

## Handout 1B – Achilles and Superman

### Achilles

The ancient Greek mythological hero Achilles was neither completely man nor god. His mother, Thetis, was an immortal nymph. His father, Peleus, was a mortal king. Those who appreciate modern mythology may wish to think of him more as a “demigod” or “mud-blood.” Thetis, however, wanted the immortality of full-blooded gods for her son, so she held him by the heel and dipped him in the River Styx, whose charmed water cloaked him with invulnerability.

Tales of Achilles abound, but his most prominent role is within the epic poetry that chronicles the Trojan War. To the Greeks, some of whom eventually revered him as a “cult hero” in the religious sense, Achilles was an honorable master of war. To the Romans, who hundreds of years later embraced their own, rebooted versions of Greek mythology, Achilles was a cruel, brutal butcher of men. Even within Greek and Roman mythology, details of Achilles’ adventures, and powers, are told differently.

Though there is no Cult of Achilles in the U.S. currently, Achilles is a part of us all—in our heels, to be exact. Our weak upper heel area, the “Achilles tendon” is named in honor of the legendary way the hero perished, struck by an arrow in his lone area of vulnerability: the heel which had been covered by the hand of Thetis when she dipped him in the Styx all those years earlier.

### Superman

In a time that seems most likely the early 1900s, a child was born on Krypton, a fictional planet on the verge of collapse. Realizing their powerful, advanced (and surprisingly human) species was doomed, the boy’s parents place him, alone, on a spaceship and set the coordinates to Earth.

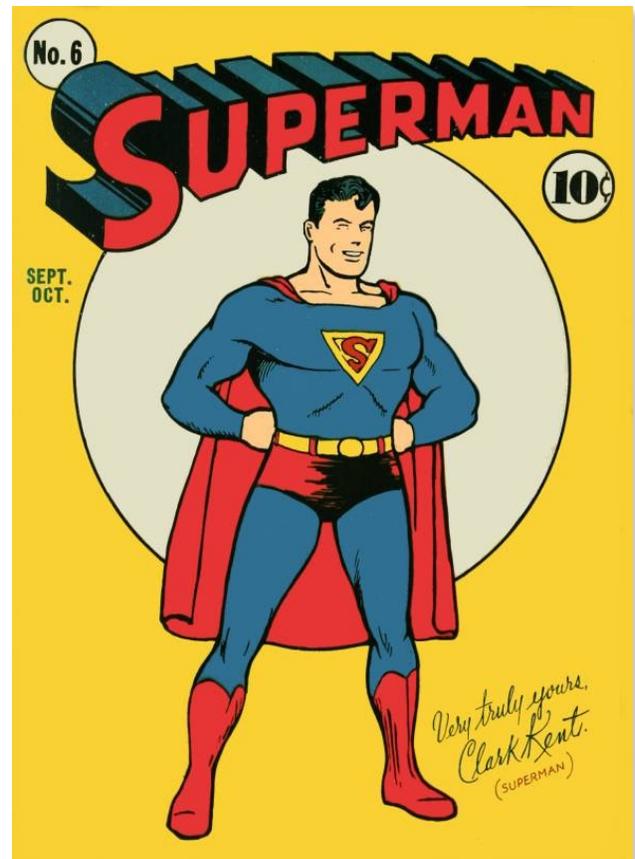
The ship landed in a small farm town in the middle of the United States, either Iowa or Kansas, depending on story’s telling. Similarly, some believe the boy was found in a field, others that he was adopted from an orphanage. Either way, his American parents, the Kents, named him Clark. Once they became aware of his superhuman origins, they also taught Clark to only use his powers for good.



*Chiron and Achilles. Lithograph after J.B. Regnault*

As an adult, Clark Kent conceals his true identity behind a mousey alter ego who works as a reporter in a large, fictional city. Somehow, the suit and tie he wears to work hide the muscular figure made so evident by the skintight, blue and red Superman costume he wears at all times beneath.

Superman's powers are many—flying, superhuman strength, invulnerability to human weapons—and, again, vary in different versions of his story. Early in his career, Superman fought gangsters, corrupt politicians, and generally evil men. Later, he developed an archenemy, Lex Luthor, an infinitely rich villain whose primary goal was to rule the world. Luthor proved harder to beat than most because he discovered Superman's singular weakness: exposure to the obscure mineral "kryptonite."



### QUESTIONS:

Do you think there are any similarities between Achilles and Superman?

What differences do you see between Achilles and Superman?

Why do you think people who lived thousands of years apart from each other might all be drawn to tales of people such as Achilles and Superman?