

# **What is a Hero, really?**

A text set to accompany canonical heroic texts

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## Introduction

*Beowulf* was one of my favorite stories to read in school. *The Hobbit* is my favorite book. *Star Wars* is one of my favorite films. So a text set on heroes was a logical choice for me. Besides, heroes are found in all shapes and sizes in all genres.

Due to my love of heroic texts, this was an intriguing project to undergo. Although many of the texts that I used were previously known to me, it was difficult to find options that I felt would intrigue younger audiences. I hope I have done so.

By focusing my text set around *Beowulf*, I can use a large quantity of outside sources to better explain the themes contained in the text. Additionally, *Beowulf* is taught in classrooms everywhere and is the only true English epic. By showing modern examples of the traditional hero, as well as the changes that have occurred over time, I can capture the attention of students and create an environment that will entice reluctant readers to join in with the class.

# **Heroes – Young Adult Novel**

Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *The Hobbit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Summary:

Of all races of Middle Earth, the Hobbit is the most unlikely for a hero. However, that is exactly what is presented in this epic tale of good versus evil. Battling Trolls, Goblins, and Dragons, Bilbo Baggins finally discovers that what he must conquer is that which is within himself. He joins the party of Dwarves under extreme pressure and duress, only wanting to make it out alive, and possibly richer. But the riches he finds are not only gold, but an inner being stronger and more determined than he had ever dreamed.

Commentary:

*The Hobbit* happens to be one of my all time favorite books. My mother first read the book to me when I was five-years-old, and I have loved it since. I would hope that all of my students would develop the same fondness that I did for this book. In this particular text set, *The Hobbit* would be a great companion text. It has all of the elements of any canonical epic; journey, fighting, decisions, rescues, honor, valor, code of conduct. But rather than being the story of a large gladiator, it is a story about a small, insignificant underdog who saves the day. Because of his status, and the unlikeliness of becoming a hero, Bilbo represents something in all of us. His growth as a person and a hero could make this story a type of heroic bildungsroman, illustrating the changes that the ordinary person can undergo to become a hero. The *Hobbit* is a must have for all school libraries, but for a look at heroism, there is no equal.

Hoobler, Dorothy. (2005). *In Darkness, Death*. New York: Puffin.

Summary:

It is 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan, and Seikei is a fourteen year old boy. The stepson of a judge, he is sent to investigate the mysterious murder of the most powerful lord in the country. With its intrigue, this story is an account of a young boy's heroic journey to catch the murderer running loose in the country.

Commentary:

Seikei is like Beowulf: both look for the mysterious murderer of their country men. Because of the target audience, *In Darkness, Death* will capture the reluctant adolescent reader better than *Beowulf*. Used along as a companion text, it will allow discussion of related issues and differences between cultures. The use of martial arts will entice male readers because of their desire to see and learn about them. Besides, as one of my students pointed out, who doesn't like ninjas? With its enticing cover, well chosen plot twists, and overall readability, this novel would be a great asset to the text set and any classroom library.

Horowitz, Anthony. (2001). *Stormbreaker*. New York: Philomel Books.

Summary:

Alex Rider is a fourteen-year-old British teenager. His parents died when he was young, and lives with his uncle and their housekeeper. But when his uncle dies in a mysterious car accident, Alex discovers bullet holes in his uncle's car's windshield, leading him to believe that his death was no accident, but murder. Suddenly, he is recruited by MI6, the spy agency that secretly employed his uncle. As a young James Bond, he is asked to investigate Herod Sayle, a man with a dirty secret. But what is it?

Commentary:

What student doesn't like a hero their own age? This is why movies like James Bond and Mission Impossible do so well. In fact, Spy Kids, Agent Cody Banks, and various other children's movies are in their third and fourth sequels. The heroic nature of the novel lends itself to parallel *Beowulf*. The use of an adolescent hero will entice the most reluctant reader into seeing just what happens. It allows them an escape from their normal, daily routine to that of a super spy.

Rowlings, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Summary:

Harry Potter is a human hobbit. He's small. He's weak. He's *not* athletic. All who know him consider him little more than a blot on the Earth, using up valuable oxygen. But Harry has a secret that not even he knows. What could it be? How can he discover it? Will he ever escape his surroundings? Can he truly save not just the day, but the world as we all know it?

Commentary:

Harry Potter has become a household name. Since the effort to ban this book, the readership has soared, and it's no wonder. Students can relate to the mediocrity that is Harry prior to his journey to Hogwarts. Once in the school, he embarks on his journey to find the sorcerer's stones and keep Lord Voldemort at bay. Harry is a hero that students can relate to. He is alone, pushed away, and excluded from groups, but he finds his way with his friends who are in the same situation. Although his journey is different from Beowulf's, it incorporates the same ideas, obstacles, and themes.

