

REVIEW

The Concept of the Hero in Modernity¹

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For as long as political theory and political philosophy have existed time immemorial, the concept of the hero has not been adequately treated. Although this appears to be the case, the surface does not reveal the entire truth, and fact does not fit fiction. The concept of the hero in political theory has existed indirectly. The concept of the hero and hero-worship has been applied to all walks of life and all forms of fiction, fantasy, and reality. This study explains the evolution of the concept of the hero in terms of Western philosophy and focuses on how it has evolved over the centuries. There can be no hero without the anti-hero and no victory without defeat.

Keywords: hero, epic hero, Odysseus, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, modern hero, supernatural power

Introduction

One of the most critical figures in Western political theory and political philosophy (beginning with the modernist discipline of philology) is the concept of the hero. The hero is characterized by his legendary status. And it is most often a man and not a woman (1). Perhaps this might be due to the paternalistic nature of Western societies. Nevertheless, it is not the intention of this article to focus on women's places as heroines or to make any argument for women's rights. The hero is often blessed by the gods and is part man, part deity. He always has at least one superpower. This is clearly seen in Western society's influences in song, dance, narrative, theater, drama, and much later talking pictures and movies. Heroism may often be associated with the kinds of theoretical frameworks that analyze social, cultural, and economic patterns. This study analyzes the evolution of the hero concept in Western philosophy with a focus on its evolution through the ages. It also illustrates how the hero concept and hero-worship have been depicted in drama, plays, narratives, and movies.

In the *Iliad and the Odyssey*, Homer refers to a central figure who was sanctioned by the gods—an epic hero for epic poesy. The word epic itself does not really mean special or

outstanding. Epic refers to the length, and an epic poem is simply a long one. However, it is in the nature of the epic hero to require an epic poem because his tasks are always related to certain exploits that require a long stretch. An epic amount of time is therefore often connected to an extraordinarily long and arduous amount of struggle.

Odysseus and Ulysses

In Chapter 24 of *Poetics*, for example, Aristotle connects the hero concept and the structure of Greek tragedy. Indeed, Dalby reminds us that the hero concept was central to the Homeric character in Homeric Society. Much later, scholars such as Scholes and Kellogg would write about epic heroes and epic poems. The epic poem referred to by Scholes and Kellogg accounts for a hero's deeds that chronicle as much as they characterize and explain the words and phrases as well as the engagements of the epic hero represented in the epic poem. Nevertheless, it was common for the Greek hero to revolve around someone like Odysseus. Known as Ulysses in English, Odysseus was part of that epic poem in ancient Greek as well as others found in various English translations. For the purposes of this study, we shall make use of Odysseus to represent the concept of the Western hero. Readers should note that the word *Odyssey* means journey; all tragic ancient Greek heroes had to embark on a long

¹ This study is dedicated to Frank Cibulka of Zayed University.

journey with many insurmountable tasks, and hence, the word *Odyssey*, *Odysseus*, and the epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus was as brilliant as he was strong. In Homer's *Iliad*, Odysseus even has personal relations with the ancient Greek people and helps Agamemnon and Achilles resolve their differences. Agamemnon was the father of Electra (recall, the Elektra complex). Agamemnon rises to become the king of Argos and a Greek commander during the Trojan War. During the War with the Trojans, his wife has an affair with a vapid man named Aegisthus. She conspires with Aegisthus to kill Agamemnon as he is in a weakened state after the War. Returning to Odysseus, his own bravery is highlighted again when Homer relates the story of how Odysseus does not think twice about embarking on a night operation with Diomedes against the Trojans. Odysseus' journey eventually leads him through various quests in distant places. One is that the Lotus-Eaters were in effect a community of marijuana smokers who lived off their lotus narcotic as they forgot everything else in life, as described in Book IX of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus also encounters and blinds Polyphemus the Cyclops. He also contends with other Cyclops (presumably in Sicily) who live as savages among men rather than among gods. He is forced to fight the cannibals, who are known as man-eating giants and are also called Laistrygones, sons of Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, storms, earthquakes, horses, and the protection of some seafarers. Odysseus is then enchanted by Circe. He prevents his companions from remaining swine for the rest of their lives, thanks to Circe. They escape only to be confounded by the sweet songs of the Sirens while being confronted by the evil Scylla and Charybdis.

All these insightful descriptions of Homer's world that depicts the journeys of Odysseus are often reproduced by various subsequent writers, dramatists, and storytellers. These include Milton, Shakespeare, and many others in the English- and non-English-speaking world of the early Middle Ages. They make good food for thought and serve as a robust structure for relating tragedy and comedy alike.

In terms of romance, Odysseus is hated by women and yet attractive to them. It is a love-hate relationship.

Conclusion: the concept of the hero in modernity

In 1751, there was a widely announced writing competition in France where large monetary prizes were to be awarded for the first and second places. The question for the first prize was what would be the most important value of a hero. For the second prize, it was "what was the most important value for man?" In both cases, the prizes (and only Corsicans were allowed to compete for the second prize for some reason) were won by unknown writers with unknown names.

Yet the most important writer of the time was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and he did not take part in either competition. No one knows why. However, in the November 1751 issue of *Le Mercure*, appeared Rousseau's award-winning essay at Dijon that led to future essays that would subsequently appear in print about the problem of inequality.

Can there ever be such a human as a modern hero?

The hero emanates purity and robustness. This is clearly depicted in Homer's *Iliad*. It is not so much depicted in Homer's *Odyssey*. Even in the modern movies world such as the final episode of John Wick in John Wick 4, the hero not only battles evil and bad guys in lieu of women, but he also does so in lieu of his own life. The modern hero in John Wick must give up his life to benefit the world; he would rather benefit the world than benefit himself. Like the ancient Greek hero Hector, Wick chose honor over life.

Northrop Frye was wrong to attempt to classify in his readings of literary fiction and to claim that the concept of the hero is about someone doing something somewhere, somehow. This is too weak and insubstantial and too generalized and simplistic to make either fictional or non-fictional sense or fictional or non-fictional logic. In other words, Frye is wrong to think that the hero's power is the same as any other mortal's power we all know that in the world of regularities and occasional outbursts; as well as in the world of Magical Realism, the hero always has more power than ordinary human beings. This is seen in such movies as *Magnificent Seven*; Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*; *Zatoichi, the blind samurai*; the Jason Bourne series; Under Siege; Under Siege 2; and Hero (Chinese version with Donnie Yen); this is also seen in Powell (2) and Bryson and Movsesian (3).

Conclusion

Various unreasonable deviations from older interpretations of the *Iliad* are often concerned with the meaningless demonstration of the separation of life through political violence. Such pathos is often attributed to the warriors depicted in the *Iliad* itself. We have seen how the concept of the hero emerged in Western civilization from the time of Homer's epic poetry in terms of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as the epic heroism of Odysseus and later heroes. Therefore, the answer is yes, there can be a modern hero—like Hitch or James Bond or Ironman—but the expectations only get more ridiculous and culpable. And the more ridiculous and culpable they become, the more imperfect and incredulous they seem. There can be no victorious hero without the defeat of the anti-hero, and therefore, the meaning of life is to be discovered in the glorious attainment of material achievement over the agony of defeat.

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