

# ENGLISH – THE PENELOPIAD NOTES

## Themes

### Storytelling

- Retelling Homer's *Odyssey* through the eyes of Penelope, Odysseus's wife.
- Atwood investigates the relationship between storytelling and the truth.
- Concept of storytelling is highly important from the beginning of the novel where Penelope talks about why she is telling her own story.
- She discusses how she had remained silent because she "wanted happy endings".
- Penelope describes many of the stories invented about her infidelity after the *Odyssey*.
- Penelope furthers this idea by frequently connecting storytelling to fibre work and her own weaving, which she uses for deceptive purposes.
- Atwood implies through the *Penelopiad* that Homer's version of the story is misleading or incomplete.
- Atwood's revision undermines several major plot points of the *Odyssey*, including Penelope not recognising Odysseus when he arrived back to Ithaca in beggar's clothing.
- Oral myth is inherently made up of many different voices.
- *Odyssey* is "not the only version of the story".
- Atwood troubles the idea of a complete and truthful narrative which undermines the trustworthiness of her own novel as well.
- The twelve maids question Penelope's decisions, suggesting that Penelope is complicit in their murders since she did not reveal to Odysseus that they were helping her all along.
- Although Penelope attempts to exonerate herself in her narrative, suggesting that there was little she could have done to help at the time, the maids' chorus condemns Penelope for her lack of action.
- Atwood suggests that even Penelope's voice cannot be taken as authoritative or definitive.
- Opens the text up to more radical interpretation (*Odyssey*).
- The maids believe that their listeners may disregard their alternative reading as "feminist claptrap," suggesting how, up to the present, readers of the *Odyssey* who questioned predominate power structures were soundly rejected by the mainstream readers.

- In short, while Atwood dismantles the idea of objective, truthful storytelling and the authoritative text, she also opens the *Odyssey* up for more creative, alternative readings.

### **Quotes**

- “Quintessential faithful wife.”
- “Don’t follow my example.”
- “An edifying legend.”
- “Rumours came, carried by other ships.”
- “Always for him.”
- “You’re worth a thousand Helen’s.”
- “Womanly modesty.”
- “We were almost like sisters.”
- “I didn’t let on I knew.”
- “It’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.”
- “Some songs aren’t worth the breath expended on them.”
- “The impertinent ones.”
- “They were notorious whores.”
- “My helpers during the long nights of the shroud.”
- “We deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap.”
- “We’re no more real than money.”
- “The two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.”

### **Class, woman’s roles and violence**

- Social and psychological pressures that women face.
- Get a sense of how Penelope feels about the societal expectations of women.
- Atwood explores the intense competition between women, mostly over male sexual attention.
- This rivalry seems to be the consequence of a society that values women only for their beauty, since Penelope’s cleverness and devotion go undervalued.
- Minute details of women’s behaviour are constantly policed.
- Atwood shows how social norms of women’s behaviour and desirable qualities cause Penelope constant stress and make her feel extremely alienated.
- Maids often the victims of rape at the hands of the suitors.
- Rape is discussed as a common event in ancient Greece.
- The maids are extremely affected emotionally and physically by rape.
- The girls “felt guilty” and “needed to be tended for”.
- Maids are punished for their rapes with murder, Odysseus says they were “whores”.

- During the “The Trial of Odysseus” chapter, Penelope states that the women were killed because they were raped with their master’s permission, not just because they were raped, highlighting the fact that their slave status makes them especially unprotected.
- While Atwood shows the struggles that women face in Greek society in general, her characterization of the twelve maids highlights how low-class status exacerbates the violence and psychological trauma that all women are susceptible to.

### Quotes

- “A stick used to beat other women with.”
- “We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls.”
- “If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse.”
- “Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does.”
- “The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard her scream.”
- “The consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape.”
- “There was supposed to be blood.”
- “Hard work is my destiny, death is my fate!”
- “Why was he still – and possibly always – thinking about Helen?”
- “He would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the room beam.”
- “I really was frightened.”
- “Always for him.”
- “You’re worth a thousand Helen’s.”
- “Womanly modesty.”
- “It was not unusual for the guests in a large household or palace to sleep with the maids.”
- “Getting out from under the thumbs of the women, who as usual were being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgement.”
- “It’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.”

