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There Is No Place Like Home: The Struggle to Find Peace After the War

“If his fate must have him see his dear ones once again
and reach his sturdy home, his native land, then let him
struggle back – a battered man, with all his comrades
lost, and on a ship of strangers.
In his house, let him meet grief” (180)

When Odysseus leaves Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War, it will be twenty years before he can set foot on his beloved homeland again. While the battle costs him ten years of his life, the desperate struggle to make it home lasts just as long as he is incessantly confronted by obstacles and situations that tempt, threaten, and deceive him. The physical return home from battle for veterans in our time is swift and quick, but the emotional homecoming to the place where they feel comfortable and safe is burdened by obstacles that may forestall readjustment for years, maybe decades afterward. When we examine Odysseus’ voyage from island to island and the circumstances that prevent him from returning home, his adventure acts as an allegory “for the real problems facing combat veterans” (Shay xv), whose social reintegration is severely impeded by the trauma caused by atrocities performed and witnessed in battle. The soldier searches for ways to lessen his guilt and pain, deal with the ways his personality has changed, make peace with his fallen comrades, and try to accept that the war is in the past. Homer understands the debilitating effects combat elicits in men and shows us that Odysseus’ physical journey back to Ithaca is a metaphor for a soldier’s emotional struggle to return to a state of safety, acceptance, and comfort after the war is over.

The pain in the heart of a combat veteran runs deep, as he is afflicted endlessly by memories of the comrades he lost, agonizing over the ways they could have been saved,

despondent in a civilian life that has lost authenticity. Upon returning from Vietnam in the sixties and seventies, as much as seventy-three percent of combat soldiers turned to drugs or alcohol to alleviate their indignation, remorse and anguish (Shay 36). Homer recognizes the beneficial effects of sedative agents when Helen, noticing the “twinging ache of grief” (Shay 37) in her guests during a story about the Trojan War, serves them an “anodyne” making them “incapable of tears that day” (Shay 37). Later, in the land of the “Lotus Eaters” (Mandelbaum 172), Odysseus’ men, “worn out and sick at heart” (Shay 35) eat the lotus fruit causing them to “disremember their homeward path” (Mandelbaum 172). Rather than promoting its mitigating effect, Homer warns the “mild magic of forgetfulness” (Shay 37) is only temporary, and that hiding pain beneath a blanket of artificial contentment forestalls any real attempt to regain the happiness and the stability held before the war. The heinous truth about drug use is propagated further when the drug Circe offers Odysseus’ men “wipe[s] from their memories any thought of home” (Shay 38) and transforms them into pigs. This effect “moralize[s] on what drug and alcohol addiction can do” (Shay 38) as men essentially become filthy animals, dehumanized by their rampant desire for the next fix. To be home means to be “emotionally present and engaged” (Shay 38), but this is not possible when a person’s mental state is manipulated by drugs. Homer understands the desire for this kind of emotional appeasement, but he warns that it prevents the attainment of what the soldier is actually searching for and in need of: to be home again.

While Odysseus did not partake in any of the above mentioned drug use, he uses sexual intercourse, during prolonged affairs with Circe and Calypso, as a means by which to ease his mental anguish. Many Vietnam Veterans have claimed that sexual activity

during and after the war helped to “let you know you are still a human being” (Shay 115), and some contend it worked better than alcohol to cause the momentary relief described above. We learn, however, this temporary “physical and emotional peace” (Shay 118) does not cause permanent healing, as we observe Odysseus on the shores of Calypso’s island “sighing and grieving” (Shay 97) still. Though ultimately unsatisfying, these seductive diversions from an inhospitable reality tempt the soldier to remain away from home, in this altered state, fearing this may be the only relief he can ever experience.

Choosing to submit to a life of drug use seems more immediately rewarding than pursuing the arduous task of readjusting to family and friends. This is partially because the survival mechanisms developed during war, and the personality changes resulting from prolonged battle, linger afterward, frustrating and impeding successful reintegration into civilian life. Upon arriving at Isamarus, the first stop after leaving Troy, Odysseus and his men sack the city and kill many residents. Though a common practice in Ancient Greece, the violent nature of this action so soon after the war, illustrates the common tendency of veterans to “[remain] in combat mode” (Shay 20) after the war ends. Today this might mean pursuing a criminal career or frequently expressing violent and aggressive behavior. Having just pillaged Troy after its defeat, the need for food and money is not what is driving this attack. Instead, the men are doing what now seems to come naturally to them, after so many years of fighting, though it has devastating effects when many of the soldiers are killed. A desire to avoid the “boredom” (Shay 33) that accompanies civilian life may also be promoting this behavior. After all, these men just spent the past few years fighting for their lives, experiencing the constant exhilaration that each day may be their last. They find it difficult to “pause, to make an end, to rust

unburnish'd, not to shine in use" (Tennyson 22, 23), and continuously seek to quench their thirst for excitement. Odysseus challenges the Cyclops with this intention in mind. Still not in need of more food, and aware that there is danger ahead, he leads his men into Polyphemus' cave where, again, many of them meet their deaths. These tragic consequences illustrate the destructive nature of Odysseus' actions, and show that they will only serve to cause more pain and devastation. Homer believes this flirtation with danger, and the residual combative tendencies mentioned above, render the soldier incapable of returning home, literally, if it results in his death, and emotionally, if he becomes too careless and loses sight of his homecoming altogether.

