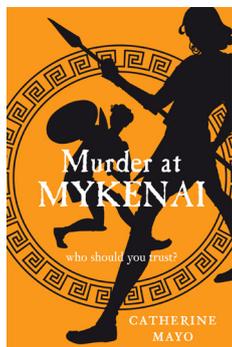


# Walker Books Classroom Ideas



draft cover

## Murder at Mykenai

Author: Catherine Mayo  
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\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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## Outline:

Friendship vs. Treachery in Ancient Greece, a decade before the Trojan War. Menelaos, teenage son of the assassinated High King of Greece, is tumbling ever deeper into danger. Odysseus, his best friend, tries to help – but Odysseus's great ideas have a tendency to come unstuck ...

## Author Information:

Catherine Mayo grew up in Auckland and was a compulsive reader and dreamer. With academics in her DNA (her dad was a research scientist and her grandfather a professor of philosophy) it was taken for granted she would go to university. She studied many things at Auckland University – history, philosophy, geology, French, music, performance violin and art history – before life took an unexpected turn and she began an apprenticeship in violin-making and restoration. About 10 years ago she started writing, urged on by the stories and dreams that filled her head since she was a child. She has since won several prizes in short story competitions. *Murder at Mykenai* is her first book.

## How to use these notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

### These notes are for:

- Secondary school years  
Aus 7-8  
NZ 9-10
- Ages 12+

### Key Learning Areas:

- English
- History

### Example of:

- Novel
- Historical fiction

### Themes/ Ideas:

- Action
- Adventure
- Classical history
- Friendship

### National Curriculum Focus:\*

Content descriptions include:

#### English

Year 7  
ACELA1528  
ACELA1782  
ACELA1532  
ACELT1619  
ACELT1620  
ACELT1621  
ACELT1803  
ACELT1622  
ACELY1719

#### Year 8

ACELA1547  
ACELT1626  
ACELT1627  
ACELT1629  
ACELT1807  
ACELT1630

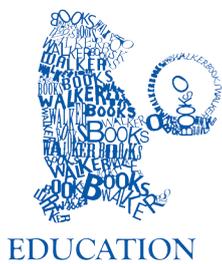
#### History

#### Year 7

ACDSEH029  
ACDSEH003  
ACDSEH035  
ACDSEH036  
ACDSEH037  
ACDSEH130

ACHHS205  
ACHHS206  
ACHHS207  
ACHHS210  
ACHHS212

\*Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian National Curriculum. However, this is not an exhaustive list of National Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text.



# Walker Books Classroom Ideas

## Catherine Mayo on *Murder at Mykenai*

Summers, when we were kids, were spent at the beach. After lunch Mum would read aloud, to stop us going straight back in for a swim and getting a cramp and drowning.

So it was under a pohutukawa tree at Sandy Bay that I first heard the Odyssey. And Odysseus – clever, loyal, resilient, subtle, sometimes foolhardy, suspicious, lucky and unlucky, versatile and brave – claimed my imagination. In a few years I was old enough to sail my own little boat, and for hours I would be Odysseus on his raft, sailing home from Ogygia, his salt-reddened eyes straining at the horizon for the first sight of Ithaka through the haze.

Then growing up got in the way - learning my trade and trying to pay the rent. But one day Odysseus was back, perching in my inner ear and telling me stories of his adventures once again.

This didn't seem so strange to me. The Ancient Greek bards believed it wasn't their own words they sang but those of the Muse. "Tell me, Muse," the narrator of the Odyssey begins, "of the man of many turns...."

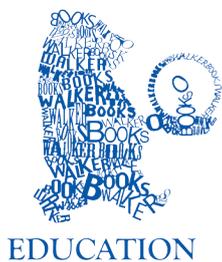
And that's often how it feels when I'm writing. Ideas and words and images come from "somewhere else" rather than from my conscious mind. When I began *Murder at Mykenai*, I knew the book would be about Odysseus as a teenager, and I thought I'd tell a couple of the stories tucked away in the Odyssey – how he won the great bow and how he was wounded by a boar. I did expect him to find Menelaos on the roof of Atreus's palace in Chapter 2, but I was totally unprepared for the pair of them to take over the book and launch into another set of adventures altogether. Blame the Muse!

I was clear about one thing. They would live in the Late Bronze Age – a real period of time – rather than in the imaginary realm of the Greek Myths, populated by gods and monsters. If Odysseus really lived (and I think he did) and fought in the Trojan War (if indeed it happened) he would have grown up sometime in the period 1300BCE to 1200BCE.

