

Odysseus as an epic hero

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What is a hero you may ask? Merriam-Webster states that a hero is a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability; an illustrious warrior; a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities; one who shows great courage; the principal male character in a literary or dramatic work; the central figure in an event, period, or movement. I could support Merriam and say that Odysseus fits many of these descriptions and characteristics.

In the words of Margalit Finkelberg: Six times in the *Odyssey* the life-experience of Odysseus is defined by the word *aethlos*. Both in Homer and in Greek in general this word (*athlos* after Homer) and its cognates have two meanings: of 'athletic contest' and of 'labour', the latter being best exemplified by the labours of Heracles. (Finkelberg) Odysseus is known worldwide from his undertakings and his courage, he is surprisingly favored by some of the gods, and he defeats many monsters throughout his journey.

Odysseus is the only Homeric hero who, in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, bears the epithet *polutlas*, 'much-enduring', and who is systematically described (in the *Odyssey* only) as passing through compromise and humiliation: his three adventures in beggar's disguise, for instance, and his ignominious escape from the Cyclops' cave by hanging under a ram's belly. (Finkelberg) These specific traits are ones that set him apart from the rest of the characters in the plot or in any epic story.

Being a hero or a character that is known throughout the land was one of Odysseus's epic hero qualities. He was the King of Ithaca, but his friends, family, and strangers knew him as so much more, and with so many heroic and brave traits. In book nine, Polyphemus mentions that he imagined

Odysseus as a strong, giant man. I find Polyphemus to believe that Odysseus is some extravagant fighter and that he'd be prepared for him when their paths crossed. He says this after Odysseus blinded the Cyclops, telling the monster that his attacker was none other than the "great" Odysseus.

Quite similar to this situation, the situation in which Circe tries to turn Odysseus into a pig and he does not because he finds a way to outsmart her magic. Three different characters know about Odysseus and his feats and strengths and have heard of him beyond his kingly status. Since he is one of the most famous kings of the time, he makes sure the people in the places he goes knows who he is and the accomplishments he has achieved. Many people probably spread the word and know of him and his feats, hence making him an epic hero. During Odysseus's travels he comes across many obstacles.

To my surprise, while trying to flourish his rivals and hindrances many of the gods help him when he struggles or seems stuck in a situation. For example, Hermes had a notion that Odysseus would not be able to withstand the strong magical powers of Circe. Hermes helped him by giving him the Moly plant, which helped Odysseus remain himself while he drank the potion that Circe gave to him to turn him into a pig. Since he did not turn he was able to round up his crew and finally leave the island. Another time in the story Athena gives Odysseus a life saving tip.

Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus enters his house and prepares his eventual revenge on the suitors. Homer presents the hero in a series of progressively more important recognition scenes, climaxed by Odysseus' revelation to the suitors by means of a special bow and to his wife via their marriage

bed(Magill). Her intentions were to let no one know he had returned home, and disguise him in a way that he would be “sneak attacking” the suitors. Athena also fights with Odysseus towards the end of the battle to help him kill off the last of the men.

It was clear to see Athena was on his side. Eumaeus, Philoetius, and Telemachus, also fight along side Odysseus to end the battle between themselves and the suitors. These people were loyal to him while he was away and along his side in battle. Without the help of the gods Athena and Hermes, and his son and friends back home he wouldn't have been successful in completing his long journey home or successful in the slaying of the suitors on his own territory.

Disguise is just one aspect of the crafty, deceptive, and suspicious nature which Odysseus shares both with Penelope, who deceived her suitors for many years, and with his patroness, Athena, goddess of wisdom. Hero, wife, and goddess thus create a bond of intelligence, which guarantees the safe return and successful vengeance of Odysseus (Magill). The final parts of the story further express his qualities as an epic hero. Further proof that Odysseus was an epic hero is the fact that almost all of the beings he had to overcome in this story were supernatural in some way, with powers incomparable to a normal human's abilities.

One of the most obviously supernatural characters was the Cyclops, Polyphemus. His enormous size was difficult to imagine, and the extent of his strength far surpassed any man. Which resulted in the eating of six of Odysseus's men. Although this aspect of their journey was difficult Odysseus kept his composure to lead his men home, a characteristic only a strong hero

could achieve. Another character of equal if not more supernatural ability was Circe. She was an immortal witch, and she used her magic against Odysseus's men and attempted to use against Odysseus.

After defeating both the Cyclops and Circe, Odysseus goes further into his journey, and has to pass the path of yet another supernatural being, Scylla. Scylla was a monster, and of course her body's shape, size, and power were unlike any natural beings'. It's not rare for a character to encounter a supernatural being on their journey; however, being able to take on as many as three opponents and only losing a few men is the mark of an epic hero. Margalit Finkelberg states: Who sets an example of how one ought to die, all Odysseus' life-experience demonstrates how one ought to live.

Earthy and prosaic as he is, Odysseus manages to pass through all the tests that life puts before him: to contrive the escape from the Cyclops' cave, to abstain from eating the flesh of the sacred cattle of Helios, and to endure the crowning humiliation of living as a beggar in his own house. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Odysseus was able to overcome everything life had in store for him not in spite of being earthy and prosaic but because of these qualities, for to be earthy and prosaic (a feature, we should remember, shared by Heracles) is after all nothing else than being human(Finkelberg).

Where a normal character might overcome an obstacle, battle a few monsters, and get some help from a friend, Odysseus goes above and beyond and sets himself apart as an epic hero. Other characters consistently offer their help for Odysseus, he fights his way through many supernatural encounters, and is known by almost all, as an extraordinary man. These

three things considered, Odysseus in my eyes is certainly considered an epic hero.