

5-2023

## Demigod and Delinquent: Percy Jackson and the American Teenager

Katie Weber

Follow this and additional works at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/honors\\_theses](https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Weber, Katie, "Demigod and Delinquent: Percy Jackson and the American Teenager" (2023). *Honors Theses*. 912.

[https://aquila.usm.edu/honors\\_theses/912](https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/912)

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu), [Jennie.Vance@usm.edu](mailto:Jennie.Vance@usm.edu).

Demigod and Delinquent: Percy Jackson and the American Teenager

by

Katie Weber

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

May 2023



Approved by:

---

Eric L. Tribunella, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor,  
School of Humanities

---

Matthew Casey, Ph.D., Director,  
School of Humanities

---

Sabine Heinhorst, Ph.D., Dean  
Honors College

## ABSTRACT

Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*, the first novel in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, has achieved tremendous success with adolescent audiences nationwide since its original publication in 2005. Despite the widespread success of the books, the critical conversation about the novel and subsequent series remains fairly sparse. The existing critical literature on the series addresses its mythological aspects and adolescents' reactions to the novel but does not analyze Percy's status as an adolescent or what the novel suggests about adolescents as a whole through its portrayal of Percy.

This thesis first provides an overview of the history of adolescence as a concept and the ways in which American adolescents are stereotyped due to this complex history. Using this framework, I analyze how Percy conforms to, breaks from, or otherwise complicates our ideas of what lies at the core of the contemporary American adolescent. While Percy may be a stereotypical adolescent in some respects, he also frequently deviates from what many consider "typical" adolescent behavior. Through its portrayal of Percy and his quest to retrieve Zeus's stolen lightning bolt, I argue, *The Lightning Thief* suggests that stereotypical traits of adolescents which are typically described as "negative" actually constitute their greatest strengths, and that until adults are able to cast aside their preconceived notions of adolescents, we may never be able to see them for who they truly are.

**Keywords:** Percy Jackson, adolescents, teenagers, history of adolescence, *The Lightning Thief*, demigod

## DEDICATION

To Caleb—it only seems right to dedicate this thesis to you. I recently came across a text from you saying that you would love to read it one day. I hope that wherever you are, you are as proud of me as I always have been and always will be of you. Thank you for always being my cheerleader. I miss you more than words can say.

To Macy, Isabel, Natalie, and Annie—I am forever indebted to you for your friendship and love. Thank you for always being there for me and for making me laugh so hard I cry nearly every time we talk. I am so incredibly grateful to know each of you. Through all the hardship we have faced these past few months, you have made my life so much brighter. I love you always.

Lastly, but certainly not least, to Mom, Dad, and Josh—how do I even put into words how much I love and appreciate you? The support, love, joy, and laughter you add to my life is unquantifiable. Nothing I do would be possible without you, and I hope you know just how much I love you. You are my rock.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I must first thank my advisor, Dr. Eric Tribunella, who I will very likely be thanking until the end of time for his kindness, understanding, reassurance, and seemingly unending wisdom throughout this process. Thank you for believing in me and for reassuring me in moments when I did not believe in myself. I am so grateful and honored to have been able to work with you on this project.

I must also thank the faculty and staff at the Honors College for their support throughout not only this process but the entirety of my undergraduate career. Particular thanks are due to Jaide Hollingsworth and Kyle Ethridge for all that they have done and continue to do for both me and the Honors College as a whole. You are the backbone of the Honors community.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II: CRITICAL CONVERSATION .....	4
CHAPTER III: CRITICAL FRAMEWORK.....	7
A Brief History of Teenagers and Adolescence .....	7
Who Is the “American Adolescent” Now? .....	9
CHAPTER IV: PORTRAYALS OF ADOLESCENCE IN <i>THE LIGHTNING THIEF</i> ...	12
Bad Reputation.....	12
“I <i>am</i> Impertinent”: Defiance and Impertinence as Power .....	15
Respecting Authority: A Two-Way Street.....	18
Unabashedly Emotional: Vulnerability, Masculinity, and Peer Pressure .....	21
Modernity and Myth: Percy’s Selflessness and Heroism .....	26
CONCLUSION: SEEING THROUGH THE MIST.....	31
REFERENCES .....	35

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* has achieved tremendous success since its initial release in 2005. It is the first of the Percy Jackson and the Olympians quintet, which has remained on the New York Times Bestseller list for over 600 weeks ("Children's Series"). The initial series has since been followed by the Heroes of Olympus and Trials of Apollo series, each with five books as well. In 2022, Riordan announced that he would begin writing another series from Percy's perspective, beginning where the Heroes of Olympus series left off ("Nearly a Decade"). *The Lightning Thief* itself has inspired a graphic novel, adapted in 2010 by Robert Venditti, and a film based on the novel was released that same year. The book has even inspired a musical, *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical*, which made its Broadway debut in September of 2019 (Van Syckle). Bookstores across the United States have held day camps and summer camps inspired by Camp Half-Blood (Adler). After the film adaptation's poor reception amongst fans of the novel and even Riordan himself, who had no creative control over the project, it was announced in 2020 that Riordan would work with Disney+ to adapt the novel into a live-action television series ("Percy Jackson, at Last!"). The first season of the show will draw from *The Lightning Thief*, with each additional season adapting the next book in the series.

*The Lightning Thief* tells the story of Perseus "Percy" Jackson, a twelve-year-old boy from New York who has bounced from school to school due to "disciplinary issues." After a field trip gone awry during which Percy learns his math teacher had been one of the Furies from Greek myth in disguise, Percy completes a treacherous journey to Camp Half-Blood, where demigods are trained and kept safe from the monsters of the outside

world, but his mother is kidnapped along the way by Hades. Upon his arrival at camp, Percy learns that he is a demigod—his absent father was a member of the Greek pantheon. After Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, claims Percy as his son and a thief steals Zeus’s master lightning bolt, Percy finds himself accused of the theft and must set off on a quest to clear his name. Percy receives a prophecy from the camp’s oracle to guide his quest, learning that he must head to Hollywood to confront Hades about the missing bolt. Hoping to save his mother along the way, Percy sets off across America with his two companions: Grover, a friend from school revealed to be a satyr sent to ensure Percy’s safety, and Annabeth, a daughter of Athena itching to go on a quest of her own.

Throughout their journey, the trio faces monsters from Greek myth—Medusa, the Chimera, and Echidna, to name a few. Percy’s reputation as a “bad kid” follows him throughout their trip, as news of his mother’s disappearance makes headlines and paints him as the prime suspect in this crime. Mortal news outlets and mythological monsters make the trio’s journey arduous, and the difficulty only continues once they finally reach Hollywood. After sneaking into the Underworld, Percy learns that Hades was not the thief after all. Percy opens a backpack given to him by Ares, the god of war, and finds the master bolt inside. Realizing he has been set up, Percy challenges Ares to a duel and wins. He then heads home to New York to return the bolt to Zeus and clear his name. Hades returns Percy’s mother upon realizing that he had been wrong, and Percy goes home to her.

