

Hero

Definition of Hero

As a literary device, a hero can be defined as the principal [character](#) of a literary work. The term hero has been applied, not only in the classical sense, but also in modern literature, as the principal character of a story, play or novel.

This term is also employed in another sense, for the celebrated figures in certain ancient legends, and heroic epics like *Gilgamesh*, *the Iliad*, *Beowulf*, or *La Chanson de Roland*. However, it has traveled a long way from classical heroes in Oedipus and Odysseus, to Hamlet, and then to modern heroes, such as Willy Loman. From confrontation of monsters, to mental dilemmas, a hero has transformed from an attractive prince to a common man.

Examples of Hero from Literature

Example #1: *Odysseus*

Odysseus is the principal character of Homer's epic "Odyssey." Odysseus is also known by his Latin name, Ulysses. As the king of Ithaca, Odysseus has been presented as the dominant character of the ten-year-long Trojan War, who became famous through his struggles in the war. Odysseus is well-known for his brilliance, versatility, wit, and ingenuity – so much so that the [epithet](#) "Odysseus the cunning" is used for his character. He is the best example of a larger-than-life-figure type of a classical hero.

Example #2: *Beowulf*

Beowulf is the hero of the epic poem of the same title from Old English. The epic consists of 3,182 alliterative lines, and is considered the oldest surviving epic in Old English literature. This long poem is supposed to have

been written between the 8th and 11th centuries. As an adventurous hero from the race of Geats – who offers his help to the King of the Danes, against a monster called Grendel – Beowulf displays legendary courage, and sacrifices his men to save the king. He fought the monster until his own death; thus achieving greatness in the ancient poem, and becoming a classical hero of English literature.

Example #3: *Hamlet*

Hamlet is the hero of the play *Hamlet*, written by William Shakespeare. He is a sort of modern hero, in that he faces physical as well as psychological dilemmas. However, he is also akin to classical heroes, for he is a larger-than-life figure, and the would-be king of Denmark after his uncle, Claudius. However, he is akin to a common man, a modern hero, in that he faces the same universal dilemmas about life and death as a common man faces. That is why Hamlet has achieved so much popularity, for he represents a common man facing common problems, despite his being a prince.

Example #3: *Willy Loman*

A modern hero is reduced to a common man, who simultaneously suffers the “slings and arrows” of the time, and of society. It is because an ordinary man has the same life as a king has. Therefore, Arthur Miller has made Willy Loman the hero of his famous play, *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman represents a common man who could not face the pressure of the modern world, and commits suicide. The difference between Willy Loman and Hamlet is the evolution a hero goes through from a prince facing common problems, to a common man facing common problems.

Function of a Hero

A hero is the major character of a [narrative](#). In classical sense, the hero is not only involved in dangerous adventures or wars, but also in feats and exploits of unparalleled courage and bravery. He possesses extraordinary mental faculties and physical abilities. He takes the narrative long with him to the end that is usually his victory or, in some cases, his death. However,

ordinary man intended to bring out complex modern psychological issues faced by modern man.

This long journey of a hero from prince to common salesman has brought several changes in a narrative, turning [tragedy](#) into a tragi-[comedy](#), and a complex modern tragedy, absurd writings, and then modern pieces.

Therefore, the character of a hero in a literary piece not only brings unity in action, but also makes other characters prominent when they are compared and contrasted with him. That is why a hero is considered the central figure of a narrative or a play, and even if a hero is not present in a piece, efforts are made to create one.