**he Rebirth of Heroism from Homer's *Odyssey* to Joyce's*Ulysses***

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On *Ulysses* by James Joyce  
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Safe!  
  
(*U* 8.1193)

There she found Odysseus among the bodies of the murdered, splattered with blood and gore like a lion who comes from devouring an ox from a farm; and his whole chest and his cheeks on both sides are covered with blood, and he is dreadful to look upon, just so had Odysseus been splattered, his feet and his hands above.  
  
(*Od*. 22.401–6)

So Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* is delighted to escape confronting his wife's lover, Blazes Boylan, by turning into the National Library, whereas in Homer's*Odyssey* the nurse Eurykleia discovers Odysseus after he slaughters Penelope's suitors standing fearsome and awesome (deinos), drenched in blood like a lion who has just finished eating.1 Odysseus has already killed so many suitors that "the whole floor flowed with blood" (*Od*. 22.309), and his house must be washed and purged with sulfur before he can reunite with Penelope (*Od*. 22.437–94). In contrast, Bloom chooses to return silently to a marriage bed befouled by his wife Molly's sexual encounter with Blazes Boylan:

What did his limbs, when gradually extended, encounter?

New clean bedlinen, additional odours, the presence of a human form, female, hers, the imprint of a human form, male, not his, some crumbs, some flakes of potted meat, recooked, which he removed. (*U* 17.2122–25)

Such a pitiful cuckold seems like the antithesis of Homeric heroism and Joyce's proof of its demise. So, at first glance, Joyce's depiction of heroism appears to supersede Homer's entirely: the extraordinary victor has become an ordinary victim.

Yet perhaps this position only allows us to dismiss the significance of Joyce's title too precipitously, for in his notes to his only play, *Exiles*, Joyce observes, "Since the publication of the lost pages of *Madame Bovary* the centre of sympathy appears to have been esthetically shifted from the lover or fancyman to the husband or cuckold" (*E* 150). With the choice of his title *Ulysses*, Joyce focuses upon precisely this problem. Just as Molly has become the adulteress Penelope is not, so Bloom has become the cuckold Odysseus could never be. Yet if we consider the possibility that such contradictions between the Blooms and their Homeric counterparts do not simply serve to present a parody of the Homeric intertext invoked by Joyce's title, a remarkable convergence between Joyce's and Homer's conceptions of love and heroism emerges.2 The obvious contradiction between Penelope's chastity and Molly's adultery can be reconciled to a certain degree with the acknowledgment that both marriages are fraught with ambivalence and infidelity.3 In the same vein, how might the heroism of the cuckold in *Ulysses* and the heroism of the avenging husband in the *Odyssey*depend upon the same heroic virtues? One answer may be found in the way in which Homer's and Joyce's uses of the word "hero" (eros) function to create and confirm a remarkably similar meaning of heroism, thus endowing Joyce's title with great resonance.4 Let us then explore the idea that certain instances in which Homer and Joyce use the word "hero" (eros) serve to define one particular kind of heroism that Odysseus and both attain.5

We first encounter the word "hero" (eros) in the *Odyssey* in the context of divine aid and wrath, a context that reveals what constitutes this sort of heroism. Athena has just sprung into action on behalf of Odysseus, after receiving Zeus' permission to help him return home: "So she spoke, and beneath her feet she bound beautiful sandals, immortal, golden, which bore her over both the deep waters and the boundless land with the breath of the wind. And she seized her strong spear, tipped with sharp bronze, heavy, huge, and stout, with which *she overpowers the ranks of hero-men* (andron eroon) whoever are the kind that tend to anger her, that daughter of an oh-so-powerful father" (*Od*. 1.96–101; emphasis added).6 Being a hero, the audience learns here, is the task of a man. Previously, the word "hero" is quite noticeably absent from the proem (*Od*. 1.1–10), where Homer initially refers to Odysseus only as a man without even mentioning his name, accentuating his humanity and his masculinity rather than his heroic status: "Tell for me the man, muse" (*Od*. 1.1). We next find the words "man" (aner) and "hero" together in the genitive case, with the grammatical effect of denoting "a connection or dependence between two words…. The substantives may be so closely connected as to be equivalent to a single compound idea" (Smyth 314). I justify my hyphenation of "hero-men" based upon the interdependence Homer's grammar accentuates, emulating how Smyth hyphenates his examples. By inextricably binding up his first use of "hero" with "man" in the grammatical sense, Homer announces that his heroes are definitively not gods, but ordinary mortal men who quiver and suffer beneath the gods' wrath.

Hero-men must cope with force, symbolized by Athena's spear. For Athena does not only come to the aid of hero-men like Odysseus; she frequently subdues them (damnemi) with her spear when they anger her. Homer's use of an aorist subjunctive (kotessetai [*Od*. 1.101]) implies that her anger is customary (Stanford, *Homer 218*). By introducing his hero-men as those who suffer from habitual divine wrath, Homer implies that they cannot avoid being mastered by the gods. The hero-men beneath the spear exemplify the complexity of the heroic task: Homer's heroes face the double task of knowing when to suffer patiently the forces beyond their control and when to use the force at their disposal for their own benefit. Heroic endurance depends upon negotiating a very delicate balance between accepting what cannot be changed and fighting to alter what can be changed. Joyce gestures toward this idea in the "Scylla and Charybdis" section with an incredible economy of words: "Act. Be acted on" (*U*9.979). This duality encapsulates the heroic task in the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*. Just as Athena controls hero-men with the force of her spear, so hero-men must control their own forces, the desires of the heart (thumos), in order to endure.7Hero-men must resist being entirely overcome by external forces while overcoming the forces that emanate from within. As hero-men, their challenge, and the test of their endurance, is taming themselves.

