Artistry of the Homeric Simile

William C. Scott

Published by Dartmouth College Press

Scott, William C.
Artistry of the Homeric Simile.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/26913.

🌈 For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/26913

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=987661
Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme

Many sections of Homeric narrative are not focused on one or two characters in a single, developing situation. Several books have a broader scope; either they describe one situation within which several warriors are highlighted, like the assault on the Greek wall in book 12, or else attention is focused on one character in a series of special situations, such as Diomedes in *Iliad* 5 or Odysseus in *Odyssey* 22 and 5. In these books the theme is important both in the structure of the individual book and in its contribution to the greater plan of the poem. Without Hector’s breaching of the wall the anger of Poseidon would lack motivation, as would the jockeying for position among the various gods who attempt to influence the battle in books 13–15.\(^1\) In *Iliad* 5 the poet sketches the problems that Diomedes, as a model hero, must resolve in conducting his aristeia, thus introducing critical problems that Achilles will explore more deeply in his radical challenge to the heroic code. Throughout the battle book of the *Odyssey*, book 22, blood is shed and vengeance taken in a series of scenes, yet it is made clear that forces greater than the heroic code are motivating the combatants. In *Odyssey* 5 the terms of the hero’s choice to return to Ithaca are made clear in the two separate panels of Calypso’s island and the storm—the choice that will motivate Odysseus’ perseverance through the rest of the epic as he regains his wife, family, and throne. In these books the similes join with familiar compositional devices, such as diction, formulaic expressions, and type scenes, to form highly individualized narratives focusing on a major theme.

*Iliad*, book 12:
**Direct Focus on a Single Theme**\(^2\)

Although book 12 presents strong efforts by both sides in the battle, at the end the Trojans finally break through the Greek defensive wall.\(^3\) There are enough
references to this wall throughout the book to establish it as the narrative’s principal framing and organizing element. At the beginning of the book, Homer develops the motif of the gods’ anger against the wall’s builders into a major statement that Poseidon and Apollo will join the force of many rivers to sweep it away once the war is concluded. Later Sarpedon comes close to breaking through the wall, and finally Hector bursts open the gates with a large stone and leads the Trojans inside the wall as the battle moves ever closer to the Greek ships.

Behind this structured Trojan advance the plan of Zeus is constantly visible; the terms of this plan were presented earlier, in book 11, when Iris reported Zeus’ pledge to give Hector glory in battle throughout the day “until he comes to the well-benched ships, and the sun sets and sacred darkness comes on” (11.208–9). Hector, putting his own trust completely in Zeus’ promise, upbraids Polydamas for his fastidious advice (12.200–250). Following this speech Zeus sends a wind from Mt. Ida blowing dust into the eyes of the Greeks, bewildering their minds and gaining glory for Hector and the Trojans (252–55). Subsequent Trojan successes are dependent on the enhanced strength of Hector, who assumes undisputed leadership as he opens the way through the Greek defenses. Even though he surpasses Sarpedon in his achievement, it is explicitly stated that Zeus made it easy for him to lift the rock with which he breaks through the wall (450). The interwoven and mutually reinforcing themes of book 12 are the plan of Zeus and the focus on Hector as he directs the battle and finally breaches the wall. All this is stated succinctly at 173–74, when the Trojan Asios complains about the unexpected Greek strength:

Thus he spoke, but his words did not persuade the mind of Zeus.
For his will was to give glory to Hector.

The book moves purposefully through six sections, organized around the failed attack of Asios, the partial success of Sarpedon, and Hector’s final victory:

1. 1–33: the description of the wall
2. 34–107: the introduction of Hector as leader of the Trojans
3. 108–94: the frustrated attack of Asios
4. 195–289: general battle stressing the successful resistance of the Greeks and the determination of Hector
5. 290–412: the attack of Sarpedon against the wall
6. 413–71: Hector breaks through the wall

The narrative is structured with care and precision. The wall stands as a continuing mark of success or failure for both sides. The opening and final lines of the book are designed to focus the audience’s attention on the wall. These are the only two sections of the book that contain no similes; the poet uses more direct description to make the wall a focusing element. Then the final appearance of Hector, enhanced by the implied comparisons to the unsuccessful Asios and Sarpedon, completes the general direction of the narrative as he easily achieves what they have only attempted.

Hector is introduced grandly in book 12. He was last mentioned in the middle of book 11 (537–42), where his success was sufficiently great that he seems to require no further introduction. Book 12 has its own design, though, and Homer introduces Hector as he would present a hero entering his aristeia. Hector immediately receives two juxtaposed similes, both of which are traditionally associated with the most powerful heroic fighting—wind and lions (40 and 41). The whirlwind simile is short and in itself would be insufficient to elevate Hector, but it introduces the topic that is used again at 11.297 describing Hector’s increased authority when Agamemnon is forced to leave the battle. The lion simile, however, presents at length one of the strongest lions of the simileme: a lion or boar confronts hunters and dogs that attack and finally kill him. They form themselves into a defensive force that is like a fortification or wall (pyrgedon) — thus tying this simile closely to the central object in the narrative. Even though the lion is stated to be alone confronting a dangerous group armed with javelins, he never gives way; rather, they back off whenever he charges. In selecting from among alternative elements in the simileme, the poet stresses bravery and might. Other lions may be more bloodthirsty or crudely vicious; this lion shows sheer valor.

Hector’s forceful introduction by juxtaposed similes is translated into action as he becomes more assertive in leading his troops. First, Polydamas advises Hector on battle strategy: let the troops leave their horses, cross over the wall, and fight the Achaeans by the ships. Hector accepts this advice, and the other Trojans follow him. Then there is a catalogue listing the five companies and their commanders; the largest and bravest contingent is commanded by Hector. Such a catalogue has introduced the aristeiai of other warriors.
In section 3 (108–94) Asios ignores the plan of Polydamas and Hector to advance on foot, choosing instead to attack the wall from his chariot. Homer immediately begins to build a poetic structure of rising resistance: Asios is a fool and will not return to Troy (113–15). As he charges the gate defended by the two Lapith spearmen Leontius and Polypoetes, his foolishness is illustrated in two complementary ways: his misjudgment of the Greeks’ inherent strength and his attempt to shift blame to Zeus. Asios himself and his troops receive no simile at all, while Leonteus and Polypoetes are described by a simile structure that recalls the earlier introduction of Hector (40 and 41). Again there is a double simile (short + long) in which Leonteus is compared to Ares and then the two Lapiths are likened to oak trees that stand firm before the constant wind and rain (130 and 132). Immediately thereafter, even though the rest of the Greeks flee before Asios’ attack, these two stand before the gate like wild boars that fight to the death (146). All three similes describing the Greek resisters are taken from similemes that customarily describe strong warriors. In addition, even Asios acknowledges Greek strength, describing the defenders with a traditional warrior simile: as wasps or bees who defend their young from hunters (167). In exasperation he attempts to reproach Zeus: “Father Zeus, now even you are totally a lover of lies” (164–65)—another misjudgment. He cannot understand that the force of Zeus and other gods is strongly behind Hector and supports only those Greeks who are participants in his plans.

The only simile in this section that does not stress the might of the Greeks describes the weapons that fly from the hands of both sides like snowflakes (156). The presence of such an even-handed simile underlines the balanced quality of the battle. All five similes in this section emphasize the stalemate between Greek and Trojan warriors.

The next division of the poem (195–289) presents a general description of the battle as the Greeks continue to resist the Trojan attack even as the pressure increases. The evenness of the battle is emphasized by the only simile in this section, a second simile of snowflakes, likening the weapons that fly from both sides to a blanketing blizzard sent by Zeus. The name of Zeus adds a foreboding quality to this summarizing simile, since Zeus is the only god active in book 12. At the opening of this section Zeus sends a sign—an eagle clutching a snake that escapes by biting the eagle’s neck; the eagle flies away with a cry of pain (200–207). Polydamas interprets this omen in a reasonable way: the Trojans are vulnerable, even though they seem powerful at the moment. Hec-
tor, however, rejects these words and drives his men firmly forward, trusting in Zeus’ earlier promises. Then Zeus strengthens Hector by raising a wind from Mt. Ida that blows dust in the eyes of the Achaeans and makes the defense of the wall all the more difficult (252–55). At this point the second snow simile recalls the previous failed attack of Asios (278, cf. 156); it is longer and more complex, just as the battle scene is more elaborately described. The threat is greater, the opponents are more powerful, and the support of Zeus is evident; correspondingly, in the simile the snow is steady and relentless, it covers the whole scene, and Zeus is twice cited as the cause of the storm. Even though the battle remains balanced, the temporary advantage that Zeus has granted to Hector becomes increasingly clear as he enters the action more decisively.

In the fifth section Sarpedon leads the Trojan advance (290–412). He is the third warrior introduced with a pair of traditional warlike similes (293 + 299, cf. 40 + 41 and 130 + 132). The first briefly compares Sarpedon to a lion among cattle; the second continues this subject in an extended simile of a hungering lion that attacks the herdsmen and dogs and will fight on until he kills or is killed. Yet the surrounding battle is presented as continuing in balance, and each side receives a short simile; the Trojans charge like a dark whirlwind, and Ajax slays his enemy, who falls like a diver (375 and 385). At the climax of this scene Sarpedon grasps a chunk of wall and it gives way, but Ajax and Teucer are able to fend off his attack.

