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Shifting Meaning of Heroism: A Comparative Study of Homer's *The Odyssey* and Madeline Miller's *Circe*

Daniel Eka Putra Wowiling[a.1*] & Tri Pramesti[a.2]
[a)] Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
[1)] danielwowiling0@gmail.com; tripramesti@untag-sby.ac.id
[*] Corresponding Author: Daniel Eka Putra Wowiling

ABSTRACT

Although numerous studies on Circe have concentrated on feminist reinterpretation and female agency, comparatively limited attention has been given to the structural reconstruction of Odysseus' heroism itself, a gap increasingly pressing given the growing cultural prominence of mythological retellings. This study examines how heroism, as a culturally constructed concept, shifts across The Odyssey and Circe. Using Roland Barthes' concept of the cultural code as a structuralist framework, it analyzes how Odysseus' heroism, grounded in *kleos, aretē,* and *timē* in the Homeric epic, is reconstructed in Circe through modern ethical and psychological perspectives. While traits such as intelligence and endurance remain consistent, the ideological foundation of heroism shifts from collective honor and public glory toward moral accountability and interior consciousness, suggesting heroism is not a universal ideal but a culturally dependent construct reshaped through literary adaptation.

Keywords: *Cultural Code, Heroism, Mythological Retellings, Recontextualization, Shifting Meaning*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Heroism is neither a static nor universal ideal but a culturally produced concept shaped by the moral and ideological values of the society that defines it (Ischuk et al., 2024; Nasrullayeva, 2024). Within structuralist theory, meaning is produced through shared systems of cultural knowledge rather than individual intention alone (Tyson, 2006); heroism may thus be understood as a cultural code, an organized system of values embedded within narrative structures whose historical shifts reveal broader changes in cultural awareness (Apene, 2023; Matoušková, 2022).

In the ancient Greek epic tradition, heroism is grounded in culturally specific values such as aretē (excellence), kleos (everlasting glory), timē (honor), and nostos (homecoming), shaping both heroic conduct and social recognition. In *The Odyssey* (Homer, 2018), Odysseus embodies these ideals through mētis, endurance, and determination to reclaim his identity and homeland, reinforced through formulaic epithets, divine intervention, and communal validation (Koblanov et al., 2025; Zhou, 2024). Recent scholarship emphasizes that Homeric heroism is closely tied to public honor, collective memory, and patriarchal authority, situating the hero within a system that privileges martial success and resilience (Al-rikabi, 2025; Koblanov et al., 2025).

Contemporary mythological retellings, however, often reassess classical heroic standards through modern cultural perspectives. *Circe* (Miller, 2018) repositions the epic narrative within a different ideological framework, shifting attention toward moral complexity and individual experience rather than celebrating heroic achievement without question. Adaptation theory explains that modern retellings function as transformative engagements with source texts rather than simple

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reproductions (Ramin et al., 2023; Sarwar & Fatima, 2022), and intertextual theory argues that meaning emerges through relationships between texts across time (Apene, 2023; Matoušková, 2022).

Among Barthes' five narrative codes, the cultural code is distinctive because it explicitly connects the internal structure of the text to the external world of social knowledge and ideological belief, whereas the other codes operate primarily within the text itself. This focus was chosen over other structuralist tools: Propp's (1968) narrative functions model the sequence of a hero's actions but not why an action is judged heroic, while Levi-Strauss's (1963) binary oppositions illuminate structural pairs such as honor/shame without explaining how a value like kleos or timē becomes naturalized as heroic. Barthes' cultural code offers a vocabulary for identifying exactly this naturalization process, making it the most direct tool for tracing how heroism's ideological content shifts between *The Odyssey* and *Circe*.

To analyze this transformation systematically, this study applies Roland Barthes' concept of the cultural code as its main analytical framework. The cultural code refers to shared cultural knowledge, moral assumptions, and ideological beliefs embedded within a narrative (Ali et al., 2022; Tyson, 2006). Through cultural codes, texts draw upon commonly understood ideas of honor, gender hierarchy, divinity, and authority to generate meaning. When applied comparatively, this approach allows the identification of how different cultural systems encode and reconstruct heroism within narrative representation (Abdullah, 2025; Ali et al., 2022).

Comparative work situating Homeric or heroic material against other adaptations remains limited but growing. Refieta (2021) compares heroic construction across Henry Gilbert's *Robin Hood* and Rizki Ridyasmara's *Pitung*, showing that heroism is shaped by socio-cultural context rather than representing a universal concept, though without a structuralist framework capable of explaining how that meaning is encoded. Septiaji et al. (2025) examine the adaptation of Greek heroic narratives into contemporary film, demonstrating how classical mythological material is modified for new audiences, but their focus remains on narrative comparison rather than ideological reconstruction. These studies confirm growing scholarly interest in cross-textual heroism but do not apply a systematic cultural-code framework.

Similarly, previous scholarship on Circe has predominantly emphasized feminist reinterpretation, female agency, and first-person narrative authority (Rodriguez Hernandez, 2024; Sarwar & Fatima, 2022; Spacciante, 2024), while Homeric scholarship has extensively examined the ethical and linguistic dimensions of epic heroism (Al-rikabi, 2025; Koblanov et al., 2025; Zhou, 2024). Neither line of scholarship, however, centers Odysseus' heroism itself as the object of a systematic, theory-driven comparison across the two texts.

