
A Comparison of the Symbolic Meaning of the Bed and the Scepter in the Odyssey and the Iliad in a Nutshell

In his epic poems, Homer often chooses commonplace objects to symbolically encompass many themes of the story. In *The Iliad*, a golden nail-studded scepter embodies the major themes of the epic, and the marriage bed of Odysseus and Penelope serves the same role in *The Odyssey*. Through close examination, it is apparent that the themes of both the epic poems are reflected by their respective symbolic objects.

In book XXIII of *The Odyssey*, Penelope tricks Odysseus into describing their unique marriage bed. This is a wise ploy because only Odysseus would know the particulars of their bed since he personally built it ("I myself, no other man, made it" Line 189).

The bed is unique in construction; one of the posts is the trunk of an olive tree, thus making the bed immovable. The bed's permanence is a shadow of Odysseus' greatness. The bed has stayed in its place for 20 years, and while Odysseus has been gone for 20 years, he never relinquished his control over his estate and has now come to re-establish himself as the rightful ruler.

Additionally, the bed's construction from an olive tree conjures images of home and contentment; olive trees are native to Greece and oftentimes symbolize peace in Greek mythology. The bed represents the intimacy between Odysseus and Penelope; they consecrated their marriage on that bed, and are presumably the only two people to ever have slept in it ("no other mortal man beside has ever seen[it], but only you and I" Ln. 226). Odysseus says the doors of the inner chamber were "[fitted] close together," just as Penelope and Odysseus are fitted metaphorically in their marriage.

The bed can be seen to represent the *oikos*, or the home. Odysseus does not speak of "a" bed; he speaks of "his" bed, the one that is inside his own home. He asks, "What man has put my bed in another place?"(Ln 184). It is almost as if the actual house does not matter to Odysseus, but rather his bed. The bed is in the center of the house, the *oikos*, and can be seen as the center of Odysseus. He says, "I laid down my chamber around this, and built it, until I/finished it, with close-set stones, and roofed it well over,/and added the compacted doors, fitting closely together" (line 192-194). Physically the bed is in the middle, meaning Odysseus' bed is the center of his *oikos*.

Equally important is the role of the bed in representing Odysseus' power. Whoever sleeps in the

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master's bed is in charge of the estate. Because Penelope has allowed no one else to sleep in Odysseus's bed, he is still, albeit in absentia, in power and in charge of his land and home (although the suitors have tested this power). His control is later affirmed by his annihilation of the suitors and his re-establishment as lord.

Turning to The Iliad, we see that the scepter Achilles throws to the ground in book I is as symbolically important within the epic as Odysseus' bed is in The Odyssey. This unique scepter expresses Achilles' importance because only a select few are allowed to use it. Homer explicitly describes the ownership of the scepter beginning with Agamemnon: "Powerful Agamemnon stood up holding the scepter Hephaistos had wrought him carefully/Hephaistos gave it to Zeus the king, the son of Kronos/and Zeus in turn gave it to the courier Argeiphontes,/and lord Hermes gave it to Pelops, driver of horses,/and Pelops again gave it to Atreus, the shepherd of the people" (bk II, lns 100-105). Most of its previous owners have been gods; the fact that mortal Achilles is in possession of it amplifies the audience's vision of Achilles as god-like.

Just as the bed of Odysseus represents the oikos, so the scepter of Achilles represents ares (conflict). The Iliad is set in the midst of a war; anger and wrath are central themes of the epic. When Achilles throws the scepter down, it marks the beginning of the central ares in The Iliad? Agamemnon has disrespected Achilles. He relinquishes the scepter in anger at how Agamemnon has treated him.

By discussing the respective themes of Odysseus' bed and Achilles' scepter, one is essentially discussing the respective themes of The Odyssey and The Iliad. Homer chooses a bed to be the item of recognition between Penelope and Odysseus. The bed is related to many of The Odyssey's themes: love, homecoming, family, the oikos. The bed represents Odysseus and Penelope's unshakeable love, Odysseus's return to his home and bed (Odysseus and Penelope essentially created Telemachos in the bed), the connection between Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachos, and the bed, and can also be seen to represent the oikos as a whole. These are the thematic emphases of The Odyssey, and Homer has been able to condense them into one significant and powerful symbol.

Similarly, Achilles' scepter embodies the main thematic elements of The Iliad. Power, ares, anger, glory, honor . . . they all saturate The Iliad thematically and can be applied to the god-made scepter. He who holds the scepter is in power of the assembly. The ares around which the epic is centered begins when Achilles casts down the scepter, a public sign of the anger and wrath he feels. Glory and honor are supposed to be given to the leader of the council, but Achilles' glory and honor have been stripped by Agamemnon, and so when he throws down the scepter, he is in essence saying he holds no honor or glory anymore because of the atrocious acts of Agamemnon. The scepter concisely illustrates the thematic emphases of the epic while

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at the same time delivering the action that provides the introductory scene of The Iliad.

Are we supposed to glean the important themes of both the epics solely and completely by these two symbols? Probably not. But the main thematic emphases of The Iliad and The Odyssey can be seen through the scepter and the bed, respectively. They are hidden clues that key the reader into specific themes that Homer considered to be of utmost importance to the development of the epics.

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