The final scene centering on Hector presents a different kind of battle. At this point nontraditional similes enter book 12 for the first time. The evenness of the conflict is described by two similes that have no parallel in Homeric poetry and are drawn from country life; whatever the source, the similes are not the lion, boar, god, or wind similes that have proven to be well suited to the battlefield. In the first, two men with measuring sticks quarrel about the placement of boundary stones; in the second, a woman weighs wool on her scale (421 and 433).

This radical shift in subjects echoes other indications that the nature of the battle has changed. Zeus has repeatedly entered the battle to show his underlying favor for the Greeks through omens, natural occurrences, or direct inspiration—all revealing the weakness in the Trojans’ situation. When Hector makes his move to break through the wall, even his victorious entry is qualified by the statement that the battle remained balanced until Zeus gave him glory (436–38). A few lines later, Zeus directly aids him in picking up a large stone—a point emphasized by another nontraditional simile:
As when a shepherd easily carries a ram’s fleece, picking it up with one hand, and slight is the weight burdening him.

(12.451–52)30

When Hector enters the city, his face is like the swift night (463). No one is able to explain adequately what this simile means, but it may be a traditional simile with connotations of an alarming and powerful attack, thus presenting Hector as stronger than expected and sufficient to surpass the earlier Trojan initiatives.31

It is now clear that while Hector may be the hero of book 12, his successes all depend on the goodwill and power of Zeus;32 the driving force of this book and those surrounding it is the plan of Zeus as he fulfills Achilles’/Thetis’ petitions in book 1. Zeus announced the enforcement of his plan in book 8, pressed it in book 11, and brings the plan close to fulfillment when Hector breaks open the gates in book 12. The extent of Zeus’ control is clear in books 13–15, where the course of battle is reversed both through the vigorous actions of men and through Poseidon’s interventions once Zeus has averted his eyes from the Trojan plain. In book 12 Hector is his army’s leader; his advice is sound at the beginning of the book and is accepted by his troops even after he ignores the omen of the eagle and the snake. He is presented as a strategist who guides his troops well, an ability underlined by the negative experience of Asios, who in refusing to heed Hector’s instructions accomplished little. In addition, he has skilled and valuable allies, exemplified by Sarpedon. Yet though the victory won by the Trojans in book 12 is presented as the culminating event of a carefully structured narrative, it is in fact a fragile achievement. Actions fulfilled only by a divine force are inherently futile and entice Hector to pursue honor blindly. He does not perceive his success as due to Zeus’ manipulation of warriors — and he easily dismisses the clear omen of the eagle and the snake.

Somewhere in Homer’s presentation of the Trojans’ attack their fighting becomes surreal. While it is difficult to define the exact point at which this happens, the switch from traditional similes customarily used in war scenes to nontraditional, more peaceful topics accentuates the brittle quality of the victory: two men who squabble over boundary markers, a poor woman who balances scales by carefully adjusting the weights as she weighs her wool, and the ram’s fleece easily lifted by the shepherd. In the final section of this book (413–71) similes reduce the effort and striving of the warriors to an almost absurd level.33

Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme · 99
Yet none of this is intended to criticize Hector; rather, it shows the heroic code’s distorting effect on humans. Sarpedon appropriately highlights this code in his classic statement to Glaucus at 310–28, and even though it strongly motivates human achievement throughout book 12, the narrative provides no critical perspective on the actions it promotes or on the human lives it puts at risk.

Given that each incident in this book seems to have its place in a well-structured and economical mosaic, emphasis through the careful placement of similes is also a significant element in the total design. Three heroes, Hector, Asios, and Sarpedon, successively enter the narrative. In each case the poet uses the same simile pattern, a short simile followed immediately by an extended one; and in each case he uses a simileme that the tradition has previously suggested for such a scene. A hero’s entrance into the narrative can be a moment for a simile, but the balanced patterning of the similes in each of these three introductions invites the audience to evaluate these incidents as parallel scenes in a developing structure. Significantly, the poet does not give Asios any similes; although in form he is introducing the short-then-long pattern that will favor the Trojans, the first pair of similes strongly emphasizes the book’s theme and structure in calling attention to the initial strength of the Greeks.

In addition, the poet presents a view of the general battle at several places, yet at only four junctures does he use a simile (156, 278, 421, and 433). Because an extended simile strongly draws the audience’s attention to a particular passage, it is important that the poet stress only those moments where this general view enhances his theme. At 156 the extended simile of snowflakes emphasizes the balanced battle between the two sides to show that Asios’ attack has little effect and to motivate his futile prayer to Zeus; then the related simile at 278 stresses the evenness of the battle resulting from Zeus’ temporary support for the Trojans — an emphasis that prepares the audience for the Trojan victories led by Sarpedon and Hector. At the end of the next episode the battle is presented as equal through two similes (421 and 433 — men quarreling over boundary stones and the woman weighing wool) to set the scene for the reentrance of Hector as Zeus’ champion. In each of these four pivotal passages the poet uses a simile at a traditional location, but he chooses a nontraditional topic for a warlike context — a choice emphasizing the unreal quality of human victories largely attributable to Zeus.

The wind is the most prominent continuing subject in book 12. Zeus raises
Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme

a wind to blow the dust from the mountains that blinds the Greeks,\textsuperscript{34} and the wind is the most frequent subject in similes. Hector enters the book like a whirlwind; Leonteus and Polypoetes stand firmly like oaks against the wind; the wind drives the snowflakes in a blizzard; in the next simile, when the battle is balanced, the wind is lulled by Zeus as he sheds snow on earth and sea; and the Trojan army attacks like a whirlwind (\textit{40, 132, 156, 278, and 375}). Generally the wind, often stirred by Zeus, is the topic that favors the Trojans as they move successfully against the Greeks—continuing even into book 13, where their advance is accompanied by a simile of flame or a wind (\textit{39}).

At a few places it seems clear that the poet has rejected the tradition’s strong suggestion of a simile. The Greek wall does not receive a simile in either the opening or closing sections of the book; such indirect emphasis would divert the audience from the restricted importance of the object. It is only a marker on the battlefield; there is little point in stressing any other element concerning the wall than its transience, and this is best done by telling its history.

It would have been customary for Homer to use a simile in the catalogue of Trojans that begins at line 88, but at this point he is not stressing the overwhelming mass of the army or the quality of any individual fighter.\textsuperscript{35} He is interested in presenting Hector as a leader of the Trojan army and the first among competent warriors; therefore none of these supporters of Hector receives a simile.

When Hector breaks through the wall at the end of the book, the poet does use the “like the swift night” simile to emphasize this culminating act, but at the same time he stresses Zeus’ gift of strength (\textit{450}). Likewise, tradition would have suggested the use of a simile for emphasis at line 397, where Sarpedon actually removes a segment of the wall. But because the section concerning Sarpedon is a preliminary stage in the larger narrative movement that builds toward Hector bursting open Troy’s gates, Sarpedon’s act is described without elaboration. Then, appropriately, Hector’s achievement receives two similes.

The similes of book 12 continually reinforce the book’s basic structure, yet the most striking feature of this book’s similes is the sudden shift in tone in section 6, the breaching of the wall. At this point the poet is at his most creative in manipulating the expectations of his audience. The direction in the narrative, in the development of three repeated attack scenes as well as in the placement and patterning of the similes, has led the audience to anticipate the success of Hector and the collapse of the Greek defenses; Homer, however,
uses his audience’s knowledge of traditional forms to present Hector’s brilliant triumph as a diminished achievement for Zeus’ puppet.

**Iliad, Book 5: The Use of Parallel Simileemes to Create a Unified Theme**

It is more difficult to discuss the similes’ design in book 5 than in book 12 because in the former there is no clearly stated, single focusing element like the Greek wall. Diomedes is the main character in book 5, but he was introduced in book 4 and continues to play a major role at the beginning of book 6. In addition, there are signs within book 5 that the theme is broader than this one hero; the narrative moves in several different directions and appears to be as much about gods as it is about men. Book 5 falls easily into four basic units, each one centered on one or two major figures:

1. 1–165: Diomedes enters three times, slaying groups of Trojans
2. 166–459: the action focuses on Aeneas and Aphrodite, both wounded by Diomedes
3. 460–710: Ares reenters and rallies the Trojans
4. 711–909: Ares continues his support of the Trojans, but Athena and Hera encourage Diomedes to wound him

This outline reveals that the tight focus of the initial section is then scattered as the narrative concentrates on several gods and their participation in battle. Diomedes plays the main role for only 165 lines before Aeneas enters, bringing along the problems caused by the presence of a divine mother ill suited to the battlefield — and from that point the spotlight moves between Diomedes and the inevitable complications that arise when gods mingle closely in mortal warfare.

