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Honors English Literature

18 February 2022

Suffering: A Universal Human Experience

Suffering is a key part of the human experience. Human history is full of examples of suffering, and individuals in today's time also face many difficulties in everyday life. Even though *The Odyssey* is over 3,000 years old, its stories are applicable to life today in many ways, a crucial example of this being how to respond to suffering. In *The Odyssey*, Homer shows that humans cannot avoid suffering without facing consequences, and they must instead find some way to respond to it. There are a variety of ways in which individuals can respond to suffering, depending on the specific situation and the tools available to them. Individuals can either accept their powerlessness to fix the suffering and physically or emotionally endure it, pray to the gods and keep hope, or try to fix the root cause of the suffering.

Throughout *The Odyssey*, Homer shows that it is impossible to avoid suffering without facing dire consequences. Individuals encounter suffering in many aspects of daily life. Those who are unwilling to put in the work to face their suffering and instead try to take the shortcut to avoid it will ultimately face the repercussions. An example of this is when Odysseus's men eat the Sun God's cattle despite receiving many warnings not to do so. After escaping Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus and his men reach the island of the Sun God. Tiresias and Circe both strictly warned Odysseus and his men not to eat the Sun God's cattle, no matter the difficult circumstances they might encounter. When Odysseus falls asleep, however, his men disobey him and make the irrational choice to eat the cattle. The text states, "Meanwhile, Eurylochus

proposed a foolish plan./ ‘Listen, my friends! You have already suffered/ too much. All human deaths are hard to bear./ But starving is most miserable of all./ So let us poach the finest of these cattle,/ and sacrifice them to the deathless gods./ If we get home to Ithaca, at once/ we will construct a temple to the Sun God,/ with treasure in it. If he is so angry/ about these cows that he decides to wreck/ our ship, and if the other gods agree—/ I would prefer to drink the sea and die/ at once, than perish slowly, shriveled up/ here on this desert island’” (312). After their ship runs out of supplies, Odysseus’s men are hungry and cannot avoid the temptation of the Sun God’s cattle. Eurylochus convinces the other men that they can and should end their suffering by eating the Sun God’s cattle and that they will not face the consequences if they build a temple to the Sun God when they return to Ithaca. They are not willing to suffer more than they already have, and they think the solution is to take the shortcut. After making this decision, however, the crew members soon face the consequences of their actions when Zeus kills them by striking their ship with lightning, showing that the crew’s efforts to avoid suffering ultimately resulted in their death. This example demonstrates that evading the realities of one’s suffering is not worth it in the end, as individuals will face a dreadful fate for it.

The consequences of fleeing suffering are not limited to facing wrath from the gods. In fact, the consequences can be mental or emotional. This is shown when Odysseus’s men eat the lotus given to them by the Lotus-Eaters, which gives them a false sense of bliss while at the same time making them forget who they are and where they come from. Homer writes, “The scouts encountered humans, Lotus-Eaters,/ who did not hurt them. They just shared with them/ their sweet delicious fruit. But as they ate it,/ they lost the will to come back and bring news/ to me. They wanted only to stay there,/ feeding on lotus with the Lotus-Eaters./ They had forgotten home” (243). When Odysseus’s men eat the lotus, they forget all of their hardships and do not

need to worry about the outside world, thus avoiding mental pain and grief. In the process, though, they forget all that makes them human: their loved ones, their purpose, and their home. Though it is unclear whether or not the men are capable of consciously making the choice not to eat the lotus, they willingly or unwillingly succumb to it. This shows that evading suffering always comes at a great price. Odysseus's men gain something superficial but at the same time forget everything that makes their lives meaningful. For years they tried to reach home, but after eating the lotus, they know nothing of their home or their purpose. The example of the Lotus-Eaters shows that giving in to appealing shortcuts to end suffering always comes at a cost that outweighs the superficial benefits.

The effects of avoiding suffering may take time to become reality. Though it is possible that individuals may avoid the consequences in the short term, they will always have to face them in the long term. For example, the suitors try to live off of Odysseus's wealth for many years. They do not want to go through the long process of building their own wealth and prestige. Instead, they take advantage of Odysseus's absence to live lavishly in his palace. Penelope, having to deal with the suitors every day, speaks to their insolence many times in the book. In Book 21 of *The Odyssey*, she says, ““Now listen, lords. You keep on coming/ to this house every day, to eat and drink,/ wasting the wealth of someone who has been/ away too long”” (462). Penelope complains about how the suitors are living comfortably in Odysseus's palace, placing a burden on the entire household. She explains how they are “wasting the wealth of someone who has been/ away too long,” showing how the suitors are unwilling to put in the hard work to make their living themselves (462). Though they live happily in the short term, the suitors finally face their comeuppance when Odysseus returns to Ithaca, thirsty for revenge. Homer writes, “Clear Odysseus scowled back and sneered,/ ‘Dogs! So you thought I would not

