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The Illusion of Heroism in the *Odyssey*: Homer's Proto-Realist and Ethical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary reading of Book 22 of Homer's *Odyssey* combines classical studies, ethics, narratology, and psychoanalytic theory to show a shift from epic heroism to a post-epic "counter-heroism," positioning the text as a precursor to literary proto-realism. This shift highlights a chronotope of excessive violence and "negative catharsis" that proves incompatible with the established heroic pattern. It suggests that epic heroism initially cultivated an illusion of heroism alongside a troubling indifference to unheroic vengeance. Rather than conforming to the heroic template of the *Iliad*, Odysseus embodies the profound ambivalence of martial violence and moral compromise. Homer decanonizes the cultic warrior-hero, revising inherited traditions through a psychologically realistic portrayal of human passions: vengeance, jealousy, vanity, and an unchecked propensity for violence. Framed as a phantasmagoric adventurer, Odysseus embarks on a mythologized homecoming that culminates in an act of proto-realist retribution, transforming the celebrated Trojan War warrior into an Ithacan counter-hero. The ethical and poetic ambiguities of violence are deployed to shatter the inherited epic canon and dismantle the illusion of heroism. By subverting this tradition, *The Odyssey* exposes violence as psychological overcompensation for moral and existential fragility, transforming the archetypal hero into a counter-hero and conventional

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catharsis into “negative catharsis.” Ultimately, the poem asserts that heroic ideals must not eclipse fundamental human empathy and ethical accountability.

Keywords: Homer’s *Odyssey*; Interpretive Syncretism; Epic Counter-Hero; Proto-Realism; Negative Catharsis; Excessive Violence; Ethical Aporia

1. Introduction

In antiquity, the intertextual evocation of mythic stories was a standard practice in epic poetry and drama. Homer’s *Odyssey*^[1] richly exemplifies this tradition, embedding numerous allusions throughout its narrative depiction of Odysseus’s journey to Ithaca. In fact, the *Odyssey* functions as a mytho-epic bricolage—a synthesis of heterogeneous prototexts, including oral tradition, collective memory, folklore, and allegory. From this perspective, the *Odyssey* operates as an intertextual and meta-mythic archive of older mythic, folkloric, poetic, and historical traditions. However, the inherent understanding and intention behind this epic code of archiving imply that, through repetitive epic storytelling, these inherited motifs were desired to have a prolonged life and be recontextualized. In this way, the *Odyssey* not only preserves ancient traditions but actively demonstrates the intertextual mechanisms by which epic poetry and all literature evolve over time. Indeed, much of later Western literary history can be traced through intertextual and metatextual responses to Homeric poetry. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have served as endless sources of creative inspiration across literature, theater, film, and visual arts. The enduring presence of Homer’s epics in artistic production—from the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, through Classicism to Postmodernism and the so-called post-historical era—testifies to a cultural continuity rooted in the active memory of an ancient canon. As scholar Sophie Rabau^[2] proposes, Homer may have deliberately crafted his epics to anticipate and invite such engagement, structuring them as open frameworks for future quotation, adaptation, parody, pastiche, and revision.

Yet, while much scholarship has emphasized the narrative ingenuity and receptive afterlife of the *Odyssey*, fewer studies have researched Homer’s interest in a revisionist intertextual dialogue with the literary tradition of his time. Recently, there has been more interest in the *Iliad* in this respect, especially in the field of neoanalysis, where many

authors have agreed that Homer’s poetry suppresses alternative myths from the existing oral tradition to privilege his own version or create his own reinterpretation by altering conventional formulas toward a desired emotional or thematic effect and shift. Laura Slatkin^[3], Jonathan S. Burgess^[4], and Margalit Finkelberg^[5] all consistently prove that the *Iliad* is a “meta-epic” reinterpretation of the Troy saga: aware of the broader tradition of Cyclic epics, but overriding it and establishing itself as the superior, definitive narrative. In this study, we will focus on Homer’s revisionist narrative strategies in his *Odyssey*, and especially on how the vengeful violence in Book 22^[1] (pp. 409–424) destabilizes the very heroic epic ideology the poem only appears to be celebrating. We propose that Homer’s shift from archetypal heroism exposes violence as a symptom of moral and existential fragility, replacing conventional catharsis with what is now referred to as ‘negative’ or ‘false’ catharsis. In doing so, the *Odyssey* dismantles the heroic cult and installs a new, initial proto-realist imagology of the heroic phenomenon. It demystifies the false ideal of pure heroism and the innocent hero. Homer’s deployment of realist narrative strategies—like objectivity, demystification, and profanization instead of idealization, detailed description (verisimilitude), psychological mapping of complex characters, ethical dilemmas, and socially marked use of the language^[6]—testifies to the transhistorical stylistic nature of this literary poetics and places the *Odyssey* as an antique precursor to literary proto-realism. The following sections demonstrate why and how Book 22 functions as a paradigm of this early proto-realist revision of the ideal epic hero.

So far, scholarly engagement with Book 22 of the *Odyssey* has traditionally emphasized its structural and spatial functions. Jones^[7] and Heatherington^[8] frame Odysseus’s vengeance as a narrative mechanism that restores cosmic and domestic order through cunning and retribution. Strauss Clay^[9] extends this by mapping the banquet hall’s transformation into a ritualized “dais of death,” highlighting

the inversion of ‘xenia’ (guest-friend ethics) and aristocratic excess. More recently, Karanika^[10] has examined how female labor and performative silence regulate visibility in the epic space, shedding light on the narrative marginalization of women during moments of martial violence, particularly in how such mechanisms control female witnessing. While these readings accurately trace the structural, spatial, and gendered dimensions of the massacre, they often treat vengeance as a restorative or symbolic act. This paper diverges by arguing that Homer deliberately subverts these frameworks: the violence does not purify or harmonize, but produces a paradoxical release that amplifies aggression, leaves ethical residue, and transforms the archetypal hero into a counter-hero. Through strategic narrative silence, sensory realism, and Penelope’s enforced absence and political distancing, the *Odyssey* stages not cathartic closure, but a proto-realist exposure of vengeance as psychological overcompensation and moral aporia.

2. A Method of Interpretive Syncretism

The author of this study advocates for a moderate ‘interpretive syncretism’ in contemporary literary hermeneutics^[11]. We have described our approach as “post-methodology”^[11] (p. 29) since it allows full creative freedom in selecting and combining tools from the existing rich methodological landscape, depending only on the needs of the given interpretive situation. Our approach defends selecting an inventive, harmonious, and functional combination of known methods that is adequate for the actual interpretive situation—the structure of relations between the subject and object of interpretation in a given historical, cultural, literary, and communicative situation. Arising from contemporary needs, this methodological strategy strives toward being pragmatic, open, interactive, creative, dynamic, inclusive, hybrid, polyphonic, plural, and dialogic: “This dialogic and creative interpretative strategy will avoid the traps of methodological schemes that have already been exhausted, it will conform itself to the new literary and historical constellation, and it will offer its own intermethodology. Today’s conditions are not only historical but also polyphonic, interdiscursive, intermedial, and intercultural. Such is the identity of contemporary hermeneutics and its interpretive practices, which are prepared to search freely

for a ‘universal,’ ‘total,’ or syncretic interpretive code”^[11] (p. 33).

