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Appearances in The Odyssey

In the book, “The Odyssey,” Homer reveals the stages of Odysseus’ character development through changing his appearance or telling tales from different adventures in his life. Whenever there’s an impression that needs to be made, Athena manipulates the appearance and sometimes the emotions and actions of mortal characters.

Near the beginning of the book when Odysseus begins his journey back home to Ithaca, he gets the help of the Phaeacians. While Odysseus is being bathed and oiled, Athene contributes to his cleaning and alters his appearance so that he no longer looks unkempt and filthy and makes him look like he was in his prime again. A few chapters later, Odysseus is challenged by one of the Phaeacian athletes to compete in their sports. It is here that Odysseus makes use of his new youthful body to show that, although he is much older, he still knows how to be a strong man.

During Odysseus’ stay with the Phaeacians, they ask him to tell them about his journey and who he is. Odysseus obliges them and recounts his journey and his many misfortunes when he attempted to sail back to Ithaca. It is in these stories that we see the actual, younger, Odysseus and his values. Although he was clever and possessed a strong body, he still made plenty of mistakes that would cost him dozens of his men and eventually led to the thwarting of his journey altogether.

When Odysseus reaches Ithaca, Athene alters his appearance again to exaggerate his age, making him look like an old man and a beggar. While in this form, Odysseus is mocked and abused by the suitors in his own home. Despite their ignorant teasing, Odysseus relies on the patience he had been practicing ever since he was trapped on the island of Calypso and withstands every insult, waiting until the perfect time to reclaim his home. It is here that we can see all of Odysseus' character development in action. All of his flaws have been corrected from his journey, and this correction granted him absolute victory against the suitors. Odysseus was always losing his men during his journey even if they were trained soldiers, while at the end of the book, the only people standing by Odysseus are his son and a few servants. They're far from soldiers but they remained unscathed by the end of the brawl.

Throughout the book, we see the alterations of appearance so that the characters can blend in or stand out to assist with furthering their development in the chapters. Whether it's being made beautiful and mistaken for one of the gods or looking like a poor beggar, alterations occur in almost every chapter. This phenomenon still happens today. How a person is treated varies based on sex, social status, ethnicity, and even makeup or physique.