

Epics

Please read the following epics from your textbook:

Homer (*Iliad*; *Odyssey*)
Virgil; *Aeneid*;
Gilgamesh;
The Ramayana;
The Mahabharata)

Option a Heroes (Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, Gilgamesh, Rama, Arjuna).
Option b Heroines (Penelope, Dido, Helen, Amdromache, Sita, Draupita)

Analyze, compare and contrast the following heroes and heroines in these six ancient epics. You will notice that the first three epics all derive from the western mythological tradition, the fourth from Mesopotamia; the fifth and sixth from India; in other words you may expect to find different world-view perspectives at work in the three categories. Do you? Do certain of these epics seem to you modern, to speak to our own time? What issues from our own time seem to be addressed here? How do plot and characterization differ in ancient *Indian* or *Mesopotamian* epic literature, from their deployment in Greek or Roman texts? Is Gilgamesh, the warrior-searcher-philosopher, comparable to Odysseus? Is the tortured warrior psychology of Arjuna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, at all comparable to the psychology of Achilles in the *Iliad*?

Characters

Achilles Achilles is arguably the central figure of the *Iliad*. It is his petulant fury (sparked by Agamemnon's pig headedness) that triggers the leaders' dispute at the beginning of the epic, and thus generates the internal Greek conflict, which only the death of Patroclus will resolve. Achilles' decision, to let Patroclus enter the fray is Achilles's move of commitment to the Greek assault on Troy, and ultimately the turning point at which Achilles reaches as far as he can into his finer nature; his feeling for Patroclus is passionate, and his fury at his beloved's death is one of those rare moments when the sulker in Achilles is transcended by the committed hero, who though doomed to an early life by command of the gods is rendered the more luminous in the life he is allowed to have. The final test of Achilles' inner flexibility is the arrival of Priam, at the camp of Achilles in Book 24, to beg for the return of Hector. Does Achilles rise to magnanimity, at that point? Or does he simply follow the orders of the Gods? Does Achilles ever emerge from his 'wrath,' which explodes in Book One, when Achilles is basically forced, by public pressure, to give his girl friend to Agamemnon? Have we much, or little, to learn from Achilles, this semi divine youngster who at his most intimate--weeping for his boyfriend, remembering his own dad, playing the harp by firelight--is in his way gracious and human?

Odysseus Does Odysseus touch us with his humanity? On the face of it, as you see at the beginning of the epic, the gods have decided to intervene in the fate of Odysseus, and to start the machinery of his return home. But does Odysseus perform for us like a puppet who is manipulated by the gods? Or does he seem a fully self-willed character? If he does seem a free actor, does his manner of returning to his wife, son and home reflect *Gilgamesh Gilgamesh* love and longing, or the desire for revenge and the restoration of order? (If the answer is no--no humanity there-- does he show us his independence and free will In other ways, by his cunning, his power, his sense of adventure? By his initiative in restraining his men or in planning the fatal attack on the suitors? Is Odysseus, in short, a hero from whom we have something to learn about the human condition, ours, or is he simply a figure out of heroic tale, more or less governed by the whims of the gods? Viewed in terms of his complex return--the adventures with multiple challenges, the problems with his anxiety ridden crew, the seductive ten year stretch with Calypso, during which he watched the smoke rising from his native island--does Odysseus qualify as the hero of a rip-roaring story of adventure and victory, or has the *Odyssey* a universal moral theme which makes it relevant to our lives today?

Aeneas Aeneas is Virgil's Odysseus, a Trojan hero and escapee from the Battle of Troy. We follow this hero as he sails the seas, looking for a homeland --his own homeland having been wiped out by the war. What is Aeneas truly

hunting for? Does he know, from the beginning, what he is hunting for? Like Odysseus he is waylaid by various adventures and challenges, mythical hurdles. He stops along the way, then, to take shelter in the new kingdom of Dido, on the coast of North Africa. Aeneas is deeply attracted to this African queen, as she is to him, but does he give in to her? The answer, of course, is no; he sails on looking for a new homeland, for himself and for the Trojans he has brought along with him. Aeneas' departure from Dido is devastating to her, but does he care? He puts his historical destiny ahead of his love life. (This test of Aeneas' true intentions reveals his difference from Odysseus, who spent ten years with Calypso on his way home, and still had difficulty pulling himself away). What concerns Aeneas in the second half of the epic? Why is he so determined to found a new state, and so fierce in his battles with Turnus, the Italic ruler he finds there? What has Aeneas' determination to do with Virgil's own motivation in writing this epic poem? What, finally, do you think of Virgil's motivation, to celebrate the empire he is in at the inception of? Can true art emerge from such a clearly defined political motive? Has Virgil managed to blend great art with propaganda?

