

Odyssey
Presented by The Acting Company

Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide



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About the Creators

Lisa Peterson

“I think to be a good director, you have to be a great listener. You have to be listening and watching the story unfold, and you have to be attuned to the actors’ impulses.”

-- Lisa Peterson, Director

Lisa Peterson is an award-winning writer and theater director who works on new plays, classic plays, and stage adaptations of classic texts.

Emily Wilson

Emily Wilson is an award-winning writer and professor who works on the translation of ancient Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. She is interested in the sounds, rhythms and meanings of words, and the ways ideas, cultures, and people change over time.

The Acting Company

The Acting Company is a touring professional theater in the United States mainly dedicated to the development of young classical actors. Since its founding in 1972 by graduates of The Juilliard School, the company has launched the careers of roughly 400 actors, including actors who have had successful careers in both stage and screen. Every year through their productions of both classic plays and new works, The Acting Company performs to as many as 20,000 audience members and an additional 5,000 students engage with their arts education programs. The Acting Company is committed to making arts and arts education accessible to young people across the country, especially in areas where there are very few opportunities for live performance and theater education.



Last year, their season included a new adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* which mashes up waltz with spoken word and high court drama with high fashion hip-hop to reclaim the swashbuckling classic for today.

You'll notice that there aren't photos of *Odyssey*, or reviews about it yet... because this show is brand new! It will be performed in front of a public audience for the first time just two weeks before you get to see it. Lucky you!

Homer's Odyssey & The Task of Translation

Written around the 8th century BCE, *The Odyssey* is one of the oldest surviving works of literature still read by contemporary audiences. It's one of two epic poems written by the ancient Greek poet Homer (the other is *The Iliad*) and both tell different parts of the story of the Trojan War.

The Odyssey tells the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, on his ten-year journey back home after the Trojan War (which also lasted ten years – that's a long time to be away from home!). At the beginning of his journey home, Odysseus angers the sea-god Poseidon, preventing him from being able to smoothly sail back home. He and his crew encounter many challenges, mythical creatures, and the wrath and support of many Greek gods and goddesses along his journey.



A depiction of a scene from The Odyssey on a Greek stamp, 1983

Back in Ithaca, Odysseus has been presumed dead and his wife Penelope has been fending off the many suitors who want to marry her (108 of them – yikes!). She and Odysseus have one son, Telemachus, who is guided by the goddess Athena to search for his missing father.

Odysseus finally returns home to Ithaca disguised as a beggar, and eventually reveals his identity and reclaims his place in his home.

In *The Odyssey* Homer doesn't specify many exact locations, so no one can say with exact certainty where Odysseus travelled. However, many scholars have attempted to reconstruct his journey onto maps based on clues from the poem. You can check out [this interactive map](#) to explore some of the best guesses about where his journey might have taken him!

The Task of Translation

Emily Wilson published her translation of *The Odyssey* in 2018, and it was named one of The New York Times' 100 notable books of the year. While *The Odyssey* has been translated and adapted countless times in the hundreds of years since Homer wrote it, Wilson's is the first published English translation written by a woman.



Emily Wilson with her adaptation of *The Odyssey*

Here's the opening of her translation:

“Tell me about a complicated man.
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy,
and where he went, and who he met, the pain
he suffered in the storms at sea, and how
he worked to save his life and bring his men
back home. He failed to keep them safe: poor fools,
they ate the Sun God's cattle and the god
kept them from home. Now goddess, child of Zeus,
tell the old story for our modern times.
Find the beginning.”

As Wilson writes in the Translator's Note, “My translation is, like all translations, an entirely different text from the original poem. Translation always, necessarily, involves interpretation; there is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which a reader can see the original.”

Wilson decided to take on the difficult task of making her translation exactly the same length as Homer's original, writing it in the same number of lines. She also wrote it entirely in iambic pentameter – a type of narrative rhythm in which each line has a certain number of syllables, and a strict rhythm of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Shakespeare is probably the most well-known example of iambic pentameter – most of his plays are written in this same meter!