Hence, our methodology for the hermeneutic interpretation of heroism and counter-heroism in the *Odyssey* is also syncretic. First of all, it involves a critical deconstruction of the epic heroism established in the *Iliad* and revised in the *Odyssey*. The paper mainly focuses on Book 22 of the *Odyssey* and, in its analysis, touches upon both immanent and external approaches, combining and contrasting a close reading and Vladimir Propp’s structuralist model with narratological reception analysis^[12]. It also engages Bakhtin’s theory of the ‘chronotope’^[13] and links this framework to the chronotope of revenge that culminates in the epic. Then, it also incorporates a psychological Jungian dimension by addressing not only the poetic but also the ethical aspects of excessive vengeance. This interpretive syncretism reveals the transformation of myth into history and of demigods into humans; through the prism of this transformation, one can more clearly understand the shift of the hero into the counter-hero and the fall of sublime heroism into profane violence. It is precisely this transformation that gives rise to the poetics of realism, understood here as a transhistorical matrix rather than a historically transient stylistic period.

3. The Deconstruction and Proto-Realism of Epic Heroism in the *Odyssey*

3.1. Homer’s Revisionism: Odysseus as a Paradigmatic Epic Counter-Hero

This analysis does not aim to survey all scholarly responses to Homer’s *Odyssey*. We acknowledge this limitation to clarify that our focus on revenge treats it as a form of violence systematized within dominant penal laws and cultural traditions. What the *Odyssey* presents as a singular, epically glorified act of vengeance is, in reality, a literary and cultural canonization of practices that emerged during and after the Trojan War. While a significant portion of literary and interpretive responses to the epic uncritically endorse ideals of heroism and violence (exemplified by Odysseus and Telemachus) and, by extension, the ideal of fidelity (embodied by Penelope), numerous other intertextual and meta-textual analyses critically engage with and deconstruct these

ancient epic stereotypes.

Our position is that Homer's Odysseus is not an idealized stereotype of epic heroism, just as Penelope is not merely an icon of fidelity. Unlike Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*—who serve as prototypes of sacralized, collective heroism—Odysseus is a hero of “a thousand faces”^[14]; it is impossible to reduce his character or the cultural imagology surrounding him across the epic's global reception history. Homer introduces Odysseus as ‘polytropos’—a “man of many turns,” shifting like Proteus^[15], a powerful king, war veteran, mythic adventurer, father, husband, and more. Yet, he also emerges as an epic incarnation of vengefulness. His dramatic and excessive violence against Penelope's suitors and the disloyal maids is triggered not by communal outrage, but by a profound, intimate sense of betrayal: the primal instinct of vengeance. The interpretive crux lies not in the fact of the revenge itself, but in its extreme brutality: an almost gratuitous massacre and torture of figures whose culpability is ethically ambiguous. Most importantly, Odysseus' act of vengeance is devoid of both empathy and distributive justice. It operates as a liminal form of justice; consequently, its brutality cannot be easily minimized. Rather than embodying traditional heroism, the episode reveals a more complex, human model of excellence—one in which wisdom, adaptability, and endurance eventually triumph over brute force. Nevertheless, Odysseus retains the aura of the epic hero, a perception that has remained largely intact throughout much of the poem's reception history. It is precisely this tension that allows us to speak of an illusion of heroism characteristic of the *Odyssey*.

The epic representation of Odysseus' heroism is inextricably linked to his mythic journey home, which functions symbolically as a return to the self: a transformation from warrior to man. For this reason, the *Odyssey* operates as a parable of self-recognition and psychological individuation in Jungian literary criticism. This transformation is driven by what the nymph Calypso ironically insinuates as his blind passion to see his poor homeland again^[1] (pp. 81–98). Though seemingly at odds with traditional martial ideals, this reconfigured heroism is not Odysseus' alone; it is co-constituted by Penelope. The poem's dual protagonists—male and female—necessitate a corresponding narrative architecture, shaping both its thematic concerns and stylistic register. This structural shift substantiates our thesis that the *Odyssey* deliber-

ately diverges from the conventions established in the *Iliad*. Rather than centering on martial rage and battlefield glory, the epic redirects its focus along two axes: first, toward the perilous journey that is aimed at homecoming—two facets of the same narrative matrix that would later lend its name to the genre of the “odyssey;” and second, toward the domestic and social sphere, encompassing the traditionalist pole of Homeric ethics—the inherited customary and proper way of living and judging what is morally right among mortals (díkē, Δίκη): valuing piety, the sanctity of the hearth, familial loyalty, marital fidelity, inheritance, and the transmission of tradition.

This latter traditionalist side of Homeric ethics is well grounded in the narrative mechanics of folktales and epic tradition, as it can be clearly demonstrated by employing Vladimir Propp's structuralist approach^[12]. Within Propp's functional actor scheme, the *Odyssey* maps cleanly onto folktale morphology: Penelope functions as the Deserving Princess in need of rescuing (object of love and reward); Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius serve as loyal Helpers; Melanthios and the suitors occupy the Villain role; and Athena appears as the divine Donor and Dispatcher whose strategic aid legitimizes the slaughter. Crucially, Odysseus himself undergoes a functional shift. Though he begins as the archetypal Hero, his climactic violence transforms him into a “falling,” morally ambiguous figure that can be read as the impersonating False Hero: one whose methods temporarily transgress the very social and divine order he claims to restore. This functional descent is not a narrative flaw but a structural necessity, mirroring the folktale pattern in which the hero must pass through a liminal, often brutal, phase before the agencies of chaos can be calmed down and the cosmic order restored. Even Jungian psychology could concur that this functional shift carries deep psychological weight. From a Jungian perspective, the violence may represent the necessary, though disturbing, confrontation with the unconscious that precedes psychological wholeness. Odysseus does not merely defeat external enemies; he works on the integration of his own fractured psyche, even if the cost is a temporary loss of moral symmetry. So, the key remaining question is: does Odysseus accomplish wholeness and does he reclaim his Hero function in the end?

A purely Jungian reading frames Odysseus' violence as the eruption of his Shadow and a necessary, albeit bru-

tal, stage in his individuation, yet most contemporary critics doubt its successful outcome. Many scholars have analyzed the archetypal nature of the suitors as Shadow and Threshold Figures^[16, 17]. As the Shadow, they embody repressed, disowned, or uncontrolled aspects of the psyche and society that threaten to consume consciousness: greed, entitlement, hubris, sexual aggression, and the violation of sacred boundaries. In Jungian terms, they are the projected shadow of both Odysseus (the king/ego that has been absent) and Ithaca (the collective psyche that has lost its guiding principle). As Threshold Guardians, they block the hero's return to wholeness. Their presence in the palace marks a state of psychic and social disintegration that must be confronted for psychic and cultural wholeness to return. Defeating them is the necessary passage through the "underworld" or crisis point that precedes reintegration. According to Jung, the shadow is "that hidden, repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors"^[18] (para. 422). Since it personifies everything we refuse to acknowledge about ourselves, it is often projected onto others by the psychological process of enemy-making. In the process of individuation, the Shadow must be confronted by consciousness, not ignored or rationalized: "If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it... But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected. It is also liable to burst forth in a moment of unawareness... At all events, it forms an unconscious snag, blocking the most well-intentioned attempts"^[19] (para. 20). This is a necessary, often painful, integration. Odysseus' massacre symbolizes the ego's reclaiming of sovereignty from autonomous complexes. The brutality symbolizes the uncompromising nature of Shadow confrontation: half-measures allow the Shadow to persist and fester. If successful, the result is restoration of inner and outer coherence, a psychic equilibrium. However, many Jungian psychology scholars question whether Odysseus's individuation process concluded well. Most of them postulate that Odysseus completely embodies the Trickster Jungian archetype and remains morally ambiguous till the end^[14, 20, 21]. Jung wrote that "the Trickster is a collective shadow figure, a summation of all the inferior traits of character in individuals"^[18] (para. 484). According to Koupatadze^[20], Jung believed that the Trickster "embodies the unsocialized, infantile, and unacceptable aspects of the

self... in a sense his Shadow". As a universal pattern of behavior that derives from the collective unconscious (a Jungian archetype), Russo explains it represents "the cunning rebel who defies convention, breaks taboos, and undermines established structures and hierarchies," whose "deep need to outfox the cosmos and be recognized for his exceptional cleverness ends up attracting the very limitations and negative attention he seeks to defy"^[21]. Russo also contrasts him with the valiant Warrior archetype exemplified by Achilles, since the Trickster's "quest for limitless freedom remains a captivating but impossible dream"^[21].

