Teaching Homer’s Odyssey Through Charles Darwin’s The Descent of Man: An Ancient Version of Evolution

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Abstract: This paper argues that Homer’s *Odyssey* was the world’s introduction to ideas about human evolution popularized by Darwin and that these ideas are recognizable in the individuals and communities that the hero and his son encounter on their journeys. Homer represents the stages of human evolution through the characteristics of various social groups described in the *Odyssey*, such as the Cyclopes, Lastrygonians, Ithacans, Kikones, and Phaeacians, as well as through the characteristics of noteworthy individuals such as Helen and Penelope. This comparison of different communities and individuals seems to mirror Darwin’s hierarchy of evolution in *The Descent of Man*. Ultimately, Homer seems to demonstrate that the participation of women and pursuit of peace serve as markers of a society's development, anticipating the ideas of Darwin by over two millennia.

Keywords: Homer, *Odyssey*, Odysseus, evolution, Charles Darwin, Cyclopes, Lastrygonians, Phaeacians, social groups, human development

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Teaching Homer’s *Odyssey* Through Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*: An Ancient Version of Evolution

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When working with material in literature and history from the distant past, teachers are often challenged to show students the relevance of the courses to contemporary life, and Homer’s *Odyssey* is arguably the easiest to defend. Besides achievements in language and the oral tradition, Homer is the origin of Western literature, for he introduced a narrative structure and themes that are found throughout our literary history: the hero’s journey and return; the relation between gods and mortals; the roles of women in patriarchal cultures; familial relations; the contrast between militant and peaceful cultures; and so on. Moreover, Homer’s timeless vision and philosophy span the ages, and by examining the parallels between the *Odyssey* and Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871), this paper will show that Homer actually introduced to the world Darwin’s ideas about human evolution.

In order to see the parallels between Homer’s vision of human development in the *Odyssey* and Darwin’s principles of progress in *The Descent of Man*, we must reorder the sequence of individuals and communities that the hero and his son encounter on their journeys. We can then recognize the similarities between Darwin’s biological, intellectual, material, and cultural evolution and the ladder of progress presented in Homer’s poem—from the most primitive form of caveman in the Stone Age to the most civilized society in the Bronze Age of the Trojan War.

Briefly stated, in *The Descent of Man* Darwin gives us ample evidence and ex-
amples of the “community of descent” from which Western humanity evolved, and he distinguishes the qualities from the lowest to the highest orders of man. He includes not only the use of tools for building, survival, protection, and creating art, but also the intellectual, moral, emotional, and social faculties in human beings as they become more civilized. When Darwin compared the most advanced primates with human beings, we see the same qualities in the *Odyssey*:

… man alone is capable of progressive development; that he alone makes use of tools or fire, domesticates other animals, possesses property, or employs language; that no other animal is self-conscious, comprehends itself, has the power of abstraction, or possesses general ideas; that man alone has a sense of beauty, is liable to caprice, has the feeling of gratitude, mystery, &c.; believes in God[s], or is endowed with a conscience.\(^{56}\)

Over 2600 years earlier, the various characters, communities, and cultures in the *Odyssey* exhibit the same progression of “faculties” in those individuals and groups that can learn and develop in the ways Darwin describes in *The Descent of Man*.

Just as naturalists studied various people living at different stages of development in different parts of the world during Darwin’s time — and Darwin discusses the physiology and living conditions of such tribes in contrast to the “civilized” men in nineteenth-century England — so too Homer envisioned the simultaneity of different stages of development during his own time. Creatures from the Early Stone Age, for example, existed at the same time that people on the mainland in what is now Greece could be living opulent lives in Sparta and Scheria. Thus, like Darwin, Homer offers us a picture of the Mediterranean world in vastly different stages of human progress at the same time in history.

The most primitive humanoid form and behaviors in the *Odyssey* can be seen in Polyphemos, of the species called Cyclopes. While he is not technically mortal, being sired by Poseidon, god of the sea, and born to the sea nymph, Thoosa,\(^{57}\) the Cyclopes represent “a more primitive, bestial phase of existence.”\(^{58}\) Thus, they provide a good beginning for our study of human progress.

The Cyclopes are more advanced than the primates in using fire and basic

\(^{55}\) Darwin (1981I, p. 32).

\(^{56}\) Darwin (1981I, p. 49).

\(^{57}\) I do not suggest that Homer intended to say that sentient life emerged from the sea, as evolutionists do, but it is an intriguing coincidence that the primitive Cyclopes were born of the sea.

language, but they have only one eye, are cannibals and cave dwellers, and do not observe religious rituals or reveal other abstract thinking. With no tools for building, no knowledge of farming, and no sense of community, the Cyclopes lack the higher mental faculties, which Darwin calls “[a]rticulate language” as well as “observation, reason, invention, or imagination.” Homer suggests such limitation in giving them one eye for diminished vision, a metaphor for intellectual powers. Their language and sense of logic are primitive, so Odysseus easily tricks Polyphemos and reveals the vast difference between the hero and this Early Stone Age creature.

