

Odysseus: the anti-hero essay



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The Odyssey, Odysseus is a hero. In all myths and legends, a hero combats the “ monsters. ” In the typical story a hero is unselfish and fights to protect his people while the monsters are greedy powerful things that antagonize the people. Yet despite this typical storyline, if we read closely, we may conclude that Odysseus is actually the oppressive hero in many of these situations – provoking the “ monsters” into fighting. The “ monsters” in the Odyssey are innocent creatures that fight to protect themselves.

Another reason Odysseus is not a satisfying hero of this story is because the main reason he pursues conflict is to maintain his own personal image and sense of pride, so that when he finally arrives home he will be cherished and honored – an honor that is unnecessary and inauthentic at the cost of so many lives. Even though it may be argued that Odysseus is the biggest hero in the book, there are many more reasons for why he should not be worth our admiration. The typical formula of a story rooted in Greek mythology involves a protagonist fighting a monster and returning to his hometown victorious.

In this storyline, Odysseus is arrayed as the “ hero” who is victorious and is never defeated. Among the “ monsters” that he fights are the Cyclops, the Scones, and the Legionnaires. If the monsters were just normal people and Odysseus came and barged in then killed them all, everybody would think that Odysseus was the real villain, but the fact that he is killing or maiming actual monsters makes the viewer side towards Odysseus. The book also uses specific language to make the monsters seem horrible and nasty, an example is the Cyclops, Homer uses words such as “ rumbling voice” (9. 89) “ monstrous hulk” (9. 289) and “ ruthless brute” (9. 323). These words then

place the reader on the humans side. Another example of Homers use of words to make the monsters look bad is with the Legionnaires. In describing them Homer says they are “ Huge as a mountain crag” (10. 124) or “ howling though the town” (10. 129). Another reason Odysseus may be considered a hero is because not only does he battle villainous creatures throughout his long Journey, but he also meets Hercules, one of the greatest Greek heroes in history, in the underworld.

Hercules draws a comparison between himself and Odysseus, saying that Odysseus is, “ Braving out a fate as harsh/ as the fate I bore,” (11. 09-710). In this passage, the great hero Hercules honors Odysseus, thus confirming Odysseus as a hero himself, and this also cues the reader to hold Hercules and Odysseus in similar regard. Overall there are many reasons that Odysseus may be viewed as a hero but many more reasons why he should be considered the villain, examples being that he acts like a pirate, is egotistical, and cares more about himself then his crew.

The fact that Odysseus is more of a pirate than a protagonist is one main reason he should not be considered the hero. What he does is to go onto people’s land and take their food without asking, and then he just expects the locals to be fine with him taking it. One example is the Scones. In this situation Odysseus and his crew go onto a random island which is home to the Scones and massacre every one and make off with their plunder and women. Odysseus says, “ but as for the wives and plunder I that rich hall we dragged away from the place” (9. 8) In this situation Odysseus kills the majority of the Scones and, like a pirate, steals everything, including the women. Another example of being a pirate is when Odysseus and his army

set their eyes on the Cyclops' land and home. Odysseus says, " There we built a fire, set our hands on the cheeses,/ offered some to the Gods, and ate the bulk ourselves/ and settled down inside awaiting his return," (9. 260-262). These passages show how Odysseus barges into the Cyclops' home, makes himself and his army comfortable by enjoying his food, and feels entitled to do so, even as they know he will return.

Then, using another pirate characteristic, being cocky and proud, Odysseus brags to the Cyclops about who he is, where he is from, and what he is doing. This arrogance is an example of how Odysseus is there to create and maintain an image for himself. Odysseus says, Cyclops/ if any man on the face of the earth should ask you/ who blinded you, shamed you so – say Odysseus/ raider of cities, he gouged out your eye," (9. 558-561). This shows how Odysseus wants the whole world to know his name, even though this is a cocky move and puts himself and his army at an even greater risk.

Odysseus is so concerned with how he looks to everyone else that he takes no precautions for the sake of himself or his army. Another example of Odysseus' egotism is when he is talking to the suitors dressed up as a homeless man for the first time. Homer writes, " If only two of us could go/ Man-to-man in the labors of the field... We'd test our strength for work,] Fasting right till dusk with lots of hay to mow," (18. 414-19). As the homeless man, Odysseus approaches the suitors with such an ego that they could have been moved to kill or beat him.

This is an example of how his ego is a negative characteristic, showing how he overuses his esteem when his odds are against him. In both this instance

and in the case of the Cyclops, he risks his life in the most arrogant of ways. If Odysseus were less cocky and had a less powerful ego, he would have a greater chance of being considered a good hero, because he would not have revoked unwanted behavior by those he was against. The way Odysseus cares more for himself than his army is another example of how Odysseus is not a good hero or even a strong leader.

The way Odysseus treats his men is the way a chess player might use pawns in a game, treating them as disposable. Pawns do the dirty work for the player of the game and are easily sacrificed. In this situation Odysseus is the “king” and the soldiers are the “pawns.” All the monsters that Odysseus decides to fight are the opposing team. When Odysseus takes himself and the soldiers into battle he does not care if his losses are title, and he doesn’t really care when his losses are great, either; he only cares whether he wins or loses the game.

This makes Odysseus less of a hero because it shows that as long as he is alive, he is fine with everybody else dying, something which happens several times throughout the epic, with little to no recollection or remorse given to each incident. One example of Odysseus caring more for himself is in the Cyclopes’ cave, Odysseus says “From the start my comrades pressed me, pleading hard,] ‘let’s make away with the cheeses, then come back...’ But I would not give way.” (9. -56) In this situation Odysseus and his crew had just entered the Cyclopes’ cave and started to eat his food, but when Odysseus’ crew mates want to leave and just take the food with them like pirates, Odysseus forces them to stay and wait for the Cyclopes. This shows how Odysseus cares more about himself than the crew because in this

situation he will not let them go. He just wants to wait them and prove to himself and his crew that he is the bravest person ever. Another example of Odysseus' lack of regard for his crew is the way which he treats Lovelorn: "But first/ the ghost of Lovelorn, my companion, came toward me.

He'd not been buried under the wide ways of earth,] not yet, we'd left his body in Circle's house,] unwept, unburied.... " (1 1. 56-60). In the previous book Lovelorn had died, and no one noticed, especially not Odysseus. They only realized Lovelorn had died when they met him in the underworld. This shows Odysseus' lack of care is consistent, given that he didn't even take a headcount before continuing his Journey. This proves Odysseus to be a weak leader, as he cannot even keep track of his own men. These passages reflect how Odysseus' strongest " leadership" quality is being a poor and selfish leader.

Overall, Odysseus is not a good hero, and does not improve as a hero over the course of his Journey. Though it may be argued that Odysseus is the real hero there is much more evidence that he is an inadequate protagonist. People can call him many things. Technically he's a hero, but two things that he could also be called include pirate, and self-absorbed. All in all Odysseus may be the hero of this epic but should also be considered as the villain instead of even a neutral character. Conation: Homer. The Odyssey. Trans. Robert Beagles. New York: Viking, 1996. Print. Word Count: 1 523 words