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# Twice-Made Men: The Journey to the Afterlife and Back

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# Twice-Made Men

The Journey to the Afterlife and Back

**John Farkas**

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No one can be certain if death is the equalizer of all human existence or if it is simply the beginning of a journey through the Great Unknown. In his article, "The End?" Jesse Bering states, "Yet people in every culture believe in an afterlife of some kind or, at the very least, are unsure about what happens to the mind at death."<sup>1</sup> He continues by arguing that the idea of "person permanence" may be the one impediment for us realizing that the dead are dead instead of continuing on in some type of dead life. While Bering is interested in the psychological roots behind the idea of life after death, I am interested in the idea itself and the forms this idea has taken throughout history, especially the near-death experience.

In modern times, a near-death experience refers to a personal event associated with impending death, where the individual will be declared clinically dead, resuscitated, and return with a story of what they experienced in the afterlife. In classical literature we find a similar phenomenon, where heroes and individuals were said to make physical journeys to the Underworld in search of solutions for problems or directions for earthly journeys. I will examine "near-death experiences" of classical literature in the context of modern versions. Despite the differences between them, I will argue that there are specific similarities in the ways both modern and ancient people make it to the afterlife, the "physical" landscape they travel through, and the individuals they encounter. These encounters lead both modern and classical travelers to be spiritually transformed when they return to life. The similarities of these journeys are not simply superficial, but have remained structurally intact throughout literature and time.

I will begin by giving a comprehensive account of the afterlife in modern literature and then a more in-depth analysis of how the near-death experience transforms those who

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<sup>1</sup> Bering 2008:34.

have them in modern accounts. For my modern sources I will be examining Todd Burpo's non-fiction New York Times Best Seller *Heaven is for Real*, Dr. Eben Alexander's non-fiction New York Times Best Seller *Proof of Heaven* and the BBC's documentary entitled "The Day I Died," produced by Kate Broome. I will give the same comprehensive examination of the Underworld in classical literature and then continue to give a deeper analysis of how the near-death experiences transform the classical heroes who experience them. In order to do so, I will look at Homer's *Odyssey*, Bacchylides' *Ode 5*, Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Plato's Myth of Er, Virgil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I have chosen these modern and classical sources because they are representative of views on the afterlife in the times that produced them. Through this analysis I hope to show that the transformative power of near-death experiences is universally acknowledged, transcending the boundaries of not only time but also of genre. In addition, I hope to show the importance of the wide reaching ability of these sources to give their audiences a way to talk and think about the inevitable human encounter with Death.

# Chapter One: Modern Literature

## A. The Afterlife

In order to have an idea of how modern near-death experiences are perceived and affect those who have them, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of these experiences. In the section “The Light at the End of the Tunnel,” I will discuss the modern ways of having a near-death experience. Next, I will give a brief overview of how individuals describe the afterlife in the section “Paradise.” Finally, I will describe the various “persons” they encounter in the afterlife in the section “Grandpa? Is that You?”

### The Light at the End of the Tunnel

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact way a near-death experience is actually “experienced” in modern times. Teetering on the brink of no return and coming back to life is something that is not easily or often accomplished. There is only one way for modern survivors to have such an experience: being medically deceased.

Though these experiences are as old as history, the term “near-death experience” only recently gained recognition around the 1950s-1960s due to the new technique physicians began using to resuscitate patients suffering cardiac arrest – cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Many people still believe that if someone comes back from cardiac arrest, then they have died and returned to life. However, the medical community revised the definition of death to be focused on the brain, instead of the heart. With this revision, as long as oxygenated blood travels to the brain, the brain, and therefore the person are still alive, conscious or not.<sup>2</sup> This change in technique has increased the number of people who

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander 2012: 134.

have, in some sense, “died” and returned to tell about their time in the afterlife, and thus given rise to the term “near death experience” to describe their experiences.

Experiences like these are described in a variety of sources. Todd Burpo’s *Heaven is for Real* is a non-fiction account of his son Colton’s near-death experience. In March 2003, three-year old Colton began experiencing pain in his stomach and began throwing up for around five days before doctors discovered his appendix had ruptured and that poison had been filling his stomach. The doctors offered little hope that he would survive operations and although he did, a few days later they found new pockets of infection and had to operate on him again. Returning to consciousness after his second operation, Colton was changed and began commenting about things he should not have been aware of during his operations. After turning four, Colton began talking about his time in Heaven, saying that he actually died for a little bit.<sup>3</sup> Looking back at the medical log of his surgery, there was no evidence of his brain losing function or him dying, making this case unique in that he has been recollecting these facts which are impossible for him to know, unless he did die and have some type of near-death experience. Colton’s experience exemplifies the fine line between being alive and medically deceased, even if only for a few seconds or minutes, which provides an opportunity for near-death experiences to transpire.

Dr. Eben Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven* is also a non-fiction, first-person account of what he, a neurosurgeon, experienced in the afterlife. In November of 2008, Alexander came down with a rare case of bacterial meningitis brought upon by E. coli.<sup>4</sup> In cases of

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<sup>3</sup> Burpo 2010:79.

<sup>4</sup> According to Betty Jones’ *Delmer’s Comprehensive Medical Terminology*, “bacterial meningitis is a serious bacterial infection of the meninges – the covering of the brain and spinal cord – that can have residual debilitating effects or even a fatal outcome if not diagnosed and treated promptly with appropriate antibiotic therapy... Once the bacteria invades the meninges causing inflammation, there is a rapid multiplication of the

bacterial meningitis, the bacteria attack the outer layer of the brain, or cortex, first. The cortex is responsible for memory, language, emotion, visual and auditory awareness, and logic. Essentially, the bacteria attack the areas that perform the functions most crucial for maintaining our human qualities. Roughly 10% of those who experience such a downward spiral in neurological functions have a chance at surviving, though most do so in a vegetative state.<sup>5</sup> Given the specific cause for his bacterial meningitis and his initial rapid decline of neurological function, Dr. Alexander had about a 10% chance of surviving the illness and if the antibiotics did not immediately make an impact, the chance of mortality would continue to rise over a few days until it reached 100%. In his case, he eventually succumbed to a seven-day coma during which he had a near-death experience and miraculously returned with no damage to his brain, something that few if any have experienced. Dr. Alexander was considered medically deceased due to his lack of a functioning neocortex, and his body kept “alive” by the use of machines.

While the medical and scientific fields are continuing to research the exact way in which one can have a near-death experience, there is one way that modern cases describe the journey to the afterlife. This way of getting to the afterlife, like Dr. Eben Alexander, is to make the journey after being declared “medically deceased” and ceasing to have a functioning brain. After returning from death, how the people describe the afterlife remains consistent over most cases.

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bacteria leading to swelling in the brain tissue, congestion in the blood circulation of the CNS, and formation of clumps of exudate which may collect around the base of the brain.”

<sup>5</sup> Alexander 2012:21.

## Paradise

Every near-death experience is unique to the person having it; however, there are a few descriptions of what the afterlife looks like that are common to most cases. To begin, many of those individuals describe having an out-of-body experience, where they can “see” their own body from a distance and the things surrounding their body (*Proof of Heaven* 108, “The Day I Died,” “Where Am I?”).

Following these out-of-body experiences, there is a general sense of darkness that ensues. Dr. Eben Alexander describes his initial experience, saying, “I found myself entering an immense void, completely dark, infinite in size, yet also infinitely comforting... My situation was, strangely enough, something to that of a fetus in the womb.”<sup>6</sup> Most of the others simply described themselves as being engulfed in darkness, only to see a tunnel with a piercing bright light at the end (*Proof of Heaven*, “The Day I Died,” “Where Am I?”). At the other end of this tunnel, they report, is a completely new world.

This new world, which many call “Heaven,” is described as being more beautiful and perfect than anything imaginable. Many of the individuals describe this place as being filled with all of the colors of the rainbow as well as colors that are not visible to the human eye (*Heaven is for Real* 62, *Proof of Heaven* 45, “The Day I Died”). As each person enters they are overwhelmed by the sense of peace, joy and love, which allows them to feel at ease and enjoy their experiences without any fear (*Proof of Heaven* 46, “The Day I Died”). Time in the afterlife also ceases to exist, at least as we know it on earth. Instead, some claim that years feel like seconds and others claim that minutes last for centuries (*Heaven is for Real* 77, *Proof of Heaven* 30, “The Day I Died”).

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander 2012:46

The “physical” landscape of the afterlife again varies depending on who is describing it. In Colton’s experience, he sees “the gates of heaven were made of gold and there were pearls on them. The heavenly city itself was made of something shiny, like gold or silver.”<sup>7</sup> For Dr. Alexander, “Looking down, I saw the villagers again, the trees and sparkling streams and the waterfalls, as well as the arcing angel-beings above (Alexander 69).”<sup>8</sup> Even in the rare case of Vicky Noratuk, a woman who was blind from birth, she was able to “see” trees, birds and people, images and ideas that her earthly experience would not have enabled her to have.<sup>9</sup>

Most individuals who find themselves in this situation often begin their journey with an out-of-body experience. This is quickly followed by them traveling through a dark tunnel and into a new, beautiful world. Here this colorful place exceeds the limitations of human sight and any sense of time, allowing them to enjoy the beautiful lush landscape of the afterlife.