The application of Barthes' cultural code to literary analysis has a growing, genre-diverse precedent. Ali et al. (2022) apply all five of Barthes' narrative codes to Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone*, showing how cultural codes naturalize assumptions about power and moral hierarchy. Abdullah (2025) applies the cultural code to Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, showing how the narrative contests Victorian assumptions about class. Lahpan (2022) and Djafar et al. (2024) similarly apply the five codes to a dramatic work and an Indonesian novel respectively, confirming their applicability across genres, while Pramesti (2018) extends the precedent to intertextual transfer, applying Barthes' reference code alongside Bloom's theory of influence in Indonesian young-adult fiction.

Collectively, these three bodies of scholarship, comparative studies of heroism, feminist and narratological readings of *Circe*, and applications of Barthes' cultural code to other literary genres, confirm both a rich surrounding context and a specific, unfilled gap: no existing study applies Barthes' well-established cultural code to a diachronic, cross-cultural comparison of heroism between a

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classical epic and its modern literary adaptation, with Odysseus' heroic identity as the central analytical focus. This is the gap the present study addresses.

This study therefore investigates the transformation of heroism by analyzing the operation of cultural codes in *The Odyssey* and *Circe*, with particular emphasis on the characterization of Odysseus. By identifying how heroic values are encoded in selected episodes and comparing their treatment across the two texts, the research traces both continuity and change in the cultural construction of heroism. The study ultimately demonstrates that literary adaptation serves as a space of ideological negotiation in which classical ideals are preserved, questioned, and reinterpreted within contemporary discourse (Ramin et al., 2023; Sarwar & Fatima, 2022).

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in structuralist literary analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings embedded within literary texts rather than measure variables statistically. Since heroism is examined as a culturally constructed narrative concept, the analysis relies on close reading to identify recurring value systems, ideological assumptions, and culturally shared norms embedded in the narratives (Ohrvik, 2024). Structuralist theory provides the foundation for this approach by treating meaning as the product of shared systems of signification rather than individual authorial intention (Tyson, 2006).

The study adopts a comparative design to identify continuity and transformation in the construction of Odysseus' heroism, applying Roland Barthes' concept of the cultural (referential) code as a consistent analytical framework for both texts (Ali et al., 2022). The analysis begins with *Circe*, identifying passages in which Odysseus' heroism is constructed through cultural references and moral judgments, then compares these with corresponding episodes in *The Odyssey* to examine how equivalent situations are encoded within the cultural system of ancient Greek heroism (Al-rikabi, 2025; Koblanov et al., 2025).

The primary data consist of *Circe* (Miller, 2018) and Peter Green's translation of *The Odyssey* (Homer, 2018). The theoretical framework is informed by Barthes' cultural code and contemporary discussions of semiotic analysis (Ali et al., 2022; Tyson, 2006). While structuralist concepts such as binary opposition provide contextual support for understanding mythic value systems, Barthes' cultural code serves as the principal analytical framework because it explains how texts naturalize culturally shared assumptions rather than merely organizing narrative structures. This perspective enables the study to examine how values such as kleos, aretē, timē, and divine sanction function not simply as themes but as culturally accepted standards through which heroism is constructed and interpreted.

Data collection followed four sequential stages. First, both texts were read repeatedly to establish familiarity with their narrative structures and thematic patterns. Second, a focused close reading of *Circe* identified passages encoding cultural values associated with heroism. Third, corresponding episodes in *The Odyssey* were located based on comparable narrative situations. Finally, the selected passages were organized into recurring cultural-code categories to ensure analytical consistency throughout the comparison.

Data analysis proceeded through four stages. The first stage examined selected passages in *Circe* to identify how heroism is reconstructed within its contemporary ideological framework. The second stage analyzed corresponding passages in *The Odyssey* to determine how heroic values are traditionally encoded. The third stage conducted a direct comparison between the two texts to identify points of continuity and transformation. The final stage synthesized these findings to explain

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how adaptation reshapes the cultural codes of heroism across historical contexts (Ramin et al., 2023; Sarwar & Fatima, 2022).

The interpretive analysis followed a consistent three-step procedure derived from Barthes' concept of the cultural code. First, each passage was examined to identify the shared cultural knowledge presupposed by the narrative, that is, the values presented as self-evident rather than explicitly justified. Second, the analysis identified the textual mechanisms through which these values were produced and naturalized, including characterization, recurring epithets, evaluative language, narrative sequencing, focalization, and patterns of narration. Third, corresponding passages from both texts were compared to determine how similar actions or narrative situations were interpreted through different cultural codes, demonstrating that heroic meaning is historically contingent rather than inherent in the actions themselves.

Passages were classified using a three-part coding structure consisting of: (1) the character or narrative element involved; (2) the narrative context in which the passage occurs; and (3) the cultural interpretation, identifying the specific cultural code activated (e.g., kleos, aretē, timē, divine sanction, or their reconstruction in Circe). Coding decisions were supported by textual evidence, theoretical interpretation, and comparative analysis. Because cultural-code identification depends on interpretive close reading rather than a standardized coding instrument, the classifications inevitably reflect the analytical judgment of the researcher. Other scholars applying the same framework may reasonably identify different passages or classify borderline cases differently. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as a focused structural and cultural interpretation rather than a fully replicable coding scheme.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis addresses three central questions: (1) what concepts of heroism are encoded in each text; (2) what similarities and differences characterize the cultural codes of heroism across the two works; and (3) what those similarities and differences reveal about the broader transformation of heroism from the classical Greek epic tradition to the twenty-first century literary context.

