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Strength and Wit

In sticky situations, certain personality traits can determine one's fate. People's successes or failures may come down to how well they use their natural gifts. In Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, two of the most important traits characters must have when facing danger are intelligence and physical power. Although both these traits are important to those who possess them, *The Odyssey* suggests that the power of wits is greater than strength.

In this epic poem, characters with wit routinely defeat or escape from the stronger opponent. This is clearly shown when Odysseus and his men are trapped inside the cave of Polyphemus, a powerful and strong Cyclops. After blinding the massive being, Odysseus says, "I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics...until a trick came" (905). The trick Odysseus comes up with is to outwit the powerful Polyphemus by escaping under the sheep and rams (906). Another example of someone using her smarts to defeat a stronger opponent is Penelope when she is approached by the suitors. She smartly stalls their efforts to marry her by weaving a shroud, from which she takes out the stitching every night (931). Her trick succeeds in holding off the many suitors until Odysseus can return home to Ithaca. When he does return home, Odysseus also outsmarts the suitors. Along with his two loyal servants (Eumaeus and Philoeteus) and his son (Telemachus), Odysseus creates a plan to trap the suitors and kill them for what they have done. After taking away their weapons and locking them in the hall, Odysseus removes his beggar disguise and begins to take his revenge on them all (938-940). Odysseus and Penelope, both known for being clever, are able to overcome even the strongest of opponents time and time again.

The characters in the story who are stronger than they are intelligent are usually defeated by the smarter opponents they face. At the island of Aea, Odysseus's powerful men explore the island and find the witch Circe. Circe tricks the crew into letting their guard down and then turns them to pigs (912). The strength these men have in battle is no match for a sorcerer's smart tricks. Odysseus's men show again how useless their strength is when they choose to feast on Lord Helios's cattle. The men are warned not to do this, but they choose to eat to maintain their physical strength, since they are starving. This unwise decision proves to be fatal when Zeus destroys them all for their disobedience (922). Another strong character, the cyclops, also proves that using one's head is more important than using one's power. When his friends hear the cyclops shout, "Nohbdy's tricked me," they simply walk off believing nothing is wrong (905). Odysseus, an ordinary man, defeats this monster because the cyclops is not smart enough to understand he's been tricked. Ultimately these characters who appear strong on the surface are not successful because they lack brains.

The fates of all the characters in the epic are based on how they use—or do not use—these two traits. Throughout this story it is clear that strength is not as important to survival as wits. Homer uses these characters to show how valuable the ancient Greeks believed intelligence really was. Clearly the ancient world was a place where it paid to be smart.