**Course: Classical Civilisation 1A (CLASSIC1001)**

**Assignment: Essay**

**Title: Agamemnon or Polyphemus: what does Odysseus’ relationship to these two characters reveal about the major themes of Homer’s Odyssey?**

**Matriculation number: 2467273**

Are you happy for your assignment to be used in future training of markers? **Yes**

Are you happy for your assignment to be used as an example for future students? **Yes**

Polyphemus and Agamemnon are two characters in Homer’s *The Odyssey* who help understand the character of Odysseus better through the use of two literary techniques: contrast with a foil and comparison by similarities respectively. Polyphemus, Odysseus’ foil, represents the immoral and brutish side of the major themes of *The Odyssey*: inhospitality, anthropophagy, savagery, and foolishness, although there is still room for some moral ambivalence in this epic work (Newton, 1983). On the other hand, Agamemnon, Odysseus’ friend and comrade, represents heroism and wisdom while also being a foreshadowing element warning *The Odyssey*’s audience and Odysseus himself of how he might meet his end and what dangers he has ahead. These characteristics of Polyphemus and Agamemnon contribute to and explore deeper the major themes of the epic, particularly the themes of returning home (*nostos*), revenge, and disguise. Each character also acts as a detailed study of an additional theme, i.e., Agamemnon’s story, often called the Oresteia story by Olson, is used and reused, modified and twisted in order to add to the theme of storytelling in a literary work that was primarily told through oral tradition before being transcribed. Polyphemus, on the other hand, adds a considerable amount to the theme of civilisation and how one is viewed from one’s actions towards others, derived mainly through the analysis of different kinds and levels of hospitality (*xenia*).

One of the major themes of Homer’s *The Odyssey* which makes the story an epic is a hero’s return home, also called *nostos* in Greek terms. Most of the story is spent with Odysseus away from home, trying and failing to return to his kingdom of Ithaca and his family after surviving the Trojan War, making the audience wait for a seemingly never-ending time. The large delay in Odysseus’ homecoming, however, lets the audience hear a similar homecoming story of Agamemnon, Odysseus’ comrade in the Trojan War, and compare it with the possibilities of the return home of the protagonist, for whom *nostos* is only in the future. Agamemnon returns home without delay or any suspicion of betrayal, is then noticed by the city watch and promptly killed by Aegisthus, who seduced Clytemnestra, Agamemnon’s wife, in his absence and planned to murder Agamemnon once he got home. Agamemnon’s story acts as a possible foreshadowing element to how Odysseus’ return home might end and why he has to be careful and cunning not to become the Agamemnon of Ithaca. The comparison can be made because of a similar group of hostile greeters at Odysseus’ home, that is, the suitors of Penelope, Odysseus’ wife, who are living in his home in constant revelry and diminishing Odysseus’ family’s fortune. They have made a similar plan to murder Odysseus and/or his son, Telemachus, when the two family members arrive home, connecting a high level of danger with the theme of *nostos* and evoking a feeling of suspense in the audience concerned for the fate of Odysseus. The return home is also a symbol for the restoration of order, a reversal of entropy, which Odysseus longs for and Agamemnon did not achieve for their own households (*oikoi*), further contrasting Agamemnon’s and Odysseus’ fates.

Another contrast can be made with the return home of Odysseus’ foil, Polyphemus, the strongest of the Cyclopes on their own island. Although there is no long journey and a heroic return in Polyphemus’ case, he does return home after a long day of work as a shepherd, only to find Odysseus and a few of his crew, who “made a sacrifice [of Polyphemus’ lambs], and ate / some [of Polyphemus’] cheese” (9.231-2) in much the same way as the suitors consume Odysseus’ resources while he is away from home (Nieto Hernández, 2000). The moment of Polyphemus’ return is quite morally ambivalent since his home has been invaded by Odysseus’ crew, who are wasting away his resources, so he feels entitled to eat them, but anthropophagy seems like a breach of a much-respected and frequent theme of *The Odyssey*: hospitality (*xenia*), a concept praised so much that its patron god is the king of the gods, ruler of the sky, Zeus. Because of this breach of hospitality, Odysseus does not hesitate to blind Polyphemus and escape his cave. In this case, both Polyphemus and Agamemnon are made as contrasts to Odysseus as their *nostoi* end in pain and suffering, while cunning Odysseus learns from their mistakes and comes home in disguise, impressing the audience with his intelligence and making them root for his safe return. However, before a complete restoration of order and the household (*oikos*) can be achieved, revenge must be taken on all the wrongdoers, which leads to the second major theme of *The Odyssey*.

