

*Is Telemachus the last moral outpost in a sea of corruption in Ithaca?*

In the absence of his Father, Telemachus has been left to serve as the master of the family household, despite being very young himself- perhaps only 20 years or so. He comes up against a number of antagonistic characters in the first two books and

The family home has become overrun with suitors for his mother, trying to convince the grieving Penelope to remarry, as would have been expected of a widowed (assuming Odysseus is dead,) woman as that time. However, rather than attempting to court her in the way that was considered 'proper' at the time, they have encroached on the family, taken advantage of Odysseus' wealth and been entirely unsympathetic to the family's feelings at the loss of their father. A more somber attitude would perhaps be more suitable to their situation rather than theirs of vulgarity and even celebration.

Telemachus had offered them hospitality, which they've chosen to take advantage off. Perhaps his politeness and preoccupation with maintaining a good reputation had rendered him incapable of kicking them out? Perhaps he's worried this would go against the God's wishes and couldn't take control of the situation until he knew that he had Athene's blessing? They don't reciprocate the level of respect that Telemachus awards them and, in any age, this would be perceived as extremely rude, arrogant and short sighted.

Despite his age, Telemachus isn't influenced by the behaviour of the irreverent suitors. He is described as being 'disconsolate' amongst them and generally exhibits a feeling of resentment towards them. In a modern context, you would expect a teenage boy to be influenced by his peers in an attempt to fit in and gain support. This isn't so in the context that Homer's Odyssey was set. Telemachus has come from a noble background and I expect that throughout his upbringing a lot of evidence was placed on family honor, reputation, respect and morality. He evidently aims to uphold these values throughout the first few books of The Odyssey.

When he first encounters Athene, disguised as Mentos, he is polite, extremely welcoming and trusting: 'He caught sight of Athene and set off at once for the porch, ashamed that a stranger should be kept waiting at the gates'. The fact that Telemachus is described as being 'ashamed' that Athene was left waiting really highlights how much importance Telemachus invests in reputation. This preoccupation with maintaining a good reputation could be interpreted as arrogance- perhaps Telemachus is so unhappy with the presence of the suitors because he feels that he warrants more attention and respect as the son of a King than they're offering him? I doubt this. I don't think that Telemachus is all that concerned with his own reputation as he is with that of his Father and his family.

He shows a high level of respect towards his father, however he doesn't award the same level of respect towards his mother. He chastises her, quite insensitively, in front of the suitors when she breaks down and cries for the loss of her husband. This seemed quite harsh to me- I understand that in the context that this was written it was no strange thing for a woman's son to have more power than his mother, but I still feel that he should show more respect and sympathy towards her than he does. Is 'keeping up appearances' so important to him that he would sacrifice his mother's happiness?

It's undeniable that, despite his flaws, Telemachus is possibly the most decent person that we have met so far in *The Odyssey*. However, it is questionable whether or not he is the *only* admirable character in the poem. Other characters display respectable qualities, for example, towards the very end of book 1, we're briefly introduced to a character called Eurycleia. Homer describes her as 'the faithful Eurycleia' and reveals that she 'loved [Telemachus] the most, for she had nursed him as a child.' Her loyalty and innocent, maternal love leads me to believe that she upholds admirable standards that so many other characters lack. There are other servants throughout the books that perhaps aren't as corrupt as their masters: The minstrel, the housekeeper, the suitor's pages (who show commendable loyalty, regardless of their masters' offensiveness).

As I've made clear a little earlier on, I don't think that any of the characters fall neatly into the categories of 'good' and 'bad'. Most are 'grey' characters, with both good and bad points. One excellent example of this is Laertes, Telemachus' grandfather. He is first mentioned by Athene, who describes him as living a 'miserable existence on his distant farm'. We're given the impression that he disappeared after it became apparent that his son, Odysseus, was likely to have died in battle at Troy. Laertes' departure could be interpreted as an act of cowardice- as Odysseus' father and the most experienced man in his close family, I think it was part of Laertes' responsibility to aid Telemachus and Penelope to run the household and to fend off the suitors. Instead he hides himself away from the grieving family, perhaps in mourning, or in shame of his son's failure and his grandson's inability to cope. Whether he is ashamed or grieving, in my opinion, neither are suitable excuses for abandoning his family. Having said this, I don't dislike Laertes; towards the end of book one, there's evidence that Laertes is a man of morals: 'Laertes had procured [Eurycleia] at his own cost long ago... He had treated her in his home with all the respect due to a loyal wife, though for fear of his own wife's displeasure, he had not slept with her.' It was an accepted fact at the time that masters exercised the right to sleep with their slaves, regardless of their marital status. However, Laertes shows faithfulness to his wife

In summary, whilst I believe that Telemachus is undoubtedly the most moral of all of the characters, he is by no means the only moral character present in Ithaca.