

Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming Excerpt

“Homer’s *The Odyssey* is the epic homecoming of a Greek fighter from the Trojan War. He was the very last fighter to make it home from Troy and endured the most grueling travel, costing him a full decade on the way. Odysseus’ return ended in a bloody, triumphant shoot-em-up. It is now more than thirty years since the majority of American veterans of the Vietnam War have returned home—physically. Psychologically and socially, however, “many of us aren’t home yet,” in the words of one combat medic.

Odysseus, like Achilles, is remembered as a *hero* of Greek myth. Today we see our heroes as unmixed blessings, almost as though pure beneficence is part of the definition. When we call those firemen and police who rushed to the New York World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, heroes, we have reason to see them as intending only good and to an amazing degree accomplishing it, at the sacrificing of their lives. However, the ancient Greek idea of hero was deeply mixed. Ancient Greek heroes were men of pain who were both needed by their people and *dangerous* to them. Achilles’ withdrawal resulted in numberless Greek deaths; Odysseus’ long return home to Ithaca caused more than seven hundred Ithacan deaths on the way or when he got there. Achilles harmed the Greeks during the war; Odysseus harmed his people after the war. They were both heroes in the ancient Greek sense” (*Shay* 1-2).

In the rest of his book, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, Shay discusses other issues that many of the combat veterans he works with experience (mainly those who served in the Vietnam War) and connections them to Odysseus’ experiences in Homer’s epic poem. Below is a list of several of those plights:

1. Staying in “combat mode”—picking and expecting fights and violence
2. Abusing drugs and alcohol
3. Direct suicidal thoughts
4. Feeling like higher powers (god, fate, etc.) hate him or her
5. Plagued by the memory and guilt of loss of friends and companions
6. Feeling that no place is ever safe
7. Distrust of and/or use of women
8. Feeling surrounded by choices with no good solution
9. Feeling blamed for wrongs or actions that are really someone else’s doing
10. Arriving home and feeling like everything is different (socially, culturally, and even physically)
11. Coldness and/or cruelty shown at times those nearest and dearest (friends and family)