- “The impertinent ones. The ones who’d been rude.”
- “They were notorious whores.”
- “Unfounded feminist claptrap.”
- “You don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice.”
- “We’re no more real than money”

### **Antiquity, modernity and progress for women**

- Penelope repeatedly refers to how society has changed since the time when she was alive in Greece.
- Ancient Grecian characters are keenly aware of what goes on in the modern era.
- Spirits can return to earth, therefore up to date on societal shifts and trends.
- Through her comparison of contemporary customs and her narrative description of older ones, Penelope highlights the vast difference in culture between antiquity and the modern day.
- Atwood shows how Odysseus’s times are, in fact, not very different from our times, with violence against women going undiscussed and unpunished (the trial).
- Suggests that progress is not guaranteed, and that societies can regress rather than progress (Penelope moving into Odysseus’s family rather than husband moving to join the wife’s family) – this change could be more objectifying and more damaging for women, a regression in their personal rights.
- The maids describe the fall of a women-centred society in favour of a men-centred one, leading to the rest of the patriarchal history of western civilization (an anthropology lecture).
- Atwood’s emphasis on the precariousness of progress for women forces the modern reader to look critically at their own society and the cultural changes being made.

### **Quotes**

- “Then after hundred, possibly thousands of years... customs changes.”
- “No living people went to the underworld much anymore.”
- “It was unusual for the quests in a large household or palace to sleep with the maids.”
- “Getting out from under the thumbs of the women, who as usual were being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment.”
- “We deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap.”
- “Rapes and murders are not pleasant subjects.”
- “We’re no more real than money.”

## Christianity vs Greek religion

- Penelope spends a significant amount of time describing the conditions of the afterlife, which Atwood bases on Greek mythology.
- In modern times, Penelope notes, the Greek gods are much less present than they were in her times. This is perhaps because Christianity is much more prevalent, and the Greek gods have to share time with the Christian one.
- Penelope also states that a new establishment to take in dead people has opened near the fields of asphodel, with “fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks.”
- Atwood does not discuss Christian heaven at all in the book, presumably because, unlike hell, which Penelope says is next door, heaven would not be located underground, near the Greek underworld.
- In Greek mythology, as Penelope notes, fate is controlled by three sisters, the fates. These three women, who are spinners, measure out the length of people’s lives with thread and cut it when they are to die.
- The fates are, in fact, considered to be even more powerful than the gods, including Zeus. This undercuts the otherwise male-dominated structure of the Greek god system, in which Zeus, a male god, is the most powerful.
- The concept of the fates also contrasts starkly with the Christian faith, which puts a male god in total control of the lifespan of humans.
- Atwood gives the reader a portrait of these two distinct and contradictory but coexisting religious systems, each with different relationships to blame, destiny, freewill, punishment, and the afterlife.

## Quotes

- “No living people went to the underworld much anymore.”
- “Fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks.”
- “Oh gods and oh prophets, please alter my life.”
- “Hard work is my destiny, death is my fate!”

## Characters

### Penelope

- Daughter of king Icarus.
- Mother of Telemachus.
- Odysseus’s wife.
- Although not beauty, is known for her cleverness, her devotion, and her modesty.
- Insecure about her looks and her ability to attract men.

- Compares herself often to her cousin Helen, whom she loathes.
- Marries at age 15.
- She loves Odysseus, however, and the two often lie in bed together, telling stories.
- Gives birth to her son a year before Odysseus leaves for the Trojan war.
- Becomes an expert at managing Odysseus's estate independently while he is away.
- Suitors beg for her hand in marriage and she employs twelve of her maids to help her spy on them.
- She tricks the impatient suitors by telling them that she will not select one of them for marriage until she is finished making a shroud for her father-in-law.
- Unravels her progress each night with the help of the trusted maids.
- In the afterlife is haunted by the fact that Odysseus ordered the maids' deaths when he returned home.
- She never chooses to be reborn, preferring like she did in life, to stay at home in the fields of asphodel.

### Quotes

- "And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been?"
- "Don't follow my example!"
- "Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does."
- "The fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape."
- "There was supposed to be blood."
- "Eurycea was an expert on all such matters."
- "Why was he still – and possibly always – thinking about Helen?"
- "He would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the room beam."
- "I pretended to be frightened, and said I would never, never think of betraying his big post."
- "I really was frightened."
- "Always for him."
- "You're worth a thousand Helen's."
- "We were almost like sisters."

