THE SHAPE OF THE HERO: A DESCRIPTIVE LITERARY STUDY OF HEROISM FROM HOMER TO HARRY POTTER

Maleeta Angelina Goddard[1], Shraddha Tamang[2]

[1]IDC India — Innovation Development Council, New Delhi, India

[2]Department of English, Salesian College, Siliguri Campus

Author Note

Maleeta Angelina Goddard https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8540-9498

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to IDC India- Innovation Development Council, 5th Floor, Wing A, Statesman House, Barakhamba Road, Connaught Place, New Delhi – 110001, India. Email: editorial@idcijst.com

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ABSTRACT

Heroism is one of the oldest and most consistently featured topics in literature, yet it resists a single, definite definition. The present paper carries out a descriptive and comparative literary analysis of the concept of heroism as it is portrayed over a period of about three thousand years in Western storytelling, looking at eleven characters chosen from epics, medieval romances, Renaissance tragedies, early modern satire, the nineteenth-century novel, twentieth-century realist fiction, and contemporary fantasy: Achilles and Odysseus from Homer, Aeneas from Virgil, the anonymous Old English Beowulf, Gawain from the fourteenth-century romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Don Quixote by Cervantes, Hamlet by Shakespeare, Jean Valjean by Victor Hugo, Sydney Carton by Charles Dickens, Atticus Finch by Harper Lee, and Harry Potter by J. K. Rowling. Instead of summarising the material in the form of tables or lists, the study approaches it descriptively, placing each character in the context of existing research on heroism, such as Thomas Carlyle's nineteenth-century idea of the hero as a world-historical figure, Lord Raglan's and Joseph Campbell's descriptions of the recurring heroic pattern, Northrop Frye's theory of literary modes, and more recent psychological and philosophical work by Ari Kohen and by Zeno Franco, Kathy Blau, and Philip Zimbardo. By examining the eleven characters in light of this range of theories and also by comparing them with one another in a continuous narrative, the paper shows a steady though clear trend in Western literature: moving

from the superhuman, warlike hero of the epic, via the honour-bound hero of romance and the flawed, self-divided hero of tragedy, to the ordinary, morally courageous hero found in modern and contemporary novels. The paper ends with an individual reflection on the meaning of these qualities for everyday life and a discussion of how the literary hero can still provide a practical model for dealing with the challenges of today, before asserting that the lasting value of heroism does not lie in any of its historical forms but in the consistent, fundamental readiness to take risks for the sake of others.

Keywords: Heroism; comparative literature; epic; tragedy; the novel; Homer; Beowulf; Don Quixote; Hamlet; Jean Valjean; Atticus Finch; Harry Potter

INTRODUCTION

The hero is perhaps the figure that appears most frequently throughout literary history and at the same time one of the most difficult to define. Ranging from the armoured heroes of Homeric epic to the reluctant schoolboy wizard of modern fantasy, the image of the hero has been continually reinterpreted to meet the moral values, social systems, and imaginative capacities of the age in which he or she was created. When Thomas Carlyle wrote about it in 1841, he viewed the hero as an exceptional, world-historical individual whose greatness had a shaping effect on the lives of all those around him; fifteen decades later, psychologists such as Philip Zimbardo advanced the view that heroism is a possibility, at least in theory, for any ordinary person who decides to act on it at a time of real risk. Over the centuries, literature has portrayed both ideas, often within the same tradition, so a reader moving from Homer's Achilles to Harper Lee's Atticus Finch is, in effect, seeing the concept of the hero transform.

The paper focuses on this formal change. Instead of limiting itself to a limited number of well-known examples, it brings together eleven figures who cover a period of nearly three thousand years in the history of Western literature and poses the same set of questions to each of them: what kind of heroism does this figure embody, what specific difficulties does the figure have to face, what qualities characterise the way the figure behaves when under pressure, how do

the figure's actions influence the people nearby him or her, and what lesson does the figure leave for the reader in the end. Since the purpose of the paper is to be descriptive and comparative and not simply to list items, these questions are answered in a continuous flow of critical prose, the various figures being examined in relation to one another and in relation to the existing literary and psychological research on the subject of heroism rather than being treated as mere items on a checklist or a table. The hope is that the outcome will be a study which treats heroism in the way that literature itself does, namely as a fluid and developing concept rather than as a collection of fixed traits.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this paper is to develop a descriptive, historically grounded understanding of literary heroism through a thorough comparative study. More precisely, the study intends to explain the notion of heroism as it has been theorised in both literary and psychological scholarship; to identify and describe the main types of heroism which have appeared in literature throughout various periods; to look at a wide variety of heroic characters taken from classical epic, medieval romance, Renaissance tragedy, the early modern novel, the nineteenth-century novel, and modern fantasy; to outline, for each character, the particular and frequently increasing difficulties he has to face; to account for the personal qualities that enable each character to be regarded as heroic according to the moral principles of his own work; to

consider the effect that each character's actions have on the other characters and on the wider community depicted in the narrative; to extract, for each character, the lesson or message which the text offers to a modern reader; to give a personal reaction linking these heroic qualities to the requirements of everyday life; to show how the example of the literary hero can assist ordinary people in meeting the challenges of the present world; and finally to present the paper's conclusions in the form of a clear statement regarding the significance of heroism for both literature and society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HEROISM

