



## Intertextuality Across Genres: A Study of Homer's the Odyssey and Suzan-Lori Parks's Father Comes Home from the Wars

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**Abstract:** This research work aims to show the relationship between Homer's *The Odyssey* and Parks's *Father Comes Home from the Wars*. It has as objective, to debunk the stereotypical norms of writing literary works, which shows that comparative analysis can only be limited to a particular genre, that is (novel to novel, play to play and poetry to poetry). This intertextual study proclaims that a literary work cannot be limited only to a particular genre but can equally cut across genres. This explains why Parks rewrites Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* into a play, *Father Comes Home from the Wars*, which she transforms into the American scenario. Thus, the researcher is going to carry out a comparative analysis between Homer's epic poem and Parks's play. Our study of the selected works has considered the way meanings are constructed by a network of cultural and social discourses which embody distinct codes, expectations and assumptions. Besides, the thematic and linguistic similarities and differences between the works of the European and American authour selected have enabled the researcher to have an insight into literary influences and affinities. This article has also studied the life experiences of the authours selected, and their historical contexts and has demonstrated that Homer had no direct influence on Parks. This work is premised on the hypothesis that intertextuality is not limited to a particular genre of writing, be it prose, poetry or drama but can equally cut across genres. Intertextuality foregrounds the notions of interconnectedness and interdependence in culture. To analyse these works, the researcher used deconstruction to debunk traditional norms of writing in contrastive studies. Although Parks subscribes to Greek mythology and the Theatre of the Absurd respectively, she deviates from her European forebear of this convention, as she presents her play *Father Comes Home from the Wars*, which is again not written in acts and scenes but in parts, through American realism, as she is somewhat a social critic.

**Keywords:** Intertextuality, across, genres.

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### INTRODUCTION

The term intertextuality is derived from the Latin word "intertexto", which means "to intermingle while weaving." When Julia Kristeva coined this term, she associated it primarily with post-structuralist theorists. In one of her essays, "Word, Dialogue and

Novel," she broke with traditional notions of the author's influences and the text's sources positing that all signifying systems (texts) are constituted by the manner in which they transform earlier signifying systems. A literary work is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts

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and to the structures of language itself. In *The Kristeva Reader*, she outlines that “text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). A text is a piece of writing made up of previous writings. Literary creation calls for intertextuality, as any piece of writing is the absorption and transformation of previous writings. Intertextuality is also seen as the interconnectedness of a text with another or the rewriting or transformation of

The aim of this article is to show the extent to which the works selected interrelate with one another, through forms of intertextuality such as allusion, convention and transformation. It also shows that intertextuality is not only limited to a particular genre but equally writers can rewrite the works of others irrespective of the agreement in genres. Intertextuality is not limited to a particular genre. Contrastive studies can cut across genres and not only stereotypical. Suzan-Lori Parks deconstructs this notion in her rewriting of Homer’s *The Odyssey* which is an epic poem, in to a play. That is why deconstruction is of vital use in the understanding of this article. This interrelatedness will be analysed through the elements of literature like setting, characterisation, plot, themes, style and structure as well as, dramatic conventions such as chorus, prayers, songs and stage direction. This comparison gives an insight into literary influences and cultural studies by showing the connection between culture and intertextuality. Intertextuality shows the link between literary texts and their connections to other cultural productions. Writers are influenced by everything that they have seen or read and even seemingly disparate fields, such as music and philosophy, can exert a strong influence on each other through intertextuality. Similarly, authors from different cultures and historical periods can influence each other. As Carolyn Heilbrun points out:

*We can only retell and live by the stories we have read. We live our lives and experiences through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (Writing a Woman’s Life 1).*

