

Homers OdysseyDue 6th November

N.B.: All texts referenced fully in the Bibliography, Page 7.

How are the figures of Telemachus, Odysseus and Athena presented in Books I to V?

Throughout the formative books (namely I to V) that shape the consensus of the poem as a whole, the author portrays a series of consistent motifs and themes – primarily utilising literary mediums akin to epic poetry of this period. Indeed, a great deal of this is highlighted through initial character portrayal and their subsequent interactions with those around them as the story progresses. This is particularly evident in the cases of the legendary Odysseus, his estranged son Telemachus (the main protagonists of the poem) and the Goddess Athene – who oversees the well being of the aforementioned heroes.

Odysseus, the central character of the poem, is repeatedly portrayed as a courageous character renowned for his cunning; everyone who comes into contact with Odysseus is left in awe of his abilities. The author reiterates this point without fail whenever Odysseus becomes the topic of conversation, and the diction employed is always wholly complimentary (Cook, Book I, l.128 “*stout-hearted Odysseus*”, Book III, l.198 “*noble Odysseus*”, Book IV, l. 270 “*stout-minded Odysseus*”). As with most heroes of epic poetry, the usual character traits are highlighted in Odysseus (strength, nobility, a skill with words, cunning, etc.) yet most important of all is the theme of *kleos* (Greek for ‘*good reputation*’, a heroes reward for the hardships they have had to face) – “the hero’s quest for immortal *kleos* is one of the oldest motifs of Greek epic and commonplace amongst all oral epic poetry¹” – and Odysseus is no exception. Indeed, though *kleos* is an important paradigm of both Odysseus and Telemachus’ quests in the poem, “both embark on their respective journeys for quite different reasons. Whilst Telemachus has to leave Ithica to establish his identity, Odysseus must return there to do so (thereby reclaiming the throne and restoring order to both his family and nation).²”

The main body of direct characterisation in relation to Odysseus comes in Book V, in which (predictably) Odysseus fulfils all that is expected of him. However, two important characteristics are prominent; firstly, his capacity to endure hardships (Cook,

¹ Quote from Jones’ Commentary, Book I P.7-8.

² Quote from Jones’ Commentary, Book III P.27.

Book V, l.219 - 224 "*I shall bear it my breast, my long grieving heart...for I have suffered much already and endured much*"), and second, in this enunciation, an absolute refusal to give in. It is in this emotional state that Odysseus exudes a sense of pathetic fallacy (employed by the author to 'humanise' the character – to show that there is something beyond the legendary warrior), an idea that is continued when Odysseus begins to fear that he will never escape Calypso's cave (Cook, Book V, l.297 "*his knees gave way and his own heart went slack*"). However, it is important to discern the fact that being afraid is not an unheroic trait (whereas yielding to fear would be) and Odysseus confirms his heroic persona yet again through his composure and skill (Cook, Book V, l. 324-326 "*though he was wearied...he shunned death*"). Finally, Odysseus' innate goodness can also be highlighted through Athene's never-wavering support of him during his plight; a sign not that he is unable to take action without her aid but that he is worthy of the Gods attention and interaction.

Despite being wholly absent in the introductory books, Odysseus' memory and subsequent fate is a prevalent issue amongst those in the palace of Ithica. His memory unconsciously dominates the proceedings due to his untouched possessions (Cook, Book I, l.128-129 "*...where many of stout-hearted Odysseus' spears had been left standing*") and the chaos that has ensued during his absence – Ithica is without an officiated ruler and, with no definitive confirmation as to his father's fate, Telemachus had been left in limbo; unable to take up his fathers vacated position or make a new name for himself. This is one of the central themes of the introductory books and it thusly means that the majority of character portrayal therein centres on that of Telemachus.

Understandably, the initial portrayal of Telemachus is one of a very emotionally vulnerable and isolated man, he can see the quandary his nation state has been left to in the wake of his fathers departure alongside the suitors callous abuse of his hospitality yet feels incapable of rectifying the situation. Furthermore, this sense of self-doubt has perpetuated his inability to take control – to the extent that he feels incapable of facilitating the expectations left by his father's memory and even makes inclinations that he wishes he could negate his royal obligations (Cook, Book I, l. 215-218 "*my mother*

calls me the son of the man [Odysseus]. But I myself do not know...ah would that I were the fortunate son of some man whom old age came upon with all his possessions!").

As well as this, there is an almost paradoxical set of traits belonging to Telemachus' persona in the early stages of the poem. The author propagates this by balancing his callow inexperience with a subtext inclining toward his adult potential. After Athene installs a new confidence within him, Telemachus calls an Assembly and exerts his mastery over the household – stating unambiguously that he will fill Odysseus' shoes. This is important as it highlights two Homeric qualities in Telemachus that are common within all heroes of epic poetry; the ability to take command and an oratorical skill – reiterated in his bold decision to “*seek reports of his father*” and challenge to the suitors (Cook, Book I, l.414-416 “*I put no trust in a message, wherever it comes from, And I give no heed to any divination my mother Might ask of a diviner, calling him to the Hall*”) - which is full of Odysseus' fabled guile. However, these encouraging signs are directly conflicted with his immature frustration in his emotive release after his encounter with the suitors (Cook, Book II, and l. 80-81 “*so he spoke, in anger He threw the sceptre down on the ground, bursting out in tears*”). This culminates in the presentation of an emotively vulnerable Telemachus at the beginning of the poem – a man unable to supersede or detach himself from the father's memory, which in turn proliferates a tension between him and his mother (Penelope). This is evident in their numerous exchanges, but predominantly in his conversation with Athene (Book I) – in which he refers to her state of indecision with very disparaging tones (Cook, l.249 – 251 “*She neither refuse the hateful marriage nor can she make an end of it*”). Yet another example not only of Telemachus' confused nature that he seeks to blame those around him for a wholly unwarranted situation but of his immature frustrations.

