The Emperor and the Little King: The Narrative Construction of LeBron James and Kobe Bryant

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The Emperor and the Little King:
The Narrative Construction of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James

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A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Department of Communication of Boston College
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DEDICATION

For Casey:

A dear sister who reminds me that life is beautiful.
ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the discourse surrounding two of the most celebrated professional athletes in the present generation. Kobe Bryant and LeBron James are two highly talented basketball players who have both been hailed within the world of sports ever since they left high school and entered directly into the NBA. This study argues that the media has presented the careers of both Bryant and James in the form of carefully constructed and familiar narratives. The analysis incorporates concepts drawn from Walter R. Fisher, Seymour Chatman, Karyn and Donald Rybacki and Kenneth Burke, in order scrutinize the narrative elements existing within specific artifacts presented by the media. The analysis demonstrates how the selected artifacts uphold plotlines that are already recognizable to the audience. Through influential rhetorical devices, the media frames the careers of Bryant and James so that the two men are featured as the mythological heroes of their tales. This study reveals the power of framing a message as an identifiable narrative as well as the implications the construction has for both the athletes and the audience.
Chapter One

The Warm Up

Humans need a sense of diversion. If they did not, there would not be billions of dollars spent each year on leisure activities. One of the most established ways to find entertainment in our society is through sports. As Robert Higgs notes in *Sports: A Reference Guide*, “the challenge of hitting a baseball or golf ball or an elusive foe in the ring provides a natural setting for the heroic, dramatic, and the spectacular” (Higgs 137). Another source humans have identified as a primary means of amusement is through the use of stories. Walter Fisher verifies in “Narration as a Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” that “humans are essentially storytellers” (Fisher “Public Moral Argument 7). Stories do not just entertain, however, they shape and influence society’s interpretation of reality. In recent years, the media has been able to enhance the experience of receiving knowledge about the world. When the media frames certain messages as familiar narratives, humans often have an easier time understanding what is being communicated to them.

This practice also applies to public discourse offered in the sports world. In its coverage of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, the sports media has made use of narrative and aesthetic elements to frame the events of their careers as stories. The two narratives the media have created about these players both have plot structures that are already familiar and well received by most audiences. Through the use of persuasive rhetorical devices, the media have been able to influence their audiences into believing Kobe Bryant and LeBron James are the heroes of their tales.
This thesis used a narrative approach to discover the symbolic meaning behind the discourse provided by the media in its coverage of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James. As part of the analysis, narrative elements were identified in various messages communicated by the media that when combined, create distinguished but equally identifiable stories about the careers of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James.

Chapter two begins the work with a review of scholarship dedicated to related topics in sports academia. Chapter three follows with a description of the methodology that draws concepts from both Walter Fisher and Kenneth Burke. Chapter four provides a reconstruction of context for the narrative of Kobe Bryant and then proceeds directly into the analysis of the narrative which incorporates the methodology discussed in chapter three. Chapter five has an identical format and first supplies historical background information on the narrative of LeBron James and then provides an analysis of the artifacts that construct his tale. Chapter six concludes the work with a discussion of the ethical implications, a determination of the winning tale and finally closing remarks about presenting the careers of professional basketball players as carefully crafted narratives.
Chapter Two

Criticism in Sports- A Review of Literature

Ever since ancient times, sporting events have held an immense appeal for societies. Since sports tend to be a source of culture, tradition and identity, they have been the focus of much academic research.

For example, many scholars have given their attention to disparities in the racial representation of athletes. In their recent study, “Skill in Black and White: Negotiating Media Images of Race in a Sporting Context,” Daniel Buffington and Todd Fraley noted, “there has been far more studies on media presentations of race in sports than studies of audience perceptions in sports. To address this gap, Buffington and Fraley asked a sample of college students about their perceptions of race in response to sports commentaries made during the NCAA Men’s Basketball Championship. In their results they found that the participants mostly associated physical skills with black athletes and mental skills with white athletes (305). While there was evidence the media played a role in the perceptions of race the students had, there was also evidence that their views came from their own previous knowledge. Buffington and Fraley concluded that “meanings are derived from a constant dialogical interplay between said content and the audience members’ intricate life experiences.” Thus, their study demonstrates the further need to examine the “impact of media on society,” and the “communication process as a whole, from production, through content to perception” (308).

Andrew C. Billings was also interested in looking at the racial implications of sports media when he wrote “Portraying Tiger Woods: Characterizations of a ‘Black’ Athlete in a
‘White Sport.” He conducted a study to see if Tiger Woods’ racial status as “half-black,” could be linked to the differences of coverage he received during his performances. He examined a number of commentaries that were in response to both successes and failures of Tiger’s play, and concluded that, “when Woods won, he was not portrayed as Black, but when he was not as successful he was more likely to be characterized using traditional stereotypes of Black athletes” (Billings 29). He notes that this topic is worthy of study because, viewers of sports should, “be aware of potential biases that directly or indirectly influence,” the commentaries made on the screen (36).

Other scholars have taken efforts to examine the differences existing between male and female athletes in the media. Especially in the last few decades, many researchers have concerned themselves with the inadequate depiction of female athletes. In their 2007 study, “Where is Tamika Catchings? A Content Analysis of Female Athlete Endorsers in Magazine Advertisements,” Stacy Landreth Grau, Georgina Roselli, and Charles R. Taylor analyzed the extent to which female athletes were used as product endorsers, as well as the portrayal of female athletes in such advertisements. They concluded that although there has been an increase in the amount of female athletes in the last several decades, there has not been the same substantial increase in advertisements using female athletes. In their results, they confirmed that, “males were overwhelmingly represented as product endorsers as compared to women” and female athletes were usually found in traditional women’s magazines…” (Grau, Roselli and Taylor 63). They also observed that the dress of the women was more likely to emphasize their sexuality instead of their talent. Grau, Roselli and Taylor suggested the first reason for the disparity could be that, “women are more diversified and sports are not the focus of their lives, therefore lessening the influence of female athletes on consumers' purchasing behavior” (63). The second,
more significant reason has to do with the fact that our society still adheres to gender ideologies and cultural norms that hinder the movement toward equal representation of females in the media (63).

In addition to the gender gaps between professional athletes, a great deal of academic research has also been given to individual athletes. In *Telling the Success Story: Acclaiming and Disclaiming Discourse*, Pamela Benoit offers a framework for analyzing the self-presentation strategies that can be applied to the discourse of athletes. She says that, “self-presentations are fundamental to interpersonal communication”. In seeking social approval, athletes may offer stories of personal success, but at the same time try not to appear overly arrogant. Therefore, “the creation and negotiation of a successful identity is poised within competing goals of self-enhancement and modesty (Benoit 1).

In 2005, Jordan Compton wrote an essay, in which he applied Pamela Benoit’s theory to analyze the discourse of professional football quarterback Brett Favre. The day after Brett Favre’s father died in 2003, he led the Green Bay Packers in an unlikely defeat over the Oakland Raiders, which put his team in the playoffs. Compton argued in “Winning on a Prayer: Invoking the Supernatural in Athletic Disclaiming,” that in the interviews following the game, despite his obvious role in the team’s victory, Favre “stepped away from taking all of the credit and let the audience know that he believed that only a higher power could have allowed him as well as his team to be in that triumphant position” (32). As Compton recognized, Favre’s response awarded him positive recognition, because “it is the disclaiming of success that is more attractive for the sports fan to shape their impression of the athletes and their performances” (32).

Michael Jordan is one athlete in particular that has called the attention of scholars from all fields of study. His marketability and influence over fans and consumers alike has earned
him millions of dollars in not only salary, but endorsements as well. In an article published in the *Journal of Advertising Research*, Lynette Knowles Mathur, Ike Mathur, and Nanda Rangun used “event study methodology,” to examine the effects that Michael Jordan’s return to the NBA in March of 1995 had on the stock prices of the companies that had contracts with him. They concluded that, “the actual impact of Jordan's impending expected return was about $1 + billion on the combined market values of the five Jordan firms” (71). This was because, “investors felt that his return to the NBA, and the possible resulting increase in his visibility and popularity, would lead to higher sales and, thus, higher profits…” (71). While the “Jordan Phenomenon,” represents an extreme case of an athlete’s influence on commercialism, it nevertheless points out that, “a major celebrity has the potential to profoundly influence the profitability of endorsed products” (72).

Likewise, Douglas Kellner wrote in "Sports, Media Culture, and Race -- Some Reflections on Michael Jordan” that Jordan is a, “dazzling sport spectacle who promotes both commercial sports and the products of corporations that market products to sport audiences” (461). Kellner further explained that sports have been commercially reduced to a spectacle in our society. Because of this, a fan becomes a “passive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the cultivation of marketable difference”. In the industrial era, sport reflected the work place because it emphasized both the importance of teamwork as well as personal achievement. In more recent times however, the blurred distinction between sports and media spectacles has taken away the “boundaries between professional achievement and commercialization” (459).

In his work, *The Joy of Sports*, Michael Novak says that the deep connection humans hold with sports and athletes in general, is related to their primal needs for symbolic meaning.
As Novak argues, the purpose of sports reaches beyond a means of entertainment. Sports are a form of religion for humans because they are “organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies... [that] recreate symbols of cosmic struggle, in which human survival and moral courage are not assured” (21). If sports are seen in this way, Novak contends that athletes become far more than just participants in a game:

People identify with them in a much more priestly way….Once they become superstars, they do not quite belong to themselves. Great passions are invested in them. They are no longer treated as ordinary humans or even as mere celebrities….When people talk about athletes’ performances, it is almost as though they are talking about a secret part of themselves. (32)

As Melinda J. Jones and David W. Schumann confirmed in “The Strategic Use of Celebrity Athlete Endorsers in Print Media: A Historical Perspective,” “there is a long history of athletes becoming heroes in our culture” (110). Companies are particularly attracted to athletes as endorsers for their products because they can attribute certain qualities or identities to the athlete.

Thomas B. Farrell addressed the heroic representation of athletes in the media in his 1989 article, “Media Rhetoric as a Social Drama: The Winter Olympics of 1984.” Specifically, he discussed the implications that are faced when the sports figures do not fulfill the expectations of the heroic roles in which they play. In examining the coverage of the Winter Olympic Games in 1984, he found there to be a “sharp and finally irreconcilable break between ‘mediated expectations,’ and actual performances of multiple performers” (Farrell 159). In anticipation of the Olympic Games, marketing campaigns created advertisements that attributed heroic and glorified qualities to both the Olympic athletes, and the products they helped to promote. Yet, as
Farrell realized, “since the athletes’ own heroic qualities were clouded further by their personal ambitions for personal successes…qualities of character and qualities of product performance virtually exchanged places through the duration of the games” (159). Interestingly enough, this type of media offers no resolution for an athlete who loses a contest. As Farrell pointed out, this is significant because, “in an ultimate sense, how each one of us faces human loss may be the best definition of character there is” (179).

In his book, *The Sports Immortals: Defying the American Athlete*, Peter Williams discusses society’s association of athletes as heroes in connection to the components of myth. Myths date back to ancient times, and are extremely powerful when they are used, they offer recognizable archetypes for their listeners. The mythical archetypes that humans associate in sports are hero, helper, goal, receiver, villain and judge. Therefore, whenever a sporting event takes place, the fans will identify the players as one of these characters (62).

In “Race in ‘The Race’: Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Heroic Constructions of Whiteness,” Michael L. Butterworth also alluded to the tendency of media to depict sports figures as heroic characters. He contended that, “in the U.S., heroism has long been linked to frontier mythology, which celebrates the rugged individualist, and that, “sport is an enactment of American mythology…, because it is driven by performance, the ability to conquer uncharted territory, and the prominence of individual acts of greatness” (228-32). He also added that the American hero is assumed to be white, and because of this, a heroic construction of a sports figure in the media has racial implications. To illustrate his ideas, Butterworth contrasted the media’s portrayal of Mark McGwire against the portrayal of Sammy Sosa during their 1998 Home Run Race. Throughout the coverage, Butterworth says McGwire was represented in the media as the embodiment of the American archetypal hero, and through him, sportswriters
“reinforced the Western masculine ideals of heroism” (235). Sosa on the other hand, was depicted as a runner up, a Latino, who although was similar in size and talent, did not accurately reflect the characteristics associated with the American ideal frontier hero. Thus, Butterworth believes that a “proper analysis of [media] coverage, reveals the extent to which whiteness is a taken-for-granted norm in discussions about race and how sports media produce and perpetuate a discourse that privileges whiteness” (229).

Similarly, Leah Vande Berg and Nick Trujillo argue that sport in America symbolizes the values of the American Dream. The values of achievement, success and courage are communicated through sports media. According to Berg and Trujillo in “The Rhetoric of Winning and Losing: The American Dream and America’s Team,” “most sportswriting consists of dramatic narratives that recount the successes and failures of sports events, participants, and organizations.” Berg and Trujillo explain the effect of sports journalism:

These dramatic narratives, however, do not merely catalog catchy slogans; they also represent and reconstruct sport reality, providing an interpretive frame that readers use to understand the significance of success or failure on and off the field…. [Sportswriters] define, interpret, and evaluate notions of success and failure not only for sports fans but for the larger American Society as well. (205)

Vande Berg and Trujillo demonstrate that there is clearly a need for further study on the influence and nature of sports reporting.

Although there has been a lot of research on the connection humans hold with sports, much of it has been in the fields of psychology, sociology and marketing. However, in our society, the commercialization of sports has lead to the increased publicity of individual athletes off the field. This is significant, especially to scholars of communication because the way
athletes conduct themselves in a public arena has rhetorical implications. If the public perceives certain athletes as heroes, then they will judge them based on the qualities a hero should possess. Even if these athletes were originally hailed for their physical talents, they are still expected to display heroic qualities when they are not participating in a sports contest. These qualities are further reinforced through sports media. I believe this is noteworthy of attention because the association of an athlete as some archetypical figure can be incredibly persuasive and often misleading. As a result, such a means of identification will have consequences for an audience, as well as for the individual athlete.
Chapter Three

The Game Plan - Methodology

Since the beginning of time, humans have practiced the art of storytelling. Humans have used stories as more than just a means of entertainment and diversion. They have used tales and myths to communicate cultural values, realities and traditions. In his essay, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” Walter Fisher establishes that human communication in general can be understood through his concept of the narrative paradigm (4). Fisher contends that “the idea of human beings as storytellers indicates the generic form of all symbol composition; it holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common…. (4). As Karyn and Donald Rybacki interpret, Fisher’s concept of the narrative paradigm may serve as “a foundation for developing a structure to explain how and why symbolic messages are created, organized, adapted, and presented to audiences received by them” (Rybacki and Rybacki 109). The Narrative Paradigm does not dismiss the theories established by previous rhetorical scholars, but it does establish that humans use more than reason and logic to understand messages. “The narrative paradigm challenges the notions that human communication—if it is to be considered rhetorical—must be an argumentative form” (Fisher, “Public Moral Argument” 2).

Although Fisher did not himself suggest a framework for analyzing rhetorical acts using the narrative paradigm, he does suggest that a message can, and should be judged based upon its narrative rationality. To judge a narrative’s rationality, an audience will use the elements of
narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Fisher clarifies that narrative probability, “refers to the formal features of a story…whether or not a story coheres or ‘hangs together’….” (Fisher, “Elaboration” 349). Narrative fidelity on the other hand, “concerns the ‘truth qualities’ of the story, the degree to which it accords with the logic of good reasons” (Fisher, “Public Moral Argument” 349). Good reasons are the “elements that give warrants for believing or acting in accord with the message….” (Fisher, “Elaboration” 357). Audiences should therefore first evaluate if the story makes sense, and then evaluate if the values communicated in the story hold true to their own experiences.

Since Fisher contends that the “narrative paradigm synthesizes two strands in rhetorical theory: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme,” (Fisher, “Public Moral Argument” 2), Karyn and Donald Rybacki contend that a narrative approach should analyze the structure of a message by separating its story level, from its discourse level (Rybacki and Rybacki 111). They borrow this idea from Seymour Chatman, who says in his book, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, that the story is, “the formal content element of narrative; [which] is communicated by discourse, the formal expression element” (31). A story that is successfully told in a rhetorical message can be examined based on its narrative and artistic elements.

In the following stories about Kobe Bryant and LeBron James as told by the media, the major narrative elements that will be evaluated are plot, character and audience and setting. A plot can be seen as the chain of events that is told within the story. As Sonja K. Foss explains in her book *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, “a narrative is not simply a series of events arranged randomly; it is at least a sequence of events” (334). As such, the events of the plot do not need to be in a traditional chronological form. Rather, certain events within the plot
are more likely to be emphasized over others (Chatman 43). Chatman refers to these major events as the kernels of a plot. Normally, these kernels are decisive moments within the plot that if removed, ruin the story in its entirety (Chatman 53). The minor events of the plot on the other hand, are referred to by Chatman as the satellites. They are not imperative to the development of the story, however as Chatman warns, their omission will, “impoverish the narrative aesthetically” (54). Satellites may serve to further clarify an audience’s understanding of the kernels, or they may serve to demonstrate certain qualities of the characters (Rybacki and Rybacki 115). It is additionally useful to analyze the plot in a narrative approach because it is often a simple variation of an already well known plotline. For example, Joseph Campbell observes in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* one such monomyth, or plot that has crossed both time and culture is the story of the mythological hero:

Setting forth from his common day hut or castle… [he] proceeds to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark….Beyond the threshold then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as…his own divinization (apotheosis). (Campbell 245-6)

A plot line that has been used before is therefore easier for audiences to identify with because they already recognize its familiar elements.

In connection with plot, characters are essential elements of a successful narrative. In fact, “characterization is central to storytelling, and the extent to which a story is believable often
depends on its characters” (Rybacki and Rybacki 115). Audiences can therefore judge a narrative based on the qualities, traits or actions of the characters in the story. Thus, if audiences are to identify the story to their own lives, the characters must not be “too far removed from the boundaries of conceivable human experience” (Rybacki and Rybacki 116). It is also important to look closely at the actions of the character, because a character may often commit an act which the audience perceives as wrong or immoral. If this is so, then the rhetor has the responsibility of communicating a righteous motive that validates the action (Rybacki and Rybacki 116). If this is not done, then the audience may lose connection or approval of the character. Regardless of whether or not an act is successfully justified, its place in the narrative may hint at the motives behind the message.