The above statement implies that there is almost nothing new to be written by writers again, since their life experiences depend on the stories they have read. Stories come to writers naturally through songs and murmurings passed on from mother, or electronically, telling them about different conventions. However, writers can use old stories to create new fictions and narratives. Writing in an

atmosphere of social and cultural upheaval, when poststructuralist theories of difference were supplanting the certainties and boundaries of structuralism, Julia Kristeva found in intertextuality a means of questioning the relationship between texts which avoid fixed meanings and hand over authority to the reader. The term intertextuality was coined to describe not merely the influence of previous sources, but also the wholesale transposition of various linguistic structures and practices into others. Julia Kristeva’s theories commented upon and developed those of Mikhail Bakhtin concerning dialogism, written four decades earlier. This approach recognised the importance of locating language within specific social situations, drawing it out of the abstract system of Saussurian linguistics and positioning it in the social networks within which language is exchanged (*The Dialogic Imagination* 27). This is central to understanding intertextuality’s transformative capability, and will form a key role in understanding the variant nature of the texts presented. In Bakhtinian thought, rather than existing as a fixed sign, constituents of a language carry within them traces of other utterances and uses which render them unstable and open to meaning: “Our speech is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness and varying degrees of ‘our own-ness’” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 27). Utterances respond dialogically to other utterances, recall previous texts and retell traces of otherness, thereby resisting both neutrality and authoritative meaning. From this perspective, a word has the potential to compress conflicting meanings within it; hence, language can be recovered and reformulated at different times and by different socio-cultural groups, so that a word resounds with a multiplicity of voices.

### Allusion

An allusion, according to *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary*, is an implied or indirect reference especially in literature; a work that makes allusions to classical literature, also the use of such references. Allusions can be seen in various domains such as historical, geographical, biological, and classical domains, just to name a few. A loose adaptation of Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*, *Father Comes Home from the Wars* follows the journey of the aptly-named Hero, a slave in West Texas whose master, a colonel, has offered freedom in exchange for service during the Civil War. Hero is surrounded by an acquired family, comprised of the Oldest Old Man, whom Hero calls father; Penny, Hero’s “best gal;” Homer, his old friend; and a chorus of “Less Than Desirable Slaves” who contemplate the possibility of Hero’s fate. Parks alludes to Homer’s Epic poem, *The Odyssey* as she follows her precursor’s style of writing, through the elements of literature as will be discussed as follow.

## Setting

*Merriam Webster's Dictionary* defines setting as, "the time, place and circumstances in which something occurs or develops, or the time and place of the action of a literary, dramatic or cinematic work". It should be noted that when we talk of setting, it is not limited to historical, (time), and geographical, (place), but there is also the psychological setting which brings in the stream of consciousness technique. Sarah Anyang Agbor in her book, *An Introduction to Commonwealth Literature*, defines setting as, "The time and place in which the events of literary work take place" (76). A setting can also be symbolic in the manner in which it makes ideas larger and more significant. The epic poem *The Odyssey* was probably written near the end of the eighth century BC, somewhere along the Greek-controlled western Turkey seaside, Ionia. It is, in part, a sequel to Homer's *Iliad* and mainly it centres on the Greek hero Odysseus, or Ulysses, as he was known in Roman myths, and his long journey home to Ithaca following the fall of Troy. It takes Odysseus ten years to reach Ithaca after the ten-year Trojan War. During this absence, his son Telemachus and wife Penelope must deal with a group of unruly suitors, to compete for Penelope's hand in marriage, since most of the people have assumed that Odysseus has died. The poem is fundamental to the modern Western canon and is indeed the second; the *Iliad* is the first, extant work of Western literature. It continues to be read in Homeric Greek and translated into modern languages around the world. The original poem was composed in an oral tradition and was intended more to be sung than read. The *Odyssey* was written in a regionless poetic dialect of Greek. Among the most impressive elements of the text are its strikingly modern nonlinear plot, and the fact that events are shown to depend as much on the choices made by women and serfs as the actions of fighting men. In the English language as well as many others, the word *odyssey* has come to refer to an epic voyage (*Merriam Webster's Dictionary*).

