

We Can Be Heroes: Pop Culture as Modern Mythology

Course Outline, Spring 2011

*“It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life.
Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.”*
— Joseph Campbell

Instructor: Treesong

Recommend Texts (Optional):

Campbell, Joseph. The Power of Myth. Anchor Books, 1991.

Knowles, Chris. Our Gods Wear Spandex. Weiser Books, 2007.

Course Summary: This 7 week course includes interactive dialog and presentations by the instructor on the presence of modern-day mythological narratives in popular culture, including how they reinforce the shadow side of power and how they serve as inspiration for real-world heroic action.

Course Objectives:

- **Comparative mythology.** The student will develop a basic understanding of the concept of comparative mythology.
- **Pop culture.** The student will learn about the presence of mythological narratives and archetypes in numerous works of popular culture.
- **The Hero's Journey.** The student will learn about the concept of the Hero's Journey, including an integral perspective on how this model relates to popular culture and the student's own heroic narrative.
- **Further Exploration.** The student will be prepared to recognize and discuss characteristics of mythological narratives in other creative works not discussed in class and in aspects of their day-to-day life.

Course Benefits:

Exploring the relationship between popular culture and comparative mythology offers us the opportunity to deepen our understanding of both topics. Many of us are already familiar with the characters and narratives of contemporary fiction, making it easier for us to examine the presence of archetypes and other mythological elements in these popular stories. In turn, as we develop our understanding of the mythic elements of modern tales, we become more prepared to discuss these elements in the works of classical mythology of cultures around the world.

Taught by Treesong
treesong.org

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Course Description:

Many people think that myths and legends are ancient works of fiction that may or may not have any relevance in the present day. A myth, however, is a living story that weaves a narrative about the nature of the world and our place in it, offering insights and inspirations that often cross borders of time, space, and culture.

What are our modern myths? How do they inspire us to discover our heroic role in the modern world?

This course offers an introductory exploration of mythological narratives in popular culture. We will examine these narratives through the lens of the Hero's Journey, exploring the ways in which works of popular culture shape our understanding of what it means to be a hero.

Our modern tales of superheroes, action heroes, warriors, vampires, and other larger-than-life characters serve many of the same roles in our society that classical myths and legends served in ancient societies. They explore the heights and depths of human nature, speak to our greatest hopes and fears, and show the consequences of heroism, villainy, and everything in between.

By examining and discussing these narratives, we may transform ourselves from a passive viewer into an active participant, taking the first step in our own Hero's Journey of personal empowerment and heroic action.

Course Outline:

Week One: Introduction. Introduce ourselves and our interests in mythology and pop culture. Discuss course outline, the nature of mythology, and the Hero's Journey, thus setting an analytic framework for discussion of content in the remaining sessions.

Week Two: Classical Mythology. Ancient Mythology: *Clash of the Titans*, *Hercules*. Old Gods in Modern Times: *American Gods*, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*.

Week Three: Fantasy. *Wizard of Oz*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Dark Crystal*, *Never-Ending Story*.

Week Four: Science Fiction. Sci-Fi Mysticism (*Star Wars*, *Matrix*) vs. Sci-Fi Hypertech (*Star Trek*).

Week Five: Vampires. *Dracula*. *Interview with a Vampire*. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Twilight*.

Week Six: Superheroes. Comic book superheroes. *Heroes* (TV Show). Superheroes as modern gods. American Warriors (*Rambo*, *24*).

Week Eight: Interactive Mythology. Role-playing games (RPGs) as interactive mythology. *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Mage: The Ascension*. *Ultima*.

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Instructor Bio:

Treesong is an author, teacher, and community advocate. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy from Southern Illinois University Carbondale in 2000.

Treesong has been an active member of the Southern Illinois community for over 14 years. As an undergraduate philosophy major at SIUC, his approach to philosophy bridged the gap between theory and practice. While he was studying environmental ethics in his philosophy courses, Treesong was also exploring applied environmental ethics through his involvement in the Student Environmental Center at SIUC.

Treesong is the author of *Revolution of One: A Simple Guide to Reclaiming Your Life and Transforming Our World*. This book draws on an understanding of dialectical and integral philosophy to present a simple and accessible self-help program for personal growth and community development.

In 2010, Treesong taught a course titled “Introduction to Environmental Ethics” through the Center for Spiritual Inquiry and Integral Education. Currently, he is working on several writing projects, curriculum development at CSIIE, and continued involvement in several local community organizations.

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