### Grandpa? Is that You?

When one imagines a near-death experience, they expect to see some type of “being” and endure a recap of their life with individuals they knew. Indeed, it is through these interactions, as we will explore in the following sections, that one might be able to achieve a spiritual transformation. While examining modern examples of near-death experiences, there seems to be two categories of spirits: consistent religious figures and person-dependent dead relatives.

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<sup>7</sup> Burpo 2010:105

<sup>8</sup> Alexander 2012:69

<sup>9</sup> Broome 2002.

The first category of spirits in the afterlife is religious figures. Some of the most common religious figures that are described are Jesus and Mary, along with angels, although these religious figures often depend on the religious views of the individual on earth, demonstrated by Colton and his Christian upbringing.<sup>10</sup> The most unanimous and frequently experienced religious figure, however, is the Creator. Dr. Alexander describes the Creator, saying, "In this case, the 'mother' was God, the Creator, the Source who is responsible for making the universe and all in it... Yet at the same time, I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely minuscule I was by comparison."<sup>11</sup> Out of the seven cases observed, all of whom come from diverse backgrounds, almost every, if not every, person who has a near-death experience encounters an ultimate divine being, generally described as a ball of light that is connected to all things and brings comfort to each individual and filling them with feelings of love (*Heaven is for Real* 100, *Proof of Heaven* 47, "The Day I Died").

The second category of spirits in the afterlife is dead relatives. Though some describe a whole range of spirits they do not know personally, they almost always see someone who is related to them in some way that has already passed away. This gives them a chance to interact with them and make their experience more meaningful and personalized. Often these relatives provide the individual with some helpful insight or general information that will help them when they return to life (*Heaven is for Real* 85 and 95, *Proof of Heaven* 40, "The Day I Died").

The modern afterlife is filled with two specific categories of spirits, each having their own characteristics and abilities, which individuals speak to and interact with. The

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<sup>10</sup> Burpo 2010:64.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander 2012:47

religious figures found in the afterlife provide peace of mind and answers for the questions of what happen to us when we die. The dead relatives give individuals a more personalized and meaningful near-death experience, often being the most important to these travelers and playing a major role in their spiritual transformations.

## B. Transformations

Having given a general analysis of modern experiences in the afterlife, I will now discuss how a journey to this new realm leads to a spiritual transformation for each individual. First, I will consider the need for these individuals to let go of events in their past in the section “Putting Your Past to Rest.” Next, I will examine how insights of their future gained during their experiences give them hope and motivation in the section “The Silver Lining.” Finally, I will explore how the ability to let go of the past and gain a look into the future transforms each individual, giving them a completely new outlook when they return to life.

### Putting Your Past to Rest

The first step for any individual to be spiritually transformed through a near-death experience is to let go of his or her past. This happens through the interactions with either deceased loved ones or divine beings that are met in the afterlife. Individuals discuss events in his or her past, or even go through a whole life review, looking at things that have proven to be heavy on the conscience and prevented a more fulfilled and successful life in the present.

In *Heaven is for Real*, Colton provides an interesting case for this essential part of such an experience. Colton was only three years old, turning four, when he almost died. This did not give him time to have many traumatizing or impacting events in his life that he would necessarily need to put to rest. However, both of his parents did. His father, Todd Burpo, was a pastor who had recently begun to feel anger and resentment toward God following a broken leg, kidney stones and breast cancer, all of which plagued him in less

than a year's span and drained his family's funds.<sup>12</sup> When he was finally recovering from all of these ailments, his son, Colton, fell deathly ill, calling into question any beliefs in the One he was supposed to be praising. Later in the story, when Colton is discussing his experiences of "dying and going to Heaven" with his dad, he explains, "Well, the reason I was yelling was that Jesus came to get me. He said I had to go back because he was answering your prayer."<sup>13</sup> This allows Todd to let go of his recent anger and resentment towards God and changes it to thanks and appreciation for the wellbeing of his son.

Colton later confronted his parents and said, "I have two sisters. You had a baby die in your tummy, didn't you?"<sup>14</sup> At first this startled Todd and upset Sonja, his mother, who lost a baby during pregnancy five years earlier, something they never informed Colton about. However, Colton explains to them that he met his second sister in Heaven and she resembles his first sister, Cassie. He lets his parents know that their unborn child, left unnamed because they never had the chance to name her, cannot wait for them to reach Heaven.<sup>15</sup> This gives them closure, allowing them to focus on the future and providing a valuable foundation for their transformation.

In the *Proof of Heaven*, Dr. Eben Alexander had a past that hung over him for most of his life. He learned at an early age that he had been adopted when he was only a few months old, born to unwed teenagers in high school. He was consistently unable to make any contact with his birth parents and though he always felt the love and affection of his adoptive parents, he continued to wonder about his biological parents. In 2000 he finally received news that his birth parents actually got married and ended up having three more

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<sup>12</sup> Burpo 2010:39

<sup>13</sup> Burpo 2010:81

<sup>14</sup> Burpo 2010:93

<sup>15</sup> Burpo 2010:95

children: two younger sisters and a brother, though one of his sisters had died ten years earlier.<sup>16</sup> Although he was somewhat elated by the news, he writes, “I also felt, for the first time ever, like an orphan. Someone who had been given away – someone less than fully 100 percent wanted.”<sup>17</sup>

Eventually Dr. Alexander was able to come into contact and even meet his biological family, healing some of the wounds of his past and answering many of his questions about himself. Yet, one wound that would not heal for him was the loss of his biological sister, Betsy, in 1998.<sup>18</sup> When he made his journey into the afterlife in 2008, he met a beautiful girl in a powder blue dress who guided him around on the wing of a butterfly. She was able to speak with him without using any words; he simply knew what she was saying. It was four months after he left the hospital that his other sister sent a picture of Betsy, who looked hauntingly familiar. At first he figured it was simply due to them sharing the same DNA, but soon he came to realize that this was the girl that guided him around in the afterlife. For Alexander, he said, “My NDE had healed my fragmented soul. It had let me know that I had always been loved, and it also showed me that absolutely everyone else in the universe is loved too... You are loved. These words are what I needed to hear as an orphan, as a child who’d been given away.”<sup>19</sup>

One of the individuals interviewed in “The Day I Died” also shared a similar experience of coming to terms with her past. This was Pam Reynolds who discovered she had an aneurism at the base of her brain. During her operation, all of the blood was shunted away from her head and she was kept “dead” until the operation was completed. During

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander 2012:66

<sup>17</sup> Alexander 2012:56

<sup>18</sup> Alexander 2012:66.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander 2012:171

her time in the afterlife, she saw her grandmother who immediately comforted her and told her about what life is like after death. She also saw her uncle who had died at age 32. When it was time for her to return to her body, she said that she did not want to because it was void of life and before she had died she was in a tremendous amount of pain. Yet her uncle kept convincing her to return to her body and eventually pushed her until her body jumped and she returned to consciousness.<sup>20</sup> By reviewing her past and talking to her grandmother and uncle, Ms. Reynolds was able to return to life, no longer looking at the past, but with a new view of her present situation and the future.

Although not all afterlife travelers return with stories of dead relatives and information to help them let go of their past, the majority of them do. Each of the individuals discussed here learns to deal with his or her intense regrets and emotions and allow them to put their pasts to rest. This also opens them up for insight that is especially helpful for their future.

### The Silver Lining

The second step for any individual to be spiritually transformed through a near-death experience is to gain a glimpse into the future. This is accomplished by either interactions with deceased loved ones or, more often, interactions with divine beings. This gives them hope and strength to deal with any adversity they are currently facing or will face in the future, as well as a sense of peace in knowing what will happen to them when they die.

In *Heaven is for Real* Colton, his mother, and father all learned valuable insight about themselves and their futures. For Colton, he came away knowing what it was like in the

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<sup>20</sup> Broome 2002.

afterlife and that there is no reason to fear death. He does not want to die, but the worst-case scenario would see him back in the arms of Jesus and surrounded by the beautiful kingdom of Heaven, something he no longer fears and is able to look forward to.<sup>21</sup> Sonja was able to let go of the miscarriage of her second daughter, something that she and Todd began to embrace; they even joke with each other, saying, “I’m going to beat you to heaven and name her first!”<sup>22</sup> Todd also received some insight from his son’s journey that continues to help him. He learned that he could be less formal with God, not needing to make up some intricate holy church prayer to be heard. He can just say what he wants to say, and God will listen. This is something that he was taught as a Christian since childhood and he believed it, but now he could know for certain it is true.<sup>23</sup> Colton also described to his dad that there would be a war in Heaven between Jesus, the angels and the good people against Satan, monsters and bad people. In this battle he sees his dad fighting for the good guys, another insight that gives Todd hope and inspiration for the future.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Alexander also gained a glimpse into his future in the *Proof of Heaven*. When he was initially recovering he had difficulties adjusting to what he considered the limitations of this earthly world. While in the afterlife, he received a message that would directly alter the course of his future. As he described it, his sister (unbeknownst to him at the time) tells him, “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong.”<sup>25</sup> He simplified this message down further into “you are loved,” and finally into one word, “love.” This message overwhelmed him with a sense of relief,

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<sup>21</sup> Burpo 2010:112

<sup>22</sup> Burpo 2010:97

<sup>23</sup> Burpo 2010:84.