By presenting this image of Athena in conjunction with his first use of the word "hero," Homer portrays a kind of heroism to which every human being can aspire, and in which every human being alive can and must participate. Everyone faces the task of controlling desire (thumos) while suffering forces beyond one's control. Because suffering itself, regardless of its source, provides the opportunity for human distinction, even the most ordinary person has the same chance of becoming heroic as an epic warrior does. R. Havard comments upon the chances of attaining such heroism: "Pain provides an opportunity for heroism; the opportunity is seized with surprising frequency" (Lewis 157). Extraordinary endurance within ordinary human life lends this heroism its special quality. Since rising to the challenges of suffering is its only imperative, one can qualify for this sort of heroism just as easily in Dublin in 1904 as in ancient Ithaca, or in the United States in the twenty-first century. Still, such heroism is ordinary only because it is possible for ordinary people in any time and place. It requires a strength that is quite extraordinary.

The first person upon whom Homer bestows the title "hero" epitomizes the demands and requirements of such an ordinary brand of heroism. Athena names him while speaking to Telemachus, after arriving at the home of Odysseus, disguised as Mentor: "Our fathers were guest-friends from long ago, which you would learn if you just go and question *old-man-hero-Laertes*, who, so they say, no longer comes to the city, but far away in the fields suffers pains, together with an old woman servant, who puts out food and drink for him, once exhaustion has seized his limbs as he struggles to move up the hill of his vineyard" (*Od*. 1.188–93; emphasis added). Surprisingly, Laertes is much like Bloom, suffering pitifully without any obvious resistance to his plight. Later, Penelope begs for the suitors' patience until she can finish "a funeral shroud for Laertes-hero" (*Od*. 2.99), while the goat-herd Melanthius holds an old, stout shield, speckled with rust, the one belonging to Laertes-hero, which he would always carry during his youth" (*Od*. 22.184–85). Young Laertes used to fight in battle. Now, like his rusty shield, he is old and worn, leading Thomas Falkner to suggest, "Like the dusty shield … Laertes' heroic abilities are hidden from sight…. in spite of his age, Laertes retains his heroic ability" (45, 46). By endowing Laertes with the title "hero" on these occasions, Homer emphasizes that heroes can be old, decrepit, and unquestionably vulnerable to suffering and death, but no less heroic for that condition. He portrays how hero-men bravely extend their mortal existence with every effort.

Other old fellows are worthy of the appellation "hero" as well. Aegyptius is also infirm: "Among them then Aegyptius-hero was the first to speak, who was bent with old age and whose wisdom was past measure" (*Od*. 2.15–16). Like Laertes, he is bent (kuphos) by old age, but not broken. Homer manages to include the reason why Halitherses is a hero at the same time as he overtly names him as such: "Then among them spoke old-man-hero-Halitherses, son of Mastor, for he alone excelled all of his contemporaries in knowledge of bird omens and in speaking according to fate" (*Od*. 2.157–59). Far beyond anyone else, Halitherses knows the pain the future holds. As the last hero explicitly titled in the poem, Halitherses cautions the families of the suitors about the consequences of the suitors' recklessness, imploring them to shun violence (*Od*. 24.454–62). Halitherses is named a hero while counseling restraint, not vengeance, stressing how crucial self-control is for this kind of heroism. Such temperance, along with great perseverance, earns hero-men a considerable degree of respect.

Hence Homer's actual use of the word "hero" refutes the idea that heroism is connected to the transient vitality of youth usually presumed to be one of its immutable requirements.8 Homer's extension of the idea of heroism to include elders raises endurance to the same status and prestige as more traditionally heroic actions like battle. The youthful, martial heroism of the *Iliad* has thus been transcended and replaced with a new brand of heroism in the *Odyssey*, as Falkner observes: "Where the *Odyssey* differs from the *Iliad*, with regard to old age as with so much else, is in reformulating and even redefining the nature of heroism and heroic values" (35).9 In the *Odyssey*, Homer's use of the word "hero" betrays how endurance itself has become a worthy form of heroism.

Homer's language further expresses how Laertes' extraordinary endurance distinguishes him as a hero. When Odysseus goes to the orchard to greet his father upon his return home, he finds Laertes gardening, digging dirt around a plant while "penthos aexon" ("fostering his pain") (*Od*. 24.231). This verb "aexo" literally means to increase, but it can also mean to foster, nourish, exalt, glorify, grow, or help to flourish or blossom (Liddell and Scott; Cunliffe). The verb describes crops thriving with rain (*Od*. 9.111, 9.358), waves rising (*Od*. 10.93), Telemachus growing (*Od*. 13.360, 22.426), and the day waxing toward noon (*Od*. 9.56). Eumaeus uses it to characterize how the gods reward labor and make his efforts prosperous (*Od*. 14.65, 66; 15.372). It seems like a very odd verb to apply to one's pain until we recognize what it connotes: the heroic embrace of the pain that fate and the gods inflict upon us. Laertes makes his pain bloom, just as a gardener tries to make a plant bloom. For Laertes relishes his suffering just as he relishes life. He cherishes his pain not because he is a masochist and enjoys suffering, but because he has no other options if he wants to survive. Since he has not yet found any remedy for the triple wound of losing his only son and his wife and being besieged by the suitors, he must persevere. For Homer, Laertes is heroic because he keeps struggling to live just as he struggles to inch through his orchard. He values life no matter how agonizing living has become. By naming him as the first hero in the poem, such endurance is presented as a kind of heroism.