- “It was not unusual for the quests in a large household or palace to sleep with the maids.”
- “He claimed his father would have been proud of him for showing some backbone and getting out from under the thumbs of the women, who as usual were being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment.”
- “It’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.”
- “Some songs aren’t worth the breath expended on them.”
- “The youngest. The most beautiful.”
- “My thrushes, my doves.”
- “The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said”

## **Odysseus**

- Penelope’s husband
- Telemachus father
- King of Ithaca and hero of Greek myth of the *odyssey*
- Described as short-legged, barrel-chested and extremely clever
- Deep voice contributes to his profound powers of persuasion and superior storytelling abilities
- Also, an expert sailor
- Marries Penelope after cheating to win a running race for her hand
- Kind to Penelope who falls in love with him
- Vague about his feelings for her
- Odysseus goes to war against the trojans
- Does not return when war is done
- Heroic deeds or lack of desire to return home?
- When he returns, kills Penelope’s suitors and executes her maids
- Leaves him with irreconcilable guilt

## **Quotes**

- “why was he still – and possibly always – thinking about Helen?”
- “he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the room beam”
- “Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed cyclops”
- “always for him”
- “you’re worth a thousand Helen’s”
- “it would have been dangerous for him”
- “it’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness”
- “a huge eagle with a crooked beak swooped down and killed them all”
- “proficient and shameless liars of long standing”

## **Helen**

- Penelope's cousin
- Menelaus's wife
- Paris's lover
- Considered most attractive woman in the Greek world
- Uses her divine beauty to her advantage
- Penelope characterises Helen as vain, cruel and flirtatious
- Penelope worries Odysseus prefers Helen to her
- Continues to seek male attention in the afterlife
- Decides to be reincarnated in the world of the living

## **Eurycea**

- Odysseus former nurse and a servant in his household
- Entirely devoted to Odysseus – always thinks she knows what's best for him
- Annoys Penelope who finds her controlling and condescending
- Loyal servant
- One of the few people who takes the time to show Penelope the ropes when she arrives to Ithaca
- Helps Penelope deliver Telemachus and nurses him
- Points Penelope's favourite maids to Odysseus to be killed

## **Quotes**

- "Eurycea was an expert on all such matters"
- "the impertinent ones"
- "they were notorious whores"

## **Telemachus**

- Odysseus' and Penelope's only son
- Prince of Ithaca
- Born one year before Odysseus left for Troy
- Knows of his father mostly through the stories his mother tells him
- Raised by Eurycea and Penelope
- Spoiled as a child
- Angry and rude to his mother as a teenager
- Criticising Penelope for letting suitors eat away at his inheritance
- Sails to find his father and helps him kill the suitors and the twelve maids

## **Quotes**

- "nine months he sailed the wine-red seas of his mother's blood"
- "he then said that he'd made the decision he'd had to make"
- "he'd gone in search of his father"
- "he claimed his father would have been proud of him for showing some backbone"

## **The suitors**



- Swarms of men who come to beg for Penelope's hand in marriage
- Generally, much younger than Penelope
- Profess to be in love with her
- Talk about how Penelope is old and ugly behind her back
- Only pursuing Penelope for her considerable dowry
- Feast every day in Ithaca
- Eating away at Odysseus's fortune and Telemachus' inheritance
- Recklessly disregard property and rape and seduce Penelope's maids
- Gets killed by Odysseus when he returns

### Quotes

- "the more outrageous versions have it that I slept with all the suitors"

### **The twelve maids**

- Penelope's most trusted servants
- Act as a Greek chorus
- Give their own perspective on the events of the plot
- Sometimes contradict Penelope's account
- Daughters of poor women and slaves
- Spent their lives working for Penelope and her family
- Maids spy on the suitors
- In order to gain the suitors' trust, Penelope commands the maids to say bad things about her and Odysseus
- Also help unravel the shroud that Penelope weaves in order to procrastinate choosing one of the suitors
- Odysseus orders the maids to be killed, and Telemachus hangs them
- Haunt Odysseus in the afterlife

### Quotes

- "we were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse."
- "hard work is my destiny, death is my fate!"
- "we were almost like sisters"
- "neither they nor I could take their servile behaviour seriously"
- "it was most irregular for the servants to be used in this way without the permission of the master of the house"
- "the impertinent ones"
- "the ones who'd been raped"
- "the youngest. The most beautiful"
- "my snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves."
- "we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap"
- "you don't have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain and real injustice"
- "consider us pure symbol. We're no more real than money"

### **King Icarus of Sparta**

- Penelope's father
- Tried to kill Penelope when she was a baby by throwing her into the sea
- Became overly affectionate towards her
- Penelope never felt at ease with him
- Wanted Penelope and Odysseus to stay in the spartan court
- Instead they broke tradition and sailed to Ithaca

### **Penelope's mother (the naiad)**

- A water nymph
- King of minor goddess
- Queen of Sparta
- Characterised as neglectful and cold
- Shows little interest in Penelope's life
- Prefers to spend time swimming in fresh water
- Does give Penelope the advice to "be like water" in order to get what she wants
- Leads to Penelope's weaving scheme

### **Quotes**

- "water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does."