<sup>24</sup> Burpo 2010:135

<sup>25</sup> Alexander 2012:41

taking away any doubt or uncertainty about his future. As he described it, it is like “being handed the rules to a game I’d been playing all my life without ever fully understanding it.”<sup>26</sup> This insight helped him to return to life more in tune with himself and his family and even spurred him to research more into near-death experiences.

This look into the future was also a very common occurrence for the individuals interviewed in “The Day I Died.”<sup>27</sup> Heather Sloan experienced a whole review of her past, felt the effects she had on every person she knew, and eventually came to the realization that she was not returning to life. She said that she had to return to life and take care of her baby and support her husband and she heard a voice say, “Okay, we will let you come back.” She was able to see what comes after death, something that she embraces now and a thought she is comfortable with. Pam Reynolds also enjoyed this glimpse into the future. When it was time for her leave, she begged not to return to her body, finding complete happiness in the afterlife, and eventually she returned with a sense of relief knowing what the future and the afterlife are like. A third individual who gained from this futuristic insight is former Financial World Magazine CEO man of the year Gordon Allen. During his near-death experience, Allen is greeted by a high spiritual being who tells him that all of his skills and talents, which he was using to make money, were meant for a different purpose, something beyond what he was already doing. This insight gave him all he needed to change his ways when he returned from the afterlife, giving him the courage to apologize to all of the people he mistreated and to change his career.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander 2012:41

<sup>27</sup> Information in this paragraph will be taken directly from the BBC’s “The Day I Died.” The information provided from each of these individuals spans the course of the entire documentary.

For all of these people, a meaningful look into themselves and their futures helps to complete the transformation process they undergo during their near-death experiences. These visions of their future give them a new sense of hope and determination needed to live a more fulfilled life. Having discussed the two basic steps of the spiritual transformation from a near-death experience, I will next discuss the spiritual transformation as a whole.

### Spiritual Transformation

Near-death experiences have extreme effects on the people that have them because for each one, life continues after death. The vast majority of such individuals are profoundly changed from their experiences. For most, it is only after successfully revisiting the past and putting it to rest as well as seeing what the future holds for them that they are entirely transformed as human beings.

This can be seen easily in the lasting effects that Colton's experience had on not only him, but also his entire family. For Todd and Sonja, watching their son suffer and be as sick as he was broke them. With Todd's obligations as a pastor, Todd and Sonja were used to helping others and not being helped. Todd says,

We were adamantly self-reliant – maybe, in retrospect, to the point of being prideful... but that grueling stint in the hospital snapped our pride like a dry twig and taught us how to be humble enough to accept help from other people, physically, emotionally, and financially (Burpo 151)

This whole experience humbled them and taught them the value of being vulnerable by breaking down their pride and forcing them to accept physical, mental, emotional, and financial help from others. Another way that his experience changed them all, as a family, was that it made them bolder. It gave them all a sense of comfort in knowing that Heaven is

real and that there is no reason to fear death, because we will enjoy perfection at its finest. It also gave them the courage to spread their faith and Colton's story to the world.<sup>28</sup>

As a practicing neurosurgeon with years of research and surgical experience, Dr. Alexander's near-death experience transformed him from a non-believer to a believer. After practicing medicine for so long, he equated the death of the body and the brain to the end of consciousness. But after his experience, he discovered this was not true; the "human experiences" of our minds continue on after death and this happens under the gaze of God.<sup>29</sup> He let go of his past feelings of being unwanted and unloved as an orphan and found a pure and all-powerful God who loves not only him, but also all human beings and creatures unconditionally. Having experienced the afterlife in a physical state that should have been medically impossible, his close-minded beliefs were finally opened to knowledge of the mind, the afterlife and God, changing how he approached life entirely. At the end of his story, he came to realize: "I have two essential duties: to honor truth and to help heal. That means telling my story."<sup>30</sup> By telling his story, he can inform others about the truth behind our lives, our mind, and what happens to us when we die.

Each person interviewed in the documentary "The Day I Died," was also spiritually transformed when they returned to life. As Dr. Stuart Hameroff explains, most of the cases he has looked at resulted in the patients becoming less materialistic, less competitive, more concerned with relationships, as well as finding a new take on the spiritual side of life. Moreover, many have even changed careers and relationships due to these near-death experiences. The most apparent case of these transformations came with the experience of

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<sup>28</sup> Burpo 2010:153.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander 2012:9

<sup>30</sup> Alexander 2012:171

Gordon Allen. Before this experience, his two important values included first, making sure that everything was okay with his children, and second, maintaining a cash flow no matter who he had to use or exploit to do so. Following his interactions with the high spiritual being in his afterlife experience, his life was changed. He gained a new sense of love, gave up his old business, and entrepreneurial ways and became a counselor in order to help other people. He returned with new beliefs, like most people that have these experiences, and he used his new skills and knowledge to do things more beneficial for others.

Spanning across the various accounts of near-death experiences, we see the transformative nature of such events. The ability of these individuals to let go of painful experiences in their past, something that many people struggle with and are unable to do, allowing them to free themselves from that weight and move on to the future. Release of the past paired with a glimpse into their future enables these individuals to gain an entirely new, positive outlook on life and positively influence those around them by sharing their stories and doing things to help them. As is the case for Colton, his near-death experience not only changed him, but also transformed his parents and those in his community. It is in this context of a near-death experience that we are able to look at accounts of not only more recent cases but also further back into classical literature. Through the basic descriptions of the afterlife and the transformations that classical heroes undergo during journeys into the Underworld, I will demonstrate in the next chapter how these classical individuals undergo what we call a near-death experience in the modern world.

## Chapter Two: Classical Literature

### A. The Development of the Underworld

As we turn to the ancient world, we find very similar descriptions of afterlife journeys in literature. In order to understand how classical journeys to the Underworld affect the heroic travelers it is important to have an idea of the Underworld as a whole. In the section “The Noose, Hemlock, or Jump,” I will discuss the various ways an individual can physically make his way to Hades while still alive. Next, I will make a road map of the Underworld, providing a stop-by-stop journey itinerary and what heroes find there in the section “On the Highway Through Hades.” Last, I will describe the various types of spirits that are encountered along the way in the section “It was a Spooky Ghost!”

#### The Noose, Hemlock or Jump

One might wonder, “How could a living person actually cross over the boundaries of life and death and physically make a journey to the Underworld?” According to the ancient sources, this is a difficult task few can successfully accomplish. There are three common methods for individuals in classical literature to make such a feat: by sea, by land, or simply by death.

Homer’s *Odyssey* was the first poem of surviving classical literature to include the heroic journey to the Underworld.<sup>31</sup> Odysseus’ journey begins with a detailed set of instructions provided by Circe on how to get there.<sup>32</sup> In the morning, Odysseus and his men set their masts and sail across the Ocean until they come to the Ocean’s river.<sup>33</sup> Here,

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<sup>31</sup> All citations from Homer’s *Odyssey* are drawn from Mandelbaum’s translation.

<sup>32</sup> Homer 10.488-535.

<sup>33</sup> Homer 11.18-19.

presumably the edge of the world, they simply sail into the realm of Persephone where they can continue on their journey by foot. This is the only prominent classical tale where a hero sails to the edge of the world and seamlessly into the realm of Hades in order to fulfill his mission.

The second and most common way to travel to the Underworld appears in the tales of Dionysus, Orpheus and Aeneas, who all travel by land. In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Dionysus travels via land to the Underworld, although the descriptions of his journey were vague.<sup>34</sup> After deciding to go down to Hades in order to bring back Euripides from the dead, Dionysus finds Heracles in order that he might ask how to travel there.<sup>35</sup> Heracles eventually explains that it is a long journey, and he would need to travel to an enormous bottomless lake where an old sailor would take him over in a tiny boat for two obols.<sup>36</sup> Virgil's *Georgics* provides a little more detail in the account of Orpheus' descent into Hades.<sup>37</sup> Instead of going to an unspecified bottomless lake, Orpheus travels to a cave in Sparta, filled with a miasmic grove.<sup>38</sup> Virgil's *Aeneid*, on the other hand, shows Aeneas traveling to the Sibyl of Cumae as directed by his father Anchises, so that she may lead him into Hades.<sup>39</sup> The Sibyl informs him that hidden in a dark tree somewhere in the forest is a golden bough, which is needed for Aeneas to travel into the Underworld.<sup>40</sup> After

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<sup>34</sup> All citations from Aristophanes' *Frogs* are drawn from Sommerstein's translation.

<sup>35</sup> Heracles is a well-known traveller of the Underworld: he is the last spirit that Odysseus interacts with during his journey in Book 11.604-629 of the *Odyssey*.