Remarkably, Homer and Joyce each name Odysseus and Bloom directly as their heroes in the context that best illustrates what this heroism of endurance comprises: the context of earning homecoming. Bloom receives the title "our hero" in the "Eumaeus" section, when he finally decides to return home with Stephen: "I propose, *our hero* eventually suggested after mature reflection while prudently pocketing her photo, as it's rather stuffy here you just come home with me and talk things over. My diggings are quite close in the vicinity" (*U* 16.1643–45; emphasis added). Bloom is proposing that he and Stephen seek homecoming (nostos), while our narrator is proposing that Bloom deserves to be accepted as our hero. We may be inclined to interpret this naming ironically or sarcastically, but Bloom is truly "our hero" when he is rescuing Stephen at the same time as he is rescuing himself. "After mature reflection," he tries to withstand the pain of Molly's adultery, pocketing her old picture and his memories along with any rancor. Bloom, like Laertes and Odysseus, refuses to give up on life and on love, resolved in his belief that "talking things over" at home is the best possible course of action.

With striking similarities, only once in the *Odyssey* is Odysseus named a hero directly. While he is telling the story of his endurance to the Phaeacians, Odysseus describes how Kirke told him to travel to the rock in Hades where the two rivers meet, the very edge of death itself. Then he quotes her next instructions: "There and then, *hero*, draw near, just as I order you and dig a pit of a cubit on each side, and around it pour a libation to all of the dead … and then right away the prophet [Teiresias], leader of the people, will approach you, and he will tell you your way and the extent of your journey and your return [nostos]" (*Od*. 10.516–18, 538–40; emphasis added). Kirke addresses Odysseus as a hero when he is attempting to return home by gaining and following this advice from Teiresias: "Still, despite everything, you may yet return, even though suffering many evils, if you resolve to restrain your desires and those of your companions [ai k etheles son thumon erukakeein kai etairon], as soon as you shall bring your well-benched ship to the isle of Thrinacia, fleeing the violet sea, and grazing there find the cattle and good flocks of Helios" (*Od*. 11.104–9). Teiresias warns Odysseus that only through self-restraint will he accomplish his homecoming to Ithaca. As Kalypso confined Odysseus in her caves (eruko) (*Od*. 1.14), so Odysseus must curb his own desire (thumos) so as not to devour the oxen of the sun. Again the utter duality of Odysseus' task cannot be ignored: as he was being restrained, he must also restrain himself. He must resist enough to restore his agency but must still resist any reckless impulses. Thus Kirke names Odysseus a hero while sending him to Hades to learn the importance of the self-restraint, patience, and determination that Bloom displays when he pockets Molly's photo and invites Stephen home.

Odysseus previously erred in this effort, for he is not the perfect hero in perfect control of himself. He sometimes fails to master his own desires and passions (thumos), and the context in which Kirke names him a hero also calls attention to his inconsistency in this regard. Barely a hundred lines earlier, Eurylochus has accused him of having lost his men to the Cyclops through his own recklessness (*Od*. 10.431–37), recalling how Odysseus' comrades were reputed to have destroyed themselves in the same way by eating the oxen of the sun and how Halitherses condemns the suitors' folly (atasthalie) (*Od*. 1.7, 10.437, 24.458). Odysseus stifles the urge to kill him (*Od*. 10.438–45), and Kirke invites the men to stay, claiming that they need to seize desire (thumos) in their chests again, because so much suffering has made them withered (askeles) and without desire (thumos) (*Od*. 10.456–65). Desire has dried up and shriveled, like a plant without water, and now requires cultivation. So they remain with Kirke, feasting and drinking wine, until Odysseus' men caution him to remember his home (*Od*. 10.466–74). Up to this point, Odysseus forgets his own return for an entire year, so busy and content is he cultivating and satisfying his heart (thumos)! Even though he then takes full credit for his decision to leave, never alluding to his comrades' intervention when he announces to Kirke: "My heart (thumos) is now eager to go, as are those of my comrades" (*Od*. 10.484–85), we the audience witness how his ability to control himself wavers.

Only in this context, the context of the crisis of controlling desire (thumos), does Kirke call Odysseus a hero. The location of his heroic naming stresses the quality that fuels Odysseus' endurance and characterizes his heroism: the willingness and the self-control to endure pain. Joyce names Bloom "our hero" at the same kind of critical juncture. For Bloom too has hesitated about returning home, thinking, "Go home. Too late for *Leah*. *Lily of Killarney*. No. Might be still up" (*U* 13.1212–13). Bloom delays his own return on purpose until Molly will be asleep, while Odysseus forgets his return while luxuriating with Kirke. Both then proceed to accomplish homecoming by following the advice that Odysseus gives to Aias in Hades, precisely the sort of advice that Odysseus himself previously received from Teiresias: "Subdue your passion [menos] and your daring spirit [thumos] damason de menos kai agenora thumon]" (*Od*. 11.562). Notably, Odysseus uses the verb "damazo," meaning to tame, master, control, which correlates very closely with the verb "damnemi," which conveys how Athena overpowers hero-men with her spear (*Od*. 1.100; see Liddell and Scott; Cunliffe). Heroes must treat desire (thumos) in the way Athena treats men with her spear, once again highlighting the duality of the heroic task in trying to subdue one's internal forces while being threatened by external ones. Only the proper balance between initiative and submission makes homecoming possible.

