

# Sample Literary Analysis Paper

Touching Untouched and Untouched Touching



Level 11-12

Famous in the *Odyssey* is Odysseus' accusation against his wife's suitors, whom he intends to slaughter for their crimes. Only two men survive the ensuing carnage: Leódès, diviner to the suitors, and Phêmios, longtime minstrel of Odysseus' palace. Both men make a plea for life, but only Phêmios escapes the wrath of his master. This circumstance is puzzling because, at least on a superficial level, there is little difference between the two requests for mercy. Both men claimed that they were innocent of Odysseus' four accusations. Why then did the pleas of Leódès bring him death, and those of Phêmios, life?

The answer has to do with beliefs about the gods, and what was due them. Leódès died because, in trying to prove his innocence, he committed a worse crime than Odysseus had marked for punishment, and in doing so, showed his contempt for the gods. Phêmios, by contrast, was blameless on all four points. To demonstrate this, let us examine first Odysseus' accusations, then the plea, guilt, and judgment of each suppliant in turn, beginning with Leódès. Odysseus accused the suitors who had invaded his home of four crimes: plundering his house, seducing his maids, bidding for his wife while he was still alive, and showing contempt for the gods (Fitzgerald 410). Leódès, begging for his life, cries,

“Mercy,  
mercy on a suppliant, Odysseus!  
Never by word or act of mine, I swear,  
was any woman troubled here. I told the rest  
to put an end to it. They would not listen,  
would not keep their hands from brutishness,  
and now they are all dying like dogs for it.  
I had no part in what they did: my part  
was visionary – reading the smoke of sacrifice.  
Scruples go unrewarded if I die” (419).

There are four appeals contained in this plea. Leódès holds that he personally did not seduce Odysseus' maids, that he tried to stop the “brutishness” (bad manners) of the suitors, that he “had no part in what they did,” but was only diviner to them, and that it would be morally wrong to kill him because scruples would go unrewarded if he died.



Such was the plea of Leódês. Now let us examine his actual guilt. Homer tells us that, This man used to find visions for [the suitors] in the smoke of sacrifice. He kept his chair well back, retired by the winebowl, for he alone could not abide their manners but sat in shame for all the rest. Now it was he who had first to confront the bow, standing up on the broad door sill .... [he] said: "... death is less bitter than to live on and never have the beauty that we came here laying siege to so many days" (395-396).

It was Leódês who first tested the bow, who was obviously at the palace to win Penelope. He was ashamed of the other suitors' conduct, yes. He did not personally seduce the maids of the house. Yet he still lived as a parasite in the palace. Leódês' words, "never have the beauty that we came here laying siege to" (emphasis mine) suggest that he was a suitor.

That was the extent of the priest's guilt. What is most interesting, in light of the fact that Odysseus, who was present to see Leódês try the bow, who heard his words and knew him for a suitor, and who could have justly executed him for that alone, chose instead to base his retribution on the fact that Leódês was soothsayer to the suitors. Odysseus, in judgment, says,

"You were diviner to this crowd? How often you must have prayed my sweet day of return would never come, or not for years! – and prayed to have my dear wife, and beget children on her. No plea like yours could save you from this hard bed of death" (419).

To be diviner to the suitors entailed a litany of actions which, to Odysseus, established Leódês' guilt. As the suitors' priest Leódês would have offered their prayers ... and his own. His plea that he had no part in what the suitors did because he was a visionary seems suddenly ludicrous; Leódês is guilty of interceding with the gods to keep Odysseus from home. Since it was the gods who had indeed delayed Odysseus' return, although apparently not because of Leódês' prayers, we can instinctively sympathize with the avenger's statement that, "no plea like yours could save you."

Leódês' appeal is to scruples, yet he does not hesitate to admit that it was he who divined for the suitors. He was their sacrificing priest, and must have made prayers for them, as Odysseus



says. How appalling is his appeal to scruples while he shows such rank disregard for the power and activity of the gods as to suppose that it would be no offense to pray to them against the warrior's return!

This is why it was not wrong for god-fearing Odysseus to kill a priest. The priest was either an utter fool who sentenced himself from his own lips; or, worse, an unbeliever who thought it no crime to pray for another's downfall, since he thought that the gods could not hear or would not act.

Thus Leódês, theoretically at least able to "touch" the gods and tickle their ears, was himself untouched with reverence for those same deities. This would indeed earn Odysseus' wrath. But now let us turn our attention to Phêmios. The opening line of his plea is entirely familiar - we have heard it from Leódês. The rest is surprising.

"Mercy,  
mercy on a suppliant, Odysseus!  
My gift is song for men and for the gods undying.  
My death would be remorse for you hereafter.  
No one taught me: deep in my mind a god  
shaped all the various ways of life in song.  
And I am fit to make verse in your company  
as in the god's. Put aside lust for blood.  
Your own dear son Telémakhos can tell you,  
never by my own will or for love  
did I feast here or sing amid the suitors.  
They were too strong, too many; they compelled me" (420).

