

Epic Heroes Within the Context of Cultural Literacy

Leonard Rétiz
Westside High School

INTRODUCTION

In the concluding pages of his book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell expresses the observation shared by many in the teaching profession, that the concept of “hero,” as understood universally for millenia, has disappeared in modern times: “. . . the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed.” Quoting Nietzsche, he goes further, “. . . dead are all the gods” (387). “Society,” that amorphous, catch-all and elusive entity which nowadays directs most aspects of artistic expression, has usurped the role of the individual. In another age and epoch, heroes engaged in titanic feats. Theirs was a daring, epic struggle, culminating in an apocalyptic finale. Where the literary hero once risked all with his or her daring, we now confront the self-loathing of the anti-hero, Everyman, Rebel Without a Cause, and every other sore loser popularized in modern literature. . . . and even in those venues of story-telling where vestiges of the classical hero still resonate, mature readers find little food for intelligent participation. Instead, they must content themselves with comic strips, electronic games and Saturday morning cartoons.

Rather than spending time criticizing “the media,” “modern values,” or “kids of today,” let me suggest some ways an adult can resurrect the classical notion of the “hero” to some semblance of its earlier, impressive state. I’ve really addressed two kinds of audiences above: “mature readers” and those who indulge in “comic strips,” “electronic games” and “Saturday morning cartoons.” As to mature, critical readers, they will always know where to trove for decent literature. As to the second—young students who like cartoon-type heroes—to reach this audience requires some work on cultivating an apparently innate taste for extraordinary feats of heroism. So, my project centers on these teenage students in middle and high school, and their interest in those “superheroes” in the venues cited above. As it turns out, those qualities that appeal to them are identical to those found in classical heroes: strength, daring, altruism, selflessness and other heroic qualities manifest themselves throughout the adventures of *Batman*, *Superman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Tarzan*, *Hercules*, and others. Games and shows that depict characters taking on danger for the sake of the common good provide the fertile ground upon which to introduce classical heroes of history and literature. Stated another way: Teenagers recognize a hero when they see one.

My objective is to introduce my students to classical heroes, *i.e.* literary and historical individuals whose heroic status has been time-tested against the higher canons of world culture. At the most basic level of learning, they will be able to describe the classical hero in terms of specific literary criteria. At a higher level, they will be intellectually enabled to discriminate between everyday choices which involve true heroism and ordinary fulfillment of expected duties. Such choices might involve the official discharge of one’s duties as soldier, policeman or student. As long as an individual in any of those capacities does what is expected, and nothing more, there is no “heroism” involved. When the individual goes beyond that which is expected, at great risk and possible loss of personal gain, a hero is born. The Navy corpsman who charges into enemy

fire to try to save his wounded comrades obviously goes beyond the call of duty. The firemen who disobey orders to withdraw from a threatening situation in order to save others obviously surpass what is expected of them. And the individual who sacrifices his/her own opportunities so that others may gain is every bit as heroic as those who accomplish physical deeds.

The students that I will focus on are native speakers of Spanish. Like their English-speaking counterparts in middle and high school they speak Spanish more or less fluently, yet lack basic skills in certain academic areas. They have little or no knowledge of correct/standard writing conventions; their vocabulary is very limited, and they have no familiarity with Spanish-language literature. In addition, many of them bear a label: “At risk.” That is, they live with the constant danger that at some point they will choose to drop out of school. Until recently, they were mostly Mexican American children; as of today, they are children from all parts of the Spanish-speaking world: countries from Central and South America, the Antilles, and Africa. Most of them really want to finish basic schooling and move on to college or other professional opportunities, but many—far too many—will drop out. This has become a tiresome fact, reported and repeated every year. As of this very writing, just today, June 3, 2003, the fact announces itself again, this time in an op-ed piece in the Houston Chronicle stating “one in three Hispanics—36 percent—drops out of high school.” I say tiresome, because the statistic hasn’t changed since the ‘60’s, and this has depressed and bedeviled teachers no end. The authors of this particular piece cite several causes for this perennial problem, two of which I select here as being particularly relevant to my unit. One reason consists of “The neighborhood gang that did a better job of recruiting than local mentors [did],” while another lies in “an educational system that concerns itself too often with assessment tests for better Texas Education Agency ratings (*ibid*).”

On the other hand, the same media reported that young Latinos are succeeding little by little and more and more. Again, I point to “the breaking news:” on June 4, 2003, the Houston Chronicle reported the preliminary official results on the first TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills). It said that “. . . [HISD] students who took the test in Spanish surpassed the state levels in all Spanish-language categories. In many cases, HISD students who tested in Spanish outpaced their classmates who tested in English” (*op. cit*). Clearly, these Hispanas and Hispanos were motivated by factors which weren’t present earlier, one factor being that teachers and administrators at those schools allowed them to perform in their own language. It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that in any class setting where teachers are allowed to implement new and creative methodologies, they create incentives for staying in school. If teachers were to introduce heroes in the curriculum that would hold the students’ interest, if only for the length of a class period, and if those students could look forward to hearing more about them and other similar heroes at the next class meeting, and then the next, and then the next—would the impetus swell?

