‘Heroes’ by Robert Cormier

Revision Guide

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What to do in the exam:
1. Answer the extract question on the text - 20 minutes.
2. Choose one of the essay questions – 40 minutes.
Heroes was published in 1998. Robert Cormier said that he was inspired to write the book by the 50th anniversary celebrations of the D-Day landings of World War II, and the desire to recognise the heroic acts of ordinary people.

Background

Robert Cormier (1925-2000) was an American novelist, best known for his many young adult novels, the most famous one being The Chocolate War. He was born and brought up in Leominster in Massachusetts, in the French-Canadian section of the town called French Hill. It is this place which is loosely fictionalised in Heroes as Frenchtown. He was in his last years at high school when the USA joined the war – making him roughly the same age as Francis Cassavant in the novel. Cormier had poor eyesight though, and so could not join the army. He studied and worked instead.

Pearl Harbour

The United States were brought into the Second World War as a result of the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese on December 7th, 1941. It was a surprise attack by the Japanese on an important US naval base. Pearl Harbour is on one of the islands of Hawaii, which is part of the USA. Many US battleships and aircraft were destroyed, and over 2,000 people were killed. The attack made public opinion in the USA switch overnight to pro-war patriotism. Unlike in Europe there was no conscription, but many Americans volunteered to go and fight overseas.

Heroes is set just after the end of the Second World War, and is told in the first person by Francis Cassavant. The narrative moves between three time periods: what happened in Frenchtown as Francis was growing up, the events of the war, and the present.

Structure

For the sake of convenience we have numbered the chapters here, but the book is arranged in unnamed and unnumbered chapters. These are summarised on the following pages, and followed by a briefer synopsis with the events of each time line in the book.

Chapter 1

Francis Cassavant returns to his hometown of Frenchtown. His face has been horribly disfigured by the war: his nose, eyebrows and teeth are gone, and his cheeks are not healing. He wears a bandage, a white silk scarf and a baseball cap to cover his face to prevent people seeing his face and recoiling, and also as a disguise. Using some of his back pay from his time in hospital he rents a room from a woman he used to run errands for: she doesn’t recognise him. He goes to church and prays, including a prayer for Larry LaSalle, and reveals that he plans to kill him. He recalls being in hospital and his friend joking he could go out with a blind girl. We learn that Francis is a decorated war hero and that he is still in love with his childhood sweetheart, Nicole Renard.

Chapter 2

Francis remembers meeting Nicole for the first time, in seventh grade, at school. Although he has no contact with her, she becomes friends with Marie LeCroix, a girl who lives in the same building as Francis. He is too shy to talk to her but enjoys seeing her come and go.

Chapter 3

Francis walks around Frenchtown, and visits Nicole’s old house. He knows she and her family are
gone, because a fellow soldier told him during the war. When he goes to the house, the woman living there has no idea where the Renards have gone. That night, he dreams of the war, and of when he killed two German soldiers, the day before a grenade ruined his face. The chapter finishes with his new "mission" to get LaSalle when he returns to Frenchtown.

Chapter 4
Francis bumps into another Frenchtown veteran, a man a few years older than him, Arthur Rivier. He does not recognise Francis, but takes him to the men's club and buys him a beer, where he meets the other ex-soldiers who have returned to Frenchtown.

Chapter 5
Francis visits the 'Wreck Centre'. This had been a town hall until a bride and groom were machine gunned at their wedding reception – then it became a 'bad luck place'. After being left empty for years it was converted to being a Recreation Centre. A charismatic and handsome youth leader, Larry LaSalle, held dance, music and craft classes at the centre. Francis spent most of his free time there. Nicole joined the dance classes.

Chapter 6
Francis has been in town almost a month and has become a regular fixture at the men's club. One afternoon he asks if anyone knows when LaSalle is coming back. The veterans toast LaSalle and the barman brings out the scrap book of his exploits. Arthur recognises Francis but accepts his wish to remain anonymous to the others.

Chapter 7
Francis remembers LaSalle teaching him table tennis. He did this to boost Francis's confidence and Francis became very good at table tennis. LaSalle organised a weekend of events, with a table-tennis tournament on the Saturday and a musical on the Sunday in which Nicole stars. Nicole speaks to Francis to wish him luck and he finally gets over his nerves. He wins the tournament and then plays LaSalle, to satisfy the other kids. He beats LaSalle, as LaSalle lets him win, but only Francis knows this. Nicole calls him her champion and invites him to the party she's throwing after the musical the next day. But the next day Pearl Harbour is attacked, the bombing by the Japanese that led the USA into the war. The news shocks everyone and the party breaks up. The mood in the town changes.

Chapter 8
In the present Francis finds Arthur drunk, slumped in an alley, obviously traumatised by the war. Arthur says he wants to talk about the things that nobody ever usually talks about, about how they were scared when they were fighting. Arthur says that none of them were heroes. They were just boys: homesick and scared. "Nothing glamorous, like the write-ups in the papers or the newsreels. We weren't heroes. We were only there..."

Chapter 9
LaSalle was one of the first men to enlist, the Monday after that weekend. The Wreck Centre closed. Francis and Nicole start going to the movies together. LaSalle makes the news when he captures an enemy machine gun nest and saves his entire platoon; he gets a Silver Star and is Frenchtown's first big hero.

Chapter 10
Francis remembers being treated in England. Initially he didn't cover his face, but on a trip to
London his wounds made a small boy cry. In the present he burns the addresses of the doctor and his friend from treatment, so that he has no future, apart from killing LaSalle.

Chapter 11
He remembers LaSalle's homecoming in 1943. The whole town, especially the kids, cheered him home. After a whole town party in the City Hall, LaSalle takes the teenagers to the Wreck Centre, re-opened for the occasion. On the way Francis promises Nicole he'll never leave her. They all dance, play music and table-tennis. One by one the kids leave. When only LaSalle, Francis and Nicole are left, LaSalle tells Francis to go. Nicole says he should stay, but he does what LaSalle tells him. He leaves them dancing in the dark but does not leave the building. After the record ends he hears noises, but does not move. He realises LaSalle is sexually assaulting Nicole but does nothing. Then Nicole runs out of the hall, crying and her blouse torn. She sees him and he realises she feels betrayed. She leaves and Francis stays hidden in the dark. LaSalle does not know what Francis has seen.

Chapter 12
Four days after the rape Francis manages to see Nicole. He is helpless to know what to say; she is angry and blames him. She tells him to go away. He climbs the church steeple, intending to kill himself, but can't, not while soldiers all over the world are dying 'Noble deaths. The deaths of heroes'. The next day he changes the date on his birth certificate and goes to enlist.

Chapter 13
In the present Francis hears his landlady and her neighbour gossiping: LaSalle has returned.

Chapter 14
Francis goes with his gun to LaSalle's apartment. He is very ill and a shadow of his former self, but welcomes Francis. LaSalle still has the trick of making Francis feel good about himself. Francis denies he is a hero – he says he fell on the grenade because he wanted to die, not save the other soldiers. He reveals he wanted to die because of LaSalle's rape of Nicole. LaSalle tells him he couldn't have stopped him anyway. Francis brings his gun out. LaSalle says that he loves 'sweet young things'. This makes Francis think that Nicole was not the only one he has attacked. Francis tells LaSalle that he used to be their hero, because 'You made us better than we were'. LaSalle asks if one sin can wipe out all the good things he's done. He is not afraid of the gun, and shows Francis his own, telling him he plans to kill himself. He tells Francis that whether he knew it or not he fell on the grenade to save his comrades. Francis leaves. Once he is outside he hears a single gunshot from upstairs. LaSalle has killed himself.

Chapter 15
Francis goes to the convent to try to trace Nicole. Her family left town, but he gets her address. He plans to see her then kill himself.

Chapter 16
He goes to visit Nicole. She is still in the final year of school. She is changed, but tells him she is sorry for blaming him. She is recovering, but slowly. He still loves her, but though she feels affection for him, she doesn't want to see him again. She tells him to write about his experiences in the war.

Chapter 17
In the railway station Francis reflects on the 'heroes' and all the scared kids who went to war. He thinks of writing about them, and finding the number of the doctor who wants to reconstruct his face. He goes to catch a train as the book ends.
Timelines

The events described in Heroes happen in three different time periods. Here are the events in each of those time periods collected together and summarised.