Gilgamesh How did the historical figure of Gilgamesh, a king who lived in Uruk (in today's Iraq) in the first half of the third millennium B.C. E. get transformed into an heroic literary figure in the literary epic *Gilgamesh*, composed in about 1800 B.C.E.? That is, what kind of deepening, of ordinary human events, was literary thought and imagination able to recruit, in order to establish this portrait of a hero, a hero who seems astonishingly modern? Or do you agree that he is modern, and if so how do you compare his modernity with that of Odysseus or Aeneas? Two phases of Gilgamesh' life seem to be offered to us. In the first he is a robust new king, enjoying his high civilized life of women and banquets, and taking his pick from the goodies of the world. The chief god, Anu, creates Enkidu as a playmate for Gilgamesh; Enkidu is a nature guy, virtually a human animal, who after a week of love making, with a very pretty lady, decides he prefers humans to animals. He becomes a great friend of Gilgamesh. Enkidu and Gilgamesh virtually twin with each other. What message are we being given, about the price that has to be paid for civilization, and about the centrality of animal nature in us all? Are we being told that nature and civilization can't exist without one another? What is Gilgamesh's response to the upcoming death of his buddy? How does Gilgamesh himself deal with the prospect of Death, the dominant issue of the second part of the poem? He is about to have to think about Utnapishtim, the only mortal who has escaped death. Who is Utnapishtim and why does he seem so important to Gilgamesh? How did Utnapishtim himself avoid death? Can Gilgamesh do the same? The fact that he himself is mortal comes over Gilgamesh. How does he react? Is he resigned? Can you see the relevance of this epic for your own death and life?

Rama The *Ramayana* concerns a protagonist, Rama, whose virtues and limitations suggest those of Virgil's Aeneas: Rama could have been *pious*, like Aeneas, had he been Roman, and in fact he is a hero of *dharma*, the core religious values for his culture: those true to *dharma* are faithful, honorable, generous. Do you find that Rama, like Aeneas, is a bit too virtuous, a bit of an eagle scout? (I am fishing for the sense of 'limitation' as used above.) How does Rama handle the great crises of his life, his initial banishment to the forest, on his wedding night, the loss of Sita to the Devil Ravana, who snatches her away, or while enduring doubts about the chastity of Sita, which have been planted in his mind? Isn't it clear that Rama puts obedience and public reputation ahead of everything else? He does have his hedonistic years, for sure, for example when he and Sita are living in forest exile together, and a paradisaical condition reigns. Yet from the moment when the Devil, Ravana, snatches Sita away and abducts her, Rama will be threatened by dread, and public suspicion, that Sita is no longer chaste. Has he any reason to doubt her chastity, other than the whispered rumors of his people? The question rises, then, whether the present epic concerns nobly honorable semi-mythical figures or psychologically haunted victims of the strict moral code of their times. In a wider sense, how successful can you become, in getting inside the mind of Rama, who is not only tortured with fear of his wife's unchastity, but capable of ruling his people for 10,000 years, in a reign of peace of prosperity which is practically Edenic? Unless you are Hindu/Buddhist--are you?--aren't you likely to struggle with the mixture of fantasy and psychological realism--like that of the evil lady in waiting who originally provokes the banishment of Rama to the forest?

Arjuna Just at the outset of the war between the Pandavas and the Kuravas, which is central to the *Mahabharata*, 400 B.C.E.--400 C.E., the rambling master epic of Indian literature, Arjuna (a major warrior for the Kuravas) speaks to his charioteer. The dialogue of warrior and divine charioteer (Krishna) constitutes the section of the *Mahabharata* called the *Bhagavad Gita (The Song of God)*, which was added to the *Mahabharata* around the time of Christ. Arjuna is facing an array of two armies, for one of which he is fighting (the Kuravas) while on the other side, hot for battle, are arrayed the powerful horses and chariots of many of his cousins--the two sides are a genetic

mix. How does Arjuna feel about plunging into this war which will involve bloodshed within family lines, as well as creating havoc in general? Arjuna is dismayed. He asks Krishna--deity of love and charity--for advice; what he learns distills compacted wisdom about the human condition. Krishna urges his tutee to plunge into battle, not to withdraw, and thus to remain true to his caste-destiny, to be a warrior. (Arjuna belongs to the *kshatriya* or warrior class). Does Arjuna settle for this command? Or does he, like Achilles, need a spur to drive him into battle? He needs a spur, and the spur is subtle; fight, says Krishna, because action is your expression of the human, fight and kill while realizing that you are free of your action by virtue of committing it at the height of your self-awareness; indifferent to and above the event. Being remains the same forever, Krishna assures his rider, and lasts eternally, indifferent to actions within it, like the present battle. In other words fight, win, and give yourself in such fullness that, at the same time you fight, you are being raised above the battle. Has this paradoxical exhortation meaning for you? Do duty and discipline sometimes seem to you to justify themselves by their very rising above the cause for which they are exercised?

Comparison Compare and contrasting the ancient heroes / characters will revolve around the relation between characters: between those six literary characters. Are these five 'heroes' similar? What do they have in common? Do they reflect a single author in the case of Homer's work or Valmiki's work? We will then ask you to go on to issues that emerge from the literary characterization, and on the relationship of one character to another. What is the relationship between character and plot, in our texts? Does the personality of the hero or protagonist drive the plot or is it simply shaped by the plot? How is the style and method of literary characterization different in different cultures? How do plot and characterization differ in ancient *Indian* or *Mesopotamian* epic literature, from the Greek or Roman manner? Is Gilgamesh, the warrior-searcher-philosopher comparable to Odysseus? Is the tortured warrior psychology of Arjuna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, at all comparable to the psychology of Achilles in the *Iliad*. What begins, in your work on characterization, unfolds as you pursue the higher level questions of this project, into issues which go to the heart of the work of the Comparatist, as well as into questions of the interrelation of cultures, and the historical settings in which literary works are created. In other words we will be working, in this project, from the seemingly simple (but really not simple) issues of analyzing literary characters, to higher order questions involved in comparing texts and cultures and genres with one another.