
An Analysis of the Different Traits of Odysseus

Odysseus: A Realistic Barbaric Hero

The ancient hero, often being assumed to be a beacon of perfection and civilization among the hordes of barbarians, is considered by modern standards to be less perfect, but more realistic. In the epic poem *The Odyssey* by Homer, the main protagonist, Odysseus, is meant to be seen as a perfect hero, but realness is the predominant impression. Portraying Odysseus as the premier Greek hero, Homer furnishes Odysseus with traits that are both heroic and barbaric to the modern reader, giving Odysseus a realistic character.

The sheer endurance of Odysseus is a heroic trait that gives him a quality of realness. Even among heroes, he is remembered for that specific trait, as Menelaos, another hero of the Trojan War, says "No soldier/took on so much, went through so much as Odysseus" (Book 4. Lines 116-117). Endurance, a characteristic Odysseus is prided for, allows him to display his courage, which in turn gives the modern reader a chance to peer inside the heroic side of Odysseus. Endurance equates to reality, as Odysseus relies on endurance rather than supernatural powers to climb over his obstacles, unlike the near perfect and unrealistic gods. Odysseus' feats of endurance are shown when he fights for his life in a grueling ordeal: "He [Odysseus] gripped a rock-ledge with both hands in passing/and held on, groaning as the surge went by,/to keep clear of its breaking" (Book 5. Lines 447-449). Giving a more earthly touch to Odysseus' endurance, this passage shows that although Odysseus is able to grip onto the rocky-ledge, he does so with a great amount of pain, revealing that his ordeals are not conquered effortlessly, making him as a whole more realistic. Groaning in pain, signaling a true challenge to Odysseus, this trial only makes Odysseus seem less invincible, thus making him more realistic. Odysseus' endurance is again shown when he is stranded on the open sea: "Two nights, two days, in the solid deep-sea swell/he [Odysseus] drifted, many times awaiting death,/until with shining ringlets in the East/ the dawn confirmed a third day" (Book 5. Lines 405-408). Encountering near death experiences multiple times, Odysseus, a mortal, utilizes his endurance to survive his time at sea. Endurance, a positive trait, gives readers an impression that his goals are not accomplished easily, but through hard work and diligence. The endurance also presents an aura of earthliness to Odysseus, showing that he does not climb over obstacles as easily as the ancient Greek gods. Although the trait of endurance gives Odysseus a heroic quality, in order to make Odysseus more realistic, this positive trait is countered by a negative one.

Cunning trickery is perhaps the prime trait of Odysseus, as his great mind is capable of formulating many barbaric tricks. His cunning is so great that even the king of the immortal gods, Zeus, is forced to recognize the abilities of Odysseus, stating "There is no mortal half as wise" (Book 1. Line 88). Identifying Odysseus for his wits, Zeus foreshadows Odysseus' actions. Odysseus' trickery is confirmed when he says to the giant Polyphemos "My name is Nohbdy, mother, father, friends,/everyone calls me Nohbdy" (Book 9. Lines 397-398) in order to prevent the giant from successfully calling for help. Showing that Odysseus will resort to lies to gain an objective, his encounter with Polyphemos reveals many flaws in his character. Instead of pondering a more moral solution, Odysseus comes to a conclusion that only trickery will work, placing another fault in his character. Making Odysseus a more believable character, those flaws are essential in keeping Odysseus realistic. Odysseus again turns to barbaric tactics in

order to neutralize Polyphemos' threat to his men after making the giant Kyklopes drunk: "So, with our brand we bored that great eye socket/while blood ran out around the red hot bar" (Book 9. Lines 420-421). Though Polyphemos is perhaps the most barbaric being in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus, by choosing to return barbarism with barbarism, displays an uncivilized side to his makeup. Instead of countering Polyphemos' barbaric tactics with a civilized answer, Odysseus counters with barbaric trickery. Balancing this negative trait is honor, providing more realism for Odysseus's character.

Although Odysseus possesses many negative qualities to counter his positive traits, honor is a positive quality that stands out among his other traits. He is highly praised by his son Telemakhos for being an honorable and fair man: "My distinguished father is lost,/who ruled among you once, mild as a father" (Book 2. Lines 49-50). Telemakhos' willingness to say this to an assembly full of his subjects proves that there is truth in his speech, as lies would have been revealed by those in the assembly. Odysseus' honor is confirmed when he refuses to steal from the Kyklopes giant: "Ah,/how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished/to see the caveman, what he had to offer" (Book 9. Lines 247-249). By refusing to steal from the Kyklopes when he had the chance, Odysseus is showing not only restraint, but honor and respect. His desire to look at situations in a rational and civilized manner contrasts the barbaric trickery Odysseus displays in his later encounters with the Kyklopes, perfectly balancing his qualities to add a realistic effect. His duty and honor to his men are also shown, when he orders his crew to remember those killed in a battle: "No ship made sail next day until some shipmate/had raised a cry, three times for each poor ghost/unfleshed by the Kikones on that field" (Book 9. Lines 71-73). Making the decision to stay behind, inviting further attacks from the Kikones, and putting his own life in jeopardy justifies Odysseus' reputation for honor, as only those who are well-principled will stay behind for paying a tribute to dead crewmen. However, for Odysseus to appear more realistic, the eagerness to take advantage and manipulate one's situation, a negative quality, offsets the characteristic of honor.

Odysseus is keen on manipulating events to take advantage of a situation. He is recalled as a man who had no rivals in the field of tricks and manipulation by Nestor: "He [Odysseus] had no rivals,/your father, at the tricks of war" (Book 3. Lines 130-131). Odysseus' manipulative nature—an imperfection in his personality—is displayed throughout the book as a reminder of Odysseus' earthliness and realness. When Kirke offers to make love to Odysseus after she realizes that Odysseus cannot be outmatched with her sorcery, Odysseus makes no hesitation: "She [Kirke] swore at once, outright, as I demanded,/and after she had sworn, and bound herself,/I entered Kirke's flawless bed of love" (Book 10. Lines 388-391). By agreeing to start intimate relations with Kirke, Odysseus is taking advantage of a situation the gods have presented him. Putting his faithfulness to Penelope in jeopardy, Odysseus displays a weakness in his moral fiber. In the process of betraying Penelope, Odysseus shows a major fault, again presenting him as realistic because of his imperfection. In another situation, Odysseus, showing no qualms about asking Aiolos, the king of the winds, for more bags of wind, calmly returns to the island of Aiolos to beg: "Under their [Aiolos and his subjects] eyes Odysseus made his plea" (Book 8. Line 155). Though Odysseus realizes that going back to Aiolos will be foolish and cause him and his crew to lose face, Odysseus does so anyways. In this instance, his desire to manipulate Aiolos into giving him another bag of wind fails, which reveals his shortcomings as a hero, making Odysseus appear more realistic, as he cannot be successful in every situation. Revealing his imperfection as a hero, Odysseus' manipulative nature counters his positive traits, giving Odysseus a realistic touch due to the lack of perfection and the ideal balance of characteristics.

Odysseus' character is gifted with many positive traits, but also plagued with many negative ones. This balance of traits allows Odysseus to appear less perfect, allowing a more realistic character to be molded. Through his journeys in the hypothetical ancient Greek world, Odysseus shows a variety of traits to appear realistic. By giving Odysseus both heroic and barbaric qualities in the epic poem *The Odyssey*, Homer shapes Odysseus into a character that appears believable and realistic to the modern reader.

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