

# Odysseus across time in dante and tennyson



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“ Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy. He saw the townlands and learned the minds of many distant men, and weathered many bitter nights and days in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.” (Homer 1. 1-10) Odysseus/Ulysses is a classical figure who reappears historically in the poetry of numerous writers. Having recurred in the classic works of at least three poets-Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante’s *Inferno*, and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “*Ulysses*”-he is clearly magnetic in his appeal to numerous cultures, regardless of the context. However, the contrasts between the Odysseus of ancient times, Medieval times, and the Victorian era communicate changing tensions within the context of the culture. Because Odysseus recurs so often in western history, it seems that he is a sort of gauge of the beliefs of the culture. In this paper I will explore the characteristics most thematic in Odysseus’ character as he returns home in the *Odyssey*, as he burns in hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, and as he exemplifies perseverance and courage in Tennyson’s “*Ulysses*.” The Odysseus of the *Odyssey* is portrayed as a hero who yearns to return home to his family after the Trojan War, but he endures countless struggles in the process. Dante, rather, coming from the Trojan/Roman side of the Trojan War portrays Ulysses as guileful and prideful, paralleling even Icarus in needing excess. And Tennyson, in the age of British colonization, looks at Odysseus as an adventurous hero with the strength and determination to persevere in the face of adversity. Regardless of their different angles in seeing Odysseus, each shows a very human interest in maintaining integrity. It is in their works that you can see the shift in the definition of virtue and the abstractions that

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indicate virtue. I will start with the *Odyssey* because it is about Odysseus as he first appears in our history. Homer uses a number of techniques to characterize. Before making a speech or in the middle of dialogue, Homer would use a number of adjectives to describe the character of the person about to speak, as it pertained to their response. As the author, Homer is closest to Odysseus and thus, when he describes Odysseus as “crafty Odysseus” or “Odysseus, the great tactician,” the impression gained is more qualified and direct than the interpretations we may have looking from our own culture at Odysseus’ dialogue. The Odysseus of Homer’s time was a hero. As such, the characteristics he embodied had mainly positive connotations. Homer called Odysseus: “the noble and enduring man” (Homer 26. 219), “the kingly man” (Homer 15. 588), “that sly and guileful man” (Homer 14. 457), “the great tactician” (Homer 11. 438), and “the strategist” (Homer 5. 223). It is clear from these descriptions that Homer considered Odysseus an admirable man. Guile, sly, and tact are the qualities most alluded to, and they were obviously respected. Guile has clearly undergone a shift in connotation since Homer used it. But the shift in connotation exemplifies differences in context. That guile was a positive trait in Odysseus and Homer’s times addresses the value of language in their culture. Odysseus was capable of using language to manipulate the situation in favor of his interests. It is not that Odysseus often lies to his audience exactly, but he instead says whatever he needs to say to make necessary preparations. For example, in trying to leave Kalypso’s island smoothly—without offending Kalypso—he nearly insults his wife. He says to Kalypso: “My quiet Penelope—how well I know—would seem a shade before your majesty, death and old age being unknown to you, while she must die. Yet, it is true,

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each day long for home, long for the sight of home" (Homer 5. 224-229).

The "craftiness" in Odysseus' response lies in his ability to hide his intentions and feelings by circumventing the issue. Kalypso wanted to know why Odysseus would leave her unless she were inferior to Penelope.

Odysseus, rather than focusing on a comparison or defending his wife, focuses instead on his desire to see his home. He intuitively knows what the situation needs, and uses language to avoid any obstacles that come between him and his goals. To the point, that "strategist," "noble and enduring man," and "tactician" have positive meanings alludes to the importance of rhetorical skills in ancient times. The focus on tact and strategy show the value of language in a culture in which oratory skills were critical to outcome. Interaction and conflict could not be enacted through the telephone, and control could not be impacted via bureaucracy. Odysseus interacted with those around him in a physical, immediate way. In such a context, the intuition to know what needs to be done and how to say what he needed to say were qualities that made him a hero and a great warrior.

Dante, however, placed the sly, crafty tactician Odysseus in his Inferno. In Canto 26, Dante followed Virgil into the eighth circle to find Odysseus there as a "counselor of fraud in war" (Dante Canto 26). Dante foreshadows his look at Ulysses in saying "I rein in my wit more than is my custom, that it may not run without virtue guiding it" (Dante 26. 20-22). It is as if he is saying "I am in the eighth circle, and I see what is happening, but I won't let it take hold of me and will remain cautious, unlike Ulysses." Odysseus erred, in Dante's eyes, in intent, rather than means. Odysseus, in Dante's eyes, used wit to satisfy worldly emotions like wrath and vengeance. Dante focused on the ethical indifference of Odysseus. Dante's side thought that he

