

## Heroes or Role Models?

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### INTRODUCTION

I teach senior AP World Literature in a magnet school in Houston, Texas. I usually start the course with ancient epics and mythologies: Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, etc. The students always love mythology, but the area that usually draws most of their attention is the hero. Since our school stresses multidisciplinary education, this is a popular discussion topic, not just in English class, but in others as well. Teachers and students often debate questions such as , “Who is a hero?”, “Does a hero have to be a hero all the time?”, “Can a hero have a mixed moral package?”, “Why is a hero not always a good role model?”, “Are heroes even possible in contemporary society?” Many of our students are ambitious and highly motivated. As they want to make the most of their lives, they are looking for some heroes or role models to guide them.

It is a well known if sad fact in contemporary culture that young people sometimes choose the wrong role models or admire “bad” heroes. How can we help them pick heroes and role models more wisely? This curriculum unit intends to guide students to make thoughtful choices. Such purpose may be achieved through the following five objectives.

**Objective 1.** Students should be aware that “heroes” and “role models” are not synonymous terms. By analyzing heroes of other cultures and periods, they will understand that many heroic figures, mythic or historical, rather than providing a model of a societal code of values, represent their transgression.

**Objective 2.** Students will learn to recognize some of the effects that tales of heroes create:

**a) *Inspiration.*** The heroes' journeys, trials, tribulations, courage, and perseverance may inspire us to pursue our dreams and achieve seemingly insurmountable goals.

**b) *Guides to Behavior.*** We may see their behavior in various situations as ideal and use these personalities as appropriate models for our own actions; or

**c) *Identification.*** We may find that many of the behaviors that, consciously and unconsciously, draw us to some heroes, are negative in nature, often in violent ways. Hence, what we take and need from the “hero” reveals a great deal about our most hidden selves

**Objective 3.** Students will understand that even heroes whose personalities are flawed may have a positive effect on us, and learn:

a) *The imaginary dimension of mythic tales.* Myths are constructions of the collective imagination, even when the figures raised to heroic levels may be historical.

b) *Catharsis.* If we do not choose negative heroes as models of our own behavior, the unconscious identification with the impulses that drive them cleanses or cancels our own hidden similar impulses; in other words, they are cathartic.

c) *Recognition of crisis heroes.* What one needs or can learn from negative models is often valuable and cathartic in nature. The crisis hero (a term to be explained later) often exhibits a high degree of negative behaviors but allows one to act out vicariously negative emotions and experiences.

**Objective 4.** Students will draw personal conclusions concerning the heroes they read about, watch on television or film, or hear about. Thus they will learn to make judgments independent from tradition or propaganda

**Objective 5.** Students will learn how to choose positive role models appropriate to their particular needs and circumstances.

Ultimately, it is the purpose of this unit to make students more critical when evaluating traditional heroes and role models, picking their own icons more wisely. Also, it is hoped that students will learn to view contemporary heroes, role models, and leaders using the critical skills they have learned to more intelligently pick good leaders and decide which personalities deserve to be emulated.

## **HERO VS. ROLE MODEL**

The first step is to make clear the distinction between heroes and role models. For the sake of clarity, this paper will focus on two basic types of personalities: the crisis hero and the positive role model.

A simple definition of the crisis hero was communicated to me by Phil Hey, a well-known writer and an instructor at Briar Cliff College and The University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop for many years. With his permission I shall paraphrase it as one who overcomes his human frailties to face a particular crisis or do what has to be done for a given moment in time. Mythic heroes, as well as many of our militaristic and competitive heroes are of this type: Hercules, Achilles, Sergeant York, George Patton, Shaquille O'Neal, Gary Cooper's character in High Noon, and many others.

This type of personality is different from a positive role model who possesses less flashy, more subtle traits that influence culture in a socially successful, long-term or day-by-day fashion. Examples of this type may include Confucius, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, or someone who may be a personal guiding influence: a dedicated father who

works hard to support his family, in spite of adversity, an aging grandmother who is raising school-aged children, etc. What makes the distinction somewhat confusing is that occasionally the roles overlap. A crisis hero may become a positive role model, at least in a partial sense, for example, King Arthur, George Washington, Winston Churchill, Dwight Eisenhower, etc. These are clearly heroes that come forth when their society is in times of crisis, but then stay in the picture for an extended period of time as positive role models. However, if one balances their positive personal attributes against their negative ones, it becomes clear that many of these individuals are not generally positive models. Parents might wonder, “Would I want my child to be Douglas Mac Arthur?” “Would I want my daughter to have the same temperament as Elizabeth the 1st?”

