

Holding out for a Hero

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The Academic Setting

This unit is a nine-week unit designed for tenth grade English Regular at West Mesa High School. The primary objective of this unit is to explore the patterns and characteristics of the archetypal hero in literature from their roots in ancient Greek literature to the modern hero in popular culture. It is an opportunity to connect many different genres, cultures and centuries of literature with a common thread.

West Mesa High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico is a large school with a diverse ethnic make-up. The school population is 74% Hispanic, 14% Caucasian, 6% Native American, and 6% other ethnic groups. We are located on the West Side of the city and serve the reservations to the west of the city. Our students come from diverse economic backgrounds as well. Many of them leave early to get to after school jobs, others show up only periodically because they have responsibilities at home, or school just doesn't offer what they feel they need or want. Attendance is one of the most difficult issues to resolve in our school system.

The English 10 Regular classes are made up of a variety of students. The majority of the students are underachievers for whom an English class is perceived to be not only boring but useless as well. They do not see any relevance in it to their lives; nor do they see a need for it as, according to them, they can already speak and write. There are also students who should be in enriched English but either because of scheduling flukes or their own behavior and lack of motivation, are in regular English. Students who have previously been in ESL English classes make up about 15% of the class. Finally, many students who are in Special Education classes are put into the regular English classes. The idea is to find a way to present curriculum that gives all these students the chance to access it and be successful. It is at times a daunting task.

The purpose of this unit is to promote the understanding of the archetypal hero. This is important because to get an understanding of the hero is to understand the similar ideals and values that different cultures hold. The study of the hero is a study of human nature and our own nature. To begin a dialogue about heroes is to discover what is important to our students. This establishes relevance because the class is discussing what is important to students. We see the values

and ideals that the students hold. This is the basis for the study. The patterns and characteristics of the hero are common across cultures and centuries from the very first hero, Gilgamesh, to today's Buffy the Vampire Slayer. There are more commonalities than differences to be found. If we begin by asking what characteristics of today's heroes are important, the students will discover the relevance on their own. The unit is based on their own ideas of what a hero is. By guiding them back through the centuries and cultures, they will find the common links on their own. The idea behind this unit is for the students to discover the characteristics and patterns of the hero and use these to create their own heroes.

The students will read about various heroes both in class and on their own. During this discovery, students will be tracking the patterns and characteristics of the hero as well as doing various activities designed to establish links between the students and the heroes. This unit is a multipurpose unit that, in its entirety, will fulfill all of the strands for 10th grade English Regular. The students will have a vocabulary list that will be used many times throughout this unit. They will have various reading assignments both in class and independently from which they will have to draw conclusions, make comparisons, ask critical questions and respond to critical questions. This will make use of Strand I (Reading Process) in which "the student employs appropriate reading strategies to read and interpret increasingly complex texts for a variety of purposes." They will have to "evaluate and analyze various texts within their historical context." From the texts, the students will have to produce ideas about the values and beliefs of the culture. This will fulfill Strand II (Reading Analysis) in which "the student responds to, examines, and critiques historically and culturally significant issues and events portrayed in literature that both illustrate and affect people, society, and individuals."

The students will have various writing assignments that will demonstrate different types of writing. They will have to write narratives describing the heroes, research papers on historical heroes, persuasive arguments for and against the actions of the heroes, and their own epic. The writing assignments will fulfill Strand III (Expressive Language Writing) in which "the student writes effectively for different audiences and purposes using appropriate writing strategies and conventions." Along with the writing assignments, the students will have to make presentations to the class. They will use persuasive speaking to debate the merits of one hero over another. They will use both their writing and speaking skills to perform their own plays based on the Trojan War. They will have to present their final projects to the class. This satisfies Strand IV

(Expressive Language Speaking) in which "the student speaks effectively for different audiences and purposes using appropriate speaking strategies and conventions." One of the writing assignments also fulfills Strand VI (Research). The students will have to research a non-Greek or Roman hero and present and turn in a paper in which they demonstrate how that hero follows the pattern of the traditional epic hero.

Finally, there are a variety of films to choose from. The students will have to watch one in class and one independently. They will compare the movie to the actual narrative of the hero and critically evaluate the efforts of the director. They will present to the class the differences they see as well as what they would have done differently. They will also have to write a review of the film and decide its value. This is a part of Strand V (Receptive Language: Listening and Viewing) in which "the student demonstrates, analyzes, evaluates, and reflects upon the skills and processes used to communicate by listening to and viewing a variety of auditory and visual works."

This unit uses a variety of genres. The students will read various myths, *Gilgamesh*, *Herakles*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, excerpts from *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. The students will also read a play based on one of the heroes. They will be getting into groups and choosing different heroes. The students will also have to read articles from periodicals about famous people to see the values we, as a society, project onto our chosen heroes. The variety of activities and readings make this unit easily adaptable to any English curriculum. It can be used in parts or as a whole in order to study archetypes and literary patterns.

