

Dana Spiegel
danas@mit.edu
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The Odyssey as a Psychological Hero Journey

Heroes, as depicted in literature, often undertake the most difficult tasks and place themselves in mortal danger in order to bring back, for themselves and their societies, both knowledge and treasure. Their stories follow what Joseph Campbell calls the “Hero Journey.” *The Odyssey*, as the epic story of the hero Odysseus, follows closely the complete cycle of Joseph Campbell’s Hero Journey, both as a physical and as a psychological undertaking. The Hero Journey, used as a framework for both Odysseus’ physical and mental journeys, serves to bind the two together. Each of Odysseus’s physical difficulties can be viewed as a metaphor for a psychological hardship that he must overcome, and by overcoming these hardships, Odysseus matures—achieving a more complete understanding of himself and his place in the world. At the conclusion of his journey, Odysseus is a better person, having conquered his own psychological restraints, and he returns home to use his new-found self-understanding to be a better king, husband, father, and son.

Campbell’s Hero Journey consists of three stages: separation or departure; the trials and victories of initiation; and the return and reintegration with society.

Each stage must be successfully completed in turn before the next is undertaken.

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” (Campbell 30) Successful completion of the Hero Journey brings the hero home, with knowledge gathered through daunting trials. He is then able to use that knowledge to achieve both personal and social greatness.

Separation or Departure

The Hero Journey begins with the *call to adventure*—the hero must be summoned on his journey by some force, either external (the bidding 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 cross an initial threshold to embark upon his journey.

Odysseus’ journey begins twenty years prior to the start of *The Odyssey*. At home, he is called upon by Agamemnon 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 on Ithaca. We are not told of the rationale behind his final decision to join the war; however, we must assume that he believes he will be successful, returning home with many spoils of war. His decision to leave Ithaca

cannot be merely an external one: he is a young king, and while he rules his land with great strength, he is inexperienced (he does not wish to go off to battle (Book 24, ll. 126-128)). In part, his reasons for initiating his journey must include the experience and maturity he will gain fighting the Trojans.

We can take the initial threshold Odysseus must cross to be 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 Achean army hid and from which they successfully sacked Troy (Book 4, ll. 304-306)), we are introduced to Odysseus as “the man of twists and turns” (Book 1, l. 1). 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 (though he may already be capable of the journey, this capacity must be shown to us in some way, hence the war).

The Trials and Victories of Initiation

The second stage in the Hero Journey is the most visible—the *trials* that must be undertaken and successfully completed in order to gain the prize that is the goal of the journey. “Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials.” (Campbell 97) One can certainly observe, even from a

cursory 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 trial—the encounter with the Cicones—strikes at a seemingly basic warrior instinct: greed. Upon sacking the town of Cicone, Odysseus and his men loot the village, sharing the spoils of war (women, money, and livestock) equally among themselves. They then make a grievous error: their greed compels them to remain in the town, collecting every last bit they can, instead of taking a fair share of their spoils and leaving. This time is well used by the Cicones; they regroup, gather reinforcements, and attack Odysseus' unprepared warriors. Defeated and driven from shore, Odysseus learns an important lesson: do not be greedy in victory.

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 the 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 trickery to escape his death. Previously, Odysseus used his cunning as a complement to his great battle prowess; ultimately, however, he relied on his impressive physical strength. Now, he overcomes his dependence on

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.

He 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, ll. 538-541). Odysseus's taunts almost cause his own ship to be grounded on the Cyclops'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.

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 mind, and cannot stray from his intended path. He understands further that this singular drive comes not just from his will alone, but also from all who join him.

Odysseus does not endure every trial himself. Odysseus's men experience the Cattle of the Sun trial, which 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 heard or we will pay the price! / The cattle, the sleek flocks, belong to an awesome master, Helios" (Book 12, ll. 345-348). Racked with hunger for more substantial food, 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, ll. 377-378), and slaughter the livestock. Their infraction ensures their certain death, from which Odysseus barely escapes, though not without learning to resist temptation.

We may ask why Odysseus does not endure this trial directly, but rather experiences the repercussions of his men's transgressions. The reason is threefold: Odysseus loved his shipmates, and their deaths are a great loss to him. We see that he grieves greatly when even one man is lost (Book 9, ll. 331-332; Book 12, ll. 279-281). His grief at losing his entire crew is so great that he has no choice but to learn the lesson that his comrades' deaths teach. Furthermore, it would be illogical for Odysseus to endure directly the trial of the Cattle of the Sun, since he would be put to death along with his crew for disobeying Helios, and thus the story would be finished. Lastly, Homer is impressing on us the intention of these trials: they

are learning experiences, not just random tests. By his enduring this trial secondhand, we see Odysseus learn without being directly tested.

The Return and Reintegration with Society

The third and final stage of the Hero Journey, the *return of the hero*, is the most important as well as the most difficult. It “is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and [and]the hero himself may find [it] the most difficult requirement of all. For if he has won through [his journey] ... there is danger that the bliss of this experience may annihilate all recollection of, interest in, or hope for [his hard-won knowledge].” (Campbell 36-37) The return may be seen as the reverse analog of the departure stage. Because 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.

Initially, Odysseus is restrained from beginning this final stage: Calypso 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, by night he sleeps with his captor. Given the greatness of the man, his restraint can hardly be absolute. We 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. Athena is capable of releasing him, by reminding him of the world he is

ignoring; his renewed desire to return causes him to take advantage of the opportunity presented. Thus, of his own accord, he crosses the threshold to begin his return.

The return to Ithaca marks both the physical and the spiritual return home for Odysseus. The physical aspect is obvious: Odysseus has, after twenty years, set foot again upon his native land. The psychological return is marked in a number of other ways. He returns to his people a powerful and fair king (Book 22, ll. 393-399); he returns to his son a proud father (Book 23, ll. 133-138; he returns to his wife a truly loving husband (Book 23, ll. 259-261).

To ensure that his reintegration into society is based upon his own personal growth, and not merely his prior societal 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, ll. 456-460) Odysseus must prove himself to his wife Penelope, his son Telemachus, 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 (Book 16, ll. 276-284). His crafty plan to strip the suitors of their weapons (which though a trait he had before his journey, is one he learned, through his trials, to use only when necessary), his ability to lead four men to victory against overwhelming odds, and his self-control and restraint not to strike prematurely each are traits learned from the lessons of his trials. Utilizing these characteristics, Odysseus brings to fruition all the knowledge and maturity he acquired through his Hero Journey. It is this successful use of his acquired abilities that allows him to complete his journey and reintegrate into his society as a better husband, father, and king for himself and for his people.

The Journey is Complete

The Odyssey very closely follows the Hero Journey presented by Joseph Campbell. 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, and 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 the 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' 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.

References

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (second edition). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968.