



FROM BEOWULF TO SANTIAGO: CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE ANGLO- AMERICAN HEROIC LITERARY TRADITION

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Abstract: *This article traces the historical development of the heroic ideal across English and American literary traditions from the Anglo-Saxon epic through the twentieth century. Drawing on a comparative framework informed by Campbell's monomyth, Frye's modal typology, and Aristotle's theory of tragic heroism, the article argues that beneath the considerable surface variation produced by different historical and cultural contexts, a set of structurally constant heroic qualities — courage, integrity, sacrifice, and meaningful encounter with transformative opposition — persists across the entire span of the traditions examined. At the same time, a fundamental and consistent divergence is identified between the communal orientation of English literary heroism and the individualistic, privatised orientation of its American counterpart. The article demonstrates this argument through analysis of representative texts: Beowulf, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Eliot's Middlemarch, Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. The article contributes a diachronic comparative perspective on heroic representation that illuminates both the resilience of the heroic narrative as a literary form and the cultural work that different configurations of heroism perform in different historical moments.*

Keywords: *heroism; comparative literature; English literature; American literature; epic hero; tragic hero; code hero; monomyth; Beowulf; Hamlet; Hemingway*

1. Introduction

The concept of heroism occupies a privileged position in the history of literary representation. From the earliest oral-formulaic epics of the ancient world to the self-consciously existential fiction of the twentieth century, writers in every literary tradition have returned repeatedly to the question of what human excellence looks like — what qualities of character, what forms of action, what modes of engagement with adversity deserve to be called heroic. This question has produced, across the centuries and across national literary traditions, a remarkable diversity of answers that are at the same time structured by a set of constants deep enough to constitute a recognisable literary tradition.

The present article addresses this question through a comparative analysis of the heroic ideal as it has developed across the English and American literary traditions. These two traditions share a common linguistic and cultural heritage, yet they have produced distinctive and in certain respects fundamentally opposed configurations of heroism that reflect the different historical experiences, national ideologies, and moral frameworks of the societies in which they developed. The article traces this divergence from its origins in the Anglo-Saxon epic through the Renaissance, the Victorian period, and into the twentieth century, arguing that the contrast between English communal heroism and American individualistic heroism constitutes the most fundamental structural difference between the two traditions, and that understanding

this difference illuminates both traditions more fully than either can be understood in isolation.

The theoretical framework employed draws on three foundational bodies of scholarship. Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth [1, p. 23] provides a structural model of heroic narrative that identifies common patterns beneath the surface diversity of specific texts. Northrop Frye's modal typology [2, p. 33] maps the historical movement of heroic representation from the mythic and romance modes toward the low mimetic and ironic modes within a single coherent analytical framework. Aristotle's theory of tragic heroism [3, p. 45] contributes the philosophical vocabulary of hamartia, catharsis, and the epistemological function of the hero's downfall. Together these frameworks provide the comparative vocabulary through which the historical analysis is conducted.

2. The English Heroic Tradition: From Communal Warrior to Moral Consciousness

The history of heroism in English literature begins in the darkness and firelight of the Germanic mead-hall, with the oral-formulaic tradition that produced the epic *Beowulf*. The heroism constructed in this earliest monument of English literary culture is rooted in the values of the *comitatus* — the warrior community in which bonds of loyalty between lord and retainer provided the fundamental social and moral framework. *Beowulf*'s greatness is from the outset inseparable from his social function: he travels to Denmark not for personal adventure but in fulfilment of the obligations that the heroic code places on those of exceptional power, and his willingness to fight Grendel without weapons is simultaneously a demonstration of personal confidence and a symbolic affirmation of the values the code upholds [12, p. 26].

What gives Beowulf its distinctive depth and distinguishes it from a purely celebratory epic is its elegiac consciousness — the poem's pervasive awareness that heroic achievement, however magnificent, cannot ultimately overcome the forces of time and fate. Tolkien identified this elegiac dimension as the poem's central moral statement: the hero who has served his community through a lifetime of courage must ultimately face a final test alone, knowing the outcome in advance, and the community he leaves behind cannot be certain of its survival without him [4, p. 271]. The heroism Beowulf constructs is therefore simultaneously optimistic and melancholy: it affirms human dignity and courage as genuinely valuable while acknowledging that they cannot permanently hold back the darkness.

