

Odysseus: character analysis



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Odysseus Leader Odyssey

Odysseus: a leader of past and a pioneer of the present era

Odyssey, the leading character of *The Odyssey* is quite complex, fascinating and inspiring. Odyssey is quite dominant as a leader who is certain of his words and actions. However, there exists some uncertainties in his character which, at times, take the form of contradictions in the character of a great leader, overshadowing his true potential. Throughout the Odyssey, the lead character, Odysseus, has been presented as an ideal leader who treats his men well and deals efficiently with problems that are presented before him.

Now there might arise a question as to how can the ideal leader be defined. An ideal leader has often been defined as one commands the respect of those being led, but also gives respect. He must be intelligent and cunning, and able to think logically with the intentions of keeping the well being of those under him. An ideal leader must have an ability to lead a military victoriously, but at the same time realizes as to when military action is unnecessary, and therefore must be avoided. Odyssey, at various occasions presents that he not only has attained these qualities but also demonstrated his keenness to enhance these qualities to the best of his ability. For example, Odysseus did not need to send his men probing the unfamiliar island, but still felt it necessary. This decision is one that had to be made, but given past experiences, the reader would expect Odysseus to choose otherwise, especially when his men felt hesitant.

“ They were all silent, but their hearts contracted, remembering Antiphates the Laistrygon and that prodigious cannibal, the Kyklopes... But seeing our
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time for action lost in weeping, I mustered those Akhaians under arms, counting them off in two platoons, myself and my godlike Eurylokhos commanding.” (X, 217-224)

Another instance when Odysseus demonstrates his leadership ability is when he is faced with the escape from Polyphemus’s cave. His quick thinking and strategic approach gave him victory over the giant, two traits Homer emphasizes in Odysseus. Odysseus is able to lead his men to blind the Kyklops, but shows how no mortal man can be perfect, no matter how heroic, by shouting back at Polyphemus and telling him who had truly blinded him.

Odysseus’s similarity to some of the known leaders of ancient Greece can be used to express how Odysseus was presented as the ideal Greek leader. The first of whom being the democratic leader of Athens, Pericles, and second being Alexander the Great. Pericles was much like Odysseus in a sense of his ability to manipulate and influence those under him, a necessary skill in any democratic society. He was able to influence the other elected officials into believing what he wanted, and stemmed his success from that ability.

Although not an especially admirable trait, the ability to influence men into what is needed to be done in the eyes of the leader is most certainly necessary, especially when it involves military authority. Alexander the Great’s decisiveness is paralleled only by Odysseus, which is another trait that all strong leaders must possess. Another element to a leader that is often present is that of arrogance, as Alexander the Great believed himself to be half immortal, and held himself in comparison with Hercules. Alexander was even known to sleep with copies of Homer’s books under his pillow, and drew heavy influence from Homer’s characters, including Odysseus.

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At the same time Odysseus has been shown to be a complex person who suffers greatly on his return from Troy. As the gods challenge him with a wide variety of trials, Odysseus creates a positive influence for anyone in the ways he responds to each new test. In some instances, Odysseus shows himself to be a remarkable hero. In other ways, however, he shows himself to be a fallible human being – the true qualities of a leader. In other words, analyzing Odysseus throughout *The Odyssey*, one can see that Odysseus is a multifaceted character who displays both strengths and weaknesses.

The epic hero of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is a fascinating character full of contradictions. On one side he is eager in returning to his home to his faithful wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, whom he has barely seen. Then on the other side he is perceived also perceived as a person who sleeps and lives with not one but two beautiful goddesses during his travels. On one hand, he shows little remorse for his infidelities, while on the other he still hates the suitors attempting to court his wife.

These contradictions extend even to his intellect. Blessed with great physical strength, which he amply demonstrates, despite his hard years, he has an equally keen mind that bails him out of many dire situations. There is no better “improviser” or “strategist” in Greek mythology, though the label attached is often “cunning” or “deceiver”, indeed, many Greeks saw Odysseus’ habit of lying as a vice and a weakness. His penchant for disguise compliments his ability to make up plausible stories about his background. Although Odysseus’ ingenuity comes across as his chief weapon, his weakness is the frequency with which he falls victim to temptation and makes grave tactical errors, none more so than when adding insult to injury

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to Polyphemes and revealing his true name (his main fault!). Still, Odysseus is aware of this flaw, and bids his men to tie him up when they pass by the Sirens, the paragons of temptation. By the end of his journey, he has learned to resist temptation, willingly suffering abuse by the suitors to meet his eventual goal of destroying them. However, temptation hurts his crew, as well, in their encounters with Circe, the bag of winds from Aeolus, and the oxen of Helios.

Despite his occasional mistake, Odysseus is a courageous and just leader who inspires admiration and respect from his shipmates and servants; the faithfulness of his dog and swineherd after so many years shows this. The near-constant protection he enjoys from the goddess Athena (the goddess of cunning and wisdom thus representing his counterpart in Mt Olympus) seems justifiable for a man who has endured so many hardships, and cast away so many luxuries, to reunite with his beloved family. Odysseus is considered to be one of the greatest mythological heroic leaders. Not only is he presented as the model for the ideal Greek leader, but has influenced many other leaders throughout history, including Alexander the Great. Odysseus was a model for ancient Greek leaders, and still influences our views of leadership today, although we may not even notice it.