two epics, but it is the "action" that is the central concern of the literary critic. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* record the geography of the Mediterranean, but more important they reflect the characteristics of every people known to the Greeks, and veritably every human activity and emotions. War is the theme of the *Iliad*, in which the world's greatest heroes and the gods participate. In the *Odyssey*, the central theme is homecoming. Here, man is shown confronting Nature, the world and the gods. The *Odyssey* successfully demonstrates that homecoming could be no less heroic a task than fighting in a battle. Let us break down this definition. An epic;

- is a narrative poem of considerable length;
- deals with grand and serious subjects;
- depicts events that come from a life of heroic action;

- centres on the actions of a heroic or semi-divine figure, on whose deeds depends the fate of a city or a country;
- gives a special pleasure because its events and persons increase our belief in the heroic potential of man; and
- is a poem of great range, spread, and scope.

The epic, Northrop Fry observes, differs from the narrative in the encyclopedic range of its theme - from heaven to the underworld - and covers an enormous mass of traditional knowledge. The studies of Milman Parry, and following him, Sir Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford, 1955) and A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, 1960) are concerned with the Homeric epic as "oral epic song." These scholars hold that the Homeric epic was composed in a manner that evolved over many generations, by singers of tales who did not know how to write.

The technique of composition is basically oral and marked by frequently recurring formulae and motifs. Nonetheless, they are usually skillfully integrated into the texture of the poem. Though composed for recitation by rhapsodes before an aristocratic audience and, as such, embodying many of the values of a feudal society, the *Odyssey* evidences a deep understanding of the human predicament and of the comic and tragic dimensions of the human condition. These qualities represent a touchstone of artistic greatness. Doubtless, it was for this quality that the Homeric epic came to be regarded as the crown of creative achievement in the history of European literature, from the days of the ancient Greeks to modern times.

Aristotle ranked the epic second only to tragedy, and Renaissance critics ranked it as the highest literary form. The epic poet was marked as a man possessing peculiar qualities of inspiration and vision. The epic mode has now fallen into neglect. Its place has been taken by the novel. Lyric poetry has become more attractive than epic poetry. But it must be stressed that no other form of literature affords the experience which the epic poem does.

The *Odyssey* differs from all poetry, with which most of us are familiar, in its construction. It is necessary to understand that it is an oral poem: a poem composed and carried in the mind and recited by word of mouth. The *Odyssey* is a heroic poem, and it must be distinguished from a literary epic like *Paradise Lost*. As Sir Moses Finley observes:

> Heroic poetry is oral poetry; it is composed orally, often by bards who are illiterate, and it is recited in a chant to a listening audience. Formally, it is at once

> distinguishable by a constant repetition of phrases, lines, and whole groups of lines. The coming of the day is, nearly always, in Homer, "And when rosy-Fingered Dawn, the child of Morn."

Skeptical readers of our print-age, prone to doubt such a feat, should know that, in 1934, the great Homeric scholar Milman Parry requested a sixty-year-old Serbian bard, who could neither read nor write, to recite for him a poem of the length of the *Odyssey*; making it up as he recited, yet retaining metre and form, and building a complicated narrative. The performance took two weeks, with a week in between. The bard chanted for two hours each morning and two more in the afternoon.

The heroic poet was a professional with long years of apprenticeship behind him. He had at his disposal the necessary raw materials: masses of incidents and masses of formulas, the accumulation of generations of minstrels who came before him. Out of these building blocks, the poet constructed his work. The *Odyssey* reveals in fullest measure all the essential characteristics of unwritten heroic poetry the world over. It reveals from start to finish the memory technique of verse-making. We do not know whether the art of writing was known to Homer but, as Sir Denys Page observes, the fact makes little or no difference to the technique employed by Homer;

> In the Homeric poems, whatever the context and whoever the person may be, the same act, thought or emotion is likely to be described in the same words not because those words are particularly suitable to that person or context, but because those are the words which tradition supplies ready-made to the poet . . . his style is traditional and typical not individual.

The structure of the story in the *Odyssey* is governed by the tradition of oral poetry. It is a complex and intricate structure that blends three stories into one: the fairy-tale wanderings of *Odysseus*; the struggle for power in Ithaca; and the homecoming of Odysseus.

The *Odyssey* might have been only a sack full of old stories without an artistic unity which comes, as H.D.F. Kitto says, "inevitably from one central idea - in this case a belief in an ultimate justice." Homer selects the events and persons relevant to his poem out of the raw welter of the Trojan war and its after-math. The *Odyssey*, according to Aristotle, with all its impossible adventure, by sea and land, its magic ship, its enchanted islands, its men transforming into swine, its vision of the world below, is constructed according to the laws of poetic truth. The whole is a faithful representation of human life and action, the irrational elements being but accessories that do not disturb the main impression. They are presented to

the imagination with such vividness and coherence that the impossible becomes plausible, the fiction looks like truth. In Homer, the absurdity is concealed under various beauties of other kinds with which the poet has embellished it.

The unity of the epic plot exists because, and not in spite of multiple fables. In the *Odyssey*, Homer draws on deep and poignant emotions such as those that invest the permanent separation of father and son, husband and wife. This fact gives a strong unity to the plot. The numerous episodes are, at first, each separate and distinct. Towards the close, all are wound up together with a breathless dexterity and speed into one collective skein and the revenge theme of personal or tribal justice is clearly presented.

We have already discussed Homer's epic mode of writing. It is not simply that of selecting a great central theme. It penetrates much more deeply into the texture of the narration. The poet does not pursue the subtleties and complexities of experiences. From the modern novelist's point of view, he under-tells the story. He avoids really individualized descriptions of scenes and places or accounts of what goes on inside the consciousness of the character, or sentimental description of feeling. When Odysseus reaches Ithaca at last, he simply does not recognize the place. His wife, as mistress of the house, receives him while he is disguised as a travelling beggar. Homer makes the occasion dramatically significant - not by analyzing her state of mind which could have been the modern way - but by showing how she remained in simple ignorance all the time.

The total action in the *Odyssey* begins when Odysseus leaves Ithaca and goes off to the Trojan War, and it ends when he gets back to Ithaca as master of his house again. The *Odyssey* begins with Odysseus at the furthest point from home on the island of Calypso, subjected to the temptations of the nymph. Northrop Frye well calls Calypso, Penelope's only formidable rival. Odysseus gets our sympathy by preferring his mortal wife Penelope to the immortality promised him by Calypso;

> My lady goddess, I beg you not to resent my feelings. You know well enough that my wise Penelope's looks and stature are insignificant compared with yours. For she is mortal, while you have immortality and unfading youth. Nevertheless, I long to reach my home and see the happy day of my return. It is my never-failing wish. And what if the powers above do wreck me out on the wine-dark sea? I have a heart that is inured to suffering and I shall steel it to endure that too. For in my day I have had many bitter and shattering experiences in war and on the stormy seas. So let this new disaster come. It only makes one more. (p. 68)

This passage is Homer's splendour. The vitality and nobility of the hero force us to admire him, and even to sympathize with him. We also see here the unfolding of a great tale and not merely a string of sensational or picaresque adventures. The action of the poem begins at a dramatically well-advanced point, *in medias res* (in the midst of things) as Horace says. We get the needed information about the career of Odysseus in Book IX.

The wanderings of Odysseus include the whole of the world known to Homer. The amplitude of the epic is such that it also includes the hero's descent into the underworld. In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, having reached the land of the Cimmerians, the frontiers of the world, the city of perpetual mist, Odysseus pours sacrificial blood into a trench and talks to the ghosts who drink it. He journeys down to Hades to "consult the soul of Theban Teiresias" (p. 141). Among the spirits are Agamemnon, Achilles, and other heroes of the *Iliad*.

In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, we have one of Homer's most sublime and most pathetic passages when Odysseus, ignorant that his mother is dead, sees her ghost at the world's end. The ghost of Odysseus' mother tells him how she died:

> It was not that the keen-eyed Archeress sought me out in our home and killed me with her gentle darts. Nor was I attacked by any of the malignant diseases that so often make the body waste away and die. No, it was heartache for you, my glorious Odysseus, and for your wise and gentle ways that brought my life and all its sweetness to an end. (p. 145)

Anticleia's speech in Hades is among the great passages of Homer. Here, as F.W.H. Myers observes, "it seems as if all that makes life precious were in the act of being created at once and together - language itself, and the first emotions. There is an effortless and absolute sublimity in these words." This episode, like the Nausicaa episode, displays the quality of the epic poet's art most powerfully. The scene stays in our minds as a single image that cannot easily be pulled apart. The image of the ghost of Odysseus' mother speaking to him is inseparable from the epic action; it exhibits the pathos of the precarious human tenure in the world. Of course, there are weak, and transitional episodes in the *Odyssey* but we need not stay too close to them. Our concern here is the intensely powerful episodes, on which depends the movement of the poem and its mystery.

In a short discussion, it is plainly impossible to give a complete account of the heroic story of Odysseus - a story which incorporates myth, legend, saga, folk-tale, and history; a story with full epic apparatus: invocations, digressions, magic, supernatural machinery,

omens, prophecies, dreams, epic similes, perilous journeys, scenes in the underworld, long speeches, elaborate greetings, direct descriptions, and larger than life characters.

We shall now focus on the Suitor episode. Dramatically more powerful than all the adventures of Odysseus after his return from the Trojan War, the suitor episode gives the epic its central theme - heroic revenge. The suitors are best described by Telemachus. He tells Odysseus (in disguise);

> . . . the house is infested by our enemies. Of all the island chieftains in Dulichium, in Same, in wooded Zacynthus, or in rocky Ithaca, there is not one that isn't courting my mother and plundering my house. As for her, she cannot bring herself to the final step of rejecting all the Suitors or accepting one of them, though she hates the idea of remarrying. Meanwhile they are eating me out of house and home. And they'll soon destroy *me*. (p. 213)

We know that, at this very moment, Odysseus is sowing trouble for the whole pack of suitors. The suitors who invade Penelope's home and devour her wealth are a study in vulgarity. The slaughter, burial, and the gathering of the ghosts of the suitors and their talk with the murdered Agamemnon not only points to the moral of the story, but unites the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad*. Odysseus and Penelope, the poet shows, belong to the nobler company of the heroes of the *Iliad* and the suitors from a mean, unheroic society. Nobility has triumphed.

If, for the sake of analysis, we divide the plot of the *Odyssey* into two parts, the spiritual and the material; searching into the internal dynamics of the plot, we will find that the spiritual internal part or aspect is more important than the material or physical. Maurice Bowra has put the whole thing succinctly: "true dignity belongs to man, and he is a sufficient subject for poetry. This is the secret of Homer's outlook. He sees man occupied with great undertakings and menaced with an inevitable doom." Aristotle gave high praise to Homer for his technique. "Homer," Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, "admirable in all respects, has the special merit of being the only poet who rightly appreciates the part he should take himself. The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person . . . Homer, after the few prefatory words, at once brings in a man or woman or other personage, none of them wanting in characteristic qualities but each with a character of his own." He is present in the work like God in the universe, present everywhere but visible nowhere. Like the Deity behind this universe, the simple poet hides himself behind his work; he is himself his work, and his work is himself.

In concluding we quote a pointed passage from M. I. Finley on the genius of the *Odyssey*:

> The genius of the *Odyssey* does not lie primarily in the individual pieces, or even in the language, for that was all a common stock of materials available to any bard in quantity. The pre-eminence of Homer lies in the scale on which he worked; in the elegance and structural coherence of his complex narrative; in the virtuosity with which he varied the repeated, typical scenes, in his feeling for tone and tempo, his interruptions and retardations, his long similes without parallel in the history of literature - in short, in the freshness with which he both invented and manipulated what he had inherited.

2. HOMER'S NARRATIVE STYLE

In this section, we will take a look at some characteristic features of Homer's narrative style. Remember, the epic was meant for recitation and these features were necessitated by the oral format; providing the audience with aids to retention and visualization in the absence of a written text.

Homeric Epithets or Fixed Metaphors

The Homeric epic was put together in word groups, formulas and formulaic expressions traditional to the oral poetry of early Greece. A typical formulaic expression is made up of a noun, often a proper name, with a conventional or repealed epithet, such as "the bright-eyed goddess Athene", "Nausicaa of the white arms", "Odysseus, the royal sacker of cities", "Odysseus, the man of many resources", "Poseidon, Girdler of Earth", "the cautious Penelope", "sea-girt Ithaca", "the ever-watchful Zeus", "Poseidon, the shaker of the Earth," "Agamemnon, king of men", and "Circe of the lovely tresses." Milman, Parry calls these epithets "fixed metaphors," comparing these epithets with those of the English Augustan poets.

Homeric epithets have vivacity, even though the picture they draw is one-sided and inadequate. Although they are often far from describing the essence of the person (or object), they are graphic forms which remain attached to the names of his characters.

Homeric Similes

Homer's language does more than denote, it is not merely formulaic. It has inimitable directness, energy, and it quickens with life every phenomenon that it describes. We must

also remember that this language carries the weight of a great story. Consider the following passage from the *Odyssey*. When the shipwrecked Odysseus reaches the royal palace of Alcinous, he sees;

> Outside the courtyard but stretching close up to the gates, and with a hedge running down on either side, lies a large orchard of four acres, where trees hang their greenery on high, the pear and the pomegranate, the apple with its glossy burden, the sweet fig and the luxuriant olive. Their fruit never fails nor runs short, winter, and summer alike. It comes at all seasons of the year, and there is never a time when the West Wind's breath is not assisting, here the bud, and there the ripening fruit: so that pear after pear, apple after apple, cluster on cluster of grapes and fig upon fig are always coming to perfection. In the same enclosure there is a fruitful vineyard, in one part of which is a warm patch of level ground, where some of the grapes are drying in the sun, while others are gathered or being trodden, and on the foremost rows hang unripe bunches that have just cast their blossom or show the first faint tinge of purple. (p. 87)

The effect of the passage is obtained not by magniloquence, nor by brilliance of phrase, but by homely imagery and the general movement of the whole.

We may now turn to the Homeric simile; also called the epic simile. Let us take a close look at the following simile. Penelope goes to the secret store-room to take her husband's great bow. This is how Homer describes the opening of the doors

> She quickly undid the thong attached to the door-knob, passed the key through the hole, and with well-aimed thrust shot back the bolt. The key did its work. With a groan like the roar of a bull at grass in a meadow, the door flew open before her, and she stepped onto the raised boarding of the floor. (p. 278)

For the strict purposes of comparison, Homer need have only said that the doors flew open with a groan that was like the roar of a bull. But he adds a bull at grass in a meadow. Strictly speaking, this is irrelevant, is extraneous matter. But it is a characteristic of the epic simile that it gains resonance from such inspired digression. The groaning of the door suggests the image of a bull who has had his fill at the meadow. This image is structurally and thematically suggestive for we are shortly to witness the Odyssean revenge and the long-eluding satisfaction achieved by Odysseus. In keeping with the expansiveness of the epic the simile expands, and fulfills itself by including not one but many things, it details with leisure the various aspects of the scene.

The Function of the Homeric Simile

A Homeric simile is an elaborate comparison in which the secondary object is developed beyond its specific points of parallel to the primary subject. It is a window through which we see epic life in all its richness and variety. The simile illuminates a whole scene. The detail is vivid and evocative and brings out the full force of an event or scene. A Homeric simile is a brief poem standing steadfast in the moving stream of the tale. The action of the poem halts as it were and the poet proceeds to paint a whole scene that is magically powerful.

The simile, in addition to making us see the scene more vividly, shows the poet's acute observation of life, sense of design, strong simplicity, and naturalness. The greatest similes offer a significant clue to the total meaning of the situation or the scene. The poet need not describe a scene exhaustively. Consider, in the following simile, the marvellous sweep and vigour of Homer's epic style:

> Seizing the olive pole, they drove its sharpened end into the Cyclop's eye, while I used my weight from above to twist it home, like a man boring a ship's timber with a drill which his mates below him twirl with a strap they hold at either end, so that it spins continuously. In much the same way we handled our pole with its red-hot point and twisted it in his eye till the blood boiled up round the burning wood. (p. 120)

Odysseus is, here, describing the manner in which he and his men blinded the Cyclops in his cave. In the next simile, disguised as a beggar, he narrates a fictitious tale describing his meeting with Odysseus to Penelope;

> He [Odysseus] made all these lying yarns of his so convincing that, as she listened, the tears poured from Penelope's eyes and bedewed her cheeks. As the snow that the West wind has brought melts on the mountain-tops when the East wind thaws it, and, melting, makes the rivers run in spate, so did the tears she shed drenched her fair cheeks as she wept for the husband who was sitting at her side. (p. 255)

There is hardly an episode, where Homer does not enhance the effect of the action through his inventive similes. As the suitors are being slaughtered in the Hall, they run around in panic. Read these lines carefully;

> The Suitors were scared out of their senses. They scattered through the hall like a herd of cattle that a darting gadfly has attacked and stampeded, in the spring-time

> when the long days come in. But the others swooped down on them just as vultures from the hills, with curving claws and crooked beaks, who swoop down on the smaller birds, who though they shun the upper air and hug the ground find no help there and no escape. The vultures pounce on them and kill, and men enjoy the hunting. So did Odysseus' party chase the Suitors headlong through the hall and hack them down. (p. 295).

The simile here tells us, more than any detailed account could, about the danger-fraught triumph of Odysseus and his inherited nobleness and his towering personality. The simile has a dreadful beauty. The simile evokes the determined violence underlying the heroic slaughter. This is a good example of Homer's blunt truthfulness. The simile registers awe; the feeling proper to epic, reminding the reader that the story told is no ordinary story, concerning no ordinary men. In a word, it is a heroic simile that stirs us emotionally.

3. THE EPIC HERO

The supreme epic quality of the *Odyssey* is the quality of heroic energy, the superabundant vitality which charges action and character alike. We sense in Odysseus great reserves of inexhaustible endurance - equally when he is active or at rest. To create a character possessed of heroic energy is a different art from that of the modern novelist who creates what is called the "personality." The modern poet or novelist probes deeper into the "self," and explores the darker recesses of mind and motive while the epic poet ranges over a wider world of men and events, but is unable to reach far into the interior of most of them. Awe is the basic response to epic poetry. Epic awe springs from the circumstance where a man can perform extraordinary deeds while still remaining human and limited.

About the epic hero and the nature of the heroic action there are different theories. We shall summarize the leading interpretations: C. M. Bowra, in his *Heroic Poetry*, places the heroic poem in the age succeeding the age of shamanistic poetry. The shaman or magician, who is the hero, succeeds not through bravery as much as through secret knowledge, magical powers, and initiation in the supernatural mysteries. The protagonist of the heroic poem is seen by Bowra as an essentially weaker man, gifted with less formidable capacities, with no superhuman power to control his world, relying chiefly on courage and strength, sometimes intelligence and cunning.

Gertrude R. Levy, in her influential study *The Sword from the Rock*, argues that the action of the human hero follows a pattern originally ascribed to divine protagonists. The

warrior-hero who has to overcome great odds to regain his inheritance or position, common in epic narrative, is a continuation of the mythic hero, who has super-human qualities.

A third critic, Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, observes that the hero of a myth is a god, whereas the hero of romance is superior to men and his environment, superior not in kind, as god is, but in degree. The epic hero, in terms of Frye's theory, would seem to be "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment . . . he has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature." All these three scholars view the epic as a human document and the epic hero as an exceptional human being. This is abundantly reflected in the *Odyssey*.

In the very first book, Homer brings out Odysseus' character unmistakably. The invocation introduces us to the hero:

> The hero of the tale which I beg the Muse to help me tell is that resourceful man who roamed the wide world after he had sacked the holy citadel of Troy. He saw the cities of many peoples and he learned their ways. He suffered many hardships on the high seas in his struggle to preserve his life and bring his comrades home. But he failed to save those comrades in spite of all his efforts. (p. 3)

Odysseus, we are told, is the victim of Poseidon's malice. The sea-god pursues Odysseus relentlessly, till the day when he reaches Ithaca. Poseidon has kept Odysseus in exile ever since the latter blinded Polyphemus, his son. As nymph Calypso's prisoner, Odysseus is pining on a lonely island and "would give anything for the mere sight of the smoke rising from his own land" (p. 65). He spends seven years with Calypso; unwillingly. His home, with his wife and his son remains the centre of his thoughts throughout. Odysseus does not have the youth or beauty of Achilles, being now in middle age. He is a short, heavy man, awkward in his movements yet he has supreme skill in speech, courage, and cunning. He is the shrewdest of heroes. He is a man of many devices, who has known so many men and monsters, nymphs and witches, and so many cities. His is an all-embracing figure, a composite of the pettiest stratagems and the largest sympathies in human nature. The prince fallen upon evil days captures our imagination and wonder by his intellectual superiority, the gift of invention, and sagacity; and wins our sympathy with the fate of an exile.

The hero of the *Odyssey*, in the important estimate of H.D.F. Kitto, is a great fighter, a wily schemer, a ready speaker, a man of stout heart and broad wisdom, who knows that he must endure without too much complaining what the gods send. He can both build and sail a

boat, drive a furrow as straight as anyone, beat a young braggart at throwing a discus, and challenge the Phaeacian youth at boxing, wrestling or running. He can flay, skin, cut up and cook an ox, and be moved to tears by a song. He is, in fact, an excellent all-rounder.

The *Odyssey* celebrates both heroic revenge and heroic cunning. Maurice Bowra pointedly sums up the spirit of the *Odyssey* and the character of its hero;

> Much of Odysseus' triumph is due to his being cleverer than his adversaries. In this task he is aided and abetted by Athene, whose tenderness for him is delightfully unashamed. She admires him because he has all the qualities she likes most in herself. She is not above praising trickery and dishonesty, though her praise is not without irony. Odysseus triumphs over a meaner world because he is in every way a better man than those who try to dispossess him.

Odysseus displays many characteristics not traditionally considered heroic. After blinding Polyphemus, Odysseus is elated and tactlessly calls to him: "Cyclops, if anyone ever asks you how you came by your unsightly blindness, tell him your eye was put out by Odysseus, Sacker of Cities, the son of Laertes, who lives in Ithaca" (p. 123). At this the Cyclops lifted up his hands to the heavens that hold the stars and prayed to the Lord Poseidon:

> Hear me Poseidon, Girdler of Earth, god of the sable locks, if I am yours indeed and you accept me as your son, grant that Odysseus, who styles himself sacker of cities and son of Laertes may never reach his home in Ithaca. But if he is destined to reach his native land, to come once more to his own house and see his friends again, let him come late, in evil plight, with all his comrades dead, and when he is landed, by a foreign ship, let him find trouble in his home. (p. 123-4).

The prayer is heard. This incident is an example of the hero's flaw. He is boastful. And, of course, he is a compulsive liar, a spinner of lying yarns. At the same time, it is also a fact that he wriggles out of many a dangerous situation by his cunning, trickery, presence of mind, and the art of flattery. But these are not noble qualities. Odysseus is perhaps the most complex of Greek heroes, and that is why his image has not dimmed to this day.

In Book IX, Odysseus is made more intimate by having to speak for himself. This interesting device of storytelling resembles the cinematic technique of flashback, whereby the hero recalls his experiences which are deemed to have taken place before the poem begins. He narrates his adventures to King Alcinous and Queen Arete: his travels to the land of the Cyclopes, a race of one-eyed giants and the Isle of Circe, who transforms his men into swine;

his visit to the underworld Hades, to learn from the prophet Teiresias the way home; and his stay on the nymph Calypso's Island.

