

Virtue In Action

“The Real American Idols: How Do We Choose?”

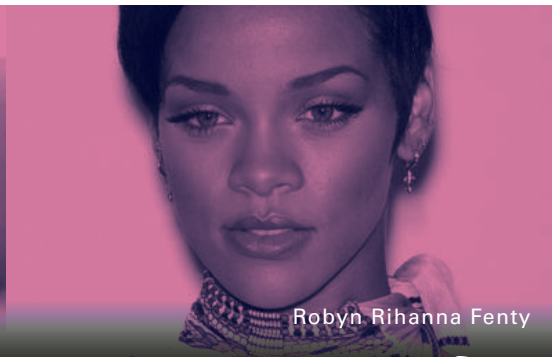
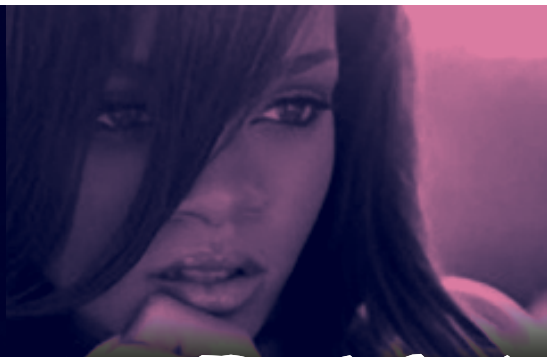
VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



Chris Brown

PRUDENCE: thinking through the implications of our actions and decisions



Robyn Rihanna Fenty

ROLE MODEL: a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others



Michael Phelps

IDOL: object of excessive adoration



Jennifer Hudson

CELEBRITIES AS ROLE MODELS AND IDOLS

Teen R&B singer Chris Brown, and Olympic champ Michael Phelps are no strangers to the spotlight. But the reasons these two young men received intense media coverage in recent months are causes for concern. Brown, set to perform at the 2009 Grammy Awards separately from Rihanna, instead found himself talking to Los Angeles police about an alleged incident of domestic violence involving his girlfriend, fellow R&B artist, Rihanna. Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps apologized after photos of him smoking marijuana surfaced in a tabloid.

Reaction to these developments was swift from fans, teammates and sponsors. After all, each of these public figures is considered an **idol** and / or a **role model**, the subject of frenzy and excitement wherever they go. Young people look up to them, and their supporters read eagerly about every move they make. But should that be the case? Should Brown be viewed simply as a talented singer, and Phelps simply as an exceptional athlete?

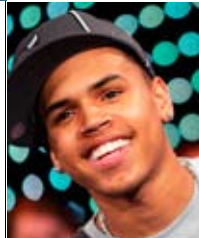
Brown and Phelps' fallouts raise deeper issues for us to address. How do we as a society determine our role models and idols? Are the elements we use to assign this status wise? What are the differences between looking to another person as a role model versus idolizing them? And, if we think it is beneficial to have role models and / or idols, what should be our expectations for their actions, both within and outside of their professions?



Teen Dream Turned Nightmare

The R&B singer-and-dancer with the gregarious smile and the Barbados beauty were the talk of the tabloids, a musical power couple that never publicly admitted their relationship. Rihanna, 20, and Brown, 19, were both at the top of the popular charts and seemed, perhaps to their fans, to have it all. Brown – also emerging as a movie star – has been the object of excessive fan adoration. The popular performer—and heir apparent to Usher—is the recipient of several Teen Choice Awards and was even nominated for a BET Image Award.

But on Grammy night on Feb. 8, Brown's public image changed. Police reported that Brown was being investigated for beating his celebrity girlfriend while the couple was parked in a Lamborghini on a Los



Angeles street. Brown has not yet been officially charged in the alleged incident, though his public image certainly has plummeted in the court of public opinion.

Wrigley immediately dropped the artist from its chewing gum commercials, as did the popular "Got Milk" campaign. Several radio stations across the country pledged to yank Brown's hits from their playlists.

