
Iliad and Odyssey Comparisons in terms of the life lessons

The respective endings of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey prove the different world-view that each epic takes. While both concern the era of the Trojan War, the characters in each seem to value two opposing outlooks. A close reading of the concluding passages regarding the heroes and their wives in each epic demonstrates the outstanding values of their respective worlds. Though both concern an acquisition of honor and glory, the different mediums used to achieve those goals result in antithetic conclusions.

"...Your father, remember, was no man of mercy...

Not in the horror of battle, and that is why

The whole city of Troy mourns you now, my Hector-

You've brought your parents accursed tears of grief

But to me most of all you've left the horror, the heartbreak!

For you never died in bed and stretched out your arms to me

Or said some last word from the heart I can remember,

Always, weeping for you through all my nights and days!

Iliad, Book XXIV, ll.870-877

"Rage - Goddess"(Ibid., Book I, l.1), Homer's invocation of The Muse to begin the Iliad, introduces the reader to the world-view he will present throughout the entire epic. The reader is automatically treated to the knowledge that "Peleus' son Achilles"(Ibid.) is doomed for tragedy. By the end of the first stanza the destruction of the city is evident. Homer glorifies the savagery of war, through the ethos of honor and glory, supposedly acquired through death. The world presented in the Iliad is one founded upon destruction and ruin through the power of honor and glory, which is characterized by chaos and disorder in both the upper and lower worlds. The enticing aroma of this heroism beckons both the Greek heroes and the Trojan warriors, to such an extent that they abandon all other concerns, including the world of the feminine domesticity that stands opposed to the world of masculine war. Achilles knows that "two fates bear [him] on the day of death."(Ibid. Book IX. L. 500) He could either die in Troy, but a glorious death, or live, but without the glory. He chooses the first.

Hector, the foreman of the Trojan army, is demonstrated throughout the epic as a hero "helmed in bronze"(Ibid. l. 336), "the bravest fighter they could field." (Ibid. l. 414). Even though he knows the Trojans are likely to lose the war, "helmet flashing"(Ibid. l. 387) he asserts that he would "die of shame to face the [people] of Troy...if [he] would shrink from battle."(Ibid, ll. 388-390)¹. He is constantly identified through his helmet and clothes of battle, yet when he arrives home, his son

is terrified by the "shining"(Ibid. I.422) helmet. In his fear, the boy recoils from the world of his father, of masculinity and violence, to his "nurse's full breast"(Ibid. I. 423), the world of femininity and nurture. Once Hector removes his helmet, the boy accepts his father's kiss and Hector is once again invited to the realm of the family. He blesses him that one day he will come "home from battle bearing the bloody gear of the mortal enemy he has killed in war - a joy to his mother's heart.[sic]"(Ibid. II. 438-440).

He is aware of the tragedy that will soon come, but he is entrenched in the warrior world. He leaves them, with his wife "smiling through her tears"(Ibid. I. 443), the heroic ideal surpassing the value of domesticity. They cannot coexist, and their culture is to accept their fate and live the life of the former. This is a dichotomous world of war² and home, but the two worlds are incompatible. The domestic world will invariably lose to the world of war. Andromache, Hector's wife, has internalized that message when she mourns her husband as he turns his back to go to war, because she knows what the future holds. When he dies, she feels the supreme "horror, the heartbreak!"(ibid, Book XXIV, I. 874) To him, and the other warriors like him³, women are secondary, as is the world of domesticity that they represent. The ethos of man, independence and glory, negate the domesticity of women and a peaceful world. Homer departs Troy through the eyes of Andromache, fantasizing the unfulfilled dream of dying in the arms of a loved one. The Iliad ends with a weeping widow and a destroyed hope of domesticity.

Though it is unclear which was written first, the Iliad or the Odyssey, the Odyssey chronologically comes later, after the Trojan War is over. The brave Odysseus has spent ten years wandering, before he returns home to his wife, Penelope.

"Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
Of longing mounted and we wept at last,
His dear wife, clear and faithful in his arms,
Longed for
As the sunwarmed earth is longed for by the swimmer
Spent in rough water where his ship went down
Under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
Few men can keep alive through a big surf
To crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
In joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
And so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
Her white arms round him pressed as though forever."

Odyssey, Book XXIII, II. 233-244

In many ways, the homecoming of Odysseus emphasizes the antithetical world-view of the Odyssey to the Iliad. This time, the invocation of The Muse speaks about a "man skilled in all ways of contending... [who] in his deep heart...fought only to save his life, to bring his ship mates home...yet all the gods had pitied Lord Odysseus...till he came ashore at last on his own land." (Ibid. Book I, ll. 2-32). From the very start, the reader is told that not only will Odysseus be successful in his journey, but that his return to his home in Ithaca is his primary concern. He is treated to many adventures during his long ten year journey, and many times, his fidelity is questioned, yet never does he lose the hope that he will go home and be with his wife again.

