Characterization in *The Odyssey* - Telemachus (AKA Telly Machos? Tell ‘em Nachos?)

Prince Telemachus is the first human character we meet in *The Odyssey*. He is young, untested, and unsure of himself. He has grown up without his father in a household overrun by greedy men consuming his inheritance and vying for his father’s place. He feels powerless. When he first sees Athena, who appears in the form of a family friend, Telemachus is daydreaming unhappily. He wishes his father would return and take care of his problems.

When at last he turns to the council to plead for help, he makes his speech and then in utter frustration throws his staff to the ground and bursts into tears. Later when he goes to Nestor, at the urging of Athena, to ask him for news of his father, he hears from Nestor how Orestes grew up and avenged the wrongs against his father Agamemnon. The vulnerable child in Telemachus speaks when he answers Nestor

 May it please your Majesty, Nestor Nelaides! He did indeed take his vengeance, and his fame

shall be carried down in the world for many generations to come. How I wish that the gods would invest me with power as great as his, to take vengeance on the men who woo my mother, for their outrageous violence, for the intolerable insults of their scheming brains! But no, the Spinner has spun me no such happiness for my father and me: we must just be patient, come what may. (Homer 37)

Consider how you would feel and act if you were in the position of Telemachus. Would you feel capable of taking the initiative to try and rid your household of these suitors, or would you, like Telemachos, feel paralyzed and resort to fantasies?

Can you recall an incident from your childhood when you felt unable to act without some superhuman force? At this point, Telemachos is still a child who is waiting to be told what to do by the “grownups,” whoever they might be. Do you consider yourself more of an adult than Telemachos at the beginning of *The Odyssey* or not? Explain.

Consider the following two quotations by Bernard Lievegoed. According to Lievegoed, an important development during adolescence is

learning to accept oneself (and thereby being able to answer questions for oneself and making choices and decisions). This is the same as being able to start bearing one’s own, individual, responsibility.

To sum up, we may say that the central problem is: *Who am I? What do I want? What am I capable of?* The individual who has failed to ask these questions in this phase of life - even if only by realizing that he suffers from not knowing the answers - has failed to lay the foundations for the awakening of his psychological being, so that he runs the risk in the important middle phase of his life of finding himself stuck at the passionately vital stage, an eternal adolescent who in his appreciation of values remains dependent on what the world thinks of him, or who, on account of his own insecurity, continues to kick against the world.

Do you agree with the two statements by Lievegood? Explain.

Have you ever thought about these questions in regard to your own life? Explain.

Do you think that Telemachus could answer these questions if someone were to pose them to him? Would his answers to the question be different at the beginning of the Odyssey from what they would be at the end of the story? Explain.

Characterization in *The Odyssey* – Odysseus

Who is Odysseus? Is he a vital hero with whom readers can identify, or is he simply an older man past his prime, a hero from a by-gone era? Odysseus is the son of Laertes, the husband of Penelope, and the father of Telemachus. He is one of the heroes of the Trojan War, an ancient historical legend which was the focal point of Homer’s poem, the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a man of courage, of integrity, of complexity, and of maturity. He is also “No Man” as he introduces himself to Polyphemus, the Cyclops. To George E. Dimock, Jr. who translates his name literally from the Greek, odyssasthai, he is a “causer of pain” and a “sufferer of pain” or, in general, he is “Trouble.”

“Trouble” is perhaps as good a translation of Odysseus’ name as any. When a character in a western movie says, “Just call me Trouble, stranger,” we take him to be a hostile type who makes trouble for other people, and so presumably for himself also.

Is “Trouble” a good name for Odysseus? Why or why not?

In contrast to the youthful Telemachus, Odysseus is a fully grown, mature man. When we first meet him, he has undergone ten years of war and ten years of traveling. He has experienced many ordeals which have tested and retested his manhood.

What does it mean to be a mature man? Are there phases in a man’s life just as there are phases in a boy’s life? Bernard Lievegood also comments on this period in a person’s life.

I have said before that the beginning of the forties is a sort of a fork in the road leading to the rest of our lives. Either the road goes downhill, together with the biological functions of the body and mind, or it leads into totally new territory in which quite different creative powers are awakened.

Odysseus thinks of himself as strong and smart, a man who can outwit and escape from monstrous Cyclops, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, and the bewitching Circe. In his travels he goes where no living man goes - to Hades where he consults with the dead souls of his mother, Achilles, and Agamemnon. He also consults with the blind seer Tiresias and sees great men and women out of the past including Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Jocasta. After having spent seven years with the enchanting Calypso, he knows better than to be entrapped by the Sirens or even by the beautiful young Nausicaa who thinks that perhaps he would make a fine husband.

