

**“The Hero’s Journey” in Application to Homer’s *The Odyssey*: How Odysseus’s Journey
Fulfills the Monomyth Theory.**

Ana Cisneros

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Professor William Fitzhenry

Story-telling and the ability to create a story is one of the defining qualities of the human species. Since the dawn of time, cultures everywhere have created myths, fables and legends. These stories have the ability to anchor us to a sense of history and meaning, uniting the many generations to come.

Joseph Campbell, an American professor, established the idea that all works on comparative mythology, regardless of their origin, follow the same universal functions. Campbell coined this literary phenomenon a “monomyth” also known as “The Hero’s Journey.” In his 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell states “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 30). In this essay, I will apply Campbell’s monomyth theory to Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Ultimately outlining how Odysseus’s journey fits Campbell’s separation, initiation, and return formula.

Every story has a beginning. Campbell has labelled the first stage in the hero’s journey as “The Separation” which is made up of five sub-stages: Call to Adventure, Refusal of Call, Supernatural Aid, Crossing of the First Threshold, and the Belly of the Whale. “The Separation” signifies a hero’s transition from comfortable to uncomfortable. A state in which the hero is called to embark into the unknown thus marking the beginning of their journey.

The first stage in The Separation is “The Call to Adventure.” Appropriately named, this stage describes a hero in a comfortable state who is called to journey off into the unknown. Odysseus’s true call to adventure was when he was forced to leave his wife and newborn child to fight in the battle of Troy. However, this call happened in *The Iliad*. Homer’s *The Odyssey*, begins ten years after the fall of Troy. Thus, in accordance with the chronology of *The Odyssey*,

Odysseus' call to adventure started when he left the island of Ogygia. Odysseus had been held captive by the beautiful nymph Calypso there for seven years. Odysseus is living idly and thus comfortably here on this island. It is Zeus' order that begins Odysseus's journey into the unknown. Zeus orders Hermes to: "...make it known to the softly-braided nymph / that we, whose will not subject error, / order Odysseus home; let him depart. / But let him have no company, gods, or men, / only a raft that he must lash together..." (*The Odyssey* 5.33-37).

Odysseus then embarks on the great sea to begin his journey home. The Call to Adventure does not have to be heroic or flashing. Campbell states, "The adventure may begin as a mere blunder..." (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 17). Odysseus' first impression is very unheroic. Sulking on a beach of Ogygia, yearning for home, we see him first in a state of solitude and despair. The opportunity to sail home symbolizes both the start of his journey home as well as the start of his spiritual transformation.

"The Refusal of the Call" is essentially a Hero's refusal to embark on a journey due to a sense of obligation, fear, insecurity, or inadequacy. Odysseus experiences "The Refusal of Call" when sailing away from the island of Calypso. As Odysseus is sailing home, Poseidon sends a storm to wreck his ship. The disheartened Odysseus then loses all ambition to continue his journey. He in fact, would rather be dead. "I am going down, that's sure. / How lucky those Danaans were who perished / on Troy's wide seaboard. Serving Atreidai! / Would God I, too, had died there - met my end..." (*The Odyssey* 5.315-318). The refusal of call symbolises humans' tendency to doubt one's own ability. The vulnerability and insecurity portrayed here by Odysseus allows readers to both sympathize and relate to him as a hero.

Once the hero has committed to their journey, either consciously or unconsciously, a guide or magical helper makes itself known. Campbell introduces this next step as "The

Encounter with a Supernatural Aid.” Struggling through Posiden’s storm “...Athena countered him [Odysseus]: / she checked the course of all the winds but one, / commanding them, ‘Be quite and go to sleep.’ / Then sent a long swell running under a norther / to bear the prince Odysseus, back from danger...” (*The Odyssey* 5.398-401). This is the first encounter of Odysseus’ Supernatural Aid in *The Odyssey* is one of many. Athena plays a major role throughout Odysseus’s journey: “..I am Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus, / I that am always with you [Odysseus] in times of trial...” (*The Odyssey* 13.355-356). Athena represents a delicate balance between dependence and independence. We must remember that Odysseus is only human, if he were to complete such an arduous journey alone he would be a God. Homer intended for Athena to provide comfort and support to Odysseus only when intervention was essential. This delicate balance of aid allows a hero’s accomplishments to appear more attainable.

The final stages of The Separation are “The Crossing of the Threshold” and “The Belly of the Whale.” Both stages represent the point where a hero crosses both physically and mentally to dangerous realms. In other words, these stages symbolize the separation from the hero's known world and self. The Kingdom of the Dead is where Odysseus completes this stage of the Hero’s Journey. A new fear was present in the spirit of Odysseus interacting with the dead as a mortal man. “From every side they came and sought the pit / with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear” (*The Odyssey* 11.44-45). This physical transition to the underworld creates a shift in his attitude. The fearless Odysseus is brought to tears when he is unable to embrace his mother. He also learns about the gloomy, frightening, and unpleasant reality of the underworld. Achilles reminds Odysseus that life in the underworld has no reward. This experience gives Odysseus the emotional push to make it home to his family.

A story is only as good as its climax. Described by Campbell as, “[The] ... favorite phase of the myth-adventure” the second stage of “The Hero’s Journey” is by far the most action-packed.” Coined “The Initiation,” the second stage of The Hero’s Journey is all about the road of trials and tribulations. Campbell has outlined five sub-stages within “The Initiation”: The Road of Trials, The Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, and The Ultimate Boon.

The beginning of a hero’s initiation is a phase called, “The Road of Trials.” It is here that a hero must undergo a series of trials and tribulations to begin their spiritual transformation. The series of trials presented in *The Odyssey* is perhaps what has allowed this story to stand the test of time. Surviving the sirens, passing Scylla and Charybdis, and escaping Calypso’s island are the few trials Odysseus experiences before returning home. “The Road of Trials” serves as a test for a mythic hero. For a hero to appear triumphant in the eyes of a reader, their reward cannot come easy. These trials and tribulations allow a mythic hero to rightfully earn their final reward, while also transforming their character.