Context and Background

What came first, the hero or the idea of the hero? The hero archetype has permeated literature from its incipience. Some of the first known manuscripts are legends of heroes. This curriculum unit is about the characteristics and patterns of the hero archetype in Western literature. The hero archetype is one of the mainstays of our literary diet. Our appetite, it seems, can never be satiated when it comes to hero consumption. In studying the characteristics and patterns of legendary literary heroes, we can understand what it is that creates this need for heroes.

A culture in need of a hero supplies one with all of the requisite attributes valued by the culture. Joseph Campbell suggests in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that heroes are the manifestation of the best in our own human nature: "It appears that through the wonder

tales which pretend to describe the lives of legendary heroes, symbolic expression is given to the unconscious desires, fears and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behavior"(256). This is perhaps the best explanation for our endless fascination with the hero and the heroic epic. The journey, quest or challenge undertaken by the hero becomes our journey as well. The monsters and evils he faces are our own internal demons and the skills and attributes he possesses or uses are exaggerated manifestations of what society values.

In this unit, the students will study the background of the hero archetype. We will chart the patterns and list the heroic characteristics. We will begin with the fully divine hero, Zeus, then look at the partially divine heroes of Herakles and Achilles. We will then move on the mortal heroes of Jason and Odysseus. I believe that this will give the students an excellent background from which to find patterns in more modern heroic epics such as Beowulf and King Arthur. The students will see how the characteristics of heroes reflect the needs and values of the various societies and ultimately use this knowledge to decipher heroic patterns in contemporary popular culture. As Head and Maclea say in *Myth and Meaning*, "It becomes obvious after reading much of the heroic literature of the ancient Greeks that a literary formula of heroism emerged which reflected not only what the Greeks demanded in their stories of heroes but what qualities of manhood they valued"(142). The down side is that when a hero makes a mistake, this too is exaggerated and severely punished. Ultimately, the expectation is that certain characteristics will emerge as dominant depending on the values of the culture and the individual creating the legend. The less desirable characteristics are also exaggerated and usually lead the hero into difficulty. Both the desirable and undesirable are necessary for a hero to be accessible and human. To be heroic is to overcome the internal demons as well as the external. Heroism would be too easy, as well as dull reading, if the heroes were perfect. After all, all can aspire to heroism, none can hope for perfection:

The heroes of all time have gone before us;
the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have
only to follow the thread of the hero-path.
And where we had thought to find an
abomination we shall find a God; where
we had thought to slay another we shall slay
ourselves; where we had thought to travel
outward,

we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world(Campbell 25).

This pattern is common throughout heroic epics be it in poetry, song, prose or drama. The first chapter in the life of the hero is, of course, birth. In most heroic epics, the child is of either divine or royal ancestry. His birth is usually during a time of upheaval or political unrest. Many times there are challengers to the birthright of the hero-child, and therefore the child is hidden or disguised to save his life. The hero is gifted with superhuman abilities either because of his divine birth or by nature. The child is always seen as superior to most mortals. Because the child is most often hidden away, very little is known about the formative years of the child. In most epics, the birth may be mentioned, but the reader is given very little other information. The hero comes to the reader or listener as a young adult at or nearing the peak of his extraordinary abilities. As Campbell says, "The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolic deficiency".(37)

Destiny becomes another key element in the pattern of the hero. "Destiny played a very great role in the lives of the Greek heroes...These men were fated to be great, and to be great meant that their lives were inextricably entwined with the interests of the Olympians"(Head and Maclea 161). In the case of many of the Greek heroes, their destiny was foretold before their births. In the case of others, a vow was as good as destiny. If their destiny were not known at the time of birth, it would soon become apparent to them by divine intervention when the hero appeared as a young man. The hero either accepts or tries to escape the call of destiny but ultimately, his first task is to confront the inescapability of it. One only has to look at the use of oracles and the many circumstances of divine intervention to see that destiny was at the forefront in the pattern of the hero.

After accepting his predetermined role in the world, the hero goes on a journey or a quest. This quest, in ancient Greece, meant a challenge to be sought out or a goal to be achieved rather than a search for one thing in particular. This quest could have been on behalf of his people as a savior, for material gain, or to establish his right to rule. The quest is a physical one in the Greek legends. In later works, the quest takes on more of a spiritual nature, many times seen as a quest for enlightenment. The quest also has a pattern. The quest becomes an epic of trials and tribulations in a hero's journey. The beginning of the

journey is a plunge into the unknown or darkness. This is the first step that separates the hero from the average mortal. Most mortals will stay within the defined boundaries and live their lives never knowing that so much is out there to threaten, destroy and enlighten them. This is the sign that the hero is no longer a part of the common world. There is something different and otherworldly about him. He can no longer be wholly a part of the world now that the other touches him. The hero's quest then becomes step after step of separation from the world, until he can be reborn and return.

The trials and challenges that a hero must endure, often with divine assistance, is the plot of the written legend. All heroes must undergo a series of fitness tests to prove themselves heroic and worthy of what they will ultimately achieve. The challenges are most often monsters, demons, or otherworldly creatures that threaten the hero and destroy his companions, further separating the hero from the world of the known. As Stephen Harris and Gloria Platzner say in *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*,

In the course of that quest he is eventually isolated from his fellow human beings and, all alone, must do battle with nightmarish creatures or monsters, usually including some in serpent or dragon form—all variants of the ancient goddess. Ultimately he must confront the divine or cosmic powers themselves (229).

