

Kimberly Evans

Dr. Warner

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## The Evolution of Heroism: Exploring Heroic Traits Across Cultures and Eras

### **Rationale:**

Everyone loves a hero. It is part of human nature to emotionally support a character or person who, despite facing immense conflict and struggle, rises to the challenge and emerges victorious. The hero is someone the reader can both identify with and aspire to be. Heroes come in many forms: a pet, a nobody, a king, someone from poverty or wealth. They appear in many types of literature—poems, narratives, songs, legends, myths, etc. The ideal of the hero reflects the values and characteristics that a particular culture or population holds dear. These ideals can change depending on the time and place the story was written. This unit of study will focus on Young Adult Literature and the concept of heroism: what it means to be heroic, and how that definition may shift over time and across cultures. As the *Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* states, “What qualities are those of a hero is not determined by him, but by the society he lives in. Different societies have different standards for judging if a person is a hero. Therefore, a person must meet the standard his society sets before he becomes a hero” (Liang 2017).

The hero is an accessible literary vehicle to spark interest and exploration. Young adults are particularly drawn to the idea of the hero, as they are on their own journey for identity and

self-worth. Students can relate to the idea of wanting to be a hero, to being able to save others or have super powers; for this reason, it is important to show students that different traits can and are perceived as heroic. It is not necessarily what you can do that makes you heroic, but rather why and how you do the things you do.

My unit of study will center around Homer's *The Odyssey*, translated by Emily Wilson. This epic, dated around 800 BCE, is part of a two-poem collection alongside *The Iliad*. The story of Odysseus is particularly well-suited to young adults for a number of reasons: the language is beautiful and accessible, and the narrative includes adventure, romance, good versus evil, monsters, politics, and deep themes of self-reflection and growth. Young adults will be drawn to the creative storytelling of Homer, while also engaging in rich discussions and extended analysis of these themes.

In addition to reading *The Odyssey*, students will also read *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan in its entirety on their own. This companion text will allow students to engage with the hero archetype in a more modern context. Percy Jackson's adventure—a young demigod navigating a world where ancient Greek mythology intersects with the modern world—provides an accessible gateway for young readers. Riordan's appeal, with over 30 million copies sold and translations in 42 languages, taps into the imagination of young adults, allowing them to explore themes of heroism through a contemporary lens. The modern retelling of Greek myths helps bridge the gap between ancient ideals of heroism and how they resonate with today's audience. This will also help students understand how heroism changes across time, culture, and even genre.

### **Into the Text**

To begin the unit, I will play “Holding out for a hero” by Bonnie Tyler:

Where have all the good men gone  
And where are all the gods?  
Where's the streetwise Hercules  
To fight the rising odds?  
Isn't there a white knight upon a fiery steed?  
Late at night, I toss and I turn  
And I dream of what I need  
I need a hero  
I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night  
He's gotta be strong, and he's gotta be fast  
And he's gotta be fresh from the fight  
I need a hero  
I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light  
He's gotta be sure, and it's gotta be soon  
And he's gotta be larger than life  
Larger than life

This song is very high energy and will help the students start thinking about heroes in general and be a fun way to start the unit. I will use this to lead into my opening questions:

-“What traits make someone a hero?”

-“Why do you consider these traits heroic?”

These reflective questions will encourage students to start thinking about what they define as heroic. We'll follow this with a class round-robin discussion where students share examples of heroes from their lives or favorite stories and explain why they consider these figures heroic.

Students will then have time to write down their thoughts and definitions of heroism. Following that, I'll break students into small groups and assign each group a heroic myth from another culture:

- **“Anansi and the Spider”** (Ashanti, by Gerald McDermott)
- **“The Hero Twins”** (Navajo, from *The Monster Slayers*)
- **“Momotaro, the Peach Boy”** (Japanese, by Linda Shute)
- **“Rama”** (Indian epic, *Ramayana*, by Sanjay Patel)

Each group will read their assigned myth and create a project that summarizes the story and highlights the traits they believe the culture considers heroic. This exercise will help students start thinking about universal versus culturally specific traits of heroism.

As we prepare to read *The Odyssey*, I'll remind students that while Odysseus' actions may not align with modern standards of heroism, he is still revered as a hero in his time. This opens up the opportunity to reflect on how heroism evolves.

While the students are reading the odyssey in class they will also be reading and analyzing *Percy Jackson And The Lightning Thief* at home on their own.

