

The Path to Adulthood:
A Boy's Journey of Growing Up in Vuong's "Telemachus"

Exploring the continually changing mindset of the speaker, this paper will argue that Ocean Vuong's poem "Telemachus" parallels the proposed Kubler-Ross Model of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. By means of tracing his passage through these stages, I will argue that the poem dramatizes a boy's transition into adulthood with the last three stanzas as the climax. The stanzas before those final three serve as a journey through each stage of grief, acting as a precursor to his development into an adult. But it is the ending three stanzas that have the greatest impact in portraying the grief and loss of innocence in Telemachus. And in illustrating the pain of a bereaved son, Vuong paints a reflection that everyone goes through loss but that it is a deeply personal pursuit, which is at its core a human experience and has an impact on one's viewpoint on life.

The first stage, denial, starts off with Telemachus's refusal to accept his father's death. Best demonstrated with the son's question, he dejectedly asks, "Do you know who I am, / Ba?" (Vuong 9-10). Vuong's usage of the Vietnamese word "Ba" is intended to represent Telemachus personally addressing his father, creating a more intimate mood between them. It emphasizes the close connection between them and further increases the denial Telemachus felt because he could not accept that the connection vanished with his discovery of Odysseus's death. In the speaker's eyes, he doesn't believe that his father is gone and is instead trying to receive a response from the dead body in front of him. Amidst the loss of time and fading memories, Telemachus's request for his father's recognition of him was to once again create a bridge between them, but their relationship had already devolved to the point where they were complete strangers. The ambiguous state of Telemachus and Odysseus's relationship is clearly present because Telemachus's inquiry towards his father contrasts the caring tone with which he asks the

question, including the word “Ba.” It pushes forward the idea that Telemachus’s relationship with his father was complicated and not simply black-and-white and that it was a constant struggle to connect with him on a personal level. Consequently, a battle within Telemachus’s mind ensued over whether his father was truly dead or not.

Directly after, the second stage, anger, begins with Telemachus observing Odysseus’s fatal injury. After asking if his father knew him, he realizes that “the answer never comes. The answer / is the bullet hole in his back” (Vuong 10-11). The knowledge that an answer from his father will never come led the son to grow resentment towards his death because the son despised that reality of his father’s passing. The use of the absolute, “never,” solidifies the truth of Odysseus’s death, and Telemachus blames it on the bullet hole in his back. The bullet provides the necessary scapegoat to take out his anger over the loss of his father, and it displays the open-ended nature of life often not having set moments for closure. Without any literary embellishments in his declaration, the son observes the truth of his father’s condition in a rational tone and neutral connotation that connotes a somber, frustrated attitude underneath it. He hopes to receive a reply for closure and to know that he wasn’t a stranger to his father, but he can’t accept that life sometimes has no answer and that he has to understand the need to move on through his own determination.

The third stage, bargaining, is established when Telemachus starts checking his father’s body for signs of life. He recounts his experience with “I touch / his ears” (Vuong 16-17) to show an action that comes from him unto his father in a desperate attempt at bringing him back from the dead. By holding on to the image of his father being alive, he creates a falsehood in his head that if he touches his ears to help his father wake up, his harsh reality will be revealed to be a dream. His direct actions to try to bring Odysseus back stem from his self-made guilt where he

believes that he should have taken greater actions to save his father from the fate of death.

Telemachus's bargaining is a clear reflection of the great lengths that he will go towards to keep that sense of normalcy and cling to that belief that life could go back to as it was before. His choice of touching his father's ears points to the subtle signs that Telemachus was searching for so that he could give his father another chance at life because he was unable to come to terms with the fact that his father died.

