

Returning from "The Undiscovered Country":
Effects of the Trip to the Underworld on Gilgamesh, Beowulf, and Odysseus

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In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp analyzes 100 Russian fairytales, and derives from them 31 commonly occurring themes.¹ Among these recurring themes are events such as an interdiction being given to the hero of the story, the hero violating that same interdiction, the villain making some reconnaissance of the hero, and other events of that nature.² The argument of this paper will concern one of these episodes in particular, which Propp describes as: "The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search."³ Within this framework, I include the trip into the underworld of each of the three heroes in *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, and the *Odyssey*. I apply Propp's theory in two ways. First, I have narrowed the scope of his transference to refer specifically to the trips to the underworld. Whereas Propp himself does not specify that a trip to the underworld is included in this aspect, I have focused on the underworld episodes. Second, I apply the portion of his claim that makes this descent necessary to the story. In each instance, the experience with the underworld changes the hero in a necessary way. This allows the character to reach a state of being he needs within the story, which is, as I shall argue, selflessness for Gilgamesh, recognition for Beowulf, and a renewed, more intense desire to return home for Odysseus.

¹ Propp 23-24

² Propp 26-28

³ Propp 50

It is necessary first to deal more deeply with Propp's theory in an attempt to demonstrate more clearly that the underworld episodes are appropriately included. He writes: "Generally the object of search is located in 'another' or 'different' kingdom."⁴ Obviously, the underworld may be included in the idea of being separated from where the rest of the action takes place. The object of search can be considered in two different ways. Each of the heroes is indeed searching for something—Gilgamesh for glory, Beowulf also for glory, and Odysseus for his homeland. Within the context of this more general search, they also experience a descent into the underworld, which is the catalyst for the aforementioned change in each of them.

In addition, Propp provides some common occurrences that occasion the trip to the underworld. These are necessary within the narrative because they provide an explanation for why the hero is undertaking this particular task. Two of these are evident in the epics under consideration. First, he says: "The route is shown to [the hero]."⁵ This applies to both Gilgamesh and Odysseus, since they are both told the way to go. Propp goes on to write that sometimes "[the hero] follows bloody tracks."⁶ This, of course, applies to Beowulf, since, in his pursuit of glory it becomes necessary for him to track down Grendel's mother, the hero

⁴ Propp 50

⁵ Propp 51

⁶ *ibid.*

notices that “the forest paths / were marked all over with the monster's tracks, / her trail on the ground wherever she had gone” (*Beo.* 1402-1404).⁷ The tracks referred to in the passage are not necessarily bloody, but the reader learns in the next few lines that she is “dragging away / the body of that thane, Hrothgar’s best” (1405-1406), an action that would leave a noticeable amount of blood in her wake.

In addition to Propp’s theory, it is useful to consider Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell’s aim is to provide a description of what “will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story.”⁸ He too examines major heroic stories and establishes commonly occurring events and themes, which he terms the “monomyth.”⁹ In Campbell’s case, he describes the hero’s trip to the underworld in the following way: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won.”¹⁰ It is clear that he is referring to the underworld experience from the examples he gives. He discusses Jason’s trip through the Clashing Rocks and how Aeneas descends to the underworld and converses with the shade of his father,¹¹ which makes it apparent that the episode to which Campbell refers is not necessarily the overall

⁷ All line references to *Beowulf* are from Seamus Heaney’s translation.

⁸ Campbell 3

⁹ Campbell 1

¹⁰ Campbell 30

¹¹ *ibid.*

journey of the hero, but the trip to the underworld. It is useful to consider Campbell's theory in combination with Propp's. The combination allows the reader to see clearly the heroic encounter with the underworld in the context of the epics. In addition to those criteria set forth by Propp and fulfilled by each hero, the reader will observe that Campbell's criterion of entering a supernatural area, encountering supernatural forces, and winning a decisive victory (as cited above) are also met by the heroes. Gilgamesh, for example, during his descent encounters a supernatural plant that gives eternal life, and he obtains it for his people. Beowulf encounters Grendel's mother in the mere and triumphs over her. Odysseus meets various shades at the mouth of the underworld and succeeds in gaining knowledge necessary for his return. Therefore, reading the epics while bearing in mind this combination of the theories aids the reader in shedding light on the underworld episode.