The Renaissance transformation of the English heroic ideal, achieved above all in Shakespeare's tragic drama, relocated heroic greatness from the warrior's physical courage to the philosopher's intellectual and moral acuity. Hamlet represents the fullest realisation of this transformation. As Bradley argued, Hamlet's heroism is constituted by an extraordinary capacity for moral and perceptual clarity — the ability to see the full complexity of his situation and to speak the truth about it even in a social world systematically organised around self-deception [10, p. 91]. His courage is not the courage of the battlefield but the courage of sustained intellectual honesty in conditions of radical moral uncertainty; his integrity is not the fidelity of the warrior to his lord but the fidelity of a consciousness to the truth it perceives, regardless of the social cost. The hero has moved inward: his greatness is no longer primarily expressed in action but in the quality of his perception and the depth of his moral engagement with his situation.

The Victorian period produced a further and equally significant transformation. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, heroism is democratised: relocated from exceptional individuals in exceptional circumstances to ordinary people in ordinary life, and from the public sphere of dramatic action to the interior life of moral choice. Dorothea Brooke's heroism consists in what Eliot calls "unhistoric acts" — countless small choices, kindnesses, and moral efforts that are invisible to the public world but constitute, cumulatively, a genuinely heroic life [11, p. 3]. This democratisation is simultaneously a feminist critique: by insisting that genuine heroism is available to those whom social convention has excluded from the public arena, Eliot challenges the Carlylean valorisation of grand, visible, masculine achievement [5, p. 42]. The hero has become, in principle, anyone who brings to the conduct of ordinary life the qualities of courage, generosity, and moral seriousness.

What is constant across this entire span of English literary history — from Beowulf to Dorothea — is the social orientation of the heroic ideal. The English hero's greatness is consistently defined by, expressed through, and evaluated in terms of its relationship to a community. Beowulf fights for his people; Hamlet's individual excellence matters because of what it represents for a corrupted kingdom; Dorothea's unhistoric acts contribute, invisibly but really, to the moral life of the community of *Middlemarch*. Even the most internalised forms of English heroism remain social in their orientation: the hero's inner greatness is valuable because of what it makes possible for others.

3. The American Heroic Tradition: From Self-Reliance to Stoic Endurance

The American heroic tradition emerged from a set of historical conditions fundamentally different from those that produced its English counterpart, and these different conditions generated a different set of heroic ideals. The formative experience of the New World — the confrontation with a vast and challenging natural environment, the revolutionary rejection of inherited European authority, and the construction of a national identity on principles of individual liberty and democratic equality — produced a heroic mythology in which the solitary individual, confronting the world with no resources but his own, stands as the central and defining image.

The philosophical foundations of this tradition were most powerfully articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay "Self-Reliance" established the central axiom of the American heroic ideal: the injunction to trust one's own instincts and moral perceptions over the received authority of tradition, convention, and social pressure [18, p. 19]. For Emerson, genuine moral authority resides not in any external institution but in the individual's own experience and inner life — what he calls "the aboriginal Self." This formulation established the fundamental orientation that would distinguish American heroism from its English counterpart for the entire subsequent history of the tradition: the primacy of individual conscience over collective convention, and the location of heroic significance in the quality of inner experience rather than in social achievement or public recognition.

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* represents the first great literary realisation of this Emersonian ideal in democratic and ironic form. Huck Finn is the most improbable of heroes: a barely literate, socially marginalised boy whose moral education has been conducted not

by the authoritative institutions of his society — which the novel consistently presents as morally bankrupt — but by the unmediated experience of human relationship on the river [7, p. 1]. The novel's moral climax — Huck's decision to tear up the letter that would return Jim to slavery and to "go to hell" rather than betray his friend — is presented not as a heroic act of principle but as what Huck understands as a surrender to his worst instincts. This ironic structure, in which the hero's moral triumph is experienced by him as moral failure, encapsulates the American tradition's deepest conviction: that authentic moral authority resides in direct human experience rather than in inherited social codes, and that genuine heroism may require the rejection of the community's official values rather than their embodiment.

Ernest Hemingway brought the American heroic tradition to its most austere and philosophically concentrated expression in the twentieth century. Writing in the aftermath of the First World War and amid the collapse of the traditional religious and social frameworks that had previously grounded heroic aspiration, Hemingway developed what Philip Young called the "code hero": a figure who maintains personal dignity and integrity in a world stripped of transcendent meaning, performing his work with complete mastery, enduring suffering without complaint, and facing inevitable defeat with composure and without self-deception [25, p. 55]. Santiago, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, is the fullest realisation of this ideal. His eighty-four days without a fish, his solitary struggle with the giant marlin, and his return with nothing but a stripped skeleton are the materials of apparent failure; yet the quality of his engagement with this ordeal — his totality of commitment, his

mastery of craft, his equanimity in the face of loss — constitutes a form of heroism as demanding as any celebrated in the tradition [8, p. 1].

