

Similes in the Odyssey: Books 5-7

Written hundreds of centuries ago, The Odyssey is perhaps the earliest piece of western literature in existence. In order to set a trend and to involve the audience, the writer; Homer, uses a range of literary techniques, including metaphors, imagery, long winded speeches and trials and tests of various characters. But the most effective device used by Homer is without doubt the simile.

At the start of Book 5, Homer compares the journey of Hermes; the messenger of the Gods, to a "shearwater/who along the deadly deep ways of the barren salt sea/goes hunting fish and sprays quick-beating wings in the salt brine". In this simile, Hermes is compared to a shearwater, and the hunting of fish is a reference to the news he will deliver to Kalypso. The fact that the fish have no control over their destiny runs in parallel with the destiny of Kalypso, who is forced to hand over the man she loves due to the will of the Olympians, not her own. This would have helped the Greek audiences understand the fate of Kalypso, by comparing it to a common image many of the Greeks would have witnessed.

Homer also uses a simile to portray the fate of Odysseus' raft. Odysseus has to endure Poseidon's anger as he tosses his raft "about the current now here, now there;/as the North Wind in autumn tumbles and tosses thistledown along the plain, and the bunches hold fast one on another,/so the winds tossed her on the great sea , now here, now there/and now it would be South Wind that push her between/them,/and then again East Wind and West would burst in and follow". The fact that a wind is doing this adds a natural edge to proceedings, which is further enhanced when one considers that a super natural entity, such as Poseidon, is the purveyor of such doom. The weakness of the "thistledown" compares well with the weakness of Odysseus' handmade raft and the repetition of the word "wind" reinforces the repeated beatings the raft is suffering. This is also further enhanced by the fact that both words begin with 'w'.

Another interesting simile that Homer uses is his comparison of Odysseus relief at being saved to "the show of life again in a father/is to his children, when he has lain sick, suffering strong pain, /and wasting long away, and the hateful death spirit has brushed him, /but then, and it is welcome, the gods set him free of his sickness, /so welcome appeared land and forest for Odysseus" The role of the father is indicative of the aid offered to Odysseus by Athena and the lengthy description of pain runs in parallel with the length of time that Odysseus has spent away from his family. However, the mention of 'land and forest' is perhaps a hint that salvation may not be too far off for Odysseus.

Homer also uses a simile to symbolize Odysseus' coming to shore, which is compared to when a "man buries a burning log in a black ash heap/in a remote place of the country, where none live near as neighbors, / and saves the seed of fire, having no other place to get a light/from". The references to fire highlight Odysseus growing rage at the situation and his loneliness is

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emphasized the reference to “none” living near as neighbors. This, combined with the lack of light helps to paint a dark picture and give a deep insight into the mind of Odysseus.

Homer also uses a simile to glorify the beauty of Nausikaa, and to contrast her beauty to that of her handmaidens. He compares her to Artemis, “who showers arrows, moves on the mountains/either along Taygetos or on high-towering/Erymanthos, delighting in boars and deer in their running,/and along with her the nymphs, daughters of Zeus of the aegis, range in the wilds and play, and the heart of Leto is gladdened,/ for the head and the brows of Artemis are above all the others,/ and she is easily marked among them, though all are lovely,/ so this one shone among her handmaidens, a virgin unwedded”. The use of high peaked mountains is indicative of the beauty of Nausikaa in comparison to the handmaidens, and her suitors are compared to “boars and deer” in their running, so are happy just to see her. However, the handmaidens “are all lovely” too, showing us that Nausikaa is indeed aesthetically outstanding.

The emergence of Odysseus from the thicket is likened to a “hill-kept lion, /who advances, though he is rained on and blown by the wind, and both/eyes/kindle; he goes out after cattle or sheep, or it may be/deer in the wilderness, and his belly is urgent upon him’ to get inside of a close steading and go for sheep flocks”. This simile once again highlights Odysseus’ loneliness, and the girls are shown as “cattle or sheep”. However, the simile seems to present Odysseus unfavorably, and is indicative of his state of mind regarding strange places after his experiences on Ogygia.

Odysseus is glorified by Athena, as Homer describes his appearance as seemingly taller, “and on his head she arranged curling locks that hung down like hyacinthine petals. /And as when a master craftsman overlays gold on silver, / and he is one who was thought by Hephaistos and Pallas Athene/in art complete, and grace is on every work he finishes, /so Athene gilded with grace his head and his shoulders, / and he went a little aside and sat by himself on the seashore,/radiant in grace and good looks”. Odysseus is compared to a piece of fine art, which has been overlaid with “gold on silver”, and this is perhaps also indicative of his new found confidence and determination, as well as his physical attributes.

However, there are no such similes present in Book 7. This may be due to the fact that Homer does not wish to describe the surroundings or characters in any great detail, since they may not have any great bearing to the remainder of the play. Also, Homer may feel that a lack of similes may give the reader a chance to use their own imagination and draw their own interpretations.