

GCSE English Literature for AQA Specification A
resource sheets

Heroes

Robert Cormier

Activities by Tony Childs

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The following pages consist of teacher's notes and classroom support sheets for *Heroes* by Robert Cormier. These resources are to help students who are studying *Heroes* as part of the AQA GCSE English Literature specification. These pages can be freely downloaded and printed out as required. This material may be freely copied for institutional use. However, this material is copyright and under no circumstances can copies be offered for sale. The publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce copyright material.

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Introduction

Heroes is one of the choices of Prose texts in the GCSE English Literature Paper for AQA Specification A. In the examination, students are given a choice of **one** out of **two** questions to respond to in 45 minutes.

Aim and content

Working through the sheets on the novel will help students to get a grasp of the features of the novel as well as the details, and to understand how they will need to write about the novel in the examination to achieve good grades. There are some guided reading tasks as well as advice on examination requirements and writing.

The page references in these resources refer to the Heinemann New Windmills edition of *Heroes*: ISBN 0 435 12511 7.

Synopsis

At the beginning of the novel Francis returns home to Frenchtown, having been discharged from the army because of his very badly wounded face. He rents a room with Mrs Belander on Third Street. The three time frames of the novel are introduced – what is happening in the present, what happened in the war, and what happened before he left. The narrative switches from one time to another throughout the novel. Below is a summary of what happens in each of these periods.

At home

The earliest time mentioned is when Francis is in the Seventh Grade at St Jude's Parochial Church, aged 12, living with his Uncle Louis because his parents are dead. He meets Nicole Renard, and falls in love. The Grenier Hall is made into a recreation centre for young people, which they call the Wreck Centre. Larry LaSalle arrives to run it – a teacher, dancer and athlete who is admired by all. He had been in show business, but returned to Frenchtown mysteriously, having 'gotten into trouble'. Larry teaches Francis to play table tennis, and praises his ability. He teaches dance to Nicole. Larry arranges a table-tennis tournament, with a musical show to follow the next day. Francis wins the tournament, and then plays Larry and beats him, though he feels that Larry has let him win. The following day is the attack on Pearl Harbour, which brings the United States into the war. Larry enlists, and the Wreck Centre is closed.

Francis starts dating Nicole. Larry wins the Silver Star for saving his platoon, and he is greeted as a hero on his return, and given the freedom of the city by the mayor. After the Welcome Home Dance, Larry leads the youngsters to the Wreck Centre to celebrate. Francis and Nicole are the last two to leave. Larry persuades Francis to go so that he can dance with Nicole to 'Dancing in the Dark'. Outside, Francis hears the struggle between them. Nicole has been raped, and Francis realises that he has betrayed her by leaving.

In the following days, Francis watches for Nicole outside her house. Larry returns to the war. Nicole rejects Francis, and Francis considers suicide, but feels that he can't do this while soldiers are being heroes elsewhere. He alters his birth certificate and enlists in the army, wanting to die.

At war

Advancing through a village with his platoon, Francis kills two German soldiers, and sees that they are young men like him. The following day, he blows his face away falling on a grenade, saving the lives of his platoon, an action which wins him the Silver Star. He claims to have been trying to kill himself, not to save lives. He is hospitalised in England, and is made aware of the effect of his deformed appearance on a visit to London.

Synopsis (*continued*)

The present

When Francis arrives home, he disguises his identity from Mrs Belander. He goes to Nicole's old home, though he has been told by Norman Rocheleau, a soldier from Frenchtown, that she had become a recluse then left the town. He goes to the Wreck Centre, and meets Arthur Rivier and other war veterans in St Jude's Club. He asks about Larry LaSalle. His face is slowly healing, but his 'mission' is the most important thing to him.

Larry returns, and Francis goes to find him, with a gun in his bag. Larry is fragile, and has lost the use of his legs. Francis draws his gun, but Larry has his own, and tells Francis to leave. He does so, and hears Larry shoot himself. Francis goes to the convent to see Sister Mathilde, and then travels to see Nicole in her final year of training in Albany. She tells him to be a writer. It is clear that their relationship will not resume, and Francis leaves.

