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## The American Hero-Quester

Curriculum Unit 79.01.01  
by Robert Lyman Biral

The purpose of my unit will be to present the beginning stages of a coherent and progressive approach to the study of American literature. The rationale for my unit arises out of a personal need to break through the “literary encounters of the separate kind” approach that holds popular sway in the teaching of literature today. Instead, my intent is to provide a structure for viewing literature that is dynamic in form yet concentrated in focus, a structure that will permit students to see the linkages that tie one work of literature to another.

To provide a structure for students to see connections between literary works, I have turned to mythology for the unifying elements. Specifically, it is in the archetypal pattern of the hero-quest myth—the central myth of all literature—that will be the structural framework of my study. One of my objectives is to place the hero of American fiction squarely into the tradition of the hero-quester, to view him as yet another journeyman on the standard path taken by all mythological heroes in their search for identity. To see that Thoreau’s journey in his *Walden Pond*, where he reflects upon the “essential facts of life,” and Hemingway’s quest in his hunting saga *The Green Hills of Africa* for the “ideal, single perfect shot” share a common narrative pattern is to begin to see a significance that goes beyond individual works.

Furthermore, I intend to concentrate my focus upon the most elaborate experience in the heroic quest pattern—the process of initiation, which, in American literature, characteristically takes place away from society. In addition, the initiation of the American hero-quester will be looked at in light of the pattern of imagery that has developed around this experience. It is in the contrasting symbolic landscapes of the garden and the wilderness that the American hero undergoes his initiation test.

My suggestion for teaching this unit is to strive for a balance between the materials of myth and archetypes and the literary selections considered in the unit. By integrating both, the student will not only be given a narrative structure through which the content of the literature can be focused, but also led to see that all literature arises out of materials that are old and enduring. To see literature as a whole, to see the interrelatedness of one work to another, to acquire a sense of continuity—of one step leading to another, of details gradually fitting into a larger design—is essential to an understanding of the literary experience.

The first two sections of my unit can be considered the matrix through which the last two sections can be viewed. Activities intended to be used with the unit together with a suggested reading list for students can be found at the end of the paper.

## Section One: Mythology—The Basis of Literature

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The main content objective for this section is to trace the development of literature from its mythological beginnings. Mythic stories were created, according to Edith Hamilton, in her *Mythology*, at a time when the distinction between the real and the unreal was not clearly perceived. The earliest form of myth, for example, was a story of a sun god or underworld god who was portrayed in human terms and yet completely identified with a specific force in nature. These early stories, metaphors in action, if you will, were man's attempt to explain the natural world in human terms. This imaginative impulse to connect the mind with the world outside is found later in literature, where connections are made through simile and metaphor, our two most common figures of speech. The need to identify through analogy evolves directly from the mythic impulse to associate human with non-human worlds.

I like to introduce mythology through the reading of Creation myths, forms of which can be found in the mythology of every culture. Several different Greek origin myths exist. The most familiar is the story of the Olympian gods found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, written in the eighth century B.C. Hesiod's story became the source for the later Roman version of the myth told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Hamilton's *Mythology* is a good source for the retelling of both versions. You will also find the story of how the world and mankind were created, together with the story of Prometheus, the first hero. Comparisons to creation stories found in Norse, Eskimo, North American Indian, and Chinese mythology will permit students to note similarities and differences. These readings can be the basis of reports to the class and discussion.

Whichever creation stories you choose to explore with your class, you will find that they fall into two groups. One group describes creations in terms of things being made, or built, or arranged in order; the other group describes origins in terms of things being born or growing. Both Greek and Chinese stories are examples of "growth" myths; whereas Ovid's story is of a god who arranges things in order. Likewise, the opening passages of Genesis present a god at whose words "Let there be," creation is ordered into being. Creation myths, then, spring from a very basic human need—to transform chaos into order. By comparing different myths, this need to exert control over the natural world can be seen as a universal impulse. Even though today we have gained more control of nature through reason, our imaginations have not changed their creative function. To bring order out of chaos is still as compelling a need as ever. The power of the imagination to give public shape to private experience as seen in myth is the basis of literary expression today. The same stories are still being told; they have just changed costumes.