Still, another traditionalist approach to Homeric heroism in the *Odyssey* insists that the epic hero is culturally constructed to legitimately strive toward upholding a stringent cult of honor, which encompasses his own heroic reputation, his wife's fidelity, his son's legacy, and his kingdom's stability. The suitors' prolonged violation of the household directly undermines this honor, since at that time, the ritualized guest-friendship (*xenia*, ξενία) was a sacred, Zeus-protected order^[22]. The suitors' abuse of it isn't just a social crime; it's a rupture in the cosmic psyche. The suitors represent chaos (*kháos*, χάος), they have disrupted the natural, social, and divine hierarchy, the proper order (*kósmos*, κόσμος). Odysseus' act reestablishes boundaries, honors the gods (especially Zeus Xenios and Athena Xenia), and returns the household to its rightful structure. In this respect, Homer's *Odyssey* emulates the *Iliad*, since there the Trojan prince Paris violates the same principle of "xenia" by abducting the wife of his host, the Spartan king Menelaus, thereby deserving the loss of protection from Zeus and the Trojan fall in the catastrophic ten-year war. This framework reflects not only patriarchal norms but also the rigid ethos of honor-based societies. However, from a poststructuralist and feminist perspective, Odysseus' extramarital liaisons are largely overlooked; his prolonged absence and adventurous wanderings do not compromise his perceived fidelity, as if his marital obligations are suspended by his heroic status. Conversely, Odysseus never explicitly accuses Penelope of infidelity for enduring the suitors' occupation of their home. Yet consider the paradox: a wife who presided over a household besieged by dozens of suitors, each a potential replacement husband, is nonetheless elevated as the archetype of fidelity. Penelope's prolonged indecision is less a reflection of personal ambivalence than a strategic negotiation of so-

cial survival; by maintaining ambiguity, she preserves her agency within constrained patriarchal parameters. Within this epic dramaturgy, the returning Odysseus channels his wrath exclusively toward the suitors and the disloyal maid-servants, framing them as violators of the sacred law and assuming unilateral authority to execute them. However, his pursuit of uncompromising vengeance to restore personal honor ultimately undermines his stature as a paragon of epic virtue. Consequently, the *Odyssey*'s narrative architecture incorporates distinct elements of tragic dramaturgy.

Since oral narratives strive for repetition, they must be linguistically and artistically shaped to become part of a collective memory. There is something poetic in the code of memory that resembles dreams and their reduced energy capacity (*abaissement du niveau mental*)^[18] (paras. 213–214). In fact, memories are a very important factor in human individuation^[18] (pp. 275–289) and the identification of ethno-cultural communities. Linguistically articulated, memories create a link between the conscious and the unconscious, the present and the past, and modern and primitive forms of culture. They stimulate the transcendent function^[18] (paras. 130–134), which regulates the dynamics of the relationship between the forgotten and the remembered, the unconscious and the conscious, and the instinctive and the rational. This allows unconscious contents and atavistic instincts to become conscious, thereby reducing their destructive action and primordial manifestations, such as traumatic memories and primitive, aggressive projections of the ego in acts of revenge (vengeance, vendetta), including execution, torture, and punishment. Betrayal, the protection of honor, rage (wrath, anger), and aversion toward the Other are foundational motifs in both war tragedies and literary works.

The differences between the poetic conventions of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* remain differences in the dominant cultural system. They point to divergent ideologies and worldviews within an epoch, different ethical values, distinct methods of memorizing history and establishing collective consciousness, and varied instruments for differentiating cultural identities in society. The revision of the ethical code is prompted by transformations in the dominant religious system. That ethical turn is usually supported by corresponding changes in the system of poetic conventions: a destabilization of the epic ambiance with elements of symbolic realism, and a conflict between the mythic/epic and historical understand-

ing of time-space. If anger, rage, and fury are considered the generative core of epic thinking and singing, it can be said that the *Odyssey* itself represents a parable for a transformed epic model of the world. However, the representation of the epic hero is also connected with higher, deified, and sacralized nobility, with sacrifice, humanity, and morality. If so, then the *Odyssey* raises questions about the attributes of heroism, nobility, and morality. Namely, do the events, ideas, and actions of Odysseus and Telemachus, as described in the *Odyssey*, follow or deviate from the ancient epic ideal of heroism canonized by the *Iliad*?

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* respond to different audience interests, types of memory, types of violence, systems of ethical values^[23], and “ethical discomfort”^[24] in ‘heroic times.’ Hence, it is significant what the epics remember and how they reflect that memory. The epic serves as a repository of reinterpreted narratives inherited from mythic and historical times. Collective memory is not homogeneous; it differs according to the subject who remembers and narrates: the tribes, the polis, the family, or the performing constellation. Artistic memory appears on the historical scene with specific stylistic and generic intentions. Even a fleeting comparison between Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reveals essential differences regarding their epic anamnesis, both poetically and ethically. In narratological reception analysis, Odysseus has already been identified as a problematic and unreliable narrator^[25] by whose ‘lying tales’ Homer invites readers to doubt and reconstruct the truth of his adventures. This represents a distancing from the initial epic model. The *Odyssey* turns the focus from the semi-divine battlefield chronotope of heroism typical of the *Iliad* toward a slightly more profane chronotope of adventure, revenge, family honor, the gap between appearance and ethical reality, and finally, “ambivalent heroism”^[24]. Behind the historicized heroes lurks the desired image of the demigods, so that the epic hero possesses an identity that inclines toward performance and the audience. The reception of epic works implies an immanent performativity, scenicity, and theatricality. In the *Iliad*, an amphitheatrical type of scenic presentation prevails, while in the *Odyssey*, a cinematic type dominates (characterized by a dynamic, fantastic adventure-family narrative).

According to Max Scheler’s ethical typology, corresponding to the idea of the hero as an ideal human type is the quality of nobility^[26]. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* establish

different models of heroism and heroic nobility. Odyssean heroism and nobility are, in this regard, a counter-heroism deprived of a sacral dimension; they are closer to real humans and their inclination toward brutality, violence, and revenge. The emphasis on piety aligns with corresponding changes in the ethical-cultural system of the epoch following the *Iliad*, connected with emphasized god-fearfulness, the fear of divine anger, the awe of the curse and higher justice, a consciousness of moral weaknesses and prohibitions, the need for moderation and reasonableness in actions, a horror towards excessive vindictiveness, a consciousness of double morality, distinctions regarding the nature of women, and the moral limitations of the collective. From the standpoint of the non-believer, however, crime becomes inevitable and may even acquire meaning. Crimes are committed in the name of justice, morality, humanity, or protection of the kingdom and family order^[27] (pp. 277, 283); although they may be emerging from the dark waters of the unconscious, from human impulses and violence, and from the violent tendencies of the human community. Homer's *Odyssey*, especially Book 22, "The Killing of the Suitors" ("Rhapsody Chi"), is paradigmatic for the chronotope of brutal revenge that revises the Trojan type of epic heroism. The *Odyssey* deviates from the heroic epic pattern inherited from the *Iliad*, decanonizing the dominant pattern and revising the popular stereotype of heroism. The semantic and philosophical context of evil expands from the ethno-cultural to the universal space, and the ethical complex is structured within an eschatological framework. Primordial images of good and evil are actualized by expressing specific human and social ethical aspects, becoming closer to reality and distinguishing between the hero and the false hero (devoid of true arch-heroism).