The final separation for the hero on his quest is often a journey to the Underworld or some connection with death from which the hero returns or is reborn into the world. To know and confront death is the greatest unknown of all. The hero must do this in order to accept his ultimate destiny, which is death. The fear of death is also a great weakness. In confronting or meeting death, the hero is confronting the great unknown and the greatest weakness within both himself and the world. To meet death is to be reborn. The quest then becomes the quest for existence in its fullness, from birth through life and death and then rebirth. This is the most treacherous of all the challenges. To face one's mortality is to face the most primitive, and yet most common, link between man and the natural world. The hero then is reborn with this knowledge of the wholeness of mortal experience and can return, enlightened, to his known world.

A fascinating element of the pattern is the return. In most legends, the hero gets the reward he originally sought; yet these rewards may not

endure for long. In all of the Greek legends, there is little mentioned of the life after the quest. Some heroes achieve instant immortality; others fade into old age or even an inglorious existence. "It was a feature of these legends that this height of power was short-lived. Perhaps the poets who had created heroes felt compelled to destroy them as well...the old age of the hero was either obscure or inglorious."(Head and Macleay, 164). It is an interesting statement of the Greek culture that there was little use for the individual after his quest was finished. With divine exceptions, the heroes faded into obscurity, only the epic remained. This seems to suggest that it is a person's actions that are important rather than the whole of his life.

The first known heroic epic is the Gilgamesh Epic. This heroic poem was written about 2000 BC. Gilgamesh was a Babylonian king who ruled Uruk. He was a terrible ruler who had voracious appetites for all women of the city. The Gods, responding to the pleas of the people, sent Enkidu who was part animal, part mortal. They wrestle and become friends. Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel and share adventures. They end up killing the Bull of Heaven and Enkidu is killed as punishment. Gilgamesh then sets out on a quest for immortality. He has a chance for eternal youth, but loses the necessary plant and returns to Uruk to live out his mortal life. Gilgamesh has the character traits of the hero. He is both great and flawed. His quest is for immortality and he must face death in the form of losing his beloved friend. He then must also face his own death as a mortal man. Gilgamesh is important because it is the first account of a heroic quest and contains many of the patterns and characteristics of the heroic epics to follow.

The Greek hero who started the tradition was the Father-God, Zeus. Zeus' birth was a supernatural event. He was destined to overthrow his father, Cronus. Zeus was hidden away as an infant then returns to free his siblings and overthrow his father and battle with the Titans. Zeus' last battle for supremacy is with the dragon, Typhoeus. This dragon or serpent is a symbolic return, confrontation and severing of the link with the original womb of Gaea. In other words, it represents a rebirth for Zeus. After his quest, Zeus takes his place as King of the Gods. Zeus is the archetypal hero in many ways. He establishes the pattern. His characteristics are exaggerated mortal strengths and weaknesses. He differs in that he is immortal and can never know death as the mortal heroes will have to.

Herakles fits the pattern of the hero most thoroughly. He is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, Alcmene. Herakles is supernaturally strong even as an infant. He is persecuted by Hera, wife of Zeus, but manages to foil each of her plans with his strength and courage. As a

man, Herakles exhibits both the divine and bestial sides of his nature. He protects and serves mortals but also gives in to the superhuman urges. He kills his wife and children in an uncontrolled rage and must then perform twelve labors to erase his crimes. These labors constitute the quest of the hero. He must demonstrate his heroic qualities and, with divine assistance, complete the labors to achieve heroic status and the reward of immortality. Herakles ends his labors, the last of which forces him to go to the Underworld for his rebirth. Herakles follows the pattern and his reward is to become immortal after his mortal death.

The characteristics of Herakles are also important in studying the hero archetype. Herakles exhibits great strength and great rage. His persona of both savior and destroyer make him the focus of the duality that we see in so many heroes. What is heroic isn't always desirable. Herakles is the perfect hero in times of war or battle, but in times of peace his qualities make him dangerous to humanity. The labors of Herakles begin as physical tests where his strength and temper come in handy. In the later labors, Herakles must exhibit more control and cunning. His physical abilities must be balanced with intelligence and craftiness. He must also become a helper to humans. This suggests a balance of his divine and human heritage. He finally controls his god-like abilities and appetites as well as his human baseness. This duality is necessary in the hero because human qualities, positive and negative, are exaggerated. Can a hero perform great feats of strength without aggression? Can he then turn off this aggression when it is not needed? He can not any more than any human can turn off dominant aspects of character.