Cormier, Robert. (2000). *Heroes*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Summary:

Set in the Post WWII 1940's, *Heroes* redefines what a hero is. The main character, a recently returned war hero, seeks to kill his former mentor for unknown reasons. Along the path, Cormier presents other characters as heroes, making this a truly unique heroic journey.

Commentary:

This novel is not a traditional hero novel, but it isn't supposed to be. The title was chosen to spark controversy, to question the very idea of the hero. And so it does. It takes a look at what can happen when the ordinary person is pushed to extraordinary places. It takes into account the psychological breakdown of such characters. But when all is said and done, it leaves us asking what is a hero? Since that is the name of the text set, it fits perfectly with the overall idea here. How do we or how should we define a hero? Cormier is a controversial author who is sure to please even the most reluctant reader, if for no other reason than that there have been many attempts to ban his titles.

# **Heroes – Picture Books**

Kotzwinkle, William and Glenn Murray. (2003). *Walter the Farting Dog*. New York:

Dutton Children's Books.

Summary:

Walter has a problem. He is a flagellant dog. His emissions are offensive to others around him, and he is misunderstood. But when burglars enter the house, attempting to take everything, Walter is all that stands between them and victory. He uses everything he has to defend the house: his flagelence.

Commentary:

Again, Walter is an unlikely hero with an unlikely super power. But is he a hero? I would have to say yes. Using Walter as either a read aloud or a discussion topic, I could easily launch the class into a discussion of what is or is not a hero. While the situations are different, thematically, there are similarities to the other texts being used for this set. And who can help but love Walter?

Madonna. (2003). *The English Roses*. New York: Callaway.

Summary:

The English Roses are exclusive, and they don't like the new girl. She is too pretty. She must be stuck up. But after a common dream at a sleepover, the four decide to befriend the newly arrived girl. They break down the barriers that commonly face adolescents and develop a level of inclusion and acceptance that they did not know they could achieve.

Commentary:

Although many may not see this as a hero story, the girls are heroic to the new girl. By realizing her need for acceptance, they overcome their personal holdups and rescue her from a life of solitude. Are they heroes? That, is a topic for classroom discussion.

Hauman, George and Doris. (1961). *The Little Engine that Could*. New York: Platt and Monk.

Summary:

This little train has a problem. He thinks he is too small to travel the distance. But with encouragement and a positive attitude, he is able to overcome the obstacles he faces and fears. He becomes a hero to all other little trains everywhere.

Commentary:

*The Little Engine that Could* is one of the first heroic texts that children are often exposed to. Though he is not an epic hero, doesn't fight dragons, doesn't overcome the supernatural, he does overcome the daily and mundane. He shows that with persistence, we can all achieve greatness. It would be a great read aloud for the text set and a discussion point for the class. They could also quickly write how the Little Engine defines the heroic journey.

Auld, Mary. (2000). *David and Goliath*. New York: F. Watts.

Summary:

Follow along with young David as he does the impossible. He slays the giant, Goliath, when all others tremble in fear.

Commentary:

David and Goliath is one of those stories that are universal, even though it appears in the Bible. It fits into the frame of a hero: a young shepherd boy, turned warrior under necessity. This theme seems to crop up quite often. But, this allows this book to fit easily into the framework that the text set creates. Again, it would be a wonderful read aloud to get the students into the subject.

Dr. Seuss. (1957). *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. New York: Random House.

Summary:

In an effort to destroy Christmas, the Grinch attempts to thwart the celebration of the Whos in Whoville. As he carries out his dastardly deeds, he hears the celebration of Christmas anyway. He then realizes the true meaning and returns things to the way they should be.

Commentary:

The Grinch is perhaps an antihero that turns hero for the residents of Whoville. When he realizes that Christmas is more than presents and feasts and food, he undergoes a change. He literally grows and becomes a supernatural force. Using his newly discovered power, he is able to undo the evils he has done. His journey is unique for the text set, but it establishes the hero and the journey in a psychological way unlike the other texts. It clearly illustrates the change that heroes often undergo. It would be a great tie in to the canonical text used and allow for a different way of analyzing the text.

# **Heroes – Non-Fiction**

Weinberger, Caspar and Wynton C. Hall. (2006). *Home of the Brave: Honoring Unsung Heroes in the War on Terror*.

Summary:

This book gives accounts of nineteen soldiers who have fought in the War on Terror, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. Written by the former secretary of Defense, it gives a realistic account of America's heroes in a time of war.