The Nausicaa story is handled with great delicacy, tact and truth. It is a deeply moving and admirably rendered episode. It is a charming inset piece in the turbulent world of the *Odyssey*. It fills the reader's mind with images of beauty and delicate wistfulness. Exhausted by his struggle with the sea, the shipwrecked Odysseus manages to crawl into a shelter of dead leaves. The enchanting figure of Nausicaa, the Phaeacian king's daughter, when she is washing clothes on the beach, meets the sea-soiled and naked Odysseus and, with complete simplicity and self-possession, clothes him and send him to her parents. Listen to Odysseus pleading his case with subtle wit;

> Mistress, I throw myself on your mercy. But are you some goddess or some mortal woman? If you are one of the gods who live in the sky, it is of Artemis, the daughter of almighty Zeus, that your beauty grace and stature most remind me. But if you are one of us mortals who live on earth then lucky indeed are your father and gentle mother . . . but he is the happiest of them all who with his wedding gifts can win you for his home. (p. 80)

These words of Odysseus are unsurpassed for their graciousness. Nausicaa's words of farewell to her guest-friend Odysseus are equally wonderful: "Good luck my friend," she says, "I hope that when you are in your country you will remember me at times, since it is to me before all others that you owe your life" (p. 106).

In the Nausicaa story, the highest point of excellence in the narrative art is achieved. Great subtlety of characterization is in evidence in the portrayal of Nausicaa. The episode enriches the plot, as it reveals the character of Odysseus. Phaeacia is the Homeric utopia: Homer here "attains the highest point of excellence in the poetic art," (Denys Page). However, not all the hospitality and affection of the Phaeacian royal family, not even the enchanting beauty of Nausicaa can stop him from his quest for his home and his family. It is in Phaeacia that Odysseus breaks down, listening to his own story as the minstrel sings the lay of Troy:

> He wept as a woman weeps, when she throws her arms round the body of her beloved husband, fallen in battle before his city and his comrades, fighting to save his home-town and children from disaster. She has found him gasping in the throes of death; she clings to him and lifts her voice in lamentation. But the enemy come up and belabour her back and shoulders with spears as they lead her

> off into slavery and a life of miserable toil with her cheeks wasted with her pitiful grief. Equally pitiful were the tears that now welled up in Odysseus' eyes. (p. 107-8)

In a beautifully moving simile, Homer conveys the deep pathos of Odysseus' situation. We see here Odysseus not as a hero but as an outsider, a lone figure locked in helpless struggle against the elemental forces of a hostile world.

It is the suffering and miserable Odysseus that appeals to us moderns more than the sacker of cities and slayer of giants. It is a weary Odysseus who, after ten years of war and another ten years of most incredible and taxing adventures, has come to the Phaeacian Utopia. His mind is reaching out to his own home and to the approaching end of his wanderings. He returns to Ithaca on a Phaeacian ship, disguised as a beggar. Although unrecognized, he has his feet washed by his ancient nurse, who suddenly sees the scar and recognizes its bearer. Odysseus is revealed to his old nurse (he has already been revealed to his son Telemachus), his swineherd, his dying hound Argus, and finally to his wife and his father. Recognitions delighted the Greeks and Homer contrives his with ingenuity and variety. More touching than any is the scene where the old dog Argus, lying in the dung-heap, full of ticks, old and neglected, recognizes his master. He wags his tail and droops his ears but cannot even crawl up to him and dies after Odysseus has seen him.

The theme of revenge now takes command; there are portents in the sky. The seer Theoclymenus proclaims the doom of the Suitors:

> "Unhappy men," he cries, "What blight is this that has descended on you? Your heads, your faces and your knees are veiled in night. There is a sound of mourning in the air, I see cheeks wet with tears. And look, the panels and the walls are splashed with blood. The porch is filled with ghosts. So is the court-ghosts hurrying down to darkness and to hell. The sun is blotted out from heaven and a foul mist has crept upon the world." (p. 275)

Methodically and coldly, Odysseus proceeds to exact his revenge. His triumph is due to his bowmanship and he shoots down the suitors with unerring aim. Eurycleia finds Odysseus among the corpses of the fallen and her instinct is to raise a yell of triumph but Odysseus restrains her. It is an impious thing to exult over the slain, he tells her. The supreme scene however is that of the meeting between Odysseus and Penelope. It is recounted with Homer's usual plainness, but it has a significance which Homer has taken twenty-two books to build up. There is nothing more moving in the *Odyssey* than the scene of Penelope's

surrender to her husband to whom she has been united after twenty years. Bursting into tears she runs up to Odysseus and throws her arms round his neck;

> Penelope's surrender melted Odysseus' heart, and he wept as he held his dear wife in his arms so loyal and so true. Sweet moments too for her, sweet as the sight of land to sailors struggling in the sea, when the Sea-god by dint of wind and wave has wrecked their gallant ship. What happiness for the few swimmers that have fought their way through the white surf to the shore, when caked with brine but safe and sound they tread on solid earth! If this is bliss, what bliss it was for her to see her husband once again. (p. 306)

This passage is the sweetest and most tender in the whole range of European poetry. Along with the slaughter of the suitors, Homer makes tenderness, grace and wedded love a necessary element of his heroic poem. Such is Homer's art that we pass from the scene of slaughter to the scene of reunion without surprise. Homer portrays humanity in its completeness, at the same time ferocious and feeble; mingling the fury of combat with the tenderest and the highest form of human love.

The splendour and gravity of the Homeric conception of the epic hero lies in the single fact that, though crushed utterly, Odysseus is yet destined, by his courage and wisdom, to rise again and rule over his kingdom. 'Warrior' and 'hero' are synonyms in Homer. Strong individuals emerging from the old tribal order in which family ties are of the first importance, form the warrior culture of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The strong individual or the hero is accepted as a leader by society because he supplies a need in that society. The hero owes his position to his charismatic power, granted by divine grace, and keeps it only so long as he continues to display these powers. Hereditary kingship, though common, was by no means invariable. As Telemachus feared, a man had to prove his claim to chieftaincy; he had to show himself to be strong, brave and courageous. Having obtained the leadership, the hero aims to enhance his position by the pursuit of honour. Questions of morality are determined by the standard of whether the action is honourable or dishonourable; in other words, it should be in keeping with the dignity of the hero. The world of Odysseus is fiercely competitive and because the heroes were warriors a hero's ultimate worth, in the words of M.I. Finley, "the meaning of his life, received its final test in three parts: whom he fought, how he fought and how he fared." Finley goes on to quote the distinguished American sociologist Thorstein Veblen.

> [Under] this common-sense barbarian appreciation of worth or honour, the taking of life . . . is honourable in the highest degree. And this high office of slaughter, as an expression of the slayer's prepotence, casts a glamour of worth over every act of slaughter and over all the tools and accessories of the act.

The actions of the hero, especially heroic cruelty and heroic revenge are intelligible, only by reference to his world. If we inject modern ideas into the world of Odysseus, the poem is destroyed.

4. HOMERIC GODS

The gods are essential to the story and the narrative collapses without the interventions of the gods. "Religion" is a European word and its basic meaning is: observing the signs of a Divine Summons. The Greek word for religion (*parateresis*) means the scrupulous observation of omens and the performance of rituals. For the Greeks, religion meant a fixed relationship between the human self and some supra-human forces. The first thing we must know about the religion of the Greeks is that it was not a set of dogmas, a creed supported by a Church. Priests there were but they were officials appointed to perform certain religious rites. A study of Greek religion must therefore begin with a consideration of the nature of their gods. The Olympian gods were not the creators of the universe and could not dispose of man as their creature with an unquestioned right of ownership; as Pindar sings in the sixth 'Nemean Ode': "of one race, one only, are men and gods."

Polytheism

The Greeks worshipped many gods - Zeus, Apollo, Athene, and the rest. The mythology of the Greeks, which the moderns regard merely as a collection of fables was to the Greeks true; or at least it would never occur to the Greeks that it might be false, might be mere stories. Though, no doubt, the stories of the gods were, in part, the inventions of the poets, the poets believed that they were bodying forth what they and every one believed to be true.

Anthropomorphism

The gods are anthropomorphic deities, that is to say, they are treated as having human form and character. These gods quarrel like relatives. Like men, they are jealous and need love and sleep; they do everything human, except hunger and suffer and die. However, because they were immortal, the gods could not be heroes. They do not shed such tears as men weep, and

they do not shed blood; because in their veins flows an ethereal fluid called 'ichor' and not blood.

Homer was one of the first poets to compose the Greek theogony; write histories about the origin of the gods, and give the gods their names; to allot them their several offices, and describe their forms. Homer gave definite and human form to the Olympian gods. He ordered them in a hierarchy. There is much that is magnificent in Homer's gods, and we come to like them for their failings. But not one of these gods could bear comparison with Hector in heroism, with Andromache in tenderness, with Nestor in dignity, or with Odysseus in intelligence. Homer is the poet of what Milton calls "the human face divine."

The gods are capricious and often hostile to man's good. But they have a nature akin to his. If they are angry, they might be pacified; if they are jealous, they might be appeased. The enmity of one god might be offset by the friendship of another. Dealings with them are not so unlike dealings with men. This indifference of the Homeric gods in moral matters was condemned by the Greek Philosophers from Xenophanes to Plato. Xenophanes (c. 570—548 B.C.), the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy dismissed the gods of Homer as thieves, cheats and adulterers.

The Gods and the World of Men

Every power of nature is deified (made a god of) by the Greeks. Every cave and fountain is haunted by a nymph; in the ocean dwell the Nereids, in the mountains the Oreads, and the Dryads in the wood and everywhere seen and heard by shepherds is the horned and goat-footed Pan. The sky is impersonated as Zeus, the earth as Demeter, the sea as Poseidon, and the underworld as Hades. Even rumour is a god. This Homeric world is less terrible than our world. Man is at home in the world. To drive the point home, let us take an illustration from the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus, after the fall of Troy, was for ten years a wanderer on the seas, detained by tempest, enchantment, and every kind of danger, beyond hope of return to his wife and home in Ithaca. His situation is hopeless enough. The powers with which Odysseus has to deal are not mere blind and indifferent forces of nature, but spiritual beings who take an interest in his fate. Consider, for example, the Homeric account of the onset of a storm:

> But now Poseidon, Lord of the Earthquake, who was on his way back from a visit to the Ethiopians, observed him from the distant mountains of the Solymi. The sight of Odysseus sailing over the seas added fresh fuel to his anger. He shook his head and muttered to himself: 'So I had only to go to Ethiopia for the gods to

> change their minds about Odysseus! And, there he is, close to the Phaeacians' land, where he is destined to bring his long ordeal to an end. Nevertheless I mean to let him have his bellyful of trouble yet.'
>
> Whereupon he marshalled the clouds and seizing his trident in his hands stirred up the sea. He roused the stormy blasts of every wind that blows, and covered land and water alike with a canopy of cloud. Darkness swooped down from the sky. East wind and South and the tempestuous West fell to on one another, and from the North came a white squall, rolling a great wave in its van. Odysseus' knees shook and his spirits quailed. (p. 70)

The scene is brought to life by thunder, lightning, swirling winds, rolling waves, and sudden darkness. The position of the hero is hopeless, it is true, but not with the hopelessness of despair. A god has wrecked him, it may also be a god that will save. If Poseidon is his enemy, Athene, he knows, is his friend. All lies, after all, in the hands of the gods who can be approached by prayer and sacrifice. In modern terms we may say that the sea is the enemy of Odysseus. The sea is the cause of Odysseus' desolation. Homer absolves Odysseus in the end so that he can be with earth-born people, "who never knew salt or heard the billow roar" (p. 143).

The exquisite beauty of this passage depends on the quality of the Greek religion. It depends on the fact that all that is mysterious in the world, all that is unknown, and hostile, and alien, and dark to man, has been clothed in radiant form. Every aspect of nature, night and dawn, earth and sun, winds, rivers and seas, sleep and death - all have been transformed into divine and conscious powers; powers that can be pacified by prayer and understood by divination (prophecy), and powers that can even be directly approached.

The Greek gods were not purely spiritual powers, to be known only in the heart. They were beings in human form, like, though superior to, men. They passed a great part of their divine life on earth. They intervened in human affairs, helped or hindered them in their undertakings. They even had semi-divine sons and daughters, and followed the fortunes of their children and children's children. Between the gods and mankind there was constant traffic. From Heracles, the son of Zeus, was descended the Dorian race. The Ionians were descended from Ion, son of Apollo. Every tribe traced back its origin to a "hero" and these "heroes" were children of the gods. Thus, the Greek gods were the founders of the Greek society. The whole social structure of ancient Greece was religious through and through.

Athene and Athens were but two sides of the same coin. The order of nature and the laws of society were regarded as sacred, and their violation amounted to challenging the gods.

Oracles, Divination, Sacrifice, and Atonement

The art of forecasting the future by signs developed quite early in Greek history. The flight of birds or the appearance of the entrails of the victims sacrificed were supposed to give a hint of the future course of events. This art was already mature at the time of the Homeric epics. The Greeks believed that some hint might be had from the gods of what their intentions and purposes really were. The *Odyssey* is peppered with prophecies, omens, and descriptions of rituals. Recall how birds appear at a number of critical points in the epic. When Telemachus is taking leave of Menelaus and Helen in Sparta, an eagle catches two doves in its talons, which Helen interprets in a fortuitous way. Theoclymenus interprets the flight of an eagle and predicts suffering for the suitors. The most significant ritual that which Odysseus performs is before he meets the soul of Teiresias in Hades. At every feast described in the epic, there are detailed descriptions of offerings made to the gods.

Athene and Poseidon

No full account of all the twelve Homeric gods can be given here. We will confine our attention to Athene and Poseidon. The following passage in the *Odyssey* is a splendid example of the working of the Homeric imagination; the heavenly picture drawn by him, and also a good introduction to Pallas Athene;

> When she had finished, Athene of the flashing eyes withdrew to Olympus, where people say the gods have made their everlasting home. Shaken by no wind, drenched by no showers and invaded by no snows, it is set in a cloudless sea of limpid air with a white radiance playing over all. There the happy gods spend their delightful days, and there the lady of the bright eyes went when she had explained her wishes to the girl (Nausicaa). (p. 77)

Athene is presented to us from the start as the deity who governs the world of the *Odyssey*. She is the goddess of civic wisdom. Her language and action, as well as the familiar frame in which they operate, mark her as a supreme deity who holds the stage throughout, who initiates and competes against obstacles. She is a pivotal figure. The Homeric image of Athene is neatly analysed by Finley:

> On Olympus the gods were altogether superior to the goddesses, considered collectively superior not only in their power but also in their appeal, in the

> feelings they inspired among men. The chief exception to the rule was Athena, and the significant quality of Athena as a goddess was her manliness . . . She was not even born of woman, having sprung from the head of Zeus.

When Odysseus awakes on Ithaca, Athene throws a mist over the place and disguises him, so that he would not be recognized by his wife or the people of the town before the suitors have paid for all their crimes. She appears to him in the guise of a shepherd and is greeted by one of Odysseus' characteristic yarns. The goddess smiles at Odysseus' tale, resumes her female shape, caresses Odysseus with her hand and speaks to him as follows:

> "What a cunning knave it would take," she said, "to beat you at your own tricks! Even a God would be hard put to it. And so my stubborn friend, Odysseus the arch-deceiver, with his craving for intrigue does not propose even in his own country to drop his sharp practice and the lying tales that he loves from the bottom of his heart. But no more of this: we are both adepts in chicane. For in the world of men you have no rival as a statesman and orator while I am pre-eminent among the gods for inventions and resource. And yet you did not know me, Pallas Athene, Daughter of Zeus, who always stand by your side and guard you through all your adventures." (p. 176-7)

Poseidon relentlessly and maliciously pursues Odysseus and Athene, the armed protectress of the city, the giver of social wisdom, is throughout observed in rehabilitating the exiled Odysseus. Poseidon is a formidable god. He enjoys the same prestige as Zeus. Here is an account, in his own words, in the *Iliad*:

> There are three of us Brothers, all Sons of Cronos and Rhea: Zeus, myself and Hades the King of the dead. Each of us was given his own domain when the world was divided into three parts. We cast lots, and I received the grey sea as my inalienable realm. Hades drew the nether dark, while Zeus was allotted the broad sky and a home among the clouds in the upper air. But the earth was left common to all of us and high Olympus too. (XV)

As one of the sons of Cronos and Rhea, he wields formidable powers over the elements. He is a wild and cruel god, and his symbol is the trident with which he lashes the sea into storm. He is called earthshaker because he causes earthquakes. Poseidon merciless, vindictive, and malicious. The epic hero is hounded by him for full ten years and but for the protection of Athene, Odysseus would have perished. Much of the primitive savagery which we meet so frequently in the Homeric picture of life is occasioned by the Homeric deities.

As many Hellenists point out 'gods' can be a misleading translation of *theoi.* Poseidon, a *theos*, is a merciless force out to destroy Odysseus. The gods seem to control and direct the actions of men even when these men are presented as completely independent and responsible agents. These Homeric gods seem to suggest a tension between the forces of joy in life and the fear of destiny. Man, for all his quality and excellence, must bow to the unalterable laws that govern the human universe. But the Homeric view of life is that honour, excellence, beauty, and peace must be sought; though the price be tears, exile, disasters, and suffering. The *Odyssey*, as Longinus says, is a poem of character rather than of passion; and that is why, we may add, it is not completely drenched in blood as the *Iliad* is. Homer does not seem to distinguish between physical nature and human nature. The powers that rule the physical nature also rule the moral universe. The gods have not yet been spiritualized; religion has yet to be sanctified by morality.

Kitto has put the whole matter clearly; "Homer has of course no systematic theology: indeed, the very idea of systematic thought has not come into existence. Moreover, he is working in a traditional form - for there must have been many writers of epic lays before Homer; so that the traditional and the new may be found side by side." And goes on to add "the Greeks never doubted for a moment that the universe is not capricious: it obeys Law and is therefore capable of explanation. Even in pre-philosophical Greece, we find this idea, for behind the gods (though identified with them) is a shadowy power that Homer calls Ananke, Necessity, an Order of things which even the gods cannot infringe."

5. THE PENELOPE SITUATION

Penelope is, after Helen, the most celebrated female figure in Greek literature. Before proceeding to estimate Penelope's character we must take a look at the social and familial life as portrayed in the *Odyssey*.

In the *Odyssey* we get a vivid picture of what early Greek life was like. Unlike the *Iliad* the *Odyssey* has a mixed plot: different ranks from the aristocracy to the slaves and shepherds are intimately and sympathetically conceived and portrayed. Life was extremely simple. The homely virtues of courage in war and of skill and dexterity in arts and crafts were highly valued. Kings built houses and ships and the daughters and wives of kings spun and wove, and washed the household's clothes, and cooked. Recall how Nausicaa goes to the riverside to wash the family's clothes and Penelope weaves a shroud for her father-in-law.

The least fortunate were propertyless labourers, who worked for hire and begged what they could not steal.

The household, or *oikos* is the centre around which life is organized. From this centre, says Finley, flowed not only the satisfaction of material needs, including security, but ethical norms and values, duties, obligations and responsibilities, social relationships and relations with the gods. The *oikos* was not merely the family; it was all the people of the household together with its land and its goods; hence 'economics,' the art of managing an *oikos* meant running an estate, not simply managing to keep peace in the family.

Homeric society consisted in the main of warriors and their women folk. A royal household was different from a common household only in magnitude. The values of this society are the values of a warrior culture. Hence the struggle for the throne in Ithaca and the predicament of Penelope. It is significant that when Odysseus returns to Ithaca there is no automatic resumption of his royal position. He has to fight against heavy odds and with all his powers of strength and guile to regain his throne. Thus speaks Odysseus to Athene: "It seems to me that I should have come to the same miserable end as king Agamemnon directly I set foot in my home, if you, goddess, had not made all this clear to me" (p. 179).

There is a war of attrition going on in Odysseus' palace and though its issue is decided according to the plan of Zeus, men have to fight for it. Homeric scholars have, on the basis of the internal analysis of the text, shown that the suitor theme was not a part of an ancient tradition but was an addition by Homer, and it shows his creative genius. Telemachus is impotent against the hundred and eight suitors of his mother. Kitto and Finley cite the Suitor Theme as an example of villainy and moral retribution. In this view what shapes the Homeric epic is nothing external like the adventures of Odysseus but the theme of the victory of the moral over the immoral, of order over disorder, and of law over lawlessness.

Penelope is a figure of innocent suffering, a pathetic study of womanhood in the aftermath of the Trojan war. Why has Homer chosen to pit the Ithacan queen against so many suitors? The question of succession has been suggested as the most important reason for the situation. Perhaps the poet had both aesthetic and ethical reasons for dramatizing the predicament of Penelope. The theme of heroic revenge demonstrates this. The Odysseus household is Ithaca in miniature. Penelope becomes the emblem of marital fidelity, constancy, and virtue. The catastrophe, whether man-made or sent by the gods has resulted in the long-drawn-out suffering of Western literature's most virtuous wife. The Agamemnon

story provides a suitable foil to the faithfulness of Penelope. The soul of Agamemnon speaks of Odysseus;

> Ah, happy prince, blessed in Icarius' daughter with a wife in whom all virtues meet, flawless Penelope, who has proved herself so good and wise, so faithful to her wedded love! Her glory will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a song for mortal ears, to grace Penelope the constant queen. What a contrast with Clytaemnestra and the infamy she sank to when she killed her wedded lord! Her name will be cursed wherever she is sung. She has branded all her sex with every honest woman in it. (p. 315-6)

The passage quoted above clearly shows that Penelope was a moral heroine for Homer, an embodiment of chastity and loyalty, to be contrasted with the faithless, murdering Clytaemnestra.

With our modern obsession with "personality" and the "star" system that goes with it we, perhaps, find Penelope to be a shadowy figure. But if we do not allow our obsession with personality to get the better of us, if we do not fix our gaze on single stars and look at the whole epic firmament, what do we find? The heroes have perished. Those who have survived and lived on are mostly scoundrels. The Trojan war has left a trail of wreckage, from which no greatness can rise. Odysseus is the only surviving hero of the epic legend. The *Odyssey* presents us not only with the exploits and adventures of Odysseus on the uncharted seas but his destiny deeply anchored in the moral law that governs the world. When Odysseus learns fully how matters stand in his house, he employs every means to clear his palace of the interlopers and thereby establish excellence; so that no one may think him to be contemptible and weak. This is the creed by which Homeric heroes lived and died.

The heroic code is that once honour is destroyed, the moral excellence of the loser collapses. Odysseus' slaughter of the entire younger generation of the degenerate Ithacan aristocracy is not questioned by Homer because he sees nothing wrong in this. It is only to be expected that the heroic revenge of Odysseus, when he feels himself dishonoured, shamed, scorned, ridiculed, disgraced, and unjustly treated, will be huge and deadly. (We have been heavily reliant on B.M.W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* in understanding the mood of the revenge situation in the *Odyssey*.)

The Penelope quandary requires a few more words. She does not know whether Odysseus is dead or alive, whether she is a widow or not. And in a patriarchal society, the suitors place the decision in her hands. This has puzzled many a Homeric scholar and no

satisfactory explanation has been given. This much, however, is certain that the entire aristocracy in and around Ithaca agreed that the house of Odysseus was to be dethroned and his successor was also to take his wife. Finley is perhaps right in observing that, "by Penelope's receiving the suitor of her choice into the bed of Odysseus, some shadow of legitimacy however dim and fictitious, would be thrown over the new king."

From the perspective of Penelope's world, the suitors embody still untamed destructive forces which need to be subdued. The Homeric Ithaca is not so secure that it can dispense with the heroic energies. Sheer physical strength, even naked force, were needed to defend it. The whole point of the war in Ithaca would seem to be that civilization has to combat savagery. The person who protects the house, the basic unit of civilization, in the absence of Odysseus is his son Telemachus. The infiltrators are bent upon destroying the house. The ruin of the house would not merely be a domestic tragedy, but implies the larger sweep of the hero's confrontation with a hostile world.

From the very beginning the house, or *oikos* is the focal point of the Odysseus story. The first book frames this theme. The family of Odysseus is so dependent on him that their very existence is threatened by his absence. The son who embodies the strongest bond between Penelope and Odysseus is instrumental in bringing them together. We must accept the violence of the hero, his son and their two helpers, because it is part of an impenetrable reality, a compelling world-order whose justice is reconciled with violence. No less than 108 nobles, 56 from Ithaca and the other islands ruled by Odysseus, and 52 from a neighbouring island kingdom, says the poet, were paying court to Penelope. She was to be forced to choose Odysseus' successor from among them.