3.1 Heroism in *The Odyssey*

3.1.1 Kleos as the Foundation of Heroic Identity

In *The Odyssey*, heroism is fundamentally built through the cultural code of kleos, the glory through publicly witnessed and communally remembered achievement. Within the ancient Greek cultural framework, which operated as an honor-shame society, identity was not internally constituted but externally validated. A hero's worth depended on how his actions were witnessed, narrated, and preserved in collective memory. Odysseus makes this logic explicit in his self-introduction to the Phaeacians: "I am Odysseus, Laërtēs' son, well known to all mankind / for my crafty devices: my fame goes up to heaven" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 19–20, p. 138). The line fuses identity with renown so completely that Odysseus cannot describe who he is without describing how far his reputation travels; fame is not a byproduct of his identity but constitutive of it. Barthes' cultural code illuminates this dynamic: kleos functions as a presupposed cultural value that makes the pursuit of recognition seem like a natural and unquestionable part of heroic identity.

This meaning is produced by the poem's oral-formulaic structure: epithets such as “resourceful Odysseus” circulate as fixed units before any single deed justifies them, so kleos is naturalized by repetition rather than demonstrated by argument.

A key instance of this kleos cultural code appears in Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus. Having escaped by using the name "No one," Odysseus reclaims his real name when he departs despite the risk of retaliation, taunting the Cyclops directly. Within the Homeric value system, anonymity is

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incompatible with heroism because it prevents the hero's achievement from being attributed and kept alive in collective memory. As Liang (2017) argues, kleos operates as a form of symbolic immortality , a way for the hero's deeds to outlive his mortal body. In this sense, the cultural code of kleos embeds a shared cultural belief that recognition is not incidental to heroic identity but is its very foundation: an unwitnessed achievement produces no heroic meaning within the epic's ideological framework.

This value system, in which public recognition functions as the measure of heroic worth, shapes Odysseus' behavior throughout the epic. His repeated self-identification through epithets and patronymics reflects a socially enforced norm , what scholars of the cultural code call an ideologically embedded social rule , that treats the public assertion of heroic identity as an obligatory act to maintain narrative presence and public standing (Ali et al., 2022; Koblanov et al., 2025). Each epithet activates the cultural code, reminding the audience that heroic identity is made through accumulated public recognition rather than private virtue.

3.1.2 Aretē and the Excellence of Mētis

Aretē, excellence in the ancient Greek sense, defines heroism in *The Odyssey* not primarily through physical strength but through mētis: the cunning intelligence and practical wisdom that allows Odysseus to prevail where brute force would fail. In the Homeric tradition, as Zhou (2024) explains, intellectual resourcefulness carries the same heroic prestige as martial achievement; the poem encodes both as expressions of the same value of excellence. The set of values embedded in the poem , what scholars describe as a shared narrative value system (Ali et al., 2022; Tyson, 2006) , presents Odysseus' intelligence as a form of heroic virtue comparable to physical bravery in other warrior traditions.

The Polyphemus episode again illustrates the cultural code of aretē-as-mētis. Rather than confronting the Cyclops directly, Odysseus deceives him, exploiting the enemy's weaknesses through careful planning, and afterward exults privately in his own cleverness: "I laughed in my heart at the way that name, / and my faultless planning, had so deceived them" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 413–414, p. 149). The satisfaction Odysseus takes here is not remorse or reflection but pure pride in the success of the deception itself , the poem offers his laughter as the natural and appropriate response to a plan well executed. The epic treats this strategy not as morally questionable but as praiseworthy, celebrating both the ingenuity of the plan and its execution.

This meaning is produced by first-person focalization: because Odysseus narrates the episode himself, no external voice can question his self-satisfaction, and his self-presentation as a masterful trickster stands unchallenged.

In Miller's *Circe* (2018), however, the same trait is examined through a different evaluative lens. Circe recalls how Odysseus' men misread one of his shrewd deceptions entirely: describing the bag of winds given by Aeolus, she notes that "he told me of… Aeolus… I had told my men what it was, of course, but, " He shook his head. "They decided it was treasure I did not wish to share" (Miller, 2018, p. 184). Where the Homeric text treats mētis as a cost-free virtue, *Circe*'s retelling shows that Odysseus' cleverness generates confusion, resentment, and ultimately catastrophe among the very men he leads , a consequence the epic itself elides. This contrast reveals a key divergence in cultural codes: *The Odyssey* encodes effectiveness as its own moral justification , a shared cultural belief that a clever outcome validates the act itself , whereas *Circe* introduces a modern ethical framework that asks not only whether the strategy worked but what it cost others. As Zhou (2024) explains, Homeric heroism prioritizes efficacy over ethical transparency.

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3.1.3 Timē, Social Hierarchy, and the Legitimacy of Violence

Timē , honor understood as social status and hierarchical recognition, places heroism within a system of public acknowledgment and authority. Honor is not merely a personal quality but a publicly negotiated currency whose gain or loss directly affects the hero's standing within the social order. Odysseus' identity as king of Ithaca establishes his social authority, and his actions throughout the epic are framed as efforts to restore the hierarchical order that his prolonged absence has disrupted.

The slaughter of the suitors in Book XXII is the most dramatic expression of this cultural code. Odysseus tells Eurymachos: "were you to give me all you had from your fathers, / all that you now possess, plus what you could find elsewhere, / not even so would I stay my hands from slaughter / until the suitors had paid the full price for their wrongdoing!" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 22, ll. 61–64, p. 335). The rejection of material compensation is significant: Odysseus refuses to let wealth substitute for blood, insisting that only violence can settle the suitors' offense. A parallel logic governs the raid on the Kikones, where Odysseus recounts, "From the city we took both the wives and a heap of goods / and divided them. I made sure none got less than a fair share" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 39–42, p. 139).

