How does Homer portray death in *The Odyssey*?

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In *The Odyssey*, Homer describes Hades using imagery that evokes feelings of sadness and fear. He portrays the spirits Odysseus meets in Hades as extremely unhappy. Homer presents an alternative idea of death through Kalypso’s island, but this paradise is unattainable to us. Odysseus’ perception of death, which greatly resembles Homer’s portrayal of death, influences him to pursue glory and fame to somehow survive his death. Odysseus also desires a glorious death, but he realises that finding happiness in life is the only way to make the eternity he will spend in Hades worthwhile.

Homer uses imagery with negative connotations in scenes involving death. The most influential of these scenes is when Odysseus visits Hades to talk to Tiresias. In order to gain access to Hades, Odysseus ventures to a place inhabited by the “Men of Winter”, where “Never the flaming eye of Hêlios lights on those men” (185). Homer thus associates Hades with coldness and darkness. Once at this location Odysseus must sacrifice a ram and ewe, filling a pit with their blood. This is a rather gruesome act, and that Homer describes their blood as “black”, rather than “red”, adds to our feeling of dread. The shades’ attraction to the blood highlights the connection between blood and life: without blood there cannot be life. This attraction also indicates that they wish they were alive, an inference later confirmed. Furthermore, by calling the spirits of the dead
“shades”, Homer\(^1\) indicates that the spirits are just shadows of their former selves—“No flesh and bone are here, none bound by sinew” (192)—and that they leave a significant part of themselves behind when they go to Hades, only temporarily reviving when they drink blood. It makes them more unpredictable and frightening to the reader because it’s difficult for us to understand what they are. The image of Odysseus crouching over the pit of black blood “to keep the surging phantoms from the bloody pit” (186) affects us powerfully. “Surging phantoms” are scary in any context, but surging to drink the blood they crave and that you protect is an especially vivid and frightening picture. All this imagery scares us, and because the scene is so directly related to death we associate the disturbing imagery and feelings with the idea of death.

Homer also evokes sadness and sympathy through the scene with Odysseus’ mother, Antiklea. She reveals that his prolonged absence from home caused her death, placing sole blame for her misery and death on Odysseus. He then tries to embrace her:

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I bit my lip,
rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,
and tried three times, putting my arms around her,
but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable
as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.
Now this embittered pain I bore,
and I cried in the darkness:

'O my mother,
will you not stay, be still, here in my arms,
may we not, in this place of Death, as well,
hold one another, touch with love, and taste
salt tears' relief, the twinge of welling tears?  (191)
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We see Odysseus break down, first biting his lip, confused, then trying to feel his mother as if she were alive, and finally crying out in pain when this attempt fails. He asks if they may hold and love each other in Hades, and the definitive answer is ‘no’. Homer gives

\(^1\) It’s unclear whether Homer or Fitzgerald distinguishes between spirits, shades, phantoms, and ghosts.
the impression that we intrude into this emotional and heartbreaking interaction
between mother and son, and we experience Odysseus' feelings with him. Some of the
essential features of life—love, warmth, and light—simply don't exist in Hades.

The unhappiness of the spirits we encounter in Hades contributes to Homer's
unfavourable portrayal of death. Akhilleus provides us with clear insight into his
feelings. He famously says to Odysseus:

Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand
for some poor country man, on iron rations,
than lord it over all the exhausted dead. (201)

Akhilleus, the great warrior who exchanges a long, peaceful life for glory and immortal
fame, would now endure the worst life he can imagine rather than be a king in the
underworld. He gives us a first-hand account that death is completely horrible even
when one is revered, making it more terrible for those of us whose power is not “royal
among the dead men’s shades” (201). By describing the dead as “exhausted”, Homer
adds another drawback to death. Not only is death cold, dark, and unhappy, it is also
restless and tiring. Furthermore, the spirits never discuss new events. None of the
shades Odysseus speaks with tell him any news. Instead, they ask about their family and
friends who remain alive. The conversation between Akhilleus and Agamémnon, where
they discuss the circumstances of their deaths—“Dressed by the nereids and embalmed
with honey . . . you [Akhilleus] turned to ash” (447)—reinforces the idea that nothing
happens in Hades, and that shades talk about the same issues that were relevant at the
time of their deaths.

