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## **Sample essays: The Penelopiad & Photograph 51**

### **Sample #1**

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#### **Prompt:**

“We made the invisible visible ...” (Photograph 51) How do Atwood and Ziegler make 'the invisible visible' in The Penelopiad and Photograph 51?

**Note: This essay has a key problem - there is not enough comparison between the two texts. Textual evidence and expression is satisfactory, but to achieve a higher mark, more comparative sentences must be included.**

## Essay:

Both Margaret Atwood in 'The Penelopiad' and Anna Ziegler in 'Photograph 51' aim to make 'the invisible visible' through their stories. In 'The Penelopiad', Atwood explores Homer's *Odyssey* from the point of view of Penelope, who has a far different perspective on things due to her female gender. Ziegler, on the other hand, shines light on the story of a scientist named Rosalind Franklin, whose x-ray photographs were critical in the eventual discovery of DNA. Both texts feature characters who are not renowned in world history, and both Atwood and Ziegler are eager to highlight their stories and their contributions to society.

It is clear in both texts that there is significant power in taking control of one's own story. 'The Penelopiad' focuses on a main narrative, told by Penelope, with 'choruses' sung by the Maids interspersed between each chapter. Atwood's intent in writing 'The Penelopiad' is to give these characters a voice - she desires to make the 'invisible visible'. This intent is referenced explicitly by Penelope herself, who muses that 'it's [her] turn to do a little story-making'. With the ability to control the narrative, Penelope is able to set the record straight on a number of things; but more than that, she is able to explore the struggles of being a woman in ancient Greek society. The Maids also highlight their perspective - namely the difficulty of living as female slaves - complaining that they 'were born to the wrong parents' and 'drudged from dawn to dusk'. In contrast to 'The Penelopiad', Rosalind in 'Photograph 51' is never allowed to take control of her own story. She fails to receive any credit for her contributions to the discovery of DNA in her time, and only through Ziegler's play (many years later) does she manage to gain any proper recognition. Rosalind is the one who comments that scientists '[make] the invisible visible', and it is therefore ironic that she never receives any visibility or notoriety for her achievements. On top of this, she is belittled and ridiculed throughout Ziegler's play, and is ultimately dismissed by her male colleagues as a 'difficult woman' and a 'right old hag'. Both texts therefore demonstrate how important it is to seize one's own story - that to become 'visible' rather than 'invisible', a person has to have control over their own narrative.

Along with exploring the power of storytelling, Atwood and Ziegler also wish to highlight the virtues of women that have gone unnoticed. In 'The Penelopiad', the character of Eurycleia is known for her many virtues, as well as Penelope herself. Eurycleia is 'widely respected' and 'intensely reliable' in regards to her abilities as a

servant, and Penelope ‘[runs] the vast estates of Odysseus’, becoming adept at ‘what was usually a man’s business’. Neither character really gets their time of day in Homer’s *Odyssey*, and it is therefore Atwood’s goal to make these people ‘visible’ through her story. Penelope references how Eurycleia ‘[made] herself invaluable when Telemachus was born’, and describes how she ‘held [Penelope’s] hands and sponged off [her] forehead’. This is the kind of virtue that Atwood wishes to praise and extol in ‘The Penelopiad’: the gentle, caring nature of women, which is mostly overlooked by the male-focused *Odyssey*. Ziegler’s ‘Photograph 51’ also honours the virtues of women, although Rosalind’s qualities are very different from that of Penelope and Eurycleia. She is a highly intelligent scientist who possesses a ‘single-minded devotion’ to her research, and she remains ‘invisible’ throughout her life, in spite of her notable achievements. Rosalind plays a pivotal role in ‘[getting] to the heart of everything’; her x-ray photographs play a key role in ‘[finding] the structure’ of DNA. Yet it is the male scientists (James Watson and Francis Crick), who receive all the acclaim, all the prestige - it is they, and not Rosalind, who ultimately become ‘visible’. Both texts clearly desire to praise the ‘invisible’ virtues of women; to demonstrate what they are capable of, and to show us that they are remarkable in many ways.

It is arguable that Penelope and Rosalind become ‘visible’ to some degree (at least in Atwood and Ziegler’s stories), but neither of them ever achieve real renown. Everyone has heard of the legendary Odysseus, famed warrior; everyone has heard of Watson and Crick. Far less people would recognise Penelope from the *Odyssey*, and even less would have heard of Rosalind Franklin. In ‘Photograph 51’, much of the story revolves around the what-if’s and the hypotheticals - around how history may have been written differently if Rosalind did not live in such a patriarchal society. She is addressed as ‘Miss Franklin’ by her male counterparts, and she is expected to ‘assist’ Wilkins rather than ‘heading up the study’. Don Caspar notes, at one point, that Rosalind’s achievements ‘should have ... secured her place in history’, but it is Watson and Crick who receive all the fame and glory. Even Wilkins - Rosalind’s ally - refers to ‘the x-ray patterns he’d made’ during a lecture, and fails to give her the proper credit that she deserved. Rosalind is ‘visible’ in the sense that she is able to achieve more than the average woman in the 1950s, but she remains ‘invisible’ in the larger scheme of things. In contrast to Ziegler’s ‘Photograph 51’, Atwood’s goal in writing ‘The Penelopiad’ is not to emphasise achievements that have gone unnoticed by society. Penelope - like Odysseus, and the other Greek legends - is more of a myth than reality, and Atwood is more focused on exploring what her life might have been like back in those times. She imagines that

Penelope ‘was running the vast estates of Odysseus all by [herself]’; that she is a person who develops ‘a reputation as a smart bargainer’. This is not as grand a portrait as that of Odysseus, who fights mighty wars and battles, but it is far more than Penelope is granted in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Both authors are trying to make the ‘invisible visible’, but they go about it in different ways: where Ziegler aims to highlight the contributions of the protagonist Rosalind, Atwood instead just wishes to explore Penelope’s life.

Both texts desire to make ‘the invisible visible’ through their narratives. ‘*The Penelopiad*’ is an exploration of female life in the times of Ancient Greece, while Ziegler’s ‘*Photograph 51*’ is highly centred around the work of the English x-ray crystallographer, Rosalind Franklin. Both texts feature characters who are underappreciated - Atwood explores the plight of the many women (Penelope and the Maids in particular), whereas Ziegler’s play is more focused on the one character, Rosalind. It is Rosalind who comments that her role as a scientist is to ‘[make] the invisible visible’, and ‘*Photograph 51*’ is Ziegler’s attempt to achieve this goal.