Timeline 1 - growing up

When Francis is in the seventh grade Nicole Renard appears in his life and he falls in love. A local hall is converted into a youth recreation centre and the handsome Larry LaSalle arrives to run it, well-loved by all the teenagers. He makes them all feel special, particularly Nicole, who becomes the dance star, and Francis, whom he teaches to play table-tennis.

One weekend he organises a table-tennis tournament followed by a musical the next day. Francis wins the tournament then plays and beats LaSalle. The next day Pearl Harbour is bombed. LaSalle enlists in the army and the Wreck Centre is closed.

At some point after the centre closes Francis and Nicole start going out. They see films together, hold hands and become close friends.

LaSalle saves his entire platoon and is awarded a medal. He returns to town on a visit, as a hero. After a party at the Wreck Centre, LaSalle persuades Francis to leave him and Nicole alone dancing. Waiting outside Francis realises that LaSalle has raped Nicole, and he feels he has betrayed her by leaving her alone with LaSalle. In the following days he waits to speak to her, but she is angry with him. He considers suicide, but in the end runs away to join the army.

The war and the present

Timeline 2 - the war

Francis is advancing through a village with his platoon when he encounters two German soldiers, whom he kills. The next day he falls on a grenade, which saves the lives of his platoon. He later claims to have been trying to kill himself. Instead it destroys his face. He recuperates in England, and meets a doctor who says that after the war he will help him with plastic surgery. On a visit to London Francis realises his face frightens children, and begins to cover it up all times.

Timeline 3 - the present

Francis arrives back in Frenchtown, but disguises himself from everyone. He goes to Nicole’s old home, revisits the Wreck Centre and meets Arthur Rivier and the other veterans in the men’s club. Arthur recognises him when Francis asks about Larry LaSalle. Arthur agrees to keep Francis’s identity a secret. LaSalle is still celebrated as a war hero – as Francis would be if they knew who he was.

When Larry returns Francis goes to his flat to confront him; LaSalle is too weak to stand. Francis reveals that he knows about the rape, and draws his gun. LaSalle asks if one sin can undo all the good things he has done. He brings out his own gun. After Francis leaves, he hears LaSalle shoot himself. Francis tracks down Nicole and goes to see her, in another state. They talk, and she no longer blames him, but she doesn’t want to see him again. She tells him to be a writer. He leaves, and the end suggests hope.

Characters

The main characters in Heroes are Francis Cassavant, Larry LaSalle and Nicole Renard.

Francis Cassavant

Francis is the first person narrator of the novel. It is told through his eyes, directly to the reader. At the end of the book it is implied he will become a writer, and that Heroes is his book, adding realism to the text.
Throughout the novel Francis reiterates his love for Nicole. Right from the outset we know that it will *always be Nicole.* His love appears hopeless, and at first we think it is because he can never get up the courage to speak to her.

He describes his physical injuries from the war in grotesque, horrifying detail, emphasising his monstrous appearance. He tries to present his inner character as being similarly monstrous, by telling us very early on that he intends to kill Larry LaSalle. Despite this there are hints that he is not that monstrous – he describes the gun as being *like a tumour on my thigh,* which suggests he is not comfortable with it.

He is driven by the guilt of having left Nicole to be raped by LaSalle, an event for which he blames himself, because he broke his promise not to leave her alone that night.

Francis has a strong sense of guilt. He has had a Catholic education and in chapter one he prays in church. He says he is filled with a sense of shame and guilt because he is praying for the man he wants to kill (LaSalle). Similarly he decides to join the army because suicide would not only be a sin, but shameful when there were soldiers sacrificing their lives for others in the war.

Although he was awarded a Silver Star in the war, for falling on a grenade and saving his platoon’s lives, Francis feels that he is not a hero, and as if he is a fraud. He joined the army because he wanted to die, and believes he fell on the grenade in order to do so. He does not believe he is a hero because his motives were not heroic. Again we see he has a sense of shame and guilt.

When he returns to Frenchtown he remains anonymous, even asking Arthur to conceal his identity when he realises it. He lies to Mrs Belander and to others about who he is. This is not only to make it easier to kill LaSalle, but also to avoid the recognition and respect he feels he does not deserve – he is not a hero.

Francis is no fool: he knows that LaSalle lets him win the table tennis match. However, he accepts LaSalle’s assessment that the others need for Francis to win, and to believe in the possibility of David beating Goliath.

He spends the whole book waiting for LaSalle’s return to Frenchtown so that he can seek revenge. Yet when the moment comes his hand is shaking and he is overwhelmed. In the end LaSalle takes his own life – but it seems unlikely that Francis could actually have gone through with it, despite his plans and protestations.

He does do his best to ensure that he has no future, by burning the contact details of his friend from the hospital in England, and of the doctor who says he will repair his face. He calls this ‘closing doors to the future.’ He seems to be doing this to leave himself no option but to go through with this plan. Hope returns to the novel in the final chapter when he thinks about tracking them down again.

Larry LaSalle

LaSalle is the glamorous and charismatic man who runs the youth club in Frenchtown. He has a talent for bringing out the best in people, and he makes special favourites of Nicole and Francis.

There is a mystery surrounding his departure from New York and his relocation to Frenchtown. Initially that only seems to add to his glamour, but in the end it becomes sinister with his reference
to other ‘sweet young things’ which suggests that Nicole was not his first victim.

LaSalle joins up the very first morning after war is declared; his actions in the war lead to him being awarded a Silver Star medal, and when he returns home on leave he is given a hero’s welcome by the townspeople and the members of the Wreck Centre. On that leave he manipulates Francis into leaving him alone with Nicole, and he then rapes her.

He reappears in Frenchtown at the end of the novel. He has been crippled by the war, so that he can no longer stand. He shows no repentance for raping Nicole, instead asking whether his one sin wipes out all the goodness he has done.

In that final conversation, LaSalle does what he has always done in making Francis feel better about himself – he tells him that he fell on the grenade out of instinct to save his fellow soldiers, and that he really is a hero.

LaSalle stops Francis from shooting him, but instead shoots himself. Is he trying to redeem himself, or can he simply not face life in his state of health, the fact that there will be ‘no more dancing’ and ‘no more sweet young things’? LaSalle never expresses a sense of guilt over the crimes he committed, so we are left in doubt.

Nicole Renard

Nicole is a bit of a mystery through the book, more conspicuous through her absence than her presence. This is appropriate because she is more important in what she symbolises to Francis – happiness and innocence – than in their actual relationship.

Francis creates an impossibly romantic image of Nicole and of their relationship. When she is first introduced, she appears to him like a saint, while he is ‘like a knight at her feet’. The simile emphasises his chaste worship of her.

Nicole is beautiful, and becomes a superb dancer through LaSalle’s classes at the Wreck Centre. Her grace and beauty are destroyed by the rape – like the peace and innocence of the world is shattered by the war.

When Francis sees her at the end of the book she has become ‘brittle’. She is, however, recovering, and it is clear that she will survive, although it is taking a great deal of strength to do so. She has grown up – and is just ‘finding out’ who she really is.

Nicole is much more mature than Francis – although she initially blames him for standing by and not stopping LaSalle, she realises very quickly her error and tries to find him to tell him so. Unfortunately he has already left for the army. She does not blame Francis, but this means that their final meeting is not quite the climactic event he imagined. She does not want to see him again, because it is necessary for her to put both him and LaSalle behind her. She has not romanticised Francis in the way he has done her.

She is the one who tells Francis that he should try to write through what he has experienced: it is her wisdom that enables him to find a way to survive the experiences he has been through.

Arthur Rivier

Although he is not one of the main characters Arthur Rivier is significant as he shares Francis’s
feelings about the horrors of the war.

Arthur takes Francis under his wing when he returns to Frenchtown, introducing him to the St Jude Club veterans, and making him one of the *men* rather than the boys.

He is the only one to recognise Francis, although it takes him a while. He calls him a hero, and recalls that Francis has his own page in the scrapbook of town heroes. However, when Francis asks him to keep his identity secret, he agrees.

