

Narcissisms and Echoes: Using Myth in Advertising

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Introduction

In the Disney motion picture *Hercules*, there is a scene, which occurs immediately after Hercules defeats the multi-headed monster, known as the Hydra, and saves the town, thus proving himself to be a real hero. The movie, then, launches into a typical Disney musical interlude, which sings about how heroic Hercules has become, and summarizes many other of his heroic feats. In addition, this song-and-dance number depicts the cult of personality that has grown up around Hercules. Images are shown of rabid fans getting autographs from their new-found hero, statues and vase paintings created in his honor, not to mention action figures, and there are even kids buying luxurious sandals, with the name "Air Herc" emblazoned on them.

As frightening as this image may be, it is more than a modern, Disneyesque, projection onto the Ancient World. Mythical figures, such as Hercules, were commonly used in Ancient Greece and Rome for purposes very similar to that of modern advertising. While there is very little evidence supporting 'advertising' in a commercial, or consumeristic sense, mythical figures were definitely used for the purposes of publicity and propaganda. Hercules was one of the most common examples of this mythical promotion. It was very common for a city-state to have some sort of story of an exploit of Hercules, which happened in their city or region. One of his famous twelve labors, cleaning out the stables of King Augeias, was a local legend of the city of Olympia that was sculpted on the local temple of Zeus, and became so famous because so many saw it at the Olympics.

The employment of mythical figures for the purpose of self-promotion was also a common practice for individuals and families to link themselves to a famous figure or story from myth. This not only serves to publicize them, but also links them to the same sorts of qualities that are represented by the particular mythical figure they have chosen to link to themselves. For instance, the Julian clan, among whom Julius Caesar is probably the most famous member, derives its name from Iulus, the son of the mythical figure of Aeneas, the legendary founder of the Roman race. The Julian clan, therefore, not only derives fame from having such a famous connection to Rome's legendary past, but also gains an almost divine right to rule, as they have been set up as descendants of the father of their race. One member of this clan definitely used this connection to his advantage; Augustus Caesar, the nephew of Julius Caesar, frequently employed the imagery of Aeneas in his self-portraiture.

Mythical figures continue to be used in similar ways, in modern-day society. As they are such recognizable and meaning-laden figures, modern advertising cannot help but to use them to promote various products. Just as the Ancients did, Modern day advertisers use mythical figures to make a connection with their audience, as well as provide information about their product, through a comparison with the qualities of their mythical figure. As advertising gets more and more prevalent, and the audience becomes less and less mindful of it, the already compact advertising has needed to become more compact in terms of substance, so there is more room available for attention grabbing techniques. For this reason, mythical references are a powerful technique for advertisers. It allows them to condense quite a bit of meaning into a very compact image or text. Because so many people are so familiar with a wide range of mythical figures, advertisers can draw on that knowledge to impart a lot of information without explicitly stating it. Even if a viewer is not familiar with a mythical figure, it is not a terrible loss for the advertiser. The mysterious nature of the reference can often pique this viewer's curiosity, thus implanting the ad in their mind. In addition, with the emphasis of advertisements placed less and less on content, whether the viewer comprehends the subject of the ad is of lesser importance, than that they remember it. This

mythical connection can be as simple as calling a liquid drain cleaner after the immensely strong, and bull-headed Ajax.

Looking, however, at the most famous mythical figure used in advertising, Nike, one can see the manner in which mythical figures can add a very layered, subtle, and complex meaning to the company or product. The use of Nike, the Goddess of Victory, adds to the image of this shoe/athletic apparel company in several ways. First of all, the goddess of victory is a very apt symbol for a company that sells competition. A deeper analysis, however, adds new layers of meaning to this company. The most common representation of Nike is a winged woman. The wings, support the athletic nature of the product—the company logo is a stylized wing—in that they stand for preter-natural speed, and agility. The assumption is that this is what the consumer will gain when they buy a Nike product. The winged female figure also suggests angels, the image of which was, in fact, influenced by the Greek goddess Nike. The angel connection almost implies a moral imperative to buy Nike products; He is blessed, who buys Nike. A final connotation of the goddess of victory lies in the very sex of Nike. It seems a western tradition that victory equals getting the girl; certainly this was the case in the Trojan War. Although, this is an aspect that Nike has not fully tapped, it actually produces relatively asexual commercials, this aspect of Nike still has a sort of subconscious resonance with the public. The media does not lack of parallels between victory and sex.

These sorts of uses of mythical figures in advertising abound in our society. When one types a mythical figure into a web browsing engine, one is likely to get just as many links to random companies, and products, than links dealing with the mythical figures themselves.

Objectives

This lesson is designed with three major objectives in mind:

1. To allow students to research and express the various symbols, themes, and stories of a particular mythical figure. In order to understand how a mythical reference emphasizes and augments meaning, students must be familiar with the various meanings inherent in this mythical figure. There are oftentimes more than one meaning to a mythical figure, so students must examine a wide range of stories about their figure.
2. To get students to realize the ways the qualities of a mythical figure can be used to impart or emphasize the meaning of an unrelated object or individual. Students gain a deeper perspective on their figure, as well as meaning, in general, when they look at the commonalities between two disparate things. Many times the connection drawn is not a simple one, and a new perspective is given on both the mythical figure and the object.
3. To induce students to think critically about the subtle meanings imbedded with advertisements, and to practice dissecting them for those meanings. Even if a student, in the course of examining a mythical figure in an advertisement, is overzealous in drawing meaning out of this advertisement, this is a good instinct to have. Too often students passively absorb advertisements. This assignment will have done a commendable thing if it instills an overly critical attitude towards ads in students.

