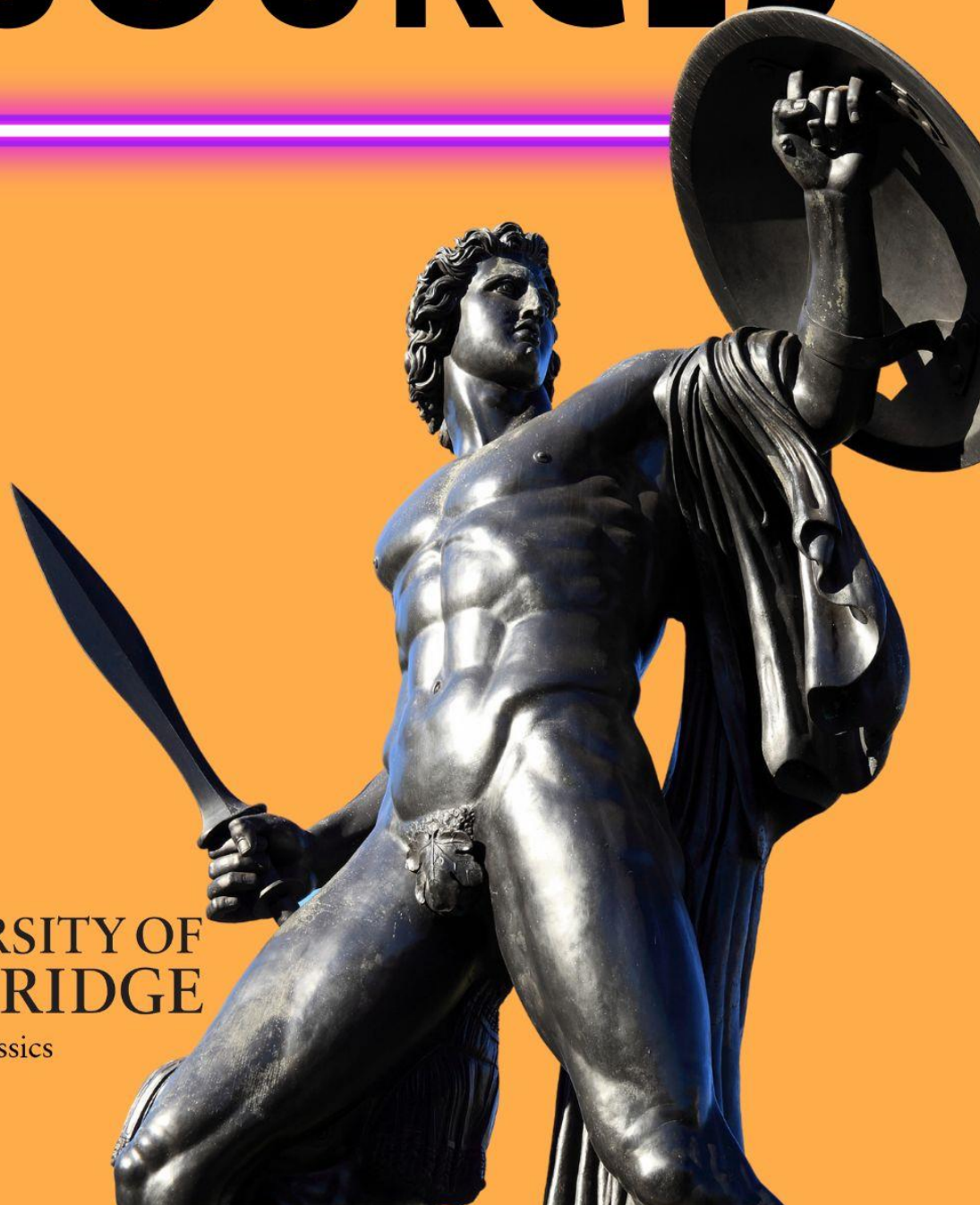


HEROES

TEACHER RESOURCES



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Heroes: Teacher Resources

Modern Heroes

The concept of a hero has evolved over time, and the modern understanding of a hero may differ significantly from the classical or traditional definitions. In modern culture, a hero is often seen as someone who is admired for their courage, selflessness, and noble qualities, and who is willing to take risks or make sacrifices in order to help others or achieve a noble goal. Heroes may be real or fictional, and they may come from a variety of backgrounds or fields. For example, a hero could be a soldier, a firefighter, a sports person, or a fictional character in a book or film.



