

# 'homegoing' and 'the odyssey': hope towards coming back

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



In her debut novel *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi explores the concept of a home as a function of both family and community: if specific characters are to truly establish a sense of belonging within a region, they must have not only the support of a powerful familial network, but also a respected and gratifying position within society. By this logic, a home may be both lost and gained through the laying or breaking of the foundations of these dual pillars.

Growing up trapped within the institution of slavery, H never held claim to the experience of a true home; however, upon reconnecting with Ethe and garnering respect from his community via his leadership in the labor union, he learns to define this concept. Alternatively, though Kojo felt accepted in Baltimore as a man loved by his family and respected through his trade, the sudden loss of the former catalyzed the eventual destruction of this ideal. A similar theme may be observed in Homer's *The Odyssey*, however, over the course of Odysseus's twenty-year journey, he never regarded his home as lost: only temporarily distanced. This dichotomy may be conceptualized through the lens of slavery, under which a home is so impermanent that it may be created or snatched away at any given moment. In contrast, Odysseus's position as an Ithacan king affords his status and family a stability that prompts his unyielding belief in their continued immutability.

Throughout the majority of his life, the institution of slavery prevented H from experiencing the kinds of family ties and pride in a community that define a true home. Still in the womb when his mother was stolen from the streets of Baltimore, he was never able to meet the father and siblings eagerly anticipating his birth. Moreover, Anna "killed herself" rather than spend her whole life laboring on a plantation as someone else's property, H

having to be literally sliced “ out her belly before she died” (Gyasi 165). In this way, the family network into which H was poised to enter was snatched away from him by slavery upon his very birth. During his time on the plantation, H’s status as a slave also kept him from experiencing the kind of pride in his work and community that is needed to define a home. Though after the war he often dreamt of moving to a place where “ a black man could make a life for himself”, slavery once again impeded these ambitions by pulling him into the convict labor system (Gyasi 162). Even after finishing his sentence and trying to reenter society, H remains permanently marked by the “ evidence of a whip” on his back, unable “ to go back to the free world” (Gyasi 167). Through robbing him of his family and position in a community, slavery as an institution long kept H from knowing a home.

However, upon reconnecting with Ethe and finding camaraderie and a voice within the labor union of Pratt City, H is able to create the kind of home unfamiliar to him throughout most of his life. Knowing that his newfound labor as a free miner is able to send money “ into his own pocket”, and that he will “ never have to pick cotton or till land ever again”, marks the beginning of H’s settling into a gratifying, stable position (Gyasi 169).

Nevertheless, the memory of slavery reminds him that “ a white man could still kill him for nothing”, thus preventing him from fully engaging with the labor unions and the community (Gyasi 170). It is only once his desire to “ make the danger worth something” prompts him to become “ more vocal at the meetings”, even risking his life for the benefit of the group through a strike, that he gains the kind of respect that eventually promotes him to

union leader (Gyasi 172). However, a respected place in society is only one part of the battle, and H's desire for the kind of "full life" that comes from having "children of his own" prevents him from fully realizing the definition of a home (Gyasi 171). It is only upon his reunion with Ethe and the birth of the daughter he longed for that H is able to truly settle into Pratt City for the rest of his life. In this way, H's dual foundation of a newfound community and family is able to create the home that slavery had stolen away so many years ago.

Contrastingly, Kojo initially held claim to the kind of familial and societal connections that defined Baltimore as his home. Though his birth parents were captured while he was still an infant, Kojo was no stranger to the feeling that he "belonged to someone", regarding Ma Aku as a mother (Gyasi 130). This love later extends to the family he creates with Anna, evident in how the "smiles of his seven children with number eight on the way" are "all that he had ever wanted" (Gyasi 115). In addition to the people dear to his heart, Kojo also defines his home in terms of "the port, the ironworks, the railroads" (Gyasi 112). He loves "the look of the boats", loves "that his hands helped build and maintain them", taking a great deal of pride in his work on the docks (Gyasi 111). As "one of the best caulkers around", he is respected not only by his coworkers, but also by the locals that form the community he lives in (Gyasi 117). This value he places on the network of people around him is clear given that even in the face of the threat of the runaway slave act, he is resolved to "never leave Baltimore"

(Gyasi 121). Through the combination of Ma Aku, his wife and children, and the occupation he takes pride in, Kojo had found a home in this city.

