From Ulysses to Princess Leia: The Heroic Ideal in the West

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Course Description and Aims

Hero comes from the Greek ἱέρος, a word that was used to designate “any free man” as well as any significant man or “gentleman.” It is this latter definition of the hero as a “significant” person that has come to dominate our understanding of this term. Indeed, standard definitions of the hero include a “demigod,” a “man who distinguishes himself in war by extraordinary acts,” or a person who “intervenes in some critical situation in a fashion that is outside, above, or in disregard of the normal patterns of behavior.”

Every human culture has a pantheon of these extraordinary individuals—real and fictional—that we designate as heroic. These figures play a critical role in our intellectual development by illuminating our relationships with the supernatural, with society, and with the self. Heroes confront those forces that appear to be beyond human understanding. They confirm as well as challenge our social conventions. And they provide us with a personal ideal to be striven for or imitated to the best of our abilities.

This seminar is concerned with this heroic ideal as it has emerged in the West over the last three millennia. Specifically, it will be studying five heroic typologies—the epic hero of Homer, the martyr, the medieval knight, the romantic rebel, and the anti-hero—through the lenses provided by a number of classical and modern texts and films. Some of the topics that we will be addressing in our study of these works are the following:

- The rhetoric of heroism, i.e., how western cultures have addressed the idea of the hero in oral, written, and visual texts.
- The characteristics that distinguish the different heroic typologies we are examining.
- The ways in which these heroic traditions continue to inform and shape one another over time.
- The historical conditions that produce these different typologies and what heroic tales tell us about those time periods.
- The ways in which these heroic types are used by societies to shape political, social, and ethical behaviors.
- The continuing relevance of the heroic ideal in a mass democratic society.
Course Requirements

Readings and Class Participation
The lifeblood of every seminar is its weekly discussions. As such, you are expected to complete the weekly readings and be prepared to contribute to group discussions. This means you must do the readings BEFORE the class in which they are to be discussed. To assist you in your reading, I will be providing you with some study questions for each assignment that will focus your thinking and prepare you for the class discussion. I strongly recommend that you answer these questions, even if you only write short notes to yourself.

Class Presentations
In the Weekly Assignments section of this syllabus, I have identified a number of presentation topics for each week of the seminar. These topics are meant to provide the class with additional information on the heroic ideal that we are addressing in a given week (e.g., honor and shame in the ancient world, classical attitudes towards “self-death,” or martyrdom, the meaning of chivalry, the characteristics of the romantic movement, etc.), as well as to provide a framework for a discussion of the assigned reading. All of you will be expected to make a presentation on one of these topics. Most of these presentations will be done in pairs and they will begin during the second week of the seminar. I will be providing you with guidelines for these presentations and I will also expect you to come by my office prior to your presentation to discuss with me how you are doing on your topic.

You may use whatever materials you wish when doing your presentation, e.g. slides, video clips, handouts, dramatic re-enactments, debates, etc. The key with this exercise is to craft the presentation as if you are the teachers (and you are): make it both exciting and useful for yourself and for the class as a whole.

Written Assignments

Media Reviews
Over the course of the quarter, you will be viewing a television episode and five films that are related to different aspects of the heroic ideal that we are discussing in this class. The purpose of these media presentations is threefold:

- To demonstrate how different heroic typologies continue to resonate with modern audiences;
- To demonstrate how these typologies are re-fashioned to address the historical conditions and concerns of western, in particular American, society;
- To afford you the opportunity to engage modern media in a critical, analytical fashion.

You will be asked to prepare four two page critiques of the following: STTNG: Darmok; The Godfather; The Times of Harvey Milk; and Harold and Maude. In these critiques, you will be asked to summarize in a succinct fashion the subject matter of these films and to address a number of questions that I will give you prior to each media presentation.

Short Papers
We will be spending most of our time in this seminar engaged in an in-depth analysis of five different (albeit related) heroic typologies in Western culture. In two short papers (5-7 pages), you will be asked to address two of these typologies, i.e., the epic hero and the knight, from a number of different rhetorical perspectives. These short paper assignments are as follows:

- Reimagining the Epic Hero (Due 4th week, May 5th): This first paper asks you to consider the earliest manifestation of the western hero from the perspective of a storyteller. Using the
information found in the *Odyssey*, the class reader, *The Godfather*, the presentations of your fellow students, and our discussions about the characteristics, provenance, and uses of Homer’s epic heroes, submit a short treatment in which you outline your own idea for a short story, graphic novel, film, or play centered on an epic hero in a contemporary setting (you can go back as far as the last half of the 19th century). In addition to a summary of your story’s plot line, you will also need to include a commentary justifying your creative choices, i.e., the setting in which you place your character, his or her actions, etc. A la Robert Darnton, this commentary should address to some degree how your historical circumstances influenced the development of your latter day epic.

