**Heroism in *The Odyssey***

**From:** *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*.



The distinctive feature of Odysseus's heroism is the way he combines cunning and wisdom with boldness and power. While many facets of heroism are on display in *The Odyssey*, more than anyone Odysseus balances courage with sense. It is this combination of wisdom and power that enables Odysseus to return home after 20 years at sea.

The poem begins with four books telling of a future hero, Odysseus's son Telemachus. Telemachus has his father's gift of speech and some of his courage, but needs Athena's encouragement before he ventures forth. Athena makes explicit Odysseus's excellence. Posing as Mentor, she marvels "now there was a man, I'd say, in words and actions both!" (102). Many Greek heroes are men of action, a few others skilled in counsel, but few combine the two like Odysseus. As Telemachus relates it, people say that Odysseus pledged his word and "made it good in action" on the battlefield (110). Telemachus wishes that his father could have had a good death in battle, or in old age at home, either of which would mean great fame for the Greek hero. Instead, he worries that Odysseus will be forever lost at sea, a death without glory. Despite his eagerness to defend his house, Telemachus himself lacks glory until his father returns to lead him in battle against the suitors.

Meanwhile, Odysseus is "fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home" (77). Zeus himself says that Odysseus "excels all men in wisdom, excels in offerings too" (79). Despite his wisdom, Odysseus runs afoul of the god Poseidon when he blinds the Cyclops Polyphemus. Odysseus's return home is cursed, and he spends 10 years wandering the seas in his ongoing voyage home. Odysseus's heroism is marked by "a hundred feat of arms," as Menelaus says (129), feats marked by his cunning as well as his courage. Helen tells Telemachus of the time Odysseus snuck into Troy disguised as a beggar, while Menelaus cites the idea of the Trojan horse as evidence of Odysseus's heroism. This combination of cleverness and courage is on full display in Odysseus's retelling of his encounter with the Cyclops. Trapped inside a cave with the giant, Odysseus defeats the Cyclops with clever planning followed by bold action. He gets the Cyclops drunk on powerful wine, works with his men to poke the giant's eye out, and then escapes from the cave by strapping himself and his men to the underside of the Cyclops's massive sheep. In one of his great tricks, Odysseus tells the Cyclops his name is "Nobody," so that when Polyphemus turns to his fellow giants for help his cries make little sense: "Nobody's killing me now by fraud and not by force!" (224). As Odysseus reminds his men later, "my courage, my presence of mind and tactics saved us all" (277). The same qualities eventually enable him to return in triumph, avenging himself against the suitors and reclaiming his wife and home.

While death is not quite as constant or as graphic in *The Odyssey* as it was in *TheIliad*, the dark side of Greek heroism is still apparent. When Odysseus travels to the House of Death to learn his fate, he sees his mother Anticleia, dead from grief over Odysseus's long absence. He longs to embrace her, but is unable. He sees a variety of heroes long dead, before meeting Agamemnon, murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus on his return home. Finally he sees great Achilles, hero of *The* *Iliad*. Odysseus praises Achilles for his greatness in life, and now his power over the dead. Achilles rebukes him, saying "By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man … than rule down here over all the breathless dead" (265). If Achilles himself has rejected the glory of death in battle for the possibility of a long life enslaved, this would call into question the entire ideal of Greek heroism in war. But the reality is that Achilles has little patience for Odysseus's flattery. His adherence to the heroic ideal is shown by the rest of his speech, in which he questions Odysseus about the fate of Achilles's son, Neoptolemus. When Odysseus tells him that his son displayed excellent tactics and great courage in battle, Achilles rejoices, "triumphant" in the knowledge that his "gallant, glorious son" has followed in his footsteps (267). The magnificence of Homer's [epic](http://www.fofweb.com/Lit/MainDetailPrint.asp?iPin=Gfflithem0266) is to recognize and highlight the consequences of heroism while still displaying the glory of those who embrace it. *The Odyssey* proves that heroism is not only a matter of courage, but also the result of wisdom and cunning, particularly in the case of Odysseus.

**Ford, James. "Heroism in *The Odyssey*." McClinton-Temple, Jennifer ed.*Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2011.*Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 16 Oct. 2014**