Up to this point, it has been assumed that what each of these characters endures can be called a trip to the underworld. It is now necessary to address a problematic element of that claim. It is apparent that neither Gilgamesh nor Beowulf visits what can be termed in the traditional sense an "underworld." In response to this, I answer that Propp's classification called for this area to be separated from the normal action of the story (in "'another' or 'different' kingdom" as stated previously), which is the mere in *Beowulf* and the trip to Ut-

Napishtim in *Gilgamesh*. Barnes argues that the mere in *Beowulf* “corresponds to Propp’s functional element G⁵.”¹² The portion of the definition to which he refers is stated by Propp as “[the hero] finds an underground passageway.”¹³ So, although their destinations are not proper underworlds complete with fire, brimstone, and the souls of the dead, they can nevertheless be included in the discussion. Furthermore, it is necessary to determine exactly when these episodes occur in the epics. Lord is helpful in this respect. In his article, “*Gilgamesh and Other Epics*,” he outlines five aspects of epic poetry that commonly occur. Among these he includes this trip into the underworld, and he sets forth what constitutes said trip. For *Gilgamesh*, he writes that “Gilgamesh’s journey to the land of the ‘far-away’”¹⁴ makes up his underworld experience. It can be argued that this trip begins with the death of Enkidu, since that is what prompts Gilgamesh’s journey to the “far-away” and fuels his desire for literal immortality. For *Beowulf*, Lord writes that what constitutes his trip to the underworld is the “entrance into a real land of death, the Mere itself.”¹⁵ Finally, for the *Odyssey*, what constitutes the trip is fairly obvious, taking up most of Book 11, from the arrival of the Greeks at the appointed place to Odysseus’

¹² Barnes 426

¹³ Propp 51

¹⁴ Lord 297

¹⁵ Lord 304

fleeing lest Persephone “send up against [him] / some gorgonish head of a terrible monster up out of Hades” (*Od.* 11.634-635).¹⁶

The focus, then, is the nature of the change brought about in the hero by this trip. In each instance, after returning from the underworld, the hero is somehow different. As I shall argue, Gilgamesh returns from his experience with a different attitude toward the people of Uruk. Namely, he is more concerned with their well-being than he is at the beginning of the poem. Beowulf is transformed by his descent in that he has, at that point, proven himself fit to rule his people, and he eventually desires a different kind of glory. Finally, Odysseus comes back from the underworld armed with information that causes him to quicken his return to Ithaca.

GILGAMESH

One will observe that before Gilgamesh's trip to the underworld, he is concerned primarily with personal glory. See, for example, the following passage:

Gilgamesh will not leave any son alone for his father.

Day and night his behaviour is overbearing.

He is the shepherd of Uruk the Sheepfold,

He is their shepherd, yet []¹⁷

¹⁶ All line references from the *Odyssey* are from Richmond Lattimore's translation.

Powerful, superb, knowledgeable, and expert,
 Gilgamesh will not leave young girls alone,
 The daughters of warriors, the brides of young men.
 Anu often hears their complaints. (1.2)

Gilgamesh is irresponsible and does not seem to care much at all for the well-being of his people, since he himself is the cause of their grief and is unwilling to change. The young men around the town have much to fear from him, as do the young girls. He is no stranger to sensuous delights, nor to indulging in whatever manner he pleases. He is described as unceasingly overbearing, and it apparently is so bad that the people have often turned to their god, Anu, for some sort of resolution. In addition, Gilgamesh is unwilling to listen to a council of his elders. He announces:

Listen to me, young men []
 Young men of Uruk, who know []
 I am adamant: I shall take the road to Humbaba.
 I shall face unknown opposition, I shall ride along an unknown
 road. (3.6)

¹⁷ Due to the nature of the tablets from which *Gilgamesh* is translated, it is necessary to represent gaps in the text graphically. I have here chosen to use a set of brackets with a single space between them. It must be understood that the length of the gaps varies and should not necessarily be taken as only one space or even just one word. In addition, where Dalley, the translator, has provided text that is possibly what would appear in the gaps, I have gotten rid of her question marks, parentheses, and brackets, and I have simply included her text.