This meaning is produced through tonal equivalence: the poem narrates the sack of a city and the slaughter of the suitors in the same measured register, so conquest and killing register as morally continuous acts of legitimate authority rather than as violence needing defense. Within the epic's value system, this large-scale violence is coded not as excessive but as the just reassertion of the hero's timē, since the suitors have violated the laws of hospitality. As Al-rikabi (2025) notes, epic heroism is embedded within hierarchical structures that equate legitimate leadership with the willingness to deploy force in defense of social order.

3.1.4 Cultural Authority and Divine Sanction

A fourth dimension of heroism in *The Odyssey* is the role of divine sanction in legitimizing the hero's identity and actions. Odysseus' sustained relationship with Athena is the most prominent expression of this code: the goddess's consistent guidance and endorsement function as a cosmic affirmation of his heroic status that goes beyond the merely human sphere of communal recognition (Zhou, 2024). Within the Homeric cultural framework, divine favor is not merely an added benefit for the hero but a structural part of heroic legitimacy , a hero without divine support is incomplete.

This cultural code reflects an ancient worldview in which the boundaries between human and divine are permeable and in which human achievement is always partly an expression of divine will. Even Odysseus' suffering, inflicted by Poseidon, is embedded within this cosmic framework , it is the expression of divine displeasure rather than mere misfortune, and its resolution requires divine permission. Divine sanction thus naturalizes a particular understanding of heroic identity as cosmically ordained rather than merely socially constructed. This is made explicit when Athena pleads before Zeus on Odysseus' behalf: "Did not Odysseus / by the Argives' ships honor you with the sacrifices he made / in the broad land of Troy?" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 1, ll. 60–62, p. 28). Athena's rhetorical question treats Odysseus' piety as self-evidently deserving of divine reciprocity, framing the relationship between mortal and god as a transaction whose terms Zeus is obligated to honor.

This meaning is produced by narrative sequencing: the gods' deliberation over Odysseus' fate opens the poem before the audience witnesses a single one of his own actions, so cosmic endorsement, not human achievement alone, is naturalized as the source of heroic worth. His piety is offered as the ground of divine reciprocity, confirming that heroic worth, within this code, is never purely a human achievement.

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3.2 Heroism in *Circe*

3.2.1 Heroism as Psychological Complexity

In *Circe* (Miller, 2018), heroism is fundamentally rebuilt through psychological complexity, shifting the primary site of heroic identity from external achievement to internal experience. Unlike the Homeric model in which identity is made through publicly witnessed action and communal validation, Miller's novel foregrounds the hero's inner life , his contradictions, his restlessness, his unresolved desires, and his ambiguous motivations. Circe describes the toll of this restlessness directly: "Disaster upon disaster. Yet he had walked into a witch's house, even weary as he was… What resolve that must have taken, what vigilant will… A knife I had named him, but I saw that he was sliced down to the bone" (Miller, 2018, p. 175). The image of a man "sliced down to the bone" recasts endurance not as triumphant strength but as accumulated damage, Odysseus in *Circe* is not presented as a stable embodiment of heroic ideals but as a figure whose external achievements and inner experience exist in persistent tension.

This meaning is produced by external focalization: because Circe, not Odysseus, narrates this observation, the novel introduces a perspective outside the Homeric heroic code, able to see the cost that code conceals from within its own logic. It is this shift in who holds the narrating voice that makes vulnerability visible for the first time.

This is particularly evident in Circe's observation that Odysseus is perpetually oriented toward the horizon , a metaphor that recodes his famous determination as a sign of psychological instability rather than heroic perseverance. What *The Odyssey* presents as the heroic drive toward homecoming and restored identity, *Circe* reframes as an inability to be fully present, an existential restlessness that undermines the possibility of genuine satisfaction or commitment. This reframing is not merely a character observation but an ideological intervention: it introduces a modern cultural assumption , that psychological stability and authentic presence are markers of genuine human maturity, which was not available as a critical framework within the ancient Greek epic tradition (Ischuk et al., 2024).

The emphasis on interiority in *Circe* reflects broader shifts in modern literary values, in which character depth and subjective authenticity are prioritized over external achievement and public performance. As Nasrullayeva (2024) argues, contemporary literary heroism increasingly locates heroic value in the quality of the hero's inner life rather than in his outward accomplishments. Within this framework, Odysseus' intelligence and resourcefulness remain present, but they are embedded within a psychological portrait that complicates rather than simply celebrates them. The heroic stoicism that the epic tradition presents as natural is here recast as a sustained act of will performed against genuine emotional damage, denaturalizing the assumption that the hero is inherently immune to suffering.

3.2.2 Heroism and Moral Ambiguity

A central feature of heroism in *Circe* (Miller, 2018) is its systematic introduction of moral ambiguity into the evaluation of actions that are celebrated without reservation in *The Odyssey* (Homer, 2018). Where the epic tradition presents Odysseus' cunning, his strategic deception, and his willingness to sacrifice others as expressions of heroic excellence, *Circe* subjects these same qualities to ethical scrutiny by foregrounding their costs and consequences. Circe's account of Odysseus' relationship to his crew is telling in this respect: describing the men he brought to war, she observes, "They have wrinkles, but no wisdom. I took them to war before they could do any of those things that steady a man. They were unmarried when they left. They had no children" (Miller, 2018, p. 184). The line, delivered in Odysseus' own retelling as Circe records it, exposes a leader keenly aware of what his choices cost his men , an awareness the Homeric text never requires of him.

