

The theme of temptation can be traced among many different genres of ancient Greek and Roman literature. Works that explore this theme include Homer's *The Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plato's *Ion*.

In Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, Book X contains the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The passage is: "They called Eurydice, and there among The recent dead she came, still hurt and limping At their command. They gave him back his wife With this proviso: that as he led her up From where Avernus sank into a valley, He must not turn his head to look behind him. They climbed a hill through clouds, pitch-dark and gloomy, And as they neared the surface of the Earth, The poet, fearful that she'd lost her way, Glanced backward with a look that spoke his love--Then saw her gliding into deeper darkness, As he reached out to hold her, she was gone; He had embraced a world of emptiness. This was her second death..." Here, we see a recurring theme of disobeying the Gods, often manifesting itself in giving into temptation, and its dire and fatal consequences. Rather than trust the orders ceremoniously given him, Orpheus gives in to human-like impulsiveness and passion and thus loses his wife for the second, completely permanent time. The temptation to always feel a need to confirm through sight what one is taught to faithfully and unconditionally believe, always leads to dire consequences in Greek and Roman literature, Eurydice's second death one of many examples.

Another story exemplifying the disastrous effects of giving into temptation in *Metamorphoses* is the story of Cinyras and Myrrha. The passage is taken from the end of the story: "Cinyras lit a lamp to see his treasure: One look at her and he went wild with horror And raised a sword that shone beside his bed; But Myrrha, lithe in nakedness and swift, Slipped free and coursed her way through night beyond him... Leaving her native

country far in darkness. After nine moons of wandering foreign sands, Heavy with child and spent, she scarcely knew Which way to take. Her life was weariness, Her fear was death. She prayed, ‘O gods in Heaven!—If any god would care to hear me now—I’ve earned my fate, but if I go no living, My life’s a curse on all who look at me. Or if I die, even the dead will damn me. Nor place on Earth or in Death’s Kingdom home; Make me a thing that neither lives nor dies.’” This passage takes place after her father, Cinyras, discovers he has been sleeping with his daughter for many nights. Myrrha manages to slip away from his fatal sword, but she is left a pregnant wanderer with no home. She is also torn apart with the guilt and shame she feels for herself and before her father and the world at large. Though she could not repress her desire to sleep with her father, it was her doing to force these feelings into action and find a way to sleep with her father. This decision marked giving into temptation and caused her fate. Though she gave in to wrong feelings and acted on them, however knowingly vile and dangerous, the results were not pleasant for her. So it goes for basically any character in a likewise situation throughout Greek and Roman literature.

The final example of the fatal effects of giving into temptation occurs in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the story of Echo and Narcissus. The opening passage illustrates the foundation of Narcissus’ error: “The pretty girl [Liriope] gave birth to a sweet child, A son so charming even as a baby, That he inspired girls with thoughts of love—She called the boy Narcissus. When she asked Tiresias how long her child would live—To great old age? The prophet answered, “Only If never he comes to know himself.” Then for a long time after this prophecy Seemed vain, and yet what finally happened Proved it true: Narcissus’ death, the way he died, And his odd love. For when Narcissus reached His

sixteenth year he seemed to be a boy As much as man; both boys and girls looked to him To make love, and yet that slender figure of proud Narcissus had little feeling For either boys or girls.” When Echo, who cannot speak unless spoken to and can only echo whatever she hears, falls in love with him, Narcissus does the wrong thing and betrays her. He denies her touch because he gives in to a selfish and egotistical love for only himself. The indulgent selfishness in denying anyone else’s love and thus refusing to give his own away causes Narcissus to be cursed with the prayer Nemesis hears from a boy: “O may he love himself alone,... And yet fail in that great love.” Thus, Narcissus’ unnatural and selfish love for only himself causes him to liquefy in heat, wearing away and drained from hopelessly loving only himself.

In addition to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Plato’s *Ion* illustrates the bad effects of impulsive and self-indulgent giving in to temptation. This is exemplified in the character of Ion. Socrates explains his error in the last twelve lines of the book: “But, indeed, Ion, if you are correct in saying that by art and knowledge you are able to praise Homer, you do not deal fairly with me, and after all your professions of knowing many, glorious things about Homer, and promises that you would exhibit them, you are only a deceiver, and so far from exhibiting the art of which you are a master, will not, even after my repeated entreaties, explain to me the nature of it. You have literally as many forms as Proteus; and now you go all manner of ways, twisting and turning, and, like Proteus, become all manner of people at once, and at last slip away from me in the disguise of a general, in order that you may escape exhibiting your Homeric lore. And if you have art, then, as I was saying, in falsifying your promise that you would exhibit Homer, you are not dealing fairly with me. But if, as I believe, you have no art, but speak all these