With Telemachus's realization over the futile nature of touching Odysseus's ears, the fourth stage, depression, is demonstrated. A simple two-word sentence, "No use," (Vuong 17) succinctly captures the speechless outlook with which he views the situation. He is slowly moving towards accepting the fact that his father is gone and is suffering the pain of his father's death in its entirety. The word "use" describes his action of checking his father's body as pointless without benefit or harm, but it simply further confirmed the truth regarding his observation of his dead father. The phrase is an understanding of how time moves forward and that no action will counter the fact that his father is gone. Its plain, direct tone contributes to the sorrow that the breaking of the father-son connection led to and signifies the feeling of hopelessness that the speaker feels mixed with his yearning for his father to return to him.

At the end of the Kubler-Ross model for grief is the fifth stage, acceptance, which dominates the last three stanzas as Telemachus initiates the process of moving on from his father's death. He makes a final decision with "I turn him / over. To face it" (Vuong 17-18). Acting on his acceptance of his father's death, Telemachus's turning over of his father is representative of a turning over of his life. He firmly makes the choice to confront his past to bury it, so he could move on and create his own life and not stay attached to his father's. This initiation process starts with him choosing to discuss the truth and by intently observing and

recognizing himself within his father's face before letting go. By using the first-person, Vuong portrays Telemachus as someone taking ownership of the challenges he has experienced and tackling his fear of the future head-on. For the speaker, acceptance is a frightening and lonely yet necessary pathway to travel on to achieve catharsis and ease the burden of life on himself.

Alongside the stage of acceptance, Telemachus's completed process of the loss of innocence is the height of the passage. When facing his father's body, the son goes through two parts: a comparison of himself to his father and the action of moving forward with his life. He sees that his father's face is "The face / not mine — but one I will wear / to kiss all my lovers good-night" (Vuong 19-21). Instead of saying "his face" when referring to his father, the speaker says "the face," dehumanizing him and making him seem like another dead body. This signals Telemachus slowly creeping away from being associated with his father. However, Telemachus addresses the fact that he is not his father but that he will always carry a part of him within him as an extension of his father's legacy. The speaker's ambivalent attitude towards his relationship with his father is further highlighted by the contrast between his father's influence and his character.

The second part starts when he illustrates the action he takes with "the way I seal my father's lips / with my own & begin / the faithful work of drowning" (Vuong 22-24). He is letting the dead rest and pass on, and he is freeing himself from the shackles of personal responsibility for his father. The cost of parting from his father is that Telemachus doesn't have an authoritative figure that he could go towards anymore like he did when he was younger, but the benefit of splitting from his father's life is that he becomes a self-reliant person as a man who learns to fend for himself. Instead of the dependent child, he is now the self-sufficient man as he takes control of his life and lives in a way that is independent of others. Imitating the way that his

father died, his own “faithful work of drowning” is a metaphor for Telemachus leading a simple yet honest life like his father and going on the same journey of self-discovery and glory.

“Drowning” can also be seen as death by water because of the inability to save him or her and applied to the concept of Odysseus and Telemachus’s separation. Since Telemachus was on land while Odysseus was in the sea, the drowning of Odysseus from his past can represent their disconnect and physical distance from one another because Telemachus was unable to save his father from the elements. Telemachus now has to replace his father’s role as an authoritative figure and diligently live the same life that his father went through alone. By bearing the weight of both his and his father’s past, this act could potentially produce the same feeling of drowning as he wrestles with life’s problems. But as Telemachus takes up his burden, he is breaking free from the hierarchy of his inferiority to his father’s superiority and creating his own identity separate from his past.

The son’s experience with his father throughout the poem serves as a bridge for him to initiate that adventure to grow up and to become a man just as his father was before him. Through the use of the Kubler-Ross model of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, the poem effectively explains the son’s personal growth and change in perspective on life through his own experience with grief and loss. By precisely utilizing each stanza as another look into the main character’s mind, the author conveys the ideas of the five stages of grief with each building on one other until the climax is achieved with the last three stanzas as the son’s transformation from a child to an adult. And it is that final realization that brings closure to the son and pushes him to move forward towards carrying out his father’s legacy.

Works Cited

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