The next people on the ladder of evolution are the Laestrygonians in Book 10. While they have a town, roads, wagons, and houses, they are giant cannibals with limited communication skills, for according to Odysseus, they offer no hospitality or discussion before attacking. Using prehistoric weapons, these giants spear the Ithakans and throw huge boulders down on the ships to destroy them. Despite their advances, they are still living in the Stone Age, for they use what Darwin calls “stones and sticks” that the earliest people used for weapons.

We know little about the Kikones except that they are more advanced than the previous peoples. They live in a city by the sea, fight together for survival against a brutal enemy, the Greeks, and have domesticated animals for their use. Odysseus and his men — for no apparent reason but greed and lust — sack their city, kill the men, and rape the women. The Kikones who live inland respond to their people’s pleas for help, fighting on foot and on horses to defeat the Greeks, who seem to be the more primitive men here. In Homer’s movement from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age in this narrative, the Kikones have bronze-tipped spears, they have developed relatively sophisticated communications and defense, and they look like human beings with whom the Greeks desire to mate.

Ithaka would seem to be the obvious model of civilized behavior because it is the narrative focus of the epic, the home and goal of the epic’s hero, the site of the battle with the suitors, and the place where order is restored; however, Odysseus’ Ithaka is not advanced according to Homer’s — or Darwin’s — view of progress.

Odysseus and his companions on their way home from Troy reveal the brutality of warriors who participated in the Trojan War: while they have advanced weapons, they create nothing to show imagination and abstract thinking, and attack innocent communities for avaricious purposes and a misguided sense of glory. Moreover, they

60 Darwin (1981I, p. 51).
are equated with the animal kingdom when Kirke turns Odysseus’ men into pigs—according to their base instincts and behaviors—before she restores them to their human forms. Like Darwin, Homer shows that human beings are descended from animals when Kirke transforms men into pigs, wolves, and lions, the animals that they most resemble in their natures.

Odysseus and his Ithakan companions are also morally and emotionally deficient in Darwin’s terms. They are disloyal and distrustful to each other and brutal to others, and the warriors are clearly not the fittest for survival since only Odysseus reaches home. Since they are related to the families of the suitors, it is little wonder that the suitors also behave like less developed members of the human race. While there are men on Ithaka like Mentor and Laertes, who are kind and decent, the suitors are inferior intellectually, morally, and socially and can hardly be described as civilized. They lack conscience in showing no hospitality or respect to strangers, elders, or anyone else; they show no obeisance or gratitude to the gods; they turn the house of Odysseus and Telemachos into a pigsty; and they live slothful and gluttonous lives. They have no purpose except to enjoy themselves, create disorder, and marry the wife of the absent king in order to get the glory of her name and her dowry. In Kirke’s view of men, the suitors function like a pack of animals.

Thus, Ithaka is low on the evolutionary ladder. We see no sense of community or social order and no attempts to come to the aid of the besieged Penelope and her household. There is no evidence of abstract thinking while Penelope manipulates the suitors for four years, so they are not fit for survival, in the Darwinian sense.

However, Penelope, who is not Ithakan by birth, represents a higher intellectual and moral development: “knowing within her heart more than others, which Athene has given her”\(^2\), or what Lattimore calls her “wisdom” and “cleverness.”\(^3\) Her contempt for the suitors, their behavior and their values, shows that what they are is not acceptable to her. While she appreciates beauty and art, there seems to be little beauty in this high dwelling with its stone walls devoid of artistic embellishment.\(^4\) Penelope is more civilized in the Darwinian sense not only for her intellect and creative accomplishments, but because she expresses love for her son and sympathy when she extends hospitality to strangers and beggars. She pays tribute to the gods whom she reveres and who protect her. Her self-reflection, her imagination and

\(^1\) Lattimore (1975, 10.239).
\(^3\) Lattimore (1975, 2.116-8).
\(^4\) Lattimore (1975, 1.125ff. Even the gold cups and goblets and “polished tables” cannot be attributed to Ithakan creativity or appreciation of art, for they could have been part of Penelope’s dowry.
language skills, her sense of logic and strategy in deceiving the suitors, her role in assisting in the defeat of the suitors, and her clever challenge to Odysseus all place her in the higher range of Darwinian progress.