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

My teaching assignment is Spanish for Native Speakers (of Spanish). Within the parameters of my assignments allotted to me over the past 7-8 years, I therefore address the procedures I deem useful in acquainting students, whose first language is Spanish, with historical and literary exemplars of heroism.

The plan outlined here deals, therefore, only with students whose primary language is Spanish. The readings, lesson plans, classroom language of instruction and students' work will be in Spanish. The overall plan extends over an entire "time-block schedule" of four nine-week cycles. However, where there exists a six-week cycle plan, the activities depicted herein may be modified later for four cycles. Within each cycle, I will build a set of lesson plans based upon one thematic hero or heroine, who will be drawn from these sources: the Bible, Greek mythology, St. Joan of Arc, and the subjects of three national epic poems: El Cid, of Spain; Caupolicán, of the area now comprising Chile; and finally, Martín Fierro of Argentina. Each cycle will begin with readings on the thematic hero of the moment. These readings and discussions thereof will be followed by an evaluation, of any type. Then, the students will research and write a formal report on the actions of a hero or set of heroes, which will be chosen from a list that I will provide them.

How does this objective, how does this kind of literary activity in a class, fit into the overall, HISD-directed scheme of things? My job is to improve and enhance the Spanish-language skills which these students bring along with them, to teach native speakers of Spanish the essentials of language and literature, a job analagous to that of teachers who are expected to teach "Grammar and Reading" in English departments. My focus here is on "literature" and "reading," which logically leads to writing and communication skill-building. As part of this literature component, the activities described herein aim to inculcate in Spanish-speaking students a sense of appreciation for two kinds of institutions found in all great literature: the classical hero and the national epic. And this, I submit, stating my objective in a nutshell: *My Hispanic students will learn to appreciate the classical sense of the heroic and become familiar with form and content of three great national epic poems which have been written in the Spanish language.*

Here is a literary objective that coordinates with goals and objectives set forth by most public schools in the teaching of literary concepts, the particular emphasis here lying on one particular genre, the national epic. As Greece has its *Iliad*, Germany its *Nibelungenlied*, England its *Beowulf*, and America its *Song of Hiawatha*, so too have Hispanic countries produced some of the most powerful, monumental epic poems on levels equal to those cited. Yet they remain unknown to most Hispanic students. Indeed, most Latinos graduate from high school and later from college knowing more about epic poetry written in English than Spanish-language epics. Try it: Ask them "Who was El Cid? Who was Martín Fierro?"

RATIONALE

Average American students who have sat in the required classes of English literature may be reasonably expected to have some passing acquaintance with "Beowulf," or "Homer," or "The Odyssey," or "The Song of Hiawatha." I submit that we should just as reasonably expect that Spanish-speakers of equivalent ages and grade levels who have taken (again, not necessarily studied, we want to be realistic here) Spanish-language literature classes know what we're talking about when we mention "Martín Fierro" or "El Cid." Extending the analogy to general education: Teachers can predict a visceral response when we in the U. S. mention "The Ride of Paul Revere." We feel shocked, surprised, perhaps even offended, if our audience expresses ignorance of Paul

Revere. We expect everyone to know that literary and historical “icon.” We also expect everyone in this country to know about “Valley Forge,” to know about “the Yanks against the Rebs,” the Alamo, Mark Twain, Custer’s Last Stand and other literary and historical concepts. This is because we hear so much about them, and not only in the classroom. We expect our conversation partners, our radio audiences, our newspaper readers to know about these and much more.

Edward Hirsch gave it a name: cultural literacy. Says one person to the other: “What, you never heard of George Washington?” and there is disbelief and condescension. Such, too, should be the level of cultural expectations for Hispanic students. As it now stands, the level of cultural consciousness among our Latino youngsters constitutes a blank slate when it comes to awareness of Hispanic contributions to world culture, and they expect their teachers to help them fill it in. Cultural literacy in their history and literature is part of their patrimony. In other words, they are entitled to it.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

At the beginning of such an exercise, it is useful to define the terms and set the criteria for the project. Perhaps other teachers of Language Arts have shared in this experience (it was reported by nearly all participants in my seminar at our first meeting): we ask our students to comment (make a list, write a paragraph, or simply talk) about what they think constitutes a “hero” and what some heroic qualities might be, and then share laughs over their responses. Among my own students’ responses, I especially like the one about “Hugh Hefner,” whose heroic trait was being “intelligent.” Out of respect for my students, I won’t waste time with such an interview in the future and will instead provide them with what I, the professional teacher, deem to be the proper defining characteristics of “hero” and “heroism.” Our students expect and deserve nothing less. They want and deserve to know; and at this stage of their education, the answers have to come from the top down.

The working definition I will give my students derives only partially from my personal opinions, formed from years of hearing and reading about heroes through past and present history, witness Mohatmas Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., and the passengers of Flight 713 on 9/11. To a larger extent, my criteria are based on the critical literature, most notably Campbell, Hirsch, and others. Accordingly, I will define a genuine hero as an individual who, in a moment of crisis, struggles for the sake of a highly moral principle, often at a painful price. The crisis may be one of persecution of the weak, or the persistence of an evil situation; the moral principle might entail the rights of all citizens or a vulnerable set of the people, the struggle might take the form of a valiant assault on a powerful system of authority which perpetuates the evil situation.