Scholars' interest in the figure of the hero dates back further than modern literary criticism. In his lecture series, published in 1841 under the title On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, Thomas Carlyle describes the hero as an outstanding individual whose insight and strength of will influence the course of history; this idea is sometimes referred to as the "great man" theory of heroism, and according to Carlyle, heroes are prophets, poets, priests and kings, who are distinguished from ordinary people by a sort of inspired greatness. A completely different and more structural approach appears in the early twentieth century with Lord Raglan's The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama (1936), in which he lists the biographical pattern that is common to mythic heroes in widely separated cultures: an unusual birth, early exile, a period of trial, and finally a return or recognition; and a decade later in

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Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), in which this same recurring pattern is transformed into the now well-known monomyth of departure, initiation and return. While Carlyle sees the hero as exceptional, Raglan and Campbell regard the heroic pattern itself as a nearly universal narrative structure which different cultures and periods simply fill in with new material.

In Anatomy of Criticism (1957), Northrop Frye offers an additional, particularly useful development of this structural approach by dividing literary fiction according to the hero's degree of superiority in relation to other human beings and the world around them. In the mythic mode, as Frye describes it, the hero is of a higher kind than other men and than the environment itself, a situation found in the tales of the gods; in the romance mode the hero is superior in extent to other people and to his environment and moves about in a world of wonders where normal rules are set aside, a feature which applies generally to Beowulf, Sir Gawain and Aeneas; in the high mimetic mode, typical of epic and tragedy, the hero is superior in degree to other men but is still subject to natural law and to a social and cosmic order which can punish him, as is the case with Achilles and Hamlet; and in the low mimetic mode, which is typical of most realist fiction, the hero is one of us, neither superior to others nor to the environment, and is distinguished only by his behaviour rather than by his status or by supernatural assistance, a characterization that applies very well to Atticus Finch, Jean Valjean, and in a more sacrificial sense to Sydney Carton. This paper uses Frye's framework loosely, not as a strict classification

but as a way to illustrate the historical trend observable among the eleven characters examined here: the shift from a literature of superhuman heroes to one of heroic ordinary people.

More recent scholarship has examined heroism from a philosophical and psychological perspective rather than a purely literary one. In his book Untangling Heroism (2013), Ari Kohen claims that heroes are individuals who face up to their own mortality, accept serious risk or hardship, and do this in the service of a principle that goes beyond their own self-interest, a definition which intentionally includes both the ancient warrior and the modern whistleblower. Zeno Franco, Kathy Blau and Philip Zimbardo go further in their 2011 article "Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism" by distinguishing heroism from ordinary kindness mainly on the grounds of the amount of risk that is knowingly taken, whether or not that risk is physical, social or professional; Zimbardo's later and more widely known book, The Lucifer Effect (2007), takes this line of analysis and develops the idea of a trainable 'heroic imagination', that is, the ability of ordinary people to recognise and act on opportunities for heroic behaviour in everyday life. When these two strands of scholarship – the literary-structural tradition which goes back through Carlyle, Raglan, Campbell and Frye, and the philosophical-psychological tradition represented by Kohen, Franco, Blau and Zimbardo – are considered together, they provide the interpretive terminology that this paper uses when reviewing its eleven selected characters.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative approach, suitable for a work that combines original literary analysis with a review of existing scholarship. The eleven characters were chosen deliberately, not by chance, in order to cover a wide and unbroken range of Western literary history, that is, from ancient Greek and Roman epic, through Old English epic, medieval romance, early modern prose satire, Renaissance tragedy, the nineteenth-century novel, twentieth-century American realist fiction, to contemporary fantasy, while at the same time enabling each character to be assessed using the same set of critical questions regarding the kind of heroism displayed, the main difficulties the character encounters, the qualities he or she shows, the effect of the character's actions on other characters in the narrative, and the lesson the character provides to the reader. Since the purpose of the paper is to be descriptive and not statistical, it does not make use of any charts, tables or enumerated lists to organise the comparison; instead, each character is examined in a continuous stream of critical prose, and the comparative aspect of the paper is accomplished through a series of sustained discussions that make clear the connections between the characters, the periods and the theoretical structure set out above. The primary evidence comes from the source texts themselves, using standard scholarly translations where appropriate, and the interpretive framework is drawn from the secondary literature discussed in the earlier section.

