Proposed Course Syllabus: Heroes, From Achilles to Superman

Course Synopsis

The concept of the hero is one of the enduring legacies of our past. Everyone can name a famous hero of myth—Gilgamesh, Achilles, Oedipus, King Arthur, and so on. But today, the term "hero" not only refers to those famous adventurers of old stories, but also to famous historical figures, such as Ghandi or George Washington, and the people who have made a significant difference in our lives, like our grandmothers, coaches, and mentors. In fact, when asked today to give a list of heroes, Americans are as likely to name family members as other real-life individuals or fictional characters. From Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger III to The Incredible Hulk, heroes make up a large part of our lives.

The proposed course, *Heroes, from Greece to Now*, will introduce students to the historical concept of the hero and its continuing legacy. Many people use the word "hero" without realizing its heritage: it is a direct translation of the Greek word *herôs*, meaning much the same as it does today. However, the ancient Greeks used the term primarily in a religious sense: the Greek hero was a deceased ancestor who still had the ability to influence lives of contemporary Greeks. These Greek heroes, often those familiar to us from mythology, had shrines and festivals, and the Greeks worshipped them in a similar manner as they would the major Greek gods and divinities. Perhaps even more interesting is the Greek practice of "heroization": sometimes, a person who had distinguished themself while living was accorded the same honors as those heroes from the distant past. We might say the same thing about Martin Luther King Jr. today—Americans have established monuments and holidays in his honor, and he holds a special place in the American historical imagination.

However, despite the popularity of a Martin Luther King or George Washington, most people would not describe them as religious entities. This course will help students understand how a Greek *herôs* with his religious significance has transformed into an American hero whose power is largely relegated to mythology and personal inspiration. What is the difference between a religious hero and historical hero? How about a real hero and a fictional one? Why do we use the term hero to describe such a broad category of people? How does our understanding of heroism affect our decisions, both in our personal ethics and political choices? These are the questions that this course asks students: their engagement with the readings and discussion in course will give them the tools to answer them.

In order to answer these questions, this course will take (and has to take) an interdisciplinary approach, employing not only readings about the origins of the hero in Greek cult but also drawing on examples from the present day. Students will have reading assignments from several disciplines, including history, literature, philosophy, psychology, political theory, and sociology. The primary textbook assigned will be *Heroes: What They Do & Why We Need Them*, a psychological and sociological take on heroes by S. T. Allison and G. R. Goethals. This book will form the backbone of the course, guiding students through the different types of heroes that populate our mental landscape. The rest of the course, described below, will go through these categories of heroes and show how our understanding of the present is shaped by our traditions from the past.

First, students will be introduced the basic concept of the Greek *herôs*. Homer's *Iliad* is ideal for this task: the story both familiarizes the reader with many famous Greek heroes and provides an opportunity to interrogate the values they ascribe to heroism. The characters of the *Iliad* often stop to ponder their own ethics, such as Sarpedon in book 12. He asks himself, "Why do we fight in front lines and risk our lives to win glory?" The answer, he gives, is so that he may have pride of place back home, and since they cannot live on forever, the Greek hero should risk his all for fame and glory. His message is very personal and self-serving: since *I* cannot live forever, *I* should struggle to win glory and riches. But at the same time it reveals why he becomes a hero: he struggles against adversity to reach the pinnacle of perfection in *other men's eyes*. This is the essence of Homer's heroes, fighting everlasting fame. However, this is not an entirely consistent notion in Greek culture: After reading the *Iliad*, students will move on to the tragedies of *Agamemnon* and *Ajax*. These plays complicate the notion of the hero striving for glory—both die as a result of unexpected consequences of adhering to this Homeric heroic code—and introduce the notion to the student that perhaps a culture may not always be consistent.

After exploring the Greek heroes of the *Iliad*, students will begin exploring heroes as religious entities. The Greek countryside was littered with heroic monuments, which start springing up at the end of the Bronze Age around huge tombs that early Greeks built for their important leaders. The archaeological site at Lefkandi is a perfect example. After a male and female pair were buried luxuriously (including the sacrifice of two horses) in the middle of a large feasting hall, the building was razed and mounds of dirt were tossed over it to create a large burial mound. For about century afterward, the community used this site as a cemetery, consciously treating the place as the holy ground for their ancestors. In later Greek society, the Greeks sacrificed at the tombs of their heroes. Students will be asked, "What role does the death of a hero serve in cementing a hero's legacy?" For the Greeks, it meant that this person, who was powerful in life, will still be powerful in death as a protector of the city. This is not entirely dissimilar to the cult of the saints, on which students will next focus. There are similarities and differences: to what extent are the practices of early Christians similar to that of the Greeks? Many of those early Christians were Greeks, and to that end we will turn our attention to a short treatise on heroes written in the third century CE, Flavius Philostratus' *Heroikos*—this text and the accompanying secondary readings will challenge students to interrogate the extent to which the beliefs either they or people they know may be shaped by Greek cult practice.

