

We Have Met the Sea People and He is Us

Christopher Nolan's *Odyssey*

Apart from the commentary in blue, the excerpt that follows is reproduced verbatim from Christopher Nolan's published screenplay. The formatting of the excerpt itself with its stage directions and capitalizations are Nolan's. The glossary and formatting guide at the end are not part of the published screenplay.

BEFORE • The unnamed speaker

The screenplay identifies the speaker as Odysseus, but Penelope has not yet learned who he is. His repeated "What if" and third-person "he" let him tell his own story as though it belonged to someone else. The distance is both a disguise and a way of approaching what he finds almost impossible to confess.

ODYSSEUS

What if, one night in a strange city, he saw things that made him think the home he knew couldn't possibly be there any more?

Odysseus closes his eyes . . .

EXT. TROY – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The great Wooden Horse stands in the moonlight before the Temple of Athena . . . Odysseus CLIMBS down from the belly . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

What if when he left the belly of the Horse . . .

EXT. GATES OF TROY – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Odysseus signals the TORCHES to DROP. The gates to be opened . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

. . . And opened the gates of Troy . . .

The VAST GATES open. AGAMEMNON stands there in the moonlight. RIVERS OF GREEK WARRIORS stream past him on either side . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

He saw ten years of rage pour into that city in one night . . .

THOUSANDS of Greek Warriors race through the streets, SETTING FIRES, pulling people from houses and MURDERING them in the streets . . . the TROJAN WARRIORS race into the streets, still PUTTING ON THEIR Armour, they are CUT DOWN by the MURDEROUS GREEKS FLYING through the narrow streets . . .

Odysseus CLASHES BRONZE with Trojans as he races back up towards the temple . . . he RACES into the square, STOPS, TURNING AROUND IN PLACE TO WITNESS CARNAGE ALL AROUND . . .

A Trojan is UPON Odysseus, HACKING at him, FURIOUSLY . . .

Eurylochus STABS the Trojan, SAVING Odysseus . . . Eurylochus offers his hand, pulling Odysseus to his feet – they run under the Horse towards the temple . . .

AFTER • Opening the gates

The Horse is called a gift of peace, yet it makes possible a massacre. The decisive image is not Odysseus's cleverness but his stunned encounter with the consequences of that cleverness. Eurylochus saves him physically; nothing here can rescue him from what he has seen.

BEFORE • The gift reconsidered

Returning to Ithaca, the speaker abandons the safer third person: "We left them a gift." Even before his identity is revealed, the shift from "he" to "we" makes his implication unmistakable. Penelope hears not a victory story but an admission of violated trust.

INT. MEGARON, PALACE OF ITHACA – NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT)

Odysseus still has his eyes closed . . .

ODYSSEUS

We left them a gift. An offering of peace that they took into their home.

Odysseus opens his eyes to look at Athena, who is CRYING. On the other side of the screen, Penelope listens, appalled . . .

ODYSSEUS

We violated all that's ever sacred between people . . .

Odysseus reaches out and interlaces fingers with Athena . . .

AFTER • "We violated"

"All that's ever sacred between people" enlarges the crime beyond the sack of a particular city. Athena's tears suggest that the story concerns an injury to the moral order, not merely a military outrage.

BEFORE • A human face and a broken image

The temple sequence gives that violation a visual form. Watch how Nolan joins the defenseless woman, whose grey eyes plead for mercy, to the statue of Athena. The match-cut makes the killing of a human being and the desecration of a goddess almost the same action.

INT. TEMPLE OF ATHENA, TROY – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Odysseus runs into the temple . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

And turned a fight into a hunt.

Polites moves towards the STATUE OF ATHENA, sword DRAWN . . .

A GREEK SOLDIER THROWS a CRYING TROJAN WOMAN down in front of him . . .

SHE MAKES EYE CONTACT WITH ODYSSEUS – SHAKING HER HEAD, GREY EYES PLEADING FOR MERCY . . .

IT IS THE PERSON WE HAVE SEEN AS ATHENA –

Odysseus sees the Greek Soldier SWING HIS SWORD TOWARDS HER NECK AND WE MATCH-CUT TO:

Polites DECAPITATES the STATUE OF ATHENA, SPARKING, STONE HEAD TUMBLING onto the filthy marble floor of the temple . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

To burn the walls of Troy was to burn the world entire . . .

Odysseus stands there, FROZEN, watching the stone head ROCK FROM SIDE TO SIDE as it comes to rest . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

Including his home.

AFTER • The decapitated Athena

Odysseus can only watch the stone head settle. The extraordinary claim that burning Troy meant burning “the world entire,” “including his home,” turns the victory into an act of self-destruction. The image of Athena vanishing from Ithaca suggests how difficult it is for him to sustain her presence.

BEFORE • Knowing what he had done

The question now changes. Earlier he asked what a man might have seen. Now he asks whether the man knew, from the very night of the sack, exactly what he had done. The ruined city and the Greeks’ celebrations expose the gap between triumph and understanding.

INT. MEGARON, PALACE OF ITHACA – NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT)

Odysseus’s hand is empty. “Athena” is gone.

ODYSSEUS

What if he knew, that very night . . . ?