### **Menelaus**

- Helens husband
- Odysseus's friend and ally
- A king of Sparta
- Rich, loud and not especially good looking
- A powerful ruler who won Helen's hand in a contest
- When Helen ran away with Paris, Menelaus came to Ithaca to ask Odysseus to join him in a war against the trojans
- Later, Telemachus goes to Menelaus's palace to seek news of his father

### **Laertes**

- Odysseus's father
- Anticleric's husband
- Faithful to his wife because he is afraid of her
- Let's Odysseus rule the island and, after his disappearance and anticleric's death, takes up a quiet life as a farmer
- Possibly gone a little crazy
- Laertes's shroud that Penelope weaves in order to trick the suitors

### **Uncle Tyndareus**

- Penelope's uncle
- Helen's father
- Shares the throne of Sparta with Icarus
- Characterised as mean, selfish and conniving
- Penelope believes that he helped Odysseus cheat in the running competition so that it would take Penelope to Ithaca and his children could inherit the spartan throne

### **Melantho of the pretty cheeks**

- One of the twelve maids
- Particular favourite of Penelope's
- Often has a speaking role in the maid's poems, plays and songs
- When Penelope told the maids to insult her and her family to gain the suitors' trust, Melantho threw herself into the role whole-heartedly

### **Palamedes**

- Main faithful to Menelaus
- Goes with him to press Odysseus into joining the war
- One who places Telemachus in front of Odysseus's cart, thereby proving that Odysseus is faking his madness to try to get out of the war

### **The fates**

- Mysterious figures in Greek mythology
- Decide the destiny and lifespans of mortal humans
- Three old women who spin thread, measuring it out to determine the length of people's lives
- More powerful than other Greek gods and goddesses
- Cannot be tricked by mortals

### **Symbols**

#### **Weaving and fibre work**

- Atwood connects fibre work and Penelope's weaving with ideas of storytelling and lying
- Refers to telling her own narrative using fiber work terms, saying that she will "spin a thread of her own"
- She calls Telemachus a "spinner of falsehoods like his father"
- The idea of "spinning a take" implies invention, suggestion storytelling is not a reflection of the truth but a fabrication of it
- The weaving and fiber crafts that are literally present in the novel are also used for purposes of deception
- Penelope's infamous weaving project is based on a lie, when, to try to pacify the suitors, Penelope tells them she will marry as soon as she is finished weaving a shroud of her father-in-law
- Penelope undoes all of her progress every night to prolong the process and buy herself time

- Penelope literalises the figures of speech she uses that connect fiber working with storytelling and lying

### Quotes

- “from the distant cave where the threads of men’s lives are spun”
- “and the lives of women also are twisted into the strand”
- “needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably”

### **The maids’ deaths**

- Metaphor for the overthrow of female-focused goddess cults by male-dominated, father-god-focused religion
- The number of maids plus Penelope equals thirteen, or the number of lunar months in a year
- The maids and Penelope represent a cult of the moon goddess according to this reading
- The slaying of the suitors stands for an annual ritual to renew their virginity
- Odysseus’s arrival and his killing of the maids and marriage to Penelope symbolize how male-centric religion hijacked the rituals of this female-focused religion and eventually eclipsed it
- Although the maids themselves offer this reading, they also suggest it as a means to avoid facing the fact that they were real girls who suffered pain and violence.

### Quotes

- “hard work is my destiny, death is my fate!”
- “the impertinent ones”
- “the one’s who’d been raped”
- “my helpers during the long nights of the shroud”
- “you don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice”
- “consider us pure symbol. We’re no more real than money”

### **Water**

- Water takes on a special but ambiguous significance
- Penelope is daughter of a naiad
- Almost got drowned in the ocean
- Near-death experience stays with her, giving her an intense fear of the sea
- Feels sick entire time to Ithaca
- May represent troubled relationship with her mother
- Water serves inspiration to weave the shroud to avoid marrying one of the suitors
- According to her mother, rather than using force, water finds ways around obstacles to get where it’s going.
- In short, water may represent Penelope’s connection to the female body and to her mother—relationships that are painful and strained for Penelope, but important nonetheless.

### Quotes

- “Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does.”