Percy, as a twelve-year-old, can be classified as an adolescent. His defiant attitude, distaste for school, and general impulsivity reflect traits thought to be typical of

contemporary American adolescents and teens. Despite the perception of these traits as simple facts of the teenage years, the concept of the “teen” in itself did not exist until the early twentieth century. How does an understanding of the history of the concept of the “adolescent” inform our understanding of Percy Jackson as a character? Where does Percy Jackson fit in, then, in regard to how American society defines the “teenager”? How does Percy adhere to, stray from, or otherwise complicate our contemporary model of the American adolescent? While adolescence is most often thought of as a turbulent, problematic period of life, I argue that *The Lightning Thief* instead presents Percy as showing how the “flaws” of adolescence actually constitute virtues.

In *The Lightning Thief*, defiance is presented as a source of power: Percy dares to defy his stepfather, his teachers, and even the Greek gods themselves. What has historically been portrayed as a defect in teenagers, something they will grow out of or settle down from, becomes Percy’s greatest source of strength. Percy also expresses his feelings honestly and allows others to see his emotional vulnerability throughout the novel, admitting his fears and making fun of himself when he makes mistakes. He demonstrates deep selflessness and puts the needs of others above his own, and his respect for and devotion to his mother quite literally bring him to the Underworld and back. While Percy certainly does conform to some of the assumptions American society makes about teenagers—after all, he is brash, unpredictable, emotional, and frequently violent—the novel and Percy’s character suggest that not only perpetuating these stereotypes but condemning these traits prevent adolescents from reaching their true potential.

## CHAPTER II: CRITICAL CONVERSATION

Despite its tremendous popularity, the critical conversation surrounding *The Lightning Thief* remains shockingly sparse. Most of the available critical literature on the book focuses on its mythological aspects. In “Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children,” Sheila Murnaghan analyzes the ways in which Greek mythology is represented in modern adaptations, with *The Lightning Thief* as one of these examples. Murnaghan describes the depiction of mythology in *The Lightning Thief* as “jokey, parodic, modernizing” (348). She asserts that “this freewheeling approach to mythology goes hand-in-hand with an antipathy to school and academic learning,” citing Percy’s dislike of school and poor academic performance (349).

Murnaghan then launches into a criticism of Riordan’s persona as an author, discussing his attempts to appeal to students’ distaste for school while also being a teacher and author himself. Murnaghan initially acknowledges Riordan’s inspiration behind making Percy struggle in school: Riordan’s own son, Haley, was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. However, she goes on to attribute Percy’s distaste for school to Riordan’s “assum[ing] a distaste for learning in his child audience and cater[ing] to that distaste by making it a prominent feature of his child protagonist” (352). She goes on to remark that Riordan

is calculating that if he enters robustly into an anti-elitist, low-cultural view of the classics, he can somehow promote the more elitist, high cultural values with which they are also identified; that by agreeing that school is boring, he can make

kids want to learn; that by denying that myths are metaphors requiring interpretation, he can get kids to benefit from the fact that they are. (352)

Murnaghan does not address how Percy's distaste for school stems directly from his struggles with learning disabilities and a lack of support structures to help with them, as well as the chaos that seems to follow him as a result of his unrealized powers as a demigod. After attempting to study for his Latin exam to no avail, Percy decides to go ask his teacher, Mr. Brunner, for help, noting that "I didn't want to leave Yancy Academy with him thinking I hadn't tried" (Riordan 18). While Percy may struggle in school, it is not for lack of trying.

In "'A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers': Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and America's Culture Wars," Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson discuss Riordan's portrayal of both Greek myth and American society in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. They assert that "Riordan is clearly offering not a retelling of traditional myths in modern language but an effort to continue within today's world the tradition represented by the ancient tales" (Morey and Nelson 235). Morey and Nelson also discuss the larger debate surrounding whether whom they call "the masses" are able to successfully understand high culture without some form of adaptation, positing that while some may see Riordan's modernization of Greek myth as a bastardization, others may see his success in adapting the novel to his adolescent audience as being worth the deviation from the source material (236).

In "Re-Discovering Mythology: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians Saga," Alexander Leighton discusses the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series' status as an adaptation of Greek myth. Leighton quotes David

Buchbinder's assertion that "much of the literary output of classical Greek culture...consisted of reworkings of already familiar narratives" (qtd. in Leighton 61). He goes on to analyze the adaptations of myth within the series and launches into a discussion of Riordan's inspiration for the novels, stating that Riordan's son "gave him the idea of reimagining the mythological narratives from the perspective of adolescents who, by their nature are in a state of 'in-between', neither fitting into the world of childhood nor adulthood" and asserting that this is directly reflected in Percy's character (Leighton 63). Leighton addresses the adjustments Riordan makes to myth within *The Lightning Thief* and explores the sociopolitical implications of these changes, drawing attention to Riordan's decision to give Percy a happy ending, which differs greatly from that of demigod heroes within the original myths (66). He concludes his analysis by arguing that Riordan's adaptation draws on classic archetypes while at the same time adapting them well enough to contemporary society that they interest younger audiences when the original myths may not (71).

While the current critical conversation surrounding *The Lightning Thief* addresses its mythological aspects and how adolescent readers might react to the novel, there is a lack of discussion of how Percy himself is presented as an adolescent and what the novel suggests about adolescents themselves. By analyzing *The Lightning Thief* alongside the history of adolescence, I hope to fill this gap in the critical conversation.

## CHAPTER III: CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

### A Brief History of Teenagers and Adolescence

The age group we call “teenagers” today were not always considered a separate category or thought about in the same way as teenagers in contemporary culture. The 1904 publication of psychologist G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* marked the beginning of adolescents being considered separate from children and adults, with Hall himself becoming known as “the father of adolescence” (Lesko 50). Hall asserted that by nature, adolescents were turbulent, going as far as to say that symptoms which might be considered indicative of insanity in an adult were normal for the average adolescent (Hine 158, 33). Prior to Hall’s publication, adolescents were typically slotted into the dichotomy of child or adult based upon boys’ ability to work and girls’ physical development; boys were considered children until big and strong enough for physical labor, and womanhood was determined by whether girls were developed enough for motherhood (Hine 16).

The Great Depression led to the initial rise of the high school—the lack of jobs led to lower teenage employment, which left schools as the primary way to fill teens’ time and keep them contained. Until this point, a high school education had typically only been available to the upper class (Palladino 15, 99). High school enrollment reached record highs during this period, with nearly half the teenage population being enrolled by 1930 and continued to climb at breakneck pace; according to Grace Palladino, “within ten years, the majority of seventeen-year-olds had earned diplomas” (xvi). While child labor laws delaying entry into full-time work predated the Depression era, they gained enough

support during this time that their effects were becoming tangible, contributing even further to the increasing high school enrollment rate (Hine 171). World War II, however, brought many students' high school careers to a halt, with the wartime dropout rate reaching 35% at its peak (Palladino 66). It was during this time that the first mention of the word "teenager" in a publication occurred in a 1941 article for *Popular Science* magazine (Hine 8).