Achilles is one of the great heroes of the Trojan War. He was born of a divine mother, Thetis, and a mortal father, Peleus. His birth came about because of Zeus' fear of upheaval. He married Thetis to a mortal because it was foretold that possibly a child of Thetis would overthrow Zeus. To ensure that this would not happen, Zeus made sure that her child would have mortal blood. He is already a Greek hero when the Trojan War begins. Except for his dip in the river to protect him and that he was then sent to Cheiron for his education, little is known about his childhood. He is strictly a war hero. He has a choice in his destiny. He can either die young and glorious, or grow old and anonymous. This is not a difficult choice for a hero: "To choose inaction is to suffer the death of the soul that occurs when one's identity is shattered; to choose action, on the other hand, is to choose to die, sooner or later, in battle." (Harris and Platzner 262). By choosing to die gloriously in battle, Achilles faces the underworld. Achilles goes through the separation when he has a quarrel with

Agememnon over a spoil of war. He refuses to be a part of the battle. His best friend, Patrocles, wears his divine armor and is killed. This is a further separation of Achilles from the rest of the mortals. He becomes enraged by grief and slays Hector, the Prince of Troy. Then he commits the crime of defiling a corpse, further separating him from the rules of men. He also refuses to eat which is a symbolic acceptance of death. An arrow to the heel, his only vulnerable spot, finally kills him.

Throughout his short life, Achilles is a recipient of divine intervention. His mother makes him impervious to death by dipping him in the River Styx. Unfortunately, she held him by the heel so that one spot becomes his mortal weakness. Thetis also gets Hephaestus to make him glorious armor. Achilles demonstrates extraordinary courage and strength that make him the best warrior in battle. As long as Achilles is fighting, the Greeks will win. He has great skill and is highly motivated to the point of fanaticism when he battles. Again, this demonstrates the exaggerated qualities the heroes portray. He is extremely loyal to his friend and committed to the promises he makes. On the other hand, Achilles also demonstrates extreme violence and vindictiveness. He shows that he can sulk longer than any mortal, and he really holds a grudge. His bursts of temper are legendary and the result is devastation for the victim. It seems that his destiny took care of what could have been a major problem for society. A war hero is necessary and heroic in battle, but the very same characteristics make him undesirable as a next-door neighbor. Achilles and Herakles seem to share these traits. Herakles got a chance to redeem his brutal nature, yet Achilles did not.

Jason is best known for his voyage with the Argonauts to acquire the Golden Fleece, and his attempt to return and take his rightful place as heir to the throne. Jason was born into turmoil. His Uncle, Pelias, deposed his father at the time of his birth. His mother smuggled him out of the palace and gave him to the care of Cheiron, a wise centaur. Jason acquired great skill and strength through the training of this divine creature, and upon learning of his ancestry at adulthood, went home to reclaim his birthright. He met an old woman and helped her across a river, losing one of his sandals in the process. The old woman was Hera and an oracle had told Pelias that a man with one sandal would depose him. Hera would then be the source of divine intervention for Jason. His Uncle, unable to kill him outright, sends him on a quest for the Golden Fleece and says that he will give back the throne upon his victorious return. Jason assembles many heroic young men including Herakles and Orpheus, has the Argo built, and sets sail. On his voyage, Jason encounters challenges

but makes many mistakes as well (which is fairly typical for a hero since they tend to act first). The Argonauts seek out Phineas, a blind king and famous seer, to get advice for their continuing voyage. They first help him out by getting rid of the harpies who are ruining his dinner plans. They find out how to avoid the Symplegades (the clashing rocks) and how to navigate to Colchis where they will find the Golden Fleece. Jason follows the advice, including the advice to trust in Aphrodite, and reaches Colchis.

King Aetes of Colchis extended the required hospitality to his guests. When Jason explained the nature of his visit, Aetes could not kill Jason outright so he proposed a test. He gave Jason the impossible task of yoking two fire breathing oxen, digging a furrow and planting dragon teeth which would become fierce warriors. If Jason could defeat the warriors, he could have the Golden Fleece. Hera got Aphrodite to cause Aetes daughter Medea to fall in love with Jason. Medea was a powerful sorceress and she used her powers to help Jason, provided he would take her home with him. Jason was victorious, but Aetes was not happy and pursued the Argonauts. Medea and Jason cut up Medea's brother, whom they had taken as hostage, and threw the bits into the sea. Aetes had to give up the pursuit in order to collect all the pieces so that they could be given a proper burial. They faced many trials on the way home, but with Medea's help, Jason overcame them.

Jason's return is most unusual in a heroic journey. Through a horrible revenge, Medea caused the death of Pelias at his daughters' hands. Jason and Medea were exiled because of the horrible death of Pelias. The people were afraid of her and would not except Jason if Medea were part of the package. Jason soon put Medea aside to marry another. Medea killed the bride, killed her own children and left. Jason wandered homeless until, as an old man, he was struck dead by a board from the rotting hull of the Argo.

Jason's story differs some from the heroic pattern and perhaps that is why his ending was so ignominious. Jason did undergo separation when he aligned himself with Medea. He further separated himself by approving of her actions, which were horrifying to the average man. He did undergo a kind of death when he went into exile. Jason at first displayed the courage, strength and skill that are required of a hero. It was when Medea entered the picture that he displayed the dark side of his nature. He allowed Medea to do horrific things for him and even approved of those things for the sake of expedience. In order to be successful, Jason could not be perfect. I would suggest that Jason was an incomplete hero perhaps because of his lack of being reborn and perhaps also because of his divine patron, Hera, who does not seem up

to the task of guiding a hero. Jason presents a difficult portrait of a hero because his actions are less than heroic at many times. One may ask what, if any, purpose an incomplete hero serves.

