

What Makes a Hero? A Look into World Literature Interpretations of Heroism

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## Abstract

This essay examines aspects of heroism in various world literature texts throughout history. The essay begins by discussing what the definition of a hero is according to the Oxford English Dictionary. This background is necessary to be able to interpret what makes a hero in each of the texts. The essay then examines the cultural aspects of heroism within *The Illiad*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Journey to the West*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Oroonoko*. By referencing pieces of each text, an interpretation is created for each work discussed. The interpretations created are then compared with literary analyses of each of the works. This essay concludes that a hero, despite the textbook definitions, can only be defined based on cultural and societal aspects of its time-period.

### What Makes a Hero? A Look into World Literature Interpretations of Heroism

Throughout history, literature has followed a common theme of discussing aspects of nature, culture, society, and religion pertaining to its time period. From the texts this semester, I found that the majority of the texts focused on heroism. This concept has been relevant since the beginning of time, and each culture seems to have its own unique interpretation of what makes a hero. Although there are many definitions of what a hero is, they all have one thing in common: a hero is one who overcomes an obstacle for the good of the community. Through examining *The Illiad*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Journey to the West*, and *Oroonoko*, we can gain an in depth understanding of how heroism has been interpreted throughout time.

### What is a Hero?

When attempting to find a definition of 'Hero', there are numerous results. This plays into the aspect that each culture has its very own definition of what traits make a hero. Oxford English Dictionary (2014) gives three separate definitions for the word 'hero', the first relating directly to ancient mythology by stating "a man of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; one regarded as semi-divine and immortal. Also in extended use, denoting similar figures in non-classical myths or legends". This definition can be directly related to the first work to be discussed, *The Illiad*, and will be discussed in greater detail ahead.

The second definition for a hero given by the Oxford English Dictionary (2014) states: "A man distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions, esp. in battle; a brave or illustrious warrior, soldier, etc.". This definition of a hero is evident within *The Illiad*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Oroonoko* through each of the characters' courage in the face of battle.

Although this definition focuses solely on the aspects of a war hero, it is clear through these texts that a hero is so much more.

The final definition given for a hero by the Oxford English Dictionary (2014) states: “A man generally admired or acclaimed for great qualities or achievements in any field”. This definition of a hero is clear in all the works discussed, as it is the broadest. Through discussing how these definitions relate to each of the texts, a proper interpretation of heroism will be made relating to the literature’s culture.

### **Heroism in *The Illiad***

Some of the earliest portrayals of heroism can be found in Ancient Greek literature; Homer’s *The Illiad* being one of the most iconic works of that time. Although the exact publication date is unknown, and not much is known about the author itself, the heroism discussed in this work is very strong. Heroism in *The Illiad* mainly follows our first definition of the word, as Achilles, a war hero, is clearly favored by the gods. In Ancient Greek culture, there was nothing more important than someone who fearlessly faces war. Although Achilles suffers through some personal struggles throughout *The Illiad* and takes it out on the well-being of others, he rises to hero status towards the end of the text when he takes on the battle with Hector to protect the well-being of the community.

This piece of work is a great example of how culture and society plays a significant role in heroism. While these days, Achilles would be considered a coward for his self-imprisonment in his tent, he was really acting heroically, as he did it to defy Agamemnon. This shows Achilles strength, which made him a hero initially. The gods stood by his side and guided him towards what needed to be done, which is what made him such a hero in that culture and society.

When reviewing the literary analysis of this text created by Roland A. Champagne (2003) of the University of Missouri-St Louis, I found the viewpoint of Roland very similar to the interpretation I created, with some minor differences. The analysis states: “Achilles is first introduced as the epitome of destructive might, it is through his self-imprisonment in his tent that he realizes that his true force is much more than that simple martial dominance over another...His compassion toward Priam, the father of his enemy, opens Achilles toward an ethical view of force as a heroic virtue” (p. 65). According to this literary analysis, Achilles did not initially display the traits of a hero, instead he was a vicious human being. The analysis states that Achilles only became a hero after his self-imprisonment and shown compassion towards the enemy. I disagree with Champagne’s analysis as I feel that Achilles was portrayed as a hero from the start. He defied Agamemnon from the start, which showed a great deal of courage, and was constantly looking out for the well-being of those close to him.

### **Heroism in *The Thousand and One Nights***

The portrayal of heroism in *The Thousand and One Nights* was unique for its time, as the heroine was a woman. Heroism in this work is a bit more complicated than the rest, however, as there are various stories within the main story, meaning many heroes involved. I feel that Shahrazad was a very strong character in this text, as she put herself in the face of danger to protect the women around her. I feel that having heroism portrayed by a female in this text speaks to the culture of that era because females were usually thought of as lesser than males. In each of Shahrazad’s stories she tells, the characters’ portrayed heroism through choosing to spare one’s life and instead condemn them to suffer the rest of their days in some way.

Heroism within this text differs from *The Illiad* because Achilles was a hero in the sense of a war hero, revered by the gods. In the case of this piece of work, Shahrazad was a hero for

being brave in the face of danger in order to protect those around her. This speaks to the cultural differences between Ancient Greece and the Middle East. In Ancient Greece, a hero was normally one who excelled in war, whereas in the Middle East, a hero was one who faced dangerous situations for the overall wellbeing of others.

