

The *Odyssey*, by Homer, is a classical piece of Greek literature. Throughout *The Odyssey*, Homer makes use of many literary techniques in order to give meaning to the poem beyond its significance as a work of historic fiction and help his readers in the comprehension of the story. One of these techniques is the use of motifs. In *The Odyssey*, perhaps the most important of Homer's motifs is the symbolic death and rebirth theme. This motif is used throughout *The Odyssey* to emphasize the growth and maturation of the characters. The first example of this motif occurs with Telemachus early in the book. Telemachus, in book I, is visited by the goddess Athena in disguise. In their conversation, Telemachus reveals the pain and suffering that he is experiencing as a result of living without knowing the status of his father, fearing that he is dead. ". . . and he left pain and lamentation to me. Nor is it for him alone that I grieve in my pain now (*The Odyssey*, Latimore, I. 242-3)." Symbolically, at this point in the text, Telemachus is dead. He is willing to take no action to save his home from the suitors or take any initiative to determine the status of his missing father. However, his symbolic death is not without a rebirth. Athena, disguised as Mentos, brings Telemachus back to life. She convinces him that he must take action to preserve the household and determine the fate of his father. This prompts Telemachus to take over his father's role in the household and journey forward to gather information about his missing father. His rebirth is further carried out in the story when he is reunited with his father; together, the two act to regain control of their household from the suitors. The next example of the death and rebirth motif occurs with our introduction to the story's main character and hero, Odysseus. Homer introduces Odysseus on the Kalypso's island. Odysseus's stay with Kalypso would cause his demise as that was the fate of mortals who lived with goddesses. On a more symbolic level, Odysseus was dead to the world as Kalypso forbids him from leaving the island and forces him to do her bidding. Odysseus was reborn, however, at the hands of Hermes, who was a messenger for Zeus. Hermes tells Kalypso that Odysseus is to be freed so Odysseus builds a raft and sets out for home. This symbolic rebirth is emphasized by Odysseus's emergence from the ocean on the island of the Phaiakians. He is washed ashore with nothing--his raft is destroyed and he is completely naked. This naked emergence can also be seen as symbolic of birth. Another reference to this rebirth is found at the end of book V. "As when a man buries a burning log in a black ash heap in a remote place in the country, where none live near as neighbors, and saves the seed of fire, having no other place to get a light from . . . (V. 488-91)." The phrase "seed of the fire" is used by Homer specifically to make reference to the rebirth of Odysseus; the term "seed" clearly brings to mind reproductive and birth images that would not be associated with a less metaphorical reference. Another instance in which Homer makes use of the death and rebirth motif occurs with Odysseus's adventure with the cyclops Polyphemus. Odysseus and his men are trapped in the cave of Polyphemus, which symbolizes their death. This death is further emphasized when Odysseus refers to himself as "Nobody". As Homer later recounts, those in the underworld are truly nobodies--they have no interaction with the living world and cannot even communicate. Odysseus is reborn through his own ingenuity and cleverness as he escaped Polyphemus's cave and announced to the cyclops his true identity, once again making himself born into the realm of mortals. The symbolic rebirth of Odysseus can be emphasized by the cave, which can be seen as a symbol of the womb, therefore making Odysseus' emergence from the cyclops's cave a true rebirth. The next example of the death and rebirth motif is a rather obvious one that has little symbolic inference: Odysseus' descent into the underworld in book XI. Homer uses many light and dark references to emphasize the death and rebirth theme in this book-- darkness symbolizing death and light symbolizing life and therefore rebirth. While in the underworld, Odysseus gains insights about his eventual return home. With this knowledge, Odysseus and his crew return to the world of the living, symbolizing their rebirth. Again, light and

dark images are used to emphasize this rebirth. ". . .where Helios, the sun, makes his uprising . . . (XII. 4)." As illustrated in the preceding line, Odysseus returns from the Underworld to the place where the sun rises-- the symbolism is obvious. The death and rebirth theme surfaces again in book XIII. Odysseus, after visiting the underworld, is returning home to Ithaca. During the long voyage, he is visited by Arete's serving women. The women bring Odysseus gifts and put him into a deep slumber, which Homer himself likens to death: "The bent to their rowing, and with oars tossed up the sea spray, and upon the eyes of Odysseus there fell a sleep, gentle, the sweetest kind of sleep with no awakening, most like death . . . (XIII. 78-81)." Again, this death is not without a rebirth. The Phaiakians leave the sleeping. This theme is re-emphasized in this book because many of the citizens of Ithaca believe that Odysseus actually is dead; they will see his return from the underworld as a true rebirth. Penelope is Homer's next vehicle to strengthen the death and rebirth motif. In book XVIII, Athena causes Penelope to undergo a deep sleep which Penelope associates with death. "How I wish chaste Artemis would give me a death so soft . . . (XVIII. 202)." While asleep, Athena enhances Penelope's looks in anticipation of Odysseus's return. Penelope awakens looking younger, taller, and more beautiful. After she awakens Penelope talks to her son and makes a definitive statement condemning the suitors; something she had never done before in public. Truly, this represents a rebirth and awakening in the character of Penelope. The final example of the death and rebirth theme in The Odyssey occurs in book XXIV when Odysseus is reunited with his father, Laertes. Laertes faints when he realizes that his son has returned. This fainting symbolizes his death. When he awakens, and is therefore reborn, he has a new love for life and no longer wishes for death to overtake him. This is a just a compact version of the death and rebirth theme at the end of the book. Overall, the death and rebirth theme makes a very important contribution to The Odyssey. Throughout the work, Homer makes use of this theme for several reasons. Primarily, it helps the reader gain better understanding into what is one of the more important underlying themes in the entire book: one should never give up on living. Homer tells his tale and emphasizes that, even though a situation may seem insurmountable, there is always an option that, if taken, will not only sustain life but provide some valuable insight or experience. This theme of The Odyssey is a universal one, which truly helps to account for the timelessness example of Homer's work.