

Study Guide & Discussion Questions for *The Penelopiad* (2005)

DAY ONE DISCUSSION, Chap. 1-13 (pp. 1-98)

1. Read the Introduction and be prepared to define the term *epithet*. What epithets are used here for Odysseus? For Penelope?
2. For what, according to Atwood, is Penelope famous?
3. How, as Atwood reminds us, does *The Odyssey* end?
4. What two questions does Atwood strive to answer in her retelling of The Odyssey?

i. A Low Art

1. What specific word choices in the first two pages of the novel communicate to the reader that Atwood is using a somewhat sarcastic and humorous tone?
2. Why do you think that some say Odysseus made a fool of Penelope? Refer to page 2.
3. Why does Penelope decide to tell her story? Explain what she says.
4. What, according to Penelope, is a “Low Art”? What are the various roles of this art?
5. What allusions do you recognize? What modern diction or references are used?
(Continue to be aware of these as you read.)

ii. The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme

1. What is a Greek Chorus? How is Atwood employing it?
2. Read the 7th line of the poem. What do those descriptions of women symbolize? What is Atwood attacking?
3. How is *The Penelopiad* a cabaret so far? What is the major theme of the “Rope-Jumping Rhyme” and to whom is it addressed?

iii. My Childhood

1. Why does Atwood open up Chapter 3 with a discussion of “beginnings”? What comical point is Atwood making here?
2. Who are the parents of Penelope, and what information is given here about each?
3. What first impression in life does Penelope receive of men? What is her “original trauma”? How did this experience impact her later life?
4. What remark does Penelope make that suggests at least one of the settings of this novel (the current setting from which Penelope is speaking) is in fact occurring in our contemporary world?
5. Explain Penelope’s guess about why her father had her thrown into the ocean as a young girl. What rescues Penelope (be specific about your description as it is a particularly odd one), and how does she feel about her father ever since? How does her father feel about her?

iv. The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, a Lament by the Maids

1. What is humorous about the title of this chapter? What is different about the chorus this time? Analyze a potential reason for Atwood’s shift in form.
2. Summarize the maids’ comments. What point do you think that Atwood is making through these characters at this stage in the novel?
3. How do the childhood experiences of the maids compare to those reported by Penelope?

v. Asphodel

1. Research what Asphodel is. What does it symbolize? How is Atwood applying this allusion in this section of the novel?
2. Who resides in the “darker grottos” of the Fields of Asphodel? Who resides in “the really deep levels”?
3. Explain the two ways spirits might get a glimpse of the world of the living. Can Penelope ever see the world of the living? Explain the simile that Atwood uses here.
4. How did people used to summon the dead? Why? What does Penelope say the dead wanted? Why would they want it?
5. Why does Penelope resent her cousin Helen? What about Atwood’s tone creates humor here? Why do you think Helen resides in the Fields of Asphodel instead of in the Elysian Fields?

vi. My Marriage

1. According to Penelope, when do people in our world get visitations from the gods?
2. Why, now, does Penelope theorize her father had grown so fond of her?
3. Why doesn’t Penelope peer directly out of the window?
4. What are the differences between Helen and Penelope (according to Penelope)?
5. Do you consider Penelope an unreliable narrator? Why or why not?
6. How does Atwood make Penelope likable?
7. By what method did King Icarius choose a husband for his daughter, Penelope?
8. What are Penelope’s initial thoughts about what Odysseus looks like physically?
9. By what trick did Odysseus win his bride? In what ways does Helen use the marriage to belittle Penelope?

vii. The Scar

1. What does Penelope compare herself to in the opening of this chapter? Why?
2. What is her evidence for stating that “the gods are not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe?” What does this imply about her attitude toward the gods?
3. What characterization of Odysseus is delivered through the description of the feast and of the wedding night? How does this compare to Atwood’s representation of him in “Circe/Mud Poems”?
4. What do you think is Atwood’s intention by having Penelope remember Odysseus’s statement to her: “I am not going to hurt you, or not very much?” What does this imply about being a woman during Penelope’s time (or our own)?
5. How does Penelope recount Odysseus’ chief strength as “a persuader”?
6. Does Odysseus love Penelope (in her mind)? Explain and site evidence from the text.
7. How did Odysseus get his scar? In what way might the title of this section, “The Scar,” also relate figuratively to Penelope?

