

The Highlight with a Thousand Faces: Sports and Our Yearning for Hero and Myth

Using Joseph Campbell's notions of archetypes and the hero's journey, students can examine current sports stories to help them understand modern society and myth creation.

Seizing on Sports' Mythic Appeal

It has been said that Michael Jordan is both the best and the worst thing to happen to basketball. The reasoning behind this paradoxical assertion offers insight into the complex relationship we have with sports in popular culture. The "Jumpman" insignia marking Michael Jordan's Nike brand and the giant bronze statue outside Chicago's United Center will outlive any realistic memory of Jordan's playing career and exist distinct from the vision of a recently remarried executive living in Charlotte, North Carolina. The ability of extraordinary individuals such as Jordan to leap from mortality to mythological image is a major reason why sports hold such a gigantic place in our contemporary world. We live in a postmodern environment characterized by rapid cultural integration, moral uncertainty, and narrative fragmentation. Within this cultural context sports often fill a narrative vacuum wherein we can construct heroes capable of transcending temporal human experience to take on mythic significance.

Whether spectators or active participants, students are regularly affected by the world of sports. For many of them, athletic competition is the most energized part of their high school experience. The intensity that sports engender is one of their primary attractions, and teachers can build on this emotional focus to engage students and, more importantly, get them to think deeply about the cultural narratives and archetypes being constructed in our present-day lives. As such, the two projects outlined in this article present distinct, intentional ways teachers can channel sports' appeal

to foster thoughtful discourse and meaningful research on our culture's desire for hero and myth.

Project #1: Sports Stories and Joseph Campbell's Monomyth

The first project asks students to seek out famous sports figures and examine how the stories of their accomplishments fit the narrative structure of heroic myth. I start by giving students a brief background in Carl Jung's and Mircea Eliade's related but different notions of archetypes. According to the former, archetypes are models of human behavior that echo the supernatural creative acts that give life meaning. To the latter, archetypes are concentrated symbols of human experience, which are hard to encapsulate logically yet play an essential role in human understanding (Meadow 188). For example, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address serves as an archetype for Eliade because it recalls some seminal act of leadership, giving the text significance far beyond its historical utterance. For Jung, the speech resonates so clearly with audiences' deep psychological desire for leadership that it becomes a symbol for this longing.

After this short introduction, students explore in small groups Joseph Campbell's notion of monomyth from his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's general thesis is that there is a reoccurring pattern in hero myths throughout history. According to Campbell, an individual goes through three distinct phases or "rites of passage" to become a heroic archetype "with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man": separation,

initiation, and return (31). Campbell breaks this process down further into 17 steps, which are given focused explanation in the first half of his book. These narrative steps invariably become the foci of subsequent conversations and notes when students return from their small-group work. Students enjoy brainstorming examples of well-known hero stories that coincide with Campbell's pattern. Figures such as Frodo Baggins, Cady Heron, and William Wallace typically emerge quickly, but it is interesting to see students make less obvious connections as the discussion unfolds—Huck Finn, Nelson Mandela, Hillary Clinton, and so on. These entertaining discussions provide a great foundation for the larger research and composition assignment to follow. We conclude this pre-research by watching excerpts from Bill Moyers's famous interview with Joseph Campbell, "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth."

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At this point, students apply their new knowledge of myth and hero to the composition of a paper. The first half of the paper requires students to seek out well-known athletes whose stories offer clear intersections with Campbell's monomyth theory. This investigation is hardly taxing. Not only do most students have particular sports figures in whom they are interested, but also the grand infusion of athletic stories into our popular culture makes finding these sorts of individual, heroic narratives incredibly easy. *Harper's Magazine* reported that there are only five days a year without a major nationally televised sports contest ("Harper's Index, August 1997"). That number could easily be down to one or two today, and ample reporting of the stars' personal stories accompanies each of these contests. The current reality is that within the business of sports, there is less money to be made in ticket sales than in media coverage. PricewaterhouseCoopers projects that the sports industry in North America will see a nearly 5 percent annual growth over the next five years, stemming almost exclusively from an expansion in media rights. There is increasing demand for story—more TV coverage, website space, and smartphone applications—which the market is eager to oblige (Van Riper). Many of the

stories to emerge, consciously or not, incorporate structural elements of Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory.

Students devote the second half of the paper to investigating the extent to which these promoted narratives are genuine reflections of athletes' lives—and the extent to which they are manufactured legends. In 2007, Susan A. Jolley wrote in *English Journal* about a hero research project that proved rewarding for her twelfth-grade students. It was a variation of Ken Macrorie's *The I-Search Paper* in which students investigated the story of a notable figure, historical or contemporary, to determine whether or not the selected individual was truly a hero (Jolley 23, 26). The greatest reward Jolley notes in her article is that the project directed students to explore "inward as well as outward." The project outlined here is similar but directs students toward sociological rather than personal reflection as they investigate one of our culture's primary fountainheads for hero creation. If the media's portrayal of an athlete's story is authentic, how much does the athlete's story—as opposed to his or her statistics or win/loss record—contribute to the popularity? If the story is manufactured, was it the writer, athlete, fans, parents, agents, or some combination thereof crafting the archetypal storyline? What was the aim of the creation of this narrative? Ultimately, sports media and our popular culture encourage consumers to look to sports to find archetypal hero stories. Are sports worthwhile outlets for this desire?

