

Initiation into Adulthood and Old Age: The Journeys of Telemachus and Odysseus

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Abstract

The journeys of Telemachus and Odysseus in *The Odyssey* portray the two most significant experiences in a man's life—the transformation from a boy to a man after adolescence, and the movement from the accomplishments of middle age into the second half of life and old age. Athena functions as an *anima inspiratrix* who launches Telemachus on his task of discovering his masculine identity by searching for his absent father. A young man's potential must be seen by other men, as done by two of Odysseus' former comrades in arms, kings Nestor and Menelaus; additionally, recognition by the feminine is particularly important, a role performed by Helen. Telemachus must connect to his warrior archetype, which is a powerful force for developing the masculine traits of courage, purpose, focus, and authority, often through physical and warlike actions. Odysseus, on the other hand, has to be stripped of his warrior identity, broken of his hubris, and humiliated by his overindulgence in the realm of the Id. His physical and spiritual reunion with his wife Penelope—attainable only after becoming purified through hardships—symbolizes the development of a man's soul in his latter years.

Keywords: Odyssey; Homer; experience.

Introduction

The Odyssey begins on Mount Olympus, a supernatural realm of beauty removed from the vagaries of weather and time, with the gods having a conversation that touches upon themes that forever fascinate the human mind: fate, the role of the divine in our lives, and divine empathy and antipathy

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for human suffering. This opening puts the reader or listener into an archetypal domain, quite different from the everyday consciousness of logic and reason, computation and calculation, thereby facilitating a connection to deep unconscious energies. Zeus functions as a Freudian Superego in his position as the benevolent overseer of the world, a somewhat detached ruler who ensures that it continues in its accustomed manner as he metes out punishment to the disorderly (Austin, 1990). Pallas Athena, in an archetypal role as messenger between Olympus and humankind, is the deity who carries out the gods' directives on earth and interjects herself into mortals' lives. She pleads with Zeus to grant Odysseus freedom from captivity on Calypso's island. A primary function of the Superego is "approval or disapproval of actions ... on the grounds of rectitude" (Brenner, 1974, pp. 111-112), illustrated by Zeus deciding that Odysseus has suffered enough and granting his daughter's request.

Athena then flies down to Ithaca to set in motion two archetypal processes for the ego, as represented by Telemachus and Odysseus: initiation into adulthood and a middle-aged man's journey to discover his soul.

Telemachus' Journey to Manhood

When Athena, disguised as Mentos, enters Odysseus' court, she finds a mob of suitors carousing, feasting, and drinking, disgracing the household and consuming its wealth. Odysseus' son Telemachus sits passively as a powerless boy, his "heart obsessed with grief" (Homer, 1996, 1.133). He daydreams of his father, who represents dormant masculine energies within, the spirit of the inner man who must be brought into consciousness and developed.

Telemachus greets Athena in a completely submissive manner even though she could be yet another parasitic suitor to lust after his mother: "Here in our house you'll find a royal welcome./Have supper first, then tell us what you need" (Homer, 1996, 1.145-146). The title of this chapter is, "Athena Inspires the Prince", and the etymology of the word *inspire* stems from the Latin *inspirare*, which means "to breathe" and is related to the word *spirit* (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2012). Athena functions in the archetypal role of anima as inspiratrix of a male by explaining to Telemachus that his father is alive, being held captive, and will return home (Jung, 1964). Athena signals to the ego, Telemachus, that his unconscious masculine spirit is now to be

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released. Like a shaman in a tribal society, she is acting as the instigator of the initiation quest into manhood, preparing Telemachus for a new life stage.

From a boy's perspective, the thought of transitioning into a man seems almost impossible, something to doubt: "Mother has always told me I'm his son, it's true,/but I am not so certain. Who, on his own,/has ever really known who gave life?" (Homer, 1996, 1.249-266) Telemachus cannot yet identify with this masculine force, leaving him an incomplete person. Athena tells Telemachus that the trial he must undergo is to voyage to King Nestor and Menelaus, two war companions of his father, in order to seek "news" (Homer, 1996, 1.111) of Odysseus, but the real objective is to connect Telemachus to his father's spirit within. A subsequent trial will initiate him into manhood, which the goddess outlines in direct language: "reach down deep in your heart and soul/for a way to kill these suitors in your house,/by stealth or in open combat./You must not cling to your boyhood any longer—it's time you were a man" (Homer, 1996, 1.338-342).