- *Hollywood and the Heroic Tradition* (Due 8th week, June 2): Your second paper requires you to be something of a historian and a film critic. Using the information provided to you in the assigned readings (Keen, Geoffroi de Charny, Chaucer, etc.) and the presentations, write a review of *A Knight’s Tale* in which you discuss the merits of Helgeland’s efforts to introduce a modern audience to the knightly heroic tradition. Specifically, address whether Helgeland’s creative choices convey an accurate picture of the political, social, economic, and cultural world of the medieval knight, as well as the chivalric code of conduct he was supposed to uphold.

The aim of these two short papers is three-fold. First, they are meant to help you learn how to isolate the key characteristics of two of the heroic types we will be studying and write about them in a clear and succinct manner. Secondly, they will give you the opportunity to approach these manifestations of the western heroic ideal from a number of different perspectives—as a writer, cultural critic, and social scientist. And finally, these writing assignments will give you some sense of what is involved in the development of two of your final paper options.

**Final Paper**
You are required to submit a final 10 to 15 page paper at the end of the quarter (see attached *Guidelines for Final Paper*, which can also be found on my website.) This paper can be:

- An exercise in heroic fiction writing in which you create your own version of one of the heroic types addressed in this course. This can take the form of an illustrated comic, a script, an epic poem, or a short story. Whatever the literary style you select, however, you need to demonstrate clearly what kind of hero you are creating and why he or she fits that category.

- A film analysis paper (see *Guidelines for Final Paper*).

- An in-depth treatment of one of the following topics: Heroism in Islam; the ancient athletic hero; or a heroic figure or tradition drawn from a non-western culture.

**Grading**

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**Required Books**
Class Reader—*From Ulysses to Princess Leia: The Heroic Ideal in the West*; Geoffroi de Charny, *A Knight’s Own Book of Chivalry*; George MacDonald Fraser, *Flashman at the Charge*; Johann W. von Goethe, *Faust*; Homer, *The Odyssey*; Plato, *The Trial of Socrates*
Weekly Assignments

“A long time ago, in a galaxy far far away:” The Hero of a Thousand Faces.

April 6: Introductions; Star Trek the Next Generation: Darmok

Reading: Class Reader, Kendrick, “Heroism and the Human Condition,” Robert Darnton, “Peasants Tell Tales;” and Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero’s Adventure.”

I. Myrmidons and Martyrs: Heroism in the Ancient World

Weeks 2-3: “Always be the best, my boy, the bravest, and hold your head high above the others.” The Epic Hero.

April 13: “Driven to wander far and wide….” The Tale of Ulysses.

Reading: Homer, The Odyssey: Books 1, 2, 9-24

Presentation Topics: The World of the Odyssey: What was Greece like in the Archaic Period? Honor, Shame, and Heroism in the Ancient World (Presentation on Malina Reading) 2 presenters.

April 20: “An Offer He Can’t Refuse:” Homeric Heroism in an American Context

Reading: Class Reader: Daniel Mendelsohn’s “The Little Iliad.”

Film: Francis Ford Coppola’s, The Godfather (2 hours and 55 minutes) in the Sycamore Room.

Week 4-5: “Here I Stand. I Cannot Do Otherwise.” The Martyr

April 27: Public Order vs. Private Conscience: The Trial of Socrates
The first hour of this session will be spent discussing The Godfather. The final two hours of class will focus on the trial and execution of Socrates.

Reading: Plato, The Apology of Socrates and Crito
Class Reader: Kendrick, Chapter Three: “Here I Stand. I Cannot Do Otherwise. The Hero as Martyr.”

Presentation Topics: Francis Ford Coppola and the making of The Godfather
The case against Socrates: Why was he prosecuted and condemned to death?
What was the ancient attitude towards “self-death?”

May 4: Dying for a Cause: Martyrs Sacred and Profane.