Since the incident, Brown has apparently taken some

responsibility for his alleged actions though he is mum about the events of Grammy night. “Words cannot begin to express how sorry and saddened I am over what transpired,” he said through a media statement a week after the scandal broke. “I am seeking the counseling of my pastor, my mother and other loved ones, and I am committed, with God’s help, to emerging a better person.”

Forgiveness has not been forthcoming for Brown to date, though some celebrities have defended him publicly. Rapper/producer Kanye West blurted out during a VH1 “Storytellers” performance, “Can’t we give Chris [Brown] a break?” Bow Wow, a rapper and friend of Brown’s, urged fans to remember that the 19-year-old “Kiss Kiss” singer is a person that should be admired for his talent more than anything. “We’re not perfect,” Bow Wow told MTV.com of musical artists. “We put our pants on the same way everybody else puts their pants on.”

These statements bring up the issue of whether it’s right for fans to view another person as an idol. An **idol** is someone who is adored to an excessive degree. Was it **wise** for fans to view an entertainment personality as an idol, admiring his or her every move, if they really don’t know that person’s character, and how they will respond to all of the different situations and pressures life will present? Or should fans simply view someone with exceptional talent as a role model?

A **role model** is a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others. However, many are questioning whether Brown should even be viewed as a role model. Assuming Brown did beat Rihanna, is it right to say someone is a role model exclusively for their talents, even if they demonstrate significant failures elsewhere such as a complete lack of **respect** for another person? Or, are we being too harsh in judging others if we say any significant failure in someone’s life excludes him or her from being a role model for his/her exceptional talent or achievement?

Olympic-sized Letdown?

There is little doubt that Michael Phelps is a stellar

athlete. He holds 14 Olympic Gold Medals for swimming, the most of any athlete in history. Phelps, 23, was named 2008 Sportsman of the Year by Sports Illustrated. But on Feb. 2, Phelps faced a problem his athletic **proWess** could not help him escape. The swimming star had been photographed smoking marijuana at a party, and the photos were sold to a British tabloid, which published them. The next day, Phelps released an apology, during which he acknowledged the accuracy of the photos.

“I engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment,” Phelps said in a statement released to the Associated Press and posted on Facebook. “I’m 23 years old and despite the successes I’ve had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner people have come to expect from me.”

Phelps also promised never to act in that way again in his statement, but his **integrity** is in question because the bong incident is not his first run-in with substance abuse. Four years ago, Phelps – underage for drinking – was charged with Driving Under the Influence (DUI). In both cases, the swimming star demonstrated a lack of **prudence** and **responsibility** by using controlled substances. In the case of the DUI, he also endangered other drivers and pedestrians with reckless behavior.

Also, in terms of his youth-as-an-excuse defense, some in the media question the role his age actually played in his most recent mistake. “He reminded us of his age, I suppose, because he’s supposed to receive a free pass until he’s 25,” wrote Rick Maese of the Baltimore Sun, pointing out that Phelps also cited his age – then, 19—in his previous DUI apology. “Or perhaps 30? Or maybe when he’s collecting Social Security?”

Doubtless, Phelps’ apology appeased some critics. The International Olympics Committee accepted it, though Phelps was suspended from competitive swimming for three months. He also retained the support of a number of his high-paying sponsors, Speedo, watchmaker Omega and Subway. Omega called the incident a “non-issue.”



Phelps did lose two motivational speaking engagements in Calgary and Vancouver, Canada, and Kellogg's decided to pull Phelps from its cereal brand advertising. "We originally built the relationship with Michael, as well as the other Olympic athletes, to support our association with the U.S. Olympic team," a Kellogg's spokeswoman said in a statement published in Advertising Age. "Michael's most recent behavior is not consistent with the image of Kellogg's. His contract expires at the end of February and we have made a decision not to extend his contract."

Other young fans, specifically some swimmers in Virginia, also expressed disappointment in Phelps' actions. "You just need to be careful, Sean Cudahy, a high school swimmer who lives in Virginia, told WCAV-TV, in Charlottesville, Virginia. "When you swim for a team, or represent a school or any type of organization, and you've become such an icon, you represent them anywhere you go." Again, the Phelps incident brings up the issues of what standards we should have for our role models, and what **responsibilities** major sports and entertainment personalities should have when they have achieved this status.