And yet, Homer shows that on Ithaka she is not appreciated, even by her son. Despite her significant role in the narrative framework of the epic and in aiding in the victory over the suitors, Penelope is not often seen or heard; for Odysseus returns to Ithaka to bring order to his home and his land, and reuniting with Penelope is a peripheral part of what awaits him. While other characters like Kalypso and even present-day commentators remark on his great love for his wife, Odysseus does not express such love. A comparison of the familial and social positions of Penelope and Arete of Scheria reveals Homer’s contrast between the two cultures and their different stage of evolutionary progress.

In Book 3, Telemachos introduces us to Nestor and his home at Pylos in southern Greece and thereby takes us to the next level of development. King Nestor, who fought beside Odysseus when they sacked the citadel of Troy, and his family of six sons and sons-in-law focus their lives around rituals to the gods. And the gods reward Nestor’s devotion by sending him straight home after the war and by giving him a family fit for the kingdom of Pylos. Nestor’s son expresses their philosophy of life when he says, “All men need the gods.”5 When Telemachos arrives, Nestor’s family is celebrating a festival to Poseidon, and they welcome Telemachos with hospitality and generosity that place them above Ithaka.

There are many indications of the Pylians’ cultural progress, besides their material wealth: the bull sacrificed at the festival has horns painted with silver, and the bull sacrificed later has horns painted in gold. Homer gives us in Nestor the Darwinian major differences between primitive and civilized cultures: articulate language skills, sophisticated tools that create material and utilitarian abundance, domesticated animals, expressions of hospitality, spiritual and abstract thinking, the intelligence and kindness of family, and reproductive power for the family to survive and pass on their best qualities to future generations. Yet, there is little sense of female or communal inclusion in Nestor’s life and celebrations, and these deficiencies keep Nestor’s family from being at the top of the ladder.6 When Homer gives women a greater role in society, that community is the most advanced.

Homer shows us the next step in cultural, moral, and intellectual progress in

5 Lattimore (1975, 3.48).
6 Though Nestor sleeps beside his wife, Nestor’s wife, daughters, and daughters-in-law are seen but not heard as they contribute to the ritual but only by doing the difficult work in preparing the bull for sacrifice. In Pylos, apparently women work but do not participate in the celebratory pleasures.
Menelaos and Helen of Sparta. Both Telemachos and Nestor’s son Peisistratos “marvel as they admire the palace of the king”: a “divine house” with gleaming bronze, gold, amber, silver, and ivory throughout. But there is more than material riches in this palace, for Menelaos has grown beyond the avaricious, bragging qualities that we see in Odysseus (and the men of the *Iliad*). In response to the young men’s admiration, Menelaos attributes his wealth to the friendships and generosity of the people he visited during his seven years of travel to places like Libya, Aithiopia, Egypt, and Phoenikia. Menelaos does not credit his own superiority or his own people for such material and artistic advances; rather, he defers to the nobility of other kings whose hospitality could not be rivaled, except by Zeus. And he clearly learned much from those people, for Menelaos says that he would give up two thirds of his possessions if the men lost at Troy and on their travels home, particularly Odysseus, could return home alive and well. Such emotional sympathy, guilt, remorse, generosity, and the courtesy and hospitality shown to Telemachos are further advances in the development of mankind, according to Darwin.

Helen’s superior and inferior roles are intriguing in this epic. When she immediately recognizes in Telemachos the likeness of his father, she seems to have the female qualities of “rapid perception” and “intuition” that Darwin attributes to more advanced women in civilized societies; however, she also takes the blame for the Trojan War and what happened to the men in what she calls “reckless warfare.” Her attitude toward war reflects that of the advanced Phaeakians and the poet himself at the end of the epic. The Spartan kingdom is Helen’s inheritance, but she is not treated with much respect: she is ignored and sits in “a well-made chair,” rather than a chair worthy of royalty.

There is further conflict between misogyny and moral growth when the king says that he “would have settled a city in Argos for [Odysseus]” and brought “him from Ithaka with all his possessions, his son, all his people” to protect Odysseus from the dangers in his own country. Like Odysseus throughout the epic, Menelaos does not refer to Penelope or credit her loyalty in waiting for twenty years. In contrast to

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7 Lattimore (1975, 4.43ff).
9 Lattimore (1975, 4.145-6); yet, according to Darwin, in “barbarous nations . . . the women are the constant cause of war . . . ” (1981II, p. 323).
10 Lattimore (1975, 4.123).
11 Lattimore (1975, 4.174-6). Presumably Menelaos expects the wife of Odysseus to be a danger, for his brother, King Agamemnon, was killed by his queen upon his return from Troy. This murder is mentioned repeatedly in the *Odyssey*. 

