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A Hero’s Journey

According to the *Heroic Imagination Project,* heroism can be defined as an action that is voluntarily done in the service of people or communities in need that involves the undertaking of some type of social or physical risk without the need for recompense. Though there are certain parallels that can be observed between the characters of Achilles and Odysseus in The Iliad and The Odyssey, each character stands out to be rightfully considered an ancient Greek “hero” for very different reasons. Not only this but the perception of “heroism” today is considered wildly different than how the ancient Greeks once perceived it, mainly in the sense that a hero must not only possess both courage and physical prowess but also some sort of moral supremacy in order to truly be classified as a hero today. Though Achilles shows himself to be an incredible warrior asset, he lacks the morality and compassion that would ultimately distinguish him from an ancient Greek hero to a hero of modern-day. Through the examination of Odysseus and the various decisions he makes whilst on his journey we are able to see a mortal man who battles against the will of the gods to return home out commitment to his Penelope and a longing for home.

Unlike Achilles, Odysseus has consistently proves himself to have compassion and concern for his men. After sailing to Ismaros where he and his men pillage the town and kill the remaining Trojan men to honor King Agamemnon, Odysseus divides the spoils “as fairly as [he] could among all hands” (p.299 l.45), and gives the order to sail out. His men ignore this order and, after being ambushed, flee to the sea for salvation where Odysseus then refuses to set out until someone had “called out three times for each mate who had fallen on the battlefield” (p. 300 l.67). Though Odysseus next sends three men to “to reconnoiter and sound out the locals” (p.300 l.91) on the land of the Lotus-Eaters, he is in search of help for his men and unknowing of the dangerous situation he had sent them to. Once Odysseus discovers the men have eaten the lotus and have forgotten the will to go home, he binds them and hauls them back to the ship for the fact that they are his comrades. Odysseus shows respect for his men by distributing the loot equally amongst them, and though he gives them no reason to doubt his evenhandedness, it is his own folly when they greedily open the “bag of winds” and are blown across the sea and back to Aeolia. Odysseus displays a great deal of compassion by honoring the deaths of the men lost in the ambush, and again by saving his scouts from life as a Lotus-Eater. Odysseus is a hero who truly cares for his men, and that is why they are willing to follow him into dangerous situations- regardless of the danger.

Much like how Achilles’ god-like fighting abilities primarily define him as a character, Odysseus is gifted with a cunning and guile that inspires others and enables him to escape perilous situations. When Odysseus and his men become trapped in the cave by Polyphemus the cyclops, Odysseus cleverly thinks of a plan to escape. He first offers Polyphemus wine as a way to dull his senses. Polyphemus gladly accepts and askes his name, to which Odysseus replies, “Noman” (p.308 l.364). Once Polyphemus falls asleep, Odysseus and four of his men sharpen a spear, harden it in fire, and drive it into the eye of the cyclops- effectively blinding him and sending him into a rage. Odysseus then concocts a plan to escape the cyclops under its own flock of sheep, a plan that which he and his men execute to perfection. They would have been found and eaten by the other cyclops if it wasn’t for Odysseus’ quick wit and deception with Polyphemus. Another example of Odysseus’ guile occurs when Odysseus finally returns home from Ithaca disguised as a beggar. While the suitors attempt (and fail) to string his bow, he waits patiently until the opportune moment to exact his revenge. His restraint and careful planning allowed him to attain a tactical position from which he could use his bow and kill the suitors who disrespected his family.

One major trait that distinguishes Odysseus as a hero over Achilles is his relentless determination and will to go on. Where Achilles has various gods who are looking out for him and constantly giving him condolence throughout his story, Odysseus is cast aside by most and “cursed by heaven” (p.316 l.86). Achilles, for instance, is gifted a shining set of armor from the gods while Odysseus is spared by Zeus simply out of pity, and where Achilles sits aside letting his comrades die, Odysseus acts. When Circe turns Odysseus’ men into pigs, Odysseus immediately straps on his sword and bow and goes to face her alone, undaunted by the danger ahead of him. With the help of Hermes he is able to resist her spell and ultimately befriend Circe. When asked over a meal with Circe what is bothering him, Odysseus replies, “How could any decent man bring himself to taste food and drink before seeing his comrades free? If you really want me to eat and drink, set my men free and let me see them” (p.326 l.408). This proves that Odysseus does not think his men to be worthless or beneath him, and exemplifies his overall determination to do his best to get them safely home to Ithaca. Even after Odysseus is separated from men and kept captive (but loved) on the island of the beautiful Calypso, he isn’t satisfied until he has returned home. Odysseus confesses, “I know very well that Penelope, for all her virtues, would pale beside you… still, I want to go back. My heart aches for the day I return to my home” (p.275 l.216). Though Odysseus finds himself in a favorable situation, he cannot find peace until he returns to his people. Achilles faces death only when he accepts it by entering back into the Trojan War after the death of Patroclus, yet Odysseus confronts death with every move he makes, needing no heavenly source of motivation to carry on. The gods bring various dangers to Odysseus on his journey commanding him to die, but even in the most hopeless of situations he perseveres.

Both Odysseus and Achilles were considered great heroes of their time, but in order to find the values of a true modern-day hero we must examine the virtues through which each character acts rather than the physical feats themselves. Though Odysseus finds himself in many difficult situations he never seems to lose the values and morals that he holds most dear. Every action Odysseus makes he makes with the thoughts of his men and family in mind, where Achilles’ motives are self-interest driven. Odysseus never gives up hope and is able to see a bigger picture while Achilles is very limited by his own selfish perception. It is Odysseus’ compassion that plagues him and his cunning and unyielding determination that carries him back home.