

THE ODYSSEY: MOVIE AND POEM

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On 11 July 2026 Christopher Nolan released his movie *The Odyssey*, the latest in a long series of adaptations of the pre-classical Greek epic poem of the same name (as rendered into English), conventionally attributed to Homer (see below).

The movie has brought this matter to the attention of new, non-specialist audiences, and commentators on it may feel called upon to explain the background. The ancient poem recounts the story of the ten-year voyage home of Odysseus, king of the island of Ithaca and one of the Greek heroes who besieged and eventually sacked the city of Troy (probably represented by the ruins at Hisarlik on the northern Aegean coast of modern Turkey). These events, if historically real, are usually dated around 1200 BCE. It is now clear from their linguistic and textual features that the *Odyssey* and similar poems were initially current in variable oral form before the development of the Greek Alphabet, probably being performed by itinerant bards at the courts of local kings claiming descent from the Greek heroes of the Trojan War. They were standardised and written up once the alphabet was created (according to some, partly for this very purpose). The *Odyssey* is dated to approximately 800-700 BCE.

Odysseus was known in Latin as Ulysses (or Ulixes), and this name is used in many secondary sources.

Since C19, scholarship surrounding these stories has involved archaeology and points arising. Most notably, Schliemann excavated Troy and also Mycenae in Greece, presented in Homer as the city of the Greek supreme leader Agamemnon. These sites are multi-layered and many questions about the Trojan War remain unanswered. There are no contemporary written accounts of these matters. We do not even know who the Trojans actually were or what language they spoke. Modern writers who speak of historical fact/accuracy in this context are over-extrapolating or worse. (Elon Musk has stated that Grok Imagine will create a 'historically accurate' AI adaptation of the work, but, given that so much is uncertain about the relevant cultures and events, historical accuracy appears less than fully feasible even at this general level, let alone with respect to a specific, essentially legendary/mythical story)

I myself first read the *Odyssey* 62 years ago, in Rieu's Penguin Classics translation. (Later, at Oxford, I read the work in the original and studied Homer closely). There have been many other translations of the *Odyssey* into later languages, including celebrated English versions by Chapman (1615) and Pope (1726). Most renderings of the *Odyssey* are paired with parallel renderings of the other major poem attributed to Homer, the *Iliad*. The *Iliad*, almost certainly the older work, is more clearly oral in origin even in its eventual written form; the processes involved were not fully explained until the early-C20 work of Milman Parry. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were very probably composed by different (series of) authors. We do not in fact know if 'Homer' as such ever existed, either as a leading composer during oral times or as a very early author of the written texts.

The *Iliad* covers the first half of the last of the ten years of the Trojan War, up to the death of the Trojan hero Hector at the hands of his Greek rival Achilles. The *Odyssey* commences just after the Sack of Troy, engineered by Odysseus through the fabled device the Wooden Horse. Neither of the Homeric poems deals with the Sack of Troy itself; this event is familiar from later classical works.

The *Odyssey* can be regarded as the earliest known novel. Strikingly, it features a substantial 'flash-back': early in the narrative, Odysseus is cast ashore on the island of Phaeacia and on the invitation of the local king recounts his exploits on the voyage from Troy. This device was replicated in the 1954 movie *Ulysses* starring Kirk Douglas. In the current movie, there is instead a piecemeal flash-back to the Sack of Troy.

Odysseus' wife Penelope is portrayed as waiting for his return for twenty years, oppressed by a band of profligate suitors seeking to take over from her supposedly deceased husband but delaying them by means of subterfuge. Her son Telemachus, now of age, travels fruitlessly to mainland Greece hoping to obtain definitive news of his father from his wartime fellow-commanders. Eventually Odysseus

manages to return in the guise of a beggar, demonstrates his identity by means of an unmatched feat involving his iconic bow, and, aided by Telemachus, massacres the suitors. Both of the movies discussed here replicate this narrative closely.

Like the original poem, the 2026 movie also displays an overt mythological (and hence ahistorical) element featuring the Greek pantheon, in particular Odysseus' 'patron' goddess Athene, and other non-human entities such as the witch-nymphs Circe and Calypso and various monsters (Polyphemus the Cyclops, the Sirens, Charybdis, Scylla). But, as critics have noted, it omits the episode of the Lotus-Eaters (rather as Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies omit some episodes found in Tolkien's books but deemed of lesser interest or plot-significance). Odysseus' temporary love-interest Princess Nausicaa of Phaeacia, prominent in the 1954 movie, is also absent.

At the end of the movie, reference is made to an oncoming age of cultural 'darkness' including the loss of literacy. This reflects the loss of the originally Cretan Linear B syllabic script, used to write Greek at this time (but not mentioned in Homer or in any classical source). The script was discovered in C19, written on clay tablets, and was deciphered in 1952. The Cretan/Aegean/Mycenaean civilisation collapsed in stages at around the date conventionally given for the Trojan War, and writing disappeared from the Greek world until the alphabet was introduced.

Also at the end of the movie, Odysseus, despite his now advanced age, embarks on a new voyage, not described in Homer but rather based upon Tennyson's famous 1842 poem 'Ulysses'. In this poem, Odysseus/Ulysses describes his restlessness upon returning to his kingdom and proposes such a voyage. He has been seen here as either resolute and heroic (famously expressing himself as determined 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield') or, by some more recent critics, as selfishly intending to abandon his kingdom and family. In the new movie, Penelope travels on with him, leaving Telemachus to rule Ithaca; this largely eliminates this second interpretation. But the more central point here, involving the Homeric poem rather than Tennyson's coda, is that, on some readings prompted by the new movie, Odysseus is long unable to reach Ithaca not mainly because of the calamities he suffers, or even because of being twice inveigled by witch-nymphs, but rather because he is trying in vain to come to terms with having unleashed horror at Troy and later. And this is why, having finally reached home and resolved the matter of his wife's suitors, he sets out on this new voyage into exile, perhaps a voyage of self-redemption, rather than returning to the throne. I myself find the textual evidence for this new arguably 'woke' interpretation no more than equivocal.

The release of the movie has sparked a series of proposals involving the reinterpretation of legendary accounts of the Odyssey and the entire Trojan War period. Nolan's script includes a reference to the 'People of the Sea', a prominent if unidentified political and military force which was apparently active in the Eastern Mediterranean (including Egypt) at the time in question; some commentators have sought to involve reports of this group with passages in the Odyssey. More dramatically, Eberhard Zangger, a non-mainstream historian who has previously equated Troy with the pseudo-historical sunken land of Atlantis, holds that the poem is not about a voyage home, as has always been regarded as obvious, but rather about the Late Bronze Age collapse of civilisation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Zangger's focus is upon Odysseus' sojourn in Phaeacia and a novel (and in my view strange) interpretation which he ascribes to the 'flash-back' expounding his journey there from Troy. I expect to hear of further revisionist expositions of the Odyssey in the wake of the movie.

There is much more that I could say about the movie and the poem; but for now this must suffice.

I welcome queries and comments on the above.