
Discussion of *Odyssey* Books 4-6



Hi everyone. In this presentation, I'm going to talk about some key moments of Books 4-6. Since there's a lot that happens in these books, I won't discuss each part of the text, but I will ask you all to bring in some additional events that I don't discuss in this presentation into your asynchronous work.

Book 4: Storytelling with Helen and Menelaus

- Helen's speech starting on line 252 (page 51)

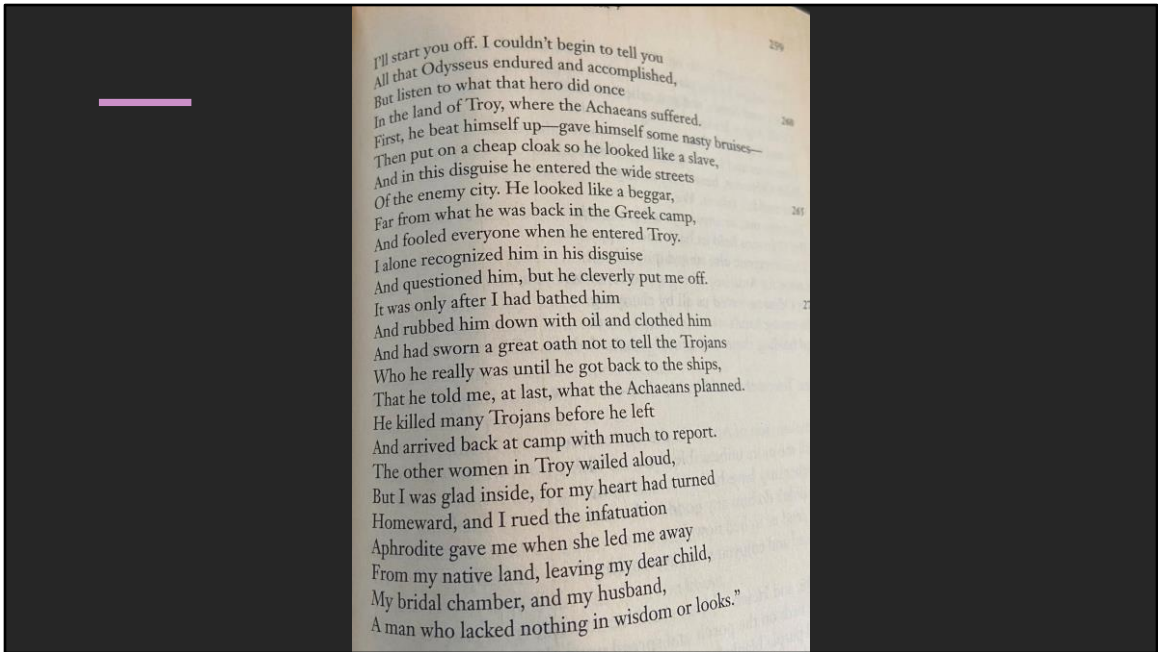


In Book 4, we travel with Telemachus and Peisistratus to Sparta, home to Menelaus and his wife, Helen, the purported cause of the Trojan War. Menelaus and Helen are having a great day, celebrating a double-wedding. Helen and Menelaus's daughter Hermione is getting married, as is Menelaus's son with a slave woman. This is a day of feasting and celebration, and they welcome Telemachus's group into the party.

It seems unfair, somehow, that Achilles and Ajax died at Troy, Agamemnon died upon his return to Mycenae on his first day home from Troy, Odysseus has been wandering the Mediterranean for 10 years since he left Troy...and Helen and Menelaus are fine. They are reunited, they have safely returned home, and they're having a celebration. It seems like they're the luckiest ones.

However, all might not be as picture-perfect as it seems, as we readers can tell based on their conversation with one another. Helen, Menelaus, Telemachus, and Peisistratus have stayed up talking and drinking, and when Menelaus says that they'll reconvene in the morning, Helen has other ideas. On page 50, line 232, Helen "threw a drug into the wine bowl they were all drinking from, a drug that stilled all pain, quieted all anger and brought forgetfulness of every ill" so that they would continue to talk to one another.

