

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HEROISM IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** *Heroism is an important theme in literature, but its meaning changes depending on culture and history. Although English and American literatures share a common language and early traditions, they present very different ideas of what it means to be a hero. This article compares how heroism is portrayed in English and American literary works from earlier periods to modern times. It shows that English literature often presents heroes who value moral duty, social responsibility, and self-control, while American literature tends to focus on individual freedom, resistance to authority, and personal moral choice. Through the analysis of works by writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Emerson, Melville, and Twain, the study argues that literary heroes reflect the values and identities of their societies. By placing these heroes in their historical and cultural contexts, the article demonstrates that heroism is not a fixed or universal idea, but a changing concept shaped by national experience and cultural development.*

**Keywords:** *Heroism, English literature, American literature, comparative study, national identity, moral duty, individualism, cultural context, literary hero*

**Аннотация:** *Героизм является важной темой в литературе, однако его значение меняется в зависимости от культуры и исторического периода. Несмотря на то что английская и американская литературы имеют общий язык и схожие истоки, они по-разному представляют образ героя. В данной статье проводится сравнительный анализ изображения героизма в английской и американской литературе от ранних этапов до современности. Показано, что в английской литературе герои чаще воплощают моральный долг, социальную ответственность и сдержанность, тогда как американская литература акцентирует внимание на индивидуальной свободе, сопротивлении авторитету и личном моральном выборе. Анализ произведений Шекспира, Диккенса, Эмерсона, Мелвилла и Твена позволяет сделать вывод о том, что литературные герои отражают ценности и идентичность общества. Рассматривая героизм в историческом и культурном контексте, статья доказывает, что героизм не является универсальным понятием, а представляет собой изменяющуюся концепцию, сформированную национальным опытом и культурным развитием.*

**Ключевые слова:** Героизм, английская литература, американская литература, сравнительное исследование, национальная идентичность, моральный долг, индивидуализм, культурный контекст, литературный герой

**Annotatsiya:** *Qahramonlik adabiyotda muhim mavzulardan biri bo'lib, uning mazmuni madaniyat va tarixiy sharoitga qarab o'zgarib boradi. Ingliz va Amerika adabiyotlari umumiy til va tarixiy asosga ega bo'lsa-da, qahramonlik tushunchasini turlicha talqin qiladi. Ushbu maqolada ingliz va Amerika adabiyotida qahramonlik obrazining dastlabki davrlardan zamonaviy davrgacha bo'lgan rivoji qiyosiy tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, ingliz adabiyotida qahramonlar ko'proq axloqiy burch, ijtimoiy mas'uliyat va o'zini tiyish bilan tavsiflanadi, Amerika adabiyotida esa individual erkinlik, hokimiyatga qarshilik va shaxsiy axloqiy tanlov ustuvor hisoblanadi. Shekspir, Dikens, Emerson, Melvill va Tven asarlari tahlili adabiy qahramonlar jamiyatning qadriyatlarini va milliy o'zligini aks ettirishini ko'rsatadi. Qahramonlikni tarixiy va madaniy kontekstda o'rganish orqali maqola qahramonlik universal tushuncha emas, balki milliy tajriba va madaniy rivojlanish ta'sirida shakllanadigan o'zgaruvchan tushuncha ekanini isbotlaydi.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *Qahramonlik, ingliz adabiyoti, Amerika adabiyoti, qiyosiy tadqiqot, milliy o'zlik, axloqiy burch, individuallik, madaniy kontekst, adabiy qahramon*

### Introduction

Heroism has always represented an essential paradigm of literary expression, providing culture with the language of ideals of courage and morality. However, the type of hero is not eternal and universal. Rather, the ideals of heroism change according to different criteria of historic change. English and American literatures offer one of the most interesting areas of comparative studies since they belong to one literary tradition but differ drastically in their socioeconomic development.

English literature developed in a stable class structure based upon monarchy and Christian morality. Hence, English heroes are often models for duty, loyalty, and moral responsibility. American literature, however, developed from a revolutionary and colonial history which replaced deference for inherited authority with a celebration of self-creation, independence, and democracy. Hence, the hero in American literature is commonly the outsider, the rebel, or the character whose morality is problematic, who finds heroism in his own conscience rather than in society.

This paper embarks on a comparative literary examination of heroism as reflected in English and American literary works, exploring the nature of the influence of historical setting on the representation of the heroic ideal and how literary form was a reflection of the evolving heroic ideals of the culture. Although the nature of the historical setting does influence the representation of the heroic ideal, this paper



proposes a thesis statement in the form of a question: is there a distinction between the two types of heroism in terms of the nature of the representation.

### **"The Hero with a Thousand Faces" and Hero**

Heroism has been conventionally associated with action and meaning. Traditional literary theory, and in particular Aristotle's Poetics, has defined the hero in terms of loftiness and seriousness of subject matter. However, more recent literary theory has complicated this monumentality and found meaning in imperfect, marginal, and antinomic heroisms. Northrop Frye's theory of archetypes places heroes in the context of mythological series, which can include divine, heroic, ironic, or anti-hero heroes (Frye 33-34). On the other hand, the cultural critics argue that heroes represent an ideology that has been ingrained in society through its values. In this view, heroes in literary works are seen as more than just individuals but as symbols of identity. As a case study, this article employs a historical-comparative approach, using the concept of heroism as a literary construct determined by social order and literary convention.