Setting is yet another element that may be analyzed within a narrative approach. According to Karyn and Donald Rybacki however, setting can be limited to what an audience perceives as believable. It can take place in the past, present or future. In fictional tales, such as one told about a real life figure, setting will usually “involve both the tale’s fictional setting and the rhetorical situation posed by the historical-social context in which it is told” (Rybacki and Rybacki 117). In some situations, these two settings may be quite similar and the setting therefore may be an extremely persuasive element within the narrative because the audience can readily identify with it.

The last elements to be considered along the story level of a narrative are narrator and audience. A narrative approach is unique from similar rhetorical methods such as fantasy-theme, because the audience “may play a part in the story” (Rybacki and Rybacki 127). Yet, a narrative that is communicated on a large scale is subject to two different types of audiences. The first audience is called the implied audience, and it is for whom the message was originally intended.
The second audience however, is called the real audience, and it includes all of those who “used the narrative in some way, interpreting it and seeing it as having some connection to their own lives” (Rybacki and Rybacki 123). The achievement of the narrative is therefore only attained to the degree of which the real audience has believed it.

In more recent times, “the availability of mass media has expanded our options for storytelling” (Rybacki and Rybacki 107). As such, a narrative can be analyzed according to its aesthetic properties. As stated before, this is the discourse level of the message. The narratives of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James for example, have been told and elaborated through not only the print media, but the visual media as well. According to Karyn and Donald Rybacki, a narrative should be judged by its structural elements (plot, characters, setting, audience and narrator), and also by the aesthetic means through which it is communicated (122).

One of the advantages of framing a message as a narrative, is that it allows for some flexibility on behalf of the creator, because audiences are familiar with multiple different plotlines. While this essay will argue that media coverage of Kobe Bryant and Lebron James are both packaged as familiar narratives, it will also consider them separately and make note of their unique but equally powerful distinctions. Another communication framework that may prove useful for this endeavor, in particular, in the analysis of Kobe Bryant’s narrative, is a concept known as Rhetoric of Rebirth, or the Pollution-Purification-Redemption Process, brought forth by literary theorist and philosopher, Kenneth Burke.

In his work, *Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke explains that the basic function of rhetoric is “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (41). Burke’s primary description of rhetoric is consistent with pre-established definitions that focus on persuasion as a central element. In several significant works written over the course of his
career, however, Burke expanded the scope of his studies, contributing a number of influential concepts to the field of rhetoric. Several of the concepts that are essential for understanding Rhetoric of Rebirth include identification, the negative, hierarchy and perfection.

Burke’s first contribution comes from his concept of identification. Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp note in *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* that Burke’s concept of identification is “rooted in the notion of substance.” Foss, Foss and Trapp explain that humans, “form selves or identities through various properties or substances, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs and values” (158). For Burke, identification, which he also terms, “consubstantiality,” is achieved when two entities are united through an association of common substance (*Rhetoric of Motives* 20).

Identification is considered by Burke to be a central component of rhetoric, because it is the primary means by which persuasion is achieved. In *Rhetoric of Motives*, he argues that, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (55).

Burke further emphasizes identification as an essential element within rhetoric because of the connection to what he describes as “alienation.” In his explanation of alienation, or “disassociation,” as he also terms it, Burke brings light to the fact that humans are necessarily divided from one another.

The dissociation of human beings is further complicated by man’s natural inclinations towards hierarchy and social order. Hierarchies are existent in every aspect of human society, and as Foss, Foss and Trapp articulate, “no one hierarchy is inevitable … [because] hierarchies are constantly crumbling and forming. What is important, Burke emphasizes, is the inevitability
to build society around ambition or hierarchy on the basis of commandments derived from the concept of the negative” (206).

The concept of the negative as Burke points out is something that is particular to human beings as “inventors of language.” In his work, *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke contends that, “there are no negatives in nature … [because] this ingenious addition to the universe is solely a product of human symbol systems” (9). In nature, objects simply are, whereas in language, the negative is used to describe things that are not. Therefore, as Burke similarly confirms in *Rhetoric of Religion*, the concept of the negative establishes moral codes for humans, “all of which are either explicitly or implicitly negative, a set of thou-shalt not’s” (290).

Thus, hierarchy may be considered as any particular sense of order in which people, objects words or ideas, establish relationships as being higher or lower than each other. No matter what a constituent’s position may be, however, each member “strives to reach perfection represented by the top of the hierarchy” (Foss, Foss and Trapp 206). Burke declares that principle of perfectionism is ingrained in all humans because, similar to the concept of the negative, it arises from the nature of language, which as mentioned before, is particular to humans as symbol-making beings (*Rhetoric of Religion* 296).

Although, hierarchy unites humans through the principle of perfection and their shared goal of reaching the top, it also exists as the basis for “estrangement and divisiveness [because] of the differences among members … [that] arise not only from the separateness of their physical bodies but also from their different modes of living” (Foss, Foss and Trapp). Inevitably, some members of the hierarchy will be higher than others, thus creating distinctions of class and further alienation (mentally and physically) from one another.
Burke brings these concepts together to form the basis for the rhetoric of rebirth cycle. Rhetoric of rebirth, or pollution-purification-redemption cycle as it is also termed, is associated as the rhetorical process through which “individuals deal with the consequences of… [hierarchy] to effect redemption, rebirth, or a new identity” (Foss, Foss and Trapp 209). The main consequence of hierarchy, which Burke alludes to as creating the need for rhetoric of rebirth, is guilt. For Burke, guilt is the “secular equivalent of original sin, an offense that cannot be avoided or a condition in which all people share” (Foss, Foss and Trapp 209). The reason for its being unavoidable comes from the nature of language. As previously mentioned, hierarchy is grounded in Burke’s concept of the negative, and it implies rules, moral laws and expected behaviors that are contingent upon one’s given place in a community:

In their societies, they [humans] will seek to keep order. If order, then a need to repress the tendencies to disorder. If repression, then responsibility for imposing, accepting or resisting the repression. If responsibility, then guilt. If guilt, then the need for redemption, which involves sacrifice, which in turn allows for substitution…the cycle of life and death intrinsic to the nature of time can now be seen in terms that treat natural death as the result of this ‘original’ sin. (Burke, Rhetoric of Religion 308)

Rhetoric of rebirth therefore, is made manifest within a community when an individual participates in an act of disobedience, or fails to adhere to one of the community’s “thou-shalt-not’s.” Once this act occurs, the individual suffers what Burke labels, as “categorical guilt,” or “hierarchal psychosis,” and as such, is considered in the first stage of pollution (Burke, Permanence and Change 278).

From the stage of pollution, the individual must seek to rid himself of guilt through a process of purification. Burke conceives the purification process as possible in two different
ways. The first alternative an individual may seek to purify himself is through what Burke labels as victimage. As a form of substitution, victimage is a transference of guilt from the wrongdoer to a separate vessel who absorbs the guilt of the disobedient act. Burke labels the victim that receives the guilt as the scapegoat. As Burke explains in *Language as Symbolic Action*, “insofar as the victim is a scapegoat, being symbolically or ritually laden by the victimizer with the guilt of the victimizer, he is a positive-seeming vessel of the victimizer’s conscience-ridden response to the Great Negations of his tribe” (435).

Contrastingly, the other means through which an individual may participate in purgation is instead self-directed, through what Burke labels as mortification. Rather than “‘projecting’ his conflict upon a scapegoat, the polluted one participates in self-inflicted punishment, which is often the ‘subjecting of the passions and appetites, by penance, abstinence or painful severities inflicted on the body’ … [or] a kind of governance, an extreme form of ‘self-control,’ the deliberate, disciplinary slaying of any motive that, for ‘doctrinal’ reasons, one thinks of as unruly” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 190).

Out of purification, the individual may arise to the level of redemption, which is “a temporary rest or stasis that represents symbolic rebirth” (Foss, Foss and Trapp). The purgation of guilt during the purification process allows for a change in the newly purified one, either through “identity, a new perspective or a feeling of ‘of moving forward, towards a goal,’ or better life in general” (Foss, Foss and Trapp 211). In *Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke summarizes the pollution-purification-guilt cycle:

Here are the steps

In the Iron Law of History

That welds Order and Sacrifice:
Order leads to Guilt (for who can keep commandments!)

Guilt needs Redemption (for who would not be cleansed!)

Redemption needs Redeemer (which is to say, a victim!). (5).

Although, the rhetoric of rebirth is particular to individuals as “the drama of the self in quest,” it is also, as Burke reaffirms throughout his various works, a repetitive and universal cycle, recognizable to most humans, because they find a similar concept comes in theology (Foss, Foss and Trapp). In transferring the theological terms of rebirth to a secular plane, Burke reinforces the “symbol-using” nature of humanity, as the characteristic which allows him to extract meaning from various contexts (*Permanence and Change* 278). Hence, universality of religious terms makes them attractive for creators of discourse because they can be used in the secular realm to convey a message or situation that has an analogous connotation. It might also be added, that religious terms are often quite simply used in order to adorn a message, so as to make it seem more powerful or dramatic to the audience.

In this essay, a narrative approach in connection with rhetoric of rebirth was used to analyze the journeys of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, as told through the media. The structural elements that play a major role in the telling of these narratives are plot, character, audience and setting. Visual and audio elements were also examined for the degree of their aesthetic contributions. From the analysis, it was brought to light how the narratives of the two athletes may be distinguished based on their plotlines, which, while distinct from one another, are both still identifiable by audiences. In addition, Kenneth Burke’s framework, rhetoric of rebirth will specifically be incorporated into discussion of narrative in the case of Kobe Bryant.
Chapter Four

Behind the Myth: Reconstruction of Context, A Laker for Life

Kobe Bryant was born on August 23rd, 1978 in Philadelphia Pennsylvania as the third and youngest child of Joe and Pam Bryant (*Newsmakers*). In Kobe’s youth, his father Joe was employed as a professional basketball player. During the eight years Joe spent in the NBA, the family lived in Philadelphia, San Diego and finally Houston. In 1983, when Houston failed to sign Joe to another season, he decided to take up a contract to play in Rieti, Italy. Joe’s agreement brought his wife Pam, Kobe’s two older sisters, Sharia and Shaya and six-year-old Kobe across the Atlantic to begin a new chapter in their lives (*Sports Stars*). The experience of living in a foreign country was new to every member of the family, and provided a bonding opportunity for them as they learned the Italian language, traveled the country and gained an appreciated exposure to diversity (*Sports Stars*).

As the head of the Bryant family, Joe not only provided a substantial salary that enabled the Bryant’s to lead a comfortable life, he also remained an encouraging and supportive role model to his only son. On his part, Kobe reciprocated Joe’s affection, and made no secret of his aspirations to follow in his father’s footsteps to one day play in the NBA. He attended his father’s practices, cheered at games, and took every opportunity to work on the skills that his father would teach him (Stewart).

In 1991, Joe decided to retire from his professional career abroad, and return to the United States to take a job as an assistant coach at LaSalle University in Philadelphia. In the next year, the family settled into the affluent suburb of Ardmore, just outside of the city of Philadelphia (Stewart). Initially, Kobe’s childhood years abroad reflected in his difficulty
adapting to the new social climate in the American classroom (Newsmakers). However, despite his struggles to fit in with other kids at school, Kobe was nevertheless able to make himself at home on the basketball court (Notable Sports Figures). In the following years, he entered the widely respected Sonny Hill League, and began to play against top athletes from around the area. Through the league, Bryant was not only exposed to a higher level competition, he was also recognized as a promising young player himself, with advanced fundamental skills that allowed him to successfully contend with older and more experienced players (Sports Stars).

Kobe continued past junior high school, and attended Lower Merion High School, where he quickly became a star on the basketball team and a starter all four years. During the summer of his junior year, Kobe was invited to the practice sessions of the Philadelphia 76ers (Jensen). He also attended the Adidas ABCD camp, where he received the 1995 senior MVP Award (National Basketball Association). In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Kobe’s high school coach Gregg Downers reflected on his first impressions of the young player and said that, “Kobe has the skills and the maturity and everything you could want. When I first met him, at age 13, and I saw him play, after five minutes I said, 'This kid is going to be a pro.' Never was there one moment I doubted that’” (qtd. in Sports Stars).

In his senior year, Bryant led the team to the Class AAAAA State Title with a record of 31-3 (Newsmakers). By the time he graduated, Kobe had scored 2,883 points, thus breaking the Southeastern Pennsylvania records set by Wilt Chamberlain (2,359), and former St. Joseph’s player Carlene Warley (2,441) (National Basketball Association). The accomplishments he achieved at Lower Merion High School earned him recognition in 1996 as the USA Today and Parade Magazine National High School Player of the Year, the Gatorade Circle of Champions High School Player of the Year as well as the Naismith Player of the Year. In addition, he was
elected to the McDonald’s All American Team (National Basketball Association). Kobe’s success furthermore made him one of the most sought after college recruits in the country. His games were frequently attended by college recruiters, and among others, “college powerhouses like Duke, Arkansas, Arkansas and Michigan tried to convince him to attend their universities” (Sports Stars).

Bryant enraptured media outlets outside the basketball world as well. Pop-culture magazines, such as People’s Weekly, introduced Bryant to a nationwide audience as a “Boy Wonder,” while celebrities and companies alike, became fascinated by the incredible young phenomenon (Tresniowski). For his senior prom, Kobe showed up his schoolmates by taking as his date, the celebrity pop singer and actress, Brandy (Contemporary Black Biography). When the time finally came for him to announce his decision whether he would proceed onto college or enter the NBA Draft he held a press conference in the gymnasium of Lower Merion High School. As it turned out, the conference had a large attendance, including not only friends and family, but also local newspapers, national media outlets and even the R&B singing group Boyz II Men (Newsmakers).

Although it was apparent that Bryant had enough talent to enter the NBA directly after high school, many fans, coaches and locals especially, expected that he would choose to play in college first. One of underlying reasons for their sentiment was that Kobe’s grades were incredibly respectful for a top notch athlete. As a B student who scored 1081 on his Scholastic Aptitude Test (not to mention who was also fluent in Italian), he was an attractive recruit and as mentioned previously, a scholarship candidate for the most competitive colleges in the nation (Newsmakers). Yet, when Kobe learned in his junior year that Kevin Garnett of Chicago announced his decision to forego college and enter the 1995 NBA Draft, Kobe began to consider
the NBA more seriously for himself as he entered into his last year at Lower Merion High School. In the spring of 1996, Kobe announced his own intention of “skipping college and taking [his] talent to the NBA,” (Newsmakers). His decision, received quite a backlash, notably from Philadelphia residents who had hoped they would be able to cheer him for four more years at a local university. Critics further believed that because Bryant differed from Garnett in terms of his scholastic achievement, he should not necessarily forego college simply because he was talented enough to enter the NBA at such a young age (Newsmakers).

Yet, Bryant did not receive negative feedback from all audiences. His family supported his decision, and Joe Bryant even resigned from coaching at LaSalle in order to help manage his son’s career (Contemporary Black Biography). His announcement also caught the eager attention of some incredibly influential basketball authorities who saw Bryant as a legend in the making. Perhaps the most important person in respect to Bryant’s future, who argued this much, was the celebrated symbol of the NBA himself, Jerry West. West commented to the Knight-Ridder/Tribune Service that, “he [Kobe] has got razzle-dazzle, personality and he’s flamboyant” (qtd. in Newsmakers). As president of the Los Angeles Lakers, West set his sights on Bryant and upon the arrival of draft day, he managed to strike a trade deal with the Charlotte Hornets in order to acquire the promising young player for his own team. In what followed, Charlotte selected Kobe as the 13th overall pick, and traded him to the Los Angeles Lakers in exchange for the Lakers’ center Vlad Divac. In the month preceding just his 18th birthday, Kobe signed a three year, $3.5 million contract with the Los Angeles Lakers and moved his family to a six bedroom mansion in Pacific Palisades, California (Contemporary Black Biography). Shortly after, the future star signed several more influential business deals and before the start of the
1996-1997 NBA season, Kobe had become an endorser for Sprite, Adidas and Spalding (Newsmakers).

During the summer going into his first NBA season, Kobe satisfied the hype that had been recently building around his name. Over the course of the summer camp with the Lakers, he averaged 25 points and 5.3 rebounds per game. Kobe’s immediate success in the NBA seemed like a sure thing, until he broke his wrist during a game in September of 1996 (Contemporary Black Biography). The injury caused him to miss training camp as well as the Lakers’ exhibition schedule. The Lakers’ coach Del Harris explained to the press that although he was excited about Kobe and his promising talent, Kobe was nevertheless was a “novice who needed more training in the pro game” (qtd. in Contemporary Black Biography). As a result, Kobe’s playing time was limited and it was made clear that he was still a young player who was going to have to gain experience, as well as muscle before he could ever become a leader on the court. Despite his initial injuries, Kobe still managed to earn rookie recognition, by becoming the youngest player to play in an NBA contest when he checked into the second game of the season against the Minnesota Timberwolves (Sports Stars). Then, during the All Star Break in Cleveland, Ohio the following spring, Kobe set a record for the most points scored in the Schick Rookie Game and he also became the youngest player to win the Nestle´ Slam Dunk Contest, with his “through the legs” slam dunk (Sports Stars). At the end of his rookie season, L.A. coach Del Harris commented about Kobe, “He’s tough-minded. He was never disrespectful. He didn’t complain publicly and he easily could have because he has a great fan base” (qtd. in Newsmakers).