The human society Odysseus confronts in his palace is no less predatory than the world of witches, giants, and nymphs with which he has had to struggle for ten years. Even the man-eating, one-eyed ogre, Polyphemus, with his gluttony and drunkenness, his clumsy jokes, his affection for his ram, is not entirely unlikeable. Circe and Calypso, despite their magic and their desert islands, are delightfully human in their admiration and affection for Odysseus. The suitors are contemptible.

It is an essential element of Odyssean life that to regain his throne the king could count on no one but his wife, son, and his faithful slaves. There is nothing more pathetic than these words of Penelope. She tells Odysseus in disguise;

> Am I to stay with my son and keep everything intact, my belongings, my servants, and this great house of ours, in loyalty to my husband's bed and

> deference to public opinion. Or shall I go away now with the best and the most generous of my suitors here in the palace? For I must tell you that my son, while still an irresponsible child, made it out of the question for me to leave my husband's house and marry again. But now that he is grown up and entered on manhood, he actually implores me to take myself off, so concerned is he for his estate, which he sees the young lords eating up. (p. 254)

Penelope is presented to us through her language, imagery, and situation as a symbol of womanhood. No matter how noble she is and how great her gifts, her destiny is to marry and subordinate her life to her husband. Her life, if it has glory, has a borrowed one. Confined to her home with her bullying son who takes out his frustration on her, and mostly faithless servants, excluded from active social, economic and political life she, though a queen, occupies a lowly position in Ithacan society. Penelope's situation might well be any woman's situation.

6. TELEMACHUS

We may consider Telemachus as a reluctant leader in the absence of Odysseus. But the emergency in Ithaca requires far more complex qualities of mind and character and much greater heroism than Telemachus possesses. It is clear that he is unable to purge his house of hostile elements. He is involved in a sweep of events that he finds unmanageable. His own perception of his dilemma makes the best starting point for a discussion of his character;

> A mob of hangers-on are pestering my mother with their unwanted attention, and these suitors are actually the sons of those who are your leaders here. Too cowardly to present themselves at her father's house, so that Icarius himself might make terms for his daughter's hand with the claimant he preferred, they spend the whole time in and out of our place. They slaughter our oxen, our sheep, our fatted goats; they feast themselves and drink our sparkling wine - with never a thought of all the wealth that is being wasted. The truth is that there is no one like Odysseus in charge to purge the house of this disease. You will understand that we are not equipped like him for the task, and that the attempt would serve only to expose our miserable weakness. Yet how gladly I should undertake my own defense, had I the force at my command! (p. 16)

Lack of power causes his passivity. He fails in his purpose in calling an assembly of the lords - which was to try to mobilize public opinion against the suitors. In the heroic world, the hero

prizes his honour above everything. And his prestige, his honour depends upon his ability to maintain his status and privileges; to retaliate a slight; to humiliate and destroy his enemies. This is his virtue, his excellence, his *arete*. If he fails, his honour is gone. The heroic world was a relatively anarchic world in which the defense of one's prestige, property, family, and friends cannot have recourse to legal process under the aegis of the state. Courage is the cardinal virtue. The only failure that the heroic code could countenance was an honourable death in battle. As such, the suitor motif in the *Odyssey* assumes enormous proportions. It becomes almost a mythical power in its own right, a force which would have destroyed both Telemachus and Odysseus but for divine intervention.

Telemachus is a secondary figure, whose weakness under pressure throws the hero's unbending will into high relief. The *Odyssey* is constructed around Odysseus; it is named after him; he is the focus of everything in the epic, a central figure whose inflexible purpose, once formed, nothing can shake. This heroic purpose is the mainspring of the epic action in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus' son Telemachus is sweet and dutiful but powerless against a hundred and eight enemies. To compound his misfortune, he has no blood brothers upon whom to call. He has a measure of authority, it would seem, as he orders his mother about in the matter of her marriage. Athene's irritation with him comes out in this admonition:

> You must cudgel your own brains for some way of destroying this mob in your house, either by cunning or in open fight. You are no longer a child: you must put childish thoughts away. Have you not heard what a name prince Orestes made for himself in the world when he killed the traitor Aegisthus for murdering his noble father? You, my friend - and what a tall and splendid fellow you have grown! - must be as brave as Orestes. Then future generations will sing your praises. (p. 10)

Persuasion has failed. Antinous, one of the suitors, fearing that the people no longer bear good will to them suggests that Telemachus be ambushed and killed. Athene, disguised as Mentes, prompts Telemachus to action, and he risks his life in a voyage to find news of his father. Accompanied by Peisistratus, Nestor's youngest son, Telemachus goes to get news of his father from Menelaus, the Spartan king. Menelaus tells Telemachus how, after the Trojan war - during his adventures in Egypt he had encountered Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, and after he had learned from him how he could return safely to Sparta he asked about his former comrades. Proteus told him the names of those who had reached home and those who had died. He told Menelaus that Odysseus was alive, but was the nymph Calypso's prisoner in the distant island of Ogygia. Athene appears to Telemachus in a dream, and advises him to

return to Ithaca. She also warns him of the ambush that the suitors have laid for him in the straits between Ithaca and Samos. The goddess also tells him how to avoid the trap. Telemachus arrives safely at Ithaca where Odysseus is waiting in the hut of Eumaeus. The swineherd gives Telemachus a warm welcome. Telemachus comes to business at once: "I wanted to see you myself and find out from you whether my mother is still in the palace or whether she has married again and Odysseus' bed is hung with cobwebs for lack of occupants" (p. 211).

In delicate touches of pathos and in the handling of recognition scenes, Homer excels all writers. We find Odysseus tarrying in the swineherd's hut and Telemachus returning from his sojourn in Peloponnese. The incident is inimitably portrayed:

> 'Believe me, I am no god. But I am your father, on whose account you have endured so much sorrow and trouble and suffered persecution at men's hands.' With that he kissed his son and let a tear roll down his cheek to the ground, though hitherto he had kept himself under control. Telemachus, softened at last flung his arms round his noble father's neck and burst into tears. And now they both broke down and sobbed aloud without a pause like birds bereaved, like the sea-eagle or taloned vulture when villagers have robbed the nest of their unfledged young. So did these two let the piteous tears run streaming from their eyes. (p. 215)

Homer has understood the undying love of father and son and understood the infinite sadness of the separation and has made it a necessary element of his heroic poem. This scene of recognition is one of the great moments of human tenderness in the *Odyssey*.

Consult Further

Bowra, C. M. *Ancient Greek Literature*. London: The Home University Library, 1933 and various editions. Introduction and chap. 1.

Finley, M. I. *The World of Odysseus*. Pelican Books 1979, especially chap. 1, 2, 4, 5.

Kitto, H.D.F. *The Greeks*. Penguin Books, 1951 and various reprints; especially chap. 1,2,3,4.

Discussion Questions

1. Write a review of the *Odyssey*, in which you describe the total action of the epic as a blend of three stories.
2. Discuss the *Odyssey* as an epic, whose central theme is homecoming.

3. Odysseus demonstrates many unheroic qualities to survive. Discuss.
4. From what you have learned about Athene in the *Odyssey*, describe your impression of the role she plays in the career of Odysseus. Point out instances from the text.
5. Describe Poseidon as he is presented by the author of the *Odyssey*. Briefly estimate his role as the director of Odysseus' misfortunes.
6. Show how Telemachus grows into a heroic character during the course of the epic.
7. Describe the familial life and social habits of the Phaeacians. "We are the outposts of mankind" (Nausicaa). Do you think they are an effective foil to the Ithacans?
8. Write a short character sketch of Penelope based on what you have learned about her from the *Odyssey*.
9. Write a short essay in which you describe what you think about the suitor episode. Tell why you do or do not consider this a good epic episode.
10. Write short notes on:
    a) the Halls of Hades episode
    b) Odysseus' scar
    c) Circe
    d) Agamemnon
    e) Teiresias
    f) Telemachus
    g) Calypso
    h) The Homeric Simile (select and analyse four similes)

Unit-II

2. ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

Dr. Anamta Rizvi

STRUCTURE

1. Aristotle: The Philosopher
2. Aristotle and Alexander the Great
3. Summary of *the Poetics*
4. Aristotle's Poetic Themes

1. ARISTOTLE: THE PHILOSOPHER

Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers in the history of mankind. Born in the 4th century at Stagira in Macedonia, this Greek philosopher possessed remarkable intellect since his childhood. At the age of eighteen, he enrolled himself in Plato's Academy in Athens. There, he exhibited outstanding intellect and wit. Aristotle interest laid in various domains- physics, medicine, psychology, politics, poetry, drama, astronomy, logic, history, rhetoric, biology, ethics, natural history and mathematics. Aristotle's ideas and concepts had such profundity that even intellectual revolutions like the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment were not able to abate their influence on Western thinking.

1.1 Early Life

Aristotle's father, Nicomachus, was a physician in the court of Amyntas III, the king of Macedonia, who reigned in the latter part of the 4th century. From the very beginning, Aristotle was in the company of intellectual men, and this played an important role in shaping his own ideas and thoughts. In 367, when his father died, Aristotle joined Plato's Academy, and lived there for twenty years as Plato's student as well as his colleague. Scholars note that Plato's philosophical debates from this period might have had a contribution from Aristotle as well. Aristotle also wrote some of his works during this period, but they got lost in the course of time. His early works were quite influenced by Plato, and were in dialogic pattern, much similar to that of Plato's style. For instance, his early work *Eudemus*, majorly exhibits

Plato's standpoints. Here, Aristotle opines that death brings more happiness and peace than living a life on this earth. This argument is very similar to that of Plato's, who also says that souls are liberated from the human bodies once they are dead.

1.2 Aristotle's Works

His other works like, *The History of Animals, On the Parts of Animals,* and *On the Generation of Animals,* have garnered much praise from scientists of all ages. He is also known as the inventor of deductive knowledge and the theory of teleology. He divides his scientific researches into three parts: theoretical, practical and productive. According to Aristotle, theoretical science explores knowledge for its own sake; practical science aims at researching those aspects which deals with good conduct and virtuous actions; and, practical science looks in conduct and good deeds in individuals as well as society. Aristotle also made major contribution in the field of rhetoric. The thematic concerns were oratory skills, the art of delivery good speeches, and the strategies of persuasion in speeches. He also talked about how the control of emotions and diction were very important aspects of rhetoric.

In his lifetime, Aristotle wrote around four hundred books, the topics of which span over various aspects of human knowledge. However, only thirty-one of his texts survived the test of times. Some of his notable works were: *Categories, De Interpretatione, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Sophistical Refutations, Physics, Metaphysics, De Anima, History of Animals, Generation of Animals, Meteorology, Progression of Animals, Generation of Animals*

2. ARISTOTLE AND ALEXANDER THE GREAT

In 343 BCE, Aristotle went to Pella, the Macedonian capital, where he was assigned the job of tutoring Alexander, who is better known as Alexander the Great. King Philip II, Alexander's father, was the one to appoint Aristotle as his son's teacher. While the archives barely have any written document stating the interactions between Aristotle and Alexander, scholars and historians comment that Alexander was certainly influenced by his teacher's teachings. In 336 BCE, Alexander ascended the throne, and it was then that Aristotle left for Athens, making their association an eight year long period. Critics and Historians note that Alexander was significantly influenced by his teacher, as many of diplomatic decisions mirrored Aristotle's teachings. The sagacious way with which Alexander led his political life also exhibits how Aristotle's teachings made him a wise ruler.

2.1 The Lyceum

In 335, Aristotle once again came back to Athens, and established his own school, the Lyceum. He dedicated this school to the god Apollo Lykeios. Lyceum became a prominent place of research of varied subjects: botany, biology, logic, music, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, cosmology, physics, the history of philosophy, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, theology, rhetoric, political history, government and political theory, and the arts. This institution eventually became one of the first distinguished library of various collected works of that period. For the next twelve years, Aristotle dedicated his life to Lyceum, where he gave numerous lectures, taught his students and carried on scientific researches. His relentless urge to learn and teach made him quite popular among his students, who were always ready to seek guidance from him. He was in the habit of explaining his concepts to students while walking within the campus, and for this Lyceum also came to be known as Peripatetic School, which literally means the school of strolling philosophers. Consequently, Aristotle's philosophy is known as the Peripatetic System.

2.2 The Golden Mean

Aristotle believed that moderation was the key to a good life. According to him, if a man learns how to strike a balance between the extremities of his emotions, then the golden mean is achieved, which helps him to lead a better life. He believed that in all aspects of life a man must find his middle course, and not let emotions astray him. When a man is able to establish a middle-ground, neither does he overdo nor does he under-do. For instance, neither is he too extravagant, nor is he too stingy. The golden mean helps the man to make correct choices in life, his actions would be right and his motives will be noble. Therefore, the golden mean helps the man to lead a happy and satisfied life. He believed that if men achieve the golden mean in their lives, the world will become a better place, without sin and malice.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Write a brief note on Aristotle early life.
2. What was the name of Aristotle's academy? Write a few words about it.
3. Explain Aristotle's concept of the Golden Mean.

3. SUMMARY OF THE *POETICS*

The *Poetics* is one of the most seminal texts written in ancient times. While the exact date of the text remains contested, researchers, scholars and critics believe that Aristotle wrote *Poetics* around 330 BCE. Till date, the *Poetics* serves as a very important document in the study of humanities and aesthetics, and its first influence dates back to the age of Renaissance. In this work, Aristotle has tried to elucidate on the fundamental issues concerning art and aesthetics. While defining and explaining art, he has also given ways on how the quality of a particular artwork can be determined. The *Poetics* was a reply to Plato's theory wherein he propounded that poetry was a misrepresentation of the actual world, and, therefore, misled the people and made them immoral. However, in the *Poetics* Aristotle takes an absolutely different standpoint. He argues that a poet's or an artist's work should not be seen just as a mere imitation of the material world, but should be considered as an artist's or poet's individual view of this world. He believed that poetry had the ability to purge the emotions of human beings and purify their souls, serving as an emotional balance in their life.

Chapter 1 to 5

Aristotle began the *Poetics* by drawing a brief outline of what his work would entail. He elucidated on different kinds of poetry and what quality each poem could hold. He discussed the features of a meritorious poem, and also deliberated on the methods in which the poem is divided. He defined poetry as a medium to imitate life or a way of representing life as per the poet's approach towards the physical world. There are various ways through which poetry could mirror life, by representing character, emotion, action or daily things. Aristotle said that poetry was an umbrella term that included the following under its domain: epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry and music (especially, flute and lyre). The point of differentiation among all these forms of poetry was their respective abilities to imitate life. Aristotle gave the following points to differentiate between various kinds of poetry.

I. Medium of Imitation:

There are various ways through which life can be imitated, and poetry is one of the most fundamental mediums of imitation. Other art forms like music and dance have a more pronounced method of imitating life as they employ instruments, bodily movements to depict life, but poetry alone, through the mode of language, veritably imitates life.

II. Object of Imitation:

What does poetry, dance, music, drama or any other form of art imitate? They imitate the actions of human beings. He argues that while imitating the action, the art must represent the action of men as more refined than they are in actual life, and, in case of representing vicious men, they should be portrayed in a more negative light. For instance, Homer will show men in a more positive light and Nichochares shows them as much worse. Here, Aristotle also makes a distinction between comedy and tragedy. He states that comedy showcased men as worse as they are, and tragedy displayed a better version of the men.

III. The Mode or Manner of Imitation:

There are various ways or modes through which a poet can imitate. Firstly, the poet can employ the technique of narration, wherein the poet assumes another personality and acts as an observer. Secondly, the poet speaks his own mind and narrates as the first-person narrator. Thirdly, the poet in his work brings characters to life, thereby, adopting the technique of a third person narrator.

Aristotle's opines that the emergence of poetry can be credited to two reasons. First was the man's human instinct to imitate things around him. Second was his urge to create harmony and rhythm in the world he occupied. As the evolution of poetry proceeded, two distinct forms of poetry emerged. The first kind of poetry imitated actions of noble and good men, and eventually it evolved into a tragedy. The second kind of poetry imitated actions of vicious people in a satiric manner. The second kind of poetry shaped into epic poetry and then tragic drama. Aeschylus, Sophocles and others played an important role in improvising tragedy, which shaped into various forms like dramatic plot, dialogue and iambic verse. On the other hand, comedy was an imitation of the actions of lower type men. It represented bawdy characters. Initially, comedy was considered as an insignificant genre, but when comedy was introduced in Sicily comedic theatre, it became very popular. Epic poetry represents the actions of noble men, similar to that of tragedy. However, unlike tragedy that focusses on the happening of a single day, epic poetry transgresses the boundaries of time. It is also mostly narrative in form and is written in one kind of meter.

Check Your Progress 2

1. What is the most fundamental aim of the Poetics?
2. What are the ways through which poetry can be differentiated?

Chapter 6 to 9

Tragedy is the imitation of actions of noble men, and has the following characteristics.

I. It follows a specific time line, and has a proper beginning and an end. In other words, it is complete in itself.
II. As it imitates actions of noble men, there are no trivialities, and, hence is serious in nature.
III. The language used is decorated in its style and is also rhythmic.
IV. It is not narrative in form, but represents actions.
V. It brings about a catharsis within the audience, and purges their soul by arousing the emotions of pity and fear.

As tragedy imitates actions of men, it is primarily concerned with presenting character and thought on stage. According to Aristotle, character and thought were the two main components which brought about the actions of men. The qualities in a character, good or bad, also determine the success of a given action. Plot, therefore, is the sequential arrangement of incidents, which is a cumulative result of character and thought as they pave the way for action. Aristotle then states six parts that define tragedy:

I. Plot
II. Character
III. Diction
IV. Thought
V. Spectacle
VI. Song

According to Aristotle, the characteristics of a plot are: completeness, magnitude, unity, determinate structure, and universality. Completeness signifies that a tragedy will have a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning is the fundamental introduction which states the origin of the tragedy. The middle makes the course for the end to follow. Lastly, the end brings about the culmination. Magnitude simply refers to the duration of the tragedy. A tragedy must not be very long as it then becomes difficult for the audience to retain the sequences of actions. However, Aristotle believed that a tragedy becomes more beautiful if it is longer in duration, but only if it has a proper beginning, middle and end. Within these three acts, the tragedy then takes its own course of bringing about a change in the fortune of the character- from bad to good or from good to bad. Unity is another very important feature of tragedy as it binds the three acts by a common theme or idea. Determinate structure means

that the tragedy will have such sequential incidents or scenes that if any one of them is removed, it disrupts the entire tragedy. In other words, every action of the plot is extremely important, and, hence, no part can be removed. Universality means that the character's thoughts, actions, language must be such that they do not seem artificial or fake, and are easily and universally accepted by the audience. Lastly, he states that he does not favor episodic plots as there is no sequence. As they do not follow any continuity, they have the ability to stretch beyond their limits, which makes them unnatural.

Check Your Progress 3

1. What are the characteristics of a tragedy?
2. Explain the six parts of a tragedy.

Chapters 10-12

The complexity and simplicity of a plot depends on the actions that they imitate. What determines the simplicity and complexity of the plot are the following essential features- astonishment, reversal or peripeteia, recognition and suffering. Astonishment is an essential feature of a tragedy as it helps to arouse the feelings of pity and fear among the audience. These feelings are experienced by the audience when the events unfold by surprise, and astonish the audience. Reversal means when a change occurs in the situation and the action moves in the opposite direction. For instance, in *Oedipus*, when the messenger comes to inform that he should unfetter himself from the fears about his mother, Oedipus's fears increase when the messenger reveals his identity. Recognition means acquiring knowledge about something that so far remained ignored. This recognition determines the fortune of the character. When recognition combines with reversal, as in the play *Oedipus*, the feelings of pity and fear are produced, and this becomes a quintessential subject for tragedy. Usually, the consequence of a reversal or recognition is suffering, which is a painful action to witness. Aristotle notes that a simple plot will either have a reversal or recognition, but a complex plot may have both. All tragedies, ultimately, aim at producing the feelings of pity and fear from the audience. Aristotle then states the quantitative parts of tragedy, which are: prologue, episode, exode and choric song. The prologue forms the very first part of the tragedy, and this comes before the first utterance of the chorus. The episode is the entire tragedy that unfolds between choric songs. The exode is that section of the tragedy that has no choric songs after it.

Check Your Progress 4

1. What features determine the simplicity and complexity of a plot?
2. List the quantitative parts of a tragedy.

Chapters 13 to 16

Aristotle then reveals what elements are prerequisite for making a tragedy a successful one. Firstly, the best kind of tragedy is the one that has a complex plot. It should employ the techniques of reversal and recognition to imitate actions which arouse the feelings of pity and fear within the audience. However, the tragedy should not merely project a virtuous man being subjected to limitless sufferings, for that merely shocks the readers instead of giving them a chance to empathize with the character. Similarly, a vicious man's trajectory should not be shown as moving from adversity to prosperity for this would be against the tenets of a tragedy. A tragedy is considered the best when the virtues and vices of a character are not at extreme ends, but fall in the midway. More so, if a character is shown as noble, virtuous and just, and he goes through some adversity or misfortune not because of his vice or weakness, but by some error or frailty, then the character becomes a renowned one, like Oedipus and Thyestes. A plot is considered as a well written one when the change of the fortune of the character is from bad to good, instead of good to bad. According to Aristotle, the second kind of tragedy is the one that has a double thread of plot and shows unhappy ending of good characters.

Inner structure of the plot is also very crucial to a tragedy of high rank. While outward spectacle does arouse the emotion of pity and fear, inner structure may also play an important role in surfacing these emotions. The construction of the plot must be such that even without experiencing the spectacle, and only by listening, the audience should be moved emotionally. A monstrous spectacle will instigate false catharsis, and it is only pity and fear that can purge the emotions of the audience. Aristotle then points that the circumstances that make a good tragedy must include those incidents that involve close relations. For instance, a son killing his mother, a brother his own brother, etc. This traditional manner used in a tragedy should be skillfully and sagaciously used by the poet. The killing or murder can be done consciously and with complete awareness of the characters. For instance, when Medea kills her children, they are aware of this situation. There can also be an instance where the deed is done without having any awareness regarding the relationships, and the discovery occurs later, like in *Oedipus*. The other way can be when the hero is unable to carry on with act of murder as he

is not able to perform it. In another instance, the act of murder is about to take place but in time the true identities of the characters are revealed, and the act of murder stops. Aristotle points that the third one is the most dramatic of all the cases, and the last case is the most effective case.

While talking about character, Aristotle points to four prerequisite factors that the hero must possess. Firstly, the hero must be virtuous in character, and thus exhibit goodness in his character. Secondly, the hero must be courageous and have propriety. Thirdly, a character must be true to his life. Lastly, the character must have consistency in his action. For instance, if he is inconsistent, then he should be consistently inconsistent.

There are also various types of recognition. The first kind is the one where the recognition takes place by signs- marks on the body, jewelry or ornaments, some other spot or mark that reveals the secret identity of the person. This kind of recognition is the least artistic of all. The second kind of recognition is the one that is invented by will or which takes place by sudden recognition. The third one is where recognition happens from memory. For instance, a character sees an object and this triggers or stimulates his memory, and recognition takes place. The fourth type is the one where the characters use their reasoning abilities and recognize the secret identity. In the fifth one, recognition takes place when a third party, for instance a messenger, interferes and reveals the identity. In the last one, which is considered the best, the recognition occurs due to the unfolding of the incidents and the discovery occurs organically as the plot proceeds. For instance, in *Oedipus Rex*, recognition takes place as the plot unravels.

