Helen's Scars: A Review of Nolan's *Odyssey*

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I have watched many film and TV Trojan War adaptations, and part of my enjoyment is seeing how other creatives interpret, reinterpret, and adapt the ancient Trojan War stories for the screen. In the context of a polarised society, it is unsurprising how much online discourse has surrounded Nolan's version of the tales of Odysseus, from the casting decisions and costume design to the script and storytelling techniques, and much more. I am not here to address the controversies or exhausting extreme views spouted about how or how not to adapt Homer's *Odyssey*, mostly because of the hypocrisy and double standards demonstrated so clearly. After all, Uberto Pasolini's *The Return* (2024) did not garner half as much attention, likely because of the simple matter of Nolan being more famous. This review is concerned with the enjoyment of cinematic experiences and Nolan's storytelling style. To put it another way, why are we here, and why is this worth talking about?

This was an impressive visual spectacle and an immersive experience. I was always on the edge of my seat. The Cyclops scene was as shocking and horrific as expected. Circe was a standout scene: brilliantly grotesque, unnerving, disgusting and tense as she transformed the men into pigs and tried to trick Odysseus. Other exciting scenes and positive cinematic pieces were the visit to Hades and the Sirens. In fact, the Hades sequence was so good that I wanted it to last longer (especially as Homer depicts Odysseus meeting his dead mother, Anticleia, which Nolan could have made use of).[1] The Sirens were excellently portrayed and, for me, this was the best scene of Matt Damon's performance; I loved the description of the Sirens' effect on the mind. Charybdis and Scylla were always going to be tricky scenes to adapt; so much visual media has already depicted these creatures in a variety of ways. I still feel that Scylla is best depicted as a more serpentine or aquatic creature rather than a rock-like, camouflaged monster. Lastly, the Laestrygonians—man-eating giants in Homer's epic—were terrifying but also confusing. In Homer, the giants not only eat many of Odysseus' men, but Odysseus has a larger group of soldiers travelling with him, so 11 of his 12 ships are destroyed.[2] While Nolan decided to shrink Odysseus' crew from the beginning, I was surprised that the audience did not witness another horrific slaughter of men being eaten by giant creatures. That said, the scene was still terrifying. The noble daughters who appear in Homer's *Odyssey* are condensed into a sinister lone child who introduces a new threat. I do not understand why the trees were moving; however, it did lean into the mythological, otherworldly aspect of Odysseus' travels, and it certainly added to the chaos and terror of the scene.

Upon reflection, the film is an anti-war adaptation of the *Odyssey*, arguably a continuation of the themes of Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023). Anti-war versions of the Homeric epics are nothing new, and even ancient scholars and historians (who were not necessarily 'anti-war') debated the war's purpose, especially Helen's role. Throughout the film, this message is fairly consistent: the colour-grading is bleak, and the score is mournful. Odysseus is a haunted veteran and regrets not just the war itself but the aftermath as he and his men fail to return home. Penelope (Anne Hathaway) and Telemachus (Tom Holland) struggle against the Suitors, and Telemachus' sense of self is uncertain in the absence of his father. This was one of the reasons I felt the first half of the film was better overall than the second half. Many have criticised

[1] Hom. *Od.* 11.84–89, 150–225. There are many translations of the *Odyssey* available; I recommend reading multiple versions for a richer experience.
[2] Hom. *Od.* 10.130–132.

certain elements left out of Nolan's film, such as Emily Wilson (in her rather scathing review) stating that "[there] are no sex scenes, and all the food looks horrible."[3] However, just as the sex in *Oppenheimer* arguably felt out of place, Nolan's *Odyssey* is not sexy, and perhaps deliberately so. This is best conveyed through the depiction of Helen (Lupita Nyong'o). When Telemachus goes to bid farewell to Menelaus and Helen, a seemingly ordinary goodbye turns into a pleading apology from Helen, who whispers to Telemachus (I paraphrase) that she is sorry for everything and sorry for the pain she has caused Penelope. Even before this moment, Helen is presented from a side view, but when Menelaus turns her head toward the camera, the audience sees the scars on one side of her face. Helen, famed for her beauty, is marred, and this is perhaps the most effective part of Nolan's anti-war message. The loss of beauty is not just indicative of Helen's suffering and the suffering of the most vulnerable in war but also reflects an idea that is generally consistent in Nolan's film. I do not think Nolan is trying to recreate or recapture Homer for the big screen. The glory (or beauty) of the past and its epic tales are, in many ways, impossible to recreate, recapture or restore, and Helen's marred face is a sign of this to the audience.

Homer's epics convey what some scholars have noted as a sense of decline, particularly heroic decline.[4] For example, Michael Clarke notes that in many ways, the warriors depicted in the Homeric epics are weaker than their parents, particularly where divine lineage is concerned.[5] That said, while Nolan's film is generally consistent with the sense of decline, loss of beauty and glory, and the overall anti-war messages, it is arguably the film's finale that undermines these themes. Compared to the violence depicted in the Homeric epics, Nolan's version shows a somewhat sanitised destruction of Troy and death of the Suitors.[6] When Odysseus returns, the tension is exciting, and in true Hollywood fashion, the final battle is one where the audience expects the 'bad guys'—especially Antinous (Robert Pattinson)—to get their comeuppance. However, minor directorial and script issues aside, the finale is not in keeping with the rest of the film. Homer's *Odyssey* ends with a bloodbath of dead Suitors and executed slaves; Nolan's *Odyssey*, despite being anti-war, smooths things over and simplifies the questionable, nuanced morality and ethics of the Homeric ending. The hero 'saves the day', the unpalatable violence is minimised, and the film concludes with Odysseus and Penelope sailing off into the sunset. While it has largely received positive reviews and achieved financial success, Nolan's ending is inconsistent with the rest of his film. It is as though Odysseus becomes a different character who ends up as plain and "uncomplicated" as the final title card.[7]

Overall, Nolan's *Odyssey* was entertaining, and it is still a valuable contribution to the many stories that have been inspired by the Homeric epics. The anti-war messages and sense of decline are thought-provoking, but undermined by the film's ending, leaving one wondering what it was that Nolan wanted to achieve.

[3]Wilson 2026.
[4]Hall 2025, 45–47.
[5]Clarke 2004, 79–80. See also Dalby 1995, 269–279.
[6]Emily Wilson goes as far as to say that Nolan has betrayed himself and his creative vision (Moss-Coane, Wilson and Burton 2026).
[7]Wilson 2026.

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