What does it mean to be a hero in a world where history is written by the vanquishers? Is heroism more closely embodied by the actions someone takes in pursuit of heaven, or is it marked by what that person did on earth for their community? Nearly 1000 years before either of the works in this paper were published, Aristotle claimed, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.” Maybe by that definition, then, heroism is nothing more than the ritual of good deeds carried across a lifetime of opportunities to forgo the practice.

Over the last few weeks, we’ve seen heroism take many forms, from the bravery and physical strength of Beowulf to the vulnerability and surrender of Augustine. While both characters[1] truly embody what it means to be a hero, the way they use rhetoric to cultivate that status from the audience couldn’t be more different. This separation does not necessarily make one hero’s journey more impactful than the other, it just provides readers with two different lenses through which they can analyze the questions posed at the top of this paper.

Starting with an analysis of the heroism found in Beowulf feels easier in a lot of ways then Confessions. The titular hero’s raw physical prowess and determination make him feel like a character straight out of a comic book. Plus, if heroism is defined by the help someone provides to others, then Beowulf is second to none, killing two Grendel’s (or one Grendel and one Grendelkin if you prefer) and one gold hording dragon for the Danish over the course of the story. These characteristics can be most strongly seen during the end of the warriors fight with Grendel in which we’re told,

> The monster’s whole body was in pain, a tremendous wound appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted the glory of winning: Grendel was driven under the fen-banks, fatally hurt to his desolate lair. His days were numbered, the end of his life was coming over him, he knew it for certain; and one bloody clash had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes. The man who had lately

[1] I use the word character here because even if Augustine is the author of Confessions, he is still a character within it.

> landed among them, proud and sure, had purged the hall, kept it from harm; he was happy with his nightwork and the courage he had shown. The Geat captain had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes: he had healed and relieved a huge distress, unremitting humiliations, the hard fate they'd been forced to undergo, no small affliction. Clear proof of this could be seen in the hand the hero displayed high up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp. (Heaney, lines 815-835)

The passage opens with Beowulf's slaying of the unslayable monster, but the way it is described to readers is a clear appeal to pathos. Instead of simply saying that Beowulf killed the monster, we are told that the monster's "whole body was in pain" and that the wound he suffered was "tremendous". This emotive language makes the conquest seem larger than life, adding to the characters reverence. The appeal does not end there, however, seeing as just 8 lines later we're told that Beowulf had "boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes" and had "healed" their "unremitting humiliations". These descriptions only add to the hero's ethos, establishing confidence within both the audience and the characters of the story. They also demonstrate just how emotionally resolving this victory is for the Danes, proving their trust in Beowulf to the audience. Lastly, it is important to mention the final lines of the section in which Beowulf rips off the Grendel's arm as a trophy for triumph. This "clear proof" serves as a reminder of the heroism of Beowulf in two different ways. Yes, it reminds characters and readers alike of the bloody battle in which he saved the village, but it also forces them to remember the monsters that were hunting them. It ties Beowulf to the entire story, not just the parts he was physically there for. He will always get to be the hero who saved the day upon any subsequent retellings of the story.

Moving to Confessions we begin to see a different kind of heroism emerge, one that is not marked by the vanquishing of one's foes, but instead the strength of emotional vulnerability. The power to confront oneself and be so at peace that they begin to light the way for others.

Author, Marianne Williamson, once said “It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us… and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” That is the kind of heroism that Augustine exemplifies in his confessions, and he does this most powerfully, ironically enough, during his recount of the pear tree incident.

> I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong… Such was my hear, O God, such was my heart. You had pity on it when it was at the bottom of the abyss. Now let my heart tell you what it was seeking there in that I became evil for no reason. I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself. My depraved soul leaped down from your firmament to ruin. I was seeking not to gain anything by shameful means, but shame for its own sake. (Augustine, Book 2, Paragraph 9)

Now, one might ask, how does stealing pears make someone a hero, and they’re right to do so. By itself, theft, especially for thefts sake, makes one a criminal, but that’s not what is being analyzed here. It’s the way that Augustine tells the story which accentuates his heroism. At the very beginning of the passage, he surrenders all his Ethos, bringing himself down to the audience’s level. Emotionally, it is as though he’s letting them in on a secret, something which normally would take away from his credibility. He uses terms like “wickedness filled me” and “I became evil” as a way of demonstrating to readers that those things can happen to anyone, inadvertently giving comfort to those who have ever felt the same way. It demonstrates to them that the piece of their life’s story do not have to be permanent failures. The whole pear tree story itself, in the grand scheme of the text, is told as a reminder that salvation can still come after a misguided youth. By showing the audience his own stumbles and mistakes, he gives them the strength to accept their own. Most importantly, however, it reminds them that God will still

accept them through these falls from grace. When he says “you had pity on [my heart] when it was at the bottom of the abyss” it reinforces the idea that God will take pity on the audience as well, so long as they repent.

It would appear then that the common link between the two hero’s is how they use their power as a means of bringing peace to those who have lost it. They each used their talents to eliminate the monsters that were hunting the masses. When Beowulf slays the Grendel (and then the Grendelkin) he brings safety and security back to the Danish. Peace has been restored in their land as a direct result of him. Augustine does the exact same thing; except the monsters he slays aren’t physical. Using his pen like a sword he cuts through shame and fear, leading the way for others to follow behind him. He sacrificed his privacy so that the audience could feel more comfortable in their own mistakes. His words gave power back to those who felt irredeemable in the eyes of God. Beowulf is a hero because he sliced right through the evil, but Augustine is to, because he refused to allow others to walk in darkness. When he lit the way, he revealed to his audience that the only thing hiding behind the corner was fear, and just like a child, all they needed was a little light to be reminded that there was nothing to be afraid of. Maybe it is impossible to say for certain just what a “hero” really is, but it is clear that the traits of these two characters qualify them for that role. Because more than any victory in battle or freeing of the mind, what we like about these characters is that they inspire people to become a little more heroic themselves. They give others strength to tackle the foes found in day-to-day life, and that strength might be the most heroic gift of all.