Each year in a small rural town in northern Louisiana, my students at Ruston High School become connected to many characters. We reach back through centuries and across expansive oceans to become acquainted with characters that stay in our memories, ignite our passions, and form our values. We root for Pip to win Estella, cheer when Scout single-handedly brings down a racist mob with one honest comment, cry with Jem as he weeps tears of rage at injustice, groan when Romeo confesses undying love after minutes of conversation, and sigh when Amanda lapses into reveries about gentleman callers. But there is one character who is especially instrumental in my students’ thinking about life. Odysseus, the master of exploits, the man of twists and turns, the long-enduring one—he is the prototype for the hero.

In a thematic study I call The Hero’s Journey, I introduce the classical archetype of the hero and the journey of the hero with Homer’s The Odyssey. After all, the wily tactician dreams up the idea for the wooden horse trick, thereby winning the war for the Greeks. He visits hell and, against all odds, makes it back. He defeats the barbarous Cyclops, evades the seductive Sirens, and survives the terrifying Scylla and Charybdis. He has the unhealable wound, possesses a wondrous weapon, and even restores peace to his kingdom. There should be no question that he is indeed a hero; however, thousands of years later, in my ninth graders’ eyes, the epic hero falls far, far short of what a hero should be—regardless of how well he fits the classical criteria.

Is Odysseus a Hero to Contemporary Students?

I treasure Odysseus because he provides a challenge for my students. His complex tale allows me to teach students to challenge traditional notions through authentic critical reading. I don’t frontload units with answers and expectations about the text because I want my students to critically analyze great literature, to question “truths” that we hold so dear. Some time ago after several years of teaching The Odyssey, I began to sense a dormant passion and curiosity within my students that I wished to channel into a formal writing assignment. After a few years of reading anthologized excerpts and giving students vapid writing assignments about Odysseus’s status as a hero, I decided to remove the scaffolding by assigning the entire work translated by Robert Fagles. It was only then that I realized my ninth graders didn’t actually buy Odysseus as a hero; consequently, I began to think of how I could best direct their passionate criticism in writing. Odysseus, a complex character, is a catalyst for thinking, for questioning. The AP Language teacher, Julie Stephenson, and I came up with a definition essay prompt that would drive both the reading and the writing of this unit:

In literature, Odysseus is one of the truest examples of an epic hero. However, many would suggest that Odysseus has some unsavory qualities and flaws in his character. What is heroism? For each person in his respective culture and era, the answer is different with radically dissimilar examples to illustrate the qualities. Consider, for example, 9/11: for radical terrorists, the heroes...
of that day were the attackers themselves because they were willing to die for what they believe; for most Americans, the heroes of that day were the firefighters and police officers who survived the attack but risked their own lives to save the victims; for yet others, the heroes of that day were the everyday people like those on Flight 93 who sacrificed their lives to save thousands. Classic literature offers yet more examples—*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, etc.—for our consideration. In a well-supported essay that makes use of textual evidence, define heroism using examples from *The Odyssey* as either positive or negative examples to support your definition.

Defining heroism is no easy task—especially with a controversial character like Odysseus. Each fall, when I initially assign Fagles’s translation of *The Odyssey* to my English I class, they balk at the size of the work, groaning when they realize that it is a really long poem. I chose this version of the text rather than the excerpts in a textbook because students cannot truly get to know Odysseus without reading the whole text. There’s no scaffolding. There’s no omission of certain scenes. There’s no canned commentary in italics between famous episodes. It is simply a naked text that they must adorn with their own thinking. Grant Wiggins, author of *Understanding by Design*, asserts that “If we learned to ‘read’ a philosophy text by a literal reading, supplemented by what the professor said about it, and if we have not learned to actively ask and answer questions of meaning as we read, reading the next book will be no easier” (41). Likewise, I must teach my students to acquire a skill set. The goal for this unit is for my students to struggle through a difficult text—to essentially begin a journey of their own to discover what true heroism is. Like all great epic adventures, they do not know where they will end up until they’ve arrived in their own Ithaca.

As we embark on this odyssey, much like Odysseus, the students and I cross a threshold of what’s safe, what’s expected. We journey into a land of darkness and uncertainty from which only the determined will emerge. To put to death what is comfortable and launch into a new realm of critical reading is difficult, but the struggle is worth it; the result is that students learn to read, think, and write about challenging texts. Most importantly, they are able to transfer those skills to other works in the future.

**Fostering Critical Reading**

To foster critical reading, I have my students annotate the text of the epic (see fig. 1.) Most teachers have heard that to be a critical reader, you must read between the lines, but it is paramount to “write between the lines” in order to “make yourself a part of [the text]” (Adler and Van Doren 49). Each year, as our reading of the text progresses and as they grow in confidence, I notice how my students carry the thick volumes with rough-cut edges around with pride. They proudly compare their annotations to their classmates’ and come to class excited because they found yet another epic simile or epithet. This book has become a companion, a friend. When the fire alarm went off in the middle of class this school year, they grabbed their copies of *The Odyssey* before exiting the building, making comments about how they couldn’t reproduce their annotations. And they can’t. It is impossible to duplicate the process of critical reading. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren also assert that “understanding is a two-way operation; the learner has to question himself and question the teacher . . . [and] be willing to argue with the teacher” and suggest that annotating a text is “an expression of your differences or your agreements with the author” (49).