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hopes he will use his wit only in pursuit of virtue was a warning, and an allusion to the faulty way in which Odysseus used wit. This marks a shift in the meaning of virtue. Odysseus was a hero in his time because of his ability to execute the needed plan. This, in fact, made him virtuous. Virtue revolved around protecting homeland and people. Dante's perspective implies that Odysseus went beyond virtue and verged on pride or greed. However, he did not put Odysseus in the fourth circle for Avarice. He instead focused on Odysseus as a counselor of fraud in war. Fraud is intimately intertwined with guile. Dante, then, puts Ulysses in hell for his dishonesty in time of war, for dishonesty was worse than pride. In Canto 26, Dante points out Odysseus' guilt and dishonesty toward Achilles. In the Iliad, Achilles was a heroic figure because he avenged the death of his best friend, Patroclus. Again, the behavior of both Achilles and Odysseus highlights a crisp difference in the appearance of a hero in ancient times and Medieval times. In a sense, it seems that in order to be virtuous/heroic in Homer's world, a character must let himself be guided by emotion and, in pursuit of honor (honor in contrast with the Medieval world) be willing to go to any extreme to sustain the original goal. It is not that Dante does not show a respect for honor. But his perception of honor is different from that of the classical figures. Dante's sense of honor is a Christian honor, whereas Odysseus' quest for honor is unquestioning pursuit of worldly honor. This is reflected in Virgil's words as he guides Dante through the eighth circle. Looking at the fires, Virgil said, "Within the fires are the spirits; each is swathed in that which burns him inwardly...There within are punished Ulysses and Diomedes; thus together they go to punishment as they went to anger... there within they weep for the art that makes Deidamia, though dead, still weep for Achilles" (Dante <https://assignbuster.com/odysseus-across-time-in-dante-and-tennyson/>

Canto 26. 47-62). The art that separated Achilles from Deidamia was Odysseus' guile and wit. They were engulfed in what burned them inwardly (figuratively represented as fire), showing Dante's perspective on Odysseus' wrath and an unchecked rage concerning worldly needs rather than sacred ones. Odysseus was clearly a brilliant sort, but his pride, again intertwined with rage, comes out vividly in the *Odyssey* in the scene in Book 9, in which he boasts while leaving Kyklops. His pride brings upon him the wrath of Poseidon. Again, pride inhibited his return to Ithaca and his family and responsibilities. He appears to want to go home but he is so boastfully presumptuous he repeatedly offends those who affect his destiny. Again, a shift in the definition of virtue can be seen. It is not that Ulysses focused on excessive honor, or honor beyond reason that Dante damned; it was instead that he wanted worldly honor, which was a desire for honor for the wrong reasons. He was consumed by feeling, and rather than feelings that acted in the physical best interest of all involved (the Greeks, Trojans, warriors, those at home), Odysseus, as well as Achilles in the killing spree that followed the death of Petroclus, acted out of passionate, fiery anger. That Odysseus was so careful, cunning, and witty made him an even more dangerous figure because he was so capable of clothing his passionate intentions under the guise of virtue or honor. Not only was he deceitful, but he also did not realize that his behaviors were at times too fantastic. It is reasonable to see that Odysseus would become insatiably wrapped in honor. It is like the modern capitalist who gets so caught up in making money that s/he never gains a realistic perspective of the actual role of money in life. Odysseus seeks out badges of success not out of physical necessity, but out of pride and a never-ending quest for acknowledgment. Dante lived in Medieval times, and in <https://assignbuster.com/odysseus-across-time-in-dante-and-tennyson/>

Inferno, one can clearly see where religious tensions in the culture affected his perspective on deceit. Medieval themes write a need for the reformation of the Roman Catholic Church. One constant question echoed throughout texts of the Middle Ages is that of appearance versus reality/intent. At a point in which integrity is being so openly questioned, the tact, guile and wit of crafty, crafty Odysseus could no longer have a positive meaning. Further, such characteristics echo of his concern with control in a worldly manner rather than concern with the sacred. In support of this is Odysseus' behavior and the speech given to his fellow men to lure them into adventure with him:" O brothers,' [Ulysses] said, ' who through a hundredthousand perils have reached the west, to this sobrief vigil of our senses that remains, do not deny theexperience, following the sun, of the world withoutpeople. Consider your sowing; you were not made to livelike brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge'" (Dante, Canto 26. 112-119). An important rotation of the idea of virtue and knowledge occurs here. Odysseus' speech shows that he believes virtue and knowledge are gained through experience of the world. Such a belief clearly indicates the dramatic difference between the worldviews of those of ancient times and those of Medieval times. Virtue and knowledge in Odysseus' time was acquired through experience rather than thought. This can be seen as well in the Odyssey when Athena mourns that Odysseus was not around to teach Telemachus to be a man, as if being a man consisted of knowing worldly, physical things. So, then, in the Middle Ages, there is a shift from respecting experience of the world to disdaining worldliness. Tennyson' angled sight of Ulysses marks a shift back to knowledge gained through worldly experience. In Tennyson's " Ulysses," Odysseus is a figure mainly heroic in his ability to continue in the pursuit of knowledge regardless of the

