

## ODYSSEUS

### Heroic Imagination Stories Series

Rose Zimbardo

Each of Homer's heroes has a particular *arête*, i.e., an excellence, e.g., the *arête* of a sword is the sharpness of its blade. The *arête* of Achilles is his raging wrath in battle; the *arête* of Nestor is his wisdom. Odysseus' *arête* is his crafty intelligence. When he has at last come home to Ithaca, he does not know where he is. He thinks he has been left by his Phaiakian saviors on yet "another strange island." Pallas Athena, disguised as a young girl, comes to him. When asked by her who he is, he is unwilling to reveal himself and so he fabricates an identity as he is wont to do whenever he encounters a stranger. Pallas Athena is delighted by his cunning. She says,

Whoever gets around you must be sharp  
and guileful as a snake; even a god  
might bow to you in the ways of dissimulation.  
You! You chameleon!  
Bottomless bag of tricks! Here in your own country  
would you not give your stratagems a rest  
or stop spellbinding for an instant?  
You play a part as if it were your own tough skin.

...Two of a kind, we are,  
contrivers, both. (The *Odyssey*, tr. Robert Fitzgerald, Book 13, 1.265-273)



Like his goddess-patron, Odysseus " [does not tell] the truth, / but, just as she did, held back what he knew." Like Athena, Odysseus weaves fictions to disguise truth. He is a tale teller; In fact, the whole account of his adventures from the time he left Troy to the time he washed ashore on Phaiakia is a story told by him to King Alcinous, his host. And so good a story does he tell that he



is handsomely rewarded by the king and the Phaiakian elders. Odysseus is a master of language, and it is largely by his skillful use of language that he triumphs.

Moreover, whether designing the Trojan horse, or escaping from the Cyclops by calling himself “Nobody,” Odysseus is a trickster. Why then is he a hero? Because behind his stratagems and disguises lie his truths: the heroic ideals he upholds and serves. He is an ideal king, an ideal husband, an ideal father, son and friend. When Telemachus is berating his countrymen for their unwillingness to help him to be rid of the suitors, he says,

Hear me, Ithacans...

Let no man holding scepter as a king  
be thoughtful, mild, kindly, or virtuous;  
let him be cruel, and practice evil ways;  
it is so clear that no one here remembers  
how like a gentle father Odysseus ruled you. (Book 2, l. 229-234)

Whether he is dealing with a slave, Eumaios, the swineherd, or a great and powerful king, Menelaus, Odysseus upholds the heroic code upon which civilization rests: the ideal of courtesy, which demands that the hero recognize the humanity and worth of each fellow human being; the ideal of loyalty, which makes the hero keep faith with his wife even when a goddess, Calypso, offers him immortality and endless sexual satisfaction; the ideal of faith in battle, which makes Odysseus serve in the Greek army to fight a war in which he does not believe and which he initially tried to avoid.

Odysseus' mighty adversary is Poseidon, the god of the raging sea and of earthquakes; that is the god of the forces that are not amenable to human control. His patron is Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom and the city, and the “dearest daughter” of the king and father of the gods, Zeus. Zeus and Poseidon are brothers, indeed we might think of them as



Brother Cosmos, Zeus, and Brother Chaos, Poseidon. Odysseus serves Zeus because like the god, he too is an orderer; he attempts to impose order in his every action down to the hateful self-control he must exercise when, disguised as an old beggar, he must suffer dreadful humiliation at the hands of the suitors. He cannot, of course, defeat Poseidon, but what he can do is *endure*. No matter how great the odds, no matter how raging the seas or the various monsters he encounters, Odysseus exercises his will and his cunning striving always to return to his kingdom and his family. His human adversaries are the suitors, primary among them Antinoos [i.e., anti-mind] whose every action is disordered. They eat like animals; they consume what is not theirs; they strive to gain a woman who hates them and whose loyalty to her husband is unquestionable; they attempt to kill Telemachus in the cowardly way of secretly ambushing him. But most tellingly, they do not value the humanity of their fellow humans; they have nothing but scorn for those who are weaker or poorer than they.



What makes Odysseus a hero is his indefatigable will, his determination to never give up his quest, and his imposition of order in the face of disorder—either by means of language, skillful stratagems, or self control. Odysseus stands tall against all the powers that threaten to overwhelm him. He upholds a code of honor despite the force brought against him either by dishonorable humans or by the chaos that lies at the heart of the universe.

### Learning Assignment for Odysseus Essay

“What makes Odysseus a hero then is his indefatigable will, his determination never to give up his quest, and his imposition of order in the face of disorder—either by means of language, skillful stratagems, or self-control. Odysseus stands tall against all the powers that threaten to



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**Write a two-page essay:** Reflect on these characteristics of Odysseus and map these characteristics to elements in your life within contemporary challenges you face. How do you uphold a code of honor despite the social and political forces brought against you?



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