In response to this statement, the elders say to him, “You are still young, Gilgamesh, you are impetuous to [], / But you do not know what you will find []” (3.6). This is significant for two reasons. First, it adds to the portrayal of his character. Gilgamesh receives extraordinary praise for attributes such as strength and knowledge. However, in the opinion of the wise council, he is not ready to go. He is young and impetuous. They do not trust in his maturity to go to fight Humbaba. Second, his impetuous nature is underscored by the fact that he actually goes on the journey. He proves the council’s criticism of him by acting in the very way they described him—he does not listen to them.

It is clear that before the descent into the underworld Gilgamesh is concerned primarily with himself. He indulges his desires whenever and however he wants, which is apparent not only from his actions toward the young men and women of Uruk (which is mistreatment to the point that the subjects have to seek assistance from their god), but also from his dismissal of the advice of the council of his elders. He is concerned primarily with obtaining immortality for himself through great deeds. He is going to face Humbaba in order to garner an everlasting reputation.

However, seeing the death of his friend, Enkidu, causes a change in Gilgamesh. His motivation for embarking on his trip to the underworld is,

according to Kluger, "his grief over the lost friend."¹⁸ It is Enkidu's death that prompts Gilgamesh to make this journey. Kluger observes:

It appears that [Gilgamesh] has to experience his friend's death on a still deeper level. Enkidu's death is becoming for him the experience of death as such. It seems that for the first time he has been struck by the awareness that man has to die and that this applies also to him. As a collective being, he had, of course, known it. He had seen people die, but up to now he had not fully realized it.¹⁹

This is evident when Gilgamesh, roaming the open country mourning Enkidu, says, "Shall I die too? Am I not like Enkidu? / Grief has entered my innermost being, / I am afraid of Death, and so I roam the open country" (9.1). His questions to himself demonstrate that he is now acutely aware of his own mortality. Thus, after Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh is left with a desire for immortality, and this precipitates his underworld experience. This immortality differs, however, from that he was seeking through great deeds. The immortality he seeks at this point is literal. He wants to avoid death altogether, not just figuratively by being preserved in a bard's song.

¹⁸ Kluger 159

¹⁹ Kluger 159

Thus, after the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh embarks on his trip to the “far-away.” Since “far-away” is the epithet of Ut-Napishtim, it is safe to say that this refers to his trip to see the same. He arrives at the mountain pass and encounters the Scorpion-people (9.2). The Scorpion-Man who addresses Gilgamesh tells him that it is impossible to traverse the mountain pass. No one has ever done it on account of the darkness. However, Gilgamesh remains firm and eventually enters the mountains. After traveling through an immense darkness—which makes his transferal into the underworld more apparent—he encounters an alewife called Suduri (9.6). Through his conversation with her, he discovers the method by which he might reach Ut-Napishtim: there is a boatman, Ur-Shanabi, who is able to ferry people across the Apsu—the “domain of sweet, fresh water beneath the earth”²⁰—to see Ut-Napishtim (10.2). Once in the presence of Ut-Napishtim, Gilgamesh asks him how he might become immortal, and Ut-Napishtim answers, “For a start, you must not sleep for six days and seven nights” (11.4). Gilgamesh fails this test, but Ut-Napishtim tells him of another way: a life-giving plant that is not easy to obtain, but will bring “rejuvenation” (11.6). Upon returning to the surface, he proclaims to Ur-Shanabi: “This plant is a plant to cure crisis! / With it a man may win the breath of life. / I shall take it back to Uruk the Sheepfold” (11.6). Instead of claiming it for his own, Gilgamesh

²⁰ Dalley 318

decides to share the plant with the rest of his city. His experience in the underworld and with Enkidu's death has caused him to change, and this change involves thinking of his people at this crucial moment. Almost immediately after discovering the plant, Gilgamesh stops to rest and the plant is stolen by a snake (11.6). In thinking of his city, he has lost for himself a chance for this second immortality and to grow young again.

BEOWULF

Before discussing Beowulf's trip to the underworld, it is helpful to have an understanding of the cultural ethics of his time. The hero is expected to demonstrate the characteristics implied by "the Anglo-Saxon word 'treow,'"²¹ and they are "1. Truthful behavior; 2. Faithfulness, in the sense of loyalty; 3. Keeping of word or promise."²² Schücking goes on to add a fourth item to this list. He writes: "An additional Germanic feature, not infrequent, is the emphasis on the duty of revenge."²³ These four characteristics, argues Schücking, are what define the Anglo-Saxon hero. The idea of revenge is further discussed by Hill.