Figure 1. Emmeline Pankhurst, founder of the Suffragette movement named by students as one of their heroes

Some common characteristics that are often associated with modern heroes include bravery, determination, compassion, and resilience. Heroes may be admired for their physical strength or bravery in the face of danger, or for their selflessness and willingness to put the needs of others before their own. They may also be seen as role models or inspirations, and may be celebrated for their positive impact on the world or the people around them.

While the concept of a hero has evolved over time and may vary across different cultures and societies, the idea of a hero as someone who embodies virtues and values that are admired and respected by society remains a central part of the modern understanding of this concept. Though it must be noted that many 'heroes' of today are so because they rejected the values of their own societies and fought against them, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, Rosa Parks, and many characters in Malorie Blackman's works. They become our heroes for modelling our values in a society that wouldn't have recognised them as heroes at all!

Who is your hero? Why do you give them hero status in your life? What qualities do they have that make them heroic? Would everyone consider them heroic?

Think of two or three of your heroes. Write down a list of positive and negative traits each of them has. Which wins out- positive or negative?

Super Heroes

When thinking about heroes, many people today will list 'Superheroes', like Batman and Superman. Superheroes have been a popular theme in literature, film, and other forms of media for many years, and their popularity has only continued to grow in recent times. There are a number of factors that contribute to the enduring appeal of superheroes, including their compelling storylines, relatable characters, and exciting action sequences.

One reason why superheroes are popular is that they offer escapism and a sense of hope. Many people enjoy the idea of a hero who is able to overcome seemingly impossible challenges and save the day, and the fantasy of having special powers or abilities can be appealing. Superhero stories often involve themes of good vs. evil, and the idea of a hero standing up for justice and righteousness can be inspiring and uplifting.

Superheroes are also often popular because they represent diverse and complex characters with relatable struggles and flaws. Many superhero stories delve into the personal lives and motivations of the characters, giving readers or viewers a chance to identify with and root for the hero.



Figure 2. Kirk Alyn as Superman

Create your own superhero, including a name, powers, origin story and motivations. TOP TIP: make sure to include a weakness to make them more relatable.

Analyse a popular superhero story- whether that's in a film or in a comic. How does the writer of the characters make them believable? What makes the audience like them?

Research the history of the superhero genre. How has it changed? What does that tell you about the change in the society that created them?

Ancient Greek Heroes

In ancient Greek culture, a hero was a person of great strength and courage who was admired for their noble qualities and celebrated in legends and stories. Heroes were often depicted as fighting against monsters or performing great feats in battle, and they were often favoured by the gods and given special powers or gifts.

The concept of the hero was central to ancient Greek culture and played a prominent role in literature, art, and religion. In literature, heroes were often depicted as larger-than-life figures who were admired for their strength, bravery, and cunning. In art, heroes were often depicted as muscular and idealized figures, while in religion, heroes were sometimes considered to be demigods or even deities.

Ancient Greek heroes, however were often not as morally virtuous as modern-day heroes. They could even do terrible things that we would associate with villains and still be classed as heroes. This is because being a hero was more about people who lived to the extreme- this could be greatness but it could also be madness or danger.

Unexpected ancient heroic traits

Here are some qualities that we might not associate with heroes but were important to the Greeks:

- **Noble birth-** In the modern world it is common for heroes to be from all walks of life, and being from a particularly disadvantaged background often adds to heroism as the person is admired for overcoming adversity. However, for the ancient Greeks being of noble (or even divine) birth was very important and many of their heroes would be kings and princes of their various cities.
- **Boasting-** Modern heroes are typically modest and do not readily accept praise for their actions. Ancient Greek heroes are typically the opposite and boast about their achievements, and the achievements of their ancestors frequently. This is because for the Greeks 'kleos' was an important cultural concept. Kleos translates as 'glory'. The idea is that your kleos or good reputation, earned by performing heroic acts or inherited from your father, is what makes you a hero and is the only way of ensuring your immortality- the memory of your glory is what you leave

behind after death, and it is the responsibility of your descendants to keep your kleos alive. This means that telling people about your heroic deeds is culturally very important and not to boast in this way would be to disrespect your ancestors and to deny kleos to your descendants as well as to yourself.