And question the author they certainly do. As they read, my students grow to see the ancient hero as the antithesis of heroic. After Odysseus has returned and the kingdom lives happily ever after (sans the evil suitors), my students have reduced the heroic hero to a sniveling, conniving, selfish miscreant. They see Odysseus, the self-serving liar, the brutal murderer, the indulgent adulterer. He is everything that they detest. And they are the harshest critics. Ninth grader Mike Skipper says it best: “Many epithets praise Odysseus, . . . but the loyal husband is not an epithet of his.” Another
student, Vincent Grisby, actually an advanced seventh grader taking Pre-AP English I, makes that critical leap that Adler and Van Doren reference by questioning our definition of heroism: “[Odysseus] practically beckoned punishment from the gods. He exhibited an atrocious lack of respect for the gods, lack of respect for his people, and lack of consideration for the noble and proud family he represented. Moments like [these] make you question the definition of hero, seeing that Odysseus is called one of the greatest heroes of all time.”

Odysseus provides excellent fodder for the question “What is heroism?” When we first meet Odysseus in book four, he is staring out at the sea, sobbing uncontrollably, pining to go home. Initially, my students feel sympathy for the seasoned veteran and wonder what unfathomable trials possibly could have brought the warrior to so lowly a state. But as we embark on his tale, my students’ pity quickly wanes, and they promptly become acerbic. They were already annoyed at the fact that Odysseus had spent seven years with Calypso “withdrawing into the cavern’s deep recesses, long in each other’s arms . . . [losing themselves] in love” (V.250–251). But when Odysseus washes up in Phaeacia, is found by the innocent princess Nausicaa (with whom he flirts shamelessly), and cries uncontrollably at the feast in an effort to gain a platform to tell his story, it is too much for my ninth graders. I’ve seen books slammed down, highlighters thrown. He loses most credibility at that insincere and contrived moment. In fact, Margeaux Smith, one of my students, began her definition essay with these bitter words: “His voice launching into song, Demodocus, the blind inspired bard, began to sing of the heroic deeds of great Odysseus. But where was this brave, courageous man now? Sitting beside [King] Alcinous, sobbing as if he were a woman with a lost husband . . . [losing themselves] in love” (V.250–251). But when Odysseus washes up in Phaeacia, is found by the innocent princess Nausicaa (with whom he flirts shamelessly), and cries uncontrollably at the feast in an effort to gain a platform to tell his story, it is too much for my ninth graders. I’ve seen books slammed down, highlighters thrown. He loses most credibility at that insincere and contrived moment. In fact, Margeaux Smith, one of my students, began her definition essay with these bitter words: “His voice launching into song, Demodocus, the blind inspired bard, began to sing of the heroic deeds of great Odysseus. But where was this brave, courageous man now? Sitting beside [King] Alcinous, sobbing as if he were a woman with a lost husband . . . [losing themselves] in love” (V.250–251). But when Odysseus washes up in Phaeacia, is found by the innocent princess Nausicaa (with whom he flirts shamelessly), and cries uncontrollably at the feast in an effort to gain a platform to tell his story, it is too much for my ninth graders. I’ve seen books slammed down, highlighters thrown. He loses most credibility at that insincere and contrived moment. In fact, Margeaux Smith, one of my students, began her definition essay with these bitter words: “His voice launching into song, Demodocus, the blind inspired bard, began to sing of the heroic deeds of great Odysseus. But where was this brave, courageous man now? Sitting beside [King] Alcinous, sobbing as if he were a woman with a lost husband...
in battle, was Odysseus, the ‘hero.’” And it only gets worse as he continues his story.

Obviously, the students quickly discern Odysseus’s hamartia, that is, his tragic flaw, overwhelmingly to be hubris or excessive pride. This deadly sin is modeled to Odysseus’s men by their mighty leader, and they all pay the ultimate price—each one with his life. Stop one on the trip home from Troy is a swift and brutal plunder of the village Ismarus by Odysseus’s newly confident and entitled warriors. Odysseus boasts, “There I sacked the city, / killed the men, but as for the wives and plunder, / that rich haul we dragged away from the place— / we shared it round” (IV.5–8). Odysseus lets his men run amuck, enjoying their spoils, but when Odysseus decides it is time to cut and run, he cannot control his men who have learned the sin of pride from their leader. The victims of the ambush, the Cicones, get aid from some mighty warrior neighbors, and Odysseus’s men suffer greatly as a result. My students always have major questions about these actions. I don’t excuse his behavior; I let them form their own conclusions and write their thoughts and criticism in the margins of the text.

