

Teacher: Why read Homer's Odyssey?

By CHRISTOPHER REA For the Gazette
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We were just beginning our study of Homer's *The Odyssey*, the epic poem that tells of Odysseus' cursed 10-year journey home from the Trojan War. While some students couldn't seem to get past the existence of strange names like Telemachus and Menelaus, others wanted to know why we were bothering to read this old stuff anyway. As an English teacher, this is a discussion I'm quite familiar with. Over my fifteen-year career I've given my share of impassioned speeches, proselytizing the value of the humanities, and for the most part my students have politely sat through them. Lately I've found it's best to let the literature do its work—to let it seep into students' psyches and slowly take hold of their hearts. On some magical days in the classroom, I can see it happening.



Our discussion of *The Lotus Eaters* episode offered such a breakthrough.

During this stop on Odysseus' journey, the inhabitants of a foreign land offer three of his men a taste of a honey-sweet fruit known as the lotus. Once his men consume it, they lose all desire to return to their ship, wishing instead to remain in this land forever. It's a small moment in the grand scope of *The Odyssey*—a mere twenty-five lines—but its message looms large. It's a potential disaster. These men have forgotten their purpose; they no longer care if they ever return to Ithaca.

The class didn't seem too concerned. In fact, to many students, a life lived *Lotus Eaters'* style didn't initially sound so bad. Permanent vacation. No worries. Rest and relaxation. Pure pleasure on repeat. However, their views changed when I asked them to reflect on their own journeys—when I asked them what their Ithacas are. By reframing Odysseus' physical destination as a symbolic sense of purpose, students began to see the text in new ways.

"My Ithaca is to play in the NBA," one student shared.

"My Ithaca is to live in a giant mansion with a bunch of fancy cars," another student offered.

"To go to my dream school," "To make varsity," "To travel the world." The responses kept coming. This was turning into a class period that I could tell would sustain me for a while.

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Once students began to see Odysseus' Ithaca as a representation of their own ambitions, a leisure-filled life spent eating lotus plants took on new meaning. Personal goals in mind, students rapidly shared the many lotus plants in their own lives — an impressive list of pleasurable distractions. Cell phones, video games, junk food, Netflix, and naps were all cited as temptations with the potential to derail their own journeys. Of course, these things are pleasant and fun, but I was glad to hear students express that they would not abandon their goals for endless entertainment. We agreed that a life lived on pause is no life at all, and it soon became obvious why Odysseus needed to get his men away from the land of the Lotus Eaters. Merging this ancient text with their own experiences, the connections became clear.

One student articulated how Taco Bell is a lotus plant when his Ithaca is a road race. Another saw how texting is a lotus plant when she has a paper due. Another how an all-nighter playing Call of Duty is a lotus plant when he needs to perform in tomorrow's game. I was thrilled. Concerns about the age of the poem, the oddly written lines, and the weird names were eradicated. We had reached the heart of the matter. Their spirited responses had moved us to the conclusion--for me, the profound and beautiful conclusion--that we read The Odyssey because Odysseus' story is our own.

Every class, of course, does not lead to such insights. They're not all filled with inspirational connections between literature and life--but when it happens, this is the kind of moment that can buoy me through the toughest of days and weeks. It reminds me why I became an English teacher in the first place. When literature works its magic on us, it can fold time. Eliminate distance. Connect us to each other. Enrich our lives.

It won't happen every day; it might work with one class and fail with another; the unexpected will arise, and obstacles are inevitable—but as I begin each school day's journey, this is my Ithaca.

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