

THE PENELOPIAD READER'S JOURNAL

There has never been a classical epic composed about a woman (a play, yes, such as *Antigone* or *Medea*). Why? Because “heroes” meant “male warriors or statesmen.” A full-blown epic about a heroic woman was, well, unimaginable! So, what is a “Penopiad” then—an “epic” about a woman named Penelope, the *wife* of the hero Odysseus? Is Atwood trying to redefine heroism to include women? Is she challenging the whole idea of heroism?

CHAPTER	ELEMENT OF STUDY	INSTRUCTIONS
i. A Low Art	Authorial Intention	“Every story has two sides.” It’s a cliché, but it’s a starting point, <i>only a starting point</i> . With Penelope as the narrator, readers hear another side to <i>The Odyssey</i> ? How does Penelope’s story align with that of Homer? How is Penelope’s perspective different? How does Atwood use the first chapter of the novel to establish her intentions?
ii. The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme	Form	Read the last paragraph on <u>PAGE 198</u> , where Atwood discusses her “tribute” to the choruses of Greek drama. Why do you think Atwood chooses to include the voices of the maids alongside that of Penelope? Why do you think she includes them as a chorus, speaking in verse, rather than speaking in prose like Penelope?
iii. My Childhood	Tone	Penelope describes some horrific aspects of her past, such as her father trying to kill her. Speaking as a dead woman—someone in the underworld reflecting on a life of long ago—what is her tone of voice when describing her past? Does she seem sad, angry, amused, etc.? How does “dead” Penelope seem different from the Penelope who lived in Sparta?
iv. The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids	Parallel Structure	Look up the definition for parallel structure. Then underline every example of parallel structure in this chapter. (Tip: There’s a lot!) What impact does the parallel structure create? How does Atwood use the repetition of this device to convey the maids’ tone of voice?
v. Asphodel	Motif	What references does Penelope make to our modern world? Why do you think Atwood includes these subtle nods to contemporary society?
vi. My Marriage	Diction	On <u>PAGE 25</u> , Penelope asserts, “If you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them <b>BRED</b> as soon as possible so you could have grandsons.” What are the connotations of the word “bred”? How does Penelope’s use of this word convey her perception of her role as a woman in her society? Reflecting on this role in the afterlife, how does she seem to feel about these expectations placed upon women?

vii. The Scar	Character Foils	How does Penelope set herself up as a contrast to Helen? To what degree does Penelope seem similar to or different from Odysseus? Do you trust Penelope's characterization of her relationships with Helen and Odysseus? Why or why not?
viii. The Chorus Line: If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune	Characterization	What is the maids' attitude toward the young Penelope? Pinpoint specific adjectives to describe their point of view on Penelope's marriage. What evidence supports your conclusions?
ix. The Trusted Cackle-Hen	Juxtaposition	Compare Penelope's portrayal of herself as a newlywed to the Penelope we meet narrating the story in the afterworld. What aspects of her former behavior seem to embarrass her now? In what way does she still seem to be the same? Why might Atwood have included these "different Penelope's"?
x. The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll	Subverting Form	An idyll is traditionally a poem that takes pastoral (country life) and rustic subjects, usually with a peaceful and idealizing tones. On <u>PAGE 67</u> , which diction and imagery choices seem in keeping with the traditional use of this form? Which seem to violate or flip that expectation?
xi. Helen Ruins My Life	Titles	Up to this point, the titles of the chapters with Penelope's first-person narrations have had a largely neutral tone: "My Marriage," "The Scar," "My Childhood," etc. What tone does the word " <b>RUINS</b> " create for Penelope when she talks about Helen and the chapter as a whole? In what way does this initial definition of a non-neutral tone shape your reading of the stories in this chapter?
xii. Waiting	Punctuation	On <u>PAGE 83-84</u> , circle any repeated punctuation marks that are not commas or periods. Which marks do you see repeated most frequently? What relationship of ideas is created by these punctuation choices? How would our understanding of the different versions of the tales of Odysseus's travels be different if Atwood had only used periods and commas?
xiii. The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty	Indirect Characterization	In this chapter, the Chorus of maidens dress up as the sailors of Odysseus's crew. Through this disguise/costume, without ever describing the sailors directly, the handmaids indirectly characterize the sailors. How would you describe the sailors? Does this characterization shape or change your perception of Odysseus's goodness as a captain and leader?
xiv. The Suitors Stuff Their Faces	Characterization	Penelope begins this chapter in a conversation with Antinous. In the conversation, he describes her as "Merciless in life, merciless in death" (100), which is a major departure from how Penelope has characterized herself.

