

The Odyssey as a Hero Journey

“All of us have similar experiences. We share in the life journey of growth, development, and transformation. We live the same stories...the trappings might be different, the twists and turns that create suspense might be different from culture to culture, the particular characters may take different forms, but underneath it all, it's the same story, drawn from the same experiences”(Linda Seger, *Creating Myth*, 1).

All people face trials and tribulations throughout their life. Thus, what defines one from one's fellow human beings is not the trials themselves, but how one overcomes the challenges along the journey, as well as the psychological and physical lessons one learns from the actions engaged. Heroes, as depicted in literature, often face the same trials the common man must face, and learn the same lessons, but their actions, reactions, and events are magnified to mythic proportions. Thus, the common man and the mythic hero both follow what Joseph Campbell calls “The Hero's Journey,” which is used as a tool to describe the framework for many of the most famous myths of all time. While the story of the Journey first manifested itself in the ancient myths and legends, it is still relevant to contemporary society, the basis for almost all of the books and plays we read. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Hobbit*, an epic fantasy adventure in which Bilbo Baggins, the connection for the reader to the fantastical world the book takes place in, is called to action and set in motion on his Hero Journey by Gandalf, a wizard. Another example of a famous myth following this archetypal framework is *The Odyssey*. Homer's epic story, *The Odyssey*, of the hero Odysseus and his son Telemakhos follows closely the cycle of Joseph Campbell's Hero Journey, as summarized by Linda Seger, both as a physical and psychological undertaking.

The hero journey begins with a catalyst entering the hero's life, that calls him to adventure. The hero must be summoned on his journey by some force, either external (the will of another person) or internal, (the need for self-growth). The call is followed by the hero's refusal to leave a safe place, such as his home. He must be convinced that the undertaking is worthwhile, and must then, and only then, after he has agreed to take the journey, embark on it.

Odysseus' journey begins twenty years prior to the start of *The Odyssey*. At home, he is called upon to join the Atrides in a war to conquer Troy and return Helen to her rightful husband, Menelaus. For one month Odysseus refuses to leave his safe home in peaceful and bountiful Ithaca. The reader is not told of the rationale behind his final decision to join the war; however, one must assume that he believes he will be successful, returning home with many spoils of war, or that he will receive honor for participating. His decision to leave Ithaca cannot be simply based on a whim: he is a young king with many responsibilities, and while he rules his land with great strength, he is inexperienced. Thus, the reasons for initiating his journey most probably include the experience and maturity he will gain fighting the Trojans.

One can ascertain that the actual catalyst that enters into Odysseus' life is the Trojan War itself. The war represents a first step for Odysseus; after all, while it is his trickery that eventually wins the war for the Achaeans (it was his idea to build the large wooden horse in which the Achaean army hid and from which they successfully defeated Troy, we are introduced to Odysseus as "the great tactician" (Book VII, 232-301).

Cunning is a trait he already possesses: it cannot be the object of his journey; it merely starts him off. Yet he must initially survive the battle, and his survival proves his capacity to undertake the journey, moving him to the next stage of the Hero Journey.

The Second stage of the Hero Journey is the most visible. It consists of the trials that must be undertaken and successfully completed in order to gain the prize that is the goal of the journey. “The hero moves into a special world where he will be transformed from the ordinary into the extraordinary...and must meet a series of obstacles to overcome the enemy and/or reach his goals”(Linda Seger, *Creating the Myth*, lines 15-20). One can easily observe, even from a light reading of the text, the physical nature of the trials Odysseus must endure. Yet there are also, upon closer inspection, psychological aspects to each trial that must be mastered before he can claim success.

Odysseus’ first major trial, his encounter with Polyphemus, the Cyclops, represents one of Odysseus’ most difficult trials. He must escape Polyphemus’ cave, but he cannot move the great rock that seals the entrance. He cannot kill Polyphemus in his sleep, since Cyclops is the only one who can remove the barrier. He cannot fight Polyphemus one on one; the Cyclops’ strength is far too great, even for Odysseus. Thus he is forced to use only guile and deceit to escape his death. Previously Odysseus used his cunning as a complement to his battle prowess; ultimately, however, he relied on his impressive physical strength. Now he overcomes his dependence on his might and relies solely on his ability to think himself out of a difficult situation. He learns to use his mind instead of his body to solve his problems. The wily Odysseus also learns a second lesson

at the Island of the Cyclops: he must fight his own hubris and learn humility. While leaving the island, after safely escaping Polyphemus's cave, Odysseus taunts the blinded beast, bragging about his ingenuity. The Cyclops replies by "ripping off the peak of a towering crag, heaving it /so hard the boulder lands just in front of Odysseus' dark prow/ and a huge swell rears up as the rock goes plunging under / a tidal wave from the open sea"(Book 9, 145-162). Odysseus's taunts almost cause his own ship to be grounded on the Cyclop's island where he and his men would surely be killed. This lesson is a difficult one for Odysseus to learn; he suffers Polyphemus's angry response twice before he understands the need for humility.

Perhaps the most famous of his trials, the encounter with the Sirens, is one Odysseus cannot survive without help from his shipmates. Physically restrained, he sails by the sirens who entice him with their songs. He cannot resist them of his own free will. Only with the help of his men can he pass by the Sirens without being drawn in. This incident represents Odysseus' drive to follow every path of conquest laid before him. He realizes that he must keep his final goal always in his mind, and cannot stray from his intended path if he wishes to survive it. He understands further that this singular drive comes not just from his will alone, but also from all who join him.

