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Humanities

24/09/05

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The Odyssey

Homer characterizes the Kyklops in such a way as to reveal the birth of Odysseus's well profound strengths as well as his inability to exercise restraint.

In this essay I will analyze the significance of the one eyed Kyklops Polyphemos as an attempt to study Homer's characterizing of the main character Odysseus.

I will analyze the Kyklops's interaction with Odysseus and will identify the various literary techniques used by Homer while simultaneously explaining the significance and effectiveness of these methods to the plot development of this epic poem.

In order to present this pre-eminent epic of action to a more striking effect, Homer uses two devices of characterization, the epithet and the simile in book IX when he describes the scene involving Polyphemos and Odysseus. Both techniques were used to provide additional information about the two characters and to reveal different aspects of Homer's development of Odyssey's state of mind.

After the war of Troy Odysseus and his crew attempted to find their way back to Odysseus's home Ithaca, but due to their lack of responsibility they were met with some resistance and choose to rest on a strange island inhabited by a Kyklops. Upon arriving on the island Odysseus and his men naively feasted on readily abundant food found in a secluded cave without first exploring the island to see whether any threats lay near. Then curious Odysseus suggested that they explore and seek knowledge about the

native people of the unconquered lands in order to decipher whether they were “wild savages ... or hospitable... god fearing men” (188 -189). This is the first instance amidst a series of others where Odysseus neglects his role as leader and causes the fate of his crew and the journey to become jeopardized. His decision to explore the island of is what caused his main goal of returning home to Ithaca to become destined for failure.

Odysseus stumbles onto a prodigious giant; this giant was Polyphemos, son of Poseidon, Greek God and ruler of the seas. When Polyphemos returns to his cave (the same cave where Odysseus and his men feasted) he realizes that his unannounced guests were expecting a warm welcome despite the fact that they had just finished raiding his cattle. The giant understandably refuses to show them any hospitality and begins to devour them one by one. Through this chaotic encounter the consequences of Odysseus’s bad leadership skills materialize, and we see that his decisions have led his men into grave danger, eventually costing him many of his greatest fighters.

However even after losing many members of his crew Odysseus was now devising a plan to again defeat the giant by tricking him into freeing himself and his crew. Odysseus decides to intoxicate Poylphemos, blinding him with drunkenness along with stunning him with a sharp blow to the eye. **He uses the opportunity to escape. After escaping one would immediately leave the island, but once again Odysseus’s irrational thinking led him to making the wrong decision.** Even after his crew begged for their departure “Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!” Odysseus still insisted on adding insult to injury by mocking Polyphemos and reciting his name. (538-539). It is at this point that as he mocked Polyphemos, Poseidon invites the wrath of the god on his shipmates as he foolishly reveals information about himself.

Apart from the obvious display of character traits in the actual content of the poem Homer uses literary devices to depict the characteristics of Polyphemos and Odysseus. Homer humanizes Polyphemos in order to create a character foil and also to draw the audience's attention to the sometimes-inhuman choices made by Odysseus. Homer traces the development of Odysseus's state of mind using similes as a technique to bring this cartoon-like character to life by comparing his habits to that of other animals. Homer uses the simile when he compares Polyphemos's demeanor to that of a lion, "gaping and crunching like a mountain lion". (317)

Homer uses irony to further convey his message to his audience presenting Polyphemos as a cruel-hearted beast in his attack but yet describes him as a "Shepard with his flock". (331-334). Polyphemos's behavior is compared to that of a shepherd who is an individual of compassion and mild qualities.

Homer again uses the simile with his clever comparison "when the young dawn with finger tips of rose lit up the world the Cyclops built a fire and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order, putting the suckling to the mothers" where he presents this beast with gentle qualities.(332-334)

Homer also uses visual imagery to provide a vivid and specific image to his readers as he describes how Polyphemos was blinded, "I lifted it, and rammed it deep in his crater eye, I leaned on it turning it as a shipwright turns a drill in planking" (415-416) and "So with our brand we bored that great eye socket while blood ran out around the red hot bar. Eyelid and lash were seared: the pierced ball hissed broiling, and the roots popped". (420-423). These images are used to emphasize the gruesome act performed by Odysseus and his crew and also to shed light on the corroborative effort and strength

needed to defeat the mighty Polyphemos. This imagery indicates the callousness and cruel nature of Odysseus the star character. This technique used by Homer proves to be effective as one can have a clear illustration and description of this beast like creature. Homer uses Polyphemos's character to place emphasis on Odysseus's state of mind and to depict his strengths and flaws.

Homer not only uses similes as a method of characterization but uses many different techniques. He uses the epithet which is usually attached to a "person" or a "thing" to aid in its identification. For example Homer uses "wise Penelope" and "bright-eyed Athena" It is used to bring irony or sarcasm to the poem, for example "brave Antinoos", who is in fact a coward as he refused compete with the other suitors to win Penelope in marriage. This proves to be effective as the audience remains attentive and adds humor.

Homer also uses Polyphemos to play an important role to show Odysseus's indignity and provide his audience with an insight that Odysseus' future will be threatened if he persists in thinking in this irrational manner. Because of Odysseus's behavior, Poseidon father of Polyphemos promises him punishment and great misery. The major use of the gods by Homer is to respond to actions by the mortals and reprimand them for misconduct. Homer tries to show that Odysseus's mind state has depreciated throughout the battle of Troy is not ready for what lies ahead. This aids in plot development as it shows transition of his state of mind from that of war, in which he used to fighting and chaos to a reformation in his decisions to that of his homeward journey.

Odysseus committed the crime of blinding Poseidon's son and received a punishment of epic proportions. If he was rational and had simply tricked Polyphemos he might have been forgiven, but added insult to injury. Consequently to this transgression in his behavior he and his family paid dearly. This episode of Polyphemos proves to be important as it plays a crucial key role in plot development and reveals fundamental aspects about Odysseus's character.

Works Cited

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