YEAR 11 ADVANCED ENGLISH
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TEXT AND CONTEXT
LESSON 3: CHARACTERISATION IN THE ODYSSEY

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1. CHARACTERISATION IN THE ODYSSEY

Over the past two lessons you have been introduced to the texts on which you'll base your comparative study. *The Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* derive from vastly different contexts and in order to compose your comparative essay you will need to have confidence in your understanding of both texts. One approach which can strengthen your understanding and also provide a basis for comparison is a consideration of characterisation. Composers make decisions regarding characters that influence the plot of the narrative. Characters – often inadvertently – embody the values and perspectives of their personal, cultural, and historical context. Characters thus provide a means for responders to engage in a critical evaluation of the similarities and differences between contexts.

![Odysseus murders the suitors](image1)

*John Waterhouse (1912) Penelope and the Suitors*
The Characterisation of Odysseus

No study of *The Odyssey* would be complete without a consideration of the protagonist. Tradition classifies Odysseus as a “wily” and “clever” man, qualities which in certain contexts can be construed as deception. In Greek literature, Odysseus seems to be lauded for morally questionable acts that others would not be able to get away with. From our modern vantage point we may discern something of the different contextual values of the Ancient Greek world by considering the esteem in which Odysseus is held by his fellow Greeks.

In the passage that follows, Odysseus relates how he deceived the Cyclops Polyphemus. Polyphemus had trapped Odysseus and his men in a cave so that he could eat them:

*The Odyssey, Book 9, 376-463*

| Nightfall brought him [Polyphemus] back, herding his woolly sheep | 376 |
| and he quickly drove the sleek flock into the vaulted cavern, rams and all—none left outside in the walled yard—his own idea, perhaps, or a god led him on. |
| Then he hoisted the huge slab to block the door and squatted to milk his sheep and bleating goats, each in order, putting a suckling underneath each dam, and as soon as he’d briskly finished all his chores he snatched up two more men and fixed his meal. But this time I lifted a carved wooden bowl, brimful of my ruddy wine, and went right up to the Cyclops, enticing, ‘Here, Cyclops, try this wine—to top off the banquet of human flesh you’ve bolted down! Judge for yourself what stock our ship had stored. I brought it here to make you a fine libation, hoping you would pity me, Cyclops, send me home, but your rages are insufferable. You barbarian—how can any man on earth come visit you after *this*? What you’ve done outrages all that’s right!’ At that he seized the bowl and tossed it off and the heady wine pleased him immensely. ‘More’—he demanded a second bowl—’a hearty helping! | 380 |
| 390 |
And tell me your name now, quickly,  
so I can hand my guest a gift to warm his heart.

Our soil yields the Cyclops powerful, full-bodied wine  
and the rains from Zeus build its strength. But this,  
this is nectar, ambrosia—this flows from heaven!'  

So he declared. I poured him another fiery bowl—  
three bowls I brimmed and three he drank to the last drop,  
the fool, and then, when the wine was swirling round his brain,  
I approached my host with a cordial, winning word:  
‘So, you ask me the name I’m known by, Cyclops?  
I will tell you. But you must give me a guest-gift  
as you’ve promised. Nobody—that’s my name. Nobody—  
so my mother and father call me, all my friends.’

But he boomed back at me from his ruthless heart,  
‘Nobody? I’ll eat Nobody last of all his friends—  
I’ll eat the others first! That’s my gift to you!’

With that  
he toppled over, sprawled full-length, flat on his back  
and lay there, his massive neck slumping to one side,  
and sleep that conquers all overwhelmed him now  
as wine came spurting, flooding up from his gullet  
with chunks of human flesh—he vomited, blind drunk.

Now, at last, I thrust our stake in a bed of embers  
to get it red-hot and rallied all my comrades:  
‘Courage—no panic, no one hang back now!’

And green as it was, just as the olive stake  
was about to catch fire—the glow terrific, yes—  
I dragged it from the flames, my men clustering round  
as some god breathed enormous courage through us all.  
Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point,  
straight into the monster’s eye they rammed it hard—  
I drove my weight on it from above and bored it home  
as a shipwright bores his beam with a shipwright’s drill  
that men below, whipping the strap back and forth, whirl  
and the drill keeps twisting faster, never stopping—
So we seized our stake with its fiery tip
and bored it round and round in the giant’s eye
till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft
and the hot blast singed his brow and eyelids round the core
and the broiling eyeball burst—
its crackling roots blazed
and hissed—
as a blacksmith plunges a glowing axe or adze
in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam
and its temper hardens—that’s the iron’s strength—
so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake!
He loosed a hideous roar, the rock walls echoed round
and we scuttled back in terror. The monster wrenched the spike
from his eye and out it came with a red geyser of blood—
he flung it aside with frantic hands, and mad with pain
he bellowed out for help from his neighbour Cyclops
living round about in caves on windswept crags.
Hearing his cries, they lumbered up from every side
and hulking round his cavern, asked what ailed him:
‘What, Polyphemus, what in the world’s the trouble?
Roaring out in the godsent night to rob us of our sleep.
Surely no one’s rustling your flocks against your will—
surely no one’s trying to kill you now by fraud or force!’