Odysseus further clarifies the nature of this task to Telemachus when they are plotting revenge against the suitors, counseling him to resist his urge to intercede too soon: "Even if they insult me within the house, still let the dear heart [ker] endure in your breast while I am suffering evilly" (*Od*. 16.274–75). Father and son agree upon the nature of their task of endurance, so Telemachus responds, "Father, most certainly, I think in time to come you will know my heart [thumos], for no weakness at all has a hold on me" (*Od*. 16.309–10). Earlier, Telemachus described how passionate wrath rose within him while desiring revenge against the suitors ("aexetai endothi thumos) (*Od*. 2.315). But as the suitors insult his disguised father, he increases his own pain rather than yielding to his desire, enabling him to abstain from immediate action and plot revenge in silence as his father requested ("mega tenthos aexe") (*Od*. 17.489ff.). During the bow contest, Homer is careful to inform us that Telemachus frustrates his desires by restraining himself: "Three times he made it [Odysseus' bow] quiver with his strength [bie], hoping in his heart [thumos] to string the bow and shoot an arrow through the iron. And now, finally, trying to pull it on the fourth try, he would have strung it with his strength [bie], but Odysseus shook his head and held him back, even as eager as he was" (*Od*. 21.126–29). At his father's silent command, he sacrifices his own success, relying upon his strength to conceal itself rather than exhibiting it. Valuing patience over bold and brazen initiative, he masters himself accordingly through the fierce control he exercises over his force (bie) and his passions (thumos). Telemachus shares with his grandfather and father the ability to foster his pain and control his desires, rather than engaging in self-destructive behavior.

Joyce is admittedly somewhat ironic in his depiction of this kind of Homeric heroism, but not in such a way that relegates heroism to meaninglessness. His narration of how Bloom acts "heroically" mocks Homer's conception of ordinary heroism in the *Odyssey* at the same time as he justifies its worth. His parody of heroism functions to confirm its persistence in a new form, not to render it null and void. Consider this example from the "Eumaeus" section, after Bloom fails to hail a ride, the only time in *Ulysses* in which the word "heroically" appears:

This was a quandary but, bringing common sense to bear on it, evidently there was nothing for it but put a good face on the matter and foot it which they accordingly did. So, bevelling around by Mullett's and the Signal House which they shortly reached, they proceeded perforce in the direction of Amiens street railway terminus, Mr Bloom being handicapped by the circumstance that one of the back buttons of his trousers had, to vary the timehonoured adage, gone the way of all buttons though, entering thoroughly into the spirit of the thing, he*heroically* made light of the mischance. (*U* 16.31–39; emphasis added)

Here is nurturing pain ("penthos aexon") in more absurdity than we could have imagined. Bloom remains undaunted by a lost button, while Odysseus and Laertes remain undaunted by nineteen years of misery! Yet despite Joyce's switch from the epic to the comic, Bloom does bear up bravely and patiently, exactly like his Homeric predecessors, despite the contrast in their circumstances. The heroic thing for Bloom to do is to endure—not to whine or complain, nor to try to find a safety pin with which to effect a repair. Bloom is heroic because he refuses to be discouraged. By subscribing wholeheartedly "into the spirit of the thing," he resigns himself to his bad luck that his button has "gone the way of all buttons." Like Laertes, he accepts the necessity of his own suffering. Like Odysseus, he returns home handicapped by mischance, but with great determination, refusing to be deterred by anything.

Of course, the most significant pain that Bloom suffers on Bloomsday is Molly's sexual betrayal. That the button has gone the way of all buttons means only a little embarrassment. But Bloom does not want his wife to go the way of all wives, so to speak, and leave him. The pain that he cherishes is the pain of cuckoldry. Bloom accepts the pain that loving Molly inflicts upon him rather than trying to escape from it by getting divorced. Joyce captures the various ramifications of this decision when Bloom kisses his wife's rump in bed, thinking, "Divorce, not now" (*U* 17.2202). Bloom is impressively forgiving and desperately pathetic as he tries to save his home and his marriage. Yet the patience that sustains Bloom and fuels his efforts to save his home mirrors the same patience with which Odysseus salvages his home. Despite the violence with which Odysseus finally punishes the suitors, that triumph operates through the self-restraint that preceded it. Only by waiting patiently and preparing shrewdly for the right moment will he be victorious, as Athena impressed upon him beneath the olive tree: "So endure even by necessity, and tell no one of them all, neither man nor woman, that you have come back after your wanderings, but in silence suffer many pains, submitting to the force [bie] of men" (*Od*. 13.307–10). Bloom has exercised exactly that sort of restraint by deciding to return home with Stephen in tow. "Prudently" pocketing his wife's photo (*U* 16.1644), he reins in his emotions, what Homer would name desire (thumos), for the sake of his homecoming. Still preserving his self-control, he later brushes out of his bed without a word the potted meat that Molly and Boylan shared (*U* 17.2125) in an impressive display of "equanimity" (*U* 17.2155, 2177, 2195). Joyce names Bloom "our hero" (*U* 16.1643) when he is exhibiting the virtues of restraint and patience that Odysseus learned in Hades and from Athena beneath the olive tree. Bloom is described as acting "heroically" (*U*16.38) when he is relying upon the silence and forbearance Odysseus also exercises in order to restore his home, ignoring the wounds to his dignity.

