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Homer Vs. Vergil

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The Odyssey Book 11: A Confrontation with the Unconscious

In Homer's *The Odyssey*, the protagonist, Odysseus is on a return journey to his home in Ithaca, following 10 years at war in Troy. After the war, Odysseus spends a year on an island with Circe, a daughter of the sun god Helios. Circe initially turns Odysseus' men into pigs and enchants Odysseus himself. With the help of Hermes, the messenger god Odysseus convinces her to turn his men back into their human forms and provide intel on what his next steps should be in returning to Ithaca. The goddess Circe directs Odysseus to the blind prophet Tiresias who lives in the underworld, Hades. She says that Odysseus must speak with Tiresias to seek guidance on how he will be able to return to Ithaca, a homecoming that is the overarching goal for Odysseus (Ekroth 37). Odysseus spends an abnormally long time in Hades, suggesting a more significant reason for his visit to the underworld beyond just receiving advice from Tiresias. Besides the next physical steps of his journey to return to his family, Odysseus's visit to Hades is psychologically significant in terms of his emotional development, and journey as a hero. Hades can be viewed as a psychological representation of Odysseus' journey. Additionally, *The Odyssey* offers critiques of heroic values presented in Homer's other epic work, the *Iliad*, which come apparent through Odysseus's interactions with the deceased members of his life in Hades. It is only after Odysseus enters Hades, a manifestation of his unconscious mind, that he will be

ultimately able to realize his higher self and return to Ithaca.

The initial reason for Odysseus' visit to the underworld is to seek guidance from Tiresias for returning to Ithaca, who will warn him of Poseidon's wrath and tell him to stay away from the cattle of Helios, the sun god. Tiresias also speaks of pragmatic steps, like sacrificial rituals that Odysseus must make for Poseidon (Homer 170-171). In the prior book 10, Odysseus supplicates Circe, reminding her that she promised to help him on his way home. Circe then provides him with instructions, stating,

“You shall no longer stay in my house when none of you wish to; / but first there is another journey you must accomplish / and reach the house of Hades and of the revered Persephone, / there to consult with the soul of Teiresias the Theban, / the blind prophet, whose senses stay unshaken within him,” (Homer book 10 lines 489-493).

In this excerpt, Circe states that the purpose of Odysseus's visit to Hades is to consult with Teiresias, a blind prophet who will provide him with the necessary steps for returning to Ithaca.

Upon receiving these instructions, Odysseus and the rest of his crew sail to Schimeria, where Odysseus will enter the underworld to meet with Tiresias. Odysseus performs the necessary sacrifices and shades of the dead begin to appear. These shades referred to are phantom images of people from his life who possess information on Odysseus's past, present, and future. They retain enough of their physical features to be recognized by Odysseus but only become conscious once they drink the blood produced by his sacrifices (Bernabé 34). His interactions with them will form the turning point of the epic, providing him the necessary emotional insight for his return home as Odysseus reconciles with his identity as a father, contrasting with his facade of a warrior. Odysseus's consultation with Tiresias, however, is not a

sufficient explanation for why he spends an entire episode of *The Odyssey* interacting with shades of the dead in Hades. There are two parallel readings: one where Odysseus receives input from Tiresias, and another where he experiences psychological transformation through interacting with the shades of his past life.

The implicit purpose of Odysseus' journey to Hades is related to his journey as a Hero, related to Joseph Campbell's notion of the "Hero's Journey."¹ The two stages of the hero's journey relevant to Odysseus's visit to the underworld, as outlined by Stuart Voytilla in *Excerpts from Myth and the Movies* are the approach to the innermost cave and the ordeal. The approach is the hero's moment leading up to the central ordeal or turning point. The innermost cave in Campbell's model describes a journey's central difficulty, where a hero must descend into a special world, in this case, Hades. In addition, his descent into Hades is also in the exact middle of his wanderings that he recounts. The hero might even need to take a break for romance before this descent, hence Odysseus having sex with Circe while on her island. In the central ordeal, a hero confronts their most difficult challenge. Here it's Odysseus confronting death itself, in the form of his deceased loved ones. It's through this pseudo-death by being in Hades that Odysseus is reborn, experiencing his resurrection and obtaining the necessary insight to see his journey to an end (Voytilla 10). The ability to overlay the archetypal Hero's Journey with Odysseus's descent into Hades is evidence of this book being pivotal in Odysseus's heroic development.