- **Murder-** Many ancient Greek heroes are involved in murder, which is taboo for modern people. While ancient society was more militaristic than the modern world, this doesn't entirely account for the killing performed by many Greek heroes. For some ancient heroes the act of killing is the heroic act itself and is praised, especially where they are killing for revenge. In some cases, the hero would be looked down on in society if they had not murdered someone who, for example, killed one of their family members or grossly disrespected them. This is clearly different from our modern worldview but does follow the same principle for heroes: that they are heroic because they respect the values of the society that they are heroes for. In some cases, however, ancient authors suggest that their heroes take it too far- Achilles, for example, disrespects the burial rites for Hector and Medea kills her own children- perhaps as an example to their audiences of the fine line between right and wrong and how not to behave.



Figure 3. Achilles slaying young Troilus, red-figure kylix

Some Ancient Greek Heroes

Odysseus

The first Hero that we encounter in the film is called Odysseus. Odysseus is a hero in Greek mythology who is best known for his role in the Trojan War and his long journey home after the war. According to the ancient Greek poet Homer, Odysseus was the king of the island of Ithaca and a skilled warrior and strategist. He was known for his intelligence, cunning, and resourcefulness, and he played a key role in the Greek victory in the Trojan War when he came up with the plan involving the Trojan Horse.



Figure 4. Head of Odysseus from a Roman period Hellenistic marble group representing Odysseus blinding Polyphemos

After the war, Odysseus began a long journey home, facing many challenges and obstacles along the way which John explained in the film and are told by Homer in his *Odyssey*- named after Odysseus who is the main character! He encountered a series of monsters and mythical creatures, including the Cyclops Polyphemos, the sorceress Circe, and the alluring Sirens. Despite these challenges, Odysseus remained determined and inventive, using his intelligence and wit to overcome each obstacle and eventually make his way home.

There are several reasons that the character of Odysseus might be distasteful for a modern audience:

- Odysseus triumphed in a contest with fellow Greek warrior Ajax for the prize of Achilles armour. This drove Ajax to commit suicide.
- Throughout the story of his journey home, he frequently boasts about his own intelligence, characterising him as arrogant by modern standards.
- All of Odysseus's men died during his journey home. While this was not entirely his fault, it may be seen as a failure on his part as a leader.
- Odysseus is also known for using sneaky and deceitful strategies, such as pretending to be mad in order to avoid going to war or using trickery to defeat the Cyclops Polyphemos. While these tactics might have been seen as clever and admirable in ancient Greek culture, they look unethical, manipulative, and even cowardly to a modern audience used to bravery and straightforwardness in our heroes.

- Finally, Odysseus is known for his infidelity to his wife, Penelope, as he has several extramarital affairs during his journey.

It's not just modern audiences that find Odysseus a bit difficult to live with. The Romans also had a complex relationship with his character. In the *Aeneid*, a Latin epic written by Virgil between 29 and 19 BC, Odysseus is often described as "cruel" or "deceitful." The ancient Greeks admired Odysseus's cunning, but these qualities were not valued by the Romans, who placed a high emphasis on honour and integrity.

Overall, while Odysseus is a hero in many ways, he is also a complex and flawed character who has both positive and negative qualities.



Figure 5. *Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship to hear the sirens. Mosaic Tunisia, 2nd century AD*

Research some more about Odysseus. Analyse his character, his strengths, weaknesses and motivations. Evaluate his actions and decide which ones you consider Heroic and which ones you don't. Which side wins out?

Write a short story from the perspective of someone who interacts with Odysseus, this could be another Greek warrior at Troy, one of the monsters he encounters on his journey, or his wife Penelope. How does this develop your understanding of him as a character? Are you more or less inclined to see him as a hero?

Theseus

The next hero we encounter is Theseus. Theseus is a hero in Greek mythology who is best known for his defeat of the Minotaur. According to the myth, Theseus was the prince of Athens and a skilled warrior.