Towards the end of the conversation Telemachus says, "You've counselled me with so much kindness now,/like a father to a son." (Homer, 1996, 1.354-355) Upon parting, Athena "left [Telemachus'] spirit filled with nerve and courage,/charged with father's memory more than ever now." (Homer, 1996, 1.369-370) Athena as anima and initiator has achieved her objective: inspire Telemachus' masculine spirit to awaken and further the process of ego development.

The bard in the court begins singing *The Achaean's Journey Home from Troy*, but Penelope, heartbroken, would rather suppress this memory of Odysseus and demands a different song. Telemachus criticizes her: "mother/ ... why deny/our devoted bard the chance to entertain us/any way the spirit stirs him on?" (Homer, 1996, 1.396-399) In some tribal societies, boys receive a spirit song when they undergo initiation into adulthood, and the *Achaean's Journey* is Telemachus' song—the last thing he needs is a doting mother to deny his burgeoning man spirit.

With his newfound masculine energy, he harshly rebukes his mother: "So, mother,/go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,/ ... As for giving orders,/men will see to that, but I most of all:/hold the reins of power in this house." (Homer, 1996, 1.409-414) This new behaviour leaves Penelope "astonished" (Homer, 1996, 1.415). Telemachus then tells the "insolent, overweening" (Homer, 1996, 1.423) suitors that "Zeus will pay you back with a vengeance" (Homer, 1996, 1.436), which leaves them "amazed" (Homer, 1996, 1.439). Athena's conversation worked wonders!

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Antinous, a lead suitor, senses a change in the prince and tries to tempt him to regress: “no more nursing those violent words and actions now./Come, eat and drink with us, just like the old days./Whatever you want our people will provide.” (Homer, 1996, 2.337-340) But Telemachus, “self-possessed” (Homer, 1996, 2.343) after Athena’s encouragement, verbally assaults Antinous and insists he is now aware of the reality of his life situation, an important milestone in adolescence: “now that I’m full-grown/and can hear the truth from others, absorb it too—/now, yes, that the anger seethes inside me.../I’ll stop at nothing to hurl destruction at your heads” (Homer, 1996, 2.349-351).

A second temptation comes from Eurycleia, the housekeeper who raised Telemachus. After hearing of his intention to leave Ithaca, Eurycleia tells him, in stark language, that the suitors will scheme to kill him and that he shouldn’t “go roving over the barren salt sea” as there is “no need to suffer so” (Homer, 1996, 2.408-409). In tribal societies, the initiation quest often involves considerable physical hardship (Jung, 1964). Regardless, Telemachus decides to continue.

Upon reaching Pylos, Telemachus does not know how to approach King Nestor because “Someone my age *might* feel shy ... / interrogating an older man.” (Homer, 1996, 3.26-27) An aspect of initiation into adulthood is learning how to act in the world and how to interact with people far beyond the familiarity of home, which expands the psyche and leads to self-knowledge. Nestor, known for his “knowledge of the world” (Homer, 1996, 3.278), affirms that Odysseus’ spirit is in Telemachus, helping to forge his fledgling adult identity: “Your way with words—it’s just like [Odysseus]—I’d swear/no youngster could ever speak like you” (Homer, 1996, 3.139-140).

A more significant recognition comes from the king of Sparta, Menelaus, who says, “your parents’ blood/is hardly lost in you. You must be born of kings,/bred by gods to wield the royal sceptre.” (Homer, 1996, 4.69-71) The king and Odysseus, two comrades on the war fields of Troy, were extremely close and “bound by love for each other” (Homer, 1996, 4.199). Menelaus also shares more attributes with Odysseus than Nestor does. He is a man who has sailed the Mediterranean “amassing a fortune” (Homer, 1996, 4.100), is a teller of wild tales, and his epithet is “warlord” (Homer, 1996, 4.85). Menelaus is the person in the *Odyssey* whose spirit is most like Odysseus’.

The third person to identify the spirit of Odysseus is perhaps the most important: Helen. She uses the prince’s name, which the two men did not: “To the life he’s like the son of great Odysseus,/surely he’s Telemachus!” (Homer, 1996, 4.158-159) It was for her that the Trojan War

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was fought; it was for her that Odysseus left Telemachus as a babe in Penelope's arms; it was because of her that Telemachus has suffered so. She is the embodiment of the desires and excuses and illusions for which men fight wars. Her recognition, along with Menelaus', gives a considerable boost to Telemachus' sense of self and his connection to his father's warrior spirit.