DEFINING HEROISM

By combining the literary and psychological traditions, heroism can be defined for the purposes of this paper as the deliberate decision to accept serious risk: risk to the body, risk to one's social position, or risk to one's established sense of self to act on behalf of a person, a community, or a principle which the hero considers to be more important than his own safety or comfort. This definition intentionally allows space for a wide variety of heroes; it can include Carlyle's exceptional figure who shapes history as well as Cohen's and Zimbardo's more democratic view that heroism is a choice that, under the right circumstances, almost anyone can make. It also takes into account the fact that not every literary hero is successful or morally praiseworthy in all respects; Achilles is quarrelsome and often cruel, Don Quixote at times simply misunderstands the world around him, and Hamlet's heroism is as much a result of his hesitation as it is of any particular action, yet each of them is still recognizably heroic within the moral framework of their personal story because in each case they knowingly take on a risk that a more self-interested person would have refused. The following therefore does not treat heroism as a fixed list of virtues but rather as this fundamental willingness to risk something real to pursue something past the self, a willingness which literature has portrayed in a great many different ways over the course of three thousand years.

TYPES OF HEROISM ACROSS LITERARY HISTORY

From a historical point of view, the literature discussed in this paper points to a number of broad, though overlapping, kinds of heroism, each linked to a specific period and literary style. The first and most direct of these is martial or epic heroism, in which the hero's value is mainly shown by his acts of arms and by his fortitude in battle; this is the kind of heroism displayed by Achilles before the walls of Troy and, in a more communal and defensive context, by Beowulf when fighting Grendel and the dragon. Nearby in character yet differing in that it relies on cunning and adaptability rather than on raw strength is what might be termed intellectual or resourceful heroism, the best example of which is Odysseus, whose survival is just as much due to strategy and disguise as it is to his strength. A third form, duty-bound or pious heroism, puts the hero's personal desires aside in favour of a greater obligation, whether this be to the gods, to a nation that has not yet been founded, or to a code of honour; this is seen in Virgil's Aeneas, who on several occasions puts aside his own wishes to carry out his destined mission, and in Gawain from the alliterative romance, whose whole ordeal is a test of whether he can keep his word even at the cost of his life.

A kind of heroism closely linked to the development of prose fiction might be described as idealistic or quixotic, the distinguishing feature of such a hero being not his actual effectiveness but rather his refusal to give up a noble and though unrealistic conception of how

the world should be; Don Quixote by Cervantes is the prime example, and later literature's inclination to favour well-intentioned but impractical idealists can be mainly attributed to Cervantes. Tragic heroism is a type of hero whose virtue is tied to a flaw or delay that leads to his downfall, a pattern Aristotle outlined in the Poetics under the term hamartia and Shakespeare presents so vividly in Hamlet. Redemptive heroism is mainly found in the nineteenth-century novel and shows how a hero can change from a previous state of compromise or criminality into one of active goodness, as in the case of Jean Valjean from Victor Hugo; closely related to this is sacrificial heroism, in which the hero's most defining action is a deliberate decision to give up his own life for the benefit of another, a case in point being Sydney Carton from Dickens and, in a completely different context, the final decision made by Harry Potter. Finally, twentieth-century realist fiction gives rise to what might be called moral or civil heroism, in which the hero's danger is mainly social rather than physical; facing disapproval, being excluded, or suffering professional consequences and this is undertaken in support of a principle such as justice, as shown by Atticus Finch. These categories are not completely separate; most of the characters mentioned below combine two or more of these types. Rather, they represent stages along a long historical trend, apparent in the chapters that follow, as literature moves from a preoccupation with superhuman strength and destiny to one increasingly focused on ordinary conscience.

HEROIC CHARACTERS ACROSS CENTURIES OF LITERATURE

Achilles: The Wrath and Grief of the Epic Warrior

Achilles, the main character in Homer's Iliad, composed in the eighth century BCE, is the clearest example in Greek epic of martial heroism. The main problem he faces at the beginning is not the Trojan army but his own anger; after being insulted by Agamemnon, he pulls himself altogether out of the battle, and the central tragedy of the poem is that this decision leads to the death of his nearest friend, Patroclus, who dies wearing Achilles's armour while Achilles himself remains in his tent in a state of sulking. Only after Patroclus's death does Achilles return to the war, driven by grief so intense that his behaviour in battle, including the desecration of Hector's body, becomes almost monstrous. The main characteristics of Achilles are therefore not simply courage but an extreme and almost dangerous intensity of feeling; this includes pride, his love for his companion, and his grief, as well as a physical ability unmatched by any other, which is why, according to the poem, he is the best fighter at Troy. (Deist) His actions have great consequences for the people around him: his withdrawal almost causes the Greeks to lose the war, his return brings about a decisive turn in the battle, and his final,

softened-by-grief decision to return Hector's body to the Trojan king Priam in the last book of the poem is one of the most touching instances in ancient literature of common humaneness between enemies. The lesson left by Achilles is a sobering one in that even the greatest heroism can be linked with pride and rage, and that a hero's growth, when it occurs, is measured by no means so much by victory as by his ability to recognise, for a moment, the grief of an enemy as something similar to his own.