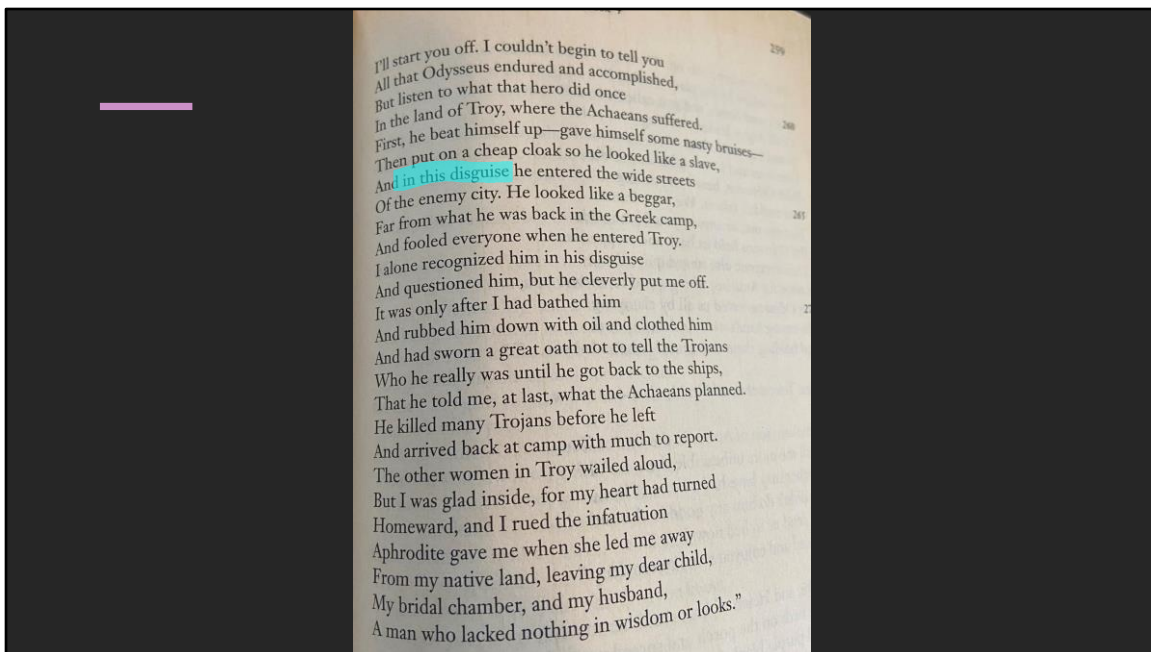
So we can assume that what they're about to say might be important. Helen has taken extreme action to keep them up talking, and Homer is calling attention to it. Let's take a look at the story Helen tells on page 51, Book 4 line 252.



She says this [reads speech]

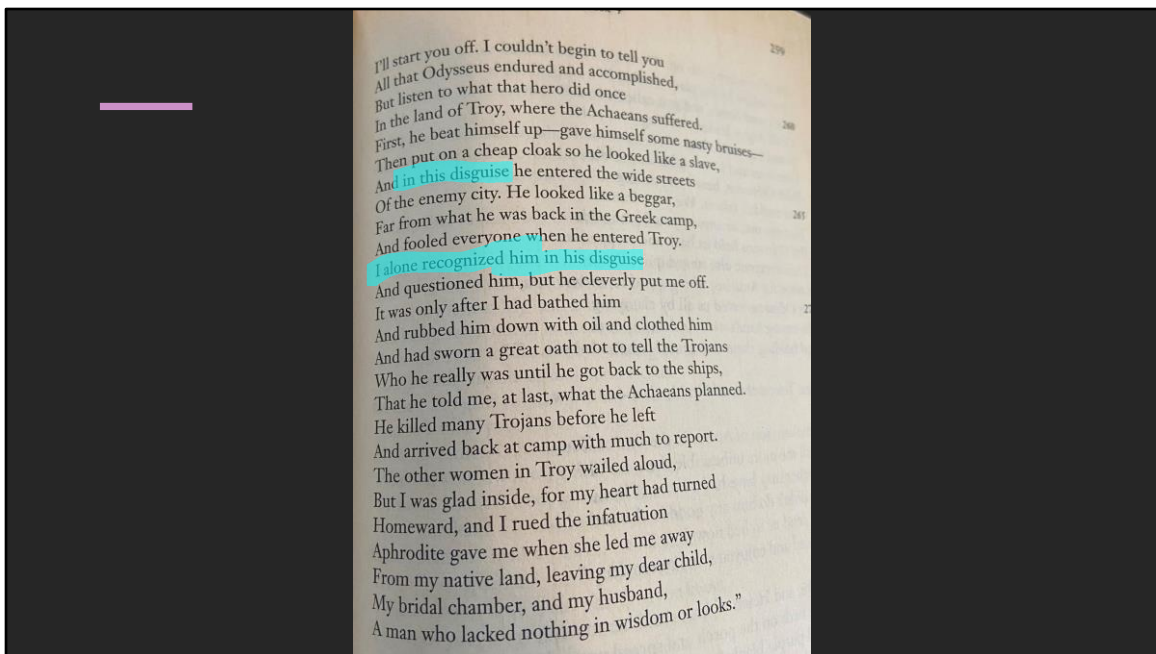
On first glance, it looks like a pretty harmless speech to tell here. Telemachus has just arrived; it makes sense that she would tell a story about his father to him.

