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## 'Carry the torch for someone' - from The Odyssey?

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## COMMENTS ON ETYMOLOGY

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‘CARRY THE TORCH FOR SOMEONE’ --- FROM *THE ODYSSEY*?

Gerald Cohen

The origin of ‘To carry the/a torch for someone’ (have a strong lingering romantic affection for s.o.) has apparently not yet been explained. The fire of the torch is hot, of course, but why does the expression say that the torch is being carried? One carries a torch in one's hand, not in one's heart.

So, in what context does one find the combination of love and the literal carrying of a torch? Here is a possible answer, which deals with deep albeit not romantic love. In *The Odyssey* (Book I, lines 433-434), we see the following lines about the old woman servant Eurycleia, who literally carries a torch as she accompanies Odysseus' son Telemachos to his room:

‘This was the woman who carried the torch for Telemachos; she loved him more than any other of the household, and she had been his nurse when he was a little tot.’ --- (translation from Rouse 1953)

*The Odyssey* has been one of the most read books of world literature, and countless students over the centuries must have read about Eurycleia. Perhaps some of them combined the notions of ‘loved more than any other’ and the immediately preceding ‘carried the torch for Telemachos,’ resulting in ‘carry the torch’ applying to love. And since most young people are more preoccupied with romantic than parental-type love, the love reference in ‘carry the torch’ was applied to romantic love.

Here is the passage in which ‘carried the torch’ appears:

‘And Telemachos went up to bed in his room, which was built high up over the wide courtyard... To light him on the way a faithful old servant carried a blazing torch. She was Eurycleia... Laertes [father of Odysseus] had bought her long ago at his own cost, when she was in her first youth... He treated her as well as he did his own faithful wife; but he did not lie with her, for he wanted to avoid any quarrel with his wife.

‘This was the woman who carried the torch for Telemachos; she loved him more than any other of the household, and she had been his nurse when he was a little tot.’

Incidentally, OED online presents only *carry a torch* (not 'the' torch), but I have heard only the version with 'the': 'carry the torch for someone.'

## REFERENCES

Homer: *The Odyssey*, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, NY: Mentor Books, 1953 (fifth printing)

Oxford English Dictionary, online edition: TORCH, 1.b. ...*to carry* (etc.) *a torch for* (someone), to feel (esp. unrequited) love for, to feel lingering affection for.

1927 *Vanity Fair* (N.Y.) Nov. 132/3 When a fellow 'carries the torch' it doesn't imply that he is 'lit up' or drunk, but girl-less. His steady has quit him for another or he is lonesome for her.

1953 L. Z. HOBSON *Celebrity* vi. 78 Jim's still carrying a torch for Roosevelt.

1959 *Manch. Guardian* 16 June 5/2 She was carrying a torch for someone.

1977 H. FAST *Immigrants* v. 305 Maybe you got a torch for her, maybe not. But we both got her interest at heart.