

“As long as humanity exists, this will be the dream of the care-laden, tempest-tossed man,” a Freudian reading of the *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey* is a poem that celebrates the journeys of its hero, Odysseus, as he attempts to return home from the Trojan War. It is the first poem to deal with the concept of a journey and has become the template for all subsequent works that deal with a journey, whether the journey occurs in the outside world or within the consciousness of the hero, or a combination of both. This paper will attempt to provide new insight into the hero's journey using the techniques of psychoanalysis developed by Sigmund Freud. Specifically, the paper will present the poem as an attempt by Odysseus to cope with the trauma he experienced during the Trojan War and his re-integration into the society of his homeland, Ithaka. In addition, the paper will posit that Odysseus' journeys are a series of repetitive dreams which must be worked through before the hero can re-enter the world of civilized men and women.

The *Odyssey* is divided into two separate parts, each containing twelve books. The first twelve books trace the hero's journey from Troy to his home in Ithaka. These books are marked by a series of adventures with various gods and supernatural beings. The second twelve books deal with Odysseus' arrival on Ithaka and his reunion with family and friends and punishment of the suitors who have squandered his estate.

Looked at from a psychological perspective, the first twelve books which deal with supernatural elements present a disorganized, often terrifying picture of Odysseus' journeys. He meets with monsters, gods, goddesses and natural forces beyond his control. Together, these forces resemble a function of the human psyche which Freud describes as the Id. In his essay "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," Freud defines the Id as follows: "We can come nearer to the id with images, and call it a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement. . . . it has no organization and no unified will, only an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure-principle" (837). The connection between the uncontrollable forces which Odysseus meets in his journeys and the Id cannot be overstated. In both cases, there is a breakdown in the fundamental forces which bind men together: one which is internal and psychological (i.e. the ego), and the other which is external and societal.

But these journeys represent more than the world of the Id, they also represent the world of dreams, a world of circular events which seem to be repeated as the hero attempts to complete his journey homeward. Odysseus is first seen on Kalypso's island and relates his journeys through the land

of the Kikonians, Lotus-Eaters, Cyclopes, the island of Aiolos, the land of the Laistrygones, Circe's island, the journey to Hades, a return back to Circe's island, the Sirens, the Symplegades, Skylla and Charybdis, the island of Helios, back again to Skylla and Charybdis and finally to Phaiakia. The descriptions of these events are often disjointed, repetitive, and hazy, much like a dream.

As Freud notes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a dream is a wish fulfillment, that is, a desire on the part of an individual for something he longs for. Freud makes this point clear on page 189, first column: "If the method of dream-interpretation here indicated is followed, it will be found that dreams do really possess a meaning, and are by no means the expression of a disintegrated cerebral activity, as the writers on the subject would have us believe. *When the work of interpretation has been completed the dream can be recognized as a wish fulfillment.*" Freud goes on to write that dreams may contain several concurrent desires that the dreamer wishes to fulfill: "The dream often appears to have several meanings; not only may several wish-fulfillments be combined in it, as our examples show, but one meaning or wish-fulfillment may conceal another. . . "(228). Odysseus wishes for a number of things in the first twelve books: a return to his homeland, a reunion with his wife and parents, as well as a desire to see his fallen comrades. Yet, behind these apparent wishes, there may be a hidden element, which Freud alludes to in the quotation referenced above.