*Father Comes Home from the Wars* follows the journey of Hero, a slave who has been promised his freedom by his master, on the condition that he fights alongside him with the Confederates – as Hero puts it, "helping out the wrong side" (60). It is an epic exploration of slavery in America during the Civil War in three interconnected parts: 1. *A Measure of a Man*, 2. *The Battle in the Wilderness* and 3. *The Union of My Confederate Parts*. The first and third parts are set in a West Texan slave cabin, and the second part on a Confederate/Unionist battlefield. Concerning the stream of consciousness technique, the slavery of African-Americans, illustrated through Hero is a serious issue that affects the characters psyche due to their lack of freedom. This can be seen in *Father Comes Home from the Wars* as Hero is indecisive and

falls out with his family because he has to choose between his family and going to war in order to gain freedom which will never be given to him.

## Characterization

*Merriam Webster's Dictionary* defines characterisation as "One of the attributes or features that make up and distinguish an individual". According to Sarah Agbor Anyang, characterisation refers to the way that a person looks talks, acts or thinks (79). Since Parks alludes to Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, his characters are an emulation of those of the Greek poet. Odysseus's heroic trait is his cunning intelligence; he is often described as the "Peer of Zeus in Counsel" (*The Odyssey* 11). This intelligence is most often manifested by his use of disguise and deceptive speech. His disguise takes forms both physical (altering his appearance) and verbal, such as telling the Cyclops (Polyphemus) that his name is Outic, "Nobody", then escaping after blinding Polyphemus. When queried by other Cyclopes about why he is screaming, Polyphemus replies that "Nobody" is hurting him, and with that, it sounds as if nobody is hurting him. The most evident flaw that Odysseus has is that of his arrogance and his pride, or hubris. As he sails away from the Cyclops's island, he shouts his name and boasts that no one can defeat the "Great Odysseus". The Cyclops then throws the top half of a mountain at him, and tells his father, Poseidon, that Odysseus blinded him, which enrages Poseidon and causes the god to divert Odysseus's homecoming for a very long time. This same cunning attitude and disguise is also seen in Hero as he was returning from war. Being afraid he could be captured, he sent his dog to go ahead and when his where about is asked by Penny and Homer, *Odyssey Dog* said, "Hero distinguished himself. And he took a new name" (*Father Comes Home from the Wars* 170).

As Homer achieves preeminence in both the serious and the comic traditions of poetry and his quasi-dramatic style points the way to tragedy and comedy in the strict sense; he also uses direct speech. It is well known that an Epic is a long narrative form, but by allowing his characters to speak for themselves, Homer makes his epic narrative approximate to drama: he thus foreshadows the later development of drama which he regards as a superior form of poetry. His use of direct speech gives two pointers. First, the poet who speaking in his own voice as a narrator is not what makes him an imitator. Parks authentically and powerfully elevates the modern African-American vernacular by intertextually reworking Greek epic (*The Odyssey*) and tragic (*The Oresteia*) tropes, including a Chorus, to create a new, brutal and subversive vision of American slaves. Her lyrically colloquial dialogue bravely explores significant political and philosophical issues concerning race, thus

challenging binary understandings of power. Parks also uses humour, reshaping absurdist elements, and songs, to portray the complex humanity of unique characters who experience both loss and love. Her use of diverse theatrical styles and forms creates a memorable play that reshapes how audiences view a significant part of American history. Homer's use of direct speech opens up possibilities for the imitation of character absent in pure narrative. In particular, letting the characters speak for themselves makes it possible for the poet to make clear, not just what happened, but why it happened: what attitudes and dispositions motivated the person to act like that and Homer empowers his verse by the dramatic technique to reach perfection. While Homer uses direct speech, Parks makes use of short stage directions in her play, *Father comes Home from the Wars*: "Penny and Homer embrace. Both begin to cry. Odyssey dog (Aside) Both are crying. I thought there'd be only one set of tears".

