The Timeless Lessons of The Odyssey: Civilization, Pride, and Power

By Gianzack Chariell

Homer's *The Odyssey* has overcome the test of time unlike almost any other work in history. Odysseus's journey, the story of his home without him, and the involvement of the Gods throughout it all lead to a multitude of themes throughout the epic poem. Notably, the themes of civilized and uncivilized societies and the pride that leads to downfall contribute to the iconic poem's fame.

Throughout Odysseus's journey, he encounters many societies that change the course of his journey home. Some of his experiences represent civilized societies, such as the Phaeacian society and the society he left behind in order to fight in the Trojan War (represented mostly by Eumaeus). Others, however, are represented by the suitors and the Cyclopes, with their violence, selfishness, and greed. Primarily, Odysseus arrives on the island of the Phaeacians and meets the princess and King Alcinous. Already showing that the society has order due to its leaders, the Phaeacians represent order and civilization through their community — they hold games, provide Odysseus with food and shelter, and even help him get home. Their hospitality, manners, and overall moral compass express the importance and difference that a civilized society can make. Additionally, when Odysseus returns home, he ends up at the hut of Eumaeus, the swineherd, who provides him with shelter even though Odysseus is disguised as a beggar. Eumaeus represents what Odysseus left behind — a civilized society with morals, hospitality,

and humility. Eumaeus could have been a king. Instead, he humbly contributes to his society by caring for pigs and helping others when he can (which is later expressed as he helps Odysseus develop his plan to bring down the suitors). On the other hand, *The Odyssey* represents plenty of uncivilized societies. After Odysseus's departure and rumored death, roughly 107 suitors show up in Ithaca, asking for Penelope's (Odysseus's wife) hand in marriage. They intimidate others (even the disguised Odysseus), steal Odysseus's resources, and show a complete lack of compassion as they pressure Penelope to marry without even knowing where her husband is or if he is even alive. Additionally, the Cyclopes are represented as brutal cannibals who slowly kill almost all of Odysseus's men. With a desire for only their own selfish gain, the Cyclops Polyphemus kills Odysseus's men not only to eat them but also to intimidate them. Their violence and lack of compassion express the worst aspects of an uncivilized society.

These contrasting societies also communicate a timeless political message about what makes a society successful. Homer suggests that civilization depends on more than simply having leaders or living together in a community. It requires justice, respect, hospitality, and a willingness to put the well-being of others above personal gain. The suitors demonstrate what happens when individuals are allowed to abuse their power without consequences, while figures like Eumaeus demonstrate how even ordinary citizens can help preserve a society's values. In this way, *The Odyssey* presents a message about the importance of responsible leadership and the dangers of a society in which selfishness and corruption go unchecked.

Eventually, Odysseus escapes the Cyclops, tricking him into believing that his name is "Nobody." After blinding him and sailing away, the proud Odysseus proclaims his identity. What Odysseus thought would be a triumphant moment was quickly ruined, as Polyphemus asked his father, Poseidon, to strike him with bad luck. Odysseus's journey took a turn for the worse, and his pride led to even more struggles. The theme of pride and its dangers is expressed by Odysseus in this scene, but also by the suitors throughout the epic. Thinking nobody could stop them, they mistreated the people of Ithaca, pressured Penelope, stole resources, and even continuously tried to prove themselves to her. In the final books, they even make fun of the disguised Odysseus. Odysseus later revealed himself and got his revenge, expressing the dangers and downfalls of excessive pride. This theme also carries a political message: when individuals believe themselves to be above the rules, they threaten the stability of the society around them. Whether it is Odysseus revealing his identity out of pride or the suitors abusing their position in Ithaca, Homer demonstrates how unchecked arrogance can lead to the downfall of even the most powerful individuals. Ultimately, these themes help explain why *The Odyssey* has remained relevant for thousands of years. Its messages about civilization, leadership, pride, and the consequences of abusing power are not limited to ancient Greece; they remain applicable to societies and governments throughout history and even today.