The reader's first view of Odysseus occurs in Book V, when Hermes visits Kalypso to secure the hero's return home. Hermes encounters Odysseus pining for home in lines 151 – 154, when he "found him sitting on the seashore, and his eyes were never/wiped dry of tears, and the sweet lifetime was draining out of him,/as he wept for a way home, since the nymph was no longer pleasing/to him" (353). Freud quotes G. Keller who explains Odysseus' longing for home and cites that passage in which Odysseus lands on Phaiakia and is discovered by Nausicaa:

If you are ever parted from your home, and from all that is dear to you, and wander about in a strange country; if you have seen much and experienced much; if you have cares and sorrows, and are, perhaps, utterly wretched and forlorn, you will some night inevitably dream that you are approaching your home; you will see it shining and glittering in the loveliest colours; lovely and gracious figures will come to meet you; and then you

will suddenly discover that you are ragged, naked, and covered with dust. . . . Homer has drawn this situation from the profoundest depths of the eternal nature of humanity. (239)

Odysseus's second series of wishes is to see his wife and parents, from whom he has been separated for twenty years. In Book XI, Odysseus' wish to see his mother is exemplified in the scene where he is reunited with her in Hades. Despite his wish to embrace her after a long separation, he is unable to do so: "Three times/I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her, /and three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow/or a dream, and the sorrow sharpened at the heart within me. . . "(410). The meeting of son and father in Book XXIV is no less heartfelt: "Father, I am he, the man whom you ask about. I am/here, come back in the twentieth year to the land of my father" (537).

The hero's third series of wishes is to see his fallen comrades, a wish which is accomplished in Book XI, when he journeys to the underworld and encounters Agamemnon, Achilles and mighty Aias. Yet, despite his desire to visit his fallen comrades, Odysseus also wishes to escape the horrors he has witnessed in the war. Early in the poem, the reader is reminded of Odysseus' struggles to return home and escape the horrors of war: "Then all the others, as many as fled sheer destruction/were at home now, having escaped the sea and the fighting. /This one alone, longing for his wife and his home-coming, /was detained by the queenly nymph Kalypso . . ." (307).

Odysseus' wishes are not realized in the first twelve books, however. Furthermore, his adventures seem disorienting and disconnected. This feeling of disorientation is known as distortion and is a technique used in the dream-work to disguise a person's wishes. Freud makes the following observation regarding the process of distortion in dreams: "Wherever a wish-fulfillment is unrecognizable and disguised there must be present a tendency to defend oneself against this wish, and in consequence of this defense the wish is unable to express itself save in a distorted form" (197). The logical question to be asked is why are Odysseus' wishes being distorted? Freud supplies a clue to the one of the causes of distortion, a cause which might apply in the case of Odysseus, on page 249: "It thus becomes obvious for what purpose the censorship performs its office and practices dream-distortion; it does so *in order to prevent the development of anxiety or other forms of painful affect.*" Anxiety results from the anticipation of a fearful event; such events occur with regularity in wartime. Freud uses the term traumatic neuroses

to describe the effects that war has on its participants, as follows: "In the traumatic neuroses, especially in those arising from the terrors of war, we are particularly impressed by the self-seeking, egoistic motive, a straining towards protection and self-interest" (603). Such traumatic events fix themselves in the mind of the sufferer and continue to visit the person in his dreams: "Now in the traumatic neuroses the dream life has this peculiarity: it continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster, from which he awakens in renewed terror" (Freud 641).

Not only does the original event trigger recurrent dreams, but any sense of impending danger creates a similar reaction, as Freud posits on page 737: "The answer seems to be obvious and convincing: anxiety arose originally as a reaction to a state of danger, and it is reproduced whenever a state of that kind recurs." It seems then, that Odysseus, like the other participants in the Trojan War, was horrified by the slaughter and devastation produced by the War. More than that: whenever he encounters similar terrifying events, he is reminded of the War and reacts with anxiety. It is this anxiety which Odysseus attempts to suppress.

