James Finlinson

14 April 2025

ENGL 201 – Masterpieces of World Lit 1

Professor Aaron Eastley

Decision Tree Analysis of Odysseus' Long Return Home

Introduction

The story of Odysseus, a tale from ancient Greece nearly 2700 years ago, continues to captivate modern readers because it delves into the complexities of difficult choices—dilemmas that resonate across all eras. *The Odyssey* recounts the tragically delayed return of a Trojan War veteran who longs to reunite with his wife and son, accompanied by his crew of 600 men. While other crews returned home swiftly (albeit with varying success), and despite modern mapping tools suggesting a mere 19-hour journey via roads and ferries, Odysseus's voyage famously spans ten years and results in the loss of his entire crew. His path is fraught with obstacles that demand critical leadership decisions. Each choice carries a cost, whether direct or indirect, and readers often judge Odysseus for the outcomes—both positive and negative. However, it's crucial to remember that at the moment of each decision, the path forward was unclear, the situations were precarious, and the outcomes were uncertain. Did Odysseus make the right choices? Could alternative decisions have reduced the toll in time and lives?

This paper examines Odysseus's decision-making in The Odyssey through an algorithmic problem-solving lens, focusing on the cultural incentives and risks of visiting unknown islands, the consequences of lingering in foreign lands, and the logical necessity of choices like navigating Scylla and Charybdis. We argue that Odysseus's heroism is troubled by the inescapable complexity of his journey, where each decision—though often reasonable given the information at hand—carried unavoidable costs and risks. By analyzing these choices without

the benefit of hindsight, we reveal how cultural norms, incomplete knowledge, and the need to balance immediate dangers against long-term goals shaped his troubled yet resilient leadership.

Algorithmic Problem Solving

In the computing world, "making decisions" is the essence of problem-solving. When a problem is well-defined, the solution accounts for all side effects and consequences, clearly indicating the best choice among multiple options. For computers, straightforward problems—like solving basic math equations or computing distances—are simple. However, more complex problems involve side effects, numerous variables, and intricate interactions, making it challenging to predict outcomes. Then there are unsolvable problems, marked by incomplete information, unforeseen consequences, and random elements that defy prediction. To tackle these, one must consider the full range of possibilities, eliminate obviously poor choices, and select from the remaining options the one likely to yield the fewest negative consequences. In practice, even for simple problems, it can take computers hours to test all combinations for the optimal solution. Often, a practical approach is to quickly find a "good enough" answer.

Similarly, *The Odyssey* can be seen as a sequence of roughly 75 to 125 individual decisions. If each had just three outcomes—bad, okay, or good—the total number of possible paths would be immense: approximately 5.15×10^{47}. For both humans and computers, exhaustively searching such a vast space is impossible. Instead, one must rapidly assess available details, rely on intuition for the rest, and hope for the best. Thus, in retrospect, we must credit Odysseus for making reasonable decisions in real time, without the luxury of extended deliberation.

Encountering Islands

At the heart of many perilous situations lies the fundamental decision: whether to venture into potential danger. In The Odyssey, several deadly encounters occur on islands that Odysseus

and his crew choose to visit. While avoiding these islands might have spared them numerous hazards—given the sea's vastness and its many unnamed islands—they would also have missed valuable opportunities. For a Greek of that era, visiting an island wasn't inherently dangerous, though many stops proved otherwise.

When approaching an island, the choice is binary: visit or bypass. The islands they explored were home to diverse inhabitants: humans like the Cicones and Phaeacians, giants like the Laestrygonians, and mystical beings such as the Lotus-Eaters, Polyphemus, Aeolus, Circe, Helios, and Calypso. Crucially, the nature and intentions of these inhabitants remained unknown until after the crew had landed.

For a returning Greek warrior, each island offered potential rewards: gifts, rest on solid ground, new alliances, favorable weather, resupply opportunities, and personal plunder. In that cultural context, looting was acceptable, even honorable; returning home with bounty was glorious. Though the Greeks triumphed over Troy, the ten-year siege yielded little spoil. Raiding places like the Cicones' city was thus customary. Moreover, these visits promised captivating stories for homecoming. Consequently, strong incentives drove Odysseus to explore these lands. Yet, the specific dangers lurking on each island could not have been reasonably foreseen before arrival. Therefore, it seems reasonable for the returning crew to stop to visit some islands on their way back home.

