

What does the Odyssey tell us about what it means to be a hero?

The Iliadic view of what it is to be a hero is winning honour through combat and in a competitive situation. A hero would be someone who has great fighting skill and would have to risk death to have honour. The Iliadic view is challenged in the Odyssey by bringing in different characteristics of what it means to be a hero. In the Odyssey, mere fighting skill does not necessarily mean that one is a hero. In Odysseus for example, we see a man who is very shrewd and cunning. A man whose skills in a variety of things match his ability to lead. And although he is a brilliant fighter, he also shows restraint and mercy.

We know that Odysseus would fulfil the Iliad's view of a hero because there are references to his fighting ability. Firstly he is a hero of the Trojan War. He is described as one who "strove the hardest and achieved the most" at Troy. He was looked upon very highly by those who fought in the wars, which shows that he has qualities that they admired, they saw him as an honourable man. He fought the Cicones and raided their land. The most prominent of all the battles is the one with the suitors, firstly we witness it, and secondly Odysseus fights a whole group of suitors with very little help. (Telemachus helps him) This shows his courage and fighting skill. It shows that compared to other men he has a lot of talent for fighting and stands out.

With all the battles that Odysseus has, he also shows a lot of restraint. This could prove hard for someone who is quick with the sword, and many who are, tend to see it as the only solution to any problem. Odysseus, being as clever and restraint as he is, knows better. When the Cyclops is devouring his men and being so rude to him, he could have tried to attack him when it happened, but the Cyclops would have only killed him straight away, which would leave his men with no escape. Instead he stays quiet and waits until he can attack the Cyclops, and save the rest of his men. When Odysseus is in the palace disguised as the beggar, he has a chance to kill the suitors when they are disrespectful to him and to kill the maids when he sees them go off to sleep with the suitors. It would have probably given him great pleasure doing so. But Odysseus kept quiet and let them go on with what they were doing, because he knew that it would ruin the plans that were to come, and he knew that the timing was all wrong in that moment. Odysseus is merciful, when the minstrel Phemius and Medon appeal to Odysseus not to kill them because they have been good and faithful to Telemachus, he does not ignore them and kill them out of rage, he listens to their plea and does not kill them.

When Odysseus escapes from the Cyclops cave, it is done through a carefully detailed plan. Firstly he told the Cyclops that his name was Nobody, so that when they Cyclops appealed for help from the others, he said that Nobody had attacked him and they did not come to help him. This was extremely clever. Then instead of just running down the hill to their ship straight afterwards, with the risk of being killed by the other Cyclops who would have been alert because of the crying. They wait until the Cyclops lets out his goats and sheep, the men and Odysseus hide under them so that they can get out of the cave safely and then get far enough down the hill to run. This proves successful. When Odysseus comes across Nausicaa he is naked, and instead of running toward her and frightening her, he realises that there is a better way to handle the situation. He is very polite and does not scare her. He is also very

charming and manages to appeal to her by complimenting her and asking her if she is a God. He is very aware about how to speak to people and what they like to hear. Odysseus is also very aware that not everyone can be trusted, when he arrives in Ithaca and Athene approaches him in disguise, he pretends that he does not know where he is and that he is an exiled man. This is so that no stranger he meets will suspect him of being Odysseus and then run and warn the suitors. He also waits for the right time to tell Penelope who he really is, because he has to be sure that she has been faithful. He is unaware of how Telemachus and Eumaeus will take the news and he waits until he has learnt how they will react and if they are loyal to him before letting them in on his secret identity. We learn of his shrewd nature in Troy, when the men are in the wooden horse and Helen comes to taunt the men out. He does not let them call out to their wives, but clasps his hand over their mouths and saves their lives.

Odysseus comes across as a very skilled man. We see in the Phaecian games that he is a very good athlete. He throws the Javelin further than any of the other men who are also considered to be very good sportsmen. We see when Penelope has set up the challenge to shoot an arrow through twelve axes with a bow and arrow. None of the other suitors manage to succeed, but Odysseus does, making him stand out. He also manages to defeat the Suitors with the same bow by killing them. When Penelope is testing Odysseus to see if he is really who he says he is, he describes the bed that he made in their room. It is an intricately carved bed, which shows that he is very skilled with his hands, and very patient to make something that is very difficult for most men to make. He is a skilled speaker, as we see when he talks to Nausicaa and compliments her and gets her to trust him. He is very polite to all the people that he visits.

Athene shows a great interest in Odysseus and genuinely wants him to get home to his family. She helps him and gives him advice along his journey. The Gods do not show this much interest in just anyone. This makes Odysseus special, and honoured. He must be someone great and Heroic to get that much attention from a goddess. Athene also appears to the rest of Odysseus' family. She helps Telemachus on his journey and actually inspires him to start it. She also appears to Penelope in a dream. The fact that the whole family is honoured by having a Goddess help them, shows that it is a special family, and shows Odysseus as being an honourable figure in society.

Odysseus leads his men throughout rough seas and dangerous situations, such as saving them from their death from the Cyclops. He also shows great leadership when he instructs Telemachus what to do when they are fighting the suitors. We also learn that he is a good king in Ithaca, which shows leadership, because he runs Ithaca properly and when he is not there, things go to ruins. He gives orders clearly and they are followed. "This advice they took readily enough."

In the Odyssey the Iliadic view of what a hero is, is challenged. We see that Odysseus is not merely a fighting machine who can kill anything. He is seen as a man who is very shrewd and cunning, and shows a level of intelligence that demands he acts in a responsible and honourable way. We learn in the Odyssey that to be a hero must be a mixture of good qualities that Odysseus does have. If Odysseus did not show mercy and restraint at the correct times, he would not be seen as a hero but a tyrant. His leadership and skill were admired and he is a true hero because of his forethought.