

Close Reading on Penelope

Close reading is the process of re-examining a short passage and asking critical questions about it. This activity is an especially useful tool when you plan to write an essay, want to trace a theme throughout the novel, or hope to learn more about a character. In the following passage, Penelope responds to the news Eurycleia brings of Odysseus' return.

Directions: Read the passage below and complete the chart below.

This was wise Penelope's reply:

“Dear nurse, your words are wild; the gods can drive
the wisest mortal mad, or even guide
a fool to wisdom. Yes, you once were wise,
but now the gods have led your wits astray.
Why do you mock me so when my heart grieves?
Why speak wild words that wake me from a sleep
that held my eyes in sweet embrace, more deep
than any sleep that I have known since he –
my dear Odysseus – sailed to Troy-the-ugly.
Now go away – back to the women's hall.
Had any of my other women dared
to wake me with such tidings, I'd have sent
her off straightway; she would have felt my wrath;
but you are old – you benefit from that.”

| Word / Phrase | Critical Question | Your Answer |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. “words are wild” | What image does this phrase evoke in your mind? | |
| 2. “now the gods have led your wits astray” | How would this sound in American English? | |
| 3. “Troy-the-ugly” | Why is Troy ugly to Penelope? | |
| 4. “she would have felt my wrath” | What is the implicit meaning of this phrase? | |
| 5. “you benefit from that” | What is the benefit of being old for the nurse? | |

Big Picture Questions

Directions: Answer each question in a complete sentence.

1. How is the *Odyssey* an example of an epic?

2. The *Odyssey* has themes reflecting timeless and universal concerns, such as courage and honor, good and evil, life and death, and the importance of home. Choose one of these topics. What message about this topic does Homer convey? Give evidence from the text to support your answer.

3. One thing that all epics have in common is tremendous scale. Everything about an epic is big: an extended and complicated plot, a long journey over great distances. Powerful gods and horrible monsters, and major universal themes. Identify one aspect each of epic plot, setting, character, and theme in the *Odyssey*. Which do you consider most impressive? Give reasons for your choice.

4. It is rare in epics for heroes to have much to do with ordinary people, but in the *Odyssey* servants play important roles. How does Odysseus treat Eumaeus and the cowherd? What values might Homer be trying to teach through that treatment?

5. Underline the theme that is present in the *Odyssey*.
 - a. People forget about home when they are away for too long.
 - b. Home is always important, even when life takes you far away.
 - c. You can't expect people to remember you if you leave home.

Explain how the story supports this theme.