The price can be terrible: death, besmirching of one’s name, condemnation by one’s own family or society, even divine punishment. The hero stands accused by the authorities who deem themselves appointed by God. And even so, the hero assumes that risk for the sake of something good. In so doing, she or he sacrifices the natural instinct for self-preservation and replaces that with a deed undertaken for the benefit of others. Such motivation, at the core, is “love.” It is St. Paul’s *agape*, the love which erupts spontaneously when one rushes to the comfort of another

being, even one's enemy. This is a love which does not question or rationalize. The heroic action may evoke the response of "Stupid!" Think of the shame, the shunning, that awaits the "whistle blower." Or think of the finality of the soldier's action of throwing himself upon a live grenade to save his buddies. Such love, *agape*, is heroism at its most extreme and defines the extraordinary persons who merit being called "heroic," as contrasted with "admirable."

Historical examples of this definition abound. One that easily comes to mind is the story of Hans and Sophie Scholl, brother and sister students at the University of Munich during World War II, who worked covertly against the Nazi authorities by distributing leaflets, organizing meetings of student dissidents, and recruiting others to their cause. They were caught and executed. The Allies ignored their efforts, they had no intention of allowing their citizens to know that there was such a thing as a "German Resistance." Another example: The women peanut-shellers of San Antonio who organized to obtain better working conditions. They failed because their leader was also a woman, "just" a Mexican, and worst of all, a card-carrying...*Communist!!!*

Suffice it here to state that these and other similar heroes underwent a pattern of struggling against overpowering odds for the sake of a highly moral, apparently naïve principle. Moreover, these overpowering odds often include lingering attitudes of those who will not accept the "goodness" of the hero's message. For example, many Germans even today regard the Scholl siblings as traitors. And it is probably safe to say that many white Texans of today will dismiss the San Antonio women workers as "Communists, after all," as well as, "just Mexicans." These powerful, overwhelming attitudes constitute the nemeses, which confront, and often destroy, the hero even beyond his or her lifetime.

Literary Criteria

Against the backdrop of the recent and historical stories of the people described here, the stories of classical heroes of history and literature, which I now bring into my students' learning portfolio, become more relevant and acceptable to young reader. The three heroes in this phase of my plan provide the criteria, a paradigm against which I expect my students to measure and describe the subjects they will choose to write about at the specified times. These archetypal three are:

- Samson, from the Bible: God's champion of His people (and also the dashing lover, incredibly strong fighter, and a penitent at the end);
- Prometheus, from Greek mythology: the literally and physically titanic creature who defies the god-authorities in order to bring a benefit, Fire, to us mortals, and is condemned to eternal punishment for his kind favor, and
- St. Joan of Arc, from European history: This little, starry-eyed teenaged girl led armies of men to do the right things, which male authorities were unwilling to do, and was summarily punished first and foremost by her country and by her Church--*her Church, God's Church*—and only secondarily by her enemies, the English. You don't get any more heroic than that.

As I lead my students through the readings, I draw their attention to the common narrative thread coursing through each of them, a device I borrow from Campbell:

The Hero undertakes a quest, a battle. This often takes the form of a challenge to an oppressive authority, and constitutes the first stage of a journey. In the second stage, the Hero suffers defeat, exile, banishment as punishment for his/her defiance. In the third, final installment of her/his journey, the Hero undergoes apotheosis, victory even unto death (Campbell 49-244).

Applying Campbell's model to any of the three archetypal heroes intended to serve as literary guides in this unit, then, yields something like the following outline for Samson. An incredibly strong fighter who wrestles lions with his bare hands and defeats whole armies with the jawbone of an ass, he sets out to deliver God's people from the oppressive rule of the Philistines (the Quest). He succumbs to his libidinal weakness when he lets Delilah seduce him. As punishment, God allows him to be captured by his enemies, blinded and enslaved (the Banishment). After years of suffering and repentance, he is led by God, again acting through the Philistines, to the pagan temple of authority and destroys it and himself as well in spectacular fashion (the Apotheosis).

Prometheus is another super-humanly strong individual who takes on impossible odds. That is because he *is* super-human, one of the race of giants, or Titans, who began to compete with the Gods of Greek cosmology and were defeated in cosmic battle. This particular Titan challenged the supreme authorities of the universe in more lasting, more spiritual and therefore more real terms: He took something which humans needed from the Gods who kept it from them. Call this something "Fire," extend the metaphor into "Wisdom" or "Advancement," no matter, the story is engaging and compelling in any version. Zeus, God of Gods, condemns Prometheus to eternal punishment for his defiance by chaining him to a rock where a bird of prey attacks him daily and devours his liver, only to have the same torture repeated the next day, and the next, and the next. And this ever-repeated torment constitutes the basis of Prometheus' defiance and victory even in the thrall of defeat: again, Apotheosis. The best expression of this defiance, this heroic stance, can be heard in Goethe's poem, with all due respect to others' authors:

*Hier sitz ich, forme Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde,
Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei,
Zu leiden, zu weinen,
Zu genießen und zu freuen sich,
Und dein nicht zu achten,
Wie ich!*

Here I sit, forming men
In my image,
A race to resemble me:
To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy, to be glad—
And never to heed you,
Like me!

