

Example of term paper on the philosophy of the hero transcendence and the role of...

War



Storytelling in *The Odyssey* is an inter-related sequence of revelation, resolution and deception in which the juxtaposition of perspectives underscores the course of the story and establishes objective and subjective counterpoints concerning the nature of Odysseus himself. For characters such as the poet Demodocus, Odysseus is the subject of myth-making, a heroic and legendary figure due a symbolic “bronzing” through the medium of storytelling. Seen through the eyes of others, his legacy is a matter of cultural currency that is indispensable, particularly to the bards charged with maintaining and passing along the society’s collective cultural memory. The underlying theme of storytelling in *The Odyssey* is the nature of the relationship between man and the gods (or man and Nature) and the philosophical consideration of man’s doomed struggle to transcend the restrictions of the natural world. These stories carry “the force of *The Odyssey*’s manifold lessons about the simultaneity of human longing for and limits on transcendence...” (Deneen, 20).

The Odyssey is a tale of man’s cunning, or trickery and, as such, is concerned with the eternal mysteries that govern humanity’s fate. Thus storytelling becomes a complex weave of personal viewpoints that communicate on multiple levels. Demodocus’ storytelling in the court of King Alcinous serves a purpose that transcends entertainment. First, and of primary importance for the purposes of Homer’s story, he lauds Odysseus once his identity is known. But he is also fulfilling an important social function, of reinforcing and preserving shared cultural values.

Demodocus “is...addressing a group, whose shared tastes and mutual obligations tend to be reflected in his song” (Doherty, 85). Demodocus’
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storytelling, then, is an event meant to be shared among a group in the interest of aggrandizing cultural mores.

Odysseus' aim is concealment when he is among the Phaeacians.

Demodocus' songs bring forth his tears and ultimately help encourage him to reveal his true identity. The pathos at work in the scenes at Alcinous' court calls forth what we today might identify as post-traumatic stress syndrome, a delayed reaction to the stress of war and loss. Demodocus' recounting of what for him is a spectacular adventure tale is a kind of epiphany for Odysseus, perhaps not so much in that it recounts a painful personal experience but in the regret produced by the embellishments of an eloquent third party. There is a temptation to see Odysseus' emotional reaction as a delayed guilt response, as with the war hero who feels a powerful sense of loss and unworthiness in the presence of effusive praise from someone with an imperfect understanding of events. "When Demodocus sings of the sufferings of the Trojans ' and the Greeks,' the theme that distinguishes 'The Odyssey' from 'The Iliad' is sounded: the education of Odysseus in the brutality and injustice of war" (Planinc, 52).

Demodocus' storytelling triggers a cathartic introspection in Odysseus. The bard's songs lead Odysseus to ponder his own role in the horrific events of the war, the end of which was conceived of by him. Demodocus has unwittingly called to Odysseus' mind the consideration of

"the justice and injustice of his own actions" (Planinc, 52). The gist of Demodocus' tale is that Odysseus' actions were more terrible and destructive than those of any wrought by the

Greek heroes, even Achilles (Ibid). The tears that Demodocus' storytelling brings forth are tears of sincere remorse, a manifestation of Odysseus' reflection and the full weight of realization that descends upon him. When Odysseus finally does reveal himself to Alcinous and the Phaeacians, he is symbolically shedding the bright but pitiless guise of the hero; his own account of the great epic, then, serves as a form of confession. It takes a lot to convince Odysseus to speak, but the accuracy and poignancy of Demodocus' story hits home. His experiences have taught Odysseus that concealment is the safest course and that identity is a precious commodity for one so renowned. Yielding to Alcinous' entreaties, Odysseus takes up the role of bard himself and embarks on his own version. There is a mutual exchange of appreciation for the skill of each respective storyteller and for the primacy of the storyteller's art and prestige. " A pattern of reciprocal confirmation is set up whereby the characters vouch for each other and for the narrator, while the latter vouches for his characters" (Doherty, 165).

The story of Menelaus unfolds under different circumstances. Menelaus' experiences since the war are vastly different from those of Odysseus. As the son-in-law of Zeus and the man who won back the world's most beautiful woman, Menelaus' life after Troy has been one of carefree opulence, an existence both soft and unchallenging. He is at ease as he speaks with Telemachus, seemingly untouched by the bloody events that have altered their lives. But we learn that his ease has been fostered by the soporific drug that Helen has been administering, a means of masking repressed pain. Menelaus has, ostensibly, put the past behind him but " the past may not be so distant after all. In any event, the need for anesthetization darkens our

evaluations of the heroes...(who) are not strong enough to face the pain of the war even buffered by time and circumstance" (Van Nortwick, 9). By comparison, Odysseus is still grappling with the past, still striving and seeking to come to terms with the world (Ibid).