And this story is about Odysseus appearing as a beggar in Troy, to do some reconnaissance work during the Trojan War. Helen, apparently, is the only one who recognizes him, and he leaves safely.



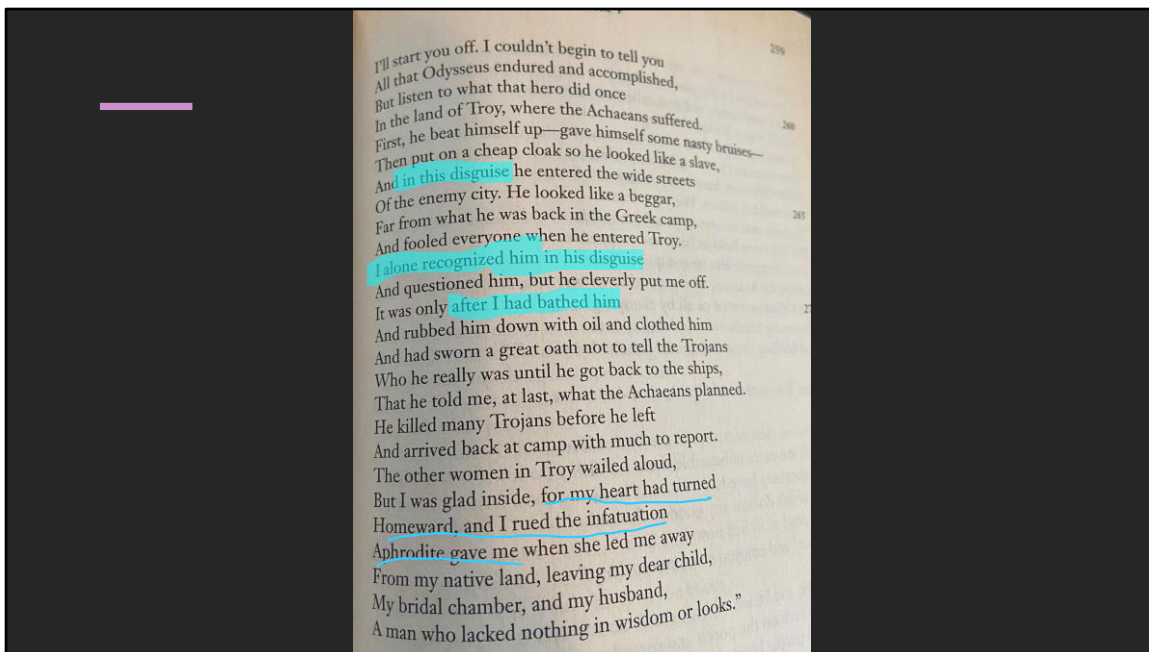
Now, I've highlighted one of the key themes of this book that is mentioned in Helen's story: DISGUISE. It's not only for the gods (by which I mean that we've seen Athena in disguise a few times now in *The Odyssey*). Here, we see Odysseus in disguise, and he'll be in disguise at various other points in the epic as well.

This disguise and the preparation that Odysseus must have taken here shows us that Odysseus isn't rash and impulsive in general. He does his background work before he makes his move; this action, ideally, will set a precedent for his return to Ithaca.



Next, in this line, we have an emphasis on RECOGNITION. Helen's recognition of Odysseus in this story is similar to the recognition that she performs of Telemachus earlier in Book 4. Helen is letting Telemachus – and us – know that she's really good at seeing through disguises.

Interestingly, Telemachus in Book 1 has been doubting his own parentage, but Helen never does. On page 48, at line 146, she asserts that Telemachus must be Odysseus's son. Importantly, she doesn't say that Telemachus looks like Odysseus at that point, but that he looks like Odysseus's son, like *himself*. This recognition by Helen highlights that Telemachus is maturing into his own man, not just in his father's shadow. And it emphasizes similarities between father and son in that neither one goes unrecognized by Helen.



And then we can get into some of the parts of this story that say the most about Helen's character. She's telling Telemachus about that time many years ago when she bathed his dad. That's kind of a weird story to tell. Normally, it would be a servant in the household who might bathe a guest, but here it's Helen herself emphasizing...in front of her husband Menelaus...that time when she bathed, rubbed down, and oiled Odysseus. Maybe everything isn't so great between these two after all.