Within the shifting mix of characters and subjects, the distribution of similes both throughout the book and in each of the four sections provides guidance in identifying the theme. Section one contains four long similes, while section 2, longer in terms of lines, contains only three part-line similes. Both long and short similes are spread widely throughout section 3, and in the final section reporting the battle between Diomedes and Ares, similes cluster: three following line 770 and two after line 860. The final two sections concern the interrelationship of gods and men on the battlefield. Such an uneven distribution of similes suggests that the poet is not employing them to emphasize the
linear development of a single action; rather, similes are placed to reinforce the complex narrative centered on situations and issues that develop around the actions and reactions of a series of characters.

Diomedes, usually regarded as a model hero, is indisputably the major human actor in this first aristeia of the *Iliad*. The Homeric audience has heard enough war narratives to have a full awareness of this form and to be aware of its possibilities and variations. Book 5 appropriately reports the mighty acts and achievements of this one hero, accompanied by long lists of enemies wounded or slain. Yet it is not necessary to regard this aristeia as a prototype for others in the *Iliad*, or even the norm, simply because this is the first. To be sure, the more intensely focused aristeiai of Agamemnon, Patroclus, and Achilles are derived from the same basic structure, but Diomedes’ appearance in book 5 is as much a creative use of the aristeia form as the later examples.

One of the strangest features of Diomedes’ aristeia is its ineffectuality. Diomedes enters book 5 as one of the most vigorous and valorous of the Greeks:

> Then to Tydeus’ son, Diomedes, did Pallas Athena give power and courage that among all he might be preeminent and win excellent honor.

Diomedes’ subsequent entrance is preceded by a list of specific Greek heroes who slay individual Trojans (37–83), with the result that Diomedes is presented as only one warrior on a list of several equals. At the close of book 5 not much has been accomplished, and book 6 even begins with a general line stressing the evenness of battle between the Trojans and Greeks. In addition, during book 5 no major hero is killed, and the only injuries to such heroes are rapidly healed by the intervention of favoring gods; Diomedes, struck with a spear, is regenerated quickly by Athena, and his victim Aeneas is immediately healed by divine aid and sent back to the battle with no serious deficiencies. Indeed, one of the notable motifs within this book is the instant healing of severe wounds in both gods and men; Diomedes, Aeneas, Aphrodite, and Ares all are wounded and emerge unblemished. Of course, Diomedes slays a series of less significant warriors, but for all his effort he accomplishes little in terms of disabling the enemy or reversing the tide of battle. Even though he twice ignores the dividing line between god and mortal by stabbing Aphrodite and Ares, the gods only grumble; no vengeance is taken.

*Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme* · 103
The broad narrative is structured around two parallel episodes: the woundings of Aphrodite and Ares. Diomedes becomes so involved in the individual squabbles and personal concerns of these major divinities that he is occasionally eclipsed. At line 127 Athena tells Diomedes that she has removed the mist from his eyes so that he may distinguish god from man and orders him to fight only Aphrodite among the gods.\(^45\) The rivalry between Athena and Aphrodite arising from the judgment of Paris is a presupposition throughout the poem.\(^46\) Still, it is surprising that Diomedes never raises the slightest objection to her command—especially since the gods are unanimous in their verdict after the event: Dione calls Diomedes foolish for not realizing how dangerous it is for a man to fight an immortal (403ff.),\(^47\) and Apollo is explicit:

\[
\text{Reflect now, son of Tydeus, and relent! Do not hope to think as the gods do since never is the race of the immortal gods like that of men who go about on the earth. (440–42)}
\]

Yet later, when Athena commands Diomedes to wound Ares, he strikes without further question (825ff.). Only in book 6 does he seem to react to these strange events in insisting that he will not fight Glaucus if he is a god because such activity is risky (6.128–41). This scenario of unreasonable and inconsistent commands may make some sense in terms of the individual animosities of the Greek gods, but it should confuse Diomedes.\(^48\) Heroes may be hesitant in calculating the most honorable course in the midst of battle, but no one, Greek or Trojan, is foolish enough to ignore or to attack a god, especially when he is given exceptional power to identify them.\(^49\)

These two features of book 5, the ineffectiveness of Diomedes and his repeated attacks on gods, seem purposely developed structural units rather than a series of his battle scenes. There is no doubt that Diomedes is presented as a major warrior and an appropriate member of the inner council of the Greeks; but he is only one of the Iliad’s many models for a heroic fighter. He always acts effectively in response to the commands given by those who have authority. When Agamemnon delivers a stinging rebuke to Diomedes in the Epipolesis,\(^50\) telling him that he is not equal to his father, Tydeus, as a warrior (4.364ff.), the king is immediately challenged by Sthenelus. Diomedes warns Sthenelus to endure such criticism in silence, respecting the position and rank of Agamemnon. Two strong imperatives control Diomedes in this

104 · The Artistry of the Homeric Simile
scene: his desire to measure his performance by his father’s success and the necessity of honoring a man of higher rank. The reverence for his forebears extends even to his moment of reconciliation with Glaucus in book 6, when he acknowledges a special relationship of guest-friendship between their fathers.

It is equally a part of Diomedes’ normal behavior that he should follow a god’s commands. There is no questioning of such orders; they are to be obeyed with no calculation of the costs or contradictions involved. In fact, Diomedes never challenges these commands or even reflects on the results. He is a routine man accepting orders on the battlefield and executing them well. But as there is no questioning, so also there is no potential for moral greatness. Never a perverse or evil hero, Diomedes is not criticized for his unhesitating performance of the ritual of warfare, yet he is presented as a limited hero, since all motivating forces are external and dependent upon the thinking of those who outrank him. The gold of Troy may finally be worthless and the leadership of Agamemnon inadequate, but still Diomedes will follow his king’s commands and seek the destruction of Troy because these are the codes and policies of those in authority.

The Diomedes of book 5 is only one of a series of portraits in books 2 through 8 that provide contrasting heroic models to Achilles. Homer presented the causes of Achilles’ original rebellion in book 1, and he will explore these reasons more deeply in Achilles’ responses to the ambassadors in book 9. Between these two books there is a series of vignettes focusing on Agamemnon, Menelaus, Paris, Diomedes, Hector, Ajax, and Odysseus. In these books Diomedes and Ajax are the models of a high type of heroism in service to the Greek cause; as a result, Achilles finds Ajax’s humane proposition for serving the Greeks even at the cost of one’s own anger the hardest to reject in the Embassy Scene, and Homer appropriately frames this scene with Diomedes’ speeches of uncomplicated, naive, even rash daring.

The placement and development of book 5’s similes support this interpretation. In section 1 (1–165) Diomedes begins his aristeia gloriously, as the personification of traditional heroism; he is introduced in a series of three separate entrances, each carefully scaled to enhance his stature as a warrior. When he first appears, Athena has given him courage and might and kindles a flame from his armor. Such a fiery entrance is given to few warriors, and to accompany this entrance the book’s first simile describes the star at harvest time that shines the brightest of all other stars (5). Then Diomedes kills
one of two brothers, while the other is snatched away by Hephaestus; he captures their horses and has them led back to the ships. At this point Athena persuades Ares, always a supporter of the Trojans, to sit apart from battle as a series of Greek heroes kills individual Trojans (29–36 + 37–83). When Diomedes enters the narrative for the second time at line 84, the poet lists him with other Greek champions in the forefront of the battle; he is described by a simile of a roaring river that sweeps away embankments, vineyards, and farms (86–92). Then he is wounded, healed immediately, and sent back to fight by Athena; at line 133 he enters battle for the third time, accompanied by the simile of a lion who slaughters sheep in the farmyard. He alone slays a long list of opponents. Here the elements of the first scene that illustrated his dominant position among the other Greeks are heightened. He kills a series of paired brothers—culminating with two sons of Priam—and caps the list by taking their horses; his success is summarized in a second simile of a bloodthirsty lion (161).

Even the gods’ movements in these three incidents are designed to provide less aid as the hero moves increasingly on his own. First, Athena glorifies Diomedes and then supports the Greek cause by leading Ares from the battlefield. After he is healed, Athena returns him to battle with a lightened step and a clearer vision. In the last scene he emerges as the preeminent Greek warrior on his own, neither requiring nor receiving help from the gods.

Four similes closely accompany this structure, marking each entrance of Diomedes and closing the scene. The subject matter of these similes becomes more warlike as Diomedes moves from being the wearer of the shining helmet to the able fighter killing a series of men. In the first scene, the gleam from his armor is compared to a beautiful star that offers no threat (5); it is an image of pure brilliance. The second simile (87) describes a river swollen by Zeus’ rain to full spate as it destroys orchards and farms. The third (136) centers on a lion that has been wounded and escapes from the fold after slaughtering unprotected sheep, while the fourth (161) describes a lion that attacks cattle in the open pasture and breaks the necks of his unsuspecting prey. In each case Diomedes is portrayed as an increasingly threatening and dangerous force.