A Real Role Model

Jennifer Hudson, of "The Secret Lives of Bees" and "American Idol" fame, shines a bit differently than stars like Brown or Phelps. Though she is a young woman with an acclaimed singing voice, she does not seem to attract the kind of media attention and scrutiny of the other two men. In fact, the majority of attention directed at Hudson was during what may be the most difficult thing anyone can face—the death of close family members.

Last year, Hudson's mother, brother and nephew were gunned down. Her sister's estranged husband, William Balfour, has been charged with the killings. Hudson, who was extremely close to her family, stayed out of the spotlight for several months and has only recently begun to perform and tour.

Hudson has always been considered a wholesome role model, admired mostly for her singing talent and acting abilities in



her Oscar-winning "Dream Girls" role. Hudson has publicly stated she will not take roles that compromise her Christian principles, proving it and maintaining her **integrity** by turning down a \$3 million-deal for a Warner Brothers film which would have required nudity. Hudson also has shunned the kind of Red Carpet partying that has embarrassed other young stars from Britney Spears to Lindsay Lohan.

There is no telling what the future holds for Hudson, or how her path might change, but it is worthwhile to consider that she just might be the right kind of model for young people. Hudson is admired for her talent and **perseverance** in moving forward with her career in the face of personal tragedy. Because she keeps her profile low in Hollywood, fans know her better for what she does on the stage rather than off of it.

Should We Stop Stargazing?

Major media personalities need to realize that the same media that gives them the exposure to earn incredible fame and fortune will also make their fans aware of aspects of their lives that they will have to account for – to be responsible for. And we as fans also have a **responsibility**, to determine what standards we as individuals will adopt in conferring the status of role model to any celebrity. Is it acceptable to admire individuals like Brown and Phelps as role models for their talent and work ethic, but perhaps not as idols? Or do acts of irresponsibly and harm disqualify them even as role models? These are important questions that we have to answer for ourselves.

Vocabulary

Idol: object of excessive adoration

Role model: a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others

Prudence: thinking through the implications of our actions and decisions

Respect for others: acknowledging the dignity and value of all other persons

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable, pursuing excellence

Integrity: steadfast adherence to a moral or ethical code
scathing: bitterly severe

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, understanding or common sense and insight; the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

Prowess: exceptional or superior ability, skill, or strength

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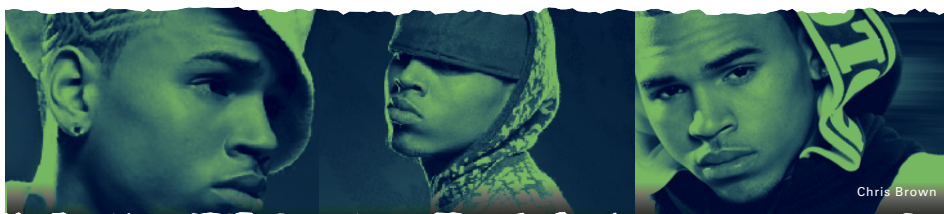
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Highlighted Virtues:

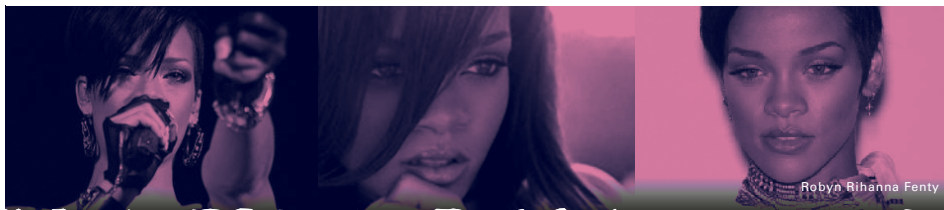
Prudence, Respect for others, Responsibility, Integrity, Wisdom