One theme throughout *The Odyssey* is the role of divine intervention in mortal affairs. In many instances throughout Homer's *The Odyssey*, Olympians insert themselves into mortal situations, affecting thought processes and situational factors. There exists a spectrum on which the tangibility of these interventions lies. In some instances, gods will physically cause and or

¹ An important feature of the Hero's journey is winning a victory upon gaining new knowledge, and returning to home transformed. A Hero's Journey consists of various steps that categorize the sequential, archetypal stages that a hero goes on while on an adventure. See Voytilla.

prevent events from occurring. In other instances, the gods will sway mortals emotionally, or act as a physical externalization of their thought processes.

In “Homer and the Poetics of Hades,” George Gazis reflects upon an important feature of the underworld in *The Odyssey*: That Hades is a place where vision is not possible. He says that Hades is a realm of invisibility, where visibility is impossible even for the gods (Gazis 83). The lack of divine intervention in book 11 is a significant difference compared to the rest of *The Odyssey* and Homer’s other work, *The Iliad*. Gazis provides an argument that the constraint of lacking divine intervention is poetically important for Odysseus’s journey as a character. Gazis states about Homer, “The freedom of knowledge and sentiment that can be found in the Underworld becomes for him a poetic resource, holding out the unique opportunity to reflect on, and transcend, the limits of his own art,” (Gazis 84). The knowledge unobstructed by the gods that becomes available to Odysseus in the underworld serves importance for obtaining the final insight necessary for making his return home; the metaphysical space in which the shades reside allows them to transcend the boundaries of time. As a result, they provide Odysseus with important information and warnings about his future to come. The lack of divine intervention while interacting with the shades allows Odysseus to interact with members outside of normative social behavior, giving him, a living member of society, insight into the perspectives of dead folk. The shades display a more pessimistic attitude towards heroism, confirming Odysseus’s desire to return to domesticity in Ithaca.

Odysseus’s descent into Hades is a representation of him confronting his unconscious mind. In the psychologist Carl Jung’s conception, an individual rises to their higher self when they become aware of the unconscious contents of their mind. Odysseus’ feelings of alienation from his normal life in Ithaca are an outcome of his long hiatus while at war. This feeling of alienation aligns with Jung’s notion of the “persona,” representing the facade one presents to the

external world. This contrasts with the “self,” which represents a reconciliation with one’s core desires (Jung 23). For Odysseus, this is accepting his devotion to family beyond the facade of playing a heroic role. Throughout his time in Troy and his wanderings, Odysseus fulfills the role of a warrior, which stands as the public version of himself or his persona. This results in Odysseus spending almost two decades internalizing the identity of a warrior. This has resulted in a discrepancy between his identity as a father and his inner wish to be home with his family which he has been attempting for 10 years (Harris 292). Odysseus’s experience with this false self as a warrior, whose goals don’t necessarily align with his core ones, is a source of his psychological distress and a reason for his inability to make his final return home. Only upon confronting the deep-rooted aspects of his psyche will Odysseus be able to achieve this higher state and make his return home. Seen later on, the shades of the dead externalize Odysseus’s mortal struggle. Their insight, due to their metaphysical knowledge, is a reflection of Odysseus’ internal state and gives him the necessary literal, and emotional insight into how he shall return home (Harris 296). Hades as a whole can represent Jung’s notion of the Shadow² as presented in his book *Aion*. Finally, once Odysseus integrates these unconscious desires of domesticity consciousness, currently dominated by his warrior persona, he will have the emotional insight necessary to return home.

