

ELVIS: RETURN OF THE HERO

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A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

—Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

ELVIS PRESLEY'S JULY 1956 RETURN TO MEMPHIS was the end of an adventure. On one level, the occasion was a simple homecoming; on another level entirely, this event symbolizes a mythic pattern as old as all of literature. Curator Chris Murray tells us that Al Wertheimer, "with his camera, is our witness to the hero's return." And although the no-



Elvis reads fan mail while on the train to New York from Richmond, Virginia, July 1, 1956

PRECEDING SPREAD: Elvis and the Jordanaires rehearse for *The Steve Allen Show* at the Hudson Theater, New York City, July 1, 1956

tion of the youthful Elvis as a returning hero may seem something like meta-lionization, this young entertainer returned to Memphis, Tennessee, having experienced worlds never imagined by his mother and father, and therefore was a powerful conquering figure.

Elvis's beginnings were about as common as they could be; both sides of his family were poor and his father, Vernon, had even spent time in Parchman—a Mississippi delta hellhole of a prison—for forgery. There was certainly nothing in his bloodline that could foreshadow Elvis's rise to fame. That fact, however, plays into the machinations of the rags-to-riches motif. Elvis's story is the Horatio Alger tale of the atomic age in which hard work, good fortune, and a nice smile yield results that rise exponentially beyond the middle-class definition of success.

By 1956, Elvis had traveled throughout the South and performed at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville—the pantheon of country music—and at the more carnivalesque environment of the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport. In Homeric terms, 1955 was Elvis's Iliad. Just as the Greeks cut a swath through Troy, so Elvis



Teenage fans outside the rear of the Mosque Theater listen to Elvis and the Jordanaires rehearse, Richmond, Virginia, June 30, 1956

and his band, the Blue Moon Boys, featuring Scotty Moore, Bill Black, and D. J. Fontana, stormed through the south and Texas, getting attention everywhere they toured and putting screams in the throats of Elvis's increasing legion of young female fans. And if 1955 was the Iliad, then 1956 was surely the Odyssey. Elvis's 1956 excursion from Memphis to New York and back, with the additional journey south to Richmond, is reasonably comparable to Odysseus's wanderings among the lotus eaters and the sirens, as Elvis, like Odysseus, was certainly seeing and experiencing beyond the realm of his Ithaca.

The early life of Elvis Presley the entertainer is a testimony to the fact that historical processes sometimes feed into mythical patterns. Of course, Elvis was not Odysseus. He was also not King Arthur, Percival, or Superman. As Joseph Campbell observes, though, the life of a given hero has certain characteristics in common with the lives of *other* heroes. Was Elvis a hero? Perhaps not, but there are moments of his life wherein his world must have seemed to him to be fantastic and un-worldly.

Beginning with his road trips in 1955, and in full motion by 1956, Elvis was living his life inside the pattern of a myth. Like Joseph Campbell's hero, Elvis ventured "forth from the world of the common day." He left his hometown, his job as a truck driver for Crown Electric, and his mundane surroundings, and entered "into a region of *supernatural wonder*..." Although Elvis never precisely witnessed supernatural wonder in his perambulations, he certainly saw a lot of things he never saw

growing up in Memphis, Tennessee—show business at its provincial roots on tour and at its refined apex in the television and recording studios of New York City. Being a good son and a churchgoer, Elvis must have wondered what kind of magic he was spinning the first time young girls screamed and cried at his performances. By the time he appeared on *The Steve Allen Show*, he was aware of his legerdemain and its effect on a population of ingenues. And he achieved a "decisive victory" over "fabulous forces" when he overcame the condescension and belittling efforts of an obviously disrespectful Steve Allen to win the love and attention of the American audience.



Elvis in motion onstage at the Mosque Theater, Richmond, Virginia, June 30, 1956

In the end, again, per Campbell, "The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." Elvis returned to Memphis after great national television exposure and after advancing high up the ladder of fame in a very short time. What boons did he bestow on his fellow man? To his fans he gave the gift of himself...to his friends and community he was charitable to his final days, and to his family he gave everything imaginable from his newly gained fortune. Among the gifts he bestowed on his mother were the legendary pink Cadillac and, in early 1957, Graceland, a grand Southern mansion which, like Camelot, would become as famous as the king who inhabited it.