In the following season, Kobe moved up the substitution line to become the sixth man on the Lakers’ roster. When the Lakers faced the Chicago Bulls in December 1997, a still very
young Kobe managed to score 33 points on “His Airness” himself, Michael Jordan (“Sports Illustrated Scrapbook”). Although sports casters had made several comparisons between the young player and legendary Michael Jordan prior to this point, Kobe’s performance led to sports media to seriously consider Bryant as possibly the next greatest player that would fill an aging Jordan’s shoes upon his upcoming retirement (“Sports Illustrated Scrapbook”). For many years the media had referred to Michael Jordan by his nickname Air Jordan. However, after December’s game, the sports media came up with a new nickname and this time it was for Kobe, referring to him as “Heir Jordan.” In doing so, the sports media signified the promising future that the basketball world anticipated from Kobe (Nadel).

By Kobe’s third season (1998-1999), he was coming into the spotlight as one of the top guards in the NBA, and he became the only Laker during the season to start all fifty games. However, despite his personal achievements, the postseason of his team was cut short in the second round of the playoffs by San Antonio (Newsmakers). In the summer of 1999, Kobe signed a 6-year contract extension with the team for $70.8 million, at which time it was becoming evident to many fans that Bryant was beginning to mature into the gifted Lakers leader that they had foreseen at the time of the 1996 draft. As Larry Brown, coach of the Philadelphia 76ers said during an interview with Sports Illustrated, “Kobe’s a model of what a young player should aspire to be. Year by year he has learned and made his game more solid and now he’s not just a highlight-film guy, but an accomplished NBA player” (qtd. in Contemporary Black Biography). Many basketball fans, even outside the city of Los Angeles looked to Kobe as an exemplary celebrity athlete. Certainly their agreement with Brown’s assertion seemed most evident during the holiday shopping season of 1997-1998 when Kobe’s shoe made by Adidas, the KB8, was the second most sold sneaker under the Air Jordan (Newsmakers).
In the summer of 1998, Kobe tested his talents off court and began recording a Hip-Hop CD called *Visions*. Although the enterprise was deemed largely unwelcome by the music community, (the record never hit sales racks), Kobe did however get a chance to meet backup dancer and model, Vanessa Laine, who had been working on a video shoot in the same building that summer. The couple quickly fell in love, and three years later, on April 18, 2001, they were happily married in Dana Point, California (“Sports Illustrated Scrapbook”). Shortly afterwards, the newlyweds bought a home in Orange County, California and an additional home in 2002, located in Newport Coast, California. In January of 2003, Vanessa gave birth to their first child, Natalia Diamante (“Lakers Players Page: Kobe Bryant”).

Back on the court, Kobe fell under the direction of Phil Jackson who was hired as the new head coach of the L.A. Lakers in 1999. The adjustment in personnel proved to be not only successful change for the Lakers, but also a wish-come-true for Kobe. Even before the start of his first season in the NBA, Kobe had previously told his father that he would one day play for Jackson (who was at the time the head coach of the NBA champions, the Chicago Bulls) (“Sports Illustrated Scrapbook”). From 2000-2003, Kobe, Shaquille O’Neal and Jackson helped lead the Lakers to win three championships in a row. With three championship rings, millions of dollars in salary and endorsements, a beautiful wife, and a brand new baby girl, Kobe existed in May of 2003, as the living dream of almost every boy in America. He was a gifted athlete with a spotless image, and significantly still young in years. Even if various critics did not think he could be the next greatest player after Michael Jordan, he still had many seasons left in the NBA to prove them wrong.

Then as fate would have it, gravity took hold of the on-top-of-it-all star and brought him down, way down. The shiny gleam of Kobe’s rings that cast the spotlight on him in all his
greatness was drastically tarnished in July of 2003, when sexual assault charges were brought against him by prosecutors in Eagle County, Colorado. The charges were brought forward by a 19-year old female hotel employee who claimed Bryant sexually assaulted her while he was staying at the hotel recovering from knee-surgery (*Notable Sports Figures*). Kobe defended himself by maintaining that his only crime was one of adultery against his wife, and the physical intercourse that occurred was not without the consent of the accuser (*Notable Sports Figures*). Then, in September of 2004, Eagle Country District Judge Terry Ruckriegle dismissed the case on the account that the prosecutor “‘simply could not continue’” (qtd. in Tuchman). In March of 2005, the matter was privately settled in civil court, and nothing further was revealed to the public about what had happened between the two parties (*Notable Sports Figures*).

Although the matter was formally resolved, the initial accusation was enough to severely damage Kobe’s seemingly perfect public image. Many of his endorsement contracts were dropped as a result of the incident. The only notable exception of these companies was Nike, who rather than terminate its contract with Bryant, simply took his name out of its advertising campaigns for some time. Bryant after all, was not the only athlete that Nike had signed to an endorsement contract. As it turned out, Nike had also offered a deal in the summer of 2003 to the newest phenomenon in the NBA, Lebron James. Much to their benefit, Lebron agreed to endorse their products, which enabled the company to utilize the young, untarnished basketball star as the public maintained its disapprobation of Kobe.

2004 brought more disappointments for Kobe when the Lakers ended their season in the NBA Finals with a loss to the Detroit Pistons. After an unsuccessful attempt at a championship title, the Lakers brought even more distress to their fans, by announcing that their long-time favorite Shaquille O’Neal was going to be traded to the Miami Heat. As the public was made
aware by the sports media, the trade was very much in part, due to a long-standing feud between O’Neal and Bryant that was causing damage to the team (Sports Stars). To make matters worse, Phil Jackson resigned from his position as head coach of the team, and published a book a short time later in which he wrote that, “the Bryant trial, and Bryant’s attitude had disrupted the team” (Sports Stars).

In the following season, the Lakers attempted to rebuild their team, yet criticism continued to haunt their leading player, especially when the Lakers missed the playoffs for the first time in 11 years, and only the fourth time since the franchise moved to L.A. in 1960 (“Los Angeles Lakers Regular Season 2004-2005”).

Kobe’s career seemed at a definite low, until the summer of 2005, when Phil Jackson returned as head coach to the Lakers. The two men revealed that they had made peace and were willing to move forward (Notable Sports Figures). From this moment on, the tides of Bryant’s career gradually began to shift in a positive direction. The team partly recovered from the previous year by making the playoffs, although they were knocked out in the first round and the title was eventually taken by former Lakers’ center Shaquille O’Neal and his team the Miami Heat (National Basketball Association). More significantly for Bryant, the year became the most successful statistical season of his career, as he became the NBA 2005-2006 scoring champion with an average of 35.4 points per game (National Basketball Association). In December of 2005, his name dominated sports news headlines when he scored 62 points in just three quarters of playing time against the Dallas Mavericks (“Kobe Outscores Mavs 62-61, in 3 Quarters”). A month later in January of 2006, he hit a major career highlight by scoring an astounding 81 points in a thrilling game against the Toronto Raptors.
In the summer of 2006, Bryant had knee surgery, but recovered for the 2006-2007 season. He changed his jersey number from 8 to 24, and the team continued to improve upon the previous years. While the Lakers’ season fell short to the Phoenix Suns in the Western Conference Playoffs, Bryant still managed to earn his second All Star MVP Award scoring 31 points in a Western defeat over the East 153-132 (Notable Sports Figures).

In the summer of 2007, Kobe’s contract with Nike took him to Asia on a tour sponsored by the company to help promote his latest sneaker the Zoom Kobe II (“Kobe Supernatural Asia Tour”). Labeled as the “Supernatural Tour,” Kobe’s 5-day visit included stops in Manila, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. In each city that he visited, Kobe was enthusiastically received by Chinese audiences who followed him to local charities, parks and finally an impressive interactive show during which he taught his basketball training regime to attentive enthusiastic fans (“Kobe Supernatural Asia Tour”).

In the 2007-2008 season, Bryant lead the Lakers in a notably positive role as their dedicated and experienced veteran. He played in all 82 of the Lakers’ games and only sat out during his 10th All Star game due to an injury in his finger (Notable Sports Figures). The Lakers progressed all the way through the playoffs to the NBA Finals and although they lost the battle for a ring to the Boston Celtics, Kobe was named the NBA’s Most Valuable Player for the entire 2007-2008 season (National Basketball Association).

In August of 2008, Bryant ventured again to Asia. However, this time around, Kobe represented the United States (not Nike) as part of the USA Men’s Basketball Team that was contending for a gold medal at the World Olympics held in Beijing, China. Once Kobe arrived, it became apparent to the entire world that was watching on television, that Kobe was by far and away the favorite and most revered player on the men’s basketball team. In fact, Kobe was
swarmed by fans everywhere he went, and the extent to which the Chinese became excited by his being in their country was so great that he needed the protection of U.S. team’s security team (Heisler). Even his own teammates such as Carmelo Anthony and Lebron James who were overwhelmingly celebrated in the United States were not nearly so adored by Chinese fans in comparison to Kobe. They were similarly amazed at the spectacle of his popularity and Anthony joked to reporters, “Kobe might want to think about moving here—to live…” (Heisler). Likewise James admitted, “I thought I was famous until I got here” (Whiteside). Many viewers, especially in the United States were baffled by the high regard that the Chinese had for Kobe, because it appeared as if Chinese were unaware of Kobe’s tainted history. Or, if they did know about his past faults, it was clear that those were not important factors when it came to their admiration of the gifted athlete (Whiteside). As the Olympics came to a close, the USA Men’s Basketball Team, also nicknamed as the “Redeem Team,” succeeded in securing a gold medal for the United States. They proudly returned to their home country with their token of achievement and began preparing for the 2008-2009 season (*Contemporary Black Biography*).

Back in the United States, the Lakers began a season that would mark for many sportscasters, the defining year of Kobe’s comeback from disgrace. While Kobe had hit many career highlights in the previous 3 years and was awarded many personal distinctions from the NBA, he had not returned his team to the top ranking position it had before Shaquille O’Neal’s departure. Since the trade, Shaquille had proven his superiority over Bryant by claiming a fourth title with his new team, the Miami Heat, in the 2006 NBA Finals against the Dallas Mavericks (National Basketball Association). During this period, Kobe faced countless assertions from the sports media that claimed he was incapable of winning a championship without Shaquille O’Neal. However in May of 2009, Kobe led his team through the playoffs and on June 14, 2009 the
Lakers defeated Orlando Magic in the NBA Finals (National Basketball Association). As it was revealed through the press in the following weeks, the majority of sports critics, looked upon the Lakers’ win over the Magic as Kobe’s ultimate moment redemption. In securing a fourth title, Kobe successfully “stepped from O’Neal’s enormous shadow,” and quieted many critics that used such an argument to contend he could not be considered one of the greatest players in the game (“Kobe, Lakers End 7 Years of Frustration”).

In the offseason, Kobe had the alternative of discontinuing his contract with the Los Angeles Lakers. Yet instead of looking to play for another team in the NBA, Bryant requested for a contract extension. In April, his request was granted and the Lakers signed him for a $90 million three-year extension (Markazi). As Bryant approaches his last several years in the NBA, the recent deal he signed will likely “make him a Laker for life” (Newsmakers). Thus far in 2009-2010, Kobe continues to lead the Lakers through another successful season. On January 25, 2010 he became the youngest player in the NBA to ever score 25,000 points, was voted a Western Conference All-Star (National Basketball Association). He also became the all-time leading scorer for the Lakers on February 1, 2010 in a game against the Memphis Grizzlies. Ironically, by scoring his 25,208th point in his 14th season with the Lakers, he broke the record set the man who acquired him in 1996 when he was an 18-year-old out of high school. The man is Jerry West, the icon of the NBA himself, and who was also the “Lakers’ first ever draft pick after their move from Minneapolis to Los Angeles in 1960” (Thomsen).

With Kobe’s recent contract extension, it is now certain that he will play at least several more years of professional basketball. However, considering that he is approaching his 15th season in November of 2010, his years beyond the next three years are likely to be limited. If the Lakers win another NBA title while Kobe is still on the team, he will have his 5th championship
ring, which will give him one more than Shaq and just one less than Michael Jordan. While critics have argued whether or not Bryant is better than or equal to Michael Jordan, one thing that most sports critics will agree on regardless, is that Kobe Bryant is undeniably one of the greatest names in the game of basketball.

**Rhetoric of Rebirth**

The narrative of Kobe Bryant reflects the rhetoric of rebirth framework offered by Kenneth Burke. In a tale told by the media, Kobe Bryant is portrayed as the protagonist who progresses through the three stages of pollution, purification and redemption. In order to use this particular framework to analyze the discourse surrounding Kobe Bryant since his entrance into the NBA, select artifacts were taken from three different time periods. When these artifacts are held in juxtaposition, they illustrate the progression of a rebirth plotline that is recognizable for most audiences.

**Stage 1: Boy Wonder**

It is customary in literature for authors to begin a written work, by first providing audiences with a description of the main characters and second, establishing an initial setting for the story. In much the same way, the rebirth narrative of Kobe Bryant begins in stage one with an introduction the tale’s protagonist, and an acknowledgment of the first major setting. The artifacts that construct stage one are an Adidas commercial, a McDonald’s commercial, and a cover page from *Sport* magazine in June of 1998. In all three artifacts, Kobe Bryant is introduced as the protagonist of the story, who arrives onto the NBA stage as a talented and promising young player for the Los Angeles Lakers. As the creator of this tale, the media explicitly establishes the protagonist as being human in the first phase, and does so by presenting
him in three different roles. By the close of the first phase, audiences come to know Bryant as a talented teenager, a family man and a dependable teammate.

Kobe’s character is first introduced in an Adidas commercial which aired in 1996 during his rookie year in the NBA. The commercial takes place at an outdoor basketball court, on a rare, rainy day in California (“Kobe Bryant Adidas Rookie Commercial”). The advertisement opens as Kobe appears holding an umbrella, while his voiceover is heard, saying with deliberate irony: “Welcome to sunny California.” At the bottom of the screen, the initial setting and story’s protagonist are plainly established for audiences in the line of text that simply reads: “Kobe Bryant. L.A. Lakers.” In what follows, Kobe is shown explaining to a group of friends while they huddle under a sheet to shield them from the rain, that if it was not raining, he would be “busting them all up” (“Kobe Bryant Adidas Rookie Commercial”). As Kobe’s voiceover continues, he explains just how exactly he will “bust the other players up.” The image on the screen suddenly changes, and Kobe is shown in action on the court. As he demonstrates skills to the audience, the other young men are shown, hollering from the sidelines to communicate their disbelief of his abilities. As these images of Kobe playing with his friends flash across the screen, Kobe’s voice is replaced by loud heavy metal music that is meant to be indicative of the adolescent men on the court.

While the interaction that Kobe has with other young men his age in commercial, the commercial clearly illustrates his exceptional talent, and it does so in a manner that still presents him as being human. In other words, the commercial depicts the protagonist as being one and the same with his audience. Although the audience is not presented as a critical narrative element in the first stage, it may be inferred that the intended audience is the city of Los Angeles, and the broader audience is the remainder of the nation. In this manner, Kobe is presented to his
future fans in Los Angeles, not as a superhero, but rather as the as “one of the boys,” from the neighborhood court. He is also is conveyed as a young man without fault, and who has yet to be tarnished by his fame. His only flaw perhaps, as presented by Adidas, is “talking up his game.” Still, this is not necessarily conveyed as a bad characteristic, as much as it is emphasized in this particular commercial, as another indication of his youth, and something that is characteristic of boys his age.

The focus on Kobe’s humanity is continued in a McDonald’s commercial that aired a few years later, during the 2001 Academy Awards broadcast on ABC-TV (“Kobe Bryant Starring in New McDonald’s Commercial”). Like the Adidas commercial, the McDonald’s commercial takes place at a civilian, outdoor basketball court (“Let’s Play”). Yet, besides its similar setting, the McDonald’s commercial has several discernible distinctions from the 1996 advertisement.

The McDonald’s commercial titled, “Let’s play,” begins on a bright and sunny day, with a team of angelic young boys warming up for their championship basketball game. When the coach calls them in to start the game, he notices that one of the players is missing. When he asks where, “Billy,” is, the team informs him that Billy couldn’t make it because he is sick. When the coach tries to get the game going despite the missing player, he looks down and sees a group of utterly inconsolable little boys. They remind him that, “Billy is their best player,” and after all, “it’s for the championship coach.” The situation seems hopeless until all of a sudden, a “nobody,” depicted by Kobe Bryant, overhears the conversation and walks onto the court, offering to play in the place of Billy. The youths are skeptical at first, and innocently ask him if “knows how” to play, to which he responds that he is, “not bad.” After one of the other boys points out that in fact, “he is tall,” the team huddles together and finally agrees to let him play. Rejuvenated, the team cheers, “let’s play!” and runs off to start the game. Just before the
commercial ends, a small boy pulls Kobe close and tells him, “the winning team gets to go to McDonald’s, so don’t blow it.” Kobe agrees not to, and offering a smile, takes the boy’s hand as they go to join the rest of the team. In the final shot, Kobe is walking hand in hand with the young boy, as the McDonald’s slogan is displayed at the bottom of the screen which reads, “We love to see you smile.”

With such an image, it can be seen that while the McDonald’s advertisement highlights Kobe’s humanness, it does so in a much different manner than the Adidas commercial. Whereas Adidas portrays Kobe as one of the regular boys of the neighborhood clan, McDonalds presents Kobe in a role that is more akin to a big brother or father figure.

In the third artifact, Kobe is defined in yet another human role. In June 1988, Sport magazine released an issue featuring Kobe on its cover, which presents him not as typical teenager or an amiable family man, but rather as a dependable teammate. Specifically, he is introduced as the teammate of a secondary character in the story: Shaquille O’Neal. On the cover, O’Neal and Bryant are happily pictured together in their L.A. Laker uniforms [see Figure 1]. As the elder and more experienced of the two players, O’Neal has already been established as the favorite of Los Angeles Fans, and therefore is logically situated in front of Kobe. He has a grin on his face and a thumb pointing back to the Kobe, who is in turn resting his arm on the
(Figure 1)
former’s shoulder, while balancing a basketball his other hand. Like O’Neal, Kobe flashes a giant, perhaps slightly more charming, smile at the camera (“Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O’Neal”).

From the photograph, it is clear that in the first stage of the narrative, Kobe and Shaq are compatible teammates that not only get along, but get along well. In fact, they appear as if they are in the middle of goofing around, when the camera man suddenly catches their attention and snaps the picture. In this manner, Kobe’s character is presented in yet another human role that audiences can easily identify.