Revenge is another major theme as it is featured heavily in both the Oresteia story and also the aftermath of Odysseus’ visit to the island of the Cyclopes. Although Polyphemus cannot take revenge on Odysseus himself because Odysseus escapes too quickly, an avenger is found in the father of Polyphemus: the great brother of Zeus, ruler of the sea, Poseidon (Nieto Hernández, 2000). After Polyphemus’ prayer, Poseidon enacts divine punishment on Odysseus to bring bad luck to his crew and delay the return home:

“But he [Polyphemus] prayed  
 holding his arms towards the sky,  
 ‘Listen, Earth-Shaker, Blue-Haired Lord Poseidon:  
 acknowledge me your son, and be my father.  
 Grant that Odysseus, the city-sacker,  
 will never go back home. Or if it is  
 fated that he will see his family,  
 then let him get there late and with no honor,  
 in pain and lacking ships, and having caused  
 the death of all his men, and let him find  
 more trouble in his own house.’ Blue Poseidon  
 granted his son’s prayer.” (9.526-38)

This revenge by the death of many mirrors Odysseus’ actions at the end of the story, i.e., the slaughter of the suitors in his own home. There are almost no judgments on which of the suitors and which of the maids should die, and there are exactly no judgments by Poseidon on which of Odysseus’ crew should die. The endless vengeance highlights an obvious lack of justice as the fate of the wrongdoers is not decided by any justice-dealings gods, such as Zeus or Themis, but it is a personal vendetta dealt by the afflicted. This personal and brutal violence with which revenge is taken is felt profoundly by the lack of any war: there is a feeling in the audience that the end of the Trojan War should have ended the violence, but Odysseus is still in a war-like state of mind highlighted by him solving his problems with revenge and murder, an incongruous concept during an otherwise peaceful time. The emphasis on violence is apparent in the vivid imagery of the aftermath of the slaughter scenes, for example, when “The floor / swam thick with blood.” (11.420-1) after the murder of Agamemnon, or when Odysseus looked at the destruction he had caused:

“He saw them fallen, all of them, so many,  
 lying in blood and dust, like fish hauled up  
 out of the dark-gray sea in fine-mesh nets;  
 tipped out upon the curving beach’s sand,  
 they gasp for water from the salty sea.” (22.384-8)

The murder of Aegisthus by Agamemnon’s son Orestes is also seen as a fair and just act that Aegisthus deserved, e.g., Zeus says in the very first book of *The Odyssey*: “But now his death has paid all debts” (1.44). Orestes gained fame (*kleos*) and praise by avenging his father and killing Aegisthus, which signifies the character of the theme of revenge in *The* Odyssey: revenge is seen as a praiseworthy method of delivering justice, restoring balance. The Oresteia story, however, seems a lot closer to Odysseus’ situation as it inverts the case of a father avenging a son (Poseidon and Polyphemus) to a son avenging a father (Orestes and Agamemnon), which Telemachus believes he is doing when leaving Ithaca in search of his father (Nieto Hernández, 2000), further emphasising this positive view of revenge and how it can make a boy into a man. Therefore, the theme of revenge may be either a satisfying way for an audience to see an immoral character killed and balance restored, or it may be a gruesome act of domestic violence, making the audience appalled at the destruction visible after major slaughter scenes. However, these slaughter scenes are driven by the survival of the one who returns home, which is only possible with the third major theme: disguise.

Disguise is a foreign concept for Agamemnon, who arrives home so carelessly that “from the lookout post the watchman saw him” (4.523) and then is ambushed by Aegisthus’ men, which results in Agamemnon’s death. The lack of disguise is emphasised by the obvious parallel drawn by Odysseus when he is warned by Athena of the suitors waiting for him at home: “Oh! I would have died like Agamemnon / in my own house, if you had not explained / exactly how things stand.” (13.384-6) Therefore, Odysseus’ cunning and wisdom (*metis*) is highlighted by the contrast with the Oresteia story: although both Agamemnon and Odysseus return home to a hostile environment, Odysseus shows his intelligence by learning from others’ mistakes and heeding the ghost of Agamemnon’s advice: “When you arrive in your own land, do not / anchor your ship in full view; move in secret.” (11.455), so Odysseus does and is not noticed by anyone except Athena as a result. The theme of disguise is used here as a literary device to develop Odysseus’ character and portray him as an intelligent Greek hero that is worthy of being a protagonist in an epic.