The individuals Athena sends Telemachus to meet are, in Jungian terms, elements of the archetype of the Warrior, which is an energy that Telemachus needs to develop in order to become a man. The three kings—Nestor, Diocles, and Menelaus—were soldiers at Troy; Pisistratus, Nestor's son, has the epithet "captain of armies" (Homer, 1996, 3.541); and Helen, as an inspiring aspect of the anima, represents that which urges men to risk their lives. The last person Telemachus meets, the fugitive Theoclymenus who had killed a man, is a source of, according to the Jungian Steven Walker (2002, p. 149), the "cruel shadow energies" that the prince will have to draw upon to slaughter the suitors.

Telemachus demonstrates his newfound manhood when returning from Sparta to Pylos. He decides to slight Nestor by not visiting him because he has been instructed by Athena to set sail. He has a mission, a purpose, which formerly was lacking, and, like a man, he knows what is important and what is folly in life: "[Nestor is] old, in love with his hospitality;/I fear he'll hold me, chafing in his palace—/I must hurry home!" (Homer, 1996, 15.223-225) When asked by Theoclymenus about his lineage, Telemachus states, without doubt, "Odysseus is my father" (Homer, 1996, 15.297). Whereas before Athena had to disguise herself as the prince to gather shipmates, now Telemachus commands them, exuding a sense of authority, even calling them "comrades" (Homer, 1996, 15.242), a term used amongst warriors. The travels have helped transform the young prince, but the final trial to adulthood remains.

Telemachus finally unites with an exemplar of his warrior spirit in the form of his father, Odysseus, and after a brief flood of emotion, they start discussing war tactics and conspiring how to bring death to the suitors. Although the prince asserts his manhood, "I'm hardly a flighty, weak-willed boy these days" (Homer, 1996, 16.344) and "the boy you knew is gone" (Homer, 1996, 20.347), others do not recognize it. Athena tells Odysseus, "your son,/as fine a boy as one could hope to have" (Homer, 1996, 20.36-37), and the nurse Eurycleia also refers to him as a boy, "And Telemachus, just now come of age—his mother/would never let the boy take charge of the maids." (Homer, 1996, 22.451-452)

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It isn't until Telemachus' "trial by fire", the destruction of the 108 suitors, has been completed that the prince's connection to his inner warrior masculine spirit has been forged. As Odysseus, the cowherd, the swineherd, and Telemachus depart the bloodied halls and head off into the proverbial sunset, the prince is referred to, for the first time, as a man: "By now the daylight covered the land, but Pallas, shrouding them all in darkness, quickly led the four *men* out of town." (Homer, 1996, 23.420-423, own emphasis)

Odysseus' Journey to his Soul

Robert Johnson, the renowned Jungian psychoanalyst, delineated three stages in a man's psychological development: the unconscious perfection of childhood, the conscious imperfection of middle age, and the conscious perfection of old age (Johnson, 1989). The transition from the second stage to the third is Odysseus' task as he strives to return home to his wife, Penelope, symbolizing his feminine side and his soul, so he can live out the rest of his days in peace.

Whereas Telemachus needed to venture out into the world in order to forge his identity, Odysseus, having won a victory over Troy, which is symbolic of the goals, ambitions, and accomplishments of mid-life, now needs to extract himself from the world and forego his male warrior identity.

Odysseus is oblivious of his entry into a new life phase upon leaving Troy, and the warlust behaviour and actions that served him splendidly in mid-life will only serve to destroy him. Despite having a ship filled with the booty of the Trojan empire, Odysseus plunders the first settlement he sees; his confused crew ask why they are "sea-wolves raiding at will ... [risking] their lives" (Homer, 1996, 3.82). In a tragically laughable episode, Odysseus has a fallout with Nestor regarding two drunken soldiers, so Odysseus returns to Troy in order to sail with Agamemnon (Homer, 1996).