The post-war era solidified the high school as a fact of American teenaged life, as well as teenagers as a separate cultural group. The formation of a youth culture had already begun in the 1930s, with advertisers capitalizing on the upper-class, white "bobby soxers." Their carefree lifestyle, focused on leisure and funded by their parents, became advertisers' goldmine (Palladino 54). After the war, however, the all-American image of these bobby soxers was quickly usurped by a reputation for delinquency, which Hall's study had predicted. The economic prosperity following the war led to the teenage buying market and high school student body being newly populated with working-class and black teenagers in addition to the white middle- and upper-class teens. Influence from these newcomers to the teen demographic led to the rebel culture of the 1950s and resulted in teenagers being seen as such (Palladino xvii-xviii). This caused panic amongst middle- and upper-class parents, who were left wondering where their comparatively innocent bobby soxer children had gone; now inspired by "working-class rebels (like Elvis Presley) [who] mocked middle-class notions of social respect and upward mobility," these teens came to be seen as participants in a culture of delinquency, Palladino argues (162). These fears largely came from fear of the "other" from middle- to upper-class parents, whether that "other" was people of color or the working class.

Presley was just the beginning of a continuing trend: popular culture began shaping the teenage experience like never before. Fears surrounding Presley's influence were so strong that there were even attempts to replace him with someone more attuned to upper-class values, like Pat Boone, for example (Palladino 130). In the coming decades, Beatlemania and "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" took hold of the adolescent crowd, much to upper-class parents' horror. No part of popular culture was spared the blame for teenage "delinquency," with adults claiming that "it was almost impossible to raise healthy children when movie directors, record producers, and comic book writers shamelessly ridiculed parental authority and encouraged teenagers to see themselves as a troubled class apart" (Palladino 159).

### **Who Is the "American Adolescent" Now?**

The beliefs surrounding teenagers throughout their recent history have continued into the twenty-first century, particularly their penchant for delinquency and violence. In a 2006 interview with *The New York Times*, My Chemical Romance frontman Gerard Way discusses the inspiration behind the band's latest hit single, titled "Teenagers." The lyrics to the song's chorus are as follows: "They said, 'All teenagers scare the living shit out of me' / They could care less as long as someone'll bleed" (My Chemical Romance). Way tells interviewer Sia Michel about a recent incident which inspired the song, where he had been surrounded by rowdy teens on the subway: "That was the first time I felt old...I was nervous and I was a target. I felt like I had become a parent figure or part of the problem" (qtd. in Michel). Way's lamentation perfectly illustrates Hine's concept of "the teenage mystique": the tendency of "adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems" (Hine 11). Despite having once

been teens themselves, adults shroud the teenage demographic in mystery and see it as something to fear—which Way alludes to in his interview. Way’s guilt at being “part of the problem” in a society afraid of teens shows an awareness of the teenage mystique, and it resulted in his writing the song as a teenage anthem of sorts, decrying adults who only think of teens as something to fear. Hine writes that this mystique encourages anxieties about teens “careen[ing] out of control, endangering themselves and others” and leads to parents feeling alienated and detached from the children they feel they once knew (Hine 17, 25). The existence of this teenage mystique shows that Hall’s ideas about adolescents as violent and turbulent are alive and well in contemporary American society.

High school remains the hub of teenage existence: teens of today spend 32% of their time in school (Lesko 176). Evidence points to high school as being hostile towards the majority of students, with outcasts facing ridicule from both fellow students and educators (Lesko 173, 150). Hine asserts that “to reject high school is to reject the society as a whole” (Hine 139). Success in high school has become more important than ever, given that “teens today cannot expect to support themselves (let alone a family) without a solid education” (Palladino xix). Combining these factors makes for students who see school as a place of both misery and immense academic and social pressure.

The concept of “peer pressure” largely colors expectations for the contemporary adolescent’s behavior. In *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, Nancy Lesko notes that the idea of adolescents as “peer-oriented” is one of the “confident characterizations” with which American society defines teenagers. She defines these “confident characterizations” as “grounding assumptions that operate in scholarly and popular talk about teenagers” (Lesko 2). As a result, American adolescents are thought to

be highly focused on conformity to their peers (4). Lesko also notes that in contemporary high schools, there is a strong focus on enforcement of gender roles for both male and female students, and those who stray from these norms are often subject to bullying, harassment, and other forms of violence (185). Thus, the contemporary American teen is deeply concerned about fitting in, which is most easily done through strict adherence to gender roles.

There remains disagreement about who is considered an adolescent. Some classify the age group as those twelve to eighteen years old, while others start at thirteen and extend the cut-off as high as twenty (Lesko 107, Hine 15). This uncertainty about who qualifies as an adolescent and what ages mark its boundaries speaks to the general conception of adolescents and teens as “emotional, unpredictable, and often confused” themselves (Lesko 3). Teens of today are still defined mostly through stereotypes: they are problems and “at risk,” they naturally challenge authority, they are “not-quite competent,” and they are more often predators than victims (Lesko xi, 49, 3; Hine 4, 19). They must be both controlled and protected, and they are “fully under the influence” of their peers (Lesko 105, 4). They are “endearing, frightening, unavoidable...exploitable,” “brash, unfinished,” self-absorbed and out of control (Lesko 134; Hine 30, 10). The enduring claims of G. Stanley Hall characterize adolescents to this day, and teens’ complicated, rebellious image over the course of the early to mid-twentieth century has remained.

## CHAPTER IV: PORTRAYALS OF ADOLESCENCE IN *THE LIGHTNING THIEF*

*The Lightning Thief* reflects this history of adolescence not only as still affecting the teens of today, but also as an antiquated framework. As a twelve-year-old on the cusp of his teenage years, Percy falls squarely in the adolescent category. Negative stereotypes about teens and adolescents follow him throughout the novel, and he lives up to quite a few of these stereotypes himself. Percy is deeply impulsive, rebellious, emotional, strong-willed, violent (though only in self-defense), and often unpredictable. Not all his traits are stereotypical, however—he also appears emotionally vulnerable, idolizes his mother, and demonstrates selflessness. As a character, Percy challenges and complicates our conception of who American adolescents are at their core.

### **Bad Reputation**

Percy's status as an adolescent causes him abundant problems throughout the novel, especially from mortal media and law enforcement. Hall's stereotypes of teens as rebellious, violent, and unpredictable land an innocent Percy in a media firestorm: after the disappearance of his mother, Sally, media and law enforcement mark him as the prime suspect. Soon after Percy arrives at camp, an anonymous fellow camper leaves a newspaper article about Percy and Sally's disappearance on his doorstep. While the article doesn't directly accuse Percy of being involved in his mother's disappearance, it features an interview with Percy's stepfather Gabe, who comments that Percy "is a troubled child who has been kicked out of numerous boarding schools and has expressed violent tendencies in the past" (Riordan 129). Gabe, who already dislikes Percy for his own selfish reasons, uses these stereotypes to his advantage in hopes of getting his

stepson arrested, despite Percy's innocence. Percy must not only deal with the grief of his mother's disappearance but must also shoulder the blame for it.