Additionally, one of the major points at which Odysseus’ cunning is accentuated is his escape from Polyphemus’ cave with a clever trick – telling the Cyclops that his name is ‘*Outis*’, or ‘Noman’, which ensures that no one will come to help Polyphemus after he yells out loud the sentence: “Noman is killing me” (9.408). His friends and neighbours are then concerned only for his mental health instead of his physical wellbeing, expressed by the phrase “Great Zeus has made you sick; no help for that” (9.411). Odysseus is again characterised as a cunning person with the masterful use of yet another clever disguise, changing his identity to suit a particular goal at that time and donning that disguise afterwards (Nieto Hernández, 2000). Odysseus’ escape is ensured with the ‘*Outis*’ disguise, without which he would have been another victim of the anthropophagus, mirroring Odysseus’ disguise in Ithaca, which prevented him from falling victim to the suitors. This “versatility in adopting identities” (Nieto Hernández, 2000) builds up the character of Odysseus as a trickster who is prepared to lie and deceive in order to escape any dangerous situation, this being a character trait not typically found in the definition of a Greek hero. For this reason the deception of Polyphemus seems rather morally ambivalent as he ends up blind and abandoned by his friends as a result of it, having eaten people who have intruded into his home (Newton, 1983). However, Odysseus does become ‘*Outis*’ out of necessity just as he transforms into an old man in order not to be killed by the suitors at home, a necessary disguise to overcome the challenges faced by Greek heroes. Necessity, however, is not that explicit in Odysseus’ mastery over the art of storytelling, which is often used as his disguise and is the fourth major theme.

Storytelling is a way for Odysseus to craft many identities for himself, which demonstrates how much storytelling influences people’s views of people, events and their own desires. Particularly significant is the Oresteia story and its many different versions in *The Odyssey* (Olson, 1990). It is not just a fragment of the epic, rather it is a story told within a story: an oral piece which can be modified by the storyteller for their own purposes. For example, Zeus’ retelling of Orestes’ revenge is male-centric and highlights conflicts between men, Athena’s version of the story inspires Telemachus to be like Orestes and try to avenge his father. *The Odyssey* features the Oresteia story as a kind of mould or prototype, the roles in which can be filled by different characters at different times: Odysseus is at first compared to Orestes as the one who takes revenge once he has returned home, when later it is Telemachus in Orestes’ role as the avenger of a father; Odysseus can be compared to Aegisthus as the one who inflicts pain on the one returning home (Polyphemus); and Penelope is often compared to Clytemnestra as the wife who could betray the husband and end the *nostos* of a hero in death and disloyalty (Olson, 1990). However, the Oresteia story is not the only story told in *The Odyssey*: a large part of the poem is spent with Odysseus narrating his journey to the island of the Phaeacians, the island’s inhabitants themselves being the audience. One way in which Odysseus could be embellishing his story is with the praise of the fifth major theme, which is dear to Phaeacian society: civilisation.

The wonders of civilisation are heavily emphasised during the Cyclops’ episode with the use of stark contrasts between the Cyclopean and the Phaeacian societies, with some carefully chosen similes in praise of a technological society. The largest contrast is seen when Odysseus describes the island of the Cyclopes as uncultivated yet full of potential, and the Cyclopes themselves are described as “lacking in customs” (9.108), with “no councils, […] no common law” (9.112): a generally uncivilised society. Odysseus’ description of the many missed opportunities by Cyclopes in not using the island’s “richness underground” (9.135) highlights and praises the agricultural advances of the Phaeacians, after having complimented their laws and customs. An implicit celebration of technology is found in different similes used during the blinding of Polyphemus, e.g., when Odysseus “leaned on top / and twisted it [the olive spear], as when a man drills wood / for shipbuilding” (9.383-5) or when describing a sound “[a]s when a blacksmith dips an axe or adze / to temper it in ice-cold water” (9.391-2) (Nieto Hernández, 2000). These similes are familiar to the Phaeacian audience, making them enjoy both the vivid imagery of the scene and the feeling of superiority over the uncivilised anthropophagi. Therefore, Polyphemus and the other Cyclopes are shown to be the exact opposite of a technologically minded civilisation, giving the audience of *The Odyssey* a moral view of a civilisation worthy of praise.

In conclusion, Odysseus’ relationship to Polyphemus and Agamemnon defines and explores many major themes of *The Odyssey*: *nostos* and its link to a restoration of the *oikos* and the recurring breaches of *xenia*; revenge and its dichotomy of perceptions, either of a just or of a gruesome nature; disguise and its closeness with *metis*, helping characterise Odysseus as an atypical Greek hero; storytelling as a literary and manipulation device; and civilisation in contrast with savagery and lack of technology. Odysseus, his friends and his family are compared to different characters and roles in both the Oresteia story and his visit to the island of the Cyclopes to create a vivid and engaging poem with complex characters interacting in a morally ambivalent world: Homer’s world.

# Bibliography

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