Theseus, volunteered to face the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull monster that lived in a Labyrinth, in order to stop the horror of seven Athenian boys and seven Athenian girls being sent to Crete every nine years to be devoured by the monster. Theseus received help from Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, who gave him a ball of thread to help him find his way out of the Labyrinth. Theseus fought and killed the Minotaur, used the string to escape the Labyrinth, and brought all of the young Athenians and Ariadne and her younger sister Phaedra with him.



Figure 6. Theseus and the minotaur

The story of Theseus's defeat of the Minotaur is often seen as a symbol of courage and bravery, and Theseus is celebrated as a hero. Indeed, this myth is getting closer to the modern idea of a hero, especially as Theseus risked his life to prevent further deaths at the hands of the minotaur, However, he isn't all good:

- Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos helped Theseus to escape the labyrinth in exchange for him taking her with him, only for him to abandon her on an island before they got back to Athens.
- On his return to Athens he forgets to change the sails on his ship, which causes his father to believe he has been killed and drives him to commit suicide.
- Other myths involving his character, include one in which he kidnaps a young Helen of Sparta (later of Troy) when she was around 10 years old.

Achilles

Achilles was a hero of the Trojan War in Greek mythology and considered the greatest warrior of his time. He was the son of the mortal Peleus and the sea-nymph Thetis. When he was born, his mother tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the River Styx, but she held him by the heel, which remained vulnerable.

In the Iliad, Achilles becomes involved in a feud with Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, after Agamemnon takes one of Achilles' war prizes, a girl named Briseis, as his own. In response, Achilles withdraws from battle and refuses to fight, causing the Greek army to struggle against the Trojans. Eventually, Achilles' companion Patroclus dons Achilles' armour and fights in his place, but is killed by Hector, the Prince of Troy. This event prompts Achilles to return to battle, filled with a burning desire for revenge. He fights Hector and eventually kills him, fulfilling his desire for revenge. However, he also meets his demise during the war when he is shot in the heel with an arrow by Paris, aided by Apollo. Despite his death, Achilles' bravery and skill in battle made him a revered hero in Greek mythology and he continues to be remembered and celebrated to this day.

Despite his heroic status Achilles also has some pretty big flaws and does some dubious things:

- He initially did not want to take part in the Trojan war so he went to an island and dressed as a girl to avoid conscription, something that would definitely be considered cowardly for a modern hero.
- By staying out of battle Achilles was condemning his fellow Greeks to die in the war.
- When he killed Hector, he dragged his body around the city and refused to give him proper burial rites, disregarding common decency even for the time.

Write a modern-day adaptation of the story of Achilles using contemporary settings and characters. Is it possible for this version to cast Achilles as a hero? If so, how did you go about it?

Compare and contrast Achilles to the other two heroes you have learnt about. Which of them do you like the most? Why?

Herakles

Herakles, more commonly known as Hercules in Roman mythology, was a hero in Greek mythology known for his great strength and courage. He was the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. Herakles was raised by Alcmene and her husband Amphitryon, and when he was grown, he married and had children.

However, a terrible tragedy struck when Herakles was driven mad by the goddess Hera, who was jealous that her husband Zeus was his father. In his madness, Herakles killed his own children and his wife. After he came to his senses, he was devastated by what he had done and sought atonement for his actions. To atone, he was required to perform a series of 12 labours, or tasks, that were meant to be almost impossible. These labours were assigned to him by King Eurystheus, who hoped that Herakles would fail and bring shame upon himself.

The labours included tasks such as capturing the Nemean Lion, defeating the nine-headed Hydra, and capturing the Erymanthian Boar. Despite the incredible difficulty of these tasks, Herakles was able to complete all of them, proving his strength and determination. As a result of his labours, Herakles became a respected hero, was eventually able to achieve redemption for his past actions, and was deified as a god.

His name and image was often evoked by historical figures to legitimise their rule and imply their power and heroism. For example, Alexander the great used the Head of Herakles on his coinage and made links with him and his achievements throughout his campaigns.

