

# Nobody's Home (The Cyclops)

## 4

### What's the point of this story?



Whilst Odysseus and his twelve companions were away seeking out the Cyclops some of the other men, back at the ships, were spending their time fishing for their food. Some of them were using nets to catch a group of fish in one go, and others were using harpoons. A harpoon is a specially designed spear-like object for catching single fish. They are thrown into the water but are tied to the fisherman so that he can reel it back, hopefully, with a fish on the end of it.

I want you to remember this fishing scenario I've just told you and we'll come back to it later.



Words are weird but useful. Here's an experiment for you to try: I want you to imagine (or do it for real!) that you are in a room with a chair in the middle of it. I now want you to communicate to someone else about the chair but you are not allowed to use any *words* whatsoever. So, you can't write anything down, you can't speak, or anything at all that involves words. How do you think you will do it? How much do you think you can communicate about the chair?

One of the most basic forms of communication is *pointing*. Did any of you think of pointing as a method of communication without words? The first thing a baby does to communicate, however, is cry, but a few months into its life, a baby learns to point. This usually begins by the baby reaching for something, until it realises that it can get mum to bring whatever it is to her by reaching for the object. This develops shortly afterwards to the act of *pointing*: using – usually – the index finger to refer to an object of desire for the baby like a toy or a biscuit.

Now *pointing* is useful when you want to refer to something in particular, like a biscuit, but what if I wanted to refer to ‘the pyramids of Giza’, for instance? If all I could do was point then I’d have to travel all the way to Egypt - with you - and then point to the pyramids so that you know what I want to refer to. But we have a way of pointing to something that is far away without having to go to it. That way is: *words and language*. So, not only have I just referred to the pyramids of Giza without having to go there, or take you there, but I can also refer to something much further away: ‘the farthest reaches of our galaxy’, for instance. Wow – I wouldn’t want to go there just to make the point I just made! And all this is done with just a few, simple words.

Here’s where we’ll return to the fishermen on Odysseus’ ship that I mentioned above.

Some words are like the *harpoon* that some of the men were using to catch single fish. That means that they are used to point to just one, special thing. Names are like this. So, when I say ‘Queen Elizabeth II’ you know that I am pointing to a woman ‘who occupies the thrown in England and who has a son called Charles who is the next in line for the throne.’ However, some words are like *nets* and they point to whole groups of things like the word ‘fish’. So, look at the following words, what do they point to, just one special thing or a group of things:



- 1 Cheryl Cole
- 2 Roald Dahl
- 3 Bears
- 4 Winnie-the-Pooh
- 5 Me
- 6 Your teacher
- 7 Polyphemus, the Cyclops



Now, if you look at numbers 4 and 7, there is something special about these examples. What do they point to? It's clear that all the others point to something we can find in the world – it's easy enough to find a bear, or your teacher, but where would I find a Cyclops or Winnie-the-Pooh? Even if I could travel back in time to the time of the Ancient Greeks, I still wouldn't find a Cyclops, so does that mean that the word 'Cyclops' points to nothing? If it does, then how do you know what I'm talking about when I say 'Cyclops'?

Some things to try:

- Also, numbers 5 and 6 are something of a trick question. How many things does the word 'me' or 'your teacher' point to? I'll leave you to puzzle over this.
- If there are two children in your class with exactly the same name then how can you use words to point to one and not the other?

## Meet a philosopher: Frege and 'Sense and Reference'



The German philosopher, Gottlieb Frege (1848-1925), said that words don't just 'point to things', they also have a 'sense'. So, I may use the word 'umbrella' to point to 'the object I have in my house that I use for keeping the rain off my head', but my daughter may use the same word to point to the same thing. However, when she uses the word 'umbrella' she means 'the thing I like to play with and that I can make a den with'. Even though we both use the same word to point to the same thing, we both have two different 'senses' of the word. So, can the word 'Cyclops' have a *sense* even though there is nothing for the word to *point to*?