²¹ Schücking 36

²² Schücking 36

²³ Schücking 37

He warns the reader against applying modern understandings to the medieval epic in the following passage:

We think of revenge as something extra-legal, as something to be replaced by systems of payment or some other form of non-lethal settlement, such as outlawing the offending person or party. But many societies, including Germanic societies, do not see revenge in exactly these ways; nor does the Beowulf poet in the world he dramatizes for us. Acts of vengeance can be good and jurally definitive.²⁴

Thus, the reader sees that vengeance, in Beowulf's society, was not viewed as evil and unnecessary, but as the normal course of how disputes were handled and it is thus reasonable to say that it is an admirable quality in the hero that he pursues this vengeance. Hill goes on to discuss another essential element of the Anglo-Saxon hero: generosity. He writes: "Gift giving . . . establishes an important, continuing reciprocity: gifts, trust, and honour on the lord's part for service, honour, and loyalty on the retainer's part."²⁵ A salient example of this gift-giving relationship occurs when Beowulf is fighting the dragon. The reader is told:

No help or backing was to be had then

²⁴ Hill 29

²⁵ Hill 88

from [Beowulf's] high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
broke ranks and ran for their lives
to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
sorrow welled up; in a man of worth
the claims of kinship cannot be denied.

His name was Wiglaf. (2596-2602)

It is clear here, since Wiglaf is referred to as a "a man of worth" that those who come to the aid of their lord are to be preferred over those who do not. Soon after that, the reader finds the reason for this man's loyalty in the following passage:

When [Wiglaf] saw his lord
tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,
how well he lived among the Waegmundings,
the freehold he inherited from his father before him.

He could not hold back. (2604-2609)

This demonstrates that Wiglaf was acting out of a sense of duty to his lord who had bestowed many gifts upon him. Thus, we see that the Anglo-Saxon hero is defined by honesty, loyalty, vengeance, and generosity.

Beowulf, before his descent, is obsessed with his own personal glory. That Beowulf was a glory seeker is apparent in several passages. First, when he arrives at Hrothgar's court and begins speaking, he tells of his many accomplishments and how he intends "to be a match for Grendel" (425), who has proven to be better than a great many Danes. One of these same Danes, Unferth, accuses Beowulf, saying:

Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca
 in a swimming match on the open sea,
 risking the water just to prove that you could win?
 It was sheer vanity made you venture out
 on the main deep. (506-510)

Beowulf's response really only bolsters Unferth's accusation: rather than denying what has been said about him, Beowulf responds, "We'd been children together and we grew up / daring ourselves to outdo each other, / boasting and urging each other to risk / our lives on the sea" (535-538). Here is admission from Beowulf's own mouth that he was, in his youth at least, extremely competitive in his search for glory. Then, as now when he enters Hrothgar's mead-hall, he was willing to risk his life in the pursuit of glory, as seen in the following lines:

I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
 As I sat in the boat with my band of men,

I meant to perform to the uttermost
 what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
 in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,
 prove myself with a proud deed
 or meet my death here in the mead-hall. (632-638)

This illustrates that Beowulf desires glory more than even life itself. He is willing to fight in such a manner that should he not win, he will also not live.

Furthermore, he claims that when he faces the beast, "it won't be a cutting edge [he'll] wield / to mow him down, easily as [he] might" (679-680). He is going to fight Grendel without a weapon. Although, as he states, he is exceedingly skilled with a sword and would probably kill Grendel without much trouble (thus accomplishing his goal of ridding the Danes of this menace), he is going to fight unarmed for the sake of further glory. He could very easily destroy an especially dangerous monster and save many lives. However, he opts to add an element of danger and suspense. He wants people not only to say that he killed Grendel, but also that he did it with his bare hands. Finally, the clearest expression of Beowulf's attitude toward glory is his statement: "Let whoever can / win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, / that will be his best and only bulwark" (1387-1389). In this statement, one can see that Beowulf considers glory the

most important goal, since it allows the hero to achieve a level of immortality because he will be sung about by subsequent generations. This fame will be a “bulwark” against Time’s damaging effects on men’s memories and by extension on the reputations of heroes.

