

The Odyssean Journey of Nolan Towards New Meanings for Homer

Valentina Orrù

University of Copenhagen

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A few years ago, the meme about guys thinking of the Roman Empire at least once per day went viral; now, Classics is back on the Internet—and all thanks to Nolan’s *The Odyssey*. The complaints about discrepancies between film and poem suggest that most people were expecting a faithful adaptation of Homer.¹ But Nolan never promised a step-by-step *mise-en-scène* of the Greek text: his is a retelling and should be assessed as such. Classical reception, after all, is a creative process in which each reinterpretation extends the previous work²—which is exactly what Nolan³ does.

Overall, Nolan manages to bring to the screen most of the plot elements told by Homer, and a few cuts are replaced by a deepening of some characters’ portrayal—especially Antinous, Penelope and Telemachus.

However, Nolan’s creativity in working with the source material is limited to a moral message and the raising of theological questions (except for Circe’s scene, which features interesting and imaginative innovations). His re-work of the Homeric world does not allow the values and culture of the original epic to truly emerge from the screen; even costumes, linguistic choices, and dwellings lack the wealth and power that permeated the epic poem—a genre that by definition deals with grandeur, gods, and heroes.

The deities are indeed one of the most ambiguous aspects of this new *Odyssey*. Zendaya’s character raises the most (unanswered) questions: is she truly Athena? Is she Athena in the guise of a war victim? Is she a girl killed during the siege whom Odysseus associated with Athena because she was beheaded like the goddess’s statue? While doubting the gods matches the overall message that Nolan wishes to convey, it is also true that the omission of the divine apparatus from the film (or at least the questioning of its existence) deeply affects the portrayal of the Homeric world, which was permeated by religion. Besides, Zeus’s law of hospitality is frequently reiterated throughout the film more for screenwriting purposes than out of an accurate representation of its value in the Hellenic world.

Circe and Calypso are deprived of their divine nature as well; but while the first shows a deeper characterisation than in the poem thanks to an alluded-to tragic background, the latter is flattened due to the dismissal of the power imbalance between her and the hero. With the Homeric episodes of the Lotus-eaters, the Phaeacians, and her own condensed into one, here she functions merely as the behavioural therapy of the first-person narration in *Od.* 9–12⁴, so that Odysseus gets a space to engage with the devastating consequences of his war-deeds on his psyche.

Indeed, the film revolves around the trauma of war. Nolan sensed that one of the central themes of the poem was the return home of a protagonist who had changed since his departure,⁵ so he explored

¹For the sake of readability and clarity, this article will refer to Homer as if he undoubtedly existed, composed, and wrote the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, although the matter is far more complex than this.

²Martindale C. and Thomas R. F., *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Malden 2006).

³Again, for the same reasons as above, I will refer to Nolan as the sole creator of the film—although he is not, as screenwriters and researchers of the epic material have been employed for the production.

⁴Christensen J., *The Many-Minded Man: The Odyssey, Psychology, and the Therapy of Epic* (Ithaca, 2020), 87–114.

⁵Christopher Nolan, “The Odyssey: the only Christopher Nolan interview you need to watch”, interviewed by Hugo Décrypte, posted July 13, 2026, YouTube, 04 min., 30 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jHpisxcmkc>.

this theme through the story of a veteran struggling with PTSD. The desire to forget homeland and the procrastination of returning home due to guilt are Nolan-esque innovations coherent with the film's internal narrative, which portrays a protagonist defeated by his own victory; yet, they profoundly alter the Homeric protagonist. And the meaning of such modifications is clear: Nolan's aim seems not to conform to the poem, but to convey the same discourse begun with his previous film, *Oppenheimer*. His Odysseus is not the unscrupulous hero celebrated for a war stratagem, but a man crushed by the realisation that his cleverness enabled a massacre. A war was won—but at what cost? Odysseus understands that the genius of his act is worthless in light of the cruelty it brought about. The movie does show a war hero on his way home—but an *ante litteram* Oppenheimer who refuses to glory in his own actions.

Indeed, to best convey the tragedy of war, the film draws from sources other than Homer: it is not surprising that one of these is the *Aeneid*, Virgil's drama of the vanquished. The role of Sinon and the reluctance on the Trojan side to bring the horse into the city are narrative elements found in *Aen.* 2. Such inclusions emphasise Odysseus' PTSD, but the expansion of Sinon's character also amplifies the characterisation of Antinous *per oppositionem*. Indeed, the honest, brave, and loyal Sinon exposes the cowardice of the suitors' leader and demands vengeance during the νέκυια episode. Such an addition gives Odysseus yet another reason for anger in his final confrontation with the antagonist—an act of revenge that thus gets even more personal, bearing a closer resemblance to Aeneas' assassination of Turnus in the name of Pallas than to the Homeric conclusion.

Still, while most of the changes Nolan made to the original material (whether or not appreciated by the audience) make sense within the film's overall framework, others are truly ineffective. The πολυτροπία of the Homeric character is essentially eliminated. Is the character on the screen still Odysseus at all? Indeed, the most contentious failure of this modern adaptation lies in its wholesale erosion of Odysseus' intellectual skills and curiosity, his defining traits. For example, the omission of Polyphemos' dialogue deprives the hero of his pivotal breakthrough point for reclaiming identity through strategic intelligence—but also hybris. Hence, the film suffers from narrative dysfunction and incoherence: while the protagonist is narrated as a brilliant tactician, the plot reveals a character devoid of actual cunning.

Nolan has clearly read and engaged deeply with Homer and other ancient sources on the Trojan War. The film draws fully from these models while adapting them to the political message Nolan wishes to send to a contemporary audience. He succeeds, but at a cost: not only are certain features of the Homeric world altered, but the protagonist himself ends up being culturally translated into a new shape to match the new morality the story is tasked with carrying.

This *Odyssey* could have been made more luxurious, more magical, and more cunning, but the aim of the film is clear, and its adaptations of the source material are justifiable within such reasoning. As Nolan himself stated: "If you make a sincere and committed interpretation of what you really believe [a story] should be, people will respect that even if it is not what they would do."⁶

⁶Christopher Nolan, "The only Christopher Nolan interview", at 11:25–15:45.

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