<sup>36</sup> Aristophanes 140-144 This is another example of a journey to the Underworld by foot, since Dionysus and Xanthias travel by foot until they come to the River Styx, where Charon takes Dionysus and forces Xanthias to run around the water and meet them on the other side.

<sup>37</sup> All citations from Virgil's *Georgics* are drawn from Lembke's translation.

<sup>38</sup> *Georgics* 4.467-484 the account of Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* does not mention how he made his way to the Underworld, but simply that he made a "bold" descent to the Taenarian Styx.

<sup>39</sup> All citations from Virgil's *Aeneid* are drawn from Williams' translation.

<sup>40</sup> *Aeneid* 6.181-190 According to the Sibyl, no one is allowed to pass into Hades without finding a golden-leaved fruit and bringing it as a gift for Proserpina. The golden bough, however, will only fall off the tree if the

successfully finding and picking the bough, Aeneas and the Sibyl make their way to the jaws of Avernus, where they come upon a deep cave with a jagged mouth, hidden by a dusky lake and woods. Here they make ritualistic sacrifices, after which the ground starts rumbling, the earth gapes open and the Sibyl and Aeneas plunge wildly into the cave, running through empty halls until they reach the entrance of Orcus.<sup>41</sup> With the exception of some changes of name and prerequisites, the specific means of descending by land remain almost completely the same.<sup>42</sup>

The third and most realistic way to descend to Hades is to go as everyone else goes, by dying. Prior to Heracles informing Dionysus of how he had traveled to the Underworld, Heracles had humorously suggested three other possible ways to get there, saying, "There's one that goes via rope and bench: you hang yourself... A well-pounded track by way of pestle and mortar... And then, when the crowd says 'They're off!' then off you go too."<sup>43</sup> This is meant to be a joke, and Dionysus quickly shoots down each of these ideas as being too suffocating, too cold, or too gruesome. But, although meant as a joke in the *Frogs*, there is still some merit to this method, which is employed in Plato's Myth of Er.<sup>44</sup> In the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates brings the Myth of Er to his discussion. This is the tale of a warrior named Er, who has been slain in battle. When each respective side takes the corpses of their fallen on the tenth day of battle, his body alone remains intact though the

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Fates call for Aeneas, which they did. This was a rule established after Heracles travels to the Underworld and steals Cerberus.

<sup>41</sup> *Aeneid* 6.328-340.

<sup>42</sup> Although the basic mode of transit is different between Odysseus and those who travel to the Underworld by land, all of the land travelers do end up crossing into the Underworld by boat and have similar experiences to Odysseus. Aeneas is required to make some sacrifices to enter. The *Odyssey*, *Aeneid* and Orpheus stories all refer to a grove (which is in some way strange or sinister), and despite making most of his journey by boat, Odysseus does seem to pass underground for part of the last leg of his journey.

<sup>43</sup> Aristophanes 121-133.

<sup>44</sup> All citations from Plato's *Republic* are drawn from Adam's translation.

others began to decay. Er's body is brought home, and on the twelfth day, when his body is laid upon the pyre, he wakes up and begins to tell his tale of what he saw in the world beyond.<sup>45</sup> According to Er, his soul went forth from his body and he journeyed with a great company to the mysterious realm of the afterlife. It is true that a Platonic dialogue is quite different from an Aristophanic comedy, or an epic, but it emphasizes the interest in such a topic as the journey to the afterlife, one that transcends the various genres of the time.

Traveling to the Underworld always involves leaving the living world and definitively crossing a boundary, be it by water, land or death. We see Odysseus and his crew traveling to the edge of the world by sea until he crosses the border and into the afterlife. Dionysus, Orpheus, and Aeneas show that it is possible to travel into the depths of the Underworld by foot, similarly through a cave near a lake. The last and fairly simplistic way to go is to die, joked about in the *Frogs* and described in more seriousness by Er. After making their way to the Underworld, their journeys begin as they travel through the vast landscape of Hades.

### On the Highway Through Hades

The first stop in the journey through the Underworld is the Tartarean waters of Acheron. Here, one must continue down to a huge whirlpool that leads into Cocytus. There are a few variations for this location based on the multiple accounts of the heroes. For Dionysus and Aeneas, these waters are muddy and filled with darkness and filth (*Frogs* 147-148; *Aeneid* 6.364-370).<sup>46</sup> Likewise, in the account of Orpheus in the *Georgics*, there is a mass of shades surrounded by black slime and reeds, trapped within the sluggish flow of

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<sup>45</sup> Plato 10.614b1-7.

<sup>46</sup> Littlefield 1968:89 "The Hell of Mud, described by Heracles, where sinners (including admirers of Morsimus) wallow, and the darkness and filth" reported by Xanthias are probably not derived specifically from anything in Eleusinian ritual, though they may be Orphic."

Cocytus.<sup>47</sup> This marshy intersection of the Styx, Cocytus, and Acheron can only be crossed with the help of the old ferryman, Charon. As the heroes are carted to the shores on the other side, they hear the ferocious barking of the watchdog, Cerberus, who dwells in his own personal cove.

Once these travelers cross the waters and land on the other shore, there is a small path that leads to the physical entrance of Hades. In the account of the *Odyssey*, after going through all of the necessary rituals, sacrifices and promises of future sacrifices, Odysseus never steps a foot into Hades. There is virtually no description of Hades, as the crowds of dead souls come from Erebus to Odysseus while he stays at the pit of blood.<sup>48</sup> Howard Clarke, in his *Art of the Odyssey*, argues that Odysseus' limited activity in Hades suggests that Homer did not inherit an elaborate mythic tradition from which he could adapt an "adventure" rich in detail.<sup>49</sup> While Clarke suggests that Homer did not have a lot of tradition to draw from, other cultures, such as the Egyptians, had already constructed their own mythic traditions that he could have used for his descriptions of Hades. Yet, despite this initial difference, there are still significant overlaps between the *Odyssey* and later accounts.

Moving deeper into the Underworld, the accounts in the *Aeneid* and the Myth of Er provide more detail and thus will be the focus for the remainder of the section. After crossing the threshold into Hades, they cross through the Fields of Mourning, and the travelers find their way to a fork in the road. This is a key location in not only for the journeys of the heroes, but for any soul in the Underworld. As it is described:

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<sup>47</sup> *Georgics* 4.473-480.

<sup>48</sup> Homer 11.22-41.

<sup>49</sup> Clarke 1967:59.

To the right,  
Winding under the walls of great Dis,  
Is the way to Elysium. But the left road  
Takes the wicked to their punishment  
In Tartarus (Virgil. *Aen.* 6.651-56)

It is at this place where Minos places judgment on the souls of those who are traveling through Hades, and decides whether they will take the path on the left or right.<sup>50</sup> This is also the same area that Er begins his journey in the afterlife.<sup>51</sup> As he describes it, there were two openings side-by-side on the left side that go straight into the earth as well as two openings on the right that lead into the heavens.<sup>52</sup>

Focusing on the left side first, when Aeneas looks over in that direction he sees under a cliff a great fortification surrounded by a triple wall and encircled by a river of fire, Phlegethon. The gate itself is flanked with columns unbreakable to any force. Inside, the Sibyl explains, the pit of Tartarus itself is located, plunging down into the darkness twice the depths as Olympus is high.<sup>53</sup> Er describes the path on the left as leading to Tartarus and further into the earth as well.<sup>54</sup> Both Aeneas and Er mention that it is here that the condemned dead are found being tortured for the sins and crimes that they committed during their lives.

The right side of the fork in the road leads towards Elysium. This region is said to be full of joy and the green and pleasant fields of the Blissful Grove.<sup>55</sup> The air and sky are spacious, there is light shining all throughout the land and this grove even has its own sun and stars. Here, the Eridanus River flows through the forests and even into the world

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<sup>50</sup> *Aeneid* 6.435-7

<sup>51</sup> All citations from Plato's *Republic* are drawn from Adam's translation.

<sup>52</sup> Plato 10.613C.

<sup>53</sup> *Aeneid* 6.654-673.

<sup>54</sup> Plato 10.614c1-4.

<sup>55</sup> *Aeneid* 6.758-763.

above.<sup>56</sup> None of the inhabitants of this region have fixed homes, but simply live in the groves, riverbanks and meadows. This is again very similar to the descriptions of the Myth of Er, though he also mentions that extended from above throughout the heaven and the earth there is a straight-like pillar, most nearly resembling the rainbow, but brighter and purer.<sup>57</sup>

The way in which the heroes journey back from the Underworld differs for each of them. Odysseus and his men return to their ships and sail away (*Odyssey* 11.636-640), Dionysus presumably travels back to the entrance and lake he came through (though not explicitly stated), and Orpheus travels back up through the cave he descended at the beginning of his journey (*Metamorphoses* 10.53-60). In the case of Er, he mentions that in the middle of the night there is a sound of thunder and a quaking of the earth, which signals the rebirth of the souls back into bodies, but he himself does not know how he returned back to his own body.