The Assessment Objectives explained

The two Assessment Objectives which you will be tested on in the examination are:

Assessment Objective 1: Respond to texts critically, sensitively and in detail, selecting appropriate ways to convey your response, using textual evidence as appropriate.

Assessment Objective 2: Explore how language, structure and forms contribute to the meanings of texts, considering different approaches to texts and different interpretations.

So, you'll need to read the text with these Objectives in mind, looking not just for what happens, but for what you think is being said about the people and ideas in the novel, and how the writer conveys these things. The first time you read a book, you're mostly just concerned with what happens, and how it develops. It takes a second reading to start to see how the writer has shaped the book. For instance, there are three time periods in *Heroes*, and it's only the second time around that you're likely to see how Robert Cormier has fitted the story together.

Heroes is only a short novel. Read it once all the way through, and then read it again more slowly. You can use the questions on pages 7–11 of these sheets to help you discover things about the ideas and the writing as you read it the second time.

Questions on the chapters

Chapter 1

- 1 Why do you think so many physical details are mentioned in the first page?
- 2 Why doesn't the doctor have much success in developing Francis's sense of humour (page 2)?
- 3 'I knew that my mission was about to begin' (page 5) marks a beginning. Up to this point, how has the writer suggested details from Francis's past life?
- 4 In the section beginning 'Later, I light a candle in St Jude's Church' (page 5), the writer introduces the other time periods in the book. How does he do this?
- 5 In this first chapter, what is revealed about Francis's feelings about Larry and Nicole?
- 6 What is suggested in the first chapter about the events in the rest of the book?

Chapter 2

- 1 At the beginning of this chapter, how does the writer show that this is the beginning of the action of the book, in terms of time?
- 2 How does the first description of Nicole establish her character? Look carefully at the words used about her in the paragraph beginning 'Nicole Renard was small and slender' (page 8).
- 3 In the five paragraphs that follow the sentence 'I knelt there like a knight at her feet' (page 8), how does the writer describe Francis's words and actions to show that he is very young here?
- 4 Look at the paragraph beginning 'I was so startled by her voice' (page 11). How does the author show that Francis is very young here?

Chapter 3

- 1 Find the sentence 'I stare at the final proof that Nicole has gone away' (page 14). How does the writer move from one time period to another here?
- 2 In the page following this, what is suggested about Nicole, and how she changed after Francis left?
- 3 In the section beginning 'I can never trace the moment ...' (page 18), how does the writer move from one time period to another?
- 4 In the section beginning 'I don't want to think about them' (page 18), in what ways is it suggested that the soldiers are not heroes? How is it suggested that war is brutal and nasty rather than heroic?

Questions on the chapters (*continued*)

Chapter 4

- 1 What does Francis remember about Arthur Rivier before the war (page 21)? Why do you think the writer has included this detail?
- 2 In this chapter, which is all set in the present time of the story, how does the writer remind you of the other periods in the story?
- 3 How is it shown here that Francis feels himself to be an outsider, even though he is in his home town?

Chapter 5

- 1 The first page and a half of this chapter detail the history of the Wreck Centre, as a place of celebration and a place of tragedy. How does this relate to what happens in the Wreck Centre in the story?
- 2 Look carefully at the story of Hervey, Marie-Blanche and Dennis (pages 25–6). How can you relate this to the story of Larry, Nicole and Francis?
- 3 Look at the text from 'The Centre opened its doors' to 'directing musical shows' (page 27). In what ways might Larry seem heroic here?
- 4 Now look at the way Francis is presented in the passage that follows, from 'The Wreck Centre became my headquarters' (page 27) to 'where the shorter kids belonged' (page 28). How does Francis contrast with Larry? Think about what he likes, how he behaves, and how he thinks of himself.
- 5 Look at the description of Larry's history on page 29. What seems suspicious about it? How does the writer prepare the reader for what happens later?
- 6 Look at the description of Nicole, from 'Nicole Renard began coming to the centre' at the bottom of page 29. What is shown here about Francis's attitude to her?
- 7 How does the writer bring the reader back to the present at the end of the chapter? What effect does the last sentence have on the reader?