Odysseus encounters his mother who he doesn’t know is dead. In recounting his tale of Hades, Odysseus states, “Next there came to me the soul of my dead mother, Antikleia, daughter of great-hearted Autokynos, whom I had left alive when I went to sacred Ilion. I broke into tears at the sight of her and my heart pitied her,” (Homer book 11 lines 84-87). His mother’s death represents a parallel with his living wife Penelope in Ithaca, who grieves for Odysseus due to his

² The Shadow is an archetype and a moral challenge that one must take considerable effort to confront. In the mind or psyche exists archetypes which are structures inherent to all of human psychology, hence the idea of the collective unconscious. See Jung 8.

long absence, giving him reinforcement for the pertinence of his return. Due to the weakened influence of gods and the unique poetic constraints of the underworld, Odysseus's mother can access this information. His mother states regarding Odysseus's wife, Penelope, "All too much with enduring heart she does wait for you / there in your own palace, and always with her the wretched / nights and the days also waste her away with sleeping," (Homer book 11 lines 181-183). This insight into his wife's current state is information that can be only provided in the transcendental realm of Hades. His mother also mentions his father's longing for Odysseus's homecoming, and that her death was a result of her longing for her son's return (Homer 173). Odysseus's conversation with the shade of his mother reveals an opportunity lost, due to her own death, but allows him to reassess what is ultimately important, which are the relationships in his life, especially with his family. In a way, Odysseus obtains this knowledge deep in his unconscious, but through manifesting it physically through the image of his mother, who is likely a projection from his mind, is he able to reconcile with his true desires beyond being a warrior.

Next, Odysseus encounters Agamemnon who relates to Odysseus the tale of his own homecoming. Agamemnon, as with the other shades, is only able to gain awareness once he drinks the blood produced by Odysseus' sacrifices (Martin 10). Agamemnon says that he has died at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra, and her lover Aigisteis. Through relating the story of his death, Agamemnon conveys a strong mistrust for women. He repeats the word "sluttish," and is regretful of how inhumanely he died at his wife's hands. Agamemnon reflects on being excited for his return home, only to be murdered by his wife. He states,

"See, I had been thinking / that I would be welcome to my children and thralls of my household / when I came home, but she with thoughts surpassingly grisly / splashed the shame on herself and the rest of her sex, on women / still to come, even on the one whose

acts are virtuous,” (Homer book 11 lines 430-434).

This interaction with Agamemnon serves psychological importance for Odysseus, as the story of his own homecoming offers a hauntingly similar parallel to Odysseus' return journey home.

In The case of Agamemnon, he was away at war, had a wife and son at home, and a man who got involved with his wife romantically. Odysseus is also on a return journey home from Troy, has a wife at home whom a group of suitors is attempting to win over, and a son, Telemachos. Agamemnon also gives an overt warning, stating “So by this, do not be too easy even with your wife, / nor give her an entire account of all you are sure of,” (Homer book 11 lines 441-442). He also states, “There is no trusting in women,” (Homer book 11 line 456). Although he ultimately tells Odysseus that his wife is faithful, he expresses a pessimistic view towards women and warns Odysseus against being overt with his intentions, which will go on to influence his behavior upon returning to Ithaca. This meeting not only foreshadows Odysseus's challenges but also critiques the traditional notion of heroism by revealing its personal costs, seen through the recollection of Agamemnon's murder told by himself. Odysseus is indirectly facing his own unconscious anxiety about betrayal, and the complexities of return. This moment is emblematic of the journey through the unconscious that Odysseus needs to complete to gain the final motivation and realization to return to Ithaca.