Although Odysseus’ intellectual curiosity enriches him with experience and wisdom during his travels, it does not lead him to stray from his original goal of returning to his home and his family. Homer’s *Odyssey* is not a story of victory at war and plunder afterward. The *Odyssey* is rather a story of homecoming and peace, and Odysseus is its hero. It is his love of home, love of wife, and piety towards the gods that are the main values of Odysseus in this poem. Odysseus is not mainly a hero of raids and conquests. He brings home no stolen jewels, no stolen money, no concubines, no slaves. He refuses the offer of immortality and a life of leisure from the beautiful goddess Calypso in order to return to his wife, who is inferior in beauty and who has grown twenty years older since Odysseus last saw her. When the gods finally allow him to return home, he is a mature man who has grown wiser as a result of his many battles with men, women, and monsters. He returns as a beggar in disguise, and, although he must fight alongside his son Telemachus to take possession of his family and his lands from his wife’s suitor s, he fights to regain what is rightfully his rather than to plunder other men’s riches.

Consider Odysseus as a hero. What qualities do you admire in Odysseus? Is Odysseus past his prime - in which case all would be downhill from this point on - or can you imagine Odysseus going on to new adventures when he leaves Ithaca? According to Tiresias the travels of Odysseus will continue until he appeases the anger of Poseidon. At the end of the poem Poseidon’s wrath is still unappeased. Which fork of the road will Odysseus take? He cannot stop forever at Ithaca, whatever his desire may be.

Characterization in *The Odyssey* - Women

Although women in *The Odyssey* play a secondary role to men, they are still very important. Can you imagine an *Odyssey* without Penelope, Nausicaa, Calypso, Circe, and the Sirens? While a double standard exists in Home’s story (Odysseus expects Penelope to have been totally faithful to him but has no qualms about telling her of his adventures with Calypso and Circe), **can it be argued that Homer still treats women with respect**? In the *Iliad* women are seen primarily as possessions to be fought over. In the *Odyssey* women are intelligent, sophisticated, and powerful, some more-so than others. They are not simply men’s possessions. Explain your thoughts on this.

The most powerful women have both human and magical powers. Calypso is a sea-nymph who captures Odysseus and holds him prisoner for many years, hoping that he will marry her. She is able to tempt him, but her powers are not strong enough to sway him from his devotion to his wife and his home. Circe is a beautiful, alluring enchantress whose powers are strong enough to change men into swine. Odysseus, with the help of Hermes and an herb called Moly, is able to save himself and his men from Circe’s powers. The goddess Athena is the most powerful, intelligent, and influential woman in Odysseus’ life. She saves him from the wrath of Poseidon by convincing Zeus and the other Olympian gods that Odysseus is worth saving. She encourages and helps Telemachus in his efforts to free his home from his mother’s suitors, and she saves Odysseus from death and despair. Like Odysseus, Penelope has lived through many ordeals and suffered much for the twenty years that Odysseus has been away. Being mortal, she does not have the magical powers of Circe, Calypso, or Athena, but she is an intelligent, attractive, and loyal woman whom Odysseus continues to love and yearn for during his absence of twenty years. Because she is a woman, she has not traveled or engaged in physical battles with men and monsters. But she has had to raise a son, and handle a household alone; and, during the latter years of Odysseus’ absence, she has had to engage in a battle of wits and endurance against a group of suitors who are trying to force her to choose a new husband from among them. She symbolizes the normal life of hearth and homeland that Odysseus finds lacking in his exciting and adventurous life overseas.

Penelope is not the usual Twentieth Century heroine. In her own way, is she still a woman of great inner strength and intelligence? Explain.

As Penelope is an untraveled female counterpart to Odysseus, so Nausicaa is an untraveled female counterpart to Telemachus. When Nausicaa, daughter of King Alcinoos and Queen Arete of the Phaeacians, meets Odysseus on the shore of the island of Scheria, she has just been told by Athena in a dream that her maidenhood must end and that she must prepare for marriage by washing her clothing and her linens in order to fill her wedding chest. Like Telemachus she is young, untested, and unsure of what she wants in life. When she first meets Odysseus, he emerges naked. She is displeased by his rough appearance but charmed by his graceful words. Shortly thereafter, when Odysseus has washed and clothed himself, Nausicaa finds herself thinking that he might be a good husband even though she knows almost nothing about him. She is, after all, very young and still very beholden to her parents whom he has not yet met. Nausicaa lets Odysseus know indirectly that she is unmarried and available. Later, when it becomes clear to her that Odysseus will leave her and her land, she asks him not to forget her when he returns to his home.

Can the teenager in high school today identify with Nausicaa? Is she too innocent, too tied to her parents and the strict behavioral code that they impose on her? She has not had the travels of Telemachus to initiate her into the wider world. She is, however, a person of your own age who faces many of the same problems that you do. How will she please her parents and the society in which they live, and, at the same time, please herself? While she does not have the freedom of many young adults today, she is direct and assertive and confident in her dealings with Odysseus. Can high schoolers today appreciate the qualities and relatability of a girl like Nausicaa?