



AP English Literature 2000 Student Samples

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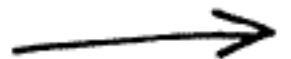
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Homer's Odyssey is regarded as perhaps the greatest epic poem of all time. Its intricate plot, poetic imagery, and timelessness give modern authors ample opportunity to reinterpret its content, sometimes in ~~a~~ startlingly different ways. In the Odyssey, the narrator Odysseus portrays the Sirens as possessing song that is so ~~powerful~~ beautiful and tempting as to require a heroic level of restraint. Margaret Atwood, however, uses tone, point of view, diction, and imagery ~~to take a different way~~ to portray the Sirens as ~~scathingly~~ down-to-earth and cynical creatures.

First, ~~Odysseus~~ ^{Homer} portrays the Sirens mainly through Odysseus' perceptions of them and the heroism, physical strength, and sacrifice that Odysseus finds necessary to endure their song. He takes care to use heroic imagery and diction to portray Odysseus, ~~as a hero~~ who uses a "sharp sword," "two strong hands," and "strength" ^{to} ~~to~~ make earplugs for his crew members. Describing Odysseus' position ~~as~~ as they pass the Sirens, "They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship—erect at the mast block, lashed by ropes to the mast," and in the last line, "the ~~the~~ boards... lashed me," Homer emphasizes in his ^{use of} strong imagery the amount of physical ~~restraint~~ and sacrifice that was necessary for Odysseus.

Homer also ~~also~~ makes direct reference to the beauty and temptation behind the Sirens' song, describing it with such lavish adjectives as "thrilling," "ravishing," and "honeyed." He also uses metonymy to emphasize what Odysseus believes is his ~~complete~~ entirely thorough defeat of the Sirens: "we'd left the Sirens fading in our wake," relates Odysseus, substituting "Sirens" for "the Sirens' song" to emphasize his heroism.



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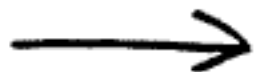
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in the defeat. It is Homer's ~~heroic~~ heroic tone, ~~and~~ imagery, and diction, as well as the use of Odysseus' point of view, which portrays the sheer beauty of the Sirens' song through both direct description and through portrayal of the ~~the~~ incredible difficulty to resist it.

Margaret Atwood uses the same literary devices to paint a very different picture. Her tone is very down to earth, and almost satirical, even comic ~~the~~. Even the title of her poem, "Siren Song," is slightly ironic. ~~Because the book is not~~ That is, it is not "The Song of the Sirens" or "The Sirens' Song," but "Siren Song," which ~~is~~ is syntactically equivalent to "Bird Song," for example. Atwood's ~~is~~ ^{diction} throughout the poem is also down-to-earth and less embellished than the Odyssey: the first verse reads, ~~very simply,~~

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: The song
that is irresistible:

Third, Atwood uses the point of view ~~of the Siren~~ of one of the Sirens, as well as a bit of comedy, to portray the Sirens as down-to-earth and cynical creatures. The narrator complains, "will you get me/out of this bird suit?" which is ~~a~~ a statement of explicit self-mockery. ~~The narrator continues~~ "I don't enjoy it here," the narrator continues, "squatting on this island / looking picturesque and mythical / with these two feathery maniacs" Here, Atwood ~~uses~~ ^{uses} such unromantic word choice as "squatting" and "maniacs" to make a direct comparison between the traditional portrayal of the Sirens



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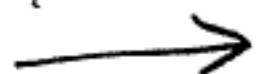
as beautiful, poetic, and elegant, and her depiction of them as down-to-earth, ironic, and cynical. Furthermore, she dispels the myth that their song is inherently beautiful; she counters, instead, that the Sirens' trademark is making their visitors feel special. "Help me!" the narrator cries, "Only you, only you can, / you are unique / at last." According to Atwood, it is this pathetic, slightly humorous cry for help that entices sailors to visit these down-to-earth creatures.

Atwood provides a stark contrast to the "original" Sirens. Homer's Sirens are so tempting and beautiful that they are a great challenge for Odysseus. Atwood's "Siren Song," from the point of view of the Sirens, portrays them as more comic than poetic. Each, however, is consistent in its use of tone, point of view, and imagery, and raised the question for the reader of which depiction can be considered ~~the~~ "truer." Perhaps this contrast shows that reality can be interpreted in many ~~ways~~ quite diverse ways.

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The mythical Sirens of Homer's Odyssey are often a symbol for the influence of women on pining and lovesick men. Their tricks and temptations are almost unavoidable. Such is the case in the original story of the Sirens in Homer's Odyssey and in Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song". The two selections portray the Sirens from the original point of view of Odysseus and from the contemplated point of view of one of the Sirens. The poet's variances in tone, point of view, and imagery create two contrasting views of the myth.

The cutting from the Odyssey shares the original tone of the work. It is determined, shown through Odysseus, but also pining. The determination of Homer's piece is shown through the measures taken by Odysseus and his crew to resist the lure of the Sirens. The Ithacan warrior "stopped the ears of his comrades one by one," in his attempt to shield them from the tantalizing song. Likewise, the crew bound him to the mast so that he could hear the song without harm. As the Sirens begin to sing, Odysseus' tone changes to one pining to stop the ship and longing to stay with the beautiful voices. His men, however,



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still determined, "[bound~~ed~~ him] faster, with rope on chafing rope." While the tone of this passage centers around strength and resistance, in Atwood's poem, the tone is cynical and uninterested. The Siren tells the reader "I don't enjoy it here." She belittles her fellow singers and claims that the listener is "unique". However, the tone changes in the last stanza. Where the speaker had previously shown a cynical look at her daily occupation, here she changes to a tone of satisfaction as she has coaxed in another man "at last."

Since the point of view in Homer's epic is that of Odysseus, his male desires and vulnerable state dominate the passage. He hears the Siren's song as the most beautiful sound in the world; ~~and~~ without their protection, Odysseus and his men are powerless against the Sirens' call. Odysseus' point of view is on the defensive side of the story. In "Siren Song", the tantalizer uses her femininity to exhort a "poor me" attitude which she uses to her advantage. Odysseus feels "the heart inside me [throb] to listen longer," but the Siren claimed ~~that~~ "I don't enjoy singing," and rallies her listener to help her off of the island. Her point

of view is carefully planned and monotonous, but as she captures yet another sailor through her trickery, she tells the reader "it works every time."

The imagery of both pieces creates a sharp contrast in the portrayal of the Sirens. The danger of the creatures is emphasized in the *Odyssey* as the men "~~flung~~ flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder," to prevent Odysseus from following their "honeyed voices" to the shore. The crew fights to avoid "their high, thrilling song." The Siren, however, creates an image of safety as she claims she needs ^{someone} ~~someone~~ to "get me out of this bird suit." She admits that the island is "picturesque and mythical," but insists that her cohorts are "feathered maniacs." The images Atwood creates are intended to assure safety to the Siren's unsuspecting victim.

These two portrayals of the mythical Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* and Atwood's "Siren Song" are sharply contrasted through the use of point of view, tone, and imagery. As the contrasting views of male and female develop, the "weaker sex" is glorified by upsetting the male's trust and prevailing.

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