This portion of the paper is more intellectually demanding, but these questions provide a useful springboard into not just *how* myths are created but *why*. As one takes into account the current cultural environment in which we teach English—a cultural context devoted largely to reader response theory and skepticism of metanarrative—the exploration of a narrative's creative origin could hardly be more pertinent. Harvard professor Lawrence Buell, most noted for his work to create a critical voice for environmentalists in literature, argues that the modern hero narrative is the imaginative product of an overly devoted observer rather than a pure archetypal event. Narratives born out of pairings such as Nick Carraway and Gatsby, Chief Bromden and McMurphy, and even Gene and Finny from *A Separate Peace* undermine the authenticity of the main

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character's heroic rendering (Buell 95). The narrators are not the heroic actors themselves but are instead creatively empowered yet emotionally damaged onlookers. According to Buell, these narrators develop a religious devotion to the main characters out of a creative desire for meaning. They need a hero. From this point of view, what constitutes the true settings and plots of these stories then becomes quite interesting to consider, for they are simultaneously actual recollections taking place in history and representations of "post romantic" yearning for myth taking place within the consciousness of the narrator (109).

Buell's comments on what he sees as an increase of "observer-hero narratives" highlight some important ideas connected to the recent growth in sports media. An important question, particularly surrounding young adults in our classrooms, is, *What is really driving the expansion of sports stories in popular culture and the more rapacious cultivation of superstar athletes?* Are the stories telling us more about the figures themselves or the psychological yearnings of sports writers to create myth—or, more likely, the larger audience's desire to experience myth? Coming to some personal resolutions about these questions is hard work; these are complex ideas. Nevertheless, stories of popular athletes provide foci that are, in my experience, accessible and exciting enough to draw students into deep, meaningful reflections that expand their cultural awareness of how and why certain achievements and behaviors are being brought to the forefront of our collective attention.

Project #2: Sports' Creation of Tragic Heroes—Achilles, Manti Te'o, and Pat Tillman

In addition to serving as a medium for students to explore modern myth creation, sports stories can provide wonderful companion studies for literary figures such as Macbeth, Emma Woodhouse, and Achilles. In his wonderful essay on Achilles, Bernard Knox describes *The Iliad's* most-storied hero as trapped in "the prison of self-absorption . . . a godlike, lonely, heroic fury from which all the rest of the world is excluded" (130). Achilles possesses godlike ambition and "inhuman rage," and he has preternatural physical abilities, which readily fuel



Statue of Achilles (Thinkstock)

his "solipsistic dream of glory" (137). These attributes permit him the power to become a celebrated character of legend. Nevertheless, despite his unique potential to become a character in myth, he is mortal and must eventually suffer the pain of descending from divine delusion back to the temporal realm of human fear. He cannot enjoy being human, nor can he sustain the fantasy of being a god. Achilles's experience echoes throughout the humanist literature we include in our curricula. Similarly, sports are full of men and women who temporarily become the heroic protagonists of their own legends only to endure painful returns to the limits of their human abilities. Casey ultimately strikes out despite his rendering in iambic couplets, and in their own individual ways, so did Mike Tyson, Joe Namath, Marion Jones, Magic Johnson, Lance Armstrong, and Pat Summit.

A pair of high-profile stories from the past few years illuminates this idea and can serve as productive analogs for engaging the often-tragic heroes in our syllabi. In early 2013, Manti Te'o, the then all-American linebacker for Notre Dame, was immersed in a bizarre controversy that captured

the nation's collective attention for several weeks. Te'o was a prized recruit coming out of high school; he was an undisputed leader for his college team; and he was undoubtedly the central character of the story of Notre Dame's resurgence among college football's elite programs. In addition to being the Irish's leading tackler, he was a fiery figure on the field, whose steely gaze and unfiltered emotion made for great montages during the airing of games. Further, Te'o was a deeply religious Mormon at the nation's preeminent Catholic university in northern Indiana. As one reporter aptly put it, "he [was] basically Manti Tebow—a less preening, more sympathetic version of last year's self-styled football Christ figure" (Zeman). But the rising action that helped elevate Te'o from a great linebacker to a sports celebrity was the fact that he had experienced a heart-wrenching tragedy during the fall of his senior season. In the span of a few hours before Notre Dame's third game against Michigan State, a game in which Notre Dame's defense dominated, both Te'o's beloved grandmother and his girlfriend died. A week later, for the Michigan game, thousands of Notre Dame fans wore leis to honor their linebacker's toughness (Thamel).