Odysseus: Cunning, Endurance, and the Long Road Home

Odysseus, who is the main character in Homer's Odyssey, has to meet a different sort of challenge from Achilles: instead of fighting in a single war, he must complete a ten-year journey in several stages back home, during which he is hindered by the Cyclops Polyphemus, the witch Circe, the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis, the temptation of the Sirens, seven years of imprisonment with the nymph Calypso, and finally the suitors who have taken over his own household while he was away. While Achilles is characterised by the intensity of his emotions, Odysseus is defined by patience, adaptability, and cleverness the quality the poem calls polymetis, or "many-minded"- constantly outwitting those he cannot overpower. (Williams, 2016, pp. 1-15) This intelligence, though, is closely linked to a sense of pride which at times ruins him, most notably when he fails to resist teasing the blind Polyphemus with his own name, thus provoking the anger of the god Poseidon and greatly extending his own suffering. It is up to him to decide whether his crew lives or dies; his long absence puts a test on the loyalty of his

wife Penelope and on the patience of his son Telemachus, and his eventual, carefully planned return brings order back to a household and a kingdom which had become disordered during his absence. The lesson to be drawn from Odysseus's long journey is that heroism can involve as much endurance and self-control as any one decisive victory, and that even the cleverest hero must, in the end, learn to combine cleverness with humility.

Aeneas: Duty, Loss, and the Founding of a Nation

The Aeneid by Virgil, which was written in the first century BCE, tells the story of Aeneas, a prince of Troy, as he escapes from the burning remains of the city and makes his way towards Italy under the influence of fate and the guidance of the gods with the aim of establishing there the state that is later to become Rome. The difficulties that Aeneas faces are mainly ones of renunciation rather than simply battles; he has to leave behind a Troy that is destined to fall, give up his passionate love affair with Dido, who was queen of Carthage and who commits suicide as a result of his leaving, and go down into the underworld to meet the spirits of the dead before he can fully commit himself to his task. The quality Virgil explicitly identifies and refers to again and again is pietas, a devotion to duty that includes obligations to the gods, to his father and to his son, and also to a nation not yet founded a heroism based on self-denial rather than self-assertion. (Virgil) The decisions that Aeneas makes have a major impact on a large number of characters, ranging from Dido, who is mourning, to the Italian people whose land he and his followers will eventually take, often at a high cost to those who

were already living there, a cost which the poem itself does not completely hide. The lesson that Aeneas provides is that heroism can involve suppressing one's own desires, sometimes in a very painful way, in order to fulfil an obligation that goes beyond a single life, although the poem's own uncertainty regarding the human cost of Aeneas's mission functions as a reminder that duty-based heroism is not free from its own ethical ambiguities.

Beowulf: Strength, Loyalty, and the Limits of Physical Heroism

The Old English poem Beowulf, which was composed at some time between the eighth and eleventh centuries, tells the story of a Geatish warrior who goes to Denmark to get rid of the monster Grendel from King Hrothgar's hall, then goes down into the mere to kill Grendel's vengeful mother, and, when he has become an old king fifty years later, fights a dragon that breathes fire and is destroying his own kingdom, in this last battle suffering a mortal wound. Beowulf's main characteristics are his extraordinary physical strength and courage, his steadfast loyalty to the comitatus code that bound an Anglo-Saxon warrior to his lord and people, and, notably, a feeling of humility in victory that credits his successes to fate rather than his own glory. ("Beowulf Character Analysis") Although his actions protect two different nations over two generations: the Danes when he was young and the Geats when he was old the poem is frank about the limitations of even such heroism in that his final battle costs him his life and leaves his own people without a leader and thus newly vulnerable to their enemies. ("Beowulf - Humanities LibreTexts") The lesson Beowulf leaves behind is therefore twofold: real heroism sometimes

means facing a battle one may not survive simply because someone has to, and a community's safety cannot rest indefinitely on the strength of any one hero.