3.2. From Divinized to Profane Hero: Further Psychological and Ethical Considerations

The heroic past does not eclipse human reality or historical contingency; rather, it leaves the question of heroic humanity fundamentally unresolved. Profane humanity is neither morally perfect nor reducible to an idealized virtue. Within the *Odyssey*, the destabilization of divine and semi-divine paradigms is embodied in Odysseus himself. The half-divine hero, once "equal to the gods," is dethroned by a more ambivalent and psychologically textured conception of heroism. Homer's poem thus marks a turning point in

the ancient understanding of both the divine/semi-divine and the heroic/semi-heroic. This shift creates an epistemological space for a critical, historically grounded perception of heroism, facilitating its profanization and paving the way for the literary emergence of the anti-hero, counter-hero, and fallen hero. Paradoxically, as the demigod acquires a fully human form, he appears to forfeit precisely those qualities that define human empathy, substituting moral reflection with performative dominance.

This tension between heroic and counter-heroic figures reflects a deeper clash between conscious ideals, repressed psychological drives, and aversion to the Other. Viewed through the lens of Jungian literary theory, Odysseus' violent outburst stems from an internal fracture between his conscious ego and his unacknowledged shadow self, exposing his vulnerability, moral ambiguity, and capacity for brutality. This inner turmoil drives the disproportionate cruelty of his vengeance, which operates through a logic of "negative reciprocity"^[24] that deliberately collapses distinctions between the guilty and the innocent. Repressed psychological content manifests as violence rooted in a hostile, dehumanizing perception of the Other. As shown above, modern literary criticism thus interrogates the ethics of Odysseus' retribution, demystifies his heroic status, and situates it within an archaic context of cyclical retribution. This raises a critical question: to what extent does Homer consciously stage this ethically ambivalent violence in Book 22 to criticize archaic ideals of unconditional heroism and initiate a new ethical paradigm? Is the poem's ethical ambiguity precisely the site where the poet distances himself from prevailing cultural norms? While the question of authorial intention remains complicated by the Homeric Question, the text itself consistently foregrounds this ethical unease by refusing to offer unambiguous moral closure.

Given that sub-generic and stylistic conventions are shaped by the poetics and politics of collective memory, a further critical question arises: how is Odysseus's vengeful violence—undeniably a brutal act—subsequently remembered and aestheticized as a symbol of heroic ambition and ethical legitimacy? Why is this violence so uncritically perceived, both within the epic and throughout its reception history, as an object of quasi-cultic veneration? This analysis proceeds from a close reading of the *Odyssey*'s inner narrative logic, rather than relying solely on external recep-

tion. The text itself offers subtle but persistent cues regarding Odysseus' moral ambivalence toward his own vengeance. His refusal to confront his ethical transgressions sustains an illusion of heroism, compelling him to continually perform the role of righteous avenger and restorer of familial honor. He must preserve this persona—for himself, if not for posterity—as it constitutes the foundation of his psychological, social, and epic identity.

Viewed outside the epic's ideological framework, however, this performative vengeance functions as psychological overcompensation for profound moral and existential fragility. By staging an uncompromising, spectacular punishment of the suitors and disloyal servants, Odysseus redirects attention away from the ethical complexity of their transgressions, foreclosing any possibility of amnesty, forgiveness, or moral deliberation. In a single, relentless sequence, he conflates multiple forms of violence: asymmetric combat, summary execution, torture, and massacre. Framed as a righteous savior, Odysseus enacts what amounts to a funeral elegy for sublime, martial heroism. Yet, through this very excess, he unwittingly demystifies the epic ideal. Rather than aligning heroism with humanism, the narrative exposes an ideological slippage that equates brutality with justice—a direct manifestation of the hero's unacknowledged 'shadow self.' Where the conscious Odysseus has long prided himself on *mētis* (cunning restraint) and adaptive survival, the massacre reveals a repressed stratum of war trauma, territorial anxiety, and identity fragmentation that he refuses to integrate. Instead of confronting his own moral ambiguities, he externalizes them, projecting his shadow self onto the suitors and transforming his internal rupture into a sanctioned carnage. In doing so, the epic traces his fall from hero to counter-hero: a figure whose performative righteousness masks unprocessed psychological fracture, and whose vengeance ultimately consumes the very humanistic ideals it claims to restore.

Even Odysseus appears unsettled by the scale of his own violence. His refusal to linger on the slaughter suggests a deliberate effort to suppress the memory of this excessive act before it can be codified into narrative or collective reckoning. Within the poem's internal logic, narrative silence functions as ontological erasure: that which is not recounted effectively ceases to exist. Through this strategic amnesia, Odysseus severs the link between act and remembrance.

Only when this psychological and narrative erasure is complete does he permit the loyal servants to approach him, as though the massacre never occurred. This systematic deconstruction of heroic myth prepares the ground for a closer examination of how the *Odyssey* reconfigures the epic journey itself—from mythic adventure to brutal homecoming. Having traced this transformation, we now consider how the nomadic chronotope of the poem resonates within specific cultural milieus, particularly the Mediterranean tradition of adventurism^[28], and how this spatial-temporal framework further destabilizes the conventional epic hero.

3.3. Chronotopes in the *Odyssey*: Revision of the Epic Heroic Chronotope

In *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1937/38), Bakhtin defines the chronotope as “the essential interconnection of temporal and spatial relationships” in literature^[13] (p. 84). It unites the different projections of a single space across time into one mythopoetic representation, so that the space and its name acquire a certain symbolic and parabolic identity. We could speak about Homer's or Odysseus' Ithaca as the first chronotope in the *Odyssey* in this regard. But according to Bakhtin, there are three types of literary chronotope: the adventurous chronotope (of the ancient love novel and the novel of ordeal, as well as of the medieval chivalric romance), the Rabelaisian chronotope, and the idyllic chronotope^[13]. The adventurous “prolonged homecoming” chronotope of the *Odyssey* is one of the most representative chronotopes in ancient and post-ancient literature. It has been traced back to the ancient Mediterranean nomadic chronotope or projected forward to individuation in psychoanalytical literary theory. Odysseus' return trip has grown to signify an endless ‘odyssey’ more than a simple homecoming. He appears almost comfortable within the twenty-year suspension of arrival, as if the journey itself has become his primary identity.

However, the chronotope concept may be applied even more broadly. Bakhtin distinguishes that the chronotope has dual meaning: it either reflects a limited space-time (an island, a castle, a prison, a city, a salon...) that possesses its own identity and evokes, or it captures a specific cultural-historical constellation, or an imaginary, oneiric, utopian, fairy-tale-like, mystified, fantastic, mythic, and psychological world^[13]. The chronotope, therefore, evokes the

metaphysical dimension of space-time entities in literature. Hence, one may also analyze the “heroic chronotope” or specifically the “chronotope of revenge” in the *Odyssey*, according to the place and manner in which heroism or the act of vengeance is executed, as well as according to the overall dramaturgy of the act. We find that the narrative, philosophical, and psychological identity of Book 22 of the *Odyssey* (and indirectly, of Book 23, to a lesser degree) constitutes a chronotope of revenge in the *Odyssey*, which is crucial for understanding the *Odyssey*’s revision of the epic heroic chronotope. We focus our attention on this chronotope of revenge as an essential semantic knot for the (hermeneutic) understanding of the *Odyssey* and of epic fiction, the moral dilemmas of the ancient world, and even of human nature, which does not exclude irrational, unjust, and violent actions.