When he is first introduced, it is in the company of the beautiful sea nymph Kalypso, who is holding him hostage in her sea-hollowed caves. He denies her advances. She points out that as a goddess she is more beautiful, interesting and desirable than any mortal, to which he tells her that his "quiet Penelope...would seem a shade before [her] majesty" (Ibid. Book VII. 225-226). Nevertheless, preferable to him against all the grandiosity of Kalypso is his quiet, modest wife. Odysseus is compared to a "swimmer" (Ibid. Book XXIII ll.237), because he has been lost for many years, many times gasping for air in order to maintain his identity, and all to return to his wife. Kalypso, which means "to hide or cover" in Greek, had attempted to prevent his return, but he "crawl[ed], clotted in brine...on kindly beaches...knowing the abyss behind." (Ibid ll. 240-242).

The vehicle of the swimmer desperately reaching his goal emphasizes the tenor in this metaphor; Odysseus overcame the trials and tribulations with which he was faced to reclaim that which was important to him. In Ithaca he is the great king Odysseus, and he wants nothing to hinder his reclamation of that title. Throughout his trials, he must overcome the adversity that comes his way, and he survives for the moment he can come home, to his wife. Penelope, "the sunwarmed earth" (Ibid. I.237), sits at home, courted by many suitors, but rather than succumb to them, every day she sews a burial shroud, and every night she undoes it, promising that at its completion she will pick a new husband. She remains faithful, endlessly pining for her missing husband.

When he returns, to test if he really is her husband, Penelope asks the nurse to remove their wedding bed, which inflicts rage in Odysseus. "That is our pact and pledge, our secret sign, built into that bed." (Ibid. Book XXIII ll. 192-193). The wedding bed is the vehicle that carries the tenor in the metaphor of their unmovable love. Their bed is built on an olive tree trunk, that cannot be moved. No matter what, both remained faithful in their trial of years. She promises him that "no other man has ever laid eyes on it." (Ibid. I. 229)

Central to the epic is the character's belief in the various gods. Odysseus's survival of the suffering he must endure, and triumphant return to Ithaca, magnifies the glory of the gods. He constantly attributes the gods and glorifies their names. He comes home, but does not tell anyone that he is Odysseus. Those who didn't truly believe he would return were those with little faith in the gods. Before killing them, he tells the suitors that "contempt was all [they] had for the gods who rule high heaven". (Ibid. Book XXII I. 38). Telemakhos, who perhaps had not had complete faith before, and had to be encouraged by Athena, only gets power and strength upon evidencing his faith in the gods.

Those who do believe in Odysseus's return, such as the swineherd and cowherd, did pray, to Zeus to "grant [their] old wish" (Ibid. Book XXI, I. 207), and Odysseus assured them that their

faith, though "alone among [his] people" (Ibid. I. 215), was appropriate. The very name Odysseus denotes "suffering" or "to inflict suffering". He knows he will be subject to adversity, but his identity is tied to the suffering. The most dangerous thing in all of Odysseus's trials is that he will lose his identity. When Odysseus comes home, the gods brought him. In his return, he regains his identity, and acquires glory not only for himself, but for the gods as well. He constantly praises the gods for his homecoming. "To glory over slain men is no piety. Destiny and the gods' will vanquished these, and their own hardness." (Ibid. Book XXII ll. 43- 433).

In a sense, the Odyssey begins where the Iliad ends. The Iliad shows the destruction of domesticity, and the Odyssey shows its consequences, as the war drove Odysseus far away from his home and family. In the Iliad, Thetis requests an armor be made for Achilles in his final battle with Hector. It is designed with the images of two cities: one of war and one of peace. Perhaps each epic takes on the persona of each of those cities. While Achilles had stood for the ideal and abstract, with little faith in the gods abilities, and much faith in his own, he had not survived. Odysseus believed in the gods, and his return home proves that he had no reason to go searching anywhere else to find the ideal because it was all right where he left it. He had always had the ideal, he had just never realized it. When he came back, it was not the same Ithaca as when he left, because he was not the same Odysseus.

He was able to understand the importance of the domesticity because while he had longed for it, he had almost lost it. The Odyssey overtly amends the priorities emphasized in the Iliad, as Odysseus journeys to the underworld (The Odyssey, Book XI). It is there where he meets Achilles who has become king of the netherworld. Achilles is unhappy though, because he is now aware that it would be better to be alive in the real world than even king of the underworld. Achilles himself, the epitome of he who chased honor and glory in his time, seems to be the one who modifies their definitions. Both Hector and Odysseus had left their wives and baby boys to go fight in the war. In Hector's world, the ethos of honor and glory by way of war had won, and he had died, leaving his wife to cry at their tortured separation, "always, weeping....through nights and days!" (Iliad, Book XXIV I. 877).

For Odysseus, honor and glory had won as well, but through a very different medium. He too, hungered for honor and glory. He had always retold the stories of his triumph, from the scar that became his as a child in conflict with a wild boar, to outsmarting the Kyklops, the sea god Poseidon's one-eyed giant of a son. That was his identity. Yet, his belief in the gods, and the need for the domesticity he had sacrificed during his absence, brought him home to his wife. Unlike Andromache, Penelope had no reason to cry. She was reunited with Odysseus, and she "rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband, her white arms round him pressed him as though forever." (Odyssey, Book XXIII ll. 243-244)