

Character Development and "The Hero's Journey" in Epic Narratives: Homer's The Odyssey

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Abstract. This paper explores the link between character development and the hero's journey in epic narratives. The Odyssey is a foundational epic that portrays the hero's journey. This study illustrates how Odysseus's character development aligns with Campbell's "the hero's journey" framework. His transformation from a proud and boastful warrior to a wise and patient leader is in sync with Campbell's monomyth structure, which outlines an array of stages that a central character undergoes, from the ordinary world to the return with the elixir. Character development is crucial within this structure as it shapes the hero's identity and enriches the emotional depth of the narrative. Throughout his journey home, Odysseus confronts physical and moral challenges that test his intellect, perseverance, and humility. The hero acquires new skills, insights and ethical values through trials and transformations, ultimately giving rise to their rebirth and integration into society. This growth process mirrors the universal themes of persistence, sacrifice and redemption that resonate with audiences across cultures. This study highlights character development and the hero's journey in epic narratives using examples from The Odyssey.

Keywords: epic, character development, the hero's journey, the Odyssey

INTRODUCTION

Epic literature is long narrative prose or poems that tell a heroic story, usually about mythological or legendary characters. These testimonial literature are prominent for their enduring themes, intricate characters and grand scope [1]. Typically, epic narratives transcend generations, recording the rise and fall of various civilisations on the heroic journey of a central figure. Classical examples of epics include "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" By Homer, "The Aeneid" by Virgil, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," and "Beowulf." Epic literature is the foundation of global literary heritage, cutting across many narratives that have gone beyond cultural boundaries and time. These trans-generational narratives, called epics, have played a crucial role in channelling the course of storytelling and general literature.

Literature frequently explores themes like life, death, generosity, injustice, the supernatural, immortality and heroism. Scholars of literature argue that nearly every culture has tales of individuals who overcome fate, natural calamities or gods. Often, these victories are due to their personal qualities, including, but not limited to, intelligence and bravery. Epics also feature themes of

betrayal, loyalty, rejection and love, cowardice and heroism and more –epic forms of heroic storytelling where the main character possesses a mix of human and supernatural abilities. Guided by fate, they embark on extraordinary journeys to discover their identities and fight for a cause or justice they often deny [2]. Epic heroes stand at the centre of these narratives. Epic heroes are astonishing figures who symbolise good value, courage and the unconquerable human spirit. For ages, epic heroes have captured readers' imagination and continued to be admired for their trials, characteristics, and importance in literature [1].

The Odyssey, a sequel to The Iliad, is a unique epic poem that focuses on Odysseus's complex human journey to return home after the Trojan War. This poem showcases his resilience, cunning, and unwavering loyalty to his family while encountering diverse human and supernatural obstacles. In the Odyssey, Odysseus's journey epitomises the hero's journey, as he undergoes significant character growth during his epic journey from Troy to Ithaca, his home. As author [3, p. 171] puts it, "Odysseus faces many challenges along his return home after the Trojan War and must put his heroic attributes to the test, all while

undergoing a unique self-transformation by Joseph Campbell's (1949) monomyth." The poem portrays the interplay between personal growth and the stages of the hero's journey. The protagonist's journey portrays universal struggles, resilience, loyalty and redemption. Odysseus's journey inspires individuals to navigate personal and professional growth. This study examines how Odysseus's character development aligns with Campbell's *"The Hero's Journey Framework"*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Character Development in Epic Narratives. According to the author [4], "Characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their instinctive ways of saying it – the dialogue – and from what they do – the action". The basis for a character's speech, ethical personality, actions, aspirations and temperament is regarded as their inspiration. Character is the thought and behavioural pattern that defines how each person lives and functions within the family unit, neighbourhood, country and state. Persons of excellent character make decisions and take responsibility for the consequences. According to the author [5], "A typified character in literature is dominated by one specific trait and is referred to as a flat character. The term round character usually denotes a persona with more complex and differentiated features". Characters are the people embodied in a storyline who the readers interpret as being furnished with specific emotional, rational and moral personas by deductions from the people's conversations and their intrinsic speech patterns – the dialogue – as well as from their actions – the things they do. A character may continue to be fundamentally "stable" unchanged both in disposition and appearance from the start to the last part of a narrative, for instance, Penelope in the Odyssey, or may evolve radically, either through a slow developmental process as can be seen in Telemachus, growing up as a baby into a young man. The reader of a realistic or traditional narrative expects consistency whether a character changes or remains stable – the character should not change suddenly and operate in a manner not reasonably rooted in their personality as has already been established [4].

