

The Heroic Spheres:

Creating and Applying a Model to Define and Categorize Literary Heroes

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Abstract

Working from some preliminary knowledge of both literary texts and critical works, I hypothesize that the heroes of literature, mythology, and popular culture around the world can be classified into three overlapping categories. During the course of the five-week project, I will employ various sources to attempt to confirm my hypothesis, or modify my model. I hope to show how the three spheres of the Epic Hero, the Anti-Hero, and the Superhero are defined, where they overlap, and what their importance is to the literary community. I plan to examine how the interplay between societal heroes and their parent societies has contributed both to the heroes themselves and the society's history. Overall, I hope to display a new range of possibilities for the incorporation of separate heroic models into different media, working toward something resembling equal representation among the various spheres. Upon completion, my results will be exhibited in a research paper, as well as in a presentation at the Learning Fair.

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Every society has its heroes. Since the dawn of known civilization, heroes have been an important part of the human societal experience. We distill our values into figures that represent what we admire most about ourselves, then strive to achieve those ideals. We tell tales of these idyllic characters combating the evils we also perceive in ourselves, evils we sometimes cannot directly fight. From looking at what the heroes of a given society are like, one can determine many of the traits and ideologies that produced them. One can learn a great deal about any group of people by studying who they admire, by studying their ideals.

More than simply finding out about individual societies, though, we can answer important questions about the entirety of humankind. Why do some traits exist consistently in the major heroes of nearly every society? How did the model of the epic hero develop in so many different societies independently? Carl Jung proposed the collective unconscious, a primal source into which all humans tap; would this explain why so many societies choose to admire the same traits?

A hero's role in society does not stop with creation and admiration. As societies grow and change, their heroes often do as well. As the problems faced by societies grow more complex, so do their heroes. Heroes, however, are not the only subjects of change in this interplay; people adapt to their heroes as well. People set heroes up as examples of how to live or behave, then adapt their own lives to try to live up to those standards. Heroes are modeled after the society's ideals, and the society models its behavior on that

of its heroes. The interplay between admirer and admired is complex and delicate, linking generations with common sets of ideals.

I have always been fascinated by the heroes of American popular culture, growing up on a steady diet of comic books and cartoons, but that interest reached a new level during the fall term of the current school year. In EN331, I did a project on the epic hero model as it is used throughout children's literature, familiarizing myself with the work of Joseph Campbell on that subject. That, combined with an independent reading of Thomas C. Foster's How to Read Literature Like a Professor, gave me a new perspective on the heroic model and how it might be expanded and applied in new ways. Literary heroes have been of great interest to me throughout my life, and I feel that I can bring something new to the study of heroic models, using some of the existing framework provided by Campbell, Lord Raglan, and an assortment of texts.

Using literary references, both primary sources and critical materials, this project will define three spheres encompassing heroic ideals from many different cultures and time periods. Each sphere is defined as a series of traits, motivations, and behaviors, which correspond to different types of literary heroes. These spheres overlap one another where they share traits.

The Epic Hero is most likely the earliest model, encompassing important figures of early literature and mythology, like Gilgamesh, Heracles, and Jesus Christ, as well as more modern characters like Milton's Satan or Rowling's Harry Potter. Joseph Campbell's work with the Epic Hero helped to spark this project, and his work on the subject provides a foundation for the sphere model. I hope to further define the notion of

the Epic Hero, and use it to compare, contrast, and help define the other two spheres and the points where they meet.

The Anti-Hero may be the broadest category, loosely defined to encompass both flawed and failed heroes like Holden Caulfield, as well as tragic heroes like Oedipus and Hamlet. In my initial examinations of the subject, it seemed that the term ‘anti-hero’ was used to cover a very wide variety of literary figures, leading me to a primary goal of further defining the Anti-Hero sphere to make it less broad and more distinct.

The most recently developed of these spheres is the Superhero, and it is possibly the most well-defined as a result. Since the 1930s, superheroes have existed in every major medium, and are ever-present in popular culture. Of the three models, the superhero is potentially the one with the greatest influence on children’s development in the modern day, and its impact on other forms of literature is clearly seen.

Also of importance are the areas where the spheres overlap, and what characters fall into those shared zones. Few would deny that The Punisher is both a superhero and an anti-hero, but are pulp characters like Doc Savage and Indiana Jones a result of the mingling of the Superhero and Epic Hero spheres? Do tragic heroes like Oedipus result from the overlapping of the Anti-Hero and Epic Hero spheres? I plan to show that nearly all heroic models can be defined as some combination of these three spheres, no matter what society or time period has produced them.

Another interest is where female heroes fit into the heroic models. If I hope to construct my heroic model in such a way as to fit literary heroes throughout history, that model will surely have to account for female heroes in addition to male ones. To that end, I plan to examine modern stories featuring female heroes, with the hope that the

heroic models of my hypothesis fit heroic characters of both genders. If female heroes do fit into the model as I have proposed it, it will open up a series of new questions. Are female heroes underrepresented in any of the three groups? How do female epic heroes compare to their male counterparts? Are the same sorts of coming-of-age tales told in female-centered epics?

Furthermore, I plan to examine the psychological roots of these heroic traits. Are Jung's collective unconsciousness and the concept of archetypes sufficient reason for the similarities between disparate societies' heroes? If there are three models, might the Freudian model of Id, Ego, and Superego be applied with greater accuracy? Might there be truth in both models? With sufficient research and reflection, I hope to provide an accurate model for heroic similarities.

I will also examine the media of perpetuation of various hero myths. Did the oral tradition somehow favor the Epic Hero model? Do children's books have a strong showing of anti-heroic characters? How has the Superhero affected mainstream literature? I hope to answer all of these questions with examinations of literary sources. Using historical cross-references, I also hope to show how societies interact with their heroes, and how heroes sometimes influence the actions of the members of a given society. Has the development of superheroes led to an increase in vigilante action? Has the rise of the anti-hero contributed to gross acts of "justified" misconduct like the tortures at Abu Ghraib? While I do not expect to find definite answers, I think the exploration of the historical contexts of heroes might uncover interesting information about the societies that birthed them.

The results of this five-week project will be reported in the form of a research paper, as well as diagrams of the Heroic Spheres and timelines of important events that shaped the development of this project. The paper will be supplemented by an oral presentation, summarizing its findings, as well as a potential exhibit at the Learning Fair.

Ultimately, this project will show the importance of heroes in the greater context of society, and how various heroic models can be easily defined. I hope to find a plausible explanation for the commonality between heroes of various societies. I hope to explain aspects of history in terms of heroic models, and vice versa. But, I think the greatest contribution of this report, if the findings are conclusive, will be to point out any disparity there might be in the presentation of one heroic model over another in given forms of media. If it appears that Anti-Heroes are underrepresented in one medium, Epic Heroes in another, perhaps it will spark writers on to creative endeavors that will balance out the scales. I hope to open doors that may have been previously closed, further distancing any medium from stagnation.