

Epicurus And Homer's Odyssey

Post by “Godfrey” of July 25, 2026 at 1:01 AM

Quote

From "Was Odysseus actually a hero? What classicists say most people get wrong about the Odyssey" by Candida Moss. Published July 17, 2026

Concluding paragraphs:

The reason for our confusion about Odysseus’s character comes down to changing definitions of what it means to be a hero. While the Odyssey has its villains—like the suitor Antinous—its heroes are not unambiguously good. Park pointed out that a Greek hero was just “a famous male mortal from the mythic past.” Martin and Christensen added that it’s not clear that ancient Greeks thought their heroes were good. Christensen notes that the Greek tragedians of the fifth century BCE emphasize Odysseus’s more villainous qualities and present him as a smooth-talking aristocrat with sketchy motives.

Part of the reason why we think of Odysseus as a role model, said Christensen, is down to the Roman Stoics. “In the writings of Seneca and Cicero, Odysseus becomes valued for his ability to resist temptation, to endure suffering and to stay true to his mission.” The reason for this is that the Romans—much like many modern readers—weren’t reading the whole Odyssey. “They sample parts of it in education, where they would read sections of the Odyssey as part of their education in school and in preparing speeches.” Otherwise, Christensen joked, they are just sort of “vibing” through it.

Odysseus enters Christian tradition through Boethius, who makes him a model for resisting the Sirens. “Which is nonsense,” Christensen added, “because he wasn’t trying to resist them. Odysseus was tied to the mast. He set up a situation where he couldn’t go to them.” From there, Odysseus increasingly became a Christ-like figure, reimagined as, at worst, a flawed but fundamentally virtuous hero. You can still hear echoes of this Christian Odysseus in the Mumford and Sons song “The Cave,” said Christensen.

When it comes to the message of the Odyssey, Christensen, sees it as a story about trauma, survival, and discovering oneself in your relationships with family and friends. Odysseus himself is less a saint than an antihero—a Walter White, Tony Soprano, or Batman figure. “Odysseus, Achilles, and everyone from the age of heroes are both what we should emulate and what we should avoid.”

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