

American Public University System

Aspects of the Odyssey

Claire A. Perry

HUMN 510 The Ancient World

Dr. Scott Infanger

January 28, 2024

Battles against mythical creatures and deities, adventures across land and sea, a harrowing journey home; these are all aspects of a great epic tale, even in the modern world. A story about a hero's travels and tribulations on their way back to hearth and home stirs the imagination; we want to hear of how the hero defeated the terrifying monster or outwitted the villainous creature. We want to read about their adventures through dangerous jungles and over tempestuous waters, and above all, we want them to make it back to their family and friends because we want to see how their happy ending plays out. Perhaps one of the oldest stories to draw the audience in with all of these aspects was Homer's *The Odyssey*.

The Odyssey tells the story of Odysseus and the many misadventures he had trying to make it back to his kingdom and family in Ithaca. While there are many encounters with danger, and multiple chances for Odysseus to show why he was considered to be the clever one in Homer's earlier work, *The Iliad*, it is why Odysseus tries so hard to return that helps to make the story poignant. He is not just trying to get his men home from the Trojan War, but rather fighting to get back to something that is a necessary part of his life. So why did Odysseus brave all the problems he did; especially when he found more than one potentially permanent refuge along the route? What was so important to him that he risked so much, and lost so many, to return to Ithaca? In a word, family; Odysseus spends much of *The Odyssey* simply trying to make it back home to his wife Penelope and their son Telemachus.

Family is an important part of culture, both today and during Homer's time. One of the things that makes stories like *The Odyssey* important because they give us a look at the "...anthropological and sociological perspective...of the influence that family culture has on the human society..." (Bistriceanu-Pantelimon, 10). Throughout the story we see the impact that family and family relationships have upon Odysseus and his journey home, both good and bad.

There are frequent mentions of the lineage of the different characters; it was not just the current or immediate family that was important, but also where one came from, who their people were. Where one came from in a familial sense could have a large impact on what families could be married into; "...marriages between family-members..." of "...heroic descent could ensure...the heroic patrimony was intensified" (Mitchell, 15). Family in Homer's time was about connections and the impact of familial connections frequently played a part in his works.

The role of family is a reoccurring theme in *The Odyssey*, not just with Odysseus, but with other characters in the story. The rage of a father over the actions against his son would go on to cause Odysseus even further delays in returning home to his own family when he continued to anger Poseidon. However, the love of a daughter would help to set him back on his path when Athena beseeched her father Zeus to remember all the Odysseus had done to help Zeus' chosen side win the Trojan War; leading to help in returning him home to Ithaca (Homer). The love that Odysseus had for his wife and son would help to bolster him on his journey, reminding him why he was going through so many hardships. Homer starts off *The Odyssey*, not just by asking for inspiration, but with discussing families and the important parts they play.

The opening paragraphs in Book 1 talk about some of the different families related to the story, both directly and indirectly; how Zeus is the father of the gods and Athena, who watches over Odysseus, is his child. It also gives the audience a brief glimpse at what strife has been happening within the family of Agamemnon during and after the Trojan War. The audience then goes on to discover that it because of another family relationship that Odysseus has some of the problems he does; the Cyclopes Polyphemus that he recounts blinding in Book 9 was the son of Poseidon: "But Poseidon who holds the earth is perpetually angry with him because of the Cyclopes, whose eye he blinded..." (Homer, 40). While Odysseus was only trying to save

himself and his men from the creature who would eat them, Poseidon only saw that one of his children had been grievously injured at the hands of Odysseus. The bond of family demanded that something be done for the dishonor done to Poseidon's blood kin, and Odysseus paid that cost in years lost at sea. This is not the only place where retribution for acts against a family member are discussed; the impending actions of the son of Agamemnon are also mentioned early in the work. Throughout Homer's work, we are reminded that family is important and so is the respect given to them and their house.

