

Nolan's *Odyssey*: What Makes a Good Adaptation?

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I believe all adaptations have value. In fact, it was obvious to me that Christopher Nolan's adaptation of the *Odyssey* was beneficial: this movie, and the fact that it was made by a well-known director, inspired those around me to learn about Homer and the Classics. All adaptations being worthwhile, however, does not automatically make every adaptation a good adaptation, or even a well-made one. As such, I asked myself these two questions while watching Nolan's *Odyssey*: did the film successfully adapt the original poem, and was the film successful as a standalone work?

First, what makes a good adaptation? Is it faithfulness to plot, or is it faithfulness to themes? What about setting, characters, or historical accuracy? In my opinion, a good adaptation should have care put into each of these areas. As such, I was initially skeptical of the quality of the film, considering what I knew of its production. After all, while there seemed to be care for historical accuracy in some areas, there also appeared to be a lack of care for historical conservation. On the one hand, I knew that Anne Hathaway (Penelope) had learned to weave with an ancient loom,¹ the Polyphemus scene was set in a historically accurate cave,² and the soundtrack used ancient Greek instruments.³ On the other hand, I'd heard complaints about the costumes being historically inaccurate, the ship hired for filming receiving major damage,⁴ and waste being dumped into the ocean near endangered habitats.⁵ This inconsistent level of care for historical accuracy and conservation worried me about whether enough care would be put into the rest of the film. Thankfully, I ended up pleasantly surprised—regardless of any controversy, the film is clearly carefully crafted!

While Nolan does exclude events and characters from Homer's poem (such as the Phaeacians, Aeolus, or Book 24), these are understandable choices to conserve time. By making Odysseus recount his journey to Calypso, Nolan cuts the Phaeacian episode without negatively impacting the story. In fact, I found the Calypso portions of the movie in general to be excellently done: the use of the lotus flowers allowed Nolan to combine episodes and further his themes. For example, by having Calypso give Odysseus addictive drugs without his knowledge, Nolan is able to encapsulate the lack of consent central to the Calypso episode without explicitly showing the rape present in Homer's *Odyssey*. At the same time, Calypso helps relieve Odysseus' trauma, introducing the film's theme of the horror of war by having Odysseus mentally, instead of physically, imprisoned on the island. I feel that this theme is best emphasized through the Sack of Troy. In the film, this episode is first shown as a triumphant and successful deception by cunning Odysseus. However, when we later see the invasion from Odysseus' perspective, the Horse is a great shame, as well as the beginning of the end of the world as Odysseus knows it—to Odysseus, this great trick of his causes the breakdown of common decency and, ultimately, the fall of the Greek Mycenaean era (due to the "Sea Peoples"). He is unable to leave the island and return home until he faces this guilt

¹Rafael Bautista, "EXCLUSIVE: How Anne Hathaway Embodied the Quiet Passion of Penelope in 'The Odyssey.'" *MEGA*, July 9, 2026.

²Tara Bennett, "How They Made the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*." *NBC*, July 22, 2026.

³Joshua Barone, "The Haunting Music in the 'Odyssey' Siren Scene Has Ancient Roots." *The New York Times*, July 25, 2026.

⁴Alex Marshall, "'The Odyssey' Hired Their Viking Ship. They Say It Came Back Damaged." *The New York Times*, July 23, 2026.

⁵Italianinsider.It, "Concerns About Prop Disposal as Filming on New Nolan Film Comes to a Close." 2026.

and grief. This is a sharp deviation from Homer's work, where Odysseus' deception ends war, violence, and savagery, allowing a return to a civilized world. Thus, we as an audience are initially shown the Horse in the same way as Homer's depiction, only to later see it as just another atrocity of war. Ultimately, Nolan's film acts as a warning against war—something which, to me, feels especially relevant, as conflict has become increasingly frequent around the world.

Nolan also maintains the themes of Homer's poem, *nostos* and *xenia*, in his adaptation. *Nostos* is connected to the themes of the film through contrasting Odysseus' and Agamemnon's homecomings—Agamemnon does not atone for the harm he caused through sacrificing Iphigenia, and so is killed in return. Odysseus, however, faces his guilt and wrongdoing and is thus able to safely reunite with his family. Odysseus' atonement is best seen through the film's focus on Sinon. In order to properly achieve his homecoming, Odysseus must first resolve his guilt of, among other crimes, causing Sinon's death. This is done by returning Sinon's draft ballot to Antinous (his 'shame'). By doing this, Odysseus metaphorically brings Sinon—and all of the other fallen soldiers—home with him, where their honour and sacrifice may be recognized.

Similarly, *xenia* also plays a major role in the movie, through "Zeus' Law," which acts as a driving force for the plot. (As an aside, I think that this name change was a wise decision: Zeus is far more recognizable to a layperson than *xenia*. For maximum viewer comprehension, the characters even explain the "Law" explicitly.) While I felt that it was invoked slightly too often, I do appreciate that characters are noticeably affected by "Zeus' Law"—the "Sea Peoples" breaking *xenia* causes mass fear, Telemachus and Penelope must uphold *xenia* and thus cannot force the suitors out, and many of Odysseus' struggles are shown to be due to a breach of *xenia*. Furthermore, connecting the "Sea Peoples"—one of the causes of the Bronze Age collapse—to this theme helped the story feel like part of a greater mythos and world to me.

Nolan's *Odyssey* also excels on its own. The fact that filming was done in real locations for many scenes, combined with phenomenal performances by actors engaged in their roles and the story, greatly improved my immersion. The film's mythological elements also looked incredible: Polyphemus (while far too loud) was terrifying in scale compared with Odysseus and his crew; the sheer number of dead in the Underworld clearly established the scale of the war; and the transformation sequence on Circe's island was stupendously visceral and disturbing.

That being said, Nolan's *Odyssey* wasn't perfect. I can excuse a lot of minor mythological and historical inaccuracies (such as using a Norse ship) as part of the nature of a Hollywood production. The two main points I found myself disappointed in, however, were the lack of Greek gods and the exclusion of the Nobody episode. To be clear, I can understand these changes—the opening text of the movie, which tells us the film is set in "a time of apparent magic," could explain the lack of gods, and Nolan was supposedly unable to make the Nobody scene work. However, for an adaptation of Homer's epic poetry—in which the gods should play a major role—I would have liked to see more than simply Athena, especially when 'Athena' is revealed to simply be a hallucination caused by grief. Furthermore, the excuse of the film being in "a time of apparent magic" doesn't work when we see undeniably supernatural elements on screen. There's nothing "apparent" about this magic in-universe; it just is. Now, while the presence of magic doesn't automatically mean there have to be gods, it does remove the excuse of why there aren't. Finally, I would have liked to see the Nobody exchange during the Polyphemus episode. Aside from this exchange being one of the best-known parts of the *Odyssey*, it also shows Odysseus' cunning and hubris, whereas the movie mostly tells us this. While Odysseus' cunning is somewhat shown by Nolan in his interactions with Circe, I feel it isn't enough.

In the end, while it may have had its flaws, I was glad to find that Christopher Nolan's *Odyssey* was very much worth the watch!

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