Percy's own awareness about stereotypes surrounding adolescents shows just how culturally ingrained these ideas are—even Percy, as an adolescent himself, starts to believe them and find them understandable. Mortal law enforcement and media hunt for Percy after the newspaper publishes the article, which complicates his quest further, since he now must lay low to avoid the media and law in addition to the monsters he was already expecting to encounter. When he spots a flyer with his picture on it asking “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY?” he quickly rips it down (158). Percy, Annabeth, and Grover take a Greyhound to get out of the city but are accosted by the three Furies. Without a back exit or windows that open, Percy is forced to crash the bus to cause enough chaos for the three of them to escape. Mortal media frames Percy for the violence once again, with a local newspaper writing that “Twelve-year-old Percy Jackson...is shown here fleeing from the bus where he accosted several elderly female passengers.” Despite Percy's acting out of self-defense, the media immediately jumps to blame him and his “two teenage accomplices” (197). Percy's public reputation only worsens as their journey progresses—as a result of an explosion atop the St. Louis Arch, caused by Echidna and the Chimera, mortal media brands Percy a domestic terrorist. After this, Percy starts to acknowledge his bad reputation himself, at one point snarking that “We were three adolescents hanging out at a car wash without a car; any cop worth his doughnuts would figure we were up to no good” (219). He even jokes about headlines reading “TWELVE-YEAR-OLD OUTLAW BEATS UP DEFENSELESS BIKER” after he nearly gets into a fight with Ares when they meet at a diner (243). The idea that teens

are violent and prone to delinquency is so ubiquitous that Percy must take care not to feed this flame further.

The focus on Percy's psychology and status as an adolescent shows clear connections to the work of G. Stanley Hall—the association between teenage behavior and mental illness or insanity still persists, and it causes Percy to be framed as a violent, unpredictable criminal (Hine 33). Perhaps the largest blow to Percy's reputation comes from an interview that Gabe does with Barbara Walters, in which Walters brands Percy “an adolescent boy with serious issues” and asks, “Is Percy Jackson a delinquent, terrorist, or perhaps the brainwashed victim of a frightening new cult?” (275). Walters notes that after the commercial break, she will be interviewing a child psychologist on the matter. Hall's persisting stereotypes about teens cause the media to see Percy as a danger to society and even prompt a psychological evaluation on television. While Gabe is most often portrayed as an unintelligent slob, he is at least smart enough to know the effectiveness of using these negative stereotypes about adolescents to start a media firestorm and get Percy into trouble with the law. The novel makes it clear that these stereotypes only serve to make adolescents a scapegoat for adults' issues and underscores the absurdity of these stereotypes by having Gabe be the one to capitalize on them.

Percy's reputation is only cleared after a public showdown with Ares, which leads mortal news outlets to report falsely that Percy, Annabeth, and Grover had in fact been kidnapped by Ares the entire time and led “on a ten-day odyssey of terror” (Riordan 334). The ease with which the media jumped to the conclusion that Percy and his companions were violent and at fault for the incidents following them on their journey illustrates just how strongly the association between adolescents and violence still persists, especially

Hine's notion that adolescents are expected to be predators more often than victims (Hine 19). The general public expects adolescents to be violent, unpredictable, and out of control, and Percy is no exception. Through Percy's relationship with the media, the novel shows both the omnipresence of these stereotypes about teens as well as how ridiculously incorrect they often are when compared to actual adolescent behavior.

### **"I *am* Impertinent": Defiance and Impertinence as Power**

One of Percy's most defining characteristics is his defiant, impertinent nature. Despite defiance being most often portrayed as a negative characteristic in teens, Percy's tendency towards defiance gets him out of several scrapes along his journey and constitutes one of his greatest assets. From the very beginning of the novel, Percy establishes himself as a "troubled" kid, detailing his history of disciplinary issues and removal from six schools in the past six years before ending up at Yancy Academy (Riordan 1, 9). These issues land him in counseling, though he finds it unhelpful (9). After Mrs. Dodds reveals herself to be one of the three Furies and attacks Percy on a field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Percy's confusion and lack of trust in his classmates and teachers lead him to be "sent out into the hallway in almost every class," and after snapping at his English teacher for calling him lazy, Percy is informed that he will not be allowed back at Yancy the following year (17). His disciplinary issues cause him ample problems, and he is by no means proud of this fact. While on a field trip with fellow Yancy Academy students, he and Grover sit as far away from their classmates as possible in hopes that other museum attendees "wouldn't know we were from *that* school—the school for loser freaks who couldn't make it elsewhere" (8). His attendance at a school for "troubled kids" clearly causes him to feel shame.

Percy has no qualms about defying the gods, either, which the novel presents as a virtue rather than a defect. After beheading Medusa at Aunty Em's Garden Emporium, Percy considers Medusa's advice not to be a pawn of the Olympians. He decides to send her head directly to the gods on Mount Olympus through Hermes's delivery service, signing it, "With best wishes, PERCY JACKSON" (186). Grover strongly cautions him against doing so, warning him that the gods will think he is impertinent, to which Percy responds, "I *am* impertinent" (187). He has no issues being rude to the gods' faces, either. Ares, the god of war, asks Percy to retrieve a shield that he left at an abandoned waterpark while on a date with Aphrodite. Percy asks him, "Why don't you go back and get it yourself?" and snarks, "What interrupted your date...Something scare you off?" to which Ares responds, "You're lucky you met me, punk, and not one of the other Olympians. They're not as forgiving of rudeness as I am" (227-229). Percy only agrees to retrieve the shield after Annabeth notes that Ares could easily kill them for disobeying a direct order. After retrieving the shield, Percy goes as far as to call Ares a jerk to his face and tells him, "You're pretty smug, Lord Ares, for a guy who runs from Cupid statues" (243-244). When Percy realizes after leaving the Underworld that Ares had set him up, he challenges the god to a duel, goading him throughout with lines like "Are you going to fight me now?" and "That'd save you from getting your godly hide whipped" (325). Percy clearly holds no distinction between mortal or god when it comes to disrespect—if someone does not respect him, he refuses to respect them.

