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Mathematical Journeys: From Known to Unknown

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The *Odyssey*: The Transformative Journey of Odysseus

The *Odyssey*, an epic poem written by Homer, tells the story of one man, Odysseus, on his journey back home from the Trojan War. The journey for Odysseus, however, does not end when he arrives back home in Ithaca. The twenty years he spent away from home held several consequences that Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, would have to face. Most epic poems result in the transformation of a character or characters as a result of their journey. The *Odyssey* is no exception to this commonality among other epic poems. At the beginning of Odysseus’s journey, he is portrayed as cunning, rash, and hubristic. Although his craftiness is maintained throughout the poem, Odysseus goes through a character transformation as a result of his journey. Odysseus’s journey home forces him to leave behind his pride and rash behavior, and instead learn to be patient and cautious.

Although Odysseus is changed by his journey, his cleverness is constant throughout. Even before his journey home, Odysseus’s cunningness is obvious. His craftiness is demonstrated by his Trojan Horse scheme, in which the soldiers were able to enter the city of Troy. This was an ingenious plan that eventually led to the Greeks’ victory. His cleverness helped him overcome many obstacles on his voyage home as well. For example, Odysseus is able to come up with a clever scheme to escape from the Cyclops. After getting the Cyclops intoxicated, he says to the Cyclops, “Noman is my name. They call me Noman – my mother, my father, and all my friends too” (Book 9, 364-365). The Cyclops then fell asleep and Odysseus and his men blinded him with a stake. When the Cyclops called for help and cried, “Noman is killing me by some kind of trick” (Book 9, 407), the other Cyclopes responded that if nobody was hurting him then he should consult his father, Poseidon. Odysseus’s plan had one final part. He bound sheep together, three for himself and each of his men, with branches so each man could hide under their middle sheep. This allowed them to escape the cave of the Cyclops because he could not see and when he reached down to grab the men, all he felt was the wool of sheep. Odysseus’s cleverness saves the lives of himself and the men that were with him in this dangerous situation. Odysseus’s cleverness is also revealed in his encounter with the suitors. Due to the fact that Odysseus was away for so long, many people assumed he was dead. His wife, Penelope, and son, Telemachus, were being eaten out of house and home by suitors. These suitors who wanted to marry Penelope and become king of Ithaca became another obstacle in Odysseus’s journey. In order to get rid of the suitors, he concocts another plan. Disguised as a beggar, he tells Telemachus to hide the arms from the suitors. Meanwhile, Odysseus socializes with the suitors to distract them. Both of them also investigate which of the female servants have been loyal to their family and which deserve punishment. Lastly, Odysseus has someone singing and playing the lyre so that anyone passing by will not know that anyone in the house is being killed. For this master plan, Telemachus says to his father, “…no man alive can match you for cunning” (Book 23, 129). Odysseus and Telemachus follow the plan and together are able to rid themselves of the suitors. These three plans that Odysseus himself devised using his cleverness represent three different stages of the journey, and therefore prove that his cunningness was constant throughout.

Although the journey did not affect his cunningness, Odysseus was changed in multiple ways through lessons he learned along the way. One way that Odysseus changed as a result of his journey was that he learned to be patient. Before Odysseus runs into trouble with the Cyclops, he and his men arrive at a place called Cicones. In this town, Odysseus says he “pillaged the town and killed the men” (Book 9, 43) and that he and his men “drank a lot of wine and slaughtered a lot of sheep and cattle on the shore” (Book 9, 48-49). What the men did not realize was that some people in the town survived and went to get help. Odysseus and his men were then attacked and many of Odysseus’s men were killed. Odysseus learns a lesson as a result of this. He and his men acted rashly out of greed and savagery. Odysseus learns that he must be more patient if he is going to survive this journey back home. He is shown in this situation that his rash behavior is hazardous and will bring death to him and his men. As time goes on, Odysseus proves that he has learned something. At his encounter with the Cyclops, Odysseus carefully waits for the Cyclops to fall asleep before attacking. He had to watch his men die and wait for the Cyclops to become so intoxicated that he would pass out before he could carry out his plan. Perhaps the Odysseus that was so rash to kill the men of Cicones would have tried just attacking the Cyclops the first chance he got, but in this situation he does not. He knows that if he and his men are going to get out of the cave, everything had to be done perfectly and precisely. Another instance where it is apparent that Odysseus is no longer rash, but rather patient, is when he sees Telemachus for the first time. When Odysseus first arrives home and nobody knows who he is because he is disguised as a beggar, Odysseus is with Eumaeus and Telemachus enters. Odysseys watches as Eumaeus embraces Telemachus “as a loving father embraces his own son come back from a distant land after ten long years. His only son, greatly beloved and much sorrowed for” (Book 16, 19-21). Telemachus even calls Eumaeus “Papa” (Book 16, 34). All the while, Odysseus watches the two of them reunite, silently. This was painful for Odysseus to watch and not tell his son who he was. Despite his urge to want to reveal himself to Telemachus, he patiently observes and does not lose focus of the plan. He has to wait patiently for the right time to tell Telemachus who he is, for he could ruin his chances of restoring his throne and family otherwise. Finally, Odysseus shows he has become more patient with his plan with the suitors. The plan was clever, but it also took time. Before he could kill any of the suitors, he had to investigate the women servants and hang around the suitors to gather information. The suitors treated him horribly throughout this process. Still disguised as a beggar, the suitors would throw things at him, kick him, and taunt him. “Odysseus absorbed the blow without even quivering – only stood there and tried to decide whether to jump the man and knock him dead with his staff or lift him by the ears and smash his head to the ground. In the end, he controlled himself and just took it” (Book 256-260). This piece of narration clearly shows that Odysseus is no longer impulsive. He is patiently waiting for his time to execute his plan and is able to refrain from his urge to act rashly. Odysseus is portrayed by Homer to be rash at the beginning of his journey. Over the course of his journey and the obstacles he faces, he learns that being rash will not bring him home or reunite him with his throne and family. Instead, Odysseus learns from the person he was when he began the journey and becomes patient.

