

Homeric Values in 'The Odyssey'

Themes of Hospitality and Civilisation in Homer's Odyssey

Feb 24, 2010 Victoria Hooper

The values of hospitality, community, and respect for the gods mark the difference between civilisation and barbarism in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The Odyssey is not simply a highly enjoyable tale of adventure, magic and monsters. It is also a moral poem, reflecting the values of its audience and concerning itself with how civilised Greek society ought to behave.

Hospitality in Homeric Society

Hospitality (*xenia*) is an important theme in *The Odyssey*, reflecting both social and religious concerns. In a time in which a family's survival depended upon their livestock or a good harvest, neighbourly concern and respect for property was incredibly important. For a sea-faring people who depended a lot on fishing, sailing and trade, hospitality and kindness to strangers were looked on as staples of a civilised society. Hospitality also took on a religious importance; suppliants were believed to be sacred to Zeus himself. Besides, a Greek never knew when a stranger might in fact be a god in disguise, testing and judging him.

Barbarians and Monsters – the Cyclops and the Laestrygonians

The Cyclopes are the epitome of barbarous society in *The Odyssey*. They have no laws or assemblies, no agriculture and no interest in their neighbours, and Polyphemus even goes so far as to disrespect Zeus. Not only does Polyphemus ignore all rules of hospitality when Odysseus appeals to him for kindness, but actually proceeds to eat his guests. This violence and cannibalism is also displayed by the fearsome Laestrygonians, who destroy all but one of Odysseus' ships.

Perversions of Civilised Society – Circe, Aeolus and the Lotus Eaters

Most of Odysseus' encounters on his journey home to Ithaca represent aspects of uncivilised or barbarous societies. At Circe's island the scene at first seems normal; Circe is singing at her loom, engaged in a respectable woman's activity. Circe, however, is no normal woman, but a powerful witch who transforms her guests into animals. At the home of Aeolus, Odysseus enters an idyllic family scene – a family, it turns out, that is entirely incestuous. Amongst the Lotus Eaters, men are reduced to the level of animals; their only concern is grazing on the mind-altering lotus fruit. By drawing a comparison between Greek society and these places, Homer emphasise the value of being a civilised Greek.

Gifts and Guests – The Phaeacians

When Odysseus reaches the Phaeacians, he is met with hospitality at last. Here he experiences the pleasures of civilised Greek life once again: family, community, festivals, singing and dancing, athletics, storytelling and respect for the gods. Here he is also treated to another important aspect of hospitality; he

is loaded with gifts by the generous Phaeacians. Gift-giving was an expected part of visiting foreign princes or kings, a traditional way to honour one's guests as well as to show off the wealth and success of one's own household. More examples of gift-giving can be seen in the lavish presents that Telemachus receives on his travels.

Restoring Civilisation – Odysseus and the Suitors

However, it seems that uncivilised behaviour has even infected Odysseus' home on Ithaca. A rabble of arrogant suitors have moved into his palace, courting his wife, making demands from his servants, and depleting his household stocks with their continual feasts and revelry. This level of disrespect for a man's home and property would have been damning enough for the Greeks, but the villainous Suitors have even plotted to murder Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Before Odysseus can truly enjoy his return to civilisation, he must eradicate the threat of the Suitors from his house.

Values in *The Odyssey*

Homer's *Odyssey* highlights some of the most important values of civilised Greek society: home, family, community, hospitality, and proper respect for the gods. It is the presence, or lack of, these qualities that mark the difference between civilisation and barbarism in *The Odyssey*.

Sources

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