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# The Quintessential Greek Hero: How Odysseus Fits the Campbellian Monomyth

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## THE QUINTESSENTIAL GREEK HERO: HOW ODYSSEUS FITS THE CAMPBELLIAN MONOMYTH

Julia M. Feron

*“Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned in the blood of his followers and the sacrifices of his friends.”*

-- Dwight D. Eisenhower

The 34th president of the United States of America, Dwight D. Eisenhower, is an ideal example of a brave American war hero and a fearless leader during a time of difficulty. Not only was he appointed to the head position of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization under President Harry S. Truman, but during his presidency led America to a Cold War victory (“Dwight D. Eisenhower”, 2017). Even amidst his popularity and accomplishments, Eisenhower was always described as a man of humility and principle. His overall successful presidency was fostered by his moral character, much like that of other heroes we see in fiction and pop culture.

Similarly, the story of Odysseus in Homer's Greek epic *The Odyssey* follows the seemingly fearless soldier and leader of Ithaca. Although Odysseus is a hero from thousands of years ago, there are many parallels between his story and Eisenhower's due to the fact that both of them experienced the same prototypical "hero's journey". Odysseus faces many challenges along his return home after the Trojan War and must put his heroic attributes to the test, all while undergoing a unique self-transformation in accordance with Joseph Campbell's (1949) monomyth. Odysseus specifically endures an "emotional transformation" involving his acquisition of humility, an essential component of the classic "hero" (Allison & Smith, 2015). Joseph Campbell's research on the traditional hero's journey closely aligns with Odysseus' story. *The Odyssey* can be broken down into Campbell's three stages of transformation in order to properly assess the characterization of Odysseus as an archetypal hero.

#### THE HERO'S MONOMYTH

When studying heroes and heroism science, the analysis of Joseph Campbell's monomyth (Campbell, 1949) is essential in understanding the traditional journey that many heroes undertake. Campbell claimed that the journey can be broken down to three parts: departure, initiation, and return. "Heroes embark on their journeys to achieve a goal that requires the acquisition of an important quality that the hero lacks. All heroes start out "incomplete" in some sense. They are missing some essential inner strength or quality that they must develop to succeed." (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017) When looking at the journey of Odysseus, it is necessary to use Campbell's monomyth to analyze his heroism and the transformation process that he undergoes. Although Odysseus sets out on his journey as a confident and capable soldier, he can only be properly characterized as a hero after proving himself along his journey and experiencing significant psychological development.

#### Departure

Campbell's (1949) departure phase is often referred to as the call to adventure. "The initial departure phase refers to the forces that set the hero's journey in motion. Heroes embark on their journeys to achieve a goal that requires the

acquisition of an important quality that the hero lacks” (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). Odysseus experiences his call to adventure when he makes the decision to leave the safety of his home and his family, including his wife Penelope and his infant son. He leaves his flourishing kingdom of Ithaca in order to fight in the Trojan War overseas. Odysseus’ role as a king, soldier, and classic Greek hero establishes the call he feels to fight in Troy. “Odysseus is behaving as a stereotypical Greek warrior hero and engaging in the type of behaviour that would have been expected of such a person” (White, 2009). His confidence in the Greek’s ability to win the war and reap the rewards provides the incentive he needs in order to leave Ithaca. Yet he is unaware of the trials and tribulations that he will face later on after the Trojan War on his subsequent journey home. Odysseus leaves Ithaca as a confident leader with his troops in tow without any knowledge of the arduous twenty-year journey awaiting him.

### Initiation

The second phase of Campbell’s (1949) hero journey is the initiation stage. Here the hero must face and overcome numerous adverse circumstances and in the process experience a self-transformation (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). Over the course of Odysseus’s journey back home to Ithaca he must channel his bravery, intelligence, and resourcefulness in order to conquer the hardships that he faces and deal with the losses incurred. A fundamental piece of Odysseus’ journey is the transformation he experiences as a result of the challenges that he must overcome. “The second type of transformation is an emotional transformation. These refer to transformations of the heart, and they include heroes who, through adversity, grow in courage, resilience, and empathy” (Allison & Goethals, 2013, 2017). Odysseus experiences an “emotional transformation” specifically in the development of humility and maturity through the consequences he endures and his dependency on his crew to make it home.

