

English 4 Honors

## Unit 1: Heroism Unit Project

The heroic archetype is not set in stone. Over the course of history, different cultures have exalted their own set of heroes that reflect their values and principles. Even today, the notion of a hero is constantly changing. Despite these variations, however, one can draw comparisons between heroes from drastically different time periods. For example, most heroes use their great strength to defeat evil, they represent the highest level of morality of their society, and they are leaders of their people, bringing them victory and prosperity.

An epic is an extended narrative relating the feats of a hero. In this type of literature, the hero is the protagonist and their travels are the main plot. Moreover, many of these epics have been written in deeply religious contexts. For example, Mesopotamia, the setting of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, was a polytheistic society, meaning people worshipped several gods and goddesses, featuring deities in art and architecture as a form of reverence (“Mesopotamia”). Similarly, *Beowulf* was an epic written around 975 AD in modern-day Denmark and was heavily influenced by Christianity. In the narrative, the characters show their devotion to God, who is portrayed as an omnipotent being. However, *The Lord of the Rings*, published in 1954, makes little mention of religion as it’s not one of the core themes of the book.

In epics such as *Beowulf* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, heroes are divinely favored and have a relationship to a higher power; however, this characteristic isn’t present in all epics, such as the more recent *Lord of the Rings*.

The influence of religion is evident in *Beowulf* as God is portrayed as a guiding and all-knowing figure who aids the hero in his deeds. It's important to consider that the narrative was composed during the Anglo-Saxon period. These people were devout Christians and incorporated religion into many aspects of their life, such as literature and art. Beowulf is characterized as possessing the same faith, and this is seen over the course of the entire epic. During Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother, for example, the author writes, "... and Holy God, who sent him victory, gave judgment For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens, Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting." (*Beowulf* 509-512). The intervention of God in Beowulf's fight represents the great significance that the Lord has in the hero's life. God is actively involved in Beowulf's feats, overseeing his actions and protecting him when necessary. This strong belief in and relationship with a higher power is one of Beowulf's most notable traits as it guides him throughout his life of heroic deeds. God's role is further established in the following quote: "Then the sword Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's eternal Lord loosens invisible Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost As only He can, He who rules Time and seasons, He who is truly God." (561-565). Although not visible, God is always present in Beowulf's life to accompany him in his pursuit to defeat evil.

Gilgamesh, the Sumerian hero from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, also demonstrates fervent polytheism, interacting with the Mesopotamian gods throughout his life. Followers of the ancient Mesopotamian religion worshipped three main gods and thousands of minor gods. The main gods were Ea, god of wisdom and magic, Anu, god of the sky, and Enlil, god of earth

("Mesopotamia"). Ea is mentioned in the epic as he crafted both Gilgamesh and Enkidu out of clay. Both the main gods and the minor deities had important roles in ancient Sumer and they aid Gilgamesh by giving him guidance and strength. Unlike Beowulf, Gilgamesh has the ability to actively communicate with the gods. For instance, Gilgamesh has an intense dream before the fight with Humbaba in which he sees Shamash, the solar deity. Enkidu, the hero's great companion, says, "That wild bull which you saw is Shamash the Protector; in our moment of peril he will take our hands. The one who gave water from his water-skin, that is your own god who cares for your good name, your Lugulbanda. United with him, together we will accomplish a work the fame of which will never die." (Sandars 9). As seen in this dialogue, both Enkidu and Gilgamesh feel an intense connection to Shamash and are able to see and communicate with him. During the battle, Shamash watches over the two warriors, guiding them towards victory. In this way, both characters exhibit a heroic trait that Beowulf also possesses: a divine connection. This unique ability further separates them from regular mortals in terms of social status because they have the ability to learn directly from the higher powers. When Gilgamesh dreams of his death, decreed by god Enlil, Enkidu remarks, "O Gilgamesh, this was the meaning of your dream. You were given the kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart, do not be grieved or oppressed; he has given you power to bind and to loose, to be the darkness and the light of mankind." (7). Again, this quote illustrates the profound connection that Gilgamesh shares with the gods. The earth deity appears in the hero's dream to deliver the moral of the piece: although Gilgamesh's life is finite, his creations, victories and achievements will be remembered infinitely into the future.

Because epics are written to reflect the values and principles of their respective societies, one can learn a lot about the social and religious context in which they were composed. For example, given the deeply religious heroes in *Beowulf* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one can deduce that the Anglo-Saxon and ancient Sumerian civilizations were spiritual in nature. Epics also reflect the beliefs and intentions of the author. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, was a devout Roman Catholic but he makes little mention of religion in his most famous work (Doughan). Perhaps this is because he didn't want gods to shape the world he built, deciding the outcome of events as they happen. Instead, he placed Middle-earth in the hands of the characters themselves, most notably in heroes such as Éowyn and Merry. In the book, wars are fought by courage and the plot is altered according to decisions made by the mortal characters. Instead of a divine connection, heroes in Tolkien's work possess a different trait: they are engaged in a constant battle of good versus evil within because they don't have a higher power to guide them. In Chapter 6, "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields", Éowyn confronts the Lord of the Nazgûl to protect her king: "But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him." (Tolkien 1125). With no god to guide her to victory, Éowyn must get her drive from within. In other words, she must always make choices to fulfill her ultimate goal of defeating evil. Despite the lack of religion in the book, this trait makes Éowyn a morally conscious hero who will protect her people without hesitation.

Given the great variation in heroic characteristics seen throughout history, one can conclude that the hero is a complex and nuanced character. Although many have common

characteristics, such as courage, intelligence, and extreme strength, not all fit into this mold. In this paper, the heroic trait of religious belief was compared and contrasted across three epic works: *Beowulf*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Beowulf and Gilgamesh demonstrate unrelenting ties to the gods, looking to them for guidance in their heroic journeys. On the other hand, Éowyn does not rely on religion and instead learns to make decisions herself, looking within to decide her path. It's important to note that these unique traits don't take away from the heroic nature of any of these individuals.

An epic is the product of the cultural and societal context in which it was written. History has birthed many different types of cultures all around the world, each with their own customs and values, and, given this heterogeneity, the diversity of heroes is unsurprising. Heroes are those characters that a society admires for their desire to protect them and defeat any evil that comes their way.

## Works Cited

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