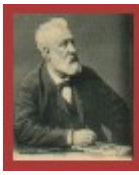
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Captain Nemo's Classical Pedigree

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The most ancient mariner of Western literature was Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* (*ODY*), who sailed with his Greek crew to Troy and struggled against great obstacles to bring them safely home. Nearly three thousand years after Homer, Jules Verne in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (*TTL*) created the personality of his protagonist, Captain Nemo, by combining the traits of two characters found in Homer's earlier nautical adventure.

The clue to the first of these characters, as previous commentators have noted [1], lies in Nemo's name, the Latin equivalent for Greek "Outis", a word, as Verne observes, that meant "Nobody" [2]. Significantly, "Outis" was the name Odysseus had the foresight to give himself when he introduced himself to his captor, the one-eyed giant, Polyphemus [3]. When Odysseus later blinded the Cyclops, his fellow Cyclopes, awakened by his cries, asked who had hurt him. Thanks to Odysseus' cunning, Polyphemus replied "Nobody", thereby persuading them to depart rather than rally to his aid [4].

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1 See, for example, Andrew Martin, *The Mask of the Prophet: The Extraordinary Fictions of Jules Verne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 19-20, and William Butcher, trans. and ed., *Jules Verne, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 396-7, n. 66.

2 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 20. For more on the possible significance of Nemo's name, see Butcher, *op. cit.*, 396, n. 66.

3 *ODY*, Book 9, 364-7.

4 *ODY*, Book 9, 399-413.

Verne's Nemo not only bears an Odyssean name but, like the Greek hero himself, is the intellectually curious captain of a ship and commander of a loyal crew who together with him encounter alien environments and strange creatures in the course of their long voyage. And like Odysseus also [5], Nemo is a man who was deprived of his beloved family by the hostile acts of others against whom he would later seek revenge [6]. As an added Hellenic touch, Verne endowed Nemo with the ability to write in modern Greek and gave him 19th-century pro-Greek political sympathies [7].

Verne, however, did not simply make Nemo into a 19th century Odysseus, but in addition modeled his persona on that of Odysseus' enemy, Polyphemus. In referring to Nemo as "the man of the sea" (« L'homme des eaux ») [8], Verne recalls that Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, was Polyphemus' father [9]. Verne further likens Nemo to the orb-eyed giant by observing that Nemo's most distinguishing facial feature was his wide-spaced eyes and penetrating gaze [10]. Moreover, like Polyphemus [11], Nemo is depicted as a law unto himself, who scorns the norms of so-called civilization and cries out for revenge [12]. Most notably, Nemo keeps Dr. Aronnax and his two companions imprisoned in the close confines of his submarine, the *Nautilus*, just as Polyphemus kept Odysseus and his crew captive in his cave [13]. In fact, Aronnax and his companions enter the submarine through an iron hatch, or manhole, that shuts behind them [14] not unlike the immense boulder that was rolled across the mouth of the giant's cave to block anyone from escaping [15]. Furthermore, right after saying that the hatch on the *Nautilus* shut, Verne has one of his characters refer to the dangers of cannibalism [16], a trait that personified Polyphemus [17].

Besides Verne borrowing ingredients from the *Odyssey* to formulate Nemo's personality, other evidence in the novel points to the Greek epic as the source of his literary

5 *ODY*, Book 11, 90-203; Books 21 and 22.

6 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 14 and 18; Part II, Ch. 1 and 21.

7 *TTL*, Part II, Ch. 6. With the help of a courageous Greek sponge-diver, Nemo transships gold bars to finance Greek rebels fighting the Turks on Crete. For more details, see Butcher, *op. cit.*, 419-20, n. 232.

8 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 10 (title).

9 *ODY*, Book 9, 526-9.

10 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 8.

11 *ODY*, Book 9, 187-92, 526-34.

12 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 10, 17, and 20; Part II, Ch. 21 and 22.

13 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 12; Part II, Ch. 1 and 6.

14 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 7 and 8.

15 *ODY*, Book 9, 240-3.

16 *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 8.

17 *ODY*, Book 9, 287-98.

inspiration [18]. Both works refer to cannibalism [19]; mention how potent substances were used to put characters to sleep [20]; and describe how the prisoners in each tale devised a plan of escape and accomplished it by boat [21]. A bloody battle between whales and an attacking *Nautilus* is specifically termed by Verne “a Homeric massacre” (« cet homérique massacre ») [22]. And later, paralleling one of the most gruesome scenes in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus and his men plunged a hot stake into the giant’s eye [23], Ned Land, Aronnax’s whale-hunting comrade, plunges multiple harpoons into the eyes of a monstrous squid [24].

Above all, our evidence reveals that Captain Nemo’s portrait is a composite drawn from features belonging to two prominent characters from Homer’s *Odyssey*. In short, Captain Nemo’s literary DNA is essentially Greek.

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18 Verne’s familiarity with classical literature is evident in his early short story, « Le Mariage de M. Anselme des Tilleuls » (Porrentruy: L’Olifant, 1991; first English trans. [by Edward Baxter], “The Marriage of a Marquis,” Albany, GA: BearManor Fiction, 2011). In this story, in addition to including numerous classical allusions and quotations, Verne mentions Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, and Helen of Troy’s husband, Menelaus. I am grateful to Jean-Michel Margot for calling this early work to my attention.

Butcher, *op. cit*., 383, cites Homer’s *Odyssey* as one of the “indisputable sources for the marine sections of the novel.” For echoes of the *Odyssey* in Verne’s works see Michel Serres, *Jouvences sur Jules Verne* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974), 13, 16-17, and 21-22; and Simone Vierne, *Jules Verne, le roman initiatique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Sirac, 1973), 448, 468, and 752, and *Jules Verne* (Paris: Ballard, 1986), 197.

19 *ODY*, Book 9, 287-98, 343-4, 369-70; *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 8 and 22.

20 *ODY*, Book 9, 345-374; *TTL*, Part I, Ch. 24.

21 *ODY*, Book 9, 360-566; *TTL*, Part II, Ch. 23.

22 *TTL*, Part II, Ch. 12.

23 *ODY*, Book 9, 375-98.

24 *TTL*, Part II, Ch. 18.