

WEEK 3: GRIEF AND LOSS **Notes Sheet**

Excerpt Analysis

1. Grieving for a Dead Soldier, p. 281, p. 301

*[[First... Who is Circe? Where is Aeaea?]]

*First came the spirit of my man Elpenor...
... we left his body in the house of Circe
without a funeral or burial;
we were too occupied with other things.
On sight of him, I wept in pity...
... He groaned...
... 'By the men you left,
the absent ones! And by your wife! And father,
who brought you up from babyhood! And by
your son, Telemachus, whom you abandoned
alone at home, I beg you! When you sail
from Hades and you dock your ship again
at Aeaea, please, my lord, remember me.
Do not go on and leave me there unburied,
abandoned, without tears or lamentation –
or you will make the gods enraged at you.
Burn me with all my arms, and heap a mound
beside the gray salt sea, so in the future
people will know of me and my misfortune...'
... 'Poor man!' I answered, 'I will do all this.'*

*... Our ship came to Aeaea...
... I sent my men to Circes' house, to bring
the body of the dead Elpenor. Quickly
we chopped the wood and at the farthest headlan
we held a funeral for him, and wept
profusely, crying out in grief.*

A. How would you describe Elpenor's sentiments – practical, resentful, resigned? Were his words or attitude surprising? How do you think Odysseus feels about seeing Elpenor? What do you think about the way Odysseus handles his feelings?

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B. Is there a right, productive, or proper way to handle grief for fellow service members who have died? Is there a wrong way? Is grief too personal for universal rules?

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2. Grieving for an Absent or Changed Family, p. 285

*[[First... who are: Penelope, Telemachus, and Laertes. And what is Ithaca?]]

*My mother answered...
... 'Your father stays out in the countryside.
He will not come to town. He does not sleep
on a real bed with blankets and fresh sheets.
In winter he sleeps inside by the fire,
just lying in the ashes with the slaves;
his clothes are rags. In summer and at harvest,
the piles of fallen leaves are beds for him.
He lies there grieving, full of sorrow, longing
for your return. His old age is not easy.
And that is why I met my fate and died...
... it was missing you,
Odysseus, my sunshine; your sharp mind,
and your kind heart. That took sweet life from me.'*

*Then in my heart I wanted to embrace
the spirit of my mother. She was dead,
and I did not know how. Three times I tried,
longing to touch her. But three time her ghost
flew from my arms, like shadows or like dreams.
Sharp pain pierced deeper in me as I cried,
'No, Mother! Why do you not stay for me,
and let me hold you...?'*

A. Why do you think Odysseus' mother speaks so openly with him, despite the pain it might cause? How would you advise Odysseus to handle or manage the news she shares?

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B. What is common or unique about Odysseus' encounter with his mother? Could a conversation like this take place in modern times – between a parent reuniting with a child returning from military service?

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3. Losing a Unit, p. 314-15

*[[First... Who is Tiresias and what is his warning?]]

*A mighty gust of wind broke off both forestays;
the tacking was all scattered in the hold.
The mast was broken backwards, and it struck
the pilot in the stern; it smashed his skull.
His bones were crushed, his skeleton smashed.
He fell down like a driver from the deck;
his spirit left his body. At that instant,
Zeus thundered and hurled bolts to strike the ship;
shaken, it filled with sulfur. All the men
fell overboard, and they were swept away
like seagulls on the waves beside the ship.
The gods prevented them from reaching home.*

*... I drifted
for nine days. On the evening of the tenth,
the gods helped me to reach the island of
the dreadful, beautiful, divine Calypso.*

A. Given the experiences Odysseus and his men have had, what do you think of his statement that, "The gods prevented them from reaching home"? After the men perish, Odysseus paces his disintegrating ship, but shows no immediate sign of grieving. How does this seeming resilience compare with his reaction to seeing Elpenor? Why do you think the reactions are different? How do you think Odysseus feels about being alone?

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B. What does it feel like to leave a unit after military service? Do those feelings depend on the conditions of one's time in service, the conditions of war, the structure of the military, one's rank? Do those feelings change over time?

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4. Grieving for Home

*[[First... when (chronologically) does this part of the story actually take place – before or after the visit to the land of the dead? Who is Calypso? Who is Hermes? How long has Odysseus been on Calypso's island?]]

*... The goddess went to find Odysseus.
She found him on the shore. His eyes were always
tearful; he wept sweet life away, in longing
to go back home...
The goddess stood by him and said, 'Poor man!
Stop grieving, please. You need not waste your life.
I am quite ready now to send you off.
Using your sword of bronze, cut trunks and build
a raft, fix decks across, and let it take you
across the misty sea. I will provide
water, red wine, and food, to stop you starving,
and I will give you clothes, and send a wind
to blow you safely home...'*

*... So, Odysseus, with tact,
Said, 'Do not be enraged at me, great goddess.
You are quite right. I know my modest wife
Penelope could never match your beauty.
She is a human; you are deathless, ageless.
But even so, I want to go back home,
and every day I hope that day will come.'*

A. Why couldn't Odysseus be happy taking the easy road – remaining immortal and living a life of ease with Calypso? Why is he unsatisfied? What do you think home means to him?

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B. What are thoughts of home like when you imagine it during military service? Are they foggy; inaccurate; crystal clear? What do you miss most, and does the answer to that question change as your time away lengthens?

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BACKGROUND FOR NEXT WEEK (“Higher Powers and Vices”)

- Who are “the suitors”?
- Background on each excerpt
 - Book 13 – landing at Ithaca (home)
 - Book 22 – killing the suitors
 - Book 22 – killing enslaved women
- Important characters [refer to the Glossary in the back of the book for more info.]
 - Athena – The glossary doesn’t mention that Athena often disguises herself in order to assess situations and/or help Odysseus. She has a special affection for Odysseus and his cunning, clever ways.
 - Eurymachus
 - The swineheard (see Eumaeus in Glossary)
 - Eurycleia
 - Melanthius

THREE TAKEAWAYS

1. Review the answers to the “A” questions above to assess: How do you think Odysseus handles grief and loss? What circumstances impact his resilience? What advice would you give him to help him shoulder his pain?

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2. Review the answers to the “B” questions above to assess: How common or unique are Odysseus’ struggles with loss and grief? What could he learn from us, and what can we learn from him?

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3. What was your favorite excerpt from this week’s reading? Why? (Feel free to choose from #1-4 above, or a different excerpt from the book.)