Commentary:

There is perhaps not a more appropriate title to be read at this time in a class study of heroes and heroism. In this type of study, heroes from today are a necessity for the classroom. It offers an account of modern day heroes and a war that the students know about first hand. Such a book is rare to find. Having a book with modern day heroes, especially war heroes, is a great way of bringing the topic home for the students. Since many of them may have parents in the military, this may help them to have an outlet in the classroom to discuss their fears and concerns about the war. This could then spark writing topics for the class; letters to soldiers, congressmen, military families, stories about war, poems about war, debates, Socratic Seminars, etc.

Pernoud, Regine and Marie-Veronique Clin. (1998). *Joan of Arc: Her Story*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Summary:

Most of what we know about Joan of Arc is myth. But here, we can now learn the truth behind the "French peasant girl who led an army to the icon burned at the stake." Pernoud is able to focus on the important individuals, historical events and interpretations of Joan and bring the reader to a new understanding of who she truly was. She is also one of few female heroes from non-modern times.

Commentary:

Because Joan of Arc is unique to her time, and in many ways, ours, she is a wonderful addition to the text set. Her story is one of condemnation and growth, exemplifying the life and struggle of a hero. She makes the ultimate heroic sacrifice: her life. She is a hero in the same tradition as Beowulf and the others.

King, Martin Luther Jr. (2001). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King*. New York: Warner Brothers.

Summary:

This book gives the reader insight into who Martin Luther King Jr. truly was. Taken from his personal notes and diaries, it gives an account from King himself, as he saw himself. It allows a true reflection of a national hero.

Commentary:

For some reason, most of the heroic text available is about Caucasians. I wanted to break the monotony by including minorities as I could. Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps the most influential hero of our time. All students will benefit from learning more about him and his journey from an average citizen to the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. There is no journey as heroic as his. By tying his trials and tribulations to those of Beowulf, a parallel can be drawn between real and fictional heroes.

Fagles, Robert. (1990). *The Iliad*. New York, N.Y. Viking.

Summary:

The Iliad gives the heroic account of Achilles, the most feared of Greek warriors. Beginning at the onset of the Trojan War, the reader follows Achilles through his journey to become a war hero. Through his fear, or lack of, his distrust of allies, his temper tantrums, and his victories, we learn what a hero truly was.

Commentary:

I chose Fagles translation because it is a great deal easier to read while retaining the true nature of the Greek. The Iliad is *the* epic story. No set on heroes would be complete without it. Achilles is the building block for the Western hero, but due to the isolation of England, a comparison between the civilized Greeks and the barbaric Anglo-Saxons. By reading excerpts, the class could compare modern heroes with those of ancient times.

Gantz, Jeffrey. (1982). *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. New York: Penguin.

Summary:

Ride along with various Celtic heroes such as the valiant Cu Chulainn in this action packed collection. See how the Celts believed a hero should be.

Commentary:

Although there are influences now between Irish and English culture, the influences were not as prevalent centuries ago. The Irish hero was more a berserker figure, one who would change shape and psychology in an instant of conflict. The differences are astounding. While the epic heroes we all know and love are more like Spiderman or Batman, Irish heroes are more like the Incredible Hulk. They actually transform their body for battle. These stories are entertaining and allow for a great deal of analogical thinking that could keep the class connected with the text. These are unlike anything they have ever read.

# **Heroes – Websites**

[www.heroes.com](http://www.heroes.com)

Summary:

This website allows people to learn about and write about heroes that they have. From personal heroes to national heroes, they are covered here.

Commentary:

This website would allow students to look at real heroes on a more personal note, perhaps from local to global. After looking at a variety, they students could examine what makes each a hero and whether or not that ties into our definition. Using these as examples, they could write about their personal hero.

[www.pantheon.org](http://www.pantheon.org)

Summary:

The Encyclopedia Mythica allows students to learn about Greek, Norse, Roman, and Celtic myths. Since most mythic characters are heroic in some way, this is a must have to understand many of the classic texts used.

Commentary:

This website is a valuable resource for quick referencing mythological information. I have used it on numerous occasions for several different projects. It would provide background mythology for the stories that we read, something that is difficult to find and that students lack before this type of reading. It would make it possible to build a foundation of prior knowledge before the reading loses them.

[www.iwebquest.com/greece/explore.htm](http://www.iwebquest.com/greece/explore.htm)

Summary:

This site is a webquest into Character traits of the Ancient Greek heroes.

Commentary:

This could easily turn into an all day assignment. By assigning the webquest, I could allow the students to discover heroic traits and then determine if they are universal. This could be done in a presentation or an essay. The webquest is becoming a staple in the classroom, and this one seems particularly good and enjoyable. The traits identified would make identifying other traits easier.

[www.learningtogive.org/lessons/unit141/lesson3.html](http://www.learningtogive.org/lessons/unit141/lesson3.html)

Summary:

This website is a set of lesson plans for teaching heroism in literature.

