

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 (Hamby). Odysseus, the hero of *The Odyssey*, is called to fight in the Trojan War, a story that would have been well known to all of Homer's original audience. According to legend, Odysseus did not actually want to fight, and he resisted the efforts to recruit him by pretending to be insane (Skidmore). Ultimately, he must sail off for war with the rest of the Greek army. While he sails on the ocean, Luke Skywalker, the hero of *Star Wars*, goes off to his adventure in space a bit more willingly. The murder of his aunt and uncle draws him into the battle. Luke has secretly been looking for a reason to leave his home planet, but when he returns to find the house burned and the bodies of his aunt and uncle charred by invading imperial forces, there is nothing tethering him to the place he has always called home (Lucas). As Luke ventures into that "galaxy far far away" to defeat the Dark Side, Odysseus ventures across the ocean to defeat the Trojans and bring back Helen. Both epics begin, as it indicates in Joseph Campbell's Heroic Cycle, when 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 (Hamby). 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 (Skidmore). Without Athena's help, Odysseus would be lost. This is just like the way that Obi-Wan Kenobi helps Luke Skywalker. Obi-Wan Kenobi becomes Luke Skywalker's supernatural helper, mentor, and advisor. 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. Both Odysseus and Luke have other, less magical, helpers and protectors as well. Once Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he depends on his son, Telemachus, to help him battle the suitors that have overrun his kingdom (Skidmore). Luke Skywalker has the droids C3PO and R2D2 join him on his adventure, where he ultimately meets up with Princess Leia, Han Solo, and Chewbacca, and together they battle the forces of evil in the galaxy (Lucas). During this initiation stage, heroes not only discover their friends but also their enemies. Besides the suitors who have been trying to steal his wife, Odysseus's primary foe is the god Poseidon, who has beleaguered the hero throughout his journey home (Skidmore). Luke Skywalker's enemy (and, spoiler alert, father) is Darth Vader, who wants to turn Luke to the Dark Side. It is during his travels that Luke begins to train with what will become his special talisman: a light saber, the weapon of the Jedi (Lucas). In all these ways, the adventures of Luke and Odysseus mimic the aspects of the initiation portion of the heroic cycle.

Another stage of the heroic cycle is the transformation, where the hero....

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