In the Adidas commercial, McDonald’s commercial, and the cover of Sport magazine, Kobe is defined in separate earthly roles, that each elicits a positive connotation from the audience. By the time the first stage is concluded, he is securely established as a charismatic and admirable protagonist with a clean and respectful image. With his exceptional talent, Kobe’s introduction is additionally exciting for the Lakers nation, because his entrance into the narrative marks a promising future for the city of Los Angeles.

Stage 2: The Accused

As history tells it, Kobe and Shaq did in fact come through on their promises to the city of Los Angeles. Between 2000 and 2002, the two players helped lead their team to win three consecutive National Championship titles for the L.A. Lakers. Yet, to an extent, these feats are regarded as unimportant in Kobe’s rebirth narrative. Instead, they are presented as satellites, or minor events, whose purpose is merely to substantiate the plot line until it reaches a point where it must change direction. Rather, the moment that is presented as a kernel, or major event that dictates the course of the narrative occurs in 2003, when sexual charges were brought against
Bryant by a 19-year-old female. The narrative elements that become important in this stage are character, plot and audience. The second phase also signifies the incorporation of Burke’s pollution-purification-redemption cycle into the plot of the narrative. From 2003-2006, the media reveals how Kobe first undergoes pollution and then, purification. The artifacts that illustrate these processes in stage two are a cover for the July 2003 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, and two Nike advertisements released in 2005. The kernel centering on Kobe’s act of pollution is the presented by the July 2003 cover of *Sports Illustrated* while the process of his purification is constructed through two Nike advertisements.

The first artifact conveys Kobe’s moment of pollution, which arises when he commits the action of adultery resulting in his own guilt and decisive rejection from the rest of the community. Early in July of 2003, the public became aware that Kobe had sexual assault charges brought against him by a 19-year-old female employee of a hotel in Eagle, Colorado where Kobe had stayed overnight for a knee surgery. In the same month, *Sports Illustrated* released an issue featuring the story’s protagonist on its cover. In the picture, Kobe is no longer depicted as the smiling and respected poster boy for the NBA that he is in stage one [see Figure 2]. Rather, he is newly identified as a criminal character that has lost the trust and admiration of his adoring community. The photograph featured, is an eerie, up close mug shot that was evidently snapped of Kobe at the Eagle Country Sheriff’s Office on July 4, 2003 (“Kobe Bryant: Accused”). His white shirt and the white background contrast against his dark skin and a black border surrounding the image. His face is serious, which on the one hand suggests his guilt. On the other however, it strikes a sense of fear and uneasiness into viewers who were perhaps once convinced that he could do no wrong. The font of the caption, which is placed at the bottom of
the picture, imitates the type of font one might see in police records, and the words simply read, “Kobe Bryant: Accused.”

With the fingers of the community pointed at him for having committed what Burke would refer to as, a “thou-shalt-not,” Kobe began taking steps to eradicate his guilt. As the media tells the story, the first way the protagonist attempted purification was through victimage. More than a year after the event had passed, the media reported that the sexual assault charges against Kobe had been dropped, and that the matter was going to be settled privately, in civil court. Not long after, Kobe released a statement offering an apology to the female employee as well other audiences who were demanding an explanation for his actions:

‘First, I want to apologize directly to the young woman involved in this incident. I want to apologize to her for my behavior that night and for the consequences she has suffered in the past year. Although this year has been incredibly difficult for me personally, I can only imagine the pain she has had to endure…’ (qtd. “Bryant: ‘I Want to Apologize’”)

Yet, later in the statement Kobe also said that, “‘although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way that I did…’” (qtd “Bryant: ‘I Want to Apologize’”).

After Bryant’s apology was released, the brief remark at the end was expressed in the media as an indicator of Kobe’s attempt to erase his guilt by placing at least part of the responsibility upon the young woman. In contending that he thought the sexual intercourse was consensual, he transferred blame to the young girl, making her his scapegoat. However, as the media publicized this process of scapegoating, it became apparent that its effects would be quite adverse from his original intention. In general, when audiences are cognizant of victimage as it
Figure 2
is being presented to them, they often have negative reactions to it, and interpret it as a sign of weakness on the part of the original wrongdoer.

Consequently, once the media made public Kobe’s commentary his thinking the act was consensual, and that the case was to be settled in civil court, the public looked down upon the matter as a distasteful and unsuccessful attempt by Kobe to save his own face. Instead of seeing Kobe as the pure and exemplary “media darling” (Beck, “Collapse of Kobe”), introduced in the first part of the narrative, audiences reinterpreted Kobe in light of his act, as an overpaid and selfish basketball player who had clearly been tainted by stardom.

Indeed, the public recognition of Kobe as a model sports hero who had fallen from grace was largely revealed through the termination of his endorsement deals. In the months following the sexual assault charge, companies such as McDonald’s, Nutella and Coke, which had all formerly hailed the basketball star for his clean image, no longer wished to have him be associated with their products. As a result, they dropped their million dollar endorsement deals with the accused, and left him alienated from the rest of society.

The estrangement of the tale’s protagonist was exacerbated in the following year. After the Lakers lost to the Detroit Pistons in the NBA finals, it was announced that the Lakers were going to trade long time Los Angeles fan favorite, Shaquille O’Neal, to the Miami Heat following the 2004 season. The media reported that the trade was a result of a long lasting feud between Bryant and O’Neal, both on and off the court. Then, as if to make matters worse, the Lakers’ head coach Phil Jackson announced his own resignation from the team. What’s more, Jackson wrote a book in the 2004 offseason, in which he notably blamed Kobe for many of the team’s failures, and stated that Kobe and his trial were “disruptive to the team” (Newsmakers).
Thus as it may clearly be seen, the events in 2004 that followed the initial act of pollution in 2003 further sullied Bryant’s image. Los Angeles fans not only looked at him in light of the sexual assault accusations, but also considered him to be directly at fault for the breakup, and downfall of their beloved home team.

Although Bryant reached a number of personal accomplishments between 2003 and 2005, he continued to be defined by the guilt cast upon him in 2003. For instance, he was named an NBA all star during these years, but he was to a greater extent, negatively associated with the fact that the Lakers missed the playoffs (in 2005) for the first time in eleven years. As the rebirth narrative suggests, it soon became clear to the protagonist that in order to remove his guilt, thereupon ending his alienation from the society, he would have to purify himself, not through victimage, but through the self-inflicted punishment of mortification.

Kobe’s process of purification through mortification is most clearly constructed in two Nike advertisements. Back in 2003, when companies were terminating endorsement deals with Bryant in order to disassociate themselves from his tainted image, Nike was oddly, the one major company reported as keeping its endorsement contract with the polluted protagonist. Since Nike had signed Bryant to a $45 million shoe contract only a month before the sexual assault charges occurred, it decided to keep its deal with the out of favor basketball player, but refrain from using him its marketing efforts for the time being (“Come On Up On the Resurrection of Kobe Bryant”).

Nike released its first advertisement featuring Bryant in 2005. Ironically, the ad appeared in the July 11th issue of *Sports Illustrated*, the same publication that pictured Bryant on its cover as the “Accused,” almost exactly two years earlier. The ad inside is a two-page, black and white spread, featuring a long column of white text on the left and a striking, darker profile image of
Kobe on the right [see Figure 3]. The text is a list of phrases that interplays between insults commonly hurled at Kobe over the past two years, and Kobe’s response to each one of these insults in the form of physical training. With words such as “Selfish,” “Ball hog,” “Not a team player,” and “Baby,” the ad acknowledges the opinions and perceptions the public has recently held of Kobe. Yet, with responses like, “100m run x 10,” “Suicides x 3,” “Film review,” and “100 made free throws,” the ad also alludes to the determination and discipline that Kobe has despite what is said about him [note: a suicide is a running drill]. Here in the advertisement, there is no scapegoat upon which Kobe is trying to place his guilt. Quite adversely, Kobe sits alone, staring into the derisive attacks that are coming at him. As Eric Neel explains in an article written for ESPN.com, titled, “Kobe, Nike Back in Business,” the advertisement speaks to Kobe’s “rehabilitation.” It seems to say to its viewers, “no matter what you’ve heard or what you think, he’s coming now to work harder and sacrifice more than ever, in order to be good, in order to be great” (Neel). In this manner, the advertisement both recognizes the past, but more importantly points to the future. As Neel further notes, the ad speaks to the widespread “cultural respect” for working hard, and overcoming obstacles to achieve greatness. It also speaks to the cultural respect for acknowledging the fact that the past may not be erased, but it is still possible to move forward in spite of it (Neel).
Additionally, the ad conveys Kobe’s purification through mortification, because it communicates a sense of humility on the part of the protagonist. For example, although Kobe is fully capable of slam dunking for the camera, he is simply sitting with his eyes looking towards his physical retribution. The black and white color scheme also makes the ad seem humble and even quiet. Kobe is sitting in the dark and taking the verbal attack that is coming from the light. In fact, as Neel points out in his article, perhaps the most striking part about the ad is the use of light and dark contrast in order to plant a seed of rebirth within the mind of the viewer. While Kobe is sitting on the darker page to the right, he is also leaning towards the light on the left, and although he is not there yet, he is nevertheless moving towards it. What is perhaps even more interesting is that while Kobe’s head is the only part of his body in plain view, it remains ambiguous as to whether or not he is clothed. Indeed just the tops of Kobe’s shoulders are exposed, and they are bare. On the one hand, the ambiguity of Kobe’s nakedness evokes a further sense of humility, especially in the face of public castigation. On the other hand, however, it also makes the ad seem either primitive, or futuristic in nature, as to mark the story’s shift towards the realm of science fiction. Indeed, the ad may be interpreted as a moment of foreshadowing within the narrative. Quite literally, it seems to communicate, that the old Kobe is in fact dead, and the Kobe coming over from the dark now, will eventually reach the light; when he does, he will be reborn as something quite different from what he was before.

Approximately six months after the print ad was published in *Sports Illustrated*, Nike released another advertisement featuring Bryant on television, which also alludes to Kobe’s process of mortification as a means of eradicating his guilt. Similar to the print ad, the television ad is in black and white, and Kobe is pictured alone. He is not presented as being a part of any team. Other than the fact that the two advertisements are in different mediums, the commercial
has several of its own distinctions. First, it has the ability to actually demonstrate Kobe in the process of physical retribution. As it shows him lifting weights, playing basketball, and clearly working out hard, his voice can be heard above the noise:

‘Love me or hate me, it's one or the other. Always has been. Hate my game, my swagger. Hate my fadeaway, my hunger. Hate that I'm a veteran. A champion. Hate that. Hate it with all your heart. And hate that I'm loved, for the exact same reasons.’

(“Kobe Bryant Love Me or Hate Me”)

Kobe’s voiceover demonstrates the second contrast between the print ad and the commercial. In the print ad, Kobe does not respond to the public scoffing with his own verbal retaliation. In fact, he does not even look at the viewer. His only response to the insults thrown in his face is more basketball training. Contrastingly in the commercial, he not only speaks directly to the viewers, he confidently challenges them. He tells them to decide whether they love him or hate him, because regardless of what they do decide, he is still going to push forward towards greatness. With such an audacious challenge from a character just recently cast down by society, the commercial when viewed by itself, seems slightly brash, overconfident and almost arrogant. However, if considered in context, then the commercial makes more sense. Released early in February of 2006 as part of Nike’s campaign to advertise the new sneaker Zoom Kobe I, the commercial appeared at a time when it seemed apparent that Kobe’s purification was providing successful results, at least on the basketball court. At the beginning of the 2005-2006 season, Phil Jackson resumed his position as head coach, and it was reported to the public that Bryant and Jackson had made peace with one another. The team improved noticeably from the preceding year and was able to qualify for the playoffs. On his part, Kobe had one of the best statistical seasons of his career and at the end of the season, he was declared the entire league’s
scoring champion (“Lakers Player Page”). He also had several remarkable individual game performances. For example, in a contest against the Dallas Mavericks in December of 2005, Kobe scored 62 points, in just three quarters. In the following month, Kobe scored an astounding 81 points during the Lakers’ game against the Toronto Raptors. The event flooded media headlines, because it was second highest number of points to ever be scored in a game in the entire history of the NBA (Newsmakers). Thus, while perhaps Kobe had not fully purified his past just yet, the Nike commercial assertively alludes to his progress, and more importantly the inexorable approach of his rebirth in the third stage.

The setting is not regarded as particularly important in this stage, because Kobe is now being judged by the entire nation. Although, his actions cause direct implications for the city of Los Angeles, his sexual assault case is judged by a national audience because it entails an act of pollution off the basketball court. To be sure, however, his actions are judged strictly by an audience within the United States. His act of pollution is largely ignored by those audiences outside the United States, especially in Asia. As the story progresses, it will be illustrated how the fact that some audiences that have not been exposed to the second phase in the same way as the audience in the United States has been, becomes critically important to the final acceptance and success of the narrative.

**Stage 3: Rebirth**

In the third part of the narrative, the story’s protagonist finally reaches the stage of rebirth. Having purified himself through mortification in the second stage, Kobe is reborn in the third stage and accepted once again into society. In contrast to the second phase, which frames Bryant’s pollution within a single event, the third stage communicates Bryant’s rebirth as a
gradually unfolding phenomenon. The transformation begins in 2006 and occurs over the next three years. Although the transformation is presented as an unfolding phenomenon, there are two events that the media constructs as the kernels that signify the completion of the rebirth cycle. They are the 2008 Summer Olympics and the Lakers’ defeat of the Orlando Magic in the 2009 NBA Finals. The narrative elements that are shifted in the third stage are character, plot, audience and setting.

As the narrative progresses from the second stage into the third stage, it becomes clear to audiences that the rebirth of the protagonist in this particular tale will not be equivalent to a return his previous persona. Rather than present Kobe’s rebirth as the redemption of the “Boy Wonder” whom audiences met in stage one, the media instead conveys it as a reincarnation into a supernatural creature. Kobe is newly identified in the third stage as a character that audiences should now both fear and respect. What is more, his reincarnated persona is depicted as having two different forms. A May 2006 cover for Slam magazine and an ad for the watch-making company Nubeo convey the rebirth of Kobe in one form, while an ad for Nike illustrates his rebirth in the other. All three artifacts demonstrate the science-fictional spin that occurs from the second to the third stage. Through them, it can be seen that the product of purification is a cold-blooded superhuman, who has been elevated above and beyond mankind.

Although they are subtle, the first hints of the Bryant’s transformation are presented in the narrative as beginning in the 2005-2006 season. During the time period in which audiences perceived the protagonist as being in a stage of purification, (illustrated by the Nike commercial from January of 2006), Kobe began to refer to himself with the nickname, “Black Mamba.” With the nickname “Black Mamba,” he implied that his adroit and nimble style of play was
comparable to one of the deadliest and fastest snakes in Africa (“Black Mamba”). In just a short amount of time, his dramatic nickname caught on with audiences other than his teammates and close kin. Especially after his 81-point game against Toronto in January of 2006, sportscasters and journalists realized that Kobe was an athlete that was determined to gain the respect of their coverage. In response to his undeniable talent, the media too soon began referring to him as “Black Mamba,” in order to convey the unpredictable offensive threat that teams faced when they guarded him.

The association of the narrative’s protagonist as a deadly serpent is first illustrated in the third phase, on the cover of the May 2006 issue of Slam magazine. In the photograph, Kobe is shown facing the viewer in a three quarter pose, standing against a vibrant blue background [see Figure 4] (“Kobe: Cold-Blooded”). The blue color lightens to a white glow around Kobe, who is himself dressed in white, and shown glaring at the viewer in a mysterious and most intimidating manner. Without a doubt, the most striking part of the cover that immediately jumps out at the observer is the live black snake that Kobe is holding close to his face. To the left of the snake, on Kobe’s front shoulder, there is a caption written in bold red letters that reads: “Kobe-Cold Blooded.”
(Figure 4)
Although the term “Black Mamba,” is actually missing from the image, the allusion to Bryant’s new name is immediately recognizable for any viewers who happen to be relatively informed in the sports world. Accordingly, the symbolic imagery of the cover may clearly be seen, and the reference to Kobe’s new persona is unmistakable.

Another artifact that demonstrates Kobe’s new identity in the same way is a more recent advertisement that Kobe did for the small watch-making company Nubeo. In March of 2009, Nubeo announced that it was collaborating with Kobe on a new luxury watch that would be directly inspired by Kobe’s style of play on the court. Fittingly, the watch was named “Black Mamba,” and it was released in the following months, whereupon Nubeo put forth an advertisement featuring Bryant [see Figure 5]. In the background, a city skyline is depicted at night, amidst a swirl of glowing green color (“Nubeo Black Mamba Kobe Bryant Watch”). Kobe faces the viewer, clad entirely in black, and markedly in a hooded, snakeskin leather jacket. While looking the viewer in the eye, Kobe has his arm extended forward, exposing the watch to the viewer at the base of his hand. Like the cover of Slam magazine, Kobe’s face in Nubeo’s ad is quite serious. In both portrayals, it is evident that Kobe should not be mistaken for the smiling, young-hearted basketball player pictured with Shaq on the cover of Sport.
The Nubeo ad does not present Bryant as a poster boy for McDonald’s, nor even as a character humiliated by his own polluted acts. Rather, he is portrayed as a deadly snake about to strike, and release his poison in the form of a fabulously luxurious watch. In an article for *International Watch* magazine, titled “Teammates in Time,” Meehna Goldsmith describes how the inspiration for the makeup of Nubeo’s new watch came from Kobe Bryant:

> On the court, he’s majestic as he is dangerous, leaving spectators and players alike with their jaws swinging from his swift precision when targeting the swoosh of the net….For his ability to strike and score with a startling yet poetic motion, Kobe earned the sobriquet of the deadly African snake, the Black Mamba. The Black Mamba watch captures the mystery, craftsmanship and subtle complexity of Kobe Bryant’s game.