Arthur appears to be functioning normally. However, one evening Francis finds him collapsed, drunk and crying in the alley. Arthur is finding it difficult because nobody will talk about the war. He says that all the soldiers were the same: scared. He says none of them were heroes, they were *just there*. It is important enough for Francis to repeat it in the very last chapter.

**Themes**

The main theme of *Heroes* is about what heroism means, and what it doesn't mean. But there are also themes of love, guilt and forgiveness.

**Heroism**

The question of what makes a hero is asked all the way through *Heroes*, by many different characters.

Before they even go to war, LaSalle is a hero to the kids of the Wreck Centre. He brings out the best in them and they adore him. Even at the end he is still making Francis feel better about himself, and prevents him from becoming a murderer. Is this more or less heroic than his war record? Francis is something of a peacetime hero as well – by becoming table tennis champion and beating LaSalle he becomes an icon to the other children.

The scrapbook kept by the *Strangler* at the St. Jude's club contains newspaper clippings about all the 'heroes' of Frenchtown, including both LaSalle and Francis. The other men regard it as something of a symbol, something to be proud of, but Francis is ambivalent.

The Silver Star is the only medal awarded for *heroism*, we are told. Both LaSalle and Francis have been awarded this medal, for saving the lives of their fellow soldiers. LaSalle does so by taking out a machine gun nest, Francis by falling on a grenade – the grenade that destroys his face. Is it significant that one wins it by committing an act of violence, whereas the other wins it by taking the damage himself? It impresses the townsfolk – but Francis wants to remain anonymous.

Francis finds Arthur drunk outside the back of the St Jude club one night. Arthur is crying, because he is haunted by the war but nobody will talk about it. He scoffs at the idea of *heroes* and says they were all just scared boys, and that there was no glamour involved. He says *We weren't heroes. We were only there.*

This can be interpreted in two ways. One is that it is wrong for people to call them heroes, because they didn’t act like heroes. It was merely chance that they were there in the war. But when Francis remembers Arthur’s words right at the end of the book, it gives them a different interpretation. Francis is suggesting that merely by being there they were heroes – scared or not, they did what they had to do and did not run away.

When Francis talks to LaSalle he admits that he fell on the grenade not out of heroism, but because
he wanted to die, so he is not a hero. LaSalle counters this, by telling Francis that deep down it was an heroic act, driven by his instincts to save his fellow men. But it is LaSalle telling him this – can he be trusted?

Francis tells us that he always wanted to be a hero like LaSalle, but that when he finds himself one he wants to get rid of the *fakery*. For him being called a hero can’t disguise what he feels underneath, the guilt at failing Nicole, and the fact that he wanted to die, so he feels like a coward. This links to the question that LaSalle asks at the end: ‘*Does that one sin of mine wipe away all the good things?*’ The whole book questions whether people can really be heroes, when they have all their human failings underneath.

Why do Francis and Nicole not tell everyone the truth about LaSalle? Why does Francis tell no-one (apart from LaSalle) that he fell on the grenade because he wanted to die? When Arthur is drunk and crying about his wartime experiences, his two veteran friends pick him and take him home, not wanting Arthur to talk about the war. There seems to be a conspiracy not to reveal the heroes for what they are. Is Cormier suggesting that we need heroes, even if they are fake? This is also suggested by the very positive effects of Francis beating LaSalle at table tennis. LaSalle knows that if the other children believe Francis has beaten him it will give them more self confidence. Although LaSalle fakes the result, Francis is a hero. Cormier is suggesting that even fake heroes can have a positive value in society.

Nicole tells Francis that he should write about it, in order to find out what a hero really is. This suggests the answer to the question is in the book. But what is it? In the train station Francis thinks of the soldiers in his platoon who were scared, but stayed and fought anyway. They died and were never awarded medals, and he calls them the real heroes. This is a straightforward way of looking back at those who died in the war.

**War**

War ties into the theme of heroism as a useful motif – it is a time when people are often called ‘heroes’ but it is also a theme in itself.

Francis dreams of the German soldiers that he killed, but in his dreams they cry *‘Mama’* and he sees them as boys, like him *‘too young to shave’*. In real life they didn’t have time to speak, but the dream emphasises a common idea in war literature – that the soldiers on both sides often have more in common with each-other than with their commanders.

Throughout Francis never questions whether the war itself was just – he describes it at the end as the *‘good war’*. However, the depiction of violence, and its effects, is quite brutal. The clinical and grotesque description of Francis's facial injuries at the beginning of the novel is a good example of this. War is presented as horrifying and terrifying, with a massive effect on those who fight in it, but Cormier is not concerned with the politics of the war, nor does he make Heroes a pacifist novel.

Arthur’s collapse behind the club one evening suggests that many of the veterans have similar issues to Francis – although Arthur appeared normal he is finding it very difficult to cope with the memories of what the war was like. Because he is physically unharmed, it is easier for him to pass as ‘normal’ than it is for Francis, but this episode shows that doesn’t mean the soldiers who came back in one piece are actually okay.

**Innocence/ the end of childhood**

There are many points in the book which represent an ending of naïveté. One is a major event in
American history – the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Francis notes that ‘We had discovered in one moment on a Sunday afternoon that the world was not a safe place anymore.’ This was not just their discovery, but the discovery of the whole United States, that they could not remain in isolation from the rest of the world.

When Francis confidently leaves Nicole alone with LaSalle in the Wreck Centre, he does so in complete innocence of the danger she is in. Taking people at face value is something which the novel constantly warns us against – the apparently happy Arthur is found crying behind the St Jude club, and the villainous LaSalle ends by doing something positive for Francis, in affirming his heroism, and refusing to let him become a murderer.

LaSalle’s rape of Nicole in the Wreck Centre is the end of innocence for both her and Francis, who waits in the dark knowing but unable to acknowledge what is happening to her. It is also symbolic of the end of their innocent belief in goodness – something that the war ended for many people.

Francis going off to war with a faked age on his birth certificate is a significant step out of childhood – like many soldiers who signed up underage, he is forcing the issue. He notices that other soldiers – even the Germans – are also very young.

He maintains a certain innocence even after the grenade – going to London with his face uncovered, he doesn’t think that other people will notice, until he makes a young boy cry. When he is home in Frenchtown he appears to have become very cynical, but at the end of the novel, he has turned back a little from that, perhaps coming to happy balance.

The fact that Nicole will not see him again after the meeting they have at the end of the book also closes a door on the idea of there being a ‘happily ever after’: although she is surviving, and continuing to recover, she cannot go back to that state of innocence.

Love

There are different types of love in Heroes.

Francis’s love for Nicole is highly romanticised – his first meeting with her is compared to a knight kneeling at the feet of a saint. He can barely get up the courage to speak to her, although they do eventually go out, and their relationship is sweet and innocent.

Later, in the army, he is motivated by both his love for her which has never gone away, and his guilt about his failure to help her when she was attacked. During the war his love and desire for forgiveness turns into the only thing that makes his life worthwhile. From the first chapter where he says ‘it would always be Nicole Renard’ to the penultimate one where he tells us the reason he went to see Nicole was to see if she could still be his girl ‘which could maybe change my mind about the gun in my duffel bag.’ This is verging on the obsessional, and Francis realises as he talks to Nicole that the love they had ended a long time ago.

There is the hero-worship the teens feel for LaSalle before the war, and then that the town feels for the returning heroes. The scrapbook, the reception for LaSalle and the toasting of the Silver Star heroes in the St Jude Club all evidence this kind of love, and the need to find something or someone to admire to make life seem better.

Much of what LaSalle did for the kids of Frenchtown, and Francis in particular could be described as loving: he makes Francis a more confident teenager, and continues trying to make him feel better.
about himself even after Francis has threatened to kill him. LaSalle also describes his sexual desire for young girls (‘sweet young things’) as love. He says ‘we love our sins. We love the thing that makes us evil.’ This is a darker side to what ‘love’ can mean to different people.

There is an element of brotherly or fraternal love in Francis’s memories of his fellow soldiers, in his remembrance of them every night. His sacrifice, of throwing himself on the grenade, could also be seen as a loving one – certainly LaSalle thinks that Francis’s instinct was to save his fellow soldiers, not to kill himself. There is a sense in which all the veterans are bound together by their experiences, which forms a kind of brotherly bond between them.