And then we have the lines underlined here. She says "for my heart had turned homeward, and I rued the infatuation Aphrodite gave me...leaving my dear child, my bridal chamber, and my husband, a man who lacked nothing in wisdom or looks." What kind of a tone do you hear when she says that? The oddness of the story to tell makes me think that she could be more sarcastic or flippant here. Or just simply placating her husband. She didn't have to say any of this, so we are invited to interpret what she means.



Book 4: Storytelling with Helen and **Menelaus**

- Menelaus's speech starting on line 285 (page 52)

And now we can see how Menelaus responds. His speech starts on page 52, beginning at line 285. Remember, his wife has just told the story about spending bath time with Odysseus and ended on the note that her husband isn't so terrible looking.

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

“A very good story, my wife, and well told.
By now I have come to know the minds
Of many heroes, and have traveled far and wide,
But I have never laid eyes on anyone
Who had an enduring heart like Odysseus.
Listen to what he did in the wooden horse,
Where all we Argive chiefs sat waiting
To bring slaughter and death to the Trojans.
You came there then, with godlike Deiphobus.
Some god who favored the Trojans

Must have lured you on. Three times you circled
Our hollow hiding place, feeling it
With your hands, and you called out the names
Of all Argive leaders, making your voice
Sound like each of our wives' in turn.
Diomedes and I, sitting in the middle
With Odysseus, heard you calling
And couldn't take it. We were frantic
To come out, or answer you from inside,
But Odysseus held us back and stopped us.
Then everyone else stayed quiet also,
Except for Anticlus, who wanted to answer you,
But Odysseus saved us all by clamping
His strong hands over Anticlus' mouth
And holding them there until Athena led you off.”

And so he says: [reads story].

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

"A very good story, my wife, and well told.
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But **Odysseus saved us all** by clamping
His strong hands over Anticlus' mouth
And holding them there until Athena led you off."

So, this story makes sense for Menelaus to tell a visiting Telemachus because it's focused on Odysseus and his good survival skills. Odysseus is described as having "an enduring heart," which would be reassuring for Telemachus to hear, and he can find a way through dangerous situations by taking action.

And Menelaus, the red-haired king:

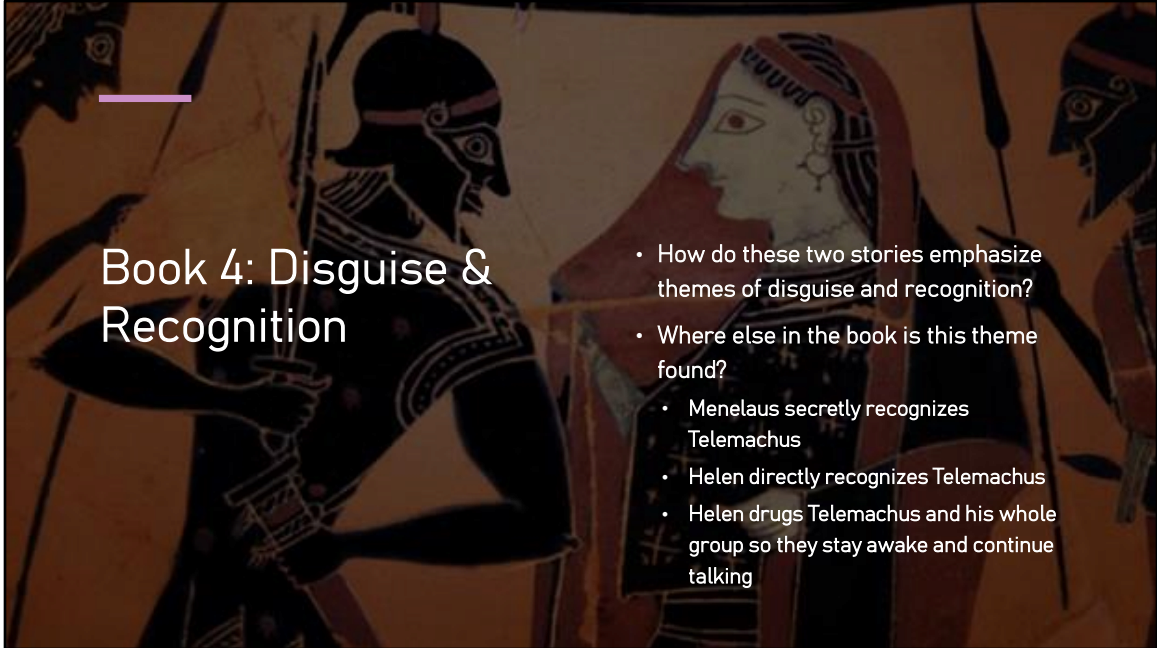
"A very good story, my wife, and well told.
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The key thing here is the danger in Menelaus's story: Helen. Helen came around and tried to trick the Greek heroes into coming out too soon by imitating their wives' voices.