Commentary:

While I would not use the lesson plans here, this site does allow teachers to gain ideas and see what others are doing with the same topic. It may be helpful to students who are also struggling and need additional support, or for parents to get involved and assist at home.

<http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=terryfox>

Summary:

Terry Fox lost his leg to cancer when he was a teenager. While in the hospital going through chemo, he was affected by the amount of suffering in the cancer ward and decided that, in his words, "Somewhere the hurting must stop." He decided to run across Canada to raise funds for cancer research here in Canada. During this run, the "Marathon of Hope," Fox ran 28-30 miles per day on one real leg and one artificial leg.

Commentary:

This site allows students to see a real hero and his journey to overcome. He struggled against the odds for his own well being. He did not seek renown, but only the personal satisfaction of success.

# **Heroes – Motion Pictures**

Adamson, Andrew and Jenson, Vicky (Director). (2001). *Shrek*. [Motion Picture].

United States: Dreamworks.

Summary:

Shrek is perhaps the most unlikely hero imaginable. An ogre from a swamp, Shrek must embark on a heroic journey to save the lovely Princess Fionna and acquire rights to his swamp, allowing him to rid it of the newly relocated fairy tale creatures. With his trusty, yet unwanted sidekick, Donkey, he sets out to maintain his hermit status, but along the way, realizes that being a hermit is not what it's cracked up to be.

Commentary:

Shrek would allow a look at a different kind of hero. While it is set in feudal times, it takes on attributes of the unlikely heroes of today, using a once familiar theme of fairy tales. Because of his journey, the movie is a perfect and entertaining example of the epic journey that commonly appears in epic poems. Shrek must overcome the supernatural, defeat the dragon, and find himself along the way. It would easily accompany any of the texts chosen for this set.

Lucas, George (Director). (1977). *Star Wars*. [Motion Picture]. United States: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

Summary:

In a galaxy far, far, away, Luke Skywalker seeks to restore peace to a galaxy full of turmoil and strife. A lowly peasant, he is trained in the sacred and secret arts of the Jedi, a power that uses nature as a source and allows control of all that is around you. After losing everything that he holds dear, Skywalker joins the rebellion in an attempt to free himself and the galaxy from the confines surrounding them.

Commentary:

This is a look at the epic hero through the lens of Science Fiction. It blends the future with the hero of the past, allowing the audience to participate in a new type of epic journey. This movie would enhance the understanding of any of the heroic texts considered because it allows a visual representation for what they are reading. Because they are able to see it, the students would be able to better understand some of the complexities that surround the hero.

Gibson, Mel (Director). (1995). *Braveheart*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Summary:

Set in fourteenth century Scotland, William Wallace has a vendetta against the English. They have killed his family, his country, his life. Now, he wants revenge. After his father's death, Wallace is raised by his uncle, only to return to his family land to raise a family of his own some twenty years later. But, after the English lord who occupies the area kills his wife, Wallace becomes enraged and swears to eliminate the English occupation.

Commentary:

This movie gives a somewhat historical account of Scottish independence. Although Hollywood has intervened, the account will help to broaden the minds of the audience and could spark research papers to determine the historical accuracy of the film. Otherwise, it offers a great account of a would be farmer turned hero after being forced to do so. Like the novels and non-fiction chosen, *Braveheart* offers a look into what makes a hero a hero and how a hero is made.

Raimi, Sam (Director). (2002). *Spiderman*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Sony Pictures Entertainment and Columbia TriStar Films.

Summary:

Peter Parker is a loser in school. No, in life. But all that is about to change. While on a class field trip to a local laboratory, Parker is bitten by a radioactive spider that somehow infuses its DNA with his, allowing him to acquire the powers of a human sized spider. However, he is not the only one mutated by science. His nemesis, the Green Goblin, is a product of genetic testing. These two face off after Parker begins to learn that “with great power, comes great responsibility.”

Commentary:

Almost all students know something about Spider Man. He may be *the* epic hero of our time, but unlike traditional epic heroes, he is human and succumbs to human frailties. Used along with the texts, discussions about what a hero was and is could be started. Classes could question whether or not he was a hero by the traditional definition. There could easily be comparisons made between Parker and Beowulf, as well as looks into the differences between the two.

Nolan, Christopher (Director). (2005). *Batman Begins*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Summary:

After seeing the murder of his parents, the audience follows Bruce Wayne through his life, watching him grow up full of hate and a desire for vengeance. When crime begins to rise, the young millionaire decides to help the police by taking matters into his own hands. This vigilante superhero fights crime, striving to defend the common person from the heinous acts around them.

Commentary:

Batman is today's tragic hero. Like Spiderman, he has also suffered great loss in his life. His journey, however, is different. He has the financial means necessary to make a life of justice. He may be easier to compare to Beowulf, being that both are driven by an inner demon to succeed and overcome evil.