Check Your Progress 5

1. What elements are important for a tragedy to be a successful one?
2. What qualities should a hero have?

Chapters 17 to 20

Aristotle states that the poet's envision should be as such that he could imagine every scene before his eyes. This helps the poet in not letting any gaps or inconsistencies come in his play. He should place himself in the shoes of the spectator and not just imagine but try to work out the scenes before his eyes. He suggests that it is important for the poet to sketch a general outline and then position the scenes accordingly. In this manner, the poet is able to analyze the essence of the play and, therefore, create "unity" within the play. He then

discusses how every tragedy falls into two brackets ie the complication and the resolution (also referred to as unraveling and denouement). Delineating on the concept of complication, Aristotle states that this term refers to all the incidents that happen from the beginning of the action till the climax or the turning point. In the climax, the hero's fortune might turn from good to bad or from bad to good. Then comes the denouement or unraveling which takes place from the climax to the end, and then determines the final outcome of the hero's fate. The four kinds of tragedy that Aristotle points at are:

I. The Complex Tragedy: This kind of tragedy depends completely on the reversal of the situation and on recognition.
II. The Pathetic Tragedy: In this kind of tragedy, the primary motive is passion.
III. The Ethical Tragedy: When the motives are ethical, they are known as ethical tragedy.
IV. The Simple Tragedy: This kind of tragedy neither has reversal nor recognition.

Aristotle further suggests that a tragedy should not assume the structure of an epic. An epic holds multiple plots, and each part has a distinct magnitude. But, as a tragedy is bounded by time, it should not follow the tenets of an epic. As the aim of a tragedy is to arouse catharsis within the audience, it should primarily follow unity of action and not focus on multiple episodes.

Diction is another important aspect of a tragedy. As diction expresses thought through the medium of language, it becomes one of the most vital components of a tragedy. Speech can be divided into the following parts:

I. Proof and refutation
II. The stimulation of emotions like pity, fear and anger.
III. The suggestion of importance.

Diction then automatically leads to language, which forms another important aspect. The components that are indispensable to language are:

I. Letter
II. Syllable
III. Connecting word
IV. Noun
V. Verb
VI. Inflexion or case
VII. Sentence of Phrase

Check Your Progress 6

1. How is a poet able to crate unity in the play?
2. What are the four kinds of tragedy?

Chapters 21 to 24

Aristotle then discusses different kinds of words. He classifies words into simple and compound words. But a word may be multiple in form as well. He then classifies words into different categories. According to him, the current words are those which are generally used by people of that time and age. A strange word is the one which is alien to one land but is used frequently in another land. A metaphorical word is the one that link two unlike things. A newly coined word is the one that has not been employed in day-to-day conversation by the people but has been adopted by the poet. Other words are a lengthened word, a contracted word, or an altered word. Aristotle then notes that the best style of writing is the one that used current words and was simple to comprehend. If the poet uses unusual words, then the style becomes lofty, and this forms a disconnect between the poet and the audience. Even metaphors come out as most effective when they use ordinary words. If strange words are used in metaphors or any other literary device, the phrase becomes ineffectual as it sounds more like jargon.

However, Aristotle states that a poet should have the liberty to lengthen, contract and change words to suit his style of writing. The usage of ordinary words creates a distinct language, and serves the purpose of maintaining clarity among the readers. In this manner, the poet can engage in the reader in the highest level. Aristotle then charts out the following requirements of a good epic poem: single meter, a dramatic plot, unity and all the other features of a tragedy. Unlike tragedy that focusses on a single action, an epic includes a series of episodes or a period, and, therefore, brings different characters into picture. However, similar to that of tragedy, epic poetry can also be classified as simple or complex or it can be ethical or pathetic. Also, epic poetry employs, like tragedy, reversals of situations, recognitions and scene of sufferings. There are also clear distinctions between epic poetry and tragedy. First, an epic poetry does not use song or spectacle to instigate emotions like pity and fear, and tragedy uses it in the most effective manner. Second, an epic, as the magnitude of its duration is much larger vis a vis a tragedy, it cannot be depicted in one single setting. It certainly needs multiple settings. Whereas tragedy, which focusses on a single action, can be presented in a single setting. Third is that as an epic poetry usually

employs narrative form, its parameters are not bounded by the stage. Lastly, epic poetry uses hexameter as its "heroic measure" but tragedy often employs different meters as per the requirement of its plot and the speeches of its characters.

According to Aristotle, in an epic poetry there should barely be any first-person narration by the poet, and the poet should not make appearances in the scenes. Also, in an epic poetry, the elements of absurdity or irrationality are allowed so as to create the factor "wonderment" for the readers. This is solely done for the pleasure of the readers. As epic poetry is not meant to be performed on stage, an absurd scene or event does not get distinctly highlighted. More so, Aristotle states that a tragedy cannot have irrational elements. The plot of the tragedy should follow certain pattern of logic and reasoning, and it is only then that it will be considered as a good drama. But, in case, the element of absurdity is introduced, the tragedy must be accepted in that manner.

Check Your Progress 7

1. What are the different categories of words?
2. State the differences between epic poetry and tragedy?

Chapters 25-26

Aristotle states that it is important for the poet to know that his works will be subjected to criticism, which can be good or bad. Therefore, it becomes important for the poet to learn the art of replying back to the critics. Aristotle gives three important rules for poets to consider while imitating actions of real life:

I. The poets must imitate either things as they are in actuality, things as they are imagined to be, or things as they should be.
II. The poet must also be true to language that is being imitated. He should mostly employ current terms or metaphors. The use of rare words should be occasional.
III. The poet must always make sure that whatever he copies, he does it in the correct manner. Only when he correctly imitates the actions that the poet holds its true essence. In case, the poet mistakenly commits an error, the work does not get ruined, for it's a human folly. However, in a nutshell, if any error that takes away the essence of the poetry is the one that actually makes a difference.

The work that gets the backlash of the critics is the one that either depicts an impossibility, illogicality, irrationality, and is contradictory in nature. However, Aristotle states that all the criticism, judgments and evaluations can be refuted only if the poem serves its purpose of holding the essence, as that is of prime importance.

In conclusion to his work, Aristotle engages with the question of which form of writing is better- the epic or the tragedy. During his times, most of the critics contested that tragedy was meant for inferior class of people. On the other hand, epic poetry was meant for a cultivated audience. However, Aristotle gives a starkly opposite view of this debate. Aristotle states that critics give a harsh criticism of tragedy because it uses extravagant gestures. But, the use of extravagant gestures is not only restricted to tragedy as an epic also employs such techniques whenever required.

Nevertheless, Aristotle positions tragedy on higher realm than that of epic poetry. He points at how tragedy uses various mediums to let the audience have a holistic experience and purge them of their emotions. Tragedy's effect on the audience is much stronger than that of epic poetry as the latter, being lengthy, dilutes its impact on poetry. Also, the concept of unity, an essential feature of tragedy, is apparently absent in an epic, mitigating its influence on the readers.

Check Your Progress 8

1. What are the three rules that a poet must consider while imitating actions in a real life?
2. According to Aristotle, which form of writing is better?

4. ARISTOTLE'S POETIC THEMES

4.1 Tragic Hero

According to Aristotle, the tragic hero is not the epitome of virtuosity or is a quintessentially flawless character. He, much a like human, has flaws that determines his fall towards the end of a tragedy. In Aristotle's view, a tragic hero is neither a good man nor a bad man. He has qualities that are likeable but there also exists a vice which is overtly visible from the beginning of the play. Most importantly, the audience must be able to identify with this tragic flaw.

4.2 Tragedy vs Epic poetry

One of the primary thematic concerns in the *Poetics* is the comparison between tragedy and epic poetry. As per the critics and scholars of Aristotle's period, epic poetry was considered to owing more weight and significance vis a vis the tragedy, which was considered a genre for the entertainment of lower class. But Aristotle viewed tragedy from a different lens and considered it to be a higher written form. He believed that tragedy, along with entertainment and pleasure, is capable of instructing as educating its readers and audience. More so, unlike epic poetry, which cannot be performed on the stage, tragedy can be converted in the form of drama as it is not as lengthy as epic poetry.

4.3 Purging of Emotions: Catharsis

Tragedies, as Aristotle believes, are able to arouse the feelings of pity and fear, which purify the underlying emotions of human, and hence releasing them of an emotional baggage. He argues that the best tragedies are those wherein the poet employs the techniques of reversal and recognition. Aristotle considers catharsis a form of redemption. When the plot of a drama is moving, the audience automatically undergoes the feelings of catharsis. The cathartic feeling that the audience experiences is because they feel pitiful for the hero, and they hold a fear that the hero's fate might be theirs.

4.4 *Poetics* as Literary Criticism

Aristotle's *Poetics* in every sense qualifies to be an important document for literary criticism. While Plato is credited for contributing significant texts to literary criticism, scholars and critics hail Aristotle as the father of literary criticism. Aristotle's criticism does not only limit to written form but extends to the study of aesthetics as well. Aristotle's popularity primarily lies on his reply to Plato who had vehemently objected to poetry and other fields of arts as he believed them to be an imitation of an imitation. Aristotle, on the other hand, gave a new perspective to mimesis (imitation) and believe that every artist viewed the world through his individual lens, and, therefore, his work then becomes not a mere copy but a representation of his own perspective of the world. Aristotle draw distinct boundaries between moral and aesthetic criticism. In *Poetics,* Aristotle extensively discussed the genre of tragedy as well as epic poetry, stating the former to be a superior genre.

4.5 Important Terms

1. Mimesis: Mimesis simply means an artist's imitative representation of the real world. In other words, mimesis can be explained as the process wherein the artist recreates

his own perception of the real world. This means that an artist through his imagination might represent those idealistic things that are apparently not found in the real world. The artist, therefore, need not copy exactly what the world has to offer, but he has the freedom to recreate his own reality in his work.

2. Hamartia: The Greek term *hamartia* literally means "error". In the context of Aristotle's *Poetics*, it means a "tragic flaw" within the hero. According to Aristotle, the tragedy occurs when the hero witnesses his own downfall due to the tragic flaw inherent within him. The tragic flaw necessarily need not be his moral failing but could be simply his awareness or ignorance about something or his forgetting.
3. Anagnorisis: This term means "recognition" or "discovery". In tragedy, when a hero or any other character gains knowledge about something that they were unaware of, that moment is described as anagnorisis. The recognition could of any kind: discovery of a family member, discovery of a hidden truth about oneself, discovery of a secret, etc.
4. Peripeteia: The term peripeteia finds its etymological roots in Greek, where it means "to change suddenly". Aristotle uses this term to denote a reversal in a play. This reversal can be from good to bad or from bad to good, and usually takes place at the climax of the play. This moment is seen as a critical juncture, and it signals that the play is moving towards its completion.

Check Your Progress 9

1. Write a short note on Aristotle's early life.
2. According to Aristotle, what are the important features of a good tragedy?
3. What is Aristotle's contribution as a literary critic?
4. What is the importance of a plot and character in a tragedy?
5. Do you agree with Aristotle's view that tragedy as a genre is better than epic poetry? Give reasons.
6. Write a short note on Aristotle's Poetics as an important critical text.

3. ANTIGONE

K. Dasgupta

STRUCTURE

1. Learning Objectives
2. General Introduction
3. The Legend
4. Summary of the Play
5. Critical Comments with Detailed Summary
6. The Title and Theme
7. The Chorus
8. The Characters
9. The Roles of; (a) Teiresias, (b) The Sentry, (c) Haemon, (d) Ismene
10. Assessment Questions
11. Glossary
12. Further Readings
13. A Note on the Oracles

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- ✓ Write a short note on Tragedy and the importance of dramatic unities.
- ✓ Appreciate the myths and legends that form the basis of the Tragedy *Antigone.*
- ✓ Write a critical appreciation of the themes that are explored in the play.
- ✓ Understand the role and importance of the Chorus in Greek Tragedy in general and *Antigone* in particular.
- ✓ Write critical notes on various characters of the play.
- ✓ Appreciate the role of Oracles.

2. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's considered tragedy as, "...an imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude complete in itself. In language, with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work, in a dramatic not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions ..... some portions are worked out with verse only, and others in turn with song"

Some knowledge of Aristotle's *Poetics*, is a good introduction to the world of Greek tragedy. According to Aristotle, Tragedy is elevated and grand involving emotions of pity and fear. It looks upon the world as a place where, despite an element of chance or fate, there is moral order and not chaos.

Thus tragedy proceeds on the basis of human dignity and human worth. It concerns itself with human values and accepts that man has a free will and that he is responsible for his action. This free choice of the course of action reveals his character, but tragedy acknowledges the existence of an all powerful superhuman factor in the universe.

Antigone was written long before Aristotle wrote his *Poetics.* Sophocles provided Aristotle with his "norm and standard of excellence". Aristotle's thesis applies to Greek tragedy in general. As we study Sophocles, we shall see that this great tragic poet presents in his work, the constant interaction between man working out his destiny through a free choice and the divine power with its everlasting laws. Sophocles asserts primarily the dignity and worth of man, that remain undiminished, though he may suffer the worst of calamity in his struggle against forces governing his life, which nevertheless he has to withstand. *Antigone* as a tragedy has certain qualities that are typically Sophoclean and attains an excellence in the lyrical quality of its odes which is unmatched.

Before taking up the detailed study of *Antigone*, you should know something about the 'Dramatic Unities', reference to which you may come across often in critical books and essays on tragedy.

2.1 The Dramatic Unities

"Unity of Action" is essential for a tragedy according to Aristotle. The tragedy manifests itself as a whole, with its parts organically related. "Within the single and complete action which constitutes the unity of a tragedy the successive incidents are connected together by an inward and causal bond by the law of necessary and probable sequence on which Aristotle is

never tired of insisting". By a "whole", Aristotle implied that the tragic action should have a beginning, a middle and an end.

Professor Butcher, in his commentary on *Poetics* explains that "A play must begin at some definite point and at some definite point it must end". It is for the poet to see that the action is complete in itself and that neither the beginning nor the end is arbitrarily chosen, within the dramatic action a strict sequence of cause and effect is prescribed. But the causal chain must not be indefinitely extended outwards. The "middle" unlike the 'beginning', stands in causal relation to what goes before, and unlike the "end" is causally connected with what follows.

The purpose of the definitions is to exclude "beginnings" which require something to prod them further, 'endings' which do not conclude the action, and "middles" which stand alone, unconnected either with the beginning or the end. "Unity", Aristotle would say, is manifested mainly in two ways. First, in the causal connection that binds together the several parts of a play; The thoughts, the emotions, the decisions of the will, the external events being inextricably interwoven. Secondly in the fact that the whole series of events, with all the moral forces that are brought into collision are directed to a single end. The action as it advances, converges on a definite point. The end is linked to the beginning with inevitable certainty and in the end we discern the meaning of the whole. In this powerful and concentrated impression lies the supreme test of unity. (Poetics: Page 284-285)

Unity of Action – is the only dramatic unity laid down by Aristotle. Regarding the Unity of Time - that the action should confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, no strict rule was given. Unity of place, has nowhere been hinted at in poetics. This was only a stage practice. A change of place was seldom demanded by the simple structure of Greek tragedy. The presence of the chorus also necessitated unity of place and time.

The unity of action is the most important law laid down by Aristotle. This law is essential for the creation of excellence in a work of art to which all tragedies aspire.[1]

2.2 Sophocles

One of the greatest tragic dramatists of antiquity Sophocles was born at Colonus near Athens. The exact year of his birth is not certain. Probably it was 496 B.C. or 497 B.C. He was a boy when Persians were defeated at Salamis. Sophocles, at the time, led the chorus, in singing the song of victory and thanksgiving. He belonged to a well-to-do family and received good

[1] For a more detailed knowledge of the "unities" refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*

education. As a boy he won prizes in wrestling and music. In his early years, he was influenced greatly by Aeschylus, a much older man and the greatest dramatist of the time.

Sophocles was a prolific writer. But only seven tragedies written by him are extant. His plays were adjudged the best during many of the performances in the theatre. He won his first victory in the theatre in 468 B.C. He was a popular dramatist and was loved and honoured universally. He was elected to hold a number of high public offices. He was a friend of the historian Herodotus. Some passages in his plays have their source in the writings of the historian. Sophocles lived a happy and fruitful life and lived up to the ripe old age of ninety one. After his death in the autumn of 406 B.C., he was honoured as a hero and was made a part of the religious life of Athens. Offerings were made each year in honour of his departed soul. He was buried in his ancestral tomb near Athens. The figure of a siren is mounted his tomb.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What is Tragedy and how did Aristotle arrive at his formulations?
2. What are the dramatic unities?

2.3 The Origin of the Greek Tragedy

The Greek tragedy originated in the cult of Dionysus. In the theatre, a large stone seat in the front row was reserved for the priest of Dionysus. The content of the tragedy was heroic legend. This content along with the dithyrambic[2] chorus comprised the origin of the Greek tragedy. The ancient Greek Theatre was a religious institution under the direction of the state. The myth provided the main source of inspiration to the tragic poets. They remodelled it to suit their individual vision of the tragic situation. The legends were the common property of the Greek people, part of their life and within their comprehension, so that they accepted as authentic these tragic figures of universal validity created by the great masters. The most famous of the Greek tragic dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, wrote during the fifth century B.C. The tragedies written by them, are regarded as great plays of all time. These plays are not naturalistic but highly conventional and stylized. The heroic characters are presented as larger than life. We see in these plays the glory of man's greatness as well as the inherent weakness of man and the sovereignty of the divine will. Some of the conventions

[2] (Wild emotional choric hymn in honour of Dionysus.)

of the Greek Theatre were the use of stilted shoes, heroic costumes, and the masks. All these added to the required atmosphere; grandeur to the scene and stature to the characters.

2.4 The Mask

The Mask has been used in the Greek drama from the very beginning. The mask brought about the transformation necessary to dramatic roles. Masks were used from primitive times in the cult of gods and goddesses such as Artemis, Demeter and Dionysus. The mask of Dionysus, hanging on a pole was an object of worship, and he was called "The God of Mask'. Satyrs, his most prominent worshippers were masked and "satyr masks were brought to his shrine as offerings. The use of masks was deeply rooted in the domain of cult" (Lesky, P.29). The plays were presented as part of the dramatic and religious festival, called Dionysia, as it was held in Athens every year in honour of Dionysus. The presentation of the plays thus was a great religious and social event. The plays were selected for a dramatic contest and prizes were awarded in order of merit. The audience comprised of thousands in number. The performance took place in daylight. Members of the audience were aware of the dramatic story and had knowledge of the various dramatic conventions. They could identify various characters with the help of the costume and the mask they would be wearing. The tiny cast could be doubled with the use of masks and men could take women's parts. The actor's voice could be amplified though a megaphone built into the masks.

All these did not take away from the freedom of imagination, the hallmark of the artist. The dramatist remodelled the myth structure to suit the requirement of his dramatic purpose. Sometimes the obscurity of the myth as in the case of 'Antigone', provided the artist with considerable opportunity to interpret the myth in an original way.

Antigone is the first of the Theban plays written by Sophocles, over a wide interval of years. The three plays written within the broad framework of the legend concerning the Royal House of Thebes are, *Antigone, Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, in that order. So they do not form a 'trilogy' and have no unity to them. *Antigone* was produced in 441 B.C. Its success led to the election of Sophocles as a general, and he became a prominent figure in Athenian public life. He commanded with Pericles (famous statesman and builder of Athenian democracy) the expedition against Samos in 440 B.C. Athens at the time, was at the height of her glory as the leader of the cultural, political and artistic life of Greece. In *Antigone*, though there is no contemporary allusion or political propaganda. Sophocles, showed his awareness of the pitfalls of success and brought into focus the dangers besetting man through pride and arrogance. The play is a rich work of art. The major issues are fused

with elements such as the lyricism of the choral odes, the political import of the scene between Haemon and Creon and a the comic touch is provided by the way the guard is treated.

3. THE LEGEND

The legend tells us of the king of Thebes, Laius, who was warned by the Delphic oracle that his infant son, would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Terrible predictions– to avoid which Laius ordered the child's feet to be pierced and bound together, the helpless child was then given to a palace servant to be killed. Out of pity, the servant abandoned the child on the mountain. A shepherd took him to the king of Corinth, Polybus, to be brought up as his son. The child was named Oedipus (Swollen-foot). As he grew to manhood; he heard the oracle declaring that he would kill his father. In order to avoid this terrible calamity Oedipus resolved never to see his 'father' Polybus again and left Corinth. In his wanderings, he met an old man with some attendants on a narrow road. There was a fight on the right of passage. The old man and all his companions except one were killed by Oedipus. The first part of the oracle was fulfilled. The old man was no other than King Laius of Thebes. As Oedipus approached Thebes, he came to know of the monster sphinx, threatening severe danger to the people of Thebes. The Sphinx put a riddle to every passer by near the gates of Thebes, and if he failed to solve the riddle he would be devoured by her. Nobody could answer the riddle and innumerable people were killed. Oedipus went to answer the riddle and he succeeded. What creature', the Sphinx asked, "what creature goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening? "Man", answered Oedipus. "In childhood, he crawls on all fours, walks erect in manhood and in old age takes the help of a stick". On receiving the right answer the Sphinx killed herself. The Thebans expressed their gratitude by offering the kingship of Thebes to Oedipus. And he married the widowed queen. After some time of the birth of two sons and two daughters to Oedipus and his queen Jocasta, Thebes was visited by a severe plague. People were dying and the city was threatened by famine. Oedipus wanted to end the sufferings of his people. Jocasta's brother Creon was sent to consult the Delphic Oracle for a remedy to this desperate situation.

Creon returned, with Apollo's message, that the murderer of king Laius must be punished and only then the sufferings of the Thebans would come to an end, Oedipus firmly resolved to seek out the guilty and punish him.

Teiresias, the blind prophet, was sent for, and he revealed reluctantly that Oedipus himself was the murderer, Oedipus ordered him out of sight; he was angry and refused to believe his words. But the secret of his birth was revealed through unimpeachable sources. It could not be doubted that Oedipus, the son of Laius had killed him, though, unaware of his being Laius' son. The monstrosity of the situation made Jocasta kill herself. Oedipus blinded himself and Creon became the regent on Oedipus' giving up the kingship.

After sometime Creon urged the banishment of Oedipus from Thebes. Polyneices and Eteocles, Oedipus's two sons also consented to this. His two daughters however were loyal to him and stood by him in his misfortune. Antigone went with him in his exile and Ismene stayed back to take care of his interest, in Thebes.

The two unworthy sons of Oedipus fought between themselves for the throne. Eteocles succeeded and Polyneices fled to Argos.He collected an army to march against Thebes. In the ensuing battle Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other, the former defending and the latter attacking Thebes. Creon became the king of Thebes. He ordered that Eteocles be buried with full honours and all the rites as the defender of the city. Polyneices' dead body was not to be buried, but left to dogs and vultures to feast upon. Creon decreed that anybody daring to disobey and giving burial to the dead would be stoned to death.

After the death of Oedipus, Antigone and Ismene had come to stay at Thebes. Antigone resolved to bury Polyneices in defiance of Creon's orders. Ismene felt sorry but she was scared. So Antigone took it upon herself this sacred duty of giving a proper burial to her brother. She fulfilled what she rightly thought were religious and family obligations. She was caught but she told Creon that she had defied his law, to obey what God has laid down. Creon got furious and punished her with death.

This is the legend of Oedipus and his, brave loyal daughter Antigone. The Part of the legend regarding Antigone is quite obscure.[3]

Sophocles *Antigone* has been interpreted in various ways by various authors. It is necessary to understand the text thoroughly on one's own, before taking up the various interpretations, sometimes highly contradictory. Our approach is textual and objective. We shall begin therefore by closely following the text of the play Antigone and see what happens in the play.

[3] In Aeschylus' tragedy – *"Seven against Thebes"*, burial of Polyncices has been denied by a decree of the Theban leaders on the ground that he had attacked his native city. There also, Antigone insists on giving due rites of burial to the body of Polyneices.

4. SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The play opens with Antigone and Ismene talking. We are at once introduced to the central conflict between the claim of the blood and claims of the State, between religious law and secular law. Antigone seeks help from Ismene in the task of burying his dead brother Polyneices. Ismene pleads inability in view of Creon's order which proclaimed death penalty for anyone burying the dead body of Polyneices. She cautions her sister to be at least secretive. But Antigone contemptuously dismisses. Ismene; resolving to carry out her sacred mission alone.

