

EPIC LITERATURE, FOOD AND COMMUNITY

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Students often ask the question regarding their studies, “Why does this matter?” Whether put with sincerity or chagrin it is a question I have fielded each year since I began teaching. As a teacher of literature I like to challenge my students with this same question – I ask them – and teaching through one of my favorite epics, Homer’s *Odyssey*, gives me a ready opportunity. In this work, we spend hours reading, sometimes in excruciating detail. For example, we look carefully at how various characters treat strangers and neighbors, the steps to welcome someone into your home for the night, and even how to set a table in such a way so that a guest may reach the breadbasket easily. We discuss this concept known to the ancient Greeks as *xenia*, a reciprocal and obligatory guest-host relationship - think extreme hospitality – the opposite of which we know as “xenophobia.” Students who have completed Western Literature often quip that this must be my favorite word since I talk about it in such great length. So, then, after reading these details I ask my ninth graders – Why does this matter? It was obviously important to the Greeks.

It’s been argued that eating and hospitality is mentioned, on average, once every thirty lines in the *Odyssey*, in very diverse contexts. On the one hand, the suitors devour Odysseus’ animals while he is away fighting at Troy, hoping

to pick up his wife and rule his city. His own crewmen men are gluttonous, too, eating the forbidden Cattle of the Sun, for which some were destroyed, and also Circe’s delicacies, which got them turned into real pigs! Polyphemus, known as the Cyclops, eats men raw, bones and all, while civilized men cook their food and offer portions to the gods. They were also set upon giants at the palace of Antepheates, who, after “spearing the men like fish” whisked them home to eat them!

On the other hand, we find many other instances in which lavish hospitality is displayed to strangers. When Odysseus washes up on the beach, the Phaeacians (Fi ACK e uns) bathe, robe and feast with him before giving him a magical boat that will take him to back to Ithaca. Zeus himself is the protector of strangers and the defender of those who show hospitality, which are too numerous to count. In the *Odyssey*, civilizations are defined by the food they eat, and by how they treat strangers, or eat them as the case may be.

Drawing on themes like these, I point students to deeper conversations of community – our community. How we treat others on daily basis – the things we read, the papers we write, the conversations in which we engage - it all matters. It matters so much that, like the ancients, it defines us. However, there are many things distracting us from fully engaging in life together. If something isn’t funny or provocative, we tend to ignore it or forget about it. If the information isn’t delivered quickly and easily, we put it down for something else. Carelessness on social media is an impediment to peace.

It is at this point we discuss the pace of the second half of the *Odyssey*, noting that compared to the first half, the plot moves remarkably slower. Professor Elizabeth Vandivar notes that the contents in the second half of the epic would not fill one chapter within the first half. This second section forces students to slow down and wait – something they are not used to with fast-paced, content-driven media. This concept of delayed gratification is difficult for students who just want to get to the good part, or in some cases, just want to get it over with. However, it is important here to stop and remind them that sometimes the best things are worth the wait. Sometimes, reading details of a community in peril allows us to reflect upon our own state of affairs with gladness. Ithaca is in complete disarray, exemplified by Odysseus’ own home. Community and civilization are fragile, and once fractured, restoring order takes time. Our own country could learn a thing or two from the ancients.

In the end where does that leave us as a school community? New Covenant Schools is a community called to something different. First, we are the recipients of hospitality, not from strangers, but from the God from whom we were estranged. He gives us himself – sacramentally speaking – in the feast of above all feasts. Second, through his “hospitality” we are made to be his people – his community. Third, we return hospitality to God when we care for the poor, feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Jesus says that in these actions, we have done it for him. Seeing these themes in parallel, we can see that the *Odyssey* anticipates the Savior of the

world, presenting almost as a foil for the literature we find in the Gospels.

In our community we challenge each other for the betterment of the whole, but this can only be done through the acceptance of our duty within the community – to love our neighbors. This requires us to slow down and consciously think about those around us. This requires us to courageously ask those difficult questions of ourselves and of those around us. This requires the hard work of going to the person with whom we disagree and engaging them in meaningful discussion rather than assuming their motives. And, yes, this even requires editing our term papers and speeches for grammatical correctness so that we write and speak with clarity

and precision. What we do allows us to live each day harmoniously because we are willing to appeal to each other and engage in life together, even in the tasks that seem tedious. We can learn to live harmoniously because it becomes less about being right and more about being informed. Whether in a mead hall with Beowulf, a dinner table with Odysseus, or a Harkness table with our classmates, these shared community experiences of listening and collaborating - not competing - allow a type of learning that is both communal and harmonious.

So, why does it all matter? As Circe Institute's Matt Bianco perfectly states, "Students learning the art of rhetoric learn to live in community artfully...To love thy neighbor? That is the pursuit

of harmony." It matters because we are humans trying to learn how to be human. It matters because we all make mistakes that we need to learn to recover from. It matters because those around us, listening to and observing us, matter. What better way to learn the necessary skills of harmonious community than alongside our peers? After all, as Aristotle points out, anyone who, by nature, had no need for a community was either a beast or a god. I leave my students with the challenge to forget the "here-we-are-now-entertain-us" mentality in order to fully surrender to the transformation of being part of a whole – having the courage to engage and the stamina to endure, together.