By the same token, role models can often be inspirational, though usually not to the same feverish pitch. For example, it is easy to visualize Elizabeth the 1st inspiring a group of overworked, tired British sailors to enthusiastically sail out to battle in a well equipped, vast Spanish Armada. It is not so easy to envision Florence Nightingale or Mother Theresa doing the same. In an attempt to simplify this confusing situation, the following guides may help:

- a) A crisis hero is typically inspirational, but seldom has the personal characteristics required to be a positive role model.
- b) A positive role model may be inspirational, but is not always so and may not be perceived as such. If they are seen as inspirational, it is normally in a less extreme, more mundane sense.
- c) The term negative role model is often applied to the crisis hero. Often people who do not understand the difference between the two see this hero and wonder how this person can be a role model with so many character defects. Usually, though, this “negative role model” reveals something about our darker needs or provides a cathartic effect.

In the next two sections I take as an example of the application of these ideas, two heroes of the Iliad, Achilles (a crisis hero) and Hector (a positive role model) and compare them; Alexander the Great, a historical hero whose real actions and, especially, the myths woven around him, continue to appear glamorous even in our day. I choose Alexander because he took Achilles as his role model.

### **a) LEARNING TO ANALYZE: COMPARISON OF ACHILLES AND HECTOR**

Students learn difficult concepts more easily if they are shown examples. An approach to help students understand the difference between a crisis hero and a role model might be to contrast two figures that clearly represent these two types of heroes. Because the Greek epics are assigned reading in many college courses and because the Trojan War is still popular with youngsters and adults alike, I have chosen Achilles and Hector as

examples of the crisis hero and the role model. Though there are some areas of overlap, there are clear differences.

Achilles is clearly a crisis hero. He is a warrior who prefers to go out in a blaze of glory, shining like a meteor and burning out quickly rather than live a long, uneventful life as king of the Myrmidons. He steps forward in the Greeks' darkest hour, when they are doomed: their troops fleeing headlong before the Trojans' army, their ships burning, most of the Greek heroes wounded, Patroklos killed, Achilles' own armor taken by Hector. At that moment he stands by the wall where he can be seen and with a roar terrifies the Trojan forces so intensely they turn and flee for the walls of Troy. The next day, the Greeks are renewed and encouraged. The great Achilles, resplendent in armor and built like a god, steps forth to do battle. He is literally blazing from the gleam off his armor to the fire in his eyes. He then proceeds to single-handedly savage the Trojan forces. Books XX and XXI give graphic, almost autopsy-like accounts of Achilles mutilating and dismembering the Trojan ranks. There are so many corpses that they are literally choking the river Skamandros. Page after page, we read the names of the dead and horrific descriptions of their wounds. He is the ultimate warrior, a killing machine that makes the movie characters of Sylvester Stallone, Steven Segal and Arnold Schwarzenegger look like boyscouts in comparison. Ironically, one of the scenes that shows how ferocious he really is comes not from the pile of corpses, but from the words of two aged and grieving parents. One of the most touching scenes in the Greek epic is the start of Book XXII of the Iliad. Hector has stayed outside the walls to engage Achilles, believing that if he can kill the most dreaded Greek hero, the city he has sworn to protect can be saved. Though he knows the odds are against him and struggles with his fear, he waits alone outside the walls. Above him, his father Priam watches Achilles swiftly approaching:

Him the old man Priam first beheld as he sped across the plain, blazing as the star that cometh forth at harvest-time . . . Brightest of all is he, yet for an evil sign is he set . . . Even so on Achilles' breast the bronze gleamed as he ran. And the old man cried aloud and beat upon his head with his hands . . . And the old man spake piteously unto him, stretching forth his hands: "Hector, beloved son, I pray thee await not this man alone with none beside thee, lest thou quickly meet thy doom . . . Nay, come within the wall, my child, that thou preserve the men and women of Troy, neither give great triumph to the son of Peleus, and be thyself bereft of sweet life. Have compassion also on me, the helpless one, who still can feel, ill-fated . . . Thus spake the old man, and grasped his hoary hairs, plucking them from his head, but he persuaded not Hector's soul. Then his mother in her turn wailed tearfully, loosening the folds of her robe, while with the other hand she showed her breast; and through her tears spake to him winged words: Hector, my child, have regard unto this bosom and pity me, if ever I gave thee consolation of my breast . . . Thus they with wailing spake to their dear son, beseeching him sore, yet they persuaded not Hector's soul, but he stood awaiting Achilles as he drew nigh in giant might.

