

How to Identify a Hero

Read the following heroic characteristics as suggested by Peter R. Stillman's *Introduction to Myth*.

Heroes are often of obscure or mysterious origin. They may be sons of gods or royal parents. Their childhoods may be unusual; they may be left to die but then they may be rescued and brought up in poverty or isolation. Often they do not discover their real parentage until they are older and can prove themselves through some sign.

Heroes are neither fools nor invincible. Heroes, while they may be partly divine, are definitely human in their natures. They are subject to fear and danger; they are not immortal but may suffer harm. Sometimes heroes are invulnerable except for one spot on each of their bodies. Also, sometimes heroes may be defeated only with one particular weapon.

Heroes are called upon to make a journey or to follow a goal or quest. Heroes frequently choose difficult or dangerous adventures. Sometimes they do not choose, but are chosen for the adventures. An event, sometimes traumatic, leads to the adventure or quest. The quest takes the heroes away from their family or homeland. They labor for the good of others by ridding a land of a hideous monster, or they seek to bring back to their people some object which has been lost or stolen. Their quest may not always be for something noble, but they follow through nobly and refuse to surrender. Heroes must prove themselves many times while on their adventures.

The heroes' ways are not always direct or clear to the heroes. The way or path of life is never clear, thus heroes frequently become lost or must take detours or solve riddles.

The heroes' ways are beset with dangers, loneliness, and temptation. Cruel kings, horrible monsters, dangerous seas—all these are physical dangers faced by heroes. Far more dangerous may be the feeling of isolation or alienation as heroes go far from home alone. Heroes are often tempted to give up or give in. Temptations appeal to their senses rather than to their intellect when they are encouraged to rest, eat a certain food, or to drink a certain wine. Women often appear as the most dangerous temptation of all.

Many quest tales supply friends, servants, or disciples as company for heroes. When heroes are given companionship, they are often still alone because the friends or servants do not understand the quest or are not motivated by the sense of mission but by friendship.

Heroes have guides. Frequently heroes receive help from unexpected sources be they fairy godmothers or beautiful/ugly witches or sorceresses. The heroes may be given a magic potion or weapon or simply information. Sometimes guides are limited by powers stronger than their own and therefore they can only help up to a certain point.

Heroes descend into darkness and are not the same after emerging from the darkness. Usually the final test of heroes is their descent, either physical or emotional, into some Hell-like place of suffering or death. The fear, loneliness, or despair experienced by heroes is a type of death-rebirth which leads to enlightenment or maturity, changing heroes in some important ways.

What heroes seek is usually no more than a symbol of what they really find. While the goal is usually something tangible, the success or achievement of that goal is somewhat more spiritual. The maturity or growth of heroes becomes more important than the actual object of the quests.

With few exceptions, mythological heroes are male. While women may be equally courageous and noble, they are not often seen in the role of hero. Women provide protection, guidance, and knowledge for the hero; they give him the secrets of life.

Characteristics of Epic Heroes

Most epic heroes possess most or all of seven general characteristics you can use to help you decide if a character is, indeed, an epic hero or heroine.

Trait 1: A Noble Birth

- ❖ Most epic heroes will have an above average station in life.
- ❖ They will be kings, princes, or nobles of some sort.
- ❖ Commoners usually do not become epic heroes.

Trait 2: Capable of deeds of great strength and courage

- ❖ Basically, this means the hero has the potential for great deeds.
- ❖ The magnitude of these actions are well above and beyond what the commoner does.
- ❖ While most epic heroes are good, not all are.

Trait 3: Great Warrior

- ❖ Before the hero of an epic does his business in the epic, he has usually established himself in combat during a war.
- ❖ Sometimes, as in *The Iliad*, we see the hero at war.
- ❖ In most, like *Beowulf* and *The Odyssey*, the hero has spent much time in battle.

Trait 4: Travels Over a Vast Setting

- ❖ Simply put, you cannot be an epic hero if you stay in your village your whole life.
- ❖ The more countries or areas traveled to, the better. The farther away from your own country, the better.
- ❖ Distance makes the hero's actions greater because they aren't selfish; they are for another country or people.

Trait 5: National Heroism

- ❖ Before a hero can be celebrated by countries the world over, he must first be recognized in his home country as a great and heroic person.

Trait 6: Humility

- ❖ Even as the rest of the world recognizes the great deeds of the hero, he is never a braggart or even willing to take applause.
- ❖ He commits his deeds because he knows they need doing, and the fame and rewards that he receives are only a matter of course, not the reason for completing his quests.