(Goldsmith)

As striking as Kobe’s reincarnation into a venomous snake seems to be, it is only one of two ways in which Kobe’s rebirth is presented in the narrative. The second form exhibited by the Nike ad, is brought to audiences as a winged superhuman hero.

In 2007, Nike launched an advertising campaign to publicize its latest sneaker, the Zoom Kobe II. During this time it released a striking print ad featuring Bryant wearing the shoes [see Figure 6]. Unlike the other four images analyzed thus far, this particular Nike ad portrays Kobe from a further distance, so that image shows his full frame (“Zoom Kobe II: Kobe Wallpapers”). Bryant is dressed in white, and stands facing the viewer, with folded arms and one hand placed on his chin. At first glance, the viewer’s eyes are immediately drawn to the enormous black, white and purple wings that are protruding from either side of Bryant’s shoulders. Looking
closely, the viewer may be able tell that the wings are creatively constructed by a repeated picture of the Zoom Kobe II shoe, with its toe pointing down. The Nike insignia is situated in the lower left hand corner and underneath it the shoe’s name is displayed, “Zoom Kobe II: Supernatural.” Then, below the name of the shoe, there is a caption which is meant to be understood as a quote from Kobe:

‘I’m chasing perfection. Elevating my game. Zoom Kobe II helps me be the best basketball player I can be. Natural fit and motion. Supernatural Performance.’ (“Zoom Kobe II: Kobe Wallpapers”)

The most interesting aspect of the ad is that it communicates the hybridization of the story’s protagonist. The picture of Kobe is real, and it therefore presents him as being fully human. Yet the enormous wings that are artificially incorporated into the picture also provide a rather realistic illusion of Kobe being supernatural. Kobe’s quote further alludes to this, as he says that the sneakers provide him, ‘natural fit,’ yet also ‘supernatural performance.’

The hybridization of Kobe in stage three is important to the narrative because it invokes a sense of mystery and curiosity within the audience. The second wave of Nike’s advertising campaign for the Zoom Kobe II further illustrates the entrance of the myth into reality, in the launching of the “2007 Kobe Bryant Supernatural Tour.” The tour also marks a major shift in the audience and setting in the third part of the rebirth narrative. In the fall of 2007, Kobe embarked on a 5-city tour through Asia beginning in Manila, and making stops in Taipei, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing.
ZOOM KOBE II
SUPERNATURAL

I'm chasing perfection. Elevating my game.
Zoom Kobe II helps me be the best basketball player I can be.
Natural fit and motion. Supernatural performance.

NIKEBASKETBALL.COM

(Figure 6)
Indeed, Nike brought the supernatural hero in the ad to life, as the same picture, presenting Kobe as a type of winged superhero became the dominant logo of the entire tour, re-appearing on venue walls, tickets, T-shirts, and buses. As part of his stay in each city, Kobe made visits to charitable institutions; spoke with the Chinese media; and performed in an elaborate show orchestrated by Nike, in which he interacted with audience members as he taught them his basketball training regime (Mercado).

For those who witnessed the 2007 tour, it became clear that Kobe’s audiences in Asia truly did treat him as their hero. Not only was he well received in each city; he was venerated and adored by screaming fans throughout his entire trip. Today, many agree the type of relationship that Kobe has with Asia, and especially China, is something that no other NBA player has ever achieved. In 2007, his jersey was the number one top selling jersey in China, even over native Yao Ming, whose jersey only ranked number six among NBA players (“Kobe Bryant Top-selling Jersey in China”). In the following months, Kobe’s ethos in China was further demonstrated with the airing of a reality television show called, “Kobe Mentu,” which is Chinese for “Kobe’s Disciples.” Sponsored by Nike, the six-part reality series aired during prime-time on China’s national television, and featured a competition that selected 24 out of 400 Chinese youths, as the worthy disciples that would be flown to the United States to train with Kobe in California. In the following episodes, Kobe was identified as the “Master,” with the power, wisdom and skill to impart his vast knowledge of the game to his disciples through a rigorous and austere training regime.

Since it aired from April to June of 2008, “Kobe Mentu” played a strategic role within Nike’s marketing campaign for the Olympics that were scheduled to take place three months
later in Beijing, the capital of China. Bryant’s four previous visits to China, including the Supernatural Tour in the fall of 2007, were brief, but the show helped maintain his powerful ethos in China while he remained in the United States. It also served as an anticipation builder, as the Chinese fans watching “Kobe Mentu” on prime-time television, knew it would only be a short time until they could expect the return of their master in training to their country.

To be certain, the Chinese continued to hail Kobe as a larger than life figure who was magically gifted when it came to basketball. Yet to a great extent, they also knew him to be an altruistic leader who dedicated himself to the people of their country. During each of his visits prior to the Olympics, he connected with civilians by making sure he allotted time to visit charities and to spend part of each day with Chinese children (Quismundo; Guian_Yeo). The affection that Kobe showed the Chinese during these visits, allowed them to look upon him in a way that reflects how he is depicted in the Nike sneaker ad; supernaturally gifted, but nevertheless human and therefore connected to his audience.

Knowing the relationship that Bryant formed with the Chinese people, it is no surprise that when Bryant did return to China for the Olympics in August, it was he, out of the entire Team USA, who received the most enthusiastic welcome from the natives. Interestingly enough, to the rest of the world that had not yet witnessed the power of Kobe’s ethos in the country, his overwhelming reception was in fact rather shocking. When Bryant’s name was announced during the opening ceremonies, the audience let forth such deafening cheers, that the only other athlete to receive louder acknowledgment from the crowd was native Yao Ming (Whiteside). The spectacle of his popularity even came as a surprise to his teammates, and Mark Heisler, a journalist for the Los Angeles Times, reported about the phenomenon in his article titled “The
Kobe Dynasty.” Written on August 20th, the article explains to American audiences not present for the Olympics, how Bryant was mobbed by fans to a much greater extent than any other athlete, and how he received the loudest cheers of any player on the USA Team during each one of their games. Heisler notes how teammate Carmelo Anthony joked, “Kobe might want to think about moving here---to live” (qtd in Heisler). Elsewhere in the article, Heisler notes how even the growing fame of superstar Lebron James seemed inconsequential in light of the Olympic games as he says, “if LeBron James is still King James in the U.S., Bryant is the new emperor of China.” Ironically, the Chinese actually refer to James as “Little Emperor,” in their native language Mandarin, because it is the translation for his nickname in the United States, “King James” (“Chinese Nicknames for NBA Players,” NBA.com). However, as Heisler pointed out, it was clear to everyone who viewed the Olympics that every athlete, even LeBron, stood well within the shadow of Bryant. If anyone was treated as an emperor in China, it truly was Bryant. Another article written by Kelly Whiteside for USA TODAY, titled, “Among Hoops-Loving Chinese, It’s a Slam Dunk: Kobe is King,” seems to make the same distinction. Whiteside even quotes Lebron himself saying, “I thought I was famous until I got here with Kobe” (qtd. in Whiteside). As the Mike Krzyzewski, the head coach of Team USA accurately understood and pointed out to reporters, “I guess what I’d say is he’s invested….He has shown them respect over the last few years and it’s been reciprocated at a very high level. It’s unbelievable really” (qtd. in Whiteside).

Aside from an acknowledgment of Bryant’s popularity in China, the most noteworthy remark Heisler and Whiteside both seem to make in their articles is the suggestion that Kobe’s reputation with the Chinese is a direct indication of his rehabilitation since his act of pollution in
2003. Heisler notes that, “at home, he [Bryant] was always overshadowed by Shaquille O’Neal before he hurtled from grace after his 2003 arrest…,” but “if everything has turned around for Bryant, it was never so clear until this trip.” Likewise, Whiteside writes that since 2003, “he has rebounded, becoming one of the NBA’s top pitchmen” (Whiteside). Whiteside makes a further important reflection which notes the shock that people especially in the United States have when they see the affection the Chinese have for him: “though there are still some lingering feelings toward Bryant among U.S. fans, in China that’s not the case.” Whereas some people in the United States still judged Kobe in view of his act of pollution during the second stage, the entire nation of China admired Kobe as if they were never even aware it ever happened.

While the affection the Chinese showed Kobe certainly surprised many unaware American audiences, it also forced them to reevaluate their own judgments of the player. Prior to the Olympics in 2008, Kobe’s rebirth was not entirely accepted by audiences in the United States. Although, his efforts to purify his guilt had been made manifest, many Americans still considered Kobe in view of his act of pollution in 2003. The existence of home team loyalties heightened their stances. The fans of opposing teams found Kobe’s shameful past a satisfying point of criticism especially after games that were victorious for the Lakers. This all changed however, when American audiences became exposed to the unbiased zeal of Chinese basketball fans. Rather than look at Bryant as a Los Angeles Laker, they looked at Bryant as a leading and proud member of United States Men’s Basketball Team. In a way, the respect the Chinese had for Bryant’s talent was revelatory for some American audiences. Not only was Kobe representing the American people at the Olympic Games, he was representing them in a highly positive manner, as one of the most favored athletes of the entire contest. As much as China
revered Bryant, it was for America that he desired to win a gold medal. When the games had ended, the desire was in fact achieved, as Kobe along with the rest of Team USA gained the ultimate victory over Spain to secure the gold medal as a token of American pride.

Consequently, when the “Redeem Team,” returned home, audiences in America owed their gratification to the protagonist that they had formerly rejected from their society. The media communicated Kobe’s success in Beijing as an indication that his rebirth cycle was nearly complete. Another indication of the Kobe’s return to the top, which occurred before his journey to the Olympics, was his recognition as NBA League’s Most Valuable Player in May of 2008. Five years after Kobe initially incurred his guilt it was finally becoming indisputable that he would be accepted once again into society.

At the same time that the media presented these achievements during the summer of 2008 as victorious moments for Kobe, it also made clear that they were not the signs of his ultimate triumph. Instead, they are constructed in his narrative as events that foreshadowed his conclusive triumph which took place at culmination of the following season. As the media tells the rebirth narrative, the last and final obstacle that the protagonist would have to overcome in order to achieve complete new life was the realization an NBA Championship title without the help of former teammate Shaquille O’Neal. Until he did so, his past would define him and he could never truly be distinguished as one of the greatest players of all time.

In June of 2009, Bryant overcame this final barrier in his narrative, by leading the Lakers in a dramatic defeat of the Orlando Magic in the NBA Finals. The moment is presented as Kobe’s ultimate victory and complete rebirth. As Andy Staples, a columnist for Sports
Illustrated stated what most sports media outlets articulated in his article, “Bryant, Lakers Finish off Magic in Five Games for 15th Championship,” “Bryant emerged from Shaquille O’Neal’s massive shadow….” Through leading the Lakers without the help of another Hall-of-Fame player, Kobe “cemented his place in basketball history…as the unquestioned on-court leader of a championship team and a Finals MVP” (Staples).

Once Bryant secured his 4th Championship, he returned to his position at the top of the NBA. The media presents the event as the logical conclusion of his pollution-purification-rebirth cycle. Having undergone purification in order to amend his pollution, the protagonist was reborn in the third stage. His culminating triumph at the 2009 NBA Finals marked his readmission into society and the rebirth narrative was able to come to a close.

Satellites in America, Kernels in China

In the narrative of Kobe Bryant, there are certain moments that are highlighted and constructed by the sports media as being the definitive and most essential events of his tale. These major events in Bryant’s career, or kernels within the narrative, are presented as Kobe’s decision to enter the NBA immediate after high school, the bringing forth of sexual assault charges in 2003, his visit to Beijing for the Olympics in 2008 and the Lakers’ victory over the Orlando Magic for Kobe’s 4th Championship title in 2009. Without any one of these events, the plot of his rebirth narrative is noticeably discontinuous in its structure. If the media did not emphasize them as kernels, the logical line from pollution through purification to rebirth would have breaks in its sequence, and the narrative would appear incomplete to most audiences. At the very least, the narrative would suffer aesthetically because audiences would not be able to
connect the narrative to their own the preconceptions of rebirth plotlines. In this regard, the narrative of Kobe Bryant may be conceived as a successful construction. Consider for a moment, if the media placed equal emphasis on each moment in Bryant’s career, constructing its layout in a bullet, or enumerated format. Such a presentation might risk losing the interest of the audiences, because they would most likely not be able to identify with events in the life of a celebrity, professional basketball player. The majority of audiences do not know what it feels like to win a national championship. Yet, they can however, relate to the feelings of guilt, perseverance and redemption. The familiarities that audiences have with the rhetoric of rebirth allow them to easily believe and participate in narrative. In placing greater importance on particular events, the American sports media successfully frames Bryant’s career with a logical, coherent and compelling plot structure.

In *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Seymour Chatman theorizes that the adverse of this assertion is also true. If the removal of certain kernels, which constitute the “backbone” of the plotline, detracts from the narrative’s ability to have a logical beginning, middle and end, then the insertion of events that otherwise play no role in the plotline, likewise lessens the narrative’s power in communicating the rhetoric of rebirth.

As such, the narrative of Kobe Bryant is constructed so that the moments in his life that do not explicitly fall into categories of pollution, purification or rebirth become the satellites: events that are not critical to the development of the story, yet whose omission will “impoverish the narrative aesthetically” (Chatman 54). All three championships that Kobe won with the Lakers from 2000-2002 may be regarded as satellites because they are not particularly emphasized by the sports media as being the most defining moments of his career. The reason that most sports critics have downplayed their significance in regards to Kobe’s time in the NBA
is because they were won alongside another great player, Shaquille O’Neal. While the three consecutive titles are certainly mentioned as having a place on the list of his accomplishments, they are often spoken of as a single unit. The unit is one successful but simply brief “chunk” of his career, during which he was able to harmonize with both Shaq and coach Phil Jackson in the pursuit of a common goal. Up until his latest feat of leading the Lakers to victory for the 2009 NBA title, Kobe was often criticized as being incapable of leading a team to greatness without Shaq or another influential player to work beside him (“Magic Proves No Match”).

Other satellites, which are notable because they bring about an interesting reflection about the importance of audience, are Kobe’s Nike-sponsored tours throughout Asia, and especially China. For American audiences, Kobe’s trips to Asia, aside from the Olympics, were not highly publicized because they do not play a major role in the plot of the narrative. In September of 2007 for example, the “Supernatural Asia Tour” was given very little mention in American media, aside for a page on Nike’s website and several other postings on Kobe’s fan-generated blogging sites. Yet, in Asia, these trips were presented in directly the alternative manner. Instead of being depicted as satellites, they are celebrated as kernels. What is even more fascinating is that the events which are constructed as kernels for American audiences, most importantly Kobe’s moment of pollution, became satellites for Asian audiences. This distinction is critical because it may help explain, especially for Americans, the existence of Kobe’s overwhelming fan base in Asia that was first revealed to the rest of the world during the 2008 Olympics.

In Asia, Kobe’s narrative is quite different. For Asian audiences, Kobe’s act of pollution in 2003 was deemed an insignificant and largely unimportant to the story. Contrastingly, Kobe’s visits, and more notably, his efforts to fund charitable organizations were the events that were
emphasized as the narrative’s kernels. He was heralded a great basketball player, as well as a genuine philanthropist to the people of Asia, and especially of China. On July 16, 2009 *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by Alan Paul, titled “Kobe’s Next Conquest: China,” in which Paul elaborates on the power of Bryant’s ethos in China. Reflecting back upon the Olympics a year earlier, Paul comments, “one of the great curiosities in modern sports is the Chinese people’s lavish affection for Kobe Bryant.” Paul continues to report on a recent award that Kobe received from the Asia Society “for his work as a ‘cultural ambassador.’” The award was partly a recognition and gratification of Kobe’s latest work of charity. On June 30, 2009 Kobe established the Kobe Bryant China Fund, as a partner to the “Soong Ching Ling Foundation, a charity backed by the Chinese government, to raise money within China earmarked for education and health programs” (Paul). As Paul explains, the establishment of the fund was well received by the Chinese public, as well as Chinese government officials because although “at the elite level, China and the U.S. have already connected” there is still no “grass-roots connection.” Thus, Chinese representatives believe that Kobe’s “popularity can help forge that connection” (Paul). Donald Tang, who is the founder and CEO of the financial advisory firm that will help direct Kobe’s fund in China, expressed his own opinion that, “I think he [Kobe] can be a one-man State Department, reaching directly to the people” (qtd. in Paul). As Terry Rhodes, managing director of Zou Marketing remarked, Bryant’s efforts are considered particularly special for the Chinese because they are likely to have “a profound impact on a nation that is just developing a culture of individual charitable efforts” (Rhodes qtd. in Paul). Hence the award indicates that Bryant’s outreach towards the country is deeply appreciated by its inhabitants. While his image is not entirely clean, as Paul notes, “in China, none of that seems to matter.”
The positive ethos that is attributed to Kobe in Asia has profound and direct implications for the way that the audiences there judge the narrative. Kobe’s character is not cast down by the community because it was never presented that he committed an act of pollution. Quite adversely, as it was demonstrated during the Olympics, Kobe’s character is hailed as the hero of the narrative from beginning to end. In one regard, Asian audiences judge him on account of his incredible abilities to be a transcendental basketball superman. Yet in another regard, they reflect upon his character in light of his palpable devotion to their country. His efforts to establish a relationship at a grass-roots level are observable. As a result, Asian audiences favorably esteem Kobe as if he were (to appropriate the words of Don Tang) a “one man state department,” or an affectionate emperor to their people (qtd. in Paul).

Discussion

The rebirth narrative of Kobe Bryant may be considered a persuasive construction of rhetoric because it appeals to audiences on the basis of narrative probability. Narrative probability “refers to the formal features of the story… [or] whether or not a story coheres or ‘hangs together’…. (Fisher, “Elaboration” 349). Kobe’s rebirth narrative is presented to audiences in three stages with a beginning, middle and end. By emphasizing particular events to be the kernels that dictate the direction of the plot, the media logically frames Bryant’s career within the rhetoric of rebirth. A plotline that is constructed through the rhetoric of rebirth is engaging for audiences because they are already familiar with its constituents: pollution, purification and rebirth (or redemption).