Task 1: (20%)

Students will select a mythical figure, and research that figure, using the approved websites listed below (This ensures that the information the students are using will be accurate, as well as comprehensive). Students should write a 1-2 page summary of their figure's qualities, symbols, etc. They should provide

examples from several different stories about their figure. Students should also point out any conflicting qualities/stories of their figure, in order to distinguish possible differing meanings that might occur.

Rubric (Task 1)

- 4 The student's summary captures an extremely complete and cogent view of the figure. It points out and assimilates the complexities of the figure. There are no grammatical errors.
- 3 The student's summary is a complete and largely cogent view of the figure. While it deals somewhat with the complexities of the figure, it has trouble meshing together these complexities. There are very few grammatical errors.
- 2 The student's summary is an adequately complete view of the figure. It largely ignores, or inadequately deals with the complexities of the figure. There are occasional grammatical errors.
- 1 The student's summary deals with only the most basic aspects of the figure. It ignores any complexity to be found in the figure. There are several grammatical errors.

Task 2: (20%)

Students will examine an ancient representation of their mythical figure. They will write a 1-2 page paper detailing how the presence of their figure may add to the representation as a whole. Students will need to discuss the context of this representation, as much as is possible, as well as appropriate meanings of the figure, in order to come to an informed conclusion concerning the purpose of their figure in the representation, and of the representation as a whole.

Rubric (Task 2)

- 4 The paper provides an excellent analysis of the purpose of the figure within the representation. It offers a detailed account of the representation's context. The conclusions follow smoothly, and clearly from the analysis. There are no grammatical errors.
- 3 The paper is a good analysis of the figure's purpose within the representation. It offers a quality account of the context of the representation. The conclusions follow fairly well from the analysis. There are very few grammatical errors.
- 2 The paper is an adequate analysis of the figure's purpose in the representation. The analysis of the representation's context is only adequate. The conclusions follow somewhat clearly from the analysis. There are occasional grammatical errors.
- 1 The paper is an incomplete analysis of the figure's purpose in the representation. It does not adequately take into account the context of the representation. The paper's conclusions are largely arbitrary. There are several grammatical errors.

Task 3: (30%)

For this task, students will find 2 modern, specific advertisements, which use their mythical figure. Students should then analyze, in detail, how their figures enhance the meaning and purpose of the advertisement. Their analysis should draw upon what they have learned about their figure from both of the two previous tasks. Their analyses should be 1-2 pages, each.

Rubric (Task 3)

- 4 The student's analyses provide a detailed and insightful analysis of their figure's role in the advertisements. They encompass all the appropriate meanings of their figure, and the meaning of the figure meshes and enhances the meaning of the ad. There are no grammatical errors.
- 3 The analyses are detailed and fairly insightful. They encompass most of the appropriate meanings of their figure, and show fairly well that this meaning enhances the meaning of the ad. There are very few grammatical errors.
- 2 The analyses are adequately detailed and have moments of insight. They encompass several of the appropriate meanings of their figure, and show adequately how the figure enhances the meaning of the ad. There are occasional grammatical errors.
- 1 The analyses are cursory and basic. They deal only with the most fundamental meanings of their figure. There are several grammatical errors.

Task 4: (30%)

Students will create their own advertisements, which use their mythical figure as the central image, company, or product. It should draw upon the three previous tasks, in order to employ the full range of meaning that their figure possesses. The advertisement could be a magazine or newspaper ad (done on posterboard), a television commercial (for those students who like to create videos), or an advertisement on the web (for the more technologically inclined students).

Rubric (Task 4):

- 4 The advertisement is extremely creative and coherent. It draws on an extremely wide range of their figure's qualities, in clever ways.
- 3 The advertisement is creative and coherent. It draws upon a wide range of their figure's qualities.
- 2 The advertisement is somewhat creative and adequately coherent. It draws upon an adequate range of the figure's qualities.
- 1 The advertisement exhibits little creativity, and is hard to understand or see the connections. It deals with only the most fundamental aspects of the student's figure.

Mythological Sources

Web Sites:

Bulfinch's Mythology (www.bulfinch.org)

The Classics Archive (www.mit.edu)

The Encyclopedia Mythica (www.pantheon.org/mythica)

Myth: The Ancient Sources (web.uvic.ca/grs/bowman/myth)

The Perseus Project (www.perseus.tufts.edu)

Books:

Biers, William, *The Archaeology of Greece*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1996.

Burn, Lucilla, *The British Book of Greek and Roman Art*, British Museum Press, 1991.

Gantz, Timothy, *Early Greek Myth*, John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993.

Harris, Stephen, *Classical Mythology*, Mayfield Publishing, 2001.

Osborn, Kevin, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Classical Mythology*, MacMillan Publishing, 1998.

Powell, Barry, *Classical Myth*, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1998.

Zanker, Paul, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, Univ. of Michigan Press, 1990.