

The gods and odysseus essay example

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Tormenting mankind is no difficult feat; given sufficient power, any person or entity that has power over another can abuse it to inflict substantial harm and torment on other people. Dictators do this; tyrants do this as well. In terms of Greek mythology, the closest analogue to these terrible people are the gods – capricious, spiteful entities who often treat mankind like their own, personal playthings. All too often in Greek myth, mankind will fall victim to the whims of the gods, who perform terrible acts of spite or capriciousness on them for their own selfish reasons. Odysseus' long, arduous journey home in *The Odyssey*, while eventually successful and happy, is beset with problems created by many different gods.

While Athena and Zeus in particular are supportive of his journey home, Poseidon carries a particular grudge against Odysseus for making his son, the Cyclops, blind; as a result, he destroys Odysseus' ship using a particularly nasty storm. Like many acts of vengeance against a man by a god, Odysseus did not mean to slight Poseidon; he was merely acting in self-defense, as the Cyclops meant to devour him and his crew. Instead of understanding why Odysseus did what he did, Poseidon seeks to take his vengeance on someone for doing what they had to do (Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 9).

However, the most intriguing relationship by far has to be between Odysseus and the god Athena, sister of Apollo. The daughter of Zeus, Athena is responsible for Odysseus' journey in the first place - she had sent him to wander in order to punish him for the events in Troy - the temple was desecrated by one of his warriors. However, Odysseus finds a friend in Athena throughout the course of the book, as she steps in repeatedly to

intervene on Odysseus' behalf and help him get home and save his life.

Given that most, if not all, of the other gods do everything they can to hinder Odysseus in his journey, Athena's choice to help him is curious. Why does she favor Odysseus above all others? The answer, surprisingly, may lie in their common ability to disguise themselves. While Odysseus disguises himself with lies, Athena constantly appears to others as a different person - Odysseus' ability to manipulate and lie allows him to act as someone that he is not, something that Athena respects very much. This lies at the heart of her decision to aid him throughout The Odyssey.

One may wonder why the gods besides Athena behave so irrationally and impetuously. It could be argued that, because the gods start out as children, grow up to a certain point, and then stay immortal, that they are perpetually stuck in adolescence or young adulthood. Artemis and Apollo, for instance, are still both teenagers, making it quite dangerous for them to be granted supreme powers. Emotions still run high, and they are never truly granted the power of wisdom to temper their emotions and behave rationally. The Greeks used these negative myths about the gods to explain away terrible things; therefore, the gods would have to be tyrannical and spiteful, in order to explain the often arbitrary and random nature of floods, plagues, disease and war. In the case of Athena, however, the Greeks likely found solace in knowing that there was one protector god that could find favor with them, particularly in the case of Odysseus. With both of their trickster natures, it is easy to see just how infatuated Athena could be with him; finally, she sees a mortal man that has a noble cause and is as able to shift himself and his identity as she is.