

Good research paper about the homeric legacy: odyssey as national, western epic

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There are but few authors in the plethora of Western literature that can rival Homer in his lasting impact on the craft of epic narrative. Both of his *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* are often attributed as the oldest surviving works of literature in the Western Greek alphabetic tradition (Powell xv). Along with Hesiod's poems, they are also considered to be the oldest substantial pieces of writing in any kind. Almost nothing survives between these poems - which appear at the dawn of Greek alphabetic literacy - and the rich literary production of fifth-century Athens. Everything else is lost. Of course, the classic and timeless nature of these two works cannot be simply attributed to their status as an early piece of literature. A host of other factors must be considered in the present analysis. For one, the internal characterization of the protagonist Odysseus serves as the quintessential development for growth in any narrative medium. He transforms and matures throughout the poem. Secondly, the context of the *Odyssey* must also be considered, as Homer's work, along with the *Illiad* is the richest source of information about early Greece. The *Odyssey* is essentially a historical work that documents the life and times of the era through an engaging narrative. Third, and finally, the *Odyssey* may also be considered as a philological work - one that has preserved the linguistic forms and representations. These three aspects of the *Odyssey* all contribute to the work's lasting impact as text, and enables the whole literary world to appreciate Homer not only in the current era, but also in the future.

While the *Illiad* deals with one short episode of the Trojan War, the *Odyssey* narrates the story of the hero Odysseus after the battle of Troy. It is vastly different from the *Illiad* in that the former deals with war, while the latter

deals with a man trying to go home. In the epic, Homer tells of his enforced adventures, his return to his homeland, his struggle to regain his kingdom and of his queen Penelope, who has spent the most part of twenty years repelling the advances of the local princes. In the end, Odysseus manages to slay Penelope's suitors, and he has angered the villagers of Ithaca for causing the death of two generations of the men of the village. In a *deus ex machina*, Athena intervenes and persuades both sides to reconcile.

The literary merits of the *Odyssey* is one of the primary reasons why the epic has lasted as long as it has. While the philologist is interested in the beginnings and origins of Homer's poem, and the historian is concerned with the historical background of the work, the average, non-academic reader is concerned with the *Odyssey* because he derives pleasure from reading the narrative of the text. The epic has been read and studied from the moment they came into existence in the eighth century BC, and never more so than today. The ordinary reader has no direct consciousness of the problem of the text because the reader responds directly to symbolic markings on the page according to patterns of behavior learned at an early age (Powell 51). The *Odyssey* is part of "reading" and not something a person thinks about. Nor does the reader derive pleasure from understanding historical elements as such, but from the swift cause-and-effect logic of events, the moral depths of the tale, the beauty of expression, and the rationality of the plot. Homer manages these elements with grace and such effectiveness that they still remain in the consciousness of modern Western literature.

One may see the *Odyssey's* literary merits in the central character of Odysseus. The story gives the reader a very able hero that is skilled and

tactful that he rarely abandons the long view. And yet, Odysseus returns ultimately to his wife, son, and his Kingdom, two decades older and wiser. His ultimate quest is simplicity, and yet he has weathered archaic and magical adventures. The world within which he ventured as one that is identified with dreams and nightmares, and yet his dreams of an ordinary life and a sublime reality has in it a reputation of fantasy as such. As Harold Bloom notes:

“ The hero has refused victimization by gods and by demons, and his triumph heartens the reader, who beholds in Odysseus an emblem of our heroic longing for the commonplace. Homer does not seem to reflect upon the irony that his hero finally refuses all enchantments even though the hero’s very name indicates that Odysseus himself is an enchanter, a troublemaker for nearly everyone whom he ever encounters” (8).

Odysseus also matures throughout the poem; he never suffers without learning from the experience, and his appeal to Athena may well be that he becomes more and more like her. James Joyce, in fact, thought the Odysseus was the one “ complete” hero in literature and therefore chose Homer’s hero as the model for Leopold Bloom in his modern classic *Ulysses*. Compared to Bloom, however, Odysseus is capable of savagery, and will resort to force when guile and cunning has failed him. He is also very pragmatic – a trait that appeals to particularly to American authors. One of the closest American literary character that may be compared to the Homeric hero may be Huckleberry Finn, whose innocent cunning sometimes suggests a childlike transformation of the Homeric hero into an American survivor. Michael Silk notes:

“ The Odyssey is essentially the tale of one man, and a man with a particular, defining quality, his ingenuity, which ensures his survival in a world of unpredictable challenges and temptations” (32).

Homeric literary techniques on plot may also be seen lingering in current narrative media. The Homeric plot in the Odyssey may be observed to contain a beginning, a middle, and an end. This can be seen in Odysseus’ adventures, where the beginning is devoted to Telemachus: chaos at home and a son trying to find his father. The midpoint of the plot is when Odysseus describes his journey home, a newborn on the verge of entering his ancient home. The final section is Odysseus’ arrival at Ithaca. This tripartite structure has existed since the Odyssey and is still used in films and novels in the contemporary world. Just watch the recent *Interstellar* and one can grasp the allusions to the Odyssey in the exploration of the world and the arrival back at home.

And yet, it is not only in the literary techniques that the Odyssey has existed through thousands of years. Scholars and historians also value it for its historical significance. The historian is interested in the date when the epics came into being, but wishes then to extract from Homer’s texts as much information as possible about how people lived then and what they thought. Homer sang his two great works and someone created a text from his song. But how much of this long-ago world depends on poetic fancy and how much reflects the real world of ancient Greece? The historical value of the Odyssey lies in its capacity to tell stories of its context and of the world within which it was crafted. Although it is part folktale, it may also be considered as a product of its age, a representation of “ reality” within which Homer and his

scribe wrote and crafted the narrative. Powell notes that “ we can never get real ‘ history’ out of Homeric poems, but we can learn what Greeks in the eighth century BC thought about the world and about themselves” (50).

The final reason why the *Odyssey* is such a lasting and impressive work is because it gives clues regarding the ancient Greek and Latin language.

Although Greek and Latin speech do not survive and are considered archaic, the texts survive and serve as great evidence of how the letters and words are used to communicate. Philologists and linguists study and value Homer because it serves as a type of “ translation tool” to decode other texts that may be unearthed in the future. Doing so will also reveal crucial nuances and information in how Greek society lived, their relationships with other nation-states, and what other philosophic questions they posed among themselves. In so doing, philologists and historians may not only see the past, but also be guided in their decisions for the future.

Homer’s *the Odyssey* is, to be sure, essential reading for any lover of Western literature. It poses not only the quintessential model for plot and character development, but also serves as a critical endeavor for historians and philologists in their quest to unravel history. Only in doing so can the human race evolve to further improve upon the mistakes of the past, and envision grander and more better prospects for the future.

Works Cited

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