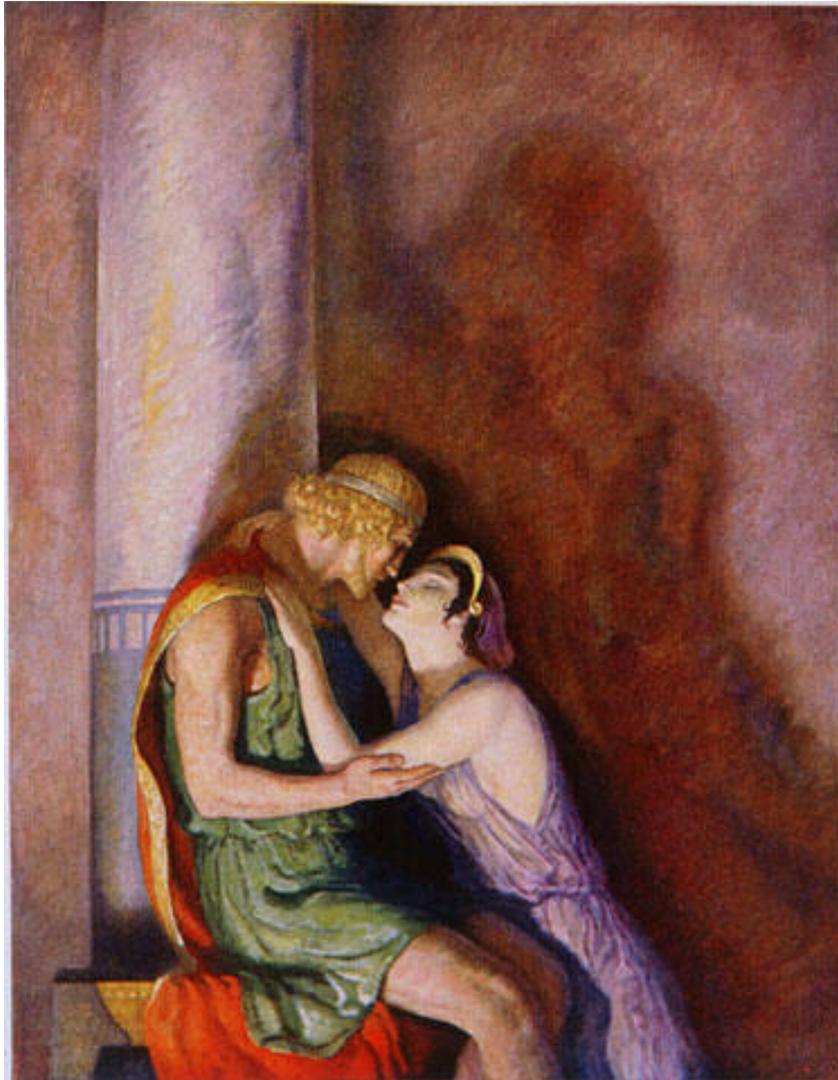


# Odysseus/Penelope



*Newell Convers Wyeth, Painting of Odysseus and Penelope Reunited, 1929, Brandywine River Museum of Art, Pennsylvania, oil on canvas.*

## Vaishnavi Sistla

In Newell Convers Wyeth's *Painting of Odysseus and Penelope Reunited*, the Greek hero Odysseus is embraced by Penelope, his loving wife. The painting was created through oil on canvas, which can be observed through the rich colors and dramatic coloring present. Wyeth weaves Greek mythology with artistic elements to depict the fulfilling and loyal relationship between Penelope and Odysseus.

The relationship between Odysseus and Penelope is one that has inspired much conversation and artistry, both on behalf of the significance of their relationship as well as of both Penelope and Odysseus in Greek mythology. Odysseus (left) is best known as the main subject of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Odysseus fought in the Trojan War and was known as the wisest of the Greek heroes from Troy; with these qualities, it is no surprise that he was a favorite of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare. Prior to his deployment, Odysseus was married to Penelope (right), a princess from the kingdom of Ithaca, who is largely regarded as his equal in intelligence and resourcefulness. Due to the combined events of the Trojan War and the Odyssey, or the journey that Odysseus underwent in order to return to Ithaca and to his wife Penelope, the two were separated from each other for a span of twenty years. During this time, Penelope famously warded off a total of 108 suitors who were vying for her hand in the absence of her husband and with the ulterior motive to secure rule over Ithaca. The relationship between Odysseus and Penelope is highly regarded for its testament to loyalty and equality; loyalty because Penelope waited twenty years for her husband to return despite lacking any knowledge of whether he lived, equality as shown through how Odysseus viewed his wife as his peer in intelligence and patience (Morford et al. 517-521).

