

Part Three: The Return of the Hero

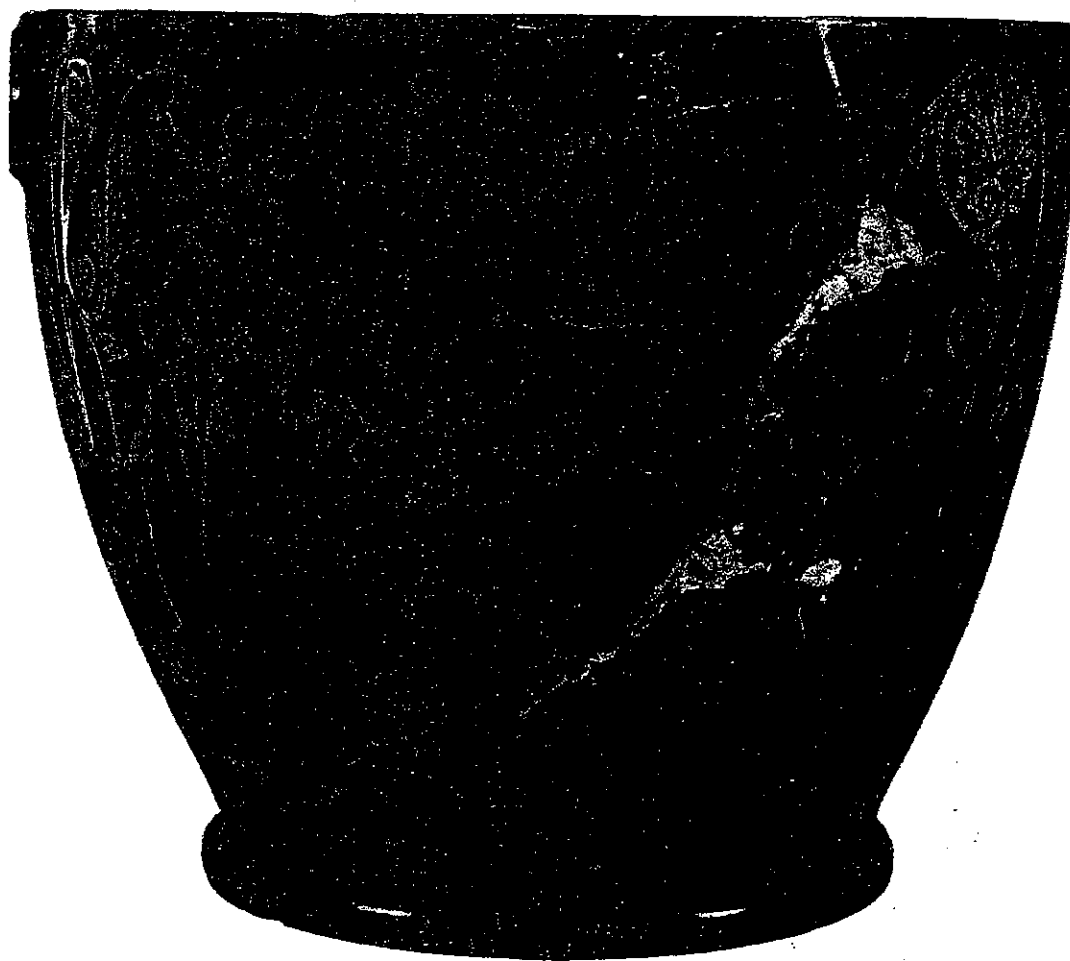
In Book 13, Odysseus, laden with gifts, is returned in secret to Ithaca in one of the magically swift Phaeacian ships. In Ithaca, Athena herself appears to the hero. She advises him how to proceed and disguises him as a beggar. Notice that this new hero of the postwar age of disillusionment will achieve success not only by physical power but also by guile and wisdom.

In Book 14, Odysseus, in his beggar disguise, finds his way to the house of his old and trusty swineherd, Eumaeus. Eumaeus is the very image of faithfulness in a servant—a quality much prized by Homer's society. The introduction of the so-called servant class as important actors is unusual in epic poetry, and it indicates Homer's originality. Odysseus is simply but politely entertained in the swineherd's hut, but he remains disguised from Eumaeus.

In Book 15, we go back to Telemachus, who is still with Menelaus and Helen. The plots of the father and the son are

*Ulysses disguised as a beggar.
Attic red figure vase.*

Etruscan Museum, Chiusi. Photo: Art Resource



your own men, and your own woods and pastures!
Always in the town, a man would think
you loved the suitors' company, those dogs!"

