

## Heroes Key Themes



**Heroes**

**Anti-heroes**

**Confronting evil**

**Forgiveness**

**Loneliness**

**Appearance and Reality**

**Can I critically respond to the text, 'Heroes'? (AO1)**

I **must** generally refer to relevant aspects of Heroes

I **should** discuss thoroughly and increasingly thoughtfully characters/relationships

I **could** consider and suggest experimental ideas and judgements;

## **Lesson Objectives**

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## Heroism

**Heroism is demonstrated in the behaviour of many different characters in a range of ways throughout the novel.**

**How many ways can you think of?**

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## War Heroes

War heroes are portrayed as role models worthy of admiration. *Why do you think the people of Frenchtown are excited by examples of heroism?*

Heroes represent bravery and patriotism. The people are intensely proud of their very own war hero, Larry LaSalle. Cheers and applause fill the cinema when Larry LaSalle features on the Movietone News after his award of a Silver Star.

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### Key Quote

Francis: 'I was impatient to reach the age when I could join them in that great crusade for freedom.'

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## War Heroes

On his return home Larry LaSalle receives a traditional hero's welcome with speeches from the mayor and the whole town turns out to greet him. He is described as a **stereotypical** hero – like a character who has stepped down from the cinema screen, resplendent in his lieutenant's uniform with ribbons and medals on his chest. The young Francis admires Larry for his traditional war exploits, just as he has admired all the young men when they returned home in their uniform.

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### Key Quote

Francis: 'I could picture him storming a hillside in Guadalcanal, rifle in hand, bayonet fixed, grenades dangling from his belt, pumping bullets into the enemy.'

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## War Heroes

Francis and Larry, who were both awarded the Silver Star, are the most obvious representations of heroism but other characters are heroes in their own ways. Robert Cormier uses Arthur Rivier as the representative of ordinary heroes in Chapter 8. Perhaps it is the ordinary heroes that Cormier want the reader to remember most. We must not forget that the young Germans Francis shot were also heroes to someone too.

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## Respect for heroes

The novel presents heroes as victims. Their heroism does not bring them happiness.

- Mrs Belander's face 'softened' and she calls him 'poor boy' when she meets Francis because of his injuries.
- In the St Jude Club heroes are treated with the utmost respect. When talking about Larry LaSalle, the bartender's voice becomes 'formal and dignified.' He has a scrapbook containing their exploits but he can also see the reality of heroism in front of him.
- Arthur Rivier is surprised that Francis, a war hero with a Silver Star, should wish to remain anonymous, but it is this same respect for Francis which makes him agree to remain silent.
- It is noticeable that Larry welcomes the adulation of others and is happy to be a very public hero.

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## Key Quote

Francis: 'I saw how young they were, boys with apple cheeks, too young to shave. Like me.'

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## Examiner's tip: writing about the illusion of heroism

**Think about how, in the novel, other people admire heroes but heroes do not seem to admire themselves. As a result there are different attitudes to heroism in the novel. Perhaps Robert Cormier wants his readers to consider whether Larry LaSalle is an anti-hero, someone who may carry out acts of bravery and heroism but also has unattractive and destructive qualities. Should a person like that be regarded as a hero?**

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## Anti-Heroes

**What do you think the term anti-hero means?**

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## Key Quote

Francis: 'He had been a hero to us long before he went to war.'

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## Anti-heroes

Initially Larry is presented as an inspirational figure because of the work he does in the Wreck Centre. He is admired for the way he develops the talents of all who go there.

It is ironic that on the very night he is acclaimed by the whole town for his heroism he destroys the lives of both Francis and Nicole, two young people who regard him as a hero. But as Larry himself asks, does this flaw in his character destroy all the good he has done?

Francis himself does not see himself as a hero because of his hidden motive for joining up. In fact he hates to be acclaimed a hero whether by his friend Enrico in Chapter 1, Sister Mathilde and Nicole in Chapters 15 and 16 or even Larry LaSalle in Chapter 14. In that conversation he admits that he was 'a fake all along.' However, we can see that he has the courage to challenge Larry and has every intention of killing him in order to expiate his guilt.

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### Examiner's tip: writing about the nature of heroism

The theme of heroism runs through the whole of the book. But the nature of heroism remains unclear. Is Francis the character who shows real heroism? Is it Larry? Or Nicole? Or is it Enrico? Or Arthur? Nowhere in the book does any character find comfort or happiness in their heroism. Think about how Cormier presents the nature of heroism – does it make the book a pessimistic one, or just a realistic one?

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### Now5min

Now you have read the book you are aware that there are many different titles Cormier could have given to his work. List alternative titles.

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## Revision

Cormier chose the word 'Heroes'. Consider why he chose that as his title for this novel above all other alternatives. Clearly the word and its meanings were more important than any other. So why did he choose it? What was he trying to say?