1. Students will have a chapter log to complete while reading at home where they will write a short paragraph of the most impactful things that happen in that chapter.
2. Students will be encouraged to read four chapters a week on their own at home as well as write their paragraphs. This will be the only homework students will get during this unit so as not to overwhelm them.

Chapter	Characters who were important in this chapter	What happened?	Heroic Traits
1	Percy, Grover,	Percy gets into a fight and gets expelled for pushing a girl into a fountain,	None

### Through the Text

To give students more context on Greek values and society, I will assign a WebQuest.

WebQuests are “Internet Scavenger Hunts” where the students are given several questions as well as the websites they will find the answers on. I will be making this from scratch for the

students. In this activity, students will explore Greek life during the time of Homer's writing and write a paragraph about what they learned.

For the centerpiece of the unit, students will begin reading *The Odyssey*. I will provide a graphic organizer for students to track Odysseus' traits throughout the poem. The goal is for them to evaluate whether these traits align with their concept of heroism. The students will track his actions through a study guide, worksheets and Hero's Journey worksheets.

Example of study guide worksheet:

<https://www.wappingersschools.org/cms/lib01/NY01001463/Centricity/Domain/1535/Odyssey%20study%20guide.pdf>

Key scenes from *The Odyssey* include:

- **Cyclops**
- **Sirens**
- **Scylla**
- **Circe**
- **The Underworld**
- **Reclaiming his kingdom**
- **Returning to Penelope**

While reading, students will be given a chart to keep track of what happened, what Odysseus did and whether it was heroic. After reading the above scenes, we will hold a Socratic Seminar,

which is something I learned during my observations, where students debate whether Odysseus' actions were truly heroic, they will have to provide textual evidence to support their arguments.

Event	What happened?	What did Odysseus do?	What was portrayed as heroic?	Why was/nt it heroic?
Cyclops	<i>Ex. Odysseus and his crew are stuck in a cave with Cyclops</i>	<i>Ex. Odysseus Blinds the Cyclops and helps his men sneak out away</i>	<i>Ex. He was cunning, he saved his men, he got them out safely</i>	<i>Ex. It wasn't heroic because he was boastful and prideful even though they had already gotten away</i>
Sirens				
Scylla				
Circe				
The Underworld				
Reclaiming Ithaca				
Returning to				

Penelope				
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Students will also complete a comparative analysis, pairing key scenes from *The Odyssey* with passages from *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. For instance, students might compare:

- **The Cyclops encounter** with **Percy's fight with Ares**
- **The Lotus-Eaters** with **The Lotus Hotel**
- **Journey to the Underworld** in both texts

As a visual celebration at the end of the unit, I'll show the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* film (time allowing). Afterward, students will write a paragraph evaluating whether Percy Jackson fulfills the definition of a hero, according to the traits valued by Ancient Greek culture, with specific examples from the movie or the text.

### **Beyond the Text**

At the conclusion of the unit, students will be able to define heroism, understand its cultural context, and compare the ways heroism is depicted in classical versus modern texts. As an enrichment opportunity, students will be given a choice of three books to read, either individually or in small literary circles:

- *After the First Death* by Robert Cormier



- After the First Death is a story of three young individuals all placed into a tough situation, each of the kids have to act in ways they consider heroic.
- *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins
  - A story of a young adult who is forced to fight for her life. Katniss makes choices even at the risk of her life to help and save others even though it puts her at risk.
- *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas
  - A young woman rises to the challenge when her brother and father are accused of committing a crime.
- *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher
  - A Boy in high school decides to give the students at his school a chance to achieve something others don't think they worthy of despite others looking down on him.
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson
  - A young girl undergoes a horrific event and faces everyday being bullied and looked down upon, she eventually stands up for herself and shares the events of what happens.

**Final Assessment:**

By the end of the unit, students will have demonstrated their understanding of heroism through their comparative analysis of Odysseus and Percy Jackson. They will articulate how cultural elements shape the idea of heroism, and how these elements evolve across time. Finally, students will use their own answers to questions they did in the beginning of the unit (“What traits make someone a hero?” As well as “Why do you consider these traits heroic?”) to complete the unit assessments: a literary analysis paper evaluating Odysseus as a hero and

wether or they believe him to be heroic, and a short digital or oral presentation comparing a modern hero (such as Percy Jackson) to Odysseus.

#### Works Cited

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