Although there are a few ways to enter the Underworld, once there the layout remains consistent over most of the texts. First stop is the Tartarean waters of Acheron, which individuals can travel over with the help of Charon. On the other side is a long path that leads to the fork in the road, the left leading to Tartarus where sinners were punished, and the right leading to Elysium. In Elysium, souls remain in eternal joy and happiness until it is time for them to return to life once again.

### It was a Spooky Ghost!

A journey to the Underworld would be pointless if there were no “beings” with which to interact. In fact, it is only through such spirits that a hero is able to find the

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<sup>56</sup> *Aeneid* 6.784-5.

<sup>57</sup> *Republic* 10.616B-C.

solutions to his earthly problems. There are two categories of spirits that individuals in classical literature can find along their journeys: mythological figures and common spirits.

The first category of spirits that populate the Underworld is mythological spirits. These are the spirits that come from ancient tradition, whether it is from religious practices or other types of literature. The first mythological spirit that these travelers encounter is the grim and frightening ferryman, Charon, who is responsible for taking the spirits of the buried across the River Styx (*Frogs* 180, *Aeneid* 6.368, *Georgics* 502). The next important figure in Hades is Minos, the judge of the Underworld, who decides whether the incoming souls are sent for punishment in Tartarus or if they would live in the Blissful Grove of Elysium. Important figures in epic literature, such as Agamemnon, Achilles and Ajax from the *Iliad* continue to roam through Hades. Mythological monsters continue to fill out the rest of the Underworld, including: the hellhound Cerberus (*Aeneid* 6.504, *Georgics* 4.483), the shape-shifting Empusa (*Frogs* 289-295), centaurs, Scylla, Briareus, the Hydra, the Chimaera, Gorgons, Harpies and the Geryon (*Aeneid* 6.350-358).<sup>58</sup> It would not be Hades, however, without someone ruling over everyone; here we see Pluto/Hades and Proserpina/Persephone ruling over all of these spirits who inhabit the Underworld.

In Tartarus are those who are being tortured by divine beings and remain in torment including a few famed figures. First is Tityus, stretched on the ground for about six hundred cubits while two vultures sit and tear out his liver (*Odyssey* 11.574, *Metamorphoses* 10.45, *Aeneid* 6.712). Second, there is Tantalus who is neither able to drink water nor eat fruit (*Odyssey* 11.582, *Metamorphoses* 10.42). Third is Sisyphus, trying to push a huge stone with his hands up a hill only to have it roll back down before he reaches

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<sup>58</sup> It was in the *Frogs* that Empusa was first mentioned dwelling in the Underworld. The rest of the monsters are better described in the *Aeneid*.

the top (*Odyssey* 11.593, *Metamorphoses* 10.46). Other famously tortured figures include Ixion on his wheel (*Metamorphoses* 10.44, *Aeneid* 6.719, *Georgics* 4.484), Belus' granddaughters with their urns, Salmoneus suffering from thunder and lightning, Lapiths, Pirithous with a black rock teetering above him, Theseus sitting forever, Phlegyas writhing in agony, and the Furies (*Aeneid* 6.689, *Georgics* 4.482).

The second and more clearly described category of spirits is the common spirit, which include the souls of mortals who live and die, whether it be a heroic life or not. This type of spirit is defined most clearly in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus' mother, Anticleia, explains to him the general process of death and departure of the spirit from the body:

This is the law that rules  
All mortals at their death. For just as soon  
As life has left the white bones, and the sinews  
No longer hold together bones and flesh,  
When erupting force of blazing fire  
Undoes the body, then the spirit wanders:  
Much like a dream, it flits away and hovers  
Now here, now there. (Home. *Od.* 11.218-225)

There remains some physical semblance or likeness of a person from his or her earthly body to their times in Hades, as each individual is clearly able to recognize whom he sees and interacts with during his time in the afterlife.

The Underworld is filled with a variety of spirits, each having unique characteristics. The spirits of monsters continue on after death, instilling fear in the living and dead alike. The mythological spirits fill out Hades, offering glimpses of what it is like to be dead. There are also common spirits, which are generally the most important to these travelers and play a major role in their spiritual transformation during their journeys through the Underworld.

## B. Transformations

Having given an in-depth analysis of the Underworld in general, I will now turn my attention to how a journey through these lands leads to the spiritual transformation of each individual. First, we will consider the necessity of each traveller to put their pasts to rest in the section “The Ghosts of the Past.” Next, we will see how the insights about their futures gained during their experiences give them extra motivation in the section “A Glimpse of the Future.” Finally, I will give an individual analysis of how letting go of their pasts and taking a look at their futures work together to completely transform each individual when they return to the world above.

### The Ghosts of the Past

In order for an individual to successfully complete his journey to the Underworld and return spiritually transformed, the first requirement is that he comes to terms with his past. This is accomplished through the individual’s interacting with spirits that he knew throughout his life, but who have died and can be found in Hades. They often discuss details about the heroes’ pasts, which have been weights holding down their spirits and preventing them from accomplishing their tasks at hand.

This is quite clear in the *Odyssey*. As soon as Odysseus makes his way to the gates of Hades, he is confronted with the shade of Elpenor, his companion, whom he did not realize had died.<sup>59</sup> Odysseus is faced with the fact of death while Elpenor is able to enlighten us regarding what happens when people die and how they want to be remembered. He asks Odysseus to plant an oar over his grave, which does not simply mark his life as one of labor, but instead, offers up the idea that a life of pain and toil can be more worth having than a

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<sup>59</sup> Homer 11.53-56.

life of pleasure.<sup>60</sup> It is through this hard work, pain and suffering that Odysseus is able to better appreciate his life, rather than simply living a life of pleasures, which gives him nothing to truly appreciate.<sup>61</sup> Elpenor also presents us with the idea that only after we have died will the meaning of our lives become clear.<sup>62</sup> Next, the text presents the juxtaposition of Agamemnon and Achilles, contrasting what Odysseus can see as the worst and best of deaths. Agamemnon comes to Odysseus, complaining about his wife, Clytemnestra, and saying that no woman merits trust, although Penelope is an exception to this.<sup>63</sup> He also asks about his family, although Odysseus does not have much news to give regarding his son, Orestes. Likewise, Achilles asked about his son and father, and says he would rather be the lowest of slaves than be dead.<sup>64</sup> Here, we see Achilles, a man who chose to give up his *nostos* “homecoming” in order to win *kleos* “honor,” tells Odysseus, a man clinging to his *nostos* against all odds, how good it is to live.<sup>65</sup> Since Achilles’ life has already found its meaning, this statement carries conviction and provides Odysseus with a new found sense of desire for life, which overshadows all of his sorrows.

Similar to Odysseus’ journey, in Bacchylides’ *Ode 5*, Heracles descends to the Underworld in order to obtain something, the watchdog Cerberus. However, as he is making his way through the crowd towards Charon and the Styx, he runs into Meleager, who is able to give him some helpful insight. Meleager discusses his perspective of what brought him to Hades, as well as the frailty and helplessness of men before the gods. His message moves Heracles to tears and even leads to him ask if he can marry a relative of

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<sup>60</sup> Dimock 1989:146.

<sup>61</sup> Homer 11.66-80.

<sup>62</sup> Dimock 1989:141.

<sup>63</sup> Homer 11.396-454.

<sup>64</sup> Homer 11.470-499.

<sup>65</sup> de Jong 2001:291.

Meleager, which later turns out to be Meleager's sister, Deianira. This also gives Heracles an opportunity to see that although he is blessed with divine strength and protection, he is still at the mercy of the gods, especially Hera.

Dionysus is another character who makes a journey to the Underworld. Although Dionysus is considered a god, he is one who had died just as men do, but is resurrected back to life again, making his journey a unique case. The *Frogs* begins with Dionysus trying to restore an Athenian poet, Euripides, to life due to the lack of great poets.<sup>66</sup> After a few adventures, Dionysus arrives in the halls of Pluto where he is at once confronted with an unexpected situation: an impending trial for Aeschylus and Euripides, who were fighting over the chair of tragedy.<sup>67</sup> Here Dionysus has to judge who is the best of two great poets of his past - Euripides, who died a year before the *Frogs* was written, and Aeschylus, who had died about fifty years earlier during Athens' period of greatness. The two poets agree that a great tragic poet not only has artistic skill, but also gives helpful advice that makes his fellow citizens better.<sup>68</sup> Through their competition, Aeschylus argues that Euripides' poetry has led to the degeneration in Athenian society and although Dionysus originally wanted Euripides, he finally decides upon Aeschylus after realizing he was the best of the two past poets. It is only through this review of the past poets that he is able to gain a better understanding to help him in his future endeavors, to revive Athens to greatness.

More similar to Odysseus' journey, Aeneas' trip to the Underworld brings up a lot from his past. Aeneas' first encounter with his past comes in front of the Styx. In the crowd of the unburied, he sees Palinurus, who while on his course back from Libya had fallen over

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<sup>66</sup> Aristophanes 70-80.

<sup>67</sup> Aristophanes 760-780.