### Plot

Plot, in Aristotle's terms, is the arrangement of the incidents. It is also the structural principle, which defines the limits of the action within the limits of the cultural pattern, and provides a form, which the dramatist can use to present his ideology. According to Sarah Anyang Agbor, "plot provides the structure of the story. The plot of a story can be chronological or begin in mediocres' as well as from the end of the story" (*An Introduction to Commonwealth Literature* 72). Structure is defined as "the design or form of the completed action" (74). It is structure that gives a story balance and coherence. Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, follows the structure of a traditional plot, which Parks later adopts. A traditional plot begins from the beginning or exposition, and later proceeds to conflict which will lead to a complication that moves to the climax and lastly, the denouement or the falling point where the protagonists pass away as a result of hubris or weakness of character. Concerning plot, Homer has avoided the mistake made by many other epic poets of giving his epic the structure of a biography or of a historical narrative. A single person's life, or the history of a single period of time, will contain lots of unconnected events; so the plot in such epics will not consist of a series of events expressed to each other in accordance with necessity or probability. The *Odyssey* begins in the middle of the plot, and that prior events are described through flashbacks or storytelling. In the first episodes, we trace Telemachus's efforts to assert control of the household, and then, at Athena's advice, to search for news of his long-lost father. Then the scene shifts: Odysseus has been a captive of the beautiful nymph Calypso, with whom he has spent seven of his ten lost years.

### SPEAK. MEMORY-

Of the cunning hero,  
The wanderer, blown off course time and again after  
he plundered Troy's sacred heights. Speak  
Of all the cities he saw. The minds he grasped,  
The suffering deep in his heart at sea  
As he struggled to survive and bring his men home  
But could not save them, hard as he tried—  
The fools—destroyed by their own recklessness  
When they ate the oxen of Hyperion the Sun,  
And that god snuffed out their day of return (15).

He is later released by the intercession of his patroness Athena and he leaves, but his raft is destroyed by his divine enemy Poseidon, who is angry because Odysseus blinded his son, Polyphemus. When Odysseus washes up on Scherie, home to the Phaeacians, he is assisted by the young Nausicaa and is treated hospitably. In return, he satisfies the Phaeacians's curiosity, telling them, and the reader, of all his adventures since departing from Troy. This renowned, extended "flashback" leads Odysseus back to where he stands, his tale told (16). The shipbuilding Phaeacians finally loan him a ship to return to Ithaca, where he is helped by the swineherd Eumaeus, meets Telemachus, regains his household, kills the suitors, and is reunited with his faithful wife, Penelope. Nearly all modern editions and translations of *The Odyssey* are divided into 24 books.

Father Comes Home from the Wars is deep in references to Greek drama and literature. The play's structure reflects Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*—three short connected plays. (Part 1, *A Measure of a Man*; Part 2, *The Battle in the Wilderness*; and Part 3, *The Union of My Confederate Parts*) that portray moments in a larger, not fully dramatised epic. Like the Greek dramatists, Parks uses a chorus to provide exposition or to comment on the action, though in her play the members of the chorus are also slaves ("The Chorus of Less than Desirable Slaves"). And Homer, too, is very present in the play, in the hero—called Hero in the first two plays and Ulysses in the last—who goes to war and then returns home, in the faithful woman (Penny) who waits for him a character named Homer, though, ironically, he is neither blind nor a storyteller. The last part of the play is in many ways a retelling of Ulysses's return home in *The Odyssey*, though Parks plays with the story a bit. In her version, Ulysses's dalliance with Calypso has resulted in a child and in an impediment to his reunion with Penny. Also, Ulysses's faithful dog, Argos, has a larger role in Parks's play (in *The Odyssey*, he merely recognises his old master and then dies). This makes Parks greatly use and masters a fable allegory. In *The Odyssey*, when King Odysseus finally returned from war after been entrapped for ten years, suitors tried in vain to marry his wife Penelope but this was not the case with Penny in

Father Comes Home from the Wars as Hero returns from war so much as a changed person alongside a beautiful bride. This breaks Penny's heart and she leaves with Homer, Hero's old friend.

