HEROES

Popular vs. Classical
Daniel Borston (famous American historian) writes:

“One of the functions of universities is to help people distinguish between celebrities and heroes.”

Heroes provide insight into the cultural values of the time.
Popular Heroes

- Athletes
- Entertainers
- Fads and cults: hero worship and fame are synonymous with false values
Emergence of Popular hero

- Sudden or unusual fame (Eli Manning)
- Special sentimentality toward hero (women proposing marriage)
- Endearment and loyalty (Oprah)
- Draws crowds, gets votes, gathers following (Oprah)
- Their tomb becomes place of pilgrimage (Elvis)
• Fame becomes legendary
• Cult may grow up as an imitation
Emergence

- Relatively obscure social status before
- Fame achieved by spectacular demonstration that impressed public
- Hero worship
- Mythical interpretation follows: art, story, song, product names, movies
People’s Response

- People “own” the hero
- Manhandled
- Pawed
- Take pictures with hero
- Offer marriage
- Throw personal items on stage
- Business proposals
- Claims of kinship
• Familiarity with hero
• Popparazzi
• People want to look like and possess hero
• Fads begin based on mode of dress
• Name babies after heroes
• Admire hero
Greek Heroes

- Based on actual king (must be king or his family)
- Idea in the flesh: fictional representation of the highest to which humans can aspire
- Story changes according to cultural values
- Hero mirrors the universe that tells his story (rarely is the hero a woman)
• The story teller indicates the world view through the hero—how he tells the hero’s story
• The best of the people becomes the hero
• As the story is retold, the hero’s story changes to fit the values of the current culture.
• e.g., Achilles in the midst of battle: has clear goals and opponents
• Odysseus after the war: has enemies that are not so evident
• Question: given this distinction, which hero better represents American values today?
• Achilles:
  – When his personal honor is affronted, he withdraws from war. He rejoins to attain revenge and achieve personal glory.
  – His entire story is told in the war against Troy
• Odysseus
  – Loses entire crew to get home
  – Lies
  – Cheats
  – Steals
  – Boasts
  – Does whatever is necessary to win
General Rules of Heroism

• Hero is outside law when the law has been corrupted by a grab for power
• Hero confirms higher values of the culture
• Hero must have his/her story told
• Hero acts out of courage and may die
• Hero defies fate by acting out of courage
• Hero must be intelligent
• Hero fights evil and restores order
• Hero is on a quest for truth and justice
American Heroes

- Group oriented
- Self-effacing types
- Operate outside the law
- Can’t boast