

The Unremarkable Odysseus and the Monstrous Cyclops in Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*

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AFTER a long wait from his fans, cinephiles, and classicists, Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* was released in July 2026. With the declared rivalry between cinema and streaming platforms persisting,¹ Nolan's film was another of this year's great titles that confirmed its success in theatres with its national and global opening weekend. It brought millions of people to their local cinemas and influenced others to make the trip to enjoy it on an IMAX 70mm screen. No matter the criticism or neutral opinions that followed, the film was quickly deemed a favourite by many among this year's productions.

With its undeniable success, my review cannot begin without praising and celebrating the movie for what it is. Christopher Nolan's film, when not considered as an adaptation, is a love letter to cinema. It is composed of beautiful cinematography and renowned practical effects, which a viewer may only marvel at when experiencing a production of this calibre.

And yet, I am centring all my praise on the movie as a film and not as an adaptation. For, as we know, Christopher Nolan wrote his movie's script, inspired and heavily influenced by Emily Wilson's translation (2017) of Homer's *Odyssey* and chose to call his story *The Odyssey*. With this, contrary to what online discourse concluded,² the movie cannot be blindly praised without being carefully considered and criticised in its relation to the original *Odyssey* – or what we know of it. This is especially true when the story's message is being changed.

That is to say that, as Nolan adapted and altered vital moments of the *Odyssey* in his rewriting³ of the story, the messages and main objectives of each episode may be lost. My review will largely focus on a single episode that has been altered in Nolan's adaptation of the Homeric text: the ninth book, the Cyclops, before shortly concluding with further examples of the alterations and the undeniable loss of their Homeric traits.

Homer's Polyphemus is remembered as the Cyclops who lives in his cave and cares for his sheep. He is loyal to his routine of sleeping, milking his ewes, eating, and leaving his flock to graze. Polyphemus is notoriously and proudly unafraid of the gods, a descendant of Poseidon, and a cannibal. His encounter with Odysseus is centred on their initial discussion, where the former tries (and fails) to outsmart the latter, on how Odysseus sees his actions as a punishment of Zeus for the crime of ὕβρις and of breaking ξενία, and, later, of Odysseus' pride, as he cannot hold back from speaking his name aloud as he escapes Polyphemus' grasp – following the famous (9.367) “no one” (trans. Heubeck) or “noman” (trans. Wilson) segment in the myth. Nolan fails to include most of these characteristics at the price, intended or not, of an interpretation of an unremarkable Odysseus and a monstrous Polyphemus.

¹A discussion which truly began when Netflix's co-CEO, Ted Sarandos, stated in 2025 that cinemas are an “outdated model”, and that people much prefer to watch movies at home. To read more, see https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/apr/24/netflix-chief-ted-sarandos-says-cinemagoing-is-outmoded-and-the-streamer-is-saving-hollywood?CMP=share_btn_url.

²Specifically, the discourse that followed Emily Wilson's own review.

³Related to Willis' term in the study of Reception (p. 36).

Nolan's Cyclops does not speak, or, more precisely, does not speak to Odysseus or his men directly. The Cyclops, when he first appears, stays silent and does not address the men who have entered his cave – unlike 9.250–255 – before he bluntly begins to feed on two of Odysseus' men. But the Cyclops uses his voice, after being blinded, to cry to his father, Poseidon. The sudden sound of his cries is meant to shock both the viewer and the characters present, for even they, the characters themselves, question why the creature hadn't spoken before. But an answer is never given to them, nor to the viewer. This alteration seems to have happened only to avoid including the "Nobody" trickery,⁴ but I argue that, ultimately, Nolan ended up removing trickery altogether. By removing the discussion where Odysseus shows his quick thinking,⁵ with his clever unspoken name, the Cyclops is never bested, never tricked into drinking the overly concentrated wine, and, ultimately, never speaking what will be Odysseus' justification for his blindness – his ὄβρις and his mercilessness in offering to eat Odysseus last.

Another alteration made to accommodate Polyphemus' silence throughout the mythical segment is the retreat from the cave. Through Nolan's writing, Odysseus does not shout his name when at a safe distance, as he does in Homer;⁶ he fires an arrow into the creature's blind eye. Viewers justify his actions, from blinding to hurting the Cyclops, as expressions of anger and frustration,⁷ but they never seem to comment on Odysseus' obliviousness to the Cyclops' (obvious) wish to defend himself once it is done, forcing them to run to their boats in a panic.

