Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Power of Cunning over Strength

If the Iliad is about strength, the Odyssey is about cunning, a difference that becomes apparent in the very first lines of the epics. Whereas The Iliad tells the story of the rage of Achilles, the strongest hero in the Greek army, The Odyssey focuses on a “man of twists and turns”. Odysseus does have extraordinary strength, as he demonstrates in Book 21 by being the only man who can string the bow. But he relies much more on mind than muscle, a tendency that his encounters showcase. He knows that he cannot overpower Polyphemus, for example, and that, even if he were able to do so, he wouldn’t be able to budge the boulder from the door. He thus schemes around his disadvantage in strength by exploiting Polyphemus’s stupidity. Though he does use violence to put out Polyphemus’s single eye, this display of strength is part of a larger plan to deceive the brute.

Similarly, Odysseus knows that he is no match for the host of strapping young suitors in his palace, so he makes the most of his other strength—his wits. Step by step, through disguises and deceptions, he arranges a situation in which he alone is armed and the suitors are locked in a room with him. With this setup, Achilles’ superb talents as a warrior would enable him to accomplish what Odysseus does, but only Odysseus’s strategic planning can bring about such a sure victory. Some of the tests in Odysseus's long, wandering ordeal seem to mock reliance on strength alone. No one can resist the Sirens’ song, for example, but Odysseus gets an earful of the lovely melody by having his crew tie him up. Scylla and Charybdis cannot be beaten, but Odysseus can minimize his losses with prudent decision-making and careful navigation. Odysseus’s encounter with Achilles in the underworld is a reminder: Achilles won great kleos, or glory, during his life, but that life was brief and ended violently. Odysseus, on the other hand, by virtue of his wits, will live to a ripe old age and is destined to die in peace.
The Pitfalls of Temptation

The initial act that frustrated so many Achaean homecoming was the work of an Achaean himself: Ajax (the “Lesser” Ajax, a relatively unimportant figure not to be confused with the “Greater” Ajax, whom Odysseus meets in Hades) raped the Trojan priestess Cassandra in a temple while the Greeks were plundering the fallen city. That act of impulse, impiety, and stupidity brought the wrath of Athena upon the Achaean fleet and set in motion the chain of events that turned Odysseus’s homecoming into a long nightmare. It is fit that The Odyssey is motivated by such an event, for many of the pitfalls that Odysseus and his men face are likewise obstacles that arise out of mortal weakness and the inability to control it. The submission to temptation or recklessness either angers the gods or distracts Odysseus and the members of his crew from their journey: they yield to hunger and slaughter the Sun’s flocks, and they eat the fruit of the lotus and forget about their homes.

Even Odysseus’s hunger for kleos is a kind of temptation. He submits to it when he reveals his name to Polyphemus, bringing Poseidon’s wrath upon him and his men. In the case of the Sirens, the theme is revisited simply for its own interest. With their ears plugged, the crew members sail safely by the Sirens’ island, while Odysseus, longing to hear the Sirens’ sweet song, is saved from folly only by his foresighted command to his crew to keep him bound to the ship’s mast. Homer is fascinated with depicting his protagonist tormented by temptation: in general, Odysseus and his men want very desperately to complete their nostos, or homecoming, but this desire is constantly at odds with the other pleasures that the world offers.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Storytelling

Storytelling in The Odyssey, in addition to delivering the plot to the audience, situates the epic in its proper cultural context. The Odyssey seems very conscious of its predecessor, The Iliad: Odysseus’s wanderings would never have taken place had he not left for Troy; and The Odyssey would make little sense without The Iliad and the knowledge
that so many other Greek heroes had to make nostoi, or homeward journeys, of their own. Homer constantly evokes the history of The Odyssey through the stories that his characters tell. Menelaus and Nestor both narrate to Telemachus their wanderings from Troy. Even Helen adds some anecdotes about Odysseus’s cunning during the Trojan War. Phemius, a court minstrel in Ithaca, and Demodocus, a Phaeacian bard, sing of the exploits of the Greek heroes at Troy. In the underworld, Agamemnon tells the story of his murder, while Ajax’s evasion prompts the story of his quarrel with Odysseus. These stories, however, don’t just provide colorful personal histories. Most call out to other stories in Greek mythology, elevating The Odyssey by reminding its audience of the epic’s rich, mythic tradition.

Disguises

The gods of Greek literature often assume alternate forms to commune with humans. In The Odyssey, Athena appears on earth disguised as everything from a little girl to Odysseus’s friend Mentor to Telemachus. Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea whom Menelaus describes in Book 4, can assume any form, even water and fire, to escape capture. Circe, on the other hand, uses her powers to change others, turning an entire contingent of Odysseus’s crew into pigs with a tap of her wand.

From the first line of the epic, Homer explains that his story is about a “man of twists and turns”. Quick, clever, and calculating, Odysseus is a natural master of disguise, and the plot of the epic often turns on his deception. By withholding his true identity from the Cyclops and using the alias “Nobody,” for example, Odysseus is able to save himself and his crew. But by revealing his name at the end of this episode, Odysseus ends up being dogged by the god Poseidon. His beggar disguise allows him to infiltrate his palace and set up the final confrontation with the suitors. It also allows Homer to distinguish those who truly love Odysseus—characters like Eurycleia, Penelope, and even his dog, Argos, begin to recognize their beloved king even before he sheds his disguise.

Seductresses

Women are very important figures in The Odyssey, and one of the most prominent roles they fulfill is that of seductress. Circe and Calypso are the most obvious examples of women whose love becomes an obstacle to Odysseus’s return. Homer presents many other women whose irresistible allure threatens to lead men astray. The Sirens enchant Odysseus with their lovely song, and even Penelope, despite all of her contempt for the suitors, seems to be leading them on at times. She uses her feminine wiles to conceal her ruse of undoing, every night, her day’s work on the burial shroud, and even gets the suitors to give her gifts, claiming that
she will marry the one who gives her the nicest things. While these women do gain a certain amount of power through their sexual charms, they are ultimately all subject to divine whim, forced to wait and pine for love when it is absent.

Symbols
Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Food
Although throwing a feast for a guest is a common part of hospitality, hunger and the consumption of food often have negative associations in The Odyssey. They represent lack of discipline or submission to temptation, as when Odysseus tarries in the cave of the Cyclops, when his men slaughter the Sun’s flocks, or when they eat the fruit of the lotus. The suitors, moreover, are constantly eating. Whenever Telemachus and Penelope complain about their uninvited guests, they mention how the suitors slaughter the palace’s livestock. Odysseus kills the suitors just as they are starting their dinner, and Homer graphically describes them falling over tables and spilling their food. In almost all cases, the monsters of the Odyssey owe their monstrosity at least in part to their diets or the way that they eat. Scylla swallows six of Odysseus’s men, one for each head. The Cyclops eats humans, but not sheep apparently, and is gluttonous nonetheless: when he gets drunk, he vomits up wine mixed with pieces of human flesh. The Laestrygonians seem like nice people—until their queen, who is described as “huge as a mountain crag,” tries to eat Odysseus and his men. In these cases, excessive eating represents not just lack of self-control, but also the total absence of humanity and civility.

The Wedding Bed
The wedding bed in Book 23 symbolizes the constancy of Penelope and Odysseus’s marriage. Only a single maidservant has ever seen the bed, and it is where the happy couple spends its first night in each other’s arms since Odysseus’s departure for Troy twenty years earlier. The symbolism is heightened by the trick that Penelope uses to test Odysseus, which revolves around the immovability of their bed—a metaphor for the unshakable foundation of their love.