

Homer's Odyssey: Mythology, Psychology and Politics

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Professor Steven Walker, SAS- Asian Language & Cultures

T 09:50A-12:50P

Honors College Rm S120

College Ave Campus

Will Count Towards elective credit for SAS-Comparative Literature Major

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Many students may have already read Homer's *Odyssey* or parts thereof, but this is one of those books that really are worth rereading and rethinking. There are 24 chapters in the *Odyssey*, and we will be reading and discussing 2-3 of them each week in the translation by Robert Fitzgerald. We will be using a recent commentary (Frederick Ahl and Hanna M. Roisman, *The Odyssey Re-Formed*) for initial inspiration and stimulation. But the bulk of our seminar work together will simply be letting our minds and imaginations work on the text through close reading and discussion, and seeing what we come up with. Homer can mean many different things to many different people, as we will surely discover.

The mythological side of the *Odyssey* is one of the things that have made it fascinating for each new generation of readers. We will look carefully at the rich mythological world of the *Odyssey* with a special eye for psychological meaning and insight, especially as regards the initiation process of a young man (Telemachus), a young woman (Nausicaa), an older man (Odysseus), and an older woman (Penelope). But there has also been a perennial fascination with the historical subtext: did Odysseus (or someone like him) really exist? Does what Homer tells us about him, his island Ithaca and his society actually correspond to history? The now classic study *The World of Odysseus* by Moses Finley will give us a look at some of what lay behind the heroic legends of this epic of seafaring and adventure. Finally, the *Odyssey* turns out to have an special relevance for the discussion and the resolution of one major problem our society is facing today, and it is Jonathan Shay's book *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* that will lead us from the world of ancient heroic epic to the problems of modern war.

STEVEN F. WALKER, Professor of Comparative Literature, majored in Greek as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, and continued to study ancient Greek literature in his work for a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Harvard. The *Odyssey* has long been one of his favorite books, but, oddly enough, although he has thought about it a lot, he hasn't written or published much on it—perhaps he wished to keep it a book mainly for pleasure reading and not for academic analysis? In all events, it is his pleasure with the text that he would like most to share with you.