Likewise, when Odysseus insists on investigating the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus, his insatiable curiosity and lust for fame cost him yet more men. Odysseus is forever getting his men out of perilous scrapes, yes, but he is the one who gets them into trouble in the first place. Scott Huler, in his book No Man’s Lands: One Man’s Odyssey through The Odyssey, describes the dynamic best: “He’s like the guy in the fraternity who always gets everyone else in the car in trouble” (120). This episode is found in book nine; there are 15 more books to go, and my students are not impressed with Odysseus. Again, I encourage my students to keep track of their observations by annotating the text. I constantly ask them, “Who’s heroic? Who isn’t?” They must become passionate about a topic before we expect them to be able to write well. Isn’t it true that “when student writing is flat and unfocused, the reason often lies in a failure to provide students with a conversation to argue in”? (Graff 157; italics in original). After several weeks of close reading, annotation, and class discussion—and lively arguments—they have a plethora of ideas from which to choose for their writing.

Lively Arguments about Heroism

After reading the episode with the Cyclops, one of my students, 14-year-old Hannah Rhodes, came storming into class with the following commentary written on an extra-long sticky note since the small margins of the book just wouldn’t suffice:

What a glory hound! You call that a heroic leader?! Seriously?! First he brings the wrath of Zeus on his men by sacking that village, then he leads several of his men to their death because he wanted to go up against a Cyclops who was mind-ing his own business! He steals food, invades Polyphemus’ home, steals his sheep, and blinds him! Then when his crew begs him to stop insulting Polyphemus, he ignores them and gives in to his ‘fighting spirit’! Egotistical, Proud, Arrogant, Jerk!!

I love a good teenage rant, but it is important to channel student commentary into a productive direction. If Odysseus isn’t a hero, then who is? If he doesn’t have admirable traits, then who does? The beautiful thing about Odysseus is he provides us with a foil—and what my students often find is that the “minor” characters of the epic stack up much better by comparison. My students often choose to focus on the overlooked, unsung heroes of the epic in order to define heroism. After weeks of jotting notes in the margins about all the characters in the epic, many students choose to define heroism using Penelope, Telemachus, and members of the servant class as examples in lieu of Odysseus. In fact, this past year, out of 64 students, only 2 described Odysseus positively. My students’ definitions shed much light on what qualities we value in a hero today, and their fresh perspective is inspiring.

According to the ninth graders, Penelope, that constant, faithful companion of Odysseus, teaches us that true heroism is being faithful and keeping promises no matter what the consequences. Although an ancient audience may not have esteemed women as we do today, my students view her as the truest example of fidelity. Penelope, just
as intelligent as her male counterpart, possesses the quality that her husband lacks—loyalty, and, in the words of ninth grader Hannah Siegmund, she “uses her intelligence and determination to defeat evil and remain faithful until Odysseus’ homecoming.” My students admire and delight in her prudence in concocting the shroud trick and later the arrow and rings trick to foil the suitors, fending them off until her husband returns. Twelve-year-old Vincent Grisby writes that “Penelope is an astonishing example of startling resilience in the face of unrelenting challenge, well representing the ideals of Prometheus (literally, forethought, in Greek).” For these students, Penelope represents the woman who will stop at nothing to preserve her family.

The servant class—those salt-of-the-earth, noble, poor individuals—teach us that heroism is having integrity, doing the right thing even when no one is looking. Ninth grader Barrett Moore came to the conclusion that “the true heroes are the ones who suffer the most, all . . . while staying loyal and true to the wily tactician, even when faced with temptation and . . . mockery.” He asserts that it is through a close examination of the differences between minor characters—Eumaeus, the kind, loyal swineherd, and Melanthius, the conceited, disloyal goatherd—which Homer’s readers may learn this lesson. Eumaeus, day after day, tends to his daily tasks while praying for Odysseus’s return. In sharp contrast, Melanthius takes advantage of the absent master to ally himself with the wicked suitors in hopes that he will one day rise in station. He heaps insult and abuse upon Penelope, Telema-
wanted us to question Odysseus; he wanted to champion the underdog. So, Homer, I think the muses heard your referent plea, for you have certainly “[sung] for our time, too” (I.12).

There is a subtext in The Odyssey to be discovered by the keen reader. If we dart through the text in a vain attempt to “cover it,” read adapted versions, or provide students with summaries and our own opinions, they miss it. And sometimes we as adults miss it, too. We must look through the fresher eyes of young adults to find true meaning in a text. There are latent warnings throughout the epic: don’t be prideful; don’t forget where you come from; appreciate your family. I believe that Homer’s answer lies in Vincent’s paper: “Why did Homer have his protagonist . . . so rudely demean the gods? What was he trying to tell us?”

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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Students can use the online student interactive tool to learn about the elements of the hero’s journey, analyze a text that follows the hero’s journey pattern, or start creating a hero story of their own. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/hero-journey-30069.html