‘Nobody, friends’—Polyphemus bellowed back from his cave—
‘Nobody’s killing me now by fraud and not by force.’

‘If you’re alone,’ his friends boomed back at once,
‘and nobody’s trying to overpower you now—look,
it must be a plague sent here by mighty Zeus
and there’s no escape from that.
You’d better pray to your father, Lord Poseidon.’

They lumbered off, but laughter filled my heart
to think how nobody’s name—my great cunning stroke—
had duped them one and all.
FOCUS QUESTIONS:

1. What characteristics does Odysseus display during this episode? Choose THREE characteristics and support them with reference to evidence from the text.

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2. Odysseus boasts of his success over the Cyclops and seems proud of his deception. Consider the concept of deception – how might deception be perceived as a positive or attractive quality? What does this suggest about the values of Ancient Greece?

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3. What poetic and narrative techniques add to the characterisation of Odysseus and Polyphemus in this scene? Discuss ONE of each in your response.

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The Characterisation of Penelope

Penelope’s characterisation as a good wife to Odysseus is based on a number of factors. Her loyalty is showcased in a number of ways: she waits twenty years for her husband’s return, refusing to take another husband (or a lover). Moreover, she actively deceives the suitors who are pressing her for marriage. The weaving of Laertes’ shroud during the day and the un-weaving of it at night is a powerful motif for women’s work in Ancient Greece; it also carries connotations of weaving as a form of manipulation. Penelope’s guile seems to be a match for Odysseus’ and yet her characterisation is also tempered by an expectation of her subordination to her adult son in the absence of her husband.

In the extract below, Odysseus has just arrived home in disguise as a beggar. He has not yet been recognised by anyone.

The Odyssey, Book 17, 1-63

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more 1
Telemachus strapped his rawhide sandals to his feet
and the young prince, the son of King Odysseus,
picked up the rugged spear that fit his grip
and striking out for the city, told his swineherd,
"I’m off to town, old friend, to present myself to mother.
She’ll never stop her bitter tears and mourning,
well I know, till she sees me face-to-face.
And for you I have some orders—
take this luckless stranger to town, so he can beg
his supper there, and whoever wants can give the man
some crumbs and a cup to drink. How can I put up with
every passerby? My mind’s weighed down with troubles.
If the stranger resents it, all the worse for him.
I like to tell the truth and tell it straight."

“My friend,
subtle Odysseus broke in, “I’ve no desire, myself,
to linger here. Better that beggars cadge their meals
in town than in the fields. Some willing soul
will see to my needs. I’m hardly fit, at my age,
to keep to a farm and jump to a foreman’s every order.
Go on then. This man will take me, as you’ve told him,"
once I’m warm from the fire and the sun’s good and strong. 
Look at the clothing on my back—all rags and tatters. 
I’m afraid the frost at dawn could do me in, 
and town, you say, is a long hard way from here.”

At that Telemachus strode down through the farm 
in quick, firm strides, brooding death for the suitors. 
And once he reached his well-constructed palace, 
propping his spear against a sturdy pillar 
and crossing the stone threshold, in he went. 30

His old nurse was the first to see him, Eurycleia, 
just spreading fleeces over the carved, inlaid chairs. 
Tears sprang to her eyes, she rushed straight to the prince 
as the other maids of great Odysseus flocked around him, 
hugged him warmly, kissed his head and shoulders.

Now down from her chamber came discreet Penelope, 
looking for all the world like Artemis or golden Aphrodite— 
bursting into tears as she flung her arms around her darling son 
and kissed his face and kissed his shining eyes and sobbed, 
“You’re home, Telemachus!”—words flew from her heart— 40
“sweet light of my eyes! I never thought I’d see you again, 
only you shipped to Pylos—against my will, so secret, 
out for news of your dear father. Quick tell me, 
did you catch sight of the man—meet him—what?”