		Examine Penelope's words to Antinous in that section. Does the indirect characterization of Penelope (through her own words and behavior) support or contradict Antinous's description? Provide evidence for your assertion.
xv. The Shroud	Tone	This central chapter provides Penelope's account not only of her most famous action (tricking the suitors by weaving and unweaving the shroud), but also of the role the handmaids played in her deception. (Remember they end up murdered as a punishment for their supposed disloyalty!) What is her account of their and her own guilt? What moments of tonal shift do you notice in this description? Are there any diction choices or tones that surprise you, given her subject matter?
xvi. Bad Dreams	Personification	On <u>PAGE 121</u> , Penelope asserts, "I cried so much I thought I would turn into a river or a fountain, as in the old tales." Later she refers to herself as a pond and an ocean. Throughout the book, Penelope links herself to bodies of water not only as a description of her tendency to cry, but also as a description of her personality. What personality attributes would you associate with water in general, and different specific bodies of water?
xvii. The Chorus Line: Dreamboats. A Ballad	Objectification	Review the literary definition of objectification. Underline examples of objectification you find in this chapter. What do the <i>specific</i> objects that the handmaidens are associated with suggest about what they and society perceive as the source of their value?
xviii. News of Helen	Repetition	This chapter is easily the fifth time that Penelope has couched her account of important plot details from the <i>Odyssey</i> in terms of Helen. What does Penelope's fixation with Helen suggest about their relationship? What about what constitute the <i>important</i> details from the perspective of this particular female voice?
xix. Yelp of Joy	Authorial Intention & Dramatic Irony	This section presents several critical departures from the traditional details in <i>The Odyssey</i> . Keep a list of those important differences. Why might Atwood choose to reimagine these details? How do the alterations contribute to her authorial intentions?  What important idea does Penelope resolve to share with Odysseus at an appropriate time? How is this an example of dramatic irony that heightens anticipation/tension in the story?
xx. Slandorous Gossip	Figurative Language	Penelope says that Anticleia planted a "toxic seed" in Odysseus' mind. What is it? How does the comparison elaborate on what Penelope is discussing in this chapter?

xxi. The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama	Form	Atwood has changed chorus form again; this time they present a dark parody. Why? What does this new form suggest and why is it appropriate at this point in the novel?
xxii. Helen Takes a Bath	Point of View	Describe the tone of the conversation between the cousins. How might Penelope's point of view be impacting the tone in this passage?
xxiii. Odysseus and Telemachus Snuff the Maids	Characterization	Does Penelope feel responsible for the maids' deaths? If so, why? What is the "more sinister explanation" for the selection and murder of the maids? What does this theory reveal about Penelope's character?
xxiv. The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture	Satire	This chapter is layered with sarcasm that is partially dependent on the vast expanse of time and culture between the twelve maids (ancient Greeks) and the modern reader. What is "Anthropology"? What is the maids' "scholarly" argument about the significance of the twelve maids and one leader? What is their poignant overall message?
xxv. Heart of Flint	Tone	At the end of this chapter, Penelope says, "It was a likely story. But then, all of his stories were likely" (174). To what is she referring? What is Atwood's tone here? Why? What is she suggesting overall?
xxvi. The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids	Juxtaposition	Again, Atwood returns to juxtaposing the age of technology and post-modern culture with ancient Greek culture. What details and literary techniques contribute to the humor in this chorus? How does the humor impact the way the reader views the maids?
xxvii. Home Life in Hades	Allusion	Who are the Sibyls? Explain in the context of this book. Then, research them and explain them in terms of Greek mythology.
xxviii. The Chorus Line: We're Walking Behind You, A Love Song	Figurative Language (Simile)	Explore the use of simile in this "song." What do the comparisons imply about the maids, Odysseus and their relationship in the afterlife?
xxix. Envoi	Symbolism	What point do you think Atwood is making in this last chapter? Research the symbol of the owl in Greek mythology and then apply its meaning to your discussion of this last chapter's message.