Character development is the method the writer uses to reveal a character's personality. Character development may be direct or indirect. A stark contrast is usually made between different methods of character development, that is, establishing the people's unique characters in a storyline through telling and showing. In performance, also known as the *"dramatic method"*, the creator shows the characters acting and talking, leaving the audience to deduce the temperament and intention that underlies what the characters do and say. The creator may present not just outward actions and speech but the inner thoughts, responsiveness to events and feelings of a character; a good example of such a highly developed inner showing method is *"stream of consciousness"*. In narrating, the writer confidently interferes in an attempt to portray and usually assess the intentions and temperamental characteristics of the characters. For instance, in the Odyssey, the protagonist, Odysseus, is often portrayed as proud; this could be seen in his statement after blinding the Cyclops, Polyphemus. He boasted: *"...and my heart was laughing – my cunning name had pulled off such a trick."* (p. 159, lines 546-547). While his ship sails away from the island and his crew tries to calm him down from being reckless, Odysseus further boasts to Polyphemus: *"Cyclops, if any mortal human being asks about the injury that blinded you, say your eye was burned out by Odysseus sacker of cities, son of Laertes, a man from Ithaca"*(p. 162, lines 662-666).

Today, innovative writers, including novelists from French writers of the new novels to James Joyce, as well as authors of the books and dramas of the absurd and diverse new forms – usually present the people in their works in manners that contradict the older methods of embodying realistic characters who manifest habitual foundation of personality. Modern structuralist reviewers have started to diffuse even the realistic characters of conventional narratives into a scheme of literary codes and conventions which are established by the audience; i.e., readers are believed to cast lifelikeness on cipherable literary depictions by absorbing them into their previous stereotypes of people in real life [4]. In the Odyssey, Homer portrays Odysseus in the likeness of a man that he is – with his strengths, flaws, and vanities. The theme captures man's resilience, longing, resourcefulness, and perseverance for that which he holds dear to his heart. Homer also captures the rulings of the supernatural in the affairs of men. Odysseus, in the course of his ad-

venture, goes through significant character development. He learnt humility and restraint from his ordeal. At every stage in the journey, Odysseus shapes his character and makes him a better leader who wins not through brute force but through his wit. Odysseus, though, was never at any point mentioned to be proud by Homer [6]; his actions spoke otherwise, especially after blinding the Cyclops. His boast about his deed brought Poseidon's punishment. His lust and vanity are observed in Odysseus having an affair with the goddess Circe on the island of Aeaea and in Ogygia with the goddess Calypso.

A significant character development is observed in Odysseus, as he later decides to go home to his wife and son and even turns down Calypso's offer of immortality. In addition, Odysseus's looking out for his crew is an exemplary leadership attribute that ensures no one is left behind; this is observed in the island of the Lotus-eaters, where some of his comrades who had eaten from the land were unwilling to embark on the journey to Ithaca; this is no ordinary food; as Homer mentioned, whoever eats abandons his plan of journeying home but stays on the land to continue eating the lotus plant. Odysseus saves his men by forcing them out of the land and tying them to the ship, and at the same time, he asks his trusted crew members to sail as fast as they can. Furthermore, Odysseus returns to the island of Aeaea to take the remains of his soldier, Elpenor, and give him a proper burial.

On Odysseus' return to Ithaca, he demonstrated wisdom and did not immediately go to his house to meet his wife or kill the suitors. He disguises himself as a beggar and goes with his son, Telemachus. He was careful enough not to reveal himself to Penelope too early; this was necessary to test her loyalty, if her heart was still with her husband, as King Agamemnon, who he saw in Hades, had briefed him of his ordeal (Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus killed Agamemnon upon his return from Troy.). Even though Anticlea (in Hades) had written a good report about Odysseus' wife, he was not quick to reunite with Penelope. He shows patience and the need to delay gratification. Disguising himself as a beggar and enduring the abuses of the suitors in his palace shows Odysseus exercising patience and wisdom. Odysseus shows humility by reconciling with his father and making amends for his offence against Poseidon.