“Please, mother,” steady Telemachus replied, 
“don’t move me to tears, don’t stir the heart inside me. 
I’ve just escaped from death. Sudden death. 
No. Bathe now, put on some fresh clothes, 
go up to your own room with your serving-women, 
pray, and promise the gods a generous sacrifice 50

to bring success, if Zeus will ever grant us 
the hour of our revenge. I myself am off 
to the meeting grounds to summon up a guest 
who came with me from abroad when I sailed home.
I sent him on ahead with my trusted crew.
I told Piraeus to take him to his house,
treat him well, host him with all good will
till I could come myself.”

that left his mother silent …
She bathed now, put on some fresh clothes,
prayed, and promised the gods a generous sacrifice
to bring success, if Zeus would ever grant
the hour of their revenge.

FOCUS QUESTION:

1. How is Penelope characterised in this passage? What does her treatment by Telemachus suggest about familial relationships in Ancient Greece?
Penelope’s complexity as a character is conveyed to a certain extent through her comparison with the goddesses Artemis and Aphrodite and her interactions with her son, Telemachus.

**ARTEMIS**

Artemis is the goddess of transitions (birth, maturation – of both sexes, female death, hunting). Artemis is a virgin, but for the Greeks she also represented erotic tension. This is likely due to the fact that although Artemis herself remained a virgin, she presides over the transition to adulthood (including sexual awakening). Other prominent features of Artemis are her ability to protect huntsmen which stands in contrast to her connection with sudden death (in the case of women) and her affiliation with all visible diseases. Artemis traditionally carries a bow, and her arrows always bring death. In short, Artemis has a range of complex connections that may enhance your understanding of Penelope’s character.

**APHRODITE**

Aphrodite was born from the severed genitalia of Uranus. She represents all the ambiguity of femininity as the Greeks perceived it: seductive charm, a creative force through the birth of children, and the potential to deceive. Aphrodite is particularly connected with the loss of virginity, and young women would often offer a sacrifice to Aphrodite prior to marriage to ensure a favourable first sexual encounter. Aphrodite is often considered to be a protector of seafarers.

Aphrodite has an important role to play in the story of Troy. When Eris, the goddess of discord, was not invited to the marriage of King Peleus to the nymph Thetis, she turned up at the wedding unannounced and threw a golden apple (a symbol of temptation) onto the banquet table. Eris claimed the apple was for “the fairest woman”. Three goddesses assumed the apple was meant for her: Hera, the goddess of marriage, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It fell to the Trojan prince Paris to decide the winner. Paris chose Aphrodite after she promised him the most beautiful woman in the world could be his – Helen of Sparta. Helen’s defection from Sparta for Troy was one of the major causes of the Trojan War.
2. How does an understanding of the qualities associated with Artemis and Aphrodite enhance your understanding of Penelope’s character?

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The comparison of Penelope to divine figures is a particular type of CHARACTERISATION. If you want to talk about this feature of her characterisation in an essay it is best to refer to as DIVINE COMPARISON. While in most English texts the divine comparison would be classified as a CLASSICAL ALLUSION, because The Odyssey actually is a classical text, this is probably not the best way to describe what is happening here.
The Characterisation of the Maids

Penelope’s maidens have only a minor role to play in The Odyssey. This is key differentiation from The Penelopiad. As Atwood notes in the introduction to her novella:

I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of The Odyssey: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in The Odyssey doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in The Penelopiad, so is Penelope herself. (Atwood xv)

The appearance of the maids in The Odyssey is hampered by a number of factors, such as:

- the male-centric focus of the text, which privileges the perspective of male characters over female characters;
- their relative lack of position in the social hierarchy of Ancient Greece. The maids are essentially slaves, owned by the Odysseus. They mostly appear as an innocuous collective engaged in menial tasks, such as providing water for hand-washing.

One of the roles of the maids is to attend Penelope, and in this capacity the maids offer service as chaperones of Penelope; their presence serves to protect Penelope from claims of infidelity. Their role as chaperone is clearly illustrated in Book 1:

The Odyssey, Book 1: 382-385

| That radiant woman, once she reached her suitors, 382 |
| drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks, |
| paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof, |
| with one of her loyal handmaids stationed either side. 385 |

When Telemachus returns home in Book 17, the maids’ status as property is confirmed:

The Odyssey, Book 17: 31-35

| His old nurse was the first to see him, Eurycleia, 31 |
| just spreading fleeces over the carved, inlaid chairs. |
| Tears sprang to her eyes, she rushed straight to the prince |
| as the other maids of great Odysseus flocked around him, |
| hugged him warmly, kissed his head and shoulders. 35 |
The return of Odysseus exposes a side of the maids that foreshadows their fate. Consider the exchange below between the maids and the lately returned Odysseus (his true identity has not yet been revealed).

