

The Odyssey Lesson Plan 3
Hospitality & *Xenia* in *The Odyssey*
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Overview:

This lesson will ask students to consider the central importance of *xenia* in *The Odyssey*. The lesson will open with a class discussion of hospitality so far in the narrative before moving into an introduction to the concept of *xenia* and its requirements. The second half of the lesson will focus on examples of characters upholding and not upholding the rules of *xenia*.

This lesson includes information from Books 15-19.

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define the concept of *xenia* and locate its importance in 4-5 places within the narrative
2. Discuss how *xenia* both connects and binds characters in *The Odyssey* together and the consequences of violating the rules of *xenia*

Class Structure:

10 minutes: Framing activity

- Ask students to brainstorm a list of moments where hosts or guests have behaved badly in their reading of *The Odyssey* so far.
 - Possible examples include the suitors at Ithaca overstaying their welcome, the cyclops trying to eat Odysseus and his crew, Calypso refusing to let Odysseus leave Ogygia

20 minutes: Review and expand the definition of *xenia* from the first lesson plan

- ***Xenia*** means both “hospitality” and “friendship”
 - *Xenos* can mean both “stranger” and “friend”
 - In archaic Greek culture, elite men who have entered one another’s homes and have been entertained appropriately are understood to have created a bond of “guest-friendship” (*xenia*) between their households that will continue into future generations, creating long-lasting alliances.
 - Introduce students to Wilson’s argument about the importance of *xenia* in *The Odyssey*. “*The Odyssey* suggests that it was the responsibility of male householders to offer hospitality [gifts of food, clothing, and aid on their journey] of this kind to any visitor, even uninvited guests, strangers, and homeless beggars. Those who traveled to an unfamiliar land used the norms and expectations of *xenia* to form bonds with people who might otherwise have treated them as too ragged and dirty to deserve a welcome, or as too dangerous to accept into their

home. Conversely, the promotion of Greek *xenia* as a quasi-universal and quasi-ethical concept can be used as imaginative justification for robbing, killing, enslaving, or colonizing those who are reluctant to welcome a group of possible bandits or pirates into their home. *The Odyssey* shows us both sides of this complex concept, which hover in an uneasy space between ethics and etiquette.” (Wilson 24).

- *Xenia* is also religious in part. As Wilson explains, “*xenia* is particularly important to the gods in general, and especially to Zeus, the father and king of all the gods. One of the standard titles of Zeus was Xenios (“God of Strangers”). He is the god who presides over visitors, foreigners, and beggars, and who is invoked to defend the rights of guests or of hosts, when people fail to adhere to the norms of *xenia*” (29).
- Requirements for *xenia*
 - Be a good host, especially to needy strangers. Hosts should welcome guests with a bath, food, drink, gifts, and safe escort to their next destination.
 - Be a good guest, respect your host, and don’t take too much. Guests must be courteous to their hosts and not be a threat or burden. Guests are expected to provide stories and news from the outside world. Most importantly, guests are expected to reciprocate if their hosts ever call upon them in their homes.

20 minutes: Close reading and discussion

- Have students revisit Telemachus’s departure from Sparta in Book 15, lines 68-132, making clear that this is an example of extraordinary hospitality.

And Menelaus answered,
“Telemachus, I will not keep you here
if you are truly desperate for home.
I disapprove of too much friendliness
and of too much standoffishness. A balance
is best. To force a visitor to stay
is just as bad as pushing him to go.
Be kind to guests while they are visiting
then help them on their way. So friend, remain
just till I fetch some splendid gifts to pile
onto your carriage. Wait till you see them!
I will instruct the women to prepare
a banquet in the hall from our rich stores.
Feasting before a long trip brings you honor;
it also makes good sense. And if you want
to have me travel with you all through Greece,
I shall yoke up my horses and escort you
through every town, and everywhere we go
we will be given gifts—a fine bronze tripod,
a cauldron, or two mules, or golden cups.”

Telemachus replied, “King Menelaus,
I want to go back home right away, I have
no one back there to watch my property.
I would not want to die while I am searching
for Father, or to lose my wealth at home.”

So General Menelaus shouted out
to tell his wife and female slaves to make
a feast from his rich stores. Eteoneus
got out of bed and came—he lived nearby.
The general boomed out orders: “Light the fire
and roast the meat!” The slave obeyed. Meanwhile,
his master went inside the fragrant room
containing treasures. Helen went with him,
and Megapenthes. There he took a goblet,
two-handled, and he told his son to bring
a silver bowl. And Helen stood beside
the chests in which she kept the special clothes
that she had worked with her own hands. She lifted
the most elaborate and largest robe
that shone like starlight under all the rest.
Then they went through the palace till they reached
Telemachus. And fair-headed Menelaus said to him

“May great Zeus, the Lord of Thunder,
husband of Hera, make your wish come true—
may you go back home safely. I will give you
the best of all my treasure, as a mark
of deep respect: a bowl of solid silver,
circled with gold; Hephaestus fashioned it.
The King of Sidon, Phaedimus, bestowed it
on me when I was at his house, en route
for home. Now take it: it is yours.”

He gave
the goblet first, and Megapenthes brought
the shining silver bowl and put it down
in front of him. Then Helen’s lovely cheeks
flushed as she moved in close. She held the robe
and said,

“Sweet boy, I also have a gift,
crafted by my own hands. Remember Helen
when your own wedding day at last arrives,
and let your bride wear this. Until that time,

your mother should take care of it. I wish you great joy. I hope you reach your well-built home, and fatherland.” (Wilson 352-354)

- Ask students to discuss the following questions:
 - How does Menelaus observe the conventions of *xenia* when Telemachus asks to leave?
 - What do the hosts provide and/or offer to provide for Telemachus? Where did these gifts originate? How do these gifts connect Telemachus to other Hellenic households?
 - Helen gives Telemachus a robe to keep for his wedding day. To whom will the robe belong? Why might Helen give Telemachus such a gift?

25 minutes: Small group discussion of *xenia* in *The Odyssey*

- Split class into groups of 3-5. Ask half of the groups to find an example of characters honoring *xenia* and the other half to find an example of characters violating *xenia*.
- Each group should try to answer the following questions:
 - Who is involved in this situation?
 - How does *xenia* influence the passage?
 - What are the consequences of honoring or violating *xenia*?
 - What does this passage tell us about the world of *The Odyssey*?
- Bring the class back together and discuss the results.
 - How are these situations related?
 - What patterns do we see emerging?
 - Who benefits or suffers from the way *xenia* is imagined or defined in these passages?

Additional discussion questions, if time allows:

- An exile named Theoclymenus comes to Telemachus as he prepares to sail for Ithaca? What does he ask?
- How does Odysseus reveal his identity to Telemachus? How does the father/son relationship develop?
- How does Telemachus change in Book 16?
- Who sees Telemachus first when he returns to the palace? What is her reaction?
- How do the suitors treat the disguised Odysseus? What consequences do you foresee?
- How does Penelope react to Odysseus?
- Who are the slave women loyal to?
- How do the suitors respond to the growing hostility between Eurymachus and the ‘beggar’ Odysseus?
- What does Penelope reveal to Odysseus about her thoughts on remarriage and her parents’ thoughts? How does she test his story?

Sources:

Wilson, Emily, translator. *The Odyssey*. By Homer. Norton, 2018.

Wilson, Emily. Translator's Note. *The Odyssey*, by Homer, translated by Wilson. Norton, 2018, pp. 1-79.