(Middleton)

And the Spanish version for my students:

*Aquí sentado, modelo hombres
A mi imagen,
Una estirpe igual a mí,
Para sufrir, llorar,
Para gozar y alegrarse
Y no adorarte más,
¡Como yo!
(Quasimodo)*

In the matter of Joan: A young, obscure girl from the countryside follows the directives of her voices to approach the rulers of her country and talks them into changing their political agenda—and we'd all love to see someone trying *that* nowadays. But this, actually, historically happened. Next, she led France's forces into impressive military victories over the English and temporarily liberated her country (the Quest). She was betrayed by her own countrymen, imprisoned and tried as a witch, a heretic, and an enemy of the state (the Banishment). Accordingly, she was burned at the stake and relegated to the annals of punished criminals, in 1431. Reason eventually triumphed: she was exonerated by her Church in 1456 and canonized in 1920. Today, she enjoys the honor of being recognized as the national heroine and patroness of the country which once rejected her: Apotheosis.

This introduction to representative archetypes of heroes and heroism will form the core of the literature component awaiting the students at the beginning of the school year. After having read selections of the readings, various comprehension activities and projects and presentations, students will be asked to demonstrate their understanding of the basic concepts presented (evaluation). These concepts involve the terms, concepts, and criteria, which attempt to identify the steps by which we define heroes, but moreover, provide the standard by which we measure anyone else in literature and history that society calls a "hero." Such a test of their acquired understanding will involve the use of a simple instrument which begins with basic recognition exercises (e.g. "The punishment of Prometheus provides an example of the hero's (a) exile; (b) beginning of the journey, or (c) return/apotheosis") and progresses through more demanding activities, such as: "Compare and contrast the apotheosis stage as experienced by Joan of Arc and Samson." The next step would be to attempt to apply the paradigm to a certain "hero-candidate," say, "Benito Juárez," whereby the students would be assigned to write a paper detailing their support or denial of hero status to the individual, applying the aforementioned criteria.

Upon completion of the evaluation process, my students should be ready for initiation into the next phase of their learning about true heroes and heroism. The next four (or six)-week cycle will have as its literary focus a reading and study of *El Cid*.

El Cantar del Mío Cid (or: El Poema del Cid)

The subject of this epic is a historical character, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, who lived between 1043 and 1099. As soldier and mercenary, he fought against the Moorish armies of occupation, though at times fought on their side against Christian Spaniards.

Comprising nearly 4,000 verses, the epic poem describes a lifetime of armed conflict and extols his steadfast loyalty to his family, his vassals, and his king (whom many, even Rodrigo himself, suspected of having killed his own brother for acquisition of the crown). He married a noble beauty, who acquiesced even after he killed her father in a “necessary” duel involving honor. They had two daughters who in turn married men chosen by the king and approved by their loyal father. When their marriages unravel as their husbands reveal themselves to be scoundrels, El Cid has to redeem their honor. Finally, in some versions of the epic, the hero vanquishes his Moorish foes even after he is mortally wounded.

Entre las dos hileras luminosas, y a su cabeza, cabalgaba el Cid, el mismísimo Campeador, cababallero en Babieca y armado de su armadura más brillante; derecho, rígido, imponente; el casco calado hasta los ojos, la larga barba blanca descansando en el arzón de la cabalgadura, y el brazo derecho . . . levantado y sosteniendo a Tizona, ¡la espada implacable e invencible! . . . Así, después de muerto ganó todavía el Cid Campeador su última batalla. -- Between the two shining columns and in the lead rode El Cid, the very same Champion, mounted on Babieca and outfitted in his most resplendent armour; upright, rigid, imposing; his helmet drawn down to his eyes, his long white beard resting on his steed’s saddletree, and his right hand . . . uplifted and wielding Tizona, his implacable and invincible sword! . . . Thus, even after death did My Lord Champion win his last battle (Morales 114-115).

Following a wrap-up evaluation exercise for *El Cid*, I would require my students to prepare and submit a report on a hero or hero-set to be selected from the prepared list cited earlier. Thus concludes the second grading cycle, and we prepare for the third.

La Araucana

This truly long, truly epical poem also derives from historical events; moreover, if we are to believe the prefatory remarks of its author (Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga 1533-1594), has history itself as its subject. At the same time, it is a conscious effort to write in the style of epic poetry popular in that age: Virgil’s *Aenid*, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and Dante’s *Inferno*, among others. Read without reference to these works, it is a gritty history of the Spanish conquest in one of its many colorful and bloody chapters. This one deals with the sixteenth-century struggle between the Spaniards and the indigenous groups (“Indians”) of Chile who fell under the collective name of the *Araucanos*; compare North American history references to “*The Iroquois*” and “*The Plains Indians*”. The work expresses genuine awe of and admiration for the Araucanos, who rejected the incursions of the Spanish and defeated them in several horrendous battles, only to lose inevitably to superior European weaponry. Leading this heroic and doomed effort is the physically superior and intelligent chieftain in command of the Indians, Caupolicán. Defeat follows upon several victories, and he is captured and tortured, and finally impaled, as was the Spanish custom.