<sup>68</sup> Aristophanes 1000-1010.

the stern into the waves. Aeneas cries that Apollo has falsely prophesized Palinurus' safe travels to Italy. As R.D. Williams writes in his book, *The Aeneid*, "It is a measure of Aeneas' feelings of self-blame and guilt that he tries to put the blame elsewhere."<sup>69</sup> After Palinurus describes his woes, he begs Aeneas by his father to bury his body so he can cross the Styx. Followed by his interaction with Palinurus, Aeneas comes to the Fields of Mourning. Here Aeneas discovers that Dido took her own life because of her love for him. She ignores his attempts to talk to her and leaves, a stranger to him, and goes to her old husband who reciprocates her love.<sup>70</sup> This greatly affects Aeneas, who seems distraught at his first glance of her.<sup>71</sup> The final confrontation with his past comes when he meets his Trojan companion, Deiphobus, whose body is mangled.<sup>72</sup> Deiphobus gives Aeneas the account of his death, that Helen had disarmed him in his sleep and then allowed Menelaus and Ulysses into the room where they showed him no mercy.<sup>73</sup> Here Deiphobus consoles Aeneas and releases him from blame, finally urging Aeneas to press onwards in his journey.<sup>74</sup> As Williams puts it, "We see him involved with guilt and regrets about the past, unable to wrench his thoughts away from those tragedies or to focus on the future."<sup>75</sup> It is only after he sees these spirits and is able to let go of his past that he is able to continue on through his journey in the Underworld and with his life.

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<sup>69</sup> *Aeneid* 6.92.

<sup>70</sup> *Aeneid* 6.548-568.

<sup>71</sup> *Aeneid* 92 at this he is overwhelmed with sorrow and guilt, and we see perhaps more of the depth and sincerity of his feelings for Dido than we (or Dido) were allowed to in Book 4.

<sup>72</sup> *Aeneid* 6.595-598.

<sup>73</sup> Quinn 1968:170 "As with Palinurus, the account given to Aeneas of his death differs from Virgil's earlier narrative...Virgil's purpose is partly, perhaps, to emphasize the elusiveness of truth – it is so hard to find out what happened."

<sup>74</sup> Palinurus, Dido and Deiphobus consist of the ghosts of Aeneas' past and a vital part of his journey. He has to experience the tragic events that have occurred throughout his entire journey, and through his encounters in the Underworld, we see that the psychological wounds are still deep.

<sup>75</sup> *Aeneid* 91.

Orpheus experiences some interesting transformations through his journey to the Underworld, more in the *Metamorphoses* than in the *Georgics*. After losing his beloved Eurydice, he travels down to beg for her back from Pluto and Proserpina. While in the Underworld, he wonders if Love has any influence in Hades, when he remembers and recounts the story of Proserpina being raped/abducted and brought there. He then makes a connection by saying that he and Pluto share the same type of love for their women. This connection hints at the possibility that Orpheus had taken Eurydice by force, rather than a normal marriage.<sup>76</sup> He is passionate to the point where he threatens to remain in Hades and “die” if he cannot have his wife back on what he will call a temporary loan, since everyone dies in the end.

The Myth of Er must be viewed in a bit of a different light since it is a Platonic text and written for more philosophical views in the *Republic*, focused on rewards and punishments of the good and bad. Er enters with a great company into the mysterious region when his tale begins. I think it is safe to assume that this company includes those who fell in battle with him; especially those who were burned on the pyres after the bodies were collected. While he does not see much in regard to his past, he does say that from the openings of the earth and heaven souls depart to the meadow and encamp there, greeting one another and giving each other news of what it was like above and below. This was interesting since these spirits in the afterlife were sharing their “past experiences” of Elysium and Tartarus with each other, not of life back on earth.

Before anyone can continue on with a successful transformation in the Underworld, they must be able to let go of their past. As each of these individuals learns to deal with his

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<sup>76</sup> Glenn 1986:133.

regrets, learns to let go of his intense emotions that are restraining him, and learns valuable lessons from those individuals who had great impacts on him in his past, he is able to rid himself of the heavy load he has continued to carry throughout his adventures. This enables each, with the exception of Orpheus, to focus on the future and what things can come after they leave Hades.

### A Glimpse of the Future

The second requirement for a successfully transformative journey through the Underworld is to look into the future. This gives hope and strengthens the will of each of the individuals to be successful throughout all of their endeavors in the future. Without this, there is less motivation for each individual to continue on into a future that might be worse than if he just give up.

The importance of gaining a look at the future becomes evident first in the *Odyssey*. Following his encounter with Elpenor, Tiresias comes forward to talk to Odysseus. As Tiresias begins to explain his future, he gives multiple conditions:

If you leave his rich herds untouched and turn  
Your mind to going home, then you can still  
Reach Ithaca, though after grim ordeals. And  
Even if your solitary self  
Escapes, your coming home will be delayed  
And sad (Homer. *Od.* 11.112-115)

By giving Odysseus and his men conditions in this prophesy, he is essentially giving them a choice. This adds a moral dimension to their fate, as those who perish or do not make it home do so by their own decisions.<sup>77</sup> Not only does Tiresias offer a way home, he also gives Odysseus a glimpse of his entire life and all the possibilities of how it can look after he returns from the dead. In this manner, it can be said that he is not just learning the way

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<sup>77</sup> de Jong 2001:277.

home from Tiresias, but also how to go on and live a successful and peaceful life, one worth being remembered by all and something that he has been striving for, but not yet able to achieve.<sup>78</sup>

Directions home are not the only topic discussed in the Underworld for Odysseus, as he also asks about his family. Before speaking with Tiresias, Odysseus sees his mother and wants to speak to her, although electing to wait to speak with her until after Tiresias.

Following his dialogue with Tiresias he turns to the spirit of his mother. After asking his mother how his family was and how she came to be down in the Underworld, she replies:

Indeed steadfast, within your house she [Penelope] stays.  
Her dreary nights and days are wept away.  
No one's usurped your kingship; and your lands  
Are held in peace by your Telemachus.  
...  
Your father keeps to his own farm; he never  
Comes down into the town  
...  
It was lament for you – your gentleness  
And wisdom – o my radiant Odysseus  
That robbed me of the honey-sweet of life (Homer. *Od.* 11.181-206)

Even though Tiresias has already informed Odysseus of how his family was doing, he asks his mother again, showing how important his family is to him. We can see through his questioning that Odysseus has been longing for his family throughout his journey. The news his mother gives is comforting, since he knows all is not lost yet and he still has time to make it home and reclaim all that belongs to him. Not only is Odysseus able to return to the living realm with the knowledge of how to get home and live out a happy and normal life, but he also comes away with an understanding of what happens to men when they die

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<sup>78</sup> Dimock 1989:146.

and what it is like in the afterlife. This gives him a deeper appreciation for his life and strengthens his will to continue his journey home.

Another hero that learns a lesson from looking into the future is Heracles. In Bacchylides' *Ode 5*, Heracles has a different view of his future. While someone like Odysseus gains inspiration to continue homeward from his mother, Heracles' destiny is affected by Meleager's tale. Odysseus' journey is forecasted to end when he is happy, old and blessed. Heracles, on the other hand, returns to the world above with a shadow of death, wishing to become Meleager's kin and in his admiration for him, there is a sort of admiration for his current situation in Hades. In the end, Heracles' marriage to Meleager's sister, Deianira ultimately leads to his death.

Similar to Odysseus and Heracles, Dionysus learns a valuable lesson from looking into the future. At the very end of the play, Dionysus picks Aeschylus to return with him, and Pluto starts to send them off, wishing them the best of luck to save the city with their good counsels and to educate the foolish folk there. But before they leave, Pluto gives Xanthias various weapons and potions to kill those making troubles for the city, meaning Cleophon, the Revenue Board, Myrmex and Nicomachus, and Archenomus.<sup>79</sup> Here we see the future of all of these individuals back in Athens and what the public, as inspired by Dionysus and Aeschylus, will do to them – kill them. This also points at the bright future of their city if these demands can be met and give Dionysus hope for the resurrection of Athens to glory. Euripides is associated with the decline of Athenian society due to his lack of artistic skills and good advice for the society, while Aeschylus is associated with the

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<sup>79</sup> Aristophanes 1500-1514.

greatness of Athens due to his excellent skills and advice, giving Dionysus the foresight of Athens resuming its greatness with the return of Aeschylus' poetry.

Just as the individuals above, Aeneas is also able to gain valuable insight when looking into the future. Aeneas' journey through the Underworld begins due to the call from his father. As discussed above, he has been looking backwards at his life, obsessed with the miseries that accompanied his mission, but this changes once he finally reaches his father, Anchises, in the Elysian Fields.<sup>80</sup> His father wants to show him the census of his generations, so that he can rejoice at the finding of Italy. He informs Aeneas who each of the great individuals waiting at the River Lethe is:

Silvius, an Alban name, your last child,  
Born in your twilight years and reared by your wife  
Lavinia, in a sylvan home  
...  
Next comes Procas, pride of our race,  
Then Capys and Numitor, and then  
Your avatar, Aeneas Sylvius,  
Equal to you in piety and arms  
...  
Then a son of Mars will support his grandsire  
Romulus, born to Ilia from the line of Assaracus  
...  
Now turn your gaze here and let it rest upon  
Your family of Romans. Here is Caesar,  
And here are all of the descendants of Iulus (Virgil. *Aen.* 903-37)

He continues to tell him about other important figures in Roman history, including Augustus Caesar, Numa, Cato, the Gracchi brothers, but shies away from telling him of Marcellus, his people's great grief. When it comes time for Aeneas to leave, his heart is fired with love for the glory to come, again instilling determination in him to finish his journey.