### **Heroism in *Journey to the West***

In *Journey to the West*, heroism is portrayed in a way that greatly differs from the rest of the works. Although the character's heroism relates to the third definition in Oxford English Dictionary, the cultural interpretation of a hero in that time was much stronger. Tripitaka and his men were considered heroes in their society because they took on and completed a journey no others could accomplish. Their Buddhist faith aided greatly in their journey, and they resisted many temptations along the way. Tripitaka was ultimately considered a hero because he reached enlightenment through his long, tiring journey.

When looking at the cultural and societal aspects of this text, it is clear that Buddhism played an important role in society. From the beginning of the text, it is made evident that those who practice and teach Buddhism were held to a higher respect than others in the society. Due to the Buddhist nature of this work, Tripitaka was considered a hero for practicing non-violence and mindfulness. Had he committed any act of violence towards those who wronged him, he would have been hailed a sinner instead of a hero.

While *The Illiad* and *The Thousand and One Nights* discuss heroism through violence or condemning one to suffer, *Journey to the West* focuses on non-violence and how it can better mankind. Tripitaka was a model citizen of his time, he portrayed all the aspects of Buddhism and was adamant about non-violence. When comparing his portrayal with our modern times, I feel that he may be considered a coward, rather than a hero, if his story were to take place today.

**Heroism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

In the Pearl Poet's text, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the portrayal of heroism is an arguable topic. In the middle ages, or Arthurian times, Knights were regarded as noble and trustworthy individuals. They were many times revered as the heroes of their society. Sir Gawain portrayed his heroism early on by volunteering in King Arthurs place to face the Green Knight. This portrayal of bravery is evident of his heroic status and lives on through the rest of the text. Some, however, may not view Sir Gawain as a heroic figure because he succumbs to temptation and acts selfishly to save his own life when facing the Green Knight the second time.

I feel like his heroic aspect is completely related to his society. It was clear that although everyone practiced Christianity as though they were devout, they still practiced paganism which goes against many of the religious aspects of Christianity. This shows that individuals of that time were not necessarily the most honest people, and they would let some things slide, just as they let it slide that Sir Gawain had acted cowardly when faced with his ultimate death.

I found that Blenkner's analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* had an interesting take on the text. When discussing the three tests that Sir Gawain faced in his journey, Blenkner (1977) states: "they suggest man's confrontation with mortality, ignorance of mind, and concupiscence of flesh – the three punishments imposed on mankind for the sin of Adam" (p. 357). While this doesn't necessarily relate to heroism, it touches base on the religious aspects of the middle ages which played a huge role in the culture and society of that era.

**Heroism in *Oroonoko***

Through all the works read this semester, I feel that *Oroonoko* contained the strongest portrayal of heroism as still relevant in modern times. The character of Oroonoko was a hero by the textbook definition, but also by the cultural definition of that era. However, due only to the

color of his skin, many did not regard him as one. Oroonoko was looked up to by many, and he always did what he felt was best for the overall wellbeing of his community. This alone makes him a hero, as although many would act extremely selfishly, Oroonoko was always selfless.

Rob Baum's analysis of *Oroonoko* from 2012, takes a unique approach and instead of hailing the character of Oroonoko as a hero, praises Aphra Behn as a hero of her time. Baum (2012) states: "It is the tale of a woman writer translating desire and meaning into flesh – black flesh, publicly consumed. Behn's authorial 'I' is transgressive, transformative. Artfully concealed between covers, Behn projects her bound English body into forbidden territories: foreign darkness, black otherness, and desires too dangerous for words." (p. 7). I agree with Baum's interpretation of Behn as a hero, and never would have conceived the idea myself. In a time where few women worked, and most were just viewed as mere housewives, Behn was an influential, society-changing writer. In a way, her portrayal of Oroonoko could be seen as a metaphor for the way women were treated during that era.

Taking a look at another perspective of Aphra Behn's work, I have examined Warren Chernaik's analysis from 2002. This analysis gives a unique perspective into the slavery aspect of *Oroonoko* and helps strengthen the argument of Oroonoko's heroism by stating:

"Oroonoko himself is unrepentant, steadfast in his principles to the last. What he comes to realize, perhaps, is that all revolutions are failed revolutions, because those who 'lov'd the whip and bell, and fawn'd the more they were beaten', those who, as Milton puts it in *Paradise Lost*, through 'fear' choose 'inglorious life with servitude', are always likely to be in the majority." (p. 104).

Chernaik's analysis discusses in depth Oroonoko's strength, up until his last breath. I have to also agree with this analysis, as although going a completely different direction from Baum's 2012



analysis, it still examines the underlying aspects of the text. I agree that Oroonoko showed strength up until his last breath, however, I feel that he still had the will to fight a revolution to free the slaves; he just had no way to do so.

Heroism within *Oroonoko* differs from the rest of the works because, when related to the era in which it was written, it portrays someone who was viewed by the common society as a slave, or an animal. Oroonoko showed his strength and compassion throughout the work, even when treated as a lesser human being.

### **Conclusion**

After analyzing these five works of work literature, it is evident that heroism plays a strong role in each of the cultures discussed. Through discussing the textbook definitions of a hero and comparing that with the cultural interpretations of a hero in each of the works, it can be concluded that a hero is solely defined by the era of the work of literature. What makes a hero today, may not make a hero tomorrow.

## Resources

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