In the next section (166–459), where the focus moves to Aeneas, there are only three similes, all short and two repeated. At 299 Aeneas stands over the fallen Pandarus “like a lion confident in his strength.” At 438 Diomedes charges against Apollo “like a god,” and Apollo uses this same simile at 459
in reporting Diomedes’ attack to Ares. Even though each of these similes is short, they all support the thematic organization of book 5. The lion emerged as Diomedes’ simile in his triple introduction, and now Aeneas receives the same comparison in coming forward as a warrior of equal ability; appropriately, Diomedes will not vanquish Aeneas but will only wound him momentarily. The comparison of a warrior to a god is traditional, but in the context of book 5 this simile has an ironic significance, since Diomedes acts as a god’s equal in presuming to attack Apollo. He may think that he is only pursuing his enemy Aeneas, who is being shielded by Apollo and, in addition, is following divine orders in attacking Aphrodite, but Apollo’s rebuke of Diomedes repeats the simile to mark his undue arrogance.

There is no other scene in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* where a man so easily crosses the line between mortal and divine, even to the point of inflicting a wound upon a goddess—an unusual action that could well attract a simile. The scene, however, is presented as a direct report of the event followed by reactions, thus highlighting the complications that arise when men interact too closely with gods; in such a straightforward style it would be distracting to introduce long similes as poetic embellishments. The parallel closing scene of book 5 is different: Athena, Hera, and Ares provide all motivation and act in the foreground using Diomedes as their agent. The same actions are augmented by several long similes in order to end the book with a display of the gods’ power and dominance over men (770, 778, 782, 860, 864, 884, and 902).

In the third section of this book (460–710) Ares rallies the Trojans. Sarpedon, in rebuking Hector for the lackluster performance of his troops, uses two short similes comparing the Greeks to lions who terrify dogs and the Trojans to fish who die caught in a net (476 and 487). Again, though the similes are short, the Greeks are presented as the stronger force in the similes as well as in their resistance (541–89). The reentrance of Ares (590–95), however, leads to a series of scenes that reverse the relative strength of the two armies: Hector rallies the Trojans; Aeneas, healed by Apollo, is returned to battle; Ares pulls a veil of night over the battle to aid the Trojan troops; Hector leads, with Ares and Enyo guiding him as Diomedes gives way; Hector and Ajax both kill enemy warriors but Ajax is unable to strip the armor from his victim and must fall back; in single combat Tlepolemus, a Greek, is killed while Sarpedon is saved; and the section concludes with a list of those Greeks slain by Hector and Ares.
Similes closely accompany this movement. At first the Greeks hold their ground, their heads and shoulders growing white from clouds of dust just as piles of chaff in the blowing wind grow white around the threshing floor (499). The scene is a peaceful harvest time in the country—a significant lessening of the warlike tone in the earlier similes describing the Greeks, especially Diomedes. At 522 the Greeks are as unmoving as mists on the mountain tops. Wind is often used as a subject to describe an attacking warrior, but in this simile it is specifically stated that the winds are asleep; the traditional topic is drained of its normal strength to show that the force of the Greeks is blunted when the Trojan army is driven by Ares. In addition, when Aeneas kills two Greeks, the emphasis is thrown on them by the simile of slain lions—and then by a second simile in which they are compared to fir trees (554 and 560). Lions are not only a traditional object of comparison for the attacking warrior but have also been impressively applied to Diomedes in this book—yet here the lions die; fir trees traditionally describe warriors who lie dead. When the poet describes Diomedes watching Hector surge across the battlefield like a rushing river (597), he has again chosen the subject of an earlier simile, the one at 87 describing the entrance of Diomedes. Now roles are reversed as Diomedes stands on the bank quailing before the river. Prior to the entrance of Ares, Diomedes fought like a lion and a god, but as soon as the Greeks are halted, the winds sleep, the lions die, the tree similes connote death, and a simile subject that has described the strength of Diomedes, the river torrent, illustrates the limitations of the Greek effort.

The last section of the book (711–909) is a much-elaborated doublet of Diomedes’ spirited attack on Aphrodite (310–61). The hero himself fades into the background, and the motivation shifts to the divine level as both Hera and Athena worry over the weakened Greek initiative. Appropriately, all similes with the exception of two short ones call attention to gods. These two short similes are both familiar from previous usage: the Greeks are again like lions or boars in their strength as they rally around Diomedes, who is supported by Hera and Athena, and Ares charges that Diomedes in attacking him is equal to a god—again the formulaic short simile that has such ironic resonances in this book (782 and 884).

The remaining similes, all of which are extended, focus on the gods’ actions. At 770 and 778 the ease of Hera and Athena’s journey to the battlefield is underlined. The simile at 770 stresses the power of the divine horses, who are able to leap as far as a man can see; 778 shows the goddesses enter-
ing the battle as timorous doves. Both similes accentuate the differences of scale between men and gods, and this unbridgeable dichotomy becomes the dominant theme of the final section. In three further similes the mortal perspective on divine action is either specifically mentioned or implied. Ares cries as loudly as nine or ten thousand warriors in battle (860), and Diomedes sees him rise as a dark whirlwind (864). At the end of the book there is one additional divine cure, when Ares is healed as rapidly as a man curdles milk (902).

Though Diomedes’ major action — attacking a god — is repeated, the effect of the passage is far different: Diomedes, earlier called foolish for wounding a goddess, still obeys Athena without question when she tells him to attack Ares. In the first incident the action at least seemed to develop from the hero’s normal instincts: Diomedes confronted Aeneas, they cast weapons at each other, Aeneas was wounded, and Diomedes pursued his advantage. Aeneas’ mother picked her son up and tried to shield him, but Diomedes kept pursuing his victim; and, of course, he was specifically told by Athena to strike Aphrodite alone of the gods. The second incident, Diomedes’ attack on Ares, leaves the hero in the background. The motivation is provided by Hera and Athena, who are disturbed that the Greek attack has been stalled. When Hera takes the shape of Stentor, she provides the impetus for Diomedes’ attack and Athena drives his chariot. Hera’s Stentor disguise is effective for the rest of the Greeks; Diomedes, however, states that he recognizes her because he retains the special vision given by Athena early in the book (815–24). As a result, the usual understandable heroic motivations are not driving this action; gods direct it. Their predominance is marked by several signs of the disparities between gods and mortals: the axle of the chariot groans beneath the weight of Athena, and the extended similes focus on the smallness of men compared to the massive scale of gods’ actions — the far-leaping horses and the god who cries as loudly as a whole army.

Book 5 is rightly regarded as Diomedes’ aristeia. He does gain glory, as Athena intended — she gave him might and courage so that he could be preeminent among all and earn renown — but he remains a mechanical hero within a hollow and ineffective aristeia. The last incidents of the book focus on Ares — the rapid healing of his wound, Hebe’s bathing of him, and his restoration to divine favor. The final lines bring appropriate closure to a book that seems to be centered on the unpredictable and meddlesome actions of the Olympians in entering mortals’ campaigns.

*Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme* · 109
They then returned back to the house of great Zeus, Argive Hera and Alalcomenean Athena, after stopping the killing of man-slaying Ares.

(907–9)

The divine action ends, but the situation of the human warriors has changed little from the beginning of the book. Book 6 opens with another list of valorous Greek warriors, among whom is Diomedes, but his special opportunity for honor has now passed (6.5–71).75

The similes in this book do not provide a new dimension to interpretation by offering a series of ironic analogies as they do in book 2. There Homer’s similes revealed the thinness of the appearance that sought to cover the reality; here the subject of interest is the heroic code. Throughout book 5 the poet mixes mortal and divine directly in order to test the heroic code’s effectiveness in a world where dominating divinities interrupt human calculations and expectations easily and often. Overall, the book moves from man to god. In the opening sections, gods progressively withdraw, leaving the spotlight to Diomedes. Once Diomedes is established in a preeminent position and pushes through the barrier separating men and gods, the gods are brought back into the story; and in the final section the gods take almost total control of the action as they manipulate mortals for their own pleasures. The similes in book 5 appear in predictable or traditional places and for the most part contain the normal topics used to describe actions on the battlefield. As each is developed and placed into the sequence of similes, it responds closely to the design of the book. Thus the initial four similes (in section 1) are taken from traditional similemes, but they describe the entering warrior in increasingly bloody terms. Then similes virtually disappear in section 2 as the poet directly presents the confrontation of men with gods; in section 3, similes that were introduced earlier are now inverted to show the relative loss of the Greeks’ strength as Ares rallies the Trojans. Finally, while the last section contains only one short simile describing men, six extended similes focusing on divine actions enhance the magnitude of the gods as they intermingle in human events. The major repeated pattern of book 5 is the wounding of a god, and it is within this repeated scene that gods apply special rules yet become angry when men do their will. Diomedes, however, never shows the independence to raise a protest. He is in every way the normal warrior, and his easy acqui-
escence to authority provides a striking comparison to Achilles’ questioning and probing of the heroic code.

There are a few junctures in book 5 where the tradition suggested a simile but Homer chose an alternate means of developing his story. Following line 10 Diomedes wounds two warriors and takes their horses; because this configuration of two warriors despoiled of their horses is repeated twice later in the book, one might expect a simile for variety. Yet the poet is seeking to show the development of Diomedes’ war strength rather than his list of prizes. A simile to vary the scenes would blur the effect of this repeated motif with no gain to the direction of the narrative.