What is constant across the American tradition — from Emerson's philosophical essays through *Huck Finn* to *Santiago* — is the individualistic, anti-social, and inward orientation of the heroic ideal. The American hero's greatness is consistently defined by opposition to or independence from social convention, expressed in solitude rather than in community, and located in the quality of inner experience rather than in social consequence. *Huck's* moral achievement changes nothing in the social world around him; *Santiago's* triumph is accessible only to the reader, not to the community that sees only a stripped skeleton. This privatisation of heroic significance is not a failure of the American tradition but a constitutive feature of its deepest conviction: that what matters most about human life is inaccessible to the social world and can be known only from within.

4. The Structural Persistence of Heroism Across Both Traditions

Despite the significant differences between the two traditions identified above, a systematic comparative examination reveals a substantial set of shared structural features that reflect their common cultural and literary heritage. These continuities operate beneath the surface differences of social orientation and cultural emphasis, constituting the deep grammar of heroic narrative that both traditions share.

The most fundamental shared quality is courage in its fullest sense: not merely physical bravery but the capacity to confront danger, difficulty, and suffering without surrendering integrity or abandoning

commitment. This quality is manifested very differently in different texts and traditions — as martial bravery in Beowulf, as existential fortitude in Hamlet, as moral stubbornness in Huckleberry Finn, as stoic endurance in *The Old Man and the Sea* — but in every case the heroic character is defined partly by the quality of response to adversity. Campbell's identification of the hero's willingness to enter the zone of danger as the structural prerequisite of the heroic journey [1, p. 108] resonates across all these texts and traditions.

Closely related is the quality of integrity: the coherence between the hero's stated values and actual conduct, and the refusal to compromise fundamental identity under external pressure. Beowulf is consistent throughout the poem in the values he embodies and the code he upholds. Hamlet's integrity, expressed through language and consciousness rather than through action, is similarly unwavering: despite the systematic pressure of the Danish court toward adaptation and complicity, he never yields to comfortable self-deception. Huck Finn's integrity manifests itself as the unwillingness to act against his conscience despite intense social and religious pressure. Santiago's integrity is expressed in his absolute mastery of his craft and in his refusal of any easier path than the one his deepest commitment demands. The form of integrity differs radically across these figures; its structural role in constituting heroic identity does not.

Finally, the epistemological dimension of heroism — the hero as a figure of superior perception who sees truths invisible to those around him — constitutes a further and important area of continuity across both traditions. Hamlet perceives the corruption of the Danish court when all around him prefer comfortable self-deception. Huck Finn perceives the

full humanity of Jim when the entire social world around him systematically denies it. Santiago perceives the dignity and significance of his struggle with the marlin in terms that the fishing community cannot access. Aristotle's identification of the tragic hero as a figure of superior understanding whose perception becomes more acute as his situation becomes more desperate [3, p. 63] resonates across this entire range of heroic types and provides the deepest theoretical rationale for the heroic narrative's persistent cultural significance.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis conducted in this article has demonstrated that the concept of heroism, across its considerable historical and cultural variation, is structured by a set of constants — courage, integrity, sacrifice, epistemological superiority, and meaningful encounter with transformative opposition — that constitute the deep grammar of heroic narrative in both the English and American traditions. At the same time, the analysis has confirmed a fundamental structural difference between the two traditions: English literary heroism is consistently communal in its orientation, defining the hero's greatness in terms of its social function and consequence; American literary heroism is consistently individualistic and inward, locating genuine heroic significance in the quality of the hero's inner experience rather than in its social effects.

This divergence is not merely a surface stylistic difference but reflects genuinely different understandings of the relationship between the individual and the community, between personal excellence and social obligation, between the demands of conscience and the authority of tradition. Understanding these different understandings — and

understanding what each tradition reveals about the other — is one of the most important intellectual contributions that comparative literary analysis can make. The English hero who acts within and for the community and the American hero who achieves his greatness in solitude together constitute a fuller picture of the possibilities of human excellence than either tradition, read in isolation, can provide.

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