Ercilla's poem ends with the reportage that the Spaniards carried the day and that a noble foe died heroically. The tone of heroic defiance has invited open-ended speculation that the Spaniards never succeeded in exterminating a people's dream of liberty. This interpretation resonates especially in recent history, as one follows modern developments in countries such as Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela, countries whose peoples have cried "Enough!" with more violent vigor against government authoritarianism in the last two decades than ever before. The Indian and the literary person know: The modern resurgence of the struggle for freedom is the inevitable follow-up to the story of Caopolicán: Apotheosis.

As earlier, we end this grading period with evaluation (testing) and a written report on one of the heroes or hero-set chosen from the list. A suggested procedure would involve applying the message of Caopolicán's struggle to the doomed efforts of the German resistance fighters, or to the Sioux leaders at Little Big Horn, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, or the tragic Nez Perce leader, Chief Joseph.

Martín Fierro

In the fourth cycle, we become acquainted with a work considered by Argentinians to be their national treasure. First and foremost, they identify with its message of bravery, heroism, pathos, and poetic musicality, embodied in the *persona* of a Lone Individual—much in the same way as many Americans identify with the character portrayed in the movies of John Wayne. The fictional subject of this long epic—8,000 verses—is a *gaucho*, translated somewhat weakly and inaccurately as an "Argentinian cowboy" (but that's another story). More importantly, he is the embodiment of the pent-up resentment of the middle classes of 19th century Argentina against the ruling aristocracy. Their discontent gave rise to a series of uprisings and revolutions which seem to have not ended even today, in the incipient phases of the 21st century. The gaucho hero struggles to please his legal and business superiors. He wants to live in accordance with the law, but just cannot do enough to satisfy them. He consents to enlist in the army to fight the Indians and receives cruel treatment from his superiors, an experience common throughout all militaries. Upon his return home, his wife and children have disappeared and his modest ranch has been destroyed, because he has not been able to keep up his rent payments. So he breaks with his law-abiding past and becomes an outlaw, killing all who stand in his way. Finally, exhausted by so much of his violent ways, he joins up with another outlaw gaucho to go live sensibly and peacefully with the Indians. Thus ends the first part, aptly called *La ida*, "The Departure" or "The Leaving," or even "The Exile," comprising 2,325 verses divided into 13 cantos, each of dissimilar length.

The second part is entitled *La vuelta*, "The Return," comprising 4,894 verses and divided into 33 cantos. Here, Fierro is reunited with his family, and the action is less dramatic and more philosophical. For obvious reasons—extreme length, students' attention span and limited time available—only selected portions will be assigned. The concluding activities will again consist of evaluation for comprehension, followed by a project or report on one of the heroes cited in the list.

Heroes Past and Present

Before proceeding to discussing implementation and bibliography, I should like to remind my readers, and my future students, of the initially stated goals of this whole exercise. I stated that the events surrounding a real hero, within the context of the literature selected, demonstrated certain recurring traits: acceptance of a challenge, banishment and vindication. These stages appear consistently. And the one thread woven throughout the literature remains a constant: the refusal to continue suffering under repression. Prometheus, Joan, Caopolicán, Martín Fierro, they all reject the overpowering dictates of repression and become outcasts, sinners and outlaws. In most cases, they never live to see their acts justified. To do so might lessen the import of their struggle, and make it more common and pedestrian. But to die amidst scorn, rejection, and in the personal confidence of the righteousness of one's stand for the good of humanity—*that* is superhuman and heroic. For Christians, this evokes the image of the crucifixion.

Superheroes of such caliber appear everywhere and at all times of history. To my students, I offer the following working list of such persons as suggested subjects of research at the conclusion of each cycle of literary study of the “hero of the moment.” The listing is random, without regard to thematic relevance, nationality or other provenience. (Names which should be left in the original language appear in italics.) Nor have I included descriptive data, in order to pique individual interest and initiative. As to why “so-and-so isn't included”—well, I hope my students will indeed be aroused to add their own notions of heroes and heroism. That is the whole point.

Cory Aquino	<i>Niños héroes</i>	<i>Geschwister Scholl</i>
<i>Graf Stauffenberg</i>	Oskar Schindler	Chiune Sugihara
Emiliano Zapata	<i>Maximiliano y Carlota</i>	Cuahutémoc
César Chávez	St. Thomas More	Archbishop Romero
Spartacus	Hector	Augusto Sandino
<i>Los patricios</i>	Peanut shellers of San Antonio, Texas (1938)	

Not all these individuals and groups of individuals will be familiar to all readers, of course. Moreover, their fame/notoriety can be fleeting. In the 1970's, Cory Aquino was on everyone's lips, as were the names of her adversaries, as she led a popular and practically bloodless revolt against the Marcos regime in the Philippines. The San Antonio women who defied their employers in the late 1930's are forgotten today. And until a certain Hollywood director came along in the 1990's to make a movie about a German who saved hundreds of Jews from extermination, no one had ever heard of Oskar Schindler. Nor is it likely that many know the story of his Japanese contemporary and counterpart (also listed).

