**Epic Poetry – Heroism**

**This unit, the fifth of six, focuses on epic poetry as its own genre and introduces students to classic and more recent epics, as well contemporary nonfiction that also addresses themes related to heroism.**

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**Overview**

* + Students read Homer’s *The Odyssey* or Virgil’s *The Aeneid,* with special attention to the hero’s journey, and learn about the characteristics of an epic hero. They become familiar with classic Greek and Roman mythology and consider the role of the gods in the hero’s adventures. Building on themes in the previous unit, they may discuss the role of fate. Through pairings with informational text, students learn about the ancient city of Troy and the story of the Trojan War for historical context. They may also encounter informational texts that describe the experience of soldiers returning from war in contemporary times; they may compare and contrast these accounts with the experiences of Aeneas or Odysseus. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Lotos-Eaters” is included in the unit so that students may explore how authors draw on the works of other authors to examine related themes. “The Song of Hiawatha” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is included so that students can compare a classic epic with a more recent one. A fine segue to the next unit on memoir, William Manchester’s *Goodbye Darkness* allows students to delve more deeply into the themes of bravery and heroism. Teachers may also choose to read excerpts from the Indian epic, *The Ramayana* (attributed to the Hindu sage Valmiki)*,* to explore an epic from yet another culture.
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**Focus Standards**

* + These Focus Standards have been selected for the unit from the Common Core State Standards.
    - **RL.9-10.2:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
    - **RL.9-10.3:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
    - **RI.9-10.7:** Analyze various accounts of a subject in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story told in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
    - **W.9-10.9:** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
    - **SL.9-10.3:** Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.
    - **L.9-10.1:** Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

[Common Core State Standards, ELA](http://commoncore.org/free/resources/CCSSI_ELA_Standards.pdf) (1.5 MB)

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**Suggested Student Objectives**

* + - Identify and explain the elements of an epic poem.
    - Identify and explain the characteristics of an epic hero.
    - Analyze the relationship between myths and legends and epic poetry.
    - Examine the historical context of literary works.
    - Compare and contrast how related themes may be treated in different genres (here, epic poetry and contemporary nonfiction).
    - Hone effective listening skills during oral presentations and class discussions.
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**Suggested Works**

* + (E) indicates a CCSS exemplar text; (EA) indicates a text from a writer with other works identified as exemplars.

**Literary Texts**

**Stories**

* + - *Mythology* (Edith Hamilton)

**Poems**

* + - *The Odyssey* (Homer) (E)
    - *The Aeneid* (Virgil)
    - “The Lotos-Eaters” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)
    - Excerpts from “Endymion” (John Keats) (EA)
    - “The Song of Hiawatha” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) (EA)
    - Excerpts from the *Ramayana* (attributed to the Hindu sage Valmiki)

**Informational Texts**

**Informational Text**

* + - Excerpts from *The Gold of Troy* (Robert Payne)
    - Excerpts from *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (Jonathan Shay)
    - Excerpts from *Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (William Manchester)
    - *Soldier’s Heart: Reading Literature Through Peace and War at West Point* (Elizabeth D. Samet)
    - *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families* (Andrew Carroll, ed.)
    - *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Joseph Campbell)

**Art, Music, and Media**

Music

* + - Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas* (1689)
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**Sample Activities and Assessments**

* + ***Teachers Notes:*** *Page and word counts for essays are not provided, but attention should be paid to the requirements regarding the use of evidence, for example, to determine the likely length of good essays. In future iterations of these maps, links to samples of student work will be provided.*

**Essay**

Write an essay in which you take a position on whether or not Aeneas or Odysseus (or a contemporary soldier from another reading) exhibits the characteristics of an epic hero. State your thesis clearly and include at least three pieces of evidence to support the thesis.  (W.9-10.1)

**Essay**

Write a poem or prose narrative about a journey you or someone you know has taken, using epic similes, epithets, and allusions. (W.9-10.3)

**Essay**

Write an essay in which you compare the ways in which the theme of heroism is treated in *The Aeneid* or *The Odyssey* and one of the contemporary nonfiction accounts. State thesis clearly and include at least three pieces of evidence to support the thesis. (RL.9-10.2, RI.9-10.7, W.9-10.2)

**Oral Presentation/Class Discussion**

Play excerpts from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas* and lead the class in a discussion on whether this rendering of an epic in another medium is or is not “faithful” to the original. Discuss why or why not. Ask classmates to provide specific evidence for their opinions. (RL.9-10.7, SL.9-10.2, SL.9-10.3, SL.9-10.4)

**Speech**

Select a one-minute passage from *The Odyssey* or *The Aeneid* and recite it from memory. Include an introduction that states:

* + - What the excerpt is.
    - Who wrote it.
    - Why it is significant as an example of an important literary tradition. (RL.9-10.6, SL9-10.6)

**Seminar Question**

“Is Aeneas/Odysseus courageous?” The seminar question may also be used as an essay topic. (RL.9-10.3 and SL.9-10.1, SL.9-10.4, and SL.9-10.6)

[Scoring Rubric](http://commoncore.org/free/resources/Socratic_Seminar_Rubric_SP.doc)

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**Additional Resources**

* + [Lessons of the Indian Epics: Following the Dharma](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=589) (National Endowment for the Humanities) (RL.9-10.6)

The epic poem *Ramayana* is thought to have been composed more than 2,500 years ago, and like *The* *Iliad* and *The* *Odyssey*, was originally transmitted orally by bards. This lesson will introduce students to the Indian concept of dharma (“right behavior”) through a reading of  *Ramayana*.

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**Terminology**

* + **Literary Text**
    - the classical epic poem
    - allusion
    - archetype
    - arete
    - epic poetry
    - epic/Homeric simile
    - epithet
    - hero
    - heroic couplet
    - iambic pentameter
    - invocation
    - narrative
    - oral tradition

**Informational Text**

* + - chronological order
    - thesis statement
    - evidence

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