Chapter 6

- 1 In the second and third paragraphs of this chapter, how does the writer foreshadow later events in the novel?
- 2 Look at the details given about the visiting baseball player and the Strangler (page 32). How is heroism suggested here?
- 3 The Strangler defines Larry's Silver Star as being for 'gallantry' (page 33). Find out what this word means, apart from heroism. How is it ironic when applied to Larry?
- 4 Francis looks away from 'the admiration' in Arthur's eyes (page 34). Why do you think he does this?
- 5 How does the writer change the time period before the beginning of Chapter 7?

Questions on the chapters (*continued*)

Chapter 7

- 1 How is Francis's respect for Larry shown in the first page of this chapter?
- 2 Find the description of Nicole in dance classes (page 39). How does the writer suggest what is to happen later?
- 3 Look at the passage from 'For the first time in my life' (page 40) to 'the centre seemed vacant when I looked and did not see her' (page 41). What feelings does Francis have here? How are the feelings related?
- 4 Look at the last part of the chapter, beginning 'Finally, the score stood at 20–19' (page 44). What is shown here about the relationships between Francis, Larry and Nicole at this point in the story?
- 5 The last sentence of the chapter is 'But tomorrow was 7 December 1941'. What is the significance of this date? How does the writer change the mood of the chapter with this sentence? Think about the words he uses as well as the significance of the date.

Chapter 8

This is one of the shortest chapters in the novel. The plot does not move forward at all here, so why do you think it is in the novel? Think about:

- what happened in the war
- what has happened to the men and their lives since
- heroes.

Chapter 9

Find the paragraph beginning 'At some point during the afternoon' (page 50). Read to 'embarrassment made my cheeks grow warm' (page 51). How does the writer convey Francis's emotions here?

Chapter 10

- 1 Read the first page of the chapter, about Francis's experience in London. How does this partly explain his later behaviour?
- 2 Read the end of the chapter, from 'Now each day when I wake up' (page 55). What do you think Enrico and Francis mean by 'disposal'?
- 3 How does the writer move the time period at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 11

- 1 This chapter is the key moment in the plot. Look at the beginning and the end. How does the mood change?
- 2 Look at the passage from 'A moment later' to 'pumping bullets into the enemy' (pages 57–8). How is Larry the same, and how has he changed?

Questions on the chapters (*continued*)

- 3 Look at the passage from 'A surprise awaits' (page 60) to 'As if we were living a love scene at the Plymouth'. How does the writer suggest what is to happen later?
- 4 In the passage from 'As she went off to search among the records' (page 61) to 'I think he wants to tell you something' (page 62), what does Francis not understand? Pick out the words and phrases that explain why he behaves in the way he does.
- 5 From 'the song ended' on page 63 to the end of the chapter, only two words are spoken. Find all the references to words and silences. What story do they tell about the three characters?

Chapter 12

- 1 When Francis climbs the stairs to the steeple (page 68), why do you think the writer describes the sound of his gasps being 'like cloth ripping'?
- 2 Read from 'Despite the calmness of the summer night' (page 68) to the end of the chapter.
 - What are the three reasons that persuade Francis not to jump?
 - What does he feel about himself here?

Chapter 13

Read the first paragraph of this chapter. How are things different from what Francis has imagined?

Chapter 14

- 1 In the first three paragraphs of this chapter the author makes three references to Francis's intention to shoot Larry. How does he do this?
- 2 Read from 'Come in, the door's not locked' (page 72) to 'sighing, as if tired suddenly' (page 74). Find all the suggestions here that Larry has changed. How is he still the same?
- 3 Francis says that he 'had always wanted to be a hero' but 'had been a fake all along' (page 75). How was he a fake, and how does he 'rid myself of the fakery'?
- 4 What does Larry reveal about himself when he refers to 'the sweet young things' (page 76)?
- 5 Why does Francis decide to aim at Larry's heart (page 77)?
- 6 How does the writer create tension when Larry says 'Wait' (page 77)?
- 7 On page 78 Larry says 'Whether you know it or not, you've accomplished your mission here.' What does he mean?
- 8 Read from 'Let me tell you one thing' (page 78) to the end of the chapter.
 - How is Larry behaving as he used to?
 - What does the writer make you think of in the last sentence of the chapter?

