

What qualities does Odysseus show in the episodes he relates in Books 9-12? Does he appear to *learn* anything as these adventures progress?

Books 9-12 are a tale of a journey in which the protagonist does not remain the same throughout. He changes due to the places he has been, people he has met and things he has done. These four books are almost entirely spoken by Odysseus and thus we are able to receive a first hand report.

At the start his wanderings, Odysseus leaves Troy with his Ithacan fleet and in a short time they come to Ismarus, the city of the Cicones. Odysseus states simply that he “sacked this place” and there they took “vast plunder”. Here we see the hero of the *Iliad* doing what a hero does. At the end of this book, Odysseus declares his identity to Polyphemus, in which he describes himself as a “sacker of cities”. This is because he is only a short time into his travels and only recently he has sacked Troy and Ismarus. However, when Odysseus tells the Phaeacians who he is, he attributes his ‘kleos’ (everlasting fame on the lips of men) to his “stratagems”. In Book 8, Odysseus asked the bard Demodocus to sing of “the stratagem of the Wooden Horse”, which he considers to be his most memorable and greatest feat – not the sacking of the city but the inventiveness of his idea. This is because, in Scherie and at the near end of his journey, Odysseus has just come through his adventures and he now considers his ‘metis’ (cunning) to be his greatest quality, and he also has not fought anyone for a long time.

It is also at Ismarus that we see Odysseus’ first conflict with his men, as he is unable to convince his men to leave (“my fools”). Thus we also see the first superficial contradiction by Homer of Odysseus as a Greek hero. When we define a Greek hero we would expect certain qualities to appear. A hero would be a good speaker, leader of men, fighter, strong, talk with and/or protected by the gods (i.e. separated from ordinary mortals, excellent, ‘aristos’), concerned about kleos, have high principles, and usually an early death is in store for them. However, though these may have been the definitions of an Iliadic hero like Achilles, these qualities are not all attributed to heroism in the *Odyssey*. Indeed in the *Iliad*, Odysseus was renowned for his frequent arguments with Achilles due to their different natures.

Odysseus does not seem to be able to control his men. This is shown time and again as he argues with them. Here at Ismarus is an example, and then he has to force some onto the boat at the land of the Lotus-Eaters. In the cave of Polyphemus, Odysseus ignores his men’s sound advice to leave. After Aeolia, it is the mistrusting crewmembers that open Aeolus’ bag and cause disaster. At the Laestrygonian land, Odysseus lands away from the rest of his men and makes no attempt to save their lives, fleeing for safety. On Aeaea, Odysseus even contemplates “lopping” Eurylochus’s “head off”. The worse conflict between Odysseus and his men eventually comes off the shores of Thrinacie, when Odysseus is unable to stop the crew from landing and the crew finally break their oaths to him and eat the cattle of the Sun-god (“my men planned this awful crime”). It seems strange that Odysseus is a hero who can not even control his own crew. However, Homer makes it very clear that this a crew that is almost impossible to control and are arguably not worth controlling. They come to fault by “their own transgressions”, “in spite” of Odysseus’ “efforts”. Not controlling the men does not destroy Odysseus’ heroism. In the battle in the food hall at the end of the book, we see Odysseus lead his son and his honourable servants to kill the suitors so it is merely this crew who are fools and he must only deal with them between Books 9-12. But what other qualities of a hero does Odysseus hold, or not as the case may be, in these books?

In the *Iliad*, Odysseus’ words were once referred to as “snowflakes”. But the call for such public speaking was little between Troy and Scherie. Addresses made to his men tend to

be only necessary orders (leaving Aeaea, shore of the land of the Cyclopes) and he talks to them surprisingly rarely. It is understandable why Odysseus chose not to tell the men about Scylla when they sailed by due to the possible creation of panic or even mutiny in a crew that had shown itself not to be trustworthy. But, if Odysseus had told his men what was in the bag of wind that Aeolus gave to Odysseus then they wouldn't have come to disaster. Odysseus had nothing to lose in telling them. When Odysseus gives his report to the men on Aeaea, saying that he sees a wisp of smoke, the men "burst into loud sobs", remembering Telepylus. Odysseus scorns these "for all the good they did". When they leave Aeaea he tells them about the trip to the Underworld and they cry again. Until Odysseus lands on Scherie and talks to Nausicaa on the riverbank, we very rarely see the rhetoric of Odysseus come to the fore. This is because Odysseus doesn't meet anyone worth or capable of winning over with his rhetoric. Those he meets tend to be weird creatures and savages, except for Aeolus but he is so friendly he doesn't need winning over except for the second visit when he can't be won over due to his decision that Odysseus must be cursed). These creatures and savages would ignore words (as Polyphemus did).