After Beowulf wounds Grendel very badly, the creature’s mother comes to seek revenge. She strikes in the night and then retreats back to the mere. Beowulf decides that this threat, too, must be eliminated. He goes to the mere (this time armed with a sword), following the tracks left behind by the monster. He dives into the water and the fight begins. Although the blade of the sword he takes with him proves ineffective against Grendel’s mother, Beowulf nevertheless succeeds—with supernatural intervention—in removing her head, and afterwards the head of Grendel’s corpse as well. Then something happens which the reader probably would not expect. Beowulf, faced with the treasure horde of the monster family, takes none of it. Instead, he returns to the surface, goes to Heorot and tells Hrothgar of his battle. This is indeed an immediate change from what one would expect, but there is a larger shift in the hero’s character. The poem itself makes a large leap forward in time. Beowulf has become king and has ruled well for quite some time. As evidence, one will consider the fact that Beowulf went on to be a good ruler from two statements made later in the poem. It is said that “the wide kingdom / reverted to Beowulf.

He ruled it well / for fifty winters, grew old and wise / as warden of the land” (2207-2210) and, quite simply, that “he was a good king” (2390). In addition to ruling well, when a dragon appears and begins to harass his people, it is clear that Beowulf goes to face this foe on behalf of his subjects more so than for his own personal glory. He says: “I risked my life / often when I was young. Now I am old, / but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight / for the glory of winning” (2511-2514). It is true that he is still seeking some sort of glory, but it is important to bear in mind the type of glory it is, as well as the mindset he is taking into the fight. He makes a contrast between the way he was as a youth (glory-obsessed) and his character at the point when he is speaking (older and willing to fight as the representative and protector of his people). The operative phrase is “as king of the people.” This demonstrates that Beowulf’s mindset has shifted from that of the self-centered glory-hound to that of the responsible monarch.

In addition, the poet seems intent on making the change in Beowulf extremely clear. Beowulf’s praises are sung throughout the entire poem. For example, upon hearing Beowulf’s name, Hrothgar recounts stories he has heard of him, saying that he heard from a group of his sailors “marvelous tales about him: / a thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty / in the grip of each hand” (379-381). However, there is nevertheless one comment that leaves the

reader with the impression that Beowulf was not always well thought of and was believed to be inadequate for ruling. This is derived from the statement:

He had been poorly regarded
 for a long time, was taken by the Geats
 for less than he was worth: and their lord too
 had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.
 They firmly believed that he lacked force,
 that the prince was a weakling; but presently
 every affront to his deserving was reversed. (2183-2189)

This statement demonstrates that, in the opinion of those very Geats who had thought him unfit as a ruler, he is now different, of a better quality than before, due to his underwater trials with the monster. Furthermore, Hrothgar himself adds his own opinion on Beowulf's level of fitness to rule. He says:

If it should come to pass
 that Hrethel's descendant [Hygelac] dies beneath a spear,
 if deadly battle or the sword blade or disease
 fells the prince who guards your people
 and you are still alive, then I firmly believe
 the seafaring Geats won't find a man
 worthier of acclaim as their king and defender

than you. (1845-1852)

These two passages demonstrate that Beowulf is now fit to rule his people. The reader also finds out that

Hygelac fell

and the shelter of Heardred's shield proved useless

against the aggression of the Shylfings:

ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,

they came against him and his conquering nation,

and with cruel force cut him down. (2201-2206)

Beowulf is immediately made king, and the process of him becoming worthy of rule is completed. All of these instances serve to highlight the change that has taken place.

Thus, the trip to the underworld for Beowulf brought a change in his essential character. As king, he is still concerned with being remembered, but he is no longer the unceasingly competitive spirit he once was. He goes out to face the dragon that threatens his own people out of a sense of responsibility, not to seek further glory. Also, without that change brought on by his trip into the underworld, he would never have been king at all, let alone one who was considered to have ruled well.

ODYSSEUS

Odysseus, before his descent, is glory-seeking, just like the other two heroes under consideration. However, like the other two, he also undergoes a change. I argue that, given the knowledge he gains from Teiresias in the underworld, he is more focused on arriving home. The trip to the underworld and the knowledge Odysseus gains there are the catalysts that precipitate his being intensely committed to returning to Ithaca, so much so that he even risks his men's lives.