At line 35 Athena leads Ares from the battlefield. It would be possible to include a simile describing this divine action, but instead the poet immediately turns to a list of Greeks who slay Trojans, culminating in the reentrance of Diomedes. The effect is clear and complementary to the design of the book. In this section the poet focuses attention on the actions of men; later, when it suits his theme, similes will call attention to the actions of divinities.

Homer, though sparing in the use of similes in the first three sections, has placed them precisely to focus on Diomedes’ advances. At lines 43–83 one might expect a simile for variety in the list of the Greek victors, but this list of killings leads to the reentrance of Diomedes in a more focused way by not calling attention to itself. It would also be in accordance with tradition to describe the quickness of the divine cure at 121 with a simile. Once again, however, the role of the gods attracts less attention because Homer is working to enhance Diomedes’ third entrance at line 133. He postpones a simile until 161, where it calls attention to Diomedes’ slaying of the last two victims, thus emphasizing the final stage of the hero’s development.

At line 512 Apollo sends Aeneas, now completely cured, back to the battlefield. A simile might be expected to accompany this miraculous cure, but Homer clearly states in lines 516–17 that the Trojans asked no questions because they had no time. This section presents the tense equality of battle—the fact that the Trojans have blunted the Greek attack—and the similes at lines 499 and 522 stress that fact. Similarly, at line 592, when Homer presents Ares and Enyo leading the Trojans across the battlefield, the tradition suggests a simile to accompany divine action, but the simile is placed a few lines later, where it describes the dismayed reaction of Diomedes to the resurgent strength of the Trojans.
In each of these passages the poet has avoided elaborating random incidents in order to keep the emphasis on his larger theme. Similes tend to retard action and to invite reflection as the audience relates experiences from two different areas in order to achieve a unified understanding of an event. Thus a poet concerned with the pace and consistent direction of his narrative must learn to evaluate carefully the suggestions of the tradition. If he does not choose subject and placement well, his narrative may be logical in its chronology and the superficial cause-and-effect relationships yet fail to develop a dominant theme. The aristeia of Diomedes could easily become a listing of incidents, but Homer, controlling his material, has effectively improvised within the aristeia form in order to expose the empty soul of his traditional warrior.

Book 5 is a long book, with many actions shifting between heaven and earth, but that fragile mixing of unmixable locales and characters is precisely the theme of this narrative. By repeating similemes from section to section, by choosing to develop each simileme in order to follow the narrative's theme, and by repeating the events for which varied similes are created, Homer makes effective use of the simile form in organizing this long but tightly structured book.

**ODYSSEY, BOOK 22: SIMILES TO INTERPRET TYPICAL ACTIONS**

Book 22 is easily regarded as the *Odyssey*'s most Iliadic book, since it presents a continuous series of battles fought by armed warriors contending for a prize. Yet there are significant differences that raise this book above the level of conventional battle narrative and mold it into one of the culminating acts toward which the second half of the poem has been building. The battle between Odysseus and the suitors has been anticipated since the beginning of the poem and became inevitable at the moment when Odysseus landed on Ithaca. As a result, the theme of hostility between those who seek the return of Odysseus and those who oppose it constantly underlies the structures of books 13 through 21, leading to the moment when Penelope arranges a symbolic contest of strength. Significantly, this competition is centered around a weapon, the king’s bow, thus prefiguring the open battle between Odysseus and the suitors.

In the contest the suitors are too weak to string the bow. Telemachus almost does, but only Odysseus completes the task—an action that under-
Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme

113 lines the strength he brings to the battle and foreshadows the actual defeat of the suitors in book 22. Odysseus’ power rests on several bases. Of course, the tradition includes him among the major Greek warriors, but there are deeper strengths on which Odysseus will draw in recapturing his palace. He has rallied a group of loyal allies, all of whom have been keenly affronted by the behavior of the suitors. In his stay with Eumaeus, Odysseus discovered a loyal servant of his family, a thankful man who appreciated his upbringing at the hands of Anticlea as well as an honorable person who fled from the palace to seek a decent life in the countryside. Obviously, Telemachus and Penelope remain loyal to the missing king; but there are also others such as Eurycleia, Philoitius, Phemius, and Medon, who are identified as stalwarts even though they have assisted the suitors. Throughout the last half of the Odyssey Homer presents a group of civilized men and women who wish to live a life drastically opposed to the paralysis, cynicism, and purposelessness characteristic of the suitors. These are characters who show pity for unfortunates, sympathy for suffering humans, understanding and kindliness to those in need—but, above all, a desire for just punishment for unacceptable actions. Their code is probably best presented in the scenes with Eumaeus in the countryside, but is also exemplified by Odysseus’ warning to Amphinomus (18.125–50), in his gentle treatment of Penelope during their nighttime meeting, in his thoughts when he lies alone at night in book 20, and in his words restraining Eurycleia from gloating over the fallen suitors at 22.411–18. The simple and unrehearsed bonding of civilized men is the real strength that will return Odysseus to his throne as the welcome king of Ithaca.

In addition, Athena’s support has been constant since the meeting on Olympus reported in books 1 and 5. After Odysseus’ arrival on Ithaca in book 13 she advised him to use guile and then disguised him as a beggar, in book 16 she reunited father and son, and in book 21 she lighted the way for them as they removed the weapons from the great hall. This support is clearly continued in book 22.

Opposed to Odysseus are the suitors who are not sufficiently united in pursuing a common cause to be effective conspirators. In their numbers they may seem to possess power, but in fact they are 108 individuals competing against each other for a single prize; Odysseus easily maneuvers them into open hostility at the end of book 18. There are continual disagreements among suitors about the appropriateness of their behavior—most strikingly in Amphinomus’ objection to their plan to kill Telemachus and the anonymous negative
comment about the propriety of Antinous’ attack on the old beggar (Ody. 16.400–405 and 18.401–4). Thus the basic contest pits the strength of Odysseus and his few associates, civilized humans who wish to live in a community sharing a basic sense of cooperative virtues, against the weakness of the numerous suitors, hopelessly isolated and divided individuals who employ every conceivable means to debase and corrupt others.

Book 22 comprises six units that portray the relentless momentum toward Odysseus’ victory from his first seemingly accidental shot through the full purgation of his halls:

1. 1–78: the killing of Antinous, which triggers cowardly bargaining as Eurymachus instantly abandons his colleague. The focused skill of Odysseus is directly contrasted to the inept intrigues of the suitors in the opening section.
2. 79–100: the first two killings by Odysseus and Telemachus
3. 101–204: the arming scenes: Odysseus and his colleagues arm, as Eumaeus denies the suitors access to armor and punishes Melantheus for supplying it.
4. 205–309: Athena encourages Odysseus and finally sends the suitors fleeing in panic from the hall.
5. 310–89: Odysseus acts as the just king, killing the guilty and sparing the innocent as he triumphs in the battle.
6. 390–501: Odysseus completes his work of punishing the adherents of the suitors and cleansing his halls.

This developing structure is strongly supported by the similes that fall at the conclusions of the fourth, fifth, and sixth sections. Since only one simile describing men’s activities does not fall in such a position (402), it seems that the poet has carefully placed his similes to enhance major moments of victory as Odysseus moves from being the lonely warrior in a room of hostile men to the returning king welcomed by his subjects.

There are no similes in the first three sections. Two similes in section 4 stress the overwhelming strength of the small group of loyal conspirators against the muscle-bound weaklings who are their opponents. The first (299) describes the suitors as a herd of cattle fleeing in panic from a stinging gadfly, and the second (302) presents them as small birds slain by vultures as men rejoice in the chase. Both are developed from a traditional simileme. Insects have elsewhere described the ferocity of warriors, and Odysseus and
his allies are likened to powerful vultures, a precedent choice for a warrior within the bird simileme. But in each of book 22’s similes there is a mildly joyful tone. One small insect replaces the usual swarm of wasps or bees, and neither the gadfly nor the cattle are defending their home or young against attack. These cattle run aimlessly before the gadfly, having an infinity of time before them because it is springtime, "when the days are long"; the vultures chasing small birds bring men joy. Homer chooses elements from the simileme that reflect peaceful life in the countryside and tempers the effect of a list of slain suitors by juxtaposing the two similes.

At the end of the fifth section (310–89), after Odysseus takes the life of Leiodes but spares Phemius and Medon, he finds all the suitors fallen in blood and dust like fish on the beach (384). Fish are traditionally used to describe warriors who have been killed, but these fish have been drawn up onto the beach in a net and lie completely helpless. Similarly, the suitors, who appeared so strong, have been proven weak when confronted by the community of men organized by Odysseus. Even though the scene in the hall is a gory one, the simile itself is once again designed to show the normal pursuit of day-to-day business on the seacoast. The sun’s heat and the lack of water kill the fish naturally; likewise, Odysseus’ desire to regain his own throne is the understandable pursuit of a reasonable man whose strength catches the suitors totally by surprise.

