

The Aged But Smarter Odysseus

Taylor Thompson

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Instructor: Joan Faust

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It is often said that old age brings an abundance of wisdom and knowledge. Experience is the best teacher, and the more experience an individual gains, the more insight he or she can shed on the complicated world. On the other hand, a person's youth is thought to be a time of great arrogance, persistent stubbornness, and intense curiosity without the consideration of any related consequences. Eventually, through experiences and mistakes, these views on life are considered to be immature and trivial, and the individual develops a wiser approach to handling situations by demonstrating thoughtfulness before action and a sense of self-control instead of egotism. This has been the life cycle since the beginning of time, and Homer does not fail to recognize this concept in his epic *The Odyssey*. Throughout the course of the story, it is clear that the main character, Odysseus, undergoes these changes in the twenty years he is away from home. Odysseus's personality begins in the war-time mentality with the Trojan War, where cleverness is key; however, through his challenges, losses, and triumphs, he successfully adapts a peace-time attitude where wisdom governs his decision-making.

While fighting in Troy, younger Odysseus has a war-like perception on life. After leaving victorious from the Trojan War, he possesses a sense of pride and invincibility, raiding cities and fueling his need for glory. Yes, Odysseus's attitude allows him to act cleverly and quickly when placed in tough situations, but it is his foolishness that gets him into dangerous positions in the first place. One example is his encounter with Polyphêmos, the Cyclops. While in the monster's cave, his companions wish to take needed supplies and leave in order to avoid any trouble that

might arise. In spite of this, Odysseus refuses to retreat; he is curious to see what the creature has to offer him. He approaches the Cyclops upon his return:

Here we stand,
beholden for your help, or any gifts
you give—as custom to honor strangers.
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest. (IX.288-93)

It is not wise of Odysseus to confront the unknown creature with arrogance and demands, but his prideful nature causes him to act in this manner. He only enrages Polyphêmos, causing him to eat some of the men and promising to do the same to the remainder. Now, Odysseus is clever when he claims that his name is “Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends, / everyone calls [him] Nohbdy” (IX.397-98) and uses this name to eventually secure a safe passage from the cave to the ships. But it is his foolish, arrogant spirit that lands Odysseus in trouble from the beginning.

He later proves that he has not learned from this adventure when he continues to mock the Cyclops upon his crew's escape. Odysseus insults the creature and still persists even after Polyphêmos throws a hilltop at the ship almost causing it to sink. Odysseus's sailors plead with him to stop, but he only continues:

Kyclops,
if ever mortal men inquire
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
Odysseus, raider of the cities, took your eye:
Laërtês' son, whose home's on Ithaka! (IX.548-52)

Polyphêmos prays for Odysseus's destruction or that he at least suffer a hard journey alone only to find hard times in Ithaka upon his arrival. His need for superiority and self-importance causes this curse to be put on him which haunts him in the future. At the beginning of this tale, Odysseus is clever but certainly not wise.

His wisdom begins to develop throughout his many challenges while trying to reach home where Odysseus begins to make a slow transition to the peace-time mentality. The situations he stumbles upon affect the way he handles decisions greatly. Instead of seeking fame and fortune as in times of war, his goal becomes the quest for home. Odysseus develops a wiser approach to situations by thinking about what to say before acting and demonstrating self-discipline in tempting situations which allows him to make progress toward his target: homecoming. The way Odysseus chooses words changes greatly from the beginning. After being imprisoned on Kalypso's island for seven years and finally having the chance to leave, Odysseus displays his new wisdom. Kalypso questions him, asking why he wants to return home so badly to his aged wife when he could have eternal youth with her. Instead of directly addressing her questions, Odysseus skillfully avoids them with answers that please her and still get the results he wants:

My lady goddess, here is no cause for anger.

My quiet Penélopê—how well I know—

would seem a shade before your majesty,

death and old age being unknown to you,

while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day

I long for home, long for the sight of home. (V.224-29)

He does not want to hurt Kalypso because he needs a raft to get home, but he does not agree to stay with her forever. Instead of expressing his thoughts ruthlessly as in his conversation with Polyphêmos, Odysseus wisely decides what to say so that she has no choice but to help him.

This is also true when Odysseus meets Nausikaa in Phaiákia. He needs her help but does not want to scare her away with bold compliments. So he flatters her slightly without causing alarm saying, “Never have I laid eyes on equal beauty / in man or woman. I am hushed indeed” (VI.161-173), but he also wishes her “a home, a husband, and harmonious / converse with him—the best thing in the world / being a strong house held in serenity where man and wife agree” (VI.194-98) which is her biggest desire. Odysseus’s smart choice of words gets him the results he wishes and shows that he is transforming from young and clever to mature and wise.

The peak of Odysseus’s wisdom is evident in the last books of the epic. Odysseus shows his complete transformation from cleverness to wisdom when he chooses to keep his arrival home a secret and by demonstrating a sense of patience when he is tested. Homer describes this aged Odysseus as “the patient hero” (XVII.362) and “the old soldier” (XVII.336), proving his maturation. Instead of announcing his presence as normal, Odysseus is careful to make his homecoming unknown to everyone so that he can plan his attack on the suitors. Many situations test Odysseus, but he succeeds in each. He demonstrates restraint when he must fight the beggar Iros:

Royal Odysseus

ponder[s] if he should hit him with all he [has]

and drop the man dead on the spot, or only

spar, with force enough to knock him down.

Better that way, he thought—a gentle blow,

else he might give himself away. (XVIII.109-14)

This use of self-control proves that Odysseus no longer lives in the war-time mentality; he does not wish to kill the man. He only wants to give him a hard blow but not death. If he tries too hard, his identity will be discovered. Another incident that tests Odysseus's character is the unfaithful women servants. Odysseus sees them leaving to go to bed with the suitors but tells himself, "Down; be steady. You've seen worse, that time / the Kyklops like a rockslide ate your men / while you looked on" (XX.19-21). His wisdom and self-control are ultimately the reason for Odysseus's success against the suitors. If he remains foolish but clever, victory would not be in his favor.

Critics argue that Odysseus has started out clever and emerges wise. Homer's depiction of Odysseus's challenges, successes, and failures proves that this thought is correct. Throughout the twenty years he is away, Odysseus makes a transformation from a younger, foolish character to a mature wise man. Odysseus's personality begins in the war-time mentality, where cleverness is key to victory in war; however, he effectively adapts a peace-time attitude where good judgment governs his decision making. Old age really does bring an abundance of truth and knowledge.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Stratus and Gloux Inc., 1998.