Phêmios makes only two appeals, as opposed to Leódês' four. First, he reminds Odysseus of his divine gift for singing, which is powerful and which Odysseus would be sorry to lose. Second, he asserts that he was forced to sing among the suitors, and calls Telémakhos to witness. Why does Phêmios base the bulk of his appeal upon the fact that he is a poet; that he is one touched by the gods? Why would Phêmios suppose that this could sway Odysseus?

Part of the answer probably lies in the strain of reverence for songs and poets that we find laced throughout the *Odyssey*. Song and dance are called "the grace of feasting" (6). Odysseus himself said in an earlier part of the poem that, "all men owe honor to the poets – honor and awe, for they are dearest to the Muse who puts upon their lips the ways of life" (139). Thus it is perhaps assumed that Odysseus should hesitate to kill a poet, for the simple reason of his vocation.



Beyond and above this, however, Phêmiôs appeals to Telémakhos' testimony of his innocence. This is a powerful talisman to dangle before the eyes of the avenger. Odysseus would hardly have been likely to disbelieve his son's word. Moreover, Phêmiôs has good reason to believe that Telémakhos will speak for him. Let us examine the extent of Phêmiôs' guilt.

We first meet Phêmiôs in Odysseus' hall, compelled, just as he said, to sing for the suitors (6). In spite of this, he chooses to sing the story of the Akhaians' return (11). Surely this was a bold thing to do, in the face of suitors who did not want to be reminded of Akhaians returning. The exchange between Penelope and Telémakhos concerning Phêmiôs' song proves that the minstrel had the right to sing whatever he would, and chose to sing about the return of warriors from Troy (11-12). We may interpret his choice to mean that he longed for his master to come home.

Furthermore, Phêmiôs belonged to the household. He was no suitor, but Odysseus' own court bard, who could hardly have been accounted a seducer of maids, or a contestant for Penelope's hand, or even a leech, living off the bounty of a home not his. On the contrary! We find him singing daring songs in front of men who could and might kill him for them. This was the "guilt" of Phêmiôs, which would equally deserve to be called great loyalty.

Now we turn to consider Odysseus' judgment. It is a curious one. After Phêmiôs' plea, Telémakhos instantly takes the part of the poet, and then distracts Odysseus' attention with a request for his herald's life. Odysseus tacitly consents to spare the poet by taking no further notice of him (420-421). He does not praise Phêmiôs' gift, nor even verbally consent to let him live. Indeed, one is left to suppose that, although the greater part of Phêmiôs' plea was an appeal to his art, Odysseus chose to spare him merely because Telémakhos spoke up.

Are we to conclude that Phêmiôs' appeal to his vocation was useless? The plain fact is that Phêmiôs was blameless, and that he could have cleared himself on all four counts of Odysseus' charge easily, *yet he chose to base his appeal on the fact that he was a poet*. Why? It was because Odysseus did care about vocation. If he did not, why would he execute Leódês for being a diviner to the suitors? Leódês might as well have been innocent of all four charges, for all the attention Odysseus paid them.



Phêmios was touched by gods whom he did not touch. He made no prayers against Odysseus' return, and he certainly had no contempt for the gods; he was their beloved object whom they had inspired. Therefore it needs only Telémakhos' word to establish his plea of innocence. His vocation demanded only honor, demonstrated only piety. With Leódês, however, a vocation as the suitors' priest rendered him deserving of death, and his audacity in admitting it, as though intercession with the gods against Odysseus were a trivial matter, made vocation doubly damning.

There are many factors at work in this scene, and we must not disregard their pertinence. Leódês was in fact a suitor for Odysseus' wife; he was indeed feasting on the bounty of Odysseus' house. Phêmios, by contrast, was a legitimate member of Odysseus' household, and Telémakhos pled for Phêmios' pardon.

These things are important to the judgments delivered, since they show Leódês to be guilty on more than one point, and demonstrate likewise that Phêmios' gift may have had very little to do with his survival when weighed against the fact that Telémakhos spoke for him. In the end it was no doubt Telémakhos' word that saved Phêmios.

Thus many considerations were involved in the judgments delivered. Yet Odysseus himself draws our attention away from his own accusations and focuses on what amounts to a theological issue. As a diviner, or priest, Leódês had the gods' ears. He could touch them, influence them. But he himself was untouched by fear of the gods; he held them in contempt. Phêmios the bard, divinely inspired, divinely touched, was not supposed to be able to influence the gods. Yet he obviously esteemed them. Since Leódês and Phêmios both made their plea to a god-fearing man it is easy to see why, though both making similar petitions and both claiming innocence, one deserved to die and the other merited life.



#### Works Cited

Homer, translated by Fitzgerald, Robert. *The Odyssey*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.