

American Heroes

A Sixth Grade Literature Unit

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Who is a hero? How do you know? Can a hero have human flaws? What criteria do you use to determine this esteemed status among American historical figures? These are a few questions this unit will be addressing to a sixth grade audience within literature circles.

Heroism is a concept that is defined by each generation individually. This poses a problem when trying to identify common national heroes. Each generation has established unique moral values and recognizes traits they have identify as heroic. For example, in today's society Al Gore could be a hero for his stand on global warming, but during the early industrial age ecology wasn't recognized as a heroic effort. In the 1970s the Vietnam veterans were regarded by many as criminals for their participation in war; today, soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are heralded upon their return from war. This is not a judgment, rather an observation of value changes within society.

Treatment and recognition of heroes change on those values as well. For many years Thomas Jefferson has been considered an American hero. With a recent focus on his human flaws has his heroic stature faltered? Yes, even elementary school students question how a slave owner could say "All men are created equal" and father slave children. In more recent history we can look at Mount Rushmore, a monument to memorialize four heroic American political leaders. How many Americans today can name all four presidents and recognize their heroic contributions to America? Overtime people's focus has changed. How do we as teachers bring heroism back to students?

Reading about exceptional lives is a place to start to address the concept of heroes. Today's generation responds to gore and humanism as in *CSI* and *NCIS*. But with our national heroes, Jefferson, Franklin, Douglass, Stowe, Truth, Lincoln, Grant, etc., they all have human qualities and failures, but their significant personal achievements helped weave our national fabric. This is the common thread that identifies lasting heroes for multiple generations.

Massachusetts State Standards

History and Social Sciences

Grade 5

5.18 Describe the life and achievements of important leaders during the Revolution and the early years of the United States. (H, C)

- A. John Adams E. Thomas Jefferson
- B. Benjamin Franklin F. James Madison
- C. King George III G. George Washington
- D. Alexander Hamilton

Grade 6/7 Concepts and Skills

History Geography

4. Distinguish between primary and secondary sources and describe how each kind of source is used in interpreting history. (H)

The Roots of Western Civilization: Ancient Greece, C. 800–300 BC/BCE

7.32 Describe the myths and stories of classical Greece; give examples of Greek gods and goddesses, heroes, and events, and where and how we see their names used today. (H)

Reading and Literature General Standards

Language Strand

Standard 1: Discussion	Students will use agreed-upon rules for informal and formal discussions in small and large groups.
Standard 2: Questioning, Listening, and Contributing	Students will pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions or interviews in order to acquire new knowledge.
Standard 3: Oral Presentation	Students will make oral presentations that demonstrate appropriate consideration of audience, purpose, and the information to be conveyed.
Standard 4: Vocabulary and Concept Development	Students will understand and acquire new vocabulary and use it correctly in reading and writing.

Reading and Literature Strand

Standard 8: Understanding a Text	Students will identify the basic facts and main ideas in a text and use them as the basis for interpretation.
Standard 9: Making Connections	Students will deepen their understanding of a literary or non-literary work by relating it to its contemporary context or historical background.
Standard 11: Theme	Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of theme in a literary work and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.
Standard 13: Nonfiction	Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of the purposes, structure, and elements of nonfiction or informational materials and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.
Standard 16: Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature	Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of the themes, structure, and elements of myths, traditional narratives, and classical literature and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.

GENERAL STANDARD 16: Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature

16.9 Identify conventions in epic tales (extended simile, the quest, the hero's tasks, special weapons or clothing, helpers) For example, students create their own hero tale, employing conventions such as interventions of the gods.

Time Frame

This unit was developed to be completed within one academic term or less.

Objectives

1. To understand the origins and define the term hero.
2. Apply understanding of Greek mythology.
3. Make connections between history and literature, relating contemporary context to historical background.
4. Through reading biographies of famous Americans, have students recognize qualities that are heroic.
5. Use and interpret primary source and secondary source material within biographies.
6. Recognize heroic actions of historical American figures.
7. Allow students an opportunity to identify personal heroes vs. celebrity.
8. Connect heroes to character education.

Background / Preparation

In order to strengthen teacher knowledge on heroes and the complexity of the topic, [A Call to Heroism](#) by Peter H. Gibbon is an excellent resource. Teachers also need to be able to refer to Greek myths, gods, and heroes. See suggested reading below.

Procedures

This unit will be taught in multiple ways: whole class lecture and discussion, small group, independent work, literature circles, and student presentations. The procedures are bulleted to be followed throughout a term while meeting one day per week.

- Introduce the concept of hero. Students will be asked to explain in writing what they feel constitutes a hero.
- Share ideas within a small group and work on one group definition to be shared with the class.
- After all groups present, establish a class definition for hero.
- Read several Greek myths to the whole class and identify characteristics of heroes. *Adventures of the Greek Heroes*, by Mollie McLean and Anne Wiseman is a recommended read aloud.
- Lecture about the origin of the term hero. What constituted a hero and how is that origin different from our class definition?
- Introduce several different biographies on American historical figures i.e. Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, etc.

- Students will select the biography of their choice. Based on their selection literature circles will be formed.
- Students will work within their literature circles, completing their individual jobs and assignments over a three week period. (supporting literature circle materials provided in appendix)
- Upon completion of the selected biography each group will determine if their character of choice is a “hero” based on our class definition. Each group will have to support their class with factual examples from the biography or connections they were able to make and/or infer.
- Each group will present their historical figure and criteria they used to determine hero status.
- Final assessment: Students will be able to use the class definition of hero and make connections with historical heroic figures to identify personal hero(es). Rubric for writing assignment is in the appendix.

Bibliography

Gibbon, Peter H., *A Call to Heroism*, New York. Grove Press, 2002.

McLean, Mollie and Wiseman, Anne. *Adventures of the Greek Heroes*. New York. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

Ruffin, Francis E. *Sterling Biographies*. New York. Sterling Publishing Company, 2008.

Teaching Resources www.lauracandler.com

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