### **Heroism in English Literature**

#### **Shakespearean Tragedy and the Crisis of Heroism While Shakespeare**

A turning point in the English heroic tradition was embodied by the heroes of William Shakespeare's tragedies. His heroes and heroines, like Hamlet and Macbeth, had aristocratic status, but they lacked heroic traits and maintained a psychological, and even moral, complexity characteristic of heroes, rather than simple-minded heroes of previous works. The heroism of Hamlet was indicated not by his actions, but by his ethics. "To be, or not to be," Hamlet's inspired soliloquy, illustrates this interiorization of heroism, this transference of heroic ideals from action to consciousness (Shakespeare 3.1.56). Hamlet's heroism is inextricably linked with uncertainty, and this shows that it is the awakening of moral consciousness that is becoming increasingly valued in English literature,

Macbeth, to contrast, portrays the results of unchecked ambition. While Macbeth was to begin with lauded for his activities and deeds, he ends up as a warning example about the irrelevance of moral structures. Shakespeare proves that heroism is morally circumscribed and supports the conventional English tradition that insists upon moral constraint and societal regularity.

### **Victorian Moral Heroism: Dickens and Self-Sacrifice**

Heroism and morality are closely linked during the Victorian era. A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens introduces Sidney Carton, an unlikely hero, whose last deed of heroism is an epitome of Christianity through redemption. Carton's character development, in particular, his conversion from an incapable and debauched character to an ethical role model, symbolized the Victorians' faith in morality and altruism. "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done" is the declaration of Carton, which presents heroism through self-denial for the sake of others (Dickens 321). Unlike the American tradition of heroes who find self-realization, Carton's act of



heroism is through self-effacement, supporting the English literary tradition of numerous works that prioritize the welfare of the community over self-assertion.

### **Heroism in American Literature**

#### **Emersonian Individualism: The Heroic Self** Emersonian

American heroism is shaped in large measure by the philosophy of self-reliance expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's philosophy attacks conformity and traditional authority by asserting that true excellence is attained only through adherence to the personal moral conscience. Hence, heroism becomes a personal quality.

“If the man is living up to his own character, always speaking the truth from his own consciousness, then he is living authentically” (Emerson 132). Also embodied in the American heroic ideal is the notion that “imitation is suicide” because “to be himself, every man must be alone” (Emerson

#### **Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the Limits of Heroic Obsession**

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is one of the most complex treatments of heroism within the framework of American culture. Ahab is the epitome of individuality beyond the bounds of both nature and society when he is obsessed with hunting the white whale. Ahab is no less heroic because of his traditionally heroic qualities of charisma, courage, and determination. However, his failure to submit to restrictions leads his heroism to qualify as monomania.

The statement by Ahab that “I would strike the sun itself, if it sinned against me” is the danger of American heroic individualism (Melville 178). Whereas the English tragic heroes' fate tends to restore moral order, the fate that Ahab undergoes unmasks the volatility that lies when self-will thrives in a democracy and an individualistic society.

#### **Mark Twain and the Moral Heroism of Huck Finn**

In Mark Twain's “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” there is a deeply democratic notion of heroism. In this novel, the protagonists are by no means noble, educated, or esteemed members of society; rather, it is their “moral development” that defines them as heroism. As noted by Wilson Fuller, “Huck's plan to aid the escaped slave, Jim, by traveling down the river with him, in spite of the fact it will send him to hell, illustrates the American idea of heroism.”

Huck's famous decision, “All right, then, I'll go to hell,” symbolizes the rejection of societal morality for individual morality (Twain 214). Twain's new definition of heroism involves resisting immoral norms and thus represents the independence of American literature in morality.

### **Comparative Perspectives**

The contrast between English and American heroism can be summarized through several key oppositions:



English Literature	American Literature
Social duty	Individual conscience
Moral restraint	Moral experimentation
Tradition and continuity	Reinvention and resistance
Hierarchical order	Democratic defiance

English heroes often reinforce social cohesion, even when they fail, while American heroes frequently challenge or reject societal norms. These differences reflect broader national narratives: England's emphasis on historical continuity versus America's emphasis on revolutionary self-definition.

### **Gender and the Expansion of Heroism**

Both traditions historically privileged masculine heroism, yet literature increasingly expands heroic identity to include women and marginalized figures. English heroines such as Jane Eyre embody moral endurance and ethical integrity, while American female protagonists often emphasize autonomy and resistance to constraint. Feminist criticism has further broadened heroism to include survival, voice, and self-assertion.

### **Conclusion**

This comparative study demonstrates that heroism in English and American literature is shaped by distinct cultural histories and ideological commitments. English literature tends to define heroism through moral duty, restraint, and social responsibility, while American literature emphasizes individualism, resistance, and ethical self-determination. Despite these differences, both traditions reveal heroism as a mutable and contested concept, continually reshaped by historical change and literary innovation.

By examining heroic figures within their cultural contexts, this study underscores the value of comparative literary analysis in revealing how literature both reflects and constructs national identity.

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