Lesson Goals:

- Encourage examination of the present status of role models and idols in our society
- Challenge students to examine their own criteria for choosing their role models, and to consider whether viewing someone as an idol is ever appropriate
- Challenge students to apply these concepts to the recent incidences involving Phelps and Brown
- Develop understanding of the virtues of wisdom, prudence, responsibility and integrity
- Encourage students to seek these virtues out in role models



PRUDENCE: thinking through the implications of our actions and decisions



ROLE MODEL: a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others



IDOL: object of excessive adoration



Discussion Question Options:

1. What events have recently occurred in the lives of celebrities that have people questioning their status as role models and idols?
2. How did you view Phelps and Brown previous to these incidences, as role models and / or as idols?
3. What are the differences between a role model and idol? Do you think in life we should have idols, if yes, under what circumstances?
4. What responsibilities do you think celebrities should have when their fame and success place them in the roles of being role models and even idols? Is it right for fans and society to place famous people in the role of role models and / or idols?
5. How have Brown and Phelps handled the present controversies? Let's reread



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from the lesson their statements and discuss for each case individually, whether you think they have taken enough responsibility for their actions?

6. How have sponsors reacted to the alleged activities of Brown and the admitted wrong-doing of Phelps? Do you agree with those reactions?
7. How do you think fans have reacted to the alleged actions of Brown and admitted actions of Phelps? Do you agree with these reactions?
8. What qualifications do you think are required for someone to be a role model? Is it enough for them to be exceptionally skilled in a certain way, or are there character traits that you think are also important for someone to possess to be a role model?
9. How would you define integrity? Give examples of individuals living with integrity and not living with integrity from this lesson, and from the lives of other major media personalities.
10. In apologizing for his actions, Phelps said, "I'm 23 years old and despite the successes I've had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner people have come to expect from me." Do you think that it is right for Phelps to use the word "youthful" as part of the explanation for his actions. Is a statement like this harmful in that it seems to imply that doing drugs is an expected part of being "youthful", or is it simply a realistic statement of the type of mistakes that young people tend to make?
11. What challenge did Jennifer Hudson face last year? What aspects of her life make her a good role model?
12. Who are other good role models in our society, famous or everyday people we encounter in our lives, and what makes them good role models?

Journal Writing Options:

1. Name a celebrity or someone in your everyday life whom you admire as a role model, and describe why you admire them. Is it because of his or her talent, a cause he or she supports, his or her general attitude, and / or character traits? Now, explain what type of

action would disqualify him or her from being a role model for you. In addition, describe an action that you would disagree with, but you would still view him or her as a role model.

2. Do you have an everyday hero (relative, friend, local official, teacher, coach) you know and admire as a role model? Explain who this person is and what skills and/or traits he or she possesses that makes him or her a role model for you. Do you think a role model you know is more or less powerful than a celebrity? Why or why not?

Extended Learning Activities:

1. Ask students to pick a person they personally know and admire, then present a short speech or write a short paper on why this person serves as a positive role model for them and others.
2. Stage a great debate. Organize the class into 4 teams for two debates. The first debate will examine the question of whether Brown and Phelps should still be viewed as role models. The second debate will examine the question of whether fans should look to celebrities as role models. Each side should site specific examples of celebrities succeeding and failing as role models, incorporate their own criteria for what traits make a good role model and present any other views they deem important.

Internet Resources:

"Brown's Career Downward Spiral" (Extra TV): http://extratv.warnerbros.com/2009/02/browns_career_downward_spiral.php

"Chris Brown, Rihanna and the Image Problem" (L.A. Times): <http://www.latimes.com/business/custom/admark/la-et-chrisbrown16-2009feb16,0,1330443.story>

"A-Rod, Phelps Old Enough to Know Better" (Times Herald Record Online): <http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090215/COMM/902150316/-1/NEWS>

"Sports has Worse Drug Problems than Michael Phelps" (Baltimore Sun): <http://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/olympics/bal-sp.maese03feb03,0,6468704.column>

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