Odyssey Notes

Book 1: A Goddess Intervenes

Hero: (Protagonist) Odysseus

Antagonists: Helios (the sun god)
Poseidon (sea god)

Other Characters:
Telémakhos (20-year-old son of Odysseus)
Penélope (Odysseus’ wife, Telémakhos’ mother)
Athena (goddess of wisdom, a supporter of Odysseus)
Aphrodite (goddess of love)
Zeus (king of the gods)
Hades (god of the underworld)

Settings:
• Olympos, the home of the gods
• Ithaka, the rocky island kingdom of Odysseus
• Bronze Age Greece

Greek concepts:
• nostos (return),
• xenia (guest-host relationship),
• oikos (the noble household),
• agathos (the nobleman, a successful warrior),
• philos (kinsman-friend, a member of one’s oikos, such as family members and friends).

Lines
1-30 Invocation: the narrator begs the muse to help him tell Odysseus’ story. This becomes a summary of Odysseus’ efforts to return home from Troy with his shipmates.

31-47 The role of the gods in Odysseus’ return: Poseidon is traveling and Zeus, remembering what happened to Agamemnon when he returned to Mycenae, wants to help Odysseus.

48-62 Zeus recalls Aigisthos and Agamemnon’s deaths. Hermes had warned Aigisthos not to kill Agamemnon, as Agamemnon’s son Orestes would avenge his father’s death and mother’s infidelity.

63-84 Athena begs Zeus to pity Odysseus, who is held on Kalypso’s island.

85-104 Zeus reminds Athena that Poseidon has a grudge against Odysseus for blinding Poseidon’s son, the cyclops (kyklopes) Polyphemos, but agrees to “take up the matter of Odysseus’ return” to his home, Ithaka.
Athena: Let Hermes (messenger of the gods) give Odysseus the good news. I will go to Ithaca (Ithaka) to encourage Odysseus’ son Telémakhos to rid of the suitors who are eating him out of house and home.

Athena, disguised as Mentes, a family friend, goes to Odysseus’ home in Ithaca. She sees the greedy suitors playing with dice while their servants butcher Odysseus’ oxen for roasting.

When Telémakhos (who has been daydreaming about his father’s return) sees Athena (disguised as Mentes), he hurries to welcome the visitor.

Servants bring Athena/Mentes food and wine.

The suitors make themselves at home, eating, drinking, and being served by Odysseus’ servants. Phemios sings to entertain them as they eat.

Telemakhos explains who the suitors are, asks who Mentes is, and explain that his father “is lost; he came to grief and perished…”

Athena introduces herself as Mentes, explains his history, asks after Odysseus’ father, and says he has heard that “your father had come home, therefore I came.” (S)he corrects Telmakhos’s assumption that Odysseus is dead, saying he is “only detained somewhere on the wide sea, upon some island…” (S)he asks if Telémakhos is Odysseus’ son.

Telemakhos questions who his father is, saying “unknown death and silence are the fate/ of him…they call my father.”

Athena/Mentes ask what is the occasion of the feasting and who are the men, “these gluttons, making free here in your house!/ A sensible man would blush to be among them.”

Telemakhos explains that, with his father gone and presumed dead, nearby lords “are here courting my mother; and they use/ our house as if it were a house to plunder.” His mother doesn’t dare spurn them and won’t marry, but as they wait they “eat their way through all we have” until “they can demolish me.”

Athena/Mentes, disturbed, recalls Odysseus’ strengths and wishes he were there. S/he give Telemakhos advice: tell the folks on Ithaka what you want, appeal to the gods, and “go abroad for news of your lost father….Talk to…Nestor, then go to Meneláos…at Sparta, last man home of all the Akhaian.”

If you hear that he is alive, you can hold out a year. If you hear that he is dead, you can come home, have a funeral, and give your mother another husband. Then you can deal with the suitors: “you are a child no longer.” S/he tells Telemakhos about how Orestes won glory for killing Aigísthos for killing Agamemnon. S/he says she has to rejoin the ship and go.

Telémakhos thanks his guest, and offer a hot bath, rest and gifts.
Athena/Mentes thanks him, saying “Do not delay me…you shall have a choice gift in exchange.” She flies off “as a bird rustles upward” and Telemakhos realizes that his guest was a god. He rejoins the suitors.

The minstrel sings about the homecoming of Akhaians (Greeks) who fought in the Trojan War, and Penélope hears it and comes downstairs from her room. She asks the minstrel not to sing “this bitter tale that wears my heart away.”

Telémakhos disagrees—“Poets are not to blame, but Zeus who give/what fate he pleases to adventurous men.” Others lost their lives.

Penélope returns to her room, weeps and sleeps.

Telémakhos to suitors: Calm down and stop shouting. At dawn, I will ask you to leave.

Antínoos rebukes Telémakhos’ “high and mighty manner” saying “Zeus forbid you should be king in Ithaka…”

Telémakhos: “All I insist on is that I rule our house/ and rule the slave my father won for me.”

Eurýmakhos asks who the visitor was.

Telémakhos: he was a “family friend, Mentes, son of Ankhialos.” However, Telémakhos knew the visitor was a god.

The suitors resume their partying and stayed until dark, when they left for their own homes.

Telémakhos returns to his bedroom. Eurýkleia, an old and wise slave woman, puts him to bed. He thinks about the advice the god (Athena) gave him.