The tendency to reproduce events which originate from trauma is known as repetition-compulsion as explained by Freud: "They [dreams] obey rather the repetition-compulsion, which in analysis, it is true, is supported by the (not unconscious) wish to conjure up again what has been forgotten and repressed" (650). The adventures which Odysseus encounters on his way home may be a series of dreams which repeat the traumatic experiences he suffered in the war. By way of example, Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclope, Polyphemos, in Book XI, is filled with the same type of horror and revulsion which he must have felt as witness to the carnage at Troy:

So I spoke, but he in pitiless spirit answered/nothing, but sprang up and reached for my companions,/caught up two together and slapped them, like killing puppies,/against the ground, and the brains ran all over the floor, soaking/the ground. Then he cut them up limb by limb and got supper ready,/and like a lion reared in the hills, without leaving anything,/ ate them, entrails, flesh and the marrowy bones alike. (389-390)

Similarly, when his men were snatched from their vessel by Skylla, Odysseus exclaims in Book XII: “That was the most painful scene that these eyes have looked on/in my sufferings as I explored the routes over the water” (423).

An objection may be raised at this stage that Odysseus' journeys, however far-fetched, seem to have occurred and that they are not dreams. Freud addresses the issue of the reality of dreams and fantasy life on page 598, and notes that the distinction between reality and fantasy is not important, but that psychological reality is paramount to the mental processes of a person: “In contrast to *material* reality these phantasies possess *psychical* reality, and we gradually come to understand that *in the world of neurosis PSYCHICAL REALITY is the determining factor*” (598). In Odysseus' mind, the experiences he has in his journey homeward have a psychic reality, and as Freud notes, the psychic reality is what matters to the person suffering from traumatic neurosis.

Yet, persons suffering from traumatic neurosis make attempts to cope with the effects of their condition. One of the methods of coping with trauma is for the sufferer to isolate events from his consciousness, and a primary method of doing so is through amnesia: “When the subject has done something which has a significance for his neurosis, or after something unpleasant has happened, he will interpolate an interval during which nothing further may happen—during which he may perceive nothing and do nothing. . . . We know that in hysteria a traumatic experience is able to be overtaken by amnesia” (Freud 732). There are three events in the *Odyssey* which have puzzled readers, and which seem to result in the lack of concerted action by Odysseus. All three events relate to Odysseus' falling into a particularly heavy sleep at an inopportune time. The first occurs in Book X, when Odysseus falls asleep after departing from the island of Aiolos, an event which causes his ship and crew to be blown off course and necessitate a return to Aiolos' island and a delay in their journey. The second occurs in Book XII, when Odysseus falls asleep on the island of Thrinakia, which causes his men to devour the cattle of the sun-god, Helios, and results in the destruction of his ship and crew. The final event comes in Book XIII, when he falls asleep during his voyage from Phaiakia to Ithaka. As a result of his sleep, he wakes up and curses the Phaiakians, believing that they tricked him into landing somewhere other than home. His curse may have contributed in part, to Phaiakia's partial destruction. These moments of inopportune

sleep may be a coping mechanism on the part of Odysseus; a lack of action which indicates an attempt to cope with his traumatic experiences.

Ultimately, the traumatic experience can be traced back to its source: the fear of death. Freud notes that one of the symbols of death is a journey: "For dying we have setting out on a *journey*. . . (506). The ultimate journey towards death is symbolized by Odysseus's descent into Hades in Book XI, and the conversation he has with the blind seer, Tiresias, who foretells the fate of the man of sorrow:

But after you have killed these suitors in your own palace,/either by treachery, or openly with the sharp bronze,/then you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey/until you come where there are men living who know nothing/ of the sea, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never/ have known ships whose cheeks are painted purple, who never/ have known well-shaped oars, which act for ships as wings do./ And I will tell you a very clear proof, and you cannot miss it./When, as you walk, some other wayfarer happens to meet you,/and says you carry a winnow-fan on your bright shoulder,/then you must plant your well-shaped oar in the ground, and render/ceremonious sacrifice to the lord Poseidon. (408)