This scene between the sisters is over before the entry of the chorus of Theban elders and their song of thanksgiving. Creon, the king, enters and declares that he has ordered the burial of Eteocles with all the rites observed. As he was the defender of the city, he is honoured even in death. As for Polyneices, who came to conquer; his body would be given to dogs and birds to prey upon. His body is denied burial as he was the enemy of Thebes. Anybody daring to bury him would be punished with death.

Hardly had Creon finished his statement, when a sentry enters. He reluctantly breaks the news that the dead body of Polyneices has been buried mysteriously, being covered with a layer of earth. The watchmen could not make out how it came to be buried. There was no indication of a tool being used, no trace of any animal, mauling the body. It seemed to be the work of some pious passer by. The spontaneous response of the chorus that it is in act of divine interference is dismissed contemptuously by Creon. Gods would not look kindly upon Polyneices, who would surely have burnt down their temples, in case he could conquer the city. There must be some disgruntled men in the city who have bribed their stooges to bury the dead body.

He threatens the sentry, suspected as an accomplice, that if he cannot bring the guilty, he will be severely punished. The sentry, resolves, never to appear again and escapes.

The scene is left to the chorus singing the ode to the greatness of man, and of human achievement, reminding at the end of the ode the danger of being lured into sin and that the impious man is to be forsaken. The sentry re-enters with Antigone, charging her with the burial of the dead body of Polyneices. As Creon enters, the sentry graphically describes how Antigone was caught in the act of ritually burying the body a second time after the guards had swept off the dust with which it was buried the first time. Then they saw Antigone, angry at the sight of the bare body, burying it a second time.

The guard is sorry for Antigone, though he is happy with his own exoneration. On being questioned, Antigone accepts her responsibility and defies Creon. The eternal laws of heaven enjoin the proper burial of the dead. No man-made law can claim superiority over these divine laws. After all death would come to her and she would willingly be a martyr to the sacred cause of burying her brother's body. She would be committing a sin, if she left her dead brother unburied, out of fear. The chorus comments on her fierce temper and compares it with that of her father. Creon is very angry and says that Ismene is also involved in the crime. He decides to punish the sisters and break the stubborn pride of Antigone, who is nothing more than a slave, according to Creon.

Antigone asserts her sacred right to do her duty by her dead brother, and says that the people of Thebes admire her for having done the right thing. She denies Creon's contention that in: honouring one brother who had come attacking Thebes, she has dishonoured the other, who fell defending the city. She says that Death demands the same rites for all and Death must have reconciled the brothers, who were enemies in life. In any case she loved both and never shared their hatred.

As Ismene enters, she is charged with a part in the crime, which she acknowledges; Antigone sternly turns down her claim. She is bitter in her denunciation of Ismene, who had refused to bury the dead body of their brother. Ismene wants to share the fate of Antigone and questions Creon if her sister would be put to death, as she is the bride-to be of Haemon, Creon's son. Creon rules out the marriage between Antigone and Haemon.

The chorus in its third Ode sings of the subsequent evils that overtake a house, once it is shaken by a disaster. The Almighty Zeus rules supreme always. A successful man would sooner or later mistakenly think of evil as good and land himself into disaster. At the end of the Ode, Creon's son Haemon enters. To Creon's question whether he has come to his father in anger, as he has ordered the death of Antigone, Haemon answers humbly declaring himself to be his father's loyal son. Creon lectures him to disown Antigone. Her disobedience must be punished, otherwise it will set a bad example. Her crime is more to be condemned, as that done by a woman. A woman cannot be allowed to defeat a man.

Haemon also has a lot to tell his father, he tells him that the common man is full of admiration for the pious act of courage performed by Antigone. People are afraid to speak out against the king, but they are murmuring that Antigone has been unjustly condemned for an act which should win her a crown of gold. He cautions his father against thinking that he alone is wise and right. Even if he is wise, there is always something more to learn and he

must change himself to meet the prevailing conditions. An angry exchange takes place between father and son. Creon brands Antigone as a criminal–Haemon cites the opinion of the people, who do not regard her as such. Creon is the master of the city and he will rule according to his own will. Haemon says it cannot be done in civilized society and he opposes his father, as he is being unjust. He says in defending Antigone, he is defending what is right and sacred. Mad with rage, Creon commands Antigone to be killed before the eyes of Haemon. The latter leaves the scene refusing to be a witness to this act of madness on his father's part, and telling him that he would never see him again. Creon reiterates his resolve to punish Anitgone. She is to be imprisoned alive in a cave, never to see the light of day again. The fourth ode is then sung by the chorus to the invincible power of Love.

Antigone enters on her way to the tomb. She speaks sadly of the cruel death awaiting her. She-laments the absence of any tangible sign of sympathy from her fellow creatures. The comments of the chorus is of cold comfort to her. For burying her brother's dead body she has only obeyed the sacred laws, otherwise she would have been guilty of transgression. Yet Creon has condemned her to a living death. She invokes a curse, on those who have thoughtlessly punished her. She appeals to the city of Thebes, her gods and princes to witness how unjustly she is being treated for keeping a holy law.

Antigone is taken away by guards as instructed by Creon. The chorus in its fifth ode refers to persons, suffering miserably, persons guilty as well as innocent. The chorus concludes that nobody is secure against sate.

The blind prophet Teiresias enters with dire warnings to Creon. He has forbidden the burial of the dead and consequently altars and hearths of Thebes have been polluted by dogs and birds that have been feeding upon the dead body of Polyneices. Signs of divine displeasure arc evident. No sire will burn offerings to the gods, prayers are not accepted by heaven. Teiresias clearly tells Creon that he has to mend his ways. To strike and injure the dead is not valour. It is foolish to stand against divine laws. It will harm Creon himself.

The answer of Creon is not only arrogant but blasphemous as well. He does not hesitate to declare that even if Zeus' own eagles feast on the dead body and carry the pollution to his seat, Creon would not, out of fear for that desecration, allow the body of Polyneices to be buried. He charges Teiresias, with having received money and being motivated by considerations of gain[4] he further provokes Teiresias by an angry exchange of

[4] In classical Greece, it was not an unusual charge against the prophets. Edith Hamilton writes of Herodotus in her book "The Great Age of Greek Literature" "Quite as characteristic is his matter-of-fact statement,

dialogue. Finally Teiresias reveals all the frightening secrets, spelling disaster for Creon and those dear to him.

Teiresias proclaims–that he has robbed the gods of the lower world of their right. He has denied burial to the dead and unjustly put a living person in a tomb. For this profanation of the sacred laws, he will have to pay with the life of a child of his own. The avenging furies are sure to make Creon miserable. The other cities arc also cursing him, whose sons arc lying unburied due to Creon's orders, whose hearths and altars are being polluted by the birds and animals, seeding upon the dead body.

Teiresias leaves, leaving behind frightened Creon. The chorus advises him to reverse his orders and listen to Teiresias. His prophecy has never failed. So Creon proceeds to release Antigone and give a proper burial to the dead body of Polyneices. Creon hastens to release Antigone, he yields out of fear and thinks it is wisest to observe the established laws.

In the sixth ode Dionysus is invoked earnestly to deliver the city of Thebes, the chosen home of the God, from the evils that threaten it."

The invocation is hardly over, when the Messenger enters with news of disaster–death of Haemon by his own hand. Haemon's mother Eurydice enters to hear the tragic account of her son's death.

Creon first went with his men to give a holy burial of what remained of the body of Polyneicess. They washed and burned it, after offering prayers to the gods of the underworld, and raised a mound over the ashes.

Next they proceeded to the cave where Antigone was imprisoned. They hear a human cry and passing through the passage where the stones were thrown apart, they could see the body of Antigone hanging by the neck with a rope made of her own dress. Haemon stood, with his arms around her body, mourning his lost bride, and his father's cruelty. As Creon implored him to come out, he looked at him angrily, spat in his face and struck at him with his sword. As Creon leaps out Haemon drove the sword deep into his own body, and embraced the dead girl with sailing arms. They both lay side by side, his life-blood colouring her pale checks. The blood-wedding showing what calamity a man's perversity can bring.

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that the priestess at Delphi, had been more than once bribed to give a favourable oracle to one side in a dispute. Herodotus had great respect for the Delphic oracle but to his mind that was no reason to suppress a charge which he had investigated and believed to be true.

The queen turns and goes into the palace, scarcely before the messengers' account is over. The chorus and the Messenger make anxious comments on the unnatural silence of the queen, the Messenger goes inside to find out what she is after. Creon comes in with the dead body of his son, lamenting his own folly, mourning his dead son. The chorus appropriately reminds him that his recognition of his mistaken judgement is too late. The Messenger comes to announce that Creon's wife has killed herself mourning her two dead sons and cursing Creon, responsible for her sons' death.

ELE Creon is crushed and learns his lesson that his blindness of judgement, failure to distinguish between right and wrong brought this deadly revenge from gods, he had defied. His only hope now is in death, which will end his misery.

As Creon leaves the scene, a broken man, the chorus speaks of happiness, that comes only through piety and wisdom. Arrogance and pride are punished till the proud learns wisdom in humility.

5. CRITICAL COMMENTS WITH DETAILED SUMMARY

L 1-100

The Prologue comprises of the dialogue between two sisters Antigone and Ismene. It has definitely conspiratorial air, with a private and personal note. Antigone's attitude of outrage and defiance contrasts with the meekness and resignation of Ismene. The full light of publicity in which the rest of the action is played out contrasts with this scene, played out, away from the glare of public vision. Antigone is furious to know that Creon has forbidden the burial of her dead brother Polyneices. She has decided to bury him with all the sacred rites. When Ismene tells her that it is an impossible task, she tells her that she will make an honest effort, and then stop, if she is made to. She knows that she is putting herself into danger for this pure crime. But she is not afraid of death, rather she is afraid of not being able to fulfill her obligations to the dead and the divine.

L 101-159

In the first ode, the Chorus sings joyfully of the deliverance of the city. It is a song of thanks giving calling for night long celebrations in honour of Dionysus. This is in contrast with the earlier scene between Antigone and Ismene. The sisters are tense, sad and Antigone full of resentment at the way her dead brother is treated, In the Choral ode Polyncices is the hated enemy and ironically the chorus sings of dangers past. The chorus like any other ordinary

dramatic character cannot foresee the crisis to which Creon leads the state through his disregard of the eternally valid laws of burial of the dead and observance of the sacred rites by the blood relations of the deceased.

L 160-220

Creon enters with his proclamation forbidding the burial of Polyneices on pain of death. He justifies himself by saying that Polyneices had come to conquer the city. So he deserves his dishonour. The ruler must be bold and patriotic Creon says, and that he would put his city's safety and security above everything and everybody. The Chorus accepts unquestioningly, the king's orders.

L 221-329

Scarcely had Creon finished talking when the guard comes in with the news of the body having been buried by some unknown person. He says, no trace of the person or of any tool having been used, was visible. As though, someone had covered it with dust to avoid a curse. The watchmen were terrified. It fell to the lot of the guard to bring the news to Creon. The immediate response of the Chorus leader is that Polyncices has been buried through divine agency. Creon explodes with anger. The guard is threatened and the suggestion of divine interference is dismissed with contempt by Creon. He can only think of money and political discontent as the motive. The guard-a common man of average intelligence feels the folly of such rash judgement. Anyway he is glad to get away, and decides never to show his face again.[5]

L 330-369

The second ode, sung by the Chorus, glorifies Man. Man has conquered the waves, and ploughs the land. He has tamed the wild beasts, is able to entrap birds and catch fish from the deep sea. He has developed speech, learnt to build cities and shelter for himself, and he knows treatment for sickness. Death alone can conquer him. If Man observes the secular laws and follows the divine laws, then only his life is full of honour, and his city secure. But the Chorus is unaware that the two laws are not in harmony in Thebes ruled by Creon, and the city is threatened by Creon himself, through his defiance of the divine laws.

L 370-570

The guard enters with Antigone. Creon is almost bewildered to learn that his own niece has challenged him in burying the body. The guard, happy at his own escape, is yet sorry for

[5] The line references are from Sophocles, *Three Tragedies* translated by H D F Kitto.

Antigone. He is frank enough to admit though, that he values his own life above everything else. He gives a clear picture of the burial of Polyneices by Antigone. It is brought out vividly how Antigone poured the funeral libation and was caught in the act of burying the body.

On being asked by Creon, Antigone calmly acknowledges her responsibility. Bravely facing Creon, She tells him that she would never obey a mortal, howsoever great, if that makes her disregard a divine rule. She does not fear death, but she is afraid of damnation, which she would certainly have incurred, if she had allowed her brother's body to lie unburied. She does not expect any mercy, nor is she prepared to compromise. She thinks that her two brothers, mortal enemies in life, might have got reconciled in death. In any case she loved them both and would not share their hatred. Eteocles would not feel dishonoured if Polyneices was given the same funeral rites. She asserts her right to bury her brother and is sure that it has brought her glory. If people were not afraid of the king they would openly say so. Creon condemns her to death. He suspects Ismene also. The latter is brought on the scene, almost distraught with sorrow. She offers to share Antigone's guilt, which is firmly rejected by her. Ismene finds life empty of all meaning, if her sister is taken away from her. Ismene says that Creon cannot be so cruel with Antigone, his son's betrothed. Creon is determined to punish Antigone. The two are matched in their stubbornness. This scene structurally links the action with the prologue and prepares for the next development – Haemon's encounter with his father.

L 571-620

In the third ode, the Chorus speaks of the pitfalls of success. They sing of the twisted judgement of the man about to be ruined by God. To him evil seem good, and he faces disaster. Again the Choric song ironically foreshadows the fate of Creon.

L 620-767

Haemon comes with humble requests and high hopes, assuring his father of his obedience and loyalty to him. Creon tells him of the virtues of obedience and loyalty to the parents. He should not care for a woman, who has rejected his father's authority. He speaks highly of the merits of abiding by the law and of discipline. Creon is unaware of his own disobedience of the sacred laws of god, that is going to bring about his own ruin. The Chorus once again approves of the king's stand.

Haemon humbly tells him of the prevailing opinion in the city. There is a hushed murmur of approval of the courage of Antigone. She has performed an act of devotion according to holy rites. She has carried out her duty towards her slain brother. For that she

does not deserve punishment, but praise. Haemon reminds Creon of the need to be flexible. No man is infallible, and one should be aware that one may go wrong in judgement, and so others must be consulted. This is true of the whole universe. The trees that bend are saved from the torrents. If the sail of a ship is not shortened during a storm, then it will sink.

To all this Creon reacts with anger and impatience. An angry exchange of words between father and son ends with Haemon's exit in anger, telling Creon that he is nothing more than an autocrat. In answer to Creon's charge that he is only supporting Antigone, being her play thing, Haemon asserts that he is defending justice and divine laws.

Creon orders that Antigone should be killed at once. She would be imprisoned alive in a cave. Then only she would realise, how stupid and wicked it is to respect the dead.

L 768-790

The Chorus sings of the invincible power of love. Love holds power over nature and the whole universe. And the Chorus feels sorry for Antigone, when she is brought out on her last journey to her death. The Chorus is personally sympathetic to Antigone unlike Creon, but they do not approve of her action unlike the average citizen of Thebes.

L 790-916

Antigone is sorry to take her last farewell and meet a living death. We look upon her as a creature of flesh and blood, as she mourns her unfulfilled womanhood. She speaks of Niobe[6], forever shedding tears for her slain children, herself being turned to stone. The Chorus offers consolation to Antigone, telling her that it is glorious for a mortal to share the fate of Niobe, born of the gods. Antigone's glory will long outlive her, she is the only living one to go to the home of the dead, unaffected by wasting disease or violent injury. To Antigone's passionate rejection of this cold comfort, the chorus spiritedly replies that she has to pay for her defiance and she is liable for the sin inherited from her father and has to pay for it. The Chorus clearly denounces her for her disobedience and sell will though her loyalty to her brother is praised. Antigone laments the terrible fate, overcoming the house of Labdacus, the unintentional sin of her parents union and the evil marriage of her brother with the princess of Argos. His death has ruined Antigone. She is being dragged to death.

Creon's inhuman reply to all her lamentation is that, she should at once be taken away to be buried alive.

[6] Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus, son of Zeus

Antigone speaks of her hope to be welcomed among the dead. She has done her duty by all her blood relations after their death. It is she who performed the last rites for her mother, father and now for Polyneices, her brother. For the last named, she is punished with death. Antigone says that she would not have dared to defy the king if it were her husband or her child who was so exposed as was the body of Polyncices. The husband dead, she could find another, and the child lost, another from him. But with the parents dead, there was no possibility of ever getting another brother. So she paid the supreme honour to her dead brother and Creon has punished her with death. Once again she laments that she cannot be married and have children, that her life is cut short in midstream. She has not committed any sin or defied any divine law. She curses her tormentors, that they should also suffer like her and she makes a final appeal to the men of Thebes to witness how wrongly she is treated by unholy men as she has tried to obey divine laws.

L 917-950

In the fifth ode, the Chorus uses three separate myths. Nothing can stand against the working of fate. Danae, the daughter of king Acrisius of Argos, was imprisoned by his father. It was foretold that if Danae had a son he would kill Acrisius. To avert this, Danae was imprisoned in a tower. But Zeus came to her in the form of golden rain (Through bribing the watchman, according to modern interpretations). Danae had a son by him, Perseus by name, who eventually killed Acrisius, fulfilling the Oracle. Lycurgus, a king in Thrace, opposed the worship of Dionysus. He was turned mad and shut up in a cave. He died being torn to pieces by animals. Cleopatra's father was Boreas, the North wind. She was imprisoned by her husband Phincus king of Salmydessus on the coast of the Black sea, as he wanted to marry Eidothea, a sister of Theban Cadmus. Eidothea, blinded Cleopatra's two sons.

Ideas of darkness, cruelty, violence and revenge permeate this ode, and give indirect expression to the feelings of outrage against Creon, who treats Antigone so cruelly.

L 950-1055

Teiresias comes, with a note of friendly caution. He tells Creon of what he has foreseen, with his power of divining the future. As he sat on his ancient scat of augury[7] he could hear birds screaming at each other and fighting. The offered sacrifice did not burn at the fire. He understood such omens, indicating pollution. The homes and hearths are polluted by dogs and birds feeding upon the unburied dead body of Polyneices. Teiresias clearly tells Creon that he

[7] Augury – prophecy

is responsible for this and must make amends. It is foolish to be stubborn and it is no heroism to strike the fallen. Teiresias advises Creon to correct his erroneous ways.

But Creon's reaction is provocative. He accuses Teiresias of bribery. He blasphemes, speaking that even if the throne of Zeus himself is polluted by his own eagles, Creon would not change his decree for fear of that defilement. A hot exchange of words takes place between Creon and Teiresias. Creon charging Teiresias with greed for gold, and he charges Creon with love for shameful use of power.

Teiresias pronounces terrible predictions against Creon and leaves in anger. He says that for the double sin of exposing the dead, and burying the living. Creon will be punished with the death of his own child. For recklessly depriving the gods of the lower world of their due, the avenging furies are pursuing Creon to make him pay a price. His house will very soon ring with lamentation and he is hated in cities polluted by birds and dogs, who have fed upon corpses, lying unburied according to Creon's orders.

L 1055-1149

Creon is frightened and prepared to compromise. The Chorus tells him that the prophecy of Teiresias is sure to be fulfilled and Creon must hasten to undo the damage his stubbornness has brought about. Creon quickly goes with his men to release Antigone from her rock cave. The Chorus leader asks him to go personally to release Antigone and bury the dead.

The sixth ode is one of supplication. Dionysus is specially the god of Thebes, son of Semele, daughter of Cadmus of Thebes. Cadmus had sown the dragon's teeth from which sprang the ancestors of Thebans. Dionysus, the son of Zeus is generous and he would put his healing touch to cure Thebes of the pollution which holds all her people in its grip.

Hardly had the Chorus finished its song, when a messenger arrives – announcing death. He comes speaking of the insecurity of human fortune. Creon has lost his joy, and all his wealth and status cannot bring back his happiness. The Messenger has brought the news of Haemon's death. Eurydice, Creon's wife comes and wants to have the news, as she has already caught the word 'death', while coming to make an offering at the temple of Pallas.[8]

L 1150-1200

The Messenger describes the delayed burial of Polyneice's body and the circumstances leading to Haemen's death. The body half devoured by animals, was washed according to

[8] Pallas Athene-In Greek mythology-the goddess who presides over the intellectual and moral side of human lise; also The Preserver of the State.

holy rituals and prayer was offered to Hecate[9] and Pluto God of the lower world, begging them to be merciful. The poor remains of the body was burnt and a mound of soil built over his ashes. Then Creon proceeded to release Antigone from the stone cave where she was held. A cry of anguish was heard as they approached the unholy site. It was the voice of Haemon. Under the orders of Creon, the men ran to see, and they could see where some stones had already been removed, the body of Antigone was found hanging and Haemon lamenting her suicide.

Creon went crying to him, entreating him to come away. At this Haemon looked at him in anger. Spat in his face, and missing his aim to strike Creon, with his sword, drove the sword into his own body. His blood reddened the white checks of the dead girl as he embraced her with his failing arms. In death Haemon and Antigone are united and the folly of Creon has brought the worst evil on himself and on his own.

At the end of this speech, the chorus leader notes the silent disappearance of the queen.

L 1201-1290

The messenger hopes that in her dignity, she would not display her sorrow in public, but has gone in to express her sorrow, but the chorus leader feels apprehensive at her strange silence and the Messenger goes in to find out. Creon enters with the dead body of Haemon. The Chorus comments that his own misdeeds are responsible for his ruin.

Creon has at last recognised his own wrong judgement. He admits his own responsibility. The death of his son has been caused by his own rigid self-will. He has learnt his lesson the hard way. Divine anger has cruelly crushed all his joy.

The Messenger comes in from the palace with the news of the self-destruction of the queen.

In desperation, Creon speaks of the ruthlessness of death, and the news of the queen's death has come as a fatal blow to one who is already dead. As the lifeless body is seen, Creon wonders in sorrow, what more suffering might be in store for him.

The Messenger speaks of how Eurydice killed herself with a knife, cursing Creon as the killer of both her sons.

[9] In Greek mythology Hecate is a deity of the lower world often described as the goddess of the cross-roads. She wanders about with the souls of the dead and dwells at places where two roads crossed, on tombs and near the blood of murdered persons.

Once again Creon acknowledges that it is his own folly, that has led to the death of his wife and son. He alone is guilty for their disastrous end. All he now looks forward to is the end of a life emptied of all joy.

The Chorus leader reminds him that no man can escape his fate, he has to suffer. And so, long as one lives, one has to continue performing allotted duties.

Creon humbly laments the great sorrow that has come upon him and wishes to be led away. He describes himself as a thoughtless man of wrong judgement, whose lack of wisdom has killed his wife and son.

The last words of the Chorus voices the pronouncement of Sophocles on the truth of human experience. The most important element of happiness is balanced judgement and wisdom. Great pride is met with great punishment, till the proud man learns his lesson through suffering and becomes reverent to gods, acquiring humility.

5.1 Study Notes With Explanations

L-106

Across the gleaming water of Dirke (Dirce): Dirke is a river near Thebes. Dirke or Dirce was a queen of Thebes, wife of Lyeus, who married her after divorcing his former wife Antiope. Antiope was treated cruelly by Dirke. Antiope's sons took revenge by killing Lyeus and Dirke. Dirke was changed into a fountain.

L-127

Sons of a dragon: "The Thebans are the offspring of a Dragon. This is a reference to the story of Cadmus. The founder of the city and the Dynasty. He, an immigrant from Pheonicia, was led by a cow to the spot divinely appointed to be the site of his city. There he was incommoded by a dragon, which he killed. Then on divine prompting, he sowed the teeth of the dragon and from them instantly sprang up a company of armed men, who became the ancestors of the Theban race" (Sophocles. *Three Tragedies*, translated by HDF Kitto, Page. 158)

L-155

Theban Dionysus: Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, daughter of Cadmus of Thebes, Dionysus was also called Bacchus, the god' of wine. As the Greek drama had grown out of the dithyramabic choruses at the festival of Dionysus, he was also regarded as The god of tragic art.