Percy's disciplinary issues and defiance also cause problems in his home life. While he has no issues with his mother, Percy frequently mouths back to Gabe, his cruel and slovenly stepdad. When Gabe tries to force Percy to apologize for interrupting his

poker game, Percy responds with “I’m sorry...I’m really sorry I interrupted your incredibly important poker game. Please go back to it right now” and remarks to readers that “Gabe’s eyes narrowed. His tiny brain was probably trying to detect sarcasm in my statement” (35-36). As discussed in the previous section, Gabe continually tries to frame Percy for his mother’s disappearance throughout the novel. When Percy finally returns home, Gabe threatens to call the police on Percy for “ruining his Camaro,” and when Sally protests, Gabe raises his hand, causing her to flinch. When Percy realizes that Gabe has hit his mother before, he considers slicing him to bits but remembers that his sword does not work on mortals (349). Rather than resort to violence, Percy returns to his room along with Sally, only to find the head of Medusa which he had previously mailed to Mount Olympus sitting on his bed, stamped “return to sender.” Instead of using the head on Gabe himself, Percy gifts it to his mother, and within a week of his returning to Camp Half-Blood, he receives a letter from her where she discusses the success of her “life-size concrete sculpture, entitled *The Poker Player*” (355). Medusa’s head allows Sally and Percy to get rid of Gabe and his abuse once and for all, and the sale of the sculpture leaves them with enough money for Sally to return to college and put a down payment on a new apartment. The only reason that Percy ended up with this power in the first place was out of his daring to send the head to the gods of Olympus. This singular act of defiance saves Percy and his mother from a lifetime of continued abuse, suggesting that adolescent defiance is a strength instead of a flaw.

While impertinence and defiance are considered typical of adolescents in the first place, Poseidon admits to Percy that his impertinent nature results at least in part from his lineage, telling him, “Obedience does not come naturally to you, does it...I must take

some blame for that, I suppose. The sea does not like to be restrained” (345). Percy’s level of impertinence is not portrayed as the norm within the novel, with Annabeth and Grover frequently warning him against disrespecting the gods. Regardless of whether Percy’s defiance and impertinence are due to his intrinsic nature or his status as an adolescent, it is clear throughout the novel that these traits are highly beneficial to him during his quest and beyond. The novel reframes these traits, typically considered negative, as some of Percy’s most significant sources of power.

### **Respecting Authority: A Two-Way Street**

While Percy’s impertinence is no doubt one of his defining characteristics, he does not treat all authority figures this way. Percy takes care to only show defiance to those who he feels do not respect him. As Grace Palladino notes in *Teenagers: An American History*, “Holden Caulfield, the privileged prep school character in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*...pointed out in 1951 [that] teenagers had a low tolerance for adult phonies...Teenagers expected adults to practice what they preached, especially when it came to ethical issues like justice, fairness, and equality” (Palladino 173). Percy is no different—when it comes to elders and authority figures who do “practice what they preach,” he is more than willing to listen. Thomas Hine also notes that “In a 1997 survey, 90 percent of adults said that young people are failing to learn...respect” (Hine 17). He later writes that “Parents often feel that teenagers have become members of an alien tribe whose members pay attention only to one another” (25). In sharp contrast to these notions, Percy adores and highly respects his mother, Sally, and strives for her approval. He considers ditching his field trip to go see her but decides against it, since he knows it would disappoint her, saying, “I wouldn’t be able to

stand that sad look she'd give me" (Riordan 9). When he is reunited with Sally after returning home from boarding school, he says, "My mother can make me feel good just by walking into the room. Her eyes sparkle and change color in the light. Her smile is as warm as a quilt...My mom is the nicest lady in the world" (32-33). His love for his mother is one of his most defining characteristics, and it is the sole reason he ends up a hero in the first place: after Sally is kidnapped by Hades, Percy presumes her to be dead and is utterly devastated. He only agrees to take on the quest to retrieve the master bolt because of the possibility of saving her: "The truth was, I didn't care about retrieving Zeus's lightning bolt, or saving the world, or even helping my father out of trouble...All I cared about was my mom. Hades had taken her unfairly, and Hades was going to give her back" (159). This devotion and love for his mother goes strongly against notions of adolescents as alienated from and disrespectful towards their parents. Sally treats Percy with kindness, fairness, and respect, and he responds in turn.

Percy also looks for validation from Mr. Brunner, his Latin teacher (who he later learns is Chiron, the centaur from Greek myth and activities director at Camp Half-Blood). Mr. Brunner seems to be one of the first teachers to actually push Percy, which he does not always appreciate; Percy laments that Brunner "expected me to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact that I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I had never made above a C- in my life. No—he didn't expect me to be *as good*; he expected me to be *better*" (7). After a miserable night studying for his Latin exam, Percy seeks out Brunner's help: "I'd never asked a teacher for help before. Maybe if I talked to Mr. Brunner, he could give me some pointers. At least I could apologize for the big fat F I was about to score on his exam. I didn't want to leave Yancy Academy with him

thinking I hadn't tried" (18). Percy clearly cares a great deal about what Brunner thinks of him, to the point that he is willing to go out of his comfort zone to impress him. He is deeply upset when Brunner says that Yancy Academy "isn't the right place" for him, admitting that his eyes stung and that hearing this from his favorite teacher left him trembling (22). While Percy's relationships with many of his teachers are rocky at best, it is clear that he cares a great deal about Mr. Brunner's opinion of him and is grateful for his encouragement.

When it comes to manners, Percy actually has them in abundance—even when he is in trouble with Mrs. Dodds, he still calls her "ma'am" and tries to apologize for pushing Nancy into the fountain (12). He shows deference to Dionysus, the god in charge of Camp Half-Blood, and to Zeus when returning his master bolt, despite having been falsely accused (343). Percy even gets angry with Annabeth when she senses danger and wants to leave Auntie Em's, noting "I was irritated with Annabeth for being so bossy, so rude to an old lady who'd just fed us for free" (177). While Percy might admit himself that he has problems with authority, this is clearly only true for those who are unkind or disrespectful towards him, like Gabe and Ares. Percy's respect is only mutual. His glowing praise for his mother, admiration for Mr. Brunner, and use of manners with many of the adults he encounters along his journey illustrate that his so-called problems with authority are not universal—they only arise when said authority does not "practice what they preach" (Palladino 173). Respecting authority and politeness in general do not align with popular conceptions of the modern adolescent, so Percy appears to be an anomaly for having these traits even in small amounts. By defying these expectations, the

novel characterizes adolescents as having far more complex relationships with authority than their reputation for defiance and rebellion might suggest.

### **Unabashedly Emotional: Vulnerability, Masculinity, and Peer Pressure**

One of Percy's more shocking traits when compared against stereotypes about teenagers is his vulnerability in regard to his emotions. Percy does not hold back in the least when it comes to describing how he is feeling. Conceptions of modern American adolescents characterize them as deeply obsessed with upholding their public image (particularly with respect to gender roles) in order to conform with their peers, yet Percy is open with readers about exactly how he feels throughout the novel, whether it comes to missing his mom or feeling embarrassed when Annabeth tells him that he drools in his sleep. Adolescents are often characterized as deeply emotional: as Lesko puts it, "The mood swings of adolescence are related to the hormonal rages and to our beliefs that teenagers are emotional, unpredictable, and often confused" (Lesko 3). Conceptions of adolescents as plagued by hormones and mood swings feed the stereotype that they are highly emotional; however, male adolescents are expected to hide emotions that might suggest weakness or risk being labelled effeminate, a fear which began with G. Stanley Hall and his colleagues and has persisted into the present day (Lesko 56-57). In spite of this, Percy is frequently vulnerable about his emotions and admits to his readers even those which might make him appear weak by standards of masculinity.