It is Odysseus' wish to remain immortal; it lies behind his fear of death, his wish to be home, his wish to be reunited with his family, his wish to see his fallen comrades. For Odysseus' understanding of death as a pleasant, blissful experience is shattered when he meets Achilles, who was revered as a god by the Achaians, in Book XI. Achilles, in famous speech admonishes Odysseus in these words: "O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. /I would rather follow the plow as 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" (415). It is the wish that he must disguise through distortion, anxiety and fear because it is a wish that cannot be attained. For as the reader knows, there is no place on earth where men have not heard of the sea, or have not used salt, or heard of ships; he therefore must continue his search forever; in effect he wishes to become immortal, but cannot. Further, the fact that Odysseus must plant his oar in the earth is a clue that he wishes to implant his seed in the fecund earth and thereby attain his immortality. The symbol of

an upright object as a form of the male anatomy is made clear by Freud in his discussion of the meaning of symbols in dreams.

The second part of the poem deals with Odysseus' homecoming. If the first part of the poem deals with Odysseus' attempts to overcome the trauma he experienced in Troy, the second part deals with the healing process that he must undertake to return to normal life. Odysseus' return marks an attempt at providing stability and organization to life, and corresponds with the function of the human psyche identified with the ego. On page 699, of his essay entitled "The Ego and the Id," Freud provides a description of the ego, that psychic process which defines a person and provides organization to daily life: "We have formulated the idea that in every individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes, which we call the ego. This ego includes consciousness, and it controls the approaches to motility, i.e., to the discharge of excitations into the external world . . ." The healing process which Odysseus must undertake is similar to the process of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis attempts to remove those elements which have been repressed in the life of the sufferer, and to restore the sufferer to a condition where he or she can live in relative peace, free from his or her earlier symptoms. Looked at in this way, Odysseus first had to recognize and overcome the traumas he experienced in Troy, and then acknowledge his desire to return home, reunite with his family and friends and face his fear of death. He must also confront his wish to remain immortal and reconcile himself to the fate of all men.

There are six separate stages which Odysseus undertakes to heal himself and the inhabitants of Ithaca when he returns: the testing of Eumaios the loyal swineherd; a reunion with his son, Telemachos; the destruction of the suitors; the reunion with Penelope; testing of and reunion with his father, Laertes; and the establishment of peace in Ithaca. All these things must be accomplished if Odysseus and the people of Ithaca are to be healed.

The first step in Odysseus' recovery is to take the measure of Eumaios, his swineherd. In Book XIV, Eumaios tells Odysseus, disguised as a poor beggar, that "the longing is on me for Odysseus, and he is gone from me," (Homer 438). The connection between Eumaios and Odysseus is made clear when the swineherd greets Telemachos, who has just returned from Sparta. Homer describes the meeting between the swineherd and Telemachos in such a way that the meeting mirrors Odysseus' own journey



homeward in Book XVI, lines 17 - 21: "And as a father, with heart full of love, welcomes his only/and grown son, for whose sake he has undergone many hardships/when he comes back in the tenth year from a distant country,/ so now the noble swineherd, clinging fast to godlike/Telemachos, kissed him even as if he had escaped dying. . . "(457). Eumaios passes the test, and to show how much he is valued by Odysseus, the man of sorrows claims that "the mind is you is something very suspicious," a phrase which is applied to Odysseus himself (Homer 443).

In Book XVI, Odysseus is directed by Athene to inform Telemachos of his true identity. After Athene performs one of her transformation of Odysseus, Telemachos is shocked and asks if the stranger is a god, to which Odysseus responds: "No, I am not a god. Why liken me to the immortals? /But I am your father, for whose sake you are always grieving/as you look for violence from others, and endure hardships" (Homer 460). When Odysseus informs Telemachos of his true nature, he is not only accomplishing another step in the reunion with his family, he is also legitimizing Telemachos' birthright and another hurdle is removed on the road to recovery.