Odysseus is a new kind of Greek hero. After the Trojan War, in which he was a key and heroic figure, Odysseus' quest is to return home. Odysseus does not have a documented infancy like the rest of the heroes. His childhood and time before the war seem to be peaceful and uneventful. He has a wife and an infant son at the time of his departure. There are many interesting character differences between Odysseus and the other heroes. His quest follows the heroic pattern, but Athena mentors him throughout. Divine intervention plays a key role in his journey. The Gods closely watch Odysseus and intervene both on his behalf and against him. Odysseus angers Poseidon who ensures that his voyage home will be a very long one. During this voyage, Odysseus must face challenges, separations and women who try to ensnare him. In fact, the reader can use his encounters with women to chart his quest. Athena also never seems very far away from her favorite. Odysseus' journey to the Underworld is also different from the other heroes. He goes not to stay or fight or conquer. He goes to question and converse. He is then reborn and faced with the choice of immortality or mortality. Other heroes seek immortality; Odysseus seeks his home and Penelope, his wife. He realizes that he needs to reconnect with the mortal world. When Calypso offers him immortality, he rejects it. As Harris and Platzner state,

Rather than deny his mortal nature, he embraces it, spurred partly by his loyalty to Penelope, who, unlike Calypso, will grow old and die. After his prolonged contact with the wisdom of figures like Circe, Odysseus chooses to remain fixed in the earthly life cycle that includes aging and death, the wise acceptance of natural law expressed by the Great Goddess(357).

Odysseus becomes completely alone in his mortality. In his wisdom, Odysseus realizes that part of being self-reliant, which he is forced to do, means reconnecting with others. It is only by doing this that he can finally get home. He decides to be a part of the mortal world and connects with King Alcinous and his daughter who, hearing of Odysseus' feats, cunning, courage and persistence, takes him to his home. As stated in the introduction to Lombardo's translation of *The Odyssey*,

Odysseus' triumph is possible only because of his exceptional nature, marked by a distinctive form of heroism. Like the other heroes, Odysseus is physically powerful and adept at the arts of war, but what really distinguishes him is a quality of the mind...designated by the term metis, which denotes intelligence cunning, versatility and a facility with words (xviii).

Odysseus has one challenge left before he can resume his rightful place beside Penelope. He must rid his land of those who would usurp it. With the assistance of Athena and his son, Telemachus, he is able to reunite with Penelope, regain his birthright and make amends to Poseidon. Through all of his adventures and temptations, Odysseus kept his desire for his goal, to be home with Penelope, at the forefront. His self-control and ability to endure are finally rewarded and he is able to redefine the hero to mean man, husband, king, and father. Odysseus states his character best when he says to Calypso,

My heart aches for the day I return to my home. If some god hits me hard as I sail the dark purple, I'll weather it like the sea-bitten veteran I am. God knows I've suffered and had my share of sorrows in war and at sea. I can take more if I have to (5,220-24).

Odysseus, when he begins his quest, is an older man, unlike the rash youth of the other heroes. He has already demonstrated his craftiness and intelligence. The main thing that, for me, sets Odysseus apart is his ability to think, observe and plan before acting. He doesn't just run in fighting. He is one of the only heroes that does not give in to his impulses and urges without caution. He has superior strength and obvious virility, but the characteristics of thoughtfulness and cunning are much more dominant and much more necessary. His caution saved him more times than his strength could. Could it be that the Greeks saw that a new and different kind of hero would be needed in times of peace? I do believe that the needs and values of a society are reflected through the heroes. A society that is no longer at war needs men who can plan and think as well as men who see homelife as important. Odysseus' driving force was to be home with his wife and son. This signals a change in values. Building and civilizing become more important than fighting and exploring. As needs change, the hero must also change to respond to those needs.

The Greeks established the pattern and basic characteristics of the heroic epic. This pattern and the characteristics arose from the valued attributes, needs and personal requirements of the culture. As Campbell says,

We must understand that mythological figures are not only symptoms of the unconscious but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained constant throughout the course of human history as the form and nervous structure of the human psyche itself (257).

In *Beowulf*, the reader gets an idea of the turmoil into which Beowulf, a Geat, arrives. Little is told of Beowulf's birth, but much is made of his abilities, which are super-human. "A crew of seamen returned with marvelous tales about him: a thane with the strength of thirty in the grip of each hand. Now Holy God has guided him here to defend us Danes." (Line 377-83). Beowulf has obviously continued the pattern of the heroic epic as the reader hears of his exploits and adventures. His greatest will be to defeat Grendel in single combat. This is the separation. Beowulf will defeat Grendel by himself. We further learn of how great a role destiny plays and Beowulf's acceptance of this when he says, "If Grendel wins...no need then to lament for long or lay out my body: if the battle takes me, send back this breast webbing that Weland fashioned...Fate goes ever as fate must." (442-455). Beowulf defeats Grendel but then must plunge into the depths of the earth to defeat Grendel's mother. He meets the demon alone in the belly of the earth, is given up for dead by all, defeats the demon then arises again to the face of the earth reconnected with humanity. He is rewarded richly, has unified two nations, the Geats and the Danes, and may now assume his rightful position as King of the Geats after a few more adventures. His final challenge presents itself in his old age when he must defeat the dragon (a common earth symbol and common heroic exploit) to protect his people and save his land. There, he is victorious and also mortally wounded. He knows and prepares to accept his mortality with courage, strength and loyalty. He is much like Achilles in his awareness and acceptance of destiny.