And it's been great fun finding out just what that bronze-armed world looked like.



photo credit: Ollie Dale



# Walker Books Classroom Ideas

## Discussion Questions and Activities

### Prereading:

- Brainstorm all associations or known facts about Odysseus, Menelaos, Helen, the Trojan War and ancient Greece.
- Look at a map and find Mykenai/Mycenae and Ithaka/Ithaca.
- Why do you think the spellings of these place names can vary? How many versions of the name “Ithaka” can you find? What does this tell you about history, language and the Greek alphabet?
- Discuss what questions are provoked by the title.

### Chapter One

- How does the writer hook the reader with the opening lines?
- What does the reader want to find out?
- What does the back story about the pears tell us about Odysseus?
- What causes the ostrich to go wild?
- Name three consequences that occur because of the ostrich’s behaviour.
- What do you predict happened to Odysseus?
- Odysseus is Eurybates’ “royal charge”. What does this tell us about Odysseus? What does it tell us about Eurybates?

**Vocabulary:** courtier, languishing, disgorging, torrent

### Chapter two

- Odysseus climbs a ladder against a palace. He thinks to himself, “He wasn’t going to fall, was he?” What does this tell us about his personality?
- What is a modern equivalent for “Poseidon take it.”
- Why does Odysseus pretend to be something he isn’t?
- How does Odysseus twist the other boy’s argument about not trusting slaves?
- Why is Menelaos on the roof?
- What does “Wrath with Mankind” mean to you?
- What does Odysseus’ nickname say about him?
- Menelaos’ reaction to the mention of resembling his mother is curious. This makes the reader want to know what happened. Can you guess what the back story might be?

**Vocabulary:** procession, parapet, forelock, pompous.

### Chapter three

- What mythological reference is there in the word pandemonium?
- List the similarities and differences between the boys.
- Who will win the wager?
- How has suspense been created here?

- Write a brief entry to a diary written by either boy after this meeting.

**Vocabulary:** aulos, pandemonium, stadia, cacophony, postern

### Chapter four and five

- How would you describe the nurse in your own words?
- What difficulty does she make for Menelaos?
- What excuse does Olli make for running away from Eurybates?
- Describe Odysseus’ emotions as implied in this chapter. Consider cleverness, guilt, relief, pride, frustration, pain, horror and shame.
- How do you think you would behave if you got away with something but knew someone else was going to be punished for what you did?
- Was Laertes just?

**Vocabulary:** assailant, desecrating, sully, gallivanting and vigilance.

### Chapter six

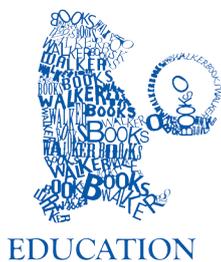
- Odysseus is very clever. He solves two problems at once. How does he do this?
- How would you describe his relationship with his father?
- How would you describe his relationship with Eurybates?
- What does Laertes say is needed to be a good ruler? Do you agree with him?

### Chapter seven

- What is suggested by the italics? If this were a film, how would you show this moment?
- Why is the nurse sad?
- There is a distinct difference between the daily routine of children and men in this culture. Menelaos is just about to cross that line. What distinguishes children from adults in our culture?
- The women and children are segregated from the men. Does this still occur today in any culture you are aware of?
- Would you like to train as a soldier in this way?
- Has military training changed much over time?

### Chapter eight

- Menelaos changes his brother’s words so as not to offend Odysseus. Is this a lie? Is this wrong?
- Odysseus says, “ideas. Much more interesting.” What does this mean? Are ideas more interesting to you than wealth?



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- Why does Odysseus pull Menelaos away from Palamedes?
- When a bully is rude to you, what is the best course of action?

**Vocabulary:** lapis lazuli, cul-de-sac, fraudling (if you can't find the word in a dictionary try to figure out what it might mean)

## Chapter nine

- Find out the meaning of Pandora's Box of Trouble.
- List the facts we have discovered about Palamedes.
- List the facts that we have discovered about Menelaos.
- How do children generally feel when they are told by an adult, "I'll tell you someday...when you are older"?

**Vocabulary:** surreptitious, countermand

## Chapter ten

- Why won't Menelaos hold on to the side of the chariot?
- Thyestes is their uncle. How long has he been away? Menelaos last saw him when he was four years old. Can you remember being four?
- What does it mean to be in exile? What could he have done to deserve such a fate?