The re-evaluation of the Polyphemus episode is telling. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' decision to reclaim his name constitutes an assertion of heroic identity within the cultural code of kleos , it

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transforms a survival strategy into a heroic achievement by making it publicly attributable and therefore memorable (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 19–20, p. 138). In *Circe* (Miller, 2018), the same act is recoded as a sign of destructive ego and reckless pride. Reflecting on the whole of Odysseus' journey, Telemachus concludes: "All those years of pain and wandering. Why? For a moment's pride. He would rather be cursed by the gods than be No one. If he had returned home after the war, the suitors would never have come" (Miller, 2018, p. 270).

This meaning is produced by a reassignment of voice: the critique of Odysseus' pride comes not from an adversary the epic would discount, but from Telemachus, his own son, giving it an authority the Homeric text has no equivalent structure to produce. Telemachus's judgment directly inverts the epic's own celebration of the naming scene: what Homer frames as courage, he frames as vanity with a body count, tracing a causal line from Odysseus' need for glory all the way to the suitors' deaths. This reframing does not simply reverse the evaluation but denaturalizes the cultural code itself , it reveals that the celebration of kleos-assertion in Homer is not a natural response to the situation but an ideologically specific one that can be read very differently from within a different cultural framework.

This introduction of moral ambiguity reflects what Nasrullayeva (2024) identifies as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary heroism narratives: the shift away from the assumption that heroic effectiveness automatically constitutes moral virtue toward a framework in which actions must be evaluated in terms of their intentions and consequences as well as their outcomes. Moral ambiguity in Circe encodes a modern ethical sensibility that demands accountability from heroes and refuses to accept success as its own moral justification.

3.2.3 Vulnerability and Trauma in Heroic Identity

Circe (2018) introduces a further cultural code that has no significant parallel in *The Odyssey* (2018): the integration of vulnerability and trauma into the construction of heroic identity. Where the Homeric epic acknowledges Odysseus' suffering only insofar as it functions as an obstacle to be overcome , a test of endurance that ultimately affirms his heroic strength, as when "nor were his eyes / ever wiped dry of tears" is offered as proof of fidelity to home (Homer, 2018, Bk. 5, ll. 151–153, p. 93) , Miller's novel treats suffering as having lasting psychological consequences that shape the hero's identity in ways that cannot be fully resolved through achievement or homecoming (Palchevska et al., 2025).

Odysseus in *Circe* carries the accumulated weight of his experiences. Circe recalls the stories of atrocity he shared: "I remembered the stories Odysseus had told me of what soldiers did to children. Astyanax and all the sons of Troy, smashed and spitted, torn to pieces, trampled by horses, killed and killed so they would not live and grow to strength" (Miller, 2018, p. 205). That Odysseus carries and repeats these memories, rather than folding them silently into a narrative of triumphant survival, marks trauma as something that persists in him rather than something resolved by his eventual homecoming.

This meaning is again produced by external focalization, here directed at the site of suffering itself. The same image of tearful, sleepless endurance the epic offers as proof of fidelity , "he was sliced down to the bone" (Miller, 2018, p. 175) , is reread by Circe's outside eye as evidence of a wound that has not closed: fidelity in one telling, damage in the other. His restlessness is presented not as heroic drive but as a symptom of psychological damage, reflecting a contemporary assumption that extreme experience leaves individuals permanently changed rather than fully resolved through acts of will (Ischuk et al., 2024).

The inclusion of trauma as a component of heroic identity is ideologically significant because it challenges the Homeric cultural code that presents the hero as ultimately invulnerable , someone whose endurance of suffering demonstrates and affirms rather than diminishes his heroic quality. In

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Circe, vulnerability is not a temporary condition to be overcome but a permanent feature of the hero's psychological landscape. This recoding humanizes Odysseus by making him more recognizably fallible and limited, while simultaneously undermining the idealized image of heroic invincibility that the epic tradition constructs.

3.2.4 Leadership and Survival in Modern Ethical Context

In *Circe* (Miller, 2018), the concept of leadership , traditionally a central expression of heroic timē , is recontextualized within a modern ethical framework that subjects authority to critical evaluation rather than accepting it as inherently legitimate. While Odysseus remains a figure of influence and decision-making authority in Miller's novel, his leadership is no longer self-validating. When Circe questions him early in their acquaintance, he offers a telling self-assessment of his men rather than himself: "I am sorry for that. They are fools, and young, and I have been too lenient with them" (Miller, 2018, p. 172). Later, watching his men with paternal warmth in public, he confides something starkly different in private: "He smiled over them like an indulgent father," but that same evening admits, "I am a fair enough warrior, but I know where I end" (Miller, 2018, pp. 188–189).

This meaning is produced by the creation of a private space , a backstage , that the epic's public, performative form has no room for. Homer's Odysseus has only the witnessed register of the hall, the deck, the battlefield; Miller's prose can follow him into Circe's private house at night, recording a self-assessment no crew member or god observes, letting leadership be judged by honest self-knowledge rather than public command alone.