Upon arriving home, after the conclusion of the (chronotope of) mythical adventurism on the way home, the epic focus of Odysseus shifts to the domestic Ithacan chronotope: the courtyard, the salon where the unarmed suitors, guests, and distinguished people from Ithaca are entertained, whom Odysseus impulsively treats as enemies who must be punished with executions, without trial, and eliminated. The act of revenge that then takes place plays the role of a kind of satisfaction of justice in the manner in which Odysseus understands justice: hyperbolized and extreme. The suitors (pretenders to Penelope’s hand) did not come to the house by force; rather, they were welcomed as guests and potential partners for Penelope, who is indecisive and prefers to preserve her social status through her marriage to Odysseus rather than remarry. The uncertainty as to whether Odysseus is alive or not lasts for decades; nevertheless, she does not remarry—not out of fidelity and love, but to protect her social and familial status.

The prolonged, mythologized duration of Odysseus’ return acquires a grotesque dimension that strips the hero of his mythical invulnerability and recasts him as a deeply fallible human. Even his name, etymologically evoking piety or “god-fearing” endurance^[29] (p. 21), contrasts sharply with the loss of self-control that marks his re-entry into Ithacan reality. A profound discrepancy emerges between his stated goal (home) and his strategy of return, rendering him a hybrid figure: simultaneously engaged in a process of individuation and trapped in a rhythm of deliberate alienation. What was once hyperbolized and mystified is reconfigured into a dra-

matically antagonistic chronotope that shifts the traditional hero toward a parodic, psychologically complex counter-hero. From a poetic standpoint, this marks a clear deautomatization of inherited epic stereotypes: Homer’s poem signals the transition from classical epic song to self-conscious verse narrative. Through this narrative architecture, the heroic epic is gradually transformed into an adventurous novella, retaining intertextual traces of mythic and folk song while dethroning the cult of sacralized collective heroism. Within this transition, a distinct realism emerges alongside the mythic and fantastic. These realistic images remain liminal, yet they are sufficiently grounded to contrast human vulnerability with mythic phantasmagoria. Crucially, it is within this liminal realism that Odysseus’ brutal revenge unfolds—not as a triumph of epic virtue, but as a psychologically ruptured act that exposes the tragic undercurrents of his so-called homecoming. Within this framework, The *Odyssey*’s revision of Trojan heroism becomes psychologically and formally legible.

3.4. The Chronotope of Revenge: Book 22

Traditionally, Odysseus has been celebrated as an exemplar of “balanced heroism”—a synthesis of martial prowess and cunning intelligence^[27]. Yet, contemporary readings reveal a disproportion between this idealized stereotype and the violent actions depicted in the *Odyssey*. As Elizabeth Drumm^[30] observes, Book 22 exposes a troubling excess: while the punishment of the suitors may follow poetic logic, Telemachus’ execution of the maids appears brutally unmotivated. Yet, interpreters often underestimate the sheer ruthlessness of Odysseus’ slaughter of the suitors. How should we interpret violence performed on Apollo’s day under the pretext of justice? Does it align with the epic’s supposed “poetic of justice,”^[31] or does it actively subvert it? Odysseus initiates the massacre with a calculated ambush, surprising the suitors during a feast while they are unprepared and defenseless. This non-stereotypical representation reveals a vindictive, merciless hero. Book 22 establishes a distinct chronotope of revenge, characterized by summary judgment, suspended moral deliberation, and loss of rational restraint. Violence is transhistorical; only its historical forms and its ethical interpretations change. The epic narration of this carnage testifies to an archaic ethical code— that, though historically situated, projects a persistent civilizational constant.

Moral norms for heroism often excuse heavy crimes and sanitize grave transgressions, depicting them as inevitable enactments of fate. The ritualized revenge Odysseus performs with his son and loyal servants is aestheticized by epic tradition and memory, yet it remains unjustifiable from a humanistic perspective. These multiple murders in a single day exhibit brutal characteristics: the prolonged mutilation of Melanthios^[1] (Book 22, verses 528–530) and the hanging of the maids^[1] (Book 22, verses 517–525). This cannot be justified merely by divine will or the restoration of domestic order^[27]. While the *Odyssey* confers epic legitimacy upon ritual vengeance, it simultaneously demonstrates that excessive violence does not constitute moral virtue. Odysseus' identity becomes inseparable from excess: prolonged absence, unbridled rage, unrelenting brutality, and absolute retribution. This accumulation of excess transforms him from a nobleman into an unusual, deeply ambivalent, and almost parodic epic hero, revealing the *Odyssey* as a work that exceeds epic boundaries and enters a tragic, psychologically irrational space. Here, the narrative shifts from mythic pictorialism to conceptual ethical scrutiny, wherein “ethos” no longer reflects an idealized code but exposes the fractures within the collective moral system^[32].

Violence is primordial and, as critical tradition observes, “law is nothing but the systematization of violence”^[27]. Within this framework, Odysseus spares only the bard Phemius and the herald Medon from execution—a decision that carries profound symbolic weight for the interpretive history of the *Odyssey*. Their survival is justified not by clemency but by their narrative function: as a poet and a messenger, they are destined to disseminate the account of the slaughter as a glorious restoration of order. In honor-based societies, vendetta frequently operates as a normative substitute for institutional justice or forgiveness. Traumatized by perceived betrayal and the systemic violation of his household, Odysseus responds with disproportionate retribution. His blood-stained hands are rhetorically framed as instruments of cosmic and social realignment—an equation of violence with “good” that underscores the contextual relativism of Homeric ethics. Yet, the poem simultaneously undermines this justification through proto-realist narration. Penelope's nurse, Eurycleia, witnesses the aftermath and delivers a strikingly visceral report, describing Odysseus “like a mountain lion/when he has gorged upon an ox, his

kill”^[1] (Book 22, verses 448–450). Homer uses socially marked distinctions in the language of his characters primarily through the rhetorical, behavioral, and thematic content of their speeches rather than distinct regional dialects or lower-class grammar. Her testimony functions as a paradigmatic instance of proto-realist narration within the epic tradition, grounding mythic vengeance in immediate, sensory observation and refusing to aestheticize the carnage.

The phenomenology of revenge in the *Odyssey* is fundamentally ambivalent and ethically aporetic. As previously noted, the execution of the disloyal maids transcends mere punishment, taking on the character of ritualized extermination. Odysseus commands that they clean the blood first, while Telemachus takes it upon himself to make sure that they would “perrish there most piteously”^[1] (Book 22, verses 525, p. 424), he “tied one end of a hawser to a pillar / and passed the other about the roundhouse top/taking the slack up, so that no one's toes could touch the ground”^[1] (Book 22, verses 517–525). This methodical strangulation—less an act of justice than a performative eradication—overshadows any residual heroic ethos. Telemachus actively escalates his father's directive, thereby becoming complicit in the degradation of Odysseus' stature as an epic paragon. As Staudigl observes, “the discourse of violence is fraught with aporias; nowhere is this more evident than in the inescapable vicious circle of violence and counter-violence”^[33]. In Book 22, this circle remains unbroken, leaving the narrative not with moral resolution, but with the lingering ethical residue that defines Odysseus' transformation into a paradigmatic epic counter-hero.

3.5. Odysseus's Negative Catharsis and Externalized Psychology

Compared to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* exhibits a heightened engagement with the concrete ‘here-and-now’, even as it remains entangled with mythic and polytheistic frameworks. Odysseus' journey, composed of episodic trials, psychological strain, and mythic imagery, embodies an ancient Mediterranean nomadic chronotope, sharply contrasted with its natural counterpart: the domestic sphere of home and family. The poem thus constitutes a new narrative mode—less traditionally epic, yet infused with distinct proto-realist elements. Erich Auerbach famously illuminates this shift in “Odysseus' Scar”^[34] by contrasting Homer's epic rhetoric

style to that of the Bible. While the latter's representation of reality (mimesis) is seen as obscure, mysterious, fragmented, "fraught with background" (unexpressed psychology, history, and suspense), and in need of interpretation, Auerbach described the Homeric style as being in the "perpetual foreground" of the present, depicting a world that is "uniformly illuminated" in full detail, populated with characters whose thoughts and feelings are "completely expressed" without any hidden background, and with events that take place "in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense"^[34] (p. 11). His close reading of the scar digression in Book 19 of the *Odyssey* reveals a proto-realist attention to depicting the here-and-now through spatial precision, temporal dilation, and intense emotion, but also a direct external projection (objectification) of character psychology into speech, scene, and action. Later critics have extended this insight to argue that Homer's fully externalized "flat" style paradoxically encodes psychological realism through these narrative techniques^[35, 36].