Given this congruence, Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses* both depict a very ordinary kind of heroism at the same time as they portray an extraordinary way to triumph. In avowing that "Joyce wrote *Ulysses* about a new kind of hero, an ordinary hero. In a way, so did Homer…. Like Odysseus, if Bloom is to be a hero, he must find a new kind of heroism" (Nelson 63, 79), Stephanie Nelson is observing how the *Odyssey* reformulates the heroism of the *Iliad*. Consequently, the ordinary kind of heroism that Joyce's *Ulysses* represents is not an invention by Joyce at all, but an embrace of the kind of heroism depicted in the *Odyssey*and an implicit rejection of the heroism depicted in the *Iliad*. Odysseus and Bloom are the same kind of ordinary human hero who triumphs through extraordinary endurance. Odysseus, an extraordinary hero in an extraordinary situation, endures by very ordinary means, controlling his impulses. Bloom is in an ordinary situation, yet he endures in an extraordinary way by the same ordinary means. Despite Joyce's objection that "A writer … should never write about the extraordinary. That is for the journalist" (*JJ* 1470), his focus upon the ordinary unveils how the extraordinary is not only hidden within the ordinary but emerges from it.10 Any ordinary mortal can aspire to the heroism of endurance, but only extraordinary ones can achieve it. The endurance of heroism between the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses* is demonstrated by the heroism of endurance, exemplified by Laertes, Odysseus, Telemachus, and Bloom.

So, in a complex intertextual echo, Joyce portrays how Bloom remains an unconquered hero like Odysseus despite his humiliations. To this end, Lenehan makes this pronouncement about Blazes Boylan: "See the conquering hero comes" (*U* 11.340). Blazes is the conqueror who ravishes Molly and makes the Blooms' connubial bed jingle on Bloomsday. But that is only part of the story, for, "Between the car and window, warily walking, went Bloom, unconquered hero. See me he might" (*U* 11.341–42). Again Bloom prefers to avoid any encounter with Boylan, as he has already done earlier at the National Library. Bloom's tactics of evasion while "warily walking" may seem disgraceful when compared to ancient standards, yet in the modern context, they reflect the degree to which his patience, perseverance, and self-restraint enable him to preserve his home. Joyce exploits his contrasting uses of the word "hero" to prove how extraordinary and impressive Bloom actually is even when coping with such a degrading situation.11

Bloom's choice to avoid confrontation with his wife or with her suitor on Bloomsday and thus to acquiesce impassively to being cuckolded may seem antiheroic, but the choice to avoid struggle is often Odysseus' best strategy as well.12 As Pietro Pucci remarks, the "choice—to do nothing—seems implicitly the best thing to do … the posture of endurance emerges repeatedly as the solution Odysseus embraces, it being the more advantageous for his survival and protection" (74–75). In both cases, our hero-men seem less than admirable, mostly because, as Pucci concedes, " 'enduring' necessarily implies survival, and so a questionable form of heroism" (49).13 This skepticism about the merit of such heroism may be countered by the acknowledgment that the qualities promoting such endurance are commendable. For the manner of Bloom's reentry into bed names those qualities and establishes why he is much more like Odysseus than we first imagined possible.

How?

With circumspection, as invariably when entering an abode (his own or not his own): with solicitude, the snakespiral springs of the mattress being old, the brass quoits and pendent viper radii loose and tremulous under stress and strain: prudently, as entering a lair or ambush of lust or adders: lightly, the less to disturb: reverently, the bed of conception and of birth, of consummation of marriage and of breach of marriage, of sleep and of death. (*U* 17.2114–21)

Bloom returns to his bed with the same degree of self-discipline and caution with which Odysseus returns home: "with circumspection … solicitude … prudently … lightly … reverently," Odysseus' return in disguise, his testing of Penelope, and his decision to unveil himself to his son and recruit his help in killing the suitors all occur in a similar manner and by a similar method as Bloom's return to bed. But Odysseus' rage at the suitors has become so suppressed in Bloom that he manifests it only with the flick of the wrist with which he cleans off his sheets and with his private condemnation, "Is there anything more in him that they she sees? Fascination. Worst man in Dublin" (*U*6.201–2). As Bloom counsels himself over his tormenting thoughts about Molly's affair—

Touch. Fingers. Asking. Answer. Yes.  
Stop. Stop. If it was it was. Must. (*U* 8.591–92)

—he resigns himself to the pain of her infidelity as necessity because he "must," much as Odysseus accepts his hunger on Thrinacia and his humiliation by the suitors while in disguise.

Bloom, however, refrains from inflicting pain on others as punishment or revenge, as Odysseus and Telemachus relish during the slaughter (*Od*. 22.171–93, 462–77). Violence for Bloom is not an option: "Duel by combat, no" (*U*17.2201–02). Herein lies one instance of a "revelation of the irreducible differences" that Wolfgang Iser finds an inevitable result of Joyce's Homeric intertext (Iser 200). Still, both Odysseus and Bloom prevail due to their extraordinary patience and capacities for self-restraint. Joyce employs the word "hero" in *Ulysses* to endorse this sort of heroism portrayed in the *Odyssey*, even as he purposely transforms how such heroism is expressed in a new place and time. *What* Bloom endures in *Ulysses* is very different from *what* Odysseus endures in the *Odyssey*, but *how* they endure is the same. As with Odysseus, Bloom's patience and self-control generate his endurance, an endurance that constitutes a particular kind of heroic excellence and that makes homecoming possible. So, while the expressions of enduring heroism have changed between the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses* due to the modern context, the meaning of this kind of heroism has not. For this reason, Joyce's conception of heroism simultaneously revolutionizes Homer's conception and reinforces it.