Forgiveness
There are two types of forgiveness in the novel: forgiveness of another and forgiveness of yourself.

Francis is intent on taking revenge on Larry LaSalle, rather than forgiving him. He does not offer any forgiveness: when LaSalle asks if his one evil act can erase all the good he did, Francis coldly tells him to ‘ask Nicole.’ However, he does allow LaSalle to redeem himself a little by letting him take his own life. Is Francis’s drive to revenge more about LaSalle’s guilt or his own?

Francis is driven by the need to find forgiveness for having let Nicole down by leaving her alone with LaSalle. The guilt of the action, and the fact that she blamed him for it, are almost overwhelming. He wants to die, and closes ‘doors to the future’ because he doesn’t feel he deserves either recognition as a hero or to live.

The theme of forgiveness is set in the context of Nicole and Francis’s Catholic school, where they are taught by nuns. After the rape, Francis climbs the steeple to throw himself off, but cannot, at least partly because it is the ‘greatest sin’.

Ironically LaSalle gives Francis a measure of forgiveness, when he tells him that he couldn’t have stopped the rape – he was just a ‘child.’

Nicole offers Francis forgiveness in a very understated way. As it turns out she regrets blaming him for the rape, and tried to tell him so many years ago, but he had already left for the army. It is somewhat of an anti-climax, but the real person he needs forgiveness from is himself.

Concealment and revealment / Appearance and reality
Francis arrives in Frenchtown with his face wrapped up and concealed. On one level he’s hiding his injuries from sight, to stop them horrifying others like they did the small boy in London who cried. The idea of a face wrapped up in bandages recalls horror films of the early part of the twentieth century. It may deliberately recall the image of the Invisible Man.

He’s also concealing his identity – he lies to Mrs Belander about how he knows her name, and the wrappings conceal whatever might be recognised. Francis is therefore able to walk around town completely unrecognised, except as a war veteran.

Larry LaSalle also has a secret concealed in his past – the mysterious reason as to why he had left his showbiz career to become a youth worker. We never find out what this reason is, but it is implied by LaSalle’s referring to ‘sweet young things’ in the plural in his last encounter with Francis, that it was for something similar to his rape of Nicole. In the beginning this mystery seems
attractive, adding to his *glamour*.

This theme is exemplified by the structure of the novel, which weaves the three timelines together. Cormier uses foreshadowing extensively to create tension in the novel – such as when Francis tells us in the first chapter that he has *just prayed for the man [he is] going to kill.* Then he gradually reveals different morsels of information, about Francis’s war experience and the pre-war life in Frenchtown.

**Narrative Structure**
By telling the story through a series of flashbacks and memories, Robert Cormier can reveal details a few at a time. The first chapter gives enough detail for the story to move on. By the end of the first chapter we know:
- That Francis has been to war
- That he is horribly injured
- That he has returned to his hometown
- That church is important to him
- That he loved Nicole and still does
- That Larry LaSalle is an enemy
- That he wants to be anonymous
- That he has a sinister plan.
The remaining chapters give clues and reveal details gradually.

**Why do you think Robert Cormier chose to structure the story in this way?**

**Understanding the characters**
When Larry LaSalle returns home from the war the first time he is considered a hero. While on leave, he attacks Nicole. From that point on the lives of Nicole, Francis and Larry are changed forever.

**How did Francis feel after he failed to do anything to stop Larry attacking Nicole? Why didn’t he do anything?**

**Larry**
What made Larry behave as he did? Did he give any thought to how it would affect Nicole? Did he know that Francis had not left the building? How long had he been planning the attack for?

**The Setting**

**Time**
The story is set during the Second World War. Larry LaSalle joined the army to fight in the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Use the Internet to find out when the Americans became involved in the war and why the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour.

**Find the answers to these questions.**
- In what year did World War II start?
- When did the Americans get involved?
- Why did the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbour?
- Why did so many young Americans rush to join the army after Pearl Harbor?
Place
The Wreck Centre
Before the war, the “wreck” centre is the centre of the lives of Larry, Nicole and Francis.

Larry LaSalle is an inspiration to the young people; they look up to him as a role model and a hero even before his wartime bravery. He is sophisticated and confident. He helps Francis to believe in himself and teaches him to play table tennis although he “fixes” the championship so that Francis wins. He encourages Nicole’s dancing.

At the end, he tries to defend himself with the memory of all the good things he did for the kids at the centre. He wonders, “Does that one sin of mine wipe away the good things?” What do you think?

The name of the centre is a pun. Shortened from ‘Recreation Centre’ to ‘Rec Centre’ and then ‘Wreck Centre’. The lives of the three main characters are wrecked because of their association with the centre. The building has a history – a rejected lover shot his love and his rival at their wedding reception. How does this foreshadow what happens in the novel?

Themes and Ideas
Heroism
Look up the word Hero in a dictionary. Write down the definition.
The title of the book could be meant ironically. (Irony is when you say something but mean the opposite e.g. If you say “That was really clever” to someone who has done something stupid).

This may be a book about “heroes” who are not true heroes. Which characters could fit this description? Explain why and find some examples from the novel to back up your ideas. (p7, p33, p47, p64, p66, p75, p76, p87, p89)

Francis Cassavant – Hero?
Francis says he feels a fake because he wanted to die but was “too much of a coward to kill himself”. When he jumped on the grenade he did not do it to save his platoon but to kill himself. In doing so though, he did save the lives of many soldiers.
Is a heroic act still heroic even if it’s done for the wrong reasons?

Arthur Rivier says, “We weren’t heroes. We were only there”. Why do you think heroes in war don’t think of themselves as heroes? Look on page 89; Francis lists the people he thinks are heroes, do you agree with him?
What makes a true hero? Is Francis a hero?

Religion, Sin and Forgiveness
In Chapter 1, Francis goes to St. Jude’s Church to pray for the souls of his parents, his wounded friend Enrico, Nicole, and Larry LaSalle, the man he intends to kill.

In Chapter 2, we learn that Francis attended a Catholic school and was taught by nuns (like Robert Cormier himself).

In Chapter 12 Francis goes to Confession in the church and then climbs the steeple intending to kill himself, “the worst sin of all”. In Chapter 14, Francis tells Larry to say his prayers before he shoots him.
In Chapter 15, Francis goes to see the nuns to ask where Nicole is. Sister Mathilde says she will pray for him. The church is often referred to in the descriptions of the town. Why do you think it's always there in the background?

Past and Future
Francis and Nicole find it hard to deal with the events that have happened in their past.

Francis/Nicole – facing up to who you are
The scarf that Francis uses to hide his face is symbolic. Francis hides who he is from the public, but he also hides who he is from himself. He finds it hard to face up to the things that have made him the person he is.

Nicole talks of learning who she really is.

Based in a strict religious community, church and catholic nuns influencing beliefs and values – everyone aware of sin/guilt/need to confess/ forgiveness

Larry commits a sin by raping Nicole. Francis ‘sins’ by doing nothing to prevent it. Nicole ‘sins’ by blaming Francis.

Francis and Nicole are consumed by guilt.

Larry who was always different from the others in the community seems relatively unaffected by what he does.

Francis cannot forgive himself or Larry. Nicole, however, forgives Francis. There is also a mystery surrounding Larry when he arrives back in Frenchtown to open up the Wreck centre. What do we know about Larry LaSalle’s background and where he came from?

Love
"The terrible thing is that we love our sins. We love the thing that makes us evil. I love the sweet young things."

‘That isn’t love,’ I say.

‘There’s all kinds of love, Francis.’

‘Then didn’t you know that we loved you?’ I say. ‘You were our hero, even before you went to war. You made us better than we were...’