This proto-realist orientation carries ethical implications that anticipate later philosophical dilemmas concerning secular morality; much like Ivan Karamazov's assertion in Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* that without the idea of God and immortality, there could be no morality, the *Odyssey* negotiates the boundaries of human justice in a post-heroic^[37], divinely ambiguous world. Through this lens, the poem subtly profanes the epic setting, introducing parodic and demythologizing elements that reconfigure the inherited heroic archetype. This entails new spatiotemporal frameworks—the chronotopes of the ship, the island, and the mythicized return—which mark a decisive departure from the martial chronotope and its traditional ethical code. A dramatic tension emerges between the nomadic topos and the domestic topos of the waiting wife. The latter functions as a narrative counterpoint to the quasi-heroic wanderer, generating a parallel form of domestic, psychic, and moral endurance. The moving adventurer mirrors the static one; both embody the hope and fear of return, the desire for autonomy, and the dread of its consequences.

When the tension between the nomadic and domestic chronotopes must be resolved, Homer's proto-realist orientation in the *Odyssey* leads to psychological realism. Book 22 externalizes the deep psychological cathartic impulses of Odysseus through his actions. Contemporary psychol-

ogy claims that, when internalized, such cathartic impulses lead to psychological fragmentation; when externalized, they culminate in conflict and destructive action. This dynamic can be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of the adapted concept of 'false'^[38] or 'negative'^[39] catharsis. Instead of resolving tension through insight or moral reconciliation, it produces: a projected shadow-confrontation that externalizes rather than integrates disowned aspects of the self; an illusion of justice that masks excessive violence; a narcissistic satisfaction rooted in ego-reinforcement rather than ethical restoration; and a repetition of trauma rather than its resolution. In the *Odyssey*, negative catharsis manifests in conflictual situations driven by primordial, atavistic impulses for vengeance, producing a paradoxical release that leaves behind ethical residue rather than genuine resolution. The narrative initially constructs an illusion of heroic triumph, which subsequently becomes the foundation for a socially and poetically memorialized legacy—a legacy that the epic itself gradually demystifies. Odysseus' satisfaction after the massacre can be read not as ethical restoration ('dikē') but as narcissistic reinforcement—the ego's pleasure in reasserting control, wherein the projected Shadow of the suitors is violently eliminated rather than confronted and integrated. According to Odysseus, it was not he, but "destiny and the gods' will vanquished these/their own hardness"^[1] (Book 22, verses 460–464). The 12 murdered maids (out of a total of 50 in the house) were tortured so severely for adultery with the suitors to "cut the life out of them"^[1] (Book 22, verses 493–494), they were hung high with a rope around their necks, so that they would not be able to touch the ground. Melantios' body was completely massacred^[1] (Book 22, verses 528–530). Through this lens, the massacre of the suitors in the *Odyssey* can be interpreted as a violent resolution that produces the illusion of justice without achieving genuine psychic or ethical integration. Much like in an antique or Shakespearean tragedy^[39], 'negative catharsis' allows the hero—and the audience—to experience the thrill of retribution while avoiding the more difficult work of acknowledging the hero's own complicity in the cycle of violence. The result of this 'false catharsis'^[38] is not purification, but a lingering moral ambiguity that challenges the epic's surface celebration of vengeance. Instigated by Jacques Lacan's psychological interpretation of Aristotle's catharsis in Sophocle's *Antigone* as a turning mechanism

that installs a “catharsis of irresolution”^[40] (p. 248), Ganani-Tomares^[41] (p. 207), describes its result as “normalization understood as a purifying discordance—the absence of harmony and a negative catharsis” in the audience, left traumatized by witnessing the floor full of bloody corpses. Or, as Homer writes in the *Odyssey*, “death’s black fury passed,” “in blood and dust,” “crowd all fallen, many and many slain”^[1] (Book 22, verses 431–433).

Recent research in empirical psychology and neuroscience demonstrates that cathartic venting typically strengthens rather than relieves anger. As Brad J. Bushman^[42] observes, “venting to reduce anger is like using gasoline to put out a fire.” The release of aggression typically amplifies hostile cognition and subsequent violence rather than purging it, directly contradicting the Aristotelian model of emotional purification^[43] (1449b25, this is the Bekker numbers used to cite Aristotle; they designate the page number, column a or b, and line number in the original 1831 Bekker edition. The same applies below), which presupposes the regulated discharge of excessive passions, feelings, and thoughts. Yet this empirical finding does not close the question of catharsis; rather, it reframes it. The escalation of negative emotion is not infinite; the critical issue is not how to prevent its onset, but how to halt its trajectory and thereby disable acts of brutal vengeance and excessive violence. To permit a continuum of uncontrolled reactions driven by revenge, anger, and rage is not catharsis at all. It is an alignment with destruction—a pact with ruin that normalizes dehumanization as a fundamental human trait.

At the core of Odysseus’ ‘negative catharsis’ lies a specific affective state: rejoicing. Unlike Aristotelian purgation, which yields moral equilibrium, Odysseus’ post-slaughter rejoicing functions as a triumphal exultation that bypasses ethical reckoning. He executes his violent revenge alongside Telemachus and loyal allies, completing his transformation from archetypal hero to counter-hero. Yet once the bloodshed concludes, his rage does not dissolve into reflection or remorse; it collapses into a sustained, almost ritualized celebration of victory. This phenomenon finds lexical and phenomenological resonance in South Slavic traditions (e.g., the Macedonian/Serbo-Croatian term: *likuva/likuje/likovati*), where the term denotes a gloating, unrestrained triumph that carries an implicit moral excess. In the *Odyssey*, this rejoicing operates as a psychological substitute for purification.

Odysseus immediately orders the restoration of domestic order, the concealment of violence, and the suppression of memory. He summons Penelope, constructing an illusion that it is time to restart life, consolidate familial bonds, and reclaim authority. This sudden pivot from carnage to domestic peace is not healing; it is emotional overcompensation. He perceives himself as a restored sovereign despite having slain nearly a hundred men within his own home. This is the epic variant of negative catharsis: the complete absence of guilt, tragic awareness, or moral self-interrogation. It manifests as a self-validating triumphalism, marked by an inability—or refusal—to acknowledge ethical transgression. What is done remains done, unexamined and unrepentant.

The massacre of the suitors in Book 22 offers a stark dramatization of this phenomenon of ‘negative catharsis.’ The scene’s visceral excess cannot be dismissed as mere epic hyperbole or conventional heroic boasting. Homer encodes Odysseus’ exultation in the famous lion simile, depicting the king “spattered and caked with blood” as a predator rejoicing over its kill:

In the shadowy hall
full of dead men she found his father
spattered and caked with blood like a mountain
lion
when he has gorged upon an ox, his kill—
with hot blood glistening over his whole chest,
smeared on his jaws, baleful and terrifying—
even so encrimsoned was Odysseus
up to his thighs and armpits.

[1] (Book 22, verses 448–455).