beautiful words about Homer unconsciously under his inspiring influence, then I acquit you of dishonesty, and shall only say that you are inspired. Which do you prefer to be thought, dishonest or inspired?" Here, Socrates draws a fine distinction between inspiration and art. True art comes from knowledge according to Socrates, of which Ion has none truly. This is analogous to characters lacking true knowledge of how they should behave and feel and simply acting on inspiration, whim and impulse. Actions achieved through well thought out and morally sound knowledge of one's place in life yield good results, often in obedience with God's wishes. However, when this knowledge is abandoned in favor of giving into temptation, impulse and in Ion's case, false artistry and merely inspiration, catastrophes occur or, at the very least, insults to the depth of art.

In Homer's *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' integrity is frequently tested by extreme temptations. A prime example is in Book XII. It occurs directly after Odysseus and his men return from Hades in which Odysseus encounters some of his old comrades, his mother and a few gods and goddesses. Him and his men flee Hades to the island of Aiaia. There lived the goddess Circe, whose house they visit. Upon their visit, Circe scolds Odysseus for his gall in visiting Hades. She then warns Odysseus about his next journey in which he will firstly encounter the goddesses Sirens. The passage reads, from the voice of Circe: "First you will come to the Sirens, who bewitch every one who comes near them. If any man draws near in his innocence and listens to their voice, he never sees home again, never again will wife and little children run to greet him with joy; but the Sirens bewitch him with their melodious song. There in a meadow they sit, and all round is a great heap of bones, moldering bodies and withering skins. Go on past that place, and do not let the men hear; you must knead a good lump of wax and plug their ears with

pellets. If you wish to hear them yourself, make the men tie up your hands and feet and fasten your body tight to the mast, and then you can enjoy the song as much as you like. Tell them that if you shout out and command them to let you loose, they must tie you tighter with a few more ropes.”

This passage brought up the theme of tempting, dangerous, deceptive and destructive goddesses that occur throughout the story. Important is the distinction between mortal women and goddesses, as mortal women (e.g. Penelope, Odysseus’ mother and Odysseus’ maid servants) behave generally without vengeance and wholly differently than goddesses. Indeed, mortal women are portrayed as vain, selfish and disloyal at times, but not dangerous in the powerful, aggressive, clever and controlled way of the goddesses. Examples of these types of mortal women include Agamemnon’s wife who, with her new husband Aegisthus, murdered Agamemnon upon his return home from the Trojan War, Eriphyle, who took a necklace from Polynices as a bribe to betray her husband Amphiarus by sending him off to war despite Amphiarus’ knowledge that he would not be spared in the fight and lastly Epicaste, who married her own son, the murderer of his own father and Epicastes’ husband.

Each and every time Odysseus is faced with a new obstacle in returning to Ithaca by a goddess, she or they present a temptation almost impossible to resist. Calypso allowed Odysseus to live for almost a decade with no hindrances whatsoever, plenty to eat, plenty of rest and infinite love and care for him (albeit unrequited). Circe, who turned Odysseus’ men to swine, enticed the crew through a delicious meal as well as a chance to lie with her. Lastly, the Sirens offer an irresistible melodious song, and most importantly, knowledge. Each time a man gives in to the temptations of these goddesses they are

forever trapped. Odysseus, through his intelligence and Calypso's sincere feeling for him, was wondrously allowed to build his own boat and leave her, but this is a purposefully rare exception.

The offering of knowledge by the Sirens would give Odysseus all the comforting information on his son's strength and whereabouts and vitality as well as his wife's piousness and loyalty. However, this knowledge, and knowledge in general, as Homer may be trying to point out, can inevitably pacify the seeker to a point of having them cease to take action and to lack the drive and restlessness that accompanies a thirst for the truth, sometimes the true force behind success. Thus, all the examples of female goddesses tempting Odysseus and his men through too-easy pleasures is meant to remind the reader or listener that one can know and enjoy pleasures too much to a point where one's drive and energy can be sedated and thus ruin any true success, in Odysseus' case, a return home and vengeance upon all of Penelope's disrespectful suitors. They present a recurring warning to Odysseus of what he must not do, and each time Odysseus triumphs through his endless self-control, discipline and patience, a foreshadowing of his true, final triumph in reuniting his family and killing off Penelope's suitors appear.

Thus, both Greek and Roman ancient literature explore the theme of temptation and how it can lead mortals to their ruin if yielded to.