The Odyssey, Book 18, 350-386

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The maids of Odysseus, steady man, took turns to keep the fires up, but the king himself, dear to the gods and cunning to the core, gave them orders brusquely: “Maids of Odysseus, your master gone so long—quick now, off you go to the room where your queen and mistress waits. Sit with her there and try to lift her spirits, combing wool in your hands or spinning yarn. But I will trim the torches for all her suitors, even if they would like to revel on till Morning mounts her throne. They’ll never wear me down. I have a name for lasting out the worst.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>At that the women burst into laughter, glancing back and forth. Flushed with beauty, Melantho mocked him shamelessly—Dolius was her father but Penelope brought her up; she treated her like her own child and gave her toys to cheer her heart. But despite that, her heart felt nothing for all her mistress’ anguish now. She was Eurymachus’ lover, always slept with him. She was the one who mocked her king and taunted, “Cock of the walk, did someone beat your brains out? Why not go bed down at the blacksmith’s cozy forge? Or a public place where tramps collect? Why here—blithering on, nonstop, bold as brass in the face of all these lords? No fear in your heart? Wine’s got to your wits?—or do you always play the fool and babble nonsense? Lost your head, have you, because you drubbed that hobo Irus? You wait—a better man than Irus will take you on,</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
he'll box both sides of your skull with heavy fists and cart you out the palace gushing blood!"

"You wait, 380

you bitch"—the hardened veteran flashed a killing look.

"I'll go straight to the prince with your foul talk.
The prince will chop you to pieces here and now!"

His fury sent the women fluttering off, scattering down the hall with panic shaking every limb—

they knew he spoke the truth. 386

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

1. How does this passage complicate your understanding of the maids? Discuss your answer with reference to language techniques and examples.

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2. What does this passage and the other extracts on the maids reveal about social codes in the Ancient Greek world. How do the maids violate social expectations?
2. **COMPARATIVE STUDY - ESSAY STRUCTURE**

**Introduction**
- Unpack the question
- Make a statement about the module
- Connect themes to question

**Body Paragraphs**
- Topic Sentence
- Textual Evidence
- Discuss contextual links

**Conclusion**
- Restate thesis
- Summarise key points
- Make a statement about the Module
3. **BODY PARAGRAPHS**

An essay is a complex persuasive document. In order to write a convincing essay you need to be confident about your understanding of the texts, and what the essay question is asking from you. The final essay you submit for an assessment or write in an exam is the summation of your learning that you have accumulated over the course of a reasonably long period of time. When you are still in the process of learning the complexities of your text, it is easier to begin with the textual analysis rather than writing an essay in a linear fashion from introduction to conclusion.

Body paragraphs are the core of your essay. The body is where you engage in textual analysis. The connection between the evidence from the text and your response to the essay question is essential for persuading your marker of the plausibility of your argument.
When you approach the comparative study of texts, you need to take into account a number of issues.

- What structure is most appropriate for addressing the question?
- **INTEGRATED** is the discussion of both texts in each body paragraph.
- **DIVIDED** is the discussion of each text in separate body paragraphs.

### Topic Sentences

Topic sentences are a structural necessity in your essay. For the marker they provide a guide to what the paragraph will focus on. The topic sentence should include the key aspect, or theme of discussion in the paragraph. Each paragraph is a microcosm of your essay and the topic sentence can be considered the introduction. Examine the following examples and identify the theme of discussion raised by the topic sentence.

**Moral codes in The Odyssey serve to draw out the contrast in the social contextual concerns between the Ancient Greek world and the postmodernist perspective of The Penelopiad.**

**The intertextual reliance of The Penelopiad on The Odyssey prompts consideration of the way in which subjectivity underpins the relative value placed upon truth and lies.**

**The Penelopiad strives to create the conditions of narrative justice, providing a strong alternative voice to the patriarchal status quo of the Ancient Greek context.**
## 4. HOMEWORK ASSESSMENT TWO