It was also important to Wilson to use language that is accessible to contemporary readers, in order to encourage a more active exploration of the poem and how it might still be relevant to us today. As she explains, “My use of contemporary language – rather than the English of a generation or two ago – is meant to remind readers that this text can engage us in a direct way, and also that it is genuinely ancient... I would like to invite readers to experience a sense of connection to this ancient text, while also recognizing its vast difference from our own place and time. Homer is, and is not, our contemporary.”

Contemporary Context & Themes

In the Translator's Note of Emily Wilson's adaptation of *The Odyssey*, she writes, "The poem is concerned, above all, with the duties and dangers involved in welcoming foreigners into one's home. I hope my translation will enable contemporary readers to welcome and host this foreign poem, with all the right degrees of warmth, curiosity, openness, and suspicion."

A major theme of *The Odyssey* is home-coming, or "nostos" in Greek (which is also where we get the word nostalgia!). Wilson writes in [an essay](#) that this epic poem "traces the way home and identity are constructed not only by geographical location, but by relationships."

Why this story today?

In writing this translation, Emily Wilson thought a lot about the context of our contemporary world. Over the last several years, our country and others around the world have been grappling with the question of how immigrants are treated – especially refugees fleeing war, terror, and lack of opportunity in their home countries. Among many other themes contained in the epic poem, *The Odyssey* is an account of what it means to be a stranger, a foreigner, to flee war, to return home from war, and to wander in search of a home.



What can we expect from this play?

Adapter and director Lisa Peterson says, "don't expect [this play] to be old-fashioned!"

In Peterson's stage adaptation, four women play all the characters in the story, and also take turns playing Odysseus. So even though you'll meet many characters in the play, you'll see them embodied by just four actors.

Peterson explains, "We're finding [these four women] in a... relocation center, in a refugee camp, somewhere in the Aegean sea, maybe the island of Lesbos for instance. They've come from all over the Middle East and North Africa and they each have different experiences, and they're telling each other this story to try to understand what their chances are of landing in a home and feeling safe there."

Reflection Questions

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about *The Odyssey*, what comes to mind?
- Have you ever seen a stage adaptation of a classic play or book? What was different about it compared to the source material?
- Do you think ancient literature can be relevant in our contemporary world? Why or why not?

After the Show:

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of *The Odyssey*?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- In theatre, symbolism is the use of one or more objects to represent something else. The object may represent an idea, a feeling, or a physical entity. Symbols allow theater makers to convey messages to audiences that would be difficult to communicate through dialogue or action alone. Did you see any symbolism in the show?
- In the show, four actors transformed themselves to play all the characters in the story, including trading off the main character of Odysseus. What effect did that have on how you watched the story? What did it make you think or feel?
- In the show, the creators took a well-known classic story and re-told it in order to say something about our world today. If you were going to pick a different story and re-tell it in order to say something about our world today, what story would you pick and why?
- Since this show is brand new, there are not yet any reviews written about it. If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?

Resources

- Interactive Map of Odysseus' Journey
- <https://www2.classics.upenn.edu/myth/php/homer/index.php?page=odymap>
- Emily Wilson's Pronunciation Guide
<https://www.emilyrcwilson.com/pronunciation-guide>
- Emily Wilson's article in Lit Hub: "Why I Gave Homer a Contemporary Voice"
<https://lithub.com/why-i-gave-homer-a-contemporary-voice-in-the-odyssey/>
- Lisa Peterson Explaining Process
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoU2VPqBUtc>
- Emily Wilson's article in The New Yorker: "A Translator's Reckoning with the Women of *The Odyssey*")

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-translators-reckoning-with-the-women-of-the-odyssey>

- Study Guide to *An Iliad* by Lisa Peterson & Denis O'Hare:
https://cdn.anoisewithin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AnIliad_AudienceGuide_Spring2021_r1.pdf