viii. The Chorus Line: If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune

1. What is the main theme and tone of the maids’ song?
2. What is the maids’ attitude toward heroes?
3. What point is Atwood making? What is she critiquing?

ix. The Trusted Cackle Hen

1. There is a water motif developing in this story (the sea, Penelope's naiad origins, Poseidon's interventions, Penelope's tears, etc.). How is Penelope's connection to water different than Oydssseus'?
2. What is the point in recounting the story about Odysseus's metaphor regarding the door and key to the heart? What is the significance?
3. How does Penelope characterize her mother-in-law Anticleia?
4. Who is "the trusted cackle hen," and why do you think she's described this way?
5. Why do you think Penelope says very little about her father-in-law Laertes?
6. In what way is Penelope, again, compared to Helen? How does Penelope have one up on Helen?

x. The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll

1. The title of this section might be an allusion to Tennyson's "Idyll's of the Kings: The Passing of Arthur." Why would the maids use this allusion instead of one from ancient Greek tradition?
2. Engage in a close reading of this passage. How do the maids represent women?

xi. Helen Ruins My Life

1. Why are dinner times "especially stressful" for Penelope? Who keeps Penelope company while she spins at the loom? What does this metaphorically suggest?
2. What is special/unusual about the marriage bed that Odysseus created, and how is this an important detail in "The Return" section of *The Odyssey*?
3. How is it that Helen ruins Penelope's life? Who is Menelaus?
4. Why does Odysseus spread the story around that he has gone mad? How does his earlier clever act come back to haunt him? How does he try to get out of this predicament with cleverness, and how does it turn out?

xii. Waiting

1. How did Penelope learn about Odysseus whereabouts and activities? How did she feel about the stories she was hearing? How does she acknowledge the nature of oral tradition and the extent to which any story is true?
2. How does Atwood create humor when Penelope recounts Odysseus' rumors of a fight with a Cyclopes? What is she suggesting about gossip here?
3. At this point, Atwood has turned the symbol of meat into a motif. Analyze her use of it here. What is its overall significance?
4. How, according to Penelope, did she become a different kind of queen than her mother? How did Penelope imagine Odysseus would quantify her worth upon his return? What does war mean for women? Is this still true in parts of the world?

xiii. The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty (As Performed by the Twelve Maids in Sailor Costumes)

1. What is the function of this particular chorus in this section?
2. In what ways are the plights of the maids and the sailors similar?
3. List the epithets used for Odysseus in this shanty.
4. What tone can you detect toward Odysseus?

DAY TWO DISCUSSION, Chap. 14-29 (pp. 99-198)

xiv. The Suitors Stuff Their Faces

1. How does Antinous appear to Penelope in the Fields of Asphodel?
2. What does he tell Penelope about the suitors' motives? What advice had Penelope's mother given her, and how does she apply it to her dealings with the suitors?
3. How does Atwood juxtapose truth and gossip/rumor at this point in the novel?

xv. The Shroud

1. *The Orestia* is a trilogy of ancient Greek tragedies by Aeschylus. Do a quick search to find out the basic plot of the first play, *Agamemnon*, which is alluded to in this chapter. Write a few sentences summarizing that play, including key characters.
2. How does Penelope "postpone the day of decision"? What does this suggest about her character? Explain the complicated relationship Penelope had with the 12 maids.
3. How and why does Atwood use a spider as a metaphor at the end of this chapter? Even though she doesn't like it, how does the phrase "Penelope's web" seem appropriate?

xvi. Bad Dreams

1. What were Penelope's dreams; and which, ironically, was the worst "nightmare"? How is Penelope tortured by her dreams?
2. Why do you think Atwood continuously mentions Penelope's crying? Think about the symbol of water in Penelope's life. How have her tears become a metaphor here?

xvii. The Chorus Line: Dreamboats, A Ballad

1. Compare the maids' perceptions about sleep and dreams to Penelope's. What is the function of sleep, as the maids present it?

xviii. News of Helen

1. What do you think of Penelope's relationship with Telemachus? How does she compare with her own mother with respect to maternal instincts and behaviors?
2. Why wouldn't Telemachus share news of his discovery with Penelope? What does Penelope say about this? How does Telemachus ingratiate himself to his mother at the end of this chapter?
3. What epithets does Penelope use for Menelaus? For Helen? What insight does the title of this section give you into Penelope's psyche?

