

Essential Question: How does the story of Hercules illustrate common themes in the heroic myths?

Thesis: Hercules had much in common with many other Greek heroes.

Areas of Focus:

- 1) Many Greek heroes killed monsters on the way to becoming heroes.
- 2) Many Greek heroes have gods or goddesses for parents.
- 3) Most of the Greek heroes had the help of the immortal gods and goddesses.

Ethan Gravis  
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### **Hercules: Just One of the Boys**

Imagine a mountain of manure taller than Mount Everest and wide as the Pacific Ocean. It smells like you just fell in a clogged sewer. What could have possibly created this? The thousands of cattle of King Augeus, and you, Hercules, must find a way to move it. What will you do? This is the problem that confronted Hercules during his fifth labor. Because he had killed his family in a fit of rage brought on by Hera, Hercules was trying to make up for what he had done by performing the twelve (impossible) labors set for him by his cousin Eurystheus. (The Oracle told him he should.) The fifth labor was to clear the stables in a day or be a slave to King Augeus for the rest of his life. He cleared the stables by diverting two rivers with stones and the rivers washed through the valley and things could grow again ("Augean Stables"). While this episode in his story illustrates his strength and willingness to tolerate horrible circumstances, Hercules was the prototypical Greek hero in many other ways. In the tradition of most Greek heroes, Hercules killed many monsters that were said to be unkillable. Also, he was the son of a divine parent. Finally, he suffered the interference of gods and goddesses in his mortal affairs. While stronger than them all, Hercules had much in common with many other Greek heroes.

Many Greek heroes killed monsters as part of their journey to becoming heroes. Hercules was no exception. He killed the Nemean lion and the hydra, both dangerous creatures (Skidmore "Hercules"). Also, Perseus killed Medusa, a snake-haired monster with scales and the only mortal one of the three Gorgon sisters. Perseus did this as a wedding present to a king who asked Perseus to bring him the head of one of the Gorgons. Perseus told the king he would bring him the head of Medusa. He set out and wandered hopelessly for weeks until Athena and Hermes helped him. Athena gave him her polished shield and Hermes led him to the Grey Ladies. There were three of them, but they only had one eye to share, so they took turns with it. Hermes told Perseus to steal their eye and not give it back until they told him how to find Medusa. By following

the advice of these gods, Perseus was ultimately able to kill the monster and return in triumph (Skidmore "Perseus"). A final character who killed a monster as part of his heroic quest was Theseus. Theseus killed the Minotaur, a flesh-eating half bull half man who was locked away in the Labyrinth. An island king sacrificed people to this "pet," and the king demanded a sacrifice of humans every so many years. One of those times, Theseus volunteered to be sacrificed, and he went on a boat with a black sail, promising his dad that if he killed the Minotaur he would change the sail color to white when the ship returned. With the help of Ariadne, who suggested that he tie a thread to the entrance and unroll it behind him as he walked, Theseus was able to navigate the Labyrinth and kill the Minotaur. Sadly, he forgot to change the color of the sail, and his dad jumped off a cliff when he saw the ship returning with the black sails still in place (Skidmore "Theseus"). Clearly, Hercules was not the only hero to slay an evil monster, but that is not the only similarity he shared with his contemporaries.

Another shared quality between Hercules and many other Greek heroes is that they often have gods for parents. Hercules was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman called Alcmena. Zeus disguised himself as her husband, and "visited" her in the night. She gave birth to Hercules ("Augean Stables"), which consequently drove Hera (Zeus's wife) insane with jealousy. That is the reason she tried to kill Hercules when he was a baby and then tormented him for the rest of his life, causing him to go temporarily insane and kill his family. Ironic, isn't it? Hera's attempts to destroy Hercules actually drove him to accomplish his many heroic tasks. Hercules, however, was not Zeus's only illegitimate child. Once he visited Danae (another mortal woman) in the form of a shower of gold. From this union, Perseus was born (Skidmore "Perseus"). Achilles, unlike many others, was not the son Zeus. He was however the daughter of a sea nymph, Thetis, who tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the River Styx, making him almost invulnerable. (She had held him by his heel when she dipped him in the magical river, so his heel was the only vulnerable place on his body. He went on to be the greatest Greek warrior and helped defeat the Trojans (Skidmore "Odysseus"). As you can see, many heroes including Hercules had immortals (often Zeus himself, but not always) for parents. Clearly this gave them an advantage when dealing with monsters and impossible tasks, but there were often other gods and goddesses who helped them out as well.

The most well-known of the Greek heroes always seem to have the immortal gods and goddesses interfering and/or helping them in their adventures. In the case of Hercules, Hera's constant persecution ultimately drove him to complete many of his heroic deeds, and upon his death, he was granted a place on Olympus due to the intervention of his father, Zeus (Skidmore "Hercules"). Perseus, throughout his quest to slay Medusa, had the help of Athena, who provided him with information that led him to a special invisibility helmet, which would allow him to get close enough to Medusa to slay her. Athena also gave him her mirrored shield that allowed him to approach and see Medusa in the reflection without turning into stone, which is what would happen if he looked at the monster directly. Hermes provided him a sickle with which to behead the beast and a pair of winged sandals that would make for a quick escape once the other gorgons realized what he had done to their sister. Finally, they helped Perseus to find the

Grey Ladies that told him where the sea nymphs were. In turn, the sea nymphs told him how to kill a gorgon, which he then went to do. (Skidmore "Perseus"). Jason had the help of Hera, who wanted him to succeed on his quest. She enlisted the help of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who in turn made the sorceress Medea fall in love with Jason. Medea gave Jason a special salve to protect him from the fire-breathing bulls. She also gave him advice on how to destroy the soldiers that sprang from the ground where dragon's teeth were sowed. Finally, she went so far as to lead him into the grove where the Golden Fleece was hidden. If not for the help of Medea, Jason would never have completed his quest, and if not for the interference of the gods, Medea never would have been so helpful (Skidmore "Perseus"). A final hero who enlisted the help of the gods was Odysseus, who was tormented by Poseidon when he claimed himself to be more powerful than a god. Even though the god Poseidon was out to get him, Athena was his constant helper and guide. She directed him safely home after twenty years of war and wandering. Once he arrived home to find his kingdom overrun by lazy suitors hoping to convince his wife to marry one of them, Athena disguised him as a beggar to allow him to sneak in among the suitors, ultimately kill them, and reclaim his wife and kingdom in triumph (Skidmore "Odysseus"). In Greek mythology, the gods often intervene in mortal affairs, and in the case of many of the heroes, the help of the Olympians makes them what they are.

In conclusion, the story of Hercules shares many common themes with other heroic myths. They all kill monsters and have a divine parent, and the gods and goddesses frequently get involved in their affairs. Given this, it does not seem so surprising that Hercules was able to clean the horrendously filthy stables of King Augeus. In fact, it was one of his least dangerous tasks. He would encounter far more dangerous and trying tasks in his life, as would most other mythical heroes.

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