

Notes on An Odyssey, by Daniel Mendelsohn

General comments. The book is a memoir written by a professor at Bard College about the author's relationship with his father. Daniel teaches classics at Bard and agrees that his eighty-year old father can participate in Daniel's winter semester course on Homer's long poem, The Odyssey, which chronicles the hero Odysseus' perilous journey home to Ithaca following the Trojan War. The two of them then take a trip around the Mediterranean to revisit many of the places that Odysseus traveled to over his ten-year ordeal to return home.

The book is both an entertaining analysis of Homer's great work and an emotional and insightful story of an evolving father-son relationship. I read and studied a lot of Greek and Latin literature in my salad days, but never fully appreciated the richness of the writings. This work brings to life the wisdom and humanity of the epic work by Homer.

There are a number of things that I found attractive about the book. The first is the author's informative analysis of the language of the poem. Daniel analyzes and explains the meanings of key Greek terms and concepts – particular words that have complex meanings that don't easily translate into the English language. The second is the writing style of both Homer and Daniel. Each author likes to spin a story, one in which the narrative unfolds not in a linear fashion, but through a series of twists and turns and circles ("ring composition"). Mendelsohn's writing style mimics that of Homer to some degree in that he uses collateral development of points to provide greater color and import to critical events. The third is the book's exploration of important themes about human relationships, of those between father and son and between husband and wife.

I list in no particular order specific examples of these points (and others).

1. *The tension between anonymity and identity is a major element of the Odyssey's plot. For its hero's life will depend on his ability to conceal his identity from enemies and to reveal it, when the proper time comes, to those by whom he wants to be recognized: first his son, then his wife, and finally his father. Odysseus is ultimately successful, not because of his brute strength, but because of his intelligence, cunning, finesse, and, as argued repeatedly by Daniel's father, the timely help of the gods.*
2. *I was fascinated by the lineage of the study of the Odyssey going back centuries (the actual events having taken place following the Trojan War and the fall of Troy around 1180 B.C.), tracing from current professors back to the Italian humanists of the Renaissance (who created the first printed versions), to the Greek-speaking scholars of Byzantium (who preserved the knowledge of Greek in the eastern Mediterranean from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries A.D.), past the Byzantines to the learned men of Late Antiquity, the 400s and 500s A.D., to the enthusiasts of Greek literature who flourished during the Roman Empire period, and finally to the earliest and most authoritative scholars of Homer, starting in the third century B.C. who served as heads of the Library*

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of Alexandria, etc. In particular, I was most interested in the debate among academics about whether Homer actually wrote the epic poem or whether Homer and others created an oral history that over time was committed to writing and massaged by others.

3. Daniel notes that Homer's skillful manipulation of the parallel homecomings (that of Agamemnon vs Odysseus) reminds us of a familiar psychological truth: that a strong sense of what our own family is like, what its weaknesses and strengths are, the relative degrees of its conventionality and eccentricity, its normalcy or pathology, is often impossible to establish until we are old enough to compare it intelligently with the families of others; something we start doing only when we begin to perceive that our family is not the entire world.
4. The discussion of the marriage bond – what holds two people together for long periods – is very perceptive. The relevant Greek word is “homophrosyne” (the fundamental quality applicable to the relationship between husbands and wives), which essentially means like-mindedness – the ability of two people to think in the same way. Odysseus and Penelope are much older when they reunite. Will they be able to recognize each other, physically, when he comes home? What is it that binds the two following twenty years of absence? What is it that allows a marriage to endure beyond the years when physical attraction is a driver?
5. The meaning of life and disillusionment. Achilles' realization that you can spend your whole life believing in something, and then you get to a point when you realize you were wrong about the whole thing: he had willingly exchanged the possibility of a long life in return for a short life with undying glory, that paramount motivation for heroic action. When Odysseus meets his former comrade in Hades, he is bent on telling Achilles he made the right choice, only to be sternly corrected by Achilles. The Iliad lauds death through valor, whereas, in the Odyssey, the overriding drive is to survive at all costs, the poem suggesting that a life at any price is preferable to glory among the dead.
6. The pinnacle of life. Was the journey more important and inspiring than ultimate attainment of the destination, being the return to Ithaca? Tennyson's 19th century poem, called “Ulysseys,” talks of an aging hero reflecting on a bitter irony: life back on Ithaca was not what he hoped for – life has become dull, as Odysseus longs for the adventure of earlier days. Being home in familiar surroundings rules out something very fundamental from one's life – there's no more excitement and uncertainty.

I believe this was a serious issue for some of the “Greatest Generation” survivors of the Second World War.

