
What Literary Travelers Can Reveal About Their People, Land, And Culture

Literary history is filled with tales of travelers. These travelers journey to lands far and wide, gaining new experiences and knowledge of cultures around the world. As much these literary travelers can tell readers about the new cultures they encounter, their stories also contain a wealth of information about the travelers' own origins. Some of the most famous tales of literary travelers are *The Odyssey*, *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*, and the two Anglo-Saxon elegies "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer." In each of these famous tales, the main characters or speakers reveal key information about their own societies through their travels.

In Homer's *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is the traveler most central to the story. Odysseus encounters many different societies in his travels, from the goddess Calypso's solitary island to the land of King Alcinous of Phaeacia. As a warrior, husband, father, and king, the story of Odysseus' travels reflects the culture of his homeland, even when he is miles away. Among the ancient Greek values that Odysseus represents are *xenia* and *kleos*. *Xenia* was the ancient Greek idea of hospitality, introduced by the Greek gods. Under *xenia*, people provided food and shelter to travelers with the understanding that the travelers would someday return the favor.

Readers of *The Odyssey* can make inferences about the Greek concept of *xenia* when reading Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus. When Odysseus and his men land on the island of the Cyclopes, Odysseus announces that he will scout out the island to see if its inhabitants "are wild, / lawless aggressors, or the type to welcome / strangers, and fear the gods". This quote reflects how prominent *xenia* was in Odysseus' culture. Odysseus is willing to risk encountering "lawless aggressors" because there is a chance that he will instead find people who follow *xenia* and will provide food and shelter for his men, as Odysseus himself would for travelers in his homeland. Another value reflected in *The Odyssey* is the idea of *kleos*, or glory. The importance of glory to Greek society is clear throughout the story, but especially when Odysseus speaks with Achilles in the land of the dead. Odysseus, seeing Achilles' bitterness over his own death, seeks to comfort Achilles by reminding him of the glory that he gained during his life as a Greek warrior.

Despite the fact that Achilles' life was cut short, leaving his son to grow up fatherless, Odysseus' reassurance shows that Odysseus believes the glory Achilles gained is worth all that he lost. This statement demonstrates how important *kleos* was to ancient Greek warriors like Achilles and Odysseus. They evidently believed that losing one's life and even one's family was worth obtaining personal glory.

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The Arabian Nights is similar to The Odyssey in several ways. Sindbad, like Odysseus, is a literary traveler who encounters new lands and cultures on his journeys. There is at least one major difference between Sindbad and Odysseus, however: while Odysseus was born into wealthy Ithacan royalty, Sindbad was a middle-class merchant by birth. Sindbad's wealth was self-made. As a result, Sindbad has a different perspective than Odysseus, and this perspective gives readers unique insight into the culture of Muslim merchants. The tales of Sindbad's journeys in The Arabian Nights focus largely on trade. On each of Sindbad's voyages, his intent is to "see the world, as well as to make a profit by trading". This sentiment reflects the Muslim merchants who traveled and traded all over the world, from the East Indies to India and the West coast of Africa. Their travels aided greatly in cultural diffusion among the areas they traded with. These merchants transmitted ideologies and customs as well as products back and forth from distant lands. These merchants became educated through this cultural diffusion, allowing them to achieve social mobility — a phenomenon not common at the time.

As a traveling merchant who made himself wealthy through trade, Sindbad personifies this new social mobility. Sindbad's goal to "make a profit by trading," therefore, is reflective of the real lives of Muslim merchants at the time. As well as representing Muslim merchant culture, Sindbad serves as an example of two important themes: hard work and hope. Sindbad represents the value of hard work in the way he obtained his wealth. Later in The Arabian Nights, Sindbad speaks with a porter who is poorer than himself. Sindbad essentially tells this merchant that he is not undeserving of his excessive wealth because of how hard he worked to obtain it. The fact that he built his fortune through his own work as a merchant shows how Sindbad's society valued hard work. Sindbad's conversation with the porter also reflects the belief that if one works hard, one will be rewarded. Thus, Sindbad's wealth is a reward for his own hard work as well as a product of it.

The tale of Sindbad also reflects the importance of hope and faith in Middle Eastern society. There are many examples in The Arabian Nights where Sindbad could have lost hope or faith. When apes plundered the Sindbad's ship, for instance, leaving Sindbad and the rest of the passengers stranded on an island, it would have been perfectly understandable for Sindbad to lose hope that he would ever get out of the situation alive. When cannibals got hold of Sindbad's men, Sindbad surely had reason to lose faith that God would protect him. After both encounters, however, Sindbad remains hopeful and thanks God for His guidance. Sindbad's optimism tells readers that he does not believe that hope is lost or that God has abandoned him, even in the darkest of times. This disposition reflects the values of faith and hope in Middle Eastern society.

The Old English elegies of "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" are also tales of literary travelers, and reflect the change in religion that occurred during the time of the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons were originally pagan, but began converting to Christianity when monks

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arrived from North Umbria. “The Wanderer” reflects these new Christian ideas, saying that “wealth is fleeting” and referencing “the Father in heaven, where for us all stability stands”.

The idea that material things like wealth are transient, while God and heaven are eternal is an idea rooted in Christianity. “The Seafarer, ” too, states, “Foolish is he who dreads not the Lord; death will find him unprepared. / Blessed is he who lives humbly; that mercy comes to him from heaven”. These lines express the Christian belief in preparing one’s soul for salvation. The presence of Christian themes in both these elegies reflect the shift away from paganism that occurred in Anglo-Saxon society. Another aspect of Anglo-Saxon society reflected by “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” is the relationship between a lord and his retainers. Historically, retainers pledged loyalty to their lord in exchange for food, land, and protection; however, this agreement was only the basis of the relationship.

In “The Wanderer, ” the exiled speaker “remembers hall-holders and treasure-taking”, dreams of “his lord of men”, and yearns for “someone in a meadhall who knew of my people”. The speaker of “The Seafarer”, also in exile, mistakes “the curlew’s cry for the laughter of men, the seagull’s singing for mean-drink”. These lines reveal the sense of community and family that existed among lords and their retainers. Both speakers’ mourning demonstrates how painful it is to lose their comrades.

In these ways, the stories of The Odyssey, The Arabian Nights, “The Wanderer”, and “The Seafarer” all reflect the societies from which they originate. By studying the tales of these literary travelers, readers are able to make inferences about their people, land, and culture. Whether they are migrants, merchants, or exiles, these characters serve as representatives of their people — examples of their culture that readers have learned from for centuries, and who will continue to learn from them for centuries to come.

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