The next few sections of the course will explore different categories of heroes, with both their roots in ancient culture and manifestations in the world of today. The first category, the Oedipal Hero, serves as a bridge to understanding the effect that Greek myth can have on our society. Students will read the famous *Oedipus Rex* drama of Sophocles, which narrates the story of the murderous and incestuous king of Thebes. This play will be juxtaposed with a reading on the psychoanalytic interpretation of Freud, whose Oedipus complex has had a lasting impact on Western civilization. Sophocles' little-read *Oedipus at Colonus* continues the Oedipus saga, but ends with the redemption and heroization of its protagonist. This play asks us, even if we reach the depths of despair, can we bounce back and redeem ourselves?

Redemption plays a key role in our imagination of heroes, as Allison and Goethals point out, and can make for a narrative that tugs at our heart strings in memorable ways.

Following the Oedipal hero, students will explore the notion of athletes as heroes. Olympians were often subject to heroization, and selections from Pindar's *Odes* will show how the ancient Greeks glorified people with amazing physical prowess in a similar manner as their ancestral heroes. Students will then look at how we treat athletes as heroes today. A common saw expressed in the media is that athletes are not role-models—and yet they still hold influence that makes people worship the ground they walk on. But, as the readings will explain, the discourse surrounding athletes often draws on larger cultural narratives. Chuck Klosterman, for instance, argues that the rivalry between the *Lakers* and *Celtics* totalizes all opposition in American society, from race to religion. These readings will make students question what other factors are inherent in our cultural dialogues about heroes.

An old question in the study of religion is known as the "Mickey Mouse Problem": how do we distinguish between a widely worshipped fictional character and a genuine religious entity? Today, fictional heroes such as those from comic books and movies are almost as large an influence on us as our historical exemplars. First, students will read from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to understand one influential way that scholars have come to understand the structure of myth. This will be put to the test by an early example of mythologizing Greek heroes, namely the Roman dramatist Seneca's *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus*. These plays take the stories of Greek heroes and twist them in interesting and grotesque ways—this should demonstrate how quickly the stories of the Greeks became more the object of fantasy than religious speculation. This will be followed by a series of articles examining the role superheroes play in encapsulating our cultural mores in fantastic ways: for instance, how Superman putting on the mask of Clark Kent can help us understand the pressures of conformity. The flip-side to the super-hero is the super-villain—the next section of the course will deal with these antiheroes. History has provided us with a recent example: the decision to bury Osama Bin Laden at sea so his tomb would not become a site of pilgrimage. To some, he was hero; to us, a villain. What role does our perspective take in deciding? This question is contrasted with a series of short studies on cult leaders and charismatic leadership—this gets at the heart of the scientology debate, which some consider a cult and others a religion. Subsequent readings will examine this idea of the super-villain in fiction.

The final act of the course will focus on the hero as political leader. Many of our heroes have after-lives as politicians: Teddy Roosevelt was hero of the Spanish American War before becoming president, and a number of actors and sports stars have followed down the same path. Students will explore why this is the case, starting with several examples from antiquity. The changing role of heroes is especially evident in the Roman Empire, where the emperors were posthumously honored as gods. This phenomenon has long been considered an offshoot of Greek hero worship, especially through the connection of Alexander the Great. At this point, students should be able to understand the totalizing effect that heroic narratives have on our perspective of the world and draw conclusions on why their political leaders both take advantage of and become stock for heroic deeds.

At the end of the course, students should be able to understand the following ideas: (1) the concept of the hero and its myriad forms throughout history and literature; (2) the religious aspects of the Greek hero and its place in Greek politics and society in general; (3) the shift in the idea of the hero from Greek culture to Roman culture (and beyond); and (4) how the perception of heroes today is formed by historical, societal, and psychological influences. Assessment will be largely through participation in discussion and short writing assignments. These graded assignments will challenge students to articulate the core themes of the course. A final paper or exam will ask students to sum up their experience by examining a hero of their choice, attempting to pull several of the themes together into a cohesive narrative about what makes their chosen hero what they are. This will be a very exciting course for me to teach, and I am sure it is one that students will enjoy.

Appendix: Required Readings and Tentative Schedule

(1) S.T. ALLISON and G.R. GOETHALS. 2010. *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them*. OUP. **(2)** J. CAMPBELL. 2008. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library. **(3)** R. FAGLES, trans. 1991. *The Iliad*. Penguin. **(4)** R. FAGLES, trans. 2000. *The Three Theban Plays*. Penguin. **(5)** J.K.B. MACLEAN and E.B. AITKEN. 2001. *Flavius Philostratus: Heroikos*. Society of Biblical Literature. **(6)** T. MORRIS and M. MORRIS. 2005. *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*. Open Court.