Readjustment into society, however, can seem fruitless when wartime experience creates the inability to trust other people after leaving battle. Odysseus' failure to trust his comrades with vital information on several occasions unnecessarily prolongs his journey to reach Ithaca. He does not tell his men that the mysterious bag he receives from Aeolus contains winds to guide them home quickly, and should not be opened. His comrades, suspicious, open the bag and free the winds, ruining their opportunity to arrive home safe and soon. Also, because Odysseus does not tell his men they will be punished if they slaughter the cattle of Helios, his entire crew is killed. Homer warns, specifically, that a soldier's inability to trust others will make his search for an emotional homecoming much longer and much more arduous than it has to be. After all, if he can not trust his family and his friends, he can not make use of their support and love to help him reintegrate into his society. The struggle to do it alone will seem incredibly daunting, if not impossible.

Re-establishing trust in loved ones after war, however, can be a difficult task. Due to the persistent atmosphere of death a veteran has been subjected to, he is at the mercy of emotions many of us can not imagine, and he doubts his family can understand his guilt and pain. The enduring presence of the dead in the thoughts of the veteran divides him from his friends and family, and obstructs his attempts to leave the war behind him and move on. This idea is represented by Odysseus' journey through the underworld as he communicates with people from his past. He encounters Ajax, who even in death refuses to forgive him for winning Achilles armor and provoking his suicide. Odysseus pleads, "Dismiss your wrath" (Mandelbaum 231), but with no avail. Though he begs Ajax, face to face, he is denied forgiveness, illustrating that the remorse and anguish a veteran feels regarding the dead seem as though they can never be remedied. When Odysseus encounters Elpenor, the dead soul begs, "do not abandon me, unwept, unburied" (Mandelbaum 215), fearing that he may not be remembered after his death. This demonstrates why a soldier, like Odysseus, though suffering, refuses to leave the memories of his fallen comrades behind, understanding that in the same position he would not want to be forgotten either. Odysseus chooses to "keep [Elpenor's] memory alive" (Shay 80) because to forget him would mean to dishonor him. As a result, though the veteran needs to make peace with the guilt he feels toward the dead in order to rebuilt a civilian life and leave the war behind, his fear that he may dishonor his comrades causes him to remain wallowing in sorrow, denying the present to respect the past.

This obsession with the dead and the events at battle are what allow the Sirens to have such overwhelming power over Odysseus and his crew when they sail nearby. They "know the Argives and the Trojans' griefs: their tribulations on the plain of Troy"

(Mandelbaum 243), and it is these “final truths” (Shay 87) about what they and the enemy did and suffered in battle that compel men to risk their lives to hear the Sirens’ song. In other words, the opportunity to find meaning and reason in such a violent mess is so important, a soldier may give up anything to find it. Circe warns Odysseus, “whoever, unaware, comes close and hears the Sirens’ voice will nevermore draw near his wife, his home, [or] his infants” (Mandelbaum 238). As Homer illustrates, discovering “complete and final truth” (Shay 87) is impossible, and the obsession to find it, for soldiers already at home, separates him from his loved ones because it is a “memory unconnected to community” (Shay 90). Quite literally, if Odysseus tries to learn the truth from the Sirens he will die trying and never make it home. Similarly, as long as a veteran pursues the futile quest to find the ultimate truth of wartimes past instead of choosing to find meaning in his present civilian life, he will never truly be home. Instead he will remain consumed by the thought of his war and the guilt that accompanies it, isolated and eternally unsatisfied.

Performed for the first time almost three thousand years ago, *The Odyssey* captures the immutable, inexorable, devastating ways that a veteran’s homecoming can be forestalled, even prevented, today as well as in antiquity. After witnessing dehumanizing atrocities, committing dreadful acts of violence, and experiencing unbearable loss, a soldier’s life is profoundly changed and readjustment into civil society is not without its obstacles. Odysseus’ adventure back to Ithaca can be perceived as a series of allegorical representations of the trials and tribulations a real veteran must face when trying to return to a state where he feels safe and comfortable. Drug use, personality change, an obsession with the past, and a desire to find meaning in war, each

act to forestall a veteran's homecoming. They trap him in an inert state, encapsulated by his own negative emotions, rendering him unable, or in some cases, unwilling to move forward and move on. What remains to be seen in this epic poem, however, is the way a soldier can be liberated from the chains that bind him to the past. Tiresias tells Odysseus that as soon as he returns to Ithaca and reclaims his throne he must leave again and travel the sea until he finds an island where he can make sacrifices to Poseidon. He is not ready to reestablish his former life until he has made peace with his greatest enemy, who is determined to see him lose his way home. Perhaps Homer is implying a soldier must, above all, make peace with himself and with his war in order to begin to live a normal life. After all, throughout his journey, it is the veteran's own fear, guilt and anguish that prevent his emotional return to his loved ones. Though, as Poseidon willed, Odysseus returned "a battered man" (Mandelbaum 180), his eventual homecoming despite all the forces against him, act as a hope for veterans struggling even today, that even though the pain is strong and sorrow is deep there is "nothing more sweet, more fair for any man than his own land" (Mandelbaum 169) and it is possible to get home again.