Questions on the chapters (*continued*)

Chapter 15

- 1 At the beginning of this chapter, which is nearly the end of the events of the story, how does the writer remind you of the earliest time?
- 2 At the end of the chapter, Francis wonders if it is 'a special sin to lie to a nun' (page 82). How is what he says to her a lie?

Chapter 16

- 1 Read the first two pages of the chapter. In what ways has Nicole changed?
- 2 When Francis says he has to go, he says it is 'My gift to her' (page 87). What do you think he means? What does it reveal about both of them?
- 3 Read from 'She nods, almost eagerly' (page 87) to the end of the chapter. What has changed between Francis and Nicole, and what has stayed the same?

Chapter 17

- 1 In the first two paragraphs, how does the writer remind you of the story that has gone before?
- 2 Who does Francis think are the 'real heroes' (page 89)? Who are not the 'real heroes', do you think?
- 3 At the end of the novel, Francis lists all the things he might do. What do you think he will do? Why?

What do the Assessment Objectives mean for *Heroes*?

You now have a lot of material to use when writing about the book. How will you use this to answer the question you've been asked? As the questions are based firmly on the Assessment Objectives, it's worth looking at them carefully to decide what you might be asked, and what sort of material you might use.

Assessment Objective 1: Respond to texts critically, sensitively and in detail ...

'Respond to' means you have to say what you think about the features of the novel – about the characters in the book, for instance, or the ideas that you think the writer has in mind.

You could be asked about your response to a character, for example 'Do you consider Francis to be a hero?' To answer this question, you would need to think about what Francis says and does, his feelings and attitudes towards other characters, and his relationships with them. You might also be asked about Larry or Nicole, or about the relationships between characters.

In the same way, you could be asked about your response to the ideas in the novel. 'What do you think the novel has to say about heroes?' would fit into this category. This time, you would need to think about the characters who are referred to as heroes at different times, and what they do and say which might be heroic – and about Francis's thoughts about heroism. It's also important to think about where these ideas come, and how they develop – what are you left with at the end of the novel?

... selecting appropriate ways to convey your response, using textual evidence as appropriate.

A relevant, focused answer is what you will be aiming for. This is an exam with a time limit, after all, so your writing needs to be concise and to the point. 'Textual evidence' is vital to support your ideas. This can be through quotations, or just evidence from the text, but if you are using quotations, try to make them brief and relevant. For some questions it might be useful to look at and quote particular passages, for instance, Chapters 8 and 14 both have passages specifically about heroes. If you know the text well, you should be able to find these passages quickly in the exam if you need to.

Activity 1

Find Chapter 8, and scan it quickly for direct references to heroes. Then look at the details in the text around the words, and write a short paragraph about what Arthur says about heroes, and how the information in the chapter makes the reader reflect on his words.

What do the Assessment Objectives mean for *Heroes*? (continued)

Assessment Objective 2: Explore how language, structure and forms contribute to the meanings of texts ...

It's important to remember that you have to consider this with any of the questions you might be asked – half the marks are here. Mostly, there will be a clear prompt to do this in the question. For example, the question 'Do you consider Francis to be a hero?' could well have a prompt like 'Write about the ways in which the writer shows him to be a hero'.

You might think about:

Language: Consider metaphors, similes and language choices – how do they affect the reader?

Structure: Look at openings and endings, of chapters as well as the whole text. The novel's structure is particularly interesting, as the action moves between three time frames. Think about what effects this has on the reader, and how the action is moved from one time to another. Some of your work on individual chapters could be used here.