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<sup>80</sup> See pages 20-21.

As opposed to the others, Orpheus provides a unique case when it comes to looking at the future. After gaining their permission, Orpheus is allowed to guide Eurydice back up to life, provided that he not look back at her. But right as he approaches the upper rim, fearing for his partner he turns back to look at her. She complains of nothing, because he simply loves her, but she dies again. In this instance we see how overly emotional he is, not being able to wait and being too insecure to trust the gods and Eurydice herself that she will be following. So he is left to mourn across the Styx before returning to the upper realm. When he returns, he is an unchanged man:

The circling sun had three times returned  
To watery Pisces, and Orpheus had rejected  
All love of woman, whether because his love  
Had turned out so badly, or he had pledged his faith.  
Still, many women fell in love with the poet,  
And many grieved when rebuffed. It was Orpheus  
Who began the custom among Thracian men  
Of giving their love to tender boys, and enjoying  
That brief springtime of blossoming youth (Ovid. *Met.* 10.81-9)

Orpheus fails to be transformed by his journey because he continues to look to the past when he should be keeping an eye on the future. This shows the importance of both components, letting go of the past and having a glimpse at the future, in the transformation of these individuals. However, I argue that Orpheus is indeed transformed, but this does not become complete until his “second death.”

The Myth of Er is especially focused on the future after death. Again, it has to be noted that this is different than the other stories above, but it contains information that crosses the boundaries of all of these genres. Er speaks of Tartarus and the punishments that are dealt to those who commit crimes during their lifetime. All of the wrongs they commit are paid in penalties in turn ten-fold for each, and the measure of this was by

periods of a hundred years, assuming that this was the length of human life and thus the punishment might be ten times the single crime.<sup>81</sup> This includes anyone who causes the deaths of others, betrays their cities and armies or reduces them to slavery, and so forth. On the other side, if anyone does a deed of kindness and is just in their lifetimes, they are rewarded in the same measure of tenfold. After covering the punishments and rewards of the deeds of men during their lifetime, Er continues to discuss the rebirth of the spirits. At the end of a thousand years, each spirit returns back to the world in a body of his choice. They are allowed to choose which being they prefer to turn into based on their previous experiences in their life before. After these souls pick their new lives, they are passed along to Lachesis, who picks out the genus that they chose, then to Clotho, who turns the Spindle to ratify the destiny of his lot and choice, then to Atropos to make the web of their destinies irreversible, and finally past the throne of Necessity, completing their decision.<sup>82</sup> Then the spirits drink the water from the River of Forgetfulness so that their previous lives will be completely erased and they can fall asleep and be sent to earth and a new life.

For someone to be completely transformed from a trip through the Underworld, it is necessary that they see a glimpse of what their future will be or could be. By seeing their future, they receive a newfound sense of hope and drive to return to the world above and take on all of the challenges that are in front of them. Having discussed the two requirements for a successful transformation, letting go of the past and seeing their future, I will next discuss how these components spiritually change these individuals.

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<sup>81</sup> Plato 10.615a1-3.

<sup>82</sup> Plato 10.617c-617d.

## Spiritual Transformation

After letting go of the things in their past, as well as gaining knowledge of what they can look forward to in the future, each hero has his own moment when these things come together and lead to a spiritual transformation. The final moment that all of these lessons came together to spiritually transform Odysseus is when Heracles speaks with him.<sup>83</sup> Heracles does not really engage in a conversation with Odysseus, rather, he makes the comments:

Odysseus, man of many wiles, divine  
Son of Laertes, you are saddened by  
The fate you bear, a destiny like mine  
When underneath the sun I lived my life.  
I was the son of Zeus, the son of Cronos,  
And yet the trials that I endured were countless;  
For I was made to serve a man by far  
Inferior to me: he set hard tests (Mandelbaum. *Od.* 11.622-29)

All of Heracles' toils, pains and trials will never be forgotten, so it is fair to claim that Odysseus' will not be forgotten either. Their lives can be viewed as very parallel in their journey, and the last labor Heracles had to accomplish was to descend into Hades and bring away Cerberus. If Heracles is able to travel into the Underworld and return above with a prize, it seems that Odysseus should return with a prize as well.<sup>84</sup> Tiresias prophesizes that Odysseus' toils end with his homecoming, revenge, and reunions and re-obtaining all possessions he holds dear to himself. If this is the case, then it seems that through his journey through the Underworld and the lessons he learns he discovers what defines his life and finds the resolve to finish the journey he was ready to give up on.

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<sup>83</sup> Dova 2012:75 in the eyes of the Homeric audience, being addressed by Heracles is a remarkable credential for Odysseus and an appropriate closure to his unusual adventure.

<sup>84</sup> Dimock 1989:160.

There are two transformations that take place in Bacchylides' *Ode 5*. First, while Heracles does not necessarily gain a spiritual transformation that allows him to go and be successful and blessed like most of the other characters in these stories, he is still changed. His encounter with Meleager sparks a newfound interest in marriage that has a profound impact on the rest of his life (albeit not a positive one since it leads to his death). Second, *Ode 5* is transformative for Hieron, the addressee of the poem. Hearing about Heracles' journey to the Underworld and how it is not necessarily the best of trips or how it leads to Heracles' unfortunate marriage, Hieron receives the opportunity to celebrate his victory all the more despite the dark spot in his life. Bacchylides not only discusses the fragility of the human condition, but he also gives a way for Hieron to have some reprieve from the consequences by hearing about Heracles' sufferings.<sup>85</sup> Just as Heracles and Meleager, Hieron is vulnerable as is all mankind, but can savor in the moment of his victory for as long as possible. The transformation of Heracles plays an important role on the audience of the story, Hieron, and is something that will be further evaluated for the audiences of all of these stories in the conclusion.

In the *Frogs*, the Underworld seems to emerge as the land of truth, where true values and knowledge are found and all questions can be answered. The entire play is built carefully around the development of Dionysus and his desire to restore greatness to Athens. Initially Dionysus travels to the Underworld due to his own desire for Euripides, yet along the way his motivation changes. By attempting to sift through his past and through his questioning of the two great poets in front of Pluto, he eventually comes to the realization that Aeschylus is the better poet and the one capable of returning Athens to a

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<sup>85</sup> Dova 2012:77.

superior state. Dionysus selects Aeschylus, showing he overcomes his initial naivety in desiring Euripides, and returns to the world above to overcome the city's shortcomings and ensure future success.

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' journey to the Underworld comes at a monumental point. He has been dragging all of the woes of his journey up to this point and is at a breaking point. This is obvious when he sees Palinurus, Dido and Deiphobus. Aeneas' grief is overwhelming, making him lose faith in his journey into Italy. Anchises' message completely erases Aeneas' despair from his journey, first telling him about the secrets of the afterlife and then showing him the future heroes of Rome if and when he completes his journey back on land. The fuller understanding of his mission gives Aeneas the resolution and passion to succeed. He will continue to face more challenges in his expedition, fight more wars and battles and inherit more hardships, but after seeing the future of Rome and his success, he is given the willpower to complete his journey.

We need to dig a bit deeper to understand Orpheus' transformation in the *Metamorphoses*, which does not occur as explicitly as it does for the others. Following Orpheus' obvious change of sexual preference, he eventually makes his way to a field where he begins to sing and play his lyre. He sings about Apollo and Hyacinthus, Cerastae, Pygmalion, Myrrha and Cinryas, and finally Atalanta and Hippomenes. Through these songs, we hear Orpheus go through the process of figuring out himself and all that had transpired, until he realizes his own faults. By the time he is torn to pieces, he has finally been spiritually transformed, allowing him to be with his Eurydice, perfectly happy, in Hades. There are no sexual frustrations or obsessive behaviors that can separate the two any longer.

The Myth of Er has very strong transformative implications as well. Er's journey begins when he is "slayed" in battle. When he arrives in the afterlife he is told that he must be the messenger to mankind and tell them of the afterlife, and he is required to listen and observe everything in this realm. There is less of an emphasis on the past in his journey until he reaches the end and sees Necessity and the Fates who sing the things that were, are and would be. The past comes to affect the future when the souls are choosing their new lives, basing their choices on their last experiences and what they prefer to be in contrast to what they were. Yet, the majority of Er's tale is focused on the future. The myth focuses on the punishments and rewards that await the soul after death, as well as the choice that some souls have to make for their new lives. The story concludes and Socrates relates the transformative implications: that if we believe in the afterlife we will be saved and that the soul is immortal. This means that we are capable of enduring all good and evil things and if we pursue righteousness and wisdom, we will be rewarded in the afterlife.