However, most of us know now that Te'o's girlfriend, Lennay Kekua, did not die of leukemia. In fact, she never existed. When Timothy Burke and Jack Dickey broke this story for *Deadspin*, they poignantly wrote, "Did you enjoy the uplifting story, the tale of a man who responded to adversity by becoming one of the top players of the game? If so, stop reading." Ronaiah Tuiasosopo constructed the fictitious girlfriend to play a practical joke on the football star and eventually blackmail the Te'o family. This sort of fraud can certainly be seen as tragic in its own way: an ingenuous and kind young man duped by a cynical and conniving criminal. But that is not an accurate depiction of the event either. Te'o discovered the fabricated identity of Kekua, whom he had obviously never actually met, on December 6, 2012. Te'o continued to talk about the hardships of his girlfriend's illness and the inspiration it brought to his play in interviews surrounding the Heisman celebration and the BCS National Championship Game, both of which occurred after December 6. Te'o became an active participant in his own fraud. It seems the story it created was too appealing and profitable to squelch (Zeman).


The story of Pat Tillman and his death in Afghanistan offers another example in which our desire to fulfill mythic narratives can result in hubris and tragedy. Tillman's voluntary departure from the NFL after 9/11 to join the Army Rangers and his horrible death by friendly fire in 2004 symbolized the best and worst to emerge from the haunting terror attacks. When Tillman turned down a multimillion-dollar football contract with the Arizona Cardinals to enlist in the military and join the fighting in Afghanistan, he quickly gained heroic notoriety. *Sports Illustrated* begins one article this way: "Even as a boy Pat Tillman felt a destiny, a need to do the right thing whatever it cost him. When the World Trade Center was attacked on 9/11, he thought about what he had to do and then walked away from the NFL and became an Army Ranger" (Smith). In a time of extreme anxiety, Tillman became an archetype for American spirit and determination. His untimely death became profoundly problematic, for it was the death of both a man and a symbol. Many investigations, including Jon Krakauer's bestseller, reveal the mortal tragedy that existed beneath the mythic representation. For example, Krakauer notes that Pat Tillman may have hustled to the front line to fulfill a desire for individual experience more so than to contribute to a patriotic cause (167). Similarly, while Pat Tillman often showed amazing physical prowess on the football field and in the theater of war, he was not exempt from the mortal failings of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and displaying hubris in moments of panic (Krakauer 272). In short, he was an exceptional man but still a man nonetheless, replete with noble and problematic elements. Thus, the promotion of an overtly symbolic portrayal of life and death was quickly seen for what it was: a perhaps well-intentioned but ultimately hurtful lie.

Te'o's and Tillman's cringe-worthy falls from the sublime to the absurd offer useful insights into the paradox of what Buell calls our "post-romantic consciousness" in which we both desire and abhor romanticized heroic narratives. But they can offer more than that. Their falls demonstrate the tragedy of humanity's Promethean desires, that part of the human story in which creativity and hope intersect with hubris to engender tragedy. Sports are rife with individuals momentarily fulfilling god-like narratives only to suffer the pain of having to

become human again. These stories offer a unique angle of consideration for studying literature's many tragic heroes. In my own classes, I have had students read Gary Smith's award-winning article in *Sports Illustrated* on Pat Tillman, "Remember His Name," and then compose essays or group presentations that compare Tillman to Achilles. However, similar assignments could be developed to elucidate the unique pathos readers encounter with Janie Crawford, Arthur Dimmesdale, Dorian Gray, Beowulf, and many others. As students can easily relate to the mixture of confusion and exhilaration that were parts of Te'o's and Tillman's experience, they often begin to see these tragic heroes in a new, sympathetic light, and moments like Achilles restoring Hector's body to the Trojan King and Janie Crawford's returning to Eatonville take on humbling significance.

Conclusion

In moments of nervous deliberation before murdering his king, Macbeth states that "I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none" (1.7.48–9). In many respects, this haunting quotation crystallizes an integral question for humanist education: How do we as humans maximize our creative potential without crossing the line into hubris and self-deception? The grand feats and stories connected to sports constantly test that limit. Accordingly, sports provide a robust theater for our culture to develop heroic archetypes who by their

successes and failures achieve mythic significance. Encouraging students to look deeply into the narrative role sports plays in our culture is a productive way to connect them with the literature we study in our courses and help them grapple with the moral power and responsibility of story. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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The hero's journey is an ancient story pattern found in texts from thousands of years ago or in newly released Hollywood blockbusters. ReadWriteThink.org has Hero's Journey, an online tool as well as a mobile app, both of which provide students with background on the hero's journey and give them a chance to explore several of the journey's key elements. Students can use the tool or app to record examples from a hero's journey they have read or viewed or to plan out their own hero's journey. Tool: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/hero-journey-30069.html>. App: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/mobile-apps/hero-journey-a-31097.html>