

Select one important episode/figure (human or divine) from The Odyssey and show what contribution it makes to the poem as a whole.

The Odyssey by Homer is a major epic of Greek antiquity, however we know little of Homers identity and it is even a question whether he was in fact one person or a collection of storytellers. The story was originally an oral composition, which would have been, performed either by one or many performers.

The Odyssey tells the story of Odysseus and his attempts to return home from Troy after the battle. We see various adventures with mythical monsters and Odysseus' constant battle with many Gods to return to his wife and homeland of Ithaca. Odysseus is a brave and cunning warrior who is also aided through his voyages by many Gods, this is apparent in The Odyssey through the patronage of Athene, Zeus's daughter. Athene was Zeus' favourite child and was born bearing an aegis, and hence she became the warrior goddess. She is clearly a very strong female character in an era where women possessed little power and were portrayed as either Gods or monsters. Athene was also goddess of industry and the arts, wisdom, agricultural arts, and of the crafts of women, especially spinning and weaving. She has been described in relation to her actions in The Odyssey towards Odysseus as, "*the goddess of success*"<sup>1</sup>

This can be shown through Odysseus' voyage home and the help he receives from Athene, we see that she has power over the Gods, as well as respect, and a great power with mortals. Athene is known throughout Homer's epic as the '*Goddess of flashing eyes*' where he uses repetition to remind the listener of the character's traits.

This description suggests intelligence and an all-knowing and seeing being, however it also expresses the cunning that Athene displays constantly throughout The Odyssey. We see this most clearly when plotting battles with Odysseus, Homer begins by reminding the listener of Athene's input into the Trojan war in building the wooden horse, "*which Epeius built with Athene's help*"<sup>2</sup>

Homer gives us insight into Athene's previous aid to Odysseus and his adventures together with the integration of his previous poem the Iliad. However within The Odyssey she aids Odysseus by assisting him in his battle against the suitors both physically and by advising him,

*"And now high in the roof above their heads, Athene raised her deadly aegis."*<sup>3</sup>

Her position in the roof shows her extreme superiority over the suitors and the fact that she does not fight on their level. Homer's description of the aegis also creates a sense of threat against her enemy and enhances her title as the warrior goddess, but also as the goddess of success. She helps Odysseus to succeed and continues the story by overpowering a group of characters within the poem to create an opening for new situations. Athene uses the mortals like chess pieces, by strategically placing her pieces before attacking as she marks the suitors for death,

*"Not that it saved him from his fate, for Athene had already marked him out to fall to a spear from Telemachus' hand."*<sup>4</sup>

Athene is clearly the decider of this battle, but also the controller of the fighters' actions, such as Telemachus. She plans the battles not only to assist Odysseus, but to inform us of the events to come in true Homeric chronological order, but also states,

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<sup>1</sup> Thorpe (1986), Homer, p51

<sup>2</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p120

<sup>3</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p337

<sup>4</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p277

*"I am eager for the battle."*<sup>5</sup> which reminds us her character as the warrior goddess. However towards the end of the poem she stops a battle which she had previously encouraged. This is mainly due to Zeus' influence after he throws down a thunderbolt, still we see a glaring inconsistency in Athene's character which cannot be explained, *"Then Pallas Athene...still using Mentor's form and voice for her disguise, established peace between the two sides."*<sup>6</sup>

Again we see Athene using disguise to convey her messages to the mortals without revealing her true form. This is the main method she uses for her interference with the mortal world, which she also uses while plotting vengeance against the suitors. To begin this she comes to Odysseus, while he is disguised as the beggar, as a beautiful woman who instructs him on the time to pursue the suitors and reveal his true self to his son. Here Athene takes the poem onto the next step of the story, progressing it and beginning the build-up to a great battle,

*"Speak now to Telemachus and hide nothing so that the pair of you can plot the downfall of the suitors."*<sup>7</sup>

Athene initiates the beginning of the relationship between Odysseus and Telemachus, but also that they bond together for a mutual goal. She also encourages them to plot without her, however Odysseus later refers to the actions that Athene will take and reminds us that this is her battle. During the fight she appears as Mentor, Odysseus' old friend, in order to increase the level of fighting she provokes Odysseus and tells him he has lost all his strength and valour. This makes him fight harder and enhances the action of the scene, but also puts Odysseus to the test of his implied strength. She uses insults and plays upon his pride to increase the tension before the final battle,

*"Where is your spirit, Odysseus? Where has your prowess gone?"*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p245

After Athene provokes Odysseus she observes from afar to witness her handiwork. She turns into a swallow to overlook the fighting, which is a small bird therefore poses an insignificant threat to the suitors. They are unaware of her as she is just an observer in this state, her image and her actions contrast to the aforementioned raising the aegis and putting fear into the suitors.

By Athene helping Odysseus in this manner Homer shows the relationship between gods and mortals. Gods only help those who are worthy, however this does not diminish his status as a warrior due to his need for help but she enhances it by highlighting Odysseus' true qualities.<sup>9</sup> Athene builds up Odysseus' character by boasting of his strength and beauty and also with the preliminary fight with the other beggar. Here he gains status with the suitors and the listener and they begin to respect him to a certain extent. Homer describes Odysseus' physical attributes therefore building our mental picture of a great man and a great threat to the suitors,

*"As a result, all the suitors were lost in amazement, and significant glances and comments were made."*<sup>10</sup>

By their reaction we see that Odysseus is clearly a man of some considerable strength, but also that the suitors are inferior to Odysseus stature.