### The Lotus Eaters

One of Odysseus’s first challenges is his encounter with the Lotus Eaters. After nine days of dangerous sailing, Odysseus and his crew land on the shore of an unknown island. The people of the island, also known as the Lotus Eaters, are kind to the exhausted crew and offer them food and drink. Yet after some of Odysseus’s men ingest the Lotus flowers that were offered to them, they forget their desire to return home and lose the motivation to continue on their journey

(Reynolds, 2017). Odysseus is faced with a crew that is no longer willing to aid him in the trip back to Ithaca, and thus he must forcefully remove his men from the comfort of the island and its people and strap them to the ship.

The encounter with the Lotus Eaters exemplifies Odysseus's role as a strong leader, which is characteristic of a typical hero. "Then the part of us that is truly hero must take charge forcefully, reimpose the rightful priority, and enforce discipline on the unruly parts who have forgotten" (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009). He must take control of his men and act in their best interest in order to accomplish their collective goal of returning home. Not only does this challenge exemplify the heroic attributes that Odysseus already possesses, but it also is a catalyst to begin his self-transformation. He must take responsibility for the actions of his men and, in doing so, he realizes the importance of his crew and what his men mean to him. The incident with the Lotus Eaters demonstrates Odysseus's heroic attributes and results in his progression toward developing a more mature version of himself.

### Polyphemus the Cyclops

The Land of the Cyclopes brings Polyphemus whom Odysseus must outsmart in order to save both himself and his crew. Polyphemus, the cyclops of great physical prowess, traps Odysseus and his men in a cave after catching them attempting to steal the sheep that he holds there (Wyerson, 2002). Odysseus is unable to rely on physical strength to overcome this challenge and consequently he must depend on his intelligence and quick wit, which are other central characteristics of a hero. He knows that he cannot kill Polyphemus, not only because the cyclops is a larger opponent but also due to the fact that without the cyclops there would be no one strong enough to remove the rock that blocks the opening of the cave. Odysseus and his men would remain trapped and would perish in the cave. When asked for his name by Polyphemus, Odysseus responds by telling him that he is called "Nobody". Once the cyclops falls asleep, the men blind him which results in Polyphemus screaming for help. Thanks to Odysseus' cleverness, when the other cyclops ask what is wrong from outside the cave Polyphemus responds with "Nobody's killing me" (Wyerson, 2002).

The cyclops leave the cave and the next morning when the blinded Polyphemus removes the rock to allow his sheep to graze, Odysseus and his men escape

by hanging from the stomachs of the sheep. Odysseus successfully leads his men to safety and is able to continue on his journey back home (Reynolds, 2017). Through his use of heroic characteristics such as his quick wit and intelligence, Odysseus is able to get his crew back on track. One of the most important components to Odysseus' defeat of the cyclops would be his subsequent need to gloat after his victory. This leads to Polyphemus enlisting the help of his father, Poseidon, to curse Odysseus with ten years of bad weather and vicious seas. This curse greatly adds to his difficulties for his return home. Odysseus suffers the consequences of showing a lack of modesty, and with this trial and ensuing punishment he is humbled yet again.

### The Sirens

The last challenge of Odysseus's journey that will be discussed here involves his encounter with the Sirens. He is previously warned by a goddess, Circe, that the enchanting songs of the creatures of the sea will be used in an attempt to seduce the men. To be properly prepared to successfully navigate past the sirens and avoid their enticement, Odysseus has his men put beeswax in their ears to block the sound, and he also requests that they tie him up to the ship so that he cannot escape once he hears the siren's melody. While the ship is passing through the siren's waters, Odysseus hears their songs and begs his men to untie him. His crew refuses and keeps him bound to the ship so that they can pass the dangerous creatures and continue towards Ithaca (Reynolds, 2017).

The incident of Odysseus and the sirens is essential to his continued self-transformation because it emphasizes Odysseus' reliance on his crew. While there is no doubt that Odysseus is a capable hero, he would not be able to conquer the seemingly impossible challenges that he faces without the help of his loyal men. "He understands further that this singular drive comes not just from his will alone, but also from all who join him" (Spiegel, 1998). This need for assistance further humbles Odysseus through his acceptance of the fact that he cannot make the journey back to Ithaca on his own no matter how much strength and skill he possesses. He must place his faith in the loyalty of his men in order to conquer the hardships and survive the journey, thereby enabling him to fully develop the trait of humility that he needs to become a true hero.