L-785

Invincible Aphrodite: The goddess of Love and Beauty.

L-839

Labdacus: Father of Laius, grandfather of Oedipus.

L-920-950

Fair Danae, who in Darkness was held... She went a Boread, swift as horses, over the lofty mountains": Three separate myths are referred to here. Danae was the daughter of an Argive king Acrisius. He received a warning that, rather like the one that came to Laius, if his daughter had a son, that son would kill him. It was to avert this that he imprisoned Danae in a tower. But Zeus came to her in the form of golden rain (interpreted...to mean bribery of Danae's gaoler) and she bore Perscus, the one who slew the gorgon and after many other adventures, and Acrisius, thus fulfilling the oracle.

Lycurgus was a king in Thrace, the wild North, who opposed Dionysian worship. Dionysus drove him mad, and his people shut him up in a cave. He was torn to pieces by animals. Phincus's two sons had as mother a certain Cleopatra, daughter of Borcas, the North wind. Cleopatra's husband Phincus was king in Salmydessus, on the coast of the Black Sea, but he imprisoned her to marry Eidothea, sister of Theban Cadmus. She blinded the two sons of Cleopatra.

L-844

Evil marriage: Adrastus the king of Argos got his daughter married to Polyneices. He then prepared to restore Polyneices to Thebes. Thus the war started against Thebes. In this war Polyneices lost his life. His brother was also killed by him.

L-1254

Megareus: The reference to Megarcus or Menoeceus, is available in Euripides' The Phoenissae, written 30 years later than Antigone. The Argive army besieged Thebes. Teiresias informs Creon that the city can survive only by the sacrifice of one of the 'Sown men', i.e. The direct descendants of the dragon's teeth. There existed only two 'Sown men' other than Creon; Haemon and Menoeceus. Sophocles calls them Megareus. Creon must sacrifice one of them. Haemon cannot be sacrificed for he is married therefore Menoeceus is the only option. However, Creon refuses the suggestion. But Menoeceus nobly kills himself to save the city.

This is not the story referred to by Sophocles, but what exactly it was, we cannot tell.[10]

Another reference to Megareus is present in Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*. In the play, Megarcus, the son of Creon, departs, as soon as he is marked out by Eteocles, to guard the third gate of Thebes, against the invaders.

Creon is not a character in this play. These are not the references made use of by Sophocles. What exactly is the story referred to by him is not clear.

Check Your Progress 2

1. The first scene introduces us to two characters, who are they? What do you learn about the dramatic situation from their conversation? (L1-100)
2. Why does Creon proclaim two different edicts for the two brothers – killed by each other? (L-190-208)
3. When Antigone is brought before Creon, charged with the burial of the dead body of Polyneices, what reasons she gives to justify her action? (L-447-500)
4. What is the significance of the choric lines that end the Third ode? (L 610-616)
5. What aspects of Antigone's character is revealed in her speech before she is finally taken to her doom? (L 866-900)
6. What does Teiresias say to frighten Creon to mend his ways? (L 1028-1040).

6. THE TITLE AND THEME

The play is named after Antigone, but whether rightly is a point of controversy.

Antigone drops out well before the play is over. We hear nothing about her after her exit except how Haemon laments over her suicide and kills himself. Creon occupies the scene almost from the beginning till the end. His part is lengthier than that of Antigone. It is his tragedy that grows before our eyes and sustains dramatic interest till the end.

[10] Material collected from HDF Kitto's–Sophocles–Three Tragedies

Having said this, it still has to be maintained that Antigone is the more important character. The emphasis of the dramatic action centres around her. Vulnerable and alone, she opposes the unjust decree of Creon. She buries her brother, paying with her life for her defiance.

The main theme of the tragedy is the conflict between the claims of the blood and the claims of the State, between religious and secular law. And it is Antigone, who raises the issue, challenging the right of the King, to encroach upon the unquestionable area of divine dispensation. Two things are disregarded by Creon, when he forbids the burial of Polyncices's dead body. He flouts the eternal unwritten divine laws, that demand proper rites and burial of the dead, and he denies the sacred right of the blood relation to carry out the rituals and bury the dead. The first assertion that Antigone makes is that Creon has "no right to keep me from my own".

Her decision is made; "I shall bury him". She has already made up her mind. She will die if necessary for what is described, paradoxically, as "this pure crime". The king will punish her according to the king's laws for her act of reverence in burying the dead body of her brother in accordance with the divine laws.

Creon has his own reasons to deny burial to Polyncices' dead body. As a traitor and an aggressor his body is denied burial; to be made an example of what dishonour waits such men. It is given to dogs and animals. Creon thinks that he is the state, he is not prepared to give any hearing to any voice of dissent. Antigone is caught, giving funeral libation to her brother's body. She gives her reasons for defying Creon's authority. No man, however powerful can flout the eternal laws of heaven. Antigone would not risk divine displeasure for the sake of obeying a man. She is condemned to be buried alive. Haemon's intervention only hastens her doom. Creon's pride, and self-will refuse to yield. Haemon rightly points out the moral sympathy of the city is with Antigone, he argues, requests and protests to no avail. His anger only hardens Creon in his resolve to punish Antigone. Finally Teiresias the blind prophet comes clearly warning Creon to change his ways, he is polluting the city, by his unholy order. Signs of divine displeasure are evident. The sacred fires refuse to burn, Creon has withheld the dues of the gods of the nether world, but Creon would not listen. To him, Teiresias, like others opposed to him, has been corrupted by money. Humiliated, Teiresias is provoked into speaking out the terrible predictions regarding Creon.

The amends offered by the frightened Creon come too late. Advised by the chorus, he yields. The poor remains of the dead body of Polyneices is washed and buried. But neither

Antigone nor Haemon can be saved. Creon's fate overtakes him. His stubbornness results in the consequential death of his wife and son.

The later part of the play is about pride and its consequence. Antigone almost fades out. Nevertheless, she holds the dramatic interest and the play is about her. The Tragedy imperceptibly glides from the main theme of divine versus temporal law to another. The tragedy of Creon unfolds itself as the tragedy of self-will; of the sin of combating the divine will. This division makes the play structurally weak but not patently *diptych* in form. Professor Waldock thinks that Haemon's love is the structural link between the two parts. Professor Bowra also thinks that the play is rightly called *Antigone*, as she is the most important figure in it. Surely her character is the most dramatically interesting. Professor Bowra says that the play is held together by Creon. As the subject is the conflict between Antigone and Creon, and she suffers in carrying out her family and divine obligations due to Creon's folly, the tragedy ends appropriately with Creon's humiliation.

The theme of the play in its wider sense deals with the conflict between family and State, between an individual and the authority, between divine and human laws. Creon is swiftly punished for his pride and irreverence by divine justice. The innocents may suffer due to human folly, but gods are not blind to such suffering. Another pervasive theme in the play is the need to learn. The closing lines of the play–say

"This is the law
That, seeing the stricken heart
of pride brought down
We learn when we are old..."

Learning through experience is the vital requirement for an individual, to reconcile himself with the world of gods and men. This is what Creon fails to do. His lack of flexibility, assertion of self-will, neglect of the sacred obligations of the rituals of burial and obedience to divine laws, violate the basic duties of man. He thinks, in his excess of pride, that he can control the world, both mundane and the spiritual. That no man can aspire to do so, is the lesson that Creon learns through suffering. Pride and arrogance cannot hold for long. The pitfalls are many, and the irreverent man is soon trapped in his own folly.

The central idea of a Sophoclean
tragedy is that through suffering, a man
learns to be modest before the gods.

> Antigone throughout acts for the gods.
> In resisting her, Creon resists them and
> pays for it. The conflict in a Sophoclean
> tragedy is mainly between divine and human
> purposes. It involves conflicts between
> human beings, but in the last resort it
> arises from man's ignorance of their own
> state, or refusal to do what the gods demand.
>
> (C.M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*)

After the discussion of the theme of the play, we may conclude that the tragedy is rightly named. We agree with Professor Kitto that the play has two central characters; Creon and Antigone. Creon, with his petty concerns and closed mind, cannot sustain the claim to be the more dominant character. Antigone holds our interest throughout, providing the main motivation of the dramatic action. The emphasis, undoubtedly, is on her. Structurally the play is not tight, but it definitely does not fall into halves. The theme is rounded off with the fall of Creon through pride.

7. THE CHORUS

The chorus should be regarded as one of the actors, it should be an integral part of the whole and take a share in the action, that which it has in Sophocles rather than in Euripides, as it has been said by Aristotle.

The chorus was normally a group of like minded and similarly placed persons (like citizens, captives or senators) representing some strongly felt idea. Greek Tragedy developed out of the dithyrambic chorus of 50 members. This number came down to 12 in the later plays of Aeschylus. Sophocles increased it to 15. The members of the chorus were dressed in simple Athenian costume, in contrast with the heroic costume of the actors. The individuals of the chorus were ordinary Athenian citizens, trained to perform. As members of the audience, their appreciation contributed greatly to the excellence of Greek drama. The poetic quality of the choral lyrics and dance enhanced the beauty of the Greek Tragedy and often built up the tragic atmosphere or set the dramatic tone. It brought poetic relief, generalised the particular events and interpreted the action.

The chorus comprised the social background as it usually consisted of ordinary good citizens as contrasted with the main characters, who were always figures of lofty status. The members of the chorus are interested commentators projecting the more universal significance of the action. One of the members of the chorus acts as the leader and "may become virtually a character in the dramatis personae".

In a Sophoclean tragedy the chorus is limited to the present action and is always dramatic. The chorus in *Antigone* is composed of Theban elders. The theme of conflict between the claims of blood and the claims of the state–a public theme–concerns the chorus as members of the public. One of the traits of the chorus in the Sophoclean tragedy is its individuality. In Antigone, the chorus sympathises with the heroine, but does not approve of her action, as the ordinary Thebans do. Ironically it speaks the right thing but about the wrong person.

The chorus shifts its sympathy back and forth between Antigone and Creon and thus it becomes a dramatic force.

Sophocles uses the chorus as an actor and also as singers but the individual actor is always in the focus as the more important character. The chorus however is always present and always relevant which is not so with all the other actors. The chorus announces new-comers, receives messengers and fills up time-space. Its sometimes common-place comments allow for time to begin another speech. Sometimes instead of addressing the other actors, the characters speak to the chorus.

The most important function of the chorus remains the lyrical one. *Antigone* is rich in its lyrical content. The first ode is dramatic as it celebrates the joy of the city in its deliverance and dispels the ominous air of the dialogue between the sisters and–ironically calls for night-long dances to be led by Dionysus, as the danger is past, so it will be forgotten.

Like any other dramatic character, the chorus may also be wrong as in the conclusion of the Second Ode. The paean to glory of man ends with the idea that divine laws and temporal laws are to be observed for security and peace of the city. The ironical twist is that the two do not coincide and the temporal lord, Creon himself is endangering the city and his family through his defiance of gods.

The third Ode foreshadows Creon's fate with its forceful though unconscious warning:

To the man whom God will ruin
one day shall evil seem
Good in his twisted judgement
He comes in a short time to fell disaster.

The fifth Ode is sung after Antigone is led away to be interred in the stony cave. It brings lyrical relics, particularly needed at that agonising moment. The ode does not refer to Creon. The net! chorus in Antigone is wise and political and solidly on Creon's side. But the Ode is full of ideas and images of dark fate and vengeance, of savage cruelty and meaningless torture. The presence of Creon on the stage is significant, as the audience knows and feels the senseless cruelty of the king towards Antigone.

The last Ode is in prayer to Dionysus, to deliver the city from the impending evils. The odes are organic to the structure of the play Antigone, the most lyrical of all the existing plays of Sophocles. In H.D.F. Kitto's words; "In the *Antigone*, the chorus carries more of the burden of the tragic theme, than in the later plays." The role of the chorus is significant from another point of view. Sophoclean view of life is revealed in the choral odes as that of the wonders of man in the *Antigone*, and that of the laws of Heaven in *Oedipus the King*. In the first, the chorus sings of the supreme qualities and values of Man. The only thing beyond his power to conquer is death. In the second, his belief in the incomprehensible but mysterious and powerful force behind the universe is professed. The force that ordains the eternal and holy laws governing the universe: Man, the noblest creature works out his own destiny, makes his own choice, but under the guidance of divine presence and the laws of heaven.

Check Your Progress 3

1. How does the chorus add to the drama in Antigone?

8. THE CHARACTERS

According to Prof. Bowra, the play concerns individual destinies and the ethical content of the tragedy, the fall of pride, is brought out through this conflict between two individuals; Creon and Antigone. These individuals meet their inexorable fate, but they are not puppets. They are free to choose their options; options which they can exercise within certain limits of the conditions of human existence, of divine laws pervading the universe which a man must obey or perish, or as in Antigone's case-obey and perish.

Antigone

The heroine in the tragedy has a character, alive with real feelings and passions. She dominates the play from the outset and remains the most interesting character.

At the beginning, she tries to associate Ismene with her task. The keyword in her dialogue with Ismene should be noted:

What outrage threatens one of those we love.

(Antigone, P.3, L.10)

She considers it rightly, to be nothing short of outrage that Polyneices' body is not to be buried.

So he has decreed,

Our noble Creon, to all the citizens,

To you, to me. To me!

(Antigone, P.4, L.28-33)

She has already resolved: "I will bury my brother." To Ismene's frightened warning, she reacts only by repeating "he has no right to keep me from my own!" (P.4, L48).

It is her love for her brother that makes her take on the might of the State. For her there is no room for an after-thought, no alternative, and the choice is made. She will obey the sacred laws and honourably bury her brother. This is the main theme of the play which she makes clear. Her single-minded purpose makes her intolerant of Ismene's timidity. She contemptuously dismisses Ismene's caution. She does not hide her contempt for Ismene when the latter pleads her inability to share Antigone's defiance of Creon. Rather than continue to exist like a coward, Antigone will face death courageously in carrying out her noble mission,

Indeed Antigone is the true daughter of her father Oedipus, staring danger full in the face, never flinching from truth.

What enrages Creon, more and what adds to the stature of Antigone, is her defiance of him despite her apparent lack of resources and her vulnerability. A young woman described as a slave by Creon, Antigone shows unique strength of purpose in doing what she thinks is right and holy, without caring for personal consequences. As a matter of fact she is prepared

for death from the very beginning and never craves for any mercy from the tyrant who has disregarded the divine laws.

The chorus describes her as fierce and defiant, showing her father's temper "she will not yield to any storm" (p.17, L.462), Indeed Antigone does not consider any other point of view but her own. Prosessor Bowra makes a distinction between the apparent arrogance of Antigone and the real arrogance of Creon. The first deceives by its fine persuasive sentiments, the second works through Antigone's refusal to offer concessions, or to consider any point of view but her own. Antigone refuses to make concessions yet her position is vindicated as the dramatic conflict is not between right and right, but between what is right and what is wrong. Antigone's stand is for the established civilized and religious values that call for the proper treatment of the dead, and the rights of the family. These values are independent of all mundane considerations sought to be superimposed on them by Creon in the name of patriotism, loyalty to the king and everything else that goes along with these worldly virtues. Antigone is not burying her brothers body out of a cold sense of duty. A throbbing warm sense of love motivates her; the love of the mother bird for her fledglings. The guard describes her reacting to the desecration of Polyncices' body as a mother bird would, finding her nest empty of its young. She tells Creon that she would not share the hatred of her brothers when they killed each other, but would love them both. Who knows that, may be in death, the brothers too are reconciled. In any case after death, they belong to the god of Death who demands the same rites for both the good and the wicked. She challenges the right of any man, howsoever powerful, to deny these rituals sanctified by god.

The superhuman courage and strength of mind that Antigone shows, make her also a lonely soul. She does not expect any mercy from Creon and refuses to acknowledge the sisterly concern of Ismene. The chorus also gives her little comfort, when she is on her way to be buried alive, under Creon's command. Her relationship with Haemon is only indirectly presented. But Sophocles was not portraying an abstraction in Antigone. She is very much a creature of flesh and blood, with normal expectations of womanhood.

Before she is taken away finally, she mourns her cruel fate that sends her to her doom. She has no morbid wish to die, but neither could she avoid death, as it has come as a consequence of carrying out her most sacred obligation.

She laments the curse holding in its grip the house of Labdacus, the cursed marriage of her parents, between a mother and a son. Now she has no hope of ever being married, or being a mother. Friendless, she goes to her doom. But she is sure to be welcomed in the

house of the dead, the dwelling of allshe held dear and by whom she has done her duty. She is comforted by the idea that her holy act of burying her dead brother, will be approved by all the right thinking wise men. She emphasises her sisterly love, as she says that only for a brother, she has defied death, and she would not have done so either for a son, or a husband. Unlike a husband or a son, a brother, she says, is irreplaceable. She finally disappears for ever, cursing her tormentor to suffer like her for the death so undeservedly thrust upon her.

Creon

Creon is one of the two central characters in the tragedy, the other one being Antigone. The dramatic conflict centres around the two. Creon stands for the rights of the State, of the temporal authority, as against the stand taken by Antigone for the claims of blood, of divine sanction and eternal laws. Creon is a very sympathetic character in *Oedipus the King* and a very different one in *Antigone.*

It is felt by many interpreters that Creon is not wholly wrong in his decision to deny burial to a traitor's body. He has his reasons and spells it out at length. But his experience and reason betray him, and over-confidence brings about his ruin. He is utterly materialistic, and he thinks that it is only motives of profit that can induce a person to defy the king's orders. In the plays of Sophocles it is shown again and again that certainty and control are human illusions. Creon's believed that, being the king, he was in control. He disregards the divine laws, and shows arrogance and pride. He considers women to be inferior beings and refers to them contemptuously. He refuses to yield when Haemon reasons with him, telling him of the subdued voice of the people who supported the pious-action of Antigone. He tries to persuade Haemon to see the rightness of his father's stand. Failing, he gets more brutal and would kill Antigone before Haemon's eyes. Creon's dry rationalistic approach leaves no room for any human considerations. Worse, he is equally arrogant towards Teiresias. The blind Prophet tells him of his guilt how it has polluted the land and of the urgency to make amends. He has denied burial to the dead thus going against the gods of the lower world. He has given the most terrible punishment to an innocent maid for her act of piety thus going against the laws of heaven. For this Creon has exposed himself to the fury of the Erinyes (Avenging Deities). And they will make him pay for the act of profanation. Self-will has so much obsessed Creon that he blasphemes and charges Teiresias with motives of profit.

> No, not though Zeus' own eagles eat the corpse
>
> And bear the carrion to their master's throne
>
> Not even so, for scar of that defilement,

Will I permit his burial–for well I know
That mortal man cannot defile the gods.
But, old Teiresias, even the cleverest men
Fall shamefully when for a little money
They use fair words to mask their villainy.

(P.35-36, L.1003-10)

He does relent, but it is too late. Man has to be humble before all powerful gods. Antigone stood for all that is holy and in opposing her, Creon opposed the divine laws. His folly would not let him modify his ways. Haemon's entreaties fall on deaf cars. Even the knowledge that Teiresias always makes correct prophecy, does not make him yield till it is too late. He has excessive confidence in himself and man's power to control, and so he violates the divine laws.

Creon's life is robbed of meaning with the loss of his wife and child. Only after losing them he learns and confesses that "the guilt falls on me alone" (P. 44, L.1266). He realises his guilt and assumes responsibility for it. Thus Creon's end is of great dramatic significance as it focuses on the fundamental view of life of Sophocles as well as on the pervasive theme of the play; learning through suffering to be humble before the God, the proud man is schooled in wisdom at the end. The closing lines of the tragedy tell us that learning takes place in time. It relates to flexibility and openness to experience that Creon lacked at the beginning.

9. THE ROLES OF; (A) TEIRESIAS, (B) THE SENTRY, (C) HAEMON, (D) ISMENE

A. Teiresias: Teiresias's introduction in the drama serves several important purposes. From the personal and the political level, the theme decisively widens to include larger issues. The conflict is between the eternal laws of the gods, and the ephemeral laws of man. For voicing the truth, Teiresias has been suspected by tyrants.

Teiresias, a blind man, who can see beyond the reaches of normal human vision, categorically states that Creon is guilty of polluting himself and the city. Teiresias comes after Antigone has been dispatched to her death. He warns Creon, to correct his folly and see the right path, the right for which Antigone stood and died. There were visible portents which only the prophetic knowledge of Teiresias could interpret. The denial of burial to the dead has

brought pollution to the altars and homes of Thebes. He advises Creon to see reason, and not defy gods by humiliating the dead and injuring the weak. The sacred fire would not burn, the gods refuse to accept the offerings made to them. These are signs of great impending disaster and the amends should be made quickly to appease the angry gods.

The angry and provoking reaction of Creon must have amazed the Athenian audience who were aware of the irony of the situation. Creon rises to the height of arrogance, defies Zeus and challenges Teiresias. Teiresias is provoked. He tells Creon that in his double sin of exposing the dead and entombing the living, he has become the target of the avenging furies who will surely take a severe toll from him. Soon they will seek death for death and claim a child of Creon to pay the price of his folly. Soon his house will ring with lamentation from men and women from the cities, whose sons were denied burial by Creon. Hatred for the Tyrant is moving in those cities polluted by dead men's flesh, carried by birds and beasts to their homes. The prophecy frightens the chorus and also the domineering king.

The second part of the speech by Teiresias is unambiguous and terrible. He leaves the scene, spelling out the part that destiny would now play in destroying Creon. He brings destruction upon himself through arrogance and folly. The blind seer sees it all, but his warning comes too late. Creon has already lost his balance before he is told by Teiresias that he is "Treading the razor's edge." It shows that man may act according to his own free will, but he cannot control the consequences that follow, that man must obey the divine laws, that hatred and tyranny recoil upon the man who hates and tyrannises, and most importantly, that gods will certainly strike at pride, injustice and irreverence. The innocent may suffer but the guilty will not get away. It is interesting to note the role of Teiresias in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. The chorus leader introduces him as "The only man whose heart is filled with truth" and earlier he speaks of Teiresias "I know of none that reads Appollo's mind so surely as the Lord Teiresias; consulting him you best might learn the truth". Oedipus too, blames and threatens Teiresias in his innocence and pride. The Seer's blazing anger voices the most terrible truth "you have your sight, yet you cannot see". It is the inner vision that matters, not the outward vision.

B. Sentry: The role of the Sentry in the play *Antigone* is important in quite a few respects. In the portrayal of a talkative sly man, we get an idea of the common man "on the outskirts of the tragedy who has escaped" (HDF Kitto, Greek Tragedy, P.155). Providing a contrast to the attitude of fearlessness of Antigone, the guard values his life above everything else. He acts as a foil to the character of Antigone. Sweating with fear he appears with the news of the

burial of the dead body of Polyneices, when Creon had just finished his announcement that anybody burying the dead man will be punished with death.

The Sentry knows the angry reaction that his message will provoke. He starts with an elaborate plea of his own innocence. After a long speech he comes to the heart of the matter and finally blurts out that the prohibited burial has taken place.

Creon explodes with anger at the Sentry who is asked to go and find out the guilty, otherwise he will be hanged. Creon accuses the Sentry of accepting a bribe and decides to teach him a lesson. The Sentry decides never to show his face again, lucky to have escaped the first time.

The fear of death, natural in a common man brings into relief Antigone's defiance of death. The scene where Antigone is brought to Creon by the Sentry is highly dramatic. All the three characters reacting differently to the situation. The Sentry is relieved, almost jubilant, to have conclusively proved his own innocence. Antigone, has achieved her sacred task, and is at peace with herself briefly, acknowledging the responsibility. Creon is slow to react to this incredible news of his own niece defying him.