Just as Athene provokes Odysseus we see her use the same method to manipulate Telemachus into going to Pylos and Sparta. She appears as a trusted family friend, Mentos, and advises Telemachus of what he should do in order to gain information about his father's whereabouts. However the real reason for this voyage is to keep him away from the suitors because they desire to kill him, but also to establish himself as a

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<sup>6</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p370

<sup>7</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p244

<sup>8</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p335

<sup>9</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, Introduction pxi

man before he meets his father again. She tells Telemachus where he should go and at the same time informing the reader of the events to come, but not of the consequences when he reaches his destinations. Homer uses Athene to hint at the coming events and the adventures that Telemachus will encounter. In order to convince Telemachus to proceed with these voyages Athene provokes him by discussing the offensive suitors and makes him doubt whether his father is alive. She later reveals that this was to ensure his reputation as a man and live up to the title of Odysseus' son,

*"I myself was his escort, so that he would win fame from his journey there."*<sup>11</sup>

Athene also appears to Telemachus as Mentor where she gives him courage and faith in himself as his father's son, therefore creating a comparative relationship with Odysseus.

Athene also disguises herself as many a guide in order to aid Odysseus in his quest and direct him in the progression of the poem. When Odysseus lands in Ithaca the first person he meets is Athene disguised as a shepherd who tells him of the beauty of Ithaca. He gives a description of Ithaca to the listener and shows the infamous nature of the country of which Odysseus rules. Homer shows the importance of Odysseus through the description of his country, which runs on a parallel to his own reputation,

*"It has a name by no means inglorious. In fact it is known to thousands, to all the peoples who live in the direction of dawn and sunrise and all who live in the opposite direction."*<sup>12</sup>

Through Telemachus' travels Homer shows that Odysseus is infamous for his part in the Trojan war and, just like Ithaca, is known by many. However when Odysseus first enters his homeland Athene takes it upon herself to protect him from the wrath of the

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<sup>10</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p275

suitors, who would make an attempt on his life if he should be recognised. Therefore Athene envelops him in a cloud of mist so as to protect Odysseus. Through this Athene gives him ample opportunity to carry out his revenge against the suitors, which Homer explains in detail,

*“To make Odysseus unrecognisable, to tell him precisely how things stood, and to prevent his being recognised by his wife and friends or the people of the town before the suitors had paid for all their transgressions.”<sup>13</sup>*

Again we see Homer’s method of stating the future events before they have happened, and he begins to prepare us for the great battle to follow.

In order to continue protecting Odysseus Athene then disguises him as a beggar so that he can distinguish the loyal from the traitors, but also so that the contrast between the appearance of the beggar and that of the Athene-enhanced Odysseus can be marvelled upon. This is specifically poignant for the reactions of both Telemachus and Penelope. Odysseus’ appearance makes such an impression on Telemachus that he takes him for a God, whereas Penelope is far less trusting as she refuses to believe that it is her husband. Athene enhances his beauty when he is clean, making him more attractive to Penelope. We see the untrustworthy attitude of Penelope even though Homer shows that she has cried her eyes out every night that Odysseus has been away,

*“She wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband, till bright-eyed Athene closed her eyes in sweet sleep.”<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p205

<sup>12</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p199

<sup>13</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p198

<sup>14</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p14

Athene's applies her relationship with the mortals to make Penelope sleep, to comfort her and can therefore give her information to further the story. Athene creates a phantom of her sister Iphthime to comfort Penelope, who tells her that Telemachus will return but refuses to tell her of Odysseus being alive or dead as "*It does no good to utter empty words.*"<sup>15</sup> Despite that fact that Homer has already affirmed Odysseus' return, Athene adds suspense to the poem and we feel great sympathy towards Penelope. The repetition of Athene closing Penelope's eyes in sleep creates an impact to remind us of her loyalty to Odysseus and her sorrow at his leaving her.

We see a great many ways in which Athene helps Odysseus to complete his long voyage, but Homer also uses her in other ways to progress his tale and to develop Athene as a character in her own right. She does not acknowledge Odysseus' cries out of loyalty towards her uncle, due to Odysseus inflicting injury upon Poseidon's son, Polyphemus the Cyclops. Due to this Athene has to refrain from helping Odysseus as Poseidon who has "*persisted in his rancour against the noble Odysseus until he [has] reached his own land.*"<sup>16</sup> Homer attempts to show Odysseus' situation without the help of Athene, however she is quick to protect him within the next 30 lines of the poem, which shows her great influence over his voyage and her significance to the progression of the story.

We have seen many examples of Athene moving the story to the next stage and her explanation of the past and future events of The Odyssey. This is most apparent within the first exchange between Athene and her father, Zeus, (I .45-106) where they discuss Odysseus' travels up to his imprisonment on Ortygia. This device is used due

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<sup>15</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p69

to the confused chronological order that Homer uses. This is one of the many types of contributions that Athene makes to The Odyssey, however she herself summarises her role within the poem,

*“And here I am once more, to contrive a cunning scheme with you, to hide the treasures of the Phaeacian nobles, prompted by me, gave you when you left for home, and to warn you of all the trials you will have to undergo within your palace.”*<sup>17</sup>

Here she states the basis of her role, the creation of plans; the attainment of wealth; and the informing of events. Athene completes these in many ways to contribute to Odysseus’ travels and the story as a whole. We see her plotting with Odysseus and Telemachus against the suitors and various mythical monsters while acquiring treasures to enhance the wealth of Odysseus. However her main role appears to be that of advising in her various forms to progress the story and direct the characters to their various stations. She does not physically action many situations, but encourages others to do so. Generally she a very important character within The Odyssey but is given little credit within the story as a whole.

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<sup>16</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p94

<sup>17</sup> Homer (1991), The Odyssey, p202



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