Tragically, this idyllic life is snatched away by the hand of slavery when Anna's disappearance rips apart the family Kojo held so dear, tainting Baltimore with painful memories of her and ultimately leading to the death of his passion for the community. Upon the news of Anna's abduction, Kojo does everything in his power to gather information about her whereabouts, but quickly realizes that the racially-fueled discrimination he faces as a free man during the slave era is a massive stone in his path. When he tries to approach a white woman with Anna's picture, her eyes begin "widening in fear", never taking a "glance at the picture once" (Gyasi 127-128). Not only did the slave society steal the anchor of Kojo's family, but it also prevents him from finding her once more. After Anna's loss, he slowly falls out of touch with his children, for they "could not stand to be around" each other due to the painful memories (Gyasi 131). It is these same pervasive memories that also destroy the atmosphere of the very city he once loved. Even though he has become "one of the best ship caulkers the Chesapeake Bay area had ever seen", he can't stand to "look at a boat again" for fear of seeing her "everywhere in Baltimore" (Gyasi 131). Though Kojo's life seemed solid, slavery once again proved itself a thief of homes, for the loss of the foundation of his familial pillar brought both it and the pillar of community crumbling down.

In contrast, Odysseus's kingly status allows him a surety in the immutability of his home that H and Kojo never had: though distanced from Ithaca for

twenty years, he remains confident in its preservation upon his return. For Odysseus, his home is defined in a similar way to that of the characters in Homegoing: in terms of both his family and his position as a leader in the community, both “ kin and country” (Fagles 400). During his travels, he not only anticipates a reunion with his “ loved ones”, but also with the status that affords him his “ own grand house” and rule over his “ native land” (Fagles 178). However, he diverges from the path of the aforementioned men in the way that not once during his journey does he entertain the possibility of losing Penelope and his throne to another. This is reflected in the way that he “ sat at ease, day in, day out” in the palace of Circe until a year had passed, needing to be prompted by his men to resume his travels (Fagles 245). In fact, when arriving in Ithaca at last, he is astounded to learn that scores of suitors have taken up residence in his hall, claiming he might have “ died the same ignoble death as Agamemnon” had Athena not “ revealed this to” him (Fagles 299). This confidence in his home largely owes itself to the power Odysseus holds as king of Ithaca and favorite of the gods. Shocked that these “ brazen rascals” are “ lording it over” his house, he immediately supplicates Athena: “ Weave us a scheme so we can pay them back” (Fagles 348, 299). Not once does he hesitate at the challenge, so sure in his power and the favor of Athena that he would “ fight three hundred men” for his home (Fagles 299). In sharp contrast to H and Kojo, the sway Odysseus holds in society enables a steadfast belief in the permanence of a home from which he was twenty years removed.

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi expands upon the definition of a home beyond that of a physical location: rather, she defines it as a function of both one's family and pride in his place in the community. Given these parameters, she argues that a home may be lost: the insidious institution of slavery reminds one that his family and community, though close-knit, could be destroyed at any given moment. Though Odysseus also defines his home in terms of both his family and the people he rules, it remains for him essentially constant throughout his years of travel, always being spoken of as if in a stasis, awaiting his return. This constancy may be attributed to his societal position: as king, he is granted a stability of his home for which those living under slavery may only hope. Though it may seem contradictory to compare the hierarchy in nineteenth-century America with that of ancient Greece, the central concepts behind their social organizations yield far more similarities than they do differences, save for the added dimension of American slavery's racial component. Those at the top of the ladder enjoy a permanence of position and family, whereas the oppressed must live with the fear that they may one day wake up to the loss of all that to which they hold claim.