Another change made to the Cyclops was his livelihood. Nolan was careful to include the Cyclops' sheep and their daily grazing, as well as the Cyclops' cheese-making. But while he still lives lonely in his cave, he seems to also live alone on the island.⁸ When hurt, he does not scream for the help of the other Cyclopes, and no one seems to hear his overpowering wordless shouts of agony. With the lack of a community, there is no mention of the Cyclopes' ways, hubris towards the gods, or any other cultural characteristic other than a particular Cyclops' flock – which, with a wordless Polyphemus, the viewer does not even know of his affection towards a particular sheep. The Homeric text (and Odysseus' narration) dedicates the introduction of the mythical episode to the description of space, to then lead with Odysseus' words: "(...) I go to check who those men are, find out if they are wild, lawless aggressors, or the type to welcome strangers, and fear the gods" (9.173–6). With no mention of the lawless community (9.112–15), no scene of the godly-influenced agriculture (9.108–11), no mention of gods other than Polyphemus' ascendancy, and no spoken order to make clear what has brought Odysseus and his men to the "country of high-minded Cyclopes" (9.117), the portrayed episode is empty of meaning and the Cyclops empty of characterisation. Polyphemus has no personality, no unlawful pride (and, therefore, no godly reason to be punished by Odysseus), and his only words are cries of pain. His actions are reduced to violence to feed on Odysseus' men and run after them when they escape, even when, through Homer, he milked his ewes, even with the pain of his blind eye (9.439–42).

My criticism of Christopher Nolan's adaptation does not aim to be overwhelmingly condemning of any alteration made to the Homeric text, for some were well executed – for example, the goddess Athena's appearance to illustrate the Sack of Troy and Odysseus' guilt. But for a film named *The Odyssey*, Nolan's alterations must be criticised, for they come with the exclusion of characteristics that make Odysseus the Homeric hero and protagonist and Polyphemus the Cyclops that later came to inspire texts such as

⁴As Nolan himself stated "It's a pun. Puns in translation are tough. I tried. It was not possible to work in it" (Hibberd, *Hollywood Reporter*, July 14, 2026).

⁵M. L. L. West mentions the idea of why it should be Odysseus that meets the Cyclops in the myth, "Not, surely, because a warrior making his way home from Troy needed an extra adventure to delay him; (...) No, rather because Odysseus was a figure known for his clever tricks and ability to outwit others who seemed to have the advantage" (p. 13).

⁶The term "safe distance" is used by West (pp. 222–3), but it can be assumed through the Homeric text: "We got out twice as far across the sea, and then I called to him again" (9.491–2).

⁷Odysseus' wish to fight back with his own weapons isn't original to Nolan, as in Homer (9.299–306) he thinks of attacking the Cyclops with his sword in a moment of anger; but Homer's Odysseus never does it, for he knows "That would have doomed us all" (9.333).

⁸Similarly referenced in Wilson's review (para. 10), *An Uncomplicated Man*.

Theocritus' idyll *The Cyclops* or Ovid's chapter in his *Metamorphoses*.⁹ These unfair portrayals extend to other characters, beyond the episode of Odysseus and Polyphemus, such as Calypso, Circe, and Helen. For example, Calypso, in the film, doesn't deliver her infamous speech regarding the differences between male and female gods, or her wish to keep Odysseus even in immortal life (5.117–144), because, through Nolan, she is reduced to being a caring companion, who feeds Odysseus lotus for his sorrows and accepts his choice to remember the past and leave her. The goddess Circe, even with Nolan's spectacular practical effects, is reduced to a paranoid¹⁰ witch full of regret over her sister, losing her seduction (10.334–6), her year with Odysseus (10.467), and her knowledge regarding his path home (10.487–96, 503–540). And the Queen of Sparta, Helen, who once was loved and sought for by her husband, Menelaus, all the way to Egypt – as in Euripides' *Helen* – is now a scarred victim of his rage.

By this means, Christopher Nolan may deserve the praise for the film he has made, but I must conclude with how his writing leaves much to be desired. In the selected episodes, he reduces complex characters, such as Polyphemus or the Homeric women, to a single simple trait. And as a price for that simplicity, Nolan is compelled to limit Odysseus too, who, with no trickery to display, resembles a common, un-heroic man, with nothing remarkable to show. Meanwhile, the women become a simple companion, a vengeful witch, and the (punished) cause of the war, and the Cyclops becomes a monster, precluded from a personality, a voice, or opinions, made simply to be slain.

⁹Irene de Jong, in her narratological study of the *Odyssey* (2001), describes Polyphemus with two sides, “The picture of Polyphemus is ambivalent: on the one hand, he is a monster, whose every word and deed is a mockery of the rites of hospitality. On the other hand, he is a pitiful victim: his blinding is described so elaborately as to elicit pity, and his address to his ram is pathetic” (p. 232).

¹⁰Circe's paranoia is, arguably, justified given Odysseus' men's actions during their journey home – which leads to them being understood, even later by Penelope, as “the people of the sea”. And yet, when Circe rightfully runs away and fights back against men who can, as shown, do wrong, she is portrayed as quite unreasonable when talking to Odysseus.

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