

How important is the episode in Phaeacia compared to the rest of the poem?

"The Odyssey," written by Homer, is the story of Odysseus and how he faced misfortune in his attempts to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. Homer describes Odysseus' journey and shows that his return back home is greatly influenced by several Gods and Goddesses. Three such influential Gods are Calypso, Athene and Poseidon. This intervention of the Gods is a recurring pattern and stylistic technique that Homer utilises in his Greek epic, "The Odyssey."

Book five opens with the Gods sat down in assembly and with the goddess Athene feeling sorry for noble Odysseus due to him being imprisoned in Nymph Calypso's home on the island of Ogygia. She said before them that she wishes for him to return home and to return quickly, this she asks the Gods to help her with. Hermes the Messenger is sent by Zeus to deliver the news to Calypso that it is time now for Odysseus to return home. However, his return would not be simple. Odysseus should be given no help, he should build a raft with his own hands and set out to sail with the help of no man or God. When he reaches a certain city that is owned by the Gods they shall make him a boat and give him riches. Already, from the opening of book five, Odysseus' challenge is set and the reader learns where he has been for the past seven years, on an isolated island with the beautiful Calypso.

At a first glance, the reader may suspect the intentions of the Goddess Calypso to be unfavourable to Odysseus. When Hermes approaches her and tells her the message, she understandably does not want to suffer the loss of him. She has grown to like Odysseus but in her selfishness for not wanting to lose him, she does not consider that Odysseus has a family of his own and a home he longs to return to.

The first time when we see Odysseus in this chapter is when he is crying, **" but the days found him sitting on the rocks or sands, torturing himself with tears."**

Of course, this is not the usual picture we are familiar of when thinking of Odysseus, he is usually classed as noble and brave, however we should remember that Odysseus is still mortal. He naturally has many emotions, separating him from the Gods. This human weakness he is feeling whilst he is on Calypso's island reminds us as readers just how much he is longing for home, for his faithful wife Penelope and for the son he left eighteen years ago. This I think is very important, it reiterates just how much Odysseus loves his wife Penelope. Calypso, the beautiful nymph who falls in love with Odysseus still after seven years does not have Odysseus' love. She indeed was a temptation to him, but the fact that Odysseus did not grow to love Calypso shows just how desperate he was to return home. The longing Odysseus has felt for seven years I think is very important to how the story is retold; the readers are being introduced to the stories of the hero.

Odysseus is reluctantly bid goodbye by Calypso and he sets off on his hard and troublesome journey. We learn that his fate has already been decided by Zeus, once again there is the presence of a God in Odysseus' story.

We read how Odysseus sailed on his man made raft for seventeen whole days and it was on the eighteenth day that Odysseus spots Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians, his next destination appointed by the gods. Just then, Poseidon, returning from a trip to the land of the Ethiopians, spots him and realizes what the other gods have done in his absence. Poseidon immediately intervenes, conjuring up a storm and ruining his raft,

**"With that he marshalled the clouds, and, seizing his trident in his hands, stirred up the seas."**

The anger that Poseidon has for him becomes apparent, his anger is shown greatly due to the fact that Odysseus blinded Poseidon's son Polyphemus. Once again, the power of a god is used to Odysseus' disadvantage as Poseidon conjures up the clouds and stirs the sea, summoning every direction of wind to blow,

It is now when we see Odysseus' fears once more, reiterating that he is different from the Gods; he is mortal. He is frightened that he will die alone at sea and will not get his proper burial rights. He tells us how he would rather have died on the plains of Troy, in battle, because there he would be remembered as a hero, and would have the decent and proper send off he deserves. He says,

**"If only I too could have met my fate and died the Trojan hordes let fly at me with their bronze spears over Achilles! I should at least have had my burial rights."**

The audience feels pity for Odysseus at this point; he is in desperation all alone at sea, he is almost dragged under the sea by the storm; a dramatic picture of him struggling is depicted.

At this moment, the goddess Ino comes to his rescue, giving him a veil that keeps him safe after his ship is wrecked. Once again Athene comes to his rescue as he is tossed back and forth out in the deep sea, against the jagged rocks of the coast. The audience meets the Phaeacians land.