This shift reflects contemporary values that prioritize accountability, empathy, and ethical responsibility over hierarchical authority and the capacity for dominance. As Al-rikabi (2025) notes, modern interpretations of heroism increasingly move away from hierarchical models of power toward more relational and ethically engaged forms of leadership in which the hero's responsibilities to those under his authority are as important as his capacity to command them. In *Circe* (Miller, 2018), Odysseus' decisions are evaluated not only in terms of their strategic effectiveness but also in terms of their moral implications , whether they genuinely serve the collective good or primarily satisfy his own ambitions.

3.2.5 Divine Authority and Human-Centered Morality

A final cultural code that *Circe* reconstructs is the role of divine authority in legitimizing heroic identity. Where *The Odyssey* treats the gods as arbiters of a cosmic moral order whose favor confirms heroic worth, Miller's novel, narrated from the perspective of a minor Olympian, portrays divine authority as capricious, self-interested, and largely indifferent to human or heroic merit. This is underscored by Circe's own recollection of her first, disenchanted meeting with Odysseus: "I think you are Odysseus," I said. "Born from that same Trickster's blood." He did not start at the uncanny knowledge. He was a man used to gods" (Miller, 2018, p. 171). The line's flatness , Odysseus' unastonished familiarity with divine intervention , strips the gods of the awe and cosmic weight *The Odyssey* affords them; for *Circe*'s Odysseus, gods are simply another fact of a dangerous world, not guarantors of his worth.

This meaning is produced by the novel's narrating position: because the story is voiced by a goddess herself unjustly exiled by Olympian judgment, divine authority is narrated from underneath rather than from above. This reversal of narrating position, not merely a difference of opinion about the gods, relocates heroic worth away from cosmic sanction and into human relationships and accountability.

Circe's own experience of Olympian judgment undercuts the presumption that divine sanction reflects genuine excellence rather than the arbitrary exercise of power. Odysseus' cleverness and endurance are no longer validated by cosmic approval; instead, his worth is relocated in human

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relationships and human accountability. This shift mirrors the broader secularization of ethical judgment that characterizes contemporary literary retellings of myth, in which moral authority derives from empathy and relational responsibility rather than from divine mandate (Rodriguez Hernandez, 2024; Sarwar & Fatima, 2022; Spacciante, 2024). The cultural code that once made the gods co-authors of heroism is, in *Circe*, dismantled from within the very perspective the epic tradition had marginalized.

3.3 Similarities and Differences in Cultural Codes of Heroism

3.3.1 Continuities in the Cultural Code of Heroism

Before turning to the transformations that distinguish Circe from its classical source, it is necessary to first establish the cultural codes that persist across both texts. This section identifies three continuities in the cultural code of heroism. Table 1 summarizes how each code operates as a naturalizing mechanism, presenting a particular trait as self-evidently heroic , in both The Odyssey and Circe, before the discussion below traces each continuity through close textual analysis.

Table 1. Continuities in the Cultural Code of Heroism: Naturalizing Mechanism and Re-Encoding

No.	Cultural Code	Naturalizing Mechanism	Novel	
			The Odyssey	Circe
1.	Intelligence as heroic excellence (aretē)	Cunning is affirmed from within, without needing outside judgment , the code naturalizes intelligence as self-evidently admirable	Odysseus privately takes pride in his own deception, treating it as unquestioned excellence	The same trait is preserved as reputation and passed on to Circe herself, but its standing shifts from unreserved admiration to ambivalent scrutiny
2.	Narrative identity (kleos)	The hero's identity is constituted by circulating report rather than by the self , the code naturalizes fame as constitutive of who the hero is	Odysseus defines himself through his own renown, unable to state his identity without invoking how far it travels	The identical logic operates in reverse: he is preceded by legend and known through others' report before he speaks , identity is still built from outside narration, now imposed rather than claimed
3.	Endurance as proof of worth	Suffering is coded as evidence of resolve rather than as harm in itself	Sleepless vigilance and unresolved grief are read as strength, proof the hero has not broken	The same restlessness is retained as a trait but re-coded as a symptom of psychological cost rather than proof of heroic will

Despite the substantial ideological distance between the classical epic tradition and the twenty-first-century literary context, *The Odyssey* (Homer, 2018) and *Circe* (Miller, 2018) share a set of

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foundational cultural codes that construct heroism as a distinctive and recognizable category of human identity. These continuities demonstrate that the transformation of heroism is not a wholesale rejection of classical values but a process of recontextualization in which some elements are kept while their meaning is shifted.

The most prominent continuity is the coding of intelligence as a defining heroic attribute. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' intelligence (mētis) is his heroic excellence (aretē), as in his private pride at outwitting Polyphemus: "I laughed in my heart at the way that name, / and my faultless planning, had so deceived them" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 413–414, p. 149). *Circe* preserves this coding , Circe invokes "Odysseus polymetis, man of so many wiles" (Miller, 2018, p. 208), Circe herself inherits the same quality , even as the evaluation shifts from unreserved admiration to ambivalent scrutiny.

A second continuity is heroism as narrative identity , a hero's significance constituted by the stories told about him. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus declares himself "well known to all mankind / for my crafty devices" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 19–20, p. 138); in *Circe*, the same logic operates from the outside, as he arrives preceded by legend, "the name… stitched into his skin," so that "whoever saw him must salute and say: There is a man who has seen the world" (Miller, 2018, p. 181).