Beowulf's characteristics are ubiquitous strength and courage. He also has a fairly grim acceptance of death and indeed seems to expect and prepare for it at the onset of each challenge. There are characteristics that, because of an increasing Christian influence, come to the forefront of the archetype. As Hrothgar says of him,

"Beowulf, my friend, your fame has gone far and wide, you are known everywhere. In all things you are even-tempered, prudent and resolute...Forever you will be your people's mainstay and your own warriors' helping hand."(1703-7). After his death, "They said that of all the Kings upon the earth he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, kindest to his people and keenest to win fame."(3180-82). The characteristics of a hero have gained layers due to the influence of Christianity. The hero is no longer rash, nor does he make the mistakes of the Greek heroes. He is still strong and brave, but now has humility and fairness as important characteristics. Graciousness was unheard of in a hero, but now this is included in the final tribute to Beowulf. What does this say about the culture's values? There is a great importance placed on Christian values rather than heroic characteristics. These must be incorporated into the hero to show that heroes are divinely supported.

King Arthur was born of supernatural events and political turmoil when Uther, impersonating Igraine's husband with the "divine" assistance of Merlin, impregnates her. Arthur is the result and he is hidden away until he reaches manhood to take his rightful place a King of Britain. He will then unify Britain and establish Camelot. Head and Maclea say,

The Arthur we know is a product of the poetic imagination a literary manifestation of a medieval society's desire to create a heroic figure who could "carry" the values of the culture and whose stories would delight and instruct (167).

Arthur's rise to the throne parallels the heroic epic. He must first accept his destiny when he is faced with the knowledge that he is the rightful heir to the throne. There are challengers to his right to be King and he must prove his worth. There are differing views on how Arthur gets the sword, Excalibur. Either he pulls it from the stone, or the Lady of the Lake gives it to him, thus proving his right to be King. This symbolizes a gift from the Mother Earth and a symbolic rebirth. Once Arthur is established as the King, he takes a wife and gathers knights to his round table. They go on quests to find the Holy Grail. Although Arthur's entire life is a fight to keep what he has earned, Arthur seems to desire peace above all else. There is weariness in Arthur as Camelot falls apart. He has had to fight challenge after challenge, come home from unsuccessful quests to find that those he trusted betrayed him, and face death in the form of his fallen knights. He must finally face his own mortality when, though desiring a truce, he must instead fight his son for the right to govern. He knows that

this will mean his death, but he accepts his fate and battles. When Arthur dies, he is transported to Avalon.

Arthur exemplifies the duality of the hero. His strengths and weaknesses are glaringly apparent. His arrogance, inflexibility and neglect of his responsibilities are among his fatal weaknesses. He is courageous, strong, divinely guided and fair-minded. The round table is a symbol of his liberal mind and the democratic principles of pure Christianity. Arthur fights for his right to govern, yet when he finally establishes his right to be King, he neglects his responsibilities in favor of adventuring with his knights. He acquires the much sought after Queen, then neglects her and she betrays him. He is capable of great feats of courage and cunning, but is unable to conquer the domestic domain. Arthur is a complex hero because of the duality of his character. He seems to exemplify the Christian values of the society, yet seems incapable of conforming to the needs of society. Through his quest for the Holy Grail, Arthur separates himself first from home, from his kingdom, from his knights and finally from his wife when he returns to find that she has had an affair with his most trusted knight. He then rejects his son, Mordred. He has separated himself from all ties and prepares to meet death in order to fulfill his heroic destiny.

The pattern of the heroic epic is one key to understanding our fascination with the hero. It is also a way to connect the reader to the hero. We see what we value exemplified in the hero. This tradition can be seen in modern literature as well. We can see the tradition continue in the stories from the French Revolution to the American West and beyond. We have only to look at Jean Valjean, James Bond, Batman or even Harry Potter to see that the pattern remains intact and the characteristics remain a reflection of our needs, values and ideals.

There is still an obvious need for heroes in contemporary culture. This need has been as much a part of our history as religion and politics. The pattern of the heroic epic remains intact and continues to be repeated every day. Human nature is such that we need to create a personification of our ideals and our failings. This is why we continue to create and destroy heroes. We exaggerate that which makes us ideal and that which makes us fail in our quest for perfection. Our popular culture is permeated with the heroic epic. We are fascinated by greatness and even more fascinated by flawed greatness. We have only to look at the glut of fantasy novels and movies to see that though we may be more scientifically knowledgeable, we still hold on to those ideals that Greek tradition personified so gloriously. We create heroes in our own image and exaggerate those characteristics we fantasize about. Whether it is courage, strength, humility, beauty,

etc., we all see a hope for ourselves in our heroes. They become heroic even though they are flawed because they are human and share our weaknesses. If heroes are truly a projection of ourselves, then we all have the qualities of the hero.