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## Confronting Evil

One of the things that motivates the characters to go to war is to confront evil. Yet evil has different forms. There is the external evil that the inhabitants of Frenchtown can all see in their wartime enemy but there is also the evil within their town which they cannot see until it is too late. Not only that, but the enemy soldiers are shown to be young boys just like any other who cry out for their mother when they are killed.

Consequently, evil in the novel is not always obvious.

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### Key Quote

Larry: 'We love the thing that makes us evil.'

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### Confronting Evil

Initially Larry LaSalle is worthy of admiration.

For this reason the revelation of his evil side in the attack on Nicole shocks Francis because it is so unexpected.

Francis is further shocked in Chapter 14 when Larry reveals that he has always been attracted to 'sweet young things,' an attraction which Larry himself considers evil.

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## Confronting Evil

Throughout the novel Francis struggles against evil. He believes that his cowardice has resulted in the suffering of the person he loves most and that an act of evil took place because he stood by and did nothing to stop it. For him, the greatest evil occurred where he least expected to find it.

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## Confronting Evil

It is **ironic** that Francis does not carry out his mission to kill Larry, as Larry commits suicide.

However, in his confrontation with Larry, Francis challenges him for the evil he has done.

Once Francis has exposed the evil side of his nature, Larry may feel he has no option but to commit suicide.

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## Revision

Look carefully at Chapter 14 where Francis confronts Larry.

- Examine Francis' reactions to Larry how they develop.
- Notice how he reacts to what Larry says.
- Why doesn't he shoot Larry?
- Why does Larry shoot himself?

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## Grade Booster

Make a list of events in the novel which you could use when writing about a particular theme so you will have examples ready in your mind when writing an exam answer.



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## Guilt

**Francis is consumed  
by guilt throughout  
the novel.**

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## Guilt

He feels guilt at the thought that he intends to commit murder. His failure to save Nicole from Larry is an even greater source of guilt.

Francis' sense of guilt is compounded by the guilt he feels at being acclaimed as a hero when he knows he only committed his act of bravery in the hope that he would be killed.

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## Guilt

**Unlike Francis, Larry does not appear to be troubled by a guilty conscience.**

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## Guilt

In Chapter 14, he explains that in his view everyone sins and one sin should not be allowed to wipe away all the good things a person has done.

He regards his desire for young girls as merely a flaw in his nature. He regrets only that Francis and Nicole no longer see him as the hero they once did.

Cormier's portrayal of Larry is a complex one and we could argue that his depressions at the end of the novel comes more from self-pity than guilt.

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## Forgiveness

The theme of forgiveness is introduced in Chapter 1 where readers see Francis praying for a man who has done him harm. The religious element of forgiveness is emphasised here and again in Chapter 12 where Francis hides in the confessional at St Jude's Church. It is as though he wants immediate forgiveness for his perceived sin of abandoning Nicole when she needed him most.

It appears to be easy for Larry to forgive himself as he does not seem to experience the sense of guilt that Francis does. For Francis self-forgiveness is harder to achieve.

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## Forgiveness

Nicole is the character in the novel who personifies goodness:

- Her first words to Francis are ones of forgiveness, apologising to him for the words she said to him after the attack.
- It is not clear whether her words relieve Francis from his burden of guilt.
- Although she forgives him, it is clear Nicole cannot forget and that she and Francis cannot be friends.

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### Did you know?

Robert Cormier, when discussing the theme of guilt in his novels, said, 'God is always there to forgive you, but it's harder forgiving yourself.'

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## Loneliness

**Many of the characters in the novel appear to live alone, separated from their past. They often struggle to communicate their real feelings and withdraw into themselves.**

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## Loneliness

At the end of the novel Nicole is alone in the convent far away from the friends she made in Frenchtown. She tries to cut herself off from her past.

Although for the greater part of the novel Larry is surrounded by crowds of people, at the end he is seen as a sad and lonely figure in his lodgings.

Francis chooses loneliness, refusing to reveal himself to people he knows.

Arthur Rivier wanders the streets at night, drunk and alone.

The loneliness of characters is often linked to the secrets they carry within them. It is their secret or hidden identity which sets them apart from others.

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## Did you know?

Robert Cormier once said, 'I have always had the sense that we are all pretty much alone in life, particularly in adolescence.'

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## Examiner's tip: writing about the sense of isolation that the characters experience

Examine the way in which the characters struggle to communicate effectively:

- Nicole's reaction to the assault is to run away, taking her pain with her. The few words she exchanges with Francis before she leaves add to his state of despair.
- Francis can only return to Frenchtown as a stranger, since he is filled with self-loathing as a result of what he sees as his failure. He hates who he is so he needs to become someone else, hiding from the people he once knew.
- Larry returns to Frenchtown but now he is no longer surrounded by admirers. He too can never recapture the past and lives alone, sitting in a rocking chair, not playing table tennis or dancing as before.
- Arthur feels trapped because he cannot speak to anyone about the war and feels no one cares about what he experienced.