In the beginning of the tale, Kobe Bryant is introduced to audiences as a talented and exemplary young man who has a clean image and promising future. He is also reflected as a top
candidate who might replace Michael Jordan as the next basketball legend. Then, when the protagonist seems most on top-of-it-all, he falls from grace by committing what the community regards as an act of pollution, or in Kenneth Burke’s terminology a “thou-shalt-not” (Rhetoric of Religion 290). Consequently, Kobe Bryant receives guilt, and is put in a position of estrangement from his team (through the trading of teammate Shaquille O’Neal and resignation of head coach Phil Jackson), the media, his fans and his endorsement companies. The rebirth narrative then communicates that in order to be accepted once again into society, Kobe must eradicate his guilt through means of mortification. Once this is successfully illustrated in the two Nike advertisements within the “Love Me or Hate Me,” campaign in 2005 and 2006, the narrative employs discourse that shifts the plot line into the stage of rebirth. The third stage is particularly worthy of analysis because it marks the entrance of the rebirth narrative into a realm of science fiction.

When some scholars refer to Kenneth Burke’s rhetoric of rebirth framework, they use the term redemption to label the last stage of the cycle. In this particular analysis however, rebirth was the only term used to label the third stage, because in using the word redemption, the analysis inaccurately conveys Kobe’s eradication of guilt as a return to his previous persona. As it is made quite clear in the artifacts within the third stage, Kobe’s transformation is not redemption of the young “Boy Wonder” who was a poster boy for McDonald’s prior to 2003. Instead, Kobe’s transformation is communicated as a rebirth into a character that is forceful, powerful and so talented that he cannot possibly be entirely human. Especially after his 81-point performance in January of 2006, the shift in discourse was evident, as the rhetoric that surrounded Kobe began to associate him as a deadly snake. Within a year, Nike developed an advertising campaign that additionally depicted the protagonist as a mythical superhuman. To be
absolutely certain, these representations of Kobe are not the same representations that appeared in the media prior to his act of pollution.

At first consideration, the transformation of Kobe Bryant into a science fictional hero may seem like it would detract from the narrative’s probability because it clearly loses an element of reality. However, the fascinating aspect of framing a message in the form of a story is that it need not be entirely realistic in order to be familiar to audiences. Indeed, the construction of Bryant’s rebirth in the third stage is strikingly comparable to the plot of a typical comic book story, or science fictional novel. Spiderman, Batman, Superman and the Hulk for instance, are all popular comic heroes that are recognizable to the majority of American audiences. All four characters are also depicted in their stories as a human protagonist with an alternative identity and supernatural powers. Kobe’s reincarnated figure is similarly presented in this way, as he is portrayed as a hybrid between a talented human and a mystical creature. Thus, while his rebirth narrative introduces elements of myth in the third stage, it does not lose its persuasive connection to American audiences.

The rebirth narrative constructed by the media also operates on a level of successful fidelity: “the degree to which it accords with the logic of good reasons….,” (Fisher, “Public Moral Argument 349). Kobe’s act of pollution is something that is very real to the narrative’s viewers because adultery is largely considered by society’s standards to be a “thou-shalt-not.” As Kobe is properly punished with guilt, and forced to amend his action through mortification, the narrative succeeds in appealing to the audience’s sense of good reasons.

The tale further appeals to the audience’s sense of good reasons, because as Eric Neel refers to in his article “Kobe, Nike back in Business,” it speaks to a “cultural respect” for perseverance, honest hard work and achieving greatness in the face of adversity. It reflects a
cultural value for recognizing that while mistakes in the past cannot disappear, it is still possible to move forward in spite of them.

This note leads to perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the rebirth narrative. When he commits his act of pollution, Kobe is initially at the mercy of the audience. Society makes him feel his guilt, and therefore leaves him in a position of disassociation. Yet, as he approaches the stage of rebirth, Kobe is the one that appears in control of his destiny. The Nike commercial “Love Me or Hate Me,” reflects this as it shows Kobe performing his training regime and working hard in spite of what his critics say about him. The commercial assertively puts audiences in their place. It seems to tell them that no matter what they think of Kobe, he is going to bounce back from his dark past. Thus, the audience is forced to respect Kobe for his perseverance and determination. However, if they do agree to even this much, it is still quite clear that Kobe is going to reach his goal of returning to a top position in the NBA.

For these reasons, it may be seen how characterization is a central factor in determining the narrative’s success. The audience becomes engrossed with the narrative because the protagonist is a real person. It becomes further engaging, when the act of pollution that Kobe commits is also presented as something very real. The narrative could have for instance, presented Kobe’s act of pollution as the loss of a close playoff game. Framing the act of pollution as adultery however, strikes the narrative close to home for at least some of the audience, while the rest of the audience is still able to collectively identify the act as a sin. In this way, the narrative invites the participation of the viewers. Kobe’s sin is made public; therefore audiences have the right to make judgments. The ability to berate the main character serves to award the audiences with a sense of empowerment. It provides them with a feeling of
righteousness, because they are given to the opportunity to identify the faults of Kobe as evils that are distant from themselves, and acts that they themselves would never commit.

Once the narrative shifts towards the stage of rebirth, the audience then meets a character who has been transformed. Kobe’s process of purification is made noticeable, and the audiences are satisfied because Kobe did not travel the easy path to the eradication his guilt. If Kobe’s purification had not been made visible, then the narrative would not only lose its fidelity (appeal to good reasons), but also its probability. Kobe’s rebirth would not make sense because the middle part of purification would be incomplete.

Although the setting was not regarded as particularly important in the first two stages, it became significant for the final acceptance of the narrative in the third stage. The setting in the first two stages was the United States. In the second stage especially, Kobe’s act of pollution was presented to a national audience, where the existence of home team loyalties served to exacerbate his position of alienation. Once his act became public, fans of teams from cities around the country found it particularly easy to rebuke the Los Angeles Lakers’ leading scorer (Whiteside).

However, once the plot approached the third stage, setting became increasingly important because it marked the entrance of an additional audience and also made possible Kobe’s rebirth into a global emperor. With the setting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, the audiences in the United States became exposed to the power of Kobe’s ethos in China and the esteem that the inhabitants in China held for him. They also saw how he proudly contributed to the success of Team USA in attaining a gold medal to bring back to the country. Therefore, when Kobe returned to America, audiences displayed a sense gratitude and new found respect for the player that was not expressed prior to the Olympics.
At the end of the following season, Kobe overcame his ultimate obstacle in achieving a fourth NBA Championship and as sports critics articulated at the time, conclusively stepped “out of the shadow of Shaquille O’Neal.” When the event took place, audiences finally accepted it as the completion of his rebirth cycle. They had witnessed his purification in the second stage and shared in his American pride of winning a gold medal at 2008 Olympics. When he returned to the United States, audiences began to look at him with a newly found sense of respect. When he was awarded his fourth ring, audiences were able to acknowledge his re-admittance into society and more importantly his well earned return to the top of the NBA.
Chapter Five

This essay will now turn its analysis towards the discourse surrounding another highly celebrated and prominent professional basketball player, LeBron James. In 2003, LeBron James entered the NBA directly after high school. Since being selected by the Cleveland Cavaliers as the number one draft pick in 2003, James has participated in seven successful and competitive seasons on the professional basketball court. Similar to Bryant, James’s remarkable talent at a significantly young age has earned him attention from global media outlets as well as recognition as the potential legend of the present generation. Much akin to the manner in which the career of Kobe Bryant has been presented by the media within the frame of a recognizable narrative, the career of LeBron James’s has been constructed so that audiences are exposed to discourse that noticeably reflects the plotline of an alternative, but nonetheless commonplace tale. After providing a reconstruction of the historical context behind James’s career, the essay will employ a narrative methodology in order to examine the efforts of the media to uphold LeBron James as an identifiable mythological hero.

How the Legend Begins: A Reconstruction of Context, The Journey of a Childhood Prodigy

In the entire history of the NBA, LeBron James has arguably been one of the most anticipated players to step onto a professional basketball court. In April of 2003, the legendary Michael Jordan made his last appearance in the NBA. Once he was officially retired, many basketball fans wondered if there would ever be another player quite like Jordan to play the game. Then, they were all introduced to the young high school phenomenon from Akron, Ohio.

LeBron James was born in Akron Ohio on December 30, 1984. With a single mother, and having never known his biological father, Lebron had a difficult upbringing. Due to his
mother’s financial instability, LeBron lived for quite some time with the family of an Akron youth football coach, Frank Walker (Jones 23). As he entered his middle school years, LeBron was able to live with his mother once again. Dru Joyce II, a local basketball coach, whose son was friends with LeBron, noticed LeBron’s athletic ability in a game and decided to invite him onto his AAU team called the Northeast Ohio Shooting Stars (Jones 24). The team was extremely successful and competed on a national level. When it came time for high school, LeBron and several of his teammates decided to enroll at the local St. Vincent-St. Mary’s Academy in order that they could all play in the same successful basketball program (Jones 30).

During his four years at St. Vincent-St. Mary, LeBron lead his team to three out of four state championships. In his sophomore year however, the hype surrounding the young player really began. Due to the team’s success the previous year, St. Vincent-St. Mary decided to have several of the games played at the arena of the University of Akron (Jones 51). By the end of the season, James had helped the Fighting Irish win a second straight state title by averaging 25.2 points per game (“LeBron James”). He became the first high school sophomore ever to receive the Ohio Mr. Basketball award, as well the youngest chosen for the USA Today’s ALL-USA Team. In addition, he was featured nationally for the first time in SLAM magazine and was even asked to keep an installment of diaries in continuing issues (Jones 80).

As the summer of 2001 approached, it was clear that LeBron’s talent had been noticed by more than just the citizens of Akron and college recruiters. Companies such as Nike and Adidas started to contact him in hopes for future endorsements (Jones 75-77). On top of this, NBA players started to take an interest and that summer, James was asked by his one and only role model Michael Jordan, to participate in an invitation only workout with players such as Antoine Walker and Ron Artest (Jones 86).
Although in LeBron’s junior year, his team fell just short of winning a state title, the young talent did not receive any less press coverage. In February of 2002, he was featured on the cover of *Sport’s Illustrated*, as “The Chosen One,” and during the next few months the legend of the high school phenomenon “King James” spread across the country. At this point, it became relatively clear that he would be entering the 2003 NBA draft upon his graduation. At 17 years old, James was already being compared by sports fans, coaches and analysts to some of the best athletes to ever play the game. In Grant Wahl’s *Sports Illustrated* cover story on James in 2002, the Adidas representative who has launched contracts with Jordan (previously for Nike), Kobe Bryant, and Tracy McGrady, Sony Vaccaro was quoted, “At this age, LeBron is better than anybody I’ve seen in 37 years in this business including Kevin [Garnette] and Kobe [Bryant], and Tracy” (qtd. in Wahl).

When LeBron entered his final high school basketball season, the demand to watch him play was so high that his school made a deal with ESPN2 to air several of the games on national television (Jockbio.com). It also made a deal with Time Warner cable to sell 13 home games to viewers at $7.95 per game (Zitrin). When the first game tipped off on December 12, 2002, an estimated 1.6 million households turned on ESPN2 to watch LeBron score 31 points against Oak Hill Academy (Jockbio.com).

Despite all of this hype, not all of the coverage James received was positive. In that same month, his mother Gloria turned many heads by purchasing a $50,000 dollar Hummer for her son’s birthday (Jockbio.com). Shortly after, LeBron’s name was criticized again when he accepted two NBA jerseys, worth $845 from a local sports store (JockBio.com). Both incidents made national headlines, and attracted the attention of even those who had not been following the success of the young athlete thus far. Many saw the controversies as an example of exactly
why high school players should not be allowed to enter the NBA draft immediately after graduation.

However, LeBron still managed to finish his remarkable high school career on a positive note. By the time summer of 2003 arrived, LeBron had been given the Mr. Ohio Basketball award three times, chosen for USA Today’s All-USA team three times, and honored as the national player of the year twice by Gatorade and Parade. In addition, he was named the MVP of McDonald’s All American Game, the EA Sports Roundball Classic, and the Jordan Capital Classic (National Basketball Association).

On May 22, 2003 LeBron shocked the nation by signing a $90 million dollar contract with Nike. Later that same exact day, the Cleveland Cavaliers, won the rights to have the first round lottery Draft pick of 2003, and reported that they planned on selecting James first to their team (All Things Considered).

As LeBron began his first NBA season the following November, many wondered if the 18 year old player could live up to all of the expectations that fans, companies, coaches and teammates had of him. He was not just a rookie, but a number one draft pick who had just signed more than $100 million in endorsements with Nike, Coca-Cola and Upper Deck. Nevertheless, he played in his first NBA game in a Cavaliers uniform on October 29, 2003 against the Sacramento Kings. He finished the game with 25 points, and became the first rookie to ever score so much in his first NBA appearance (Jockbio.com).

In the next few years, it seemed as though LeBron was exactly what everyone had hoped for. In 2004, he became the youngest player to receive the Rookie of the Year Award and also to the youngest to score 2,000 points (“Witness: LeBron James”). From 2005 through 2010, he was named a league All-Star six times, and named MVP of the All-Star game in 2006 and in 2008.
Not only that, he helped to re-establish the Cavaliers as a competitive team in the NBA. Before James’s arrival, the team had just 17 wins in the 2002-2003 season. With LeBron however, the number rose to 35 in 2004, 42 in 2005 and 50 in 2006 (McCullum “His Kingdom Come). Since 2006, Cleveland has made five playoff appearances in a row.

One of the most notable games of James career thus far occurred in the 2007 playoff series against the Detroit Pistons. During Game 5 of the Eastern Conference Finals, LeBron put on a heroic and remarkable 48 point performance in a double overtime 109-107 win over Detroit (“Witness: LeBron James). He scored 25 of the team’s final 30 points, and it seemed as if LeBron had finally succeeded in fulfilling the role of the NBA’s next Michael Jordan (McCullum, “His Kingdom Come). However, LeBron and the Cavaliers were eventually shut down in the 2007 finals by the San Antonio Spurs. This loss came as a major disappointment, because although LeBron had proven his talent, he was still without a championship ring. Until he won an NBA championship, he was not to be considered another Michael Jordan.

2008 was another successful season. LeBron became the youngest player to ever score 10,000 points, and became only the third player behind Oscar Robertson and Michael Jordan to average at least 30 points, 7.9 rebounds and 7.2 assists per game (National Basketball Association). He led his team once again all the way to the Eastern Conference Finals against Boston. Yet, his path to a championship ring was to be held off once more, as the Cavaliers lost to the Celtics in the seven game series.

LeBron’s path instead pointed him straight towards Beijing, China. In August of 2008, he and several other superstars from the NBA such as Kobe Bryant, Jason Kidd, Carmelo Anthony and Dwight Howard joined the United States Men’s Olympic Basketball team in a quest to bring home a gold medal. The trip proved to be a success and the U.S. Men’s team
secured the gold to bring back to America. In doing so the “Redeem Team,” made up for the disappointing bronze medal that the U.S. received during the 2004 Summer Olympics (Abrahamson). More importantly however, James’s image as a global figure seemed to enhance quite a bit. Due to his endorsements with Nike and Coca-Cola, the growing popularity of basketball in China, and his position as one of the team captains, LeBron’s arrival in Beijing for the Summer Olympic Games was much anticipated by the Chinese population (2008 Beijing Summer Olympics). To his slight disappointment perhaps, once he arrived, it became incredibly apparent that his popularity with the Chinese, only stood second, if not well behind teammate Kobe Bryant. As the U.S. came to find out, Kobe was loved and adored by the Chinese audience much more so than any other athlete present for the Olympics (Thomaselli, “With no Ring”).

Despite this Kobe phenomenon, Lebron’s global ethos expanded to an extent and in the United States he continued to be regarded as one of the most prominent players in the NBA. In the following season, the Cleveland Cavaliers advanced again to the playoffs, and James was also awarded as the NBA league’s Most Valuable Player. However, during the Eastern Conference Playoffs, a minor controversy occurred which involved James and what many deemed to be an act of poor sportsmanship. Directly after losing to Orlando Magic, James walked off the court in a visibly upset state. He refused to shake the hands with the Orlando Magic players and on he waved off media reporters as he made his way to the locker room (“Lebron on Loosing”).

Only a month later, another minor controversy was brought to light, when a camper at the LeBron James Skills Academy, Jordan Crawford slam-dunked over LeBron during a pick-up game (“Nike Confiscates LeBron Camp Tapes”). Criticism arose in the following days, because it was learned that after the game, a Nike representative helping to run the camp, confiscated the
tapes from the videographers that had recorded the dunk on film (“Nike Confiscates Lebron Camp Tapes”).

As the National Basketball Association enters the 2010 playoff season, Lebron has still not achieved what most are expecting of him yet, a championship. Despite this, he has made accomplishments on the basketball court that not even the shrewdest of sports analysts could predict. Yet, at 25 years old, he is still quite young, and therefore has a number of years ahead of him to complete the ultimate test of a winning a championship. What is even more significant about James however, is the heightened attention he has received off court since he was introduced on the national scene as a young teenager. Ever since high school, he has been featured as a “King,” the “Chosen One,” the “Heir to Michael Jordan,” and the “Second Coming.” In 1996, when Kobe Bryant made the decision to enter the NBA directly after high school, he too received an extensive degree of publicity even outside of sports media. Yet, despite the build-up surrounding his name, Kobe was still portrayed to audiences as a “Boy Wonder.” The media made clear to audiences that while Bryant had incredible talent, and held a promising future, he would have to gain experience and knowledge about the NBA before he could become legendary. LeBron conversely, seems to have been considered legendary from the very beginning. Even when he was in high school he was labeled with nicknames that portrayed him as a larger than life character. While much of the hype that surrounds LeBron James comes from sheer awe of his basketball talents, a lot of it also comes from his status as a celebrity figure. From endorsements alone, LeBron makes about $25 million a year (Thomaselli, “With No Ring”). As a result, much of the public’s perception of LeBron has come from the advertisements by the companies that he represents; advertisements that emphasize his identify as a king. Similar to Kobe, fans of basketball and natives of Ohio are no longer the only ones
keeping tabs on the celebrity basketball player. Now, people throughout the world regularly see images of the King James, in advertisements, billboards and commercials. Last spring, LeBron was even noted as one of three men to ever be featured on the cover of the fashion magazine *Vogue*.