Stages of the Hero's Journey. The "hero's journey" is a storyline model in storytelling, myth development, drama, etc. The hero's journey is ascribed to the work of Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where he retells several stories explaining how each represents the monomyth or hero's journey. The journey can be likened to a cycle that begins and ends in the hero's ordinary world, but the quest passes through an unfamiliar, special world [7, 8, 9]. This journey occurs in twelve typical stages.

The Ordinary World: The ordinary world is the initial stage of the hero's journey. Here, the hero presents in his ordinary world, usually through birth. Ordinarily, a person's life begins at birth, when the parents introduce the baby to the world of ordinary people. In Homer's epic poem, Odysseus, king of Ithaca, lived his everyday life on his home island. His wife, Penelope, recently gave birth to their son, Telemachus. Everything appears to have fallen into place in the ordinary world; there was no better place he would have been at that moment but with his wife and child in Ithaca.

The Call to Adventure is when the hero receives a call to undertake a transformation journey, usually triggered by an external crisis force [10]. This call disrupts the hero's ordinary world and establishes the consequences of rejecting the challenge. The call to adventure can take various forms, usually given by the standard of the messenger, including a man's dying words (*Citizen Kane*), a message or announcement (*The African Queen*), the arrival of the villain (*High Noon*), an abduction (*Star Wars*), a death (*Jaws*, *Some Like it Hot*) and a sudden storm (*Home Alone*) [11]. In the case of the *Odyssey*, the call to adventure occurred when Menelaus, king of Sparta and Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, came to Ithaca to ask Odysseus to join them in the war against Troy. Odysseus leaves Ithaca as a confident leader and warrior, accompanied by his soldiers, without knowing the arduous twenty-year journey awaiting him [3].

Refusal of the Call: Due to the insecurities and the fears that arise from the call to adventure, the hero refuses the call. The hero prefers the haven of the ordinary world to making changes. This stage is essential because it communicates the dangers inherent in the journey that lies ahead of the hero. The audience will not be interested in being a part of the hero's journey without the threat, risks and probability of failure [11]. For

example, Hyginus, in his work *Fabulae*, portrayed Odysseus as reluctant to join Greece in the war against Troy, as he was unwilling to leave his wife and their newborn son, Telemachus, for the war in Troy. He is likely concerned about the extended time it would take to return from the war. The show of refusal of the call was evident in Odysseus feigning insanity when the Greek army called upon him (this he did by yoking a donkey with an ox to plow and sowing salt on a field) to circumvent joining the Trojan War.

When Agamemnon and Menelaus, son of Atreus, assembled the leaders who had pledged themselves to attack Troy, they came to the island of Ithaca to Ulysses, son of Laertes. An oracle had warned him that if he went to Troy, he would return home alone and in need, with his comrades lost, after twenty years. And so when he learned that spokespeople would come to him, he put on a cap, pretending madness, and yoked a horse and an ox to the plough. When he saw this, Palamedes felt he was pretending and, taking his son Telemachus from the cradle, put him in front of the plough with the words: *'Give up your pretence and come and join the allies.'* Then Ulysses promised that he would come; from that time, he was hostile to Palamedes [12, *Fabulae* 95].

Meeting the Mentor: At this stage, the hero meets a wise mentor who counsels and gives him power and, sometimes, a magical weapon. In the *Odyssey*, the epic discloses the goddess Athena as Odysseus' mentor. She served as a mentor and guide to him and interceded on his behalf to Zeus; this is portrayed by [6, p. 5] as follows:

*"Son of Cronos and father to us all,
You who rule on high, yes indeed, ...
...But my heart is torn
for versatile Odysseus, an ill-fated man,
Who has had to suffer such misfortune
for so many years, far away from friends.
He's on an island, surrounded by the sea,
...
Odysseus yearns to see even the smoke
rising from Ithaca and longs for death.
Yet, despite that, Olympian Zeus, your heart
does not respond to him. Did not Odysseus
offer you delightful sacrifices
on Troy's far-reaching plain beside the ships?
If so, why are you so angry with him?"*
(lines 59 - 83).

Aside from Athena, whose mentorship is quite apparent, several characters give Odysseus advice, guidance, and support during his journey. While on the island of Aea, the land of Circe [*"we reached the island of Aea, home of that dread goddess, fair-haired Circe, who possessed a human voice..."* (p. 171, lines 180-183)], Hermes gave Odysseus an antidote to neutralise Circe's spell:

*"But come,
I will keep you free from harm and save you.
Take a remedial medicine with you,
and go to Circe's house. It will protect you
and keep your head safe from any danger
this day may bring. Now, I'll describe
every one of Circe's fatal ploys.
She'll mix a drink for you and with that drink
include a drug. But she won't have the power
to cast a spell on you..."* (p. 176, lines 374-383).