The final section (390–501) begins with a lion simile, the only simile in the book to present the strength of Odysseus in terms typical of a Homeric warrior (402). Significantly, the battle has already been won when this simile is used. While Odysseus fought, no matter how bloody the battle in the narrative, the stages in the fighting were paralleled by images that presented nature at its most peaceful. Though the lion simileme was available as an appropriate subject for Odysseus throughout book 22, it is only at the moment of Odysseus’ triumph that Homer draws on this simileme to present the warrior’s true strength:

spattered with blood and gore like a lion
who comes after feeding on an ox of the farmyard;
for his entire breast and his cheeks on both sides
are bloody, and he is a fearful sight

(402–5)

Such delayed use of a topic freighted with traditional meaning allows the poet to incorporate both Odysseus’ strength in executing his enemies and
his mercy toward the innocent in his role as Ithaca’s returning king. He uses the lion as an appropriate image for Odysseus’ performance and superficial appearance, but he immediately limits its cruder connotations by applying it to the now peaceable and just king, who prohibits Eurycleia from vaunting over the slain men and directs her attention to the continuing task of separating the guilty from the innocent. Then, in punishing the women, Telemachus hangs them like thrushes or doves who fall into a snare, a simile from the world where man hunts small helpless animals as a normal pursuit involving no risk or danger to the hunter (468).

The similes of book 22, with the exception of the bloody lion, fall at the end of sections as summarizing images. Each stage of the battle is filled with bloodshed, yet the effect of such warfare is mitigated by the choice of lyrical, peaceful, normalizing similes from day-to-day life. It is important that the battle Odysseus fights presents him as a strong warrior, for he was; it is equally important, however, that this battle not appear to be a contest for plunder and spoil. The king struggles to regain his rightful place and to reestablish a community of men who feel a strong common bond. Although taken from different similemes (insect, bird, fish, and lion), the similes are organized to reinforce the coherent design supporting the book’s theme: both the violence of the battle and the peace of the simile world characterize the new Ithaca that will arise directly from the deaths inflicted by Odysseus.

Homer’s control in designing these similes is further evident in the several places where he chose to omit a simile. At line 1 there is an obvious occasion for a simile when Odysseus suddenly reveals himself before the suitors as the returned king, but such a simile would be more appropriate for a single hero entering a full-fledged aristeia emphasizing battle strength.

The language of the second and third killings, those of Eurymachus and Amphinomus, is reminiscent of the Iliad, and the addition of a simile here, as often in the Iliad, would provide variety for either one of these individual slayings (79–98). However, at this point Odysseus is presented as seeking a communal goal with the aid of Telemachus rather than personal honor through heroic fighting. Homer therefore uses these two suitors to present a single moment of battle as he begins to develop his theme, the united power of Odysseus and his allies. For the same reason there is a short list of killings by Odysseus and the others at 283–85, a technique familiar from the Iliad, but there is no simile to emphasize this joint activity.

At 297 Athena displays her aegis, sending the suitors racing through the
halls in panic; in a brief summary Homer reports the groaning as Odysseus’ comrades slaughter the remaining suitors and the floor runs with blood (308–9). The lack of a simile describing Athena’s divine action raises the question whether the goddess actually does anything in the course of this battle to help Odysseus. First, she appears in the disguise of Mentor and encourages Odysseus by comparing his present strength to that which he had at Troy; Homer says expressly at this point that she was testing the might and strength of Odysseus and his son (236–40). Then, when the suitors throw their spears, Athena renders them ineffectual (256); yet at 260 Odysseus and his comrades are stated to have successfully evaded the spears. Since the previous books have not presented even one scene of suitors drilling with spears in the recent months of high living at Odysseus’ palace, there is no sign that anything unusual or unexpected has occurred. At 272ff. Athena again scatters their spears harmlessly throughout the hall; there seems to be no break in the chain of human activity that justifies the suspicion of divine interference. After each of these actions Odysseus and his associates slay a series of enemies, until even the oxherd Philoitius is able to boast over the fallen Ctesippus (287–91). It is no wonder that the remaining suitors are panic-stricken. Their retreat did not require Athena to raise her aegis; Homer used the goddess as poetic shorthand to present an action that would involve complicated factual justification and psychological motivation if told realistically. Although Athena is present during the scene, Odysseus and his colleagues are responsible for winning the battle, and appropriately Homer did not use a simile to call attention to this unnecessary divine action.

Finally, at 495–501 it would be possible for similes to describe the emotions of the loyal women as they welcome Odysseus back or his joy at being safely home among his people. However, the act of judging the guilty and the innocent as well as the cleansing of the palace is more important to the poet. Thus the simile is placed to call attention to the punishment that Odysseus metes out to the disloyal servants (468ff.).

Book 22 presents an Odyssean battle. Though a warrior, Odysseus is not an Iliadic seeker of honor; he is dedicated to creating a new Ithaca where men may live within an organized and civilized society. The spotlight continually falls on him as he kills a few in order that many may live happily. The similes are an effective device by which Homer repeatedly undercuts any idea that this battle is being fought for heroic glory. Similes from the world of normal, often lyrical, nature consistently present an Odysseus who fights battles that

Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme · 117
are compared to peaceful images. At no place is this design clearer than in the
delayed appearance of the simile that the audience of the Iliad would expect:
the bloody lion. Only when Odysseus has won and his restraint has been
shown is he displayed as the powerful warrior he has been from the begin-
ning of the book.

ODYSSEY, BOOK 5: THEMATIC SIMILES

Book 5 is framed to present a crucial week in the life of Odysseus. In the
first line Dawn rises from her bed; in the final lines Homer brings closure:

Upon his eyes
did Athena shed sleep so that it would quickly
free him from toilsome weariness, veiling his eyelids.

During this time Odysseus confirms his desire to leave the comfortable
island of Calypso and seek a world of death, sickness, weakness, and compro-
mise — a flawed world dominated by powerful and often vindictive divinities.
This choice may seem strange, perhaps even wrongheaded, yet the rest of the
Odyssey demonstrates that this dangerous world outside the sheltered island
is an arena where a man of determination and skill can welcome challenge
and strive for achievement. Such a choice is worthy of the epic’s hero, a man
who embraces the chance to flee anonymity. The Odyssey initially focuses on
the end of Odysseus’ wanderings, because the choice on Calypso’s island is
pivotal in his career. During ten years of wandering he has learned what this
choice should be. On the verge of returning to Ithaca he undergoes two final
temptations, Calypso and Nausicaa; both times he affirms his plan to return
home. Book 5 is built on two themes: Odysseus’ resolve and the support
for his actions through divine mechanisms — Calypso’s island, the world of
the storm, and the plan of Zeus.

Homer is careful to assure his audience that those elements in the story
that threaten Odysseus offer no real danger. At the outset of book 5 Zeus
declares that Odysseus is fated to see his friends and to return to his palace
on Ithaca (41–42). He also receives the aid of Ino, who protects him as
he heads for the Phaeacian shore, and Athena smooths his way while he is
involved in the storm:
But Athena, the daughter of Zeus, thought of another plan. She checked the paths of the other winds; she ordered them to stop and be lulled to sleep. She roused the swift North Wind and broke the waves before him until Zeus-born Odysseus arrived among the Phaeacians, the lovers of oars, after escaping death and destruction. (382–87)

Yet though Odysseus is shielded during the storm, he has no means of knowing it. Hermes had informed Calypso that the hero is fated to return to Ithaca, but she did not report these words to him and even attempted to sow suspicion by saying:

If only you knew in your heart how many sorrows you are fated to fulfill before you come to your native land, then remaining here with me you would guard this house and be immortal (206–9)

Odysseus is compelled to build his own raft, an act implying that he must earn his way home relying on his own wits. When he is caught in the storm, he almost despairs, envying those who died a normal warrior’s death at Troy and even suspecting that the aid offered by Ino is an untrustworthy snare (299–312 and 356–64). The skin is scraped from his hands as he struggles to reach the shore. Once he escapes from the sea, he still must devise ways to protect himself, since he has lost his raft and equipment, even his clothes. In the course of the storm he confronts death and suffering and learns to work with nature and respect it. He ends the book with an awareness of the tenuous and fragile quality of life in the chancy world that he has chosen:

Woe is me, what am I to suffer? What now at long last will happen to me? If I spend this weary night at the river, then together the evil frost and the fresh dew will overcome me when I have gasped out my life from weakness; the cold breeze blows up from the river in the early morning. But if I climb up the slopes to the dark wood and lie down in the dense thicket — if cold

_Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme_ · 119
and exhaustion leave me, and sweet sleep comes upon me,
still I am afraid that I will be prey and booty for wild beasts.

(465–73)

The experience of the storm is sufficiently intense to rouse his sense of purpose and to energize the abilities that Odysseus will need to survive on Ithaca, where equally hostile forces will turn their destructive power against him. His enduring, indomitable spirit remains a constant element in the epic from book 5 through his final reinstatement in Ithaca. He begins the book yearning to escape the dominating nymph Calypso and ends it having passed through a series of tests, still clinging to life, yet not for a minute renouncing the crucial choice that is the fixed point from which all the later episodes of the epic arise.

