

What makes these accounts so fascinating is that they are imaginative reconstructions of an earlier period as seen by a later age. The poets who wrote about the heroes were not interested in just recording facts about the past, but in creating the perfect hero for their own age. In heroic literature, the heroes became idealized as did the age in which they lived. They represented the height of attainment to the culture which delighted in telling of their exploits. The real character of a Theseus, for example, became less important than the more general heroic qualities that the poets assigned to all heroes.

Thus the classical heroes have many character traits in common with each other and are involved in similar quests and adventures: a literary formula of heroism emerged which reflected not only what the Greeks demanded in their stories of heroes but what qualities of manhood they valued.

• excerpted and adapted from *Myth and Meaning*, by James G. Head and Linda MacLea, Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing Co, 1988

Heroic Literature: Larger than Life

Every society has a need to create heroes who embark upon adventures which reflect the values and aspirations of that society. Though the characteristics of the hero may vary, the need for a literature dealing with heroes remains constant. Heroic literature is a specialized type of literature concerned with the adventures of a central figure who is somehow greater than ordinary mortals. This hero is set apart from, and above, the average person because of his almost superhuman courage, bravery, and cleverness. In fact, Hesiod, an ancient Greek writer, defined the word *hero* as a person whose status is between that of an ordinary mortal and that of the gods. Thus heroes are almost a link between human beings and the gods. They represent the ideal for their society.

For this reason, a great body of literature is collected about their exploits. By recounting the adventures and triumphs of the hero, the society reaffirms its own values and allows the listeners or readers to identify with the deeds of the hero. Heroic literature instills a sense of pride and imprints a value system on the audience. It is far easier to study the heroic literature of the past because it is complete and because we have a perspective that is relatively objective. Studies of the great Greek heroes-- Theseus, Perseus, Jason, Heracles, Odysseus-- tell us much about the ancient Greek moral outlook and value system. In the same way, stories about King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain in the Arthurian cycle reveal the values of the medieval Christian society.

The later Bronze Age was the age of heroes in Greece. This was an age when the Greek city states were becoming a power to reckon with in the Mediterranean area. In many ways, the age of heroes was a celebration of the conquests of that time. In each case, the hero was responsible for destroying the enemies of the Greeks and helping to unify the countryside; therefore, each was a kind of founding father. The exploits of these heroes were recorded by many famous poets of antiquity. The most famous sources are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, probably composed in the eighth century B.C. These very long poems were made up of thousands of lines each. And yet, for two hundred years they were transmitted orally before being written down. The literature of Western culture is rooted in this oral tradition.

A great deal of material can also be found in the works of the Roman poet Ovid, who, although he was often skeptical of the Greek myths and legends, lovingly recorded them. He is a particularly valuable writer because many of his original sources no longer exist and therefore some legends remain only in his writings.

Two observations can be made from the above. One, there is no unified source for the stories of the Greek heroes. All of the literary sources were taken from an oral tradition as well as any writings available. Even at the time of writing, each poet must have selected details which suited his purpose from the numerous accounts available to him. Therefore, although the stories agree in the main, there are many variations in detail and emphasis. Two, and most important, none of the writings are strictly historical. Rather, they are literary: they are works of the creative imagination. This does not mean that we can find no historical truth in the accounts. Heinrich Schliemann destroyed that theory when he followed the directions of Homer and discovered the buried city of Troy.