I discuss Percy's openness with the readers themselves in this section because he himself acknowledges his audience on the very first page of the novel, speaking directly with readers and pleading with them to stop reading the book if they think they too may be half-bloods. The novel establishes half-bloods as being a demographic of mostly

adolescents, with many dying before they reach adulthood (97). Percy speaks directly to his audience several other times throughout the novel, as well. Because of this, the novel reads like Percy himself has written it, especially due to Riordan's use of first-person narration. Given that Percy acknowledges his readership, his candidness in regard to his feelings throughout the novel seems even more of a surprise when noting that this readership is made up of fellow adolescents. Instead of trying to keep up an image or portray himself in the way that might make him look cool in the eyes of his peers, Percy is open and honest with readers about his thoughts and feelings, which drastically contradicts the notion of adolescents as obsessed with fitting in with their peers. If Percy cared about meeting a certain standard of masculinity, fitting in, or appearing "cool," he would be far less vulnerable with readers about his feelings and leave out any moments that might damage his reputation with his audience of peers.

Even when it might make him seem uncool or cause him embarrassment, Percy is honest about his feelings and insecurities with his readers. He recounts events without sparing any details that might make him look foolish. He talks openly about his homesickness while at Yancy Academy and how much he misses his mom (17). He also talks about his feelings of alienation from the other, far wealthier students and the insecurity their wealth and status make him feel, writing "They were juvenile delinquents, like me, but they were *rich* juvenile delinquents. Their daddies were executives, or ambassadors, or celebrities. I was a nobody, from a family of nobodies" (22). Percy shows a disregard for appearing popular by admitting to readers that he does not fit in with his classmates—if he cared about his readers' perception of him as his peers, he could easily have left out this detail.

Percy spares no detail about his moments of insecurity or embarrassment at camp, either. After learning about the fate of Thalia, a young demigod who had sacrificed herself to save her friends, he compares her heroism to his defeat of the Minotaur, questioning whether “if I’d acted differently, could I have saved my mother?” (115). Percy is honest and vulnerable about his own insecurity and guilt surrounding his mother’s disappearance instead of attempting to put on a brave face. He also is quick to make himself the butt of the joke—he describes himself as “an uncool middle-schooler,” and is grateful to Luke for being so welcoming towards him as an elder camper (101). As he gets acclimated to camp and begins settling into his routine there, he loses a race with the wood nymphs and admits “it was a little humiliating to be slower than a tree” (107). Capture the flag begins similarly, with Percy’s lamenting that “Standing there alone, with my big blue-feathered helmet and my huge shield, I felt like an idiot” (119). He is even honest about his feelings of loneliness after being claimed by Poseidon and moved out of his temporary home in the Hermes Cabin, confessing that “I was absolutely miserable. Just when I had started to feel accepted, to feel I had a home in cabin eleven and I might be a normal kid...I’d been separated out as if I had some rare disease” (127). When it comes time to leave for his quest, Percy fears going alone. Grover eventually volunteers to accompany him, which Percy admits made him feel “so relieved I wanted to cry, but I didn’t think that’d be very heroic” (146). Each of these instances are full of details that Percy could have easily left out for the sake of seeming cooler or more self-assured to his audience of peers, but he instead opts for vulnerability and authenticity.

Even on his quest, when he is supposed to be the hero, Percy makes it clear that he is far from perfect and that he knows how to not take himself too seriously, showing

complete disregard for what his audience of peers might think of him as a result. He admits to slamming into a tree in the darkness after he crashes the Greyhound bus, snarking, “Add to the list of superpowers I did not have: infrared vision” (170). He talks about his nightmares, as well: “My nightmare started out as something I’d dreamt a million times before: I was being forced to take a standardized test while wearing a straitjacket...and the teacher kept saying, *Come on, Percy. You’re not stupid, are you? Pick up your pencil*” (252). Judging based on this nightmare, Percy clearly has insecurities about his level of intelligence, yet he still chooses to be open with readers when he makes a fool of himself. Percy is honest about his other insecurities also: he questions how he could possibly be Poseidon’s son, wondering, “How could I be the son of someone that powerful?” (270). When he finally does meet his father, he shares his relief at Poseidon’s distant nature, admitting that “In a strange way, I was glad that Poseidon was so distant. If he’d tried to apologize, or told me he loved me, or even smiled, it would’ve felt fake” (341). Percy even confesses that he cried when he reunited with his mother: “I’ll admit it—my eyes were a bit misty, too. I was shaking, I was so relieved to see her” (347). Even when he may seem weak, foolish, or uncool, Percy is honest with readers about how he feels. He puts authenticity above his reputation every time. As a result, the novel calls into question the ubiquitousness of the desire of teens to fit in as a result of peer pressure.

Percy also spares no detail when it comes to discussing his feelings of fear and grief. Constructions of the modern American adolescent paint them as strongly desiring to fit in with their peers. Social status is often solidified through adherence to gender roles, and in the case of boys in particular, asserting masculinity; Lesko stresses that

within high schools in particular, “hegemonic masculinity is reinforced, ever more vitally performed, and strictly enforced” (Lesko 184-185). As a result, teenage boys must adhere strictly to expectations for masculinity or risk social exile. Contemporary American ideas of masculinity leave men unwilling to be vulnerable about their emotions and especially unwilling to show weakness through fear or by crying. Percy, however, is frequently candid about his fears and moments of sadness. When the Minotaur makes his mother disappear in a flash of light, Percy is wracked by grief, admitting, “I smelled like livestock and my knees were shaking...I was weak and scared and trembling with grief...I was crying, calling for my mother” (55-56). While being so emotional might paint Percy as weak in the eyes of fellow adolescent boys, effectively making him a social outcast, he remains candid with his audience about his grief and anguish.

Even throughout recounting his quest, Percy does not paint himself as a fearless hero. He talks about how his “heart skipped a beat” when the Furies boarded the Greyhound with him, Annabeth, and Grover (161). He mentions that his nightmares leave him trembling and that he feels claustrophobic in the elevator of the St. Louis Arch (194, 205). None of these details were necessary for him to include, especially if he cared about upholding his reputation as a tough, fearless hero. After an encounter with Echidna and the Chimera, Percy is poisoned by the Chimera’s venomous snake tail and must jump from the top of the St. Louis Arch and into the river below; as a son of Poseidon, the water should heal him. Even still, Percy is afraid to take the leap, and when he does, he tells readers, “I’d love to tell you I had some deep revelation on my way down, that I came to terms with my own mortality, laughed in the face of death, et cetera. The truth? My only thought was: Aaaaggghhhhh!” (212). The way he phrases this makes it clear that

he values authenticity over appearing “cool” to his audience. Percy is also deeply afraid upon entering the Underworld, especially when Grover is nearly pulled into a dark pit. A voice from the pit laughs at the trio, and as Percy tries to figure out what could possibly be down there, he writes that “Annabeth and I looked at each other. I could tell she was nursing an idea, probably the same one she’d gotten during the taxi ride to L.A., but she was too scared to share it. That was enough to terrify me” (306). Percy fails to save Sally from Hades, and when he is forced to leave her behind in the Underworld, he admits to readers that “If I talked about my mother, I was going to start crying like a little kid” (321). Percy’s candidness about his feelings of fear, grief, and sadness in particular show a clear deviance from stereotypes of adolescent boys as obsessed with fitting in and therefore being unwilling to show weakness through expressing their emotions, lest their masculinity be called into question. Percy’s emotional vulnerability could easily be seen as a sign of weakness or as unmasculine, but he risks social exile in favor of being candid about how he feels. As a result, the novel suggests that adolescents care more about authenticity than their reputation, harkening back to the likes of Holden Caulfield.

