

Spiritual Odysseys in Children's Television

The story of Odysseus' wanderings is part of North American story telling to the point that it can be classified as modern folklore. (Hardwick 2007). Although other aspects of Homer's *Odyssey*, such as the Telemachiad and the Phaeacians, have fallen by the wayside, the dangers, temptations, and adventures that Odysseus encounters on his journey home are interwoven throughout much of children's literature (Norton 2003, Huck & Kiefer 2004). Unsurprising, visually appealing encounters with sirens, Cyclopes, and sentient whirlpools often appear in children's television. However, these exciting encounters are only the superficial focus of their stories. Instead, children's television often transforms the myth of Odysseus' journey into a journey of personal growth for the shows' young protagonists.

It is not uncommon for televised adaptations of the wanderings of Odysseus to relegate Odysseus to a secondary role or outright replace him with a younger character. To give a few examples, *Duck Tales'* episode "Homer Sweet Homer" sends Odysseus's nephew, Homer, to retrace his famous relative's steps with the help of the McDuck family, and Odie, a descendant of Odysseus in *Class of the Titans*, encounters Calypso, Scylla, and Aeolus in the episode "Odie-sey." These youthful characters act as stand-ins for the young viewers. As a result, Odysseus becomes older relative or father-figure to the young travelers and an object of inspiration. As the heroes make their journeys, they also struggle with their own personal feelings of weakness, failure, or inferiority and aspire to match Odysseus' accomplishments.

Rather than exploring all instances of this phenomenon, the paper will seek to illuminate the personal growth aspects of Television Odysseys through one example, an episode of *Martha Speaks* called "Truman and the Deep Blue Sea." *Martha Speaks* is a television show aimed at children from ages 4 to 7. The show's main learning objective is to build vocabulary (Martha

Speaks: Program Summary). The show stars a talking dog named Martha, her human owner, 10-year-old Helen Lorraine, and their friends. In the episode "Truman and the Deep Blue Sea," Martha and Helen's neighbor, Truman, wants to come with them on a whale-watching cruise, but is troubled by seasickness. He reads the *Odyssey* and draws inspiration from the story to overcome his seasickness.

The episode begins with Truman daydreaming that he is on Odysseus's ship and convinces the hero to persevere in his quest to return home in spite of the sirens' singing. Later, Truman imagines Odysseus encouraging him with his own words before Truman leaves the comparative safety of his cabin and ventures up to the ship's deck to look for whales. In the end, with Odysseus's help, his strength of will overcomes his weakness of stomach, and he is the first person on the boat to spot a whale.

In the middle of the episode, Truman becomes discouraged and decides that he will never be able to set foot on a ship. His anxiety expresses itself in a dream, with Odysseus encouraging him to overcome his problem, then frantically urging Truman to jump in a rowboat to escape a raging Cyclops. The dream prompts Truman to board the whale-watching boat the next day in spite of his seasickness.

Like Odysseus in "Home Sweet Homer" and "Odie-sey," Truman's Odysseus is both a mentor and an inspiration to Truman. The hero gives him advice and reminds him to have strength in his own convictions. The sirens and the Cyclops become representations of the anxiety that Truman feels as his desire to see whales clashes with his physical weakness. Thus Odysseus' mythical trials become an extended metaphor for Truman's psychological quest to overcome his personal failing and achieve his goal.

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