7. Father and son. In his formative years, unable to bond with his father (whose personality and interests differed markedly from those of the son – i.e., the father's devotion to mathematics, rigidity, apparent lack of emotion, and aversion to displays of physical

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affection), Daniel developed relationships with other mentors that were more appropriate to serve as father figures, particularly teachers (those with strong interests in music, opera, ballet, theater, culture in general). These folks helped Daniel develop his own perspective on what he wanted to do with his life: “It was from Fred that I understood that beauty and pleasure are at the center of teaching. For the best teacher is the one who wants you to find meaning in the things that have given him pleasure, too, so that the appreciation of their beauty will outlive him.” It is apparent that, in Daniel’s classics course at Bard, he makes an effort to share with his students, and with his somewhat skeptical father, the jewels and insights that, upon reflection, derive from the lines of the *Odyssey*.

8. *The meaning of “rough justice”.* The slaughter of Odysseus’ soldiers following their eating of the Cattle of the Sun; and the same disastrous result for all of the Suitors – even the nice Suitor, Amphinomus. Why? Because it’s a rough world, says Dan’s father, recalling the little guy who’d been broken by life, or fate, or bad luck. The father’s rigid and uncompromising attitude reflected his own life experiences and sense of justice: the inflexible application of severe standards of honesty and of intellectual performance to himself, to his friends, and to his children. You had to be tough. The world didn’t compromise, after all, so why should you?
9. *Failure and the next generation.* The father had many opportunities to advance his interests and career, but over the course of his life, failed to take full advantage of them – examples include failure to seek out the best school (Bronx Science) for which he was qualified, failure to advance further in his study of Latin, failure to complete his dissertation to obtain his Ph D. Burdened in retrospect by these disappointments, the father pushed his children to complete their education and to excel beyond the achievements he himself had realized.

This is something that I observed in my own family, where my father failed, for reasons unbeknownst to me, to complete his law studies (with life’s consequences, occasioned by the lack of a law degree) and constantly pushed his sons to complete their education.

10. *Sons of the father.* There is a contrary theme in the memoir about sons’ not achieving the greatness of the father – a theme in Greek literature, which recurs throughout the poem regarding the life of Telemachus, Odysseus’ son.

“A father makes his son out of his flesh and out of his mind and then shapes him with his ambitions and dreams, with his cruelties and failures, too. But a son, although he is of the father, cannot know his father totally, because the father precedes him; his father has always already lived so much more than the son has, so that the son can never catch up, can never know everything. No wonder that the Greeks thought that few sons are the equals of their fathers; that most fall short, all too few surpass them. It’s not about value;

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it's about knowledge. The father knows the son whole, but the son can never know the father."

In life, my father was a mystery to me. He lived before me, went to war in the Pacific, he returned home to resume a normal life and, in many ways, remained distant, rigid, and uncompromising, at least in his relations with his three sons, save at the very end of his life (following the death of our mother). Daniel's memoir resonated with me.

11. *Classroom dynamics. I very much enjoyed the back-and-forth discussions in the seminar room and Daniel's well-developed skill in remembering the names of each of his students by reference to their visual characteristics – Jack of the Dimples, Nina Dark Eyes, Don Quixote Tom, Trisha of the Botticelli Hair. Very clever. I still remember, as a first-year law student, sitting in my torts class with about 100 other students. Professor Marshall Shapo, a diminutive but very sharp-tongued fellow, presided. Anyway, it became clear to all that Shapo, by the end of the third week of class, had remarkably managed to memorize everyone's name (he asked that we should sit in the same spot in the first several weeks). Fortunately, I managed to keep a low profile and avoid his wrath until well into the month of November when, unexpectedly, he called my name and said "Igoe, stand up and tell us what you think of the holding of this case?!" I stood up and presented what I thought was a well-reasoned and, after 10 weeks of training, lawyerly response. Shapo paused, stared at me, and then curtly said, "Igoe, you are still back in September....."*

12. *The value of a classical education. Over the years my thinking has tipped back and forth on the value of studying the classics – perhaps I spent too much time on ancient texts at the expense of other studies. The older I have become, however, the greater my appreciation for classical literature. See the accompanying New York Times Op Ed piece by Frank Bruni, where he quotes a college president who asserts that a college education should prepare you for all of your life...It should make you a "more thoughtful, reflective, self-possessed and authentic citizen, lover, partner, parent and member of the global community....And what better idiom for the instruction than the classics? They're the foundation of so many of America's ideals and institutions. They're the through line from yesterday to tomorrow."*

Tom Igoe – 26 September 2018