As we all know, Achilles mercilessly dispatches Hector, dishonors his corpse and, until the last book of the poem, refuses to give his remains to his family so that they can properly mourn his death. Clearly he is the stereotypical, militaristic hero we have seen and idolized throughout centuries of epics, chanson de gestes, and war movies: The young soldier who picks up the flag from a fallen comrade and bravely marches in the frontline, whether it be from the Revolutionary War, the Civil War or countless other wars; The Charge of the Light Brigade, the doomed defenders of the Alamo defying Santa Ana, George Pattons' tanks racing across Europe to save American troops trapped at the Battle of the Bulge, John Wayne standing tall, Thompson, submachine gun in hand, shielding his platoon, the cavalry coming in the nick of time to save the helpless settlers, the exhausted or injured quarterback or basketball star that reenters the game in the last few minutes to save the day for the home team. These examples have always been idolized as heroes – and they are inspirational. We all need (individually and as a country) encouragement to try harder in times of personal trial or stress. This is a legitimate need attended to by the hero, yet there is an almost juvenile fantasy aspect to the crisis hero (more on this later), and they are not often positive role models (many young people idolize WWF wrestlers, for example). Certainly, Achilles is not a positive role model. Besides being “gifted” in dismembering human beings, it is not clear what other assets, if any, he possesses. What is apparent, however, are his personal characteristics. He is vain, egotistical, and immature. He refrains from battle, not for honor or principle, but because Agamemnon took his war prize, the girl Briseis. This is much like a child who pouts when he doesn't like the rules of a game and refuses to play. Even when the Greek army is on the verge of total destruction, his pride stops him from doing his sworn duty. He is the leader of the Myrmidons only because of social status and because he is the most deadly warrior in the group. Even after the war is won, the spirit of Achilles demands one more sacrifice—the death of the innocent girl Polyxena (see the play *Hecuba* by Euripides). This is in contrast with Agamemnon, Menelaus, Nestor, Odysseus, etc. who care about their men and lead by example.

When one examines the character of Achilles, it is clear that he is a hero whose real claim to fame is that he comes forward in a most critical hour. He has inspired the people of his culture and has been idealized by many in modern times, apparently for his ability to make war and kill on an epic scale. Nowhere is this better shown than in Book XXI of the *Iliad* when Lykaon, the young son of Priam and merely a boy, encounters Achilles. The youth kneels at Achilles' feet in the traditional supplication for mercy. Loosely paraphrased, Achilles says that if the gods have put the boy in front of him, they must have wanted him to die at his hands, and almost cuts the youth in half. Then he flings the body into the river. However, beyond being a deadly warrior, he has very few positive traits. After he kills the brave and honorable Hector, he dishonors the body, dragging it behind a chariot for days, letting dogs and carrion-eating birds tear at the body and refusing Priam's legitimate request to allow his son a proper burial ceremony. Eventually, however, he relents, obeys the command of Zeus conveyed to him by his mother Thetis, and, overcome by compassion for the old Priam, weeps with him.

Clearly, he is a crisis hero and he is inspirational. Yet he should not be adopted as a role model.

Hector, a Trojan hero and therefore an enemy of the Greeks, is much more of a role model. Though he is a fierce, powerful and courageous leader of men and clearly braces up the people of Troy, he is primarily a man of peace who is fighting not so much for glory or fame, but for his family and home. It is apparent that he does not enjoy putting on his armor and going out to battle. It is a job and a duty, and a grim one at that. In Book Six of the *Iliad* he tells his beloved wife, Andromache, that though he fights for honor, glory, and the city, he has a premonition that Troy will lose. What bothers him most is not his own death or his father's and mother's, but what will happen to her and his young son, Astyanax. Hector would prefer to spend his days with her and their son, helping to govern Troy in a fair and prosperous manner. He is that citizen/soldier Americans are so proud of, the individual that will "fight like hell", not because he loves war, but because he wants it to end as quickly as possible.

Hector is considered an honorable man and noble hero by Trojans and Greeks alike. Historians and writers from ancient times to Shakespeare (in his *Troilus and Cressida*) have described him as the most honorable figure in the entire Trojan War saga. He openly condemns Paris for the immoral act that started the war; Paris did not simply have an affair with another man's wife. He let his lust take control of his proper judgement, he betrayed a friend's trust, violated the guest code, and brought his illegal and tainted relationship back to Troy. He senses that they will lose the war because they are fighting for an unjust cause, which they are validating. Hector believes they should return Helen to her rightful husband, and that by keeping her, Troy is compounding the immorality of the original transgression. Yet, believing all of this, Hector will continue to fight valiantly because it is his duty and responsibility. (These traits can be compared to those of a historical figure in America's Civil War. See the Lesson Plans below.)

Hector tries to end the conflict and the killing on both sides by proposing that Menelaus, Helen's rightful husband, and Paris fight in single combat, the winner taking Helen and a fair recompense in treasure. Knowing that his brother will probably lose to Menelaus, he still guarantees a fair fight. The Greek generals agree to the arrangement, even the highly suspicious Odysseus, because they know that Hector can be trusted. Later, when Hector encounters Achilles exhausted and resting, the Trojan does not press for battle because it would give him an unfair advantage.