Menelaus begins his story by telling Telemachus that he, too, roamed after the war, spending eight years venturing to Egypt, Phoenicia and other distant lands. Even so, his wanderings resulted in good fortune:

" 'T'was after suffering, and wandering long that in my fleet I brought My wealth with me, and landed on this coast in the eighth year" (Homer, 78).

There is acknowledgment in Menelaus' speech of the part Odysseus played in Troy's destruction, not to mention an appreciation for Odysseus' great contribution to the Greeks' final victory. Menelaus addresses Odysseus' son with no indication of disingenuousness or falsification, just sincere and heartfelt grief at the perceived fate of a friend:

" When I think of him, the feast and couch are joyless, Since, of all the Achaian chiefs, none brought so much to pass As did Ulysses, both in what he wrought, And what he suffered" (Homer, 80).

Menelaus acknowledges the tragic fate Odysseus has suffered and concedes that his own grief cannot be assuaged. Consequently, he tells a story that lends weight to the perception of Odysseus' mental acuity and the legend of his martial valor, though he must first establish his right to address the subject. As a storyteller, Menelaus accords with Greek tradition by asserting

his own personal authority and status, which give him the gravitas to speak of Odysseus as an equal describing the exploits of an equal.

Helen's story plays a similar part. The unimaginably beautiful queen who lies at the heart of Homer's epic tales also has a story to tell about Odysseus and, though she is a woman, she is a consort of the Muses and Queen of Sparta and, as such, is as authoritative a storyteller as her husband. Each storyteller in *The Odyssey* has a contribution to make in building Odysseus' renown, and Helen's contribution is significant in that she represents a unique source of wisdom, not only as the central figure of the Trojan War but as a powerful and illustrious woman, an anomaly in a male-dominated culture and storytelling tradition. Whereas Menelaus' story provides context and a dramatic framework for the fates of the Greek heroes after the fall of Troy, Helen's function in *The Odyssey* is to provide telling and specific details about how Odysseus outwitted the Trojans, how he infiltrated their city in disguise and orchestrated the war's climactic event, the surprise attack from inside the Trojan horse.

For Helen, storytelling is a means of personal communication with the listener. She highlights details about Odysseus that would certainly be of emotional significance to Telemachus. She and Menelaus tell of the Trojan horse and the battle of wills in which Helen and Odysseus engaged; Odysseus advising his compatriots to keep silent and not give in to Helen's seductive entreaties. Her story does honor to Odysseus' memory and promotes him as her equal in subtlety. Together, Menelaus and Helen weave a composite story that serves multiple purposes, as did those told by

Demodocus. Menelaus is king, lord and master, but in this they are equal: he acquiesces to the virtuosity of his wife's verbal skills. " Menelaus thus implicitly approves Helen's ability to tell a story that highlights Odysseus' ingenuity and his military prowess and that thereby flatters and gratifies his son" (Worman, 161).

The stories that comprise The Odyssey are layered accounts that not only cumulatively create a kind of mythology about Odysseus but instruct the reader about the nature of the hero. Hero stories play a vital social role, laying a moral groundwork for shared cultural values and lauding characteristics prized throughout the Greek world. Homer's stories describing the great events at Troy, and those that unfolded in the war's aftermath, are important links in an ancient tradition that imbues ordinary (and historic) individuals with supernatural talents and powers.

This is the common thread that runs through The Odyssey, which is universally considered the Western literary canon's formative work of narrative. The Iliad is concerned with the super human, specifically with the relationships and conflicts that arise between humans and the denizens of Mt. Olympus. The Odyssey tells a different sort of tale, in which the exploits of a mortal assume the aspect of divinity, abetted by the reminiscences and opinions of storytellers who have a vested interest in communicating the philosophy of the hero.

The most important philosophical point to be distilled from The Odyssey's tales is that survival and longevity are more important than glory and gain, that man's lot is the skill and tenacity of Odysseus, not the physical

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supremacy and omnipotence that Achilles sought in battle. Achilles secures glory but it is, for him, short-lived, eternal glory being the sole province of the gods. A line from Demodocus' song sums up what amounts to a battle between the two contending poles of man's psyche:

“ The Muse inspired the bard to sing the praise Of heroes; t'was a song whose fame had reached Between Ulysses and Achilles, son Of Peleus, wrangling at a solemn feast Made for the gods” (Homer, 184).

The Odyssey is a far more mature book than The Iliad. Storytelling transmits these important virtues at the tribal level. As such, their stories serve as portents, as a means for seeking aid and as a social bonding mechanism. “ Sometimes in stories of the past there are warnings of future danger. Most important, however, storytelling is a way of seeking truth and value in personal and tribal remembrance” (Johnson and Johnson, 5). For Odysseus, storytelling is everything, a defensive tactic (and weapon) with which he can both hide and reveal his identity. It is the medium through which he comprehends the meaning of the great events that have shaped his life and the message that emphasizes, for the hearers, the philosophy of the hero.

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