### **Modernity and Myth: Percy’s Selflessness and Heroism**

While conceptions of contemporary American adolescents paint them as largely self-absorbed, Percy often acts the exact opposite, putting the needs, feelings, and safety of others above his own. His selfless nature gets him into more than a few scrapes at Yancy Academy—his attempts to defend Grover from bullies often land him in trouble. After Nancy Bobofit dumps her lunch in Grover’s lap on their field trip, Percy pushes her into a fountain, which results in his confrontation with Mrs. Dodds and his ultimate expulsion from school (9). Defending Grover is evidently an extremely common

occurrence for Percy; he says that “All year long, I’d gotten into fights, keeping bullies away from him. I’d lost sleep worrying that he’d get beaten up next year without me” (24-25). Percy’s protectiveness of Grover does not stop after he leaves Yancy Academy, either—when the Minotaur catches up to them, Percy puts himself at risk to save Grover, acting like a matador to distract the Minotaur while Grover lies unconscious (53). He puts his grief at watching his mother vanish aside to help Grover over Half-Blood Hill, as well: “I wanted to lie down and cry, but there was Grover, needing my help” (55). Instead of securing his own safety, which his mother begged him to do, Percy refuses to leave his friend behind.

While teenagers may be typically characterized as selfish and self-absorbed, conceptions of the contemporary American adolescent also frequently paint them as everyday heroes. Hine writes that Americans see teens as “performing heroically when necessary...the noble savage in blue jeans” (10). The idea of teenagers as heroes also has historical basis, with Palladino noting that during the Second World War, “Fresh-faced high school athletes were the prototypical war heroes” (65). Percy’s selflessness certainly leads him to heroic feats—when the three Furies trap Annabeth and Grover on the Greyhound, Percy nearly escapes unscathed, having made it to the front of the bus without incident with the help of Annabeth’s invisibility cap. While the plan had been to let Percy get away and for Annabeth and Grover to stay behind as bait, Percy could not let that stand—instead, he crashes the bus into the wall of the Lincoln Tunnel to cause enough of a distraction for his friends to escape, a move which he brands “so impulsive and dangerous I should have been named ADHD poster child of the year” (164). Even at the expense of his own safety, Percy puts his friends before himself and refuses to leave

them behind, including when they beg him to. He does the same when he finally makes it to the Underworld—while Annabeth and Grover each insist on staying behind so that Percy can save his mother, he refuses to leave either of them. Given three pearls by his father which will each allow one person to escape the Underworld, he is unable to save himself, his two friends, and his mother at the same time. Percy feels so strongly about protecting his friends that he resolves to return to retrieve his mother once he has cleared his name, despite the fact that wanting to save his mother was the only reason he had taken on the quest in the first place. He considers sacrificing himself but realizes that his mother would never forgive him for trading his life for hers, or for putting her fate above the fate of humanity: “I turned and faced my mother. I desperately wanted to sacrifice myself and use the last pearl on her, but I knew what she would say. She would never allow it. I had to get the bolt back to Olympus and tell Zeus the truth. I had to stop the war. She would never forgive me if I saved her instead” (317). Here Percy exhibits the polar opposite of self-absorption, putting his friends’ safety above his own emotional needs and desires—he throws away his entire plan to save his mother for the sake of ensuring that Annabeth and Grover escape the Underworld safely.

Percy’s selflessness extends past his peers and his mother, as well. When he is attacked by Echidna and the Chimera atop the St. Louis Arch, his primary concern is not for his own safety but that of the tourists and park ranger who are trapped on the observation deck with him: “the family and the park ranger...were all screaming now, trying to pry open the emergency exit doors. I couldn’t let them get hurt” (208). After the Chimera’s snake tail bites him in the leg, Percy feels himself dying from its venom, yet is still most concerned about the innocent bystanders: “I glanced at the park ranger and the

family. The little boy was hiding behind his father's legs. I had to protect these people...If I died, would the monsters go away? Would they leave the humans alone?" (210). He ends up jumping from the arch into the Mississippi River below, healing himself in the water. Despite his own life being saved, Percy does not feel relief—instead, he feels guilt at not being able to save the other people on the observation deck, lamenting that “Those poor people in the arch were probably toast. I couldn't protect them. I was no hero. Maybe I should just stay down here with the catfish, join the bottom feeders” (214). The guilt Percy feels after putting his survival first illustrates the sheer selflessness of his nature. Selflessness is incompatible with the model of the contemporary adolescent as self-absorbed, yet Percy is frequently selfless to a fault, putting himself at risk and ignoring his own desires to put others before himself. This selflessness frequently leads him to perform heroic deeds, though he may doubt his status as a hero at times. *The Lightning Thief* therefore rejects the stereotype of teenagers as self-absorbed while leaning into their reputation of heroism.

Percy's feats throughout the novel draw inspiration from the quests of actual heroes of Greek mythology, like Perseus's defeat of Medusa, to name the most obvious, and Theseus's slaying of Procrustes. It is worth reiterating here that at the time these myths were recorded, the concept of “adolescence” as it is known today did not exist. While Percy may not face nearly as many gruesome hardships as these heroes of myth, he is still forced into a very mature position at his young age. The fate of the entirety of Western Civilization rests on Percy's shoulders and hinges on the outcome of his quest to retrieve the master bolt. He is solely responsible for saving the life of his mother after witnessing what he thought at the time was her death. He fights monsters, ends up in

several near-death situations, and even fights a god by himself. Despite only being twelve, Percy clearly must deal with highly “adult” issues. Rather than expressing fears of Percy being forced into a more mature role, adults like Chiron in the novel fully accept the fate which the prophecy has foretold for Percy. There is no question of whether he is too young to save the world, despite the fact that “Young people are often judged to be less able than they are” (Hine 7). Through Percy’s capacity for heroism, the novel implies that adolescents are far more capable than they are often given credit for.

