

The Heroic Cycle: *The Odyssey* and *Star Wars*

Most people don't consider a "boring" epic poem from ancient Greece in the same category as a modern science fiction adventure like *Star Wars*, but those stories actually have a lot in common. Joseph Campbell's heroic cycle is a series of steps that all epic heroes go through, and the first story to include all the steps is *The Odyssey*. Composed by a poet named Homer a thousand years before Christ, *The Odyssey* still stands as the primary example of a homecoming epic. Created by George Lucas in the late 1970s, *Star Wars* probably needs no introduction to modern audiences: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." Even though they are separated by 3000 years, both *The Odyssey* and *Star Wars* illustrate similar elements of the heroic cycle.

The first stage of the heroic cycle is the call to adventure. Something draws the hero out of his ordinary world (Campbell). Odysseus, the hero of *The Odyssey*, is called to fight in the Trojan War (Homer). The murder of his aunt and uncle draws Luke Skywalker, the hero of *Star Wars* into his epic adventure (Lucas). While Odysseus resists the call, pretending to be insane so they will not take him away from his family, Luke Skywalker has actually been seeking a reason to leave his home planet. In both stories, the hero is pulled from his everyday environment.

After the call to adventure, heroes go through an initiation, where they learn who their friends and enemies are (Campbell). Odysseus's protector is the goddess Athena, who watches over him throughout *The Odyssey*. In Book VIII, Athena disguises herself as a little girl and leads Odysseus to the palace of the king who will help him get home to Ithaca (Homer). Without Athena's help, Odysseus would be lost. This is just like the way that Obi-Wan Kenobi helps Luke Skywalker. Although he isn't a god, Obi-Wan does have a magical power called the Force, which he uses to protect Luke. When the Imperial forces are searching for rebels like Luke, Obi-Wan tells them, with a magical wave of his hand, "These aren't the droids you're looking for," and the befuddled soldiers leave them alone (Lucas). Of course, both heroes have other, less magical, helpers and protectors as well, but it is during this initiation stage when the heroes discover their friends. And their enemies. Poseidon, the raging god of the seas is out to destroy Odysseus because in Book IX of *The Odyssey*, the hero blinded Poseidon's cyclops son, Polyphemus. Luke Skywalker's enemy (and, spoiler alert, father) is Darth Vader, who wants to turn Luke to the Dark Side. Clearly, both of these epics include an initiation of the heroes.

Another stage of the heroic cycle is the transformation, where the hero discards his old self and takes on a new role (Campbell). For Odysseus, this means getting rid of his dangerous pride and arrogance. In the movie version of *The Odyssey* directed by Francis Ford Coppola, his pride is clear in the scene after the Trojan War when Odysseus shouts in triumph, "You see this, you gods of sea and sky! I did this! Me! A mortal man!" His ten years' worth of wanderings on the journey home are full of sorrow, as he encounters monsters and witches who prevent him from reaching his goal. When he learns that man is nothing without the gods, he is allowed to return home (Homer). In the first *Star Wars* trilogy, Luke must transform himself into a Jedi, undergoing training with Yoda in order to join the knighthood of those who represent the good side of the Force against "the dark side." The old Jedi master reminds Luke, "You must let go of your fear" (Lucas). It is by becoming a Jedi that Luke is finally able to face Darth Vader. Odysseus and Luke undergo different kinds of transformations, but both become better people in the process.

Elements of the heroic cycle are apparent in both *The Odyssey* and *Star Wars*. Luke and Odysseus have a call to adventure, an initiation, and a transformation before they achieve their legendary status. So the next time you complain about one of those boring old poems in English, just remember that they often share the same story pattern with your favorite epic movies.