Sir Gawain: Honour, Temptation, and Imperfect Integrity

The fourteenth-century anonymous romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight puts its hero through a different sort of trial. (Owen) After having made a strange deal with an enigmatic green-skinned knight, Gawain is required, a year later, to go to the Green Knight's chapel to receive a blow in return, one for which he has every reason to expect will prove fatal; on the way, he is put to the test not by monsters but by questions of hospitality, by temptation, and by the pressure to break his promise, since the host's wife tries on more than one occasion to seduce him and he is gently tempted to hide his protective girdle rather than keep to the terms of his agreement. Although Gawain's main qualities are courtesy, honour, and courage that remain even when death appears certain, the poem is particularly concerned with his imperfections: he does, in the end, conceal the girdle out of fear, and the poem permits both his survival and his quiet, public shame over that one failure. (Kaske) Gawain's action affects the whole court of King Arthur, who treat his humility as a shared reminder rather than a private embarrassment. Gawain's lesson is that even a hero based on an ideal of nearly perfect honour can fall short under real pressure, and that honestly acknowledging failure, rather than hiding it, can itself be a kind of integrity.

Don Quixote: Idealism Against a Disenchanted World

Miguel de Cervantes's Don Quixote, published in two parts in 1605 and 1615, follows an aging Spanish gentleman who, having read too many chivalric romances, sets out to revive knight-errantry within a world that no longer has any use for it, mistaking windmills for giants and a farm girl for an enchanted noblewoman. (Cervantes) His challenge is not a monster or an army but the persistent, often humiliating gap between his generous ideals and an unglamorous reality that refuses to cooperate. Quixote's defining qualities are immovable idealism, personal generosity, and a courage that, however misapplied, is entirely genuine; his squire, Sancho Panza, initially drawn along by promised rewards, comes to love and protect his master's dignity over the course of the novel, even as he recognises his delusions. ("Sancho Panza Character Analysis in Don Quixote") Quixote's escapades repeatedly disrupt, embarrass, and occasionally genuinely help the people he encounters, and by the novel's end, his eventual return to sanity and quiet death read less as triumph than as loss, since the world he re-enters is markedly poorer, and perhaps a little more cynical, without his particular form with hope in it. The lesson Quixote leaves behind is that heroism can lie in the firm refusal to let a disappointing world talk a person out of generosity. The play Hamlet, written around 1600, shows a hero whose main problem is almost entirely within himself. (Editors) After being told by his father's ghost to avenge a murder carried out by his own uncle, who has now become king, Hamlet spends the majority of the action not taking action but rather considering the truth of the ghost's statement, pretending to be mad, and continually questioning matters of conscience, the nature of

death, and the trustworthiness of his own senses, until a series of events leads to a violent ending in which he, together with a number of others, loses his life. What is most characteristic of Hamlet is not conventional courage but rather a persistent and deeply analytical intelligence which prevents him from acting until he is completely sure of the moral principles on which he bases his actions, a kind of delay which Aristotle's theory of tragedy would regard as an essential part of Hamlet's greatness. (Cantor) Hamlet's indecision has effects that spread outward with great tragic impact, causing the death of Polonius, the drowning of Ophelia, and, in the final scene of the play, the deaths of Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet himself. The message Hamlet gives the reader is hard: moral seriousness and heroic decisiveness do not always go well together, and a hero's most commendable trait,in this case, his refusal to act unless he is convinced,can also cause disaster. This admirable quality is, in this case, a refusal to act without conviction. The novel Les Misérables by Victor Hugo, which came out in 1862, tells the story of Jean Valjean from the moment he is set free after having spent nineteen years in prison for stealing bread, via a show of unexpected mercy from a bishop which leads him to take a completely new course, to his later years as a well-respected mayor and factory owner, and finally to his role as the guardian of Cosette, the daughter of a woman whose earlier neglect Valjean had caused. ("Les Misérables Character List") The main and continual problem that Valjean faces is his own past, personified by the determined police inspector Javert, who pursues him over many decades because of a broken parole; Valjean is therefore constantly faced with the choice between the security of hiding and the moral risk of coming forward, including an

instance in which he admits his real identity in open court in order to save a man who has been wrongly arrested in his place. His most notable traits are his practical and active generosity, his ability to undergo real self-transformation, and his readiness to accept personal danger rather than allow someone else to suffer, a point which is most clearly shown when he later forgives the very man who is hunting him. Through his actions, he saves Cosette, restores the trust which the bishop had formerly placed in him, and, in the final pages of the book, even causes a sort of moral crisis in the strictly law-abiding Javert. The lesson that Valjean leaves behind is that heroism can manifest itself in the form of continuous, unglamorous self-reinvention and that mercy shown to an individual can have an effect that spreads outwards and transforms the lives of people far beyond the one to whom it was first given.nvention, and that mercy shown to one person can travel Sydney Carton, an English lawyer who is dissolute and holds a deeply negative view of himself, believes that his own life has been entirely wasted in Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities, which was published in 1859 in the context of the French Revolution. ("Sydney Carton Character Analysis in A Tale of Two Cities") Unlike the other characters who have been considered so far, the problem that Carton faces is not a monster, a war, or the legal system, but rather his own firm belief in his worthlessness, a belief which he overcomes only through his love for Lucie Manette, a woman who marries another man, Charles Darnay, who happens to look very much like Carton. When Darnay is sentenced to death during the Terror, Carton secretly exchanges places with him in prison and goes to the guillotine in Darnay's place, enabling Darnay to escape to safety with Lucie and their family. The most remarkable feature of