Hector became a role model to many in antiquity and to readers of the *Iliad* in classical as well as medieval times. He exhibits traits that most cultures are proud of and would want their young people to emulate. He is a powerful and skilled defender who feels fear, but has the courage to overcome it. He prefers peace; he fights because it is his duty and responsibility, but mainly to protect those he cares about and his home. In fact, he will willingly sacrifice his own life if it will save those he cares about. His devotion to his wife and child is his strongest motivation. He is an honorable man who is fair even in

mortal combat and is revered by friend and foe alike. He is respectful of his parents' feelings and honors the deities in which he believes. He is a very different man than his counterpart, Achilles. Yet it was Achilles who was adopted in the western tradition as the ultimate epic hero, the "greatest of the Achaeans."

## **ALEXANDER THE GREAT, HERO AND GOD**

In his short life (357-323 B.C.E.) Alexander of Macedon made a lasting mark in history. He pushed the boundaries of his father Philip's domain to what seemed the confines of the world, but his charisma endured much longer than his empire. Arrian wrote in the second century C.E., "For I myself believe that there was at that time no race of mankind, no city, no single individual, to which the name of Alexander had not reached." Alexander has been seen as a young romantic hero by some, as a megalomaniac madman by others

In 338 B.C.E. Philip of Macedon held sway over all of Greece's mainland cities except Sparta. After Philip's death, his son Alexander started his own army eastward toward Asia Minor. News of Alexander's victories over Darius spread fast through the Mediterranean region and West Asia. Awed by Alexander's success, various cities proclaimed Alexander a divinity. Alexander and his army marched into the middle of Asia Minor in pursuit of Darius, leaving behind the pacification needed for expanded conquest. In an extraordinary campaign, the young Alexander acquired a vast empire. He was clever enough to win the hearts and minds of those he defeated. He was generous toward his own men and did not neglect to offer worship to the gods of those he conquered. But as he piled up success after success, his ambition grew proportionately.

Alexander admired the *Iliad* and carried it in his campaigns. In his own imagination, he was another Achilles. He founded Alexandria of Egypt and several other cities bearing his own name. Egypt's priesthood hailed Alexander as pharaoh—as a king of kings. Like the pharaohs, he was hailed as a god. At Siwah, Alexander was welcomed by the local high priest as a great conqueror and as the son of Amon-Ra, a counterpart of the Greek god Zeus. He encouraged those who revered him as the son of an Egyptian pharaoh, as the son of a god, and a god himself. Alexander welcomed this proclamation of his divinity.

When Darius, the Persian emperor, was killed by an assassin, Alexander pursued and captured the culprit. Now he was king of the East and as such he began borrowing from the pomp of the Persian throne: for example, those who came to see him had to prostrate themselves before him in recognition of his divinity. Alexander's march into India would have been followed by the conquest of Sicily and Italy. But in 323 BCE, at the age of thirty-two, Alexander died from illness.

By his conquests, Alexander had changed the world. But what had not changed was the inclination to create myth. Even while Alexander lived, his court historian,

Callisthenes, had written of an incident in which the sea had retreated from before Alexander's path. After his death mythmakers colored their image of Alexander as they pleased. Some described Alexander as having had godly powers, while Zoroastrian priests demonized Alexander. In Egypt, Alexander would become known as the son of the last pharaoh, Nectanebus. Arabs came to know him as Iskander and told fanciful stories about him. In Ethiopia, Christians would describe his father, Philip, as a Christian martyr, and characterized Alexander himself as an ascetic saint.

As time went on, more miraculous feats were attributed to Alexander. Examples of Alexander's amazing adventures are the following: he attempts to explore the depths of the sea; he goes into the heavens in a basket carried by large birds; he searches to find the End of the Earth. The ambition that drove the restless historical Alexander to expand the boundaries of his empire readily translated him into a folk figure striving to venture beyond human limitations. In popular folklore, Alexander (or a daughter or sister of Alexander, known as Gorgona) was identified with a mythic fisherman who became a creature of the sea after drinking the Water of Life. Unless the sailors answer Gorgona's question ("Who is Alexander?") saying that he is the Ruler of the World, she was thought to sink their ship.

A man of contradictory traits (cruelty and sympathy, brilliance and blindness, paranoia and an open-handed generosity), driven himself by megalomania, Alexander still fulfills the secret dreams of many who idealize his figure. As evidence of his living popularity, it can be mentioned that there are over 600 web pages dedicated to him, some of which are full of romantic or nationalistic passion for this mythico-historical young hero.

### **CATHARSIS: THE NEGATIVE ROLE MODEL**

There are needs that heroes can fill of which we are not always aware. Heroes who are excessive, violent, even transgressive of the most basic ethical and social principles may allow us to live vicariously through them. As pointed out above, some of the qualities of the hero are negative in nature. It may be that the positive facets are not the only things that draw us to a particular personality; often the negative ones do. Achilles is a merciless killing machine. We may not want to admit it, but this is exactly what we admire in the character. The negative traits of the hero are as important to the character as the qualities that make us admire him or her. Almost anyone would agree the most awe-inspiring and powerful aspect of Medea as a personality is the fact that she did kill her children. The best part of Star Wars is not that Darth Vader was eventually reformed; it was all the horrific acts he dared before that moment. The bloody homecoming of Odysseus when he unhesitatingly kills the sons of the most important families in his own kingdom, may be seen as too extreme, yet ancient audiences and modern readers alike may secretly cheer him on, thinking "They deserve it!" They may relate to his revenge, wishing that they, with the help of the fates or whatever powers that be, might in an equally swift manner take revenge on those who had wronged them.