However, after his conversation with Athene, Telemachus becomes a changed man – Book III highlighting this as he commands the attention of the established hero Nestor, who affirms that he strongly resembles Odysseus in both speech and demeanour (Cook, Book III, l.124-125 “*yes, indeed your speech is like his. You would not think a man so young could speak in such a likely way*”). This is ratified later by Menelaus, (Cook, Book IV, l.149-151 “*his feet are the same as that man's, his hands are the same,*

And the glances of his eyes, and his head, and the hair upon it. Yes just now I was remembering about Odysseus") - again fulfilling the Homeric condition of epic heroes ability to command a powerful diction. Also, this reiterates Telemachus' potential, as actions such as these are worthy of *kleos* – a theme commonly associated with Odysseus throughout the poem – and an entity common amongst Homeric protagonists.

In short, the introductory figure portrayed of Telemachus is that of a man in his seminal years attempting to transcend his self-doubt and broach the problems left in the wake of his father's absence. His plight is summarised concisely by Athene, who dismisses his melancholic demeanour saying, "*...no need to indulge in childishness. You are not that age*" (Cook, Book I, l. 296-297).

A character prevalent in the development of Telemachus' persona during the poem is that of Athene, the Goddess that aids Odysseus as well as Telemachus during the poem, alongside representing them in the council of the Gods. One factor intrinsically linked to Athene throughout is that of her 'divine plan', reiterated after each of her interactions with the main characters (Cook Book I, l.444 "*...pondered in his mind the course Athene had shown*"). However, it is important to discern the fact that Athene's aid does not diminish the heroic qualities of either of the aforementioned; though she expounds the qualities and actions necessary for them to succeed, they themselves must carry out each respective task under their own volition. This is evident in Books I and II as Athene, after convincing Telemachus to leave Ithica, makes him travel the seas without her divine intervention (albeit initially).

In fact, throughout Books I to V, Athene adopts a removed position from major events, choosing instead to influence matters from a more indirect angle. Athene receives little characterisation initially beyond her desire to help the two heroes, yet is more involved in the portrayal of the poems principal themes. She often appears to Telemachus in Books I and II under the guise of Mentor, highlighting the poems consistent motif of adopting deception and cunning for a greater good (an ideal employed repeatedly in the later books by Odysseus on his travels). One example of this is when she first meets Telemachus in Ithica, disguised as a traveller where she gives him a false account as to

the fate of his father (Cook, Book I, l. 197-199 “*He is still alive somewhere...on a flood-circled island, and troublesome men hold him, Savages...against his will*”). This is not only to spare his feelings of dejection at the thought of his father being held captive by a semi-divine being (Calypso) but also to convince him that the situation can be rectified (Cook, Book I, l.203 “*not much longer now, surely, will he be away*”).

Another theme that Athene propagates is the symbolic father and son association of Telemachus and Odysseus, and is herself aware that the Odysseys success is hinged on Telemachus’ ability to emulate his fathers deeds. She even informs him directly of this hypothesis (Cook, Book II, l. 270-280) “*If there really is instilled in you the might of your father then you are to achieve in both word and deed...what you wish. But if you are not the offspring of him and Penelope then I have no hope...*”.

Overall, Athene is portrayed as a wise, caring and cunning Goddess. She not only assists Telemachus and Odysseus with divine powers throughout the epic, but also speaks up for them in the council of the Gods on Mount Olympus³. As well as this, the author as a literary device uses Athene to highlight the poems primary motifs (the usage of disguises, the power of cunning over strength, etc.) and, with her frequently referenced ‘divine plan’, give the narration both a piety and omnipresent overview to which only a God would be privy (which in turn aids the narration of the story).

In summary, there are a great deal of motifs and themes highlighted in the portrayal of these respective characters. Not only do they reiterate the consensus of the poem (predominant in Athene’s disguises or Telemachus’ quest for identity and belonging) but also serve to underline the consistent paradigms of epic poetry (Odysseus’ cunning and guile, Athene’s divine interventions, etc.). In respect of the characters themselves, the opening books function to give concise summaries of them, which are later expanded on as the story progresses. Odysseus is repeatedly proven to be a great hero (albeit with a human side that longs to reunite his estranged family), whilst Athene is revealed to be a wise and cunning Goddess that serves to give the poem a sense of gravity (through the inclusion of the council of the Gods) and lends omnipresence to the narration. The majority of the characterisation revolves around the complex nature of

³ An abridged summary of Athene, www.sparknotes.com/homer_odyssey.htm

Telemachus, who initially feels incapable of assuming his father position yet eventually yields to his destiny (albeit through Athene's help).

WORD COUNT 2,000.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

All the texts below were utilised in preparation for this Assignment.

- '*Homer, The Odyssey*' by Albert Cook, Norton (1993).
- www.sparknotes.com, '*Homers Odyssey Study Guide*'.
- '*Homer's Odyssey Commentary*' by Peter Jones, Bristol Classical Press (1992).