xix. Yelp of Joy

1. This section presents several critical departures from the traditional details in *The Odyssey*. List any important differences that you recognize.
2. Consider the subject of prayer in the opening of this chapter. What does this discussion suggest?
3. In this chapter, how does Penelope prove that she is just as clever as Odysseus?
4. What important idea does Penelope resolve to share with Odysseus at an appropriate time? Who gives out a "yelp of joy" and why?

xx. Slanderous Gossip

1. Identify three pieces of “slanderous gossip” in this chapter. What person is blamed for maligning Penelope with some of this gossip? Here, how is Atwood using the notions of silence and gossip?

xxi. The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama

1. Atwood has changed chorus form again. Why? What does this new form suggest and why is it appropriate at this point in the novel?
2. What conspiracy do the maids suggest in this dark parody?

xxii. Helen Takes a Bath

1. Analyze Helen’s and Penelope’s interaction in the world of the dead. Compare and contrast the manner in which Atwood represents them, remembering that their representation is all shown through the eyes of Penelope.
2. Describe the tone of the conversation between cousins. What does Helen call Penelope? In what unusual way does Helen quantify her beauty?

xxiii. Odysseus and Telemachus Snuff the Maids

1. Why are the maids killed? What is Penelope’s alibi for complicity in their deaths (in other words, how could she not have known and intervened, according to her story)?
2. How were the disloyal maids reportedly selected? What were they made to do before their death? How does the method of their execution differ from the directions Odysseus allegedly gave his son?
3. What the “more sinister explanation” for the selection and murder of the maids?
4. How is Eurycleia spending eternity in Hades, and why is this both apropos and a convenient obstacle to the truth?

xxiv. The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture

1. What is Anthropology? Define it and then explain what this chapter title is symbolically suggesting, given this next new approach to the chorus.
2. This section is layered with sarcasm that is partially dependent on the vast expanse of time and culture between the twelve maids and the modern reader. What is their sarcastically erudite (scholarly) argument about the significance of twelve maids and one leader? See author’s notes on p.197 where Atwood references Robert Graves.
3. What evidence is there that the maids are speaking directly to you, the reader (and others like you)? What is their poignant message?

xxv. Heart of Flint

1. What actions and reactions does Penelope claim to have carefully calculated? How does she tease Odysseus one last time?
2. In what ways are Penelope and Odysseus a perfect match?
3. Penelope says, “It was a likely story. But then, all of his stories were likely.” To what degree does she doubt the veracity of Odysseus’ stories, and how much does this bother her? What is Atwood’s tone here? Why? What is she suggesting overall?
4. Why did Odysseus purportedly have to leave so soon after his arrival home?

xxvi. The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids

1. Again, Atwood returns to juxtaposing the age of technology and post-modern culture with ancient Greek culture. How exactly does she create humor in this chorus? What effect does it have on the way in which the readers view the maids?
2. What literary artifact, according to a feminist perspective, symbolizes the subjugation (or oppression) of the twelve maids (and arguably, by extension, “womankind”)?
3. What details and techniques make this scene particularly humorous?

xxvii. Home Life in Hades

1. Who are the Sibyls? Explain in the context in terms of this book. Then, research them and explain the context in terms of Greek Mythology.
2. What shades do modern-day people try to conjure? What are “the rules” about getting reborn and having “another try at life”?
3. What lives has Helen lead? Odysseus? Telemachus? Why do you think any or all of the three characters choose to repeatedly escape and try again?
4. How is Penelope still playing the role of the ordinary queen/cousin and the patient and faithful wife (in comparison to Helen)? How does this one idea spin out and expand into a new context of history? In other words, how does Atwood make us rethink our own history when we learn what Helen has been up to?

xxviii. The Chorus Line: We’re Walking Behind You, A Love Song

1. To whom is this “song” addressed, and what is its tone? What rhetorical techniques do the maids employ and to what effect?

xxix. Envoi

1. What is the purpose/function of this section? (What is an envoi?)
2. What metamorphosis occurs, and why might it be significant? What point do you think Atwood is making in this last section?