When we watch Rambo or a Steven Segal movie, we might say we abhor the violence, yet we watch it. In the movie "Falling Down," Michael Douglas plays a middle class professional who one day reaches a breaking point. With considerable firepower he has inadvertently acquired from a street gang, he proceeds to "get back" at everyone who has done him a real or imagined wrong. We all agree we would never do such things, but millions went to see this movie and millions more rented it. Why? Is it because, vicariously at least, we want to do those things? People or situations can provoke us enough in our highly stressed, often harsh world to push us to a breaking point. Most of us would never shoot up a post office, commit road rage on the freeway or other such outrageous actions. Instead, we find ways to release these tensions in manners more socially accepted and less likely to land us in jail. We may beat a small white ball unmercifully, ride high-speed motorcycles, jog or live out our aggressions towards our enemies through the various exploits of our heroes. Most of these activities are not what we would consciously do in the real world. They are not only socially unacceptable and illegal, but they are not who we are. However, they do give expression to parts of our nature and emotions in ways that do not threaten our freedom or our "community image." These hidden traits, desires and socially incorrect actions give vent to our "bad side" and are clearly cathartic in function. They provide a cleansing of these strong, sometimes evil, destructive emotions. We live out these desires and actions acceptable and unacceptable, expurgated through our heroes.

## **CONCLUSION: EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE OF THIS UNIT**

Ultimately, what we want our students to learn from this unit is how to pick heroes and role models thoughtfully. They need to understand that positive and negative heroes can fill dissimilar and specific cultural needs.

Many different historical and fictional personalities might be appropriate candidates to fill the role of the hero in a particular application: Genghis Khan, Lancelot du Lac, Machiavelli's Prince, Don Quixote, Lenin, etc. Most are not particularly good role models; some are, in fact, abysmal. But, as long as our students understand that these are crisis heroes picked to answer a specific need or purpose in a critical instant, they will realize these individuals are not intended to be role models.

Students need to pick role models because they show a variety of long-term characteristics that will be of benefit in broadly based applications and because in human life there is a requirement for consistency. We are only concerned with how Davy Crockett acted as a hero at the Alamo, not how bad mannered he was when provoked in public. We may look to Budha, Ghandi, Christ, or Martin Luther King, to see how to control our tempers when someone insults us or makes caustic comments about us, how to cope with troubling personal issues that don't have immediate resolution or how to find the courage to simply go about our daily routines when a loved one is diagnosed with terminal cancer. This is the domain of the role model. If properly introduced to the

concept, our students will see that Mohammed, Mother Teresa, Jimmy Carter, Grandmother, even Winnie the Pooh, can be excellent role models as long as these students are shown what a role model is and how to select attributes to match particular needs in life. An added benefit to students learning these skills is that they will learn to analyze and be more critical of those traditionally seen as heroes and role models. The purpose is not to make them more cynical but wiser and better informed when picking their own personalities to admire and emulate. Such understanding will help them make better personal choices, but will also enable them to use critical skills when they make judgments about history, different cultures of the world, or political propaganda. It is hoped this will especially carry over when picking elected leaders.

Teachers can use any personalities from their particular curriculum, or they can select icons suggested by their students. In our school, where multi-discipline learning is stressed, some of my colleagues who teach our government and history are thinking of using part of this unit to contrast Grant and Lee as Civil War counterparts to Achilles and Hector. They feel it will put a multidimensional perspective to the conflict, rather than simply a good side vs. bad side, winners vs. losers portrayal. If younger students are still confused by the differences between heroes and role models, there are some activities on the following pages that may simplify the issue. In the final analysis, this is still a work in progress. I invite the colleagues who read this unit to contact me or The Houston Teachers Institute with their feedback and comments.

## **TEACHING STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES**

I do not offer detailed lesson plans, but rather general strategies. The classroom teacher can tailor them for his/her individual students. The four sample sessions described are but an arbitrary number. The instructor may separate this material into as many individual lessons as he/she sees fit, as well as develop other lessons relating to the topic.