come back home/ from Troy? And so you fleeced my house, and raped/ my slave girls, and you flirted with my wife/ while I am still alive! You did not fear/ the gods who live in heaven, and you thought/ no man would ever come to take revenge./ Now you are trapped inside the snares of death” (477). With the help of the gods, Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca. In this quote, he explains all of the terrible acts the suitors committed in his absence. Odysseus passionately declares how he will give just punishment to the suitors for their bad deeds. Though the suitors’ plan to exploit Odysseus’s wealth works in the short term, in the end, they become “trapped inside the snares of death” when Odysseus arrives (477). Thus, the suitors themselves bear the responsibility for the ill fate of death that comes upon them, as they are unwilling to earn their living the hard way. Through multiple examples, *The Odyssey* demonstrates that evading suffering always comes at a price that outweighs the short-term benefits. Things that come easy are not worth it in the end, as they come with grave, inescapable consequences. It is part of the human experience to face suffering, and individuals must use their mental and physical willpower to navigate their lives successfully.

In situations in which individuals are powerless to fix the suffering, they must first accept the reality of their suffering. Sometimes, humans cannot control the unfortunate events that happen to them, and they are in no position to change them. In such instances, individuals must first accept their powerlessness to change the situation. Calypso is a character who demonstrates acceptance of her suffering when Hermes arrives at Ogygia, commanding her to release Odysseus. The text states, “Calypso shuddered and let fly at him./ ‘You cruel, jealous gods! You bear a grudge/ whenever any goddess takes a man/ to sleep with as a lover in her bed... Still, I know/ no other god can change the will of Zeus./ So let him go, if that is Zeus’ order,/ across the barren sea” (184). In this quote, Calypso complains about the unfairness of her situation. The

gods are allowed to keep mortals as their lovers, but goddesses do not have the freedom to do this. If they do, they will be scolded by the male gods. Though she complains, Calypso realizes that she must yield to Hermes's demands, as she does not have a choice. She accepts that she will have to suffer under Odysseus's absence as "no other god can change the will of Zeus," and she does not try to fight this reality (184). Telemachus also demonstrates acceptance of suffering when he tells Penelope that their situation, in which they must deal with the grief of Odysseus's absence, is outside of their control, as it was fated by the gods. He explains how nothing they can do could bring Odysseus back home. Telemachus says, "Mother, no,/ you must not criticize the loyal bard/ for singing as it pleases him to sing./ Poets are not to blame for how things are;/ Zeus is; he gives to each as is his will./ Do not blame Phemius because he told/ about the Greek disasters" (116). Telemachus reprimands his mother for scolding the bard for singing the tales of Odysseus. Telemachus explains that "Poets are not to blame for how things are;/ Zeus is; he gives to each as is his will" (116). Some suffering is outside of the control of humans.

Telemachus comments on how the suffering was decreed by the gods, a power that mortals cannot influence. Telemachus explains how the bard should not be criticized, as Odysseus's absence is a mere fact that cannot be changed. Therefore, Telemachus and Penelope must accept that they will suffer and find a way to live with it. Odysseus also displays acceptance of his suffering throughout his long journey at sea. Odysseus's ability to accept suffering is a critical reason why he survives: he does not fight the unfavorable conditions that come his way but instead acknowledges his powerlessness to change them. Odysseus says, "More pain? How will it end? I am afraid/ the goddess spoke the truth: that I will have/ a sea of sufferings before I reach/ my homeland. It is coming true!... I can hold on to one thing: certain death" (190). Before Odysseus leaves Ogygia, Calypso tells him that his path will be a long one filled with suffering

and pain. Odysseus accepts this harsh reality. After getting released from Calypso, Odysseus is peacefully sailing towards Phaeacia. Poseidon, enraged, changes Odysseus's path and brings a storm his way. Odysseus knows that what comes his way is outside of his control, and he realizes that immense pain lies ahead of him. He has accepted the gods' will and understands that he is fated to suffer in his journey. Through the examples of Calypso, Telemachus, and Odysseus, Homer shows the importance of accepting suffering when one does not have the power to change the circumstances they face.