Finally, a river up the coast of the island answers Odysseus's prayers and allows him to swim into its waters. He throws his protective veil back into the water as Ino had commanded him to do and walks inland to rest in the safe cover of a forest.

How Odysseus arrives on this land is very important. The Phaeacian section of "The Odyssey" seems mostly likely influenced by fairy tales or folk legends. It fits a genre, found in many cultures, in which a beautiful, innocent young girl, quite often a princess, who is attracted to a rugged, handsome stranger more than likely older and more experienced than she is. Sometimes the two end up together, but more than likely it is the man who makes an impression on the younger woman, with varying degrees of intimacy. Even in modern times this theme is popular in fiction and drama. In this case, it is recognisable with Odysseus and the beautiful virgin Nausicaa.

The people of Phaeacia, with a few minor exceptions, are decent, civilized and kind people. They are known for returning helpless strangers to their homelands, an act that exceeds even the generous welcomes usually found in "The Odyssey." This tradition is also consistent with the locals' devotion to Zeus, the protector of lost wanderers and the champion of suppliants.

Phaeacia itself is a paradise, a magical place. Luxuriant orchards, featuring apples, pears, figs, pomegranates and more bear fruit all year round. Vegetables and grains are in abundance, no one goes hungry on Scheria.

Nausicaa, who is one of the most famous and poignant characters in Greek literature, is the daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete.

When Odysseus wakes, she is down by the river with her friends washing laundry and playing games. He wakes up naked and so showing modesty and good manners, being the gentleman he covers himself up with a "leafy bough" so as to not meet the islanders naked. He travels towards the girls, who all run away apart from Nausicaa who stands firm, eager to listen to the stranger's words. Odysseus is a cunning man, and is always quick with flattery as he speaks to Nausicaa, which takes the emphasis away from his shabby appearance.

Fearing that she may become scared if he were to grab her knees in an act of supplication, he decides to speak to her from a distance. This shows how Odysseus always thinks of every situation before he decides what to do; ensuring that the decision he has made is correct and plausible.

With his speech to Nausicaa, he makes her feel sorry for him, partly because he tells her of his suffering, and partly because he seems to appear so pleasant to her. Odysseus knows that in this situation he cannot use his handsome good looks to get around her but must instead use the power of his speech to persuade her for help. This is done by using flattery and by charming her, which Nausicaa seems to respect.

She is stood alone, without her two maidservants and without her veil, two things that normally protect her person and reputation, perhaps showing that how Odysseus is speaking to her she feels comfortable with.

To repay Odysseus' good manners, Nausicaa shows her equally good manners by asking her friends to bathe him in the river and to clothe him. Once more Athene intervenes and using her divine power enhances Odysseus to make him look like a God. His appearance becomes much more important later on in this Phaeacian section when Nausicaa becomes a temptation for Odysseus.

How Odysseus presents himself I think is very important. He presents himself as a gentleman; he speaks kindly and honourably to Nausicaa for he knows that he must win the young girl's trust.

That evening she invites him to her mother and father's palace where he will meet them. Whilst waiting to do so, Odysseus prays to Athene and asks her to aid him in his supplication to the King and Queen; once more this shows his forward thinking and planning. It is important that he wins their trust, this both Odysseus and the audience are aware of.

When Odysseus enters the palace it is interesting that he greets Nausicaa's mother first,

**"Arete, daughter of godlike Rhexenor, as one who has suffered much I come a suppliant to your husband, to you and to your guests."**

He does not address King Alcinous first, perhaps showing his manners again or a different society that the Phaeacian people live in.

He is offered food and drink whilst he petitions the people there to send him on his way back to Ithaca,

**"Pontonous mix a bowl of wine and fill the cups of all the company in the hall."**

This emphasises their hospitality and good welcoming they give to strangers.

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When there is some doubt in Alcinous' mind as to who this man is who is standing before them, Odysseus speaks to them showing his way of words. He is decent in values, speaks politely and emphatically showing his passion and his honesty. He engages their minds and convinces them that he is no God in disguise but a man who really does need their help.