**Vocabulary:** oracles, sanctuary, opportune

## Chapter eleven

- How does Agamemnon treat Menelaos? Is this typical of older brothers?
- What worries Menelaos about Thyestes?
- Atreus forgives his brother Thyestes. Menelaos leaves the hall and sees his other uncle, Gelanor. Why is Gelanor uncomfortable?

**Vocabulary:** sinuous, irresolute, saffron

## Chapter twelve

- There is a three day celebration to welcome Thyestes back home. Menelaos is exhausted. Why doesn't he go to bed?
- That night something terrible happens. Explain the event and the impact on Menelaos.
- In his dream Menelaos is riding backwards. It's as though he is looking at the past and can't see the future ahead of him. How does this connect with the events of this chapter?
- Describe the actions of the Nurse. Could you do this for someone you loved?

**Vocabulary:** superfluous

## Chapter thirteen

- The perspective has switched to Odysseus. What effect

does this have on the reader? What does it leave you wondering?

- What is the difference in the mood between chapter twelve and thirteen?
- What is significant about the fact that Odysseus can see the incoming ship before the Captain of the Watch? This is a contrast to Menelaos in what way?

## Chapter fourteen and fifteen

- Look up Helen of Troy and record five facts about her life.
- Would you risk your family's safety to hide and protect someone else?

**Vocabulary:** aghast, blighted, exuded, supplication, curtly, dismember

## Chapter sixteen

- What poetic device is "the blanket wrapped itself round and round him like a python"?
- What are our traditional associations with snakes?
- Who do you think the woman in the dream was?
- Why would Palamedes do something good for Agamemnon and Menelaos?
- Why is Uncle Thyestes trying to kill his nephews?

## Chapter seventeen

- Who is the "vicious, ill-bred young Ithakan"?
- Draw a family tree that shows the connection between Palamedes and Agamemnon and Menelaos.
- How would you describe Palamedes?

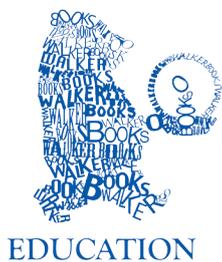
**Vocabulary:** arduous, coup, explicit, azure, hypocrisy, cavorting, impediment, acquiescence

## Chapter eighteen, nineteen and twenty

- Who do you think sent Meges?
- Make your own copy of the map on blank paper. Mark Mykenai, Sikyon, Aigion, Aigeira, Ithaka, Mt. Kyllene, Aitolia, Olenos and Pleuron.
- On your own map, mark the journeys, by land and sea, of Menelaos and Agamemnon in one colour, and Odysseus's travels in another colour.
- What is Laertes' plan?
- Explain what you've learned about the title. Do you have all the answers now? What do you still need to find out?

## Chapter twenty-one

- "His body drooped from his shoulders like a spare tunic hanging in a cupboard." How does this simile signify not only how Menelaos looks but how he feels?
- Odysseus is shocked by Menelaos' appearance and



# Walker Books Classroom Ideas

he is nervous about how to approach him. When a friend has suffered a terrible loss, it's hard to know how to act. What do you think Menelaos would want from his friend?

- Who else sided with Palamedes?
- Where is the line between punishment and abuse?
- Odysseus has gone for help. Why didn't Menelaos ask for help himself?

## Chapter twenty-two

- Something terrible has happened. The reader doesn't know what this is exactly. Menelaos has complained to his brother Agamemnon who took Palamedes' side. Now what can Menelaos do besides suffer in silence?
- Explain Odysseus' one word message.

## Chapter twenty-nine

- Describe Menelaos' feelings during this scene. Pay particular attention to how his feelings changed about his mother. Look closely at the last lines.

**Vocabulary:** irrevocably, dittany, naiads

## Chapter twenty-three

- Odysseus and Laertes have managed to separate Menelaos from Palamedes. How did Laertes make their scheme seem like Agamemnon's idea? Why was that a good method of persuasion?

## Chapter thirty

- What are the two meanings of the phrases "burning ambition" and "mother stewing"?
- What is this language device called?
- How is Odysseus different from Agamemnon as an older brother? How is he the same?

**Vocabulary:** crux, clodpate, scurrilous

**Vocabulary:** macabre, circumstantial

## Chapter twenty-four

- Why are Nauplios and Sipylos making up lies to make the old king Atreus look bad and Thyestes look good?
- What does it mean to play both sides of the game?

## Chapter thirty-one

- How do you feel about the law "it isn't rape if it happened inside a woman's house"?
- What does Odysseus figure out about Europa? How does he test his idea?