Before any of this can be addressed, however, it is necessary to establish exactly what was expected of a hero in the Homeric society. Adkins provides an outline for this system. He observes that the Homeric system involves the pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame, which is to say the difference between being *agathos* and being *aischron*—the former denoting the fulfillment of the code and the accompanying honor, the latter referring to failure to live up to the code and the corresponding shame.²⁶ Indeed, Adkins writes that “the attainment of success and fame . . . and the avoidance of failure and disgrace . . . are the chief aims of Homeric man.”²⁷ To achieve honor in this situation, “one must be brave, skilful, and successful in war and in peace; and one must possess the wealth and (in peace) the leisure which are at once the necessary conditions

²⁶ Adkins 30

²⁷ Adkins 57

for the development of these skills and the natural reward of their successful employment.”²⁸ Similarly, the opposite of these actions will bring ultimate shame upon a Homeric hero. Adkins writes that “to fail, in war or in peace . . . entails . . . a feeling of shame combined with and resulting from the words and actions which a failure in Homeric society will have to suffer from his fellows.”²⁹

Another useful way to evaluate the Homeric system is to look at the relationship between those deemed heroic and the rest of the society. Each of these has a claim on the other, as Adkins says, the “system . . . gives society a strong claim against the *agathos*, but the *agathos* an equally strong claim against society.”³⁰ The claim that the society has against the hero is to expect that he will fight at the forefront of the battle and protect the people from whom he receives much honor and many gifts. The method that the society has to make sure that the hero fulfills his obligation is, as Adkins points out, “what people will say, the *dēmou phatis*,”³¹ which he goes on to describe as “the most important standard.”³² On the other end of the relationship is, of course, what the hero can expect from the society. This aspect of the Homeric code is summarized succinctly by Sarpedon in a speech to Glaukos in the *Iliad*. He says:

Glaukos, why is it you and I are honoured before others

²⁸ Adkins 33

²⁹ Adkins 33-34

³⁰ Adkins 46

³¹ Adkins 48

³² *ibid.*

with pride of place, the choice meats and the filled wine cups
 in Lykia, and all men look on us as if we were immortals,
 and we are appointed a great piece of land by the banks of Xanthos,
 good land, orchard and vineyard, and ploughland for the planting
 of wheat? (12.310-314)

This question demonstrates the rewards of being a good warrior. These two men, as a result of their valor in battle, are awarded the prizes enumerated.

Later in this same speech, the reader observes the previously mentioned corresponding obligation incumbent upon those receiving such gifts. Sarpedon says, "Therefore it is our duty in the forefront of the Lykians / to take our stand, and bear our part of the blazing of battle / [...] let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others" (12.315-328).

Therefore, we see in the Homeric code an innate sense of responsibility. The heroes are required to fight where the battle is the thickest in order to protect the people over whom they rule and from whom they receive all the spoils mentioned above. Thus, one sees that the pursuit of honor and glory, combined with the avoidance of shame, is the driving force behind the code for Homeric heroes.

Turning back to Odysseus, the reader sees that he is primarily concerned with personal glory and displaying his craftiness. Illustrative of this aspect of

Odysseus' character is the encounter with Polyphemus. In the process of breaking free from the Cyclops, the Greeks blind him. He demands the name of who is responsible, and Odysseus tells him that his name is "Nobody." However, once he and his men, having escaped, are safely out of range, Odysseus yells to Polyphemus:

Cyclops, if any mortal man ever asks you who it was
that inflicted upon your eye this shameful blinding,
tell him that you were blinded by Odysseus, sacker of cities.

Laertes is his father, and he makes his home in Ithaka. (9.502-505)

Here the reader sees Odysseus' desire for glory and to use his intellect to obtain it illustrated simultaneously. As Griffin observes, "[Odysseus] yields to a temptation of heroism in revealing his own name in a shout of triumph."³³ He was crafty enough to give a false name at first, but eventually succumbs to that desire for glory. His outburst turns out to be ill-advised, since it leads to later trouble with Poseidon—trouble that causes serious misfortunes for the hero and his men. The motivation for yelling this is that he wants to make sure that he is credited with the deeds he has accomplished. Fame would certainly be far-reaching for a man who overcame such an enormous adversary. The manner in which he has bested this foe is also something Odysseus wants to be

³³ Griffin 96

remembered. He wants people to know not only that he managed to escape from the Cyclops, but also that he did so by using his intellect.