The next two sub-stages of the Initial stage serve as a test to the heroes strength and fidelity. These two substages are called, “Meeting with the Goddess” and “The Woman as a Temptress.” In accordance with Campbell’s definition, The meeting with the Goddess is the “Final test of the hero to win the boon of love, which is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity” (118). In other words, this stage is where the hero gains items given to him that will help him in the future. Throughout Odysseus’ journey, he collected many divine lovers. In addition to providing Odysseus with important gifts, these lovers also served to test Odysseus’ loyalty to Penelope. This is where the next sub-stage ties in, “The Woman as a Temptress.” This stage displays a hero faced with temptations, often of a physical or pleasurable, that may lead

him to abandon or stray from his quest. The most obvious example of a woman as a temptress in *The Odyssey* is Circe. Stranded with his men on Circe's island, Odysseus becomes Circe's lover, and he and his men live with her in luxury for a year. However, a year of passionate love did not lure Odysseus away from his journey. Although his new life with Circe was desirable, he chose to continue his journey home, thus proving his loyalty and devotion to family and homecoming.

The final three stages of The Initiation take place when Odysseus returns home to Ithaca. His arrival in Ithaca symbolizes "The Ultimate Boon." It is during The Ultimate Boon that, simply put, the hero achieves the goal of the quest. "The Apotheosis" is the point in a hero's journey in which a greater understanding is achieved. Armed with this new knowledge and perception, the hero is resolved and ready for the more difficult part of the adventure. When Odysseus arrives home he understands that the more difficult part of his adventure, removing the Suitors, awaits him. This is shown especially when Odysseus is kicked in the hip and taunted by Melanthius. "The lord Odysseus walked along, debating / inwardly whether to whirl and beat / the life out of this fellow with his stick, / or toss him, brain him on the stony ground. / Then he controlled himself, and bore it quietly." (*The Odyssey* 17.266-271). Rather than fighting Melanthius, Odysseus has learned to stay composed and not act on impulse. His purpose is to rid his home of the Suitors. Fighting Melanthius on the basis of being upset is not only unnecessary but also a distraction from what is truly important. The suitors symbolize "The Atonement with the Father/Abyss" stage. In this stage, the hero must confront and be initiated by whatever holds the ultimate power in his life. The suitors currently obtain important things in Odysseus' life, his home. The end of The Initiation stage symbolises the hero's mental transformation. Everything leading up to this point has been preparing Odysseus to successfully return home a changed man.

It is human nature to long for a happy ending. We hope for nothing but success and happiness for the protagonist in a story. In the monomyth theory, the final stage of a hero's journey is indeed, happy. The third and final stage of the Hero's Journey is called, "The Return." Not unlike its predecessor, this stage is also made up of five sub-stages: Refusal of the Return, The Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, The Crossing of the Return Threshold, Master of the Two Worlds and finally the Freedom to Live.

Campbell claims that some heroes do not look favourably upon returning to their original homeland. According to his monomyth theory, "The Refusal of Return" phase marks the hero's hesitancy to complete their task. This stage, however, does not apply seamlessly in accordance with *The Odyssey*. However, Odysseus is hesitant on the eve of battle to reclaim his home. "... so he rolled left and right, / casting to see how he, alone, / against the false outrageous crowd of suitors / could press the fight." (*The Odyssey* 20.26-28).

"The Magic Flight" and "The Rescue From Without" are portrayed in the battle against the Suitors. According to Campbell, "The Magic Flight" occurs once the hero has obtained "The Ultimate Boon" and must escape with it. Odysseus has arrived home, now he must "obtain" his palace. This stage of the Hero's Journey usually involves supernatural aid and can come in many forms: some positive, some difficult for the hero. The fight against the suitors proves challenging for Odysseus. He is not able to successfully clear his home without the help of Athena and Telemachus. This is where "The Rescue From Without" stage is applied. In this stage, The hero is rescued from a final plight from an unexpected source.

"The Crossing of Return Threshold" is similar to the previous stage "The Ultimate Boon." Campbell says this stage is when "The returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 194). In other words, this

stage is a Hero's struggle to settle into the life they had before "The Call to Adventure."

Odysseus crossed the return threshold the moment he stepped off the ship and onto his homeland of Ithaca. This transitions into the final stage of the Hero's Journey: "Master of Two Worlds and Freedom to Live." When you are "The Master of Two Worlds" you are living without attachments. A hero who completes the Hero's Journey has learned patience, control, and has restored peace. Rather than being driven by impulse and pride, a master of two worlds has harnessed their emotion. After the massacre at Odysseus' palace, the parents of the suitors seek revenge on Odysseus. The battle between Odysseus and the Ithacans' represents Odysseus' first "world": anger, pride, and violence. Athena, disguised as Mentor, puts a stop to the fight. "Athena raised a shout / that stopped all fighters in their tracks" (*The Odyssey* 24.548-549). Odysseus stops in his tracks and harnesses control, he "...yielded to her [Athena], and his heart was glad." At this moment, Odysseus became a master of his second world: Peace in Ithaca. The Hero's journey is completed when Odysseus learns to put his pride aside and restore the peace within both himself and his homeland. Thus proving his mastery of two worlds!

The Hero's Journey serves as both a template to mythology and a map to inner peace. When applying Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory to *The Odyssey*, we can see that Odysseus' journey home perfectly matches Campbell's seventeen steps. The Hero's Journey is a relevant mapping of both myths and the human experience.

Work Cited

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