

World Literature Essay

The Power of Cunning over Physical Strength

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Strong men have always been admired for their physical abilities while intelligent individuals have always been well-respected and called upon for advice. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Homer explore the power that intelligence has over physical ability in their books *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Odyssey*. In fact, if Odysseus and Shukov had not been intelligent, clever men, Odysseus would have surely died during his travels and Shukov would have died a prisoner's death in the Soviet penal camps. The protagonists of the two works would not have succeeded in their main objectives had it not been for their cleverness, which turns out to be more useful than their physical strength.

Such cleverness, as the protagonists of the books possess, is in truth both a virtue and a vice. Some individuals awarded with inventiveness use their gift for personal gain at the expense of others around them. However, Odysseus' cleverness is established as a virtue during his first introduction into the plot. This is done by introducing his intelligence along with his compassion for his men. Odysseus is described as a man "who was never at a loss" (Homer, 11) and "saw many cities of men, and learnt their mind; he endured many troubles and hardships in the struggle to save his own life and to bring back his men safe to their homes" (Homer, 11). The coupling of Odysseus' intelligence with his concern for his men causes him to be seen more like a father to the men, rather than a tyrannical general and this, in turn, causes his analytical ability to be seen more as a virtue than a vice. Along with the audience of the storyteller, Odysseus' men know that he cares for them and thus, respect him better than they would have if he had been a violent, dominant leader. This ends up earning Odysseus loyalty and obedience from his men, making his travels easier which, in turn, make it easier for him to attain his definite

objective. While Odysseus' resourcefulness is established as a virtue right at the beginning, it is because Odysseus is already recognized by the reader as a *good* person. In Shukov's case, his *good* character is determined a little bit after his character is first introduced. He is seen as a victim who only expects punishment when he does something wrong because "if Shukov had been sent to the can for something he deserved he wouldn't have been so upset" (Solzhenitsyn, 7). Shukov's fair and just character dictates that he should not be sent to the can but his intelligence tells him to keep his ideas to himself. If Shukov had decided to pick a fight with the Tartar about this, he would have had to mop the floors *and* he would have really been sent to the can. In all, we see that Odysseus and Shukov's good nature and their intelligence will immediately assist them in their daily lives.

The characters' lives on a daily basis become less difficult due to their intelligence even though physical strength, which both men possess, does help them out. Shukov is a strong man and a skilled bricklayer. However, even the best bricklayers cannot work with faulty equipment. So Shukov had "pulled a fast one" (Solzhenitsyn, 61) on the clerk that collected the tools from everyone at night. Thus, he was able to keep the best trowel in the camp, making his work as a bricklayer easier. He was even smart enough to "[hide] it in a different place every night" (Solzhenitsyn, 61). While Shukov was smart enough to outsmart the clerk and get the best trowel, Odysseus was also cunning, and even after staying years with Calypso, he keeps his head. Calypso cannot fathom why Odysseus would want to leave immortality to go on a journey filled with suffering, just to be with his wife. She wonders whether Penelope is more beautiful than she. So Odysseus, sly as he is, diplomatically explains that it is not Penelope's beauty that

draws him to her. “My wife is nothing compared to you” (Homer, 66) he says and this calms Calypso’s ill will against Penelope and so she gives him the best axe he has ever seen. The axe makes it much easier for him to fell the trees and he soon “cuts down twenty trees, then trimmed them with the axe, shaped them neatly” (Homer, 67), eventually building a raft. In all, both Shukov and Odysseus are smart enough to either fool the right people, or butter them up so that their daily lives are made easier. Since the difficulty in their daily lives is gone, both Odysseus and Shukov can focus on their main goals in life.

Both protagonists would definitely not have reached their ultimate aspirations had they depended on their physical ability alone. As Odysseus tells the Phaiacians,

“I considered whether to go near and draw my sharp sword and drive it into his breast; I could feel about till I found the place where the midriff encloses the liver. But second thoughts kept me back. We should have perished ourselves in that place, dead and done for; we could never have moved the great stone which he had planted in the doorway.”
(Homer, 106)

Homer puts Odysseus in situations like these to mock the reliance on physical strength alone. Odysseus may rely on physical strength to kill the giant, but he definitely is not strong enough to move the stone. In the same way, Shukov is definitely physically fit enough to survive on his dinner alone but he knows that will affect his work rates. So, knowing that Caesar is the richest prisoner in the camp, he does favors for Caesar, hoping to get into his good books. He definitely succeeds and is on the top of the world when Caesar says “You eat it yourself” (Solzhenitsyn, 158). Through previous knowledge and asking Caesar at the right time, Shukov is able to get two suppers instead of just his own.

By using intelligence, both Odysseus and Shukov make their lives less grueling in different ways, allowing them to attain their ultimate purpose. Both Odysseus and Shukov use and show their cleverness and cunning in different ways. Odysseus is a brave soldier fighting to get home while Shukov just wishes to survive his time in the camps. Had it not been for their sly ways getting them outside support, such ambitions would have been unattainable and their lives would have ended in tragedy

Bibliography

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