

## Poetry Related to the *Odyssey*

### Calypso

by: Suzanne Vega

My name is Calypso  
And I have lived alone  
I live on an island  
And I waken to the dawn  
A long time ago  
I watched him struggle with the sea  
I knew he was drowning  
And I brought him into me  
Now today  
Come morning light  
He sails away  
After one last night  
I let him go

My name is Calypso  
My garden overflows  
Thick and wild and hidden  
is the sweetness there that grows  
My hair it blows long  
As I sing into the wind  
I tell of nights  
Where I could taste the salt on his skin  
Salt of the waves  
And of tears  
And though he pulled away  
I kept him here for years  
I let him go

My name is Calypso  
I have let him go  
In the dawn he sails away  
To be gone forever more  
And the waves will take him in again  
But he'll know their ways now  
I will stand upon the shore  
With a clean heart  
And my song in the wind  
The sand will sting my feet  
And the sky will burn  
It's a lonely time ahead  
I do not ask him to return  
I let him go  
I let him go

*This song was written by Suzanne Vega in 1978. In the song, Vega assumes the voice of the sea nymph Calypso, who saved the drowning Ulysses and waylays him on her island for 7 years as she is in love with him. Eventually Zeus sends Hermes, the messenger of the Gods, to tell Calypso to release Odysseus, which Calypso reluctantly does. The story is taken from Homer's Odyssey.*

*Suzanne Vega: "Calypso makes an appearance on the first page [of Homer's Odyssey] and I guess she never really comes back, and no one ever checks up on her to see how she's doing. It's very one sided, I remember feeling that. So this song is called Calypso and it's written from her point of view the night before he left."*

Calypso Questions:

1. Summarize the account from *The Odyssey* of Odysseus' feelings about Calypso.
2. Summarize the account from the poem of Calypso's feelings about Odysseus?
3. What can you infer about the time these two people spent together? How long were they together? How did they get along?
4. Who do you feel the most connection toward—Odysseus or Calypso? Why?
5. What is the tone of this song?
6. Why do you think the words "I let him go" are repeated so many times in the song?
7. Why does Calypso say that she has a "clean heart"?
8. Who is the speaker in this poem?

## **Penelope**

by: **Dorothy Parker**

In the pathway of the sun,  
In the footsteps of the breeze,  
Where the world and the sky are one,

He shall ride the silver seas.  
He shall cut the glittering wave.  
I shall sit at home, and rock;  
Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;  
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;  
Bleach the linen for my bed.  
They will call him brave.

### *Penelope* Questions:

1. Who is "he" referred to in lines 1-5?  
How is he described?
2. How does the speaker describe her life?
3. On what aspects of Penelope's life does this poem focus?
4. What does Penelope symbolize?

## **Odysseus**

by: **Merwin**

Always the setting forth was the same,  
Same sea, same dangers waiting for him  
As though he had got nowhere but older  
Behind him on the receding shore  
The identical reproaches, and somewhere  
Out before him, the unraveling patience  
He was wedded to. There were the islands  
Each with its woman and twining welcome  
To be navigated, and one to call "home."  
The knowledge of all that he betrayed  
Grew till it was the same whether he stayed  
Or went. Therefore, he went. And what  
wonder if sometimes he could not remember  
Which was the one who wished on his  
departure perils that he could never sail  
through, and which, improbable, remote,  
and true, was the one he kept sailing home  
to?

### *Odysseus* Questions:

1. What aspects of the Odyssey are alluded to in this poem?
2. What point does this poem make about Odysseus' adventures?
3. What ideas about life and experience does this poem explore?

## **Circe**

by: **Olga Broumas**

### The Charm

The fire bites, the fire bites. Bites  
to the little death. Bites  
till she comes to nothing. Bites  
on her own sweet tongue.  
She goes on. Biting.

### The Anticipation

They tell me a woman waits, motionless till  
she's wooed. I wait  
spiderlike, effortless as they weave  
even my web for me, tying the cords in  
knots with their courting hands. Such power  
over them. And the spell their own. Who  
could release them? Who would untie the  
cord  
with a cloven hoof?

### The Bite

What I wear in the morning pleases  
me: green shirt, skirt of wine. I am wrapped  
in myself as the smell of night wraps round  
my sleep when I sleep outside.  
By the time  
I get to the corner  
bar, corner store, corner construction  
site, I become divine. I turn  
men into swine. Leave  
them behind me whistling, grunting, wild.

### *Circe* Questions:

1. What do Circe and the speaker symbolize in the poem?
2. What is the source of Circe's power in the myth and in the poem?
3. What is the significance of:
  - a. "spiderlike"
  - b. "courting hands"
  - c. "cloven hoof"

**Siren Song**  
**by: Margaret A. Wood**

This is the one song everyone  
would like to learn: the song  
that is irresistible:

The song that forces men  
to leap overboard in squadrons  
even though they see the bleached skulls

The song nobody knows  
because anybody who has heard it  
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret  
and if I do, will you get me  
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here  
squatting on this island  
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,  
I don't enjoy singing  
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,  
to you, only to you.  
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

at last. Alas  
it is a boring song  
but it works every time.

*Siren Song* Questions:

1. Who were the sirens in Greek mythology? What effect did their song have on men?
2. What is the speaker's "secret"?
3. What does the speaker say about her life?
4. What happens to the "you" at the end?