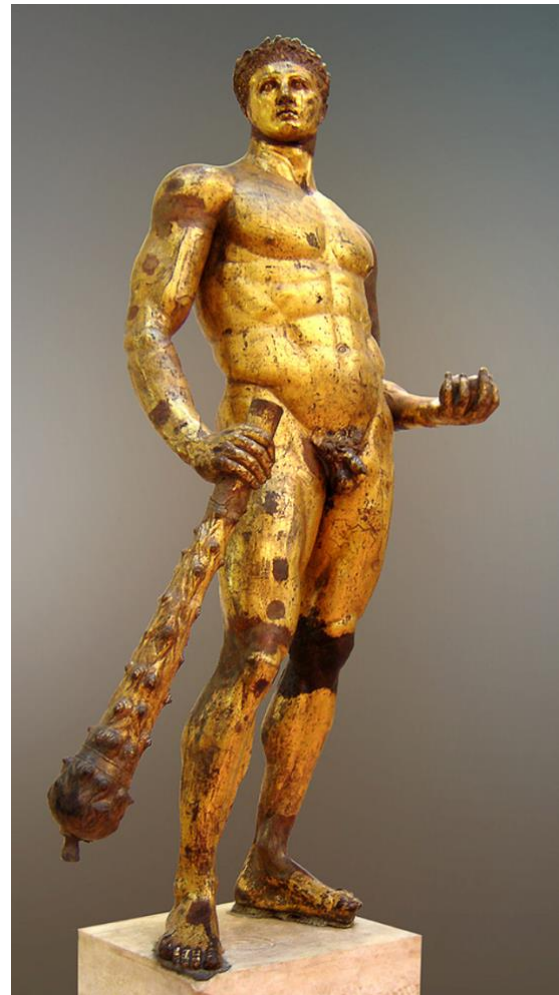


Figure 7. Gilded Bronze Roman statue of Hercules holding the Apple of Hesperides 2nd Century AD

Villains

The mythological heroes we have looked at all have good and bad qualities, but what about the ones that seem entirely bad? Should we just refer to them as Villains instead? Let's take a look:

Medea

Medea was a sorceress and princess in Greek mythology, known for her intelligence, cunning, and magical abilities. She was the daughter of King Aetes of Colchis. Medea was married to Jason who she helped overcome numerous challenges and obstacles, using her magical power and ruthlessness—including killing her own brother to distract her father. However, after they returned home to Corinth, Jason abandoned Medea for the daughter of King Creon, the ruler of Corinth. Medea was devastated by this betrayal and sought revenge against Jason and the king. She plotted to kill the princess, as well as her own children with Jason, in order to punish them for their betrayal. Medea was eventually able to carry out her plan and fled Corinth, becoming an outcast and living in exile for the rest of her life.



Figure 8. Medea on her chariot with her dead children, Germán Hernández Amores

Clytemnestra

Clytemnestra was a queen in Greek mythology. She was the daughter of King Tyndareus of Sparta and the sister of Helen of Troy. Clytemnestra was married to Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army during the Trojan War. However, while Agamemnon was away at war, Clytemnestra had an affair with a man named Aegisthus and plotted to kill her husband upon his return. When

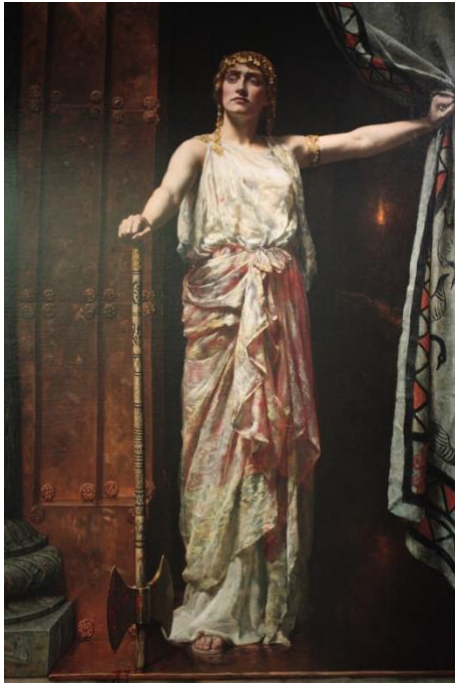


Figure 9. Clytemnestra, John Collier, 1882



Figure 10. The murder of Agamemnon, Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, 1817

Agamemnon finally returned home, Clytemnestra welcomed him with open arms, but then murdered him as he stepped out of the bath. Clytemnestra's actions were motivated by a desire for revenge, as Agamemnon had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to the gods in order to obtain favourable winds for the voyage to Troy. Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon was eventually punished by her son, Orestes, who killed her in retribution for his father's death.