The background to this book is a rapidly changing unpredictable element: the world of nature. Calypso’s island is a paradise, filled with a variety of trees and flowers, birds and fountains, odors and music.\(^{106}\) Opposed to this lovely area where nature freely pours forth her gifts is the sea, where nature threatens to overwhelm puny, terrified mortals. Calypso provides Odysseus with food and welcomes him to her bed each night; the storm offers him no shelter and so strips him of protection that he fears being eaten by wandering animals. The nymph offers him immortality, while the natural world offers death. In choosing between Calypso and Penelope, Odysseus consciously makes a choice worthy of a hero:

My queenly goddess, do not be angry with me for this.
I myself know it all — that wise Penelope
is far less than you in beauty and bearing,
for she is a mortal while you are immortal and ageless.
But what I want and yearn for during all my days
is to go home and to see the day of my return.

(215–20)

Book 5 is designed to highlight the hero’s choice between two alternatives: the effortless life of anonymity in the service of a preponderant goddess versus the risky world of challenge, danger, and individual achievement. Appropriately, the book is split between Calypso’s island and the open sea as the hero seeks to move from one to the other. The narrative falls into three sections:
1. 1–42: The conference on Olympus
2. 43–282: Odysseus on Ogygia
3. 283–493: Odysseus and the storm
   a. 283–353: He abandons the raft (Poseidon and Ino)
   b. 354–87: He escapes from the storm (Poseidon and Athena)
   c. 388–457: He finds refuge from the sea
   d. 458–93: He finds refuge from nature

Because the narrative’s structure is so clearly marked by contrasting locations and a series of coordinated scenes, similes are not needed to organize a chain of incidents. Rather, book 5 contains more similes than any other book in the _Odyssey_ because—though used in a wide variety of situations—they are tightly focused on the theme of the book, the hero’s choice.

Divinities play a major role in surrounding Odysseus with sufficient protection to effect his final escape from Poseidon. Appropriately, book 5 opens with a divine council in which a plan to return Odysseus to Ithaca is sanctioned by the words of Zeus himself, and it closes with Athena’s care for the exhausted hero. The poet sets this narrative in motion by sending Hermes to Calypso. It is traditional for a simile to appear in connection with the journey of a god to the world of men and equally normal for a god to be described by the bird simile. In this case the passage of Hermes from Olympus to earth is given special prominence when the poet juxtaposes three traditional means of presenting such a journey. First Hermes is given sandals in typological preparation lines for gods:

> [He/she spoke and] immediately bound beautiful sandals upon his feet, immortal and golden, which bore him over the sea and the endless stretches of earth with the streaming wind.


Then there is a brief listing of the god’s itinerary, a customary device for describing such journeys. Finally, there is the extended simile of a bird skimming the sea looking for food (51). This is a peaceful scene in which Homer avoids the element of attack that is part of the bird simile in order to echo the life in Calypso’s paradise. Every feature in the presentation of the god’s entrance is traditional, but the significance of this journey in inaugurating the action of the poem is emphasized by the multiplication of standard devices.

_Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme_ · 121
Not all immortals receive such treatment, even though they appear constantly throughout this book. Ino, who lends Odysseus her veil and watches over him throughout the storm, receives two short bird similes (337 and 353). Athena and Poseidon, as the opposed divinities, receive no similes at all; Calypso is presented directly in actions and words. The tutelary divinity of the Phaeacian stream that graciously receives Odysseus from the sea is unnamed and in spite of this crucial assistance is not further highlighted. Similes are not employed to emphasize the continuing role of the gods in this book; they focus only on moments when Odysseus is divinely aided in pursuing his wish to be free from Calypso.

Similes also describe the world of the storm that Odysseus has so willingly chosen. When Poseidon sees Odysseus on the raft, he realizes that this is the last moment to assert his will if he is going to continue torturing his victim. Since he knows that Odysseus is fated to escape from his power once he reaches Phaeacia, he has every reason to make this storm violent:

He spoke and gathered the clouds, and he shook the sea taking up his trident in his hands. He raised up the blasts of all the winds and covered the earth and sea with clouds. Night fell from the heavens. The East Wind, the South Wind, and the West Wind blowing ill all clashed together with the North Wind born in the bright upper air as he rolled a great wave before him.

(291–96)

Odysseus fears this severe storm, yet the audience knows that he is in no real danger. Similes enforce the impression of his protected existence. Two similes, both from the wind simileme, describe the storm itself. Though such similes could be forceful depictions of the large-scale destruction resulting from a violent storm, the wind similes in this book are gentle. In the first the wind blows thistle clumps across a plain; in the second the wind only scatters a heap of dry straw (328 and 368). To describe one of the most powerful sea storms in this storm-filled epic, these two similes present the wind expending itself on trivial and useless objects in scenes from a farmer’s daily life; no one is hurt or threatened. Likewise, in this narrative the wind, though threatening to Odysseus, has no fatal force and will merely blow and scatter his raft harmlessly. Odysseus himself is described by two similes that minimize his plight. He rides on a plank from the ruined raft like a man who rides a
horse (371), and the flesh ripped from his hands on Phaeacia’s rocks is likened to pebbles that an octopus carries away in its suckers when it is pulled from its lair (432). In the first, Odysseus is compared to a man who is not threatened or out of control; in the second, there is no blood, pain or destruction—just a minor disruption in the life of the octopus who is free to return to his dwelling.

All these more peaceful similes accompany potentially dangerous narrative situations; only the similes reveal that all is under the control of the gods who guide and protect the hero. The remaining similes focus on the human theme, Odysseus’ choice. The keynote to his introduction is struck almost immediately: Athena praises the kingship of Odysseus, comparing him to a father at the moment he is yearning for his wife and family (12). This is not the first time that this simile has occurred in the Odyssey; when Telemachus earlier spoke to the assembly, he reminded them that Odysseus was gentle like a father, and Mentor also speaks of Odysseus’ kingship and includes the same simile (Ody. 2.47 and Ody. 2.230–34). Throughout the poem, similes of family relationship cluster about Odysseus, Telemachus, and Penelope as they struggle to return to the peaceful existence that they enjoyed before the family was split by the Trojan War.

An extended simile at 394 continues this pattern; Odysseus first glimpses Phaeacia, the land that offers salvation from the storm and will complete his return to Ithaca:

as when a father’s life appears welcome to his children after he has lain in sickness suffering strong pains, wasting away for a long time, and a hateful demon vexes him, but then the gods free him from evil and he welcomes it, so did land and woods seem welcome to Odysseus (394–98)

Odysseus’ joy is like the joy of the children who have been expecting the death of their father—perhaps the ruination of the family. They have watched him suffer for a long time as his life is being eaten away; Odysseus too has been watching his life erode as he sits on the beach weeping in desire for his home even though he is surrounded by an island paradise. His despair at the prospect of an anonymous death by drowning is the culmination of his fears—the final inglorious, unheroic end of a life that once held promise. The simile suggests that Calypso’s island has been the land of death; the sea is the place
where death is only threatened; the land of Phaeacia, with its prospect of return to Ithaca, is the gift of life. If the simile had stated that Odysseus welcomed this land as much as the father welcomed the return of good health, it would have been intelligible but would have failed to emphasize the perspective of the children who have watched a life decline and draw near its end. That external and objective view is the position of Odysseus in book 5; he is the man who can see his own life as an observer and choose from among the paths open to him. And, of course, starting in the proem and continuing throughout the rest of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus will be presented as the man who seeks to serve not only himself but also his family, wife, son, and father—and, as Mentor’s and Athena’s use of the father simile implies, his subjects, who are his figurative children.

This theme of renewed life is echoed in the final simile of the book, that of the lonely farmer who buries a surviving ember that can be rekindled (488). Fire is a traditional topic for a warrior, but just as Odysseus feels small and threatened by overwhelming forces, so also the fire is diminished in size—though not in potential.

In these last two similes, the recovering father and the preserved fire, there are implicit values that provide additional meaning on several different levels; the audience is informed through similes, among other devices, that Odysseus even at his lowest moment is the potential father to his family and subjects, he is returning to life, and he will once again be the inspiring force that will effectively ignite his people to reestablish a community on Ithaca. Although he seems aware only of the need to save himself by escaping the storm, there is a broader sense of salvation for a wider group, which will depend on the continuing role of gods as the family’s protectors all the way to the end of the *Odyssey*. In addition, there is a metaphorical perspective in which Odysseus is escaping from a living death on Calypso’s island and returning to the fullness of life in a human community as an effective hero. At the end of book 5 he is largely unaware of these second two levels of meaning, but the placement, subjects, and extensions of the similes at 5.394 and 488 point to actions that have larger dimensions than the single victim’s experience of the actual storm.