One thing for certain is that LeBron’s image has been carried and re-enforced throughout his career ever since he was in high school. In recent times especially, it becomes more and more apparent that King James is represented as a savior just as much off the court as he is on the court.

**Witness the Heir to the Throne**

An application of the narrative paradigm to the discourse concerning LeBron James will consist of a discussion of select artifacts that when put together uphold the narrative told by the media. Similar to the rebirth narrative of Kobe Bryant, the artifacts used will be centered on the three major time frames that constitute the story. The narrative elements that are presented by the media as being the most significant to the tale are plot, character, setting and audience.

The tale told by the media is one that is very familiar. Unlike the narrative of Kobe Bryant, the narrative of LeBron James does not involve a plotline structured upon a rebirth cycle. As a matter of fact, the narrative is condensed and much simpler. The underlying reason for this is quite simply because LeBron James is younger than Bryant. James has played in the NBA for seven seasons, which is exactly half the amount of seasons as his elder Bryant. Thus, to this moment, LeBron’s narrative has been constructed fairly tightly contrary to Kobe’s more elaborate, substantive and time-spanning tale.
Despite this, LeBron’s narrative is similar to Kobe’s narrative because it is a basic variation of a monomyth that most audiences have also heard before. It can be seen as a combination of two common plot structures that scholars have identified in pop culture. The first contains three elements:

1. A hero of royal birth or distinguished parentage (a god, king, or someone with great power or talent) is conceived or born under unusual circumstances.
2. The hero escapes death in early childhood, is raised by foster parents, and reaches adulthood to seek his destiny.
3. The hero goes on a journey, has many adventures, overcomes a great obstacle or wins a great battle, and marries a princess or is given a great honor. (Martin qtd. in Rybacki and Rybacki 114)

The other plot structure is similar, but is slightly varied and is often found in American tales:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores, the community to its paradisal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Jewett and Lawrence qtd. in Rybacki and Rybacki 114)

**Stage One: Make Way for the Chosen One**

The first section of the narrative is constructed through a *Sports Illustrated* cover article, and two Nike commercials. In these representative artifacts the crisis is established, the hero is introduced, and first major kernel of the plot occurs.
The story begins with a community in crisis. Curiously, the crisis that arrives at the beginning of LeBron’s narrative is reminiscent of a crisis that was established at the start of the Kobe Bryant’s rebirth narrative. The crisis is the official retirement of Michael Jordan from the NBA in 2003. Once he finally retired, many basketball fans wondered if the NBA would ever be the same. He was without a doubt one of, if not the, greatest athletes to ever play the game. In stepping down from his rule over the basketball kingdom, he left an empty throne and a nearly impossible task to any player willing to try and follow in his footsteps. This crisis had been well known to most basketball fans for many years prior to Jordan’s retirement, and the media addressed the concern countless times before LeBron was even in high school. After 1996, much of the basketball world believed Kobe Bryant was the next candidate to fill Michael Jordan’s role. To an extent however, the crisis at this time was not as urgent as it was in 2003. The reason being is that in 1996, Michael Jordan was still employed in the NBA, and fans had significantly less anxiety because they were still able to see the legend in action. However, Jordan did in fact retire in 2003, leaving a sudden vacuum in his place. Although Kobe had been previously considered to fill this void, 2003 also marked the year that he committed his act of pollution. As a result, Bryant’s ethos severely diminished and audiences rejected him as an undeserving candidate who was unworthy of the respect that was awarded to Jordan.

In response to the grave threat faced by the basketball community, the media introduced LeBron James as the NBA’s next player in line destined to embark on the momentous journey to reach Jordan’s throne. In February of 2002, *Sports Illustrated* ran a cover story of the young high school junior. In doing so, *Sports Illustrated* began the tale by introducing the main protagonist, and new found hope, to the rest of the nation. Although James’s name was well known locally and within the basketball world before this time, the *Sports Illustrated* article was
able to lure the rest of the nation into the narrative by featuring LeBron on its front cover as “The Chosen One” [see Figure 7]. The article inside is titled, “Ahead of His Class: Ohio High School Junior LeBron James is so Good He is Mentioned as the Heir to Air Jordan,” and in it LeBron is constructed as the character in the narrative that possesses all of the necessary traits of a hero about to begin a high quest. Grant Wahl, the author of the article describes LeBron as a “spectacularly gifted 6’7”, 225-pound guard…[who] is thought to possess all the elements necessary to do for some apparel company what Jordan did for Nike” (Wahl). He also notes that while LeBron’s talents, “his shooting range, his fluid handle, his disarming explosiveness,” help contribute to his “all-around package,” the one remarkable gift that makes him such a rare player, is his ability to pass (Wahl).

Wahl also portrays LeBron as a hero born under unfortunate or unusual circumstances. In the article, Wahl highlights how LeBron’s youth was characterized by his mother’s financial instability as well as his “nomadic existence and unsettled home life” in Akron, Ohio (Wahl). To demonstrate the toll this has on the young hero, Wahl quotes James “I saw drugs, guns, [and] killings….” (Wahl).

Consequently, LeBron is introduced by Sports Illustrated as the chosen one, born of unusual circumstances, but possessing of a special gift that will help guide him through the difficult journey ahead. His task will be at first to fulfill the heightened expectations of him, and then to become the next Michael Jordan. The kernel or major event that follows the article’s publication is LeBron’s decision to enter the 2003 NBA Draft. Without this action, the rest of the narrative would never occur. He would never embark on the rest of his journey, and he would fail all of those counting on him to restore their faith in professional basketball.
(Figure 7)
In Nike’s commercial, “Book of Dimes,” James’s decision is celebrated, and the audience is instructed to prepare for his arrival. The commercial takes place in a school gymnasium that mimics the inside of a church. Bernie Mac stands in front of the audience as a preacher, with a gospel choir standing behind him. He reads from the “King James Playbook,” that the “Chosen One,” “asked the soul of the game for court vision.” In what follows, LeBron enters the church, dressed in white and dribbling a basketball. As he makes his way down the center aisle, he passes the basketball numerous times, and those that receive the ball from him, are able to perform remarkable tricks. All the while, the gospel choir is singing a joyous hymn that repeats the word “Pass,” and the rest of the church is blissfully clapping and witnessing the glory of the Chosen One. The commercial therefore uses aural and visual elements to highlight the same gift (ability to pass) that is mentioned in the *Sports Illustrated* article. However, it also uses religious elements to further depict James, not just as a hero, but as a messiah. The depiction of James as the Second Coming of Michael Jordan becomes incredibly powerful, because it specifies the hero of the story, and uses additional religious elements with which an audience may identify. The religious connotations might also provide wider acceptance and participation of the narrative, because it appeals to an audience’s sense of good reasons.

In a similar way, Nike’s other commercial, “Chamber of Fear,” points the attention of the audience to the future. It foreshadows the daunting tasks that are in store for the young protagonist, and as such, serves as the narrative’s “page turner.” In the commercial, LeBron is again dressed in white, and labeled as the “Chosen One.” The narrator speaks in Chinese, but the English subtitles that read across the bottom tell of the great test the Chosen One will have to face within the Chamber of Fear. In order to proceed through each room in the Chamber, he has to defeat each one of his greatest fears (personified as a Chinese speaking character) in a game of
one-on-one. In the following scenes, LeBron enters each chamber and defeats hype, temptation, haters, complacency, and the ultimate test, self-doubt.

These two commercials help bring the audience of the message into focus. The *Sports Illustrated* article was written in order to call the attention of the entire nation. However, after LeBron is drafted, the implied or intended, audience for the message becomes those citizens of Cleveland Ohio, who up until this point, have been oppressed by a loosing team. Since the commercials are nationally broadcast, the entire nation serves as the real audience, and may therefore follow the narrative if they so choose.

**Stage 2: Witness His Gifts**

The next stage in the narrative takes place over LeBron’s first three years in the NBA. During this time, it became apparent to both believers and previous non-believers that he did in fact possess the basketball skill that could help him become the next Michael Jordan. As such, the time period is not constituted by one single event. Rather, the action becomes a continuous display of the LeBron’s great talents. The second stage of this story is upheld and best represented through two Nike advertisements that were created as part of a string of the Nike “We Are All Witnesses” Ad Campaign launched in 2005.

In an effort to promote the latest version of the LeBron James basketball sneaker, Nike hung a billboard advertisement near Quickens Loans Arena, the home court of the Cleveland Cavaliers. The billboard is 110 feet tall and 212 feet wide [See Figure 8]. The picture on it is a black and white photograph taken of LeBron in the middle of an authoritative slam dunk (“Now That’s Posterization”). He is in his Cavaliers uniform, and the caption beside him reads, “We Are All Witnesses.” The billboard therefore calls the attention of every single Cleveland citizen
that drives past the advertisement. The billboard created by Nike is incredibly persuasive, because it uses visual elements to position James as a larger than life figure, who has come to save the city of Cleveland from complete destruction.

The other Nike advertisement is much smaller than the billboard, but equally as powerful. It is a wallpaper size picture that was created by Nike to be offered for sale on its website. In the picture, James is neither shown in his uniform, nor with a basketball (“Witness: 5 Years LeBron James Wallpaper”). Instead, he seated upon a throne, adorned in royal robes and jewels [See figure 9]. As he sits, he touches his hand to his chin, as if in deep thought. Surrounding him, are three real lions that lay on a crimson carpet that extends into the backdrop. The picture is filled with royal imagery, but the one object that appears missing is the crown upon his head. This minor but important detail helps to illustrate the importance of the second stage of the narrative. At first glance, both artifacts presented by Nike seem to communicate that the story is over. The one, who was predicted, came and demonstrated his great powers to all of those who witnessed him.

However, the narrative is not finished because he has not yet received his crown. Thus, both advertisements are keeping the audiences involved by calling them to witness his great gifts. If they do so, then they can expect even greater things from him in the future. The advertisements have an extended appeal for Cleveland fans in particular because they as the implied audience, are the ones that will be most rewarded when in fact the King is crowned with an NBA championship.
(Figure 9)
Stage 3: Divinization

The third stage of the narrative takes place over the last two and a half years. As promised, the hero has put on a great display of his gifts and has just about nearly reached his goal of bringing a championship to the citizens of Cleveland. In overcoming the harsh criticisms and high expectations of him throughout his young years in the NBA, he has withstood many of the great tests given to him. However, after two trips to the NBA finals, he has still not fulfilled the prophecy as the Chosen One. In order to be the next Michael Jordan, which is the ultimate task of the hero in the narrative, he must win a championship. Since he has not, the narrative as presented by the media has a restructuring of its narrative elements. The construction of this part of the narrative can be seen through Nike’s second “We Are All Witnesses,” Advertisement Campaign, an image designed as a wallpaper for computer desktops, as well as the cover story of James featured in Dime Magazine in February of 2007. The elements that have been altered are characters, plot and audience. The setting is also introduced as having a key role.

The three artifacts indicate that the plot centered on the familiar hero seems to take a jump, almost as if several pages were missing from the story. Instead of achieving his royal rank as King of the NBA, LeBron James continues his quest to become something much larger, a global icon with divine status. His character is altered. In the Dime Magazine article, Patrick Cassidy highlights the growth of LeBron’s character by quoting Kevin Garnett: “LB is a rare case…he came in taking full advantage of the opportunity… [and] he keeps his nose clean. You gotta have good armour…..He’s humble…he respects people… [and] he’s created a legacy” (qtd. in Cassidy). In addition, new characters are established. The members of LeBron’s marketing company (LRMR) and the Fortune 500 companies with whom he has formed partnerships, are all introduced as members of his royal court. Together, their mission is to
globalize LeBron’s brand (Cassidy). To confirm the hero’s goal, Cassidy uses the words of LeBron himself: “I want to expand. I don’t want to be known just in the U.S. That’s not enough for me” (qtd. in Cassidy).

The kernel of this time period is the opening of the Summer Olympics in Beijing, China on August 8, 2008. If LeBron is made into a global icon by this date, he will have succeeded, and the symbolic reward he will receive to imply his divinization is an Olympic Gold Medal.

Another alteration in the third phase is the introduction of a new setting. While the setting in the earlier stages of the narrative is not seen as an essential element, it now becomes quite important. The background is no longer Ohio, nor even America. Instead, it is the entire world, and it is the stage upon which LeBron is about to build an empire.

Since the tale now takes on a global set, a different audience is also called to participate in the narrative. Now, people from all nations (especially those in China where both the Olympics and LeBron’s new shoe market are located), are called to witness the great event of LeBron’s exaltation.

The changes in the story are constructed through textual elements in Dime Magazine’s article, and through visual elements in both artifacts. In Nike’s second “We Are All Witnesses” campaign that was launched during his first NBA Finals appearance in 2007, a new black and white picture of LeBron was featured along with a commercial that aired on national television (“Witness: 5 Years LeBron James Wallpaper”). The picture is similar to the billboard from 2005, but instead of dunking, James is glorified in his pre-game, Christlike pose, with his arms extended out wide and his head facing the sky [See Figure 10]. In the accompanying commercial, clips of LeBron’s play during the 2007 Playoffs are shown to the accompaniment of the background song “I Shall Be Released,” sung my Marion Williams.
In the wallpaper image, James is in a similar Christ like position, with his arms extended out on both sides [see Figure 11]. However, he is holding a basketball in each hand, and stands with his back facing the viewer (Ruckfulez). He is also shirtless, and his bare skin reveals to the audience the large tattoo that runs across his back that reads, “Chosen One.” The image is particularly befitting for the third stage, because it illustrates the change that has occurred within the protagonist since the beginning of the tale. While the first stage of the narrative similarly uses religious connotations to introduce LeBron’s character as the “Chosen One,” it does so in an ostensibly lighthearted manner. In comparison, the third stage portrays LeBron’s character in a monumental, and even mystical manner. There is no element of humor in these images, and instead James is depicted mighty, all-powerful and immortal.

On the cover of *Dime Magazine*, James is pictured differently, but the effects are relatively the same. The title reads “The World Will Witness: 08/08/08,” with the words in bold black lettering, and the numbers in bold red type [See Figure 12]. James himself is pictured in a sweatshirt with a large hood covering his head, and his hands folded together at his sternum, as if he were in deep prayer. Although the visual images of *Dime* cover, and the previous images are clearly not the same, they nevertheless represent the alterations in the narrative. James is no longer presented as a king, but as godlike figure. To further narrate LeBron’s heavenly ascent to glory, the Nike commercial even adds the aesthetic element of music, through the song “I Will Be Released”. In addition to telling the action of LeBron’s character, the song highlights the potential rewards the audiences will receive for participating in the narrative. It seems to promise that in witnessing the glorification of LeBron, the audiences might find their own sort of religious identification.
WE ARE ALL WITNESSES.
Although these Nike advertisements and the *Dime* cover were published before the major event of the third chapter, the rest of the narrative has been constructed through other media sources. The story continues and leads up to the climax of the plot, on 08/08/08. As the media tells it, LeBron wins his final contest on the global stage. He is at last given his symbolic gold medal, and is finally able to return home with glory, pride and honor. The hero of the narrative therefore comes to the end of his journey, and the story is able to come to a close.

**Satellites**

Similar to the rebirth narrative of Kobe Bryant, the three phases of the LeBron’s story demonstrate the ability of the media to determine which events throughout his career will be the defining elements of its plotline. The media constructs these kernels to be his decision to enter the NBA in 2003 and the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The events that became satellites in the plot are the events that portray LeBron the hero, in a negative light. For example, in his high school years, the controversy that surrounded James regarding the jerseys he accepted from a clothing store was not emphasized by many media sources. Doing so would of course taint his radiant image, especially his image as the self-less savior destined to save the NBA.

Another event that was not highly illuminated by the media was LeBron’s refusal to sign a letter written by his teammate Ira Newble. The letter protested against the events revolving around the Darfur Genocide. Specifically, it urged China, the host of the 2008 Summer Olympics, to use its political influence to help stop the mass extermination in Sudan. Although the event received some publicity, it was not nearly as highlighted as the other moments in his
career. In some articles, James was actually acknowledged for his ability to properly handle political issues.

Some of the most interesting satellites though, are the games that he lost during his appearances in the Playoffs, and especially his defeat in the 2007 NBA Finals. Since he did not win these games, it was impossible for the media to construct a narrative in which he reached the ultimate coronation of an NBA Championship. If he did win a championship in the past two years, then perhaps the narrative would have used these as the kernels, and a completely different plot in the third chapter. However, he did not, and so the media instead featured them as satellites.

It is furthermore curious, that as the number of years in which LeBron fails to attain title ring increases, events that would have previously been regarded as satellites, are now given more importance in the media. Two events that occurred in 2009 seem to illustrate this point. The first incident took place in early June, when the Cavaliers were defeated by the Orlando Magic in the Eastern Conference Playoffs. Once the game had concluded, James stormed off court, and refused to shake hands with the opposing team or speak with the media as he made his way to the locker room. In the following weeks, LeBron’s post-game behavior inspired lengthy discussions from sports commentators on what they believed was the proper etiquette of professional basketball. In his article published in the The Wall Street Journal, “Shaking the Hand that Defeats You,” Matthew Futterman brings to light the differences of opinion that existed over James’s post-game behavior during this time. He notes how some commentators, such as former professional athletes, empathized with James, arguing that there was nothing wrong with his fierce sense of competition. Hall of Famer Bill Walton for instance, spoke his opinion that, “NBA stars are expected to have human reactions to a loss….” He told
interviewers, “‘You’re angry, mad, disappointed, frustrated and embarrassed because you think you’re going to play for a championship….When it doesn’t work out, it’s difficult to say that everything is great’ (qtd. in Futterman). Others, however, did not see James’s frustration as a suitable defense for his lack of manners. As Futterman discusses, criticism of James’s behavior came from a variety of viewers who expressed both a sense of surprise and disappointment with the King. Futterman further writes that Nick Standering, the program director for a YMCA in Ohio, was unsure of how to explain the incident to players in “youth-basketball circles,” who did not understand “‘why he wasn’t shaking hands with the other players’” (Standering qtd. in Futterman). Some audiences displayed concern for LeBron. To illustrate, Futterman draws on Jim Fanin, a sports psychologist who has focused his career on working with “the mental side of athletes, such as Alex Rodriguez....” In the article, Fanin says, “‘you can still be looked as tenacious, unwavering, a closer and a winner, but when you lose you need to be gracious....How you handle loss dictates how you go forward’” (qtd. in Futterman).