The Sentry is surprised at the quick vindication of his own innocence and the only moral which he can draw is that "against, nothing should a man take oath" (P.15, L380).

He is honest, though vulgar. He feels sorry for the girl, knowing what she has to face, but still for him "my own escape comes before everything" (P.16, L.430).

The Sentry represents the common man in every respect. The average Thebean is against the unjust decree of Creon, and has no grudge against Antigone. The Sentry voices the feeling of the average citizen when he says "It's bad, to judge at random and judge wrong" (1.321, P.13). Creon is wrong to prohibit the burial and to suspect that the Sentry is one of the group of malcontent, motivated by monetary gains.

And then he refers to Antigone as a friend and is pained to have been compelled to bring her to ruin.

Apart from these functions, the Sentry gives a detailed account of Antigone's act of burying the dead body. He is the dramatic agent to convey the vivid version of the burial of Polyneices' body by Antigone, which is done off stage. The dramatic skill of Sophocles is evident in making the necessary information a close-knit part of the dramatic structure. The Sentry's role is important and vital to the drama. Though a minor character, he is clearly portrayed with a few telling strokes. He occupies the scene briefly, but his fright, his cleverness, his instinct for self preservation, his feeling for others' suffering, his absence of

ego, are presented effectively. The Sentry in *Antigone* remains alive as an average individual. He also provides a comic touch to the otherwise sombre play through his mannerisms and frank display of his overwhelming desire for sell-preservation.

C. Haemon: Haemon and Antigone are never together on the stage and she speaks about him only once, answering the taunt of Creon, "O my dear Haemon how/your father wrongs you!" She feels that Creon is wrong to suggest that Haemon would take any other woman. Haemon, Creon's son, interferes in the action towards the middle of the play. The dialogue between the father and the son is at the centre of the play. We already know that Haemon is to marry Antigone, and love for her motivates him to intercede on her behalf. But he does not mention his love. He politely reminds his father of the need to change and of the advantages of flexibility. He confirms himself as an obedient son and then proceeds to tell him that it is the well being of his father that he has in mind, when he is asking him to see reason. The city, approves the brave action of Antigone, burying her brother defying death–a glorious deed at once pious and loving. His temper gradually rises when no entreaty, no argument shake Creon's determination. The only answer of Creon is denial of love and confirmation of his own rigid stand. Ultimately Haemon goes out in rage and Creon's only reaction is to proceed with his act of cruelty in immediately commanding that Antigone should be buried alive. This is the last we see of Haemon. Later on we hear about him breaking open the tomb and lamenting his dead bride. Teiresias's prophecy is fulfilled when Haemon kills himself.

Haemon's role[11] is to assert the power to love that Creon denies. Creon mocks at Antigone`s sisterly love and condemns her to hell to go and love there if love she must. To Haemon, Creon preaches the need of obedience of a son to the father. He never once speaks of love, but dismisses Haemon's attachment to Antigone as merely his pleasure in a woman. He thinks Haemon can have any other woman as his wife as his son's love does not mean anything to him.

The chorus speaks of the invincible power of Aphrodite. It is the influence of love that has made the son rebel against the father. It is the cosmic Eros holding sway over the universe, that has recoiled against Creon. Heamon turns violent at the tomb aiming his sword against his father. Creon has destroyed the last tie of the family bond in his inhumanity. Haemon and Antigone are united in death and their love lives. It is Creon who has lost all that he loved.

[11] It is to be noted that love is the personal motive of both Antigone and Haemon in opposing Creon. Haemon gives political reasons and Antigone a religious one.

D. Ismene: Ismene is Antigone's sister, but it seems Sophocles was out to create an effective contrast. The first scene opens with an air of conspiracy as the two sisters discuss Creon's edict. Ismene is timid and weak, conceding that she will not be doing her duty by the dead, she pleads inability to rise against the might of the state. The king has forbidden the burial of the dead body of Polyneices. Antigone has decided to bury him. She resents this dishonour to her brother's body she emphasizes the bond of blood, that calls upon her to carry out this burial, and love motivates her to do this sacred duty. She is prepared to sacrifice her own life, and angry with Ismene for her weakness. Ismene is scared lest her sister too should die. The reason she gives for conforming to the unjust law is curiously the one which doubly angers Creon against Antigone–

> Remember too that we
> Are women, not made to fight with men.
>
> (P.5 1.61-61)

To Antigone such considerations carry no meaning. Life is empty of its worth if one has to survive on compromise.

In the second scene where Ismene and Antigone are together, Ismene offers to be her partner in death. But Antigone would have none of it. She seems, here, to be rigid and stern. Since Ismene had refused to share her task out of fear, now Antigone refuses to let her share death.

It is significant that at the end of the play only Ismene and Creon survive. The tyrant and his pliant victim. The two live on without love. They had denied the claims of love. Ismene had refused to join her sister in her task of love as she wanted to cling to life. Paradoxically she wants to share her sister's fate, as she realises that life without love is empty of all meaning.

Ismene introduces the love theme between Haemon and Antigone. She questions Creon whether he should be so unnatural as to kill his son's bride. In answer Creon mocks at their love and makes vulgar insinuations.

Ismene's love is not strong enough to face death. Still, she does love her sister and is prepared to share the responsibility of the action for which Antigone is condemned. Antigone's refusal of her offer brings out the loneliness of the Sophoclean heroine. However, at one point, the sisters have affinity of character. This affinity is in their devotion. Ismene ultimately is prepared to face death for the sake of her sister. She cannot be equal to Antigone who defies death, without a second thought, for the sake of her dead brother. Nevertheless,

her love gets the better of her timidity and she cries out "But what is life to me, without my sister?" (P.20, L.556)

10. ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Write answers to any two questions in about 600 words each

1. The first song of the chorus is one of thanksgiving, calling for night long celebrations as dangers are past. Do you think dangers are really over for Thebes?
2. Ismene and Antigone are different in every way, though they are sisters. Do you find any sort of similarity between the two?
3. Notwithstanding, his preoccupation with self preservation, the guard in Antigone is not a wholly unpleasant character – Do you agree?
4. Teiresias comes with a friendly caution and departs with bitter warnings. Why does his attitude change?

11. GLOSSARY

Aeschylus– Greek tragic poet.

Aphrodite– Greek goddess of love and beauty.

Augury– Declaration; telling what the future will be.

Acheron– A river of the lower world.

Demeter– Goddess of agriculture and of all the fruits.

Dionysus– The god of wine also called Bacchus.

Dionysia– festivals held at Athens in honour of Dionysus.

Dithyrambus– A hymn sung at festivals of Dionysus to the accompaniment of music.

Divination– Act of telling the future.

Dirke-Dirce– A queen of Thebes, wife of Lycus, killed by her stepsons and changed into a fountain.

Hecate– A deity of the lower world, dwelling at cross roads.

Hades– The god of the nether world.

Labdacus– Father of Laius.

Laius– Father of Oedipus.

Libations– Liquids poured out in honour of a deity.

Niobe– Daughter of Tantalus, wife of Amphion, king of Thebes, changed into stone after her children were killed by Apollo and Artemis. The stony Niobe weeps forever.

Panoply– Complete suit of Armor.

Persephone– Wife of Pluto, daughter of Zeus and Demeter.

Pluto– The god of the lower world.

Sons of a Dragon– The men who grew up from the Dragon's teeth, sown by Cadmus.They were the ancestors of Thebans and so the Thebans were called the sons of a dragon.

12. FURTHER READINGS

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13. A NOTE ON THE ORACLES

An oracle was a divine announcement, revealed through any person or agency believed to be in communication with a deity. The ancient Greeks had firm faith in such oracles. There were men and women in ancient Greece, who claimed inspiration and clairvoyance.

The most famous oracle in the historical period of ancient Greece was that of Apollo at Delphi.

Three priestesses, each at least fifty years of age, "were trained to consult Apollo through a trance. From a pit in the earth below the temple, came a peculiar gas, ascribed to the eternal decomposition of the python that Apollo had slain there. The officiating priestess called Pythia took the scat of the python on a high tripod and over this cleft inhaled the divine stench. Along with this they chewed narcotic laurel leaves and fell into delirious convulsions and thus inspired, uttered incoherent words. The priests then translated these incoherent utterances for the people. Very often the final reply admitted of diverse, even contrary interpretations so that the infallibility of the Oracle was maintained irrespective of the event. Possibly the priests were no less puppets than the priestesses. Sometimes they accepted bribes, and in most cases the voice of the oracle harmonized melodiously with the dominant influence in Greece. Nevertheless, where external powers did not constrain them, the priests taught valuable lessons of moderation and political wisdom to the Greeks. They aided the establishment of law, encouraged the manumission (liberation) of slaves, and bought many slaves in order to give them liberty....They gave a helpful supernatural sanction to necessary Greek Policies and provided some degree of international conscience and moral unity for the scattered cities of Greeks".

(Will Durant. *The life of Greece*, page. 198)

Unit-III

4. ARISTOPHANES, *LYSISTRATA*

Dr. Seema Suri

STRUCTURE

1. Learning Objectives
2. Greek Theatre
3. Aristophanes
4. Historical Background: The Peloponnesian War (431- 404 BCE)
5. The Structure of Greek Comedy
6. Study Guide
7. Major Themes in the Play
8. Lysistrata
9. *Lysistrata* as Comic Theatre

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* was written and first performed in 411 BCE in Athens. It is one of the few surviving plays of ancient Greek comedy. Even two and a half centuries later, *Lysistrata* remains popular and continues to be adapted for the stage. It is of historical interest to any student of Western theatre.

You are advised to read the play carefully before going through this study-material, which includes a detailed commentary on the play. The main objectives of this unit are;

– to guide you through a close reading of the play;

– provide a historical context to the events;

– draw your attention to the major themes; and

– familiarize you with the conventions of ancient Greek theatre.

All references to the play are to the following edition: *Aristophanes*: *Lysistrata and Other Plays*. tr. Alan H. Sommerstein. Penguin: UK, 2002. This edition includes extensive Notes to the play, which will help you understand topical references. At the same time, absence of familiarity with these will not hinder you from grasping the central message of the play.

2. GREEK THEATRE

As an art form, Greek theatre has its origins in the religious festivals, such as The Great Dionysia and the Lenaea, in the sixth century BCE. These festivals were held every year, over a period of four to five days, and the plays were performed as part of a competition. The *archon* or chief magistrate of the city selected one poet who would present a trilogy of three plays and one satyr play, for comic relief. In addition, two comedies by two other poets were presented. The production of the plays was financed largely out of public funds: actors were paid by the state and choruses by private citizens. A *choregoi*, who was usually an affluent citizen, looked after the aspects of production, such as costumes and selection of chorus, and a jury of ten members selected the winners. Inhabitants of the city would have flocked to see these plays, performed during religious festivals.

The plays were performed in large open-air theatres, with a seating capacity of 14-20,000 spectators. The amphitheatre, semi-circular in shape, was usually built out of a hill-side and in the shape of a truncated, inverted cone. (Figure 1) The last row of seats would have been around a hundred and twenty feet from the ground. The central performing area, known as the *orchestra*, was circular in shape, with a diameter of around eighty-five feet. This is where the chorus would have stood and danced, throughout the play. Sometimes, the actor would enter the *orchestra* but the chorus never left it. Behind the *orchestra* was the *skene*, a two-storey wooden structure meant to represent any building or its interior; such as a palace, temple or cave. With a door, it provided an entry point for the actors and, most probably, a place where they could change costumes for the next part. In front of the *skene* was a raised platform. In

Lysistrata, the *skene* would have represented the Acropolis, where the women have laid siege.

Figure 1: The theatre of Epidaurus

[Source: https://thedramateacher.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/epidaurus.jpg.webp]

Resources were limited, so there were very few changes of scene. Events that took place offstage were narrated by a messenger. Sometimes, mechanical devices like a crane or *deux ex machina* was used to show the entry of gods and an *ekkyklema* or a wheeled trolley was used to show indoor scenes. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, for instance, the body of Eurydice would have been brought out on an *ekkyklema*.

Many of these amphitheatres, built between the fourth and second centuries BCE, stand on archaeological sites all over Greece and form a major tourist attraction. There are fifteen such ancient theatres and the Dionysian theatre, on the slope of the Acropolis in Athens is the

oldest and considered the birthplace of drama. In the image above, you can observe the layout of one such theatre. Note the arrangement of ascending seats and the circular *orchestra*, which forms a model for similar structures even today. However, the *skene*, which was a temporary wooden structure is missing here.

It is important to remember that the plays were performed in conditions very different from modern theatre, which allows a great deal of freedom as far as representation of emotions is concerned. The actor in Greek plays had to depend on his voice and gestures to make an impact on the audience. You would be interested to know that the acoustics of these theatres are so good that the actor's voice would have reached the spectators seated in the last row. It is reported that, even today, in the theatre of Epidaurus, the sound of a coin dropping on the floor can be heard in the last rows.

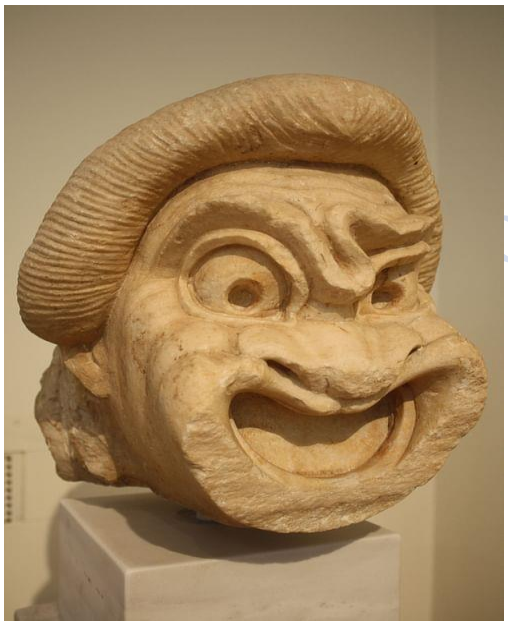

Figure 2: Marble mask of a slave, Figure 3: Mask of a woman

[Source: https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads/images/3290.jpg?v=1648307523]

[Source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/453174781258308887/]

It was not a naturalistic theatre of the kind we are used to and subtle, nuanced acting would have been lost in those surroundings. Plays were always performed in daylight and under an open sky. All actors wore masks, with exaggerated expressions painted on them;

making it easier for the audience to read facial expressions from a distance and one actor to play many parts. The masks would fit the face, had wigs attached, and open mouths to allow clear speech. In addition, there were holes for the eyes and ears. These masks or *prosopon* were made of wood, leather, or linen and were of stock characters: angry old man, servant, young lover, courtesan. Historians list twenty-six types of masks in tragedy and around forty-four in comedy.

In Figures 2 and 3, there are images of reproductions of ancient Greek comic masks. The actual masks used in Greek theatre were burned as an offering to Dionysus, in whose honour the plays were performed. Archaeological evidence, like numerous paintings on Grecian urns and small terracotta figurines, helped historians reconstruct these. There are around two hundred such mixing vessels, depicting theatrical performances, at various places all over the world. It is an attestation of how important theatre was for ancient Greeks.

The rule about the number of actors was rigid and only four actors were allowed to perform. This was done to save the cost to the state, which paid these professional actors. Men performed all the parts in the plays; those of women included. Some believe that it could have been due to the paucity of professional actors. Some male actors specialized in playing female parts. In *Lysistrata*, four actors would have performed some twenty parts and the chorus, as was the custom, would have remained on the stage throughout. However, poets didn't always conform to these rules. Aristophanes has two choruses in the play, comprising twelve actors each. In comedy, the actors wore short tunics with padding and large phalli. Characters from the upper strata of society wore long robes and high platform heels underneath. In this short space it is not possible to present an exhaustive account of ancient Greek theatre. However, it is important to be aware of these to fully appreciate the contribution of Greek theatre in the development of drama.

Activity 1

With the help of online resources, write brief notes on;

– The City Dionysia

– Masks in ancient Greek theatre

3. ARISTOPHANES

Aristophanes' work belongs to the period known as Old Comedy (445 – 385 BCE) and he is the only poet whose works have come down to us. Not much is known about Aristophanes, except what can be gleaned from his plays. It is speculated that he was born around 449 BCE and, in a career spanning around forty years, he wrote forty plays. However, only eleven of his plays are available today. His first play, *The Banqueters* won a prize at the City Dionysia in 427 BCE and his second play, *The Babylonians* won the first prize the following year.

The subject matter of tragedy was borrowed from ancient mythology or legend, with each poet giving his own treatment. In comedy, the plays dealt with more topical matters; satirizing politicians and social evils. The subject matter of Aristophanes' plays is diverse, ranging from political and social satire to mythological parodies, as in *Birds*. *The Clouds* (423 BCE) is a satire against the famous philosopher Socrates and *Frogs* (405 BCE), an attack of Euripides. Three of his plays have war and peace as their subject: *Acharnians* (425 BCE), *Peace* (421 BCE), and *Lysistrata* (411 BCE). *Lysistrata* is the last of the peace plays and it is a dream about peace, at a time when Athens was going through a political crisis. More of this will be discussed in the next section.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR (431-404 BCE)

Athens was at the height of her power when Aristophanes was a young boy. All adult males had an equal say in policy decisions; taken in the Assembly by a show of hands. Under the strong leadership of Pericles, Athens had successfully fought a war against Persia, becoming an indomitable power at sea. Between 462 - 431 BCE, Pericles transformed the city, spending money on public buildings, such as the Acropolis; as revenue poured in from confederate states. He transformed a military alliance into the Athenian empire.

At the time, Sparta was the greatest power on land and growing resentment and dissatisfaction with Athenian supremacy led to war in 431 BCE. After Pericles' death, Cleon took over and the war dragged on, ending in a compromise in 421 BCE, known as the Peace of Nicias, in which Sparta suffered the greater losses. After six years of peace, in 415 BCE, Athens provoked another war with the Peloponnesian League, led by Sparta, launching an attack on Sicily in 413 BCE. However, Athens suffered the destruction of its naval force in

Sicily; losing two hundred of its ships and around twenty thousand men, and was surrounded by hostile Spartan forces and Persian governors. By 411 BCE, when *Lysistrata* was written, Athens had regained its naval strength and there were rumours of negotiations between Sparta and Persia. It is against this backdrop that the events in the play take place. Eventually, Athens went on to surrender to Sparta in 404 BCE, forever ending its political supremacy over Greece and bringing the golden age of Greece to an end.

5. THE STRUCTURE OF GREEK COMEDY

Greek theatre followed many conventions as far as structure was concerned. The plays usually followed a set pattern, which I will briefly touch upon. It was not divided into acts or scenes but other demarcations were well-defined. These are briefly listed;

Prologos: this is the Prologue or the beginning of the play, where there is an exposition of the main situation.

Parodos: this is the first appearance of the chorus.

Agon: this is generally followed by the Agon or contest, which literally translates into a debate between two antagonists, one of whom loses.

Parabasis: an ode in which the chorus members remove their masks and address the audience directly.

Episodes: these scenes involve the actors in dialogue with each other and the chorus.

Stasimon: this refers to the choral song, following each scene. No other actor is present at this point.

Exodos: this is the exit scene, usually depicting feasting, singing, and dancing.

The chorus, as mentioned earlier, stayed in the middle of the performing area throughout the play and the lyrics were sung by them in unison, to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Aristophanes' play follows this pattern in most parts. However, a noticeable innovation is the inclusion of two choruses, comprising twelve members each.

You will notice how almost each major scene is followed by a choral song. The choral songs were an integral part of Greek theatre, serving as a moral indicator, especially in tragedy. One of the two choruses in *Lysistrata* comprises twelve old men as, presumably, the young ones are away, fighting the war. They are comic figures, weak and bashed up by the old women. There are indications in the play that they are former soldiers, now dependent on

the state for a pension. The other chorus of twelve old women are from the lower strata of society: "inn-keepers, bakers, garlic vendors" (158).

6. STUDY GUIDE

The title of the play refers to its main protagonist, Lysistrata, whose name means 'liquidator of armies.' She is an Athenian and proud to be one. Tired of the suffering around her, she decides to do something to establish peace in her country. The name Lysistrata resonates with the name Lysimache (which means 'liquidator of battles) who was the high-priestess in Athena's temple and one of the most visible public figures at the time. At the beginning of the play, Lysistrata is waiting for all the women she has summoned, from across the various city states of Greece.

Line 1-254: *Prologos*

Lysistrata is seen standing outside her house, impatiently waiting for the women to turn up. Her friend Calonice explains that they must have got delayed because of household chores. Lysistrata is excited and she tells Calonice that "we women have the salvation of all Greece in our hands" (142). Soon, women from different parts of Greece turn up: Boeotian women led by Ismenia, Spartan women led by Lampito, and women from Corinth. Note how they are depicted; Lampito speaks in a rustic style and Ismenia stinks. There are references to smelly shrubs and body types, pointing to inter-state rivalries.

Lysistrata begins by touching on their personal hardship; "The fathers of your children - don't you miss them when they're away at the war?" (145). She then describes her simple plan to force all participants in the war to end it: the women should all get together and go on a sex strike;

> LYSISTRATA: Then I will tell you my plan: there's no point in keeping it back. Women, if we want the men to make peace, we must renounce – [*She hesitates*].
>
> MYRRHINE: Renounce what? Go on.
>
> LYSISTRATA: Then you'll do it?
>
> MYRRHINE: At the cost of our lives, if need be. [*All indicate enthusiastic agreement*.]
>
> LYSISTRATA: Very well then. We must renounce – sex (145).

Lysistrata's proposal is met with disapproval from all the women, except the Spartan Lampito. However, Lampito thinks that the abundant wealth of Athens, lying in the state treasury in the Acropolis might form a hurdle, as the men would still have access to abundant resources for the war. Aristophanes' play follows this pattern in most parts. However, a noticeable innovation is the inclusion of two choruses, comprising twelve members each. Lysistrata declares that they are going to occupy the Acropolis that very day.

In an apparent parody of Greek heroic customs, the women fill a bowl with grape juice and take an oath to abstain from sex, till their husbands agree to make peace. In the first unit of this paper, you must have read the *Odyssey*, which is a celebration of Greek heroism. The epic is peppered with incidents where the warriors sacrifice animals and offer their blood to the gods, before taking an oath or in an attempt to placate an angry god. Here, the women do not kill any animal, but use grape juice. Suddenly a shout is heard: the Citadel of Athena has been captured. Lampito is asked to leave her companions behind and return to Sparta with a proposal to negotiate peace.

Note how Lysistrata has brought together women from different city-states of Greece. Her purpose is to create a peaceful nation – one that rises above the rivalries between the different states. The women are in agreement as far as the need for peace is concerned. They use surprisingly bawdy language and there are numerous jokes about sexual positions and sex toys. This part of the play forms the *Prologos*, where the central issue of the play is set out.

Check Your Progress

i) Define the *prologos.*

ii) Why does Lysistrata plan to lay siege to the Acropolis?

iii) Why is Lampito sent back to Sparta?

Line 254–705: *Parodos, Agon,* and *Parabesis*

A chorus of old men appears. Aristophanes has broken from tradition and included two choruses of twelve men and twelve women each in this play. The men are carrying logs of wood and pots in which to burn the logs. Their aim is to drive the women out of the Acropolis, with the help of smoke. They keep muttering derogatory remarks against the women; calling them "a pestilent disease" and "enemies of the gods" (151). The old men try,

without much success, to burn the logs that they have brought with them. The Men's Leader prays to Athena Nike, the goddess of victory, for help.

The second chorus, comprising twelve old women and led by Stratyllis, comes on stage. They are carrying pitchers of water and are equally dismissive of the men, calling them "old half-wits" and a "gang of male scum" (153, 154). They have come, determined to help their companions. It is interesting how Aristophanes sets up an opposition between the two genders; through the two choruses and symbolic associations of fire with war and water with peace. As mentioned earlier, the first appearance of the chorus is known as the *parodos*. The men and women keep exchanging bitter insults and threats, ending in the women throwing water on the men. This marks a victory for them, as they have sabotaged the old, seasoned warriors' attempt to drive the women out of the Acropolis.