# Chapter Three: Bringing it All Together

## A. Bridging the Gap

Although the term “near-death experience” only became a household term recently, around the 1970s, the experience itself is described throughout history. Whether seen as reality or fantasy, beliefs and practices concerning the afterlife experience can be traced as far back as the Egyptian *Book of Death* and their Rituals of Embalming and Opening the Mouth. Homer’s *Odyssey* is one of the earliest and most important classical sources featuring a journey to the afterlife and back. This epic sketches a basic outline of such an experience: traveling to the afterlife, performing an important task, having significant encounters with various spirits and returning to life where a hero proceeds to succeed in the rest of his earthly endeavors.<sup>86</sup> These components of a journey to the Underworld continued to be written about and described in finer details throughout various genres in antiquity. Stories such as Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, Bacchylides’ *Ode 5*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, and even the more “modern” and possibly important account in Plato’s Myth of Er in the *Republic* continue to explore the epic journeys of these heroes into the afterlife and how they return changed men.

More recently, the near-death experience has become a topic of much discussion. The publication of Dr. Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* in 1975 opened the door to a newly sparked popular interest in the afterlife and even more in depth scientific research into this phenomenon. In this book he investigates over one hundred case studies of people who were declared “medically dead” only to be revived and return with extraordinary stories of

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<sup>86</sup> Dova 2012:1.

a new world beyond death. This helped spark the making of the BBC's documentary "The Day I Died," where a team of doctors from around the world explored the various possibilities for the cause of near-death experiences and how they affect those who have them in a scientific and controlled environment. Two of the most recent near-death experience accounts are Todd Burpo's *Heaven is for Real* and Dr. Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven*, written in 2010 and 2012 respectively. This topic, however, is not isolated to classical and modern eras. If one takes a look at literature and art throughout the time between these classical and modern sources, they will find more examples that span not only genre but also form.

## B. A Shared Experience

Although every near-death experience is different, individualized for each person experiencing it, there are quite a number of similarities that remain consistent between the classical texts and modern accounts. The first similarity comes in the way these individuals cross the boundaries of life and death, making their way into the afterlife. Modern medical understanding argues that people can have near-death experiences only when all activity in the brain ceases and are thus medically determined to be “dead.” In classical texts, there are three ways for individuals to accomplish this: by sea, by land, or by dying. Though the first two do not necessarily have any relevance to modern research, the third is similar to current theory. This is described in great detail in Plato’s Myth of Er, which sounds like a modern day account. In this story, Er dies on the battlefield and is later revived, returning with a story of the afterlife.

In looking at the classical and modern methods to traveling to the afterlife, an obvious and major difference is the fact that most ancient heroes do not die in order to get to the Underworld, while modern people do die to get to the afterlife. While this is a major difference, there is a common thread that is shared between both. Heroes making the journey either by sea or land come to the river Styx, which they need to journey over, crossing the barrier from the living to the dead. This is in harmony with what we find in modern accounts and even the Myth of Er. Although they are not making physical journeys, they are crossing the barrier between life and death in order to make their way into the afterlife and have these experiences.

The second point of comparison comes in the “physical landscape” of the afterlife. Most modern near-death experiences are described as taking place in beautiful, heavenly

like worlds where they are overwhelmed by peace and happiness. This other world is accessed after they travel through a dark tunnel and into the light. Of course, some modern travelers talk about a dark, muddy place they go prior to this tunnel, as Dr. Alexander experienced in his *Proof of Heaven*. Though most of the classical stories of heroes' journeys into Hades begin in a dark tunnel or passageway, most of them continue into muddy and "hellish" land. As time continued from the creation of the *Odyssey* (800 B.C.E.) to the *Aeneid* (19 B.C.E.), however, more of these stories began to incorporate another area that some of the heroes traveled to, Elysium, which is said to be a heavenly realm full of joy and happiness, lush fields and shining light – just like the modern accounts. This is similar to the realm that Er describes in more detail, including a journey from darkness to light, feelings of peace and joy, and visions of a beautiful realm. One reason that Elysium might be a later development in ancient sources, as opposed to the consistent image of the afterlife in modern accounts, is because these images and descriptions are culturally determined. Both ancient and modern people are trained to have a certain image in their minds for what the afterlife looks like. Whether it is bright lights and luscious trees or dark muddy waters, these are images and concepts that are created and spread throughout cultures. Another possibility for this "later invention" of Elysium can be traced to the physical aspects of someone as they die - the bright light at the end of the tunnel can be related to the narrowing of the field of vision and the feelings of peace and calmness can be related to the surge of endorphins released as a person dies. Although there are a few possibilities for this development, the similarities of the final image remain similar.

The third similarity comes through the spirits these afterlife travelers encounter during their journeys. For the modern near-death experience, these travelers often interact

with divine “beings” as well as those who were well known to them, often relatives of some sort. Although modern experiences do not generally report any type of monsters or bizarre creatures, as classical heroes often do, the divine beings and relatives they interact with are very similar to the spirits seen in almost every experience of antiquity. Greeks and Romans had many more divine figures with whom to interact, because they were polytheistic. Also, the type of genre, epic versus true life accounts, needs to be taken into consideration.

Dealing with epics like the *Odyssey*, people of the classical period would be less concerned with the people Odysseus knows personally and more interested in hearing about figures that are well known and that everyone has access to, such as Achilles and Heracles. Aside from these minor differences, the second group of spirits they encountered, those whom they knew and had died before them, is very similar to those seen in modern experiences. This second group is very dependent on the person who is having the near-death experience due to the impact that they had in their life before, as well as the impact they will have on the spiritual transformation of the person as they return to life.

Through the spirits they encounter in the afterlife for both modern and classical cases, each traveler is spiritually transformed. This transformation begins with the spirits helping them to let go of their pasts that are restraining them. Many people have serious issues in their past that they are not able to forget about and let go of. This is something that most modern individuals who have near-death experiences say, and through their journey they are able to finally let go. This usually comes through their direct contact with either the divine spirits or the spirits of those they had previously known. Whether it is being able to let go of the death of a loved one or of serious doubts and failures, these people are spiritually lifted from their weighted pasts. This freeing from their past is a

common occurrence in classical cases as well. From Odysseus letting go of all of the hardships he endured on his journey home to Aeneas letting go and accepting the losses of many of his loved ones, these classical heroes are able to leave behind anything that previously was holding them back. A modern example of this is when Dr. Alexander comes to interact with his deceased biological sister, Betsy, who tells him that he was loved and made him no longer feel like an orphan. Through their interactions with these spirits, both classical and modern travelers are able to take the weight of their past off their shoulders and finally look into the future, which these spirits also help them to do.

The second step in the spiritual transformation in both modern and classical cases is for the individuals to take a glimpse into the future. Whether it is simply gaining the knowledge of what the afterlife is like, fitting all of the pieces of their life together, or learning what their talents and gifts are to be used for, modern individuals have gained valuable insight about themselves and their future from their near-death experiences. This gained knowledge has led them to change their lifestyles, accomplish goals they have set for themselves, and enjoy knowing that in the end they will return to such a beautiful place. This is the same type of information that travelers who ventured into Hades and the afterlife in classical texts found for themselves, which they used to succeed in their future endeavors. Just as the heroes of antiquity, modern travelers use this information to give them a new sense of hope and drive to take on all of their future challenges. This second stage helps to fully transform the spirits of anyone visiting the afterlife.

Through letting go of their pasts and learning about their futures, those who have recently had a near-death experience are spiritually transformed. This profound change for the modern individual includes a new resolve for overcoming adversities in their lives,

making them stronger believers in their faiths, opening their minds to new possibilities, giving them strength to change their ways and giving them the ease of mind that comes with knowing there is something to look forward to after death. This transformation is echoed in the heroes of classical texts, who are able to overcome all of their hardships and future tasks with fortitude and more developed personalities, also having the reassurance of the existence of their spirits after death. These are not simply superficial transformations that all of these individuals sustain, but deep and life changing.

## C. Conclusion

Whether there will be a scientific discovery in regards to human existence living on past death or not remains to be seen. But one thing is certain: the idea of near-death experiences has captivated the minds of men and women throughout history. While the term itself is of recent origin, the idea behind it can be traced to literature throughout antiquity. Both classical and modern cases share the same common patterns that have come to define what a near-death experience is. Though each story is unique to the individual who experienced it, they come to represent the views and beliefs of the afterlife in the times they are written. These stories, whether they are true or not, continue to provide opportunities for their audiences to share their own experiences and beliefs, discuss the possible implications of what they could mean, and face the inevitable human encounter with death. By seeing how a hero like Meleager succumbed to the forces beyond his control, and understanding that the great heroes inevitably die, Hieron was able to release himself from the burden of the unknown and continue to live an “epic” life. In a sense, we modern readers are like Hieron who, by vicariously encountering death through tales of near-death experiences, are able to live and die fearlessly. What happens to us when we die? It is an age-old question, but an important one nonetheless.

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