So, after 10 years of fighting side-by-side with him, the best Odysseus story that Menelaus could come up with has Helen featured as the great danger, not any of the warriors they fought against, not any actual war strategies. Interesting.

If we weren't already questioning Helen and her behavior earlier, we certainly are now.



These stories are told, in part, for Telemachus to learn information. But there is also a recognition of disguise theme in terms of how Helen and Menelaus are relating to one another. If these stories might be disguising their “real” meanings, what could Helen and Menelaus really be trying to get across to one another.

They are home, they are reunited. It seems like they have a happy ending.

However, they clearly do not trust one another, and they are letting each other and the world know that they are unhappy, casting barbs through their stories. There are issues of mistrust here, knowing perhaps too well who the other person is.

And then disguise and recognition feature throughout the rest of Book 4.

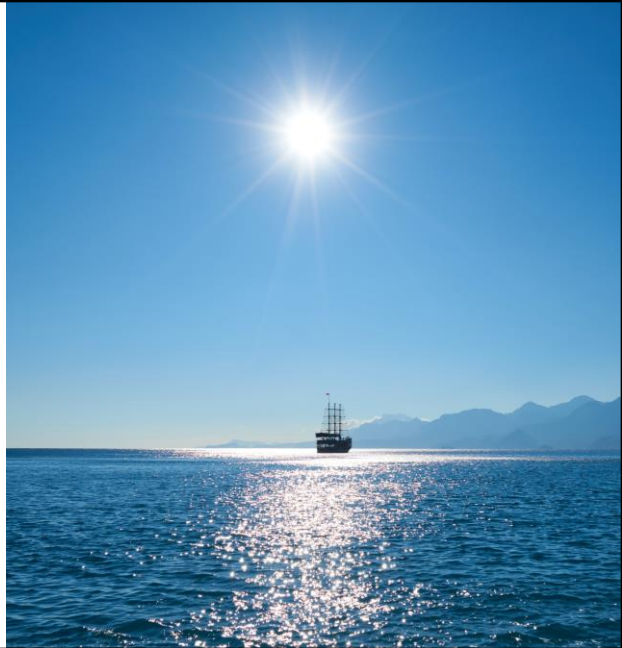
Menelaus secretly recognizes Telemachus but doesn’t outright say anything.

Helen does directly recognize Telemachus and says so.

The drugging that Helen does of the group is another type of disguise/recognition theme in that she’s disguising what she wants and doing it anyway.

Book 4: New Comparison for Odysseus?

- Menelaus's voyage
 1. Stuck in Egypt
 2. Helped by a goddess
 3. Asking which god is against him (Zeus)
 4. Takes help from a woman to overcome Proteus
 5. Learns who is against him
 6. Asks about homecomings of other heroes – Ajax, Agamemnon, Odysseus
 7. Learns that Odysseus is with Calypso



And then we get Menelaus's long speech about his journey home.

Menelaus first expresses anger at the behavior of the suitors, and then he goes into a discussion of how he was (1) stuck in Egypt, (2) helped by a goddess – Eidothea, daughter of Proteus, (3) asking which god is against him [Zeus], (4) takes advantage of the help given to him by a woman in learning how to subdue Proteus, (5) learns who is against him, (6) asks about the homecomings [Ajax, Agamemnon, Odysseus], (7) learns that Odysseus is with Calypso.

What Connections are there, now, between Odysseus and Menelaus? Many. Odysseus seems to be more and more a Menelaus analog rather than an Agamemnon analog, as Telemachus had thought him to be earlier in the epic.