Odysseus does not fight very often either. He holds back from stabbing Polyphemus due to it's futility. Odysseus dons armour when he goes past Scylla against Circe's advice yet it gets him nowhere. The beasts in the Odyssey are usually fantastic and extraordinary who can't realistically be fought with a sword (e.g. Scylla, Laestrygonians). The dangers usually need the application of 'metis' (cunning) not 'bié' (brute force). Odysseus can be praised for his flexibility in this sense. If Ajax were to go on that same voyage as Odysseus then he wouldn't have succeeded, not having the same skills of deception or mental prowess. One could view Odysseus' vanquishing of Polyphemus by one of his stratagems as physical proof that 'bié' without 'metis' can not be victorious.

The heroic quality of divine intervention and being separated from other mortals is another to consider. In these four books, Athene does nothing to help Odysseus or at least nothing that Odysseus notices (remember Odysseus didn't know that Athene was helping him on the sea between Scherie and Ogygia). But this absence is necessary due to the tradition of Athene punishing the returning Achaeans due to Ajax the Lesser's rape of Cassandra in her temple. But Odysseus is helped by Hermes and is given the flower 'moly'. Of course, Odysseus also makes a venture down to the Underworld. This is one of the most prestigious things that a hero can do and is a major contributor to any kleos Odysseus has. He is definitely concerned about his kleos. The raid on Ismarus is to obtain plunder and thus build kleos for when he returns. At the land of the Cyclopes, he stubbornly waits in the cave of Polyphemus to receive guest-gifts for the same reason, intermixed with curiosity. When Odysseus leaves the coast, to ensure that his deed spreads, Odysseus makes sure that the Cyclops knows "your eye was put out by Odysseus". He even says to Alcinous that he would gladly stay "another year" if he would obtain more guest-gifts.

Our hero definitely has high principles. His never wavering aim of this voyage is for 'nostos' (the return home of a hero). The only time that he is kept from this desire is on Aeaea, where he spends an entire year feasting like a suitor (though one could argue that he is under the intoxication of the witch Circe). Finally, we come to the last heroic quality on the list above – to be doomed to an early death like Achilles. This is obviously not true in Odysseus (though you could argue that his visit to the Underworld is like an early death which Odysseus returned from). After visiting Hell and consulting Achilles and Agamemnon, Odysseus now sees that to die for kleos is not worth it, though it was obviously preferable to an ignoble death. But the most important knowledge he gained there was that in death there was no joy just everlasting grief, so far as Odysseus could see. Achilles himself told Odysseus "do not...make light of death" and crucially "I would rather work...as a serf...than be a King of all these lifeless dead". After he has been told this, Odysseus has a renewed lust for life and his continued survival. Achilles had made a decision not to "return home" but this is the exact opposite to Odysseus who wishes to fulfil his nostos and "die peacefully of old age", as prophesised. He is not now a coward of danger but he does wish to continue living. Remember, though, that when Calypso offered him immortality in return for his stay there, Odysseus preferred to leave so returning to Penelope and 'philia' (attachment or union) are

more important. At the end of Book 12, we are left with the wonderful image of Odysseus hanging doggedly onto the olive tree that grew over the whirlpool Charybdis below, refusing to die.

Odysseus as we have seen above does not fulfil all the qualities need for an *Iliadic* hero, in these four books at least, though some qualities of his are listed above. But a definition of a hero in the *Iliad* is not quite the same as in the *Odyssey* and also the environment requires a different kind of hero to the one who would triumph in the *Iliad*. Odysseus has the qualities required to survive the ordeals that are thrown at him because he is the right hero for the tale. Arguably the greatest hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, is met in the Underworld and the two dissimilar heroes talk. Homer may use this meeting to show how Achilles is from a different world from Odysseus now and that the kind of hero Achilles is may die with him. Ajax, the personification of *bié*, doesn't even speak to Odysseus their rift is so great. In the *Iliad*, Ajax lost the competition for armour and committed suicide. Odysseus would never do the same due to his endurance and his ability to continue on even after having been crushed by a disaster or calamity (e.g. after being blown back to Aeolia).

In Books 9-12, Odysseus' most noticeable qualities on top of those mentioned above are endurance and inner strength, inquisitiveness (slowly replaced by caution), cunning and stalwart, (which is often Odysseus' epithet).

The mere fact that Odysseus survived his travels demonstrates his endurance and his skill for survival. As he goes from one hardship to another he grows in durability. When the worst event for his morale occurs (i.e. he almost reaches home but the ship is blown away and back), Odysseus did indeed contemplate suicide but then, in a line that, in my view, characterises Odysseus so well: "I stayed and endured". Odysseus made a decision that he would not die and he even survives battering in the sea and the whirlpool Charybdis, holding onto the tree above him, "I clung grimly on". As more and more men are killed and he sees more and more horrors, Odysseus can be praised for his courage to continue on so doggedly (hence his epithet "stalwart").