Crossing the Threshold: This is where the hero makes his first entry into the extraordinary world, leaving what is familiar behind and entering the realms of challenges and uncertainty [13]. In the *Odyssey*, this stage corresponds to the circumstance where Odysseus, with his men, leaves Troy on a boat heading home and gets hit by a storm and thrown off course to Ciconia, after which they encounter the Lotus Eater.

*"From Troy, my ships were carried by the wind
to Ismarus, land of the Cicones."
(p. 147, lines 38 - 39)
"Nine days of fierce winds drove me away from
there,
across the fish-filled seas, and on the tenth,
we landed where the Lotus-eaters live."
(p. 148, lines 108-110).*

Each encounter after the Lotus-Eater seems more supernatural than the previous one. Their encounter at the land of the Lotus-eaters signifies Odysseus' first entry into the supernatural world; some of his comrades, whom he sent to learn about the land, were fed with lotus plants, and they jettisoned their desire to travel home, as [6, p. 149] wrote:

*"... whose fruit,
 Sweet as honey, made any man who tried it
 lose his desire ever to journey home
 or bring back word to us – they wished to stay,
 to linger there among the Lotus-eaters,
 feeding on the plant, eager to forget
 about their homeward voyage."
 (lines 121–126).*

Odysseus is faced with some of his crew (those who ate the lotus plant) no longer willing to assist him in his journey back to Ithaca. Thus, he must forcefully remove his men from the comfort of the island (of the Lotus-eaters) and its people and strap them to the ship [3]; this is as written in the narration of his ordeal to King Alcinoos of Phaeacia: *"...I forced them, eyes full of tears, into our hollow ships, dragged them underneath the rowing benches, and tied them up. Then I issued orders for my other trusty comrades to embark and sail away with speed in our fast ships, in case another man might eat a lotus and lose all thoughts about his journey back..."* (p. 149, lines 127-134).

Tests, Allies, Enemies: At this stage, the hero will go through tests to make friends and foes in his extraordinary world. This stage prepares the hero for his adventure. In the Odyssey, the hero Odysseus encounters various challenges and makes enemies and allies throughout his quest to Ithaca. Some trials and enemies he encounters include the Lotus-eaters (though not causing any harm to humans, their food – lotus plant, can make any man forget about his journey home), the Cyclops Polyphemus (one-eyed giant son of Poseidon who ate some of Odysseus' crew members, and was blinded by the crew as a means to escape), the man-eating Laestrygonians, the sorceress Circe (who through her poisoned portion turns some of Odysseus' crew members to animals), the perils of the underworld (where he encountered several souls at the gate), the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, the possessive Calypso, as well as the greed of his crew. There are some prominent allies of Odysseus, the chief of which is Athena, the goddess of war.

Approach to the Inmost Cave: Here, the hero finally reaches a perilous place, usually deep underground, where the object of the adventure lies hidden. In the Odyssey, Circe prepares Odysseus for what he is to encounter in the underworld, "house of Hades" to seek Teiresias's spirit and

hear his prophecies. A prophet foretells what lies ahead for him and his crew and warns him how to proceed. Also, he became aware of Poseidon's wrath and was instructed on how to appease him.

*"You ask about your honey-sweet return.
 But a god will make your journey bitter.
 I don't think you can evade Poseidon,
 whose heart is angry at you, full of rage
 because you blinded his dear son."
 (p. 189, lines 101-105).*

In propitiation of Odysseus' offence to Poseidon (blinding of his son, Polyphemus), he must go to a distant land where the name of the god has not been heard (by the people) and make him known with the oar planted in the ground and a sacrifice [14].

The Ordeal: The hero, at this stage, faces the ultimate ordeal. It is a crucial time when the hero encounters the likelihood of death, conveyed to the edge in a battle with an imaginary being. The hero seems to die and is reborn. The ordeal is a key source of the hero's magic myth. In the Odyssey, Odysseus travels to Hades (the underworld), where he faces his greatest fear and is transformed. *"Then out of Erebus came swarming up shades of the dead—brides, young unmarried men, old ones worn out with toil, young tender girls, with hearts still new to grief, and many men wounded by bronze spears, who'd died in battle, still in their blood-stained armour."* (p. 187, lines 43 – 48). In Hades, he encounters several shades of the dead, including his companion Elpenor (who died in the house of Circe), his mother, Anticleia (who was alive before he left Ithaca for the war in Troy), and a series of female shades.