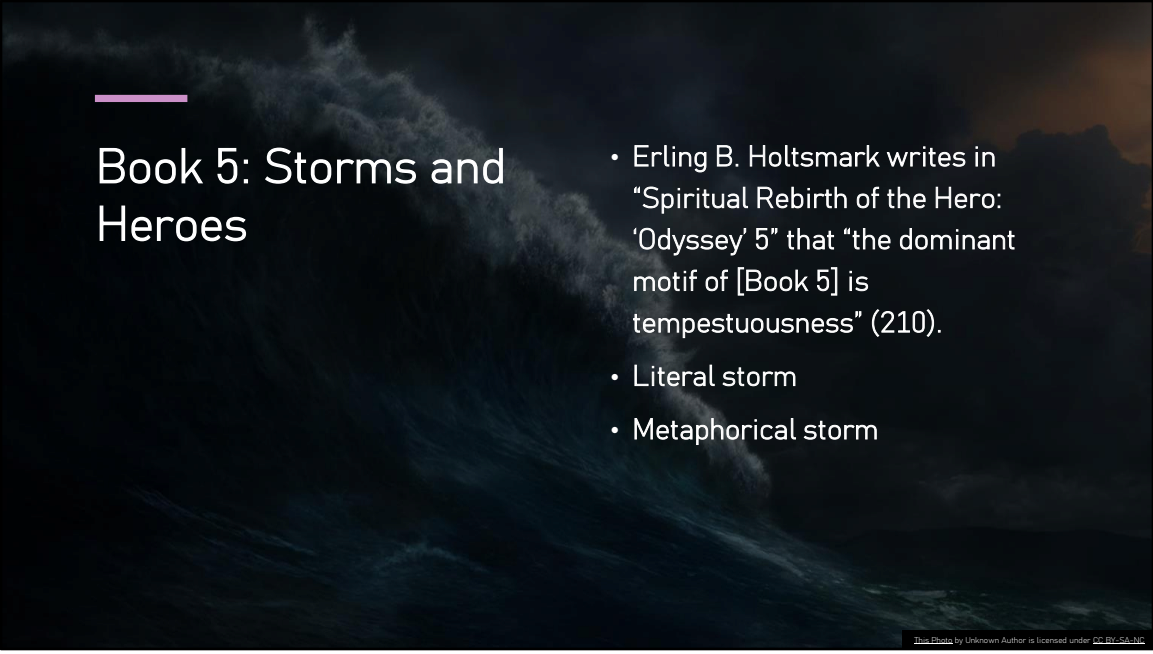
Telemachus doesn't know very much about his father, but he is learning a lot about him:

- His characteristics through these stories
- His behavior and actions during the Trojan War
- His reputation among other important figures
- Where he is

Most importantly, if he is a Menelaus analog, he'll come home, a point which is

crucial.

But what kind of life will he have then? What will his reunion be like with Penelope, because Menelaus and Helen do not seem happy.



Book 5: Storms and Heroes

- Erling B. Holtsmark writes in “Spiritual Rebirth of the Hero: ‘Odyssey’ 5” that “the dominant motif of [Book 5] is tempestuousness” (210).
- Literal storm
- Metaphorical storm

Shifting now into a discussion of the next book, Erling B. Holtsmark writes in “Spiritual Rebirth of the Hero: ‘Odyssey’ 5” that “the dominant motif of the book is tempestuousness” (210). And, for the word “tempestuous,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* has two definitions: “1. Characterized by strong and turbulent or conflicting emotion. 2. Very stormy.”

So my first question for you is: What literal and metaphorical storms do you see in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*?

- The literal storm comes from Poseidon
- The metaphorical storm comes from the emotions here:
 - Calypso’s sadness at having Odysseus leave, even making her go so far as to offer to make him immortal.
 - Also, the metaphorical storm can come from Odysseus’s lack of trust in Calypso’s offer, his shudder at the proposal, his need to balance his caginess in dealing with Calypso and his desire to return home. That is, to avoid angering a goddess which could be

disastrous for him, he can't show how much he wants to leave.

And how well does Odysseus do navigating and coming through these storms, both literal and metaphorical?