A Magistrate enters at this point, accompanied by four Scythian policemen and two slaves, carrying crowbars. The Leader of the men complains to him about the women beating them up. Like the male chorus, the Magistrate speaks disparagingly about the women and thinks it is "the unbridled licentiousness of the female sex displaying itself" (154). To prove his point, he recalls how, at a time when a politician named Demostratus was urging the Athenian Assembly to send a naval expedition to Sicily, how a drunk woman was lamenting the death of Adonis on her rooftop. The young Adonis was worshipped as a god in Athens, as he was the mortal lover of Aphrodite, ancient Greek goddess of love; but he was killed by a boar and died in her arms The women mourned his death every year in a ritual lamentation on their rooftops. The drunk woman's words could be viewed as an ominous portent, as Athens lost thousands of young soldiers in Sicily but Demostratus paid no heed to her. Even the Magistrate does not understand that the drunk woman was giving a veiled warning, though he curses Demostratus, calling him a "dirty villain" (156).

The Magistrate needs money from the state treasury to buy timber to make oars. There is perhaps an oblique reference to the shortage of timber after Athens suffered the loss of almost her entire navy in Sicily. He orders his men to forcibly open the doors of the Acropolis with the help of crowbars. At this point, Lysistrata emerges and confronts the Magistrate, who orders his men to tie her up but the women, led by Stratyllis, threaten them. Lysistrata calls to the women inside the Acropolis and they come out. Following her orders, they punch and kick the constables and the Men's Leader tells the Magistrate "not to deal with sub-human creatures" (159). The Magistrate asks Lysistrata;

MAGISTRATE [*to Lysistrata*]: Well, the first thing I want to know is – what in Zeus' name do you mean by shutting and barring the gates of our own Acropolis against us?

LYSISTRATA: We want to keep the money safe and stop you from waging war.

MAGISTRATE: The war has nothing to do with money –

LYSISTRATA: Hasn't it? Why did Peisander, and all those other office-seekers, always keep stirring up trouble? To get more opportunities for stealing public funds, of course! (159-160)

Peisander was considered to be a corrupt politician, who was bribed to bring about the Peloponnesian War. Lysistrata displays exceptional acumen in laying siege to the state treasury. She knows that the sex strike alone may not act as a strong deterrent against war. In a tactical move, worthy of a seasoned warrior, she ensures that the men of Athens are deprived of the money necessary to wage war. To the Magistrate's assertion that women have no understanding of finances, she retorts that if women can be trusted to manage household funds, they can be trusted to control state funds and ensure peace.

Lysistrata goes on to tell the Magistrate that women are not allowed to express an opinion, when it comes to matters of state. They are usually silenced by their own husbands when they attempt to question decisions taken in the Assembly. Now, the women have decided to take matters in their own hands and put an end to the mismanagement by the men. When the Magistrate taunts Lysistrata, she removes her veil and places it on his head. The women in the chorus applaud her action and pledge their support. Lysistrata predicts that one day, all the women will come to be known as "Liquidators of War" (162). She goes on to declare that she will put an end to the practice of men moving around in full armour, "like lunatics," even when it is not necessary, as when they go shopping (162). She wants to put an end to displays of masculine aggression in public spaces.

When the Magistrate asks Lysistrata how she proposes to deal with the current international situation she replies, using an extended metaphor of unravelling wool: "Actually, if *you* had any sense, you'd run the whole City on the model of the way we deal with wool" (163). She explains, in detail, the whole process - from cleaning the wool to creating a warm coat out of it. Read the passage carefully, as it illustrates the quality of statesmanship in Lysistrata:

> Imagine the citizen body is a raw fleece. You start by putting it in a bath and washing out the dung; then lay it on a bed, beat out the villains with a stick and pick out the burrs. Then you have to deal with the cliques, who knot themselves together to get chosen for public office; you must card those out and pick off their heads. Then you card all the wool into the basket of Civic Goodwill – including everyone, immigrants, friendly foreigners – yes, and even those who are in debt to the Treasury! Not only that. There are many other states which are colonies of Athens. At the moment these are lying all over the place, like little flocks of wool. You should pick them up, bring them here, and put them together in one ball of wool – and from that you can weave the People a nice, warm coat to wear (164).

This speech of Lysistrata's demonstrates her deep understanding and wisdom. It is all the more remarkable that, though belonging to a patriarchal society where women could not vote, she prescribes a model of governance that is inclusive and intolerant of personal ambition and insurgency. Not surprisingly, the Magistrate dismisses her suggestions, pointing out that the women have made no contribution to the war effort. Lysistrata reminds him that it is the women who have provided sons for battle and have had to deal with their loss; a sacrifice that has gone unacknowledged and undocumented. This long exchange between the Magistrate and Lysistrata constitutes the *agon* in the play.

The women adorn the Magistrate, as they would a corpse ready to be taken to the grave. Furious, he exits the stage with his slaves. Lysistrata and the two old women go back inside the Acropolis and the logs, pots, and pitchers are removed from the stage, leaving the two choruses facing each other on the stage.

The chorus of men blame the Spartans for inciting the women and pose threateningly. Note that they remove their garments at this point. The women respond in similar fashion. They express their gratitude for the honour of being chosen to participate in the festivities and rituals associated with Athena Polis, the patron saint of the city. They also question the men about the whereabouts of the gold seized from the Persians during the war. There are mutual recriminations and the men withdraw when Stratyllis threatens them. This is the *parabasis* in the play. However, instead of addressing the audience, as was the convention, the two choruses fight with each other.

Check Your Progress

i) Why do the men bring logs of wood with them?

ii) Comment on the metaphor of wool used by Lysistrata.

iii) Why, in your opinion, do the men and women remove their garments?

Lines 706 – 979: First episode and *stasimon*; second episode and *stasimon*

This is the first episode of the play. Five days have passed since the women occupied the Acropolis. Lysistrata comes out in a state of agitation. The women have started to rebel against the sexual abstinence and come up with all sorts of excuses to return home to their husbands. One even pretends to be pregnant, by putting Athena's helmet under her dress. There are many such farcical moments in the play. To motivate the women, Lysistrata tells them that she has an oracle that says that they will triumph if they stay united. The audience would have immediately understood that it was fake as oracles were supposed to be short, cryptic messages, whereas Lysistrata reads out a poem;

> 'When the swallows escape from the hoopoes and gather together,
>
> Keeping away from the cock-birds, then trouble and sorrow will persish,
>
> Zeus will make high into low –
>
> But if the swallows rebel and fly from the sacred enclosure,
>
> Then 'twill be patent to all that there's no bird that's so nymphomaniac' (172).

It is interesting to note that 'swallow' was slang for the female genitals and the 'cock-birds' a pun on male genitals. She returns inside with the women, leaving the two choruses facing each other.

In this first *stasimon*, the choral song that follows an episode, the chorus of men sing of one Melanion, who is called wise because he "loathed women" (172). The women, in turn, sing praises of Timon, who detested the company of men but adored women. The two choruses move to opposite sides of the orchestra, the central performing area, and the women carry their own garments as well as the men's. This is the first *stasimon*.

In the second episode, Lysistrata appears on the ramparts and notices a man coming from afar: it is Cinesias, the husband of Myrrhine. He is described as being in a state of sexual excitation, which would have been depicted on the stage with the help of a leather phallus. Such conventions were the accepted norm at the time. He is accompanied by a male slave carrying his infant son. He appeals to his wife, Myrrhine to return home. Following Lysistrata's instructions, Myrrhine tantalizes him with the possibility of sex but rushes back inside at the critical moment. Cinesias voices his frustration in sexually explicit language.

A Spartan Herald enters; in the same condition as Cinesias. Observe how he attempts to hide his state by wearing a loose tunic. But it doesn't go unnoticed. He complains that Lampito has incited the women of Sparta to go on a sex strike. He has come to Athens, to "talk of a settlement" (180). Cinesias urges the Herald to return to Sparta and send delegates to negotiate peace and he promises that he, on his part, will speak to the Council to choose delegates to represent Athens. Lysistrata's strategy seems to have had its desired impact. They both leave the stage.

In the second *stasimon*, the Men's Leader expresses his loathing for the women. Stratyllis offers to dress him in his clothes and even removes a gnat that has been lodged in his eye. There is unmistakable symbolism in this act: Stratyllis helps the Men's Leader see clearly. She wipes his tears and even kisses him. All the women in the chorus kiss the men. It is a moment of tenderness, displaying the best of feminine qualities; caring, compassion, and nurturing. There is none of the belligerence that dominated the exchanges between the choruses till now. They resolve to unite and sing songs together. They invite everyone to a banquet and even offer loans to anyone who needs one.

Check Your Progress

i) Mention some of the excuses made by the women trying to return home.

ii) Who is Cinesias? Why has he come for his wife?

iii) Describe the change in Stratyllis' behaviour at the end of the second *stasimon*.

Line 1071- 1214: Third episode and *stasimon*

In the third episode, the Spartan delegates enter, all in a state of sexual arousal. The Athenian delegates also arrive; in the same state and trying to hide their embarrassment by leaning

forward. Lysistrata is called out as she's "the only person who can bring about a true reconciliation" (185). She appears and calls out a young woman, aptly named 'Reconciliation.' The young woman is naked and it seems that it is another of Lysistrata's strategic moves. The naked woman, as expected, keeps the delegates conveniently distracted while Lysistrata acts as a mediator. Remember that, in ancient Greek theatre, men played the parts of men and women both: so, 'Reconciliation' would have been a man dressed to look like a naked woman. Throughout this scene, Reconciliation remains silent.

Lysistrata reminds the Spartans and Athenians of their common Greek heritage and how, in the past, they helped each other in times of crises. She persuades each side to return conquered territories and convince their allies to maintain peace in Greece. Note how the body of Reconciliation is used as a metaphor for different territories in this scene. The scene is a mix of sober and farcical elements. The seriousness of the situation is undermined by the presence of the naked Reconciliation. All the while that Lysistrata is acting as an arbitress, both the Spartan and Athenian men are preoccupied with thoughts of sex. She invites all of them to "maintain purity" and share the food the women have brought to the Acropolis (188). The chorus sings, offering wheat to whoever needs it, but also warning that the trunk might be empty.

Check Your Progress

i) Who is 'Reconciliation' and what does Lysistrata ask her to do?

ii) What advice does Lysistrata have for the Athenian and Spartan delegates?

Line 1215 – 1321: *Exodos*

A couple of Athenians enter the stage in a drunken state, satisfied that their negotiations with the Spartan delegates have gone well; "If the Athenians took my advice, they'd always go drunk on diplomatic missions" (190). When a Spartan delegate comes out, he sings of their camaraderie. Lysistrata appears, accompanied by the Athenian and Spartan women, wearing the aegis of Athena, protector of the city state. The aegis was a leather cloak, supposed to possess supernatural powers and decorated with the head of a Gorgon. She invokes various gods in the Greek pantheon, expressing gratitude for the "solemn vow" taken by the Athenian and Spartans (192). Aristophanes is clearly granting divine sanction to Lysistrata's actions. The wives are reunited with their husbands and order restored. The Spartan sings another song and the play ends in general festivity.

Check Your Progress

i) Why do the Athenians feel that it is better to go drunk on diplomatic missions?

ii) Why is Lysistrata shown carrying Athena's aegis?

iii) Comment on the significance of the Spartan singing two songs in the end.

7. MAJOR THEMES IN THE PLAY

War and Peace

As discussed in the Historical Background, the play was written in the backdrop of the Peloponnesian War. Almost every city-state of Greece was allied to either Athens or Sparta: two of the most powerful ones. Its main protagonist, Lysistrata speaks up against the human cost of war;

> MAGISTRATE: . . . What have you ever done for the war effort?
>
> LYSISTRATA: Done, curse you? For one thing, we've given you sons, and then had to send them off to fight.
>
> MAGISTRATE: Enough, don't open old wounds.
>
> LYSISTRATA: For another, we're in the prime of our lives, and how can we enjoy it, with our husbands always away on campaign and us left at home like widows? And quite apart from us married women, what about the unmarried ones who are slowly turning into old maids? (164)

In an otherwise comic play, this sombre exchange highlights the suffering endured by women in times of war. The two choruses hurling abuses at each other – replete with bawdy jokes, puns, and references to male and female genitals - creates an opposition where men are identified with war and women with peace. Led by Lysistrata, the women go on a sex strike and capture the state treasury at the Acropolis. In the context of all these, it is not surprising that *Lysistrata* has been termed 'anti-war' in its stance.

However, a close reading of the play suggests otherwise. As Sommerstein observes about Aristophanes: "It is an egregious mistake to portray him as a pacifist. He fully shares or at least regularly voices the pride felt by all Athenians in their victories over the Persians at

Marathon in 490 and Salamis in 480 . . .” (xx). The women are aware that the Acropolis has a vault where the money paid to Athens, as tribute by its allies, is stored. They accuse the men of squandering the wealth acquired by Athens:

Where’s all the gold

Your fathers took from Persian foes of old?

You’ve squandered it and live instead on tax – (167).

The play is not so much ‘anti-war’ as it is a vision of peace between Athens and Sparta; warring city-states of Greece. Throughout the play, we catch glimpses of the rivalry between these traditional foes. The Athenians think that the Spartans are uncouth and untrustworthy. As the Men’s Leader says: “he who trusts a Spartan trusts a snake” (165). However, Lysistrata tells the Athenians and Spartans;

You worship the same gods at the same shrines,

Use the same lustral water, just as if

You were a single family – at Olympia,

Delphi, Thermopylae – how many more

Could I make mention of, if it were needed?

And yet, though threatened by barbarian foes,

You ruin Greece’s towns and slay her men (186).

Here, she underlines their common religious and cultural heritage, and shared Greek identity. She goes on to remind the Athenians how Sparta helped them expel the tyrant Hippias; whereas the Athenians helped Sparta suppress a rebellion in Messenia. There is a warning of “barbarian foes” attacking in the future.

As Sommerstein observes; “Aristophanes’ ideal vision of Greek politics, briefly mentioned in *Peace* (line 1082) and given concrete form in dance and song at the end of *Lysistrata*, is of Athens and Sparta ‘ruling Greece together’ in friendly collaboration” (xxi). It would not be incorrect to assume that the play is more pro-Sparta, rather than anti-war. As Lysistrata declares; “we women got together and decided to save Greece” (161). Her vision is of a Greece that stands united against the Persians.

It is not a coincidence that, at the end of the play, it is a Spartan delegate who sings of their combined resistance to the Persian invasion of Greece in the past. He credits the

Athenians with victory against the Persians at the sea-battle at Artemisium in 480 BCE whereas, in reality, it was an inconclusive battle. Around the same time, in Thermopylae, the Spartan King Leonidas led his men from the Persian enemy. The fact that all the Spartans were eventually killed is conveniently omitted;

SPARTAN:

Send me thy child, the Muse of fame,
Who knows the pride of Sparta's name
And Athens' feats at sea,
O holy Memory:

How once they focht in days of yore
Close by the Artemisium shore -
Fu' godlike were their deeds,
And well they whipped their Medes [Persians].

Leonidas led *us* from home:
Like boars, oor cheeks ran white wi' foam,
Like boars, oor teeth we whet,
And doon our legs ran sweat.

The Persian men they filled the land
In numbers mair than grains o'sand,
Whom we opposed that day
At famed Thermopylae (191).

The play has left behind an enduring legacy as a pacifist play. But we must not lose sight of the fact that Lysistrata speaks with a sense of Greek nationalism; not against war per se.

Gender

A large part of the play is devoted to bitter wrangling between the two choruses, comprising old men and old women, who stand at opposing ends of the orchestra and hurl abuses and insults at each other. In the middle of this is the strong, confident, and wise Lysistrata who decides on a unique strategy to end war between the two most powerful city-states of Greece.

The play has, understandably, been hailed as feminist by many readers. However, as with 'anti-war,' any label should be applied with caution. The play needs to be understood in its historical context. In Aristophanes' time women did not have much of a position in a dominantly patriarchal society. Though lauded as the earliest example of a democratic society, where every citizen was a member of the Assembly and had a vote, ancient Greek society excluded women from politics. They were denied an education, had no legal status, and were barred from owning property or appearing as witnesses in courts. They were not allowed to participate in the Olympics and other games. Married at an early age, women were confined to the home and expected to manage the household; occupying themselves with cooking, spinning, and weaving. Jones points out that even their tombstones did not have their names on them; only their husband's (95). The general belief was that a woman's main purpose in life was to give birth to and rear children. This belief was so firmly entrenched that even Hippocrates, considered the Father of Medicine, believed that women who did not become mothers were prone to various illnesses (61).

It is still a matter of debate that women were allowed to watch plays during the City Dionysia, though they were represented on the stage. The novelist Virginia Woolf has noted this paradox and, speaking about the tragic heroines on stage, says;

> A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents fixed a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband (10).

Though Aristophanes' play has a strong woman at its centre, much of the comedy in *Lysistrata* is based on stereotypes about women as slaves to their passions. When Lysistrata proposes a sex strike, Lampito is the only one who supports her without reluctance. Lysistrata comments ironically;

> LYSISTRATA: I didn't realize that we women were a total lot of nymphos. The tragic poets were right about us after all: shag, calve and dispose of, that's the way we live (146).

It should be noted that it is, perhaps, distrust of her own sex that makes Lysistrata change her original plan. Though all the women swear to go on a sex strike in the Prologue, they end

up in the Acropolis, away from their homes and temptation. Once the women are inside, many of them attempt to escape by making excuses, even though only five days have elapsed since they entered the Acropolis. They come across as unable to manage their sexual urges. Lysistrata has to stop them by coming up with a story about an oracle.

Lysistrata has the courage to act on her convictions. She summons women from the warring city states into a public space and with immense daring, captures the Acropolis, which is the stronghold of the state treasury. It is under her leadership that the women succeed in their mission to force the men to make peace. At the same time, it is significant that the women have to resort to using sex as a weapon to get their message across – not through intellectual debate or political solutions. Many critics have pointed to the historical anomaly in this strategy. The underlying assumption is that marital sex was the only kind available to Greek men. However, it is a well-documented fact that it was the norm for married men to have extramarital sex with mistresses, concubines, and female slaves. Myrrhine raises the possibility of the husbands forcing themselves on their wives but Lysistrata dismisses it with the suggestion: "make yourselves frigid" (146).

When Cinesias comes looking for his wife Myrrhine, there is a long-drawn scene, where he ends up being denied the pleasure of sex with her. More frustrated than ever, he says:

CINESIAS: O what, tell me what, is there for me to do?
And, robbed of her beauty, who's there for me to screw?
Philostratus, I need you, do come and help me quick:
Could I please hire a nurse for my poor orphan prick? (179)

Philostratus was a well-known pimp of the time and the fact that Cinesias calls out to him is clear enough indication of the prevailing practices.

The misogynist underpinnings of the play are unmistakable. This is glaringly obvious in the scene where Lysistrata calls out Reconciliation. To the modern mind, trained to catch the slightest whiff of sexism, it is distressing to watch the Athenian and Spartan delegates lay claim to territories, using her body as a metaphorical map. Even the most comic of intentions cannot reconcile us to the disturbing implications here. But then we need to repeatedly recall that this play was written 2500 years ago and viewing it from a modern lens is not appropriate.

From a historical context, *Lysistrata* is a play, written by a man, performed by men for what was, in most likelihood, an all-male audience. A large part of the comedy is sexual in

nature and hinges on the fantastical belief that a sex strike can be an effective political tool. Moreover, a large part of the humour is directed at the women. To sum up, read this quote by Zuckerberg; "Somehow, the character of Lysistrata has transcended her misogynist Aristophanic roots to become an iconic yet flawed exemplar of feminist activism (n.p.)"

8. LYSISTRATA

Lysistrata appears as an independent woman in the play. Though she understands the power women wield over men as far as sex is concerned, she never mentions a husband or children of her own. In a society where women had a subordinate status, Lysistrata emerges as a vocal representative of Athenian women. She knows how their voices are silenced at home: though they disapprove of many political decisions taken in the Assembly, they are not allowed to speak out. Lysistrata is extremely intelligent and has all the qualities that define a good leader. Through her appeal to the women, she is successful in persuading them to go on a sex strike. Her skill in planning and implementing the strategy to capture the Acropolis is admirable; she knows that control of the state treasury will give them leverage. Her understanding of state matters is highlighted especially in the long exchange with the Magistrate. Recall how she counters each point of his with wise words. Though she uses a metaphor from the domestic domain, Lysistrata stresses the importance of making efforts to establish peace between warring and rival city states, through diplomatic efforts. The ultimate aim of governance should be the welfare of the people.

Though her methods may not seem realistic or plausible, Lysistrata understands the power of sex as a driving force. Especially clever is her strategy to bring out a naked young slave girl, naming her 'Reconciliation' and using her to keep both the Athenian and Spartan delegates suitably distracted during the negotiations for peace. She is confident, decisive, and a true leader. It is not surprising that she is considered an icon by feminists across the globe. There are numerous instances, from all over the world, of women going on similar sex strikes and being hailed as modern day Lysistratas by social media.

Lysistrata is much more than the woman who instigates the Athenian womenfolk to go on a sex strike. She has all the qualities of a good warrior and statesperson. Her main objective, as discussed in a previous section, is to end the war between Athens and Sparta. Aristophanes identifies her with Athena, protectress of the city and goddess of war and wisdom. Towards the end of the play, Lysistrata's appearance with Athena's aegis puts the stamp of divine approval on her actions.

9. *LYSISTRATA* AS COMIC THEATRE

Greek comedy was physical in nature and *Lysistrata* provides numerous occasions for such humour. Confrontations between the old men and old women of the two choruses are a parody of actual battle. The old men, lugging logs of wood and being drenched in water; the Magistrate being decked in feminine garb; the policemen being beaten up by the women; and the Spartan and Athenian delegates moving around the stage, trying to hide their erections: all these add a farcical element to the play.

The play, to a great extent, depends on bawdy language, double entendres, and puns - mostly sexual in nature – for its humour. There is a protracted scene between Myrrhine and her husband Cinesias, which provides much of the sex comedy. The costumes worn by many of the characters in Ancient Greek Comedy would also have elicited laughter: distorted features on the comic masks, short tunics with padded backs and bellies, and fake leather phalluses visible. In Greek comedy, fools usually sported large, false genitals - considered a sign of stupidity. On stage, female nudity would have been depicted through body suits worn by the male actors; more hilarious than offensive. In addition, there is the suggestive visual metaphor in the stage set, with the women guarding the gate to the Acropolis and the men, unsuccessfully, trying to penetrate it with logs of wood. It becomes symbolic of the sex strike at the centre of the play. Bordering on the obscene and discomfiting for a modern audience, such scenes would have been enjoyed by the Greeks.

Before dismissing the play as being vulgar and crass we must appreciate the fact that the cultural norms in ancient Greece were very different from ours. It was a society where men participated nude in athletic competitions and heroes, gods, and athletes were depicted completely or partially nude in visual art; especially sculptures and friezes. One of Dionysus' symbols was a phallus – signifying fertility and divine male protection of the community. In fact, during religious processions, a phallus-bearer would carry a large three-dimensional model of a phallus on a pole. Outside homes and in many public spaces, it was the custom to keep rectangular marble pillars known as herms, with the torso of either the god Hermes or Dionysus and a phallus emerging midway.

Any evaluation of the comedy in *Lysistrata* should be made, keeping these cultural and theatrical practices in mind. What is shockingly obscene for us may not have been so for Aristophanes' audiences. But, in spite of the overtly sexual content, *Lysistrata* manages to get

its political message across. The play presents us with a strong female protagonist who takes a stand against war in her country.

Questions for Discussion

i) Would you agree that *Lysistrata* is an 'anti-war' play?

ii) Describe Lysistrata as a leader of the Greek women.

iii) Write a detailed account of Aristophanes' treatment of the theme of gender in the play.

iv) Describe some of the comic elements in the play.

v) Write an essay on the role of the two choruses in *Lysistrata*.

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