This insistence upon enduring and remaining unconquered despite enormous sufferings unites the Homeric and Joycean conceptions of heroism. Homer's inclusion of the title "hero" at the point when Odysseus is about to visit Hades while still alive draws attention to his choice to remain mortal and heroic, joining his father in embracing suffering. Kalypso offered Odysseus immunity from suffering, aging, and death: "I told him I would make him without death and old age for all his days" (*Od*. 5.135–36), she confides to Hermes. But in spite of Kalypso's admonition that if he knew the extent of his future suffering, he would stay with her (*Od*. 5.206–10), Odysseus aspires to become an old-man-hero who dies at home, gently, out of the sea, as Teiresias predicts (*Od*. 11.134–37), accepting suffering, old age, and death as the necessary prerequisite of his heroic glory. Odysseus' absolute refusal to yield in this regard causes him to endure like a hero instead of living like a god, because accepting the invulnerability of immortality would mean the death of his humanity and of his heroism. Life, suffering, and death are the horizons of heroism for Homer; to try to escape them is to lose any eligibility for heroism. For this reason, Jean-Pierre Vernant insists that accepting Kalypso's offer is the equivalent of rejecting heroism: "Sharing divine immortality in the nymph's arms would constitute for Odysseus a renunciation of his career as an epic hero" (188). Homer's gods enjoy a transcendence of time that heroes cannot share. As Jasper Griffin confirms, "If the hero were really godlike, if he were exempt, as the gods are, from age and death, then he would not be a hero at all" (92–93). Kalypso's offer therefore presents Odysseus with a choice of deaths: the death-in-life of immortality, or a heroic death in Hades. His choice lends veracity to Dean Miller's conclusion that "Death therefore is the limit—the only limit—the hero accepts without demur" (383–84).

Heroic endurance thus requires an extraordinary will to live and the tenacity to welcome suffering until a fully inevitable death arrives. Joyce's fascination with the hero's need to endure life's pain until a fully fated and inevitable death arrives is borne out by his notes. Two passages of the *Odyssey* cited in Joyce's notes, "*Od*. XI.118.130–XXIII.250.275" (Herring 28), betray Joyce's attention to Odysseus' decision to endure pain until his fated death. Joyce notes Teiresias' prediction to Odysseus: "You will make them [the suitors] pay the penalty for their violence [bie] when you come home" (*Od*. 11.118); and Odysseus' pronouncement to Penelope: "Hereafter there are still countless toils, many and difficult, which I must complete in full" (*Od*. 23.249–50). The rest of both citations detail Odysseus' next journey, wandering until he finds the man who calls his oar a winnowing fan, at which point he must plant it in the ground and make offerings to Poseidon. Only then can he return home for good. Joyce's notations comprise his recognition that Odysseus must punish the suitors and then leave home again to finish the full measure of his suffering. Joyce's notice of the lines in the *Odyssey* establishing why Odysseus' homecoming is only temporary alerts us to a curious and crucial connection between Bloom and Odysseus. They share the same need to endure suffering as they try to return home, knowing they must only leave again. After all, every new day in Dublin is a new journey, regardless of who prepares breakfast. Despite the banality of that daily departure, love always seems to require another return in both texts. Homecoming is not a single, discrete task, but a constant and continual effort.

In that endeavor, why do Odysseus and Bloom sustain the will to live? They may very well have learned from the examples of their parents' failure to do so. That Bloom's father Virag is a suicide is no surprise, but Odysseus' mother, Antikleia, is not typically categorized as one. She is normally described as dying of a broken heart. Why is she too a suicide, and in whose opinion? In Hades, Odysseus asks her what fate of sad death overwhelmed her (damazo) (*Od*. 11.171ff.). She attributes her death to her longing for the extraordinary kindness of heart of her son, his unmatched aganophrosune (*Od*. 11.203, a full*hapax legomenon*): "Nor did the sharp-sighted archer attack me in my halls with gentle arrows and kill me, nor did any sickness come to me, such as the wretched wasting away that removes the spirit [thumos] from the limbs. No, it was longing for you and for your advice, shining Odysseus, and for your kindheartedness [aganophrosune] that stole my honey-sweet will to live [thumos]" (*Od*. 11.198–203). Death conquers Antikleia because she cannot master her own desires. She later enumerates how death ensues once desire (thumos) has left the bones: "For the sinews no longer keep the bones and flesh together, and the strong force of the blazing fire destroys them, as soon as the spirit [thumos] leaves the white bones behind, and the soul [psuche] like a dream, floats away, to hover and drift" (*Od*. 11.219–22). In death, Antikleia details the cause of her own death. She explains that the pain of her yearning for her son was so strong that it erased her will to live, forcing Odysseus to confront the fact that death is often the consequence of failing to control desire (thumos).

