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The Symbolic Numbers of Odysseus

When reading Homer's heroic epic *The Odyssey*, I was intrigued by many aspects of his journey. The heroic epic is definitely a multilayered feast for the mind concerning symbolism. Fortunately for us, much of this symbolism is easily accessible, as Homer's works are considered part of Western literature and therefore have played a foundational role in it. As I read the assigned portions of *The Odyssey* what I found particularly interesting was the use of numerical symbolism. Reading the various adventures and considered them numerically, I found direct correlation between the traditional symbolism of the numbers that I have become familiar with through my hobby of the study of Tarot symbolism and the events that transpired.

In the first adventure, the numbers one and six figure prominently. Taking the journey chronologically, not as written since it was written *a media res*, the first adventure Odysseus and his crew had after leaving Troy was on the island of the Cicones. The number one, as in the first adventure, is symbolic of selfishness, as seen in the actions of the crew members who put their feasting before safety. Odysseus and his men plundered and killed their way through the village Ismarus, taking the wives as slaves and the cattle as plunder. The crew then took oxen and feasted on the shore instead of leaving the island as Odysseus instructed. This delay gave the survivors of Ismarus time to go into the hills and join with other forces. Odysseus then states, "Out of each ship, six men-at-arms were killed" (9.69.). The number six, as in the number of crew members killed from each ship, is symbolic of the mortality of man.

The number two is the number of brotherly love, which Odysseus showed when he acted for the good of afflicted crew members. The second adventure encountered was that of the Lotus Eaters. Two of the three crew members that Odysseus sent to scout ate of the lotus and so not only forgot the past but also lost the desire to return to their home. Instead of leaving the two afflicted crew members behind, however, Odysseus said “But I brought them back, back to the hollow ships, and streaming tears-I forced them “(9.110.).

The numbers one and three figure prominently in the next adventure. The third adventure was that of the Cyclops, the one-eyed giants, home to Polyphemus, a son of Poseidon. The one eye of the Cyclopes again denotes selfishness, both on the part of Odysseus and his crew, who saw the sheep of the giants and wanted them, as well as the selfishness of the giants themselves who were inhospitable according to Greek tradition. The boasting that Odysseus did in spite of the crew cautioning him otherwise as they were leaving the island was also very selfish. He was putting his own pride and dignity above the safety of the crew when he said, “if any man on earth should ask you who blinded you, shamed you so—say Odysseus, raider of cities, he gouged out your eye”(9.559-61.). The number three is typically significant of the gods, because the gods and lesser deities often come in threes, such as Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, or the Fates. When Polyphemous prayed to the god Poseidon, his father, this sparked what became an ongoing enmity between the god Poseidon and Odysseus.

In the fourth adventure, the number four denotes stability or lack of change, and also the four winds. After leaving the Cyclops the ships of Odysseus then arrived at the island where Aeolus, the king of the four winds, dwelled. The halls of Aeolus with its many bronze ramparts embodying stability and, seemingly with no change, his children “with delicacies aplenty, they feast on forever”(10.10).

The fifth adventure was that of the Laestrygonians and the numbers twelve and five are apparent. Twelve is the number given for the number of gods and goddesses on Olympus and it also denotes a spiritual kind of completeness. Up until this catastrophe with the Laestrygonians, Odysseus had not just one ship, but twelve under his command. Before the adventure with the Cyclops Odysseus stated, "A dozen vessels sailed in my command"(9.176.). Five is the typical number given for the elements, the basic building blocks of the universe, so perhaps it is not a coincidence that Odysseus' fleet of ships was reduced to just one ship.

In the sixth adventure, when Odysseus met the beautiful Circe, the number six, for mortality, is prominent. Six is the number denoting being mortal, and Circe tried to take advantage of Odysseus' mortal weaknesses, but was unable to succeed due to the interference of Hermes. However she was able to delay Odysseus and his crew for a year by catering to their weaknesses as mortals, as Odysseus said, " And there we sat at ease, day in, day out, till a year had run its course, feasting on sides of meat and drafts of heady wine"(10.514-16.). Only after Odysseus begged her to let them go, did she release them.

The number seven is often used to symbolize dreams, prophecies, or the afterlife. After leaving Circe's island Odysseus and his crew begin the seventh adventure in the House of the Dead, arriving and performing a ritual according to Circe's instructions in order to bring up the spirit of Tiresias. This entire episode is the embodiment of the meaning of the number seven as it deals with death, the prophecies of Tiresias, and the seeing of all the spirits. It is also significant that the death of Elpinor on Circe's island starts this particular adventure into the underworld, and his proper burial occurs after its conclusion.

The number eight is usually a reference to one overcoming one's nature. On the voyage to the island of Helios, Odysseus found that even he was not able to resist the Siren's singing. He

also found through the trial of the Scylla and Charybdis that he and his crew were still very mortal, with the loss of the six strongest men to the Scylla. On the island, the crew were unable to overcome their human nature and by killing the cattle of Helios sealed their fate. Odysseus was able to overcome his hunger, however he succumbed to sleep and so was not present when the crew slaughtered the cattle of Helios.

In the ninth adventure, the numbers nine and seven are very prominent. The number nine is symbolic of achieving a goal but only alone and after having made many sacrifices. Odysseus arrived on Calypso's island, alone, having lost his ship and his crew to the anger of the gods. While Odysseus was held captive on Calypso's island for seven years, he spent his time grieving, and it was written about him that "Off he sat on a headland, weeping there as always, wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish"(5.93-4.).

The tenth adventure was that of the meeting with Nausicaa and her father Alcinous. The number ten denotes the completion of a cycle. In this case it was the end of the perilous, and often mysterious, adventures Odysseus underwent before he returned to his home. While the section of the text where Odysseus is with the Phaeacians is quite lengthy, the main actions consist of feasting and games which contrast with the other adventures where peril seems to be ever-present.

In conclusion, numeric symbolism often can be found in many aspects of our culture, in advertisements, in art and literature. Reading many great works of literature we can often use our knowledge of such symbolism to unearth meaning hidden by the authors. The question comes to mind though, where did these ideas about numbers come from? Finding these numbers in *The Odyssey* has given me the idea that perhaps the bards first used these numbers as a tool to aid their memories, since the text was first a group of orally told stories before Homer collected

them. Now the same numerical symbolism can be found in religious texts as well as modern literature.

Bibliography

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