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the Phaeakians, he ignores the woman’s value but otherwise shows levels of generosity, empathy, and concern for others that are not previously seen in other men in the *Odyssey*. Helen also has the capacity to develop, for her disloyalty to her husband and daughter long ago, though presumably caused by the gods, taught her the value of family and home. In Darwinian terms, such moral and emotional growth is the result of both intelligence and learned experiences in life. Thus, they are closer to the top on the ladder of progress but are not yet there.

Finally, in Books 6–8, Homer reveals his admiration for the Phaeakians, the highly intelligent, social, kind, generous, hospitable, creative, resourceful, and most civilized people in Homer’s age. They express Homer’s philosophy of evolutionary progress with their respect for women and the positive consequences of their peaceful way of life. The abundance of their material wealth, which they attribute to the gods but which they also create for themselves from their own intelligence, hard work, and creative skills, and the quality of their moral character are further evidence of their advances over all others in Homer’s time.

In the kingdom of King Alkinoös, Odysseus marvels at the ships and harbors, the acres of orchards, vineyards, groves of olive trees, and gardens that produce in all seasons and that reveal advanced knowledge of agriculture and irrigation. Their communal unity is symbolized in the spring where the townspeople come for their water and where they meet in social interaction.12 The lavish home of Alkinoös and Arete is immediately recognized, with its golden doors, silver lintels, amber friezes, and gold and silver statues of two dogs made by the god Hephaistos gracing the main door of the palace;13 and the people share these wonders, for the assembly room is where meetings of the leaders and feasts are held.14 As Darwin notes, men who develop the greatest “social instincts,” in turn “would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience …”15 We see evidence of such self-reflective conscience and moral sense on Scheria when men apologize for rudeness, or offer fifty-two of their best men to take a stranger home, in spite of a prophecy that they may not return.

Unlike Odysseus who brags about the men he slaughtered and the women he bedded and raped, the Phaeakians pay tribute to other values and behaviors and have no need for an army or military weapons. Instead, Alkinoös is proud of his wife and people for their skills and creativity and character. He points out that the men

12 Lattimore (1975, 7.112–32).
13 Attributing the skill and beauty to the god would seem to suggest the level of ability in the artists and artisans of the kingdom.
14 Lattimore (1975, 7.43-102).
are expert ship builders, mariners, and runners (their games are not designed for the glory of war but for physical prowess and clever strategy), and “their women/ are skilled in weaving and dowered with wisdom bestowed by Athene,/ to be expert in beautiful work, to have good character.”

Homer’s remarkable depiction of women in this society separates the Phaeakians from other people in the *Odyssey*. His attitude actually raises Homer above Charles Darwin, who over 2600 years later believed that women were innately inferior to men. Not so with the Phaeakian monarch. While King Alkinoös has the greatest power on the island, he has bestowed on his wife, Arete, enormous respect and authority and gave to her

such pride of place as no other woman on earth is given …
So she was held high in the heart and still she is so,
by her beloved children, by Alkinoös himself, and by the people, who look toward her as to a god when they see her,… For there is no good intelligence that she herself lacks.
She dissolves quarrels, even among men, when she favors them.

Thus, Odysseus’ return home depends upon Arete’s opinion and her authority.

I believe that Homer depicted various species and cultures, from the most primitive Cyclopes to the most civilized Phaeakians, to express his attitude toward war as well as women in human development. Through the communities that the hero and his son encounter, Homer reveals that the people who desire peace and reject war are not only the most admirable human beings, but also the ones who create the most desirable lives and communities for their people. Instead of expending their time and energies on male aggression and military objectives, the Phaeakians value the contributions of all of their people — male and female, leaders, athletes, workers, and artisans — in their pursuit of peace that leads to progress. For Homer, war limits the potential of each society that values (and participates in) war while the Phaeakians continue to develop and offer a model for the life that peace, social order, and mutual esteem can provide. Homer’s admiration for the Phaeakian phi-

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18 Lattimore (1975, 7.67-74).
19 Odysseus’ values and behaviors are so antithetical to those of the Phaeakians that it is surprising that Arete and Alkinoös admire him. It is probably a tribute to his support from the gods and his poetic gift of language that the king offers their daughter, the beautiful and clever Nausikaa, to Odysseus in marriage.
losophy is further heightened at the end of his poem when, in Book 24, lines 528–48, the *Odyssey* reveals both the poet’s and the gods’ wish to end war. Thus, in extolling the virtues of these beautiful and civilized people who teach us the value of women and of peace, Homer has given us one of the greatest intellectual achievements in Western literature: he has seen into the future and anticipated by over 2600 years some of the major aspects of Charles Darwin’s renowned Theory of Evolution.20

### Works Cited


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