Reading: Class Reader: Kendrick, “Hear O Israel the Lord thy God, the Lord is One: Heroism in a Jewish Context;” Maccabees II VIII. “The Martyrdom of Eleazar;” and IX. “The Martyrdom of the Mother and Her Seven Sons;” Smith, “The Early Christian Martyrs: ‘My Lady’ Perpetua”

Film: Robert Epstein, The Times of Harvey Milk (87 minutes) in class.
Presentations:  Who were the Maccabees and what was the background of their revolt?  
Why did the early Christian martyrs see themselves as heroes?

FIRST SHORT PAPER DUE (Reimagining the Epic Hero)

II. Might for Right:  The Heroic Ideal in the Middle Ages

Weeks 6-7: God, Glory, and the Quest for Love:  The Knightly Warrior

May 11:  The Order of Chivalry

Geoffroi de Charny, A Knight’s Own Book of Chivalry

Presentation Topics:  What was Chivalry, why is it so hard to define, and how important was it to the knight?
What was “courtly love” and how did it fit into the ethos of the knightly hero?

May 18: A Knight’s Tale Sung in a Modern Key

Film:  Brian Helgeland, A Knight’s Tale (2 hours and 12 minutes) in the Sycamore Room.

Presentation Topics:  The Knightly Tale on the Big Screen
Medieval Rock and Roll?  Brian Helgeland’s use of anachronism in A Knight’s Tale.

III. Rebels, Rogues and Reprobates: Heroism in a Modern Context

Weeks 8-9: “The Road of Excess Leads to the Palace of Wisdom.”  The Romantic Rebel

May 25:  “No pleasure sates him, no success suffices.” The Restless Intellect

Reading:  Goethe, Faust: Dedication, Prelude on the Stage, Prologue in Heaven, Part I and Part II, Act V
Class Reader, Eric Hobsbawm, “The Arts”

Presentation Topics:  Who were the Romantics and what were they against?  2 presenters
What’s romantic about Faust?

SECOND SHORT PAPER DUE (Hollywood and the Heroic Tradition)

June 1:  A Strange Romance:  The Bohemian as Hero.

Film:  Hal Ashby, Harold and Maude (91 minutes) in the Sycamore Room


Weeks 10-11. Rebels Without a Cause:  The Anti-Hero

June 8:  Staying Alive: Heroism in an Age of Imperialism and Genocide

Presentation Topics:  The Picaresque Tradition in Literature
Who is George MacDonald Fraser and why did he create the Flashman series?

**June 15:** Outcasts and Oddballs:  Heroism in a Mass Society

Reading:  Class Reader:  Lynn Smith, “Losers on the Rise”
Comics Journal Interview with Harvey Pekar

Film:  Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, *American Splendor* (1 hour and 41 minutes) in the Southbay Room, Covel Commons.

Presentation Topic:  Mainstream Comics
Alternative and Underground Comics

**June 15:** FINAL PAPER DUE
Bibliography

Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*
C.M. Bowra, *The Greek Experience*
Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*
John Bright, *The History of Israel*
Victor Brombert, *The Hero in Literature*
Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth and The Hero With a Thousand Faces*
Victor Carrabino (Editor), *The Power of Myth in Literature and Film*
Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*
Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*
Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*
William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*
Arthur J. Droge & James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*
Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined and The Chivalrous Society*
Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*
M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*
Casey Fredericks, *The Future of Eternity: Mythologies of Science Fiction and Fantasy*
Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*
Ron Goulart, *Goulart’s Great History of Comic Books*
Gary Groth and Robert Fiore (Editors), *The New Comics*
Chandos Herald, *Life of the Black Prince*
Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones, *The Comic Heroes from the Silver Age to the Present*
Richard Jenkyns, *Virgil’s Experience: Nature and History: Times, Names, and Places*
Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*
Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*
Maurice Keen, *Chivalry*
Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*
Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*
Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*
Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero*
Menachem Mor, Editor, *Crisis and Reaction: The Hero in Jewish History*
Edwin M. Moseley, *The Outsider as Hero and Anti-Hero*
Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*
George W.E. Nickelsburg and John J. Collins, Eds., *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*
Moshe Pearlman, *The Maccabees*
J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*
J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*
Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Lives of the Noble Romans*
V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktales*
Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*
Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Traitors, Martyrs, and Fools: The History of Martyrdom in the Western World*
Anthony Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece*
Anthony Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment*
Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*
Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*
Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*
Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*
Jan Willem Van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People*
Cedric H. Whitman, *The Heroic Paradox*