Implementation

Making the curriculum relevant to the students so that their attention is captured is a primary objective for teachers. In this unit, the hero archetype is one that all students can relate to. Our popular culture is inundated with hero types. To begin this unit, it is vital to first have a discussion about modern day heroes. Students enjoy talking about what they enjoy watching in the movies and on television. They also love, above all else, talking about themselves. By having this discussion, the students will talk about characters in movies, on television and in books or comic books that appeal to them. One only has to ask why these people appeal to them then make a list of the reasons. From this point, the teacher can segue into a discussion of how those "types" came into being.

Throughout the unit, the students should be listing particular characteristics of the heroes. For each legend, the student will decide what heroic characteristics are positive and which are negative. The first task will be to create a working definition of the hero. The students will create a hero prototype. They will have a running list of the characteristics of the hero and a pattern of the heroic epic from which to work. The students should be given the vocabulary list at the beginning of the unit. The terms on the list should be discussed with the students right away so that the students will be familiar with the terminology.

Week 1

The objectives of this week are to set the pattern for the heroic epic, create a prototype of the hero and begin to recognize the duality of the hero. The students should have this background in order to recognize the heroic patterns inherent in all of the legends.

Ask the students who their heroes are and why. Make a list of the characteristics that they value in a hero. Ask them then who are the heroes in movie that they have seen or books that they have read. Write down a list of the heroes, then list their attributes and failings. Keep this list as a reference. Ask each student to write a paragraph about a prototype of a hero. Hand out the list of vocabulary and terms to the students and go over it with them. The students must keep a notebook in which the lists are kept and updated. This should be checked weekly for points. Segue into a discussion of how the heroic

tradition started, then hand out the story of Gilgamesh. Read the story, then discuss why Gilgamesh was a hero. List the positive and negative aspects of his heroic character. Have the students draw a life map for Gilgamesh. A key idea should be the quest for immortality.

After discussing the nature of the hero and beginning to see a pattern for the hero, the major Gods and Goddesses should be reviewed with the students. These characters set the background for the Greek tradition of the heroic epic. Either describe or hand out the pattern of the heroic epic to the students. This pattern will help the students to analyze the following heroic epics. This week should establish the basic pattern and characteristics of the hero.

Key Questions

What is the reward that heroes seek?
How do heroic characteristics emerge?
Why do heroes have flaws?

Materials needed

Spiral notebook with pockets
The story of Gilgamesh
Vocabulary and terms handout
Posterboard and markers

Week 2

The objectives for this week are to read about the life of Herakles, recognize both the positive and negative heroic traits, summarize, analyze and critique Herakles' actions and character. The students will have to use their ability to think and write critically about literature. The students will also add to their lists of heroic traits, both positive and negative. They will fit Herakles into the heroic pattern.

The students will read the adventures of Herakles then create a time line for Herakles' life. This line should be illustrated at the significant points in his life and represent the highs and lows of his adventures. The students will write brief paragraphs for every illustration. The students may either draw their own illustrations or find pictures representative of the actions.

Key Questions

What is the duality of Herakles' nature?
Why is he like this?
How does Herakles fit the role of the hero?
What is his reward and is it fitting?

Materials

Notebook with ongoing list and pattern

Markers

Posterboard

Magazines for pictures

Week 3

Students will read about the Trojan War, Achilles and excerpts from *The Iliad*. The students will list the attributes and flaws of Achilles as a hero. The students will understand further the dual nature of the hero. The students will apply what they know about Achilles in a written assignment about him. The students will use appropriate writing techniques to create and present a dialogue between Achilles' ghost and a therapist. The students will use critical questioning to find out why Achilles is a hero and what his negative and positive aspects are.

The students will be put into pairs after reading and discussing Achilles' legend. The students will discuss and write dialogues between Achilles and his post-mortem therapist. They will present these to the class and turn in a written draft. The class will then discuss the various ideas that came from the dialogues about Achilles' heroic temperament and the problems that he encountered. Students will also continue the list of heroic characteristics and fit Achilles into the pattern of the heroic epic.

Key Questions

How does Achilles fit into the heroic pattern?

What makes him heroic and what makes him human?

How does the knowledge of his destiny affect his decisions?

What are the consequences of his choices?

Week 4

The students will read about Jason and his adventures with the Argonauts. They will then watch the movies *Jason and the Argonauts*. The students will critically analyze the actions of Jason and make value judgments based on their knowledge of heroes about his heroism. The students will decide why Jason is or is not a hero. The students will use their analytical abilities to determine whether or not Jason deserves the title of hero. The students will write papers for and against Jason as a hero using appropriate writing techniques.

The class will be divided into halves after reading about Jason and watching and discussing the reading and the movie. One half of the class will have to write papers in favor of Jason a hero. The other half will write papers vilifying Jason. They will then engage in a

controlled debate to determine his justification as a hero. The rules of the debate must be set beforehand. I would suggest having a spokesperson and time limits for each side. The class will then vote on whether to include Jason in the canon of heroes or not. Both sides will have to stick to the pattern of the hero and the lists of attributes and flaws to determine the worthiness of Jason. If the vote is yes, the students will include his characteristics and pattern in the ongoing list.