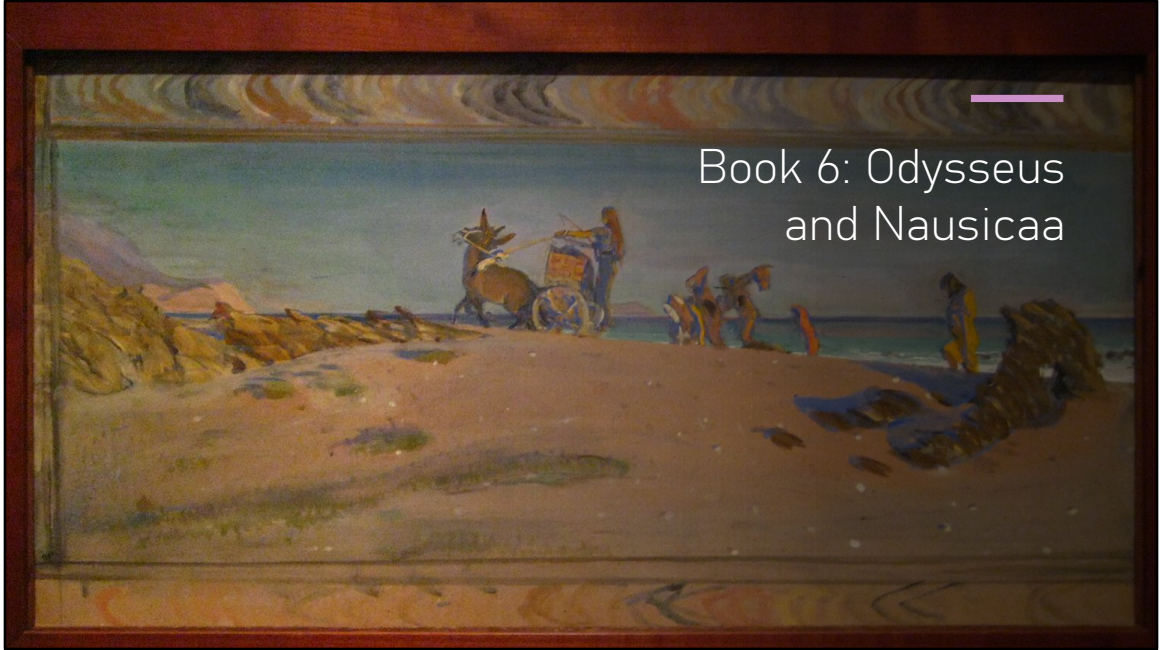
- For the metaphorical storms: pretty well. He can help contain Calypso's sadness by flattering her and using really careful language.
 - First, he tries to make sure that her offer of help isn't a trick, so he makes her promise that there isn't any new trouble for him (as shown on page 75, lines 172-178)
 - Next, he mentions that she's more beautiful than Penelope, so that she won't get too jealous and curse him on page 76, lines 215ff.
 - Finally, he says that it is the lure of home and not any person in particular that draws him in. He's trying to make it seem as though he is drawn to Ithaca, and that's the main reason he wants to leave
 - He recognizes her loneliness and doesn't exacerbate it.
 - He highlights place rather than wife & son & father, as she's alone
- For the literal storm from Poseidon, he does less well. He is tossed about by the waves and is unable to really control anything. His raft becomes directionless, and he's powerless.



Now we can ask: What do we learn about Odysseus and how he is being shaped as a hero, in this the first book of the epic in which he is active, because of the theme of storminess?

- We are set up to think about how he is born again (as is discussed in Holtmark's article). He literally removes all of his old clothing, emerges naked into a new land, leaves a place where he was – for all intents and purposes – dead and turns up alive, back in an area where he is acting among people. He is beginning to live again
- Even with all of that said, though, he's not entirely re-born. He's a middle-aged man, therefore he has his traits more calcified. They can change, still, of course, but it will be harder for him to do so.

He's surviving, he's clever, he sizes people up really quickly and can tell them exactly what they want to hear. He is resilient.



In order to have Odysseus brought to the Phaeacian court, Homer explains a ruse through which Nausicaa and Odysseus meet and then Nausicaa provides the hero with instructions on whom to approach and how to approach her parents. He could have chosen to tell this tale of how Odysseus met the Phaeacians in many different ways, and this is the one that is selected. What is there about this meeting between the older, mature Odysseus (made to look more attractive through Athena's help and – interestingly – described with a simile that compares him to a lion on page 88) and the young, adolescent girl that helps us to understand

Odysseus's character and the themes of the epic better?
Looking back on Odysseus's early interaction with
Nausicaa, what do you understand better about him and
about his situation after having read those passages?

Book 6:
What does Odysseus
talk to Nausicaa
about?

How do his choices
tell us more about his
character?



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Nausicaa adds a dimension of youthfulness, hope, romance, to the story. She is a sympathetic young girl who begins to fall in love with Odysseus, as we can see from their conversation. Odysseus knows it, too, which is why he begins to talk to her, cagily, about weddings and husbands.

Nausicaa, reasonably, is initially surprised by Odysseus's appearing, naked, at the shore (seen on 89) and then she's flattered when he talks about how beautiful she is on the same page. He takes a guess about what matters to her and hits the mark: He wishes for a husband for her, which is her fixation of the moment on page 90. She is "dazzled" by his appearance, saying on page 92, "If only such a man would be called my husband." Then she says that when if he walked into the city with her, people might tease her about him, saying "She'll probably marry him" as she explains on page 93. Basically, she's a romantic kid, a nice new kind of character in this epic that we haven't seen yet.

We also learn more about Odysseus through this encounter. We see that he's easily adaptable, and again, he can read situations and play into them very cleverly by

referencing marriage so early on, so the idea is put into her head. He takes advantage of every opportunity.