*"As we talked together, some women came,
 all wives and daughters of the noblest men,
 sent out by queen Persephone. They flocked
 in a throng by the black blood."
 (p. 194, lines 280–283)*

Reward: This stage represents the hero seizing the sword. After surviving death and defeating the monster, the hero claims the treasure he has sought. This treasure could be a special, unique weapon such as a magical sword or an elixir capable of healing the wounded land. Here, the he-

ro is appreciated for his exceptional adventure. In the underworld, Odysseus received instruction from Teiresias on how to return to Ithaca, as [6, p. 189] wrote, "...you ask about your honey-sweet return. But a god will make your journey bitter. I don't think you can evade Poseidon," (lines 124-126).

The Road Back: The hero must eventually reaffirm his dedication to finishing the journey and agree to return to the Ordinary World. The success recorded by the hero in the extraordinary world could make his return very difficult. Just like crossing the threshold, the Road Back requires an incident that will propel the hero across the threshold and back into the regular world [11]. After Odysseus is stalled for seven years on Ogygia, Athena persuades Zeus to hasten his return to Ithaca, and Zeus sends Hermes to deliver the message to Calypso.

*"Son of Cronos and father to us all,
ruling high above, if immortal gods
Now find it pleasing for wise Odysseus
to return home, then let's send Hermes,
killer of Argus, as our messenger,
over to the island of Ogygia,
So he can quickly tell that the fair-haired nymph
our firm decision – that brave Odysseus
will now leave and complete his voyage home."
(p. 6, lines 107–115).*

Odysseus's decision to leave Ogygia, the hollow island of the goddess Calypso, even when offered immortality, reaffirms his dedication to return to Ithaca (to unite with his wife and son). In his attempt to return home, Calypso helps Odysseus construct a raft; after this, he sets sail from Ogygia and gets within sight of Phaeacia. Though Poseidon sends a storm which destroys the raft, Odysseus receives help from the sea goddess Leucothea. After hearing Odysseus' story, King Alcinous of Phaeacia sends him home to Ithaca with gifts and treasures.

The Resurrection: at this stage, the hero encounters rebirth, his most risky encounter with death. This ultimate life-and-death ordeal demonstrates that the hero has retained and can utilise everything he has brought back to the ordinary world. This ordeal and Resurrection may symbolise a "cleansing" that must take place after the hero

has returned from the land of the dead. The hero emerges transformed or reborn, carrying the qualities of his self along with the lessons and insights gained from the characters he encountered during his journey. On Odysseus' return to Ithaca, he must defeat the suitors to regain his home. He had learnt forbearance and humility as he disguised himself as a beggar; this placed him in a position to judge the loyalty of the people in his home [15]. Penelope arranges an archery contest with the axes: "... I will arrange a competition featuring those axes he used to set up in his hall, aligned like ribs on ships, twelve axes in a row. He'd stand and shoot an arrow through them all. I'll suggest this contest for the suitors." (p. 355, lines 724-728). Wielding his bow, Odysseus transforms from the beggar to the once and future king of Ithaca, thus reclaiming his home and kingdom.

Return with the Elixir: This represents the ultimate prize earned during the hero's journey. Having been resurrected and purified, the hero has received the right to the ordinary world and shares the elixir of the expedition. A true hero brings back an Elixir to share with others or to heal a ravaged land. This elixir could be a great treasure, a magical potion, embodying love, wisdom, or wisdom gained from surviving the special world [11]. After Odysseus kills Penelope's suitors, he purifies his home, reunites with his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus, reconciles with his father Laertes, and pacifies the families of the slain suitors.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of character development and the hero's journey in the Odyssey reveals timeless themes of resilience, courage, and redemption, enabling readers to see reflections of their aspirations and struggles through the character. As a hero goes through trials and tribulations, he confronts external challenges and undergoes extraordinary internal changes that shape his identity. Odysseus' transformation enriches our understanding of the human experience by illustrating the intricacies of growth and the importance of personal sacrifice. Ultimately, the link between character development and the hero's journey drives the plot and enhances the narrative, making it a timeless exploration of what it means to undertake a transformative adventure.

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