LESSON PLANS

Week One/Two of Academic Year (Cycle One): First Archetypal Hero - Samson

Goal

To familiarize my students with the Biblical figure of Samson, plotting the story against the classical stages of the hero's journey (in Campbell's terms).

Text

Excerpts from Judges, Chapter XIII-XVI, from *Sagrada Biblia: Nueva Edición Guadalupana*

Materials

Handouts of copies of the biblical text, and of a web diagram

Activities

On Day One, we will brainstorm. Some students will be familiar with the story, but most will not. Just before we begin to read, they will be given worksheets containing a blank Web Diagram. As they begin to read aloud, I will interject with comments and questions, inviting the students to make pertinent observations. They will begin to enter notes in the circles in the web diagram, noting in particular the beginning of Samson's journey, the cause and nature of his exile, and his eventual apotheosis. Students will continue this reading and note-taking through Days Two and Three, both in class and at home (homework).

On Day Two, we will do intensive readings, with interpretations and clarifications, of handouts of excerpts from the Book of Judges, chapters XIII-XVI, which tell the story of Samson from his birth until his death. I will show my students how to apply their notes in the web diagram in developing a first draft of a three-page report. Before beginning work on the written report, and as a way to enliven the story in a personal way, they will first be assigned project tasks, the simplest and time-tested form being the *retablo*, a three-panel kind of triptych drawn on a standard 22" x 28" poster board. In each panel, they draw or sketch a scene of Samson's journey, exile and return (or apotheosis). Thus: Panel One would show Samson wrestling with the lion, or sending the foxes into the fields of the Philistines, or his slaughter of the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Panel Two could show Delilah shearing his locks as he slept; Samson hauling at the millstone, or the Philistines mocking their captive enemy, Samson (*Judges XVI, 23-25*). Panel Three could only depict Samson pushing the pillars of Dagon's temple to destroy God's enemies and himself. They would submit the *retablo* at the next class meeting and do an oral, five-minute presentation. I will then collect these, grade them and return them with comments.

On Day Three—if necessary, Day Four—students will submit their first draft along with a brief, five-minute oral presentation or description. Comments and suggestions from the rest of the class will be encouraged. The students will then submit their First Drafts to me for inspection and revising suggestions.

Evaluation

After they have received their annotated First Drafts, the students will re-write their paper into a Second and Final Draft. I will develop a rubric (in Spanish) as a reference guide for writing the

paper. The rubric will serve as a guide outlining what constitutes “heroism” in the classical history mode:

Rubric

Name of the hero *and details* (25 points)

Nature of the Quest (25 points)

Nature of the Exile (25 points)

Nature of the Return (25 points)

At this point, we are on Day Five or Six. I return their papers on Day Six, at the latest, graded according to the rubric and with commentary.

With the return of their graded papers, I declare this phase of our introduction to epic heroism as closed and we proceed in similar fashion for our next two archetypes, *Prometheus* and *St. Joan of Arc*. The kinesthetic component of the student’s presentation may take any form other than the *retablo*, of course. For Prometheus, I might suggest an oral and dramatic recitation of the poem, either Goethe’s or Shelley’s or any other (Goethe’s poem will be the text I use).

Week Seven / Eight of Academic Year (Cycle Two): Second Archetypal Hero—St. Joan of Arc

Goal

To familiarize my students with various readings, historical and literary, with the person of Joan of Arc. As before, we will plot the story of her life and career against the classical stages of the hero’s journey as per Campbell.

Text

A Spanish-language edition of George Bernard Shaw’s *St. Joan*.

Activities

After having read the play in its entirety, I will have my students present, as earlier, a *retablo* illustrating the three stages of our heroine’s journey. At the conclusion of this activity, we will proceed to the next. Since we are dealing with a work meant for the stage, I would enjoy seeing my students enjoy presenting a dramatic skit of a scene from Shaw’s play (in Spanish translation, of course). Imagine the fun, the insight gained from performing the following scene, taken at random:

JOAN [*to the Dauphin*]: Who be old Gruff-and-Grum?

CHARLES: He is the Duke of de la Trémouille.

JOAN: What be his job?

CHARLES [*petulantly moving to the throne side of the room to escape from her magnetic field*]: How can I prevent him? He bullies me. They all bully me.

JOAN: Art afraid?

CHARLES: Yes. I am afraid. It's no use preaching to me about it. It's all very well for these big men with their armor that is too heavy for me, and their swords that I can hardly lift, and . . . I only want to be left alone . . . I never asked to be a king . . . I am not built that way; and there is an end of it.

JOAN [*trenchant and masterful*]: Blethers! We are all like that to begin with. I shall put courage into thee.

CHARLES: But I don't want to have courage put into me. . . . let me alone.

JOAN: It's no use, Charlie: thou must face what God puts on thee. . . . Come! Let me see thee sitting on the throne. I have looked forward to that.