One could count the actions of Odysseus against the suitors as retribution for the dishonor they had towards his family in general; family was important, and so was the respect given to them. When we first meet Telemachus, he is sitting at home surrounded by the suitors who are courting his mother Penelope. He is not thinking about getting rid of the suitors and defending his family's honor, but rather thinking about "...his noble father..." and hoping he would come back "...and win honor and rule over his household" (Homer, 41). Telemachus wanted his father, who was the rightful head of the family, to deal with the problems of the disrespectful suitors and regain the family honor. Even believing his father dead, he still felt it was not his place to demand retribution and honor for the disrespect the suitors gave to his family name and house. While he seeks to protect his mother, like many children he still feels like it is the job of his parents, specifically his father, to protect the house and those within. Telemachus is the first of the family to learn that Odysseus is alive and finally returning home, but not the first family member to greet him. That honor went to Eumaios, a pig herder "...who cared about Odysseus' well-being more than any other...slave..." (Homer, 265).

It is not just the three, Odysseus, Telemachus, and Penelope that are part of the family in the Ithacan house; the slaves there are also part of the family, especially the older ones like

nurse, Eurykleia and manservant, Eumaeos. They greet their masters Odysseus and Telemachus with love bordering on the familial when they have not seen them for a while; overjoyed to have those they consider loved ones to have returned safely (Homer). The fact that “Family affection is present in all the relationships of the ancient family...” increases” the complexity of the family...” (Bistriceanu-Pantelimon, 15) making the bonds greater; this also gives a more accurate depiction of what family would have been like during Homer’s time. Family is not only those bound by blood or marriage, but those who are cared for like family; upon the return of Odysseus, it was the slaves and servants who made some of the first celebrations of his survival. They “...embraced him...in loving welcome...” and Odysseus “...recognized each one of them in his heart” (Homer, 408). They were not the only ones happy to have Odysseus home either.

Penelope had a broken heart because she thought she had lost her husband, a key part of her family. When the nurse Eurykleia informs her that Odysseus has finally returned, Penelope is not overjoyed, but rather sad and angry at what she feels is a cruel joke. Once she is convinced though, she is thrilled at the prospect of seeing her beloved husband again. Although their reunion is filled with wariness and concern, it is still a happy event between the couple once Penelope is reassured that she is not being tricked. Their family is again together and they could move forward with any other issues together. Once the couple are finished with their reunion and accounting of what happened to each while Odysseus was gone, it was time for other family reunions to occur.

The final book in *The Odyssey* covers the reunion of Odysseus with his father Laertes and resolutions regarding Odysseus’ actions against the families of others. The families of the slain suitors seek retribution, but Zeus has other plans to “...bring about the forgetting of the death of their sons and brothers” (Homer, 435). Resolution for the death of the suitors comes in the form

of a truce between the many families and Odysseus; resolution for Odysseus' actions against the son of Poseidon are spelled out in the previous book when he is telling Penelope all about his adventures and what must still come. The honor of their family is on its way to being returned and the family of Odysseus, whether by blood, marriage, or action, are all happy to be reunited with their long lost family member.

Family was an important part of the Ancient and Classical Greek culture, and so it was an important part of Homer's works, especially *The Odyssey* which portrays many of the different aspects of family and how they play a part in Odysseus' journeys. It was not just his own family, that were important either, but also his actions towards the families of others. His blinding of Polyphemus cost him several years away from his own family, but his deeds in the Trojan War for Zeus ultimately helped to set him back on his way home. It was the family waiting for him in Ithaca that gave Odysseus the strength and drive he needed to keep heading home regardless of the challenges.

Works Cited

Bistriceanu Pantelimon, Corina, and Cristi Pantelimon. "FAMILY AND AFFECTION IN INDO-EUROPEAN CULTURE: ODYSSEY." *Revista Română de Studii Eurasiatice*, vol. 14, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 7–18.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translation by Barry B. Powell. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199925889.book.1>.

MITCHELL, LYNETTE G. "THE WOMEN OF RULING FAMILIES IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE." *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838811000590>.

Works Resourced

Christensen, Joel P. "The Clinical Odyssey: Odysseus's Apologoi and Narrative Therapy." *Arethusa*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2018.0000>.

Euron, Paolo. *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work*, BRILL, 2019. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=5884246>.

O'Grady, Jean, et al., eds., *The Critical Path and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1963-1975* (University of Toronto Press, 2009).