Interestingly, here in book 6 and shifting away from how he was presented in book 5, he becomes more romantic and less helpless. With Calypso, he was a bit of a victim; with Nausicaa, he's strength and virility personified.

Similes in Book 6

*A weathered mountain lion steps into a clearing,
Confident in his strength, eyes glowing.
The wind and rain have let up, and he's hunting
Cattle, sheep, or wild deer, but is hungry enough
To jump the stone walls of the animal pens.
So Odysseus advanced upon these ringleted girls,
Naked as he was.
(6.129-135)*



At this point, I'd like to discuss – here on my last content slide for this presentation – some similes that are here in this text. For whatever reason, Lombardo's translations put the similes into italics, which makes them easy to find in the text, but it's an odd choice. The original text doesn't have them visually set off from the rest of the language at all. But, for us, it makes them easier to see.

The first simile I'd like to discuss is the one from Book 6 lines 129-135. Homer is describing how Odysseus first goes up to Nausicaa and her girls, writing: [reads simile].

What does this comparison between Odysseus and the lion suggest? What emotions are evoked, what types of compared people/figures are there here? **Well, we can see that Odysseus is the lion that is confident, the girls are the hunted items. There are points about power, ability and daring here, which are all abilities associated with Odysseus because of his participation in the Trojan War but not on display so far in the *Odyssey*. We can also connect up the disguise/recognition theme from Book 4 to this simile. Odysseus is in disguise as someone harmless – naked and alone on the**

shore – but the simile recognizes him as someone who is potentially dangerous.

Some scholars have discussed this simile about Odysseus and the lion and seen other elements. For example, Cedric Whitman reads this simile as taking battle-like behaviors of a warrior and adapting them to a new situation. A.F. Garvie wonders if this simile is meant to be more ironic, as the lion-like Odysseus emerges not into a dangerous situation but among a group of girls doing laundry. His appearance, then, makes them run away in terror. Justin Glenn discusses, then, how some scholars have suggested an erotic reading of this simile, as a naked Odysseus, hidden only with a leafy branch, joins a group of young girls.

Similes in Book 6

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Cattle, sheep, or wild deer, but is hungry enough
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So **Odysseus** advanced upon these ringleted girls,
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(6.129-135)*



*Artemis sometimes roams the mountains –
Immense Taygetus, or Erymanthus –
Showering arrows upon boars or fleet antelope,
And with her play the daughters of Zeus
Who range the wild woods – and Leto is glad
That her daughter towers above them all
With her shining brow, though they are beautiful all –
So **the unwed princess** among her attendants.
(6.101-108)*

*Imagine a craftsman overlaying silver
With pure gold. He has learned his art
From Pallas Athena and Lord Hephaestus,
And creates works of breathtaking beauty.
So **Athena herself** made Odysseus' head and shoulders
Shimmer with grace.
(6.239-44)*



I think it's interesting, then, to compare this simile with the others in Book 6. They are here, and in the first one, a simile compares Nausicaa to Artemis, a virgin goddess. Then there's a simile later in the book used when Athena makes Odysseus more attractive. The simile connects a craftsman putting gold over silver to a work of art.

The rest of this week's work: discussion board

- **Please respond to this question about Book 4:**
 - I discussed a key theme in the presentation when I discussed Book 4. Explain at least three ways that this theme relates to Telemachus's character based on what you have read of him so far.
 - Provide specific page numbers (or book/line numbers) for any events you quote or paraphrase.
- **Please respond to this question about Books 5 and 6:**
 - Look at the simile about the lion and the simile about the craftsman that I discuss in the presentation. At this point, you've read about Odysseus for two books so far; explain how these two similes from Book 6 and one other simile of your choice from Book 5 relate to your understanding of Odysseus so far. Looking at these similes that describe him and his actions so far, is Odysseus what you expected?
 - Provide specific page numbers (or book/line numbers) for any events you quote or paraphrase.
- Finally, **please suggest a question** you have about Books 4-6 that you would like your classmates to respond to.

I'm going to ask you to think more about similes that appear in these books and relate them to your understanding of Odysseus.

On a discussion board this week, you are asked to write first about your understanding of Telemachus and then about your understanding of Odysseus. You should reference specific events, pages, and lines as appropriate when you write your post. At the end of your post, I ask you to suggest a question.

You should create this first post by the end of day Saturday, at 11:59 pm.

Then, I ask you to respond to one classmate by end of day Sunday, at 11:59 pm.

I'm looking forward to seeing your discussions of these characters and how they are presented early on.