

The Hero's Wanderings, The Mortal's Return: On the Duality of Odysseus and the Dual Nature of His Homecoming Journey

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Abstract: Odysseus, one of the most complex and multifaceted characters in "The Odyssey," is vividly portrayed in his dual nature. He is both a hero and an ordinary man; both a brave and cunning adventurer, a far-sighted leader, and a deeply loving husband and father, as well as a ruthless warrior towards his enemies. This unconventional heroic image is typical of the late Greek culture and reflects Homer's profound contemplation on human nature. Corresponding to Odysseus' dual nature is the duality of his homecoming journey. On one hand, it is a rich and tortuous adventure, full of destined twists, trials, and unforeseen predicaments. On the other hand, it is also a journey of returning home, exploring self, and rediscovering humanity. The tension between adventure and return, perseverance and abandonment, revenge and reconciliation, self and fate, infuses this fantastical life journey with philosophical reflections.

Keywords: Odysseus, Homecoming Journey, Dual Nature, Duality

1. Introduction

With its dramatic plot and brilliant language, "The Odyssey" indisputably stands as one of the most influential epics, an inexhaustible source of inspiration for subsequent literary creation. As an integral part of this grand epic, the protagonist Odysseus, with his image of a hero endowed with both intelligence and bravery, is etched in the collective memory of humanity, becoming a pivotal point for exploring the complex aspects of human nature. His homecoming journey has also become an enduring cultural symbol in the history of literature. Over the millennia, numerous scholars have conducted in-depth and meticulous studies of this work, exploring its rich philosophical connotations, insights into human nature, and artistic achievements.

Compared to his unparalleled combat prowess, Odysseus' rich inner world and multifaceted character are even more captivating. This paper attempts to re-examine the inner struggles of this legendary hero from a new perspective. The author delves into the dual nature of Odysseus' homecoming journey and his tortuous psychological transformation, vividly presenting the complexity of human nature. Through an in-depth interpretation of Odysseus' inner world, this paper aims to reveal the broader humanistic concerns behind it, hoping to provide a new perspective for a deeper understanding and appreciation of this eternal heroic figure.

2. The Dual Nature of Odysseus' Character: Hero and Mortal

Both "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," as brilliant jewels of Homeric epics, depict grand scenes with meticulous detail. "The Iliad" vividly portrays the grandeur of war, with gods clashing and heroes fighting on the battlefield, striving for glory under the shadow of predetermined fate. This epic weaves a majestic and tragic symphony where honor and death collide. In contrast, "The Odyssey" is a "song of peace" [1] infused with philosophical reflections. It describes a ten-year journey home, filled with hardships, where resilience, wisdom, and prudence are paramount. Faced with divine intervention, both hindrance, and aid, humanity gains more agency, thus becoming the true protagonist.

As the absolute protagonist of "The Odyssey," Odysseus demonstrates profound complexity throughout the narrative. His duality is established and refined through diverse interactions with various characters during his adventures [2]. He is undeniably a hero endowed with both intelligence and bravery. Simultaneously, the narrative intricately portrays another side of his humanity: he is an ordinary man, a deeply loving husband and father, who has also made grave mistakes due to pride. Alongside his cunning bravery, he exhibits slyness and cruelty.

The name Odysseus (Ὀδυσσεύς in ancient Greek) carries deep significance, tracing back to the ancient Greek word "ὀδύσσομαι," meaning "to feel pain; to be hated." [3] Therefore, the name symbolizes someone "hated and suffering," closely tied to Odysseus' fate of wandering, emphasizing his need to endure hardships and struggles. This also implies that his journey of atonement is destined to be fraught with challenges. Similar to Achilles in "The Iliad," Odysseus' name first appears linked to "anger":

"...the gods pitied him, except Poseidon, who still nursed a relentless rage against godlike Odysseus until he reached his home." [4]

However, unlike Achilles, the bearer of "anger" here is Odysseus, indicating Poseidon's resentment towards him and foretelling the impending disasters of his journey.

Despite his destined suffering, Odysseus still manages to return home to his family, showcasing his heroic defiance against the divine will. This struggle against fate, marked by resilience and courage, reflects early humanistic traits.

Firstly, an inescapable feature of Odysseus is his wisdom, vividly reflected in his speech. In "The Iliad," Odysseus immediately attracts the reader's attention as a master of rhetoric and strategy, despite his unremarkable appearance. "But when he sent his great voice forth from his chest, and the words fell like the winter snows, then no mortal man could rival Odysseus." [5] He excels at lying, even deceiving the gods. In Polyphemus' cave, he cleverly uses the name "Nobody" to escape harm. Upon returning home, he disguises himself as a beggar, hiding his identity to kill the suitors at the right moment. However, he also employs such tactics on his family, testing his loyal wife and eagerly awaiting father, which could be seen as overly suspicious and mistrustful.

Secondly, resilience is another distinct characteristic of Odysseus. Resilience implies perseverance and cautious endurance. The narrative vividly reflects his unwavering loyalty to his family and his persistent longing for home through his entanglements with three women on his return journey. Unlike the Olympian gods who treat emotions lightly, or the Greek heroes who disregard family ties, Odysseus and Penelope's marital bond is deeply moving. Odysseus has fleeting encounters with the sorceress Circe, a romantic moment with Princess Nausicaa, and a lasting relationship with Calypso. Yet, even in the most beautiful paradises with the most affectionate goddesses, the lure of eternal youth does not sway him. It is this steadfastness that allows him to survive numerous trials and eventually return home.

