Dante and the Hero's Journey

The trope of the Hero's Journey has existed for millennia and will continue to function for millennia still. When thinking about the journey, images of Odysseus, Gilgamesh, and Aeneas are often brought to mind; and rightfully so. Each of these heroes immortalized what it means to be a hero. However, the Pilgrim from Dante's *Divine Comedy* does not conjure the same images to mind. If Odysseus is strong, brave, and cunning, then the Pilgrim is weak, cowardly and unimaginative. Despite that the hero of *La Commedia* is underwhelming, he too goes through the hero's journey across three works*: Inferno, Purgatorio,* and *Paradisio*. This paper will primarily focus on the Pilgrim's journey through hell.

When most heroes start their journey, they are usually somewhere familiar. However, in *Inferno*, the Pilgrim is already in a dark forest which is a trope that typically occurs later during the journey. Regarding the call, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell says,

> This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the 'call to adventure'—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. The hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure, as did Theseus when he arrived in his father's city, Athens, and heard the horrible history of the Minotaur; or he may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent as was Odysseus, driven about the Mediterranean by the winds of the angered god, Poseidon. The adventure may begin as a mere blunder ... or still again, one may be only casually strolling when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one away from the frequented paths of man. Examples might be multiplied, ad infinitum, from every corner of the world.

The call to adventure is arguably the most important aspect of the journey for without it the journey would not exist. The trope of the journey continues in modern literature as well: in the

Harry Potter series Harry is called in book one, and like Odysseus and Dante before him, Harry initially refuses the call when Hagrid comes to tell him about Hogwarts believing he cannot be a wizard (Rowling). While the hero's journey typically takes place over a single narrative, Harry goes through various aspects of it across seven. The Pilgrim has not yet been established as the hero, and when he first sees Virgil, he cries out in fear, "Have pity on my soul… whichever you are, shade or living man" (Alighieri 394). These are not the Pilgrim's first lines, but they do their part in reiterating his cowardice. After the two are introduced, Virgil provides the call to adventure, "'but you must journey down another road,' / he answered, when he saw me lost in tears, / 'if you ever hope to leave this wilderness'" (Alighieri 394). The wilderness Virgil refers to is the dark forest in which the Pilgrim awoke. However, Clark said that the hero's journey would take the hero through personal psychological development, which implies that the wilderness could also be a state of mind and for the Pilgrim to return to civilization he must first embark on this adventure.

The call to adventure is followed by the refusal of the call. Harry did it because he did not believe that he could be that extraordinary, "I can't be a wizard" (Rowling). Odysseus did it, because his wife Penelope had recently given birth to their son Telemachus. Odysseus knew that leaving for war to Troy would potentially mean abandoning his wife and new-born child. The Pilgrim also refuses Virgil's call to adventure in Canto II:

> But why am I to go? Who allows me to?
> I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul,
> Neither I nor any man would think me worthy;
> And so, if I should undertake the journey,
> I fear it might turn out an act of folly—
> You are wise, you see more than my words express.

The Pilgrim is right; as cowardly as he is no person would ever mistake him for Aeneas or Paul. However, Dante was writing La Comedia as a spiritual successor to the Bible, having his hero

appear less heroic and more like the everyday man would make it relatable to the Christian masses. The Bible frequently has characters who could be considered underdogs go up against powerhouse adversaries. David and Goliath, for example. In the Old Testament God used Moses who did not want to be a leader, Moses too refused the call to adventure, "Moses said to the LORD, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue'" (Exodus 4:10). This happens later in the New Testament during the sermon on the mount, Jesus spoke, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the alpha males for they will rain down holy terror on mine enemies." The Pilgrim Dante is in good company, however like Moses, he too must accept the call to adventure.

Once the call to adventure has been accepted, the hero is typically given supernatural aid. For example, in the Greek mythology story of Theseus and the Minotaur, Theseus is given a ball of string and a sword with which to navigate the maze and fight the minotaur (Hamilton 212). In *The Odyssey*, the Goddess Athena frequently assists Odysseus on his journey, sometimes by sending him an item, other times by disguising herself and directly intervening. In *The* Iliad, Achilles was given a shield that was crafted by Hephaestus. All of those items were extremely big deals. However, that kind of direct divine intervention was drastically reduced with the switch from polytheism to monotheism. Occasionally in the Old Testament, God would lend some direct help, but typically he worked indirectly. In the New Testament his presence was even more indirect if Jesus is not counted. That lessening in divine intervention is apparent in *Inferno.* Granted Beatrice in heaven, who was acting on behalf of God, sent Virgil to guide the Pilgrim. However, unlike Odysseus, Achilles, or Theseus, the Pilgrim receives nothing physical to assist him. While the absence of a weapon may seem like a big deal at first it is important to