What kinds of love are there in the novel? Find evidence of as many kinds of love as you can.
**Quotations**

**Larry La Salle**

“broad shoulders of an athlete and the narrow hips of a dancer”

“A tall slim man stepped into view, a lock of blond hair tumbling over his forehead, a smile that revealed dazzling movie-star teeth”. Pg 32

‘We can’t let the Japs get away with this’, he said, anger that we had never seen before flashing in his eyes.” Pg 33

“You are all stars” Pg 35

“I’m not supposed to play favourites, Francis, but you and Nicole are special to me”. Pg 47

“Why did he turn his back on show business and return to Frenchtown? No one dared to ask him, although there were dark hints that he had ‘gotten into trouble’ in New York City”. Pg 35

“Dazzled by his talent and his energy, none of us dwelt on the rumours. In fact, the air of mystery that surrounded him added to his glamour, He was our champion and we were happy to be in his presence.” Pg 35

Immediately after the incident with Nicole “He passed through the flash of moonlight, a ghostly silence”. Pg 76

“Larry LaSalle was one of the first Frenchtown men to enlist in the armed services, announcing his intention on Monday afternoon, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, a few hours after President Roosevelt’s address on the radio declared that a state of war existed between Japan and the United States.” Pg 57

**HEADLINES**: “Lt La Salle Earns Silver Star”  “LaSalle Captures Enemy, Saves Fellow Marines.” Pg 41

“Lt Lawrence LaSalle, US Marine Corps holder of the Silver Star for acts of heroism in the steaming jungles of Guadalcanal in the South Pacific, hero of the newsreels and radio broadcasts, was coming home on furlough”...‘You are our celebration,’ the mayor declared, ... ‘ Your presence in this great city of ours, Lieutenant Lawrence LaSalle , is cause enough for jubilation.’ ” Pg 67/68

“He gave lessons tirelessly, arranged contests, encouraged girls to take up the sport”. Pg 45

“He is pale, eyes sunk into the sockets...he seems fragile now, as if caught in an old photograph that has faded and yellowed with age.” Pg 86

“Everybody sins, Francis. The terrible thing is that we love our sins”.

“My legs are gone...No more dancing for me, Francis. No more sweet young things.”
“Whether you know it or not, you’ve accomplished your mission here. And you couldn’t have killed me anyway, in cold blood”. Pg 86

“The sound of a pistol shot cracks the air”. Pg 93

Nicole Renard

“Nicole Renard was small and slender, with shining black hair that fell to her shoulders. The pale purity of her face reminded me of the statue of St Therese …” Pg 10

“Something flashed in her eyes, too, a hint of mischief as if she were telling me (Francis) we were going to have good times together”. Pg 10

“Nicole Renard began coming to the centre that first winter and joined the dancing group. She had taken lessons in Albany and instantly caught the attention of Larry LaSalle. I’d watch her glide across the floor, catching flashes of her white thighs as she twisted and turned. She seemed to exist in a world of her own, like a rare specimen, bird-like and graceful as she danced, separate from the rest of the dancers”. Pg 36

“In the dance classes, Nicole was the most talented of all, her slender body dipping and turning without effort, as if her bones were elastic. Larry LaSalle tossed her in the air, letting her float, defying gravity for a breathless moment, then caught her, pressing her close, their faces almost touching, their lips only an inch or so from a kiss, before he allowed her to slip down against his body.” Pg 46

“Nicole touched my shoulder, her hand both tender and caressing, and my flesh burned with the echo of her touch. ‘Good luck,’ she said” Pg 49

When Francis wins the table tennis championship. “My eyes sought Nicole, and found her joyous face, hands joined together, as if in prayer, eyes half-closed as if making herself an offering to me.” Pg 54

At the dance in honour of Larry LaSalle. “I (Francis) glanced occasionally at Nicole as she gazed, wide-eyed and wistful, at the ladies in their fancy gowns, glittery sequins catching the light from a crystal ball revolving on the ceiling. ‘Isn’t that beautiful?’ Nicole said, pointing to a woman in a simple white gown that clung to her body like whipped cream.” Pg 70

When Francis tells Nicole he has to go (leaving Larry and Nicole together)... “Nicole frowned. ‘Stay and watch,’ she said, and I was puzzled by the expression on her face... “Don’t go,” Nicole whispered into my ear”. Pg 74

“She saw me in the moment I saw her. Saw her face, her eyes. Her hair dishevelled, mouth flung open, lips swollen. Cheeks moist with tears. Her white blouse torn and one hand clutching to the front of her blouse to hold it together.” Pg 75

“In the spill of moonlight, her eyes flashed black with anger as she looked at me. More than anger. But what? What? … I recognized in her eyes now what I could not deny: betrayal. My betrayal of her in her eyes.” Pg 75
“Her eyes met mine. She didn’t say anything for a long moment and when she finally spoke, her voice was harsh. ‘You were there all the time,’ she said... ‘You didn’t do anything.’... ‘You knew what he was doing, didn’t you?’... ‘Why didn’t you do something? Tell him to stop. Run for help. Anything.’... pg 79

“ ‘No, I’m not alright,’ she answered, anger flashing in her eyes. ‘I hurt. I hurt all over.’ ” Pg 79

“ ‘Poor Francis,’ she said at last. But no pity in her voice. Contempt, maybe, as her eyes swept over me. She flung her hand in the air, a gesture of dismissal. ‘Go away, Francis,’ she said. ‘Just go away.’ ” Pg 80

“ ‘I’m sorry about one thing,’ she says. ‘What I did to you that day.’... ‘I shouldn’t have said those things to you on the piazza. You weren’t to blame for what happened. I realized that later and went to your Uncle Louis’ place but found out that you’d enlisted.’ ” Pg 100

Francis Cassavant

There is a significant difference in the way Francis sees himself versus how others see him. Francis tends to write about himself in a negative way, occasionally inspired by the encouragement of Nicole and Larry LaSalle. What other characters say to Francis about himself is almost always positive.

“Poor boy.” (Mrs Belander, chapters 1 and 3)
“You’re a good boy, Francis.” (Uncle Louis, chapter 5)
“You deserve to be recognised, Francis... You’re a goddam hero.” (Arthur, chapter 6)

“I feel like a spy in disguise as I walk the streets of Frenchtown, hidden behind the scarf and the bandage...” Pg 16

I explode into wakefulness along with the booming artillery and I find myself gasping, instantly wide eyed, not cold for once, in Mrs Belander’s tenement, the sweat warm on my flesh, but in a minute the sweat turns icy.” Pg 24

“ ‘I’m rotten at everything” (Chapter 7) “I can’t sing. I can’t dance. I’m no good at baseball.’ And I can’t even get up the nerve to hold a normal conversation with Nicole Renard, I added silently. / Avoiding his eyes, I was suddenly angry at my self-pity. Snap out of it, I told myself.” Pg43

“ ‘You’re a natural.” (Larry, Chapter 7)
“I love to watch you play...” (Nicole, chapter 7)
“For the first time in my life, a tide of confidence swept through me.” Chapter 7
“I knew no doubt...” (Chapter 7)

“The truth is that I don’t care whether I heal or not... Pg 65

“I could not die that way. Soldiers were dying with honour on battlefields all over the world. Noble deaths. The deaths of heroes. How could I die by leaping from a steeple?/ The next afternoon, I boarded the bus to Fort Delta, in my pocket the birth certificate I had altered to change my life, and become a soldier in the United States Army.” Pg 81
“I went to war because I wanted to die... I was too much of a coward to kill myself. In the war, in battle, I figured it would be easy to get killed... When I fell on that grenade, I wasn’t trying to save those GIs. I saw my chance to end it all, in a second. But a freak accident happened. My face got blown off and I didn’t die...” Pg 89

“When I study myself in the mirror, I don’t see me anymore but a stranger slowly taking shape”. (Chapter 10)

“I had always wanted to be a hero, like Larry LaSalle and all the others, but had been a fake all along.” (Ch 14)

“I was always too much of a coward to kill myself.” (Ch 14)

“You would have fallen on that grenade, anyway. All your instincts would have made you sacrifice yourself for your comrades.” (Larry, Ch 14)

“Don’t be afraid to show your face, Francis. That face, what’s left of it, is a symbol of how brave you were...” (Larry, chapter 14)

“You’ve made us all proud.” (Sister Mathilde, chapter 15)

“You weren’t to blame for what happened.” (Nicole, chapter 16)

“...you were part of the good times, Francis.” (Nicole, chapter 16)
Example Essay Questions
40 minutes

1. How does Robert Cormier present experiences of growing up in ‘Heroes’?
2. Write about the relationship between Francis and Nicole and how it is presented in ‘Heroes’.
3. Write about the relationship between Francis and Larry and how it is presented in ‘Heroes’.
4. To what extent do you find ‘Heroes’ an effective title for the novel?
5. What do you think of Francis and the way he is presented to the reader?
6. In your opinion, who or what had the greatest influence over Francis as he was growing up?
7. Explain how the arrival of Larry changes Francis’ life.
8. How does the character of Nicole develop throughout the novel? Or, what are the events that most have an impact on Nicole? Why?
9. ‘The scared war’. To what extent is this a suitable description for the way war is presented in the novel?
10. How is revenge important in the novel as a whole?