The next step in any study of mythology is a discussion of the gods. The most important thing to note is that even though the gods in the earliest myths are all associated with the natural world, they are, nevertheless, fashioned in the image of man. Furthermore, since they are all members of one big family, they behave in their social relationships very much as do members of any family. They are jealous and loving, possessive and generous, crafty and gullible, vindictive and forgiving. My favorite story is of Zeus, who when he learned that his wife Metis was pregnant with Athena, swallowed her, fetus and all, in a jealous rage. Zeus wanted to give birth to the goddess himself. Cannibalism is only part of the story. When Athena came to term and was about to be born, her loving father hired a lesser god, probably Hephaistos, to split his head open with an ax so that Athena, privileged child that she was, could spring from his forehead. And spring she did, fully grown, in full armour, shouting her war-cry and waving her sword around her head. No pimply adolescence for her. When Archie and Edith Bunker sing "Those Were The Days" on their TV. show "All In The Family" we know exactly what they are longing for.

The next thing to observe about myths is that, sooner or later, they begin to cluster into a mythology. When they do, they take on the character of the history of human development. Ovid organized the Greek myths into a complete body of stories which when read in the proper order revealed to the reader the mythical story of the human race from the creation of man down to his own day. Gods reappear in different episodes, in characteristic roles. Also, the plots of the stories begin to recur. Stories of beginnings, stories of the loss of innocence, stories of destruction, stories of metamorphosis, stories that connect human life with the turning of the seasons, stories of search, stories of separation and reunion become familiar to the reader.

The last step in the mythological process is the creation of stories about semi-divine or human figures with extraordinary powers—in a word, heroes—completing the cycle from Zeus to Prometheus. Whatever the story, from whichever culture, the hero stories follow the same recurring narrative pattern. This pattern which will be considered in the third section of this unit is the hero-quest-myth.

## Section Two: Archetypes

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My major content objective for this section is to help students discover that archetypes are the basic building blocks of literary structure. The discussion in this section is of a general theoretical nature and is offered as mainly background for teachers. Whatever material might be useful for class activity and discussion I will leave to your judgment; but whatever you use can be easily woven into the unit at any time. You might want to discuss archetypes in connection with the quest myth, since it is the archetypal plot.

To fully explore the matter of Archetypes would involve the thorough study of the modern mythographers: Sir James Frazer, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell. Such a study is neither within the scope of this paper nor the reach of my knowledge. However, some attempt will be made to connect their ideas on archetypes.

Frazer observed in *The Golden Bough*, his study of myth, magic, and ritual in primitive society, that there was an unexplainable similarity that existed in certain tribal rituals in tribes so separate, no contact had ever taken place. He saw in these ritual patterns man's common imaginative connection to the universe he inhabits.

It is these common recurring patterns that Jung saw as manifestations of what he called "the collective unconscious." Located in our psyche, it is the repository of a shared racial memory, an inheritance from our common ancestors. By linking the psyche within the evolutionary cycle, Jung concluded that our patterns of experiencing and responding to experience are the same for us today as they were for primitive man. Jung labeled our genetic-biological linkage with the past "archetypal." Archetypes, for Jung, were forms of intuition, perception, and apprehension inborn and located in the unconscious. Most commonly, he observed, these archetypes took the form of images, usually in our dreams, and occurred in connection with transitional stages of life, such as those involving birth and death. Jung saw in the appearance of these images—such as the Earth-mother symbol, the tree of life—in myth stories, factors so basic to human experience that they had to be recorded. Hence, our earliest myth stories are the first public expression of these private experiences.

Joseph Campbell, in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, sees in the ancient hero-myths the eternal human struggle for identity (the hero-quest myth as "monomyth"). Campbell believes that since myths and religions have always followed the same archetypes, they can not be the exclusive right of any particular race, religion, or region. He also contends that in the modern world the ancient heritage of myth is in full decay. That meaning which the great coordinating mythologies provided to the group has been lost; all meaning is now in

the individual. Today, because of science and technology, communication between consciousness and the unconscious is cut. He sees the modern “hero-deed” as that of questing to bring light again to, “the lost Atlantis of the coordinated souls.”