To achieve the effect of cathartic climax, purification, or liberation from passions, an appropriate dramatic linguistic-aesthetic composition of the narrative is necessary. Negative catharsis implies narcissistic pleasure from one’s own crime both in the act of committing it and in the moment after committing it. It implies extreme dramatic circumstances (fictionally structured pragmas) and time to culminate and return the subject from a state of mindless affect to sanity. This imagery captures the psychological mechanism of ‘negative catharsis’: a purported purification achieved through deeply ambivalent, almost narcissistic satisfaction in violence:

After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as

falcons
 from eyries in the mountains veering over and
 diving down
 with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,
 who cover down the sky in chutes and bursts
 along the valey—
 but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no
 frantic wing avails,
 and farmers love to watch those beaked
 hunters.
 So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,
 turning, turning to strike and strike again,
 while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran
 smoking
 over the whole floor.

[1] (Book 22, verses 337–346).

The feeling of “gloating” in negative catharsis—the rejoicing in someone else’s misfortune, death, and suffering—means killing the human within. Odysseus becomes an illustrative example (perhaps a proto-paradigm) of an epic and folk hero who kills the human within. Consequently, the *Odyssey* sustains a dual portrayal of Odysseus, casting him simultaneously as hero and counter-hero, depending on the viewer’s perception and the audience’s reception. His unreflective self-perception leaves him wholly satisfied with the eradication of the suitors, whom he frames as legitimate enemies. External, distanced perspectives—such as that of Eurycleia, who witnesses the massacre firsthand—can readily frame him instead as a counter-hero. Perception and reception thus become the decisive factors in the ethical aporia surrounding justice and violence, ultimately shaping the very systems of moral valuation. While this process is rarely equitable, it reflects a stark human reality: one that is often more violent than it is humanistic. Ultimately, catharsis cannot be reduced to a strictly emotional or mental purification. Instead, it also operates as a formal convergence in relation to the plot, the composition, the arrangement of incidents/events/acts (pragmas)—in this case, violent, unjust, and tragic ones within irreconcilable conflictual situations. As Macedonian classical philologist Mihail D. Petruševski proposed in 1954, in Aristotle’s traditional definition of tragedy, the phrase “acting as a means of catharsis” (κάθαρσις παθημάτων, *kátharsis pathēmátōn*)^[43] (1449b25) could have been an error instead of “arrangement of incidents” (σύστασις πραγμάτων, *sista-*

sis pragmaton)^[43] (1450a5) through pity and fear, thereby highlighting the greater importance of the notion “systasis” (the deliberate composition) as the most important feature of Aristotle’s tragedy as a genre^[44].

The epic violence of Book 22 thus culminates in a distinct psychological and narrative phenomenon. Odysseus, Telemachus, and their allies revel in the slaughter, expending aggressive impulses, and cannot be considered as an act of home and kingdom restoration of the order. Through this structure, the *Odyssey* reveals that heroic identity is not innate but constructed through collective memory and the cult of glory. The transition from mythic and idealized heroism to brutal realism signals not merely an individual psychological shift, but the emergence of a new poetic canon—one of proto-realism. This shift is most clearly illustrated by Homer’s deliberate narrative choice to shield Penelope from the bloodshed, constructing her and Odysseus as a non-traditional, even psychologically asymmetrical, epic pair. Their dynamic defamiliarizes and ultimately redefines the very concept of heroic identity, leaving the reader not with cathartic closure, but with the lingering weight of ethical aporia.

3.6. Penelope’s Dream, Escapism, and Political Distancing

While the prevailing understanding in works of cognitive narratology views Penelope’s comportment in the *Odyssey* as a requirement of the epic plot instead of character psychology^[45], we propose that Penelope’s divinely induced sleep throughout the slaughter^[1] (Book 22, verses 398–403) operates as far more than a narratological convenience. By removing her from the scene of slaughter, Homer constructs a deliberate ethical shield that preserves the mythic facade of Odysseus’ heroism while simultaneously exposing its moral fragility. Unconsciousness here functions as narrative escapism: Penelope is spared the traumatic witnessing of a violence that implicates her own social world. The suitors, though antagonistic, were not foreign invaders but Ithacan nobles, former guest-friends (*xenoi*), and community members whose prolonged presence in the household reflected both civic instability and the breakdown of traditional courtship protocols. Penelope’s absence during their extermination thus reflects a profound political and ethical distancing. She cannot openly endorse the carnage,

yet to condemn it would fracture the very restoration the epic ostensibly celebrates. Homer resolves this impasse not through dialogue, but through dream-induced erasure.

This narrative strategy reveals a stark gendered asymmetry in the epic's economy of violence. While Odysseus, Telemachus, and loyal servants actively participate in and revel in the slaughter, Penelope is structurally excluded from the chronotope of revenge. Her unconsciousness mirrors a broader Homeric pattern of marginalizing female interiority during moments of martial excess^[46], yet it also serves as a subtle critique of heroic ideology. By remaining unconscious, she is shielded from witnessing the violence, effectively preserving the mythic facade of Odysseus' heroism. Consequently, she retains no direct memory of the carnage that might otherwise destabilize her perception of him as a noble husband. The poem recognizes that a direct witness would collapse the justification of the massacre into a tragedy. Instead, the aftermath is mediated through old nurse Eurycleia's visceral report in Book 23, which describes Odysseus standing "a lion/splashed with mire and blood,"^[1] (Book 22, verses 50–51) compared to the traditional symbol of heroic triumph exulting over its kill. This simile, delivered by a female witness who survives only through narrative proximity, captures the duality of Odysseus' psychological state: a purported purification achieved through a deeply ambivalent, almost narcissistic satisfaction in violence. Penelope's dream-state, by contrast, becomes the site of unspoken ethical residue. Her apparent indifference is not emotional detachment, but an enforced political distance within a patriarchal framework that grants her no sanctioned voice to judge the slaughter.

When Penelope finally descends to confront the aftermath, her response is marked not by jubilation but by hesitation, testing, and emotional reserve. This delayed reunion, often misread as narrative delay or feminine duplicity, functions as a proto-realist rendering of psychological trauma and moral ambivalence. Unlike Odysseus, who swiftly transitions from bloodshed to domestic restoration, Penelope embodies the ethical aporia that the slaughter leaves unresolved^[47]. Her cautious interrogation—demanding proof of identity, questioning the scale of violence, and withholding immediate emotional reconciliation—mirrors a trauma response that refuses the mythic shorthand of a triumphant return^[48] (pp. 542–548). Where Odysseus performs 'negative

catharsis' (rejoicing, suppressing guilt, demanding narrative silence), Penelope's comportment registers the human cost of vengeance. Her political distance is thus a survival strategy, allowing her to navigate the collapse of one social order and the violent imposition of another without assuming complicity in its brutality.

Through this narrative architecture, Homer positions Penelope not as a passive recipient of restored order, but as the poem's implicit moral conscience. Her induced sleep and subsequent hesitation destabilize Odysseus' counter-heroic triumph, exposing the ethical vacancy of his rejoicing. The epic's refusal to grant her direct witness to the massacre, followed by her emotionally guarded return, demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of psychological realism long before the term existed. Penelope's dream-state becomes a metaphor for the collective amnesia required to sustain heroic myth: violence is sanctioned only when its witnesses are narratively silenced or emotionally distanced. In this way, the poem's treatment of Penelope reinforces its broader deconstruction of archaic heroism. The restoration of the household is achieved not through cathartic justice, but through strategic erasure, leaving the reader to confront the unresolved tension between vengeance and empathy, myth and memory, triumph and trauma.