Key Questions

Why is Jason problematic as a hero?

Does his patron, Hera, have anything to do with Jason as a hero?

What part does Medea play in his heroic epic?

Is Jason an incomplete hero and why?

Week 5

The students will read *The Odyssey* or chosen excerpts from the poem. They will then summarize and analyze Odysseus' adventures and characteristics. The students will demonstrate how the notion of the hero has changed with Odysseus while still staying true to the pattern of the heroic epic.

The students will be correspondents writing articles about the adventures of Odysseus for the Ithaca Weekly. They will have to submit at least five articles with an extra article from the homefront. They can include an interview with Telemachus or Penelope. These articles will be submitted for grading in journal form.

Key Questions

How is Odysseus a different kind of hero?

What does he see as his goal?

What are his strongest attributes?

Why does he reject the reward of immortality?

Week 6 and 7

The students will read "The Coming of Arthur" from *The Idylls of the King* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and excerpts from Beowulf. They will discuss and trace the patterns of the hero. Students will then demonstrate how both of these heroes fit the traditional pattern. The students will list the characteristics and determine how the onset of Christianity changed some of the characteristics of the hero if, in fact, it did. The students will continue their lists and patterns for each of these two heroes.

The students will research and present a paper on a non-Greek hero. They will use their research abilities to write a three-five page paper about a hero from a different culture and time. They will spend two

days in the library compiling research from at least three different sources and include an annotated bibliography citing works for further interest. This paper will be presented to the class then turned in. The class, after each presentation, will add to their lists of characteristics and decide whether each hero fits the traditional pattern.

Key Questions

How does our idea of the hero change as society changes?

What attributes are important at what times?

How does the hero reflect society?

Week 8 and 9

The students will watch the first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Star Wars* and discuss the differences and similarities between modern heroes and the classical heroes. The students will determine what accounts for differences and how the pattern remains the same. The students will use the lists they have compiled to write their own heroic epic with themselves as the hero. The pattern for the hero must follow the traditional pattern and the attributes should reflect what the individual and society values. The student will create an epic in the form of a comic book, epic poem or song. This will be presented to the class and turned in.

Assessment

The students will be assessed accordingly. Their ongoing lists and patterns will be given a point value of 20 points per week. They will have a discussion grade based on their participation to be evaluated by the teacher on an individual basis. Each project will be worth 30-50 points. The research paper will be valued at 40 points plus ten for the presentation. The final project will be valued at 50 points with the presentation worth 20 points. Evaluation is highly individualized in an English class. This is a suggestion for how to assess. Each teacher may include quizzes or tests if appropriate.

Documentation

Vocabulary and Terms

Myth

Myth Proper-involving major Gods

Demigod

Nymph

Satyr

Centaur

Archetype

Prototype

Hubris-an act of extreme pride
Ate-mental blindness
Nemesis-punishment
Tragedy
Anthropomorphic
Saga
Legend
Folktale

Annotated Bibliography

*Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982.

A retelling of the King Arthur Legend from Morgan's point of view. This is an interesting and informative perspective of the legend.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton, 1968.

A resource that traces the patterns of epics, legends and folktales

**Galloway, David. *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*. Austin: University of Texas, 1965.

A book for studying the modern hero of absurdist literature

**Goodrich, Norma Lorre. *King Arthur*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1980.

A resource for the historical study of the Arthurian legend

*Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. New York: Amereon Ltd, 1942.

Harris, Stephen L and Platzner, Gloria. *Classical Mythology; Images and Insights*. Sacramento: Mayfield Publishing, 1998.

Necessary resource for studying mythology. Contains excerpts from many great works of classical mythology and critical study of mythological figures and legends.

Head, James G. and Maclea Linda. *Myth and Meaning*. Evanston: McDougal Little, 1976.

A book that gives synopsis, outlines and basic themes of heroic epics. It also has examples of questions pertinent to each hero.

*Heaney, Seamus, translator. *Beowulf*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000.

An excellent translation of the entire Beowulf epic with Old English on the opposite page.

*Latimore, Richard, translator. Homer's *Iliad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

*Lombardo, Stanley, translator. Homer's *Odyssey*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2000.

*Mason, Herbert, translator. *Gilgamesh*. New York: Penguin Books, 1970.

*Mayer, Marianna. *Women Warriors: Myths and Legends of Heroic Women*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1999.

A good resource for students interested in female heroes.

*Monaghan, Patricia. *The New Book of Goddesses and Heroines*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publishing, 1998.

A resource for students interested in heroines. Includes amazing pictures.

*Rowin, Jeff. *Adventure Heroes*. New York: Facts on File, 1994.

An encyclopedia type book of adventure heroes. Gives brief summaries and comments on heroes from Gilgamesh to comic book heroes.

*Stecknesser, Kent Ladd. *The Western Hero in History and Legend*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1965.

A resource for students who are interested in legends of Western heroes.

*Tennyson, Alfred. *Idylls of the King*.
<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/idyl-ded.htm>

*White, T.H. *The Once and Future King*. New York: Putnam, 1958.

*Student resource

**Teacher resources not cited in unit