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misfortunes that are bestowed upon him. This theme, in fact, closes the poem: "We are not now that strength which in old days Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are-One equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will To strive, to seek, to find, but not to yield" (Tennyson, "Ulysses" lines 67-70). Again, it is obvious that Tennyson sees Ulysses' quest for adventure as necessary. In Tennyson's time, under Queen Victoria, Britain had become the world's leading industrial power (Oxford Encyclopedia of World History 705). Industrialization is similar to the quests of Odysseus. By its nature-building more extravagant technology to sustain a non-agrarian economy-it is presumptuously at odds with the humble nature of Christianity, and Dante's Christianity at that. As such, the conflict between the very physical sciences and the spirituality of Christianity were at odds, as they remain in many contexts today. Medieval times revolved around spirituality and intellectual integrity, as seen with Dante and his excommunication. The Victorian age, like the times of the original Odysseus, necessitated experience of the world due to the physical reality that shaped their context. Virtue, in Tennyson's poetry, again focuses on the pursuit of knowledge. In gaining knowledge through experience and conflict, Ulysses shifts virtue again to human experience, marking a shift from the value of a person as measured externally (for example, by God in Medieval times) to value measured internally, knowledge as gained through physical experience. Such themes suggest that the only path to knowledge is experience. The focus then moves from the success of the whole to the success of the individual, as seen in Greek literature as well. If knowledge relies on experience, an individual can gain knowledge, but because he gained it through his own experience he is unable to translate that



knowledge in pure form. Such a theory must be believed for industrialization to be sustained. Ulysses says in Tennyson's "Ulysses", "I cannot rest from travel; I will drink/ Life to the lees. All times I have enjoyed/ Greatly, have suffered greatly" ("Ulysses" lines 7-10). Ulysses' language and preference for experience pervades the culture since industrialization. Curiously, Tennyson fails to mention Ulysses' questionable characteristics. In using Ulysses as narrator, Tennyson's attitude toward him is slightly unclear. With the exception of endurance, the attributes-tact, guile, craftiness, perseverance-that make Odysseus a hero of the ancient world are mainly absent from "Ulysses." Ulysses is clearly a positive figure for Tennyson. His virtue is measured by his persistence in exploring the world, while the world remains unknown. The motivation behind the behavior of Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Ulysses, as painted by Tennyson in "Ulysses," is different, regardless of the similarity in context (very physical realities). Whereas Tennyson focuses on the honor in perseverance, the Odysseus of the *Odyssey* and the narrator of "Ulysses" want the honor that comes with conquering other lands and other people. This can be seen in the way Ulysses views his son in "Ulysses." He judges that life at home is not for him, but is instead for his son: "And this grey spirit yearning in desire To follow knowledge like a sinking star, Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. This my son, my own Telemachus... (lines 29-32) Most blameless is he, centered in the sphere Of common duties, decent not to fail... (38-39)... He works his work, I mine" (Tennyson's "Ulysses"). This section of Ulysses' language captures his own devotion to experiencing the world rather than taking care of his family. Again, Tennyson focuses on Ulysses' ability to endure, equating it to courage and virtue in itself. In each of the texts in <https://assignbuster.com/odysseus-across-time-in-dante-and-tennyson/>

which Ulysses/Odysseus appears, whether the representation of him is negative or positive, the intent behind representing him that way revolves around human virtue and honor. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is honorable and virtuous because he has the ability to live through attacks on him coming even from the gods. The qualities that enable him to do that are thus judged as positive because they attain a positive outcome. Dante, instead, focuses on the process and actions Odysseus takes to gain what he wants, contrasted with what he needs. The wrath thrown upon him by the gods during his life, then by God in *Inferno*, was caused by Ulysses' actions, his presumption, and his tactics. As such, his characteristics were no longer positive, but echoed of disaster. Interestingly, that Odysseus clashed so brutally with Poseidon shows that he was perhaps indifferent to satisfying the gods; and he therefore did not measure honor and virtue with his reflection in the action of god figures. Dante, in contrast, measured honor in the eyes of the Christian God. The shift to Ulysses appearance in Tennyson's "Ulysses" marks the shift in virtue back to the pursuit of worldly knowledge. However, it is Ulysses' perseverance, despite the agony of antagonism by the gods, that makes him a heroic figure for Tennyson. In Tennyson, the empathy and emotion that comes out of Christianity appears under the facade of internal conflict Ulysses portrays between being at home and experiencing the world. Tennyson's definition of the virtue in Ulysses' character is not just a celebration of physical experience. It is combined with the idea that experience overcomes the isolation incurred through the pain of life. Today, we live in a context that continues to favor experience. In industrialized societies there remains the conflict between the knowledge gained through adventure and the isolation inherent in not knowing the

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world, proud that it may be to believe that simplicity is not satisfying. Most significantly, and relevant to the academic world, there remains a conflict as to whether the path to knowledge comes through experience or through the intellect and deliberative thought, whether it is with God or nature. Works Cited Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Trans. Robert M. Durling. Oxford University Press, 1996. Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "Ulysses." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Sixth Edition. Ed. Abrams et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1993. Market House Books Ltd. *Encyclopedia of World History*. "Victoria." Oxford University Press, 1998.