The common thread that ties the work of Frazer, Jung, and Campbell together is the idea that we all share recurring patterns of behavior. It is with Northrop Frye, in his book on myth and archetypes, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), that a systematic study of these recurring patterns and their relationship to literature brought the scientific findings of the mythographers to bear on literary criticism. It seems to me that Frye completes the cycle of thought begun with Frazer’s observations of basic recurring patterns of ritual behavior. Jung’s notion that mythology arose from the impulse to express these common experiences, possessed by all men in the “collective unconscious, is completed by Frye, who saw in the recurring patterns of imagery in mythology the basis of all literature. It is precisely at the point that Jung’s unconscious archetypal images become consciously expressed in myth that Frye begins to evaluate the importance of these images in literature. For Frye, archetypes are the recurring patterns of imagery (wastelands or gardens), character types (scapegoat or hero), events (rites of passage), stories (monster-slaying), or themes (good versus evil) that provide the structural principles that give literature its unity.

Archetypes, therefore, are those images that recur often enough in literature to become recognizable as elements of one’s own imaginative experience. Consider, for example, the snake. For us, the snake is something evil or sinister needs no introduction. Classical and Biblical allusions abound. Serpents and (by analogy) dragons are constant villains. There is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Perseus slays both a dragon and the Medusa, whose permanent hairdo is of writhing snakes. A serpent guards the Golden Fleece. St. George saves his people from the dragon. In chapter three of the book of Genesis, God ordains an eternal enmity between reptiles and humans. Carl Sagan in his study on the evolution of human intelligence, *The Dragons of Eden*, speculates about the implacable hostility between man and reptile. He wonders whether it is just accident that the common human sounds used to demand silence or attract attention sound like imitations of hissing snakes. Could it be also that dragons posed a real danger to our protohuman ancestors a few million years ago, and this terror was lodged in what Sagan calls the Repetilian-complex core of our brain, at a point in our development where we shared a common experience with reptiles? In the poems “The Snake,” by Emily Dickinson, “Filling Station,” by A.M. Klein, and “Snake,” by D.H. Lawrence we can see that the power of the archetype is still as compelling as ever. In the first two poems, each poet retains the traditional associations of snakes as evil. On the other hand, Lawrence chooses to reverse the archetypal meanings. He sees the snake as good, and blames the prejudice against them on “the voice of his education”—that is, on the archetype.

Lawrence’s poem raises a moral issue that you might pose to your students. How can confusion between the symbol and the real thing result in harmful consequences? The narrator in Lawrence’s poem dramatizes this conflict forcefully, when he nearly kills the snake because of its archetypal history. A distinction must be pointed out between the literary symbol and the literal thing. As a literary symbol, snakes can be portrayed as evil; but in real life to kill a snake because of its archetypal associations is an act of moral abnegation. But absurdities of this type occur over and over again in modern life. The archetype of the snake has shaped our moral categories; the real snake stands outside of them.

## Section Three: Hero-Quest Myth

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Northrop Frye identifies the central myth of literature, in its narrative aspect, with the quest myth. He sees the significance of quest myth “in its vision of the end of social effort, the innocent world of fulfilled desires, the free human society.” Perhaps the most complete form of this utopian vision is found in the combined Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Together they comprise the archetypal story of loss and recovery of identity. Greek mythology has the same general framework, though not as complete as the Bible. There we also find the story of man’s creation, his relationship to the Gods, and his loss of the Golden Age. The Golden Age is recovered in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (parallel to the structure of the Old and New Testaments) with the establishment of the ideal Kingdom, in this case the Roman Empire.

Since it is from Classical (Greek and Roman) mythology that the Western literal tradition has evolved, I would at this point have my students read one of the four great hero quests of Greek mythology—the stories of Perseus, Heracles, Jason, or Theseus. Any one of the stories presents us with all the basic elements of the quest pattern in classic form. So basic is the quest pattern to narrative, that Joseph Campbell, in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, labels it the “monomyth”.

Campbell’s description is an enlargement on the basic formulae represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-discovery-return. The quest of the hero is an *extended search* for something that has been lost or taken away from him, something that ought to have been his birthright. He *encounters fabulous forces* and *wins a decisive victory*. The successful completion of this search reveals to the hero the secret of his *true identity* and enables him to *return* from his mysterious adventure and take his rightful position in society.