(Shaw)

There are simply too many other excellent scenes in Shaw's play to mention here which students would have fun with as a dramatic exercise. Other sources would include either of two plays which Bertolt Brecht wrote on this girl-subject (*two*, no less; he was obviously fascinated by her: *Der Prozess der Jeanne d'Arc zu Rouen 1431* and *Die Gesichte der Simone Machard* (*The Trial of Jeanne d'Arc at Rouen in 1431; The Visions of Simone Machard*). These kinesthetic activities would precede and facilitate the writing of a traditional paper on the hero-subject. They are necessary components of any study of epic literature if I intend for my students to perceive these subjects as real and relevant. In attempting to teach historical concepts, it is disheartening to hear the perennial student judgmental comment that, "All we do is read about dead people." To bring the subject to life, to make the information relevant and to make the concept of "epic heroine/hero" a visceral reality should be the motivational principle guiding the planning and execution of plans to teach about these literary and historical figures to young people.

Week 19/20 of Academic Year (Cycle Four): Thematic Hero of the Cycle—Martin Fierro

Goal

To familiarize my students with the best-known features of the epic poem of Argentina's national hero, Martín Fierro, recognizing in the story the classical stages of the hero's journey: quest, exile and return.

Materials

Handouts of excerpts from the poem. It is readily available in book form as well as on several web sites.

Activities

On Day 1 of the Martín Fierro cycle, I will distribute informational material that describes geographical, historical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Central to the imagery of the setting of the epic is the Argentinian landscape, and while every Argentine can easily visualize the *pampa* where all this takes place, HISD students need a thorough introduction to this concept. In presenting the historical background, my students will learn of the oppressive attitude taken by the Argentine oligarchic classes towards everybody else, especially the laboring-class gauchos, those people who put food on the plates of this upper class. They will also learn of the unique position of Argentina with regard to the presence and the legacy of indigenous people in that country: there is none. Culture will involve the expressions of the Argentine mentality of freedom and individualism, which again has its roots in its geography of the *pampas*. Finally, the language encountered in the work mirrors actual vernacular usage of the period and formed a basis for the immediate acceptance by the Argentine reading public. For outsiders, of course, this uniqueness requires closer inspection and clarification.

On days 2 and 3, we will read aloud in class the three parts of the poem which describe the phases of the hero's journey: For the Quest, selections from Cantos 1—c. 1117. The hero sings of his happy life on the *pampas*, which is interrupted by the arrival of government agents, who yank him from his family to fight against the Indians. After three years of harsh military life, he decides that enough is enough and deserts to return to his ranch. But when he arrives there, everything is gone: His family has disappeared and his belongings have been ransacked. He looks for a fight, insults a black couple and kills the man, and from then on lives the life of an Exile: Cantos 1117—c. 2311. The third stage comprises a book in itself and is entitled, aptly, *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, The Return of Martín Fierro.

To conclude and enhance this introduction to the epic, I will show the 1968 movie *Martín Fierro* (directed by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, in Spanish with English subtitles). Thereafter, students will be ready to lend the story new life as perceived by them. Among the various kinesthetic activities available to them, they could (a) design a triptych in a style similar to the one presented above, for Samson. These drawings (or any other kind of pictorial representation) would involve the *gaucho's* traditional, working garb, horses, knife-fights, military maltreatment (such as the staking-out of the hero after he asks his commander for his due wages)—all very fast-paced, action-packed scenes. Again, some students might be tempted to dramatize certain scenes (b). Such dramatization could be straight, or, beyond that, (c) a spoof. Students would play with the lines, convert them into contemporary and immediate terms, whereby the military commander might “become” a modern strongman (*the Argentine junta? Charles Taylor? Augusto Pinochet? the Somozas of Nicaragua?*) and the rebel would be any or any one of modern-day persons who challenge them: Rigoberta Menchú, Augusto Sandino, *Los Patricios* and so many others.

Granted, this is a controversial field, since there are as many persons who condemn my “heroes” as villains as there are who agree. *One man's hero is* That is to be expected, and could actually form the basis for yet another activity: (d) a debate. The *pro* team could argue the merits of the case for the Sandinistas as heroes, while the *contras* could argue the merits of the

Somoza legacy. Or a *pro* team could argue why the Irish who turned on the U. S. Army and fought on the Mexican side in the war between those two nations are considered heroes not only in popular Mexican consciousness, but on an official level as well. The *contras* would present equally well-researched and well-prepared arguments for the U. S. contention that these men were deserters and deserved their punishment.

After the initial two weeks of these introductory exercises, the students should be in a position to prepare a written, conventional report on *Martín Fierro*. As in the evaluation stage of the first archetypal hero, Samson, I will grade their Final Drafts using the rubric described above (*q. v.*).

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary

Samson

La sagrada biblia. Ed. Bishop Felix Torres Amat. Charlotte, NC: 1993.

Authoritative Spanish–language version (bears *Nihil obstat* and *Imprimatur*) corresponding to the Douay version. Fully annotated on each page; has wonderful art reprints of masters; for instance, Salvador Dali’s *Cristo de San Juan de la Cruz* graces the frontispiece. Handouts from the relevant chapters will be provided to the students.