Odysseus' trip to the underworld is the result of Circe's instructions, and it consists of him going to the edge of the underworld and making a blood sacrifice in order to summon the shades—primarily Teiresias, the main character with whom this analysis is concerned—to talk to him. Although some scholars have expressed doubts concerning the authenticity of the descent to the underworld and its corresponding relationship to the rest of the poem, I believe the episode is entirely relevant. One opposing voice is that of Denys Page, who observes that if the goal in making the trip to the underworld is to obtain information necessary for his return home (as it is stated), then the motive “is flatly contradicted by the following events. Circe, who gives him this motive, is herself the person who will describe the journey: Teiresias will do nothing of the sort.”³⁴ Page's point is certainly well argued. However, as Sourvinou-Inwood observes, Page might be, in a manner of speaking, missing the point. The main idea here is not that Odysseus does not accomplish his goal of gaining certain information from Teiresias, but that something necessary does in fact take place. It must be kept in mind that “the advice that will not be duplicated and supplemented by Circe concerns Ithaca. Teiresias tells Odysseus about the Suitors, foretells his revenge,

³⁴ Page 32

gives advice about what must be done after that, and finally prophesies Odysseus' death in happy old age. Thus he articulates closure."³⁵ And, as Reinhardt points out, it is fitting that Teiresias is the one who brings this information to Odysseus. Reinhardt writes that "the way to be shown has become an inner way—no longer the way over the seas but through the cliffs and dangers of one man's fate."³⁶ Similarly, Dimock observes that the information "concerns not only his course through the Mediterranean to Ithaca but his course through life up to and including his death."³⁷ Thus is Teiresias' information useful to Odysseus in more ways than one. He sees what he must do in a literal sense to make his way back to Ithaca, but he also sees that, once he gets there, the rest of his life will be lived relatively peacefully and that he will die an old man. He gets to have it both ways. He not only gets to live a long life with his wife and son, but he also has the enduring fame he has won by fighting in and contributing to the victory of the war at Troy. These points help to establish that the trip to the underworld is integral to the story in a way that Page does not admit; and also bolsters the assertion that this passage has meaning in relation to the overarching narrative. People do not always get the results they desire, but that does not mean that the results are useless or somehow unrelated to what is

³⁵ Sourvinou-Inwood 74

³⁶ Reinhardt 110

³⁷ Dimock 145

happening in their lives. In this way, Odysseus' trip to the underworld must not be viewed as tacked-on or unnecessary.

Furthermore, the trip to the underworld is linked to the rest of the poem in another way—one that involves the change the hero will undergo as a result of the trip. While in the underworld (more specifically while speaking to Teiresias), Odysseus receives information that causes him to focus more intently on returning to his home. Of course, his overall goal throughout the entire poem is to do just that, but one notices a shift in the intensity of his desire to do so after his discussion with Teiresias in the underworld. Circe advises Odysseus by saying, "Then, leader of the host, [Teiresias] will soon come to you, / and he will tell you the way to go, the stages of your journey, / and tell you how to make your way home on the sea where the fish swarm" (10.538-540). Once he has done as she has instructed (which is to "sacrifice one ram and one black female" [10.527]), he first encounters the shade of Elpenor (11.51), to whom he speaks about the manner of his death. He finds out that his comrade fell from the roof and broke his neck while the others were preparing for the trip. Then he encounters the ghost of his mother (11.84), another person he was unaware had died. However, despite his eagerness to speak to his mother, he holds her from the blood until he can question Teiresias. Finally, the shade of the seer does approach and proceeds to tell Odysseus about what will happen on his journey.

He tells him that he will arrive home, after much suffering, if he and his men can avoid harming the cattle of Helios when they put in at the island of Thrinakia (11.104-111), but that, should they harm the cattle, Odysseus will return home “in bad case, with the loss of all [his] companions, / in someone else’s ship, and [will] find troubles in [his] household” (11.114-115). What Teiresias says next is the catalyst that intensifies Odysseus’ desire to return home. He tells the hero that there are “insolent men, who are eating away [his] livelihood / and courting [his] godlike wife and offering gifts to win her” (11.116-117). It is my contention that this knowledge of what is taking place at his home in Ithaca is what causes the change in Odysseus. The thought of his house being destroyed and his wife being assailed by other men is too much for him to bear, and he is now more resolute than ever to return.