Odysseus also encounters famous Greek heroes, among which is Achilles, his comrade from the Trojan War. While interacting with him, Achilles is keen on learning about the whereabouts of his family, asking questions about his father Peleus, and his son Neoptolemos (Homer 181). Similar to his interaction with his mother, Odysseus' encounter with Achilles offers him a chance to reassess what is important in his own life. Odysseus seems to have been fulfilling the role of a warrior, which doesn't necessarily align with his core values. Because

Achilles is dead, and no longer exists within the social constraints of reality, he conveys his honest, pessimistic view of heroic values. Achilles asks of his father and son, and expresses a regret towards his death, despite the honor it brought him. Achilles too had the persona of a warrior, but in death expresses a yearning for life. Achilles replays attitudes of Odysseus's true persona as a father and acts as a mirror of him. Learning from Achilles's regrets, Odysseus gains further reinforcement for returning to domesticity in Ithaca. Through the medium of Achilles's voice, Homer articulates a dialogue with Odysseus' unconscious, pushing him towards a realization that valor lies not in the accolades of battle, but in the fulfillment of his roles as a father and a husband.

The Odyssey is self-consciously aware of *The Iliad*. Odysseus's interactions with the shades in the underworld offer a critique of the heroic values that underlie the story of the Trojan War in *The Iliad*. Achilles directly critiques heroic values, and expresses regret towards his valor at war, despite the honor it brought him. He states, "I would rather follow the plow as a thrall to another / man, one with no land allotted to him and not much to live on, / than be a king over all the perished dead," (Homer book 11 lines 489-492). This difference in attitude in *The Odyssey* is a direct juxtaposition to his view in *The Iliad*, where he conveyed that he would rather live a short life with honor rather than a long life without. In retrospect, the soul of Achilles wishes that he would have lived a longer life of simplicity, rather than being even king of all in Hades, critiquing the former notion of heroism presented in *The Iliad*.

Agamemnon's death was indirectly due absence while at war, as his wife Clytemnestra, found another lover. What he thought would unfold as a beautiful homecoming with his children ended up with him being murdered at the hands of his Clytemnestra. As an outcome, Agamemnon's heroism displayed in *The Iliad* had the domestic consequences of his wife cheating, and him being murdered by her lover. He states "Aigisthos, working out my death and

destruction, invited / me to his house, and feasted me, and killed me there, with the help / of my sluttish wife, as one cuts down an ox at his manger” (Homer 178). Similar to Achilles's reflections on death, Agamemnon also expresses an attitude of regret. Although he was valiant at war and brought himself honor, he isn't content due to the bitter domestic ending he faced.

Upon interacting with his mother, Odysseus becomes aware of the consequences of being absent while at war. When reflecting upon his interaction with his mother, Odysseus states,

“So she spoke, but I, pondering it in my heart, yet wish / to take the soul of my dead mother in my arms. Three times / I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her, / and three times she fluttered out of my bands like a shadow / or a dream, and the sorrow sharpened at the heart within me,” (Homer 173).

This is the most poignant interaction of Odysseus with the shades as it is a chance for Odysseus to observe the concept of impermanence in his own life. By interacting with a deceased member of his family, Odysseus himself reevaluates what is important. He is regretful at the fact that he can no longer hug his mother, an attitude towards death not conveyed as strongly in *The Iliad*. This projection of a likely pre-existing sentiment for Odysseus ultimately provides confirmation and motivation for continuing on his return to Ithaca.

Odysseus' interactions with the shades make him increasingly conscious of the actions that can be taken with his living family in Ithaca, giving him the proper psychological transformation necessary to finally return home. Rather than being literal phantoms, the projections can also be viewed as projections of Odysseus's existing unconscious state. They confirm his deep-rooted desire for homecoming and negative sentiment towards traditional notions of heroism, which he spent much time embodying but now wrestles with straying away

from. Perhaps the primary reason for Odysseus's descent into Hades is not for Tiresias's instructions, which are secondary, but to chart the innermost territories of his psyche, a homecoming to his humanity.

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