Such a strong sense of family is reflective of the late Mycenaean period of ancient Greek society, where patriarchy had been established, and monogamy was becoming the norm, aiding in the preservation of private property. [6] Moreover, Odysseus embodies an exemplary husband and father,

yearning for worldly life, enjoying the pleasures of feasting, thus rendering his character more profound and allowing for the nuanced expression of emotions. This contrasts with the heroes in "The Iliad," who defend honor and pursue immortality, highlighting "The Odyssey's" emphasis on ordinary human nature.

Having endured the brutalities of war and long years of wandering, Odysseus is capable of silent endurance, especially in critical moments for the greater good. On his journey home, whether drifting clinging to a mast amidst storms or starving on the island of the Sun God, he exhibits extraordinary patience. This trait plays a crucial role in his revenge plan. He can set aside his kingly stature and heroic dignity to humbly act as a "beggar," enduring various humiliations. When he sees the household maids consorting with the suitors, he burns with anger but still strives to calm his emotions:[7] "Heart, be patient! You have endured worse before, on the day when the unrestrained Cyclops ate your brave comrades; you endured it then, and wisdom saved you from the cave that seemed your death." [4] When the time is right, he selects his allies and decisively slays all the suitors, even the relatively kind ones, showcasing the ruthlessness and cruelty beneath his patient exterior.

3. The Dual Nature of the Homecoming Journey: Exploration and Return

"The Odyssey" masterfully combines two major traditional literary themes: ancient folk tales and maritime legends, infusing them with new meanings within this framework. The theme of folk tales has ancient origins, following a narrative pattern of "wandering-return-revenge," where the male protagonist leaves his homeland for many years, during which his wife is pursued by many or even remarries. Upon his return, he embarks on a revenge mission, ultimately achieving victory. Maritime legends emerged against the backdrop of Greece's expanding maritime dominance, depicting grand and strange scenes where the protagonist experiences fantastical encounters at sea and gains immense fortune [7]. Folk tales represent secular life, while maritime stories symbolize the fantastical world. "The Odyssey" excels in connecting the infinite distance with the present and oneself, achieving reconciliation with fate and self-awareness through the wanderer's experiences.

Although maritime legends are a common literary motif among many cultures, Odysseus' wandering journey is not limited to exploring a fantastical world; it also addresses the universal human condition—how should we face the trials of fate? In Book XI, Odysseus' journey to the underworld marks a significant change in his attitude toward fate. He encounters numerous spirits of those who perished in the Trojan War, comrades with whom he once fought side by side. Through conversations with them, Odysseus rekindles his desire for life. Though he had moments of despair, contemplating death, the words of these spirits strengthen his resolve to return home alive. The obstacles between him and his homeland are not merely sufferings but human frailty and ignorance. [6] He realizes that returning home symbolizes a victory of life over easy death. [2] Thus, he stops lamenting fate's injustices and truly reconciles with it.

As David Leeming points out in "The World of Myth," "Odysseus' 'exploration' carries the mission of 'quest.'" [8] His wandering is not just a journey home but an exploration of the foundations of personal life. Odysseus' understanding of his identity is unclear, sometimes leading to self-doubt. The author hints at this from the beginning. Unlike Achilles, whose identity is immediately clear, Odysseus is referred to as "that man" until his name appears in line 21 of the first book. This separation of Odysseus from his name signifies his unclear understanding of himself and his fate. This is vividly reflected in his journey. His cunning escape from the Cyclops by using the name "Nobody" and his skillful storytelling to obscure his true identity illustrate this. [9] Thus, Odysseus gradually builds an understanding of his identity through this fated journey: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?

Looking further back, tracing Odysseus' wanderings to "The Iliad," we can see that this "exploration road" is also a "path of atonement," a ten-year journey to atone for the numerous sins

committed during the ten years of war. In a broader sense, it represents a return to humanity. He witnesses the destruction of cities, the deaths of comrades, and the loss of homes, “escaping collective madness to reclaim the essential human conditions—freedom and dignity [10]” This arduous journey home becomes a path to cleanse personal sins, uncover the light of humanity, and rebuild civilizational order.

4. Conclusion

Through Odysseus' homecoming journey, Homer establishes an alternative hero image characterized by wisdom, resilience, and prudence, making him a quintessential figure of his era. In his use of intellect and patient endurance, Odysseus embodies the transition of ancient Greek culture from its primitive roots towards rationality. In his portrayal of family and loyalty, Odysseus reflects the marriage views of the Mycenaean age. Additionally, Homer, with his profound insight into human nature, dissects the conflicts and struggles Odysseus faces as both a hero and an ordinary man, prompting readers to ponder the intricate and contradictory aspects of the human psyche.

Certainly, beyond its unassailable exalted position in literary history, this 2,800-year-old work continues to offer numerous insights to modern readers. Just as Odysseus encounters fateful challenges at every turn on his journey home, the epic highlights the universal human condition—how to confront the uncertainties of fate and achieve self-awareness. "Wandering" is both Odysseus' life journey and the essence of "The Odyssey" itself. It eternally drifts on the sea of literature, inviting readers to discover infinite possibilities within it and ultimately reach their own "Ithaca."

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