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Carton's character is his ability to love so fully that it supersedes his own sense of self-worth, transforming a man who, throughout the novel, has thought himself of no importance into the most important figure in the story. By making this sacrifice,, he not merely saves Darnay's life but also secures the happiness of a whole family, and the final lines of the novel indicate that Carton dies believing the last thing he did gave his life a meaning it had previously lacked. The lesson that Carton provides is that heroism can come very late and that it is possible to redeem an entire wasted history through a single, final, freely made act of self-sacrifice.eroism can arrive very late, and can redeem an entire wThe novel To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee, which came out in 1960, brings the idea of heroism down to the level of everyday civic life. (Suzuki 21-33) Atticus Finch is a lawyer in a small town in Alabama during the Depression period and agrees to defend Tom Robinson, a Black man who has been falsely accused of rape, in a legal system and community that is strongly influenced by racial prejudice; the difficulty he faces is not a monster or a battlefield but rather the hostility of his neighbours, who treat him with insults, exclude him socially, and even threaten violence against his children, all while he knows from the beginning that a jury biased on the basis of race is unlikely to find his client not guilty no matter what evidence is presented. ("Atticus Finch") The heroism of Atticus is of a moral rather than a physical kind: it consists of integrity, fairness and empathy, which he makes a point of teaching his daughter Scout, famously advising her to try to see things from another person's point of view before passing judgment on them, together with the patience to show his children these values even though he cannot be sure of achieving a just result in court. His behavior

deeply affects both Scout and her brother Jem's moral growth, and although his actions do not set Tom Robinson free, they clearly shake the town's unconscious beliefs about race and justice. Atticus teaches that heroism does not have to involve winning; it can mean doing the right thing even when you fully expect to lose, because the principle is worth defending regardless of the outcome.ight thing while fully expecting to lose, simply because theThe Harry Potter books, which were published from 1997 to 2007, tell the story of a boy who had no parents and did not realise at the time that he was the focal point of a prophecy about the return of the dark wizard Voldemort. (Rowling) The problems he faces consist of numerous encounters with Voldemort and his followers, the deaths of people who are close to him, a constant doubt about whether he is capable of the role imposed on him, and, in the last book, a deliberate decision to go forward knowing that this will mean his own death in order to protect the people he loves. Different from the mostly solitary heroism shown of figures such as Achilles, Odysseus, and Beowulf, Harry's heroism is clearly relational in that he achieves his success mainly because of his friendships with Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger and because the wider Hogwarts community eventually takes action to resist Voldemort, most clearly through the student resistance group known as Dumbledore's Army. (Berndt and Steveker) Harry's main characteristics are loyalty, courage, and, most importantly, an ability for love and voluntary self-sacrifice, which the series repeatedly shows as more powerful than any pure magical ability; Voldemort's final defeat is therefore the result of a collective effort, not the sole achievement of one boy. The lesson left by Harry's story is that modern-day heroism is usually communal rather than individual, being

supported by relationships rather than by birth, prophecy, or power, and representing a model of heroism based on choice and love rather than on destiny.d by relationships rather than by birth, prophecy, or pIf you compare these eleven figures side by side, you will see that they illustrate a wide historical trend which the conceptual framework described earlier in this paper makes clearer. In the earliest works that are being considered here , Homer's epics, Virgil's Aeneid, and the Old English poem Beowulf , heroism is similar to what Frye refers to as the high mimetic and romance modes: Achilles and Beowulf both demonstrate their status by performing feats of physical strength which ordinary humans could not hope to achieve, Aeneas is directly guided by the gods towards a destiny that is determined before the poem even starts, and the trials that all three heroes have to face are external and, generally speaking, physical , an army, a monster, a sea journey, a divine mission. The criterion for heroism in this early literature is likewise external: it consists of strength, martial ability, and the extent of the danger successfully endured. Nevertheless, there is already a considerable internal element in the case of Odysseus, since his successes are based on craft and self-control rather than merely on force, and with regard to Aeneas, his heroism lies exactly in suppressing rather than in expressing his own desires , this is an early indication that the literary concept of the hero was never entirely about muscle, even in its most epic form.His own desires , an early sign that literature's idea of the hero was never purely a matter of muscle even at its most epic.

