

The Poet Still Sings: Christopher Nolan and the Homeric Tradition

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I didn't like Nolan's adaptation of *The Odyssey* when I first saw it. I thought it was violent, loud, awkwardly paced, and poorly written. As a Classics major, I hadn't stopped taking mental notes on inaccuracies and modern twists since the beginning of the film. However, in the days and weeks following, I began to think and talk about the film and realized there is a lot more depth beneath the surface than immediately meets the eye.

One must keep in mind when approaching any modern adaptation of a story as ancient as *The Odyssey* that the view of the modern storyteller is not going to be the same as that of the ancient one. All epic poems are about events that are ancient in relation to their own present history, but they are told through the lens of the author's own time and civilization. When Homer tells the story of Troy, he tells it as a Greek following the end of the Bronze Age and the rise of the so-called "Dark Age" of Greece, with all of the political, social, cultural, and literary views and conventions of that time. The collapse of the Bronze Age was turbulent and caused disruption in many areas of society, which is reflected in Homer's narration of political events such as the Trojan War and stories closer to home, like the return of Odysseus to a home taken over by rival suitors.

When Christopher Nolan tells the story of Troy and of Odysseus, he tells it as an American during the 21st century. Nolan tells it as someone living in the aftermath of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the tumult of radical political changes and sporadic wars across the world during the past 20 years, and in a world shaken by the pandemic of the early 2020s. Ultimately, Nolan tells his story as a man writing during the complete shift in Western culture and ethos in the 21st century. In a way, Nolan is abiding by the poetic epic tradition: he is telling the "deeds of ancient men" through the eyes of a modern man. This must be understood and kept in mind when approaching his film as an adaptation of *The Odyssey*. This is not Homer's *Odyssey*. It is Christopher Nolan's.

There is a tendency in recent written, audio, and visual media to focus on hardship, trauma, depression, and all other forms of human struggle, both in modernity and throughout history. We have more ready access to news from around the world than ever before, and many of us in the 21st century have grown desensitized to violence and horror. Despite this greater access to the world, many people have become mentally isolated. Nolan's adaptation of the ancient *Odyssey* demonstrates this trend. His Odysseus is a man haunted by the Trojan War. He is still noble in his desire to bring his men home safely, but there is a shadow of regret and sorrow looming over him. The men returning home from the Trojan War in Nolan's *Odyssey* are tired, beaten down by a decade of fighting and watching men die. They have seen much in their sojourning, but they have also suffered much. Nolan threads this theme of the effects and consequences of war throughout the film.

Throughout most of the *Odyssey* film, Agamemnon is merely a dark, hulking figure who demands respect and obedience from his men. Nolan ties in references to the Greek tragedies that tell the rest of this great king's story—both the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus and *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides—which further portray the horrific effects of war on men and families. Just as in the original poem, Agamemnon appears to Odysseus in the film during the gathering of the shades of the underworld. He tells Odysseus how he

died at the hands of his wife and her lover, and it is the only time we catch a glimpse of the great king's face beneath his plumed helmet. It is a face filled with pain.

Odysseus faces terrible threats and foes on his journey home. Nolan ensures that the viewer feels the horror of Odysseus as he watches his men be eaten alive by a Cyclops and transformed into pigs by the sorceress Circe. These experiences harden him, so that when he faces the suitors in his own hall, he shows no mercy.

The slaughter of the suitors is arguably the bloodiest scene in the original *Odyssey*, and Nolan does not disappoint. He portrays his material well, and I personally found this scene to be the most accurate and most compelling in the film. The Homeric hero's virtues of *aristeia* and *kleos* are not prominent throughout Nolan's adaptation. However, in the encounter with Antinous and his fellow conspirators, Odysseus performs a heroic one-man feat of *aristeia* by fighting to regain his throne. It is a scene to rival the divinely-assisted performance of Diomedes in *The Iliad*.

The conclusion of Nolan's *Odyssey* is another example of his adopting and adapting the epic poetic tradition. Again, he tells the story through the eyes of modern man, yet nods to his source material. The ending of the original poem is a bit abrupt and vague. Odysseus and the families of the suitors agree to establish peace at the command of Athena, but it ends there. Nolan's Odysseus, who throughout the film has more and more felt the weight of grief and regret, comes to terms with his experience. He is a changed man after the war, but he is a pious man. He acknowledges that he has violated the law of *xenia* and accepts that he must pay for his offenses. He chooses voluntary exile, in order to offer sacrifice for his deceased comrades and to make atonement for his and their crimes. Nolan subtly references the poem *Ulysses* by Tennyson, which shapes a similar ending for Odysseus in which he leaves his kingdom to Telemachus. Nolan's ending is fitting and ties together both his own epic and Homer's, along with other modern retellings, to bring everything full circle. The film begins *in medias res*, as does Homer, and brings the story to a clear conclusion.

There is much to say about Christopher Nolan's film *The Odyssey*, but setting aside all politics and partisan debates about casting and accuracy, it is a well-told adaptation of Homer's poem. Again, it is Nolan's *Odyssey*, not Homer's, but it utilizes the source material well to create a version of the story that is understandable to modern viewers. Just as Homer told the ancient story of Troy through the eyes of his own age to viewers who understood the world in which he lived, Nolan tells us the same story through the eyes of our own age. We may not always like what we see, but—as with the ancient authors—that may tell us more about ourselves and our culture than about the story itself. Nolan's film is a great moment for the classics and for Homeric poetry. We can join with Homer's bard and say, "Of these adventures, Muse... / tell us in our time..."¹

¹Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1998), 1.17–18.

References

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1998.