### YEAR 11 CRITICAL WRITING MARKING CRITERIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Band 6</th>
<th>Band 5</th>
<th>Band 4</th>
<th>Band 1-3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement with the question/formulation of thesis.</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong engagement with question using a thesis that is maintained throughout the response.</td>
<td>Evident consideration of question; with a general thesis that is referred to throughout the essay but tended to lose focus at times.</td>
<td>Some regard to the question and an attempt at a thesis but has written down everything they know on the subject.</td>
<td>Little to no regard of the question with no discernible thesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Originality</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting and original ideas which show evidence of wide reading.</td>
<td>Original thinking is evident but some ideas require more development.</td>
<td>Some original ideas but they are underdeveloped and not clearly articulated.</td>
<td>No evidence of original thinking; phrases are lifted from classroom discussions or text extracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control of syntax, grammar, diction.</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excellent grasp of syntax, grammar and diction. Writes with flair and confidence.</td>
<td>Mostly well-developed sentences, with occasional grammatical slips; some sophisticated diction used but sometimes inappropriately.</td>
<td>Some well-formed sentences, developing grasp on grammar and diction.</td>
<td>Poor grammar, sentence structure and diction through the response.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strong, sustained structure with a topic sentence introducing every new idea.</td>
<td>A generally well-maintained structure with occasional tangents.</td>
<td>Some attempt at structure; may include an introduction and a conclusion.</td>
<td>No structure; has written whatever came to mind.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Textual examples</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consistent and appropriate use of strong textual techniques with a view of furthering the argument.</td>
<td>Consistent use of textual examples with some weak choices.</td>
<td>Some textual examples but not used to further the argument.</td>
<td>No use of textual examples.</td>
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</table>
CONTEXT AND MEANING IN A MODULE A STUDY

Please note that this task is due for submission in Lesson Four; this means you have ONE week remaining to complete this Assessment.

Module A stipulates that:

Students examine ways in which social, cultural and historical context influences aspects of texts...

With this part of the Module A syllabus in mind, compose an extended response to the following question. Aim for 600-800 words in your response.

Compare *The Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*. How are different attitudes towards social structure and gender relations explored in each text?

To gain the best result in this Assessment you will need to plan your response. Before the next Lesson it will be helpful to spend some time deconstructing the question and consider the following elements:

- Consider what influences you wish to focus on in your answer
- Brainstorm connections between characters and influences from each text
- Go over the evidence from *The Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* and consider the connections to patriarchy, feminism, and postmodernism
- Note down the examples from each text that support your ideas
- Identify the techniques in each of your chosen examples

If you have concerns about the question or the meaning of the text, ask your teacher: they’re here to help!
5. INDEPENDENT LEARNING MODULE: FURTHER CHARACTERISATION

☐ The Characterisation of Telemachus

On the surface, Telemachus is a troubled son who lacks a father-figure; part of his struggle is coming to terms with his role in the family. Much depends on whether Odysseus is dead or alive. If Odysseus is alive, Telemachus has a filial duty to seek out and help his father. If Odysseus is dead, Telemachus will assume the role as head of the household – a position which is constantly under threat from the suitors. If any one of the suitors succeeds in persuading Penelope into marriage, Telemachus' position as head of the household is jeopardised. If Telemachus comes across as frustrated, he has good cause. His fate is inextricably entwined with the actions of his parents, and perhaps as a result of the fact that he has little control over his future, Penelope is often at the mercy of Telemachus' foul moods.

In the following extract, Telemachus is indirectly addressed by Eurymachus, one of the leading suitors competing for Penelope. The tension between Telemachus' priorities and the suitors' is clear:

The Odyssey, Book 2, 215-249

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“Telemachus? 215
Here in front of you all, here’s my advice for him.
Let him urge his mother back to her father’s house—
her kin will arrange the wedding, provide the gifts,
the array that goes with a daughter dearly loved.
Not till then, I’d say, will the island princes quit
their taxing courtship. Who’s there to fear? I ask you.
Surely not Telemachus, with all his tiresome threats.
Nor do we balk, old man, at the prophecies you mouth—
they’ll come to grief, they’ll make us hate you more.
The prince’s wealth will be devoured as always,
mercilessly—no reparations, ever … not
while the queen drags out our hopes to wed her,
waiting, day after day, all of us striving hard
to win one matchless beauty. Never courting others,
bevies of brides who’d suit each noble here.”
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Telemachus answered, firm in his resolve:
“Eurymachus—the rest of you fine, brazen suitors—
I have done with appeals to you about these matters.
I'll say no more. The gods know how things stand
and so do all the Achaeans. And now all I ask
is a good swift ship and a crew of twenty men
to speed me through my passage out and back.
I'm sailing off to Sparta, sandy Pylos too,
for news of my long-lost father's journey home.
Someone may tell me something
or I may catch a rumour straight from Zeus,
rumour that carries news to men like nothing else.
Now, if I hear my father's alive and heading home,
hard-pressed as I am, I'll brave out one more year.
If I hear he's dead, no longer among the living,
then back I'll come to the native land I love,
raise his grave-mound, build his honours high
with the full funeral rites that he deserves—
and give my mother to another husband.”

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

1. What complications does Telemachus face in this extract?
2. How are Ancient Greek attitudes towards women revealed in the extracts studied in this lesson? Discuss with reference to techniques and supporting examples.