**Vocabulary:** unadulterated, insinuations, pungent, veracity, lamentable

**Vocabulary:** blasphemy, jurisprudence, acquitted

## Chapter twenty-five

- Menelaos is troubled by nightmares and he is still unsure of Odysseus' feelings. What advice would you give him?
- Why is Hermes the god of travellers?
- Are you aware of any other divine protectors of travellers?

## Chapter thirty-two

- Which are your favourite insults? Make up four new ones.
- What is ironic about Gelanor's comment about "urging their comrades on with such pride and enthusiasm"?
- Gelanor says, "Death came so close, I swear I felt the brush of his fingertips." Identify the poetic device used here.

## Chapter twenty-six

- Menelaos and Odysseus finally talk. What had Menelaos been thinking all this time?
- What had Odysseus been thinking?
- How would you define true friendship? Are these two boys true friends?

**Vocabulary:** myriad, crestfallen, obliterated

## Chapter twenty-seven

- Can you tell the time by the stars? Can you tell direction by the stars?
- How did the mirror signal system work?
- What is a harpy?
- Menelaos refuses to try swimming. This makes the reader uneasy. Find a quote that captures Menelaos' discomfort.

## Chapter thirty-three

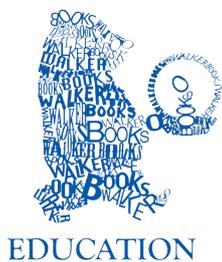
- Find Kephallenia on your map and label it.
- Odysseus helps the conversation move towards a plan to keep Menelaos and Palamedes apart. What new evil idea is Palamedes trying to spread?
- How are Odysseus' persuasion skills like his father's?
- What has the author left the reader wondering at the end of this chapter?

## Chapter twenty-eight

- Menelaos has been brutally beaten by Palamedes. How does Laertes try to justify it at first?

## Chapter thirty-four and thirty-five

- What was Menelaos going to say?
- Why would Laertes think that the boys were planning to run away?



# Walker Books Classroom Ideas

- Was someone trying to kill Menelaos?

## Chapter thirty-six

- Suicide is a terrible choice. What better choices could Menelaos make?
- If a friend confided in you that he or she had such thoughts, what would you do?

## Chapter thirty-seven and thirty-eight

- Why does Menelaos think that Atreus is not his real father?
- Victims often believe that they are at fault. It is hard to convince them that they are not bad but that something bad has happened to them. Does Odysseus handle the situation well?
- If you were Odysseus what emotions would you be feeling?

## Chapter thirty-nine and forty

- Add the journey of Menelaos to Olenos on your map.
- Which journeys have been by land and which ones have been by sea?
- The simile, "A voice slid like a knife into his ear," is very scary. What words do we associate with slid and with knife?

## Chapters forty-one to forty-five

- If you were Agamemnon, what emotions would you be feeling?
- Write an imaginary diary from Agamemnon's point of view.
- Why is Menelaos dreaming that he is on fire?
- Why won't Agamemnon leave the room?

## Chapter forty-six

- What do you think of Nauplios' comment that this business was "His son's little misadventure."?
- Why does Agamemnon not want Nauplios' gold?
- Vocabulary: lauding, sanctity, quaver

## Chapter forty-seven

- How does Palamedes escape from prison?
- Why does he seem a bit ungrateful?
- How does Nauplios feel about his son?

## Chapter forty-eight

- How does Argos help the ship?
- What reason does Laertes give for sparing Palamedes life?
- What does the metaphor that compares Menelaos to a pawn mean? What game is this taken from?

**Vocabulary:** skiff, archipelago

## Chapter forty-nine

- Why is this chapter in italics?
- What is kohlr? Is it still used today?

## Chapter fifty-one

- What lie does Nauplios tell Laertes?
- What happened to Palamedes?
- Who did this to Palamedes?
- What does Laertes mean by "The Gods have a strange way of delivering justice"?

## Chapter fifty-two and fifty-three

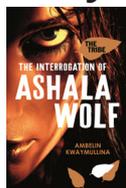
- Why doesn't Menelaos join the conversation?
- If he had spoken, what might he have said?

## Chapter fifty-four

- Menelaos is going to be alright but he still has some unresolved problems. What are they?
- How has Menelaos changed from the beginning of the book?
- What changes has Odysseus experienced?
- What was your favourite moment in this book?
- If you could write to the author, what would you tell her?

**Vocabulary:** cajoled, spiel, flaccid, capitulate, cacophony

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