EXT. TROY – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Odysseus walks through the BURNING CITY, its VAST TOWERS COLLAPSING ALL AROUND HIM . . . BURNING, TUMBLING CHUNKS OF ARCHITECTURE LANDING IN FIERY CLOUDS, CRUSHING, DESTROYING . . . STATUES PULLED DOWN WITH ROPES . . . ARMAGEDDON . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

As he walked through fires of anarchy and pain . . .

EXT. RUINS OF TROY – DAY (FLASHBACK)

Odysseus WATCHES thousands of Greek Warriors CELEBRATING in the ashes of Troy. Drunk. Appalling.

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

And in the days of sweaty celebrations to follow . . .

Someone KNOCKS Odysseus on the shoulder, but he does not react, STARING . . .

ODYSSEUS (V.O.)

What if he knew exactly what he’d done?

AFTER • Victory and recognition

The ruin stretches from the night of Troy’s fall into the victorious army’s drunken celebrations. “What if he knew exactly what he’d done?” can be heard as an accusation directed by Odysseus at himself, though he continues to hide within “be.”

BEFORE • Penelope answers

Penelope corrects the speaker’s solitary account: “What all of you had done.” Her interruption changes the moral scale. Whatever Odysseus’s responsibility for the Horse, the destruction was collective. His next words nevertheless return to “one man’s idea.”

INT. MEGARON, PALACE OF ITHACA – NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT)

Penelope rests her head gently against the screen.

PENELOPE

What all of you had done.

Odysseus breathes . . .

ODYSSEUS

One man's idea. One man's trick to break Zeus's law forever.

He looks up at the stones and beams of the megaron, looming in the firelight . . .

ODYSSEUS

We lived in a world of palaces and trade and language . . . blind to its beauty until we broke it.

Penelope realizes something . . .

PENELOPE

You are the people from the sea . . .

AFTER • “The people from the sea”

Penelope's “You are the people from the sea” turns the Greeks into the destroyers from whom civilization might once have feared invasion. Her “you” may address the speaker while also naming the entire force he describes. The passage invites a historical analogy with the collapse of Bronze Age palatial culture, but the screenplay's moral interpretation should not be mistaken for an established historical explanation.

BEFORE • The final admission

The speaker's language expands from “one man” to “we” and “our”: palaces, trade, language, an entire age. Yet he ends by retreating once more into “he,” a man who might not bear to see his own home. The concealment of identity and the fear of homecoming are now bound together.

ODYSSEUS

The breaking of Zeus's law is spreading like cancer. Our age of bronze is collapsing. And maybe he couldn't bear to see the ruins of what he'd done, anywhere. Least of all his home.

Odysseus rubs his face. Turns to the screen, glimpsing Penelope in the lamplight . . .

AFTER • The home he cannot face

At the end, Penelope is present only as a glimpse through the screen. The man who has returned is physically close to his home and wife, yet remains divided from both by the story he is telling and the identity he has not disclosed. The screenplay makes homecoming a problem of moral recognition as much as arrival.

Screenplay Terms and Conventions

INT. (Interior) The scene takes place indoors.

EXT. (Exterior) The scene takes place outdoors.

V.O. (Voice-over) A character's voice is heard over images, without the character speaking within the scene shown. Here Odysseus narrates events at Troy while we see them in flashback.

FLASHBACK A scene showing an earlier event rather than the narrative present.

BACK TO PRESENT A return from an earlier event to the scene in Ithaca.

MATCH-CUT An editing transition that joins two shots through a resemblance in image, composition, or action. Here a sword moving toward the Trojan woman's neck cuts to the decapitation of Athena's statue, linking human violence and sacrilege.

Capital letters in action Emphasis on notable actions, images, or sounds (for example, CLIMBS, MURDERING, or STOPS). This is a screenplay convention, not a new speaker.

Scene headings Labels such as "EXT. TROY – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)" identify where and when a scene takes place.

Megaron (μέγαρον) A great hall or principal room of an ancient Greek palace or house. In the screenplay it refers to the central hall of Odysseus's palace at Ithaca.

The screen An interior partition through which Odysseus and Penelope are separated in this scene; it also reinforces his still-concealed identity.

How This Document Is Formatted

Scene headings Bold capital letters, aligned left, mark changes in place, time, or narrative frame (such as a flashback). Extra space above helps the reader recognize a new scene.

Speakers and dialogue A speaker's name appears in bold capitals. The words spoken appear directly beneath it, indented and in regular black type, so that speech stands apart from physical action.

Voice-over The notation (V.O.) attached to a speaker means that the words are heard over the scene rather than spoken by a person visible within it. The words follow the same dialogue formatting.

Stage directions Descriptions of movement, setting, and visible action are left-aligned, in slightly smaller italic black type. These directions are to be seen, not spoken.

Interpretive commentary The added BEFORE and AFTER notes appear in light blue italics, distinguishing editorial interpretation from the screenplay itself. They are not Nolan's dialogue or directions.

Spacing and typography Whitespace and indentation separate these functions without intrusive rules or boxes. The title stays on one line, without a line dividing it from the text.

Original capitalization Where capitals occur within action directions in the source screenplay, they serve as emphasis. The reformatted directions use restrained typography to make the passage easier to read.