Many of the features we see in Hades appear on Kalypso’s island, yet Homer
portrays Ogygia as extremely beautiful: “Even a god who found this place [Ogygia] /
would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight” (83). Despite this beauty, Homer makes it clear that for Odysseus to accept Kalypso’s offer of immortality would be, in effect, to die. Homer implies that no mortals can find Kalypso’s island—Hermès says of his visit to Ogygia, “Who cares to cross that tract of desolation, / the bitter sea, all mortal towns behind” (84)—so Odysseus didn’t arrive at Ogygia by accident. He cannot leave, and no one can visit him. The effect of Odysseus no longer interacting with any human being would be the same as him dying; Penelope and Telémakhos would feel the same if Odysseus died or if he accepted Kalypso’s offer. Homer thus presents here another view of death that reflects the recurring ideas depicted in Hades. Life on Ogygia lacks excitement and change, and Odysseus always thinks about life off the island:

Odysseus,
who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
and racked his whole heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. (83)

This parallels the feelings of the shades in Hades. Yet the darkness, coldness, and restlessness of Hades is not present on Ogygia. Furthermore, Kalypso herself is beautiful and happy on the island, making it nearer to the Christian Heaven than to Hades. Despite the differences in afterlife, elements of death remain constant: a lack of excitement and change, and a longing to live again. This raises questions about the nature of death itself and the common elements of all religions’ afterlives. The idea of Kalypso’s island appeals to readers more than Hades does, but in The Odyssey this paradise isn’t offered to everybody. Homer portrays Ogygia as an elusive dream to common people who wish to escape the horrific reality of death. Kalypso’s island acts as a foil to Hades, illustrating that we cannot escape a gloomy, restless, unhappy death.
Odysseus’ view of death, which resembles Homer’s negative portrayal of death, greatly affects his actions in life. Odysseus would have believed that he would go to Hades regardless of his actions, so his moral code must stem from a non-religious source. He’s capable of both tender chivalry with his friends and family, and ruthless violence with his enemies, as in the massacre of the suitors. It’s likely that these contrasting qualities result from his main objectives of honour, glory, and fame. Odysseus seeks to act honourably throughout the story, exemplified by his courteous treatment of Nausikaa and the Phaiákians, but also seeks glory and fame as in the sacking of Ismarus and his curiosity about the Kyklopês. Indeed, Akhilleus, arguably the greatest Greek hero, knowingly exchanges a long, happy life for a short, glorious one. This leads to the question of why Odysseus, along with Akhilleus and all other Greek heroes, pursues glory and fame so vigorously. The idea that they will spend eternity in Hades—a cold, dark, restless wasteland—plays a significant role. Homer makes it clear that everyone eventually dies—“Though as for death, of course all men must suffer it” (42). Homer also implies that spirits cannot live any resemblance of a life in Hades. Odysseus therefore believes his life will completely end when he dies, and he must find a way to somehow survive his death. Odysseus and other Greek heroes therefore pursue glory and fame, seeking to go on ‘living’ in the memory of those who remain alive. This idea remains with us today, where people donate money, create art, and procreate in order to be remembered. Odysseus’ obsession with glory and fame leads to his less charming characteristics, revealed in the sacking of Ismarus and his savage treatment of

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2 *The Odyssey* makes no significant reference to the Elysian Fields. The only people mentioned in *The Odyssey* who get special treatment in Hades are Tantalus and Sisyphus, but they don’t seem to reside in a different section of Hades than the rest.
the suitors. It also influences him to arrogantly reveal his name to Polyphêmos, Poseidon’s son, which results in Poseidon prolonging his return home. These qualities show that Odysseus is not perfect, that he makes mistakes just like all of us. It somehow comforts us, knowing that we share qualities with such a revered hero, and allows us to relate to him.

The Greeks’ pursuit of glory and fame also influences them to pursue a glorious death. Odysseus, when leaving Kalypso’s island for Skhería, contemplates his probable death:

Would God I, too, had died there—met my end
that time the Trojans made so many casts at me
when I stood by Akhilleus after death.
I should have had a soldier’s burial
and praise from the Akhaians—not this choking
waiting for me at sea, unmarked and lonely. (201)

Odysseus clearly prefers a glorious death where people respect and pay homage to him to an anonymous death at sea, a sentiment shared by Akhilleus and probably all other Greek heroes. However, we’re led to believe Odysseus lives a long, happy life with his family after they reunite. We see that Odysseus values his happiness with his family; Odysseus learns from Akhilleus’ mistake. Achieving glory and fame will, to a certain extent, prolong one’s ‘existence’ in life, but Odysseus realises what’s more important. He realises that the short time he has left to be alive should be spent with the people he cares about, and that to find happiness in life is the only way to make the eternity he spends in Hades worthwhile.
Bibliography