Dante and Tennyson

Both Dante and Tennyson offer alternative views of the hero's quest, suggesting Odysseus actively sought adventure. In their works, Ulysses (Odysseus) goes out of his way to discover distant, exotic lands at the expense of his own family. Dante's *Inferno* portrays Ulysses as driven by insatiable curiosity, leading to his death far from home. Tennyson's *Ulysses* has him reach Ithaca, only to grow restless and depart again for new horizons. These depictions partly

align with *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus risks visiting unknown islands. However, they misinterpret his core motivations.

If Odysseus craved exploration, he wouldn't have resisted the Trojan War's call, lingered a year with Circe instead of seeking new lands, or urged the Phaeacians to rush him home to Ithaca. Rather, his openness to new encounters reflects *xenia*, the Greek custom of hospitality. Guests expected generous treatment and gifts from hosts, as seen in Ithaca with beggars, or with Kings Nestor and Menelaus. Odysseus and his crew were thus shocked when met with hostility—Polyphemus devouring men, Circe turning them into pigs, or the Laestrygonians sinking ships with boulders. If Odysseus craved discovery, the story would have mentioned his efforts to find new lands and inquire about intriguing destinations. Instead, the book mentions the winds blowing the company off course or blocking their path back home. When given the opportunity, the hero asks for intelligence from back at home while in the underworld, returns to Circe to receive guidance home, which leaves the impression that he only visits islands on his path.

Tarrying and Feasting

Another critique is the time Odysseus and his crew linger on islands during their return. The decision is binary: depart now or stay longer. They spend roughly 80% of their journey on islands—seven years with Calypso, one with Circe, a month with Aeolus. Yet, some stays were involuntary. For example, Calypso imprisoned Odysseus with divine power which prevented escape, and unfavorable winds trapped him and his crew on Helios's island. A month with Aeolus seems reasonable, given their recent war and decade away from home. The year with Circe, though, is less defensible; indulgence suggests human weakness, a lapse in purpose as they savored luxuries. Tragically, it was their last such chance, as none survived to reach their

families. On the one hand, this warns of human frailty and the need for resolve amid temptation, but on the other hand, this suggests that it may be acceptable to enjoy life while we have it.

Many troubles arose from lingering too long. Departing after raiding the Cicones could have dodged retaliation. Avoiding Polyphemus's cave would have saved men and averted Poseidon's wrath. Odysseus learns this by journey's end and declines the Phaeacians' offers to stay and wed their princess.

Logically Obvious Decisions

Some decisions, debated as morally tricky, resolve to clear answers when viewed with an algorithmic perspective. In the following cases, Odysseus received critical information beforehand which allowed him to predict outcomes and make optimal plans, despite ethical complexity.

1. **Scylla vs. Charybdis**: Choosing to navigate near Scylla at the cost of six men was wiser than risking all to Charybdis. Circe's prophecy showed that staying meant more deaths, while Tiresias warned Poseidon's wrath blocked other routes. Alerting the crew risked mutiny or panic, worsening losses. Accepting six deaths was calculated, though it cost Odysseus pride, as some might mock his restraint.
2. **Revealing Himself in Ithaca**: Choosing to disguise himself and not immediately announce his return was prudent. The story of Clytemnestra's murder of her husband Agamemnon gave a clear warning to return home carefully. Scoping out his household let Odysseus test loyalty, punish the treacherous, and spare the faithful. This patience ensured justice and resonated with Greek audiences valuing cunning in domestic tales.

Conclusion

In analyzing Odysseus's journey through decision-making, we see a hero navigating a labyrinth of choices, each fraught with uncertainty and peril. Much like a computer algorithm

sifting vast possibilities for a viable solution, Odysseus makes real-time decisions with incomplete information, balancing immediate risks against long-term goals. His choices—whether to visit islands, how long to linger, or how to face monstrous threats—reflect troubled heroism, where no path is cost-free, and the "optimal" decision is merely the least disastrous. Perspectives from Dante and Tennyson contradict the demonstrated motivations of the hero from the original work by recasting his actions into a model driven by insatiable hunger for new explorations. Examining Odysseus' decisions without hindsight reveals the ingenuity he wielded with little confidence from his crew and against overwhelming odds. Ultimately, *The Odyssey* endures as a timeless study of leadership under pressure, where heroism lies not in perfection but in facing tough choices head-on.