remember that the Pilgrim's journey was a journey of the soul, so enchanted items, however amazing they may have been, would be of little use to him in hell. With Virgil as his guide, the Pilgrim is able to navigate his way through hell. Both Virgil and Dante the poet were intellectuals, so much of their trip through hell is Dante the Pilgrim trying to understand sin and put his own life into perspective. Virgil started out as a guide, but he would evolve into a mentor, tutor, and father figure until they part in *Purgatorio.*

Following the gift of supernatural aid, the hero must first cross the threshold into adventure. This step is somehow more and less important than the supernatural aid—more important because it shows the first step of commitment from the hero, less because it lacks the gravitas that supernatural aid brings. Using Odysseus as an example again because *The Odyssey* is the classic piece for the hero's journey, Odysseus crossed the threshold when he departed Troy and attempted to head home to Ithaca. Dante's Pilgrim crosses the threshold by literally passing through the gates of hell (Alighieri 399). However, the Pilgrim crossing the threshold of adventure is different than Odysseus doing so because Odysseus left home, somewhere that was safe and familiar. The Pilgrim was already in a dangerous dark forest which was completely foreign to him. Transitioning from somewhere he was unfamiliar to somewhere else he is equally unfamiliar with lacks the weight of leaving a sanctuary for the unknown.

Unsurprisingly, the journey for the hero does not get easier after taking those first steps. The next part of the journey is referred to as The Belly of the Whale. This branch of the journey represents the final separation of the known world and the self for the hero. Again, it is difficult to completely tie this aspect of the journey to the Pilgrim because he had left the known world before he was introduced to the reader. Regardless, when the hero does enter the belly of the whale, the hero is demonstrating a willingness to go through with the metamorphosis that he

must go through to exit the abyss. For Odysseus, this happened when he went into Polyphemus' cave knowing he may not come out alive (Homer 430). Odysseus had been in many life or death situations before, but this is the first time he was keenly aware of his mortality. A major factor in that was likely the issue of legacy. Honor and as a by product, legacy, were big deals to the ancient Greeks, especially the warriors of the stories. Nearly everything they did was to ensure a lasting legacy, and if Odysseus died at the hands of Polyphemus nobody would ever know, and he would have faded away into obscurity. For the Pilgrim, the belly of the whale occurs when he and Virgil ride across the river on Geryon in Canto XVII. Only the Pilgrim's commitment to the journey could have caused him to climb on that monster.

The road of trials is the next step on the journey, though typically listed as coming after the belly, the road of trials is a process that spans the duration of the journey. The Pilgrim's first trial was the encounter of the beasts in the forest in Canto I. The second trial was Charon the pilot of the ferry which crosses the river Acheron in Canto III. Charon refused to let the Pilgrim gross because he is still alive, Virgil insisted that they had permission from heaven and were to be let through. The third major trial is in Canto IX while the Pilgrim and Virgil were trying to gain access to the city of Dis. When they arrived they were harassed by the three furies, Megaera, Allecto, and Tisiphone. It took an act of heaven for them to get past the furies who had threatened to summon Medusa to turn them to stone. This scene also counts as the rescue from without, which typically occurs later in the journey.

As the Pilgrim walks through hell and arrives at the final circle he achieves apotheosis by recognizing his sins and repenting for them. After he repents, he and Virgil must climb Satan's body and exit hell and make their way into purgatorio. This act is the magical flight aspect of the journey.

Inferno ends with that ascent up the body of Satan and exiting hell. However, the hero's journey is far from over. There are nine terraces of purgatory to go through where the Pilgrim learns what it means to repent of each of the seven deadly sins. Once he makes it to the top of Mount Purgatory he must then traverse the nine spheres of heaven. The Pilgrim grew exponentially in hell, but despite all the trials he did not grow enough to achieve the Freedom to Live, which is the final part of the journey. The Pilgrim lacked the typical bravado and cunning that are typically associated with the epic heroes, but having the spiritual fortitude to endure the trip marks him as heroic in an unconventional way. Odysseus may be strong and cunning, but the Pilgrim's journey is not one that Odysseus could have completed. The Pilgrim may not be the hero the people wanted, but in a time when there was much emphasis placed on spiritual warfare, the Pilgrim was the hero the people needed.