## Return

“From Gilgamesh to Luke Skywalker, from Odysseus to Jane Eyre, heroes set out on a journey, transform into new and improved versions of themselves, and in the process encourage us all to follow in their footsteps” (Allison & Goethals, 2017, p. 1).

The final phase of Campbell’s monomyth is the hero’s return. Upon their return, the hero has been transformed and bestows some type of gift to the original world from which they came (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). To accomplish this feat, Odysseus enlists the help of the goddess Athena to disguise him as a beggar once he returns to Ithaca. This decision can be seen as symbolic of the humbling self-transformation Odysseus has experienced that is imperative to every hero once he has returned to his home. He left as a confident and authoritative king and returns in the form of a lowly peasant, representing the “emotional transformation” that he has undergone. Using his disguise to his advantage as well as the help of his now grown son, Telemachus, Odysseus enters his home and proceeds to kill the nefarious suitors who have encroached upon his kingdom and his loyal wife Penelope.

After they have all been slain and his role as husband and father have been reinstated, Odysseus finds his father Laertes to seek his forgiveness (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009). With his place in society restored and with Laertes’ blessing received, Odysseus has returned Ithaca and its people to the stability it once enjoyed. Odysseus has destroyed the evil plaguing his kingdom which was embodied in the form of Penelope’s relentless suitors, and he has once again become the respected king of Ithaca. “He must now introduce the new Odysseus to those he left behind... He is a different person than the one who departed on the journey of self-discovery so many long years before, and they have changed, too” (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009). By the end of his trip, Odysseus has become a better hero in the sense that his development over the course of his adventure now allows him to continue his life as an improved version of what he was beforehand, not only with regard to being the leader of Ithaca but also within his family. Using Joseph Campbell’s (1949) monomyth, one can begin to uncover the deeper meaning to the journey that Odysseus traversed. Both physically and

psychologically, Odysseus rises to the challenges that he faces and uses them to transform his identity to that of a humbled, admirable hero (Spiegel, 1998).

## JUNGIAN ARCHETYPES

Within heroism science the identification of archetypes imbedded within the hero's journey remains an integral part of research. Archetypes are universal themes and patterns of human experience that according to psychologist Carl Jung are said to be a part of our collective unconscious (Jung, 1969). The *Odyssey* contains numerous archetypes that can shed light on the heroism of Odysseus. Not only does the general archetype of a classic hero fit the description of Odysseus, but several other archetypes present themselves in Homer's piece as well.

### Reunion of Father and Son

The reunion of father and son is a prevalent example of an archetype within Odysseus' hero journey (Lowery, 1970). Odysseus left his infant son Telemachus when he went overseas to fight in the Trojan War. Upon Odysseus' return twenty years later, Telemachus is a young man and is immediately ready to stand by his father's side and aid him in taking back the kingdom of Ithaca and reinstate him as the patriarch of the family. Even when Odysseus is said to have been killed in the Trojan War, Telemachus remains skeptical and accepts the help of the goddess Athena to bring his father back home at whatever cost.

Femme Fatale

Odysseus' seven years of captivity on the island of the goddess Calypso represents a second archetype in the story of his heroism: *femme fatale*. Odysseus becomes captivated by Calypso's beauty and her care for him which distracts him from his true purpose, which is returning to Ithaca. "This alluring, fascinating *femme fatale* exists for all men, and we call her the *anima*... This archetype offers the quicksand of intoxication and complacency when it is approached without intercession..." (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009). Odysseus must overcome the enchantment of the alluring goddess and reassess his true objective: to reclaim his identity as the heroic soldier and king of Ithaca.

## Odysseus' Mentors

A heroic journey, especially when being referenced in regard to the Campbellian monomyth, is not complete without the presence of the “mentor” archetype. Odysseus receives help from the god Hermes, who helps Odysseus accept his “call to adventure”, an essential component of the departure phase of Campbell’s (1949) hero’s journey. Without Hermes’ push for Odysseus to accept the trip to Troy, he may have not accepted the journey and he would not have embarked on an adventure essential to the hero’s humble transformation. Not only is Hermes crucial in Odysseus’ departure phase, but he also comes to help Odysseus during his time on the Aenian island with the goddess Circe. Circe gives Odysseus’ men a potion to make them forget their goal of returning to Ithaca. Hermes appears again to assist Odysseus in getting his crew back on track by providing a potion that would reverse the effects of Circe’s mischief (Hartman & Zimmeroff, 2009). The help that Hermes gives Odysseus on his journey is indispensable to his transformative development along the trip.