Example answer

Question
How does Cormier present the character of Larry LaSalle?

Planning an answer
Here is an outline of how you could answer this question. Print it off and write some notes on what you plan to include in each section, before you try the essay. Remember to refer in detail to the actual text, either with quotations or precise references. Try to expand on each section, then, when you have finished, check our example answer on the next page to see if you have covered the main points.

Section 1 - Introduction
Give an overview of LaSalle’s importance in the novel.
Mention the fact that the presentation of his character is not always clear-cut.

Section 2 - Structure and form
• Paragraph 1 - How does Cormier use foreshadowing to create mystery about LaSalle? Link this to any appropriate themes.
Paragraph 2 - How does Cormier use the three time line structure and the first person narration to present LaSalle?

Section 3 - Other characters’ reactions
How does LaSalle’s appearance contrast with his character? What does he appear to be to everyone except Francis?

Section 4 - The confrontation
• Paragraph 1 - Appearances. How does LaSalle appear now? What does this do to our understanding of LaSalle as Francis’s antagonist?
• Paragraph 2 - Characteristics. How does LaSalle reveal his own sinister side? Think about the ‘sweet young things’ and his manipulation of Francis.

Section 5 - Conclusion
What major themes does Cormier use LaSalle to contribute to? Don’t forget the central question of the book: what is a hero.

Answer
How does Cormier present the character of Larry LaSalle?

1. The character of Larry LaSalle is vital to the plot and themes of Heroes: Cormier presents him in opposition to Francis and uses him to explore the central issues of the novel. From the very first chapter of the novel it is clear that LaSalle is going to be a very important character, as Francis tells us that he is ‘the man I am going to kill.’ Initially there is some ambiguity about this: Francis’s description of his own horrific injuries combined with this statement are designed to suggest he is a monster, and therefore might give sympathy to LaSalle. However, even by this stage the reader is empathising with Francis, and therefore suspects that LaSalle may not be the victim.

2. This ambiguity about LaSalle’s character is continued through the book, reflecting the theme of concealment and revelation. Despite LaSalle’s ‘dazzling movie-star’ good looks when he arrives in the town, there is a sense of uneasy mystery about him, as to why he turned his back on show-business. Cormier uses this technique of foreshadowing and undermining throughout the novel, reflecting the uncertainty of many of the themes and characters of the book.

In addition to this, Cormier’s structuring of the book, with the three interweaving time lines, leads to the reader being fed information bit by bit, creating a sense of suspense about the events of the past, and what will happen when Francis finally confronts LaSalle. This is supported by the use of the first person narration, so that we only see LaSalle from Francis’s point of view; we experience Francis’s changing feelings, always in the light of the knowledge that sooner or later Francis will want to kill him.

3. LaSalle is also presented as a man whose public appearance conceals what is really beneath the surface. Both in the first timeline, as a glamorous youth leader, and in the present as a ‘Silver Star’ war hero, LaSalle receives public admiration. In the St Jude Club, the war veterans toast him as the ‘patron saint’ of the Wreck Centre, and he is the main feature
of the scrap book of Frenchtown’s war heroes.
The fact that only Francis knows what he is really like makes this appearance seem more sinister. The heroic exterior is undermined throughout by foreshadowing and our eventual knowledge of what LaSalle has done, which contributes to the major theme of what a hero really is. Cormier contrasts the hideous exterior of the veteran Francis, who has our sympathy, with the memory of the beautiful LaSalle.

4. Ironically, after Francis has created the picture of the beautiful but dangerous monster, when he finally confronts him, LaSalle is presented as a shell of his former self. He is ‘fragile’ and his eyes are ‘sunk into the sockets’. He is not immune from the effects of war which have been shown to have such an impact on Francis and the other war veterans elsewhere in the book. This image is reinforced a few pages later when Cormier reveals that LaSalle’s legs are ‘gone’. Both the reader and the narrator are taken aback slightly by this turn of events. The bathos of this image undermines the climax to which the entire novel has apparently been building, the confrontation between Francis and his antagonist; it becomes clear later that it is fact Nicole whom he needs to see in order to resolve his problems.

However, the sinister aspects of LaSalle’s character are fully highlighted in this scene, when he talks of the ‘sweet young things’. He is presented as being highly manipulative – as in the way in which gets rid of Francis the evening that he rapes Nicole, and indeed his whole construction of that evening – and he continues to manipulate Francis to the very end. Part of this is his ability and intention to make Francis feel better about himself; right to the end, he is trying to convince Francis that his motives in throwing himself on the grenade were heroic. Cormier also uses this to show that the characters in his novel are not black and white but inhabit a grey area.

5. It is LaSalle that Cormier uses to ask the central question of the book: *Does that one sin of mine wipe away all the good things?* He doesn’t answer it directly, but allows Francis to; his reply is that LaSalle should ask Nicole. In this question Cormier manages to present LaSalle as deluded about the damage which he has caused, but also contrasts the two sides of his character. Cormier uses LaSalle to show that people need to see heroism, even if on closer examination that heroism is flawed. For example LaSalle says faking the table tennis result to let Francis win is a good thing for the other kids. He also has LaSalle ask the question of whether his heroic acts are devalued by his crimes. LaSalle does not feel any guilt over his actions. This limits our empathy with LaSalle. Cormier is asking how far any good he did achieve, in boosting the children’s confidence, and in giving the town a war hero, was flawed by this. At the end of the book Francis thinks about the ordinary soldiers in his own platoon. Boys who ‘didn’t receive a Silver Star. But heroes anyway. The real heroes.’ Cormier is suggesting that these heroes need to be remembered, not only the famous war heroes. Therefore, LaSalle is presented as being central to the themes of concealment and revelation, and of what makes a hero; he is never allowed to become a complete monster, but is a much more subtle character, which means the reader must think much more carefully about the moral questions which Heroes raises.
Example answer

**How does Cormier present war in the novel Heroes?**

The novel Heroes is set around during the 1940s and the reality and experience of World War 2. Francis Cassavant, the narrator, is a young teenager when America joined the war and soon he is fighting for his country in the fields of France. He takes the reader through what the war was like on the battlefield and the aftermath as an injured veteran back home in Frenchtown.

Francis and his childhood ‘crush’ Nicole Renard ironically celebrate him winning the table tennis championship when the news of attack on Pearl Harbour broke out. Cormier presents the impact of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on civilians like Francis and highlights the panic the announcement created as Francis says “I’m not sure Frenchtown is safe anymore”. Even though far removed from the actual attack, people were shocked and scared that their country was going to war. Larry LaSalle the leader of the Wreck Centre and Francis’ table tennis teacher enlisted almost immediately and so did many others. Francis claimed “it quickly became noticeable the lack of men on the streets of Frenchtown”. Here we see how patriotic the community was to do their part for the war but also the visible impact that it had on towns like Frenchtown as many men signed up.

The movie newsreels shown at the Plymouth showed updates on the war as seen often by Francis and Nicole. Larry LaSalle appeared in one such film featured for winning a Silver Star medal for bravery as he captured an enemy machine gun nest. These films were US propaganda, the kind of thing that inspired young men to go to war, and created the myth of hero around which theme the novel revolves. Francis later dismisses the propaganda typically used to support the war effort, arguing that the war is “Not like the war movies at the Plymouth. Nobody displaying heroics or bravado.” Cormier shows that the films were not in any way a typical reflection of the real experience of war and there is a note of bitter resentment in the narrative here that propaganda portrays war so very differently to the actual experience itself.

After the tragic return of hero Larry LaSalle to Frenchtown and the rape of Nicole Francis thinks about jumping off the steeple at St Jude’s Church. However, he decides to go to war instead. He does this because he wanted to die and possibly make up for his inability to help Nicole. His experience of war is presented as vastly different to the movie version he had seen and reveals what the war was actually like.