Section I: The Martial Hero	
Week 1: *Iliad*	—*Iliad* Book 1 & 2. Allison & Goethals, Intro & Ch. 1.
Week 2: The Heroic Code	—*Iliad* Books 6, 9 & 12. •Strauss Clay, 2009, "How to be a Hero: The Case of Sarpedon," in *Ἀντιφίλησις*, 30-38. •Redfield, 1994, "The Hero," in *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 99-127 (partial). — *Iliad* Books 16-19. •Osborne, 2004, "Homer's Society," in *Cambridge Companion to Homer*, 206-19.
Week 3: Saving the City	— •Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Allison & Goethals, Ch. 2. — •Sophocles' *Ajax*. •Kearns, 1990, "Saving the City," in *The Greek City*, 323-44.
Section II: Worshipping Heroes	
Week 4: Death and the Hero	—*Iliad* Books 22-24. Mourning at the Tomb of the Hero. —Lefkandi and Homer. •Antonaccio, 1995, "Lefkandi and Homer," in *Homer's World*, 5-27. •Bravo, 2009, "Recovering the Past," in *Heroes: Mortals and Myths in Ancient Greece*, 10-29.
Week 5: Greek Hero Cult	— •Ekroth, 2009, "The Cult of the Heroes," in *Heroes: Mortals and Myths in Ancient Greece*, 120-43. •Kearns, 1992, "Between Gods and Man," in *Le Sanctuaire grec*, 64-99. — MacLean & Aitken, *Heroikos* Text (English Only)
Week 6: Christian Saints	— MacLean & Aitken, *Epilogue*. •Hershbell and Skedros, 2004, in *Philostratus's Heroikos: Religion and Cultural Identity*, 169-94. — •Geary, 1994, Ch. 8-10, in *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, 163-219.

Section III: The Oedipal Hero?	
Week 7: Oedipus	— Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. •Caldwell, 1990, "The Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Greek Myth," in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, 344-89. — Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Allison & Goethals, Ch. 2.
Section IV: Sports and Heroes	
Week 8: Olympic Heroes	— *Iliad* 23, Revisited. •Selections from Pindar. •Currie, 2005, "The Heroization of Athletes," in *Pindar and the Cult of the Hero*, 120-57. — •Selections from Pindar. •"The Olympic Games in Antiquity," 2007, in *The Olympic Museum Guide*. •Golden, 2011, "War and Peace in the Ancient and Modern Olympics," *Greece & Rome* 58: 1-13.
Week 9: Sporting Heroes	— Allison & Goethals, Ch. 4. •Barthes, "The Wrestlers," in *Mythologies*, 15-25. — •Klosterman, 2003, "33," in *Sex, Drugs, & Cocoa Puffs*, 97-108. •Layden, 2001, "Does Anyone Remember the Titans?" in *Sports Illustrated*, 10/15.
Section V: the Fictional Hero, From Religion to Myth	
Week 10: Campbell	— *Hero with a Thousand Faces* Ch. 1 & 2. — *Hero with a Thousand Faces* Ch. 3 & 4.
Week 11: Fictional heroes	— •Seneca's *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon*. — Morris & Morris Ch. 2, 11, & 19. •*Kill Bill Vol. 2* "On Superman".
Section VI: Antiheroes: Evil and the Morals of Heroism	
Week 12: Antiheroes	— Allison & Goethals Ch. 5. •Seneca's *Thyestes*. On the death of Osama Bin Laden, and the burial at sea: a memorial denied? — •Long, 1986, "Prophecy, Charisma, and Politics," in *Prophetic Religions and Politics*, 3-17. •Wallis, 1982, "The Social Construction of Charisma," *Social Compass* 29: 25-39. •Wilson & Kwileck, 2003, "Are these People Crazy, or What?" *Humanomics* 19: 29-44.
Week 13: Heroic Morality	— Morris & Morris Ch. 12-15. — •Sophocles' *Antigone*. Burian, 2010, "Gender and the City," in *When Worlds Elide*.
Section VII: The Political Hero	
Week 14: Politicians into Heroes	— •Dougherty, 1993, "It's Murder to Found a Colony," in *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece*, 178-98. •Kowalzig, 2006, "The Aetiology of Empire?" *BICS* 49: 79-89. — •Gradel, 2004, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Selections. •Herz, 2007, "Emperors: Caring for the Empire and their Successors," in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, 304-16.
Week 15: Wrap-Up	— Allison & Goethels Ch. 6 & Conclusion. — •Selections from Kennedy, 1961, *Profiles in Courage*.