

First & Last Name

English 2332

Professor Martin

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*The Odyssey*

Passage: “Brewing high thunderheads, he churned the deep with both hands on his trident—called up wind from every quarter, and sent a wall of rain to blot out land and sea in torrential night. Hurricane winds now struck from the South and East shifting North West in a great spume of seas, on which Odysseus’ knees grew slack, his heart sickened, and he said within himself: ‘Rag of man that I am, is this the end of me?’” (V.301-309).

Question: What does the struggle of Odysseus to overcome nature in order to return to the civilization of his home symbolize?

Issue: Issue of Symbolism. The question does not deal with a particular object but the events of Book V, where Odysseus finally gets off the island and tries to sail his way home and Poseidon makes the waves rise and the rain fall. What is the meaning of Odysseus’ battle with the natural element of the sea? What does Odysseus’ home symbolize? These types of questions help to get the ball rolling on what his journey means to the reader as a human being.

Critical Approach: The answer is based mostly on what I glean from the material, in that sense I am taking the Reader-Response Approach. The words speak to me in a completely different way than they might speak to someone else. These reoccurring images of the grand palace of Menelaos and Odysseus grappling with the environment seem to stick in my mind and they symbolize something to me; something that I feel is basic in who I am as a member of the human species.

Answer: Human beings are made up of two conflicting portions: reason and animal instinct. It seems that humans are constantly trying to overcome their emotions and their instincts in favor of reason. The battle between the head and the heart is an ancient war. *The Odyssey* uses the external fight against the sea to symbolize the internal effort for humans to suppress within themselves the “raging sea.” Odysseus’ homeland, with the buildings and the farming, symbolizes civilization or societal convention. At the very end of Book V, Odysseus makes his bed from fallen leaves out in the wilderness and Homer says that Odysseus’s “heart laughed” as he lay down for sleep (V.508). He is not bitterly within nature, yet he is led out of nature into the town by a king’s daughter. Society corrupts the nature in humans and for the purposes of society that is not necessarily a bad thing; to be able to function as a group requires some rationale. We will always have an animal instinct for we are part of nature, whether we like it or not, and we possess a sort of sixth sense, an ability to know, for whatever reason, that something is just not right. More and more, however, we are letting our reason win until there will be nothing left of what we once were.