Endurance is a third point of continuity, though its meaning shifts. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' sleepless vigilance on Calypso's island , "nor were his eyes / ever wiped dry of tears" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 5, ll. 151–153, p. 93) , codes endurance as strength; in *Circe*, the same restlessness, "what resolve that must have taken, what vigilant will" (Miller, 2018, p. 175), is recoded as psychological limitation. Both texts recognize it as central to Odysseus' identity , the same raw endurance, differently named.

3.3.2 Differences in the Cultural Code of Heroism

Building on the continuities identified above, this section turns to the more substantial divergences between the two texts' cultural codes of heroism. Table 2 summarizes the most significant divergences between the two texts across three key dimensions of heroic meaning.

Table 2. Key Differences in Cultural Codes of Heroism

No.	Key Dimension	Novel	
		The Odyssey	Circe
1.	Basis of heroic identity	A hero's worth is determined by how his deeds are witnessed and remembered by others (kleos, timē). Without public acknowledgment, achievement holds no heroic meaning.	Heroic significance is located in the quality of the hero's inner life , his motivations, contradictions, and psychological landscape , rather than in communal recognition.
2.	Moral evaluation of actions	Effectiveness is its own moral justification. Clever deception and strategic cunning are celebrated without ethical qualification because they achieve the right outcome for the community.	Actions are judged not only by their outcome but by what they cost others and what they reveal about the hero's character. Accountability becomes a necessary part of heroic evaluation.
3.	Role of vulnerability	Hardship is a temporary obstacle. Enduring it proves the hero's strength and ultimately confirms his exceptional quality , suffering affirms rather than diminishes heroic status.	Suffering leaves lasting psychological marks. Odysseus carries the accumulated weight of his experiences, and his restlessness is read as a symptom of damage rather than heroic drive.

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The differences between the two texts' cultural codes are more numerous and more significant than the continuities. The most profound is the shift from external to internal validation. In *The Odyssey*, worth is determined by how deeds are witnessed and remembered, as when Odysseus claims his "fame goes up to heaven" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, ll. 19–20, p. 138); in *Circe*, significance is displaced onto inner life, most tellingly in his private confession, "I am a fair enough warrior, but I know where I end" (Miller, 2018, p. 188) , a self-assessment earning him no glory.

A second transformation concerns moral evaluation. *The Odyssey*'s aretē validates cunning through effectiveness alone; *Circe* subjects it to ethical scrutiny, weighing what it costs others, as in Telemachus's retrospective judgment that "all those years of pain and wandering" were undertaken "for a moment's pride" (Miller, 2018, p. 270) , a modern code that rejects the equation of effectiveness with virtue.

The coding of vulnerability is the most revealing divergence. *The Odyssey* treats it as temporary, redeemed by homecoming, as Odysseus weeps, "sweet life… draining from him" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 5, ll. 151–157, p. 93); *Circe* treats it as permanent and constitutive, the same endurance meaning he was "sliced down to the bone" (Miller, 2018, p. 175) , damage rather than proof (Palchevska et al., 2025), reflecting a contemporary preference for psychological realism over heroic invincibility.

3.4 The Shifting Meaning of Heroism

3.4.1 From Collective Honor to Individual Interior Consciousness

The comparative analysis reveals a fundamental transformation: from a collectively oriented, externally validated heroic ideal to an individually centered, internal one. In Homer, heroic identity is relational, constituted through communal recognition, as when Odysseus frames his mission as "battling for his own life and his comrades' homecoming" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 1, ll. 1–5, p. 27).

In *Circe*, this communal framework is replaced by an individual one: significance is located in the quality of inner life, most plainly in the private admission, "I am a fair enough warrior, but I know where I end" (Miller, 2018, p. 188). Circe's focalized consciousness assesses heroism through psychological depth and ethical self-awareness rather than public glory, reflecting broader cultural shifts toward individualism and interior consciousness as the primary site of meaningful experience.

This has implications for heroism's social function: in *The Odyssey* it reinforces communally endorsed values (kleos, aretē, timē); in *Circe* it becomes a site of individual negotiation and critique. The change is not merely in content but in function , from cultural reproduction to cultural critique.

3.4.2 From Idealization to Humanization

A second dimension of the transformation is the shift from idealization to humanization. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' qualities , intelligence, endurance, cunning, leadership , place him above ordinary human limitation. Although he experiences hardship, it ultimately affirms rather than diminishes his heroic quality, since "nor were his eyes / ever wiped dry of tears" is narrated as endurance, not damage (Homer, 2018, Bk. 5, ll. 151–157, p. 93). This idealization provides the community with a model of excellence that reinforces its collective values.

In *Circe*, this idealization is dismantled: Odysseus is complex and morally limited, his achievements inseparable from their costs, his reputation revealed as partly a construction of communal storytelling , a legend that precedes and outsizes the man, so that "whoever saw him must salute and say: There is a man who has seen the world" (Miller, 2018, p. 181), even as the same evening reveals a far more modest self-assessment behind closed doors.

This humanization reveals what *The Odyssey*'s idealized Odysseus conceals: a culturally specific ideological construction rather than a natural or objective assessment. As Tyson (2006) explains,

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myth presents its ideological constructions as natural and inevitable; exposing that construction is itself an ideological act.

3.4.3 Cultural Re-Signification of Heroic Meaning

These findings confirm the core idea of the cultural code framework: meaning is not built into a text but shaped by the cultural values of the society that reads it (Ali et al., 2022; Tyson, 2006). The same figure, performing the same actions , reclaiming his name before the Cyclops, leading men to war and losing them , is coded as heroic in the classical framework and as morally ambiguous in the contemporary one, because the governing cultural codes, not the actions, have changed.

