

Hero

When teaching some of the more famous epic poems or heroes, I feel I must add Vera Laska to the list. Her testimony is one of the most engaging that I have found. She embodies the qualities of a hero, and although she may not have considered herself a hero, I believe her testimony is more than heroic.

Hero/heroine- Often considered synonymous with protagonist, a term referring to the main character of a work.

Epic: A long and formal narrative poem written in an elevated style that recounts the adventures of a hero of almost mythic proportions who often embodies the traits of a nation or people. A distinction is generally made between tradition (folk or primary) epics and literature (art or secondary) epics. Traditional epics are derived from oral tradition, whereas literature epics are the work of a single poet, written in conscious imitation of the traditional style.

Epics typically share a wide variety of characteristics: (1) the protagonist is a hero of great stature and significance (whether historical or mythic) with the two traditional virtues of bravery and wisdom; (2) the setting is on a grand and vast scale, often encompassing the known world at the time of the epic's composition; (3) the plot entails noble, fantastic, and even superhuman efforts; (4) supernatural entities often must descend into some kind of underworld before he can claim victory; and (5) the writing exhibits an elevated style designed to complement and heighten the already mythic stature of the characters and their actions.

Epics also generally involve certain conventions. These include; (1) invoking a muse's aid during the argument and posing a question to her; (2) starting the narrative in media res; (3) introducing the roster of characters in a formal manner and giving them speeches revealing their principal characteristics and attitudes; (4) using epic similes. Today, the term epic may also be used more generally to refer to any event involving heroic actions taken in broadly significant situations.

Examples: Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey, Beowulf, and James Joyce's Ulysses. As an example of epic in its broadest sense appeared in "Recording Replays Flight 93's Fight to the Death," an April 13, 2006 *Washington Post* story on the Zacarias Moussaoui trial in which Jerry Markon and Timothy Dwyer reported that "The 32-minute tape [from the voice recorder of United Flight 3, one of the planes hijacked on 9/11] captures an epic struggle as passengers surged forward to retake the plane, using whatever low-tech weapons they could find."

Source: The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, Third Edition

Typically, I paraphrase this definition, or ask my students to summarize it.

Bell ringer- Students should answer the following questions:

What is a hero?

What qualities does a hero typically encompass?

Give three examples of a hero that you have seen on tv or read about.

Why are they considered heroes?

Do you think some people are considered heroes that don't fit the description?

Why or why not?

Objective and Purpose: The student will be able to write about heroes as they relate to literature and his/her life. Also, the student will answer questions based on Vera Laska's testimony and determine whether she fits the definition of "hero/heroine" and give an explanation (with supporting details) of his/her opinion.

Vera Laska's testimony can be checked out at the Central Arkansas Library or an excerpt of her testimony is available at:

<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/education/livinghistories/lesson.php?nid=713>

Modeling- Give students the definition of hero/heroine and epic (this may be summarized or paraphrased depending on the grade level). Explain what a hero means to you (the teacher) and write down a few examples with supporting details.

Students should then view Vera Laska's testimony and answer the following questions (you may omit some of the questions if you'd like).

Questions:

1. How does Dr. Laska characterize herself as a child Do you think this helped her to become a member of the Resistance?
2. What was Dr. Laska's passion when she was young, and how does this help her in the Resistance?
3. How is Dr. Laska captured? How does she react to her imprisonment?
4. Do you think the "cooking club" she had with her friends and other prisoners helped her stay alive in Auschwitz? Why or why not? How do things we deem normal or inane help us through rough times? What are some things that help you get through the difficult times in your life?
5. Describe the images that haunt Dr. Laska when she arrives in Auschwitz. How does her use of vivid imagery paint a picture of her experience in the concentration camp?
6. Why does Dr. Laska volunteer for a job/transfer on her birthday? What is her rationale behind this?

Gross-Rosen

7. How does Dr. Laska continue to fight (resist) while in Gross-Rosen as a machinist? Does this characterize her as a hero? Why or why not?
8. Was she the only person that resisted during this time?

1944-1945

9. How could Dr. Laska and her fellow prisoner's figure out what was happening in the war by the way they were being treated by the Germans in charge?

Dora-Mittelbau

10. How does Dr. Laska sabotage Nazi production of rockets?
11. What does Winston Churchill (Prime Minister of England during World War II) say about using political prisoners as laborers?
12. Why does Dr. Laska say "slow-down" is instinctive? Why? Did other prisoners do this? Was it effective?
13. What does the picture of the horse in the theatre where Dr. Laska lived during this time symbolize to her? Do you think this helped her to continue to resist and fight for survival?

1945- Death March to Mauthausen

14. Why didn't the Nazi's announce the march that was to take place? How did they treat the prisoners on the marches?
15. Whom did the guards shoot and why?
16. What are some of the obstacles the prisoners faced during the death marches?

Escape

How did Dr. Laska decide to escape and who did she tell?

17. Why didn't this person escape with her?
18. Do you think Dr. Laska was brave in her attempt to escape? Why or why not?
19. Do you think she picked the most opportune time?
20. What does she say to the person with whom she hoped to escape after they met later on? What does this say about her character?

Epilogue

21. Why can't people express in writing the pain and torment endured during this dark time in history?

22. Do you think fear helped Dr. Laska to survive and attempt to escape?

23. What does Dr. Laska say about solitude?

24. Why does Dr. Laska explain her experience as phantasmagorical?

Definition of phantasmagorical (dictionary.com):

1. a shifting series of phantasms, illusions, or deceptive appearances, as in a dream or as created by the imagination.

2. a changing scene made up of many elements.

3. an optical illusion produced by a magic lantern or the like in which figures increase or diminish in size, pass into each other, dissolve, etc.

Independent Practice- Students will write a brief paragraph about Vera Laska and whether she should be considered a hero. Please use examples.

Or

Two essay options (depending on grade level, etc.)

1. Dr. Vera Laska faced death to help others during a very dark period in history. Given the definition of a hero, do you believe she fits that description? Why or why not? What character traits helped her accomplish her assignments, and how did she get through her time in prison? What can one learn from her? Please use examples (the questions should help you formulate your response). 3 point essay.

2. Write an essay about a person you deem a hero. Why should this person be considered a hero? Please give details that include their childhood, adult life (if applicable), and if this person makes you want to do the right thing, even when it is difficult.