

The Idea of Heroism in Homer's "The Odyssey"

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Abstract: The paper discusses about the idea of heroism as portrayed in the *The Odyssey* by Homer. The characterization of the literary work is delved into for the purpose of comprehending the traits that can be linked to the notion of heroism. The central character of the literary work is analyzed for highlighting the specific qualities that set Odysseus apart as an individual.

IndexTerms—heroism, Odysseus, Homeric work, heroic characterization.

I. Introduction

There can be no doubt about the fact that Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the most significant works of artistic expression in the history of literature. The literary work has come to leave an everlasting mark in the minds of the avid readers with its aesthetic quintessence and literary appeal. The tale of Odysseus goes on to leave the avid readers of the literary work in an awe of the sheer expression and the narrative of the events in the life of the make protagonist penned by Homer. Now, one has to be compliant with the opinion that Odysseus is a heroic character. The character of Odysseus is truly heroic in nature as he goes on to exude many such characteristics that make him come across to be quite different from a common character. One of the most commendable things by Odysseus is that he goes on to remain totally faithful as well as loyal to his household and wife.

II. Characterization

Now, it has to be taken into account that the character of Odysseus goes on to wander away from his home for as many as twenty years. However, in this long span of time the only thing that keeps him going braving all the odds in the journey is the very thought of getting reunited with his spouse and son who are left waiting for him back at his home. It has to be reckoned that in the course of his long journey, Odysseus goes on to defy immortality twice so as to stick to his propriety and morality. Odysseus opines, "the gods brought me to the island Ogygia, where Kalypso lives, with ordered hair, a dread goddess, and she received me and loved me excessively and cared for me, and she promised to make me an immortal and all my days to be ageless, but never so could she win over the heart within me" (Book V). Odysseus is never selfish in his outlook and deters from opting to have immortality. The assurance of immortality could not sway his heart at all. This strength of character is surely one of the most commendable characteristic traits of the character in context. The very act of embracing morality in the course of events goes on to provide him with the much needed strength to withstand all the impediments that come in his way during the journey.

There can be no denial of the fact that the character of Odysseus is very witty and clever in nature. The readers come to know in the course of the narrative that it was Odysseus who came up with the idea of the Trojan horse. This saved the Greeks in the course of the Trojan War and even made the Greeks win over the opposition. Homer pens, "But come now, change thy theme, and sing of the building of the horse of wood, which Epeius made with Athena's help, the horse which once Odysseus led up into the citadel as a thing of guile, when he had filled it with the men who sacked Ilium" (Book VIII). Thus, the Greek army could win the war after a long ten years of clash with the opponents. While the example of the war is just one, there are many other instances in the course of the narrative that show how the character goes on to use his wit and cleverness to triumph over many impediments in the course of his life. A close scrutiny of the character of Odysseus would make one understand how he was different from other, and how he exuded his skills and strength of character.

III. Odysseus as a character

Odysseus can be described to be a man who is self-assured and self-made. He comes across as the perfect embodiment of the various standards of the culture. This is a character that is highly favored by the Gods of the Greeks and is even respected by all the humans of the society he belongs to. The very fact that even the wrath of Poseidon fails to dissuade him from coming back home testifies to the fact that Odysseus is driven by immense grit, valor and heroic qualities. This character is surely an embodiment of contradictions, and is very much complicated in comparison to other stereotypical epic heroes in the history of literature.

The character of Odysseus goes on to live by his courage as well as his wiles. He is definitely an intellectual person who goes on to evaluate a situation at hand so as to demonstrate his logic for the purpose of making his choices. For the purpose of manipulation, Odysseus also goes on to steal and cheat. This is one character that comes across to be quite disciplined in nature, and so he refuses to eat the lotus. He is very much devoted to his family, and he leaves to see his father after his reunion with his wife. He opines, "But now I shall go to our estate with its many orchards, to see my noble father who has grieved for me

constantly” (Book XXIII). Moreover, the audience or readers come to understand that he is ready to pay the price for his knowledge. Thus, he goes on to insist on listening to the Siren’s call, although for the purpose he needs to get strapped to the mast of the ship so as to make it sure that he is unable to give in to the temptation (Book XXIII).

Apart from this, he even shows his characteristic trait of being merciful in nature. Thus, he goes on to spare the bard Phemius. He also shows the same traits while he deals with a number of maidservants who are disloyal to him. The man goes on to create his very own code of conduct via his number of adventures (Book XXIV). Thus, it becomes clear that Odysseus is a contemplative character with much depth, but with capacity to resort to immense violence. Thus, one can understand why Odysseus is known as the modern man who is imbued with immensely heroic characteristics. A hero is someone who is better than a common man with many inherent characteristics that set him apart from commonality with others. Such characteristics are found in Odysseus and the traits explicate themselves through his actions in the course of the narrative of the epic by Homer.