### Transformation

*Merriam Webster's Dictionary*, defines transformation as an act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed. One of Parks's most interesting and most important experiments is her adjustment of *The Odyssey* of Homer to an American situation. This adjustment is Parks's attempt to construct the Ithaca idea and define its variable realisations particularly in America. Parks converts Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* to suit the context of her American society. Homer's poetic form was classical history of poetry and it was a form which could be mimicked to suit Parks's search for aesthetic poetic form and the reinterpretation of myth, psychology and culture in relation to social criticism. Parks therefore transforms Homer's classical poem in to a play, reflecting the American society.

### CONCLUSION

As far as themes and style are concerned, Homer and Parks can be considered as social critics as they satirise the evil plaguing their societies, one way or the other, through the theme of war, slavery and other societal ills respectively. Concerning style, they use devices and techniques like symbolism, satire, humour, tragedy, chorus, mask, direct speech and stage directions, but Homer make use of detailed writing as he expands his epic poem with a lot of analysis. This explains why *The Odyssey* has 24 books but *Father Comes Home from the Wars* rather has the three patterns of Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*. They satirise man's greedy nature and the wickedness of man to another. After performing a careful analysis of this intertextual study, we discovered that Parks modified the myth in *The Odyssey* and provides a key to the meaning of the action in *Father Comes Home from the Wars*. The plot of *Father Comes Home from the Wars* is remarkably faithful to *The Odyssey* as Parks adapts to Homer's style. While Parks writes about the Civil War and the struggles of slavery, she uses that period to question the value of freedom in a contemporary America where black people are routinely killed without consequence. Unlike any other Civil War narrative you are likely to encounter, Parks takes the exclamation point from behind the word "freedom" and replaces it with a question mark. This play is challenging, beautiful, and, most of all, important. It appears at first glance like Parks is drawing a parallel between the Trojan War and the American Civil War, but really the comparison she is making is not between the two wars—which were started differently and ended differently—but between the effect of both wars on the survivors.

The characters in both Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* and Homer's *The Odyssey* suffer a kind of crisis, as the characters in *Father Comes Home from the Wars*. Likewise, reverberations from both the Trojan War and the Civil War continued to shake history long after the fighting ended. By bringing in allusions to works about the Trojan War, Parks also shakes up the audience, forcing us to look with new eyes at a war and a world we think we knew already. She does not just want to say slavery is bad or that the Civil War was hell, she wants to show us their full effects—the way they distorted and damaged lives, and the ways the patterns of slavery live on in our own still-wounded culture and in our unequal justice system, which seems designed to incarcerate and disenfranchise more African-Americans than whites—a point made by costuming the slaves in orange prison jumpsuits. Parks also bring in aspects of American Realism as she idiosyncrasies the American culture of slavery and slave trade and the continuous torture of African-Americans, (slaves) and the non-fulfillment of liberation promises given by their masters, (whites). This is seen in Hero's relationship with the Boss Master (whites). This paper also came to the compromise that although Parks rewrites Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, she avoids plagiarism by transforming it in to the American scenario, through American realism. She focuses her realistic work more precisely on Realism as she presents the condition of African-Americans in her American odyssey. Thus, we aver that, *Father Comes Home from the Wars* is the African-American *Odyssey* towards freedom. After carefully carrying out this investigation, we validate our hypothesis that intertextuality can easily cut across genres and contrastive studies must not be limited to a particular genre such as (prose to prose, poetry to poetry or drama to drama), but can cut across like Parks dramatic allusion to Homer's poem. We therefore debunk this stereotypical approach in comparative literature.

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