In flashback Cormier vividly presents Francis’ experience of war. Francis lists the names of the young men in his platoon as a means of trying to get to sleep. “I silently recite the names of the guys in my platoon – Richards and Eisenberg and Chambers”. The use of listing reminds Francis and the reader of the number of Frenchtown men who fought in Europe. The list of names is like a ‘litany’, or a prayer. But Francis’ prayer for these young men is pointless as many can’t be brought back. Cormier describes the way the soldiers like Francis felt: “We are all tense and nervous and scared” the tripling emphasises the fear experienced by the young men as they faced gruelling combat. The first person plural ‘we’ shows that the overriding experience of all young soldiers was that of fear. The dynamic verbs ‘scrambling’ and ‘scurrying’ convey panic and a lack of control. The image also counteracts the ‘heroics’ of the propaganda movies. The young men lose a sense of their dignity here as they scurry, like animals, in search of safety. The simile of the soldier exploding ‘like a tomato’ is gruesome and would have a strong impact upon the reader. The comparison also has something to say about the fragility of human life. The image of the other German soldier crying for his ‘mama’ also reminds the reader that many soldiers were very young and, like Francis, had joined up under-age. Eddie’s rhetorical question ‘What the hell are we doing here anyway?’”
conveys the general feeling of disillusionment experienced by many and questions the purpose of war. It provokes the reader to consider the futility of war.

Francis deals with his post traumatic stress alone. The image of him waking in a cold sweat, “I find myself gasping… in a minute the sweat turns icy” with no one to turn to for comfort, is in direct comparison with the images of camaraderie experienced by the men in the bar, who put a brave face on events and discuss hope, the future and celebrate the achievements of those in the Stranger’s scrapbook.

While in France Francis also kills two German Soldiers. He claimed they were “apple-cheeked” and “too young to shave” just like Francis. The war led to many young boys enlisting thinking that it would make them brave and heroic. Cormier shows that war is not glamorous and emphasises the needless loss of young, innocent lives. Francis returns to Frenchtown with horrific facial injuries after falling on a grenade. His ears are left as “pieces of dangling flesh” and he has “caves for nostrils”. Here we see the devastating effects on veterans as many received lifelong injuries and were never the same again. The same thing happened to a friend Francis met in hospital, Enrico, who was left with a missing leg and arms.

When Francis arrives in Frenchtown he hides his identity because the war has completely changed the person he is. He enters the St Jude’s club, a bar where all the veterans spend their time. They appear to be making plans for the future, some speak about joining the police or fire service and others want to use their GI Bill to go to college. However, as St Jude is the patron Saint of lost causes Cormier seems to suggest it is unlikely that there is much hope for the returning soldiers. Arthur Rivier recognises Francis and keeps Francis’ secret quiet when Francis finds Arthur drunk and slouched against the wall in Pee Alley. Arthur opens up to him about the war. He called it the “scared war”, he said “we weren’t heroes, we were just there”. He claimed that he was so scared that he “messed my pants”. This shows the devastating effects on the veterans’ mental health. Arthur shouted “no-one talks about the war” as he struggles to come to terms with what he has seen and experienced. The war obviously badly affected Arthur as it would have millions of soldiers, it is definitely not like war as shown in the newsreels.

In conclusion Cormier presents the war as affecting the lives of everyone, not just the soldiers. He shows the reader how war was glamorised in propaganda but in reality left the soldiers broken and hopeless.

Example answer

How does Robert Cormier present the character of Nicole throughout the novel?

Nicole is as important to the novel “Heroes” as the two main male characters Francis Cassavant and Larry La Salle. Nicole (like Francis and LaSalle) contributes to Cormier’s complex exploration of heroism in the novel. The relationship between Nicole and Francis represents innocence, purity, and romance. Their relationship involves: going to the movies, talking about their dreams and aspirations. Nicole’s relationship with LaSalle in contrast is far more sinister, sexualised and traumatic. Cormier initially presents Nicole by describing the impact her beauty has on Francis as he claims she is: “The most beautiful girl” he had ever seen. Nicole’s beauty is also associated with innocence which is emphasised both by the colour and alliterative “pale purity of her face” and also through the comparison of her to the “statue of St Therese”. The comparison of Nicole to a saint heightens the horror of what happens to Nicole later in the novel and links to the religious themes of sin and
forgiveness that run throughout the novel.

Nicole is presented as lady like and noble. Cormier associates the relationship that blossoms between Nicole and Francis with romantic courtly love. Cormier highlights the strength of love and loyalty Francis has for Nicole as he takes on the role of her protector and ironically “silently pledged her my love and loyalty forever.” This loyalty is tested when Francis is unable to protect Nicole from Larry LaSalle the consequences of which becomes central to the plot and later prompt Francis to go to war.

Cormier also presents Nicole as fragile, special and unique: “She seemed to exist in a world of her own, like a rare specimen, bird-like and graceful, separate from the rest of the dancers” which makes the tragedy of her rape seem more vicious, cruel and violent. When Cormier presents Nicole’s rape her vulnerability is emphasised by the simile: “like a small animal caught and trapped”. Nicole is presented as prey and LaSalle as predator. Her suffering is also emphasised by the noise she makes “whimpering” like a wounded animal to highlight her suffering. Cormier uses Nicole as a device to maintain suspense and create mystery in the novel both connected to Francis and the “mission” he has returned to Frenchtown to complete. “All kinds of rumours about her. She began to stay at home… She was like… a hermit.” The impact of Larry LaSalle’s attack on Nicole are immediate with Nicole withdrawing completely from Francis and everyone.

Cormier presents Nicole by exploring Francis and Larry La Salle’s reaction to her. As Nicole dances with Larry at the Wreck centre “His eyes moved to Nicole and I saw the rush of affection on his face.” Cormier uses Nicole’s relationships with Francis and Larry to explore the two extremes of innocent teenage first love and the more predatory sinister “affection” that Larry La Salle has for “pretty young things”. The fact that Francis mistakes Larry’s reaction as “affection” reinforces the childlike innocent trust that both Francis and Nicole place in Larry. Cormier also uses Nicole to explore issues of honour, trust and loyalty. “I recognised in her eyes what I could not deny: betrayal. My betrayal of her in her eyes.”

Cormier returns to a physical description of Nicole towards the end of the novel but here Nicole’s physical appearance represents survival, transformation and heroism of a kind. Nicole still has an impact on Francis as the moment he recognises her is compared to a lightning strike: “For one lightning moment, I don’t recognise her”. Nicole’s physical appearance is altered, less sexually attractive in order to reflect the trauma she has undergone “Now her hair is cut short and combed straight and flat”. Cormier uses an almost filmic-close -up of Nicole’s face. Nicole’s eyes in particular are emphasised as though she has literally and metaphorically opened her eyes to the cruelty of people like Larry LaSalle: “Her cheek-bones are more prominent and her eyes seem to be bigger”. Cormier continues to present Nicole in an idealised way as though almost not real. Cormier presents her through the comparison of a picture as Francis looks at her “as if studying a painting in a museum.”