The Holy Bible. Douay version. New York: J.P. Kennedy and Sons, 1950.

Annotated on each page and cross-referenced. The relevant text comprises Chapters 13-16 in *Judges* and corresponds verse for verse to the Spanish version.

Prometheus

Guerber, H. A. *Grecia y Roma*, originally *Greece and Rome*, Trans. Seuk Kwon. Madrid.

A shorter version of Bullfinch’s *Mythology*, containing (pages 23-25) “La historia de Prometeo”—The Story of Prometheus. This is where it all begins, the starting point for any and all future discussion, treatment and interpretation of the myth. The language, though based on Bullfinch’s work, is much simpler in style and hence more accessible to middle and high school native Spanish speakers.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. “Prometheus.” In *Selected Poems*. Ed. Christopher Middleton.

Trans. Michael Hamburger *et al.* Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers Inc., 1983.

Has side-by-side German and English versions of Goethe’s poems from different stages of his works.

Quasimodo, Salvatore. “Prometheus.” In *Tres aristas de lo humano en la poesía de Goethe*.

<<http://usuarios.iponet.es/ddt/goethe.htm>>.

A literally and tonally accurate translation, which passionately reflects the defiant attitude of Goethe’s protagonist. This is a text any middle or high school Spanish speaker can use.

Joan of Arc

Shaw, George Bernard. *Saint Joan*. Ed. Dan H. Laurence. Penguin Books, 2001.

Introduced by useful interpretive and critical essays by scholars Imogen Stubbs and Joley Wood and concludes with a historical timeline of Shaw's works. While delightful reading in English, the Spanish-language edition has yet to be located in order to make the work available to Spanish speakers.

El Cid

Cantar de Mio Cid. Eds. Ramón Menéndez Pidal *et al.* Madrid, 1999.

Juxtaposes a prosaic "translation" in modern Spanish opposite the original, medieval language on each page. Complete version. I would employ only sections of this work with my students, because the language style can be laborious and tedious.

Hazañas del Cid Campeador. Adapted by María Luz Morales. Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 2002.

Written in prose and as juvenile literature, the simplicity of the language employed and the engaging manner in which the epic is re-told make it the text of choice and the best suited as a classroom tool for the majority of my students.

La araucana

Ercilla, Alonso de. *La araucana*. Ed. César García Alvarez. In *Colección juvenil Zig-Zag*. Santiago de Chile, 1984.

Written for young (high school level) students of Spanish-language literature, with a biography of the author, a structural and stylistic analysis of the work and a bibliography. In addition, a running annotated glossary accompanies each page at the bottom.

Vega, Miguel Ángel. "*La Araucana*" de Ercilla. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Orbe, 1970.

The abbreviated text of the poem itself does not begin until page 151, but each page thereafter is amply annotated and the author of this compilation has carefully selected the most gripping and most salient verses of the work. Prior to the primary text, the reader is treated to 148 pages of historical and interpretative information, which enhance the modern reader's appreciation of a work which remains unknown to most American audiences.

Martín Fierro

Hernández, José. *Martín Fierro*. In *Colección Antares*. Quito, Ecuador, 1995.

Contains a very useful introduction consisting of a preface; a literary analysis; a bibliography; comments of critics; a history timeline of events in Argentina, Ecuador, and Europe and Latin America as a whole, and suggested student activities. The volume contains selected verses of both Parts 1 and 2 in the space of 304 pages (for example, the first canto begins with verses 1, 7, 13 and 19, followed by 25, 31, 37, 43, 49 *etc.*). Even in

this edited format, I would assign only certain segments of each canto. The language and style are very readable, and the story line very engrossing, such that I can expect that some students will want to read those parts left out.

Secondary

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Princeton UP, 1973.

The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Eds. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. et al. Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993.

Gibbon, Peter H. "Heroes for Our Age: How Heroes Can Elevate Students' Lives." *American Educator* Winter 2002: 8-15; 46-48.

Traces the evolution of American thinking about "heroes" throughout U. S. history and discusses various scenarios which might arise in the classroom when discussing certain candidates for heroism. The article also offers a rationale for teaching heroes to American students.

Saint Joan: Fifty Years After. 1923/24—1973/74. Ed. Stanley Weintraub. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1973.

Twenty-five scholarly essays which could serve as springboards for thematic research by students, including "Saint Joan: A Marxist View;" "An Irish Joan," and "That Sure Mark of Greatness: Saint Joan and Its Imperfections."

Ordóñez, Antonio. *Análisis de La Aracucana*. Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Voluntad S. A., 1991. Very useful as a teacher's guide.

Aquila, August J. *Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga: A basic bibliography*. Grant & Cutler, Ltd, 1975. On page 21, the author cites four English translations, none of which were to be found in the libraries I have searched thus far. The search continues.

Hernández, José. "The Gaucho Martín Fierro (1872)." Trans. Frank G. Carrino et al. In *UNESCO Collection of Representative Works Latin-American Series*. Delmar, NY, 1974. Besides being an English translation of the more salient parts of the poem, this book contains numerous explanatory notes, glossaries and excerpts from the original Spanish text, in several editions.