

Odysseus' predicament: explanation and justification in the odyssey

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The oral tradition is the oldest and most archaic manner of human discourse. The *Odyssey* of Homer is an example of a literary work that emphasizes the importance of such oral tradition. In it, the hero, Odysseus, is faced with the tasks of detailing, through poetry, how he came into the predicament of losing both the booty that he collected from the Trojan War, as well as the lives of the men he fought beside in that war, and being able to answer salient questions about why he was the only man to survive the ordeal of his homecoming to Ithaca. The story that Odysseus manufactures must be able to stand up to scrutiny, or suspicion and even civil uprising could result. Odysseus must practice the craft of synthesizing his own story for the Phaiakans because of the need of the people of Ithaca, particularly Odysseus' own wife and son, to have a cohesive story describing how those that died in battle as well as in homecoming met their end; this would bring closure to the families of those that have died and provide an explanation as to why Odysseus is the only survivor.

In the times of the ancient Ithacans, the acquisition of honor in both life and death was of the highest priority. For this reason, the people of Ithaca need closure as to how their loved ones died in battle and in homecoming. More specifically, the Ithacans need to know if their loved ones lived and died honorably or in disgrace. Odysseus, being the only survivor, is the only one that can answer this burning question in the hearts of the fallen Ithacan's relatives: " My men were thrown in the water, and bobbing like sea crows they were washed away on the running waves all around the black ship, and the god took away their homecoming" (12. 417-419) In this passage, Odysseus describes the shameful demise of his comrades, who ate of the

cattle of Helios, and were punished by Zeus for their transgression.

Unfortunately, in a similar fashion to the crew described above, all the Ithacans that die in homecoming perish dishonorably, whether by Zeus, or otherwise. This harsh reality seems like it would be a bit too much to handle for the Ithacans, and therefore, Odysseus works to stress his crew's honor whilst living through the tale of how the Ithacans strategically passed through the dominion of the sirens:

This description of the iron will and loyalty of the crew is a mechanism that Odysseus will use to hearten the relatives of his fallen comrades by showing them their nobility in living.

These tragic deaths each have a reason for taking place. The people of Ithaca do not know these reasons for the deaths of their beloved warriors and thus need an explanation for why Odysseus is the only one to have survived the trip home. Odysseus may stress the honor of his men, but he does attribute to his crew the blame for why they met their demise. This principle of the crew's collective accountability can be seen in Odysseus' description of the spoiling of the bag of winds given to Odysseus by Aiolos. "...Now too Aiolos in favor of friendship has given him all these goods. Let us quickly look inside and see what is in there, and how much silver and gold this bag contains inside it" (10. 43-45). The purpose of this is to show that Odysseus was not responsible for their deaths, because he fully intended to use the bag of winds to get his crew back to Ithaca, but the crew, in their greed, brought their relocation and ultimate destruction upon themselves. This is the craftiness with which Odysseus describes his crew's honor. He

praises the crew's honor enough to hopefully appease the families of his fallen comrades, but not enough to stir their anger against him because of some sort of neglect or mistake on his part. This strategy is most important in Odysseus' reconnection with his own family. Telemachos has yet to gain a fair impression as to who his father truly is, and Odysseus' first impression to his son would be one of disdain if there was any indication whatsoever that Odysseus was in any way inferior to his subordinates in the accrual of honor. Penelope's reaction to Odysseus' account of such events is perhaps even more important, as she has held off numerous suitors who want her hand in marriage for the entirety of Odysseus' absence. If Odysseus came home to tell her that he had let all the men of Ithaca die through his recklessness, it is possible that Penelope might have regretted her choice to reject the suitors in anticipation of Odysseus' return.

Odysseus has crafted this story for the Phaiakans, as they ask him to tell of how his circumstances came to be. Odysseus agrees, however reluctantly, to tell the painful tale of how he fell on such sorry luck. This oral account that Odysseus gives, however painful to him, is a perfect opportunity for Odysseus to practice telling his story of misfortune to his fellow Ithacans; It gives him the chance at a 'rough draft,' thereby allowing him to synthesize his tale from the ground up without any challenge from any other witnesses, and simultaneously allowing him to use the Phaiakans' reaction to his tale as an accurate gauge on how cohesive his story remains from beginning to end. If the Phaiakans were to have reacted poorly, Odysseus would have been given the chance to refine his narrative to better suit the story to the interest

of the Ithacans. Instead, the Phaiakans react in an overwhelmingly positive manner. They are not only riveted by Odysseus' compelling account of his struggles, but they give Odysseus transport back to his country, as well as plunder such as bronze and gold: “‘ But they carried him, asleep in the fast ship, over the sea, and set him down in Ithaka, and gave him numberless gifts, as bronze, and gold abundant, and woven clothing, more than Odysseus could have ever taken from Troy, even if he had come home ungrieved and with his fair share of the plunder.’” (13. 134-138) This reaction from the Phaiakans shows Odysseus that he has indeed proven his ability to masterfully craft a testament of his experiences, as well as his ability to use that testament to his advantage. The careful reader of the *Odyssey* could say that Odysseus' irresponsible and reckless actions in the dominion of the Cyclopes could reveal to the Phaiakans and Ithacans that Odysseus was partially to blame for the deaths of his comrades. Through further examination of the text, it can be deduced that the Phaiakans observe that Odysseus was greatly disturbed by his mistake, and that the Phaiakans see this dissonance as a burden carried by Odysseus. This dissonance, whether feigned or genuine, serves as an even greater testament to the passion and craft with which Odysseus delivers his story. Odysseus serves as a notable example of the notion that the characterization of a person can be illustrated through that person's style and careful manipulation of language in human discourse. Odysseus uses deliberate and well thought out diction and sentence structure in his catalog of the events that he has lived through. This can tell the reader that

Odysseus is a reflective character, and though he may have bouts of recklessness, he is mostly thoughtful and contemplative in the situations that he finds himself a part of and circumstances that he is presented with. This can show the reader that through human discourse, one finds out about a person not just by the stories that said person has to tell about themselves, but how that person decides to tell those stories.