Moreover, Antikleia recognizes that Laertes is managing to endure what she could not, telling Odysseus, "[your father, Laertes] lies grieving in the orchard and nurtures great pain [penthos aexei] in his heart, longing for your return" (*Od*. 11.195–96). Unlike her husband, who is able to endure his agonies, her longing for her son kills her, leading to Joyce's judgment in his notes that her death is tantamount to suicide: "Antikleia dies of grief (suicide) / Laertes goes to country" (Herring *15*). Joyce also wrote "Suicide 15.356" and beneath it, "Sisyphos—Antikleia" (Herring 30). Antikleia failed to endure her pain, whereas Laertes and Sisyphos submitted to its necessity. In the passage Joyce cites, Eumaeus tells the disguised Odysseus, "Laertes still lives, but he is always praying to Zeus that his spirit [thumos] may pass away from his limbs in his halls. For relentlessly he grieves for his absent son, and for his lawful and respected wife, whose death agonized him most of all and brought him to old age before his time" (*Od*. 15.353–57). Joyce specifically marks *Od*. 15.356, the line in which Laertes grieves most of all for Antikleia, the only place in the*Odyssey* where the depth of his grief for his double loss of wife and son is emphasized. He is so devastated by losing his beloved wife that he wishes for death, but he nonetheless renounces suicide and tolerates his agony. Joyce's consideration of Eumaeus' description of the extent of Laertes' grief justifies the suspicion that Joyce intended to emulate Homer's focus upon the need to endure grief from the loss of loved ones. *Ulysses* demonstrates how Joyce learned the same lessons that Odysseus did from Teiresias and Antikleia in Hades, and that he appreciated their implications for the meaning of heroism.

Odysseus, like his father, succeeds where his mother failed. Bloom too succeeds, but where his father failed.14 Virag and Antikleia died for the same reason: grieving for a lost beloved. Bloom remembers finding his father after his suicide and ponders what death incites: "No more pain. Wake no more" (*U*6.365). Virag's suicide note states that life has ceased to hold any attraction for him in his grief: "it is no use Leopold to be … with your dear mother … that is not more to stand … to her … all for me is out" (*U* 17.1883–85). Choosing to commit suicide is the ultimate failure of this kind of ordinary heroism that extends and values human life above all else. Virag seems to have made that choice by poisoning himself: "Verdict: overdose. Death by misadventure" (*U*6.363–64, see also 6.529). His note indicates that he sought his own death for the sake of joining his wife, while Antikleia just pined away until she died.

Love, then, has the power to kill in *Ulysses* and in the *Odyssey*. As Bloom muses, "Poor papa too. The love that kills" (*U* 6.997). The pain that belongs to love killed Virag and Antikleia. Neither one can recover from grief, and so the loss of love kills them. Stephen has not yet experienced the pain of love: "Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart" (*U* 1.102). But the pain that has not yet become the pain of love for Stephen is fully in bloom for Bloom, Virag, Odysseus, Antikleia, and Laertes. Recalling Stephen's declaration that "*Amor matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life" (*U* 9.842–9:3), we wonder how to interpret the pain of love. No one has any love for pain in the objective genitive sense. But Bloom and Odysseus do feel the pain that belongs to love, in the subjective genitive sense. They know that to survive love's pain, they must follow Laertes' example. Only by cultivating pain ("penthos aexon") can they resist succumbing to death. Treasuring pain has become another part of treasuring life. The insistence of Laertes, Odysseus, and Bloom upon the value of living and loving is the hallmark of their heroism.

By the standards of the heroism of endurance, Virag is no hero. Heroes are supposed to save lives, not end their own. Ironically, given the title of Joyce's*Stephen Hero*, Joyce relies upon Stephen to protest that he is not a hero at all for this very reason, telling Buck Mulligan, "Out here in the dark with a man I don't know raving and moaning to himself about shooting a black panther. You saved men from drowning. *I'm not a hero, however*. If he stays on here I am off " (*U* 1.60–63; emphasis added). Because the only life Stephen is trying to save is his own, he maintains that he is no hero. But by this measure, Odysseus is not a hero either, because as the only hero to come home, in the end he saves only himself. After all, Odysseus is the hero who does not even try to save drowning men! Instead, when Zeus strikes their ship with a thunderbolt after his men have eaten the oxen of the sun, he paces their sinking ship and watches his men drown: "Like sea crows they were tossed upon the waves around the dark ship, and the god stole from them their homecoming" (*Od*. 12.418–19). No examples of altruistic, heroic rescue like those to which Stephen avers are enacted by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. In the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*, heroism first requires saving one's own life, not sacrificing it for the sake of others.

Exposing such complexities in the notion of heroism, while insinuating that heroism may actually be much more ordinary, and even more pitiful or contemptible than one normally presumes it to be, was likely one of Joyce's aims in selecting his novel's title. Joyce's words to his brother Stanislaus reveal that heroism was not a universal ideal he sought to embrace and glorify, but an illusion he sought to dispel: "Do you not think the search for heroics damn vulgar—and yet how are we to describe Ibsen? … I am sure however that the whole structure of heroism is, and always was, a damned lie and that there cannot be any substitute for the individual passion as the motive power of everything—art and philosophy included" (*Letters* 1180–81). Setting aside the problem of Ibsen here, Joyce's notion of heroism as a lie veiling the potency of a single individual's capacities is borne out by Homer's *Odyssey*. The prominence Homer gives to the power of desire (thumos), and the hero's need to master it and yield to it at the right moments, constitute exactly the individual motive power to which Joyce alludes. For in some sense, Odysseus, the victor of the Trojan War who devised the stratagem of the Trojan horse, gives up on the "damn vulgar" search for heroics in the *Odyssey* for the sake of simply surviving and returning home. Odysseus is both victor and victim as he seeks homecoming. Thus, by creating a conception of heroism fraught with ironies, tensions, and contradictions, the *Odyssey* demands the reconsideration and revision of its own premises.15 Both Homeric poems critique the very notions that they depict, simultaneously accomplishing the presentation and the revision of those notions. Joyce's *Ulysses* engages in the same struggle with traditional heroic values, assuming the same posture of self-reflexivity, self-critique, and self-contradiction, exposing why "the whole structure of heroism is, and always was, a damned lie." Heroism deconstructs itself in the *Odyssey* and in *Ulysses* by discrediting the lie that only the extraordinary is heroic. In both texts, heroism is ordinary and extraordinary at the same time, without becoming entirely ineffable or incommensurable.