IV. The idea of heroism

It has to be taken into account that Odysseus is motivated by triumph. He is a man who wishes to go back home and start living in Ithaca once again. As such, every step in his way is a test of his character. It has to be reckoned that Odysseus’ concern with victory is cultural as well as practical in nature. As such, one can come across many instances where Odysseus goes on to face the choice between victory and demise as he faces all the odds in the way of his journey. Although Athena comes to intervene on the behalf of Odysseus, she often goes on to leaves the final success or failure up to the character. Even during the battle with the people who come as suitors, Odysseus is made to earn his triumph against his opponents.

Odysseus can be deemed to be an ideal hero as he finally reaches the land of Ithaca. Apart from that he is successful in establishing an ambiance of peace on the island with the aid of Athena. Also, at the end of the epic, one can very well comprehend that he has no further conflicts with any God. The audience or reader can understand that Poseidon is also not angry with Odysseus, and this very fact goes on to raise the character in context to the level of a heroic one in the truest sense of the word. Thus, in spite of the many commonplace characteristics of a human, Odysseus is someone who comes across as a person who is a mesh of heroic as well as common human traits. There can be no doubt about the fact that Odysseus goes on to face a number of ordeals in his journey, but he finally gets united with the members of his family. In this way, Odysseus goes on to succeed in reaching his ultimate ambition that he had nurtured right from the inception of his tedious journey.

Odysseus is one character who can be found to grow as a person in the course of his journey. All his ventures go on to teach him to become a stronger individual, and he grows in judgment and wisdom. However, there are certain humanistic shortcomings in his character as well as he comes across to face the impediment while controlling his men. When he comes to triumph over the Cyclops, he wants to depart as soon as possible after taking the plunder. However, his men choose to stay there, that leads to a loss when the reinforcements arrive (Book IX). In the course of the narrative, Aeolus goes on to grant fair winds so as to enable Odysseus return to the island of Ithaca. However, one can very well remember that Odysseus falls asleep with the sight of the island. Thus, it works to enable his undisciplined and suspicious crew to open the bag containing the ill winds so as to let a tempest loose. As such, they are blown off course by the wind. Again, his men go on to disobey Odysseus on the island of Helios, and indulge in feasting on the sacred cattle when Odysseus falls asleep. It has to be taken into account that the struggles of Odysseus make his portrayal more realistic to the readers or the audience (Book X).

Thus, it can be understood that Odysseus is quite different as a hero than the typical notion of heroism. While the audience or readers can have a notion that a hero is someone who goes on to show his strengths and acts of greatness sans any shortcomings in his character. He is someone who shows his pride even when he is disguised as a beggar. He says, “Leave blows alone, do not press me too hard, or you may make me angry so that, old as I am, I may give you a bloody chest and mouth. Then I could have peace, and still more of it tomorrow, for I do not think you will make your way back here a second time to the house of Odysseus, son of Laertes” (Book XVIII). However, in stark comparison to the notion of heroism in the general sense of terms, the character of Odysseus shows gradual betterment in strength and falls in a number of problems due to his several shortcomings. As such, it is very much understandable that Odysseus is more human as a character. He comes to terms with the way of life as he says, “Keep your joy in your heart, old dame; stop, do not raise up the cry. It is not piety to glory so over slain men. These were destroyed by the doom of the gods and their own hard actions” (Book XXII). Odysseus is realistic as a character as he shows many shades in his nature. The very fact that Odysseus finally succeeds in his ambitions in spite of all the impediments that aim to thwart his path of journey goes on to show his immense strength and heroic nature.

V. Conclusion

Odysseus comes across to be an ideal hero in the eyes of the readers and the audience. Odysseus is nothing short of being an inspirational character that leaves a lasting mark in the minds of the avid readers and audience. The people can successfully relate to the character of Odysseus as a heroic one. It would be correct to opine that the character of Odysseus is a mortal hero, a human, with a number of flaws in his nature. The portraiture of this character goes on to show the transformation of the Greek society and cultural expression as well as it shows a mortal human flawed character to be a hero in the truest sense of the world. In spite of the many shortcomings, Odysseus is never daunted to face the many powerful odds that come in his way. Many of his travels exude the fear of the gods as it was the case in the Greek society and culture. Many of the hosts request Odysseus to pray for the

happiness of those people as he received their hospitality. Showing hospitality was also customary in Greek culture and society. As such, Odysseus expects to get hospitality when he visits Cyclops, Polyphemus.

Homer shows his literary quintessence while penning the character as he incorporates ample such traits of a mortal human so as to create a perfect mesh of heroism as well as humanism. Thus, Odysseus is someone who can very well be seen as a true inspiration and an epitome of heroism in the modern sense of the term. He is a person who becomes a hero in spite of being one who can be related to by the common people. This is something that sets him apart, and appeals to one and all.

REFERENCES

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