Trait 7: Faces Supernatural Foes and/or Receives Supernatural Help

- ❖ Most epic heroes either receive aid from a god or goddess or battle some superhuman enemy.
- ❖ This is what makes a hero's action epic: they fight something mere mortals cannot battle. *Beowulf* has his Grendel; *Odysseus* his Cyclops.
- ❖ For each hero, the enemy is unique. You won't see two heroes battling the same foe.

Who is a Hero?

Read the following excerpt from Peter R. Stillman's *Introduction to Myth* and answer the questions at the end of the article.

The bullfighter, the Grand Prix driver, the rodeo rider on the bucking horse -- each is a crowd pleaser, a star. Why is it that spectators single out such daredevils for special attention, devotion, near-worship? Why is it that the casual baseball fan has no difficulty ticking off the names of six good pitchers but probably can't recall three great second basemen? Why are quarterbacks enshrined in the public memory while the names of linesmen quickly fade?

Most of us don't wonder about these matters, either because they aren't really important or, more likely, because we grew up accepting them without question. What makes a hero is a fascinating question, however, with profound implications. The types of heroes mentioned share common characteristics which suggest much about how we see ourselves, determine our goals, and view our passage through life. To honor an individual, either real or legendary, with the exalted title of hero, we must be satisfied that he has ably performed certain ritualized tasks and feats. Furthermore, his character must be essentially noble. (Even great athletes often suffer public condemnation for unsuitable behavior off the field of play, regardless of how well they perform while in uniform.)

A hero must leave behind him, or overcome, the weaknesses and temptations we give into; must be totally committed to his heroic role; and must suffer dangers and agonies beyond those we are able to endure -- even if he suffers them in a basically meaningless contest. Furthermore, he must act out his role alone. That he may at times be surrounded by others has no bearing on his solitude. Most importantly, the hero must have a difficult goal, which he will reach on his own.

We honor running backs over receivers because the former are subjected to enormous physical punishment; bronco riders over calf ropers because their feat is more nakedly dangerous than the other; pitchers over second basemen because the former are cast in a lonely and harrowing role; and bullfighters over tennis players because of their ritual acting-out of the drama of the single warrior pitted against the savage forces of nature. While it can be argued that all athletes have difficult goals, we tend to admire, even stand in awe of, those who accomplish the most nearly impossible or most perilous ones.

To these characteristics -- all necessary to the conception of the hero -- should be added one more: the hero figure must, despite his superhuman achievements, have something in common with even the meekest of people. It is essential that we see in the hero many of the same qualities -- the raw stuff of heroism -- we find in ourselves. Within each of us dwells the hero image although most of us are reluctant or afraid to act it out. Some of our fondest fantasies picture us in various familiar heroic roles modeled on characters and situations we have read about or seen.

Not all of our heroes are athletes, of course, or famous warriors, or flinty-eyed tall-in-the-saddle saviors of the pretty schoolmarm. These are obvious examples and perhaps a bit corny. They are, however, quite legitimate representatives of mythological heroes through the ages. They are also useful in pointing the way toward deeper considerations about the important function of the hero myth and its relationship to literary themes.

Identification with heroes has always provided a strong, guiding influence for both the individual and society. Because the hero's achievements and high purpose establish positive, believable, and possibly attainable goals for everyone, the individual tends to direct the better part of himself or herself toward the same goals. Courage, nobility, sacrifice, fortitude, and grit are highly prized in nearly all societies. They help to assure the rightness of a society's values, institutions, and actions. If a society's heroes personify these qualities, that society's members will aspire to them.

Furthermore, on a personal level, the hero figure points a way through life's most baffling and fearsome obstacle -- death. No mortal quite understands it. It remains beyond the reach of any philosophy. Its biological explanation offers cold comfort and fails to unlock its spiritual and intellectual secrets. Science offers one kind of truth -- a bleak one. But mythology offers another, metaphorical truth, reassuring and humane. The hero endures. He has confronted death as well as the agonies leading to it. He has crossed alone into unknown territory, suffered, and returned. So will we his experience tells us. Thus, the hero tale brings back to us what we could otherwise not know: that we are not simply trapped, doomed; that while we are often foolish, petty, selfish, we are also made of immortal stuff and are meant for more than a "brief candle" length of life.