The most revealing simile in this book falls at the moment when Odysseus is forced to use his vaunted intelligence to earn his independence, the moment when he begins to build his raft:
as broad as the curve of a freight ship’s hull
laid out by a man well skilled in carpentry

(249–50)

In the narrative this action is important because it allows Odysseus to leave Calypso’s island by means of his own ingenuity as a man “well-skilled in carpentry”; his voyage is in every way the result of his own initiative and actions. Throughout the Odyssey the hero attracts craftsman similes. At the beginning of book 9 (3–13) he contrasts himself to a minstrel; later in the same book he is compared to a man who bores a ship timber and a smith who tempers an ax head (384 and 391). The images of the craftsman put the hero in a proper perspective. As a craftsman lays out a design and then brings it into actuality, so also Odysseus has a driving desire to return to home and family, and in retrospect he will be seen to have taken the initial step in achieving this goal by choosing to flee Calypso. His conduct from this point on—he employs tact and discretion among the Phaeacians, his use of disguise and cleverness on Ithaca, even his final self-control before a resistant Penelope—all are signs that Odysseus is careful in planning his moves and competent in their execution.

The building of the raft is a simple activity charged with meaning by its placement at the crucial beginning point of the return story. Book 5 is Homer’s introduction of his hero both as he is and as he will be when all the forces involved in his complex life permit him to achieve his chosen goal. The events of the immediate narrative have a focused meaning for him because his view, as that of any mortal, is limited; but the poet has a broader perspective and is able to present his hero caught up in larger events. This wider view is made clear in a variety of ways, including the divine council, divine messengers, and gods and goddesses accompanying the hero, but also the similes. The fear and despair of the moment are real to Odysseus, and in fact they are vivid individual markers of the kind of life that he has chosen to embrace. In this book the hero needs divine protection; but on his arrival on Ithaca he will be left largely dependent on his wits to reestablish himself. He receives help mostly in the form of encouragement and a disguise from Athena (book 13). In book 22 he will stand on his own, with no more divine help than is given to most other Homeric heroes. The similes throughout book 5 reveal a variety of broader perspectives that will be crucial in Odysseus’ successful
return to his throne. Similes carry the theme. While the narrative follows the quick shifts and risks of Odysseus’ continuing adventures, the similes, drawn from home, farm, and countryside, consistently focus attention on solidly developing forces that at the moment are unclear to the hero—the benign reality of his threatening experiences and the full potential of his significant choice.

CONCLUSION

The books discussed in this chapter are complex; each moves through a series of episodes, shifts the focus between various locations, and involves many characters. Yet the firm hand of the poet is constantly evident in the development of a major theme that shapes and unites events, scenes, and characters. This control is at its clearest in book 12 of the Iliad, where the Greek wall provides a physical focus for the book; once this focus is established, the narrative is built in episodes centered on a series of three Trojan heroes whose achievement increases from Asios to Sarpedon to Hector. Yet at the same time the Trojan dependence on Zeus also increases, a discordant note that is ominous for the future defense of the city. The similes reflect these mutually reinforcing elements of the narrative so closely that even though their omission would not leave unbridgeable gaps, the contrasts between the characters and their actions would not stand out so clearly.

The subject of book 5 is ostensibly the aristeia of Diomedes, but the theme is the ambiguous situation of mortals in a world dominated by divine forces. Achilles occupies the same world of cause and effect and will fight the last single combat in the Iliad; he provides such an obvious contrast to Diomedes that his later aristeia threatens to reduce book 5 to the status of a mere precursor to the major action. Yet book 5 has its own contribution to make within the first half of the Iliad. The audience should not focus on Diomedes’ individual actions so intently that they are unaware of complications that result from the mixing of human motivation and divine initiatives. The similes, consistently highlighting the book’s theme, are constant supporters of this theme.

The promise inherent in Odysseus’ choice to leave Calypso is realized as Odysseus returns to his family, his house, and his community as king. He must scheme, struggle, and finally fight for this position, but Homer makes the battles in book 22 of the Odyssey the means of expressing the communal achievement when a man with a just cause gathers irresistible resources.
against inherently weak competitors. The similes, accompanying the final steps in this theme, are important factors in defining this victory.

In book 5 of the *Odyssey* Odysseus chooses to leave Ogygia—a choice sufficiently great to make him an epic hero. This book introduces the story of Odysseus at an advanced stage; later he will backtrack to tell the Phaeacians his story from the day he left Troy. Such a pattern, however, is characteristic of Homeric narrative: the opposites between which the hero will choose are presented first (books 5 and 6–8), and only then is the preparation for the decision reported (books 9–12). Thus it is typical that book 5 develops extreme positions between which Odysseus must choose.\(^{121}\) Similes are especially effective in maintaining a focus on the divine protection of the hero as he shapes his own life rather than slumbering in isolation on Calypso’s island.

In each of these books the themes are carried principally through the narrative; never does the simile control the direction of the story. Yet the similes are a wonderfully subtle and flexible device to enhance and bring into focus the essential features of that narrative. Two examples of comparative passages make the simile’s contribution clear. First, there are two scenes in book 12 of the *Iliad* where heroes pick up stones to hurl at the enemy; Ajax bashes in the head of Epicles and Hector dashes down the gates in the Greek wall:

First, then Telamonian Ajax slew a man,  
the comrade of Sarpedon, the great-hearted Epicles,  
striking him with a huge, jagged stone,  
which lay inside the wall near the battlement on top of the others.  
Not easily  
would a man, such as men are now—  
even a very young man—hold it with both hands.  
But he raised it high and cast it forward,  
and it crushed his four-horned helmet and shattered all the bones  
within his head.

\[(12.378–85)\]

Hector snatched up and carried a stone, which stood  
in front of the gates, thick at the bottom  
and sharp at the top. The two best men of the people,  
such as men are now, would not easily have heaved it upon a wagon  
from the ground. But he by himself handled it easily;  
the son of crooked-counseling Cronus made it light for him.
Just as when a shepherd easily carries a ram’s fleece, picking it up with one hand, and its mass weighs him down little, so Hector lifting the stone bore it straight against the doors. . . .

(12.445–53)

Since the stone of Ajax is meant to seem heavy and destructive, the poet describes its size, its shape, its position, and the inability of any living man to pick it up. When it strikes its target it is only to be expected that it instantly kills a man; realism pervades this small scene. Hector’s stone is so much heavier that it would require two men to lift, and it is large enough to have different shapes on top and bottom; yet Hector, though no stronger than Ajax, easily lifts it. Without the simile of the shepherd juggling the fleece, this heavy stone would still be light for Hector, since he is bolstered by Zeus’ aid; but because of the simile Hector’s act seems eerie and surreal. In a literal sense the simile is an extraneous repetition of action already in the narrative; but in terms of the poetic effect the simile makes Zeus’ aid a tangible force in Hector’s success.

Second, there are comparable scenes where a hero is saved and brought back into the narrative. First, the miraculous return of Aeneas in Iliad 5:

[Apollo] himself sent Aeneas forth from his rich shrine and cast power into the breast of the shepherd of the people. Aeneas stood in the midst of his companions, and they rejoiced as they saw him alive, moving fearlessly, and of sound strength. But they asked him nothing for their other toils did not let them. . . .

(5.512–17)

Aeneas’ cure is presented as simple, and his men quickly turn back to the business of fighting. Since one of the principal characteristics of Diomedes’ aristeia is its ineffectuality, this instant cure of the only wounded hero seems appropriate. Compare Apollo’s healing of Hector in book 15:

Thus speaking he breathed great might into the shepherd of the people. Just as when a stalled horse, fed on barley at his manger, breaks his halter and runs galloping over the plain. He is used to bathing in the beautiful river—a proud stallion. He holds his head high and his mane streams over his shoulders; confident in his glorious strength,
his knees bear him swiftly to his haunts and the pasture land of the
other horses.
In this way Hector moved his feet and knees nimbly,
driving on his charioteers after he heard the voice of the god,
just as when dogs and country men
press on a horned stag or a wild goat,
but a steep rock and a shady grove
save him and it is not fated for them to find him.
Yet at their shouting a bearded lion appears
in the road and instantly turns all of them back even though they
are eager;
so the Greeks for a while followed after in a throng
jabbing with their swords and sharpened spears,
but when they saw Hector moving throughout the ranks of his men,
they grew frightened. . . .

(15.262–80)

Both horse and lion similes are suited to a hero who has just been healed
by Apollo. Hector is not only spirited in his return to the field, but so power-
ful in his attack that he will drive the Greeks back to their ships; and yet in
this controlled battle every success of Hector is far more a show of spirit than
of real strength. For Hector this return to battle is really the chance to earn
his death, a fact which has already been made clear in Zeus’ prophecy at the
opening of the book (15.54–77). Thus the horse is harmless but filled with
spirit, pride, and confidence; and the lion turns the hunters from their mis-
sion, but he neither kills anyone nor gains any meat himself. With such simi-
les as support, Hector does not measure up to Aeneas as a warrior.

Aeneas is presented as an effective and vigorous fighter in his own right, a
strong leader and defender of his troops. Homer’s audience not only knows
the simile subjects available to describe effective fighters but also is familiar
enough with the horse and lion similemes to appreciate the poet’s choice of
elements from the similemes for emphasizing Hector’s weakness.

The technique of contrasting parallel passages—one with similes and the
other without—reveals the real power of this traditional device in support-
ing the narrative. The similes at 12.451, 15.263, and 15.271 are so well designed
to underline the themes developing in the surrounding narrative that they
become clear guideposts to the poet’s broader concerns.