Another obstacle to recovery is removed when the suitors are defeated by Odysseus, Telemachos, Eumaios, Philoitios the cowherd, and Athene in Book XXII. The next obstacle to be removed occurs in the recognition scene with Penelope, who is loath to make a mistake regarding the true identity of her husband after so many reports of his existence have proven false. Odysseus finally provides evidence of his true identity by informing his wife of the nature of their marriage bed in Book XXII, when he says: "There is one particular feature/ in the bed's construction. I myself, no other man, made it. /There was the bole of an olive tree with long leaves growing/strongly in the courtyard, and it was thick, like a column. /I laid down my chamber around this, and built it, until I /finished it with the close-set stones, and roofed it well over. . . "(527). Penelope is finally won over.

The final reunion scene in the second part of the poem is one between Odysseus and his father. After this reunion, there is one more task to accomplish; the townspeople must be confronted, and the deaths of the suitors acknowledged. The traumatic events which the suitors enacted on Ithaka must also be healed. For all his acumen and resourcefulness, Odysseus is unable to craft a solution to the problem; only the gods can provide the wisdom necessary to solve this intractable problem. It is Zeus

who tells Athene: "Do as you will; but I will tell you how it is proper. /Now that noble Odysseus has punished the suitors, let them/make their oaths of faith and friendship, and let him be king/always; and let us make them forget the death of their brothers/and sons, and let them be friends with each other, as in the time past,/and let them have prosperity and peace in abundance" (540). And it is Athene's job, as goddess of wisdom, a function of the ego in Freud's conception of the mind, that part responsible for order and reason, who must undertake the task of reuniting the inhabitants of Ithaka.

It is only through restoring the stability of the kingship that the life of the people in Ithaka can return to normal, and the scars created by the war can be healed. Freud offers an insight into the function of culture, a function which is based upon stability and order, on page 778 "We will be content to repeat that the word culture describes the sum of the achievements and institutions which differentiate our lives from those of our animal forebears and serve two purposes, namely, that of protecting humanity against nature and of regulating the relations of human beings among themselves."

The first twelve books of the poem deal with the instinctual, chaotic life of mankind, a life which is dominated by the Id, and which is symbolized by the appearance of gods, goddesses, monsters and natural disasters. These books deal with the traumas inflicted by the Trojan War, traumas which are repeated in the dream-life of Odysseus, and which he attempts to vanquish. Until he can resolve these conflicts, he must repeat his traumatic experiences through a new series of adventures, all of which result in more trauma and disaster, and which leave him no closer to his goal of reaching home.

The second half of the poem deals with the need to establish order, to heal the wounded spirits of those people, both at home and those who served in the war, and to re-establish the rightful rule of the king and law. Once at home, Odysseus undertakes a series of recognitions, reunions and renunciations which are necessary to erase or cure the traumatic events of the past. He must rely on his sense of identity, his ego, which is the organizing force of the psyche, to effect a cure, not only for himself, but for his loved ones and subjects.

Freud offers an insight into this tension between the instinctual and the rule of order in establishing culture in mankind:

Thirdly and lastly, and this seems most important of all, it is impossible to ignore the extent to which civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilization presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression, or something else?) of powerful instinctual urgencies. This cultural privation dominates the whole field of social relations between human beings; we know already that it is the cause of the antagonism against which all civilization has to fight. (781)

For a return to normal existence in Ithaka, Odysseus and his subjects must forego the instinctual gratification offered through violence and adopt an attitude of forgiveness and acceptance to refashion their society. At some level, Homer must have realized how difficult it was for humans to reject their instinctual impulses, and invokes the aid of the gods in forming solution to this crisis.

Perhaps the words of Penelope, shining among women, to Odysseus, best capture the resolution of the trauma of the Trojan War, as well as the final journey of the man of sorrows: "If the gods are accomplishing a more prosperous old age, /then there is hope that you shall have an escape from your troubles" (529). By working through his trauma, by establishing peace in Ithaka, and by his last journey towards a prosperous old age which will be marked by the fate common to all men, Freud would likely agree that Odysseus has finally escaped his troubles and that the name given to him by Penelope's father, which means "I hate," no longer applies to him. At last, Odysseus, like many of Freud's patients, has been made whole.

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