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11th grade

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An Odyssey Through Time

“And with twinkling eyes the goddess
said, ‘Stranger, you must be a foreigner
from distant parts, or foolish, since you ask
about this famous country...
Foreigner, I think the name
of Ithaca is even known in Troy,
a land they say is far away from Greece’” (13.235-49)

My first dip with the *Odyssey* was in 8th grade. We used Emily Wilson’s recent translation and went through a respectable number of key scenes, given the time allotted. Though I had never shown much interest in “musty old stories” beforehand, Odysseus’s struggle to find Ithaca was unexpectedly captivating. It was a strange experience to read about Odysseus’s return home when I hadn’t had a place to consider “home” myself, having travelled constantly between South Korea and the United States. But at its core, I think the question remains the same, whether it’s asked by a hero of the Trojan war or a paltry kid in the 21st century. What is home, and why should it matter?

That opening passage is from Odysseus’s arrival in Ithaca. For the first time in two decades, Odysseus sees his homeland, and so his dream of reaching home is fulfilled. The end? Homer thinks not. Home, the ideal that sustained Odysseus on his journey, must be rid of the suitors that plague it. On his journey, Odysseus had conceived of home as a kind of paradise, an escape to his suffering. Even confronted with the choice of Calypso and immortality, Odysseus remains adamant in his choice “to go back home” (5.219). Odysseus may not know, but the readers do—that soothing home Odysseus imagines is filled with suitors “wasting” his wealth and food

(16.121). There is a disconnect between Odysseus's idea of home and its reality, which Homer uses to tell us that home is a flawed place. It can be full of injustices and atrocities alike.

However, Odysseus still plots revenge against the suitors and defends his home. Why must the place overflowing with greed and gluttony be protected? Homer offers his answer: its people. Again Odysseus's exchange with Calypso gives insight. Honor and comfort Odysseus can have with Calypso, possibly more since she is an immortal. But Calypso cannot provide "that wife you always pine for" (5.210). This exchange places Penelope as an important part of what home is to Odysseus. Later, Telemachus, Eumaeus the swineherd, and Laertes also join this picture. On the other side of the spectrum, we see Eupheithes, father of the suitor Antinous, die trying to avenge his dead son. Though physically his home is safe, it has been violated through the death of Antinous, and thus Eupheithes attempts to defend it. Home is a flawed place, as the *Odyssey* tells us. But home is defined by its people, and this is what makes it worth protecting.

In this way the *Odyssey* offers an answer to the question of what home is. Does it cover all the nuances? No. But perhaps more important than the accuracy of the answer is the fact that it offers one for interpretation. We may disagree with Homer's answer, but his beliefs influence our own. Whatever we decide to take away from them gives us our own unique understanding of home.

John Stuart Mill believed that individuality was necessary for the progress of humanity. Human nature was not a "machine" to do whatever it was taught to do, but a "tree," to grow in ways previously unseen (55). As social creatures, our sense of self is largely shaped by others around us. Interactions with people help us articulate who we are, clarifying our identities in the process. But this doesn't have to be limited to the present. Language remains a remarkable human invention, allowing us to tap into thousands of years of human thought. Just as we might interpret what home is by talking with family or friends, we might read the *Odyssey* to converse with answers from Homer's time.

The *Odyssey* still matters, as any other work of literature does, because its enduring ideas help strengthen our views and morals, our identities. In today's globalized world, one question is

particularly poignant: what is home, and why does it matter? Drifting on the raft of Odysseus, landing on the rocks of Ithaca, slaughtering the boy Antinous—Homer answers: flawed or not, home is worth defending because of its people. Though we may not agree, these views shape our own unique understanding of the concept. Thus, by growing our human capacity for individuality, we help humanity progress on its own little journey, one small breeze among many, steering its sails through the waves.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. E-book, Batoche Books, 2001. Accessed 17 Feb. 2025.