
Guide to The Classics: Homer's Odyssey

Epic Hero or Epic Homecoming? Arguably one of the most famous poems centered around a homecoming, Homer's *The Odyssey* tells the story of literature's most famous veteran, Odysseus, and his journey home. After ten years of fighting in the Trojan War, Odysseus's priority was getting back to his wife, yet his trip back home turned into a voyage of endless battles resembling the war Odysseus had just left behind. In many cases, Odysseus's ego was the cause of this cycle of violence, such as when he angered a Cyclops and ate the cows of Helios. For a man favored by Athena for his cunning and metis, he made some reckless choices, causing many readers to wonder if his true intentions were to be remembered as a hero rather than get back to Ithaca. Although Odysseus's occasionally rash behavior and arrogant demeanor cause readers to question Odysseus's priorities, his actions were actually the result of his lasting war mentality, the intervention of the gods, and his role as an epic hero in an epic poem. To begin with, Odysseus displays signs of a war mentality, which gave him a desire to fight every mythical creature on his journey.

For example, Odysseus's aggression is seen when he confronted the Cyclops Polyphemus and felt his "heart beat high now at the chance of action and drawing at the sharp sword from my hip". The words "heart beat high" demonstrate Odysseus's excitement to cause physical harm. His violent state of mind can be explained as the result of when "he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy". The words "plundered" and "Troy" are an allusion to the Trojan War and the moment Odysseus changed the course of the battle with his Trojan horse strategy. This reveals that Odysseus played a prominent part in the war and in the end still survived. The fact that Odysseus survived when so many have died means that he had to be tough and aggressive. This behavior adapted into Odysseus's survival instinct, which proves that Odysseus didn't fight the mythical beasts on his journey for fame, but rather because of his instincts. Caroline Alexander, an author for the *New York Times* underscores this claim in her 2009 article "Back From War, but Not Really Home". In this article, she describes the extent of the influence of a war mentality when she writes, "It's vexing power was underscored... when a military psychiatrist who had been treating the mental scars of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan went on a shooting rampage at an Army base in Texas". By using the words "shooting rampage", Alexander draws a connection between the aggression Odysseus displayed to that of a real veteran.

However, while Odysseus was an active fighter during the war, this man was only a psychiatrist which shows how powerful the influence of war can be. Moreover, the irony in the fact that a military psychiatrist suffered mental damage serves to prove that the impact of war is almost inescapable, no matter who you are. Therefore, there is no doubt that Odysseus did not leave the Trojan War mentally unharmed. To conclude, the Trojan War left an impact on Odysseus's mental state, causing him to want to fight every beast he encountered, and elongated his trip home. In addition, Odysseus's homecoming was also delayed due to divine intervention. After Odysseus angered the Cyclops, Polyphemus got his revenge when he cursed him, saying "never see his home again... far be that day and dark the years between. Let him lose all companions, and return under strange sail to bitter days at home". Polyphemus adds in his curse "far be that day", showing that the journey was always meant to be long, no matter what Odysseus did during his voyage. The phrase "dark the years between" shows that Polyphemus

willed Odysseus to have a miserable journey home too. As Odysseus is only mortal, there was nothing he could have done to escape the curse placed on him by a mythical being. It can be concluded that Odysseus didn't go on adventures to gain fame, he went because they were inevitably placed in his way as a result of the curse. To add on, Odysseus and all of his actions could have been under the control of the gods. Such manipulation from the gods is not unusual in *The Odyssey*, as seen when Odysseus returned to Ithaca and, 'the goddess Athena has cast an obscuring mist over all the familiar landmarks, making 'everything look otherwise/than it was'.

This moment shows that Athena exploited Odysseus's mind so that he saw things differently than they were. By mentioning the word "familiar", Homer displays that Athena's influence is strong enough to make scenes that are recognizable to Odysseus look foreign to him. This shows readers that every action and decision Odysseus made -including those that made his journey last ten years- could have been the result of the control of the gods. In conclusion, opposing divine forces placed physical and mental obstacles in Odysseus's path, which is why it took him ten years to get home. Finally, as an epic hero, Odysseus was designed to be a masculine character to look up to. In Ancient Greece, masculinity was a common feature in most epic heroes because ancient Greek societies looked up to masculine traits. Even today with the uncertainty of what it means to be masculine in this day and age, 60% of people in a 2017 survey stated that looking up to masculine men is a positive thing. This demonstrates that a majority of people both in the past and present looked up to men who are masculine, so in order for Odysseus to be considered the ideal man, Homer had to make him manly. By putting him on dangerous journeys and making seem like an adventurous person, Homer truly makes Odysseus seem like an epic hero like Achilles and Jason. From a more literal perspective, Homer makes Odysseus go on epic adventures to make the story more interesting. An epic poem can be defined as a poem involving "a long journey, full of complications, such as strange creatures, large-scale events, divine intervention, treacherous weather". This shows that all of these events happen in *The Odyssey* are necessary aspects of the poem.

The definition of an epic poem includes a "long journey", showing that Odysseus's journey is supposed to take many years, otherwise, it would not be an epic. The other characteristics of an epic poem such as the "strange creatures" like Scylla and Charybdis, and "large scale events" must have been added by Homer to make the poem more interesting and exciting for his audience to listen to. This shows that Odysseus's journey home was extended for entertainment value and that his desire to get home should not be judged based on how long it took for him to get back to Ithaca. In summary, both *The Odyssey* and Odysseus are held to certain standards due to their roles as epics, which explains the cause for many events in the poem. It is now clear that Odysseus did not go on a ten-year voyage so he could be remembered for his epic feats as a hero. Odysseus was subject to the influence of a war mentality and the manipulation of the gods. He was an aggressive puppet, whose actions were in the control of the gods and destiny was in the hands of Homer. This shows how every action has multiple layers of causality. Odysseus's actions were the result of many uncontrollable factors, yet readers still questioned Odysseus's motives, believing that he was in control of himself. Using this example, readers can learn that it would not be right to judge others based on their actions without knowing what caused the person to do it in the first place. In both the world today and in the world of literature, a person cannot be defined by their actions, rather, their intentions.