The second incident which occurred a month later, involved the confiscation of video tapes that recorded a camper dunking over King James during a pick-up game at the LeBron James Skills Basketball Academy. According to a report on ESPN.com, one of the tapes belonged to videographer and freelancer Ryan Miller. In his interview, it was revealed that Miller had been “filming all day and had his tapes confiscated only after Crawford’s dunk over James” (“Nike Confiscates LeBron”). The tapes were confiscated by Nike representatives who were helping to run the camp. According to an alternative article written by Jemele Hill for ESPN, “LeBron’s Action Lack’s Grace,” the Nike representatives who were questioned about their action reported that they took Miller’s tapes because “video-taping pick-up games after hours is against policy” (qtd. in “LeBron’s Action Again Lacks Grace”). As sports critics
articulated, Nike’s reasoning would have been suitable as a defense, until Miller alternatively revealed that he had been informed “earlier in the day by public-relations that he could videotape the game” (“LeBron’s Action Again Lacks Grace”).

The events in 2009 are noteworthy because they exemplify instances when the nature of LeBron’s character was clearly questioned. The events were publicized in the media more so than the previously mentioned satellites, and were even regarded by some media outlets as minor controversies. During these weeks critics labeled James as “immature,” “Prima Donna” and “King Baby.” In July of 2009, Jemel Hill wrote an article for ESPN, titled “LeBron’s Action Lacks Grace,” and in a discussion about the two recent controversies she reflected that, “lately, it seems as if James doesn’t realize ‘King,’ is just a nickname and not an official title. He exposed himself as a sore loser against Orlando in the Eastern finals.” While Hill acknowledged him as “perhaps the most talented player in the NBA,” she also said that James “needs to remember the most appreciated kings are those that routinely exercise graciousness.”

At the same time, the events were not publicized to the extent that they significantly altered James’s image. Although they reflect possible character faults, the events are not presented as being definitively despicable. In comparison, Kobe Bryant’s act of pollution was considered to be shameful, and his narrative was constructed accordingly. While the media highlights LeBron’s minor controversies to a greater degree than other satellites, it did not reflect on them as kernels, and therefore critical moments within his career.

In an analysis of the events during LeBron’s career that are framed by the media into his narrative, it is important to keep in mind that he is still relatively young for a professional athlete. Each year he continues to play phenomenal basketball while setting records and advancing the Cavaliers far into the playoffs. He may win a championship, or he may encounter a situation that
severely tarnishes his image. Regardless of which path his career takes, it is possible and very likely that the media will reconstruct the message that it presents to audiences.

**Discussion**

Similar to Kobe’s narrative of rebirth, LeBron’s narrative has a plot that is already very familiar to most audiences. Thus, it is easily identifiable as well as believable. The tale as has a logical beginning, middle and conclusion, and the events that occur are likely to be found in any other story with a similar plot structure.

The character of the story is also recognizable. The terms used to label LeBron James, such as “King,” “Chosen One,” “His Highness,” and “Second Coming,” are names of figures that most audiences have already heard of before. In using these labels, the media is able to persuade the audiences that the character of LeBron has all of the positive traits of other figures with these names. This becomes even more vital for the story’s acceptance because it appeals to an audience’s sense of good reasons. LeBron is depicted as an innocent prodigy, coming from a difficult youth, who will one day be the savior of the NBA. His rare gift of court vision has also established him as a self-less hero. In a converse manner, the media incorporates the occurrences that might spoil James’s likeness, as the insignificant satellites within the plot. As a result, it is able to attribute James’s character with positive values and make him worthy of an audience’s attention.

Although the setting is not strongly emphasized within the narrative, it is still communicated with successful appeal. The reason the setting of the story is engaging for the audience is because it includes the real life rhetorical situation of the narrative’s context. An audience is more likely to believe the story, because the events of the plot are current events
occurring either within or very close to the time frame in the narrative. Similar to Kobe’s rebirth narrative, setting in LeBron’s narrative becomes critically important in the third stage with the advent of the 2008 Olympics. In his narrative, LeBron’s goal was communicated as becoming a global emperor. He believed that his success at achieving this goal would be made manifest when he traveled to China and it would be exhibited to the rest of the world through his popularity with the Chinese people. To an extent, this became true, and LeBron was one of the more highly celebrated athletes that were present for the games. Yet as it was previously scrutinized, LeBron for all his victory did not quite achieve his stated goal. When Team USA arrived in Beijing, Kobe Bryant was instead the most praised athlete of all. While LeBron’s ethos remained overshadowed, Kobe was dubbed by the sports media as the new emperor.

LeBron’s perceived sense of failure however, did not endure once Team USA returned to the United States. LeBron’s name was highly regarded prior to the Olympics and continued to be so after his return from China. He was welcomed back by his fans in America and was celebrated after all, for assisting in the victory of a gold medal for their country. Soon afterwards, the members of Team USA parted ways to prepare with their league teams for the upcoming NBA season. Once the season was underway, the home team loyalties of fans, led to the dimming of the spotlight upon Kobe, and a leveling out of the attention that he received in August during the Olympics.

Notwithstanding LeBron’s present status as a favorite among basketball fans, he still has not won a championship with the Cleveland Cavaliers since he entered the NBA in 2003. Consequently, although he may win a title in the future, for now he is not accepted as the next Michael Jordan. Since this was the original crisis faced by the community as the narrative began, the audience has been left with a somewhat disappointing conclusion. While the media
did its best in altering the narrative’s elements in the third chapter to make it plausible, audiences are still expecting LeBron to win a championship. It is evident from the responses to LeBron’s victory in China, that an Olympic Gold Medal does not provide circumstantial reasoning for most audiences to accept him as a global icon. In order to fulfill the promises of the narrative, LeBron must attain NBA titles. Since he has not, the tale constructed by the media may be deemed incomplete.
Chapter Six

Game Over

Implications

It is nothing new to the public knowledge that the media employs various techniques to influence perceptions of celebrities, athletes and political figures. Some events are publicized, while others are not. Some public figures have their worst flaws highlighted by the media, while others have most positive attributes celebrated to the high heavens. Yet, constructing the careers of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James as familiar tales of mythological heroes is dangerous for several reasons. First, the stories may be easily confused with reality. Since the narrative elements, setting, character and plot are consistent with the present times, the audience may become lost within the tale told by the media and what is actually happening behind the articles and advertisements. In addition, Kobe and LeBron the athletes may also lose their sense of realism. One of the most interesting ways to analyze the entanglement of the athletes within their own narratives is their body art. Both athletes have tattoos on their bodies that are highly symbolic and indicative of the roles they play within their narratives. As it was seen in the wallpaper image of the third stage of LeBron’s narrative, LeBron has a large tattoo stretched across his back that reads, “Chosen One.” Yet, he has even more tattoos covering the rest of his body. His skin is branded with numerous motivational verses as well as the names of family members. More striking though, James has a crowned lion head on his arm, the word “Witness” on his leg, and the words “Gifted Child” on his chest. Even his car is symbolic of his role, as the license plate on the back reads, “King of Ak.” Kobe conversely does not have as many tattoos as James, however, he does have a highly visible design on his skin that speaks events presented
in his tale. On his arm, just below his shoulder, there is a large a crown with angel wings above the name of his wife Vanessa. Then, beneath her name, there is a verse from Psalm XXVII (Harris). Although society recognizes tattoos on professional athletes today as standard, Kobe’s are tattoos are distinguishable because of the timing that they were branded onto his body. Interestingly, they appeared on his skin during the offseason in 2003, in the months following his arrest and sexual assault charges. In Kobe’s rebirth narrative, it was presented by Nike through the 2005-2006 “Love Me or Hate Me Campaign,” that he underwent purification through means of intense basketball training. However, with the knowledge of Kobe’s tattoos, it appears as if Bryant had enacted his mortification much earlier than audiences were aware; and quite literally, his enactment came through the self-inflicted punishment of a needle. Reflecting back upon the matter, it may safely be assumed that Kobe was genuinely remorseful for the pain that he caused his wife Vanessa by his act of adultery. Nevertheless, it is curious to wonder whether or not Kobe would have branded himself in such a way if the media had not made his scandal so public? While the audience may never know for certain, the question does invite viewers to become critical interpreters of sports media coverage.

The other point to note about the potential hazards of the narratives is that they do not require extensive action of the audience in order to participate. Whereas other narratives might instruct their audiences to behave in a morally conflicting way (for instance agree with a war effort), these narratives simply ask the audiences to engage their senses. In the narrative of Kobe Bryant, audience members are allowed to collectively recognize Bryant’s act of pollution and then judge him accordingly with their sense of good reasons. In LeBron’s narrative, audiences are specifically called to witness simply, James’s glory. For both audiences, these tasks are not highly demanding, which makes it easier for them to accept the stories as true. Though in doing
so, audiences risk overlooking the satellites of the stories, and therefore ignoring the instances that could potentially reveal the true character of the athletes as they exist in real life beyond the narratives.

A final implication to note addresses the artistic presentation of the narratives. Aesthetic elements such as religious connotations, background music and symbolic images in both narratives were alluring and highly captivating for audiences. For the most part, these artistic constructions were also subtle. From such an observation, it may be generalized that aesthetic elements serve as persuasive tools which can significantly alter the way a message is communicated. Because of this, untrained audiences may not even realize their judgments are being influenced as the narratives are presented to them.

**The Great Debate: Kobe or LeBron?**

It is difficult to analyze the effects of narratives on such a large audience. Since the rhetorical situations have taken place within recent times, it is impossible to evaluate the long term ramifications of the stories constructed by the media. One way to determine the success of the narratives upon the present audiences may be to consider the television viewer ratings of Kobe and LeBron’s NBA games. The revenue generated for both their home teams and their respective endorsement companies might also be a mode of evaluating the impact of the narratives. The issue brought forth through these particular evaluations, however, is that James and Bryant each have been the source of an outlandish amount of revenue for those who are invested in them. An alternate method is to determine which player has a higher ranking in jersey sales. As it was illustrated in stage two of Kobe’s rebirth narrative, Bryant largely fell out of favor with the American public. As a result, the number his jerseys that were sold in the year
following dropped dramatically. In his *New York Times*, article titled “The Collapse of Kobe,” Howard Beck cites from SportScan INFO, a private sports retail data provider, in order to demonstrate the link between Kobe’s tumultuous summer in 2003 and his jersey sales in the following year:

In 2002, 3 versions of Bryant’s jersey placed among the top 20 in sales, a combined total of 312,665 jerseys….In 2003, that figure plummeted to 89,831 before rebounding to 136,964 in the following year….During the four-week holiday shopping period, Bryant had no jerseys in the top 20. (Beck)

Hence, the number of jerseys sold may directly correlate with an audiences’ perception of the player. From 2004, Kobe’s jersey sales increased each year, and according to the National Basketball Association, his jersey amazingly, returned to the number one spot by the summer of 2007 (“Lakers’ Bryant Ends Season Atop NBA’s Most Popular Jersey”). If the players’ ranking in jersey sales is the determining method of evaluation, then Kobe’s rebirth narrative would prove to be better of the two received by audiences. Not only did Bryant’s jersey rank number one in 2007, it ranked number one in 2009 and again in 2010. At the same time, LeBron’s jersey sales were not at all far below Bryant’s with a ranking of number three in 2007, number two in 2009 and number two again in 2010. From the statistics, it is rather evident the two players are presently in close contention as the greatest player in the NBA. In fact, the “Kobe versus LeBron” debate is one of the most widely discussed topics currently existing in the sports media. The comparisons made between the two players on sports shows, in newspaper columns and on fan blog sites seem to be endless and without resolution. In the past two years, the debate has exploded as many fans argue which player they believe is more talented. Perhaps more importantly, they argue over which of the players better suits the role as the heir to Michael
Jordan. Especially with the 2010 NBA playoffs well underway, many basketball fans are anticipating and hoping for a Lakers versus Cavaliers matchup in the NBA Finals that is scheduled to take place in June of 2010. Many believe that the winner of such a contest would be the answer to the debate.

To be certain, Kobe Bryant and LeBron James are both considered as arguably the best players in the NBA today, and two of the greatest players of all time. Judging strictly by their numbers and talent, it would be impossible to distinguish in the present period, which player is truly the better of the two. The debate is a matter of personal preference and contextual circumstance which exists outside the realm of communication scholarship.

Bryant and James may, however, be differentiated through an analysis that is strictly based upon the narratives which have been presented in discourse surrounding their careers. In comparing their two tales, the crisis that appeared to surround both characters was the retirement of Michael Jordan from the NBA. Jordan is considered a legend in the basketball world and by stepping down from his throne in the NBA, “His Airness,” left an open seat for the next great player in line. Out of all the talented players that have entered the NBA since Jordan’s official retirement in 2003, Kobe Bryant and LeBron James have been the two most commonly considered contenders for the legendary title. To answer this debate, the analysis scrutinized the narratives to determine their probability, fidelity and ultimate success. Both narratives presented by the media utilized familiar plotlines with a logical beginning, middle and end. The events in Bryant’s and James’s career were framed so that events which better supported the structure of their respective plots became the decisive kernels that dictated the direction of their tales. When it was necessary the events that did not support the plotline were constructed as insignificant
satellites. Both narratives additionally incorporated powerful aesthetic elements which made them entertaining and persuasive for their audiences.

Although the two narratives presented by the sports media had these positive traits in common, they differed in several ways. In Kobe’s rebirth narrative, the protagonist committed an act of pollution which was deemed so despicable by the audience, he was dissociated from society. If Kobe did not purify the guilt as a result of his act, then his narrative would have failed the audience. However, the media communicated that Kobe did in fact purify his guilt through mortification, and the audience was then able to accept his rebirth in the third stage. In the third stage, the media represented Kobe’s rebirth as a triumphant transformation into a transcending figure who now receives respect, esteem and adoration across the globe.

Kobe’s rebirth narrative may be considered additionally appealing to audiences because the protagonist overcame adversity, obstacle, criticism and alienation in order to return to his place at the top of the NBA. Although Bryant’s character was cast out of society, he determinedly worked himself back into the collectivity. While perhaps his act of pollution was disgraceful to the community, it was also real and identifiable by a majority of audiences. Even though some audiences still did not favor him once he was reborn in the third stage, they nevertheless could not ignore the perseverance he displayed in order to rise again. The rhetoric of rebirth proved to be conducive to a plot structure which appealed to the audiences’ sense of good reasons, as well as its cultural respect for purifying faults in the past in order to press forward in the future.

In LeBron’s narrative, the protagonist did not commit an act of pollution, and in reality, remained innocent for the duration of the narrative. Yet, as the analysis of LeBron’s narrative concluded, his tale was considered by audiences as incomplete because he did not solve the
original crisis of the community. The original crisis was to successfully step in the place of Jordan as the next King of the NBA. Although the narrative persuasively presented King James as the “The Chosen One,” destined to answer the cries of the community, he never attained his coronation, which could only be realized through the accomplishment of Championship titles. Therefore, according to the narrative exactly as it is presented through the media, King James is not really King James, because he has not been crowned with an NBA title. Until he is, he remains the “Chosen One,” which is merely an heir, or a prince. He is doubtlessly gifted however, and as a result, the future continues to bode well for him as he has the time ahead to accomplish his destiny.

Conclusion

This analysis indicates that the narrative paradigm can provide a useful approach to examining the messages communicated through the media. The media utilized both narrative and aesthetic elements to carefully construct a story around the careers of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James. It used two different but equally recognizable plot structures that made both narratives engaging for their audiences. In portraying the careers of Kobe Bryant and LeBron James as the tales’ of familiar heroes, the media was able to present narratives with admirable traits that could appeal to the audience’s sense of good reasons. In addition, it took advantage of a fictional setting that was similar to the historical-social context of the time. The media furthermore, decisively emphasized the particular events in the athletes’ careers which would best support the plots of their respective narratives. In the telling of the stories, the media also made use of artistic elements to further enhance plausibility. In combining all of these elements,
the sports media was able to create two inviting narratives to tell the careers of two celebrated professional basketball players.

In determining the better of the two narratives, the original crisis and resulting conclusions were taken into consideration. Kobe Bryant’s rebirth narrative proved to be the more successful construction, because the protagonist solved his crisis of pollution and was accepted into society at the closing of the tale. LeBron’s narrative was less compelling because the protagonist did not solve the original crisis of the community. As a result, his narrative was determined to be somewhat fragmentary at its conclusion and therefore deficient.

The entertaining aspect of applying a narrative paradigm to current sports discourse is that the circumstances are always changing and messages are always evolving. Kobe Bryant and LeBron James are still employed in the NBA, and continue to dazzle the professional basketball court, attract fans and spark debate among sports critics. LeBron in particular, is young and has more years left in his career than Bryant. Although he has accomplished much, he has not won a championship, which is a source of criticism from many sports analysts. However, no one denies his talent and the promising future he still has ahead of him. Bryant on the other hand is likely approaching the end of his career. However, throughout his time in the NBA he has set records, overcome controversy and achieved four championship titles. Regardless of where the future takes both players, the media will without a doubt continue to report on the events of their careers. In order to avoid the potential dangers of believing a narrative presented by the media at face value, an audience should be more educated about the subtle rhetorical devices that are often used by the media to communicate such events. With a proper understanding of the narrative paradigm, audiences can accurately make their own judgments about current dealings and refrain from converging reality with a well constructed story.
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