Not only was Odysseus clever when he embarked on his journey, but he was also hubristic. Although his cunningness was able to get him out of multiple situations, his excessive pride proved to be a major character flaw that would put him and his men in danger. Odysseus’s sharpness gets him out of the situation with the Cyclops, but he quickly turns his great escape into a prolonged, dangerous, and lonely voyage home. His pride, impulsive instincts, and “hero’s heart,” prompt him to call back to the Cyclops even though his crew begged him not to, “… if anyone… asks you how you got your eye put out, tell him that Odysseus the marauder did it, son of Laertes, whose home is on Ithaca” (Book 9, Lines 500-503). This is the reason why Poseidon, god of the sea and the Cyclops’s father, makes Odysseus’s journey home so treacherous. Odysseus learns from this episode and his experience in the town of Cicones that, like his instinct to be rash, his excessive pride would also not bring him home to Ithaca. From his journey, Odysseus learns to be less prideful and more cautious. Odysseus shows that he is being more cautious once he arrives back in Ithaca. His plan to kill the suitors is well thought out and complex. Based on this alone, it is obvious that Odysseus has spent a lot of time figuring out the best way to complete the task. He is careful in the way that he goes about things. For example, in Book 19, when his former maid, Eurycleia, recognizes Odysseus by a scar, Odysseus thinks ahead and tells her to she is not to share the fact that he has come home with anyone. He knows that he has to be careful about who knows that he has returned, and to keep those who are not supposed to know yet in the dark, including Penelope. Odysseus is also wary with Penelope. While away, Odysseus finds comfort with two goddesses, Calypso and Circe. He was intimate with both of these immortals. When he arrives home, he tests Penelope’s love for him. While in disguise, he carefully and skillfully attains this information, without allowing her to figure out that the man disguised as a beggar was in fact her husband. Penelope passes this test, saying, “Stranger, the gods destroyed my beauty on the day when Argives sailed for Ilion and with them went my husband, Odysseus” (Book 19, 135-137). She goes on to say that she spends all of her days thinking of her husband, and from this, Odysseus is convinced she has been faithful and still loves him. Another way to prove that Odysseus has become less prideful is by looking at a remark made by Athena. It is shown through Odysseus’s actions that he has become less hubristic, but the fact that another character, Athena, also noticed this transformation is more proof that the transformation occurred. Athena says she cannot believe that the same Odysseus who fought in Troy is standing before her getting “teary-eyed about showing [his] strength to the suitors” (Book 22, 245-246). Even Athena can see that his overabundance of pride that he had at the beginning of the poem has lessened toward the end. Odysseus has learned that the pride he had was too much and he needed to start being more cautious.

Odysseus’s long journey from the Trojan War to the restoration of his household and family was one that changed him. Although he never lost his cunningness when he embarked on the journey, his encounters with the gods, monsters, suitors, and others led to his transformation in character. He became less rash and more patient, less prideful and more cautious. It is because of his cleverness, newfound patience, and attention to detail that he is able to reunite with Telemachus and Penelope. It is because of his cleverness, newfound patience, and attention to detail that he is able to reach his destination, which for Odysseus was more important than the journey. Regardless of what the journey looked like or how long it took, what was most important to Odysseus was the end result, which he was able to attain.