**Penelope to Ulysses**  
**By Meredith Schwartz**

Like a spider committing suicide  
each night I unweave the web of my day.  
I have no peace.  
About me the insistent buzz of flies  
drones louder every day.  
I am starving.  
I watch them, always, unblinking stare.  
All my dwindling will  
I use in not moving, not trying, unweaving.  
I pull in my empty nets  
eating myself, waiting.

*Penelope to Ulysses* Questions:

1. What does Penelope literally unweave in the Odyssey?
2. Who are the "flies"?
3. Why is the fly metaphor appropriate?
4. What does it mean that Penelope is "starving" and "eating myself"?

**Ithaka**  
**by Constantine Cavafy**

"As you set out for Ithaka  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.  
Laistrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon -  
don't be afraid of them:  
you'll never find things like that on your  
way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised  
high,  
as long as a rare sensation  
touches your spirit and your body.  
Laistrygonians, Cyclops, wild Poseidon -  
you won't encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your  
soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of  
you.

Hope your road is a long one.  
May there be many summer mornings  
when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you enter harbours you're seeing for the  
first time;  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
sensual perfumes of every kind -  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
to learn and go on learning from those who  
know.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the  
island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have  
fooled you.  
Wise as you have become, so full of  
experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these  
Ithakas mean."

*Ithaka* Questions:

1. What does "Ithaka" stand for (what does it symbolize)?
2. What do "Laistrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon" seem to symbolize?
3. Where does the poem suggest that the "Laistrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon" come from?

**An Ancient Gesture**  
**By Edna St. Vincent Millay**

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner  
of my apron:  
Penelope did this too.  
And more than once: you can't keep  
weaving all day  
And undoing it all through the night;  
Your arms get tired, and the back of your  
neck gets tight;  
And along towards morning, when you think  
it will never be light,  
And your husband has been gone, and you  
don't know where, for years,  
Suddenly you burst into tears;  
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the  
corner of my apron:  
This is an ancient gesture, authentic,  
antique,  
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;  
Ulysses did this too.  
But only as a gesture,--a gesture which  
implied  
To the assembled throng that he was much  
too moved to speak.  
He learned it from Penelope...  
Penelope who really cried.

*An Ancient Gesture* Questions:

1. Why does it say that Ulysses' tears were "only as a gesture"?
2. What is the "assembled throng" referring to?
3. What does the last line mean?

**The Cyclops in the Ocean**  
**By Nikki Giovanni**

Moving slowly...against time...patiently  
majestic...  
The Cyclops...in the ocean...meets no  
Ulysses...

Through the night...he sighs...throbbing  
against the shore...declaring...for the  
adventure...

A wall of gray...gathered by a slow  
touch...slash and slither...through the  
waiting screens...separating into  
nodules...making my panes...accept the  
touch...

Not content...to watch my frightened  
gaze...he clamors beneath the  
sash...dancing to my sill...

Certain to die...when the sun...returns...

Tropical Storm Dennis

**Even Odysseus Yearns**  
**A poem inspired by the Odyssey**  
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*(Torrey Philemon of Ancient Sites)*

I, wanderer, warrior,  
Strategist, explorer,  
Inventor of schemes which conquered Troy,  
Outwitting even Poseidon's one-eyed son.  
I, who enchanted goddesses  
But escaped their grasp,  
Could not be seduced by Sirens,  
Tied to the mast of past longings, heard another's  
song,  
Saw another's face,  
The silky black tendrils of her hair weaving  
through the tapestry of my thoughts.  
Penelope, are you more than memory?  
In my dreams I become your loom,  
You ravel and unravel my hopes.

Are you the Penelope I knew or have you too  
forgotten,  
Foundered, as I did in that mad mad war, in these  
madder wanderings,  
And even now in the wonderings of my tide-  
tossed mind.  
Penelope, do you wait for me?  
What have I lost in this world of brawn and  
manly prowess,

*The Cyclops in the Ocean* Questions:

1. What is Tropical Storm Dennis being compared to in the poem?
2. How are those two things similar?
3. What do you think would have happened to the Cyclops in the Odyssey if Ulysses had not met him?
4. What are screens, panes, sash, and sill all related to?
5. What do those words suggest about the point of view of the speaker?
6. Which words in the poem are onomatopoeia (imitate sounds)?
7. What do the sounds in the poem suggest?

Where women are goddesses or slaves,  
Above or below me,  
Where human hearts dare not yearn  
For what they cannot claim or reclaim?

In the mist I see Penelope in her garden,  
Watering the blossoms of tomorrow,  
Penelope in her room winding the warp,  
Twisting the skeins of yesterday,  
Letting slip through her fingers year after year,  
the colors of the seasons.

Am I then in love only with memory?  
I, the wily Odysseus, humbled by wisps of  
dreams  
Waking me at dawn to stare at the rising  
tumescent sun swollen on the horizon,  
Behind me always.  
But only in the dusk of this vast western  
emptiness,  
Lies the warming call of home.  
Penelope,  
Must memory alone sustain me,  
Or do you live outside my mind,  
Daily scanning the craggy shore of Ithaca  
Peering across that fog-gray desolation,  
Weaving into your woolly nights the foam of this  
churning sea,  
Waiting for me?