The goddess Athena also lends immense assistance to Odysseus throughout his experience. She reaches out to his son Telemachus to support his efforts in locating Odysseus, who is assumed by most people in Ithaca to have been killed sometime during the war. Athena is also the goddess who disguises Odysseus as a beggar upon his return to Ithaca, thereby successfully helping him eliminate Penelope’s myriad suitors (Spiegel, 1998). Athena’s help is imperative in order for Odysseus to be able to reclaim his position as Penelope’s husband and the leader of Ithaca. Without the mentorship of both Hermes and Athena, the course of Odysseus journey, his hero development, and his success might never have transpired.

## Suffering

Suffering is an inescapable part of the hero’s journey. While suffering is undeniably unfortunate, it can paradoxically result in multiple long-term benefits. Six benefits have been identified as deriving from suffering, with humility being one of the central benefits. Humility is an integral part of Odysseus’ personal self- transformation. “Suffering doesn’t create anything tangible but creates space for learning and love” (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). Without the trials that Odysseus had to endure alongside his crew, he would not have undergone an

intense self-transformation that resulted in the acquisition of a deep sense of humility. While the multiple issues Odysseus faced were undoubtedly difficult, they became beneficial to his psychological advancement by allowing him to develop the modesty that is necessary of a hero.

### Social Influence Based Hero Taxonomy

It can be seen that throughout the thousands of years that *The Odyssey* has been heard, read, and analyzed that Odysseus is the consummate hero. There are multiple subtypes of heroism used to classify heroes, especially according to the social-influence-based hero taxonomy proposed by Allison and Goethals (2013). Odysseus is best classified as a traditional hero. “Traditional heroes follow the conventional Campbellian hero’s journey” (Allison & Goethals, 2017). The application of Joseph Campbell’s (1949) monomyth to the journey that Odysseus undertakes allows him to be seen as a traditional hero whose legacy has been cemented by the passage of time.

### ODYSSEUS’ ENDING: IS IT HEROIC?

At the conclusion of *The Odyssey* it is said that Odysseus slays numerous men due to their unrelenting attempts at winning over Penelope and assuming the throne of Ithaca in place of Odysseus. It is true that Odysseus kills many men, yet his role as a soldier, king, and the patriarch of his family deems it necessary that Penelope’s suitors are removed so that Odysseus may reclaim his throne and his family. The men are unyielding in their efforts to claim Penelope as their own especially due to the fact that the kingdom of Ithaca would then become theirs. Therefore, the only way for Odysseus to reassert himself into his rightful position of power and to earn his title of a hero is to engage in physical combat with the suitors. Odysseus’ actions at the end of Homer’s epic poem can therefore be seen as a necessary and admirable ending to his hero’s journey because it allows him to eradicate the “evil” threats to his home and his family and enables him to reintegrate himself into society as the humbled hero he has become.

Odysseus sets out overseas for Troy to fight in the Trojan War, and he embarks on a journey that aligns with Joseph Campbell’s (1949) monomyth and its three

distinct stages. He faces myriad challenges and trials of physical and mental strength, all of which are overcome with the help of his crew and his immortal mentors. Throughout his journey and as a result of the many difficulties he encounters along the way, Odysseus experiences a meaningful and significant self-transformation. This supports the assertion that he follows Campbell's monomyth and that he can be classified as a "traditional hero".

Over the course of his 20-year trip back to Ithaca, Odysseus is significantly humbled (Worthington & Allison, 2018). He suffers the consequences of his arrogance and overconfidence, and he also comes to realize and appreciate the indispensable assistance that he receives from his men and mentors. While during the departure phase of Odysseus' journey he can be seen as a somewhat self-righteous character, by the time of his return to the kingdom of Ithaca he has experienced enough challenges and endured enough suffering that his personality is forever altered. This humbling is essential for him to become a true hero. Odysseus is a striking example of a traditional hero whose transformation will no doubt entertain and inspire people for centuries to come.

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