If Perseus is the prototypical hero-quester of Classical heroic literature, Superman certainly fulfills that role in modern society. He is the perfect “middle class” hero. His history closely duplicates that of Perseus. Not only is his birth special, but he updates the tradition by coming from outer space. Like Perseus, Superman was orphaned shortly after his birth, and brought up in obscurity. When he reaches his majority he sets out on his journey to recover his rightful inheritance. For Superman, this takes the form of knowledge of his true identity and purpose on earth, which he gains before taking his place in the world. Like Perseus, Superman undergoes trials, battles powerful opponents, and rescues maidens in distress. Both Perseus and Superman are model heroes; their goals are noble, and their values, at least for Superman, are not complex. Superman is always on the side of goodness; his enemies are always evil, monsters in the sense that their malignant motives have rendered them inhuman. The one important difference that exists between the two is the matter of romance. One of Perseus’ triumphs was to win Andromeda, after slaying the dragon. Superman, on the other hand, for all his conquests, never wins Lois Lane. His sexual purity remains intact, with all his energies directed toward his single-minded purpose of preserving the American way. One wonders whether Lois would settle for less preservation and more pursuit. The notion of a sexual union between Lois and Superman gives rise to some naughty speculations. One is naturally led (isn’t one) to think of the last two lines of Yeats’ “Leda and The Swan,” to see what I mean. “Did she put on his knowledge with his power before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” Is Superwoman really the wishfulfilled fantasy of Lois Lane? I wonder!

Of course, not all quest myth stories contain every feature of the Perseus story. In fact, the variations that can be played on the major elements are almost as many as there are hero-quest stories. However, what does recur in all individual stories is the search for something that man has lost, his true inheritance. Think of the poignant longing of Ratso Rizzo for Florida in the movie *Midnight Cowboy* (based on the novel by James Leo

Herlihy) to see how persistently this memory or dream of Eden remains alive in the human imagination. Ratso, deprived of a truly human environment, at war with monsters of poverty outside and the demons inside him, is kept alive by the sheer force of his imagination. He dreams of his return “home” to Florida, a home he had never seen but which was as imaginatively real for him as any Biblical Eden or Classical Golden Age.

Popular music lyrics are a rich source of material for the quest pattern of imagery, especially in their call for a return to a Golden Age. The two songs that best captured the sixties sensibilities, “Aquarius” by James Rado and Gerome Ragni, and “Woodstock” by Joni Mitchell both send out a call to recover the Golden Age. A look at the imagery of each song presents the quest as fulfilled. In “Aquarius,” the first verse offers images of the harmony of the spheres, the perfect order of the universe, propelled by love and peace. The second verse sings of “harmony,” “understanding,” “sympathy,” and “trust.” The song presents a vision of a time when man’s dreams were not only “golden,” but living. Likewise, the singer of “Woodstock,” distressed by what she sees in the world, sings “We are stardust, we are golden,” and need to escape the polluted, corrupt world and “get ourselves back to the garden.” Both songs, in the pattern of their imagery, present pictures of a lost kingdom that is still meaningful and desirable.

In the song “Wooden Ships” by Crosby, Kantner, and Stills, the narrative structure of the quest myth can be seen in the pattern of imagery. We are presented in the poem with the grim picture of a group of survivors of an atomic holocaust who have set sail in wooden ships in an attempt to recreate a community of citizens who would live in harmony with each other.

One final example, E. E. Cummings’ “Pity This Busy Monster, Manunkind,” will serve to illustrate the variations played upon the quest pattern. The hero in the poem is the poet-narrator. The monster that he confronts is the human race, “manunkind.” The heritage that the poet, together with the rest of mankind, has lost is the original “world of born.” Contaminated by the rampages of technology, man has fallen from his state of grace into a “world of made.” Satiric targets aside, the poet-hero wants to set things right, to be born again, to regain his rightful kingdom. With the trenchant solution he proposes—to move to the universe next door—the poet not only scores with his satiric thrust, but also sets off to complete his quest, to recover the “world of born.”

## Section Four: *Initiation and the American Hero-Quester*

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Whether the hero is Perseus, Superman, or the poet who pities mankind, his importance lies in his potential for recreating the perfect human community. In Classical and Biblical tradition the picture of the perfect human community is clearly set before us at the beginning of each myth—the Golden Age and Paradise. The vision presented is of a world that is totally intelligible. Blake understood well this absolute clarity and presented in his *Songs of Innocence* crystal-clear visions of the unfallen world, a world that would inevitably be lost in experience. It is the memory of the lost Golden Age that motivates the hero to recover his rightful heritage.

