

Xenia and odyssey

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The Odyssey begins in medias res (in the middle of things). This epic tells the story of one man's voyage home despite a series of antagonists that make the journey incredibly long and grueling for the hero, Odysseus. Some of these antagonists include Greek gods, mythical creatures, and even a slothful crew.

The story also observes the impact that Odysseus's absence has on his wife, Penelope, and his growing son, Telemachos. Despite the different points of view in the epic, one important theme is explored throughout both plots, xenia. This Grecian concept, roughly translated as "a formal friendship," carries a significant amount of weight within the epic.

Xenia is a concept similar to hospitality, placing an obligation on both the host and the guest to create a strong relationship based on cultural respect for one another. However, it was based on a set of rules and customs that was much more than simply being gracious and considerate in one's home. Disrespecting xenia is what is said to have begun the Trojan War, clearly establishing the importance of this model. The function of xenia assists the development of the plot in both positive and negative ways. Some positive examples of respecting xenia include Telemachos's stay in Sparta and Odysseus's stay with Nausicaä. Consequences of disrespecting xenia within the Odyssey are shown first when Odysseus encounters Polyphemus and upon his return home when he confronts Penelope's suitors.

Another prominent example of xenia is seen in book 6 when Odysseus comes upon Nausicaä. Odysseus had become shipwrecked and sought shelter in a bush. He awoke when he heard Nausicaä and her handmaids screaming while playing with a ball they had inadvertently kicked into a nearby river.

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Odysseus, dirty, naked, and covered with nothing but an olive branch, approached the women. All of the handmaids ran from the hideous man “ besmirched with brine” except Nausicaä, who remembered her obligations to xenia (Odyssey, 6: 127). As Odysseus recalled how he ended up in such a predicament, Nausicaä began taking pity on the stranger and offered him what she could saying, “ Because you have come to our land and city, you shall not lack clothing nor anything else appropriate to a suppliant who has suffered a long time and then come our way” (Odyssey, 6: 181-183). She then called back her handmaids to help care for the stranger reminding them that “ all strangers and beggars are from Zeus, and a small gift is a dear one” (Odyssey, 6: 195-196). After imploring her handmaids to help, they then took Odysseus to the river and bathed him. Nausicaä provided him with clean clothing and offered him food and drink. These are all examples of good xenia to a stranger, even one in as poor a condition as Odysseus was when they found him. She ensured he was cared for and even offered a parting gift by helping him approach her parents and win them over, so he would have a better chance of receiving the knowledge and tools he needed to return home.

However, when xenia is not respected it leads to negative consequences. Such is the case of Odysseus’s encounter with the cyclops Polyphemus. This episode establishes the consequences that come with the failing of xenia and can be weighed against the previous examples of providing said hospitality. When Zeus sends a storm to Odysseus and his crew, they end up sailing into the “ land of the arrogant and lawless Cyclopes” (Odyssey, 9: 98). As they search for food and shelter Odysseus explains to his men that

the inhabitants of the island “ do not have assemblies where they discuss policies, nor do they establish rules ... nor do they care about one another” (Odyssey, 9: 103-106).

When the men come across a cave full of cheese, sheep, whey and milk, they implore Odysseus to get what they need and leave, but he refused, saying the dweller of the cave may have gifts for them, as laid out in the principles of xenia. The encounter began as proper xenia should as Polyphemus questions the men. In order to adhere to xenia, one must create a relationship by learning the identities of said guests. Polyphemus asks the men “ Strangers! Now who are you? From where do you sail the watery paths?” (Odyssey, 9: 235-236). Odysseus answers honestly and describes their treacherous journey through Zeus’s storms. Upon realizing Polyphemus would not know the customs of xenia, Odysseus tells the cyclops, “ We come to you on our knees, as suppliants, in the hopes ha you might give us a gift-token or some other present, as is the custom among strangers,” therefore presenting the cyclops with the opportunity to provide them with basic necessities, an element of hospitality that is tradition in this culture (Odyssey, 9: 248-250).

In spite of this honesty, Polyphemus refuses to accept this and begins to suddenly devour Odysseus’s crew. He proceeds to move a large rock and trap the men in the cave, promising Odysseus the gift-token of eating him last. These acts completely disrespect the concept of xenia. By allowing Odysseus to realize he no longer had the obligation to follow this practice, he was able to trick Polyphemus and escape the cave.

One of the most obvious examples of bad xenia in the Odyssey is the treatment of Odysseus' family, and Odysseus himself, by the suitors who have come seeking Penelope's hand in marriage.

This episode shows how not following the practices of xenia can lead to extreme consequences and how without an obligation to be hospitable, one instead is allowed to become hostile.