The preceding inquiry thus confirms Hugh Kenner's suspicion that Odyssean and Ulyssean heroism might somehow intersect in the realm of meaning in spite of the undeniable contrasts in its forms: "Was Odysseus perhaps a Bloom perceived through Ionic hexameters? … is this 1904 Ulysses perhaps the same man, reclad in circumstance as also in headgear and idiom? In Homer he seems different, very; may we say, though, thanks only to parallax?" (Kenner, *Ulysses*106). Of course, Bloom shares Kenner's preoccupation with parallax, wondering, "what's parallax?" (*U* 8.578). Joyce provokes his readers to ask the same question about heroism, having imposed parallax on heroism itself by transplanting the story of homecoming into a new cultural and historical context. In so doing, Joyce has not subverted Homer's heroism but given it a new birth in a new guise. His readers must resort to the patience and perspicacity of Bloom and Odysseus if they are to appreciate the rebirth of heroism in Dublin. Yet from the stance of patience and endurance, there is no heroic parallax whatsoever between the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*. Bloom is Ulysses is Odysseus, who "would somehow reappear reborn above delta … and after incalculable eons of peregrination return" (*U* 17.2019–20).

Ames, Keri Elizabeth. "The Rebirth of Heroism from Homer's *Odyssey* to Joyce's*Ulysses*." In *Twenty-First Joyce*, 157–180. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. Quoted as "The Rebirth of Heroism from Homer's *Odyssey* to Joyce's *Ulysses*" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *James Joyce, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2009. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 23 Oct. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCVJJ009&SingleRecord=True>.

## 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*The* *Iliad*, 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. 23 Oct. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=ETL0576&SingleRecord=True>.

## Zeus' Justice and Poseidon's Revenge

**Date:** 1974  
On the *Odyssey* by Homer  
**Author:** Bernard Fenik  
**From:** *Homer*, Bloom's Major Poets.

Aigisthus slew Agamemnon in pre-meditated murder and then married his victim's widow, both deeds in defiance of the gods' express admonitions that Orestes would be sure to exact revenge. Evil intent, warning from on high, persistence in criminal action, deserved retribution—the suitors, whose fate the story of Aigisthus is meant to illuminate and predict, follow an identical course into the same ruin. The gods' concern for human behavior, and the ethical categories which the story of the hero's return will exemplify, and in terms of which the suitors' catastrophe is to be judged, are thus established right from the start. The fate of Odysseus' crew is explained in the same terms: like Aigisthus (and therefore like the suitors) they perished because of their own http://www.fofweb.com/Electronic_Images/Equations_Characters/greektext25.gif—reckless folly—and accordingly lost their chance to make it home.

But when we consider how Odysseus incurs the wrath of Poseidon, it becomes immediately clear that the same motif of wise advice disregarded conceals a profound difference in the circumstances and acts that call forth the punishment. . . . The blinding was justified in terms of Homeric or any other morality: Odysseus and his men would have perished if they had not acted, and the hero's furious boasting does not turn the deed from self-defense into wanton criminality. Odysseus makes a bad mistake, a tactical error, but he does not commit a "sin".

It is impossible to justify Odysseus' suffering at the hands of Poseidon in terms of Zeus' explanation of guilt and punishment in the prologue, or to catalogue Odysseus along with Aigisthus and the suitors as another example of how man brings his own troubles upon him. Zeus was clearly thinking of men of a genuine and consistent criminal temper, not of somebody like Odysseus who suffers for a momentary and understandable aberration. We are forced to conclude that the ethical standards set forth by Zeus do not apply to the Poseidon-Odysseus story, or to put it another way, that the religious and moral outlook of the Odyssey is not uniform.

Helios' anger, like Poseidon's, focuses upon a factual guilt consequent upon a single act: the crew *did* eat the sacred cattle, just as Odysseus *did* blind Polyphemos. But the men are actually driven to the act by the very gods who punish them for it.

I conclude that neither the anger of Helios nor of Poseidon conforms to Zeus' excursus in the prologue, but that together they form a pair in their divine character, as they do in the external similarities of narration.

The epics represent a historical, cultural, linguistic and intellectual amalgam. They are a rich storehouse of contributions from many epochs and generations of poets. Their unity does not consist of a logically conceived philosophical or theological system, in which everything in this world is integrated into a neatly distributed whole. Unity consists rather in certain narrative structures and in dominant emphases imposed upon a complex substructure. The angers of Helios and Poseidon do indeed contradict Zeus' words in the prologue. But they are so similar to each other both in general and in so many particulars as to belong unmistakably to the whole larger class of doublets in the Odyssey. They contribute to the stylistic unity of the epic as much as they disturb its ethical uniformity. The story is always the same: strong stylistic tendencies and narrative emphases take precedence over a consistent world-outlook.

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Fenik, Bernard. *Studies in the Odyssey* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974): pp. 210, 211, 213, 215, 219. Quoted as "Zeus' Justice and Poseidon's Revenge" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Homer*, Bloom's Major Poets. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2001. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 23 Oct. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMPHom24&SingleRecord=True>.