The American hero-quester is the inheritor of this tradition, with some important differences. American literature contains no hero who has completed his quest and returned to restore the perfect human community. We have no Odysseus or Aeneas to give final form to the American myth. *Leaves of Grass* (1885) tried to capture the scope of the American experience, but Whitman was limited to his age, and, however remarkably he captures the quality of response to that age, his vision was incomplete. Even *The Bridge*



(1930), Hart Crane's epic poem about America, which was a deliberate attempt to complete the American myth, finally fails. His use of the Brooklyn Bridge as the mythic symbol of man's quest for unity with the natural world around him lacked the authority and scope of a true epic like the *Aeneid*, which provided the inspiration for Crane's poem. Instead, the bridge settled back into what it has always been for Americans, an iron passage from Manhattan to Brooklyn and back.

One major cause for the incompleteness of the American myth is history. Virgil had the advantage of writing at the end of a long period of meaningful history. His *Aeneid* is really a celebration of a goal achieved, the end of a long journey which began at Troy and ended with the apotheosis of Augustan Rome. Early American writers had no such historical advantage. Even after two hundred and fifty years we would still be hard put, I think, to find any American fiction where the journey is completed. *Henderson The Rain King* and *Rabbit Redux* come close, but the return of the hero in each is an ambiguous triumph, finally ironic and contradictory.

One major strain of the American tradition sees life and history as just beginning. Americans have always taken the term "New World" with literal seriousness. America is the New Jerusalem, The Kingdom of Heaven brought from within each man to earth, and expressed in the forms of our American society. America was perceived not as paradise regained, but as the original paradise, a world starting up again, a second chance for the human race. American tradition arises out of the notion that we were truly the chosen people destined to fulfill the promise of Eden so clumsily fumbled in the old world of Europe.

This sense of beginning anew gave rise to a new type of hero. He had shaken off the baggage of the past, and could be seen standing at the threshold of experience, looking hopefully out at the Westward future which lay before him. Characteristic of the new hero is his innocence, identified most readily with, as R.W.B. Lewis observes in his *American Adam*, Adam before the fall. He is self-reliant and self-motivated; the Emersonian figure, "the simple genuine self against the whole world." This view of the innocent American hero is best represented in the works of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman. Heroes in their own works, their quests took them into garden-like places where they sought to preserve the vision of America's destiny. Soon, however, time and space brought an end to the vision of innocence and newness. America was moving west, and conflict inevitably arose at the point where the advancing frontier and the wilderness collided. It is from the opposition of city and country, of civilization and the wilderness, of the restraint of custom and the freedom of the Western expanses that the American hero-quester emerges. What the hero did when he could no longer retreat into the womb-like world of Thoreau's Pond, but had to step into the breach between the new and the old set the pattern for the American literary experience to the present day.

The first hero to take the plunge is Cooper's Deerslayer. His journey is a qualified one, however, because the forest into which he enters remains free of the moral complexities of the fallen world. Deerslayer is still the Emersonian figure. The only change is that he is free of the constraints of space; he has been liberated from the city and ventures like an innocent Robin Hood into the still-green world of the garden-forest outside of time. It is not until Hawthorne and Melville arrive on the literary scene that the American hero-quester moves into a darker universe. The "single genuine self against the world" becomes the solitary self pitted against an alien, hostile, or indifferent universe.

As the picture of the American hero changes so does the imagery associated with the forest. No longer a place of communion, the forest becomes a place where things are tested out, a place of exile where initiation is undergone and from which return must be made. Located firmly in a world burdened by time and experience the ambiguous setting of the forest becomes a place of moral choice. In the shaping of the American character the forest image is pivotal. The forest is the central image of the American Dream. The image is of the endless

expanse of Western wilderness where one could always dream of starting over. America's mythic destiny—a place of second chances—is confirmed in the dream. As a literary symbol, the forest became the metaphoric space where the American hero-quester undergoes his initiation.

At the point where both these images meet—probably at the frontier—the shape of the initiation experience of the American hero-quester begins to form. It is the picture of the solitary figure set against the backdrop of a small village at the edge of an inviting but dangerous wilderness. In story after story, the movement from village to forest, from city to country, burns a path across the literary landscape as one character after another attempts to come to terms with his destiny. In one of Hawthorne's most powerful and poetic stories, "Young Goodman Brown," Young Goodman is representative of this picture of the heroquester. He is impelled to journey away from home and community, away from his wife and the everyday comforts of social routine into the forest of the night. It is a journey into the heart of darkness where he is forced to realize man's true nature.