Letting go of Warrior archetype egotism is a difficult lesson and will require a decade of suffering; it is Odysseus' character flaw. While the previous two incidents had innocuous consequences, the third proves disastrous. In order to trick Cyclops, Odysseus has to suppress his identity, which he does until he is safely in his ship and he reveals that his name is not "Nobody". He boasts, "Odysseus, raider of cities, *he* gouged out your eye, Laerte's son who makes his home in Ithaca!" (Homer, 1996, 9.560-563) He cannot contain his Warrior hubris because his name represents

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everything he fought and suffered for at Troy; without his name, he is a faceless wounded veteran, and his war experience is virtually meaningless. Odysseus' attachment to his hard-won name, so difficult to develop in youth as Telemachus' journey illustrates, leads to Odysseus' trials of initiation: Poseidon vows Odysseus will "come home late/and come a broken man—all shipmates lost,/alone" (Homer, 1996, 9.592-594).

Whereas Telemachus faced only two temptations to remain in the safety and comfort of Ithaca, Odysseus, a full-grown man, is enticed with the platter of the dark desires of the human heart. Similar to Telemachus' temptation to regress to boyhood, the Sirens try to lure Odysseus to live in the past. "We know all the pains that the Greeks and Trojans once endured/on the spreading plain of Troy" (Homer, 1996, 12.205-206). As Bernard Knox explains, Odysseus is a veteran of a ten-year war, and he is on his way back to a society where the new generation knows only peace; no one will understand him (Homer, 1996). The Sirens' island is littered with the skeletons of dead men, and it is in the Underworld where Odysseus could relive the Trojan saga with his fallen comrades. The song of the Sirens is essentially the same song that lured Telemachus to adulthood—the *Achaean Journey Home*—which was beneficial for a youth, but pernicious for Odysseus, since it is an invitation to live in a previous life phase, a kind of death.

Two other primary temptations appear in the forms of Circe and Calypso, both of whom offer an opportunity to forget his home and Penelope. Circe offers satiation of carnal desires—food and soirees and sex—and Odysseus spends one year in dalliance on her island. His crewmates complain, "Captain, this is madness!/High time you thought of your own home" (Homer, 1996, 10.520-521). Calypso heightens the enticement by offering sex *and* immortality, the chance for Odysseus to lay with a "lustrous" (Homer, 1996, 5.96) and "breathtaking" (Homer, 1996, 5.69) goddess forever. It is fitting she resides on an island named "Ogygia", whose etymology means "primal" (Thornton, 1970, p. 27)—Calypso, in Freudian terms, represents a man's Id, the source of all instinctual urges (Hall, 1954).

The Id's sexual enticement keeps Odysseus on Ogygia for seven years, lured away from a more highly developed soul/anima. He is miserable; he "[wrenches] his heart with sobs and groans" (Homer, 1996, 5.94). A man cannot feel emotionally and spiritually fulfilled by sex alone; higher levels of soul development incorporate a physical *and* symbolic dimension of sexuality. Telemachus was miserable because he could not escape the connection with the mother and identify with the

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masculine force within, so Zeus sent Athena to inaugurate the transformation of his psyche. Odysseus is miserable because he has an *overidentification* with his adult masculine energies, making him vulnerable to being captured by the sexual pleasures of the Id and the female as a sex object, so Zeus sends the messenger Hermes to free him from his fixation.

By overcoming the temptations of the Sirens, goddesses, and others while abroad, Odysseus learns to overcome his possession by the Warrior archetype and his identification with it. Whereas Telemachus was desperate to establish an adult male ego, Odysseus is desperate to remove a total identification with it. At Ithaca, he skilfully conceals his identity by dressing in rags and pretending to be a beggar in order to trick the suitors. He chooses to be a nobody instead of a boastful warrior. After Antinous, the principle threat, has been killed, Odysseus unveils himself, for now he is a man who has mastery of his warrior identity and has conquered his hubris.

Free from total identification with the archetypal Warrior energy of his adulthood, so difficult to connect to as a youth as Telemachus' story illustrates, Odysseus is ready to return to his wife. As a mature, accomplished male, he is prepared to engage a mature feminine side in his psyche personified by Penelope (Jung, 1964). Upon entering their sacred bed, they "reveled in all/ the long-for joys of love, reveled in each other's stories,/ ... [and] Odysseus told his wife of all the pains/he had dealt out to other men and all the hardships" (Homer, 1996, 23.343-344; 23.349-350). Penelope provides what the Sirens combined with the goddesses offered: understanding *and* love. At last, Odysseus is made whole, rejoined with his soul, and can live until a "ripe old age" (Homer, 1996, 11.155) in the contentment and grace of 'the perfection of old age'.

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