Once individuals have accepted their powerlessness to change the situation, they must endure the situation, as giving in to the suffering could result in grave consequences. Many individuals in *The Odyssey* demonstrate physical endurance in the face of suffering. For example, Odysseus physically endures his suffering when he gets shipwrecked on an unknown island after leaving Ogygia. The text states, "He grabbed a rock as he was swept along/ with both hands, and clung to it, groaning, till/ the wave passed by. But then the swell rushed back,/ and struck him hard and hurled him out to sea./ As when an octopus, dragged from its den,/ has many pebbles sticking to its suckers,/ so his strong hands were skinned against the rocks'" (194). After getting shipwrecked, Odysseus grabs a rock and hangs on for a long period of time, hoping he will get saved eventually. Odysseus realizes that there is no other option for him to survive: he can either hang on and have a chance at survival or die immediately. The epic simile in this quote emphasizes Odysseus's physical resilience. Odysseus is being compared to an octopus, gripping the rock tightly with unwavering determination. Odysseus does not give up even though holding on to the rock is painful. In the end, he is able to hold on long enough until Athena helps him reach the shore. This shows that when individuals are unable to change their situation, endurance is necessary in order to have a chance at survival.

Additionally, individuals can demonstrate mental endurance in the face of suffering through strong willpower and resolution. An example of mental endurance in *The Odyssey* is when Odysseus watches Scylla eat his men. Odysseus is forced to witness his friends cry out his name while he can do nothing about it. Still, he tolerates this situation because he knows that he must focus on his larger goal to reach home. The text states, “The men were seized by fear./ But while our frightened gaze was on Charybdis,/ Scylla snatched six men from the ship—my strongest,/ best fighters. Looking back from down below,/ I saw their feet and hands up high, as they/ were carried off. In agony they cried/ to me and called my name—their final words./ As when a fisherman out on a cliff/ casts his long rod and line set round with oxhorn/ to trick the little fishes with his bait;/ when one is caught, he flings it gasping back/ onto the shore—so those men gasped as Scylla/ lifted them up high to her rocky cave/ and at the entrance ate them up—still screaming,/ still reaching out to me in their death throes./ That was the most heartrending sight I saw/ in all the time I suffered on the sea” (309). Odysseus initially tries to protect his crew members from Scylla. However, his efforts prove fruitless, and Scylla grabs Odysseus’s men and eats them. Odysseus feels immense agony as his friends call out his name, but he realizes he cannot change the circumstances. However, Odysseus has gone through much suffering, and he is accustomed to it. He summons the emotional willpower to continue despite the pain, as he realizes that he must go on to his next destination, the island of the Sun God, to progress in his journey. Clearly, Odysseus’s resilience in the face of suffering allows him to remain focused on his larger goal to return home, helping him succeed in his journey,

Individuals can alleviate the pain of their suffering by praying to the gods and asking for help. This provides a sense of reassurance that a higher being is watching over the individual, protecting him or her from danger. Odysseus is a character who prays to the gods for success

throughout his journey. An example of this is when he asks the gods to help him reach safely to shore after escaping Poseidon's wrath. Odysseus says, "Unknown god, hear me! How I longed for you!/ I have escaped the salt sea and Poseidon./ Even the deathless gods respect a man/ who is as lost as I am now. I have/ gone through so much and reached your flowing streams./ Pity me, lord! I am your supplicant" (194). In this quote, Odysseus is swimming towards the land, praying to the gods to cease the current and bring him safely to land. Odysseus realizes that he cannot directly change his situation, so he appeals to the gods, divine beings who have the power to aid him in his difficulty. This provides him with a sense of hope for his survival, which keeps him going throughout his journey. Without having this outlet of prayer, Odysseus would lose motivation and lack the courage to keep going through his difficulties. Furthermore, we can see the importance of praying to the gods from the point of view of Odysseus's family members and slaves, who long for Odysseus's return. They cannot actively do anything to bring Odysseus back, so they pray to the gods, who have the ability to influence mortals' fates, to bring him home. This gives them a sense of hope, however small, for Odysseus's return. For instance, when Odysseus disguises himself and arrives at Eumaeus's home, Eumaeus prays to Zeus for Odysseus's return. The text states, "The cowherd said,/ 'O Father Zeus, please make this wish come true,/ that he may come! May spirits guide him home!/ Then you would see how well-prepared I am/ to fight for him!' Eumaeus prayed in turn/ that all the gods would bring Odysseus back home" (467). Before talking to the disguised Odysseus, Eumaeus is disheartened and has little hope for Odysseus's return. However, when Odysseus reminds him that there is still a chance for Odysseus's arrival, Eumaeus regains hope and prays eagerly to Zeus to bring Odysseus home. Eumaeus has suffered greatly as a result of Odysseus's absence, as he has been taunted consistently by the suitors. In response to these difficult conditions, Eumaeus finds

comfort and hope in the power of the gods to change his situation by bringing Odysseus home. Like Eumaeus, Penelope endures much emotional suffering throughout *The Odyssey* due to the absence of her son and husband. To assuage her grief, she prays to the gods, which gives her a sense of hope that her prayers may be heard and things may change for the better. After she realizes that Telemachus left to find Odysseus, she is deeply worried for his safety and prays to Zeus to protect Telemachus. The text states, ““Hear me, Athena, tireless child of Zeus,/ if my quick-minded husband ever gave you/ fat thighs of beef or lamb here in our halls,/ remember now and save the son I love./ Protect him from the abuses of those suitors!?” She wailed aloud; the goddess heard her prayer” (176). Penelope realizes that she cannot do anything to bring Telemachus back home; he has already left and his safety is out of her direct control.