Throughout his journey, Odysseus does not endure every trial himself. However, the final Cattle of the Sun trial is one that only he may survive. This trial represents the "forbidden fruit" that one must resist. Stranded, Odysseus warns: "Friends, we've food and drink aplenty aboard the ship-- / keep your hands off all these herd or we will pay the

price! / The cattle, the sleek flocks, belong to an awesome master, Helios” (Book 12, 213). racked with hunger for more substantial food than sea-fare, his men decide they would “rather die at sea, with one deep gulp of death, / than die by inches on this desolate island” (Book 12, 214-215), and slaughter the livestock. Their infraction ensures their certain death, from which Odysseus barely escapes, though not without learning to resist temptation.

The third and final stage of the Hero Journey, the return of the hero, is the most important as well as the most difficult, because it integrates three indispensable steps: the hero hitting rock bottom, the hero seizing the archetypal sword and taking temporary possession of a victory or treasure, and the hero’s transformation at the end, reaching realizations about himself and being resurrected into a new type of life. Initially, the hero was immature. In order to complete his journey successfully, he must have grown into his expected position, and be willing to use his hard-won knowledge and maturity to better himself and those around him.

Ironically enough, just as Odysseus is beginning this final stage, Calypso captures him and holds him captive on an island for seven years. It is clear that he is ambivalent about returning: while by day he is distraught by his imprisonment, at night he sleeps with his captor. Given the greatness of the man, his restraint can hardly be absolute. One must believe that if he wants to escape, he has the power and cunning to do so. Yet he refuses his return by remaining a willing captive on the island, just as he refused to leave Ithaca at the beginning of his journey. Athena, seeing this great man stalled by so small a foe after all of his trials and tribulations, pleads with her father Zeus to finally be allowed to free him without incurring Poseidon’s wrath. When he finally agrees to allow her to

help Odysseus, she acts as the catalyst to send him on the “road back home,” (Linda Seger), and also visits Odysseus’s son, Telemakhos, acting as the catalyst that calls him to set out on his own Hero Journey and find his father. Throughout the last section of *The Odyssey*, Telemakhos and Odysseus’s journeys parallel one another. As Odysseus builds his boat to leave Calypso’s island, Telemakhos and Athena are gathering men to search for his father on the seas. As Odysseus is shipwrecked by Poseidon and survives, shipwrecked on Scheria, the evil suitors set out to ambush and kill Telemakhos, and of course fail in doing so. Finally, as Odysseus sails home with the aid of Nausikaa and Athena, Telemakhos reaches Pylos and sails back home, after talking to some of his closest friends bearing the knowledge that his father is still alive. The two meet at Eumaios’ (Odysseus’s faithful servant) hut, and embrace, joyously reclaiming their father-son bond, the first sign of the road back home, a small part of the world put back in order, an old relationship renewed.

Furthering the path home, and ensuring that Odysseus’s reintegration into society is based upon his own personal growth, and not merely his prior social position, he appears first transformed by Athena into a haggard beggar, such that no one will recognize him. She “shriveled the supple skin on his lithe limbs, / stripped the russet curls from his head and decked him out / in rags he’d hate to see some other mortal wear; / she dimmed the fire in his eyes, so shining once-- / until he seemed appalling to all those suitors, / even his wife and son he left behind at home” (Book 13, 243) The hero of *The Odyssey* has now indeed hit rock bottom. He must prove himself, to his wife, his son, and his loyal servants, by working through this handicap. Only then can he prove himself worthy enough to be accepted back into their lives. Odysseus proves himself the master

of his world by destroying the evil suitors, who far outnumber his few men. His crafty plan to strip the suitors of their weapons (which though a trait he had before his journey he learned only to use when necessary), his ability to lead four men to victory against overwhelming odds, and his self control and restraint not to strike prematurely, are all the culmination of his lessons learned from his trials. Odysseus brings to fruition all the knowledge and maturity he has acquired through his Hero Journey. It is this successful use of his acquired abilities that allows him to complete his journey and reintegrate into society as a better husband, father, son, and king for himself and his people.

The Odyssey very closely follows the Hero Journey presented by Joseph Campbell and summarized by Linda Seger. Each part of the cycle is presented and addressed in turn: Odysseus is called to battle and leaves behind his home on Ithaca; he survives both physical and psychological trials, from which he learns to be a better person; he returns to his home, capable of using his newfound knowledge to destroy evil and serve as a mature husband, father, son, king; he successfully completes his journey, and as “the hero of...myth achieves a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph. He brings back from his adventure the means for regeneration of his society as a whole” (Campbell, 37-38). He achieves his goals and is greater for it. By using the framework of the Hero Journey, we can see Odysseus’s trials not merely as physical difficulties, but also as metaphors for his psychological limitations that he must overcome and conquer. By surviving these trials Odysseus not only proves his physical prowess, but learns the psychological lessons of survival. Using these lessons he can climb above the rest, a more mature and capable man, able to use all of his abilities together to lift himself and those around him closer to greatness. Thus is Odysseus truly a hero, as are all those who

would strive for greatness in themselves and peace and justice for their homeland and family. "The cosmogonic cycle is now to be carried forward not by the gods, who have become invisible, but by the heroes, more or less human in character, through whom the world destiny is realized. The archetypal heroes become less and less fabulous, until at last, in the final stages of the various local traditions, legend opens into the common daylight of recorded time"(Joseph Campbell).