This re-signification reflects genuine changes in cultural values: the rise of individualism, the questioning of hierarchical and divine legitimacy, and the recognition of trauma as permanent rather than a temporary obstacle. Heroism is thus not a fixed ideal but a dynamic construct renegotiated through literary adaptation.

3.5 Discussion

The analysis presented above answers the three questions motivating this study. First, Odysseus' heroism in *The Odyssey* is constructed through kleos, aretē, timē, and divine sanction , crystallized in his claim that his "fame goes up to heaven" (Homer, 2018, Bk. 9, l. 20, p. 138), while in *Circe* it is reconstructed through psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, vulnerability, and accountable leadership, most concisely in his private reckoning that he is "a fair enough warrior" who "know[s] where [he] end[s]" (Miller, 2018, p. 188). Second, the comparison identifies continuities , intelligence, narrative identity, endurance , alongside transformations in how they are evaluated. Third, this shift is not a rejection of inherited values but a re-signification of them, supporting the hypothesis that heroism is culturally contingent rather than universal.

These findings on Odysseus's psychological complexity extend rather than contradict Spacciante's (2024) argument that Circe's narrative voice grants her interpretive authority over the male heroes she encounters; the present analysis shows specifically what that authority reveals about Odysseus , that his heroism, narrated from outside the epic's own value system, as when Circe concludes he "would rather be cursed by the gods than be No one" (Miller, 2018, p. 270), is exposed as psychologically costly rather than purely admirable. These findings also extend Ischuk et al.'s (2024) account of trauma as permanent rather than resolvable: where Ischuk et al. theorize this shift generally, the present analysis demonstrates it concretely in Odysseus' case, showing how the suffering Homer encodes as proof of fidelity is re-encoded in *Circe* as unresolved damage. Similarly, this study extends Nasrullayeva's (2024) claim that contemporary heroism locates value in interior life, by identifying the specific mechanism , external focalization , through which Circe accomplishes that relocation. This pattern is not confined to Odysseus and Circe: Refieta (2021) finds heroism culturally contingent when comparing Robin Hood and Pitung, while Septiaji et al. (2025) show cinematic adaptations of Greek mythology selectively preserve and modify heroic elements for contemporary audiences, supporting the conclusion that this shift reflects a broader tendency in adaptation rather than an idiosyncrasy of Miller's novel alone.

These findings matter beyond the two texts examined here. As noted in the Introduction, existing scholarship on *Circe* has concentrated heavily on feminist reinterpretation and female agency, leaving the structural reconstruction of Odysseus' heroism comparatively underexamined. By foregrounding this dimension, the present study adds further evidence that mythological retellings do not merely add new perspectives alongside the classical narrative; they actively renegotiate the ideological codes that made the classical narrative meaningful in the first place. This is consistent with adaptation theory's claim that retellings function as transformative engagements with their

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source texts rather than passive reproductions, and it extends that claim by showing concretely, through Barthes' cultural code, which values are preserved and which are reorganized in the process.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The analysis is restricted to selected, comparable episodes involving Odysseus rather than an exhaustive survey of every scene in which he appears, and it does not engage in philological comparison of translations or in empirical study of historical or contemporary audience reception. Because the cultural code is identified through interpretive close reading, the specific codes isolated here, and the readings offered of them, reflect the analytical choices of this study; other readers applying the same framework could reasonably foreground different passages or arrive at different emphases. The findings should therefore be understood as a focused structural and ideological comparison rather than a comprehensive account of heroism across classical and contemporary literature.

These limitations point toward productive next steps. The same cultural-code approach could be extended to other contemporary mythological retellings, such as adaptations centered on other Homeric or classical figures, to test whether the pattern identified here, denaturalization of inherited heroic codes through interior consciousness and ethical accountability , holds as a broader feature of the genre or is specific to Miller's treatment of Odysseus. Future work could pair this structural analysis with reception-based methods to examine whether contemporary readers perceive and respond to the ideological shift this study identifies at the level of the text.

The take-away of this study is that heroism is not a property carried unchanged inside a story, but a meaning assigned to that story by the cultural code through which it is read; when Miller rewrites Odysseus, she is not simply telling his story from a new angle but exposing, and replacing, the very system of values that made him a hero in the first place.

4. CONCLUSION

This study applied Roland Barthes' concept of the cultural code to examine how Odysseus' heroism is constructed in Homer's *The Odyssey* and reconstructed in Madeline Miller's *Circe*. In Homer's epic, heroism operates through interlocking codes, kleos, aretē-as-mētis, timē, and divine sanction, that presuppose shared ideological knowledge as self-evident, naturalizing the pursuit of glory and the legitimacy of conquest as unquestionable conditions of heroic worth. Miller does not reject these codes but subjects them to a different ideological framework organized around psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, vulnerability, and accountability, denaturalizing what the epic presents as natural. The comparison confirms Barthes' proposition that meaning is not inherent in a text but produced by the cultural code through which it is read: the same figure, performing many of the same actions, is coded as heroic within one framework and as morally ambiguous within another, not because the actions changed but because the governing cultural codes did.

These findings extend existing *Circe* scholarship, which has concentrated on feminist reinterpretation, by foregrounding the structural transformation of heroism itself. Future research could extend this cultural-code approach to other contemporary retellings of classical figures to test whether this pattern, the shift from collective honor to individual interior consciousness, is a broader feature of the genre.

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