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## Key Quote

Francis: 'The visit to Nicole's house on Sixth Street brought back only loneliness and regret'.

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## Question

Think about the loneliness of Francis and his lack of engagement with others on his return to Frenchtown.

- What advantages does this give to Robert Cormier?
- How does he use this as a device in the novel?

Look especially at the chapters which are not set in the past: Chapters 1, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 13.

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## Appearance and Reality

**When Sister Mathilde says to Francis 'We all have secrets', she is in fact talking about everyone in the novel. There is a difference between how characters present themselves and the reality which lies beneath.**

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## Appearance and Reality

In the veterans' club Arthur Rivier hides his depression after the war.

Enrico Rucelli hides his despair behind a mask of humorous remarks.

Francis goes to great lengths to hide his identity on his return to Frenchtown

The theme of hidden identity is exemplified in the character of Larry LaSalle, about whom there have been rumours since his first appearance in Frenchtown.

Nicole hides the attack from her family in order to spare them pain.

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## Appearance and Reality

Of course the difference between the appearance and reality of war is the central part of Robert Cormier's novel. The people in Frenchtown see a sanitised version of glory and heroism in the cinema. They are proud of the contribution they can make to a war which is taking place such a long way away. However, the survivors bring back with them the reality of their wartime experiences.

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## Did you know?

Robert Cormier once said, 'I really believe that most people hide who they really are and I think we all have hidden lives.'

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### Examiner's tip: writing about Francis' disguise

The white silk scarf and the Red Sox cap that Francis wears serve not only to protect people from being distressed by his terrible injuries, but also to prevent them from recognising him. His desire to avoid recognition has a practical purpose as he does not wish to be recognised before he kills Larry LaSalle.

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### Examiner's tip: writing about Francis' disguise

However, his disguise is also a symbol of his shame, the shame that he carries everywhere with him and which haunts his waking hours – the shame of being recognised as a war hero, a bearer of the Silver Star, when actually his act of bravery was motivated by the selfish desire to be killed.

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### Examiner's tip: writing about Francis' disguise

There is irony in the novel in that readers are aware of Francis' hidden identity from the start while characters whom he meets such as Arthur Rivier or Mrs Belander are not, thus creating suspense. This also enables the reader to sympathise with Francis during the moments when he fears recognition, such as when he is looking for lodgings or making his first appearance in the St Jude Club.

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### Key Quote

Francis: 'Nothing glamorous like the write-ups in the papers or the newsreels. We weren't heroes. We were only there.'

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## Revision

Look at the three main characters, Francis, Larry and Nicole. They have different motives for hiding their secrets or their identities.

Divide a page into three columns and write down each of their reasons.

Notice how Francis, Larry and Nicole have one thing in common: the terrible event in the Wreck Centre. It is ironic that the secret that they share is responsible for dividing them.

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## Writing

# Who says these things in the novel?

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## Revision

1. 'No heroes in that scrap-book, Francis. Only us, the boys of Frenchtown.'

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## Reading

2. 'I know what he was. For a while there he made me feel special.'

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## Revision

3. 'Your secret is safe with me.'

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## Revision

4. 'Leave everything here, the war, what happened at the Wreck Centre.'

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## Revision

### 5. 'My hero from the war.'

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## Revision

How does Francis' childhood shape the person he becomes?

*Start: We are aware that Francis is a lonely child who finds it difficult to make friends. He prefers to spend his time reading. In fact he tells Nicole that his ambition is to read every book in the library ...*

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## Revision

How does Robert Cormier explore the concept of evil in the novel?

*Start: The presentation of evil is complicated. When war breaks out everyone believes that they know where the evil is that they need to confront but ...*

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## Grade Booster

Answer this longer practice question about a theme in the novel:

**Q: How does Robert Cormier deal with the theme of loyalty in *Heroes*.**

**For a C grade:** show how the idea of loyalty runs through the book. Francis is loyal to his comrades in the war and shows great loyalty and commitment to Nicole. Indicate that he does not believe he is worthy of loyalty in return. Other characters have their own brand of loyalty, to their country, which is clearly displayed in their reactions to the outbreak of war. Show how their experiences in the war create a real sense of loyalty and mutual respect on their return.

**For an A grade:** deal with all the issues above but expand the answer to examine the difficulties faced when making a judgement about Larry. His loyalty is entirely to himself. Show how the loyalty and respect the others have for him is at first exploited and then betrayed. Also mention that the friendship Marie shows and the supportive comments Nicole makes to Francis about his future show that loyalty is an essential human quality. Use appropriate quotations to support your answers.

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*Reflecting on my learning: copy out **ONE** skill you need to work on the **MOST** at the moment.*

***When studying the novel 'Heroes', I need more practise...***

1. Describing and explaining characters personalities
2. Understanding the links between the themes and characters
3. Using a quotation that matches my point
4. Identifying and exploring language techniques
5. Explaining and commenting on narrative techniques
6. Interpreting the messages within the story

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