Additionally, being a woman, she does not have much authority in the household to make influential decisions that could bring Telemachus back home. Due to her powerlessness to change the situation, she appeals to the gods, higher beings who have the power to actualize her wishes. This gives her solace, as the gods are watching over her son and taking care of him. It also provides her with optimism for a good future, as the gods have immense power to influence the lives of mortals. Through these examples, it is clear that prayer provides individuals with comfort and optimism in their times of suffering.

Sometimes, individuals can respond to suffering by trying to fix the root cause of the misery. In order to do this, individuals must have the willpower to deal with the obstacles they face as they go about in their journeys to end the suffering. For instance, Telemachus tries to end his suffering by seeking his father, traveling to new places for the first time. Telemachus says, ““Nanny, please pour sweet wine in jugs for me,/...Load up/ all these provisions secretly. At nightfall,/ I will come here and get them, when my mother/ has gone upstairs to go to sleep. I am/

leaving for Sparta and for sandy Pylos,/ to learn about my father's journey home'" (131). After Athena's conversation, Telemachus is motivated to find his father. He realizes that his journey may not end favorably, as it is possible he may never find his father. Still, he is determined to at least try to end his and his mother's suffering. The suitors have been looting Odysseus's wealth and courting Penelope for many years, and Telemachus is driven to find Odysseus and fix these issues. With the help of Athena, Telemachus has the willpower to deal with the challenges he will face. Even though he does not find Odysseus on his journey, the effort shows that he is making a critical attempt to end his suffering. Another example that illustrates the importance of actively ending suffering is Odysseus killing the suitors. The suitors have been the root cause of Odysseus and his family's suffering for twenty years. After going through a long path to get home, Odysseus is ready to take revenge on the suitors and return stability to Ithaca. Odysseus declares, "Even if you give me all/ your whole inheritance, and even more,/ I will not keep my hands away from slaughter/ until I pay you suitors back for all/ your wickedness. You have two choices: fight,/ or run away: just try to save your lives!/ Not one of you will get away from death'" (478). After facing many long years at sea, Odysseus is finally home. His family has been suffering for many years due to the suitors' "wickedness" (498). He knows that the best way to end his and his family's suffering is to attack the root cause of it, the suitors. Odysseus has the willpower and courage to take this course of action because he is fueled with twenty long years of suffering and has the support of Athena. He is committed to killing the suitors to bring stability back to his household. These examples show that individuals can deal with suffering by trying to attack the source, a path that requires the individual to be prepared to deal with setbacks and challenges they face.

In *The Odyssey*, Homer shows that humans cannot avoid suffering without facing consequences, and they must instead find a way to respond to it. Individuals can respond to suffering by accepting their powerlessness to end the suffering and physically or emotionally endure it, praying to the gods and keeping hope, or trying to fix the root cause of the suffering. *The Odyssey* shows that escaping suffering and finding shortcuts is not a viable solution, as demonstrated by the suitors who loot Odysseus's wealth, Odysseus's men who eat the Sun God's cattle, and Odysseus's men who eat the lotus. All of these individuals face dreadful consequences as a result of their attempt to avoid suffering. Once individuals realize that they cannot avoid suffering, they can choose to accept the reality of the suffering due to powerlessness to change the situation. Telemachus, Odysseus, and Calypso demonstrate acceptance of their suffering throughout the story by recognizing that the circumstances they face are out of their hands. Once individuals have accepted their suffering, they must brave the suffering, physically or mentally. Through clinging on to rocks and trees and watching his comrades die before his eyes, Odysseus demonstrates physical and mental resilience to his suffering. Despite the physical and emotional toll that these experiences place on him, he proceeds with his journey with a strong will. Additionally, individuals can respond to suffering by praying to the gods, as it provides comfort and hope that a higher being is protecting the individual. Odysseus consistently prays for success on his journey at sea. Penelope and Eumaeus, who both have little power to take direct action to end their suffering, use the outlet of prayer to lessen their misery. Finally, individuals who are strong-willed and ready to deal with obstacles they face can respond to suffering by trying to fix the root cause of the suffering. Odysseus does this when he attacks the suitors, and Telemachus does this when he goes on a journey to find his father. Altogether, *The Odyssey* validates that suffering has existed since the beginning of human history. We should take inspiration from

characters like Odysseus, who show us how to endure suffering, and Telemachus, who show us that we should take the step to end our suffering, and apply these strategies to problems we encounter in our daily lives.