

The Odyssey – Written Commentary

Narrative Section: The Epos
Key Passage: Book IX 394-449

Composed approximately in 700 B.C., Homer's epic narrative, 'The Odyssey' depicts the homeward voyage of the legendary Greek hero Odysseus. The Epos, commonly known as "The Wanderings of Odysseus" are the protagonists' recounting of his perilous misadventures to King Alcinous of the Phaeacians; to date, the most

celebrated and noted section of the great epic. Contrasting 'The Iliad', 'The Odyssey' places emphasis on cunning and guilefulness rather than strength as in the former epic; elucidated in Odysseus' dealings with Poseidon's son, the Cyclops Polyphemus. Compelled by curiosity to explore the island, Odysseus opts to refrain from pillaging a discovered cave glutted with provisions, choosing to his crew's dismay to linger and test the inhabitant's hospitality rather than scuttling to the ships. Holding no interest in civility or hospitality, the insidious Polyphemus entraps Odysseus and his men cannibalistically consuming them. Utilizing his guile Odysseus initiates through a chain of events his masterful plan of escape. This passage, illustrating the most renowned example of Odyssean cunning is vital to 'The Odyssey' because it exemplifies through motifs and literary devices the major themes of deception and cunning over strength.

A critical component of the passage supported by motifs, the theme of deception helps to reaffirm the extract's importance to 'The Odyssey' as a whole. Through the employment of deception, supported by the motifs of lies, Odysseus' Machiavellian trick ensures not only immediate, but future security. Questioned as to his name, Odysseus conscious of the imperative importance to his greater plan of escape cleverly lies, "My name is Nohbdy" (397); the sole reason for his survival. Blinded, Polyphemus' howl beckons the other Cyclops who ask inquisitively of the screams. Appealing for help he cries: "Nohbdy, Nohbdy's tricked me, Nohbdy's ruined me!" (443) But told that nobody's tricked him, the other Cyclops return to their slumber. Had Odysseus never implanted his initial lie, an act of consummate deception and deceitfulness, his fate would have been sealed with the Cyclops brethren entering to identify the attacker. Not only representing the power of deception, but more importantly supporting the major theme of cunning over strength, the theme of deception is vital in emphasizing the extract's importance.

Essential to the passage, the extensive imagery and repeated motifs support the underling theme of the extract. Percolating with grotesque imagery unlike any other in 'The Odyssey', it serves to underlie the affect of cunning and intelligence over strength. A gargantuan barbarian "[dribbling] streams of liquor and bits of men" (405), Polyphemus' cannibalism and dominance over his prisoners is clearly outlined. But then when blinded, immense accompanying graphic imagery such as: "Eyelid and lash were

seared; the pierced ball / hissed broiling, and the roots popped” (422-423) conveys the critical message that it was Odysseus’ intelligence and resourcefulness, not his immediate vigor which led to the brutal destruction of Polyphemus’ eye. The repeated motif of blood apparent throughout the passage also supports this thought. Death and destruction, represented by the motif of blood are customarily associated with physical strength, but in this instance, it is a result of ingenious innovation rather than magnificent physical prowess. Although the act of blinding of the eye was a feat of physical skill, it was planning, acumen and guile which remained the true forces behind the immense damage as is emphasized by the imagery because without them, the opportunity to blind the beast would never have presented itself. Viciously rotating the pike into Polyphemus’ eye, Odysseus and his crew’s action is depicted by Homer as that of sailing a ship. Odysseus assuming his role of captain and guiding the pike, “turning it as a shipwright turns a drill” (417) and the crew falling into ranks, their action in ramming the pike into the beast’s eye is exactly like that when at open sea. The significance of the epic simile serves to, as everything else in the passage, to fortify the theme. Even in his state of suppression, if only a few men attempted to blind Polyphemus confident of their might, the damage inflicted would be meager and the Cyclops awoken. Instead, employing his intellect, Odysseus “cheered [his] men along” (408) and functioning as a unit, their combined forces brought forth by Odysseus’ astuteness was the true driving force behind Polyphemus’ blinding. This idea is even demonstrated in the subtlest of manners by Homer in using an olive pike as the instrument of destruction. Traditionally a symbol of peace and prosperity, Odysseus applying his craftiness and creativity turned an object of peace into a weapon of annihilation, strengthening at the most basic level the theme of cunning and intelligence over strength for if Odysseus had not been resourceful enough to forge a the pike into a spear, then he and his crew would undoubtedly have been consumed.

Reinforcing the fundamental theme of the passage, the language and rise in tension play important roles. Abundant with energetic verbs together with the vivid imagery, Homer’s diction undoubtedly creates a powerful text as seen in sentences such as: “forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it / deep in his crater eye” (415-416). Together with the rising tension, the intensity of the passage lends itself to the theme.

Filled with anxiety as to Odysseus' fate, the beginning tension is relatively low. Rapidly rising due to frequent sentence pauses as Odysseus' men prepare the pike, the tension and intensity peaks when Polyphemus is blinded. With the already powerful language, the heightened tension and intensity truly make the text inspirational and profoundly support the major theme, because it highlights and adds awe to the gruesome damage done to Polyphemus which of course, was a result of perspicacity.

Vital to the second of Homer's epics, this passage is crucial to 'The Odyssey' because it serves as a cardinal exemplification of the major theme of cunning over strength. Supported by the theme of deception, imagery, motifs and various literary devices present in the text, the theme is clearly outlined in Odysseus' dealing with Polyphemus. Intoxicated, intelligently taking advantage of the situation Odysseus first cunningly lies to the Cyclops, an act of deception which ensures future safety. Then utilizing his resourcefulness and intelligence, working with his crew they gruesomely blinded their cannibalistic captor. While the blinding was a physical act, in every sense it was a representation of the passage's theme. Overcoming all odds and defeating what seemed an invincible foe by taking to heart Homer's message of guilefulness over strength, this passage is truly crucial to 'The Odyssey' as a whole.

Motifs – cunning tricks, blood, death, fire, supported by theme of deception (escape wouldn't have been possible without the initial planning and the deceptiveness of planting the lie)

Language (language and imagery come together in all the gory action showing that lots of planning and the slightest, perfectly timed and placed physical attack can yield to such a gory and deathly outcome)

Imagery – fire imagery depicting and representing destruction

Epic simile

Change in tension indicates the above.

Tone

Diction and order of words

Rammed the thing in the crater of the eye – different than saying I shoved it in, so the language and diction is powerful

Drunk hiccupping not only is visually imagery but is also very powerful.

Imagery brings out meaning more

Power →

For a hero of the Iliad, they would have blinded Polyphemus at first chance, but stressing the importance of the two themes of BLAH AND BLAH, the necessity of ... is seen in this passage.

Motif of cunning tricks is not in this passage but the trick is in getting Cyclops drunk anyway.

Odysseus's inventiveness in this situation is a tribute to the hero's manipulation of the truth.

So basically by putting on a disguise he ensures the future safety of his men so Polyphemus can't curse them.

Established by Homer in the beginning lines of the passage, the theme of deception works to clarify the importance of this passage.

emphasize, in this cardinal representation of Odyssean cunning, the major theme of cunning over strength.

In alien worlds with other people

Machiavellian

How it resembles cunning

Talk about theme and how it is important to the story? And then connecting you can say how its shown. How it applies to rest of Odyssey and give examples.