Form: The story is written in the first person. What effects does this have on the reader? For instance, if you were writing about the writer's presentation of Francis, you could use some material from the page in Chapter 2 beginning 'I knelt there like a knight at her feet' (page 8), to show how Francis's words and actions convey how young he is.

... considering different approaches to texts and different interpretations.

Think about how different readers might view the book. There might be different views about a character, for instance, within your own class. Is Francis a hero, or isn't he? The examiner hasn't got a 'right' answer. You can say that Francis is a hero, or that he isn't, as long as you explain what you think and back it up with evidence. You can certainly say that in one sense he's a hero because ... and in another he isn't because ...

Activity 2

Write about the section in Chapter 2 that begins 'I knelt there like a knight at her feet' (page 8), concentrating on how the writer is conveying Francis here. Remember it is early in their story. Look at the language the writer uses to show how Francis feels, and how he is behaving. Think and write about how it makes you respond to Francis, and how another reader – one of a different gender to you, or of a different age, perhaps – might view Francis here.

Planning responses to questions

What the questions are about

Questions might focus on any part of the Assessment Objectives. Here are three typical examination questions on the text.

- 1 Francis says: 'I had always wanted to be a hero, like Larry LaSalle and all the others, but had been a fake all along.'

How are Francis and Larry shown to be fakes?

- *This is focused on two characters, and an idea about them. 'How are they shown' means you have to write about Robert Cormier's methods, too.*

- 2 Robert Cormier chose the title *Heroes*. What do you think he has to say about heroes in the text, and how does he say it?

- *This is focused on your response to an idea in the text, and how it is shown – the writer's methods again.*

- 3 How does the writer make events in *Heroes* seem dramatic?

- *Here the focus is firmly on the writer's techniques.*

How to begin

Whatever question you choose, the first step is to read the question carefully, checking that you know exactly what is being asked of you. The second is to think about what to use in your response to the question, remembering that you will only have about 40 minutes to write after you've completed your plan. Jotting the material down in brief note outline, and perhaps ordering it, will form a plan; then you write.

You need to start with a clear attitude to the question. For the second task above, for instance, the first paragraph should state what you think the author has to say, and mention what his methods are. The rest of the response will unpick this opening. For both of these elements, you need to support what you say with details from the text.

Exam practice question

Look at the practice question below and read the advice on how best to answer it.

Do you consider Francis to be a hero?

Write about:

- **what Francis says and does**
- **the ways in which the writer shows him to be a hero, or not.**

Your opening paragraph should give a clear view of Francis, either as a hero or not – it depends on your view. The rest of your response should develop and support this view.

‘What Francis does’ might be a good place to start – you could think about what he does in the war, what he does in the Wreck Centre playing table tennis, what he does on the night Larry attacks Nicole, what he does with Larry at the end. Each of these can be viewed in different ways, of course.

‘What Francis says’ could well be integrated with the material above – as this is a first-person narrative, Francis usually comments on what happens, and this provides another layer of supporting detail.

‘The ways in which the writer shows him to be a hero, or not’ invites you to write about methods, and different interpretations. You could, for instance, look at the effect of the book being written in Francis’s voice. He insists he’s not a hero – you will probably have used material like this already. But do his words and actions leave the reader with the same conclusion? Perhaps one element here might be what other people say about Francis – which is also the writer’s choice, of course.

Remember...

There are many ways of structuring a response, of course, but the one above would certainly work. Remember that you only have 45 minutes to respond to the question, so by the time you’ve thought about it and planned a response, you’ll be left with a maximum of 40 minutes’ writing time. You will need to write directly and succinctly, supporting your ideas briefly. Do not try to incorporate all the material you can possibly find – you won’t have time to do that.

When you revise the text before the examination, you will obviously read again anything you've written about it during your course, as well as any other materials you have about the text. The best final revision, though, is to read the text again, and you should allow yourself time to do this. You need to know the text thoroughly for the exam, so that you won't need to spend too much time looking for detail to support your comments, and another reading may well reveal new things about the novel, which will pay off when you think about it in the exam.

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical margin lines or other markings on the page.