The medieval and early modern works discussed here,Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Don Quixote, and Hamlet,mark a further move toward the internal. Gawain's trial is

essentially a test of his private conscience, one that is carried out via themes of hospitality and temptation, rather than through direct combat, and it is difficult to conceive of the poem allowing him to fail, even slightly, and then having him suffer public humiliation as a result of that failure, within the context of the unblemished heroic universe presented in Beowulf. Cervantes takes this process of internalisation even further by having his hero's entire sense of heroism rest on a private, almost delusional idealism which he maintains in the face of a world that resists and tends to disillusion, so that Quixote is regarded as heroic not because of his successes but because he refuses to give up his beliefs. Hamlet brings about this shift inward by setting the whole drama of heroism within a single mind as it considers questions of certainty, conscience, and justified action; whereas Achilles' main conflict is a struggle against Agamemnon and later against Hector, Hamlet's central conflict is one with his own doubts. Read together, these three figures show that as literature moved from the epic and the romance into drama and prose fiction, the decisive heroic battlefield shifted from the field of battle to the interior of the hero's mind.

The nineteenth-century novels discussed here, Les Misérables and A Tale of Two Cities, conclude this trend by placing heroism almost entirely in the sphere of moral decisions made in ordinary social situations. In neither case does Jean Valjean nor Sydney Carton fight a monster or lead an army; Valjean's heroism lies in his long-lasting, decade-spanning refusal to let his past determine him and in his readiness to place himself in danger rather than allow another person to suffer injustice; Carton's heroism is based on a single, freely chosen act of substitution which

redeems what he had regarded as a life completely wasted. Both these characters foreshadow the even more domestic form of heroism seen in Atticus Finch in the next century, whose whole act of heroism takes place within a courtroom and a family home rather than on any battlefield, and whose risk is of a social and moral nature rather than physical; finally, Harry Potter brings together a number of the themes found in the earlier works , the acceptance of a destiny similar to that of Aeneas, the willingness to make a self-sacrifice shared with Sydney Carton, and the dependence on cunning and loyal companionship shared with Odysseus , but reinterprets them in the light of a clearly modern stress on friendship and collective resistance, so that his heroism, unlike that of Beowulf or Achilles, is never really his own.

When we look at the entire situation, this comparative study indicates that the literary hero has, over a period of about three thousand years, shifted from being mainly characterised by superhuman strength and external success to being mainly defined by ordinary moral courage and its impact on the community around him; this kind of evolution is generally in line with Frye's idea that literary genres have moved downwards through literary history, from myth and romance to realism. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this development as a simple narrative of a decline from greatness to the ordinary. The fact that Kohen and Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo all stress that heroism essentially involves taking known risks for a purpose beyond the self applies just as much to Achilles on the plain before Troy as it does to Atticus Finch in an Alabama courtroom; the difference between the eleven texts is not that the hero takes on risk, but rather the type of risk that literature has come to regard as most significant, moving from risk to

the body to risk to reputation, safety, and a settled identity. In this way, the comparative trend described in this section can be seen as literature's gradual response to one constant question: what, in any particular age, is worth risking oneself for.

PERSONAL RESPONSE: HEROIC QUALITIES AND REAL LIFE

As a group, these eleven characters display a range of heroic qualities that are not limited to myth, romance, or the historical past but can be applied directly to ordinary life. The readiness shown by Beowulf and Achilles to go into battle even if they might not survive illustrates the kind of courage needed when facing a difficult diagnosis, an unstable job market, or any circumstance in which the outcome cannot be predicted in advance; the value of their example does not lie in the guarantee of a favourable outcome but in the fact that the confrontation is entered into regardless. Odysseus's dependence on patience and resourcefulness instead of force is similar to the way most real-life difficulties , such as a hostile work environment, a long period of financial hardship, or a complex family situation , are usually settled by persistence and pliability rather than by a single decisive measure, and his repeated struggle with pride serves as a warning that capable people can unknowingly make their own problems worse through simple arrogance. Aeneas and Gawain's willingness to put duty and honour before immediate personal desire reflects the everyday discipline of keeping a promise,

fulfilling an obligation to family, or continuing a responsibility even when it no longer seems rewarding.