What is remarkable about the stories of initiation is the feeling of inevitability that compels the hero to face his fate or destiny. Together with the sense of "out there" or a "place entered into" which characterizes the testing-ground place for the quester is the correlative sense of "something that must be done." For the American hero the choice of whether to enter the wilderness or not becomes a decision of whether to confront reality. Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" presented a picture of the tragic consequence for two lovers who were unable to face the harshness of reality. Their attempt to preserve the childhood world of their idealized love brought death for Annabel Lee and a life of suffering for her lover. Henry James' American innocent, Daisy Miller, is another who doesn't survive the collision with the world. Her suffering and death expose the vulnerability of innocence. Daisy's journey into the wilderness landscape of Europe, as hostile an environment as any Hawthorne forest of the night, demonstrates that initiation does not always lead to wisdom and maturity.

The inevitability of initiation has two modes of motivation. The first mode presents the initiate's destiny as coming from outside. In William Faulkner's *The Bear* initiation takes the form of tradition which compels the hero, Issac McCaslin, to participate in the bear hunt. Issac's quest is into the forest, where his voluntarily participation in the bear hunt is taken on as a ritual proof of manhood. The frequency with which the hunt provides the ritual as the framework for initiation in both fiction and real life attests to how deeply the hunt is ingrained in the American imagination. Norman Mailer's *Why Are We In Vietnam* and the movie *Deer Hunter* both make powerful statements about the central role the ritual of the hunt has in shaping the mind of the American character, and its destructive impact when raised to the level of experience. Another example of this first mode is Richard Wright's "The Street," the story of a young boy growing up in Memphis. He has his initiation thrust upon him by his mother, who refuses to let him return home until he has fulfilled his quest—to bring home the groceries. He can only return, however, after he has faced a gang of boys who prevent him from completing his journey. The pressures of family and society force Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, and the nameless hero of *Invisible Man* to undertake their quests. The need for a wife forces Leo Finkle in Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" to seek out a matchmaker.

On the other hand, sometimes the inevitability comes from some inner compulsion to obey a law of one's own nature—to follow what Abraham Maslow ( *Toward a Psychology of Being* ) calls our "intrinsic conscience. This compulsion to be true to one's own nature, the sense of "calling," is what forces Henderson, in Bellow's novel, to follow the Siren-like call "I want, I want" of his inner voice to Africa. What is sacrificed in each of these quest stories is innocence: the comfort, protection, ease, and simple pleasures of childhood. Because the hero must separate himself from his every-day place, initiation is one of the loneliest experiences a human being can



undergo.

The possibility of physical pain is also part of the initiation process. In the rite of passage undergone by young Australian Aborigines (the movie *Walkabout* portrayed this experience), physical pain and even death awaited the young man who had to survive alone in the bush for six months before he could return and take his rightful place in his village. The boy in *The Bear* has a very close brush with death, when, alone in the woods, he confronts the bear. Death awaits Billy Budd after his confrontation with the evil Claggart. Physical suffering takes place in Wright's "The Street," when Richard has to defend himself with a club from the gang of boys who harass him. In Faulkner's "Barn Burning," a terrifying story involving ritualistic murder, a boy must make a choice between blood loyalty and following his own values. The boy's initiation into the real world is only accomplished by the sacrifice of his father, a horrible price to pay but inevitable, if he is to pass from one stage of life to another. Initiation in this story can be viewed as a way of coping, not succeeding.

And finally, besides loss and sacrifice, there is also important gain associated with initiation. Once the ordeal has been undergone, the hero feels as though he has been reborn. Both Richard in "The Street" and Issac in *The Bear* return from their ordeals. Richard returns triumphant not only over the "mob-monster" but also over his own fear.

Issac must face the world of the forest; for him, it is not slaying the "bear monster," but confronting it, that matters; it is not the bear but his own fear he must overcome. Both boys become more mature as the result of their experiences. One becomes a man because he fights, and the other because he doesn't.

All the heroes who return from their initiations share in the secret knowledge of what it means to be human. Each has undergone and survived a version of the larger journey through life.