Both a strength and a failing for Odysseus is his curiosity. As the voyage continues, these are replaced by a growing preference for caution but this inquisitiveness does put the crew in danger. One of the best examples of this is on the land of the Cyclopes when Odysseus takes men inland and stays in the Cyclops' cave despite the pleas of his men. Odysseus admits, "I wished to see the owner". This wish leads to the loss of six men. When the crew are rowing past the Sirens, Odysseus does not let his curiosity to hear their enchanting song endanger the crew, whom he tells to put wax in their ears and ignore his cries. When they finally get to Thrinacie, Odysseus is not even curious to see the island and argues with the men to go straight on past it (the first time he has wanted to go past an island without going onto it). By this time, Odysseus chooses the choice caution each opportunity he can and will continue for the rest of his adventures.

Other instances of caution can be remembered also. On the island of the Laestrygonians, Odysseus moors his boat away from the harbour and the other boats sending in only two men and a messenger. On Aeaea, Odysseus reconnoitres first then he sends in a large party lead by a man of his choosing, Eurylochus, and keeps half the men back. When passing Scylla, Odysseus dons his armour even though he has been advised against it but he does, due to his wish to take all possible precautions.

Of course, Odysseus' most important quality is his 'metis' (cunning). Odysseus' talks with Polyphemus were good examples of this. Odysseus lied about the location of his boat, he gave Polyphemus a fake name ('Nobody') and the plans to blind the Cyclops and exit undetected afterwards are also cunning stratagems. Instances such as the Sirens and Scylla and Charybdis are however executions of advice given to Odysseus to Circe and can not be counted in these Books as examples of Odysseus' cunning. The *Odyssey* has other examples of deceptions and disguises but for the moment this is all from 9-12.

Odysseus learns a great deal in his travels. An example is the way he approaches new lands. After the disastrous stay at the land of the Cyclopes, Odysseus does not go inland himself at the land of the Laestrygonians and keeps his ship away from the harbour, where it might be seen. He sends only three men inland. Unfortunately, all of Odysseus' fleet, except

for his ship, is destroyed and he does not wait to save them. At the island of Aeaea, Odysseus this time explores alone, not wishing to lose more men. After having explored, he divides the men in two with the half to go inland lead by a man of his choosing. He must have come to the conclusion that three men were not enough people to investigate last time. He must believe that a party of that size should be able to deal with a threat and to take in a larger group would mean that too few men could be ready to row the ship away in a rush or defend the ship on the shore. You can see how Odysseus' way of approaching a land is developing prudence. When Odysseus hears that the men are lost, Odysseus decides that he will not lose more men out of his fleeing in haste. He goes in himself and saves the men. The next event after the *Nekyia* (voyage to the Underworld) is to go past the Sirens. Odysseus' logic has been developing through the ordeals as he has learnt from each. By this time, Odysseus' decision making is reaching its peak and now he does not let his curiosity endanger the crew. He listens to the song, without endangering the crew. Odysseus then follows Circe's advice and sails close to Scylla. He has donned his armour, in the hope that he can do all he can to save people being lost. His ignoring of Circe could be a result of Agamemnon's warning in the Underworld not to trust women but I think he probably just feels more prepared with it on. He is unable to save the men and the sight of losing yet more is a most "pitiable sight". At Thrinacie, Odysseus has now learnt that he cannot trust his men (yet he does not wish to lose any more) and so he makes them swear an oath not to touch the cattle of the Sun god, hoping that they keep to their word.

The ultimate education of Odysseus in his travels, however, were the sights and information imparted to him in the Underworld. Agamemnon tells Odysseus not to trust women and to be careful when he reaches home to find out the situation on Ithaca before he enters the Palace, lest he suffer the same fate as Agamemnon did. Achilles shows Odysseus how the Underworld is not a place of old war heroes united but muted souls in anguish. Odysseus thus wishes to avoid going there after seeing it and he thinks that death is not the best way to find kleos, as Achilles regrets his decision to die for it. Tiresias tells Odysseus about his destined inland journey to secure the favour of Olympus and Poseidon once more. Odysseus also sees the fates of the sinners who defied the Gods (like Sisyphus). This being placed at the end of Book 11 is related to the suitors' punishment for the Gods at the end of the story. Odysseus sees how the Gods want sinners to be punished and it must give him a sense of justice, either created anew in him or rejuvenated. Going on the *Nekyia* also makes Odysseus a better hero, as it elevates him above other mortals still further and even above many other heroes.

In Books 9-12, we can see the change of Odysseus from an Iliadic hero to an Odyssean hero. He goes from place to place, gaining experience and getting more and more thick skinned to each new disaster. When Calypso warns him in Book 5 that on the way home he will suffer still more hardship, Odysseus shrugs it off saying "it only makes one more". He is no longer the man he was when he started the voyage and he realises it himself, claiming his "stratagems" to be his best claim to fame. He has now finally made the jump away from bié (even though when he arrives in Ithaca, he must fight a battle and return to his old ways once more). He has become the man who recounts his story to the Phaeacians. Whilst recounting it, we can see what Odysseus considers to be the most important things in the story he accomplished. He skips through the story of the Cicones and the sacking of their city extremely quickly whilst the stratagems inside Polyphemus' cave are given special attention. We would not expect such a preference in a warlord but we would in what Odysseus has become.