Whether this teaching tool is to be used as a primary unit or as a supplement to a longer treatment of mythology is also the choice of the instructor, who can determine when and how the concept of the hero will be incorporated. If a section on myth is to include all major components of a mythology course, the teacher can use the quest hero (a type of crisis hero) as a starting. If the examination of the hero is the only focus of the presentation, a brief mention of the nature of mythic tales and their widespread tradition in many cultures may be the start of the unit. Likewise, prior to beginning this unit, the teacher might assign a writing project due the first day. Have the students write an essay about their favorite hero or role model. Do not give them any further directions or restrictions. At the start of the first day of this unit, collect all of these papers and keep them on file for a later date.

## Session 1

I like to start a class, particularly the first day of new material, with a “set.” This is an activity of some type that focuses the student’s attention on the main point of the unit. It can be a simple question thrown out to start an animated discussion, a skit performed by some students, a film excerpt or the like. For instance, I might show a film clip from “The Wind and the Lion” where Sean Connery, sword in hand, charges in on a black Arabian to save the heroine. Whatever the set is, it should rivet the student’s attention so they will be open to the concept of the hero.

After the focus on the “hero” has been established, the teacher might pose questions that will not only elicit responses but discussion. Typical questions might be, “What is a hero?” “Who is a hero?” “Are our world leaders heroes?” “Who are your personal heroes?” Students like to answer these types of questions; they especially like to add to or disagree with the comments made by others. The teacher can guide this into an organized discussion. By now it will probably be apparent that they are combining heroes and role models with few, if any, realizing that there is a difference. There may be some responses strongly disagreeing with a choice of a hero because other students, not understanding there is a difference, cannot identify with that character as a role model.

At this point, you could break the class into groups of four or less, each foursome picking one of the heroes a group member had previously suggested. Have them prepare a brief presentation explaining why they see this person as a hero. After each group has made their presentation, ask the other groups if they agree with the findings. “Why not?” The next step might be to ask if their chosen hero has any negative qualities. The students may not know these readily and this could be assigned as a take home project for the next class. Before the class is dismissed, assign a three-to-five page mythological story revolving around a hero’s quest or deeds of courage.

## Session 2

The second class would begin with each group ready to discuss the negative qualities of their “hero.” Though this sounds simplistic, it may not be. Depending on the age and academic level of the student and input from parents, these could be anything but objective. If students claim that their hero has no negative characteristics, remind them of documented negative actions of some widely admired figures. The teacher may have to guide this activity a bit. When each group is ready, have them share the negative characteristics with the class. The next step is to have each group create two columns: one listing the positive traits, the other negative. It is important that everyone in the group is satisfied with both lists. Then, have them count the numbers in both columns; ask how many groups had more negative traits than positive. At this point the teacher *could* ask, “Why is this so?” “How could this happen?” “Do you still see this person as a hero?” It would be better if the students asked these questions, not the teacher. Ultimately, the answer will be that there is a difference between heroes and role models

and heroes don't always make good role models and vice versa. It would be better if the students derive these answers on their own, not merely have them given to them. The instructor can guide or ask questions, even introduce clips of brutal scenes from films based upon the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* and have them compare them with several scenes in "The Right Stuff" to help learners see the difference between Achilles or Ulysses and John Glen. As a last resort, or as a means of summation, the classroom teacher can deliver a brief lecture on the crisis hero and the positive role model.

Eventually, the difference between the two will become clear. For younger students or those who are having difficulty with the concept, have them do a ratio of positive to negative characteristics. Using the lists previously generated, students can calculate the ratio as more than one or less than one. A crisis hero usually has a quotient less than one—sometimes far less! Positive role models are typically much higher than 1:1. Wrap up the session by summarizing what was learned in this session and reiterate that there are heroes that come forward in times of societal and cultural crises and there are positive role models. Restate the differences.

### **Session 3**

The next time the class meets, distribute the essays on heroes that were previously collected. The students can read them to themselves, exchange them with a partner or read them in front of the class. The important point is that they will use their new-found skills to ascertain if their hero really is a crisis hero or a positive role model. After a short period for this activity, the class will ask questions of themselves and each other.

Next, have students determine which personality type is appropriate for a given need. Have them imagine a variety of different situations that would call for either a crisis hero or a positive role model. These situations can be anything from exerting that last bit of energy to win a race, to facing one's parents after wrecking the new car or working towards a scholarship while managing a part-time job to help the family. The students can simply label each situation as matching one of two personality types, or they can designate some as overlap situations. They may want to make a game of it and use the heroes and role models written about by their classmates to fit the manufactured scenarios. I let my students decide how they will do these types of activities. They are far more creative than I and usually pick a way of doing the activity that is more fun than what I had envisioned.

As a means to enhance the learning process, or as an enrichment activity, films or excerpts that portray heroes and/or role models can be shown. Alternatively, the class activities can be linked to other academic areas. Students can read the poem *Ulysses* by Tennyson and *Whose Woods These Are* by Frost. Ask the class what relation to the hero/role model issue is suggested by those poems. Most students will immediately pick up that one describes the inspirational, crisis hero while the other is about the staid,

responsible role model. Other reading assignments from other academic areas can be incorporated in much the same manner. (This could be anything from *Macbeth*, for English, or *The Lathe of Heaven*, for technical writing, to a biography for a history class.) End the class with a question for the next day. Why do crisis heroes have negative qualities and what can we learn from these?