Nicole contributes significantly to the structure of the novel. Francis is able to confront La Salle and then reconcile with Nicole. Cormier presents Nicole as a symbol of forgiveness. When she talks to Francis she is able to forgive him for not stopping Larry from attacking her: ‘I shouldn’t have said those things to you that day… You weren’t to blame for what happened”. Nicole ultimately represents heroism and hope. She is able to survive the trauma of a rape and tells Francis to write about the things that have happened to him echoing their early conversations at the start of the novel.
The game began.
My serve:
Paddle met ball. I didn't try for speed or spin, merely wanted to place the ball in proper position, without risk, and then play my defensive game. My heartbeat was steady, my body poised for action. The ball came back to me. I returned. Came again and again I returned. Larry LaSalle's return was placed perfectly, at the edge of the table, almost impossible for me to reach but somehow I reached it, returned it, throwing him off balance. My point. Next point his, then mine again. Then his.
We were half-way through the game, the score standing at 13–12, my serve, when I realized that he was letting me win, was guiding the game with such skill that no one but me realized what he was doing. He cleverly missed my returns by what seemed like a thousandth of an inch, feigning frustration, and placed his returns in seemingly impossible spots, but within my reach.
The noise of the crowd receded, diminished to a hush, broken only by the plopping of the ball on the table, the soft clink of the ball on the rubber dimples of our paddles. A giant sigh rose from the crowd when an impressive point was made. I dared not take my eyes away from the game to look at Nicole.
Two games were being played at the same time, the sharp, take-no-prisoners game the hushed audience was observing and the subtle tender game in which Larry LaSalle was letting me win.
Finally, the score stood at 20 – 19. My favour. One point away from victory. I resisted meeting Larry LaSalle's eyes. It was still his serve. Crouching, waiting, I finally looked at him, saw his narrowed eyes. They were suddenly inscrutable, mysterious. A shudder made me tremble, as I realized that he could easily win the next two points and take the championship away from me. He could win it so easily and so humiliatingly that the crowd – Nicole – would know instantly that he had been toying with me all along.
The perfect serve came my way but my return was perfect. We entered a see-saw cycle, hit and return, repeating endlessly, near-misses and lunging stabs, until finally the ball came to my side, a breath-taking shot that veered to the table's edge, causing the crowd to gasp, although he and I knew that it was within my reach. His final gift to me. Lunging, I returned the ball to the only place it could go, impossible for him to return.
‘Say your prayers,’ I tell him, just as I rehearsed those words so many times through the years. I’ve decided to aim for the heart, after all, to shatter his heart the way he broke Nicole’s and mine, and how many others.

‘Wait,’ he calls out, reaching towards a small table next to his chair and a cigar box on the table. He opens the box and withdraws a pistol, like my own, a relic of the war.

I flinch, my finger agitated on the trigger, but he places the gun in his lap, cradling it in his hand. ‘You see, Francis. I have my own gun. I take it out and look at it all the time. I place it against my temple once in a while. I wonder how it would feel to pull the trigger and have everything come to an end.’ He sighs and shakes his head, then nods toward me. ‘So lower your gun, Francis, one gun is enough for what has to be done.’

He sees the doubt in my eyes and, in a swift movement, removes the magazine from his pistol. ‘Empty,’ he says. ‘You’re safe, Francis. You were always safe with me. So put your gun away. Whether you know it or not, you’ve accomplished your mission here. And you couldn’t have killed me anyway, in cold blood.’

We stare at each other for a long moment. ‘Please,’ he says, and his voice is like the small cry of a child.

I lower the gun. I remove my finger from the trigger. My hand trembles. I put the gun back in my pocket.

‘Go, Francis. Leave me here. Leave everything here, the war, what happened at the Wreck Centre, leave it all behind, with me.’

Suddenly, I only want to get out of there. The aroma of the soup is sickening and the tenement is too warm. I don’t want to look into his eyes any more.

My hand is on the doorknob when he calls my name. I open the door but pause, making myself wait. But I don’t look at him.

‘Let me tell you one thing before you go, Francis. You would have fallen on that grenade, anyway. All your instincts would have made you sacrifice yourself for your comrades.’

Still trying to make me better than I am.

I close the door, my face hot and flushed under the scarf and the bandage. The coldness of the hallway hits the warmth of my flesh and I shiver. It seems that I have done nothing but shiver since I returned to Frenchtown.

His voice echoes in my ears:

_Does that one sin of mine wipe away all the good things?_

_I go down the stairs, my footsteps echoing on the worn staircase._

_Downstairs, at last, after what seems like a long long time, I pause at the outside door. The sound of a pistol shot cracks the air._
Larry LaSalle was everywhere in the centre, showing how strips of leather could be made into key chains, old wine jugs into lamps, lumps of clay into ashtrays. He tamed the notorious schoolyard bully, Butch Bartoneau, convincing him that he could sing, coaching him patiently day after day, until Butch's version of 'The Dying Cowboy' brought tears to the eyes of everyone in the Wreck Centre's first musical production, *Autumn Leaves*.

'But he still beats up kids in the schoolyard,' Joey LeBlanc observed.

Under Larry LaSalle's guidance, Edna Beauchene, tall and gawky and shy, became the hit of the show, dressed like a bum and dancing an intricate routine with ash-cans, winning applause like a Broadway star.

'You are all stars,' Larry LaSalle always told us.

Rumours told us that Larry LaSalle had also been a star, performing in night-clubs in New York and Chicago. Someone brought in a faded newspaper clipping, showing him in a tuxedo, standing beside a night-club placard that read 'Starring Larry LaSalle.' We knew little about him, however, and he discouraged questions. We knew that he was born in Frenchtown and his family left to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Larry had taken dance lessons at Madame Toussaint's studio downtown as a boy and had won first prize in an amateur contest at Monument City Hall when he was nine or ten.

Why did he turn his back on show business and return to Frenchtown?

No one dared to ask him although there were dark hints that he had 'gotten into trouble' in New York City, a rumour Joey LeBlanc delighted in repeating, with raised eyebrows and a knowing look.

Dazzled by his talent and his energy, none of us dwelt on the rumours. In fact, the air of mystery that surrounded him added to his glamour. He was our champion and we were happy to be in his presence.
How does Robert Cormier present the character of Nicole in this extract?  

She comes to me and doesn’t reach for my face this time but takes my hand. “Still moist,” she says tenderness in her voice. “My good Francis. My table tennis champion. My Silver Star hero...” Hero. The word hangs in the air. “I don’t know what a hero is any more, Nicole.” I think of Larry LaSalle and his Silver Star. And of my own Silver Star, for an act of cowardice. “Write about it Francis. Maybe you can find the answer that way.” “Do you think I can?” “Of course you can.” A trace of impatience in her voice. Like the Nicole Renard I knew at the Wreck Centre just before the table tennis competition, urging me on. Telling me I could win. She steps away. “Look, I’ve got to go.” Suddenly brisk and hurried. “Can I come again sometimes?” I ask, hating myself for asking because I know the answer. It’s as inevitable as the answer to an arithmetic problem Sister Mathilde wrote on the blackboard. “Oh, Francis,” she says, the words weighted with sadness. And I see the answer in her eyes. She reaches up and presses her lips against the damp scarf that covers my own lips. I expect a flash of pain but there is only the pressure of her lips, and I close my eyes, clinging to the moment, wanting it to last for ever. “Have a good life, Francis. Be whatever will make you happy.” The bell rings, freezing us together for a moment, and when I open my eyes, she is gone, the room vacant, her footsteps echoing down the hallway, until there’s only silence left.

Example answer

How does Cormier present the character of Nicole in this extract at the end of the novel?  

The extract takes place in the last few moments of Nicole and Francis final meeting when both are trying to get some closure on their relationship. Nicole is trying to say goodbye to Francis because she doesn’t want to see him again; she wants to move on.

Firstly, Nicole is gentle, kind and affectionate when she takes Francis’ hand and says it’s “still moist” like it was when they held hands on dates. She says this with “tenderness in her voice” despite the slightly melancholy nostalgic mood. Nicole shows strength in forgiving Francis for standing by when she was raped and compliments him in the quote “My good Francis. My table tennis champion. My Silver Star hero”. The repetition of “my” shows that since Francis pledged her his love he has been hers ever since.

Next Cormier presents Nicole as encouraging and presents flashes of their old relationship as she urges Francis to “write about it”. Nicole is then presented as slightly short tempered but still supportive of Francis when he doubts himself with a “trace of impatience” in her voice, The Nicole I knew” according to Francis is speaking but the past tense “knew” highlights how different she is now in the present.

Nicole is “brisk and hurried” as she says she must leave demonstrating that she hasn’t really enjoyed the reunion and thinks it’s time for them both to go their separate ways. Nicole’s response to Francis when he asks if they can meet again “Oh Francis” words which are “weighted with sadness” show that she knows it would not be good for either of them to carry on seeing each other. Nicole’s final tender act as she reaches up “and presses her lips against the damp scarf” reflect affection and a bitter sweet goodbye. Nicole’s final words “Have a good life, Francis. Be whatever will make you happy” could make the reader sad as the relationship is most certainly over with the extract ending with a reminder of this as the only trace of Nicole is the echo of her footsteps as she walks away from Francis.