It is interesting throughout his meeting with the people at the palace that Odysseus does not tell them who he is; not once does he mention his name to them. This shows how he does not want to boast about who he is, he does not want to use his great name as the reason he sends him back home. I think this is important as it shows what kind of man Odysseus is. He is modest and honourable, and once again has thought of the situation and decided it is best not to base his return on the greatness of his name.

The Phaeacian section of the poem shows huge importance, particularly because it is here that we learn about Odysseus' adventures since leaving his home.

During book 8, the famous bard Demodocus sings a song,

**"When they had satisfied their appetite and thirst, the Muse set the bard to sing the famous deeds of the heroes."**

This proves to be a moving moment for Odysseus. Becoming quite upset as he listens to the story of the song, he tries to hide his tears from the people at the palace. He desperately tries to hide his emotions from the people enjoying the feast as he does not want to embarrass his hosts,

**" but Odysseus with his sturdy hands drew his purple cloak over his head and hid his handsome face as he was ashamed to be seen weeping by the Phaeacians."**

The Phaeacians are not great warriors, but they excel at seamanship, dancing and sports. During an exhibition of athletic skills, a youngster called Broadsea embarrasses King Alcinous by openly mocking Odysseus and challenging his athletic skills. The great Ithacan Odysseus promptly hurls a discus and throws it further than any of the other young men can manage. He is equally adept at wit and conversation, convincing his hosts that he is no ordinary wayfarer. When Demodocus, the blind bard, sings of the exploits of those at Troy, Odysseus weeps, causing King Alcinous to suspect that a hero of the Trojan War is amongst them.

Odysseus's stay at Alcinous's palace provides the reader with some relief as it bridges the narrative of Odysseus's uncertain journey from Calypso's island and the woeful exploits that he recounts in Books 9 through 12. Ironically, for all of his poise, Odysseus cannot remain at peace even when he finds himself outside the direct influence of the wrath of various gods. His melancholy at the Phaeacian games prompts an insult from Broadsea, which in turn provokes an intense series of challenges between Odysseus and the Phaeacian youths. His tears at Demodocus's song attract Alcinous's attention and ultimately force him to reveal his identity and relate the history of his anguish-filled journey. Additionally, though he makes no mention of it again after Book 8, Homer has already hinted that Odysseus has aroused the affection of Princess Nausicaa—just a short while after escaping the demanding attentions of the divine Calypso.

The tension between passion and constancy is particularly strong in Books 7 and 8. Homer sustains it not only through subtle allusions to Nausicaa's blossoming love for Odysseus but also through Demodocus's rather unsubtle and greatly detailed song about the illicit affair between Ares and Aphrodite. Though its discussion of the planned trysts between the two lovers and the cleverly wrought trap used by Aphrodite's cheated husband, Hephaestus, to catch the adulterers in the act ends the song on a light note, the song clearly has relevance for the morose and dejected Odysseus. It invites us to recall his helpless transgression with Calypso and points to the future, when, like Hephaestus, Odysseus will take vengeance upon those who have tried to steal his bed.

The contrast between the Phaeacian youths' naïve glory-seeking and Odysseus's somberness despite having achieved considerable glory highlights how Odysseus's painful experiences have matured him. Inexperienced in life's hardships, the youths act rashly, as when Broadsea insults Odysseus, to attempt to demonstrate their manhood. The exhortation of the youth Laodamas to Odysseus, "What greater glory attends a man . . . / than what he wins with his racing feet and striving hands? / . . . throw your cares to the wind!" illustrates the youths' simplistic preoccupation with physical prowess ("racing feet," "striving hands") (8.170–172). Odysseus, on the other hand, though clearly capable of besting the youths in athletic competition, exudes poise in the face of the youths' carefree brazenness, exerting himself only to defend his honor after Broadsea's insult. His retort that "[p]ains weigh on my spirit now, not your sports," displays his prioritization of the more grave concerns of family and loss over the trivial concern of glory for its own sake (8.178). Likewise, Nausicaa's immature attraction to Odysseus proves insignificant to him and cannot trump his desperate longing to return home.