His haste is immediately evident when Circe warns him about Skylla. Of this creature Circe says, “No one, / not even a god encountering her, could be glad at that sight” (12.87-88), and she reiterates after an objection from Odysseus that “it is best to run away from [Skylla]” (12.120) and the beast may very well “snatch away once more the same number / of men” (12.123-124). She tells Odysseus explicitly that his men’s lives will be in danger. However, later, as the Greeks approach Skylla’s cave, the reader learns that Odysseus “had not / yet spoken of Skylla, a plague that could not be dealt with, / for fear that [his]

companions might be terrified and give over / their rowing, and take cover inside the ship" (12.222-225). His actions certainly have consequences. He relates that as they were passing the island, "Skylla out of the hollow vessel snatched six / of [his] companions, the best of them for strength and hands' work" (12.245-246). This is horrifying, and the audience must assume that if he were not in such a hurry, he never would have allowed this fate to befall his crew. Odysseus deliberately puts his men in danger, which is an indication of his renewed haste to return home.

Thus, we see that the information Odysseus has gained from Teiresias in the underworld causes him to focus more intently on his overarching goal of returning home to Ithaca. He is not able to bear the information that his house is being destroyed by strangers and that his wife is being wooed by the same, so he puts on haste to such an extent that some of his men lose their lives for the sake of expediency. This is the change that takes place for Odysseus as a result of his trip to the underworld.

Therefore, we have seen that Propp's theory may be extended to include the trips into the underworld of the heroes of three great oral epics from the Western tradition. Each of the three in one way or another made a trip to an alternate area outside the realm of the other events of the poem. Each of them made it there by a means enumerated by Propp in his book. Also, we have seen

that Propp's theory may be pushed even further to assert that the descent was responsible for some change in the hero. Moreover, the portion of Joseph Campbell's monomyth that deals with the trip to the underworld is valuable to keep in mind when evaluating the epics in this way. This change was in each instance necessary for the advancement of the story, as well as for the development of the character. One can see that, whereas Gilgamesh was concerned primarily with himself and winning glory and renown for himself, he grows to have a concern for his people as a result of his experience with Enkidu's death and the trip into the "far-away" that make him into someone capable of ruling with the good of his people in mind. At the moment when he has in his hands the very thing he has been searching for in one way or another throughout the entire poem—immortality—he thinks of his people and not merely of himself. Similarly, it is apparent that Beowulf's struggle with Grendel's mother in the depths allowed him to prove that he was fit to rule, as well as to change the nature of the glory he sought after. After saving the Danes from the threats and returning home, he is made king and is reported to have ruled well, a fact which is attested to by his fighting the dragon. Finally, the reader sees that Odysseus leaves the underworld with a renewed and vigorous desire to return home to Ithaca. Obviously, returning home is what he has been trying to do throughout the epic, but one notices in him a haste which was not present before.

In the case of the latter two heroes, it is also important to bear in mind the heroic tradition from which their stories arise. Each of them operates within the heroic code of their time and society. Odysseus' fulfillment of the Homeric code is less obvious in the *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*. However, the reader is aware of his exploits in the *Iliad* and how they fulfill the code. In addition, although not as prevalent, the code still informs the events of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus still seeks glory and fame as shown in his encounter with Polyphemus, and he is still responsible for the well-being of his men, which helps to highlight his haste when he deliberately puts them in danger. In these ways, although to a much lesser extent than in the *Iliad*, we see that the Homeric code is still present in Odysseus.

Each of these characters enters a mysterious area—the dangerous mountains, the deadly mere, the land of the dead itself. Each of them faces a challenge and emerges victorious. Along the way each battles monsters, endures incredible physical dangers, and encounters fantastic creatures—all for the sake of winning fame and glory. However, by the end, each of them, within the context of their larger quest, finds something in the context of a trip to the underworld that results in a change that helps them along their primary journey, although not always in the way they might expect. Each of these characters

encounters death very closely, and not one of them leaves the experience unchanged.

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