At the same time, Don Quixote's tenacity in holding to his ideals acts as a counterweight to the quiet cynicism that may take hold of a person following a series of disappointments, showing that certain kinds of hope are worth maintaining even if the world seems determined to prove them wrong, while Hamlet's situation acts as a warning that even careful and thorough consideration comes at a cost and that moral seriousness must in the end lead to action. The experiences of Jean Valjean and Sydney Carton speak most directly to those who feel that their lives have been defined by a mistake or a wasted period of time, since both of them show that a life can be greatly transformed through a series of consistent ethical decisions, or even restored by a single decisive act, no matter how it started. Atticus Finch's example is the one that comes closest to ordinary experience: his determination to treat an unpopular client fairly and his adherence to showing his children what integrity means, even if this brings social disapproval, is similar to the small, personal decisions that ordinary people have to make when deciding whether to speak up for a colleague who has been treated unfairly or when to stick to a principle even if it is inconvenient. Finally, Harry Potter's story shows that very few real struggles are faced entirely alone, and that friends, family, and the wider community often sustain personal courage over time. Together, these eleven figures suggest that heroism in real life seldom takes the form of a fight against a monster or a dragon; more often, it means showing up, staying honest, keeping a promise, and not giving up on the people who rely on you.

HEROISM AS A RESOURCE FOR OVERCOMING CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Zimbardo has maintained that ordinary people can be taught to spot opportunities for heroic action and to take advantage of them, an ability which he terms the heroic imagination, and the eleven literary cases examined in this paper are in effect a kind of long-standing historical training in that ability. When people suffer from great anxiety, social isolation, or economic insecurity, they can look to the examples of Beowulf and Achilles to see that fortitude consists in proceeding even when the outcome is uncertain, rather than waiting for a certainty that might never come. In situations involving complex, long-term problems such as a long job search or a chronic illness, Odysseus shows the value of patient adaptability rather than relying on a single dramatic solution, while Aeneas and Gawain illustrate the importance of keeping a commitment even when it no longer seems rewarding. In an era often criticised for fixed, defensive cynicism, Don Quixote's persistent refusal to abandon his optimistic view of the world offers an outdated yet genuinely useful resource, and Hamlet's example also gives the equally necessary warning that excessive reflection can itself become a form of paralysis.

For anyone who is facing the burden of a difficult personal past, Jean Valjean and Sydney Carton show two different ways of reaching the same conclusion, namely that a person's life is not permanently determined by its most unpleasant episode and can instead be greatly,

even dramatically, changed as a result of making deliberate ethical decisions. In a time of widespread misinformation and social pressure to stay silent about disputed issues, Atticus Finch shows a readiness to take an unpopular but honest stand and accept whatever social consequences follow. And when it comes to problems that are too big for any one individual to deal with,such as discrimination, climate anxiety, or various kinds of community crises,Harry Potter's story illustrates the importance of organising with others rather than hoping that a single saviour will appear, since, as the entire literary history examined in this paper shows, collective courage has been found to be more enduring than the courage of any one person acting by themselves. In all these cases, what the literary hero provides the modern reader is not a workable solution but rather a mindset, a readiness to act in the face of real uncertainty for the sake of something or someone other than oneself, a mindset which repeated engagement with heroic stories seems to be well adapted for developing.

CONCLUSION

Over nearly three thousand years in literature, from the days before the Trojan War to the passages of Hogwarts, the basic form of the hero has changed so much that it is almost unrecognisable. Achilles and Beowulf show their worth by carrying out feats of arms which an ordinary reader could never hope to equal; Aeneas and Gawain assess themselves against a code of duty and honour that is greater than their personal preferences; Don Quixote and Hamlet base their heroism on the private and often difficult ground of belief and conscience; Jean Valjean and Sydney Carton achieve heroism through moral reform and self-sacrifice within the everyday framework of nineteenth-century society; and Atticus Finch and Harry Potter, the ones closest to our own time, find their heroism in simple civic integrity and in the strength that friendship and community provide. Viewed historically, this sequence shows a long, slow shift that Frye described in his discussion of literary modes: a move from a literature based on superhuman strength and inherited destiny to one based on ordinary, personally chosen moral courage.

Nevertheless, despite this major change in appearance, one thing stays the same, and the present paper regards this constant feature as the real focus of its investigation. All of the eleven figures discussed here, using the terms of Kohen as well as those of Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo, deliberately take on a serious risk,physical, social, or intensely personal,in order to

serve a cause that goes outside immediate self-interest; they are all confronted by real and frequently increasing difficulties; and as a result each of them leaves the people nearby in a significantly improved state, whether that involves making a kingdom safe, restoring a household, defending an innocent man's dignity in open court, saving a family from the guillotine, or giving a community the courage to resist tyranny together. This persistence amid so much historical change shows why heroism stays at the heart of both literature and society. In literature, the hero passes on and sustains a culture's fundamental conception of courage, integrity, and selflessness, adjusting it for each new generation of readers while never abandoning its essential core. In society, this transmitted idea continues to have a real impact, giving ordinary people, managing their own much smaller problems, a set of words and concrete examples of how to behave properly under pressure. In this sense, heroism is not simply a feature of stories set in a safe past; throughout the long history outlined in this paper, it has been one of literature's most enduring methods of preparing its readers for whatever they may yet have to face.

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