

Shifting Definitions of Justice: A Study of Military Veteran Responses to Homer's *Odyssey*
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In the final scene of Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, the returning veteran and would-be epic hero, Odysseus, massacres over 100 Ithacans in his home: men and women, who have been exploiting his family's resources, harassing his wife, and, most importantly, violating his country's core values. For a century, scholars have debated the justice of this scene. Is Odysseus a murderer, a vigilante, an epic hero? For the returning veteran, it would seem that Odysseus is none of these. He is, however, the archetypal combat veteran transitioning from combat to civilian life—and facing his second war at home.



Odysseus kills the suitors. Illustration by William Russell Flint, 1924.

I. Case Scenario for Conference Attendees:

The year is roughly 1180 B.C. You have been away from your home for twenty years: ten years at war in a foreign country and another ten years at sea while trying to return home. On the route home, you make a stop in the underworld (a debriefing in Hawaii for many current-day veterans), where you learn from your deceased mother that your 20-year old son is purposeless and your wife is being harassed by more than 100 single men from your town, who are seeking her hand in marriage and exploiting your resources. Upon your arrival home, the gods grant you permission to slaughter all of these men – without asking any questions and without fear of punishment.

What would you do?

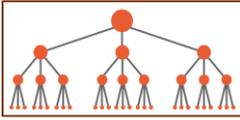
- (a) Disguise yourself to assess matters before killing anyone.
- (b) Interview the suitors to provide them a chance to explain themselves.
- (c) Deliver to the suitors the “justice” (aka *bloodbath*) they deserve.

II. Summary of Homer's *Odyssey*: Ithaca's Cultural Codes First & Forever

Odysseus engages in all three of these activities – and in this order. In characteristic style, he prioritizes reconnaissance: He disguises himself as a beggar and interviews his son and wife regarding their desperation. Equipped with the information he needs, he then reveals his true identity and interviews the suitors. Satisfied that the suitors' testimonies reveal excessive abuses against his family and his country's cultural codes, he slaughters all of them. Odysseus's first and last goal? To restore Ithaca's cultural codes.

III. Summary of Veterans' Responses to Slaughtering of Suitors: God & Family First

A. Responsiveness to authority prioritized over responsiveness to my own belief system.



While a majority of veterans acknowledge the excessive amount of killing that Odysseus and his son deliver, they nevertheless give higher value to the point that this killing is ordained by the ancient Greek gods.

The gods are the final say in these things and “Odysseus did not do these things against the will of heaven” (Bk XXII, ln.107). That means the gods are fine with the massacre. Although Odysseus may have gone to the extreme, the gods see it as fair.
- Austin, U.S. Army

B. Violations against family prioritized over violations against country's cultural codes.



When pressed to explain why the ancient Greek gods approve Odysseus's slaughtering of over 100 men and maids, veterans point to the suitors' long-running violation of Odysseus's wife and their abuse of his son – thereby prioritizing abuses against one's family over abuses against a country's cultural codes, in justifying this slaughtering.

The reason they [Odysseus and Telemachus] are absolved from the murder is because it is fair. Although it might be illegal in the system of Ithaca, the amount of suffering Odysseus endured and the amount of abuse his son and wife suffered justifies killing everyone.
-Tim, U.S. Navy

C. Literary ambiguities and complex moral questions entertained – but cautiously.



Unlike lyric poetry, epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* go large – they sing a country's anthem and they openly wrestle with cultural and ethical ambiguities. Veterans embraced these ambiguities – albeit, sometimes awkwardly.

As seen before, the justice system is not perfect, the law doesn't keep bad people off the streets. Similar to the Show “Dexter” where a forensics agent goes undercover to kill bad people that the law cannot simply resolve. Dexter is overall doing the community a large favor by killing bad people. But what he's doing is very illegal. Odysseus luckily has the Gods to back him up in his endeavors to restore peace to Ithaca.
-Tyler, U.S. Marine