#### **Session 4**

The first activity is have the students read their mythological stories to the class. All mythology students know that the mythological hero is often called a quest hero because they go on a quest or face a challenge (i.e. The Grail, The Golden Fleece, The Ark of the Covenant, etc.) By now it should be apparent to the class that the quest hero is a type of crisis hero. If not, efforts to guide them to this point should be made. After hearing several of the myths, the students should quickly identify the inspirational aspects and the negative qualities of the character. Most writings are autobiographical in nature, especially those of amateur writers. And, since the members of the class have known each other for some time, they will observe that the stories reveal some personality traits of the author. Some of these traits will be less than ideal. They may show pent up frustrations, aggression, even violence expressed through the exploits of the hero. They may also reveal insecurities, self-doubts in interactions with members of the opposite sex or resentment towards authority figures. If the class already has a friendly rapport, open discussions are the norm and the students are sufficiently mature, the self-revealing, emotion-releasing aspect of the crisis heroes as well as of the negative role models in the students' papers can be discussed in a direct and open manner. As students are already familiar with the cathartic element in tragic heroic tales, they should readily see that the negative role model is a cathartic figure. Hence, the negative actions shown by the "heroes" of these stories are a type of emotional cleansing.

If the class atmosphere does not encourage such a straightforward approach, the instructor may have to be more subtle and tactful. A less personal approach to emphasize this point might be an informal discussion of how a movie hero acts out what the audience would like to do to the bad guy, or against an unfair situation. This can lead to various and revealing examples of how those students felt when they watched that film. Other techniques could also be employed. If a number of students in the class have read Shakespearean or classical tragedies, perhaps the cathartic element can be introduced via this avenue and later transposed to the student-created hero.

Note: The following section is optional and recommended for advanced and older students.

At some point it will be suggested that some of the crisis hero's actions are immature fantasies. For example, we are all familiar with youth movies that feature the shy, nerdy underdog who somehow becomes the hero, saves the school, city or world and gets the vivacious, gorgeous girl. It could be the plot from numerous teen movies---it could also

be the plot for a Jerry Lewis film! The images of John Wayne, Arnold Swartzenegger, or countless others standing alone, machinegun in hand, holding off an entire army, has always made veterans snicker or, possibly, become offended. Any one who has seen combat knows that the media-induced fantasy of invincibility does not represent the harsh reality of war. The idea that the hero is always victorious follows soon after. At this point, some of the more mature students might observe that many of the negative aspects of the crisis hero seem to be a function of immaturity and the longer term qualities of the role model may be the result of maturity and wisdom. Though this statement is too general and sweeping to be completely true, it is an interesting observation. If the teacher wishes to pursue this further, an excellent work to point this out is *The Odyssey*. Odysseus, portrayed in the *Iliad* is a young, arrogant leader, the most brilliant tactician of the expedition, is suffering numberless trials and tribulations in his return journey from Troy. In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, a pivotal point in this epic, he descends into Hades where he meets his mother and many dead comrades. He learns that Penelope and Telemachus are in great need of him and usurpers are trying to take his home and kingdom. He tries to embrace his mother, but her ghost vanishes. He finds that great Achilles would prefer to be a poor man's slave than be a hero in death. He comes out from the underworld a changed man, reborn as it were. From that time on he clings to the unwavering purpose of returning home, to become once again a deserving husband to Penelope, a devoted father to Telemachus and a fair and noble king to Ithaca. Clearly, a change has occurred in the character, a maturing. The horror of battle and the absence of loved ones and home have helped him see that his childlike attitudes about the glorious, heroic aspects of war were only fantasies. This also explains why in Odysseus, as in some other characters, there appears to some overlap between the crisis hero and the positive role model.

Ultimately, the end of lesson four should be a direct and in-depth analysis of the crisis hero/negative role model and what they reveal about the emotional condition and needs of those, and the society that creates and relates to these heroes.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Suggested reading for teachers:

Fishwick, Marshall, *The Hero—American style*, New York, David McKay Company Inc., 1983.

This book shows that our heroes reveal the kind of people we are. It focuses on uniquely American heroes such as the mountain men, cowboys, Robert E. Lee, Douglas Fairbanks, Admiral Byrd, Bob Dylan, JFK, etc.

Frazer, Sir James, *The Golden Bough*, New York, McMillan, 1922.

This is a classic work in mythology that documents innumerable myths and rituals of many cultures, documenting the connection between magic and religion, and showing the significance of the sacrificial hero.

Hadas, Moses and Morton Smith, *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity*, New York, Harper & Row, 1965.