## Suggested Activities: Sections One and Two

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1. Introduce unit by discussing order and chaos. Why do people place value on order? Who are the people who have created order (scientists, doctors, politicians, auto mechanics)? Is a person's value based on how much order he brings to society? Why do people reject chaos? Who creates chaos in our society? Why do we condemn them?
2. Myths deal with order and chaos: what purpose do creation myths play in this conflict? Does the formation of these myths parallel a need in our own life?
3. Compare the behavior of gods with human beings. How does the likeness give shape to our own view of the world?
4. Students can make their own collections of creation myths. They can be presented to the class as prepared reading or dramatizations. Let students use their imaginations to create myths that are either serious or humorous.
5. Have students try to depict visually in drawings or in words or dramatizations what the original chaos looked like. Compare to what chaos looks like to them today.

Students can be asked to find god-like characters in TV commercials and advertisements.

Have students make up a list of our contemporary “gods,” and what they say is good for us. Is

6. their power over us still magical? Do we accept what they say because they are larger than life? What role do the media play in their transformation? How can we counter the influence of these “gods” and what they promise us?

Discuss the reasons why we don’t create gods and heroes of the same stature today. Ask students whether we immortalize famous people. (Christ, Mao, the Kennedys, Lincoln, King,

7. Gandhi, Einstein, etc.) Discuss just what actions lead to a person’s immortalization. Introduce concept of “Euhemerism.” Refer to the Prometheus myth. What “gifts” did these heroes bring to mankind? How did they help remove the chaos and create order?
8. How does man impose order on the animal, vegetable, and mineral world (zoos, parks, gardens, city plans, dams, fountains, etc)? Why does he do this?

## Suggested Activities: Sections Three and Four

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1. Introduce section by asking students to describe their ideal perfect world. How would they create it? What kind of journey would be required to reach their world? Make a list of images that appear in their descriptions and compare them to imagery in “Woodstock” and “Aquarius.” Compare to descriptions of Golden Age in Classical myths.

2. Make a collection of advertisements that place product in paradise-like setting (eg. cigarette ads that promise cool green woods and running water). Analyze ads for candor and plausibility.

3. Disneyland can be viewed as a commercial version of the Golden Age. Why do you think people go there? What are they trying to recover? Give other examples of commercial paradises.

4. Discuss the attraction for nostalgia in popular culture: TV, films, dress, etc. Why do people long for the “good old days”?

5. Compile complete list of Golden Age imagery found in today’s world: ads, political speeches, religious teachings. What places, objects, emotions, seasons of the year are associated with the Golden Age?

6. Have students write descriptions of what they think Hell is like. Who would they meet there? Hell is always more interesting than heaven to describe, but they could try heaven also. Students may write poems, use drawings, or plan skits to portray their visions.

7. Whichever quest myth is read have students identify the quest and explain why it was an important objective for society.

8. Discuss the role of women in the quest stories. Do they have any control over their destinies?

9. Discuss the role of the monster in the quest stories. Have students rewrite the monster scenes from the point of view of the monster. Make the monster sympathetic. Students might enjoy reading John Gardner’s *Grendel*, a retelling of the Beowulf legend from the monster’s point of view.

10. Who are our modern-day heroes? What are their quests?

11. Compare modern heroes in comic books, detective stories, films, or TV to the heroic tradition. What values do they possess? What aspirations do they reflect? Write radio play based upon modern hero.
12. Ask students what kind of hero they would become if they could; what goals would they try to accomplish; what problems would have to be overcome? What kind of personality would they have?
13. Discuss role of hero in modern ironic fiction: what forces trap the hero and reduce his hope of being saved? Define concept of anti-hero.
14. Compare John Steinbeck's "The Flight" with Hemingway's "The Killers." Both stories contain violent initiations.
15. Collect contemporary poems which reveal any aspect of the quest myth and write an essay about that facet.
16. Have students read the *Declaration of Independence*, Kennedy's Inaugural speech, and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Each calls for the recovery of our lost heritage. Analyze quest-imagery in each and relate to Golden Age myths.
17. What makes for a better human community? Discussion can lead to examination of Utopian literature: Thoreau's *Walden*, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and Wm. Dean Howell's *A Traveler from Altruria*; compare to Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*.
18. Ask students to discuss or write about initiations that they have experienced or that young people in general experience.
19. Form an open forum in your class on the topic of initiation. Discuss all the facets that the rite of passage takes in our society. Relate present rites to mythical implications. Ask students if they have seen *The Graduate* or *The Summer of '42*, two movies in which initiation is the major theme.

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