4. Discussion

The excessive violence in Book 22 of the *Odyssey* underscores the enduring persistence of the heroic illusion across the historical, cultural, and literary reception of canonical antiquity. Rather than celebrating triumph, the episode functions as a prologue to a counter-heroic narrative of human experience—one that defies epic glorification yet demands continual retelling so that readers might confront their own moral fragility. This passage lays bare the archetypal Shadow self latent within the image of Odysseus as a Trickster or "cunning one" (πολύμητις/polymētis), a duality that defines his figure as an epic counter-hero. Operating within a chronotope of excessive vengeance—where time compresses into relentless slaughter and space contracts into a sealed hall of judgment—the episode suspends epic glorification in favor of unflinching moral exposure. The traditional heroic ideal thus collapses into the figure of the dehumanized perpetrator. This topos of counter-heroism emerges from the

absence of an ethical framework capable of transcending the atavistic impulse toward annihilating vengeance. Such violence seeks not merely to defeat an adversary, but to erase the very existence of the Other, eliminating not only immediate transgressors but also anyone who fails to demonstrate absolute loyalty.

Viewed from a historical distance of more than two millennia, the temptation to minimize Odysseus' moral responsibility remains ethically symptomatic, even though he does not act alone in this violent retribution, and scholars note his reliance on familial and servile accomplices^[32]. Yet, it is equally problematic to detach these acts entirely from the poetic and cultural canons of their own era. Rather than resolving this tension, the narrator deliberately pushes vengeance to its extremes, transgressing the moral boundaries later theorized in "ethical narratology"^[49]. Although historical vengeance was rarely classified as a criminal act—frequently subject to social and ethical relativization—the *Odyssey* actively interrogates this tradition. Through Odysseus' example, the poet implicitly calls the very conception of epic-mythic heroism into question: heroism or crime? The traditional lustre of the epic figure darkens, replaced by a character who is driven by an uncompromising impulse for retribution, one who chooses ritualized brutality over ethical restraint and leaves readers with profound "ethical discomfort"^[24]. In enacting a 'negative catharsis,' Book 22 operates as a critical parody of the ancient Homeric ideal—a narrative in which the "cunning one" inadvertently unravels his own myth. This demystifying impulse positions the episode as a precursor to proto-realism in literary narratives: a moment where the text refuses to aestheticize violence, instead presenting it in its raw, ethically destabilizing immediacy.

The massacre compels us to examine the moral justification and purpose of revenge, echoing contemporary debates on amnesty, forgiveness, and the juridical treatment of systemic violence^[41]. How do we delineate the crime from the criminal? Must violence be met with violence, betrayal with betrayal? How can we measure the magnitude of wrongdoing to determine a proportional response, and where lies the threshold between punishment and forgiveness? Does retribution truly regulate violence, or does the absence of public accountability—coupled with unacknowledged guilt—precipitate its escalation? When perpetrators perceive vulnerability, restraint dissolves into contempt; the

transgressor is deemed unworthy of existence and erased from collective memory. Indeed, as scholarship reminds us, "revenge is an unstable foundation for a community"^[31]. The epic's enduring power lies not in providing answers, but in staging these questions within the very architecture of cultural memory.

As historical memory shifts and the interpreting subject evolves, so too are public and institutional positions revised regarding ethically ambiguous phenomena such as vengeance—whether blood feud, familial, national, political, or religious. Official stances are either recalibrated or deliberately left ambiguous, thereby perpetuating the ethical relativization of foundational civilizational categories: justice, vengeance, and violence. Reception remains deeply entangled with contemporary ethical paradigms, continually reframing ancient violence through modern juridical and moral lenses. In recent years, similarly settled narratives have been reopened across other domains of cultural memory, including the historiography of the Second World War. While the democratization of historical discourse ensures that no subject remains permanently taboo, it is equally symptomatic that radical revisions of interpretive frameworks recur with predictable regularity. For this reason, no reading of Book 22—or of Odysseus' collective vengeance against the suitors and Penelope's "domestic servants" (δμῶν, dmoe, female-home-slaves)^[50]—will ever yield a definitive ethical judgment. Instead, interpretation will continue to fluctuate according to prevailing historical, political, and cultural constellations, as well as the ethical and poetic dominants of each era^[51]. The evaluative spectrum of heroism perpetually oscillates between sacralization (mystification) and profanization (demystification).

Finally, the *Odyssey* leaves us with an unresolved aporia: does the restoration of order through brutal vengeance secure justice, or merely perpetuate the cycle it claims to terminate? Yet, the text imposes a moral imperative: we must refuse narrative amnesia and employ critical reason to distinguish clearly among punishment, revenge, proportionality, and justice^[37]. The "ethics of revenge"^[31] remains one of the most delicate categories in human thought, a persistent dilemma that demands continuous interrogation. We must resist confinement within a self-sustaining cycle of violence that regenerates itself through mythic justification. The essence of humanistic inquiry lies in rejecting the equation

of heroism with brutality—whether manifested as personal vengeance, institutionalized retribution, or systemic violence. It is precisely this proto-realist refusal to sanctify violence that elevates the *Odyssey* beyond mythic celebration into enduring ethical inquiry. Mythic glory cannot serve as a permanent pretext for ethical evasion, and the *Odyssey* endures precisely because it forces us to confront the cost of our own illusions.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that Book 22 of the *Odyssey* marks a decisive rupture in the epic tradition, transforming the archetypal warrior into a counter-hero through a deliberate destabilization of heroic ideology. By tracing the chronotope of revenge—the compression of narrative time into summary execution and the contraction of spatial boundaries into a sealed domestic tribunal—we see how Homer displaces the martial heroism of the *Iliad* with a psychologically textured, ethically ambiguous mode of storytelling. The slaughter of the suitors does not function as a restorative climax but as a site of moral fracture, where the illusion of heroic inviolability collapses under the weight of disproportionate violence.

Central to this transformation is the emergence of ‘negative catharsis.’ Rather than yielding Aristotelian purification, Odysseus’ vengeance produces a paradoxical release that amplifies aggressive cognition, leaves ethical residue, and culminates in a triumphal rejoicing that actively bypasses remorse. This affective structure, coupled with Homer’s unflinching attention to sensory detail, bodily vulnerability, and strategic narrative silence, inaugurates a proto-realist mode of representation. The poem refuses to aestheticize or mythologize the carnage; instead, it grounds epic action in the concrete, psychologically legible “here-and-now,” exposing violence not as divine mandate but as human overcompensation for moral and existential fragility. In doing so, Homer substitutes the cult of the flawless demigod with a profoundly ambivalent figure whose performative righteousness masks unprocessed psychological rupture.

The ethical aporia that permeates Book 22 remains unresolved by design. Homer offers no juridical closure, no divine absolution, and no unambiguous moral verdict. Instead, the text constructs a narrative vacuum that forces

readers to confront the limits of heroic ideology and the instability of vengeance as a foundation for justice^[47]. As reception history and contemporary cultural memory demonstrate—from ancient performance traditions to modern public adjudications—the poem continues to generate divergent ethical judgments, proving that its enduring power lies precisely in its refusal to dictate a single moral truth. The *Odyssey* thus operates not as a monument to archaic glory, but as an enduring instrument of ethical inquiry.

Ultimately, Homer’s deconstruction of the epic hero anticipates later literary, psychological, and philosophical engagements with violence, memory, and accountability. By replacing mythic certainty with psychological complexity and cathartic closure with negative catharsis, the epic dismantles the inherited paradigm of unconditional heroism and replaces it with a framework that demands critical vigilance. The poem’s legacy persists not because it sanctifies retribution, but because it insists that heroism must be continually measured against the standards of empathy, proportionality, and moral reckoning. In exposing the human cost of violent triumph, Homer does not merely revise an ancient canon; he establishes a transhistorical matrix for confronting the illusions of power, the persistence of trauma, and the unending necessity of ethical accountability.

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All data analyzed during this study are included in this published article and its references. No datasets were gener-

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

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