## CONCLUSION: SEEING THROUGH THE MIST

Percy may differ from most adolescents by being half god, but like any real adolescent, he amounts to more than just “negative” stereotypes. His character paints a far more complex picture of what lies at the core of the contemporary adolescent—he may be brash, unpredictable, and violent, but he is also selfless, vulnerable about his emotions, and devoted to his mother. Comparing Percy to stereotypes about the contemporary American adolescent, many of these traits seem to mark him as an outlier. However, if we are to see Percy as an anomaly amongst fellow adolescents, then why does his story resonate so strongly with adolescents across the country and the globe? *The Lightning Thief* and Percy himself suggest that reducing adolescents to stereotypes, especially those which society labels “negative,” is a flawed way of defining this age group and that condemning these traits is even more problematic. Many of these stereotypical traits deemed “negative” by contemporary American society become some of Percy’s biggest strengths, saving himself and his loved ones from monsters and mortals alike. The novel suggests that by condemning these traits, American society prevents adolescents from realizing their full potential and makes their “success,” whether on a quest for a lightning bolt or a high school diploma, all the more difficult. Percy’s character and the hardship he faces from mortal media along his journey show that more often than not, when it comes to adolescents, we are blinded by prejudices which have existed for over a century. Whether real or fictional, demigod or mortal, adolescents are still defined by stereotypes, fears, and confusion. Percy acts as an example of how adolescents are far more complex than we give them credit for and

shows adolescent readers that, “troubled” or otherwise, they still have the potential to be heroes.

The history of adolescence and the stereotypes which come along with it clearly still affect contemporary adolescents, so much so that these ideas bleed into our fiction. These persistent misconceptions are so ever-present in American society that they even affect the teens of our imagination. Percy does not even question it when he becomes the prime suspect in his mother’s disappearance or when the media labels him a domestic terrorist—for adolescents, this is par for the course. Of course authorities would think he was responsible—after all, are adolescents not typically frightening, violent, unpredictable? Even the monsters of Greek mythology expect trouble from adolescents. Annabeth explains to Percy that demigods are most often unsafe outside of Camp Half-Blood, since they “attract monsters. They sense us. They come to challenge us. Most of the time, they’ll ignore us until we’re old enough to cause trouble—about ten or eleven years old, but after that, most demigods either make their way here, or they get killed off. A few manage to survive in the outside world and become famous...But very, very few are like that” (Riordan 97). Monsters wait until demigods are “old enough to cause trouble”—that is, on the cusp of adolescence. As a result, hardships during adolescence are double for demigods. They are troublemakers in the eyes of monsters and American society alike, problems to be dealt with. Rather than being exempt from societal pressures as half-gods, demigods are subject to even more scrutiny. This also means that demigods themselves are a category intrinsically linked with adolescence—they are too young to be noticed before adolescence and are more often than not killed before reaching adulthood.

The novel therefore presents the experiences of adolescence and demigodhood as parallel, effectively constructing contemporary American adolescents as demigods.

Demigodhood is presented as a state in between mortality and godhood, just as adolescence is presented as a state in between childhood and adulthood; as Hine writes, “teenagers are treated as something less than real people—sometimes resembling children, sometimes adults” (17). In the same way, demigods are sometimes mortal, sometimes god. Demigods are able to consume ambrosia and nectar, the food and drink of the gods, but mortals are not: Annabeth tells Percy that “That stuff would've killed a normal kid. It would've turned your blood to fire and your bones to sand and you'd be dead” (Riordan 88). Demigods are unable to consume ambrosia and nectar as freely as the gods are, however—Percy notes that “It was god food, Chiron reminded us... Too much of it would make a half-blood very, very feverish. An overdose would burn us up, literally” (149). Demigods’ vulnerability to weapons works similarly: while mortals cannot be harmed by weapons forged with celestial bronze, what Percy’s sword is made from, Chiron warns Percy that “as a demigod, you can be killed by either celestial or normal weapons. You are twice as vulnerable” (154). The novel presents demigods as stuck in between godhood and mortality, the same way adolescents are stuck between childhood and adulthood, often oscillating between being treated as both and neither on each side of these dichotomies. Demigods and adolescents alike are classified as whatever is most convenient, whether mortal or god, child or adult. Like adolescents, demigods are also shrouded in mystery—quite literally. *The Lightning Thief* uses the concept of “the Mist” to explain away instances in which mortals would see monsters, demigod powers, or other fantastical elements: Chiron explains to Percy that “Whenever

divine or monstrous elements mix with the mortal world, they generate Mist, which obscures the vision of humans. You will see things just as they are, being a half-blood, but humans will interpret things quite differently” (155). This Mist acts as a physical manifestation of Hine’s concept of the teenage mystique: like mortals through the mist, adults cannot see adolescents for who they truly are, instead reducing them to potential problems rather than individuals.

*The Lightning Thief* dramatizes the experience of contemporary adolescents—including what makes them powerful, heroic, and successful—by presenting adolescents and demigods as one and the same, both subject to obscurity and assumed to be powerful, violent, and in a state of in-between. Members of each of these two categories are simultaneously worshipped and feared. The novel makes it clear that trying to box adolescents into categories or define them with stereotypes alone is impossible. Like the demigods of Riordan’s novel, contemporary American adolescents can be powerful, heroic, mysterious, complex, and capable—and certainly more than just problems or walking stereotypes—if only we can see through the mist.

## REFERENCES

- Adler, Margot. "A 'Percy Jackson' Summer Camp Thrives in Brooklyn." *NPR*, 17 Aug. 2010. *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2010/08/17/129251388/a-percy-jackson-summer-camp-thrives-in-brooklyn>.
- "Children's Series Books - Best Sellers - The New York Times." *The New York Times*. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/series-books/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2022.
- Hine, Thomas. *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. Avon Books, 1999.
- Leighton, Alexander. "Re-Discovering Mythology: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians Saga." *Mousaion: South African Journal of Information Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2, 2014, pp. 60–73. *unisapressjournals.co.za*, <https://doi.org/10.25159/0027-2639/1690>.
- Lesko, Nancy. *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*. RoutledgeFalmer, 2001.
- Michel, Sia. "Fresh From the Garden State, in Black Leather and Eyeliner." *The New York Times*, 22 Oct. 2006. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/arts/music/22mich.html>.
- Morey, Anne, and Claudia Nelson. "'A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers': Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and America's Culture Wars." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2015, pp. 235–53. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2015.0025>.

- Murnaghan, Sheila. "Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children." *Classical World*, vol. 104, no. 3, 2011, pp. 339–53. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2011.0049>.
- My Chemical Romance. "Teenagers." *The Black Parade*, Reprise, 2006.
- Palladino, Grace. *Teenagers: An American History*. BasicBooks, 1996.
- Riordan, Rick. "Nearly a Decade after the Release of THE BLOOD OF OLYMPUS, Percy Jackson, Annabeth Chase, and Grover Underwood Will Star in a Brand New Adventure from Rick Riordan! PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS: THE CHALICE OF THE GODS Will Go on Sale September 26, 2023!" *Twitter*, 18 Oct. 2022, 4:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rickriordan/status/1582477423333244928>.
- . "Percy Jackson, at Last!" *Rick Riordan*, 14 May 2020, <https://rickriordan.com/2020/05/percy-jackson-at-last/>.
- . *The Lightning Thief*. Disney-Hyperion Books, 2005.
- Van Syckle, Katie. "'The Lightning Thief' to Open on Broadway in September." *The New York Times*, 12 Aug. 2019. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/theater/the-lightning-thief-broadway.html>.