1400 Telemachus with his clear candor said:

"I am with you, Uncle.^o See now, I have come
because I wanted to see you first, to hear from you
if Mother stayed at home—or is she married
off to someone, and Odysseus's bed
1405 left empty for some gloomy spider's weaving?"

Gently the forester replied to this:

"At home indeed your mother is, poor lady
still in the women's hall. Her nights and days
are wearied out with grieving."

Stepping back

1410 he took the bronze-shod lance, and the young prince
entered the cabin over the worn door stone.
Odysseus moved aside, yielding his couch,
but from across the room Telemachus checked him:
"Friend, sit down; we'll find another chair
1415 in our own hut. Here is the man to make one!"

The swineherd, when the quiet man sank down,
built a new pile of evergreens and fleeces—
a couch for the dear son of great Odysseus—
then gave them trenchers^o of good meat, left over
1420 from the roast pork of yesterday, and heaped up
willow baskets full of bread, and mixed
an ivy bowl of honey-hearted wine.
Then he in turn sat down, facing Odysseus,
their hands went out upon the meat and drink
1425 as they fell to, ridding themselves of hunger . . .

Not realizing that the stranger is his father, Telemachus agrees to protect him as best he can. But he tells the beggar that he cannot stay in the palace hall because he will be abused by the drunken suitors.

The swineherd is sent to Penelope with news of her son's return. And now it seems that even Athena cannot stand the suspense any longer. She turns to Odysseus, in beggar's rags:

She tipped her golden wand upon the man,
making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic
fresh around him. Lithe^o and young she made him,
ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard
1430 no longer gray upon his chin. And she
withdrew when she had done.

1401. Uncle: here, an affectionate greeting.

1419. trenchers: wooden platters.

1428. Lithe: limber.

Then Lord Odysseus

reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck.
Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away
as though it were a god, and whispered:

“Stranger,

1435 you are no longer what you were just now!
Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are
one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven!
Be kind to us, we’ll make you fair oblation°
and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”

1438. oblation: offering of a sacrifice.

1440 The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no.
I am that father whom your boyhood lacked
and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks
as he embraced his son.

1445 Only Telemachus,
uncomprehending, wild
with incredulity,° cried out:

1447. incredulity: disbelief.

“You cannot

be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits
conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!
1450 No man of woman born could work these wonders
by his own craft, unless a god came into it
with ease to turn him young or old at will.
I swear you were in rags and old,
and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

1455 Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear
and said:

“This is not princely, to be swept
away by wonder at your father’s presence.
No other Odysseus will ever come,
for he and I are one, the same; his bitter
1460 fortune and his wanderings are mine.
Twenty years gone, and I am back again
on my own island. . . .”

Then, throwing

his arms around this marvel of a father,
Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears
1465 rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.
So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
1470 and might have gone on weeping so till sundown. . . .

Responding to the Epic

Analyzing the Epic

Identifying Facts

1. After twenty years, Odysseus finally returns in secret to Ithaca. Once there, whom does he visit and how is he disguised?
2. What **images** in this little episode help us feel as if we were there by appealing to our senses of sight, hearing, and even taste?
3. How does Athena transform Odysseus just before he reveals his identity to Telemachus?

Interpreting Meanings

4. We feel **irony** when a situation seems inappropriate or just the reverse of what we expected. Why is it ironic that Odysseus should return to his kingdom dressed in beggar's rags?
5. **Dramatic irony** in particular refers to a situation in which the readers (or the audience) know more than the characters in the story (or play)

know. Where do we get a sense of great dramatic irony in this episode in the swineherd's hut?

6. It is rare in ancient epics for heroic characters to have much to do with ordinary people, but in the *Odyssey*, servants play important roles. How do Odysseus and Telemachus treat Eumaeus? What might Homer be trying to teach us through that treatment?
7. What **simile** describes the feelings of Odysseus and his son as they embrace after twenty years? How would you describe exactly what the father and his son are feeling here?
8. Do you know of any other stories or any movies or TV shows in which the hero (or heroine) appears in a disguise? What do these heroes (or heroines) usually learn while they are in the disguise?
5. Suppose Odysseus were a modern general who finally got home after an absence of twenty years. How do you think he would have approached his old home—if he had had to face the problems that exist in Ithaca?