



General Certificate of Education

Classical Civilisation

CIV2B Homer *Odyssey*

Report on the Examination

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CIV2B Homer *Odyssey*

Most candidates clearly enjoyed their reading of the *Odyssey* and found much in it to talk about. A pleasing number of scripts on this option demonstrated secure knowledge and sound understanding, although some lacked precision in the recall and use of detail. Candidates must be aware that, to obtain higher level marks, there is no substitute for detailed knowledge of the books set. Some scripts introduced valid points from books outside the prescribed reading, but candidates should be reassured that this is not necessary in order to obtain top marks. The short introductory questions, Questions 01-03, were generally dealt with more successfully than Questions 06-07, while the reverse was true for the 10-mark context questions where the moods of Odysseus and the suitors were on the whole much better analysed than Agamemnon's views on wives and sons. There was a slightly better performance on the 20-mark question on Telemachus (Question 09) than the equivalent Question 05 on the visit to Hades, but some excellent answers were produced for both.

Option A

Few candidates found difficulty with identifying the characters required for Questions 01 and 02, although a small minority believed that Orestes murdered his father. Some answers to Question 03 lacked the detail required for three marks, while a few students thought that Odysseus went directly from Ogygia to Ithaca. The best responses to Question 04 employed a mix of direct quotation from the passage with empathy for family relationships of the Homeric era. Some found a degree of jealousy in Agamemnon's view of Penelope; others commented sensibly on the extra emotion revealed when he talked about his son. A number of answers suffered from lack of specific reference to the passage. This tendency to over-generalisation was also evident in answers to Question 05. The most impressive answers considered both sides of the question as well as making specific use of the many meetings and incidents in the book. Some of the best responses argued strongly against the importance of the book, pointing out that most of the 'vital' information received is duplicated elsewhere, but there were good cases made both ways. Very few candidates took the opportunity to mention, even in passing, the tales of women from mythology, characters suffering punishments and Heracles; a very small number used these incidents to point out that the *Odyssey* was intended to amuse as well as inform.

Option B

Question 06 required direct knowledge of a specific passage from Book 21; performance on this question was mixed. More surprisingly, a significant minority of candidates attempting Question 07 had no idea where the arrows in question went. The 10-mark question, 08, was much better done. The passage contained a wealth of detail to convey mood, and this was often used convincingly to contrast the calm and constant approach of Odysseus with the suitors' transformation from arrogance to terror. Many candidates spoke of 'the calm before the storm' or similar. The question of the importance of Telemachus in Question 09 was generally considered from both sides. Many responses again tended to make a series of general points, sometimes repeated several times, rather than evaluating using more specific examples. There were a variety of approaches to the question, with many candidates tackling the appearances of Telemachus in a themed way rather than as a simple chronological narrative. Candidates wrote convincingly of his early positive example of *xenia*, how his maturing throughout the poem helped create a sense of the passage of time, as well as his importance in illustrating family relationships. Some candidates added detail from his travels in Books 2-4, but these were not necessary. The first bullet point referred to 'Telemachus' journey to Pylos and Sparta'. What examiners were looking for here was the reasons for, and importance of, the journey; these can

be found in the set books. The examiners apologise for any confusion caused by the wording but would reassure teachers and students that those who used only the information about the travels from Books 1 and 13 were able to gain full marks.

Option C

This was a very popular question, with many candidates eager to impress with a wealth of knowledge. This was sometimes translated into an impeccable account of the importance of *xenia* to the plot and, less often, themes of the poem. Unfortunately, a significant number of candidates fell into the trap of writing an extended narrative, detailing every incident of *xenia* without relating these to the title. The best essays took a thematic approach, grouping instances of *xenia* under headings such as morality and justice; one or two answers went on to link these to factors relating to Homeric society, rather than including a detached paragraph on the 'rules of *xenia* and the reasons for them' at the beginning. There were some interesting attempts to investigate how far the gods and other immortals were, or should have been, bound by the rules of *xenia*. Those who discussed the reward/punishment aspects of the topic often kept to the more obvious examples; braver candidates examined the fate of the Phaeacians in this context and were rewarded for so doing. Other good answers sought to contrast the, often bad, examples of *xenia* in Books 9-12 with those in the 'real world' of Books 1-8 and 13-23. A number mentioned Aeolus but rarely showed insight into his failure to repeat his generosity during Odysseus' second visit. Calypso and Circe offer interesting possibilities for discussion; unfortunately this rarely went further than stating 'they offered both good and bad *xenia*'. Eumaeus often received a late mention, but several impressive scripts used him to discuss the relevance to the question of one's status in society. Finally, Polyphemus is indeed a great example to discuss, but some candidates wasted much time here by relating every detail of the story, often with minimal evaluation.

Option D

This question was equally popular, representing, as it did, another central theme of the *Odyssey*. Many candidates wrote at length, displaying a rich fund of knowledge of both areas mentioned in the quotation. The best scripts approached the question in an evaluative way, attempting to interweave the two strands, supporting with regular illustration. Many, however, simply wrote two separate accounts, 'what the gods did', followed by 'what Odysseus did'; there would follow a brief concluding paragraph containing an often unsubstantiated, judgement returning to the title; occasionally even this was missing. Somewhat better were those answers which retained the separatist approach but incorporated a degree of evaluation at the end of each section; the highest scoring candidates, however, inevitably evaluated as they went, selecting actions of Odysseus and the immortals to discuss, contrast and judge between. Candidates should beware of leaving comparison implicit: the storm scene of Book 5 was sensibly used by many candidates, but too regularly as a lengthy narrative description, leaving the reader to surmise how far the various parties each contributed to Odysseus' arrival on Scherie. While Zeus was often identified with Fate, few candidates went beyond the obvious to examine Fate as an area to either confuse or clarify the title. Beyond the Cyclops episode, candidates tended to deal over-briefly with the pro-Odysseus evidence of Books 9-12, often resulting in an overall lack of balance. In short, there were pleasingly few poor answers, but a number of missed opportunities.