Wyeth's painting is set after the famous scene in *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus defeats Penelope's suitors and depicts Odysseus and Penelope embracing each other. The scene depicted is still, yet fraught with emotions which contrasts with the preceding violence. Through the use of pink tones in the majority of the painting, namely the background, the pillar, and in elements of Penelope's dress, a theme of romanticism is communicated to the viewer. The inclusion of the pillar, which Odysseus sits upon, serves as a reference to their marriage bed. Commissioned by Odysseus as a gift to Penelope, their marriage bed is carved from the bedpost of a live olive tree; the significance of this occurs both as the way that Penelope is able to identify Odysseus amongst her suitors as well as a larger metaphor for the unbreakable bond and endurance of their love for each other. Penelope and Odysseus are painted with their eyes closed. With a greater understanding of the events of the Trojan War and *The Odyssey*, this can be interpreted as both parties recognizing that they have finally attained peace. After their reunion, it is written that "He [Odysseus] wept as he held the wife who matched his heart [...] even so with joy did she [Penelope] look upon her husband, and her white arms would not let go of her neck" (Odyssey 23. 232–240). Although from a different scene, the emotional nature of this passage is depicted through Wyeth's painting. Penelope holds onto the man that she loves and no longer has to devise plans to avoid remarriage, while Odysseus has returned from the horrors of the past twenty years to the woman he loves and regards as his true equal in life. When apart, both faced trials and tribulations; together, their shared resilience is rewarded with peace and companionship in each other.

My interest in the piece stems from how Wyeth is able to express the emotional complexity of such a reunion through artistic elements. In doing so, Wyeth is able to bring out a story that may be overlooked over the adventures and tragedies of what is notably regarded as the original ‘quest’. *Painting of Odysseus and Penelope Reunited* depicts the emotional finale to *The Odyssey* between Penelope and Odysseus and, in doing so, emphasizes the importance and rewards of loyalty, resilience, and trust as the foundation of relationships.

## **Nandini Yogi**

The painting *Odysseus and Penelope Reunited* by Newell Convers Wyeth depicts a moment of recognition between Odysseus and Penelope. Painted in 1929 and now housed at the Brandywine River Museum of Art, this oil on canvas painting reimagines the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope after twenty years of separation. In this essay, I argue that Wyeth’s painting reframes Homer’s epic not as a story of heroic conquest, but as a myth about endurance and emotional restoration, particularly emphasizing Penelope’s often overlooked strength.

The background of this scene originates in *The Odyssey*. After fighting the Trojan War, Odysseus wanders for 10 years, facing divine obstacles including Poseidon's wrath. Meanwhile, in Ithaca, Penelope remains besieged by suitors who assume Odysseus is dead. However, Penelope resists them, most famously by weaving and secretly unweaving a burial shroud to delay remarriage. When Odysseus finally returns in disguise and defeats the suitors, Penelope does not immediately accept him. Instead, she tests him by referencing their immovable marriage bed, carved from a living olive tree. This moment accentuates the central theme of the epic, that intelligence defines both Odysseus and Penelope (Morford et al. 517-521).

Wyeth chooses to depict the quiet aftermath of this recognition rather than the violence of the suitor’s slaughter. The painting centers on the embrace itself. Odysseus, no longer disguised as the beggar, appears grounded and solid, while Penelope leans into him, her body curved in relief. Unlike more dramatic depictions of Greek Myth that emphasize action, Wyeth employs softened lighting and warm tones that create a suspended, intimate atmosphere. The architecture behind him, suggestive of Ithacan stability, frames their reunion as a restoration of order.

What is unique about Wyeth’s interpretation is the emotional stillness. Homer describes Odysseus weeping as he holds Penelope. Wyeth visually translates this into posture and proximity rather than literal tears. Along with that, their closed eyes depict trust between Penelope and Odysseus. The myth becomes less about Odysseus’s heroic suffering and more about shared resilience. The epic’s violence is absent, and what remains is reunion as catharsis.

Personally, I find this interpretation compelling because it restores balance to a story often dominated by Odysseus's exploits. In many retellings, Penelope functions as a symbol of fidelity, however, here, she is an equal participant in the emotional gravity of the moment. The reunion is not framed as Odysseus reclaiming what is his, but as two individuals rediscovering one another after trauma and time. The myth, therefore, becomes timeless because it speaks to longing, patience, and recognition. By presenting *Odysseus and Penelope Reunited* in this exhibition, I invite viewers to reconsider what constitutes heroism in Greek mythology. Wyeth's painting suggests that survival and steadfast love are as worthy of remembrance as battlefield glory. In transforming Homer's poetry into paint, Wyeth reminds us that myth continues to evolve, shaped by values of each era that retells it.

Works Cited:

*Homer. The Odyssey.*

*Morford, Mark P. O., Robert J. Lenardon, and Michael Sham. Classical Mythology: Greek and Roman Myths. 11th ed., Oxford University Press, 2019.*

*Newell Convers Wyeth, Painting of Odysseus and Penelope Reunited, 1929, Brandywine River Museum of Art, Pennsylvania, oil on canvas.*