Odysseus and the Sirens



Homer tells the story of Odysseus—also known as Ulysses—a respected warrior who is returning home, to the island of Ithaca, from the Trojan War.

It's a war the hero never wants to fight in the first place. It isn't that he is afraid to fight. His concern stems from an oracle's prophecy predicting that if he fights, his post-war journey home will take a *really* long time.

Odysseus doesn't want to leave his family for such a long time, so he pretends to be a lunatic. His efforts to avoid the conflict fail, however. He ends-up fighting in the Trojan War (during which he becomes a hero).

The Odyssey is Homer's tale of Odysseus' homeward journey, after the Trojan War is over. Likely written during the second half of the 8th Century, BC, *The Odyssey* was popular throughout the entire Mediterranean region. We know this because artifacts, like Greek vases, depict aspects of the story.



Why is *The Odyssey* still popular? It's a timeless and fast-paced tale which features a hero on a seafaring adventure traveling through exotic lands, enduring terrible storms and horrifying monsters. All of this is set against an enthralling, supernatural atmosphere where gods move around in humble disguises so they can be involved in human activities.

Those gods, of course, are capable of casting spells and curses. They can predict things, which actually come true, and their warnings to humans can help people avoid catastrophes—provided, of course, that they heed the warnings.

At the center of it all is a human hero called Odysseus (Ulysses) who is a sympathetic, complex man. He tries to do the right thing and usually pays attention to what the gods tell him.

He especially heeds advice from the goddess Circe who warns him about the "Sirens." These two monsters, who pretend to be beautiful women with amazing voices, try to assure sailors, who pass their island, that they just want to entertain them with beautiful melodies.

What they really want, however, is to kill them.

What is the message about the Sirens which Circe gives to Odysseus? Among other things, she warns him that his men must fill their ears with wax so they do not hear the Sirens' beguiling songs:

> *First you will come to the Sirens who enchant all who come near them. If any one unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens, his wife and children will never welcome him home again, for they sit in a green field and warble him to death with the sweetness of their song.*
>
> *There is a great heap of dead men's bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them. Therefore pass these Sirens by, and stop your men's ears with wax that none of them may hear; but if you like you can listen yourself, for you may get the men to bind you as you stand upright on a cross-piece half way up the mast, and they must lash the rope's ends to the mast itself, that you may have the pleasure of listening. If you beg and pray the men to unloose you, then they must bind you faster.* (See Samuel Butler's translation of *The Odyssey*, Book XII, online via MIT.)

This warning triggers fear in Odysseus. He heeds Circe's warning, taking care to completely block his men's ears with bees' wax.

The good ship glides across a calm and grey sea toward an island of sloping meadows, golden in the sun. The crew wants to land, but Odysseus knows better. He tells them:

> *That is the Island of the Sirens. Circe warned me to steer clear of it, for the Sirens are beautiful but deadly.*
>
> *They sit beside the ocean, combing their long golden hair and singing to passing sailors. But anyone who hears their song is bewitched by its sweetness, and they are drawn to that island like iron to a magnet. And their ship smashes upon rocks as sharp as spears. And those sailors join the many victims of the Sirens in a meadow filled with skeletons.*

Taking a large block of beeswax, a gift from Circe, Odysseus breaks it into small pieces and gives one to each of his men. He tells them to soften it and put it into their ears. In this way, they will not hear the song of the Sirens.

But Odysseus wants to hear that famous song and still survive. Circe has told him how to do it.

He orders his sailors to tie him firmly to the ship's mast. When he is firmly tied, and his men have the beeswax in their ears, they row their ship alongside the island.

Then Odysseus hears the magical song of the Sirens as it floats over the summertime waters:

> *Odysseus, bravest of heroes,*
> *Draw near to us, on our green island,*
> *Odysseus, we'll teach you wisdom,*
> *We'll give you love, sweeter than honey.*
> *The songs we sing, soothe away sorrow,*
> *And in our arms, you will be happy.*
> *Odysseus, bravest of heroes,*
> *The songs we sing, will bring you peace.*

When he hears the words and the music, the song enchants Odysseus' heart. He longs to plunge into the waves and to swim to the island. He wants to embrace the Sirens.

He strains against the bonds which hold him to the ship's mast. He strains so hard that the bonds cut deeply into the flesh of his back and arms.

Nodding and scowling at his ear-plugged men, he urges them to free him. Expecting this reaction, the men row harder and harder with their oars.

To Odysseus, who is bewitched by the song, the Sirens look as beautiful as Helen of Troy. To his crew, made deaf with beeswax, the Sirens seem like hungry monsters with vicious, crooked claws.

The ship speeds forward and soon the song of the Sirens is an echo of an echo. Only then do the crew members stop rowing and unplug their ears.

Eurylochus unbinds his grateful captain, Odysseus, who has now come to his senses.

By heeding the advice of the goddess Circe, Odysseus has avoided a catastrophe. He will face many more trials and temptations before he reaches his home and family.

The picture, illustrating this story, is “Ulysses and the Sirens,” an oil-on-canvas painting which John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) created in 1891. The original painting is maintained at the National Gallery of Victoria (in Melbourne, Australia).

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Credits:

Why Should We Care about Odysseus and the Sirens?Image, described above, by John William Waterhouse.

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Questions 2 Ponder

Why Should We Care about Odysseus and the Sirens?

Odysseus instructs his men to tie him to the mast of his boat. In this way, he can listen to the enticing songs of the Sirens but not give-in to their temptations.

What does such a story have to do with 21st-century life? We don't live in a world of make-believe or in a place where it takes ten years to get home. However ... we do live in a world which is filled with temptations.

Have you ever been tempted? Were you able to resist the temptation? How?

If you couldn't resist the temptation, do you regret giving in? What would have helped you to resist?

Have you ever had to give-up something you really wanted? Did giving it up make you resentful or relieved? Why?

What if, like Odysseus, you could experience whatever it is that is tempting you, but you also had a way—also like Odysseus—to keep you from totally falling prey to it? Would that be a help or a hindrance in living your life?

If that were possible, what would be your temptation (akin to hearing the Sirens' songs) and what would be your resistance (akin to being strapped to a ship's mast so you can't succumb to a temptation capable of ruining your life)?

Media Stream



Ulysses and the Sirens

Painting, described above, maintained at the National Gallery of Victoria; online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Odysseus and the Sirens - Greek Pottery

This piece of Greek pottery, from ancient times, depicts the story of Odysseus as he travels back to Ithaca following the Trojan War.

The artifact is an Attic red-figured stamnos—a piece of pottery used to store liquids—created circa 480-470 BC, showing Odysseus and the Sirens.

The hero, of *The Odyssey*, is securely fastened to his ship's mast so he does not succumb to the enticing sounds of the Sirens.

The artifact, which stands at 13 ¾ inches (35.3 cm), is maintained by the British Museum in London.

Click on the image for a better view.

Artifact, described above, is maintained at the British Museum (Upper floor, Room 69, Greece and Rome: Daily Life). Accession number GR 1843.11-3.31 (Cat. Vases E 440). Created by an artist known as "Siren Painter."

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Ulysses - Hero of Homer's Odyssey

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