

The pursuit of justice versus the fulfillment of self-interest in the odyssey and...

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The Pursuit of Justice Versus The Fulfillment of Self-Interest in The Odyssey and Electra If one were to closely analyze the actions that are carried out by the characters in both The Odyssey and Electra, it would be quite difficult to assess what the standards of true justice are in such era of ancient Greece. Certain instances suggest that they work strictly through a measure of balance while others conclude that the people simply do whatever is necessary in order to obey the Gods.

However, for every incident that leads to a potential answer, something happens that contradicts it and the reader is left to assume nothing more than that it is a chaotic society that lacks any logic or reason. In a series of brutal encounters, there is always a question of the motives that exist behind the constant violence. From a broad perspective, it seems as if there is always a rational reason for one to act in such a manner (often to avenge another's death or mistreatment), yet the extent of their viciousness can only lead one to ask if such person is acting out of the pursuit of justice or out of pure expediency.

Justice is nothing if not entirely merciless in The Odyssey. For most transgressions, the punishment is given in an extremely harsh manner, usually resulting in one being killed for their behavior. Death is served for even the most miniscule examples of misbehavior, such as inhospitality. There seems to be a general ideology that exists among both men and Gods within their culture that perceives the act of killing another human being to be of relative insignificance. Obviously, in today's society, we consider the cruelest form of retribution towards someone to be in the form of taking such person's life or the life of their loved ones.

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However, it appears that in *The Odyssey*, whether or not the person performing the murder has made such decision themselves (as opposed to being told to do so through divine order), the characters view death as something that's completely reasonable in almost all cases. To such people, to kill another man is the equivalent of our decision to simply put him in jail. In order to gain a better comprehension of the internal process of reason that occurs within these men, one must try to place themselves during such time period.

When doing so, it does become easier to understand their decisions, for that the culture is comprised of an almost entirely different set of ideals than ours does. During such period, the values of courage and manhood were placed in considerably higher regard. Warriors were viewed as one of the most prominent classes in society and were judged based on their willingness to engage in drastic amounts of violence. However, even with this realization, there are still certain occurrences that seem completely unjustifiable under any kind of circumstances.

Therefore, under keen analysis, we are left only to see these actions as a means of gaining personal fulfillment and tending to the needs of self-interest. The massacre that ensues towards the end of *The Odyssey* is full of many examples of this nature. The very fact alone that each suitor was condemned to die a ruthless death without any chance to redeem himself gives reason to question the justice behind such decision. There are indeed certain suitors who exhibit such atrocious behavior, such as Antinous, that

the reader is easily able to lay aside their beliefs on when death is necessary for the sake of good storytelling.

Again, while many of us may frown upon such an act in today's society, it appears to be a reasonable punishment for those who live under such apathetic standards towards violence. But then there are others who share the exact same fate, such as Amphinomous, who display many esteemed qualities, giving the reader a reason to believe that they may be granted pardon for their initial misdoings. By placing all of the suitors in a single, large class of thieves and villains, who must all pay for their actions in the same manner, Odysseus becomes dehumanized to a degree.

It seems that a more qualified way of handling the situation would be to judge each suitor on an individual basis, discerning from there as to whether such man is capable of undergoing a change in their moral state of living. But instead, they are treated like rabid animals without any chance of rehabilitation, which makes it seem as if their deaths are not so much a payment of justice, but merely a way for Odysseus to seek revenge and regain his manhood that was stolen by these men in his absence.

To further accentuate on some of the seemingly unwarrantable actions taken by these men, it is worth looking for some of the events that may seem smaller in the context of the story, but are highly significant for the sake of this discussion. One of such examples would include the outcome that is placed upon all of the women who have been unfaithful during the war. First of all, there is a severe double standard that exists among the men and women of this culture in terms of their ability to physically engage with

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people other than their spouses, so any kind of punishment would be nothing more than hypocrisy.

However, these women are not just murdered (in a manner deemed most torturous by Telemachus), but they are forced to clean the aftermath of the massacre beforehand in a final blow of humiliation. To put these women through such suffering contradicts any argument that such men live under any code of sincere justice. Another example of completely irrational violence occurs almost at the very end of the story, where Laertes takes an innocent man's life for the sake of reclaiming his manhood. It paints a dark picture of their society, presenting it as a very harsh and inconsequential world.

While they may be receiving strong influence from the Gods, they give the reader the idea that anyone who isn't of royalty is simply not a worthwhile human being and is disposable for the sake of another man's benefit. While it may be depicted in a more subtle literary style, the strong contrast between sincere justice and the pursuit of fulfilling self-interest is just as prominent in Electra. It seems that as readers, we are expected to feel an immense amount of rage towards Clytemnestra for murdering Agamemnon while feeling sympathy towards Electra due to her great amount of suffering as a result of it.

However, almost every portion of this situation could be debated as whether such person was acting out of justifiable vengeance or some sort of self-advantage. Clytemnestra claims that she killed Agamemnon in order to make him pay for the sacrificing of their daughter, which raises the question

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if even Agamemnon was acting justly to begin with. Regardless, with the information we are given, it is reasonable to conclude that this is merely a cheap excuse for her behavior; the truth being that she performed the act in order to marry Aegisthus.

Therefore, the reader is able to perceive Clytemnestra as an unredeemable villain while holding Electra in a rather heroic light. But what severely contradicts this view is Electra's verbal argument against her mother's actions, which is that even if Clytemnestra did murder Agamemnon over her daughter's death, justice cannot be brought about by answering a murder with another murder. This assertion attaches a large sense of hypocrisy on Electra's character and motives, for that is exactly what she is plotting to do.

Her mind appears to be incredibly unstable and it becomes clear that she is not internally processing her decisions in a proper manner, but instead plotting a rash and thoughtless revenge. The opposing values of justice versus expediency are also shown clearly through the interactions between Electra and her sister, Chrysothemis. Electra claims to have a strong devotion to the spirit of justice, which she tries to portray in her abilities to continuously suffer in the wake of her father's death. She feels that nothing more will rectify the injustice of Agamemnon's death than the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Chrysothemis appears to have much more passive feelings towards the death of her father and bases her decisions from such point on towards what will most serve her own self-interest. She sees that Electra is morally just in her position, but tends to rely on what will be most advantageous towards

her own well-being. Thus, she performs the actions that she deems will grant her the greatest benefit without calling into question of whether they may be just or not. While such behavior may not be necessarily commendable, it's difficult to place any more fault on Chrysothemis than Electra.

The situation is unnervingly complex and completely muddled, which even creates the argument that she might be thinking more rationally than her sister under the circumstances. Through both stories, we are able to experience a culture that is completely unlike anything we have ever known. The principles that these characters hold in such high esteem are of little importance to our current day society, which makes it difficult to gain a true feeling of empathy towards them as people. Under such conditions, one must ask a larger question, which is if moral behavior is only relevant to a specific culture.

The extremities that they perform seem undoubtedly drastic to a modern reader, but there is the possibility that in the relative time period, these may have been entirely normal decisions deriving from a completely different upbringing. However, if there is indeed a universal moral code, it appears that almost everyone from both *The Odyssey* and *Electra* attempts to break it at some point. On the surface, there are rational excuses for the countless acts of murder and violence, but through an effort of examining their true nature, it becomes fairly clear that they all have a selfish agenda and are doing their utmost to adhere to it.