In your opinion are the characters of Medea and Clytemnestra Villains?

Are there any reasons why their actions may have been justified?

Write a story about each of them making them more heroic by modern standards. Is this an easy task?

How do these female Greek Heroes compare to Male Greek heroes?

As Malorie mentions in the film perhaps some of the reason that these characters come off so badly is that they are women, and in the case of Medea, she is also foreign to the Greek world...and a witch! This may have reflected the cultural values and gender roles of ancient Greek society, in which women who were acting in extreme ways were thought to be transgressing, where men might be considered pioneering or bold.

It is also worth noting that many of the versions of myths from ancient Greece were written by men, with their own biases and perspectives that influenced the way they depicted women.

Olympic Athletes as Heroes

In the modern world we are used to thinking of Olympic athletes as our heroes: they achieve amazing things and inspire us to keep fit and healthy. But this idea was also common at the ancient Olympic games, the added religious element at the ancient Olympics meant that ancient Olympic heroes could even be worshiped.

The ancient Greeks considered Olympic athletes as heroes because they embodied many of the values that were highly prized in Greek culture, such as physical strength, determination, and discipline.

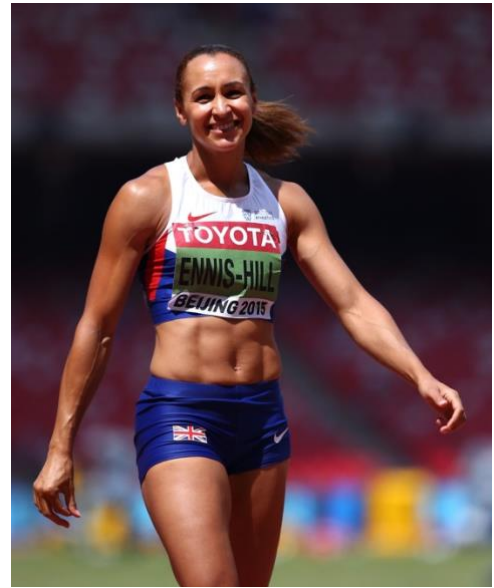


Figure 11. Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill, modern Olympian, photograph by Ian Walton

The ancient Greek sporting calendar included a number of different sporting events, with the most prestigious being the Olympic Games. The Olympic Games were held every four years in honour of Zeus at Olympia, in the western part of the Peloponnese. The Olympic Games were considered the most important sporting event in ancient Greece, and they were attended by spectators from all over the Greek world. The Olympic Games featured a variety of athletic events, including foot races, boxing, wrestling, pankration (a combination of boxing and wrestling), chariot racing, and pentathlon (a combination of five events: running, jumping, throwing the discus and javelin, and wrestling). The Olympic Games were held in a sacred grove dedicated to Zeus, and it was believed that the gods themselves watched over the proceedings and granted victories to their favourite athletes. This added to the sense of awe and reverence that surrounded Olympic athletes, and contributed to their status as heroes in Greek society. Winning an Olympic victory was considered a great honour, and could even lead to people worshipping you as a hero- as more than a mortal.

In addition to the Olympic Games, there were also other major sporting events held throughout ancient Greece, including the Pythian Games, the Nemean Games and the Isthmian Games. These games were held every two or four years, and they featured similar athletic events to the Olympics.

Who is your Olympic hero? Imagine they were helped to victory by the gods how would this change your view of them and their achievements? What does this tell you about the different between ancient and modern culture?

Read More

Ancient Texts

For Achilles and Odysseus (and a version of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's story) read

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

For Theseus try Plutarch's *Lives (Theseus)*

There are numerous sources on Herakles. A good place to start for the narrative of his life would be

Apollodorus 2.4.8-2.7.8 followed by Diodorus Siculus 4.8-4.39

Euripides *Herakles*

For Medea

Euripides *Medea*

Seneca's *Medea*