This book looks at figures such as Dionysus, Orpheus, as well as Moses and Jesus. It is a work with a highly spiritual slant.

Jones, Gwyn, *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

This examines the nature of several epic heroes including Beowulf and King Hrothgar of the Norse saga. It would be useful for comparative study of the heroes.

Kirk, G.S., *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990. A perspective on the understanding of myths published in 1970 that still commands interest.

Kramer, Samuel Noah, *Mythologies of the ancient world*. With contributions by Rudolf Anthes and others. Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1961 This book provides a comparative view of several, diverse mythologies. Recommended for those who will teach various world belief systems.

Mason, Herbert. *Gilgamesh*. New York: Mentor Books, 1972.

An English translation of the oldest epic text preserved fragmentarily. Suitable reading for students as well. Clearly shows similarity in heroic traits even as far back as the earliest civilizations.

Morford, Mark and Robert Leonardon, *Classical Mythology*, 6th. Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999., 1973. One of the better all-around general treatments of mythology. This book includes translations of ancient texts, illustrations, and references to films based on the myths. Recommended for students too.

### **Suggested reading for students:**

(Note: Most of the above references would be suitable for older or more advanced students.)

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Bantam Books, 1969. A novel often assigned in classes; it shows the heroic role portrayed by a young, African-American woman.

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975. This Nobel Prize winner explores existentialist heroes fighting a passive, non-violent battle more of philosophy than bullets. On many college reading lists.

Cervantes, Miguel. *Don Quixote*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1950. The classic work which features an un-heroic hero and examines what really constitutes a hero. Also on most college reading lists.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Random House, 1994. A novel depicting a Hispanic woman trying to find a purpose in a life that she does not control and often dominated by men.

Connolly, Peter, *The Legend of Odysseus*. Oxford University Press. Mythic and historical materials told in an appealing way. This book covers all of the *Iliad* as well as the *Odyssey*.

*Demeter and Persephone*, translated and adapted by Penelope Proddow, Illus. Barbara Cooney. Doubleday, 1972. A version of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.

Euripides. *Medea*, in *Medea; Hippolytus; Electra; Helen*, translated with explanatory notes by James Morwood ; with introduction by Edith Hall. New York : Oxford University Press, 1997. Well-known classic of a strong-willed woman whose emotions are too large to control.

Homer, *Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles; introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. New York: Viking, 1990. The classic story of the hero. Mandatory reading for teachers and students.

Homer. *Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagle ; introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. New York : Viking, 1996. One of the greatest epics of all time that should be mandatory reading for everyone.

Millstone, David H. *An Elementary Odyssey: Teaching Ancient Civilization through Story*, Heinemann. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1995. An excellent guide for teachers, describing in lucid detail a full curriculum for fifth-graders based on Homer's *Odyssey*.

### **Suggested Movies or Excerpts:**

#### Falling Down

A film depicting a middle-class professional who once snaps. There are some violent scenes, but it does show the cathartic nature of heroes.

#### Ghandi

The life of Mahatma Ghandi. It shows Ghandi in a completely positive role model; negative aspects are ignored.

#### The Lathe of Heaven

A futuristic story of a simple man who saves the world, but does not want to be a hero. Instead he becomes a role model for those campaigning against over zealous science.

#### The Odyssey

A recent television movie starring Armand Desante. It can be shown to all ages and has the visual effects and pizzazz young people love.

#### Rambo

A cult classic in the violence genre. The hero is one-dimensional but clearly of the crisis type. A good example of what a role model is not.

#### The Right Stuff

The story of the original seven astronauts. This is a fine example of the inspirational hero and in a form suitable for all ages. The character of John Glen is also depicted as an excellent role model, but it is a bit contrived.

#### Rocky I

The cult classic of a crisis hero. It has all the inspirational gimmicks: the poor underdog, a simple forced to face a great challenge, with the musical score adding effect. Some scenes are too violent to show younger children.

### **Web Sites:**

Ancient World Web Site, <http://www.julen.net/ancient>. This broad site links to a variety of related sites about ancient civilizations. It is user friendly with convenient sub-listings. 06/20/00.

Bulfinch's Mythology, <http://www.bulfinch.org/fables>. One of the better online mythologies with excellent illustrations. 06/20/00.

Encyclopedia Mythica, <http://www.pantheon.org/mythica>. An extensive collection material on most aspects of mythology. The information is more general than scholarly, however. 06/14/00.

Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts, <http://www.artsmia.org/mythology>. This data base mainly features related art works, but does give information and background on the myths that inspired the art. 05/23/00.

Mythweb, <http://www.mythweb.com>. This site for teachers has materials on the heroes, gods and monsters of Greek mythology. 06/27/00.

Perseus Project, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. A basic site with numerous links, particularly user friendly. It is an excellent site for all classical studies, with stronger emphasis on the Greek civilization. 04/23/00.